

# **ARCHITECTURE AS A SYSTEM OF APPROPRIATION: COLONIZATION IN EGYPT**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

When a foreign power takes control--as in colonization--of a land it leaves traces. The traces are political par excellence, economic, social but also urban and architectural. The visual traces are often a most powerful reminder and visual evidence. This paper traces colonial interference and the way it altered and shaped a layer of the cultural environment: urban and architectural. The British presence in Egypt and the traces left on the local architecture and the cities is examined and discussed in light of the French and British colonial attitudes and policies. The paper aims at uncovering a layer of the architecture heritage of Cairo in reference to politico-cultural issues.

## **COLONIALISM:**

Colonialism is a set of interactions between colonized and colonizer in complex and global relationships based on the imposition of political control of the powerful nations over other--usually weaker--nations. The basic purpose of it is the management of raw materials: of men, plants, minerals and animals, to the profit of a minority from a different country. Colonialism is synonymous with appropriation and exploitation. As a system it appropriates in order to exploit.

### **Phases**

Colonialism went through major phases since the 15<sup>th</sup> century: the 1<sup>st</sup> phase was oriented to trade, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of industrial and military character. The first phase spanned the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries; Spain and Portugal were the leading colonial powers. This phase was based on the exploitation of crops for trade; European merchants lived in coastal cities that were mainly trading posts. During the second phase of colonialism (from circa 1800) the European nations reverted to military interference to protect their interests; with England as the main power followed by France. The eastern part of the Arab world fell under British rule while the western part (North Africa) was under French rule. This phase of colonialism was overtly military motivated by strategic interest to control raw materials and outlets for European

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industries. Furthermore the colonials of the 19<sup>th</sup> century believed in their moral responsibility to rule “backward peoples” and civilize them.<sup>1</sup>

## APPROPRIATION:

To appropriate: -v. 1. *To set apart for a particular use.* 2. *To take or use, often without permission.*

Appropriation is a main concept in this complex relation; at its core is the belief that the rich educated noble white westerner owns the world.<sup>2</sup> Within this concept of appropriation is the principle of objectification: i.e. to render people and lands objects; for to own and appropriate necessarily follows objectification.

The past and the present of the colonized were presented in books as objects for appropriation to a Western reader who eagerly assembled the different and the distant.<sup>3</sup> The culture, its artifacts and the people were documented in details, and collected in large travelogues, catalogues and encyclopedic works.

The Universal Expositions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were another setting for such objectification where natives and their architecture were displayed for the visitors’ amusement and ‘enlightment.’ In the Expositions a reproduction of the settings of streets, parts of cities enlivened by people to perform a live show were effectively used to illustrate the colonial possessions and visually annex distant lands.

Newspapers and journals reserved sections to reports—often illustrated—from distant lands. One illustration from Cairo of the Shepherd’s Hotel catches the meeting of East and West: the exotic natives are displayed to the pleasure and disdain of the Western civilized tourists as well as the observer-reader to whom it is addressed. (Fig.1) The two worlds are well delineated: they are distinct and separated.<sup>4</sup>



Fig (1): Illustration from 1884 (Warner, *Egyptian Panorama*, p.6)

<sup>1</sup> Edouard Said analyzed the political and intellectual framework of colonial morals in *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. (The British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972.) Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*. (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, quoted in Nicholas Warner, ed., *An Egyptian Panorama*, (Cairo: Zeitouna, 1994), p. xvii.

<sup>4</sup> The caption reads: “Its steps are a limit which the clamorous donkey-boys and pedlars in the street below hardly dare to pass.” *Illustrated London News*, February 9, 1884 in Warner, p. 6.

### Urban and Architecture

During the first phase of colonialism the architecture was of a pragmatic order serving the immediate needs of the foreigners in the colonies. Their buildings used local materials, while adapting these to practices of their original lands. The process of appropriation and domination was perfected during the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the objectification of culture and people was followed by the imposition of European ways. It was during the second phase--of military intervention—that the colonial powers used urbanism and architecture.

