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Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Dutch connections

Citation (APA)

Panigyrakis, P. I. (2020). Arthur Staal, notes on the Greek landscape. In S. van Faassen, C. Hein, & P. Panigyrakis (Eds.), *Dutch connections: Essays on international relationships in architectural history in honour of Herman van Bergeijk* (pp. 265-273). (Inaugural speeches and other studies in the Built Environment; Vol. special issue). Delft University of Technology.

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Arthur Staal, notes on the Greek landscape

In 1944 amidst the Nazi occupation, a book on Greece circulated in the Netherlands, was quickly sold-out and circulated again in 1946 and 1951. Its title was *Hellas. Een reis door Griekenland* [Hellas. A journey through Greece] and its author was Arthur Staal (1907-1993), a young architect who found himself in the epicenter of the developments of Dutch modernism, and whose achievements in the drawing board were paralleled with his ventures in faraway countries of the Middle East and the Mediterranean. The country of Greece, and its landscape were of particular importance to him and the development of his architectural thinking.¹

On and around Greece

Through a national competition in 1935, Staal was awarded the prestigious Prix de Rome of the Rijksacademie [Academy of Visual Arts] in Amsterdam. An occasion that started the long trajectory of his acquaintance with Greece. The award included the funding of a three-year study on the arts and architecture of ancient civilizations. Seizing the opportunity, Staal undertook two long journeys between 1935 and 1939 and recorded his memoirs in two books, one of which dealt exclusively with Greece.² As the Dutch academy designated,³ Staal's first journey took him southwards crossing France and the coasts of Spain to reach Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. From there, Staal shipped to Greece and focused on the study of the archaeological sites of Olympia, Delphi, Athens, Corinth, Delos and Santorini. It was in this first journey that Staal decided to return again in Greece on a second trip of his own initiative for a wider survey of the land and its people.

Indeed, four years later, in 1939, Staal ventured again from the Netherlands, and toured the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean: Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Jordania and Cyprus.⁴ He finally reached Greece on the 27th of August. He stayed there for the next four and a half months that became essentially the main subject of his *Hellas* book.

Arthur Staal, architect

Staal came from a family with a long tradition in architecture. His father, J.F. Staal, was the co-founder of one of the most renowned partnerships of early 20th century Netherlands: the Staal-Kroopholler office where Arthur also came to work. From 1928 Arthur also maintained his own office that attracted important commissions including the laboratories and administrative tower of the Shell Corporation in Amsterdam (1971). Educated and experienced in practice, Staal Junior was also active in intellectual matters as an editor, designer and founder of several architectural organizations and periodicals: *Architectura et Amicitia*, *Groep 32*, *De 8 en Opbouw*, *Forum* and *Bouwkundig Weekblad*. In these activities, travelling played an integral part as both in terms of the content of his writings as well of the means of inspiration for his designs. For Staal, Modernism was much more than the application of functionalism and industrial design. Willing to expand Modernism towards nature and history and engage in a dialectic opening to the world, Staal fixed his gaze towards Greece.

Hellas. Een reis door Griekenland, 1944

As described in his book, Staal's journey started with the exploration of Athens and the surrounding area of Attica with a lingering emphasis on the sites of Classical Greece: Acropolis, Sounion, Marathon, Eleusis and Megara. His journey continued with the islands of Crete and the Cyclades where he encountered the 'symphony' of small-scale towns with the Aegean sea. And then, in his exploration of the Peloponnese, Thessaly, Epirus and Macedonia he noted woodlands, rivers, mountainous landscapes and the presence of Roman-Byzantine and Ottoman history that till then had escaped him. Finally, back in Attica, Staal reinvigorated his experiences of Greece and put them into perspective with his Dutch background. On the 6th of January 1940, he inevitably broke off his journey due to the outbreak of the Second World War.

Travelling equipment and modes of transportation

In these travels, Staal carried in his luggage design tools as well as a Leica photographic camera that he used to produce more than a hundred black and white photographs and hundreds of sketches of the Greek landscapes and its people. More importantly, Staal was equipped with an FN motorcycle that gave him freedom to travel in rudimentary or difficult routes. Due to this mode of transportation, any change in the climate and the landscape was directly affecting

the traveling architect, whose strong sentiments are imprinted in the romantic style of his writing, sketches and photographs. In-between the destinations of his trips, he would often stop to recover in remote places that captured his focus and slowly gained primacy over the historic sites that he set out to explore and became the opportunity for interaction with locals and other travelers. The Greek countryside of Staal's sketches is often framed, or accentuated by turning roads, paths and city streets captured from the side, or even from the middle of them.

