

## MEDITERRANEAN VISUAL MESSAGES: THE CONUNDRUM OF IDENTITY, ISMS, AND MEANING IN CONTEMPORARY EGYPTIAN ARCHITECTURE

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### Abstract

Egypt like many of the Mediterranean countries is an amalgam of influences. Its rich history and unique geographical position afforded many opportunities for the emergence of architectural trends and movements. This article presents a new positional interpretation of contemporary Egyptian architecture. It is culled from a spectrum of issues I have presented in several events and published in local and international conferences and trade magazines. However, it calls for a fresh look at the issue of meaning in architecture by critically analyzing the current status of architecture in Egypt through a reading of trends that emerged over the last decade. The article discusses the concepts of Mediterraneanism and Middle Easternism in association with the situation of architecture and urbanism in Egypt. A number of ISMS including postmodernism, historical revivalism, critical regionalism and confusing symbolism are identified and reviewed and representative examples are critically analyzed. The article concludes by outlining an approach for a deeper insight toward the understanding of meaning in Egyptian architecture.

### Keywords

Identity, ISMS, meaning, Mediterraneanism, Middle Easternism, contemporary architecture, Egypt.

### The Two Way Mirror!

Societies tend to re-evaluate the meaning and desirability of built environments rapidly. The search for an architectural identity, the rise and fall of ISMS (movements and tendencies), and the continuous debate on symbolism and character issues in architecture are derived from this fact. That search seems to be a preoccupation with countries that have cultural richness and multi-layers of history. Architects and designers in those countries find themselves dealing with a paradox needing to project a certain image of themselves through their built environment. In the Mediterranean region, issues that pertain to identity, character, and architectural trends of the built environment have been in debate for several decades, more so because of this region's cultural uniqueness and plurality. However, it is this cultural uniqueness that has made it a tough quest and has - in many cases—culminated into sacred symbolism that is painful

to behold or comprehend. Some scholars pose the question of the necessity to refer to cultural or religious symbolism in architecture to reflect a specific identity. Others argue for the fact that Mediterranean architecture should embody the collective aspirations of societies in this region. There are many who have questioned the need to debate architectural identity at all, claiming that it merely displays a lack of "self-confidence" as a region or as a group of nations. Reviewing the recent practices and searching the recent debates reveals that we still seem to be at odds with the issue of identity. Also, the review corroborates the absence of serious discussions and research on meaning in architecture. On the other hand, images and image making processes do not often address the issue of meaning in relation to the public. This mandates looking at the built environment as a two-way mirror. One way can be seen in the sense that it conveys and transmits non-verbal messages that reflect inner life, activities, and social conceptions of those who live and use the environment. The other way is seen in terms of how it is actually perceived and comprehended by a certain society at a certain time; simply how it evokes certain images for that society.

### **Egypt Between Mediterraneanism and Middle Easternism**

The Mediterranean and a consciousness of it existed long before the 19<sup>th</sup> century; no one would deny that there is such a thing as a Mediterranean cultural unity woven through centuries of trade and cultural exchange (Fuller, 1990). However, in the world of cultural politics it would appear that "Mediterraneanism" took a back seat in recent debates where other

competing forces such as European Union, Arab League, MENA, and Middle Easternism have emerged.

In the context of European debates on the Mediterranean, two attitudes can be identified: the first looks at the Mediterranean as a bridge in terms of history and culture while the second focuses on it as a line of division or barrier. The first refuses Huntington's thesis of the "Clash of Civilizations" (Huntington, 1998), while the second reflects the old North-South conflict as expressed in a growing fortress mentality that has only one interest; closing the frontiers against the culture of the south (North Africa) for merely political purposes. In this context one can find that several socio-political arguments have voiced the opinion that an attempt to rebuild Euro-Arab partnerships is critically needed (Omaya Abelatif, 1996; Sid Ahmed, 2000).

Mediterraneanism and Middle Easternism have been described as "partnership" and "conflectual" models. However, they have several features in common. Both include polar partners and in the context of globalization none of the partners can ignore others where the main characteristic is the downfall of barriers between regions and societies. However, some voices are now arguing that globalization paradigm is paused since local problems--exemplified by economic hardship and poverty, and political instability-- were much more stronger in influence than the idea of a global world and thus its potential was never realized. Cultural politics in recent years have had tremendous impacts on economy, development, architecture, and urbanism. Whether Mediterraneanism or Middle Easternism several countries in the region are

witnessing common features and discourses on architectural practice and academic scholarship.