In architecture, a two-way movement of importation and exportation characterizes the colonial period. The styles of the colonized, and of the colonizing country's schemes of composition were exchanged in that movement.<sup>5</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Egyptian style in the architecture and decorative arts was en vogue in Europe especially after Napoleon's campaign to Egypt of 1897 and the discoveries of the Tut Ankh Amun tomb. (Fig. 2) European architects used freely the heritage of Algeria and India as well, as an inspiration in this period of stylistic diversity.<sup>6</sup> The fascination with styles from distant lands coincided with the height of colonialism: the picturesque exotic styles were a fashionable taste of the European elite who proved their importance and privileged position in the appropriation of objects from various cultures. This age of colonialism witnessed a growing fascination with the collection of objects from colonies. Travelers returning from the Orient who wished to create an appropriate setting to display their Arabic art collection commissioned residences or wings designed in the "Arabic" style. (Fig. 3)



Fig (2): Paris, rue du Caire



Fig (3): Cairo: Project for The French Consulate (*L'Egypte d'un Architecte*, p. 81)

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Gubler, "Architecture and Colonialism", (*Lotus International* 26, (1980/1): 5

<sup>6</sup> Spiro Kostof, *A History of Architecture Settings and Rituals*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 572-573.

At the same time colonialism thought to impose the European way on other nations in the name of humanity and civilization. European architects practicing in the colonies employed the classical European repertoire in their buildings. (Fig. 4) Both trends, of importation and exportation in urban planning and architecture, are within the same paradigm and could be construed as tools of appropriation and domination, and as symbols of power and control. The imposition of a style of architecture marked the territorial acquisition. The distant lands were annexed by using European planning and architecture. Taking control and possession was expressed by an image. In urban planning the interventions were based on military policies. The distinct objective of the colonizers was to provide the possibility for the troops to be moved and displayed in case of need or in a blatant show of power to intimidate the natives.



Fig (4): Cairo: Shepherds' Hotel (Norbet Schiller collection)

The urban policy of the British and French colonizers consisted of demolition of the indigenous towns, cutting avenues in the original fabric and of building European cities adjacent to the old ones as seats of power for the European colonizers and the local aristocracy. Although this policy was perfected during the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of colonialism, Cairo had witnessed, as early as 1798, during Napoleon's campaign, the cutting of a large avenue to the north of the old gates of the *Bab al-Nasr* and *Bab al-Futuh* to move the French troops of to overlook the city and reinforce the rule of the French. The French repeated the same policy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Algeria, Morocco and Tunis. By juxtaposing two towns a new colonial urban form was created. Two different disparate towns had been connected without any apparent relation except by adjacency.

## The British and The French Attitude

### The French Attitude:

The French attitude towards the architecture of its colonies in North Africa is exemplified in Algiers. During the military phase of colonization the French systematically destroyed traditional houses in the city (*Kasbah*) and replaced these by western styled buildings.

“After 1830, French policy in Algeria had given a considerable role to symbolic manipulations of the visible. The stake was a double one: to mark out a territory, the object of international envy, as a French possession, and to display sufficient architectural pomp to convince the conquered of the power of the conqueror.”<sup>7</sup>

Later when large numbers of Europeans settled in Algiers the French government planned new neighborhoods of geometric grids and added new monuments. The architecture of the

<sup>7</sup> Gildez Baudez and Francois Beguin, “Arabisations”, *Lotus* 26: 43.

new buildings was in a purely western style. The French favored a neo-classical style of architecture in the academic tradition of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Occasionally they used a hybrid style that mixed Beaux-Arts principles to local features. The architecture styles recreated a landscape familiar to the expatriate Europeans and displayed the ‘magnificence’ of the colonial power to the natives they ruled. Their contribution to the built environment was ordered, clean, efficient and elegant. It emphasized the “*mission civilatrice*” of the French colonial in North Africa.

Later, during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the French in North Africa chose psychological action rather than military. The French sought an alliance with the local religious and political powers by preserving traditional cultural forms. This appeasement was expressed in the urban and architectural programs: the demolition of the old towns was stopped and a new style of Franco-Islamic architecture that combined elements from the local North African repertoire was born. In Algiers new parts of the city were designed using local architectural features, in Morocco and Tunis adjacent to the *medina* a new European city was planned and most public buildings were dressed up a *l’arabe*: Arabized or *Arabisance*.<sup>8</sup>

Once appropriation was completed, the local heritage was used safely within the western principles to add a “hygienic” sense of place. The architecture of the European town took on the Arabic decoration to express the new image of a paternal caring France respectful of traditions. This *Arabisance* was achieved through the addition of decorative elements without concern for function or fit: minarets stuck on town halls and train stations, tiles applied on facades, arches and arcades adorned blank masses to provide the needed picture. The visual helped in joining the disparate entities of European and indigenous town and in marking the phase of complete control and domination, or as Gwendolyn Wright expresses:

