

Viola Bertini

Hassan Fathy. The Monkeys and the Giraffes

Abstract

In 1980 Hassan Fathy was awarded the first Aga Khan Chairman Award, a prize specially created as a recognition to the value of his career. Until then, very few texts were published on his work, the first ones dating at the beginning of the 70s. It's only at the end of his long career that the work of the Egyptian architect began to be known and internationally recognized.

The article contextualizes Hassan Fathy's work, discusses the reasons why it was forgotten when he was still alive, its rediscovering in the 80s and the most recent interest paid by the scientific community. Emphasis is given to the relevance of Fathy's thinking, constantly aimed at finding a technically and culturally appropriate architecture.

Key-words

Tradition — Modernity — Appropriateness

The Monkeys and the Giraffes (Fathy w.d.) is the title of an anecdote written by Hassan Fathy, in which the Egyptian architect ironically discussed the topic of colonialism. The short story, set in a scenario where pollution and nuclear war caused the extinction of mankind, tells of the monkeys' oppression against notable giraffes, convinced to shorten their neck to appear more attractive. The giraffes' modification, in addition to depriving them of their original elegance, transforms them into weak and frivolous creatures, no longer able to reach the foliage on the trees and therefore forced to depend on others for their survival. The love of a princess giraffe for a commoner convinces her to refuse cosmetic surgery to preserve her height and thus to be able to kiss her beloved. The episode pushes the other notable giraffes to reflect on their miserable condition of life, caused by a loss of identity, moving them to a revolt and so getting rid from the apes' tyranny.

The parable represents a Fathy's reflection on the status and value of culture in postcolonial societies, alluding to the Egyptian society to which he belonged and which he frequently criticized with harshness in his writings (Fathy 1973, p. 19-27). It's in contrast to foreign cultural domination and to the importation of western architectural models, in particular from Europe, that the architect conceived and structured his work.

The theoretical and design work carried out by Fathy, starting from the thirties, is geared towards the identification of an appropriate architecture with respect to the cultural context of reference which: according to the architect's vision, this is the world of Arab-Islamic *koinè* as a whole. In the architectural practice, this research is translated into the choice of looking at the past and selecting from the basin of tradition a repertoire of for-

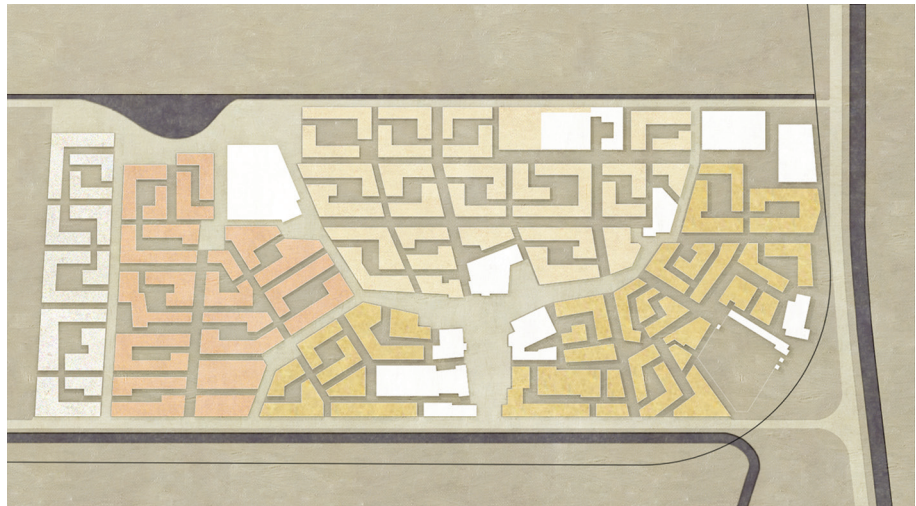


Fig. 1

Plan of New Gourni Village, Luxor, 1946. Drawing by the author. The drawing shows the parts of which the village is composed and, in white, the public buildings.

mal, figurative and technical elements that, as still considered valid in the present days, can be transposed into the contemporary. The compositional materials that Fathy chose as syntagmas of his own language are elements of the vernacular or refined, Egyptian or Arab tradition, some still alive and others which are lost. These elements, transposed into the present and re-assembled together according to new orders and meanings, configure an architecture which is new, but made of familiar figures recalled to echo. Fathy's choice to follow the genealogical chain of the form and to perpetuate it is an intellectual operation that, if on the one hand is contextualized in a precise period of the Egyptian history, on the other hand draws Fathy near to some architects of the Twentieth century who can be considered part of another kind of modernity (Semerani 2000).

