

A new house for the gods

I grew up surrounded by the Parthenon even though I'd never even set foot on the Acropolis. Nevertheless, classical Greece was ever present in our suburban Adelaide home.

It was a classical cream brick house of the "New Australian-Mediterranean" school of architecture. The dream home of most aspirational Greek migrants... those who had really made it added Doric or Corinthian columns to the facade, so there'd be no mistaking from where the occupants had come.



The opening of the New Acropolis Museum this week was the subject of a Foreign Correspondent report on ABC TV in October 2008. ABC reporter HELEN VATSIKOPOULOS shares her thoughts on going to the Parthenon and the memories it brings back for all of us.

And there was also a pillar or two inside, holding up a pot plant or Grecian urn. On the mantelpiece, a mass-produced bust of Alexander the Great, a javelin-throwing Olympic athlete and a Greek goddess or two. But the pride and joy of the household was my mother's massive needlepoint rendering of the Parthenon - hanging in the special lounge room, the one with the red velvet couches, that was too special for us to use.

On special occasions I was made to wear bright gold jewellery always emblazoned with yes, the Parthenon... gifts sent to me from unknown relatives from the homeland.

On Saturdays at Greek school we'd be indoctrinated with tales of brave Greeks fighting for their freedom from oppressive Ottomans.

My favourite was the story of how the freedom fighters offered the enemy bullets so they would stop melting down the lead coating from clamps that held together parts of the Parthenon. Interesting enough but it was Saturday and there was another battle I would have preferred to be watching with my Australian friends - Port Adelaide slaughtering Norwood at the footy.

Over the years I've made my peace with Greek culture. My embarrassment with Parthenon kitsch is gone.

My own home has museum copies of Cycladic and Classical art.

Two years ago I took my Australian husband, yes, the presenter of this program, Mark Corcoran and our children to Athens.

I wondered what my son and daughter would make of these marbles on the hill.

I asked my then six year old son Andreas what did he think this place was all about?

"This is where God lives," was his reply.

I returned to the house of God recently for an assignment for Foreign Correspondent.

Just setting foot on the Acropolis was enough to take my breath away.

The Parthenon survived almost intact for more than two thousand years, suffering its greatest damage in the last four hundred. It has been a temple to Athena, a church, a mosque and an ammunitions storage site before becoming a tourist attraction.

It survived Venetian cannonballs, Ottoman dynamite, acid rain and a very bad "restoration" early last century, but the worst damage of all was perpetrated by a man, just one man.

Just two decades before Greece was to gain its independence from the Ottomans, the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Lord Elgin, was planning to build his dream home, back in Britain, and his architect suggested he get some drawings and plaster casts of the Parthenon frieze and pediment sculptures.

Lord Elgin hired an artist and the drawing began. But then somehow he decided that the real thing would look much better. He sought a firman or

permission note from the Ottomans.

While he was waiting for permission, his gang of men equipped with saws and other tools began to remove the sculptures. The frieze which ran all the way around the inner cella of the Parthenon, depicted a procession of youths, animals, men and women all honouring Goddess Athena. The relief sculptures pulsate with life, every rib, every muscle is carved as if in motion. The slabs of marble were heavy, so Elgin's men sawed off the surface as this would be much lighter to transport.

The firman arrived - but just what permission had been granted to the diplomat? British journalist Christopher Hitchens has written in "The Parthenon Marbles" that Lord Elgin was allowed to take some marbles - a few that lay scattered on the hill. In fact Elgin and his men removed almost half of the surviving frieze, metopes and sculptures.

Elgin never managed to put them in his lounge room, mantelpiece or veranda. Call it hubris or divine intervention,

he fell on hard times and was forced to sell to the British Museum - where they remain to this day.

This week, the Greeks officially opened the most important building to be constructed in Athens since the Parthenon. The New Acropolis Museum sits at the foot of the Acropolis and now houses all of the remaining frieze, metopes and sculptures from the ancient site.

The Bernard Tschumi design relies on massive columns that sit on top of an archaeological site.

Walking through the museum on a transparent floor, ancient Athens is observed below.

Ascending the stairs is like climbing up the Acropolis to the first level which houses the Archaic era displays. Then, more stairs to the Parthenon gallery.

The glass box on top of the building sits askew the rest of the building so it is parallel with the Parthenon, which is now clearly in view.

It has the exact dimensions of the Parthenon, with steel columns mimicking the marble. The frieze surrounds what is a recreation of the inner cella; in fact the whole room is a recreation of the ancient temple in modern materials. The ancient marbles sit side by side with white plaster copies of those which Elgin stole and are now in the British Museum. The pediment sculptures - all white and cream - look like dismembered bodies from a massacre of long ago.

The Greeks want their marbles back and they'll settle for anything. They're even willing to name the Parthenon gallery, the British Museum annex, if only the sculptures can be reunited.

I also visited the British Museum, and guess what? They're sticking to the old script that Elgin saved the sculptures from ruin. They were bought legitimately because Elgin was dealing with the legitimate government of the day. Lord Byron begged to differ, giving his life fighting the "legitimate government of the day" in the name of Greek independence.

For years, the British claimed the Greeks were incapable of looking after the antiquities and had nowhere to put them. They have now.

The newly built house of God is awaiting their return.

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