

# THE ANTI-HIERARCHICAL ATELIER THAT COULD NOT LAST

Stylianos Giamarelos

1  
Kenneth Frampton ed.,  
*Atelier 66: The Architecture  
of Dimitris and Suzana  
Antonakakis* (New York:  
Rizzoli, 1985).

2  
In 2014, I conducted a series  
of interviews with the  
architects: Suzana and  
Dimitris Antonakakis,  
Giorgos Antonakakis,  
Aristide Antonas, Boukie  
Babalou, Konstantinos  
Daskalakis, Theano Fotiou,  
Eleni Coussi-Desylla,  
Kostis Hadjimichalis, Aleka  
Monemvasitou, Antonis  
Noukakis, Annie Platanioti  
and Dina Vaiou. I thank  
them all for agreeing to be  
interviewed at length, for  
granting me access to their  
private archives, and for  
permitting me to reproduce  
the material that illustrates  
this article.

Atelier 66, the collaborative architectural practice set up by Greek architects Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, attracted international attention in the early 1980s, when noted historians and theorists like Alexander Tzonis, Liane Lefaivre and Kenneth Frampton hailed it as an exemplary proponent of critical regionalism. In his introduction to a 1985 monograph dedicated to the office, Frampton highlighted Atelier 66's "cultivated sense of collectivity", noting that this ethos was an essential characteristic of the practice of critical regionalism, which "consciously cultivates its own roots ... to arrive at its expressive form".<sup>1</sup> But while Frampton was right to emphasize the collective spirit of Atelier 66, his account idealized the way the firm actually operated, some 20 years after its founding. By the time his celebratory monograph was published, Atelier 66 had grown to 12 partners, but within a year its apparently "stable" structure had dissolved. Based on interviews with its members,<sup>2</sup> I will retrace the inner life of this collaborative architectural practice to show how Frampton's critical regionalist discourse accelerated its inevitable dissolution.

Atelier 66 was formed in 1965, when husband and wife Dimitris and Suzana Antonakakis teamed up with Eleni Gousi-Desylla. Consciously striving for a non-hierarchical office structure, they were soon joined by their close friends and contemporaries Gabriel Aidonopoulos, Denys Potiris and Efi Tsarmakli-Vrontisi. Such collaborative offices were not uncommon in Greece at the time. Partly, this was a local expression of a broader international trend instigated by seminal texts like Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American*



*Cities* (1961), with their critiques of functionalism and authoritarian modes of practice. On a less ideological, more pragmatic level, however, collaboration also enabled young architects to access competitions and large-scale projects that would have been beyond their reach as sole practitioners.

The early 1960s were a boom time for construction in Greece, driven largely by the development of the tourist industry (in which Greek banks were keen to invest) and the infrastructure this required. And the boom continued even after the military junta seized power in 1967, with the regime actively seeking to promote economic growth as a means to shore up popular support – a time-honoured method of dictatorships the world over. In 1968 the planning regulations were substantially modified to allow for larger-scale structures. Architects were encouraged to consider buildings as stand-alone objects, independent from the confines of the specific site or the wider urban context. Effectively, this cleared the way for the construction of Athens' first skyscrapers (e.g., the Panormou Tower), among other large-scale projects. The regime also organized a series of competitions for public buildings, including schools and hospitals. Like any other young practice, Atelier 66 took part in some of these competitions. If Greek architects had reservations about participating in a joint venture with their military rulers, these were mostly outweighed by the attraction of being able to work on projects of a larger scale than the standard apartment building. Participation also did not equate with acquiescence: they would resist the regime's grandiose briefs through modest architectural proposals, especially in sensitive historical sites like the Akronafplia Fortress in Nafplion.

It was in fact a competition win, for the Archaeological Museum of Chios in 1965, which allowed the Antonakakis to rent an office space on Yianni Statha Street and set up Atelier 66. Their chosen name echoed that of the Swiss architecture collective, Atelier 5, whose work was often published in *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* in the early 1960s. Competitions also formed the lifeblood of the practice, providing a stable source of commissions for Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, who were not inclined to spend time on public relations exercises. Since the flow of work was erratic, everyone in the office needed to maintain alternative sources of income, either working independently or for a larger firm. The office served as a shared workspace for whoever needed it, whether they were working

on their own, or with other members of the group. Each contributed proportionally to the running costs. Over the years, this fluctuating cast of architects would be joined, at various times, by trusted craftsmen attuned to the specific needs of the Atelier's work.

