Hassan Fathy's concept of aesthetics in architecture

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Introduction

In a book published recently on the work of Hassan Fathy, the architect and critic J.M. Richards states, in a very perceptive essay, that in the area of socially oriented concerns and the living standards of the ordinary man, the ideals of both the Modern Movement and the famous Egyptian architect he was introducing coincided to a surprising extent.[1]

This comment, and the connection that it implied between the contemporary conscience of the current renaissance in Arab architecture and the basic principles of the International Style, which are now perceived to have been so culturally and environmentally destructive throughout the developing world, resulted in a very adverse reaction. The significance of this reaction, other than providing an insight into a rising consciousness against what are believed to be the alien values of the Modern Movement, is that it shows a basic lack of understanding of Hassan Fathy's true principles on both sides. This is hardly surprising, however, given the paucity of information that is available to a public eager to understand the ideas of this elusive and mysterious man.

Fathy's primary influence among young architects today has come about mostly through the continuity and consistency of his work, which amounts to an enormous body of built theory, and his teaching. In each of these his principles and his aesthetic direction become most clear. In addition, his writings — most notably *Architecture for the Poor* — have had a great impact.

Fathy's aesthetics and the Modern Movement

All of these sources indicate that further pursuit of the intriguing comparison begun by Richards may yield a clearer view of Fathy's philosophical stance if considered objectively; especially in the areas of:

- the primacy of spatial perception;
- the relationship of form to function; and,
- the role of technology in architecture.

His views and those of the Modern Movement do seem to superficially coincide in these areas as well as in the social sphere cited by Richards, but it is the way that he differs in each that reveals the man most distinctly.

The primacy of spatial perception

For the Modern Movement, interior space is viewed as an almost tangible, socially corrective entity, to be visually reinforced by the expression of the structure supporting it, the quality of the light defining it and the degree to which the potential of the processional element through it was exploited. Ada Louise Huxtable, as one of the leading chroniclers of the credo, has said: "The leaders of this era sincerely believed that health and happiness were natural corollaries of the right way of building and they even believed that human nature could be conditioned or changed by the right physical environment."[2]

For Fathy, however, the emphasis of approach is not one of the architect as omniscient hero who is providing a soul-cleansing spatial experience for the uninitiated masses, but rather of someone who first asks the question: "Is this for man, or something else?" Rather than following the trend toward overwhelming structural pyrotechnics, huge man-made caverns, hangar-like "open landscapes" and scaleless atriums that are sadly becoming the norm today, Fathy has always stressed what sensitive planners such as Jaqueline Tyrwhitt began to define as the need for a "human scale intermediary in architecture, in which the individual is led gradually from small scale to large, in both exterior and interior spaces, so that human reference is always retained."[3]

The relationship of form to function

The way in which Fathy's humanism consistently qualifies his design approach is also apparent in how the exterior forms of his architecture express interior functions. In order to compare his attitude with the "Form Follows Function" panacea of the Modern Movement, it may help to trace the history of the concept in a brief general way. The first appearance of Functionalism as an idea seems to appear in the Classical Greek view of beauty as inherent in a thing which best approaches utility. In the *Hippias Major* by Plato, or Aristotle's *Topica,* the idea of Kallos — or beauty — is closely tied to serviceability, and the visual appeal of outward form in itself is not considered. While the Renaissance

purported to mimic classical values in architecture and the arts, a more emotional and sensory idea of beauty began to emerge in that period which continued through the Romantic era of the 18th century. The modern view of Functionalism is more accurately related to that of Classical Greece, and again links beauty with utility. The concept emerges once more in the middle of the 19th Century in the writings of Emerson and Greenough, and in the beginning of our own century in the *Kindergarten Chats* of Louis Sullivan, where the expression "Form Follows Function" is first used, in 1901. The most emphatic expression of the idea, however, came from the architect Le Corbusier in his book *Towards a New Architecture* published in 1927, in which he put forward the then radical idea that it was the engineers and industrial designers of the age that were the most important arbiters of contemporary taste, and not the architects. This manifesto, which is filled with examples of this "engineers' aesthetic" — in works such as bridges, grain elevators, factories, airplanes and ocean liners — is based on the premise that "when a thing responds to a need, it is beautiful."[4] This view was adopted by the Bauhaus in its initial search for a way to combine industrial techniques with traditional crafts. But it was also singled out of context and disseminated when that institution was closed during World War II. The result has been a sad legacy of coldly aloof structures that are now a regrettably familiar part of today's urban landscape.

