

Volait Mercedes,

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The Italian contribution to the construction of the new city of Heliopolis

**Mercedes Volait
(CNRS)**

A city born of a railway

A city created *ex nihilo* on the edge of Cairo, Heliopolis arose on the initiative of two railway men: the Belgian baron Edouard Empain, one of the entrepreneurs of the Parisian metro, who had been granted the management of Cairo's streetcar network in 1894, and his partner Boghos Nubar, a one-time student at the École centrale des arts et manufactures and administrator of the Egyptian State Railways. The city's original nucleus was developed at the extremity of a vast concession of land (2,500 hectares) obtained in 1905 in the Eastern desert abutting on Cairo, on a site that had previously been graded by serving as a maneuvering field for the British army. The contract provided for the operation of public transportation means to link Cairo to the planned settlement. The challenge was to offer the inhabitants of the Egyptian capital that were poorly-housed, affordable modern dwellings, easily and quickly reached from the city center. The real estate company set up for this purpose in 1906 under the name *Cairo Electric Railways and Heliopolis Oases Company*, initially planned to realize a "series of oases" that would extend for about 100 km between Cairo and Suez, probably influenced by the model of Arturo Soria y Mata's linear city, but only one was eventually built. According to the project promoters' assertions, the residential offer targeted the demands "of the middle-class element", as well as those of "merchants and the working-class element." The plan – as the French-Belgian shareholders were reminded in 1911 – was to build "a city of middle-rank employees and craftsmen" that could also host very economical housing, such type being the one offering the best financial returns.¹ The average standard of Heliopolis' housing, as well as its architecture, precisely reflected this option, intended to meet the needs of the middle classes of Egyptian society.

The construction of the city took place in two major phases.² Up until the First World War, most of the housing was built by the Belgian company. Luxury constructions were undertaken for explicitly "publicity-oriented" aims: the main avenue was lined with buildings in "monumental Arab style," with columns and arcades, and at its ends were a colossal hotel and a hippodrome that flanked an amusement park. Visitors had the impression of a universal exhibition's setting. Groups of detached, semi-detached or row houses were built for the middle-class clientele, and proposed identical layouts behind "Romanesque," "Arab" or "Italian Renaissance" facades. A few bungalows were built to house Egyptian government employees. At the other end of the oasis, a working-class

neighborhood called “Garden City” consisted of a walled “indigenous city” grouping basic dwelling units, of blocks of balcony-access flats and of small, single-storey houses. In 1920, the city already featured 627 housing units and housed about 13,000 inhabitants.³

The period of private construction

A second phase of realization began just after the war, a period of extremely rapid growth in private initiative. Until then, few private individuals or institutions had invested in the city, despite efforts to attract them. The company offered each congregation or philanthropic organization land at a symbolic price (1 piaster per square meter) on which to build places of worship or educational institutions. The Melkite (Greek-Catholic) community was one of the first to accept the opportunity: its church of S. Cyril, by Ettore Morello and Habib Ayrout, was inaugurated in 1913. Most of the other places of worship, which in 1940 numbered twenty comprising all religions, date to the period between the two world wars. The same applies to most educational institutions run by religious or civil organizations. Three early exceptions are the Melachrino Foundation, which in 1915 commissioned a plan for a school for the Greek-Orthodox community to Ernesto Verrucci (1874-1945), or the Brothers of the Christian schools and the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, both present from the early 1910s. Here again, the increase was spectacular: in 1940 Heliopolis had no less than 34 schools. The private clientele followed soon after in this evolution; construction sites owing to private initiatives multiplied at an equal rate beginning in the 1920s. The unfolding activity was intense: in 1937, the central nucleus of Heliopolis held about 1750 buildings (of which 55% due to private initiative) on some 280 hectares, and more than 30,000 inhabitants. In less than thirty years, the plan conceived by a small group of visionaries took shape and met with the anticipated success.