The cultural, political, and economic movements in the Mediterranean have heavily influenced Egypt. Over three decades of fluctuating cultural politics in the region the Egyptian economy has passed through three distinct, but related, phases. These were the open door policy, economic reform, and privatization. The open door policy took place during the period between 1974 and 1981. It placed emphasis on encouraging the private sector, at both regional and international levels; to develop and employ new investment plans. Laws pertaining to taxes and trade have been tailored to facilitate foreign investments and international trade. The economic reform was the second phase that occupied the whole decade of the Eighties. The main objective of this phase was to heavily involve the private sector and to encourage international investment in several development realms. Therefore, the government has designated 50% of its total investments to facilitate the efforts carried out by these segments. Laws were tailored to encourage local investment in desert development, land reclamation, industrial development, housing and urban development, and tourism. The preceding two phases culminated into the privatization era, which started in 1991, emphasizing the effective interaction with market dynamics. The repercussions of these phases on the urbanization process are evident, especially when looking at the private sector investment in intensive housing and industrial development around greater Cairo (Salama, 1999).

The government has failed to fulfill a number of roles pertaining to public service delivery and guiding the privatization process and this resulted in the monopoly of the private sector to deliver these services, succumbing its operation to market speculation. The active and aggressive participation of the private sector in housing and service delivery led to a virtual inflation and an overrated and overestimated real estate development. Evidently, the private sector targets strategic locations inside the urban perimeter of central cities for developing large-scale luxury commercial and office buildings. It also directs its housing projects of the new cities to the affluent population and the upper middle class avoiding the larger segment of society.

Although Mediterraneanism and Middle Easternism are constructs that serve political ends they are of heuristic value. They bring into focus questions about identity and the sharing of deeper meanings at cultural and human existence levels. The unique political, cultural, and geographical position of Egypt in the Mediterranean and the Middle East created a rich soil for architectural and urban development experimentation where a number of ISMS have emerged toward originating identity and in searching for meaning.

### **Egyptian Post Modernism and the Emergence of Historical Revivalism**

Internationally, the post-modern movement was a direct challenge to many of the premises upon which modern architecture was predicated. It acknowledged the role of symbolism in architecture and regarded modernism as lacking the premises to properly

respond to the emotional and cultural needs of people while simultaneously expressing economic, scientific, and technological givens of the time (Mitchell, 1993). Post modernists acknowledged the taste codes of the public as a source of design, in the belief that such a practice will help their work communicate with the public.

On criticizing the attitudes of post modernists, Salingaros argues and rightly so, that *"The star system of design makes a building the achievement of a single individual based on his/her personal preference or whim. The public might still seem to admire such a building, but only because some expert declares it to be a great work of architecture. This manufactured admiration does not arise internally. Personal whims and stylized expressions serve only to distance the user from the architecture, because they negate the greater spectrum of neurological connections"* (Salingaros, 2004) While this understanding is unquestionable, one should note that whether academics, theorists, and responsive practitioners agree or do not agree with current practices, such attitudes are still phenomenal and are a result of current economic, socio-political visions. On that basis they need to be investigated.

In Egypt, the postmodern movement is formed within the framework of international post-modernism. It does not offer a critical vision of previous local architectural thoughts (modernism). It is a simple transposition from following international modernism to following international post-modernism (Salama, 1999). The major weakness lies in the fact that its disposition does not allow it to go far enough in its acknowledgment and understanding of its

context. It does not address the shortcomings implicit in modernist architectural practices, but rather, it tacitly accepts them.

Historical revivalism is not new as an architectural trend; it existed since the European renaissance. However, it has re-emerged everywhere in the Mediterranean including Egypt as one of the important ISMS underlying post modernism, which have influenced the architectural scene. Several Egyptian architects envisaged the selection of many historic features specifically plowing from the Egyptian history that has a rich mix of three main cultures, the Pharonic, the Coptic, and the Islamic. They believed that simulating the history in contemporary buildings would help establish a sense of belonging and a strong emotional tie between society and the built environment (Salama, 2002-a).

