

The Aristocrat of Mud: Hassan Fathy and the Paradox of Architecture for the Poor



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ABSTRACT

Hassan Fathy (1900–1989) is recognized as a pivotal figure in the rebirth of Arab and Islamic vernacular architecture, significantly influencing Egypt's cultural and nationalistic reawakening. While he is globally celebrated for his 1945 project at New Gurna and his seminal text *Architecture for the Poor*, this study re-evaluates his career through the lens of alternative histories, including his collaboration with Doxiadis Associates from 1957 to 1961. By examining his works in Egypt, Iraq, and the United States, this article analyzes the tension between his humanistic pursuit of cultural authenticity and the technocratic demands of postwar development. Fathy's passive climate control solutions, such as **thick mud-brick walls**, wind towers, are recognized as fundamental principles in the design of energy-efficient buildings. It further investigates the paradox of his "Architecture for the Poor" becoming a preferred style for the urban elite and its recent reframing as a pioneer of sustainable architecture. He used adobe (mud brick) as the foundational material for almost all of his major projects. The findings suggest that Fathy's significance lies in his attempt to calibrate science and tradition into a "vernacular modernity". Scholars have noted that Fathy's "Egyptian tradition" was a hybrid that combined Mamluk Cairene courtyards with Nubian domes, a style alien to the Saidi villagers who associated domes with mosques and tombs. This architectural conflation meant that he was imposing a generalized, pan-Islamic vocabulary on regional communities that had completely different cultural sensibilities and domestic needs. Furthermore, New Gurna is often viewed as a "colonial project" in its approach, as Fathy imposed. Instead of creating genuine grassroots empowerment, Fathy assumed a very paternalistic role as a top-down state agent who knew best what was good for the community without actively taking their vocal protests into account in his master plan.

KEY WORDS: Adobe (Mud Brick), Hassan Fathy, Elite Aristocrat, Appropriate Technology, Architecture for the Poor.