

Memory Re-Configured: Working with Fragments as Catalyst for Imagination

Keywords Fragments; Memory; Re-Configuration; Pikionis; Imaginary Interior

Abstract This contribution elaborates on how the reuse of architectural fragments in secondary contexts can generate associative, memorial, or intense sensorial experiences of interiors in an increasingly standardised and homogeneous interior world. Integrating these second-hand fragments can elevate interiors beyond anonymity, particularly when composed of high-quality materials or intricate craftsmanship. Their haptic qualities provide more grounded interior experiences, evoking associations with time and place that are connected to local identity and zeitgeist. The fragments function as first-hand liaisons between past and present, and additionally, between observer and maker.

In this paper, the well-known paths on Philopappos Hill by Dimitris Pikionis will be discussed as an imagined interior, configured as a sensitive landscape that reassembles a time and place never truly existed, merged from the haptic qualities of reused fragments of local debris. The imperfect fragments guide the observer on a sensorial journey embedded with associations and historical references, demonstrating their capacity to attract and evoke contact with the past while shaping a reality that the observer imagines. In this way, the fragments act as catalysts for imagination and as generators of sensorial experiences.

Memory Re-Configured reflects on the significance of the fragment's materiality, while also reconsidering the contemporary designer's methodology: the designer shifts from being a consumer of raw and processed materials to a collector and configurator of existing fragments. In doing so, the contemporary interior may re-value the power of imagination, re-present memory, and evoke sensitive interpretations and associations through the reuse of second-hand fragments.

1. Introduction

In Athens, meandering stone paths twist and turn slowly up Philopappos Hill.¹ Under the Greek sun, the paths seem to reassemble an archaeological site from an unknown past, while mirroring the ancient Acropolis. For the observer, the paths' imperfect stones, with their edgy and emotional corners, seamlessly integrate with the ruined state of the adjacent complex on the hilltop in the distance. Nevertheless, the paths were only built seventy years ago by Greek architect Dimitris Pikionis (1887-1968).

Together with his students and local craftsmen, Pikionis configured a sensitive landscape, reassembling a time and place that never existed as such. Rather, it is an imagined state of arranged stone fragments resurrected from demolished buildings in the area, and *as found* fragments of the site itself. The observer notices the careful arrangement of the seemingly ancient architectural fragments. The embodied qualities of the fragments on Philopappos Hill take the observer on a sensorial journey embedded with associations and historical references. A reused marble piece suggests, for example, it could have once been part of a larger cornice due to its fine craftsmanship and pure materiality (Fig. 1). This encounter generates an associative, and, above all, direct connection to the past.



FIG. 1. Associative qualities of reused fragments. Photograph taken by the author.

2. Messages Through Reuse

Historian Johan Huizinga defined this connection as a *historical sensation*: when a historical detail suddenly gives the feeling of an immediate contact with the past, touching the essence of things,

makes one experience truth through history.² Building upon this notion, fellow historian Herman Paul argues that the past thus attracts, albeit adding the condition that it is important to understand what this past signifies exactly. In Paul's context, the past signifies either the historical reality—a state of affairs at a given point in time—or the past in which individuals imagine that reality to have existed.³ This contribution builds on the latter understanding of the past.

When we consider that a material fragment—as illustrated by Pikionis' reuse of fragments—is able to attract and evoke contact with the past to a reality the observer imagines it to have been, then this notion can be translated to the reuse of material fragments in secondary contexts. It can be argued that when a designer works with a carefully selected second-hand fragment, the fragment can function as a catalyst for imagination, generating, associative, memorial, or even intense sensorial experiences.

Pikionis intuitively recognised the associative and sensorial qualities of the paths' potential stones, making them highly suitable for conveying narratives. He succeeded in embedding inherent messages within them, through understanding the power of the fragment's materiality and its haptic qualities. This phenomenon is inextricably linked to our senses, which in turn foster our associations.