Hassan Fathy was born in 1900 in Alexandria and graduated in Cairo in 1926. He worked in the Egyptian capital for a large part of his long career, up to his death in 1989. The argument that he developed within the architectural field, aimed at reinventing the words of the architectural Egyptian and Arab language, reflects the operation carried out in Egypt by the Alexandrian and Cairene intellectuals in the early twentieth-century. In the first half of the Twenty Century Egypt was in the process of constitution of an autonomous state: the establishment of an independent Republic called for the definition of a re-founded national identity. Thus the Egyptian artists and intellectuals, freeing themselves from the main European thinking, began to look at the origin of their culture and the rural word, founding a myth on the Pharaonic age and finding in the *vernacular* the expression of an archetypal character. It's mainly starting from these two ideas that painters, sculptors and writers started to free themselves from the colonial past and to discover and reinvent the Egyptian national identity. The same kind of operation was made by Hassan Fathy in the architectural field. The choice of relating to the tradition is a statement, it has a programmatic value and it tries to define a language that has national and identity character. Fathy's work can hardly be understood without taking into account the strong relationship that exists between it and the cultural period in which it was conceived. And probably it's in this link that we may find one of the deepest reasons of his work and a possible collocation in the architectural history of the last century, where Fathy's name hardly appears.

The Egyptian architect was forgotten for a long time; excluded, due to his heterodox interpretation of modernity, from the reconstruction of the events that involved the theory and the architectural practice of the XX



Fig. 2
New Gourna mosque, Luxor,
1946.
Photo by the author (2010).

Century. Probably, it isn't by mistake that Fathy was a friend of and appreciated the work of Dimitris Pikionis¹, whom he met during the years he spent in Greece collaborating with Constantinos Doxiadis². Fathy, Pikionis and Doxiadis, along with Joze Plecnik, Louis Barragan and many others (Ferlenga 2018), are all part of that large and heterogeneous family of architects who, standing at the edge of modern thinking, have been ignored for long. Appreciated in their respective countries, but often recognized abroad only after their death or at the end of their career, each of these architects dealt in his own way with the topic of the relationship between architecture and place, making of it the main material of the project and trying to lead, reinventing them, the forms of the past into the contemporary.

This is the case of Hassan Fathy who, in 1980, was awarded the first *Aga Khan Chairman Award*, a prize which was specially created as a recognition to the value of his work³. So far there were only few texts on his work, the first of which are dated at the beginning of the 70's⁴. The texts followed the publication of Fathy's book *Gourna: A Tale of Two villages* (Fathy 1969), republished in 1973 with the title *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt* (Fathy 1973). The book, divided in four parts following the structure of a musical work, tells the stories of the construction of the village of New Gourna, close to Luxor. The narration and the epilogue of this project, which was partially a failure, of the village construction are a pretext to introduce some of the main issues that Fathy posed at the base of his architecture. The architect discusses themes such as the relationship with the tradition and its meaning in the present, the role of architect, owner and craftsman in the building making process, the use of an appropriate technology with respect to the geographical and cultural context.

The *ante tempore* experiment in "participatory design" carried out in New Gourna by Hassan Fathy received some attention from the European press (Mortimer 1947, 1947a, 1956). However, it was only after the publication of his book, later translated into several languages, that the scientific community internationally began to recognise the work of the Egyptian master. As pointed out by Pyla Panayiota (Panayiota 2009, p. 715-730), the alternative offered by Fathy to rationalist thinking and his valorisation of local



Fig. 3

The khan arcades in New Gourni village, Luxor, 1946. Photo by the author (2010).

