

School for Sonic Memory  
Alexandria 2022 Residency Report

The project 'Alexandria: (Re)activating Common Urban Imaginaries' (ALEX) aims to take a fresh look at the relation between arts, heritage and urban life in the Mediterranean and in Europe, through the prism of the antic and modern cities of Alexandria, their creativity and cosmopolitanism. The project is supported by the European Union's Creative Europe program.

As part of the “(Re)activating Common Urban Imaginaries” project, Theatrum Mundi and Onassis Stegi are producing a pluri-disciplinary nomadic residency program exploring sound, memory and trans-Mediterranean resonances called the School for Sonic Memory. Together, and in collaboration with local artists, urbanists and researchers, the 6 participants will form a 'school' for sonic memory, investigating the ways that three cities across the mediterranean resonate with one another, how elements of a connected and conflictual past are made audible within them.

# School for Sonic Memory

## Partnering Organisations

### Alexandria Project

Organised with the support of the European Union's Creative Europe programme, the project 'Alexandria: (Re)activating Common Urban Imaginaries' (ALEX) aims to take a fresh look at the relation between arts, heritage and urban life in the Mediterranean and in Europe, through the prism of the antic and modern cities of Alexandria, their creativity and cosmopolitanism. To do so, it relies on several tools shedding new lights on both Ptolemaic Alexandria and contemporary creativity: the setting up of nomadic artistic residencies between Egypt and Europe, the co-production of exhibitions in the cities of Marseille and Brussels, and Europe-wide forums and showcases staging contemporary creations in both northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean.

Based on these experiences, the project will also be an opportunity for partners, cultural sector stakeholders, researchers and public decision makers, to try and build a collective knowledge aiming at enriching the state of the art of heritage and cultural practices and policies in European and the Mediterranean cities.

Website: [alexandria-urban-imaginaries.eu](http://alexandria-urban-imaginaries.eu)

Instagram : [@Alexandria\\_Urban\\_Imaginaries](https://www.instagram.com/Alexandria_Urban_Imaginaries)

Facebook : [@Alexandria Urban Imaginaries](https://www.facebook.com/AlexandriaUrbanImaginaries)

Twitter : [@Almaginaries](https://twitter.com/Almaginaries)

Youtube : [Alexandria Imaginaries](https://www.youtube.com/AlexandriaImaginaries)

### Onassis Stegi

Onassis Stegi, the cultural hub of Onassis Foundation, is the place where contemporary culture meets aesthetics and science. The place where courageous, restless, daring Greek artists find the means to showcase their work; the place where international collaborations are nurtured; the stage on which the boundaries between science, art, society, education, learning and politics are renegotiated. Above all, Onassis Stegi is the space where questions are asked which feed the mind and spirit, which query givens, with this ideal ultimate goal: generating actions, interventions and ideas which shape and shake society.

The Onassis Stegi building hosts theatrical and musical productions, film screenings, art and digital shows, but its activities and central concept extend beyond the four walls of the center on Syngrou Avenue. Since 2012, the Onassis Foundation has acquired the Cavafy Archive with a view on providing free and open access to its materials, on promoting the Egyptian Greek poet C. P. Cavafy's work and the international character of his poetry and on bolstering education and culture through archival resources.

Website: [onassis.org](http://onassis.org)

Twitter : [@OnassisStegi](https://twitter.com/OnassisStegi)

Instagram : [@onassis.stegi](https://www.instagram.com/onassis.stegi)

Facebook : [@Stegi.Onassis.Cultural.Centre](https://www.facebook.com/Stegi.Onassis.Cultural.Centre)

Twitter : [@OnassisStegi](https://twitter.com/OnassisStegi)

### Theatrum Mundi

Theatrum Mundi is a centre for research and experimentation in the public culture of cities. We help to expand the crafts of city-making through collaboration with the arts, developing imaginative responses to shared questions about the staging of urban public life. Based in London and Paris, we work through performance, design, publishing, research and teaching with partners across Europe and the Mediterranean. Theatrum Mundi was founded in 2012 by Professor Richard Sennett. Its genesis is a series of conversations at both NYU and LSE, driven by a curiosity about the links between the crafts of performance and of city-making. Dialogue between artists and urbanists – expanding the scope of both – remains our core, and generates projects combining research and creative experimentation.

