

The author holds a 1960s-era postcard of the Hilton Athens in front of the renovated building, soon to become the Conrad Athens hotel.



A T H E N S

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Beyond the marble monuments and ancient ruins, the Greek capital bears traces of another golden age: the heyday of Modernist design and architecture.

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A FRIEND TIPPED US OFF to the surprising number of Modernist architectural gems in Athens. “All you have to do is look,” she said. When Jason and I started researching, we found a few crumbs right away. For instance, the U.S. Embassy was designed by Bauhaus founder and Modernist pioneer Walter Gropius as a reinterpretation of the Parthenon. Another crumb: in 1933, Le Corbusier visited Athens, where he praised the work of Greek architect Kyriakos Panagiotakos by signing “Compliments de Le Corbusier” on the wall of a school that Panagiotakos had designed. Intrigued, we decided to plan a trip to Athens that would swap the usual ancient ruins for a tour of the city’s more mysterious mid-20th-century masterworks.

We started at the most visible monument to Modernism, the Hilton Athens, which opened in 1963 with a glitzy two-day celebration and would go on to attract high-profile guests like Frank Sinatra and Ingmar Bergman. The building, designed by Emmanuel Vourekas, Prokopis Vasileiadis, and Spyro Staikos, is clad in gleaming white marble, and one side is covered with a massive relief mural by the avant-garde artist Yiannis Moralis. The 11-story piece depicts spare, stylized figures from Greek myth who look as though they were messengers from the future. The hotel was under renovation during our visit, but is set to reopen as the Conrad Athens later this year.

At the well-preserved Athens Conservatoire, we saw students dancing in the halls and shoes lined up outside

classroom doors. The long, low building was designed by architect Ioannis Despotopoulos (who also went by the name Jan Despo) in the 1950s, but didn’t open until 1980. In the Bauhaus era Despo lived in Weimar, Germany, where he fell under the spell of Modernism. You can see its influence in the Conservatoire’s simple geometry and functional design.

Next we visited the Library of Science, Technology & Culture at the National Hellenic Research Foundation, designed by Constantinos Doxiadis and Dimitris Pikionis. Pikionis was a painter inspired by abstraction, Japanese design, and vernacular Greek tradition. When he collaborated with architects like Doxiadis, the results had a warmth often absent in the movement. At the suggestion of the librarian, we headed to Philopappos Hill to seek out the walking paths Pikionis designed, which wind their way to the foot of the Acropolis.

The Ghika Gallery was only open on Fridays and Saturdays, so we made it our last stop. It should have been the first. The museum is a tribute to the intellectual and artistic output of Greece from the end of World War I to the 1960s. Its exhibits bring to life a sprawling community of Greek writers, architects, and artists—foremost among them the Cubist painter Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika—who freely exchanged ideas with their Western avant-garde counterparts until 1967, when Greece fell under the military dictatorship of Georgios Papadopoulos. Every architect we had sought out was present—as were a few we had missed. It was clear we’d have to come back.



The view of the Acropolis from **Philopappos Hill** (*left*) is stunning, but make sure to look down. In the mid 1950s, architect Dimitris Pikionis (*below*) created the stone walkways that snake up the hill in abstract patterns. The paths appear so organic it takes an effort to notice them—part of their magic.



Though we were drawn to the National Hellenic Research Foundation because of the geometric sculptures we spotted on the grounds, inside we found the **Library of Science, Technology & Culture** (*below*). The inner atrium and skylights took our breath away.



The **Alekos Fassianos Museum** houses the work of the Athenian artist, who died in 2022 and was known for his vividly colored paintings, murals, and sculptures, like *Spirit* (*below*). This drawing is the logo of **Aster** (*entrées \$10–\$20*), a Cretan restaurant we loved near Philopappos Hill.



