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The Shock of the Tradition

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First of all I would like to thank Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyya for the invitation to speak within the framework of the current Cultural season. I am very honored to be here with you tonight and to have this opportunity to share some ideas regarding a topic that has kept me busy for several years now. As an architect and historian of art interested in the legacy of the architectural heritage, I have often wondered about the tradition, or, more exactly, about the relation between tradition and modernity. Why did certain traditions disappear? Under which circumstances did they disappear? How were they replaced? And how can we understand the surprising fact that these forgotten traditions are sometimes suddenly rediscovered and become, in certain cases, shocking?

The Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy has provided extremely interesting answers to these questions that I will discuss tonight. I shall begin my talk by briefly presenting the career of the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, who lived from 1900 till 1989. I will then develop some of the main ideas he developed concerning the tradition. Finally, I shall conclude by analyzing the eventual impact of his theory of tradition in the field of modern architecture.

In 1936, year of the Egyptian accession to independence, Fathy's work took a dramatic swing in a new direction. He who had until then been working with the neo-styles and Modern Movement imported

from Europe through the English professors who taught him at the Polytechnical School in Cairo began to focus on the “pre-Napoleonic” national heritage: that is, the Islamic heritage that had developed from the crossing of many cultures. Included in a group of intellectuals dispossessed of their history and seeking a reevaluation of the Arab dwelling, Fathy started acting in order to recover a lost tradition.

Starting in the 1940's, he recognized traditional elements of Egyptian architecture and integrated them in his work. His plans contained plenty of these initial reinterpretations. An entire lifetime would not have been enough for him to fully explore and refine his knowledge of Cairene, Egyptian and Arab architecture, craft and applied art, from which he intended to gather the seeds of ‘modern Arab architecture’, the latter being the objective of a veritable crusade. The architect's quest was embodied thereafter by this new credo. (Fig. 1)

Championing a nation's cause, he describes in many texts how the Arabic architecture was hijacked from its natural evolution that had been broken almost a century and a half earlier by the process of colonization. Arab architecture needed to find its own modernity – a modernity to which it would have otherwise evolved naturally. The intrusion of Western municipal and architectural models into Cairo – as well as elsewhere in the Arab world and in Africa – had come into conflict with the complex and refined system of traditional building. (Fig. 2) In the cities, extrovert blocks had taken the place of palaces and houses that looked inwards towards their *sahn* (Fig. 3), thus

upsetting the urban structure and the character of the streets. The flexibility of housing that had been fashioned through agglutination, like the Arab language, had been replaced by westernized typologies. The grace and appropriateness of older architectural and decorative devices had given way to charmless innovations and inappropriate technologies. In Fathy's view, the problem was particularly accurate in the Egyptian countryside. Tricked by the smokescreen of Western modernity, rural upstarts imitated city-dwellers and disfigured their villages.

From that moment on, Fathy completely changed his way of designing (Fig. 4, 5, 6) He rejected the foreign models and tried to catch the very specific way of building and crafting of the Arab World. He rediscovered the beauty and the cleverness of the urban mamluk or ottoman dwellings, sometimes even palaces, as well as the adequacy of the vernacular traditional Egyptian architecture. Walking through the narrow streets of the old Cairo, often with his younger colleague and friend Ramses Wissa Wassef, he admired the refinement of ancient houses (Fig. 7). It is of little knowledge that Fathy also played a prevailing role in the history of the monumental restoration of the 1960's along with the biggest Italian specialists like Piero Gazzola. In 1968, he attended as the representative of the United Arab Republic the important Conference of Pistoia organized by the UNESCO, a decisive step in raising the awareness of architectural heritage and historic cities in Europe.

The observations of Hassan Fathy led him to understand the adequacy or “appropriateness” of the traditional architectural devices used by the Ancients (Fig. 8). Organized around one or many *sahn* or patios, the ‘inward-looking’ house did preserve the intimacy of the inhabitants. At the same time the patio (often decorated with a fountain) and the inner gardens brought some freshness, forceful argument in warm countries (Fig. 9). He discovered then that the *qa‘a*, the central piece of the typology, was flanked by *iwanat*, the *durqa‘a* of which covered by a dome or a *shukhshaykha*, and intended to restore it instead of using the western living room.

