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Exterior of Fathy's Agricultural Cooperative Building in New Bariz With Bricks Remaining From the End of Construction in 1967.

*Source:* Photo by author.

## Utopias of Mud?

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### Hassan Fathy and Alternative Modernisms

**Malcolm Miles**  
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*The article reconsiders the mud-brick architecture of Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1900-1989), looking particularly at his two major (but, for different reasons, incomplete) projects for settlements at New Gourna (1945-1949), across the Nile from Luxor, and at New Baris (1965-1967), in the Kharga Oasis (or New Valley). This reconsideration is timely in two contexts: first, current interest in sustainable architecture and the potential of mud brick as a low-cost (or, as Fathy put it, a no-cost) solution for the housing needs of nonaffluent countries and, second, reflections from a position in postmodernity on modernism and the possibility that there are alternative modernisms besides the international modernism specific to Europe and North America. This leads to debates around modernism and tradition, and Fathy occupies a complex position in this regard. But his work also raises questions as to the production of space, not least in a fusion of design and building, and the handing over to local masons of key aspects of both. The key question, however, in which both of the above aspects figure, is whether Fathy's work, particularly his efforts to create whole settlements, constructs a traditional (and nationalist) alternative to modernism or (still as nationalism) an alternative modernism incorporating aspects of European modernism and articulating them in new ways. The question has wide implications for visual culture—art and design as well as architecture—as well as being a means to read Fathy's work within postcolonial and postmodern frameworks.*

**Keywords:** architecture; modernism; traditionalism; Egypt; mud brick

Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1900-1989) undertook two projects to design new settlements—New Gourna (1945-1949), to rehouse the inhabitants of Gourna al-Jadida in the archaeological zone on the west bank of the Nile from Luxor, and New Baris (1965-1967), a proposed settlement in the Kharga Oasis—in both cases using the traditional material and skills of mud-brick building. Both projects were, for different reasons, abandoned before completion

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and could be regarded as failures. Yet a reconsideration of Fathy's work may be timely in context of interest in sustainable architecture today. But while some aspects of sustainable architecture, such as self-build housing, could appear to reject the social engineering of European modernism, they may also retain (or redeem) something of the utopianism implicit in the modernist program. And perhaps a similar ambivalence can be found in Fathy's work. It is helpful to examine this issue as a prelude to a wider reconsideration of Fathy's work and its relevance today. I put this, then, in terms of a question as to whether Fathy's work constitutes an alternative to modernism (in keeping with the avowed traditionalism of his published writing) or, instead, implies an alternative modernism incorporating aspects of European modernism and articulating them in an alternative, perhaps traditionalist, way in a postcolonial context. I begin, after a note on the literature, by describing the projects at New Gournā and New Baris.<sup>1</sup> I observe difficulties in a reappraisal of these projects today. Drawing on the literature, I then ask how Fathy might be appropriately situated in relation to modernism and traditionalism, in the context of Egyptian nationalism in the 1940s. Given renewed interest in Fathy's work in the context of sustainable architecture today, a reconsideration of his major projects is timely.

## The Literature

The literature on Fathy is sparse. In English, his own writing is published in *Gournā: A Tale of Two Villages* (1969)<sup>2</sup> and *Natural Energy and Vernacular Architecture* (1986); he contributed to the journal *Ekistics* and the City of the Future project in the 1960s for the firm Doxiades, Athens; an essay, "Rural Self-Help Housing," was published in *International Labour Review* (1962); a manuscript on mosque architecture is in the archives of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture; and statements by Fathy are collated in a monograph by J. M. Richards, Ismail Serageldin, and Darl Rastorfer (1985, pp. 147-152). There is a slightly smaller body of his writing in French,<sup>3</sup> as well as several lectures and papers in Arabic.<sup>4</sup> Critical sources include three monographs—Richards et al. (1985), still a key source—and two books by James Steele (1988, 1997); all three are well illustrated and contain bibliographies as well as project chronologies. Richards's first contribution on Fathy was a short paper, "Gournā, a Lesson in Basic Architecture" (1970). Reference to Fathy's work is included in Jean Dethier's *Down to Earth* (1982, pp. 138, 156-157, 164, 172-173, 176-177; based on an exhibition at Centre George Pompidou, Paris). In addition are reviews and journal papers (inter alia, Clark, 1980; Cliff, 1976; Dillon, 1983; Friedlander, 1981, 1982, 1982/1983; Moustader, 1985; Seamon, 1984; Swan, 1980; Ward, 1974).

It is curious that a greater volume of Fathy's writing exists in European languages than in Arabic. Said Zulfikar observes, "From the outset his professional path has been strewn with obstacles ... Nor were [his] relations with the architectural establishment in Egypt more fruitful. The latter has regarded his architectural ideals as romantic, anachronistic, controversial, irrelevant, or non-lucrative. His achievements have received scant recognition in the Egyptian press, which has largely ignored his message" (quoted in Richards et al., 1985, p. 157). The dates of the literature suggest, too, with the exception of Steele's second book, a waning of interest in Fathy after the 1980s. But, in the 1990s, he reappears in the literature of ecological architecture, for instance, as one of three architects discussed under the heading of cultural identity by David Pearson (1994).<sup>5</sup> Architect Simone Swan observes, "As our global population continues to rise, the number of people without dignified, healthy, safe housing has soared...."

Fathy's designs, ideas, principles, and character promise to grow only more relevant with time" (Swan, 2002, p. 252). The lack of adequate housing results, of course, from global economic policy as well as population growth, but if Fathy's work is recognized in the literature of ecological architecture, this might indicate a new framework in which to consider his legacy: that of sustainable development.<sup>6</sup> Putting Fathy in a new framework for the 21st century does not mean, however, that complexities that arise in a reconsideration of his work can be overlooked, and my purpose here is to investigate a few of these.

## New Gournia

Fathy's first built project was a pilot house for the Egyptian Royal Society of Agriculture at Bahtim (1941). It was destroyed shortly after construction on the grounds that the society had its own architect, with whose work Fathy's mud-brick house did not fit. It was his first involvement in the problem of rural housing, which preoccupied him through most of his career despite that a majority of his realized designs are for individual houses—such as that designed initially as a weekend retreat for Hamed Said in 1942 at Marg, near Cairo (Richards et al., 1985, pp. 40-41; Steele, 1997, pp. 54-59). Said and his wife were both artists and, like Fathy, engaged in the question of what constituted an Egyptian national culture. The house was enlarged in 1945 and has been used by the Suids as a meeting place for the Friends of Art and Life.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Fathy taught at the School of Fine Arts in Cairo.

From 1945 to 1949, Fathy was employed by the Department of Antiquities to design and supervise the construction of a village in which to rehouse the inhabitants of Gournia al-Jadida in the archaeological zone on the west bank of the Nile from Luxor. The old village has (still) five constituent hamlets beneath the Tombs of the Nobles. The Gournis were expert at finding tombs, many of them employed by the Department of Antiquities as laborers in archaeological sites or as draftsmen copying inscriptions, and in many cases, they had built their houses over tombs. A traditional income was derived, too, from the sale of artifacts. Whether this is theft or appropriation is arguable. A comparison could be made between the piecemeal acquisition of antiquities by the Gournis and the organized, large-scale appropriations made by the colonial powers during the 19th century. Leaving that aside, by 1945, "thefts" had reached a scale unacceptable to the authorities, leading to a decision to move the population as a preventive measure. Fathy (1969, p. 15) notes the inept business skills of the Gournis, "exhausting the richest treasure long before the antiquities fetched a really high price," and had incorporated a pharaonic relief in the interior courtyard wall of the Said house. A 50-acre site was compulsorily purchased on agricultural land closer to the Nile. Fathy hoped to persuade the 7,000 Gournis (900 families) to move voluntarily and began to research the social structure of the village, hoping to recreate patterns of spatial use, in better conditions, in the new village. Fathy's research was restricted to conversations with village elders, for this purpose, and to arrange the hire of labor. He admits that "we should really have subjected the village to a thorough socio-ethnographic and economic investigation" (Fathy, 1969, p. 53). From his research, he determined the spatial organization of New Gournia at two levels—that of the family and that of the *badana*, or group of families: "The badana is a tightly related knot of people, consisting of some ten or twenty families.... The families live in adjoining houses and, though

there are differences of wealth and status ... they follow a communal way of life" (Fathy, 1969, p. 58). In the old village, each badana had its own cafe, barber, and grocer, while all families in a badana used the oven of a member baking bread and participated together in feasts such as circumcisions. Fathy formalizes the arrangement as a gradation from shared courtyards to houses grouped in quarters around small squares linked by streets, which have detours to discourage strangers.

