

why the new acropolis museum?

the changing context of the parthenon sculptures

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"The visitor's route forms a clear 3 dimensional loop, folding an architectural promenade with a rich spatial experience extending from the excavations to the Parthenon Marbles & back through the Roman period. Movement in & through time is a crucial dimension of architecture." Bernard Tschumi

Where The Parthenon Marbles are never going back onto the Parthenon. Pollution & the effects of weathering mean that rapid & unacceptable deterioration would occur if they were left there. This is a fact accepted everyone involved in the current restoration of the Acropolis monuments. The question is though, if the sculptures are no longer displayed on the Parthenon then where should they be situated instead?

The British Museum claims: *"Because the Parthenon is now a ruin the best use that the world can make of these sculptures is for them to be here in London in the context of other great art works."*¹

Context The original context of the Parthenon Sculptures was that they were an integral part of the Parthenon, sitting within the complex of buildings on top of the Athenian Acropolis, in the Attica area of mainland Greece.

The Parthenon was a building carefully positioned as a culmination of the route up to the Acropolis, rather than a structure that existed in isolation. Throughout Athens, even within the densely developed city that exists today, you continually catch glimpses of the Parthenon high above you.

For many stages of the approach however, the Parthenon is hidden, either by other buildings, or by other parts of the rock of the Acropolis. As you climb up towards the Propylaeum the Parthenon is completely hidden from view, only revealed again as you emerge out through this gateway onto the Acropolis. From this point your route across the rock leads you past the Parthenon, your view of it continuously changing as you move along its perimeter. Eventually the building disappears behind you until you turn to face it & the main entrance confronts you directly, filling your field of view.

Sculptures Throughout the time that you are passing the building, the pediment sculptures & metopes can be seen clearly, but the frieze is hidden behind them & is never easily visible from the outside of the building. Beyond the frieze lies the final centrepiece to these layers of sculpture. Within the dark interior of the temple itself is the long since destroyed, giant chryselephantine (ivory) sculpture of Athena, the goddess to whom the Parthenon is dedicated.

The pediment & metopes are each designed to tell a story & are read in a direction as you pass them, while the frieze breaks into two paths at its starting point & wraps around the building until the two branches rejoin & conclude above the main entrance.



The building & sculptures were not designed to exist in an abstract space; they were always about constrained channelled paths of movement around & through them. This direct relationship with the site & the wider context of Athens visible from it is one of the reasons that later replica buildings, such as the ones in Nashville, Edinburgh & Germany can never come close to recreating the sensation of standing on top of the Acropolis looking at the Parthenon.

Later context The Parthenon's use as a temple ceased during the early Christian period, when it became a church & many of the metope sculptures were defaced. Most of the sculptures on the building remained relatively intact though until the explosion of 1687 that occurred while the building was used by the Ottomans as a gunpowder store & was hit by a cannon shot. This single event did more than any other to end the life of the Parthenon as a working building & redefined it as the ruins that we are familiar with today. This was the end of the original context of the Parthenon sculptures.²

London When Lord Elgin's collection of sculptures arrived in London they were originally stored in a shed adjoining his Park Lane house, before later being moved to the Elgin Room at the British Museum. When the sculptures were displayed there, the aim was to create interesting compositions from them, rather than arranging them in a way that related to their placement on the Parthenon.

Duveen Gallery In the 1930s, Joseph Duveen,³ a wealthy & prolific art collector financed the construction of a new purpose built gallery within the British Museum for the marbles, which opened to the public in 1962 & is known as the Duveen Gallery.⁴ This new home for the Parthenon sculptures is a vast space within the museum, seventy six metres long & up to twenty two metres wide. The problem though is that although the sculptures were now clearly on view, they still weren't arranged in a way that helped to understand how they originally fitted into the context of the Parthenon.

The pediments are at either end of the gallery, facing inwards. Because of the constraints of the space, the pieces on display are pushed together, so that although a substantial central segment is missing, there is no space left in the middle of the arrangement for the missing sculptures, giving a false impression of the scale of the pediments.

The metopes in the possession of the museum are arranged in four groups, around the ends of the gallery, even though originally they all came from a single side of the Parthenon.

The frieze runs along the two long walls of the gallery, again facing inwards, so that it is instantly visible in its entirety. It is only broken by 3 doorways & at the ends, implying that what you are seeing was originally a continuous run of the frieze, whereas in reality the sections in the British Museum are actually split into twenty five parts separated by pieces that are either destroyed, or in Athens.⁵ Even



if you know the Parthenon well, it is still hard to relate these fragments of the frieze to their original positions on the building.