Within the Egyptian context, one can see two ISMS that represent the revivalism trend; the first is a scholarly copying from the past which can be labeled as "cloning" or "copying-pasting" or attempts at re-interpretation. However, in the process of re-interpretation of images many architects produce images that are grotesque and clownish! In this respect, one can argue that also eclecticism, the license to select, borrow, and copy from the past became integral components of architectural practice and education. Concomitantly, to copy from the past became, unfortunately, logically acceptable. Examples of historical revivalism are evident in the works of El Gohary, Abo Seif, and others. In this respect, one can argue that also eclecticism, the license to select, borrow, and copy from the past was revived. Concomitantly, to copy from the past became,

unfortunately, logically acceptable. Examples of historical revivalism are evident in the works of El Gohary, Abo Seif, and others.

In the headquarters of Oriental Weavers, Farouk Al Gohary uses hierarchical arches and designs the building with an inner courtyard. Openings are covered with stucco screens (Figure 1). It is believed that this has been to simulate the past with a contemporary image, while building corners simulate the squinches or the muqarnas. Also, apartment buildings that have been built in the nineties deserve special attention, where features of Islamic architecture are borrowed to localize the public face of architecture. An example of this trend can be found in the works of Ashraf Salah Abo Seif who avoids the use of any modern visual features and heavily uses shallow arches and wooden pergolas and harmonizes the overall building shell in an attempt to simulate and adapt the Islamic heritage (Figure 2).

Some other architects went to the extreme

and allowed themselves to copy and paste from the past. In Khan Al Azizia project, the developer and the architect wanted to create, in the desert, an image similar to that of old Cairo (Salama, 1999). The architect copied some features of old Cairo such as the mashrabiya and the narrow openings. An attempt was made to add and create a hybrid in some other features. However, the overall appearance is not convincing (Figure 3).



Figure 1: Oriental Weavers Headquarters, Heliopolis, Cairo. *Example of Islamic Revivalism by Farouk Al Gohary*



Figure 2: Apartment Building, Al Mokattam District, Cairo. *Example of Islamic Revivalism by Ashraf Salah Abo Seif.*



Figure 3: Khan Al Azizia, Cairo-Alexandria Desert Road. *Example of Cloning Islamic Architecture!*

## Facadism... Surface Treatment Architecture

Another trend that can be identified based on current practices is "Surface Treatment" which is basically based on avoiding the use of any reference whether historic or contemporary, local or western. This trend can be named basic design exercises in building facades. In this respect, one can argue that this attitude is based only on the creative impulses and intrinsic feelings of the architect without giving any attention to the extrinsic influences exemplified by historic, cultural, and environmental concerns. This is due to the belief among clients and architects that buildings with distinctive visual appearance can attract public attention (Figures 4 & 5).



Figure 4: The Headquarters of the Ministry of Finance and Tax Department. *Example of Surface Treatment Architecture "A Basic Design Exercise on Building Form and Facades," By Farouk Al Gohary. Photo: Arab Contractors*



Figure 5: Integrated Care Society, Heliopolis, Cairo. *Example of Surface Treatment Architecture "A Basic Design Exercise on Building Form and Facades," By Magd Masara.*

## Confusing Symbolism: The Conundrum of Identity and Meaning in Tourism Architecture

Buildings tell us about themselves almost as if they are speaking. They tell us about what is happening and what ought to happen in them. They can symbolically represent an attitude about what is taking place inside. Building entrances are no exception; they have certain qualities that can evoke a strong image in any observer; they can be inviting or repelling. We often feel emotionally triggered by an entrance image. Our first impression is to either like it or dislike it, but if we look more carefully for the reasons for our preferences we may find associations between our present feelings and past experiences (Sanoff, 1991; Salama, 1996 & 1998). Entrances can have different meanings that depend on our ways of looking at objects. The meaning of an entrance goes beyond the fact that every opening in the

ground floor level that goes down to the floor is immediately understood as an entrance. In some cases we can easily identify who uses the building and what happens inside it by looking at its entrance. This always occurs when some physical aspects of the entrance fit the idea we have about certain people who inhabit the building and what they do there (Sanoff, 1991, Salama 2001-b).

During the last fifteen years there has been a surge in the construction of tourist facilities along the Northern Coast, the Red Sea, and Sinai peninsula. These facilities are shaping the skyline and waterfront of these areas, and examining the characteristics of their entrances is thus paramount. When looking at the entrances and gates of tourist facilities of Hurgada one can explore some answers to these questions: Should the entrance of a tourist facility convey the message that it is a special place for tourists? Should it be welcoming for both tourists and locals? Should its size and scale reflect the number of the occupants? Should it reflect our heritage, the tourists' heritage, or current technological advancements? These and other related questions form the basis for understanding the meaning of entrances of tourist villages. Eighteen entrances (Figure 6) have been photographed and examined in an attempt to investigate some aspects that pertain to visual pleasure and meaning (Salama 2001-b).

