REVOLUTIONARY CAIRO AND URBAN MODERNITY: LESSONS FROM THE SIXTIES

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ABSTRACT

Following the 1952 military overthrow of the centuries old monarchy, Egypt’s former president Nasser initiated a pan-Arab movement that sought to distance Egypt from its Islamic past and instead engage the country with the region as well as the world. Architecture and urban space were tools through which this vision was spatialized. Thus the construction of the Hilton hotel – overlooking Tahrir square – became a symbol of sorts for the kind of Egypt that was envisioned by the new regime. Similarly, a series of governmental buildings were constructed next to the hotel. Adopting the international style of architecture popular at the time with its distance from any historical references it was an ideal canvas onto which the national aspirations of a new emerging nation could be placed. The paper discusses these developments looking at the construction of modernist buildings in Nasserist Cairo, and the definition of a new kind of urban space, placing this within a larger historical narrative. Through this narrative which will be linked to the socio-political discourse at the time, I will argue that the regime engaged in a short-lived modernist attempt in which Egypt as a nation sought to move beyond its historical constraints and in turn become modern. This project of modernity did not last, as I will argue, and in the 1970s degenerated into a post-modern pastiche adopting Arab-Islamic elements influenced by the rise of the Arab Gulf.

INTRODUCTION

Recent events of the Arab spring have focused attention on Cairo and the symbolic heart of its uprising – namely Tahrir square. The square’s history, transformation and more significantly the buildings that overlook this iconic space are representative of a modernization attempt that goes back to the second half of the 20th century. Thus following the 1952 military overthrow of the centuries old monarchy, Egypt’s former president Nasser initiated a pan-Arab movement that sought to distance Egypt from its Islamic past and instead engage the country with the region as well as the world. Architecture and urban space were tools through which this vision was spatialized. The construction of the Hilton hotel – overlooking Tahrir square – became a symbol of sorts for the kind of Egypt that was envisioned by the new regime. It suggested a new life-style and became a place to be visited not just by tourists and the well to do but also ordinary Egyptians.

An archival image from the opening of the hotel, showing Conrad Hilton (founder of the Hilton Hotels), Nasser as well as Tito (former president of what was then known...
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as Yugoslavia) is telling of the changes taking place in Egypt and the extent of its alignment with the outside world. Similarly, a series of governmental buildings were constructed next to the hotel including the seat of the Arab League. Taken together they defined a substantive edge of Tahrir square and in their architecture marked the countries’ entry into the modern age — subsequently playing a substantive role in the city’s turbulent history. Adopting the international style of architecture popular at the time with its distance from any historical references it was an ideal canvas onto which the national aspirations of a new emerging nation could be placed.

The paper discusses these developments looking at the construction of modernist buildings in Nasserist Cairo, and the definition of a new kind of urban space, placing this within a larger historical narrative. Through this narrative, which will be linked to the socio-political discourse at the time, I will argue that the regime engaged in a short-lived modernist attempt in which Egypt as a nation sought to move beyond its historical constraints and in turn become modern. This project of modernity did not last, as I will argue, and in the 1970s degenerated into a post-modern pastiche adopting Arab-Islamic elements influenced by the rise of the Arab Gulf.

The paper will rely on an analysis of historical and archival documents, depictions in the popular media, literary evidence, as well as case studies of select buildings. Projecting to the current situation in Egypt and the extent to which the recent revolution can be informed by the lessons of revolutionary Cairo in the 1960s will form the concluding part of the paper.

THE ARAB SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE: BETWEEN TRADITIONALISM AND MODERNITY

"Over here is like there, neither better nor worse. But I am from here, just as the date palm standing in the courtyard of our house has grown in our house and not in anyone else’s. The fact that they came to our land, I know not why, does that mean that we should poison our present and our future? Sooner or later they will leave our country, just as many people throughout history left many countries. The railways, ships, hospitals, factories and schools will be ours and we’ll speak their language without either a sense of guilt or a sense of gratitude. Once again we shall be as we were – ordinary people – and if we are lies we shall be lies of our own making."

