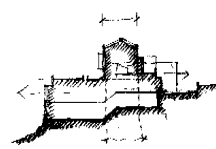
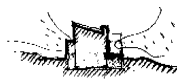
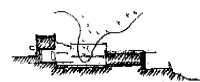
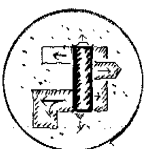
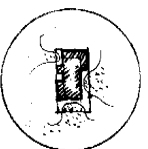
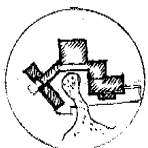
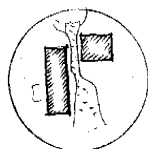


# ERROR AND RECOVERY

When I agreed to do an introduction on the work of Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, I obviously knew that I would be courting ridicule; for it is somewhat ridiculous for a son to appraise the work of his parents. My opinion on whatever the Antonakakis have built over the years must be suspect by default; it cannot help being so, since it comes from me. However, just as there are parents who trumpet out loud their children's exploits, so there are often children who have a soft spot for their parents, and who wish, whenever given a chance, to sing their praises. This is my case. The views I am about to express here unavoidably rest on the precarious ground of strong filial feelings; however, my urge to write about my parents overrules my awareness of the problem;



and so I forge ahead regardless.

Architectural schools and journals usually teach us how to deal with the commonplace and the obvious. The architect is called upon to prove his skill in reproducing the selfsame, dreary images of contemporary architecture. Truly individual work is rare, not only in the limited field of Greek architecture, but in the whole of Western architecture. I detest the ordinariness of much so-called tasteful design; it is something the Antonakakis have always managed to keep at bay. Let us not forget that the architectural journals are not solely responsible for the bane of "good taste"; it is primarily due to the aping propensity of usually uncultured architects – a propensity on which the publishers of the architectural press, whether serious or trashy, naturally thrive.

Faced with this situation, I appreciate and respect all the more those works which genuinely constitute an individual, consistent whole. The



continuity represented by the successive emergence of Pikionis, Constantinidis, the Antonakakis – followed by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre<sup>1</sup>, as regards guiding principles, at least – is a continuity of recognisable, purely individual works in the field of modern Greek architecture. Dimitris and Suzana Antonakakis are among the few living architects who may claim an identity strictly their own. Their work possesses a particular character, a particular style; it has brought forth a world structured according to clear-cut principles and forms.

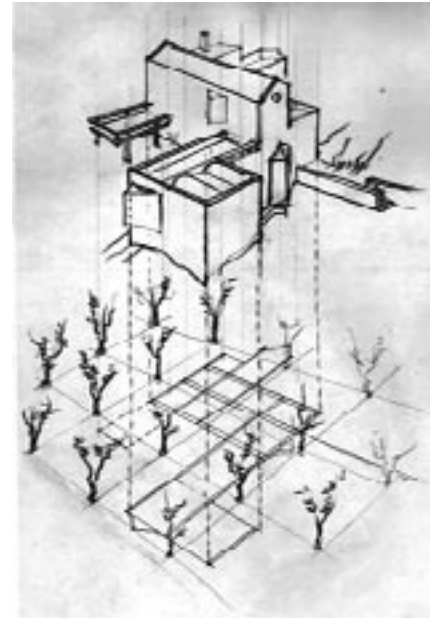
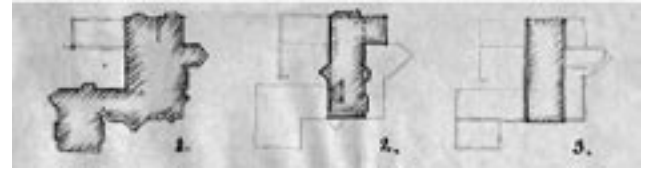
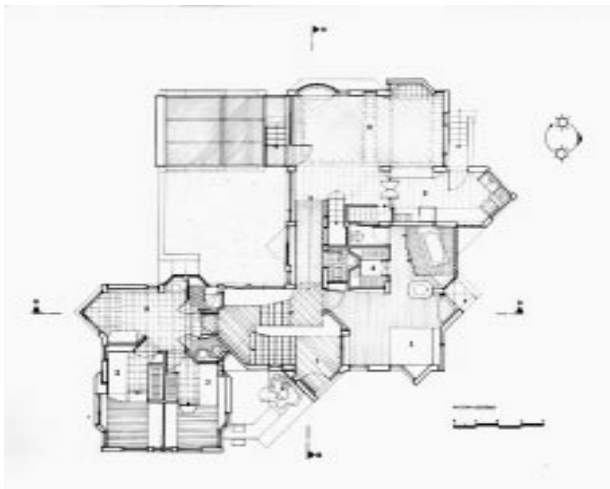
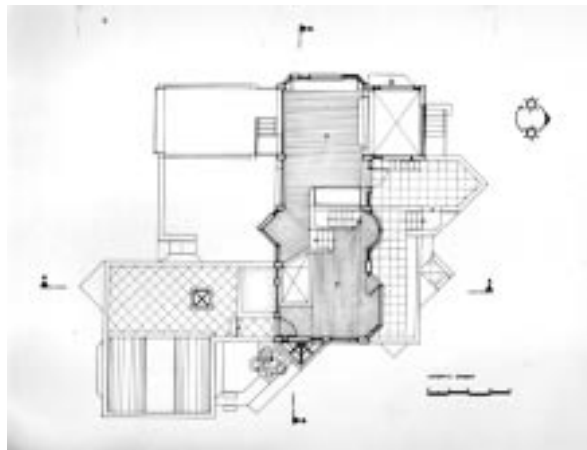
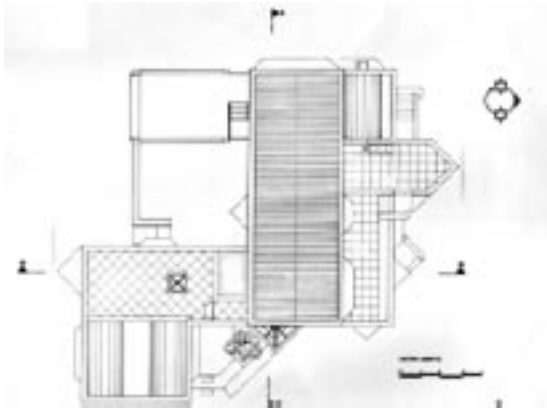
Every truly personal work can only come into being through a series of personal choices. It is these choices that anyone attempting to explore and interpret

