Egypt (1914-2014): Global architecture before globalization

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1914 did not represent a major disruption in the development of Egyptian architecture; that is, architecture on Egyptian soil. Forces that had shaped its norms and forms during the previous half century continued to be at play throughout the subsequent decades. The relentless quest for modernity pursued by Egypt's rulers and its ever growing state apparatus in the wake of the Ottoman reforms of the 1830s represents one such enduring factor. The strategy had meant to emulate Europe in order to resist its expansion. Although architectural modernity in the non-Western world is commonly attributed primarily to colonial agency, its development and domestication in the Egyptian context occurred within a top-driven endogenous process, embedded in Ottoman cosmopolitanism, and prone to all sorts of hybridizations.[1] The British occupation of Egypt from 1882 to 1922 (with Protectorate status from 1914 to 1922) did not alter much this general pattern.[2]

In other words, an established tradition of borrowing and naturalizing European techniques and aesthetics characterized Egyptian architecture as it entered into the 20th century. Major civil engineering undertakings such as hydraulic infrastructure (from the 1830s), the railway network (starting in 1854), or the digging of the Suez Canal (1859-69), had led many European firms to establish local branches. By 1893, metallic structures were locally produced (by the Belgian Baume & Marpent); reinforced-concrete construction, along the system patented in 1892 by the French François Hennebique, had started the following year.[3] A time of thriving expansion in the building sector, the turn of the century had seen the launching of large scale real estate developments: the

[1] Khaled Asfour, "The domestication of knowledge: Cairo at the turn of the century," *Muqarnas*, X, 1993, 125-137.

[2] Mercedes Volait, "Making Cairo modern : (1870-1950) : Multiple Models for a "European-style" Urbanism », in Joe Nasr and Mercedes Volait, eds, *Urbanism – Imported or Exported? Native Aspirations and Foreign Plans,* Chichester : Wiley-academy, 2003, p. 17-50.

[3] Claudine Piaton, Ezio Godoli, David Peyceré, eds. *Building beyond the Mediterranean. Studying the Archives of European Businesses (1860-1970)*, Arles : Honoré Clair, 2012; virtual exhibition on http://www.archmuseum.org/Gallery/building-beyond-the-mediterranean_41.html.

garden suburbs of Garden-City, Giza, Maadi and Heliopolis, to name only Cairene schemes, all starting in 1903-06. The flows of European capital and migration attracted by Egypt's westernization, again a long-time phenomenon, had their share in the building boom. The peak of foreign residents was reached in 1927 with 225 000 people out of a population of 14 million. Professionally wise, Italians and Eastern Europeans outnumbered any other national in the building industry, from architects and contractors to ceramists and cabinet makers. The foreign presence decreased sharply after 1937, and became insignificant after the Suez Canal War of 1956, but it had contributed in the meantime, along with local elites, to the internationalization of Egyptian architecture.

Finally, the pace of westernization was sustained by substantial public commissions. The international competition organized in 1894 for the Museum of Antiquities, the first held in the Middle East, was followed by many others: for the Alexandria railway station in 1912, for a hospital and medical school at Manial al-Roda in 1921-22, for the premises of the Cairo's Mixed Court in 1923-24, for the reconstruction of the historic mosque of Amr in 1927, for the creation of a Fine arts Campus in 1930, to mention but a few. In parallel, a number of imposing educational facilities, including Cairo University campus (1925-37) and al-Azhar University campus (1932-1936), together with hospitals, museums and administrations, were erected by the State buildings department, the specialized body within the ministry of Public Works in charge of most public buildings.[4] Religious structures were the prerogative of the ministry of Endowments (*Awqaf*), itself a major builder, and indeed promoter of innovation. The mosque of Abou Abbas al-Morsi built in 1929-39 in Alexandria, on designs by Eugenio Valzania and Mario Rossi, featured the first octagonal plan ever considered in Egyptian mosque architecture.[5] The state engagement in construction represents again a characteristic of Egyptian architecture that cuts across temporalities and regimes: equipping the

[4] Mercedes Volait, *Architectes et architectures de l'Egypte moderne (1830-1950), Genèse et essor d'une expertise locale*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2005.
[5] Mariangela Turchiarulo, *Building "in a style": Italian architecture in Alexandria, Egypt ; the work of Mario Rossi*, Roma : Gangemi, 2012.

nation with modern facilities, from culture to transportation, from education to healthcare, has been a concern for almost every ruler, from Khedive Ismail (r. 1863-79) to President Nasser (in office 1956-70), and beyond.

