

Branding the Greek vision for Tourism: The Xenia Network

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The Greek National Tourism Organization (GNTO) was founded in 1950, to develop Tourism as a basic axis of economy, to attract foreign exchange and to promote the international “icon” of Greece as a “cultural product”. At that time, high standard facilities for tourists did not exist. Thus, GNTO started the Xenia Project to create accommodation infrastructure for the development of Tourism. The produced buildings, prominent examples of Post-War Modern Greek Architecture, and the associated infrastructure, created a network that shaped the leiscapes of the country based on Modernism. Although local communities welcomed the Programme enthusiastically, it was mass tourism, new luxury life model and bad management that led the Xenia Project to decline.

This paper's ambition is to reveal the current condition of the buildings and of the leiscapes of the Programme, and the causes of their decay, to evaluate re-uses and renovations, to explore contemporary threats and to make proposals for their protection and recognition as monuments. Selected examples will support the above effort, by exposing the necessity for preservation and re-use. This article is part of a larger scale effort to communicate the values of the Xenia Project to the public, so that a large-scale restoration can be acknowledged and appreciated. Modern accommodation buildings and leiscapes can be upgraded to a branded cultural product.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE XENIA PROJECT

At the end of World War II and the following civil war, the newly-founded GNTO had to renovate the obsolete facilities destroyed by raids and to subsidize new investments in high standard tourist hotels. Unfortunately, private investors hesitated to invest in tourism accommodation, although they were supported by low-interest loans¹. Thus, GNTO started the Xenia Project, a State programme to create accommodation infrastructure for the development of Tourism.

The buildings of the Project follow the principles of modernism mixed with local, geographical and cultural context.

We can categorize the types of the buildings of the project in two groups. The first one comprises *Tourist Facilities without accommodation* such as: Beach Facilities, Pavilions, Restaurants, Tourist Stations, Special Facilities. The second group comprises *Tourist Accommodation* (more than 100 buildings) such as: Hotels, Motels & Highway Stations with accommodation, Hostels etc.

2. BRANDING THE GREEK LEISURESCAPES

The Xenia Project fulfilled the vision of GNTO to develop international tourism. Those constructions were designed to offer hospitality to high-class international tourists, who brought valuable foreign exchange to a poor developing country. You would find them in archaeological sites, on the islands, along highways, in urban settlements, in Spa-towns and other destinations of tourist interest.



FIGURE 1. J. Triantafyllides, Xenia Motel of Messologi, © J. Paraschos, 1960.

The Organization was not planning the buildings alone, but rather as part of an integrated sustainable policy on tourism. Sites were declared as “tourist sites” with special legal status for hotels and tourist accommodations. “Wild”, beautiful places would be transformed into high-class resorts. GNTO aimed to extend the tourist season beyond the summer period, so as to ensure the financial sustainability of the hotels. Occasionally, other activities (Yachting, Golfing etc) or events (the Athens Festival, the Epidaurus Festival, the Feast of Wine) were also promoted.

At the same time, there was not sufficient access to the developing tourism sites. GNTO planned the infrastructure to connect to the periphery, which would serve the local communities, too, and organized tourist tours by pullman. Sea cruises were organized in a similar way. The Organization upgraded the port of Igoumenitsa and connected Greece to Italy by ferry-boat. Many other programmes (Casinos, Campings etc) were organized all over the country.

The Xenia Project gave priority to the underdeveloped provinces and led the private Greek investors towards international high standards. The produced buildings, which are prominent examples of Post-War Modern Greek Architecture, and the associated infrastructure created a network that shaped the leiscapes of the country based on Modernism. The “Xenia” brand managed to build awareness of high standard tourist facilities.

3. DECAY, CURRENT CONDITION AND CONTEMPORARY THREATS

The Decay

A public operator as GNTO, no matter how well organized, is never as flexible as a private one. Bureaucracy and inexperience led public management to failure. The Organization soon recognized its inability and tried to privatize the projectⁱⁱ. Its attempts in most cases were unprofitable. The only solution was long-term leasing by private operators. Concessionaires were exploiting the hotels with beneficial contracts, ignoring their obligations for new investments and proper maintenance of the facilities.