Several statements in Hassan Fathy's writings may make it seem that he ascribes to parts of what Paolo Portoghesi has called "the Functionalist statute"[5] — but he does not. The difference basically lies in his concern for the cultural role of form. When he says for example, as he has in one interview, that: "Arab architecture begins with the interior and goes to the exterior. The function of the space is primary. The outer form must express the forces on the inside,"[6] the emphasis is not on functionalism as such, but on architecture as a sociologically adaptive wrapping that can sensitively correspond to the inward focus and need for privacy of a specific culture. In addition to this, Fathy is very aware of the need to organize forms with certain rules of harmony, rhythm, pattern and proportion in mind, for the most pleasing visual effect. His training as a musician must have been an important influence on his belief in the use of harmony in the arrangement of forms, as well as his long friendship with Egyptologist R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz, who did extensive research into Pharaonic systems of proportion.[7]

Fathy's School at Fares, done in 1957, is a good example of how all of these considerations are combined in one building. Natural ventilation, which is used to cool each classroom, is introduced through tall slotted wind-catches that act as visual foils for the domed classrooms between them, and both are used, along with an alternative window pattern, to lead the eye to the higher massing of the mosque, library and assembly hall, which skillfully terminates this horizontal, almost musical notation (fig. 1). At the same time, the forms are accurately scaled to their structural and functional requirements, to produce an aesthetically pleasing effect.

The role of technology in architecture

The final and perhaps most important comparison to be made between Fathy's aesthetic and that of the Modern Movement is related to architectural responsiveness to physical and environmental laws, and the use of technology. The prime mandate that Modernism set for itself, as expressed by Mies van der Rohe, was to "express the technology of the times," as "architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space." The will, as far as this major practitioner of Modernism was concerned, involved embracing all of the advances made possible by the Industrial Revolution and the Scientific Age, with the perception that the architect's role was to smooth out the vicissitudes of nature and to remain hermetically sealed from them within as controlled an environment as technology could provide.

As the 20th century has advanced to a close, however, it has become clear that technology cannot solve every problem — instead it has produced many of its own! The legacy of science has been an endangered world, but not a better one. Fathy, like Mies, has acknowledged a philosophical debt to Kant in his search for a basis for design. With Mies that basis was a rational one which sought an abstract fitness of purpose for each contributing part, relative to Kant's definition of rational ideas as those "untouched by personal experience" and therefore totally objective and analytical.[8] Fathy, however, while believing in the need for science and technology in architecture, relates more to what Kant calls "Aesthetic" ideas in that regard, or "representations of imagination" which are wholly subjective and beyond rational analysis. For Fathy the application of technology must be appropriate to its users, context and purpose, and is related to inspiration, as "the knowledge coming directly from inner feelings without study or analysis ... from what psychology calls the subconscious."[9] In his consistent reference to the need for architects in the developing world to follow scientific methods in their work, Fathy always tempers the admonition with the qualification that this must be done in a way

