A Critical Voice on Architecture and Urbanism

Contemporary Cairo Demystified

By Ashraf Salama

Contemporary Cairo encompasses fragments that represent a symbiosis of urban, natural, cultural and economic processes. Much of what manifests itself today as Egyptian politics, knowledge and culture was and is the product of the modern physical, socio-cultural and socio-economic realities of this city. History adds another dimension to Cairo’s architecture and urbanism. It reflects the intersection between place, society, culture and technology. This has made it a complex and extremely diverse city with over 16 million inhabitants and a range of well-established traditions, where the symbols of religious, political, institutional and economic power are often competing.

A few glimpses of that history may help to demystify Cairo. The city evolved historically through a series of grand political designs: pre-modern Cairo consisted of four physical formations envisioned and initiated by great military-political commanders. Al Fustat was established in 641 AD, then to the north east of it Al Aqmar was built. A third settlement named Al Qutaia was envisioned in 870, adjacent to Al Aqmar. The Fatimid Jawhar Al Sekilli established Al Qahirah, or Cairo to the north east of these three settlements in 969. In 1187 these settlements were joined and walled by another military commander, the Ayyubid Salah El Din. It was at this point that Cairo assumed its physical unity and functional integrity as a single city. Most of the physical and socio-cultural developments occurred within the confines of this single entity covering about five square kilometres. For three centuries the city flourished under the Mamluks. It lost its political eminence with the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517 and entered into a state of decline affecting all walks of life until 1805 when the Ottoman Empire sent Mohamed Ali to rule Egypt. He attempted to modernize Egypt by creating modern institutions parallel to the traditional ones. Under him Cairo re-emerged as a major regional power and became a threat to the Ottoman Empire itself. The modernization of Cairo continued under the Khedive Ismail (1863-1879), whose agenda was to establish the ‘New Paris of the East’. He seized the opportunity of the opening of the Suez Canal to build new districts in the European style with parks and wide streets, an opera house and palaces to accommodate his European guests. He opened the doors of Egyptian society and economy to many Europeans and after the British occupation in 1882, hundreds of thousands of Europeans flocked to Egypt and settled in Cairo seeking fame and fortune. They established their own quarters and founded and operated western-style institutions. This was the case until 1952 when massive public housing projects started to develop in the poor districts of Cairo.
However, new areas in the 1960s and 1970s were zoned and subdivided for the housing of technocrats who were the backbone of the development drive, while during the 1980s new satellite cities were envisioned to accommodate the growing population.

Economic conditions
The Egyptian economy has unquestionably influenced the process of urbanization in Cairo. It has passed through distinct, but related, phases: the open door policy, economic reform and privatization. The open door policy operated between 1974 and 1981. It placed emphasis on encouraging the private sector, at both regional and international levels, to develop and implement new investment plans. Laws pertaining to taxes and trade were tailored to facilitate foreign investment and international trade. The period of economic reform occupied the whole of the 1980s. The government’s policy was to develop plans geared to both economic and social development and to encourage international investment in several development realms. These two phases culminated in the privatization era, which started in 1991. It emphasized effective interaction with market dynamics, the aim being to transform government projects into private ventures and to minimize and limit the role of the public sector and its involvement in strategic projects crucial to the national economy. This trend, which manifested itself in an intensive industrial development and a withdrawal of investment from the agricultural sector, has had a marked effect on the urbanization process. The repercussions of these policy phases on urbanism are evident, especially when one looks at private sector investment in mass housing and industrial development around greater Cairo. A redistribution of powers has been conceived in which the government role is supposed to be minimal in production and development and maximal in environmental protection. The government’s role was to provide security, safety and public services, to direct the activities of the private sector for the benefit and welfare of the general public, and to create employment opportunities. The failure of the government to fulfill this role resulted in a private sector monopoly in the delivery of these services which became subject to market speculation. The aggressive participation of the private sector in housing and service delivery led to inflation and an overheated real estate market. Clearly, the private sector targets strategic locations inside the urban perimeter of Cairo for developing large-scale luxury commercial and office buildings. It also targets its housing projects in the new cities around Cairo at the affluent population and the upper middle class.

Architectural practice
Three different but related transformations affect Cairo: population growth and rapid urbanization, the rising demand for more low-income housing, and the emergence of informal squatter settlements. Accelerated population growth has had a severe impact on the city’s infrastructure and services where the capacity to cope with that growth is limited. Immigrants from rural areas to the urban metropolis tend to live in squatters’ settlements on the urban peripheries. This in turn has increased the pressure on the public services thereby attracting substantial political attention at the expense of other issues that pertain to improving the quality of the built environment.

Within the historic and economic context of Cairo, several architectural and design positions have emerged to deal with these issues. However, many of the projects that were created left the city to suffer in ugliness while the public was starving for visually appealing environments. Although few attempts were made to create built environments that address the practical realities of the time, there was a search for a contemporary Cairene identity. These efforts were a prelude to the 1990s, when several buildings and housing schemes were constructed with an emphasis on producing distinctive visual images. Whether or not these images are appropriate reflections of local culture, climatic conditions or socio-economic realities is a question still being debated.

