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THE PIONEER SPIRIT

THOMAS DOXIADIS
ACHIEVES HARMONY
BETWEEN THE NEW AND
THE OLD IN GREECE



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The pioneer spirit

Landscape architect **Thomas Doxiadis** is setting trends in his homeland of Greece by integrating contemporary garden design schemes with the ancient landscape in a way that respects both the old and the new...

Photos by Clive Nichols (unless otherwise stated) **Words** Louisa Jones

Previous page:

The re-colonisation of native Mediterranean species on the windswept slopes is encouraged by random irrigation

This page: This house by decaARCHITECTURE is part of a larger development on the island of Antiparos with landscaping by Thomas Doxiadis. The houses are kept deliberately low and flat so as not to interfere with existing landscape

▶ **GREECE IS ONE BIG** archaeological dig, where 'site memory' is inescapable. The landscape loved and visited today, however wild in appearance, has been shaped by millennia of human use. Greece is a hotspot in today's debate about man's possible place in nature – destroyer or partner?

As pointed out in a recent study [see sources], "There is often more biodiversity in a single square kilometre of the Mediterranean than in any area 100 times larger in the northern parts of Europe." This is attributed in part to human "co-evolution" with other species; some researchers even propose ancient Mediterranean agro-forestry as a model for future sustainability.

Greece is also a place where landscape architecture has only recently been recognised as an essential profession. Thomas Doxiadis is a pioneer in this new generation, for whom foreign work experience is still essential. In 2001 he set up his own cross-disciplinary practice, doxiadis+ in Athens, and much of the team's work is redesigning places of great beauty, steeped in site memory, for tourism and private leisure use that potentially endanger them. In 2010, ▶

INTERNATIONAL

▶ doxiadis+ won an Emerging Architecture Awards Commendation for “identifying historical and contemporary systems of structures and combining them in a new, integrated and sustainable landscape”. The main project was a luxury housing development on 16 hectares of steep land on the Aegean island of Antiparos. The developer, OLIAROS, assembled a pool of distinguished young architects who then worked with Thomas Doxiadis and his collaborator on this project, Terpsi Kremali.

Preserving identity

Each of the eight houses has a swimming pool, three covered parking spaces and exterior individual driveways. Thomas points out: “This is a landscape where windswept vegetation stays low. Everything you do shows up immediately. The most important thing was to find an organising structure for a development visible from so many angles.” The site is a typical Mediterranean configuration: on the lower slopes, drystone terracing once supported farming, while higher up the windswept scrubland known as *phrygana* in Greece was pasture.

The houses are mainly built in the island’s own idiom – low and flat, using local stone. doxiadis+ was concerned to preserve the existing landscape identity and special care was needed to integrate the roads, often hidden by low stone walls. The landscape architects worked closely with their stonemasons who are mainly Albanian and proud of their skills. Excavated soil was recycled as part of the terracing restoration. The planting was particularly subtle. Aerial photographs helped determine the *phrygana*’s “fractal patterns” and four different zones were determined.

The first, near the houses, is irrigated and planted with “primarily resilient species, which aesthetically mimic local vegetation”. Then comes a “zone of structured mixture where ‘Mediterranean’ plants are planted so that interstices form between them. These interstices are progressively re-colonised by native species, resulting in a static/dynamic combination.” This blends into a zone featuring the “accelerated re-colonisation of native species. Left unplanted, but randomly irrigated for the first years, it hastens re-colonisation by surrounding native species. Irrigation is progressively eliminated resulting in a naturally dynamic zone.”





Photo: Thomas Doxiadis Studio

The Doxiadis gift is synthesis, between vulnerable archaic sites and new functions; economy and ecology

Finally, there are large stretches of untouched spontaneous growth. The transitions between the four zones work by mixing a dominant species with smaller amounts of those growing nearby, then gradually shifting the balance. Truly native sub-species were hard to find in nurseries and in some cases were grown by the team. The plants included *Centaurea spinosa*, *Sarcopoterium spinosum*, *Calendula arvensis*, *Inula viscosa*, *Chrysanthemum coronarium*, *Limoniastrum*, a range of local cistus, thymes and oregano.