Tayeb Saleh. Season of Migration to the North.

The quote above by the late Sudanese writer El Tayyeb Saleh, taken from his 1969 novel “Season of Migration to the North” exemplifies a certain longing for independence – both from the colonialists who have left but also from a burdensome past in general – which would include the Islamic past as well. The physical artefacts left will be ours – and ‘we’ will be actively participating the shaping of our own destiny. Wherever that may lead us, Saleh seems to be suggesting that Arabs need to participate in their own destiny and not be guided by any pre-conceived notions or ideologies. In short they need to become modern.
Saleh's call needs to be understood in a wider context – whereby the region has for a long time been mired in a debate about its so-called identity. Oscillating between what some have called Traditionalism and Westernism. According to Edward Said (1994) this problem ‘animates’ all sorts of discussions — whether it is influence, blame or judgment. Within the context of this paper, I would like to briefly discuss the notion of modernity as it pertains to literary production – as it will have direct bearing on the production and contestation of urban space in Cairo.

As noted Arab literal production and its political discourse has for many years centered on the debate between ‘traditionalism’ and ‘Westernism’ (Makdisi, 1992). For many this debate shaped the whole process of modernization within the Arab world. The former, traditional approach has been articulated by Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani (1839-97) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), who argued that the perceived conflict between Islam and modernity is a false one since Islam contains principles of modernity. Others, most notable Rifa’at Al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), argued that in order to be modern one had to become European. This latter ideology became the center of political reform movements within the Arab world in the 20th century. In Egypt, writer and education minister Taha Hussein (1898-1973) went so far as to declare that ‘we must follow the path of the Europeans so as to be their equals and partners in civilization, in its good and evil, its sweetness and bitterness, what can be loved or hated, what can be praised or blamed’ (quoted in Houri, 1962, p. 330). Thus an either/or position emerges: either follow the traditional path or embrace the west.

Literature has dealt with these issues in a number of ways. In Egypt Naguib Mahfouz's trilogy – written in the 50s and 60s – utilized the traditional setting of Cairo to articulate the transformations witnessed within Egyptian society – from the struggle against the colonial powers to the 1952 revolution and the emergence of Egypt as a modern nation (e.g. Mahfouz, 1990). The traditional environment, in its architectural and urban elements, is used to symbolize the old fashioned ways which need to be overcome to become modern. In a different context, using a fictitious Gulf country, Abd Al-Rahman Munif addresses the impact of oil discovery and the emergence of imperial powers — the Americans — in his _Cities of Salt_. He shows how the idyllic and simple life of the Bedouin is transformed and how its inhabitants are uprooted and transferred to a newly built city, a place for workers serving the newly emerging oil industry. This settlement with its cramped quarters is contrasted with its western-style oriented ‘twin-city’ housing the American executives (Munif, 1989). It is of interest to note that these depictions are not cast in a romantic light where the traditional or idyllic are perceived to be ‘ideal’ states which one needs to return to. Neither embracing ‘westernism’ or ‘traditionalism’ these two novels exemplify the ambiguous nature of east/west encounters.

Examples pertaining to how this influenced and shaped the production of urban space abound throughout the Arab world but perhaps the case of Egypt during the rule of Ismail in the late 19th century and early 20th century is illustrative. After visiting Paris he ordered the construction of a new section of Cairo, modeled after Paris with its wide boulevards and spacious squares. The traditional environment was perceived to be incompatible with notions of modernity and had to be literally dismantled as noted by his chronicler Ali Mubarak. Yet in their drive for modernity “...they had not grasped ... that in European eyes there was one thing that defined them as unalterably and ineluctably different, unalterably and ineluctably unlike
European and unalterably and ineluctably inferior – their race” (Ahmed, 2000; p. 36). This ‘modernist’ project proceeded and in 1869 during the opening of the Suez Canal Egypt presented its modern face to the civilized world (Europe) (Elsheshtawy, 2000; 2002). However, things unraveled soon thereafter and Egypt became a British colony. While acquiring semi-independence in the 1920s with a continuation of westernization, it wasn’t until 1952 when a group of army officers conducted an operation in which its King was deposed and an Egyptian government under the leadership of Mohamed Naguib and subsequently Abd El-Nasser in 1954 ruled the country. Under Nasser a tide of nationalism swept the country, in addition to calls for Arab unity. Anti western rhetoric figured highly in the political discourse.

