Book Reviews

Babylon of Egypt: The Archaeology of Old Cairo and the Origins of the City

Peter Sheehan

Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010. hbk. 178 pages.

The Minarets of Cairo

Doris Behrens-Abouseif with Nicholas Warner

London: UK: I. B. Tauris, 2010. pbk. 352 pages.

Hassan Fathy and Continuity in Islamic Arts and Architecture: The Birth of a New Modern

Ahmed Hamid

Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010. hbk. 206 pages.

The Palimpsest of Cairo

Cairo is an overwhelming, intense, and unforgettable city that imprints immediately upon anyone who has visited or lived there. The city itself is a result of the impressions and marks left by two millennia of settlements, conquests, and immigration. Three books recently published cover different layers of this city, and within each layer are multiples of layers of history impressing on each other and revealing a most complex and intertwined amalgam of histories evidenced in the architecture extant today.

All three books not only center around works from Cairo, but the contributors and authors have all lived in this city of a "thousand minarets" for certain periods of time. Just as Nagib Mahfouz's works bring to life the multifaceted city in novel form, creating characters that are never forgotten, so to do these books begin to bring to life and to communicate some of the fantastic histories that can be read from the buildings that mark the skyline and can never be forgotten.

In Peter Sheehan's *Babylon of Egypt: The Archaeology of Old Cairo and the Origins of the City*, the earliest settlements of the city are traced layer by layer through archeological and architectural study. Beginning with the ancient and earliest settlements of the Pharaonic city of On to the Roman constructions including the Harbor of Trajan and the fortress of Diocletian of what the Romans would call "Babylon." Facing the Nile, this historic settlement of Babylon was also the location of the flight of the Holy Family and became an important site of Christian history. In the mid-seventh century, Islam entered and conquered the country and settled right next to these Roman fortifications with the construction of the mosque of Amr Ibn al-Aas and the army encampment settlement – now, this area was no longer called Babylon but went by the name of Fustat. Layers of medieval church construction began under the tolerant and semi-tolerant rule of Islam, as was the establishment of a synagogue. The area became concentrated with the oldest and most revered churches of the city.

Simultaneously, the Islamic rule of the country was not homogenous and rather demonstrated influences coming in from various factions and parts of the Islamic world – and thus, the borders of what would become Cairo shifted and grew. The nearby settlements that followed of the Abbasid 'al-Askar' and the Tulinid settlement of 'al Qatai' (both meaning "encampments") each demonstrated not only different veins of political orientation but each brought with them foreign and new methods of construction and architectural morphology as can be seen in the Samara-inspired minaret of Ahmed Ibn Tulun's mosque. Later, the North African Shiite movement of the Fatimids came to the growing settlements in this area of On-cum-Babylon-cum-Fustat-plus-al-Askar and al-Qatai. The Fatimids made this not only the capital of the country but also the capital of their entire movement. Here they established the city of Al Qahira (Cairo), which encompassed much of the existing settlements but brought in the then-unknown dimension of city and urban planning creating the metropolis that continued to grow. Following the Fatimid rule, which contributed magnificent edifices and institutions such as the al-Azhar University, the Sunni Ayyubid dynasty initiated by the historical figure of Saladin succeeded in enclosing the entirety of all of these settlements within defensive walls, including

the area of Babylon/Fustat still under the name of Al Qahira, which means "the Victorious." Saladin and the Ayyubids brought with them their certain sensibilities and morphologies from Syria, which can be seen, in the introduction of the madrasah-type, which was both a conceptual and formal framework of education in the city. The subsequent rule of the slave army of Mamluks brought in from Turkic nomadic people, including the Cumin and Kipchack, infused their architecture with yet another layer of sensibilities and were the greatest at amalgamating the previous morphologies into monumental edifices. The Mamluk reign, after essentially ending the Crusades and ruling Egypt for nearly three centuries, collapsed to the invading Ottoman rule. Again, Cairo was layered with even more added morphologies, and the Ottoman constructions added within the walls of this great city caused yet another turn in its history.