Winning combinations


In recent years, doxiadis+ has undertaken a wide range of projects. For the ancient 'Square of Heroes' in Elefsina, "the place of Mother Earth, of nature and agriculture", now a post-industrial site, they proposed an evolving wheat field growing through a metal grate, in a space defined by vines and olive trees. In an area to the south of Athens, an ecological park, designed with a limited budget for a much-degraded public beach, includes natural stream regeneration, a wilderness area and renewable energy sources for power.



Plan left and rendered image above: Thomas Doxiadis Studio



On Milos, a volcanic Cycladic island where mining has been practised for some 7,000 years, a kaolin mine next to a medieval monastery will be transformed into an open-air landscape museum, restored in such a way that "its dramatic features will be visible only when one enters the crater itself... Strategically, the design foregrounds the mine's interesting elements by turning them into land art" to display the strong lines of terracing, contrasts between red rock and the bright white kaolin, and the historic hand-made tunnel. Slopes will be planted in a "camouflage" pattern to integrate them into the surrounding landscape.

Some of the firm's work is also private: a villa on Mykonos features a "distillation" 

Clockwise from far left: The landscape around the buildings on Antiparos is structured into zones with planting nearest the houses gradually giving way to more naturally dynamic areas; for a private villa on Mykonos, ramps in the form of stone *pazoules* (agricultural terraces) are camouflaged within the *phrygana* (scrub) slopes; an artistic rendering of the villa project, where traditional landscape elements such as the *xerolithies* (drystone walls) are used to cope with a difficult site that had large differences in levels; a section for the Square of Heroes project in Elefsina



All images this page: Thomas Doxiadis Studio

Clockwise from above:
The visual for the Mykonos project shows the relationship of the landscaping and planting to the sea; sketches for the ecological park south of Athens with differential natural re-vegetation and dunes; a sketch showing how the kaolin mine on Milos is to be transformed – the kaolin powder is stacked into large cones

of native forms and vegetation and their use in a contemporary aesthetic. This includes the use of plants, which are all low-maintenance Mediterranean vegetation, again using terracing.” The area between the pool and the sea has been landscaped using simple gravel, big rocks found on site, and sparse *Hyperbarhia hirta* (a native grass), giving onto a view of the sacred island of Delos.”

Thomas is closely related to Constantine Doxiadis, a pioneer ecologist-architect and urban planner in the 1960s, who made a point of training also as a stonemason. One of his uncles publishes best-selling novels (in English) about logic and mathematics. An aunt is past president of the Mediterranean Garden Society. In this culture, mathematics, architecture, landscape design, masonry, botany and gardening are not separate categories,

much less opposing ones, but all part of the same study of Nature. The Doxiadis gift is synthesis, between vulnerable archaic sites and new functions; between architecture and landscape, economy and ecology; between the vernacular idiom and modern minimalism. □

Sources

- [doxiadis+](http://doxiadisplus.com)
- 8 Angelou Vlahou St, 10556 Athens Greece
- Tel +30 210 6770662
- www.doxiadisplus.com
- www.antiparosdesignproperties.com
- [The Mediterranean Region: Biological Diversity in Space and Time](#) by Jacques Blondel, James Aronson, Jean-Yves Bodiou, and Gilles Boëuf (OUP 2010)
- [Louisa Jones](#) is preparing *Mediterranean Landscape Art* for Thames & Hudson



About the designer

Thomas Doxiadis graduated from Harvard in 1992 with degrees in Visual and Environmental Studies and Fine Arts.

His thesis on revitalising the economy of a traditional village in the Peloponnese won prestigious prizes. In the mid 1990s he worked for the city of Athens, spent time in Berlin, then returned to Harvard to take Masters degrees in architecture and landscape architecture. This led to work in both New York and Athens again. Thomas also mobilised the first public large-scale tree transplanting program, saving 650 olive trees at the Athens Equestrian Centre. He set up his own company doxiadis+ in 2001.