Transformations in Architecture and Urbanism: Public Projects and Private Initiatives
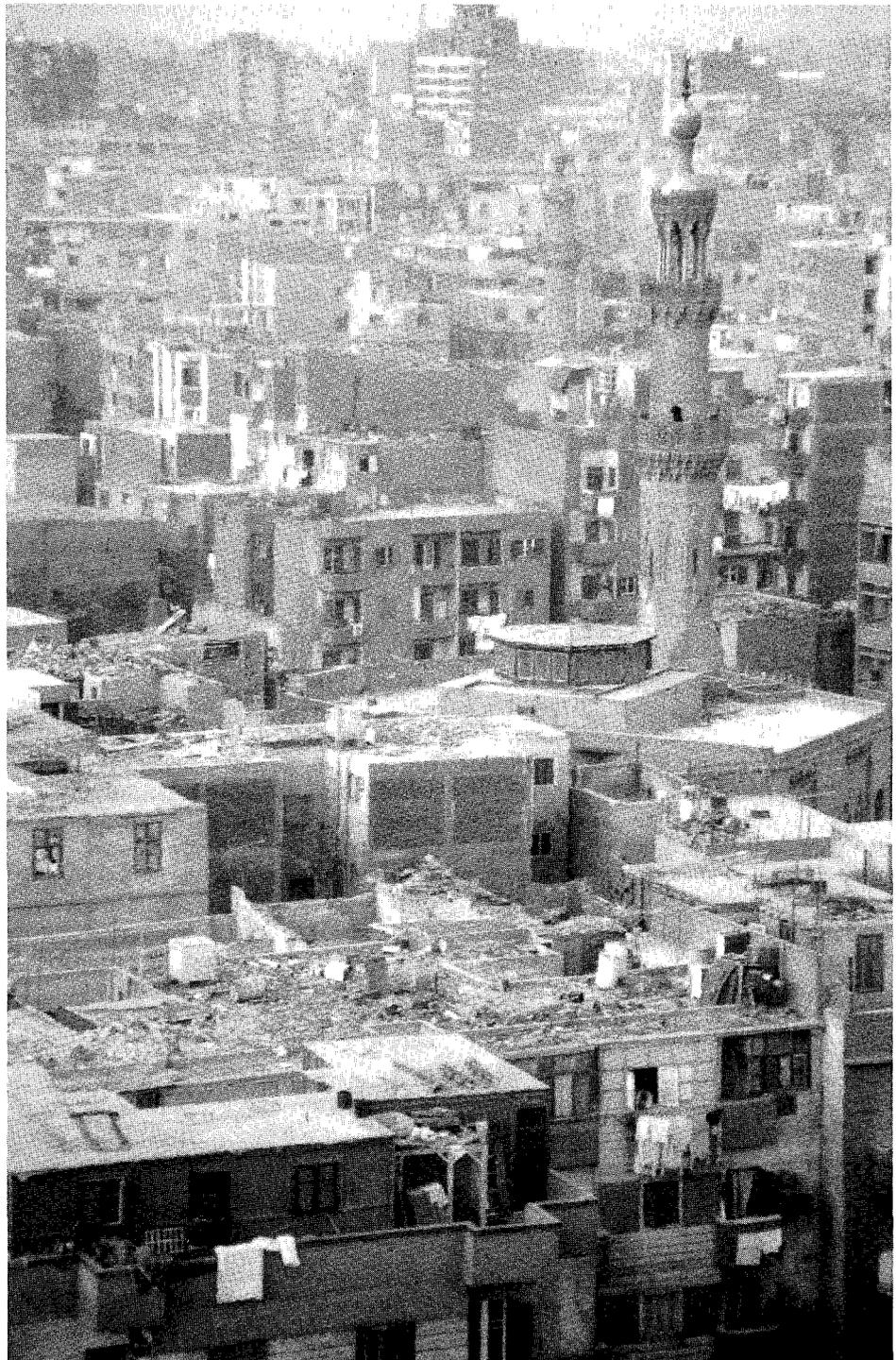
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The aim of this study is to identify the main forces and factors that have influenced the contemporary architecture and urban form of Cairo and then to propose preliminary formulations with regard to the concepts and patterns whereby these transformations took place between 1920 and 1950. Though it does not aim to reach conclusive results, the study is hoped to provide a theoretical and conceptual background for the present debate on the urban furture of the city.

The study is organised in three parts. The first part focusses on theoretical aspects in seeking to answer some fundamental questions pertaining to the past and the future of the city. The second part deals with the components of the field study on the architecture of Cairo and its urbanism, during the period between 1920 and 1950, in which a number of higher study candidates at Cairo University participated in its preparation for this seminar. The third part attempts to describe the benefits derived from the examination of the architecture of Cairo and its urbanism during the period covered by the survey.

