



Hassan Fathy
Egypt's Visionary Architect

Ismail Serageldin

Hassan Fathy was undoubtedly Egypt's most important architect in the 20th century. Yet he remains a controversial figure for many, who avoided and even opposed the modernist wave that prevailed in favor of the legacy of each society's heritage and its vernacular architecture. Sometimes dismissed as a romantic, sometimes as a hopeless idealist, he nevertheless inspired whole generations of architects by his tenacity and his commitment to principle. Ismail Serageldin participated in producing the first major book about Fathy and his work in the 1980s and later wrote two other books about him, and as Director of the Library of Alexandria organized an architectural prize in his honor. In this lecture, which is here reproduced in DVD format, he talks about the man and his legacy. Serageldin shows Fathy as a visionary architect whose ideas about the importance of the environment, attention to the poor and guided self in building, plus using local materials have all become so accepted that we forget their revolutionary character when he articulated them so long ago.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

BACKGROUND

The twentieth century was a century of upheaval and modernization. Politically, it was to see colonialism defeated by the rise of nationalism and decolonization, totalitarianism of various stripes and its ultimate defeat by the democracies. In art, it was to see the rise of abstract art and the broad applications of the telephone, radio, cinema and television, the first true mass media for entertainment and social connectivity, the last being crowned by the appearance of the internet.

In architecture, the twentieth century saw the largest transformation in the history of that art, as engineering and new materials, seen on a large scale for the first time in the 19th century, with such iconic achievements as the Crystal Palace by Paxton in 1859 and the Eiffel Tower in 1889, would come to dominate construction, and as urbanization and mass housing and the emergence of the middle class were to transform societies. The emergence of true globalization and the International Style after the Second World War would be part of that profound

transformation, as the modern movement evolved from the early part of the century into last quarter, and the post-modern movement appeared. Hassan Fathy was to be part of that scene for his whole life, but always as a counterpoint, a dissenting voice that called to architects to take a different path. This is the story of that remarkable man and his ideas.

The Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy was born to a wealthy family on the 23rd of March 1900 in Alexandria. When he was eight years old, he moved to Cairo with his family and settled in Helwan. He was talented in drawing which was to stand him in good stead when he joined the King Fuad I University to study architecture. In his formative years he witnessed the 1919 revolution and Egyptian independence in 1922. Fathy graduated in 1926 and took a job as an engineer in the Local Councils affiliated General Administration of Schools. In 1930, he was appointed as instructor at the Faculty of Fine Arts where he remained until 1946.

During that first half of the 20th century, Europe was in turmoil. Modern art flourished, and movements such as Futurism in Italy, epitomized by speed and such sculptures as Umberto Boccioni's bronze, and Santelli's vision of the future city, were at the forefront. Constructivism in Russia was to influence architecture, as in this Zuev Workers' Club of 1928. In addition Art Deco emerged as an embrace of bold design, machines and technology as well as bold geometric shapes, and lavish ornamentation. But by the 1930s, the bold leaders of the Modern Movement in Architecture had emerged: Walter Gropius with the Bauhaus in Germany, and Le Corbusier in France and others. Their work was impressive: Mies van der Rohe with the great Barcelona Pavilion of 1929, with its fabulous chairs, and buildings such as the Schroder house in Utrecht by Rietveld in 1926, the Villa Savoye in France in 1928 by Le Corbusier, and Tugendhat House in Brno by Mies in 1930 epitomized this new Modern Movement.

In America, Frank Lloyd Wright was to hew to a somewhat different path with a truly unique and evolving style all his own, from the Robie House in 1910 to the house on the waterfall of 1936.

But it was the emerging ideas of the futurism, modernism, and constructivism that melded into the deification of the machine and the birth of the Modern Movement in European Architecture that would anger Fathy. Fathy would start his attacks on the Modern Movement, and the International Style that it would engender in the late thirties, confronting such giants as Le Corbusier in the forums of the Congrès International d' Architecture Moderne (CIAM), calling for an architecture of humanism and a vocabulary of forms drawn from local vernacular architecture. That was to isolate him from his peers who were trying to join the Modern Movement. Some of them were indeed successful. Thus my father, Anis Serageldin had one of his designs featured in the NY Times of 1937 as an exemplar of modernism's use of glass.