such a work seeks to trace. According to Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, the Antonakakis choices are contained within a pair of explanatory concepts: the grid, and the pathway in the sense of an ongoing progression; in other words, the architecture of Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis involves a synthesis of these two concepts, which belong to Constantinidis and Pikionis respectively. In my own interpretative enquiry of their work, I locate its centre in another pair of opposing concepts, namely error and recovery.

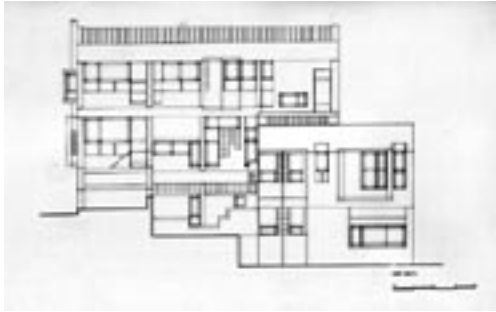
After a few moments in the Antonakakis' office (a single visit will prove sufficient), one becomes aware of a strange, constant, shrill sound, which seems to come from a multitude of cicadas. This strange noise comes from razor blades, with the aid of which everyone seated before a drawing-board in the atelier scratches out drawings completed only a short while ago; they keep erasing what they have done, right up to the last moment before handing in their work; they erase entire sections of ground plans and elevations, in order to replace them with others which are most likely to be erased in turn to make way for new drawings; and so on and so forth.

This is not only indicative of the mode of work in the Antonakakis atelier, but also of the kind of work they produce. It does not only suggest perfectionism, but a very distinctive character that underlies everything they do.

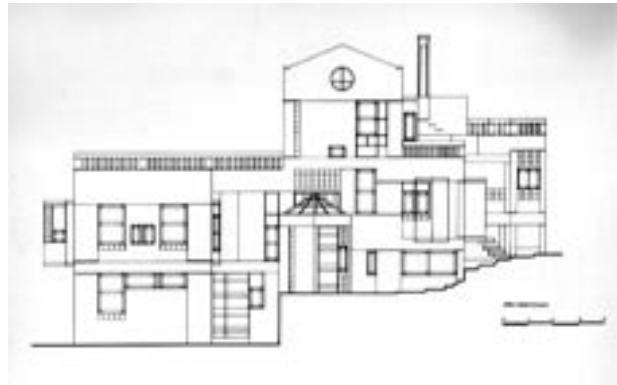
The successive corrections leave traces on the final work. These traces acquire such importance that they are often indistinguishable from the overall concept of the building. Transitions, alterations, salutary interventions: this is how the Antonakakis confront the errors and use them creatively; for needless to say, they are not errors encountered by chance in the course of composition. They are deliberate, staged errors, which seem to arise along with the first, general idea behind the project. The error is frequently the theme itself of the composition. The first choices and the handling of details soon elicit a whole series of propitious interventions. The central idea appears enfolded in the web of its own refutations, but these are overcome by means of delicate surgical adjustments leading to the recovery of the initial concept<sup>2</sup>.



