

Rising Up

On the Mediterranean, the modern **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** evokes the grandeur of its ancient predecessor

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I ARRIVED AT THE PORT OF ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT, full of expectation, as I had long wanted to visit the ancient city and its modern library. A world landmark designed by Norwegian firm Snøhetta and completed in 2002, Bibliotheca Alexandrina commemorates the city's famed ancient library, whose exact location—and the location of its priceless contents—remains a mystery. But my anticipation quickly turned to anxiety when I reached the street. Vulturous taxi drivers fought for my fare, and the sidewalks were littered with rubble from the rundown buildings. The driver I chose aggressively pitched other tours to me as he dodged pedestrians and other vehicles on the crowded streets.

My anxiety began to lift when we took a turn that brought the Mediterranean back into view. With another turn I saw my destination. Located on

the Mediterranean shore, the library features a gigantic, sloped, disc-shaped roof that extends below a reflecting pool to create the illusion of the ancient library rising out of the sea. The roof's simple but powerful geometric pattern of skylights and panels evokes the computer chips and solar cells of our high-tech Information Age. The building's curved outer walls, made of gray Aswan granite, are carved with characters from 120 different scripts.

The interior boasts a spectacular main reading room, with 11 levels of stepped, terraced floors open to the grand central space. Skylights flood the interior with indirect natural light and provide readers on the upper levels with views of the sea. On the day of my visit, it seemed that every one of the reading room's approximately 2,000 carrels and computer stations was occupied by a student or scholar absorbed in his or her studies. The quiet intensity was powerful and inspiring—and a sharp contrast to the chaos of the streets at the port.

—William Armstrong, AIA



Beneath the library's sloped, disc-shaped roof (above) is one of the largest reading rooms (far right) in the world. Visitors pass beneath an exterior granite wall (near right) into which 120 different scripts are etched.

