



*Fayoum (Gouache by Hassan Fathy).*

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**A TRIBUTE TO HASSAN FATHY**

Hassan Fathy died in his sleep on 30 November, 1989, and the final chapter in his long and remarkable life has now been closed. During his professional career, which began with his graduation from the University of Cairo in 1926, he was caught up in the end of an era, as well as the emergence of Egypt as a modern state. He lived through occupation, world war, revolution, and the beginnings of a search for a national identity, within a new international order. Because of his deep love for his country, as well as his rare ability to place momentous changes objectively within a wider historical pattern, he did his utmost to assist in that search. Throughout his life, he struggled to ensure that this new identity which continues to evolve, would reflect the best elements of both the past and the present, in order to truly express the cultural richness and complexity that is the essence of Egypt rather than the foreign materialistic values that are completely alien to it. His efforts were tragically misunderstood by the majority of his countrymen, as well as by others throughout the developing world, because to those without his wider perspective, he seemed to stand in direct opposition to the kind of progress deemed to be so vitally important in the three decades following World War II. He was considered by the people who were empowered to implement his ideas to be a hopelessly sentimental romantic. Even worse, he was perceived as a dangerous iconoclast by building contractors who saw his calls for self-help housing and mud-brick architecture as a direct threat to their livelihood. The active resistance to his projects that he frequently alluded to, as well as the numerous accounts of the destroyed careers of those who did believe in him, were both very real.

Because of his unshakeable belief in the validity of tradition, he also stood virtually alone against the Modern Movement that began to gather strength on the Continent just as he started to practise architecture, and he remained a lone, prophetic voice in the wilderness, speaking against it as it began to spread. Any suggestion that Hassan Fathy shared the views of this movement is an affront to his principles and everything

he stood for; yet it would be equally inaccurate to assume that his opposition to it implied any doubts on his part about the important role that science and technology must play in architecture. His most vehement criticism of Modernism, in all of its permutations, was its total disregard for human needs and social values, and he held it directly accountable for the wholesale destruction of long-established cultural patterns that such disregard has now encouraged. He also focused on what he considered to be another major failure of Modernism by constantly pointing out its inability to fulfil a self-declared mandate to derive an architecture that would provide clear answers to both physical and environmental laws. Examples of this failure are now legion. In dramatic contrast to the inability of modern architecture to both understand and reflect these unbendable laws, Fathy's own work stands as an eloquent tribute to the seemingly endless degrees of expression offered to those who both accept and work within them, in a knowledgeable, respectful and sensitive way. The form of this architecture, rather than being simply a highly stylized outcome of functional and structural requirements, as it is in Modernist doctrine, becomes primarily answerable to natural forces, as the best vernacular construction has always been. As Fathy himself once said in a lecture at Dar al Islam:

*"If the architect does not respect the God-made environment, he commits a sin against God. The God-made environment is the landscape; the atmosphere, the flora, the fauna, and the human beings who live in this environment. In this God-made environment there is nothing that is inharmonious. If we become one with nature, beauty is defined as it is. Beauty, then, is obtained when form considers the forces that are working on it. It is only when man has ignored the environment and has been cut off from nature that problems arise. We must not distort any of the forces in nature."*

He not only recognized and was answerable to the dictates of the environment, but also was able to identify and give meaning to the critical connection between an appropriate design response to natural forces and human needs. He saw that this connection, in turn, has been a key factor in the different architectural expressions of various cultures, and has provided a valuable clue to the meaningful continuation of regional differences.

Instead of responding to his plea to reflect environmental and cultural variations in their work, most architects continue to indulge in the same kind of self-serving individualism that characterized the beginnings of the Modern Movement, with its several cults of personality. The profession today, however, is also confounded by a wave of pluralism that seems to be an adjunct to the refraction that has beset all other aspects of contemporary life, resulting in a bewildering kaleidoscope of styles that now answer to fashion rather than the physical and spiritual needs of the people they are intended to serve. Upon close examination, each of these styles is as exclusive, unresponsive and dogmatic in its own way as the Modern Movement was in the past.

As the 20th century draws to a close, it has become very clear that technology, which held such promise at the beginning of the industrial age nearly a century ago, cannot solve every problem and has instead produced many of its own. The legacy of science has ironically been an endangered world, not a better one, and as public awareness of this sobering truth has spread, the entire concept of "progress" has changed as well.

Hassan Fathy offered a world view that is built around a core of humanity rather than abstraction, and on a basis of perpetual renewal, rather than destruction. In answer to the now fashionable cry that "tough times demand tough architecture", his approach shows that tough times, instead, call for kind architecture, and that the human will can prevail. For him the continuity of life, and the tangible manifestations of the most durable values that manage to emerge out of common experience, were far more important than personal recognition. His extreme sensitivity to the lessons of the past also made him keenly aware of the fact that such expression, at its best, has inevitably taken more than one lifetime to complete. When considered in this way, his work was only a part of a cyclical process that must be left to others who follow after him to fulfil. His basic humanity, and belief in meaningful continuity, as well as the selflessness with which he incorporated each of these into his architecture, give his ideas great appeal when they are compared to the confusion, superficiality and egotism that we see around us today, because tradition,

by definition, never goes out of style. If these ideas are ever to prevail, however, his work, in its entirety, must be made available to a wider audience, in order that past misunderstandings may be corrected, and the broad scope of what he has achieved can be appreciated. As can be seen here, his writings went far beyond New Gourna and *Architecture for the Poor*, for which he was most widely known. As important as those two legacies are, they have tended to attach a label to him in the public eye, and to limit an awareness of the many other facets of this complicated, brilliant man. Solving the housing problems of those whom he called the "economic untouchables" of the world, was a concern throughout his life, but his interests ranged far wider than rural, self-help projects.

One of Fathy's most prominent disciples, who has also tasted his share of approbation and critical acclaim, once pinned up a verse from the Holy Qur'an next to a short obituary of Hassan Fathy taken from a Cairo newspaper. The obituary reflected the dismissive attitude that Fathy constantly had to endure in his own country. While this will soon be forgotten, the Sura next to it may be considered a more fitting testimonial. It reads:

"Among the Believers are men  
Who have been true to  
their covenant with God.  
Of them, some have completed  
their vow to the utmost  
and some still wait.  
But they have each never changed  
their determination in the least."

Sura xxxiii, 22-24