

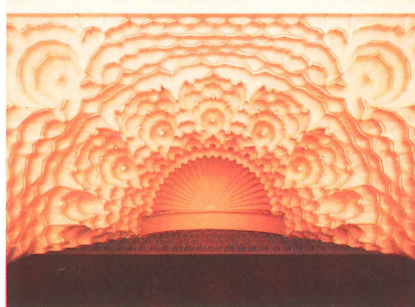
THE NEW TRADITIONALISTS

James Steele examines the work and ideas of three architects who are emerging as standard-bearers of the Hassan Fathy tradition.

Since the death of Hassan Fathy in November, 1989, the future of traditional architecture has been a subject for concern in the Middle Eastern media and particularly in Egypt. A recent issue of *Alam Al Bena*, for example, focused exclusively on this question, and offered various suggestions as to how his philosophy might be perpetuated.¹ In the course of his long career, Hassan Fathy had many apprentices in his studio, some staying with him longer than others. This has resulted in several generations of followers, including architects who never worked with him directly, and are now struggling to establish an identity, if not ascendancy, in this specialized area. Ironically, the style that Fathy painstakingly evolved and which drew ridicule during his lifetime, is now fashionable among the rich in his homeland, and many are trying to capitalize on his posthumous popularity. While his architectural language was constructed from indigenous sources, it was still a highly selective and individual vocabulary that depended a great deal on his own sense of proportion, harmony and balance. The evolution of that language was not without moments of hesitation: Fathy himself expressed doubts about the use of the dome in a residential context, or the adaptation of the medieval Cairene *qa'a* to a contemporary lifestyle. However, such concerns tend to be overlooked by many who are interested in this spatial and structural system today, as are the less subjective principles related to the environmental effects of materials, natural ventilation and orientation. For example, methods of filtration such as damp muslin have now been improved through research to include cellulose panels misted with a fine water spray; vaults originally intended to let in fresh air are now glazed, eliminating one of the basic reasons behind the selection of this form. Concrete, which was an anathema to Fathy for telluritic as well as thermal reasons, is now also used by clients and designers for reasons of fashion.

While such enterprise will no doubt

continue, there have been many sensitive interpretations of Fathy's spatial and structural system, that have looked beyond form to intention. Three architects in particular have begun to emerge as genuine standard-bearers of his philosophy, each focusing on a different aspect of it. If tradition really is "the social analogy of personal habit", as Fathy defined it, then the objective and accurate translation of those habits becomes the most important aspect in an architecture that seeks to express them.²



1. *Harity Mosque, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Muqarnas and dome. (A. W. El-Wakil.)*

2. *King Saud Mosque, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Muqarnas. (A. W. El-Wakil.)*

This analogy has been particularly evident in the work of Abdul Wahed El-Wakil. He has also been most active in carrying the defence of traditionalism to an international audience. A graduate of Ain Shams University, El-Wakil met Hassan Fathy in 1967, and left the University to work with him, staying in the atelier until 1973. He has been in private practice since then, first gaining international recognition with Halawa House in Agamy, Egypt, which won an Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1980. Since then, he has been chiefly involved with the design and project supervision of mosques, completing 13 during the last decade in Saudi Arabia alone. Several others, such as the Yateem mosque in Bahrain, are now under construction. He is currently working on the Sawda and Dalgan mosques, which will be in the Asir region of Saudi Arabia.

El-Wakil's interests, and the ideas that give his work such power, are related to the symbolic and geometric aspects of traditional architecture. This has led him to study the work of scholars such as Seyyed Hussein Nasr, René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burkhardt, and R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz.³ Such research has enabled him to reproduce very complicated forms from the past, such as *muqarnas*, to a degree of accuracy that has not been achieved elsewhere today (Fig. 1). His recent interest in computers has allowed him to construct such elaborate geometries with even more precision; as was the case with the *muqarnas* used over the main doorway of the King Saud Mosque in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Photogrammetric reproduction of the portal of the Sultan Hassan Mosque in Cairo, was regenerated by CAD into a highly intricate, but buildable set of working drawings for the new doorway. This represents perhaps the most elaborate example of the marriage of old and new technologies that characterizes this architect's work (Fig. 2). While criticized in some quarters for such recycling, El-Wakil has noted that reinterpretation of archetypes has always been a central part of traditional architecture: there is always a socially important element of

recognition and continuity in the regeneration of something familiar into something new. For El-Wakil, the significance of reforging the link between the past and the present, destroyed by the Industrial Revolution, lies in this rediscovery. According to El-Wakil, before any progress can be made in the renewal of architectural craftsmanship, the intellectual, as well as the physical techniques that were integral to it must be reestablished through the replication of prototypes. In the words of El-Wakil's friend Leon Krier: "Beyond the discipline of Islamic building and construction types, his formal repertoire is equally informed by the study of classical orders and mouldings and by the geometric science of Western and Eastern cultures. His buildings, however, are not merely a collage of clever quotations, but organic, spatial and volumetric compositions which, while being definitely Islamic in character, reflect the universal nature of that culture."⁴

