

# OMA

## Qatar National Library, Doha

### The Library

The physical impact of books has been important in terms of my entire formation. The first books that fascinated me were the fairy tales of Grim illustrated by Gustave Doré. I still remember the physical nature of those books as one of the strongest memories of my entire life. In the 1950s I would spend time in the library of the Stedelijk Museum – almost like in a living room. My first intersection of writing and architecture was *Delirious New York*, which I wrote in the New York Public Library, going through microfilms, old newspapers, and books. I made one particular seat my own, almost day and night.

One similarity between architecture and bookmaking is that both have unbelievably long traditions but are also forced to be of the moment, constantly updating in order to survive. We have designed many libraries and built a few. Libraries, as a typology, are so exceptionally suitable to produce radical architecture. Apparently, there is a paradox that such a traditional form produces inventive solutions, and that is the case for the Qatar National Library.

The building is 138 meters long, equivalent to the length of two 747s. This is not to boast about scale but because from the beginning the idea was to make reading as accessible and as stimulating as possible to the population of Qatar as a whole. We thought we could achieve that by creating a building that was almost a single room, not divided in different sections, certainly not into separate floors.

We took a plate and folded its corners up to create terraces for the books, but also to enable access in the center of the room. You emerge immediately surrounded by literally every book – all physically present, visible, and accessible, without any particular effort. The library is a space that could contain an entire population, and also an entire population of books...

*Rem Koolhaas*

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Qatar National Library contains Doha's National Library, Public Library and University Library, and preserves the Heritage Collection, which consists of valuable texts and manuscripts related to the Arab-Islamic civilization. The public library will house over a million books and space for thousands of readers over an area of 42,000 m<sup>2</sup>. The library is part of the Education City, a new academic campus which hosts satellite campuses from leading universities and institutions from around the world.

Qatar National library is the latest expression of OMA's long-term interest in the library, which goes back to the competition for the National Library of France in 1989. At that moment, the "electronics revolution" seemed "to eliminate all necessity for concentration and physical embodiment" of knowledge (*S,M,L,XL*). The whole *raison d'être* of the library was being questioned: Would we still need libraries? Could libraries survive the digital culture? With Qatar National Library, we wanted to express the vitality of the book by creating a design that brings study, research, collaboration and interaction within the collection itself – a collection that consists of over one million volumes, among which are some of the most important and rare manuscripts in the Middle East.

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The library is conceived as a single room which houses both people and books. The edges of the building are lifted from the ground creating three aisles which accommodate the book collection and, at the same time, enclose a central triangular space. This configuration also allows the visitor to access the building at its center, rather than laboriously entering from the perimeter. The aisles are designed as a topography of shelving, interspersed with spaces for reading, socializing and browsing. The bookshelves are meant to be part of the building both in terms of materiality – they are made of the same white marble as the floors – and of infrastructure – they incorporate artificial lighting, ventilation, and the book return system.

A column-free bridge connects the library's main aisles, allowing for a variety of routes throughout the building. The bridge is also a meeting space: it hosts media and study rooms, reading tables, exhibition displays, a circular conference table, and a large multipurpose auditorium, enclosed by a retractable curtain designed by Amsterdam studio InsideOutside, who were also responsible for the landscaping.

The heritage collection is placed at the center of the library in a six-meter-deep excavated-like space, clad in beige travertine. The collection can also operate autonomously, directly accessible from the outside.

The corrugated-glass façade filters the otherwise bright natural light, creating a tranquil atmosphere for reading. The diffuse light is directed further into the core of the building by a reflecting aluminium ceiling. Outside, a sunken patio provides light to the staff office space in the basement, and at the same time acts as transition space before entering the world of books.

Qatar National Library plays a central role in the Education City, a project initiated by Her Highness Sheikha Mozah and the Qatar Foundation as part of Qatar's transition to a knowledge-based economy. The master plan, designed by Arata Isozaki in 1995 and inaugurated in 2003, consists of education and research facilities, including branches of internationally acclaimed universities and the headquarters of the Qatar Foundation, also designed by OMA and completed in 2016.