Entrances have the capacity to unleash feelings, trigger emotional reactions, feed the memory, and stimulate the imagination of the public. Thus, the image of the entrance allows the public and the visitors to anticipate the interior world. The character of the entrances in

the facilities examined reflects the overall tone/character of the project. However, on the one hand, one can find some confusing images where the image of the entrance or the gate differ from that of other masses of the project as in the case of Marlin Inn and Alaadin Beach Resort, an aspect that produces ambiguity and is usually misleading to the public. On the other hand, one notices in the Intercontinental Hotel that a better treatment is made, where the design of the outside gate matches the entrance of the main building that is in harmony with the rest of the project, as well as the interior environment. While the aesthetic qualities of entrances are to be respected, for a complete appreciation one must go beyond the visual appearance and examine meaning and content. The inherent meaning of entrances can stand for the representation of place and/or the representation of the people occupying it. However, entrances of tourist villages have more than that to offer. They have physical variables that carry symbolic meanings that can impart information and enhance legibility in a sense that is not confusing, easy to read, and allows visitors to know their whereabouts.

The conundrum of identity and meaning is apparent in the entrances examined. It is the cultural uniqueness that has made it a tough quest and in fact culminated into sacred symbolism that is painful to behold or comprehend. In the entrances examined one can find plurality of trends in their designs within the efforts of their designers to metaphorically reflect certain images or symbols. On the one hand, some of them simulate the Egyptian culture by reinterpreting the elements of heritage architecture, Pharonic, Arabic, and Islamic, as in the case of Sultan Beach, Hilton

Hotel and Grand Hotel, in order to attract tourists. On other hand, others simulate classical architecture or introduce images that pertain to the surrounding natural environment like Samaka Beach Resort. One can argue here that the designers of these entrances try to use metaphors, identifying relationships between the present and the past, or between the natural and the man-made worlds. These relationships are abstract in nature rather than literal. However, this does not mean that all of them have been successful in addressing the issue of meaning, but at least they are offering attempts toward introducing specific visual content for the purpose of tourism.

An important question can be posed here: Does Identity Give Meaning?. To answer one must go to the deep definition of identity, it is the collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a building, or a portion of a building is definitively recognizable (Salama 2002-b). When tracing other attributes that incorporate meaning into visual pleasure one can find that three aspects are achieved, they are according to Abel-Salam (2001): permanence, distinction, and recognition, contributing to the identity of the entrance. The aspect of permanence is observed in Mashrabiya Hotel, Hilton, Sultan Beach, Hor Plalace, and Intercontinental, where some symbolic physical elements are used such as the mashrabiya, the dome, and the sloped walls in an attempt to link the present to the past. This is exemplified by interpreting these elements in a contemporary image. Aspects of distinction and recognition are manifested in some entrances by the use of rough and hard surfaces as in the case of Giftun Hotel and Yasmine Village, or by the use of the Arch in different forms, though sometimes

confusing. Although the use of white color is preferred to many, one can find it repelling in this sunny environment of Hurgada, since it produces glare with the rest of the project as in the case of Hotel Sofitel, Grand Hotel, and Beach Al Batros.

While these preliminary observations are important, one should assert that a systematic investigation and a comparative research are needed to investigate how different entrances can provide visual pleasure and meaning to different age groups of tourists, different tourist groups from different cultures, and equally important their meaning to the public and the locals.

By and large, one can recommend in this context that designers should strive to investigate the meaning of the visual content they introduce. Meaning in this respect can be interpreted with regard to perceptual, cognitive, and responsive meanings that pertain to the public and the users. Designers need to expand their skills beyond manipulating forms and to develop a deeper understanding of architectural symbolism that is regarded as a visual (non-verbal) mechanism they can use to communicate environmental messages to the tourists and the public about their buildings. Only when they do so, buildings will provide valuable visual pleasure, and will encompass significant meaning and relevant visual content.