The haptic qualities of the material object, shaped over time by the forces of nature or the skill of the craftsman, are crucial in this understanding, as is the importance of the physical remains in experiencing history and memory, as studied by several authors.⁴ This spans from the evocation of images and associations through the material condition of our buildings and places,⁵ to the interplay between our senses and architecture.⁶ In the context of this contribution, the multitude of associations a fragment can evoke must be acknowledged, as well as the ability to ascribe human-like qualities and characteristics to the fragment: the fragment, thus, acts.⁷

3. The Paths as *Imaginary Interiors*

The suggestive character of the paths' fragments generates an imaginary reality of past times: Pikionis configured an *imaginary interior*.

In a rapidly changing post-war Athens, Pikionis had been commissioned by the Greek government to create an infrastructural landscape on the historically charged hills surrounding the Acropolis. Before being commissioned, a thorough clean-up of the area was conducted by the State in order to accommodate this new landscape in a reimagined Greece. Pikionis, who had great affinity with the multitude of cultural layers of his home country—not only the classical tradition—used among others the quarries that emerged from this clean-up as his *magasin*.⁸ Fragments that resulted from his act of reuse forged past and present in the new paths to continue the narrative of the *locus*.

During the creation of the paths, Pikionis introduced a variety of indigenous trees, evoking the illusion that they had always been there. Today, the wooded landscape envelopes the created spaces while functioning as an interior frame. In some places, an interplay is suggested between the dense wall of trees and the Greek sky, which functions as a canopy for the interior of the space, resembling a *hortus conclusus*. In other places, certain frames bring the experiencer to a vista on a historical reality, with the Acropolis positioned on its plateau, functioning as a decor against this contemporary reality. Providing a window on time, the observer becomes a witness to past times.

The Mediterranean light gives soft touches to the high tactility of the stone fragments found in the landscape. The stones are nestled organically in the earth, functioning as steps to ascend up the hill. Occasionally, they are stacked on top of each other to provide a well-deserved resting spot. They invite touching, creating an additional connection back to their carvers (Fig. 2).

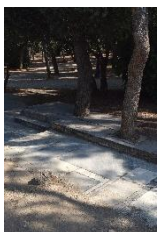


FIG. 2. The stone's tactility is highlighted by the filtered Mediterranean light. Photograph taken by the author.

Moreover, Pikionis demonstrated his profound understanding of a fragment's agency. He imagined what was in the stone, where it came from, how it was shaped, and where it was destined to be. The sturdy stones suggest that they have landed there at some point in time, and have remained undisturbed ever since. They have been easily polished, touched, and shaped by the elements over time. For Pikionis, their existence and interior qualities were far from coincidental, which can be understood when reading his 1935 essay *A Sentimental Topography*.⁹ Despite having been written some twenty years prior to the completion of his Athenian paths, the essay suggestively reveals Pikionis' thoughts and understanding on architecture, materiality, and one's place in nature.

Pikionis writes how he is truly convinced of the harmonious interplay between the whole and its fragments when confronted with a path and its stones. Wandering this winding path, Pikionis explains that observing and experiencing the landscape will announce what will come next. It is nature's way of saying which material fragments belong there.¹⁰

Later, he focuses on the fragment itself: the stone. For Pikionis, nature and its forces have 'moulded its divine shape' while he studies 'the harmony of its contours.'¹¹ He observes, touches, feels. It is no coincidence that this stone is found here. Pikionis experiences how a material can truly belong somewhere, because it 'came to occupy a place within its vast expanse that was in no way accidental.'¹² Thence, the stone tickles Pikionis' imagination, suggesting its origin, its story, its potential, its identity: 'I feel you growing, expanding my imagination [...] [y]ou are the landscape.'¹³ His observations continue to become imaginary, focusing on the stone's shaped imperfections and eventually on the hidden forms which are captured within the fragment.¹⁴

Being a keen hiker himself, he meticulously configured the paths, establishing an interplay between the reused fragments, the topography and human engagement. Sensitively, he directs the observer into a heavily charged landscape, as 'an "invisible" architecture of movement.'¹⁵ Pikionis continued a tradition rather than breaking with it, disregarding the seemingly boundless possibilities of the then current welfare architecture that was disconnected from its context (Fig. 3, 4).



FIG. 3, 4. Pikionis provides the observer with numerous patterns and associations. Photograph taken by the author.

4. A New Greek Identity

The stones act, the stones speak, and the stones allow the observer to imagine. The fragments' interpretive qualities, as studied in *A Sentimental Topography*, tie in with Pikionis' constant search to understand how men and nature related to each other. Aware of the absence of a unified theoretical framework in modern architecture that linked structures and their surrounding context as a unity, he wondered how his deeply charged historical environment could fit into this.¹⁶ This resulting work has since been referred to as Critical Regionalism, a term first coined by architectural theorists Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in 1981, and later adopted by fellow theorist Kenneth Frampton in 1983.¹⁷ Recently, the architectural journal *OASE* published a new review on the concept.¹⁸

Alongside this search, Pikionis engaged in a nationwide movement that sought a modern cultural expression for Greece, which originated in the 1930s.¹⁹ This Generation of the '30s consisted of poets, writers, and painters, with Pikionis as a unique figure in the field of architecture. In a 1976 issue of *A + U*, architect and author Anthony Antoniadis explains how Pikionis devoted his life to unravelling a style that harmonised classical Hellenistic architecture with the 'architecture of the land';

the vernacular architecture of mountainous regions' of Greece and its islands—a search for 'Greekness.'²⁰ This resulted in a theoretical framework relating buildings, landscape and historical memory, combining his knowledge of the land and its culture with his affinity for (landscape) painting at the time.²¹ Notably, his search was a response to previous imaginary interpretations of Greek cultural expression that had exclusionary approaches towards its layered historical discourse.

4.1 Classical Adorations

Following the Greek War of Independence in the early nineteenth century, foreign influences contributed to the creation of a modern Greek nation state. European architects, such as Leo Von Klenze and Karl Friedrich Schinkel, helped shape this cultural expression. They were heavily inspired by the prosperity of society and the technological innovations of the time, which they combined with their deep and exclusive knowledge of the classical language, creating radically novel technological architecture.²² This was in form and motive redolent of an imagined, bygone era.

Their interpretations of the classicist culture were heavily intertwined with the associative qualities of the found ruins of the Acropolis and other sites. The ruins' nineteenth-century resurgence created suggestive interior spaces these temple complexes were never originally designed for as such, only made possible through the great adoration of the intrinsic qualities of the ruin and its fragments.

This phenomenon, in turn, nurtured imaginations of history of Romanticists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evoking more sensitive interpretations of the Hellenist appeal by explorers such as Frédéric Boissonnas. His photographic expeditions through the Greek peninsula and archipelago resulted in extraordinary series of dreamy imaginations of the non-academic Greek culture and identity. Boissonnas' photographs suggest heavily imaginary interior scenes of the Acropolis, where the observer imagined a state the complex had never witnessed before (Fig. 5). For others, the stones embodied artistic potential, as seen in photographic series of dancer Therese Duncan by photographer Edward Steichen from the 1920s. Drawn by the classicist culture and structures, Duncan would sometimes literally immerse herself in the marbles and myths of the place.



FIG. 5. Frédéric Boissonnas, *Athens, The Acropolis after the rain* (1908), silver bromide gelatin print on cardboard, 42,4 x 57,4 cm. Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main.

4.2 Architecture for the People

The discussed adorations represent a European focus on classical Greece as the nation's prevailing architectural identity, while overlooking centuries-old layers of Byzantine and Ottoman-era culture. Byzantine architecture only gained its renewed adoration at the end of the nineteenth century, when awareness grew among Greek intellectuals opposing the foreign obsession with the classical. Byzantine layers were no longer excluded from architectural and archaeological theory, as they had been by Northern and Western European architects. Instead, they were incorporated into the discourse, for instance for their representation of the memory of the religious local culture.²³

Architectural historian Nikos Magouliotis states how '[t]he construction of a modern national identity on the country's ancient past prioritised the study of classical monuments over the material traces of every other period,'²⁴ whereas for Pikionis, the expression of Byzantine churches in Athenian and Greek memorial layers served as significant references for the creation of his paths. He encountered their remains during long hikes in his formative years,²⁵ where he saw how re-configured fragments were used as integral part of their architecture. He exposed the forgotten layers of Greek identity, and interwove them with nineteenth-century pieces of marble, and contemporary materials

(Fig. 6). The paths illustrate local history and memory of Greek culture in the post-classical era: an architecture for the people.

More intuitively influenced by the historical tradition of reuse, Pikionis' attitude can additionally be read as a continuation of an ancient tradition of meaningful and intentional reuse of architectural fragments, which has been practiced throughout the course of history: from the Acropolis itself,²⁶ to *spolia* churches in Byzantine Athens,²⁷ and later in its nineteenth-century architecture. Strongly connected to its zeitgeist, this practice imaginarily shapes the observer's historical formation, with the Acropolis as a significant subject in shaping the Athenian identity.



FIG. 6. The path is a collage of different materials embracing the found landscape. Photograph taken by the author.

5. Conclusion

The suggestive interiors created by the staged ruins of the Acropolis find their echo in the *imaginary interiors* that Pikionis generated on Philopappos Hill, as an imagined reality of past times. With the demolition of nineteenth-century Athens and the subsequent construction of a contemporary city, Pikionis once again saw the obliteration of a layer of local identity and memory. Through the reuse of the previously excluded Byzantine-Ottoman layers, Pikionis succeeded in creating a physical expression of collective memory through material reuse, thereby including the multitude of layers of Greek history. For Pikionis, the paths' reused fragments served as powerful identifiers of a new awareness after extended periods of uncertainty, reflecting a historical consciousness of Athens and Greece during the period of their creation. Today, one can still experience the dialogue between artifact and landscape and its profound presence despite its invisibility.

This contribution demonstrates that designing—or rather, re-configuring—existing fragments in secondary contexts serves as a catalyst for the observer's imagination. The paths stimulate and nurture the senses by incorporating both on-site and off-site second-hand architectural fragments into new designs. Pikionis' initial observations in *A Sentimental Topography* demonstrate his profound engagement with materials, culture, and history—almost as a necessary condition to participate in meaningful projects—where messages embodied by material fragments are key components in creating sensorially rich interior spaces.

Pikionis' paths serve as striking references for the discourse on adaptive reuse and are gaining new relevance in times of sustainable challenges related to material reuse. They serve the increasingly pressing duality between heritage and sustainability since the paths embody deeper layers of meaning through second-hand fragments. Pikionis' approach of observing, selecting, and placing every stone with the utmost care and precision, as if listening to each fragment before deciding where to nestle it, offers contemporary designers alternative methodologies. In an era where not only the building as a whole, but every individual fragment becomes valuable, designers can acquire impactful skills for future (reuse) projects. Rather than creating homogeneous spaces with universal construction methods in which everything is possible, interior spaces—in the broadest sense—can regain their distinctive character as spaces for the mind and senses through fragmental reuse.

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¹ Alex Tzonis, 'Pikionis and the Transvisibility', *Thresholds*, 19 (1999), pp. 15-22 (p. 15), doi:10.1162/thld_a_00480. The term paths is here adopted from the 1999 article.

² Johan Huizinga, 1920, quoted in Herman Paul, 'Wat is het verleden?', in Paul, *Als het verleden trekt. Kernthema's in de geschiedfilosofie* (Boom uitgeverij, 2016), p. 33.

