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Epistolary architecture: when writing letters created modern space.

The case of Iannis Xenakis's house at Amorgos, Greece

Abstract:

Media of Communication (publicity, exhibitions) have been thoroughly examined for their contribution to the *perception* of modern architecture (Colomina, 1996). This paper analyses the relationship between letter writing and exchange and the design of the Amorgos house of Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001). It argues that epistolary discourse has been a significant medium by which a certain type of 20th century architectural space was *produced*. Based on archives the article pinpoints how embodied experiences of place have been translated into architectural space, through letters. This assumption may cast new light on the broader relation between tradition and modernism. Then, building upon the polyphony of letter writing, it sketches the model of collaboration among multidisciplinary professionals separated by distance that modern architecture initiated.

Biographical note:

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How do you share your ideas, my dearest architect? Publishing, exhibiting, and posting on social media may appear indisputably as part of the activity of your profession nowadays. As Beatriz Colomina (1996) shows this strategy was initiated by modernist architects at the dawn of the 20th century. The canonical figures, Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos, developed a discourse, both visual and verbal, that promoted the technological and formal novelties of modern architecture via engagement with emerging systems of communication (publications in journals, advertisements, films, exhibitions). Through the public circulation of images and words, modern architecture was transformed into a gigantic medium, a vehicle for ideas, beyond buildings and real space.

Nevertheless, while communication media have been analysed for their contributions to remodeling the perception of architecture, we have been less curious to question their role during the design process. One of them, writing letters, has been the sole means – along with the very expensive and thus laconic telegraph and telephone – that allowed modern architects to collaborate with diverse participants in a project. Engineers, contractors, clients and politicians, all depended upon letters for communication. How exactly does the form of the letter allow an architectural idea to be expressed? Do letters potentially act as plans and drawings? What type of professional collaboration and network does this discursive form initiate?

Marshall McLuhan has explained the reasons behind the perpetual overlapping between a medium of communication and its content. Beyond allowing information to circulate, ‘the “message” of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that introduces into human affairs’ (McLuhan 1964: 8). It is difficult to grasp this argument if we do not understand that ‘the “content” of any medium,’ continues McLuhan, ‘is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print ... and the content of speech ... is an actual process of thought, which is itself nonverbal’ (McLuhan 1964: 8). This means that the use of a certain medium of communication presupposes that the thought of the participants is modeled according to the formal characteristics of this medium. Technology of communication forms certain types of discourse and as such shapes any production or information initially intended ‘just’ to be conveyed. It is in this sense, that McLuhan claims that media are ‘extensions’ of the human body and consciousness. Taking this assumption as a basis, in this article I argue that a certain type of technology of communication (writing letters) affects the model of the architecture produced.

To make this point clear, I will analyse the design process of the vacation house on the island of Amorgos in Greece, designed by Iannis Xenakis in 1966, through a series of letters exchanged between various participants. I will explain later why I consider this late-sixties building as an example of modern architecture. I will show that letter writing is a medium that helps thought to unfold, by being an ‘active metaphor’ in its power to translate experience into new forms of understanding, to extend McLuhan’s argument (McLuhan 1964: 63). Moreover, the qualities of the extended network built up by the correspondence of project participants mirrors the polyphonic and interdisciplinary nature of a modernist architectural work. There is no such thing as a solitary architect having an idea that would eventually be translated into a building; technical and legal issues, economic requests of a certain professional

community are accomplished or rejected through these letters and in this way the letters remodel the project constantly.

In the sections that follow, I will first detail the formal characteristics of epistolary discourse and its social repercussions, through a historical survey of familiar letter and letter-writing manuals. This section will pinpoint how writing letters has always reflected singularity, while promoting polyphony and dialogue. Next, I will offer a close reading of a selection of letters exchanged concerning the Amorgos house. The '*Letters as sketches*' section is a 'genetic' critical method of approaching Xenakis' plans for the Amorgos house and their relation to his music practice, hitherto undiscussed (Sterken 2003: 371-374; Kanach 2008; Vizoviti 2017; Kalfa & Papavasileiou 2019). It provides evidence of how the form of the epistolary discourse allows scraps of the architect's embodied experiences to emerge, bringing the personal desire of the architect into articulation with the client's commission. It also casts indirect light on another question: the relation of modernism to tradition. The focal point of the next section, '*Letters as plans*', is the rhetorical and performative function of the epistolary exchange, i.e. the art of efficiently arguing about a subject, ultimately persuading the interlocutor and demanding a specific action to be accomplished, through letters. I will end by identifying the type of work sphere that epistolary activity shapes in modernity.

