ARCHITECTURE IN FACT AND FICTION: THE CASE OF THE NEW GOURNA VILLAGE IN UPPER EGYPT

In 1946, the architect Hassan Fathy (1900–89; fig. 1) was commissioned by the Egyptian government to plan and build a new village for the inhabitants of Old Gourna, who for generations had lived directly above the rock-hewn tombs in the cemetery of Thebes on the western mountain side of the Nile, near Luxor (fig. 2). The purpose of the project was to put an end to the villagers’ age-old livelihood of robbing antiquities from the Pharaonic tombs and offering them up for sale to archaeologists, tourists, and anyone else who set store by these treasures.

The planning and building of the new village took about three years; when it was finished art historians, anthropologists, and sociologists, mainly in the West, extolled the inventiveness of Fathy’s design and his extraordinary sensitivity to climatic problems, local materials, and traditional Islamic architecture. The villagers on the mountain, however, sullenly resisted the government’s offer to relocate them and would not consent to move to Fathy’s model village.

Official reports and articles published in Egypt and in the West, as well as the book written by the architect himself in 1969, *Architecture for the Poor*,1 ascribed the refusal of the Gourna community to red tape, failure to supply alternative sources of income, and other problems,2 and presented a one-sided view, largely in the form of value judgments that did not reflect the open and more especially the hidden conflicts between the authorities and the villagers.

The case of New Gourna, ostensibly a story about the social cohesion of a community of villager grave robbers refusing to give up a lucrative livelihood and holding their own against the establishment’s professed endeavor to effect a major improvement in

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their lives encapsulates another story, another field of significance, which raises questions about the ability of visual representation—an architectural project, in this instance—to reconstruct and preserve an authentic culture. Here we will deal with the question whether Hassan Fathy's model village, universally acknowledged to be a masterly reconstruction of an authentic experience from the strictly architectural point of view, was genuinely attuned to the mental state and life patterns of the population for which it was planned.

On the face of things, the answer is yes. In his design Fathy stayed close to the Nubian tradition, using mud brick, its characteristic building material, Pharaonic architectonic elements, such as unsupported arches and vaults; and, in particular, upholding the traditional values of Islam, answering the fundamental and all-encompassing need for observance of the Muslim mores, and demonstrating coherence between structural and sociological needs.

The underlying organizational principle of Fathy's plan is a physical manifestation of the balancing of the needs of the Islamic social system, with its clear separation of private life, as reflected in the traditional roles of men and women, from participation in the economic and religious life of the community. Throughout the project, the architect was guided by this paradigm of seclusion versus exposure, as conveyed by the three-tiered hierarchy of spaces—public, semi-public, and private—in the village structure (fig. 3). The public space was composed of the main street, the central square, and the buildings opening onto it: a khan, a mosque, a theater, a village hall, etc. The streets were wide, well lit and airy, and allowed for an easy flow of traffic (fig. 4). The semi-public space consisted of narrow, intimate, shaded lanes winding their way towards the small squares at the center of clusters of houses linked by extended family relations (badana) (fig. 5). The private space took the form of a building with a central open courtyard, enclosed by a fence, modeled on the qa'a, the medieval Cairo dwelling.

The public space was designed for the men, the private space for the women, the family, and the livestock. The semi-public space linked the two. The private space spilled into the semi-public space on