

New chapter: a landmark move for Greece's national library

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From January until April, the National Library of Greece is moving root and branch, out of its 100-year-old home in central Athens and literally into the 21st-century

Wearing masks and gloves, specialised staff gingerly place their

treasured cargo inside wheeled, shock-absorbing boxes for a historic trip to the other end of Athens in the biggest book move in Greek history.

From January until April, the National Library of Greece is moving root and branch, out of its 100-year-old home in central Athens and literally into the 21st-century.

"This is no simple move. It's a journey into a new era," says library general director Filippos Tsimpoglou.

More than 550 staff worked on the two-year operation to clean, digitise, tag and relocate over 700,000 manuscripts and books, made possible by a massive donation from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), one of the country's leading philanthropic organisations.

The foundation in 2016 unveiled the library's new home—a 20-hectare (49-acre) cultural centre designed by famed Italian architect Renzo Piano on the Athens seafront that also hosts the national opera.

The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, named after one of Greece's most successful shipowners, cost nearly 600 million euros (\$735 million) and took eight years to design and build.

Library staff say the move could not have come soon enough. And without private funds in crisis-hit Greece, it would never have happened.

The relocation alone cost 500,000 euros.

The Greek state nevertheless did manage to contribute—it and the SNF together paid the overall costs of the library revamp, which came to just over 10 million euros.

Room to grow

"For years, the library has been clamouring for space," library engineer Chrysanthi Vassiliadou told a media briefing earlier this month.

"As a country we were a little behind in terms of services provided," she said.

Since 1903, most of the National Library collection has been housed in the iconic Vallianeio neoclassic mansion in central Athens, designed by Theophil Hansen and built by Ernst Ziller, the architects that beautified 19th century Athens.

But in a listed building that could not be easily remodelled and with a reading room of just 80 seats, staff say it was time to move on.

"The National Library had approximately 20,000 visitors and 21,000 readers each year. At its new facilities, the annual number of visitors and readers is expected to be 10 times higher," said reading room head Vasiliki Tsigouni.

The library will now be able to provide ebooks and electronic journals, and for the first time also lend a selection of copies to readers.

The reading room will be expanded to 400 seats.

And thanks to SNF funds, the library has renewed its foreign-language collection for the first time in 20 years.

Founded in 1832, the National Library is the custodian of Greece's cultural heritage in written form—including rare copies of Homeric texts, 1,200-year-old manuscripts, maps, Byzantine-era music, 19th century Greek revolutionary archives and the personal papers of poet Dionysios Solomos, author of the Greek national anthem.

In the past, it has been housed in an orphanage, a public bathhouse and a cathedral in Athens.

Just planning how to display the collections in the new 22,000-square-metre library building took a year, with the British Library acting as consultant to the SNF.

Set for 25 years

"At the rate of today's book production, (the new building can meet our needs) for 25 years, if not more," said Vassiliadou.

Four climate-controlled vaults will hold the library's rarest books and manuscripts, some of which date back to the 9th century, organisers said.

Some of the oldest books were donated by prominent [19th century](#) Greek citizens, monasteries and even foreign royals.

Among its treasures is a 1674 chronicle written by Jacques-Paul Babin, a Jesuit missionary who was a frequent visitor to Athens, and published by French archaeology pioneer Jacob Spon.

"It is the first book on Athens in modern times... a milestone in the history of Athens' 'rediscovery' by the Europeans in the 17th century," says Yannis Kokkonas, professor of historical bibliography at Ionian University.

"Until then, references to Athens were vague medieval stereotypes of a once-glorious city now lying in ruins," Kokkonas said.

It 'hurt' to leave

Another prized relic is a 14th century prayer book that once belonged to Jovan Uros Nemanjic, one of the last members of a dynasty that ruled Serbia and parts of Greece in the Middle Ages.

For all its limitations, veteran staff say the venerable Vallianeio building was hard to part with.

Once restored, it will still be used to hold library archives and events.

"When the building started emptying, it hurt us. We have been working here for many years, we identify with this building," said Vassiliadou.

"Now it can be restored. We are impatient to see this work bear fruit in the new facilities. And then come back to fix this building and complete the circle," she said.

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