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### The many lives of New Gourná: alternative histories of a model community and their current significance

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# The many lives of New Gournā: alternative histories of a model community and their current significance

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This article uncovers several different and occasionally competing interpretations of Hassan Fathy's famous design of the village of New Gournā: a pilot project of the late 1940s for revitalising rural Egypt. Based on archival and field research, and a critical analysis of the reception of Fathy in different contexts, the article re-examines New Gournā from alternative points of view, with the goals of revisiting Fathy's vision and of uncovering the nuances of its response to culture and modernity. The alternative stories about New Gournā not only situate the model village within the socio-political circumstances of its locale, but also contemplate the rôle of this model community within broader discourses on nationalism, decolonisation, modernisation, modernism/anti-modernism and environmentalism. Through an interdisciplinary outlook that integrates historical and theoretical perspectives on modern architecture with critical perspectives on the cultural politics of modernisation, representation and post-coloniality, the article considers the rôle Fathy's project played (and still plays) in the formation of contemporary conceptions about local tradition and cultural identity, and about modernism, urbanism, technology or ecology.

## Introduction

Hassan Fathy (1900–1989) became widely known in the early 1970s when the University of Chicago Press published his book *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt*, which shook up the architectural and planning community worldwide. Fathy's book (later published also as *Construire Avec Le Peuple: Histoire d'un Village d'Égypte*), described the construction of New Gournā, a village he had designed almost three decades earlier, between 1945 and 1947 in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> Its wide impact stemmed not only from the book's vivid description of an innovative design/planning approach, but also from its vigorous articulation of concerns that had already begun to influence architectural/planning thought and practice. Fathy's praise of local cultural traditions challenged

rationalism and universalism at a time when these modernist tenets had already come under scrutiny; and the book also presented a forceful argument for local knowledge systems, at a time when the spread of advanced technologies began to provoke serious concerns. For these reasons, the majority of the book reviews, some of them in high-profile publications such as the *New York Review of Books* or the *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal*, embraced *Architecture for the Poor* enthusiastically.<sup>2</sup>

The seminal character of the book increased with time and eventually it was placed among the ranks of pioneer critiques of architectural Modernism that had already emerged from the mid-1960s and opened fresh directions in architectural and urban theory. Looking at Fathy's book a couple of

decades after its spectacular debut, the historian-theorist Diane Ghirardo identified it as being among the 'four most serious assaults on the Modern Movement': the other three being Jane Jacobs's *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*, Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* and Aldo Rossi's *Architecture and the City*.<sup>3</sup> Others credited it with an even greater impact, as a book comparable to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, in the sense that it shocked people into rethinking the heroic claims of modernity, development and progress.<sup>4</sup>

As Fathy became an international celebrity, criticism also emerged. Was Fathy's amalgam of forms really a way of reviving an authentic tradition—or was he manufacturing his own particular version of heritage? Was Fathy really responding to the aspirations of Egyptian peasants (*fellahin*), and how convincing was such a claim, given his limited exposure to the peasant's lifestyle: not to mention that he chose to write his book in English, rather than Arabic? Was he perhaps assuming a paternalistic posture or even a colonial worldview that imposed foreign concepts of welfare and comfort on the Egyptian fellahs?<sup>5</sup>

This essay is not framed in terms of a fan-or-critic opposition, but rather, it focuses its attention on the diversity of interpretations and reactions that the plan of New Gournā provoked throughout its existence over more than half a century. From the time the project was launched and interrupted, to the time it gained international acclaim, all the way to the current reframing of its sensibilities. These various interpretations have a historicity of their own, in that they were tied to particular circumstances, and they

had, to one degree or another, particular goals and uses. It is these alternative histories that are being studied here, with an interdisciplinary outlook that integrates historical and theoretical perspectives on modern architecture with critical perspectives on the cultural politics of modernisation, representation and post-coloniality.

The goal is to contemplate the complex trajectory of New Gournā's life and to rethink the ways it represents a nuanced response to culture and modernity. By presenting different histories about Fathy the essay does not aim to advance any of them as more valid than others nor to advocate some kind of total relativism that insists that each interpretation is just as valid as the next, but rather, to reconsider the rôle this work played, and still plays, in the formation of contemporary conceptions about local tradition and cultural identity, about modernism, urbanism, technology or ecology.

### **New Gournā within the sociopolitical circumstances of Egypt in the mid-twentieth century**

Let us take things from the beginning, from the building of New Gournā. In 1945 Fathy was asked by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities to design mass housing in Upper Egypt near Luxor for the inhabitants of Gournā, who had, until then, lived on top of Pharaonic tombs in the area. The main objective was to create a prototype of economical and sanitary housing that could be reproduced around the Egyptian countryside, with the goal of regenerating it. For the monarchy—which, since the early 1940s, had been trying to cope with social and political instability as a result of



Figure 1. The making of sun-dried bricks, recorded in New Gournia by the first photographer of the village and collaborator of Fathy, D. Papademos (Papademos Archive).



Figure 2. The Hamid Said House in Cairo, designed by Fathy, 1942–45 (photograph by the Author).

