

UNESCO
**International Campaign for the Establishment of the Nubia Museum in Aswan and
the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Cairo**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

NMEC: National Museum of Egyptian Civilization



Model of NMEC © UNESCO/A. Abdel Moneim

Objective

The planning and conceptualizing of the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC) started with the launching of the *International Campaign for the Establishment of the Nubia Museum in Aswan and the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Cairo* in 1982, following a request of the Arab Republic of Egypt in 1978.

At this point it was felt that a new museum needed to be built in order to display Egyptian civilization as a whole, embracing all periods of its history from Neolithic times up to present days and integrating through a thematic approach a wide variety of materials from national collections. Thereby the museum will serve as an introduction for local and international visitors to all aspects of Egyptian culture, both tangible and intangible.

As a civilization museum, NMEC will display some of Egypt's most valuable treasures including, the Royal Mummies from the New Kingdom period, currently on display at the Cairo Museum. Artefacts and objects from all key periods of Egyptian history will be featured. NMEC will also host major temporary exhibitions related to Egypt's past and present culture.

A future leading national Egyptian institution, NMEC will function as a museum as well as a cultural, educational and research centre. Its main philosophy is to 'share knowledge', not only with Egyptian society but also with its national and international visitors, researchers and partners. This pioneering project reflects a new approach to heritage that preserves, displays, safeguards and keeps alive material collections as well as intangible heritage with a particular focus on living traditions and arts and crafts.

History

In 1981 a special working group was formed under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and assisted by a group of ICOM/UNESCO experts in the fields of Egyptology, Museum Planning, Museology, Architecture and Landscape Architecture. The working group as a liaison between Egyptian authorities and UNESCO experts identified a site for the museum's construction and developed a concept for the NMEC.

The site originally intended for the museum was on the Gezirah island located in the centre of Cairo. The site was abandoned a decade later as it did not provide sufficient space for further development.

In the meantime, a national competition was launched in 1983 with the purpose to identify an Egyptian architect - associated with interior designers, exhibit designers, landscape architects and engineers - who would develop architectural, interior and exhibition plans for the NMEC and supervise its construction. The winner of this competition was given the contract to execute the project. Nevertheless, the interior design remained incomplete and its completion was delayed.



Model of NMEC, © UNESCO/A. Abdel Moneim

Given the facts that the original site was judged unsuitable and that the Egyptian Authorities attributed priority to the completion of the Nubia Museum in Aswan, it was

only in 1998 that a new site for the museum was identified at El Fustat, an area located on a lake in the south-east of the historic city of Cairo.

The initial architectural project was to be adapted to this area. It became clear that adjustments to the original plans (1986) were indispensable in order to integrate the layout of the museum into its new location, to update its exhibition concept and architectural design in line with the rapid development of technology and various aspects of museology, and to respond to increased expectations of local and international visitors.

In November 2000, the Executive Committee and the Egyptian authorities started the revision of the NMEC project. Consultancy services were provided by a highly qualified group of international experts from the following fields: archaeology, architecture, landscape architecture, museology, interior design, conservation/restoration, educational services, environmental conditions, museography and documentation. The recommendations that resulted from several expert missions led to a profound review of the NMEC project. This review has been carried out by the UNESCO team of experts in collaboration with the Egyptian authorities. Four expert meetings were held in Paris and a workshop was held in Cairo in order to establish and clarify the museum's vision, concept and policies.



UNESCO team of experts and Director of NMEC © UNESCO

The foundation stone ceremony for the NMEC took place in December 2002.

Construction started in June 2004, but provisional offices and spaces for storage and conservation workshops to host and prepare the collection for exhibition have been set up previous to the construction of the museum.



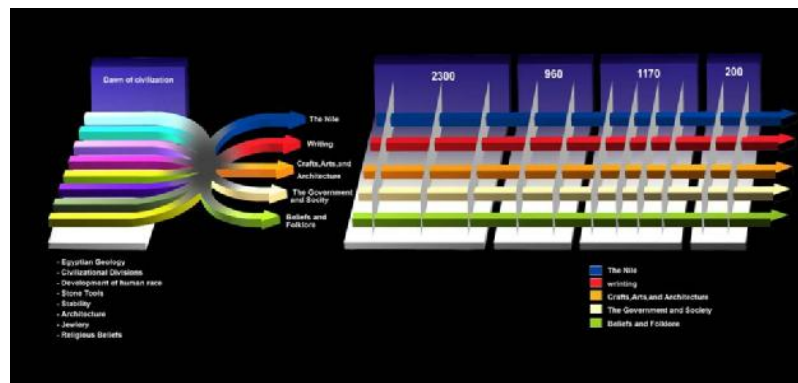
Signature of the construction of NMEC building by the Egyptian authorities © UNESCO/A. Abdel Moneim

Museological programme

NMEC is being built near Cairo's last remaining lake, on the road to the Pyramids and in the vicinity of principal sites from many periods of Egyptian history. The museum complex will include an archaeological path, an archaeobotanical garden and an open-air auditorium for concerts, festivals and cultural events.

