

THEY DESIRED TO 'DANCE': NOTES ON AN OPTIMISTIC YOUTH AND AN EMERGING GREEK MODERNITY

Late 1950s. Carnival time. Athens, Greece. At the high-society Grande Bretagne hotel in the city center, it's Dance Night. Two young architects, Takis Zenetos and Soula Tzakou, arrive at the entrance. The stunning brunette is dressed in a bright, I imagine blinding, red sweater. They desire to dance ... and they'll manage to gain entrance, even without a formal invitation, becoming the center of interest for the rest of the evening.

At one and the same time, a real and allegorical description, since these two, Tzakou, and even more so, Zenetos, 'danced' in the limelight of Greek architecture and – yes, why not? – of Greek society of the period, heralding the presence of an optimistic professional youth who were part of a similarly optimistic period of Greek modernity. This real and simultaneously allegorical description, this real and simultaneously allegorical testimony, is the first thing that comes to mind, unexpectedly so, every time I think of Zenetos, every time I recall Theodoropoulou's text. This description always conveys an anecdotal and at the same time emblematic reference to an economic, cultural and architectural spring that was unfortunately followed, irrespective of the usual natural succession of seasons, by a 'void': a dark political and cultural winter.

Zenetos is thirty-one, an architect with no more than four years' professional experience, when he and Margaritis Apostolidis undertake to redesign the FIX factory. Every time I think about it, I feel, behind the staggering synthetic certainty of the new, redesigned facade, a second level of certainty, one that is deeply visionary, going far beyond the design choices. I feel the certainty of vision, the certainty of arrogance that architecture can bear and project, and which, through visionary change and development, can even more promote the central physiognomy of a society. From this there follows admiration, but also the 'traumatic' response – to recall the discussion I had with Theodoropoulou – every time I call to mind the FIX factory, at the height of the 1960s, at the height of its operation, having already been provided with the most modern of faces through the architectural intervention.

Traumatic, trauma, wounding – words that derive from the Greek verbs *πρώσχω, διατρυνώ, τραυματίζω*: *to pierce, to penetrate, to wound or injure*. To cause a wound that breaks the physical continuity or, if we consider the metaphorical, psychoanalytic use of the term, to cause a violent psychological shock so powerful that it destroys our ability to maintain control of our emotions. A violent shock that, in conjunction with the physical pain, causes painful emotions. We suffer from traumatic memories; we are hurt by painful memories and painful realizations. First of all, the discontinuity between the initial active operation of the redesigned factory and the vacant abandonment of later years. Then, the literal mutilation of the building, the emasculation of the architectural presence, which the equally emasculated senior administration of the country failed to grasp as culturally significant.

This is not solely an architectural 'grievance', the feeling of pain that follows the wounding of the architectural world. In other words, it is not the pain felt only by architects, who have seen their work, once culturally and politically significant, now debased and degraded, on a downward slide from the status of major art into an insignificant material clogging of urban space... In the case of the FIX factory, a clogging split in half by 'formal' administrative procedures. The trauma is more pronounced, overcoming the architectural sensibility. It affects us every time we look back to that period of Modern Greek history – the 1950s and the early-to-mid-1960s – in many expressions of that period that project an overall vision of development. Not just a vision of economic 'expansion', but a vision of simultaneous global, economic, and cultural development that required the production process to be given the ideal face; a modern aspect on a modern architectural form. The recollection of this period is what still 'traumatizes' us, since we cannot but compare it with what was to follow.

With all the possible social and political mainstays that characterize the 1950s and the first major part of the 1960s, we can still recall, fifty years later, the widespread optimism typical of those times when we hoped our lives would get better and better as we left

behind the horror of World War II and the equally horrific wounds left by the civil war. We still feel the pulse of the society that desired to 'dance', which made great efforts to 'dance', producing not only new conditions for production, but also at the same time sophisticated examples in numerous fields of cultural expression.

Yes, they desired to 'dance'; yes, Takis Zenetos desired to 'dance'. Thus, we imagine him in the bright spotlight of a society that, like its architecture, had great hopes of developing along multiple avenues.

And so, we come to a close. We bypass the tragic ending, the ending of the desire, the desire for design, the desire for life. We remain persistently absorbed in the earlier jubilant image of young people, the earlier jubilant image of a society of modernity that dared to think optimistically about the future.