It is against this context that intellectuals such as Naguib Mahfouz, Yousef Idris and many others articulated their writings. Architects responded in a similar manner, adopting modernist principles and more or less abandoning an ‘Islamic’ heritage. Others, such as Hassan Fathy emerged arguing for a ‘return’ to traditional building techniques and the use of traditional forms. In the words of Mitchell, his approach “...was to become internationally famous for announcing the rejection of Western modernism and seeking to re-appropriate the styles and materials of a local heritage” (Mitchell, 2001; p. 216). Commissioned by the pre-Nasser government in 1945 to build a model village for residents in Gurna, an Upper Egypt village located next to Luxor. Supposedly, the project would relate to “place” using local materials, structures and forms. The experiment ultimately ended in failure – residents drowned the village and refused to move into this new “hygienic environment” (e.g., Mitchell, 2001). While initially presented as a solution to the identity dilemma it became for the local population a foreign intervention, meant to subjugate them. The Ministry of Culture published an account of this story twenty years later – in the late sixties – in English, in a well known book called “Architecture for the Poor” written by Fathy himself (Fathy, 2000). The patronizing nature of the book, its foreign language, asserts a certainty of conviction, that a return to imaginary traditional forms is the only way to ascertain ones identity. For Fathy there was no black or white – in dealing with western ideas the only solution is to search for ones own traditional forms and present them as a viable alternative. Fathy’s answer to modernity is the invocation of the language of medieval Cairene architecture (e.g. AlSayyad, 2001).

Following this brief overview on the evolution of modernity in the region — were I have been trying to problematize the construct and the extent to which modernizing actors viewed tradition with skepticism — and how this became quite obvious in Egypt my focus now shifts to a discussion of specific architectural cases.

**REVOLUTIONARY CAIRO**

My focus is on the time following the so-called revolution of 1952 in which a group of military officers overthrew the monarchy. This phase is associated in the mind of many with a certain radical modernity, which aimed at overcoming decades of traditionalism and what they saw as a backward link to an Islamic past. I am grounding this discussion through a case study analysis of one specific building,
namely the Hilton Hotel, to be followed by a brief overview of other buildings designed at the time.

What was known as the Nile Hilton Hotel is part of a complex of buildings, which capture the various layers of modern Cairo. These would include, the Arab League building; the Socialist Union Headquarters; and the Mogamaa (an office building). Complementing these is the Egyptian Museum, opened in 1902. In the center is the Hilton itself – the ultimate symbol of modernism – opened in 1958.

The hotel is located on a site that represented for Egyptians at that time the essence of colonialism and occupation — the English barracks. A 1904 photo taken from a balloon show these barracks next to the Kasr al Nil bridge and also the Museum. The Zamalek island appears as an agricultural paradise which was to change during the course of the century. The specific locale of the barracks in relation to the city and the Nile is of significance. A map shows the barracks facing the Nile and in the back is the new City that had been planned by Ismail – the city’s ruler – to create a European center that would rival Paris. In fact Cairo was called for a long time Paris on the Nile to be contrasted with the old city and its dense alleyways (e.g. Myntti, 2003; Mostyn, 2006). This was the backward city, which modernizers felt they needed to move away from.