Building the *Res Publica of Letters*: Familiar letters and letter-writing manuals

Letters have been a medium that helped singular expression while actively encouraging connections among family members, friends, merchants and scholars. Familiar letters bridged distance and therefore postponed or extended time, conveyed ideas to more than one person, and, as such, created community; moreover, they were performative utterances as they validated or canceled transactions. In other words, letters were an early communication technology whose brief, formal structure and eloquent style accomplished the principal functions of *speech acts*: to describe and to do (Austin 1962). As such, letters have been a support to the rhetorical arts and a perpetual subject of specialised manuals (Poster & Mitchell 2007).

The eloquent letters of Cicero to his friends Pomponius Atticus and P. Cornelius Lentulus Spinther, beyond behaving as a personal journal, are the speeches of an orator trying to *act* on his correspondents. During the Renaissance, renewed attention to the epistolary activity (following Petrarch's rediscovery of Cicero's correspondence with Atticus), wove in parallel a new form of dialogue between scholars, engaged in the pursuit of truth. The public dialectic model of *quaestio* and *disputatio* of Scholasticism, exclusively used by the clergy and the monks, was replaced by a model of private rhetorical dialogue designed to convince, appeal to and affect the interlocutors (Fumaroli 2015: 24). At the end of the 15th century, the 'Querelle' was the privileged method of research practised by scholars all over Europe. More recently, in the centuries proceeding major political upheavals on both sides of the Atlantic, such as the French and American Revolutions, there was a 'reciprocal determination between a medium [the exchange of letters] and its politics' (Warner 1990: xii). While print could be viewed as impersonal and therefore able to represent a popular opinion (republicanism) the circulation of letters among individuals required novel rules of debating, arguing and convincing, to constitute the

public sphere. Pal and Barnes show that from the outset, in print, this emerging *Republic of Letters* hosted an eclectic and diverse assemblage, including an extensive international community of female scholars (Pal 2012; Barnes 2013). The discursive practice of letter-writing and polite conversation associated with the Parisian salons had the power to contest monarchy within the frame of the Enlightenment, as the letters between Voltaire and Rousseau show (Habermas 1992; Goodman 1994). Throughout history, familiar letters have acted as a medium of dialogue whose relatively simple structure both *bridged* physical and social distance and *opened* new paths to erudition. It was a discursive practice that shaped the type of knowledge produced and modeled novel governmental mechanisms.

Letters were a significant discursive form; from the medieval period to the end of the 19th century epistolary manuals and formularies were produced to provide instruction in the rules and rhetoric necessary to write letters that could accomplish specific actions, such as to persuade, inform, introduce, give advice, inquire, request, exhort, or praise. While the rules and points of emphasis shifted over time, in general these manuals contained: a) classifications determined by the relationship between the sender and the recipient, or the objective of the letter; b) models of letters to copy verbatim or to freely inspire the reader; and c) analysis of the subparts of the letter and the stylistic registers (tone and brevity) that allow rhetorical goals to be achieved efficiently. The letter's function, i.e. its performative character (it actually *accomplishes the aim* for which it was initially composed), explains the subspecies of 'exhortation', 'introduction', 'requesting', 'praising' and so on, that were developed. The position of recipients (either professional or social) determined both the salutation and the tone of the letter. Nevertheless, as a letter was only ever one half of a conversation, dialogical style needed to be adopted in order to allow space for the recipient of the letter to re-act. In the process the letter writer and recipient each had an equal place in the development of the discursive action (conversation) [1].

Having briefly considered the letter as a discursive form, we can now explore the correspondence of architects *as acts of speech*, that along with plans and sketches, both represent ideas, intentions, experiences and accomplish demands and tasks.

Epistolary Architecture: Writing in order to Design

The house in Amorgos was literally built through the correspondence between various actors, namely Iannis Xenakis (the architect), Francois-Bernard Mâche (the owner), Popa Diamantopoulou and Lia Bellou (Greek architects, and successive supervisors of the construction site) [2]. Analysing these letters, first I will concentrate on the embodied experiences of the individuals represented in the correspondence. In this case, writing is an agent of enactment that contributes to the ongoing and iterative performance of place and that will ultimately be translated into architectural qualities. Later, I will demonstrate how the seven-year exchange of letters concerning the Amorgos house manifests the temporalities of design and its polyphonic character. Here letter-writing stands for a medium that offers *space* to other participants to re-act, allowing a gradual evolution of the project. In many cases, letters accomplish a goal that has a direct repercussion for the *form* of the house. In order to adhere to current publication guidelines, I have reproduced a selection of the 80 letters found in the archives, often excerpted to avoid revealing sensitive

information. Archived material is translated by me from Greek or French into English and is reproduced here in italics.

A. Letters as Sketches: When Writing Reveals Experience

Letter I

Iannis Xenakis to his brother Cosmas Xenakis

(translated from the Greek)

23-03-66

‘My dearest Cosmas,

Father sent me Rozitas “Kathimerini”’s and his own critiques of your paintings! I am sorry I cannot come closer to your work. Your two canvases always hang in the same place in our house.