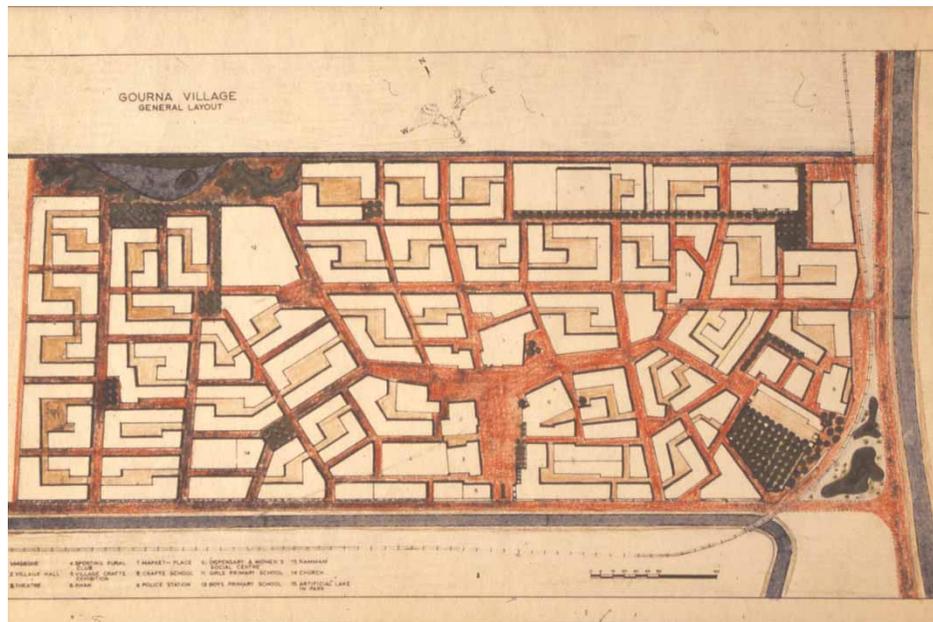
increasing land disparities, uncontrolled urbanisation and labour unrest—the project fitted perfectly into its larger plans for advancing a general modernisation of the country and for providing the foundation for a modern, postcolonial national identity.

Well connected to the Royal family, Hassan Fathy was selected as the architect of the project and immediately saw it as an opportunity to advance his experiments with alternative construction methods that would not depend on imported materials. Fathy had already been performing such experiments with mud bricks and had attempted the construction of pilot homes with mud since the period of World War 2, when Egypt faced great shortages in wood and steel. Fathy also aimed to nurture collaborations between architects

and local craftsmen, not only to minimise cost but also to create a type of architecture sensitive to local rural lifestyles that would, in turn, cultivate peasants' pride about their own culture.<sup>6</sup> Based on these combined objectives, then, Fathy focused on reviving pre-modern building methods with hand-made sun-dried mud bricks (figs 1, 2). Fathy made a series of experiments with mud brick construction, and the biggest problem he faced was how to span the mud brick walls to create a roof without depending on wood or any type of framework. In the end, he found the answer during his travels to Nubia, where he learned how to create mud brick vaults, and he brought craftsmen to Gournia to teach and disseminate their skills.<sup>7</sup>

Another important source of inspiration for Fathy was the typology of the Mamluk mansions of Cairo. Fathy was particularly fascinated by the *qa'a* — the reception hall of mediaeval Cairo dwellings—because it provided an organising principle for the house and also because it facilitated natural ventilation and lighting.<sup>8</sup> For similar reasons, he wanted

Figure 3. Plan of New Gourna (Hassan Fathy Archives).



to transport the idea of the *mashrabiyya*—the wooden window screen of Cairene mansions—to New Gourna, in its mud brick version, to temper the harsh daylight and reduce air temperature by increasing its pressure.

These precedents were then reinterpreted in New Gourna. Fathy envisioned a new village of mud-brick dwellings topped with domes and organised around central open courtyards. The cosy houses were arranged in clusters around small squares that were interconnected with streets of a semi-public character, and which connected the houses to the main public village square, defined by public

buildings such as a mosque, a theatre and a village hall (Fig. 3).<sup>9</sup> The formal character of the houses and public buildings reflected the architect's aesthetic sensibilities that combined the masterful joining of domes and vaults with a sensitive play of shade and light (figs 4, 5). The poetic simplicity of the buildings had a sensual presence on the desert landscape, while it also revealed the designer's modernist sympathies, with the abstraction of spaces, the simplicity of volumes and the monochromatic character of the buildings, which, incidentally, stood in stark contrast to the colourful mud houses of Nubia.



Figure 4. Photograph  
of the Market  
(Papademos Archive).

The project attracted some attention in the European press, which praised Fathy's aspiration to put physical design at the centre of social reform and also hailed his success in designing economic and comfortable housing without a monotonous and standardised appearance.<sup>10</sup> Despite the positive reception abroad, however, the Gourni refused for years to transfer to their new homes and they even resorted to drastic measures, vandalising the houses of New Gurna. The Gourni's stance sabotaged Fathy's proclamations for a village sensitive to rural lifestyles and the project was interrupted

before its completion in 1947, leaving the main public buildings and more than a hundred homes which were already erected, empty for years. Thus, at that moment—in the Egypt of 1947—New Gurna was a dramatic failure.