Although in the 1940’s Fathy and his wealthy clients were still hesitating between the living room and the *qa‘a*, the changeover became complete in the sixties. In 1969, Fathy dedicated his important paper for the International Conference on the Millenium of Cairo to this key element (Fig. 10). He gave a new and highly symbolic interpretation of the emblematic space of the *qa‘a*, whose origins date back to the court of the Bedouin dwelling, open to the sky. It was the space of transition between the celestial Cosmic Universe and the terrestrial domestic space. The *durqa‘a* could reach considerable heights, such as 17 meters at the Katkhuda House, while the *iwanat*, in which the *masatib* were placed, were on a human scale. The dome that was situated above this court, while continuing to represent the celestial vault, was the result of a gradual architectural evolution. Doing so Fathy contrasted the prosaic and materialistic character of Western modernity of the plain living room with the symbolic

richness of the Arabic tradition, which he sought to reintroduce into contemporary domestic architecture.

(Fig. 11) As he claimed in his late publication *Natural Energy and Vernacular Architecture Principles and Examples with Reference to Hot Arid Climates* (1986), traditional architecture was in agreement with the climate. He pointed out that the traditional Arab house was working like a natural fan, catching the dominant wind through the malqaf and conducting it into the patios and gardens where it was refreshed, thus cooling the inner of the house. The whole mechanism was providing a kind of natural air conditioned. (Fig. 12) Fathy's architectural creations were thus characterized by the prominent role given to the combination of the windcatcher (or malqaf) and of the mashrabiyya. (Fig. 13 à 21)

The *mashrabiyya* (Fig. 22) is probably one of the most significant elements of Islamic architecture. This prevailing element of the traditional applied arts was the result of a kind of know-how associated with traditional Arab creative genius, which Fathy was determined to help perpetuate. (Fig. 23) Created by a cabinetmaker (*shughl al-naggar*), this screen of turned wood was, for him, the ultimate symbol of Arab architectural and artistic tradition. An ingenious sun-shading device placed in front of windows, it filtered out excessive light and allowed those inside the building to see without being seen, both preserving the privacy of the *harim* and allowing air to circulate in the apartments. Its interlaced structure could be finely or heavily wrought, and its patterns infinitely varied.

Convinced of the artistic and technological supremacy of the *mashrabiyya* above all other architectural elements (and it is interesting to note that today the word *mashrabiyya* is used in common Arabic speech to mean any sort of craft object), Fathy was a collector of antique *mashrabiyyat*, using them to decorate his modern homes.

(Fig. 24) The *mashrabiyya* was so central to Fathy's thought that he dedicated a whole play to it. Written in 1942, revised in 1984 and published in Lebanon after his death, *Tale of the Mashrabiyya (Qissat al-mashrabiyya)* is a key item in Fathy's oeuvre. The hero of Fathy's autobiographical tale is called Khalid. As a young nationalist in his thirties, he carries within him the culture of East and West. Khalid campaigns for the perpetuation of oriental ways of life that do not contradict modern life. He condemns the changes that are being forced on all aspects of his country's civilisation, and in particular on its architecture. Although over thirty-five years old, he does not marry because he has not yet found the house where he would like to see his children be born and grow up. There is no longer a single palace or any architecture that has not been westernized and disfigured without any sense of elegance.

Khalid sets about seeking ways to pass on the know-how of the artisan *mu'allim*: transmission is the only way that the art of the *mashrabiyya*, of wood-turning, of stained glass, of pavements, and of all the tried and tested techniques of vernacular construction will be able to survive. How can art be put back on the rails of local

authenticity? How can it be reoriented? How can tradition be renewed to make it suited to our modern environment? Such were the questions that Khalid pondered, and such were the questions that preoccupied Fathy from the 1940's. The *mashrabiyya*, a synecdoche of Egyptian and Arab architecture, is the protagonist that alone embodies the survival of ancient architecture and tradition in general. The *mashrabiyya* in Fathy's tale previously adorned a fourteenth-century palace in Nahasin Street and has been rescued by an antiquarian. The advice of the antiquarian to Khalid, who is searching for an architect capable of building in the modern Arab style and of designing a house that would fit for the *mashrabiyya*, are as through Fathy's own voice.

