

Contemporary Arab Architecture

The Architects of Egypt

This is the second in a series of articles which covers the work of architects from different parts of the Arab world. This article looks at the work of contemporary Egyptian architects and the influence of Hassan Fathy. The common denominator of the architect is their search for identity and the development of new appropriate architectures.

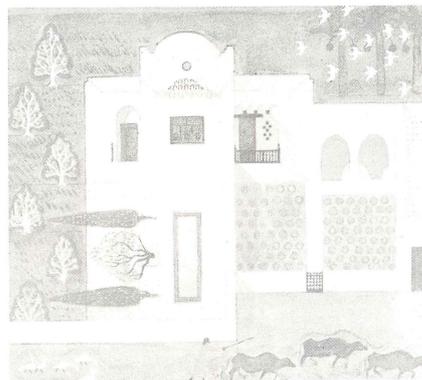
The impact ancient Egyptian civilisation made on the formation of the Western world, African culture and the Islamic heritage cannot be underestimated. But over the centuries this great heritage in architecture has been lost, and in order to re-establish these values and continue the great tradition in contemporary buildings, enormous amounts of energies will have to be invested. There is no easy way to return to the past, and especially since Egypt's past is a multi-layered heterogeneous assimilation of many influences. The present cultural revolution, nevertheless, is finding contemporary solutions based on these traditions. Young Egyptian architects today have to compete with international architectural giants from America and Europe which makes their task of preserving cultural identity and great architectural tradition an enormous challenge.

In contrast to the ancient times Egyptian architecture today is dominated by poverty and chaos and a lost identity. Egypt has to feed and house a population of 42 million people on only 4 percent of the land, 96 percent of it desert. The majority of building programmes are commissioned to architectural firms from other countries, resulting in buildings which are not only alien to the contemporary way of Egyptian life, but create serious negative implications for the future.

Egypt today is to a large extent dependant on foreign support. It is part of the Third World in the sense that it belongs neither to the Communist nor Capitalist systems. Furthermore, it lacks the resources with which it possibly could regenerate itself from the disastrous marks left by the colonial history of recent centuries. Hassan Fathy, the leading architectural and cultural reformer of contemporary Egyptian architecture, was right when in a lecture in New Delhi in 1963 he defined the situation: "There is something basically wrong with our cities and villages today. It is not merely that they have become surprisingly ugly, but that, inspite of the recent technical advances and the highly expert work of our townplanners and architect are putting into town and village planning and architectural design, every single building manages to increase that

ugliness, and every attempt to remedy the situation only underlines the ugliness more heavily."

There are no easy solution to this crisis, and those Egyptian architects like Raymond Ayub, Karim Sayed and Ahmed Sidky who in their various attempts to remedy the situation with large building programmes modelled after Western structures have not contributed to a viable solution. They only add to the chaos and confusion by not posing the basic question of what Egyptian architecture today should be. And the Egyptian government, as in all other countries, is of no help in these matters. And to further complicate the matter the frequent cooperation between foreign firms and local architects have led to other problems which have, as yet, not been recognised, analysed or understood. As a result of this situation prominent architectural and engineering firms such as the Development and Popular Housing

