

Making Archaeological Exhibitions in Greece: Striving for Excellence

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Introduction

Greece is a vast archaeological field with 21,000 registered archaeological sites, of which 246 are organized and offer a series of services to their visitors¹. Apart from its glorious ancient past, the country also has a vigorous contemporary cultural presence, which is growing rapidly, partially due to partnerships with local communities, private collectors and institutions² or sponsorships³. These dynamics are represented in the variety of museum institutions that can be found throughout the country, from Natural History and Open Air to Folklore Museums and Art Galleries (Glazer and Zenetou 1996:224).

Nevertheless, the 202 archaeological state museums comprise the largest category of museums in Greece (Athanasopoulou and Douma 2008) and play a significant role in the formation of its museological landscape (Gazi 2011; Bounia and Gazi 2012). Archaeological museums fall in the following categories:

- **Site museums**, which are connected to an archaeological site or monument.
- **Local museums**, which hold and display antiquities from a wider area
- **National Museums**, which hold collections of the so-called encyclopedic-type
- **Specialized museums**, with collections of specific interest.

A short history

The protection of antiquities, abundant in the Greek topography, were one of the priorities of the newly established Greek state (Voudouri 2003:18-30). The first archaeological museum, with

¹ A detailed list of archaeological sites, monuments and museums, compiled by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, can be found online in http://odysseus.culture.gr/index_en.html (accessed 12/8/2014).

² An example of an inspiring partnership is the Network of Museums and Cultural Institutions of Athens (<http://www.athensmuseums.net/index.php?lang=en>, accessed 12/8/2014).

³ An interesting approach on the concept of sustainability and the valuable cooperation schemes between stakeholders was made in the “*Heritage First! Towards a common approach for a sustainable Europe*” Conference, 6-8 March 2014, which was organized by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports (<http://gr2014.eu/events/conferences-and-seminars/conference-heritage-first-towards-common-approach-sustainable-europe> and also <http://www.blod.gr/lectures/Pages/viewevent.aspx?EventID=332>, accessed 12/8/2014).

the purpose of safeguarding this moveable cultural property, was founded as early as in 1829 as “National Museum”, from the collections of which other important National Museums later emerged (Voudouri 2003:15-17; Kokkou 2009). The National Archaeological Museum in Athens, which endeavoured to constitute an iconic museum for the museological thinking of the country during the 20th century (Gazi 1994), is such a characteristic example (Kaltsas 2007:15-22; 2009). The formation of the legislative framework, aiming at both the protection of antiquities and the presentation of the country’s archaeological material, started early in the life of the Greek State and consisted of a series of legal documents, which were codified in Law no. 5351/1932 (Government Gazette 275/A/24-8-1932) entitled “On Antiquities”⁴.

Some 70 years later, in 2002, the valuable experience gained from the management of archaeological sites and museums and of cultural heritage issues overall, along with the ratification of important international conventions and treaties, has led to the publication of another fundamental legal document, Law no. 3028 “On the Protection of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage in General”⁵. This framework managed to assemble the most advanced directions in the field of heritage management, thus, becoming the main vehicle for the safeguarding of our archaeological past and its presentation to the public, as well as for its linking with local communities and the academia alike. With the Presidential Decree no.191 that followed in 2003⁶, the organizational chart and the administrative structure of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture were described in detail and, for the first time, the Directorate of Museums, Exhibitions and Educational Programmes was established as the governing authority for all the archaeological museums of the country.

The process

The Directorate of Museums, Exhibitions and Educational Programmes is a central unit of the Ministry of Culture, which oversees all the operational aspects of archaeological museums in Greece. Apart from being responsible for many tedious administrative issues, which nonetheless

⁴ Laws, presidential decrees and various legal documents of the Greek State are available online in the website of the Government Gazette, <http://www.et.gr/>. Law no. 5351/1932 [in Greek] is available at http://www.et.gr/idocs-nph/search/pdfViewerForm.html?args=5C7QrtC22wFxCLy-gog7EndtvSoClrL8PBriuq63Sul5MXD0LzQTLWPU9yLzB8V68knBzLCmTXKaO6fpVZ6Lx9hLslJUqeiQWC8TYzysJPsbWP_N9Z8g8rpuM6N1wkBOC0dDxVhj7xA. (accessed 12/8/2014).

