

Travel

Antiquity's great library rises out of the ashes

Egypt struggles to become a center for learning once again

By Ellen Hale
USA TODAY

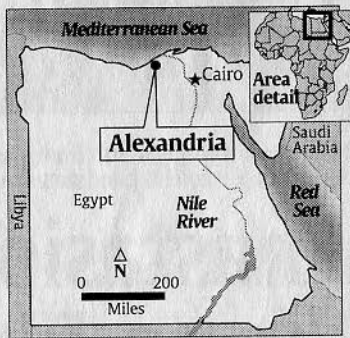
ALEXANDRIA, Egypt — Here by the turquoise waters of the Mediterranean Sea, a high-tech building shaped like a computer disk climbs out of the sand. Amid the endless stretch of concrete high-rises and battered storefronts, the structure strikes an odd pose, as if trying to tug this dated civilization into the future.

That is exactly what many are hoping the 21st-century incarnation of the fabled library of the Pharaohs can accomplish. The new Bibliotheca Alexandrina, which even bears the same name as its forerunner, was slated to open on April 23, International Book Day. But Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak postponed the official opening indefinitely, citing continuing violence in the Middle East.

Yet while the most important cultural project in the Arab world awaits its debut, its significance is already established. It is seen by many as a crucial symbol in a critical time: proof to the West that the Muslim world can match it culturally, intellectually and socially.

"Reviving the biggest and most important library of all time will change the whole situation in the region, in the Mideast," predicts Shawky Salem, professor of information technology at the University of Alexandria. "It will tell the West that we are part of the world, part of the global culture."

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burned the remaining scrolls to heat the city baths, providing enough fuel for six months' hot water.

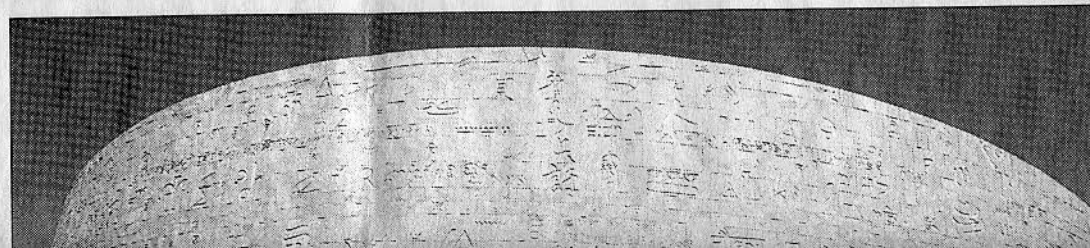
The notion of re-creating the Great Library may have been prompted, oddly, by an innocent query from President Richard Nixon on a visit to Alexandria in 1974: Where, he wanted to know, did the ancient library stand? The question piqued the interest of Egyptian leaders, and the project was soon on the drawing boards. Mubarak, who has made the government-run library a national priority, primed the pump with a \$100 million contribution, and Arab leaders pledged another \$65 million. (Saddam Hussein is said to have outbid all of them with a \$25 million donation, which fortuitously was collected before the Persian Gulf War.) The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has provided a continuing sizable allowance to help make up the difference toward the \$170 million goal.

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Bibliotheca Alexandrina

An ambitious design: In addition to the library, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina complex includes a conference center, a planetarium, a School of Information Studies, a calligraphy institute and museums of science, antiquities and manuscripts. The Mediterranean Sea can be seen at a distance.



If you go ...

Although the official opening has been delayed, the library gives free tours at 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. on Sundays and Thursdays. Library hours are 10:30 a.m.-7:30 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; 3:30 p.m.-7:30 Friday-Saturday. www.unesco.org/web

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The new library may actually have been built right on top of the old, but no one knows, for not even a scroll from it remains. No one is even sure how or when the Great Library, as it was known, was destroyed.

Built in the third century B.C. by Ptolemy, successor to Alexander, who founded this city at the mouth of the Nile, the library was the linchpin that turned Alexandria into the greatest cultural capital of the ancient world. It was here that modern astronomy was invented, the circumference of the Earth calculated, the first link established between nervous disorders and sexual problems, and the brain — not the heart, as assumed — determined to be the source of intelligence.

So thirsty for knowledge were the city's rulers that they demanded visitors forfeit any scrolls they carried so they could be copied for the library (although apparently the copies were often returned instead of the originals). At its peak, the library held as many as 700,000 books in the form of scrolls. Scholars, emperors and religious leaders from throughout the world traveled to study and debate the great issues of the day at the Bibliotheca.

By 700 A.D., the library and all its contents had completely disappeared. Common currency holds that Julius Caesar had a hand in its destruction, burning it down in his attacks against the city. But it is also likely, experts say, that fanatical Christian monks and Arab invaders vandalized the library. The Arabs

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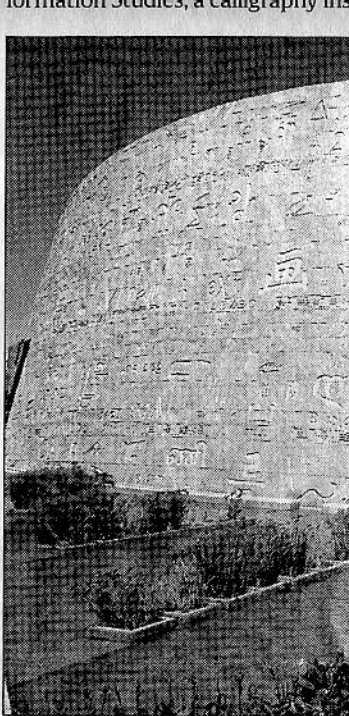
one that now pokes out over Alexandria's famed corniche. The design, by a Norwegian firm, is deceptively simple: a circular building cantilevered toward the sea to evoke the image of the rising Egyptian sun. The bottom four stories of the 11-story building lie below ground and partly underwater. The aboveground

portion is wrapped in Aswan granite, engraved with letters and characters representative of the world's written languages. Also in the complex: conference center and planetarium.

Inside is the world's largest reading room, graduated over seven open stories and filled with stacks, hundreds of computers with Internet ports and a state-of-the-art virtual browser system that lets users peruse ancient manuscripts by turning the pages with a touch of the screen. Teak, brushed stainless steel and oak floors (imported from the USA) give the interior a sleek, contemporary air.

But since the first cornerstone was laid more than a decade ago, the Bibliotheca has been beset by problems, raising questions of whether it can become the link between North and South and East and West that the Great Library was. Five years behind schedule, its cost has ballooned from \$170 million to \$240 million. Critics doubt whether, in this digital age, such a grand physical presence is even necessary; others question the financial drain on a country where only half the population can read and one-fourth have incomes below poverty level.

The library will focus on Mediterranean culture and ancient Egyptian history, according to



Bibliotheca Alexandrina

The writing on the wall: The outside of the circular Bibliotheca Alexandrina is boldly inscribed with letters and hieroglyphics, representing written languages from around the world and through history.

Youssef Zeidan, the director of acquisitions. But while the library owns some important ancient Islamic manuscripts and documents, the bulk of the collection will rely on databases and copies of books and manuscripts from other great libraries, such as the British Library. (One of his main tasks, says Zeidan, is to make a "heritage map" of Arabic manuscripts.)

The Bibliotheca has been built to hold 8 million volumes, exponentially more than the Great Library, but so far has only 400,000 — many of them donations of dubious value. (The world's largest library, the Library of Congress, has more than 120 million items, including 18 million books.)

"We must weed out and exclude junk like *Guide to Hong Kong* — and they probably have two copies of that — plus a lot of cookbooks," says Mohammed Aman, dean of the School of Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and consultant to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina for the past decade. Aman urges patience, however, and takes critics to task for being shortsighted.

Of equally great concern is whether Egypt can provide the unrestrained scholarly environment necessary to turn the library into a global gathering place for the great minds of the world. The growing power of religious conservatives here has led the traditionally moderate Egyptian government to drive Arabic literary classics and controversial works into obscurity and to clamp down on freedom of the press and public dissent.

"There is great scholarship in Egypt and the Arab world, but it is a small group and it is not the dominant voice," concedes library director Ismail Serageldin. But he also points out that the Kansas

Board of Education tried to ban the teachings of Darwin and that some schools in the USA have tried to ban *Huckleberry Finn*.

On one thing both critics and advocates agree on: If the Bibliotheca Alexandrina can succeed, it will be under the visionary guidance of Serageldin. A former director general of the World Bank with a Harvard doctorate and a little black book full of impressive international connections, Serageldin was brought in two years ago to right the listing library. Before taking the job, he insisted he answer only to Mubarak; upon accepting, he immediately appointed an international roster of big names to the

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For information on Alexandria and places to stay:

- ▶ www.alexandriatour.com
- ▶ www.alex-guide.com

board, such as writer and biologist Steven Jay Gould.

Serageldin has very shrewdly started to put the library on respected footing by holding international conferences on cutting edge — but non-controversial — issues such as biotechnology. Give the library a few years to work on its collection and mature before passing judgment, he asks.

The new Bibliotheca Alexandrina, he promises, is "going to be true to the ancient library and be a vibrant space of international debate. Every kind of issue will be discussed here."

These public pronouncements hearten many Egyptians, right down to hotel clerks, who look to the library — the first modern monument in Egypt in 50 years — to put a progressive face on their ancient country.

"Cultural meaning in this part of the world means going back to the past, to the Pharaohs. All our solutions we get from Islam. There is no forward thinking here," says Mohammed Awad, an architect and historic preservation expert in Alexandria. "This library is an extremely important test for Egypt. It must pull us into the future."

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