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

This essay will explore affordable housing in Egypt within government systems through Hassan Fathy's New Gournia project and 20th-century modern housing projects. It will investigate and analyze how Fathy and modern architects developed their projects within government systems and how they contributed to Egyptian housing architecture. Two focal hypotheses will be examined. The first hypothesis will examine whether architects and planners may or may not be complicit in systems of governance and oppression. The hypothesis will further explore how modernism influenced Egyptian housing architecturally at the rise of globalization and as the result of independence and nationalism in search of a new cultural identity. The second hypothesis will review Fathy as a supporter of traditional architecture and an opponent of modernism and how it shaped Egyptian architecture during globalization. Therefore, it will investigate his efforts to acknowledge and preserve historical Egyptian architectural heritage in the face of the growing modernized and westernized Egypt in the 20th century.

With these hypotheses, the essay will be structured into two sections. The first section will analyze modern Egyptian architects' projects developed during 20th-century modernism under government systems and how they rapidly transformed the perception of housing architecture in Egypt. The projects will explore the architects' attempt to provide affordable homes for low-income and working-class Egyptians within a growing modernized Cairo while reflecting the government's role and responses. Through these projects, the essay aims to answer

whether architects and planners may or may not be complicit in systems of governance and oppression.

The second section will analyze Hassan Fathy's New Gurna Village and how he aimed to improve the quality of life for the poor and challenged perceptions. It will also analyze how he taught people to construct their own homes using local materials and provide housing necessities at low cost without sacrificing the traditions and lifestyle of the countryside Egyptians. The essay will attempt to prove or negate the stated hypotheses through these analyses.

To understand modernism's role in Egypt, Mohamed Elshahed's thesis, *Revolutionary Modernism? Architecture and the Politics of Transition in Egypt 1936-1967* explore Egyptian architectural modernism influenced by political changes and post-colonialism to form a new architectural and cultural identity. Due to political and cultural instability, the 1952 Egyptian Revolution transitioned the political regime from a monarchy to a Republican regime.¹ While modernism flourished globally, it was implemented within the national politics by the Egyptian government and the people as part of the country's nationalization and new development post-monarchy rule.² He also examines how Egyptians applied modernism into the fabric of Cairo to express a new architectural style, national politics, and social and cultural developments, and how due to nationalization, a new concept of housing emerged where the new government began to develop mass housing and apartment buildings for the middle-income class.³ The new political

¹ Mohamed Elshahed, "Revolutionary Modernism? Architecture and the Politics of Transition in Egypt 1936-1967," (PhD diss., New York University, 2015): 1-2, file:///C:/Users/Bibzyee/Desktop/Revolutionary_Modernism_Archi.pdf.

² Elshahed, "Revolutionary Modernism," 19.

³ Elshahed, "Revolutionary Modernism," 22, 37.

transition also introduced an increase in Cairo's population and urban expansion issues.⁴

Between 1952 and 1965, more than fifteen thousand public housing units were built, and the need for affordable housing in the city was still not fulfilled.⁵

In 1950, Ali Al-Meligi Masoud planned a *Workers' City* (Fig.1) to provide affordable homes for the working class who worked in factories such as a brick factory that was the essential supplier of the country's most used construction material in the district of Imbaba where industrialization took place.⁶ His design consists of two-story cubic concrete single-family townhouses with stone finishes placed horizontally on an urban grid, each divided by a personal green space.⁷ Due to a government change that prompted nationalization policies, the project was discontinued. Instead, a new housing project for the workers and low-income government employees with a similar housing design was constructed.⁸ The new design focused on saving money by applying only essential home finishes.⁹ Since then, informal building constructions began to grow in the district, densifying it while maintaining its identity as a working-class district in Cairo today.¹⁰ This project allows further understanding of the government's role in developing homes in Egypt.

Another architect who sought to improve the low-income class and slums in the Bulaq district in Cairo was Salah Zaki Said. He proposed a *Turguman Regeneration Plan* (Fig. 2) that

⁴ Abdel-moniem M. El-Shorbagy, "The Architecture of Hassan Fathy: Between Western and Non-Western Perspectives" (PhD diss., University of Canterbury, 2001) 53, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/35469027.pdf>.

⁵ Mohamed Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900: An Architectural Guide*, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2020): 27.

⁶ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 250-251.

⁷ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 254.

⁸ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 254.

⁹ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 256.