The organisation is supported by a network of collaborators, trustees, and advisors. Its intellectual approach is based in the work of Richard Sennett, who acts as chairman of the board of trustees. We receive core funding through a generous grant from James Anderson, and work with other funders on a project-by-project basis.

Website: [onassis.org](http://onassis.org)

Instagram : [@cityastheatre](https://www.instagram.com/cityastheatre)

Facebook : [@CityasTheatre](https://www.facebook.com/CityasTheatre)

Twitter : [@cityastheatre](https://twitter.com/cityastheatre)



# School for Sonic Memory Alexandria 2022 Residency Report

**Dates: 6-13 February 2022**

## Various Locations

On the second stop of the SFSM residency programme we aimed to further develop the initial questions that had been explored during the residency week in Athens in November 2021: Is it possible to identify transmediterranean sonic practices? What might these practices might sound like? How can the past of one city be heard in another's sonic culture? How does the classification as a heritage site affect the overall dynamics of the surrounding urban environment and what are the politics of preservation?

The following document attempts to capture in an abbreviated manner the activities and discussions that took place during the week-long collaboration between nomadic and local residents in Alexandria.

Participants included local and nomadic residents: Asmaa Jama, Onyeka Igwe, Hatem Hegab, Monai de Paula Antunes, Youmna Saba, Maria Sideri, Ahmed Saleh, Yasmine Hussein, Mohamed Adel Dessouki, Marwa Abdel Gawad, Ossama Helmy (Ozoz), and Mohamed Gohar.

Theatrum Mundi team:  
Andrea Cetrulo and John Bingham-Hall

Local curator:  
Sarah Bahgat

Local facilitators:  
B'Sarya

In collaboration with  
Institut Français d'Egypte



Above: El Labban area

Right: Visit to the Centre d'Etudes Alexandrines



## Monday 7 February

10:00 - 13:00  
Group session  
Institut Français d'Égypte (IFE)

As the first session of the week, nomadic residents and curators reflected on the week in Athens and shared their insights with local Alexandria residents. Some of the themes explored were: Water and sound as monuments; water as therapy; radio waves as decentralization of information; fiction and storytelling as alternative narratives to reality; uncovering the archive through micro-histories and objects; shared and particular mythologies of the Mediterranean region; migration and circulation of knowledge in the Mediterranean; mapping as a method.

14:00 - 16:00  
Visit to El Labban and talk  
Raya wa Sekina house

Visit to Raya wa Sekina house at El Labban and introduction to the neighbourhood with local resident, Yasmine Hussein, researcher, art manager and artist based in Alexandria. What used to be the house of local historical figures, female serial killers Raya and Sekina, is located in the El Labban district and currently inaccessible to the public. For this reason, we held the session across the building in a public space where we gathered and talked about the history and repercussions of the Raya and Sekina murder case, which took place in Alexandria in the 1920s in the context of colonialism and major changes in jurisdiction and public life in the city. The El Labban area is a place filled with historical sites having been one of the main burial places for several Sufi saints.

## Tuesday 8 February

11:00 - 14:00  
Visit to Centre d'Etudes Alexandrines

A visit to the archives of le Centre d'Etudes Alexandrines (CEA) and a conversation with Marwa Abdel Gawad on the history of the Alexandrian Hydraulic system. This session deepened participants' knowledge on the role that water has historically played in Alexandria, and the symbolic meaning water still carries for its residents. The Byzantine cistern was built between the 5th and 7th century AD, which resemble underground cathedrals due to their architectural splendor. It wasn't until the 19th century with new discoveries in the field of microbiology that they were closed as they were believed to be a spreader of bacterial infections in the city. The session also tackled underground myths, the construction of mosaics, maritime exchange before the Suez Channel, an introductory talk to the archives and cartographic collection of the Centre d'Etudes Alexandrines.

