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Save Hassan Fathy's New Gourna
Le Corbusier's Color Keyboards

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Save Hassan Fathy's New Gourna

To a somewhat general indifference, a modern Egyptian village of outstanding artistic and heritage value is shamelessly neglected and allowed to decay and crumble. But architect Hassan Fathy's New Gourna village should not disappear. There, an extraordinary formal modern architectural language emphasizes the lessons of know-how, human solidarity and appropriate technology placed in the hands of an underprivileged community. New Gourna really ought to live on in order to show future generations, as the architect would have wished, the possibilities of well-reasoned development in an emergent country.

LEILA EL-WAKIL
AND NADIA RADWAN

HASSAN FATHY

Hassan Fathy (1900–1989) was among the most important architects of Africa and the Middle East. As an intellectual, writer, humanist, architect and scientist, he considerably influenced generations of architects and engineers throughout the world. He was born in Alexandria and worked mainly in Egypt except for the five years he spent in Greece where he worked in the very cosmopolitan Doxiades Agency in Athens (1957–1962). He became internationally famous after the publication of *Gourna, a Tale of two Villages* in 1969, published again in 1973 under the title of *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt*. The tremendous impact of the book shook the world and had significant repercussions in Western academic circles.

The depth of Hassan Fathy's anthropological thinking, his genuine social concern and the wisdom of the reasoning underlying his architectural experience were internationally acclaimed but still need to be fully absorbed in the age of sustainable development we are presently entering. The notion of "appropriate technology" formulated by Fathy at the twilight of his life has not

been sufficiently acknowledged, in particular in emergent countries.

Fathy was prolific and passionately involved in many subjects. His projects were varied, from his 1930s reinforced concrete constructions and private residences built with stone to projects for an 'Ideal City' in Baghdad and Karachi during his Greek period. He addressed all types of briefs such as villas, farms, mosques, social health centers, schools, theaters, peasant villages and tourist villages. As a researcher in the field of architecture and construction, he devised construction technologies solutions for hot and arid climates.

Fathy, driven by a very strong social involvement underpinned by nationalist feelings, strived to work out adequate low-cost schemes drawn from the ancestral genius of the place, primarily for Egypt and then for the Arab and African counties where he was commissioned. The notion of 'situated architecture' finds in him one of its champions. His unvarying concern was the integration of the building to its environment, finding inspiration in any possible heritage and answering the conditions imposed by the site. Fathy defended traditional

