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European Garden Award 2018/2019

1st Prize: INNOVATIVE CONTEMPORARY CONCEPT OR DESIGN OF A PARK OR GARDEN

STAVROS NIARCHOS PARK, ATHENS

I am very honoured to be able to deliver this laudation as it is the very first time that a garden or park from Greece has received an EGHN award.

There are many aspects which are extraordinary about this park and cultural centre, the astonishing point is that it was ever built considering the economic issues that have faced Greece in recent years. This is forward thinking at its best and it will provide open spaces for future generations in a city with the lowest per capita amount of green space in Europe.

The 17 hectare park has been developed with the new national library and opera house on an abandoned site from the 2004 Olympics. Its strategic approach reconnects the city to the sea, a feature so often lost in seaside cities. Its detailed features provide large public spaces as well as intimate spaces, balanced with a classicism that one would hope to find. This is not a pastiche of earlier designs, but an inventive and creative resolution to complex issues.

Playfully called a cultural playground, it is playful in the sense of the scale and the prestigious buildings by Renzo Piano that contrasts the more modest needs of the local neighbourhoods.

There are serious answers to today's problems where green roofs are used to reduce cooling costs and the use of solar power for the library and opera house. A new canal was built with waterside promenades, a large lawn for events, and the main pedestrian route called The Esplanade. Of course there are shaded areas for sitting and for playgrounds. Integrated walks cut across the slopes for the less mobile, essential where the park has a 32m change in level rising up to Piano's buildings that seem to float visually above the park.

Creating a garden in this climate is not for the faint hearted, it is full of challenges from the low rainfall to the extreme heat of summer.

Deborah Nevins, Landscape Architect, explained her approach to designing the park in collaboration with Renzo Piano... 'We made the decision at the beginning that this park has

to 'speak Greek', or at least Mediterranean, so we tried as much as possible to use indigenous Mediterranean plants.' explained Nevins. 'The idea is to give the sense of being in a Greek landscape.'

This landscape is full of colour, texture and the scent of the Mediterranean. There is a formality to the structural layout of the spaces and this is emphasised with trees such as olives and pines. Evergreen and flowering shrubs such as boxwood, coronilla, cistus, lentisc, salvia, oregano, thyme, lavender, rosemary, roses and euphorbias give year round interest.

This detailed planting is informal; it is mixed, almost wild, soft and comfortable with a feeling of being natural. The contrast between formal and informal planting speaks of being in a Greek landscape, the effect that Deborah Nevins with her Greece partners Pangalou & Associates had hoped to achieve.

This is a landscape of heroic scale, concept and initiative, and it is certain to be a favourite place for the people of Athens. On behalf of the European Garden Heritage Network and Lorenz von Ehren, our congratulations to all those involved for this well-deserved reward and in particular to the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre for initiating and financing this entire project.