Italian investment

The contribution of Italian architects⁴ was also most considerable in the period between the wars. Apart from Ettore Morello, who designed prototypes of bungalows for employees of the Public Works Department as early as 1907, all professionals identified (39 names to the present day) worked after 1920. Their clientele was essentially local, encompassing Copt or Muslim figures and numerous Syro-Lebanese or Egyptian Jewish families. Italian patrons were few: evidence that the Italian colony was late to establish itself in Heliopolis is offered by the fact that education in Italian (through the *Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians) was not available until 1932.

In terms of number of constructions, Italian professionals ranked third, after Armenian and Syro-Lebanese builders. Three types of professional profiles can be distinguished among the 39 Italians individuated: the artist of repute, the occasional builder and the local entrepreneur. In general, their level of education was not particularly high, as was common in Italy, although the profession began to be regulated in 1923.⁵ Most seem to have learned their trades on construction sites. A few - such as C. Florida, the designer of a 1927 Venetian-style building, or Ovidio Gamboni - were ex-Company draftsmen who had taken up architecture, with more or less successful results. Italian plans were in fact often criticized by the Company’s architectural Department, which had instructions to vigilantly monitor the “general esthetic of the city,” which constituted one of the main features of commercial promotion of its building lots. This gave rise to legal conflicts: owners and architects did not welcome such interference in the private sphere. As a whole, the architecture that shaped the constructed landscape of Heliopolis was one of compromise.

Works by well-known architects in Heliopolis

A few of Heliopolis’ villas, apartment buildings and places of worship were the work of Italian architects in the “vanguard,” or at least well known for their activities elsewhere,⁶ who came to Heliopolis wearing the halo of their reputations. One of the first to come on the scene was Carlo Virgilio Silvani, author of a plan for a villa with stables in neo-Mamluk style, which he designed in 1909 for Doctor Issa pasha Hamdi, personal physician to the khedive. Another well-known figure

who worked for a brief period in Heliopolis was the Alexandrian Giacomo Alessandro Loria (1879-1937), who, in 1924 with Carlos Suarès was hired by the Sassoon Shohet brothers to design one of the large arcaded buildings characteristic of the first urban ring road, the old “circular boulevard” where the most monumental constructions clustered. While very active in Cairo, Giuseppe Mazza (1891- ?) nonetheless realized three buildings in Heliopolis between 1928 and 1932 in a squarish, monumental vein, distinguished by a certain “Roman-ness” that characterized his production between the wars. Also in this initial group was Romolo Giraldini, although virtually nothing is known about him today except that at the time he was one of the “best-known architects in Cairo”.⁷ Between 1923 and 1933 he authored plans for many large residences, including the neo-Renaissance palazzo built for Mrs. Amina Hanem El-Menchawi, now owned by a member of the royal family of Kuwait.⁸ Also falling within this category were the mansion that Mario Rossi designed in 1926 with Luigi Gavasi for the Aguri family, the Armenian Nubarian school designed by Domenico Limongelli in 1924 and a 1948 building by Vittorio del Burgo. Giuseppe Tavarelli, finally, was a particular case, combining a solid reputation on the Egyptian architectural scene⁹ with an abundant production in Heliopolis. His realizations doubtless owed much to his roles first as inspector of monuments and then as chief architect of the Waqfs ministry between 1914 and 1928; high-ranking positions in the Egyptian administration were prestigious and led to commissions for their holders. The Coptic-Orthodox church, which he designed in 1921, was one of his first realizations in Heliopolis; ten years later he was assigned to design a second place of worship, the great mosque financed by members of the royal family, today paradoxically known by the name *Masgīd al-Thawra* (Mosque of the Revolution). Meanwhile, Tavarelli, in partnership with Guido Gavasi until 1924, realized about a dozen villas and apartment houses.