I am writing to you for a reason:

A friend of mine, a lover of Greece, both ancient and modern, a composer and, in a way, a man of letters, has bought a small property in Amorgos, where he would like to build a vacation house. I have drawn a complex for him (free of charge, needless to say) that I would like to see built, if I were able to return to Greece. But the problem now is who will supervise the construction and, of course, how much it will cost. If it is not too much trouble, I would like you to give me your opinion on this subject. I do not know the local construction conditions, therefore whoever is in charge would have to be friendly, smart and experienced. The general disposition, the forms and the openings, as well as some details that I have drawn should not be changed (= fixed points). They are adjustable, of course, by mutual agreement.

So please, send me your suggestions and give me your opinion, without delay, because in early April I am off to the Philippines, Japan and America for a congress and some concerts (invited, of course). My friend is François-Bernard Mâche and he will go to Amorgos during the school holidays in July and August, (he teaches Greek at a French High School), to launch the construction of his villa.

I am thankful to you. Kisses.

IX’

Letter II

Cosmas Xenakis to Iannis Xenakis

(from the Greek)

6/04/1966

‘Dear Yannis,

They gave me your letter along with your drawings, just before yesterday.

I asked around and luckily found someone who knows a contractor in Andros who builds villas on the islands and would very likely also build in Amorgos.

So, first of all, we could say that we have found a contractor to oversee the construction (I will look for this guy later because he is away from Athens).

It will be difficult to find a supervisor. That's why I suggest that you don't count on getting one but still have completed plans. The contractor will be in charge and will be assisted by your philhellene, who will have to be there during the construction (there is a ferry once a week to Amorgos).

So, you need to complete the plans with measurements and technical clarifications as soon as possible: For example, how are the walls supported over these crooked window-openings? Will the floor be gros-beton and grout?

Out of necessity, I will help with the communication, but I don't want, and neither do I have the time, to be in charge.

Conclusion:

1. *You must prepare additional plans, as soon as possible.*
2. *Your friend has to be here during negotiations to be held with the contractor so that he can set a price.*
3. *I will be present during the negotiations and will communicate clarifications to the contractor, if technical queries arise regarding the plans.*
4. *A topographical plan may be needed to give levels for the plot and cesspool.*

Kisses, Kosmas

PS: Next time, it would be preferable if I were consulted for a house to be built nearby. I don't have any observations to make on the construction, but on the aesthetics: the design smacks too much of your teachers.'

Mâche, wishing to build a house in Greece, drew himself a plan in 1965 to show to Xenakis 'what kind of villa [he] imagined at first' [3]. It was an orthogonal five-room house with small windows and a veranda, all typical of Cycladic architecture [see Image 2 below]. In his own preliminary sketches, Xenakis seemed not to take into account Mâche's rather traditional ideas of domestic architecture. Instead, he worked with five amoebic-shaped volumes to form a circle, in the center of which a person bearing the initials of François-Bernard [FB] was drawn [see Image 3 below]. A year later, in 1966, Xenakis presented a plan to Mâche in which the five independent, *amoebic-shaped* buildings no longer formed a circle, but were arranged along the plot, probably due to the very narrow form of the parcel [4] [see Image 4 below]. Their facades bore a set of windows and openings that formed orthogonal configurations, framing the surrounding landscape. This was the plan enclosed in Xenakis' letter of March 1966 [see Image 1 below].

We could look for the reasons for these formal transformations of the house's plan in Xenakis' music. In the beginning of the 60s, he introduced a new compositional method, *Musique Symbolique* [Symbolic Music], of which the best-known examples are his *Herma* (1961) and *Eonta* (1963). In order to compose, he defined several pitch/density/dynamics algebraic sets and proceeded with various logical operations between them. The five amoebic-shaped buildings sketched for the Amorgos house

recall the ‘bubble’ diagrams often used to represent mathematical sets. Moreover, the facades’ configurations invoke the ‘neumes’, a set of openings introduced for the first time by Xenakis on the facade of the school in the Unité d’habitation in Reze-les-Nantes (1950-55) and in the Monastery of La Tourette (1953-61), a kind of tribute of his to neumatic musical notation, an innovation traditionally attributed to Guido d’Arezzo (10th century) which preceded the contemporary five-line staff notation. According to Mâche, Xenakis used the initial letter of his name (F) to ‘compose’ this rather cryptic notation on the facades (Kiourtsoglou 2010: 252).

All of the above rational explanations of the design of the Amorgos house stand next to some rather naive, unsophisticated images of Greece’s landscape and architecture recycled by Xenakis. His archives reveal that he collected a postcard of the Panagia Hozoviotissa monastery in Amorgos along with his preparatory sketches and plans for the Amorgos house. The monastery, a white cubic 9th century Byzantine ecclesiastical design, with small openings in its facade, literally hangs over a rocky cliff. Mâche gave Xenakis a photo of Tyrokomos Bay, which is situated just below the construction site. According to Mâche, the bay’s curve reappeared in Xenakis’s plan, in the form connecting the kitchen to the living room [5] [see Image 5 below].

