

A REPORTER AT LARGE

RESURRECTING ALEXANDRIA

Can rebuilding the Great Library also redeem the city?

BY ALEXANDER STILLE

For nearly three centuries before the birth of Christ, Alexandria was the center of the Western world. Alexander the Great founded the city in 332 B.C., and laid out its basic grid, with a long, wide central avenue, the Canopic Way, connecting the Gate of the Sun at one end of the city to the Gate of the Moon at the other. After Alexander's death, the empire was divided among his lieutenants, and Ptolemy I Soter, who had been one of Alexander's generals, took over Egypt. On the island of Pharos, in the middle of Alexandria's harbor, Ptolemy II built one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world: a lighthouse some four hundred feet high, whose flame was said to be visible for seventy miles.

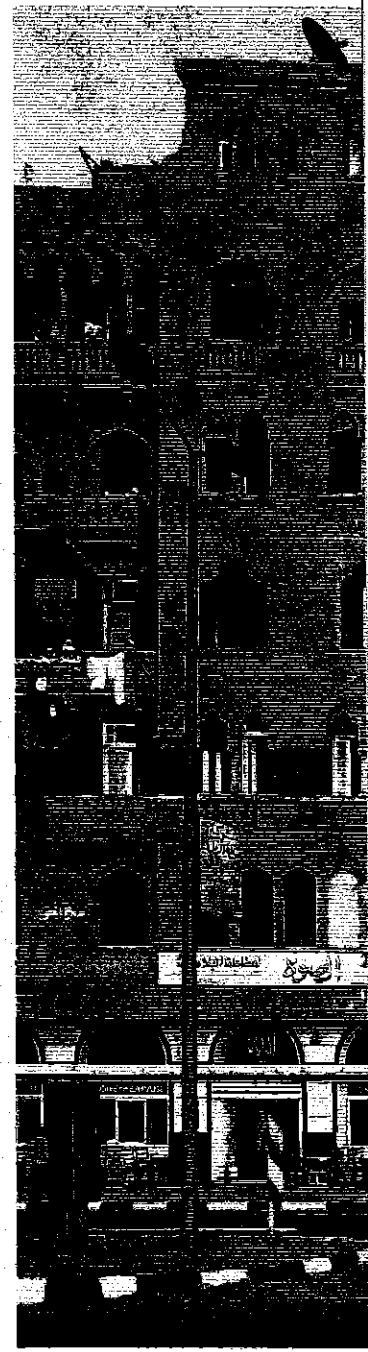
From this strategic location near the mouth of the Nile, the Macedonian Greeks were able to dominate both the trade routes of the Mediterranean and the Nile Valley, with its thousand-mile swath of rich agricultural land. Before the Ptolemaic dynasty ended, with the death of Cleopatra, in 30 B.C., Alexandria had grown into the world's first true metropolis, an opulent, multicultural center with a population of about six hundred thousand. (Although Alexandria was later outstripped by imperial Rome, Europe was unable to sustain urban life on such a scale again until the eighteenth century, when London and Paris reached a similar size.) The city the Ptolemies built combined the grandeur of Egypt with the classical traditions of Greece. A description survives of a Dionysian procession through Alexandria in the third century B.C. which included a hundred-and-eighty-foot golden phallus, two thousand golden-horned bulls, a gold statue of Alexander carried aloft by elephants, and an eighteen-foot statue of Dionysus, wearing a purple cloak and a golden crown of ivy and grapevines.

Perhaps the proudest achievement of

Ptolemy I Soter and his heirs was the Great Library, which was situated in the Mouseion, the Temple of the Muses. The Ptolemies were insatiable in their pursuit of books. They decreed that every ship that passed through the port of Alexandria hand over any manuscript or scroll on board for copying. The Alexandrians then returned the copy and kept the original. They tricked the Athenians into giving them a set of the major Greek tragedies and paid a fortune for what they believed was the library of the philosopher Aristotle. The Ptolemies also called upon the sovereigns and rulers of the world to send them all books worthy of inclusion in the Great Library and summoned seventy-two Jewish scholars to translate the Torah, creating the ancient-Greek Old Testament, known as the Septuagint. They gathered Buddhist texts from India and a work on Zoroastrianism said to contain two million lines. Eventually, they succeeded in amassing about five hundred thousand scrolls.

The Great Library housed scholars as well as books, and functioned as the ancient equivalent of a think tank. Euclid completed his famous "Elements" in Alexandria and dedicated it to Ptolemy I Soter. Other scholars at the Mouseion mapped and measured the Earth and the stars, and produced great works of astronomy, physics, and anatomy. But, under circumstances that remain mysterious, the Great Library's vast collection was destroyed, surviving only as fragments, copies, or quotations in later texts.

In the world of scholarship, the ancient Library of Alexandria is the ultimate romantic myth, a kind of paradise lost. "One ghostly image haunts all of us charged with preserving the creative heritage of humanity: the spectre of the great, lost Library of Alexandria," James H. Billington, the United States Librarian of Congress, said in a 1993



Alexandria enjoyed two periods of grandeur.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT POLIDORI

speech. This image inspired the Egyptian government and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to undertake a major new library project, which has been billed as the Revival of the Ancient Library of Alexandria.