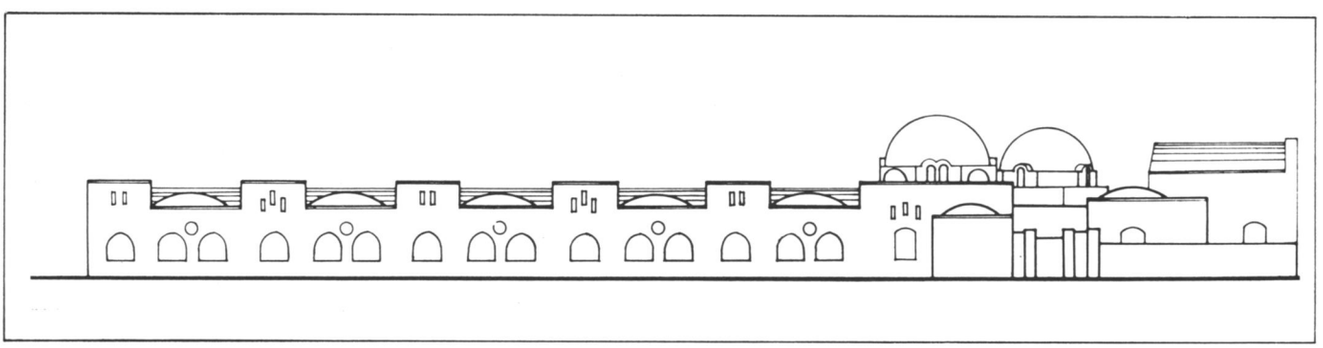

Fig. 1: School at Fares, Egypt, 1957, by Hassan Fathy — Elevation (drawn by Rami El-Dahan).

that is consistent with human values. For him, the idea of technology is closely tied to the original etymological meaning of the Greek word *techne*, meaning skill or craft; and through this skill, architecture becomes a tangible arbiter between human intelligence and the natural environment. By failing to fully acknowledge the human need to co-exist with that environment, Fathy believes that modern architecture has refuted its original mandate. He cites as evidence the countless glass-sheathed curtain wall buildings visible throughout the hot-arid zone that present huge, energy inefficient facades to the sun ... which must then be shielded by brise-soleil, so that the occupants have no visual or sensory connection with the outside!

In contrast to this approach is Fathy's Baris project located in the Kharga Oasis of the Central Desert of Egypt, which was partially completed before construction was cut short by war, in 1967. The Souk, which was finished, was to be the central distribution area for this isolated agricultural community and thus had to provide cold storage for perishables without the possibility of future infrastructure sufficient to supply air-conditioning to do so. Fathy's solution was an imaginative use of natural ventilation for cooling. Detailed studies of local wind patterns were done, and the Souk was oriented to maximize air movement while minimizing solar heat gain (fig. 2).

Air scoops were designed to reach high up to catch the desert winds and funnel them down through a series of baffles that increased the velocity of the air on its way to a basement level where vegetables were to be kept before sale or transport (fig. 3). Aside from functioning extremely well and avoiding the need for artificial means of cooling, this design shows that the application of scientific knowledge need not be dehumanizing, and that the "technology with the human face" that Schumacher talks about in his book *Small is Beautiful* can exist (fig. 4).

As Fathy has said: "The direction of every advance in technology has been towards the mastery by man of his environment. However, until very recently man has always maintained a certain balance between his physical and spiritual being and the external world. Disruption of this balance

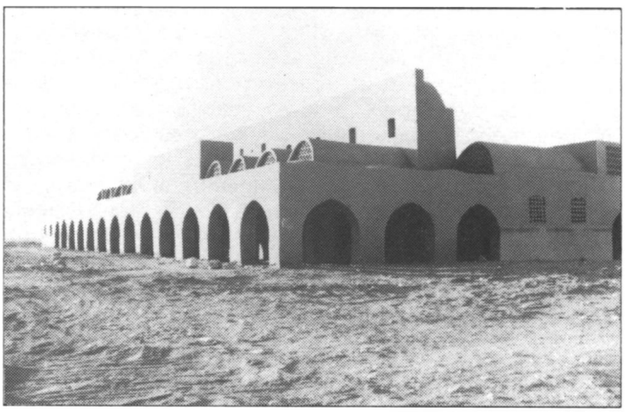

Fig. 3: The agricultural community of Baris, Kharga Oasis, Central Desert, Egypt, 1967 — View of the Souk designed by Hassan Fathy (Photograph by Tina Wik).