Later in the tale, one of the scenery represents the *qa'a* of the modern Arab house that Khalid has built and the *durqa'a* crowned by a cupola with *qamariyya* windows; a balcony overlooks the *iwan*. A number of *mashrabiyyat*, with interlacing elements of varying thickness, decorate the walls of the *qa'a*; the largest of these dominates the central *iwan*, and lamps bearing candles hang from the ceiling of the *qa'a*. Settees are draped with patterned silk, and the floors, of crafted marble, are covered with Persian carpets. A particularly splendid *mashrabiyya* with sublime geometric designs adorns the *durqa'a*. Khalid dresses his guests in the traditional *abaya* and asks the musicians to play Arab music. If Fathy is the Khalid in the play, he is also the *mi'mar* capable of conceiving his design around a *mashrabiyya*, as several 1940s projects testify especially the project for Aziza Hassanein's house.

The play's final act is the story of a nightmare; Fathy stigmatises Western modernity, which destroys everything in its wake. Evil creatures decide to cover monuments and living beings with Ripolin (*ribulin*) [*da shughl Bariz*] – the cheap industrial paint of which Le Corbusier was so fond. Lacking all sensitivity, the vile substance conceals all evidence of time and patina; in Khalid's account, the artistic heritage is attacked by brush and white paint, like the daubings that some monuments have suffered in real life. However, in Fathy's tale, the lovers of the past and of slowly developed traditions from which much can still be learnt today finally triumph.

(Fig. 26 et 27) The *mashrabiyya* thus became *the* symbolic object of Fathy's theory of architecture, which represents at once the ambivalence of the Arab tradition, both backward- and forward-looking; the jewel of the decorative arts applied to architecture. He used it in several buildings as well as the claustras, which are another mean to filter the light and separate the inner from the outer space.

Now let me turn to the most important shock that struck Fathy with respect to traditional architecture, which is the tradition in vernacular architecture and the experiment of New Gurna. New Gurna and the story of this experiment, *Architecture for the Poor*, are probably the masterpieces of the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy. As he conceived New Gurna, a peasant's village imagined in the mid forties to relocate a population of inhabitants living above the pharaonic tombs in the context of the Reform of the Egyptian

Countryside, the architect was convinced that he was writing a contemporary page in the history of Egyptian architecture, using the traditional technology of mud-brick vaults and cupolas.

(Fig. 28-30) Fathy started by studying 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 industrialized materials to provide good-quality conditions of life. On the contrary, in Assouan and Nubia, he discovered idyllic villages, a kind of Miltonian paradise, in their original purity, far from the ugliness of misunderstood processes of industrialization. The shock in front of those traditional beautiful houses was intense: “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.” The architect was thus quickly convinced that the village he was about to plan should rely upon traditional know-how.

When Fathy received the commission for the model village, he was forty-six years old, and already had a solid career. He was

assigned the project by the Service of Antiquities through its director, the French archaeologist Etienne Drioton, who was seeking a low-cost solution to rehouse the Gournis then living in the ancient village of Gourna, set on the hillside above the tombs of the Valley of the Nobles. New Gourna was in no way spontaneously conceived, as has often been suggested. Rather, it was the result of repeated technological, typological and formal experiments over the course of the previous decade in the field of rural architecture.

Fathy chose to use mud brick (*tub al-akhdar*) (Fig. 31) as his fundamental material for various reasons, among which economic constraints. Considering its very cheap price, Fathy actually went as far as to imagine an architecture that would be executed by the inhabitants themselves, thus short-circuiting the Western process of architectural production and its prohibitive costs. He imagined as a masterplan that masons could teach a range of architectural typologies and simple know-how to the inhabitants: New Gourna would be the ultimate illustration of ‘self-help’, a social utopia that Fathy defended furiously throughout his career. (Fig. 32)

Fathy strove to bring out the architect’s role in innovation, interpreting an age-old material tradition (Fig. 33) but doing so in such a way as to make his own creation, a creation embedded in the inspiring cultural landscape of New Gourna. Material tradition, spiritual heritage, the spirit of a place and sociological survey are the ingredients from which to build a contemporary model village,

stripped of the violent inadequacy of modern expensive industrialized technology. (Fig. 34)

Fathy's inclination to build without architects and to avoid 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. Created by the architect, but built by its inhabitants, the village of New Gournia would seem to spring naturally and spontaneously from the soil, just as the local date palm trees grow. In paraphrases that would become clear over the following decades, Fathy forged the important and – in our era of sustainable development – largely achievable concept of ‘appropriate technology’.