Occasional builders

Very often builders, or rather contractors, tried their hand at architecture because they were encouraged by a commission from a relative or by the construction of their own home. Their plans, often overloaded, were judged rather inappropriate for the local context. The plan for a villa with two apartments that the builder Francesco Quaratino presented for himself in 1932 in a “Louis XVI style, overloaded with ornamentation” was considered completely incongruous “in a city of a rather modern character”.¹⁰ The building stood out markedly from its surroundings due to its imposing scale and hybrid esthetic, midway between Louis XIII and Renaissance style, all wrapped in the shell of an Italianate villa with corner tower, of the sort that became popular around 1900.¹¹ Alongside these apprentice-architects with uncertain hands, there were in any case more capable professionals, and plans more consistent with the image we have of Italian colonial architecture from the period between the two wars, with its unadorned rationalist approach exemplified by Florestano Di Fausto or Umberto Di Segni in Libya.¹² This was the case of the buildings conceived between 1929 and 1955 by Riccardo Thomann, an architect who had graduated from the Cesare Battisti school of Trieste in 1923, or those of one Aldo Amato, “architect DBIE SIP”, as he signed his work. The constructions by Max Mourad Balassiano (“architect D.D.C.”) or Serafino Seifallah di Jeva (1908 - ?) – the latter graduated from the Superior School of Architecture in Rome in 1930 – can be placed in this category, admitting that these two professionals can effectively be considered Italians. But it should be emphasized that this classicizing style, claimed as the essence of “Mediterranean architecture” by Italian architects in Libya or Ethiopia, found very little representation in Heliopolis.

Particularly active builders

The Italian contribution to the construction of Heliopolis was also represented by men in the building trade who were significantly involved in the undertaking, to the point of making it the most essential part of their careers, such as Umberto Bottari (1890 - ?), to whom we can attribute more than thirty realizations between 1921 and 1947. Little is known of him, except for the mention of a diploma earned in 1928 from an engineering school in Italy¹³ and the existence of numerous

Bottaris in the construction sector in Egypt.¹⁴ The long-standing presence of the surname Bottari in the southern Mediterranean (in Tunisia beginning in the 18th century, then in Algeria) leads one to think that the family had long left Italy; the Algerian branch, which included in particular some interpreters in the service of France, “spoke Italian, but also French and Arabic with equal ease”.¹⁵ The oldest indication of the Bottari family’s presence in Heliopolis is a plan for a “villino” built for Ms. Anna Bottari in 1909 on plans by an architect whose signature is not clearly legible, but who was most likely Eugenio Valzania.¹⁶

Umberto worked both as an architect and as a builder on the construction jobs entrusted to him; in a few cases, he acted also a real-estate agent. His clientele included some Syro-Lebanese, such as Léon Sultan and Gabriel Bocti, Italians, Greeks, two druggists named Mr. Tsourolis and Mr. Boyadjis, as well as one Marie Martiniou (Belgian or French) and numerous Egyptians (Anouar Zaglamah, Mrs. Neamet Chaker). The assignments he received were generally modest: single-storey villas, to which a second storey was later added, in accordance with the typical genealogy of buildings in Heliopolis. In fact, their construction progressed in phases: first a ground floor, raised and with a roof terrace, and later, after two or three years, one or two storeys added, depending on the means available. These storeys could also in turn be crowned by an attic with balconies, in anticipation of further floor-additions. This mode of operating in successive strata also contributed to conferring some common shape to buildings in Heliopolis.

Another great Italian builder very active in Heliopolis was Edoardo (or Edward) Cherini. His works in Heliopolis (25 identified to date) run from 1925 to 1943. His first plans were for houses, which he built on his own initiative and re-sold. His stylistic repertoire was wide-ranging, from the most common neo-Moorish (Helmi bey el-Masri building, 1930) to the most overwrought Art Deco (Chalaby building, 1931). In 1939, he concluded his signature with the mention of a “diploma ICBT”; perhaps he obtained the title late from the Cesare Battisti Institute of Trieste on the basis of attestations of his professional experience. His works did not find favor with the Company’s architects. One was criticized for looking too much like “an unfinished building”¹⁷ (in any case typical of Heliopolis, as mentioned above), and another for having a too-prominent and decorated top. The city authorities had little tolerance for such kind of topping, as Gennaro Scognamiglio (1903 - ?), who was also given to overabundant decoration, experienced indeed in 1930.¹⁸