The architectural outcome of these globalizing forces was of marked heterogeneity. Structures of every possible origin and essence coexisted almost side by side. European-style historicism, as illustrated by the neo-Renaissance design proposed at a 1914 competition for the newly founded Egyptian University (Ernesto Verrucci, arch.) (fig.1) remained fashionable well into the 1930s for official and domestic architecture alike. Local expressions of historicism, such as Mamluk revivalism (villa Harari, 1921) (fig. 2) and Pharaonicism (Saad Zaghlul mausoleum, 1927-31, Mustafa Fahmy, arch.), flourished. While the latter cultural movement was short-lived (nonetheless, for the paganism associated with Ancient Egyptian civilization), the former had been a recurrent theme in Egyptian architecture since the 1870s and persisted as such in the 20th century, when the struggle for independence led to search for a national idiom in architecture based on Egypt's Islamic heritage. French architecture was represented by over ornate Art déco and all possible variations of modern classicism. A good example is the Cairo Mixed Court (1924-34), featuring French Renaissance details and elaborate Art déco ironwork and flooring, on plans by the French firm Azéma, Edrei and Hardy. Exceptions to the mainstream of neo-styles and mild modernism include the avant-garde residences designed by Auguste Perret for two eager local modernists, banker Gustave Aghion in Alexandria (1926-30, demolished in 2014) (fig. 3) and lawyer Elias Awad bey in Cairo (1930-37, demolished in 1970) (fig. 4). The Italian community developed its own architectural language, along the functionalist "Mediterranean spirit" advocated by MIAR (*Movimento Italiano per l'Architettura Razionale*) within the expanding Fascist ideology. Its early icons were the schools built in Alexandria in 1929 (fig. 5) and in Cairo in 1933 on designs by Clemente Busiri-Vici; strongly promoted by the local Italian press, their style had a decisive impact on Italian building in Egypt.[6] The affluent Greek community sponsored in Alexandria in 1937 an early application of the compact hospital, a new

[6] Ezio Godoli, Milva Giacomelli, eds. *Italian architects and engineers in Egypt from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century,* Florence : Machietto, 2008.

concept developed by French architect Jean Walter following a mission to the US and tested in France in 1935. In contrast and paradoxically, the British left few architectural traces of their presence while in power, besides the winning design for the Qasr al-Aini hospital and medical school (1923-33, Charles Nicholas & John Edward Dixon-Spain, arch.) and the Cairo's University campus (1925-1935, Eric Newnum, arch.) designed in a grand imperial manner reminiscent of Luytens' Delhi, although devoid of any reference to its local setting.

As the 1930s came to a close, functionalism and International style penetrated more strongly in Egypt, under the lead of Syro-Lebanese architects (such as Raymond Antonious, Charles Ayrout, Antoine Selim Nahas, Albert Khoury, Albert Zananiri, Jean Kfoury, etc.) and clients. The journal *al-'Imara*, the first architectural magazine in Arabic language edited by Egyptian architect Sayyid Korayem was created in 1939 to promote International style in the country, and in the region at large. Increased travel to Europe, and later to the US, of Egyptian elites was also instrumental in channeling Modern movement architecture to Egypt. Post-war politics reinforced the process, with American, and later Russian, aid entering the game. Education abroad was another vector. Whether Egyptian or non-Egyptian, what architects brought to their early or even mature works, had much to do with what they were exposed to during their formative years. The series of apartment and administrative buildings designed by Liverpool-trained architect Mahmud Ryad, who also interned on the site of the Empire State building in New York, are good examples of British and American Beaux-arts style (Misr Insurance buildings, 1948, fig. 6; The Arab League headquarters, 1955 and Cairo municipality–later Socialist Union–building, 1959). The villas designed by Salah Zeitoun in the late 1950s do reflect the time he spent as a Taliesin fellow in 1947 in contact with Frank Lloyd Wright (Richter house, 1958-61 No. 20 Road 20, fig 7).

