

MIES COMES TO GREECE: A. JAMES SPEYER AT NTUA

Between 1957 and 1960, A. James Speyer served as a Fulbright visiting professor at the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA) in the Faculty of Architecture. The Fulbright program was established to foster mutual understanding across the world, and Speyer was a choice candidate for such cultural exchange. An American, Speyer had studied and become a professor under Mies van der Rohe at IIT. In 1957, it was his time to travel to Athens, the city of the Parthenon. Although only a brief exchange, one would think that his three years in Greece promoted the vision of the Fulbright program: the American introduced his Greek students to the work and the educational method of the great German master.

Eventually, many of Speyer's students became important figures in the local architectural community. Nevertheless, Greek architectural historians have only superficially studied Speyer's impact. The main source of information on his work remains the oral history recorded by Pauline Saliga in 1986. Other historiographical details were independently contributed by some of the former students.

Does this mean that Speyer's work will soon be lost to history? Seventy years have passed, and only a few of his former students are still available for an interview. In Athens, Dimitris and Suzana Antonakakis were available to meet me in their office. My efforts in traveling to Chicago immediately sparked interest, and Antonakakis showed me one of her student projects she has kept all these years, together with her beautiful memories. The project is published here for the first time (figures 1 and 2). How then was Speyer received in Athens?

Author

Vasileios I. Chanis
TU Delft

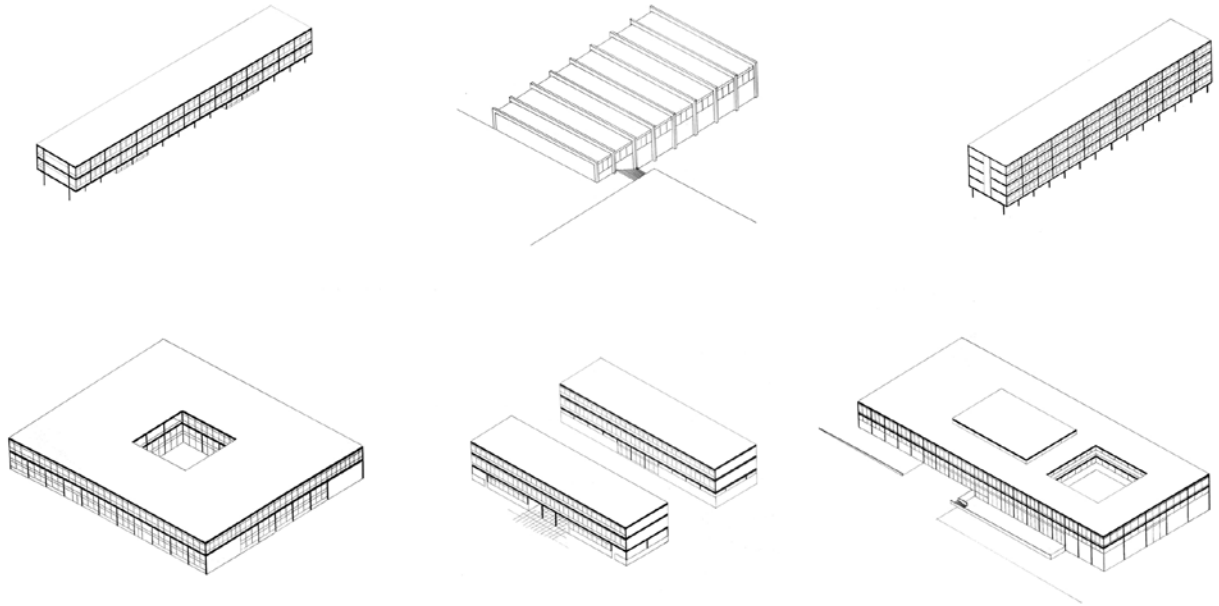
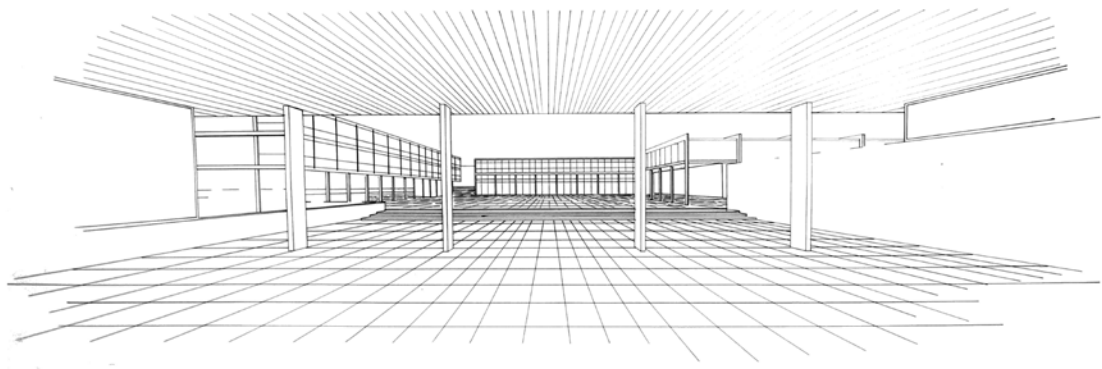