Looking at this display of the sculptures as a whole, everything is instantly visible as you enter the gallery. You are the focus at the centre, with the sculptures looking in at you. There is no sense of a linear narrative being revealed as you move past, nor is there anything to indicate the hierarchy & layering that defined the placement of the sculptures when they were on the Parthenon. Continuity should be broken by the absent sculptures, but there is never a sense that you are not seeing the complete set.

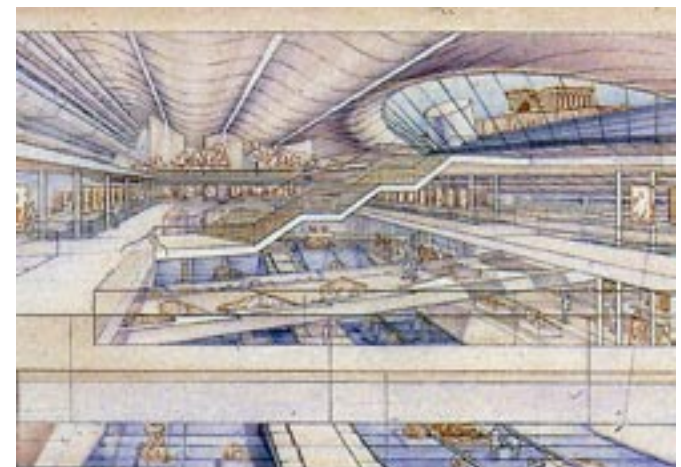
One aspect of Attica in Greece, that defines external spaces there, is the unforgiving brightness & clarity of the sunlight. Anyone who has visited will have seen the surfaces of buildings there forced into sharp relief by the contrast between light & shade. As you move around a building, one side is dark, while the other is brilliantly lit, the balance shifting constantly through the day as the sun moves across the sky. The Metopes & Pediments of the Parthenon were exposed to this harsh sunlight whereas the frieze, which was completely shaded, was therefore perceived in a different way to the other sculptures on the building through soft diffuse light. In the Duveen Gallery however, frosted glass roof lights ensure that everything is illuminated in an equal level of grey, with imperceptible shadows.

Acropolis museum The current Acropolis Museum dating from 1865, is a cramped building, sunk into the ground on one corner of the Acropolis. It houses various finds from the Acropolis, from earlier temples of the Archaic period, through to some of the Parthenon sculptures & Roman remains. As pollution problems necessitated the removal of the remaining sculptures on the Parthenon to a safer location, it became clear that a new building was needed to house the growing collection & display items that had been kept in storage due to the lack of space.

New acropolis museum In 1989, the third competition⁶ for a new Acropolis Museum was announced, with a choice of three possible sites & attracted an unprecedented 438 submissions. The winning entry was by the Italian architects Passarelli & Nicoletti, located on a site known as Makryianni, after the road that ran down one side of it.

After delays during the early 1990s due to legal issues, work on clearing the site began in 1998, only to stop soon afterwards when the excavations revealed previously unknown remains of the Early Christian settlement of Athens. After initial consultations it became clear that it was not possible to adapt the design to avoid the remains & therefore the best option was to design a new proposal that reacted to & integrated with the archaeological remains on the site.

A competition was launched in the summer of 2000 & in addition to the requirements of the museum itself, the brief also laid out where the building could make contact with the site, so that there would be no possibility of damage to the archaeological remains.



Tschumi design In October 2002, a joint entry by Bernard Tschumi Architects & Michael Photiadis Architects was selected as the winner & work on site began the following year, although it has since been heavily delayed by legal & political issues.

Tschumi saw the building as a challenge on three levels;⁷ firstly he had to relate a landmark modern building to the Parthenon. Secondly he was designing for a complex site with issues ranging from the archaeological remains through to earthquakes & harsh sunlight. Most importantly, he saw it as a museographic challenge, defining the best way to view sculptures that were designed to be viewed by the ancient Greeks in a specific way & are now seen by us in a different way.

Site The Makryianni site is close to the Acropolis & the upper levels will have a clear view of the Acropolis, although lower down the view is obscured by the 19th century building at the front of the site, housing the Centre for Acropolis Studies. The location benefits from the recent pedestrianising of the road that leads around the base of the Acropolis. It is also next to the entrance to the recently opened Acropolis Metro Station. Even before you enter the building, you are already in the context of the Parthenon.

The New Acropolis Museum acts as the first stage of a visitor's journey from the metro station, before they continue on to the Acropolis itself.

Externally, Tschumi's design has a simple form, using a limited palette of materials so that it does not fight for attention with the historic monuments surrounding it, but instead sits above & within the history of the area.