Between 1949 and 1952, Fathy was appointed director of the Educational Buildings Department of the Ministry of Education, and in 1953 Hassan Fathy became the head of the Architecture Department at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Cairo University until the late fifties. During these years, he designed what was to become his flawed master work, the village of new Gournah: an architectural masterpiece beset by socio-economic issues beyond the control of the architect. He was recognized by State Awards, but was

increasingly out of step with the modernist trends ruling supreme in the architecture schools of those days. In 1959, he left Egypt to work for the Doxiadis Organization in Greece for two years, but returned to Egypt and resumed his activities. His long career continued, but he was marginalized by his peers as he remained true to his vision with dogged determination.

He wrote about his experience in a book that was to make him famous: *Gourna: a Tale of Two Villages*¹, which when re-issued in the west as *Architecture for the Poor*² would become a major text for all architectural students in the world. Fathy was an international figure of stature, even if in Egypt the mainstream views and the teaching in the architecture schools still tended to reject his ideas.

He did consulting work for the United Nations and the Aga Khan Foundation, and took part in numerous international and Arab conferences, where his ideas found receptive audiences. Despite having erected very few buildings, Fathy had become an international superstar.

¹ Hassan Fathy, *Gourna: A tale of two villages*, Ministry of Culture of Egypt, Cairo, 1969.

² Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1973.

Hassan Fathy served on the first steering committee of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, and was technically barred from being considered for a prize. However, a special award, the Chairman's Award, was created for him. He was also the first architect from developing countries to receive the Gold Medal of the UIA (the International Union of Architects).

Finally recognized at home and abroad, Hassan Fathy was laden with honors when he passed away at the age of 89 on the 30th of November, 1989.

THE MAN

For many, Hassan Fathy remained an enigma. The purity with which he pursued his vision of the truth, his unwillingness to compromise his standards, and his devotion to his art and his craft have always been a great inspiration to all those who knew him and to many students who have simply heard of him. But his message had a resonance of ambiguity, that came from a populist who was nevertheless a member of the elite. In Hassan Fathy's life and character there is a striking noblesse oblige of the aristocrat, the intellectuals, and social elite of his country.

It is somewhat ironic that Hassan Fathy, whose name is so closely associated with *Architecture for the Poor*, built much for wealthy patrons. Just like the great master of Western architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright, Hassan Fathy's genius was initially appreciated mostly by an intellectual and wealthy elite, whose private commissions remained the important body of his built work. Like Wright, Fathy built for them structures that drew upon a local environment, which in the hands of a master were transformed into a better vision of the reality from whence they sprang, using familiar imagery but remaining categorically distinctive.

The paradox of the situation is sharpened in the case of Fathy since his concern with rural architecture and community building found its expression in four great projects. Two of these were public commissions that were plagued with problems due to socio-economic circumstances beyond his control: New Gurna (undoubtedly his masterpiece and most well-known work) and New Bariz (largely unbuilt). Both were architectural and planning successes flawed by external socio-economic considerations. The other two were private commissions: Lu'luat al-Sahara built for the epitome of the wealthy Egyptian elite, Hafiz Pasha Afifi, and the Islamic community effort in the United States which was still under construction at the time of his death.

These are hardly the means of guided self-expression for the rural poor. His other famous buildings were private residences mostly for the rich and well-to-do.

Yet such criticisms are unjustified. To many young architects and planners in Egypt, Hassan Fathy's intellectual and personal integrity shone through the isolation and adversity that an indifferent government bureaucracy and architectural establishment forced upon him. His is the triumph of ideas. The few projects that were known to us (mostly Gournah) were so powerful in their immediacy and their aesthetic appeal that they eloquently expressed the integrity as well as the artistry of their creator.

