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THE MYTH OF INHABITING THE MEDITERRANEAN. TRADITION AND MODERNITY OF HOUSES OVERLOOKING THE SEA

MIT O MIESZKANIU NAD MORZEM ŚRÓDZIEMNYM. TRADYCJA I NOWOCZESNOŚĆ DOMÓW Z WIDOKIEM NA MORZE

Abstract

The paper investigates two houses that in the same years interpreted the myth of inhabiting the Mediterranean in a strictly and unusual relationship with the principles of modern architecture. The two houses are *Casa Lanaras* in Saronida, Greece, by the architect Nikos Valsamakis and *Villa von Saurma* by Bruno Morassutti with Aldo Favini in Termini di Sorrento in Italy.

The generation of Valsamakis and Morassutti knew closely, in various forms, the Modern Movement, but this need for *modern* intended to reconcile it with the local cultural values: therefore, in the presence of the same modern aspirations and values – perhaps not generically local but specifically Mediterranean – both houses seem to have an interesting “at distance” dialogue.

Keywords: Mediterranean house, critical regionalism, Nikos Valsamakis, Bruno Morassutti

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest analizie dwóch domów, które w tych samych latach zinterpretowały mit śródziemnomorskiego mieszkania w ścisłym i niezwykłym odniesieniu do reguł modernistycznej architektury. Te dwa budynki to *Casa Lanaras* w Saronida w Grecji autorstwa Nikosa Valsamakisa i *Villa von Saurma* autorstwa Bruno Morassuttiego i Aldo Faviniego w Termini di Sorrento we Włoszech.

Pokolenie Valsamakisa i Morassuttiego dobrze znało modernizm w różnych formach, ale tamta potrzeba nowoczesności miała na celu pogodzenie jej z lokalnymi wartościami kulturowymi: stąd, ze względu na te same współczesne aspiracje i wartości – być może nie tyle lokalne, co specyficznie śródziemnomorskie – te dwa domy wydają się prowadzić interesujący dialog „na odległość”.

Słowa kluczowe: dom śródziemnomorski, krytyczny regionalizm, Nikos Valsamakis, Bruno Morassutti

“Let leave to the reader the task of comparing in detail *Casa Campanella* in Positano (1937) and *Casa Ugalde* in Caldes de Estrach (1951) [...] Both facing the same sea and under the same sky”. With these words, Antonio Armesto concluded his text about Cosenza, Rudofsky and Coderch,¹ in which, assumed the theme of the relationship between tradition

¹ A. Armesto Aira, *Cosenza, Rudofsky, Coderch: la tradizione come oggettività*, in M.P. Fontana, M.Y. Mayorga, Luigi Cosenza. *Il territorio abitabile*, Alinea, Firenze 2007, pp. 141–147.

and innovation in the works of three architects, he tries to investigate the role and influence of “popular, vernacular and spontaneous” architecture in their work.

Following this suggestion, a reading/comparison of two other houses “facing the same sea and under the same sky” will now be developed: *Casa Lanaras* in Saronida, Greece, by the architect Nikos Valsamàkis and *Villa von Saurma* by Bruno Morassutti with Aldo Favini in Termini di Sorrento in Italy.

However, the compositional reading of these two houses belonging to the category of *another modern*² proposes a significant difference related to the comparison of *Casa a Positano* and *Casa Ugalde* because, in this case, there is no concession to the vernacular but, even considering some biographical data of the authors, these two works can be really defined as undoubtedly “modern.” In particular, in using both constructions as a tool to achieve a singular architectural expressiveness that here becomes “Mediterranean” in establishing a privileged relationship with the landscape.

The thesis to be argued, through the analysis of the architecture, is that another Mediterranean κοινή existed in the second half of the twentieth century – the two houses were significantly built in the same years, 1961–1963 that of Valsamàkis and 1962–1964 that of Morassutti – less investigated than that linked to spontaneous architecture, aimed rather at the experience of the Masters of the Modern Movement – here in particular Mies and Frank Lloyd Wright, but perhaps also Walter Gropius – but able to express its character with originality and with respect to local context: a *koinè* built through cultural exchange with the world of international architecture and culture.