The Gourni's reaction seemed like an incomprehensible mystery to Fathy, who blamed the peasants for failing to appreciate his noble attempt to improve their lives. Fathy's colleagues and supporters (as well as some scholars of his work later) supported Fathy's own view, recounting many socio-political reasons for the work's

Figure 5. Photograph  
 of the Market  
 (Papademos Archive).



interruption, including the locals' defiance and the unpopular actions of the Department of Antiquities, which was in charge of the project.<sup>11</sup> Others also pointed to land-use disputes and other antagonisms between locals and government bureaucracy (including accusations that the locals were looters) which provoked the locals' resentment.<sup>12</sup>

In the midst of all this, however, the designer, too, had a share of the responsibility. First, one can easily detect an element of paternalism in Fathy's claim that he was trying to restore aesthetic qualities that the locals were incapable of appreciating. This attitude towards the peasants—reflected also in Fathy's statement that he wanted to build a village 'where the fellahin would follow the way of life I would like them to'—differed little from the biases of a typical bourgeois urbanite of Cairo.<sup>13</sup> Second, Fathy's assumption that the villagers would willingly relinquish their own homes for a planned village was resonant of the arrogance that characterised many state-sponsored planning visions of the mid-twentieth century. It was this

vanguardist attitude that also offered a basis for criticisms that the planning of New Gourna would potentially facilitate top-down surveillance tactics aiming to exploit the local population as a controlled work force.<sup>14</sup>

One can also point to more specific pitfalls in the designer's approach. Fathy's rhetoric about reviving an 'Egyptian tradition' ignored the ironies behind a homogenising view that conflated many different formal precedents and building techniques from diverse cultural provinces of Egypt. For example, Fathy's key strategy to organise the house around a courtyard drew on spatial conceptions from the urban residential architecture of Cairo; but it had a very different reception among the rural population of Gourna, four hundred miles south of the Egyptian capital, where land was highly valuable for cultivation.<sup>15</sup> In the eyes of the Gourni, the courtyard was first and foremost a waste of space. Not only were courtyards rare in residences in Upper Egypt, they were associated with more utilitarian functions, as places for work, washing, raising animals: quite distinct from the secluded and serene outdoor places Fathy envisioned.

Similarly, Fathy's choice to roof the houses with mud-brick domes, which drew on habits of building brought from Nubia—a culturally and linguistically distinct region—proved just as unsettling for the population of New Gourna, which associated domes only with the most sacred of spaces: mosques and mausolea. It is thus no surprise that several years later, when the village began to be inhabited, the users remodelled the houses, precisely to cater to their formal preferences. For example, domes were knocked down and

courtyards became areas for raising animals, so as to become acceptable to the local population.<sup>16</sup>

The local inhabitants' reactions demonstrate that Fathy's insistence on internal courtyards or mud-brick domes, as vestiges of a forgotten Egyptian architectural tradition, imposed an homogenising conception of culture/tradition that did not in fact exist. Further, his zeal to exalt 'tradition' separated it from everyday realities and led Fathy to nostalgia for the past. This is why he even designed the houses without running water, arguing that this would preserve old rituals of social interaction by forcing locals to visit the village well regularly.<sup>17</sup> Such a gesture, however, denied users the basic convenience of modern life and this increased the locals' suspicion.

### **New Gourná in the light of Fathy's travels in Greece**

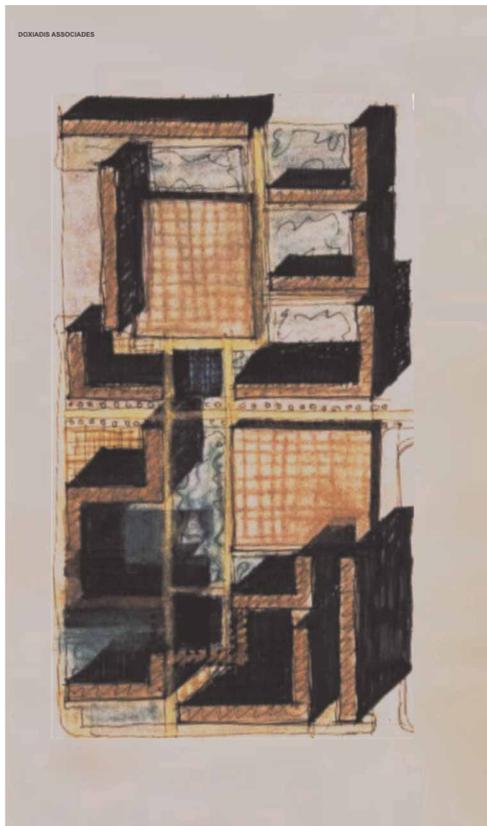
Soon after the New Gourná experiment, Fathy was also confronted with dramatic political turmoil in Egypt, with the brutal demise of the monarchy in 1952 and the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser that eventually led Fathy to a self-imposed exile.<sup>18</sup> He found a new home in the office of Doxiadis Associates in Athens to which he was invited by Constantinos Doxiadis himself, as a consultant for his firm's Middle East projects. Doxiadis Associates, which had a prolific practice designing mass housing and new cities around the world, offered Fathy an opportunity to tackle larger-scale planning issues. Doxiadis believed that the only realistic approach for postwar architects was to align themselves with international trends in urban industrialisation; at the same time, he shared many of Fathy's

sensitivities. Through his collaboration with Doxiadis, Fathy had the chance more systematically to contemplate the interrelationships of local knowledge systems with dominant demands for standardisation and mass production. For this reason, the five-year period Fathy spent in Athens was key to shaping his thought.<sup>19</sup>

While at Doxiadis Associates, Fathy worked on housing projects for Iraq and Pakistan, while he also performed various experiments, proposing, for example, a plan of mass-produced mud houses and a scheme for transporting the idea of the internal courtyard to high-rise housing (Fig. 6). Through these research activities, which were supported by Doxiadis Associates, Fathy began a much more systematic study of the principles that guided the design of New Gourná. He started a series of investigations into the ways in which courtyard houses supported passive cooling, and he even went as far as proposing modifications and improvements to maximise a courtyard's climatic benefits.<sup>20</sup> Also, he experimented with minimising construction cost.

