

Phoenicians inspire new LAU Byblos library

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The design of university libraries is evolving and LAU's new library on its Byblos campus is no exception to this phenomenon.

Whereas in the past collections formed the nucleus of a library, today it is people who are at its heart. This plays into the seismic change in the way students, researchers and academics are accessing and studying information. Communal spaces for social and group learning are now essential and the transformation in library building design reflects this new reality.

In conceiving the new Byblos library, design concept architects Anna Torriani and Lorenzo Pagnamenta of the New York-based A*PT Architecture started by researching the history and culture of the area. The Phoenicians were never far from their thoughts. As the greatest ancient world seafarers and traders, they understood the importance of an efficient and global communications system. In place of a complex cuneiform system relying on hundreds of signs, the Phoenicians devised an alphabet of 22 letters: one sign for each sound.

The creation and transmission of the Phoenician alphabet happened 3,000

years ago, but it is just as relevant today. In our world, technology constantly enhances and shapes the way we communicate with each other. Inspired by the Phoenicians' dynamic spirit and today's technology, the designers expressed the concepts of movement, communication and language in the buildings' volumes and open spaces, as they conceptualized the new 9,000 m² Byblos Library and Central Administration complex.

The buildings are conceived as dynamic forms and shapes; their exterior skin is progressively layered, providing a shading system according to the orientation. The concept of movement reverberates in the rhythm of the curtain wall and the second skin. The Phoenician character decorative pattern of the second skin is a reminder of the central role of Byblos's maritime trade and local culture in the spread of written language across global civilization. The carved letters along the concrete wall overlooking the amphitheater represent four alphabets used historically through the region: Phoenician, Greek, Latin and Arabic.

While it's important for libraries to stay ahead and provide users with access to the latest online resources and technologies,



research shows it's also about being able to provide a delicate balance of "blended learning" — study that takes place in both the digital and physical space. The interior spaces of the new library are designed to reinforce users' fluidity and communication, through the transparency and openness of the study areas, the many possibilities of chance encounters and exchanges along the open staircase, the lounge corners and the café, as well as the visual connection to the surrounding landscape.

In line with LAU's goal to foster "sustainable and green" initiatives in its campuses, local consultant Rafik El Khoury & Partners engineered the project's design in accordance with the LEED-Gold pioneering standards set by the US Green Building Council. The project is currently in its tender phase and is planned for completion in two stages: the Library building in Spring 2017 and the Central Administration building in Summer 2017.

While libraries used to be known as places of silence with pockets of group work and activity, in the 21st century university they are becoming places of learning activity with pockets of silence.

