

# ABDEL HALIM'S CAIRO GARDEN AN ATTEMPT TO 'DEFROST' HISTORY

*Khaled Asfour*

## *Al-Houd Al-Marsoud*

*Architect:* Abdel Halim Ibrahim

*Location:* Sayyida Zeynab, Cairo

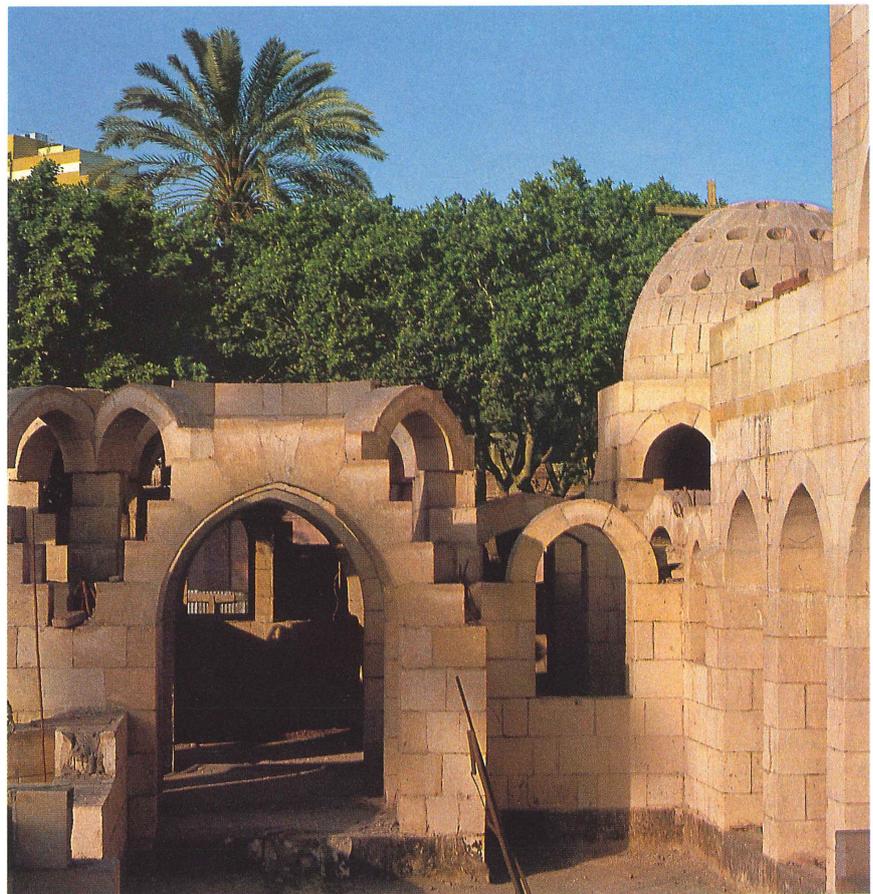
*Sponsor:* Ministry of Culture

*Cost:* 0.6 million US\$

*Completion (first phase):* October 1989

One of the prevailing trends in Arab architecture is to use history as a design criterion in order to solve the question of identity. There are many approaches to this; however they are all centred around the perception of history as a 'frozen' past. This article attempts to reveal how Abdel Halim's garden represents a new line of thinking, where the past is perceived as a 'living process'. In order to show how innovative this idea is, it is necessary to analyse the current practices in the Arab world, revealing a static perception of history.

A first approach to the use of history as a design criterion is at the level of imagery. That is to say, architects allude to past architecture in a photographic sense when designing contemporary buildings. They decompose traditional architecture into elements, either at the level of facades or plan types, and then copy these in their new design. The process of copying can be literal, or may involve a slight transformation of the model from which it is derived. We can call this process 'visual abstraction'. Abdel Wahid El-Wakil, a recent recipient of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture for his Corniche Mosque in Jeddah, masters this approach. On presenting his project in the seminar that followed the Award ceremony, he felt the need to project the inspirational historical monument as part of his design procedure, thus accentuating the importance of the past as an indispensable *visual* source for his new creation. What distinguishes one architect from another, in this approach, is the degree to which past visual icons are handled artistically when designing new forms, and this is what El-Wakil demonstrated through his presentation, provoking a critical label by Jameel Akbar as "copy and improvement on the



(historic) model". Not all architects may have a distinguished artistic talent, so, in many cases, the design does not escape arbitrariness in form-making, or even schism between the nature of the building programme and its formal language.

