ITALIAN PARTICIPATION IN DESIGN COMPETITIONS IN EGYPT

The design competitions organized by the government of developing Egypt between the second half of the nineteenth century and the 1930s attracted a great number of Italian architects, engineers, designers, developers, and entrepreneurs. Some of them decided to establish their practice in Egypt; others simply took part in the most important competitions or collaborated at a distance with on-site developers, often of Italian origin.

Architectural literature has recently given some space to the Italian contribution to the development of Egypt, but information on design competitions - and especially on Italians participating in them - remains scarce and often approximate, jeopardizing any attempt to further research on the subject.

The Italian architectural reviews of the time - the most common medium for advertising international competitions - neglected or completely ignored Egyptian contemporary architecture, even when it was realized by Italians. It was a strange attitude indeed, when we consider that, especially in the 1920s, design reviews gave increasing space to the Italian colonies in northern Africa, while Egypt, regardless of the continuing cultural exchanges with Italy, was with very few exceptions disregarded.

This paucity of information can be attributed, aside from ever present political reasons, to the architectural trends of the time - Italian architects practicing abroad somehow had a reputation in their mother country for producing outdated designs, far from the latest architectural debate. Buildings that had just been completed in Africa were even sometimes published as bad examples: "It is exactly this architecture that we shouldn’t allow to be built in those countries,” reported Architectura of a Banco di Roma advertisement showing three of its branches in eastern Africa.

The first competition we know of was organized for the design of the opera house of Alexandria (fig. 1). In 1857 the Florentine banker C. Biagini decided to invest in the construction of a theater and several adjoining buildings. In 1858 the general counselor of Tuscany A. De Rossetti introduced the board of trustees (composed of P. Pasquini, Cassavetti, and Biagini) to the viceroy Mohammed Said, who approved both company and plan. The architects Antonio Corazzi, Mariano Falchini, and two other unknown participants won the following competition exaequo, but a disagreement among the trustees blocked construction.

The winners had some previous experience in theater design: Falchini had designed a theater for Campi Bisenzio, near Florence; Corazzi, himself the son of a theatrical producer, had designed various theaters before, especially in the last years of his practice. His project clearly showed his background at the Regia Accademia delle Belle Arti di Disegno of Florence, where he was educated at a time of neo-classical inspiration and an absolute rejection of Baroque decor.

in the academy.

One of the best examples of the numerous Italian projects entered in Egyptian competitions is the 1895 contest for the Museum for Egyptian Antiquities in Cairo. Out of 100 entries, 73 were entered by Italian architects, many of them living in Egypt. Among the participants were prominent figures in the Italian architectural scene of the time, such as Giuseppe Sebastiano Locati. However, the first prize went to a Frenchman Marcel Dourgnon, who designed a classical building heavily inspired by Graeco-Roman architecture blended with some typically Egyptian decoration. Following the competition, the commission to rehabilitate and expand the building went to the Italian contractors Francesco Zaffani and Giuseppe Garozzo. After a regular tendering process, the Garozzo company was also chosen for the construction of the Umberto I Hospital in Cairo. Its design competition, organized by the Società di Beneficenza of Cairo in January 1901, was awarded, among the eleven submissions, to a project called “Pro Patria” by the Italian architect Luigi Tosi. However, unlike the other open competitions, only Italian architects and engineers living in Egypt were invited to enter. The construction works were completed in 1903 under the direction of the engineers Tutti and Carlo Virgilio Silvagni. Voluntary donations and contributions to the interior design came from renowned furniture craftsmen such as the Furino and the Jacovelli brothers, from decorators like Riccardone, as well as from various painters and sculptors.

A few years later, a similar competition was held in Alexandria for the design of the Benito Mussolini Italian Hospital. Again, the Società di Beneficenza organized the competition and took the first steps toward its realization: in 1906, the society bought a lot in the salubrious area of Hadara, and around 1913 the Italian Consul Naselli invited Italian architects and engineers living in Egypt to enter the competition. The winner was Giacomo Alessandro Loria. The Ministry of Public Health gave its approval from Rome, and the construction firm of Almagni won the tender. Work began on 22 May 1922; the hospital was inaugurated on 25? 1925.

In 1914, the Cairo University Board of Trustees held an international design competition for its new campus. The winner was the architect Ernesto Verrucci Bey, who had been working for a network of wealthy Cairo clients before being appointed Chief Architect of the Royal Palaces under King Fuad I. However, when the First World War broke out, construction for the university administration and annexes for the departments of physics, chemistry, zoology, mineralogy, anatomy, etc., were suspended.