Alexandria today bears little resemblance to its glorious predecessor. It is poor and shabby; a provincial backwater in a country dominated by Cairo, the capital. The sidewalks are broken and crumbling; the streets are dark and dirty, strewn with litter and garbage, and full of potholes. The once elegant turn-of-the-century architecture is now in a state of dilapidation. Yet here, on an empty lot beside the Mediterranean, a mammoth edifice has been taking shape.

The new library's architecture is in keeping with its ambitions. A glass-and-aluminum disk-shaped roof almost twice the length of a football field tilts up at an angle, rising from below the ground to about a hundred feet in the air. It is meant to look like the sun emerging from the sea at dawn. The surface of the roof includes hundreds of different-colored panes, and resembles a huge computer circuit chip. On the back of the building, workers are finishing up an enormous curved wall encased in granite, on which characters from almost all the world's known scripts and alphabets are inscribed, symbolizing the universal aims of the new project.

But now, as the building nears completion, questions are beginning to emerge: What does it mean to "revive" an ancient library whose exact location and contents are unknown? Can a library that will start with about two hundred and fifty thousand books—far fewer than the number in the library of a small four-year college in the United States—hope to live up to its grand claims? Does it make sense to build a library designed to hold eight million books at a moment when so much information is moving from printed to digital form? In the age of the Internet, does it even make sense to conceive of a universal library in terms of glass, aluminum, and concrete?

The project reflects the tensions in Egyptian society. The decision to build a major international library in Alexandria, by the sea, facing north toward Europe, is part of a larger effort to open

Egypt up to foreign investment, satellite television, the Internet, and cellular phones. There are more than a million satellite dishes in this country of nearly seventy million, and the government has granted Egypt's two hundred and fifty thousand Internet subscribers unrestricted access to the World Wide Web. Yet even as the government of Muhammad Hosni Mubarak spends hundreds of millions of dollars on the library project, it is stepping up censorship in an effort to placate the country's Islamic militants. "It's a bit of a paradox that the government is building a library while it is banning books," says Hisham Kassem, an Egyptian journalist who publishes a weekly English-language news magazine called the *Cairo Times*. During the past year, the Egyptian government has earned a spot on the Committee to Protect Journalists' list of the ten worst enemies of freedom of the press.

The idea of creating a cultural revival in Alexandria by government diktat from Cairo would seem to be a contradiction in terms, and the library is already at odds with some of the local intellectuals and cultural institutions. It is difficult to see how the library project can remake Alexandria into a hub of world culture after the government in Cairo has, for more than forty years, sucked so much life out of the city. Alexandria's fortunes have waxed and waned according to Egypt's attitudes toward Europe, and that deep ambivalence is very much present in the library issue. Culturally, "it's as if there are two different winds," Kamal el-Zohairy, the director of the library in Cairo, said in an interview in 1998. "One is from the Mediterranean, and the other is from the desert. From the sea, it's nice. From the desert, it's hot."

Alexandria actually enjoyed two periods of prosperity, in which it became a cosmopolitan center of culture and learning. The first occurred during the rule of the Ptolemies, which ended when Caesar Augustus dethroned Antony and Cleopatra, in 30 B.C. Thereafter, in the early fourth century, Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, and Alexandria became a center of Coptic Christianity. But in 642 A.D. Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula conquered Egypt and moved the capital to what is now Cairo. Sea

trade gradually became less important to Egypt, and by the time Napoleon reached Alexandria, in 1798, he found a small fishing town of some seven thousand souls.

Starting in 1805, however, the pashas of the Ottoman Empire set out to modernize Egypt and stimulate trade by luring Europeans to Alexandria. In a matter of decades, the city was once again a thriving port, the center of Egypt's booming cotton industry, and soon one of the first cities in Africa with electricity, modern plumbing, trams, street lights, newspapers, movie theatres, and a stock exchange. A long building boom, which began in the late nineteenth century, filled the city with Italianate villas, eclectic fin-de-siècle buildings, Art Deco palaces, wide boulevards, and grand squares with magnificent bronze statues. The streets were a curious babel of languages, cultures, and nationalities: Jews speaking Arabic, Egyptians speaking Greek, Armenians speaking Italian, Syrians speaking a Franco-Arabic patois, and men in French suits, English bowlers, and Egyptian djellababs smoking water pipes in the cafés. "Five races, five languages, a dozen creeds" is how the English novelist Lawrence Durrell described the city in "The Alexandria Quartet." By the nineteen-fifties, there were some hundred and fifty thousand Europeans in Alexandria, out of a population of about six hundred thousand. "The city was beautiful, and so clean that one could have caten off the streets," the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz once said about the Alexandria of his youth.

Even though the city was almost devoid of ancient ruins, its twentieth-century inhabitants, through some strange kind of metempsychosis, felt themselves to be reliving the cosmopolitan life of the Ptolemy era. E. M. Forster, another English writer who lived in Alexandria, wrote that "visions kept coming as I went about in trams or on foot or bathed in the delicious sea." Looking at the Arab fort on the island of Pharos, he "would multiply the height . . . by four and so envisage the Pharos [the lighthouse] which had once stood on the same site. At the crossing of the two main streets I would erect the tomb of Alexander the Great." Durrell called Alexandria the "capital of memory."

