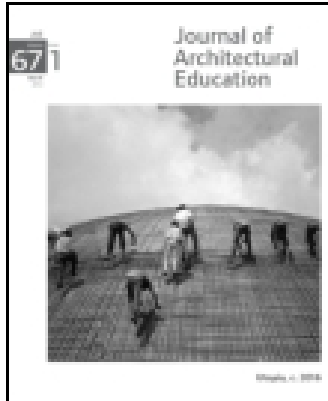




Journal of Architectural Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjae20>

The Failed Utopia of a Modern African Vernacular: Hassan Fathy in New Gouna

Miguel Guitart^a

^a University at Buffalo, The State University of New York

Published online: 14 Oct 2014.



CrossMark

[Click for updates](#)

To cite this article: Miguel Guitart (2014) The Failed Utopia of a Modern African Vernacular: Hassan Fathy in New Gouna, Journal of Architectural Education, 68:2, 166-177, DOI: [10.1080/10464883.2014.937232](https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2014.937232)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2014.937232>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

The Failed Utopia of a Modern African Vernacular

Hassan Fathy in New Gourn

Miguel Guitart

University at Buffalo, The State University of New York

My research on Hassan Fathy's New Gourn project in Egypt will try to set the appropriate history and the relevant principles on which this key project is based. The main body of the paper consists of a critical analysis of some of Fathy's theories and practices, as we understand they are essential to reevaluate the architect's work. Concentrating on this specific part could encourage some interesting new discussions of a legacy that dealt with the transitional relationship between modern and vernacular in Egypt. Through the text, I will try to synthesize Fathy's achievements and rediscover what his ideas have meant to the architectural discourse in a postmodern context. The exploration of a critical case study in Fathy's architectural work leads us to question his practice of architecture under economical and social circumstances within a nation that was dealing with its own identity.

As a pivotal figure in the rebirth of Arab and Islamic vernacular architecture, Hassan Fathy played a key role in Egypt's cultural and nationalistic reawakening and wielded influence throughout the Middle East through his revival of mud brick construction and careful concern for local traditions and natural resources. Fathy's poetic analogy between music and architecture is symptomatic of his work, described as a mixture of social realism and utopianism. For Fathy, tradition was neither old-fashioned nor stagnant. Tradition may have begun recently, and modernity does not necessarily mean liveliness. Thus, change is not always

for the better. Throughout his career Fathy expressed a vivid and particular interest in low-cost housing for the rural poor (Figure 1).

This essay examines the design, construction, and reception of Fathy's best-known work, New Gourn, which was a resettlement plan for the residents of Old Gourn that began in the mid-1940s. The paper discusses the historical and political context of Egypt, and the architect's career and educational background, before engaging in a close description of the new village. It also considers the substantial criticism of New Gourn and explains

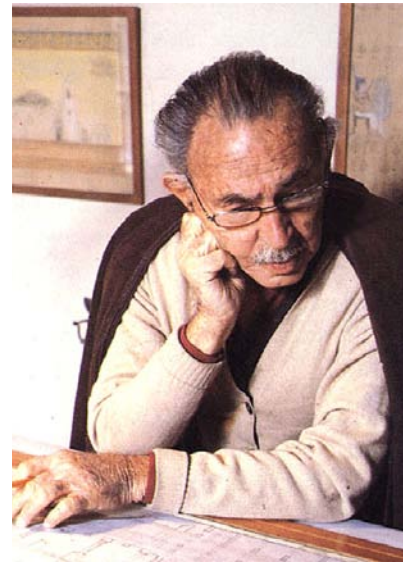


Figure 1. Hassan Fathy.
(© Al Ahram Weekly)

why construction was abandoned before the project's completion.

This analysis of New Gourn yields insights into Fathy's interest in a regionally specific vernacular architecture and his complex relationship with the Modern Movement. Of particular interest are the pilot projects launched at New Gourn, such as co-op building, in-service training, and socioeconomic initiatives. The text also traces an evolution in Fathy's "progressive regionalism" in the use of mud brick, a readily available material that required no expensive centering, as well as in the master plans he proposed for New Bariz and Dar al-Islam, the community projects he designed in New Mexico and Egypt, respectively.

Fathy's cultural ambivalence and educational formation contributed to

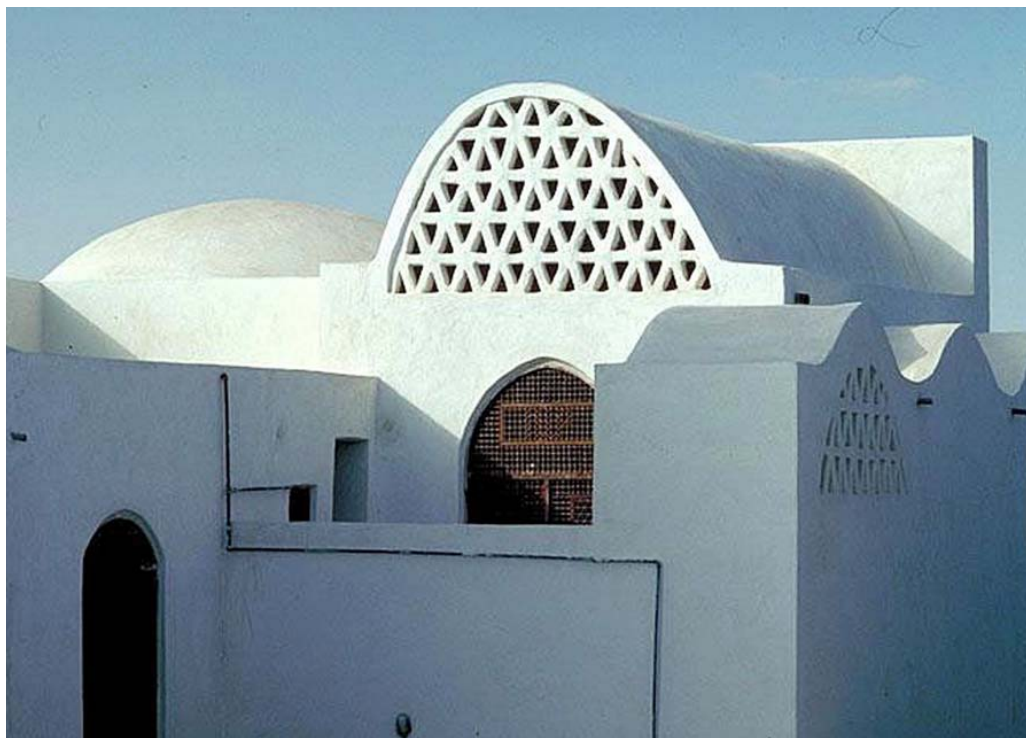


Figure 2. Akil Sami house in Dahshur, Egypt by Hassan Fathy. Exterior façade. Photograph by Christopher Little. (© Aga Kahn Trust for Culture)

