



GREEK REVIVAL

Stella Roos REPORTING FROM *Elefsina*: Heavy industry – and its departure – has shaped a small but ancient Greek city. Becoming European Capital of Culture has given its artistic offering a welcome boost – and shows the way ahead for other post-industrial outposts.

PHOTOGRAPHER *Louiza Vradi*



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Every autumn the 21km stretch of beach leading northwest from Athens to the city of Elefsina hosted a set of ancient rites intriguingly dubbed the Great Mysteries of Eleusis. Initiates, sometimes thousands at a time, took part in the secretive nine-day ritual – including toasting the dead and some walking – that was said to promise eternal happiness in the afterlife. While a visit today might not offer a ticket to a happily-ever-after place, Elefsina (formerly Eleusis) is a great example of how being nominated a European Capital of Culture can help smaller cities jostle for cultural prominence at home and abroad.

Since its ancient heyday, the hills and olive groves have been cut through by a six-lane highway dotted with petrol stations, fast-food joints, junk yards and refineries that obscure the view of the sea

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“This was really a scarred landscape, in many senses of the word”

from the Bay of Elefsina. The road is at once one of the most sacred of antiquity – walked by Plato, Socrates and several Roman emperors – and an industrial backwater that’s still easily missed by holidaymakers and commuters shuttling back and forth to the Peloponnese.

MONOCLE exits the motorway on a fair Friday and finds shade in a courtyard of a disused olive-oil mill close to the waterfront. It is the setting for an exhibition called *Elefsina Mon Amour: In Search of the Third Paradise*. “For Athenians, Elefsina has long been terra incognita,” says curator Katerina Gregos. Soon a well-heeled crowd of locals and Athenians fill the courtyard to toast the opening. At sunset they’re whisked off by bus to a two-hour dance performance set against the rusting hull of a stranded ship. These are just two events that have happened as part of the city’s stint as a 2023 European Capital of Culture; many here hope that this will help get this city back on its feet.

This is the fourth time that Greece has hosted a European Capital of Culture, starting in Athens in 1985. The story goes that Melina Mercouri, actress-turned-minister of culture, came up with the idea while stuck at the airport with her French counterpart Jack Lang in the early 1980s. Mercouri pitched it to the European Commission and the EU obliged by footing the bill. The blockbuster first edition included a 10-hour play and shows by German choreographer Pina Bausch, Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, jazz from Miles Davis and plenty of fireworks. In the following years, successive European cities took their turn in the limelight by hosting the cultural festival.

The definition of what makes a European Cultural Capital has shifted over time. Apart from awarding the title, the EU’s support is mostly of the moral kind and funding is limited to a €1.5m Melina Mercouri Prize. Since 2000, multiple cities have been appointed each year based on formalised selection criteria (the rotation of host countries is set by the EU parliament and cities are picked through national competitions). Instead of established cultural centres such as Athens or Amsterdam, the priority has shifted to more peripheral, post-industrial



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Previous spread

1. Beachfront performance
2. Elefsina’s Archaeological Museum

This spread

1. Artist Natalia Manta
2. Afternoon dance lessons
3. Art through a lens
4. Michail Marmarinos, artistic director of Eleusis2023
5. Industrial building turns cultural venue

cities that could use a lift: think Timisoara in Romania and Veszprém in Hungary. Even so, many were surprised when, in 2016, Elefsina was awarded the title for 2021 (postponed to 2023 due to the coronavirus pandemic). With just 20,000 inhabitants, it’s the smallest European Capital of Culture to date and, while the archaeological site at its centre is famous among classicists, even some locals were left scratching their heads at what culture would be on offer to visitors.

If you walk along Elefsina’s central thoroughfares, you’ll see some sweeping contrasts: on one side there’s the ancient Well of Demeter, where Homeric myth puts the harvest goddess mourning her lost daughter Persephone, and on the other is a gaming parlour with street-side slot machines. The top stay is the city’s sole four-star hotel and the only cultural venue before the festivities was a rickety outdoor amphitheatre. “There was no infrastructure,” says Michail Marmarinos, artistic director of Eleusis2023. “It was a huge challenge.” Marmarinos, one of Greece’s foremost contemporary

