

Adam Henen Residence
Giza - Cairo, Egypt

293
EGY.

Mohi Houssen Residence
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Traditional houses with workshops for two Egyptian artists, near the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre, Harraniya

Dates of completion: 1968 and 1970 respectively

Objectives

I. In both projects the architect sought to:

- provide the artist and his family with a comfortable house and a functional workshop at a minimal cost;
- design houses in harmony with the other buildings he had constructed in the area.

Description of Site

A. The two houses are built close to each other, on either side of an irrigation canal, just to the North of the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre near Harraniya. Each stands in its own garden, Adam Henen's house amidst agricultural land to the West of the canal, Mohi Houssen's on a wedge of land between the canal and the Saqqara road.

B./C. (For further information about the topography, climate, economic and social background and local architectural character, see 291. EGY - Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre)

D. Access to Mohi Houssen's house is direct from the Saqqara road; to Adam Henen's along a track which runs beside the canal from Harraniya Village and the Art Centre.

Design and Construction

(i) Adam Henen House

A. Architect's Brief

This was the first to be built, in 1967-68. Adam Henen was a young sculptor, a pupil of Wissa Wassef, and shared his philosophy. He needed a place to live and work, and could not then afford to buy a conventional house.

B. Evolution of Design Concepts

1. The choice of mud-brick as a material ensured not only that the construction cost would be kept to a minimum, but also that the thermal performance would be good. The site was large enough for the artist's studio to be in a separate building.

2. The house was planned for a small family. The ground floor comprises a

VI. Let the owner speak for himself: "Even now, when I can afford a more luxurious house, I feel this house as it was built is my own home and I do not need to change anything in it.

(ii) Mohi Houssen House

A. Mohi Houssen's house was commissioned when he saw what had been done for Adam Henen, and the brief was identical. The results are very different.

B. First, the house was to be slightly larger, and it was decided to build it in rough-hewn limestone, with cement mortar at the corners only and mud mortar elsewhere.

The house is entered by a porch at the North-east corner. The accommodation is divided into two parts: the North end is for the family, with three bedrooms and a bathroom on two levels. A corridor leads to the other half of the house where there is a domed sitting room, dining area kitchen and workshop.

From the beginning the house seems to have been beset with difficulties. There were long delays: although the main work had been completed in a year (1969-70) the house was not finally completed until after Wissa Wassef's death in 1974. The distribution of rooms was soon found to be inconvenient - the kitchen difficult of access - and a flat roofed extension was built on to accommodate it next to the dining area. First one, then two large sheds were added to the south in the area of the kilns (Mohi is a potter), and finally the courtyard arcade was altered. The house already had a curiously unfinished air to it because the masonry was unrendered: these changes only accentuated the impression.

Finally the house has been plagued with structural problems, probably due to excessively shallow foundations and to the lack of stability in the walls. There has been serious settlement of the north-western end on the house, leaving a gaping hole in the wall which it is intended to remedy with a rather obtrusive ring-beam. Further cracks in the north-east corner await diagnosis and treatment...

The house is not without good features, but it would be idle to pretend that it could be a serious contender for an architectural prize. Even the few interesting design features somehow fail to achieve the desired effect: the staircase, for instance is a single cavernous flight rising straight to the first floor under a dimly-perceived barrel vault at first-floor level. Having ascended this curious staircase, an even curiously well gives a vertical glimpse of the floor of the corridor below.

PROJECT SIGNIFICANCE

Adam Henen's house is a distinguished piece of work having great affinities with some of the buildings in the Art Centre - in design terms it is the prototype of the house that Wissa Wassef built for his sister Ceres. It has in the end very little in common with Mohi Houssen's, which is in its present form untypical of Wissa Wassef's work .

large sitting room, with a dining area, study and kitchen; the first floor, two bedrooms and a bathroom.

3. The architecture is extremely simple, but the articulation of space is highly sophisticated. The window apertures are asymmetrically placed, in relation to the facade and to the internal structure. The thickness of the walls and the use of domes and vaults makes for strong internal modelling. Old pieces of craftsmanship such as wooden grilles, doors and cupboards, often collected from rubbish carts, are reused throughout the house.

C. Structure, Materials and Technology

The foundations are of local limestone laid in mud mortar, and extend to 40 cms. above ground level. The external walls are all mud brick, as are the first floor domes. The ground floor is vaulted in local red brick with cement mortar. The floors are laid with good quality wire-cut bricks. The whole structural system is dependent on thick walls and vaulted ceilings.

External and internal walls are plastered in mud/sand plaster. The house was built entirely by one of Wissa Wassef's pupils at the Art Centre, Fu^Cad Hamza, under the supervision of architect and client.

The materials are all of local origin.

There is mains electricity, water drawn from a 26 m. artesian well, and drainage to septic tank.

IV. Construction Schedule with Costs (Adam Henen's House)

The whole project from design to completion took less than a year. The final cost was £E 4,100 (£E 300 over budget), of which £E 2,000 (\$ 4,600 at 1967 prices) was the land cost and £E 2,100 (\$ 4,830) the cost of construction. It was paid for privately by the client.

- V. A. The house is not a large one, but it is not cramped. The space is economically used, with alcoves set into the thickness of the walls, beds placed in Iwans (2.10 m. high). The springing of the vaults in the bedrooms is as little as 1 metre above floor level. In contrast, the living area seems quite spacious.

B./C. Climatic performance is as expected. Within the house the intensity of the light varies considerably with the size of the apertures, type of grille, etc. The bathroom is constructed as a small hammam with blue glass oculi.

D. No settlement or deformation was noted. The mud plaster needs to be renewed every 4 or 5 years.

E. An attentive eye to detail characterizes the design of this house. The massing is sober and the textures are plain. The house is well integrated into its predominantly rural site, in terms both of colour and of form.

F. Costs

In comparative terms, the Henen house was scarcely more expensive to build than the weavers' houses at the Wissa Wassef Art Centre.