The economic development of Egypt favored the growth of banks, and real estate and finance companies in cities throughout Egypt, the headquarters of which were sometimes built following open design
1923. Design competition for the MiXT justice court at Cairo, by Alfonso ManesCalco.
DESIGN COMPETITION FOR THE NEW LIBRARY IN ALEXANDRIA, EGYPT. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FLOATING PALACE OF PTOLEMY IV.
PROJECT OF THE LUDOVICO MICARA TEAM.
competitions. The 1904 competition for the Credito Fondiario Egiziano Headquarters in Cairo was awarded to the architect Carlo Prampolini; the bank director Charles Beyler liked the project so much that he commissioned the design for his Italian Renaissance-style villa in Garden City to the same architect. The G. Groppi building, completed in 1924 by the construction company of Ernesto De Faro, then decorated in Art Deco by the Barbieri Company, became one of the most popular and fashionable clubs in Cairo; the winning design was entered by the architect Giuseppe Mazza. Giacomo Alessandro Loria won first prize in the competition for the Sciarabari Pasha Palace in Alexandria, a monumental eight-story building built in 1925 by the construction firm of Ugo Dessberg. In the same year, he also won design competitions for the luxurious Misr Bank Headquarters and for the Sassoon Shoet Palace in Helioziopolis. In 1928 the architect Riccardo Smith, after another competition, was chosen for the Mouassat building on the corniche of Alexandria. Building activity in Egypt increased continuously throughout the 1920s, and the number of international architecture competitions increased proportionally. Among the most important were the competitions for the Monument for the Defense of the Suez Canal, the courthouse and a mosque in Cairo, the master plan of Smouha, and the Museum of Greek and Roman Art in Alexandria. In 1921 the Egyptian government held a design competition for the Kasr El Aini Hospital in Cairo (1,225 beds). The review Architettura e Arti Decorative openly disapproved of the selection criteria and urged Italian architects not to participate.

The international design competition for the new courthouse in Cairo grew out of a series of events beginning in 1907, the year of the approval of the first project by Carlo Prampolini, at that time a delegate of the Ministry of Public Works. His project, based on the design of two separate buildings (the court and the Cassa del Debito Pubblico) on a large lot capable of holding future extensions, was dropped during a time of financial crisis in Egypt. In 1910, because of the precarious condition of the old courthouse at Ataba elKhadra square, the proposal to extend the building remained unrealized. The idea of constructing a whole new building was suggested again in 1923 during a period of national economic growth. Despite a project proposal by the English architect E. G. Newmum, an open competition was finally organized in 1923: the jury - composed, among others, by the Italian architects Antonio Lasciac and Ernesto Verrucci - assessed 35 projects, 11 of which were designed by Italian architects practicing in Egypt. The winning project was submitted by the architectural office of L. Azema, M. Edrei, and J. Hardy; it retained Prampolini’s idea of two separate structures. However, the Cassa di Sconto building was finally realized in neoclassical style by the architect Alfonso Manescalco, who had already designed the Alexandria courthouse around 1886. International design competitions in Egypt reached their climax in 1925. Browsing through the Italian architecture reviews of the time, we can read of a competition for a Monument to the Defense of the Suez Canal on Lake Tinsaah in Ismailia, organized by the Universal Company of the Maritime Canal of Suez; a competition for a mosque in Cairo organized by the government of Egypt; and a competition for the master plan of the Garden City of Smouha, on the outskirts of Alexandria. The last, won by M. Clauzzer, was also entered by Antonio Lasciac (as Mercedes Volait notes), who was a member of the competition jury. In the late 1920s, another international competition for the design of the Museum of Greek and Roman Art was held by the Municipality of Alexandria. Competitions were also organized in the decorative arts, giving craftsmen, designers, painters, and sculptors the chance to contribute to the design of many Egyptian buildings. Among the most important was the competition for the decoration of the Coptic Church of Cairo dedicated to Boutros Ghali. The church, of early Christian inspiration, was designed by Antonio Lasciac in the early 1920s; the architect had suggested that the church be decorated by an Italian artist. The proposal was well received by the clients—the Boutros Ghali family, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Wa’if Ghali Pasha, Youssouf Bay, and the administrative board of the Simeiska Pasha church, who decided to organize an open competition to commission the work. Lasciac let the Associazione Artistica fra i Cultori di Architettura in Rome organize the competition. The jury, composed of the architects G. Giovannoni and G. Venturi, and the painters V. Grassi and B. Biagetti, awarded the first prize to Professor Primo Panciroli, followed by Professor Nenni from Trieste.

