The Meaning of History in Cairo

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The purpose of this essay is to raise questions about the significance of the Cairene pecularity and to provoke a discussion on how to interpret it at two different levels. One is the level of perceiving, or reading, the city's static monuments as an integral component of the living fabric of the city. The second level is more of a query: assuming that a reasonable interpretation has been proposed for the monuments and therefore an adequate definition exists of the city's formal character, can and should this awareness be extended to the judgement of the modern city and become part of any planning of the future city?

The first historical question posed by Cairo is why it became so uniquely different. There is no clear answer to this question, but, I should like to propose the following explanation. Alone among the major urban centres of the mediaeval Muslim world, Cairo was provided with a combination of incentives for investment and expression in large scale architecture. The main ones are: continuous sources of wealth through trade for nearly half a millenium, whatever vagaries existed in commercial activities; absence of destructive invasions which had plagued most of western Asia until the sixteenth century; and an indigenous mix of religious and ethnic communities. It was also a consistent magnet for intellectual, social, and money-making institutions and activities which brought people from all over the Muslim world and, in a more controlled way, from the non-Muslim world as well. No other Muslim centre was provided with that many operative factors, creating in Cairo both a consistent patronage and the means to invest in building.

But the possibility of architectural investment does not compel its actuality. Something else triggered building as the major form of expression, as opposed to the manufacturing or collecting of objects, for instance (although both of these activities did take place). A partial answer to this second question emerges when we recall the remarkable conservatism of Cairene architectural forms. Whereas Iran and the Turkish beyliks, not to speak of Italy, embarked, from the thirteenth century onwards on major experiments with novel and sometimes striking ideas, Cairene architecture exploited and honed, lovingly and imaginatively, very traditional forms of spatial composition and surface decoration: courts, porticoes, domes, iwans, Muqarnas, geometric interlaces, large bands of writing, and so on. The Mamluk monuments of Cairo tell and tell again the same story in a by-then well established language, because the need had not arisen to seek a new idiom or to say something new. A culture at apparent peace with itself saw in the proclamations of buildings the best and most expressive way of reminding itself of its own accepted values and, a way of entering into a dialogue with whatever preceded them. They recall, it seems to me, the way in which the late nineteenth century mercantile civilisation of the West built, wherever it reached (including Cairo and Istanbul), its banks, insurance companies, museums and often universities in modified neo-classical style. I am arguing, in other words, that, beyond the existence of resources and of a

patronage, there was in Cairo, especially in Mamluk times, a cultural self-assuredness and an unquestioning agreement on which forms are needed and why. It is this agreement which was necessary for the expression of resources and patronage in architecture and for the conservatism of that expression.

Historians may well refine these generalities, and pointing out certain exceptions to them like the madrasa of Sultan Hassan, identify many additional motivations and explanations for the buildings of Cairo between 1000 and 1500. They may pursue the multitude of descriptive, technical, archaeological, textual, formal and comparative analyses which are the requisites of a synchronic understanding of the monuments, that is to say of their meaning within their time, ideally coming as close as possible to the moment of their creation. However fascinating and important this knowledge may be for a proper awareness of the past, its pertinence for the contemporary world and especially for contemporary building is more difficult to ascertain. Only too often, as with the monument to Rifat Pasha, the direct mirroring of the past, even when well-done, gives a feeling of imitative emptiness, because it lacks the nexus of motivations, purposes, and ideological, functional or pious meanings which gave genuineness to the past. But, even if one is critical of the values of what has been called the neo-Mamluk style, it remains true that the genuine Mamluk style is an inescapable part of Cairo, deeply anchored in its very being, and therefore, that the contemporary city must come to grips with it without slavishly copying it.

A different kind of analysis of the classical, especially Mamluk, monuments of Cairo makes it possible to suggest a number of subtler and more profound ways in which the historical monuments of Cairo have in fact affected the physical fabric of the city and have created a specifically Cairene aesthetic, which may or may not be transferable into contemporary terms for new parts of the city, but which ought to be considered whenever the fate of the historic city is being debated. I shall limit myself to two points and develop some of their consequences.

