

Egypt 1914–1954, global architecture before globalization

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1914 did not represent a major disruption in the development of Egyptian architecture, that is, architecture on Egyptian soil. Forces that had shaped its norms and forms during the previous half century continued to be at play throughout the subsequent decades. The relentless quest for modernity pursued by Egypt's rulers, and its ever-growing state apparatus in the wake of the Ottoman reforms of the 1830s represent some of these factors. The strategy had intended to emulate Europe in order to resist its expansion. Although architectural modernity in the non-Western world is commonly attributed primarily to colonial agency, its development and domestication in the Egyptian context occurred within a top-driven endogenous process, embedded in Ottoman cosmopolitanism, and prone to various sorts of hybridizations. The British occupation of Egypt, 1882–1922 (with Protectorate status from 1914 to 1922) did not greatly alter this general pattern.

In other words, an established tradition of borrowing and naturalizing European techniques and aesthetics characterized Egyptian architecture as it entered the 20th century. Major civil engineering projects such as hydraulic infrastructure (from the 1830s), the railway network (starting in 1854), or the digging of the Suez Canal (1859–69), had led many European firms to establish local branches. By 1893, metallic structures were locally produced (by the Belgian company Baume & Marpent), and reinforced-concrete construction, according to the system patented in 1892 by the French engineer François Hennebique, had started the following year. The turn of the century had seen the launching of large-scale real estate developments at a time of thriving expansion in the building sector: the garden suburbs of Garden City, Giza, Maadi and Heliopolis, to name only the Cairene projects, all started in 1903–06. The flow of European capital and migration, attracted by Egypt's westernization, once again a long-term phenomenon, had their share in the building boom. Foreign residency peaked in 1927 with 225,000 foreigners out of a population of fourteen million. In terms of professions, Italians and Eastern Europeans outnumbered any other nationals in the building industry, from architects and contractors to ceramists and cabinet makers. The foreign presence decreased sharply after 1937, and became negligible after the Suez Canal crisis of 1956, but it had contributed in the meantime, along with local elites, to the internationalization of Egyptian architecture.

The pace of westernization was sustained by substantial public commissions. The international competition organized in 1894 for the Museum of Antiquities, the first to be held in the Middle East, was followed by many others: the Alexandria railway station in 1912, a hospital and medical school at Manial al-Roda in 1921–1922, the premises of Cairo's Mixed Court in 1923–1924, the reconstruction of the historic Mosque of Amr in 1927, for the creation of a Fine Arts Campus in 1930, to mention but a few. In parallel, a number of imposing educational facilities, including the Cairo University campus (1925–1937) and al-Azhar University campus (1932–1936), together with hospitals, museums, and administrative buildings, were erected by the State buildings department, the specialized body within the ministry of Public Works in charge of most public buildings. Religious structures were the prerogative of the ministry of Endowments (Awqaf), itself responsible for a major projects and a promoter of innovation. The mosque of Aboul Abbas al-Morsi built in 1929–39 in Alexandria, following designs by Eugenio Valzania and Mario Rossi, featured the first octagonal plan ever considered in Egyptian mosque architecture. The state's engagement in construction represents a characteristic of Egyptian architecture that cuts across temporalities and regimes: equipping the nation with modern facilities, from culture to transportation, from education to healthcare, has been a concern for almost every ruler, from Khedive Ismail who ruled from 1863 to 1879 to President Nasser, in office from 1956 to 1970, and beyond.