As a champion of lost traditions, Fathy was disappointed by the devastating effect of the *tabula rasa* approach on towns. His desire to reconnect with the lessons of the past, which caused him to be seen as a precursor of the Post-Modern Movement, was a recurring feature throughout his career. (Fig. 35) The deliberately irregular fabric of the village, halfway between a grid pattern and a radial concentric plan, required an imaginative response and a rich and varied architecture. The village would be divided into four main sections, which would correspond to the four *badana* of the Gournis. A maze of small secondary streets, linking the semi-open courtyards of the groups of

houses, would protect the *badana*'s privacy and discourages outsiders from venturing in. The fellah would live with his family and his animals, in a house designed according to his specific needs. He would raise livestock and engage in agricultural pursuits on the outskirts of the village, but would also involve himself in craft activities at the Trade School and the *khan*. He would sell the products of the land in a handsome, shady marketplace, and the craft produced in the Khan. He would be able to practice his religion in a sleekly designed mosque or in a Coptic church (though the latter remained unbuilt). He would have a place for gatherings and festivities at his disposal. He would be able to have his children taught in two distinct schools, one for girls, one for boys. He would participate in the popular or folk entertainments that would take place in the theatre or on the esplanade behind it.

But the peasant's village invented by Hassan Fathy in the mid forties to relocate a population of inhabitants living above the pharaonic tombs provoked many reactions, from praise to condemnation. New Gourna's critical reception reached its maximum at the end of the fifties. The critical weight of Fathi Ghanim's 1959 novel *Al-Gabal (The Mountain)* certainly served to reinforce negative views of the village in Egypt. In this early paraphrase of the story of New Gourna, Ghanim paints a ruthless portrait of a westernised orientalist architect – intended to represent Fathy – who seeks to impose on the Gournis a way of life that they do not want: Ghanim notably stigmatises the use of the dome, a synonym of mortuary

architecture, in domestic buildings, and shows how little the engineer brought from Cairo understood the users' mentality. Of all criticisms of New Gurna, the comparison of the village houses to funerary architecture still remains till today the most indelible within a superstitious society.

On the opposite, Western observers gave glowing reviews to the project, which appeared in the best international journals from the late 1940's. Immersed in the theories of William Morris, the British writer Raymond Mortimer expressed his excitement on seeing this essentially human architecture, integrated into the landscape, representing the survival of a tradition that had escaped the clutches of the machine age. Once complete, the village should serve as a model of rural housing in Egypt, raising the standard of living and improving sanitary conditions. The photographer and specialist in American architecture, G. E. Kidder Smith decreed that the model village was the most interesting example of Egyptian architecture besides the Pharaonic monuments. Raymond Lasserre praised the genuine inventiveness of the Egyptian architect. His creations would contribute to the battle against the standardization and predominant force of Americanization, « which is gradually suffocating all human creative forces ».

New Gurna was only partially completed, for reasons that include bureaucratic inertia, the reticence of the Gournis and covert boycotting by heavy technology lobbyists. Using age-old construction techniques that still survived in Nubia, and which he wished to revive

in the spirit of the *Nahda*, Fathy projected himself into his own time and invented a possible model for ‘contemporary’ Egyptian rural architecture.

The revelations Fathy experienced in Nubia in 1941 gave him access to a new vision of the world. From this, he built up what might be called his ‘theory of tradition’, which he continued to reinforce throughout the key stages of his career. If ‘culture is the result of the interaction between man’s intelligence and his environment, to satisfy his physical and spiritual needs’, tradition results from the quintessence of experiments that have been tried and succeeded over generations, in a particular place. “Tradition is the social analogy of personal habit, and in art has the same effect (...) Tradition is not necessarily old-fashioned and is not synonymous with stagnation. Furthermore, a tradition need not date from long ago but may have begun quite recently. As soon as a workman meets a new problem and decides how to overcome it, the first step has been taken in the establishment of a tradition. When another workman has decided to adopt the same solution, the tradition is moving, and by the time a third man has followed the first two and added his contribution, the tradition is fairly established.”