Part I

Let us begin with the question, why look to Cairo's past as we consider its future?

The importance of studying a specific period in the history of a city such as Cairo lies in the viability of intensifying the historical and urban consciousness of its inhabitants and community as a whole. Furthermore, such a study helps to understand the nature of the circumstances imposed by present-day problems and needs, as well as the requirements of the future. This historical consciousness of the civilisational presence of any city, and of the historical depth and extension of that presence, is vitally important in order to enable the city to define its reality and to give expression — architecturally and urbanistically — to its identity and requirements, both present and future.

View of Sayyeda Zeinab quarter showing the complexity of the urban fabric

Photo H Abdelhalim

The selection of an historical period for study, therefore, is subject to two fundamental considerations. The first concerns the position of the selected period in the historical development of the city not merely as a chronicle or description of events and components, but rather as a set of fundamental lessons and rules underlying the urban and social structure of the city. Hence, such a period must necessarily be a period of transition and fundamental transformations, rather than an historical continuity. The second consideration is with regard to its relation to the city's present and future realities; i.e., it must constitute the historical roots of the present.

The second question is: what is the historical significance of the period between 1920 and 1950 for a study of the architecture of Cairo and its urbanism? The period from 1920 to 1950 is central to an understanding of the inherent duality experienced by Egypt from the time of Mohammed Ali to the present day, a duality between the acquired and the inherited. Evidence of this two-fold aspect could be found not only in the architectural expression of the period, but also in all government institutions and public life itself. This conflict between the two trends is still going on at all levels, though in different forms, in present-day Cairo which, in reality, is two cities, not one. The architecture and urbanism of Cairo are an embodiment of the struggle between the *acquired* which is western in its origin, secular in its thinking, materialistic in its economy and cumulative in its laws, and the *inherited* which is Islamic in origin, religious in ideology, social in economy and regenerative in its laws.

Considered within the context of world history, this thirty-year period, coming in the wake of World War I and the ensuing political and conceptual changes, also witnessed the great economic depression of the thirties, the events of World War II, the triumph of the Allies and the subsequent division of the world among the Big Powers. In addition, it gave rise to national liberation movements all over the world. All these factors played an important role

Extension of Lycée Al-Horya near Tahrir Square, 1955, a discreet expression of authenticity.

Photo C.D C /Tareq Sweilam

in determining Egypt's relations with the outside world on the intellectual and economic levels, which consequently influenced the artistic and architectural trends in the country.

Historically, the period surveyed falls amidst a vitally important phase of intellectual and religious development in Egypt, i.e., the vacillation between Islam and secularism. The twenties were a decisive period witnessing the physical completion (urbanistic and architectural) of institutions, on Western lines, as initiated by Mohammed Ali and planned under Khedive Ismail. This was, I believe, a real turning-point in Egyptian public life, exceeding in importance the establishment of the administrative, military and even intellectual institutions. Architecture and building in Egypt had always been a framework for legitimacy and a vital process for the embodiment and formulation of a balance of forces. This is what happened in the twenties. Architecture had decided, though in stages, the relation between Islamic intellectualism and Western secularism

as a source for shaping public life. Hence, the urban structure was designed accordingly to express and assert this identity.

But what, we may ask ourselves, is the importance of this period to the present circumstances of Cairo and its future?

The importance of the years 1920 to 1950 lies in the structural characteristics which are common to that period and to those of today First, the call to rebuild and reassert the Islamic cultural identity of Cairo is as real and urgent today as it was then, one that demands a professional and architectural response. Although such a response is not yet clearly delineated in the area of architectural and urban theory, it does exist in other areas, such as sociology, economy, philosophy and the arts, with numerous indications in the field of architecture as well.

Secondly, the ongoing transformation in the architecture of Cairo and its urbanism are occurring today in the same places and under the same structural circumstances that witnessed the early transformations

Office of Planning, completed early 1950s, an example of the "inherited"

Photo: C.D C /Tai eq Sweilam

and changes made to introduce acquired Western trends. These locations comprise the public squares *(midans)* in the city centre and the banks of the Nile. These very same locations formed the setting for the confrontations that split Cairo into two cities, creating an urban-cultural gap, which the architecture of the twenties (and up to the fifties) attempted to fill by means of a national language and symbols. Today, these locations continue to be the real and vital scene for the issue of cultural identity.

Cairo's architectural transformations of the 1920-1950 period could serve as models for our present urbanisation projects as a

means to re-weave the cultural texture of our city by taking into account the twin aspects of Cairo: the inherited and the acquired, the historical and the modern. It is a task that is at once urgent and viable The benefit to be derived from history does not lie in its mere repetition or reconstruction. Rather, it lies in our comprehension of the law governing history and in our capacity to deduce the position of the present within the scope of that law. This would be a realistic basis for any movement towards the future. Thus, the years between 1920 and 1950 — place and events, architecture and system, symbol and law, programme and structure, thinking and politics — con-

stitute an efficient model for rebuilding Cairo as an Islamic metropolis

Part II

This part constitutes an introduction to the field study, the results of which were presented during the course of this seminar.

