

A New Home for Treasures of the Acropolis

Continued from Thursday's edition

But it is a mistake to focus solely on the museum's role in the effort to recover the marbles. I walked through the museum the day before it opened with its architect Bernard Tschumi. As a few other journalists and I waited for our tour to begin, I thought about the idea of building anything next to the Acropolis. It's a bit like creating a museum for Michelangelo right next to St. Peter's Basilica. But Tschumi embraced the challenge, and let the environment, the collection, and mostly the Acropolis determine every aspect of his design. For example, the glass walls take advantage of the plentiful sunshine. No artificial illumination is needed and the sculptures, many of which stood outside on the Acropolis, can be seen in natural light.

When I looked through the panels toward the Acropolis at the center of this teeming modern city, I could see how it still dominates the story of Athens. The past and the present are engaged here in much the same way they were in antiquity. Kallikrates, the architect of the new temple and of the goddess's cult statue in a specially designed basement level. He also included a window into the foundations through which worshippers could view the remains and remember the sanctity of the old temple's site and the outrage of the Persians' destruction of it. Similarly, the highly unusual architecture of the Erechtheion, completed in 406 BC, was designed to avoid destroying some of the city's most sacred sites, including the spot where Poseidon hit the Acropolis with his trident in the competition with Athena for patronage of the city; the tomb of Kekrops, the mythical half-man, half-serpent king who judged the competition; and the sacred olive tree that sprouted when the goddess struck the earth with her spear, ensuring her victory and eternal patronage of the city that henceforth bore her name.

Most people will probably begin their visit by going straight in the museum's entrance, but I stopped on Dionysiou Areopagitou, the pedestrian street in front, to consider the early 20th century apartment buildings



Ten years of excavation at the museum site uncovered evidence of more than 3,500 years of habitation, including houses, large wells and cisterns, roads, and thousands of artifacts. After protest by prominent archaeologists, the excavation was integrated in the building's design, allowing appreciation of another layer of the city's history.

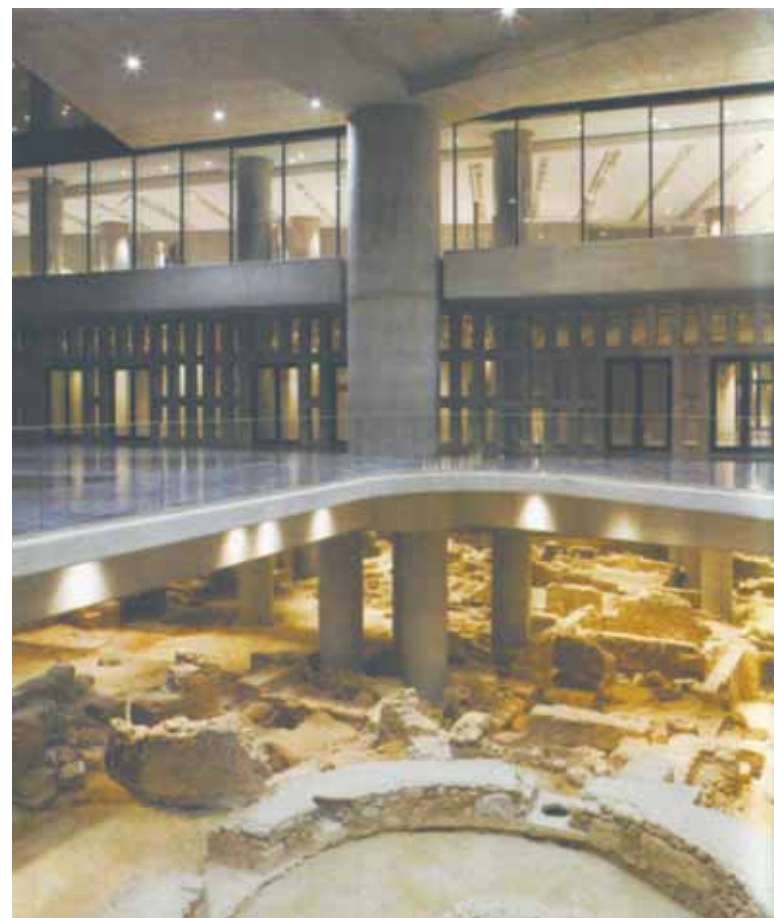
that have presented primary challenges to Tschumi and museum president and archaeologist Dimitrios Pandermalis. After more than 100 lawsuits, most of the original buildings have been torn down and the owners compensated. But two buildings - numbers 17 and 19 - remain disputed. The government has recently rescinded the buildings' landmark status, perhaps hastening their demise. On number 19, multilingual signs put up by its residents read, "If this building looks neglected it is because the Ministry of Culture has issued a decree preventing any repair or maintenance works... it has been almost two years since we submitted our proposal (to surround the building with large trees and thus cover its less appealing back) but there has been no response so far". The issue of these two holdouts is far from resolved - the museum wants the buildings, which block part of the view of the acropolis from the museum's cafe, torn down. But the buildings' residents want to keep their homes. Looking at the elegant facades, carved entranceways, and delicate iron balconies of these excellent examples of Art Deco architecture. I wondered if it's right for a museum that encourages its visitors to consider the Acropolis and its surroundings as part of the city to demolish another part of its history.