Babylon of Egypt is a large 178-page book with six chapters (that cover the area's history chronologically); it is based on the 2000–2006 archeological study of the area and on historic studies of the area. The text not only has ample documentation in the form of historic and contemporary images and photographs of the site of "Old Cairo," but the real contribution of the text can be felt in the drawings. In a series of large foldout pages, the layers of the buildings that make the city are brought to life. Many of the drawings are cutaway axonometric drawings, which in their three-dimensional quality are much easier to read by a non-architecture specialist but even for the architect are demonstrative of the spatial qualities of the layers and materials of the buildings. The series of drawings reveal the literal layers of the Roman canal beneath the Roman Fortress, which is beneath the medieval churches and synagogue. Even with actual site visits, this superimposition of buildings could be understood only conceptually because of the real inaccessibility of most of the layers. However, with the drawings, the relationships structurally and morphologically between the different superimposed buildings becomes abundantly clear and didactic. Edifices such as the Greek Orthodox church of St. George, which is built on top of the round tower of the Roman fortress and the neighboring "Hanging Church" of the Virgin, which is built on top of the south gate of the Roman fortress, both have sub-sub structures of the Roman canal. These clear drawings explain in immediate terms the influence of the form of the Roman constructions on each other and on the medieval churches above them. The Hanging Church of the Virgin, a well-known and greatly venerated site in this area, is called "Hanging" because it is placed on top of the Roman constructions, which can still be seen today.

Nicholas Warner created most of these drawings of the historical Cairene buildings in this book and has also contributed nearly all of the draw-

ings in *Minarets of Cairo*. This particular area today, with the many historic and important churches, the Ben Ezra Synagogue, and the Mosque of Amr Ibn al-Aas is called locally "Mugama al adyan" (Gathering of Religions), symbolic of a time and place where plurality was not only accepted but celebrated. This book documents the changing influences and layers of history of this area and is one of those rare texts that is both an interesting read for students and lovers of architecture and of Cairo's history, and it is a dense reference book compounding historical and newly discovered knowledge of the area.

In Doris Behrens-Abousief's *Minarets of Cairo*, the layers of Islamic history in the city – as manifest in the minaret towers – are not only landmarks of history and faith but shape the unique and characteristic skyline of the city. The expression seen in the diversity of minarets in the city reflects the ever changing politics and qualities of the city – that for certain periods of history, absorbed ideas and inspired innovations that are dramatically visualized in these tower-like structures. The range in the city is unequalled by any other and vividly speaks of the innumerable influences and changes in the metropolis. Beginning with the influence of Pharonic pylons on early minarets, to the influence of the spiral minaret of Samarra on the form of Ibn Tulun, to the influences of the North African imported era of the Fatimids, to the Aleppo sensibilities of the Ayyubids – the influences were diverse yet amalgamated to create unique Cairene structures, which are unequalled in innovation and diversity. The Mamluks who followed the Ayyubids culminated this mixture of previous eras and influences with the complex and magnificent minarets composed of three tiers of changing plans (square, octagon, circular) and unique embellishments of carved stone geometries, stalactites, and epigraphy. The conquest of the Ottomans brought in Turkish aesthetics, and introduced "pencil" minarets to the skyline of Cairo. After the collapse of Ottoman rule in the country, subsequent construction of minarets, even today, are mostly inspired by these historic forms.

