Hassan Fathy Seminar on the occasion of the 5th anniversary of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina
Alexandria, 25 October 2007

Hassan Fathy and the Arts

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Introduction

First of all, I wish to thank the Bibliotheca Alexandrina for inviting me to participate in this seminar on Hassan Fathy. It is a great honour to be here today to join in the celebrations of the 5th anniversary of this cultural edifice that owes a lot to the patronage of the First Lady, Suzanne Mubarak, and the inspiring leadership of Ismaïl Serageldin. Unfortunately, I did not have the privilege of knowing Hassan Bey personally but researching him over the last few years, he became more and more a familiar figure. The more one goes through the works of this person, who was not only an architect, but also a philosopher, thinker, humanist, a man of science, an accomplished writer and above all, a spiritualist who sailed through the arts, the more we discover the richness of this personality.

The theme of this presentation relates to Hassan Fathy and the Arts. This is for two reasons: In the first place, Hassan Fathy is often referred to as an artist, and this is not usually used as a compliment. One wonders why? Secondly, to place him within the context of contemporary artists and the craftsmen in whom Hassan Fathy had a great interest. I wish at the outset to underline the fact that he was neither cut from his world nor was he a solitary “guru”, but a person who shared a wave of thinking that involved his contemporaries.

Hassan Fathy, who was born here in Alexandria in 1900, and died in Cairo in 1989, is an architect whose life spans the century. A century which, especially for Egypt, was marked by political turmoil and historic events of profound impact. These events had serious repercussions on the culture and, a fortiori, on the movements that dominated the artistic scene in Egypt. Hassan Fathy was
born in a country under British domination. He spent his young years in a climate of struggle for independence until the accession of King Fouad to the throne in 1923 and then his son Farouk in 1936. His years of maturity where marked by the emergence of nationalism that led to the 1952 revolution and the ascendance to power by Gamal Abdel Nasser. When Sadat took over in 1971, Hassan Fathy was in his mature age and witnessed the radical political changes that followed the policy of the *infitah*. He lived in the twilight of his life to see Hosni Mubarak as the President of Egypt. We are talking of a life span that has covered an important spell of Egypt’s history. Hassan Fathy was influenced by these radical political changes and, like his contemporaries, was swept by the flow of history, which left him all his life searching for solutions to the problems of a society in perpetual evolution.

**The Nahda**

*Egypt’s awakening*

Hassan Fathy graduated in 1926 from the School of Engineering of King Fouad University. It was at this moment that the first Groups of Modern Art made their appearance in Egypt. The creation of the School of Fine Arts in 1908 by Prince Yussef Kamel paved the way for a new creative wave. A first generation of artists includes such personalities as the sculpture Mahmoud Mukhtar and the painters Ragheb Ayad, Yussef Kamel, Mahmoud Said and Mohammed Nagui. These intellectual artists were fully aware that they represented the first generation of Egyptian artists in a country that had been so far dominated by successive waves of foreign occupations since the Sixteenth century. They attempted to demonstrate through their works the will to create a bridge with an authentic Egyptian heritage where deeply inspired by scenes of popular traditional life.
They searched for an identity which was lost due to the brutal confrontation with the West which began with Napoleon Bonaparte’s expedition in 1789. The Campaign triggered a cultural confusion which gave rise to searching questioning concerning the scientific backwardness of Egypt compared to the Occident. Paradoxically, this choc resulted in a positive cultural awakening in Egypt that we call the *Nahda*.

Mohamed Ali (1805-1849) was the first to initiate the tradition of sending scholarly missions abroad, and the generations of artists that followed benefited from such scholarships. On their return to their country, they adopted nationalist themes expressed in an occidental manner. And writers like Taha Hussein and Tawfiq el-Hakim also adopted forms imported from the west such as prose and theatre to express nationalist values. There was no question that they were blindly imitating the West nor categorically rejecting it, but rather they projected an internal conflict, almost schizophrenic, between East and West.

The monumental work by the sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar, *Egypt’s Awakening*, is a clear illustration of this movement. This work, in pink granite, of a *fellaha* embracing a proud sphinx, lifting her veil to witness the future of an Egypt reborn, reflects the conscience of a national identity, championed by Saad Zaghlul at the time. Meanwhile, the simple and stylised lines of the sculpture evocate modern European sculpture and betray the influence of Mukhtar’s apprenticeship at the Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Hassan Fathy, as all these plastic artists was in search for the authentic architecture of his country. But the question arises as to what was the Egyptian architectural heritage at the time when he started his carrier?