Beginning in the early 1930s, Italian reviews ceased to publish announcements of design competitions in Egypt. In fact, not by chance in those years Italian activity in Egypt declined noticeably in all sectors, including public administration. The loosening of the political relationship between Italy and Egypt discouraged Italian emigration to North Africa, which reached its lowest figure in 1935. The death of Fuad in 1936, and the treaty between England and Egypt of the same year, established English supremacy in Egypt for the next eighteen years, marking the virtual end of Italian participation in the development of Egypt. We have to wait until the 1990s before we can talk about design competitions in Egypt again. One of the most important architecture competitions of the past decade was held in Alexandria for the design of the Biblioteca Alexandrina; it was won by the international team Snohetta. The Italians followed in second place with a project by Manfredo Nicoletti, and an honorable mention to Ruggero Lenci. Among the many Italians who
entered the Alexandria Library competition, we should mention the Ludovico Micara team (fig. 2), to which my friend Paolo gave his wise collaboration.

*Written in memory of Paolo Cuneo*

Otello Iolita

**Notes**

1. On Italian architecture in Egypt, see *Environmental Design*, 9-10, 1999; see also the articles and essays by Mercedes Volait. The architectural reviews of the time only published a number of schools by C. Busiri Vici, various projects by M. Avena, and one building by G. Falorni.

2. See “Commenti e Polemiche,” in *Architettura. Rassegna di Architettura*, 6, June 1936. Another example is the following excerpt from an article by the architect F. Reggiori: “Modern architecture should have developed a colonial style. How did it happen that this African city grew by imitating late-19th century French architecture instead? Even Cairo’s master plan was heavily influenced by Marseille.” A caption reads: “A very peculiar example of the most insipid European architecture transplanted to Africa: family tombs in the Arab cemetery of Cairo. Where has tradition gone?” See Ferdinando Reggiori, “Architettura coloniale e architettura coloniale,” in *Rassegna di Architettura* 14-15 (1936): 339-42. It is easier to find information on design competitions in publications devoted specifically to Egypt, most of them social-political magazines, or in advertisements; see L. A. Balboni, *Gli italiani nella Civiltà Egitiana del secolo XIX*, 3 vols. (Alexandria: Pubblicata italoegiziana, 1906); *Annuario degli italiani in Egitto* (Alexandria, 1933); *Costruttori italiani all’estero. I continuatori* (Milan, 1939).

3. The company, the subscriptions, and the events of the competition are thoroughly documented in the elegant book, *Statuti della Società del Teatro “Mohamed Said” in Alessandria d’Egitto, dedicato a S.A.I. e R. Leopoldo II, Granducato di Toscana, only one copy of which existed in Egypt in 1906. This is the source for Balboni (1906, 2: 75-76). For the competition drawings, see Riccardi di Architettura 5 (1932), fig. 5; Miscellanea Corazzi (Rome: Biblioteca Casanatense), cart. 602, 694, 704; A. Volphysi (Rome: Biblioteca Casanatense). cart. 3, tav. 12, 25-28, 33-37, 44.

4. Antonio Corazzi (Livorno 1792 Florence 1877) received his degree from the Accademia delle Belle Arti di Disegno di Florence in 1816. After an internship in the architectural office of G. del Rosso, with whom he designed the Arena Goldoni in Florence, he moved to Warsaw in 1818, where he worked as a general contractor and director of the School of Architecture and Planning, in addition to designing almost all the monumental buildings of the city before 1831. He returned to Florence in 1847, where he continued practicing mainly in urban design. See Pietro Bieganski, “Architettura di Antonio Corazzi,” in Palladio 14 (1968): 131-36; M. Bencivenni, “Corazzi Antonio,” in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 28; Carlo Cresti, Luigi Zangheri, *Architetti e ingegneri nella Toscana dell’Ottocento* (Florence, 1978), p. 69. St. V. Tombszkov, “Corazzi Antonio,” in Ulrich Thieme and Felix Becker, *Allgemeines Lexicon der Bildenden Künste* 7 (1889). Mariano Falconi (Camps Bisenzio 1804 Florence 1885) entered the Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze in 1820. He worked in the architecture offices of G. Cacioli and P. Poccianti until 1828, then continued his Beau-Arts studies at the Accademia, where he won a triennial architecture award and a visiting scholarship to Rome in 1832. From 1835 to 1841, he was involved in the Scrittio delle Regie Fabbriche di Firenze, before working as an architect’s assistant beginning in 1840. In 1856 he was appointed architect of the Direzione Generale dei Lavori and delle Acque e Strade e delle Fabbriche Civili dello Stato. He also joined the Genio Civile of the Italian Kingdom. Falconi, far from being a marginal figure on the Italian architectural scene of the time, was a central figure; an eclectically architect, he pursued all possible styles, adapting himself to the diverse situations and building typologies. See Carlo Cresti and Luigi Zangheri, *Architetti e ingegneri nella Toscana dell’Ottocento* (Florence, 1978), pp. 88-89, figs. 74-77; M. Cozzi, “Falconi, Mariano,” in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 44: 277-80; G. Battelli, “Falcini, Mariano,” in Thieme-Becker, *Allgemeines Lexicon der Bildenden Künste* 11: 213-14.


