THE CONSERVATION PLAN FOR THE RESTORATION OF THE PIRAEUS MUNICIPAL THEATRE

Nikolaos Charkiolakis
Architect, Director of Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Monuments, Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism
17, Ermou str., 15773 Athens, Greece

Maria Leni, Manos Mikelakis
Archaeologists, Directorate of Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Monuments, Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism
17, Ermou str., 15773 Athens, Greece

Keywords: Restoration, Conservation, Monument, Management

ABSTRACT

The Piraeus Municipal Theatre, a late 19th century monument, is currently being restores by the official Service of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism. During the period of its function, the Theatre suffered from damages caused by earthquakes and poor conservation, therefore it had already been renovated in the past. The Service carries out a Restoration Project in order to preserve the original architectural plans and structure of the building, using restoration technology. Moreover, the Service aims at the modernization of all technical equipments, so that the Theatre will be able to stage all kinds of plays and serve a larger number of audience, including disabled people. As the restoration works proceeded, new needs were revealed: the conservation of the old wooden stage, of the original paint and sculpted decoration and of the remnants of an ancient building at the basement. When completed, the restored Piraeus Municipal Theatre will be an international cultural center.

INTRODUCTION

The Piraeus Municipal Theatre was reared thanks to the initiative taken by the industrialist Tryphon Moutsopoulos, mayor of Piraeus form 1874 to 1883. He called the architect Ioannis Lazarimos to draw the first plans of the Municipal Theatre, which would show off the superiority and the progressiveness of industrialists and merchants in Piraeus. At that time, two other ports and industrial centers competitive to Piraeus already had municipal theatres, Ermoupoli at Syros (1864) and Patras (1875).

Lazarimos designed an imposing neoclassical theatre, a well-proportioned rectangular building, having a monumental façade with a corinthian column portico [1]. The side views are three-storeyed with arched windows and a gable at the roof chamber. The horseshoe theater room, having a seating capacity of approximately 1300-1500 spectators, consists of the auditorium, two levels of boxes and a gallery. The stage (11.00 m. x 20.40 m) is supported by a structure of large height, which is being accessed by two staircases. Aside from the auditorium and the scene, the Theater also includes reception rooms, dressing rooms and administration rooms. On the ground floor of the side views, a number of shops supported the Theater financially.
In a nutshell, the Piraeus Municipal Theater was architecturally designed after the opera houses in Berlin and Paris [2]. Lazarimos’ architectural proposal lent west-european glamour to the Municipal Theater, which was intended to become the emblem of the ruling class.

![Figure 1: Photograph of the Piraeus Municipal Theatre at 1900-1910](image)

**PLANNING THE RESTORATION PROJECT**

The Ministry of Culture aimed at restoring the Theater to its initial form, according to Lazarimos’ plans. However, several interventions made during a century of function have changed the original designs. The Restoration Project should take into consideration all the possible transformations, and investigate all the renovating phases in order to conclude to the authentic architectural plans. More specifically, the Piraeus Municipal Theatre was inaugurated in 1895; during its operation, it was altered by many different uses. Especially after the Great War, the Theater was used as garrison headquarters and some of its rooms housed the Piraeus Labour Center and other trade unions. It was partly used as a school and it also sheltered refugees of the greco-turkish war in 1922. Those different uses damaged the rooms and altered their initial form, so that the necessary renovations started in 1926 [3].

After repairing the damages, the Theater continued to put on plays in 1945. After the Second World War there were extended renovations of specific parts of the Theater; new materials would serve better its functional needs. Particularly, in 1951 the restoration works regarding the manufacture of floors and staircases of armed concrete were completed, although these interventions suffered from severe criticism. Later on, the curtain was replaced with a fireproof one, the seats were also replaced and the refreshment room was renovated.

The most radical interventions were made during the 1970’s. The Piraeus Municipal Council’s Acts show that the works consisted of manufacturing windbreaks at the entrance doors, cleaning the marble bases of the columns, reconstruction and replacement of the doors and the shop-windows of the shops at the ground floor and the completion and repairing of the chandelier of the main room [4]. In conclusion, estimating the renovation works until the earthquake in 1981, which caused severe damages to the building, Lazarimos’ initial plans were realized without important alterations. Within
the framework of modernization, the number of the shops at the ground floor was increased and, more important, the initial scene was replaced. Most of the renovation projects carried out concerned the foyer, as it is an important place for social events and it housed a variety of functions.

Figure 2: Architect Ioannis Lazarimos’ original plan

Taking into consideration all the past modifications in the interior spaces and the exterior surfaces, the Restoration Project tries to isolate the original elements and, at the same time, to propose new solutions to functional problems, adopting modern material and innovative methods. The Project, prepared by the Directorate of Restoration of Modern and Contemporary Monuments (D.R.M.C.M.) of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Tourism, assesses the significance of the building in all its intricate, working detail. It also places it in its historic context, and looks at the impact of the changes from previous restoration projects or the damages of the earthquakes in 1981 and 1999 [5].

Figure 3: Graphic depiction of the auditorium and the boxes after the restoration works
EXPERIMENTAL: STATIC AND AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS

The earthquake in 1981 provoked serious damage to the building, which was considered to be in a dangerous situation. It could not meet the requirements of a place of assembly, as the emergency exits were closed. The wooden structure of the scene was in a bad condition and the shops on the sides limited the basements. Therefore, serious static problems occurred, due to the earthquake and to the lack of structural conservation [6].

