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# Part one: The Culture and Philosophy

“We are not concerned with the people  
with millions. We are concerned with  
those who earn *millimes*.”





# Interview with Hassan Fathy

## Cairo, 16 March 1983

Hassan Fathy began by speaking about the restoration of Islamic architecture. He was leafing through a book published for the last Venice Biennale, which was devoted entirely to Islamic architecture. The Biennale showed work in Arab and Islamic countries by contemporary Arab and Western architects who had contributed either to the restoration of certain features of old cities or to modern buildings whose forms drew on Islamic architecture.

**Hassan Fathy (HF):** So far most restoration projects in Islamic architecture have been approached from a Western perspective; it would be preferable for there to be several projects (in this vein), because resolving the issues around restoration is not something that can be done in a day or two—it requires years and a lot of time.

Change is one of life's necessities; without change you have death. Yet uninspired change, if it is not for the better, could be for the worse. When we approach change, what motivates us, what are the principles of this change, and the rules and ideas that urge us to change for the better? We must know that among civilisations, certain things are transferable and certain things are not. We attempt to adopt non-transferable aspects of Western civilisation: that is to say, there are things that can be adopted from the West and there are things that should not be adopted from the West, but we are adopting things from the West that we should not. That is as far as transferable and non-transferable aspects of civilisation are concerned.

With regard to development itself, for Muslims or Arabs there are constants, and there are things that change and develop. There are those constants that are absolute, or implicit, and there are the variable or arbitrary matters on which one can form one's own opinion.

We must make distinctions as to what is absolute. If we take these matters (where they are relevant to us) into consideration when working in development and modern architecture, then we make decisions as we draw, not after the work has been designed and built. Before you design and commence work, you use your judgement and think about the distinction between what is transferable, what is fixed, and what is personal opinion. These are the things that Arabs must understand, and the scope within which architects may innovate. Islamic architecture is an architecture of space, not an architecture of walls or an architecture of façades. All classical architecture has its roots in an archi-

itecture of façades, the Greek and Roman orders. But Islamic architecture is the architecture of space, the space contained within the walls. So we must also, when we are innovating, do so with a respect for the design principles of architecture, that is, introducing foreign elements is not innovation; it is very easy to introduce foreign elements into Islamic architecture.

Anyone can copy from magazines and create a façade. In Arabic, it'll turn out as fasād (corruption). I think that there is an aspect to it—things related to architecture in general,



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both Eastern and Western—the human as reference point, you could call it: architecture should return to the human as its point of reference—for isn't architecture for human beings, or is it for something else?

These are all issues that one must consider when writing and designing, in order to appraise [or engage] these thoughts [or ideas]. Naturally this concerns those we address, and the most important people to address are, unfortunately, architects themselves and architecture students at universities.

We studied Islamic architecture as if it were exotic, the architecture of remote countries—and we studied it in archaeology, not architecture. In fact it is classical architecture that is exotic.

This is self-colonisation. Among the Arabs there is a kind of self-colonisation—it was Gaston Bouthoul who coined the term, which denotes the process by which a nation copies the civilisation of another nation. It used to be rulers such as Alexander the Great and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk who imposed this imitation. Now it's the people themselves who change the colour of their skin and copy the West. That is self-colonisation.

**Salma Samar Damluji (SSD):** You have spoken about an important topic, related to people asking about urban building solutions that use and apply your theory on building with

local materials and making use of vernacular methods—you have said you are not interested in what happens in the city.

**HF:** I am interested in the poor, in the eight hundred million poor people. When there are eight hundred million rich people, that will be another matter ... When we speak of the urban centre or the rural (centre), this is also another matter ... Each locality has its own solution...

The solutions are there for those who want to think about them. We aren't concerned with high rises and we don't deal with that in the city. It is not our problem. That is understood, taken for granted, and I have no interest in it. Are the clients we want to serve the people with millions? We want to serve the people with millimes (piastres), the poor, with an architecture for the poor. As for architecture for the rich, let them do what they want. People who talk like this (i.e., who confront us with the problem of the city and vertical expansion) must be made to see they are idiots. This point must be included in the manual that we are putting together on mud brick architecture.

