

The Role of Contemporary Architecture

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The transformation of Azhar Park from arid hillside to green oasis overshadows discussions of any individual architecture placed within its bounds. The metamorphosis of this prominent open space, offering release within the compressed confines of one of the world's densest cities, will attract attention on a large scale, as urban intervention, as master plan, and as social amenity. Yet several buildings situated within the park, primarily two restaurants and an entrance structure, created by two teams of architects, demand critical attention, embodying human intention in their design and construction and bringing focus to the planning efforts of the entirety.

While relatively small in relation to the park or to its surrounding cityscape, their architecture, visibility, and prominence convey semiotic messages, important signs and signals to onlookers and the community. In the midst of idealised parkland, these structures strung along the hilltop of a reclaimed landfill assert human values, including the potential for change and the vital role of leisure in revitalising human energy. Additionally, by approaching historic precedent in differing ways, they extend the debate on the role of modernity within a rapidly evolving, historically rich setting.

In an earlier essay on the city of Cairo, critic Michael Sorkin summed up the challenge both architectural teams would face when he said: "The issue for architects is [...] how to create environments that speak to both the aspirations and traditions of an extremely complex culture without prejudice for either old or new". The question Sorkin outlines (without foreknowledge of the park architecture), and the Azhar architects confronted in their designs, consists of architecture's stance towards the past in constructing a contemporary identity.

Historically, cultural identity rose in importance concurrently with the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In recent decades, the

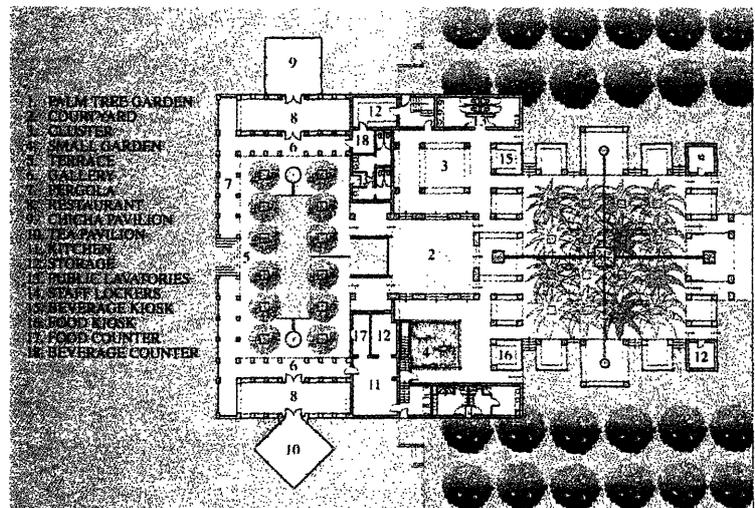


Fig. 96. General plan of the Lakeside Café by Serge Santelli.