The biography and work of Nikos Valsamàkis have to be placed within *the days of Alcione*,³ a period of great importance for Greek architecture, for defining the “Greek line” in modern architecture after the complex political events of the *Third Hellenic Civilization* and the regime of Ioannis Metaxàs, the Second World War and the Civil War that followed.

The development of a cultural movement in Greece, not limited to architecture, but very actively involved, including above all musicians and writers, is the backdrop for a stable political and economic condition, for the first time, and after a long time.

Obviously one of the main work themes of the Greek architects of the Valsamàkis’ generation (born in Athens in 1924 and graduated from the Athens Polytechnic in 1953) was that of urban building apartment houses (*polykatoikia* in Greek). Considering that if in 1940, 33 per cent of the Greek population lived in an urban setting, an increase to 39 per cent in 1951 was already destined to reach 44 per cent in 1961, with rapid growth that mainly concerned the country’s capital. Valsamàkis’ first work is precisely an *apartment house in Odòs Semitèlu 5* in Athens (1951–1953) that, together with the following *apartment house in Leofòros Vassilissis Sofias 129* (1955–1957), already testify to the affection of this architect to the themes of modern declined according to some local characters. The work

² The definition is referred to the book of Luciano Semerani, *L'altro moderno*, Allemandi, Torino 2000 but also to the famous Kenneth Frampton’s *L'altro Movimento Moderno*, Silvana editore, Cinisello Balsamo 2015: both dedicated to architects and buildings that testify an idea of modernity interpreted following local identities.

³ For a deeper reading of this period in the Greek architecture started in the middle of the fifties, see A. Tzonis and A.P. Rodi, *Greece. Modern architectures in history*, Reaktion Books, London 2013. The chapter *Halcyon Days* is about the myth of Eolo’s daughter, transformed by Zeus into a sea bird that laid its eggs in winter and to which the gods of Olympus gave, during the coldest season, fifteen days of mild climate so that it could hatch and teach the little ones to fly.

of Valsamàkis is indebted to the *polykatoikia* project in via Heyden (1938) by Nikolaos Mitsakis and Dimitris Pikionis in the choice to expose the frame by moving the apartments away from the road and creating long continuous cantilevered balconies. The work is also certainly influenced by the work of Giuseppe Terragni. The Lombard Terragni and the Greek Valsamàkis articulate the facades in their projects with three different depths – in the base, in the body of the apartments with cantilevered balconies, and in the crowning – which underlines with a different use of colour and some materials: stone on the ground floor, for example, wood for the *brise soleil* – all justified by the attention to the issue of protection against the strong sun. These themes become even more evident in *Casa Lanaras* in Saronida (1961–1963) which stands on a hill facing the sea, at kilometer 47 of the coastal road that connects Athens with Cape Sùnio. The house consists of two distinct parts: the sleeping area with three bedrooms, rooted to the ground with thick walls and facing the east, and a large living room completely open on three sides – to the north there is the kitchen – in order to intercept all possible panoramic views. The large living room is defined by two horizontal floors, two thin concrete slabs with large overhangs on slender steel columns which, in fact, define a huge space towards the panorama while the glass diaphragm between the interior (of the house) and exterior (of the terrace) disappears: similarly to what happens in *Casa Tugendhat* in Brno by Mies but, in a perhaps bolder but also more significant comparison, in the *Neue Nationalgalerie* in Berlin you feel “inside” the building as soon as you cross the roof line, even though you are still in an exterior space, and even here the space of inhabiting is protected by the upper slab that builds a *shelter*,⁴ here above all for the sun, covered but open to nature.

So, what Mediterranean themes does this house develop? The house is a place of shelter from such beautiful nature, from which sometimes it is necessary to be protected: so it happens for heat and light at certain times of the day. This house defines a space of mediation between the inside and the outside, a space that still has an “interior” character given by the presence of the roof, but overlooks the landscape and, at the same time, allows you to enter the house from multiple angles. The two thin slabs represent an abstraction, in their lightness, of the connection to the ground and the connection to the sky, identifying the space of inhabiting. The house privileges, in this way, the horizontal dimension that looks at the very long horizon line and at the landscape. If what Iosif Brodskij wrote that “There are places where [...] geography provokes history”⁵ is true, then the Mediterranean is one of these places par excellence and this house declines this singular condition also in the relationship with “the ground [which] is not, therefore, an abstract plane but constitutes an architectural experience”⁶. The more obvious theme of the choice of materials is, then, added: as in the case of apartment houses in Athens, the wood is used for the screenings of the windows and the local stone for the walls of the sleeping area and for those that define the exterior spaces of this house.