Simultaneously, he travelled around Greece studying mud structures in Santorini, Corfu and elsewhere. This speaks to the fact that Fathy's search to establish continuities with past design and construction methods was not, at that time, confined by national (or ethnic/religious) boundaries; instead, his quest was to understand the validity in mud-brick domes and courtyards and cast a spotlight on the larger bioclimatic region of the Eastern Mediterranean. This flexibility and breadth in his notion of 'tradition' would later be set aside in favour of other conceptions: as we shall see below.

Figure 6. Fathy experiments with high-rise courtyard housing in Baghdad (Hassan Fathy Archives).



### **New Gourna on the international scene, circa 1970**

New Gourna acquired new life in the early 1970s, when, as mentioned earlier, Fathy published a book that described his experiment. The book was first published in Egypt in 1969 with the title *A Tale of Two Villages*, but in 1973 it was published by the University of

Chicago Press and it was with this later edition that Fathy became a celebrity. There were many conditions that helped the phenomenal reception of the book. With the radical challenges to the Modern Movement, as they were formulated in the 1970s, there was a great suspicion in relation to the type of faceless, mass-produced housing projects that had radically altered cities both in the postcolonial world and in the West, in the name of a homogenising internationalism. In this climate, Fathy's position was particularly appealing, not only because of its aesthetic sensibilities, but also because it valorised cultural difference. Emphasising the timeless wisdom of particular building traditions, Fathy appeared as an apologist for any local knowledge system worldwide. The positive reviews over time came in much more massive numbers, portraying the book as offering a way out of the dilemmas of a modernising third world where 'from Baghdad to Benghazi, look-alike blocks of dreary high-rise buildings rose along drab, dusty boulevards.'<sup>21</sup> Even the few book reviews that expressed unease with Fathy's nostalgia hailed New Gourna as a 'superb example' of 'indigenous vernacular architecture.'<sup>22</sup>

Fathy's personality contributed to this success, as the charismatic communicator was quick to offer ethical one-liners that resonated with professional and popular anxieties about the universalising and dehumanising effects of modernism: 'It is a sin to put a Swiss chalet beside palm groves' Fathy was quoted as saying.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the book's narrative, which made indirect but insistent references to the phenomenological qualities of architecture and the emotional needs of users, represented a powerful challenge to rationalism and functionalism.

And, Fathy's argument for the 'trinity' of architect-builder-user called for a modest architect willing to collaborate with others and this was immensely appealing at a time when the megalomaniacal signature-designer became anathema. It may of course be true that the Gourni did not quite consider Fathy's approach modest, but the book had already acquired a life of its own, transcending the realities of the particular village in Upper Egypt.

Fathy's ideas were so well received because others had already begun to pave the way. Bernard Rudofsky's seminal book, *Architecture Without Architects* (1964), which valorised pre-modern building methods, had already presented a strong argument for an indigenous anonymous architecture and challenged in many ways the architectural profession itself. Similarly, Paul Oliver's *Shelter and Society* (1969) presented a strong case for the timeless and trans-cultural validity of anonymous architecture.

Fathy was also touching topics that were explored by Victor Olgay in *Design With Climate: Bioclimatic Approach to Architectural Regionalism* (1963) and Ian McHarg in *Design With Nature* (1969), both of whom advocated the adaptation of architecture to local climate and natural energy sources (and paved the way for current practices in green architecture). Fathy's work echoed, in addition, many of the ideas of John F. C. Turner and Robert Fichter, whose book *Freedom to Build* (1972) advocated self-help housing as the key to the emancipation of the world's poor and formed the foundation for current debates in participatory design.<sup>24</sup> All these books may have challenged some of the dominant trends in Modernism as they were advanced by the Modern Movement in the interwar period and

as they were re-conceptualised in the aftermath of World War 2. However, these positions were still tackling quintessentially modern problems, such as the social responsibilities of architecture and its democratisation.

Fathy's book also entered another dimension. Through its valorisation of the cultural/architectural particularities of Egypt, it was advocating a resistance to Eurocentric internationalism that characterised many dominant trends in Modernism: as well as many tactics of post-World War 2 modernisation programmes. Fathy's praise for a 'traditional Egyptian architecture' (regardless of how problematic this homogenising concept may have been: as described above) became a symbol of resistance to colonialism and its remnants in many parts of the postcolonial world. The book's anti-colonial spirit—also advanced in other writings by Fathy in the late 1960s—was embraced by many architects not only in Egypt but also in the Arab world and well beyond.

Fathy's choice to place great emotional weight on the concept of 'tradition' contributed to this effect. For example, in his analysis of the introverted courtyard, Fathy still spoke of the economic and climatic benefits he had studied all his life, but at this point he contended that 'to the Arab' the courtyard had an altogether different value. 'To the Arab', Fathy maintained, 'the courtyard is more than a space that controls temperature', and 'more than an architectural device for privacy and protection. It is, like the dome, part of a microcosm that parallels the order of the Universe itself.'<sup>25</sup> Such arguments, that emphasised the particularity of Arab identity, were very palatable to Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt because they supported his Panarabist

Figure 7. Mit Rehan House by Fathy, 1967, Cairo (photograph by the Author).



ideology. Especially after the defeat by Israel in the six-day war (1967), Nasser increased his efforts to cultivate Egyptian and Arab pride. It is in this climate that Fathy (and arguments of his such as the idea that mud construction in Egypt reached all the way back to the Pharaonic era) was promoted by Nasser. The 1969 publication of the book was funded by the Egyptian State.