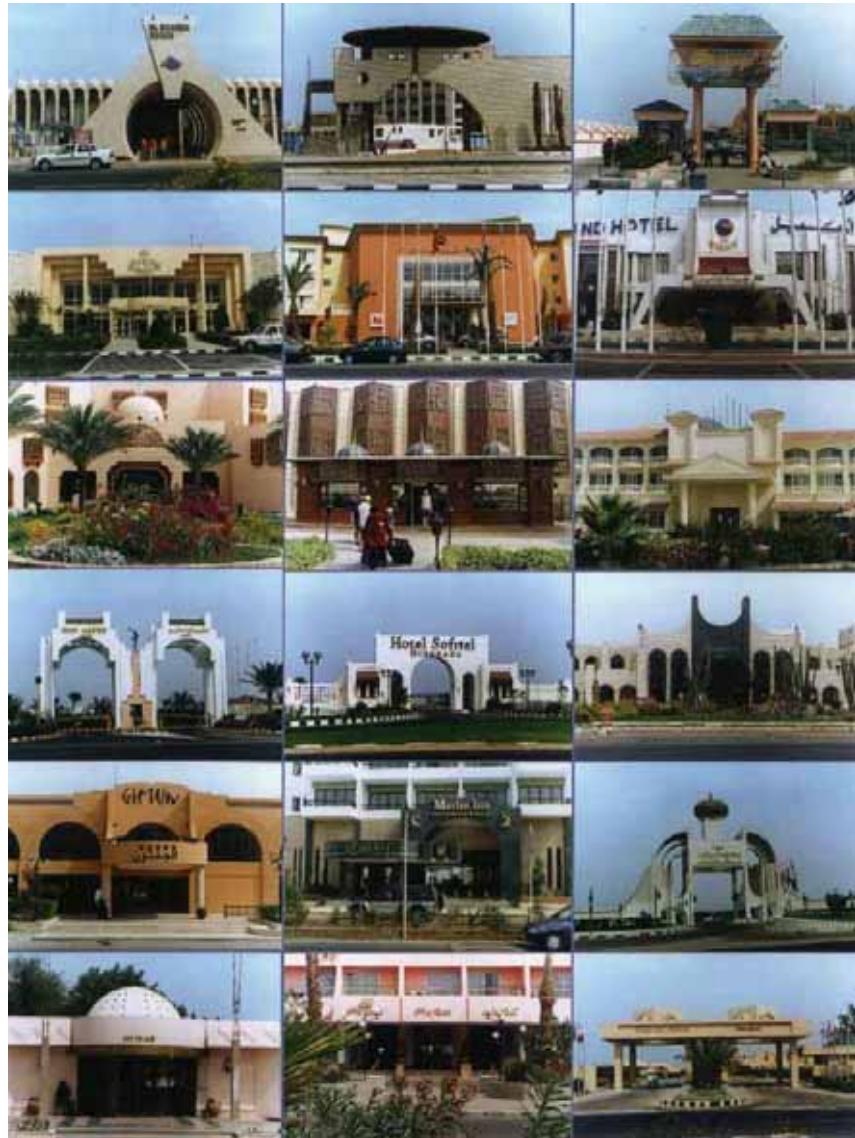


Figure 6: Example of "Confusing Symbolism and the Chaotic Search for Identity. 18 Entrances in Hurgada representing different confusing attempts to use metaphors or refer to "SOMETHING".

## Content Inflecting Context and the Emergence of Gated Communities

*"Before I build a wall I would ask to know what was I walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offense." Robert Frost.*

The phenomenon of gated communities emerged in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Britain, and later in the twenties and thirties in New England signaling the tension between the individual and society (Richardson et al. 1995) and now they are shaping most of American suburbia. It is striking to see their presence in Egypt and around Cairo. One would want to ask if they have emerged in response to a true immediate need or as a result of aggregated problems, or whether they have emerged as only one of the new ISMS.

It would appear that the failure of the new developments to attract a larger number of populations to move from Cairo and

settle in cities like 10<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan and 6<sup>th</sup> of October led to the dissatisfaction of affluent and upper middle class families. The private sector involvement in land development and speculation and the people's search for a decent life-style led concomitantly to the emergence of gated communities that can be defined as enclaves of residential units--for housing and tourism purposes-- surrounded by walls, often with security guards. Gated communities are becoming popular along Cairo-Alexandria and Cairo-Ismailia desert highways, and intensive development of gated communities is currently undertaken in "New Cairo" along the belt road, northwestern coast, and Hurghada. Many families are now choosing to reside in gated communities while others purchased residential units as a second home for weekly or monthly recreation (Figures 7, 8, and 9).