⁵ An English translation of Law no. 3028/2002 is available at <http://portal.unesco.org/culture/fr/files/25587/11113354823nomos4en2.pdf/nomos4en2.pdf> (accessed 12/8/2014).

⁶ Available at <http://www.et.gr/idocs-nph/search/pdfViewerForm.html?args=5C7QrtC22wFalhF2BrTT7HdtvSoClrL8NFVwjN9oWbZ5MXD0LzQTLWPU9yLzB8V68knBzLCmTXKaO6fpVZ6Lx9hLslJUqeiQwjsEaF0gsivze783tSNEAAvtzfo54f08B-EeYRGst4>. [in Greek] (accessed 12/8/2014).

are fundamental for the smooth operation of public museums and collections, the Directorate of Museums is also in charge for another significant parameter of museums' activities, namely the development and design of their permanent and temporary exhibitions. According to the legal framework described above, all exhibition proposals prepared by various museums and institutions are first submitted to the Directorate of Museums, which is responsible for their review. To this end, the Directorate cooperates with the diverse stakeholders towards the finalization of challenging sections of their exhibition proposals. Some of the issues under review are the structure of the exhibitions' scenario, the communicate power of the exhibitions' headlines, the stratification of the exhibitions' textual information, the materials used for the display cases, the placement and appropriate height of the exhibits etc.⁷ The Directorate then prepares its assessment report for the introduction of the submitted proposals to the Council of Museums or the Central Archaeological Council, two prominent collective bodies of the Ministry of Culture⁸, invested with the authority to decide upon the content, the design and the communication aspects of the proposed exhibitions.

Since the beginning of the previous century, the approach on exhibition making in Greece has followed the prevailing current of presenting artifacts with a strong emphasis on their aesthetic and didactic values. The critical shift towards the educational character of museum institutions, a change that was decisively reinforced in the '80s, has expressed itself through a groundbreaking display of this Neolithic Culture at the Volos Archaeological Museum (Chourmouziadis 1976). Under the same concept and on the basis of the constructivist views of learning, the open air museum of Dispilio, in western Macedonia (Sofronidou 2008), was created at the end of 1990s, so as to represent a glimpse of the important Neolithic lake settlement. During the same period, Greek archaeological museums began to put greater effort in planning and implementing educational activities, aiming at establishing direct connections between the curricula of the formal educational system and the abundant historical traces of the past that museums aimed to represent.

⁷ In 2007 the "Prerequisites for the development of study reports for the making of archaeological works, funded by the Measurement 3.3 of the "Culture" European Programme" [in Greek] (available at <http://ep3kps.culture.gr/culturemin/pol/upload/7-odigoi-egyklioi-ypodeigmata/%CE%A0%CF%81%CE%BF%CE%B4%CE%B9%CE%B1%CE%B3%CF%81%CE%B1%CF%86%CE%AD%CF%82%20%CE%9C%CE%B5%CE%BB%CE%B5%CF%84%CF%8E%CE%BD%20%CE%A9%CF%81%CE%AF%CE%BC%CE%B1%CE%BD%CF%83%CE%B7%CF%82%20%CE%9A%CE%B5%CE%AF%CE%BC%CE%B5%CE%BD%CE%BF%20%CE%9A%CE%91%CE%A3.rar>, accessed 13/8/2014) were approved with a decision by the Minister of Culture and still form the basic guideline in preparing and assessing museological proposals.

⁸ The website of the Secretariat of the Central Archaeological Council, with a detailed archive of the past subjects reviewed by the two Councils, is available at <http://kas.culture.gr/> [in Greek] (accessed 13/8/2014).

With the beginning of the new millennium and the crucial contribution of the 2nd (1994-1999) and 3rd (2000-2006) European Community Support Frameworks, as well as the National Strategic Reference Framework (2007-2013), an extended scheme has been planned and implemented by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. This aimed at the renovation of existing museum premises or the construction of new ones, along with the planning of dynamic exhibitions with interactive qualities, which would connect more effectively with the various sightseers of the Greek cultural scene. To this end, the Central Administration of the Ministry has provided detailed guidance to regional bodies and independent institutions and has circulated guidelines, wishing to give a creative and participating orientation to the museological scene of Greece.