Again, *Minarets of Cairo* like *Babylon of Egypt*, is a text enriched by the detailed drawings made by Nicholas Warner, which demonstrates not only the exterior qualities of the various minarets of Cairo, but also describes sectional and structural details – often in proportional comparison to each other to aid in the immediate visual understanding of the material. Many of the drawings in the book are uniquely rendered in a perfectly scaled freehand drawing style, evoking the craftsmanship and physical richness of these minarets. The 352-page tall-format book (emphasizing the proportion of the subject) is densely filled with historical and contem-

porary documentation of color images of minarets, details, and interiors. Behrens-Abousief acknowledges the work of well-known previous experts in the field, such as K. A. C. Creswell and others, and layers on their studies her own analysis and interpretations based on recent information and materials for a wholly original yet continuous line of scholarly research on the subject. Like *Babylon of Egypt*, and Behrens-Abouseif's previous book, *Cairo of the Mamluks* – this is simultaneously a fascinating read and an encyclopedic reference.

The first seven chapters of *Minarets of Cairo* are dedicated to the history, meaning, and qualities of minarets – and covers the call to prayer, the function, evolution, placement, construction, decoration, and epigraphy of minarets. For the beginner and the expert alike, these chapters highlight a rich and layered history of influence and meaning of this building element which is often linked with the history of mosque but is also independent in many ways. Chapter 8, written by Nicholas Warner, analyzes "the Minaret depicted," studying images and texts throughout medieval, premodern, and modern history. This text is also a dense reference book, with chapters 9 to 11 detailing 107 minarets in Cairo chronologically. In each of these chapters, the minarets discussed are grouped according to historical era, with chapter 9 covering the early minarets of Cairo from Amr Ibn al-Aas to the end of the Ayyubid era. There are eight key examples given in this chapter. Chapter 10, that of the Mamluk's, has the greatest number of examples – this is of course due to the nature of the prolific rulers with a building program unlike any other and is due to the Mamluk's chronological place in history. Eighty-two examples are described in this very long chapter, tracing the finite development of minarets during this era. Chapter 11 covers seventeen minarets built during Ottoman rule. The examples in this era are demonstrative both of the new foreign influence and of the mixing of forms from previous eras, most notable of Mamluk forms. In these three chapters, the examples are vividly explained with relevant notes on their specific histories, detailed and expressive photographs and with the brilliant language of scaled freehand drawings – which show everything from intricate decorations, to proportional geometry, to internal spaces, to the relationship of the minaret to the rest of the mosque. There are numerous two-dimensional and three-dimensional drawings each used to relay different qualities of the subject. Chapter 12 covers the provincial minarets in Egypt and their relation to their urban Cairene counterparts. Examples from upper Egypt (including Luxor and Aswan), the various oases, villages, Delta, and Alexandria are covered with historical and contemporary photographs and drawings. The final chapter of the book analyzes the Egyptian (Mamluk) commissioned minaret of Sultan Qaytbay at the mosque of the Prophet

(ṢAAS) in Medina, again connecting back the architectural morphology to trends developed in Cairo. This chapter appropriately concludes really where "it all started" – within the constructs of the first purpose-built mosque that prototypically spawned a movement all over the world. *Minarets of Cairo* is a most innovative, intriguing, and a precise work of scholarship that will become an important reference on the subject.

Cairo is in that strange position of other ancient metropolises – what is the contemporary identity of such a place already loaded with so much historical baggage? What are the relevant ways contemporary architecture can situate itself in such a built environment and, indeed, in such a country with seemingly endless layers of diverse history?

Ahmed Hamid's *Hassan Fathy and Continuity in Islamic Arts and Architecture* discusses the pivotal role of the award-winning contemporary architect who chose to resist the influence of Western aesthetics of modernity in architecture and proposed an autochthonous alternative rooted in forms and materials unique to the specific context of country. Fathy himself was based in one of the oldest areas of Cairo, Darb al-Labbana, near the Ibn Tulun Mosque, from where he designed, mentored students and graduates, and wrote many important texts. including *Architecture for the Poor*. Fathy's impacts on the city, the country and beyond are acclaimed and form a living part of the history of contemporary architecture in the city and the country.

