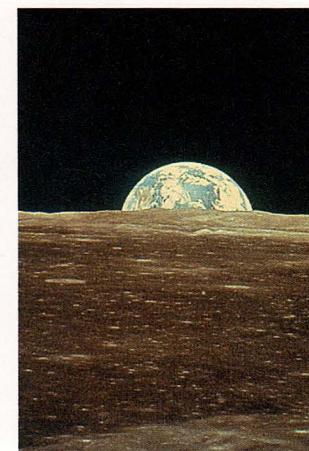


## The New Alexandrian Library

*Snøhetta*



It can be expected that the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina will bear a legacy that will reach as far into the future as its predecessor has provided to the past. We can potentially create an institution whose influence may span from the time of Alexander the Great, some two thousand years ago, to the present and beyond an additional two millennium. This new library can set the stage for provocative debate and insight for generations to come. As an architecture, the objective is a product of its context, both tangible and cognitive. These motives help to structure the spatial intentions characterizing both the old and new libraries in Alexandria.

### **The Alphabet**

The extinction of symbolic language such as Cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs signaled the beginning of a new structure of thinking and this era began very near the origins of the Alexandrian Library. When writing appeared in Mesopotamia and Egypt, a complex system linking length, volume, weight and calendar had already been elaborated. This system could not have been developed if some method of numerical notation had not existed.

Early texts in fact indicate that a high level of mathematical achievement had been attained by the time records began to be kept by the use of words. Livio Stecchini, a grammarian, suggests that within this context, "the first stimulus to writing was given by the necessity of noting down numbers of calculations; the alphabet provided the transition from the writing of numbers to the writing of words." The history of our language and indeed our libraries is directly related to mathematics and the power of early scientific achievement over philosophy. This hidden order cannot rely on endless symbolism; it must recognize the parallel evolution of science and art. It must be sculptural and mathematic yet not become a slave to the primitive stigma of truth found in science.

