

# **The Unknown Hassan Fathy**

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[Seminar Hassan Fathy and his legacy](#)

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I wish to begin by apologizing for presenting a communication titled “The Unknown Hassan Fathy” to an audience composed of colleagues who have been close to him, wrote or produced exhibitions on him, worked with him. I personally never met Hassan Fathy. I can argue for my defence that it might be easier to study scientifically Hassan Bey, the “Gourou” as many people say, without knowing him personally. This way, my hope is that I can remain objective and uninfluenced by this charismatic personality. The memory of Hassan Fathy, that one often has, is one of an old and a bit dogmatic man, involved in mud brick and appropriate technology. But who remembers the young Hassan Fathy? The one before Gournah? The modern architect? The seducing Hassan Fathy?

My attempt, as a historian, is to approach the truth through investigation methods ; that is to say, in our case, by studying the archives, - a fantastic and immense world, which is still being classified at the Rare Books Library at AUC -, by interviewing the people who closely knew Hassan Fathy, by understating the timeframe during which he lived and worked, to shed the light on his important network of relationships. Hassan Fathy may have given us the impression of being a lonely creator but, in fact, he had numerous professional relationships. He was involved with ministries, international organizations, associations, appointed for projects concerning rural development, housing, heritage, education, culture, tourism ...

By contextualising the thoughts and works of Hassan Fathy, we discover that he is completely in accordance with his time, as a nationalist architect who defends the Egyptian way of building against westernized architecture. The researches undertaken to understand his relationships with the Egyptian intellectuals and artists of his time are of greatest significance. Nadia Radwan, assistant at Geneva University, who wrote a remarkable thesis on the work of Hassan Fathy that won a price in Switzerland, will present this subject later on.

I myself would like to examine the work of Hassan Fathy under the axis of modernism. By Modernism, I mean his concern for modern programs, but also his modern thoughts and way of designing. Hassan Fathy, who is trained at Cairo University in the Twenties, mainly by Italian and British professors, is deeply westernized and this was never emphasized in the publications on him. His early production reflects the Deco Style and Modern Movement influences. We still know little about this subject. Fathy did not mention it in his old years, maybe considering this early work as a youth failure and censuring these early projects for posterity? The attempt to reconstitute Fathy's carrier during the 1920s is a difficult task. Very few papers remain from this period when Hassan Fathy worked at 44 Falaki Street and lived in a brand-new modern apartment house in Zamalek.

At that time, during the reign of King Fouad, Fathy designs projects for the cosmopolitan Cairene society who enjoys entertainment and elegant villas. Like his contemporaries, he uses the new technology of concrete even if it was not such an easy task, as it appears in a controversial correspondence with the Egyptian constructor of the Bosphore Casino in 1932. An interesting contract with Victor del Burgo, an Italian engineer and constructor, specialized in concrete, shows us that he would have applied a mixed technique for the construction of an apartment-house in Zamalek in 1937. This project was to be constructed with a concrete skeleton and brick walls. Hassan Fathy intended to cover the building with various coatings (like tartache or takchine or "à la tyrolienne"), which was commonly used in Egypt at that time to disguise modern materials. Sayed Korryem condemned this way of dissimulating in an article of 1940, mentioned and translated by Mercedes Volait in her outstanding publication *Al Imara, Pour un style national de l'architecture en Egypte*.

The early 1940s are usually considered as the turning point of Fathy's career and the beginning of the vernacular style as shown in the Hamdi Seif el Nasr project in the Fayoum. From then on Fathy had the reputation of an architect mainly concerned with tradition, heritage and vernacular architecture. The material found in the archives enables us to try another interpretation of Hassan Fathy's work. Though he rejected in a very interesting text the idea of modern architecture and created the concept of contemporary architecture, I would like to point the ambiguity and the richness in the work of Hassan Fathy through a few examples. I would also like to relate him to his contemporaries.

