



Second Edition

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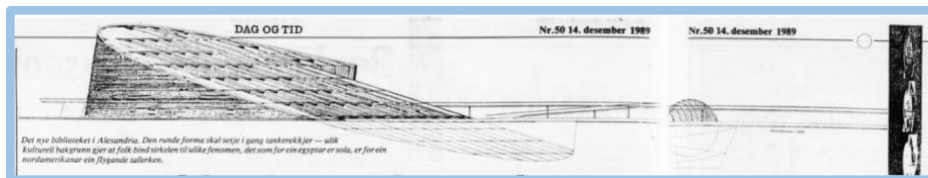
## EXCLUSIVE COVERAGE



## Culture and History

### The Story of the Norwegian Friends of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina

By Bodil Hoem & Geir Rise



The Norwegian Friends Association has since its foundation in 1990 been supported by librarians, authors, scientists, journalists and individuals with a profound knowledge of and interest in Egypt and the Middle East, in the past and the present.

The BA revival was originally planned as an international project, based on cooperation between the Arab Republic of Egypt, UNESCO and United Nations Development Programme. The fact that the winning team of architects "Snøhetta" was based in Norway naturally had an inspiring effect on the foundation of a Norwegian Friends Association.

In the autumn of 1989 Bodil Hoem had an interview with Project Director Prof. Dr. Mohsen Zahran in Alexandria to learn more about the project and its aims for the future. Prof. Zahran then expressed his visions


for Friends Associations to be established worldwide. This interview was published in the Norwegian Library Association Journal.

Then in 1991 our Friends Association was contacted by the Norwegian representative of UNESCO, Ingrid Eide, and encouraged to establish itself as part of an international network of Friends Groups under the supervision of UNESCO.




A steering committee with a chairperson, Bodil Hoem, was formally appointed by UNESCO's Norway Branch. At the same time formal rules/regulations regarding the Association's ways of supporting the Bibalex project were set up as an agreement between UNESCO and the Friends in Norway.

[Cultural Diplomacy Presentation](#)



**Zoom Meeting  
January 17, 2021**



**By Gloria S.  
Pérez del Valle  
IFBA Vice  
Chair &  
Mexico  
Chapter Chair**

1. The Friends Group should provide/present a national gift of literature/material/equipment of relevance to the Alexandria Library. The donation should be in accordance with the demands of the General Organization of the Alexandrian Library (GOAL). Authors/contributors should be of Norwegian origin, or have done research on behalf of Norway in one of the official world languages.
2. Our Friends Group should not have the authority to get involved in fundraising, as this was to be handled on official and governmental level. The Association should operate on the basis of idealism and non-profit.
3. The Friends Association should work to make the project in Egypt known to the public to gain support by arranging seminars and exhibitions. Articles were published in the press; we wished to get the intellectual and scientific circles involved.

Important partners turned out to be the Egyptian Embassy, Oslo Public Library (Deichmanske bibliotek) with book donations/exhibitions, the University of Oslo with book donations, the National Library; and the Royal Norwegian Academy of Science donated a collection of its publications on the Middle East. Other contributors were the University of Agriculture and the Peace Research Institute of Oslo, the Institute of International Labour Research, Norwegian Institute of Foreign Policy, the Norwegian Nobel Institute (Nobel Peace Prize). Private donors have given essential support to the book/media collection. The scientist Thor Heyerdahl has given a signed collection of his works, etc.

4. Financial support for our Friends Association's work has come from UNESCO (Norway), the Norwegian Library Association, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Norwegian Ministry of Development Cooperation, the Municipality of Oslo City.  
Support from private donors made it possible to produce T-shirts designed by the artist Jorun Sannes from the "Snøhetta" team, portraying ornaments from the exterior Library wall and giving information about the Library. The same artist designed bookmarks to be sold in various libraries.
5. Staff training  
A librarian from Alexandria spent two weeks as a trainee with the Public Library of Oslo (Deichmanske bibliotek). A donation from one of the Norwegian Friends made this possible in 2004.
6. Further donations. In connection with the inauguration of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina the Norwegian Friends presented a special gift "Through words" by the artist Ragnhild Windsvold, a symbolical representation of ancient bookscrolls made in the "raku" technique.  
We hope that we through our work have inspired a permanent commitment in Norway regarding the future of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina!