The second fatal mistake was the Organization's compromise to decrease the budget of some projects. The changes reduced the hotels standards (for example by replacing private bathrooms in each room with shared toilets) and, at the same time, reduced the return on investment and its life expectancyⁱⁱⁱ.

It is worth clarifying that even in the cases that a project failed as an economic activity, it always contributed to the tourist development of the site and gave a long-term macroeconomic profit.

The Current Condition

Today, most of the buildings are obsolete and abandoned, waiting to collapse or to be demolished with irregular procedures. Re-uses, with the same or a different function, temporarily saved some, but awkward attempts for renovation and structural reinforcement have dramatically transformed/destroyed their architectural identity. Here are some characteristic examples of each category:

DEMOLISHED XENIA'S

In 2004, the Xenia of Heraklion, Crete (1961, G. Nikolettopoulos), although in a good condition, was demolished by the local authorities, thus provoking an intense political dispute.



FIGURE 2. **G. Nikolettopoulos, Model of Xenia Pavillion in Chalkida, © G. Nikolettopoulos.**



FIGURE 3. Cl. Krantonellis, Xenia Hotel of Nafplio in 2015, © M. Moussa, 2015.

In 2006, the Xenia Hotel of Ioannina (1958, Ph. Vokos) was replaced by "The Grand Serai" (Saray=Palace in Turkish). Its demolition was "inevitable" for the new management, as the contradiction between the lean modern hotel and the glamorous, phantasmagorical new building, representing a new "luxury" life, was more than evident.

ABANDONED XENIA FACILITIES

The majority of the abandoned buildings are owned by the State or the local authorities. In most cases, these owners don't have the budget or the motive for structural reinforcement and renovation.

The Xenia Hotel of Tsagarada, Pelion (1957, Ch. Sfaellos) and the Xenia Motel of Vytina, Arcadia (1961, C. Mpitsios), prominent examples of GNTO's effort to develop winter tourism, are abandoned. The local communities claim ownership of these structures in order to re-operate them.

XENIA'S IN USE WITH THE SAME FUNCTION

Re-use with the same function is the most promising solution, but, unfortunately, not all examples are successful. In many cases, limited or extensive expansions have corrupted the modern characteristics of the projects.

The first Xenia Hotel of Nafplio (1951, expansion 1956, Cl. Krantonellis), is preserved in a very good condition. No significant alterations were made, except for the external coloring of the visible concrete surfaces.

The renovation of the Xenia Hotel in Kos island (1959, Ph. Vokos), transformed the basic architectural characteristics of the building. The most inappropriate intervention was the extensive replacement of specific original materials with glass.

XENIA'S RE-USE WITH ANOTHER FUNCTION

In the majority of the re-uses with a different function, the property is owned by local authorities. Almost all Xenia projects were very popular among local communities, hosting all the social events.

The Xenia Motel of Olympia I (1963, A. Konstantinides), is currently used as a Town Hall. The main transformations, which oppose to the original characteristics of the building, are the external coloring and the enclosure of pilotis.

The Xenia Hotel of Nafpaktos (1966, P. Manouilides) is currently owned by the local authority. An extensive debate is in process about the re-use of the building. The main stake is to choose between re-use with the same or a different function. A re-use with the same function comes with the risk of anarchical expansions. In addition, local hotel owners are against this competitive re-use. A re-use with a different function, which would host leisure activities lacking in the town of Nafpaktos (a conference center or a multipurpose hall), seems to be a better proposal.

Contemporary Threats

Natural landscape, as well as Xenia's leiscapes, has been alienated by mass tourism. New environmental legislation and the development of alternative tourism (ecotourism, geotourism, agrotourism etc), are measures that will restrict the environmental degradation.

Economic crisis is a new threat. The facilities owned by the State are now under the *Public Properties Company's* control, an organization for the management of public real estate. Its only goal is privatization at any cost, as the income is repaying the National Debt. In the name of exploitation, all kinds of landscapes, including the Xenia's facilities, became sites for construction.

4. PRESERVING AND REINFORCING THE MODERN MONUMENT

The Modern Monument

Greek people respect ancient and medieval monuments. More recent monuments (traditional, neoclassic style etc) are treated with romance and nostalgia. On the contrary, *béton armé* as a material, is demonized by the public, as a result of our modern lifestyle in compact cities. Under those circumstances, modern monuments are only appreciated by a limited elite.