These stylistic excesses were attributed to clients’ tastes. “The Oriental loves lively lines and colors,” Cherini wrote, adding that “clients are demanding and ask for overwrought ornaments”.¹⁹ In his defense, Cherini recalled a French example, the Palais de la Méditerranée in Nice, an Art Deco work completed by architects Charles and Marcel Delmas in 1928. It is symptomatic that a French, rather than Italian, project was used as an example. In this one can see without doubt the effect of the diffusion of French architecture across the Mediterranean in the period between the two wars, and also the suggestion of a loosening of ties between some Italian architects and the architectural culture of the peninsula.

An architecture rooted in the local milieu

The national indefiniteness of much of the Italian colony in Egypt is a well-known fact. Certain families had long been implanted on the banks of the Nile, others descended from political exiles who had broken off ties with their home country; many had been born in Egypt and had no plans to “return” to the motherland. This relative distancing had a strong local rootedness as a corollary.²⁰ All signs are that the majority of Italian architects involved in the construction of Heliopolis were among this group of Italians “*di cognome*” who were both distant from their homeland and strongly rooted in the land that had welcomed them.

This particularity explains the tenuous link between the Italian architecture in Heliopolis – and in Egypt more generally – and the major trends in production on the peninsula, as well as with the colonial experiences in nearby Libya.²¹ This is rather curious if one considers that in 1912, the example of Heliopolis – “this wonderful city meant to become the most attractive part of the Egyptian metropolis” – was proposed by Luigi Luiggi, head inspector of the civil Corps of

Engineers, as a model for work to be carried out in the city of Tripoli, recently fallen into Italian hands; the ingenious provisions of certain devices that took their future evolution into account from the outset (an extensive road network with narrow roadways, but with broad sidewalks that could be narrowed to leave space for increased traffic) had made a particular impression on him.²² It is true that at the time, Heliopolis attracted attention especially because of its town planning conception, rather than for its architectural landscape. Fifteen years later, the divorce between what was being built in Tripoli and the Italian plans for Heliopolis proved to be total, in any case. Italian architecture in colonial settings thus presented several facets. On the one hand, there was the Mediterranean expression of a “monumental order” that sought out Latin roots, as practiced by the protagonists of the discipline beginning in the 1920s; at least this was the “Fascist architecturalism”²³ that dominated in professional publications. On the other hand, as seen in Heliopolis, there was a more anonymous and common practice, far removed from the spotlight, characterized by the perpetuation of anachronistic models and manners by the measure of the Italian theoretical debate and its colonial expressions. Italian constructions in Tunisia²⁴, however, would lead one to conclude that this type of architecture - exuberant and logorrheic in its decorative approach and little-innovative in its typologies – had been more widespread than the specialized press suggested. Some drawings found in Tunis archives are so similar to their Heliopolis homologues as to appear interchangeable. In both cases, the plans speak the language of a moderate modernity, which converged with the plebiscite approval of the local clientele. It is true that in Egypt and Tunisia, the Italians did not control the political situation, nor were they in a dominant position. But it is nonetheless possible, as has been seen in other times and places, that the architecture magazines were basically tendentious guides, which highlighted only the doctrinal ferment of the architectural production of a given context.

¹ Diplomatic archives of Nantes, Dispatch to the Department dated April 26, 1911, Cairo, Ambassade 602 articles, Box 230.

² For the city's history, see Robert Ilbert, *Héliopolis, genèse d'une ville (1905-1922)*, CNRS, Marseille 1981, Mercedes Volait, with Jean-Baptiste Minnaert, « Héliopolis, création et assimilation d'une ville européenne en Egypte au XX^e siècle » in *Villes rattachées, villes reconfigurées, XVIe-XXe siècles*, ed. Denise Turrel, PUF, Tours 2003, pp. 335-365 and *Mémoires héliopolitaines*, with texts by Robert Solé, May Telmissani and M. Volait, Al-Ahram, Cairo 2005.