culture found a fertile ground in the context of the Seventies, when modern functionalism and internationalism started to be questioned, particularly as part of a general critic of the cities of the postcolonial world and the developing countries. Moreover, some of the ideas proposed by Fathy found an antecedent in the publication of the books *Architecture Without Architects* by Bernard Rudofsky (Rudofsky 1964) and *Shelter and Society* by Paul Oliver (Oliver 1969), both seminal and focused on the value of local anonymous architecture, i.e. an architecture which wasn't planned but, using the Egyptian architect's word, which had «the appearance of having grown out of the landscape that the trees of the district have» (Fathy 1973, p. 44). A little more after the first publication of *Architecture for the Poor*, the choice of focusing the second International Architecture Exhibition of Venice (1982) on the topic of *Architecture in Islamic Countries* seems to be emblematic. The exhibition, curated by Paolo Portoghesi, presented, among others, the work of Hassan Fathy, to whom a tribute was dedicated in the exhibition catalogue (AA.VV. 1982). The text was written by



Fig. 4

View of the khan at New Gurna, Luxor, 1946.
Photo by the author (2010).

Attilio Petruccioli who chose to explain the work of the Egyptian master through a series of texts, taken from Fathy's writings and articulated in some thematic groups: architecture, architectural tradition, appropriate technologies, client – craftsman – architect, place meaning and Islamic architecture. The themes are those that Petruccioli identified as dear to Fathy, clarifying, at the beginning of the text, how his architectural production, «rather articulated and not entirely homogeneous», hadn't been yet the object of systematic studies. Therefore, Petruccioli wrote: «It's difficult to make a critical evaluation of [Fathy's] work that, overcoming the enthusiastic support for a master's prophetic figure and the role of standard-bearer of poor technologies, is able to place Hassan Fathy in the context of contemporary architecture» (Petruccioli 1982, p. 45).

The essay published in the Biennale's catalog is one of the first to pose the problem of the search for a possible Fathy's location in the panorama of the twentieth century architectural history. The articles published on Fathy during these years put the accent on his technical choices - the use of mud bricks, Nubian vaults and traditional climatic devices - and frequently tended to associate his figure with the idea of vernacular architecture. It's often absent the attempt to thoroughly investigate Fathy's work, contextualize it, figure out its reasons and understand, regardless of the stylistic and formal outcomes, its intellectual value, that is its modern character. At the same time, Fathy's work began to be associated with a precise category, that of critical regionalism, which Kenneth Frampton describes as: «a hypothetical and real condition in which a local culture of architecture is consciously evolved in express opposition to the domination of hegemonic power. In my view, this is a theory of building which, while accepting the potentially liberative role of modernization, resists being totally absorbed by forms of optimized production and consumption» (Frampton 1988, p. 56). In particular Suha Özkan in the introduction to the book *Regionalism in Architecture* (Özkan 1985), William J. R. Curtis in the essay *Towards an Authentic Regionalism* (Curtis 1986, p. 24-34) and James Steele in the writing *The New Traditionalists* (Steele 1991, p. 40-47) are the first to make an attempt to classify Fathy's work in the framework of an architectural movement. It's therefore in the mid-eighties and early nineties, following the awarding of the Aga Khan prize and the Second International-