¹⁰ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 251.

consisted of low-rise and medium-rise commercial and residential buildings in response to the mass housing systems implemented by the government.¹¹ The primary goal was to offer an affordable shared social space with better infrastructure, urban fabric, a better social life, and healthy modern living.¹² However, he was limited by government policies and decisions, so the plan was never realized. The district was considered an important industrial area developed as a working-class neighbourhood, with new housing schemes provided by the government to get rid of its industrial infrastructure and low housing to make way for elite infrastructures.¹³ Said's proposal reflects the government's nationalization policies that allowed government ownership over most of the buildings and affected the transformation of many areas to build governmental institutions in Cairo¹⁴ and the lack of attention and efforts to provide for the low-income class.

Evidence of the government's nationalization policies favouring the upper classes can be found in Naoum Shebib's *Sabet Sabet* Building (Fig. 3) which was constructed in 1958 and exceeded the concrete construction limits, making it the tallest structure in the city.¹⁵ Shebib also designed Cairo's landmark for the government and experimented with materiality, such as concrete, to express modernism.¹⁶ Initially, the Garden City district the building was situated was initiated by Ebenezer Howard, who wanted to improve the quality of life for the workers in the industrial cities.¹⁷ However, the district was transformed into residential mansions and palaces for the wealthy during the monarchy period. When the monarchy ended, apartment buildings

¹¹ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 153.

¹² Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 153.

¹³ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 142-143.

¹⁴ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 174.

¹⁵ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 185.

¹⁶ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 38.

¹⁷ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 172.

began to transform the district and continued to act as a space for the wealthy. Nationalization policies further influenced the ownership of the area, leading to the demolition or transformation of the residential buildings for governmental institutions.¹⁸

Lastly, Sayed Karim was commissioned by the government to develop a master plan for a new, modernized city called the *City of Revolution*, known as Nasr City (Fig. 4), with various mass housing designs for the middle-income class.¹⁹ The plan was composed of residential, university, governmental, medical, military, and touristic zones and intended to solve the housing crisis in Cairo. However, it never did.²⁰ Formerly, the government rejected his proposal because it believed it contradicted socialist principles.²¹ Karim's plan was never fully implemented and was largely modified or unbuilt due to a dispute with the state government.²² It is unclear what the conflict could have been. However, sources indicate that it could have been a disagreement between Karim and the Minister of Tourism, who wanted Karim to sell his own apartment.²³ Another reason is his architectural magazine, *Al-Imarah*, which promoted modern and western architectural ideas. The government believed the magazine did not align with their politics and constituted elements of the old monarchy regime they wanted to eliminate despite Karim and the government sharing the same purpose of modernizing the country.²⁴

¹⁸ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 173.

¹⁹ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 340.

²⁰ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 342.

²¹ Marwa M.S. El-Ashmouni, "The Rationale of Architectural Discourses in Post-Independence Egypt: A Contrapuntal Reading of 'Alam Al-Bena'a (1980-2000)," (PhD diss., University of Adelaide, 2013): 154.

<https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/101516/2/02whole.pdf>

²² Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 340.

²³ El-Ashmouni, "The Rational of Architectural Discourses," 158.

²⁴ El-Ashmouni, "The Rational of Architectural Discourses," 157-158.

The second section will begin by analyzing Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, who gained himself the title of “Architect of the Poor,” and the use of traditional construction materials and techniques in his New Gourni Village to build affordable houses for low-income Egyptians. It will also include Abdelmoniem Elshorbagy’s *The Architecture of Hassan Fathy: Between Western and Non-Western Perspectives*, in which the author analyzes how Fathy’s experiences, the influence of colonialism, and nationalism that constitute Egyptian vernacular and Islamic architecture shaped the architect’s identity and approach to architecture.²⁵

In *Architecture for the Poor*, Fathy explains that his parents’ perceptions of the countryside influenced his ambition to provide for the poor and transform the countryside and enhance its beauty. He describes that while his mother enjoyed the countryside, his father saw it as a place with poor living conditions; both views led to the belief that the countryside was a “heaven” that needed to be restored.²⁶ Therefore, between 1945 and 1948, he was allowed to achieve his ambition when commissioned to design the New Gourni Village (Fig. 5) in the city of Luxor for seven thousand people, who at the time, inhabited an ancient site and made their living by selling ancient artifacts, which posed problems for the government and challenged archaeological preservation of the site.²⁷

Fathy believed that architecture is a tool for people to design a home that expresses their identity and culture. He also believed that the standard mass housing was harming the Egyptian culture and asserted that every house design must satisfy occupants’ needs. He discussed in his book how the government erected inhuman standard mass housing design and how modernism

²⁵ El-Shorbagy, “The Architecture of Hassan Fathy,” 2.