The main directions of this strategy can be summed up as follows:

- Exhibition plans should take into consideration the economic and social aspects of the cultural environment they are created in.
- The exhibition proposals should have a detailed and clearly structured narrative, which would present the main points of the exhibition scenario in an intriguing manner.
- Exhibition scenarios should introduce a more critical approach to material culture and the past.
- The museographic approach should aim to incorporate in the exhibitions' architectural language and design the main concepts and narratives of the display.
- Traditional communication media, like text and pictorial elements, should follow the accepted principles of visibility and intellectual accessibility, albeit with stimulating graphic design.
- An array of interpretive media should be used in order to approach the diverse groups or individual visitors offering them the possibility to experience, contemplate, interact, communicate and enjoy within the exhibition space.
- Educational and public programmes should be designed with a focus on the school curricula and on the interrelation between museum objects and the modern world.
- The exhibition design should cater for people with special needs and take into consideration principles of accessibility and spatial interaction.

The practice

Following the presentation of the theoretical framework for developing exhibitions, according to the policies and procedures described above, we will continue with the display of characteristic examples that bear the core of contemporary museological thinking and practice in Greece. A

significant number of them has already opened to the public, such as the Archaeological Museum of Nikopolis in northwestern Greece, the Archaeological Museum of Vravra in Attica, and the Archaeological Museum of Patras in Peloponnese. Many others are underway, including the Archaeological Museum of Corfu at the Ionian Sea, the Byzantine Museum of Chalkidiki in northeastern Greece and the Archaeological Museum of Larisa in central Greece in the Peloponnese. For the purposes of this presentation, we will next discuss a selected number of museums in detail.

One such is the **Byzantine Museum of Didymoteicho**, a small town in southeastern Greece, lying on the west bank of the Evros River, the natural frontier between Greece and Turkey. In the distant past, Didymoteicho served twice as seat of the Byzantine Empire, and once as capital of the Ottoman State. Today, this small town suffers from severe demographic and financial decline, whilst, at the same time, being home to various ethnic and religious groups. Scheduled to open in 2015, the Museum is among those institutions exemplifying the state effort towards developing theme-centered and community-oriented permanent exhibitions. To this end, the organisers' intention was primarily to make the locals aware of their home town's glorious past and, eventually, support them towards regaining their lost self-confidence. This fact was taken into account in the exhibition scenario and was materialised as the last exhibition section, titled "Tribute to famous people of Didymoteicho and Thrace"⁹. Moreover, the exhibition narrative makes frequent references to the life and pursuits of the various minority groups residing at Didymoteicho. For the implementation of the aforementioned objectives, vigorous scenography as well as a significant number of challenging interpretive media have been employed, such as video projections, digital applications, sound effects, and mechanical interactive exhibits. Finally, an artistic installation by the contemporary and widely-respected Greek artist George Hadjimichalis will serve as an epilogue to the exhibition. His work interprets, through his own eyes, the past of the region, proving that the dialogue between our cultural heritage and contemporary creative arts has always much to offer.

Another museum, which will certainly be a valuable addition to the museum map of Greece, is the **Museum of Underwater Antiquities**, the construction of which falls within the scope of an

⁹ The "*Study Report for the Making of the Byzantine Museum of Didymoteicho*" (2010) was the fruit of a cooperation between the Directorate of Museums, Exhibitions and Educational Programmes and the 15th Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities (project team: E. Glytsi, P. Kalamara, D. Makropoulou, A. Manioudakis, K. Tzortzi et al).

ambitious master plan for the urban regeneration of the today abandoned coastal zone of Piraeus (Anomeritis and Arachovitis 2012). The Museum, the making of which is in progress, will provide an overview of the 37-year long underwater activities of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture from the bottom of the Greek seas. The Museum will be housed inside a transit grains warehouse, called SILO, which is a landmark monument of Piraeus from the 1930s. The building will be further restructured so as to obtain museum use. The main narrative of the Museum¹⁰, which will be staged at a specially made, mammal-like, metal form installed at the core of the building, will attempt to recreate the experience of a submersion through time into the depths of the Greek seas¹¹. The New Museum will make an appealing attraction for the approximately 11 million cruise boat passengers, who disembark at the Piraeus port every year and for the more than three million residents of Piraeus and Athens, who will have every reason to visit the museum repeatedly, as other interesting stories will be presented, such as the transliteration of shipwrecks in literature and in the Seventh Art, the cereal trade in the Mediterranean, etc.