In retrospect, to most Near Eastern architects, Hassan Fathy was the dominant figure in the architecture of Egypt in the 20th century. He was a controversial figure and one whose impact was widely acknowledged but not quite understood, although he had been a continuous presence on the scene for almost 60 years. Nevertheless, during those six productive decades he had always been peripheral to the mainstream of building activity, of architectural education, and of decision-making on urban matters in Egypt. But peripheral to the mainstream does not mean easily discountable. His persistent presence had sometimes infuriated, sometimes disconcerted, always challenged

those who were most influential in building matters in Egypt. His intransigence baffled some, who saw him as a lonely guru, reminiscent of Old Testament prophets, promising that the world will reap misery for not listening to the truth of his message.

His strength was the strength of ideas more than buildings. In his long and illustrious career, he had built only about 30 projects. Furthermore, with the exception of Gournah, his most well-known and widely respected work, few of Hassan Fathy's buildings were known to the wide public. Yet his name and ideas are widely acknowledged. What were those ideas?

THE IDEAS

Appraising the intellectual contributions of Hassan Fathy is not an easy task. Perhaps his most significant legacy will be the humanism that he championed and the boost he gave to the self-image of architecture in the Third World generally, the Muslim World specifically, and in Egypt in particular. He elucidated his positions over the years with a remarkable clarity, courage and consistency.

Fathy was not enamored by modern forms. He recognized that architecture is for human beings. This was not just an affirmation of a simple truth, it represented an alternative paradigm to the prevalent “modern” understanding of architecture and its role in society.

The paradigm can be sketched out by spelling out the various themes that comprised its various elements: architecture is for humans, cultural authenticity, non-interchangeability of cultures, adopting scientific measurements as arbiters of choice, the participatory nature of the design process, and individualized attention to each building.

Fathy articulated cultural authenticity as a main theme of his message. He rejected architecture that was not indigenous, rooted in the location and the culture of the area, which in his mind found its truest expression in the vernacular architecture of a society. He opposed an imported internationalism, rooted in a common technology rather than a common humanism, and championed an indigenous architecture with its vernacular heritage.

In so doing, Hassan Fathy reaffirmed a central element of his major paradigm. The recognition that architecture is for humans, and that human beings are not interchangeable, requires that architecture must be

responsive to their psychological and cultural needs as well as their physical and physiological needs. Fathy therefore rejected the elements of internationalism that were to try to unify the world in a common pattern of living derived from a common technology. His rejection of internationalist modernism thus went beyond a rejection of Westernization of a cultural heritage that he considered an important part of his identity. His rejection was of internationalism itself as a homogenizing concept that stripped human beings of their individuality.

In defending cultural authenticity, Hassan Fathy emphasized that there is an essential non-interchangeability of cultures. By that he meant that basic cultural elements developed in response to indigenous needs, environmental and psychological, and that alien elements cannot be implanted or transplanted from other cultures or other environments if they are culturally inappropriate. Culturally inappropriate elements that are so inserted into the fabric of the harmoniously built environment will undoubtedly generate contradictions, and will, with time, corrode and degrade the traditional culture.

He was careful, however, to note that a living culture must always remain open to the world and borrow, as well as, invent new things. There is nothing wrong, he would

say, for us to take from the West that which is suitable. It was the difficulty of defining what is suitable that led him to encourage architects to use as determinants of suitability the objective measurements of science such as thermal efficiency, cost, energy efficiency and other measures of the suitability of materials or the appropriateness of the relationship of spaces and volumes.

He was open to the use of appropriate technology, even if it was not indigenous technology, in the narrow sense of the term. He thus did not hesitate to transplant the dome building techniques of Southern Egypt to the villages of Northern Egypt. This was particularly suitable for a time when wood (for shuttering) was expensive, labor was plentiful and mud brick was the local building element throughout rural Egypt. In addition, it was suitable to the climate. He, himself, launched an experiment around 1970 in which he tested seven chambers built in different techniques to identify their suitability to Egyptian climatic conditions. But in his own studio, and in his own work, he dealt with the much more subtle aesthetic aspects of the suitability of form to indigenous expression. In this domain of nuances, his yardstick was his own aesthetic sensibility much more so than arid historical scholarship.