It would be a major oversight not to mention Le Corbusier, the architect who introduced Xenakis to Modern architecture during their collaboration in *Atelier de Sevres* (1947-1959) in Paris and who had a long-lasting attachment to Cycladic architecture dating from his 1911 journey, published as *Le Voyage d’Orient*, where he visited some of the archipelagos’ islands, and up until the 3-day journey by boat to the Cyclades after the 4th CIAM Congress (Congrès international d’architecture moderne) held in Athens in 1933. The scathing comment of Xenakis’ brother Cosmas, who also trained as an architect and artist, that ‘it smacks too much of your teachers’, is not too far from the truth. It is significant that the architecture shelf in Xenakis’ personal library, principally contains *Les Oeuvres Complètes* of Le Corbusier, along with a selection of books on vernacular architecture, including the seminal *Architecture without Architects* by Bernard Rudofsky (1964), and two books by the Greek modernist architect Aris Konstantinidis (1949; 1950) treating the relation of tradition to modernism. This raises the question of how tradition informed Xenakis’ architecture.

Returning to Xenakis’ music, where this question has been thoroughly discussed, his early musical ambitions oriented him towards an analysis of Greek folk music, similar to that of Béla Bartok on Hungarian music. Nevertheless, he soon recognised the impasse at the end of this approach (Solomos 2001). Unexpectedly, his work as a civil engineer in Le Corbusier’s atelier offered him mathematical tools to compose the new music of which he had dreamed, without tradition, nostalgia, or sentimentalism. ‘Taken from a pure hearing aspect and separated from any other function’, Xenakis declares, a demonstrator’s yell during the war in Athens, the cicadas’ song, or the noise of hail or rain share similar structures in how their parameters (pitch, density) evolved over time (Matossian 2005: 70). This is the case: events and memories are not represented in his music; rather they offer their nature (order-disorder, evolution through time) as structures with which to compose. Using the high abstraction of mathematics, Xenakis translated embodied, often traumatic, experiences to music.

Regarding architecture, as discussed above, Xenakis also needed the graphic structures of his music to deal with the spatial configuration of the plans and facades of the Amorgos' house. Once again, he needed abstraction to translate experience. Indeed, the photos of Tyrokomos Bay and the Panagia Hazoviotissa Monastery could be perceived from an abstract aspect: they actually demonstrate geometrical and topological relations. These images reveal the *limits* set by the landscape and the sea, as well as the relations of a close, human construction geared towards the elements of openness and verticality in the landscape. In other words, rather than nostalgic images of his homeland, these images could sketch an abstract account of embodied experiences of a human walking, coming up a slope and comparing himself to the surrounding scale of the environment. Xenakis inserted a totally modern building into a specific place; for he had once experienced it, and he was now able to observe the abstract relations that were active beyond the forms. In his 1966 letter to his brother Cosmas, Xenakis is conscious of this, writing '*I have drawn a complex for him [François-Bernard Mâche] that I would like to see built if I were able to return to Greece*'. For Xenakis, designing the vacation house in Amorgos would be an occasion to walk up the rocky hills of the Aegean Island and, from there, to stare at the horizon and the vast blue stretch of the Mediterranean Sea. In his letter, Xenakis claims that he designed this house as if he were there, and not in order to reproduce 'Greek' style. This hypothetical phrase, addressed to his brother and introduced by a verb (return), describes the embodied experience at the origin of the design and not a style or a form to re-produce. It could have occurred only in the context of the first-person narration of a familiar letter, 'in the core of a consciousness that discovers itself by writing' (Calas 2007: 70-71).

B. Letters as Plans: Write to Act and to Collaborate

Letter III

Francois Bernard Mâche to Popa Diamantopoulou

(from the Greek)

Paris, 08/06/1966

'Dear Madam,

I am writing to you regarding a matter about which your friend Yannis Xenakis has probably already informed you. I am a musical composer myself and a philologist. I have been charmed by Greece, and above all by its islands, for a long time, to such an extent that a) I learned Greek, as you can see (I am now translating the collected works of Odysseus Elytis with his collaboration) and b) I bought a small plot in Amorgos to build a summer house.

Yannis has done me a favor in conceiving and designing the plans for this house, but the greatest difficulty remains, that of the construction. An architect is needed to supervise the work of a local contractor, which will not be so easy: The plans are something like this {...}

I apologize if I have given you such a complex problem to solve. I hope you will have the kindness to respond to me soon and that we will have the chance to meet some day. Please accept my kindest regards.

F.B.M.’