⁴ Among many texts dedicated to the archetype of the shelter, see R. Capozzi, *L'idea di riparo*, Clean, Napoli 2012.

⁵ I. Brodskij, *Fuga da Bisanzio*, Adelphi, Milano 1987, p. 13.

⁶ L. Ficarelli, M. Turchiarulo, *Architetture topografiche. Principi di forma nella costruzione del territorio* [in:] S. Nuzzo, G. Andria, P. Camarda (eds.), *Contributi di Ricerca 1 – Research Contributions 1: 1° Workshop sullo stato dell'arte delle ricerche nel Politecnico di Bari – 1st Workshop on the State of the Art and Challenges of Research Efforts at POLIBA*, Bari, 3–5 dicembre 2014, Gangemi, Roma 2014, pp. 359–363.

Many of these themes were also these of the long research on the house of Aris Konstantinidis, a Greek architect who had a greater critical fortune in Italy than Valsamàkis. Only one kilometre away, at number 48, along the same coastal road of *Casa Lanaras*, is Konstantinidis' *Week-end house* (1961–1962)⁷: also here there is a large entrance area in contact with the partially open but covered living room, again with large openings to intercept the panorama, that favours a work on the horizontal dimension, with a large space of mediation – here a loggia – between inside and outside. On the other hand, it has been written that “the history of post-war Greek architecture came out with domestic architecture, and in particular, with single-family homes located in the peripheries or near the sea.”⁸ However, there is a substantial difference in the way these two houses interpret the relationship with the theme of construction. The construction system of Konstantinidis' house is that of the stone wall, with the innovation, compared to the more introverted previous houses, of the use of only three parallel partitions with visible concrete beams, which allow large openings of the domestic space towards the landscape. Instead, Valsamàkis' house, as mentioned, is based on a composition consisting of a few, identifiable elements: two concrete slabs and steel columns. Both systems express constructive sincerity: it is superfluous to say something about this subject for the second house, while in the case of Konstantinidis, the partitions denounce their function of supporting the roof, which uses a different material, and remain independent thanks to the solution of the different plan and material for the panels under the windows. However, Konstantinidis' house still represents a reflection, albeit cultured, on spontaneous Greek architecture: he stated

[...] I tried to find in spontaneous architecture what I wanted to create today: simplicity of layout, honesty and constructive discipline, and a quality that harmonizes the building with the spirit and plastic character of the Greek landscape and of its people.⁹

On the other hand, Valsamàkis has already shown his interest in working with the techniques of his time and, in this house, he relies on the constructive principle that is transfigured into an expressive principle able to create a house that establishes a different relationship, non-mimetic, with the landscape, that aspires to the construction of a place through the abstraction of the architectural forms.

In 1966, in the issue of *Bauen+Wohnen* dedicated to the eighty years of Mies van der Rohe, Aris Konstantinidis answers the question about the importance of the work of the master from Aachen and describes Mies as “sober and classic”, talking about the continuous unity of internal and external space that he was able to create thanks to the “framework-building” and defining “less is more” as “[...] one of the best ways for the future of contemporary architecture.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, it was rather the house of Nikos Valsamàkis who, in

⁷ Both houses are often localized in Anavyssos instead of the near Saronida as in O. Doumànīs, *Architettura greca contemporanea. Guida 1945–1988*, Aletheia, Firenze 1990, where the forms 97 and 98, on pages 134 and 135, are respectively dedicated to the house by Valsamàkis and by Konstantinidis.

⁸ Y. Aesopos, Y. Simeoforidis (eds.), *Landscape of modernisation. Greek Architecture, 1960s and 1990s*, Metapolis Press, Atene 1999, p. 51.

⁹ A. Konstantinidis, *Projects + Buildings*, Agra, Atene 1981, reported in M.A. Caminiti, M. Mangano, C. Marchese, L. Marino, *Percorsi d'Architettura ad Ingegneria*, Biblioteca del Cenide, Canitello (RC) 2005, p. 115.