²⁶ Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976): 1,2.

²⁷ El-Shorbagy, “The Architecture of Hassan Fathy,” 41.

ignores each family's identity, needs, and traditions.²⁸ He also explained that if the government changes its attitude toward housing, it will allow people to express their individuality architecturally.²⁹ He further explained that "in nature, no two men are alike. Even if they are twins and physically identical, they will differ in their dreams."³⁰ Since the government focused on providing homes for the middle-income class, Fathy made it his duty to help the low-income class develop their own homes using traditional and local materials. Through the New Gournia Village project, he strived to provide affordable homes for the poor, restore the Egyptian countryside for the better, and revive Vernacular Architecture and old construction and craftsmanship traditions.

He worked with the inhabitants-to-be in designing and constructing their homes which included traditional architectural elements such as a courtyard, domes, and vaults, to reflect the Islamic and cultural identity of Egypt.³¹ He used Egyptian and Nubian traditional techniques, such as implementing vaults without centring using mudbricks.³² With traditional materials and construction methods, his designs reflect a relationship to sustainability that provides privacy that the people needed and shelter from their environment.³³

²⁸ Fathy, "Architecture for the poor," 30.

²⁹ Fathy, "Architecture for the poor," 33.

³⁰ James Steel. *The Hassan Fathy Collection, A Catalogue of Visual Documents at the Aga Khan Award for Architecture*, (Geneva, Switzerland: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 1989): 8.

<https://archnet.org/publications/3528>.

³¹ El-Shorbagy, "The Architecture of Hassan Fathy," 115.

³² El-Shorbagy, "The Architecture of Hassan Fathy," 33.

³³ Ahmad Hamid, *Hassan Fathy and Continuity in Islamic Architecture: The Birth of a New Modern Cairo* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010): Foreword, xvi.

https://books.google.ca/books/about/Hassan_Fathy_and_Continuity_in_Islamic_A.html?id=oA2zYXWNSTEC&redir_esc=y

However, the government and the people could not accept his vision because they were not global modern architecture-driven and could not understand the purpose of cultural and identity representation. Instead, the government was motivated by economic drives, hoping that the project would help them gain assets. Similarly, the people refused to occupy their new homes because it would affect their income,³⁴ and they believed that the mudbrick and dome construction resembled tombs.³⁵ At the time, modernism's ideas had already spread and influenced the country, where people began to desire a modern lifestyle and to live like the elites. His architecture, however, attracted the west and the foreign elites who later commissioned him for projects. The Egyptians eventually realized his project.

Fathy's rejection of modernism and desire for indigenous and traditional architecture was influenced by political changes that shaped his identity for many reasons. Historically, it began with Egypt's ottoman ruler, Muhammad Ali, who introduced modernism to Egypt in 1805.³⁶ The ruler desired to modernize Egypt by implementing a European-style school system.³⁷ Ali's grandson, Khedive Ismail, further instigated the desire for modernity. He wanted Egypt to become a part of Europe during his rule between 1863-1879 by hiring foreign architects, transforming the country's fabric and architecture and sending Egyptians to study architecture in Europe.³⁸ While Fathy admired Medieval Cairo, he believed that the rulers and the involvement of foreigners led to the loss of the indigenous Egyptian style. The submission to modernization, in which he argued that the new architecture influenced by technology failed to acknowledge

³⁴ El-Shorbagy, "The Architecture of Hassan Fathy," 41.

³⁵ El-Shorbagy, "The Architecture of Hassan Fathy," 43.

³⁶ El-Shorbagy, "The Architecture of Hassan Fathy," 3.

³⁷ El-Shorbagy, "The Architecture of Hassan Fathy," 3.