Fathy's management of the planning and building of New Gourna entailed intricate dealings with government bureaucracy and the local recruitment of a workforce of around 300. On meeting the assistants appointed for him by the Department of Antiquities, he comments,



**Figure 1.** Interior of the Theater, New Gourna  
Source: Photo by author.

After I had gathered my wits, I reflected that it was not really so important that I had no supervisors to help me. The important thing was building, and that would be done by the Aswani masons. They would work without supervision and could, indeed, teach a thing or two even to qualified architects. (Fathy, 1969, p. 151)

Then, meeting his assistant director, he finds that the person is mainly concerned with what food stores they will need to take to Gourna:

I must say that the question of what I was to eat had not occurred to me before, and considering that we were just across the river from Luxor, teeming with the most resplendent grocers' shops, his anxiety seemed a little uncalled for. (Fathy, 1969, p. 152)

The recruitment of a workforce was no easier:

In order to distribute work in the fairest possible manner, I thought I might ask the sheikh of each hamlet to give me a list of all the people in his hamlet who would make suitable labourers.... I wrote to the sheiks ... but not one replied. (Fathy, 1969, p. 159)

Problems were encountered in digging sand to mix with mud and chaff for the bricks, and Fathy's workers were sent away by villagers who thought they should be employed to do it. Fathy's employment of a group of trained masons from Aswan, where he had observed mud-brick vaulting on a visit in 1941 (Fathy, 1969, pp. 6-8), may have seemed the most reliable aspect of the project.

There is an issue here: Aswan is a 3-hour rail journey from Luxor, but this is not a journey the Gournis would have made. The architectural vernaculars of the two regions differ, as do the ethnicities of the populations. Fathy imports an architectural style and technique, not just a group of exponents, from Nubia, in the absence of vault-

building skills in Gournā. The justification is that by using mud-brick vaulting, the cost of timber used in flat roofs is saved—large timbers being scarce and expensive and palm trunks needing replacement every few years.

Fathy's perception of Gournā contained ambivalence, too, as that of an urban, middle-class professional. Of his arrival in Luxor by overnight train, he writes,

I got off with all my suitcases, trunks, rolls and rolls of plans, [technical] instruments, gramophone, records, bits, pieces, odds and ends ... and I found a great crowd assembled to meet me. This crowd was composed of all sorts of people who had some connection to the work or who hoped to be engaged, and with it I set off like a sultan for Gournā. (Fathy, 1969, p. 152)

His description of a peasant house as holding "a large variety of bulky stores and the owner's cattle as well ... hens running in and out among the dust and babies" (Fathy, 1969, p. 92) is less sympathetic than English expatriate Winifred Blackman's, 20 years earlier:

In the better houses there is generally a flight of steps leading to an upper story, where there may be a sitting room.... The flat roof is a pleasant place on which to sit and watch the life in the streets below. (Blackman, 1927, p. 27)

Fathy's impression is colored by his mother's nostalgia for a countryside remembered as idyllic and his father's negative impression of his rural estates.<sup>8</sup> He writes of the countryside as "a paradise darkened from above by clouds of flies, and whose streams flowing underfoot had become muddy and infested with bilharzia and dysentery" (Fathy, 1969, p. 2).<sup>9</sup>

Despite his modernizing intentions, Fathy's relations with the Department for Antiquities proved difficult. Forced to buy straw in small quantities from petty cash in the absence of better arrangements, he accused the administration of slowing the project: "This apparently touched them in a tender spot, for they contrived a clever scheme for getting rid of the whole Gournā project for good" (Fathy, 1969, p. 161). An official was sent to report and concluded that funds had been used for the wrong purposes and that employees on the project were unqualified. The project was saved only by the refusal of a senior official to countersign a proposal for its closure. At this point, one street had been built.

By the time Fathy abandoned the project in 1949, 20% of the planned area was built, including a residential quarter, mosque, theater, *khan* (crafts market), boys' school, and market space. The mosque resembles Nubian types seen by Fathy in 1941, with a domed prayer space and courtyard, plus two external courtyards, one for washing. The interior is a sequence of arches and domes creating a many-faceted and tranquil space. The courtyard garden is planted with trees and shrubs to create a cool space, the air of which passes through large, open-work (claustra) screens to the prayer hall. The use of claustra is one of the most characteristic visual elements in Fathy's work, functional and aesthetic at the same time, and relates to an urban precedent in the wooden lattice windows (*mashrabiya*; Steele, 1997, p. 85) of houses in old Cairo (Steele, 1997, p. 39). The minaret has a stairway external to the main mass of the building like those in Nubia but unlike the mosque of old Gournā (Fathy, 1969, Figure 45). The theater was intended to revive vernacular drama and support traditions such as stick dancing with stepped seats on three sides, a limestone floor, and a stage with balcony,

tower, door, and window as a permanent set. Theaters are not customary in Egyptian villages, but it appears to have remained in use and still has a store of scenery behind the stage.<sup>10</sup> Fathy designed schools for both boys and girls, in the context of a government drive to build 4,000 schools, many in villages, in the late 1940s (Fathy, 1969, p. 81). The market provided shade for animals and was intended to establish Gournā as a trading site.

The houses of New Gournā are grouped irregularly, so that each is different, overcoming the standardization of mass housing. Fathy writes, “By compelling myself to fit the houses ... into a variety of irregular plots, and by being ready to vary the plan of each to suit the people who would live in it, I made sure that I should think carefully about the design of each one” (Fathy, 1969, p. 73). There are common elements in that each house had a domed space with alcoves for a bed on one side and a cupboard on the other and a baking oven sited outside the kitchen, which leads onto a small courtyard for animals. Fathy’s approach is logical, as reflected in gradations from public to private space: from the large square outside the mosque—which acts as the village center—to the other public buildings, streets, shared courtyards, and enclosed spaces of domestic life. Rastorfer sums this up as follows:

There is an architectural hierarchy to the village which is easiest read by the system of open spaces. The main route to the village interior widens to create a kind of public square around which many of the community functions were to take place including prayer, shopping and entertainment housed by the mosque, *khan* and theatre respectively. The housing is planned in irregular allotments ... shaping a network of angular streets that turn on themselves to create broken vistas ... the lives of households are played out in these small, quiet streets that serve as extension to the home and workplace, and as play areas for children. (Richards et al., 1985, p. 87)<sup>11</sup>

This is much as it is today. It could almost read, too, as a description of, say, a Dutch home zone or, with a little adjustment to context, the London inner-city street described by Edward Robbins:

The public spaces of these neighbourhoods ... could become living rooms where people socialized and passed the day because their homes are neither large nor nice enough to entertain indoors. Streets provided a place to live out both a public presence as well as private longings. (Robbins, 1996, p. 285)

