THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA

The ancient Mediterranean port of Alexandria, one of the glories of antiquity, was the focus of the Hellenic world and by far the largest city before the rise of Rome. Alexandria was, at the beginning of the third century, the birthplace of the great plan to build a library: the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. The library was built in the fourth century B.C. and it became the world’s first university with its scholars including such famous names as Euclid, Erastosthenes (who made the first accurate measurement of the earth’s circumference), and Archimedes. The great library also served as a publishing house. Anticipating our modern libraries in the way it was run, all the works that it possessed were catalogued -700,000 of listed and classified manuscripts already in the third century B.C. – and enjoyed legal deposit rights, being entitled to make a copy of every book that entered the country. But this vast storehouse of learning was destroyed when Julius Caesar set fire to the port of Alexandria in 48 B.C. during the reign of Cleopatra.

In order to revive the idea of the ancient library which existed some 2000 years ago, the Arab Republic of Egypt and UNESCO decided to build one of the largest libraries in the world, housing a collection of books and rare manuscripts which would also give this part of the world an important focal point for culture, education and science. An international competition for the architectural design, including 500 entries, was won by Snohetta Architects (a young, Oslo-based international practice). Then a consortium was formed with Hamza Associates of Egypt which provided the detail design and engineering services. The inauguration ceremony took place on 16th. October 2002.

At Selsela, the Biblioteca Alexandrina lies alongside the University of Alexandria Faculty of Arts campus and it covers an area of 45,000 square metres on the site of the ancient Ptolomaic palace. The library has a panoramic vista across the circular Eastern port to the old Mameluke citadel of Qait Bey, the site of the famous Pharos lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The design concept is a simple circle (160 metres in diameter)inclined towards the sea at an angle of 16°), partly submerged in a pool of water. This circle represents the Egyptian sun that will illuminate the world and civilization. The sloping roof allows a view of the sea and also allows indirect daylight to filter through blue and green glass blocks into the library. These colours, which have always been important to Muslim culture, animate the reading room turning the space into an enormous sundial as the sun crosses the sky. An elevated passageway, designed as an arrow, and an open plaza link the University of Alexandria to the Corniche. The building is surrounded by a wall clad with 6000 square metres of Aswan granite slabs (20cm. thick) on which 4000 ancient and modern languages are engraved. The reading space, where there are 10,000 rare books and 1000 manuscripts, is developed in an original manner along terraces. Also housed within the building are a conference centre (3,200 seats), a school of information, a science museum and to the exterior is a planetarium. In a country where only 50 % of the population is literate is the new library an expensive folly or the realisation of a vital dream?

Part A) Answer the following questions:

1) When was the ancient Bibliotheca Alexandrina built?

2) Give the names of 3 famous scholars who studied in the ancient library.

3) How did the ancient library anticipate modern libraries?

4) Where is the new library sited?

5) How large is the area covered by the library?

6) What colour are the glass blocks in the roof?

7) What is the name of the firm of architects who won the competition to design the library?

8) What material was used to clad the wall surrounding the building?

9) What does the form of the simple circle represent?

10) How thick are the granite slabs?

Part B

Write True or False next to the following statements

1) There are 4000 seats in the conference centre.

2) The new library is on the site of Qait Bey.

3) The ancient library was also a publishing house.

4) The elevated passage way is like an arrow.

5) The ancient library had the right to make a copy of every book that came into the country.

Part C)

Find a word or words with similar meaning in the text.

1) came into (1)

2) way (1)

3) to bring back to life (2)

4) on the outside (3)

5) will light up (2)

Part D

1) it (in line 6) refers to

2) which (in line 7) refers to

3) which (in line 16) refers to

4) which (in line 25) refers to

5) on which (in line 29) refers to