Figure 1: Design Thesis project by Suzana Antonakakis under A. James Speyer. (Source: Suzana Antonakakis.)

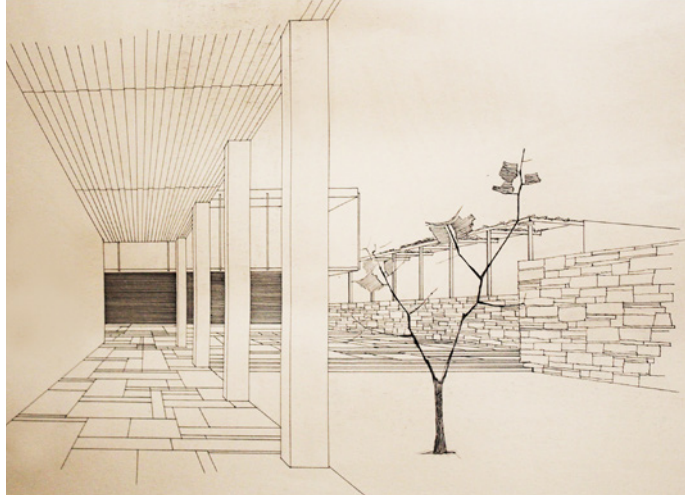
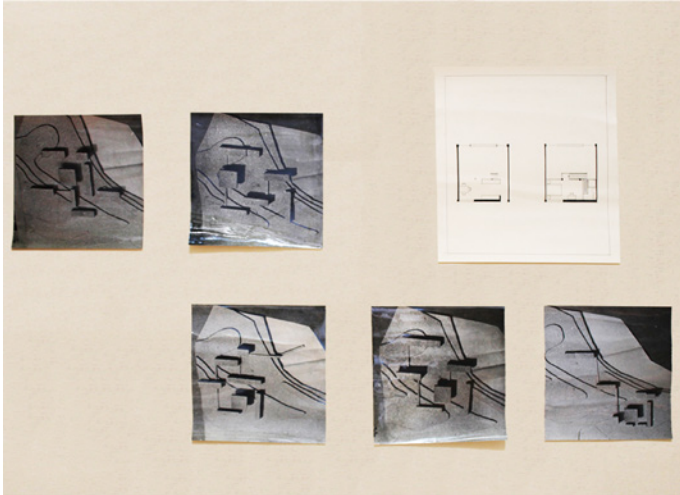