Letter IV

**Popa Diamantopoulou to François-Bernard Mâche
(from the Greek)**

13/10/1966

‘Dear Mr. Mâche,

I’m sorry that you apparently haven’t received my letter, which as far I remember, I sent around the 20-25th of July. In it I had calculated the costs of the building (I am sending you those here again) and conveyed some news from the island, and greetings from the locals. As soon as I received your letter I sent an architect to Amorgos (for our own business as well) and he identified what was necessary. The cost is relatively high, because a) there are no specialized workmen on the island for concrete, b) water for the construction will need to be carried there and c) there will be a fee for both the contractor and architect, but no other charges (profit) for our office.

A small gift to a friend of Greece and to Yannis.

I am looking forward to seeing you.

Greetings.

Popa.’

Letter V

**François Bernand Mâche to Amorgos’ Notary
(from the Greek)**

1/11/1966

‘Dear Madam,

Do you remember that last year you were preparing a contract when I bought a plot in Lefkes from Yorgos Gavalas? I hope that I will have the pleasure to visit you again in two months, and maybe we can prepare another contract for the piece of pasture that Gavalas could not sell to me at that time. But I have recently learned that, according to French law, I don’t have permission to buy this plot as a tourist. I have to arrange things in order to be able to transfer money ordinarily. On this issue, would you kindly send me an official document which certifies that Gavalas now agrees to sell me this 2-acre parcel of land on Tyrokomos bay in Amorgos, in order to build a summer house there? I need this document in order to send the necessary currency. {...} I will probably be in Amorgos around Christmas. If you need anything from France, please let me know and I will bring it. I thank you in advance for your consideration.

Kind regards,

F.B.M. '

Letter VI

**François-Bernard Mâche to Popa Diamantopoulou
(from the French)**

09/04/1967

Dear Madam,

My work will not allow me to come to Athens before summer, but I believe that you can start construction work anyway. I have calculated that I could save at least {...} by eliminating 1) the external paving 2) the room on the left between the main room and the lavatory. I will try to pay you the rest, up to {...}, all included. If you are agreed, please arrange an estimate for the other three pavilions without any changes, as soon as possible, including only the interior paving. I also propose that I send you right away {...} and pay the balance as soon as the work is completed (or according to your needs).

I hope to have your favorable and quick response.

Kind regards.

F.B.M.

Letter VII

**François-Bernard Mâche to Lia Bellou
(from the Greek)**

03/04/1974

Dear Mrs. Bellou,

I have just arrived from Athens and I have made a copy of the contract from Amorgos that you will find attached here. This morning Mr. Diamantopoulos called me to inform me that there is another difficulty because the plot is only 1½ acres, and according to Greek Law, I should have at least 4 acres in order to build a house outside a settlement. What are we going to do? Should we proceed with the building permissions and determine what is going on later or should I write to the notary in Amorgos to make another contract? Please advise me on how to proceed {...}.

Greetings,

F.B.M.

Letter VIII

**Lia Bellou to François-Bernard Mâche
(from the Greek)**

28/05/74

'Dear Mr. Mâche

It has been just a week since I came back from Amorgos. Mr. Gavalas has agreed to help you (I don't know if he is going to ask for any money ultimately to sell you another 3.5 acres). Now we are stuck again: In Greece, there is a law (1366/ of the year 1938) that forbids any transaction with foreign citizens who want to build in borderlands, on the islands and islets, as well as in the shoreline zone. The law had been relaxed and that's how you and so many others were able to buy land in Greece and that is why we were struggling till now to get the building permit. But recently, the same law came into force again, more strictly, and when we approached the notary of Amorgos (who is currently in Naxos) he explicitly refused. {...}

The details of the budget and features will be discussed in my next letter.

Greetings,

Lia Bellou

P.S Needless to say, once again Amorgos has cast a spell on me.'

Letter IX

**Lia Bellou to François-Bernard and Marie-Luce Mâche
(from the Greek)**

27/09/1974

'Dear François and Marie-Luce,

I have only just managed to write to you because Grigoris was not able to translate your letter earlier. {...}

We concluded an agreement with Nomicos regarding the doors. I didn't go to the craftsman in Chora because we have been discussing them with Nomicos for so long since he is closer to the construction site, and we have gotten to know each other. As we know the craftsman, he would be committed in a different way from a total stranger. Moreover, we need Nomicos every day and it is good to please him. {...}

Currently, onsite there are: six workmen (Fragkos, Kontomihalis, Giannis Nomicos, Nicolas, the younger Nomicos, G. Gavalas, and Manolis), four craftsmen (G. Prekas and N. Fosteris from Vroutsi, who are locals) and two from Athens. One has come for 15 days and is leaving tomorrow because his wife will give birth, but another came last Wednesday to replace him. With those from Athens, work began on September 14th. I don't know if Grigoris has told you about their payment; it is 800 drachmas a day for eight hours plus 160 for their insurance (IKA) per day, in addition to their trip expenses and daily wages during their trip. They have been put up in our house. Unfortunately, one of them had food poisoning and has not been working the last two days, for which he is not being paid. Another craftsman must be found by Wednesday. Since they arrived, the weather has been very bad and the sea troubled. We have been reaching the plot with Sarpakis's boat, but they prefer going on foot. The weather has

been getting better the last 4-5 days and that really helps us with the construction materials. We have gathered gravel, and we bought cement, tiles, paving stones and bricks. We will fabricate cinder blocks onsite with Giannis “fat” Nomicos, and Manolis, whenever we need them. {...}

It was painful trying to convince Simos (who owns the unfinished hotel) to buy some timber because we wanted to be able to cast two concrete slabs at the same time.