“ A complex semiology of architectural messages—a certain respect and knowledge of the other, but still a clear dominance by the West— was of course especially evident in public buildings.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The British Attitude:**

The British used the same strategy as the French for appropriation and domination through urbanism and architecture. The British conquered India after the English East India Company had established a stronghold of the inlands in 1757. In India, the British used town planning and architecture symbolically to express the domination of one culture by the other. In Bombay and Calcutta the urban policy consisted of juxtaposing a planned European city that contradicted with the indigenous town; the two towns were racially divided. Their architecture was purely European: British architects designed public buildings in a Gothic-Victorian style. The Indian rich classes moved their residence to the European town; they built their mansions and used external ornaments in the Western styles in an attempt to ally with the ruling power.

Delhi, the new Indian capital, was planned in a Western style while attempting to use the Indian heritage in an Anglo-Indian style. The dominant colonizers imposed taste and culture.

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<sup>8</sup> The concept of *Arabisance* was intended by the colonialist to “delight and reassure the native soul.” *Lotus* p.43 or “ to cheer and inspire Europeans.” Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, p. 113.

The upper classes admired and imitated the colonial style and passed it down to the middle class that made it its own by using mogul schemes of decoration.<sup>10</sup>

The British visual impact on India was apparent but their influence on the architecture of Egypt was through presence rather than by direct building or planning.

## EGYPT

Within this framework of universal colonialism Egypt's experience stands apart. While French and British had imposed an urbanism and architecture on their colonies, Egypt's capital and its architecture remained outside the realm of colonial influence. For since the rule of Muhammad 'Ali and his successors, the major cities—mainly Cairo and Alexandria—had been modernized by the rulers and were increasingly under European influence.

It was in this context that Egypt became a British Protectorate in 1882, though not officially a colony, it was covertly ruled and managed by the British who took control of the economy and stationed their army troops.<sup>11</sup> The cityscape and architecture had already been changed and Europeanized. The question therefore remains as to what was then the impact of the British “colonialism” on the architecture of Egypt?

### Alexandria

Before British occupation Alexandria hosted a large European community that was part of a cosmopolitan population. Alexandria as the main port and the second capital to Egypt was the major city to feel the impact of this large community of foreigners who resided in it and formed a sort of colonial community. Alexandria was a coastal city and an important commercial port on the Mediterranean since antiquity, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—unlike other formally colonized areas—it attracted foreigners (Greeks, Italians, French, Syrian and Maltese) involved in trade and other professional services. Even before 1882 the situation in Alexandria represented an effective colonization.<sup>12</sup>

The city reflected the changes in its residents in a spatial distribution characteristic of the colonial urban cities. The expansion of the city during the 1850's to the East was based on segregation. A newly established European quarter, that attracted foreigners and members of the royal family, was separated from the old town where the Egyptians resided.<sup>13</sup> The old town was characterized by narrow winding streets and traditional architecture while the European quarter was characterized by its wide rectilinear streets, its apartment buildings and villas surrounded by gardens and decorated with neo-classical motifs. (Fig.5) The quarter housed churches and foreign schools as well as banks, and shops. The large public squares were presided by the Italian and French consulates. The architecture and the urban planning were effectively used to mark the European territory.

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<sup>10</sup> Kostof, p. 695.

<sup>11</sup> This military presence as well as the control of the economy could be defined as colonialism according to the theories.

<sup>12</sup> Michael J. Reimer, *Colonial Bridgehead: Government and Society in Alexandria 1807-1882*, (Cairo: The American University Press, 1997), p.193.

<sup>13</sup> Reimer, pp. 132-135.



Fig (5): Alexandria: The Stock exchange (Norbet Schiller collection)

### **Cairo**

The impact of the colonial presence of the British (from 1882 till the Protectorate officially ended in 1936) on Alexandria and Cairo was neither apparent in planning nor architecture. Alexandria was influenced by the presence of a foreign community while Cairo was Europeanized under different circumstances. Since 1867, Khedive Ismail had juxtaposed a European city to the capital. Planned in the Haussmann style, its architecture followed an Italian-French neo-classical fashion.