A second approach to the use of history as a design criterion is at the level of principles. The architect analyses past architecture in a manner that can yield rules and formulas with which he can create his new design. Thus abstraction here is 'conceptual'. These principles are: circulation of air through wind-catchers and clear-story windows, bent entrances, separation of sexes in circulation for privacy, proportions of window openings and projections, etc. Principles extrapolated from history are utilized in design thought so as to appear to have naturally evolved from the expected requirements

*Above: A detail of the atelier on the main street.*

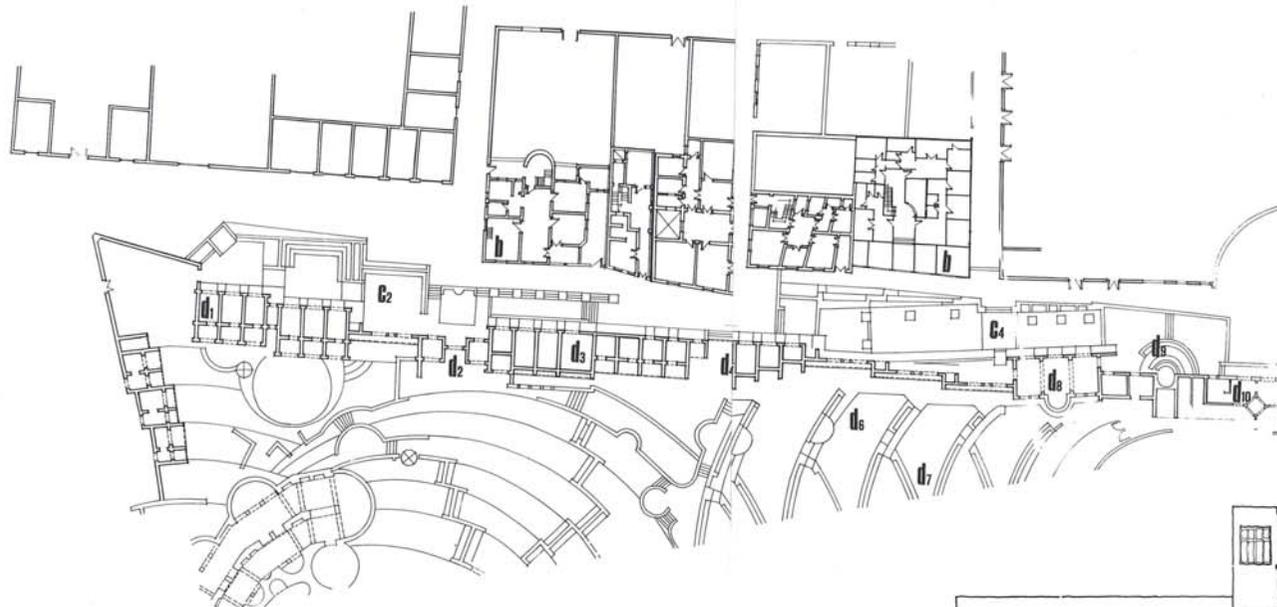
*Right: A detail of the model for the public garden shows the palm tree promenade (centre) and the service strip overlooking the side alley (right).*

of the building. The end product is devoid of direct visual resemblance to past architecture and may reveal the full thrust of modern technology. A good example of this approach is SOM's National Commercial Bank of Jeddah. The architect adopted a single principle from past architecture; namely inward orientation through courtyards, and applied it in skyscraper design. This was done by creating huge triangular voids in the tower. In this way the glass facades of the offices are always in shade, thus



**KEY**

- B Street facade upgraded
- C2 Outdoor classrooms
- C4 Outdoor prayer area
- D1 Art and craft studios
- D2 Entrance to the garden and future Museum
- D3 Bookshop
- D4 Entrance to the garden and Puppet Theatre
- D5 Ateliers and stores
- D6 Puppet Theatre
- D7 Green terraces & playground
- D8 Small mosque
- D9 Public fountain
- D10 Corner café & information kiosk



Left: Plan of one edge of the garden, where there is a walkway and service strip. It reveals the articulated interface between the new and existing portions of the neighbourhood.

Below: An elevation of the service strip, showing the renovated façades of houses in the background.

Bottom: The schematic site plan of the first phase of construction of the garden indicates the way in which the whole fits into the existing urban fabric, and the principal axis through the garden.



reducing energy consumption for air conditioning.

The third approach to the use of history as a design criterion lies somewhere between the first two. On seeing a design based on such an approach, the observer may find it hard to believe that there is an obvious reference to history, either visually or conceptually. Rasem Badran is one of the architects utilizing this third approach. The secret of his success is that he treats extrapolated principles and visual icons equally. The sole criterion with which he validates components from either approach is rational thought<sup>1</sup>; for every component, whether visual or conceptual, must prove to be of relevance to the design at hand, either through its historic *raison d'être* or through a newly acquired function that suits the project. An example of his work is the architecture of Queen Aliya Airport Estate. However, architects who use this approach are rare and may not maintain a consistent

standard because of the difficulty involved in the process of abstraction. In this approach, the architect should maintain a fine balance between visual and conceptual abstraction in a manner that should not tend to one of the two ends. This is not usually the case. Arab architects such as Rasem Badran usually tilt their projects towards the first approach, while Westerners practising in the Arab world, like Henning Larsen (a recent recipient of the Aga Khan Award for his Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riyadh), are more inclined towards the second approach.<sup>2</sup>

