

Research Article

The Concept of Difference in Architecture: Transpositions Between Insides and Outsides

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Abstract

Postmodernity unhorsed the subject as powerful creator of life, showing not only that it is not in direct correspondence with the world, but furthermore that it is not even in control of itself. In this context, philosophy introduced an understanding of the world based on the concept of difference. Specifically, structuralism acknowledged difference as a poetics of ambiguity in the service of communication, while poststructuralism proclaimed difference as the impossibility of meaning. In this paper, we critically interpret these approaches in reference to the criterion of interiority/exteriority. Difference under structuralism introduces meaning as totally inside constructed, although towards outside operating. The figurative internalization of the postmodern architecture presents exactly the disconnection of meaning-making processes from the social context and their orientation towards consumption's external experience. In addition, under the poststructuralist conception of difference the meaning lies exclusively outside and the corresponding trends of architectural creation, while in a way approximating freedom, seem also to contribute to a cultural disempowerment of critical ways of life and thinking. In distance both from the subject's restriction inside and its abandonment in the tragedy of the outside, we suggest a Bakhtinian conception of difference which allows a creative continuous motion between interiority and exteriority, by both decomposing and producing meaning, always within the conflictual reality. In this direction, architecture may call for a spatial ethos of justice, a carnival polyphonic space of open boundaries between insides and outsides, which, although retaining their identities, they do not construct impenetrable territories as, in a sense, they are always at the critical limit.

Keywords

Difference, Limit, Interiority, Exteriority, Structuralism, Poststructuralism, Spatial Ethos, Bakhtin

1. Introduction

Modernity gave prominence to the creator and defined clearly the identity of the work. The eradication of the creator from his work, which followed in postmodernity, took place in two ways: On the one hand, within the anti-humanist framework of structuralism emphasizing the text as a form independent from the subject, writer or reader, and, on the other hand, in the context of the poststructuralist recognition

of the reader's semantic role. While structuralism attributed omnipotence to the text accepting that its individual units gained their meaning only due to the relationships between each other - in specific, due to the fact that each differed from another -, the poststructuralist approach was multiplying the work according to its readings, revealing precariousness of meaning. In both cases, however, meaning was treated in

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relation to the notion of difference, which, despite the various versions, summed up the critique of modern identity as a coherent entity in certain relation to the world. In such context, the work and the world were two separate spheres without synergy between them, and, furthermore, moving from the one theoretical framework to the other involved an intellectual transposition from interiority to exteriority.

Architecture followed this course of theory, translating it in its own way. As long as the rational subject was perceived as capable of knowing the reality, which then it represents, the earthly monumentality of modern architecture reflected a belief in man as the guarantor of a future world [20], that operates from outside towards inside. Even in modernism, language and the distinctions we impose on the world through it were recognized as the means of producing meaning, but the consistency between the plan and the elevation, the functional emphasis of the interior space, as well as the hierarchies and contrasts between the spatial elements translated the dynamism of modern architecture as synthesis of an undeniable meaning, over which the subject had, in any case, full control. Postmodernism has preserved language as the starting point of meaning, but inverting the control relationship with the subject, who now thinks and perceives only thanks to the material provided by language, until it is also found to be incapable of constructing any kind of a stable reality. The notion of difference, as the only truth of the world and essence of every creation, was already in the forefront.

In such context, the architectural creation reconsidered both its objectives and potentialities and took considerable distances from social concerns and issues related to people's wellbeing. Our research hypothesis is that this evolution is related to the ways that the concept of difference is understood within the corresponding philosophical schemas. Specifically, a crucial point for the interpretation of difference is connected to the ways with which the world is understood as functioning through internal or external processes. In this paper, we will argue that the architectural evolution of the last decades, within the context of the semantic estrus of the postmodern structure on the one hand and the tragic cognitions of post-structuralism on the other, can be effectively interpreted through the criterion of interiority/exteriority as a pivot of difference. Ultimately, each architectural orientation is connected to a corresponding philosophical choice regarding the understanding of life; but the latter is obliged to turn to the social reality, which does not always keep equal distances from subjective or objective approaches of the world.