Figure 1- Spelterini, E.: Über den Wolken/Par dessus les nuages, Brunner & Co, Zurich 1928, p. 81. 1904 aerial photograph of Central Cairo.

The construction of the Hotel needs to be understood in a larger context in which the development of Hilton Hotels throughout the world was evocative of an age of American imperialism. An ad from 1959, published in Time magazine, portrays the hotel as a modern TWA jetliner – the ultimate symbol of sophistication at that time. Tellingly the hotel is shown from its backside facing the Islamic city and our gaze is directed across the Nile towards the pyramids and the Sphinx.
Much has been written about the role played by the Hilton Hotels in the cold war era and how it was used to export an image of America to the world (e.g Wharton, 2001). Conrad Hilton’s — the chains founder — slogan “World Peace through International Trade and Travel” — is illustrative of the kind of message it was meant to communicate. The building itself was designed by an American architect — Welton Beckett and Associates. According to Wharton it signified an “Americanization of the touristic experience.” Or as LIFE magazine put it: “In 19 Lands instant America.”

The hotel was opened in 1959. Historical images show Presidents Nasser and Tito as well as Conrad Hilton in a cowboy hat. According to Conrad, Nasser’s embrace of the Hilton represented an embrace of capitalism and America. Or, so people thought. In its initial representation the hotel was portrayed as a kind of new face for Cairo and in turn Egypt. For instance, in a 1962 issue of LIFE magazine the hotel appears in all its splendor accompanied by other Hilton’s — such as Istanbul. In this representation a direct link is established to the countries’ pharaonic past. This is accomplished among other things by photographing the building from the site of the Egyptian museum. In this way the building's backside is highlighted as it is covered

1 Life Magazine. August 30, 1963; p. 67

Figure 2- Time Magazine. February 1959. Advertisments for the Hilton Hotel in the late 1950s.
in large decorative hieroglyphs, emphasizing a move away from an Islamic past and a return/revival of an authentic Egyptian identity. Significantly this backside faces the Islamic city — although it is placed at a considerable distant and is not physically visible.

![Figure 3: Source unknown. A 1962 image of the Hilton hotel showing the side facing Tahrir square.](image)

According to news reports at the time the property is a landmark because of its "strong affinity with local people" and because it was the first hotel in Egypt built "by a public-sector company in a management agreement with a foreign company." Yet the hotel moved beyond that to become something more representative. According to an official: "Nasser wanted the hotel to be a showcase, something to show off to foreign visitors."³

At the time of its opening the 12-storey hotel was the tallest building in Cairo. According to Wharton (2001), it offered a ‘spectacle of glamorous modernity.’ Moreover, the modern form of the structure was a ‘materialization of the modern social practices that it housed.’ Significantly the building according to this reading was an attempt by Nasser to make public a new face of Egypt. This new face as it were was primarily guided and inspired by an ideology of secularization, through which the Egyptian state was aiming at regaining a proper international role. The hotel’s design — following the dictates of the international style — was a direct manifestation of this trend. This continued also in the hotel’s interior lobby, which as an echo of the pharaonic theme on its exterior, contained a massive reproduction of a stone relief from the Egyptian museum. Additionally, much has been said about the

³ [http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/199704/hotels.with.a.history.htm](http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/199704/hotels.with.a.history.htm)
floor plan which rather than being an elongated slab is configured along two diagonals. While Wharton argues that this makes the building turn its back towards the old city, the reason is functional to elongate the façade facing the Nile thus maximizing riverside frontage.

The hotel also signified new cultural practices, whereby it became a symbol of modernity accompanied by life style changes. As Wharton pointed out the balconies were people can display themselves stand in contrast to old Cairo were women were hidden from view by Mashrabiyya’s. Such interpretations maybe a bit forced, but it is also telling to look at promotional brochure’s distributed at the time.