Eventually, however, this world also



"They're in a statistical dead heat."

disappeared. Alexandria, Egypt's "European" city, became the target of nationalist resentment that arose after the British occupied the country in 1882 and retained a controlling hand in its affairs until the revolution of 1952. As Gamal Abdel Nasser began confiscating foreign businesses, French, British, and Israeli troops occupied the Suez Canal in order to undo its nationalization, and the attack further enhanced anti-European sentiment. Nasser responded by expelling Jews and British and French residents en masse. Today, Alexandria's population of four million includes virtually no Europeans.

As foreign capital fled, the revolutionary government centralized power in Cairo and nationalized nearly all civic and cultural institutions. Many Alexandria businesses moved their headquarters to Cairo because of the constant

need to obtain government permits. Publishers, movie producers, journalists, writers, actors, and artists followed, and Alexandria's elected municipal council was replaced by a series of governors—usually retired military men—dispatched from Cairo. "What happened afterward was a tragedy, for which we still feel badly," said Mostafa El-Abbadi, a distinguished professor of ancient history at the University of Alexandria, who in 1960 returned from his doctoral studies, at Cambridge, to find that his lively, beloved Alexandria was now dull and monochromatic.

In 1974, on a Presidential visit to Alexandria, Richard Nixon unwittingly acted as a catalyst to the library project by asking his Egyptian hosts where the ancient Library of Alexandria had stood. The Egyptians were embarrassed to

admit that they had no idea and later asked El-Abbadi to draw up a memorandum on the subject.

"The ancient library might be right beneath us," El-Abbadi told me last summer, when we met in his study in downtown Alexandria, which overlooks the eastern harbor. No one knows exactly where the ancient library stood, but we know it was somewhere within the royal palaces of the Ptolemies, which occupied a vast area near the harbor. Indeed, the lot in front of El-Abbadi's house—now occupied by a rusting amusement park—was considered one of the possible sites for the new library. "Perhaps if we dug in the basement, we might find the ancient library," El-Abbadi said, petting a beautiful Siamese cat named Cleopatra.

El-Abbadi is one of the few remaining Alexandrian cosmopolitans. A small man of seventy-one with cottony tufts of gray hair, he combines a sense of warm Egyptian hospitality with the courtly manners and natty professorial dress of a British university don. A broadly educated man, he is equally at home in Arabic, English, French, Latin, and ancient Greek. He is a Muslim, with a keen interest in the Greek, Jewish, and Christian history of Egypt. His study—lined floor to ceiling with books on ancient history and the poetry of Milton, Shelley, and Keats—might briefly give you the feeling that you were somewhere in England, until a gust of wind blows open the flowered curtains, offering a glimpse of the Mediterranean. The brilliant Egyptian sun floods in, tempered by the sea breeze.

El-Abbadi and his university colleagues saw UNESCO's sudden interest in the old library as an opportunity to push for a major new university library. But when they approached UNESCO directly, El-Abbadi said, they were told, "We cannot make agreements with universities—we make agreements with governments." So the project was recast as the Revival of the Ancient Library of Alexandria, or the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, as the library is now officially called. The idea did not really take off, however, until Hosni Mubarak became the President of Egypt after the assassination of Anwar Sadat, in 1981. The French President François Mitterrand—who spent the waning years of his life building the

new Bibliothèque Nationale de France, in Paris—was apparently influential in persuading Mubarak of its importance. In 1986, the Egyptian government procured UNESCO support for the project, and in 1988 Mubarak laid a symbolic foundation stone.

The following year, UNESCO sponsored a major international competition for a building design, attracting five hundred and twenty-four entries from fifty-eight countries. The jury, composed of Egyptian and foreign architects, selected a bold, modernist concept by a team of young, little-known architects based in Norway. Designed as a kind of amphitheatre facing the sea, the building has seven terraced floors, each narrower than the one beneath it, which rise in one enormous open space under the tilting glass roof. The lowest floor, below sea level, will house ancient manuscripts, and each successive floor is supposed to advance metaphorically to the present.

To raise money for the project, Mubarak summoned a group of world leaders to a meeting in Aswan, in southern Egypt. There the assembled company—including Mitterrand, Queen Sophia of Spain, Princess Caroline of Monaco, and the heads of most of the Arab nations—witnessed the curious spectacle of sheikhs from the oil-rich Gulf States, where even the hint of dissenting information is harshly punished, competing with one another to make the largest contribution to the new universal library. Sheikh Zaid bin Sultan of the United Arab Emirates stunned the crowd with an offer of twenty million dollars, only to be bested by Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, who put up twenty-one million dollars—which was then topped by Saudi Arabia's twenty-three million dollars. (Luckily for the Egyptians, Saddam's check cleared before the beginning of the Gulf War, which turned Egypt and Iraq into adversaries and drained Iraq's coffers.)