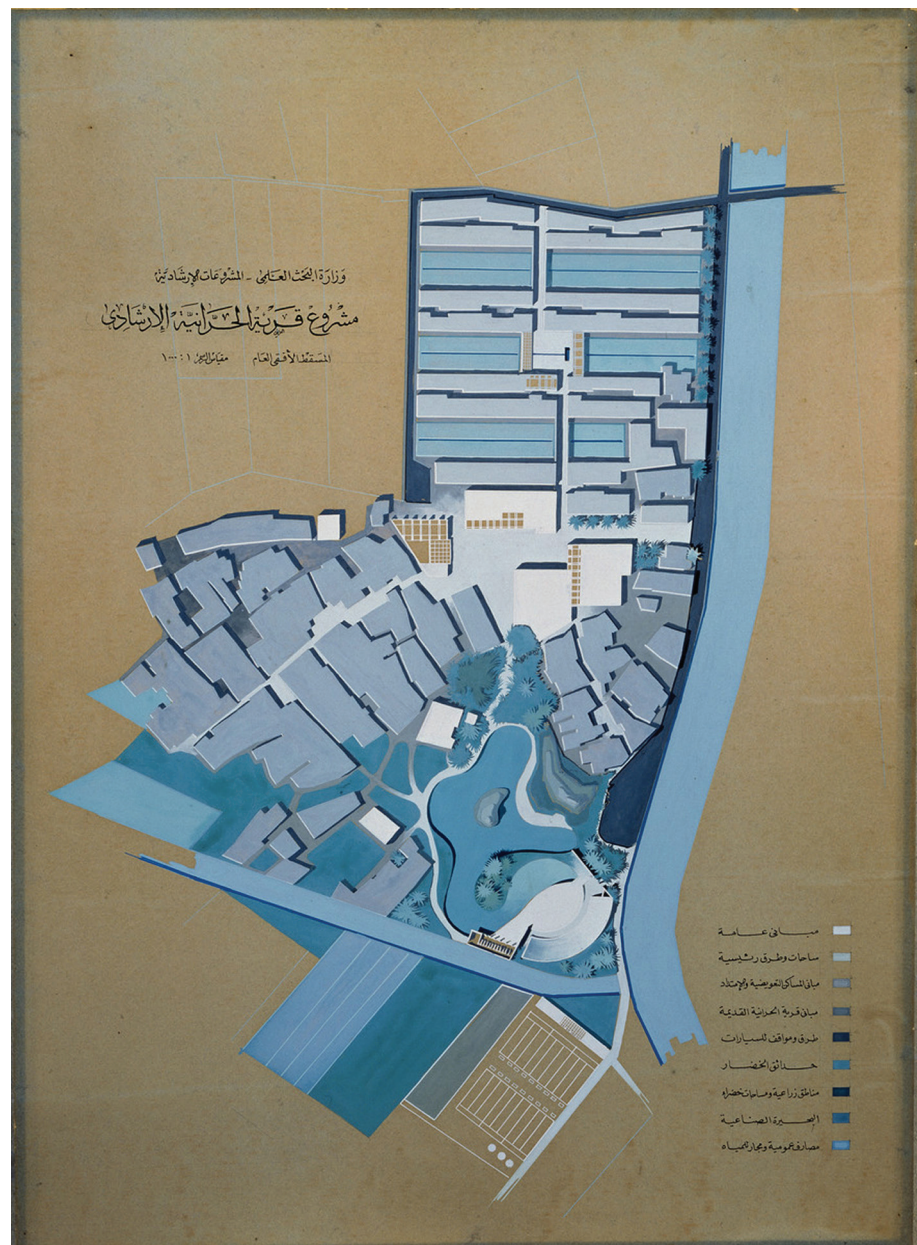


Fig. 5
Hassan Fathy, plan of Harranya
village, 40s. © Aga Khan Trust
for Culture.

al Architecture Exhibition of Venice, that the Egyptian architect's work begun to be discussed in the wider architectural panorama of the twentieth century and put aside to that of other architects who made a similar thinking on the relationship between tradition and modernity.

At that time Fathy's was dealing with the last of his major urban projects, the village of Dar Al-Islam in Abiquiu, New Mexico (1981). The architect was asked to design a mosque and a madrasa for the Islamic community of Dar Al-Islam, in the United States, teaching the local population how to build mud bricks, Nubian vaults and domes. The project is emblematic both because it demonstrates how Fathy was then recognized outside the Egyptian borders, and because it clearly explains the architect's attitude towards tradition, completing a theoretical and design research he started about fifty years before. Although the place of the project isn't part of that Arab-Islamic *koinè* world to which Fathy referred to in the attempt to outline his own tradition, his architecture remained substantially unchanged. In part this is due to the codification of a language that, at that point of his career, represented the architect's stylistic code, and in part it's justified in Fathy's attempt to build spaces that are the expression of what he called



Fig. 6

View of the mosque and madrasa at Dar Al-Islam village, Abiquiu, New Mexico (USA), 1981. © Aga Khan Trust for Culture, photo by Said Zulficar.