³ Herman Paul, 'Wat is het verleden?', p. 34.

⁴ Here, Iida Kalakoski, 'Defining Requirements for Appreciation of Patina,' in *Aesthetics – The Uneasy Dimension in Architecture: Proceeding Series 2016:1*, 89 (2016), pp. 27-40, <<https://arkitekturforskning.net/files/journals/1/issues/89/89-7-PB.pdf>> [accessed 17 April 2025].

⁵ Adam Caruso, 'Energy and Matter', in Caruso, *The Feeling of Things* (Ediciones Polígrafa, 2008), pp. 15-21.

⁶ For a comprehensive overview, see Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Wiley-Academy, 2005).

⁷ Among other works on material agency, as studied in material culture, see Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (John Wiley & Sons, 2012). Especially 'Humans Depend on Things', pp. 15-39.

⁸ Nick Papandreou, *The Magical Path to the Acropolis* (Melissa, 2016), pp. 12-22; 72.

⁹ *A Sentimental Topography: Dimitris Pikionis*, ed. by Márcia Nascimento, and ed. and trans. by Nuno Costa, special issue of *Käräjäkivet*, 13 (2022).

¹⁰ Nascimento and Costa, 'A Sentimental Topography', pp. 7-9.

¹¹ Nascimento and Costa, 'A Sentimental Topography', p. 9.

¹² Nascimento and Costa, 'A Sentimental Topography', p. 11.

¹³ Nascimento and Costa, 'A Sentimental Topography', p. 11.

¹⁴ Nascimento and Costa, 'A Sentimental Topography', pp. 11-15.

¹⁵ Tzonis, 'Pikionis and the Transvisibility', pp. 20-21.

¹⁶ Tzonis, 'Pikionis and the Transvisibility', p. 19.

¹⁷ Bie Plevoets and Koenraad Van Cleempoel, *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline* (Routledge, 2019), p. 98.

¹⁸ *Critical Regionalism Revisited*, ed. by Tom Avermaete, Veronique Patteeuw, Hans Teerds, and Léa-Catherine Szacka, special issue of *OASE*, 103 (2010).

¹⁹ Alberto Ferlenga, 'Caminos de piedra, recintos de sueños', in *Otras Vías: Pikionis, Lewerentz y Van der Laan*, ed. by José Ignacio Linazasoro (Nobuko, 2011), pp. 14-17 (p. 15).

²⁰ Anthony Antoniadis, 'Poems with Stones: The Enduring Spirits of Dimitrios Pikionis', *A + U*, 72 (1976), pp. 17-22 (p. 18).

²¹ Tzonis, 'Pikionis and the Transvisibility,' p. 19; Darío Álvarez, 'La piedra, el paisaje y la memoria,' in *Otras Vías: Pikionis, Lewerentz y Van der Laan*, ed. by José Ignacio Linazasoro, pp. 18-21.

²² Adam Caruso, 'Traditions', in Caruso, *The Feeling of Things*, pp. 22-26 (pp. 22-23).

²³ Nikos Magouliotis, 'French architects and 'églises grecques': the discovery of Byzantine architecture in Greece, 1820s-1840s,' *The Journal of Architecture*, 25.8 (2020), pp. 1028-1054 (p. 1029), doi:10.1080/13602365.2020.1849355.

²⁴ Magouliotis, 'French architects and 'églises grecques'', p. 1029.

²⁵ Papandreou, *The Magical Path to the Acropolis*, pp. 30-41.

²⁶ Rachel Kousser, 'Destruction and Memory on the Athenian Acropolis', *The Art Bulletin*, 91.3 (2009), pp. 263-282, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40645507>> [accessed 03 July 2025]. Kousser gives a concise review of fragmental reuse in the Acropolis as can still be seen today.

²⁷ Charalambos Bouras, *Byzantine Athens, 10th – 12th Centuries* (Routledge 2017). Bouras provides a comprehensive overview of architectural reuse in Byzantine Athens.