In essence—if seen as a reaction to need, gated communities are delivering what they



Figure 7: A Typical Example of a Clubhouse within a Gated Community on the Northern and Eastern Suburbs of Cairo.



Figure 8: A Typical Example of an Entrance of a Gated Community on the Northern and Eastern Suburbs of Cairo,

have promised by providing an effective defense against daily intrusions and offering opportunities for a better lifestyle. However, it can be argued that the benefits of gated communities are achieved at the expense of social issues. According to Lang and Danielsen (1997), a sense of community within gated communities comes at the expense of the identity of the larger community outside. It is anticipated that they will have strong impacts on the way in which Egyptian cities are shaped and developed.

In the thirties, the poet Frost wrote *"Before I build a wall I would ask to know what was I walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offense."* Walls, fences and gates are meant to give offense in a way or another. A Number of studies have criticized gated communities as a paradigm for architectural and urban development (Garreau, 1991; Blakely and Snyder, 1997; Lang and Danielsen, 1997; Stark, 1998) voicing the opinion that

tensions and paradoxes are the result. Blakely and Snyder (1997) argue, *"Gates and fences around residential neighborhoods represent more than simple physical barriers. Gated communities manifest a number of tensions: between exclusionary aspirations rooted in fear and protection of privilege and the values of civic responsibility; between the trend toward privatization of public services and the ideals of the public good and general welfare... Blakely and Snyder (1997)."* Other paradoxes can be envisaged such as integration within the gated communities and segregation from the larger community and that engagement at the gated community level reduces the need for civic engagement outside. It remains to be seen what impact gated communities in Egypt would have on the structure of Egyptian society and on the structure and content of the cities when more and more families and groups of individuals collectively wall themselves off from society in private developments.



Figure 9: A Typical Example of an Entrance of a Gated Community on the Northern and Eastern Suburbs of Cairo, *Manifesting the Tension between Exclusionary Aspirations Rooted in Fear and Protection of Privilege and the Values of Civic Responsibility.*

### Context Inflecting Content: ISMS of Hope

Despite the presence of several negative attitudes on creating building images, one can argue that there are some signs of hope. While such signs are not matured yet, one can argue that they can form ISMS of hope if they are adopted by local architects.

### Critical Regionalism

Critical regionalism was coined by Kenneth Frampton in 1983 and heavily discussed by Tzonis & Lefaivre (1995, 2001, 2003). Broadly defined, critical regionalism is an attempt to synthesize the rooted aspects of a region, including physical and cultural characteristics, with appropriate contemporary technology. It is the search for a contextual architecture; a content that is meaningful within its context and at the same time participates in the more universal aspects of a contemporary society. Critical Regionalism is another position that attempts to read the history of Egypt and extract its essence while adapting it to suit the spirit of the times. It can be regarded as a way to manifest cultural, economic and political independence.

When the formal vocabulary is closely related with indigenous space concept and space characteristics, one can find supreme examples that give people an opportunity to reconstruct missing links in their traditional culture and to enhance their learning process of it. In the Nile Art Gallery, Halim Ibrahim considers heritage in a building that serves a modern function. His concern was to link the current art movement in Egypt with an Islamic and Arabic cultural heritage. The project is a thoughtful attempt towards the development of a contemporary

Cairene cultural identity. Gamal Bakry's work is based on profound interpretations of history and culture. In his design for the commercial and tourist centre near the Pyramids, he reflected on the cultural richness of Egypt, with a yellowish facade that references the desert environment nearby. Hierarchical masses are used to simulate the idea of a pyramid. Openings are designed with motifs that reflect Egyptian culture and a conscious attempt is made to link the building with the pyramid platform, using it as a panoramic view (Salama, 2002-a) (Figures 10 A & B).



A.



B.

Figure 10: A. Nile Art Gallery, Opera Grounds, Cairo, Figure 10: B. Kenouz Commercial and Tourist Center, Giza  
*The Two Projects Involve Re-Interpretation of Local Heritage while Adapting to the Physical Context, Photo: Courtesy of Gamal Bakry.*

### Culturally and Environmentally Responsive Architecture

Movements toward a more culturally and environmentally responsive architecture are now taking place. Public participation, adaptive reuse and urban intervention in historic Cairo are relatively new approaches to architectural practice. The *Al Darb Al Asfar* alley project exemplifies a real experiment in limited restoration coupled with wider conservation (Figures 11 A & B).

