CONTESTED REPRESENTATIONS AND THE BUILDING OF MODERN EGYPT: THE ARCHITECTURE OF HASSAN FATHY

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the career of the architect Hassan Fathy as a case study for the Egyptian experience of modernity during the mid-twentieth century. I argue that the discussion of modernity has neglected the Middle East and positioned the West as the singular centre of modern life. I challenge this view through a discussion of twentieth century cultural history which looks at how the issues of modernity and culture, as expressed through architecture, developed as part of an interconnected global dialogue. By analyzing Fathy’s role constructing the village of New Gourna during the mid-1940s I call into question the implications of his traditionalist mud-brick architectural practice and recast it as an expression of the uniquely modern political, economic and cultural circumstances of Egypt at that time. Furthermore, by arguing that Fathy’s traditionalist architecture was based upon essentially modern ideas I challenge his status as a founding father of post-modern architecture.

Keywords: Modern Egypt; Modernity; Cultural History; Modern Architecture; Hassan Fathy

Subject Terms: Egypt -- History -- 20th Century; Egypt -- Culture -- 20th Century; Architecture, Modern; Fathy, Hassan
To My Lovely Wife Kathy-Ann

and

In Memory of Dr. William L. Cleveland
who always kept me honest
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I am for richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning…

-Robert Venturi
INTRODUCTION

Modernity, as a collective image in the minds of historians, enjoys incredible nuance and texture—it is a word that calls to mind so much more than simply a matter of the recent past. It is an image of socialists and anarchists debating long into the night in the cafés of Vienna and Barcelona; or, if as in a Degas, whiling away the oppressive loneliness of the city over a glass of that bitter green elixir—absinthe. The images shift and grow in depth—the barefoot wonder of modern dance Isadora Duncan—that oversexed Grecian goddess in flowing translucent white robes who took a sledgehammer to the dying conventions of old Europe as she swirled and undulated across the stage.1 Nijinsky and the Ballets Russes performing ‘Rites of Spring’ in Paris, May of 1913, offending every respectable or traditional sense of beauty and movement. Just one more shot across the bow of a society whose death would be drawn out over the following four bloody years.2 Other images circulate and intermingle, building in intensity; the surging of a locomotive hissing steam and rushing forward—speed—as only a Boccioni sculpture could capture. The perspective shifts, encompassing the awe of watching Gustave Eiffel’s tower rise above the church spires of Paris, or wandering in and about the technological marvels displayed inside Joseph Paxton’s oversized greenhouse during London’s Great Exhibition.3 A final flash, as hundreds of thousands of young men go over the top, losing their lives in an instant. These images become nothing less than the historians’ drama—a struggle between triumph and tragedy—

tinged with not a little romanticism. Through this imagining, the historical analysis of modernity has grown to be so much more than a description of matters recently past; something that can be defined by mere political happenings or technological advancements. This history attempts to recapture and struggle with a way of thinking about the world in terms of a period of real or perceived progress that was based around perpetual upheaval.

While the debate about modernity has in many respects become a debate about the nature of humanity, progress, truth and ultimately the question of hubris — what of discussing modernity in the Middle East, or as I will be concerned with, Egypt? To compare the state of discussions about North American and European modernity to that of the Middle East would be to note much more than the vast disparity in the amount of literature, but rather the general character of that literature. Whereas ‘Modern France’ or ‘Modern Germany’ calls to mind the works of Proust and Goethe as much as specific political happenings, wars, or the rise of one particular government, the words ‘Modern Egypt’ hang in the air as simply a designation of time. Certain signposts stand out along the path of ‘Modern Egypt’ – the reign of Muhammad Ali – the British occupation – the Free Officers Revolution. Yet these histories take on the appearance of being simply noteworthy events of the past two centuries. They hardly evoke the dread or romance with modernity that underpins so much of the Western historiography – it is something not even considered. There is no sense of the intoxicating will to progress, no debate over whether an Egyptian modernity had the “capacity for perpetual self-critique and self-renewal” as Marshall Berman so forcefully argued about the experience of modern life in America and Europe. Nor has it become a site of the passionate post-modern backlash. What would it mean to see modern Egypt with the same eyes that led the contemporary cultural theorist Terry Eagleton to write “We are now in the process of wakening from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the

totality...”\textsuperscript{5} Or, to naturally include the Middle East in the mental imagery called to mind when Jean-François Lyotard finally declared, with barely contained exasperation, “The grand narrative has lost its credibility...”\textsuperscript{6} The proposition feels dissonant and unfamiliar because the Middle East has for so long been accepted as outside the critical discourse of modernity and by extension, post-modernism. Yet the failure to generate a discussion including the Middle East is not simply an unfortunate oversight; rather, the historiography of the ‘West’ claims exclusive rights to the ‘Modern’. The terms remain virtually interchangeable. As the historian Timothy Mitchell noted, there is an overwhelming and continuing bias within the historical literature in which, 

Modernization continues to be commonly understood as a process begun and finished in Europe, from where it has been exported across ever-expanding regions of the non-West. The destiny of those regions has been to mimic, never quite successfully, the history already performed by the West. To become modern, it is still said...is to act like the West.\textsuperscript{7}

This implicit understanding of modernity as a paradigm originating in the West and emanating outward – getting weaker with distance – has produced a distorted image of both modernity and those areas of the world which have been designated the periphery.

The intellectual history of the twentieth century encompassing modernism, and now post-modernism, has been framed in such a way that it assumes the ‘West’ as its context and frame of reference – it is the spectator for its own performance. In this thesis I intend to question that view by undertaking a discussion of twentieth century cultural and intellectual history which looks at the interconnected global exchange of ideas and criticisms about modernity. I argue that modernism developed in the ‘West’ interdependently with similar

\textsuperscript{5} Terry Eagleton, as quoted by David Harvey in, The Condition of Postmodernity (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), 9.
\textsuperscript{7} Timothy Mitchell, Questions of Modernity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1.
ideas in the ‘East’. Furthermore, this interdependence continued into the latter half of the twentieth century as the modernist dream came crumbling down. In this respect, I propose to use architecture to segue into these larger discussions about the intellectual history of modernity between ‘East’ and ‘West’. More specifically I will look at the work of the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1900-1989) as a case study. Fathy’s architecture and writings are a set of sources uniquely positioned to trace the interconnectedness of ideas about modernity during the twentieth century. Fathy leaves behind a particularly rich legacy of sources and was most distinguished for building a utopian village in Upper Egypt (near Luxor) called New Gourna between 1945 and 1948. Furthermore, the story of Fathy’s work building this village was told in his critically acclaimed book Architecture for the Poor which was published in 1973. The book made Fathy internationally famous and also made him one of the foremost commentators on architecture and society. Fathy used New Gourna in his writings to discuss the need for culturally and historically appropriate architecture, as well as emphasizing humanistic design and sustainable development. His work was a point of convergence; an architectural practice that was self-consciously Egyptian yet at the same time was explicitly engaging with international discussions about the social and cultural

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8 I have chosen to use architecture as an intersection between all of these discussions throughout my thesis because the discussion of architecture has always maintained a close relationship to the discussion of modernity, and by extension, post-modernism. Architects like Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe have furnished historians and critical theorists with a set of indelible images of modernity – a stage for the modern drama, and by extension the focus of much postmodern indignation. Also, the history of modern architecture in Egypt (and the Middle East in general) remains untold and, by and large, dismissed. The overall tendency has been to look at modern architecture (and here I use the term ‘modern’ in the broadest sense, not strictly referring to the International Style modernism of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, but modern architecture in the most general sense as the architecture made possible by modern industry and capitalism dating from the early nineteenth century) in the Middle East as the exception rather than the rule – or to simply ignore its existence altogether. As anecdotal evidence, in the 824 pages of the recently published Phaidon Atlas of Contemporary World Architecture there are exactly 15 pages on all of the Middle East and Africa. The implications of the interrelated development of architectural modernism in Europe and the Middle East are generally left unexplored, or on the other hand modern development is lamented for its destruction of some ‘authentic’ or traditional landscape.

9 Throughout my research I have encountered several ways of transliterating the name of the village and its people. In Timothy Mitchell’s book Rule of Experts he refers to the village as “Gurna” and its inhabitants as “Gurnawis”. Fathy refers to the village as “Gourna” and its inhabitants as “Gournis”. To create a minimum of confusion I have adopted Fathy’s wording, except in cases of direct quotation.
meaning of architecture. In short, his work was a bridge between the physical practice of architecture within Egypt and the larger universe of rhetoric, ideas and debates about modernity as manifested through architecture. My thesis unfolds by first tracing and discussing Fathy’s role in that meeting and exchange of ideas in Chapter 1. This is followed in Chapter 2 by a discussion of Fathy’s architectural practice and how his work engaged with larger ideas about modernity while at the same time remaining specific to its Egyptian historical context.

While I argue for a reappraisal of Egyptian modernity, the process of realizing that goal builds out of a number of ongoing historiographic and theoretical discussions. First and foremost my thesis is positioned within a gap in the historiography of nineteenth and twentieth century Egyptian history. This collective body of work has until recently shown remarkably little concern for a cultural narrative of modern Egyptian history. The main focus has been the development of a strictly political and economic narrative which has taken on the discussion of nationalism and Islam (often framed as competing ideologies) as its two main abstract concerns. In many ways this discussion has proceeded in a direct line, originating in the 1950s and 1960s with certain foundational texts by authors such as Charles Issawi, Gabriel Baer, Robert Tignor and Roger Owen. Through the 1970s and 1980s these same historians continued their earlier work while also influencing a new generation of historians such as PJ Vatikiotis, Jacques Berque, and Robert Hunter. Most recently this discussion has continued in the works of Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski who have

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written extensively on the nuances of nationalism and political development during the interwar years. Yet despite Gershoni and Jankowski’s stated goal of emphasizing “the social, the intellectual, and the internal political dimension of nationalism” as well as “the creation and dissemination of new Egyptian national images and frameworks of identity”12 their writings seem to continually hark back, and rehash old arguments about politics, economics and nationalism. The overall character of the historiography seems to accept the proposition that a representative history of Egypt can be reached by tracking the state through its political and economic development.13 ‘Culture’ seems like a garnish, the occasional quote from an Egyptian novelist to support the argument that politicians were corrupt or illustrate the chronic mistreatment of the fellahin.14 Little effort has been made to incorporate modern art or architecture into the larger cultural history of Egypt in the same way that art and architecture form part of the backbone for the historiography of Western modernity. While there is certainly value in continually reappraising political narratives of nineteenth and twentieth century Egypt, my main concern is how such a narrative has come to represent Egyptian history. To draw a point of comparison, Dipesh Chakrabarty noted a similar tendency in the historiography of modern India: “Indian history, even in the most dedicated socialist or nationalist hands, remains a mimicry of a certain ‘modern’ subject of ‘European’

12 Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, Redefining the Egyptian Nation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), xi.
13 This observation draws on debates about the conceptualization of the state sparked by Timothy Mitchell in, “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics,” The American Political Science Review, Vol. 85, No. 1 (1991): 77-96. Mitchell characterized the predominate view in the following terms: “The statist approach always begins from the assumption that the state is a distinct entity, opposed to and set apart from a larger entity called society.”(89) He later argued for a new approach built, in part on the proposition that “The state should not be taken as a freestanding entity...located apart from and opposed to another entity called society.”(95) Further discussion of the topic and Mitchell’s article is found in, John Bendrix, Bertell Ollman, Bartholomew H. Sparrow and Timothy P. Mitchell, “Going Beyond the State?” The American Political Science Review, Vol. 86, No. 4 (1992): 1007-1021.
14 This tendency to force the literature has also been noted and justly criticized by Charles D. Smith in his review essay on Gershoni and Jankowski’s work, particularly as it concerned their usage of Muhammad Husayn Haykal. Charles D. Smith, “Imagined Identities, Imagined Nationalisms: Print Culture and Egyptian Nationalism in Light of Recent Scholarship,” International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol. 29, No. 4. (1997): 614-615.
history and is bound to represent a sad figure of lack and failure.” At a most basic level, the
overall direction in the historiography has failed to explain what ‘Modern Egypt’ might have
meant in the more abstract sense. For if Egyptians identified and thought of themselves as
‘Modern’ in ways that were similar to or perhaps even totally different from Europeans and
Americans, then what exactly did it mean for Egyptians to take part in this ‘Modern’
intellectual framework?

While the historical literature has hardly proved adept at answering this question, the
same is true when approached from another angle – looking at the place of the Middle East
within the body of critical theory making up academic post-modernism. Indeed it would
seem that in the aftermath of thirty years of post-modern theoretical ascendancy – in which
nothing modern was sacred – sometime along the way the topic of modernity in the Middle
East would have come up. Nonetheless, the classic works of post-modern criticism by the
likes of Charles Jencks, Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Michel Foucault and many
others made little mention of the Middle East as a location for the modern, or its darker half,
modern alienation. In a very real sense, the post-modern conception – and criticism – of
modernity has been framed exclusively around the West.

Even though the idea of a ‘Modern’ Egypt or a ‘Modern’ Middle East has been
absent from post-modern critical theory, that absence should not be mistaken for total
disinterest. As the post-modern critique began to take shape in the early 1970s, new

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16 It seems important to qualify this narrative of the past fifty years of Egyptian historiography. While I
find historians’ portrait of ‘Modern Egypt’ to be manifestly incomplete – I hope not to exaggerate the claim
simply for the sake of effect. Nor do I intend to implicitly tar an entire stream of historical literature with
the brush of Orientalism – I do not think that the literature conforms with Said’s argument about knowing
the Orient as part of an intellectual-imperial project; furthermore the literature certainly does not convey a
sort of free floating mythology of the Orient. My main concern is that a seemingly endless debate about
politics or nationalism has made ‘Modern Egypt’ into something which appears hollow or incomplete – a
spectre of the more fully ‘Modern’ history in the West. Thus, my argument for a truly ‘Modern’ Egypt and
Middle East is in many ways an extension of this direction of thought; a way to think about modernity
without it being reserved for ‘us’ and internalizing the hostility that such a definition can come to imply.
alternatives to the 'nightmare of modernity' were being actively sought out. As these critics began to define the language of their debate in terms of "privileg[ing] heterogeneity and difference...and intense distrust of all universal or totalizing discourses," they also came to seek out and celebrate the quality of 'otherness'.\textsuperscript{17} It was in this way that the sense of difference and the oppositional relationship between 'Modern' and 'Orient' – 'East' and 'West' took on renewed meaning. On the one hand, cultural products such as modern architecture were used to define the sense of oppressiveness, institutional violence and crushing uniformity that seemed so intrinsic to Western modernity. On the other hand, the 'East' became a land where vernacular architecture survived, where social cohesion still existed; a place spared the ghettos of New York and Detroit. The 'rich tapestry' of 'Eastern' culture was represented in the generations old mud-brick courtyard homes, mosques and the meandering streets of Cairo and Damascus. Ultimately the 'East' came to be viewed as a place where alienation was not the dominant mode of existence. The use of the 'East' as positive response to the condition of modernity was part of a much larger discussion about art, architecture, aesthetics and the 'rediscovery of tradition'. In England, heritage groups formed to save old thatch-roof country cottages; while in California, adobe and Spanish colonial architecture began to sprout up in the Hollywood hills. This marked the beginnings of what David Harvey characterized as the birth of a global "heritage industry."\textsuperscript{18} As post-modern architects, critics and theorists framed 'heritage' and 'tradition' as alternatives to modernity, a subtle and problematic undercurrent of orientalism became central to the discourse of post-modernism. Based on the redemptive role of the 'East' and 'heritage' within theoretical and architectural discussions about post-modernism, a narrative of modern cultural history in Egypt cannot be framed as filling in some minor absence or

\textsuperscript{17} Harvey, \textit{The Condition of Postmodernity}, 9.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 62.
oversight, but rather must acknowledge that such an oversight has served a definite purpose. To find a place for modernity in the Middle East is by its very nature a critique of certain basic premises and origin myths of academic post-modernism.

These long-term trends and directions in both the theoretical literature as well as in the historiography of modern Egypt have, in my opinion, amounted to much more than simply an incomplete picture – they are altogether misleading and disingenuous. Yet despite this rather cheerless depiction, my analysis of modern Egypt is situated within a growing body of work on the cultural history of the Middle East. Thematically, this aligns my analysis with newly emerging discussions of Egyptian cultural history and media studies. Most notably this body of literature includes Walter Armbrust’s work on early popular Egyptian cinema and music, Donald Malcolm Reid’s study of Egyptian archaeology and heritage as well as Lila Abu-Lughod’s discussion of recent themes in Egyptian television.19 Much of this discussion owes its recent origins to the questions raised by Timothy Mitchell’s early work, Colonizing Egypt, as well as his more recent book The Rule of Experts. These sorts of studies have begun to carve out a unique intellectual space, allowing Egypt a place in the interplay of ideas about modernity. In addition, this small body of literature is augmented by the much more substantial historical and theoretical analysis of modernity in late-Ottoman studies; most notably, Selim Deringil’s The Well-Protected Domains.20 Moreover, the

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continuing work of Zeynep Çelik analyzing Ottoman architecture, urban planning and World’s Fairs, with an eye for comparison and interconnectedness, has made a substantial contribution writing the late-Ottoman Empire into the physical history of modernity.21 These discussions have been taken up and continued in the subsequent works of historians such as: Sibel Bozdoğan, Jens Hanssen, Wendy Shaw, and Stefan Weber.22 Yet perhaps most importantly, the work of these historians has paved the way for an increasing interest in theorizing about modernity outside Europe and North America. For example, Ussama Makdisi’s groundbreaking essay “Ottoman Orientalism,” in the American Historical Review proposed an entirely new way of viewing the Ottoman Empire and has instigated new directions in the historical discussion of late-Ottoman national identity.23 Furthermore, Timothy Mitchell’s work, Questions of Modernity as well as Dipesh Chakrabarty’s Provincializing Europe have theorized in much more general terms about how the mental geography of modernity has represented lands outside Europe and North America. As Mitchell argued, “we should dispense altogether with the picture of the globe divided into a Western core and non-Western periphery.”24 It is this body of work which represents my main points of influence and departure.

The intellectual paradigm of ‘Modern Egypt’ and the ‘Modern’ Middle East has been boxed in from two sides. On the one side, historians have failed to take into account the

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22 See: Sibel Bozdoğan, Modernism and Nation Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); Jens Hanssen, Stefan Weber and Thomas Philipp eds. The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire (Beirut: Orient-Institut, 2002); and, Wendy Shaw, Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of Culture in the Late Ottoman Empire (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
cultural narrative of modernity in the Middle East. This failure created a void in which the 'East' came to serve as a device illustrating the failures of 'Western' modernity. For this reason, the first step in writing a narrative of cultural history for modern Egypt must be an investigation into the processes that have contributed to our current understanding. Once a new space for discussion has been created it becomes possible to re-examine what exactly 'Modern' Egypt meant, and how the Egyptian experience of modernity developed its own nuances, complexities and local meanings within a much larger, global discussion of modernity. As Dipesh Chakrabarty affirmed, "The idea is to write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it;" but even more so, to be able to include Egypt as a full participant in this drama of modern life.