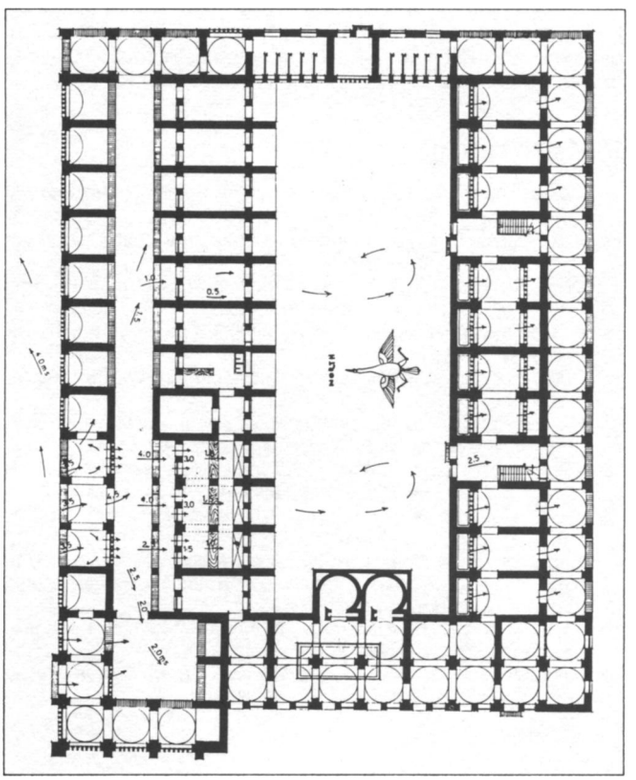

Fig. 2: The agricultural community of Baris, Kharga Oasis, Central Desert, Egypt — Plan of the Souk, by Hassan Fathy, 1967.

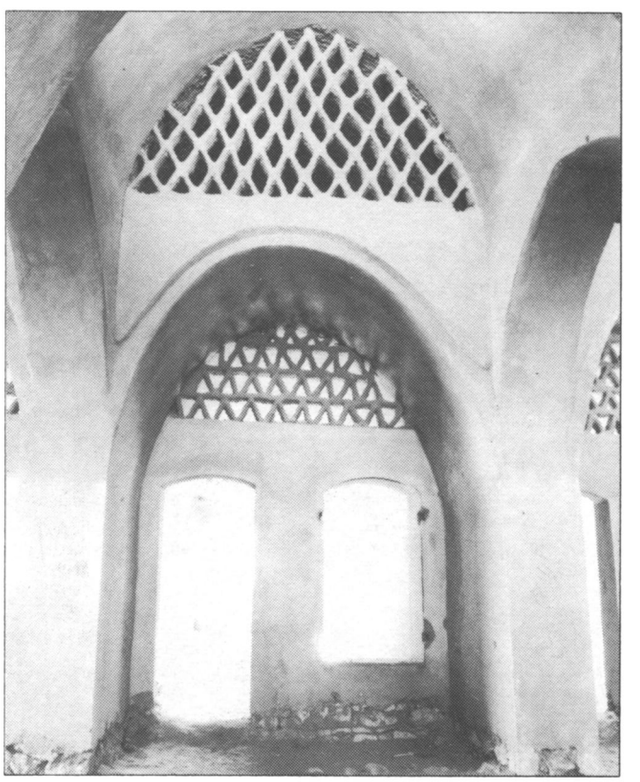

Fig. 4: The agricultural community of Baris, Kharga Oasis, Central Desert, Egypt, 1967 — The Souk, detail by Hassan Fathy (Photograph by Tina Wik).

may have a detrimental effect on man genetically, physiologically or psychologically. And however fast technology advances, all change must be related to the rate of change in man himself."[10]