One image from such a publication shows an Egyptian couple, sitting in the balcony. Their sight represents the very image of modernity promoted at that time. It is a glamorous sight, the woman in a short dress, bare arms and significantly no veil; the man appears in a western suit. This stands in stark contrast to the sweeping conservatism characterizing the country today, and is an attempt to project an image of a modern ‘Egyptian’ citizen. Such depictions were also common in movies at the time. Additionally many middle class Egyptians — from Cairo or its surrounding provinces — would visit the hotel and spend time in it, as a form of encountering a glamorous environment. Another significant feature in the hotel was the main staircase strategically placed in the lobby to allow for the display of people. This would prove to be of particular significance for weddings as the traditional walk of the bride and groom would take place on the staircase. A tradition that continued up until the hotel’s closure for renovation in 2010.

![Figure 4- Nile Hilton Archives](image.png)

Figure 4- Nile Hilton Archives . An image taken from one of the hotel’s rooms showing a couple conversing.

Aside from its function as a meeting point for ordinary Egyptians, the hotel became a locale for Egypt’s elite. Moreover it witnessed a series of historic events such as the
opening of the Arab league in 1969. It also was a major hangout for many Arab leaders such as King Hussein enjoying sitting at the poolside bar. It also witnessed the meeting following the ‘Black September’ massacre. Both Yasser Arafat and King Hussein, sporting guns, and brought together by Nasser are seen in the hotel as displayed in the media. Incidentally, this is one of the last photographs of Nasser who died shortly afterwards, and if the stories are to be believed, in his private suite at the hotel.

The Hotel is currently undergoing a major renovation by the Ritz-Carlton and was set to initially open in 2012 but its opening has been postponed due to events related to the January 25 revolution. Planned changes include the closure of balconies to expand room size, thereby depriving the hotel from one of its most attractive features: open-air balconies facing the Nile river. An extension added in the 1980s will be removed thereby returning the hotel to its original form, with an addition of an auditorium.

As noted before the hotel is surrounded by symbols of post(1952)-revolution Egypt. One of the most famous and even though it is associated with Egyptians collective memory with the Nasser era dates back to 1951 and was opened immediately before the revolution. The building was described by its architect Kamal Ismail to be a “simplified form of the Islamic style” and was designed to house “a large number of bureaucratic functions” under one roof.

Another series of iconic projects were designed by a very prolific architect from that era, Egyptian Naoum Chebib who was one of the leading Egyptian architects of his time. All were uncompromisingly modern in their appearance reflecting a modernist ethos as noted but also compatible with the image propagated by the Hilton. The first is the Belmont building — so named because of a cigarette advertising on its top. The building when it opened in 1954 was 31 stories high — the tallest in Cairo. And there is also the Cairo Tower which opened in 1961. This tower till this day is a major landmark and it is striking because of its shape resembling a pharaonic lotus flower, continuing the pharaonic theme as it were.

A significant landmark is the Radio & Television Building also known as 'Maspero’ a French Egyptologist after whom the area was named were the building is located. The building’s construction was ordered by Nasser in 1959, and the first broadcast commenced in 1960, on the 8th anniversary of the revolution. Similar to the Hilton and Naoum’s structures, the building reflected a modernist ideal in the sense that it is a very simple and functional structure consisting of a cylinder as a base from which a solid rectangle emerges. There are absolutely no traces of any cliched Arab or Islamic influences.

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Modernist buildings in Cairo constructed in the 1960s (Belmont Tower and the Radio&TV Building)

These projects reflect a certain optimism — a belief in the transformative power of modern architecture. By building these new structures a new society can be forged as well; one that can free itself from the shackles of its (Islamic) past and one that is truly modern. The following section will examine this in some more detail.