Relatively little is known about the library that is being "revived." In all likelihood, it was founded by Ptolemy I Soter, who is also believed to have planned the lighthouse and built numerous temples and a fabulous, long-lost burial site for Alexander. As foreigners governing in Egypt, the Ptolemies took on the trappings of traditional Egyptian

pharaohs but also saw themselves as the rightful heirs of classical Greek culture. The Library of Alexandria was probably modelled on the Lyceum, Aristotle's library and school in Athens.

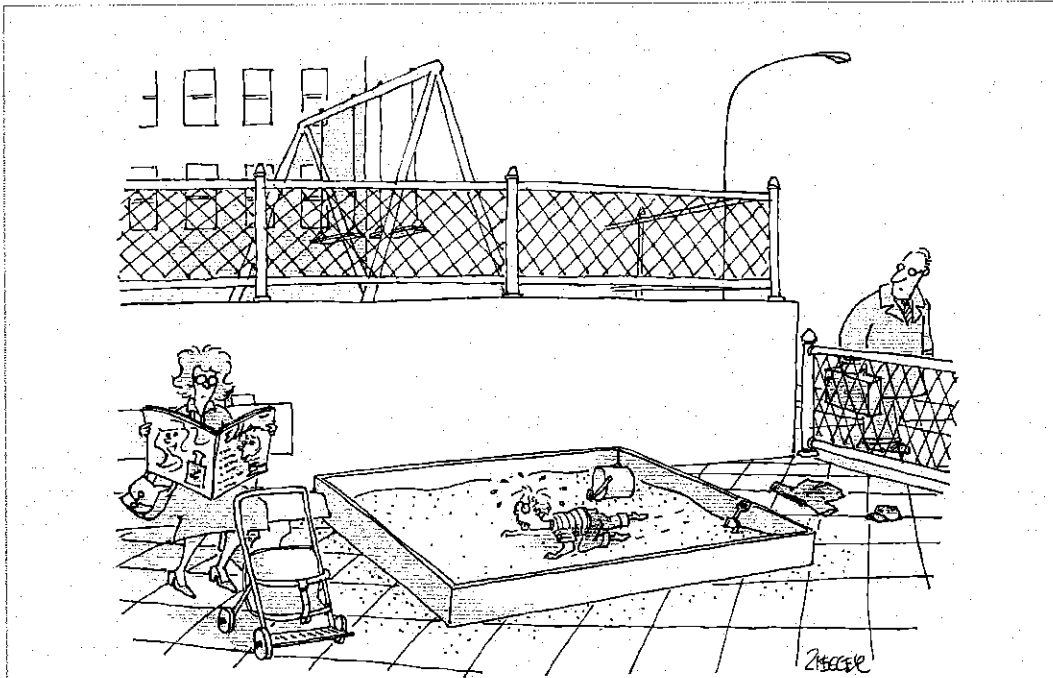
The Ptolemies eventually amassed some four hundred and ninety thousand scrolls written on papyrus—seven hundred thousand if you count duplicates. Another forty-two thousand scrolls were stored in a "daughter library," housed in the Temple of Serapis. Scholars debate whether the four hundred and ninety thousand scrolls represented four hundred and ninety thousand separate works or the total number of scrolls. Longer works were stored on multiple scrolls, so that the twenty-four "books" of Homer's Iliad, for example, probably represented twenty-four scrolls. Either way, the figure was enormous. (In the fourteenth century A.D., the largest library in Europe, the Sorbonne, had about seven hundred books.) The Great Library, which was part of a complex that included a zoological park and botanical gardens, was more than a collection of books. According to the geographer Strabo, who visited Alexandria around 20 B.C., the library "was part of the royal

palaces, it had a walk, an arcade, a large house in which was a refectory for members of the Mouseion. They formed a community who held property in common with a priest appointed by the kings (and, under the Empire, by Caesar) in charge of the Mouseion."

Even in ancient times, the scholar's life was sometimes a source of ridicule. "Many are feeding in populous Egypt, scribbles on papyrus, ceaselessly wrangling in the birdcage of the Muses," one skeptic in the third century B.C. writes. But Alexandria's scholars were not simply pedants. Eratosthenes, the head librarian from 245 to 204 B.C., made the first accurate measurement of the circumference of the Earth. An Alexandrian astronomer named Aristarchus understood, nearly eighteen hundred years before Copernicus, that the Earth revolved around the sun. The anatomist Herophilus and Erasistratus, working in the third century B.C., dissected human bodies and concluded that the brain was the center of the nervous system and the seat of intelligence. And the engineer Heron of Alexandria, in his work "Pneumatica," laid out the principles of steam power. The twentieth-century French



"Derek's sneakers were made in Malaysia. Can anyone show us where Malaysia is?"



historian Fernand Braudel observed that the Alexandrians had enough technical knowledge to start an industrial revolution but lacked the economic incentive to create labor-saving machinery because they relied on slaves.

The destruction of the Great Library meant that much of this knowledge was lost to the West for about fifteen hundred years. Gone, too, are hundreds of works of the great Greek dramatists and poets, and virtually all of ancient history. Only three historians—Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon—survived the first five hundred years of Greek historiography, although we know, from brief references in later works, of countless books about various ancient peoples (the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, the Etruscans, the Carthaginians, the Egyptians, and the Ptolemies) which almost certainly were in the ancient library.