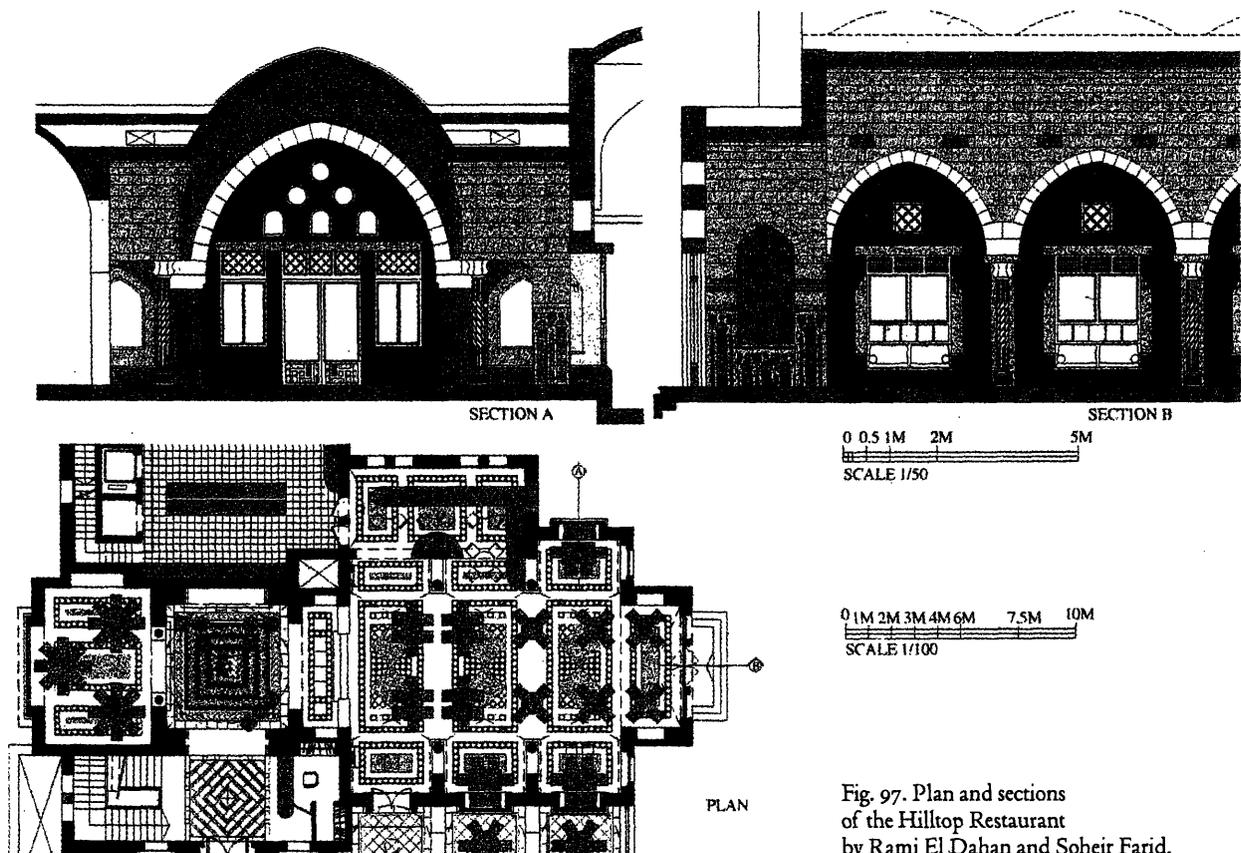


Fig. 97. Plan and sections of the Hilltop Restaurant by Rami El Dahan and Soheir Farid.

difficulties of asserting individual personality have become compounded by the universal corporate hegemony in the late twentieth century, in which certain streets in Manila appear indistinguishable from those in contemporary Cairo, with their array of tall buildings in steel and glass. In the presence of this international sameness in commercial and institutional construction, what might serve as sources of meaning or of inspiration for placemaking? In seeking architectural responses to sameness, much of the critical discussion has focused on cultural absolutes, such as the term 'authenticity', a term that proves difficult to define.

What constitutes an 'authentic' architectural response? Zeynep Celik suggests that the answer proves subtler than the authentic "ethnic, social, and cultural differences" might suggest. According to Celik, the globalisation of economic development and widespread dissemination of education and information render such terms as authenticity and purity obsolete. At one extreme, theme park or so-called entertainment architecture trivialises the terms by reducing history to façadeism, in which appearance or perception constitutes the underlying reality. By contrast, developments in digital media have resulted in structures without precedent or apparent contextual referents — architecture as sculptural expressionism.

Yet despite the complications inherent in determining appropriate theoretical underpinnings for architectural development today, architects such as those at Azhar Park have continually returned to history and to human memory, in some cases recalling familiar elements of scale, proportion, and rhythm, and in others transforming familiar forms and patterns into new designs. For the two primary projects within the park itself, the Hilltop Restaurant and the Lakeside Café, each team took a different, clearly defined approach.

For Rami El Dahan and Soheir Farid, the commission to design the Hilltop Restaurant began with a competition. The planning of the park itself by Sasaki Associates and Sites International set the park's overall organisation, including its principal axes and focal points, and located its specific architectural features. Dahan and Farid were invited as one of seven teams to compete for the design of the restaurant in 1999. Following an August presentation to the AKTC that year, their proposal emerged as winner.

For the architects (both personal and business partners), the Azhar Hilltop Restaurant represents a continuing working relationship that began when the two worked with the late Hasan Fathy, Egypt's most prominent architect of the twentieth century. Fathy, widely published in professional and consumer media, espoused a return to local traditions in building, including forms, materials, and methods of construction. His architecture, which was aimed at improving the lot of the indigenous Egyptian population, while forging a new identity based on qualities arising from the Egyptian culture, relied on environmentally sensitive, load-bearing masonry structures which featured, noticeably, vaults and domes, set above simple masonry square or rectangular walls.

By extending planning to include entire communities, such as New Gournah, and encouraging local craftsmanship in the construction process, Fathy envisioned architecture as the generator of a complete system – one that engaged physical improvement from historic models with economic well being. By multiplying individual units into clusters of structures, Fathy composed urban settings that were uniquely Egyptian, grafting vernacular forms with contemporary planning principles.