Subsidized housing

There is one sector where the interwar years made a difference: low-cost and subsidized housing. Most of postwar schemes, and indeed Nasserite projects, are rooted in initiatives developed during

Egypt's so-called "Liberal Experiment period". As elsewhere, WW1 had caused construction work to stop. The supply of coal and of building materials had ceased during wartime, and no alternate power had been devised to continue manufacturing bricks, lime or cement locally. The acute housing shortage that ensued, coupled with dramatic inflation, affected not only the lower income groups, but indeed the middle class. Governmental intervention was envisioned in the immediate aftermath of the war in order to stimulate the construction of affordable dwellings. Land development companies and major employers were encouraged to lead the effort. The Suez Canal Company and the Heliopolis Oasis Company implemented significant subsidized housing schemes in 1920-23; in the process, new typologies, such as the 4-appartment house with individual gardens in the Heliopolis Housing scheme or attached dwellings in the new garden suburb of Port-Fuad, were introduced. The Misr textile group, a holding created in 1927 to encourage Egyptian industry, started building large company towns during WW2, at Mahalla al-Kubra (in 2 phases, 1941-47, and 1946-51, the latter on designs by Aly Labib Gabr) and Kafr al-Dawwar (near Alexandria, 1943-44, Mahmud Ryad, arch.). Considered as "outstanding examples of housing for industrial workers" and the "last word of modernity", these self-contained schemes included all modern amenities: central restaurants and hospitals, markets and coffee shops, an open-air cinema, welfare centers, sporting fields, bathhouses and automated laundry facilities. (It is no accident if unionism grew stronger in such communities, ultimately contributing leading forces to the 2011 uprisings). By 1950, 22 other enterprises had erected dwellings for their employees.[7]

As social reformers raised their voices louder in the 1930s, slum clearance and the provision of healthy dwellings in urban and rural areas came to the forefront. The largest share of the population (75% in 1927) lived in the countryside in appalling conditions. A number of initiatives were developed to sanitize the Egyptian village. Regulations were passed in 1933; model villages were built by progressive landowners and model designs were disseminated through publications and industrial

[7] Ministry of Social Affairs, *Social Welfare in Egypt*, Cairo, 1950, p. 66; further details in M. Volait, (1995)." Réforme sociale et habitat populaire : acteurs et formes (1848-1954)". In *Entre réforme sociale et mouvement national : identité et modernisation en Egypte (1882-1952)*. A. Roussillon (ed.). Le Caire: Cedej, p. 379-410 (Arabic version in *Misr wa al-'alâm al-'arabî*, n° 4, 1995, p. 9-54).

fairs. A ministry of Social Affairs was established in 1939, with a department devoted to the Peasant (*fellah*); it embarked itself upon model village construction. It was in this context that Hassan Fathy started experimenting what will make him internationally acclaimed: mud brick architecture, for a model village at Bahtim (1940) (fig.8), following the idea that adobe was commonly used for construction in Arizona and California, two regions with climates resembling that of Egypt.[8] After trial and error, essays in mud for roofing, using Nubian techniques, proved successful, and Fathy started building New Gourna, a self-sufficient pilot community (1947-53) in Upper Egypt, his most iconic achievement (fig. 9).[9] In 1949, reformer Ahmed Husayn and architect Mahmud Ryad were entrusted with the task of designing a scheme to provide housing for groups with limited income (*Machru'a li-tawfir al-sakin lil-tabaqat al-mahduda al-dakhl fi misr*). A number of measures followed, including the creation in 1950 of a department of "Popular Housing" at the Ministry of Social Affairs that Ryad headed. In 1951 the Parliament passed a law on subsidized housing, drafted after consulting German and American experts, and adopted an ambitious Social Housing scheme that started to be implemented in 1953 with the building of 4000 units in suburban Cairo. Experiment with new materials and techniques, both resulting from wartime research in Europe, was conducted in parallel: foam concrete construction was carried out in 1951 using "Betocel", a porous cement-type material invented in 1944 by French engineer René Fays; pilot projects in standardized housing were conducted by a German specialist, architect Hans Spiegel, in 1951-53.[10]

These early attempts at coping with poverty and housing shortage show that many projects commonly associated with the new regime of the Free Officers that came to power in 1952 – including the monumental Mugamma' on Midan al-Tahrir (fig. 10) – had in fact started much earlier on, and were deeply rooted in the progressive and reforming ethos of Egypt's early steps to independence.

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[8] Mercedes Volait, "Réforme sociale et habitat populaire: acteurs et formes (1848-1954)", *Entre réforme sociale et mouvement national: identité et modernisation en Egypte (1882-1952),* A. Roussillon (ed.). Cairo, Cedej, p. 379-410.
[9] Leila El-Wakil and Nadia Radwan (eds.), *Hassan Fathy dans son temps*, Gollion: InFolio, 2013.
[10] Hans Spiegel, « Arbeit für den sozialen Wohnungsbau in Agypten », *Bauwelt*, vol. 44, 2 november 1953, p. 866-870.