The relevance of Hassan Fathy in the Western World

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Abstract

La conférence relève l'intérêt toujours actuel du travail et de la pensée de Hassan Fathy en Occident. La réception et la fortune critique de Hassan Fathy sont rapidement brossées. L’auteur se questionne sur le pourquoi de la réception controversée de l’architecte dans son pays d’origine.

Reference

THE RELEVANCE OF HASSAN FATHY IN THE WESTERN WORLD

First of all I would like to thank Prof. Ahmed Hamid for the opportunity he offered me to talk at the Department of Art History of the American University of Cairo. I had the pleasure of meeting Professor Ahmed Hamid last year for the first time, as I came to visit the Hassan Fathy Archives at AUC. Mrs Barbi Essylinck who is in charge of the Hassan Fathy Archives, happily established contact between both of us. As I guess everybody of you knows, the archives of late Hassan Fathy, first given and partly classified in the Aga Khan Foundation in Geneva, were then transferred to the American University of Cairo. Being involved in the project of an exhibition in Geneva to take place in 2007 or 2008 and showing the work and the influence of Hassan Fathy, I was wonderfully received at AUC for a first week of contact.

At the same time, as a teacher at the Department of History of Art at the University of Geneva, moreover particularly involved in the history of architecture, I decided to dedicate one seminar during last summer term to Hassan Fathy's work. This seminar was followed by regular students of the Department of History of Art mostly trained in western arts and who previously had no idea of Egyptian or Middle Eastern arts or architecture. But it was also followed by students from the Arabic Department, who were interested in increasing their knowledge of cultural aspects connected with Arabic countries. A great emulation rose from this seminar and some of the students decided to go on working either on Hassan Fathy or on Egyptian architecture.

Seen through western eyes Hassan Fathy (1900-1989) is, there is no doubt about it, a celebrity in the world of architecture. His fame was established a long time ago through his publications and through his projects and realizations in Egypt and all over the world. The book which built up his reputation, first published as Gourna, a Tale of two villages (1969), and translated in French Construire avec le peuple. Histoire d’un village d’Egypte (1971), published again in English as Architecture for the poor: An experiment in rural Egypt (1973), relates the experience of New Gourna, I shall describe further. The article of Jean Cousin dedicated to Hassan Fathy in the periodical L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui (1978) established the international fame of the Egyptian
architect in the French speaking countries. Two years later Hassan Fathy gained the greatest recognition in 1980 when he received the Aga Khan Award for the whole of his career. Since then some publications on Hassan Fathy have appeared. I.M. Richards, Ismaël Serageldin, Darl Rastorfer, published a three voices *Hassan Fathy* in 1986 before the American historian of architecture James Steele, who was involved with the classification of Fathy's papers completed a catalogue *The Hassan Fathy collection* (1989), which is currently published on the website Archnet (MIT), that later gave way to a kind of synthesis under the title *An architecture for people, The complete work of Hassan Fathy* (1997). Steele was also responsible for several articles which celebrated Hassan Fathy as “a master of the renaissance of islamic architecture” and as “a new traditionalist”. The list of articles and books on Hassan Fathy is quite long today and we do not intend here to quote all the authors of researches. But we only wish to underline the fact that there are very few Arabic publications on him. Abdel Wahed el-Wakil, his main Egyptian disciple, wrote in English the foreword to James Steele's book. Ismaël Serageldin also participated in English to the collective book I have already quoted, the architect Mahmoud Magid Khaloussi published in 1997 a small book for students simply called *Hassan Fathy* (Publishing house Darb Qabess, Beirut, Lebanon). This publication seems to be till now quite a unique contribution in Arabic.