Emerging from their work with Fathy, who died in 1989, Dahan and Farid commenced their formal practice in 1984/1985. Since that time, their own work has included the design of new resort towns and plans for twenty-five hotels, including projects nominated for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

While to the casual observer, the Hilltop Restaurant Dahan and Farid designed for Azhar Park recalls historic elements from Cairene architecture, the architects are adamant that the project avoids the traps of replication or historicism. "It is not an imitation of anything else," they assert. Instead,

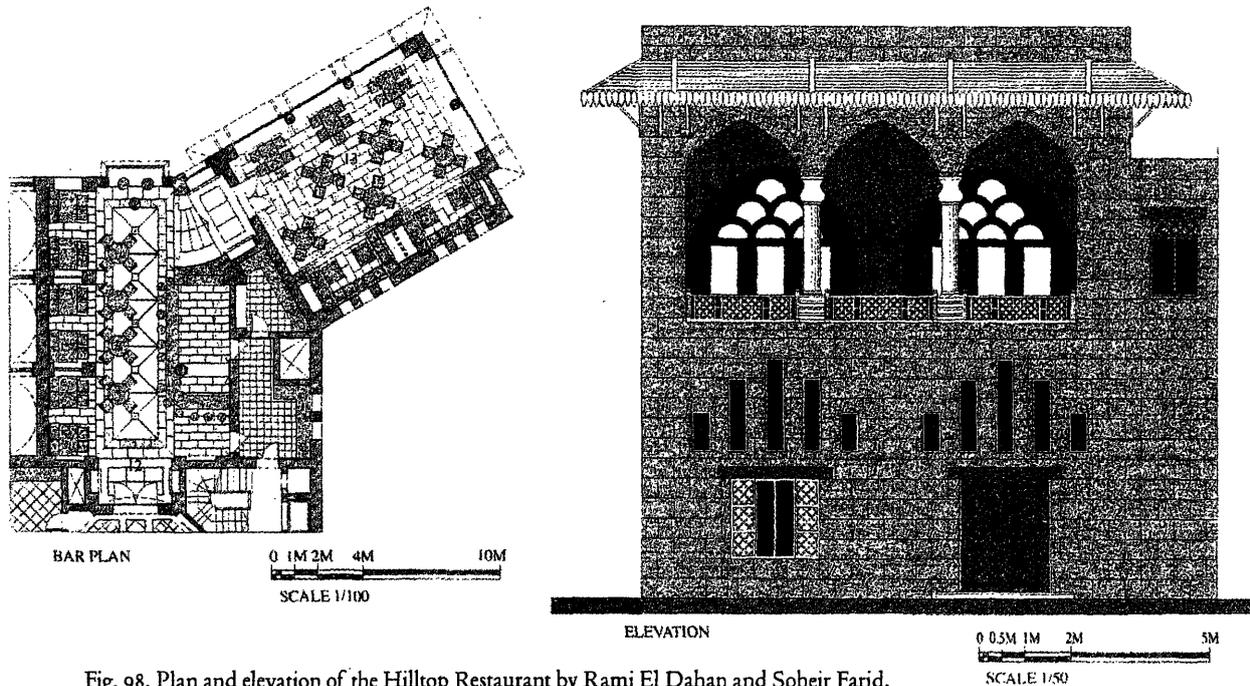


Fig. 98. Plan and elevation of the Hilltop Restaurant by Rami El Dahan and Soheir Farid.

the pair has employed elements from history, adapting “old techniques for new needs and functions” intentionally, employing familiar architectural elements like a vocabulary, but changing them according to contemporary usage and requirements.

The restaurant occupies high ground, prominently sited as an individual structure within the park. Unlike the dense neighbouring city, this three-dimensional building stands alone, a structure with implied formal connections to early Cairo, resembling more a large villa than an urban commercial structure. The restaurant functions as a critical component to the park’s success, since the donor intended the park to sustain itself economically.

In plan, the restaurant maintains the strong axis that proceeds from the vehicular access to its hilltop location, dropping into gardens that follow along a watercourse, past the Lakeside Café, and out towards the citadel. All architectural elements reinforce the axis and its view out towards the gardens, including the covered portico, or *takhtaboush*, on the south elevation, a seating area overlooking the gardens surmounted by domes. Exterior massing places forms of varying height and weight in asymmetrical equilibrium.