Regarding the future of the library in general:

The members of the committee signing the Aswan Declaration should regularly be reminded of their responsibilities towards the library.

There is plenty of space capacity available in the building to be filled, and the library staff must consist of skilled, qualified and updated persons, and their working conditions must be secured in the best way.

Finally, we strongly support the efforts to begin archaeological excavations on the site of the "Luna Park". This will hopefully identify the location of the ancient library!

Update by October 29, 2020:

The original board of the Norwegian Friends Association consisted of six persons. We are now two: Bodil Hoem (former head of branch of the Oslo Municipal Library) and Geir Rise (special librarian in the National Library of Norway). We have every year since the opening contributed with a book gift to the BA Institute for Peace Studies from Norwegian Peace Research Institutions (Nobel Institute Library, Peace Research Institute of Oslo, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Norwegian University of Life Science, and others).





### Historical Notes and Newsletters

Dag og Tid, no. 50, December 14, 1989

The new library in Alexandria. The round form is supposed to start thinking - different cultural backgrounds make people associate the circle to different phenomena, what for an Egyptian is the sun, is for a North American a flying saucer.

The library in Alexandria was one of the most important institutions of the Old Age, with more than half a million papyrus scrolls. Around 300 BC Alexander founded the city, which became a melting pot of Greek, Jewish and Egyptian culture. The library of Ptolemy 2nd burnt down half a century BC, according to tradition, and it had completely perished by 200-300 years AD.

New "Bibliotheca Alexandrina" for the third millennium

A huge round slab tips towards the sea, towards the sky, enclosed by a wall that is a sculpture: this is how the new universal library in Alexandria will appear. Snøhetta Arkitektur-Landskap in Oslo has won the international architectural competition.

Snøhetta Arkitektur-Landskap in Oslo: Five young men from different backgrounds who will keep an international profile: Christoph Kapeller, Kjetil Trædal Thorsen, Craig Dykers and Per Morten Josefson. Øyvind Moe was not with us when the picture was taken. (Photo: Bernt Eide)

OONA SOLBERG

Snøhetta Arkitektur-Landskap in Oslo debuted as a group in the competition for how the new Alexandria Library will appear. Five young men around thirty, three Norwegians, an Austrian and a North American - on their road up and forward - were in September informed that they had won among 524 drafts from 77 countries — with what the jury called "an architectural event."



Snøhetta Arkitektur-Landskap i Oslo: Fem unge menn med ulik bakgrunn som vil haile på ein internasjonal profil: Christoph Kapeller, Kjetil Trædal Thorsen, Craig Dykers og Per Morten Josefson. Øyvind Moe var ikkje med då bildet blei teke. Foto: Bernt Eide.



The five of them had been working together in different ways before. Snøhetta, where Øyvind Moe and Kjetil Trædal Thorsen have been the longest, has occasionally made their mark in Norwegian architectural competitions. Thorsen knows Christoph Kapeller from studies in Austria, who again knows Craig Dykers from many years in the United States. Fifth is Per Morten Josefson.

By mid-February next year, model, video and technical stuff must be ready. On The 11th and 12th, the International Committee of the Library meets in Aswan in Egypt. Many prominent figures lead by Mrs. Mubarak are to find out how they will raise at least 60 million US dollars — probably the cost estimate is too low — to help the project to be realized. The plan is for the stone, concrete and steel house to be completed in 1995.

“To erect the building is the most important thing for us now,” says Christoph Kapeller. They must set up an office in Alexandria to monitor the construction.