This capacity of Atelier 66 to expand and undergo constant renewal was rather unusual. Other Greek firms never seemed to grow beyond their original three or four partners, whereas numerous young architects joined Atelier 66 over the years, all entering on equal terms to the founding partners. These fellow architects were often family members or former students of Dimitris Antonakakis at the National Technical University of Athens. In any case, they were not employees in the traditional sense. They listened to the same music or poetry while they were working, they shared similar political beliefs, they sometimes went on trips together. There were no office "protocols". Voicing an opinion was positively encouraged. In this way, the culture of companionship of the original group of friends in the 1960s was perpetuated through to the 1980s, and so, too, was a sense of youthfulness, with the injection of the new arrivals.

Given the relative autonomy of each architect in the office structure, the decision to work as a large group on a competition submission typically entailed intensive weekend and after-hours charrettes. The tendency of Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis to dismantle and rethink the original brief, and then to explore multiple possible solutions, only added to the workload. Every competition would go right down to the wire. And yet as stressful as this model was, it did ensure a high-quality proposal, creating a sense of satisfaction that compensated to some extent for the demanding workload.

In the mid-1970s, when Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis finished their apartment building on 118 Benaki Street, Atelier 66 moved into the ground floor: the couple lived on the floor above. The boundaries between home and work soon became blurred. The additional responsibilities of childcare for Suzana, and teaching duties for Dimitris, meant that they would only begin their office work at the end of a normal day, when their two children were tucked up in bed. In theory, the terms of the collaboration within the practice were relaxed and flexible. In practice, however, the younger members of the team had to follow their lead, devoting their leisure hours to work. More than an office, Atelier 66 was in this sense an entire way of life dedicated solely to architecture.

But the sacrificing of free time was not the only problem for the younger architects at this collaborative practice. Although it welcomed new colleagues, the influx of fresh blood and novel ideas was not reflected in either Atelier 66's design practices or its built works. This was a group consciously seeking to transgress authoritarian modernist approaches to architectural design. But the terms of this transgression were only ever set by Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, the de facto leaders of the collaborative practice. Their style was the house style: every project that came out of Atelier 66 was immediately associated with them. The number of different architects involved in the office was therefore an irrelevance, because they all designed in the same way. This was especially the case for former students of Dimitris Antonakakis, who continued to regard him as a kind of mentor long into their professional lives. What began as a break from the conventional singular and heroic architectural office – like the ateliers of Le Corbusier, Aalto or Mies – ended up resembling this very model.

Although Dimitris remained the initial prompt for many young architects to join the firm, it was Suzana who became the main creative force behind Atelier 66, and the lead architect on most of their projects – especially after 1977, when Dimitris' attention was diverted by his professorial candidacy at the National Technical University. Husband and wife developed their own way of working over the years and, in the mythologizing eyes of their peers, it seemed they could communicate complex and profound design intentions with the merest glance across a drawing board. In the later years of



Atelier 66 architects in  
Olympia in 1980.  
Giorgos Antonakakis  
private archive

the office, the intimacies of this professional relationship deepened the divide between them and their younger colleagues, who lacked their experience and, increasingly, did not share the same interests or points of reference.

If the younger members of Atelier 66 were at a disadvantage, the office still benefited from their input, particularly when the commissions touched on urban design. For Kostis Hadjimichalis, Alekos Polychroniadis, Konstantinos Daskalakis and Dina Vaiou, this focus mirrored the scale of projects they had worked on individually during their graduate studies. In this sphere, the younger colleagues brought with them a certain confidence that translated into competition success. But in the process two different aspects began to emerge within the practice: the architectural work of Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, and the urban work of Atelier 66. These two worlds would collide in 1980, leading to what some members of the office have described as a “design crisis”. The couple, it seems, had given into an almost “baroque” obsession with adding small-scale detail to already elaborate drawings for complex, large-scale projects.

To deal with these emerging differences – which were already apparent in the 1970s – the office developed a strategy of splitting design teams in two, allowing one proposal to compete against the other. Both proposals would be pinned to the walls of the studio and there would be a collective discussion to decide on a preferred option. The egalitarianism of this intent, however, masked a reality that in nearly every case saw the proposal developed by the team led by Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis advance. In some cases, in the middle of the night, while everyone else had retired to bed, the couple would keep working to independently revise a colleague’s work and point out its shortcomings. Their younger collaborator, lacking their design experience, would find it hard to argue their corner. The usual back-and-forth of the design process notwithstanding, collaboration in Atelier 66 usually followed a linear development controlled by Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis.

Even within this uneven process, consensus was not always possible. For example, in the competition for the Tavros City Hall (1972), Atelier 66 submitted two entries, one of which won, while the other received a commendation. Whereas the winning proposal gathered the programme into a single self-enclosed volume, the alternative worked with shorter building blocks that connected to



Nous vous envoyons deux pages de bibliographie où on a corrigé deux fautes (copies No 3) et on a complété la page 9 (copie No 4) avec le titre d'un dernier texte de Suzana.