Another element of the paradigm that Fathy erected step-by-step, was the participatory nature of the design process. He encouraged self-help and promoted user participation in design. In some instances he allowed the peasants to express their wishes for the layouts of their homes, in other instances he let the peasants use a courtyard for a number of days and then established the layout of the courtyard on the basis of their use, defining the pathways where the earth had been beaten by their steps. In designing the village streets in Gournah, he accepted that the farmers live with their animals, and thus allowed ways of having the animals enter the homes from external entrances as he allowed the small street to be for human use and interaction. All these efforts are examples of Fathy's persistent attempts to introduce further individualization in the design process.

On the philosophical level, Hassan Fathy stood against the dehumanizing bureaucratic approach to mass housing with its endless repetition of prototypes in ever-shifting combinations. He could not accept the "assembly line" approach to architecture. He advocated individualized attention to each building and housing unit. He was fond of offering an analogy that the greatest brain surgeon in the world, if given two hundred operations to do in one

day, would surely kill all his patients. He admonished architects never to take commissions of more than 15 to 20 units at a time, to deal with users as individual clients and persons and not as “prototypes” or “generic average families”. Architects, he asserted, had to remain true to the human dimension of their vocation if their work was to retain its meaning.

Hassan Fathy’s ultimate contribution, and possibly his most important, was to shift the attention of architects, however briefly, away from the mainstream commissions of major buildings towards the problems of the poor. He was concerned with the masses of humanity that were living in poverty, and identified directly with the problem of shelter for the poor. He became one of the prime advocates, and most powerful voices, of the social consciousness of architecture in the seventies and early eighties that merged with so many currents that have exploded throughout the universities of the world in the sixties.

The upheaval that the sixties wrought throughout Western universities was matched by an age of equally important upheaval in Egypt; intellectually, Egypt passed a milestone. At that time national priorities shifted from the pursuit of sovereignty and national independence to the pursuit of social development. In parallel to that

change the old “icons” of the established orders were being questioned. Fathy started his third major community building effort, New Bariz, at that time, but the war of 1967 stopped that project as national priorities shifted back to foreign policy considerations.

But internationally, this socially-oriented climate was particularly receptive to Fathy's ideas of humanism, national authenticity and concern with the poor. By the late sixties, Fathy found a responsive echo in some Western universities. In Egyptian universities, however, architecture was one of the disciplines that was to remain among the most insulated from these currents of thought. Repetition of the dictated models the Western masters of the forties was the order of the day. Even during the seventies, the time when modernism was being called into question in the West, there was no rising wave calling into question these same ideas and theories in the East. Ultimately, Hassan Fathy's work and his ideas would be legitimated by being “rediscovered” in the academic circles of the West. After an intellectual odyssey that lasted forty years, widespread recognition finally came in his own home country by the late seventies. Although it must be noted that partial recognition had been granted to Fathy in 1967 when, at the instigation of some far-sighted university professors of

architecture, he was awarded the Egyptian Order of Merit. That, however, did not lead to significant commissions or widespread academic acceptance in Egyptian Universities, which for the most part remained indifferent (though not hostile) to both Fathy and his message.

This prolonged lack of acceptance only served to motivate Fathy further in pursuit of his cause. But as time went by, Hassan Fathy's emphatic manner in preaching his truth forced upon him a number of positions that were etched with a hard edge, that made it impossible for some of the subtleties to remain in the message. And this, to my mind, led many of his followers, if not himself, into three broad shortcomings from which the school of thought whose seeds he has planted is still suffering today.

First and foremost among those shortcomings is an overly romantic vision of the past combined with a mystic understanding of Islam as a culture and a presence in society. It is the "flip side" asserting an indigenous cultural identity and the intensive pursuit of authenticity in expression. This pursuit has undeniably contributed to an elaboration of counterpoints that sought to emphasize the "otherness" of the Western mode of thought and thereby

underline the differences between the West and the East, between non-Muslim and Muslim societies.

The emphasis on defining the difference created, amongst many would-be disciples, a stark image that bore little resemblance to the reality of muted variations and of infinite flexibility that scholars of the Muslim world have come to recognize and accept. Nor did this narrow interpretation of Fathy's much more subtle message recognize that in the same individual whose cultural identity Fathy and his followers sought to preserve, there was an innate evolving synthesis of modernity and tradition. This synthesis was being wrought by the very nature of a progressing everyday life, a reality that cannot be fitted into the sharply defined categories that these limited intellectual constructs would imply.

