

Parkway Theater Remarks

Distinguished guests,

Good evening. On behalf of all my colleagues at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), it is a great pleasure to be here with you this evening to celebrate the ribbon cutting for the new Stavros Niarchos Foundation Parkway Theater. I would like to begin by acknowledging and thanking the Foundation's partners and collaborators in reaching this significant milestone. Johns Hopkins University, and especially its President Ron Daniels, it was indeed a quick first call, and an easy one; the Maryland Institute College of Art and its President Samuel Hoi, and last but not least, the Maryland Film Festival and its Director Jed Dietz. It is because of your collaborative efforts and vision that we are standing here today, witnessing the critical transformation of the historic Parkway Theater coming to fruition and at the same time the Theater becoming once again a beacon of hope for the community, for the city of Baltimore, and beyond.

Our Foundation began its global philanthropic work in 1996 upon the passing away of our late founder and my great uncle, Stavros Niarchos. His extraordinary generosity has made it possible for us to engage on this 20-year global grant-making journey, providing more than 3,700 grants in 112 countries, supporting the areas of Arts and Culture, Education, Health and Sports, and Social Welfare. What motivates our grant-making activity is the will to engage in and support projects that aim to generate a lasting positive impact for people and communities, always focusing on those amongst us that may need our support, or benefit from it, the most. Approached from such a perspective, we would like to believe that our own work and mission are not very different from Johns Hopkins' mission to "bring the benefits of discovery to the world."

All of us here tonight, understand how important this moment is for the city of Baltimore in general, and this community and neighborhood in particular. As is the case in most big cities today, all of you who call this great city home, have experienced over the last few decades a painful gradual decline of certain parts of this city, and a certain decimation of its once humming urban core. It is a decline that has been experienced across many American cities, and it is intensely felt in Baltimore.

All three collaborating institutions have had a long history and presence in this community and in the city of Baltimore. All three of them, to a varying degree, are also international institutions with a global presence. But despite the fact that operating in a global context is a critical component of the mission of any educational and cultural institution today, it is equally important to recognize that the lofty goal of providing "knowledge for the world" begins here at home, in Baltimore.

The global therefore should not preclude the local, and it is the responsibility of institutions to recognize their critical role in engaging and bringing together their broader communities. This mission has defined the Presidency of my very good friend, Ron Daniels, at Johns Hopkins, and under his guidance, the university has vigorously embraced its role as an anchor institution in the region and has played a key part in the city's urban redevelopment and revitalization efforts, understanding that no matter what, Johns Hopkins cannot isolate itself, no matter how successful it may be on its own; it has to embrace and be embraced by the wider success of the community and of the city of Baltimore at large. The opening of the new Stavros Niarchos Foundation Parkway Theater today—a building that is both a historic landmark and an architectural gem—represents Johns Hopkins', MICA's and the Maryland Film Festival's latest contributions in promoting the cultural and commercial rebirth of East Baltimore.

The theater will officially begin operations on May 3 for the weeklong Maryland Film Festival. From then on, it is our vision as a Foundation that this space will serve as a community hub, one that provides filmmakers and students with a state of the art facility but is also welcoming to families and children and to the community at large. This beautiful theater will host a range of programming including free Community Night films, a Youth Media series, and family-friendly weekend events. Put simply, the space will serve to bring together anyone in the community who loves movies and art at large—so as far as I am concerned, everyone.

Spaces like the Parkway Theater that are open to individuals of all ages and backgrounds and that are bustling with life are of vital importance in any healthy community. The societal value of shared meeting places, like this new center, has been demonstrated throughout human history, dating as far back as the ancient Agora in Athens and later Commons in New England towns. A proverbial 'agora' or 'town square' that fosters ideas, creativity, and a sense of communal belonging is no less important in our modern times, especially today when polarization appears to be the rule of the land, not only in the US but globally as well. A true public space cannot be a polarized one, or cannot be one where polarization takes over. In our current polarized, digital and increasingly virtual age, such spaces can unfortunately be difficult to find, and are thus amazingly important.

The Foundation has thought deeply in recent years about the concept of 'place' and the positive role that well thought out public spaces, whether or not they are publically owned, can play in society. This was particularly true as our Foundation worked to construct the recently completed Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center (SNFCC) in Athens, Greece, designed by the renowned architect Renzo Piano. The Cultural Center is the new home to the National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera, and sits on a 42-acre park. The Foundation recently completed this project, which is our single largest grant to date, and gifted the center earlier this year to its permanent owner, the people of Greece at large, by ways of donating it fully to the Greek State. The SNFCC, like the Parkway Theater, is open to all members of society and offers regular free cultural and educational programming for families and children. In many ways, the SNFCC constitutes an experiment to reimagine and redefine public spaces, make them again a true destination and critical component of civic life, and place them once more where they belong, in the heart of the community.

Through projects like the Parkway Theater and the Cultural Center in Athens, the topic of Place making has become of such importance to our Foundation that we have selected this theme for the SNF's annual Conference on Philanthropy in Greece this June. The conference will explore the theme of Creativity, Imagination and the Importance of Reactivating Public and Ethical Spaces in a Highly Polarized Society.

It is our Foundation's sincere desire through our words and actions to help contribute towards cultivating spaces that enable exploration, experimentation, and imagination to all who seek them. We have great enthusiasm that the new Parkway Theater will be precisely this sort of place. During the past century, the theater evolved on many occasions to reflect the creative values of its community and times. It is the Foundation's hope this will continue as its doors reopen for a second act.

We thank you for the opportunity to play a part. Thank you.