

Anyone

A Building's Building: The New Acropolis Museum

Author(s): Palmyra Geraki

Source: *Log*, No. 24, Architecture Criticism (Winter / Spring 2012), pp. 63-70

Published by: Anyone Corporation

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41765470>

Accessed: 11-11-2016 05:23 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Anyone Corporation is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Log*

A Building's Building: The New Acropolis Museum

There is nothing like it in the architecture of all the world and all time. There is no question of religious dogma, of symbolic description, of natural figuration: these are pure forms in precise relationships, to the exclusion of all else. . . . For two thousand years, those who have seen the Parthenon have felt: this was a decisive moment for architecture.

– Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*

As a building whose inception and realization are laden with cultural significance as well as a polemical political agenda, the new Acropolis Museum in Athens, designed by Bernard Tschumi in the literal and figurative shadow of the Parthenon, is not an easy building to critique formally. It is especially difficult to ignore certain extraneous aspects that inadvertently influenced its design, such as the political ambition inscribed in the rhetoric surrounding the project, the desire of the Greek government to prove to the world, and to the British in particular, that Greece could finally be entrusted with the safeguarding of the Elgin marbles. However, while responding to these programmatic demands as well as to the surrounding urban context, the museum remains an architectural object with an internal logic of its own. It is neither a muted and deferential solution nor an overstated gesture seeking to assert its presence in the face of a greater one. It is, one could say, a building without an inferiority complex.

The context for the new Acropolis Museum includes not only the Parthenon, of course, but also the entire hill of the Acropolis as well as the Makriyianni site with its excavated ruins, from which the new museum rises, resting on 43 strategically placed columns. These three sites are both the physical and historical context for the new building and each exerts a significant influence over different aspects of the building's design.

What strikes one immediately upon approaching the museum are its three distinguishable layers – a base, middle, and top, which break up the otherwise monolithic mass of

the building and create a dynamic visual and spatial effect through the selective shifting of their volumetric enclosures. The variation in facade treatment for each layer, which includes precast concrete panels for the base, corrugated steel and glass for the middle, and more glass for the top, further contributes to the modulation of the exterior envelope. The combination of volumetric shifting and varying materiality ameliorates the effect of the building's scale with respect to the low-rise buildings surrounding it.

The orientation shared by the lower two layers, which include the entrance and lobby level and the floor of the main galleries, is determined in part by the layout of the ancient roads unearthed during the excavation and in part by the surrounding urban context. This diagrammatic clarity of the massing camouflages the subtle differences in the orientation of each face. On the whole, the museum adopts a suburban attitude, pulling back from the edge of its site in direct contrast to the low-rise but densely built urban fabric of the surrounding historic neighborhood. Due to the mazelike nature of the circulation in the neighborhood, the effect of this setback, in conjunction with the precise orientation of each face, is to open up sweeping oblique views of the building from the nearby streets.

In addition to mitigating the effect of the museum's scale in its immediate context, the landscaped buffer zone between the sidewalk and the edge of the building signals the back-of-house nature of the west, south, and east facades, where gridded precast concrete panels present a rather opaque surface to the city while letting light into the interior spaces. Signaled by a protruding canopy, the main public access point to the museum is on the north side of the site, along Dionysiou Aeropagitou Street, where the museum's gated entrance shares street frontage with those buildings that were not torn down during the new construction.

A major pedestrian thoroughfare and a shared edge between the museum's site and the hill of the Acropolis directly north of it, Dionysiou Aeropagitou Street is a natural entry point to the museum grounds. Due to the north-to-south downward sloping topography of the Makriyianni site, entering on the north side allows the visitor to come in at the level of the lobby while allowing easy access, visually as well as physically, to the pilotis underneath, which houses the unearthed archaeological finds. The tapering effect produced by the building's trapezoidal footprint minimizes the perception of the museum's total mass from the north.

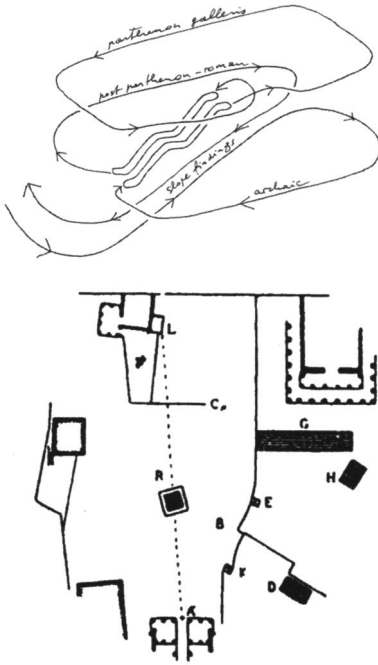


BERNARD TSCHUMI ARCHITECTS,
ACROPOLIS MUSEUM, ATHENS, 2009.
ENTRY FACADE. RIGHT: VIEW FROM
THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS,
LOOKING UP AT THE ENTRY CANOPY.
PHOTOS BY CHRISTIAN RICHTERS.
COURTESY THE ARCHITECT.