The public-private threshold differs between European-industrial and Egyptian-rural settings, yet the idea of a complex set of interrelated functions taking place informally in the street is common. Fathy’s contribution is to formalize the possibility for this in giving the design of streets as much attention as that of buildings and in providing intermediate spaces for use among families in a society the structure of which is, at root, the extended family. The courtyard is a pivotal space between that of the family and that of the *badana*, and the smaller courtyard within is a pivotal space of individual family life. But neither is found in Gournā al-Jadida, where the larger houses have external compounds for animals. Is the courtyard an aspect of city more than village architecture? Is it, as Steele (1997) claims, an import from an urban setting? He writes (in his first book),

While the adaptation of a courtyard space from an urban dwelling type in the past to a rural village house in the present may be defensible on environmental and sanitary



**Figure 2.** A Courtyard in the Mosque, New Gournia

Source: Photo by author.

grounds, the transfer ... regardless of economic or educational background is unrealistic. (Steele, 1988, p. 75)

I return to this question below. Here, I would cite Fathy's emphasis on the aesthetic rather than social aspect of the courtyard:

In ... a courtyard, there is a certain quality that can be distinctly felt, and that carries a local signature as clearly as does a particular curve. This felt space is in fact a fundamental component of architecture, and if a space has not the true feeling, no subsequent decoration will be able to naturalize it into the desired tradition. (Fathy, 1969, p. 55)

Whereas Steele looks to the conditions in which a set of design solutions arose, Fathy aspires to the more universal availability of a certain kind of somatic (and perhaps spiritual) experience in architecture, which he sees in the rural vernacular as much as the urban—or which he projects onto the former.

The khan, too, may represent an imported element. Designed both as an indoor market space for the proposed craft industries and with rooms (in the manner of the traditional khan as a travelers inn) for visiting teachers, it faces the main open space outside the mosque (Steele, 1997, p. 64). The aim, clearly, was that spiritual and material life should contribute to a bustling, thriving village center. Given the location of the village near tourist sites (then as now), Fathy foresaw a potential market, not in real or fake antiquities but in locally produced textiles and ceramics. But the crafts never materialized, and the khan is now used for storage, normally locked.

Even in the second season of work at New Gournia, difficulties multiplied. In 1946, Fathy received rumors of a plot to flood the site by breaking the dikes that protected it from Nile inundation. This did not occur until 1948, during Fathy's final season there. In 1947, the accounts section of the Department of Antiquities sent notices to the effect that Fathy was running out of money. Work stopped between January and September 1947. He records an incident in which a bureaucrat put pressure on a Gourni to overcharge for the sale of pipes, demonstrating subversion of the project at a junior administrative level (Fathy, 1969, pp. 163-165). But Fathy was summoned to Cairo, where the king had taken an interest in his work. While he was away, the dike was cut and the site flooded. Fathy was offered but declined a detachment of Sudanese border guards to protect it, but the incident confirmed a lack of local support for the new village.

Fathy's voice turns negative now in relation to the Gournis: "Everybody obeys the heads of families, who, in Gournia, were tomb robbers. They were both feared and respected people, and they used their power to preserve their trade"—despite that "they were directly hurting themselves, for they were all earning good money as labourers in the village, and the new houses were, even financially, better than their old ones which, for the most part built on government land, were virtually worthless" (Fathy, 1969, p. 176).



**Figure 3.** Detail of Shops, Agricultural Building

*Source:* Photo by author.

In 1948 and 1949, official disdain (and a move of officials to new posts) led Fathy to abandon the project:

In all three departments [Fella, Housing, and Social Affairs] committees sat, apparently convened solely to find excuses for stopping the work and enabling the department concerned to wash its hands of Gournā altogether.... It was clearly impossible to go on working with such people, so when I was finally told either to return to the School of Fine Arts or to give up my chair and go permanently into the Housing Department, I returned to teaching with relief. (Fathy, 1969, p. 183)

He worked next on the rural estate of Lu'Luāt al-Sahara ("Pearl of the Desert") for an enlightened landowner, a ceramic factory at Garagos (1955), and a primary school at Fares (1957). Fathy left Egypt in 1956 to work for the firm of Doxiades Associates in Athens (Steele, 1997, pp. 109-123), in the Centre for Ekistics, and on the City of the Future project. On returning to Egypt, he designed a training center and cooperative for desert development at Kharga (1962) and then New Baris (1965-1967). The training center was damaged by broken water mains and is now replaced by a concrete structure (Richards et al., 1985, p. 163).

## New Baris

In the south of the Kharga Oasis is the 200-acre site of New Baris, like New Gournā designed by Fathy and built in mud brick with Nubian vaults (though using an im-



**Figure 4.** Roof Lines, Houses at New Bariz

Source: Photo by author.

proved formula for making the bricks). New Baris was begun in 1965 following President Nasr's proposal to green the corridor of oases in the Western desert—called the New Valley—as a way to reduce the pressure of urban expansion in Cairo resulting from migration from rural areas. It was to have been the last in a sequence of settlements spreading through the New Valley and a hub for a group of six satellite hamlets. Within sight of the few but dramatic structures of New Baris are new buildings using industrial materials in Baris, which has recently received an influx of people from cities such as Sohag and Asiat in the Nile Valley.<sup>12</sup> Irrigation from underground sources allows cultivation of what is, apart from a lack of water, a fertile soil. There are fields of barley and pockets of brilliant green where onions are grown, as well as some trees. In traditional villages in the region, flocks of goats roam the streets, but in the cultivated areas, there are some cows. While Baris grows, however, New Baris, designed as a model settlement for 250 families, was never occupied and was abandoned in 1967 in the crisis of the Israeli invasion of Sinai. All that was built was a market complex for an agricultural cooperative (*suq*), two large

houses, a small house (occupied by the guardian and his wife), a bus terminus waiting room, an administrative center (still unsurfaced), and at some distance, a workshop for making cars.

New Baris is well preserved, only the workshop showing signs of deterioration perhaps as a result of other uses, in this area where there is no rain. Perhaps more than New Gournia, it demonstrates Fathy's potential contribution to new forms of settlement. While Fathy studied the existing building types of the Kharga region, he also drew on his work for Doxiades on housing projects (in Iraq, for instance) and the discussions of the City of the Future project (Steele, 1997, pp. 111-123).

That he undertook New Baris after leaving Egypt in the 1950s, notably, due to a conflict with Nasr's government over the building of the Aswan High Dam—which ended the annual inundation of the Nile and renewal of the supply of mud in the Nile Valley—suggests a reconciliation of sorts. Fathy's sympathy for the rural population seems, in any case, in keeping with Nasr's achievement of land redistribution, universal education, and establishment of a state health service.<sup>13</sup> New Baris also follows a tour of settlements in north Africa, which Fathy made for the City of the Future project, setting out after giving a paper on New Gournia to a conference in Cairo in 1960 (Berger, 1964).

Because the inhabitants were not as yet identified (were not, that is, a relocated population), Fathy could not undertake social research based on their existing spatial practices. His efforts are therefore directed more at dealing with the harsh climate, with summer temperatures of 45°C. Steele describes the *suq* as “the ultimate test of Fathy's attempt to ameliorate the extremely harsh conditions without mechanical means” (Steele, 1997, p. 141). Whereas the streets of New Gournia were irregular, at New Baris, Fathy introduces an orthogonal plan to achieve maximum shade.<sup>14</sup> Only the mosque was to be angled obliquely to it, opposite a palm-lined square. Houses have pairs of courtyards as a cooling mechanism. A sunlit area draws air by convection from a planted and hence cooler courtyard next to it to create a breeze, as in the houses of

medieval Cairo (Steele, 1997, p. 141). This, and any available external breeze captured by roof-level wind catches (also a traditional feature in Cairo), is filtered through the house via claustra screens. The added effect of thick, mud-brick walls is that the houses remain within an acceptable temperature band in summer and winter. The suq uses a row of high wind catches to filter air down through the walls of the north side of the building, to keep the temperature of a series of underground vaults at around 15°C to 18°C even in summer—on my visit in winter, with an outside temperature around 25°C, it was noticeably cold in the vaults. These were the spaces for storage of crops, such as vegetables, for sale by the cooperative. The building has a large central courtyard, rows of vaulted spaces for shops, and a vaulted arcade. In the middle of the long, featureless road across the Western desert, it has an extraordinary grandeur and iconic quality.