Since the 1990s there has undoubtedly been a demand for new architectural services, witness the number of architects, firms and architectural schools that have sprung up. Apparently, the profession is being diffused into several new activities. There are specialists in architectural programming, cost analysis, construction management and client relations. These activities require skills beyond the capacity of the traditional architect, thereby threatening the conventional approaches...
once required for successful practice. There are several large-scale projects carried out by joint venture companies of consultants. Collaboration is taking place between local firms and expatriate professionals who seize work opportunities, especially in interior design and landscape architecture. In addition, some projects are totally or partially carried out by teams of international firms, such as SOM and HOK. Conrad International Cairo Hotel, First Residence (Giza) and Aracadia Mall are examples of this type of collaboration. Several new private companies and banks have been established and government agencies have started to update and upgrade their facilities. There has been a corresponding surge of office construction in central urban areas and in the construction of other building types such as commercial buildings and shopping centres and new government buildings. Many of these occupy prime locations in greater Cairo; few have contributed to the development of suburban areas or the surrounding desert environments.

Approaches in architecture
A plurality of architectural schools of thought has emerged, resulting in a fertile soil that encourages new attempts at all levels, from the construction of individual houses to large-scale public projects.

Postmodernism in Cairo is within the framework of international postmodernism. Yet the local movement has had little to offer critical visions of architectural thought. It has not provided a panacea for problems resulting from thoughtless appropriations of Western and modern architectural traits. And it has not gone far enough in its acknowledgement of the needs and aspirations of Cairene society. Postmodernism has not addressed the faults implicit in modernist architectural practices, but rather, has tacitly accepted them. It is merely a changeover from following the international modernism to following the international postmodernism.

One major position that exemplifies contemporary Cairene architecture and urbanism is historical revivalism. This has materialized with clear references to the mix of Egyptian heritages. Many insisted that simulating history in contemporary buildings would foster a sense of belonging and strong emotional ties between society and the built environment. Instead, the license to blindly select, borrow and copy from the past has become acceptable. There are several examples of historical revivalism using the architectural ideology of a certain period. For example, the Supreme Court of Egypt, designed by Ahmed Mito, employs features of Pharaonic architecture but with different proportions. In the Oriental Weavers headquarters, Farouk El Gohary incorporates arches and an inner courtyard and openings covered with stucco screens in an attempt to produce a new image of Cairene architecture. Some other architects have gone to extremes and allowed themselves to literally copy and paste from the past. The Khan Al Azizia project features superficial copying of ancient designs that are completely at odds with both function and context.

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

Movements toward a more culturally and environmentally responsive architecture are now taking place. Public participation, adaptive reuse and urban intervention in historic Cairo are relatively new approaches to architectural practice. The Al Darb Al Asfar alley project exemplifies a real experiment in limited restoration coupled with wider conservation. Like other areas of heritage and cultural value, the area around the Al Sahyani house in Old Cairo was neglected. Documentation and preservation processes started in 1994, funded by a grant from the Arab Association for Social Development. Three distinguished houses in the alley have been refurbished: the Al Sahyani house (1648), the Mofta Giafar house (1713) and the Al Khonezati house, a living example of 19th-century residential architecture. As

Appiah

Appiah be praised.
restoration proceeded in the three houses, the surroundings were also improved. Community participation was conceived as a collaborative design process, thereby increasing the sense of belonging and community appreciation of the heritage buildings they live with and in.

Al Azhar Park is an ongoing project that illustrates the practice of culturally responsive architecture. It was envisioned by H.H. the Aga Khan in the 1980s as part of a larger programme for the development and upgrading of the Al Darb Al Ahmar area of Old Cairo. Under the direction and management of the AKTC (Aga Khan Trust for Culture), Síces International was selected as a local consultancy to develop the final designs of the park. This project is another thoughtful attempt towards improving the quality of the built environment and retrieving some of what Cairo has lost over the years.

Contemporary Cairo does not appear to have produced a solid architectural trend or planning direction, but rather a collection of planning and architectural positions. Few cases correspond to the history and economy of Cairo, while many defy Cairo culture. Although there are honest attempts to tame urban development processes, I would assert that while Egyptian architects manage individual buildings well enough, the overall Cairene built environment is increasingly mismanged. This is due to the dichotomy in which the planning and architectural professions exist. This in turn suggests three generic strategies. The first is to rethink the planning and architectural professions in terms of the physical city versus the economic and demographic city – in other words, strategic planning versus master planning and how it looks versus how it works. The second is to develop the habit of criticism and evaluation since there is no tradition in professional practice in which planners and architects are expected to evaluate their work or that of their colleagues. This is needed in order not to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. The third is an urgent need to re-conceptualize architecture, moving beyond its value as an art to its role as a scientific and socially based profession.

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