## **The idea and the ideal of the village**

As admirably described in *Architecture for the Poor*, a book written like a novel or like a symphony, Fathy discovers the beauty of the old Nubian villages during a travel with his colleagues of the Fine Arts Academy in 1937. Everybody is aware of the importance of this “revelation” on the production that follows this trip. The interest of Hassan Fathy for villages comes from, as he says himself, his study of the theories of British urban planners. Thomas Sharp is one of them. Sharp, a follower of Ebenezer Howard, wrote several books on the English village during the thirties and the forties. As well as Sharp thought “the man-made landscape of England was the most beautiful in the world and the English village was the perfection of the village idea”, Fathy praised the Nubian villages as ideal and perfect locations and tried to recreate something of them in Gournah. Both are searching for the secret of the charm and character of those traditional villages of which they study the conscious or unconscious principles of design. Both have the fear that those beautiful and worthy entities lose their genuine identity.

The theme of the village is central in the designs of Hassan Fathy, from Gournah to the latest community projects of the eighties. Those villages are mainly either peasant villages or touristic villages. During his stay in Greece with the Doxiades agency (1957 - 1962) Hassan Fathy studies many proposals for implantations in Iraq in the country of the Great Mussayeb. The planning of the cosmopolite agency is often totally modern, without any formal reminiscences from any kind of vernacular architecture. Later on, after his return to Egypt, Fathy will plan the village of Baris, an unaccomplished but magnificent endeavour.

## **The holiday village**

Major part of Fathy’s villages projects from the sixties to the eighties are holiday villages. This very contemporary concern of Hassan Fathy with tourism was never really underlined even though many projects and texts reflect a comprehensive and pioneering attitude. Hassan Fathy was called back by the minister of culture, Sarwat Okasha. In 1963, Hassan Fathy, after his return from Greece, became consultant to the Ministry of Tourism.

In which way did his stay by Doxiades give him the image of a westernized architect able to cope with this urgent and important program? The holiday village appeared all over the world as the best answer to Post Second World War social tourism and the cleverer

formula to preserve the beauties of the sites. Thomas Sharp thinks that “the holiday village” should be a future solution and says: “The holiday village will ... provide country and seaside holidays, with the amenities of small community life, for urban family group, each family having a house to itself.”

The Hassan Fathy’s archives show us some touristic projects of the Doxiades Agency. The village of Apollonion at Porto Rafti in Attica forty kilometres from Athens “combines the comfort of modern living and the privacy of one’s own home with the beauty and tranquillity of an unspoiled natural setting”.

Apollonion is an example among many others built in the fifties or in the early sixties to fight the damages caused by excessive building. Gérard Brick then associated with Trigano will invent in 1950 the successful formula of the Club Med, whose holiday villages all included will proliferate through the world and answer the general demand of the new social tourism. Alcudia (Majorca) will host the first constructed village of the Club Med.

The formula of (pseudo-)vernacular village is very much appreciated around the Mediterranean Sea. Such inventions like Port Grimaud by the architect François Spoerri (1963) were even supported by the General de Gaulle to avoid in France the disastrous concrete densification of the Costa Brava in Spain.

We know that Hassan Fathy collects documentation about many Mediterranean touristic infrastructures, like Varna in Bulgaria, Izmir, that he will visit in company of Omar el Farroukh (1968), Marrakech, Djerba, where was built a first Club Med in 1965 and Tunis. Later on, considered as a specialist in tourism, Hassan Fathy will participate to the Hammamet conference, a panarabic meeting, held by the UNESCO in 1974, hosting an important section on the impact of tourism on architectural surroundings. Fathy certainly influenced deeply the conclusions of the general report concerning the recognition of heritage, inspiration of vernacular models and claim for genuine form and typology.

At the end of the sixties Hassan Fathy will begin developing some proposal for a low-cost holiday village on the North Coast west of Alexandria. He addresses an interesting report to the minister of tourism and proposes to construct a village in indigenous character that should have an esthetical appeal on tourists. Two prototypes should be built for the investors to get an idea of what will be the realisation: the first one in Agami (it will produce the Sidi Krier House, 1971), the second on the Mokhatam in Cairo, which was never built.