Building As you enter the museum across a concrete & glass bridge, you can just manage to see the Parthenon sculptures at the top of the building, behind a glass wall. As with the route up to the Acropolis though, you lose sight of the sculptures as you pass through the doors of the museum.

Through the glass floor of the bridge you can see beyond the modern building to the dimly lit excavations on the site below. The building is not just about exhibiting artefacts in galleries, but it also acts as a roof over another archaeological site.

Once inside, a wide ramp with a glass floor leads up between two walls. The act of walking up the ramp, focussing on the top of it symbolises the act of climbing up to the Acropolis & various finds from the lower slopes are displayed on either side of this ramp. High above a series of bridges pass across the space & daylight filters in through the roof.

The main gallery is a space with a monumental feel to it, with tall columns supporting the roof. It holds items from the archaic period, parts of buildings on the Acropolis that were destroyed long before the Parthenon was built.

At the end of the main gallery, escalators lead up through the mezzanine to the top of the building, where you arrive in a central courtyard, flooded with light from the glass roof above. Multiple slots in the concrete walls form doorways leading out from this space.



Parthenon gallery Passing through one of these openings you emerge into the Parthenon Gallery, & on turning around you are confronted again with the Parthenon sculptures, that you previously glimpsed as you entered the museum. Full height glass walls give the impression that you are on top of Athens, & you look out with a similar sensation to being up on the Acropolis itself.

Sunlight floods in to the gallery, illuminating the sculptures in harsh relief. The space initially feels like a long room, with glass one side & a concrete wall on the other. This back wall forms the setting for the frieze, which is not hit by direct sunlight during the day as it is sheltered by the roof & is instead illuminated by more diffuse lighting through a slot above, replicating the disparity between the harsh & diffuse that defined the original setting of the sculptures.

Throughout the design, Tschumi sees light as the central theme of the museum, using it as a tool to replicate as closely as possible the original outdoor environment of the sculptures.

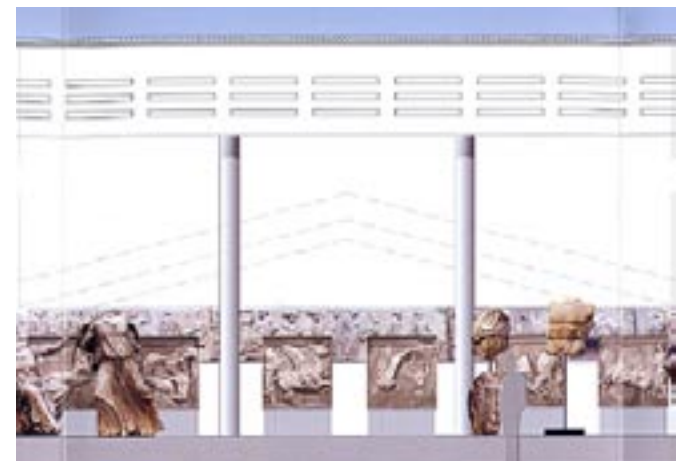
In front of the frieze the metopes sit on individual plinths, forming a layer shielding the frieze behind. Columns rise up between these plinths, their spacing identical to those on the Parthenon.

At what you thought was the end of the gallery, it turns a corner & a new view is revealed. The frieze continues along the wall, with the metopes in front of it, but in front of the metopes is a larger plinth holding the pediment sculptures.

Acropolis regained At the next corner you finally regain your view of the Acropolis capped by the Parthenon high above you, while at the same time you can look at the sculptures that once formed part of the building.

The design of the Parthenon Gallery is carefully planned to match that of the Parthenon itself. The size is the same & the alignment is the same. As you move past the sculptures, exactly the same areas are in shade as would have been on the Parthenon itself. It is easy to understand where a particular sculpture would have fitted onto the Parthenon. In areas where there are no sculptures surviving, the walls are left blank & the plinths removed, so that you quickly build up a picture of which parts are destroyed. The entrances into the gallery occur through the spaces where the missing frieze panels would be. Every aspect of the gallery's form is defined by aspects of the Parthenon. The spaces where sculptures are missing also accentuate how much of the collection is still held in the British museum.

Due to the design of the gallery, it is impossible to see all the sculptures simultaneously; you are forced to move through the space & pass each of the sculptures individually at close range, trying to understand the story being told. Tschumi likens this to a cinematic experience, where you discover the sculptures frame by frame.⁸



Route down At the end of your circuit through the Parthenon gallery, a different route leads back down through the building into galleries containing artefacts from the Post Parthenon & Roman periods of the Acropolis.

Once you reach ground level, steps lead down beneath the building, where you can look at the excavations from the 3rd, 4th & 7th centuries. Light filters down onto you through the glass floor of the ramp that you passed over at the start of your journey through the building.