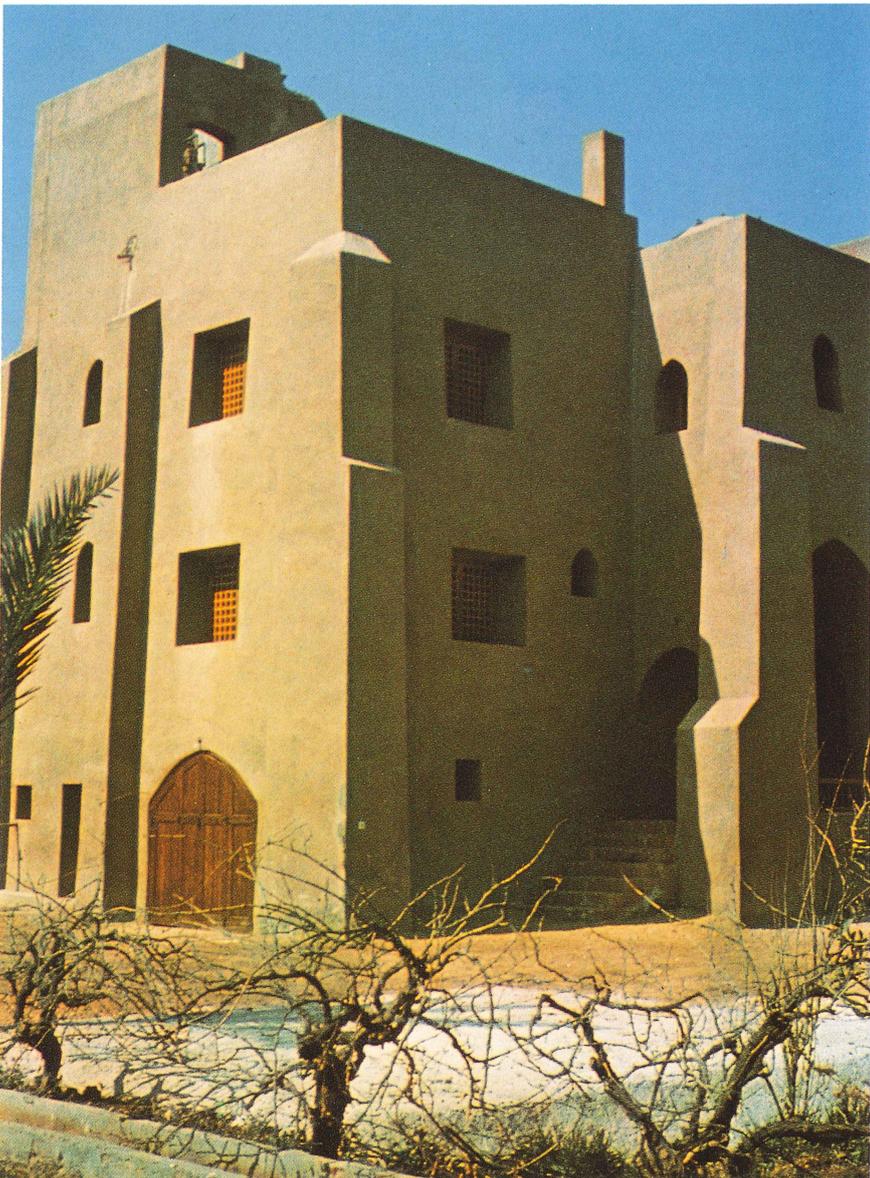
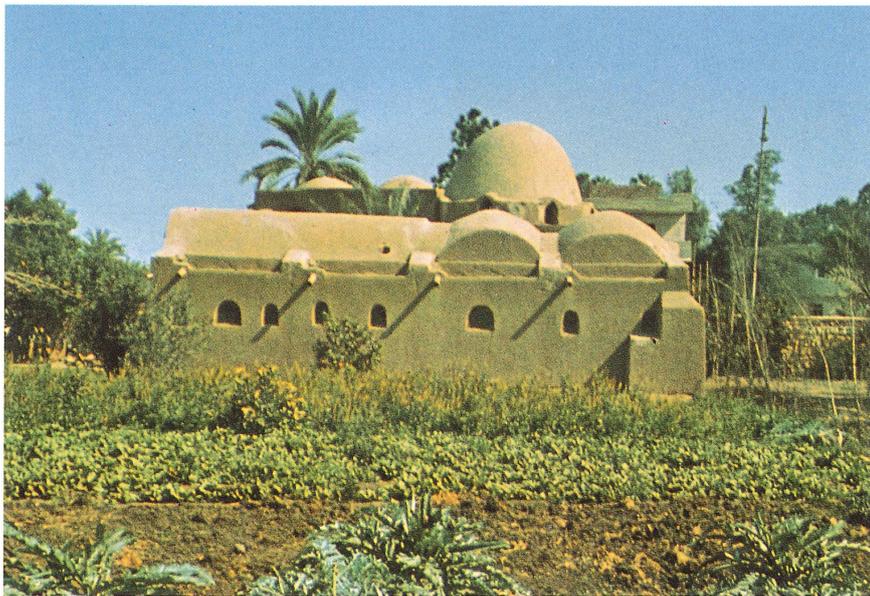


House for Abd El Razik; gouache drawing by Hassan Fathy. Photograph: C. Little/Aga Khan Awards.

