AZIZA FAHMY PALACE, ALEXANDRIA

FOLLOW THE CURVE OF THE Corniche leading you to Glymonopolou and Zezenia, and there it is, big, majestic and glorious. As you move a little closer, the image before your eyes may not be as glamorous, but imposing it certainly is. There, adjacent to the sea, on a slightly elevated piece of land estimated to have an area of 16,000m², surrounded by a huge desolate courtyard and a rusting, decrepit fence, stands a gaunt palace occupying no more than 5% of the location, conveying to the observer a ghost-like appearance.

Since the city of Alexandria began flourishing, particularly after the cotton boom in the late 19th century, and many wealthy families built villas and palaces in the still sandy landscape of the Ramleh area, Zezenia has always been, and still is, one of Alexandria's most salubrious residential districts. However, most of these elegant villas and palaces have vanished, giving way to large apartment blocks. A few, though, have managed to escape the architectural sacrilege that has hit the city during the last few decades, and still invoke echoes of their glorious past.

It takes exactly 11 minutes to walk around the Aziza Fahmy Palace, which often incorrectly carries the name of her sister Aisha Fahmy, who actually rented the neighbouring, but now non-existent, villa belonging to Baron Alfred de Menasse, one of Alexandria's most prominent Jews of the time. A third sister, Fatma Fahmy also had a small complex of rented out villas built not far from the Aziza Fahmy Palace. These three granddaughters of Mahmoud Pasha Fahmy certainly left their aristocratic imprints on the coastal city.

According to Architect Dr. Mohamed Awad, lecturer at Alexandria University and Principle of the Alexandria Preservation Trust, this was a summer house designed for the family of Aziza Fahmy in the late 20's or early 30's by Granato, an Italian architect mainly known for his work in Cairo. Awad is most impressed by the imposing setting of the house as a building standing in the centre of an integral lot of land. The villa was constructed at the time when the contractors Cartaregia and Dantamaro were carrying out the execution of the Corniche of Alexandria, so the sandy dunes which the facade of the palace originally overlooked, were gradually replaced by a well-paved road.

Awad classifies the architecture of the house as belonging to the Neo-Renaissance school, more specifically modelled on a Palladian design, which was a revival of classical Roman styles influencing the whole of Europe, and especially England in the early 16th century. Like many other Palladian buildings, Aziza Fahmy Palace manifests a kind of ideal abstraction, derived from a clarity and apparent simplicity of design based on careful interrelationships between elevation and plan, organised within a harmonic system of proportion. The Palace features the typical central hall plan with adjacent rooms and the classical architectural vocabulary with its balustrades, column pedestals, various classical column orders and decoration motifs in relief.

The Neo-Renaissance eclectic style of construction was en vogue during the 1920s and 30s even though Awad considers it to be a rather regressive style of building and outdated for the period, since Art Nouveau and even several International style prototypes were already spreading in Egyptian architecture. 'The design of this palace was an implanted Palladian model when Neo-Renaissance architecture was dying as a tradition and becoming obsolete in terms of a revivalist architecture', says Awad. Nevertheless, eclectic Neo-Renaissance architecture was very much an influence on elitist architecture so it represented, in some form, a language of elitism as far as this, and other houses, is concerned. We can even notice a striking similarity of style between this palace and the nearby Fatma El-Zahraa house which now serves as the Royal
Aziza Fahmy Palace as it stood in the 1950's.

Neo-classic details are evident in the side elevation and strongly influenced by the Palladian style.
Family's Jewellery Museum, built in 1919 by Aly Fahmy and Antoine LasCiac. In fact, the king, the royal family and Egypt's elitist society commissioned a great many waves of Italian eclecticism. This was certainly the peak of the era that bespoke of the strong Italian architectural influence on Egyptian aristocracy, while the bourgeois society and the new industrial technocrat classes opted for Art Deco designs and eventually the New Art and the International modern style.

So what has lead then to the lamentable deterioration of this once impeccable residence?

Awad recalls that during the early 50s, his grand father was asked, in his capacity as a contractor, to renovate the house and restore some areas of the damaged roof. During that time, he took photos of the residence, and it had seemed to young Awad that even then, the gardens were neglected in spite of the fact that the family was still using the house during the summer.

