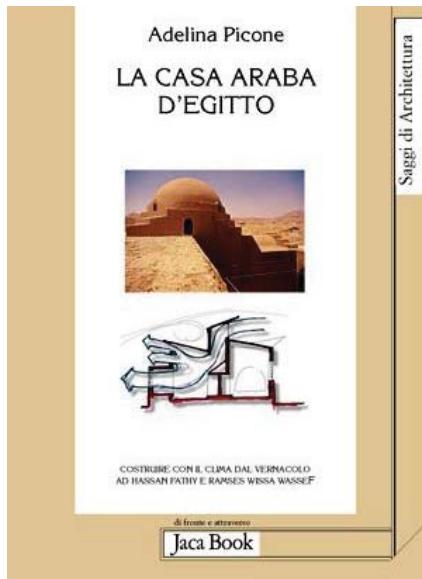# CULTURAL EVOLUTION AND THE ARAB HOUSE IN EGYPT

BOOK REVIEW: LA CASA ARABA D'EGITTO: COSTRUIRE CON IL CLIMA DAL VERNACOLO AI MAESTRI CONTEMPORANEI BY ADELINA PICONE

Ashraf M. Salama

La casa araba d'Egitto: costruire con il clima dal vernacolo ai maestri contemporanei
Adelina Picone
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Traditional houses in Egypt were discussed in the literature in a fragmented manner. While in many of the writings emphasis was placed on the stylistic debates and the analysis of their cultural authenticity, little emphasis was placed upon functional, climatic and socio-spatial aspects of the continuous process of transformation of their major spaces and within different regions and contexts. While it is evident that this book "La casa araba d'Egitto: costruire con il clima dal vernacolo ai maestri contemporanei" covers a wide spectrum of issues, I find it an opportunity to reflect on some issues that contextualize the discussion.

It is clearly evident that this is an important contribution where Dr. Adele Picone takes the debate further by offering a comprehensive analytical and articulated overview of traditional houses in different regions in Egypt from Nubia through the Western Desert Oases to Cairo. This is not all; the analysis goes beyond the typical discussions and offer reflections on important socio-spatial elements with emphasis on reactions to climatic conditions and natural light.

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Within the argument and examples of this book culture appears to be a crucial concern. Culture encompasses the sources and methods of obtaining knowledge and the manner of its storage, dissemination and utilization. It is the creative spirit of people made manifest. Culture is what people uphold as essential, valuable and desirable, and how they go about making choices and transactions. It is an integrated pattern of human beliefs, customs, norms, morals and behaviors shared by a group, inhabitants of a region or a nation over a specific period of time.

There have been different views and assumptions on the changing concept of culture. In general, culture is a complex concept that was commonly considered to be a static phenomenon that could inhibit change. Today, culture refers to a relativistic and multidimensional concept with its components, evolving, changing and developing over time. On the one hand, the consequences of this more complex and dynamic interpretation of culture ought to be recognized in contemporary methodological research, for a better understanding of the past change and development of the spatial environment of traditional houses. On the other hand, this interpretation allows for a better prediction of the quality of future spatial environments.

The preceding interpretation suggests the co-existence of both cultural constants and variables. Constants can be exemplified by the links with the past--the traditions--as sources of legitimacy and inspiration of actions. Variables can be exemplified by the degree to which the society is capable of adopting and incorporating new phenomena into those traditions. Concomitantly, several theorists argue, and rightly so, that cultural change is a natural social incident that occurs on different rates; slow, gradual changes on the one hand allow adaptation and integration to happen in a smooth process of synthesis between the old and the new, while rapid, abrupt changes on the other hand result in confusion and inconsistency.

Taking Cairo—the Capital of Egypt—as an example, it has historically evolved through a series of major political constructs. There are four main physical formations that constituted the city of Cairo, envisioned and initially carried out by great military political commanders of the empire builders; Al-Fustat (641), AL-Askar (751), Al-Qatai (870) and Al-Qahira – Cairo (969). These four settlements were later joined and fenced by Salah Eddin –the military commander- in 1187. Since then, old Cairo assumed its physical unity and functional integrity as one comprehensive entity. Much of these developments reveal physical and cultural influences that occurred within the confines of this city of about 5 sq. km., an area that persisted for the three centuries of the Mamluk dynasty until the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517, when Cairo lost its political eminence and entered into a decline phase that affected all walks of life .

By the end of the French occupation (1798-1801), a sense of national dismay with respect to ignorance, illiteracy and deterioration has emerged. Afterwards, Mohamed Ali (1806-1848) –the ruler of Egypt- started a new progressive era basing his ideologies on the westernization of Egypt. This new paradigm has resulted in several rapid changes, some of which were the extinction of the typical traditional house type and the introduction of a new western model formulating a totally new residential concept

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that speedily became popular amongst the wealthy and the intellects finding it more convenient to their needs and the overall life style adopted.