An example of this narrow interpretation is the assertion that only inward looking courtyard houses are truly Islamic. This certainly does not apply to much of Arabia, where in Yemen a remarkable heritage of vertical multi-storied, outward-looking architecture shows a different conception. It is also incorrect to generalize such a

statement to all social strata. In historic Islamic Cairo, for example, a large number of persons lived in multi-family apartments called Rab' (plural Riba')³.

In pursuit of a humanistic architecture for the poor, and in his concern with the authentic Egyptian architectural medium, Hassan Fathy ultimately developed an extremely powerful architectural vocabulary and syntax, but one that was primarily rural. The forms and the medium – Adobe – that he chose to express them in were predominantly of a village architecture. Therein lay the second shortcoming. This vocabulary, being rural in character, has limited applicability in confronting the challenge of large-scale urbanization in the developing world generally, where high land values and massive urban densities prevail. There is a need to pursue a new paradigm for the aesthetic form of our sprawling urban metropolises, one that can cope with the standard office building, the dense vehicular traffic, and contemporary technology. To answer these questions

³ See for example Laila Ali Ibrahim, "Up-to date Concepts of the Traditional Cairene Living Units" in *Ekistics*, vol. 48 No. 287, 1981, and Andre Raymond, "The Residential Districts of Cairo during the Ottoman Period" in Ismail Serageldin and Samir el-Sadek (eds.) *The Arab City: Its Character and Islamic Cultural Heritage*, Arab Urban Development Institute, Riyadh and Washington, D.C., 1982.

Fathy's work provides few clues, although his message of humanism and individuality remains important.

Hassan Fathy's pursuit of an authentic cultural expression and a low-cost medium of building pushed him to experiment very successfully with vernacular architectural techniques, indigenous materials and forms of guided self-help. Having achieved great success in these areas he encouraged, and rightly so, young architects to look at and recognize that important wealth of experience and expertise that lay at their doorsteps, rather than always seek answers amongst the imports. But at the same time, this intensive pursuit kept him from extensively experimenting with the new materials of the 20th century. This, to my mind, is the third major shortcoming. In the hands of a master such as himself, with his assured use of volumes and forms, his understanding of a cultural identity whose structures, symbols, and instruments he had so thoroughly internalized, such materials would probably have produced a new set of expressions using 20th century methods and techniques. Perhaps that was not possible, for there is only so much that one can do in a lifetime. It is thus perhaps unfair to ask of one who has already given so much to the architecture of his country, his region and even of the world, why he has not given even more.

But it is nevertheless important to highlight these points if one is to try to draw lessons from Fathy's work, to understand the limits of extending them to the problems of a contemporary urban metropolis. It is important to highlight these points to those who have claimed for Fathy's architectural vocabulary a universality of application that it does not possess, and that he, the most dedicated of individualists, who vehemently eschewed "cookbook recipes" and always studied every new problem afresh, would be the first to recognize.

THE BUILT FORM

The seductive simplicity so characteristic of Fathy's work is misleading. He was an accomplished architectural craftsman with an artistic eye for form, balance and harmony. The learned casualness of his layouts and the almost austere simplicity of his facades owe much more to his creative genius than to the vernacular "architecture without architects" that inspired him.

Through the years, he had worked and reworked some of the key elements of the architectural vocabulary in an unrelenting search for "truth" and "oneness" as he saw them. It is wrong to imagine this visual repetition as an

absence of imagination. Rather it is the same perfectionism which is found in Goethe reworking the same manuscript for forty years, or in Ingres and the late Picasso who reworked many variations on the same theme - some of which appeared to be almost copies of the first work.