Pour le "cover image" nous pensons que c'est une bonne idée mais il ne faut pas oublier de mettre aussi au titre <sup>avec</sup> les noms: "ATELIER 66".

En ce qui concerne les noms des photographes, comme on ne connaît pas quelles sont les photos choisies pour la presentation finale, ce serait peut être mieux pour nous de noter les noms sur le "präter's proof" quand tu va nous l'envoyer.

Pour la note biographique de Dimitri puisque sa place à l'Ecole d'Architecture n'a pas son pareil à la langue Anglaise, ce serait mieux au lieu de "Lecturer of Architecture in the NTU 1978" de mettre: "Member of the Teaching staff in the school of Architecture on N.T.U. 1975\*." (copie (5))

Nous espérons avoir à bientôt vos nouvelles.

Amitiés et saluts à Kenneth,

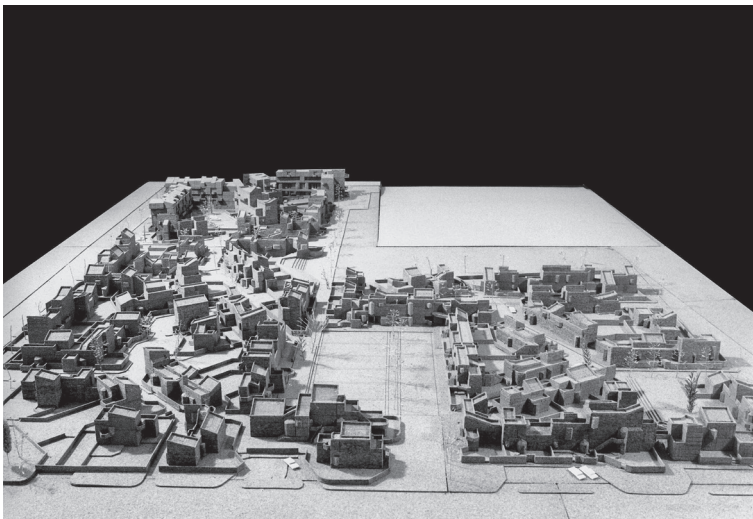
*Suzana + Dimitris*  
Suzana                  Dimitris



the surrounding public spaces on various levels. In other words, the same practice had produced opposing architectural solutions to the same brief.

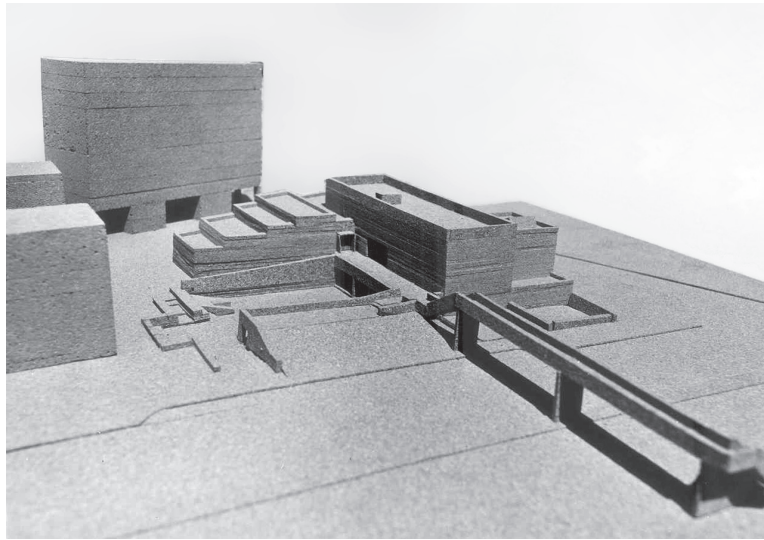
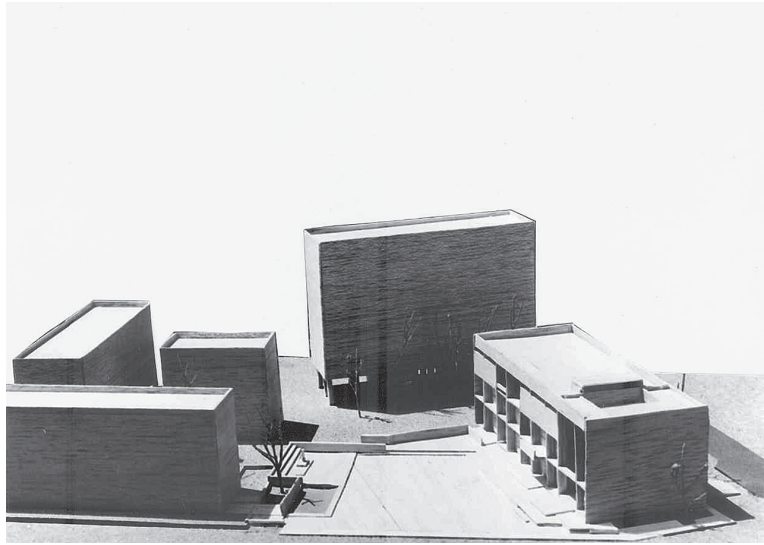
Atelier 66 was further fractured when working on commissions. The masterplan and general design principles of a large-scale project would be devised collectively, but once these had been agreed the office members would split into smaller groups of two or three, taking on responsibility for specific sections of the plan or the design of individual buildings. The idea was to introduce a measure of variety into the work. The various group discussions that preceded these decisions were also opportunities to theorize the work of Atelier 66. Yet none of these discussions produced serious ruptures, because in the final instance the collaborators always fell back on the common design principles that stemmed from the practice of Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis. In retrospect, this seems like the strategy of a group that understood its internal tensions, but preferred not to address them at length.