Plenty of exhibitions on the work of Hassan Fathy took place in different countries in Europe. Among them a small exhibition took place in the building of the United Nations in Geneva in 1997 *Hériter / innover en Egypte* with no publication, but a website. The first exhibition on the matter in Cairo *Selection from the Hassan Fathy archives* took place at the Library of Rare Books at UAC in 2000. The last important and interesting exhibition *Hassan Fathy, un architecte égyptien (1900-1989). La terre et la tradition* (4/12/2002-13/02/2003) was organized at the Paris IMA with the cooperation of the Rare books and special collections library of AUC and the Aga Khan Trust for culture was unfortunately not followed by a publication. But a website gives us an idea of its content. Finally an exhibit opened last week, on the ninth of February, at the Museum of Architecture in Frankfurt.
IMPORTANCE OF HASSAN FATHY

If the international reception of Hassan Fathy is glorious, we cannot say the same of the reception given him within Egypt. The architect certainly contributed much himself to his own fame mostly constructed around Gourna and the use of mud brick among other traditional architectural means. The experience of the new Gourna spread around the world. It may have hidden the other valuable thoughts of the architect.

I shall bring to mind the main points concerning the project of New Gourna, which took place quite early in the life and production of Hassan Fathy. The experience remained unfinished as you know. For different reasons the inhabitants of old Gourna didn’t want to move to the new place. The buildings have received many alterations since the time of their construction or have lost their previous character. The experience was considered even by Hassan Fathy himself as a failure and I confess it was for me a painful experience to visit the site in the year 2000. The plan of the village of New Gourna was altered, the houses modified with adjunctions anduperstructures. Fathy’s own house was kept by a poor bawab, living in the house with his family; the man complained he had received no help from the Ministry in Cairo. Nevertheless he tried to repair and restore himself the damages inherent to mud brick structure that should be regularly looked after. Being myself involved in historic preservation in Switzerland, I felt quite upset after this visit, measuring the gap between the ideals of Fathy and the sad reality.

Profoundly and sincerely concerned with peasants dwellings, Fathy, (who as a student wanted to study agronomy before choosing architecture), participated in several experiments on rural settings. In the thirties he already proposed a model farm house in Mansoura for the Society of Agriculture and another farm for the village of Ezbet el-Basry. He was then (in 1946) appointed by the Department of Antiquities of the Ministry for Cultural Matters to design the new village of Gourna (Gourna el-Gedida). The experience exceeded the field of architecture and was inserted profoundly in the social context, defining an anthropological territory concerning strongly the Egyptian fellah.

Before planning, Fathy studied the architecture of villages, looking for possible models on Egyptian soil. He visited many places, described the poverty of most of them
and the failure of expensive new materials. The architect was quickly convinced that the way to follow was the traditional how-to-do. He visited Assouan and Nubia and found there idyllic villages, well preserved, clean and smart. He discovered a kind of Miltonian paradise, kept in its true purity, far from the ugliness of misunderstood processes of modernization:

“On entering the first village, Gharb Aswan, I knew that I had found what I had come for. It was a new world for me, a whole village of spacious, lovely, clean, and harmonious houses each more beautiful than the next. There was nothing else like it in Egypt; a village from some dream country, perhaps from a Hoggar hidden in the heart of the Great Sahara—whose architecture had been preserved for centuries uncontaminated by foreign influences, from Atlantis itself it could have been [...] It was like a vision of architecture before the Fall; before the money, industry, greed and snobbery had severed architectural from its true roots in nature.”

From Nubia Fathy took not only the image of original beauty of native architecture but also the constructive practices he looked after, as the cupola built without wooden centering. The choice of mud brick was an economic choice, to construct nice and good farmers' houses: Mud brick. Sole hope for rural reconstruction, as he called a chapter of Architecture for the Poor. After having visited several villages he concludes: “...in every hovel and tumbledown hut in Egypt, was the answer to my problem. Here, for years, for centuries, the peasant had been wisely and quietly exploiting the obvious building material, while we, with our modern school-learned ideas, never dreamed of using such a ludicrous substance as mud for so serious a creation as a house. But why not?”

