

In Search of An Egyptian Architectural Identity **Do Our Pharos Still Have the Magic**

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Abstract:

Recently the Egyptian architectural product is undergoing a severe problem of loss of identity except for a few trials that could be classified as unique. Egypt has been blessed to be the cradle for The Pharonic civilization, one of the greatest civilizations in terms of its ongoing impact on human life,. Unfortunately, we failed to capitalize on the great achievements of this heritage neither we did to benefit from its excellence. We, as architects, spent great efforts studying this civilization as history and rarely analyzed its architectural vocabulary and create a system that would enable us to stem our future from these deep solid roots.

The entire world, when asked about Egypt, will link Egypt to the pyramid. That is how strong an architectural product could be successful and strong that after 5000 years still creates and gives the place its character and identity. It clearly shows that our civilization is engraved in the back mind of the human race in the form of a pyramid.

This research will briefly classify the different architectural milestones in the Egyptian history since 4000 BC and explain why the following architectural attempts failed to form the Egyptian identity except for the Pharonic era.

The research will also illustrate and present some of the architectural trials of contemporary architects who used some of the Pharonic vocabulary in an attempt to revive this beautiful heritage. It will also shed the light on the importance of form when it comes to studying heritage. In art, when chaos rules, artists take refuge in their heritage. What a better time for architects to do the same nowadays!

After reviewing some of the contradicting points of view, the research concludes with the result that the Pharonic heritage is our only roots that Egyptian architects must nourish on in order to achieve buildings with identity. The importance of form is evident.

Will the magic of Pharos save us today or have the magic gone?

Introduction:

It is amazing how the creation of an architect can have such a great impact on a nation's history that would last for thousands of years. How did a form become the nation's symbol & source of pride in spite the fact that the location of this magnificent structure witnessed some other great civilizations Most of these civilizations played a role in shaping the Egyptian identity but the pharonic civilization was something else. What is more strange is that the pharonic civilization does not have any religious impact on our lives today, but still we "Egyptians" when we seek a reason for pride of glory or even declaring the ability of great achievements we say we are the pharos ancestors.

This might trigger an important question why the pharonic civilization did so and not the other civilization? I believe that there is a major reason for that. The pharonic civilization is a pure Egyptian civilization with roots well deep in our soil from Alexandria to the borders of Sudan. Architecture, as a byproduct of civilization, reflected the wealth and strength of the Pharonic era. On the contrary, the Islamic civilization with its greatness originated outside Egypt. By definition, because it is a civilization based on religion, it has to be global while its architecture was able to take different shapes and have different impacts on the communities that would follow the rules of that religion. That is why, we can not define a universal Islamic architecture, but there are derivatives of this architecture depending on geographical and socio-economical factors. Also, architects were free to exchange forms and shapes or even parts of the vocabulary and melt all this under the Islamic style. For example, we can say that the mosque that appears in the fig (1) is in middle Asia in those old cities like Summerkand, but in fact it is in Cairo.



Office building Fig. (2)
Mosque Fig. (1)



Modern style
Fig. (3)



Residential building
Fig. (4)

Even the apartment building in fig (2), although featuring the Islamic architectural vocabulary in a very strong & evident manner, still can not define where it could be found. It could be in any city in the Middle East. Figure (3) illustrates an office building designed with the international style that could also be in any place in the world. As for the classical European architecture with its different areas, common people can not differentiate between German or French interpretations of each era. Down town Cairo for example, was planned according to 19th century European theories of planning with main department stores as a replica of similar ones in Paris. Figure (4) illustrates a residential building in Cairo with classical European vocabulary reflecting no Egyptian identity. Why then, whenever we see these buildings we have doubts about where there are located, while when seeing a pyramid everyone on earth is sure that it must be in Egypt or copying from the Egyptian pharonic architecture. The Washington Memorial fig (5) and the Pyramid de Louvre in Paris fig (6) illustrates how clear is the Pharonic identity even when used in different remote countries.