³ Heliopolis Housing and Development Company Archives, Graph of population and construction increase in Heliopolis, 1917-1932.

⁴ For a detailed overview and for the sources and methodological problems of such study, see M. Volait, « Les bâtisseurs italiens d'Héliopolis : éléments pour un portrait de groupe », in *The Presence of Italian Architects in the Mediterranean Countries*, proceedings of the seminar held at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, Egypt, 15-16 November 2007, Maschietto Editore, Florence (forthcoming).

⁵ Guido Zucconi, *La città contesa. Dagli ingegneri sanitari agli urbanisti (1885-1942)*, Jaca Book, Milan 1989, pp. 114-115.

⁶ *Architetti e ingegneri italiani dal Levante al Magreb, 1848-1945*, eds. Ezio Godoli and Milva Giacomelli, Maschietto Editore, Florence 2005.

⁷ Heliopolis Housing and Development Company Archives, File 641, letter dated 15 October 1931 to the HOC.

⁸ M. Volait, « Un ensemble urbain Art déco en Egypte : Héliopolis, banlieue du Caire », in *ARQ-Déco*, proceedings of the seminar held in Melilla, Spain, 9-10 October 2006 (forthcoming).

⁹ *L'œuvre italienne dans l'histoire de l'Egypte*, special issue of *La Liberté*, s.l., s.d, p.n.n..

¹⁰ Heliopolis Housing and Development Company Archives, File 899, Letter from Verhelle to the CER administration in Heliopolis, 12 August 1932.

¹¹ See for example the volume *Ville e Villette moderne*, published in Turin by C. Crudo & C.

¹² For a recent comprehensive view and a bibliography, see E. Godoli, « L'architecture coloniale en Libye : travaux publics et organisations d'intérêt public », in *Architecture coloniale et patrimoine : expériences européennes*, Marc Paboïs and Bernard Toulhier (eds.), Somogy/Inp, Paris 2006, pp. 93-102 and pp. 245-246.

¹³ According to the union list of engineers in Egypt drawn up in 1950 (document in Arabic).

¹⁴ *Annuario degli italiani d'Egitto*, 1933 ; *Annuaire du bâtiment*, 1947.

¹⁵ Alain Messaoudi, *Savants, conseillers, médiateurs : les arabisants et la France coloniale (vers 1830 - vers 1930)*, Thèse Paris I, 2008, p. 615.

¹⁶ Heliopolis Housing and Development Company ARchives, File 320, Small villa for Mrs. Bottari, 30 April 1909.

¹⁷ Heliopolis Housing Company Archives, Dossier 292, letter from the Heliopolis administration to the central administration in Brussels, 28 October 1929.

¹⁸ Heliopolis Housing and Development Company Archives, File 428, Sketch of correction to the façade of the Marie Soliman property, 1930.

¹⁹ Ivi, File 697, letter from Edouard Cherini to the director of the HOC, 4 December 1930.

²⁰ Anouchka Lazarev, « Italiens, italianité et fascisme », in *Alexandrie 1860-1960*, R. Ilbert and Ilios Yannakakis (eds.), Autrement, Paris 1992, pp. 92-110.

²¹ For the latest survey, see Mia Fuller, *Moderns abroad, Architecture, cities and Italian imperialism*, Routledge, Oxon 2007.

²² Luigi Luiggi, « Le opere pubbliche a Tripoli. Note di viaggio », *Nuova Antologia*, XLVII, vol. 158, issue no. 965, 1 March 1912, pp. 115-143.

²³ M. Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

²⁴ Silvia Finzi (ed.), *Architectures italiennes de Tunisie*, Finzi, Tunis 2002.