6. On 14 December 1900, the Administrative Board of the Società voted for the construction of a new hospital. Following the deliberation, the company bought a 15,000 sq. meter lot in the Abbassia district, and invited the Italian community in Egypt to contribute to the funds needed for the construction. The competition jury was composed of the architect Alfonso Manescau and the engineers Giudo Manusardi and Guido Maroni, all members of the administrative board of the company. See Balboni, *Gli italiani nella Civiltà Egitiana del secolo XIX*, pp. 251-58, 267.

7. After 1903, new funds were raised for the extension of the hospital, a large surgery department designed by the architect Paolo Cacchioni Donnini in 1906, a chapel, and two other 1933 additions designed by Achille Patricolo, an architect renown in Egypt as Chairman of the Conservation Committee for Arab Art and Monuments for 18 years. See Angelo Sammarco, *Gli italiani in Egitto* (Alexandria, 1937), pp. 170-71; Archivio Storico Diplomatico, Ministero Affari Esteri (ADSMAE), Affari politico Egitto, file 24-8 (1937); Chiara; ed., *Costruttori italiani all’estero. I continuatori* (Milan, 1939), p. 78; Balboni, *Gli italiani nella Civiltà Egitiana del secolo XIX* 1: 112, 3: 251-58. Both the Furino and the Jacovelli brothers, originally from Puglia, went to Egypt in the early 1860s, where they worked in the most famous furniture atelier of the time, that of Giuseppe Parvis. After starting their own company, they worked on the most important buildings in Cairo and Alexandria. The company of S. Riccalbone was one of the most renown firms for Arab style decorations. It mainly worked on luxurious villas in the capital. See Balboni, 3: 353-57; *Annuario 1933*, pp. 208-11.

8. Giacomo Alessandro Loria (Mansoua 1879?) was one of the most famous architects in Alexandria. He started his career as a draftsman at the Alexandria Municipality before enrolling in the architecture school in Turin. Although he never obtained his degree, after his return to Egypt he designed a great number of public and private buildings (hospitals, banks, apartment buildings, and villas). In fact, many well-established professionals in Egypt never received the degree necessary to practice. See Mohamed Fouad Awad, “Italian influence on Alexandria’s Architecture, 1834-1895,” in *Environmental Design*, 910, 1992, p. 83; Chiara, ed., *Costruttori italiani all’estero. I continuatori* (Milan, 1939), pp. 80, 84, 86. The construction company of the engineer Edoardo Armita worked on important projects in both Italy and Egypt. In the latter, her most renown works are the Corniche - a monumental promenade along the sea, lined with the most important buildings of Alexandria - and the extension of the west port. See Lucio Mariani, “Cenni necrologici, 1921,” in *ATTi della insigne Accademia Nazionale di San Luca* 4 (1914-31): 159. For the hospital, see C. Sierra, “L’ospedale Benito Mussolini di Alessandria d’Egitto,” in *Le vie d’Italia e del Mondo 2* (1933): 173; Istituto di Studi Romani, *Roma e l’Antico Egitto. L’Italia e l’Egitto Moderno*, p. 39.

9. Ernesto Verruzzi (Foro 1874-1945) obtained his degree from the Accademia di Belle Arti di Modena, Italy. He moved to Alexandria in 1897, where he worked at the Graeco-Roman Museum and at the Ministry of Public Works. He started his own independent practice in 1907. In 1917 he became architect of the Ope Pie Latiniani and Member of the Conservation Committee for Arab Art and Monuments. He was appointed Chief Architect of the Royal Palace from 1919 to 1936. He went back to Italy for a short time, before returning to Egypt in 1938. His most important projects are the Royal Palace of Abcin in Cairo, the Royal Palace of Koubbeh, and the Khedive Ismail Monument in Alexandria. See Riccardo Giglio, “L’architetto Ernesto Verrucci-Rey e le sue opere in Egitto (Ascoli Piceno, 1947, update of the original 1941 edition).