¹⁰ Full answer to the two questions “How do you see the importance, in general, of the work of Mies van der Rohe?” and “What influence did the inner world of Mies van der Rohe exert in his work?”

relying on construction as an “exact expression” of architecture, seemed to fully understand the Miesian lesson.

Speaking specifically about construction, moving to the other side of the Mediterranean in Italy – on the Tyrrhenian coast to be precise – another house designed and built, with the collaboration of the engineer Aldo Favini by Bruno Morassutti (an Italian architect, born in Padua in 1920 and graduated from the IUAV of Venice in 1946 who had spent a year in Taliesin, in the Frank Lloyd Wright community-studio at a very young age), is representative of patient research into the relationship between forms of construction and expressiveness of architecture. Also in the case of Morassutti’s research, the cultural context in which he lived is important: in this case, post-war Milan which, as it has been written, is

Design forge not only for the architects of the previous generation, again in ferment, but also for those, like Morassutti, who finished their studies immediately after the war and that, coming from other cities, found in Milan the possibility of experimenting, in the architectural project, the interconnection of forms, materials, construction techniques and construction sites.¹¹

Strengthened by this cultural *milieu*, as well as by his interest in artistic research, Morassutti built a house in Termini di Sorrento, on the Campania coast overlooking Capri. *Villa von Saurma* was commissioned to Morassutti who developed the project with Aldo Favini for the structural calculation of the slab on four columns which constitutes the main idea that defines the whole house, also in its relationship with the singular landscape.

Therefore, analogies and differences in the ideal remote dialogue with Nikos Valsamakis’ house in Saronida. The attitude of the architects related to the singular morphology of the ground and the nature of the place is similar, even if the solutions are partially different. Also, the house by Morassutti is, in fact, far from any mimesis with the nature: it artificializes the slope through the construction of wall terraces, then placing the house on a podium. Also, in *Villa von Saurma*, the living and sleeping areas become “autonomous parts”, even if in Sorrento there is no one part that prevails over the other, but the house presents two twins, staggered, building parts.

But the two themes that, in a broader and more relevant way, this house shared with the previously analysed Greek house, are that of the relationship with the landscape and with the construction to which both houses declare the formal definition of their character. The roof slab here is not a slender plane with a constant section but has a curved section, tapered towards the ends and becomes a sort of *sail*¹² – able to evoke, in another way, the same idea of lightness. This slab bases on four columns, with relevant overhang in all directions, and, in this way, creates a covered and protected space, a continuous and wider “interior-exterior”,

posed to Aris Konstantinidis by the editorial staff of the magazine “Bauen+Wohnen” in issue no. 5/1966, is reported in L. Marino, *Aris Konstantinidis. Un caso greco tra modernità e tradizione*, Aión, Firenze 2008, pp. 138–140.

¹¹ A. Torricelli, *Tra tecnica e forma* [in:] G. Barazzetta, R. Duilio, *Bruno Morassutti. 1920-2008 opere e progetti*, Mondadori-Electa, Milano 2009, pp. 8–10.

¹² Two relevant texts, here quoted, on *Villa von Saurma* are the one by Roberto Duilio (G. Barazzetta, Roberto Duilio, *op. cit.*, pp. 136–141) and, especially about the theme of construction, Martino Doimo (*Bruno Morassutti, con Aldo Favini (strutture), Villa von Saurma a Termini di Sorrento, 1962–64* [in:] C. D’Amato, *Il progetto d’architettura fra didattica e ricerca, Vol 4. Architettura e Costruzione, Atti del 1° Congresso Internazionale*, Bari, 2–6 maggio 2011, Rete Vitruvio, POLIBA-Press, Bari 2011, pp. 2029–2038).

wider than the rooms which are defined by thin diaphragms of glass or local stone walls, laterally, because here the view has to look at the island of Capri which, from this place, really seems to be within reach. If, as Roberto Duilio stressed, the form of the slab closely resembles Wright's *Walter House in Quasqueton* in Iowa, the tapering of the columns and the solution to define the capital "by absence" remind the cruciform pillar of *Neue Nationalgalerie* (1962–1968) by Mies even if it cannot be demonstrated that Morassutti knew the Mies' work. Similarly, in relation to the work of Mies van der Rohe, it should be noted that the stone walls never touch the roof slab. On the other hand, it is perhaps even more interesting to argue that the rational work on the expressiveness of construction and on abstraction as a possible search for both classic and modern language has led to similar results in different and sometimes distant places. This house is, therefore, a Mediterranean and modern house, as the beautiful description of it by Giulio Barazzetta emphasises:

The roof on the four columns of Baranzate is freed from the perimeter of the glass curtain. The doors and windows, set back under the shell of the roofs, reveal the supports [...] Thus, the ground in terraces, assumed as a sort of base, coagulates in the retaining walls, becoming a fence and finally a masonry screen, in the shade of the roofs. The articulation of the house flows seamlessly between inside and outside [...].¹³

Therefore, what conclusions can be drawn from this "similarity" of themes and characters between *Casa Lanaras* in Saronida, Greece, by Nikos Valsamakis and *Villa von Saurma* by Morassutti and Favini in Termini di Sorrento?

Certainly in distant places, these two works, as mentioned, are the product of a fertile and lively cultural environment in which these architects, along with others and with other artists,¹⁴ define a line of work that can be described as "critical regionalism."

Not by chance, this is a concept inaugurated by Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre,¹⁵ even if the definition by Kenneth Frampton is better known: "[...] a new culture of building which, while accepting a potentially liberating of modernization, nevertheless resists to being totally absorbed by global imperatives [...]"¹⁶. In Italy and Greece, a similar direction of work was, with many differences, *in nuce* for some previous generations. In Greece, the aforementioned Mitsakis and Pikionis, but also the less known Kyriakos Panayiotakos, Stamo Papadakis, Georgios Kontoleon and many others, have for example declined the stylistic features of the international style relating them to the conditions of light and landscape of their land. In Italy, Enrico Mantero's theses on the possibility of identifying a geographical-cultural triad of

¹³ G. Barazzetta, *Via Quadronno 24* [in:] G. Barazzetta, R. Duilio, *op. cit.*, pp. 35–41.

¹⁴ In Greece, for example, the birth of a "regionalist direction" is identified even before the Second World War and, alongside the importance of the figure of Dimitris Pikionis for architecture, is that of Angelos Sikelianos, a poet who conceived and directed, with his wife Eva Palmer, the Delphi Festivals of 1927 and 1930, who "[...] succeeded in bringing together a multidisciplinary group, creating a platform that enabled the Greek regionalist modern movement of the late 1920s to become visible internationally." See the Chapter *Open Wide the Windows – Let the Sun Come in!* in: A. Tzonis and A.P. Rodi, *op. cit.*, pp. 81–126.

¹⁵ The first definition of "critical regionalism" in architecture is in L. Lefaivre, A. Tzonis, *The grid and the pathway*, Architettura in Greece, 1981, no. 15, pp. 164–178. This theme accompanied all the researches of the two authors until the recent L. Lefaivre, A. Tzonis, *Critical Regionalism: Architecture and Identity in a Globalised World*, Prestel, New York 2003.

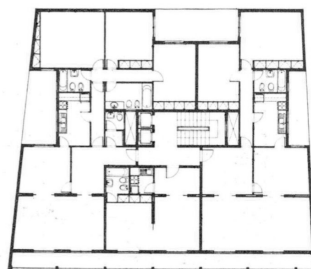
¹⁶ K. Frampton, *Luogo, forma, identità culturali*, Domus, 1966, no. 673, giugno, p. 20.

Italian Rationalism, in its heroic period, with local declinations in Rome, Milan and Turin, not so much because of the morphology of the places but because of the context that leads architects like Libera, Terragni and Figini and Pollini to make “[...] Romanesque, Baroque and eighteenth-century neoclassical [...] the deep stilts of their cultural spheres [...]”¹⁷ Mantero associates with this reflection the images of *Villa Malaparte* in Capri by Libera, the project for the *Cortesella* by Terragni in Como and the *Asilo-nido* in Ivrea by Figini and Pollini.