New Gournā's ultimate failure. Paul Ricoeur expressed the dilemma that Fathy encountered in his work in the following terms: "How to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive a dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization."¹ The essay concludes with a consideration of Fathy's legacy and the attempt to revive a vernacular language appropriate to a nationalistic discourse. The architecture that Fathy proposed gave birth, ironically, to a new identity, while extinguishing the original one.²

Context and History

Fathy was born in Alexandria in 1900 and was educated as a true aristocrat within a westernized elite environment. Cosmopolitan in his habits and tastes, the young Fathy studied under the Beaux Arts system. After studying architecture at the University of Cairo, he started teaching at the College of Fine Arts.

The 1933 construction of the second Aswan Dam, in the Nubian region of Upper Egypt, forced the government to relocate peasants from villages located in areas slated to be flooded. In 1945, the government

commissioned Fathy to design New Gournā, a new village that was to represent at that time the most relevant project of his professional career, where he experimented with a series of ideas he had been testing throughout his previous body of work. New Gournā would also be an attempt to relocate the villagers and provide them with a new kind of economy. The new methods and materials would also be an answer to the lack of industrial trade due to the war in Europe. The project, criticized as a social failure but praised as an architectural achievement, was abandoned in 1949.

In 1957, frustrated with bureaucracy and continuous administrative disappointments, Fathy moved to Athens to collaborate with international planners who were working along the principles of ekistical design under the direction of Greek architect Constantinos Apostolou Doxiadis (1914–1975). Fathy served as an advocate of traditional solutions for passive energy mechanisms in major community projects for Iraq and Pakistan. He also undertook extended travel and research for a "Cities of the Future" program in Africa. Fathy moved back

to Cairo in 1963 and entered a period where teaching and consulting became his primary occupations.

The publication of his book on New Gournā in 1969 established Fathy's legacy. *Architecture for the Poor* contained the achievements and failures of his theories and ideas, physically expressed in his project for New Gournā. The book became even more influential in 1973 when it was first published in English. Fathy was criticized for the cosmopolitanism that led him to disseminate his vision in books published in English and French, which were admired around the world but excluded those who read only in Arabic (*Architecture for the Poor* was only translated into Arabic in the 1980s). Cosmopolitanism, however, may have been central to Fathy's achievement. It gave him a certain distance from the narrower materialism and less generous paternalism of the landowning class to which he belonged and opened him to the influence of other inventions of the modern vernacular, such as French colonial architecture in Morocco.

In 1989 Hassan Fathy died in Cairo, leaving behind a unique legacy for the modern African vernacular



Figure 3. Akil Sami house in Dahshur, Egypt by Hassan Fathy. Detail of Musharabiye. Photograph by Christopher Little. (© Aga Kahn Trust for Culture)

architecture and for the identity of his nation.

Techniques and Influences

Fathy showed an early interest in the improvement of the living conditions of rural people and developed

a whole series of thoughts on how these people could be reinstalled in new villages through an architectural language that was particular to Egypt. After years of British occupation and in a time of identity crisis, Fathy proposed a look at the past and the

tradition of Egypt through the use of construction techniques and specific materials, developing an unseen opportunity for a much-needed Egyptian architectural identity.

Both Fathy and the Modern Movement were very much concerned



Figure 4. New Gurna. Detail plan of Town Center. (© Aga Kahn Trust for Culture)

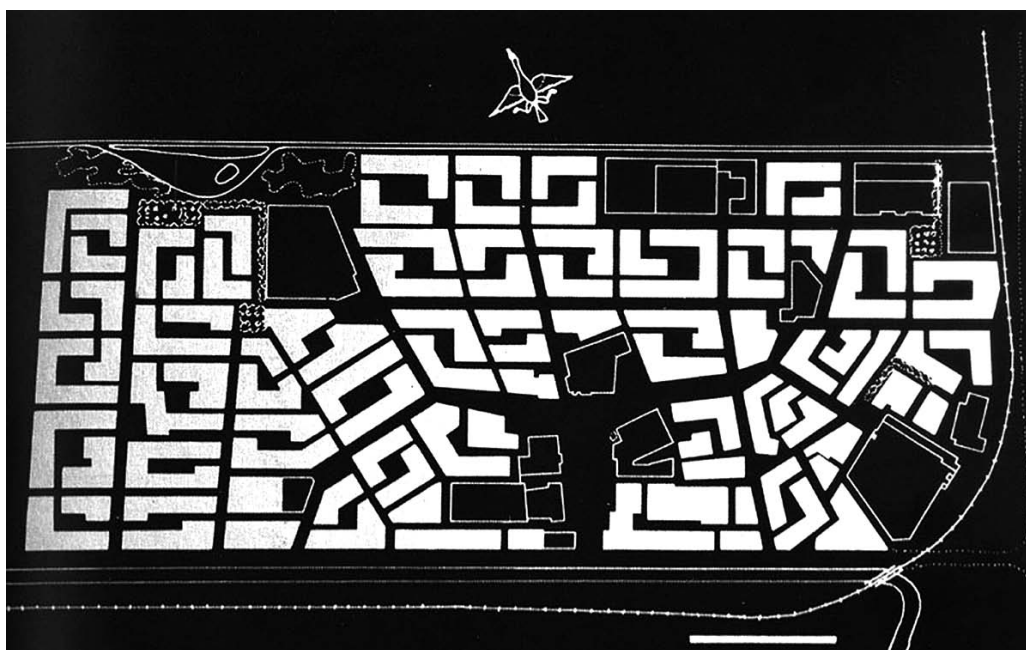


Figure 5. Mass plan of New Gurna. (© Aga Kahn Trust for Culture)

with the conditions of ordinary people's lives. Both worked toward the improvement of these conditions, especially those of the poor. Yet while the Modern Movement proposed solutions through a break with the past in European countries, Fathy believed in the historical continuum as a required condition to successfully shape the new identity that he wanted to establish in Egypt through the right use of architecture (Figure 2).