Historians have charged several different suspects with the destruction of the library, motivated in part by their own nationality or ideology: Edward Gibbon blames the Christians, consistent with his theory that religion caused the fall of the Roman Empire; Professor

El-Abbadi, in his book on the library, blames Julius Caesar; and, in his 1987 book, "The Vanished Library," the Italian scholar Luciano Canfora seems equally determined to blame the Arabs and exonerate his fellow-countryman Caesar.

The evidence against Caesar would, at first glance, appear to be quite strong. Seneca and Plutarch both wrote that Caesar, after taking Alexandria in 48 B.C., found himself under attack from the sea and torched the boats in the harbor. The fire spread to the shore and, according to Seneca, some forty thousand scrolls were destroyed. Canfora's book points out that Seneca's text, the closest in time to the event, refers to scrolls in a warehouse. These, he writes, were probably books stored near the docks ready to be exported. Even if they were in the library, forty thousand scrolls would be only a tiny fraction of the four hundred and ninety thousand original scrolls the library possessed. Plutarch reports that Marc Antony compensated Cleopatra by commandeering two hundred thousand scrolls from the library at Pergamon—the other great Hellenistic library of the time—and giving them to Alex-

andria. Clearly, an important number of works were destroyed in Caesar's fire, but it is also clear that the library, as an institution, was not destroyed, since there are several accounts of work being done there not long after Caesar's time.

The evidence against the Christians is even more circumstantial. After Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, in 324 A.D., tensions rose in Alexandria between pagans and Christians. In 391 A.D., the Christians went on an iconoclastic rampage, smashing pagan idols throughout the city and destroying the Temple of Serapis, which housed the daughter library. But there is no specific record of their having also attacked the Great Library in the Mouseion.

The last principal suspect is the first Caliph of Egypt, who ruled the country after the Arabs brought Islam to North Africa, in the seventh century A.D. According to one twelfth-century Arabic account, the new vizier of Alexandria asked the Caliph what to do with the books in this enormous library, and the Caliph replied, "If their content is in accordance with the word of Allah, we

may do without them . . . If on the other hand they contain matter not in accord with the book of Allah, there can be no need to preserve them. Proceed then and destroy them." This account goes on to say that the bathhouses of Alexandria were heated for six months with burning scrolls. However, El-Abbadi points out that the account was written nearly six centuries after the incident, and may reflect the religious hostilities between Muslims and Christians during the Crusades rather than historical fact. As a rule, the early Islamic conquerors respected local customs and cultures. Now, in a recent publication, Canfora fingers a new possible culprit: Queen Zenobia of Palmyra (contemporary Syria), who took Alexandria in 270 A.D., prompting a ferocious counterattack by Emperor Aurelian, which reduced much of the city to ruins.

The idea that the library was destroyed in a single catastrophic event is probably a myth. There were at least a dozen major libraries in the ancient world—in places like Antioch, Athens, and Rome, as well as Pergamon—and none of their collections fared any better than Alexandria's, because ancient documents were too perishable. "Papyrus rolls were very vulnerable," Alan Cameron, a classicist at Columbia University, told me. "I suspect that if you went to Alexandria in the second century A.D. you might have found broken scraps of papyrus where many rolls had been." (The papyri that do survive—such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gnostic Gospels—were buried in dry caves or in a sealed container, like a tomb.) Given the fragility of ancient documents, it's likely that every major disaster—fire, flood, political upheaval, or military invasion—involved the loss of books.

The works that have survived were generally the most popular texts, which were copied and recopied and eventually found their way onto a more stable medium, like parchment. Made of tough animal skin, it gradually replaced papyrus by about the third or fourth century after Christ. And even the early parchment documents had to be copied repeatedly. The oldest complete version of Homer, for example, is a medieval copy made in the tenth or eleventh century A.D., nearly eighteen hundred years after it was originally written. "The rela-

tionship between texts that have survived and those that are lost is about one to forty," Canfora writes. "The relationship is even more unfavorable when you consider the countless number of texts lost without a single trace."

Like its ancient predecessor, the new Library of Alexandria has the feeling of a grand royal project. Power in Egypt still flows from the top, and Suzanne Mubarak, the President's wife, is the titular head of a commission overseeing the project. When she visited the construction site last spring, Mrs. Mubarak suddenly decided that a drab-looking hospital wing next door spoiled the look of the library from a certain angle. "That has to go," she said, and it has since been demolished.

Officially, power over the library project was supposed to be shared by UNESCO and the Egyptian government. But "the Egyptians are very good at creating these diabolic mechanisms where they nominally give control to a foreigner but then undermine it through a complex double structure," explained Giovanni Romerio, a UNESCO official from Italy who was put in charge of the Executive Secretariat, to oversee day-to-day work on the project. Romerio quickly discovered that the real power lay with two committees in Cairo, one headed by Mrs. Mubarak and the other by the Minister of Higher Education. On paper, a professor of architecture at the University of Alexandria named Mohsen Zahran was Romerio's second-in-command, but in fact, Romerio said, "he took orders from the minister," in Cairo. Romerio said he had been constantly outmaneuvered by his deputy, who at one point tried to hide the fact that he had gone to the Frankfurt Book Fair to acquire books. "He could not tolerate sharing power," Romerio, who reached retirement age in 1995, said. Zahran then became the head of the Executive Secretariat.