Washington memorial Fig. (5)



Pyramid de Louvre Paris Fig. (6)

Chaos & Order

It is clear that now a day, architects are living the time of chaos in the construction industry. The absence of rules and regulations to guide our construction activities and the absence of the engineering syndicate that would lead efforts to save our heritage, direct governmental policies and protect the architect rights, as well as, the decline in public awareness and respect to its roots, all this, led to the chaos architects live today.

Usually artists, among which we can classify the architects, in those hard times, would start searching to what is solid and true around them and try to take refuge in their heritage. In other words, they are looking for order and discipline. Little attention whether publicly or governmentally was spent to study the pharonic heritage. The government role is only to save the existing structures from natural weather conditions and the environment and keep them as a magnet for tourists. So little attention to the architectural value or meaning.

Basic Vocabulary of Pharonic Architecture:

In order to design buildings reflecting the pharonic heritage and make them appreciated easily by the Egyptian community, here are some of the most significant basic vocabulary that symbolize the pharonic architecture and were stated in most of the reference books concerning the history of architecture. Figures (7),(8),(9),(10)



Scale Fig. (7)

Walls Fig. (8)

Columns Fig. (9)

Forms Fig. (10)

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| -The pyramid shape. | -Tilted planes |
| -Lotus headed columns. | -Oblisques |
| -Massive solid block walls. | -Straight lines for openings |
| -Stone (heavy weight buildings) | -Use of granite |
| -Enormous Scale | -Symmetry |

What buildings are suitable to adopt the pharonic style?

It is well known that what is left from the pharonic buildings are those buildings related to the ruling government “dictatorship of the pharaoh” & other buildings for worship. Thus temples

& palaces were the evidence left to tell us about that magnificent architecture. While, due to religious believes, the ancient Egyptians believed in life after death and thus all their efforts were directed accordingly. So little attention was given to building their earthly homes & all efforts were to build tombs among which are the Pyramids who's mystery is still living till our days. Accordingly, the best building types that could be designed using the pharonic architectural vocabulary and reflect the proper meaning are the following building types:

- Large scale governmental buildings.
- Exhibitions and art galleries.
- Office buildings.
- Selected railway stations.
- Hotels and Resorts.
- Schools.
- Hospitals.

The governmental role

The government has an important role in adopting and implementing a plan for pharonic architecture revival. Through its means and power of legislation, it can start with governmental buildings especially located in cities having pharonic monuments like Giza and other cities in Upper Egypt. Educational buildings and schools are good choices to start this plan. Schools that would reflect this magnificent architectural style can achieve a couple of goals at the same time. Firstly, children will become more aware of their heritage in a physical manner. Secondly, we will start creating an architectural identity in our communities because schools are located in all neighbor hoods. The government plan to build a 1000 school all over Egypt in the coming 5 years will give us a 1000 chance to influence the Egyptians perception. Also, governmental buildings that perform service activities to large number of people like the “ Tahrir Complex” down town Cairo can have a strong visual effect on people who flood in every day from all over Egypt to finish their business.

The government can start this plan by directing all renovation projects of existing buildings as well as new ones to acquire parts of the pharonic architecture vocabulary. In the same time increase directed research work in studying this great heritage by means of specialized architects and subsidize issuing books and periodicals that illustrate design guild- lines & analysis of this beautiful and rich architecture.

The opposite point of view:

Many including architects have a very strong argument against the revival of pharonic architecture. Their ideas rely on the following points:

- a) The pharonic architecture is a product of a great civilization that is no longer present in our days. It reflects a way of life so different than ours.
- b) A big conflict might arise with the call for revival of the Islamic oriented architecture.
- c) Some of the vocabulary is very hard & difficult to implement in the contemporary building types.
- d) Why the pharonic architecture in the first place?
- e) Would those new buildings be considered as genuine or false heritage?

