The Architecture of Cairo

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Course Description

Among the cities associated with the Islamic civilization, Cairo is perhaps the most representative culturally and certainly the richest architecturally. Founded in 634 at the strategic head of the Nile Delta, the city evolved from a military outpost to the seat of the ambitious and singular Fatimid caliphate between the 10th and 12th century. Its most spectacular age, however, was the Mamluk period (1250-1517) which established it as the uncontested center of a resurgent Sunni Islam and produced a wealth of religious, palatial, and commemorative structures that synthesized the achievements of previous periods and symbolized the image of the city for centuries to come. After that, Cairo was reduced to an Ottoman provincial capital until the end of the eighteenth century. Then it witnessed a short and capricious renascence under the independent-minded Muhammed ‘Ali Pasha (1805-48) followed by a period of vacillation between conservatism and modernization that was exacerbated by the late-twentieth-century problems of population explosion and underdevelopment.

Yet, Cairo still shines as a cultural, political, and economic center in three spheres of influence: the Arab world, Africa, and the Islamic world. Moreover, many of its Islamic monuments (456 registered by the 1951 Survey of the Islamic Monuments of Cairo) still stand, although they remain largely unknown to the world's architectural community and their numbers are dwindling at an exceedingly alarming rate.

In this course we will recount the story of Cairo. We will review its urban and architectural developments from the initial settlement on the site to the twentieth century and interpret them in light of the cultural, political, and social history of the country, the region and the world. We will examine Cairene architectural types and urban patterns to see how they reflect various regional influences and relate to their counterparts in the wider Islamic and Mediterranean contexts.

Beginnings: History, Geography, and Religion

- History and Geography
- The Nile and the Site of Cairo
- The Legacy of Ancient Egypt
- Egypt on the Eve of Islam
- Hellenism, Christianity, and the Copts
- The coming of Islam
The Foundation of al-Fustat

- The Mosque of `Amru ibn al-`As: the first mosque in Africa
- The vocabulary of the mosque: the minaret, the mihrab and the minbar
- The Nilometer

Imperial Ambitions: Ibn Tulun and al-Ikhshid

- The foundation of al-Qata`i`: The Mosque of Ibn Tulun
- Buildings of the Ikhshidids

Reading:

- Behrens-Abouseif, 3-34, 47-57.
- Abu-Lughod, 3-25.
- Briggs, 47-62.

Age of the Caliphate: The Fatimids

- The foundation of Cairo
- Fatimid palaces
- Comparison with contemporary Islamic cities
- Fatimid Mosques of Cairo: new traditions and old forms
- The Azhar Mosque and the Institution of religious learning
- The centrality of the mosque in a medieval Islamic urban setting
- Mosques of al-Hakim, al-Aqmar, and al-Salih Tala`i`. 
The Cult of Saints: mashhads and mausolea

- Genealogy as a propaganda tool for the Fatimids
- The evolving function of the dome
- The appearance of the muqarnas: decorative purposes and symbolic meanings

The defenses of Cairo

- The first walls of al-Mu’izz
- The walls of Badr al-Jamali
- The gates of Cairo and the question of regional influences
- The Crusades, the fall of the Fatimids, and the rise of Salah al-Din

Reading:

- Behrens-Abouseif, 58-77.
- Briggs, pp. 63-75.
Rise to Prominence: Ayyubids and Bahri Mamluks

- The relationship of the citadel to the city
- The emerging importance of the citadel as the residence of the ruler
- The Roda Citadel and the urban development of Cairo in the Ayyubid period

Ayyubid Architecture and the Sunni Revival

- The Mausoleum of al-Imam al-Shafe`i
- The introduction of the madrasa: The Madrasa of al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub
- The political and social functions of the madrasa
- The mausoleum of the ruler

The Bahri Mamluks: continuity and change

- A brief introduction to the Mamluk system
- The Mosque of al-Zahir Baybars and traditional forms
- The Complex of Qalawun and the Syrian import

The Apogee of Medieval Cairo

- The City under al-Nasir Muhammad
- The charitable institutions of al-Nasir Muhammad's princes
- The Waqf system

Mamluk Madrasas and Khanqahs and the problem of the Four-Iwan Plan

- The royal madrasas on the main thoroughfare of Cairo
- The Madrasas of Sultan Hasan

Residential and Palatial architecture

- A brief survey of residential architecture up to the Mamluk period
- Royal and princely palaces of the fourteenth century

The urban character of Mamluk architecture

- A short film, Medieval Cairo by Nezar AlSayya
Reading:

- Behrens-Abouseif, pp. 35-44, 78-132.
- Abu-Lughod, pp. 27-36.
- Briggs, pp. 76-109, 145-64 (Domestic Architecture).
- Rabbat, The Citadel of Cairo, 283-95.
- Irwin, Robert. The Middle East in the Middle Ages, The Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250-1382, (Carbondale, 1986).

Afterglow of Empire: Burji Mamluks and Ottomans

The mosques, madrasas, and mausolea of the Burji Sultan

- Urban complex from Barquq to Khayer Bak

The growth of Cairo and the development of the Qarafas

- The royal charitable complexes from Umm Anuk to Qaytbay

The Mamluk style

- The development of the dome, the minaret, and the Qa`a under the Mamluks
- The development of Mamluk decorative techniques and patterns
The coming of the Ottomans

- The urban changes in Cairo from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries
- Ottoman mosques in Cairo: wavering between the local and the official

Cairene Ottoman houses

- The stabilization of a hybrid type
- Comparison with houses of other Ottoman provinces

The legacy of the pre-modern city

- The French Expedition and the Description de l'Egypt

Reading:

- Briggs, pp. 110-44.
- Kessler, Christel. The Carved Masonry Domes of Medieval Cairo. (Cairo, 1976).

Modernization and After: Muhammad 'Ali to the Present

The architectural and urban works of Muhammad Ali

- The Mosque at the Citadel
- The Westernization of the palatial architecture
- The modernization of the city of Cairo

Orientalism and the Fascination of Egypt

- Ethnographer-Painters and the romanticization of Cairo
- The Comite de preservation des monuments du Caire and preservation
Cairene architecture in the late nineteenth century
Historicism and the Mamluk revival
The Mosque of al-Rifa’i
Other Orientalizing styles
Cosmopolitan architecture

The emergence of vernacular style in the 1940s

- The works of Hasan Fathy, Ramses Wissa Wasef, and their students

Cairo’s expansion and modernization

- Population explosion and urban chaos
- Problems of preservation and accommodation
- The image of Cairo: past and present

Reading:

- Behrens-Abouseif, pp. 167-70.

Bibliography

- Edward William Lane, Cairo Fifty Years Ago, ed. S. Lane-Poole, London: John Murray, 1896.
- Edwige Lambert and Isabelle Vinatier, eds., Autrement Le Caire (Feb 1985).
- M. Georges Salmon, Etudes sur la topographie du Caire, la Kal`at al-Kabch et la Birkat al-Fil, Cairo: IFAO, 1902.
- Max Herz, La mosquée du sultan Hassan au Caire, Cairo: Comite de conservation des monuments de l’art arabe, 1899.
- Max Herz, La mosquée el-Rifai au Caire, Milan: H. Allegretti, 1912.
- Nelly Hanna, Habiter au Caire, la maison moyenne et ses habitants aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siecles, Cairo: Institut francais d'archeologie orientale, 1991.
- Stanley Lane-Poole, The Story of Cairo, Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1902, reprint 1971.
- Ulrich Haarmann, Quellenstudien zur fruhen Mamlukenzeit, Freiburg: D. Robischon, 1969.