Arab feeling (Fathy 1998, p. 63). The Dar Al-Islam settlement is located in a desert environment and is designed for a Muslim community. These project starting data, the place and the theme, explain the choices he made: «We're not taking decorative details from Islamic architecture, we're taking design principles [...] How were we going to build a mosque in America? It was a real challenge for the architect: how were we to build a mosque that was in harmony [with its surroundings]? The only way [...] to build a mosque and be sure that one wasn't going to get one's head chopped off like the missionaries in China was to look at the basic principles of Islamic architecture, mosque architecture. Mosque architecture has a symbolic aspect [...] and an ornamental aspect and a style aspect and so on. The most important thing about religious architecture is that it be characterized by good faith: towards the doctrine; towards the environment, like we said; and to the civilization, culture and traditions. So, [this good faith consists in] the design principles behind the mosque, not the ornamentation and stylistic details. These were all things that helped us in what we were doing. We wanted to be sure that the Santa Fe mosque would be appropriate to the environment: we used local materials, we didn't move anything a single millimetre – it all came from the surrounding environment. Materials like mud, you know, silt, defined the form [the building would take] so the result was bound to be natural [...] most basically of all, in terms of its texture and colour. It's the same mud, the same colour, as the environment – that's one aspect of good faith [...] And thank God, having done away with architecture of style, I mean [an architecture of] decorative elements, we went back to the basic design principles, their symbolic language, and the building turned out» (Damluji 2018, p. 263-264). Fathy's words clarify how the use of raw earth and forms and spatial systems derived from tradition respond to the need of giving life to an appropriate architecture with respect to a climatic, symbolic and cultural context and capable to activate a mechanism of recognition by the individual and the community in the built form. Yet this operation has often been misunderstood.

The public buildings and the hundred houses built in New Gurna (1946) remained unused for a long time. For many years the inhabitants of the ancient village refused to abandon their old houses and live in the small town designed by Hassan Fathy. A refusal which was partially caused by

Fig. 7

Hassan Fathy, Plan and elevation of the mosque at Dar Al-Islam, Abiquiu, New Mexico (USA).
© Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

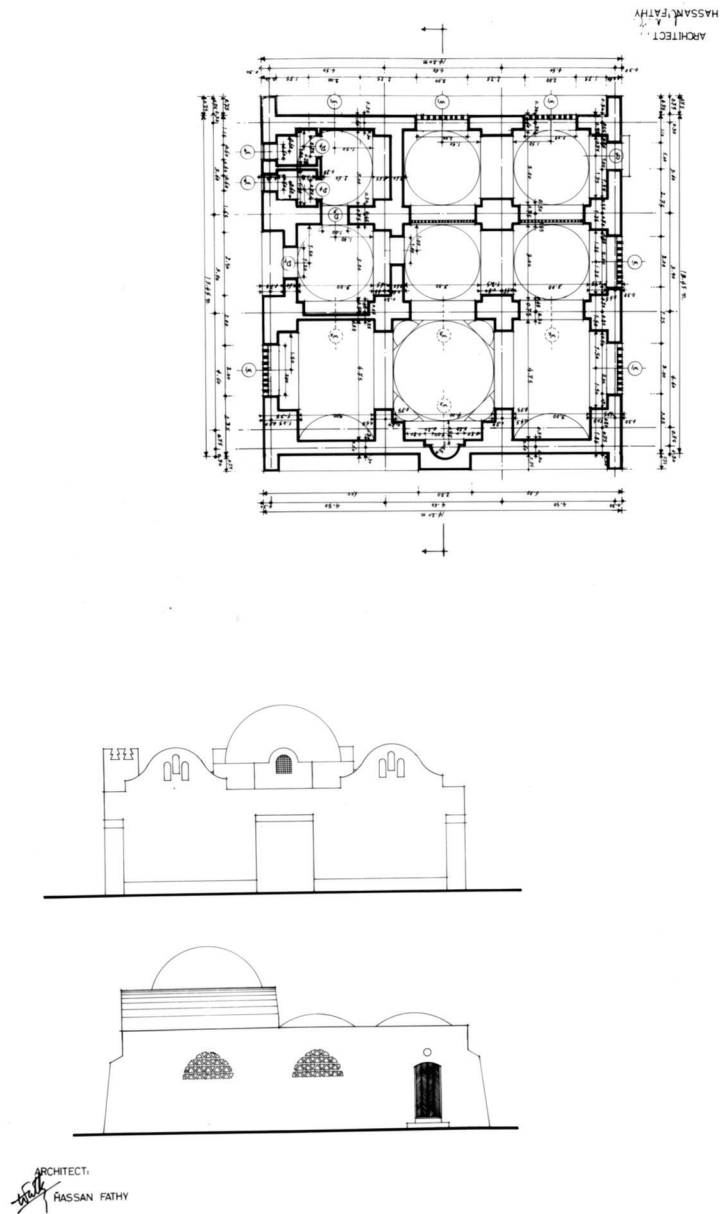




Fig. 8
Casaroni house, guest hall,
Shabramant, 1980.
Photo by the author (2010).

