

Acropolis presents a new challenge

Greece's construction of a showpiece museum has encountered difficulties in both design and organisation, writes Kerin Hope

Dimitris Pantermanlis, chairman of the Acropolis museum project, takes a hands-on approach to his job. The Thessaloniki University professor of archaeology has reconstructed his office to resemble the hall where, he hopes, the marble frieze from the Parthenon temple will one day be displayed.

The Greek government is financing construction of a €37m (\$38.5m) museum intended to house the sculptures from the 2,400-year-old temples on the Acropolis hill. The government hopes it will also eventually include the pieces acquired by the British Museum in the 19th century from Lord Elgin. The aristocrat had them sawn off and shipped to London as part of his private collection and Greece continues to campaign for their return.

To underscore the Parthenon marbles' place in Europe's cultural heritage, Greece staged an international architectural competition to design the museum rather than choose a local company. The winning design, by Bernard Tschumi, a Swiss architect, is an unassuming three-floor building in glass and concrete that echoes the shape and proportions of the Parthenon as well as its east-west alignment.

Nevertheless, the construction of the new building and the plan for running the museum have proved difficult to manage. Prof Pantermanlis says: "The design of the building is simple but it poses a technical challenge: to use as much

natural light as possible in the sculpture halls. Getting the right choice of glass for windows and skylights will be critical."

He points to the experimental "fritted" glass in the windows above his desk. Several layers thick, it is implanted with mineral particles to reduce heat and glare.

Construction started in November 2002 – five months behind schedule because of administrative delays and the discovery of additional ancient remains on the museum site at the base of the Acropolis hill. It has already taken four years to excavate the ruins of a Byzantine-era settlement that will be incorporated into the basement and be accessible to visitors.

Controversy remains over the small size of the museum site and its position next to a 19th-century former hospital prized as one of the earliest surviving examples of neo-classical Greek architecture. This building serves as a study centre for a project to conserve and restore the Parthenon and other Acropolis temples and as a venue for educational programmes.

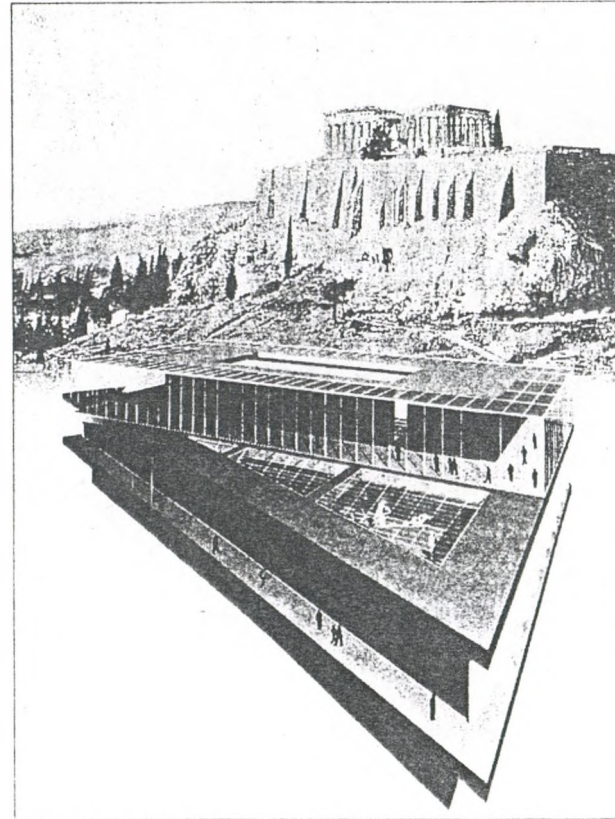
Alkestis Horemi, director of the Acropolis, says the site is "exactly right" for the museum because it is only 10 minutes' walk from the Acropolis temples and because visitors will have easy access from a metro station. Its concourse is dedicated to Meina Mercouri, the actress-turned-culture minister who launched Greece's official campaign to get the marbles back and came up with the initial

plan to build a new museum.

Meanwhile, the second challenge will be to manage the Acropolis site and the new museum in a visitor-friendly way, Prof Pantermanlis says. The Acropolis is Greece's chief cultural attraction, with about 1.2m visitors a year, and the number is projected to rise by 10-20 per cent once the museum opens. In July and August, the high season for tourism, more than 10,000 tourists daily are likely to pass through its doors.

But Greece's state archaeological service adopts a rigorously scholarly approach to managing the 150 or so sites and museums in its care. Cafés, for example, are not permitted on museum premises. Although funding to refurbish sites and expand museums has increased significantly – thanks to European Union grants and bigger allocations for the culture ministry from state lottery receipts – only a few offer audio guides or floor maps in English.

Axia, a Greek consultancy, has developed a management plan for the museum that includes the creation of shopping and café areas. It has still to be approved by KAS, the deeply conservative central archaeological council that has the final say on museums and sites. Prof Pantermanlis says: "We have to create a balance – an environment which is geared towards explaining the achievements of classical Greek art in an accessible way. But we don't want to end up with a theme park."



A computer-aided artist's impression of the Acropolis museum