**NEO-LIBERALISM AND THE RETURN TO TRADITION**

A new aesthetic began to emerge in the 1970s and 80s and well into the 90s as well. An echo to a large extent of a renewed worldwide interest in traditional/vernacular architecture leading to a revival of traditional forms — known as postmodernism. But there were also specific local factors embracing such conservative approaches to building. These include the 1967 defeat against Israel and the subsequent death of Nasser. In many ways it symbolized the failure of the modernist ideology. Moreover, the emerging power of the Arabian Gulf, after the 1973 war, and the oil embargo eventually resulted in a huge financial windfall for oil producing countries. Associated with this was an increase in migration of Egyptians and others to that region and their eventual return, bringing with them an outlook deeply steeped in particularly rigid interpretations of Islamist traditions.

This was echoed in a reactionary architecture that made visible and externalized such conservatism. Relevant projects would include the Children’s Park in Sayyida Zeinab, a low-income neighborhood in Cairo, designed by Egyptian Architect Halim Ibrahim. A student of Fathy, his design — which won the Aga Khan Award — is embedded in this tradition. Thus, predictably, the architectural vocabulary is inspired by a Nubian context. While well executed it remains an alien space not particularly tied to a specific Cairene context and more significantly it tries to project an imagined past onto the present. Gone are the modernist ideals of the 50s and 60s.
In a similar manner a more recent project started in the 1990s — the Azhar Park — transformed what was essentially a rubbish dump into a green park. Located in close proximity to the old city the park was commissioned and executed by the Aga Khan Foundation. Aside from lovely landscaping some of the buildings continue the tradition of Fathy — criticized by some observers as an Orientalist revival. The large and the iconic became a part of this as well. For instance, the tower of the ministry of foreign affairs located next to the modernist Radio & TV building established its Arab-Islamic credentials as it were by incorporating pointed arches. A stark contrast to the more progressive architecture of the 1950s and 1960s.

![Figure 6- Source: Elsheshtawy. Post-modern and late-capitalist architecture in Cairo; Al-Azhar Park](image)

Such a renewed interest in the traditional was not just present in public buildings and parks but could also be seen in smaller residential buildings. Some of the main architectural features would include solid facades and decorative mashrabiyyas or wooden windows. In many instances these were designed by Egyptian architects returning from the Gulf region and the Arabian Peninsula, were the presence of such clichéd elements were evocative of some illusive Islamic past. Rather than embrace a global ideology linking the city to a larger context, architects opted for a much more limited, and limiting, orientation.

**CONCLUSION**

I have in this paper focused on a specific time-frame in Cairo’s long history namely the period following the 1952 military takeover. An architecture was promoted at that time that was meant to be representative of a new Egypt, one that would overcome the shackles of the past and present a progressive image to the world. At the same time, these buildings were meant to induce a certain change in people’s lifestyle to be more in line with a modern, civilized society.

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Developments that have taken place since the 1970s have reversed these trends. Indeed conservative elements present within society — inspired by a Gulf based ideology — have led to a revival of historical elements. Additionally neo-liberal discourses, manifested through the disengagement of the state from urban development, have begun to dominate urban development in the region. An architecture of spectacle inspired by Dubai and seen in places such as Cairo, Rabat, and Amman (Elsheshtawy, 2010).

Recent events which have taken place under the general umbrella of the ‘Arab Spring’ and known as the January 25 revolution have among other things taken place because of a disenfranchisement of a large part of the population. Seeing the rise of cities in the Arabian Gulf — with their soaring skyscrapers and glitzy shopping malls — they looked at their own city, taken over by corporate interests and greed, and felt that they have been left behind.

Looking back at Cairo’s modernizing attempts in the 1950s and 1960s numerous lessons could be drawn. But perhaps the most significant is how architecture and urban space were tools through which an inspiring vision was spatialized. With its distance from any historical references it was an ideal canvas onto which the national aspirations of a new emerging nation could be placed. While short lived the physical manifestations of this are still present and form part of Cairo’s cityscape. Indeed their very presence reminds us that a new architectural and urban national project needs to emerge. One that is not shackled by the past or succumbs to capitalist aspiration, but is thoroughly grounded in peoples needs and desires and would truly offer a way forward.

REFERENCES