the inhabitants' firm opposition to the Government's decision to transfer the entire village outside the archaeological site of the Valley of the Kings and Queens, but also by their reluctance towards the idea of going back to forms and traditional ways of life (Panayioti 2009). The myth of modernity and the inhabitants' longed-for-Westernization could hardly welcome the Arcadian landscape proposed by Hassan Fathy. His idea of *Arab feeling* didn't please the Egyptians because it was far from an idea of progress which was assimilated to Western life models. It was appreciated even less by those to whom Fathy's work was specifically addressed, since these people, pursuing well-being, have shown little interest in its cultural value. Thus, paradoxically, the architect who for most of his life dedicated himself to the search for a technologically and culturally appropriate architecture, addressed mainly to the less well-off classes, was better understood and esteemed in the bourgeois and noble context. The village of New Gourna was uninhabited for long and then modified by the inhabitants, who replaced the raw earth vaults and domes with reinforced concrete roofs, while New Baris village (1965) remained completely unfinished. Instead, Fathy successfully built many villas for the upper middle class and buildings for princes and sovereigns. This led to a further misunderstanding of his work and its semantic emptying.

The critics of the nineties began to discuss Hassan Fathy's cultural legacy, trying to understand how, partly with knowledge of the cause, teaching, writing and building, and, partly unconsciously, the Egyptian architect gave life to a school. However, a significant distinction should be done between those who have really assimilated his thought and those who, on the contrary, have transformed his architecture into a style. Among the first James Steele, talking about *new traditionalists* (Steele 1991), includes Abdel Wahed El Wakil, Rasem Badran and Omar El-Farouk, each of whom has developed his own personal way of working with tradition: Wakil relating to the symbolic and geometric aspects of the traditional structures, Badran looking at the transformation processes of typological matrices and El-Farouk working on the language. Concerning the second, Hassan-Uddin writes about a *Disneyfication* process, that «represents a deterioration and a denaturing of the signs and symbols that Fathy used and intended» (Kahn 1999, p. 56-57). In this regard, Khaled Asfour discusses the birth in Egypt of a praxis that reduces «Fathy's architecture to few images to be



Fig. 9

Terrace roofs in the villas for the administrators of the village, New Baris, Kharga Oasis, 1965. Photo by the author (2010).

readily recycled in their current design [the design of many Arab architects] » (Asfour 1991, p. 54-59). Moreover, Curtis writes: «Through no fault of Fathy's own, his ideas - or rather his images - have been appropriated as, a sort of instant Islamic identity kit; a piece of acceptable costume to show that one is doing the right thing. This travesty of his critical stance into the terminology of an easily consumable 'peasantism' reminds one of the way that current fundamentalist ideologies delight in reducing mosque typology to a clichéd rendition of dome, minaret and muqarnas even in areas where one or all of these elements have never played a previous role; at issue once again is the distinction between signs that have no expressive base and the genuine reinvigoration of symbols» (Curtis 1986, p. 24-31). What actually happened is that Fathy's way of conceiving architecture, in his intentions mainly aimed at ordinary people and little understood in his country when he was still alive, has now become in Egypt a sort of *status symbol* for the wealthy class. Improperly identified with the vernacular and the Islamic, the language of the Egyptian architect has lost its qualities, its research character and therefore its meaning. But it's exactly in the meaning that we may find the deeper value of Fathy's lesson and its relevance in present days. Little has changed in the Arab architectural context since when Fathy started his personal battle against the importation of foreign architectural models, completely detached from the cultural context. Twice relevant because the process of Westernization has been joined by a tendency to schematically and without any founding thinking propose the stylistic elements of traditional architecture, often referring to Fathy's work as a validation tool.