19:00 - 21:00  
Live session and discussion  
with Ahmed Saleh

The evening took place at local community centre B'Sarya, with a session led by local resident, musician and producer, Ahmed Saleh, who spoke about his artistic process, and shared his music through a live performance at the recording studio. The session was followed by a discussion around Ahmed's experience of being a musician in the current Alexandrian music scene, and the changes that have taken place since the political unrest intensified in recent years.



Above: Visit to the Kom El Shoqafa catacombs.

Below: Presentation by local resident, architect and artist Mohamed Adel Dessouki.



## Wednesday 9 February

11:00 - 14:00

Presentation by local resident, architect and artist Mohamed Adel Dessouki

Dessouki shared his work on the project 'Save Alex', which seeks to save heritage buildings in the city from demolition brought by rapid development by reclaiming its infrastructure as a public asset rather than as a heritage based on nostalgia, often endorsed by the elites of the country. Through the creation of a fictive archive that reconstructs lost or untold narratives, the artist proposed an alternative story to the hegemonic one promoted by government and private developers. This is exemplified in Dessouki's work 'Monument to the Truth', which seeks to fill in the gaps in the story of the life of Egyptian architect Naoum Chébib using archival materials, sketchbooks, videos, and sound.

16:00 - 19:00

Collective workshop

The rest of the afternoon was spent with local and nomadic residents exchanging their impressions on the city and their initial ideas for the works they will produce towards the upcoming public assembly in Athens in June 2022.

## Thursday 10 February

10:00 - 13:00

Visit to the Kom El Shoqafa catacombs led by Yasmine Hussein

Local resident, researcher and artist Yasmine Hussein led a guided tour of the Kom El Shoqafa catacombs, built in a Graeco-Roman style, often combined with Egyptian elements, an example of the hybrid and syncretic beliefs of ancient Alexandria. They date from the end of the first century CE and signal the start of Christianity as a religious practice in the city, where underground burial rituals and religious ceremonies were performed. On the sarcophagi visitors can see depictions of mythical figures and gods in a variety of forms and motifs.

The rest of the afternoon was occupied by resident's independent research of the city, including a visit to the archives of Behna Films in Alexandria dedicated to the conservation of films and related promotional materials of the heyday of Egyptian cinema from the 1930s until the 1950s.



## Friday 11 February

11:00 - 14:00  
Presentation of Description of Alexandria at B'Sarya

Architect Mohamed Gohar introduced his project initiated in 2013 'Description of Alexandria', a cultural and artistic documentation study seeking to document the heritage of the city and its architectural and cultural memories, presenting a true and actual image of today's Alexandria and the recollections of the past. The project also aims to engage locals in preserving their legacy through long-term awareness. The presentation was followed by a group discussion with local and nomadic residents.

16:00 - 17:00  
Visit of Cavafy House

The team of the Hellenic Foundation for Culture invited the residents to visit the house of Greek Alexandrian writer Constantin Cavafy, which harbors a collection of artifacts and writings of the author tracing historical links between the two cities.

19:00 - 22:00  
Dinner and listening session hosted by Ozoz

The day culminated with dinner and a listening session hosted by local music collector Ozoz at his place. He shared his views on Alexandria through songs, focusing on community radio, vinyl, tapes, and folk songs in vernacular genres such as iskandarani, sa'idi, zaffa, masmudi kabir, aqsaq, and settat ashar.

## Saturday 12 February

11:00 - 13:00  
Reflections on the week  
Planning session for next steps

The last morning of the residency took place at IFE and was dedicated to a collective discussion with Theatrum Mundi curators the next steps of the residency as well as reflecting on the weeks spent in Athens and Alexandria as local and nomadic residents prepare to showcase their works in the public assembly at Onassis Stegi, which will take place in Athens in June 2022.