Although the titular subject of *Hassan Fathy and Continuity* is an icon in his own right, deserving of acclaim, this book does not reveal much that has not already been covered more methodologically in previous books. The 206-page book reproduces many previously documented drawings and images of Fathy's work. The four-chapter work seems to skim the surface of an intriguing life work and influence. In the eight pages of the first chapter, "The Hibernation of a Tradition," Hamid quickly debates the opposition between traditional and modern architecture, pitting his views in opposition to Fathy's views, which were that tradition and modernity could not coexist. The author fills his argument with quotes from Hegel, Descartes, and others to support his definition of the two terms (modernity and tradition) and ambiguously points to a convergence of the two. In the second chapter, "The Institutionalization of Islamic Art and Architecture by the Aga Khan Foundation," the author diverges to criticize the award cycle and the program of the Aga Khan Foundation – again like the previous chapter in vague terms – and then he connects Fathy's role to the inception of the foundation and award. Hamid uses this chapter to quickly criticize many of the winners of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA) without

really connecting these criticisms to the subject of the book. In the third chapter "Hassan Fathy: A Condenser of an Older Intelligence," comprising over half of the book, the author documents many of Hassan' Fathy's projects with some color reproductions of Fathy's drawings, and many black and white photographs and reproductions of Fathy's studies. The works are for the most part described, without any sense of critical analysis or a new contribution to the understanding of works already so well-published. The final chapter "Toward a New Islamic Art and Architecture" (alluding to the title of the Modernist work of Le Corbusier *Towards a New Architecture*) – is a chapter that is filled with quotes from Heidegger, Nietzsche, and other Western thinkers and ultimately leaves the question of how Islamic architecture can perpetuate itself today open ended, and unanswered.

Hamid makes clear from the beginning of the text that he spent several years in Fathy's office, and the book is peppered with anecdotes recalling in excruciating detail his encounters with the icon to overemphasize (or validate) his "insider's" view. The text is also filled with criticism of the works of AKAA winners, and criticisms for many of Fathy's other protégés (who would be Hamid's peers). However, these criticisms are stated quickly and in blanket terms and are never really substantiated.

There is no sense of the continuity of the legacy of Fathy in *Hassan Fathy and the Continuity in Islamic Arts and Architecture*. However, inspired by his study of Egypt's history, Fathy himself appreciated and applied all of the layers of Egyptian history in his designs and writings – with his focus on Ancient Egyptian, Coptic, and Islamic geometry as well as important investigations regarding the viable vernacular materials and technologies for construction with mud brick. In addition to this, many of Fathy's students and protégés did go on to construct and adapt his methodologies and approaches and to have work that spanned the country and beyond. His books are still taught today in many schools of architecture in the country (contrary to what Hamid states in his book) and the continuity of Hassan Fathy's ideas are palpably present in many examples of architecture. It is such a pity that this opportunity was lost to contribute a new level of understanding of the work of one of Cairo's greatest architects. One is better suited to read (or reread) Fathy's brilliant texts – *Architecture for the Poor*, or *Natural Energy and Vernacular Architecture* – or any of the many monographs dedicated to his work to better appreciate his contribution to Cairo and the contemporary Egyptian-built environment and to a knowledge of architecture in general.

The palimpsest of Cairo, from archeological to architectural, in its multiple layers remains as enigmatic today as it was to its Roman and

Muslim conquerors, and the various European explorers and expeditions. It is a city with infinite hidden stories – at times as fantastic as the legends in *A Thousand and One Nights* – and at times revealed to us through the impressions made upon its inhabitants and on edifices of the monuments that remain today. Peter Sheehan, Doris Behrens-Abouseif with Nicholas Warner, and Ahmed Hamid all belong to the city in one way or another, and each has put into words and images some elements of the city. Sheehan and Behrens-Abouseif have successfully revealed some connections of the city to other great cultures and religions beyond the extents of the country that although mostly rooted in history continue to exert their impression of ideas in today's consciousness of the metropolis and much more.

Cairo seems immortal in its continual metamorphosis and in its non-physical presence in the words, drawings, and in the hearts of all those who have known her.

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