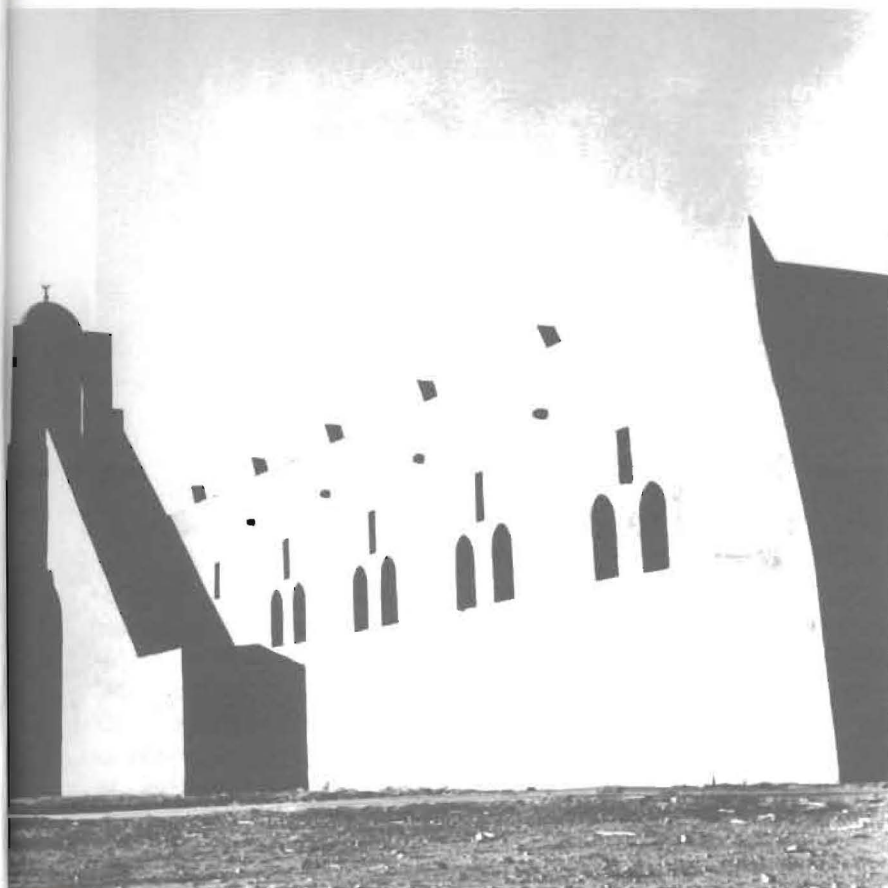


Fig. 1. **Hassan Fathy**, *New Gourna Mosque*, circa 1950

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know-how and native crafts which were threatened by industrialized products imported from the West. Ideologically close to the artists of his time, such as the Friends of Art and Life group founded in the 1930s around the personality of Hamed Saïd, he preferred techniques which required the hand of man, believing these could bring happiness and dignity to man.

Conscious of the importance of educating his compatriots and contemporaries, he wrote many books and reports and gave a multitude of conferences. The innumerable memos, drafts, booklets scribbled with notes, notebooks and sketches constitute the most considerable part of the archives currently conserved at the Rare Books Library and Special Collections (RBLSC) of the American University of Cairo. The ongoing cataloging of this material broadens the knowledge of his vast and prolific production that failed to be fully recognized during his lifetime, although every day in the architect's later years, strangers

from the world over, anxious to benefit from his precepts, visited his house in Darb el Labana. In his country Fathy was marginalized but he was definitely connected to the international intelligentsias and part of his career was dedicated to expertise in the field of development, as well as African architecture and heritage. The thousands of photographs conserved at the RBLSC show that he traveled in many countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe and in the United States. As a consultant for international organizations and UN agencies he implemented projects for countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Palestine and Pakistan. During his travels, the close study of local architecture, whether modern or vernacular, and native crafts, sustained his theoretical and architectural thinking. He thus often illustrated his conferences and articles with examples of architecture or town-planning he had discovered abroad. Bad fortune cruelly affects Fathy's production, as several significant

buildings have already disappeared: Bosphore Casino (1932), commissioned by the Koudsy brothers on Train Station Square (Bab el-Hadid) in Cairo, has fallen; several art deco villas from the 1930s have been torn down and the villa he built for his wife, Aziza Hassanein, was destroyed during the creation of the Maadi waterfront road. At present, the legendary house of artist and potter Hamed Saïd in el-Marg has become surrounded by a hostile environment and the villa Toussoun Abu Gabal is threatened by the progress of land-bank in the surroundings of the new Four Seasons hotel. Furthermore, two houses built in the village of New Bariz (Kharga) have recently undergone renovations which have totally altered them.

Fathy embodies the Egyptian genius, along with such contemporary figures as Nagib Mahfouz, Um Kalthoum or Yussef Shahin. But today, although no one would think of letting the Mahfouz's Trilogy, Um Kalthoum's songs or Shahin's cinematographic heritage disappear, the outstanding realizations of a prominent architect are falling one after the other and New Gourna is gradually vanishing.

NEW GOURNA: AN INNOVATIVE CONCEPTION

Hassan Fathy's owes his international recognition to the publication of *Gourna, a Tale of two Villages*, which recounts the adventure of the construction of the New Gourna village. The project and building of this pilot-project of a village for a traditional rural community, in the early 1950s, is an experience without precedent in Egypt. Although the book narrating this experience still has an international echo today, the village which bears witness to this unique and original effort is in an advanced state of dilapidation. In 1945, Fathy was entrusted by the Department of Antiquities and the Director of Excavations with the building of a new village upstream of the old village

of Gournia, behind the Memnon Colossuses. This pilot-project was planned to relocate the inhabitants of Old Gournia far from the Pharaonic sites but the Gournis opposed a strong resistance to this displacement. More than half a century later, those still living in Old Gournia had to be evacuated by force before their houses were destroyed by bulldozers.