2. Difference and Communication: From Inside Towards Outside

Postmodernism was architectural as far as its preference for history over future, segments over composition, and randomness over consciousness, as long as it was surrendered to aesthetics, resulted in interpretive constraint and semantic

rigidity over plurality, freedom and tolerance which, on the other hand, were introduced by philosophical postmodernism [13]. In this context, the evaluative flexibility of 'and...and' was revealed as 'methodological weakness', while the multiplicity of styles was not convincing enough as complexity of thought [5]. As a result, architectural postmodernism was excepted from the postmodern program towards the 'end of domination', since, bound to 'form' in order to confront modernism, it was trapped in the scientism that was balancing the arbitrariness of the image.

Architectural postmodernism was based on linguistic structuralism, under the light of which the architectural work-text was perceived as a mental source free from externalities. Not that the anti-humanism of the closed structure did not experience theoretical deviations that recognized a role in the historical subject as well, but the laws of the system had the dominant role. Indeed, the elements of the system, acquired meaning only from the relationships between them, while their inherent meaning which we are able to perceive based on our knowledge of the outside world, was indifferent: in this sense, the content of the text is identical with its structure and is completely defined within the text [18]. Based on Saussure's [30] structural linguistics, structuralism recognizes difference as a primary principle of signification within the structure: the meaning of each element is due only to its difference from other elements of the structure, while it has nothing to do with its construction as a sign through the connection of the signifier to the signified, nor with the relationship between the sign and the object of reference, these relations are arbitrary.

Structuralism introduced a paradigm shift in the world, the transition from science to language. Reality was no longer something out there, which science can understand, but it was the language that produced, rather than described, reality. Since the word and the thing were arbitrarily connected, there was no basis for us to think that language simply represented pre-existing reality. The notion of difference, as a relationship between signs, governed language and reality, but it probably overbid in favor of a static and consolidated world, rather than the discovery of the new, renewal or change. Indeed, the differential law of structure provided a basis of certainty and stability against historical change: language was understood as a conflict-free system governed by internal laws, the shocks of which ultimately balance the structure through the change of its element relationships, that is, through the redefinition of difference relations. The text was a copy of its deep structure and difference was the cause of this copying substance. This view was also confirmed by Levi-Strauss' [25] structural anthropology, since myth, as built on binary oppositions, was considered as a mirror product of the human brain's mental functions. After all, the opposition between nature and culture converged toward the scandalous capability of a phenomenon not to belong to the one or the other but to both at the same time [26].

In architecture, structuralism was translated on the one

hand as a distinct approach of creation and on the other as the philosophical basis of architectural postmodernism. In the first case, Aldo van Eyck emphasizes the need for 'in-between realms' and detects a quality of 'labyrinthian clarity' in the produced associative meanings of space, the ambiguity of which is integral to both parts [15]. Hertzberger perceives the ambiguous quality of labyrinthian clarity - in distance from the structuralist interiority - in terms of experience, as a chance for users' individual interpretation and final configuration of space which has been left unfinished [19]. Differently, in the context of architectural postmodernism, structuralism linked architecture to historical references, introducing a new version of restoring architecture's ties to the past. While 19th-century classicism suggested the use of genuine forms of Greek and Roman antiquity, modernism favored a severance of all ties with the past as a precondition for inventing a new architecture for a new subject to inhabit it. Indeed, the architectural object of modernism constituted its identity in emphatic reference to the historical present and the social condition, within the revolutionary humanitarian context of the Marxist materialist worldview. Unity between theory and practice, between arts and techniques, as well as spatial fluidity and continuity between interior and exterior, correspond to the conception of a complete subject and a creator-composer, who through interacting with his social context can lead to progress [37]. Already after the Second World War there were noticeable reactions to the principles of modernism, while with architectural postmodernism the past regains its value, now internalized in the architectural work as a field of differential meaning production processes.