In the postwar years Fathy searched for affordable housing methods. He opposed the concrete boxes that proliferated all over the country as temporary solutions for

low-income housing. From Fathy's standpoint, those developments were totally inadequate for sheltering poor Egyptians. Neither natural ventilation nor protection from direct sunlight were sufficiently provided by these projects, which neglected the implications for domestic design from local habits. Instead, Fathy developed a series of techniques based on a careful study of traditional models from three key sources: Copt architecture, mud brick construction, and Nubian building practices.

Copt architecture has its origins in the Christian Community of

Egypt. A considerable portion of the nation's total population belonged to this religious group that had its origins near the Kharga Oasis around the sixteenth century. Fathy took a number of trips to this area to study its necropolises and funerary architecture, whose geometrical forms made a big impression on him. Fathy incorporated traditional techniques of mud construction from the Kanuz district, which did not require the use of complex instruments and technological knowledge. He adopted the signature catenary vaults³ and domes of Nubian architecture. Fathy re-created these

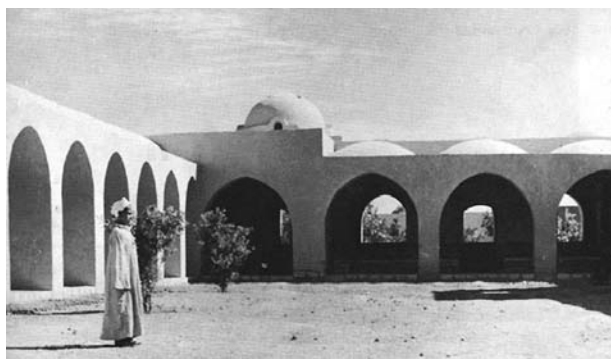


Figure 6. New Gournia. Girl's primary school. (Image via Egypt Architecture)



Figure 7. New Gournia. Khan. Photograph by Randa Shaath. (© Al Ahrām Weekly)

ancient elements in modules he would repeat to cover any space that he projected.⁴ From a hotel vestibule to a classroom or a kitchen, all the spaces acquired the ability to be enclosed with a dome-vault module. Fathy also considered elements from Nubian vernacular architecture, such as the organization of the village, the layout of the house, the orientation of the rooms, doorways, living room and *khayma*, the *mandara* (guest room), the techniques of roof and wall construction, the external plastering, the ventilation, the grain storage, and the cooking systems of the kitchen, among others.

The streets and houses of Cairo provided other sources that Fathy synthesized in the design of New Gournia, including courtyard-centered planning, passive ventilation systems and functional decorative elements. Courtyards accommodated privacy, social activity, cooling conditions, and protection from the harsh sun. Narrow streets were used with similar intention. These open spaces formed a clear sequential system where Fathy re-created public, semipublic, and private areas that provided social space. The systems of ventilation, which could be traced back to ancient Islamic culture, drew air from the prevailing winds through a network of inclined filtering openings located on the roofs. The air then passed through a number of pools where a process of evaporation lowered its temperature enough to cool the home. A series of

functional and decorative elements like the *musbarabiye*, a kind of carved wooden filter that worked to allow proper ventilation along with a subtle natural illumination, supported the ventilation system and reinforced the connection to traditional architectural forms (Figure 3).

Fathy intelligently gathered all these systems and influences as adequate ideas that had been used for centuries by local peasants. The reutilization and enhancement of these solutions were for Fathy the right starting point to elaborate a local modern language that would prevent architects from providing a rootless architecture, therefore avoiding breaking with the past tradition, which, as Fathy could foresee, would fail in Western countries.

Old Gournia and the New Project

The old village of Gournia had stood for many years in the ancient cemetery of Thebes. Lying on the west bank of the Nile River opposite Luxor, 400 miles south of Cairo and close to the Valley of the Kings, Gournia was located in a key area for the tourist industry of Egypt. This small village of peasants had grown over the years atop rich archaeological sites, and the local economy was said to depend on tomb burgling at some point.⁵ After the Great War, the central government decided to relocate these people in order to preserve the tombs and further promote tourism in the area.

Much had been said about the real responsibility of the Gourniis

when tourist development halted in the area. The Gourniis were accused of tomb robbing, but there is no clear evidence on that matter. Moreover, while it was true that a handful of ancient tombs of Old Gournia had houses built over their entrances, there were many hundreds of other tombs that were not concealed by houses yet had not been opened up to tourism. The relationship between household and tomb may represent a question of local heritage more interesting from a historical point of view than many of the empty tombs that were cleared out and opened up as tourist sites. Early excavations contained rich evidence of this long period of Coptic and early Islamic local life. The communities located atop the tombs may have dated back four or five hundred years (Figure 4).

Fathy's client, the Ministry of Antiquities, was interested in the preservation and expansion of tourist resorts to support a new economy. It would be interesting to explore issues related to tourism at the time, such as the depopulation programs that took place in the area. The goal of these programs was to increase the number of tourists. Investments in the area of Gournia led to phenomenal growth in tourism during the 1980s and early 1990s, until the Islamic attacks that caused tourism to dip again in the 1990s.

The new site for the project was about fifty acres and was located away from ancient remains but close to the road and railway line. Fathy selected



Figure 8. Market of New Bariz. Photograph by Chant Avedissian.
(© Aga Kahn Trust for Culture)

the site to position the village close to the tourist traffic to ensure activity and avoid isolation. Aside from the historical and technical concepts directing the project, considerations influencing the design of New Gournia ranged from specific social concerns to purely theoretical ideas.

