That there is a Mediterranean culture and that events at one end of the basin can have reverberations at the other end is borne out by this tribute from a Spanish architect to Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy. Guillermo Maluenda met and spoke at length with Fathy in Egypt before determining to write this piece, with Felipe Pich-Aguilera, principally to further debate among their Spanish and Catalonian colleagues. Their attempt at introducing Fathy’s philosophy and experience into a new critical approach to architecture in their own country has relevance for other developing societies. — Editors

What times these are. Times of confusion and disenchantment. I do not know what you think, but every time I try to form an opinion about our indigent, yet endearing, architectonic present and adopt a criterion, I am overcome with a sensation of dissatisfaction; it is similar to the feeling I have after a lively party as I contemplate the disorder of an empty room and I go home sleepy and empty inside, with only the rumour in me of what the night was like.

We are immersed in a sovereign chaos and we form part of it, with all of the fascination and disarray that this circumstance produces. We move among scores of criteria, we weigh infinite possibilities where all of them are valid but where not a single one is certain.

We tend to doubt to an extent that is excessive and our opinions are always relative; individualism and loneliness. Nonetheless, it is a moment of reflection and criticism. Of judging the dizzy race towards modernism and reviewing sincere and deep-seated attitudes amidst the euphoria, were scarcely kept in mind.

Above all, it is the time to avoid etylic discontrol — now that the orchestra has ceased to play — exemplified by those who, covered with confetti, continue to dance, attempting to convince themselves that the party is not over.

Beyond the Realm of Discourse

When the pragmatic rationalism of the first years gave way to the following generations of the modernist movement, the latter started out upon different paths, all stemming from those highly schematic dogmas that great masters had bequeathed to them.

It is my understanding that the majority of these paths eventually led nowhere, or else led to an extremist position with respect to the spirit and the postulates of primitive rationalism, without affording an enrichment of essential matters (or at least this was the common denominator of the attitudes of those who considered themselves to be the immediate inheritors of rationalism).

This would explain why many of these attitudes, seen from the vantage point of the present, appear to us to be somewhat naive, and naivety and simplicity can only be forgiven when they are associated with novelty and vanguardistic concepts. Thus, once the inertia of those beginnings was overcome, the modernist movement (understood exclusively as an evolution or rationalism) was lacking in new values, and entered into a period of crisis, or rather, it never ceased to be in a permanent state of crisis as regards its followers or those who proclaim to be its followers; they never questioned the revision or validity of those primitive postulates that had had such an impact on them.

Now that the myths have been cast aside, we question with impunity those initial dogmas, and we have suffered disenchantment and disillusionment upon realizing that what we thought to be certain was also quite relative. The few truths that remain intact had reached us from the masters of the first generation, and those truths are slipping through our fingers, like water slipping through the hands of a person dying of thirst.
With today’s perspective, other interpretations of the rationalist seed appear much more suggestive; they tend to incorporate new reflections, such as tradition, handicraft work, vernacular trends, the surrounding environment, primary materials...; these are interpretations that in their day were considered to be stepping-stones that led away from modernist canons. These are the paths that most closely approached present-day reality, reflections of sages that knew how to swim against the current and foresee the real problems in the midst of the euphoria of those years.

Perhaps it is for this reason that today we are attracted to the architecture of Sert, Codexch, Barragan, Erskine, prominent figures who were more in line with the times than they were with the stylistic moment in which they found themselves and thus, paradoxically, they proved to be “more modern”.

It is in this context that the personality and the work of HASSAN FATHY can be inserted; he is perhaps one of the architects who most genuinely represents this philosophy. A mixture of humility and grandeur.

**Humanism and Urbanism**

“In India”, notes Fathy, “some villages were provided with running water but such an innovation was not too popular. The young girls preferred to continue to go to the river to fill their heavy jars and to carry them upon their heads. This was the only way to go out and to be seen by the village’s young men. They knew that a long stay at home using tap water would surely mean not getting married.”

“In the rural societies, we can often see how the rigid and out-dated customs served a lot of unexpected and practical purposes.

“Where a meaningful aspect of tradition is eliminated, it is necessary to replace it with another one that satisfies the same social function. For example, if the communal centre of water supply is eliminated, it is necessary to provide other means that must be able to facilitate social compromises and communication, no matter how trivial they may seem.”

Hassan Fathy reinstated the **Hamam** (Turkish bath) in New Gourna village after having done away with the women’s walk to the well for water.

**New Gourna**

“A shoemaker can do his best to try to satisfy his client, taking careful measurements of his foot and having the shoe conform as much as possible to that foot; or he might pretend to work like an army supply officer that is concerned with standardising production so as to produce only one size of boot, whereby the wearer’s foot must adapt to this standard size.