Postmodern architecture has been criticized for a complete indifference to any notion of innovation, and this has been related with an aesthetization of the past, among other things. The entanglement with the modernization that consumerism promises by highlighting individual preferences and needs, has degraded every traditional quality into sterile aesthetics and diverted their creative potential to a denial of anything new. As Frampton puts it, while Charles Moore's eclecticism in Piazza d'Italia expresses, through a scenographic composition, a consciously ironic comment on the mixing of populations in New Orleans, Stirling's Staatsgalerie seems to emerge as a random placement of architectural elements without any imaginative involvement of a creator [17]. Furthermore, Michael Graves's figurative approach of architecture is concerned with the use of traditional forms in a way that narrows the rhetorical nature of the sign: according to Eisenman, they are texts of authority without inventive perspective [13]. At the same time, the art of communication was proposed by Robert Venturi as an object of study in Las Vegas architecture, in the spontaneous significations of everyday use [41]. Along with the ambiguity of double coding, the complexity of the difficult whole and the autonomy of the decorated shed, architecture were perceived to highlight difference in human communication. A view that is also enhanced through the possibility of multiple and simultaneous readings

provided by the quality of grayness [33].

A different conception of communication, opposing architectural paradigms as above, is provided by Aldo Rossi. Not that Rossi's architecture is limited within structuralism, but by deploying a syntax of emptied signs he reverts to a conception of language as a finite closed system. As Tafuri puts it, emptied of time the universal forms which he (Rossi) recalls, constitute absolute signs which enable a 'clear narration' free from the radical cracks of reality, a linguistic system of exclusions and strict delimitations which rejects the communication codes of the era [35]. It is worth to say, though, that by his pure forms, Rossi at the same time criticizes his contemporary times and mass culture, and affirm ideology as an obstacle for any humanism, or humanistic architecture.

Without being appended to the views of structuralism, it is worth referring here to the concept of type since it presents another approach to history in relation to the concept of difference in the context of architectural creation. Kriers attempt to recover the classical values and the symbolic wealth of the traditional city through earlier forms' reinterpretations and typological mutations, given an understanding of architecture as a synthetic evolutionary process which finally achieves to meet the needs of time [23]. Furthermore, new urbanism movement considers the creative potential of typology in terms of scale, and the type seems to enhance difference in the scale both of details and the city, while proved to be not so creative in the scale of building where some uses such as housing are by definition less receptive to experimentation [22]. In new urbanism's approach, the importance of typology lies in the fact that it clearly defines the signification of the urban landscape, sets the boundaries of meaning, and in so doing coheres the community.

In particular, the question of typologies returns throughout time in architecture and is definitely related to the understanding of the production of meaning in relation to interiority/exteriority qualities of the architectural work. Types in architecture are primary arrangements of spaces that have been preserved over time through continuous transformations and repetitions expressing the relationships, needs and ways of people's life in each era. In other words, types are general ways of managing spatial programs, which through the stability of repetition have secured a kind of validation in time. Indeed, according to Quatremère de Quincy's distinction, unlike the model which is a static object of imitation, the type is an idea and cannot be copied, it produces new works and is dynamic, a place of tensions and accumulations capable to produce change and variation [34]. As Eco points out, it is postmodern aesthetics that recognized the fact that there is nothing to prevent innovation from existing in the variations of a type: in the sense that innovation does not lie in each of the multiple individual products of variation, but in the fact that the process of variation is potentially infinite, a kind of life's victory against art [11].

In conclusion, structuralism as translated into architectural postmodernism, proposed the work as a closed universe in

which the past had been internalized as a source of meaning through diverse applications of difference relations between its elements. In this function, the primary role was assumed by the image, being independent from the subject, creator or user. The result of this figurative internalization was the disconnection of meaning-making processes from collective and social processes and their limitation to elaborations of individual consumption or other experience, or even to analyses of human unaltered functions. With the exception of architectural approaches such as that of Aldo van Eyck, where meaning was a product of experiencing the complementarity of opposites, structuralism, through the understanding of difference as an inherent property of an introverted structure, was criticized for activating architecture as a field of consumer communication inhibiting any orientation towards social change, political invention or cultural renewal.

3. Difference and Liberation: From Outside Towards Outside

Moving on to poststructuralist radicalism, the concept of difference, instead of being perceived as a property of a differentiating structure which gives identity to the signifier - that is, to be different from another signifier within the structure -, is understood as a catalytic factor of suspension or even definitive cancellation of any identity. Contrary to the structuralist conception that accepts difference as result of the operation of a structure, poststructuralism perceives difference as positive and infinite, before any function or knowledge, outside any concept of structure, at the exteriority of language [10]. Lined up to this perspective, psychoanalysis recognizes the structural resemblance between unconscious and language and finds that the subject is devastated by the radical lack within it, so that any attempt to construct an identity cannot but fail [32]. Fatefully, in the poststructuralist understanding the architectural object is not confined within watertight boundaries of meaning and uses, but is left open to a continuous becoming, to incessant and undetermined transformations.