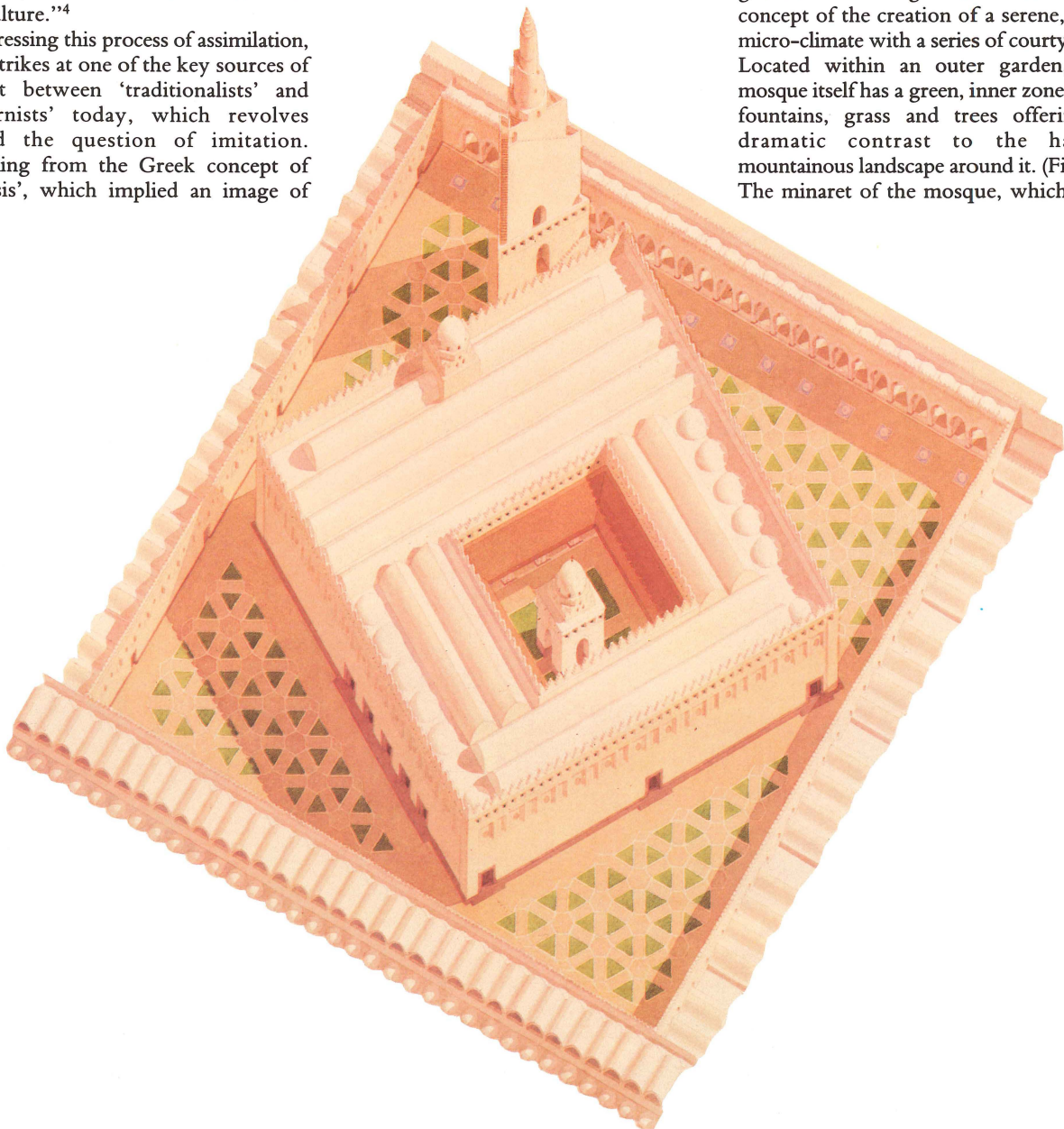
In stressing this process of assimilation, Krier strikes at one of the key sources of conflict between 'traditionalists' and 'modernists' today, which revolves around the question of imitation. Stemming from the Greek concept of 'mimesis', which implied an image of

reality rather than a perfect replica of it, imitation in the classical sense referred to the interpretation of nature as the artist felt it could be (*oiaeinai thei*), not a literal representation of what it was. Following the misrepresentation of works such as Aristotle's *Poetics*, during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, his dictum "art imitates nature," (*e techne mimeitai*) began to gain negative connotations.⁵ For the classical architect, in the expression of what has perhaps been the most durable of all tectonic traditions, imitation was not reprehensible, but a reaffirmation of a social consensus. El-Wakil himself believes that it is the pursuit of novelty