Sidi Krier, which was built out of sandstone, the local material, enables us to experiment the cleverness of the inner and outer organisation according to the program, the climate and the site. Hassan Fathy says himself that “he tried to bring to the guest all the best qualities of Arab domestic architecture crystallised into this unit”. He mentions the combination of the Qâa with its iwan, the courtyard, the Ma’qâad or loggia, the use of the muschrabeyya, but concludes: “It is worthy of note that while all the elements of design were of the most traditional, all the materials were of local origin, yet the building is absolutely contemporary”.

Hassan Fathy’s project for the North Coast won’t be constructed and the house of Sidi Krier (1971) will be the late and isolated result of creating a housing unit as prototype. After this first attempt many other projects will be designed for touristic and/or cultural villages, as the Nile Festival Village in the Seventies, which should have been located near Louxor and which should have hosted many artistic manifestations.

The very controversial Village of the Journalists (karia al Sahafiyin) in Sahel el Shamali, 82 kilometers west from Alexandria, and constructed after the death of Hassan Fathy, could, I think, nevertheless be considered as a late or posthume realisation, if not of Hassan Fathy, in close connexion to him. AUC archives conserve a mass planning of 1989 showing the Hassan Fathy’s signature.

Hassan Fathy’s many attempts to build touristic villages since the the sixties remained unaccomplished. In Nasser’s time, tourism was in his first steps. Twenty years later, plenty of touristic villages were to be constructed on the shore of the Red Sea, by followers, who benefited from the track he had opened.

## **Housing Units**

Involved since Gurna in the elaboration of the housing units, Fathy goes on working on different minimal units that should host various family cells. The way of thinking and designing these Housing Units has close connexions with the work of Modern architects concerned with social housing. Germans and particularly the *Frankfurter Schule* also studies *Das Existenzminimum*, that is to say the minimal vital housing cell. Gropius and Le Corbusier, among others, produced revolutionary low and middle classes apartments, grouped in some Siedlung, like those beautiful and protected examples which still could be visited in the neighbourhood of Berlin, or in the Unité d’habitation, like the one of Marseille, which is today listed as national heritage.

## Gourna

Gourna's experience has fairly in a good and in a bad way hidden the rest of the production of Hassan Fathy. The project was partly misunderstood by people who saw in it merely the use of poor material (mud brick) and the shape of tombs architecture (domes). But who did really appreciate this Egyptian endeavour as a contemporary answer to modern housing questions?

Isn't the *fellahin* village the counterpart of the European working classes city? Who, apart from the Greek photographer Dimitri Papadimou, underlined the very modern game of the simple masses under the light? What about the curves of his mud-bricks vaults which are very close to some concrete constructions like the parabolic vaults of Freyssinet for the plane shelters of Orly Airport? Fathy himself didn't totally emphasize in *Architecture for the Poor* that he used mud brick to achieve social, typological but also formal modernity, approaching in that Le Corbusier (for whom he had contradictory feelings) formula: "L'architecture est le jeu savant, correct et magnifique des volumes sous la lumière".

Hassan Fathy tried by many means to save and restore the unfinished and deteriorated village of Gourna. He even thought of turning it into a touristic village. From 1968 until the eighties this proposal was examined. The latest plans (1981) propose the restoration of the existing village and his extension for the touristic project in its original style adapted to coming times.

Hassan Fathy remains a major figure and his production is an important subject for researchers as this seminar organized by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina confirms. Behind the known Hassan Fathy, the technician of raw brick and Architecture for the poor hides a much richer personality: a polyvalent architect, able to design for the poor as well as for the rich, in mud or in concrete, caring for heritage while looking towards the future. Even though he has been awarded and honoured during his life, most of his constructions are today neglected and call for urgent care. What remains of his work deserves protection as an outstanding heritage for Egypt and for the world. Gourna, the jewel that Fathy gave to Egypt and that Egypt gave to the world, has been recently considerably damaged. As Mies van der Rohe Barcelona's small Pavillion was entirely reconstructed as a testimony of Modern architecture, it is now the time to bring Gourna back to life.