If structuralism struck the subject through an understanding of language's interiority, in which the subject is subsequently placed, the dissolution of the subject was brought about by poststructuralism by recognizing an inescapable and uncontrollable exteriority in the processes of signification. More specific, while structuralism dealt a blow to representation, as it separated the sign from the object, the word from the thing, poststructuralism exposes the futility of any meaning-making process: not only that there is no world outside language, but also that the meaning itself is unstable, therefore no reality can be expressed, not even constructed in a definite way, that is, as something that exists [10]. Meaning therefore arises as a result of a potentially infinite network of differences, instead of the difference between two signifiers, it is the product of a difference without beginning and end. The circulation of signi-

fiers never ends, so that meaning is never stabilized, but is scattered in the chain of signifiers, each sign bearing the traces of those that preceded and is going to be modified by those that follow. Here difference is a primary principle of meaning production and is understood in a context of uncontrolled and merciless exteriority.

For Derrida, the whole world is a system of bipolar oppositions constructed ideologically [28]. Every meaning is structured through the absence which is carried as a trace in every presence. Each term of a binary opposition is therefore hidden within the other. Through this oppression, hierarchies that govern each system of thought are built. But, since meaning is a product of absence, it can never be stabilized, it cannot be fixed within the limits of the word which expresses it, but it is always postponed and finally escapes. The neologism of *différance*, as both differ and postpone, refers to this dual reality of meaning, presence and absence. Deconstructionism aims to clarify the oppositions, to reveal that the strict boundaries between the two concepts are ideological constructions, and not inherent mental functions or deep structures of language. Derrida's strategy is to reverse the opposing terms and shift the opposition in order to avoid any resettlement, any internalization, while exhaustingly processing minor's importance parts of the work until resolving the oppositions that govern it. He deals with the margins of the texts, the limits, because these are the weaknesses of the text, the points that can betray its lie, as is also the case with uncontrolled speech.

In the deconstructive approaches of architecture we recognize the points of the Derridian *différance*. For Eisenman, architecture has to reinvent place as a palimpsest [13]. To this end, he suggests the concept of the 'rhetorical figure', a hybrid form that composes presence and absence, as it reveals through superposition meanings that pre-existed in a latent status. Since the elements of the built space are opaque - that is, much more than just referring to a concept, they carry it within them - they must accept absence, disengage from established meanings and open up to new ones. The input of the traces of absent elements recognizes the dynamic reality of the living city. Eisenman considers that the consistent correspondence of spatial type and function in modernity reflected outdated idealistic conceptions of meaning [12]. But, also, for Eisenman, the example of Graves's figurative representational architecture still limits thought. He argues that postmodernism must therefore find ways of breaking down the relationship between the signifier and the signified, forms free from cultural connotations.

In agreement with Derridian *différance*, Tschumi suggests architecture of disjunction, which recognizes that each construction arises from the traces of other constructions and rejects the idea of space as a composition or autonomous whole, while achieving to destabilize spatial relationships [40]. A architecture of disjunction is far from a static perception of space and systematically produces dissociations in space and time, conflicts between architectural elements and

what is part of that space, such as programmatic functions or body movement. This conflict is the only function of the architectural elements. La Villette challenges the notions of unity and order. Through superimposition and repetition, the space is constructed as an incomplete field. The boundaries are never defined, the meaning is not stabilized, the spatial episodes of the follies remain unrelated to each other, as long as they are neither parts of a common program at the site, nor any of them refer to a specific use or meaning. The result is an 'eventual architecture' which is open to difference, to interpretive multiplicity, open to an exteriority beyond the control of the creator or the architecture itself. Tschumi makes it clear that it is not the social orientation of architecture that prevents the emergence of difference, but it is the reductionist attitudes which deny deviations and limits: after all, as he says, differences and conflicts through historical allusions and ambiguous points existed also in modernism, but were hidden [38].

