

ACADEMIE D'ARCHITECTURE

Paris 11 January 2018

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Hassan Fathy, Cairo c. 1970s.

HASSAN FATHY: EARTH & UTOPIA¹

My talk this evening is on the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy who had a large influence on my professional and academic life as an architect. Before I share with you a glimpse of my most recent work, I open with a quote from a paper (presented to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in Boston 1969.)

Today, for comprehensive planning we need a modern sage capable of combining the disciplines of the architect, biologist, astronomer, philosopher and mathematician, as the ancients did, together with a sheaf of modern studies like sociology, psychology, economics, engineering and so on. But he will need too the sensibility of the artist, and he must be versatile enough to apply this imaginative appreciation of beauty (and ugliness) not only to the visual aspect of the city, but to man's whole way of life.

Hasan Fathy, 'Comprehensive Design for Rural Living'

BACKGROUND & INTRODUCTION

Over the past 4 years, I have been working on a book that brings together Fathy's unpublished papers and reports, on which we worked together and that he had wished to see published as early as 1981. This book is therefore a tribute to him – one which I have owed him, and is overdue.

It has been a long process, and one that lay dormant for over two decades. I had been entrusted with these papers since the early to mid-1980s. An outline was prepared during the 1990s, but I could not get enough interest or sponsorship.

I became preoccupied with travel and with work on other projects that I had to complete at that time in Oman and the UAE. Returning to Yemen to work there from 2006 onwards deferred the process further, when I embarked on preparing and finishing the book *The Architecture of Yemen* (2007). The years that followed were busy with practice in Hadramut (up to 2013), and research for another publication in Qatar (2009-10).

My receipt of the Global Award for Sustainable Architecture in 2012 revived interest in my work with Fathy, and recognition of the importance of this was brought to the forefront. A series of events followed that consolidated this position, with a strong sense of causality taking effect. Abdelwahab Meddeb was asked by Marie-Hélène Contal to write an essay on my work, for the book of the Global Award at the Cité de l'Architecture. We had first encountered each other at Fathy's in 1976, and we had not met since except briefly in Granada in 1999. The Leçon Inaugurale that I gave at the Cité in 2014, and the publication that ensued, contained a section on Fathy with Meddeb's preface. The book project came to life again. I discovered how interested

¹ Excerpt from the forthcoming book *Earth and Utopia*, published by Laurence King Publishing, London, Fall 2018.

architects and academics in Europe were in Fathy's ideas and his work, and the importance that they attached to both. I discussed the book with both Contal and Meddeb separately, and became convinced that I needed to work on editing and completing the papers. The original outline was brought out, and the papers that had travelled from Cairo to London in the 1970s and to Beirut in the 1980s, had gone back to London and now were in Beirut in three boxes. In 2009, when moving my office and papers from London, I had packed these because this was a pending, unfinished project that I intended to work on further.

In October 2013, I was invited to the Iuav University of Architecture in Venice to give a lecture on my work, and a seminar on Fathy. The i-seminar presentation on Hassan Fathy was introduced by Viola Bertini. I was so impressed by her introduction and reading of his work that I invited her to work with me on the book project. This was the background to this collaboration, in which her writings, initially the research she carried out for her PhD on Fathy (2010–13), contribute to the analysis of his work in theory and practice. We met and worked in short, concentrated phases in Beirut, Cairo, London, Milan and Venice. Three trips to the American University in Cairo archives were made. And research was carried out on the images and documents there to supplement and illustrate the materials that we had.

A large amount of the original materials on which I had worked with Fathy were in Arabic. These include several of Fathy's papers on Nubia, the Higher Folk Art Institute, two interviews, his lectures, the play *The Story of al Mashrabiyya*, and *'The Land of Utopia'*. These were all translated into English for the book.

PART ONE: CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY

The first part of this book covers Fathy's architectural discourse, with a reading of his research, thoughts, theoretical construct, and the spirit and rhythm that permeated his work and practice.