Discriminating critics have recognized some of these themes, as Renata Hood and Darl Rastorfer said of Fathy when he received the Chairman's Award in the first cycle of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture:

“The architect accepted not only the forms of this building tradition but the entire constructional system and its constraints. By working within it, he elaborated its spatial and structural aspects. What evolved from a close observation, filtered through the architect's superb aesthetic sense, was a distinct, clearly ordered universe of architectural hierarchies based on the juxtaposition and arrangements of the following elements: the square domed unit, the rectangular vaulted unit, the semi-domed alcove, the breezeway/loggia, the courtyard. The urban forms of Cairo, which he so lovingly collected and to which he referred in his sketches and studies, served to enrich this

architectural universe and provided models for later larger-scale projects”⁴ .

By accepting the austere limits of both indigenous materials and construction systems, Fathy’s work could not rely on color or surface texture for effect, except to the extent that his carefully crafted brick facade variations could be termed textural variations. This imposed a greater importance on volume, forms and fenestration to achieve the overall aesthetic effect. This self-imposed limitation, however, was handled with such artistry that one does not feel that the imagery of the end product is in any way impaired. In fact, it is as if the quasi-monochromatic treatment of exteriors and interiors was a conscious choice to blend better with the surroundings and to heighten the sense of overall harmony that colors, or contrasting materials, would have ever so subtly disturbed.

It is an evolving polishing and glazing of the work of art, drawing ever more deeply from the same well. There is a strengthening of a set of symbols that are gradually turned into signals, making the image sharper and the message clearer. He succeeded to such a degree that his

⁴ Renata Holod with Darl Rastorfer (eds.), *Architecture and Community: Building in the Islamic World Today*. The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, published by Aperture, N.Y., 1983.

message has been caricatured by insensitive critics as quaint rustic scenes; domes, vaults and arches; courtyards; mudbrick! That is the same nonsensical oversimplification as saying that Mies van der Rohe's contribution is nothing more than a glass-encased steel box!

In fact, by his later years, Fathy had elaborated a number of aesthetic standards establishing geometric proportions for the elements of his architectural vocabulary that were very carefully crafted but not as restrictive as the standards of the classic orders. On the other hand, some of Fathy's pursuits of a metaphysical symbolism in architectural design are really marginal to an appreciation of his work. In his own hands they may have helped, but in the hands of some of his disciples, this aspect has been turned into a veritable esoteric numerology.

THE BUILDINGS

But architecture has to be experienced. In the absence of an actual visit, pictures are worth a thousand words, especially in the case of Hassan Fathy, where many of his buildings have been so neglected that they are unrecognizable. So let me show you a few pictures of some of the buildings of this great artist.

Let's look at the simplicity of an early residence, the Hamed Said House, uses the basic Fathy motifs that we came to know and appreciate. These same motifs are also deployed in the larger and later Casaroni House ... They also reappear with considerably more sophistication and complexity in the Sami Akil house. The variations on the vertical and the horizontal are like musical variations on a basic theme, they retain the overall character, the signature of the artist.

The variations have been successfully adapted to the needs of different kinds of building from a small ceramics factory ... to a small school ... and these are the distinctive stylistic features of the built form in Gournas as well.

But allow me to show you my favorite: the little mosque that he built in Gournas. Here you can see the enormous ability of the artist at work. The simple serene restful façade, remarkably well balanced, but actually innovating in form as well as function. No other mosque at that time had such a minaret with an ascending staircase in this fashion.

The dome is simple, yet exquisitely balanced to cover the space underneath it and to bring in enough light.

The interplay of light and darkness provides echoes of shade from the harsh midday sun and openness to the soft afterglow of the late afternoon light of the setting sun. The cool interior is peaceful and invites meditation and spirituality. For the architect or the architectural critic there is much in this subtlety that invites reflection and repays attention.

On the outside, Fathy makes an ally of the harsh sun. He creates a pergola that casts these stark lines etched in shadow against the blank wall. In so doing, he evokes the classic Ablaq stonework of many great Islamic structures where alternating rows of dark and light masonry would create this series of horizontal lines on the monumental facade. Fathy creates a muted echo, appropriate for a small peaceful rural mosque.