Egypt was just beginning to come under the influence of the International Style and other Western concepts after World War II, such as the “New Town” movement, which was then coming into full swing in the United Kingdom and the United States. City dwellers were proposed schemes that would supposedly improve their psychological and physical well-being: single family semidetached houses or town houses were identically repeated, apartments and duplexes were arranged in “superblocks,” and pedestrian and vehicular traffic were separated to achieve quality of open space and supply variety within these elements. For Fathy, profitable use could be made of these plans if they were transposed to the Arab city. Furthermore, he had in mind Egypt’s urgent needs for housing and a law in effect at that time that required that a new building project should embody standards markedly higher than those prevailing. Fathy knew he had to come up with a model project. James Steele epitomized the New Gournia project thusly: “The social experiment that Fathy had been mentally piecing together for so long was thus to finally become a reality.

He saw this opportunity not as an end in itself, but as a testing ground for all his ideas and a prototype for other, larger villages to come.”⁶

Fathy presented a humanist approach to the problem at Gournia by stressing the variety and individuality of his clients. He tried to custom-design each house. Twenty houses were erected at an early stage to observe families and consult with them on some matters, but also to show the Gourniis the kind of architecture to be built and have them participate in the constructive and planning process.

Interested in ekistical policies, Fathy began the design process by gathering information and particularly socioeconomic data on the town residents.⁷ He identified five social groups within the settlement and tracked down their leaders and extended families. These characteristics and internal relationships guided the plan of New Gournia, which was clearly divided into five districts representing an organic figure ground plan (Figure 5).⁸ The city’s dynamic character was provided by its interlocking irregular allotments that shaped a network of angular streets and created broken vistas through their winding, encroaching streets. Several architectural gestures highlighted the layout of the new village and conferred it with its specificity: the hierarchy in the open spaces, an important amount of planned public institutions and the use of the courtyard and the square as main collective areas. Public

buildings were strategically dispersed on the outskirts of the five residential quarters and provided each of the residential districts with identity and a point of orientation. Each tribal group had a specific characterization that Fathy accentuated by placing that groups’ residences next to functions related to them: the *Ghabat* (forest) tribe was located next to the park, the *Horobat* (warriors) were next to the marketplace, the police station, and the village hall, and so on (Figure 6).

The main entry to the site was through one of those buildings, the market, located at the southeast corner of New Gournia, which was divided into two sides by the railway. Traditionally a trade and a social space in rural Egypt, the market acted as a filter, a kind of funnel that directed the movement along an orchard to a large winding main street. The main route led to the rectangular-shaped public square where most of the community functions were grouped. Next to the mosque were the village hall, the theater, the sporting rural club, the crafts exhibition hall, and the *khan*. The boys’ primary school was near the park northwest of the village, whereas the girls’ school was located to the east. Two other main streets curved away in crescents and ended at the Coptic Church to the south and at the police station, the women’s dispensary, and the Turkish bath to the north. Not all institutional buildings were executed: the schools, the marketplace, the mosque, and the theater were the main relics of Fathy’s vision.

The mosque still serves today as the main focal point of the village. Well maintained by the inhabitants, its horizontal and vertical massing was based on Upper Egyptian tradition. The bold, straight outside staircase to the minaret and the arrangement of passages on the main street added to its Nubian character and helped to make one forget the presence of the road. The theater, however, did not serve its purpose; it fell into decay, was restored, and remains closed to the villagers. The *khan*, the third spatial anchor to the main square, suffered the same fate.

The schools were bulldozed and rebuilt in concrete (Figure 7).

Broad streets intended as traffic routes separated the quarters, whereas narrower interlocking streets providing shade and intimacy established a distance among the houses and gave access to semiprivate courtyards. The scarcity of traffic allowed for angular and narrow streets and the rejection of the grid used in modern Western cities. Each house had a courtyard, and each group of houses was arranged around a larger semipublic common courtyard or square. Each square served a family group or *badana* (a group of ten to twenty families). Fathy put his ideas on the human intermediary scale into practice, and he worked outward in a purely visualized spatial hierarchy.

The relation between the residential tissue and the public spaces provided the rich plan of the town. The variations on the angled-shaped sites were also important to insist on the effects to which this variety of experiences contributed. Fathy used a powerful vocabulary of primary elements in the interior organization of the dwelling units: domed and vaulted spaces as well as courtyards were important architectural elements in Egypt because of their many symbolic values. These elements gave the buildings an introverted character and, by doing so, provided privacy, coolness, and protection, relating to the internalized cultural character of the local Islamic spiritual background.

The prototypical peasant's house consisted of a two-story construction articulated by a courtyard and two entry points: a main entrance and a service entry. On the first level, it included household services, a generous storage space, large cattle sheds, and the guestroom, all grouped around the courtyard, which was not treated as an independent element but rather strongly connected to the remaining functions. Vertical connections were achieved through the disposition of the loggias on different levels at the courtyard, a main staircase and

a service staircase. The cattle sheds were separated by walls and levels but were still integrated in the interior structure. Bedrooms and a fuel storage bin occupied the upper floor. The bedrooms consisted of a square domed room with vaulted alcoves that reproduced the layout of an old Arab house. The massing consisted of simple geometrical forms punctuated by the bedroom domes. The roofscape was truly reminiscent of regional Mediterranean and North African villages (Figure 8).⁹

Examples of public open space connected to institutional buildings in the Saidi villages were uncommon. Streets and small interstitial protected spaces fulfilled gathering purposes. As proven in New Gournā, squares and semiprivate courtyards were left unused, whereas narrow streets witnessed daily social life. A school, a mosque, and a space for social interaction were fundamental to Gourniis' daily life. Although Fathy understood the rural social system, he nevertheless imposed Western customs on the villagers. He added a police station to the series of institutional functions even though the rural social network was far more efficient than "modern" methods of control and persuasion.

Finally, Fathy, inspired by the Theban Necropolis's volumes, exploited the possibilities of the domed module for the dwelling units, which resulted in an incomprehensible gesture for peasants. He was mistaken in believing that architects and peasants from Upper Egypt would share his aesthetic appreciation of simple funerary elements throughout time, or that they could actually be imposed upon the villager's notion of aesthetics.