Tradition in architecture

Apart from these crucial issues, a main feature of Hassan Fathy's unique architectural aesthetic is his search for the meaning of tradition. His search for culturally valid typologies has led him to deeply consider the role of tradition in Islamic society and the impact of that tradition upon the built environment. He has noted that the word "contemporary" implies living or existing, whereas "tradition" etymologically embodies the concept of transmission or transfer, and is therefore as cyclical and renewing as life itself. Implicit in this transfer is the impact of individual mores upon a society in general, since tradition, as he defines it, is "the social analogy of personal habit."[11] The study and expression of these mores within a particular architecture requires more than one lifetime or one generation to achieve, and is instead the fruit of a series of evolutions, of social research geared toward understanding the inter-related cycles that continuously take place within each culture. Some traditions or habits have finished their cycle and are thus meaningless and anachronistic if perpetuated, while others are constantly valid and timeless. In determining these analogies and giving them form, the individual architect need not feel that creativity is sacrificed, for tradition provides a framework for imaginative variations not a barrier to expression. Sensitivity to such habits requires recognition of the fact that the act of building is fundamentally cultural rather than purely functional, rational or analytical. In its highest form it is symbolic of cultural identity and is therefore rooted in the constancy of experience achieved over time. This kind of recognition is in direct contrast to the elitist cult of the individual promoted in the recent past, in which one person could assume responsibility for the aspirations and traditional patterns of an entire society.

In Fathy's view, the re-use of traditional forms has not been an end in itself but has been the means of searching for a missing link in a cultural chain that has been cut by the intrusion of industrialization. It is the search that is the issue, not the forms. It is only necessary to compare the quality and variety of the past with that of the present to understand the urgency of that search. Fathy does not want to mummify architecture; his particular skill has been to adapt and perceive each local environment in a way that synthesizes architecture with it. In this respect, he stands with many others, such as Seyyed Hussein Nasr, René Guenon, Gai Eaton and Titus Burkhardt, in his belief that tradition alone speaks to each human being in a language that can be understood, and that the crisis in many societies today is directly attributable to a break in what has heretofore been a continuous dialogue in local dialects (fig. 5).

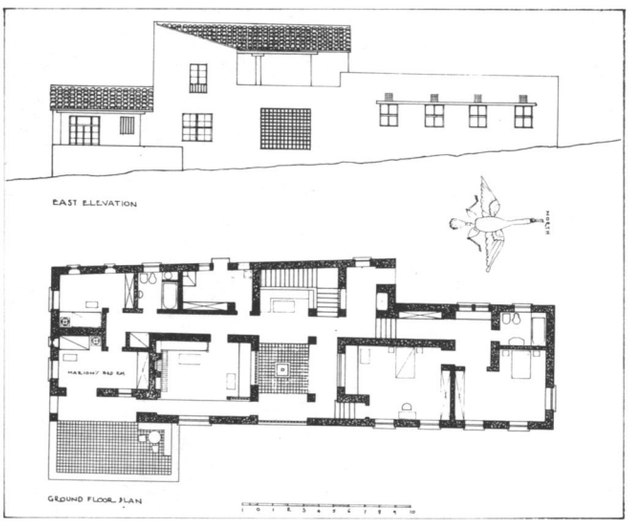

Fig. 5: House for Marion Carr, Liopessi, Greece — Plan and elevation by Hassan Fathy.

Fathy, a romantic?

Fathy has been criticized for being a romantic, but before thinking of him in this way, it may be helpful to examine his position in terms of Professor Jacques Berque's definition of Romanticism as "a growth in sentiment and expression in compensation for technological change."[11]

Fathy's critics seem to imply that this sentimentality is the sum total of his message, neglecting to realize, as Berque does, that the role of the Romantic has historically been that of an individual revolutionary representing a growing social malaise. As he says, the true romantic arose in the past as an expression of popular discord. In the wider view expressed by Berque, Fathy's function as a Romantic is that of an extremely sensitive barometer measuring cultural destruction, of a premonitory cry for balance in advance of the disruptions that will follow if such balance is not sought.

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