

THE OTHER PROTAGONISTS

ANDREAS DRACOPOULOS

by STAVROS THEODORAKIS

It will be like joining the Acropolis to the sea!

The Co-President of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation talks about the ambitious three-fold project at Faliro Bay, which will be completed in 2015.

His gaze was restless. He didn't feel at ease with the photographer and journalists are not his favorite people. Perhaps he has learned to avoid them from the time when he was with his uncle, the shipping magnate. What was it like growing up with Niarchos? That was my first question. I wasn't looking for an answer. I wanted to see him and draw my own conclusions. And then, what is it like managing such great sums of money? In the last few years, Andreas Dracopoulos, Co-President of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, has signed off on grants worth almost a billion euro. "Eighty percent has gone to Greeks and Greek-related activities, both within and outside the country," he says proudly. Greece is always on the tip of his tongue. Perhaps it's because our meeting took place only a few hours before he was to return to Manhattan. That's where he spends his winters. In the summer he is in Athens, in Vouliagmeni, and the Aegean.

"Did I show you the model?"

He approaches it slowly, as though he can't get enough of it. The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center at Faliro Bay. This is perhaps the biggest cultural project in the world right now. "This is where the National Library will go, the National Opera will be here, and the rest will be a park. The canal will bring the sea into the park, and there is also going to be a school of dance..." Yes, he speaks with enthusiasm. As though he'd like to push time forward and transport us suddenly to 2015.

Christmas 2015?

Yes, at the end of 2015.

So we won't have the delays usually associated with Greek State projects?

We are not the Greek State; we do what we say we will. Except if everything falls apart, we begin to have strikes, and unpredictable things take place.

How much money are you spending, in the end?

566 million euro to date. We have put the funds for the project aside. We will build it, deliver it, and then we will go.

So you won't be involved in its operation?

Not even for an hour. "The Uncle from America" came, donated the money, built the Center and then left.

Let's take one thing at a time. What does the National Library mean? Is it shelves with books or desks with computers?

The same discussion is taking place all over the world. Is this a place for traditional books? Computers? Or is it a meeting place? To us, it's all of the above in one. It is like the New York Public Library and the British Library. It's not just a sterile place, where academics go to read and where you have to be quiet.

Are you just building the facilities?

The books are already there. There exist whole treasure troves. We are just handing over the infrastructure for the Library, the Opera House and the Park, a three-fold project.

And what do you want from us? The Greeks?

Meritocracy, and respect for this important project.

Meritocracy? Could you elaborate on that?

We want you to make sure you find the best people to run the Library, the National Opera and the Park. In Shanghai, for example, the library is open 24 hours a day, every day. It doesn't even close at night. That needs to take place here too.

You decided on this project before the recession. If you were to decide today, what would you build; schools and hospitals?

We're doing that anyway. We have made 150 million worth of grants in Greece, and we have built schools, intensive care units...

I'm asking because some people might consider creating an Opera House at this time a luxury.

The Library and the Opera are national assets. This project offers us hope that there will be a future. When the site is elevated, it will create the impression that the Acropolis is unified with the sea, that the future is connected to the present. This project, it's one of a kind. In America, most of a city's infrastructure was built during the depression of '29: bridges, skyscrapers, and hospitals. The easiest thing one could do right now, is to pull the shutters down and do nothing.

What sort of park do you have in mind?

A huge park with pathways, spaces for sport, rest areas and concert venues, and, of course, a park full of Greek plants. We will create it. However, it will be the responsibility of the Greek State to keep it bright and clean.

Did you ever go to the Horse Racing track?

I did just once, a long time ago. I was a student, on my way to the "G. Karaiskakis" soccer stadium, and I stopped by.

Did you finish school here?

Yes. Since then, I'm only here during the summers. Two months, three months. I have an office here now. I work, and the children get to know their country.

How old are your children?

They are young, 7, 4 and almost 2 years old.

Do they speak Greek?

They have no choice (laughs). In New York, they go to Greek school one afternoon a week, and at home my wife and I only speak to them in Greek.

Will the works in the area from the coastal highway all the way down to the sea, that need to be carried out by the State, be completed by 2015?

You have to ask the Greek State about that. The seafront, "Tina's Grand Idea," as I call it, certainly has Renzo Piano's approval. That's what he wanted. To bring the sea back to Athens, to let it breathe, which is why he's making a big canal to connect the sea to the land.

Do you mean a sea jetty within the project?

Exactly. But the works on the seafront and the highway have nothing to do with us. We simply introduced Piano to the then Minister, Tina Birbili and they had their own conversation. We covered the expenses for the seafront master plan as by means of a 3 million euro grant, but what will actually happen there is the government's business. Just like we gave the Municipality of Kallithea 5.5 million euro to create a soccer field, a playground and a swimming pool. These are projects adjacent to our own big project.

Did you stop by Syntagma this summer?

Our meeting with the Prime Minister and Piano in the Parliament building was on the same day as the events at Syntagma – the 29th of June. American newspapers, the day after, wrote both about the destruction in Athens, and about the presentation of our major project: the two versions of Greece, good and bad, all at once.

Which area did you grow up in?

Near the National Gardens.

Are you friends with any Greek politicians?

I am with very few. They are people I knew before they became politicians.

What do you say to them?

I tell them not to think of the ten percent only, their friends or those who make a fuss. There is also another ninety percent that they need to consider. What Diamantopoulou did in Education, the actions being taken to clean up football – those are good signs. But there must be continuity, if the people are to believe that something is being done.

What is your interpretation of the weaknesses of Greek politicians?