25 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 43.
CHAPTER 1: NEW GOURNA AS RHETORIC

In the summer of 1945 the architect Hassan Fathy was commissioned by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities to design a model village just outside the tourist town of Luxor. The project was initiated as part of a relocation plan for the village of Gourna which was situated on the Theban Necropolis adjacent to a number of ancient pharaonic tombs. Over the previous few years the Department of Antiquities had become increasingly concerned with the preservation of these tombs, and the Gournis had been long suspected of supplementing their meagre incomes with tomb robbery. Following one particularly audacious theft, in which an entire section of wall was cut out of one of the tombs, the Department of Antiquities became determined to be rid of the villagers for good. Soon after, the village lands were expropriated and a plan to relocate the population was put into action. It was at this time Fathy was invited to join the project as architect and planner for the new village. A 50 acre site suitably far enough away from the tombs was eventually chosen in a section of low lying agricultural land along the Nile, close to the main road and railway line. Design work began in August 1945 and construction commenced in October of that same year.

For Fathy, this was not to be a village like any other. During a trip to Aswan eight years earlier in 1937, he had come across a distinctive mud-brick Nubian village. Fathy was enamoured with the strength and fluidity of the forms which the Nubian masons were able to coax out of such a seemingly unruly material—particularly the mud-brick domes which could span several metres unsupported. He was struck by the practical benefits: the materials could

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2 Ibid., 17.
be procured at next to no cost, the technique required little expertise, and moreover mud-
brick structures were much more suited to the hot Egyptian climate. Over the following
years he employed the Nubian masons to work on his numerous projects throughout the
country, experimenting with his own style of mud-brick architecture.

By 1945 Fathy was looking to expand beyond smaller private commissions and
New Gourna presented him with a prime opportunity. Despite his initial optimism and
high hopes, the project fell almost immediately into serious trouble. The Gournis could
hardly be expected to be enthusiastic about their forced relocation, and from the outset
they engaged in petty obstructionism, intermittently refused to work, and were generally
uncooperative. The site supervisors assigned to Fathy by the Department of Antiquities
were untrained and his assistant was a self-serving bureaucrat mostly concerned with
“impress[ing] the administration.” 3 Fathy recalled a litany of nuisances plaguing the
project, “the men’s wages failed to turn up on time, as was always happening, and they
went on strike, or...the stores sent me twenty-kilograms of nails without heads, because I
had not specified heads in my indent.” 4 Worse still, Fathy recounted, his own
insensitivity to bureaucratic norms and his propensity to offend or sack influential – yet
always incompetent – persons made him many enemies in high places. 5 Problems piled
up: the lorries to move stone never arrived, procurement of straw for brick making
proceeded too slowly, rumours spread of a plot to cut the dykes which held back the Nile
and swamp the village. Intrigue and deception swirled around the site threatening to
scuttle the whole project should the government pull its support. 6

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3 Ibid., 153.
4 Ibid., 150.
5 For example, Fathy recalls that after he sacked his assistant the man went back to Cairo and “began an
involved campaign against me.” Ibid., 156.
6 Ibid., 157-166.

13
Figure 1: New Gourna, ca. mid 1980s.

Image used with permission courtesy of ArchNet

Figure 2: Village Mosque, New Gourna, ca. mid 1980s.

Image used with permission courtesy of ArchNet
Furthermore, in 1947 an outbreak of cholera put a stop to work and closed transport to or from the area, leaving Fathy stuck in Cairo.

In 1948 the pressure that had been building from seemingly endless problems and setbacks finally reached a breaking point. Ironically, while Fathy was away in Cairo receiving an award from King Farouk for his work on New Gourna, a group of disgruntled villagers succeeded in cutting one of the adjacent dykes during the Nile’s annual flood, partially swamping the site. Although the dyke was repaired and the village drained, massive cracks began to appear in the drying earth, ruining many of the houses. From that point onward the Ministry of Antiquities had had just about enough of the project and Fathy’s attempts to have it transferred to either the Fellah Department or the Ministry of Housing came to naught. Ultimately the village was abandoned in its state of partial disrepair.

Before undertaking any discussion of New Gourna or its larger historical and architectural context, the process by which the history of the village has been written needs to be identified and analyzed. In many ways, revisiting and rethinking the history of modern Egypt through New Gourna begins by analyzing the processes which have contributed to our current understanding of how that history unfolded and the relevance it assumed. Self-reflection of this sort is particularly relevant in Fathy’s case, for despite what would appear to be New Gourna’s rather spectacular failure as well as its unique architectural aesthetic, the significance of the project within the chronology of twentieth century Egyptian architecture is surprisingly difficult to locate. While both New Gourna and its architect currently occupy a place of distinction within the genealogy of twentieth century architecture, it would be wrong to assume that this was always the case.

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7 Ibid., 179.
The state of awareness about Fathy's work can be gauged based on the publications about him and New Gourna from the late 1940s. During and immediately following the construction of the village, Fathy received brief note in three architectural publications: The Architectural Review, Architectural Forum and L'Architecture Française. Yet, coverage was limited to between two and four pages, and the village itself was generally viewed as a utopian, but quaint curiosity to be taken in along with the pyramids or the great temple at Luxor. The articles were little more than brief reviews by authors who happened to pass through Egypt, and at that time neither the project nor this limited coverage generated any lasting interest. Even within the Egyptian architectural community Fathy appears to have been a figure of fairly minor importance. He was the author of only one brief two page article in al-'Imara, the Egyptian professional journal of architecture. The article appeared in a volume dedicated to architectural education and was titled "Some Problems Facing the Egyptian Architect". Fathy wrote about the importance of practicing an historically appropriate architectural aesthetic, and the article could be best characterized as having a nominally nationalist tenor. These two pages were the limit of his engagement with the wider architectural community in Egypt which, by and large, had embraced modernist architecture and had little interest with his experiments in traditionalist forms. For this reason it comes as no surprise that the journal contained no subsequent articles published by

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9 Hassan Fathy, "Some Problems Facing the Egyptian Architect" Majallat al-'Imara, No.4/5 (1945) [in Arabic]. The article is also significant because while Fathy continues an old argument combining Egypt's ancient past with a new nationalist architectural aesthetic, he does so without resorting to the monumental neo-Pharaohnism of the 1920s and instead focused on the more modest traditionalism of mud-brick structures. I would like to express my gratitude towards Dr. Thomas Kühn from the SFU History Department for his generous assistance translating the article.
other authors explicitly discussing his work. Thus, during the time New Gourna was constructed, Fathy could be most accurately regarded as a minor figure in the Egyptian architectural community and was certainly not internationally well known.

Fathy's architectural celebrity was launched over two decades later and was due in no small part to the timely intervention of an old friend. During the Second World War Fathy had become acquainted with the architectural writer and critic Sir J.M. Richards, who in subsequent decades rose to become the prolific and famous editor of *The Architectural Review*. Richards returned to Cairo in 1967 and took the occasion to visit what remained of New Gourna with Fathy. As Richards later recounted, he was greatly impressed with the village but did not really reflect on its full significance at that time. It was not until two years later when Fathy sent him a copy of his new book *Gourna: A Tale of Two Villages* (1969, published in very limited numbers by the Egyptian Ministry of Information) that he came to realize the full significance of the project. Richards was so impressed with the book that he wrote it up as the feature article of the February 1970 edition of *The Architectural Review*. The article mainly summarized the events surrounding the construction of New Gourna, splicing together large excerpts from Fathy's book. Richards narrated and attempted to coax forth Fathy's underlying argument and was particularly concerned to illustrate to his readers how the village was currently relevant. He declared,

...it was beautiful to look at. Its basic geometry of cube and vault and rectangle, emphasized by the deep shadows cast by the Egyptian sun, appeared as the essence of architecture itself. Wholly modern, with no feeling of pastiche, its combination of repetition and contrast, variety and simplicity...a monument to the achievement it might have been.

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12 Ibid., 12.
Richards continued,

...from the Gourna experiment much can be learnt about the vernacular way of building, about the value of traditional technologies, about self-help – even about the psychology of minor bureaucrats; but above all about good architecture’s close involvement with the people it serves.

There is a lot of talk nowadays about the social responsibilities of the architect – and very properly so. But theorizing is one thing and practice another. Egypt can be very proud of possessing, in the person of Hassan Fathy, an architect who has shown the world how theory and practice should find inspiration in each other.14

He saw Fathy’s account of New Gourna as a timely engagement with many of the issues related to architecture and social responsibility which were currently being debated in architectural circles.

The exposure reaped from Richards’ high praise in The Architectural Review paved the way for the much wider publication of Fathy’s book in 1973, re-titled Architecture for the Poor. Very quickly, Fathy became the darling of progressive architects and architectural theorists throughout Europe and North America. This high level of interest was reflected in the substantial number of academic publications about Fathy’s work. This included (but was not limited to) articles in the prestigious Royal Institute of British Architects Journal, as well as the Architectural Association Quarterly, Design and Environment, Architectural Design and also The Architectural Review. Fathy’s growing fame also extended into the popular presses. In the following few years he received substantial reviews and articles in Le Monde, The New York Times, The New York Review, Time Magazine and the Christian Science Monitor.15 Fathy’s assertions in the book, as well as in subsequent articles, about the viability of tradition and the perils of being dazzled by the aesthetic of modernity were well appreciated and reiterated in this body of literature. J.M. Richards later wrote, “To me and to

14 Ibid., 118.

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others Fathy's account of Gourna and of the research and resulting convictions that led up to it were...an architectural revelation."16 Fathy's ideas about humanistic architecture, appropriate technology and historical continuity were new and fresh. As but one example, the extremely influential post-modern architectural theorist Charles Jencks wrote about Fathy's approach to sustainable development and also drew associations between his work and pressing theoretical issues such as the revival of tradition and the issue of historicism in architecture. Jencks described New Gourna in his typically playful style:

...the town is not only far cheaper than any modern counterpart could be, but also more varied and delightful. [Fredric] Jameson contends that the architect's role is to rediscover such past traditions and keep them operative...Gourna proves it can be done, but where is the Western barefoot architect?17

Fathy's inclusion in Jencks' landmark book The Language of Post-Modern Architecture illustrated how important he was becoming within the international discourse of architecture. Fathy was associated with every aspect of progressive architecture: sustainability, humanistic design, economic feasibility and historical appropriateness. To this group of scholars and architects, Fathy's scepticism for modernism was avant-garde, his use of vernacular forms and materials represented a new humanistic alternative in architecture, and to top it off, he had done all this nearly thirty years ahead of anyone else.

By the early 1970s Fathy had secured a new and lasting architectural celebrity. Suddenly, the spotlight was on the architect whose book told the tale of an idealistic vision for humane architecture compromised by petty bureaucrats and unruly villagers. Yet, what was the significance of the twenty-five year interlude between the construction of New Gourna and the publication of Architecture for the Poor? Furthermore, what does this mean

16 Rastorfer, Richards and Serageldin, Hassan Fathy, 12.
in terms of using Architecture for the Poor as historical evidence for an analysis of New Gourna and Egypt during the 1940s? These problems become more pronounced upon closer reading of Fathy’s book, for while it was written in the late 1960s Fathy continually adopted a sense of immediacy in his tone, claiming the perspective of the 1940s. This was a significant shift; the book was not a diary accompanying him through his exploits and misadventure building New Gourna. Rather, the book was based entirely on dusty memories and recollections. Put simply, there is a real and meaningful difference between the firsthand account of a forty-five year old professional and the reminiscing of a seventy year old gentleman. Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss Architecture for the Poor as simply inaccurate or the product of a poor memory. Rather, the work drew upon a context and was meant to resonate within discussions that were happening around the time Fathy was writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this way much of what he argued, in terms of his motivations, the architectural vernacular he used, and the entire universe of ideas that gave the village meaning – was ultimately ahistorical. The New Gourna which he crafted in the pages of Architecture for the Poor was a literary creation, a thing totally separated from its original historical context in the 1940s.

While the social and architectural vision which Fathy presented in his book had great appeal among his peers at the time he was writing, those observations were based on fundamental misrepresentations of history. Throughout Architecture for the Poor Fathy sought to present New Gourna as a response to the failures of government sponsored social housing initiatives. In this way, much of Architecture for the Poor was dedicated to illustrating the problems with the status quo of modern architecture and the institution of social housing. He set the stage by paraphrasing the official government attitude towards social housing: “We have a million houses to build, we have little money and little time” therefore, they continued, “We must cut down costs...by rationalizing our programs,
streamlining the whole process, and economizing in the way indicated by industrial mass production.”  

Social housing was to be undertaken in such a way as to utilize governments’ ability to draw together disparate financial and human resources, then concentrate those resources on one particular spot. Projects would be defined by speed and efficiency, making the most of the economies of scale and the benefits of centralization. Yet, as Fathy explained, this model for development was a catastrophic failure. Every government sponsored social housing project seemed to follow the same path: the government scraped together a few million dollars—called in contractors, subcontractors, foreign experts and then all of the funds were quickly exhausted. These projects typically ended up as one-off showpieces intended to make politicians appear progressive while at the same time enriching their cronies. As he wryly noted, “The charm of spending other people’s money is that a lot of it sticks to the spender.”  

For Fathy, the failures of government social housing were much more than matters of impractical economics or otherwise good planning compromised by imperfect application. He saw these projects as fundamental failures on a human scale. Throughout Architecture for the Poor Fathy continually utilized imagery of impractical, oppressive and decaying modernity to express his discontent with modern architecture, particularly its manifestation in social housing. He was unambiguous in his condemnations, arguing “Modernity does not necessarily mean liveliness, and change is not always for the better.” While he drew out the various technical failings of modern architecture, Fathy was able to weave those faults into a set of visceral mental images—to endow the aesthetic of modern architecture with a moral character. For example, he wrote,

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18 Fathy, Architecture for the Poor, 30, 32.
19 Ibid., 137.
20 Ibid., 24.
...on the outskirts of provincial towns where the most recent building has been taking place the ugly design of the house is emphasized by the shoddy execution of the work, and cramped square boxes of assorted sizes, in a style copied from the poorer quarters of the metropolis, half finished yet already decaying, set at odd angles to one another, are stuck up all over a shabby wilderness...21

The intuitive sense of cramped and destitute ghettos was the clearest and most forceful component of his argument. This physical oppressiveness was further confirmed by the callousness of the bureaucratic mechanisms that created and perpetuated such housing. As Fathy put it,

For the government architects, even when they don't dismiss the poor as too ignorant to be taken into consultation, say that they have no time to deal with each family separately....And so the government’s architects build their million identical houses. The result is hideous and inhuman; a million families are bundled into these ill-fitting cells...22

Fathy repeatedly called to mind an image of endlessly duplicated concrete bunkers which invariably deadened the soul of those who had the misfortune to be compelled to live there. This theme continually appeared in his writing: “if you push families into rows of identical houses, then something in those families will die, especially if they are poor. The people will grow dull and dispirited like their houses, and their imagination will shrivel up.”23 As Fathy imagined it in the pages of Architecture for the Poor, New Gourna would represent a solution, a way to restore the humanity to the institution of mass housing.

Fathy’s claim that the many faults of modern social housing formed the backdrop and context for his work building New Gourna in the mid-1940s should not be accepted uncritically. Much had changed in the two decades between the construction of New Gourna and the publication of Architecture for the Poor. Throughout the book Fathy conjured up an image of modern social housing embodied in row upon row of desolate concrete apartment

21 Ibid., 20.
22 Ibid., 30.
23 Ibid., 31.
blocks and soulless high-rises. This served as an aesthetic counterpoint to the architect’s own mud-brick structures, the austerity and alienation found in concrete and glass as opposed to the authenticity and humanity of hand-laid earth. Yet this aesthetic and moral continuum for architecture was not based on the historical realities of social housing which existed during the 1940s. Rather, Fathy’s image of social housing was very much based on the failures of modern architecture and social housing which were becoming more and more apparent during the 1960s as he was writing Architecture for the Poor. In this respect, Fathy’s descriptions and arguments about modern architecture and social housing were rife with assumptions, observations, and even language that only came to have meaning twenty years after New Gourna was actually completed. Thus, in order to separate Fathy’s condemnation of modernist social housing in Architecture for the Poor from the actual state of that enterprise in the mid 1940s, New Gourna must be situated within a larger history of social housing.

The origins of government sponsored housing have their roots in discussions about the growth of cities and city planning from the 1920s and 1930s. This new willingness to organize society on an unprecedented level was embodied in the writings of the famous Swiss born architect Le Corbusier, particularly his books The City of Tomorrow (1925) and Towards a New Architecture (1931). These ideas were widely circulated and discussed as cities throughout the world faced similar problems attempting to manage massive urban expansion and modernization. While the idea of the ‘modern city’ was gaining momentum, the actual process of implementing that vision proceeded much more slowly. In the United States large scale social housing gained the support of the federal government in the late 1930s as part of New Deal legislation, most significantly reflected in the Housing Act, passed by Congress in 1937. However, these initial movements stalled due to the War and only
regained momentum with the second Housing Act in 1949.\textsuperscript{24} In Europe, government social housing got an earlier start; however, it was still characteristically slow throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Some exceptions stood out, particularly efforts in Germany made by the Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius, whose Törten Estate (1926-28) in Dessau was designed to provide affordable housing for industrial workers and was supported by the Weimar government.\textsuperscript{25} In the Middle East there were several noteworthy housing projects from the 1930s. The new Turkish Republic supported the construction of a number of experimental housing projects during the expansion of Ankara. These projects were undertaken as part of Atatürk’s much larger modernization plans, and the housing units themselves drew clear influence from the Bauhaus.\textsuperscript{26} Perhaps the most significant example of early modernist housing was in Tel Aviv during the 1930s. Seeking to provide work and housing for the massive influx of Jewish immigrants, the Jewish labour agency, Histadrut, oversaw the construction of a large number of Bauhaus inspired modern houses and low-rise flats.\textsuperscript{27} Yet generally speaking the scale of such projects was much more modest than had been envisioned by architects like Le Corbusier, and mainly consisted of low density residential construction, never sprawling high-rise blocks or completely redesigned cities. Overall, the government sponsored social housing initiatives of the 1930s were the exception rather than the rule, and most of these projects seemed to have the words ‘experimental’ tagged to the side. Governments had neither the will nor the financial resources to support the total remaking of cities which avant-garde modernists were calling for.

