

# CTPA February 10, 2012

## Visit to Chicago's National Hellenic Museum

**Thirty-one CTPA members attended** our 10:00am visit to the new free-standing National Hellenic Museum, **hosted by Elise Freed-Brown**. The white and glassy interior space houses the only major museum in the United States dedicated to telling the story of Greek history, culture, and art from ancient times to the present. Located on the NE corner of Halsted and Van Buren overlooking the Eisenhower Expressway, at the south end of today's Greektown, the museum is said to be the cornerstone of former Mayor Daley's planned redevelopment of the neighborhood.

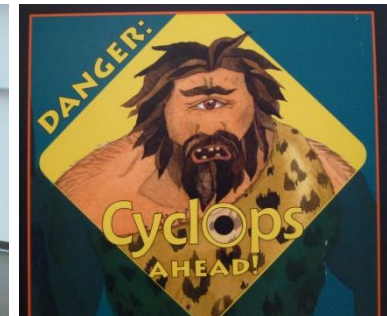
A must-see in the museum is the view out of the huge south-facing window wall which scales the building. On the second floor one can look out that floor-to-ceiling window and envision the old immigrant neighborhoods where now the expressway flows and University Of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) stands. In fact, transparencies of old photographs of the area can be slapped up onto the window for now, and returned to x-ray type holders on the wall, a clever way to envision the old neighborhood. (See photo on page 2.)

"The newest thing in ancient history" is how the museum describes itself, and the building's architecture is one of the best new things on Chicago's near west side. **Demetrios Stavrianos** is the architect who designed this magnificent glass and limestone structure, dramatically squared and flat-topped, with part of the roof sporting greenery and a whole section open for parties in season with a view eastward over the Loop's skyscrapers. (See photo to the right.) Stavrianos is a Principal in the Chicago office of a global architecture firm, RTKL Associates (which has a terrific site [www.rtkl.com](http://www.rtkl.com)). The museum is built with natural limestone and glass, incorporating historic architectural references like the covered walkway or stoa, found in classical pagan structures.



Elise Freed-Brown told us that the architect was inspired not so much by classical Greek temples, but the four elements – earth, wind, fire and water. The "symbolic heart of the new building" in natural wood (earth) is "a dramatic, skylit east-to-west staircase that represents the immigrant experience, cultural ties to Greece and the limitless potential of Greek Americans in the United States." Wind is represented by the whiteness of the stone floor and walls; fire is represented literally by a glowing fireplace set flush with one of the walls near the entrance. Water images reverberate in blue painted glass, or so it seems, on the south facing wall, and is further represented by the dramatic windows. From the street, one can see into the entryway and white space within; from the front desk and shop area, one can look out onto the street. This is a most welcoming feature of the building.

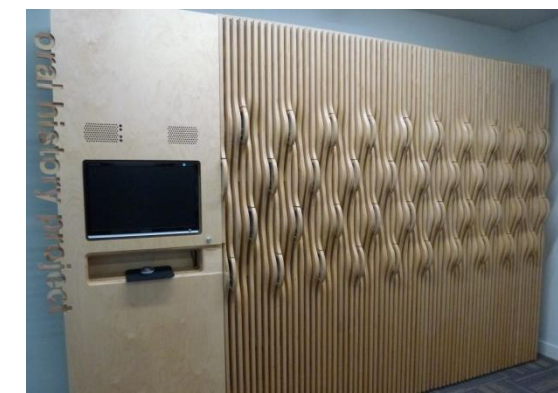
Just off the entry to the left is a big open space which can be used for social and teaching functions, and to the right is the **Calamos Great Hall**, for displaying temporary exhibitions. Until August of 2012, one can visit a temporary exhibit in this hall on loan from the New York Children's Museum, "Gods, Myths and Mortals," all about ancient Greece, with humor and interactive elements teaching about everyday life and famed mythology. A giant Disney-like version of the Trojan Horse stands ready to be climbed into by little kids.





The museum is not complete; it is a work progress as money continues to be raised. The second floor permanent exhibit in the **Halikias Family Exhibition Hall** is still being designed amid unfinished floors, drop cloths and inspiration boards. We could see the progression from inspiration to examples in the logo itself for the exhibit, to be called “In Search of Home, the Greek Journey from Myth to Modern Day.”

Some artifacts and photographs were on display, and we marveled at that south-facing view out the window in the SW corner of the space, knowing that Hull House is just a few blocks away. We were reminded of how the work of Jane Addams was such a tremendous influence on the Greek Community that when she died in 1935, every Greektown establishment closed for a day. One of the exhibits in this area tells of a Greek candy manufacturer and founder of an ice cream shop whose business was maintained through the years by the family and became Gus & Alex’s Candy in Berwyn. One descendant closed down the business, stored the entire contents in a basement, and later donated everything to the museum, including candy boxes with brand names like Cupid and Dove. This guy invented Dove Ice Cream Bars!



We took the stairway up to the third floor to see the **Frank S. Kamberos Oral History Center** – a listening room with benches and an amazing sculptured wooden wall looking like wavy stripes. To view a video of someone’s oral history, one pulls forward one of the wooden panels and – surprise, surprise – the video begins to play on a small screen nearby. Many of the museum’s oral histories were taken by employees or volunteers who were not trained in the art of such interviews. Elise indicated to us that the museum may hire professionals to carry on this task in the future. Next to the glassed-in listening room is a classroom

area with a video playing while we visited.

Also on the third floor (where the south window view continues to impress) is the **Gus and Mary Stathis Research Library** with only part of the vast collections on shelves. One can do research there for a few dollars and not have to pay entry to the museum, but it is private in that sense – not open for free to the public. Administrative offices are on this floor as well.

From the third floor, we took an elevator to the rooftop terrace and garden for a view of the city to the east and the neighborhoods all around. The green roof and many other elements of glazing, lighting and HVAC technologies throughout the building are planned to meet LEED Silver certification. This open air rooftop space should be quite an attraction for those hoping to host a party at the museum. Local restaurants will undoubtedly have a tie-in for catering purposes. Congratulations to our Greek community for achieving this milestone of its very own free-standing, gorgeous National Hellenic Museum.

For more info: [www.nationalhellenicmuseum.org](http://www.nationalhellenicmuseum.org)