Few in Egypt at that time followed that path. Few had the capacity to do so. A rare and worthy exception was the great Ramses Wissa Wassef, a friend and occasional collaborator of Hassan Fathy who created his own masterpiece in Harraniyya, a village whose plan Fathy had designed. There Ramses Wissa Wassef created an amazing community of young artists from poor rural backgrounds that he brought under his wing, and whose talents in pottery and weaving he nurtured. It blossomed into a

world famous location. And in that location where his own house was found we find the mastery of another great artist: witness the rhythmic elegance of this facade. Look at the spaces he created. And here in counterpoint to Fathy's Gourni Mosque I would like to show you Wissa Wassef's incredible museum for the sculptures of Habib Gorgi.

Notice the studied casualness with which he angled the interior of the plan from the exterior rectangle of the building, thereby creating an amazing sequence of totally different spaces, each suitable for particular presentation. Notice how he used the harsh midday sun of Egypt to introduce lighting into dark corridors or even to light the sculptures in the alcoves as if with spot lights ... but they are spotlights created by natural light.

I chaired the second Aga Khan Award Jury in 1983 which gave that building a prize. Regretfully, it was only to be posthumous, as Wissa Wassef did not live as long as his friend Hassan Fathy and it was his widow and his sister who received the honor in his name.

But returning to Hassan Fathy, what is the legacy of that great architect? His buildings are few and scattered, and his image in the minds of younger generations that have not known him or his works is dimmed by a new wave of technological advance and environmental concerns.

THE HASSAN FATHY AWARD FOR ARCHITECTURE

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA), the New Library of Alexandria, decided a number of years ago that to be faithful to its mission, it should make a special effort on behalf of Architecture. A number of activities were launched, but one that immediately gained a special place in the hearts of both the management of the institution, the students and practitioners of architecture, and the public at large, was the idea to honor the name of the great Egyptian Architect Hassan Fathy. An annual Award (medal) in his name was welcomed by all.

However, a number of points are pertinent to underline about this Award. Hassan Fathy was not only a brilliant architect in terms of his mastery of form, space, and building techniques, but he also was a person of principle, who defended the ideas of an architecture of humanism at a time when the modernist wave of the 20th century was deifying the machine. Fathy would wage his sometimes lonely fight for decades, and it was only very late in his life that he received the recognition that was his due.

But beyond his convictions and his ideas, Fathy was an artist of great talent whose architectural creations enchanted everyone by their seductive simplicity of form,

their learned casualness of layout and interplay of light and shadow, solids and voids, in always brilliant harmonies. Some have mistakenly reduced the legacy of his ideas to the vocabulary of domed structures and walled courtyards that were his characteristic of many of the structures that he built, to a simplistic message about environment and local materials, or to an excessive attachment to the folk architecture of parts of Egypt.

It is not the intention of this prize to reassert a style that characterized particular buildings that Hassan Fathy produced 70–80 years ago, in totally different socio-economic and technological conditions. This prize is dedicated to those committed to an architecture of humanity, to caring designs that nurture the well-being of people and community, to those who recognize that we must live in harmony with our environment and to those who can see beauty in simplicity and not just in lavish expense and excess. To those who struggle with the challenges of societies today, from over-populated slums to vast, ugly but necessary infrastructure, to the need to recapture beauty and to those who see architecture as serving the poor and the marginalized as much we serve the rich and the affluent. The Award also seeks to recognize those who toil to preserve the legacy of the past as much as those who dream to create

the icons of the future. It must pay particular attention to youth. As a result, there is an enormous range of projects that were selected for recognition by the Award. (start of Video Mosaic of winners of the medal fits here).

Because the Award seeks to recognize different parts of the vast canvas on which Hassan Fathy worked, from architectural writing and journals to interior design and decoration, from teaching and art to building methods and techniques, each year a steering committee organizes our efforts around a different theme or themes.

By the diversity of these themes, the greatness of the legacy of Fathy is underlined (end of Mosaic Video about here). Long may it endure to inspire successive generations of young Egyptian architects to stand on principle and to build the architecture that suits their time, but with a firm commitment to humanism. That is how we hope the legacy of Hassan Fathy will be truly kept alive.

A SUMMATION

So how could we sum up the man and his legacy?