It is significant, though, that Fathy designed the suq for a cooperative: In an unpublished paper to the Egyptian Society of Architects (1977), he writes the following in response to a UN report on the problem of housing resources:

The only alternative is to resort to the traditional cooperative system by finding means to make it work under the non-traditional conditions prevailing nowadays. The snag in cooperative building is that one man cannot build a house, but ten men can build ten houses easily. ("Bariz Case Study," in Richards et al., 1985, p. 92)

Fathy recognized that the traditional skills of building on which New Gournah had relied were absent, seeing a renewed role for the professional architect as an intermediary: "These traditions do not exist any more in most peasant societies and it is implicit that we secure the assistance of the specialized architects to revive the lost experience and traditions among the peasants until a new tradition is established" (Richards et al., 1985, p. 92). He adds that for this to function, the families involved need to know each other and that the critical mass needs to be small enough, 20 families being an optimum level, to avoid anonymity in the collective. The question, then—which throws into relief the wider question as to whether Fathy modernizes rural housing by introducing Nubian vaulting, the courtyard, and so forth—is whether such an attitude can be introduced into a situation through professional agency or must arise spontaneously. Fathy argues that the architect can design for individuality within a large scheme:

When the architect is faced with the job of designing a thousand houses at one time, rather than dream for the thousand whom he [*sic*] must shelter, he designs one house and puts three zeros to its right.... As if he were a portraitist with a thousand commissions and painted only one picture and made nine hundred and ninety-nine photocopies. But the architect has at his command the prosaic stuff of dreams. He can consider the family size, the wealth, the social status, the profession, the climate, and at last, the hopes and aspirations of those he shall house ... let him begin with the comprehensible, with a handful of people or a natural group of families.... Once he is dealing with a manageable group,



**Figure 5.** Vaulted Passage in Fathy's Agricultural Cooperative Building

Source: Photo by author.

of say 20 to 30 families, then the desired variety will naturally and logically follow in the housing. (Richards et al., 1985, p. 93)

This may sound romantic, yet it may have been informed by the settlements Fathy saw in north Africa. These grow cumulatively, have irregular street patterns and minimum street space, and are maintained through collaborative efforts between families.<sup>15</sup> The scale of 20 families also resembles the badana.

### New Baris and New Gournā Today

The only occupants of New Baris, for a year, were 27 families deported from Ismailiya.<sup>16</sup> But if the immediate cause of abandoning the site in 1967 was a political crisis, work was not resumed after the recovery of Sinai, nor has it been since, despite renewed efforts to settle the New Valley as a way to relieve the pressure of population growth in Cairo and cities in the Nile Valley. Similarly, Fathy's principles were ignored by the Egyptian government in building a second new village in industrial materials on arid land near the Valley of the Kings, to which some villagers from Gournā al-Jadida were removed in the mid-1990s.<sup>17</sup> It would be easy to dismiss both projects as interesting failures; yet New Gournā is now fully occupied, and its population appears relatively stable. An examination of its present state—particularly the extent to which the plan or buildings have been changed—may offer insights for a reappraisal of Fathy's work.

Walking through New Gournā in 2005 was a mixed experience. Electricity has been installed, from the High Dam, and several houses have satellite dishes.<sup>18</sup> New shops have proliferated on the main road that skirts the village. One houses an Internet café. But changes are more evident within New Gournā, between its current state and what I remember from a visit in 1997 (as well as between both visits and what I read of the site's original construction). Of the public buildings, the mosque, theater, and khan remain (the latter as a store), but the school for boys has been destroyed and replaced by a large concrete building. The market area contains heaps of scrap and is used for unloading lorries. The trees are gone. Oxen browse, however, in the shade of an area of trees on the edge of the village, and the surrounding fields are intensively cultivated (mainly for sugar). Fathy's rest house and field office has been carefully restored recently and is now a semipublic building as well as a private dwelling, which the owner, Mahmoud Abdelradi, and his son hope to turn into a Fathy museum.

There is still cause for concern: Several of the houses show serious signs of deterioration due to rising damp and salt corrosion. Although Fathy used rubble for the foundations, the water table has risen since the building of the High Dam, and it may be that the composition of the bricks, made in a hurry, was not optimum.<sup>19</sup> A solution, which has been applied selectively, is to underpin the walls with concrete below ground level and clad them in concrete render for 50 cm above ground, at a cost of 10,000 Egyptian pounds (EGP; £1,000 or \$560) per house. The cost to rebuild a house is EGP50,000 using industrially produced materials and, to some, is more attractive. Because the poorest villagers, such as the guardian of the mosque (salary EGP200 per month), cannot afford either, their houses are falling down. The condition of some houses may be worsened by adjacent infill building in industrial materials (though I have no technical knowledge). The money for this comes from family members working in the Gulf states rather than from tourism—all the villagers I met work in other

ways—a mechanic, an artisan and restorer, the mosque guardian—and the village has not a single tourism shop or stall.

Again, it would be easy to write of New Gourna as idealistic and flawed in construction. It would also be easy, from an acquaintance with its quiet atmosphere and the visual aspect of the portion which remains more or less as Fathy designed it, to say that it has stood quite well the test of almost 50 years of occupation. Yet a more interesting discussion might be around the changes that villagers, as varying levels of income allow and in a changing cultural

context, have made. In 1997, I recall one concrete balcony, looking like those of the apartments of an aspirant middle class in Luxor. In 2005, there were some completely new houses and several major extensions in modern styles. One house owner proudly showed me the additional floor on which he had worked over some years, not yet roofed, in fired brick and concrete. There were two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom to comprise a separate apartment. How do we read this?

Fathy wrote, “When the architect is presented with a clear tradition to work in, as in a village built by peasants, then he has no right to break this tradition with his own personal whims” (Fathy, 1969, p. 26). He does not say that the villager cannot break it, though he might have assumed so. In 1997, nearly all the houses retained their original design, though some of the domes were replaced by flat roofs using timber beams to allow rooms to be constructed above them. There were several additional stalls for animals, such as a cow to provide the family with milk (see Richards et al., 1985, pp. 86–87, 90). These additions, denoting a slow increase in prosperity, were in mud brick; a house owner showed me what was original and what he had added, pointing to features and either saying Fathy’s name or indicating himself. In 2005, by contrast, the extension I note in the previous paragraph covered the whole roof area, with considerable rebuilding beneath. In this case, the villager, not alone by any means, has broken with tradition but done so within an available, limited vocabulary of materials, in a design that is functional and engineered rather than a product of architecture but not careless—the house owner wants his family to live in the best conditions he can afford. The purpose of the extension in this case, following a previous subdivision of the house, is to provide a separate apartment for a second married son and his family, within the extended family structure that the village still supports. It would seem churlish to complain that foreseeable needs of this kind are met in the ways most open to the villagers. Current extensions of houses in New Gourna seem to indicate not that villagers are ignorant of Fathy’s principles—the interest of a few (mainly academic) White visitors has alerted them long since to Fathy’s reputation abroad—but a selective application of them in face of a relentlessly modernizing global industrial culture.

