

Speech by SNF Co-President Andreas Dracopoulos
Delivery Ceremony of the SNFCC to the Greek Society
February 23rd, 2017

Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister, dear friends,

On behalf of the Board of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation—my Board colleagues Spyros Niarchos, George Agouridis and Heini Murer are with us here today, while Philip Niarchos regrets that he is not able to attend—and all of us at the Foundation, we welcome you and thank you for honoring us with your presence in tonight’s event, celebrating the delivery of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center (SNFCC) to the Greek State, the Greek society, and to all of you. As of today, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center is officially YOURS!

I have many thoughts that I wish to share with you, and I don’t really know where to begin... Let me start with few words on the history of the place where we are standing tonight. According to archaeologists, this is the location of one of the largest *necropoleis* (cemeteries) of Attica, during the Archaic period, next to the first port of ancient Athens before 492 BC. Recent findings of approximately one year ago during the construction of the SNFCC—80 ancient bodies were discovered with their arms shackled above their heads, an indication of violent death. It is suggested that the prisoners were captured for following Cylon during the 7th century BC—were reported among the most significant archaeological discoveries of the past year, worldwide. With regards to this discovery, our Foundation is in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, and has agreed to discuss the funding of all the costs relating to the construction of a museum at the site. In the 19th century, the surrounding area was called “voidolivado” (cattle pasture), since cattle would graze here, among the moors of the Faliron Delta. This takes us to the 20th century and the famous horse racing track, open from 1925 to 2003 and then...

Then... our Foundation, was born in 1996, following a bequeath by my great-uncle, the late Stavros Niarchos during the same year, and started its activities around the world in general and, of course, in Greece in particular. At this point I would like to extend a huge “thank you” to our founder, Stavros Niarchos. If it wasn’t for him, neither our Foundation nor the Cultural Center would exist today.

[Applause]

Among its many and broad philanthropic activities, our Foundation began discussing a “large” independent project that would be a gift to Greek society. In a very short period of time, the idea for the SNFCC was born. In 2007, we signed the Preliminary Agreement, and in 2009, the Greek Parliament ratified the agreement for the construction of the SNFCC. Just before the space was turned into a construction site, we held a public presentation of the project by architect Renzo Piano in the area where the Agora is located today.

Construction works began in 2012. Internally we had named the SNFCC as the “triple” project, since, apart from the new premises of the National Library of Greece (NLG)—almost 114 years after the decision of February 26, 1903 concerning the delivery of the Vallianeios Library (the magnificent neoclassical Hansen and Ziller building on Panepistimiou Street) to the Greek State—and the Greek National Opera (GNO), it also included a park, the Stavros Niarchos Park, covering an area of almost 200 square meters. This is a park that, with regards to the Cultural Center, is almost as important as the two institutions-pillars of our culture.

And now, 10 years after the Preliminary Agreement, 5 years after the commencement of construction, the SNFCC is delivered, in its entirety, to the Greek State. As of today, IT’S YOURS!

The SNFCC, with a total budget of €620 million, is delivered fully equipped, fully paid, and already full of thousands of memories...

[Applause]

We are delivering a SNFCC built according to the highest construction, environmental and operational standards. We are delivering it to you with the commitment that, as long as the SNFCC is “run” properly, we will continue to assist it and support it financially, with a grant totaling €50 million for the next 5 years.

[Applause]

€25 million for programming, remaining in this way active participants (independently of the programming by the National Library and the National Opera), and €25 million to cover operating expenses. Also, our Foundation has given a grant of €5 million to each of the two institutions, NLG, GNO, for their smooth transition to the SNFCC. Let me remind you at this point that the National Library of Greece continues to operate under the Ministry of Education and the Greek National Opera under the Ministry of Culture, while the entire Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center will fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Finance, which will act as the Center’s institutional owner, always on behalf of its actual owner, Greek society.