Programmatically, the project includes restaurant, exhibition gallery, and tearoom spaces, with public and private dining areas. The plan proceeds axially from the vehicular drop-off point through an entry portico, to a multi-domed shaded seating area. On one side of the primary axis lies the bulk of the restaurant; on the other, the art gallery, bar, and cafeteria. A hierarchy of spaces,

from large to small, characterises the interiors. A *durqa'a* entrance, comparable to the large hall found in historic Arab palaces, serves as the restaurant's main entrance, topped by a monumental dome and free of furnishings. Across the entranceway, the bar occupies an elevated open loggia, or *manzara*, which has been oriented to enhance breezes and to provide "a touch of intimacy", according to Dahan. Stairs have been minimised as architectural elements.

A concern for shade and light characterises the entire composition, including ample porches, covered seating areas and passageways. A high pergola admits light and shade to the entry courtyard, with fountain beneath. Covered with wooden *treillage*, the roof covering provides subdued, filtered daylight during the day, and at night reflects the artificial illumination.

Among the most explicit features with historical antecedents are the restaurant's arches, which in spirit recall the Fatimid arches of the tenth to twelfth centuries – shallow arches outlined in masonry supported by short columns – that characterise Fatimid structures. Other reinterpreted elements include shading devices based on ideas present in the *mashrabiyya*, the familiar bay windows shaded with turned wood, the previously mentioned *manzara*, and the *shokhsheikha*, an octagonal wooden lantern topped by clerestory windows. Materials are not superficial, but integral, carrying their own weight. All facing stone, typically *hashma* stone (limestone rich in sand – saw-cut, trimmed, and hand-faced by local craftsmen) is load bearing, as are all domes, vaults, and wooden roofs. Only the basement relies on concrete framing, a structural underpinning that actually rests on over two hundred piles, driven thirty-five metres into the soil of the former landfill. Floors of marble or ceramic consist of new interpretation of old patterns; few industrial materials appear throughout the construction.

Following the course of the hillside down from the Hilltop Restaurant, visitors follow a pathway that the landscape architects Maher Stino and Laila Elmasry Stino describe as "a spine like a *casbah*". The path proceeds through a series of gardens along the spine, accompanied by trickling water, aromatic plants and local materials, providing a series of experiences in which outdoors and indoors merge, from one structure through sunken gardens like outdoor rooms towards the next building. After changing direction towards the south-west, the spine connects to the second major architectural component, the Lakeside Café.

Unlike the hillside restaurant, with its arches and domes, the Lakeside Café offers a contemporary counterpoint within the park. While the restaurant achieves its architectural effects through massing of architectural elements such as domes and arches, the café arrays a collection of simple cubic volumes around a series of open courts, stepping down to a lake. Cascading water and paving materials provide the unifying elements that convey the spirit of the Islamic garden.

Essentially a series of shaded platforms, the café serves as a mediating point between the open spaces within the park and enclosure, providing shade and resting places for park visitors as well as casual food service. Two distinct zones organise the venue: a square palm court surrounded by kiosks divided into quarters from a central fountain by water courses, offering shade and seating for visitors; and an intermediate space defined by service rooms and a cafeteria that extends from a cascade out over the lake as a terrace, offering the illusion of floating. Designed as a cluster of pavilions by the French architect, Serge Santelli, the café offers both enclosure and protection as well as a transparent aspect towards the city beyond.

The 'floating' terrace, which houses the cafeteria, culminates the pathway begun uphill within the garden. Oriented as a cross-axial courtyard, divided by fountains and a pond, tree-lined, and served by food kiosks, the terraces provide a dramatic conclusion to the garden progression, offering water, shade, and views, anchored by two larger pavilions at each end, with semi-transparent walls of wooden latticework.

Santelli, a former student of the late American architect Louis Kahn, came to the commission, like Dahan and Farid, through the invited competition for the hillside restaurant in 1999. A former winner of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1983 for a project in Tunisia, Santelli describes one of his chief design concerns as "expressing Islamic tradition through contemporary language". Whereas the original plans for the park included only one restaurant, ultimately the plans changed to include another structure for food service along the artificial lake, with Santelli as architect.

In conceiving the underlying ideas for this Lakeside Café, Santelli reinterpreted historic Islamic designs in a more 'rationalist' vocabulary. According to the architect, his motivating ideas lay in a variety of Islamic traditions, including Mughal and Andalusian, where controlled watercourses define human versions of paradise. In contrast to the hillside restaurant, where the forms seem explicitly drawn from history, Santelli has employed a contemporary rationalism to reinterpret historic precepts.

While the hillside restaurant comprises a complex of upper and lower levels, from service and storage spaces to elaborate, mechanically cooled dining rooms, the lakeside pavilion relies on a more modest programme and budget. Simple pavilions follow a rigorous orthogonal geometry, composed of piers and bases of concrete block with wooden latticed roofs, and border the palm court — essentially an indoor/outdoor seating area. *Hashma* stone provides accents in the most important areas of the courtyard and terraces, beneath walls of concrete block with artificial stone coating. Service rooms, toilets and kitchen consist of plain rectangular spaces arrayed around the transitional courtyard, culminating in the open lakeside terrace.