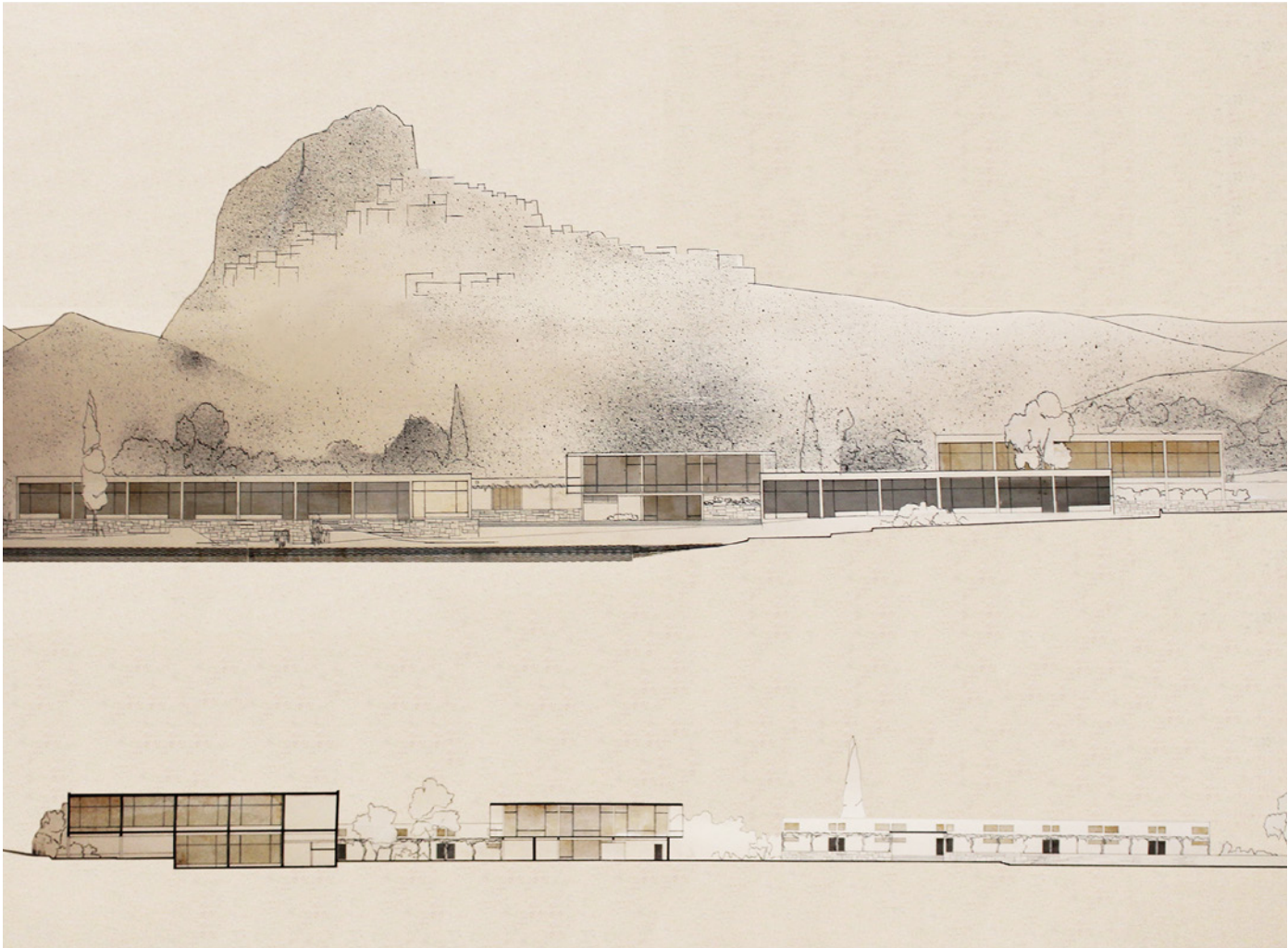


Figure 2: Design Thesis project by Suzana Antonakakis under A. James Speyer. (Source: Suzana Antonakakis.)