#### **Who was in/out of Fathy's reformist vision?**

Having gained an extensive reputation in Egypt, Fathy began to build many houses in his own country, especially for Cairo's urban elite, eg, the Fouad Riad House (1967), the Mehrez apartment (1967) and the Mit Rehan (1982) (Fig. 7). This is a phenomenon rather familiar in the history of Modern architecture: the initial opposition turned into sympathy, and even a new fashion in favour of Fathy's approach. Some critics have pointed to the irony behind the fact that the proponent of 'architecture for the poor' ended up designing

luxurious villas.<sup>26</sup> Fathy's followers resisted the criticism by stating that the lesson he learned from New Gournā was that the only way to reach the poor was first to collaborate with the rich to establish a trend which the lower classes would then feel compelled to copy. One of Fathy's most famous students and followers, Ramy El-Dehan, has repeatedly been quoted as saying that '[Fathy] built for the rich, in the knowledge that the poor like to emulate the rich, and in this manner the taste for vernacular architecture would find its way back to the source.'<sup>27</sup>

Aside from the dubious logic of such a tactic, one cannot miss the disappointing implication of an argument that is based on the binary categorisation of an 'architecture for the "rich"' and an 'architecture for the "poor"'. This was a categorisation that Fathy himself had rejected in the past: when the University of Chicago Press changed his book's title from 'A Tale of Two Villages' to 'Architecture for the Poor', Fathy had resisted, arguing that 'my

architecture is not just for the poor, it is for man'!<sup>28</sup> Similarly problematic is Fathy's insistence on presenting the introverted courtyard as sensitive to the local desire for women's privacy. For all his reformist ambitions Fathy steered entirely clear of the politics of domestic space.<sup>29</sup>

As Fathy's reputation increased in Egypt, a new generation of architects turned to him as their main source of inspiration (for example, Ramy El-Dehan and Soheir Farid, Abdul Wahed El Wakil and Rasem Badran, amongst others),<sup>30</sup> and their work reflects two larger phenomena. First, the kind of amalgam of interpretations that Fathy created from various vernacular architectures lost its relative value as the interpretations of one architect, and it was elevated, instead, to the status of *the* tradition. As a result, New Gourná's mud houses came to be viewed as a timeless repository of an authentic 'Egyptian tradition', an Arab identity or even Islamic symbolism.<sup>31</sup>

Even if New Gourná's visual-artistic symbolism left some room for a multivalent representation and interpretation of a culture, the neo-traditionalist design strategies of the 1980s and 1990s that claimed it as an inspiration—for example, the Quseir Movenpick resort (Dehan and Farid, 1987–1994)—did not have this ambivalence. Similarly, discussions of Hassan Fathy which pointed to a binary between 'tradition and modernity' seemed aligned with an essentialist assumption that ethnic, cultural or religious traditions were unified, coherent, unambiguous: and, distinct from the processes of modernity.<sup>32</sup> Fathy's own rhetoric during the last decades of his career reinforced these interpretations by framing his preferred forms and typologies in terms

of notions of Arabism and Islamism.<sup>33</sup> It was no surprise then that his projects and writings were often appropriated by essentialising politics of separatist identity or formalist agendas of historicism.<sup>34</sup>

The second phenomenon that characterised the aftermath of Fathy's international success is that what had emerged as a refreshing critique of the establishment—an architecture that represented the rejection of colonialism, a challenge to euro-centrism and a denunciation of sterile forms of modernism—ended up being *the* establishment itself. The most vivid exemplification of this phenomenon is perhaps Michael Graves's Sheraton Miramar on the Red Sea, which claims Fathy's work as its precedent, but is empty of any dynamism, social vision or critical attitude, becoming, instead, a theme park more or less, where any form of public space or shared experience is limited to a passive and predetermined consumer itinerary (Fig. 8).<sup>35</sup> It may be true that the hotel is to a certain degree a space of consumption by its nature, but in this case an entire notion of 'tradition' is turned into a commodity to be consumed. Of course the village of New Gourná itself is today an object of consumption, having been renamed on tourist maps as 'Hassan Fathy's Village'!<sup>36</sup> And it is at this point that we come to another dimension of Fathy's work: the last, at least for this essay's purposes.