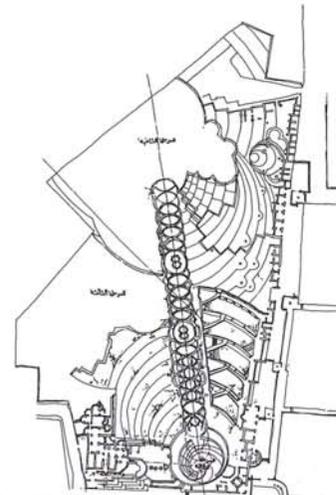
Despite the fact that architects who use the three approaches utilize past architecture in various ways, they all regard history in a similar fashion. It is seen as a static entity rather than as a dynamic process. History, in this sense, is codified into a series of 'inspiring icons' to be readily recycled in current design. In the first approach, this perception is

evidently strong since history is primarily captured in its physical form, and further strengthened by the availability of nineteenth century paintings that depict scenes from the traditional fabric. A familiar artist in this respect is David Robert. In the second case, principles are extrapolated and the question then becomes how to embody these principles in new forms and modern technology. Architects may even consult works like

1 Taking what only proves to be valid from history for current purposes is an approach that is captioned by John Hancock as scientific in his theory of precedent. See his article *Between History and Tradition: Notes Toward a Theory of Precedent in Precedent and Invention*. Harvard Architecture Review 5, 1986.

2 This analytical survey of current practice in the Arab world was an outcome of research with Professor William Porter at MIT.

3 Hakim, Basim *Arab-Islamic Cities: Building and Planning Principles*, KPI, London, 1986.



that of Basim Hakim,<sup>3</sup> attempting to learn about these principles. This misuse of sources has led to the assumption that the past is a dead monolith rather than a 'living' organism.

How past architecture can be seen as a living, inspiring process is a question that needs to be answered from history. In Abdel Halim's approach, the architect seeks from history a design attitude and not an end product. This philosophy is adopted in his garden design for children.

Aiming to stimulate a child's awareness towards his/her cultural systems, Abdel Halim found that nothing could be more rewarding than taking the powerful image of neighbouring Ibn Tulun's minaret and using it as a conceptual icon. Therefore he based the formal layout of the garden on a geometric study of the helix which had the axial orientation of an existing palm tree promenade. By this he alluded to 'conceptual' abstraction. At

the beginning of the promenade is a large fountain associated with stepped terraces, thus allowing for an intimate relationship between the child and water. Close to the fountain and beside the main entrance is the atelier for children, with an outdoor exhibition area. At the end of the promenade is a museum for children. In between lies a puppet-show theatre<sup>4</sup>. The dominant image of those individual buildings is through a series of arches, transitional zones, domes and vaults, resonating with the numerous historic mosques and schools in the vicinity. In this case he employs 'visual' abstraction. Abdel Halim has thus utilized history through conceptual and visual abstraction simultaneously. Had he ended his design development at this point, we could have categorized his project as being of the third approach, but this was not the case.

4 These are elements of phase 1 of the project.

On the occasion of laying the cornerstone of the project, Abdel Halim constructed a full-scale model out of canvas representing the geometry and configuration of the scheme. He then engaged hundreds of school children in a festive atmosphere, dancing and singing on the ground of the project. During the ceremony, guest officials and the surrounding community found themselves in front of a real life situation, rather than looking at drawings and charts. Thus actual communication between them and Abdel Halim was established, allowing for creative decisions regarding the subsequent development of the project.

The idea of a ceremony recalls a similar tradition that was associated with the completion of a school/mosque complex during Mamluk times. The process and the scheduling of the two ceremonies, old and new, differ, but what they have in common is that they both announce effectively the emergence of the project into the cultural system. In our case, the garden's ceremony marked the beginning of a design process; accretionary in nature, and interactive with the community. Consequently, Abdel Halim transcends the boundaries of the third approach and merges into a 'living' process of design philosophy.