\textsuperscript{26} Bozdoğan, \textit{Modernism and Nation Building}, 64, 65, 219.
\textsuperscript{27} Khan, \textit{International Style}, 222.
Despite such slow progress in the 1920s and 1930s, the seed of potential for large scale planning and housing had been planted and came to represent an incredibly powerful, optimistic and even utopian vision for the future. Whatever reluctance remained quickly vanished after World War II. Europe was a wreck and the United States faced an onslaught of returning veterans who were all clamouring for housing. Very quickly, Le Corbusier’s earlier warning “Architecture or Revolution” began to take on a very tangible meaning.\textsuperscript{28} Riding a wave of public demand combined with leftover New Deal social welfare policy and a strong shot of Keynesian economics, the United States and other national governments began to mobilize a massive project of urban renewal and housing. Le Corbusier, the great modernist himself, designed one of Europe’s first and most significant large-scale social housing projects in Marseille, the Unité d’Habitation, built between 1947 and 1953.\textsuperscript{29} Similar projects and experiments in mass produced housing followed fast and furiously around the world.\textsuperscript{30}

As Fathy began construction at New Gourna, massive government sponsored social housing projects were only just beginning to get underway. For the first time national governments began to sense that they had a responsibility to house the nations’ poor. Architects then translated that responsibility into buildings which spoke of optimism and hope. It was a dream of gleaming pinnacles of light amidst the darkness; clean, safe streets – healthy and active citizens. Thus in 1945 the institutions of social housing could hardly be considered the bloated, conservative, ever present blight on the urban landscape that Fathy presented in \textit{Architecture for the Poor}. For him to frame New Gourna as a response to the


\textsuperscript{30} See for example, the famous Case Study Houses in California which represented one of the first and most famous large scale movements in mass produced housing. Esther McCoy, \textit{Case Study Houses 1945-1962} (Santa Monica: Hennessey + Ingalls, 1977), 8-11. Also see, Mallgrave, \textit{Modern Architectural Theory}, 380-381.
failures of modernist social housing was ahistorical since that sort of housing, not to mention its failures, hardly existed. It took another fifteen or even twenty years for those problems to emerge and become increasingly unbearable.

In this respect, two particular projects serve as an evocative case study for the rise and spectacular fall of government sponsored social housing initiatives since the late 1940s. As the first larger scale social housing projects got underway, the Egyptian government moved quickly to support these construction initiatives. During World War II construction in Cairo was halted due to war rationing instituted by the British occupiers. This was despite the fact that during those years the city was absorbing unprecedented numbers of migrants from the countryside.31 As part of a plan to deal with this backlog of demand, in 1947 the government sponsored the construction of a massive social housing project in the Cairo suburb of Imbāba. The Imbāba Workers Housing Complex included 1100 units spread out over 140 hectares of land and was to serve as affordable family housing for workers in adjacent factories.32 It is important to pause and note the significance of the Imbāba Workers Housing Complex as an example of Egypt partaking in that first movement by national governments to embark on the project of mass social housing. A few years later, and on the other side of the globe in St. Louis, the architect Minoru Yamasaki began work on the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex (1951). The project represented the very embodiment of architectural high-modernism; it was a series of elegant concrete slabs, fourteen-storeys tall, bisected by raised walkways and public gardens. As Charles Jencks described it, “...its Purist style, its clean, salubrious hospital metaphor, was meant to instil, by good example, corresponding

virtues in the inhabitants.\textsuperscript{33} Pruitt-Igoe embodied every progressive design principal and won an award from the American Institute of Architects.\textsuperscript{34} Both the Imbāba Workers Housing Complex and Pruitt-Igoe reflected the sense of post-war optimism that national governments could once and for all overcome the crushing social problems of the populace through large-scale planning and housing projects.

Yet failure came; not immediately, but over the next twenty years the initial optimism and high hopes for mass social housing turned sour. The fate of projects such as the Imbāba Workers Housing Complex and Pruitt-Igoe exposed the 	extit{hubris} of the modernist dream. Over the following decade Pruitt-Igoe became a ghetto ridden with crime and abject poverty. It was the embodiment of the social, economic and racial problems of America which the architect had so brazenly frozen into concrete. Considered totally unsalvageable, in 1972 Pruitt-Igoe was felled by a demolition crew amidst the cheers of its former residents.\textsuperscript{35} This massive failure of a social vision manifested in concrete and steel was mirrored in the Imbāba Workers Housing Complex. Hardly the workers paradise that had been promised, the project became the centre of an ungovernable slum ridden with poverty, and more recently, Islamic fundamentalism.\textsuperscript{36} The only difference was that the Imbāba Workers Housing Complex never fell to the mercy of a wrecking ball. This widespread failure of the modernist social vision was reflected on by the author and critic Marshall Berman during a trip to Brasília, the controversial and oft reviled modernists capital of Brazil designed by the architect Oscar Niemeyer between 1956 and 1960. Berman asked,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Jencks, \textit{The Language of Post-Modern Architecture}, 9.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 9.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} The history of the decline of Imbaba is told in part in by the journalist Geneive Abdo, whose research on radical Islamism in the 1990s led her into the depths of the suburb. Suffering from long term decline, in the last ten years the suburb has become virtually ungovernable, and the Egyptian government has resorted to sending the military in on periodic raids. See, Geneive Abdo, \textit{No God But God} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 19-40.
\end{itemize}
And yet, how much was Niemeyer to blame...? Didn’t everything most deadening in Brasilia spring from a worldwide consensus among enlightened planners and designers? It was only in the 1960s and 1970s, after the generation that built proto-Brasilias everywhere...had a chance to live in them, that they discovered how much was missing from the world these modernists had made.37

In this way, Architecture for the Poor represented a retroactive reappraisal of Fathy’s own earlier work based on the experience of two decades of declining housing conditions. Architecture for the Poor required the likes of Pruitt-Igeo and the Imbāba Workers Housing Complex to have already failed before the book could have had much meaning. When architects and theorists like JM Richards and Charles Jencks read Fathy’s work in the late 1960s and early 1970s they found it significant because they could call to mind images of decline, ghettoes and social decay which could be directly attributed to modern social housing. Fathy could claim no such insight in the 1940s. The actual village of New Gourna was not built as a humanistic alternative to the failures of modern housing; it was only the literary production of New Gourna which could claim to do that.

Fathy’s relationship with the enterprise of modern housing in the years surrounding the construction of New Gourna was much more complex and unclear than the image presented in Architecture for the Poor. Prior to New Gourna, Fathy had worked mainly in private practice, building for Egypt’s elite. These early works exhibited a wide array of stylistic influences ranging from faux-Classical and Second Empire architecture (the typical fare of Cairo’s *nouveau riche*) to much more modern buildings of concrete and glass.38

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37 Berman, All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, 8.
38 Many of Fathy’s early works were characteristically modern or were stylistic hybrids. For example, the Talkha Primary School (Cairo, 1928), the Husni Omar Villa (Giza, 1930), which made use of glass, steel and concrete combined with a flat roof and white stucco walls. Such modern influences were exhibited in a number of his subsequent works including the al-Harini Villa (Giza, 1938), the Hishmat Villa (Cairo, 1938) as well as a number of private residences constructed in the early to mid 1930s. James Steele, An Architecture for People (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 23, 188, 189.
This was Fathy's first commission, and represented a clear example of the popular *Beaux-Arts* architectural style, long an architectural staple for private residences and government buildings around the world. Image used with permission, courtesy of ArchNet.
The al-Harini and Husni Omar Villas were notable for their modern influences such as the use of flat roofs, and uncluttered features. Image used with permission, courtesy of ArchNet.
Fathy's usage of mud bricks developed extensively in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and while this was reflected in most of his commissions from those years, he was still more than willing to depart from that style to accommodate the aesthetic whims of his clients. Yet, based on the strength and veracity of the convictions he presented in *Architecture for the Poor* it could be expected that his work after New Gourna would be dedicated entirely to vernacular architecture.

This was not entirely the case, for in 1956, following the Free Officers Revolution, Fathy left Egypt for Greece and took up a position with the renowned modernist planning firm Doxiadis & Associates. His departure was a self imposed exile of sorts, for by 1956 Gamal Abd al-Nasser had consolidated power following the 1952 Revolution and storm clouds appeared to be gathering on the horizon for associates of the old regime. Fathy's dealings with the pre-revolutionary government through his architectural practice as well as his friendships extending into the royal court labelled him as a royalist. In this respect, his move to Greece could be best characterized as a 'proactive' decision.\(^{39}\) Fathy's career with Doxiadis & Associates represents an oft forgotten segment of his professional career, and Fathy made little or no mention of his work with the firm in his subsequent writings. Doxiadis & Associates was a massive think tank and urban planning institute intended to bring together the very best minds in the development business. The firm's customers were not private individuals or corporations, but rather national governments seeking urban

\(^{39}\) As Max Rodenbeck described it, this was a choice which was becoming all too common among Cairo's cosmopolitan upper class in the 1950s. "They could feel their place in the country's future shrinking by the day. At the Hellenic Club, the Circulo Italiano, and the Alliance Israelite the talk was of timetables, of cousins in Montreal, and — *sotto voce* — of false bottomed suitcases. Fortunes began to filter out of Cairo — so many that a Swiss banker I met forty years later smiled at the memory: 'Ah, the early fifties. Now that was a golden age,' he sighed." Max Rodenbeck, *Cairo: The City Victorious* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 158.
renewal plans for entire cities. Soon after joining Doxiadis, Fathy was assigned to the Iraq Housing Program which occupied him for the next two years until 1958.

Figure 6: The Iraq Housing Project, (ca 1950s, sketch by Hassan Fathy).

The Iraq Housing Project now only exists in the few remaining sketches Fathy made at the time. Yet, even in these sketches the project appears as a rather conventional work of low-rise social housing. Image used with permission, courtesy of ArchNet.

His work in Iraq was described by the architectural historian James Steele as quite out of character from his overall architectural output, and was made up of “repetitive, box-like

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40 Doxiadis & Associates was founded in 1954 by Constantinos Doxiadis. Doxiadis was a corporal in the Greek Resistance during the Nazi occupation, afterwards serving as the director general of Housing and Reconstruction, and later as the director for Marshall Plan aid in Greece. He also served as the Greek representative in San Francisco for the founding of the United Nations. Making use of an international network of powerful friends as well as his experiences of the reconstruction of Greece, Doxiadis & Associates quickly became a very influential international urban development and consulting firm. While the firm was based out of Athens, the majority of its work came from the Middle East, Africa and Pakistan, with such notable examples as the complete urban plan for Islamabad. Doxiadis promoted an urban planning model which he called ‘ekistics’ (also the name of the journal published by the firm), which aspired to be an all encompassing view of urban life. The main tenet of the firm’s work was the reorganization and centralization of humanity into massive urban centres. Doxiadis enjoyed incredible celebrity as an urban planner, and in 1966 Life Magazine labelled him the ‘busy remodeler of the world’. Yet the popularity of the firm waned and was not able to outlive Doxiadis himself, who died in 1975. Ray Bromley “Towards Global Human Settlements: Constantinos Doxiadis as Entrepreneur, Coalition-Builder and Visionary” in Urbanism: Imported or Exported, 316-337.
units, concrete frame and International Style elevation." Steele further recounted that, "several of these units were actually built in Sulimania and Mosul, but they were so unpopular that armed guards were needed to keep people in them." While Steele sought to accentuate the difference between the Iraqi Housing Project and Fathy's other works, the reaction of the Iraqi recipients was virtually identical to that of Gournis. Furthermore, Fathy had completed many other projects which exhibited modernist influences. If New Gourna was a physical manifesto for Fathy’s ideas, as was presented in Architecture for the Poor, then how could he explain his subsequent work with Doxiadis & Associates – one of the foremost modernist urban planning firms in the world? Indeed, the Iraq Housing Project calls to mind a most straightforward application of modernist social housing principles and was certainly not informed by the commitment to progressive design which was so central to Architecture for the Poor.

Stepping back for a moment, the vision of New Gourna which Fathy crafted in Architecture for the Poor appears to be rife with historical inconsistencies. He jumped back and forth, using the village as it stood in the 1940s to address problems that only became evident to planners and architects in the 1960s. Furthermore, his work in Iraq calls into question the convictions that were purportedly so central to the planning of New Gourna. As a result, the rhetoric which Fathy used to justify and explain his architectural decisions did

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41 Steele, An Architecture for People, 114.
42 Ibid., 114, 116.
43 Following the Iraq Housing Program, Fathy’s subsequent work with Doxiadis was primarily academic. He became involved with The City of the Future project, which was an attempt by Doxiadis to theorize about the problems of massive population growth and urban expansion. The project was based around continental studies, and Fathy did a great deal of unpublished work on Africa. The City of the Future project resulted in a series of conferences and symposiums which drew in the likes of Buckminster Fuller, Margaret Mead and Arnold Toynbee (it is interesting to note that several of Fathy’s subsequent projects made use of Fuller’s geodesic dome). Yet, Fathy’s Africa study was left unpublished and Fathy’s only bibliographic credits from the time are two small and forgettable articles in Doxiadis’ journal, Ekistics. Fathy continued a loose association with the firm until after Constantinos Doxiadis died in 1975 and the firm began to collapse. His last work with the firm, coinciding with its ultimate demise, was as a representative in the 1976 UN Habitat Conference in Vancouver, BC. Ibid., 119.
not quite line up with the historical realities of Egypt at the time of New Gourna's construction. He continually confused the problems of New Gourna in the 1940s – a rural village in Upper Egypt – with the problems that were becoming endemic to cities fifteen or twenty years later. It was not as though the Gournis were ever facing the prospect of being transferred into concrete apartment towers. Nor, on the other hand, could architects and planners in the 1960s and 1970s hope to emulate Fathy's mud-brick homes inside cities where there was a real housing shortage. Fathy's tale of New Gourna was appealing precisely because it was somewhat disembodied, a sort of comforting fantasy of an explicitly anti-modern and perhaps even 'oriental' village. This vision became particularly meaningful because of its overt references to the failed expectations of modern life.

When Architecture for the Poor was made widely available in 1973, the historical manipulations that underpinned the work were overlooked and little attention was paid to the circumstances of the Gournis, or for that matter, the larger context of Egypt during the 1940s. It was the literary fiction of New Gourna that was appealing; the idea of a humanely planned village combined with a unique method of construction that explicitly shunned concrete, steel and glass. For this reason the value of Architecture for the Poor as a piece of historical evidence is primarily in what it says about new directions in professional architecture during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Architecture for the Poor emerged within a sympathetic

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44 Fathy's adamant commitment to vernacular mud-brick architecture in Architecture for the Poor contains a small irony worth noting. Just as Fathy was beginning to garner recognition for his mud-brick architecture after the publication of his book, the Egyptian government banned the production of mud-bricks. One of the many factors not taken into account during the planning of the new Aswan Dam was the massive reduction of sediment and silt flowing down the Nile with the annual flood. The entire fertile landscape for miles around the river is created by silt carried from the Sudan during the annual flood, and has built up over the millennia to tens-of-feet thick. After the Aswan Dam was constructed, these rich agricultural sediments were stopped up behind the dam. What was once commonplace now became exceedingly valuable, and since the production of mud-bricks requires tons of sediment, the government banned its usage. Just as Fathy was gaining an international reputation, his basic materials were declared off limits. In his subsequent 'traditionalist' designs Fathy was forced to compensate by using a variety of stone and conventional brick. Ibid., 131.
intellectual environment in which scholars, theorists and architects were also exploring many issues similar to those that Fathy raised. This is not to say that Fathy’s ideas were passé or unoriginal but rather to recognize him as an important contributor to an ongoing critical discussion. In this way, Architecture for the Poor was very much a primary source for ideas about architecture and planning from the 1960s and 1970s and was an important addition to the body of anti-modernist criticism that became the foundation for post-modernism.

Rather than a stand alone vision, Architecture for the Poor was part of a larger discussion about architecture and planning that had begun to take shape in the early 1960s. In this respect the ideas that Fathy superimposed on New Gourna – about modern architecture, social housing and community planning – contributed to a discussion dating back to Jane Jacobs classic critique of modern planning, The Death and Life of Great American Cities from 1961. Jacobs called attention to the minute details of community life which made certain cities great liveable environments while others decayed into slums and ghettos. This was done through a close analysis of several neighbourhoods she considered to be successful, most notably her own Greenwich Village in New York. Jacobs argued that the liveability of cities was not determined by the traditional wisdom of modern urban planning: wide boulevards for the free movement of cars, large parks, and tall modern buildings. Rather, she argued that the most liveable cities were virtually the opposite, those built on the level of human interaction and mutual trust. In the graceful prose which became the hallmark of her writing, Jacobs described such an environment:

Under the seeming disorder of the old city…is a marvellous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city. It is a complex order. Its essence is intricacy of sidewalk use, bringing with it a constant succession of eyes. This order is composed of movement and change…we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance…an intricate ballet…[that] never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations.45

As Jacobs saw it, communities worked when old ladies watched the street, when young people filled cafés and played sports well into the long summer evenings, and when the corner grocer kept a watchful eye as he swept. These were living, breathing, thriving cities. Dead cities were built on institutional spaces: high-rise blocks, vast underground parking lots and crime-ridden parks – in other words, Le Corbusier’s city of the future. Jacobs’ challenge to the status quo of modern architecture and planning was the foundation for a generation of anti-modernist critics which grew and developed over the next twenty years.46

The language and reasoning which Fathy used to justify the village of New Gourna bore a striking resemblance to Jacobs’ description of a vibrant urban community. As but one small example, Fathy repeatedly dwelled on the importance of social exchanges between women at the public water pump in the centre of the village. Fathy wrote that as an architect it was his duty to preserve and facilitate these sorts of human interactions, and for this reason he eschewed private plumbing as antisocial.47 He described other socially oriented designs which were incorporated into the project such as a stage for public performance, a café for old men to gossip, a permanent marketplace, and a colourful school meant to tweak the imagination of New Gourna’s youth.48 Public performances, gossip, and the playing of children were all a part of his design for New Gourna. Although it is possible these ideas

46 While the list of anti-modernist criticism from the 1960s and 1970s could go on for pages, a few notable examples stand out and serve as signposts for general directions in those discussions. See for example: Malcolm MacEwan’s famous work Crisis in Architecture (London: RIBA Publications, 1974), Peter Blake’s book Form Follows Fiasco: Why Modern Architecture Hasn’t Worked (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1977) and a whole load of social criticism from the 1960s and 1970s such as Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle (New York: Zone Books, 1967) and EF Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered (New York: Perennial Library, 1973). Harry Francis Mallgrave provides an extremely thorough discussion of both the physical as well as rhetorical decline of modernism in America; see, Mallgrave, Modern Architectural Theory, 380-387.


48 Interestingly, when Fathy discussed the construction of a school for New Gourna, his discussions relating to the education and development of children bear a telling resemblance to those of the famous Swiss child psychologist, Jean Piaget. Piaget’s famous works from the late 1950s and early 1960s: The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood; The Psychology of the Child; and Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood were extremely influential and coincided with the expansion of alternative childhood education since the 1960s.
actually motivated Fathy in 1945, that is not really the point, for they assumed a new relevance and reinforcement in the early 1970s once Jacobs had made them all but *de rigueur* among progressive architects. It was the language Fathy used to describe his architectural practice which gave his buildings meaning, making them come alive to the reader.