³⁸ El-Shorbagy, "The Architecture of Hassan Fathy," 3-4.

traditional architecture and made the city more “ugly.”³⁹ He believed it threatened Egypt’s native culture.⁴⁰ Fathy’s concerns are evident in today’s Cairo due to political changes, foreign involvement in architectural projects, and government neglect of the low-income and working classes. Especially when they began to aim for self-government by transitioning towards a military republic state government and searching for their own cultural and architectural identity. Therefore, Fathy believed that modernism is a tool for the mass destruction of urban heritage.⁴¹

One of the best examples of modernism influence in Cairo is Sayed Karim’s 1948 *Villa Ibrahim Al-Sassas Bey* (Fig. 6), which applied Le Corbusier’s five points of architecture. It is Corbusian in style, where the main living spaces are lifted on pilotis, has sculptural spiral stairs with horizontal strip windows and a ground and roof garden.⁴² Construction materials present the critical difference between Western and Cairo modernism. Egyptians used local materials to construct their homes for better functionality with sound and climate insulations, such as reinforced-concrete frames with hollow sandstone bricks and aluminum window frames with toughened glass for the balcony’s railing.⁴³ The project is part of understanding Fathy as a supporter of traditional architecture and an opponent of modernism. While Fathy openly expressed his opposition to modernism, what would he say about this building? His New Gournia Village and the Villa 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

³⁹ El-Shorbagy, “The Architecture of Hassan Fathy,” 7.

⁴⁰ El-Shorbagy, “The Architecture of Hassan Fathy,” 2.

⁴¹ Mai Elwakil, “Modernist Indignation: Two architects on the forgotten legacy of Sayed Karim,” Interview by Mai Elwakil, *Mada*, February 16, 2019. <https://madamasr.com/en/2019/02/16/feature/culture/modernist-indignation-two-architects-on-the-forgotten-legacy-of-sayed-karim/>.

⁴² Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 215.

⁴³ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 215.

traditional elements such as domes and arches in his projects, whereas the horizontal design of the villa is purely western in style.⁴⁴

While Fathy claimed he was a supporter of traditional architecture and an opponent of modernism, his New Gournia project links a relationship between traditional and modern architecture by implementing designs that emphasize buildings' function. Therefore, "modernizing" traditional spaces and earning him a position in modern architecture studies. Ismail Serageldin's *Hassan Fathy: Egypt's Visionary Architect* clarifies that Fathy rejected modernism and globalization in concerns that it would lead to the loss of Egyptian architectural identity. He was not against technological advancement but favoured a reinterpretation of traditional Egyptian architecture and the use of local materials instead of imported materials that he felt were appropriate to Egypt's culture, economy, and climate.⁴⁵ Fathy thought Islamic architecture was more modern and universal for its lack of decorative elements, merely focusing on the essential functional elements such as a courtyard, domes, and vaults.⁴⁶ He combined both architectures, including a courtyard, considered an essential element of traditional architecture within rural and urban sites, to achieve comfort and privacy and generate warm and cold air in winter and summer.⁴⁷ His purpose was to provide affordable homes based on the climate and functions people need in a home without sacrificing Egyptian identity.

Fathy's interest in indigenous Egyptian architecture is also strongly present in his plan designs. His New Gournia's plan drawing demonstrates and reflects the cultural identity of the countryside Egyptians. In this plan (Fig. 7), he combined history, art, architecture, and

⁴⁴ Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900*, 215.

⁴⁵ Ismail Serageldin, *Hassan Fathy* (Alexandria: The Bibliotheca Alexandria, 2007): 14, 41. https://www.bibalex.org/Attachments/Publications/Files/hassan_fathy.pdf.

⁴⁶ El-Shorbagy, "The Architecture of Hassan Fathy," 115.

⁴⁷ El-Shorbagy, "The Architecture of Hassan Fathy," 119.

countryside elements to create an aesthetic representation of the Egyptian identity.⁴⁸ While Cairo's plan designs were limited to a simple representation of lines and forms, Fathy understood art and architecture as intertwined elements of the culture to generate a rich representation that helps communicate his visions. This prompts questions such as "how can modernism or globalization combine history, art, and architecture with culture today? How can architects create a sense of individuality within the globalization context?" In *Cairo Since 1900*, Mohamed Elshahed portrays the essential of fusing history, art, and architecture to develop originality that reflects the country's identity. He also 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 today.

Today, political corruption, economic factors, and lack of attention to the low-income class led to the development of informal housing in low-income class and working-class communities. Due to the constant demolishing of earlier buildings and the lack of documentation of Egyptian architectural history, it is difficult to determine what can be classified as Egyptian Architecture. The reason is that the government and people are motivated by economic drives and the need to sell and make profits. 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. Fathy is the only well-known architect in Egypt whose work reflects the identity of traditional Egyptian architecture. Pieces of modernism ideas of form and function continue to stitch within Cairo's urban fabric, where cubic structure became the standard design. However, due to concrete and brick being the cheapest and most commonly used materials in Egypt and

⁴⁸ Fathy, "*Architecture for the poor*," 2.

government neglect, low-income Egyptians refer to the self-help construction of their homes consisting of cubic brick structures exposed without any plastering or embellishments.

