Mind the Gap: Prediction and Performance in Respect to Visitor Numbers at the New Acropolis Museum

James Beresford*

Abstract

This paper attempts to understand why the initial predictions of attendance at the New Acropolis Museum proved highly inaccurate when compared against visitor numbers recorded in the five years following the museum's inauguration. It will be argued that the exaggerated estimates of visitation at the museum are the result of political factors, primarily the interest in bringing about the return of the Elgin Marbles to Athens. The desire for the disputed sculptures encouraged Greek officials, as well as campaigners seeking the repatriation of the contentious sculptures, to inflate projections of attendance in an effort to bolster claims for the restitution of the Marbles.

Key Words: New Acropolis Museum, Elgin Marbles, Parthenon, attendance

Introduction

Located just 300 metres to the south-east of the Athenian Acropolis, and offering 14,000 square metres of exhibition space, the New Acropolis Museum was officially opened in June 2009, its inauguration greeted with intense public and media interest. With the design and construction project spread over more than 30 years, and completed at the cost of €129 million, the museum had also been under intense scrutiny from long before its completion. As the home to roughly half the surviving sculptures that once adorned the Parthenon, there has also been considerable political interest in the New Acropolis Museum which was always intended to play a major role in Greek attempts to repatriate the Marbles removed from the ancient temple at the start of the nineteenth century by Lord Elgin, and which are currently housed in the British Museum. (Following Merryman (2006: 98), this article uses the term ‘Elgin Marbles’ to differentiate the sculptures currently residing in the British Museum from the rest the surviving Parthenon Marbles, the vast majority of which are now on display in the top-floor gallery of the New Acropolis Museum.) Despite opening as the recession began to impact on Greece, the New Acropolis Museum nevertheless immediately established itself as the most well-attended museum in the country, and over the past five years it has become the second most visited cultural attraction in Athens, topped only by the archaeological site of the Acropolis itself.

A range of academics and museum professionals have offered opinions regarding the new museum. The architects and their advisors involved with the design process have presented detailed discussions of the aims and intentions that guided the modern design and construction of the building (e.g. Bernard Tschumi Architects 2009; Mantis 2010; Pandermalis 2010), while other professional architects have expressed some rather less-than-complimentary opinions regarding the appearance of the large museum constructed from concrete and glass (e.g. Lepicovsky 2009). Those affiliated with the various international campaign groups intent on repatriating the Elgin Marbles to Athens have been eager to endorse the design of the new museum and the layout of the galleries inside (e.g. Flynn 2006; Hitchens 2009), while archaeologists and museologists have offered more balanced assessments of the museum and its exhibition design that blend praise with criticism (e.g. James 2009; Beard 2010: 190-197; Eiteljorg 2010; Caskey 2011; Plantzos 2011). Such was the importance of the New Acropolis Museum that the international press also devoted numerous articles to the building and its
contents: Nicolai Ouroussoff (2007), the architecture critic for the New York Times, offered praise for a what he considered to be a ‘building that is both an enlightening meditation on the Parthenon and a mesmerizing work in its own right’, by contrast The Guardian journalist Simon Jenkins rather less effusively with his praise, comparing the exterior of the museum to ‘the headquarters of a British republic’.

One feature of the New Acropolis Museum that has, however, previously received only cursory attention is that of visitor numbers. Yet comparison of the initial estimates of visitation against the fluctuating levels of attendance recorded over the course of the first five years of the museum’s life reveal that the original predictions were wildly inaccurate. It is the contention of this paper that the attendance estimates made by Greek culture officials and politicians, and supported by international campaigners seeking the return of the Elgin Marbles, were exceedingly optimistic and the museum never had any credible possibility of fulfilling such expectations. It will be argued that, had greater care and attention been paid to recording of visitation at the nearby Acropolis, then considerably more accurate estimates of attendance at the New Acropolis Museum could have been generated. Unfortunately, even in the years following the opening of the museum, poor use of statistical material has continued to provide erroneous and misleading information concerning levels of attendance. It is the belief of this article that the high profile nature of the dispute regarding ownership of the Elgin Marbles, and the political and cultural importance that is attached to these sculptures, played the principal role in the exaggerated estimates of attendance in the years leading up to the opening of the museum. It is also possible that more recent inaccuracies regarding the calculation of visitor numbers at the museum in the years since its inauguration have also been proffered to the media and international campaign groups in an effort to reinforce the argument in favour of the return of the Elgin Marbles to Athens.

