FROM NUBIA TO KHARTOUM

The Politics of Constructing the Sudan National Museum

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ABSTRACT: In April 2023, just weeks after the armed conflict broke out in Sudan, the National Museum was damaged by fire and later broken into by the militias of the Rapid Support Forces. In the months to come, it would be reported that a part of the museum's collection of over a hundred thousand priceless antiquities was looted. These events chronicle the most recent entanglements of the Sudan National Museum with politics and power relations in Sudan. However, examining the museum's history unveils deeper connections to pivotal moments in the nation's history. The museum's colonial roots, as a building, archive, and educational institution, reveal how the British perceived it as a potential tool for establishing sovereignty over Sudan through the politicization of archaeology. As the project was given new life after Sudan's independence, external influences continued to shape the museum when it became entangled in the geopolitics of the Nile Waters Agreement and the construction of the Aswan High Dam. The International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia, launched by UNESCO in response, was a vital moment during which the endangered Nubian antiquities were 'displaced' to the museum. While the museum was positioned as a repository for cultural heritage protected by conservation law, the museum building itself fell outside of this protection because it does not apply to modern heritage.
Since the museum is a national project, it would come to be governed by the politics of Sudan's successive military governments, each leaving its imprint on the project. All these political influences cannot be separated from the museum, rendering it an archive of critical moments that shaped the country. Unraveling this archive allows us to trace the interwoven threads of displacement, national identity, and representation embedded within the museum complex. It allows us to understand the museum not merely as a static collection of objects, but as a dynamic reflection of Sudan's evolving socio-political landscape.

KEYWORDS: Archeology, modern architecture, Nubian heritage, post-independence, Sudan National Museum

INTRODUCTION: The Sudan National Museum, designed by Petermüller, Hinkel, and Muddathir, was inaugurated in 1971 (Abusalih, 2024) and has been housing one of the largest archaeological collections of Nubian antiquities in the world [FIGURE 01]. This paper explores the history of the museum and its archive by analyzing the various influences that shaped its development. Firstly, the project's colonial roots, as it was initially proposed to serve as an instrument for strengthening British sovereignty over Sudan vis-à-vis Egypt's desire to rule a unified Nile Valley. Secondly, the realization of the museum through its entanglement with the geopolitics of the 1959 Nile Waters Agreement, which allocated water shares between Sudan and Egypt and enabled the construction of the Aswan High Dam. Due to the Dam reservoir, the museum became a part of the International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia launched by UNESCO. Thirdly, the architectural visions within the design of the museum complex that mirrored its influences. Lastly, the role of Sudan's successive military regimes in shaping the museum, leading to the impact of the ongoing conflict since April 2023.

National buildings are governed by the policies and ideologies of political regimes, and for developing countries like Sudan, external influences and regional geopolitics shape the country's national projects as a part of their support and funding. Understanding how the museum was formed contextualizes its architecture in history. It allows us to question how the museum buildings, collections, and curation act as mediums for the power dynamics in the country. Unraveling this history enables us to trace the interwoven threads of displacement, national identity, and representation embedded within the museum

01 School children visiting the Sudan National Museum. © Vaughan Parry, 2010.

complex. It allows us to understand the museum not merely as a static collection of objects, but as a dynamic reflection of Sudan's evolving socio-political landscape.

The paper examines the history of the National Museum through an interdisciplinary framework that draws from archaeology and heritage studies, post-colonial analysis, architectural history and theory, political history, and foreign relations. The research builds upon a diverse body of local and international scholarship. Alsadig (2006), Adam (2017), and Adam and Taha (2022) examine the establishment of Archaeology and Antiquities Ordinances in Sudan by British colonial officials, the colonial legacies of the discipline that was shaped by Egyptocentrism, and trace the development of museums in the country. Critical reflections by Bushra Hamad (1995) highlight the politicization of archaeology under the colonial British administration. Abdalla (1971), Taha (2009), and Ginat (2007) examine the geopolitics of the Nile Valley and Sudanese-Egyptian relations before and after independence, particularly surrounding the construction of the Aswan High Dam. UNESCO's involvement in the Nubian salvage campaign is documented by various sources, including the UNESCO Courier, Hinkel (1978), Säve-Söderbergh (1987), and Carruthers (2022). Dafalla's The Nubian Exodus (1975) offers a detailed account of the displacement of Nubian communities, while Abdalla (1970) analyzes the government's decision to select Khashm el-Girba as a resettlement site. More recently, Carruthers (2022) reflects on how colonial legacies shaped the archaeological work of the Nubia Campaign and created an ancient Nubia severed from the region's population. Bundi (2019) and Mohamed and Emberling (2021) offer critical perspectives on the museum's relationship to national identity and representation. Architectural analyses by Osman (2005), Osman, Bahreldin, and Osman (2014), Bashier (2007), and Akcan (2022) contextualize the history of modern architecture in Sudan, situating the museum's design within the broader framework of Tropical Modernism and post-independence nation-building. Hinkel (1978), Richter (1975), and Bundi (2019) provide technical and curatorial insights into the museum's design and construction. Recent documentation of ongoing threats to heritage amid conflict underscores the impact of war on the museum and the urgent need for stronger protections and international cooperation. The National Museum is arguably one of the most documented modern buildings in Khartoum, largely due to the visibility it gained through the Nubia Campaign. This paper contributes to the existing literature by offering an interdisciplinary analysis that situates the museum's architecture at the intersection of broader historical, geopolitical, and cultural frameworks.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM AS A COLONIAL INSTRUMENT

