

Greeks bearing controversial gifts

You don't have to walk more than 50 paces anywhere in Thessaloniki to realise something is afoot. Roman arches are swaddled in wraps, mosques nestle in scaffolding. Byzantine churches suddenly look new.

In the neo-Byzantine cathedral an army of artists is painting frescoes on hitherto plain walls, in acrylic colours and acres of gold leaf, but in an antique style: a shining-eyed executant explains that these will be the equal of the celebrated frescoes of Mount Athos — no, they will be better.

Wander into an exquisitely restored Art Nouveau mansion in the city's former Jewish quarter, and you get a tirade about these frescoes from an architect so angry he can hardly speak. He blames the

bishop who has hired the painters, and the nationalist, back-to-basics Christianity he represents.

Next year Thessaloniki is taking its turn as Cultural Capital of Europe, and this aesthetic spat is just one of many conflicts which the city's temporary enthronement has brought to a head.

The Art Nouveau mansion is the headquarters of the Cultural Capital project. Originally owned by a Turk, then

commandeered by the Nazis, then housing Nato, and thereafter the Red Cross, it reflects the vicissitudes through which the city itself has passed.

The Greek Government is left of centre, while Thessaloniki — Athens's northern "co-capital" — is staunchly rightist. Cultural Capital funds are channelled via Athens, and between Athens and Thessaloniki there is a long history of rivalry. What's more, the local committee

overseeing next year's jamboree is split along similar political lines. As a result, what should have been a concerted cultural push by a city seizing its chance is riven by factionalism.

When I visited the project two years ago it was headed by a formidable Eurocrat named Anne Haritou, who had previously been the right-hand woman of Melina Mercouri (begetter of the Cultural Capital concept). Now Haritou and her entire team are gone, and

a writer named Panos Theodoridis is installed in her place. It emerges that two other artistic directors have come and gone in the meantime: the composer Stavros Xarchakos (who lasted five months) and the pianist Yannis Vakarelis (who managed

six). How come? "They were outsiders who didn't understand the aspirations of this city," explains Theodoridis briskly. "I am a Thessalonian and I do. I shall stay the course."

Among those who fervently hope he does are the local British Council, which has been driven mad by the constant changes of plan. Britain's official contribution to the festivities will include Anthony Caro's huge sculptural assemblage *The Trojan War*, as well as drama and music; things are not yet finalised.

Nor are the home team's plans. "Pens are still poised over contracts," says Theodoridis, but he happily runs through his list: productions by Peter Hall, Franco Zeffirelli, Peter Stein, Giorgio Strehler, Robert Wilson — yes, the usual circus. Glasgow — cultural capital in 1992 — is for him the touchstone of success (the celebrated Saatchi campaign still reverberates).

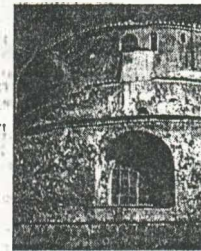
In June this beautiful port city will bring out its trump

card: for the first time ever, the religious treasures of Mount Athos will go on public display. This means that the half of the human race forbidden entrance to the monks' all-male stronghold will finally get a sight of them too.

The architect enraged by those frescoes is Professor Lois Papadopoulos, a laid-back, bear-like man who takes me on a tour of the works-in-progress. First we pause beside a work stopped in its tracks. The Rotunda was originally a mausoleum, then it became a church, then a mosque, and then a church cum concert venue. Now in perilous disrepair, it is barred to everyone except parishioners on Sunday. Two months ago Papadopoulos and his friends staged a concert in it, which was violently disrupted

by protesters — led by the clergy — while police looked on.

Then we stop at a series of edifices: a gorgeous mosque built for Jewish converts to Islam which is now an art gallery; a textile factory destined to become the city's museum of modern



Thessaloniki's historic Rotunda

art; a monastery being transformed into a cultural centre; a Turkish bath which is now a theatre; a new museum area in the port. The Roman forum, whose streets and arcades are in strikingly good repair, will be turned next year into an "open site".

On the ramparts overlooking the town is the biggest conundrum of all: the "prison", where Turks built over what Christians had added to the original Roman foundations. This was where political prisoners languished under the Nazis, and more recently under the Colonels.

Proposals to expose the Byzantine building by stripping out the prison were quashed by those who argued its historical importance. Poems and novels were written in there; it is part of Greece's folklore. Now a computer simulation will reflect its changing guises while it is gradually made ready as a penal museum, and its exercise yard is reborn as a theatre. Finally, everything becomes culture.

Άρθρο του Michael Church που αναφέρεται στη Θεσσαλονίκη και στις προετοιμασίες για την ανακήρυξή της ως πολιτιστική πρωτεύουσα της Ευρώπης το 1997.

Περιγράφει τις εργασίες αναστήλωσης μνημείων και κτιρίων της πόλης, τις διαμάχες που έχουν δημιουργηθεί για την ανακαίνιση ενός αρχοντικού της Art Nouveau στην παλιά εβραϊκή συνοικία το οποίο έχει κατά καιρούς στεγάσει το διοικητήριο των Ναζί, υπηρεσίες του NATO και του Ερυθρού Σταυρού και αντικατοπτρίζει όλες τις μεταβολές που υπέστη ιστορικά η ίδια η πόλη.

Εξηγεί ότι η Ελληνική Κυβέρνηση πρόσκειται στην κεντροαριστερά ενώ η Θεσσαλονίκη είναι πιστή δεξιά.

Τα κονδύλια για την Πολιτιστική Πρωτεύουσα έρχονται μέσω Αθήνας στη Θεσσαλονίκη και είναι παλιά ιστορία ο ανταγωνισμός ανάμεσα στις δύο πόλεις. Επίσης κάνει μία αναδρομή στους αρμόδιους ανά καιρούς που ήταν επικεφαλής στη διοργάνωση και φθάνει στον σημερινό Θεσσαλονικιό συγγραφέα κ. Π. Θεοδωρίδη.

Αναφέρει τη συνεισφορά στις εκδηλώσεις του τοπικού βρετανικού Συμβουλίου που θα περιλαμβάνει και ένα τεράστιο γλυπτό σύμπλεγμα του Anthony Caro με θέμα τον Τρωϊκό πόλεμο καθώς και εκδηλώσεις μουσικής και θεάτρου. Επίσης απαριθμεί άλλα σημαντικά κτίρια που ανακαινίζονται όπως η Ροτόντα, το εβραϊκό Τζαμί, τα τούρκικα λουτρά, η ρωμαϊκή αγορά, οι φυλακές και καταλήγει στο σπουδαίο γεγονός της μεταφοράς, τον Ιούνιο κ^α έκθεσης για πρώτη φορά των θρησκευτικών θησαυρών από το Αγίο Όρος.