**Between Estimates and Actuality**

Interviewed by Time in October 2007, Professor Dimitrios Pandermalis, President of the Acropolis Museum’s Organizing Committee, and currently the President of the Museum, was absolutely clear about the number of visitors he expected to see annually coming through the doors of the New Acropolis Museum finally opened to the public: ‘More than two million. Today the Acropolis gets about one and a half million. And we believe the new museum will attract more’ (Lacayo 2007). Writing in the Museums Journal a year earlier, Tom Flynn, an art historian and a leading advocate for the return of the Elgin Marbles to Athens, provided an even more optimistic assessment of the likely popularity of the museum: ‘The old Acropolis Museum currently attracts around 1.5 million people each year. The Greeks hope their New Acropolis Museum will at least double that figure’ (Flynn 2006). As early as 2001, the British MP Eddie O’Hara tabled a Private Members’ Bill in the House of Commons which also claimed that, once opened, there would be an ‘estimated three million visitors per annum to the Acropolis Museum from around the world’ (O’Hara 2001).

Even as Greece began to suffer from the effects of the economic crisis, officials in Athens were still adamant that the New Acropolis Museum would deliver about two million visitors annually. Thus, in June 2009, with the financial crisis well underway and just as the museum was about to officially open to the public, it was noted in the Greek press: ‘The museum is also expected to ... [attract] some 10,000 visitors a day and about 2 million every year, an in-flux that Culture Minister Antonis Samaras believes will shift public opinion in favor of the Parthenon’s return’ (Kitsantonis 2009). The future Greek Prime Minister had already used the predicted attendance at the museum to push for the return of the sculptures from London; a month earlier he had emphasised the importance of museum visitation to the repatriation issue: ‘The presence of thousands of visitors will be much stronger than any public opinion poll regarding the disputed sculptures’ (Paphitis 2009). In the five years since it opened, however, the New Acropolis Museum has failed to live up to the predictions made by Greek politicians and museum officials, or those offered by international campaigners seeking the return of the Elgin Marbles.

Spurred on by the novelty of the newly opened New Acropolis Museum, together with an entrance fee of just €1, visitor numbers during the first official count carried out by the museum for the 11 month period June 2009 to May 2010 were a highly creditable 1,950,539 (Table 1). This number appears to have increased a little over 60,000 by the time the museum reached its one-year anniversary, with Professor Pandermalis informing the Greek press that attendance at the museum during that year had reached close to the 2 million that O’Hara and Flynn estimated would be the annual visitation. The New Acropolis Museum also proved to be the most popular cultural attraction in Greece, and in the calendar year of 2010 the Hellenic Statistical Authority (prior to 2010 the National Statistical Service of Greece) recorded that more people visited the museum (1,355,890) than were actually venturing up onto the rock of the Acropolis (993,496). Hellenic Statistical Authority 2011: 465, 467. See also AfP 2011; Labropoulou 2011: 13–14; Bounia 2012: 138. See below, Table 5). However, an increase in the museum’s entrance charges from €1 to €5, added to the deepening of the recession in Greece, and possibly a decline in visitor curiosity as the novelty of the new museum wore off (Gill 2013: 234), contributed to a devastating tail-off in the numbers visiting the New Acropolis Museum during the second 12 months of operation (June 2010–May 2011). As can be seen in Table 1, official visitation figures compiled by the staff of the New Acropolis Museum (as calculated from the sale of visitor tickets in the museum), recorded a precipitous drop in attendance of well over half a million during the museum’s second year. Further declines in visitation, though not as sharp, were also recorded over the following two years. Attendance records from the museum do, at least, appear to indicate that the decline in visitation has stabilized, with a sizable increase in visitation of well over 100,000 during the last year of operation (June 2013–May 2014): hopefully the beginning of an upward trajectory that will continue over coming years.

According to the official attendance figures produced by the New Acropolis Museum, the total number of visitors to the New Acropolis Museum since inauguration in June 2009 through to the end of May 2014, therefore, stands at 6,601,896. To welcome this many visitors over the course of five years is no small achievement for any museum. Nominal achievement for any museum. The actual number of visitors present at the museum during any one day is perhaps 7,000, yet the visitor total is a poor return on what Greek officials and international Marbles campaigners had been predicting the museum would achieve. Total attendance across the first five years of operation has therefore fallen almost 4.4 million short of the figure predicted by both the museum’s president and suggested by the current Greek Prime Minister. It is the current Greek Prime Minister who has suggested that over the course of five years of operation the museum has serviced large crowds with an on-average of over 3,000 visitors daily (Acropolis Museum 2014a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Visitor Numbers</th>
<th>Variation in Visitors From Previous Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 2009 – May 2010</td>
<td>1,950,539</td>
<td>Decline of 640,889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2010 – May 2011</td>
<td>1,309,859</td>
<td>Decline of 640,889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2011 – May 2012</td>
<td>1,143,886</td>
<td>Decline of 165,973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2012 – May 2013</td>
<td>1,036,059</td>
<td>Decline of 107,827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2013 – May 2014</td>
<td>1,161,555</td>
<td>Increase of 125,496</td>
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It might be argued that there is a natural tendency for the staff of all museums to overestimate projections of attendance for a variety of political or financial reasons, while politicians are also expected to talk-up the prospects of landmark construction projects. In the case of the New Acropolis Museum has fallen so far short of the initial estimates that it is difficult to pass off the discrepancies in the figures as the result of a somewhat over-exuberant approach to attendance prediction. The vast disparity between prediction and performance at the museum...
is simply too large to be dismissed as over-optimism. Rather, it is an exaggeration of annual attendance by as much as 56 per cent, and involving millions of people.