The architectural outcome of these globalizing forces was of marked heterogeneity. Structures of every possible origin and essence coexisted side by side. European-style historicism, as illustrated by the neo-Renaissance design proposed at a 1914 competition for the newly founded Egyptian University (Ernesto Verrucci) remained fashionable well into the 1930s for public and domestic architecture alike. Local expressions of historicism, such as Mamluk revivalism (villa Harari, 1921) and Pharaonism (Saad Zaghloul mausoleum, 1927–1931, Mustafa Fahmy), flourished. While the Pharaonic cultural movement was short-lived (largely due to the paganism associated with

Ancient Egyptian civilization), Mamluk revivalism had been a recurrent theme in Egyptian architecture since the 1870s and persisted into the 20th century, when the struggle for independence led to a search for a national idiom in architecture, based on Egypt's Islamic heritage. French architecture was represented by excessively ornate Art Deco and myriad variations of modern classicism. A good example is the Cairo Mixed Court (1924–1934), featuring French Renaissance details and elaborate Art Deco ironwork and flooring, according to plans by the French firm Azéma, Edrei and Hardy. Exceptions to the mainstream of neo-styles and mild modernism include the avant-garde residences designed by Auguste Perret for two eager local modernists, banker Gustave Aghion in Alexandria (1926–30, demolished in 2014) and lawyer Elias Awad Bey in Cairo (1930–1937, demolished in 1970). The Italian community developed its own architectural language, along the functionalist "Mediterranean spirit" advocated by MIAR (*Movimento Italiano per l'Architettura Razionale*) within the expanding Fascist ideology. Its early icons were the schools built in Alexandria in 1929 and in Cairo in 1933 on designs by Clemente Busiri-Vici; strongly promoted by the local Italian press, their style had a decisive impact on Italian building in Egypt. The affluent Greek community in Alexandria sponsored in 1937 an early application of the compact hospital, a new concept developed by French architect Jean Walter following a mission to the US and tested in France in 1935. In contrast, and paradoxically, the British left few architectural traces of their presence while in power, besides the winning design for the Qasr al-Aini hospital and medical school (1923–1933, Charles Nicholas & John Edward Dixon-Spain, arch.) and the Cairo University campus (1925–1935, Eric Newnum, arch.) designed in a grand imperial manner reminiscent of Lutyens' Delhi, although devoid of any reference to its local setting.

As the 1930s came to a close, functionalism and the International style penetrated more strongly in Egypt, under the lead of Syro-Lebanese architects such as Raymond Antonious, Charles Ayrout, Antoine Selim Nahas, Albert Khoury, Albert Zananiri, Jean Kfoury, among others. The journal *al-'Imara*, the first architectural magazine in the Arabic language edited by Egyptian architect Sayed Karim was launched in 1939 to promote International style in the country, and in the region at large. Increased travel of Egyptian elites to Europe, and later to the USA, was also instrumental in channeling modernist movement architecture to Egypt. Post-war politics reinforced the process, with American, and later Russian, aid entering the game. Education abroad was another factor. Whether Egyptian or non-Egyptian, architects were heavily influenced by what they were exposed to during their formative years. The series of apartment and administrative buildings designed by Liverpool-trained architect Mahmoud Riad, who also interned on the site of the Empire State Building in New York, are good examples of British and American Beaux-Arts style (Misr Insurance buildings, 1948; The Arab League Headquarters, 1955 and Cairo Municipality – later Socialist Union – Building, 1959). The villas designed by Salah Zeitoun in the late 1950s reflect the time he spent as a Taliesin fellow in 1947 in contact with Frank Lloyd Wright (Richter house, 1958–1961).

Subsidized housing

The interwar years made a difference to one sector in particular: low-cost and subsidized housing. Most postwar schemes, and indeed Nasserite projects, are rooted in initiatives developed during Egypt's so-called "Liberal Experiment period". As elsewhere, World War One had caused construction work to stop. The supply of coal and other building materials had ceased during wartime, and no alternative power had been devised to continue the manufacturing of bricks, lime or cement locally. The acute housing shortage that ensued, coupled with dramatic inflation, affected not only lower income groups, but indeed the middle class. Governmental intervention was envisioned in the immediate aftermath of the war in order to stimulate the construction of affordable dwellings. Land development companies and major employers were encouraged to lead the effort. The Suez Canal Company and the Heliopolis Oasis Company implemented significant subsidized housing schemes in 1919–1923. In the process, new typologies such as the four-apartment house with individual gardens in the Heliopolis Housing scheme or attached dwellings in the new garden suburb of Port-Fuad, were introduced.