The founding of museums in Sudan is generally linked to the 1898 reconquest of Sudan by the British. In the early years of Anglo-Egyptian rule, the British actively collected archaeological and ethnographic materials during their colonial explorations (Adam, 2017; Mohamed and Emberling, 2021). This led to the founding of a small archaeological exhibit in 1904, which occupied a room at Gordon Memorial College (now the University of Khartoum). In the same year, Sudan's Governor-General Reginald Wingate expressed his hopes for dedicating a site in Khartoum for an archaeological museum, but admitted that funds to construct such an edifice were

not forthcoming (Wingate, 1904). Soon after, the first Ordinance of Antiquities was formulated in 1905, which defined antiquities to

> *"mean all buildings monuments, remains or objects of whatever age or people which are illustrative of art, science, industry, history, religion, literature or custom and were built produced or made in the Sudan or brought thereinto before the year 1783 of the Gregorian Calendar"*
> *(Antiquities Ordinance, 1905, p. 377).*

This encompassed movable and immovable objects, granted the colonial government ownership of all antiquities and authority to expropriate any site or structure deemed historically significant, and established the position of Conservator of Antiquities to be filled by senior British employees at the Department of Education. As Alsadig (2006) notes, the colonial government prioritized the preservation of antiquities primarily to export rare and significant artifacts to Europe and the colonial metropole. He recounts that the first colonial archaeological exhibit was accessible exclusively to Europeans. It wasn't until 1932 that Sudanese audiences were permitted entry.

The idea for an independent permanent building for the Sudan National Museum was first proposed in the 1940s during the final decade of Anglo-Egyptian Condominium rule (1899-1956). The convergence of interest between the two governing entities seems to have frayed since the signing of the Condominium Agreement in 1899, which came to a head after Egypt gained its nominal independence from Britain and launched a propaganda campaign calling for the unity of the Nile Valley (Ginat, 2007). The Anglo-Egyptian rivalry over the question of Sudan was driven by Egypt's desire for sovereignty over the country and a return to the 19th-century unification of the Nile Valley under the Muhammad Ali Dynasty. Britain, on the other hand, supported Sudan's achievement of self-governance as long as it remained the predominant external influence in the country. In response to Egypt's propaganda, the British funded education in Sudan from the early 1940s to cultivate a national identity and counter the Egyptian influence (Ginat, 2007). One potential avenue for this was to utilize archaeological research to educate the Sudanese people about their history and foster the concept of nationalism, through which the British would highlight Sudan's ancient history, which was distinct from Egypt's, enabling it to contest Egyptian claims. Bushra Hamad (1995) argued that through Sudan Notes and Records (SNR), a journal established by the British Administration in Sudan in 1918, archaeology was politicized to keep Sudan under British rule and defuse Egyptian claims of sovereignty. A proposal for Sudan's National Museum was publicized in SNR editorial notes, which framed the museum as a vital instrument of conservation and education that would disseminate knowledge of Sudan's ancient history. Anthony Arkell, Commissioner for Archaeology and Anthropology and SNR editor at the time, argued that

> *"knowledge of history will sow the seeds of a national culture and will lead to a realization of the causes, both moral and economic, which once operated to raise the Sudan to a world power, and then reduced it to an unknown back-water, causes which are still operative today."*
> *(Arkell, 1946, p. 3).*

The editorial notes mentioned that the proposal plans were prepared by architect W. G. Newtown, who designed the additions to the nearby Gordon Memorial College. It was to be built on the site of the River Hospital (now the Ministry of Health) as soon as it was evacuated by the Medical Service. This site was chosen due to its proximity to Gordon Memorial College, which was seen as advantageous for research work (Arkell, 1946). However, the timing of these colonial ambitions following World War II impeded their realization since the British Administration did not allocate funds to the museum in the Post-War Development Programme (Arkell, 1947).

THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE NILE WATERS AGREEMENT AND THE INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO SAVE THE MONUMENTS OF NUBIA

New urgency for the National Museum became apparent when Egypt decided to build the Aswan High Dam in 1954, which triggered a sequence of events that shaped the project. The hydraulic development of the Nile Valley, which was governed by the distribution of water shares between Sudan and Egypt, had been a topic of contention since the late 1940s (Taha, 2009). At the time, the irrigation system was controlled by the 1929 Nile Waters Agreement, signed by Egypt and the British government on behalf of Sudan, which gave Egypt the overwhelming majority of the shares (48 billion cubic meters compared to Sudan's 4 billion). As Sudan gained its independence and began to reassess its future agricultural expansion, the previous agreement had to be revised (Abdalla, 1971). From 1954 to 1958, negotiations between Sudan and Egypt over Nile water shares repeatedly ended in a deadlock. Resentments and political tensions waged to the extent that Egypt occupied the Halaib Triangle in 1958, an area recognized as a Sudanese constituency in the 1954 elections (Taha, 2009). It took the military coup of General Ibrahim Abboud for negotiations to progress. Despite controversy, the military regime signed the Nile Waters Agreement on November 8, 1959, just

02 Sudan National Museum site in Khartoum. © Google Earth, 2025.

weeks after negotiations began. Egypt was allocated 55.5 billion cubic meters, and Sudan 18.5 billion (Taha, 2009). With the countries' shares decided—and with the exclusion of other Nile Basin countries such as Ethiopia and Uganda—construction of the Aswan High Dam commenced two months later.

From its inception, it was clear that the High Dam would have catastrophic repercussions. The dam reservoir, Lake Nasser, which would become one of the largest human-made lakes in the world, would submerge the villages of 120,000 Nubians in Egypt and Sudan, as well as ancient temples, churches, and antiquities dating back thousands of years (Dafalla, 1975). The affected area in Sudanese Nubia would extend to 150 km, encompassing Wadi Halfa town and twenty-seven villages, along with their entire agricultural land, which would be submerged under the reservoir lake. The reality of the imminent destruction of Nubia's cultural heritage drove Sudan and Egypt to appeal separately to UNESCO to salvage the endangered monuments. The International Campaign to Safeguard the Sites and Monuments of Ancient Nubia was consequently launched in 1960.

At the campaign launch, Abboud stated at UNESCO House that Sudan is "*prepared to give at least fifty per-cent of the finds to contributors and, since Nubia is a little-known country, finds are likely to be of great importance*" (UNESCO, 1960, p. 5). Sudanese Nubia, unlike its Egyptian counterpart, was framed as *terra incognita* (Vercoutter, 1960), a label rooted in colonial legacies that reflected both the logistical challenges of accessing remote desert sites and the broader racialized bias against recognizing black Africa's ancient civilizations compared to Egypt's (Grzymski, 1993; Adam & Taha, 2022). At the time, only around 100 archaeological sites were known. Following the campaign, approximately 1,500 sites were identified in Sudanese Nubia. These discoveries marked the establishment of Nubian Studies as a distinct discipline and repositioned the ancient kingdoms of Nubia as distinct and complex civilizations in their own right, rivaling those of Egypt. In exchange for their participation, half of the findings were taken by foreign archeological missions. The selection of what was rescued also relied on the funding of foreign missions, which didn't necessarily prioritize Sudan's benefit, and Nubians were ignored in this process (Carruthers, 2023; Lemos et al., 2024). The Sudan Antiquities Service identified four temples–Aksha, Buhen, Semna East, and Semna West–to be rescued alongside many other archeological finds.

In 1956, shortly after independence, the Antiquities Service designated an area of 31,348 m^2 for the National Museum in Khartoum (Alsadig, 2006). The site is located on the banks of the Blue Nile in the Mogran neighborhood, which is named after the nearby confluence of the Nile River [FIGURE 02]. The foundation stone for the "Sudan