Figures compiled by the Hellenic Statistical Authority provide a similar picture of the attendance at the New Acropolis Museum (Table 2). Rather than the system used in the official reporting of the Acropolis Museum, which takes June as the starting point for each annual count of visitors, the Hellenic Statistical Authority follows the calendar year. Thus, from January to December 2010 – the first full year in which the New Acropolis Museum was open to the public – 1,355,890 people were recorded as coming through the museum’s doors. However, attendance declined by 111,188 in 2011, and dropped a further 224,240 in 2012, before visitation finally rallied in 2013, increasing by 70,677. According to the Hellenic Statistical Authority, the New Acropolis Museum therefore welcomed 4,712,193 visitors through its doors in its first four full calendar years. Very similar figures have also been reproduced and widely circulated in The Art Newspaper’s annual calculations of visitation at international exhibitions and museums, which records total attendance at the New Acropolis Museum since the first full year of operation at 4,612,027 (Table 3).²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Visitor Numbers</th>
<th>Variation in Visitors From Previous Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1,355,890</td>
<td>Decline of 111,188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1,020,462</td>
<td>Decline of 224,240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>1,291,738</td>
<td>Increase of 70,677</td>
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Predictions and Propaganda

The vast gulf that exists between the initial estimates of attendance at the New Acropolis Museum and the visitation figures generated over the course of the past five years begs the question of whether the predictions of visitor numbers could have been more accurately calculated. Even a cursory examination of the attendance records from the nearby archaeological site of the Acropolis would certainly indicate that visitation to the New Acropolis Museum was unlikely to reach the levels estimated by the Greek government. It was, after all, attendance to the hill-top site that provided the statistical foundation upon which were built the predictions of Pandermalis and Flynn paid closer attention to the attendance records from the Acropolis, visitation at the associated museum could – and indeed should – have been predicted with far greater accuracy than proved to be the case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Visitors to the Acropolis</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1,132,973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>877,502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>770,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>821,657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1,022,459</td>
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</tbody>
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For Pandermalis and Flynn to envisage that the New Acropolis Museum would welcome two or three million visitors each year also required roughly 100–200 per cent more people to visit the museum than were already visiting the rock of the Acropolis. It would be an understatement to say this was assuming a great deal of the New Acropolis Museum. Even had Greece avoided the economic recession, it would still have been exceptionally optimistic to expect double or triple the number of people visiting the hilltop of the Acropolis, with the iconic temple in honour of Athena Parthenos crowning its summit, to go and visit the new museum. Indeed, long before the opening of the New Acropolis Museum, it was clear that the trend among tourists to Greece indicated the opposite was more likely to be true; the majority of overseas visitors to the country are generally more likely to visit archaeological sites rather than museums (Kalogeropoulou 1996: 136).
Acropolis Museum since 2010 clearly demonstrate that people are more interested in standing on the summit of the Acropolis, even with the full price ticket costing €12, than part with €5 to gain admittance to the nearby museum (Table 5). Indeed, only in 2010, the first full calendar year of operation of the New Acropolis Museum, was the recorded number of visitors greater than the archaeological site. In the three calendar years that have followed, the museum has recorded an overall decline in annual attendance of 264,751. By contrast, visitation to the rock of the Acropolis has grown year-on-year and from 2010 to 2013 there was an increase in annual visitation of 586,290. Indeed, if the number of visitors to the hilltop site keeps growing at the present rate, visitation to the Acropolis should finally reach the 1.5 million that both Pandermalis and Flynn erroneously claimed had already been the annual average back in 2006 and 2007.

