

History in the Making

The extraordinary new Grand Egyptian Museum is more than merely impressive – it is the largest archaeological museum on the planet. Designed by Heneghan Peng Architects, it takes its rightful place beside the Pyramids of Giza, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Words: Dawn Gay / Photography: Georges and Samuel Mohsen, Iwan Baan & GEM



The Grand Egyptian Museum rises out of the Giza plateau with the kind of quiet audacity only a truly confident building can muster. A vast plane of pale concrete and glass, it occupies the liminal strip where the desert slips into the Nile Valley, sitting in deliberate dialogue with the pyramids rather than trying to out-shout them. On a 50-hectare site, it unfolds as a cultural campus: 24,000 square metres of permanent galleries, a conference centre, education spaces, a children's museum – a kind of mini city of antiquity and light.

It is also the result of what was, at the time, the largest architecture competition in history. More than 1,500 anonymous submissions arrived for the Egyptian Ministry of Culture's commission. The winning entry came from a then relatively under-the-radar Dublin practice, Heneghan Peng Architects – now hparc – led by partners Róisín Heneghan and Shih-Fu Peng, who initially sent in just five A3 boards.

"I'm probably the more organised, more pragmatic one and Shih-Fu is a bit more 'out there'," Heneghan says, amused at the memory. "I try to get it all in shape. When we graduated from Harvard we were doing different competitions together, and in 2001 we finally won a project. We kept going – and we won the Egyptian Museum."

The win came in 2003. The museum was inaugurated in November 2025. In between: almost a quarter of a century of political upheaval, economic crises and shifting cultural expectations. "We had all our drawings finished and all the construction documents finished in 2009," Heneghan recalls. "Then there was the Arab Spring, there was a lot of change in Egypt, and construction didn't start until 2013. The Global Financial Crisis happened; Covid arrived at the end. It really has spanned everything."

The scale of the brief was mythic: to house the largest collection of pharaonic artefacts in the world, including the full Tutankhamun assemblage – golden mask, sarcophagus and all – as well as both solar boats of King Khufu. The temptation, perhaps, would be to drown in reverence. Heneghan's way through was to keep her eyes slightly above the detail.

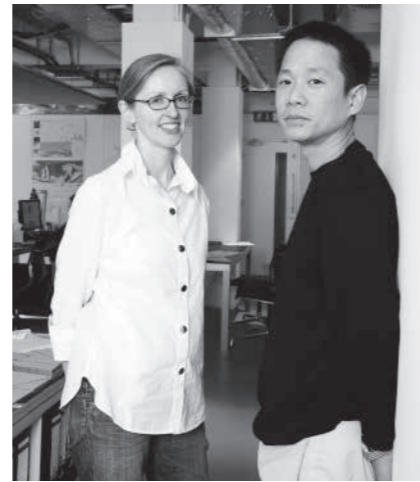
"I think we zoomed above it a little bit," she says. "When we started, we didn't know exactly what pieces were going to go in. We didn't get too caught up in all the details at the beginning, we tried to keep this broad overview – designing for future iterations, because buildings last for hundreds of years, whereas exhibitions change."

That notion of designing for time – deep, geological time on the plateau and the much brisker tempo of curators and conservators – is most palpable in the visitor journey. The building is not about a single room or artefact, but a carefully choreographed procession.

"The visitor leaves security behind at the roadway," Heneghan explains, laying out their early competition drawings, "and then goes through this very monumental forecourt." It's a deliberate decompression chamber: the city falls away, the desert asserts itself. From there, you enter a vast courtyard anchored by a colossal statue of Ramesses II, a sort of pharaonic maître d' holding the centre of gravity.

Beyond, a grand staircase – in effect an ascending gallery – pulls visitors upwards towards the main exhibition halls. It's here that the masterstroke reveals itself: at the top, the glass façade opens onto a perfectly framed tableau of the pyramids. The museum, which could easily have turned its back on its neighbours in favour of introspection,▶

Below: Irish-Taiwanese double act Róisín Heneghan and Shih-Fu Peng did not just see off competition from more than 1,500 practices, they also admit to having had just one project breaking ground when they won the project. **Opposite:** Housing over 100,000 artefacts spanning millennia, spread across more than 80,000 square metres of gallery space on a 120-acre site and carrying a price tag north of 1 billion USD, the Grand Egyptian Museum comfortably lays claim to being the most consequential museum commission of recent decades.





Opposite, top left: An 11-metre statue of Ramses II greets visitors the moment they step into the Grand Hall. **Bottom right:** These sculptural showstoppers portray King Amenemhat III as a sphinx, excavated from the Great Temple of Amun at Tanis. **Below:** The kneeling statue of Queen Hatshepsut is a knockout, but the headline act at GEM is the complete contents of Tutankhamun's intact tomb – shown together for the first time since British Egyptologist Howard Carter uncovered it in 1922.



instead becomes an instrument for viewing them.

"We had a really clear idea, which was built around the view to the pyramids, and that drove everything," Heneghan says. "Sometimes with projects things just fall into place and it feels like it's running itself. For this one there was real clarity, which really helped decision-making as we worked through the design. Of course there were a lot of technical challenges," she adds, with understatement.

If Giza is defined by its collection and its world-famous backdrop, hparc's other major project in the region, the Palestinian Museum at Birzeit, completed in 2016, is almost its mirror image: a museum without a fixed collection, perched on an old farm terrace in the hills above the Mediterranean.

"The Palestinian Museum was a completely different type of museum," Heneghan says. "At the Egyptian Museum, they had a lot of work and needed a place to store it. The Palestinian Museum was driven by something different – it didn't have a permanent exhibition or collection. It was almost established as a place to have a conversation about Palestinian identity."

Here the architecture becomes the landscape. The 3,000-square-metre building is stitched into a series of cascading terraces, a contemporary reworking of the traditional agricultural stone walls of the region. Exhibition spaces, an open-air amphitheatre and an al fresco café are folded into a sequence of gardens that read as both botanic archive and social condenser, with views sweeping out towards the Mediterranean.

"When people walk through the gardens, they start to talk about different food and festivals," Heneghan notes. "So much culture is built around dishes associated with different harvests. It's a way of holding onto something or touching on something, but it's also ephemeral because it's always changing according to the season."

If Giza deals in civilisations measured in millennia, Birzeit works with memory – fragile, contested, stitched together with recipes and planting schemes. Both projects, however, share hparc's instinct for using architecture to frame something beyond itself: a pyramid plateau, a hillside of olives and figs, a people's idea of itself.

Next, Heneghan's attention turns to a different kind of monument: the ruined tower of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in central Berlin, bombed in the Second World War and preserved as a jagged reminder of destruction at the heart of the city's commercial bustle.

Work begins at the end of 2026 on a renovation that is as much about atmosphere as it is about fabric. The new design – inspired by the original church's rose window – will insert circular galleried floors within the shell of the tower, light filtering down to a reflective pool at the centre. It's a delicate brief: to invite people in, to give them space to gather and reflect, without domesticating the ruin.

"After the war it was kept as a memorial, and it's become a site of reconciliation, which seems so relevant now," Heneghan says. If Giza is about the endurance of empire and Birzeit about the persistence of identity, Berlin is about how we live with the memory of violence.

Across these projects, there is a common thread. hparc's buildings do not shout for attention; they stage encounters – between visitor and artefact, landscape and history, loss and the possibility of repair. In an era obsessed with architectural spectacle, that quiet precision may just be the most radical gesture of all. 🌐