Like other areas of heritage and cultural value, the area around the Al Suhaymi house in Old Cairo was neglected. Documentation and preservation processes started in 1994, funded by a grant from the Arab Association for Social Development. Three distinguished houses in the alley have been refurbished: the *Al Suhaymi* house (1648), the *Mostafa Gaafar* house (1713) and the *Al Khorazati* house, a living example of 19<sup>th</sup>-century residential architecture. As restoration proceeded in the three houses, the



A.  
Figure 11-A: The Back Yard of Al Suhaymi House After Restoration.



B.  
Figure 11-B: The Entrance of Al Darb Al Asfar After Restoration.

surroundings were also improved. Community participation was conceived as a collaborative design process; thereby increasing the sense of belonging and community appreciation of the heritage buildings they live with and in (Salama, 2001-a). *Al Azhar Park* is another project --completed and officially inaugurated in 2005-- that illustrates the practice of culturally responsive architecture. It was envisioned by H.H. the Aga Khan in the 1980s as part of a larger programme for the development and upgrading of the *Al Darb Al Ahmar* area of Old Cairo. Under the direction and management of the AKTC (Aga Khan Trust for Culture), Sites International was selected as a local consultancy to develop the final designs of the park. This project is another thoughtful attempt towards improving the quality of the built environment and retrieving some of what

Cairo has lost over the years (Salama, 2002-a) (Figures 12 A & B).



A.  
Figure 12: Upgraded Houses around Al Azhar Park Project.  
Photo: Ragaei S. Abdelfattah.



B.  
Figure 12: Al Azhar Park; A new Lung for Cairo's Urban Core

## A Responsive Argument: Towards a Deeper Understanding of Meaning in Mediterranean Architecture

Contemporary Egypt does not appear to have produced a solid architectural trend or planning direction, but rather a collection of planning and architectural positions. While few correspond to the history and economy of Egypt many defy the culture of the region. Many Egyptian architects have immersed themselves in exploring a number of trends in search of visual images that distinguish their work and that simulate the culture and history of the country in search for a contemporary identity. However, many fell into the trap of dealing with architecture in visual, formal, and purely functional terms and only in those terms. The search for visual vocabulary is a valid quest that should not be envisaged by over simplifying the meanings that this vocabulary conveys to the public. The lack of serious studies on meaning in architecture and the overall development process together with the absence of professional discourse, evaluation, criticism and assessment studies created sufficient opportunities for experimentation and concomitantly led to the continuous emergence of erratic trends and ISMS at the expense of the morphology of most cities. In response, a theoretical approach is proposed toward a deeper understanding of meaning in architecture. That approach concerns itself with two philosophical perspectives for understanding the built environment: positivism and anti-positivism.

Derived from positivism and anti positivism there are two positions: ontology and epistemology, The AHD (1994) defines ontology as the branch

of metaphysics concerned with the nature of being. It is the nature of the reality of the phenomenon that examines the relationship between the mind and matter. Epistemology is defined as the branch of philosophy that investigates the nature of knowledge, its foundation, extent and validity. It examines the way in which knowledge about a phenomenon can be acquired and conveyed. Relating to ontology, positivism adopts the position of realism involving the conception that objects of sense perception exist independently of the observer's mind and this means that reality is believed to be objective and available for observation by everyone. Relating to epistemology positivism considers knowledge as independent of the observer and objectively verifiable.

Alternatively, anti-positivism involves the conception that universal laws do not exist independently of the human mind and this means that reality is perceived by people as individuals and in groups. It adopts the view that individuals acquire different types of knowledge. In this respect, one can assert the individuals' and group differences are regarded as valid and important mechanisms and thus socio-cultural context is envisioned as critical and unavoidable.

In positivism, a building is seen by architects as an objective reality with components and parts that everyone can observe, perceive, and agree upon. In turn, emphasis is placed on the common properties of architecture and its universal principles leading to the suppression of multiple viewpoints, thoughts, and voices. In anti positivism, a building is seen by architects as having multiple realities. In turn, emphasis is

placed upon values, preferences, and cultural aspirations of people as individuals and in groups leading to the production of culturally and socially responsive non-verbal messages.

In light of the preceding philosophical perspectives and positions, it is necessary to examine a number of crucial issues that posed themselves on the map of current discourses but are always avoided or forgotten when they come into practice. The issues are not discussed in a traditional sense that views them individually but rather are centred on identity discourse that establishes links between the way in which visual and environmental messages are perceived and acquired by the public.

