Alexandria Library
Returning to a Golden Era

The Alexandria Library and its famous lighthouse represent two of the most remarkable landmarks of the Hellenistic world, a veritable jewel in the crown on the forehead of ancient Alexandria. This city, which was built by Alexander the Great twenty-three centuries ago, was not only the land of the great kings of Ptolemy and a refuge for Cleopatra, but a fortress for intellectuals. Alexandria, with its scientific and literary geniuses, has a creative history that is recorded by the likes of Accalymachos, Hybathia, al-Tartoushi, al-Bouseeri, Kafaees, and Lawrence Daryl. It is a history that reaches out from the sea from where the new library emerges and where the drowned remains tell us of its ancient glory.

by: Dr Khalid M Azab

A Modern Egyptian Landmark

الجدار الجرانيتي في المكتبة
Granite Wall of Alexandria Library
The Alexandria Library project is an example of the use of modern scientific techniques in the construction industry using the most up-to-date technology. But it is also testament to the legacy of the distant past when ancient Alexandria was the first integral university on earth for one thousand years. The old library housed more than 700,000 volumes containing sources in science, medicine, engineering, astronomy, arts, as well as other subjects.

Alexandria Library: Facts and Figures

Location

The new Alexandria Library is located opposite the College of Humanities complex of Alexandria University in the area of al-Shatibi. Its northern façade overlooks the Mediterranean Sea at Lisan al-Silsilah. The library’s new location is al-Brokuum (the ancient anarchist quarter of Greek and Roman civilization excavated in 1993). The site is bordered by the corniche and the sea from the north, overlooking the impressive eastern port.

Facts and Figures

Land area of project: 40,000sq.m
Number of levels: 11
Total area of levels: 85,405sq.m
Building height: 33m
General Library area: 36,770sq.m
Cultural Activities area: 4,210sq.m
Artistic and Technical Services area: 10,860sq.m
International Institute for Information Studies area: 3,500sq.m
Conference Centre, including sub-services and additional surfaces: 30,840sq.m
Number of references / volumes: 4,00,000 at opening and space for 8 million
Periodicals: 1,500 to 4,000
Audio and visual aids (various mediums): 10,000 to 50,000
Number of manuscripts and rare books: 10,000 to 50,000
Number of maps: 50,000
Database and information using computers and various mediums such as the Internet.

Library Components

The new library building, as the pictures, figures and facts indicate, contains four million books. It includes the main library, a youth library, a library for the blind, the sky dome, and three museums: a science museum, an inscriptions museum, an archaeological museum, a variety of fairs, five research institutes, a preservation and renovation factory, a modern centre for conferences equipped with three thousand seats and providing all the usual services, many meeting halls, as well as cafeterias and storage places for books. A granite wall encompasses the library, which has an artificial lake surrounding it, a bridge linking Alexandria University with the corniche, and underground car-parks. The interior designs of the reading halls are made up of graded levels, like waterfalls.
There are seven of these, four of them underground, two above ground and at the level of the entrance. These will eventually be roofed in the form of a slope that will go out towards the sea and allow natural light to enter.

Project Development: A brief Overview
The Egyptian First Lady, Mrs Suzan Mubarak, was the initial sponsor of the project and continues to be engaged in its development. The revivication of Alexandria Library was due mainly to the University of Alexandria which allocated the land and built the conference centre at al-Silsilah, a prominent site. President Husni Mubarak then adopted the idea as a national project.
Later, the Minister of Education at the time, Mr Fathi Surur, agreed an international appeal with UNESCO. The General Committee of Alexandria Library was subsequently established by a Republican Decree in 1988. The Minister of Education, Dr Hussein Kamal Baha’ al-Din and Dr Mufeed Shihab (Minister of Higher Education at the time) supervised the project with the help of another minister, the engineer Mr Salwar Salim, who would help implement the project. The role of Dr Shihab was particularly effective in achieving the new legislation. The general manager of UNESCO, as part of an appeal for the project in 1987, arranged a competition in architecture in which hundreds of architects participated from many countries. The best designs were nominated and a Norwegian architectural company, Snohta, in collaboration with an Egyptian consultant, Mamdouh Hamza, who undertook the structural designs.

The project began in 1995 and was implemented by the Arab Contractors company of Egypt in collaboration with Italian and British companies.

The opening of the library now depends merely upon some improvements that need to be made in order to qualify it as a world class mission. Thus, special legislation was issued in 2001 to enable the necessary developments for its final completion.

The President of Egypt has authorized the First Lady to preside over a board of trustees made up of distinguished personalities, and has nominated Dr Ismail Siraj al-Din as the library’s director.