“I was confronted with this option in New Gourna. A living society with all of its complexity was before me. I had two choices: to build houses combining several patterns, forcing the inhabitants to feel the same discomforts of the soldier with new boots, or to create a village that would conform to the peculiarities of its inhabitants; a process similar to that of taking a snail out of its shell and putting it into a new habitat.”

Old Gourna was not really a very good example of urban development; nevertheless for the observer, it was easy to distinguish the five tribes living in four well-defined settlements. Hassan Fathy planned the new habitat or settlement in New Gourna keeping this social organisation as the main premise and having it conform to the climatic and landscape factors, which are peculiar to any project.

Fathy himself said: “I wanted to save the abyss between those two architectures using common features and where village-dwellers could find a familiar point of reference that would make them able to enhance their perception of the new situations. Such factors can be used by the architect as a sign of truth of his own work for the people and the place.”

Through this obvious and basic consideration, arises the kind of city that conforms to people and their culture. If this premise is not considered sufficiently, we can be sure that the final result will be far from something that is really adapted to the inhabitants’ needs.

These reflections served as the basis for the development by Hassan Fathy of the project for New Gourna.

**The Commitment**

New Gourna was an attempt on the part of the Egyptian government to provide shelter to 7000 villagers. Until then, they had live nearby in Old Gourna, constructed on ancient ruins. Their principal occupation consisted in desecrating the site and selling the antiquities extracted in that area. The location of the new settlement was carefully chosen by members of the Department of Antiquities, the Mayor of Gourna, sheiks of the five tribal settlements, and Hassan Fathy. The land had to be far enough from places of artistic or historical merit to avoid further desecrations. In the final analysis, they decided on a cultivated tract located near the main road and the railway.

“It seems really attractive to plan a complete village, but it must be said that it was a bit intimidating to find oneself confronted with a stretch of desert of 23 Ha. and 7000 Gournies ready to start a new life there. All of them were joined together by virtue of a complex network of blood and marital relations. This, together with their customs and taboos, their friendships and their disputes, a social organism delicately balanced, intimately integrated into the topography, to every wall and beam of the village. The whole society was going to be dismantled and reassembled in a new place,” recalls Fathy.

To receive such a large commission is not easy in architecture. And especially if it comes with total freedom to act. As a result of the opportunity afforded by this project, Hassan Fathy attempted to set the guidelines for defining a national programme for rural reconstruction using New Gourna as the pilot project. He pursued as the main objective an under-
standing of the individual and in particular that of the Gourou villager closely tied to his traditional values.

Fathy is well aware of the enormous distance that separates the dweller and the architect. Certainly the figure of the architect is a kind of imposition for village dwellers, and historically, the latter’s traditions in building are hardly taken into account.

Fathy makes a great effort to reduce this distance, by studying their habits, providing the different environmental factors, the streets, the houses ...

In this fetid village of congested and bad-smelling houses where the bureaucrat, the spectator, the contractor and surely most of us are not able to see more than a dunghill, Fathy discovers logical and even poignant expressions of man and his social organisation.

The character of a barracks, or a house, whatever it is with their own forms, colours, folklore, etc., has in itself architectonic character. He realises how certain forms that are specially appreciated in a community, are employed in a myriad of variations. Developing an original, splendid language that can be fitted into the character and the land.

From this slow and friendly approach to the user, ideas are arrived at with naturalness, where each formal and functional feature that will constitute the village are like housing typologies, with suburbs and street images and at last the conception of the city.

The primary unit for forming a grouping is in New Gourou the Badana. A Badana is a unit comprising a group of people bound by strong ties; it is comprised of 10 to 20 families. A patriarch is recognised by all of them and towards him and towards the entire group there is a strong sense of loyalty.

The economic situation of families can be different but all of them share a communal life. Natural forces transform the desert into a hostile place so the typology used by Fathy is closed to the external environment. For this reason this kind of
settlement in violent climates grows firm, consisting of the houses forming an almost monolithic body. All of them are open to the interior courtyard that is directly connected to the porch and to the Iwan. Houses belonging to the same Badana form a group surrounding a small square where their facades have an important sustaining mission. So we can say that the square for the Badana is similar to that of a courtyard for the private dwelling. This process permits us to sort out consecutive spaces; from the porch to the courtyard, passing through the Badana square, and finally reaching the street; so transition from interior to exterior is gradually produced, permitting a better harmony with the individual when he emerges from his private ambience to the public one.

Our architecture normally uses landscape as an enriching element in the design of interiors; desert countries achieve this interior-exterior dialogue through the sky; the sky and what it represents (serenity, spirituality, etc) reach the house through the courtyard so intensely that the piece of sky which can be viewed from it is considered as a part of the house and in the same way belonging to the inhabitants.

