

Why the Greek Island of Antiparos Should Be on Your Radar

A visionary group of developers on the island of Antiparos is building a community around a modern architecture movement.

BY ELENI N. GAGE, PUBLISHED ON 05/15/2020

I spend part of every summer in Greece and much of every winter dreaming about it. Which is why I was sitting in [New York City](#) one frigid March morning gazing at infinity pools and whitewashed houses with one of the owners of Five Star Greece, a luxury villa-rental company.

“We have architecturally significant villas all over Greece,” Five Star’s Titos Siopoulos told me. “Although, of course, everyone thinks of Antiparos as the architects’ playground.”

“Of course,” I said out loud. But I wondered if he could really be talking about the same 13-square-mile islet I’d visited in 2006, which had one town, Kastro, one paved road, and a few bed-and-breakfasts. I’d stayed in one whose owner proudly reported that Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson were housing their staff at her place while renting a villa nearby. In the decade and a half since, I’ve scrolled through enough social media to see that the Hankses had built their own villa there, and a smattering of celebrities like Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson had been spotted on the island. But I doubted that a Hollywood coterie had put down roots and turned a small-time fishing island into an architectural wonderland.

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But, sure enough, the day after my arrival on the island last summer, I found myself sitting under the pergola of Kratir, a stone showpiece that emerges from a hillside crater and curves around a black-bottomed infinity pool designed to resemble a lava flow. When I told my four-year-old to stop scaling the slanted stone wall surrounding the pool area, Iasson Tsakonas, Kratir’s owner and founder of Oliarios, the company behind most of the modern marvels on the island, interrupted me. “That was the original idea, actually,” he said. “The concept by Deca, the architectural firm, was that the residents would hang out on the cliffs of the crater. This angled wall has been brilliant because the kids have turned it into a play wall.”

Tsakonas’s own kids will only be able to climb the wall for one more year. After that they’ll move to the Peninsula house, located on a swathe of land closer to the sea. Designed by the Tokyo-based firm Atelier Bow-Wow, Peninsula will be split by a channel of water that will extend past the house to become an infinity pool overlooking the Aegean.

His original plan was to build seven houses, but when a few of them appeared in design blogs and got word of mouth, the island-wide collection mushroomed to 52—all of which will be completed over the next few years. In building the houses, Tsakonas followed a model of hiring new start-ups or foreign architects who had yet to design a property in Greece, because, he said, “I like to explore a fresh approach to Cycladic life. In Greece we have deep roots. I feel architecture needs to work with those while addressing contemporary needs.”

His strategy developed quite by accident. After earning a degree in hospitality at Cornell, Athens-born Tsakonas worked in finance in New York and in real estate in Azerbaijan before returning to Greece for his compulsory military service. After he completed his tour of duty, he wanted to create an island complex for himself, his brothers, and maybe a few friends. A navy buddy, the son of a carpenter from Antiparos, bragged about the beauty of his island, so Tsakonas, lured by its location in the center of the Cyclades, dropped anchor, called him, and asked, “Where are the best sunsets?”

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His friend introduced him to a broker, who brought him to a hilltop that was near an unofficial garbage dump but had an unbroken view of the sea. “I bought it on the spot,” said Tsakonas. He had Antiparos’s complicated zoning laws to thank for the land’s being untouched. In an attempt to stall rampant development on neighboring Páros and on other Cycladic islands, a 1993 Greek law set the minimum plot of land one can build on in the archipelago at two acres, rather than the one acre required in much of the rest of the country. And it was forbidden to break large plots into smaller ones unless they had bordered a public road prior to 1923—and Antiparos’s road was not paved until the 1980s. Furthermore, Greek law prohibits construction on land that wasn’t cultivated before 1945, when aerial photos of the country were taken; everything else is decreed forest. Essentially, Tsakonas was working with a blank canvas.

On top of that, there are construction codes that must be adhered to, such as using stone and not building higher than 23 feet. “There are restrictions that for a young architect, or even a foreign one, I have found to be good,” says Tsakonas.

The first architect Tsakonas asked to get creative was a friend from New York, Tala Mikdashi, who was then working in Renzo Piano’s studio. She visited and quickly agreed to design a house, but they still needed a local architect to help manage the project. Not long after, Tsakonas went to an Athens sandwich shop and bumped into a former classmate, Alexandros Vaitos, who happened to have a degree in architecture.

