

Save Hassan Fathy's New Gourna

Preamble

The professors of the Department of Art History and of the Master in Environmental Sciences of the University of Geneva wish to make an emergency appeal to DOCOMOMO INTERNATIONAL for the registration of the village of New Gourna (Egypt). This exceptional masterpiece of contemporary architecture is famous worldwide and belongs to the artistic as well as to the intellectual heritage of Humanity.

This heritage has already been severely damaged to somewhat general indifference. Every measure should now be rapidly carried out to preserve what is left, restore what has been altered and reconstruct what has disappeared to bring it back to its original form and signification.

Hassan Fathy's New Gourna village can not simply disappear through inertia and unconcern. The lessons of know-how/savoir-faire, human solidarity and appropriate technology put in the hands of a poor community are served by an extraordinary formal modern architectural language. They should continue to testify to future generations, as the architect himself would have wished, of the possibilities of reasoned development in emergent countries.

Importance of Hassan Fathy

Hassan Fathy (1900-1989) is among the most important architects of Africa and the Middle East. As an intellectual, writer, humanist, architect and scientist, he deeply influenced generations of architects and engineers throughout the world by his constructions as well as by his thought. Hassan Fathy was born in Alexandria and worked mainly in Egypt except for the five years he spent in Greece where he worked in the very cosmopolite Doxiades Agency in Athens (1957-1962). He became internationally famous after the success of the publication of *Gourna, a Tale of two Villages* in 1969, published again in 1973 under the name of *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt*. The tremendous impact of the book shook the whole world and had significant repercussions in western academic circles.

The richness of Hassan Fathy's anthropological thought, his authentic social concern and the wisdom of his reasoning underlying architectural experience, have had an international blow

which as yet to be assimilated in the era of sustainable development we are presently entering. The notion of “appropriate technology” formulated by Hassan Fathy at the twilight of his life has not been sufficiently acknowledged, in particular, in emergent countries.

Hassan Fathy had a prolific mind and was passionate about numerous subjects. He designed and constructed projects of various nature; from modern constructions in armed concrete in the 1930's and private residences built with stone to projects for an “Ideal City” in Baghdad and Karachi during his Greek period. He addressed all types of programmes such as villas, farms, mosques, social health centres, schools, theatres, peasant villages and tourist villages. As a true researcher in the field of architecture and construction, he endeavoured to develop construction technologies by inventing solutions that would fit the climatic circumstances of hot arid countries. Although the project of NEW GOURNA is one of his important works, his career cannot be limited to this one and only realization.

Hassan Fathy was motivated by a very strong social involvement combined with nationalist feelings and wished to develop adequate low-cost formulas drawn from the ancestral genius of the place, in priority for Egypt and then for the other Arab and African countries by which he was commissioned. The notion of “situated architecture” finds in him one of his champions. His constant concern was the integration of the building in its environment, finding inspiration in any possible heritage and answering the conditions imposed by the site.

Hassan Fathy was a defender of traditional know-how and *native* crafts which were threatened of disappearing in favour of industrialized products imported from the West. Ideologically close to the artists of his time, like the group of the “Friends of Art and Life” founded in the 1930's around the personality of Hamed Saïd, he preferred techniques which required the hand of man, believing they could bring happiness and dignity.

Conscious of the importance of educating his compatriots and contemporaries, Hassan Fathy left numerous works and reports and gave a multitude of conferences. The memos, drafts, booklets scribbled with thoughts, notebooks and sketches are innumerable and constitute the most considerable part of the archives' collection currently conserved at the American University of Cairo's Rare Books Library and Special Collections (RBLSC). The classification of this material which is ongoing widens the knowledge of the vast and prolific production of this man. In his lifetime, he never received the recognition and grandstand he deserved even though in his late years, strangers from all over the world, desirous to *benefit* from his precepts, visited his house in Darb el Labana every day.

Although Hassan Fathy was marginalized in his country, he was related to the international *intelligentsias* and he dedicated part of his career to expertise in the fields of development,

African architecture and heritage. The thousands of photographs conserved at the RBSCCL prove that he travelled in numerous countries all over the world, in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the United-States. As a consultant for international organizations and UN agencies he elaborated development projects for countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Palestine and Pakistan.

During his travels, he would always closely study the local architecture, whether modern or vernacular, as well as native crafts. These experiences were part of his training as an architect and theorist. Therefore he often illustrated his conferences and articles with examples of architecture or town-planning he discovered abroad.

The bad fortune seems to be fiercely attached to Hassan Fathy's production as several significant buildings have already disappeared: the Bosphore Casino (1932) commissioned by the Koudsy brothers on Train Station Square (Bab el-Hadid) in Cairo has fallen, several Deco villas from the 1930's have been pulled down, the villa he built for his wife, Aziza Hassanein, was destroyed during the creation of the Maadi cornice and the legendary house of the artist and potter Hamed Saïd in el-Marg is now surrounded by a hostile environment. At present, the villa Toussoun Abu Gabal is threatened by the land-bank in progress (?) in the surroundings of the new Four Seasons Hotel. Recently, two houses built in the village of New Bariz (Kharga) have suffered renovations which have totally altered them.