### **The life ahead: New Gourná within the context of twenty-first-century globalisation**

Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Fathy's work is reframed as an environmental strategy. Those who search for the pioneers of sustainability, green architecture or appropriate

Figure 8. Sheraton Miramar in El Gouna, by M. Graves (internet image at <http://www.egyptpreservation.com/Sheraton%20Miramar.htm>).



technology, often point to Fathy as a good example to emulate.<sup>37</sup> Parallels between New Gournā and the more recent environmental consciousness are of course on target for many reasons. The readily obvious explanation is that Fathy's mud-brick structures fulfil many criteria for reducing both the energy consumption and the embodied energy of buildings. A book that Fathy wrote towards the end of his life, *Natural Energy and Vernacular Architecture: Principles and Examples with Reference to Hot Arid Climates*, elaborated on the bioclimatic principles that justify his choice of thick mud-brick vault-and-dome structures in terms of processes of heat flow, diurnal temperature fluctuations, etc.: it also set out the arguments for the use of shaded or open courtyards as a means of facilitating the processes of air movement by convection and of elements such as the pierced loggia walls in terms of an effort to create air movement through temperature differential.<sup>38</sup>

Such arguments, systematised diligently in the *Natural Energy* book—with references to New Gournā as well as to other projects by Fathy—

came to be supported, and occasionally augmented, by more recent literature that revisited Fathy's project in terms of sustainability concerns. Apart from energy issues, another reason why Fathy constitutes a rôle model in current sustainability debates is that his emphasis on local materials, low technologies, local knowledge systems and the economy of means, allows the integration of social, cultural and economic concerns within a definition of environmental sustainability.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, Fathy's work promotes a broad definition of sustainability that transcends techno-scientific issues of energy conservation and encompasses larger social processes that affect stakeholders, social groups, urban dynamics and regional politics just as much as they influence environmental transformations.

For all of the above reasons, it is logical to draw parallels between Fathy's work and current strategies in sustainability. However—whether these parallels are substantive, or whether 'sustainability' will be appropriated, or even be 'hijacked' as a marketing tool, is an open question that requires constant vigilance.<sup>40</sup> Let us keep in mind that the notion of sustainability—and even specific references to Fathy's work—have already been used for the promotion of eco-development projects of sorts. For example, a 1990s' tourist village of 'eco-lodges' in the Siwa oasis may cite Fathy as an inspiration, but its exclusive character aligns it more with corporate attitudes towards the environment than with any aspirations for combining ecological, economic and social sustainability. The rather nostalgic reuse of mud bricks marks the Egyptian landscape in as dubious a way as the Graves hotel mentioned earlier (Fig. 9).

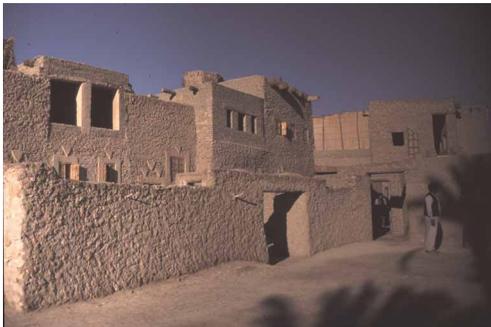


Figure 9. Eco-tourist village designed by the firm Environmental Quality International, 1999; Siwa, Egypt (photograph by the Author).

rigorous reflections they cultivate can introduce useful complexities into contemporary architectural concerns about the social, political and ideological uses of concepts of 'tradition', 'place' and 'environment' in a globalised world: where the dilemmas of developmentalism, cultural identity and environmental protection are ever-more powerful.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes and references

1. H. Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1973) and *Construire Avec Le Peuple: Histoire d'un Village d'Egypte, Gournata* (Paris, 1977). Fathy had originally published the book in 1969 in Egypt as *Gourna: A Tale of Two Villages*.
2. Among the positive reviews of the book see, for example: M. Safdie, 'Joy in Mudville', *New York Review of Books* (December 11th, 1975), p. 233; C. Ward, 'For the Fella with Nothing', *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal* (February, 1974), p. 35; W. Mares, 'An Architect Whose Clients Are Peasants', *The Christian Science Monitor* (September 5th, 1974),

Fathy's work, as well as the history of its multiple interpretations explored here, constitute an important page in the history of modern architecture because they contemplated quintessentially modern concerns: about the relationships of architecture with society, culture, the environment and history. Fathy creatively synthesised his interest in social reform with his ambivalence about modernisation; and his commitment to artistic and cultural expression with ideas of environmental efficiency and protection.

The 'alternative histories' explored here remind us, first of all, that the social impact of architecture and of the architect is neither singular nor uniform. Concepts such as 'tradition' or 'locale' are proved to be far from neutral, and any binary opposition between 'traditional' and 'modern' or between 'local' and 'global' misses the fact that these concepts are not only intricately intertwined but also that their very definition is part of processes of selection and contestation. To situate these 'histories' into the larger socio-political realities that shaped them is not simply a matter of historical research or historiographic critique; rather, these histories and the