### **Information**

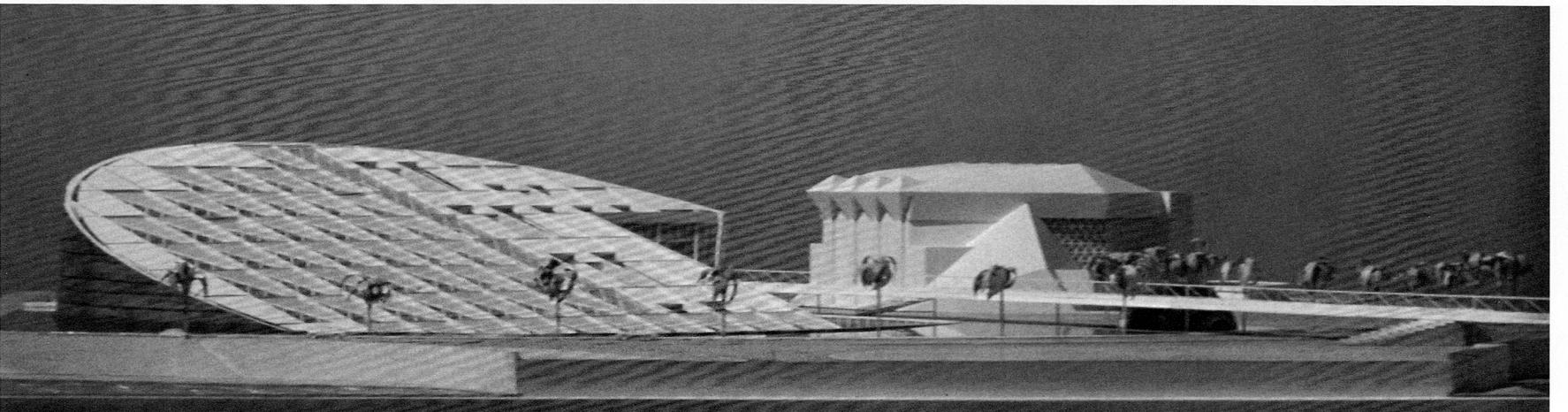
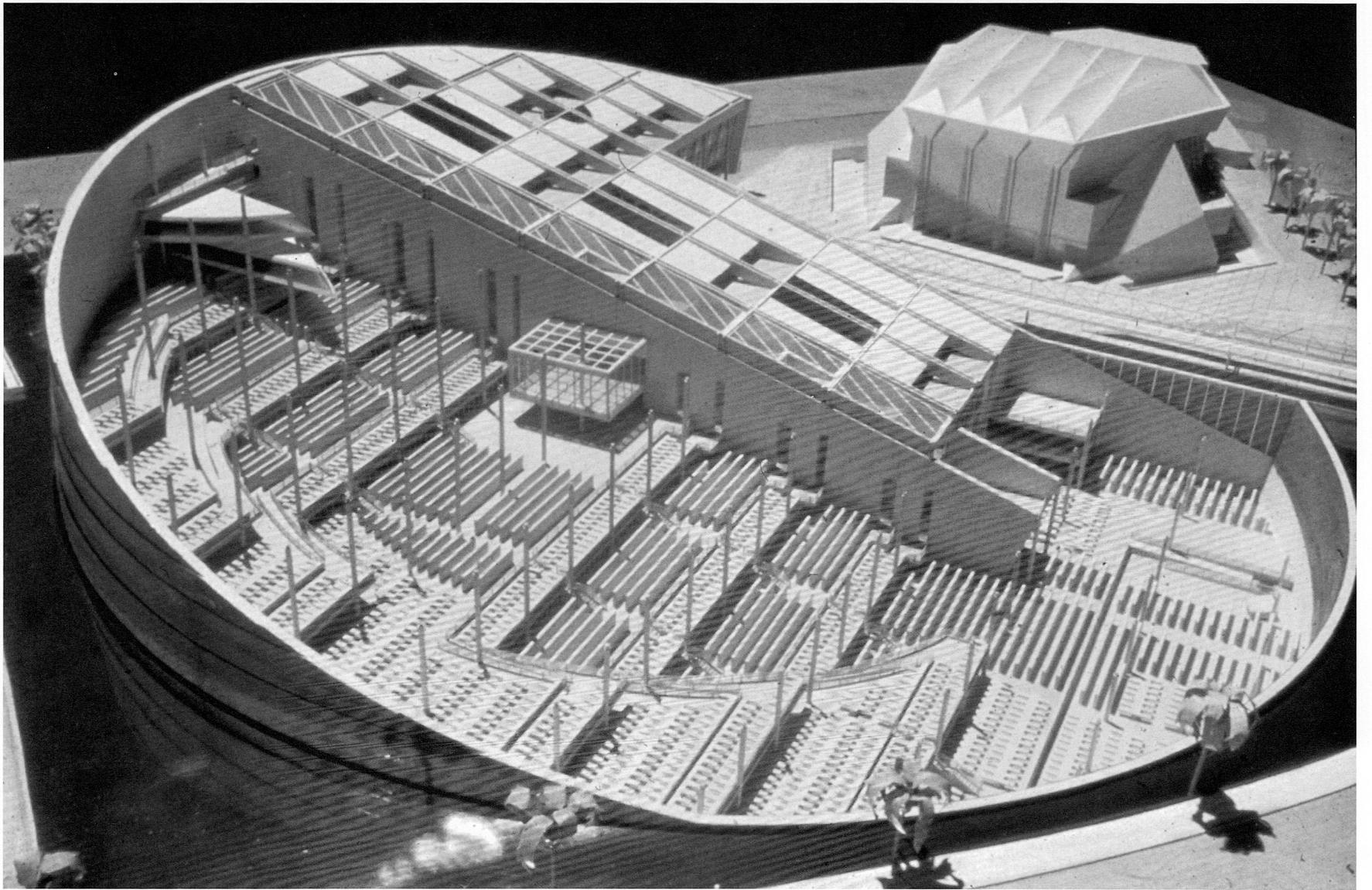
We spend much of our time talking and listening, reading and occasionally writing. We exchange information as a source of energy. We use it to create order, we use it to create disorder. Information allows us to transform and reproduce more information, and we expect the library to be a storehouse. The Alexandrian Library, whose ambition is

to contain a specific collection from Mediterranean cultures throughout history, also has a more idealistic objective; to collect a book from every country in the world. This notion relates the new library to its ancient ancestor whose ambition was to indulge in a type of unconscious information gluttony: knowledge for power. The library represents our intentions to inform and be informed, while also reminding us that our motivations to inform are not always Samaritan but often instinctual.

