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*Viewpoints* Special Edition

# Architecture and Urbanism in the Middle East

*The Middle East Institute*





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## Introduction

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MEI's special edition of *Viewpoints* on "Architecture and Urbanism in the Middle East" is an opportunity to celebrate the beauty, diversity, and vitality of the built environment of the region. It is also an opportunity to consider the challenges facing architects, designers, and developers in their efforts not only to preserve the rich cultural heritage of Middle Eastern cities but to shape these urban spaces in ways that address the physical and socioeconomic pressures occurring within them.

Indeed, as the contributors to this volume demonstrate, the Middle East's built environment is at an important juncture. There are major choices to be made if the region's urban development is to meet the needs and expectations of its peoples. The 15 essays comprising this volume are snapshots of the built environment arcing from the Maghreb through the Levant to the Gulf.

Taken together, the essays suggest the need for a new paradigm of designing Middle Eastern urban spaces for sustainability — comprehensive in that it encompasses all physical components of human settlements such as buildings, streets, public spaces, and infrastructure; balanced in that it supports physical and economic growth while accommodating the traditional and cultural needs of the local community; responsive in that it protects and enhances the health, safety, and general wellbeing of inhabitants; and innovative in that it incorporates new technologies into designs so as to reduce the stress on the natural environment.

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# Cairo's Plurality of Architectural Trends and the Continuous Search for Identity

*Ashraf M. Salama*

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Egyptian politics, knowledge, and culture are rooted in the modern physical, socio-cultural, and socio-economic realities of Cairo. History — reflecting the intersection of place, society, culture, and technology — adds another dimension to Cairo's architecture and urbanism. As a result, Cairo today is a complex and diverse city of over 18 million inhabitants with a range of well-established traditions and an array of often competing symbols of religious, political, institutional, and economic powers.

The Egyptian economy has unquestionably influenced the process of urbanization in Cairo. The Open Door Policy (1974-1981) placed emphasis on encouraging the private sector, at both regional and international levels, to develop and implement new investment plans. Laws pertaining to taxes and trade were tailored to facilitate foreign investment and international trade. During the 1980s, a period of economic reform, the government's policy was to develop plans geared towards both economic and social development and to encourage international investment in several development realms. The privatization era, which started in 1991, emphasized effective interaction with market dynamics, the aim being to transform government projects into private ventures and to minimize and



Figure 1: The Supreme Court of Egypt, designed by Ahmad Mito. An explicit example of historical revivalism.

limit the role of the public sector and its involvement in strategic projects crucial to the national economy. This trend, which manifested itself in intensive industrial development and a withdrawal of investment from the agricultural sector, has had a marked effect on the urbanization process.

The repercussions of these policy phases on Egyptian urbanism are evident, especially when one looks at private sector investment in mass housing and industrial development around greater Cairo. A redistribution of powers has been conceived in which the government role is supposed to be minimal in the areas of production and development and maximal in environmental protection. The government's role was to provide security, safety, and public services; to direct the activities of the private sector for the benefit and welfare of the general public; and to create employment opportunities. The failure of the government to fulfil this role resulted in a private sector monopoly in the delivery of these services, which became subject to market speculation. The aggressive participation of the private sector in housing and service delivery led to inflation and



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an overheated real estate market. Clearly, the private sector targets strategic locations inside the urban perimeter of Cairo for developing large-scale luxury commercial and office buildings. It also aims at housing projects in the new cities around Cairo, at the affluent population and the upper middle class.

Within the economic context of Cairo, several architectural and design positions have emerged to deal with these issues. However, many of the projects that were created left the city to suffer in ugliness, which left the public starving for visually appealing environments. Although few attempts were made to create built environments that addressed the practical realities of the time, there was a search for a contemporary Cairene identity. A diversity of architectural theories has emerged, resulting in a fertile soil that encourages new attempts at all levels, from the construction of individual houses to large-scale public projects. One such theory is Postmodernism.



Figure 2: Original Weavers Company Headquarters by Farouk Al Gohary. An implicit example of historical revivalism.



Figure 3: Integrated Care Society by Magd Masarra. An example of surface treatment architecture that makes little reference to anything but the creative impulses of the architect.