The "village," as locals still refer to Fathy's project, was constructed over three winters in the corner of a large, irrigated tract of sugarcane fields. In 1948, with only a fraction of the village constructed, Fathy was forced to abandon the project, partly because of bickering between government departments, but mostly because one night that winter, men

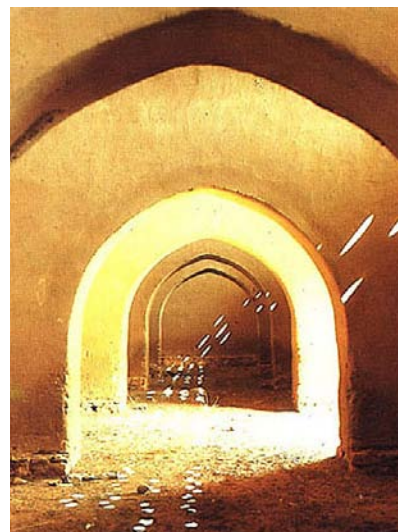


Figure 9. New Gournā. Market arcade. (© World Monuments Fund)

from the old hamlets of Gournā, whose families opposed the planned eviction and resettlement, had cut the dyke and flooded the low-lying village. Of the 900 units, only 130 were built.¹⁰ Gourniis never moved in. Nowadays around 2,000 villagers live in New Gournā, mostly squatters from the Aswan region.¹¹ Houses were overbuilt with additions, infills, and extra floors.

New Gournā's failures were partly related to the contextual circumstances, partly connected to the architect's undertakings, and to a certain extent associated with design decisions. In fact, the use of inappropriate typologies and architectural elements did have an indirect impact on the Gourniis' motivations to reject the new village (Figure 9). Fathy relied on spatial systems developed in urban typologies that initially derived from Cairo's sixteenth-century palaces. Those urban prototypes were intended for wealthy merchants in a medieval context. Transposed to a rural framework, their significance and internal functioning differed. They first implied means for the purchase of land that was to be turned into open space (New Gournā's site was only 50 acres).¹² Acquiring new land to provide open spaces was also typical of city dwellings where the dense urban fabric did not allow open



Figure 10. New Bariz, detail of the central area.
(© Aga Kahn Trust for Culture)

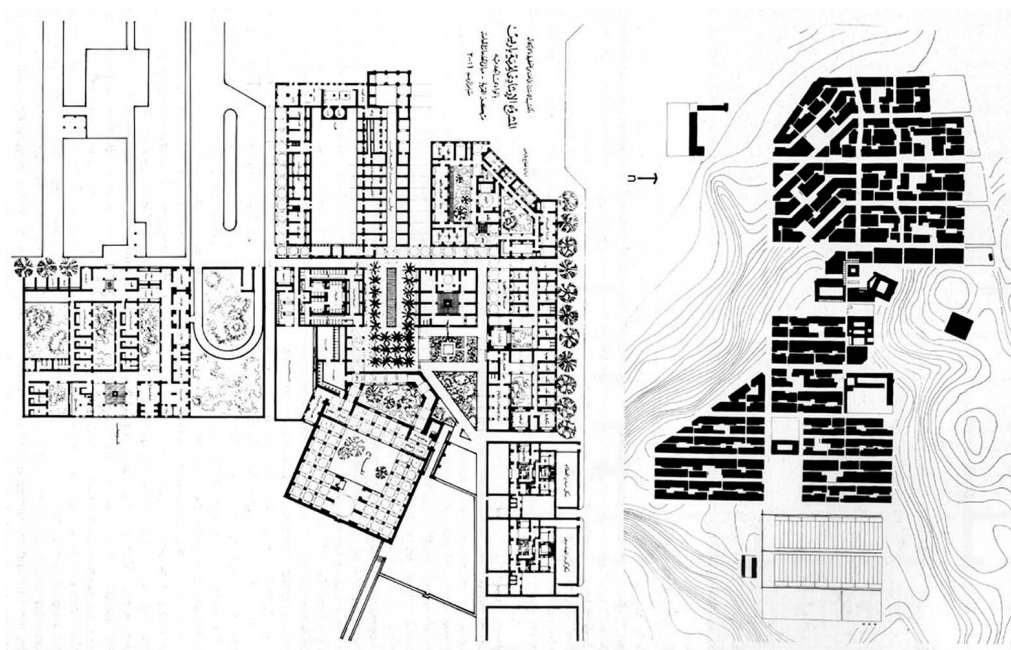


Figure 11. Plan of New Bariz.
(© Aga Kahn Trust for Culture)

spaces around the building. Although Fathy referred to the typologies of Aboul-Riche, a Nubian village in Aswan, the latter showed different configurations from Old Gourna itself. Furthermore, the spatial system of the *Ka'a*, *Dorqaa*, and *Maqaad*³ that derived from the grand houses of old Cairo was implemented regardless of economic or educational background.

Modernism and Regionalism

Fathy's goal was to create an indigenous environment at a minimal cost and develop "an aesthetically pleasing popular architecture"¹⁴

by reappropriating the styles and materials of a local heritage as well as reinvigorating the economy and standard of living in rural areas. To achieve his goals he introduced not only technical improvements but also innovative social and rural processes that would be applied later to his other planning projects. Paradoxically, those same new ideas found their sources in the International Modern Movement that Fathy had strongly rejected because of its universalism.

Fathy had observed that, in parallel to the Modern Movement,

there had been a renaissance Arts and Crafts movement, specifically in the Northern European countries. The architect then realized that the use of cross-ventilation techniques, the repetition of architectural modules such as domes and vaults, and the revival of mud-brick construction were not only intended for affordable housing. They also aimed at reestablishing the traditional disappearing rural crafts of Egypt. In fact, by encouraging a new crafts-based economy—reeducating the villagers in the arts of weaving, pottery, basketry, and stained glass—Fathy had hoped to provide

a lucrative substitute to their alleged tomb robbery. Advantageously situated on a tourist route, the village would represent a halt to the stream of visitors on their way to the Valley of the Kings: therefore, the existence of a crafts school, crafts exhibition hall, and a strategically located marketplace, completely open and accessible to the tourist crowds.

Beyond the conversion of their economic activities, another aspect was the contribution to the welfare and betterment of the rural population's living conditions. Fathy envisaged the modern system of cooperative building that consisted in the direct involvement of the population in the design-building process of their own physical community. The transfer of skills and the building production would be more satisfying and enriching to the human resources of the locality: peasants would lend each other a hand, produce their own material, and express their opinions on some matters. Therefore, locals would all be integrated in the process of construction.