"This breathable ambience is in fact a fundamental architectural component; if a space is not really rich by its own merit, no dressing added later will make it more natural inside the desired tradition".

Streets in New Gourna are walkable (Gournies cannot afford to buy vehicles). All of them are set out in branch-work fashion and at the crossing are located in different ways the Badanas (basic units of the composition) so the wholeness loses its monotony and rigidity; this way of building up the city reminds us of blueprints for villages in the Middle Ages. The heart of the city is represented by social activities: the Mosque, the theatre, the gymnasium and the building dedicated to exhibiting handicrafts. However, the market is placed close to the railway station and the school near the artificial lake. All these buildings reflect a great richness and simplicity at the same time. Fathy was accustomed to emphasising what is valid and admirable in local forms, making the villager proud of his creation.

"Modernism does not necessarily mean vitality nor do changes always imply advancement".

"Tradition for villagers is the only safeguard of their culture. They are not able to distinguish between unknown styles and if they leave the way of tradition they will irresistibly crumble. To cut consciously a tradition in a society which is basically traditionalist as the rural is, represents an assault of such a culture and the architect must respect the tradition that prevails".

New Gourna, like other great projects promoted by the government, suffered some alterations during its execution. The supply of materials, which was being done through the government, was notably shortened and wages for workers underwent a dangerous delay. All of these circumstances had an adverse effect on the pace of the work and created a hostile environment among people working there. Gourna sheiks utilised this situation to undermine the project's prestige because their interests were still tied to the sale of antiquities unearthed from beneath their present dwellings. Cooperativist proposals fostered by Hassan Fathy fell through, and the roofing technique using mud bricks proved to be unacceptable. Assertions were made to the effect that the project was more costly than if steel and concrete were used. The works in New Gourna were practically paralysed in a few weeks and during the following months the process passed through the different official Departments, representing the start of a slow agony which has continued up until the present.

Meanwhile, Hassan Fathy did his best to defend the project but it was useless. Bureaucracy let the New Gourna project die; nevertheless, the problem existing with the rural housing and the message...
left by Fathy are still today absolutely valid, not just in Egypt but probably also in three quarters of the world.

Urbanism is a very complex matter and operates on a large scale; massive and cheap housing projects form a part of it. The technical and economical aspects represent a small part of the total. The real problem goes further and includes systems and persons, both professional and laymen. As Fathy said: "The satisfaction produced when solving architectural problems is similar to that enjoyment you feel climbing a mountain, but to cooperate with bureaucracy is like wading through an artificial lake; it just destroys the soul". Actually, after so many years of urbanistic abuses, we continue with vanity attempting to apply “models” of cities based on experiences and theories which in many cases are far removed from our culture and of course from that of the user.

Without a doubt, a concern for controlling and establishing parameters that would aid in defining a new order for the cities of our grandchildren certainly exists already; ordinances and norms, perhaps more than we can possibly assimilate, or hope to carry out, are totally lacking in ingenuity and naturalness; in discord of course with the creative process, and in any event far from reflecting the peculiarities and aspirations of future dwellers.

"Construction is a creative activity in which the decisive moment is the instant at which conceptualisation occurs; it is the moment at which the spirit takes shape and virtually all the characteristics of the new creation are determined. The features of a living being are forged at the time of fertilisation; those of a building are determined by a complex series of decisions made by all those involved in the project at each stage, so that the instant of conception, during which time the final form is developed and converted into a living thing which is the building, is a multiplicity of such instants where each one assumes an important role in the total creative process."  

Are we truly convinced that our ordinances and norms contemplate sentiments such as those that brought Fathy to plan New Gourna? Do they guarantee that these new cities are truly human?

Listening to Tradition
The honesty of Hassan Fathy, of his character, in harmony with his way of thinking, at each step; the honesty also of a work undertaken without making a false step and without reservations, false pride, or any of the signs that today architects like to insert in their works; a code that only they understand. Honesty in their ideas, in their procedures and commitments, honesty in the results obtained.

The architecture of Hassan Fathy that is understood on the basis of its form, acquires a true meaning that is derived from the cultural and ethnic ambience to which it lends itself. There exists an intimate union between the houses that Fathy built with the user in mind. Absence of protagonism, obsession with not going further than what is strictly necessary, hiding behind the work, concealing the signature of the author.

When we analyse a building of Fathy, it is not the architecture itself that assumes a relevant role, but rather we could say that it is the hand of the architect which has known how to maintain itself discreetly aloof, allowing the materials to act subtly. The proportions, the ‘chiaroscuro’, all of it without high notes, in such a way as to permit these factors to assume their true force.

