

# Hassan Fathy: The Unacknowledged Conscience Of Twentieth Century Architecture

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**Abstract—** Hassan Fathy is one of the most important architects of the twentieth century, whose works have had a widespread influence on the architecture of the Islamic world and whose ideas have extended to the Western world. This paper focuses on the complexity of Fathy's architecture and the richness and range of its theoretical intentions. It also assesses Fathy's attitudes towards modernism and the International Style as well as the critical responses to his works and philosophy. The relationship of his philosophy to movements such as Post-modernism, community architecture and self-help building, eco-architecture and sustainability and tendencies such as neo-vernacular and earth building are also examined. The main objective of this paper is to reveal the significance of Fathy's approach while placing him within the wider perspective of twentieth-century architecture

**Index Term—** Architects, Criticism, Earth Architecture, Modern Architecture, Postmodern Architecture, Regionalism, Sustainability,

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Egyptian architect and master builder, Hassan Fathy (1900-1989) was one of the first architects to break with modern architecture and to found a new approach based on a conception of interpreting forms and masses from the past. He was unique in believing that this language could exist alongside that of an aggressively modern one that cut all ties with the past. In addition to Fathy's tireless efforts to establish his traditional approach, throughout his life he struggled to improve the housing and living environments of the poor, especially in the Third World. Fathy's efforts were acknowledged by several awards, including the Chairman's Prize, Aga Khan Awards for Architecture (1980), the Right Livelihood Award (1980) and the first Gold Medal of the International Union of Architects (1984).

The sheer span of time involved in Fathy's career, from 1927 to 1989, makes the study of his architecture fascinating as well as problematic. Fathy's career encompassed the development of modern architecture and the International Style from the 1930s to the 1970s, as well as the formulation of the Postmodern Movement from the 1970s onward. Born in 1900, Fathy was of a slightly younger generation than Walter Gropius (1883-1969), Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-

1969), Le Corbusier (1887-1965) and Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983). He was almost an exact contemporary of key figures in the development of modern architecture including, Alvar Aalto (1898-1976), Louis Khan (1901-1974) and Philip Johnson (b.1906). Fathy's career also extended to overlap with the next generation of postmodernists architects including Charles Moore (1925-1974), Robert Venturi (b.1925), Aldo Rossi (b.1931) and Michael Graves (b.1934).

## II. FATHY AND THE IDEOLOGY OF THE MODERN MOVEMENT

Beyond the evident typology in Fathy's buildings and the guiding architectural principles which were pioneered through his work, his architecture was shaped by a conceptual framework which developed an understanding of contemporary responses to modern environmental, urban and societal conditions of existence. Fathy's approach was a transformation of a prevalent modern architecture language to a social metaphor evoking honesty, efficiency and availability. Fathy's vision of architecture also extended beyond the utilitarian and the mundane towards its ability to shape people's lives and contribute to their sense of identity. His concept was that the more people are involved in creating their environment, the more healthy they would be physically and psychologically. This was the standpoint of Fathy's architecture as well as the basic tenant of his beliefs [1].

Fathy's most important contribution to the debates over the development of twentieth-century architecture probably lies in his continuous opposition to the International Style and the phenomenon of universality in architecture. He distrusted the inability of twentieth-century architects to answer the specific environmental issues of particular regions and believed that the answer must lie in the recreation of forms true to the region as well as to methods of construction. He valued architecture that is rooted in the location and the culture of a region, as opposed to an imported internationalism, rooted in a common technology rather than a common humanism. The way in which Fathy pronounced the inadequacy of the ideology of modernism in fulfilling human needs attracted the attention of the architectural profession worldwide. By questioning the relevance of modernist solutions to the developing world Fathy not only called attention to the limited range of solutions that modernism was able to offer, but also drew international

attention to the larger economic, social and cultural objectives which twentieth-century architecture needed to address. Fathy, in fact, gave a voice to the architectural concerns of a vast number of people for whom modern western architecture remained both alien and ultimately irrelevant.

The assertive individuality of Fathy's concept also provided ample fuel for his critics. But the characteristics of this criticism in itself is testimony to the importance of Fathy's ideology to the architecture of the twentieth century. Like, Udo Kultermann, who believed that today no one can create architecture on a craft basis,[2] Moshe Safdie rejected Fathy's belief that local materials and traditional building methods, without modern technology, are the answer to the problem of housing in both the city and the countryside [3].

Another aspect of the criticism of Fathy is the attempt of James Richards to claim him as a covert modernist. Richards claimed that Fathy's ideals and those of the Modern Movement were similar to an extent "that he might find difficult to accept". Although Fathy was suspicious of the ideology of the Modern Movement, Richards believed that he has been "part of it in the sense that he too aimed at reorienting architecture in the direction of improving human living conditions, especially those of the poor". Richards explained that while Fathy's main concern was to improve the conditions of the rural poor, the modernists occupied themselves with improving urban conditions. Richards argued that the modernists wanted to achieve their objective by using fresh resources, but their "philosophy required a total break with the past, whereas Fathy has looked always for continuity [with the past]... But the Modernists' break with the past proved disastrous to the relationship between architecture and the public" [1]. Richards is, in effect, arguing that a similarity of social intent equals a similarity of architectural intention. Fathy would, however, have rejected this separation between the social and architectural realms. Although Fathy would have agreed with the modernist position that architecture has the potential to improve peoples' lives, he always took as his starting point the way of life of the people he was attempting to help.

Richards not only believed that Fathy's objective coincided with that of the pioneers of the modern movement, but also suggested that Fathy's way of expressing form, materials and structure paralleled the path of modernism. James Steele argues that Richards's claim seems "inconceivable", because Fathy always rejected the concepts of both the founders of modernism and the International Style. However, Steele believes that "Richards can only be faulted for not going far enough" since Fathy "would [not] use the same methods he professed to abhor" [4]. In fact, one should consider in-depth the potential of Richards' views rather than interpreting its surface meaning. It would be pointless to try to define any similarities between Fathy's style and that of the founders of modern movement because the style and content are to a large extent independent of each other. But other similar themes and design strategies can be found in their work, irrespective of the external appearance of their buildings.

The concept of the architectural system, which offered the basis for creating a satisfying architecture, was as fundamental to both Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright as to Fathy. Both sought an integral co-ordination of structure and form refined by aesthetics. Le Corbusier created a new and modern architectural system depending on the opportunities afforded by the new materials and new ways of building, and this can be realised in his Villa Savoye, 1930, one of the most famous houses of the modern movement in architecture (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Villa Savoye, Poissy-sur-Seine, 1929-30 by Le Corbusier [25]

Like Le Corbusier, Wright formulated a new architecture according to an architectural system with his 'Prairie houses', in which he was able to define the formal language of his style. All Prairie Houses blends in with the flat, prairie landscape and featured the same architectural characteristics, such as the open floor plan, two-storey house, low-pitched roofs with large overhangs eaves and a central chimney. These characteristics can be traced in the Robie House, Chicago, 1909 (fig. 2).

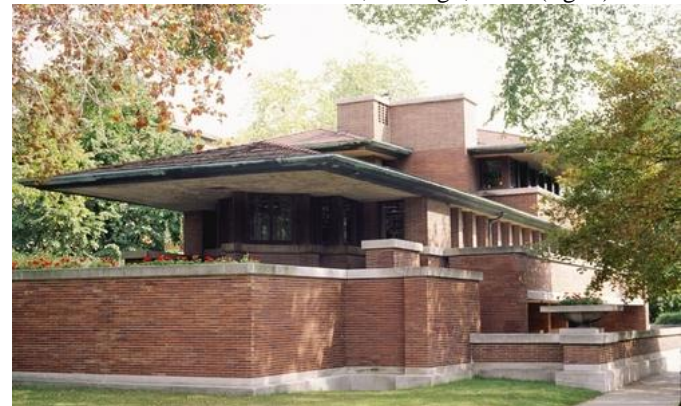


Fig. 2. Robie House, Chicago, 1909, by Frank Lloyd Wright [26]

In his houses of the 1940s, Fathy had been approaching a similar consciousness of independent systems combined with a symbolic architectural system. He developed his own system of construction through the principles of the Islamic-Arabic house and the Egyptian vernacular. The architectural style of both Wright and Le Corbusier was to be achieved through standardisation, which implies the separation of building elements into independent systems. It is not surprising, then, to find that Fathy's houses also were manipulated by coordinated systems of almost independent elements such as the *majaz* (entrance), the *qa'ah* (reception hall), the *dorqa'ah* (central part of *qa'ah*), the *'iwan* (recess in a wall) and the courtyard (fig. 3). In fact, these repetitive elements in Fathy's work

represent a vernacular version of standardisation. Undoubtedly, the similarity in methods of design of both Fathy and the founders of the Modern Movement, were not acknowledged because they had worked in different contexts.



Fig. 3 Mit Rehan House, Shabramant, Egypt, 1981, by Hassan Fathy [27]

Placing Fathy in the context of idealists such as Wright and Le Corbusier may indicate, to an extent, that there is some truth in Richards's assessment. One also can understand that Richards felt that Fathy's contribution has something that modern architecture lacks. In turn, he wanted to maintain the validity of the modern movement and to deflect the criticism of it implied by Fathy's architecture as well as in his direct comments. Richards believed that the modern movement was more encompassing than Fathy himself admitted. Certainly, Fathy's approach, which is most commonly understood as a stylistic phenomenon, should be understood first in the context of what the modern movement both opposed and affirmed. Eugène Viollet-le-Duc acknowledged the inability of the nineteenth century to find forms appropriate to the new social, economic and technological conditions of the modern world. He believed that these new forms could be created if one returns to the past and understands its underlying principles and processes rather than its external effects. Viollet-le-Duc thus defined a central problem which architects of the early twentieth century faced; the need to formulate a style appropriate to modern conditions. Twentieth century modernist architects became aware that tradition should not be totally rejected, but should be considered a rich source from which one can create new forms. As William Curtis explains, "it was not tradition that was jettisoned, but a slavish, superficial, and irrelevant adherence to it" [5].

In retrospect, each of the masters of modern architecture, including Aalto and Kahn arrived at an individual style through a traditionalist phase. This reveals the foundations on which they built, and suggests the source from which they drew their principles. In this context, however, one can recognise the similarity between Fathy and the modern movement architects in terms of advocating a return to the first fundamental principles of architecture, but there are also key distinctions between them. The modern movement opposed the application of past building technology and adopted machine

fabrication, while Fathy's work employs traditional techniques and materials and is handcrafted. The modern movement affirmed the creation of forms appropriate to the modern age by allowing them to be thought of in new ways as well as giving the result universality, while Fathy opposed unnecessary change and the concept of universality. In this, Fathy's disagreement with modernism was not a matter of using modern or traditional forms and building techniques, but his belief that architectural styles are not universally applicable and that the uniqueness of different parts of the world should not be denied.

### III. MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY ARCHITECTURE

The 1960s witnessed another stream of condemning modernism and the International Style by emphasising the importance of vernacular architecture. Before the publication of Fathy's *Architecture for the Poor* (1973) Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects* (1964) appeared to break down narrow concepts of the art of building by introducing the vernacular architecture of different parts of the world. Rudofsky believes that the "vernacular is much more than a style; it is a code of good manners that has no parallel in the urban world" [6]. When we link the worldwide interest in vernacular architecture, which was represented by Rudofsky's magnificent exhibition in 1964, or by Myron Goldfinger in his *Villages in the sun* (1969), Fathy's contribution to vernacular architecture was more than 30 years earlier, when he presented his work in the Mansoura exhibition in 1937. Fathy's work in New Gourna of 1948 (fig. 4) also exhibited an extreme responsibility toward authenticity in architecture which can be the basis for today's aspiration of an architecture rooted in local heritage as well as for continuity into the future. Undoubtedly, Fathy's simple compositional technique and his ability to recreate the essence of a tradition without pastiche epitomise the strength and endurance of the vernacular.