Through aided self-help principles, Fathy had also hoped to solve economic issues. The architect mentioned the positive psychological effect that cooperative building would have on the people; it should raise the morale and self-respect of the society and give it a sense of common purpose that would be of spiritual benefit to its members. At the same time, he introduced the owner-builder system, thus articulating a social approach.

In the context of the regeneration of new social housing and development in rural Egypt, Fathy pursued the idea of "in-service training." This concept implied that a training course in building construction would be provided to the villagers. Workers would be educated on the job but not in technical schools that were "far too elaborate"¹⁵ for the needs of the people. That training would also represent an economic and social advance to fully exploit the productive potential of the Egyptian nation.

Mainly through its materiality and technicality, the village of New

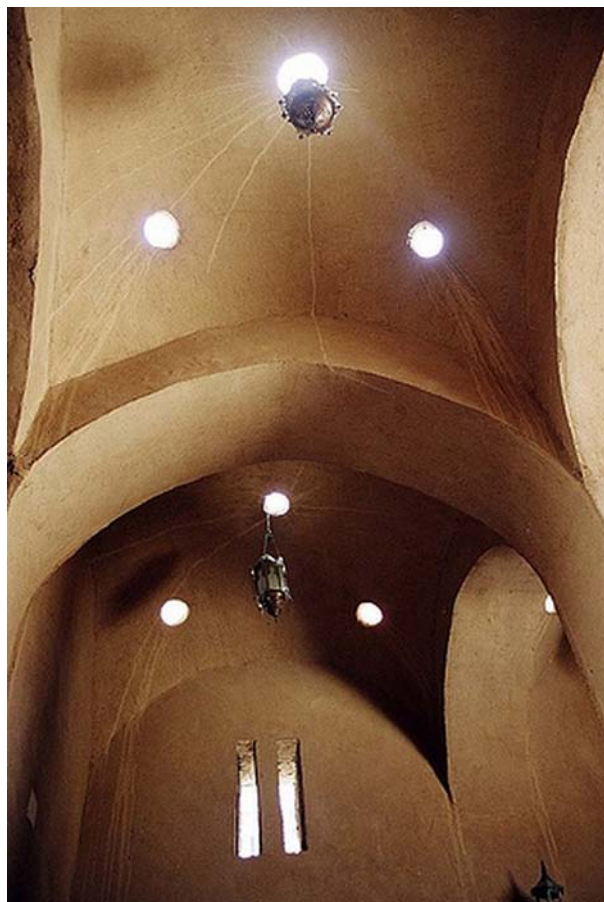


Figure 12. House in New Gourna. Photograph by Jane Akshar.

Gourna presented aspects of vernacular architecture under principles that derived from modern ideas. Fathy followed a social humanist approach to solve some of the design issues by applying principles of formative participation. Institutional buildings integrated two new foreign concepts in rural Egypt, a theater and a police station, whereas a park and a lake delimited the northern boundary of the village. New Gourna's façades presented openings with few shading devices that consisted of geometrical abstract forms with a lack of any decorative elements—Gourniis had developed a refined and aseptic architecture façade. The rectilinear openings represented a small proportion of the overall wall surface. Subtle shading additions harmonized with the façade and underlined essential elements such as roof cornices as well as window parapets. Lattice patterns

or *musbarabiye* gave rhythm to the façades and provided ventilation and lighting shafts into the dwellings. Mud brick surfaces allowed the play of shadows and provided a specific irregular texture to the building. Over time the new settlers would vernacularize the façades and adapt them to their own needs (Figure 10).

A legitimate question arises at this point: what kind of regionalism was supported by this architecture? Alan Colquhoun acknowledges that "regionalism is permeated by modernist theory,"¹⁶ which in the case of Fathy turns out to be finally a modernism permeated by regionalist elements. Ricoeur argues "that everything will depend ... on the capacity of regional culture to recreate a rooted tradition while appropriating foreign influences at the level of both culture and civilization. Such a process of cross-fertilization and reinterpretation is impure by definition."¹⁷ A romanticist

in his intuition and a modern in his rationalism and practicality, Fathy's "progressive regionalism" prompted him to rigidify his plans in the cases of New Bariz and Dar al-Islam, thus becoming more estranged from his initial vernacular ideas. The architect failed in finding the right balance for the planning of his villages.

Comparisons between the communities in New Gournā, New Bariz, and Dar al-Islam show evolutions in the use of massing and architectural elements as well as in technical procedures and social processes. After his return from Greece in 1957, Fathy planned New Bariz in the context of the new agricultural plan in the mid-1960s. The village was to accommodate 250 families and was to be the last link in a series of new villages. Fathy was to design the central village, which would also serve as the administrative and commercial center (Figure 11).

The inhabitants of New Bariz, unlike those in New Gournā, came from different regions. The plan of the new town represented two distinct nuclei connected through public buildings. It had a robust geometrical shape that was only altered at some peripheral areas by the topography. Fathy kept the winding streets and combined them with the principle of the cul-de-sac. The housing forms were also introverted but grouped in tighter clusters that created more intimate and narrower courtyards. James Steele described the town as "no vast open squares baking in the sun"¹⁸ in comparison to New Gournā, where the weather was milder. In New Bariz, institutions were more relevant to the needs of the inhabitants. They consisted of a mosque, a hospital, administrative offices, a souk, and a Moorish café. New Bariz's major characteristic and contribution resided in its market's wind catchers; they combined a scientific principle with the prevailing natural winds and thus reduced temperature on the ground level. The construction had started in 1966. But in 1967 the Arab-Israeli war broke out and the agricultural plan was altered and construction never resumed. New Bariz, like New

Gournā, was an experiment with a community-oriented planning as well as aesthetic investigation in the domain of the vernacular architecture.

In the case of the Dar al-Islam Foundation in New Mexico, the commission consisted of the establishment of a Muslim community in the United States. The project was on a smaller scale but was similar to New Bariz in its strict geometrical plan, its use of technical elements, and the location of its public institutions, which consisted once again of a mosque, a school, dormitories, housing, a women's center, a public bath, a hotel, and a center for Islamic crafts. Extensive high-tech modifications were made because of higher moisture levels and the difference in the heat tolerance of the clients. Another main difference was that the 150 families had no tribal affiliation whatsoever. The American community was well educated and in this sense had more in common with Fathy's private clients than with his public user groups in Egypt.