Figure 4: Present situation of the stage and its mechanisms

A number of basic and urgent safety measures, such as removal of inflammable materials, opening the emergency exits, temporary support of the scene floor and a geological subsoil research, secured the monument. Soon the Theatre was able to function again, until a second strong earthquake in 1999 proved that a wider restoration was needed. Therefore, the D.R.M.C.M. cooperated with the Municipality of Piraeus in order to satisfy the needs of the building. A special Restoration Project and a study were carried out. According to the study, a number of static interventions on the bearing walls were planned. More specifically, all the wooden bearing elements were replaced or reinforced, wherever it was necessary, with wooden or metal cross sections. Moreover, the stonework was armoured the same way.

Designing and carrying out a research programme regarding the existent structural materials determined the nature of the interventions to the bearing and non-bearing elements of the building. While running this research programme, it became obvious that the stage needed new equipments. The modernization of the stage equipments by adding modern mechanisms that move the sceneries is going to provide the theatre with the necessary tools to put on any play and to satisfy the imagination of all theatre directors. The new stage is going to provide underneath more storage area for the different sceneries and their mechanisms.
The redesign of the audience service spaces will create refreshment rooms and water closets, including special ones for the disabled, at all levels. The rearrangement of the supportive spaces will create an efficient number of dressing rooms for the artists, having independent water closets each. Moreover, a new room for rehearsals will be created, having the necessary dimensions to set small sceneries. Likewise, a new ballet room will be formed, so that artists will have the opportunity to warm up and rehearse. Special rooms for the other participants in the play, such as the director, the scene-painter, the stage manager and the technicians, have also been designed.

![Figure 5: Graphic depiction of the Municipal Theatre stage showing the scenery mechanisms](image)

In addition, a new room will be created for the theatrical and photographic archives of the plays. This archive will satisfy the need for documentation and is going to be addressed to specialised visitors mostly. The air conditioning of the whole Theatre is indispensable, therefore new solutions had to be found in order to achieve the best results. Thus, a number of engine-rooms at the basement is going to serve all mechanical purposes. Furthermore, an acoustic study influenced the architectural designs of the roof and its materials.

Concisely, the Restoration Project has taken into consideration all the different parameters that could be predicted, in order to offer to the artists and the audience a Theatre similar to the best European ones, containing the most up-to-date equipment, and at the same time to preserve unchangeable the architectural character of the monument.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: ADJUSTING THE RESTORATION AND CONSERVATION STRATEGY

However complete and thorough a restoration study could be, it should also be flexible to a number of alterations, due to the elements revealed during the restoration project. The restoration works started at the Theatre on March 2008 and while the stage floor was carefully dismantled, the old inclined stage floor begun to reveal, as well as more elements of its structure. Soon it became clear that the
The initial 19th century wooden stage is preserved to a large extent, as part of the mechanisms [7]. The D.R.M.C.M work group, formed for this purpose by specialized personnel, such as architects, designers and art historians, undertook its documentation, study and representation. For each one of its parts (stage, substage, fly loft, platforms) there were architectural designs, photographic documentation of current situation and graphic depictions of the mechanisms and their function.

The Restoration Project taking into consideration the importance of this stage proposed its conservation and reuse for educational purposes and for matters of historical documentation, as it is a fine sample of the baroque theatre technology [8]. The stage arrangement, consisting of pair slots used to slide wing panels and of streets, which were equipped with elevator mechanism and trap doors, is one of the most developed of that period [9]. The two levels under stage were equipped with panel dollies and support wagon for the wing panels. Other mechanical devices, such as winch drum, pulleys and counterweights, were also installed [10].

The decoration at foyers and the auditorium were gradually revealed by a special group of conservators. The elements show that a large-scale paint and sculpted decoration was designed by architect Lazarimos himself. As it was common in the late 19th century public buildings, inner decoration was designed according to classicist models, using vegetable and geometrical motifs as well as cupids. Although it seems that the initial decoration programme was not completed, due to financial reasons, the subsequent renovations create three layers of paint decoration. The initial colours at the boxes, for example, were deep red with gold-plated embossed ornaments [11]. The conservation plan created a database of all original interior paint colours and provided extensive photographic inventories before and during the restoration. The foyer will be refurbished and the auditorium will be renovated without damaging historically significant features.

The archaeological research at the inner part of the Piraeus Municipal Theatre, specifically at the basement of the auditorium, revealed the remains of a building of the theatre company club of Dionysos, dating at 2nd century B.C. The ancient remains, proving that the modern theatre was built on top of an ancient one, are going to remain in situ. Moreover, the remains found at the east side of
the Theatre are very important for our knowledge on the city plan of ancient Piraeus [12]. After modifying the initial study of the Restoration Project, all ancient remains will be preserved and will be visited in a specially formed space, underneath the auditorium.

CONCLUSIONS

The Piraeus Municipal Theatre Restoration Project is a large-scale programme that comprises of various research and structural parts. The study is being modified and updated as the restoration works proceed. During the works many technical means have been used and the interventions vary to different degrees: for example, there has been reinforcement of bearing walls from the basement to the ground floor with concrete, as well as simple plaster at the rest of the walls, with the exception of the foyers walls, where the intervention will be as light as possible in order to preserve the original paint decoration. The Conservation Plan is not uncompromising; on the contrary, it remains flexible respecting the same restoration principles. It was modified in order to guarantee the preservation of the old theatre stage, the original paint decoration and the remnants of the ancient building.

The Municipal Theatre has a monumental and symbolic character for the city of Piraeus. The restores Theatre is going to become an international cultural center with all modern conveniences, which will be able to support all kinds of theatrical, musical and dancing performances. It will house the modern artistic expression and set off the cultural development of the city, by rallying its spiritual and artistic forces. The Piraeus Municipal Theatre is going to serve both as a restoration model and sample of the new technologies usage in conservation strategies, as well as the core of new social networks of artistic expression and creativity.

REFERENCES