

Toward Greekness: Dimitris Pikionis' Architectural Fantasies of Japan

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In 1954, Konstantinos Karamanlis (1907-1998), the Greek Minister of Transport and Public Works, assigned Greek architect Dimitris Pikionis (1887-1968) to construct a new pathway leading up to the Acropolis, to landscape the historic sites around it, and to build a Tourist Pavilion there. Pikionis chose the area adjacent to Agios Dimitrios Loumbardiaris, a ninth-century Byzantine church, as the new resting place for visitors. Four years later, the Acropolis landscaping project reached its fruition. Within the 80,000 square meters complex, Pikionis synthesized a modern Greek identity by intertwining the narratives of heritage emerging from the classical Greek and Byzantine past. However, for Pikionis, this modern-era Greekness laid its inventiveness elsewhere: on the island of Japan.

My study explores how Pikionis employed a version of Japan in his tectonic works in the decade of 1930s and trace its influence leading up to the Acropolis project. The open-air theatre Marika Kotopouli at Heyden Street in Athens (1933, now destroyed) and the Experimental School of Thessaloniki (1935) have been described as “following and employing the principles of the classical Greek and Japanese theatre” and “of a slightly Japanese character.” These structures, and an apartment block at Heyden Street (1936), point to the nascent formulation of Pikionis' *Japonisme*.

Why are evocations to Japan important in shaping the pathways leading to the topmost of the Acropolis hill, where the Parthenon rests, and a Greek flag waves below the blue sky at all times? The ideal world of the classical Hellenic past appeared interrupted in modern Greece. In the late nineteenth and early-/mid- twentieth centuries, Japanese intellectuals viewed ancient Greece as the direct predecessor of Japan and attempted to establish several lineages and links with the country. The Buddhist temple Hōryū-ji (epitomizing the country's national “aesthetic”) was known as the Japanese Acropolis. Yet, the situation on the ground was different. Greece, at the time, was entering a period of tumultuous politics and upheavals, in contrast to the country's idealized classical past. Did Pikionis, and contemporary Greek artists and literati, consider that Japan never experienced such a rupture? Did a fantastical version of Japan, or a fascination, become an apparatus to negotiate political and social trauma?

Ultimately, this essay aims to show that Pikionis was searching in Japan a twentieth-century Greekness, which shaped the pedestrian storylines of the Acropolis. A fantastical Japan became the missing link connecting modern Hellenes to ancient Greece and Byzantium.