Fathy was not simply adapting Jacobs' words or attempting to stretch progressive architectural theory to fit the case of Egypt, rather he was writing *Architecture for the Poor* because he was witnessing the failures of modern planning in Cairo, like Jacobs in New York. Jacobs' book was written as part of her campaign against New York's leviathan city planner Robert Moses, whose proposed Manhattan Expressway threatened to destroy her beloved Greenwich Village.49 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* were fighting words meant to stop a steamroller of modernization from running over her city. In a similar way, Fathy's critique of inhumane housing and modern planning needs to be interpreted alongside what was happening in Cairo during the mid-1960s. Janet Abu-Lughod painted a vivid portrait of the city during those years in her landmark book *Cairo*. That image was not particularly comforting. As she noted, in the thirteen years between 1947 and 1960 the population of the city had all but doubled in size from 2 million to 3.5 million. All the while, housing stock within the city had not nearly kept pace with demand.50 This massive influx of people had taxed the Egyptian government's ability to provide housing and services to the very limit. In 1958 plans were put in motion for the construction of the massive Nasr City government housing initiative, intended to accommodate half a million people.51 Two years later in 1960 the Ministry of Housing organized another massive construction campaign, allocating over £E 30 million (Egyptian pounds) towards urban housing as part of a five-year

49 The story of Robert Moses' impact on shaping the face of New York since the Great Depression was chronicled and vividly critiqued in Robert Caro's masterful work, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974).
50 Abu-Lughod, *Cairo*, 177.
51 Ibid., 233-237.
housing plan. Cairo received £E 11 million out of that sum, and by 1964 423 social housing projects had been constructed containing roughly 14,500 housing units.\textsuperscript{52} The nature of these projects was characterized by Max Rodenbeck in the following terms, they “promised vistas of neat, modernist cubes marching into fields and desert. The fact that the dwellings were cramped, hot, and shoddy; that the neat street plans often dead-ended in sand-dunes or farming villages, were of no account.”\textsuperscript{53} Attempting to stave off disaster the government was tossing up apartment towers and pushing the city boundaries back towards the desert.\textsuperscript{54} Even still, the government could not keep up with demand and this led to a boom in unplanned construction and shanty towns on the outskirts of the city.\textsuperscript{55}

The frantic pace of growth produced nightmarish results and one event in particular came to stand for the symbolic failure of Egypt’s modern planners. Whereas the buses, roadways and sidewalks of Cairo were so swollen and congested with its teeming populace that the city appeared to be straining at its very seams, so too were its sewer pipes. Over a number of days in the spring of 1965, raw effluent literally overwhelmed the antiquated system, backing up onto the street and collecting in basements and other low-lying areas of the city. The French historian André Raymond recalled that city workers made a desperate attempt to stop the flooding by cementing over manholes.\textsuperscript{56} Intrepid tourists hired donkey carts to be transported across ponds of sewage.\textsuperscript{57} This symbolic humiliation was followed up by a much more tangible defeat two years later when the Egyptian army was crushed by overwhelming Israeli air strikes. The momentum was gone; Cairenes were no longer caught up with the enthusiasm of Nasser’s socialist experiment. Thus, at the same time that Fathy

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 231.
\textsuperscript{53} Rodenbeck, \textit{Cairo: The City Victorious}, 172-173.
\textsuperscript{54} Abu-Lughod, \textit{Cairo}, 206.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 358.
\textsuperscript{57} Abu-Lughod, \textit{Cairo}, 227.
was writing his tale of a well-planned and orderly little village which explicitly shunned modernism, the modern city of Cairo was brought to its knees. His ideas about humane and delightfully varied architecture were nothing less than a reflection of the disorder and inhumanity which he saw around him as he was writing. It did not matter that New Gourna was a rural village built twenty-five years earlier – the relevance of his critique would have been immediately understood.

Figure 7: Contemporary Urban Sprawl in the Outskirts of Cairo.

Cairo’s urban expansion has continuously pushed out the boundaries of the city, and development continues to be of poor quality and haphazard planning. Photograph from the collection of the author.

While the failures of the modern city and the challenges towards conventional urban planning in the mid 1960s formed part of the backdrop for Fathy’s work, his writing drew upon a number of other discussions from that period. The most significant was the work of Bernard Rudofsky. In 1965 Rudofsky curated a tremendously important architectural exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibition was titled
Architecture Without Architects (also the name for the subsequent catalogue), and was the first serious scholarly discussion of vernacular architecture. Such a discussion was evidently of great significance to Fathy and his ideas about the architecture of New Gourna. Fathy repeatedly associated his own architectural practice with the revival of local vernacular forms, citing mud brick as the quintessential building block of traditional Egyptian architecture. Once again, Fathy's words would have leapt off the page, seeming immediately relevant and engaging for architects and critics reading his book in the early 1970s. Yet Rudofsky was not the only one within the architectural community whose interests eschewed modern architecture. One year later in 1966 the architect and author Robert Venturi published his groundbreaking work of architectural criticism, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture. Venturi’s work stood as the first challenge by a professional architect to the established aesthetic of modernism. He praised hybrid forms, regional variety, historicism – ambiguity – and turned the old modernist axiom of “less is more” on its head, famously stating, “less is a bore”. Building on Jacobs’ work, Venturi did nothing less than allow a generation of architects to re-examine their own national architectural heritage without the typical modernist scorn. He shunned the universalism that had come to define modern architecture in favour of a new interest in regional and historical architecture. Fathy needed – if not required – this intellectual chasm to be crossed. In this way, Architecture for the Poor was published right at the cusp of a dramatic rhetorical shift, and was very much a part of that first movement within professional architecture away from modernism.

Academic discussions evolve in a linear fashion as one generation of critics builds on, or challenges, the works of those preceding them. While the actual village of New Gourna was built between 1945 and 1948, its literary incarnation in Architecture for the Poor

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was imbued with significance from events and academic discussions that were happening twenty years later. Indeed, the wider literary context for Fathy’s writing extended far beyond Jane Jacobs, Bernard Rudofsky or Robert Venturi, and was emblematic of the general tone within a huge body of anti-modernist literature from the 1960s and 1970s. Fathy’s writing fit into a general shift in academic and architectural discussions away from modernism in the 1960s, which then became explicitly post-modern in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Thus, the idea of New Gourna, the pure intellectual product that Fathy produced in *Architecture for the Poor*, was most significant as a contributor to that shift towards the emerging project of post-modernism.

Up until this point I have attempted to illustrate the processes by which the village of New Gourna was moulded and shaped so as to take on a new relevance within debates about society and architecture that were developing in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet Fathy was much more important than simply one voice in a crowd that had turned against the status quo. His personal rise to prominence marked the beginning of a dramatic shift within the wider institutions of architecture. While there was a tremendous appetite for new and progressive ideas in the 1960s and 1970s, the space for such discussions was still very limited. Architecture is an institutional profession built out of interconnected networks extending into professional publications, universities and cultural institutions such as museums. New discussions required new institutions, and in this respect Fathy took an active role creating those new forums and spaces for discussion. Since the institutions of professional architecture had previously demonstrated an overwhelming disinterest towards contemporary architecture in the Middle East, Fathy’s rise to prominence in the 1970s took on additional meaning. His architectural celebrity, as well as his subsequent professional activities, signified the beginning of a fundamental shift within the institutions and power structures of
professional architecture. These changes were, for the first time, beginning to allow for a much wider and inclusive discussion of architecture.

Fathy’s role influencing and changing the professional environment of architecture was most significantly reflected in his involvement with the Aga Khan Awards for Architecture (AKAA). The AKAA has taken place every three years since 1978 and is meant to recognize excellence in the creation of ‘Muslim Space’. The Award is financed by the Aga Khan and consists of a $500,000 prize which is the largest award of its kind. Since its inception, the AKAA has quickly become one of the foremost events and points of discussion within professional architecture. Fathy’s involvement with the Award grew out of his personal friendship with the Aga Khan, who had a longstanding interest in architecture. This friendship dated back to 1970, when Fathy designed a Nile villa for the Aga Khan at Aswan. The Aga Khan was intrigued by the unique accommodation of traditionalist forms, progressive social ideas and locally determined solutions which Fathy had written about in *Architecture for the Poor*. These ideas came to represent the character and spirit behind the Aga Khan’s new award – recognition for a more humanistic architecture which appeared

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60 For the sake of clarity it is important to understand exactly how the AKAA functions. The Aga Khan does not simply pick the winners, but rather the award is administered independently in a tripartite arrangement between a Secretariat, a Steering Committee and a Master Jury. The Secretariat is in charge of producing a short list of projects. The Steering Committee, chaired by the Aga Khan, then selects a Master Jury which is to include a diversity of Muslim and Western architects and thinkers. The Steering Committee’s primary job is to provide direction to the Master Jury, but the final decision is left to the Jury. The Jury typically meets twice, once to produce a short list which will then be subject to a close technical review, and then once more for the actual selection of an award. The criteria for awarding projects change with the Master Jury and Steering Committee, yet there is one basic requirement: that the projects be used by Muslims. This allows for considerable flexibility and architects are not required to be Muslims themselves. For more details concerning the administration of the Award see, Ismail Serageldin ed., *Space For Freedom: The Search for Architectural Excellence in Muslim Societies* (London: Butterworth Architecture, 1989), 14-18.

61 The Awards are organized and financed by the Aga Khan. The Aga Khan claims direct lineage to the Prophet Mohammad and is the spiritual leader of approximately 20 million Ismaili Muslims. His position has afforded him considerable wealth which he has administered through the Aga Khan Foundation and Development Network. This foundation has provided funding for a mixture of projects including mosque construction, community development, restoration work, an academic sponsorship – particularly for the Massachusetts Institute for Technology (MIT), and Harvard - his alma mater. [no author] ‘About His Highness the Aga Khan’ (www.akdn.org)
self-consciously Muslim and intensely regional. For this reason, Fathy was invited to join in
the selection process for the first cycle of the Awards (1978-1980) and was given a central
role in crafting its overall character and direction. Furthermore, he was presented with the
‘Chairman’s Award’ from the Aga Khan in recognition for his lifetime of achievement.
Fathy’s ideas about humane planning as well as the validity of traditional aesthetics and
building techniques took on a new relevance, giving definite meaning to the otherwise vague
concept of ‘Muslim Space’. In many ways, his work became enshrined as the standard by
which all other entries were judged.

Yet, the importance of Fathy’s position directing the AKAA must be seen within the
context of the much wider role the Awards played. Over a very short time the Awards came
to be a dominant force in the institutional landscape of professional architecture. The
presentation ceremonies have become legendary – held in ancient palaces, garden and
heritage sites – presided over by the Aga Khan and a who’s who of international dignitaries
and architects. Furthermore, the Awards were intentionally confrontational towards the old
architectural establishment because the selection committees continually passed over modern
architecture and the works of professional architects in favour of mud-brick houses, mosque
restorations and community improvement projects. To present these sorts of non-
professional works as examples of architectural excellence – to give all that international
prestige as well as the massive cash prize to some village mason was a shock to the very core
of the profession. One member of the 1986 Master Jury recalled,

It was the first international award for architecture that was about and for a
non-western context... One must not underestimate the symbolic significance
of the master mason Alladin Moustafa receiving an architectural award from

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63 Serageldin, Space for Freedom, 24, 25.
the hands of the Aga Khan in the presence of the president of Pakistan and so many luminaries of the architectural world.64

The Awards challenged an elitism and sense of cultural hegemony which dictated that the West would set the cultural tenor for the rest of the world. It snubbed the old scions of architecture and purposefully ignored the monumental and pompous buildings which had come to dominate the profession.

While the AKAA was a direct challenge to the architectural establishment, it also served as a mechanism that was slowly acting to change and even replace that establishment. The ultimate goal for the Award was the institutionalization of its underlying ideas and the mainstream acceptance of contemporary Middle Eastern architecture. As Renata Holod stated in the first catalogue for the Award, the intention was for Muslim architects and issues of ‘Muslim Space’ to be “integrated into the international language and culture of architecture.”65 In this respect, the AKAA was slowly incorporated into the mainstream by getting the foremost scholars and architects to serve on the selection and steering committees. The institutional weight and credibility of the Award was demonstrated by the makeup of these committees during the first cycle (1978-1980). Its members included: Oleg Grebar, Chairman of the Department of Fine Arts at Harvard; William Porter, Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT; and also Sherban Cantacuzino, Secretary of the British Fine Arts Commission and formerly the Executive Editor for the publication The Architectural Review.66 In addition, over the next two cycles several of the most eminent post-modern architects such as Robert Venturi, James Stirling, Hans Hollein and Charles

64 Ibid., 24.
66 Serageldin, Space for Freedom, 19.
Moore served as selectors for the AKAA. As a group, these individuals held tremendous institutional and rhetorical power, and thereby gave the AKAA an immediate sense of credibility among professional architects, theorists and critics around the world. This influence was extended through the many international conferences as well as edited volumes and publications which came about as an extension of the Awards. Furthermore this influence extended into a number of institutional relations such as the development of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard and MIT. This led to the creation of Muaarnas (published from 1983-present), a scholarly journal of Islamic visual culture based out of Harvard and edited by Oleg Grebar, the noted scholar of Islamic art and architecture.

The Aga Khan also provided funding for Mimar (published from 1981-1992), a glossy publication on contemporary Muslim architecture. Through these sorts of interconnected relationships the AKAA became woven into the very institutions of professional architecture.

The importance of the AKAA was rooted in the ways it adapted the idea of 'Muslim Space' to dovetail with the rising tide of anti-modernist and post-modern criticism. In the shifting intellectual climate of the 1970s and 1980s the AKAA began to provide a new space for discussion which a growing group of architects and theorists were clamouring for. In this respect, Fathy's ideas about humane planning as well as the validity of historical and regional

67 In addition, over the years members of the selection and steering committees have included such illustrious architects and critics as Jacques Herzog, Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman and Charles Jencks. For information on past steering and selection committees [No Author] “Previous Award Cycles” (www.akdn.org).
68 In a 2001 interview with the Aga Khan, conducted by Robert Ivy, the editor of Architectural Record, the Aga Khan reminisced about these institutional relationships developing out of the Awards, stating, “I was a Harvard graduate, therefore I knew about Islamic studies at Harvard. In the arts and sciences, I had been involved with MIT, and I knew that their school of architecture was very strong. Ultimately, people who are trying to reposition what they are doing will be looking at the most credible, most competent resource. They are not going to address themselves to a third rate institution.” [no author] “Interview with his Highness the Aga Khan by Robert Ivy, FAIA Editor in Chief, Architectural Record, Aiglemont, August 31, 2001” The Eighth Award Cycle, 1999-2001, (www.akdn.org)
architecture took on a new relevance and were discussed at length by those involved with the AKAA. Fathy had already earned a great degree of recognition and credibility since the publication of Architecture for the Poor and was re-cast as a sort of forerunner and father figure to a new generation of architects who were rediscovering their national heritage through avant-garde post-modern architecture. Fathy was of interest not strictly as a fringe or regional figure, but rather as a legitimate and respected architect who was raising relevant issues and proposing timely solutions. In this way, he helped lay the groundwork for Middle Eastern architects to enter into the mainstream institutions of professional architecture. In the long term, this fundamentally changed those institutions and began to end the longstanding indifference and overt orientalism of the architectural academy.

When New Gourna was built it was the product of a specific moment in Egyptian history and signified a system of thought locked into architectural form. Yet as I have demonstrated, the only written primary source – Architecture for the Poor – was not a primary source for the 1940s at all, but rather was the product of a growing sense of disillusionment with modernism in the 1960s and 1970s. Since Architecture for the Poor was written a quarter century after the events it described, Fathy was re-imagining the village in light of those emerging anti-modernist discussions. For this reason, the webs of meaning and significance woven into his descriptions of the events between 1945 and 1948 were fundamentally ahistorical. While I have attempted to challenge the evidence and thereby create a new space for analysis, I have also sought to show how Fathy’s literary creation was significant for entirely different reasons related to the budding discourse of post-modernism. Even though the New Gourna of Architecture for the Poor was Fathy’s own mental fiction, that fiction still had a real impact. In the literary creation of New Gourna, Fathy pieced bits

of progressive ideas from the 1960s together with a new stylistic vernacular of culturally and historically ‘appropriate’ architectural forms. This unique hybrid of ideas found great appeal within a burgeoning discussion of post-modernism. Also, through Fathy’s subsequent writings and personal involvement in the creation of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, his ideas formed the foundation of discussions among a generation of Middle Eastern and Muslim architects and critics.

While the New Gourna of Architecture for the Poor served as a sort of post-modern origin myth, the consequences of such a device should not be overlooked. If, as I have argued, Fathy’s New Gourna came to be seen as a key piece of evidence supporting the development of post-modern architectural practice since the early 1970s into the 1980s, then it also served to challenge an underlying system of power within the institutions of professional architecture. Owing to Fathy’s status as a ‘founding father’ of sorts for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, his ideas gained a disproportionate influence and his work came to be seen as the starting point for discussions that were perpetuated through the activities of the Aga Khan Foundation. Through the institutional infrastructure of the Aga Khan Foundation, with its ties to Harvard and MIT, its publishing activities through the journals Mimar and Muqarnas, and also the Aga Khan Award for Architecture itself, a new intellectual forum was emerging where the idea of ‘Muslim Space’ was discussed and explored. Yet most significantly, as a result of this institution building such discussions took shape within the mainstream and had a great deal of acceptance among both American and European architects and theorists. This acceptance and increasing interconnectedness helped shed the longstanding orientalism of the architectural academy, which had maintained a crushing sense of indifference towards the work of contemporary Middle Eastern and Muslim architects. At this most basic level, Fathy helped make the idea of ‘Muslim space’ critically relevant within the general discourse of post-modernism.
Yet throughout this entire debate one troubling theme remained constant. The final moment of widespread critical acceptance for both Middle Eastern architects and institutions such as the AKAA only occurred once those architects and institutions embraced an ‘Eastern’ aesthetic. Indeed, it seems striking that the first architects to achieve any degree of widespread success were those whose works appeared ‘Muslim’, ‘Eastern’ or ‘oriental’. By presenting this ‘Eastern’ aesthetic as a counterpoint to notions of ‘Modern’ or ‘Western’ what happened to the history of modernity and modern architecture in the Middle East? Since neither post-modern architects and theorists, nor institutions such as the AKAA have shown much interest in that history, the ‘East’ survives as a sort of post-modern origin myth.

By implicitly accepting an oppositional relationship where the ‘Modern’ is synonymous with the ‘West’ the possibility of an equally ‘Modern’ Middle East is ignored. Perhaps most troubling of all, the vague appeal of ‘tradition’ as an answer to the supposed failures of modernity is inherently superficial. As David Harvey noted, “The glass towers, concrete blocks, and steel slabs…have progressively given way to ornamental tower blocks, imitation medieval squares and fishing villages…all in the name of procuring some more ‘satisfying’ urban environment.” Yet as he later concluded, “It has, unfortunately, proved impossible to separate postmodernism’s penchant for historical quotation and populism from the simple task of catering, if not pandering, to nostalgic impulses.”

Thus, despite the fact that the debate about post-modernism has found a place for the Middle East, its inclusion is still based on the ‘otherness’ of the ‘East’ in relation to modernity. As Harvey further noted, “Worst of all, while [post-modernism] opens up a radical prospect for acknowledging the authenticity of other voices, post-modernist thinking immediately shuts off those other voices from access to more universal sources of power by ghettoizing them within an opaque otherness….It thereby disempowers those voices (of women, ethnic and racial minorities, 

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72 Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity, 40, 87.
colonized people, the unemployed, youth, etc.) in a world of lop-sided power relations." In essence, for the 'other' to be included in the critical discourse of post-modernism it must always maintain its outsider status – to represent the 'ethnic' – never to be normalized.