The museum's east facade, the only instance where the three layers of the museum are coplanar, provides the literal plane of transition between the lower levels and the top layer, which houses the Parthenon Gallery and replicates the orientation of the Parthenon itself. Thus, the east facade, where the logic of shifting becomes secondary to that of stacking, represents a temporary flattening of the otherwise dynamic composition of the building's mass. The reading of the Parthenon Gallery as a self-contained glass box is temporarily suspended and the dominant impression is that of the museum as a totality.

From the outside, the volumetric shift that occurs between the base and middle layer of the museum and its top layer would appear to suggest that the Parthenon Gallery is an exceptional moment in the internal organization of the museum. Whereas urban and site considerations dictated a bottom-up approach to the morphing of the museum's exterior enclosure, the logic governing the museum's interior is top-down. Despite being the most special of the museum's exhibition spaces, the Parthenon Gallery is also its least exceptional, a simple rectangle, the integrity of which can only be maintained by orienting the building's internal axis to the rectangular layout of this top layer. This singular formal decision introduces a simple and precise solution to the very complex problem posed by the program for the new museum. The amenities needed on each floor are neatly packed within the thick walls flanking the circulation core, which maintain their geometric and diagrammatic integrity at each level.

The ongoing formal tension between the rectangular object of the internal circulation core and the exterior enclo-



AUGUSTE CHOISY, "THE ACROPOLIS, FIRST SIGHT OF THE PLATFORM," FROM "LE PITTORESQUE DANS L'ART GREC," *HISTOIRE DE L'ARCHITECTURE*, 1899. TOP: BERNARD TSCHUMI, SKETCH OF CIRCULATION ROUTE THROUGH THE ACROPOLIS MUSEUM.

sure creates a backdrop against which the various exhibition spaces can begin to assume a localized identity, a formal and organizational logic tailored to their respective collections without sacrificing the flow of movement through the space or the visitor's ability to comprehend the relationship of these various parts to the whole of the museum.

Tschumi's decision to deploy a cinematic method of internal organization – a playing out of the Panathenaic procession, reflects a conscious attempt on the part of the architect to restage the age-old approach to the plateau of the Parthenon without relinquishing control of the movement of the visitor through the museum. This is architecture as a four-dimensional act – a play of objects in space that relies not only on a vague sense of movement through the space but also on the deliberate setting up of "events," a recurring concept in Tschumi's work. And so when the architect uses Corbusian tropes such as the pilotis and the promenade, their deployment is not referential but essentially performative. From the moment the museum becomes visible at a street corner, an elaborate sequence of events has already been set in motion. The entire building and its urban context become the backdrop for the unfolding of a daily drama.

The actual ascent to the top of the rock of the Acropolis is a gradual and organic experience of climbing a natural form dotted with man-made interventions. The general approach, which is dictated by the topography, has been altered numerous times throughout history, as has the architectural landscape of its surroundings. The climb is accented by successive arrival points and culminates not upon arrival at any particular location but upon achieving an understanding and appreciation of the nuanced spatial interactions of the various parts comprising its whole. As Sergei Eisenstein notes in "Montage and Architecture," "It is hard to imagine a montage sequence for an architectural ensemble more subtly composed, shot by shot, than the one that our legs create by walking among the buildings of the Acropolis."¹ Even today, the Acropolis continues to exude an aura of dynamism in its composition.

Tschumi seeks a similar dynamism in the new Acropolis Museum, but through more static means, with the internalization of the trope of the promenade. In an attempt to establish a chronological relationship among the various exhibits and to control and facilitate the flow of the public through the museum, the architect orchestrates a clear three-dimensional loop that defines the visitor's route through the various galleries. Already differentiated enough by its unique content, each gallery takes on a separate formal and organizational character.

1. Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage and Architecture," *Assemblage*, 10 (December 1989): 111–31.



ACROPOLIS MUSEUM, ARCHAIC GALLERY. PHOTO: PETER MAUSS/ESTO. COURTESY THE ARCHITECT.

The display of artifacts from the slopes of the Acropolis on the side walls of the main ramp forces the visitor to pause and look sideways, thus slowing the pace of the public along the internal promenade by creating visual and physical activity on an axis perpendicular to the movement along the ramp. The first-floor Archaic Gallery, on the other hand, signals a shift from the directional space of the monumental ramp to a field condition, a “democratic” space populated by columns that compete for the visitor’s attention with the Archaic statues themselves. The overall shape of the gallery, a residue of the confluence of the clashing geometries of the exterior envelope and the interior armature, creates moments of spatial ambiguity at the edges of the floor plate, where the internally driven column grid meets the row of columns lining the south face of the gallery. The exaggerated height of the gallery provides the necessary relief for such moments of formal tension.

The theatricality of the ascent through the museum, however, is derived not only from these carefully choreographed spatial moments and the transitions between them, but also from the setting up of sectional visual cues along the main circulation axis that infuse the visitor’s path with a sense of anticipation and suspense. For example, by placing the Caryatid statues, once part of the south porch of the temple of the Erechtheum and among the most prized artifacts of the museum, on a porch overlooking the main ramp,



the architect taunts the visitor by creating a frontal visual connection to the sculptures while denying an immediate physical approach. The arrival to the Erechtheum balcony is further delayed as the suggested exhibition route bypasses the Caryatid exhibit on the ascent to the top level of the museum and directs the visitor to it only on the downward loop that follows the viewing of the Parthenon Gallery.