And he goes on saying: “Yet other solutions may not be worked out fully before many generations have passed, and this is where tradition has a creative role to play, for it is only by tradition, by respecting and building on the work of earlier generations, that each

new generation may make some positive progress toward the solution of the problem. Once a particular tradition is established and accepted, the individual artist's duty is to keep this tradition going, with his own invention and insight to give it that additional momentum that will save it from coming to a standstill, until it will have reached the end of its cycle and completed its full development. He will be relieved of many decisions by the tradition, but will be obliged to make others equally demanding to stop the tradition dying on his hands. In fact, the further a tradition has developed the more effort the artist must expend to make each step forward in it."

"Architecture is still one of the most traditional arts. A work of architecture is meant to be used, its form is largely determined by precedent, and it is set before the public where they must look at it every day. The architect should respect the work of his predecessors and the public sensibility by not using his architecture as a medium of personal advertisement. Indeed, no architect can avoid using the work of earlier architects; however hard he strains after originality, by far the larger part of his work will be in some tradition or other. Why then should he despise the tradition of his own country or district, why should he drag alien traditions into an artificial and uncomfortable synthesis, why should he be so rude to earlier architects as to distort and misapply their ideas? This happens when an architectural element, evolved over many years to a perfect size, shape, and function, is used upside down or enlarged beyond recognition till it no longer even

works properly, simply to gratify the architect's own selfish appetite for fame.”

Consequently, Fathy bemoaned the fact that, in a world where everything was becoming universal, tried and tested location-specific solutions were too often brushed aside, only to be replaced by systems that were doomed to failure, such as the senseless importation of glass curtain walls in countries with extreme climates, or Swiss chalets in the deserts of the Orient. He made a plea in favor of the progressive and thoughtful evolution of architectural forms, the opposite to unchecked revolution, and recommended in particular that local tradition should be regarded as a basis, to guard against errors: ‘Decisions on form will be taken in the light of all the knowledge and civilization that is in the developer's reach.’ His interest in Egyptian, Arab and Mediterranean heritage manifested itself in in-depth investigations of building techniques, typological devices and decorative elements. He sought to extract lessons from these that could revitalize the foundations of contemporary Egyptian, Arab and Mediterranean production and which would stand out from the superficial Orientalism that some of his Western and ‘Eastern’ predecessors practiced.

Bad fortune cruelly affected Fathy's production; as several significant buildings have already disappeared like the villa he built for his wife, Aziza Hassanein, which was destroyed during the creation of the Maadi waterfront road. At present, the legendary house

of artist and potter Hamed Saïd in el-Marg has become surrounded by a hostile environment and the villa Toussoun Abu Gabal is threatened by the progress of land-bank in the surroundings of the new Four Seasons hotel. Furthermore, two houses built in the village of New Bariz (Kharga) have recently undergone renovations which have totally altered them.

Fathy embodies the Egyptian genius, along with such contemporary figures as Nagib Mahfouz, Um Kalthoum or Yussef Shahin. But today, although no one would think of letting the Mahfouz's Trilogy, Um Kulthum's songs or Shahin's cinematographic heritage disappear, the outstanding realizations of a prominent architect are falling one after the other and New Gurna is gradually vanishing.

In 1972, when UNESCO adopted the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in Paris, it was a turning point in the globalization of cultural and natural heritage. This heritage of outstanding values needed to be preserved as part of the world heritage of humanity as a whole. The widening of the heritage field has induced a new questioning of common criteria for evaluation. What was worth to be integrated in the “patrimonial paddock” to quote a Choay’s formula? This globalized vision has certainly opened new horizons in terms of values. The Western aesthetical debate more than ever appeared empty and vain and was to be replaced by a more profound discussion.

In this change of paradigm, the *Appropriate* is in the process of replacing the *Beautiful* and the *Sublime*. There is so much to relearn from ancient and adequate traditions, which have been hastily swept away by the tsunami of the Modern Movement. UNESCO indicates a possible path by valuing traditional sociability, endangered know-how, arts and crafts rather than major artistic expressions and selecting them as part of the World Heritage. It thus pleads for the defense and exemplification of a heritage that is certainly a life lesson and possibly a morality lesson, because, to quote Fathy once more, “Modernity does not necessarily mean liveliness, and change is not always for the better.”