The total surface of NMEC will be about 270,000 square metres. Its two main buildings – the museum proper and the reception buildings – will cover approximately 63,000 square metres. Permanent collections will be displayed in three distinct spaces:

- **The Core Exhibition** will highlight the main achievements of Egyptian civilization in a chronological approach featuring eight main time periods: Prehistory, Archaic, Pharaonic, Graeco-Roman, Coptic, Islamic, Modern, and Contemporary;
- **The Thematic Galleries** are organized according to six themes: Dawn of civilization, The Nile, Writing, State and Society, Material Culture, Beliefs and Thinking;
- **The Royal Mummies Gallery** containing the remains of great pharaohs will be the climax of the museum and will recreate the experience of visiting one of the Royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings.



Museological programme © UNESCO/A. Abdel Moneim

Outlook

The work carried out by UNESCO and the Egyptian authorities has resulted in a vision and a set of objectives for the museum which will create a civilization museum unique in Egypt being different in character from other museums in existence or planned. The close dialogue between UNESCO and the Egyptian Authorities will continue until the establishment of the NMEC has been completed.



UNESCO team of experts with the Egyptian authorities © UNESCO

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES ON THE NMEC SITE



NMEC site during archaeological excavations, 2004 © UNESCO

Following archaeological discoveries in the immediate proximity and on the proposed NMEC construction site, archaeological assessment and investigations have become necessary. An UNESCO-expert in archaeology reported in 2001, 2002 and 2003 on the progress made by the archaeological investigations conducted by the Egyptian authorities, assessed the archaeological work necessary and analyzed the possibility to integrate the archaeological findings into the NMEC.

Historical background of the site

The proposed site for the museum lies in the south-east of the area forming the historic city of Cairo: El Fustat. The site lies to the north and west of the junction between Sharia Ain el-Sira and Sharia Masr al-Qadima and is thus located at a key point within both the current and planned future development of the Cairo road network.



NMEC site under construction, 2005 © UNESCO

Historically the site lies in the upland area of Fustat. To the east of the River Nile the limestone valley rises in a series of terraces or *plateaux* to the steep scarps of al-Muqattam. This higher ground was extensively colonized during the great expansion of Fustat in the 7-9th centuries AD, following the Arab Conquest of Egypt in 641AD. The continued occupation of the site into at least the first century of the Fatimid period (969-1171 AD) is suggested by analogy with the parts of the city excavated to the west and south, as well as by the presence of the Fatimid *masbagha* or tannery exposed at the western edge of the museum site. Like much of the southern part of Fustat this area was probably abandoned after the political, economic and social upheavals that affected the Egyptian capital during the reign of al-Mustansir in the 11th century AD. Thus for much of the past thousand years the area formed part of the southern area of the great al-Kharab or 'ruins' which was used first as a source of building material for the medieval city and then in turn as a vast dumping ground. The archaeological significance and national importance of the site should be noted in the context of the destruction in relatively recent times of much of the upland area of the city of Fustat, first during the excavation of huge quarries in this area from the late 19th early 20th century onwards, and more latterly by the rapid growth of both planned and informal housing during the past twenty years.

Preliminary assessment

A preliminary assessment of archaeological remains in the area proposed for the construction of the NMEC was made by UNESCO in April 2001, based on the limited existing information available on the site, supplemented by observations made during visits to the site. This assessment concluded that parts of the site had been affected by quarrying in the 19th and 20th century. The soil in these parts consists of modern refill and building debris up to 20 m and is of no archaeological interest. Large parts of the NMEC building are located in this area.

The other part remained intact, unaffected by quarrying, and offered an approximate 3m of archaeological material above natural bedrock levels.

Broadly, the assessment concluded:

1. That the extents of any surviving archaeology on the site would be limited to the areas not affected by 19th/20th century quarries on the site.
2. That efforts should be made to locate as much of the construction work for the museum within the archaeologically sterile area of the former quarries. This idea was accepted by the Egyptian authorities and led to a slight shift northwards in 2001 of the museum building into the Fustat Gardens. This had implications for the other site boundaries, which were adjusted from their initial limits in consultation with the Cairo Governorate.
3. To ensure that the archaeology of the site be investigated and recorded in line with international standards.

Archaeological investigations



NMEC site during archaeological excavations, 2004 © UNESCO

Boreholes in the western part of the site indicated the survival of the natural rock plateau beneath 2-3m of archaeological mounds, whilst others clearly indicated modern quarry backfill. In addition to the boreholes a number of archaeological test pits were excavated by the Fustat inspectorate of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) in 2002. These test pits clearly indicated that this is a complex archaeological site preserving important evidence for the early settlement of Fustat.



NMEC site during archaeological excavations © UNESCO

Subsequently between March and May 2003 further test pits were carried out by the Fustat inspectorate of the Supreme Council of Antiquities.

The medieval Fatimid *masbagha* or dye house/tannery discovered on the site is being protected during the construction field of the museum and is planned to be part of the NMEC outdoor exhibition as a testimony of Egypt's traditional culture.



NMEC site during archaeological excavations © UNESCO

The inclusion of archaeology as one of the museological themes of NMEC makes its physical link with other nearby archaeological sites an issue of great importance.