Fig. 4. New Gourna Village, 1948, Egypt by Hassan Fathy (source: Fathy, 1973)

Fathy's early response to the vernacular also corresponded with the prevailing historical and cultural atmosphere in architecture, when regionalism emerged within architectural discourse from the late 1960s onwards. The result was an unmistakable deviation from the International Style with its perfect glass and concrete box to more contextual forms.

Regionalism, which is the exact reverse of the phenomenon of universality, evokes responses to the essence of particular places, cultures and climates within a modern context. Certainly, Fathy's visionary understanding of the importance of restoring the harmony between people, artefacts and nature played an essential role in articulating the basic theory of regionalism and bringing it under serious discussion in the late twentieth century. Curtis believes that any "discussion of regionalist values in the past few decades must give the practice and theories of Hassan Fathy the most serious attention... the Fathy philosophy contains a moral plea in favour of preserving age old adaptations from rural culture" [7]. This is why Fathy's breakthrough must be considered in a broader context of emerging regionalism in many parts of the world.

The preceding discussion demonstrates the value of Fathy's ideas in both explaining the importance of the architecture of the past and in responding to the crises of modernism in architecture. From the vantage point of the present day, it is possible to see how the 1960s constituted a sort of turning point in the evolution of twentieth-century ideas about human needs and requirements and that Fathy's architecture and philosophy was part of the mainstream of the architectural profession. Undoubtedly, Fathy's critical evaluation of the modern movement and the International Style stimulated change and indicated that a renewed understanding of human architecture is not only possible, but also present and emerging. This attitude towards humanistic architecture began to be felt with the development of the post-modern movement in the early 1970s. It was a pluralistic period that implied multiplicity of architectural issues and tendencies, which were developed upon the limitations of the theories of modern architecture in addressing issues concerning meaning in architecture.

Shortly, after the publication of Fathy's *Architecture for the Poor*, Charles Jencks's *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, appeared in 1977 to reinforce the sense of humanity in architecture. Jencks acknowledged Fathy's traditional approach in building the New Gournia project and recognised the similarity between Fathy's approach and post-modern architecture, as long as both are concerned with vernacularism, contextuality, metaphor and symbolic architecture [8]. For Jencks, Fathy's experiment in New Gournia represents an example of rediscovery of the vernacular as well as an example of a self-build project. Jencks believes that "Gournia proves it can be done, but where is the western barefoot architect?" [9]

As Fathy's architecture and ideas conformed to the postmodern concepts and interests, his aspiration of realising architecture that is environmentally relevant to the region echoed the more recent movement of ecological or sustainable architecture, which has emerged since the energy crisis of the 1970s. The issue of eco-architecture has been raised with the publication of a number of books during the 1960s, including Ian L. McHarg's *Design With Nature* in 1969. It was one of

the most widely used ecology-inspired books of this period which created an awareness of landscape, geographic and natural features [10]. Although McHarg was one of the first people who had drawn attention to eco-regions, Fathy was there twenty-five years before him creating buildings integrated with both their natural environments and ecological regions. This integration is evident in all Fathy's planning and building designs where he provided a means of natural temperature control in order to avoid the use of mechanical equipment.

The sustainable architecture movement also witnessed an international interest in reviving earth architecture. Certainly, Fathy's realisation of mud-brick buildings stimulated renewed discussion of developments which recognise earth as an essential factor for creating sustainable architecture. Houses continued to be constructed in earth by their future inhabitants to counter both the impact of modernisation on building materials and methods of construction and the adoption of western models. This growing concern with earth building worldwide reveals the significance of this substance to future generations to meet their own needs.

The English architect and engineer, G. F. Middleton (1900-1956) experimented with this material to create earth roads, dams and military buildings in Australia. Like Fathy, Middleton was fascinated by the earth houses of the Australian countryside and became interested in earth as a building material. Coincidentally, in 1946 he too began research on earth construction at the time when Fathy was building the New Gournia village (1945-1948). In contrast, Middleton's research was limited to building earth walls only, while Fathy developed his experiments and constructed mud-brick roofs without centring. Although Fathy is recognised as the prophet of mud architecture, and his New Gournia village was featured in the *Architectural Review* in 1947, Middleton received early recognition and became the first international expert on low-cost housing at the United Nations from 1952. Consequently, Middleton was able to publish his book *Build Your House of Earth* in 1953, and it became one of the classic works on rammed earth and mud-brick [11].