Furthermore, additional floors with exposed brick structures have been added to heighten previous modern buildings over the decades, overthrowing the appearance of the buildings. Upon examining this image closely (Fig. 8), animals are raised on the roof, which gestures Fathy's dispute with modernism and his aim to provide good homes for the poor that are both structurally functional and appealing. Meanwhile, his New Gurna Village design included a courtyard and a functional area for the people to raise the animals while maintaining an Egyptian and architectural identity.

Overall, the Egyptian housing crisis for low-income Egyptians reflects political corruption and the government's inability to provide appropriate homes for the low-income class without harming or hindering the city's identity. It also reflects how architects cannot help or offer solutions without the government's permission and support. Today, the city communicates and provides an understanding of why Fathy had concerns about internationalism that prompted the rapid transformation and modernization of the city.

Finally, with the analysis of 20th-century Egyptian architectural projects, Hassan Fathy's New Gurna project, and the architectural transformation in Egypt, one can understand whether architects and planners may or may not be complicit in governance systems and oppression. Additionally, modernism and globalization shaped Egyptian architecture because of a new government searching for a new cultural identity. Overall, with their perceptions and values, the government and citizens influenced the development of Egyptian architectural housing and the shaping of architecture in Egypt.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig.1 “Ali Al-Meligi Masoud, Workers’ City, 1950.” p. 255.
Cairo Since 1900. (Photography
by Hesham Mohameed Hassan)

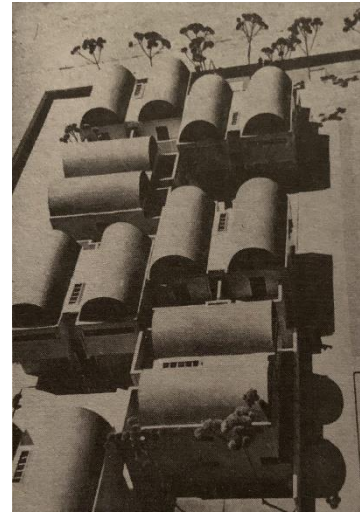


Fig. 2 “Salah Zaki Said, Turguman
Regeneration Plan, 1967.” p. 153. *Cairo Since
1900.*
(Photography by Al Nashra Al-Mi’ariya)



Fig. 3 “Naoum Shebib, Sabet Sabet
Building, 1958.” p.185. *Cairo Since 1900.*
(Photograph by Van Leo, courtesy of
RBSCL, AUC)



Fig. 4 “Sayed Karim, Nasr City Plan, 1953.” P. 343.
Cairo Since 1900.

(Photograph by Al Musawwar)



Fig. 5 Steele, James. "Street Scene, New Gouna 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.



Fig. 6 Sayed Karim, Villa Ibrahim Al-Sassas Bey (demolished), 1948. p. 215. *Cairo Since 1900*. (Photography courtesy of RBSCCL, AUC.)

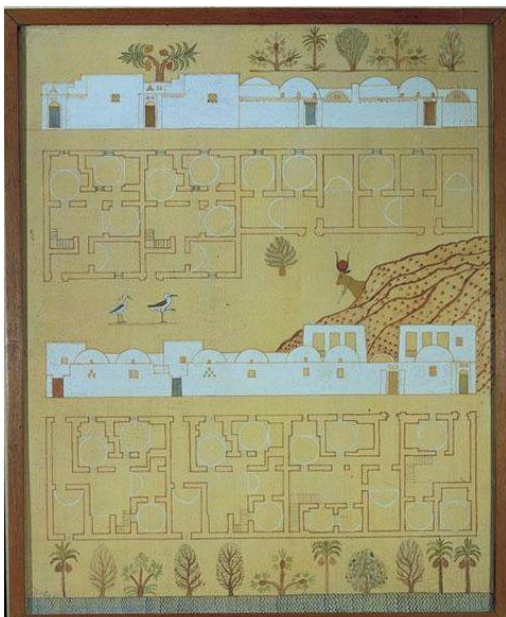


Fig. 7 New Gouna, plan/elevation with Hathor, 1946. *Archnet*. https://archnet.org/sites/90/media_contents/30381.



Fig. 8 "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>.

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