On one special occasion, Staal travelled on an airplane (Junkers 52 type) crossing 'just like Icarus' and spectated the Cyclades islands 'as a combined whole' rather than singular units. But mostly, Staal travelled on ships from the decks of which he produced a series of panoramas of coastal towns and their landscapes. These sketches, despite their clean outline often feature a layered narrative. For example, Staal's sketch of the city of Heraklion subtly shows the mountaintop of the Jukta as the resting 'face of Zeus'.⁵ In Paros, a pattern of horizontal lines depicts in a simple way the dry stone walls of the islands' fertile fields while the unique volcanic landscape of Santorini is shown in a section that cuts the whole island! Those of Peiraieus, Thessaloniki and Nafplion on the other hand are carefully detailing the every-day life of the more lively urban setting.



FIG. 1 On the road towards the Mediterranean [Het Nieuwe Instituut, STAA t22.80]



FIG. 2 The landscape of Santorini as seen from Mountain of Profitis Ilias with the volcanic Kaldera in its center [Het Nieuwe Instituut, STAA a46]

Naturally, in several cases throughout his stay, Staal is left with no transportation and goes about on foot. In these cases, fatigue and the physical experience of walking disrupts his analytical descriptions. In Santorini for example, he is left hopeless by the warm, dry and steep terrain of the island that makes his encounter with the sea ecstatic: ‘All this light, all this heat and dryness define one riveting desire: with leaps I abandon the stone ground and cross the sand to the sea.’⁶

Towns, villages, landscapes and people

In Staal’s account, changes from small to large scale, from landscapes to people and from conceptual to factual and experiential are constantly alternating. Especially the parallel between land and people is a recurrent motif. The mountains of Crete, he says, impose a lonely lifestyle to the Cretan people and define their plain and straightforward speech and wisdom ‘that you see in their eyes and marks their eyebrows’. In another instance, attending a marriage festivity of an Attican village Staal remarks that the vineyards that cover the surrounding landscape is both cause and effect of the ‘Dionysian’ and vivid characters of the villagers. In Syros island and the town of Ermoupolis which climbs vertically on steep ground, Staal combines in his description the topography, the built environment and the everyday life of the locals: ‘I envy modern Greeks, their simplicity and innate feeling for proportionality [...] As an architect and artist, I completely give in to this town. Following its narrow streets we turn uphill to meet a church that welcomes us with doors wide open. In there, there is sanctity and tranquility, and from a side-window a view opens over the island. Early in the morning we move downwards towards the central street. Men and children go about their job in the market with big baskets on their heads and backs. Women stay off in this. They talk with each

other joyously around ponds, washing clothes or feeding their babies while sitting in sunny terraces.' (162).

On a larger scale, when in Rethymnon, he writes of the appeal of the medieval city's dense urban fabric and the experience one has when exiting its boundaries and confronts the surrounding landscape. An issue that he contrasts with contemporary planning models: 'The city rarely crosses its 16th c. borders, and has thus sustained an enviable separation from the countryside that surrounds it. One of the most challenging issues in modern planning is undoubtedly the fact that the city expands like an octopus to all surrounding areas. This expanded periphery, this gradual transition, is both curse and blessing for city and nature. Who hasn't felt the alluring power of a small walled city?' (73).

On a smaller scale, Staal's descriptions range even down to food, that he intricates to the flora and fauna of each region and underlines as a basic catalyst for the culture and characteristics of the local population.

The presence of the past

The archaeological sites that provided the initial opportunity for Staal's travels to Greece were the point of departure for tracing the presence of time on the Greek landscape, natural or man-made. The link between place and time is a central theme of his watercolors. The town of Naxos is framed by ancient gates, featured in the foreground and in Olympia, a fallen column's capital mirrors the shape of a hill behind it. Similarly, on the plateau of Acropolis, fallen fragments of marble stone on the ground find their parallels in the clusters of clouds on the sky above. The Lycabetus hill seen in the distance is mirrored in a ruined pillar's base. Correspondingly, the tile roofs of Sparta echo the slopes of Taygetus mountain around them. Another recurring motive is the depiction of remote churches and monasteries emerging from the mountainous and rocky settings, contrasting the antithesis of their pure forms and pale colors, with the sculptural volumes of the topography. As for the urban setting, Staal's gaze is captured by the narrow cobbled streets of the island towns and arched walkways that frame glimpses of their surroundings, while important monuments such as the Roman Rotunda of Thessaloniki or the Kapnikarea church of Athens are shown as central elements in wider perspectives of the urban fabric. The multiple temporal layers that Staal explores in his drawings and photos lead him to thoughts on the Greek everyday life that takes place in what he calls 'fragments'. His drawings are rigorously romantic in their portrayal of the landscape⁷ while the photographs more realistically capture the timelessness of characteristic activities of Greek people such as sailing, fishing or sea bathing and drinking from amphorae.⁸ [4]



FIG. 3 At the ancient ruins of Corinth [HNI, STAA, t22.82]



FIG. 4 'Timeless activities' at Santorini [HNI, STAA, f209-74a]

Athens, Acropolis and greater Attica

Almost a third of Staal's book on Greece concerns Athens, which becomes the testing ground of his theories and questioning of modernism's validity in comparison with the ancient monuments of Classical Greece: 'The balance and harmony of these magnificent volumes of marble, the play of horizontal and vertical lines is unsurpassed by any other architecture. How happy I feel to stand here once again, after having longed for it so much!'