The first point is that nearly all buildings of classical times are independent constructions and not major modifications of or additions to older buildings. There are exceptions, no doubt, as with the Mamluk additions to the mosque, and especially the Azhar complex. The latter is important, because it is the one example of a monument with a complex and idiosyncratic history which required constant modifications — as it is still modified today — because its living force and purpose overshadow its formal character and make its succession of synchronic meanings irrelevant as new ones come to the fore. Other exceptions are usually repairs or secondary reflections of a new taste, although further studies on individual monuments may modify this conclusion. Assuming, however, that it is valid, what are its implications for the history of Cairo, especially if one recalls that relatively few monuments (except for private dwellings or secular buildings) were systematically or willfully destroyed in order to be replaced by new ones?

Two implications strike me as particularly important. One is that the integrity of the monument was protected by much more than the legal deeds which assured, for a while at least, its proper utilisation. It was protected because, even when its initial functions had lessened in importance or dwindled to nothing, something else in it had become part of the fabric of its urban setting. On a pious and emotional level, it could be that so many of these monuments contained burial places and thus the fascinatingly complex relationship of the traditional Muslim ethos to the presence of the dead developed, nearly automatically, a web of constant associations with any monuments containing a mausoleum. I shall return shortly to a possible formal level of associations in a different context, but a second implication of this social protection of so many monuments may well be that, regardless of the formal differences which exist between them, they were always part of the visual code expected within traditional society. There would have been what may be called a semiotic contract between patrons, builders and the population which required certain functions to
be performed. Certain forms were to be available regardless of the functions to which they were applied (Was there really a need for example for all the madrasas which existed in Cairo?).

It is much more difficult to identify the operation of a visual code in the past than to understand practical function, but (and this is my second point about the historic city of Cairo) the large number of monuments preserved as well as the literary and epigraphic sources available for them lead to a general hypothesis for discussion. It has often been noted that the specific function of many Mamluk buildings — madrasa, khanqah, ribat, masjid, jamii, even at times hospital or warehouse — is difficult to identify by visual observation alone, by the simple perceptions of its gate or façade. Most of those buildings use a small number of architectural themes which are the ones dominating the city's landscape, most particularly minarets, domes and gates. They are the real, continuous, architecture of Cairo much more than the functions they house. The historian of society and of culture forgets the forms and discusses purposes, investments, economic and ideological contexts. The historian of art looks at them and determines stylistic evolution, technical quality and expressive power or else he points out that these and other similar features are related to each other in the sense that the mosque of Baybars recalls that of Al-Hakim, that Qaytbay's madrasa bears a relationship to Qala' un's or to al-Nasir's. These relations can be explained in terms of certain ideological or emotional objectives from the times of Baybars, Qala' un or Qaytbay, but these explanations do not operate for later times, when the contingencies of the thirteenth, fourteenth or fifteenth centuries are not meaningful. What still operates today is what I would like to call the rhythmic power of the monuments, whereby minarets (more accurately called towers) serve as a visual relay leading from one place to another, and elaborate gates request of the passerby that he stop and enter, or at least look. To the judgement of the historian of society or of art may be added the judgement of the Cairene urbanologist who seeks meanings from the point of view of the visual perception of the city.

What has been provided in the city of Cairo is a network of visual signs which orders movement within the city and which makes it physically usable and understandable. These directions are given by permanent forms epistemologically independent of the functions to which they are attached.

Among the Islamic cities known to me, only Istanbul has a relatable rhythmic order, but it lacks the density of signs provided by Cairo and it is on a totally different scale. It no longer matters, at this level, what specific historical contingencies, functions or investments were needed for the creation of this visual network. What does matter is that a character has been given to a city in the latter part of the Middle Ages which has remained in function until today, but which has not been extended to the new areas of the city, where traffic circles and neon ads have replaced minarets as beacons, tall buildings took over from domes, and gateways have given way to window displays. This is indeed the language of the end of the twentieth century, but it may just be possible that a fuller understanding of what made Cairo unique in the past may help in keeping it unique in the future.

But the argument of this short essay in interpreting a city seeks to go beyond the specifics of the city of Cairo. Using a city unusually rich in mediaeval monuments, it suggests that, when a city has acquired the monumental density of Cairo, monuments escape the exclusive scrutiny of the historian; they become continuous factors in the life of the urban system because their real meaning is determined less by what happened in them than by how they act upon the total urban fabric.