The Parthenon On leaving the museum site, you continue your journey up the Acropolis, culminating at the Parthenon. Although the museum is left behind you, & soon becomes hidden from view, once you reach the Parthenon you can look down & see the distant sculptures in the Parthenon gallery once more, adding a contemporary element into the Parthenon's theme of views that are concealed before being revealed again. Your perspective of the Acropolis Museum has now completely changed, & rather than nestling behind buildings, you are looking down onto it with its roof forming its fifth elevation.

Conclusions Creating a building that can exist comfortably in the context of a monument as iconic as the Parthenon, yet at the same time fulfilling a complex programme of functions would be a challenging task for any architect, but Tschumi's museum has no problems dealing with this challenge. The journey through the building is a three dimensional loop, not only in space, but also in time,⁹ as you move through the different periods of the Acropolis's existence in order, right through to the present day, represented by the building itself. Here the sculptures are presented perfectly within their historic & topographic context.

You have to ask yourself, when MPs arguing for the retention of the sculptures describe the possibility of their return to Greece as *Iconoclastic Decontextualisation*¹⁰, do they really understand what the true context of the Marbles is?



References

- 1 Neil MacGregor speaking on BBC Radio 4's Front Row, 2nd January 2003
The British Museum's official position that they provide the best context for the marbles was also put forward in the memorandum submitted to the Select committee on Culture, Media & Sport by the British Museum on 28th June 2000
"...The legal status of the collection is fully documented and was confirmed by the British Museum Act (1963). Ownership in a broader moral sense is justified by the Museum's commitment to serve a world audience by providing the widest possible access. The British Museum provides an international context where cultures can be experienced by all, studied in depth and compared and contrasted across time and place."
- 2 Mary Beard, *The Parthenon*, 2002. P 161
*"Here the sculptures from the Parthenon jostled with many of the other antiquities that had ended up, thanks to his agents, in Elgin's packing cases: not just the famous caryatid from the porch of the Erechtheion, but some bits & pieces from Mycenae, a whole variety of architectural fragments, some plaster casts of other material not removed from Greece, as well as a notable statue of the god Dionysus from a monument on the Acropolis slopes...
...No attempt was made to recapture the original placement of the sculpture, nor to separate what belonged to the Parthenon from the rest. It was a 'picturesque' arrangement, whose main purpose was to provide the most congenial atmosphere for artists to draw. Many of the most famous pieces were fixed to swivelling bases, so that they could be moved to catch the best light."*
- 3 Joseph Duveen 1869-1939, First Baron of Millbank was also the person responsible for instigating the controversial cleaning of the Marbles in the 1930's without the appropriate permissions from the British Museum Authorities.
- 4 The dimensions given are the maximums. The width at the ends is 22.8 metres, but for the central section of the gallery is 12.5 metres.
- 5 A small amount of the frieze is held in other museums in Europe. The largest of these pieces is in the Louvre & constitutes less than 1% of the original frieze's area. Other smaller fragments, whose collective total area is less than 0.3% of the original frieze are located in Vienna, Palermo, Rome & Heidelberg.
- 6 In 1976 & 1979, competitions were held to design a new museum, but in both cases the limitations of the sites available for the competitions meant that no acceptable proposals were found.
- 7 From a lecture given by Bernard Tschumi in London, November 12th 2002.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Tim Loughton MP (Conservative, Worthing & East Sussex) speaking in the House of Commons on 5th May 2002
*"...The hon. Gentleman said that his proposals were modest, but they are not. The implications for the future of all world museums housing universal collections are enormous. I oppose this latest attempt at iconoclastic decontextualisation and will judge it on the following grounds. Are the Elgin marbles rightfully in the British museum, are they in the best place to be appreciated most by the widest audience, and what are the real motives for destroying the status quo?...
...The British museum is a world museum. Forces for educational and cultural enlightenment across the globe exist there. It has 6 million visitors a year. Academics, students, school children, Greeks, Britons, South Africans, Koreans all visit for free. They are able to see the Elgin marbles not just as a single artistic treasure but in the context of the great developing panoply of archaic and classical art and architecture."*

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Plaka - Photo by Matthew Taylor
The west end of the Acropolis - Photo by Matthew Taylor
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The marbles in the Elgin Room at the British Museum - Painting by A Archer, 1819.
The Duveen Gallery at the British Museum - Photo by Matthew Taylor
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The current Acropolis Museum - Photo by Matthew Taylor
The 1989 winner of the new museum competition - Drawing by Passarelli & Nicoletti Architects
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Makryianni site from road - Photo by Matthew Taylor
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View of Museum site from the Acropolis - Photo by Matthew Taylor

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