All these points of views are respected but as mentioned earlier, we should look for what is ours & not what was imposed on us. We look for our roots & try to create a system that would enable us to stem our future from those deep solid roots. A nation with no past is a nation with no future. The revival of pharonic architecture is not aimed at copying or designing replica of ancient buildings but is a transitional period to gain momentum to achieve a new level of excellence. History will define this era as an era when Egyptian architects were trapped in

their ideas and decided to take refuge in their heritage. Time will tell if they have succeeded or failed.

Some trial of Egyptian architects:

The following pictures illustrate selected works by contemporary architects for different building types. These attempts have positive sides as well as negative sides. Remarks are states under the each of these illustrations

Gates:

Gates are first choice structures when applying the pharonic architectural vocabulary because of the columns that are used to mark the entrances. Most of the presented examples are successful trials but lack the consistency & order of a style. Figures (11), (12),(13) , (14) ,(16)

On the contrary, the Teba-Mall side gate way fig (15) is a poor example due to the naïve combination of pharonic architecture represented by the titled planes & granite cladding & the Islamic architecture represented by the point arches. It is known that the pharonic architecture vocabulary did not have any circular arches.



Cairo –Alex Desert Road
Toll-Station Fig. (11)



Gate to a residential
Compound pyramids Fig. (12)



Gate to a park
In mohandessen Fig. (13)



Cairo University hostel
Main Entrance Fig. (14)



Teba-Shopping Mall
Fig. (15)



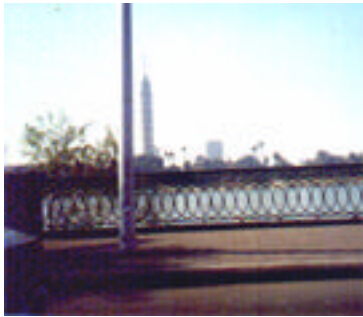
Cairo Fair main Entrance
Fig. (16)

Land Marks:

Placing land marks of pharonic heritage in squares or in gardens or even as functional building is a good way of creating the identity required. The gezira tower fig (19) will always

be a symbol of dignity to the Egyptians. It is a combination of heritage and modern achievements. The use of original statues is a big question due to environmental negative influences. Sculpture reflecting the meaning, not replica of an old statue, like Nahdit Misr Statue fig (22) is very important. The Unknown Soldier fig (20) is a brilliant example of how an abstract design can reflect a meaning. Saad Zaghlol statue fig (21) rests on a four lotus columns base. The use of pharonic vocabulary in the base add strength and power to the statue. An abstract design marking Click Square is also a successful design fig (18).

The oblique at the main Entrance of the Faculty of Engineering Cairo University fig (17) is an example of a false interpretation of the old heritage. Lacking proportion, wrong choice of material for the Pyramid on top & all engravings that means nothing are reasons for the failure of this trial.



Gezira Tower
Fig. (17)



Click Square 6 October City
Fig. (18)



Faculty of Engineering -Cairo
Fig. (19)



The Unknown Soldier Monument
Is an example of how can an
abstract design reflect the meaning
Fig. (20)



Saad Zaghlol Statue
The use of Pharonic vocabulary in
the base to add strength & power to
the statue Fig. (21)



Nahdet Misr Sculpture is an artist
proof that the future of Egypt is
based on its Pharonic roots.
Fig. (22)

Public Buildings:

As mentioned earlier, many public buildings are suitable to adopt the pharonic architecture style. The following are some examples of building types that adopted parts of that vocabulary with different interpretations.

Luxor International Hospital fig (23) and Sharm el Sheik hospital fig (24) adopted some pharonic architecture vocabulary due to their presence in touristic areas.