### **Technology**

As civilization grows, we are realizing the pretensions of a highly developing society which can remain illiterate; technology can overpower the importance of the word. A library must maintain the integrity of ideas and authors with technology as a by-product not a medium. The new library must not allow technology to erase the memory of our past and the origins of the library itself. When we think of the torture that early grammarians, librarians and intellectuals overcame to produce a single book or manuscript, the effort is dispossessing. These people worked in dingy surroundings with little light, feeble inks and degradable





papers. Papers which they knew would soon become obsolete and decay. Yet they continued their work, perhaps because of the information instinct or perhaps because of a maternal ambition for the future. The new library should portray the technology within its livelihood, yet as Oscar Wilde believed, it should "wear the veil of its past ambitions."

### **History**

Egypt's historical presence is staggering and the significance of this historical weight is carried by those who live in Egypt today. Egypt has become a prisoner of its history, however glorious its past might have been. Much of the world expects the very essence of its culture to be found in Egypt and the modern Egyptian is asked to deliver this heritage. He is asked to maintain 3000 years of development, he must constantly upgrade the Pharonic principles and he is expected to spend millions of dollars to rebuild and maintain this heritage despite his local economic misfortunes. If the new library is to be a link with this richness of cultural history, it must respect this somewhat Kafkaesque struggle which Egypt must endure to be able to live with its past.

The history of Alexandria is a patchwork of visitations and events. It is a city of immigrants from the Hellenistic Alexander and the Ptolemies to Amr and Arabia. The city has witnessed European, Asian and African cultures. Since Alexander the Great, it has been home to Julius Caesar, Marc Antony and Cleopatra; Napoleon and Mohammed Ali. Its Homeric harbor was once guarded by one of the seven ancient wonders of the world, the Alexandrian lighthouse Pharos. It is this richness which maintains the life of Alexandria despite its stage of development. E.M. Forster has said in his Guide to Alexandria, "The 'sights' of Alexandria are in themselves not interesting, but they fascinate us when we approach them through the past."

Finally the history of the Library itself is somewhat of a fantasy. It was in this institution that, for better or worse, our ancestors created the foundations of academic thought which have propelled us for two millennium. It was in the Alexandrian library that Euclid seized the elements of geometry, forcing us deeper into Platonic fortifications. We have now only just begun to remove ourselves from the Euclidian mentality. The Library allowed Cladius Ptolemy to scientifically rearrange the map of the world. However, the library also allowed for more accurate achievements. Two thousand years ago Erasthones managed to determine the circular geometry of the world giving it nearly accurate measurement. Herophilus established the rules of anatomy and Callimachus wrote poetry while developing a modern library cataloging system. The new library then must somehow objectively recognize the achievements of our ancestors without simply glorifying them. It must understand the inherent imperiousness of achievement.

### **Monumentality**

The library will inevitably remind us of something important. It exists to remind people of an obligation they have incurred, the obligation of history and its influence upon the future. Yet for the Library to have a significant impact as a monument it must not attempt to reconstruct its past. To purge ourselves of historic guilt through prodigal transcription violates the presence of the library's history as a memory. Simply because the Library has a link with a didactic past, it inherently becomes a monument; it must portray its monumentality in its own originality.

### **Revival**

The Alexandrian library project is rare in that it is attempting to revive both an institution and an idea. Nearly every academic has his own interpretation of what the original library was and how it disappeared. The final result is however clear; the books vanished and no one



absolutely knows how or why. Yet, at the root of all the disasters which may have overcome the ancient library are our own human endeavors. It was our hands that lit the flames and burned the scrolls, our own impudence which allowed the manuscripts to decay, and our resolve which abandoned our own creations. Still most of us instinctively provide the ancient institution with many endearing qualities; intellect, beauty and impression. The revival of these worthy notions becomes self-perpetuating. The revival feeds upon itself and creates itself and is merely assisted by all of us. The new library must feel itself as part of an endless cycle; as a rebirth, as a death and as a life of an idea.

Therefore, providing a space for a new library of Alexandria automatically rests upon innumerable associations. Those might originate in: the prehistory of the "Bibliotheca Alexandrina" itself, and the fascination that Egypt's cultural history contains throughout time. Furthermore, they could be imbedded in those experiences and achievements of humankind and in how the outgoing 20th-century represents them and/or perspective or projections of any kind connected with moving toward a new or different time sequence during the turning of the millennium. Also, associations could be grounded upon what a library "per se" provides, serves and represents. Whether any associations are based upon individual experiences, cultural mentalities and backgrounds, intentions or locations; the space shall inspire, allow, receive, absorb, forward and direct them constructively and so become a vital binding element in space and time.