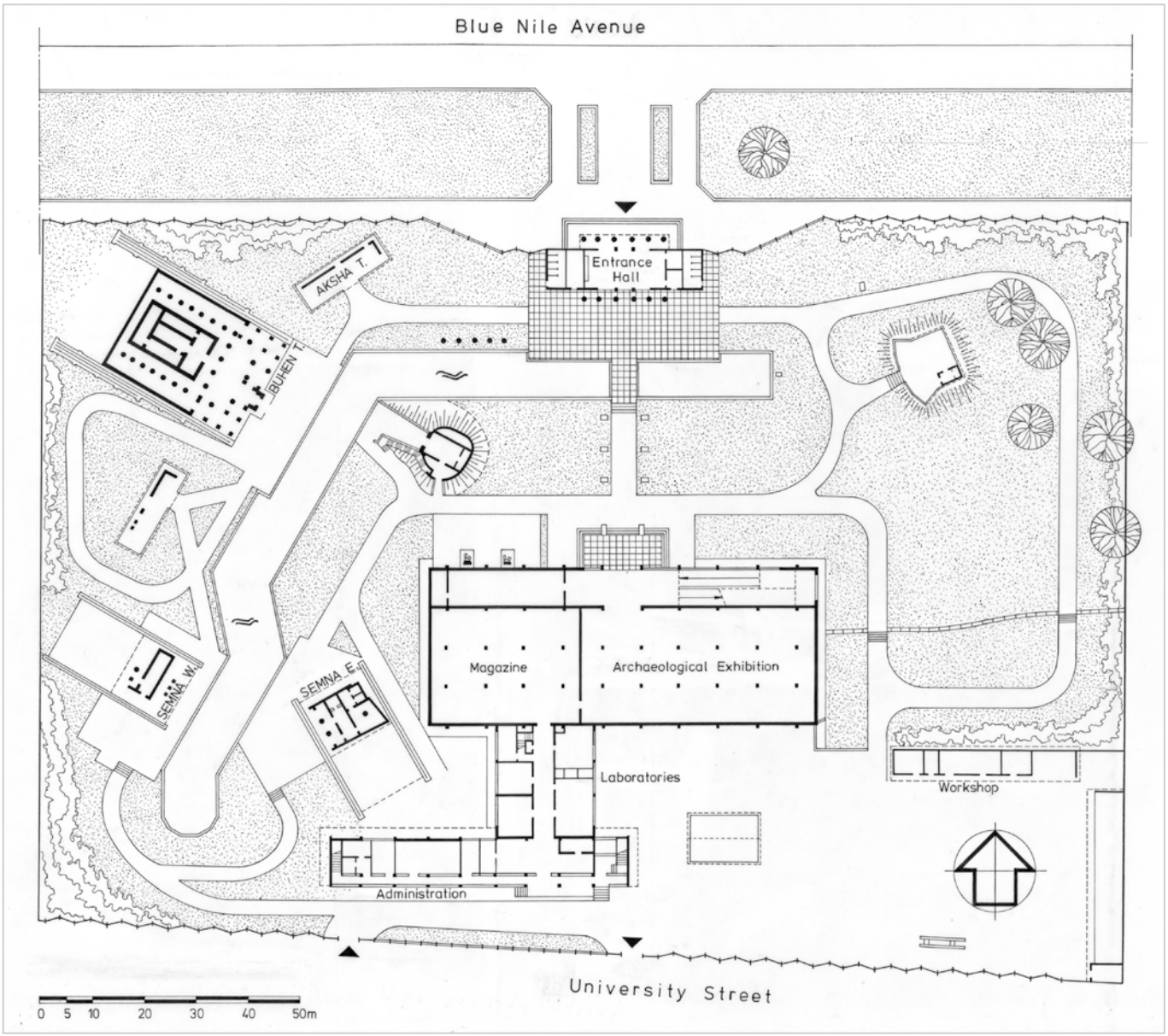
Museum" was laid on November 19, 1959, on behalf of General Abboud, which coincided with the first anniversary of his military coup, and took place ten days after the signing of the Nile Waters Agreement (Bundi, 2019). Abboud's government insisted that the Nubian temples be transferred to Khartoum to ease access for schools, universities, teaching centers, and tourists. The government argued that it would be difficult to access the antiquities if they were relocated to nearby deserted areas, which could put them at risk of being vandalized (Säve-Söderbergh, 1987). Mohamed and Emberling (2021, p. 39) argue that "the Sudan National Museum aimed through its name, its location at the confluence of the Blue and White Niles, and its connection to UNESCO and the international community, to serve as a symbol of national identity for Sudan."

To undertake the difficult task of dismantling, packing, transporting, and reconstructing the Nubian temples at the museum in Khartoum, the Antiquities Service hired Friedrich Hinkel, a German architect who worked for the Academy of Science of the German Democratic Republic. In his book, Exodus from Nubia, Hinkel (1978) recounts that the reconstruction plan he submitted to the Antiquities Service in 1961 for the Lion Temple of Musawwarat es-Sufra—a significant archaeological site near Khartoum where he participated in Humboldt University's expedition—inspired the government to pursue a similar effort to preserve the Nubian temples threatened by flooding. Nubians living nearby were crucial to this monumental task and were hired to dismantle the temples, which were then transported from Wadi Halfa to Khartoum. The extensive documentation of the UNESCO campaign reveals Nubians braving the scorching sun as they worked tirelessly to rescue the heritage of their ancestors (Sudan Radio and Television Corporation, 1964; Carruthers, 2022). As the monuments were rescued and given priority, Nubian villages were left to be submerged by Lake Nasser. It is estimated that 50,000 Sudanese Nubians were displaced. Most were relocated over 800 km away in Khashm El Girba, the chosen resettlement site by Abboud's government despite mass demonstrations in 1960 (Abdalla, 1970; Dafalla, 1975). Nubians requested a sum of £313 million as compensation for their lost homes and palm trees, but were granted only £15 million in compensation from Egypt according to the Nile Waters Agreement (Abdalla, 1971).

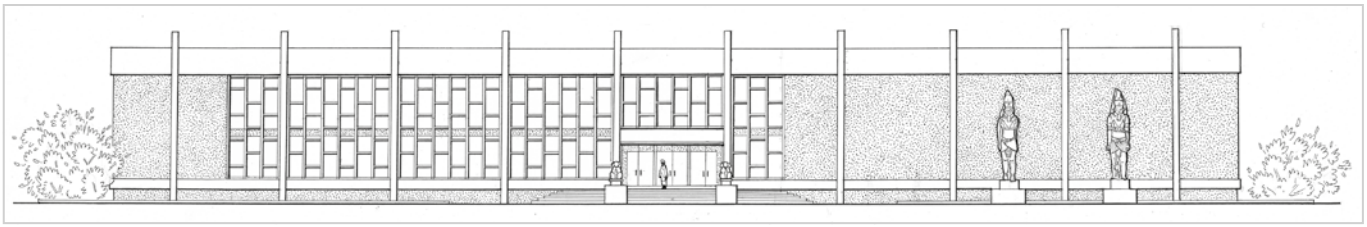
The campaign reflected a broader historical pattern in Sudan's heritage conservation, which was shaped by colonial legacies. Early 20th-century practices were dominated by European-trained archaeologists and technical approaches that prioritized the preservation of monumental, tangible heritage from a colonial perspective (Alsadig, 2006; Adam & Taha, 2022). As Adam and Taha (2022) argue, this framework treated heritage as a scientific field reserved for experts, sidelining local communities by disregarding the significance of intangible cultural practices. The Nubia Campaign echoed this pattern by divorcing heritage from the everyday lives of Nubians and stripping their agency through alienation and dispossession.

TWO VISIONS FOR THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

In Khartoum, the National Museum complex was constructed in two parts: three interconnected museum blocks and an open-air archeological garden. The Museum Board commissioned Austrian-Greek architect Alexandre O. Petermüller in January 1957, shortly after acquiring the site, making him the first architect appointed to the project. Petermüller established the first architectural practice in Sudan in 1954. His firm was responsible for most of the major works in Khartoum at the time, including the Senior Trade School (now Sudan University of Science and Technology), the Chemistry Laboratory at the University of Khartoum's Faculty of Science, the Industrial Bank, and the Bata Shoe Factory (Gibb, Petermüller & Partners, 1966; Osman, 2005; Akcan, 2022). For the museum project, he designed three interconnected blocks: a two-story museum, a two-story laboratory, and a four-story administrative headquarters for the Antiquities Service—today known as the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) (Richter, 1975; Bundi, 2019) [FIGURE 03, FIGURE 04]. Hans Asplund, a Swedish architect, was chosen as a UNESCO architect in 1957 to advise on questions of museography. In his capacity as architect-consultant, Asplund collaborated with Petermüller on the development of the design until 1959. The National Museum could be considered a part of Khartoum Style Architecture, a regional interpretation of Tropical Modernism (Bashier, 2007; Osman et al., 2014). Similar to other newly independent African countries, the architecture of the Modern Movement came to be associated with nation-building in Sudan post-independence. The museum's International Style architecture reflected its international influences and the post-colonial embrace of Modernism in the nation-building process. The main exhibition hall, reminiscent of S.R. Crown Hall, is a rectilinear structure defined by ten reinforced concrete columns that protrude from and wrap around the building. The 8-meter-high main exhibition hall features an open space illuminated by circular skylights [FIGURE 05]. Exhibits span two floors and are connected by a ramp [FIGURE 06]. The museum's exterior, finished in sandy-brown, bush-hammered artificial stone plaster, evokes mud buildings in Sudan, which are suited to the local climate and require minimal maintenance [FIGURE 01].



03 Layout of Sudan National Museum Complex, 1971 (inauguration date). © DAI, Archiv Friedrich W. Hinkel, Z1721.

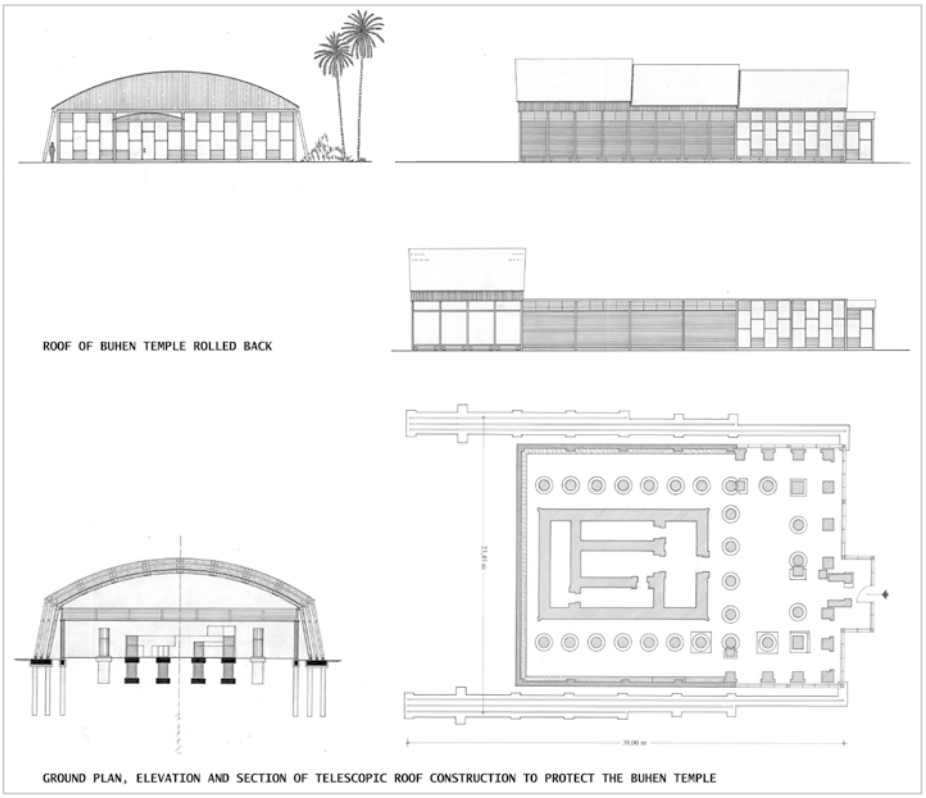


04 Elevation of the Main Exhibition Hall, 1971 (inauguration date). © DAI, Archiv Friedrich W. Hinkel, Z3139-1-2.

05 Interior of Main Exhibition Hall. © Alan Mandic, 2018.

06 Circulation ramp connecting exhibits. © Rund Alarabi, 2015.

07 Temple Shelters in the garden. The artificial lake suffered some leakage issues and has not been filled in recent years. © Rawya Saeed, 2022.



08 Ground plan, elevation, and section of the Telescopic Shelter of the Buhen Temple. © DAI, Archiv Friedrich W. Hinkel, Z3108, Z3111, Z3113, Z3118. Annotated by Author.

09 Buhen Temple with Telescopic Shelter. © Eric Lafforgue, 2019.

For the archaeological garden, Hinkel designed a 200-meter-long artificial lake to serve as the project's "dominant centerpiece" and symbolize the Nile River. Under his supervision, the Nubian temples were reconstructed on the banks of the artificial lake to replicate their original relations and orientation, recreating their origins along the Nile. One aspect Hinkel had to contend with was Khartoum's climate, which is rainier than that of Nubia and would ultimately affect the monuments. Hinkel designed three enclosed steel structures to shelter the Buhen, Kumma, and Semna West temples, as well as two open protective shelters for a wall from the Aksha temple and other gathered monuments. Low cost and efficiency were prioritized in the design; however, the pavilions were movable since they could close during the rainy season and open for the rest of the year to display the uncovered temples (Hinkel, 1978) [FIGURE 07, FIGURE 08, FIGURE 09].[1]

The entrance to the museum, designed by Sudanese Architect El Amin Muddathir, is a horizontal pavilion with a flat roof overhang supported by *pilotis* and integrated into the boundary wall [FIGURE 10]. Muddathir graduated in 1961 as part of the first cohort of professionally trained architects from the University of Khartoum and spent two years working at Petermüller's office following his graduation. He recalls the National Museum as one of the projects "on the drawing board" during the working drawings phase. After establishing his practice, Muddathir was invited by Hinkel in the late 1960s to design the museum's entrance pavilion and support site work on the garden and movable shelters. In 1985, the Central Bank of Sudan issued a 50-pound banknote depicting the museum entrance pavilion as well as a view of the Nubian Antiquities alongside the lake, underscoring the museum's status as a national symbol [FIGURE 11].

It remains unclear whether Petermüller and Hinkel ever met, as Hinkel's account of his work at the National Museum does not reference an interaction between them. The two components of the project appear to have been designed independently, possibly because the decision to displace the Nubian monuments to Khartoum was a late addition that necessitated some site expansion. Petermüller's design approach reflected his other public commissions in Khartoum tied to post-independence nation-building. In contrast, Hinkel opted to create a micro-environment in his garden design to evoke the Nubian monuments at their origins. Hinkel's original design intent, which envisioned movable shelters, became unachievable in 1974 when a UNESCO consultant warned that UV light would harm the temples' painted displays, and they have since remained enclosed (Mallinson Architects & Engineers, 2012). Between these

10 Entrance Pavilion. © Sami Elamin, 2012.

11 Sudanese 50 pounds banknote issued by the Central Bank of Sudan in 1985. © KATZ Auction.

12 Aerial View Sudan National Museum Complex. © Mazin Salah, 2022. Annotated by Author.

two contrasting visions for the museum complex, the relationship to Nubian Antiquities remained a point of tension. While the proximity to the Nile and the artificial river evoke the civilizations that thrived, these bodies of water also serve as symbols of the interwoven relationship between the geopolitics of Nile waters and Nubian displacement, into which the museum became implicated. Both rivers, whether natural or artificial, reference submerged Nubian lands and the separation between Nubian monuments and Nubian people despite their shared history. As Carruthers (2022) notes, the only surviving connection in the museum between these monuments and living Nubian heritage is the names of the temples, which reference the villages now submerged under the waters of Lake Nasser.

THE MUSEUM AND THE STATE

The main construction work on the museum blocks was completed by 1962, but was halted due to financial constraints. Work resumed after 1967, albeit with challenges (Hinkel, 1978). Following the October 1964 Revolution, which ousted Abboud's regime, popular calls for the nationalization of foreign trade and property had a negative impact on foreign businesses, leading to their departure, including Petermüller, who left the country in 1965 (Osman, 2005; Bundi, 2019). The prolonged construction was also influenced by Gaafar Nimeiry's 1969 coup. Nimeiry's regime ushered in an era of nation-building, characterized by the construction of roads, bridges, and numerous public projects, including the National Assembly and Friendship Hall. For the museum, Nimeiry's government urged construction to be done by May 1971 to coincide with the second anniversary of its *May Revolution*. To meet this deadline, the remaining cost of the project had to be drastically reduced from £200,000 to £70,000 (Hinkel, 1978). According to Hinkel, whose responsibilities later expanded to include overseeing the museum's finishing work, earlier material selections were replaced with local alternatives. Marble originally sourced from Italy was substituted with marble from the Red Sea Hills, and special timber intended for the interiors was replaced with locally available wood, further integrating the museum's modernist design into its local context. Some features in the design, such as seven-meter-high aluminum sunbreakers, were deemed "unnecessary extravagance" and discarded (Hinkel, 1978). The National Museum inauguration ceremony was held on May 27, 1971.

Following Nimeiry's embrace of Islamic ideology and the implementation of Sharia Law in 1983, the regime sought to enhance Islamic representation within the museum's collections. This resulted in the Christian medieval galleries expanding to include artifacts from Sudan's Islamic periods (Mohamed and Emberling, 2021). These Islamist policies continued following the military coup of Omar Al-Bashir in 1989. The government initiated a major expansion, the new Islamic Hall wing of the Sudan National Museum (Mohamed and Emberling, 2021; Bundi, 2019). The new building design by DAR Consult was approved in 2005, and construction soon began with Dan Fodio Co. as the contractor. However, due to a lack of funds as well as some rumors of structural deficiencies, the skeleton of the expansion lay unfinished for over a decade (Bundi, 2019). Funds allocated to museums have historically been insufficient and are rarely prioritized in public expenditure (Adam, 2017). This was exacerbated by Sudan's placement under international economic sanctions between 1997 and 2017, which impacted the museum's ability to receive external support. After the sanctions were lifted and Bashir's regime was overthrown by a popular revolution, the expansion was inaugurated in 2022–albeit with discarding its earlier vision–to contain laboratories and a storeroom [FIGURE 12]. According to senior NCAM curator Shadia Abdrabo, the new building suffered from structural issues and leaks despite having only recently opened.

Amidst the prolonged political turmoil, the museum remained without comprehensive rehabilitation for over 50 years. In 2012, Mallinson Architects & Engineers conducted a study of the museum's general conditions for NCAM and the Qatar Museums Authority, proposing the "*Renaissance Project*," a new extension that was never realized. The study revealed that the buildings had deteriorated due to a lack of maintenance. The main hall's flat roof asphalt had deteriorated and would leak in heavy rains. The steel structures in the garden were weathering, and birds had made nests above the Nubian temples, resulting in bird droppings on their surfaces (Mallinson Architects & Engineers, 2012). These conditions worsened over the years.

The declining state of the museum underscores structural challenges in the protection of Sudanese heritage. Generally, 20th-century modern architecture in Sudan, particularly post-independence, is not regarded as heritage. The Ordinance of Antiquities, first introduced in 1905, has undergone two revisions. Initially, the law only protected antiquities produced before 1783, and was first revised in 1952 to extend protection until 1821. The 1999 Antiquities Ordinance introduced a more expansive definition of heritage, encompassing sites, buildings, and objects dating back over 100 years. The latest Ordinance protects the archeological collections, but the museum buildings themselves, which house these priceless collections, fall outside of this protection. Both suffered from limited support. As Adam and Taha (2022) observe, the gaps in protection reflect broader issues in Sudanese heritage legislation, where enforcement has been weak and many sites that should be protected were nevertheless demolished and destroyed by developers, foreign investors, and military personnel. Adam and Taha note that decades of political instability led to frequent changes in the government ministries responsible for heritage management, which hindered long-term preservation efforts and reduced interventions to rescue missions due to increased threats.

In early 2023, the museum began preparations for a full rehabilitation project sponsored by UNESCO. However, on April 15, 2023, armed conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces militia (RSF) broke out in Khartoum, close to the museum premises. By May 2023, the Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab and the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative released a report that confirmed fire damage to the Aksha and Buhen temple structures in the garden (Gunter-Bassett et al., 2023). In June 2023, viral videos on social media showed the RSF breaking into the museum garden and bioarchaeology laboratory. The extent of the damage to the National Museum only became clear in March 2025, after the SAF seized control of the capital from the RSF. By then, the looting of the museum had been confirmed, with reports indicating that portions of the museum's collection of over 100,000 priceless antiquities had been stolen (UNESCO, 2024; York, 2025). Photographs and videos shared on social media depicted the museum's shattered glazed facade and broken temple shelters. The destruction and looting of the National Museum amid the ongoing conflict mark the culmination of decades of neglect, political instability, and weak heritage protection. As a result, one of Sudan's most significant cultural institutions has suffered severe losses that may take years, if not decades, to recover from.

CONCLUSIONS

Sudan National Museum's history serves as a microcosm of the country's political history, reflecting key moments of national development and the interplay between architecture, power, and national identity. Despite this history, Mohamed and Emberling (2021, p. 50) note that "*museums in the country are not currently thought of as places for political debate*" and that decolonization has not yet influenced museum discourse, partly due to the country's isolation from these global debates. This remains a considerable oversight given the colonial roots of the museum and its ongoing entanglement with politics, particularly the separation of Nubian monuments from their communities. These political decisions ultimately benefited the museum, as the acquisition of the Nubian collection cemented its status on the national and global stages.

Within the current context of conflict, Sudan has become the world's largest and fastest-growing displacement crisis, with over 11.3 million people internally displaced and another 3.9 million having fled across borders (International Organization for Migration, 2025). Amid such a catastrophe, addressing humanitarian needs understandably takes precedence, often leaving cultural heritage vulnerable and sidelined. Nevertheless, it's important to address the considerable impact on cultural institutions, as many museums, universities, and archives have been damaged in the war. In response to the impact on the National Museum, a post-conflict future will need to prioritize strengthening heritage protection measures. Recovering the museum's looted collection will require a higher level of support from the international community, as outlined by the 1970 UNESCO Convention to combat the illicit trade of cultural property. The current crisis underscores the need not only for reconstruction but for rethinking the role of heritage and museums in Sudan. In a country fractured by divisions, the very notion of a National Museum should spark debates about the institution's identity, purpose, and representation. It is imperative to question what it means to be a "national" institution in a context of fragmentation.

In recent years, NCAM developed and launched the Western Sudan Community Museum Project, which focused on the heritage of Darfur, the region most threatened by conflict in Sudan (Mallinson et al., 2020). The project prioritized community participation by engaging local leaders and residents in shaping museum activities and training both NCAM staff and locals in new, inclusive museum practices. Education was used as an integral tool to strengthen community ties, raise awareness about the importance of heritage, and involve communities in their own heritage recording. Perhaps a similar approach can be adopted in the National Museum to reframe the nation's history through open dialogue by providing a platform that fosters cultural resilience, inclusion, and reconciliation.

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ENDNOTES

1 In 1973, Hinkel was awarded the Medal of Merit, First Class, by the Democratic Republic of the Sudan in recognition of his efforts to preserve Nubian archaeological monuments threatened by flooding. For more background on Hinkel's work in Sudan, see Lawrenz (2017).

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