Zahran, who wears dark suits, is a stocky man with gray hair, a gray-

ish complexion, and a dark mole on his left nostril. He affects an air of joviality and engages in an almost mystical lyricism, referring to the new library as "a lighthouse of knowledge." But he has the reputation of a suspicious and closed man with a prickly character, a tough political fighter who knows how to work the levers of the Egyptian bureaucracy. "He is an apparatchik," Romerio, who is now back in Italy, said.

As an architect, Zahran has been effective in the construction phase of the library, but "he is not a library man," El-Abbadi told me. It was not until 1997 that El-Abbadi and other intellectuals were invited to form an advisory group to recommend books for the library, and they haven't been consulted very much. Originally, the library was supposed to be finished in 1995 and have a collection of two million books by the year 2000. It is now slated to open later this year with two hundred and fifty thousand to three hundred thousand books. Meanwhile, the cost of the structure has tripled, from sixty-five million dollars to a hundred and ninety-two million dollars, and the Egyptians have locked themselves into high operating costs in perpetuity. (The project's chief architect, Christoph Kapeller, says that between ten and fifteen per cent of the total construction cost is typically spent to keep a building in good working order.) The government has not yet established a budget for maintenance or acquisitions.

How many of those acquisitions should be printed texts is also an unresolved question, because the library was conceived before the Internet revolution. Gerald Grunberg, a French librarian whose services have been "donated" to Alexandria by his government, thinks the subsequent delays have actually been providential. "I think we are lucky to be starting now rather than five or six years earlier," said Grunberg, who worked on the new Bibliothèque Nationale de France, a high-tech library that has been beset by problems. Back then, "we were buying technology that was obsolete in a year," explained Grunberg, an intense-looking intellectual with wire-rimmed glasses, cigarette-stained teeth, and a handlebar mustache. "Now I think there has been a set-



ding or stabilization in the technology.”

Grunberg's field has grown dramatically in complexity and importance over the past decade. Librarians now must master immensely complicated and extensive information systems and understand fibre-optic cables, server networks, software formats, and audiovisual systems, among many other things. Grunberg and his Egyptian colleagues recognize that the goal of building a universal library "makes no sense." Even the Library of Congress, in Washington, with a hundred and nineteen million items in its collection, is selective in its acquisitions, and the cost of being even quasi-

universal comes to some three hundred and eighty-six million dollars a year.

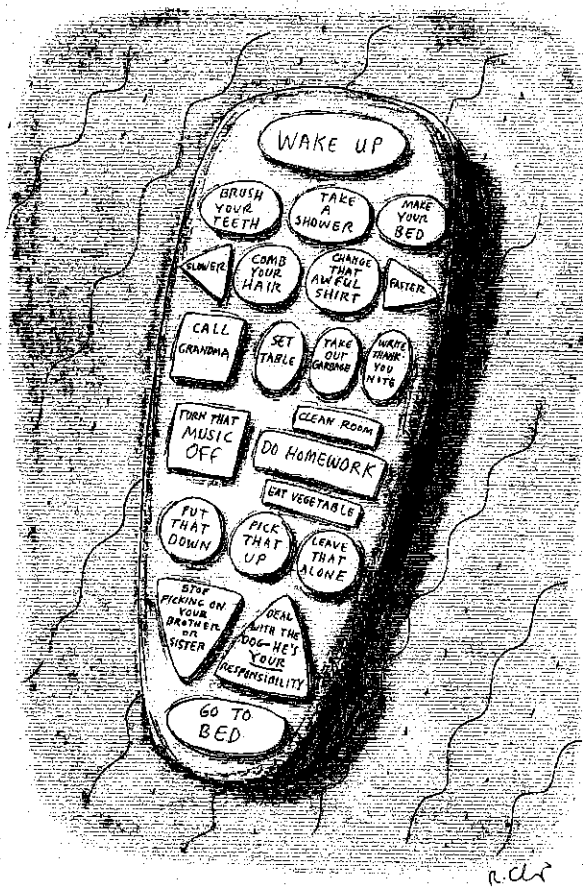
The current Library of Alexandria will try to have a good general collection and several areas of specialization—regarding Alexandria and the rest of Egypt, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean—in which it hopes to build world-class collections. Already, it has made some important acquisitions and received some major gifts. It now has, on microfilm, the papers relating to the construction and operation of the Suez Canal. The Spanish government has given it microfilm copies of the Arabic manuscripts in the royal library at El

Escorial. It has become the custodian of some ten thousand Arabic manuscripts from local mosques and libraries and is setting up a modern laboratory for the conservation of manuscripts.

The new library will also have an information-systems center, with banks of computers and Internet access; a large audiovisual library, which will include the archives of Egyptian television; and a planetarium. There are plans for a business-research center, where Egyptian companies could purchase worldwide market information. But does it make sense to collect all this material in a physical space when it could simply be made available on-line? "Actually, I think it is more important than ever," Grunberg said. "With globalization, there is an enormous need for spaces where one will assemble and conserve the collective memory of a community or of a country. . . . Egypt is a country with a great civilization, an extremely rich history, and a strong identity, but because of historical circumstances—the conquest of Napoleon, the British occupation of the country—many of the cultural niches of Egypt are in great museums and libraries overseas. The Alexandria Library testifies to a desire to conserve Egyptian identity."