As a general principle, motion is carried out in infinite, three-dimensional "space." On the contrary, "time" is one-dimensional. "Space" shows the extension of things, their coexistence, their posture toward each other and their distance from each other. Motion in "time" is not reversible, all events

proceed in one direction: past to present to future. It is within this context that the new library appears.

### Intentions

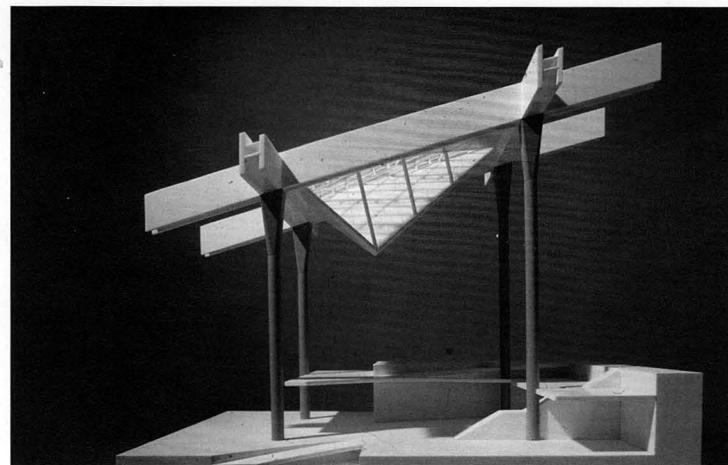
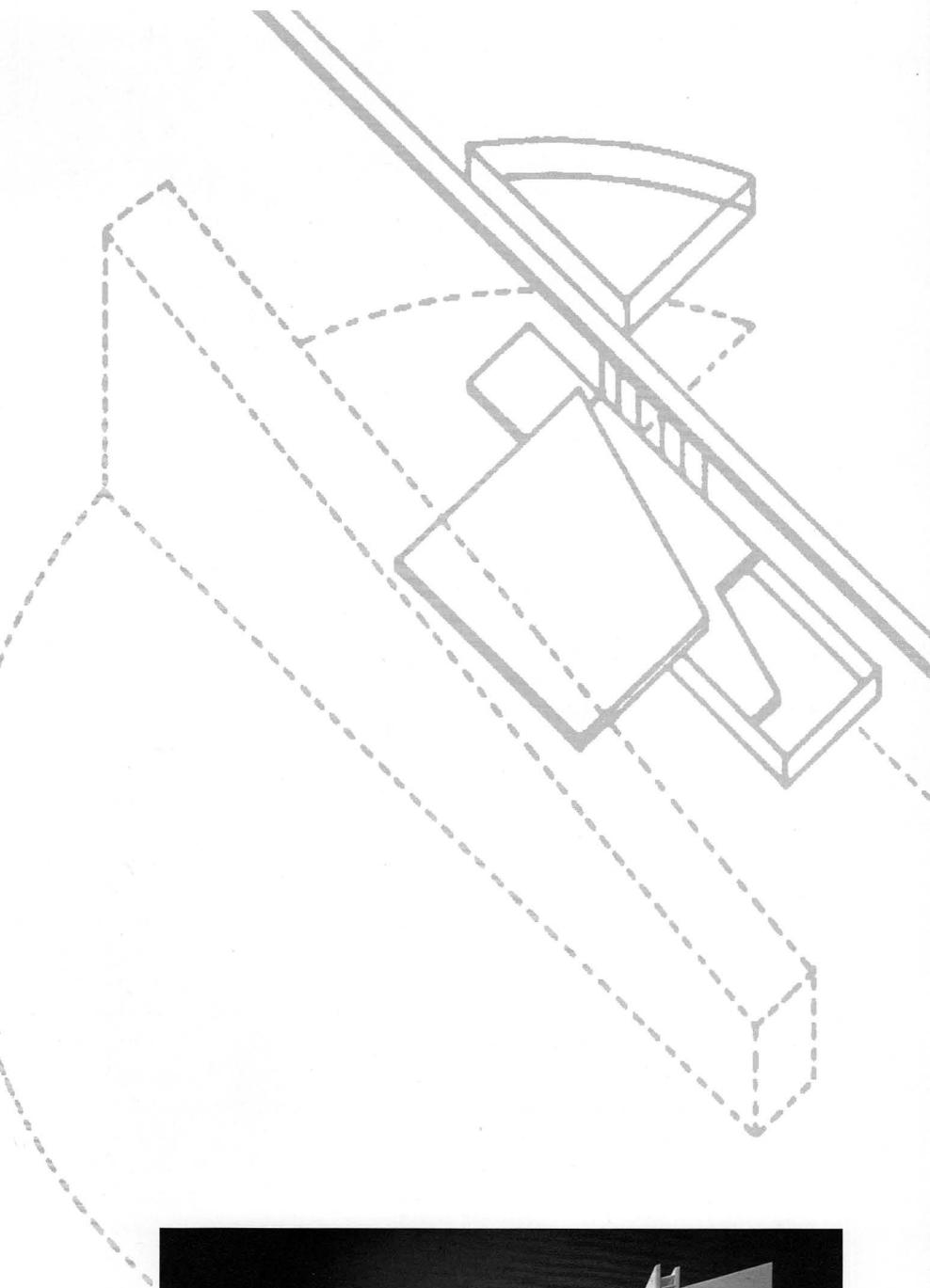
The most general characteristic of the building is its circular shape. Content in itself and exceeding itself equally, it does not act as part of the homogenous skyline along the corniche; a fact which accentuates the prominent object. Seen from an aerial view it proposes to the image of the sun.

