

Greece's first Museum of Underwater Antiquities finds home in Piraeus



When plans for the cultural revamp of Piraeus's main coastal zone were first unveiled two years ago, few expected to see results so soon. However, an exhibition that ends today at the Piraeus Port Authority's Petrini (Stone-built) Warehouse, displaying the studies submitted by architectural firms for the construction of the Museum of Underwater Antiquities – which is a key component of the revamp – shows that things are well under way.

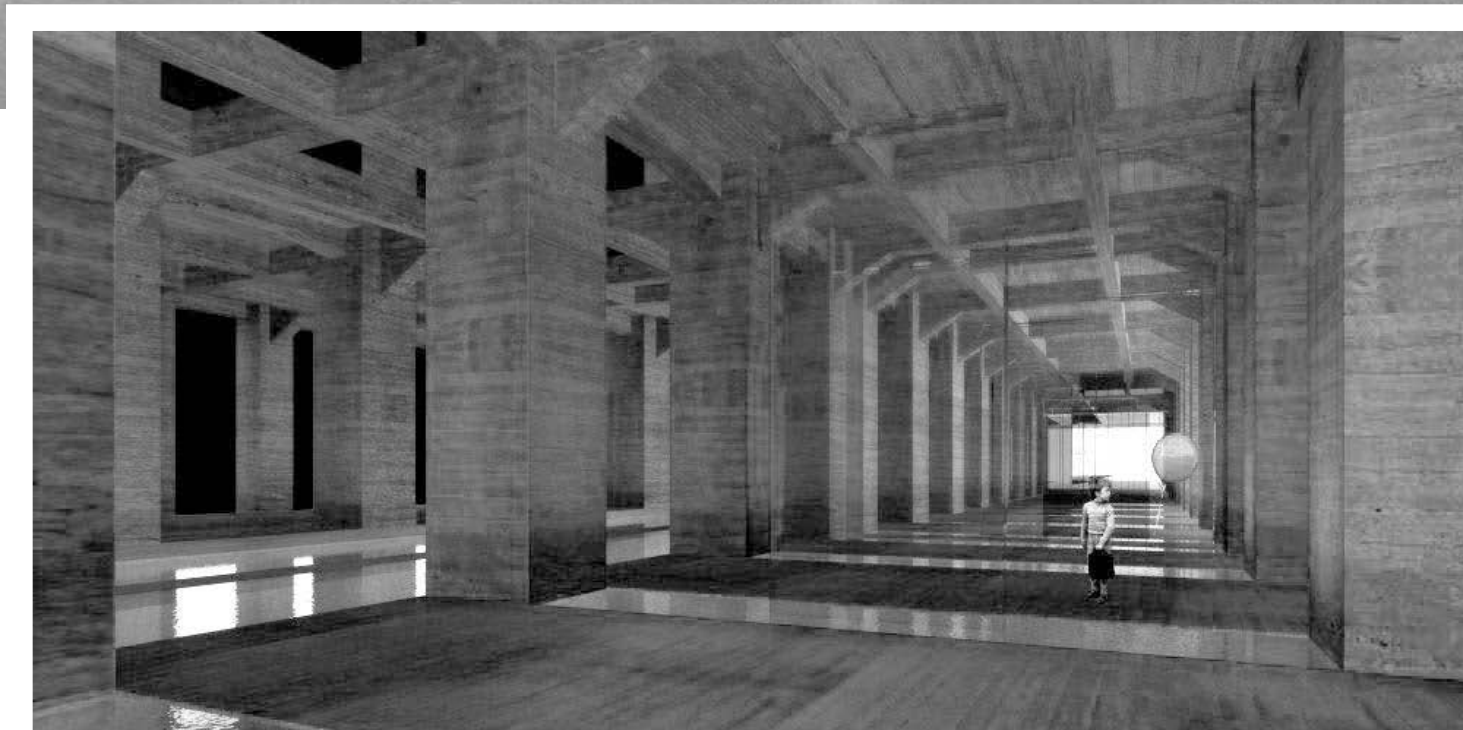
The plans also include the construction of a museum about Piraeus and another on immigration mapping the city's as well as the country's history in this significant area of social change, the latter of which, however, is still some time away from completion.