Challenging the limits and acknowledging the significance of difference, subsequent architectural trends introduced amorphous shells and interior spaces, folded surfaces, 'slopes and curves', attempting to demonstrate the creative dynamics of the undetermined and the random, inspired primarily from Deleuze's groundbreaking thought. If Derrida's deconstruction attempts to reveal difference by understanding the falsity of binary oppositions, Deleuze asserts the absolute positivity of difference as the prohibitive condition of any formation or distinction. In this context, life itself is being perceived as a flow of difference, moving away from a dialectical understanding of it. While dialectics understands difference as opposition and contradiction, which it overcomes and resolves, Deleuze talks about an eternal return of difference, in the sense of a repetition of potential events and tensions which, by their very nature, can never return the same, a continuous becoming through energy transformations without begins or ends [7]. In this context, Eisenman argues that the architectural quality of criticality is charged by the impossibility of truth and is realized in spaces of indefinite uses and unpredictable meanings, while introducing a blurred field of the interstitial, where contradictions are removed and the limit ceases to distinguish, whether it concerns forms, functions, concepts, qualities or localities [14]. Furthermore, the mathematical concept of the moebius strip, as introduced in the Lacanian psychoanalysis, expresses precisely this questioning of binary contradictions, the tragic paradox of an extimité ([extérieur] ex - intimité) [24]. To the extent that 'the unconscious lies outside', that is, although the unconscious is formed in a direct relationship to the signifier - outside - it constitutes the inner core of the subject, the distinction between inside and outside does not exist.

Since language is dominated by difference it is impossible to have a universal translation and, therefore, cultural creation and architecture should highlight the multitude of possible points of view, instead of a certain one. However, although Derrida attributes to postmodernism the responsibility of

bringing about the end of the modern project of sovereignty, architectural deconstruction proved to be incapable to this point since the corresponding efforts were exhausted in an attempt to highlight an unresolved openness of the building-text, overcoming the fact that meaning and culture are necessary terms in human life. By his side, Deleuze acknowledges, in Nietzsche's tragic method, the will to power as a creator of values itself, as a critical principle in the sense of a creator's devastating aggression: the object of criticism is not, anymore, justification - life is, after all, essentially just - but a new way of feeling and thinking, freed from the bondage of purpose [6]. It is a fact that postmodern softness has liberated theory from dogmatism and conceptual instrumentalism, while the conception of the subject and the world through the emergence of the unconscious, power and absence has opened up escape routes from the metaphysical interiorities of the systems of thought, bringing criticism closer to the undefined work of freedom [16]. However, at the same time, it is also a fact that the poststructuralist thought redefined criticism on the basis of difference, outside and at distance from criteria of truth and justice.

4. Difference and Carnival Polyphony: From Outside Towards Inside (and Back Again) Towards Outside

A truly postmodern approach to difference, according to Tschumi, would seek intertextuality in architecture, at a distance from its degradation into a morphological means of visual communication [39]. Indeed, in this case Venturi's declaration about 'richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning' would correspond to a condition of living one among the many, engaged with a world which does not mirror oneself, to an ethics of an open city [31]. Barthes recognizes intertextuality in writerly texts [14]. A text has no definite boundaries, but diffuses into the works that surround it, it is the result of reprocessing other texts that precede or are contemporary with it, creating infinite perspectives that flicker in time. From another point of view on intertextuality, Bakhtin ascertains the polyphonic nature of the sign, which is composed through the simultaneous presence, in the same word, of different voices which intersect, complement and contrast [2]. This process takes place within the conflictual historical social field which posits open perspectives and possibilities of meaning. At a distance from the structuralist approach of language as a system of objective relations that which ignores its fundamental relationship with the living reality, for Bakhtin language is speech, praxis and partnership, and the sign is a field of social struggle and conflict and, in this sense, subject to movement and exchange, open to an unfinished dialogue.