Company in Cairo, under the direction of Ali Nour El Din Nassar merely construct public and commercial buildings with the help of a large number of designers who are in the twilight between alien concepts and limited solutions. The famous Thousand Dwelling Project, a housing scheme in Cairo, perpetuates the standard of Western style architecture and has little in common with Islamic patterns of life and Egyptian value systems.

It was the work and teaching of Hassan Fathy, born in 1900 in Alexandria, who signaled the turning point in the development of Egyptian architecture today, and his often rejected projects and buildings, as well as his slowly and inadequately understood philosophy broke the ground for a new departure. Fathy demanded a new unity between user, builder and architect, he advocated the concept of self-help in architecture, he reintroduced basic old Egyptian concepts of housing types, such as the courtyard house, and he envisioned architecture in harmony with the existing conditions of the people in Egyptian cities and villages. In order for building to be in

Article by Professor Udo Kultermann. Photographs courtesy of respective architectural firms unless otherwise indicated.



harmony with culture Hassan Fathy proposed that the people who are to inhabit the buildings should also help to design and build them, as was the case in the old African and Egyptian traditions. In spite of the fact that many of Fathy's own realisations were failures, due to bureaucratic interferences and general mismanagement, and the number of actual realisations remained minimal, the essence of his work reverberated throughout the Arab world and created a new challenge and awareness of architecture in general. This does not mean, however, that Hassan Fathy's ideas should not be put to the test of critical investigations.

Many Egyptian architects of Fathy's own generation and those of the following generations are more or less under the spell of this great reformer, and their works articulate in modifications and variations, as well as in non-executed projects, the first steps toward an emerging autonomous Egyptian architecture. Several of Hassan Fathy's pupils are now working in many countries of the world, such as Japan, India and Saudi Arabia. His ideas about the basic existence of architecture in the 20th Century have penetrated the international debate, and have become an important factor towards a humanisation of architecture. It will be in comparison with the work and teachings of Hassan Fathy that the Egyptian architects of today will be evaluated in this article.

Parallel to the creative activity of Hassan Fathy, but without formal education, are a number of other Egyptian architects who, like Fathy, are in line with the local traditions and create works in harmony with the cultural heritage. One of these architects is Ramses Weisa Wasef who built several houses in Harania near Cairo which resemble the traditional types of buildings of Hassan Fathy. Wasef used mud-brick as the main building material, thereby reviving the old Egyptian rural tradition. His houses are constructed with basic elementary forms such as cubes and domes, which reconstitute the simplicity and beauty of the buildings in harmony with the environment.

In contrast to these traditional and craft-oriented architects and master masons, are those architects who dominate the majority of building in Egyptian cities. They remain within the French academic tradition, which was once powerfully articulated in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo of 1902 by the French architect Marcel Dourgnon. Since then the developments of official architecture is still dominated by the same

*Left, top: Mud-brick house in Harania, near Cairo.
Left: Extended family house in Harania.
Architect: Ramses Weisa Wasef.
Photographs: Amir Abdel Kawi.*



type of foreign influence and the works of architects such as Galal Moemen, Hassan Mohamed Hassan and Hamed Kaddah have to be seen along these lines. The French educational system of the Ecole des Beaux Arts is still found in the Egyptian schools of architecture in Cairo and Alexandria and only very recently has it been challenged by "modern", but equally outdated concepts of the Bauhaus or Le Corbusier.