Despite the erosion of the village’s integrity by rising water and development in industrial technology, the point remains that for a village to grow as a stable community, it needs to be able to adapt its spatial ordering. In New Gourna, the growth of families is traditional, but the means to house that growth has been improvised in contemporary terms. A case could be made for international investment in New Gourna. But if it is not to be a museum with living inmates but to remain a living com-



**Figure 6.** Exterior of Fathy’s Agricultural Co-operative Building in New Bariz With Bricks Remaining From the End of Construction in 1967

Source: Photo by author.

munity, villagers must be entrusted with its future development. Having said that, my impression was that if more is not done soon to restore the existing mud-brick houses, then the integrity of New Gourna will be lost irretrievably.

Before moving to a recapitulation of the difficulties in Fathy's work and an attempt to find a suitable critical framework in which to situate him, a further question arising from the visit is whether the villagers are previous inhabitants of Gourna al-Jadida or come from elsewhere. Steele says they migrated to the area as squatters from villages south of Aswan after the building of the High Dam (Steele, 1988, p. 74). Richards et al. (1985, p. 162) state,

The process of habitation, beginning in the late 1940s, was not spontaneous. At first, only the poorest area residents, those living in little more than caves, moved to the new housing provided by the government.... Other families slowly moved into the village, possibly drawn to the economic opportunities the site offered through its proximity to an active tourist trade or in response to the general housing shortage experienced in Egypt in the past few decades. The picture given by New Gourna in 1983 is that of an independent community with a strong sense of self identity.

The conversations I had with villagers confirm this, with a few ambiguities. All those interviewed asserted that the inhabitants today were Gournis, admitting only if pressed that there might be a few families from the Nile Valley and Aswan as well, but I was not sure if this might be a perceived right answer for use in conversations with foreigners. What was clear, however, was that many Gournis had been recruited to work on construction of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s and had returned to the new village after this (which might explain Steele's impression). In interviews, I was told by two people independently that in the 1950s, five families moved to New Gourna from Gourna al-Jadida and that these included the guardian of the mosque and the current owner of Fathy's rest house. In another case, the householder, who had worked on the construction of the High Dam, had put his protective helmet on the living room wall, as a prized object, between an old magazine image of Colonel Nasr and framed photographs of his father. In another, the householder said his wife's parents were from Aswan and showed me several photographs (in color) of himself doing national service there. The answer, then, would appear a mix of gradual relocation from Gourna al-Jadida, in many cases via the High Dam, as well as some movement from elsewhere.

## Difficulties

If, as Fathy (1969, p. 149) wrote, "the Gourna experiment failed," it is important to understand why. Even if that judgment is avoided, it remains important to ask what difficulties need to be addressed if Fathy is to be reconsidered in a new context. Steele, for example, asks why the Gournis did not want to move to New Gourna and why Fathy's work did not ignite a housing revolution for Egypt's rural poor (Steele, 1988, p. 74). The answers are fairly obvious. The villagers wanted to prolong their traditional livelihood; the intended move was a ploy by the authorities to end the appropriation of artifacts by villagers, but the villagers' engagement in Fathy's research may have been a ploy to prevent more drastic actions.<sup>20</sup> In the event, the drift away from Gourna al-Jadida was gradual. The rural poor did not ignite a housing revolution, because they had no power or resource to do so, nor precedents on which to base a concept of what

such a revolution might be. Nor, given the close family ties that were reflected in a geographical proximity of dwelling and their low economic level, were they likely to spread ideas from one place to another. Besides, as Fathy notes (above), power in the village rested with a small number of heads of extended families, not with a mass public.

There are other difficulties in making a case for Fathy's work as a precedent for sustainable architecture—above all, his complicity in a planned, compulsory relocation of a population. Fathy's effort to improve their living conditions could be read, on one hand, as making this more acceptable and, on the other, as making the best of a nonideal situation. It is like the difficulty, central to the aesthetic theory of the Frankfurt School, that art renders suffering beautiful and thereby mediates against its refusal in the act of its depiction. The difficulty, in both cases, is not soluble but sets up a possibly creative tension between two less than perfect polarities. I have to leave that there but am left wondering if there is a flaw in Fathy's method or concepts that prevented his examples from becoming the beginning of a housing revolution.

Is Fathy's model derived, for instance, from inappropriate sources? Steele (1988, 75) criticizes Fathy's use of design features from merchants' houses in medieval Cairo in New Gourna. But I am not sure what Steele expects—if it is only the reproduction of a vernacular, then it would have been best left to the Nubian masons, though their work itself was an imported tradition. Although there was, and is today, expertise in building in mud brick in the Gourna area, there was not then (or is now) expertise in making mud-brick vaults. Fathy introduced this to save costs and so that the model could be widely applicable. Today, it could be added that it avoids cutting down trees, a common source of land erosion in nonaffluent countries. Where timber is used today in New Gourna and nearby villages, it denotes an increase in income levels. Similarly, the use of *claustra* would seem a logical and helpful inclusion in the design style of New Gourna, even if it is not found in Gourna al-Jadida. A tradition survives by renewal rather than by ossification. Fathy may have invented a vernacular, as hybrid of rural and urban typologies, but did so to prolong another sense of vernacularism—the intimate involvement of villagers (and dwellers) in the creation of their own environments.

This leads me to a different line of argument, from Rastorfer. He asks why Fathy's solution to the problem of providing rural housing remained marginal:

Could there be a critical element missing in his framework that prevented his social-oriented projects from being widely replicated? Fathy had developed his architecture of private houses by seeing many designs realized. Had he been given more public support for community projects, then too, he may have refined or evolved a self-sustaining solution. Others see the basic reason his projects have not been replicated as institutional: land tenure, public services and utilities, and finance. (Richards et al., 1985, 94)

Fathy was certainly not assisted by government bureaucracies and appears unserved by them now, but Rastorfer hints at what may be the underpinning difficulty: Fathy's failure to facilitate an appropriate social process alongside his architectural model, through which it would be extended in ways he might not predict but in keeping with the fundamental values of the project.

Fathy attempted to provide a foundation but did not seed the social process that would have enabled it to be further developed through new vernaculars. As Rastorfer says,

New Gourná's identity is related to similar villages in the region, but it possesses a character all its own and if there are shortcomings they are measured in the gap between intention and realization. The planning intentions far exceeded the rural population's ability to upgrade itself. Though community life in rural Egypt is undergoing transition, people have not yet broken fundamental ties. (Richards et al., 1985, p. 89)

This is parallel to the failure to establish the craft industries. How far that might have happened had Fathy been suitably supported is an open question.

Within such an argument, however, is a complexity: The spatial organization of New Gourná is hierarchic; although a most-least exalted scale is not stated, it runs from the most public to the most private in a series of gradations. I wonder if there were a significant, residual sense of hierarchy, too, as would have been expected by all concerned, in Fathy's role as, while facilitator and planner rather than designer, an urban professional working with villagers. In his time, then, Fathy made a considerable step toward empowering villagers and did integrate design and building in handing over both to Nubian masons; however—and the antagonism of villagers and authorities would have disabled anything else—he restricted his vision of an architecture for the poor to a technology. If there is a major area for revision in the aftermath of Fathy's village projects today, it is probably in recognizing the equal importance of social architectures—the structures by which decisions are made, the role of consensus, and so forth—beside built architectures. Yet a degree of historical adjustment is necessary; although consensus decision making is the norm in intentional communities and ecovillages now, there was no such precedent in Egypt in the 1940s—quite the reverse. His effort to plan space according to the social structure of a village was progressive in its time and took place in a semicolonial situation.

Despite all the difficulties and without denying them, I would argue that Fathy has much to offer to groups seeking to create sustainable settlements today. A factor I would see as particularly important, from New Baris, is his belief in cooperative methods of construction (see Richards et al., 1985, p. 93; cited above). This could be read as Fathy's response to the problems of New Gourná. As it happens, Fathy is recognized in the literature of alternative development. In 1980, he received a Right Livelihood Award and the Chairman's Award for lifetime achievement as an architect from the Aga Khan Award for Architecture.<sup>21</sup> Reviewing the former, which covers fields from biotechnology to cultural identity, human rights, and sustainability, Jeremy Seabrook links Fathy to John Turner (award winner in 1988):

If governments are now coming to understand that the people themselves are the most effective architects, planners and builders ... this is due in considerable measure to the pioneering work of the late Hassan Fathy. (Seabrook, 1993, p. 79)

Perhaps, then, Fathy can be situated in relation to recent interest in issues of sustainability and the recognition of local knowledges.