I don't like the idea of Giannis Prekas doing the plaster on the walls. I will keep searching for someone else more trustworthy, if you agree. I haven't calculated the budget for the rest of construction yet. I hope to send it to you soon.

I have taken pictures but I don't have time to develop them and send them to you. {...}

So, that's all for the moment.

Greetings,

Lia

PS: You took the plans with you making it impossible for us to work. {...} Please send them back as soon as possible. We will make a copy and forward them to you. {...}

Grigoris has asked you to write directly to him in Greek because he is overwhelmed by the work and your letter takes more time to reach me. {...}'

At the beginning of June 1966, three months after Xenakis had finished his plans for the Amorgos house, Mâche got in touch with Gregoris Diamantopoulos' office in Athens. Diamantopoulos was a former exiled communist and his brother Aggelos Diamantopoulos had, along with Xenakis, been part of a left-leaning resistance group in Athens during the German Occupation. Popa Diamantopoulou, a female architect working in the office, would be in charge of the construction. A frequent correspondence between Mâche and Diamantopoulou took place for an entire year, until the spring of 1967. The exchange of letters broke off a few weeks before the 21st of April 1967 *coup d'état* by a group of colonels in Greece that was followed by seven years of ultra-right military juntas. During this period, there is no archived correspondence regarding the house in Amorgos. At that time, continuous cases of civil rights abuses along with a complete lack of press freedom had led to a psychology of fear among Greek citizens. We can assume that the interruption of the correspondence, as well as the postponement of the construction, is due to the imposition of dictatorship. Against all odds, however, Mâche got in touch again with the Diamantopoulos' office in the spring of 1974 in order to revive the project. Lia Bellou, a young architect, would now be in charge and finally see the mission to its end. Through frequent correspondence, she updated Mâche on the construction's evolution and charted progress on legal issues. Grigoris Diamantopoulos interfered occasionally in this exchange. Xenakis was asked to give his opinion whenever questions of construction arose. Mâche transferred his suggestions through letters to Bellou. Xenakis, who had been exiled in France since 1947, officially returned to Greece in November 1974, just a few weeks after the Amorgos house had been finished.

The letters reproduced in this section, more than describing the design process, accomplish specific actions in the construction. Letter III is an ordinary introduction letter in which Mâche presents himself to Greek architect Popa Diamantopoulou and asks her implicitly to be in charge of the construction, without ever formally posing the question. Whether Mâche was sure about Diamantopoulou's acceptance in advance, or whether it was simply a consequence of writing in Greek (not his native language) while drawing from the implicit model of questioning from French, this letter stands for the foundation of the Amorgos' house. It is the first act that transforms Xenakis' plan into a potentially 'buildable' house. While Letter IV from Diamantopoulou informs Mâche of construction costs, essentially it validates the contract between them; the house in Amorgos will be built by the Diamantopoulos office at cost, as a courtesy to Xenakis. This letter establishes the economic agreement between Mâche and Diamantopoulou by turning the former into the latter's client. A significant number of letters from Diamantopoulou, and later from Bellou (not reproduced here), deal further with the costs of materials and compensation for architects who were added later to the project. All of them balance and fine-tune the client-architect relationship established here. Letter V, from Mâche to Amorgos' notary, and Letter VII from Mâche to Bellou, while concerning the legal framework for currency transfer, actually rearrange the plot's legal limits from an initial 1.5 to what will be 4 acres in the end [see Image 7 below]. In Letter VI to Diamantopoulou, the last before the seven-year break through the dictatorship in Greece, Mâche settles on-going financial issues. Aiming to save money, he decides to allow for only four out of five initial volumes of the house to be built. Through this letter, he eliminates part of Xenakis's plan and alters the final arrangement of the volumes within the construction plot [see Image 6 below]. Letter IX from Bellou to her clients, the Parisian couple, charts the progress of the main construction phase. All of this information about the workmen and construction materials documents the almost archaic way in which this highly complex form was built, during those hot days of July 1974. These letters convey an impression of the extent of the endeavour involved in accomplishing the project which cannot be gleaned from the plans or visiting the finished construction. This letter stands witness to thousands of actions that were necessary in order for the house to be built [see Image 8 below].

