

# A new museum for an ancient land: Patras University Science and Technology Museum

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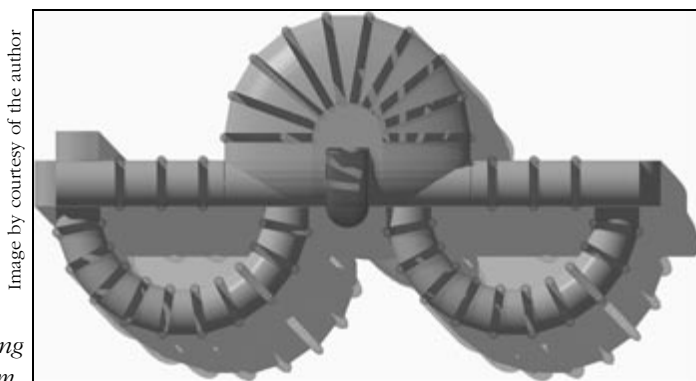
*That university museums have a major role to play in contemporary life and are far more than the fortuitous outcome of random collecting is amply illustrated by the project of Patras University. Located just outside the city of Patras with a view over the Gulf of Corinth to the mountains of central Greece, it lies on a self-contained campus of about 240 hectares and is now the third largest institution of tertiary education in the country. Its decision to create a Science and Technology Museum was seen as vital to its mission as a major venue for scientific research and knowledge. The author is a member of the museum's preparatory team and is co-chair of the ICOM/CIDOC/Ethno Group. She was formerly secretary and vice-chair of the ICOM Hellenic National Committee. Her publications include texts in The International Core Data Standards for Ethnology/Ethnography (Collections Ethnographiques et Documentation Muséale), ICOM Study Series, 3, 1996, as well as its Greek version published in The Handbook for the Documentation of Ethnographic Collections, Athens, 1998.*

Patras University was founded in 1964 and began functioning in the academic year 1966/67. A self-governing public institution under the supervision of the Ministry of Education financed entirely by the state, its initial orientation was towards science and technology with the first departments to be established being Biology, Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry, followed shortly by Electrical Engineering and Mechanical Engineering. Over the years the number of departments has grown to eighteen, now including Civil and Chemical Engineering and Computer Sciences, and the academic orientation of the institution has been balanced by the creation of schools of Health Sciences and of Humanities and Social Sciences and departments of Architecture and Management. Most departments include several academic divisions, so that in fact the range of disciplines is even greater than it appears at first sight.

Two small museums already exist at the University, the Zoological Museum and the Botanic Museum, which mainly serve the research needs of the Biology Department. In addition, several university departments, sections and laboratories also hold collections of old equipment and material gathered in the field. Since his election in 1994, the rector, Professor Stamatis Alachiotis, began thinking of the

need for a museum in order to spread knowledge about the various sciences to a wider public, improve contacts with the city of Patras and emphasize the importance of a science museum as a tool for teaching the history of science in the region of Western Greece and the Peloponnese. After discussions within the university community, it was agreed to create a Science and Technology Museum to acquire, conserve and research (register, document and evaluate) the traces of science and technology starting with those sciences taught at Patras University. Those traces could be utensils, tools, machines, technical or other equipment (laboratory, pharmaceutical, industrial etc.), archives, photographs, cards, books and other accompanying material, which would be exhibited for purposes of study, education and enjoyment. The aim of the museum is to demonstrate the evolution of science and its latest achievements to as broad a public as possible, including primary- and secondary-school pupils, university students, out-of-school young people, adults, the elderly, scientists and researchers.

It was decided that plans for the museum should be carried out along three parallel lines: development of a building and museological programme, including the design and the construction of the museum structure; collecting, recording and documenting relevant material, and creation of the museum's operating structure. A building and museological programme document was developed in collaboration with the university departments and a comprehensive bibliography and a host of Internet resources on science and technology museums and university museums worldwide were consulted in order to understand how similar museums function. The museum's operating framework was established and the special requirements for presenting the various sciences



An artist's rendering  
of the new museum.

Image by courtesy of the author



*A 1920 manual soldering press engine belonging to the laboratory of machine elements of the Department of Mechanical Engineering and Aeronautics. It was bought and donated by Professor A. Dimarogonas.*

were recorded in the programme document, which also contains a description of the space to be allocated to the museum's diverse activities.

### **A focus for campus and community**

The museological programme will be elaborated so as to present the history and development of the sciences over the centuries (mainly from the nineteenth century to the present, with references to the ancient Greek period), describe the relationship among the several sciences and technologies, and demonstrate the divisions and the links between the exact and applied sciences and the humanities.

The museum will cover a surface of 3,200 m<sup>2</sup>, which may be extended, and will be situated in the centre of the university campus, just in front of the conference centre (at present under construction) and alongside the university café-restaurant. This position confirms the important role that the museum can play within the university community and also the vital link between the university on the one hand and the town and region on the other.