The new Piraeus museum and the Museum of Underwater Antiquities are somewhat easier propositions because all they basically need to do is bring together a plethora of material that currently lies gathering dust in warehouses and will be put on public display for the first time.

The lamentable fact is that Greece has never before had a museum of underwater antiquities even though it has 119 listed submarine archaeological sites and hundreds of ancient relics waiting to be investigated at some 1,000 locations.

The museum will be located in Piraeus port's old silo, an impressive edifice that was once used for storing grain before its transportation. It will contain a significant display of antiquities found underwater and will also play an important research role, as well as contributing to tourism in Piraeus.

The first prize for the design of the museum went to a group of six Greek architects: Evangelos Antonopoulos, Thaleia Vetta, Giorgos Gavalas, Maria-Kyriaki Riga, Anastasia Stamouli and Marina Pylarinou. The concept behind their design is about restoring the connection between the city and the sea in this emblematic building from the 1930s, painting it a striking red so that it stands out almost like some kind of monster



that has emerged from the deep.

The need for such a museum in Greece is clear and has been made more than apparent by the resounding success of the Antikythera Shipwreck exhibition at the National Archaeological Museum, which ends on April 28. After all, who can resist the idea of divers discovering an ancient ship full of fascinating finds lying under the sand at the bottom of the sea? And it appears that there is no shortage of treasures to be found in the Greek seas. In 2012, for example, archaeologists studying the area where the famous 60-50 BC wreck was found off the coast of Antikythera, an island south of the Peloponnese, discovered wooden links believed to have belonged to a ship's anchor, paving the way for the possibility of another important find. Off the coast of Kythera, archaeologists have discovered part of a ship's hull, while the remains of six wrecks dating from the 11th to the 16th centuries AD as well as 4,000 coins from the 1750-80 period have been found close to Rhodes and the southern Euboean Sea has revealed at least 25 wrecks from the Classical and Byzantine periods.

When archaeologist Angeliki Simosi, who heads the ephorate in charge of underwater antiquities, presented the results of research conducted by her team during a recent lecture at the National Archaeological Museum, she made special reference to the museum being planned in Piraeus, saying that it will be "unique not just by Greek standards, but also on an international scale in terms of its concept and of the breadth of exhibits." The first items to go on exhibit, which will number over 2,000, are the fruit of research conducted by the ephorate over the past 37 years and date from prehistoric to modern times.

The museum is also slated to have interactive exhibitions and simulation exercises such as exploring a wreck in scuba gear or sailing through a storm.

The museum is expected to take four years to build. In combination with the other two new museums, on the history of Piraeus and immigration, the revamp of the port area will comprise an important attraction, especially for tourists from cruise ships that tie up right beside the silo. The revamp of the coastal zone – which will include green

areas and entertainment venues – is also expected to help promote other cultural sites in Piraeus, such as the Municipal Gallery and the Nautical Museum, among others. The Piraeus museum will be housed in a building known as Kastraki, or Little Castle, and its aim is to promote the history of the city and the broader region through 3,000 exhibits organized in five thematic units, starting with the original plans for the city designed by pioneering urban planner and the father of the "Best State" theory, Hippodamus (498-408 BC).

According to the study for the museum presented by the head of the 26th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities, Stella Chrysoulaki, to the National Council of Museum, the first part of the exhibition will be on the founding and fortifications of Piraeus, the second part will be on its history as a maritime force, the third will be on commercial activity and economic history and the fourth will be on Hipodamus's concept of building the perfect city. The fifth and final unit will be dedicated to notable figures in Piraeus during antiquity.