The colonial period emphasized the already existing plan of two juxtaposed cities of Ismail. Until 1896 the city grew according to the plans set by Ismail.<sup>14</sup> During that period the major change in the city was the remarkable growth of the new city and the increase in demand for the new developments. Two new districts *al-Tewfiqiya* (1889-1890) and *al-Hilmiya* (1894-1903) were developed adjacent to the European city of Ismail. Only a few new streets were added to the already existing network.<sup>15</sup>

The old traditional and the new modern cities became symbolic of the national and the foreign: the Egyptian monarch ruled from *Abdin Palace* between the old and new city, the British colonial regime ruled Egypt implicitly from *Qasr al-Dubara*--the Residence of the General Consulate-- located on the Nile and the British army barracks in *Qasr al-Nil*. Foreigners from all nations had taken possession of the new city with its European styled apartment buildings, hotels, opera house, banks, bookshops, shops, restaurants, and coffee shops,... The rich classes abandoned the old city, which fell quickly into neglect and over population, for the new city.

The monarch favored French architects amongst the large number of practicing Europeans architects in Egypt; they worked for the royal family as well as for private investors. Foreigners, bankers, industrialists, acquired land and built their residences. The architecture ranged in style from the pure neo-classical to the Arabic style that combined Moorish, and Ottoman elements in neo-classical composition. The foreigners favored a style that carried some of the features of an Arabic style while catering to their functional needs in organization.

Between 1897 and 1917 under the colonial presence the segregation became more apparent: the European planned Cairo developed and became separated from the old city except for the

<sup>14</sup> Janet Abu Lughod, *Cairo, 1001 Years of the City Victorious*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 117.

<sup>15</sup> Among them were the *Khalij* street, *al-Azhar* Street, and *Faruk* street. The Tramway Company filled the *Khalij* in 1897 and constructed a thoroughfare with a tramline that ran north south. Abu Lughod p. 135

Boulevard *Muhammad Ali* that crossed it and tied the old to the new western city. The population of the city increased,<sup>16</sup> because of the increase in rural migration to Cairo and the arrival of a larger numbers of Europeans.<sup>17</sup> More quarters were Europeanized and rents rose. On the other hand, rural migrants, many of them poor with no proper housing, found refuge in the back streets and mainly in the old city that was deserted by its affluent residents to the new city. In the old city neglect was apparent: large houses were subdivided and overcrowded, and no infrastructures were provided. The explanation of this neglect lies in what Mitchell explains as the negative image needed by the colonizers to express their power.

“...the argument that the native town must remain ‘oriental’ did not mean preserving it against the colonial order. The Oriental was the creation of that order, and was needed for such order to exist. Both economically and in a larger sense, the colonial order depended upon at once creating and excluding its own opposite.”<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile the appropriation process of the new city was completed. During that period while no new houses were built for the poorer classes new neighborhoods were planned for the affluent residents (European, Levantine or natives) especially during the years of economic prosperity and large influx of Europeans.<sup>19</sup>

Although the British powers contributed little in the area of urbanism and architecture, their presence influenced the growth of the city and encouraged the expansion of the city through the entrepreneurial efforts of foreign European and Levantine companies. The British built military and functional buildings, their interest was for opening the city to inspection: they cut wide thoroughfares, lit and patrolled streets; but the city was modeled by European practicing architects and by a large community of European and Levantine residents.<sup>20</sup> The foreigners controlled the economy from their rich neighborhoods where the native elite was allowed. The Egyptian elite’s lifestyles and residences were in the style of the Europeans.<sup>21</sup> Often houses of the Egyptians were planned according to Western norms and decorated in an Arabic style.<sup>22</sup>

At the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century a Belgium entrepreneur planned *Heliopolis* in a “garden-city” type.<sup>23</sup> The private enterprise attempted to build a modern European town that carried some of the local architecture character. The “*Heliopolis* oasis” catered mainly to European and Levantine communities. Its original plan made room for a quarter where the “Arab” service workers would settle around a mosque. It was the only planned neighborhood of the times to provide lower income housing for the native lower classes. Its architecture used liberally from the local and regional repertoire; a clear application of the concept of “respect” of local tradition while appropriating and dominating.

During the early twentieth century Cairo witnessed a growth of new neighborhoods. Map (1) Neighborhood after neighborhood emphasized the control of the foreign community and their total domination of the city in *Garden City*, *Zamalek*, and *Maadi*. This time around

<sup>16</sup> Abu Lughod, p. 120.