We have nothing to do with those who talk about [developing] projects in the city centre and build to show off their money. When we speak about architecture there is poor and rich, and there is the city and countryside, and there are the suburbs. We have to choose the appropriate solution for each. The urban condition is a separate issue. People who live





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in a big city need shops and parking spaces, amongst many other things. Such people, who have cars, we have nothing to do with them. We're interested in the people who don't even have bicycles or [make] EGP 25 a year.

Those who talk like this [i.e. criticise building with local materials] are talking nonsense—we know what their (intentions and interests) are, we shouldn't make an issue of it. I'll give them a piece of paper and a pen and ask them to go ahead, design a house for the man who earns EGP 25 a year so he can build it.

**SSD:** Previously you've spoken about the need for a revolution in mud brick architecture. How is it possible now to cut through the current government bureaucracy responsible for public and low-cost housing projects—in order to build for the largest proportion of the people ...

In Abiquiú near Santa Fe (New Mexico) they wanted to build with mud brick, but making the roof out of wood was a problem financially—the timber roof cost US\$ 6,000 today, and ten years from now it will cost US\$ 35,000. For them the problem was similar to those faced by third world countries. When they learned that there were arches and domes built of mud brick they were amazed, and we sent Nubian builders to teach them. They had a mud brick revolution.

We built a mosque and a school and there is housing for the American Muslim community. Those poor people have nothing. We brought builders to teach them how to build and they are now building houses by themselves.

**SSD:** The school that you built in Faris (Egypt, 1960s) perhaps was a success from the start, wasn't it? Is it still in use?

**HF:** It succeeded because the people did the building themselves and participated in the construction from the beginning. In Faris they build with mud brick, arches, and domes.



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**SSD:** There was no government involvement in this project?

**HF:** This project was done by the school building association; they gave us the project to implement and to prove it could be done. The school, which cost EGP 6,000, has ten classrooms. They'd spent EGP 64,000 and EGP 34,000 on two separate renovations of a high school—on renovations alone. It was this Faris school that made me leave (the country for Greece). The cost of the school was under EGP 6,000—actually, it was five thousand something. At the time the minister of agriculture was a friend of mine and he said to me, “Hassan, your experiment failed.” I said, “Why is that, ‘Abd al-Razzâq [al-Şidqî]?” He told me that he'd been with the Minister of Education the day before who had told him that the school cost EGP 19,000. When I showed my surprise he told me I should go talk to them. I said to him, “What am I going to say?” When the lie is coming from the deputy ministers and the minister is the one who makes the decisions ... There's no place for me in a country with this level of corruption. I won't go and explain the situation to him tomorrow—I'll submit my resignation from this country. Then they proposed that I stay on for a month to get my pension “in order”. I told them those who care for me should just let me go, and I left. I lived abroad for five years.

**SSD:** You went to Greece and worked with Doxiadis. Did you work on the Ekistics project during that time?

**HF:** Yes, we worked on projects in Iraq and Pakistan, although they threw us out of Iraq during the revolution, accusing us of being Americans. We did a study for a housing project in the area of al-Musayyib al-Kabir dam and worked on two villages there. In Baghdad I wasn't in agreement with Doxiadis on what they did there, and I designed a quarter in Baghdad: the design concept was for residential buildings resembling a wikāla, that is, using the principles of designing

around an interior (an introverted plan) and opening onto a closed area. Rather than each house being by itself with a private şahn, there were twenty homes facing a large şahn. We studied the project with regard to ventilation. Homes in tall buildings used this to prevent or block the wind; we used the malqaf (wind-catcher) and high walls because when the air hits it at that speed it generates a lot of energy—and openings, we made openings in the shape of riwâqs [arcades or galleries] catching the wind.

*He was quiet momentarily then continued:*

There were and still are some subtle ideas to be implemented, however, the opportunity wasn't available. The market, and common market trends, is responsible for wasting these solutions.