Other reinterpretations of Islamic traditions include the use of wood for *mashrabiyya*-like effects. Santelli mentions *bourgalli* latticework, a technique he observed and used for its simplicity and low cost. However, he refers to the use of wood for windows and in kiosks, as inspired, “not in shape, but in spirit”. Santelli employed a sophisticated paving scheme for the entire complex, using light cream Egyptian marble with green accents in patterns that reflect the Islamic interest in geometry.

In the initial planning for the park, landscape architects Stino and Stino of Sites International had positioned an entrance pavilion down the eastern hillside, allowing vehicles and pedestrians a moment’s pause before gaining access to the park. Following their design for the Hilltop Restaurant, architects Dahan and Farid were asked to design

the entrance gates to the park, complementing the design of the restaurant with a similar design vocabulary. Their design for the entrance was a “strong, intuitive” one, according to the architects.

Their plan calls for two pylons, interlaced with a series of arches. Essentially the pavilion forms a portico with dual sections: the first section, roofed or covered; and the second, a semi-covered pass-through. As in the hillside restaurant, the architects returned to Fatimid antecedents in determining its scale. In the initial section, intersecting vaults cover the ticketing area; in the second, wooden trellis provides covering. Other materials include wrought iron for the gates, wooden tie beams, and marble and slate patterned floors.

These three primary structures join an ensemble of parkland structures and surfaces designed by Sites International, including paving materials, lighting standards, seating, and waste receptacles. In addition, play equipment and observation points on the summits of the hills will add architectural character to the natural setting, producing an effect of ordered openness throughout the thirty-one-hectare design.

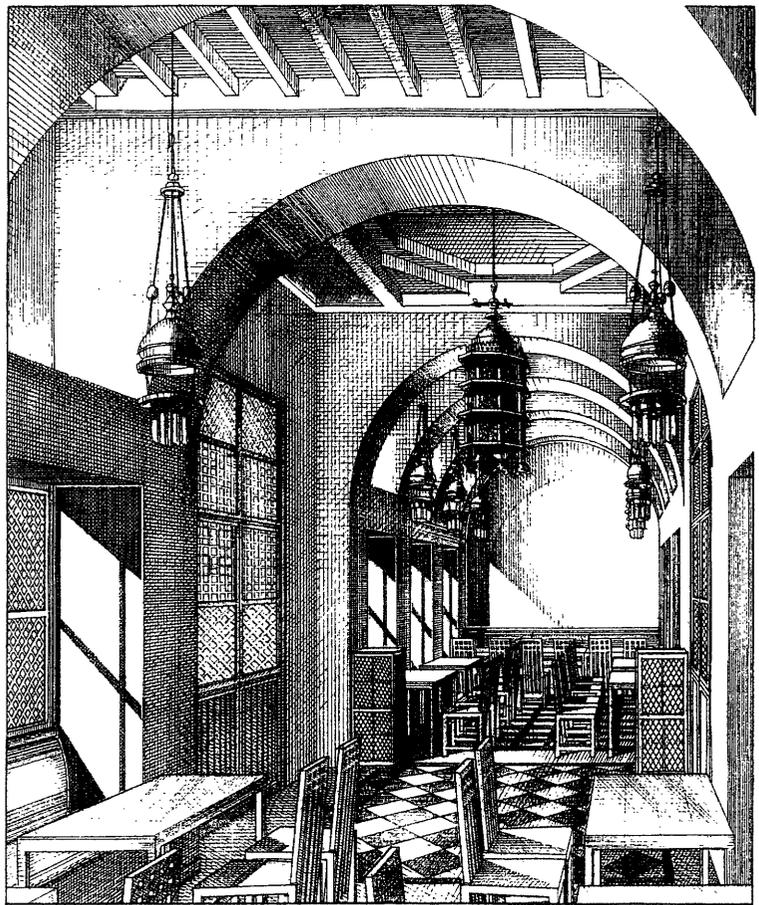


Fig. 99. Drawing by Serge Santelli of the Lakeside Café interior.