The University Technical Service put out a

tender for the museum and seven groups of jointly acting agencies, all experienced in developing museum projects, expressed their interest. The Selection Committee decided, in March 1999, to charge all seven to proceed to a preliminary project based on the directions given by the building and museological programme and to submit proposals by 22 June 1999. The winner was selected and an agreement signed on 5 October 1999 to draw up the final project which is to be completed in spring 2000. At that time construction of the museum building will begin and work on the definitive museological project will be completed in order to design the permanent exhibitions and be ready to open as soon as the building is ready. This will, of course, depend on the number of departments that agree to collaborate and the state of the different collections at that time.

Among the many collections that already exist within the university, some of the most important are those of the departments of Education, Physics, Electrical Engineering and Computer Technology. As indicated, the Botany and Zoology museums, with holdings of numerous specimens, will continue to function separately for the needs of the Biology Department. However, other traces of the biological sciences will be acquired and evaluated by the new museum in order to present their history and evolution. Thus, it was decided to begin gathering together all the existing material as well as supporting documents such as books, cards, photographs, etc., in a single place in order to record, document and evaluate them. The collaboration of the university departments is considered vital and each was requested to designate a co-ordinator for the Science and Technology Museum.

The department co-ordinators will have to agree on a documentation and collections

policy and will be responsible for indicating the existing materials in their departments to be placed in the museum, suggesting ways to enrich them with other items that have to be found outside the university, assisting in organizing the logistic support for recording and documenting the objects, and offering ideas for the museological design of the exhibitions and the development of the philosophy of the presentation of each science. The university provided a building where the materials and documentation could be assembled; after renovation, it will contain all the facilities and equipment needed to create the permanent museum collection. The eventual content of the Science and Technology Museum will depend on the number of sciences represented and the variety of the traces of their history and evolution on hand, which will, of course, influence the museological implementation plan and the final form of the exhibitions.

Existing documentation procedures and data standards developed by different organizations such as ICOM/CIDOC (Documentation Committee of the International Council of Museums), as well as the classification systems currently in use, are being evaluated in order to agree on the procedures and standards to be adopted in the new museum. It is hoped that the full collection, documentation and evaluation process will start at the beginning of the academic year 1999/2000 after the museum building is completed.

The museum will operate in collaboration with the participating university departments, which will be expected to provide staff and other support for such activities as collection, documentation, temporary exhibitions, educational programmes, etc. The structure and functioning of similar institutions in Greece and abroad are being researched, studied and evaluated

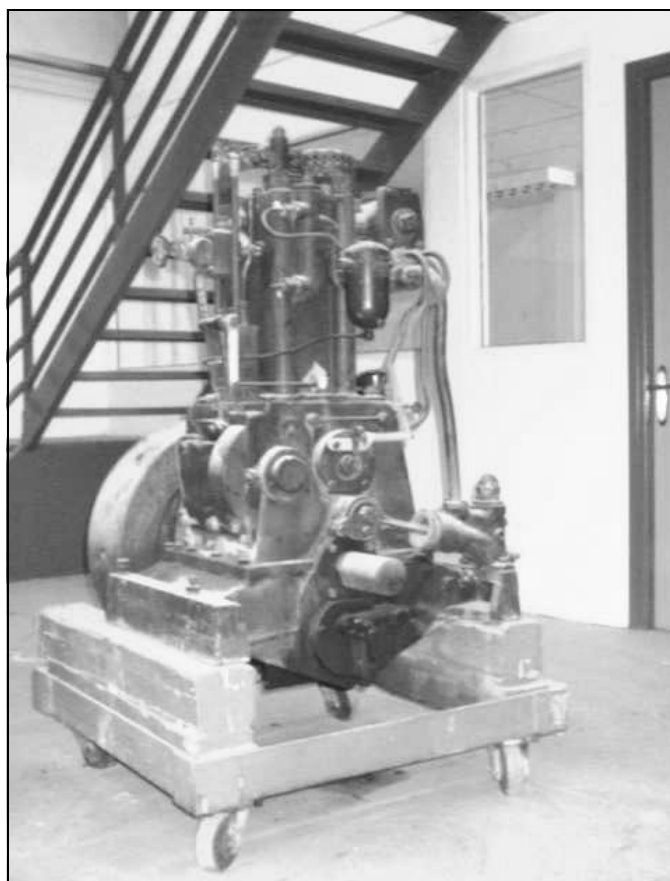


Image by courtesy of the author

in order to develop the museum's operations and work plan. The organization of the museum is not yet clear, but it is likely that a board of university professors and a director will lead it. Staff will be needed in several categories: scientific staff to run the scientific activities in collaboration with the university departments, administrative and support personnel (cloakroom, information, etc.) and security guards.

It is evident that the process of preparing and organizing the Patras University Science and Technology Museum is going to be long. However, it is possible that presentation of single-subject exhibitions, manifestations for International Museum Day or other activities may be organized before completion of all work in order to attract the public and make the museum known. So, in the space of a few years, we hope to offer to the Patras University community and the concerned public a contemporary museum that will benefit from existing experience in the field and respect the standards given by ICOM, and one that will constitute an important tool for the teaching of the history of the sciences. ■

*A Danish diesel engine donated to the Department of Mechanical Engineering and Aeronautics by one of the oldest engineers in Patras, C. Skouras.*