The contribution of the architect in this case is that of affording in a sensible fashion a series of elements whose value was implicit in their natural state. The warm feeling that is produced before a wall that is not there, a brick wall, a vault...

"I knew that I was looking at living architecture", Fathy recalls, "surviving within the realm of Egyptian traditions, a way of building that naturally suggests the landscape, an integral part of the construction, as well as the palm trees found in the region. It was like a vision of architecture before the fall of mankind, before the invention of money, industry, avarice, and the pretension that separated architecture from its true roots in nature."

During those years in which current fashions made reinforced concrete a popular building tool in Egypt, Fathy opted for the traditional method of constructing walls and vaults made of adobe for his buildings, beginning in that way an attitude coherent with tradition.

"The adobe dwellings with vaulted roofs, aside from being inexpensive, are also attractive; they cannot avoid being so, since the structure dictates the forms and the material imposes the scale; each line respects the distribution of forces and the building adopts forms that prove to be self-satisfying and natural”. Fathy had confidence in this return to constructive tradition, as the only means of successfully bringing about the great plans for extensive construction projects in his country: By employing the inhabitants themselves for building their own houses, for obtaining in this way cheap labour and at the same time by providing jobs for unqualified workers that would never have been able to participate in projects calling for reinforced concrete.

Moreover, the use of traditional materials and techniques was a guarantee that the new settlements would conform to the Egyptian landscape and to the type of tribal and rural society to which they are committed.

Wood is another of the materials reclaimed. With respect to the material and the way it was worked, a series of crafts almost forgotten forever were restored and now flourish again.

"Materials are neither good nor bad; it is a question of the use to which they are put. By using them coherently, we can achieve their spiritualisation," Fathy believes.

He attempts to provide a rational basis for his work as regards his resources and the cultural context for all of the processes involved in the inhabitable building. Thus, he was concerned with taking
Master plan of Town Centre.

Cultural center in Luxor: "Man is the measure".
advantage of the resources that nature provided him with, for protecting his houses from the severe conditions of the desert. He then conceived of several systems of ventilation, based on chimneys that created drafts or air currents which were fed through wet carbon filters that served to palliate the dryness of the environment. He also reintroduced the idea of using ceramic ovens to heat rooms through adobe walls in public buildings.

The Road to School

In the life of Hassan Fathy, there exists a concrete fact which, according to his own testimony made manifest in his book, *Architecture for the Poor*, had a profound influence on him as an architect and as a person. The anecdote occurs when he was in his twenties. Fathy was then a young architect who had recently graduated from the Polytechnical School of Cairo. The students studying architecture in Egypt at that time received an academic training marked by a vague spirit of *beaux arts*. We can imagine the kind of ideas that ran through the mind of this young architect when he was called upon to build a school in Talkla, for a small agrarian community inhabited by impoverished farmers.

We do not know the plans for that school, but it would be impossible to discover in this early work the characteristic traces of subsequent undertakings. Young Fathy had lived completely devoid of any contact with agricultural communities in his country (which represented a relatively high percentage of the Egyptian population), and he had been bred on imported canons or precepts that were impossible to apply to that poor social environment. According to his own words, he later wrote, "the land for the school was outside of the village itself, and after a day or two, I deliberately avoided the village, as I could not stand the smells or the view of the narrow streets, full of mud and all sorts of fetid things, where the garbage from the kitchens was discarded together with the dirty water, fish scales, rotten vegetables and all other wastes. It was also extremely depressing for me to visit the miserable stalls with their particular odours and full of flies, where poor wares were offered for sale to poor passers-by."
The vision of that village, the way of life of those farmers that did not know anything nor wish to know anything, meant for Hassan Fathy the unexpected fact that soon he would truly open his eyes and witness the latent reality that he had always ignored. He then realised that he was not planning for others but rather for himself; he knew that the school had been conceived of for the purpose of satisfying his own stylistic tastes, rather than for housing half-naked children from the village. From then on, Hassan Fathy began to work on behalf of others and he erected structures that took into account the traditions, culture and climate in which people were immersed.

Hassan Fathy is neither a prophet nor a romanticist, his attitude is absolutely valid today. The road that he chose to follow for creating architecture is neither ancient nor modern, but simply in accordance with the times and the place in which he found himself. And his work confirms this fact.

In closing, we wish to express our appreciation to the architect, Hassan Fathy, for the successive talks that took place at his home in Cairo, prior to the writing of this article. He demonstrated a capacity for awakening in us a great interest and inquisitiveness for his ideas and his work. We also wish to thank the Mexican architect, Vicente Armendariz; the Egyptian architect, Samir Youseff; the Egyptian journalist, Mohamed Oda; and finally the engineer Geri Andreoli, for the support they have lent us, either directly or indirectly.

Works cited: