



ALEXANDREA AD AEGYPTVM

THE LEGACY OF MULTICULTURALISM IN ANTIQUITY

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BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRINA: BEGINNING ANEW

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So much was said about the ancient library, and its legend lived throughout the ages as an unprecedented center of learning and a place of culture and science. Like its illustrious predecessor, the New Library of Alexandria, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, was built not far from where the ancient library once stood to become a new center of learning in the Alexandria of the 21st century.

Inaugurated in October 2002, the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA) aspires to be more than a meeting place for peoples of different cultures, and to become a house of wisdom that fosters dialogue with the other and encourages inquiry and exploration.

In its mission statement, the BA envisions itself as «a center of excellence for the production and dissemination of knowledge, and a place of dialogue and understanding between cultures and peoples»¹.

In pursuing its mission, the new Library seeks to recapture the spirit of the ancient one and desires to become:

- The world's window on Egypt;
- Egypt's window on the world;
- An instrument for rising to the challenges of the digital age; and
- A center for dialogue between peoples and civilizations.

¹ <http://www.bibalex.org/aboutus/mission_en.aspx>.

Such a grand vision was created to honor the illustrious past, celebrate the present and embrace the future. The careful selection of the BA objectives is quite admirable; to be the window of Egypt on the world and the world's window on Egypt carries an image that is vivid and easy to understand.

The Library building was designed by the Norwegian firm Snøhetta and built by Egyptian contractors with local and imported materials. The Library complex comprises three buildings: the Main Library building, the Planetarium, and the Conference Center which was built earlier. The main building is designed in the shape of a slanting disk. The disk symbolizes the sun rising from the Mediterranean; an appropriate image for the emergence of a new beacon of learning. The larger sphere of the sun is facing the smaller sphere of the Planetarium which resembles a moon, while the Conference Center acts as a counter point in the overall massing. The plaza that connects them all is open and inviting, with olive trees to symbolize the Bibliotheca Alexandrina as the underlying premise of peace, openness to the other, dialogue, rationality and understanding.

The building exterior is covered with a large gray granite wall on which letters (not words) from the alphabets of some 120 languages are carved, and the unique roof structure is reminiscent of the contemporary computer. A slim and elegant pedestrian bridge runs through the Library from the edge of the University of Alexandria campus in the southeast towards the open sea on the northwest. It symbolizes the knowledge transfer from the halls of academe into the Library where information is processed and transferred into the larger world across the Mediterranean Sea as was the case in the ancient world. Water surrounds the whole building and provides a reflecting motif from various angles, and a reflecting and separating medium for the main complex, creating a unique separateness and a hint of «floating» the building out of reach of the surroundings, other than the plaza entrance side.

While the building looks massive on the outside, the Entrance hall looks surprisingly austere and does not quite reveal the grandeur to come. When you delve into the Main Hall, the building in its entirety unfolds before your eyes and the space gradually expands. As you move inwards, you reach a viewing balcony, named in honor of Callimachus, the great Hellenistic poet who created the first catalog of the ancient library's holdings organized by subject and author, thus becoming the father of Library Science. There, one is overwhelmed by the great size of the Reading Area: spectacular, soaring, and elegant. The main Reading Area spans 7 open cascading floors where each has a portion of the Library collection, and entries to either museums, special libraries, meeting rooms, or administrative offices.

The Bibliotheca Alexandria is an amalgamation of lively entities. It consists of a library that can hold millions of books; an Internet Center and an Internet Archive; six specialized libraries; four Museums; a Planetarium; an exploratorium for children; a Culturama, which is an interactive three-dimensional digital presentation of heritage material over nine screens; a Virtual Immersive Science and Technology lab; fifteen permanent exhibitions; two art galleries for temporary exhibitions; a conference center with a large theater for

1,700 people, and nine academic research centers involved in studying and developing Alexandria and Mediterranean research, art, manuscripts, calligraphy and writing, information sciences, cultural and natural heritage, Scientific Research, Hellenistic Studies, Democracy and Social Studies, and Development studies.

While it is unusual for a library to have all these components, it is important to emphasize that the ancient library's ideology of learning encompassed many of the human activities that involve most of our senses. Learning does not happen solely through reading but through hearing, speaking, and experimenting as well. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina is a learning platform where users with their different cognitive styles are able to learn with a pace that suits them most.

In order for the Library to emphasize its role as an international entity that facilitates the exchange of culture, it hosts a number of international entities such as the International Federation for Library Associations (IFLA) Regional office, the Secretariat of the Arab National Commissions of UNESCO, the Middle East and North Africa Network for Environmental Economics (MENANEE), and many more.

The Main Library collections and services are organized to meet the needs of adult learners while the specialized libraries are created to either serve specific groups of users such as Taha Hussein Library for the blind and visually impaired, the Young People's Library and the Children's Library, or to facilitate the usage of different formats such as the Arts & Multimedia Library, the Map Library and the Rare Books and Special Collections Library.

In its endeavor to reach excellence and create an impact, the BA has been working to set Egypt as a leading center for Arabic bibliographic studies and research through the establishment of the Arabic Union Catalog, the translation of internationally accepted standards, and the establishment of the first Arabic Manual of Style.

Living the mission has been the passion and the challenge that drive the everyday activities at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. In less than a decade, the Library has proven its leadership in the digitization, preservation and management of heritage. It has digitized more than 300,000 volumes of its Arabic monographs and millions of documents, and is in the process of digitally documenting the modern history of Egypt beginning with Napoleon's mission to Egypt until the time of President Sadat.

The Library has been an actor in the sustainable development of Alexandria and has been working with the Ministry of Education and with the culture and museum sectors of both the government and the not-for-profit organizations as well as many foreign consulates in Alexandria. It has sponsored many art shows, exhibitions, performances and festivals that were open to the public and free of charge.

The BA has also taken upon its self the responsibility of becoming an incubator for children's talents. It offers children and young people extensive collections of books, magazines, videos, films, games, and a plethora of activities and competitions. It facilitates the

children's entry into internationally sponsored competitions and creates a space where children are able to learn about art, science, and technology and assist in schoolwork. Many of Alexandria's children have had the opportunity to enter these competitions for the first time, and this was a life-changing experience for many.

The Library is also a promoter of science and technology. It hosts a number of internationally renowned science conferences such as the BioVision where key scientists from across the world meet in Alexandria to discuss the many advances in biological science. Through these events, young Egyptian scientists get the chance to meet with renowned scientists and Nobel laureates from all over the world, and enrich their experience with the exposure and communication every scientist needs.

The BA has also been a catalyst for reform in the region. It sponsors a number of conferences that discuss reform in many of the vital sectors such as health, education, economy, and difficult topics such as political challenges, freedom of speech and expression, youth employment, separation of religious institutions from the state, and many more.

The Library activities extend beyond the geographical boundaries of Egypt, for it enjoys the patronage of more than 1.7 million visitors a year. It not only conducts its basic activities, opens branches in other Egyptian cities, and enriches the cultural scene in Egypt; it also collaborates with a number of international organizations where many of the Library staff have taken leading positions, and with which the Library has been a partner on projects such as the *Memory of the World* project of the Library of Congress and UNESCO, and The Virtual International Authority Files which is a joint project with the Library of Congress, the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The Library is recognized as an apex for networks and partnerships. It houses the offices of 12 international organizations and offers multilingual collections to the public. It also thrives with the friendship of so many citizens around the world through the BA International Friends Associations.

The impact of the Library after a decade of service is breathtaking, and it has truly proven itself worthy to be heir of the Ancient Library of Alexandria.