The inexplicable exaggeration of the attendance figures from the Acropolis during the 1990s and early 2000s, compounded by the unlikely claim that, once opened, the New Acropolis Museum was expected to receive 100–200 per cent more visitors than the nearby archaeological site, appear to be the immediate cause of the over-optimistic attendance predictions for the museum. Why the faulty figures, and the estimates that they generated, were not spotted far earlier is, however, possibly due to the highly politicized nature of the New Acropolis Museum and especially its role in the campaign to reclaim the Elgin Marbles.

As has already been seen, the close association of the New Acropolis Museum with the campaign to repatriate the Elgin Marbles was clearly referenced by the, then, Culture Minister Antonis Samaras in 2009. The role of the museum in applying further pressure on the Trustees of the British Museum and in facilitating the repatriation of the Elgin Marbles is also clear from the nature of the design and construction of the building. The 1989 architectural competition for the museum made plain this intention when it was noted: 'the envisaged return of the Parthenon pediment marbles (the so-called “Elgin Marbles”) necessitates the creation of corresponding areas for their display.' The design programme would later add: 'Since the repatriation of the original Parthenon sculptures is envisaged, room must be provided to facilitate their display together with the remaining architectural members and sculptures which are found in Greece’ (Hellenic Ministry of Culture 1989: 23, 49. Quoted in Lending 2009: 571). It has thus been recently stated that the links made between the New Acropolis Museum and the return of the Elgin Marbles in the 1989 architectural competition had, in effect, made the design brief a ‘political-legal and museum-historical manifesto in disguise’ (Lending 2009: 572).

The winning design of the 1989 architectural competition was eventually shelved, necessitating a fourth and final competition that was run in 2000, with Bernard Tschumi declared the competition winner in October 2001 (Rutten 2009: 137). Over the following years it was this design that would take its concrete and glass form to become the New Acropolis Museum inaugurated in June 2009. (For the four museum design competitions spread between 1976–2000, see, for example, Fouseki 2006: 636; Pandermalis 2009: 24.) While the architectural brief for the fourth and last competition was never made public, Tschumi has, nevertheless, acknowledged that he was well aware of the innate relationship that existed between the campaign to repatriate the Elgin Marbles and the construction of the New Acropolis Museum. The Swiss-French architect would thus write of the difficulties he faced when attempting to ‘design a structure whose unstated mandate is to facilitate the reunification of the Parthenon Friezes’ (2009: 82).

Given this intimate relationship that binds the New Acropolis Museum to the Greek desire to reclaim the Marbles from London, there is the disturbing possibility that the estimates of annual visitation at the museum offered by Greek politicians and culture officials, and subsequently referenced by international campainers, were deliberate exaggerations intended to bolster repatriation claims for the Elgin Marbles. There is certainly no doubt that the over-optimistic predictions of museum visitors in the run-up to the opening of the New Acropolis Museum were used to add greater weight to the ongoing political and cultural campaign to reclaim the sculptures from London, whether offered to the Greek press by Samaras, proffered to the international media by Pandermalis, placed before British politicians by O’Hara, or presented to an academic and professional audience by Flynn.

Decline and Denial

With the estimates of the New Acropolis Museum’s visitor numbers that were offered by heritage professionals such as Pandermalis and Flynn, as well as politicians such as Samaras and O’Hara, all failing to materialize at the museum, it is perhaps understandable that Greek culture officials have seemingly avoided drawing attention to the decline in visitor numbers. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that officials at the New Acropolis Museum have been well aware of the fall in visitation, both through their own attendance records as well as those published by the Hellenic Statistical Authority (Tables 1 & 2). In the museum’s annual highlights report published in the summer of 2011, it was also proudly noted that, during the previous calendar year, the New Acropolis Museum managed to achieve a ranking of 25 in the annual breakdown of museums internationally by visitor numbers, released by The Art Newspaper (Acropolis Museum 2011; Table 3). However, when the next annual international ‘league table’ of museums and galleries was published in The Art Newspaper in April 2012, the New Acropolis Museum had dropped 13 places; the museum then fell an additional 21 places in 2012, before rising two places to finish 2013 in position 57; an overall drop of 32 places in three years (Table 3). It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising to find that all the annual reports published by the New Acropolis Museum after 2011 have neglected to make any further reference to The Art Newspaper’s attendance ‘league tables’ (Acropolis Museum 2012, 2013, 2014).