In the final analysis, Hassan Fathy's contribution to Egyptian architecture has been his image-making faculty, his ability to give body and form to a concept that was always recognized but that could not be easily seen, remaining formless and invisible simply by virtue of being all around us in the environment in which we live. It was his ability to charge with symbolism, and to suggest and evoke a reality emanating from the ontological substance of an Egyptian society that traces its roots from the mists of time through its most recent manifestation of a predominantly Islamic culture. This was the supreme creation of an artist, for art is an act of bringing truth into being. In effect, Hassan Fathy has shown us an Egypt which all of us knew was there.

He integrated the information which was available to all but heightened it by his sensitivity and his ability to discover something that otherwise would escape our attention. For Hassan Fathy picked from the world of Egypt many of the forms that he ultimately used to such good effect. But it was an integrating exercise. He transported the skills of the masons from Upper Egypt to the fertile lands of the Delta. He combined these

with his own vision and emotional understanding of the myth of a bucolically pure, rural Islamic Egypt. Then the sensibility of a wealthy patron or understanding client was all that was needed to enable him to transform his vision into the lyrical structures that have evoked such a strong empathetic emotional response from all those who saw them. He speaks with incredible immediacy and purity to our understanding of such terms as serene, simple, calm, balanced, peaceful, and above all; beautiful.

In the realm of ideas his emphasis on self-help, concern for the poor, cultural authenticity and individualism are now so widely accepted that it is difficult to remember the revolutionary character of his message when he enunciated it so long ago. It is an impressive legacy. It is a great privilege to have known him personally and to have been inspired by his voice and his presence. It is a great challenge to try to live up to the lofty standards he has set for all of us.

Thank you.

REFERENCES

1. Hassan Fathy, Gournah: *A Tale of Two Villages*, Limited edition issued by the Ministry of Culture of Egypt, Cairo – January 1, 1969.
2. Hassan Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1973.
3. See for example Laila Ali Ibrahim, “Up-to date Concepts of the Traditional Cairene Living Units” in *Ekistics*, vol. 48 No. 287, March-April, 1981, pp. 96-100, and Andre Raymond, “The Residential Districts of Cairo during the Ottoman Period” in Ismail Serageldin and Samir el-Sadek (eds.) *The Arab City: Its Character and Islamic Cultural Heritage*, Arab Urban Development Institute, Riyadh and Washington, D.C., 1982, pp. 100-110.
4. Renata Holod with Darl Rastorfer (eds.), *Architecture and Community: Building in the Islamic World Today*. The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, published by Aperture, N.Y., 1983 p. 240.



ISMAIL SERAGELDIN, Director, Library of Alexandria, also chairs the Boards of Directors for each of the BA's affiliated research institutes and museums. He serves as Chair and Member of a number of advisory committees for academic, research, scientific and international institutions. He has held many international positions including as Vice President of the World Bank (1993–2000).

Dr. Serageldin has received many awards including: First recipient of Grameen Foundation (USA) Award for a lifetime commitment to combating poverty, (1999); Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters awarded by the government of France (2003); Pablo Neruda Medal of Honor, awarded by the Government of Chile (2004); The Bajaj Award for promoting Gandhian values outside India (2006); Order of the Rising Sun – Gold and Silver Star awarded by the Emperor of Japan (2008); Champion of Youth Award by the World Youth Congress, Quebec (2008); Knight of the French Legion of Honor awarded by the President of France (2008); The Swaminathan Award for Environmental

Protection (Chennai, India, 2010); Millennium Excellence Award for Lifetime Africa Achievement Prize, by the Excellence Awards Foundation, Ghana (2010); The Public Welfare Medal, by the National Academy of Sciences, Washington DC (2011); Commander of the Order of Arts & Letters awarded by the government of France (2011).

He has lectured widely all over the world including delivering the Mandela Lecture (Johannesberg, 2011), the Nexus Lecture (Netherlands, 2011), the Keynote Address to the First International Summit of the Book (Washington DC, 2012). He was distinguished professor at Wageningen University and at the College de France.

He has published over 60 books and monographs and over 200 papers on a variety of topics including biotechnology, rural development, sustainability, and the value of science to society. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in engineering from Cairo University and Master's degree and a PhD from Harvard University and has received over 30 honorary doctorates.