- p. 7; F. Clark, 'Appropriate Invention', *Architectural Record*, 168 (January, 1980), pp. 186–87 and 195; R. Marquis, 'Egypt's Prophet of Appropriate Technology', *AIA Journal* (December, 1980), pp. 38–39; and 'UIA's Gold Medal Awarded to Hassan Fathy', *Architecture*, 74 (January, 1985), pp. 25–26.
3. D. Ghirardo, *Architecture After Modernism* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1996), p. 7.
  4. 'Two-Thirds of the planet Ill-Housed?', *Design and Environment* (Spring, 1976), p. 2 and J. Steele, *Sustainable Architecture: Principles, Paradigms, and Case Studies* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1997).
  5. See N. Alsayyad, 'From Vernacularism to Globalism', *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, 7 (1995), pp. 13–24; H.U. Khan, 'Inventing Tradition and the Paradox of Continuity', *Saudi Aramco World*, 50:4 (July/August, 1999), p. 3; T. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002); and M. Miles, 'Utopias of Mud? Hassan Fathy and Alternative Modernism', *Space and Culture*, 9 (May, 2006), pp. 113–139. See also discussion below.
  6. Apart from Fathy's *Architecture for the Poor*, see, for example, C. Ward, 'For the Fellah With Nothing', *op. cit.*, p. 36.
  7. Fathy's *Architecture for the Poor* includes photographs and detailed explanations of the technique of constructing mud-brick domes with a series of brick arches resting on a wall.
  8. For a detailed explanation of the Qa'a see D. B. Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo: An Introduction* (Leiden, New York, E. J. Brill, 1989), p.35. For Fathy's interest in passive cooling, see Fathy's later book which summed up his research and investigations on this topic, *Natural Energy and Vernacular Architecture: Principles and Examples with Reference to Hot Arid Climates* (Chicago and London, published for the United Nations University by the University of Chicago Press, 1986).
  9. For more on the relationships of public, semi-public and private spaces in New Gourna, with special reference to the specific gender rôles associated with them, see H. Taragan, 'Architecture in Fact and Fiction: The Case of the New Gourna Village in Upper Egypt', *Muqarnas*, 16 (1999), pp. 169–178.
  10. Raymond Mortimer, 'A Model Village in Upper Egypt', *Architectural Review* (September, 1947), pp. 97–99; 'Le Nouveau Village de Gournah', *L'Architecture Francaise*, 8 (1947), pp. 78–82; 'Gourna', *Atlantic Monthly*, 198 (October, 1956), pp. 156–57.
  11. Author's interviews with Fathy's student, Abdelhalim Abdelhalim (Cairo, November, 1998) and close friend, Nawal Hassan (Cairo, November, 1998 and March, 1999). Also, see J.M. Richards, 'Gourna: A Lesson in Basic Architecture', *The Architectural Review*, CXLVII, 876 (February, 1970), pp. 109–118; 'Art and Survival Fashioned in Bricks of Mud', *Middle East Times*, IV (March, 1986), pp. 12–13; J. Steele, *An Architecture for People: The Complete Works of Hassan Fathy* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1997); W. Polk, 'Gropius and Fathy Remembered', *Architectural Design*, 74:6 (November/December, 2004), pp. 38–45.
  12. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, *op. cit.*, pp. 184–195, offers a fascinating analysis of the government's rôle in provoking the locals' resentment.
  13. Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
  14. For a critique of Fathy's paternalistic views towards the 'ignorant' peasants see Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, *op. cit.*, p. 185. For Fathy's cosmopolitan assumptions, see N. Alsayyad, 'From Vernacularism to Globalism', *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, 7 (1995), pp.13–24 and H. Taragan, 'Architecture in Fact and Fiction. . .', *op. cit.*, pp. 169–178.
  15. Fathy's adoption of Cairene (specifically Mamluk and Ottoman) forms is analysed in N. Rabbat, 'Hassan

Fathy and the Identity Debate', in, G. Tawadros and S. Campbell, eds, *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes* (London, Institute of International Visual Art, 2003), pp. 196–203.

16. For a description of the alterations users made, see F. Hassan and C. Plimpton, 'New Gouna: Vernacular Remodeling of Architectural Space', *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Working Papers Series*, XVI (1989), pp. 47–77. See also Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, *op. cit.*, pp. 193–194. The more recent state of the village is described in M. Miles, 'Utopias of Mud?', *op. cit.*, pp. 126–128.
17. Fathy describes the significance of courtyards and public fountains to women in *Architecture for the Poor*, *op. cit.*, pp. 56–59 and pp. 99–101.
18. Many members of Fathy's circle describe his departure for Greece as a self-imposed exile. Author's interviews with Nawal Hassan (Cairo, March, 1999) and another close friend of his, Shahira Mehrez (Cairo, April, 1999).
19. This particular 'life' of New Gouna, that relates to Fathy's collaboration with Doxiadis, is analysed in detail in P. Pyla, 'Hassan Fathy Revisited: Postwar Discourses on Science, Development, and Vernacular Architecture', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 60:3 (February, 2007), pp. 28–39.
20. Many sketches attest to this and also many of Doxiadis Associates' reports, such as Fathy, Deimezis, Kyriou & Marinos, 'Thermal Comfort', Doxiadis Associates R-GA 108 (April 15th, 1958); Fathy and Marinos, 'Applications of Ideas on Thermal Comfort' (May 2nd, 1958), pp. 1–6; Fathy, 'Heat Protection', Doxiadis Associates R-GAH 305 (April 19th, 1958); Fathy, 'Climate and Architecture, Course Outline, 1959–60' (Hassan Fathy Archives).
21. 'Architect for the Poor', *Time* (September 30th, 1974), p. 1.
22. M. Safdie, *op. cit.*, p. 233. Safdie was the first to draw attention to Fathy's romantic insistence on a central village well instead of the basic convenience of running water, but nonetheless, he praised the project overall. Another example of an ambivalent review of Fathy's project is M.H. Shaheen, 'Hassan Fathy Architecture for the Poor', *International Journal for Middle East Studies*, 6:4 (October, 1975), pp. 511–14.
23. 'Architect for the Poor', *op. cit.*, p. 2.
24. Paul Oliver, ed., *Shelter, Sign and Symbol* (London, Barrie and Jenkins, 1975); Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects* (New York, Doubleday, 1964); Ian Mc Harg, *Design With Nature* (New York, Natural History Press, 1969); Victor Olgay, *Design With Climate: Bioclimatic Approach to Architectural Regionalism* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1963); John F.C. Turner, *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments* (Great Britain, Marion Boyars Publishers, 1976); John F.C. Turner and Robert Fichter, eds, *Freedom to Build* (New York, Macmillan, 1972); William Margin and John F.C. Turner, 'Benavides and the Barriada Movement', in, Paul Oliver, ed., *Shelter and Society* (New York, F.A. Praeger, 1969).
25. Fathy first presented this argument at a conference in Egypt in 1969: H. Fathy, 'Planning and building in the Arab tradition', in, M. Berger, ed., *The New Metropolis and the Arab World* (New York, Octagon Books, 1974).
26. N. Alsayyad, 'From Vernacularism to Globalism', *op. cit.*, p. 13.
27. Author's interview with Fathy's student Ramy El-Dehan (Cairo, February, 1999). See also H. Irfan, 'Hassan Fathy: The Barefoot Architect', August 3rd, 2004: <http://www.islamonline.net/english/ArtCulture/2004/08/article01.shtml/>
28. Letter from Fathy to the editors at the University of Chicago, 1972 (Hassan Fathy Archive).
29. For a feminist critique of Fathy's design along these lines, see Asia Chowdhury, 'The Persistent Metaphor: Gender in the Representations of the Cairene House by Edward W. Lane and Hassan Fathy' (Massachusetts