There has also been an almost complete lack of scholarly interest in the decline in visitation at the New Acropolis Museum. It has recently been noted that ‘[t]he main arena for public debates with regard to cultural matters in Greece in the last two decades has been the major national newspapers’ (Bounia 2012: 133); both the Greek and international press did...
indeed carries articles referencing the strong early performance of the New Acropolis Museum during the opening weeks and months of the museum, and the strong visitation numbers for the first year of operation (e.g. AFP 2010, 2011; Athens News Agency 2009). However, the newsmen and analysts do not mention the dramatic drop that took place in visitor numbers over the following couple of years. This preference of focusing on the positive aspects of the New Acropolis Museum, while downplaying the more worrying aspects of the attendance records, is exemplified by the brief report published in Greek Reporter in August 2013, in which it was noted: ‘The Acropolis Museum, which exhibits findings of the archaeological site of the Acropolis of Athens, ranks first in visitation [of museums in Greece]’ (Korologou 2013). Just two days later, this article was picked up by Elginism, a website established and operated on behalf of campaigners advocating the return of the Elgin Marbles to Athens, which re-ran the story, with the main focus being the comment: ‘The New Acropolis Museum is doing extremely well in terms of attendance, and a general lack of interest or concern regarding the rapid decline in visitation at the New Acropolis Museum following its first year of operation, let alone the failure of the museum to attain the annual visitor numbers of 2–3 million that were originally estimated, is partly understandable and may stem from a combination of an unwillingness to swallow national pride at the underperformance of such a landmark heritage project, together with a reluctance to undermine one of the arguments recently promoted in favour of repatriating the Elgin Marbles to Athens. Nevertheless, if new strategies are to be devised to boost visitor numbers to the museum in the future, then there needs to be an acceptance that a problem exists before it can be meaningfully addressed, or new approaches to increase attendance set in place. Aside from a recent passing reference to the drop in visitation at the museum by Professor David Gill (2013: 234), there appears to have been no acknowledgement of the problem of low levels of visitation until a short comment piece was published in the Museums Journal in September 2013 which claimed: ‘Restitutionists petitioning for the return of Elgin’s keepsakes have greeted the disappointing attendance figures at the New Acropolis Museum with dejection, hardly surprising as a drop in attendance can only damage attempts to repatriate the marbles’ (Beresford 2013a: 46; see also, Beresford 2013b). A paper in the Journal of Art and Museum Studies, published slightly earlier that summer, in which the figures, when contrasted with those of previous years, made it abundantly clear that attendance at the museum had dropped to a new low, declining by more than 100,000 relative to the previous year, while annual visitation was down by about 900,000 compared with just three years earlier (Acropolis Museum 2013; see Table 1).

Academic publications have also failed to address the dramatic decline in levels of visitation at the New Acropolis Museum and, while content to emphasize the relatively high attendance during the initial months following the museum’s inauguration, there has been a similar lack of interest in, or indeed acknowledgement of, the sharp fall in visitor numbers that began in 2010. Thus, in 2013, the academics Rodoula Tsiotso (University of Macedonia) and Eleni Mavragani (University of the Aegean, Chios) made great play of the attendance figures from the museum during its first year. The introduction of their 2013 paper, ‘Marketing Strategy of Museums: The Case of the New Acropolis Museum in Athens, Greece’, thus began with an extremely upbeat assessment of attendance at the newly opened museum:

In June 20, 2009, the new Acropolis Museum opened in Athens attracting the interest of international and national tourists and media. In June 2010, the museum announced that it accepted 1,700,000 visitors the first 9 months of its operation and reached more than 2,000,000 visitors on its first anniversary (Adamopoulos 2010). Since its first year of operation, the New Acropolis Museum achieved high visibility, attracted the interest of a number of tourists, became a major attraction of the city of Athens and overall created a positive image globally. (Tsiotso and Mavragani 2013: 43-46)