He found a Cairo that had just been disturbed by the Hausmannian planning of the nineteenth century initiated by Khedive Ismaïl in an attempt to Europeanize Cairo after the Parisian model. Although the very rich Islamic architecture produced an influence on him, he was confronted by an architecture that was essentially foreign. That may explain why in his quest to search for inspirations
to create a genuine Egyptian architecture, he looked back on the time of the pharaohs. 
Hassan Fathy can therefore be considered as a child of the Nahda searching for architectural solutions respecting the works of his predecessors with a view to adapting it to contemporary life.

**Ancient Egypt**

**The gouaches; rupture and return to the sources**

Hassan Fathy presented early in his career some gouaches which represented designs for country houses. Their artistic character is not usual for architectural plans: Resorting to the one dimensional perspective and the deliberately naïve character used by the pharaohs earned Hassan Fathy the title of “romantic”. However, Hassan Fathy who was a graduate of the School of Engineering perfectly mastered the academic design techniques. Presenting constructions by using the techniques of the gouache represents a rupture with the usual lavish technique of the Beaux Arts tradition.

With his gouaches, he establishes his projects on the immediate continuity of the heritage of the glorious Pharaonic past of Egypt and brakes away with all foreign influence. This way of painting architecture flows directly from the mural paintings that decorate the tombs of the Valley of the Nobles at Luxor. Ancient Egypt represented a conceptual reference recurring in his work event if it doesn’t formally appear in his constructions. Even in his plans and drawings, these figures appear from time to time as a reminder of the ideal society to which he desired to link his work with.

His interpretation of Pharaonic architecture was also mystical and derived from the theories of the Egyptologist Schwaller de Lubitz whom he met in Luxor. The latter in his work, *The Temple of Man*, often quoted by Hassan Fathy, presents a
symbolic and cosmological interpretation of the architecture of Ancient Egyptians.

I would like to quote Hassan Fathy concerning the pharaoh’s drawings:

« The Ancient Egyptians had penetrated the soul of this land and had represented its character with an honesty that carries across to us over the intervening millennia. In their drawings-simple lines painted on the wall of the tombs,-they convey more of the essential character of nature than the most elaborate confections of colour and light and shade by the most celebrated exponents of modern European-style painting. »

For the artists contemporary to Hassan Fathy, the symbolism of ancient Egypt was of equally strong influence. As the feminine figures with Pharaonic profiles as well in the works of Mahmoud Said and Mahmoud Mukhtar clearly show we can see that the occidental medium becomes a tool in the service of reasserting a genuine culture.

**Rural life**

*Architecture with a social vocation*

In addition to this interest in Ancient Egypt, Hassan Fathy shared with these artists a concern for rural life which in a certain way links up with Ancient Egypt. The life of the fellah in Egypt had hardly changed since the time of the pharaohs and they continued they reliance on the Nile which represents in the collective conscience of Egyptians for millennia, the symbol of prosperity. The fellah then and the people of the popular quarters of Cairo became a dominant

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subject for the artists of that time. They presented scenes of their daily life, their fields, their animals and the popular traditions of the village.

Hassan Fathy, a son of a landowner has shown from his very young age an interest in rural life so much so that he attempted to pass the admission exam for the School of Agriculture were he failed, probably for our luck. Despite that, the condition of the fellah’s lives where to be one of his major preoccupations all through his life. This social consciousness characterizes the work of the artists belonging to the Group of Contemporary Art, founded by the painter, theoretician and educator, Hussein Yussef Amin, in the early thirties, such as Abd el Hadi El Gazzar and Hamed Nada. They describe with realism the difficult condition of the fellahs and inhabitants of the popular quarters of Cairo. Hassan Fathy, for his part pays attention to these groups when he builds villages for peasants or when he plans for the rehabilitation of certain quarters of old Cairo. Architecture with a social vocation was an innovation in the first half of the 20th century. In Egypt, a country predominantly rural, the interest was naturally towards the peasants.

Pedagogical education and anti-academism

This social interest led the intellectuals of the generation of Hassan Fathy to value the education of the poor social classes and to establish anti-academic educational systems. When Hussein Yussef Amin returned to Egypt in 1930 after having lived in Europe and Brazil, he decided to train young artists coming out of unprivileged backgrounds, completely on the margin of academic artistic currents, and he followed them from Secondary School until their graduation from the School of Fine Arts.

