

ATHENS HAS SCORED

Planned by Renzo Piano and financed by nearly 600 million euros from a private foundation, the Stavros Niarchos Cultural Center will be a national library and opera house and a driving force to restart the economy

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NEWS



Photos Courtesy SNFCC

The Stavros Niarchos Cultural Center seen from the harbor of Piraeus.

They say the bees have returned to Kallithea. And the birds which now come and settle on the branches of over 1,100 trees that have just been planted on the new hill that Renzo Piano wanted to forge, arching the flat land of the bay with a gentle slope. In the void left in this district south of Athens by what was originally a racecourse and

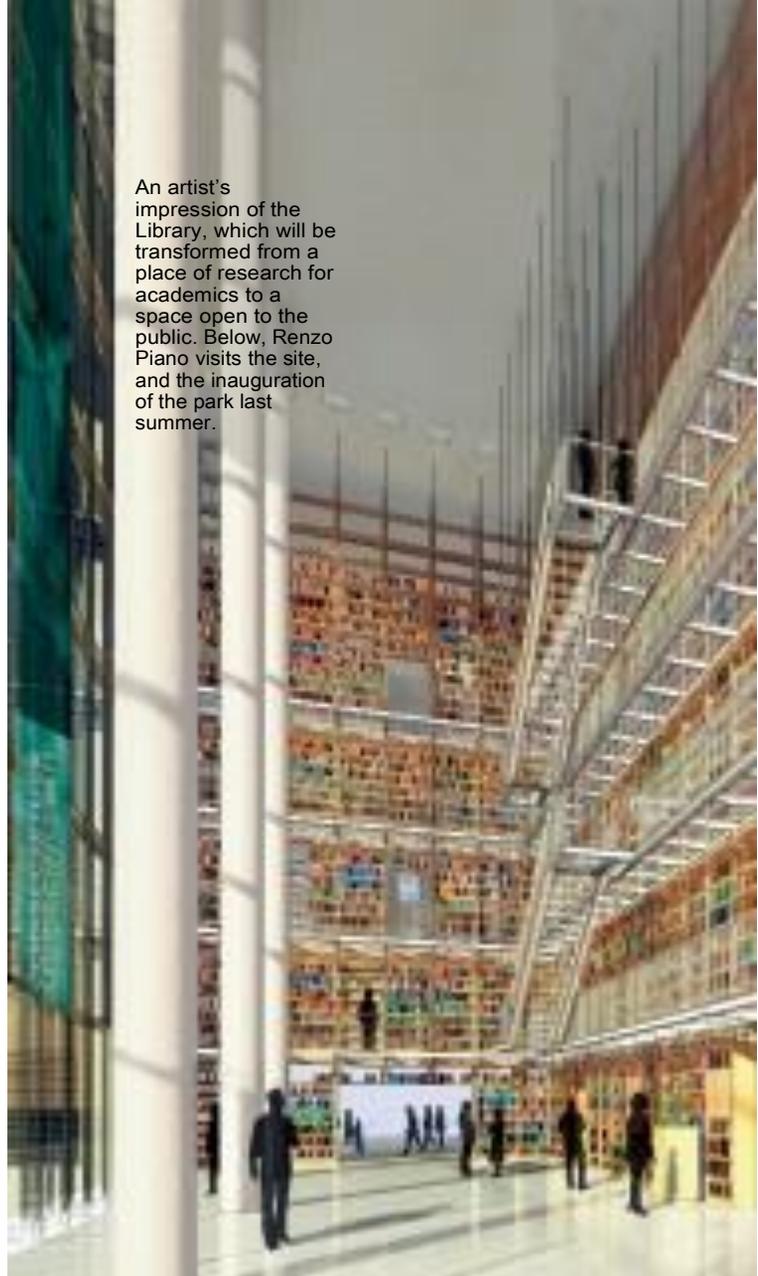
then became a car park for the 2004 Olympics, bordering a horizon of sea and islands, hidden until recently by the motorway viaduct, something is going up which promises to be more than just a building. A new space, a new perspective, the symbol of a new Greece.

Announced in 2006, the Stavros Niarchos Cultural Center, a multipurpose complex dedicated to art and culture which will consist of the new Greek National Library and the new Athens Opera House, will be completed early in 2016. Designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano and financed by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation – established in 1996 from the fortune left by the Greek shipbuilder and which has become one of the world's major philanthropic organizations – the SNFCC, once it is completed, will be gifted to the State. "This is the biggest gift ever made by a Greek foundation and one of the biggest bequests for a cultural project in the whole world," explains the co-president of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, Andreas C. Dracopoulos. "The Greek state will take over the ownership and management of the structure. But its success, for us, will depend on how it will be received by its real owner – the community."