The three projects demonstrated contextual and social differences, but they were strongly connected through their powerful affirmation of Arab and Islamic identity. The architect's conscious concerns for authenticity and identity opposed the idea of climatic adequacy inherent in the concept of regionalism. He deliberately discarded the durability of a material in different contexts. For instance, as shown previously in New Mexico, technical changes had to be made to allow the application of mud brick (Figure 12).

This twofold approach to architecture was directly related to his educational background, an important factor in the failure of New Gournā. Effectively, two questions are to be raised in the context of a single-author planning project. (1) The question of identity: can a man define the needs of a community objectively without imposing his own views and interests, even through ekistical principles? (2) The question of democracy: to what extent was the planning process democratic even though participatory principles

were followed as the basis for a truly democratic developing country?

After years of foreign occupation, Egyptian society was going through a deep cultural identity crisis. The affirmation of the superiority of Western cultural and democratic principles provoked the liquidation of a unique heritage. The people of the Middle East were trying unconsciously to eradicate and deny their very own traditions. Egyptians wanted to become part of Europe, and so the country's elite embraced Western customs and education. Fathy's architecture was meant to be a nationalistic response to the climatically and culturally inappropriate "imports" of the West. He was calling for the value of traditional integrity and cultural heritage, and his investigations were attempts at reawakening Arabism in art and architecture.

Fathy presented a dual personality. On the one hand, the architect was proud of his Arab heritage, but on the other hand, he was conscious of the limitations and contradictions of that same culture he defended. He belonged to the ruling elite of Egypt. This social stratum had always been different ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and racially from those of the peasants and villagers. He wanted to adopt the role of the pariah struggling for the poor against a lethargic administration, "a socially responsible anti-hero battling a growing governmental bureaucracy."¹⁹

He also presented the struggle for New Gournā as a story of progress, culture, and intelligence, as an architecture for the poor, impeded by the ignorance and lawlessness of the natives. In his description of New Gournā's events, Fathy consciously concealed mentioning important facts related to the Gournis' attitude during the three years of construction: the malaria and cholera epidemics were also the chance for him to realize his architectural vision. Reasons for the spread of those diseases were poverty and inequality, but the government mentioned the unsanitary conditions (and again the "ignorant peasant" is brought up) in which the peasants

were living, and this was due to the impetus for the relocation and the uprooting of the community. Amidst this suffering (Gourna had already lost one-third of its population),²⁰ Fathy, strangely enough, still questioned the strong rural opposition encountered.

Fathy's attitude denoted an alienation from the rural context and a misunderstanding of the villagers' considerations. His attitude was probably closer to that of Western planning agencies that made decisions about developing countries on the basis of abstract sociological concepts rather than an awareness of the concerns of the villagers. Although he expected social participation, he was finally commanding his planning decisions and dictating the villagers' social behavior. He was imposing specific social spaces associated with definite activities, the sharing of certain facilities, and above all a basis for a new economy. The way people interacted was being controlled, and this restriction was likely to be one of the causes of the failure. For seemingly economic reasons, the planning did not provide them with electricity and running water, obviously a future element in every home. Another aspect connected to his social background was his unawareness of the country's movement of population. To realize his vision, Fathy should probably have dealt more intensely with a political and social framework that ended up contributing strongly to the collapse of the project.

While Egypt underwent an important migration out of the countryside, Fathy was planning the spatial organization of a rural community, keeping in mind a possible extension to other localities. Because of economic motivations as well as deteriorating living conditions, villagers were escaping the countryside and occupying informal settlements on the outskirts of Cairo. Agricultural land had been transferred from the hands of an occupying power (the Ottoman Empire) to absentee landlords unaware of the peasants' living situation.

Institutional buildings were left unused and the revival of arts and crafts failed; the supply of sufficient

agricultural land would have been far more helpful to ameliorate Gourna's standards of living. Indeed, for a community that lived below the poverty line,²¹ the availability of natural alimentary resources was far more relevant than the aesthetics of mud brick or the construction of a theater. Government officials were also not ready for his approach. The administration opposed Fathy's project, not only for ideological reasons but also for economic justifications that were estimated necessary for the country's growth: "contracts with cement, concrete, and steel companies made bigger dollars than mud brick."²² The administration underlined a contradiction in Fathy's discourse: one cannot enter industrial civilization and maintain a preindustrial technology. This reflected a general concern about Egypt's international image: "In order to take part in modern civilization," Ricoeur argued, "it is necessary to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandon of a whole cultural past."²³ Fathy, for identity ideologies, rejected this discourse.

An Architectural Language: The Identity of a Nation

For a nation to prove it was modern, it was necessary almost to prove it was ancient, to prove there was a past of its own: "A nation that wanted to show it was up-to-date and deserved a place among the company of modern states needed, among other things, to produce a past."²⁴ Deciding on a common past was critical in the process of making a particular combination of people into a coherent single nation. The community can only understand its present by knowing its own past.²⁵ Fathy opposed the attitude of the Modern Movement, which posed the approach to the architectural discourse as a break with the past. The idea of "continuum" that Fathy proposed was based upon the idea of linking the past with a present that needs a history to become coherent for its people.

Ernest Renan remarked that the idea of the nation required that

people learn to forget certain aspects of their past to gain a common present. Many people also had to learn to forget or reconsider their sense of place: "They were supposed to reduce the significance of those connections, genealogies, hegemonies, moral systems, and migrations that had defined a social landscape whose horizons reached beyond what became the new boundaries of the nation—or even to forget their existence altogether."²⁶

Yet constructing the past is never a straightforward issue. Ancient architecture does not necessarily belong to one's own past. In order to belong to one's history, architecture must connect with some aspects of one's social identity. Efforts had been made in Egypt to present the Pharaonic past as a source of the modern national identity. However, continuous attempts had been made by writers with original ties to Europe to show Egypt as a modern Western nation. Therefore, the significance of the past for these writers was not so much that it gave the nation a distinct and authentic identity, but that it showed that the nation belonged to the much larger community of modern civilization.

