



## Association of Project Management – Project Journal

# The new jewel in Egypt's crown

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*The planned opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum in Giza later this year marks an internationally important event for a country that's also enjoying a project boom, reports Emma De Vita.*

The Grand Egyptian Museum is preparing for its delayed grand opening this summer. It will cover 3,500 years of ancient Egyptian history and house more than 100,000 artefacts, displaying Tutankhamun's complete treasure of around 5,600 pieces for the first time since his intact tomb was discovered in 1922. The hope is that the museum, at a cost of roughly \$1bn, will become part of the Pyramids tourist experience.

The museum's opening is symbolic of Egypt's determination to kick-start its tourist economy. It is also the jewel in the crown of the country's numerous large-scale projects.

It's boom time for project management in Egypt, says Muir Smith, country director for Gleeds Construction Consultancy. Usually based in Cairo, the Scot tries to conjure up the excitement of working in the hot and dusty capital while speaking on video call during lockdown from Glasgow. "It's the land of big projects," he says. "Over the past 10 years the level and pace of infrastructure projects has been breathtaking."

Projects include a programme of 14 new cities that started with New Cairo, with the latest including the likes of the new administrative capital and the new city of El-Alamein on the Mediterranean coast. Egypt also wants to attract international business travellers, opening convention centres including one under construction at Sharm-el-Sheikh. The focus for 2021, however, is the museum, says Smith: "It's almost impossible for anything to overshadow that."

## World's first project manager

Project management has a long history in Egypt. In 2013, papyrus fragments were discovered in caves on the Red Sea coast, 100km from the plateau of Giza where the Great Pyramid was constructed 4,500 years ago. They contained the logbook of a middle-ranking official called Inspector Merer, who has since claimed the title of 'world's first project manager'. He not only logged the details of the construction project, but also referred to the head of works (aka the world's first programme manager) Ankhhaf, Pharaoh Khufu's half-brother, who was overseeing the entire construction.

Managing construction projects is nothing new, then, for Egyptians, but things have moved swiftly for project management since the 2010s. "Egypt has learnt a lot in the past decade," says Smith's Egyptian colleague Sherif Sweillam, also a director at Gleeds. "When we first started, the idea of project management was limited in Egypt, but nowadays I don't think that any project we work on at a major scale would not have a project manager on board."

## **A once-in-a-lifetime project**

Waleed Abdel-Fattah is the senior vice president and Africa managing director at global project management consultancy Hill International. He has more than 20 years' experience in the construction and management of complex capital projects. As project lead on the Grand Egyptian Museum, he appreciates that this is a unique, once-in-a-lifetime project.

Abdel-Fattah has been involved with the project from 2010. When he speaks to Project in January, he says the construction and fit-out of the museum is 98 per cent complete. While the pandemic meant international subcontractors slowed down early in 2020, work carried on with the local teams on-site. With everyone back in place, the summer 2021 opening date remains a realistic prospect.

"You can see all the statues along the grand stairs... the museum is nearly there," he says. The state-of-the-art conservation centre, connected to the museum by a tunnel, is filled with museum pieces that have been restored and are ready to be moved into the galleries. "When you see a building this good, so well designed and with so much sophistication, it's a one-off," he says.

The aim is that museum will become a tourist destination in its own right. Tourist arrivals in Egypt in 2020 dropped to three million, less than a quarter of the record 13 million who visited the year before. The nearby Sphinx Airport is being expanded in expectation of demand, as is the transport network.

## **Keeping everything together**

Key to managing a project like this is good stakeholder engagement, says Abdel-Fattah. This includes everyone from the client, Egypt's Ministry of Culture, to archaeologists, international engineers and local construction workers. Surrounded by colossal statues in an immense building (the statues of Ramses II was brought into the uncompleted atrium so that construction could be done around it), he says you "see just how very small humans are in civilisation". It's a good way to put problems into perspective (but not one available to every project manager, unfortunately).

Working on an internationally important museum with such an ingenious architectural design means that the project "will take time and cost a lot". The high-tech galleries, for example, require specialised knowledge from experts drawn from around the globe. Abdel-Fattah says maintaining a balance between managing the technical complexities and keeping workers happy is critical.