### Contested Emphases in the Literature

Fathy's place in architectural history is perhaps less clear than his relation to sustainability and is contested in the literature. I look briefly at this as a way into the question of Fathy's modernism. For Richards, "[Fathy's] ideals and those of the Mod-

ern Movement coincide to a degree that he might find difficult to accept” (Richards et al., 1985, p. 10). Richards took part in the proceedings of CIAM (*Congres Internationalaux d'Architecture Moderne*; Curtis, 2000, p. 56) and sees modernism as taking architecture toward the creation of better conditions of life for a range of social classes and groups in cities. Steele's (1988) position is that of an advocate of vernacularism, in which context he has written on Indian architect Balkrishna Doshi (Steele, 1998) as well as on Fathy.<sup>22</sup> Yet he writes in the conclusion of his second book that “in an article about his friend in one of two initial studies that appeared in 1988, J M Richards caused a storm of protest among followers by suggesting that his functionalism ... put Fathy on a parallel path with Modernism, regardless of the historical elements he chose to reinterpret” (Steele, 1997, p. 183). Steele says Fathy disputed this but goes on to say that Richards does not go far enough. Specifically, “he did not consider the causes of Orientalist intimidation that fostered cultural envy and insecurity.... Fathy was a victim of the syndrome most clearly defined as ‘marginality’ ... increasingly identified as a global epidemic in our increasingly disconnected world” (Steele, 1997, p. 183).

Steele sees Fathy as a product of the Beaux-Arts tradition who embraced traditional architecture. He argues that Fathy draws selectively on the Enlightenment tradition, his view “derived primarily from those models specifically indicated in the *Description de l’Egypte*” (Steele, 1997, p. 184).<sup>23</sup> Steele also argues that Fathy's style became ossified in his late work, a set of visual images of symbolic resonance rather than practicality, notably, in Dar al-Islam in New Mexico: “the facile assimilation of building for a completely different way of life” (Steele, 1997, p. 185).<sup>24</sup> Rastorfer cites Dar al-Islam as “the one community scheme Fathy designed that has been self-generating,” where dwellers entered the project “with an enthusiastic involvement that was sustained from the initial programming to the execution” (Richards et al., 1985, p. 94). He attributes this to the education level of the community at Albiqiu: “Perhaps the disparity between Fathy's success as an architect of villas and his failure as a planner to effect a housing revolution, lies not with his architecture *per se*, but with the nature of his clients and his practice” (Richards et al., 1985, p. 94). Differences appear here that reflect, on one hand, a retrospect on Fathy, which recognizes some of the insights of a literature of postcolonialism, and, on the other, an effort to acclaim Fathy as embodying some of the progressive aspirations of modernism.

Richards, nonetheless, makes much of Fathy's efforts to link architect and dweller and sees modernist architects as lacking this capacity. His critique of Fathy is an oblique lament on the failure of modernism:

The utter unfamiliarity of the new style of building wounded people's instinctive desire to feel at home in their surroundings, and their resistance to iconoclastic aspects of the new architecture was reinforced by the architectural and town-planning professions' enthusiasm for a literal clean sweep. The Utopian vision ... led to an urge ... to destroy the past in order to create a better-ordered future. (Richards et al., 1985, p. 11)

Richards then casts Fathy as representing a humane architecture in which the architect relates to the dweller—perhaps his prescription for a redemption of modernism:

[Fathy's legacy] includes the message that in solving human problems one must not remove oneself too far from the human individual, and that even, perhaps especially, in our age of infinite technical resources, the simplicities inherent in the very nature of building must not be overlaid by the worship of progress. (Richards et al., 1985, p. 14)

Richards remarks elsewhere of the 1951 CIAM meeting, “The world of the architect had suddenly expanded to embrace that of the town planner and even the sociologist” (Richards, 1970, p. 192; cited in Curtis, 2000, p. 56). He adds that Fathy’s reconstitution of a vernacular is adaptable:

There are ... in the spaces between the buildings, proportional variations infinite in number, invisible maybe to the observer but giving satisfactions to the user of which he [*sic*] may not even be conscious. Fathy’s use of mud-brick moreover is not an archaic fad, a choice of primitive methods for a primitive way of life. It can be admired in terms of the strict scientific use of available materials, of the relation of building costs to habitable space, and of optimum thermal efficiency. (Richards et al., 1985, p. 14)

The latter points are confirmed in Fathy’s (1986) second book. On balance, Fathy might seem a modernist despite his own protest.

### Modernism and Tradition

As a member of a cultured urban middle class, Fathy emerged from the Beaux-Arts tradition of the late 19th century. From this, he inherits an aestheticizing outlook and an interest in decoration. This seems compatible with, not contradictory to, his reassessment of the role of the architect when he writes that “the modern advance in technology which has given us new machines and methods in building has also necessitated the intrusion of the professional architect ... [who] has taken all the pleasure of house building away from his client” (Fathy, 1969, p. 29). He does not say that the technology is fit for universal use but implies that the architect, using a professional status and expertise, can facilitate projects in situations in which the clients—like the rural poor—lack power to do so themselves. Fathy was independent of circles such as CIAM but, in retrospect, may have more in common with their outlook than might have been thought.

Fathy’s affirmation of tradition against modernism and his use of specifically Egyptian models can be understood in two ways: His romantic image of rural life produces an aestheticization of vernacular architecture, but his social concern seems genuine and practical. Mud-brick building is, he says, a no-cost solution to Egypt’s housing problem (Fathy, 1984, p. 16). The two are not exclusive; his idealization of the vernacular is linked to a wish to improve the quality of life for the peasantry, translated into projects as a contribution to postcolonial development and Egyptian nationalism.<sup>25</sup>

The difficulty for Egyptian artists was in determining what strata of Egyptian culture constituted its origins—pharaonic art, though the Arabs of Cairo are not indigenous; folk art, which might lose authenticity if incorporated into the mainstream; or Islamic decorative style, a high culture nonetheless used in buildings that housed a common life of faith for people of all classes. Each position is problematic. In the 1940s, the time of New Gourna, the folk realists were the most influential group (Karnouk, 1988, p. 47). After 1952, public buildings such as railway stations and bridges tend to adopt a pharaonic style. Today, tourism trades on little else. But the folk tradition, for an urban bourgeoisie, was perhaps as remote, in its way, as the Pharaonic.

Fanon writes of the tendency of the colonized to look to a remote past for legitimation of freedom:

The past existence of an Aztec civilization does not change anything very much in the diet of the Mexican peasant of today.... But ... this passionate search for a national culture ... finds its legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped. (Fanon, 1967, pp. 168-169)

In this respect, Fathy's mud-brick architecture has at least two possible interpretations: a rejection of the specific remote (historical) past of Egypt in favor of the living and contemporary, in the extant skills of the Nubian masons, and/or a search for a remote (geographical) present, filtered as a past through the memories of childhood stories of a lost paradise.