Tsiotso and Mavragani’s paper appeared in the book, Best Practices in Marketing and Their Impact Quality of Life Applying Quality of Life Research, published in June 2013. Given the publication date, it is understandable that the chapter did not include the New Acropolis Museum’s records spanning June 2012 to May 2013, during which visitation reached its lowest ebb of just over 1 million (Table 1). It might, nonetheless, be expected that the authors would, at least, have referenced the rapid drop in visitor numbers that set in from June 2010 and was clearly evident in the museum’s Highlights Report June 2010 – May 2011. Yet Two, released online in the summer of 2011 (Acropolis Museum 2011). The third year attendance figures at the New Acropolis Museum, revealing a decline of 806,653 visitors compared to the first year records (Table 1), were also released an entire year before Tsiotso and Mavragani’s article was published and might therefore reasonably be expected to have been included in their study. Attendance at the museum compiled seen to the Statistical Authority, and more widely disseminated by The Art Newspaper, covering at least the first two, and much of the third, years of the museum’s operation was also available well in advance of the book’s publication. However, there is no reference in Tsiotso and Mavragani’s paper to the precipitous drop in visitation at the New Acropolis Museum during its second year of operation. Instead, the museum is held up as a shining beacon of success, and the paper claims in its epilogue that ‘[t]he new museum of Acropolis constitutes the benchmark for all other museums in Greece which … have a very low visiting rate.’ The Greek authors would continue by noting that, despite some underlying problems such as understaffing, as well as initial teething problems, nevertheless, ‘the new Acropolis Museum achieved its goals: to attract global attention, to reclaim the return of the Acropolis marbles from the British National Museum, to attract tourists that faced more than 2,000,000 visitors during the opening weeks and especially pupils’ (Tsiotso and Mavragani 2013: 58). The New Acropolis Museum is undoubtedly a valuable cultural resource that can be enjoyed by both Greeks and overseas visitors, while it also provides a powerful new weapon in the armory of those seeking the repatriation of the Elgin marbles from London. However, it is clearly a long way from fulfilling the goal of providing in excess of the 2 million visitors that Greek academics like Tsiotso and Mavragani – or indeed the museum’s president and the current Greek prime minister – clearly believed to be the annual attendance target of the museum. The apparent desire to put a positive spin on attendance, and a general lack of interest or concern regarding the rapid decline in visitation at the New Acropolis Museum following its first year of operation, let alone the failure of the museum to attain the annual visitor numbers of 2–3 million that were originally estimated, is partly understandable and may stem from a combination of an unwillingness to swallow national pride at the underperformance of such a landmark heritage project, together with a reluctance to undermine one of the arguments recently promoted in favour of repatriating the Elgin Marbles to Athens. Nevertheless, if new strategies are to be devised to boost visitor numbers to the museum in the future, then there needs to be an acceptance that a problem exists before it can be meaningfully addressed, or new approaches to increase attendance set in place. Aside from a recent passing reference to the drop in visitation at the museum by Professor David Gill (2013: 234), there appears to have been no acknowledgement of the problem of low levels of visitation until a short comment piece was published in the Museums Journal in September 2013 which claimed: ‘Restitutionists petitioning for the return of Elgin’s keepsakes have greeted the disappointing attendance figures at the New Acropolis Museum with dejection, hardly surprising as a drop in attendance can only damage attempts to repatriate the marbles’ (Beresford 2013a: 46; see also, Beresford 2013b). A paper in the Journal of Art and Museum Studies, published slightly earlier that summer, in which the figures, when contrasted with those of previous years, made it abundantly clear that attendance at the museum had dropped to a new low, declining by more than 100,000 relative to the previous year, while annual visitation was down by about 900,000 compared with just three years earlier (Acropolis Museum 2013; see Table 1).

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The reparation of the Elgin Marbles was that both BCRPM members, together with other leading Marbles campaigners from around the world, had attended the colloquy, 'The Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles', held in London in June 2012. Though not personally present at the conference, the president of the New Acropolis Museum, nonetheless, proudly published a short note entitled, 'A Brief Message From Professor Pandermalis', which was included in the colloquy's programme. In the opening paragraph of his message, Pandermalis proudly proclaimed that there had been 'over 5 million visitors [to the New Acropolis Museum] in its first three years' (2012). The President of the New Acropolis Museum was, therefore, clearly using visitor numbers to emphasize what he would go on to refer to as the museum's 'third exceptionally successful year of operation.'

The claim by Professor Pandermalis that there had been more than 5 million visitors to the New Acropolis Museum over its first three years of operation also artificially inflated the museum's attendance. There were, in fact, only 4,404,284 visitors officially logged by the staff of the museum over the first three years of operation (Table 1). Pandermalis thus managed to find well over half-a-million (595,716) extra visitors during the same period. Just how the figures of museum attendance are 'irrelevant' to the cause of repatriation, nonetheless, their role in the tourism sector is not, of any merit in the long-running dispute concerning ownership of the Elgin Marbles and Money.

Effects of Economic Recession

It might be argued with some credibly that, had the economic environment in Greece not deteriorated in the years following 2008, then the initial predictions of attendance at the New Acropolis Museum may have been considerably closer to being realized. Indeed, there is little doubt that the level of visitation at the museum partly reflects the Greek economic recession and its impact on the tourism sector. It has, therefore, been recently claimed that any discussion of attendance at museums or heritage sites must be measured against prevailing trends in tourism (Cellini and Cuccia 2013). Nevertheless, as can be seen from Table 6, while the numbers of international tourists coming to Greece did indeed drop from a high of 16 million in 2007 to 12.5 million in 2013, they still held up remarkably well considering the socio-economic crisis affecting the country, as well as the adverse publicity Greece suffered as a result of violent demonstrations, strikes forcing the closure of museums and archaeological sites, and frequent political deadlock (e.g. Gill 2013: 236; Howery 2013: 231). In fact, throughout the first three years of the financial crisis – from 2008 to 2010 – tourist numbers to Greece remained higher than any year prior to 2006. By 2011, the numbers of international visitors to the country actually outstripped pre-recession figures, and they continued to grow in 2012 and again in 2013. The outlook for the Greek tourism industry in 2014, and on into the immediate future, is also extremely positive (e.g. To Vima 2014).

