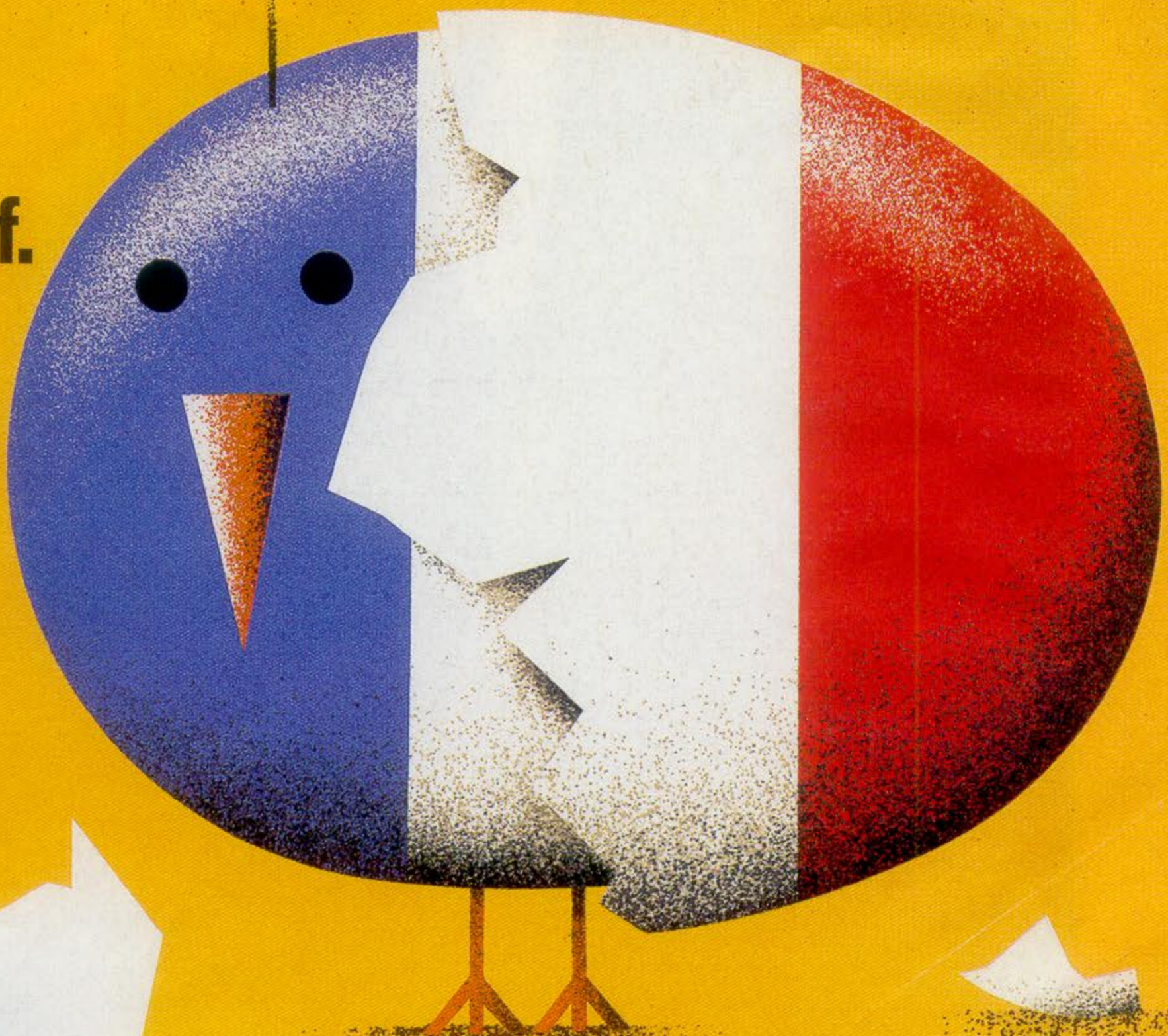


A FRENCH RENAISSANCE

TIME

SPECIAL REPORT

France is struggling to re-invent itself. It might just succeed.



**IRAN EXCLUSIVE
KHATAMI V. THE ISLAMIC
HARDLINERS**

23
9 770928 843003

SWITZERLAND F 6.20
SWEDEN (incl. tax) KR32.00
DM 6
AUSTRIA S 49.00



AHEAD OF THE CURVE: The new library was designed to live up to the original's reputation and catapult Egypt onto the global stage as a world-class center for knowledge

ARCHITECTURE

RECREATING A JEWEL

Egypt has built an updated version of the fabled Bibliotheca Alexandrina, but its commitment to intellectual freedom remains an open question

By **SCOTT MACLEOD** ALEXANDRIA

THE EGYPTIAN CITY OF ALEXANDRIA has one of the world's greatest libraries—but nobody can find it. Not even archaeologists. Somewhere beneath the buildings and asphalt of this Mediterranean port of nearly 5 million people lies buried a library that flourished during Egypt's Ptolemy dynasty of Greek rulers about 2,000 years ago. It is thought to have held as many as 500,000 books—in the form of scrolls—and was a fount of knowledge for mathematics, astronomy, physics, medi-

cine and history. The exact location of the building—somewhere in the city's old royal quarter—and the fate of its contents remain unknown. So Egypt decided that what hasn't been rediscovered must be replaced. A new library, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, will open early next year, 12 years after its foundation stone was laid. This is a library nobody will have difficulty finding. One of the largest ever built anywhere, it perches dramatically on the Mediterranean shore with a grand circular design intended to evoke the rising and setting of the sun. Its reading room is as big as New York's Grand Central Station;

its bookshelves cover the space of four football fields.

As a vanity project, the Bibliotheca should have little trouble doing for Alexandria what the Opera House did for Sydney or, more recently, the Guggenheim Museum for Bilbao. Its roof resembles a gigantic microchip 160 m in diameter, to reflect the idea of conducting knowledge to Egypt and beyond, just as the original did. The structure also pays homage to its predecessor. By tilting the roof at 16 degrees, and covering the walls with layers of unpolished granite—chiseled into which are characters from most of the world's known



languages—the 11-story library gives the impression that the cloistered temple of Euclid and Archimedes is re-emerging from the earth.

Alexandria University academics first came up with the idea in the 1970s to recreate the ancient jewel, but the government has turned the project into one of monumental proportions, personally overseen by Suzanne Mubarak, wife of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Visiting London last month, she was presented by the British branch of the Friends of Alexandria Library with plans to donate 45,000 manuscripts held on microchip at the British

Museum. “The library is an international center,” said Mubarak, “a gift to mankind that will enrich the past, the present and the future. It is a digital lighthouse for the world.” Her imagery is appropriate in that the 1,800 scholars using the library’s reading room will be able to relieve tired eyes by gazing out to sea from their desks.

Snøhetta, a firm of young architects based in Norway, beat 523 rivals in an international competition with a design for the Bibliotheca that Egyptian officials felt suitably echoed its former glory. “The building takes you into the past, but also into the future,” says supervising architect Christoph

Kapeller. “You actually see it rising up, as if we have taken a snapshot of its movement.”

Friendly countries, including pre-Gulf War Iraq, donated \$64 million toward the project, but the construction costs are now estimated at a whopping \$140 million, leaving the fiscally strapped Egyptian government to raise the rest—and that’s before they buy any books. No expense is being spared on materials, which include North American oak for the parquet floors and Zimbabwean granite for the interior walls. The entrance will be adorned by mosaics of ancient wrestlers, discovered during early construction on the site. In the exterior

THOMAS HARTWELL—SABA FOR TIME (2)