Unfortunately, despite their visual and narrative interest, these sectional relationships are never integrated into the greater museum experience. Whereas one would expect the porch of the Caryatids to be an arrival point, it remains a glorified visual connection that is not part of the promenade of the museum but rather is found in a detour off the first-floor Archaic Gallery.

The path through the museum culminates with the Parthenon Gallery, the museum's ultimate arrival point. Here the attempt to establish a narrative relationship to the architectural referent takes on an added existential quality. The circumambulatory movement set up by the circulation sequence takes the visitor through a visual tour of the Parthenon marbles, both those salvaged from the temple itself and plaster casts of those still at the British Museum. This ends with a spectacular view of the temple itself across the roofs of the surrounding neighborhood. While the visual connection to the Parthenon is celebrated, it doesn't become a crippling one-liner. Capitalizing on the view of the Parthenon from the top floor of the museum, the architect adds an extra layer of complexity to the new building by orienting the volume housing the Parthenon Gallery to mirror the actual

ACROPOLIS MUSEUM. LOOKING
TOWARD THE ACROPOLIS FROM
PARTHENON GALLERY. PHOTO:
CHRISTIAN RICHTERS. COURTESY
THE ARCHITECT.

orientation of the ancient temple, while attempting to stay true to its overall size and proportions.

This mimetic gesture becomes the conceptual pivot point of the entire museum, obscuring the fact that the view of the Parthenon from the new museum is not on the oblique, the optimal visual angle at which to experience and appreciate the Parthenon as an autonomous architectural object as well as a part to a whole. As Auguste Choisy has argued, the Acropolis plateau is a carefully choreographed composition of various symmetric elements in asymmetric relationships to one another, the most prominent example being the progression from a frontal approach at the Propylaea to a diagonal approach to the Parthenon. Given the site that was eventually chosen for the new museum and the view of the Parthenon afforded by its location, Tschumi turned what could have been perceived as a disadvantage into the primary aspect of the building itself – a fascinating play of mimesis and reinterpretation.

The nature of the relationship of the Parthenon Gallery to the ancient temple is representative of the general disposition of the new Acropolis Museum, a reverent yet confident response to the complex demands of the site, the program, and the client. The material palette chosen for both the exterior and the interiors is appropriately “neutral,” not only in its physical characteristics, but also in its connotations. Using materials typical of a modernist sensibility, Tschumi creates a backdrop for the exhibition of a stunning range of archaeological artifacts that highlights the collection while asserting its own unique presence and identity in the city. Furthermore, the choice of a modernist formal repertoire is not simply a matter of reflex for Tschumi but a conscious attempt to put the new Acropolis Museum in direct contrast to the 19th-century building of the old Acropolis Museum just behind the Parthenon (that preceded it) and the British Museum’s neoclassical Parthenon Gallery, designed by John Russell Pope and completed in 1938, with which it is competing to house the Elgin marbles.

Perhaps the most challenging question associated with the design of the new museum concerns its own position in history and, even more poignantly, its role in the absence of its referent. Seen in this light, the decision not to mimic, borrow, or in any way reference the architectural language of Antiquity is not only a sign of deference to the canonical buildings on the Acropolis but also a declaration of the museum’s autonomy as a contemporary architectural project within a highly historical context.



Well-known Greek cartoonist KYR touches upon these issues of presence, absence, replication, and substitution, as well as on the notion of the diagram, both as a summary of architectural form and as a conceptual tool and mode of communication, in one of his cartoons, whose primary target is Greece's "sellout" in the context of the recent economic crisis. In this drawing, KYR reduces both natural and architectural forms to recognizable diagrams, which together convey the Acropolis without depicting its most recognizable landmark, the Parthenon; in fact, KYR supplants it with the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. In doing so, he offers an unwitting commentary on the pliable architectural language of Antiquity. Exemplified by the very monument missing from the drawing itself, this language, reinterpreted through the lens of neoclassicism, is shown as seeking to replace the very "standard" that gave birth to it. Most interesting, however, are its implications about history. Here the Brandenburg Gate colonizes not only by destroying but also by replacing. KYR doesn't leave a gap where the Parthenon would be and hence doesn't allow for the temple's absence to be felt, rendering the space identifiable even without its primary architectural feature.

In the new Acropolis Museum, on the other hand, the architect adopts a different strategy toward history. By replicating the orientation of the Parthenon and the layout of its marbles in the museum's top gallery, Tschumi recreates the Platonic idea of the Parthenon's presence but not the object itself. Given this nuanced and complex – symbiotic rather than either codependent or adversarial – relationship to the Parthenon and its surrounding context, the new museum fits right in with the sentiment KYR alludes to in his cartoon, a future where nothing is certain. The seeds are now sown for the new museum to become an autonomous architectural object, finally freed from the political rhetoric that has so dominated the decades leading up to its realization.

PALMYRA GERAKI IS AN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNER IN NEW YORK.