From the first moment of its conception, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center has shined like a bright star. This did not happen by accident, but came as a result of hard work, excellent and continuous collaborations at all levels, a shared vision, and a common goal. All of the above, resulted in a beautiful creation that was built on the previously abandoned space of the Faliron Delta. We wish to thank our many colleagues and associates, who shared our vision and joined us in this “journey to Ithaka” ... the amazing man, architect and loyal friend of Greece, Renzo Piano.

[Applause]

And his associates inside and outside Greece (Betaplan), the joint construction venture Impregilo-TERNA,

[Applause]

The Park’s architects, Deborah Nevins and our “own” Eleni Pangalou.

[Applause]

Our associates and project managers Faithful and Gould.

[Applause]

Our team from the Foundation, guided by the amazing Theodore Maravelias.

[Applause]

The SNFCC team, led initially by Ioannis Trohopoulos and then by Dimitris Protopsaltou.

[Applause]

The thousands of workers who worked tirelessly on the site over these past 5 years, and so many others... a huge THANK YOU!

[Applause]

AT THIS POINT I WOULD LIKE TO ASK THE SNFCC TEAM TO PLEASE STAND UP SO THAT THEY MAY BE RECOGNIZED AND SO THAT WE MAY THANK THEM FOR ALL THE WONDERFUL MOMENTS THEY HAVE GIVEN US TO DATE.

[Applause]

And, an even bigger “thank you” goes to all my colleagues, associates and friends at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, my second family.

[Applause]

It is a place and a way of life. ALL OF YOU WORKING AT THE STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION, PLEASE STAND UP. THANK YOU!

[Applause]

And now in order to address some of the concerns... the following are just some of the messages we have received via email and social media recently, and I quote:

---the beginning of the end,

---the time we all feared is now upon us,

[Laughter]

---I'll take a pic, to remember the before and after,

[Laughter]

---and now, the decline begins,

---...it really pains me that the project is delivered to the Greek State. I have no confidence and no hope that the Greek government can manage the SNFCC properly,

[Applause]

---I was wondering... Does the Board of the Foundation realize that anything which goes through the hands of the Greek State ends up destroyed? ...Why leave this jewel of Athens in their hands? [Applause]

In my opinion, it would be best if the Cultural Center was not delivered to the Greek State, so that it doesn't end up as an abandoned, unkempt building. Please, even though I am just 15 years old, take my email under consideration.

[Applause]

And, a last one:

---Why are you doing this, my good people? Is this your first time in Greece?

[Laughter and Applause]

To this last question, let me just say that Stavros Niarchos came to Greece in 1956 and, by signing a contract with the Greek Government, started one of the largest shipbuilding facilities in Europe, the Hellenic Shipyards, *[Applause]* that employed more than 5,000 workers. In 1985, almost 30 years later, the Shipyards were taken over by the State, and most of us know what happened after..... Yes, we've been in Greece before, but we still choose to BELIEVE!

[Applause]

Most concerns are quite reasonable, and it is good to have concerns. But, sometimes, concerns can function as an excuse for “paralysis” and feverish rants. Perhaps, what would help is a reading from the poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” by Constantine P. Cavafy, which ends with the following verse, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard:

“Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
And some who have just returned from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.
And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.”

Leonard Cohen, a friend and regular visitor to our country, passed away recently. In his songs, he had talked about the “crack” that exists in everything and through which the light gets in. This is also the case for the shining star that is the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center. It does not need to shine even brighter within the darkness of despair; it only needs to function itself as a “crack”, through which the light of hope gets in, for a better and more creative tomorrow.

[Applause]

Officially, the Cultural Center is owned by the government, but its true owners are all Greek Citizens. Let us remember President Obama’s words on this very stage approximately 3.5 months ago, when he said:

“Most of all, we’re indebted to Greece for the most precious of gifts, the truth, the understanding that as individuals of free will, we have the right and the capacity to govern ourselves. For it was here, 25 centuries ago, in the rocky hills of this city, that a new idea emerged: Demokratia (Democracy) and Kratos (the power), the right to rule, comes from demos, the people. The notion that we are citizens; not servants, but stewards of our society. The concept of citizenship: that we have both rights and responsibilities. These are all concepts that grew out of this rocky soil.”