Hassan Fathy along with contemporary figures such as Nagib Mahfouz, Um Kalthoum or Youssef Shahin, incarnates the Egyptian genius. Nowadays, who would even think of letting the Trilogy of Mahfouz, Um Kalthoum's songs or the cinematographic heritage of Youssef Shahin disappear? Meanwhile, because of quasi-general inactivity and fatalism, the outstanding realizations of a prominent architect are falling one after the other and NEW GOURNA is gradually vanishing.

New Gourn: An Outstanding Conception

Hassan Fathy's owes his international recognition to the publication of Gourn, a Tale of two Villages which tells the adventure of the construction of the village of NEW GOURNA. The project and execution of this model-village for a poor traditional rural community, at the dawn of the 1950's, happens to be an experience without precedent in Egypt. If the book narrating this experience still has an international echo today, the village which testifies of this unique and original attempt is in an advanced state of deterioration.

In 1945, The Department of Antiquities and the Director of Excavations committed the building of a new village to Hassan Fathy, upstream of the old village of Gourn, behind the Memnon Colossuses. This pilot-village should have relocated the inhabitants of Old Gourn far away

from the pharaonic sites. The Gournis opposed a strong resistance to this displacement. Recently, more than half a century later, they have been constrained by force to leave their houses in Old Gournia destroyed by bulldozers.

This project meant for the modest Egyptian peasantry should be put in parallel with the research of the modern European architects of the inter-war period: whether in the domain of social housing for the working-class (Britz or Siemensstadt in Berlin by H. Sharoun, W. Gropius, B. Taut or the Kiefhoek housing project in Rotterdam by J.J.P. Oud) or in the field of model-villages of the Reconstruction which are starting to be seriously studied (Bousquet in France by Bossu and projects by Thomas Sharp in Great-Britain).

Before planning anything, Hassan Fathy analyzes the existing situation. Indeed, he tries to improve the sanitary facilities and enhance the living conditions of the Gournis fellahs while preserving their cultural traditions. In order to build a new village that can answer the needs and customs of the inhabitants, he carries out a meticulous ethnographic approach by observing the functioning of Old Gournia. He studies the family (badana) and social structure of the clans or tribes and the way of life of the Gournis. These observations will dictate the principles underlying village-planning.

Hassan Fathy also analyses the lucrative activities of the Gournis: in addition to land cultivation which provides them with insufficient resources are the licit income from native crafts and the illicit one from the fraudulent commerce of antiquities. This will favour his idea towards promoting a large variety of native crafts in the new village by perpetrating existing local traditions and reintroducing ancestral know-how.

In his search for low-cost building solutions, Hassan Fathy uses the technology of raw earth which he has already experimented successfully in many circumstances. The material is costless and requires a technique that the Nubians still master. He wishes to hand this knowledge over to the Gournis to enable them to build their own houses themselves without the need of an architect. This self-help system would guarantee the durability of the village because it could develop in a sustainable way without an architect or professional mason, which the Gournis cannot afford. This pilot-project was to serve as a model for the construction of other low-cost villages in the poor rural areas of Egypt.

New Gournia: An Exceptional Realization

The site of Gournia is located on the western bank of the Nile at the level of Luxor with which it makes up Ancient Thebes. The western bank shelters the pharaoh's necropolises (the Valley of the Kings, the Valley of the Queens and the Tombs of the Nobles), which number among the

most visited sites in Egypt. As from the eighteenth century, dwellings have been built close by the tombs. This is what we call the Old Gournas that has just been evacuated and has been undergoing demolition since December 2006 in spite of international protests.

Hassan Fathy was to design the project on a flat parcel in a 50 arpent *hosha* of farmable land, bought from Boulos Hanna Pasha, protected by dykes and situated close to the main road and the railway. It is on that *piece* of land that he freely designed the project of a pilot-village to relocate 7000 Gournis. Between 1946 and 1949 he will accomplish only part of the designed plan. The works will be suspended for lack of political support.

This village neither resembles traditional villages nor the attempts to design modern Egyptian villages. It can be qualified as an ideal village just like the Saline de Chaux by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux was an industrial ideal town at the end of the Enlightenment. Hassan Fathy built Gournas in keeping with his (high) idea of what an Egyptian village should be like in the middle of the twentieth century. The richness of the profoundly humanist programme of New Gournas constitutes a *unicum* in the history of village-planning. It resulted in a very ambitious project, maybe *too* ambitious for its time and place.

The fellah was to be housed with his family and animals in a dwelling designed according to his own needs. He was to breed his stock, cultivate the land in the surroundings of the village and also produce native crafts (weaving, pottery etc.) at the crafts' school and the khan. He would then sell the harvest of his farming in a nice shaded market and his native crafts' products in a hall built to this purpose. He would practise his faith either in a Mosque with pure lines or in a Copt church (which was not constructed). He would dispose of a meeting place for celebrations and feasts. His children would be sent to two distinct schools, one for the girls and the other for the boys. He would participate in the popular folkloric entertainment taking place at the theatre or on the esplanade situated just behind it. Part of the equipments (mosque, theatre, khan, market etc.) still exists today and does not appear as over- dimensioned considering the fact that Fathy was planning a possible population growth of 20.000 inhabitants.