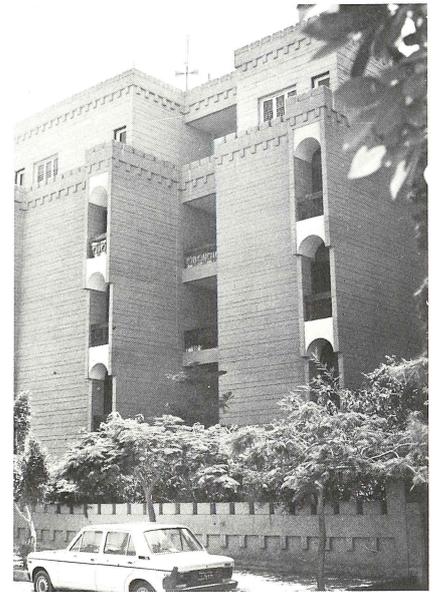
The many buildings of Galal Moemen, among them the Radio and Television Center in Cairo of 1956, and the more recent petroleum Tower in Cairo of 1977, residential, commercial and cultural buildings and factories have become very famous. His realisations have expanded as far as Libya, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. But only in a few religious buildings, such as the mosques in Cairo, Tripoli and Abu Dhabi, do Islamic features emerge. As the works of Galal Moemen, also those by Hassan Mohamed Hassan are dominated by foreign technology. His large complexes of hospitals and housing are part of the official Egyptian architectural language which has little to do with the roots of Egyptian culture. This same dependence can also be seen in the works of Hamed Kaddah who often works in collaboration with English firms such as William Halcrow and Robert Matthew, Johnson Marshal and Partners. Kaddah tries to solve building problems by applying methods of technical engineering and the language of international architecture.

Bound to shape the many new cities in Egypt, among them Sadat city, Tenth of Ramadan and King Khaled city, these vast complexes often planned by foreign experts are nearly always completely void of the elementary characteristics of the Egyptian Islamic way of life. One example of this is the master plan for the new city of Suez

which was submitted in 1976 to the Minister of Housing and Reconstruction and developed by a consortium of architects and planners, including Hamed Kaddah. The principal aim of this plan is to expand the existing population to between 750,000 and 1,000,000 by the year 2000, which in itself is a difficult task, but without serious and intensive consideration of cultural values of the Islamic tradition it can create a multitude of further problems.

Steps toward an Egyptian architectural vernacular become evident in the works of Mahmoud El Hakim. Born in 1907 in Cairo, El Hakim studied at Cairo University and Liverpool University in England and is now mainly concerned with public and domestic buildings. His most prominent realisations are the museum in Luxor and the more recent museum in Aswan. In his Luxor museum he attempted to recreate the environment for the exhibition of ancient Egyptian sculpture by creating a simple exterior with large dark interior spaces which, by the excellence of the lighting fixtures, resemble the old dark tomb interiors. The simplicity of the architectural details and the omission of motifs of international style architecture distinguish the building as a major step in the direction of a contemporary Egyptian architecture.

Another attempt to cope with contemporary problems of Egyptian architecture is seen in modern scientific approach made by architect Abdelbaki Ibrahim and his Center of Planning and Architecture Studies in Cairo. Ibrahim began his professional career after his education at Cairo University, the University of Liverpool and Durham University in England. In addition to Abdelbaki Ibrahim, who is president of the Center, other architects related to the project are Hazem Mohamed Ibrahim, Hussein Mohamed Abaza, A.K. Abdel Fattah, Sherif Ibrahim, Nohad Tolan and Abdel



Above, left: The interior of the Luxor Museum resembles the old dark tomb interiors in an effort to recreate the old in a new setting.

Architect: Mahmoud El Hakim. Photograph courtesy of the architect.

Above: An apartment building in Cairo, 1976.

Architects: Abdelbaki Ibrahim and CPAS. Photograph courtesy of the architects.

Right: Gulf University in Qatar; a prototype structure constructed in 1980.

Architect: Kamal El Kafrawi. Photograph courtesy of the architect.

Hakim Osman. The Center has done extensive work in the fields of residential architecture in Cairo as well as commercial buildings in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Libya. One of the major realisations of the Center is the planning and construction of the Cairo International Fair after a competition won in 1958 by the Egyptian firm Faramay, Ibrahim and Zeiny. The Fair buildings give ample opportunity to exhibit Egyptian products permanently in the fields of Industry, Agriculture, and Animal Husbandry. Actual construction began in 1960 and by 1964 the larger part of the buildings were completed, work was resumed after a pause in 1975 and the total complex was completed in 1980. The architectural form and meaning of the individual buildings of the Cairo International Fair can be seen as an important step in the direction of a modern Egyptian architecture while, at the same time, programmatically continuing the great Egyptian past.

