

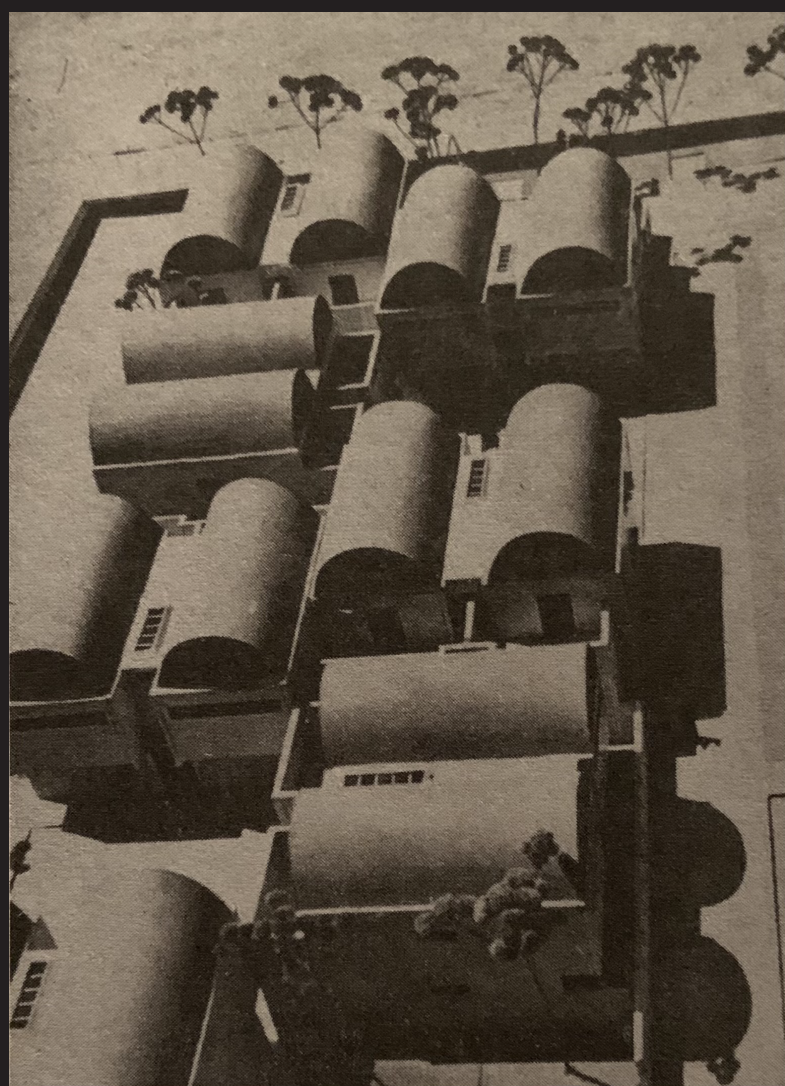
Hassan Fathy's New Gournia Village and 20th Century Cairo in the context of Government Systems and Modernism



"Ali Al-Meligi Masoud, Workers' City, 1950." p. 255. *Cairo Since 1900*. (Photography by Hesham Mohamed Hassan)

Beside Hassan Fathy, few other architects attempted to help and provide affordable homes for lower-income and working classes within a growing modernized Cairo, in a district called Imbaba where industrialization and factories such as a brick factory where it was the essential supplier for the country's primary use of the construction material took place. An Example is Ali Al-Meligi Masoud's Worker's City plan first initiated in 1950 for the workers in Imbaba, consisting of two-story cubic concrete single-family townhouses with stone finishes placed horizontally on a grid, each divided by personal green space. In 1952, the project was halted due to a change in government that prompted nationalization policies and developed a new housing project for the workers and low-income government employees with similar housing design but with only essential finishes to save money. Building constructions continue to grow informally in Imbaba, densifying the district and still preserving its identity as a working-class district in Cairo today. In examining whether architects and planners may or may not be complicit in systems of governance and oppression, the project allows further understanding of the government's role in the development of housing in Egypt.

Mohamed ElShahed, *Cairo Since 1900: An Architectural Guide* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2020), 250-251, 254-256.



"Salah Zaki Said, Turguman Regeneration Plan, 1967." p. 153. *Cairo Since 1900*. (Photography by Al Nashra Al-Mi'mariya).