The coming weeks will for the five of them above all be full with long days and a lot of work. The \$60,000 price is not enough to cover even the expenses they have had to take part in the competition, a huge commitment for a small architectural office.

Why? “A new library in Alexandria will be designed only once every two thousand years. A rare possibility. A unique task. The historical and cultural dimensions also make this task very special, says Per Morten Josefson. Moreover it was a serious competition funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and organized by UNESCO and the International Union of Architects (IUA) — not like any Norwegian Hurum or Olympic Games with chaos all along...

The Library of Alexandria has a high priority in the cultural decade inaugurated by UNESCO last year.

#### Sea and desert

Where the new library will sit, there was earlier an ocean. A filling, archaeologically enticing enough, exposed to sand, salt and strong winds from the Mediterranean. Here on the northern edge of Africa, the sun and the sea are free, and in the desert the nomads have lived in tents since unmemorable times.

Here, midway between Asia, Africa and Europe — was Al-Iskandarijah or Alexandria situated — the leading city of the Orient, a center of trade and spiritual life for centuries. Where the world’s longest river, the Nile, dissolves into a delta, is still the city that always has had a strong European character — a Mediterranean city — with much in common with Nice and Barcelona, with French-British colonial port façade and a melting pot culture forming the background for Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet*. Little may be left of the old Alexandrine mentality today, but it is still a beautiful city with two and a half million inhabitants, where the Egyptian elite moves when it gets too hot further inside the country.

#### The long time

In today’s Alexandria there are only ruins left of the splendour of the past. A few catacombs and an amphitheatre remain from antiquity. There are no sources that describe how the old library looked. No one knows how it was, where it was, if there were more of them — we have only a mythical tradition to hold on to, says Josefson, an exciting advantage. The architects went off to Egypt to get a sense of the city and culture before they hired an office for five weeks of intense designing in Los Angeles in the early summer.

“Working on this project has been a fascinating journey into the past,” they say. Back to what we read in school, back to the roots of the Greek words we still have in our language. The word library, “biblion” = book and “theke” = storage are only examples.

“Facing pyramids that are four thousand years old, the sense of time becomes totally different. In these surroundings we find the earliest known cultural manifestations. That’s something else than our nearly 1,000-year-old Viking ships,” Josefson wonders.

### Sun sign

From the sea, the library will look like a long flat ellipse, a subtle expression, which will act as a breach in the façades, Josefson explains. Exactly a breach with everything else, he emphasizes, not an attempt to adapt, but something totally new, different, without similarities with what has been.

“It was clear from the beginning that there had to be a house that is a circle,” he says. There were several reasons why the circular form was chosen, among them that the house should lie on a totally dissolved spot, a turning point between two harbours, so that the round form becomes a way to clean up, mark and define the place in itself.

The circle is a strong shape that makes people react. According to their cultural background, they will connect it to various phenomena, which, for an Egyptian, is the sun — in the Egyptian cultural history it is a sun sign — becomes for a North American a flying saucer. But the most important quality of this house is that it is association-rich, says Josefson. It’s open. It’s a building that’s going to start thinking.

### Towards the third millennium

The house turns to Europe, towards history, but it also goes up to Egypt, inland — and the future.

“In Egypt, one gets a sense that everything has a great spectrum, with an ancient culture and long time since things have happened,” Josefson says. It makes one ask what time is. Time may be defined as when the sun cuts through earth’s horizon. The point you stand at determines where you are in time. The horizontal line is the present.

The house is partly underground, somehow in the past, in what was. Even if there is now a highway outside on both sides, it becomes a place for the person who seeks silence, an escape from the world outside. The enormous roof above the total house provides direct contact with the sky and the reflection from the sea; it gives the possibility to follow the sun’s passage and how day and night shift.