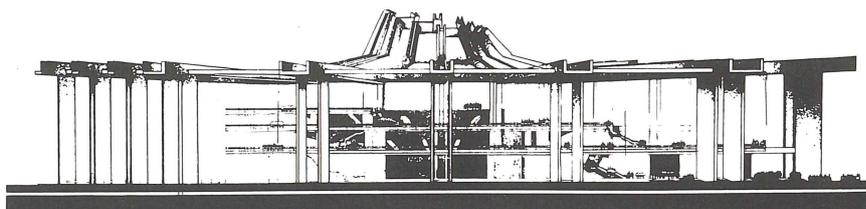
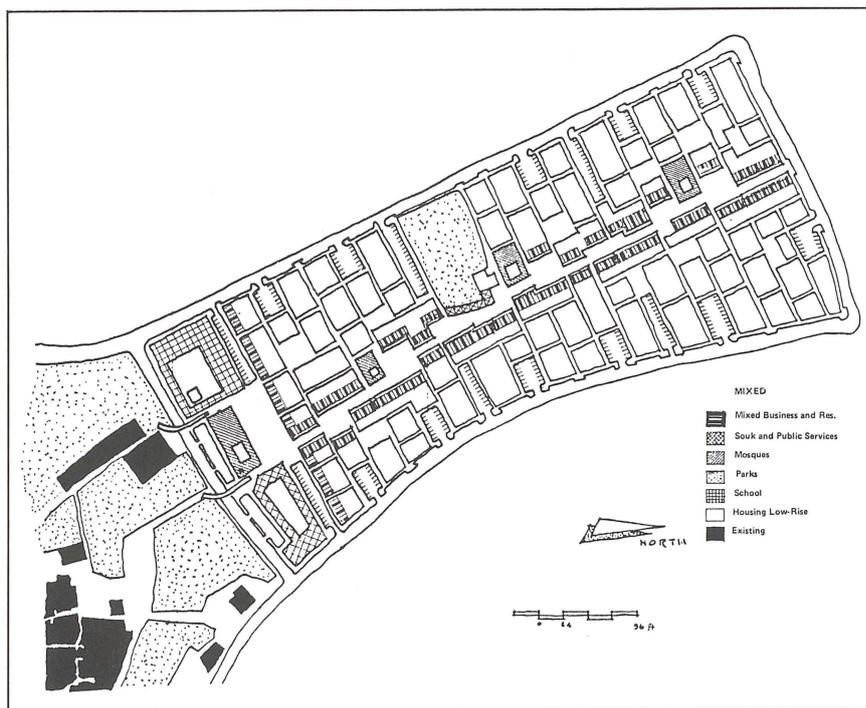
A large number of younger Egyptian architects who studied in Egypt and in Western universities are actively expressing radiant progress in Egyptian architecture beyond the borders of Egypt. Working in Japan, Canada, England and America, most of these architects are devoting their professional know-how to buildings in countries on the Arabian peninsula, predominantly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates



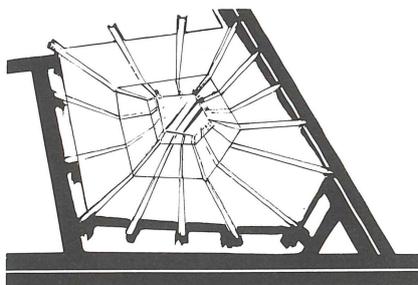
and Kuwait. For example, one of the most prominent new universities in the Arab world, the Gulf University in Doha, Qatar, was designed by the Egyptian architect Kamal El Kafrawi, whose immense project, under construction since 1980, is a gigantic scheme in which traditional values and contemporary needs are united. El Kafrawi made use of the ancient Arabian tradition of wind towers for the air conditioning systems of the total campus and explaining his goal said: "I aim to extend the way in which traditional values and lines are expressed architecturally, so as to strengthen the psychological link with the Qatari character, and ensure a sense of continuity in the modern environment." In order to change the environment it is crucial to do both at the same time: to deal with the past of a region in a legitimate way and to make it an integral part of the design in harmony with contemporary requirements. Traditional values from the past and contemporary technological requirements here are not contradictory, but harmoniously united elements. The university, which is located north of Al Markhiah, approximately 7 kilometres from Doha and 2 kilometres from the shore of the gulf, will integrate academic, cultural and recreational facilities creating a total academic community in the spirit of contemporary Islam.

