

Cultural Center of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation in Athens



Myths woven with costumes, stories and art are part of the Greek culture, which, in its course over ancient, Byzantine and modern years is characterized by the idealization of beauty in all its aspects. We find it in the impressive columns, sometimes hurt by time, in the ruins of the ancient temples, in the marble and bronze in which Phidias materialized the symmetry, the mystery and grace of the human being, the legends and the fabulous characters: Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Electra and Oreste, Antigona and Oedipus... At every step, Greece displays surprising connections of abundance and asperity, tranquility and power, wildness and harmony. Its culture is heavily influenced by Agora's spirit, where centuries ago commodities and ideas were exchanged. It is the land of democracy and tragedy, components of civilization that have marked history and universal culture.

Beyond mythological resonances, Athens maintains a balance between the present and the tradition and itself reports to the past as no other European city. Odeon of Herodes Atticus, near Acropolis, although built around 160 BC, hosts concerts and theatre performances during the summer period, and the ruins of Dionysus Theatre remind of the times when tragedies written by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were played for the first time, as well as the comedies of Aristophanes, which allowed them to equally judge the governors.

The "Golden Age" spirit, as the Pericles period was called, is deeply rooted in the subconscious of the Greeks today. That is why, leaving the Hadrian's Library, one of the most magnificent constructions of its time, and heading for the current National Library of Greece, we realize that Athens itself is in a continuous transformation. Passed row by row from the stage neoclassical renovations, to the reconceptualization of values damaged by time and

the creation of postmodern structures that ensure the transfer of cultural heritage to the new generations.

Located near the Parliament building, the National Library of Greece is part of the neoclassic architectural ensemble "Trilogia", next to the University and the Academy. The Academy Building is considered to be the most beautiful neoclassical edifice in the world. It is flanked by two statues erected on ionic columns, God Apollo and Goddess Athena, symbolizing the continuation of the ancient Greek spirit, a spirit that is also personified by the two philosophers, Socrates and Plato, whose statues are placed in front of the building.



The old location of the nearby National Library housed for more than a hundred years one of the most valuable collections of printed documents and manuscripts in an overwhelming space to reflect its role in the community. In large part, the National Library of Greece dealt with specialized co-ordination, conservation and indexing of collections, and services to the public consisted of providing academic and research documents for consultation. The transmission of cultural heritage to future generations is the goal that the Greeks pursue with consistency and the old space of the National Library, as remarkable its architecture is, so restrictive and inconspicuous has proved to be for the public. That's why, since 1998, the idea of relocating the library has been launched, and in 2010 it was decided to build a cultural ensemble that would offer space and modern solutions for the exploitation of library funds.

The initiative was immediately embraced by Stavros Niarchos Foundation in Athens. At the same time, the foundation also took into consideration the support of the Greek National Opera. The two initially disparate plans were allocated in a generous space on the site of the former hippodrome near Phaliron Bay, which allowed the development of a common, harmonized and perfectly integrated environment. The ensemble benefited from a budget of over 600 million euros, plus other costs for moving the two institutions and for organizing interior and exterior spaces. Designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano, the one who has signed on the controversial Georges Pompidou Center in Paris, the new urban complex in Athens is impressive and innovative. From the architect's point of view, a cultural center has to suggest, through its visual impact, the importance of culture in society, so he designed it in the form of a symbolic ray of light that will bring optimism to the Greek mentality.

Before entering the building, visitors are greeted by the sound and motion of water jets, and a network of alleys crosses the lush landscape of the garden with trees, plants, playgrounds and open spaces. The park creates a soothing contrast between the closed and open space,

natural and artificial light, color and texture and turns each visit into a unique experience. In the centre of the park there is an open green space for concerts, festivals, film screenings, public discourses. The park is itself a destination, being designed as homage to the Greek tradition of Mediterranean horticulture. Every month, the garden changes its nuances due to the numerous plants brought from all over Greece, and both the theme and the dominant color are selected on a yearly basis. Guests can rest in specially designed areas or explore the nearby circular labyrinth. The park is an ideal playground for children, but also for all those who prefer to enjoy a walk or practice outdoor sports.