Another architect who sought to improve the low-income class and slums in Cairo, but was restricted by government policies and decisions, especially in Bulaq district was Salah Zaki Said who proposed a plan consisting of low-rise and medium-rise commercial and residential building in response to the mass housing systems implemented by the government. The primary goal was to offer an affordable shared social space for the people with better infrastructure and urban fabric. Said examined and attempted the possibilities of intertwining social life and healthy modern living through this project. The district was considered an important industrial area developed as a working-class neighbourhood, with new housing schemes the government attempted to get rid of its industrial infrastructure and low housing to pave ways for elite infrastructures. The proposed project is a reflection of the government's nationalization policies that allowed government ownership over the majority of the buildings (ElShahed, 85) and affected the transformation of many areas to build governmental institutions in Cairo (ElShahed, 173) and the lack of attention and effort to provide for the low-income class. The purpose of introducing Said's and Masoud's projects is to prove whether architects and planners may or may not be complicit in systems of governance and oppression.

Mohamed ElShahed, *Cairo Since 1900: An Architectural Guide* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2020), 142-142, 153.



"View over the informal settlements of red-brick construction off Saft El Laban corridor in Giza." Photograph by Rena Effendi. <http://www.refendi.com/cairo-urban-decay>.

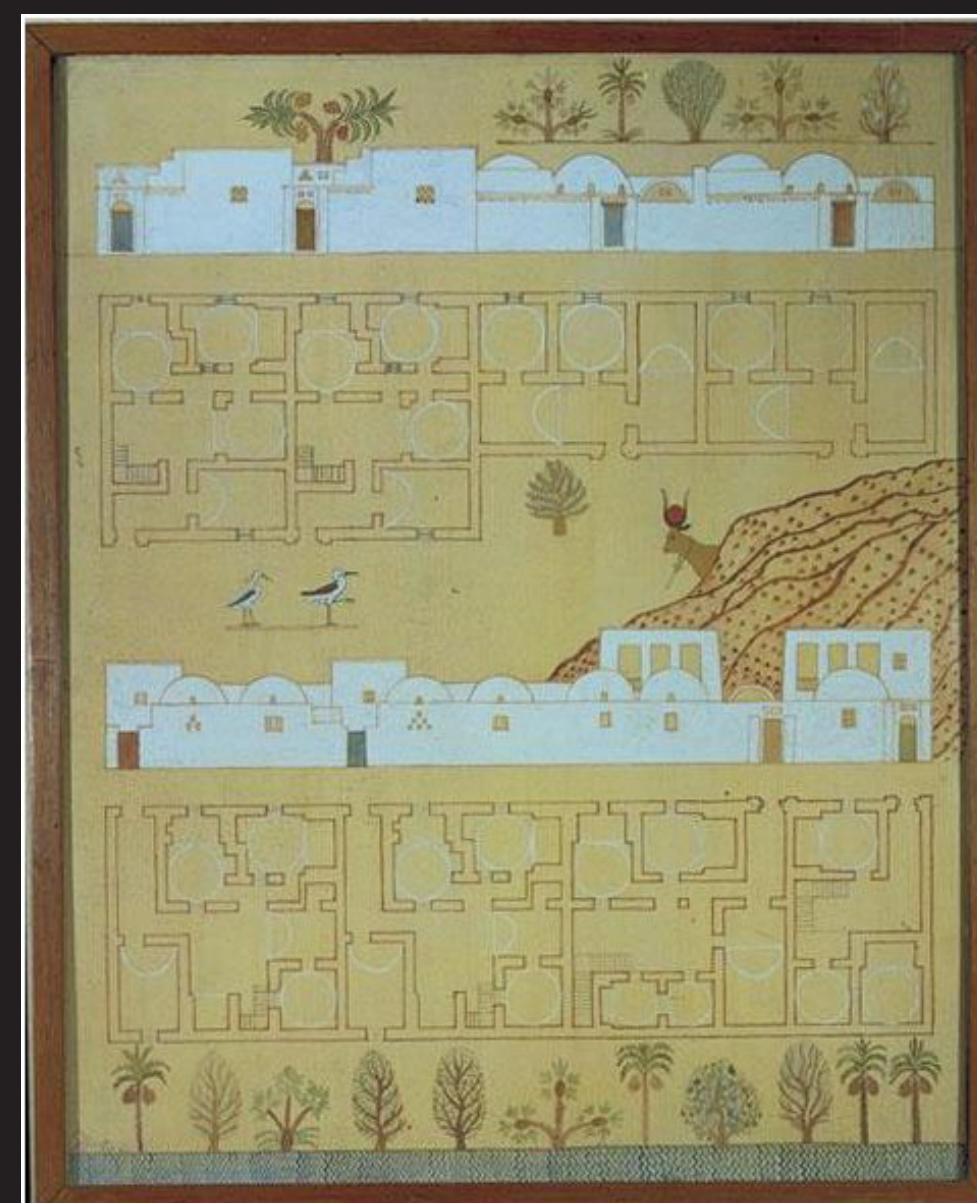
This image reflects the reality and majority of the low-income lifestyle and informal housing in Cairo today due to political corruption and economic factors. Due to the constant demolishing of buildings and lack of documentation of Egyptian Architectural history, it is difficult to determine what could be classified as Egyptian Architecture. The reason is that the government, as well as people, are motivated by economic drives and needs to sell and make money. The corruption of the government allows people to pay bribes to informally build over agricultural lands without a clear and proper plan or urban infrastructure. Pieces of modernism ideas of form and function continue to encompass Cairo's urban fabric, where cubic structures became the standard design. (ElShahed, 33). However, due to concrete and brick being the cheapest and commonly used materials in Egypt (ElShahed, 35) low-income cubic homes are left exposed without any plastering or embellishments. Furthermore, additional floors with exposed structure have been added to heighten previous modern buildings over the decades, overthrowing the appearance of the buildings. Upon examining the image closely, there are animals raised on the roof in the lower left that signals Fathy's dispute with Modernism and aim to provide good homes for the poor that is both structurally functional and appealing. In his New Gournia design, he included a courtyard and a proper area for the people to raise the animals, all while maintaining an Egyptian and architectural identity. Overall, this housing issue reflects political corruption and government inability to provide appropriate homes for the low-income class without harming the identity of the city and how architects are unable to help without the government's support.