The vital aspect of this space concept consists of shifting the building on ground level through tilting it into the ground. Therefore, it incorporates a reflection of the forces below the surface in mirroring them above the ground. Cutting through the surface thus coincides with cutting through time. This assumes that time is defined by the rotation of the earth in interplay with the sun, which is described by the horizon interacting with light, while the surface or the actual ground one walks upon represents the present. Thus the turning point at ground level marks the point at which present meets past and future.

Hence the building—as a joint—inclines toward the sea. It makes itself accessible to the different cultures and traditions in the Mediterranean and those of Alexandria itself. Thus it suggests eventual boundaries as an area of convergence for Alexandria and the library site; it shall then maintain its energies equivalently.

The tilting motion of the building is elucidated through the curving exterior wall which moves and repeats itself in reverse by rotating inside-out when leaving the ground at the turning point datum. A positive-negative image is thus established which intensifies the initial impulse.

This image is resumed once more in the wall texture as the plane is tilted out of the present creating layers of time



modeled upon patterns arising from nature. Here the layering is filled with scriptures carved in the stone relief. The wall, responding also to light and shade, consists of a positive-negative image itself. Although the wall responds to the tilting by slightly bending, it remains generally vertical and therefore applies to central human preconditions. The scriptures point toward the cultural history initiated by human creativity. Therefore, as a medium, it expresses necessities, functions and intentions arising from tradition; translating and creating new issues so as to characterize the content of the space.

In surrounding the building with water, the ground plane corresponds to the sky by reflection. The reflected image of sun and wall is that of a fusion of sun, water and earth as essential forces of nature becoming static with the constructions of humankind.

A surface revolved into quadrangles completes the building upwardly. Due to this composition the so-emerging grid gives the idea of a complex screen covering the interior space. This solution condenses the elevational aspect of the building making the roof screen primarily visible. The arising pattern is produced by solar sails installed at the ceiling, and thus allows sunlight to diffuse into the interior space. The construction resembles a skin which resolves various acoustic, light and temperature concerns.

Furthermore the roof operates as a connecting link allowing visual access to the exterior and vice versa. Although this “coat’s” manner or presentation evokes a simple visual pattern, its structural process develops in three overlapping layers. The organization indicates the building’s interior and exterior structural procession, the conceptual positive-negative movement in organizing the sun shade conditions of the screen itself and the representation of the complexity of information contained in the library. The roof may

be seen as a “microchip” which dictates the various conditions of interior and exterior activity.

The underlying positive-negative movement is once more resumed in the contour of the main entrance area, which allows entry into the library at ground level (present) and leads into the stepped interior volume where past, present and future symbolically connect in a singular open space. There is direct contact with the sky through the roof plane manifesting the vital importance of the sun. Further it emphasizes the significance of the sun in the Alexandrian environment. With the catalogue of meanings which the sun has acquired: mind, will, sovereignty, magnificence and likewise, balance between conscious and unconscious, physical and spiritual—the roof then may also maintain these intentions. Thus characterizing the intention, spirit and aim of the new library of Alexandria.

The design then forms a multiple unit in different respects and on different levels, a fact that only could be suggested in this setting. The library will transform and present itself flexible through varying demands. Time can merge with this spirit, creating a space for human creativity. The library can call for and inspire any type of association and interpretation becoming a place of contemplation and dispute in every imaginable respect.

Text by Craig Dykers and Cordula Mohr, on behalf of Snøhetta