In Awad's opinion, the misfortune of the residence could be attributed not only to the sequestration policies in operation during the Nasserite period, but also due to its abandonment for many years, bearing in mind the regular and careful maintenance a sea-side construction requires.

However, nobody really knows what has been going on since the sequestration of the house. The story goes that ownership of the palace shifted to the government, who in turn passed it on to a public sector company following its confiscation. The family inheritors allegedly filed a lawsuit against the government later and consequently were able to lay hands temporarily on the palace once again. However, several sources spoke of mysterious damages that have slowly and secretly occurred in the inside of the house leaving it completely stripped of its contents and decorations. This was all done with the purpose of convincing the relevant authorities to issue a demolition permit.

Architect Mokhtar El-Wessemy, former director general of the Urban Planning Department in Alexandria Governorate during the 1980s, told Medina that the Aizia Fahmy Palace fell among his responsibilities as well as his interests when he was a member of the Higher Committee for Demolition. El-Wessemy is very proud to have succeeded in preventing several attempts to pull down the palace and turn the entire location into ugly, high rise concrete blocks.

Now, however, a restoration and renovation project has been proposed by the holding company, and a governor's decree dated 23-11-1997 has appointed Awad as a consultant to the governorate as far as this project is concerned. According to Awad, the project consists of two parts, the first of which deals with the restoration works while the second focuses on revitalisation in the context of reuse by turning the house and its gardens into a restaurant. The restoration works seem to face no technical problems as opposed to the renovation process. A civil engineer is allegedly in charge of the architectural works, a fact that Awad resents, preferring this to fall in the hands of a specialised architect rather than a civil engineer.

Asked whether such a plan was the right approach for the conservation of the city's rich architectural heritage, Awad argues that the context of reuse is the right kind of approach for preserving the site, on the condition that adequate feasibility studies for any potential conservation be conducted. "The idea of conserving buildings is not necessarily an idea that is linked to beauty or linked to something that has architectural
The small salon was internally decorated in the Louis XVI style.

The idea is to preserve the whole context, and the urban building environment.” In Awad’s opinion, the real problem lies in the fact that everybody is looking at the problem of conservation as a problem merely related to the demolition of villas. This is not the core of the problem though. “If you have a villa and you completely disfigure it and you lose its value because it has been remodelled in a bad way.” The sensible approach would be to look at conservation not as a process of merely restoring buildings but revitalising the buildings so that a process of development might occur while preserving the values that are invested in them.

El-Wesemcy, who also heads the Patrimony Preservation Committee of the Friends of the Environment Association in Alexandria, seems to agree adding that no more than 300 to 400 villas still remain in Alexandria. “Buildings are the manifestation of a nation’s civilisation, pulling them down would mean destroying our patrimony,” states El-Wesemcy.

For the time being, despite the signs hanging on the four sides of the palace clearly stipulating the name of the holding company, controversy still remains as to who is the legal owner. Unofficial sources at the company’s offices told Medina that they had orders not to give any statement on the matter until everything is settled down.

Presently, the project seems to have ground to a halt, except for painting the fence that surrounds the location, which is routine restoration undertaken every now and then according to the guards planted at the entrance of the Palace by the company.

Instead of the alleged restoration project aiming at turning the site into a restaurant and a five star hotel, or even better, seeing it housing a large family as it once did, it is heartbreaking to see it as it stands today. A large expanse of land with clumps of dried grass, three wooden sticks serving as a football goal, and laundry of the guards hanging before the main entrance of the palace, searching for some sun under the emblematic, entangled initials of Aziza Fahmy still crowning the roof and resisting the test of time.

The small salon was internally decorated in the Louis XVI style.

In addition to the controversy, the alleged restoration project sparked a wave of protests from the public, who were concerned about the fate of the palace and its historical value. The project was eventually abandoned, and the palace remains as it was, a symbol of the city’s architectural heritage.

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الصور من أرشيف د. محمد عوض

Photography provided by: Dr. M. Awad