As discursive form, letters turn the exchange of architects *into speech acts* that accomplish goals and tasks, and have a direct repercussion on the form of the house and the construction plot. Grounded on the fact that as letters they stand in for the person who writes them, the letters of architects and clients are performative media: for them to write, is not only to describe a task, but to actually do it. Alongside traditional media of representation of designed objects (plans, sketches), used to connect and to explain, letters become a medium that represents a conscious subject, ready to act.

This multi-directional letter exchange represents the actors involved in the design process, and at the same time it inevitably builds an invisible *space* in which concerned members can re-act to each other's suggestions. Since addressing a letter to someone is not the same as attaching a plan, there are requests that are taken into consideration and objections that are foreseen, as 'a letter aims to influence the one who receives it in order to create a new situation' (Calas 2007: 209-10).

I argue that this invisible work sphere is a characteristic of modern architecture. In order to negotiate the demands of modern architecture – its global spread over the post-war period and its gradual increase in size and technical requirements – a multi-specialty team of professionals established a work space through letter writing. Sigfried Giedion in his seminal *Space, Time and Architecture* sketches out the cultural context of these changes to the modern architect's profession, explaining that:

It would be a complete misunderstanding to suppose that contemporary architecture has been evolved by a few isolated geniuses.... [C]ontemporary architecture is no longer dependent upon a few individuals; it has its roots deep in the life of our day. It grows more and more anonymous: innumerable workers in every part of the world contribute to its nourishment and progress.... Individual creative work remains necessary, but the complicated problems which have to be solved (along with a growing unity of expression) are leading to more and more collaborative work. Architects are collaborating not only with other architects but also with specialists of every description – landscape gardeners, physicians, statisticians and many others. (Giedion 1954: 605-606)

By undertaking projects across the globe, modern architects – whose fame was expanding, thanks to mass media amongst other reasons – increasingly depended upon writing letters to chart the progress of their work, as taking a train, ocean liner or airplane was frequently prohibitively expensive. Thanks to the carbon copy, a letter could reach more than one recipient, creating, in a way, a 'virtual' workspace, long before the digital era.

One has only to go through Le Corbusier's abundant professional correspondence in Fondation Le Corbusier and the recently published collection of his letters to his family (Baudoui & Dercelles 2011; 2013; 2016; Morel-Journel 2015) to see the importance of letters to modern architecture. Carbon copies of letters were exchanged between the permanent collaborators of *Atelier de Sèvres* and *AtBat* (Atelier des Bâisseurs), joint yet independent professional structures Le Corbusier created to advance the increasingly large number of projects under his auspices. At that time, Le Corbusier's Atelier became a European centre of exchanges of ideas and associates (Loach 1992). Le Corbusier acknowledged that this 'open' collaborative sphere of work was part of his modern project. 'We have been dispersed all around Europe. Would that be a difficulty? Not all; it is the key to our success. For, at every meeting, we have to come with our pockets full of ideas. We speak little, we act intensely' (Petit 1958: 23), he writes when an international team of engineers in Holland, architects in Paris and a composer in the United States were commissioned for the Philips Pavilion at the International Fair of 1958 in Brussels. At that time, during Le Corbusier's long absences, responsibility for a project meant also taking care of the correspondence (Sterken 2003: 22). Interdisciplinary and international communities exchanged plans and letters and the final architectural work was similar to the readjustments needed in polyphony for the harmonization of a number of individual melodies together. Nevertheless, this internal, deliberately open, *Society of Letters* maintained relations between non-equals. This 'workspace' was remarkably tolerant, allowing for significant contributions from Iannis Xenakis or André Wogenscky, none of whom, nevertheless, were mentioned in 'classical' monographs on Le Corbusier's work (Sterken 2003: 15).

Yet, the invisible, shared and long-distance workspace established for the Amorgos house was not intentionally promoted by the architect; it was created by a necessity brought about by the historical circumstances of post-war society. Xenakis was one among the many political refugees of a ruined Europe. He was sentenced to death at the dawn of the Greek civil war in 1947 for deserting the army, and he was a political refugee in France without the right to visit his homeland until the Restoration of Democracy in 1974 (Matossian 2008; Xenakis 2015). His personal library reveals his subscriptions to print weekly or monthly journals by Greeks displaced for political reasons across Europe, released during the seven years of dictatorship (1967-74). Principally these journals contained collections of letters exchanged between and addressed to this print community [6]. For many of these subscribers, reading and writing letters was the means of establishing a permanent, yet invisible, link to their homeland and to defy the political situation. It is rather significant that at the beginning of the 1950s in Le Corbusier's atelier there were at least twelve Greek architects and engineers who had left Greece because of their political beliefs (Sterken 2003: 20). On the other hand, Mâche belongs to that generation of scholars who sought common artistic patterns in diverse cultures in and outside of Europe, torn apart by two world wars. He was a Hellenist, a composer, a Classics scholar, an archaeologist, and a professor of Musicology who searched for musical archetypes in long-lasting Greek mythology (Serrou 2007: 125-135). 'I have been charmed by Greece ... that I learned Greek ... and I bought a small plot in Amorgos to build a summer house there', Mâche writes in the Letter III introducing himself to Diamantopoulos.