The vernacular has an advantage in this situation: It does not require the large-scale technology (necessarily imported) of a recreation of pharaonic gigantism; as such, it is a postcolonial solution, independent of the power, knowledge, and technologies of colonial states. That gigantism could, too, be seen merely as a replication of the imposing qualities of colonial architectures in general and in Egypt as elsewhere. The following is when he is critical of architects who import design:

The work of an architect who designs, say, an apartment house in the poor quarters of Cairo for some stingy speculator, in which he incorporates various features of modern design copied from fashionable European work, will filter down, over a period of years, through the cheap suburbs and into the village, where it will slowly poison the genuine tradition. (Fathy, 1969, p. 21)

Fathy is arguing, I suggest, both against a corruption of rural life and against the acceptance of economic colonialism. Perhaps, too, the acquired vocabulary is not just debasing for indigenous culture but an aspect of the way a colonial power assimilates the elite of the subject state by gradual means.

Tradition is contrasted to modernity, then, as a safeguard, and Fathy argues that it is based in material culture:

A tradition need not date from long ago but may have begun quite recently. As soon as a workman meets a new problem and decides how to overcome it, the first step has been taken in the establishment of a tradition. (Fathy, 1969, p. 24)

But traditionalism includes traditionally gendered space, and Fathy does not intervene in such social patterns, replicating them as an aesthetic principle:

The inward-looking Arab house, made beautiful by the feminine element of water, self-contained and peaceful ... is the domain of woman.... [I]t is of great importance that this enclosed space with the trembling liquid femininity it contains should not be broken. If there is a gap in the enclosing building, this special atmosphere flows out and runs to waste in desert sands. (Fathy, 1969, p. 57)

The metaphor is almost sexual. But aestheticization is a form of generalization and of normalization. By reducing women and houses to signs for an aesthetic principle, Fathy, as a product of the Beaux-Arts tradition, reduces architecture to embellishment. Yet there is a glimpse, too, of a recognition of somatically experienced space.

Fathy sees the peasantry as unable to conceptualize space:

The Gournis could scarcely discuss the buildings with us. They were not able to put into words even their material requirements in housing; so they were quite incapable of talking about the style or beauty of a house. A peasant never talked about art, he makes it. (Fathy, 1969, p. 40)

This raises the question as to how far Fathy allows an autonomy of spatial production and how far he imposes a model, a utopian project equivalent to that of the provision of social housing by progressive architects and planners in Europe in the inter- and postwar years. Here, at once, is Fathy's biggest weakness and proximity to modernism and his distance from it.

The difficulty in modernist social housing, for the most part, as Robbins (1996) argues, is that the poor are assumed to be unable to order their lives and must have it done for them. This produced, in effect, social engineering that despite its progressive aims, can only inhibit the occupation of an urban space. Robbins cites the 1960s Thamesmead scheme in southeast London, in which all functions are compartmentalized. Despite the good intentions of planners and designers who, he notes, were socialists, Thamesmead fails due to an assumption that physical environments condition behavior and that an ordered environment produces orderly behavior in those who cannot order themselves. To what extent, then, does Fathy order space for others?

On one hand, he made a plan for the village, but on the other, building in mud requires improvisation and is the province not of the architect but of teams of builders. Fathy describes a traditional arrangement in which the design of a house is a process of mediation between the owner and craftsmen from the same neighborhood who interpret the owner's intentions (Fathy, 1969, p. 28), and while he controlled the allocations of plots and the ground plan for each house, his drawings are more like artworks than specifications. As a member of a professional elite, Fathy had the power—though not in the end—to push through the project. The villagers, even less the landless fellahen who made up a majority of Egypt's rural population, had (and have) no such power and will make no revolution except in desperation. Fathy, furthermore, introduces Nubian masons not only to build but also to teach their skills to others. Or, at least, that was his intention. If the projects at New Gourna and New Baris failed to establish a new model of settlement, it was not for lack of aspiration but of the processes, which require engagement on the part of communities of dwellers, through which dwellers could take on the future management of their settlement. In the case of New Gourna, the plan for an imposed relocation destroyed such a possibility. In New Baris, the principle of cooperative building (and agriculture) was advanced, but there was no community. Fathy was required, so to say, to make bricks without straw.

I conclude that Fathy produced an alternative modernism. His vernacular is an invention of a new and hybrid style within his own hybrid cultural inheritance, in an emerging postcolonial situation. His aim is to create a new form of the provision of mass housing. It is a utopian vision and shares with European modernism the absence of a developed means to achieve its end. Or, to put it more carefully, Fathy's work shares with European modernism a separation of the concept of means from that of end, so that the means lead to, are the vehicle for, but do not embody the end. Hence, the undesired, against which the desired end is set as a foil or liberation, is reproduced by default. Fathy's modernism, employing the vehicle of a vernacular style and local material technology, is an alternative modernism but not, I think, an alternative to modernism. And yet his insistence on the need to respect the individual needs of each social unit (in this case, family) introduces a concern for the specific analysis of condi-

tions that distances him, by implication at least, from the universalizing (and deathly) tendency of European modernism.

## Notes

1. I visited New Gournā and New Baris in January 2005 with Louise Tyrie, a graduate student in rural development at the University of Plymouth, who previously studied Arabic at the University of Alexandria. The visit was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, with support from the University of Plymouth. I made previous visits to New Gournā in 1990 and 1997. Being assisted by an Arabic speaker enabled interviews with villagers in New Gournā and Gournā al-Jadida. New Baris is not inhabited except by a guardian (who was away) and his wife. We visited Baris and Dosh, a village south of Baris, for comparative purposes. The method of making contact with villagers was informal: We walked through the streets and responded (in Arabic) to greetings and invitations to tea (mainly from men sitting outside their houses). Women tended to stay indoors but joined the conversations. In Gournā al-Jadida, where most men work in the tourist industry, women were met working in the compounds outside their houses. These informal interviews were structured by prior agreement with Louise to include questions on the length of occupation, state of the house, family structure, uses of spaces, and other practical matters, but the conversations were allowed to develop as they would and generally lasted more than an hour. We both took notes (mine based on periodic updates of the conversation) but did not use a tape recorder. We could not be other than White visitors, and there will be an extent to which responses—as on where the occupants of Gournā came from—contain normative elements, but the villagers had no cause to invent details of daily life. We had access to a more recent house in traditional style near Gournā al-Jadida, designed and owned by Franco-Egyptian architect Olivier Sednaoui (with David Sims; Dethier, 1982, pp. 174-175), and a house under construction by builder Muhammed Alsalaam Abd al-Waarth, drawing selectively on Fathy's methods.

2. *Gournā: A Tale of Two Villages* (1969) was first published (in English, presumably for an international rather than Egyptian audience) by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, was republished as *Architecture for the Poor* by the University of Chicago Press (1973), and was republished again under the same title by the American University, Cairo (1989). The text, illustrations, and pagination are identical in all three.

3. For bibliographies on Fathy, see Richards, Serageldin, and Rastorfer (1985, pp. 171-172) and Steele (1997, pp. 203-205). A French version of *Architecture for the Poor* was published in 1977 and 1978 as *Construire avec le Peuple: Histoire d'un village d'Égypte: Gournā* (Fathy, 1977/1978). See also Fathy (1947, 1949). Fathy contributed a preface to André Ravereau's *Le M'Zab: une leçon d'architecture* (1981), an account of vernacular architecture in Algeria.

4. See Steele (1988, pp. 121-136) for two papers delivered by Fathy in Arabic.

5. Dick Doughty (2002) and Simone Swan (2002) include Fathy in a book on self-build projects in low-impact materials (Kennedy, Smith, & Wanek, 2002, pp. 249-253). Swan (1980) is informed by Fathy's work in New Mexico—Dar al-Islam, Albiquiu, 80 km north of Santa Fe (Richards et al., 1985, pp. 94, 168, plates 134-148; Steele, 1997, pp. 142-153, 201). Fathy began the project for a pilot village retreat for North American Muslims in 1980. The site of 1,200 acres is the largest on which he worked, but only the mosque and *medrasa* were completed by Fathy (Steele, 1997, p. 201).

