

# Library and opera go green

*Italian architect Renzo Piano presents his concept design for the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre, to be completed in six years' time*

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**F**OR A city of 2.5m<sup>2</sup> of green space per person - compared to the average of 7m<sup>2</sup> for the rest of Europe - the addition of a 166,000m<sup>2</sup> recreation space the size of the National Gardens, over three-quarters of which will be undeveloped, is no small deal.

A much-needed breath of fresh air to the city's urban profile, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre

(SNFCC), at the Delta Falirou area in southern Athens, will also function as a cultural arc, hosting the National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera, both of which have been struggling over the years with serious space problems.

Funded in its entirety by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, which was set up in 1996 by the heirs of the Greek shipping magnate, the ambitious project that includes the latest in environmentally progressive, state-of-the-art-facilities will cost 450 million euros and is expected to be completed in 2015. Pritzker Architecture Prize winner (1998) Renzo Piano, who is known for his 'green' architectural solutions, has been chosen among 24 entrants to carry out the work.

In 1981 Piano, who has worked with architecture heavyweights Richard Rogers and Peter Rice among others, founded the Renzo Piano Building Workshop (RPBW), which currently has branches in Genoa, Paris (the architect's current residence) and New York. The prestigious workshop also undertook the construction of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the redevelopment of the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin and, most recently, the design of the *New York Times* offices in New York.

The 71-year-old Italian architect unveiled his concept design (the complete study will be delivered in August) for the cultural centre at a January 24 press meet in Zappeio in the presence of Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis. Piano pointed to the collaboration of light, breeze and water - all vital elements of the Greek landscape - towards an environment-friendly effect.

"The cultural centre's proximity to water, the natural warm breezes and the

light of Athens were particularly inspiring during the design process," he said. "It was immediately clear that we must take advantage of all these elements to ultimately design a zero-emissions building that expresses movement and energy."

Situated in the old Hippodrome area, the centre borders the municipality of Kallithea. Though Kallithea's name is suggestive of a fine view, said Piano, the abundance of cement and the area's dense population have spirited away this advantage. "Our concept is based on bringing back this stolen view," Piano said.

With this in mind, the ground level will be raised to form a 30-metre high hill that will allow visual access to the sea and function as a natural shield with regard to the library and opera buildings.

"Land is fragile and, therefore, architecture should not be hostile. I don't like the buildings that impose

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Hans Akriviadis

Architect Renzo Piano takes the Megaron podium



Yorgis Gerolymbos/ SNFCC

Land surveying in the former Hippodrome area



Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre/FPBW

## Library design for the cultural centre's opera building

...s on the viewer," said Piano. Architect's respect towards the environment is also evident in his use of glass as the work's main materials. The centre is expected to receive the

US Green Building Rating System's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, which addresses high standards for environmentally-sustainable construction.

Easy access is a key phrase for the National Library, which is designed to accommodate people with physical disabilities but also complies with the digital era's ever-changing technology demands. Greek language courses for immigrants and Braille computers are also planned.

Placed at the building's higher level, the reading room - or "living room", as Piano suggestively referred to it - will give the impression of being suspended in the air.

Apart from a 1,400-seat capacity main hall, the National Opera will have an additional hall dedicated to dance performances. The opera and library edifices' innovative roofing will consist of photovoltaic cell panels, which will take advantage of solar energy.

The opera and library buildings will be joined at the Agora, an outdoor

square that will operate as a meeting point in the Ancient Greek sense of the word through the hosting of concerts, theatre performances and exhibitions. The Stavros Niarchos Park will follow the Mediterranean model of landscape architecture by featuring heat-resistant vegetation such as rosemary plants, as well as olive, pine and Judas trees.

A 1km-long, 30m-wide canal running parallel to Syngrou Avenue will offer visitors the opportunity to engage in sea sports like sailing.

Piano referred once more to the element of water and its central role in connecting people during his lecture at the Megaron Mousikis later on the same day.

"It was the first 'internet' in history. Architecture is like making art in moving sand," he said.

His lecture - which mostly focused on characteristic examples of his work, including the Centre Georges Pompidou - came to an awkward close with the unfurling of a banner by Greek Polytechnic architecture students that read "No More Cement".