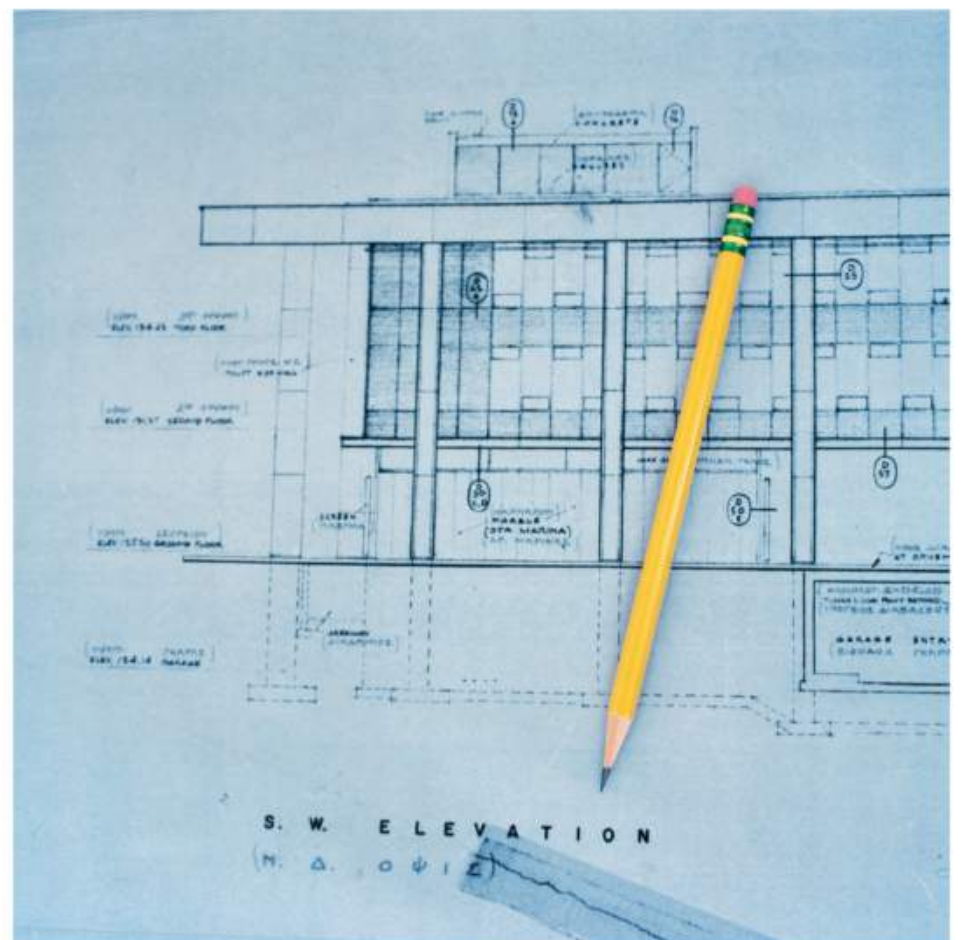


Perianth (above; doubles from \$335) occupies a 1930s building preserved by the Athenian architecture firm K-Studio. Curved walls lead to spacious rooms with balconies, some of which have a view of the Acropolis. The hotel is located in the center of the city, on the peaceful Agias Irinis Square.

The top floors of the **Benaki Museum/ Ghika Gallery** (right) were once the home and studio of painter Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika. The other floors hold works by Greek artists, writers, and architects from the end of World War I to the eve of the 1967 dictatorship. The museum introduces visitors to all the players and displays artifacts like Ghika's paintbrushes (below).



Walter Gropius's blueprint for the **U.S. Embassy** (right) illustrates how, in a feat of engineering, the building's upper floors appear to hang from the roof. We loved the blue tiled grids (left) that filter daylight into the meeting rooms. The building's square columns are clad with marble from the same quarry used by the builders of the Parthenon.





The **War Museum** (above), designed by Thucydides Valentis, opened in 1975. The exhibits range from ancient weaponry and drawings to modern uniforms and dioramas. Outside, an old military vehicle has been converted into a coffee truck, with tables made from ammo boxes.

Students practicing dance at the **Athens Conservatoire** (right). While the music school is accessible only to pupils and faculty, the theater and café on the ground floor are open to the public.



Savory pies—including the classic spinach and cheese—are a favorite Athenian snack. **Mam** (above), founded in the late 1950s, makes especially good ones.



Natalia Boura (right) is head of the Neo-Hellenic Architecture Archives at the **Benaki Museum**. The archives include drawings, models, books, and tools (above) from the estates of 20th-century Greek architects.





Built in 1935, the outdoor **Cine Thision** (below) is the oldest movie theater in Athens. It screens classic and contemporary films in spring and summer. When we visited in May, the air was crisp, and a cat zipped by our feet.



We took a break from Modernism to visit the **Acropolis** (right). These are the columns of the Erechtheion, a temple with a chamber dedicated to Athena, patron goddess of the city. At the **Presidential Mansion**, we saw guards in ceremonial dress, including shoes with black pom-poms (above).



Situated in the low-key neighborhood of Kolonaki, the hotel **Modernist Athens** (doubles from \$318) opened in the former Canadian Embassy in 2020. We loved its clean design, friendly staff, and the T-shirts in its shop (above).