New Light on Modern Egyptian Civilization
The Alexandria Library project is an example of the use of modern scientific techniques in the construction industry using the most up-to-date technology. But it is also testament to the legacy of the distant past when ancient Alexandria was the first integral university on earth for one thousand years. The old library housed more than 700,000 volumes containing sources in science, medicine, engineering, astronomy, arts, as well as other subjects. It was also the destination of famous scientists and philosophers, including Aristotle, Archimedes, and Pythagoras. Alas, the library was totally destroyed at the end of the 4th Century.

Its rebuilding would regain Alexandria’s preeminent position and also be in line with modern demands.

Sky Dome
The modern sky dome is a fitting introduction to the new library’s cultural, educational and teaching agenda. The dome itself is one of nine that exist in the world today and which are distinguished by their utilization of modern technological systems of display, according to Dr Ismail Siraj Al-Din, the library’s manager. The dome is an observatory for viewing the sky and planets. The visitor is able to view the stars at any time of the day or night free of meteorological or lighting factors. One can also enjoy cosmic shows that delve into 

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the mystery and wonder of space in an attractive and entertaining way that combines stunning photographic images with scientific commentary and analysis which is accompanied by music.

The engineer, Mrs Huda al-Miqati, who supervises the dome, explains that the dome also contains various display aids, such as a Star Projector, a Complete System Slides Projects, and Multi Media Systems, which add to the spectacle.

There are three astronomical domes in Egypt. The first is in Giza in Cairo, which was closed in 1993 for technical reasons and is to reopen and transfer to the pyramids; the second is at the Saint Mark School in Alexandria, but this is described as small and old, dating to the 1940s; and the new dome of Alexandria Library. The latter is the first of its kind in the Middle East, and second only in terms of its capabilities to the sky dome in Iran.

**Civilizational Objectives**

Alexandria Library, a project that blends the past with the shape of things to come, will play a unique civilizational role focusing on four pivots:

**First: as the world’s window to Egypt**

A window into Egyptian civilization, past, present and future. This would represent a strong challenge for the library’s collection and classification of everything related to Egyptian civilization in an easy, accessible and modern way. This does not necessarily involve placing entire catalogues in one place but its shelves would provide a direct link with the other great libraries of Dar al-Kutub and al-Azhar, particularly via the internet.

**Second: as Egypt’s window to the world**

The library would become a place where Egyptians can learn about other cultures outside of their own, and in particular the civilizations and cultures of the Middle East.

Alexandria Library plans to develop Egyptian heritage. Some progress in this context has already been made and implemented, such as the setting up of a digital library for manuscripts (a database), microfiche facilities, and the publication of original texts relating to the history of sciences, in addition to other projects that combine original heritage with modern digital technology.
The first task of the board of trustees would be to plan a policy for obtaining books and manuscripts, and determine priorities, gradually achieving a geographic balance that has been so far missing.

**Third: as an international electronic database**

It is anticipated that Alexandria Library, a pioneering establishment with its huge wealth of data, would be able to combine all the great efforts currently underway by other educational establishments throughout the world, such as the Congress Library, facilitating in a direct and efficient way the best means of acquiring electronic data from around the world. It will especially contribute to enabling people to consider Egyptian intellectual output electronically. This new numeric wealth in telecommunications and data would provide huge opportunities for developing countries, such as Egypt, to modernize their methods of investment as well as open up new perspectives for university students and researchers in line with the needs of the modern world. Thus, the role of the library would also be to cooperate with educational and cultural organizations, in particular the higher educational and scientific research organizations in Egypt and the region.

**Fourth: as a centre of education and dialogue**

Last but not least, Alexandria Library would be a centre where north and south, east and west meet. The role of the library would therefore also be to promote and enhance dialogue among civilizations.

**Plans for Developments in Heritage**

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Dr Ismail Siraj al-Din states that within this framework Alexandria Library has paid special attention to establishing a comprehensive index for a collection of manuscripts of the library of Alexandria Municipality, which were presented to Alexandria Library as an important step towards discovering its heritage. Alexandria Library is now undertaking a large inscriptions collection in Alexandria, such as the collection of the Religious Institute in Sammuhah, the collection of Abi al-Abbas al-Mursi, as well as a collection of other manuscripts presented to the library.

Alexandria Library has recently issued the fifth volume of *The Index of Manuscripts of Alexandria Municipality*, which contains Hadith al-Sharif. According to Dr Siraj al-Din, this index contains a thorough description and classification for the manuscripts of Hadith al-Sharif, the foundation of religious and intellectual thought in the history of Islamic civilization over fourteen centuries.

Dr Yousif Zaydan, the administrator of manuscripts at Alexandria Library, says that the manuscripts of Ahadiths in the library are the most valuable and rare collections in existence, mainly due to the interest of the general, Ibrahim Pasha bin Muhammad Ali, in this science.

His collection was included in the library of the Municipality in Alexandria, which in turn is included in Alexandria Library. Dr Zaydan adds that the value and rarity of manuscripts of Ahadiths indicates that these are books from the Middle Ages of Arab and Islamic civilization, dating from 386 AH.