**SSD:** You've done many studies on rural housing. These popular housing projects are restricted to the governmental domain because that is the official entity responsible for implementation. How, based on your experience over the past few years, do you think it may be possible to break through this constraint?

**HF:** The mud brick architecture manual will have an impact...

**SSD:** But that means the manual must be written for the use of the general population.

**HF:** We must begin to write it. I started several times then quit because the mentality around us is very distressing and leads one to become apathetic. But, no—it is unacceptable, when young architects or the people do not care, and none of the offices involved are of any use. It's painful.

When we did the Santa Fe project in the United States I told them, “I belong where my ideas are shared; I belong to where







# Inspired by Nubia

## From Al-Majalla, July 1962

Berum volestem alit dellecum doluptae aut voluptatur?  
Qui si nihiliqui cum in consed eresequae laboressimus  
desendam, sinulparum ad ut alit quat.

When the Old Aswan Dam was raised for the second time in 1932, no proper scientific studies were carried out on how to resettle the local population whose villages would be submerged by the waters of the reservoir: the government of the day regarded the issue merely as one of compensating local people for the loss of their individual property. The villagers were thus faced with two choices: either to move to Kom Ombo or remain where they were and rebuild their villages as best they knew how at the foot of the nearby mountains, above the new level of the Nile.

While such a choice may have appeared democratic, in practice having to make this decision imposed a burden on local people for which they were ill equipped, lacking any conception of what it would mean to have their farmland inundated for eight months of the year and the resulting imbalance between their already scarce resources and the burgeoning local population. Thus it was natural that for most of them, emotion played a far more important part in their decision than obscure economic logic – which required a capacity for calculation and computation that was quite beyond them. They therefore chose to remain, basing this vital decision on their sense of belonging to their native land, the land of their ancestors. It was a decision which anyone with any insight into human nature can fully comprehend.

“They therefore chose to remain, basing this vital decision on their sense of belonging to their native land, the land of their ancestors. It was a decision which anyone with insight into human nature can fully comprehend.

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The power of this sense of connection to a place is illustrated heartbreakingly by photograph 1. The little dome visible on the left is neither a plaything nor a child’s grave: it is a symbolic representation of the tomb of a revered Muslim holy man. When his actual mausoleum was submerged in the Nubians’ old village, they built this figurative replacement for him in miniature, lacking the means to construct anything on the scale of the original.

Agricultural land in Nubia was scarce even before the construction of the Old Aswan Dam, because of the narrowness of the Nile Valley: a fact which prompted local men of working age to migrate to Cairo and leading Egyptian provincial towns in large numbers. After the Old Aswan Dam was raised for the second time in 1932, existing farmland was submerged for all but four months of the year, when the gates were opened and the river returned to its former level. As a result, the only crop that local people were still able to grow was sorghum; and even this could not be guaranteed, as sometimes the Nile flood would be more limited than usual, leading to the early closure of the Old Dam gates and the inundation of the crop before it could be harvested.



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For these reasons, the villagers who stayed behind soon faced an increasingly acute shortfall between their resources and their everyday needs, despite the remittances they received from relatives who had migrated to urban areas. Whereas previously only men had moved to the towns and cities, now women and children began to join them, leaving behind only a small number of people to harvest the date crop and grow sorghum during the months of the annual flooding of the Nile. Some villages were abandoned altogether, as their former inhabitants settled permanently in the towns and cities and lost their connection to the countryside forever.

Despite the hardships they endured, the Nubians' circumstances gave rise to a number of important phenomena worthy of scientific study. Warned by the government that they had only a year in which to build themselves new homes before their villages were submerged, the Nubians drew on their remarkable latent creativity and gift for construction. Like genies let out of a bottle, the local builders of Aswan set about constructing the beautiful villages we see across the region today – particularly in the Kunuz area adjacent to central Aswan – displaying a native ingenuity rooted in antiquity (see photographs 2 and 3). The Nubian women added enchanting decorative touches to these buildings, giving them a feeling of homeliness perfectly in keeping with the architecture (see photograph 4): a subject worthy of a paper in its own right, although we do not have the space to discuss it in detail here.