There are many things he has learnt working on this project, but the most important is that "the more time you spend on quality and coordination during the very early stages of the project, the easier it makes your life. Having said this, you cannot control everything!"

## Something special

Francis Archer is a project director at Arup who began work on the project in 2003 when the open architectural competition was announced for the design of the new museum. When Dublin-based architecture practice Heneghan Peng was shortlisted, they approached Arup and Buro Happold to help them in the next stage of the bid – and won. The three formed a joint venture and found Egyptian partners.

"The design team went on a three-day crash course in Egyptology from the British Museum. I've never done that on a project before, where the whole team get to grips with what the museum is all about," says Archer. "We knew we were doing something special." The design team had to make the building suitable for objects that were thousands of years old, with some weighing over 70 tonnes.

"The interesting thing about museums," explains Archer, "is that you have two parties – the design team for the building and the exhibition designers. Who's top dog? There's a conflict. It was good during concept to have a proper debate, but I think the right approach was taken." This meant letting the architects lead once they'd learnt about the exhibition and the context, and then bringing the designers back in to design for the building space.

Other project management challenges stemmed from the way government business is done in Egypt, where contracts are signed one stage at a time. "You do six months' work on a concept design and then you spend six months negotiating the next one. Then you do six months' work," says Archer. It was partly this approach that contributed to the decade-long delay, but it

was also, Archer says, “a combination of restricted cash-flow and funding, as well as the way the construction contract was set up; it gave the contractor very tight working constraints and little freedom in how they worked.” The Arab Spring uprisings in 2010, the subsequent change in political regime and, most recently, the pandemic have also played their part in stalling the opening.

Regrets about the early years of the project include failing to spot where gaps in expertise might appear, such as in international procurement. “They [the client] tried to procure internationally for the design, construction, running and management of the museum for the first five years. They failed, because nobody wanted to take that on – you can see why,” says Archer.

## **The best of both worlds**

All international work in Egypt requires a joint venture with a local partner, which is invaluable for international project managers. A local partner is necessary in any country to help negotiate culture, custom and politics, and give a deep understanding of the local stakeholders. “You could do something seemingly innocent that would just cause an outrage because of a cultural issue,” says Sue Kershaw, APM president and a director at Costain, who has worked on numerous international projects. “You need that adviser,” she says. “You need to be empathetic with the people you are working with and also have patience, because a lot of countries don’t work at the rate we do. And respect is the most important, because you have to respect the people and the culture.”

Where international companies coming into Egypt might once have thought they would need to bring in their own team to get things done the ‘right’ way, now Sweillam says that they have finally figured out that they can work successfully with Egyptian teams at a much lower cost. The trick is to get the best of both worlds – combining international practices with “how things can be done in an Egyptianised way that is more efficient or quicker”, he says.

Eventually (after a change of team on the client side), the Belgian construction contractor Besix was procured with Egyptian partner Orascom. There were 5,000 people a day on-site. “It was a gigantic force of labour,” says Archer. In 2008, the 83-tonne, 9m tall statue of Ramses II was moved from Bab Al-Hadid Square outside Cairo’s railway station to the new site as a symbolic gesture that work was underway. “There was a procession through the night, because they had to close several roads and they had 25,000 people following the truck carrying the statue for 10 miles,” says Archer.

“It’s a fantastic, powerful building inside. I was surprised how successful it really is, and that’s because of the architecture. Some of the galleries have 20m-high ceilings. Overlooking the Pyramids you’ve got 40m-wide windows without any mullions, so the view is completely clear,”

says Archer. He is sure the Grand Egyptian Museum will be a great success, despite it opening 10 years late.

“It’s a pity, because it doesn’t need to be like that. Everybody feels that projects do inevitably go over budget and are delayed, and that is just not the case. As we know, with good project management, it is not inevitable. It happens because people put their heads in the sand,” he says, laughing at his unintentional joke. Now, what would Inspector Merer think about that?

***by Emma De Vita***

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