In light of these considerations, the interest that the international architectural debate paid to Fathy over the past decade is significant. The Egyptian architect has been the object of a renewed attention by many scholars and architects, mainly from the West. It's paradoxically in Europe, and not in the postcolonial world to which his work was addressed, that the cultural legacy of Hassan Fathy's thought begun to be understood and assimilated. Only today, almost thirty years after his death, Fathy's work, «for a long time wrongly presented as a curious case of post-modern-vernacular» (Furlenga 2015, p. 60), has been re-interpreted as the expression of another kind of modernity. Much, perhaps too much, time has been needed to understand the validity of his lesson, which today seems very timely.

Fig. 10

New Baris village, now submerged by the sand, Kharga Oasis, 1965. Photo by the author (2010).



Regardless of figurative outcomes, the search for an architecture capable of building a relationship with the place, built for man by questioning the past and establishing a dialogue with the present, based on the geographical context and appropriate not only from the climatic point of view, but also and above all cultural, are topics on which contemporary architectural culture is questioning itself, demonstrating how the Egyptian master's lesson has still plenty to teach.

«The entire man is there – his intelligent collaboration with the universe, his struggle against it, and that final defeat in which the mind and matter which supported him perish almost at the same time. What he intended affirms itself forever in the ruin of things» (Yourcenar 1983, p. 58).

Notes

¹ In February 1958 Dimitri Pikionis gave to his friend Hassan Fathy a collection of poems by the Greek Kavafis. The book is stored at the Rare Book and Special Collection Library of the American University of Cairo, where Hassan Fathy's personal library is located. The dedication reads «To my dear Hassan Fathy, D. Pikionis and Imo, 20-2-1958» and testifies the knowledge and the friendship between the two. A short text in which Fathy appreciated Pikionis' work is published in FERLENGA A. (1999) – *Pikionis 1887-1968*. Electa, Milano, 304.

² Following the epilogue of New Gournia project, which remained unfinished, Fathy accepted the invitation from the Greek architect Constantinos Doxiadis to go and work with him in his Athenian office. Fathy collaborated with Doxiadis from 1957 to 1961. He actively participated in parts of the projects on which the office was working in that moment: the *National Housing Program* (1955-1960), in the context of which the housing needs of the main Iraqi cities (Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, Kirkuk e Surstinar) and the rural regions of the country were studied; the development plan for the *Greater Mussayib* area, south of Baghdad (1958), where the project of a system of agricultural communities and possible residential solutions were elaborated; the design of the satellite city of Korangi in Pakistan (1958) and the research program *City of the Future*.

³ The *Aga Khan Chairman Award* is part of the *Aga Khan Award for Architecture*. The award is given as a recognition to the value of the work of architects and scholars whose work is considered particularly significant in the context of Islamic culture. In addition to Hassan Fathy (1980), the award was given to: the Iraqi architect and educator Rifat Chadirji (1986); the Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa (2001) and the Islamic art and architecture historian Oleg Grabar (2010).

⁴ Among the texts published on Fathy in the early seventies see: EL-ARABY, K. M. G. (1972) – “Fathy Hassan: Gournia: a Tale of Two Villages”. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 38, 191-192; Arida, M. (1972) “Hassan Fathy ‘Architecture Égyptienne du Peuple’”. *L'Illustre du Proche-Orient*, 15, 54-55; IBRAHIM, A. (1971) – “Hassan Fathy ... on Balance”. *Alam al-Bina*, 71, 3; KHATR, N. (1972) – “Hassan Fathy”. *Al-Nahar*, 4, 7-8; Richards, J. M. (1970) – “Gournia, a Lesson in Basic Architecture”. *Architectural Review*, 147, 109-112.

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Viola Bertini is a Ph.D. architect in Architectura Composition at Luav University of Venice with a thesis entitled "Hassan Fathy, the Invention of Tradition. Study of the project for the Village of New Baris". At Luav she is currently a research fellow and a teaching assistant. She has been contract professor at Politecnico di Milano.

She participates in conferences, international workshops and design competitions. Among her research topics there are the relationship between tradition and modernity, the cultural landscapes and the relationship between architecture and tourism in marginal areas.

In 2016 she was visiting researcher at the Universidade de Evora. She also worked, as a consultant researcher, with the American University of Beirut.