This project, designed for the modest Egyptian peasantry, should be considered in parallel with the research led by modern European architects of the inter- or postwar period: in the field of social housing for the working-class (Britz or Siemensstadt in Berlin by H. Sharoun, Walter Gropius, Bruno Taut or the Kieftshook housing project in Rotterdam by J.J.P. Oud) or in the field of model-villages of the reconstruction period which are just starting to be seriously studied (Bousquet in France by Bossu, or projects by Thomas Sharp in Britain).

Before planning anything, Fathy analyzed the existing situation in order to improve the sanitary facilities and enhance the living conditions of the Gourni fellahs while preserving their cultural traditions. Observing the functioning of Old Gournia, he carried out a meticulous ethnographic study of the Gourni family (*badana*) and social structure of its clans and tribes, and their way of life. These observations dictated the principles underlying the village's planning. He also analyzed the Gournis' production activities: in addition to an insufficiently yielding agriculture were the licit income drawn from traditional crafts and the illicit drawn from the fraudulent commerce of antiquities. The latter prompted his wish to promote a large variety of handicrafts in the new village by perpetrating existing local traditions and reintroducing ancestral know-how. Searching for low-cost building solutions, Fathy developed the mudbrick technology—using a costless material and a technique still mastered by the Nubians—which he had already successfully experimented in many



Fig. 2 **Hassan Fathy**, *New Gournia Market vaults*, Dimitri Papadimou, circa 1950

circumstances. He wished to pass on this knowledge to the Gournis to enable them to build their houses themselves without the costly services of an architect or a mason, which in the long-run would ensure the village's sustainability. This pilot-project was to serve as a model for the construction of other low-cost villages in Egypt's underprivileged rural areas.

AN OUTSTANDING REALIZATION

The site of Gournia is located on the western bank of the Nile at the level of Luxor with which it forms Ancient Thebes. The western bank shelters the pharaoh's necropolises (the Valley of the Kings, the Valley of the Queens and the Tombs of the Nobles), which number among the most visited sites in Egypt. Since the eighteenth century, dwellings have been built close to the tombs, in what we call today the Old Gournia, which has been undergoing demolition since December 2006 in spite of international protests.

Fathy designed the project on a flat parcel in a 50 arpen *hosh*a of farmable land (approx. 50 acres), bought from Boulos Hanna Pasha, protected by dykes and situated close to the main road and the railway. The village was meant to relocate 7,000 Gournis, but only part of the designed plan was carried out between 1946 and 1949 when works were suspended for lack of political support.

The village neither resembles traditional villages nor other attempts to design modern Egyptian villages. It can be qualified as an ideal village, in the same way as Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's Salines de Chaux were considered an ideal industrial town at the end of the Enlightenment. Fathy built Gournia in keeping with his (fine) idea of the mid-twentieth century Egyptian village. The profoundly humanist program of New Gournia constitutes a unicum in the history of village planning and resulted in a very ambitious project, maybe too ambitious for its time and place.

The fellah was to be housed with his family and animals in a dwelling designed according to his specific needs. He was to breed his stock, cultivate the land in the surroundings of the village and also produce handcraft (weaving, pottery, etc.) at the crafts' school and the *khan*. He would sell his harvest in a pleasantly shaded market and his handcrafts in a hall built to this purpose. He would practice his faith either in the pure lines of the mosque or in the copt church (which was in fact never built). He would dispose of a meeting place for celebrations and feasts. His children would be sent to two distinct schools for girls and boys. He would participate in the folk events taking place at the theater or on the esplanade located just behind it. Part of the facilities (mosque, theater, *khan*, market, etc.)

still exist today without appearing over-sized considering the possible population growth of 20,000 inhabitants that Fathy had anticipated. New Gourna was planned around a vast, irregular central public square surrounded by the principal civic or public buildings: the mosque, mayor's house, theater, native crafts exhibition hall and khan. At the village entrance, nearby the railway station, is the open-air market bordered by hall rooms to welcome visitors.