After making an impact in Egypt with his works, the Egyptian architect Medhat Hassan Shaheen is now working in Ottawa, Canada. Finishing his studies in England, he became principal of his own architectural firm in Cairo between 1957 and 1967, building a small Coptic church, a detached country house in a Cairo suburb, and the 6 story Science building and library for the American University in Cairo. Though in contact with Hassan Fathy during the 1940's and 50's, Shaheen was more interested in the application of technical materials and modular design, industrialisation of construction and advanced forms in reinforced concrete and thus developed a new way to solve the problems of contemporary Egyptian architecture.

Ahmed Farid Moustapha, the Dean of the School of Architecture at the King Faisal University in Damman, Saudi Arabia, is another Egyptian architect now working outside the borders of Egypt. Born in 1939 he studied at the University of Alexandria, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts and the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. before going to Saudi Arabia where he designed buildings for the King Faisal University in Damman and for Riyadh University. His most recent and ambitious project, in collaboration with Frank J. Costa, is the plan for the village Al Jarudiya in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The model which was worked out in 1980 proposes a low-rise high-density



Elevation



Bird's eye view

Top: Al Jarudiya village, general land use plan, showing relationships of various land uses both within the extension area and the existing town.

Architects: Ahmed Farid Moustapha and Frank J. Costa. Drawing courtesy of the architects.

Above and left: Project for the National Theatre, Cairo, 1968.

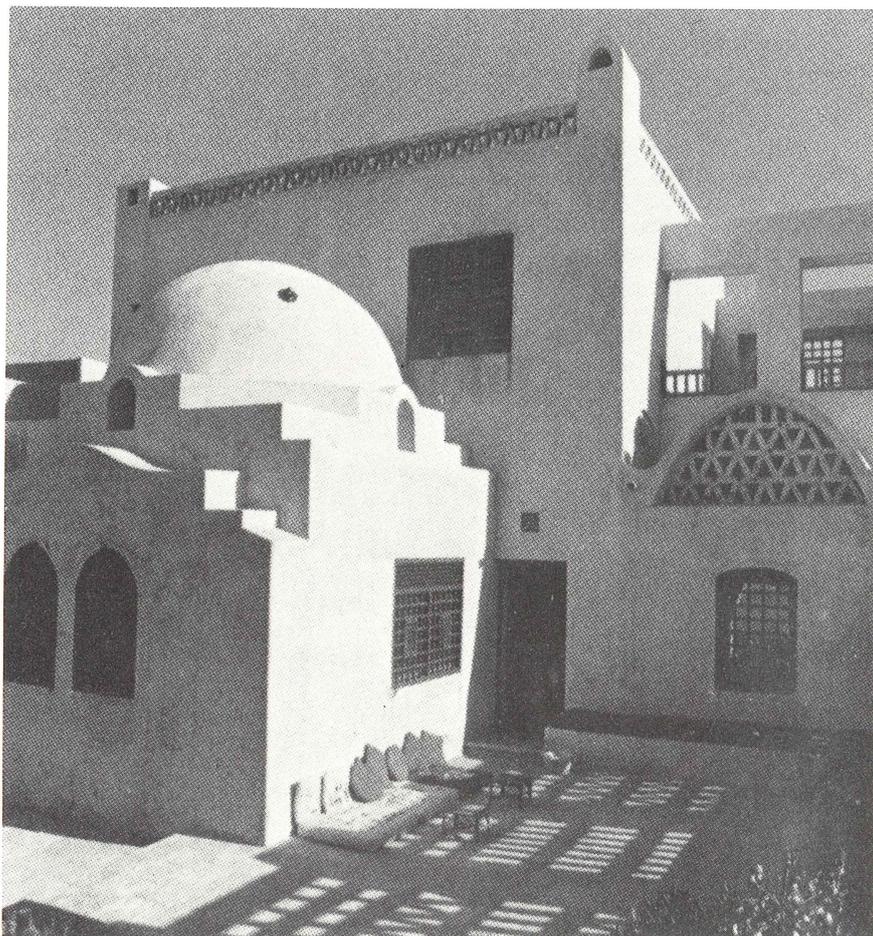
Architect: Abd-El-Rahman Ahmed Sultan. Drawings courtesy of the architect.