The first question the study attempted to answer was with regard to the specific nature of architecture in Egypt, and what it was that gave Cairo's architecture its Islamic identity. Architecture, in Egypt, is a vital process that substantially contributes

to shaping its identity and regulating its energies and potentialities. It is a means of expression and, hence, a means of change, which if not channelled towards the progress and development of the community, will assuredly be instrumental to its backwardness. Architecture, therefore, cannot be interpreted as just buildings and establishments, but rather as an intricately complex matter that has fundamental bases capable of triggering and crystallising vital forces. These three bases are faith, will and imagination. In Egypt, the final outcome of the building process, be it positive or negative, is determined by the interaction of these three.

The second part of the study examined the roots and characteristics of Islamic identity. Cairo is a city of Islamic birth, but of Egyptian organisation, having an Islamic identity, but with an Egyptian methodology in the general pattern of its buildings and construction. Cairo's Islamism is not a style. It is an inner rhythm or law that governs formation and organisation, growth and production. This governing law has been embodied in concrete expression throughout its long history giving evidence of the strong roots that are deeply embedded in the beliefs, sentiments and will of the people.

The immutability and continuity of this law shaping Cairo's Islamic urban environment, does not necessarily mean the immutability and continuity of its expression. On the contrary, an examination of Cairo's Islamic architecture would reveal that it came in the form of creative outbursts from the creative geniuses of every decade, each one interacting with the realities and components of the moment, and all being linked and guided by that law governing their creative activity.

The rift in the Islamic identity of Cairo began during the last decade of the Ottoman caliphate under Mohammed Ali with the establishment of government institutions based on western models, alongside Islamic cultural institutions. Ali's plan was the Islamic Egyptian project. Since then, the architecture and urbanism of Cairo are

an embodiment of the conflict between the two trends: the acquired versus the inherited; and it is within this context that the period of 1920-1950 is vitally important in order to understand the nature of the rift in the cultural identity of Cairo.

With regard to the scope of the study, it focussed on the survey and documentation of about seventy private and public buildings and establishments, all of which were either built, or had their functions modified, during the period. The study also covered seven public squares around which these buildings are located. These *midans,* as a whole, represent the network of public places that, side by side with the buildings examined, completes the perspective of the study

Part III

An examination of the architecture of Cairo and its urbanism during the period between 1920 and 1950 was undertaken with the hope of promoting a certain historical consciousness which is seen as a prerequisite in order to effect any significant future change in Cairo. It is a three-faceted consciousness: theoretical, applied and methodological.

Theoretical· We must realise that the ongoing debate between the inherited and the acquired, the original and the contemporary, regardless of forms or slogans, is one that is deeply ingrained in the intellectual movement of this city. We should associate our thinking and efforts today with those of' the twenties, thirties, forties, etc., not from a pre-conceived reactionary point of view, but rather from an enlightened futuristic concept, being firmly convinced that the intellectual forces capable of effecting any significant change in the architecture and urbanism of this city were, and always will be, those forces that have their roots firmly entrenched in the heritage and beliefs of this nation. We do not seek to adopt the theories of societies where the concept of the modern city is based on the separation

of faith from action, or of culture from production. It is a reality of our society that unity — of faith and action, of production and culture — remains the genuine latent power of our energy and potentialities.

Applied. Our call to link our debate with, and intensify our consciousness of, the roots of our modern history does not stem from a vacuum; nor is it an attempt to impose a historical model or concept on the realities and problems of present-day or future Cairo. It is a call motivated by an urgent practical reality.

The areas of great change in Cairo, today and in the future, are the same social and residential areas that witnessed the urban struggles in the Cairo of Khedive Ismail. They are also the same locations of the major changes and transformations of the twenties, namely, the main public squares, which form the linkage points between the two fundamental structures in the city: the inherited in Old Cairo, and the acquired in modern Cairo.

Motivated by our historical consciousness, we should raise questions concerning the sentiments, feelings and identity of the city with regard to Cairo's projects today. Moreover, we should transform them from being just huge technical projects into a realisation of our consciousness and maturity of vision of our true identity deeply rooted in our history and heritage. Thus, each project could be a trigger releasing our creative energies.

Methodological: We must regard the heart of Cairo, with its two aspects — the inherited and the acquired, the old and the new — as but one single unit that is governed and shaped by one language; a language that is rooted in the heritage and identity of this city, encompassing the heart of Cairo as a whole, and which takes into consideration its present and future requirements. Likewise, we must clearly formulate a national cultural plan to shape the city in the light of our historical consciousness of it, a plan comprising cultural components alongside the technical and economic specifications of each project.