The contemporary setting of the urbanized Greek capital is used to transition a comparison between past and present and later on between Greece and the Netherlands: 'The landscape trembles in the heat. The regularly built city lies now in an apathetic stillness. No towers, no factory chimneys break the restful horizontal lines of this picture. The houses are cubes of an equal size, cream-colored and light. Thin white clouds hang unmoving about t. The mountains, which have become an integral part of this architectural composition, bake in the sun. A dry, not to be defied perfume is everywhere. I stroke the fluting of the columns, which feels warm and sensual as if alive, and which air burned by the sun to a golden color, like healthy bodies.' (42).



FIG. 5 Acropolis [HNI, STAA, f209-4a]



FIG. 6 Lycabettus [HNI, STAA, f201-1]

Netherlands/Greece

The comparison of Greece with his home country is in the end unavoidable. Characteristically, he notes that Greece is the ‘spiritual cradle’ of Europe mostly because its architecture does not emanate from the “soil” but from the “soul.” (42-43). For Staal, the gothic cathedrals and the traditional architecture and planning of Saxon countries traditionally emphasize the ‘shadows and mysticism’ of the ground element while the ancient Greek temples are ‘light itself’. A city like Rotenberg appears to have evolved ‘in and from’ the landscape, in contrast to a ‘mathematical’ city such as Peiraeus (43). Being independent from the ground element, Greek architecture is based in Staal’s optics on the elements of the sea, air and light. The connection with nature is still there, but the human spirit dominates. In one segment, after having described shortly the developments of modern architecture in the Netherlands and the directions of Berlage, Granpré Molière and the experimentalisms of the Delft School that promote brick-construction, he proposes that like the Greeks, modern Dutch architects need to build with ‘spirit’ not ‘ground’. He says that both cultures are best represented by ‘bright architecture’ and ‘open windows to the sea and the horizon’ and that both are constricted from their landscape to an architecture of small scale. Therefore, he concludes that the Dutch need to shed off the cultural remnants of the Roman ‘colossal hyper-monumentality’, the English ‘picturesque’, or the German ‘Rustique’.

Conclusion

Staal did not belong to the group of early 20th century modernists that understood construction as the basic fundamental of architecture. For him, architecture is a cultural issue that demands from the architect to be open to the world, willing to understand it through his own experiences and assert his knowledge to a larger 'whole'. In that respect the experience of traveling contributes to his thinking. And the landscape occurs in and out of focus. What seems to be of more importance is the point of departure and the point of return of an endless wandering. Architecture and landscape are defined by their contrast to each other, and through Staal's first-person narrative, the reader is invited to feel – not understand – his surroundings. By and large, Staal's project is not a radical one, neither does it attempt to disrupt the status quo of architectural practice. Instead, it is an intellectual project of making amends, contrary to modernism's absolutisms.

Apropos of the Greek landscape, Staal found a place both different and similar to his own background that made it easy to draw comparisons. As a man whose nation survives 'despite' nature and 'against' its elements, he is happy to have found a nation whose landscape has marked its culture for millennia. The explanation is not handed over easily. It is not transmitted in words but through the touch of the human body against the cold stone. With feet on the ground and head in the sky: 'Why are these Greek landscapes so much prettier than so many equivalent ones in other countries? There are many that we could compare them with, with Italy or South of France for instance. Still, why are they surpassing them? Because of the light probably. Because of the unparalleled clearness of the sky, because of this penetrating light. The air! And then... its History! The pines are so green as if they were created just now. The sky is blue, a light blue with light clouds hovering. The land has the red-brown color of terracotta, the rocks all the shades of yellow to grey and still, transparent.' (15)

Notes

- 1 This paper first appeared in the 2018 Docomomo Greece Conference in Chania, Greece and was published in the 2020 collection *Το μοντέρνο βλέμμα στο Ελληνικό τοπίο* [Modernism's gaze over the Greek landscape], ed. K. Tsiambaos and A. Kotsaki.
- 2 The Arthur Staal papers are housed in Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam. There is also kept the common archive of his parents Jan Frederik Staal and Margaret Staal-Kroopholler.
- 3 More specifically, the Academy opposed the passing of Staal through Italy due to the hostile relations between the Netherlands, and the Italian fascist regime.
- 4 About his second trip, Staal published a book that preceded *Hellas*, titled *Onder de gouden zon van het morgenland*.
- 5 Staal, *Hellas*, 79.

- 6 Staal, *Hellas*, 118. The pagination of the other quotations is given in brackets after the text. The translation to English is by the author. Both books *Hellas* and *Onder de gouden zon* have only been published in Dutch.
- 7 Naturally, he also submitted a number of technical drawings of archaeological sites according to the guidelines set by the Prix de Rome committee.
- 8 Staal, *Hellas*, 93.