Indeed, Bakhtin in *Rabelais* develops the concept of Carnavalesque and describes a situation of all-popularity and all-urbanity, the lack of any hierarchy and a universal ambiguity that correlates opposites and reveals their common

constitutive and, simultaneously, conflicting nature [3]. A carnival space, a place of polyphonic interaction, is set up, where boundaries are removed only as elements of discrimination, while otherwise, as limits, they release their history and transitions within the social context. The carnival fest embodies the socio-cultural origin of dialogicality as the democratic element of language [36]. Indeed, an indispensable condition of dialogicality, as realized in *Dostoyevski's* polyphony, is the unassimilated quality of each voice, the irreducible duality [2], the confirmation of difference. Language is utterance and in this sense it holds a quality of exteriority, as it is always directive and responsive, involving the other in its performance [21]. Such a dialogical language, which is constantly strained by polyphony and conflict, indicates the peculiar regime of an eternally evolving truth [1], where difference is perceived as a begin for new meanings, in contrast to Deleuzian chaosmos or Derridian differance. In the carnivalesque, the world is constantly recreated and re-founded, maintaining difference through constant anapraxes and reworkings within a framework of social conflictual meaning-making process. The architectural translation of the carnival can refer to open spatialities where the inside and the outside retain their meaning, but each inside does not constitute a interiority as it is open and permeable from a changeable and convertible outside: inside and outside are in a sense always at the limit [29]. Such correlation between inside and outside may be understood as realized both physically, through the operation of a spatial boundary, and meaningfully, through the connection of architectural space to the historical-cultural surroundings. At both levels, architecture faces the dynamic of the threshold as a place of encounter and a critical limit of change, recreation and passage.

The element introduced by the Bakhtinian approach of difference is its conception within the social context. Indeed, Bakhtin provides us with the articulation of the historical and social-public with the private. From one point of view, it might be told that, while the social context is exterior to the individual subject, at the same time it is that interior which resists the desert of exteriority. From another, though, it is true that the entanglement of the context with the process of signification keeps the word away from the liberating capacity of exteriority. The critique against to the 'from outside towards inside' approach condenses the poststructuralist rejection of the Marxist primacy of the social instead of the individual.

Bakhtin stands in between the two approaches. The individual subject as voice is constituted through the internalization of the social context and other individual voices which then externalizes. Two things are worth highlighting here. On the one hand, the fact of the externalization of what has been internalized, 'from outside towards inside and back again towards outside', a process that recognizes equivalence to the constitutive role between the individual and the collective for each other. At the same time, and this is the most important here, during the internalization of the social context, a process

which is continuous, both the individual subject and the social context are differentiated and transformed. Laughter as displayed in the carnival celebration is an excellent example for understanding the concept of difference as multiple displacements of the relation of language to the object and the speaking subject, as the creation of new adjacencies, the exodus out of the limits of language and thought's standards.

5. Epilogue

Difference is recognized as a parameter of creation both by architectural postmodernism and the poststructuralist trends in architecture. In the first case it was clearly intertwined with historical references and put in the service of communication. In the second case it was revealed as void and absence and was suggested as a critical term for undermining hierarchies. In both cases, it strongly supported critique of ideology. And while the internalizations of postmodernism carried by inherent conservative qualities, the spatial realization of the 'ever-coming and never-present' seems not to preclude the contribution of architecture to the pursuit of liberation. But, what about justice, supposed it is considered, as Eagleton name it, as the non-deconstructible limit of deconstruction, as an ultimate condition to enter the poststructuralist exteriority? Should we then think of the limit as difference and difference as a condition of justice? The Carnavalesque provides a conception of difference which could contribute to a spatial ethos of justice, a carnival polyphonic space that decomposes meaning but always in an incomplete participatory social process of meaning production, conceiving the world from-outside-towards-inside-towards-outside, in a continuous motion that renews truth embedding it into the historical experience.

To the extent that lived space acts upon our thinking and praxis, its contribution to such differentiation of the subject, individual and collective, consists the condition which enables the anticipation of freedom. At the same time, the fact that together with this expectation of freedom, it leaves room for the involvement of the social context provides the condition which also legitimizes the expectation of justice.

Author Contributions

Charikleia Pantelidou is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Charikleia Pantelidou is an architect and adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Interior Architecture at International Hellenic University. She studied architecture (PhD, Dipl.Arch.) and social sciences (MSc, BSc) at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Her doctoral thesis investigates gated communities as a contemporary case of socio-spatial exclusion. She has conducted postdoctoral research on private/public space, as well as on collective housing, supported by scholarships awarded by the Aristotle University's Research Committee and the National Scholarships Foundation, respectively. Her research interests fall in the area of the relationship between architecture and the social/human sciences. On these themes she has extensively published in international collective volumes, journals and conferences, co-edited six books and authored one book in Greek.