“There’s going to be a rich room to be in,” Josefson emphasizes. Even if it is a house with five million books and two thousand reading room work places, you will experience the room, because the reading space is located at the front, but open bookshelves behind and closed bookshelves further back. It’s a really new way to arrange books. Around it all there is a high long wall that protects from noise. But the wall is at the same time a sculpture, full of calligraphy, a graphic expression itself, a relief, a tribute to the letters, the language, the alphabet. When the sun plays on it, it gives the sense of something alive, plasticity.

### What is a library?

In ancient Alexandria, they wrote down by hand in Arabic all the words they found in the boats that arrived in the harbour, Josefson tells us. Even though this ancient totalitarian society does not attract us, without democracy, with slaves and an oppressed Arab minority — they had an idea of learning, about knowledge, and of documenting for the posterity that is close to and powerfully affects us today,” he says.

Of course one may ask how long one will collect and store books. Maybe it’s one of the last major libraries to be built? But the new library will also be packed with advanced electronics, Josefson says. The whole project is electronic.

The Library of Alexandria is a prestige project for the Egyptian government, a new cultural center with roots back to the time when the Mediterranean was not an effective border between continents. It becomes an international institution of regional and local value by organizing library services in the area and providing the University of Alexandria with a research library. But the library is not going to be a book collection in an area with many analphabets. It is also thought of as a cultural center with showroom, auditorium, technical museum and an international school for information studies, ISIS.

“The Library of Alexandria is an important cultural organization that we are proud to be able to provide our vision of,” says Christoph Kapeller. He emphasizes, however, that their role is to provide a framework for an event, to make something happen, create a place for creativity. What’s important is that people use it. A building without people is no success.

### **Aftenposten, Tuesday, September 26, 1989**

In competition with over 600 architects from all over the world the architects Kjetil Trædal Thorsen and Øyvind Mo in the architectural office Snøhetta has won the competition for a new library in Alexandria.



### Norwegian architectural triumph

- For us, this is like winning an Oscar! The architect's office Snøhetta is in a rush of luck.

As the first Norwegian architects, they have won a major international competition. Yesterday they were in Egypt to receive the first prize in the competition for a new library in Alexandria.

### LARS ELTON

"It's a big day for Norwegian architecture. When we were going to win an international competition, we could not have picked a better one." The competition for a new library in Alexandria is considered one of the most important in this decade. It was organized by UNESCO and the Egyptian State, in cooperation with the International Association of Architects, and brought together over 600 participants from all over the world. 1300 requested the program.

The building is not just a prestige building for Egypt. The library is the central part of a larger plan to rebuild Alexandria as a cultural center of gravity in the Mediterranean. It also has historical dimensions, because the international community with this building wants to honor the memory of the ancient largest library, founded by Alexander the Great more than 2000 years ago. Here, Greek, Egyptian and Jewish literature was collected.

### Roof as façade

The jury's reasoning is not yet known, but it has probably attached itself to the large circular form and the sloping ceiling that, together with the artist Jorunn Sannes's decoration proposal, gives the building a strong personal character. The young Snøhetta architects see the roof as a fifth façade, as it falls from 32 meters above to 12 meters below ground level. Large glass surfaces to the north are laid in the ceiling, so there will never be sunlight on the books. The library room itself, which with its 30,000 square meters is almost as large

as four football fields, will become a wonderful room with terraced space zones between a forest of pillars. "The building's main form gives associations to the sun sign in the Egyptian script, and the falling ceiling cuts through the time frame and shows change in time," Kjetil Trædal Thorsen told Aftenposten.

Snøhetta formed its contribution over the course of a month in Los Angeles. The 80,000-square-foot library will be erected directly on the beach, on a site belonging to the University of Alexandria. The foundation stone was laid down as early as last summer (1995), and the intention is that the detailed designing of the building should start immediately.

Snøhetta received the message of joy on Friday afternoon. Money for the engineering phase has already been allocated. All the money for the construction has not yet been allocated.

So what do they say for themselves? Architect Øyvind Mo expresses great satisfaction at finally having met recognition: — It is especially funny that it happens in an international competition with such participation. This job means an enormous amount to us.