A large number of the modern movement figures in western architecture, including Rudolph Schindler (1887-1953), Wright and Le Corbusier experimented with mud construction as well as exploring versions of the primitive and the vernacular. For example, in 1915 the Austrian architect Schindler, who was fascinated by the vernacular adobe architecture in the American west, designed an unrealised earth-residence for T. P. Martin in Taos, New Mexico (fig. 5) where Fathy later built his Dar Al-Islam mosque (1980) [12].

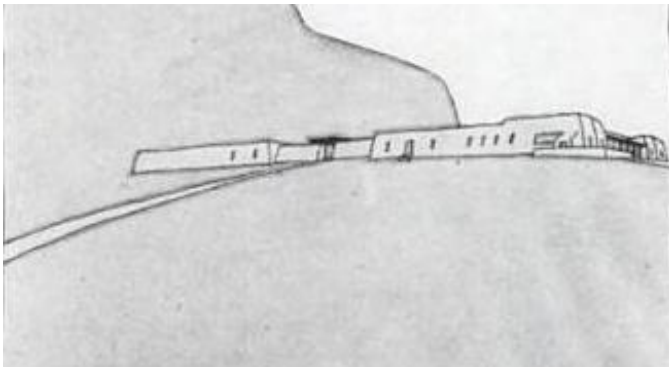


Fig. 5. T.P. Martin House, Taos, New Mexico, 1915, by Rudolph Schindler. (Source: Gebhard, 1971)

Likewise, in 1941, during Fathy's early experimentation with mud buildings, Wright designed the Cooperative Homesteads project (1941-1945), inexpensive houses to be built by their prospective residents in Detroit, Michigan (fig. 6). The project was intended to be built of rammed-earth but only one prototype-house was built and the project was abandoned for lack of cooperation [13].



Fig. 6. Cooperative Homestead Minnesota, 1942, by Frank Lloyd Wright. (source: Futagawa, 1988)

At the same period, Le Corbusier also showed a similar interest in back-to-earth philosophies and examined mud as a building material. In 1940, before the invading German army, the migration to Southern France caused a housing problem. Le Corbusier responded to solve this problem by suggesting plans for what he called the 'Murondins' Houses'. These were self-build housing units and schools to be constructed in sun-dried mud-bricks and covered with grass. Like Fathy, Le Corbusier believed that mud-brick constructions "blend naturally into the countryside allowing picturesque groupings, regardless of siting" [14]. Unfortunately, although Le Corbusier's scheme was attractive to the traditionalist, it remained conjectural.

This sympathetic response to earth structures reveals the contradiction which many figures of the Modern Movement felt between their ideological beliefs and their emotive response to natural materials and vernacular forms. Although these pioneers attempted to revive earth building, their efforts proved fruitless. Unlike Fathy, most of their investigations and

projects did not go further than the drawing board. Although, Ruth Eaton believes that Fathy was "probably the most influential contemporary advocate of building in raw earth", [15] there is no doubt that if the pioneers of modern architecture realised buildings in mud, it would have attracted the attention of a much wider public and earth architecture would have found a new dimension in the modern era.

Nevertheless, the 1970s witnessed a host of architectural movements and tendencies whose ideologies conformed to Fathy's thinking and ideas. The 1980s, which was the last decade of Fathy's life and career, also witnessed the emergence of the community architecture movement and public participation. Community architecture is one of the most significant trends which played a key role in contemporary architectural debate. It has emerged as a powerful force for change in the creation and management of human settlement as well as involving the active participation of people in the development of their own environment. Richards, who was among the pioneers of the community architecture movement in England in 1975, [16] argued that Fathy's concern with social needs and the problem of public participation in the design and building process, which he firmly grasped in the 1940s, "was one that hardly began to concern the architectural profession in the West until at least twenty years later" [1].

