

The pioneer spirit

Designer **Thomas Doxiadis** is setting trends in his homeland of Greece by integrating contemporary garden design schemes with the ancient landscape in a way that respects both the old and the new... ➤

Photos by Clive Nichols (unless otherwise stated) **Words** Louisa Jones





Previous page, and this page: Houses from the luxury development on Antiparos, which are built low and flat to not interfere too much with the existing landscape and vegetation

➤ **GREECE IS ONE BIG** archeological dig, where ‘site memory’ is inescapable. The landscape loved and visited today, however wild in appearance, has been shaped by millennia of human use. Greece is a hotspot in today’s debate about man’s possible place in nature – destroyer or partner?

As pointed out in a recent study [see sources], “There is often more biodiversity in a single square kilometre of the Mediterranean than in any area 100 times larger in the northern parts of Europe.” This is attributed in part to human “co-evolution” with other species; some researchers even propose ancient Mediterranean agro-forestry as a model for future sustainability.

Greece is also a place where landscape architecture has only recently been recognised as an essential profession. Thomas Doxiadis is a pioneer in this new generation, for whom foreign work experience is still essential. In 2001 he set up his own cross-disciplinary practice, doxiadis+ in Athens, and much of the team’s work is redesigning places of great beauty, steeped in site memory, for tourism and private leisure use that potentially endanger them. In 2010, ➤

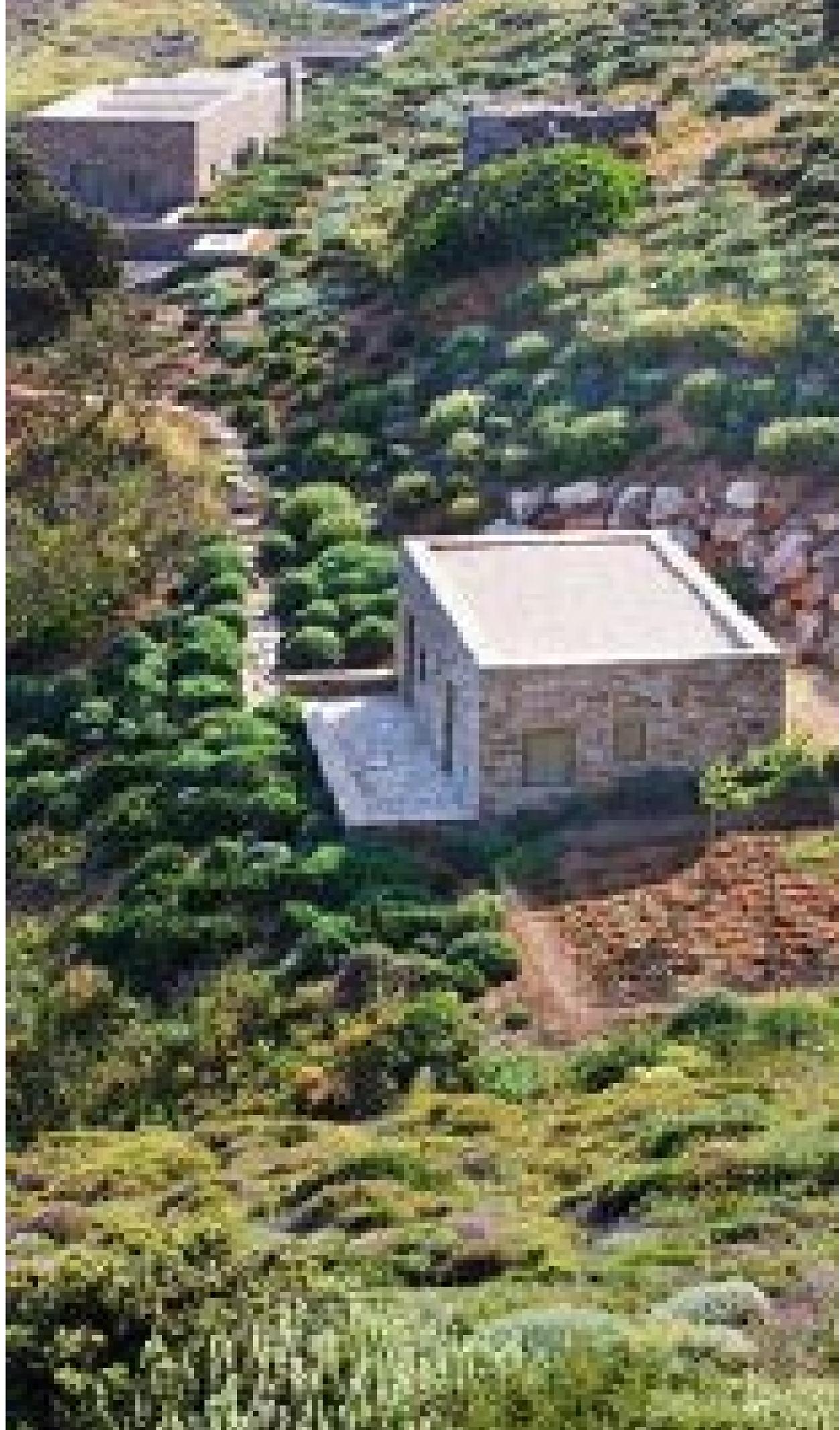
- doxiadis+ won an Emerging Architecture Awards Commendation for “identifying historical and contemporary systems of structures and combining them in a new, integrated and sustainable landscape”. The main project was a luxury housing development on 16 hectares of steep land on the Aegean island of Antiparos. The developer, OLIAROS, assembled a pool of distinguished young architects who then worked with Thomas Doxiadis and his collaborator on this project, Terpsi Kremali.