But memory and identity are intensely political issues. Since the nationalist revolution in 1952, Egypt has chosen to ignore its long stretches of foreign domination. "The Egyptians are proud of only two periods in their history—ancient Egypt and the Arab conquest," El-Abbadi told me. "The Greek and Roman period is looked upon in a way as an alien culture." In Egypt, history teachers traditionally have skipped from the collapse of the Egyptian pharaohs to the Arab conquest in 642 A.D., leaving nearly a thousand years of Greek, Roman, and Christian culture in Egypt unexplored. Last year, however, the government set up a committee to reform the curriculum to include the Ptolemaic and Coptic periods. And Alexandria, in particular, has decided that its past may well be its future—albeit a fantasy version of that past. There have been at least six plans afoot to rebuild the ancient lighthouse, though no one knows exactly what it looked like. One plan would copy a famous engraving of the monument, adding shops on the lower floors

THE DREAM REMOTE

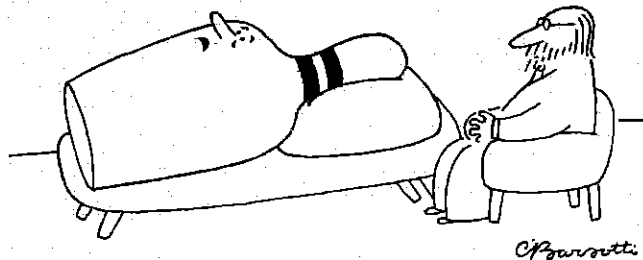


and a revolving restaurant at the top. Another project—sponsored by the French clothing designer Pierre Cardin—involves laser projections. At the same time, French archeologists believe they have located the remains of the actual lighthouse, out in the eastern harbor.

As Alexandria undergoes another building boom, developers are discovering that a surprising number of Greco-Roman monuments lie intact underneath the nineteenth-century city. But, too often, they emerge only briefly before being bulldozed over again by contractors reluctant to lose time or money to excavation. “Unfortunately, the Egyptians have no concept of salvage archeology,” said Jean-Yves Empeureur, a French archeologist who is excavating the ancient lighthouse, and who also heads the Centre d’Études Alexandrines, an archeology project sponsored by the French government. Egyptian authorities will call for excavation only when it is obvious that a major archeological site is being damaged. Empeureur has kept a particularly close watch on the library, since it stands on part of the ancient royal palaces of the Ptolemies.

At a certain point in 1993, Empeureur noticed that bulldozers were digging the foundation in the middle of the night. He alerted Mohamed Awad, an Egyptian architect who is the head of the Alexandria Preservation Trust, and Awad went to see for himself. “The bulldozers were working between one and four o’clock in the morning,” Awad told me when we met in his office in the crumbling downtown area. “They claim they were doing it because there was no traffic around.”

When Awad and Empeureur went to see Zahran, he became furious and ended the meeting. Awad then videotaped the nocturnal digging and filed a report with the police. The French newspaper *Le Monde* picked up the story and ran an article that embarrassed UNESCO and the Egyptian government. A small amount of money was appropriated for an archeological excavation, and almost immediately workers uncovered two second-century B.C. Greek mosaic floors—almost as finely detailed as oil paintings—which gave a tantalizing glimpse of what a full and systematic excavation of the area might have revealed. But the funds for excavation soon



“Why me?”

ran out, and now, ironically, the new library may be burying the ancient library once and for all.

Empeureur also discovered, quite by accident, that the new library had missed an opportunity to obtain fifty thousand valuable books weeded out of the University of Alexandria’s collection, which ended up being sold on the street for about a dollar apiece. “I could only afford to buy about six hundred,” Empeureur told me as he pulled open a glass case to show me some of the volumes he had rescued. Among them were seventeenth- and eighteenth-century illustrated travelogues by Europeans who visited Egypt and the Middle East; many of the books had come from the library of the Egyptian royal family. In London or Paris antiquarian shops, each of these books would have sold for hundreds if not thousands of dollars. Reportedly, the university librarians had first offered them to Zahran but were told that the new library was not interested in old books.

Again, Empeureur was contacted by *Le Monde*, and a short article appeared. The Minister of Higher Education then reportedly made an angry call to Zahran, who quickly took possession of twenty thousand books, though the best ten thousand had already been sold. Zahran denied that he had ever refused any books and insisted that the incident was the result of a regrettable miscommunication.

Ultimately, the success of the new library will depend on whether Alexandria can once again become the literate, sophisticated, multicultural

city that Nasser’s revolutionary government dismantled in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. Unfortunately, however, Zahran’s autocratic manner has alienated him from some of Alexandria’s more important cultural resources. The Preservation Trust, for example, has a formidable collection of photographs, maps, and postcards from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but it’s not likely to go to the library, because the library has yet to ask for the collection and Zahran and Awad have barely spoken to each other since their showdown over the excavation.