Vaitos agreed to work on Mikdashi’s project—if he could design the next house in Tsakonas’s master plan. Mikdashi came up with the S-shaped Little Cedar, a stone and whitewash structure that winds its way around a cedar tree, a nod to traditional Cycladic architecture, in which walls were often erected around trees to protect them from the gusty winds. “The untouched landscape of this part of Antiparos was very much the starting point for the designs,” Mikdashi recalled. “Any building needed to fit within the landscape rather than impose its presence.”

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When Vaitos’s turn to design a house came up, he partnered with Carlos Loperena to start Deca and dreamed up Kratir, the crater-side jungle gym, again following Cycladic custom by working with the specific plot he was given. “When the islanders did not have enough flat fertile land, they transformed vast hilly areas into stepped landscapes by building stone walls that followed the contours of the topography,” said Vaitos. “That expansive tradition of landscape architecture in the Cycladic countryside, with its beautifully integrated man-made structures, has had a large impact on our work.”

The new homes attracted a certain kind of owner, one who appreciates innovative architecture but also perhaps the remote atmosphere—there is only one road on the island and no airport. Antiparos can be reached by a five-minute ferry from Páros. “It’s a mixed crowd internationally, but there are certain common values,” Tsakonas mused. “You may have a big house, but your kids are together in the village swimming class. Everyone takes care of the other. A community has been formed.”

As part of his community-building, Tsakonas opened the Beach House on Apantima beach in 2013, rehabbing a taverna and some rooms above it into an eight-room hotel, restaurant, and beach club. It now functions as a social hub for the villa owners. The Beach House, which was restored and redesigned by Argyro Poulivouli, Tsakonas’s wife and an award-winning architect, is still more traditional than design-forward.

“I love old structures, and I like to expand on them,” explained Tsakonas. “I don’t like faking anything, and the Beach House is an old taverna from the ‘50s.” Today the residents of the Oliarios villas gather there for parties, yoga classes, kids’ workshops, to rent boats or helicopters, or to rent out their homes when they’re not on the island; all 13 houses currently under development were sold to people who stayed in one of the others in the past.

While he has created a mini empire on Antiparos, Tsakonas isn’t the only Athenian to see the island’s potential—nor the first. That distinction belongs to Ion Siotis, whose beloved nanny hailed from the island. He visited with her as a child, and when he grew up to become a nuclear scientist living in London in the 1970s, sold his inheritance and bought a huge piece of land on unpaved, unloved, and practically unheard-of Antiparos.

“For this period of time, this was crazy, to come to an unknown island,” says Maria Stratos, who has been summering on Antiparos since 1984, after discovering the place during a vacation on Páros. She quickly fell in love with the place and asked about available property when she was at a taverna. She was directed to Siotis, who would sell her only an entire hillside sloping down to the sea. She and her husband, returned to Athens and brought ten friends together to buy it. “Over the next ten years, all of us built homes here,” said Stamos. “And the ten friends became 20, became 50,” who still summer on the island.

Antiparos feels like home to both generations of summer people—those who came before Tsakonas and his architects, and the more recent arrivals living in the modernist homes, including Ktima, a mostly subterranean villa with an earthen-covered roof and a whitewashed, zigzagged façade.

And, of course, the island is still home to year-round residents—it felt like I had stumbled upon all of them one night watching a black-and-white Greek film projected on the wall of the old fortress, deep in a warren of streets behind the town’s main strip, far from the tourists warrening about with ice cream cones in hand.

For now, depending on when and where you look, Antiparos feels both very authentic and quite transformed. A 15-minute drive from most of the Oliarios villas lies Agios Georgios, the island’s only other real settlement. My family and I stayed there, not in a modernist villa but in a former miner’s cottage—all whitewashed walls, cool stone floors, and gray-painted shutters. It is part of a complex of Cycladic houses that are called Another Island, because eight other islands are visible from the compound. Above it stood a converted windmill with an outdoor kitchen, and below it a field full of thyme sloped down to the sea. Across the water, I could see Despotiko, an uninhabited islet that’s home to one of the most important Greek archaeological discoveries of the past 25 years: a sanctuary dedicated to Apollo. The clear lines of the ancient temple, sanctioned to make the most of the surrounding views, reminded me of the contemporary villas I’d visited. Even in little Agios Georgios, the village opposite the ruins, the residents were struggling to retain the balance between timelessness and innovation that the villa architects worked to achieve.

On our last day, I overheard owners of Another Island discussing improvements for next summer. They’re planning to put in a pool—but one with a silent motor, so they’ll still hear the bells of the sheep when they gather at sunset in the field below.