As a polyphonic discursive form, letters were able to showcase multiple voices and mirror the post-war condition of the architect's profession. Following Michel Foucault's definition of the author here becomes significant; he writes that 'The subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse' (Foucault 1969: 314). Modern architecture, produced in this environment, was a function of the discursive form of letters, that is, of its limits and its deviations.

Letter Writing as Medium: Changing the Scale, the Pace and the Model of Modern Architecture

Letter writing, using words to describe space, invites ambiguity and interpretation and the whole design process, as shown here, is about working out and repairing these flaws. For writing letters is not simply about jotting down on paper whatever passes through the minds of the author; it is about carefully exploring the intentions of the recipient, while expressing social tensions and shedding light on the writer's own conditions. In other words, it is about translating experience into language, and as with any kind of translation, this transformation cannot be transparent nor unmediated. It is through this chasm, between what has been experienced and how it is narrated, that clear or new representations of personal or social reality are hashed out.

Writing letters – the discursive form of modernity – shaped the pattern of architecture produced; polyphonic, pluridisciplinary communities of 'builders' dispatched around the globe turned plans into architecture by writing and answering letters. To adapt

McLuhan, the letter used as a medium to convey information and ideas conveyed another, far more important message. It affected the model of architecture that was produced. Along with publicity and exhibitions, letters transplanted modern architecture beyond its main centres of production to the periphery of Europe and beyond. Letters wove the affectionate, yet controversial, regard toward tradition of modernist architects, as the latter travelled and reported in first-person narratives how novel techniques and forms could be aligned with existing spatial configurations and landscape. The intensive exchange of letters mirrored the change in the *scale* of influence of modern architecture. As with any other medium of communication, by writing letters architects established a certain *pace* of dialogue, initiated a collaborative – and thus not always equal in contribution – sphere of work. This multidirectional exchange was foundational to the expanded network of professionals from diverse occupations necessary for highly technical buildings.

The Amorgos house correspondence represents a significant case study in architectural history, one that enriches our understanding of the relationship between communication technologies and the development of modern architecture. As Adrian Forty (2004: 20) claims, suspicion of language was a key feature of modernist discourse. Modern architects granted privilege to drawing as the only medium able to demonstrate the unique nature of architecture, even if language was present at every single stage of their practice. To adapt Forty's argument, extensive letter writing and exchange, as presented here, may be seen as *the return of the repressed*; in Freudian terms: the unrecognizable, thus uncanny, reappearance of the performative role of words within modern architecture.

Notes

[1] For arguments about the relationship of epistolary discourse to the rise of the Epistolary novel and novel in general see Versini (1979) and Bray (2003).

[2] Letters I and II are in the Xenakis' family archives. The rest of the correspondence derives from François-Bernard Mâche's personal archives.

[3] Personal correspondence with the author, 25-10-2011.

[4] Personal correspondence with the author, 17-09-2011.

[5] Personal correspondence with the author, 26-01-2019.

[6] Xenakis was a subscriber to the following print editions: *Ελεύθερη Πατρίδα. Εβδομαδιαία Έκδοση Ελλήνων του Εξωτερικού* [Free Homeland. Weekly edition of Greeks living abroad] and *Grèce Libre. Bulletin Mensuel du Mouvement Franco-Hellénique pour une Grèce Libre* [Free Greece. Mensual Bulletin of French-Greek movement for a liberated Greece].

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Images

Image 1. Initial Plan and elevation drawn by Iannis Xenakis for the house in Amorgos, March 1966. Collection Famille Xenakis. All Rights reserved.

Image 2. Plan by François-Bernard Mâche, around 1965, for the Amorgos house. Collection Famille Xenakis. All rights reserved.

Image 3. Preliminary sketch by Xenakis for the Amorgos house, around 1966. Collection famille Xenakis. All rights reserved.

Image 4. Collage by Xenakis for the Amorgos house, around 1966. Collection Famille Xenakis. All rights reserved.

Image 5. On the left, a postcard of the Monastery of Panagia Hozoviotissa (no date), Collection Famille Xenakis. All rights reserved. On the right, photo of Tyrokomos Bay by François-Bernard Mâche.

Image 6. The room that was finally eliminated due to high construction expenses is on the right of the main room and not on the left as proposed in this letter by the owner. Plan made by the author.

Image 7. The construction plot of 4 acres as indicated in the construction permission. Image found in Naxos' Public construction Office, Greece.

Image 8. During construction, July 1974. François-Bernard Mâche's collection.