Fathy believed that the standard of living and culture of the poor in the world could be developed by applying a new approach of mass co-operative housing. He argued that advanced modern technology has given us new materials and building methods as well as necessitating the imposition of the professional architect, who exploited technology in producing millions of identical houses. He explained that the expert professional architect has taken all the pleasure of building these houses away from the people, who are unable to follow the rapidly advancing techniques [17]. In their *Community Architecture*, Nick Wates and Charles Knevitt recognise that Fathy focused all his life on community architecture and that he is "best known for bringing architects, craftsmen and the community together in the creation of shelter for the poor". They shared with Fathy the same belief that the environment works better if people contribute positively in the creation of places where they live, work and play, and are not treated as passive consumers [18].

This attitude of creating better environments for community projects can be found in the work of Ralph Erskine (b. 1914) in his Byker Wall housing project (1969-1980) in Newcastle-on-Tyne (fig. 7). Erskine developed a social and cultural dialogue with the residents, similar to that of Fathy in the New Gourna (1945-1948) and the New Bariz (1967) villages.



Fig. 7. Byker Wall housing project in Newcastle-on-Tyne, 1980, by Ralph Erskine (1969-1980), [25]

Like Fathy's attitude towards the inhabitants of the New Gourna, Erskine was concerned about rehousing the inhabitants of the Byker Wall "without breaking family ties and other valued associations or pattern of life" [19]. The Walter's Way project (1976) is another example of self-build housing projects (fig. 8). This project was designed by the British architect, Walter Segal (1907-1985) who, like Fathy, was concerned about cost control and methods of construction as well as achieving social needs [20]. Segal also applied the self-build method using timber frame construction, but unlike New Gourna, each family in the Walter's Way project was responsible for building their own house according to their own needs as well as at their own pace. The Walter's Way project won a *Times / RIBA* Award in 1987 [21].



Fig. 8. Walter's Way project, 1976, by Walter Segal [26]

Although other Western community projects were heralded in architectural publications, Fathy's early vision of establishing the basic formula of community-based development was hardly recognised. The Prince of Wales, an influential advocate of the community architecture movement, argues that the important issue nowadays is "how to give people more pride in their environment, involvement in their housing and more control over their lives... To restore hope we must have a vision and a source of inspiration" [22]. He realised that these issues were implied in Fathy's philosophy and work especially his efforts for housing the poor and improving their living conditions. Prince Charles believed that "Fathy is a remarkable man whose courageous voice deserves to be

heard" [23]. Indeed, it is time to look objectively at the work of architects such as Fathy, who had an individual approach to community architecture as well as experiences that were sufficiently broad to deal with the difficulties involved. However, although Fathy's ideas towards a humanisation of architecture have become an important factor in the architectural debate, he can still be seen as the unacknowledged conscience of twentieth-century architecture.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

From a late twentieth century standpoint, one can recognise that Fathy's architecture has contributed to many of the main themes running through the development of the century's architecture. Fathy remains a profoundly important figure, partly because of the way in which his work mirrors the complexity of those cultural, traditional and socio-economic changes that have taken place during the second half of twentieth century. Although Fathy remained an outspoken critic of modernism and criticised both the International Style and the pioneers of modern architecture in many of his writings, his main objective was to show that the architecture of the past is still a very rich source of inspiration to the coming generations, who should look to the inner content rather than the outer one. Without question, Fathy was one of the most significant architects of modern times and he deserves to be seen as a figure comparable in importance to architects such as Wright, Le Corbusier, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe. The fact that Fathy's architecture stands largely in opposition to that of the leaders of the modern movement in no sense reduces his significance, and indeed his ability to resist the pervasive influence of modernism is a measure of his standing within twentieth-century architecture. Because Fathy's career brought together many aspects of twentieth-century architecture, it is not easy to differentiate between his influence as an architect and his contribution as a researcher and a teacher. But his legacy provided inspiration for younger architects whose prime concerns were to preserve cultural identity in architecture. Fathy recommended that architects should not just follow the canons of their art but must also "be humble, modest. Even discreet" [24].

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