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73 Ibid., 117.
CHAPTER 2: NEW GOURNA AND THE CONSERVATIVE SOCIAL ORDER

Fathy's role in creating critical acceptance of Middle Eastern architecture in post-modern circles has resulted, with few exceptions, in a discussion about his work that is completely detached from its historical location. Discussions that have taken place under the auspices of the Aga Khan Foundation have shown little concern for the actual village of New Gourna or what happened during those three seasons between 1945 and 1948. New Gourna has remained a virtual entity, a product of the mind that has been continually moulded and reappraised so as to remain relevant to current architectural discussions. Furthermore, there has been a protective instinct, for those same critics who wrote about Fathy's work were themselves very much dependant on the origin myths that his work provided. Thus, discussions of Fathy have served to implicitly reaffirm the origins of an entire strain in contemporary architectural discourse.

In light of Fathy's own ahistorical accounting for the construction of New Gourna as well as the reluctance of a newer generation of post-modern architectural theorists and historians to challenge that narrative, there is a real need to dispense with devotionals and analyze Fathy's work as a historical product unique to Egypt during the 1940s. By framing the village as a forerunner to high-level global discussions about architecture, the project has grown increasingly distant from its locale, alienated from its users, and has ultimately forsaken Egypt for a much more idiosyncratic critique of architecture in general. In this chapter I mean to discuss New Gourna as something intensely local; as a project that was inextricably linked to the social, economic, political and cultural circumstances of Egypt.
during the mid 1940s. The purpose is to see the construction of the village as a much more prosaic event than has been generally portrayed. More than simply the masterful dream of a failed idealist, New Gourna was an everyday place where people were supposed to live, something situated within an identifiable local and national context made up of everyday concerns. To look at the construction of New Gourna as a local-historical process means departing from the realm of international architectural discourse, and entering into an historical narrative about the Egyptian national experience of modernity. This narrative marked the intersection between peasant and elite interests. On the one hand the destruction of New Gourna was a moment of peasant resistance, a rebuff to a history of elite coercion and expropriation that had formed the basis of the modern Egyptian nation state. On the other hand it was a signifier of power structures, attitudes and the ambitions of planners, bureaucrats and Fathy’s own class of urban landowning elites – those who had charged themselves with managing the country’s vast rural population. These underlying systems of power were hardly benign, and were in fact dedicated to maintaining a political and economic order that had been developing for nearly a century. Yet New Gourna was more than a stage for those dramas of power to be performed, for it was also a spectacular and unique aesthetic statement. In many ways, Fathy’s conception of an appropriate peasant aesthetic was based on an elite fantasy where peasants lived and looked as the Egyptian elite imagined they should. This pastoral and nostalgic image belied the very real economic and political crisis that had embroiled the countryside through the 1930s and 1940s. Yet this carefully constructed environment ultimately collapsed and New Gourna stands today as testament to the failures, internal contradictions and hegemonic controls that were inherent to modernity. It is this process combining resistance, narratives of power, and the self-assured construction of modernity into the national identity (elite though it was) which I mean to explore through Fathy’s model village.
While I have spent the previous chapter criticizing the value of *Architecture for the Poor* as historical evidence, this has created both problems and opportunities. In terms of opportunities, the problematic historical value of *Architecture for the Poor* creates a new space for analyzing Fathy's work. However, in terms of problems, I have also undermined the value of my main piece of evidence. Puzzling over a similar historical problem, the noted Harvard art historian James Ackerman observed it is often the case that "Because works of art are preserved for reasons other than their historical or biographical significance, they often lose all extrinsic evidence of their historical position, so that no record survives of the artist(s), era, or locale which produced it."¹ This seems to be precisely the problem with Fathy, for his work found its primary significance (and preservation value) in an era other than when it was built. The question must then be posed, how can an historical analysis of New Gourna be completed without somehow falling prey to those pitfalls inherent in the evidence? The problem then is where to locate meaning, for if the document may not be entirely trustworthy, then what other source might be drawn upon? In the absence of any primary documents discussing Fathy or New Gourna, the only source is the architectural product itself – the village. Yet the physical village of New Gourna, which remains in photographic evidence, drawings and plans, as well as the partial ruins still standing on the site should not be viewed as second rate evidence that must suffice in the absence of the written word. On the contrary, as the material historian Ronald T. Marchese put most forcefully, "Material remains do not lie. They reinforce or refute the exaggerations of written testimonia and lore. Things...are the concrete physical expressions of any social

Yet at the same time Architecture for the Poor cannot be dismissed entirely, for despite all of its shortcomings, lapses in memory, and wishful thinking it still remains the only document in existence to offer a first hand account. By analyzing the history behind the writing process it becomes possible to read Fathy’s work ‘against the grain’ and thereby attempt to historically locate many of his ideas, euphemisms and prejudices. In this way, Architecture for the Poor can be seen as a sort of hybrid, a document written for the 1970s but still containing shades and glimpses of the 1940s.

Throughout Architecture for the Poor Fathy separated the idea of his village – its perfect execution – from the facts on the ground. In this way, neither the model village nor its architect was ultimately the cause of the project’s failure. As Fathy stated in his conclusion to Architecture for the Poor,

But the Gourna experiment failed. The village was never finished, and is not to this day a flourishing village community. It would not be fair to the reader to let him suppose that the principles explained earlier will automatically succeed in practice. At the same time, I should not be fair to myself and my country if I let the principles stand condemned because this one attempt to apply them failed.3

But if it was not the architect’s fault, then whose was it? For Fathy the project failed mainly because of two reasons: the first and lesser cause was bureaucratic obstructionism, but the second and ultimately most direct cause was the Gournis themselves. From the outset Fathy made it very clear that the villagers of Old Gourna were tomb robbers, and as a result of their illicit enterprises were unwilling to be relocated. As he exclaimed, “Their economy was almost wholly dependant on tomb robbing; the farmland around could not support anything

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3 Fathy, Architecture for the Poor, 149.
like seven thousand people..."⁴ Continuing on, he attempted to soften his literary blows, "Yet
the operations of these tomb robbers should not be viewed too lightheartedly. For all their
skill, for all their likableness, and in spite of their undeserved poverty, the damage they do is
measureless. They excavate and sell, and no one knows the provenance of their finds, which
means a big loss to Egyptology."⁵ This description was followed with numerous gossipy
examples of how one peasant had set himself up on forty acres of farmland from the profits
of a find, or how certain villagers had become experts at forging antiquities for gullible
tourists. As Fathy conveyed from the outset, this was not a village that would take kindly to
his activities. Indeed, these initial impressions were confirmed as the villagers became
increasingly resistant to the project and actively sought to undermine Fathy's work. This
resistance initially took the form of petty obstructionism but escalated, and ultimately
culminated in flooding the village. After the dyke was cut, Fathy speculated as to the cause,
attempting to remain diplomatic and not spread the blame too broadly, stating "everybody
obeys the heads of families, who, in Gourna, were tomb robbers....They had no intention of
giving up their nice, profitable, squalid houses in the cemetery with treasure waiting to be
mined under their floors, to move to their new, hygienic, beautiful village away from the
tombs."⁶ It was at this point that the villager's refusal to be moved took on moral overtones –
they refused to move into their new home not because of anything Fathy had done, but
because of their own greed, short-sightedness and moral failing. The villagers were thieves,
and their refusal to be moved was a testament to their guilt.

Fathy's characterization of the Gournis as thieves and tomb robbers served a dual
purpose: first it provided a legitimate reason for the relocation of the villagers; and secondly,
an external reason why his model village failed. While there is undoubtedly some truth to

⁴ Ibid., 15.
⁵ Ibid., 15.
⁶ Ibid., 176.
tales of the Gournis’ illicit activities in the tombs adjacent to Gourna, it is striking to see how large the idea of the ‘peasant as thief’ played in some of Fathy’s other projects. Indeed, Gourna was not the first time he remembered being faced with thieving peasants. During the construction of a private villa for one of his friends Fathy recalled that “the local peasant, who coveted the wood, had stolen all the roofs in the farm.”

While it is certainly possible that two of Fathy’s commissions revolved around illicit activities of Egyptian peasants, a third seems unlikely. Yet only a few pages later the architect recalled a story about an entire village of thieves (!) wiped out during the annual Nile flood, (he had submitted a proposal to help with the rebuilding, however it was turned down by Egyptian Red Crescent Society). Fathy’s tale is so strikingly odd that only his recounting does it justice:

[the village] was called Ezbet el Basrey and was inhabited largely by thieves. Very justly, it was quite swept away by a sudden flood, such as occurs every twenty years or so, and the Egyptian Red Crescent undertook to rehouse the homeless families. The flood showed the hand of God most plainly, for not only did it punish the unrighteous, but it restored to at least one of their victims his stolen property. This victim was Amin Rustum, who had two tires stolen from his car...He knew the culprit – and the tires – to be in Ezbet el Basry, but the police would not do anything about it. However on the day of the flood there was a swirl of water and Rustum’s two tires came sailing merrily into the police station, where they obligingly ran aground, and he collected them.

Such a fantastic description – an entire village of thieves – in addition to Gourna and the friend’s house, which made for a total of three projects instigated by or involving thieves. While there is no evidence to doubt Fathy’s honesty, the question is not whether or not these events actually happened but why they should figure into his story at all – a second-hand bit of gossip about a man losing a set of tires hardly seems noteworthy. Despite the actual existence of thieves or not, their presence in Fathy’s writing always seemed to precipitate the activities of the architect.

7 Ibid., 11.
8 Ibid., 12.
While the image of 'peasants as thieves' was a recurring trope in Fathy’s writing, indicating a certain moral hierarchy between the architect and his impoverished clients, it was by no means singular. Fathy’s moral order was relational, for while he saw the Gournis as thieving and untrustworthy, this conception was inverted when it came to Nubians, particularly the masons he employed from Aswan. In virtually every respect the Nubians are opposite to the mass of Egyptian peasants represented by the Gournis. Whereas the Gournis are lazy, the Aswani masons are hard working; and while the Gournis repeatedly try to cheat Fathy, the Aswani masons are straightforward and forthright in their dealings. Fathy encapsulated this scale of Egyptian peasant morality, when he recalled drawing up a work contract with his Aswani masons.

...when they were asked how they would prefer to be paid, by the day or by the job, they were too simple to see any difference. Now the average workman much prefers to be paid by the day, for then he can take frequent rests, refresh himself with coffee every half hour or so, and spin out the work so that it will continue to be a source of income to him for many weeks. It never occurred to these Aswani masons...

This view was not simply based on a general distain for the Gournis and a love of Nubians, rather it formed the basis of his ideas about architecture. Fathy constructed an opposing view whereby the moral qualities of the peasant were signified by the integrity of their architecture. As he mused, “Placid people live in tranquil houses, in a village of beggars the walls cringe and whine...” He noted that this was particularly true of his Aswani masons, whose scrupulously honesty and simplicity was directly linked to the aesthetic integrity of their homes. Fathy recalled his first impressions of the Nubian village at Aswan:

I realized that I was looking at the living survivor of traditional Egyptian architecture, a way of building that was a natural growth in the landscape, as much a part of it as the dom-palm tree of the district. It was a vision of

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9 Ibid., 9.  
10 Ibid., 51.
architecture before the Fall: before money, industry, greed and snobbery had severed architecture from its true roots in nature.11

When Fathy first travelled to Aswan in search of traditional Nubian mud brick architecture, the masons' village of Gharb Aswan became his model for an architecture where the health of the community was explicitly linked with its architecture. He described the village in the following terms, "It was a new world for me, a whole village of spacious, lovely, clean and harmonious houses each more beautiful than the next....Not a trace of the miserly huddle of the usual Egyptian village...."12 This description was radically in contrast with his descriptions of the 'usual Egyptian village', which he characteristically described when recalling an earlier project for a school in Talkha, near Mansoura in the Delta.

The site for the school was outside the town, and after a day or two I made a deliberate detour to avoid going through the town. I was so disgusted at the sight and smell of the narrow streets, deep in mud and every kind of filth...that I could not bear to pass through....This town haunted me; I could think of nothing but the hopeless resignation of these peasants to their condition, their crippled and stunted view of life, their abject acceptance of the whole horrible situation...amid the wretched buildings of Talkha. The revelation of their apathy seized me by the throat; my own helplessness before such a spectacle tormented me.13

By using architecture as a representation of inner moral qualities Fathy intentionally blurred the line between clean harmonious houses and clean harmonious people.

Whereas Fathy's continual usage of the 'peasant as thief' illustrated a much more subjective and literary construction of the village of New Gourna it also opens up questions about who the villagers actually were and demands a much more rigorous historical analysis. Based on his own descriptions in Architecture for the Poor, it seems clear that Fathy had only the vaguest understanding of Gourna's local history and people. His remarks on the matter are limited to a brief note about how the village had appeared about fifty years earlier when

11 Ibid., 7.
12 Ibid., 6.
13 Ibid., 3.
antiquities were discovered and since that time the villagers had made their livelihood off the illicit antiquities trade.\textsuperscript{14} Yet the history of the village was much more contested and important to both the development and failure of Fathy’s utopian vision than he let on or was perhaps even aware.\textsuperscript{15}

Despite the seductive simplicity of peasant-thieves sabotaging Fathy’s model village, the failure of the village must be seen within a larger history of land ownership and the relationship between landowners and peasants going back nearly ninety years into the mid-nineteenth century. The land in and around Gourna had been village land up until the mid-nineteenth century when it was expropriated by the Egyptian royal household.\textsuperscript{16} Such expropriations were not unique, and as the historian Robert Hunter documented, the extent of such expropriations could be enormous. Hunter cited a single decree where fifty-four

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[Ibid., 15.]
\item[15] Throughout this chapter I make substantial use of Timothy Mitchell’s recent book \textit{The Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), particularly his essays “Heritage and Violence” (179-205) and to a lesser extent “Can the Mosquito Speak” (19-53). For the sake of both clarity and prudence it seems necessary to outline precisely how I have positioned my thesis in relation to Mitchell’s work. In his introduction to the \textit{Rule of Experts} Mitchell clearly positions his work as a study of economics (3). He looks at, and calls into question, the processes by which the study of economics was understood as a discipline, and how that ‘way of knowing’ motivated certain actions which were characterized as ‘modern’ (15). In “Heritage and Violence” Mitchell uses Gourna as a case study, delving into the history of the village encompassing topics varying from land expropriation to malaria and tourism. In this respect our narratives intersect, and I owe a great deal to his vivid descriptions of the village and its ongoing confrontation with the various power structures of the modern state. Yet, Mitchell is not the only author to write about these subjects, and both of our works build on a substantial body of secondary literature such as James Steele’s architectural history of Hassan Fathy, Nancy Gallagher’s discussion of public health, as well as the classic studies on Egyptian economics and landownership by Robert Hunter, Robert Tignor and Gabriel Baer. Yet my thesis departs from Mitchell’s book in several important ways. First and foremost, Mitchell takes Fathy’s work at face value and does not attempt to account for the publication of \textit{Architecture for the Poor} in the 1970s. As a result he falls prey to Fathy’s ahistorical account of New Gourna when he writes about the construction of the village during the 1940s. Also, Mitchell is interested in exploring the processes by which the modern nation state was crafted through a specific understanding and usage of heritage. In this way Mitchell’s narrative of Gourna continues up until the present and is tied up with the ongoing confrontation between the Gournis, the state and tourism industry around Luxor – a subject which I leave to him. My interest is in developing a narrative of Egyptian modernity through cultural history, and thereby looking at New Gourna as something characteristically modern. Thus, while we both delve back into the history of Gourna up until the 1940s, and also draw on a similar set of secondary sources, the ultimate purpose is very different.
\item[Mitchell, \textit{Rule of Experts}, 190,191.]
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villages and 56,000 feddans were taken. Yet these expropriations were not simply the arbitrary actions of a despot, but rather were carried out under a veneer of legality through the supposedly normalizing processes of the newly expanding bureaucratic state. These processes began in earnest following the passing of Khedive Sa’id’s Land Law in 1858, which was the Egyptian counterpart to the much more substantial Ottoman Land Code also passed that same year. Both codes stipulated that parcels of land must be registered, ownership established by legal title and taxes paid. In Egypt the bureaucratization of landownership produced an ironclad system where land could be quickly seized and sold off for the non-payment of private debts or back taxes. As one MP exclaimed, “The land is knocked down to their creditors before they are even aware that it has been put up for sale”.

A similar account of massive land seizure and dispossession of peasant lands was related by the sociologist Ted Swedenburg in the case of Ottoman Palestine following the implementation of the Ottoman Land Code. Swedenburg characterized the results of such

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18 A detailed discussion of Khedive Sa’id’s Land Law is provided in Gabriel Baer’s pioneering study *A History of Landownership in Modern Egypt: 1800-1950*, 7-10, 19. Baer took a generally positive view of the land law, characterizing the establishment of legal land title as a monumental achievement—which through the normalizing process of the state and the judiciary would benefit the fellahin in the long run by giving them stability. Yet, later Baer does discuss the way the Land Law was used to increase the tax burden of peasant cultivators, who were often forced by economic conditions to abandon their land which was subsequently seized by the state. In many respects, Baer’s discussion of the Land Law is somewhat idealistic; he sees the legalization of landholding as a part of the process of modernization and therefore a commendable achievement. The tangible benefits of that achievement are called into question when Baer’s narrative is compared to Hunter’s more detailed discussion of the *de facto* realities on the ground.
19 Kenneth M. Cuno, *The Pasha’s Peasants: Land, Society, and Economy in Lower Egypt, 1740-1858* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 184. Cuno noted that the Land Law required taxes on agricultural land be paid in hard currency rather than in kind, as had been previously accepted. The sheer lack of hard currency in the countryside meant that many peasants required loans to secure coinage, and that these loans were often negotiated at exorbitant interest rates.
20 As quoted in, Baer, *A History of Landownership in Modern Egypt*, 36.
reform and bureaucratization, stating quite frankly that they “facilitated a massive land grab.”

Yet in Egypt the purpose behind such bureaucratization and expropriation of peasant cultivators’ land was more than to simply fatten royal coffers, it also formed the basis for a system of clientage used by the monarchy to maintain and expand its domestic power base. One of the major trends in landownership throughout the nineteenth century was the massive concentration of landownership. Expropriated land was sold or redistributed among the Khedives’ political allies and the new cadre of powerful state bureaucrats who were increasingly responsible for the smooth functioning of the expanding modern, bureaucratic state. The wealth from the expropriation and redistribution of peasant land contributed to the creation of a new bourgeois class of urban elites. It was this bargain, tying together acquiescence, wealth and power, that was so essential to creating and maintaining the political and economic order of the modern Egyptian state which persisted until 1952.

This history of expropriation applied directly to Gourna, and was tied specifically to the creation of Fathy’s model village. While the land in and around Gourna was absorbed into the vast body of royal landholdings in the mid-nineteenth century after Khedive Sa‘id’s land law, the effects of that expropriation began to turn against the Gournis twenty years later in 1875 when the royal household was declared bankrupt. Thereafter British authorities charged themselves with settling the country’s massive foreign debt – imposing increasingly direct and onerous terms of repayment on behalf of creditors. In 1908 the royal estates around Gourna, which were at this time managed by foreign bankers as part of the country’s

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22 Ibid., 173.
23 Tignor, Modernization & British Colonial Rule in Egypt, 1882-1914, 240-241. Also see, Owen, Cotton and the Egyptian Economy, 1820-1914, 238-245.
24 Hunter, Egypt Under the Khedives, 63-69.
25 For complete details of Egypt’s bankruptcy and debt repayment terms see, Ibid., 179-189.
financial restructuring undertaken by Lord Cromer, were auctioned off to Boulos Hanna Pasha, one of the largest landowners and sugarcane producers in Upper Egypt. The bankruptcy creditors favoured the sale of large tracts of land so as to settle debts as quickly as possible. For this reason the bankruptcy sales further contributed to the massive concentration of landownership, as large landowners were the only ones with sufficient capital to take engage in such an outsized property market. It was at that time, as Timothy Mitchell described it, “local villagers discovered that their land and even their houses were to become the property of a new plantation owner. When bailiffs later came to evict the villagers…fifteen members of the eviction forces were injured, and fifty-seven villagers were arrested, one of who died in custody.”