- Institute of Technology Masters Thesis, June, 1993). See also H. Taragan, 'Architecture in Fact and Fiction', *op. cit.*
30. For a description of these works see J. Steele, 'The new traditionalists', *Mimar*, 40 (September, 1991), pp. 40–47; S. Shahed, 'Abdel Wahed El Wakil, interpreter of a living tradition', *Arts and the Islamic World* (Winter, 1983–4), pp. 56–64; M. Vicat, 'Between tradition and modernity: eight Egyptian architects' (pamphlet published by the American University of Cairo, 1992); Y. M. Saddiqui, 'Through a master's pupils: Four projects by disciples of Hassan Fathy', *Medina*, 15 (2000), pp. 38–46; H. Irfan, 'Hassan Fathy: The Barefoot Architect', *op. cit.*
  31. 'L'illustre architecte égyptien declare', *Le Monde Islamique* (February, 1971), p. 11; J. Jobbins, 'Architect for the Arabs', *Near East Business* (March, 1980), pp. 7–10; I. Serageldin and El-Sadek, eds, *The Arab City: Proceedings of a Symposium Held in Medina, Saudi Arabia in 1983* (Virginia, Arab Urban Development Institute, 1992).
  32. See, for example, M. Vicat, 'Between tradition and modernity: eight Egyptian architects', *op. cit.*; and the internet article, 'African art and architecture: Hassan Fathy, the silent dialog between tradition and modernity', <http://www.kmtspace.com/fathy.htm>.
  33. See, for example, H. Fathy, 'Planning and Building in the Arab Tradition', in M. Berger, ed., *The New Metropolis and the Arab World* (New York, Octagon Books, 1974), pp. 210–229; and H. Fathy, 'Constancy, Transposition and Change in the Arab City', in C. Brown, ed., *Madina to Metropolis* (Princeton, Darwin Press, 1973), pp. 319–334. See also, I. Serageldin and El-Sadek, eds, *The Arab City: Proceedings of a Symposium Held in Medina, Saudi Arabia in 1983*, *op. cit.*; J. Jobbins, 'Architect for the Arabs', *op. cit.*, pp. 7–10; 'L'illustre architecte égyptien declare', *op. cit.*, p. 11.
  34. See, for example, references to Fathy in C. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York, Rizzoli, 1984), p. 94 and C. Jencks and K. Kropf, *Theories and Manifestoes of Contemporary Architecture* (New York, Academy Editions, 1997).
  35. Associated Press, 'Legacy of Egyptian architect, seen in Graves hotel', 08/24/00: <http://www.cnn.com/2000/STYLE/design/08/24/egypt.graves.ap/>
  36. See entries on New Gournā and Fathy on the site, <http://touregypt.net/featurestories/>; notably, 'Whatever happened to New El-Gournā' and 'The Village of New Gournā'.
  37. See, for example, J. Steele, *Sustainable Architecture:...*, *op. cit.*, and M.J. Amerlinck, 'Building Sustainable Environments', *Current Anthropology*, 36:4 (1995), pp. 687–688.
  38. H. Fathy, *Natural Energy and Vernacular Architecture: Principles and Examples with Reference to Hot Arid Climates* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1986). In his book, Fathy also cites sources such as Daniel Dunham, 'The Courtyard House as a temperature regulator', *New Scientist* (8th September, 1960), pp. 659–666 and D.H.K. Lee, 'Physiological Objectives in Hot Weather Housing' (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1953). See also H. Fathy, 'Architecture and Environment', *Arid Land Newsletter*, 36(1994), p. 4.
  39. This argument is made, for example by Steele, *Sustainable Architecture*, *op. cit.*, by Amerlinck, 'Building Sustainable Environments', *op. cit.*, and by Miles, 'Utopias of Mud?', *op. cit.*, p. 130, where he argues that 'Fathy can be situated in relation to recent interest in issues of sustainability and the recognition of local knowledges.'
  40. See A. Parr, *Hijacking Sustainability* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 2009) and P. Pyla, 'Counter-Histories of Sustainability', *Volume*, 18: 'After Zero' (December, 2008), pp. 14–17.