This transitional dynasty has caused a leap towards the western thought, thereby leading to the complete dependence on the western experience in all fields. Slow but confident changes took place in all walks of life until the reign of Ismail Pacha (1860s-1880s), the celebrity khedive whose project of Paris of the East has completely adopted the 19th century European model as a reference for inclusive development. Housing was one realm in which a new model has emerged, developed and continued until the traditional models have finally arrived at complete obscurity. By 1897, Cairo was split into two separate communities which when combined doubled the population.

Ismail's model dominated the opposing national movement in search for an Egyptian identity that was evoked by the 1919 revolution. Literature indicates that houses of this era either reflected the ideas of classical continuity and revival, or applied this comparable concept of re-introducing traditional architecture into Cairo. The later went by two approaches; the first was Islamic style revival and the second was Ancient Egyptian style revival. Both approaches were faced with the lack of plan stereotypes in the style of older Egyptian heritage for houses with new functions, there was no choice but applying decorative elements to the western house model introduced by Ismail Pacha as a mere surface veneer. Those diverse influences dominated the Cairene house model in the early 20th century, paving the way ahead for the introduction of modernism concepts

in the architecture of Cairo. This resulted in the emergence of a new housing type that revealed the concepts of function, modularity and the international style based on the open plan concept and the avoidance of using ornaments while reducing detailing aspects to be minimal.

A sense of patriotism has emerged since the mid of the 20th century as a result of gaining independence. Adopting and adapting the socialist concepts of centralization, nationalization and targeting the newly emerged middle class sector of the society, the governing regime placed emphasis on co-operative and consortium housing projects. Further strategies were devised for economic and low cost housing for industrial workers for the hurriedly spread industrial units all around Cairo. Typical prototype blocks were scattered in the available unoccupied lands within and around the periphery of Cairo.

Shifting from socialist paradigm to openness policies in 1974 resulted in a sudden inflation, which extremely raised the land value. Accompanied by a parallel shift toward the western life-style, the courtyard house has completely disappeared from the housing arena, and the dominance of the apartment buildings took place all over the city of Cairo and its surroundings. Following was an economic reform era that started in 1981 and continued throughout the nineties to the present. With privatization policies being practiced, the re-birth of private houses was witnessed to spread all along the city suburbs and the new settlements, while ignoring the traditional courtyard type and any associated traditional elements, and willingly adopting global colonial

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house models.

Linking the concepts of culture and cultural change to the influences and impacts on Egyptian traditional houses, it is believed that -all along its history- Cairo was exposed to a layer upon layer of imported cultures that have been localized over time and adapted to regional conditions and local taste. When colonization arrived with Ismail pacha in the late 19th century, a whole new set of cultural imports was introduced, developing Cairo into a typical dualistic pattern of the colonial city with its new house types. Progressively, paradoxically, and according to the successive awkward cultural and political circumstances, a new avenue was opened for a process of continuous experimentation of ideas, resulting in a mix of hybrid--in many cases-- ambiguous thoughts. This was followed by oversimplification of traditions and a complete loss of identity, and in turn, it was dramatically reflected on the evolution of different house types. The work of Adele Picone paves the road to retrieve some of this lost identity by showing articulated examples of contemporary physical interventions in different regions within the Egyptian context. It is my firm belief that Dr. Picone offers lessons on how to relate to some of the missing links with the past while addressing the dialectic relationship between cultural constants and variables in the design of Egyptian houses.

While—typically—academics and practitioners voice the opinion that traditional elements of the old houses of Egypt should be retrieved innovatively in new housing projects the dominant approach was to consistently emphasize predetermined house standards built as cheaply as possible for lower income households. With this approach social and cultural values are disregarded and the house as concept was governed by economic norms only. Recently, emphasis is placed by decision makers on the value of adapting traditional elements of Egyptian traditional houses and incorporating them into new projects. However, this has not gone beyond political discussions and economic aspects continued to be important determining factors governing the production of houses.

An important assertion can be made within the context of this book; that is the continuous need for architects to understand the impact of cultural processes that influenced the transformation of traditional houses on the macro and micro scales. Aspects that pertain to urbanization, migration, westernization, and modernization represent impacts of cultural changes. Modernization and development must be considered as forms of cultural change and need to be investigated and carefully studied rather than automatically accepted. Westernization which is an impact of an acculturation process in the Egyptian society is a good example of this type of automatic acceptance. Thus, the examination—undertaken by Dr. Picone—of different physical elements of traditional houses and their spatial transformations sets the standards for understanding future perspectives that pertain to cultural changes and as a result of cultural processes.

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