In the instant when Boulos Hanna Pasha exercised his rights as a landowner to evict his tenants, the consequences of the initial act of legalized land ownership fifty years earlier crystallized – the results of a vague and shifting legal framework brought down to the blows of a bailiff’s baton. As a result of the partial 1908 eviction, the village was put in a state of general upheaval, now occupying a legal void – somewhere between squatters and illegal trespassers. Since that time the villagers have held onto their houses and what little farmland they could through obstinate refusal and resistance to state coercion. That the villagers held onto some land after their eviction prevented them from becoming totally destitute sharecroppers. It was at this time, once the farmlands that had sustained the village had been

26 Mitchell, Rule of Experts, 191. Gabriel Baer also made reference to a certain “Bushrā Hannā” as one of the notable purchasers of bankruptcy land, and later made note of the Hanna family was one of the most wealthy and politically influential Coptic families in Upper Egypt. Whether or not Bushrā Hannā and Boulos Hanna Pasha were the same person is unclear, although they were certainly members of the same family. Baer, A History of Landownership in Modern Egypt, 96, 137, 139, 145.

27 Gabriel Baer provides the most detailed account of rural land sales as part of the bankruptcy proceedings. Baer noted that the years of the large bankruptcy land sales between 1900 and 1906, marked the largest increase in the ownership of private property in Egyptian history. The future fortunes of many of Cairo’s wealthiest families were secured through the purchase of these formerly royal estates. Ibid., 95-99. Also see, Tignor, Modernization & British Colonial Rule in Egypt, 243.

28 Mitchell, Rule of Experts, 191.
expropriated through the functioning of the modern state to favour its newest son – the massive landholding elite – that the Gournis were forced into their marginal position. Furthermore, once deprived of the land they required to survive, the villagers began to look beyond their traditional agrarian base and towards Egypt’s newest growth sector – tourism and antiquities. As the state had stolen the villagers farmland, the Gournis stole something the government had claimed for itself, but was hopeless at administering – Egypt’s rich cache of antiquities. It was precisely at that moment of dispossession that the village began to take advantage of the illicit antiquities trade.\(^{29}\)

Yet, what did this act of institutional violence forty years earlier mean to the development of Fathy’s model village – for Fathy was clearly unaware, or totally disinterested in the legacy of land expropriation that had created the current circumstances of the Gournis. That Boulos Hanna Pasha’s massive sugar cane estate had once been village land seemed to have been totally lost on the architect nor did he seem to appreciate the bitter irony the villagers faced of having to buy back land they considered to be stolen. To add insult to injury, the financing for Fathy’s model village was derived from an arbitrary assessment of the houses the Gournis currently occupied, which was to be paid as the sole compensation for the expropriation. Not only were the villagers going to be evicted again, but through some creative financing, the money – £E 50,000 – was given directly to Fathy to buy a parcel of land from Boulos Hanna Pasha. The Gournis did not have the option of

\(^{29}\) Mitchell challenged the general characterization of the Gournis as tomb robbers, stating that while the village had certainly been a part of some illicit activity, in fact, the vast majority of stolen antiquities that have been recovered typically bear excavation registration numbers, meaning that they had come onto the black market from corrupt officials working in government storehouses. As Mitchell argues, the perception of the Gournis as antiquities thieves is something that is repeated ad nauseam but represents only a partial and overblown truth. As he states, “It is curious that we now look on the Gurnawis [sic] as tomb robbers, but still find it difficult to describe the British Museum in London or the Metropolitan Museum in New York as collectors of stolen goods.... It was easier to demand the eviction of villagers from a hillside in southern Egypt than to investigate how the trade in antiquities was actually run and to collaborate on measures against international dealers and buyers.” His research and conclusions were based on substantial field work in the village. Ibid., 201-202.
taking a cash settlement, rather they were forced to buy back the land from which they had been evicted forty years earlier. Throughout Fathy’s narrative Boulos Hanna Pasha remained in the background, simply a benevolent landowner who offered Fathy his own guards and labourers to repair the dykes after the Gournis had flooded the model village.

Figure 8: The Old Village of Gourna, ca. mid 1980s.

Image used with permission, courtesy of ArchNet.

In addition to the ninety year legacy of land expropriation, the Gournis also had a number of practical economic reasons to reject Fathy’s model village. The positioning of the new site was hardly ideal, fifty acres of reclaimed sugarcane fields that lay adjacent to the Nile. The old village had been located up on the hillside relatively distant from the Nile, presumably to protect it from the annual floods and also to preserve the most fertile land for farming. While the new site was not in immediate danger from flooding as a result of dyke

construction and also recent work to heighten the Aswan Dam (1929-1933), the site made its inhabitants much more susceptible to disease. The combination of a rising water table as well as the lack of an annual flood to flush the system clean resulted in a marked increase in waterborne parasites such as bilharzia, but more notably, malaria. Between 1942 and 1945 Upper Egypt fell victim to a catastrophic outbreak of the disease, with death tolls reaching between one and two hundred thousand, with the highest rates in and amongst the sugar cane estates near Gourna.\(^{31}\) In addition to the threat of increased disease, the new site made no provisions for farmland.\(^{32}\) With neither the space to grow food nor the opportunities arising from the illicit antiquities trade, Fathy’s village was condemned to economic destitution. Beyond his confidence in the absolute value of teaching the villagers how to make mud-brick houses, Fathy’s only attempt to provide for the village’s economy was to teach a few of the children some arts and crafts that could be sold to tourists – yet even he admitted that these projects met with little success.\(^ {33}\) Ultimately the economy of the proposed village was to be inextricably tied with the original act of expropriation. Just as Boulos Hanna Pasha had made his fortune growing sugarcane on old village land, the villagers were to return and work that same land as sharecroppers on what was now the Pasha’s estate. Thus despite any rhetoric by Fathy about architectural aesthetics, the actual economic underpinnings of the village were totally unworkable, and in fact were intimately tied to a ninety year old economic order that actively sought to disempower the peasantry. The old village stood as a testament to the initial act of institutional violence that had given birth to the economic and political systems


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 189.

\(^{33}\) Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor*, 63, 64.
of the modern Egyptian state and the villagers’ staunch refusal to accept that system.\(^\text{34}\)

Whether he knew it or not, Fathy’s job was to tie up those loose ends.

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The concentration of landownership and the creation of a new urban upper-class had personal meaning for Fathy, for this was the narrative of his own family history. Fathy was born at the cusp of the twentieth century into a family ranking in Egypt’s upper social and

\(^{34}\) The failure of New Gourna is also discussed in, Hana Taragan, “Architecture in Fact and Fiction: The Case of the New Gourna Village in Upper Egypt.” *Mugarnas* 16 (1999):169-178. Taragan’s brief article provides a fascinating account of how much the Gournis disliked Fathy’s work and found him totally unresponsive to their needs. While many of Taragan conclusions are echoed in Mitchell’s *Rule of Experts*, her analysis was based on unique first-hand accounts written by the Egyptian novelist Fathi Ghanim who travelled to the village in the late 1940s to find out why New Gourna failed. Ghanim’s later adapted his experiences into the novella ‘al-Jabal’ (available in Arabic only). According to Taragan, Fathy’s attempts to make his new rural utopia were based on the characteristically lopsided power relations of modernization. Fathy assumed the ignorance the villagers against his own superior expertise. Furthermore, he never attempted to adapt his architectural style to suite local aesthetic mores, for as Ghanim recounted, the villagers regarded Fathy’s mud brick domes as better suited to tombs – not houses.
economic strata. Fathy’s mother was of Turko-Circassian descent, which was a particular prized social distinction, shared by, among others, the Egyptian royal family. His father was of the newer class of wealthy urbanites whose income was derived from substantial rural agricultural landholdings. While the precise extent of the family’s holdings remains unknown, Fathy later recollected that his father “possessed several estates in the country, [but] he would never visit them, or go any nearer to the country than Mansoura, the provincial capital, where he went once a year to meet his bailiffs and collect his rent.” Such a large income derived from agricultural landholding hundreds of kilometres away was by no means abnormal – nor was his dislike for the countryside. Since the turn of the century, patterns of rural landownership had shifted away from traditional rural-estates where landowner and peasant lived in close proximity. By the early twentieth century landowners were primarily rent collectors living in Cairo. This trend accelerated in the twentieth century

35 The high rank of Turko-Circassians throughout the nineteenth century can perhaps be attributed to the Egyptian monarchy, which was of Turko-Circassian descent. It is interesting to note how common it was for prominent Egyptian men to seek social distinction through marriage with Turko-Circassian slaves. As Magda Baraka has noted, even though slavery had been outlawed by Khedive Ismail in 1877 the practice lived on well into the twentieth century with such prominent men as Lutfi al-Sayyid marrying their Turkish consorts. Fathy seems to have been the product of such a union, for although his mother was Turko-Circassian she did not come from a prominent family. To give some idea of the significance of such marriage practices, Fathy would have been in the illustrious company of the notable feminist and social elite Huda Sha‘rawi, whose mother was a Turko-Circassian slave. Magda Baraka, The Egyptian Upper Class Between Revolutions (Oxford: Ithaca Press, 1998), 143.

36 There is some discrepancy as to who Hassan Fathy’s father actually was. No name is ever given; however, James Steele asserts that Fathy’s father rose to prominence from poor rural backgrounds, eventually leading a “middle-class household” and was a “landowner and a farmer”. Steele, An Architecture for People, 1. In another retrospective on Fathy, the author asserts that Fathy was born into “a family of artists and scientists, the son of a noted jurist…” Simone Swan, “Elegant Solutions” Saudi Aramco World, vol. 50, no. 4 (July/August 1999) 16-27. Despite these discrepancies, Fathy’s own statements in Architecture for the Poor leave little doubt that ‘middle class’ would have been something of an understatement. From Fathy’s brief description of his father as a first generation landowner who administered his estates from Cairo, it seems clear that the family had achieve its land through the purchase, or redistribution of excess lands by the Egyptian monarchy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

37 Fathy, Architecture for the Poor 1.
as many urban bureaucrats and professionals joined the landowning class, using their professional income to purchase agricultural land for investment.\textsuperscript{38}

Fathy's upbringing was in many ways typical of the Egyptian upper-class – life was good. As a youth he had attended the Khediveya School for his secondary education, which was one of the most elite schools in the country.\textsuperscript{39} The expense of such an education entrenched a \textit{de facto} separation from the rest of the population. Tuition in this rarefied education system was far beyond the financial limits of most Egyptians. For example, in 1913 the annual tuition in a private secondary school could range from £10-£30/year, a price so prohibitive that it dwarfed the annual incomes of most of the population.\textsuperscript{40} Such a life was unknown to most Egyptians, and in turn, most Egyptians were unknown to this class of men and women of property and leisure. As one Egyptian novelist wrote,

\begin{quote}
It is rare, in the milieu in which I was born, to know Egyptians... the Sporting Club and the race meetings and the villa-owners and the European-dressed and travelled people I met, were not Egyptians. Cairo and Alexandria were cosmopolitan not so much because they contained foreigners, but because the Egyptian born in them is himself a stranger to his land.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

This was particularly true for Fathy, who recalled never having visited the family estates in the countryside or meeting a peasant until the age of twenty-seven.\textsuperscript{42} To be a member of this leisured class, as Fathy was, meant an upbringing where French, English and perhaps even Turkish were spoken before Arabic.\textsuperscript{43} It meant summers in Alexandria, travel to Europe, and leisurely afternoons at the poolside and backgammon tables of Cairo's best clubs. Yet the

\textsuperscript{38} Baraka, \textit{The Egyptian Upper Class Between Revolutions}, 237-239.
\textsuperscript{39} Fathy, \textit{Architecture for the Poor}, 84.
\textsuperscript{40} Baraka, \textit{The Egyptian Upper Class}, 131.
\textsuperscript{42} Fathy, \textit{Architecture for the Poor}, 1.
\textsuperscript{43} Fathy's wide linguistic abilities are demonstrated by his vast collection of English and French books. Perhaps the most telling sign of his cosmopolitan orientation is the fact that \textit{Architecture for the Poor} was first published in English and French, then translated into Arabic in the 1980s. Indeed, Fathy rarely wrote in Arabic. Fathy's collection of books and an archive of his personal papers, renderings and architectural drawings is available through the Rare Books and Special Collections Library at the American University in Cairo. "Hassan Fathy Archives" http://www.aucegypt.edu/hassanfathy/index.html
wealth of this cosmopolitan, Mediterranean oriented upper-class was ultimately derived from vast rural landholdings and a political system dedicated to maintaining a favourable status quo.

Based on the history of land expropriation, systematic political and economic marginalization as well as Fathy’s own elite upbringing, what should be made of his original justification for the failure of his project – that the Gournis were thieves? It seems clear that Fathy’s characterization of the Gournis as thieves was in fact a euphemistic device meant to provide the moral imperative for action. The image of peasant-thieves evoked the sanctity of protecting Egypt’s vast cultural patrimony by any means necessary. This image served as a sort of moral buttress, something required to stem the ambivalence of development. For while the Gournis were certainly thieves, without any context or qualification that characterization was designed to marginalize the history of elite expropriation that had forced the Gournis into their current position. The language of thieves and moral self righteousness was meant to obfuscate the fact that Fathy’s village had political implications and was designed as a very conservative statement to preserve the imbalance of power between peasants and landowners. As George Orwell noted in his classic essay ‘Politics and the English Language’, “In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible…. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outline and covering up all the details.”

The real surprise is not that Fathy, a man of the landowning upper-class whose family wealth was derived from the new land regime of the nineteenth century, would be unreceptive to a history of elite oppression and ill-gotten land, but that his words have been so readily adopted by those writing about him. The general tenor of such

writing can be summed up in the words of the Egyptian artist and art historian Lilliane Karnouk, who explained that Fathy’s idealistic project failed because “...tomb robbers are not revolutionaries.”45

Fathy’s euphemistic and stereotyped view of the Egyptian peasant was hardly unique, and can in fact be historically located in the language of upper-class landowners from the 1930s and 1940s. The relationship between the Egyptian peasantry and the urban landowners who they served was wrought with contradiction and misconception. As early as 1938 Father Henri Ayrout, an Egyptian French-trained Jesuit who spent much of his ministry in the Egyptian countryside, spoke about the conflicting attitudes of the Egyptian elite towards the peasantry in his work Moeurs et Coutsomes des Fellahs, later translated into The Egyptian Peasant (1945). Father Ayrout recalled a number of elite characterizations of the peasantry:

‘The fellah is lazy…’
‘The fellahin are a cowardly, cringing lot.’
‘They are evil and stupid.’
‘They will take any opportunity to cheat you’46

Yet as Father Ayrout noted, these opinions were not unanimous and often opposing or even contradictory remarks could be elicited from the same person.

‘…the fellahin are a quiet, gentle people’
‘The fellah is always happy and grateful. He is a hard and loyal worker.’47

According to Father Ayrout, these contradictory conceptions of the fellahin were based on a total disinterest for the condition of peasants and the countryside. As he stated, “Faced with the simplest queries about them, the rich often display an ignorance which shows quite

47 Ibid., 137. Similar observations are also recounted in, Baraka, The Egyptian Upper Class Between Revolutions, 228-229.
clearly that such questions have never occurred to them and arouse no curiosity at all." Yet Ayrout was wrong to simply attribute these attitudes to the ignorance or indifference of the upper-class. Rather, by labelling the fellahin as lazy, dirty, rebellious or ignorant the upper-class was able to ignore challenges to the implementation of ‘modern’ economic and political systems or the history of rural land expropriation. As the social historian Nathan Brown observed in his study of the Egyptian discourse of peasant-elite relations, “the ignorance on the part of the rulers was recast as inscrutability on the part of the peasants.” Any complaint on the part of the peasantry was construed as a sign of rebelliousness regardless of how valid that point might have been. The historian Magda Baraka, who has written extensively on the Egyptian upper-class of the 1930s and 1940s observed that “One of the ways by which landed, business and other interests were defended in parliament was by creating negative stereotypes for the groups at whose expense those interests needed to be secured.”

Through the perpetuation of negative cultural stereotypes about the fellahin, landowners and legislators (often one and the same) were able to resist any calls for reform. To slightly adapt the words of the author and revolutionary Franz Fanon, “For the native, objectivity is always directed against him.” Indeed, if the problems of the fellahin were not caused by the massive and systematic centralization of landownership through the

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48 Ayrout, *The Egyptian Peasant*, 19. It should be noted that Father Ayrout’s remarks should not be taken uncritically simply because he was a firsthand observer. For someone who was ostensibly critical of others who made generalizations about the poor, his own work was full of them. As he stated, “The fellah preserves and repeats, but does not originate or create.” (137) Timothy Mitchell best characterized *The Egyptian Peasant* noting that for Ayrout the Egyptian peasantry was a backward mass whose current circumstances were the result of a timeless mentality and not because of current political or economic realities. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 129-132.


50 Baraka, *The Egyptian Upper Class Between Revolutions*, 266.


bureaucratic tools of state, then they could be attributed to fundamental character problems of the fellahin. This view allowed elites to redirect discussion about the problems of the fellahin and countryside away from the nature of the economic order, towards petty and idiosyncratic criticisms. Legislators and cultural critics were supremely adept at offering a host of remedies to the abstract problem of inscrutable peasants. For example, as Nathan Brown noted “in the 1940s, Prime Minister Husayn Sirri proposed to meet the problems of the peasantry by launching a campaign to distribute shoes among them to combat barefootedness.” For each stereotype arose a corresponding solution — yet, like the stereotypes, the solutions were often conflicting. The ‘problem’ of peasant appearance was a recurring theme in such discussions and was often interpreted as the outward signifier of supposed inner moral or social failings. Whereas PM Husayn Sirri sought to modernize the peasantry through footwear, others saw such outward signifiers of modernity as precisely the problem. The parliamentary debates over the compulsory education bill (1933, 1937) segued onto precisely this topic when a group of ten deputies proposed that children not wearing a galabiyya be denied entry into public schools. Another deputy offered the following exasperated observations, “I saw some...peasants going out to their fields wearing coats, stockings and shoes. And I saw five of them carrying their hoes and baskets on their shoulders, while riding their bicycles.” The same deputy later stated, “…the wearers of blue galabiyyas...have been an example of ardour and diligence, would with the passage of time turn to be wearers of ironed galabiyyas, and thus turn to be a burden on this nation and a malady of the most malicious kind.” The evils of barefootedness (or shoes depending on who you asked) and ironed galabiyyas were part of a process by which elites rendered social

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53 Brown, “The Ignorance and Inscrutability of the Egyptian Peasant” 218.
54 Baraka, The Egyptian Upper Class Between Revolutions, 266.
55 Ibid., 267.
56 Ibid., 268.
unrest to fit into old stereotypes about the fellahin. At the same time, the conflicting nature of those stereotypes illustrated a deep ambivalence over exactly what modernity could mean in terms of maintaining the existing social and economic order.