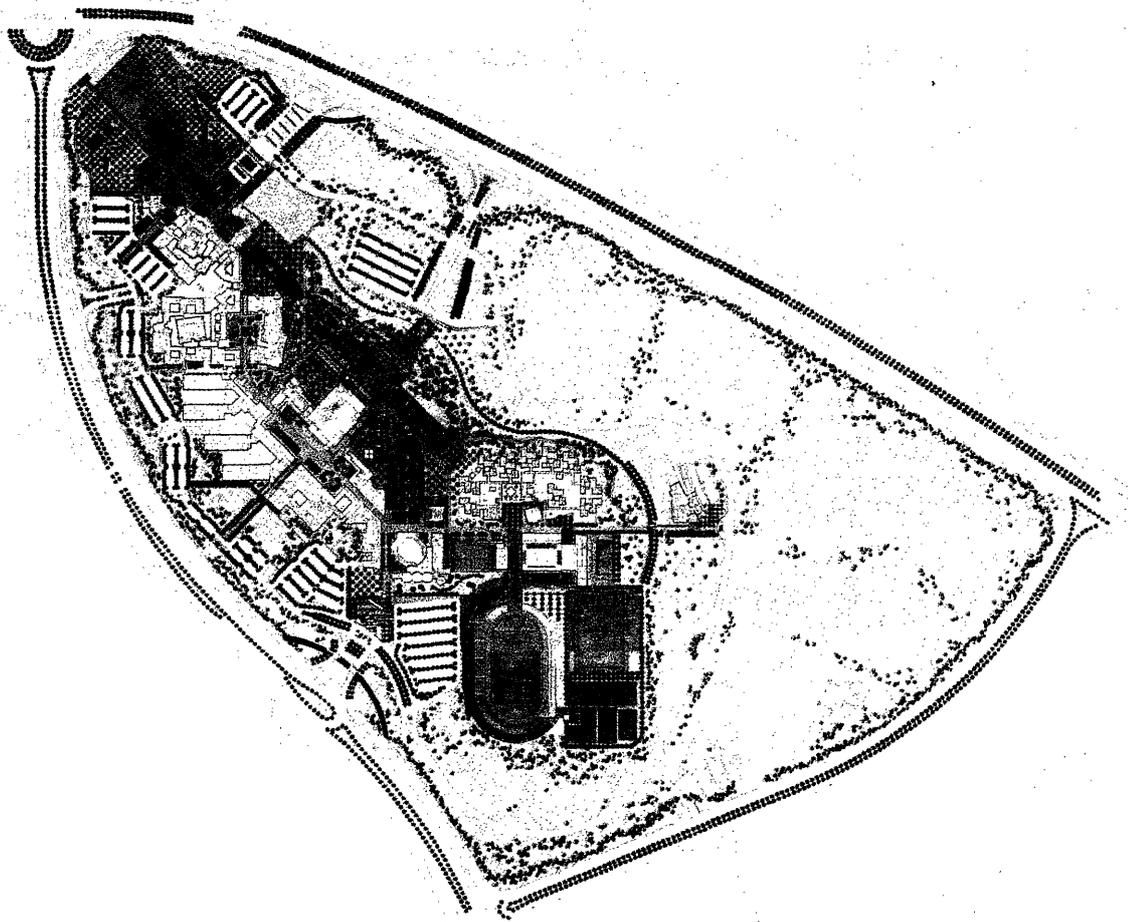


Fig. 100. Master plan of the new AUC campus.

While relatively small in square-metre-coverage, these three structures should have a telling presence within Cairo proper, sited so prominently within Azhar Park. They may consequently provoke discussion and debate on architecture within Cairo and Egypt, a cosmopolitan city within a nation searching for additional strong architectural models. Egyptian architecture during the last decades has struggled to keep abreast of a burgeoning population, a scenario in which more than 350,000 persons join Cairo's ranks annually, rendering Cairo one of the world's fastest growing cities.

Although blessed with one of the world's greatest ancient architectural treasure-troves in its Pharaonic heritage, and a similarly rich Islamic treasury of urban architecture, contemporary architecture has followed international trends with mixed results. Although populated with a large number of architects, lax construction codes, lack of contemporary theoretical discourse, and varying client demand have resulted in few significant contemporary structures of note. In an article reported in *Archi-*