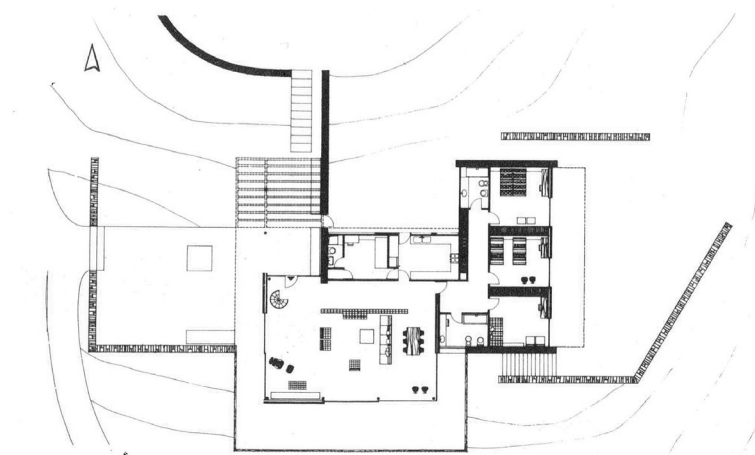
The generation of Valsamàkis and Morassutti is even more immersed, perhaps in a more conscious way, far from political conditioning, in this work theme because it has known, in various forms, closely the Modern Movement, but this need of *modern* has intended to reconcile it with the local cultural values: therefore, in the presence of the same modern aspirations and values – perhaps not generically local but specifically Mediterranean – the two houses seem much less distant than they are on a geographical map.

Finally, the works of Valsamàkis and Morassutti testify to a path that remains of great interest even in a topicality that is too often equally divided between those who pursue a global architecture (everywhere similar as the products of the global market), and on the other hand, those who take refuge in the comforting dream of “architecture without architects” as the only possible solution, forgetting a nobler tradition, also entirely Mediterranean, which is characterized by the aspiration for the classic and with it, to the longevity of Architecture.

¹⁷ E. Mantero (ed.), *Il Razionalismo italiano*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1984, pp. 12–29. In Mantero’s introduction, the above thesis is accompanied by images of *Villa Malaparte* in Capri by Adalberto Libera, the project for the *Cortesella* district in Como by Giuseppe Terragni and the *Nursery* in Ivrea by Figini and Pollini.



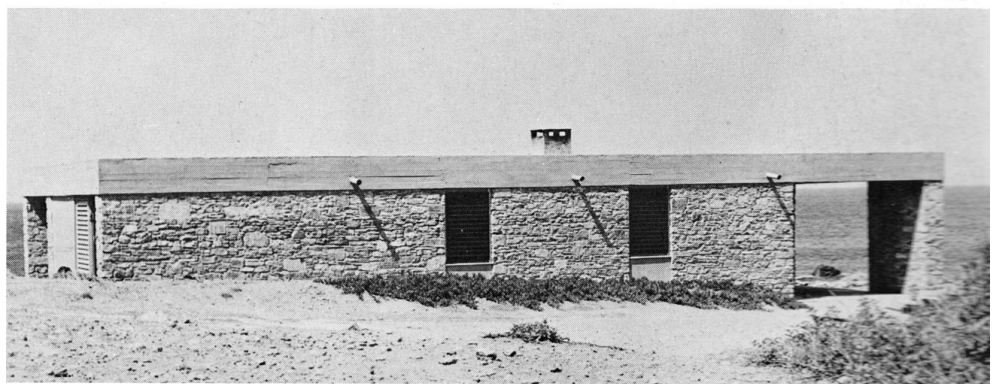
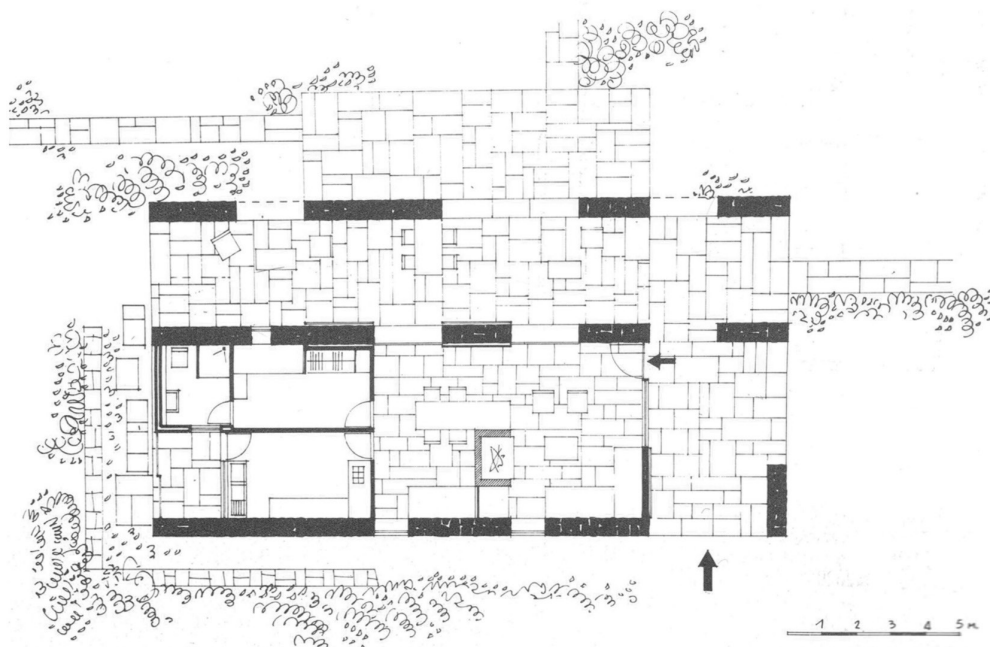
III. 1. N. Valsamàkis, *Apartment house in Leoforos Vassilissis Sofias 129*, 1955–1957 (O. DOUMÀNIS, *Architettura greca contemporanea. Guida 1945–1988*, Aletheia, Firenze 1990, p. 79).