The garden extends to construction and takes the form of a hill that rises up to 32 meters, forming a green roof over the structure of the building. Not only is it spectacular, but this roof also has a practical role: it considerably reduces the energy requirements of the building.

The hilltop is transformed into a huge esplanade that offers a 360 degree view across the entire city: the sea stretches across the west, the Acropolis, the park, the Agora - the central square between the Library and the Opera, and the twisted streets around which arise the distinct, ancient constructions of Athens. From this point of view, the panorama, the Cultural Center and the Acropolis, both located on the roof of Athens, seem to be in a timeless dialogue, in a symmetry that marks -like terminals- the cultural trail of Greece.

But the spectacularity of the ensemble lies not only in the visual details but also in the technical characteristics.



The roof of the center is undoubtedly a key element of the project: an architectural and engineering masterpiece. A 10,000 m² photovoltaic canopy covers much of the esplanade, supported by steel columns with a shock absorption system. It allows the entire structure to move in case of thermal expansion, strong wind or during earthquakes. On the esplanade there is a 900-square-meter lighthouse, a place for those looking for a quiet area to read and reflect, as well as an ideal space for events and exhibitions.

Harmony continues at ground level. Renzo Piano's architectural studio designed a channel - a figurative extension of the sea - and a pedestrian passage, both in plan parallel to the flat

facade of the structure. They lead the visitor to Agora, the common space between the two great cultural institutions, fully paved with Dionysus marble, also brought from the area of Athens.

Under the green roof on the western side of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, the Athens Opera stretches over an area of 33,000 m². It includes a main theatre of 1,400 seats and an experimental theatre of 400 seats. The interior design has taken on classic themes both in terms of elegance and space functionality. The ceiling seems to be detached from the rest of the decorations, reproducing the figure of a smiling emoticon used in virtual space. The designers have introduced not only a novelty element, but also an innovative technique that allows the permanent ventilation of the space and provides perfect acoustics.

On the other side of the Agora lies a 24,000 m² area, the new National Library of Greece, with a capacity of at least 750,000 volumes. On the ground floor there is the public relations office, the periodical publications section and the children's space. Upper floors are occupied by shelves with free access books. The entire edifice gives you a sense of dynamism accentuated by the installations of Japanese artist Susumu Shing, hanging from the ceiling's center.

The National Library of Greece saw this move as the occasion of a new beginning. The relocation of the library is not only a matter of site changing, but it also involves a complete rethinking of its premises. From the activities mostly focused on facilitating study and academic research, the National Library has opened its doors to all categories of audience, regardless of educational status, age or occupation. It is now developing new cultural, educational and leisure services. The desire of the people responsible is that all writers, researchers, students and pupils can find there everything they need using modern study spaces and means. For this, they added educational and recreational programs designed for the whole system of services dedicated to seniors.

No matter how tied they are to the tradition, the Greeks do not lie on their laurels. The library has sensed the need for change and adapts its services, putting, in the good Greek spirit, "the man before all things". They believe that the mission of the library is not fully fulfilled as long as it is addressed only to a loyal, interested and predictable public. The biggest challenge for the library is now the expansion of user categories, especially those who oppose the idea of library and reading. They are of the opinion that no matter what reasons they would reach the library, people should find at least one service of interest to them. The argument is that anyone who comes into contact with the library either for study or reading or for educational or leisure activities, that person becomes a resource of ideas and contributes to changing library approaches according to the real needs of the community.

So, with regard to the library, the Greeks chose the adaptation, because it knows no limits, is a continuous process, involves knowledge, creativity and a full understanding of the environment. Libraries will continue to have a say in the community as long as they do the technology pact and extend their relationships to new audiences, potential users, adapting their services and maintaining their standards at the highest level of professionalism. This is

what the new National Library of Greece at the Cultural Center of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation will inaugurate in February 2017. Being one of the largest cultural projects in Greece's recent history, the Athens Cultural Center can become an engine for cultural and economic stimulation. It is a commitment to the future of Greece.