By the late 1950s, almost everyone at NTUA venerated three great professors, namely, Michelis, Pikionis, and Ghikas, each of whom pioneered a different area of expertise. However, this circumstance also meant that students did not necessarily trust foreign newcomers such as Speyer. Nevertheless, partially with support from Michelis, the Fulbrighter came fast in the students' favor. To convince myself, I looked at the numbers: In 1957, Speyer supervised 27 students, then 38, and then 60 in the following two years.

After his remarkably quick adaptation to the Athenian environment, the NTUA gave Speyer absolute freedom in organizing his studio. In a historical interview with Saliga, Speyer mentioned that he was free to do projects "related to the kind of thing, that [he] had been exposed to as a student with Mies, and that [he] had taught as a professor under Mies."¹

This development went hand in hand with Speyer initially teaching architectural design studio, but later supervising final design theses, and eventually completely replacing the Chair of Architectural Compositions, which would otherwise have been in charge of the theses.² In line with these facts, the oral history records suggest that students tried to benefit as much as they could from Speyer's teaching strategy and knowhow.³

Speyer organized his design studio mainly following the contemporary model at IIT. In particular, he valued the Miesian studio culture and replicated it in Athens. He worked closely with each student, which allowed him to monitor the designs in progress. For this reason alone, one may say that Speyer was strict to today's standards. Rules, practice, and discipline came at the cost of free individual expression. At every design stage, the professor demanded from each student three different design proposals, but students did not initially perceive that this created a freedom of choice.⁴

Despite Speyer's strictness, Suzana Antonakakis appreciated her master as an approachable professor who knew how to pay attention to the needs and concerns of each individual student. Ironically, this quality might have been the result of the same close collaboration between professor and students. Speyer also had a contribution in helping students "digest" the subjects that the other Greek professors taught, mainly through his wide knowledge of references from the architectural past.⁵

What may somehow seem a departure from the Miesian model was the way Speyer came up with architectural examples to explain his own approach. This led to a mode of design that included architectural history.⁶ Not surprisingly, Antonakakis told me that the students perceived Speyer as an "encyclopedia of modernity." His knowledge of the International Style, and the ease with which he recalled buildings and people was a luxury very much valued. In 1958, Mies was prominently featured in the 79th issue of *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*. This fact increased Speyer's and his master's reputation in Greece, outside academia.

Speyer tested some of the most progressive methods of architectural design at the time in a context deeply tied to history and cultural heritage. This circumstance makes him more than just a transmitter of the Miesian model of education. For Speyer, the cultural heritage and the sense of place were essential parts of architectural design. What then remained was a great, perhaps fruitful, contradiction.

Is Speyer a lost legend? The Antonakakis couple, as well as the few remaining records, tell the story of a forgotten legacy, embellished by the passage of time—but a beautiful legend no longer told. It is indeed paradoxical that the three years Speyer spent in Athens remain, until today, neglected in the history of modern Greek architecture. Did his teaching continue influencing the work of young architects in the troubled decade of the 1960s? Do historians have methods to recover this past when they write the history of the few big influencers, or will they simply leave out people like Speyer, whose students still dream of their time with him?

Bibliography

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Saliga, Pauline and A. James Speyer. "Oral History of A. James Speyer." Interview by Pauline Saliga, compiled under the auspices of the Chicago Architects Oral History Project, Department of Architecture, the Art Institute of Chicago, 1986.

Notes

1. Saliga and Speyer, interview, 97.

2. Antonakakis, "James A. Speyer: The Fertile Alienation," 5.

3. Saliga and Speyer, interview, 93.

4. Antonakakis, "James A. Speyer: The Fertile Alienation," 9.

5. Antonakakis, "James A. Speyer: The Fertile Alienation," 6.

6. Antonakakis, "James A. Speyer: The Fertile Alienation," 5.