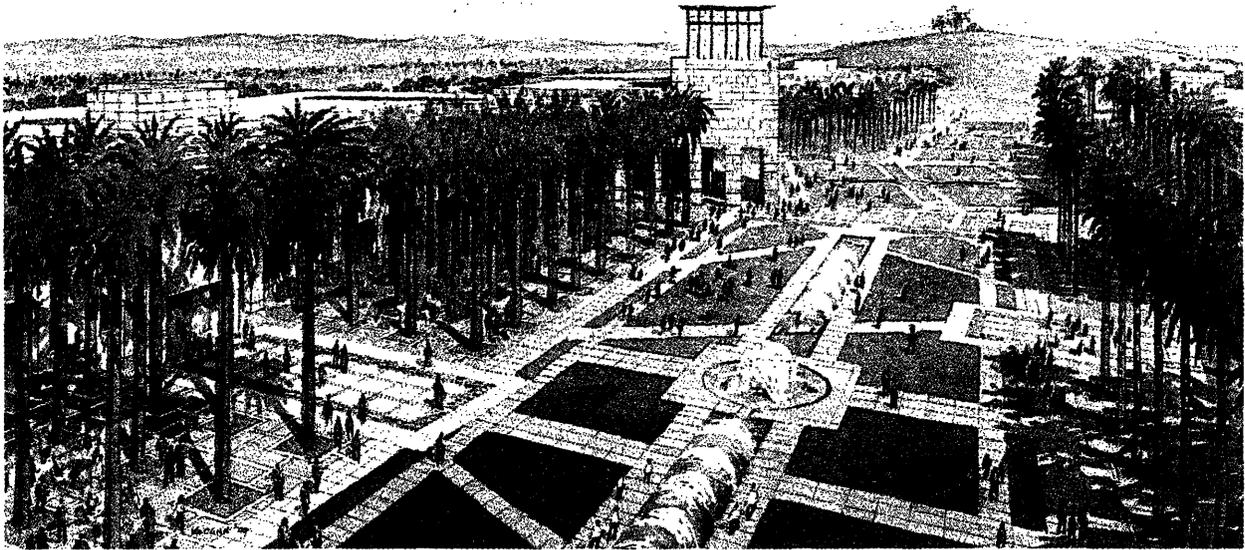


Fig. 101. A rendering of the main axis of the new AUC campus.

tectural Record, Paul Bennett summed up the situation: “A lack of building restrictions, outdated laws for licensure, and inadequate education reached a breaking point in 1992, when a number of poorly-built structures collapsed during a major earthquake”. The demise of the architectural magazine, *Medina*, has constricted academic communication among architects practicing there.

Landscape architecture relied in large part on international sources: Maher Stino, together with his wife and partner, established the first office of landscape architecture in the country. The aforementioned Fathy, whose clientele included the poor, remains the country’s most well known practitioner. Talented architects have been practicing in Egypt, however. Abdel Halim, the principal of the Community Design Collaborative, a Cairo-based architectural and planning practice located in Cairo since 1980, has witnessed his firm’s growth to include comprehensive, multi-hectare projects. His work has regularly taken him throughout the region, to Saudi Arabia, Muscat and Oman, and to Jordan. His plans for a cultural park for children received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture.

In Cairo, Abdel Halim’s work includes the Qasr El Funoun, or Palace of Fine Art, formerly known as the Nile Gallery — a thorough renovation and redesign occupying land on the grounds of the Cairo opera house. In that project, Abdel Halim employed light and enclosure, geometric planning and details that graft contemporary and historic motifs. His most recent significant project involves planning for an entirely new campus for the American University in New Cairo (AUC), a \$250 million project for the university that includes a “series of interweaving spaces”, he says. Originally award-

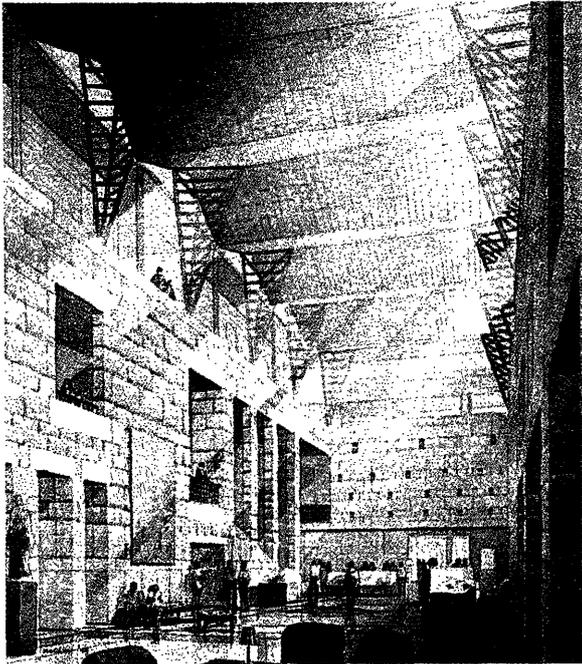


Fig. 102. A rendering of the new AUC campus by the architect Abdel Halim.

ed to a firm in Boston, Massachusetts, called Boston Design Collaborative, the team was enlarged to include Abdel Halim's firm as well as Sasaki Associates.