Atelier 66 architects generally regard the EKTENEPOL housing project in Komotini (1981) as the best example of their collective practice. A complex of 220 apartments, it was developed around a series of open spaces and outdoor routes of varying widths that served as piazzas, playgrounds and streets. This was the project that Dimitris Antonakakis cited in 1988 as the cornerstone of Atelier 66's residential work during the 1980s. However, it was not the collective



**Atelier 66's EKTENEPOL project in Komotini (1981): the architects defied the original development plan to create a maze of open-air routes of varying degrees of privacy and openness. Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis private archive**

In the architectural competition for the Tavros City Hall (1972), Atelier 66 submitted two proposals. Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis private archive



aspects of this design project that interested him the most, but the specific housing typology they had explored there, and that he and Suzana Antonakakis would develop further in residential projects later in the decade.

Unsurprisingly, the architects also have differing recollections of the important design debates in the office during the 1980s, and these mismatches indicate the widening divergence of interests within the group. Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, for instance, remember the discussions as revolving around their own main concerns: the implementation of the grid, and the exact metric relations between the various design elements. Which module – 90cm, 86cm, or 83cm – would they choose to control every aspect of the design, from the overall dimensions of a room to the door and window openings? Once this decision was made, a series of new questions arose. Did the grid refer to the top or the bottom of the window opening? Did it start from the floor, and if so, from what point, exactly (the slab, or the final covered or tiled surface)? For Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis, such questions were of the utmost importance. The three-dimensional grid was an instrument of design control that defined the basic “horizons” of a building, the individual details of which could then be safely elaborated by one of their collaborators. Their private archive includes countless sketches on tracing paper with metric variations on the single theme of a specific design detail. However, this obsessive concern with the micro-scale of architectural details was not necessarily shared by all their Atelier 66 peers. Others were much more interested in discussing problems on the larger urban scale – what, for example, was an acceptable level of repetition of modular units, and how could they be organized in functional urban zones?

It was around this time that the work of Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis attracted the attention of Kenneth Frampton. Although in print he celebrated Atelier 66’s “cultivated sense of collectivity”, the British critic and historian had originally intended to focus on the husband-and-wife team alone – from their correspondence, we can see that it was the Greek couple who insisted on including Atelier 66 in the title of the monograph. But title aside, the content of the book makes it clear that Frampton is directing his praise specifically at Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis. In the wake of this international recognition, the couple decided it was time to re-set their relations with their partners. Rather than maintaining the pretence of equal-

ity, they needed to assert their leadership – something made easier by the fact that the last of the original partners had gone their own way in 1983, and the rest of their co-workers were now much younger than they were. In 1986, only a year after the publication of Frampton’s monograph, the couple assumed overall control of the office.

Stressing continuity over rupture, the Antonakakis now refer to 1986 as a significant moment in the evolution of Atelier 66. In practical terms, however, 1986 marked the end of the anti-hierarchical experiment of their collaborative practice. Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis were joined by a new group of even more fresh-faced architects (Matina Kalogerakou, Efi Koumarianou and Xenia Tsioni), including their son, Aristide Antonas, who was by then old enough to join them. In an interview only a few years after the dissolution of Atelier 66, the couple both referred to its original collaborative terms as “utopian”. Their young collaborators had not been able to define their own creative route independent from the Antonakakis’ distinctive way of working and architectural idiom. And that is why Atelier 66 couldn’t effectively last. Since this was only nominally a partnership of equals, the collaborative practice lacked a structure that would enable it to carry on and develop further into the future. Contrary to the architects’ original intentions, in the final instance Atelier 66 was always Suzana and Dimitris Antonakakis. By 1986, the anti-hierarchical collaborative design practice the two Greek architects envisioned in 1965 could no longer survive its inadvertent mythologization by Frampton. Rather than rejuvenating and propelling it into the future, its international celebration thus signalled its imminent implosion.