Fathy was aware of this lack of identity in Egypt. He believed he could start a new language that combined a "progressive regionalism" with a past that had been utilized by many Western countries to reinforce a national identity. Through the language developed in New Gourna, Fathy projected Egypt's history into the past and organized that past as the life of the nation. Fathy's intention was to develop an affordable and aesthetically pleasing popular architecture, a scheme that could grow itself after its success was proved. The buildings of the village marked the birth of a new vernacular style, one that was to become internationally famous for announcing the rejection of Western Modernism and seeking to reappropriate the styles and materials of a local heritage. Fathy saw his village as a pilot project launching a National Program for Rural Reconstruction²⁷ that would lead to the "complete regeneration of the Egyptian

countryside through rebuilding its villages.”²⁸ In this way, Fathy had hoped that by promoting an architecture similar to that of the most powerful and rich people, the peasants and poor people would try to mimic these characteristics, resulting in a growing typology that worked both as shelter for the poor and as a national image.

The construction of New Gournā also marked, as Kees van der Spek has noted, “the moment of this new vernacular’s ultimate death.” Fathy expressed his disappointment twenty years later at the failure of this plan to “revive the peasants’ faith in their own culture,” and his bitterness toward the “suspicious and strict” inhabitants of Gournā who had refused to cooperate. It would be easy here to criticize Fathy’s arrogance or paternalism toward villagers who stood in the way of his architectural vision. But more interesting than this critique are Timothy Mitchell’s comments, which are far more relevant. In his article “Making the Nation: The Politics of Heritage in Egypt,” he found evidence that the events that took place in Gournā during the 1940s were an “attempt to define and preserve a national heritage that was simultaneously born and destroyed.”

Fathy desired to revive an indigenous culture as a means of developing an Egyptian national heritage. To perform this revival he needed the people of Gournā, yet he needed them as a community outside their nation, whose elimination would help bring that nation and its past into being. Thus, the people of Gournā could only enter into national politics by submitting to an act of violence. The preservation of the past required its actual destruction first so that the past could be rebuilt: Old Gournā was to be pulled down and rebuilt. Likewise, rebuilding the nation required that every one of its rural inhabitants be declared outside the nation, so that in reinventing them the nation could be made.

As Fathy declared, “Nation-making is a performance that remains open to improvisation and restaging.

Such restaging is not the subversive acts of outsiders, but the imaginative response of those in whose lives the nation is performed.” After all, it was thanks to the violent history of the irrigation schemes that the villagers had the power to thwart Fathy’s plans: the village was protected by a dike that could be opened. In more than one way, the vision of preserving and reviving a vernacular peasant culture was haunted by the violence that made it possible.

Author Biography

Miguel Guitart is an architect, designer and academic from Madrid. He obtained his PhD in 2014 at the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid. He obtained his Master’s Degree at the Graduate School of Design (GSD) at Harvard University, graduating in 2003. He is currently an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Department of Architecture at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. He has previously taught at EINA University of Zaragoza, UPSAM University, the Boston Architectural Center, the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, GSD, and ESNE-UCJC, and has lectured at the School of Architecture and Planning at the State University of New York at Buffalo and at the School of Design and Construction at Washington State University. His current research focuses on the relationships between anonymous vernacular and contemporary architecture, and he is the main researcher of Vernacular Original Strategies of the Contemporary in Architecture.

Notes

- 1 Kenneth Frampton, “Prospects for a Critical Regionalism,” *Perspecta* 20 (1983): 147–162.
- 2 Timothy Mitchell, “Making the Nation: The Politics of Heritage in Egypt,” in *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage*, ed. Nezar Al Sayyad (Oxford: Routledge, 2001), 212–239.
- 3 The term “catenary vault” comes from the Latin for linked chain, since the curve of such vaults is the inverted form taken by a chain suspended between two points. This form of roofing is used today in many parts of the Mediterranean, Africa, and South America.

- 4 “If you had seen some of the works of these Nubians when they were building for themselves, you could not have failed to appreciate at least some of the beauty of what they had made. ... Today everything is evaluated merely in terms of its material cost. There seems to be no place for art, no place for creativity.” See Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).
- 5 Mitchell, “Making the Nation” (note 2).
- 6 James Steele, *Hassan Fathy* (Hoboken, NJ: Academy Editions/St. Martin’s Press, 1988).
- 7 The author mentions the necessity of an ekistical approach: “Indeed, we should have subjected the village to a thorough socio-ethnographic and economical investigation since we wished for reliable information on which to base our planning. The social ethnographer ... is an essential contributor.” The book was written after the travel to Greece and work with Doxiadis. In Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor* (note 4).
- 8 A situation that was already present in Old Gournā.
- 9 Indeed, the configuration of the Cairene palace was played out on another scale. It also presented different levels of intimacy. Its plan had an irregular shape. The entrance, consisting of a spatial sequence, led to the formal courtyard, which had commonly generous rectangular proportions. It was also the only element on the ground floor besides the household services and a formal reception area. Family life took place on the upper floors and integrated a number of smaller courtyards and narrow chambers.
- 10 Steele, *Hassan Fathy* (note 6).
- 11 Mitchell, “Making the Nation” (note 2).
- 12 Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor* (note 4).
- 13 The *Ka’a* is a system constituted by the *Dorqaa*, which is a central formal courtyard area, and two low-roofed *iwans* covered by a tower. The *Maqaad* is the outdoor loggia on the first floor connected by a stair to the formal courtyard.
- 14 Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor* (note 4).
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 See Gulsum Baydar Nalbantoglu and Wong Chong Thai, *Postcolonial Space(s)* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997).
- 17 See Frampton, “Prospects for a Critical Regionalism” (note 1).
- 18 Steele, *Hassan Fathy* (note 6).
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Mitchell, “Making the Nation” (note 2).
- 21 Eleanor Curtis, “The Architect of Mud,” *Metropolis* 20 no. 1 (2000): 90–96.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Paul Ricoeur, “Universal Civilization and National Cultures,” in *History and Truth*, trans. C. A. Kelbley (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1961), 276–277.
- 24 Mitchell, “Making the Nation” (note 2).
- 25 See Timothy Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity,” in *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1.
- 26 Ernest Renan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? What Is a nation?* trans. W. R. Taylor (Toronto: Tapir Press, 1996).
- 27 Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor* (note 4).
- 28 Ibid.