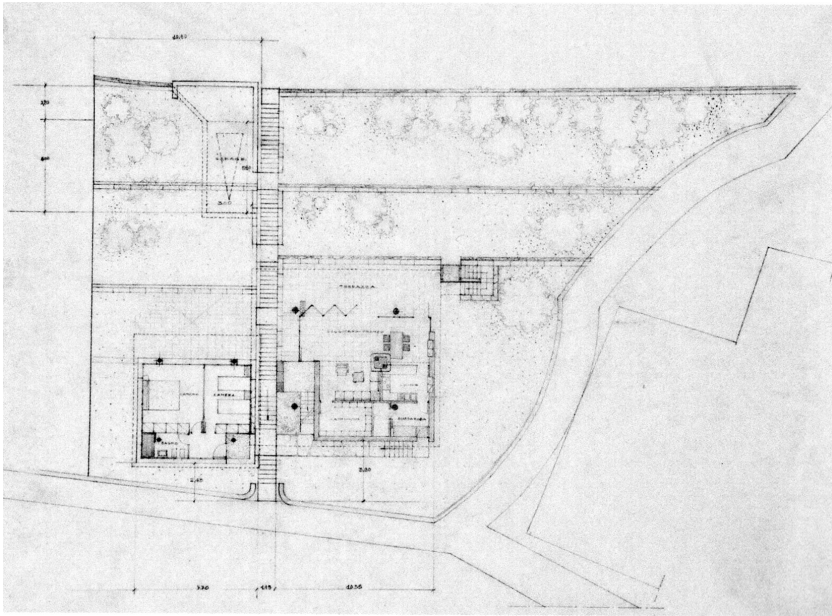
III. 2. N. Valsamàkis, *Lanaras House* in Saronida, 1961–1963. Plan (O. DOUMÀNIS, *Architettura greca contemporanea. Guida 1945–1988*, Aletheia, Firenze 1990, p. 134).



III. 3. N. Valsamàkis, *Lanaras House* in Saronida, 1961–1963. View (O. DOUMÀNIS, *Architettura greca contemporanea. Guida 1945–1988*, Aletheia, Firenze 1990, p. 134).



Ill. 4. A. Konstantinidis, *Week-end house* in Saronida, 1961–1962. Plan and view (O. DOUMÀNIS, *Architettura greca contemporanea. Guida 1945–1988*, Aletheia, Firenze 1990, p. 135).



Ill. 5. B. Morassutti with A. Favini, *Villa von Saurma*, 1962–1964. Plan (G. BARAZZETTA e R. DUILIO, *Bruno Morassutti. 1920–2008 opere e progetti*, Mondadori-Electa, Milano 2009, p. 137).



Ill. 6. B. Morassutti with A. Favini, *Villa von Saurma*, 1962–1964. View (G. BARAZZETTA e R. DUILIO, *Bruno Morassutti. 1920–2008 opere e progetti*, Mondadori-Electa, Milano 2009, p. 138).

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