Hassan Fathy, while building the pilot project for the New Gourna village trained the builders on the job outside the scholar system so that they could train the following generations. He would also take his architects students to the building site and train them together with his bricklayers from Nubia.
One of the pioneering figures in this area of artistic education of the time was Habib Gorgui. This man, who was Chief Inspector of Arts at the Ministry of Education, introduced several innovations to the educational system of Egypt. He believed in the capacity of children to develop “dans la liberté et par la liberté” their artistic aptitudes and their personalities. Like Hassan Fathy who wanted, according to himself, to abolish the hierarchy between the architect and the master mason, Habib Gorgui thought that the relationship between the master and the student should be revisited so that the master guides the student without imposing his aesthetic values on him. He tried a pilot project at his place in the gardens of Koubbah with children sculptures and he would specially choose peasant children with no preconceived idea about art. He would give each a piece of clay and would leave them to express themselves only interfering from time to time to guide them in the technique.

The expressive qualities of those works led the UNESCO in Paris to organise in 1950 an exhibition to present the works of the children of Koubbah. This shows the innovative character of such educational projects. Hassan Fathy and Habib Gorgui subscribe to the same current which values manual production rooted in the tradition and that uses a material that should be enhanced in value; earth.

**Earth**

*The material*

If I speak of the importance of earth, I wish only to underline to what extent the use of this material was not a completely marginal idea if we place it within the perspective of current thinking which put Hassan Fathy in relationship with such personalities as Habib Gorgui. On the contrary, from the point of view of economic feasibility of peasant communities, the accordance with climate and the ecological response by the architect, in the beginning of the 1940, the use of this material is an innovation. At the same time, in Europe, Le Corbusier who
was a proponent of the use of building materials resulting from modern technology such as armed concrete, published in 1940, during the war, when such material were rare, *Les Constructions Murondins*, a work which had the objective of teaching the youth of France to build their one Houses with compressed earth.

One of the first houses Hassan Fathy built in mud brick, commonly known as *toub al- akhdar* is the house of Hamed Saïd. This artist was also a potter and we understand that he was seduced by the architecture of Hassan Fathy of which he said was an « object of pottery and a construction at the same time»

And it is true, as the material itself, rough and malleable, has an aesthetic aspect close to *modelage*, which is accentuated in the architecture of Hassan Fathy by the harmonious play of volumes.

Hamed Saïd first asked Hassan Fathy to build his studio which he later enlarged, at El Marg, which at the time was in the heart of a lush countryside. He is also the founder of an art movement of which Hassan Fathy was a member, the *Group of the Friends of Art and Life*. This group was made up of artists and intellectuals who were all concerned with the negative effects that rapid industrialization of the country could have on traditional values. In fact, they desired to give value to craftwork as opposed to mechanical production and believed in the respect of Nature. In this Group, we also encounter the architect Ramsis Wissa Wassef, the son in law of Habib Gorgui who also believed in the inherent creativity of each human being. He studied at the Beaux-arts of Paris and obtained his diploma in 1935 with the compliments of the Jury for his Theses entitled “The House of a potter in old Cairo”. We note that the theme is recurrent. Hassan Fathy and Ramsis Wissa Wassef met at the School of Fine Arts in Cairo were they were both teachers. They travelled together to Nubia in 1941 and shared the same fascination for its vernacular architecture. Ramsis

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Wissa Wassef built in 1951 an Art Centre in Harraniyya, a traditional village, preserved from modern life and situated on the road to the Saqqara pyramid outside Cairo. He decided to train the young villagers in another traditional craft, weaving and built the workshops and the craftsmen’s houses in mud brick. The two men were similar in their wish to value traditional crafts and do away the hierarchy between arts and artisans. The experience of Harraniyya has born its fruits and the weavings have been exhibited all over the world and the centre continues to be active.

**Conclusion**

_The Lesson of Hassan Bey_

Hassan Fathy, like his contemporaries, has experienced with pilot projects and the social vocation of his work is registered in a century which itself makes the transition between tradition and modernity. With this presentation I wanted to shed the light one of his many facets which is the relationship with a certain cultural environment which is the vehicle of the innovative ideas to which he completely adhered. From this perspective, his work should be considered as he himself defined it, contemporary architecture. Like Mahmoud Mukhtar, Hussein Yussef Amin, Habib Gorgui, Hamed Saïd, Ramsis Wissa Wassef and others, he searched for alternative solutions without blindly imitating all what comes from the West. All these people laboured for the positive development of a modern Egypt. The originality of these pioneers’s contribution is a reflection of an uninhibited vision of the future that is firmly anchored in their country’s glorious past.

The originality of Hassan Fathy’s thoughts and works at that particular moment of history is without precedent in Egypt nor is it in the rest of the world. This heritage is considerable and today we still have a lot to learn from the lessons of Hassan Bey.