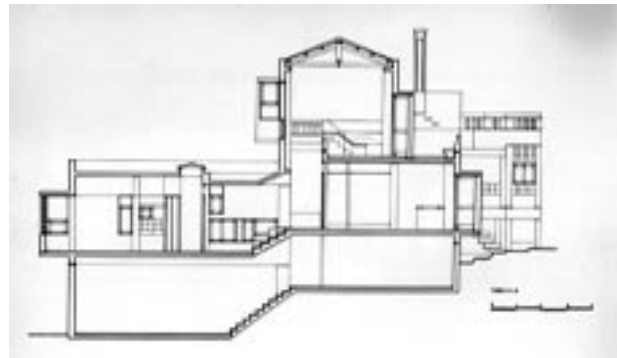
In the Hartokollis residence at Spata, the courtyard is the error that organises the whole composition. It is an error, for the arrangement of the living areas and the limited size of the site seemed to call for a simple, single construction. The fragmentation of the house's units, as finally planned by the architects, immediately gives rise to a new problem: the ongoing sense of progression resulting from the position of the central, enclosed courtyard, poses a kind of threat to the areas of the house proper. This threat, however does not reverse or hinder the subsequent evolution of the design. None of the initial decisions is revoked; but new, remedial ones are taken at this point. The objective is to create the central courtyard, even if this choice is to burden the construction with a compulsory itinerary disproportionate to the size of the house.



Tzitzikalakis Residence: South elevation



Tzitzikalakis Residence: East eleva-



We have here one of the most telling examples of the Antonakakis' characteristic "structured walk", according to Tzonis and Lefaivre; it has been devised in this case for the purpose of rescuing a compulsory itinerary resulting from an intractable central idea. The affirmative approach to the courtyard is by no means irrelevant to the next problem to be dealt with. The progression, the itinerary across the courtyard is now obliged to become an autonomous element of the composition. It is here that the subtle ingeniousness which informs the Antonakakis' method of composition is fully revealed. The error is introduced in order to be refuted. The central idea itself is the initial error<sup>3</sup>. The composition evolves and takes shape under the burden of an original sin. The courtyard of the Spata residence thus must be seen as a conscious, well-designed error. From the outset the architects work within the error, by virtue of the error: they are fully aware that the second line they will draw must come to the rescue of the one before. This is one of the rules of the Antonakakis' compositional game: elaboration signifies rescue, recovery; it may entirely reverse the terms under which problems present themselves. These problems should preferably appear frequently and retain a fine balance: neither so onerous as to ruin a project, but not entirely absent either, as this would lead to obvious, facile solutions. The composition, finally, amounts to the solution of deliberate, fabricated problems. Successive transitions and reversals remove these problems as they come up, healing open wounds as if by miracle. But the wounds healed with such art are wounds inflicted by the surgeons themselves.

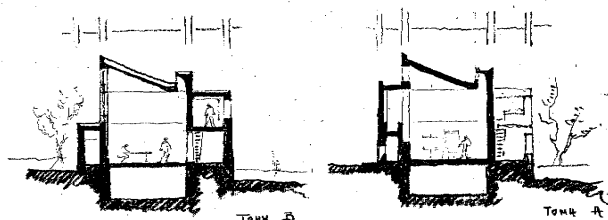
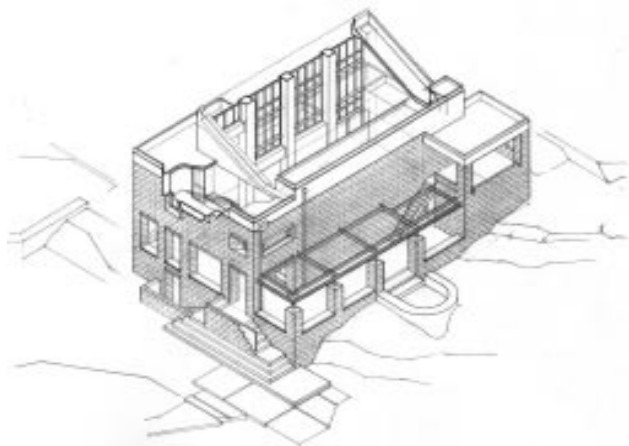
Writing about the great maestro Wilhelm Furtwängler, the pianist Alfred Brendel wondered: "What is that makes Furtwängler's transitions so memorable?" and proceeded to answer his own question as follows: "They are shaped, each and everyone of them, with the greatest care, and yet they cannot be isolated. They are not patches which have been introduced to join two ideas of a different nature. They are created from, and lead to, something. They are areas of transfiguration"<sup>4</sup>. The same may be said of many nodal points of transition in the work of the Antonakakis<sup>5</sup>. They become areas of crucial importance and take on a major,

though inconspicuous, part in the entire composition. At the point of transition from one section of the construction to another, a kind of condensation takes place, a coercion that has a beneficent effect on the entire space. Such points of transition are present in almost all the works of the Antonakakis; and what they do is to bring about the recovery, the rectification of the errors.