11. Giuseppe Mazza, pupil of Antonio Lasciac, worked in Cairo and Alexandria, where he designed a great number of buildings in the 1920s and 1930s, usually in neoclassical style. See Chiesa, ed., Costruttori italiani all’estero. I continuatori, pp. 84, 86, 88.


13. The competition was divided into two phases: the preliminary one was open to everyone; the final phase was limited to 12 architects, 6 of them competition winners and the other 6 chosen by the Egyptian government according to the proposal of the architect and a member of the jury named Simpson. In reaction to the competition rules, Architettura e Arti Decorative 2 (1921): 298, wrote: "This competition seems to be organized in a rather odd way. An English architect, most probably or rather certainly a man of great honesty and excellent profession, will freely choose 6 architects among his trustworthy acquaintances to compete with the 6 best according to the results of the preliminary competition open to all. He will also be the final judge of the competition. This architect will, then, pick both the competitors and the winner by himself. Such a procedure does not comply with common sense, let alone a serious and honest competition. Thus, we emphasize the fact and urge all Italian architects not to take part in the competition not only to save their time and energy, but also as a sign of protest against such mechanisms."

14. The architecture office was founded in Paris in 1921 by three former schoolmates at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. After the competition results, they moved to Egypt for a few years, where they designed and built many buildings and villas in Cairo and Alexandria, such as the S. Marco College. See Mercedes Voltai, "Egypt," in Jean-Paul Midant, Dictionnaire de l'architecture du XX siècle (1989), pp. 264-65. On the design competition, see Architettura e Arti Decorative 3 (1923): 142, and 5 (1923): 239; Paul Houriet, "Les divers Palais du Tribunal Mixte du Caire," in Les Juridictions Mixtes d'Egypte 1876-1926, Livre d'Or (Alexandria, 1926), pp. 307-47.

15. Antonio Manescaiolo (Giuliano 1853?) received his degree in architecture from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts of Paris in 1873. He moved to Alexandria in 1883. From 1884 to 1904 he worked as Chief Architect of the Cairo Department of Public Works. His most important projects are the Museum of Arab Art, the Cassa Pubblica in Cairo, and the courthouse of Alexandria. See Balboni, Gli italiani nella Civiltà Epigiana del secolo XIX, 2: 109; 3: 252, 259; Chiesa, ed., Costruttori italiani all’estero. I continuatori, p. 67.

16. The winner of the competition, Michele Roux Spitz, designed a 40-meter-high red-granite monument composed of two massive pillars standing on two long terraces reached through a slightly sloped ground. See Architettura e Arti Decorative 9 (1925): 142: C.C., "Monumento per la Difesa del Canale di Suez a Ismailia (Egitto)," in Architettura e Arti Decorative 94 (1926): 150, 164; "Concorso per il Monumento commemorativo...Arch. M. Roux Spitz (vincitore)," in ibid., pp. 16972. The Suez Canal Company, founded by De Lesseps in 1858, undertook the planning and construction of the city of Port Said, as well as the construction of the canal itself (1859-69), according to the project of Luigi Negrelli (Trento, 1799-1858).


18. ibid., 8 (1925): 376.

19. The Museum of Greek and Roman Art was founded in 1892 by the Italian archaeologist Giuseppe Boffi. In 1895 it was moved to the west wing of the building, which has been extended many times since then. See Architettura e Arti Decorative, 1929, p. 339.

20. "Fanciulli imagined that, on the walls of the great nave above the colonnade, were various scenes of the life of Christ; that on the wall of the apse was the Virgin glorifying Christ, and at the bottom of the scene the Apostles appeared. On the windows of the great nave glorified archangels were depicted. The motif of the angels in the S. Zenone chapel in S. Prassede is reproduced on one of the vaults, except that a large Coptic cross replaces the central Cipico. We must acknowledge that, despite the quick sketching, the artist succeeded in giving a realistic impression of both the groups and the single scenes, thanks to excellent drawing skills and colors..." See "Concorso per la decorazione di una nuova chiesa copta al Cairo," in Architettura e Arti Decorative 4 (1923): 180. For the paintings and frescoes, see the photographic album (Cairo, Del Vecchio) compiled by Antonio Lasciac (Cairo-Egitto), pp. 1417, in the Biblioteca dell'Accademia di San Luca in Rome.