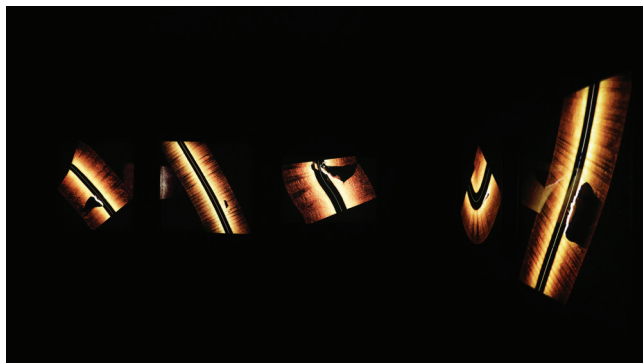


1 The mystery of Elefsina
 Elefsina lies on the Thriasio plain, which grew the wheat that fed ancient Athens. At about 600BCE, the cult of Demeter started holding annual rites around harvest season, which grew to become the most important in the Greek and later Roman Empire (nobody knows exactly what they involved thanks to a death penalty-enforced antecedent of “what happens in Vegas”).

“The city offered the term mysteries – and art itself is a mystery and the goal of a European Culture Capital is transition,” says artistic director Michail Marmarinos. Each element of the festival was titled “Mystery”, followed by a number as a nod to the ancient intrigue.



- 1. Dance performance in a ship graveyard
- 2. Katarina Gregos, curator of Elefsina Mon Amour
- 3. Marina Gioti’s ‘Sounding the Silent World’
- 4. Hand-painted tiles by Natalia Manta, as part of Elefsina Mon Amour
- 5. Elefsina lights up after dark



playwrights, stepped in as artistic director in 2020. He secured a postponement and herded the whole organisation into action. Marmarinos’ theme became “Mysteries of Transition”, a remix of the city’s ancient claim to fame and a hope that a new procession might spur its cultural growth beyond its Capital of Culture tenure.

The transition that Elefsina is undergoing is a version of the story shared by many European Cultural Capitals: of reviving a city built and then abandoned by heavy industry. At the turn of the 19th century, Elefsina’s shore was lined with shipyards, refineries and soap and cement factories. Immigrants from all over Greece and the Balkans arrived in search of work. In the 1970s the factories spewed so much ash into the air that Elefsinians couldn’t even hang their laundry outside. The sea was more black than blue.

“This was really a scarred landscape, in many senses of the word,” says Gregos. For *Elefsina Mon Amour*, she invited 16 artists from nine countries to create newly commissioned pieces (a key goal of the European Capital of Culture is to put

artists to work). The exhibition is spread across three dimly lit factory halls. The show’s title is a reference to *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, a 1959 film by Alain Resnais. “Only the difference is, the catastrophe [here] did not come from nuclear war but from industry,” says Gregos.

Marina Gioti spent more than three years on an artwork called “Sounding the Silent World” for which she mapped the shipwrecks in the Elefsinian gulf using sonar. The resulting abstract, amber images are mesmerising and highly political: Gioti was forbidden from publishing the names of the 12 ships she found decaying on the seafloor. The bay is still strewn with abandoned ships but the clean-up of the sea started in the 2000s and now locals happily jump in for a swim.

Artistic duo Joanna Tsakalou and Manos Flessas created “Hadal Zone”, a visual opera in five acts, which leads up to the top of an outdoor amphitheatre, where visitors are serenaded while taking in Elefsina’s industrial horizon through binoculars. The vista is memorable. Just down the coast, one of the largest oil refineries in the Balkans shoots up a flame every few seconds.

As night begins to fall, MONOCLE returns to the Old Oil Mill. “It looks like Manhattan,” says Yorgos Skianis as he looks out over the jumble of factory buildings. Skianis, an Elefsina local, organised the Aeschylia Festival that connected visual artists with factory spaces to exhibit their work long before the Capital of Culture crowd showed up. “We showed people that Elefsina can produce more than just pollution,” he says, drawing attention to the fact that Capitals of Culture need backing after the banners and EU funds have been and gone. He tells MONOCLE about growing up in the city when it wasn’t possible to access the waterfront at all. “We Elefsinians used to avoid saying where we were from. There was a stigma,” he says as the venue’s DJ strikes up and the crowd begins to move in rhythm. “They are proud,” he adds, gesturing to the people and raising his voice with the crescendo of the music. “Today nobody pretends not to be from Elefsina.” — (M)

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