New Gournas was planned around a vast, irregular central public square encircled by the principal public buildings: mosque, mayor's house, theatre, native crafts' exhibition hall and khan. At the entrance of the village, nearby the railway, is the open-air market bordered by a range of halls to receive the visitors. The boys' school (which has been demolished) was situated in the North-West sector of the village.

The design of the village, deliberately irregular, between grid and radio-centric systems, was to develop the imaginary and encourage a rich and varied architecture. The village is divided into four main parts, separated by streets at least 10 meters wide, corresponding to the four Gournis

tribes. A system of secondary streets, not exceeding a width of 6 m., protects the intimacy of the badanas and dissuades strangers from going any further. The inner court houses are assembled in more or less complex sectors open at the angles. This design deliberately avoids any systematic or symmetrical character and repetitions which lead, as Fathy says, “to boring rows of identical housing that are considered to be what the poor deserve” and are harmful to the human well-being of mankind.

To solve the economic question of the rural village programme, Hassan Fathy uses raw brick. This choice is determined by his knowledge of the architecture and monuments of upper-Egypt. Indeed, in regions which are poor in wood, one has to imagine other roofing systems. The vaults and cupolas in raw brick like the Ramasseum, Bagawat and the Fatimid mausoleums, will serve him as models to roof his first experimental farms and the houses in New Gourná. In every epoch, the elementary technology of mud brick has been a traditional material in Egypt, particularly in rural areas. The material itself, immediately at hand, and the fabrication of the raw bricks, dried in the sun, is simple and low-cost. By applying the system of catenary vaults which he improves, Hassan Fathy can build a house entirely in earth. The building of such a house requires only two persons.

The thermal inertia of raw brick walls has been studied and we know that it is superior to a wall in baked brick, in stone or in concrete. In consequence, the choice of this material for New Gourná, located in an extreme desert climate region, is totally appropriate. The connotation of raw earth as being an archaic and poor material was one of the causes of the bad reception of New Gourná by the population for whom it was meant. The paradox of poor populations in emerging countries is that they aspire to industrialized technologies as a sign of wealth even if a material like concrete is totally inappropriate to the climatic and economic situation.

Hassan Fathy created a particular formal language from earth technology; houses bearing thick walls with small openings roofed by domes and vaults. In drawing his inspiration from an ancestral technical tradition, he manages to invent a typology of habitations which is totally original though it also refers to the distribution of space in Islamic dwellings. The volumetric and special qualities of the ensemble have nothing to envy to modern western architecture and magnificently illustrate the famous phrase of le Corbusier: “l’architecture est le jeu correct, savant et magnifique des volumes sous la lumière”. The simple and refined geometry which governs the architectural conception imposes itself through its harmony. The aesthetics of the village just after it was completed, shown by the photographs of Dimitri Papadimou, call forth the geometric formalism of German and Dutch architects.

This innovative formal language of Hassan Fathy at the time of its creation will have a long posterity in Egypt and around the Mediterranean. Today, in Egypt, one commonly uses the term

of “Hassan Fathy style” even if it does not design raw earth constructions but any architecture using vaults and domes. Numerous tourist settlements and holiday houses reveal this general gusto.

Exceptional character and uniqueness of New Gourna

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the idea and the execution of the village of New Gourna constitute an experience without precedent. It is both unique in its time and premonitory of the preoccupations that were to come. The idea of a self-help system among the peasants intended towards the building of their own houses adapted to the climate with a simple and low-cost technology is an exception. Hassan Fathy was *sensitive* to the question of social housing as an architect and as a man and sincerely wished to enhance the living conditions of the peasants. He invented a model-housing based upon constructive and typological models from the historical range of Egyptian constructions. This concern for re-linking with the lost traditional know-how anticipates the theories underlying the question of sustainable development.

Because of the extreme abundance of heritage from all epochs, Egypt is essentially preoccupied by antiquities, Islamic and Coptic arts and does not yet recognise the more recent heritage; this is why the concern for the village of New Gourna has not been considered as a priority. Nevertheless, it constitutes an exceptional cultural conception and heritage.

New Gourna, Hassan Fathy’s pilot-project which has been partially constructed is at present abandoned and in peril. Even though the theatre and the mosque have been restored and are in a good state of conservation, some of the buildings suffer from lack of maintenance and savage transformations. Other buildings, like the boys’ school and the *native* crafts’ hall of the village have been purely and simply destroyed.

In consequence, the professors of the Department of Art History and of the Master in Environmental Sciences of Geneva University in Geneva, *are taking the initiative of a demand for international registration of New Gourna as a Docomomo listed heritage.*