Marbles and Money

The debate regarding the extent to which attendance at the New Acropolis Museum is, or is not, of any merit in the long-running dispute concerning ownership of the Elgin Marbles is primarily of concern to academics and those museum professionals with an interest in disputes involving cultural heritage. However, the possibility that exaggerated projections of visitation at the New Acropolis Museum were used to bolster Greek governmental requests for funding of the construction of the museum from the European Commission has potentially wider ramifications.

At the foot of every page of the New Acropolis Museum website it is noted: 'The
Attendance and the Entrance Fee

It is almost certainly the case that visitation at the New Acropolis Museum could be increased by a reduction in the entrance fee, or even the provision of free admission. For example, in the ten years following the 2001 institution of free admission to all the national museums of Britain, attendance at those museums that used to charge an entrance fee increased by 158 per cent. Nonetheless, the need for entry fees had been accepted when the Greek Government and repatriation groups were making their initial predictions concerning attendance at the New Acropolis Museum and, as such, should have been factored into these visitation estimates. Just prior to the inauguration of the museum in June 2009, it was therefore stressed by the Greek Culture Ministry that they had taken the decision to ‘set the admission price for the museum at one euro throughout 2009, in view of the global crisis’ (Athens News Agency 2009 ‘New Acropolis Museum Opens in June’, 21 May 2009).15

The low cost of admission to the New Acropolis Museum, together with an aggressive marketing campaign and global media interest, certainly fuelled the initial high levels of public interest and visitation to the museum (Tsiotso and Mavragani 2013: 53-57). However, the desire by the Greek Government to set the admission price at €1 by way of thanks for the Greek taxpayers, might be taken as something of a snub to taxpayers from across the rest of the EU. Moreover, the ERDF ‘is the largest of the three main funds used by the EU to achieve greater economic cohesion, reduce regional disparities and promote economic growth across the EU.’9 Although heritage professionals rightly look to a wide variety of other factors in judging whether a museum should be considered successful (e.g. Falk and Dierking 2008), it was, nevertheless, primarily the economic potential of the project that allowed EU taxpayers’ money to be used in the construction of the New Acropolis Museum. As such, in order for the museum to receive ERDF monies, it should have been required to adequately demonstrate that it would be a creator of jobs and revenue of the Makiyianni district of Athens. Exaggerated predictions of attendance at the New Acropolis Museum – and the revenue these paying visitors would bring to the museum and the surrounding region of the city – might, therefore, have proved useful in convincing the European Commission to sanction the Greek request for €85 million of European taxpayers’ money to complete the construction of the New Acropolis Museum.

According to a recent communication by O’Hara, the estimate of 3 million annual visitors to the New Acropolis Museum that was used in his 2001 House of Commons report was ‘from the perspective of the planning of the “National museum”’ (comment in Beresford 2013a, 08 September). O’Hara felt sufficiently confident in the estimated attendance figure contained in this prospectus to inform his British MPs that there would be an estimated three million visitors per annum to the Acropolis Museum from 2001 onwards (O’Hara 2001). However, it has already been seen that at no point in the years leading up to 2001, or in the following eight years before the museum was finally opened to the public, could it credibly be claimed that 3 million was a plausible estimate of visitation at the New Acropolis Museum. Instead, attendance levels similar to, or just below, the 1.1 million predicted for 2001 at the summit of the Acropolis in 2001 had to be factored into these visitation estimates. This, therefore, begs the question of whether the Greek government was deliberately disseminating exaggerated visitor estimates with the intention of not only misleading politicians such as O’Hara and the other 109 MPs in the House of Commons who voted for his bill, but also as a means of convincing the European Commission that estimated levels of attendance guaranteed the economic viability of the museum. Predictions of very high visitor numbers on completion of the New Acropolis Museum, and the fees which they would supply on entering the museum, would certainly provide a strong monetary foundation upon which to base requests for financial assistance from the ERDF. Future investigations by political scientists would certainly appear necessary if we are to ascertain the extent to which inflated predictions of attendance played a role in convincing the European Commission to sanction spending €85 million of European taxpayers’ money on the construction of the museum.10