It allows us to assert ourselves in the international market, as well as a great response here at home. Now we need to create a Snøhetta branch in Alexandria.

The architects of Snøhetta are in their early 30s. In a few years they have made their mark in the Norwegian architectural community, with bold projects, including in the competitions for bathhouses at Aker Brygge and the new centre in Slemmestad. Recently, they launched the optimal compromise proposal in the dispute over a bridge or tunnel across the Drøbak strait: Snøhetta's proposal is a combined bridge and underwater tunnel. In three weeks they will deliver their entry to the Hurum competition. There they may get their national breakthrough.

#### Vårt Land, Saturday, October 7, 1989

The trio Kjetil Trædal Thorsen, Øyvind Mo and Per Morten Josefson won the architectural competition to draw the library of Alexandria.

#### **Hooray, we won!**

"Snøhetta" knocked out 650 world architects

By Ingeborg Eliassen, Vårt Land

"It's a long way to the Royal Albert Hall," sang Åge Aleksandersen before becoming a superstar in Norway and even in Sweden. No one knows how many world breakthroughs never came because the talent had too little thoughts about himself. But for a sky-falling architectural trio from Oslo, the boldness bore fruit: They ran away with the first prize in the drawing competition for the library in Alexandria!

The fuss has by no means settled after the small architect's office "Snøhetta" in Oslo received the sensational call from Alexandria a couple of weeks ago. "But now we have been celebrating for a while," says Kjetil Trædal Thorsen (31). He shares the price of NOK 420 000 with colleagues Øyvind Mo (33) from Lørenskog and Per Morten Josefson (32) from Oslo. Thorsen himself is from Karmøy.

Around 650 entries from around the world fought for top positions in the competition UNESCO and the Egyptian state arranged for the reconstruction of a main library in Alexandria after the ancient legendary, which burned down in the year 47 before Christ.

700,000 papyrus rolls

"It has never happened before that Norwegian architects have won an international competition," says Kjetil Trædal Thorsen, who knew that the team had made an exciting contribution to the competition on the deadline 9 June, and who was hoping for a place in the top 20, but who did not believe his own ears when the jury's decision became known.

The Library of Alexandria was the world's largest in ancient times. There are no handed-over images from the site, but in recent times people have tried to reconstruct the building and the interior. From Cappelen's world history, we get this description:

"In the pillar halls the papyrus scrolls lie closely, and in the "reading room", eagerly studying researchers sit. During the heyday, around the time when, for example, Euclid was a frequent guest in the library, the book



collection contained almost 700,000 papyrus scrolls. A crowd of literate slaves copied the papyrus, a regular mass production of the foremost scientific works of the time."

It is no copy the architects from "Snøhetta" have drawn.

The "Snøhetta" architects have participated in international competitions before. But it's no coincidence that they contributed to this.

"We are very pleased that it is a cultural building we have designed and not an office complex. Egypt is a developing country, and some will be wary of focus on such a prestigious project in such a cramped economy. We believe that this library should help fight one of the biggest problems in the developing countries - illiteracy. Thus, this becomes a kind of developing aid. If the library is also funded with international and non-Egyptian money, this will be a gift to the country, while Egypt gives back in terms of its outstanding history. The money is missing

On October 17, Thorsen and the others head to Paris for the opening of an Alexandria exhibition. There, the models of the first, second and third prizes from the world competition will be displayed. Then, the architectural trio will visit a librarian symposium in Germany and be busy creating materials for the major impending sponsorship hunt. For the library is by no means fully funded, Thorsen says.

"UNESCO will mobilize sponsors, but they wanted wait until they knew which project to market. It is intended to be accomplished with the help of both private and state funds."

"Snøhetta" is set to join further and actually erect the building.



IFBA March 17, 2021 Virtual Zoom Meeting  
Features Count Federico Wardal – Coordinating Poetry Readings

IFBA Digital Newsletter March – April 2021  
Articles 200 – 400 words submissions by March 21.