Elites interpreted the main problem of the countryside to be that the peasants were no longer acting like peasants, and as a result were becoming uppity. Yet was not this the same sort of rhetoric used to justify New Gourna? Fathy’s goal, of using architecture to “revive the peasant’s faith in his own culture”, framed the plight of the peasantry in that same sort of aesthetic and paternalistic rhetoric that characterized elite discourse.\(^{57}\) Fathy ruminated further on the matter, noting philosophically,

> Western communications have done for the village what Copernicus did for the earth – the village is now seen as a small part of the universe, not its centre, while the Western world, the factories of Czechoslovakia and Italy with their goods which are specially designed in crude and conspicuous colors to meet the corrupt taste of the peasant, increasingly comes to seem like the sun, the only source of life. The overwhelmed peasant, seeking progress, has abandoned the cultural traditions safeguarding his taste before acquiring the faculty of discrimination necessary to replace them.

Fathy continued, growing more forceful,

> The ever more shiny products of Europe and America, the lustrous metal cups and gold-spangled glasses....The debased and greedy taste of the middle-class townsman dictates the fashion to millions of peasants. Just as the rest of Egypt’s living history is in full retreat up the Nile, so her craftsmanship is disappearing before the attack of shiny tin and gaudy cloth.\(^{58}\)

In other words, the problem was not that peasants were poor, diseased and increasingly agitated because of tangible economic and political realities, but because they had become corrupted by tasteless imports from Eastern Europe. Such remarks seem profoundly disingenuous, illustrating an elite fantasy of what peasants should look and act like. In this way, a village of mud brick houses was appealing because it referenced a notion of the eternal and pastoral peasantry. For Fathy, like Ayrout, wanted to believe that “[the peasants]

\(^{57}\) Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor*, 43.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 52-53.
have changed their masters, their religion, their language and their crops, but not their way of
life."\(^{59}\) By an extension of this logic, passivity could be restored to the peasantry by returning
to the semblance of that eternal way of life. For Fathy the first and most important way of
doing that was by making a village that looked the way he imagined it should; and once the
stage had been set, the peasants – it was hoped – would assume their roles. This was simply
a much grander extension of the same oft conflicting logic that condemned barefootedness, or
conversely, the decadence of ironed galabiyyas. Whether it was through modern blocs of
concrete houses or pastoral mud brick villages, the Egyptian elite were utterly convinced that
an aesthetic for living could affect social change and that the peasants would adopt the
mentality evoked by their surroundings. Yet as these politicians and architects tinkered with
the social order they betrayed a sense of uneasiness; for perhaps what the fellahin really
wanted was not shoes, hats or houses but to be rid the Egyptian elite altogether.

*The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire... The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession – all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible... And this the settler knows very well... (Franz Fanon)*\(^{60}\)

Whatever the peasant may want to do, whatever the rich man's villas he may
wish to copy, he won't be able to escape the severe restraint imposed upon
him by the material. Whether, when he has lived in a truly beautiful and
dignified village, he will still hanker after imported modernity, we shall have
to wait and see. Perhaps when he has no reason to envy the rich man
anything at all – his wealth, his culture, and his consequence – then too he
will cease to envy his house. (Hassan Fathy)\(^{61}\)

Despite fantasies to the contrary, the central development of the late 1930s through
the 1940s was not the scandalous increase of tacky bric-a-brac pouring out of Eastern

\(^{59}\) Ayrout, The Egyptian Peasant, 1.
\(^{60}\) Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 39.
\(^{61}\) Fathy, Architecture for the Poor, 37.
European factories, but rather the ominous clouds of political revolution that were massing on the horizon. In this respect, the construction of New Gourna was very much linked to the long-term decline of social and economic conditions. The Great Depression had struck the Egyptian countryside with particular harshness, and from the late 1930s onward it was becoming increasingly clear that the status quo could not be maintained. One notable attempt to identify the causes of these degenerating conditions was Mirrit Boutros Ghali (from the notable Coptic family of the same surname), whose book The Policy of Tomorrow (1938) was a frank account of conditions in the countryside. Ghali is useful, first to help identify some of the most pressing grievances facing the fellahin, and secondly, to provide some insight into discussions among elites as to how those problems could be solved without upsetting their own status. Ghali identified four main causes for declining conditions in the countryside: an expanding population, too little land, malnutrition and disease. As he made clear to the reader, despite increases in cultivatable land the population was expanding at an even greater rate.\footnote{Mirrit Boutros Ghali, \textit{The Policy of Tomorrow}, trans. Ismaïl R. el-Faruqi (Washington DC: American Council of Learned Societies, 1953), 29.} As a result, the countryside was rife with malnutrition. He noted several alarming trends: since the beginning of the 1930s consumption of corn had fallen sixteen percent, wheat – thirteen percent, beans – an astonishing forty percent.\footnote{Ibid., 38, 39.} Malnutrition was made worse by a dramatic increase in disease, particularly waterborne parasites such as bilharzia – a chronic condition that left the host sapped of energy and afflicted upwards of eighty percent of the rural population.\footnote{Ibid., 42.} In his own understated manner Ghali clearly outlined the potential outcome if these maladies stood uncorrected, “man’s patience is not absolute” he warned, “and the day would necessarily come when economic need will drive us into a
period of governmental and social disturbances." Yet Ghali's description of the countryside was incomplete, tainted by his own elite status and reluctance to upset the underlying economic order. For many, the problems that Ghali listed were simply the symptoms of a greater disease - the concentration of landownership among elites. Indeed, peasants were not so reticent about assigning blame for their condition. As Baraka noted, in the mid 1940's peasant violence against landowners spiked dramatically, and many of the Greek superintendents who were hired to run large estates were either shot or run off. Yet despite such violence, the 1930s and 1940s were decades in which the general trend of landownership concentration continued unabated. All the while peasants voted with their feet - so to speak - leaving the countryside in droves. Unable to sell their crops in the depressed agricultural market of the 1930s or find work on one of the large estates that would pay a liveable wage, most simply left for Cairo, which was expanding at its greatest rate ever during the early 1940s.

While Fathy's village of New Gourna emerged out of a backdrop where the social and economic problems of the countryside were mounting with alarming rapidity, the village was equally linked to the domestic political troubles of the Egyptian government in the early 1940s. As Europe lumbered back to war in 1939, Egypt quickly became much more than simply a port of call for the British army and navy; rather, it was a country whose resources and international relations were virtually hijacked in support of the British war effort. Despite the independence promise by the Anglo-Egyptian treaty signed in 1936, the sub-clauses pertaining to military defence were used to amass huge numbers of British soldiers on

65 Ibid., 46.
68 See, ibid., 321. Also, Abu-Lughod, Cairo, 164.
Egyptian soil. At the same time the domestic Egyptian economy and its foreign trade were monopolized to support the British war effort. The presence of the great imperial power loomed even more ominously for the Egyptian population as the British assumed an increasingly large role in domestic security under the guise of rooting out Axis spies. Yet as Rommel’s tanks crossed Libya the British could no longer afford to maintain even the polite fiction of Egyptian independence. On February 4th, 1942, British tanks surrounded the palace, and the British ambassador Sir Miles Lampson ordered the young King Faruq to convene a pro-British government. 1942 was starting badly.

Only two months after the British had successfully challenged Egypt’s sovereign political independence at the barrel of a tank, a much more dangerous enemy struck in the South as malaria crossed over the Sudanese border. By July malaria had reached Aswan, and a month later, Luxor. The unexpectedness and deadliness of the disease can be best illustrated by the fact that in Mirrit Boutros Ghali’s long list of diseases afflicting the peasantry in The Policy of Tomorrow written in 1938, malaria received hardly any mention. This particularly deadly form of malaria was not native to Egypt and had been brought in as the unintended consequence of a series of interactions encompassing politics, economics and society. As mentioned earlier, the expansion of the Aswan Dam between 1929 and 1933 had resulted in rising groundwater levels and extensive irrigation which proved to be prime mosquito breeding grounds. Furthermore, because of prevailing malnutrition and the related decision by many landowners to expand sugarcane production, mosquitoes bred in the wet growing conditions of the cane crop and infected the already weak and sickly estate workers.

69 Berque, Egypt: Imperialism and Revolution, 561,565.
70 Ibid., 559-567.
72 The narrative of Egypt’s malaria epidemic during World War II is the subject of Timothy Mitchell’s compelling essay “Can the Mosquito Speak?” in Rule of Experts, 19-53.
Lastly, the activities of the war itself, through increased plane and boat traffic between Egypt and the Sudan facilitated the spread of the insect which could otherwise travel only a few miles. The human toll of the malaria epidemic was unimaginable, as mentioned earlier, with some of the highest mortality rates in around Luxor and Gourna. Overall roughly three quarters of a million people contracted the disease and between one hundred and two hundred thousand succumbed.

News of the malaria outbreak was slow to reach Cairo because the British had censored all reports to avoid alerting the Germans of any potential threats to British troops, and also to forestall domestic unrest. The extent of the epidemic was only publicly acknowledged in late 1943 and early 1944 when the Palace announced a massive relief effort. As malaria raged through Upper Egypt, news that malnutrition and death tolls were worst on large estates prompted popular outrage towards the wealthy landowning upper class. Political reformers in Cairo latched onto land reform, and in 1944 such calls resulted in the first motion for land reform ever introduced in parliament (later attempts were made in 1948 and 1950). The motion was rejected outright by the assembly and the deputy that had dared propose such radicalism was ejected from his party.

The malaria outbreak and the British diktat combined with the legacy of rural poverty, disease and malnutrition from the 1930s were serious challenges to the credibility of the Egyptian government. This neglect was beginning to bear fruit as communist groups flourished and discussions among leading politicians continually alluded to growing social unrest. In 1946 Muhammad Mandur, a leading leftist in the Wafd, appealed to such

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73 Ibid., 19-27. Also, Gallagher, Egypt's Other Wars, 23-25.
74 Mitchell, Rule of Experts 20.
75 Gallagher, Egypt's Other Wars, 26-27, 38-40.
76 Berque, Egypt: Imperialism and Revolution, 642. Also see Beinin, “Egypt: Society and Economy, 1923-1952” 323.
77 Baraka, The Egyptian Upper Class Between Revolutions, 89.
sentiments, avowing “Never again will the People be content with hollow promises and derisory reforms smacking of charity.” Continuing, he stated that these views had “…spread to the districts and [are] beginning to filter down to the villages. There is no village in the country where students and intellectuals on leave are not mixing with the fellahin, opposing their parents’ ideas and spreading the new approach everywhere.” Yet these were not simply the dreamy fantasies of a would-be revolutionary; in 1946 such words could even be heard from the likes of Prime Minister Ismail Sidqi. As an industrialist, he gave the following warning to his agrarian landowning colleagues,

The maldistribution of land which flows with bounty over a small group of people is likely to form a destructive element in the structure of the Egyptian society, the consequences of which are to be feared, as facilitating the acceptance – by those who are drained and deprived – of dangerous social principles.

The malaria outbreak served as a catalyst which brought the concentration of landownership over the past century into clear focus. The Egyptian public demanded a meaningful response to the epidemic while at the same time landowning elites were unwilling to engage in any discussion that might jeopardize their interests and lead to land reform. Danger was in the air, for such a standoff threatened revolutionary consequences.

While only one precocious deputy might have dared to propose in open chambers what the Egyptian masses were clamouring for, parliament virtually unanimously rejected land reform as a possible consideration. Yet a response to these crushing social and economic problems needed to be formulated, and in this respect many of the policy initiatives that resulted from the malaria epidemic were the product of an elite discourse around social obligation that dated back to the 1930s. Indeed many of the proposed reforms bore a striking

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78 Ibid., 85, 86.
79 Ibid., 261.
80 During the 1930s and 1940s parliament was overwhelmingly made up of large landowners or businessmen. For a complete description of the socio-economic background of Egyptian parliamentarians see, ibid., 250-252.
resemblance to the policies advocated in 1938 by Mirrit Boutros Ghali in The Policy of Tomorrow. Ghali had long disavowed fundamental political or economic changes such as land reform, stating that the plight of the peasant would be no better if “every five or six-person might get some two faddans [sic] or so.”

Rather, social policy would improve as the economy expanded, and this required that the state massively support large endeavours to expand the area of cultivatable land, and support a program of modern industry. A similar argument was repeated by Abd al-Wahid al-Wakil, the Minister for Health during the epidemic, who stated that malaria was directly linked to the failure of the previous government to implement plans to install hydroelectric generators at Aswan and expand irrigation works. The second part of Ghali’s argument was also recycled after the malaria outbreak, for Ghali spoke extensively on disease (although not malaria at that time) linking it to unsanitary conditions in rural villages. Ghali’s natural conclusion was that the reconstruction of rural villages would dramatically improve the condition of the peasants. He characterized the current state of peasant housing as “small, low-roofed mud-houses, devoid of paint or furniture and closed to the purifying rays of the sun.”

This elite discourse manifested itself in 1942 when the Wafd passed the Law for the Improvement of Village Health. Again in 1943, Health Minister Wakil promised to allocate massive sums toward digging wells, building health centres and reconstructing villages in the countryside. These initial plans for village reconstruction and improved sanitation were followed up with more promises for funding announced in both 1945 and 1946. While the government placed substantial blame on landowners, such criticisms were always framed in terms of elite

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81 Ghali, The Policy of Tomorrow, 49.
82 It is ironic that such an argument would be made, when it was precisely those public irrigation works which were largely responsible for the scale of the outbreak. Mitchell, Rule of Experts, 39. Also see, Gallagher, Egypt’s Other Wars, 26.
84 Ghali, The Policy of Tomorrow, 68.
85 Gallagher, Egypt’s Other Wars, 103, 107.
obligation and neglect, never around land reform.\textsuperscript{86} It was in this manner that the debate around malaria was redirected away from discussions of major structural changes in landownership into a discourse of hygiene and village reconstruction. The fact that malaria had nothing to do with hygiene and had been historically linked to the expansion of perennial irrigation and the expansion of agricultural estates was simply brushed aside.\textsuperscript{87}

\textbf{Figure 10:} Abandoned House, New Gourna, ca mid-1980s.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 83. Also, Mitchell, \textit{Rule of Experts}, 39.
\textsuperscript{87} Gallagher, \textit{Egypt’s Other Wars}, 23, 24.
meticulously sculpted over the last century (an order, which ironically played no small part in creating the malaria outbreak to begin with). Fathy's village of New Gourna was in the middle of this debate about continuing patterns of landownership and social unrest. Moreover, the village was not a passive object in this debate and was very much a conservative response to the social, economic and political crisis that had been intensifying through the early 1940s. The physical form of the village as well as the rhetoric which Fathy used to justify it bore all the hallmarks of an elite discourse on poverty, and offered little meaningful change for the Gournis. Thus, when Hassan Fathy got off the overnight train from Cairo to Luxor he was stepping into a world that was very much the product of modern systems of power. New Gourna was a site where all of these themes concerning economics, politics, culture and the Egyptian experience of modernity – for a brief moment – intersected.

Yet why Fathy; or more specifically, why mud-brick? Indeed New Gourna was hardly in line with the aesthetic mores of Egypt at the time. Professional architecture was an urban pursuit, and in this respect the streets of Cairo and Alexandria were lined with buildings that stood as a testament to the modern orientation of its planners, architects and economic elites. Modern architecture developed simultaneously in Egypt and Europe, borrowing and feeding off each other. In Cairo, the streets themselves speak of the city’s modern heritage, sharing the same underlying order and urban planning principles as Haussmann’s Paris, which was its contemporary. The city is a treasure trove of French

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88 The history of modern architecture in the Middle East has yet to be written, and has been typically treated as a Western import at best, or a cheap local imitation at worst. It should not be ignored or forgotten that some of the earliest incarnations of modernist architecture and planning can be found outside Europe; in Algeria, Morocco, South Africa, the Ottoman planning of Istanbul, the cornice in Alexandria and Beirut, the modernist paradise of Tel Aviv and the luxury villas and hotels of Cairo. For more information on Modern architecture outside Europe and North America see, Khan, *International Style: Modernist Architecture from 1925 to 1965*, 189-224. Also, Zeynep Celik’s excellent history of urban planning in Istanbul, and her more recent book on World’s Fairs stand out as notable exceptions. See, Çelik, *The Remaking of Istanbul: Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century*; and, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth Century World’s Fairs.*
Second Empire architecture, Art Deco apartments and sleek white modernist offices such as the Immoblia Building (now most of these buildings are in a sad state of disrepair, hidden under a thick coating of Cairo's notorious smog). Standing eighteen-storeys tall, the Immoblia building (const. 1940) was the first large scale corporate interpretation of modernism in Egypt; its white façade, round corners and concrete balconies recalled the architecture of Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus. The Egyptian professional journal of Architecture, al-'Imara was filled with articles featuring Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, as well as other modernist architects working in the developing world such as Oscar Niemeyer in Brazil and Erich Mendelsohn in the Palestine Mandate. Modern architecture reached its peak with the construction of the Nile Hilton between 1953 and 1959, a massive white slab running parallel to the Nile adjacent to the Egyptian museum. The Hilton and the adjacent Egyptian Museum could be seen as appropriate symbols for the history of modern architecture in Egypt; while the Egyptian Museum contained the foundations of the modern nation through the preservation of its ancient past, the gleaming white Hilton signified the limitless horizons of a modern future.

While the history of avant-garde architecture in Egypt was dominated by the aesthetic of the modern movement, there was also a distinct undercurrent of traditionalism within the architectural and artistic communities. This traditionalism was most directly embodied in the ideas of Hamed Sa'id who was the founder of the Group of Art and Life and

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89 Cynthia Myntti’s striking photographic tour through Cairo in Paris Along the Nile: Architecture in Cairo from the Belle Epoque (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003) documents many of these buildings, highlighting the city’s cosmopolitan architectural heritage.
92 For a history of the construction of the Nile Hilton see, Annabel Jane Wharton, Building the Cold War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 45-54. Also, Donald Malcolm Reid provides a fascinating discussion of the Egyptian Museum in Whose Pharaohs?, 3-7, 192-195, 290.
one of Fathy’s close friends (Fathy was also a member).93 Sa'id’s ideas revolved around an eternal concept of Egypt linking together religion, agriculture and art – a trilogy whose essential features could still be found in “Nubian art, folklore, children’s art, calligraphy and handicrafts.”94 While the Group talked about the unbreakable link between art and the

Figure 11: Hamed Sa'id House, constructed 1942.