Visiting these villages, one is struck by the artistic ability of the builders of Aswan, their creativity and the harmonious proportions of their buildings; and at the same time by their technical accomplishment: particularly in building semi-circular vaulted roofs of adobe or baked mud bricks (see photograph 5) and domes constructed without wooden centrings or supports, using methods handed down from father to son since the days of the Old Kingdom (see photo-



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graph 6). These vaulted structures provided local people with the spaces they needed for a wide range of functions, both domestic and social: places where they could shelter from the sun and receive guests and visitors comfortably, without any of the awkwardness or frugality that were typical of life in other villages of the area. It was precisely because building such roofs came easily to them that they erected these rural mansions, which radiate beauty and culture from every brick and decorative detail. Like the traditional domes,

the entrances to these houses are also of ancient design, their shapes suggestive of the buildings of bygone eras (see photograph 7) and reminiscent of structures carved on the walls of Old Kingdom tombs and painted on ancient Egyptian sarcophagi (see photograph 8).

The villages which the Aswan builders erected in only a year were fully in keeping with both their environment and the character of the Nubians themselves, as if they had emerged organically over centuries from the land where



# Letter from Hassan Fathy to President Abdul Nasser on Rural Housing

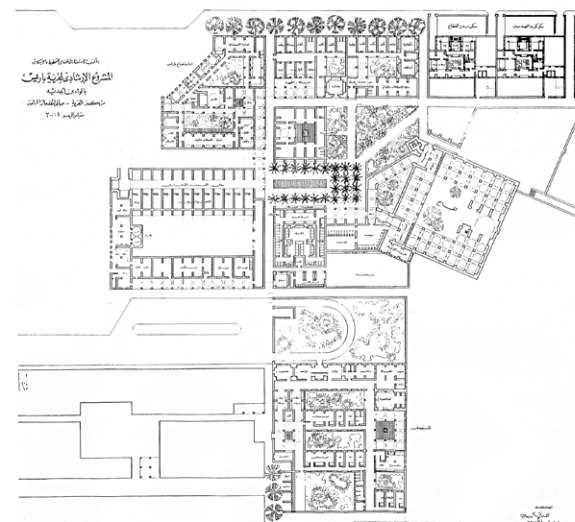
In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate  
4 Darb al-Labana  
The Citadel, Cairo  
To President Gamal Abdel Nasser  
23 March 1963

Your Excellency,

I am writing to you personally about the technical matter of rural construction and development for two reasons. One is my belief that this diverse issue, which is of such importance to Egypt, has implications that go far beyond the fields of architecture and engineering alone. The other reason for my writing is my faith in your ability to make a difference to the lives of some 800 million people – from Asia to Africa and Latin America – who are currently deprived of adequate housing. Experience has taught me that it is only through your policy of co-operative socialism – indeed, only through yourself personally – that these people have any hope of relief from the wretched conditions in which they live now.

Forgive me, Your Excellency, if I have strayed from my own field of architecture into that of politics: a subject in which you are supremely well versed. If I have done so, it is because development is intimately bound up with politics – and because of my firm conviction that the challenges facing rural Egypt are identical to those which confront the other parts of the world I have mentioned.

All of these countries, which have only recently gained their independence, are currently going through the most important stage of their development: they are at the beginning of a process in which the decisions they make now will determine their future for generations to come. And yet the former colonial powers only granted them their independence after ensuring that these same countries would remain economically and culturally subservient to them: in a new kind of colonisation, achieved using the native populations themselves, by planting in their minds notions of development and civilisation based exclusively on a western model.