I believe in what Putin did in Russia. He summoned the oligarchs, all those that had robbed the country blind, and told them: "You did what you did, but as of tomorrow, I never want to see you again." And he mended his country.

I would have expected your role model to be Obama...

Obama made us believe he could do anything. At the end of the day, perhaps it's unfair to expect one man to deliver Heaven on Earth.

Are you disappointed?

I think there exists a gap in global leadership. Perhaps we shouldn't be looking for a hero, and instead, each one of us should try to do his/her job in the best possible way. This applies to you journalists as well. Most of you are only looking to sell more copies. So it's the politician's fault, but also the professor's fault, it's the Church's fault, and most of all, it's the fault of those who don't pay their taxes...

You're basically saying what Pangalos said.

But he was wrong to just limit it to money. It was all of us together, who squandered our *filotimo* (pride), our values, our essential "being," and now we're weak and we've become a target. With globalization, says Friedman, the world becomes flat. You cannot hide your weaknesses. So Greece has been stripped bare. It wasn't the others that did this; it did it to itself.

But many will blame the foreigners, the markets, the Germans...

Yes, there was a time we blamed the Americans, now we blame the Germans. There's no one left to blame anymore.

If it were up to you, what would you do to change things?

We need to work, in order to give young people a dream. Why should they live in a country that is falling apart, although they had nothing to do with it. It will be tragic if they get up and leave. They need to see the country cleaned up. Those who have made mistakes must pay. Some need to go to prison. There must be justice, and people must pay their taxes.

You are referring to the very wealthy as well, I suppose.

Everyone needs to pay, from top to bottom. But we're all looking to get away with things, and then we blame the country. It's a vicious cycle that needs to be broken.

If Niarchos were alive, would he say the same?

Look, Niarchos was a global citizen, and shipping has no home, as such. By definition, therefore, he didn't used to pay much in taxes, if that's what you're implying, but he helped Greece in any way he could. That's why he set up the Foundation, in order to help Greece. He may not have made his money here, but he wanted a large part of his fortune to go back into Greece, because he loved Greece.

Did you spend much time with Niarchos?

Yes, especially in the last 6-7 years, I was with him all the time.

Was he very competitive?

You must be competitive in order to succeed, whether you're a footballer or a shipping magnate or a politician. The issue here is whether you become enslaved

to it all, or you use it to do the right thing. In any case, he worked very hard, until the very last minute. He was a perfectionist. He asked a lot of those around him, but he asked even more of himself. And that made him a leader. A politician cannot say “do 100 things” while he does nothing. If people see you rolling up your sleeves, they will follow you.

Does the Foundation earn money to do what it does, or is there a pool of money that will dry up at some point?

Niarchos has left enough money to the Foundation – it’s his baby – which we manage in order to make more and be in a position to give more.

Are the markets responsible for the current global crisis? Some say, that “capitalism got out of hand.”

Yes, many of us got used to easy profits. This is why I believe in public-private partnerships, the private and public sector working together. Up until the 80s, the public sector was very powerful. From the 80s onwards, the private sector gained the upper hand. This coincided with the rise of Reagan – because a lot of things begin in America. The dominance of the private sector produced a lot of money, but we lost sight of boundaries. What we need now is partnerships between the public and private sector, like our project. The State gives the land; we build it, pay for it, and give it back, as a public asset.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the poor, even in the US, are multiplying rather than decreasing in number.

Democracy doesn’t say that out of 100 people, all 100 will be rich and happy. It’s almost against human nature. What are we? We’re animals. The point is to increase the number of people who are happy. We have to figure out what needs to be done so that the seventy percent living a good life can become eighty or ninety percent.

Does it make you sad when it’s time to leave Greece in the autumn?

It makes me sad to see Greece stagnated. You know Florida? What has it got? It has sunshine, much less than here, and nothing else. Here, every Naxos, Paros, Milos could be put to good use and become a true Paradise, with nothing to envy of any other place in the world.

So it’s all about development?

I would personally run a pilot program on five islands. I would take an island with strong winds and make use of wind power; I would invest in agro-tourism on another island, marinas on a third, museums on a fourth. We’re not looking for a new formula in Physics or Chemistry. All it takes is common sense. With all those islands, we should be world leaders in desalination.

Did you say all this to Papandreou and Samaras when you met with them?

What was I supposed to say? When they built the Acropolis Museum, I had suggested bringing schools from Europe to visit. Invite the Europeans, the French, the Germans, and the Italians, to learn about their history. We were going to pay for the whole program. I got no reply. I found myself begging. I’m

tired of begging. And who's to blame for this? Isn't it us? We would do well to clean up our own home first before we start complaining.

A new urban symbol for the third millennium

The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center includes the 169.000m² Stavros Niarchos Park, the modernized National Library of Greece and the new building for the Greek National Opera. Once completed, the project will be donated to the Greek State. Renowned architect Renzo Piano took up the challenge to design a new urban symbol for the third millennium, incorporating features of the national landscape – the sea, the sun, stone and earth – into a contemporary “*topos*,” infused with lightness and transparency. The site will be developed to include a gently inclining 32 m hill, which will provide views of the sea and the Acropolis, while also serving as the green roof of the Library and Opera House. The buildings take up less than 15% of the site; the Stavros Niarchos Park extends over the rest of the space.

Captions/Quotes

Andreas Dracopoulos in front of the model of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center (p.1)

Andreas Dracopoulos at the Foundation's offices in Athens. On top of a display cabinet with a ship, there is a black and white photograph of Stavros Niarchos in a sailor's cap. (p.2)