Fathy then went even further, following a way to avoid totally the use of wood that made the constructions expensive. He turned back to Nubian ancestral tradition and found in the villages of Upper Egypt a technique, the mud brick, and forgotten forms among which the cupola to cover the rooms, which could be built up while avoiding the coffers in wood, material too costly and too rare in Egypt. He believed the problem of agrarian architecture could be solved with the teaching of traditional architecture, the use of a simple and ancestral technology, easy to transmit through mutual teaching, that is to say without architects.
This socialist way of thinking, the deep and real interest in raising the standard of living of Egyptian peasantry was largely misunderstood in Egypt during the end of the forties and the fifties. Nobody was prepared then to accept such revolutionary ideas. The uneducated peasants were not prepared to understand the economic interest of self-made homes. The large trustees involved with concrete couldn’t accept the dangerous competition of the possible revival of a cheap technology. Neither the politics nor the specialists could really admit taking lessons from the Past as they were mostly looking at western ideas of progress issued from the Modern Movement. From then on Fathy was categorized as an idealist artist, an utopian, who had nothing to do with architecture.

Twenty years later Fathy gained international recognition through his publication in English and in French of the experience of Gourna. The social ideas he developed through the construction of new Gourna which he widely explained in his book almost twenty years later strongly established his broad international fame. The ideological contents of Fathy’s book, which appeared after the May 1968 Revolution, was of particular concern to the European people, prepared to that kind of message by the works born in the world of ethnography like those of Claude Levi-Strauss, for example *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). The interest in vernacular architecture was raised by Bernard Rudovský's inventive architecture exhibition at the MOMA in New York, *Architecture without architect, a short introduction to non pedigree architecture* (1964-1965) translated in French later on as *Architecture sans architectes: brève introduction à l’architecture spontanée* (1977).

The first preoccupation with ecology that will lead nowadays to cars of sustainable development through the Club de Rome (1970) helped understanding the great pioneer ideas developed by Fathy and his car to turning to traditional means of construction obeying to climatic preoccupations as well as to natural and inexpensive resources.

Though important is the Gourna’s experience, it has been so much emphasized that it puts out of sight all the others. Fathy’s interest in tradition and arts and crafts already raised during the twenties, as he was student at the Polytechnic School (Section of Architecture) in Cairo, a school largely indebted to European influences. We know
that he was deeply shocked to find in Sir Banister Fletcher’ History of architecture, a book advised from the professors, Egyptian traditional architecture characterized as “exotic architecture”, a qualification he couldn’t accept from an Egyptian point of view. He studied and analyzed many examples of traditional architectures in Cairo during the thirties; he understood how worked those constructions, underlined the cleverness of the system of natural ventilation or air conditioned through the malkhaf for example.

During the forties he became close to a group of intellectuals and artists who intend to revive tradition, thinking it could give way to a renewed creation. One of his first customers was a painter called Hamed Saïd, who first asked him to build a studio on a plot he had in El Marg (1941). The studio later became a complete house you can see on the picture. This artist founded a group called the Friends of the Arts, who dedicated themselves to the revival of Egyptian arts and crafts. Fathy’s colleague, the architect Wissa Wassef, shared the same ideas; he promoted the revival of arts and crafts in his center of Harannyyia, a center still in activity today, ruled by the daughter of Wissa Wassef and her husband, Ikram Nosshi. This very attractive center of Harranyyia, on the road to Saqqhara, still produces beautiful products as tapestries and carpets after traditional designs, pottery, today even batiks. The complete archives on Wissa Wassef were few months ago given to the AUC and are being now recorded. Their study will permit us to know more about the relationship with Hassan Fathy and the role played by these architects and artists, still largely unknown, inspired from Egyptian traditional arts and who sincerely thought, in a kind of nationalistic manner, that solutions for the Future could be found into the national Past.