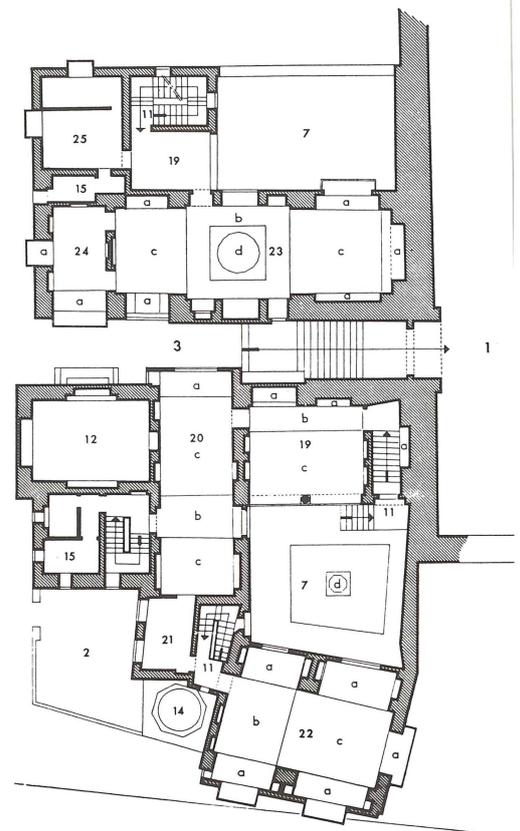
He began by adding a series of services at the north-western side of the garden in response to the events of the ceremony. These services are: a corner café, a small mosque, an ablution fountain, stores and workshops. He then adjusted the geometry of the project in relation to the surrounding streets of the neighbourhood, taking into consideration this added layer of services. Thus we have, for example, the portal of the mosque facing the entrance of a street. He also pedestrianized the side street (Abu al-Dahab) in order to create a practical link between the service strip and the abutting neighbours. Once his idea had germinated and included the side street pedestrianization, he worked on overruling the expropriation law that had prevented the renovation of the houses overlooking this street, since 1949! On reaching a compromise with legislative officials in this matter, he restored confidence to the community; after which they could safely upgrade their houses without threat from the law. Consequently, the entire street façade was renovated in less than a month!

The accretionary nature of his decisions is not only manifested at an urban level but architecturally as well. During construction, Abdel Halim may apply further design readjustments that could make his buildings more responsive to the surrounding milieu. In the atelier, for example, after having the walls of a room

*Right: The ground floor plan of the Kiridliya House (17th century) in Cairo illustrates the traditional manner in which structures grew by accretion. The reception room, or qa'a, is of a regular shape, with its axis shifted in order to be in tune with the street (no 22). It represents a formal layout and the first step in the accretion process. A staircase (no 11) and the courtyard (no 7) absorb the shifted axis of the qa'a, thus representing successive steps in the process. Service areas assume any shape, depending on site peculiarities. Note that the house fused with a neighbouring one through a bridge in a later period, reflecting a further step of accretion. (From Revault, J. and Maurey, B. Palais et Maisons du Caire du XVe and XVIIIe siècle, vol III, CNRS, Paris, 1979).*

erected, he found that it would be better without a roof to allow for the rewarding effect of moonlight. On another occasion, after building a sitting area, he noticed the visually appealing view of Ibn Tulun from its location, so he framed the view with an arch and named this sitting area after Ibn Tulun. "You have to have courage to capture moments like those", said Abdel Halim. What helps him in this accretion of design decisions is building with stone. Because it depends on carving, the interaction between this material and the craftsman becomes so immediate that it allows adjustments and adaptations to be made easily. In this manner, it grants the architect flexibility and spontaneity in decision-making.

The accretionary nature of Abdel Halim's design process has led to a plan that contains two layers of design thought. The first is the formal layout inspired by a helix pattern whereby the components of the project are organized around the palm tree promenade. The second is a circumstantial layout resulting from the ceremonial process. The latter has been aligned with the side street, causing readjustment of the first layout. Those two layers in the design process recall a similar attitude in history. In traditional Cairene houses, there are two levels in design thought. The first level takes into consideration the *qa'a* (the reception/ living room) of the house, that is provided with best orientation and a regular shape; while at a second level, service areas are of lesser importance and literally take any shape, depending on site circumstances. What exists here is a design process that perceives spaces as autonomous entities which come into existence through accretion of design decisions, irrespective of the final layout of the house. Consequently, elements of one house may have more than one orientation at the time of construction,



*Above right: Partial view of the puppet theatre in the now public garden.*

*Right: A view from the garden showing a section of the service strip.*

and during expansion or sub-division of its spaces through time<sup>5</sup>. Thus what Abdel Halim experienced from history is not an end product or a formal idea but a *process* of design that was inaugurated by a living event, the ceremony. With this design attitude he attempted to 'defrost' history.

The final outcome is an architecture that evokes a feeling of intimacy, that ties the human perception of space to the surrounding milieu. It is this itching instinct which we usually have on walking through a Cairene Mamluk school or house, that the past must indeed have a 'living' message for us.

<sup>5</sup> For further information on this design approach, see Jameel Akbar, *Accretion of decisions: A Design Strategy in Theories and Principles of Design in the Architecture of Islamic Societies*. The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard and MIT Cambridge 1988.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

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