6. Swan notes the work of the Centre de Recherches en Architecture de Terre, Grenoble, and Development Workshop, Lauzerte, in introducing the Nubian technique of mud-brick building to Mali, Niger, and Iran. In the same book, Zulficar writes, "His message has been espoused abroad by enthusiasts who have built accordingly in Algeria, Mauretania, Upper Volta [Burkina Faso], Niger, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and even as far away as New Mexico.... [H]is invaluable legacy constitutes inspiration for younger architects whose prime concerns are to preserve cultural

identity in architecture while providing appropriate and affordable shelter for the disinherited of this world" (Richards et al., 1985, p. 157). Dethier (1982, pp. 144-189) cites Fathy's projects at New Gournā and New Baris in a section headed "Architecture in Earth: New Prospects, New Projects."

7. Steele links this circle, concerned with a relation between humans and their environment, with Ramsis Wissa Wassif, founder of an art center at Haranya (Steele, 1997, pp. 58-59).

8. Fathy begins *Gournā: A Tale of Two Villages* with a reflection on childhood memories of the countryside titled "Paradise Lost." He writes of his mother's attachment to it and his father's distaste and admits that he was 27 before he set foot there (Fathy, 1969, p. 1).

9. In 1943 and 1944, a malaria epidemic wiped out a third of the population of Gournā. Fathy notes this and a cholera outbreak in lower Egypt in 1947 and that villagers drank water from open wells (Fathy, 1969, p. 166).

10. Photographs are displayed of performances but may be a few years old. The theater was restored in 1983 and is under government control.

11. Rastorfer adds that houses do not have running water, though this does now appear to be provided.

12. The Egyptian government offers tax incentives to settle in the New Valley. Baris has expanded in the past few years, with many new buildings in a perceived Western style and others more traditional with a walled enclosure but in industrial materials. Steele notes the influx of the rural poor to Cairo, which began in the late 19th century but increased sharply after 1945 when the limited area of agricultural land (in a country that is mainly desert) could no longer support population growth (Steele, 1988, p. 76). He adds, "This level has now reached uncontrollable proportions, and the rural poor that Fathy was seeking to provide with clean, dignified and inexpensive housing all flock to the big city seeking a chance for a better life" (p. 76). By 1998, around half of Egypt's population lived in urban areas (Drakakis-Smith, 2000, Figure 1.2).

13. Nasr came to power after the overthrow of the corrupt monarchy. The nationalist party won the elections of 1950; in 1952, the Free Officers Movement led by General Muhammad Nagib forced the abdication of Farouk and assumed power, Gamal Abd al-Nasr being elected as president in 1954. The Suez crisis followed an Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt after Nasr's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. The purpose of the nationalization was to raise funds to build the High Dam as a centerpiece of Egypt's modernization (see Fluehr-Lobban, 1990, pp. 29-39).

14. A sketch for a street of interconnected houses with party walls does, however, show an irregular street width, with narrow openings and wider intervals (Steele, 1997, p. 142).

15. See Goldfinger (1993) on villages in Morocco and Tunisia. See Dethier (1982, pp. 18-19) for an illustration of a village in the Dra Valley, Morocco. See Ravereau (1981) on a case in Algeria.

16. The following is from Rastorfer's conversations with villagers in Baris: "Confined to the workshop, a number of stories have sprung up around them. Some say they were displaced by the Israelis in the Sinai and temporarily relocated in Bariz by the government. A more credible story is that the heads of the families were hashish smugglers in Ismailiya and that they were detained in the oasis as retribution for their offence. A record of their story has been made by children who scratched drawings on the village walls of ships remembered from the Suez" (Richards et al., 1985, p. 165). I saw several such graffiti of ships in the market building. They resemble, too, the ships that used to figure in *haj* paintings—house decoration to commemorate the return of a *haji* from Mecca—before air travel became the norm.

17. I visited this site briefly in 1997. I asked the taxi driver how people were persuaded to live there. He replied, "They shouted at them." This followed damage to several houses in the old village by heavy rain.

18. Electricity has been installed in most of Gournā al-Jadida, where there are also several satellite dishes.

19. Fathy himself notes another possible cause of subsidence. After the site flooded in 1948, the ground reverted to a parched (*sharaki*) state: "Enormous cracks began to appear ... going

down as much as three meters and as wide as fifty centimeters at the surface.... Since the subsoil water rises every year to within two meters of the surface, and the foundations of the houses in [New] Gourni were of the customary strip type, made of rubble masonry and earth mortar, laid in trenches a meter and a half deep, each house would be sitting on a thin crust of soil floating on liquid mud. The cracks would allow the soil to slide laterally, and the houses themselves would certainly crack" (Fathy, 1969, p. 178). Fathy's response was to provide deeper trenches filled with sand under the stone rubble. He adds, though, that cracks in mud-brick buildings are easy to repair (see pp. 221-223).

20. Steele says, "The Gourni never had any intention of leaving their old homes and way of life, but simply went through the motions of co-operation with this representative from the Ministry of Housing in order to forestall any radical measures involving forced evacuation" (Steele, 1998, p. 74).

21. Right Livelihood Awards are made by the Right Livelihood Foundation, a registered charity with representatives in Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. For details of awards between 1980 and 1985, see *People and Planet* (Green Books, 1987); between 1986 and 1989, see Woodhouse (1990). The Aga Khan Award for Architecture is given to projects that significantly (not exclusively) benefit a Muslim population and include many socially based projects. See Aga Khan Award for Architecture (2001, 2005) for details of more recent awards, such as the Barefoot College (Social Work and Research Centre) at Tilonia, Rajasthan, India (Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 2001, pp. 77-88). The idea of handing over the construction of settlements to dwellers, pioneered by Fathy and Turner to an extent and practiced at the Barefoot College, is becoming a norm for social housing in postapartheid South Africa (Umenyilora, 2000).

22. "Doshi's nationalistic pride, independent spirit and desire for autonomy is certainly equally [*sic*] to, if not greater than, Fathy's, yet his method of expression has been different. His emphasis has not been on deriving a clearly recognizable 'Indian architecture', but on a logical, theoretical archaeology that will lead him to the principles behind the form" (Steele, 1998, p. 90).

23. The *Description de l'Egypte* was produced in Paris in 23 volumes between 1809 and 1823, using material gathered during Napoleon Bonaparte's military expedition to Egypt in 1798 and gradually brought to France after his withdrawal. Said writes, "For with Napoleon's occupation of Egypt processes were set in motion between East and West that still dominate our contemporary cultural and political perspectives ... [the *Description*] provided a scene or setting for Orientalism, since Egypt and subsequently other Islamic lands were viewed as the live province ... of effective Western knowledge about the Orient" (Said, 1978, pp. 41-42).

24. Steele worries that Dar el-Islam has a fundamentalist tendency: "Tradition is most distilled in religion, making him the logical choice to confer architectural legitimacy as [perhaps it should be *on*] one of the largest Muslim communities to ever be established in the United States, in spite of the fact that his typologies are once again inappropriate to their time, function, and location" (Steele, 1997, p. 185).

25. Egypt in the 1920s to 1940s was a puppet state under British domination. It had a constitutional monarchy and a form of political organization, but Faud was not a popular monarch—Hopwood (1982, p. 15) says he spoke Italian better than Arabic—and his successor Farouk was seen as corrupt. During this period, Egyptian nationalism sought cultural representation. The Young Egypt movement (founded in 1938) was quasi-fascist and sought a revived pharaonic style in visual culture; the Muslim Brotherhood (founded 1928) was Arabist; the Egyptian Communist Party (founded 1922, many of its members Europeans resident in Egypt) took a more internationalist approach in art as in ideology. There were also liberals and reformists. The prevailing cultural representation of nationalism in the 1940s took the form of a revived folk realist art (Karnouk, 1988, pp. 47-72), which could be read as a parallel development to Fathy's vernacularism.

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