[All of them certainly illustrated at the time the thoughts of a minority. To politics the main ways to find solutions for the needs of demographic pressure were to be found elsewhere. The new technologies of the concrete and the western models generally appeared as examples to be followed without hesitations, even if these foreign constructions didn’t took in account the specific conditions of Egypt (specially the hot climate in summer), even if the prices of these new technologies were prohibitive, even if the forms had often nothing to do with the genuine and local tradition of architecture and were just the irruption of the Western World in the Middle East without thinking any further.
Fathy designed plenty private houses for cultivated people who appreciate his architecture and his way of thinking. But he never achieved the rural projects he was involved in, neither New Gourna, nor New Bariz near the oasis of Kharga, which was undertaken in the late sixties and interrupted by the six days War (1967).

**ACTUALITY OF HASSAN FATHY**

Many architects, especially in Arabic countries, turn nowadays to the revival of tradition, often through the revival of mud structures. They deplore the ugliness caused by the abuse of misunderstood concrete in the countries of the Mediterranean basin. In the same time they consider a more convenient architecture from a climatic point of view. They also insist on the integration of contemporary production into the landscape.

Some experiences are already pretty old. The French architect, André Ravéreau, trained in France, did his career in Algeria from the fifties on to the seventies. He studied there the traditional houses of the *casbah* in Alger and in the cities of the M’Zab in the south of the country. He was a great admirer of Hassan Fathy’s work and he wrote in 1981 *Le M’Zab, une leçon d’architecture* to sum up his reflexion on mozabite architecture. This book was introduced by a text issued from an interview of Fathy called “*De l’implicite en architecture*”. He dedicated to Hassan Fathy another book *La Casbah d’Alger, et le site créa la ville* (1989): « Ce livre est dédié à notre maître et ami Hassan Fathy. » The connection between the two men is difficult to assess and even if they never met, Ravéreau developed a great admiration for the Egyptian he learned to know through reading the latter’s writings. He approached vernacular architecture in a similar way, trying to understand the complex relationships between form, space, material, use and behavior, that is to say with a kind of ethnological eye. Both men searched in the study of ancestral patrimony forms and techniques for a production that echoes landscape, climate and customs, rejecting in the same time blind importation of modern western techniques. Ravéreau founded there a workshop involved in the study of vernacular architecture. When he turned to France in the mid seventies, he was, through his students, responsible for the research center on mud brick near Grenoble, called CRAterre, whose founders
were previously trained in the Workshop of the M’Zab. CRAterre experiences today still deal with mud construction.

Born in Morocco, Elie Mouyal, trained in the Beaux-Arts of Paris during seven years, rediscovered when returning to his country the interest and beauty of the local mud tradition. He worked in Marrakech where he developed plenty interesting projects of individual houses as well as some kind of condominiums, deeply inspired from vernacular architecture. So did Rasem Badran from Jordan and plenty other famous architects from Middle East.

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**ATTEMPT AT EXPLAINING THE POOR RECEPTION OF FATHY IN EGYPT**

Fathy's inclination to build without architects, avoiding any professional go-between, goes back to the system of guilds and corporations of the middle ages, system which fascinated the Egyptian architect as it fascinated John Ruskin and William Morris during the nineteenth century. Hassan Fathy developed a very pessimistic outlook on the role played by the architect in the Egyptian society; he wrote that he only succeeded in being a “screen-figure” between tradition and invention: “The owner dealt directly with the men who did the work, and he could see what he was getting. For their part, the craftsmen were free to vary their designs within the limits of tradition and subject to the owner’s approval. If an architect had come between the owner and craftsmen, he would have produced plans that neither could understand, and, unable to escape from his drawing boards, would have remained quite ignorant that the
variations of detail possible in a design make all the difference between a good house and a bad one.” (Architecture for the poor (3e ed. 2000), p. 29).

While criticizing corruption and denouncing lobbies, Hassan Fathy made himself many enemies. His main publication contains many criticisms of people concerned with building, from top to bottom of the hierarchy. His ideas on architecture were inscribed in a dream world without bakshish, a dream world, that didn’t resemble Egypt at the time and that doesn’t resemble Egypt even today.