In addition to the planning, programming, and design work, the firm has analysed local resources, including indigenous industries that may provide materials and systems for the campus. An array of well-known international architects, including the firm Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, Legorreta+Legorreta, and Ellerbe Beckett are signed to contribute designs for individual buildings within the campus.

While the AUC project involves an institution, Egyptian architects are frequently employed in the development of residential and hospitality

structures for the satellite cities springing up on the outskirts of Cairo in Heliopolis or Nasser City. Sometimes confined to gated compounds, the residences within the new towns often reflect European or American housing trends, according to local architects. The question becomes how to establish a context where none had existed previously. International architects have often contributed designs for resort architecture, including such well-known practitioners as Michael Graves and Sasaki Associates, who associate with local firms in the implementation of their designs. Michael Sorkin describes the condition of houses reminiscent of Beverly Hills out on the edges of the encroaching desert land as both "surreal and familiar".

The architect Akram El Magdoub, together with two Italian architects, Maurizio di Puolo and Enzo Serrani, recently designed the Om Kalthoum Museum, situated near the famous Nilometer river gauge. Paul Bennett describes the museum as "richly textured", showcasing "one of the first uses of multimedia programming in the city".

Recently Egypt has been the setting for two prominent international competitions, both of which illustrate trends in the larger design culture. In the first, for the design of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a hitherto unknown firm called Snohetta received the commission, in contemporary form, for a site near the Mediterranean of the Library of Alexandria — what had been one of the premier institutions of human civilisation. Prior to the competition, no firm had existed; the principles cobbled together a group specifically for the Alexandrine effort, which they won.

The resulting 74,400 square metre structure, with its strong circular geometry reminiscent of the harbour, its tilted roof over an ellipse, and its powerful interior spaces, captured worldwide interest and brought international attention to new architecture in Egypt. Hamza Associates of Egypt was associated with the Norwegian firm. Subsequently, Snohetta acquired additional commissions, including the Oslo opera house and a museum for the work of the British artist J. M. W. Turner.

In 2003, in another example of international firms acquiring important Egyptian commissions, a small Irish architectural firm won the competition for the design of a new Egyptian Museum. Long a mainstay of urban life on Tahrir Square near the Nile, and a stopping place for generations of

tourists, the Neoclassical museum will be relocated to the periphery, approximately nineteen kilometres out near Giza, and will be housed in a dynamic structure to be designed by the firm Heneghan-Peng. Decentralisation and internationalism continue to flourish in Egypt.

This injection of modernity on a large scale, produced under the spotlights of international competitions, may open Egyptian architecture to additional intellectual currents and broaden the professional dialogue. Until now, as Michael Sorkin has reported, “one of the surprises [...] is that architecture figures so little in the elaboration of this difference, that its symbolic import seems to have little or no weight” in the struggles facing Egypt as it grows and changes.

The Azhar Park project, constructed on land that is both two thousand years old, yet fundamentally changed — re-engineered, scoured three metres below grade — and reconstituted as urban parkland, may provide badly needed breathing room for the citizens of Cairo. But it may, in fact, serve as a spur for architectural discussion, offering alternative expressions of contemporary design sensibility and understanding, and questioning the role of modernity within a country in the act of defining itself.

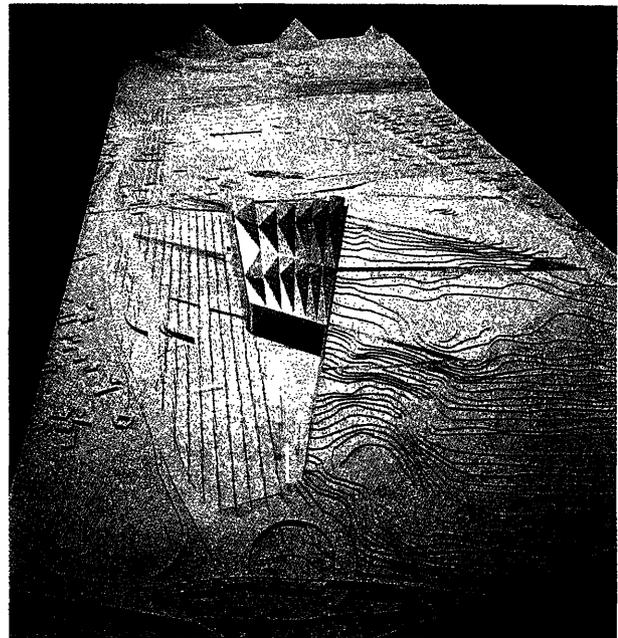


Fig. 103. Model of the Grand Museum of Egypt by Heneghan-Peng.