development which is in harmony with the Arab urban design principles. In his presentation of the project at the International Symposium on Islamic Architecture and Urbanism at Damman in January 1980, Moustapha articulated these Islamic principles, which apply to the traditional as well as the contemporary Islamic way of life: "the need for family privacy; the need to maintain and enhance a sense of neighbourhood community; the importance of introducing passive cooling features in the design and construction of the house; and the importance of providing a visual distinction between public and private spaces."

Although he divides his work between Cairo and Tokyo, the architect Abd-El-Rahman Ahmed Sultan has been fundamentally shaped by his teacher Hassan

Fathy. Born in 1947 in Cairo, Sultan studied at Ain Shams University in Cairo and received his Master and Doctor of Engineering from the Department of Architecture at Tokyo University.

The design work of his firm, A.A.S. Associates International, includes commissions in Japan, Denmark, France, Algeria, Egypt, and other countries, which are all based on his early Egyptian experiences. An outstanding project in this context is his design for the National Theatre in Cairo in 1968, as well as some of his apartment buildings in Cairo, such as his Ma'adi Apartment Building completed in 1976. Abd-El-Rahman Ahmed Sultan is also very much concerned with the theoretical foundations of his new architectural concept which will soon be published in a book: "Traditional Architectural forms in Relation to the Cosmos." Sultan's results are based on the earlier teachings of Hassan Fathy



*Halawa House, Agamy, Egypt, 1975.
Architect: Abdel-Wahed El-Wakil. Photograph: C. Little/Aga Khan Awards.*

which only today begin to be accepted as an alternative to the rigid lines of "modern architecture." The tradition of Arab architecture thus has become one of the foundations on which a human architectural expression for all countries can be created.

The youngest Egyptian architect of international reputation, who now lives in England, is Abdel Wahed El-Wakil,¹ born in 1943. Honoured by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1980 for his Halawa House in Agamy of 1975, this prestigious prize was given not only to the architect, but also to the client Mr. Esmat Ahmed Halawa, and the master mason Aladdin Moustafa. The citation of a master mason with an International Award was unusual, as never before has the traditionally craft oriented profession been recognised at an international level. Both the architect and the master mason had close connections with Hassan Fathy. Abdel Wahed El-Wakil studied with Hassan Fathy, and Aladdin Mosutafa worked with Fathy for a long period of time as a master mason. The focus given to the values of traditional design and the change in priorities are clearly demonstrated with this award.

Abdel Wahed El-Wakil's buildings, such

as his house in Agamy, his palace and commercial complex in Jeddah and his house in Cairo are examples of a new type of architecture by an Egyptian architect which reflect the changing priorities and values and reestablishes architecture as a profession in harmony with human conditions. There is hope that the works of these young architects will become models for future generations of Arab architects and that one day the Egyptian identity of contemporary architecture will be dominated with visions and realisations of this type.

But even with some hope, the overall prospect of the general situation of contemporary architecture in Egypt is bleak. Nearly all major commissions by the government and large private companies are given to either foreign architectural giants or to those Egyptian firms which follow the lead and technical applications of the foreign firms. The few creative Egyptian architects attempting to fight the alienation and exploitation by foreign capital investments are in most cases losing their fight and, as Hassan Fathy, resign or leave the country and go someplace where they can build. Because of this the human and cultural losses to Egypt, where challenges of gigantic dimensions are waiting to be solved, are enormous. Hopefully it is not too late to remedy this situation.

Udo Kultermann is Professor of Architecture at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. He is the author of numerous books and articles on modern architecture.

¹El-Wakil's work was covered in MIMAR 1. — Editors.