Culture and Philosophy is a structural synthesis of the time spent in Darb el Labbanah with Hassan Fathy over various periods between 1973 and 1977, and then 1984 when I went back to work over conversations, discussions and uncertainties shared with him – a tradition that was established in his *majlis*, rich with a pleasurable and challenging mindset that characterized the time spent there.

Cairene Conversations opens with an interview held with Fathy at his home in Darb el Labbanah in 1984 on the poetics of space. Another dialogue, held with him in 1983, offers a review of his thoughts on Arab architecture; reflecting in hindsight on building for the poor; and on his previous projects, which will be covered in the subsequent chapters. This first section ends with a review of Fathy's ideas and thoughts on the role of the crafts and geometry in the city and the 'Million Axes' that go into its making.

The second section of Part One, Nubia and Watercolours, explores Fathy's architectural métier and the roots of his inspiration, which were to identify and to draw (with his research on Islamic architecture and the Cairene Arab house) the colour, spirit, philosophy and trajectory to his future design work. The land of Nubia was overshadowed by the Pharaonic legacy that he evoked as a point of reference and source. This was beautifully illustrated and distilled in his watercolours, which followed the technique used in framing, drawing and painting formal miniatures depicted in

Islamic manuscripts, in which the third dimension of the distorted, or diminishing, perspective was absent.

This is followed by the third section, The Greek Period 1957–1961, which synthesizes Fathy's previous research and work in Cairo, broadening his scope by working with Dioxiadis's ekistic theory – carrying further, challenging and complementing research in Africa with the research project and reports on the 'City of the Future'. The section closes with the projects for Iraq, which were aborted shortly after the revolution in 1958.

This period heralded a new era in establishing a different thinking 'grid' that would impact on Fathy's planning and design – one in which we understand how the village relates to the city, and how the urban is validated in the subtle formality of his rural village design. Henceforth for Fathy, the divide between the urban and the rural was fictional. The formality achieved in his village planning actually revealed a geometric system, which was introduced and formalized by Fathy in his newly adapted grids, or thinking, for designing a new city in the desert oasis of Baris. By the time he returned to Cairo, he had enriched his own system of design and consolidated it to unleash the work that he set out to do in the next phase, covered in Part Two.

The fourth and final section in Part One is Cultural Alienation: Stories, its constituent parts written in the 1940s. Fathy was struggling with the demise of Arab culture, and reinstating its authenticity became a leading obsession in his essays, work and philosophy. It was a painful mission. His quest was to uncover, prior to Edward Said's seminal work on Orientalism,¹ the importance of recognizing and appreciating the rich sources and resources of Islamic and Arab architecture and culture, and its inherent beauty and proportion, which the foreign 'other' had come to record, study, adopt and adapt, purchase and use, admire and live with. All this at a time when his fellow bourgeoisie were leaving the Ottoman settings of their homes, furnishing and environments, and moving out to the more desirable, fashionable locations in the newly designed quarters of Garden City and Maadi – all the while avidly demanding new imported ways, architecture and artefacts. The modern period was replacing the archaic. Witnessing this gradual collapse and loss, Fathy foresaw the dangerous effects that this change would bring as mass production and the import of ideas, with modern construction and town plans, would inevitably weaken, or even obliterate, the main core of the vernacular (Islamic or Arab) arts, crafts and designs along with the skills, knowhow and knowledge that had created a rich and distinguished language and culture. This he identified as his Arab culture, referring as his point of reference, or departure, for the discourse to his empirical 'point de repair'.

In the course of his research, Fathy had already discovered the discipline in Islamic architecture, which he worked on as a living form of architecture and structure, interpreting its designs and recognizing the 'concepts' that were to inform his own design structure. These included the elements of formation conceived and pronounced in the Arab or Cairene house. Fathy lifted this architecture out of the domain of art history and archaeology, as he also did with Pharaonic architecture (aided by the analysis and works of Schwaller de Lubicz and the Temple of Man, which reoccur in his study for Mosque Architecture [Part Two]). More relevant in this section on 'Culture and Philosophy', however, is the establishment of the vital role of the crafts and craftspeople, and, essentially, geometry, which is the underlying organization and

overall matrix composing the order and proportion that he sought to instil back into architecture in general, and his own built works in particular.