In philosophical terms identity appears to have three underlying definitions. These are: A) the permanence over time of a subject unaffected by environmental changes below a certain threshold level, B) the notion of unity, which establishes the limits of a subject and enables us to distinguish it from the others, and C) a relation between two elements, which enables us to recognize them as identical. It is critical to link designing built environments to identity in philosophical terms. Architecture is meant to be a "man-made spatial entity" in a "structuralist" sense. According to Jean Piaget, there are three main points of relevance that can be introduced here, these are: "Wholeness," "Self Transformation," and "Self Regulation." A human being, as a structural entity, has the ability to modify his/her physical environment "accommodation, in Piaget's terms," as well as his well being "assimilation" in order to be able to adapt "balancing accommodation and assimilation." With these concepts in mind architectural design can be regarded as an

act of preference that induces the public and building users in one way or another to reach a condition of adaptation.

If a certain environment possesses a unique character, then we may safely say it has an identity. An environment may be unique due to the use of certain unique forms that are to be found in this environment and nowhere else, or it may be unique due to certain activity or a certain sequence of human activities that were performed in this environment and nowhere else. Hence, it can be argued that there are two types of identity: visual identity, and activity-based identity. However both should—at least-- be conceptually linked.

Identity is governed by the visual field and its visual cues. Perceiving and interpreting the visual environment is a complex process involving the interaction of human physiology, development, experience, and cultural sets and values with outside stimuli. In making sense of the visual world people rely on a number of physical characteristics, which define objects and their relationships in three-dimensional settings. In 1961, William Ittelson, a leading environmental psychologist identified three basic components of the perceptual process. These are 1) definition of "Thereness" and "Thatness" as impingement by the physical object, 2) excitation of the physiological sensors, and 3) assumption in the psychological realm. According to this view, I would argue that in simple discrimination of elements in the visual field we rely on the interaction of physical qualities or cues such as size, shape, color, brightness, position in the fields...etc. At a more mature complex psychological level we interpret selected characteristics of

the perceived built environment in terms of associations and values that communicate identity and status, while establishing a context and defining a situation (Sanoff, 1991).

The non-verbal messages transmitted by the built environment convey cues which people are able to read and understand. The built environment, then, has a certain meaning, which is communicated and acted upon by people in diverse settings. This means that the built environment contains social, cultural, and symbolic information eliciting appropriate behavior. Sherif & Sherif (1963) have distinguished various characteristics of a space or an environment by classifying the visual world into fixed features (components of the built environment: walls, doors, windows, entrances), semi-fixed features (furniture and furnishings), and non-fixed elements such as people, their facial expressions, gestures, and their proxemic relationships. Therefore, it should be emphasized here that the built environment in itself through meanings attached to it affects people's perception of identity and environmental and visual qualities.

Research indicates that 87% of people's perceptions are derived through the sense of sight. However, if we scratch the surfaces of images the word "image" may reveal a sense of integrity and true identity. A positive image of the built environment goes beyond appearance to include a complete fit in the landscape and the global environment. The concepts of Image-ability and legibility introduced by Lynch in the sixties appear to enhance this finding; if an environment has the ability to stamp an impression in the mind of people, then they will carry that impression

for a long period, or for the rest of their lives. It is argued that built environments have certain qualities that give them a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. Physical qualities of the built environment enable the making of identified mental images. Mental images are the result of a two way process. First, people look for non-verbal cues in the built environment, then these cues transmit certain concepts, they have something to say about the people who occupy, own these environments, and about what is taking place in them.

***To conclude, I would assert that current ISMS and trends are predicated on the premises of positivistic perspectives where architecture is created to establish dialogue with the self and with fellow professionals, but not with the public. A balance of the architects' preferences and those of the public is needed. Concomitantly, future debate on current architectural trends needs to concern itself with the memory of architects and memory of others, the perception of the professional community and that of others, the consciousness of architects and that of others, and the reasoning of architects and that of others. A deeper understanding of how environmental messages and cues are transmitted to and perceived by the public and how the public establishes associations between these messages and their underlying meanings and in accord with their socio-cultural backgrounds is clearly on the rise. The non-verbal messages conveyed by the work of architects would be irrelevant and meaningless if the perception and consciousness of the public; the people for whom we are producing built environments - are avoided, misinterpreted, or not comprehended.***

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