Renzo Piano's intentions, in the pencilled lines in which he put this majestic work on paper (for a budget of 584 million euros and 240,000 square meters in overall size), were precisely to create a place able to enter the emotional geography of the Athenians. Designing links rather than lines, affinities and interactions: "Architecture does not just mean finding responses to needs but finding responses to desires. Architecture signifies lightness, brightness, accessibility, sustainability, all the things that together make a space into a place where people feel at home and part of the same community," Piano said when presenting the project. His idea was to take the ground and raise it, creating a hill and uncovering the two aspects of Athens, "The expanse of the sea of Odysseus and the city on the other side."

A unique building in steel and glass divided by a central agora which gives access to the two temples of culture, the Greek National Library and the Greek National Opera, soaring on columns reaching 18 meters in height. A park (170,000 m²) which envelops them, climbing gently to 15 meters above Faliro Bay and

An artist's impression of the Library, which will be transformed from a place of research for academics to a space open to the public. Below, Renzo Piano visits the site, and the inauguration of the park last summer.





The multipurpose center will be 240,000 square meters in size, 170,000 of which will be taken up by a park conceived by American garden designer Deborah Nevins



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A rendering of the side of the building which faces the channel. On the left, an aerial view of the park.

freeing the gaze as far as the island of Aegina. A channel which brings the sea 400 meters closer to the heart of the capital. All this is currently taking shape at the hands of over a thousand workers on site, while in the nearby visitor center, the Foundation's young architects flick their laser pointer up and down over the highly detailed model of the structure created in the Renzo Piano Building Workshop in Paris. «Accessibility, sustainability, efficiency and excellence are the center's main inspirations», they explain. «Investing a lot today, in the light of these objectives, means having fewer costs in the future». From the green roof that covers the National Library to the channel which provides protection against the site flooding to the 100 by 100 meter solar paneling suspended like a canopy over the Opera House (to meet the entire complex's energy needs and contribute to eliminating emissions), every solution has been planned to attain environmental and financial sustainability and, the Foundation hopes, the highest level of LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) international certification.

Even the park which covers 85% of the entire Niarchos Center has been planned so as to give Athens a green turning point: designed by the American garden designer Deborah Nevins, who chose to plant only Greek and Mediterranean species, it aspires to become Athens' Central Park and provide oxygen to the European capital with the lowest percentage of green space per head of population. «I wanted this to resemble the land of Greece overall, let its scents speak to the memory of the people,» Nevins explained.

The park itself, first part of the project to be completed, has already welcomed nearly 40,000 people who took part in a four-day preview, with concerts and film shows, conceived in order to present the new space to the locals. «This massive participation gave us an important indication of the community's support and has given us confidence in the role that the center is aspiring to take in the future,» says Dracopoulos. «That of the power to bring people together.»

The Opera House, with its two stages, one traditional (with 1,400 seats) and one dedicated to experimental performances (450 seats), has been conceived to welcome a varied audience – through different prices, times and programs. The Library, in the new building, will change from being a place of research open only to the academic community, to a space open to all for free, the sign of accessibility defined and expressed even by the glass walls through which the tall bookshelves will be visible from the outside. It was with this transparency that Piano wanted to make

A PLAYBOY WITH A BIG HEART

Let's talk about a man who left his mark.

If in his life as a shipbuilder, playboy and collector,

Stavros Niarchos became a Greek icon of sophisticated luxury and success in business; after his death, the magnate (who, in 1996, left his heirs a fortune estimated at 4 billion dollars) wanted to ensure that he did not fade in the memory of his compatriots. The Stavros Niarchos Cultural Center bears his name, the biggest private donation to the state in Greek history, but, through the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, his signature is also behind the many subsidies acknowledged in the last few years supporting not-for-profit organizations for social security, health, education and culture. Last July the SNF launched a new initiative to fight the Greek crisis, part of a wider 100 million euro program of subsidies, earmarking over 20 million euros for the municipalities of Athens and Thessaloniki, in response to the needs of the citizens of the major urban centers, hit more severely by the crisis.

At the same time, for another 100 million euros overall, the Foundation is continuing its Recharging The Youth initiative begun in October 2013 with the aim of creating better work prospects and new opportunities for Greece's younger generations.

the purpose of the building «legible». The agora will be the meeting place, the junction where one can feel part of a common history, that of a country whose past – written in over 4,500 rare and ancient manuscripts kept in the library – is a founding part of the history and identity of the West, whose difficult present is driven by hopes of redemption.

«It's not news that the Greek economic crisis has worsened considerably in the last few years,» Dracopoulos states. «From the beginning, the Foundation has sought a different view of the problem, investing in creating new economic activities based on Greece's traditional strong points: art, culture, education, environment and tourism.» In fact, in 2010, it commissioned a study from multinational strategic consultants Boston Consulting Group to evaluate the long-term benefits of the cultural center. Significant figures emerge: the building will create 1,500 jobs and 1 billion euros in financial incentives. «In the longer term, we calculate that the center will be able to generate 160 million euros a year, showing it to be a driving force for the country's recovery at a critical time.»

But behind the scaffolding that is still largely hiding it from our gaze, the Stavros Niarchos Center bears its most ambitious hope written in its concrete: to be the monument to a rebirth. If, as Piano says, it is true that «beauty can save the world.»

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