Fathy possessed a vivid and compelling imagination that he used remarkably and creatively in sketching while outlining and investigating his line of inquiry through the stories he had written. They accompanied him fondly for his entire life; he often recalled them, quoting passages and anecdotes from them. They represented his unrequited love, like his quest and unbuilt projects, unfulfilled and incomplete. In 1983, I dedicated my time with him to completing those texts,² and in particular the *Story of al Mashrabiyya*. He reviewed the whole play and edited it, while I was writing it up and having it typed. We completed the Arabic version to begin with, since the original was in Arabic. He attempted a translation into English, but we were diverted working on other projects; at the time of his death, he left an incomplete translated version. The translation here is new, and based on the original Arabic. 'The Land of Utopia' was complete, a beautifully written manuscript in an extraordinary calligraphic hand. Luckily, Fathy had asked me to prepare this for publication, and I had the original scanned in the late 1970s.³ A bromide print-out of the films remained, and has been reproduced here. When checking with the American University of Cairo archives, it was discovered that this manuscript, sadly, had never been received. An edition exists in French, which Fathy had published.⁴ An Arabic version might have appeared in *Rose al Yusuf*, a popular (weekly) cultural and political magazine avidly read by the intelligentsia and covering issues of the day. Since there was no English version, the translation here was done for this book. The drawings were wood engravings produced by one of Fathy's close friends, Bernard Rice (1900–1998), who lived in Cairo from 1929 until 1939.⁵ By the 1970s, Rice had moved to London and was living in one of the Chelsea artist studios. This story brings to a close Part One of the book.

PART TWO: DESIGN, PLANNING AND EARTH CONSTRUCTION

This part covers Fathy's design work and projects, mainly in Egypt, supported by the documents that he wrote to support his design theories and construction methods. It begins with a section on The Concept of House and Village, opening with the 'Rural Concept' that informed much of his work. This is followed by 'Village and House Design', with a discussion on his major village projects for Gournah, New Baris Dar al-Islam in New Mexico, Al Mashrabiyyah Ekistics Village in Cairo and finally the project for the Nile Festival Village – a major cultural project that was intended for a site in Luxor in Upper Egypt.

The section ends with 'House Design Projects', in which a selection of prominent private houses designed and built by Fathy are analysed and discussed. This opens with an introduction by Bertini on 'Spatial Invariant Systems', with an analysis of the principles and design vocabulary that Fathy worked with, based on his inspiration and reading of the Arab house concept mentioned earlier.

The next section comprises Fathy's blueprint for Mosque Architecture, while the following section covers earth construction, with a memorandum by Fathy on an Institute for Appropriate Technology that he set up in the early 1980s. The second part of this section ends with the *Mud Brick Manual* on the techniques of building

roofing with vault and dome construction, and for designing units for housing and building with earth. This is followed by an interview with Fathy's master builder, Alā' al-Din Mustafa, who built many of Fathy's projects. A biography and list of projects is provided at the end of the book.

The rules of aesthetics in music and architecture are very similar.

... But in music there are rules for the ordering of harmony and counterpoint, while in architecture, the quality of rightness must be felt intuitively.

In the absence of any established canons of composition, the architect must rely upon his own sensibility to order his light and shadow, mass and void, plain surface and decoration, so that the total design should present the same succession of themes, of crescendos and climaxes, the alteration of calm and animated passages, etc. to produce town plans to which visual modulation gives constant variety and beauty within an overall unity of conception.

Such designing raises planning to the level of composition and artistic expression, and by its example creates or at least demonstrates the-as-yet unwritten rules of visual harmony in architectural and town and village design. Hassan Fathy, 1969

This is this a modest tribute to the man who believed architecture is a noble form of art that combines science and philosophy. And there is not a more befitting venue or institution to introduce his work and celebrate his legacy.

Thank you for having me with you this evening.