Preserving Monuments in Greece

The State faces the modern monuments with discrimination, too. Two different Organizations, the Ministry of Culture (focusing on Antiquities) and the Ministry of Environment (newer monuments), are in charge of monuments' classification. Very often, the two authorities are competitive to each other.



FIGURE 4. **D. Zivas, Xenia Hotel of Arta, © J. Paraschos, 1960.**

The Xenia Hotel of Arta (1958, D. Zivas) was built in the medieval castle of the town. Unfortunately, building on medieval ruins was not a rare practice in the 50's. In Arta's case, the new hotel's construction was considered as a regeneration, because the castle had been used as a criminal jail. In 2009, the building was proposed to be declared as a monument, but the claim was overruled by a council composed by members from both authorities. The main excuses were that such declaration would put at risk the older monument and that the modern building needed reinforcement, which would destroy its authenticity.

Structural Reinforcement

This is the main problem a modern building faces today. All other necessary upgrades to comply with contemporary regulations (fire security, user safety, even energy upgrade) are manageable. The core legislation^{iv} demands that all buildings made of concrete, even monuments, when they are reinforced, they should obtain seismic resistance similar to new buildings, by using concrete cloaks, seismic diaphragms, concrete or metal shear walls etc. These retrofits deform the bear structure by changing the ratios. New materials, such as steel plates, fibre reinforced polymers and new methods, may reduce this disharmony, if the regulation should loosen in case of monuments.

In 2008, researchers^v from the Department of Civil Engineering of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki evaluated the structural system of the

Xenia Motel of Paliouri, Chalkidiki (1960, A. Konstantinides). According to the study, the main issues were: the geometrical forming of the structure (without shear walls, complicated plan structure provision, irregular sections) which is against today's seismic codes, concrete carbonation due to the damages of the visible concrete from the sea nearby, moisture and the lack of maintenance. Fortunately, the general ophthalmoscopic stability was good. A structure analysis followed, proving that the current condition was insufficient, as expected. Unfortunately, the two proposals made by the team were discouraging. The first one would transform the facades and the second proposed a full reconstruction.

5. RE-BRANDING MODERN GREEK ARCHITECTURE: THE XENIA NETWORK

In 2007, the Association of Greek Architects started an "aggressive" effort to declare the most important Xenia Project's buildings as monuments^{vi}. The effort has - for the time being - saved some of them from demolition, but not from physical decay leading to collapse. *P. Nikolakopoulos*, who was in charge of the Association's effort, came with the idea of the "Xenia Network". The declared buildings would be restored to their original state and re-operated as accommodation units. The Xenia Network would address to sophisticated tourists that are looking for alternative cultural attractions and appreciate modernism as a lifestyle.

Taking this idea a few steps further, we could re-use "Xenia" as a branded experience. Modern accommodation buildings and leisurescapes will upgrade to a branded cultural product, addressing not only to tourists but also educating local communities on modern architecture heritage. The brand will communicate the values of the Xenia Project to the public, so that a large-scale restoration can be acknowledged and appreciated.

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- i Document Archives of the GNTO Management Council, Athens 1951.
- ii See previous note, Athens 1960.
- iii See previous note, Athens 1956.
- iv *Retrofitting buildings from concrete*, published in 2013 by the *Greek Center on Prevention and Forecasting of Earthquakes*.
- v Ch. Ignatakis, A. Voulgari, O. Katopodi, A. Petrakis, "Hotel XENIA Paliouri, Chalkidiki, Greece. Evaluation-Assessment of the Structural System Alternative Proposals for Strengthening or Reconstruction", 2008.
- vi Xenia Projects declared monuments - for the time being - are: Hotel in Mykonos (declared in 2001), Motel of Kalampaka (2008), Motel of Paliouri in Chalkidiki (2008), Motel of Igoumenitsa (2008), Highway Station of Platamonas (2008), Motel of Vytina in Arcadia (2008), Motel of Carteros in Crete (2011), Hotel in Andros (2011), Hotel in Skiathos (2011), Hotel of Kastoria (2011), Hotel of Tsagarada (2011), Hotel of Sparta (2011).