As I headed for the museum's entrance, I noticed I wasn't walking on the courtyard's gray marble pavement, but on a wide

glass pathway. Peering down through a maze of painted black polka dots, meant to help those who suffer from vertigo, I soon realized that there was a past excavation beneath me - a strange experience for someone trained for many years not to walk on top of archaeology.

During a decade of work on the site before most of the museum was even built, excavators uncovered evidence of habitation here dating from the end of the Neolithic period (about 3000 BC) to at least the seventh century AD. Looking down into one immaculately excavated section not covered by glass, I saw dozens of wells and cisterns - reminders of the abundant underground water supply that first attracted people to settle here - and well-preserved house walls and roads. There is also a Classical andron (a large open space for entertaining), which Pandermalis thinks may have been for symposia, ancient Greek debating-drinking parties. I could imagine tipsy philosophers discussing the day's most pressing issues here as the future soccer stars shrieked behind me.

We stopped and Tschumi noted how, after pressure from many prominent archaeologists, including a lawsuit brought by the International Council on Museums and Sites (ICOMOS), he had to modify the design of the building so as to neither cover up nor destroy this section of ancient Athens ("Acropolis Museum Is back on Track", Ju-



ly/August 2004). To preserve the remains, Tschumi raised the whole museum up on massive concrete columns and suspended it over the excavations, no small feat in an earthquake-prone part of the world. Pointing to one of these columns, he laughed and said, "I call this the fourth architectural order. There's Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and Tripartite," the last referring to the fact that each column is composed of three thinner ones to leave as small a foot-print as possible on the remains below. Once conservation work is finished, visitors will be able to begin their tour at the excavation level and consider how the evidence of Athens's past is always part of its present and how here - as on the Acropolis itself - it is venerated.

Once inside the museum, I stood on a gently sloping glass ramp, from which it is possible to see all the way to the building's top floor, listening to Tschumi explain many of the carefully considered details of his design, such as how the ramp recalls the one leading up to the Acropolis, how circular holes all over the walls absorb noisy echoes, and how much he hates to design museum furniture (the only places to sit are simple marble cubes that do not clutter the space, but may make it a bit difficult to stop and contemplate the artwork). On each side of the ramp are cabinets filled with cases, marble reliefs, ceramic incense burners, bronze tripods, and other artifacts found on the Acropolis. At the top of the

ramp, I encountered a large, brightly painted limestone sea monster, lions attacking a bull, and Herakles and the sea-god Triton, remains from the pediments of the Hekatompedon, Athena's first temple on the Acropolis, which dates to about 580 BC.

Rounding a corner to the second-floor Archaic Gallery. I was surrounded by sculptures from the period between the seventh century BC and the Persian Wars of the fifth century BC. I walked around each work, none of which is behind glass. I felt like I was standing on a massive chessboard, each sculpture like a piece captured in place during a match. It's in antiquity, the Acropolis was covered with sculptures, and not just the building remains we see today.

As I climbed the stairs to the top level and the Parthenon Gallery, I took a deep breath, not because I was winded, but because I was worried. Here is where the art and politics collide, and I was concerned that this confrontation would overshadow the sculptures. It does. The room's enormous size, natural light, and parallel alignment with the Parthenon make it an ideal space to display the temple's architectural sculptures exactly as they were installed on its exterior. For the first time in more than 200 years, it's possible to follow the continuous narrative of the frieze and be able to see the temple itself at the same time. I smiled a bit incredulously when Tschumi noted that once he started measuring