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In this form, colonialism lives on: having transformed itself from an overt, undisguised process to a stealthy, self-colonisation. As Gaston Bouthoul, deputy chairman of the International Institute of Sociology, wrote in *La Surpopulation dans le Monde*:

*Today, a new fact has changed things completely: the spirit of self-colonisation has become widespread and has extended to the mass of the population. What do we mean by self-colonisation? It is what we call the process by which the imitation of an alien civilisation is imposed upon a nation by its own leaders: most famously Peter the Great of Russia and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey.*

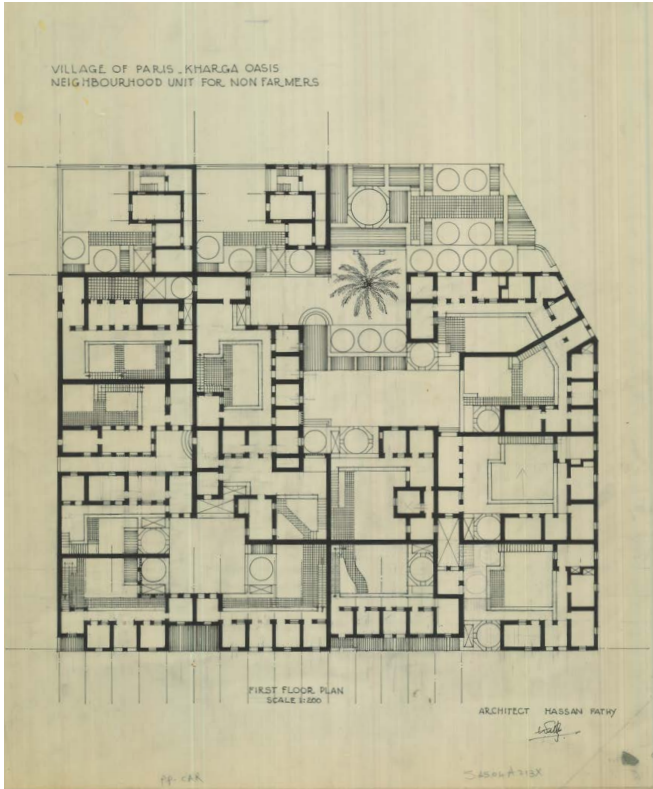
In the past, the process of self-colonisation was always carried out by national leaders: those who, with varying degrees of vigour, sought to impose the imitation of the West in their efforts to combat the inertia or fanaticism of their subjects. However, today the spirit of self-colonisation has suddenly spread to the masses themselves. It is they who are now eager to reject their old way of life and change the colour of their skins<sup>1</sup>.

The colonial powers left these countries abruptly, with no forewarning that they would henceforth need to manage their own affairs, and with the path to natural development closed to them for generations. Their former colonial rulers left them impoverished, having drained them of their resources – as they continue to do. In his book *Decision in Africa: Sources of Current Conflict*, William Alphaeus Hunton writes that:

*‘Twenty billion dollars’ worth of materials, more or less, [have been taken] from sub-Equatorial Africa and additional massive quantities from other areas – and yet they say Africa is poor. If by that is meant the mass of the population, it is certainly true. But why should the people be poverty-stricken when the continent’s sub-soil yields such wealth? The answer is obvious: the mineral riches and the profits therefrom are taken by non-Africans.*<sup>2</sup>

The colonial powers left these countries devoid of experts, professionals or specialists in any field, at the very same time that their populations were filled with a hunger for development and a desire to rid themselves of the shame of lagging behind

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1. Gaston Bouthoul, *La surpopulation dans le monde* (Paris, 1958), p. 82.
2. William Alphaeus Hunton, *Decision in Africa: Sources of Current Conflict* (New York, 1960), p. 73.

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their former colonial rulers. In one of his speeches, President Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire said of this subject:

*Let us resolutely set aside any ideological conflict, which would only hold back or even paralyse the historic work of solidarity in which we wish to engage. In Côte d'Ivoire we have twenty lawyers, ten doctors and three engineers: do you really think that we can fend for ourselves? One might ask Monsieur Houphouët-Boigny who was responsible for putting Côte d'Ivoire in this position, if not France.*<sup>3</sup>

The imperial powers only left their colonies once they had ensured that they would remain culturally subordinate to them, having fixed in the minds of the natives the idea that the only true cities are western cities: a belief that first became current

3. Charles-Henri Favrod, *Le Poids de l'Afrique* (Paris, 1958), p. 115