Luxor hospitals Fig. (23)



Sharm el Sheik hospitals Fig. (24)

The Mubarak Police academy fig (25a,b) is a contemporary example of a public educational building with a design that reflects pharonic heritage. The pharonic style is very appropriate when applied to office buildings as it reflects the stability and strength of the businesses operating in them. Fig (28), (29)

Also embassies and national agencies with international exposure can send a very strong message when applying some vocabulary of pharonic architecture. Fig (26), (27)



Mubark Police academy Fig. (25a)



Mubark Police academy Fig. (25b)



National Woman Council fig (26)
The Egyptian Embassy Berlin- Contest fig (27)
Designed by researcher



A Governmental Building Cairo Alex.
Desert Road fig (28)



Click Office Building 6 October City
fig (29)

Hotels & Bazaars :

Hotels are among the best building type adopting the pharonic design, as most of its users are tourists coming to see the real heritage and are ready mentally to appreciate such designs. These designs should be handled with extreme sensitivity to minimize the risk of comparing the design with the real heritage. Fig(30a,b,c) (31) (32).



Bazaars at Pyramid St fig (30a)



Bazaars at Pyramid St. fig (30b)



Bazaars at Pyramid St fig (30c)



Hotel Entrance fig (31)



Sheraton Somabay fig (32)

Cosmetic intervention to existing structures.

It is a big risk when trying to do cosmetic work to existing structures & the research will illustrate a successful example & another two examples that are complete failures.

The renewal of the elevated water tank in Giza fig(33) and how by a simple touch, the structure reflected another image & meanings is a complete success.



Before
fig (33a)



After
fig (33b)



fig (33c) After

On the other hand, the way the side walks under the 6th October Bridge from both sides in Cairo & Giza cities is a complete failure. Wrong proportions, poor workmanship & an ugly design .It is a shame and degrading to our heritage.



fig (34a)



fig (34b)



fig (34c)

The Constitutional Higher Court . Successes and pitfalls.

It is one of the most famous buildings built during the past 5 years with a clear and strong message. The whole building is a good example of the use of all vocabulary items that constitute the pharonic architecture. A successful design of all elevations, proper choice of finishing materials and color scheme. Fig (35)



Use of proper material (a)



Column detail & Cornish (b)



Tilled plans (c)



Composition of different items (d)



The main entrance symmetry (e)



Solid massive standard (f)

fig (35)

However, there are 3 negative points that can be pointed out: fig (36a,b, c)

- 1- The dome on top of the building which is out of context
- 2- The circular arrangement of the entrance columns which is a roman style vocabulary.
- 3- The security gates with no clear style.



1)Dome over building fig(36a)



2)Circular arrangements of columns fig(36b)



3)Security gate fig(36c)

Conclusion

According to the previous presentation we can state that the Egyptians have such a magnificent architectural heritage that after 5000 years, still contributes to their identity and is their most important source of income. We must capitalize on this beautiful treasure and focus our efforts to guide our construction industry so we can leave to our followers a respected heritage, not ruins that will cost them money to remove. If we succeed in beginning this pharonic architecture revival and take the chance while there is an Egypt mania overwhelming the western world, we will be taking our first step towards creating a great part of the Egyptian identity in the new millennium.

The pharonic architecture survived on its unique and magical forms proving how forms are very important to reflect meanings. It is clear that there are contemporary attempts but still they are individual and lacks national coordination.

Recommendations

- 1- The government has a great role in directing efforts and issuing regulations to help creating the required identity.
- 2- The government should start by its own public/constitutional buildings as a start of this important voyage in search of our identity and to create a mental image in the minds of the Egyptians.
- 3- The government is responsible in educating people and increase public awareness of their heritage and how to respect it.
- 4- Form is the physical evidence of creation hence should be carefully studied
- 5- Research work on architectural analysis, not preservation only, should be carried out either by governmental agencies or as academic work in universities & schools of architecture.
- 6- Pilot studies on organized plan & continuous & evaluation of architectural designs with pharonic vocabulary should be adopted to secure success & avoid reason of failure?
- 7- Long term planning is very important since these architecture movements take years to be implemented and have the required impacts

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