18:00 - 19:00  
Screening of Domestic Tourism by Maha Maamoun

The final activity of the Alexandria residency took place at the cinema of the IFE, where the film Domestic Tourism II (Maha Maamoun, 2009) was screened. The metafilm is a collection of Egyptian films that have the Pyramids of Giza as a backdrop and reveal the diverse cinematic representations of the touristic site, and how they are implicated in Cairo's ongoing negotiations and active struggle over the past and present.



## Overview of themes

Expanding on the core themes of the residency (sound as resonance and shared historical past, present and future imaginaries in Athens, Alexandria and Marseille) new threads emerged during the residency week in Alexandria:

- Fiction as a way of reconstructing and imagining alternative realities.
- The need of reassessing the meaning of what an archive is and can be.
- The material identity of the mediterranean as an infrastructure of humans.
- Being a citizen of the Mediterranean sea; Mediterranean rather than national identity.
- Second city syndrome as a way of capturing the experiences of urban non capital residents.
- Mediterranean culture and religion as syncretism in the Levant.
- Toxic nostalgia: the dangers of living in the past and refuting progress as inevitable.
- The tension between the political imagination of utopia against a reality and history of defeat.
- Water as a source for circulation, cultural capital, merchants and its relationship to a colonial past. Reflections on water grids and social class - the privatization of water.
- Mapping as a documentation method.

Possible collaborative outcomes and formats:

- A collective repository of sounds/ texts/objects which tell different nomadic stories that keep moving.
- A hybrid text and sound piece based on field recordings, sound piece accompanied by cartographic mapping project.
- A radio day based in Marseille, compiling a soundbank related to a transmission system of transmitters that have content related to the SFSM that are all tuned to the same frequency.
- Piece for 3 voices - each voice based on one of the cities visited, mix of human and non human voices.
- A scent that evokes a feeling or memory in space to accompany an audio piece.
- Creating a character based on the sea and creating a mythology and folklore around this character - using this for the basis to write a series of poems, and potential sonic work.



The international project “Alexandria: (Re)activating Common Urban Imaginaries” is implemented by the partners Mucem (FR), University of Leiden (NL), Kunsthall Aarhus (DK), Undo Point Contemporary Arts (CY), Musée Royal de Mariemont (BE), Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels/BOZAR (BE), Ariona Hellas AE (GR) and Cittadellarte (IT), with the assistance of the associated partners Cluster (Egypt), Institut Français d’Alexandrie (Egypt) and Theatrum Mundi (UK).



**ONASSIS  
STEGI**

**THEATRUM  
MUNDI**

**Bozar**

**Mucem**

**INSTITUT  
FRANÇAIS**  
Egypte

**CLUSTER**

**Point**

**Kunsthall Aarhus**



Theatrum Mundi is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, with the charitable aim of improving the understanding of cities through education and research. We think that collaboration with artists can offer city-makers — architects, planners, engineers, and urbanists — critical approaches to the way their crafts shape the public life of cities.

Our concern is for the ways the public lives of cities, in all their forms, are understood and designed. We aim to enrich these by engaging urbanists in co-production of knowledge, culture, and design, with artists, writers, performers, and scholars.

We convene practitioners and scholars in workshops, seminars, public events, and creative projects. We also publish independently and through other platforms. Established now as a charity based in London, our projects and programmes operate internationally with a wide range of partners.

Theatrum Mundi was founded at LSE Cities in 2012, as a series of conversations led by LSE Professor of Sociology Richard Sennett and Dr Adam Kaasa. It was established as a research project at LSE Cities through seed funding from Nesta, and at the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University through a grant from the Mellon Foundation. After 5 years of incubation and through the kind support of colleagues at both NYU and LSE, it became an independent charity in 2017.

Credits  
Text: Andrea Cetrulo  
Design: Cecily Chua

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*School for Sonic Memory* is a Nomadic Mediterranean Residency programme focused on Sound and the Politics of Heritage. As part of the ALEX Creative Europe project coordinated by MUCEM, Theatrum Mundi and Onassis Stegi are producing a pluri-disciplinary nomadic residency program exploring sound, memory and trans-Mediterranean resonances.