Some other museums of note are those which fall under the so-called “**Grand Project**” type and have required a master-plan for their development. The **New Acropolis Museum** is probably the most emblematic, not only because of its direct connection to a heritage site, Parthenon, that fundamentally influenced modern art and architecture, but also because it is home to some of the world’s most renowned works of classical antiquity. Special note should be made to the groundbreaking architectural design of the Museum, as well as to its top level, which hosts a significant number of the Parthenon marbles, offering a magnificent view to the monument itself due to its ingenious placement. The overall quality of the exhibits is unsurpassed, while the scenographic display of the archaic sculpture and the overall lighting design, which inventively uses the strong natural light of Greece, are most impressive.

Another “Grand Project” in progress is the **Archaeological Museum of the city of Athens**, which will be erected in that part of the city where Plato used to retain his Academy in the 4th century B.C. The narrative of the museum puts forward the idea of Athens as a palimpsest, in which archaeological finds from the city’s historical center and periphery will be conversing with space,

¹⁰ The “*Study Report for the Making of the Museum of Underwater Antiquities at the Cultural Coast of Piraeus*”, was synthesized in 2011 by the Directorate of Museums, Exhibitions and Educational Programmes and its museologists A. Alexopoulou, E. Glytsi, E. and M. Mouliou.

¹¹ For draughts of the proposal that got the first prize in the architectural competition and the narrative behind it see http://en.alies.piraeusculturalcoast.org.gr.193-92-97-57.linuxzone26.grserver.gr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=104&lang=en (accessed 13/8/14).

archaeology and urban development. An international architectural competition will soon be announced aiming at the design of a 'green' museum, which would follow bioclimatic principles of building.

During the last five years important exhibitions of archaeological character have travelled abroad. The Greek state, taking into consideration the power and the reciprocal benefits of such cultural diplomacy endeavors, has recently redefined its State Indemnity Scheme, in order to encourage the display of the country's cultural treasures abroad. One such was the **Olympia: Myth-Cult-Games** show, which was hosted at the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin in 2012 and was next moved to the Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum in Doha (Gehrke et al. 2012). Another prominent exhibition of Greek origin is the elegant **Heaven and Earth. Art of Byzantium from Greek Collections** show, which was staged at the National Gallery of Art at Washington D.C. and, currently, at the Jean Paul Getty Museum (Drandaki et al. 2013). Finally, **Nautilus: Navigating Greece** exhibition was organized by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, with the collaboration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, within the scope of the Greek Presidency of European Union for 2014 (Garezou et al. 2014). The show, which was held at the BOZAR Centre of Fine Arts in Brussels, was a Greek production that brought together 90 ancient artifacts with 24 works of modern Greek art, with the purpose of exploring the intimate relationship between the Greeks and the Mediterranean Sea through the ages. Indeed, it is the first time in the context of a temporary exhibition organized by the Hellenic State that contemporary art has been so central in an archaeological exhibition, thus making an equal counterpart in a synthetic and dialectic approach of past and present and highlighting the so-called diachronia of Greek culture. In addition, the exhibition brought to the fore social, political, economic and cultural issues, traditionally associated with the sea, which, nevertheless, are of much interest to the people of today.

Conclusions

Concluding, the pursuit for excellence is a difficult road to walk in the cultural sector, particularly nowadays that we all feel the distressing results of the worst recession since the 1920s (Voudouri 2014). The conference entitled "Heritage First! Towards a Common Approach for a Sustainable Europe", which was organized by the Ministry of Culture this March, demonstrated the way out of the crisis for museums and cultural institutions and has resulted in the drafting of "Conclusions on cultural heritage as a strategic resource for a sustainable Europe", which were next

adopted by the Council of Culture Ministers of the European Union at its meeting on the 20 May 2014 in Brussels¹². In addition, this coming autumn, the Directorate of Museums, Exhibitions and Educational Programmes will organize a workshop for the updating of the guidelines for developing archaeological exhibitions, which will discuss the lessons taken from the review of exhibition proposals from all over Greece, while presenting the latest trends in the development of exhibitions narrative and architectural design. We hope that this workshop will encourage exhibition organizers to adopt a more critical approach to the past, to involve more actively creative arts into their making, and eventually, to produce more coherent, society-oriented and lively archaeological exhibitions.

The Directorate of Museums, Exhibitions and Educational Programmes, with a twelve-year experience on exhibition making, is working systematically to reappraise itself and strives for the best. Apparently there is still much to be done. Nevertheless, Greece is working hard towards this direction.

¹² Available at http://ec.europa.eu/culture/news/2014/20140602-heritage_en.htm (accessed 13/8/2014).

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