Conclusion

There are a great many points worthy of admiration and praise in the design, construction and presentation of exhibits at the New Acropolis Museum. The museum is also a statement of the importance that the Greek government, and the country’s government, attaches to its heritage and the well-being of their ancient heritage, and the desire to ensure the nation’s artworks and archaeological artefacts are preserved and displayed in facilities that rival the best in the world. The museum has also become the embodiment – made manifest in glass and concrete – of the Greek desire to see the Elgin Marbles returned to Athens. It is, however, extremely likely that it was this desire to recover the missing sculptures that led Greek politicians and the museum’s president, as well as international campaigners lobbying for the repatriation of the Marbles, to offer grossly exaggerated projections of the visitor numbers, while paying scant attention to the mathematical methods upon which such estimates were calculated. It was the contention of this paper that the predictions of visitation made in the years leading up to the opening of the New Acropolis Museum were generated for propaganda purposes in an effort to present a further argument in favour of the repatriation of the disputed sculptures currently on display in the British Museum. However, these initial estimates of visitation set unreasonable goals that the museum could never hope to achieve on a regular basis.

In the annual report of the New Acropolis Museum, published in the summer of 2011, it was claimed that, ‘Museum visitation numbers are a measure of the Museum’s success’. While the report would go on to correctly emphasize that visitor numbers ‘also reflect other social and cultural factors such as the number of tourist arrivals to Athens and the disposition and mood of the local community’ (Acropolis Museum 2011), nonetheless, judged against this particular criteria of success, the New Acropolis Museum must be considered a failure. After a strong opening year, attendance plummeted and, despite an encouraging rise in 2013, remains far below the initial predictions of visitation that were made in the years leading up to the opening of the museum. However, this paper has attempted to demonstrate that the politicians, academics and campaigners who proposed and disseminated the exaggerated estimates of visitation set an unreasonably high benchmark against which to gauge the success of the museum. It has therefore been suggested that, by delivering an annual attendance only slightly below that of the now archaeological site of the Acropolis, crowned with the iconic Parthenon, the museum has achieved all that could reasonably have been expected of it.

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be generated from such visitation – played a role in persuading the European Commission to award the money. As such, it should be stressed that the role of projected museum attendance in the proposal for ERDF monies is currently unclear.


References


AFP (2011) ‘Acropolis Museum is Greece’s Top Site: Official Data’, Agence France Presse, 11 April 2011. For text, see: http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ipm5hVpxZjuD8QZbYG9puLWA9K7Q

Notes

1. Danae Zaoussis, Communications Officer, New Acropolis Museum, email message, 30 October 2012.

2. The Art Newspaper emphasizes that, ‘All data used was supplied by the institutions concerned’ (2014: 3), and it would appear that the slight discrepancy in visitor numbers between The Art Newspaper and the Hellenic Statistical Authority is likely to be the result of slight readjustments to the data made by the Greek authority.


4. For more on the importance of the Marbles to Greek politics, see, for example, Kersel 2004: 49-50; Harrison 2010: 174-82. John Henry Merriman in particular has laid emphasis on the perceived cultural nationalism bound up with Greek claims for the return of the sculptures, 1985: 1911-1916; 2006: 102-106.


6. Given that there is no means of calculating the numbers of visitors to the Duveen Gallery, while attendance at the British Museum at the time Snodgrass was writing was 5,569,981 in 2009 and 5,842,138 in 2010, Snodgrass’s assertion that fewer than 36 per cent of these visitors to the British Museum were inclined to view one of the museum’s most famous exhibits, is questionable. (Attendance figures derived from The Art Newspaper 2010: 24; 2011: 24; see also Caldwell 2000.)

7. Even if attendance at the New Acropolis Museum during June 2012 is added to the museum’s records of visitation spanning June 2009 to May 2012, thus taking the visitor numbers up to (and indeed slightly beyond) the three years during which the museum had been open to the public, it still falls well short of the total claimed by Professor Pandermalis. Thus, according to the Hellenic Statistical Authority, during June 2012, attendance at the New Acropolis Museum was 94,003 (2013). Added to the 4,404,284 visitors officially logged by the staff of the museum between June 2009–May 2012, the total is 4,498,287; this is at least 501,713 less than the ‘over 5 million visitors’ Pandermalis claimed had visited his Museum during June 2012, attendance at the New Acropolis Museum was 94,003 (2013).


10. It has proved impossible to locate records relating to the official Greek governmental proposal that ERDF monies be sanctioned in order to allow the completion of the New Acropolis Museum. The ERDF also does not appear to make public the reasoning behind its decision to award the €85 million for the museum and the extent to which, if any, museum attendance – and the revenue that could


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