He then mentioned, and I quote:

“I am certain that if you persevere in your efforts, no matter how difficult the challenge may be, Greece will live to see better days. Because, this wonderful Hall and the Center—a symbol of Greece’s culture and resilience—remind us that, just as your strength and determination have enabled you to overcome great adversity in the course of your history, there is nothing that can demoralize the Greek people.”

[Applause]

WE BELIEVE. We believe because we won this wager. The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center has been embraced warmly by the people. Indicatively, I will just mention that since the events of last June and, since we opened the Center on August 15th, approximately 760,000 visitors have visited the SNFCC, on average 25,000 weekly, exceeding all reasonable expectations, even though there is no public transportation to the Cultural Center. Already, the Center has almost 50,000 registered members. Present and future governments, in the decades to come, can continue in this way to “win the wager”, by overcoming any partisan, political and private interests, aiming to preserve the project for the good of the Greek people.

[Applause]

If we all put on—granted, that it is perhaps hard for all of us to fit in the same size, but not impossible—the historic blue & white jersey of the Greek National Team, dreams can come true. And, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center can be an example of cooperation and efficiency for the entire country, as long as all of us believe in it. WE BELIEVE, because in the 70 Government Committee

Meetings in which we have participated during the project's construction over the past 8 years (indeed, the 70th such Meeting took place today at noon), alongside the local government of the Municipality of Kallithea, representatives of the National Library and the National Opera, and representatives from the relevant ministries of 8 different Governments, there has been excellent cooperation in all areas. If you share a common vision, everything is possible.

Today, there are many who speak of projects created through public-private partnerships. The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center is one of the world's finest examples of such a project. We wish to thank all the Prime Ministers and Governments for their excellent cooperation over the years. Specifically, I wish to thank the Prime Minister and his associates for their impeccable cooperation over the last few months and during the project's final delivery stages. WE BELIEVE, because, when there are proper partnerships in place, with common goals and without hidden agendas, dreams can come true. But, I also have a concern of my own... Perhaps, it is more like a secret dream of mine... All of us who worked for this dream which is now a reality, we hope that the Cultural Center will continue to operate in the manner it has operated up to this moment, with a similar attitude and goals. The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center can be an example of how the entire country can move forward... and not the opposite.

Our Foundation will continue our journey to Ithaka... the SNF will continue to give, wherever it can and to the fullest extent of its capabilities. From 1996 until today, after 20 years of actions, we have already made grant commitments of over 2 billion dollars in 111 nations.

[Applause]

In Greece, we have helped with grants totaling more than 1.1 billion euros. And we continue...

[Applause]

We are close to announcing our grant to the National Emergency Center (EKAV) for the upgrading of its Athens operational center, the procurement of 143 new ambulances, i.e. 22% of the total fleet, which will be available in all regions of the country and the Aegean and Ionian islands, as well as the funding of the total maintenance expenses of the new ambulances for 8 years, which is their average lifespan.

[Applause]

In conclusion, I would like to extend a big "thank you" to our dear friend, the late Tzanetos Antypas, who left us way too early *[Applause]* a few days ago, for everything he managed to accomplish in his life for his fellowmen... Tzaneto, farewell...

And, on a lighter note, we would like to wish good luck to Daphne Mantziaraki and Kyriakos Papadopoulos at the Oscars on Sunday, representing the best qualities of the Greek spirit through the documentary *4.1 miles*.

[Applause]

And we continue... WE BELIEVE... and, with all our hearts, filled with love and hope, WE DELIVER TO YOU the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center.

Thank you.

[Applause]