<sup>17</sup> Abu Lughod, p. 115 122, 125.

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell, p.165.

<sup>19</sup> Abu-Lughod, p. 142.

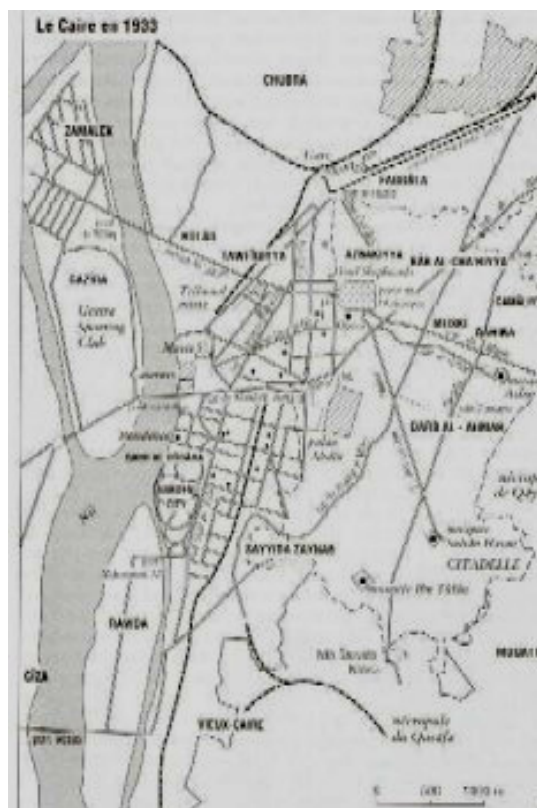
<sup>20</sup> Andre Raymond, *Le Caire*, (Paris: Fayard, 1993), pp. 318-321.

<sup>21</sup> Whether they resisted and fought against colonialism and foreign dependence or accepted and sought to be part of. (Ex: *Beit al-Uma*, Saad Zaghloul residence).

<sup>22</sup> This was especially apparent during the period of struggle against occupation (1870-1930) when the spirit of patriotism and independence was at its highest.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Ilbert, *Heliopolis, genese d'une ville, le Caire, 1905/1922*, (Marseille: CNRS, 1981).

entrepreneurs led the development of *Garden City* and *Zamalek*. Between 1904 and 1906 a private company of Levantine major shareholders commissioned Jose Lamba to plan *Garden City* in the British style (of Ebenezer Howard). The area once occupied by a palace of the royal family (*Qasr al-'Ali*) was attractive to speculations because of its proximity to the city and its adjacency to the Residence of the British Consul General (since 1890). It was a luxurious neighborhood of large residences surrounded by gardens in circular streets. It attracted high-ranking foreigners and the Egyptian elite who, beginning at the turn of the century, constructed elaborate large villas surrounded by gardens. Baehler Society started *Zamalek* between 1905-1907 as a development of checkered villas in the north part of the island around the *Jazira* Palace built by Ismail for the opening ceremony of the Suez Canal. The British who were the least of the foreign communities (French, Greek and Italians) to have ties with the native Egyptian population lived there and played polo in *Gezira* club on the island. They also preferred living in *Maadi*: a suburb to the south with villas dispersed amidst large gardens. The architecture of these neighborhoods was modeled in the Western style. The politics and economy were controlled from the European neighborhoods while Cairo had been physically appropriated.



Map 1: Cairo 1933 (Raymond, *Le Caire*, p. 314).

## CONCLUSION

The foreign Europeans had appropriated both the capital Cairo and the second capital Alexandria not to mention the cities along the Suez Canal that were totally controlled by a French-British company. The appropriation was achieved through the visual signs of architecture and urban planning by imposing a European style of architecture with the approval of Egyptian rulers who eagerly adopted this as a sign of modernism and passed it to the Egyptian upper class and subsequently to all classes. The actual control and power of the

foreigners had reached unsurpassed heights and the city urbanscape reflected this submission to Europe and its representative communities residing in Egypt. Europeans achieved a symbolic domination of Egypt through appropriation of the city and its architecture. The architecture styles mapped a territory and visually delineated the territory of a foreign community and a group whose interest intersected with those of the foreign powers to whom they submitted. The foreign presence in Egypt, the British amongst many, left traces on the architecture and the cities. The visual traces are often a most powerful reminder and visual evidence of colonial interference that altered and shaped a layer of the cultural and physical environment: urban and architectural.

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