Their personal clash epitomizes the deeper conflicts in Alexandria. Though only in his mid-forties, Awad, like El-Abbadi, is a product of the city’s old multicultural society. Half Egyptian, half Greek, he was educated at British schools in Alexandria and moves seamlessly between Arabic, French, and English. He is a working architect, but also spends much of his energy preserving nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Alexandria. “In trying to save this cosmopolitan world, I am trying to save myself,” Awad said. “Alexandria symbolizes this pluralism, this tolerance, and this multinational society that existed throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. . . .

It’s part of our history, but it’s also our future. I can only envision a future for this city as an open, international city. And the library project, whether it will work or not, is at least in line with what we see as the future of the city.” ♦



COMMENT

EGYPTIAN GRAFFITI

The long history behind the Luxor massacre.

WHEN Eratosthratus burned down the great temple of Diana at Ephesus, he did so specifically in order to ensure that posterity not forget his name," the art historian David Freedberg writes in "The Power of Images," about the strange history of violence directed at great cultural monuments. Last week's massacre of fifty-eight foreign tourists and four Egyptians at Luxor, while it was particularly heinous in the scale and viciousness of the killings, is only the latest variation on one of history's oldest forms of political theatre.

Precisely because of possessing extraordinary symbolic power, celebrated icons of art and antiquity have increasingly become objects not just of lunatic vandalism but of terrorist attack. In this century, Rembrandt's "The Night Watch"—a symbol of Dutch national unity—has been slashed twice. In 1972, someone took a sledgehammer to Michelangelo's "Pietà," in St. Peter's, the seat of papal power. When the Sicilian Mafia wanted to intimidate the Italian government in 1993, it planted bombs in the medieval church of San Giorgio in Velabro, in Rome, and also in the Uffizi Gallery, in Florence, the artistic heart of the Renaissance. In Egypt in 1996, Islamic fundamentalists opened fire on a busload of Greek tour-

ists at a hotel near the Pyramids outside Cairo, killing eighteen people. And just two months ago, on September 18th, terrorists killed nine German tourists outside Cairo's Egyptian Museum, in a disturbing prelude to the latest attack.

In choosing Luxor for this carnage, the Islamic militants who are hoping to overthrow Egypt's secular government targeted not only the foreign infidels who contribute so much to its Western-oriented economy but also the country's most spectacular symbols of Pharaonic, pre-Islamic glory. Luxor is the setting of perhaps the greatest concentration of ancient monuments in Egypt: the fabulous temples of Karnak, Luxor, and Hatshepsut; the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens; the tomb of Tutankhamun; the Colossi of Memnon; and the giant, broken statue of Ramses the Great, which inspired Shelley to write "Ozymandias," his meditation on the transient nature of power. Beyond the tourist area, Luxor still moves to rhythms of life which were established six or seven thousand years ago: men follow a horse and plow, women carry huge bundles of sticks on their heads, children drive donkey carts.

Moreover, for thousands of years the temples themselves have been targets of political attack. In the Temple of

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Hatshepsut, where the most recent killings took place, the last works of art seen by the tourists may have been the ghostly bas-relief images of the bearded Queen Hatshepsut, which were vigorously defaced during the reign of her successor and stepson, Thutmose III, in an attempt to eliminate her from history. There were similar efforts to erase any evidence of the boy Pharaoh Tutankhamun, which succeeded so well that his lavishly outfitted tomb remained undisturbed until it was discovered in the nineteen-twenties.

Elsewhere in Egypt, even the protection and the restoration of monuments have been charged with political meaning. In 1400 B.C., Thutmose IV claimed that the Sphinx had appeared to him in a dream, promising that if he would clear away the sand from its body it would make him Pharaoh. Thutmose thereupon did his best to restore the Sphinx in an attempt to legitimize his reign. Foreign conquerors, from the Romans to Napoleon, carried off Egyptian obelisks in order to give symbolic weight to their imperial claims. In the tenth century, Islamic rulers of Egypt knocked the nose off the Sphinx, because local people were still worshipping this representation of a pagan god.

Although last week's terrorists killed people instead of smashing monuments,

they, too, are trying to destroy history—to rid Egypt of anything they regard as un-Islamic. Besides demonstrating a horrifying disregard of human life, this was an act of profound futility. The civilizing influence of Ancient Egypt has long been ingrained in the Western imagination, as is manifested in the pyramid on the back of the dollar bill or in so many murals in American inner cities. A new book—"Moses the Egyptian," by Jan Assmann—finds in the Pharaoh Akhenaton's attempt to banish multiple deities in favor of a single god the origins of Jewish monotheism, a form of worship that in time would be adopted by Islam and brought back to Egypt.

The Islamic militants, who have had an uneasy relationship with Egypt's pagan monuments, would like to obliterate this rich interaction between Egypt and the West. But, as the enduring images of Hatshepsut, Akhenaton, and Tutankhamun demonstrate, what such efforts have done, more often than not, is to perpetuate what they sought to destroy. Instead of erasing the past, the terrorists have written yet another chapter in the long history of violence against monuments. The blood-flecked bullet marks on the Temple of Hatshepsut are simply a grotesque and peculiarly modern form of graffiti.

—ALEXANDER STILLIE