The village's design, purposely irregular by merging the grid and radio-centric systems, was meant to develop the imagination and encourage a rich and varied architecture. The village is divided into four main districts for each Gourni tribe, separated by streets at least 10 meters wide. A system of secondary streets, not larger than 6 meters, shields the badanas' privacy and discourages strangers from going any further. The inner court houses are assembled in more or less complex sectors open at the angles. This design clearly shuns systematic or symmetrical character and repetitions which lead, in Fathy's words, "to boring rows of identical houses that are considered to be what the poor deserve" and are harmful to the well-being of men. To solve the economic question of the rural village program, Fathy used raw brick. This choice was determined by his knowledge of the architecture and monuments of Upper Egypt, a region which is poor in wood, where other roofing systems had to be devised. The raw brick vaults and cupolas, such as in the Ramasseum, Bagawat and Fatimid mausoleums, served as models to cover his first experimental farms, and the houses in New Gourna. In every period, the elementary technology of mudbrick has been used in Egypt, particularly in rural areas. The material itself, immediately at hand, and the production of the mudbricks, sun dried, is simple and inexpensive. By applying the system of catenary vaults which he improved, Hassan Fathy was able to build a house entirely

in mudbrick. Furthermore, the construction of such a house required only two people. The thermal inertia of raw brick walls has been studied and we know that it is superior to a wall in fired brick, stone or concrete. Consequently, the choice of this material for New Gourna, in an extreme desert climate, is totally appropriate. The negative connotations of mudbrick as being archaic and of poor quality partly account for New Gourna's unenthusiastic reception by the people to whom it was destined, who aspired (as often in emergent countries) to industrialized technologies as a sign of wealth even if a material such as concrete was totally inappropriate to the climatic and economic situation. With his raw brick technology Fathy created a particular formal language of thick walls with small openings, of houses covered by domes and vaults. In drawing his inspiration from an ancestral technical tradition, he managed to invent a dwelling typology which was totally original although it also referred to the classic Islamic distribution of space. The volumes and special qualities of the ensemble

have nothing to envy modern Western architecture and magnificently illustrate Le Corbusier's famous words: "l'architecture est le jeu correct, savant et magnifique des volumes sous la lumière." A simple and refined geometry harmoniously governs the architectural conception. The aesthetics of the village, shown by Dimitri Papadimou's photographs just after (partial) completion, evoke the geometric formalism of German and Dutch architects. Hassan Fathy's formal language, innovative at the time of the village's creation, has been of enduring influence in Egypt and around the Mediterranean. Today in Egypt one commonly refers to the "Hassan Fathy style" even if it does not specifically design raw brick constructions, but somewhat inaccurately any architecture using vaults and domes, frequently employed in many tourist settlements and holiday houses.

A UNIQUE HERITAGE

In the post World War II context, the village of New Gourna was an experience without precedent. It was both unique in its time and premonitory of the preoccupations

Fig. 3 **Hassan Fathy** Street in New Gourna, circa 1950



© AUC, BBSC, Photo Dimitri Papadimou



Fig. 4 **Hassan Fathy**, *New Gourna Khan*, general view, January 2007

that were to come. The idea of a self-construction system allowing peasants to build their own houses adjusted to the climate with a simple and economical technology was the only one of its kind. As an architect and as a man Fathy was sensitive to the question of social housing and sincerely wished to improve the living conditions of the peasants. He invented a housing type drawing from a wide range of constructive and typological historical Egyptian models. In recovering lost traditional knowledge and skills,

Fathy was a forerunner of the theories underlying the question of sustainable development.

Owing to the abundance of heritage from all times, Egypt is essentially preoccupied with artifacts from ancient or classic civilizations, or with Islamic and Coptic arts, and has not yet recognized its more recent heritage, which explains why the village of New Gourna has not been considered a priority. Nevertheless, it remains an exceptional cultural production more than worthy of conservation efforts.

New Gourna, Hassan Fathy's pilot-project, is at present abandoned and in danger. Although the theater and the mosque have been restored, many buildings are uncared for, others have been brutally altered and others yet, such as the boys' school and the village handcrafts' hall, have purely and simply been torn down.

Therefore, the professors of the Department of Art History and of the Master in Environmental Sciences of Geneva University, are requesting an international heritage listing of New Gourna.

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Fig. 5 *New Gourna Market vaults*, January 2007



Fig. 6 **Hassan Fathy**, *House in New Gourna*, January 2007

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