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**HASSAN FATHY: AN ARCHITECTURAL LIFE, ED.
 LEILA EL-WAKIL (2018)**

Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 416 pp., 325 colour illus.,
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Reviewed by Igor Demchenko, University of Kassel, Germany

Many architects were made famous by their buildings, some by their projects, and very few by their publications. Hassan Fathy is known first and foremost as the ‘architect’ of a book, titled *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt*.¹ He was also an architect in the conventional sense of this word, as a professional who designed, built, and contributed to the preservation of architectural monuments. Leila el-Wakil has assembled a collective of scholars to produce a volume, originally published in French but now translated into English, that surveys and analyses the personal history, architectural activities, and societal context that defined and perhaps generated Fathy’s pivotal text.²

The volume includes Leila el-Wakil’s introduction and twenty-one chapters of differing lengths and uneven scope, of which ten are authored by el-Wakil and the rest by other authors. The volume is thus neither a monograph nor a collection of articles and is instead essentially el-Wakil’s project accomplished with a support from her students and close colleagues. The volume’s consistently positive bias constructs an image of the architect and the theoretician that is less that of a pure genius, as his admirers and followers have tended to present him in the past, but rather that of an accomplished humanist. The aims of the volume, clearly outlined in the introduction, include ‘researching [Fathy’s] origins and training, seeking out his clients, establishing his professional network at different periods, throwing light upon his romantic attachments and significant friendships, listing and analysing the trips he made, and pursuing an understanding of his relationship with the authorities’ (11).

The first chapter, contributed by Leila el-Wakil, covers Fathy’s family history, early life, education, and his first projects. Each subsequent chapter likewise sheds light on a particular aspect of Fathy’s life or the precedents for his oeuvre, both built and published. Most chapters are based on extensive archival research and contribute previously unpublished material. When read together, the chapters present a dynamic, comprehensive and multidimensional picture of Fathy’s professional self.

Jessica Stevens-Campos explores Fathy’s musical training, which was reflected in the structure of his celebrated book and, arguably, in his architectural projects. El-Wakil covers Fathy’s early commissions, which exhibited a spectrum of interwar architectural styles. Fathy’s final project for a degree

in architecture at the Polytechnic School of the King Fuad I University in Cairo (now the University of Cairo) employed the neoclassical style with added Art Deco elements, thus hardly pointing in the direction of his later, experimental designs.³ As an example of this shift in Fathy's work, the chapter by Mercedes Volait discusses the architect's modernist phase, which led him to his first experiments with vernacular construction techniques. This is followed by el-Wakil's presentation of the villas designed and constructed by Fathy in an orientalizing style for the upper class of pre-1952 Egyptian society. Some are eclectic fantasies, but others point to the original synthesis of his most celebrated project, the Upper Egyptian village of New Gournā. Nadia Radwan surveys Fathy's artistic output, his ideals of craftsmanship and integral approach to design and Ola Seif focuses on Fathy's paintings and their aesthetic roots. In the eighth chapter, Ahmad Hamid presents his personal recollections of Fathy's architectural pedagogy at Cairo University's Faculty of Engineering and of his practical working methods.

Samir Radwan discusses the conditions of the Egyptian peasantry – Fathy aimed to improve their lives through his utopian projects, which integrated the purported revival of vernacular construction techniques with the belief in self-help and the ideal of self-organization for local communities. In the tenth chapter, Leila el-Wakil presents traditional rural dwelling types that served as a starting point for Fathy's experiments in designing his architecture for 'the poor' classes that became the subject of the architect's book. In the eleventh chapter, conceptually and structurally central to the book, el-Wakil covers the ambitions and the failure of the New Gournā project, which Fathy used to illustrate his theoretical principles in the *Architecture for the Poor*. Designed in the harsh economic environment of the mid-1940s, the village of New Gournā in Upper Egypt was partially built in the early 1950s using vernacular Nubian vaulted construction techniques and unbaked brick. Jessica Stevens-Campos offers valuable insights into the musical terminology employed by Fathy in his book.

Leila el-Wakil's thirteenth chapter explores Fathy's further efforts to put his theoretical principles into practice to improve the living conditions of Egyptian peasants; much to his grief, all of them failed. Joseph Abram discusses the problems of adopting vaults for the construction of popular dwellings in Egypt's climate. While Nicholas Warner presents an interesting precedent for the construction of vaulted mud-brick structures during the British colonial rule in Egypt, there is no clear evidence that Fathy was aware of or interested in these designs. Camille Abele surveys Fathy's collaboration with the Greek architect and urban planner Constantinos Doxiadis, a relationship that was essential for the publication and the global fame of *Architecture for the Poor*. Rémi Baudouï offers a useful survey of Fathy's employment outside of Egypt. It is unfortunate that the American part of this history is missing from the book, as it would be particularly interesting to the readers of its English translation. El-Wakil concludes the book with four chapters that cover Fathy's brief involvement with the rising Egyptian tourist industry, his activism in historic preservation, his spiritual quest, and his global standing as an architect.

The volume is beautifully illustrated, and the English translation of the original French text is almost flawless. The style is narrative, and there is little critical engagement with Fathy's design principles and the social and aesthetic theories that he espoused. Although Fathy failed to realize any of his utopian visions, he did inspire several generations of non-Western architects in the use of original local morphologies and of vernacular construction techniques

in response to global challenges. The adequacy of the humanist image of the architect presented in this book can only be judged against the critical assessment of the role that *Architecture for the Poor* played in propagating the delusional imperative of self-help in the developing world. That said, Leïla el-Wakil's edited volume will certainly be useful, or even indispensable, for any serious reader of Fathy's text as an extensive commentary and insight into his private, intellectual, and professional life.

Contributor Details

Igor Demchenko is a Teaching and Research Fellow at the University of Kassel, Germany. He received his Ph.D. in architectural history from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2015. He taught architectural history and historic preservation at Illinois Institute of Technology, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Columbia University. His research has been supported by the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Swiss Government Excellence Scholarship, the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, and the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library. His publications and conference presentations explore the questions of non-Western architectural expertise, regional planning in the Soviet Union, and the problems of historic preservation in the Islamic world.

Endnotes

- 1 Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).
- 2 Leïla el-Wakil, ed., *Hassan Fathy dans son temps* (Gollion: Infolio, 2013).
- 3 Although the type of building that Fathy designed as his final project is unknown, el-Wakil suggests it was a courthouse.