Images used with permission, courtesy of ArchNet

Egyptian countryside, the elite background of its members contributed to an element of idealization as well as performance. The oft conflicting nature of the relationship between the Group of Art and Life and its pastoral conception of the countryside was exemplified in

93 Hamed Sa'id provided a rough manifesto for the Group of Art and Life in, Hamed Said, Contemporary Art in Egypt (UAR: Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, 1964), VII-XIII.
94 Karnouk, Modern Egyptian Art, 122.
the work of Ramses Wissa Wassef. In the 1940s Wissa Wassef began making arts and crafts, particularly textiles and clay sculpture, with peasant children. Wissa Wassef provided the children with raw materials and certain basic skills, then set them loose to make what they wished. The key to his pedagogical approach was the idea that the children should remain uncontaminated – free from outside influence, which would thereby bring an inherent authenticity to their works. Later, Wissa Wassef developed the project into an entire utopian community (made in mud brick) of resident craft-makers who sell their wares to tourists. The community, hailed as a rare example of sustainable development, seems in retrospect to be strikingly paternalistic, appealing to notions of an eternal peasant mentality (similar to Ayrout) that could be witnessed through the supposedly ‘quintessentially Egyptian’ quality of their craftwork. The community was hardly sustainable; rather it existed because it was the exception, a place where authenticity was performed for the consumption of tourists.

The members of the Group of Art and Life could be described as a sort of Egyptian ‘back to the land’ movement that, paradoxically, could never quite give up the city. Sa’id and his wife lived in the mud-brick house Fathy built for them on the edge of Cairo, maintained their impeccable garden and hosted casual lectures with other artists over a vegetarian lunch. Yet slowly the city encroached, and eventually their small house was in the midst of a sprawling suburban community. Likewise, in the 1930s Fathy moved from the fashionable suburb of Ma’adi to a quarter of the Old City near the Citadel, an area described at that time by the Egyptian novelist Waguih Ghali as a place where your “…neighbours are barrow-keepers, servants and sometimes beggars. It is the prettiest and most colourful part of Cairo and anywhere else the arties would have flocked [there].”

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95 Ibid., 125-127.
96 Ibid., 123.
98 Ghali, Beer in the Snooker Club, 31.
surroundings of his old Mamluk courtyard house, Fathy entertained guests and talked about the esoteric nature of architecture. Yet the combination of Fathy's upper class background, as well as his confident assertion of an aesthetic mode of living somewhat outside the norm, combined to produce an enormous sense of upper class social distinction. In this sense, Fathy's architectural aesthetic best fits into a narrative of class and taste, for as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu aptly noted,

…the strategies aimed at transforming the basic dispositions of life-style into a system of aesthetic principles...are in fact reserved for members of the dominant class, indeed the very top bourgeoisie, and for artists, who as the inventors and professionals of the 'stylization of life' are alone able to make their art of living one of the fine arts.100

Fathy and the Group of Art and Life took their art seriously, yet were themselves never able to leave the city and join the fellah. Their pastoral vision always emanated from the eyes of a spectator, from a person who had grown up in an upper class home, spoke several languages, and was as comfortable in Cairo as in Paris or Vienna. It was in this way that Fathy and the Group of Art and Life always maintained a distinct separation between themselves and their objects of aesthetic curiosity. Fathy was always the wealthy landowning Cairo architect, the well dressed man with the quaint watercolour drawings of mud brick houses. His traditionalism was self conscious of the fact that he was wealthy, urbane and had savoir faire. It was a sign of intellectual and social distinction which set him apart from those who had wealth but little cultural capital, or that elusive quality – taste. It was certainly not the sign of aesthetic marginalization or poverty in the same way that it was for the fellah. To be able to reject the dominant aesthetic of modernity, while at the same time to be fully modern marked

99 Swan, "Elegant Solutions" 16-27.
the highest level of social distinction. To build a small traditionalist utopia in the midst of urban sprawl and wax romantically about art and architecture, was, and remains, a strictly upper-class pursuit.

Perhaps because of the immense social and cultural significance of being able to adopt a marginal aesthetic, Fathy found most of his commissions among members of the extreme upper-class. Through the late 1930s and into the 1940s Fathy produced spectacular mud brick urban villas, rural estates and rest houses for Cairo’s elite in the same style he applied at New Gourna. For example, three of his most notable clients were Abd al-Riziq – one of the largest landowners in Egypt; Hamdi Seif al-Nasr – the Minister of War; and most significantly, Hafiz Afifi Pasha. Afifi was a managing director/board member of the Misr Group, a position he held along with forty-one other directorships, all of which was in addition to a short stint as Egyptian ambassador to England. He commissioned Fathy to build improved worker housing on his enormous agricultural estate, Lulu’at al-Sahara (Pearl of the Sahara).

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101 Pierre Bourdieu noted “The artist agrees with the ‘bourgeois’ in one respect: he prefers naivety to ‘pretentiousness’. The essential merit of the ‘common people’ is that they have none of the pretensions to art (or power) which inspire the ambitions of the ‘petit-bourgeois’. Their indifference tacitly acknowledges the monopoly. That is why, in the mythology of the artist and intellectual, whose outflanking and double-negating strategies sometimes leads them back to ‘popular’ tastes and opinions, the ‘people’ so often play a role not unlike that of the peasantry in the conservative ideologies of the declining aristocracy.” Coming back to appreciate the inherent authenticity of the ‘common’ people marked the highest level of social distinction, for it signified the security and of Egypt’s social and economic elites, who could afford to risk dabbling in a lower class aesthetic. Ibid., 62.
102 For a list of Fathy’s commission from the 1930s until the early 1950s see, Steele, An Architecture for People, 188-193.
103 Ibid., 189, 190, 191.
105 Steele, An Architecture for People, 91.
Figure 12: Hamdi Seif al-Nasr House (1945, Watercolour by Hassan Fathy)

The house was designed for al-Nasr at the time he was Minister of War. Fathy often produced stylized paintings of his more notable projects and private commissions. Image used with permission, courtesy of ArchNet.

Fathy stood at the intersection between elite wealth, taste and social distinction. He moved effortlessly among the landowning class of his birth, the artistic community of the Group of Art and Life, all the while spouting ideas about rural housing. He was the embodiment of the cosmopolitan, artistic, cultural and economic elite. It was a sign of upper class distinction to own a modern factory or an office tower, and then be able to host a black-tie dinner party in one of the mud brick estates Fathy had built. He provided the elite with an aesthetic that was playful and ironic, something which allowed them to highlight their own wealth and modernity through the conspicuous display of tradition.

New Gourna represented a point of intersection where a number of uniquely modern and Egyptian experiences collided: the long-term interests of the landowning elite, the political crisis of the malaria outbreak, a simplistic and stereotypical view of the fellahin and
lastly, the aesthetic discourse of elite cultural distinction. In the aftermath of the malaria epidemic, the elite were compelled to form a response that would deal with the growing sense of social unrest that threatened their land interests. New Gourna was the perfect site, for it had been a centre of social unrest for over forty years. In his attempt to build a new village and stabilize the precarious social order of the 1940s, Fathy looked back to an imagined past, a past where peasants and landowners lived in harmony. In that imagined past, landowners were benevolent and respected the fellah – treating them as though they were their children, and the fellah in turn were obedient and farmed the land. The problem, as Fathy saw it, was that the landowners abandoned the fellah to go to the city. As a result, the peasants had become corrupted by modernity, seeking to follow their masters and abandon the old ways which had kept them secure for millennia. Thus, Fathy’s approach to the construction of New Gourna was based around an attempt to reassert an old social order, to restore the peace that had been upset by modernity. Yet what Fathy refused to realize was that such a peace never existed and that the fellahin were restless because they had been systematically exploited by landowners – his social order was a fantasy. In Fathy’s imagined world of New Gourna the peasants would look and act as peasants should; they would live in mud-brick houses, occupy their time making quaint crafts, and contentedly farm the neighboring Pasha’s land as they had supposedly always done. The eternal fellah was to be rejoined with the eternal mud-brick house – a form as old as the Pharaohs. Thus, social order was linked to an imagined idea of an authentic peasant, and Fathy’s attempt to provide them with an authentic architecture was the first step in a larger reconciliation.

New Gourna was the ultimate manifestation of upper class paternalism in both economics and aesthetics. It was simply the performance of an elite fantasy of social order without understanding or addressing any of the substantive issues for why the Egyptian countryside was growing increasingly agitated. Fathy most directly manifested this notion of
the countryside as an elite fantasy when he mused over the following question in *Architecture for the Poor*:

If you were given a million pounds, what would you do with them?...I had two possible answers: one, buy a yacht, hire an orchestra, and sail around the world listening to Bach, Schumann, and Brahms; the other, to build a village where the fellaheen would follow the way of life that I would like them to.¹⁰⁶

New Gourna was Fathy's fantasy, a place where acquiescence was restored and the fellahin rediscover their authenticity by embracing their eternal character.

Figure 13:  Photograph of Hassan Fathy outside his site office in New Gourna, ca. mid 1940s.

Images used with permission, courtesy of James Steele

Perhaps Fathy's words should be taken alongside those of Waghuib Ghali who wrote about the attitudes and habits of Egypt's old ruling class just after the 1952 revolution in his novel *Beer in the Snooker Club*. As one character stares out the window at his two friends, (both are from upper class backgrounds) he asks the following:

[I] saw Font and Levy downstairs with the owner of a coffee-house, sitting in chairs on the pavement playing dominoes, the three of them. Did Font really like to play dominoes, or did the scene of himself playing with a man in peasant clothing complete a cherished self-portrait?107

New Gourna completed Fathy's own cherished self-portrait – simply part of maintaining the polite fiction that elites deserved their inordinate wealth and exercised their power with benevolence. It was the velvet glove covering the hand that exercised raw power.

In the end neither Fathy nor other members of the Group of Art and Life like Wissa Wassef and Hamed Sa'id came up with a social model that could be sustainable for the entire community. Rather, their traditionalism was simply a temporary refuge from the modern city – an aberration, a fantasy – a place where tourists could buy quaint tapestries or self-congratulatory elites could reflect on their great benevolence. Theirs was a model that depended on modernity for its existence and definition. The countryside was simply a place where those fantasies could be made real. In many ways New Gourna was much more a product of modernity and modernism than Fathy would have ever liked to admit. Roughly forty years later, Fathy's friend JM Richards reflected on the contradictory nature of New Gourna's architecture, musing,

...it is easily forgotten that a principle impetus behind that movement [i.e. modernism] was the need for socially oriented planning, and the need – and here Fathy's ideals and those of the Modern Movement coincide to a degree that he might find difficult to accept – for architects to concern themselves with the ordinary man's living standards.... much as he has always distrusted the Modern Movement, [he] has nevertheless been part of it...108

Perhaps because Richards was not affiliated with academic post-modernism he was able to offer a somewhat more contemplative appraisal of Fathy's early work. Yet at the same time, he was not willing to view the 'social concerns' of the 'Modern Movement' as the product of an elite discourse – something intimately tied to the preservation of an elite social and economic order. For many architects and social theorists it is an uncomfortable thought to reflect on the fact that New Gourna met the same fate as Pruitt-Igoe and the Iraq Housing Project. Regardless of aesthetics, all of these projects relied on the very modern mechanisms of expropriation and relocation; furthermore, they were all based on an elite fantasy of a redemptive social order based around architecture. These underlying themes demonstrate both the incredible violence as well as complexity of modernity, and in all of these cases, the total rejection of such planning on the part of the intended recipient. The Iraqi peasants abandoned their modern high-rises – Pruitt-Igoe was dynamited – and the Gournis flooded their mud-brick houses.
CONCLUSION

The experience of modernity is defined by our unprecedented ability to instigate change coupled with the unimaginable dangers, pitfalls and *hubris* that necessarily accompany us on that path. This precarious balance was brilliantly captured in Marshall Berman’s work *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, particularly during his discussion of Goethe’s cautionary tale of modernity and development – Faust. Berman recounted Faust’s infamous deal with Mephisto, which gave him the power to completely rebuild society based on his own new order. Buildings rose from the dust, teeming masses of workers erected dams and dug canals. Yet as Faust stood on the verge of his moment of triumph, he was confronted by one last parcel of earth that had remained untouched by his hand. Here lived a kind elderly couple who had no desire to move from their little cottage by the sea. Faust became obsessed – his final glory denied.

He summons Mephisto and his “mighty men” and orders them to get the old people out of the way. He doesn’t want to see it or know how it is done…Mephisto and his “special unit” return…Faust, suddenly concerned, asks where the old folks have been moved – and learns that their house has been burned to the ground and they have been killed.

At that moment Faust realized the enormity of his actions,

[He] is aghast and outraged…He protests that he didn’t say anything about violence; He calls Mephisto a monster and sends him away. The prince of darkness departs gracefully, like the gentleman he is; but he laughs before he leaves. Faust has been pretending not only to others but to himself that he could create a new world with clean hands….It appears that the very process of development, even as it transforms a wasteland into a thriving physical and social space, recreates the wasteland inside the developer.¹

¹ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, 67-68.
It was this quintessentially modern struggle, embodied in the tale of Faust, that Fathy took part in. Yet, his was a tale with a twist, for he tried to have it both ways. In Architecture for the Poor Fathy styled himself a man who knew of this Faustian bargain and tried at all costs to avoid it – to even embody some sense of vigilance through a more humanistic architectural practice. Yet as I have shown, Fathy’s recounting of New Gourna was largely a retroactively applied fantasy of progressive architecture laced with good intentions and wishful thinking. In reality the promise of progress was not so simple or clearly defined; for as both Faust and Fathy discovered, the supposed beneficiaries had good reason not to share in their utopian designs.

Despite the fact that New Gourna hardly appeared modern in any conventional sense, its underpinnings were wholly based on modern systems of power. Behind the rhetoric and pastoral fantasies that so effectively cloaked the village was a legacy of conflict and institutional violence. New Gourna was uniquely modern in terms of its ability to uproot and reorganize based upon a totalizing social and aesthetic vision, which in practice totally disregarded all local considerations. The villagers’ voices were lost on Fathy; to him and those who read his work their needs and issues were unintelligible. The dogmatism – the patronizing sense of authority which so naturally assumed the right to determine the villagers’ way of life was a necessary component of the New Gourna project. Because of this confidence and sense of certainty, the often worthwhile criticisms of the Gournis were refashioned into something the architect could disregard – ignorance and criminality. Fathy’s exclusive claim to the very modern qualities of reason and objectivity were hardly passive, for the outcome of several longstanding political and economic conflicts were being held in the balance. New Gourna threatened to unilaterally end the villagers’ land claim dispute and sweep aside the legacy of expropriation which was at the very basis of their current plight.
Furthermore, as a part of the larger village reconstruction program in Egypt during the late 1940s, New Gourna represented a conservative response to the much larger issues of poverty and disease which had resulted in widespread unrest and calls for land reform. As Egypt's social and political climate grew increasingly volatile, the landholding elite sought to stabilize and further entrench the order which they had so painstakingly crafted over the past century. It was this modern order which formed the backdrop to Fathy's work building New Gourna, and which he was actively moving to support.

The village stands today as a compelling architectural vision; although, certainly not the model for humanistic planning that many would have liked to believe. Instead, Fathy's mud-brick houses have been transformed into flights of the imagination. For a generation of ambivalent architects and jaded cultural theorists his architecture came to represent a beautiful and calming respite from a world seemingly gone mad with progress. Fathy embraced the past at a time when everyone else seemed so quick to discard it – his material spoke of warmth and comfort while concrete, glass and steel were cold and artificial. He became emblematic of new and possible alternatives which were not characterized by the same sense of callous distain or overt Western dominance. The new sense of hope inspired by Fathy's work enables theorists and architects to do what would otherwise seem unthinkable: to walk among the crumbling remains of New Gourna and yet at the same time proclaim it as a success and source of inspiration. In the face of so many unmet promises and failed dreams – theorists and architects confused the aesthetic of modernity with the systems of power that underpinned it. As the failure of New Gourna demonstrated most vividly, the disappointments and contradictions of modernity and modern architecture were not simply that a building looked 'modern' or was made of concrete and glass. Ghettoes were not
created by bad aesthetics and the complexities of human alienation could not be solved with something so simple as mud-brick homes.

While the aesthetics of New Gourna did not determine its efficacy as a social space, the village conveys an imposing physical presence. The sheer wonder evoked by the project has captivated architects and art critics alike, contributing in no small way to the fame of its maker and also assuring it a place within the narrative of post-modern architecture. Yet in the same way that the social meaning of the village was shaped in accordance with the intellectual environment of the 1960s and 1970s, so to was its aesthetic interpretation. The meaning of art and architecture is socially produced, and fundamentally tied to the circumstances of the viewer. Thus, as I have come to see the village within the larger social, cultural, political and economic context of the modern movement, I have come to question the inherent aesthetic ‘traditionalism’ of Fathy’s work as well.

A village of mud-brick along the Nile has an inescapably Egyptian quality, yet at the same time Fathy’s architecture was created through a process of discovery, revival and ultimately, adaptation. This raises questions of authenticity and hybridity while also making room for the possibility that elements of New Gourna reflected the wider aesthetic context of modern art and architecture. On one level, the village was an exercise in pure abstract forms and materials. The primary element of earth, water and sun – coaxed and persuaded to rise up and span across space with seemingly impossible grace and fluidity. Furthermore, his mud-brick structures stood as models of symmetry and geometry; the sum of planes, rectangles, squares and domes brought together into a coherent whole. These same basic concerns with simplicity, form and material were at the very core of the modern movement in both art and architecture. While other architects sought to find the limits of concrete, glass, and steel – to make buildings appear as airy pinnacles of light in the sky – Fathy chose to
stretch the physical limits of mud-brick. From this perspective, his architectural and aesthetic concern with form and materials calls to mind the famous modernist maxim, ‘the medium is the message.’ Artists such as Constantin Brancusi, Jackson Pollock, Martha Graham, Barnett Newman and Isamu Noguchi all explored similar issues through sculpture, painting and dance. In this way, I have come to view Fathy’s architecture as a unique interpretation and manifestation of modern aesthetics.

This thesis started out with the goal of finding a place for ‘Modern Egypt’ within the historian’s drama of modernity. On one level, that drama has proven to be intensely local, linking together politics, economics and culture. Yet over the course of pursuing modern Egypt, that narrative has also shown to be inextricably connected with the rest of the world. Modern Egypt developed as part of an infinitely complex global system of ideas and actions; something in which a mud-brick village in Upper Egypt could be tied to cutting edge discussions about architecture and urbanism on the other side of the globe, or could become a source of inspiration to architects and critics thirty years later. Historians cannot compartmentalize ideas by simply accepting the artificial boundaries drawn on a map. By demonstrating the interconnectedness of these discussions about modernity, I have attempted to illustrate the futility of writing about modern Egypt as something that existed in isolation or could be captured in a singular economic or political narrative.

Fathy’s relationship with the enterprise of modernity was rife with contradictions and complexities, yet in many ways that was exactly the point. As I have argued, the experience of modernity was defined by complexity, ambiguity, and profound interconnectedness — extending far beyond any singular national narrative. Furthermore, by framing Fathy at the centre of a narrative about modern Egypt I have attempted to make room for a more inclusive
definition of modernity which included the Middle East in a more abstract and meaningful sense. As Timothy Mitchell argued, the purpose is to "...break with the historical narrative that always locates the origins of modernity in the West and represents the non-West only in terms of its efforts to copy or resist an imported, second-hand modernity."² Yet, as the failure of New Gourna illustrated, the experience of modernity in Egypt could be just as violent, elitist, and based on manipulated fantasies of progress as it was in the West. By representing Fathy's creation of New Gourna as quintessentially 'Modern' we can appreciate both the complexities and contradictions tied to that position.

² Mitchell, Questions of Modernity, xxvi.
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