Sayed Karim, Villa Ibrahim Al-Sassas Bey (demolished), 1948. p. 215. *Cairo Since 1900*. (Photography courtesy of RBSCCL, AUC.)

One of the best examples of Modernism influence in Cairo can be found in Sayed Karim's Villa that applied Le Corbusier's five points of architecture and is Le Corbusian in style where the main living spaces are lifted on pilotis, has sculptural spiral stairs with horizontal strip windows, and ground and roof garden. What divides Western Modernism and Cairo Modernism is the construction materials, where Egyptians used local materials for better functionality such as sound and climate insulations to construct the house such as reinforced-concrete frame with hollow sandstone bricks, aluminium window frames, and toughened glass for the balcony's railing. The project is part of understanding Hassan Fathy as a supporter of traditional architecture and an opponent of Modernism. While Fathy openly expressed his dislike for Modernism, what would he say about this building? Both his New Gournia and the Villa share the same focus on functionality and lack of embellishments using local materials, but the intended users for both places are different. Another difference is that Fathy applied traditional elements such as domes and arches in his projects, whereas the horizontal design of the villa is purely Western in style.

Mohamed ElShahed, *Cairo Since 1900: An Architectural Guide* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2020), 215.



New Gournia, plan/elevation with Hather, 1946. *Archnet*. https://archnet.org/sites/90/media_contents/30381.

This plan drawing was by Hassan Fathy of New Gournia Project, where the architect combined history, art, and architecture, as well as countryside elements to create an aesthetic representation of the Egyptian countryside. Fathy had described in his book that the countryside was considered unattractive with lots of infrastructure issues, so he hoped to provide better homes to improve quality of life and functionality of space that reflect the beauty and identity of the countryside.(2) Compared to other plan designs found in Cairo that are limited to a simple presentation of lines and forms, Fathy understood art and architecture as intertwined elements to generate a rich representation that helps communicate his vision he wants the audience to see. How can Modernism or globalization combine history, art, and architecture? How can architects create a sense of individuality? In *Cairo Since 1900*, the author portrays the essential of fusing history, art, and architecture to develop originality that reflects the country's identity where he explains how Cairo struggles to preserve historical buildings and continues to demolish them which poses a housing issue that lacks history, art, and architecture and struggles with national identity in Cairo.

Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976).



Steele, James. "Street Scene, New Gournia Village." In *The Hassan Fathy Collection*. Geneva: Aga Khan Trust for Culture. 1989. (Photograph by Chant Avedissian) https://archnet.org/sites/90/media_contents/29906.

Hassan Fathy claimed that he is a supporter of traditional architecture and an opponent of modernism even though he uses traditional materials and building construction as mudbrick. His New Gournia Project links a relationship between traditional and modern architecture by implementing designs that emphasizes the function of his buildings, thus modernizing the traditional space. In his book, *Architecture for the Poor*, he discussed how the government erected inhuman standard mass housing design and how modernism ignores each family's identity, needs, and traditions (30). Fathy also explained that if the government changes its attitude to housing, it will allow people to express their individuality architecturally (33). In New Gournia, he included each family in the construction of their homes, but both the government and the people turned their back on him and could not accept his vision because they were not driven architecturally and could not understand the purpose of representation. Instead, they were motivated by economic drives, hoping that the project would have helped them gain assets. Similarly, the people did not want to leave their Old Gournia that was their primary source of income by selling artefacts. However, when Fathy published his book, his visions and projects attracted the attention of the west and the wealthy whom some commissioned him for vacation homes.

Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976).