





Bibliotheca Alexandrina

Photographer: Gerald Zugman

1&2 | Dramatic semi-circular granite wall, with historic inscriptions and contemporary symbols.

3 | Staircase in the library's main room, the Reading Room. Snøhetta designed the library's interior to make a coherent design experience both inside and out.

4 | View from the Planetarium Staircase towards the Entrance Plaza at night.

5 | Large Reading Room seen from a meeting room.

Snøhetta was relatively unknown on the world-wide architecture scene until the unveiling of its design for the new library, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, in Alexandria, Egypt. An 85,000-square-metre cultural centre built in the shape of a setting sun beside the glistening Mediterranean, the library was opened in 2002 after a construction period of ten years to a succession of wows across the industry. Commissioned by the International Union of Architects, UNESCO and the government of Egypt as part of an international competition, Snøhetta created something that they hoped would act as a catalyst for a city-wide makeover. The winning design is certainly a showstopper, characterised by a circular tilting form that rises up from the ground to reveal an expansive granite wall carved with historic inscriptions and contemporary symbols. The library's roof is as jaw-droppingly beautiful as any pharaoh's tomb, too, with a honeycomb structure made from glass and aluminium that opens up the interior to the sea. Inside, 11-storeys are capable of storing up to eight million books, half of which are held in the 20,000-square-metre reading room. As the interior's most distinguished feature, the reading room is the largest in the world and has enough space for 2,000 bookworms. The books themselves are stored across seven terraces, which are indirectly lit by a north-facing skylight to afford readers enough light without risking damage to the books. Reading areas and stacks are also arranged close by at the same level to reduce retrieval time. Aside from the library, the building includes a planetarium, several museums, a school for information science and conservation facilities, as well as a smaller library for children. Built to replace the ancient library erected by Alexander the Great thousands of years ago (and

subsequently 'lost' to civilisation centuries later), Bibliotheca Alexandrina is so much more than just another place the public are told to be silent in.

Another of Snøhetta's grandest designs is the New Opera House in the Norwegian capital of Oslo, which just opened this April and which was also response to a design competition. Chosen from 230 entries, it features two auditoriums, foyers, production areas, workshops, storage areas and rehearsal rooms, all of which are divided between separate 'Front of House' and 'Back of House' sections. Arguably the most eye-catching thing about the New Opera House, however, is its roof, which boasts horizontal and sloping planes to create drama in the Nordic skyline. From the inside, the roof's architecture is just as incredible, with either side of the foyer tapering down like inverted ski slopes. Incredibly, visitors are even permitted to clamber onto the roof to enjoy the panoramic views of the city, something that would never be allowed in most safety-obsessed countries. On the outside, the building is clad with metal panels and marble, making it appear like it's rising out of the fjord like a silvery glacier. And in a way, it is, with the structure half-submerged so that musicians in the pit are actually playing 40-feet below sea-level. But they needn't worry; the building has its own underwater sea defence just in case the ferry from Oslo to Copenhagen veers dangerously off course. The heart of the building is predominantly oak stained with different hues, making for a pretty remarkable contrast with the outside. The jury summed up Snøhetta's winning entry with: "The design takes from the city and gives back to the city; it directs, but is nevertheless subservient and puts people and the magic and power of the Opera House at