

Thursday, September 27, 2012

Isn't That the Parthenon...in Nashville?

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NEW YORK – There is a full-scale archaeologically-correct reproduction of the Parthenon standing in centennial Park in Nashville, TN. Anyone can go there and experience the masterpiece of Greece's Golden Age firsthand. On September 20, Professor Barbara Tsakirgis spoke at Columbia University about one of the people who helped make it a genuine cultural achievement and not just a piece of historical kitsch.

Schermerhorn Hall is nestled in the Neo-classical campus of Columbia, one of many sites throughout the United States that evoke the grandeur of Greece and Rome and help solidify the links between the democratic and republican achievements of the ancient world and the aspirations of America's founding fathers and citizens.

Tsakirgis, Associate Professor of Classics and History of Art at Vanderbilt University, and Vice Chair of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens (ASCSA) Managing Committee, presented "The Athens of the South: William Bell Dinsmoor and the Design of the Nashville Parthenon," which focused on the contributions of that renowned architect and scholar.

She called her story "a tale of two cities and a tale of two buildings," and explained how they were linked by Dinsmoor, a professor at Columbia University and the ASCSA.

The lecture traced the detailed information and measurements Dinsmoor obtained through years of examining the original Parthenon and which informed the creation of the replica.

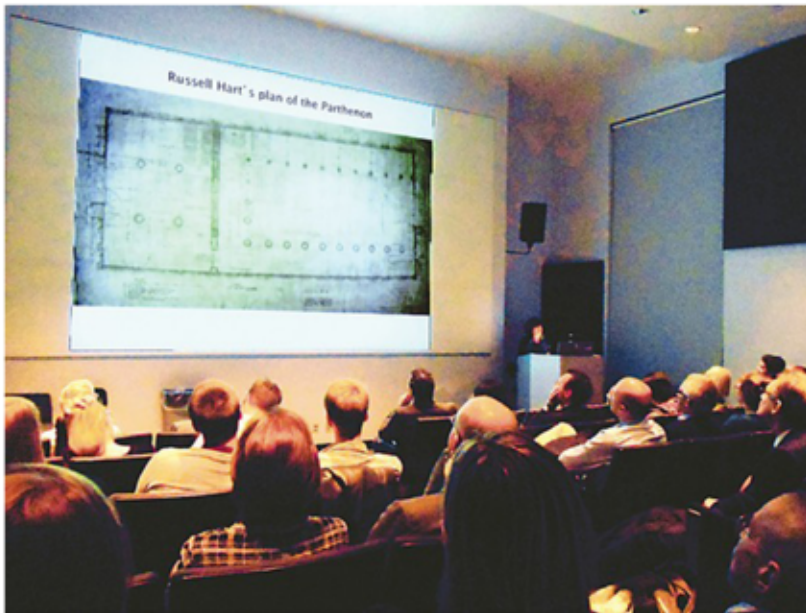
The building he helped create replaced a temporary structure that was created in 1897 for the city's one-year-late centennial celebration. The citizens loved it so much – Nashville, now known as Music City but called the Athens of the South before the centennial - the city chose not to tear it down,

By 1920, however, it was in need of renovation or replacement. It had become a symbol of the city and while the populace wanted it preserved, the directors of the park asked Russell Hart to design and build a permanent and more faithful replica of the Periclean original.

Tsakirgis said Hart approached the restoration from a very scholarly perspective and early in the planning process, in June 1920, he wrote to Dinsmoor asking for his advice.

Their relationship and contribution were illustrated through architectural drawings and images of their letters.

While the exterior design was already complete, in the introduction to his influential “Architecture of Ancient Greece,” she said “Dinsmoor boasts that he designed the only full scale replica of the interior of the Parthenon.” She added that while there are a number of other replicas in the world “the Nashville building is the only full-scale replica built with the intention of recreating the original as accurately as possible.”



She pointed out that the replica does not include all the ingenious visual refinements of the original, but it is an awesome sight.

During the lively question and answer period that followed the lecture, the guests wished to learn more about oft-ignored fact that the Parthenon’s sculptural and architectural elements were painted, which was an important issue for Hart and Dinsmoor. Whether the colors were more or

less intense is a matter of continuing debate.

One guest also noted – to the amusement of the lecturer and the audience alike – that there is a full-scale replica of the Parthenon in China, but in its current ruined form. It was apparently built with the intention of demonstrating the superiority of Chinese architecture and civilization.

Tsakirgis is a Classical archaeologist whose research focuses on Greek houses and material found in them. She studies them for what they tell us about the people who lived in them. Among the breakthroughs in social history that has resulted from such work is the demolition of the idea that Athenian women were secluded in their houses. It is now clear “it was a stated ideal rather than a practical reality of life,” she said.

Much has also been learned about Greek religion as people’s worship was focused more on household practices than on visits to temples. Tsakirgis’ work will eventually cover the late antique period and the fascinating transition from pagan to Christian civilization.



A reception followed the lecture in Schermerhorn Hall. Seen (L-R) are: Stathis Andris, Ioannis Mylonopoulos, Barbara Tsakirgis, Mary Emerson, and Dorothy Dinsmoor.

THE MAKING OF AN ARCHAEOLOGIST

Greek history is not only in Tsakirgis' genes. Her father's father was from the village of Alatsata in Ionia, near the Western coast of Asia Minor and Tsakirgis. She said many of its residents settled in Somerville, MA.

Her mother's roots are in Northern Epirus, another

unredeemed part of the Greek world. Their descendants include Tsakirgis' sister Christina and her brother James, who is an architect in Boston.

Ancient Greece's art worked their magic on her when she was 11 years old. That was when she became fascinated with the chryselephantine statue of Athena created by Phidias for the interior of the Parthenon and wrote a report about it. At that point, she said "I knew I wanted to become a classical archaeologist." The statue was recreated by Alan LeQuire in 1990 and lives in the Nashville Parthenon's cella.

Armed with an undergraduate degree from Yale University and an MA and PhD from Princeton University, since 1993 she has been part of the American School's excavations in the Athenian Agora.

GREEK ART IN DANGER TODAY

TNH asked Tsakirgis about the state of archaeology in Greece and she said "It is a matter of very serious concern." There have been two serious thefts already.

"The culture ministry has been hard hit and there isn't the money to pay guards," and she fear dire consequences for archaeological sites.

She said some museums that are ready to open cannot do so due to the crisis. The archaeological site of Abdera in Thrace – the birthplace of the thinker Democritus – the

philosophical grandfather of the idea of the atom – remains unopened.

Although she has not heard of private initiatives in the Diaspora to help – though she welcomes them – she said that “through the auspices of the ASCSA we have long supported our Greek colleagues not only morally but in practical matters.”

She expressed the importance and her appreciation of the ASCSA’s 190 cooperating institutions across the United States, which along with private benefactors provide vital funding.

Professor Ioannis Mylonopoulos of the Department of Art History and Archaeology, Columbia University and ASCSA Managing Committee Member, organized the event and introduced Prof. Tsakirgis. Both Columbia and the ASCSA were sponsors of the lecture that filled the sixth floor auditorium and which was followed by a reception.

Among the guests were Dorothy Dinsmoor, niece of W. B. Dinsmoor and Greek Consul Evangelos Kyriakopoulos. Many students and professors from neighboring universities were also in attendance.

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