Preserving identity

Each of the eight houses has a swimming pool, three covered parking spaces and exterior individual driveways. Thomas points out: “This is a landscape where windswept vegetation stays low. Everything you do shows up immediately. The most important thing was to find an organising structure for a development visible from so many angles.” The site is a typical Mediterranean configuration: on the lower slopes, drystone terracing once supported farming, while higher up the windswept scrubland known as *phrygana* in Greece was pasture.

The houses are mainly built in the island’s own idiom – low and flat, using local stone. doxiadis+ was concerned to preserve the existing landscape identity and special care was needed to integrate the roads, often hidden by low stone walls. The landscape architects worked closely with their stonemasons who are mainly Albanian and proud of their skills. Excavated soil was recycled as part of the terracing restoration. The planting was particularly subtle. Aerial photographs helped determine the *phrygana*’s “fractal patterns” and four different zones were determined.

The first, near the houses, is irrigated and planted with “primarily resilient species, which aesthetically mimic local vegetation”. Then comes a “zone of structured mixture where ‘Mediterranean’ plants are planted so that interstices form between them. These interstices are progressively re-colonised by native species, resulting in a static/dynamic combination.” This blends into a zone featuring the “accelerated re-colonisation of native species. Left unplanted, but randomly irrigated for the first years, it hastens re-colonisation by surrounding native species. Irrigation is progressively eliminated resulting in a naturally dynamic zone.”





The Doxiadis gift is synthesis, between vulnerable archaic sites and new functions; economy and ecology

Finally, there are large stretches of untouched spontaneous growth. The transitions between the four zones work by mixing a dominant species with smaller amounts of those growing nearby, then gradually shifting the balance. Truly native sub-species were hard to find in nurseries and in some cases were grown by the team. The plants included *Centaurea spinosa*, *Sarcopoterium spinosum*, *Calendula arvensis*, *Inula viscosa*, *Chrysanthemum coronarium*, *Limoniastrum*, a range of local cistus, thymes and oregano.

Winning combinations

In recent years, doxiadis+ has undertaken a wide range of projects. For the ancient ‘Square of Heroes’ in Elefsina, “the place of Mother Earth, of nature and agriculture”, now a post-industrial site, they proposed an evolving wheat field growing through a metal grate, in a space defined by vines and olive trees. In an area to the south of Athens, an ecological park, designed with a limited budget for a much-degraded public beach, includes natural stream regeneration, a wilderness area and renewable energy sources for power.



On Milos, a volcanic Cycladic island where mining has been practised for some 7,000 years, a kaolin mine next to a medieval monastery will be transformed into an open-air landscape museum, restored in such a way that “its dramatic features will be visible only when one enters the crater itself... Strategically, the design foregrounds the mine’s interesting elements by turning them into land art” to display the strong lines of terracing, contrasts between red rock and the bright white kaolin, and the historic hand-made tunnel. Slopes will be planted in a “camouflage” pattern to integrate them into the surrounding landscape.

Some of the firm’s work is also private: a villa on Myconos features a “distillation” ➤

Clockwise from far left: The landscape around the buildings on Antiparos is carefully structured into zones with planting nearest the houses gradually giving way to more naturally dynamic areas; on a difficult site with great differences in elevation, traditional landscape elements such as the *pazoulas* (agricultural terraces), *xerolithies* (drystone walls), and *phrygana* are used in contemporary ways to connect the spaces – here the protected rear of the house; the wheat grows at the level of the ancient remains, and through a metal grate to reach the present level

Plans left and above: Thomas Doxiadis Studio



Anti-clockwise from left: Thomas uses sub-shrubs to weave patterns of light and shade that are obviously planted, but echo the local vegetation; a plan showing how the kaolin mine on Milos is to be transformed – the kaolin powder is stacked into large cones; sketches for the ecological park south of Athens with differential natural re-vegetation and dunes; natural species growing at the Antiparos site

Plans/photo right: Thomas Doxiadis Studio



of native forms and vegetation and their use in a contemporary aesthetic. This includes the use of plants, which are all low-maintenance Mediterranean vegetation, again using terracing.” The area between the pool and the sea has been landscaped using simple gravel, big rocks found on site, and sparse *Hyparrhenia hirta* (a native grass), giving onto a view of the sacred island of Delos.”

Thomas is closely related to Constantine Doxiadis, a pioneer ecologist-architect and urban planner in the 1960s, who made a point of training also as a stonemason. One of his uncles publishes best-selling novels (in English) about logic and mathematics. An aunt is past president of the Mediterranean Garden Society. In this culture, mathematics, architecture, landscape design, masonry, botany and gardening are not separate categories,

much less opposing ones, but all part of the same study of Nature. The Doxiadis gift is synthesis, between vulnerable archaic sites and new functions; between architecture and landscape, economy and ecology; between the vernacular idiom and modern minimalism.

Sources

doxiadis+
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 Tel +30 210 6770662
www.doxiadisplus.com
www.antiparosdesignproperties.com
The Mediterranean Region: Biological Diversity in Space and Time by Jacques Blondel, James Aronson, Jean-Yves Bodiou, and Gilles Bœuf (OUP 2010)
 Louisa Jones is preparing *Mediterranean Landscape Art* for Thames & Hudson



About the designer

Thomas Doxiadis graduated from Harvard in 1992 with degrees in Visual and Environmental Studies and Fine

Arts. His thesis on revitalising the economy of a traditional village in the Peloponnese won prestigious prizes. In the mid 1990s he worked for the city of Athens, spent time in Berlin, then returned to Harvard to take Masters degrees in architecture and landscape architecture. This led to work in both New York and Athens again. Thomas also mobilised the first public large-scale tree transplanting program, saving 650 olive trees at the Athens Equestrian Centre. He set up his own company doxiadis+ in 2001.