In the Tzitzikalakis residence at Canea, transition is the main theme. Not only because there appear several points of condensation in the boundaries separating various areas (such as the children's area, for instance), but because transition is also the theme as regards the building's height (this becomes obvious in the elevation), for the entire building seems to unfold in an ascending thrust towards the living area upstairs. This thrust is also apparent in the final shaping of the building's volume, starting at the top with an austere prism (rectilinear in the ground plan), and dissolving on the ground floor, upon contact with the earth, into a shattered geometrical form. There is a deliberate refusal to give shape at the ground floor level. In a text on Dimitris and Suzana Antonakakis, Elias Constantopoulos wrote that the Antonakakis "take advantage of the accidental until it becomes conscious"<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, one may say they foster the accidental; they cultivate it, but only in order to annul it; they play around with it, but only in order to correct its development and control it. The external form on the ground floor of the Tzitzikalakis residence is not the result of external choices, but of internal needs. The house's needs are allowed to unfold within an ambience of formal fortuitousness. In reality, however, this fortuitousness is perfectly controlled. But the architects will not hesitate at any point to disrupt pre-determined forms in order to accommodate the living spaces required.

The near seems to prevail over the distant, the partial over the whole. Each element is shaped by the one adjacent to it. It is no accident, however, that this play with fortuitousness and geometrical refutation is initiated at ground level. The fragmentation of volume at ground level enables the building to rest more naturally on the earth; it also establishes on the ground floor a natural transition between building and earth,





allowing the earth to merge smoothly into the building and the building to melt away smoothly upon the earth. On the ground floor, the earth is about to receive something solid, increasingly inflexible; and the architects, in the very act of building, are thus let to apologise for doing so. The error of erecting this house is corrected by geometrical fragmentation, by breaking up volume in the lower part of the house, so that the building finally seems to dissolve on the face of the earth<sup>7</sup>.

Error and recovery, then, are the key towards a comprehensive understanding of the Antonakakis' work. But what was the error – and where – in the case of Varvara Mavrakaki's studio on the island of Aegina? Where are the deliberate complexities we find in other projects, where are the considerations, the development of the composition from within to without? In what way does the interior of the building organise the refutations, the ensuing complications? Where are the angles, the ruptures, the subjection of geometry to the demands of the functional partitioning of the building units? Where is the dialogue with the earth, the negotiations between the building's volume and the surface of the ground? The transitions here have been made with great care, but they are limited to the shape of the entrance and the geometry of the concrete blocks. But transitions of this kind have always occurred, even in the "autonomous object-like" buildings that mark the entire course of architecture through the ages.

Varvara Mavrakakis' studio casts a different light on the Antonakakis' work. The neat, rectangular ground plan, the tranquil details, the way it rises above the landscape of Aegina without entering into negotiations with the earth, indicate a different approach to the building concept, a different approach to the landscape.

This goes to prove, beyond question, that the key to the laws of creation always remain in the pocket of the creators, out of reach of anyone attempting to explain and interpret their work. Creators reserve for themselves the capacity, the freedom to surprise us. The con-

cept of error and recovery certainly does not exhaust the whole range and substance of the Antonakakis' work, even though it may serve as a significant rule informing most of their constructions. It constitutes one of the laws that govern the small universe of their architecture, but not the only one.

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Translation: Kay Tsitselis

## Notes

1. From the article "The grid and the pathway", *Architecture in Greece*, 15/1980, pp 164–178.
2. cf. Dimitris Antonakakis: "Elaboration and improvisation", *Meletemata* [in Greek], Athens, p. 257, where Pikionis' method of work and his landscaping of the Acropolis is commented upon:  
"...he was trying to discover the principles enabling us to overcome the error, in an attempt to transform it into a creative device and integrate it into a system of transgressions..." The interplay of error and recovery thus has its roots in the teaching of Pikionis.
3. The arrangement of space around a courtyard is a frequent choice in the Antonakakis' work, even in cases where a tightly-knit plan requires breaking up. We may mention the examples of the courtyards in the Zannas and Pierrakos residences at Oxylythos, the courtyard of the Mavrakakis residence in Aegina, but also the old courtyard of the Chios Museum that was so warmly appreciated by Elias Petropoulos in *I avli stin Ellada*, [in Greek], Athens 1983, p.6.
4. "Wilhelm Furtwaengler", *Epopteia*, [in Greek], Athens, October 1992, pp. 91–94, p. 94.
5. "We always design according to a rigorous logic, and then invent... what might happen at each point of contact". "Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis", interview in *Tefchos*, no. 6, September 1991, p. 4.
6. "On the Architecture of Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis", *Design and Art in Greece*, no 25, 1994, pp 18–26, p. 18.
7. cf. "Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis", *op.cit.*, p.4.