One major position that exemplifies contemporary Cairene architecture and urbanism is *historical revivalism*. This has materialized with clear references to the mix of Egyptian heritages. While many insisted that simulating history in contemporary buildings would foster a sense of belonging and strong emotional ties between society and the built environment, the license to blindly select, borrow, and copy from the past has become acceptable. There are several examples of historical revivalism using the architectural ideology of a certain period. For example, the Supreme Court of Egypt, designed by Ahmed Mito, employs features of Pharonic architecture but with different proportions. In the Oriental Weavers headquarters, Farouk El Gohary incorporates arches and an inner courtyard and openings covered with stucco screens in an attempt to produce a new image of Cairene architecture. Some other architects have gone to extremes

Postmodernism in Cairo is within the framework of international postmodernism. Yet the local movement has failed to offer an alternative vision. It has not provided a remedy for problems resulting from thoughtless appropriations of Western and modern architectural trends. And it has not gone far enough in acknowledging the needs and aspirations of Cairene society. Postmodernism has not addressed the faults implicit in modernist architectural practices, but rather, has tacitly accepted them. It is merely an adjustment from following the international modernism to following the international postmodernism.



Figure 4: Khan Al Aziza. An example of straight copying from the past.



and allowed themselves essentially to copy and paste from the past. The Khan Al Azizia project features such superficial copying of ancient designs that are completely at odds with both function and context.

*Critical Regionalism* is another position that attempts to read the history of Cairo and extract its essence while adapting it to suit the spirit of the times. It is a way to show cultural, economic, and political independence. In the Nile Art Gallery, Halim Ibrahim considers pre-modern heritage in a building that serves a modern function. His concern was to connect the current art movement in Egypt with the Islamic and Arabic cultural heritage. The project is a thoughtful effort aimed at the development of a contemporary Cairene cultural identity. Gamal Bakry's work is based on profound interpretations of history and culture. In his design for the commercial and tourist center near the Pyramids, he reflected on the cultural richness of Egypt, with a yellowish facade that references the nearby desert. Hierarchical masses are used to simulate the idea of a pyramid. Openings are designed with motifs that reflect Egyptian culture and a conscious attempt is made to link the building with the pyramid platform, using it as a panoramic view.



Figure 6: Commercial and Tourist Centre by Gamal Bakry. An example of Critical Regionalism — a conscious attempt at reinterpreting the heritage of Cairo.

Adaptive reuse, and urban intervention in historic Cairo are relatively new approaches to architectural practice. *Al Azhar Park* illustrates the practice of culturally responsive architecture. It was envisioned by H.H. the Agha Khan in the 1980s as part of a larger program for the development and upgrading of the *Al Darb Al Ahmar* area of Old Cairo. Under the direction and management of the Agha Khan Trust for Culture, Sites International was selected as a local consultancy to develop the final designs of the park together with other consultants. This project is another thoughtful attempt to improve the quality of the built environment and retrieve some of what Cairo has lost over the past 30 years.

Contemporary Cairo is a collection of planning and architectural positions that search for an identity. Few cases correspond to the history and economy of Cairo while many defy Cairene culture. Although there are honest attempts to tame the urban development process, and Egyptian architects manage individual buildings well enough, Cairo's overall built environment is increasingly mismanaged. Nevertheless, there is hope found in a few designs that Cairo can produce a solid architectural trend and planning direction.



Figure 5: Nile Art Gallery. An example of Critical Regionalism — a conscious attempt at reinterpreting the heritage of Cairo.

Movements toward a more culturally and environmentally responsive architecture are now underway. Public participation, adaptive reuse, and urban intervention in historic Cairo are relatively new approaches to architectural practice. *Al Azhar Park* illustrates the practice of culturally responsive architecture. It was envisioned by H.H. the Agha Khan in the 1980s as part of a larger program for the development and upgrading of the *Al Darb Al Ahmar* area of Old Cairo. Under the direction and management of the Agha Khan Trust for Culture, Sites International was selected as a local consultancy to develop the final designs of the park together with other consultants. This project is another thoughtful attempt to improve the quality of the built environment and retrieve some of what Cairo has lost over the past 30 years.



Figure 7: A view of Al Azhar Park: An example of culturally and environmentally responsive architecture.



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