3. *Al Miqat Mosque, Medinah, Saudi Arabia. Axonometric rendering. (Ed Venn.)*

and individuality, rather than the repetition of established principles that brings a loss of identity; "the tradition is always greater than the individual architect; his true identity lies not in his alienation from but in his alliance with tradition. On the other hand, designing within a tradition is not a pretence for repeating the old. It is not a mere act of imitation; for mimicry destroys the whole significance and meaning of the repetition of archetypes. Authentic traditional design is a complex process of careful adaptation and assimilation in an act of gestation. This ritual revitalizes the spiritual identity of the community through the proper act of building, and the masterpiece is created by the faith of the artist in his tradition more so than in the arrogance of his revolt."⁶

El-Wakil's most recent project, the Miqat mosque, demonstrates such inventiveness within culturally prescribed guidelines in a design that is based on the concept of the creation of a serene, cool micro-climate with a series of courtyards. Located within an outer garden, the mosque itself has a green, inner zone with fountains, grass and trees offering a dramatic contrast to the harsh, mountainous landscape around it. (Fig. 3.) The minaret of the mosque, which was



built after other parts of the complex had been completed, begins as a triangle, and transforms into a cylinder as it spirals upwards. This geometric *tour-de-force*, which evokes many precedents and yet replicates none of them, is a strong argument for this architect's belief that creativity is inherent in traditional forms. (Figs. 4, 5, 6.)

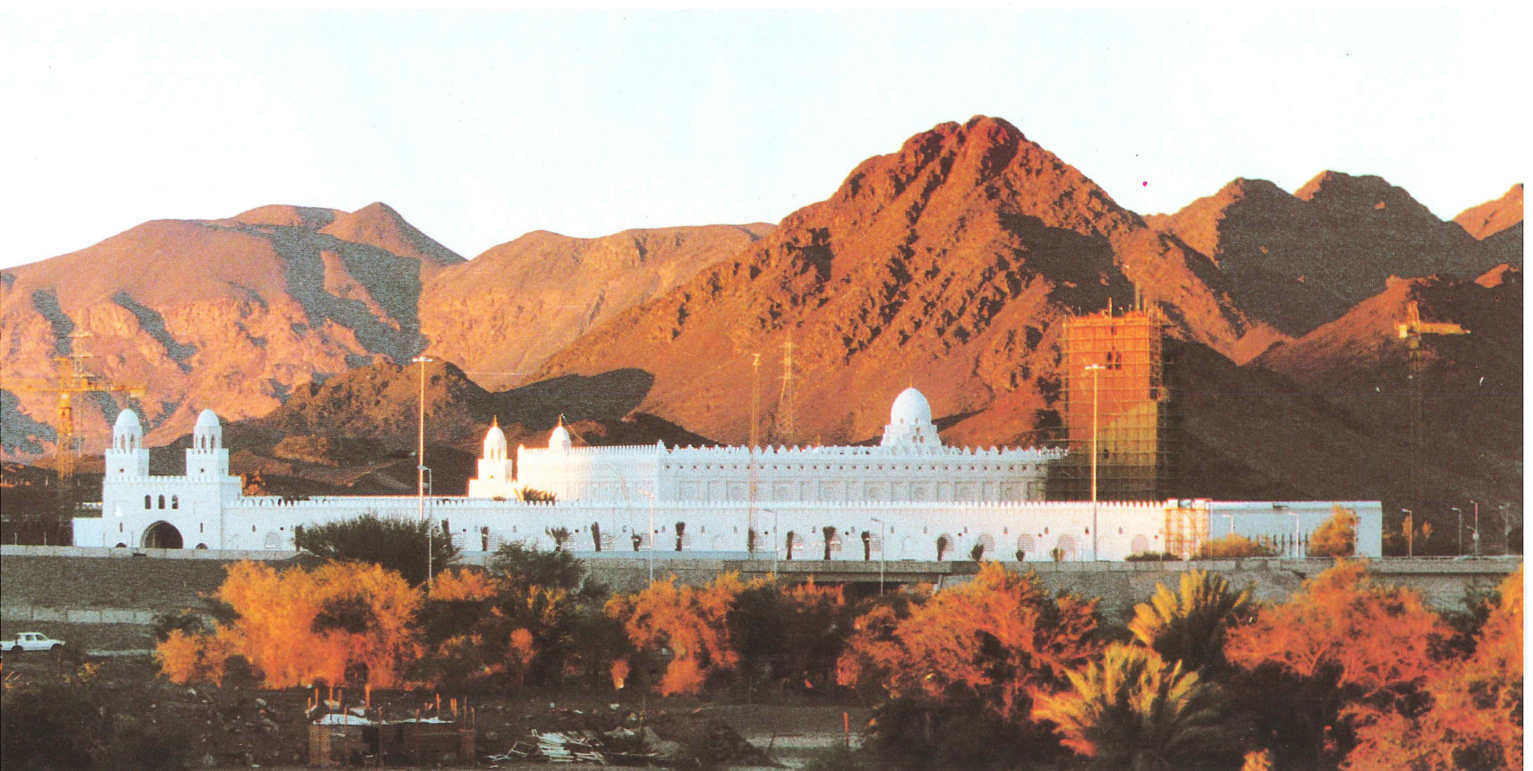
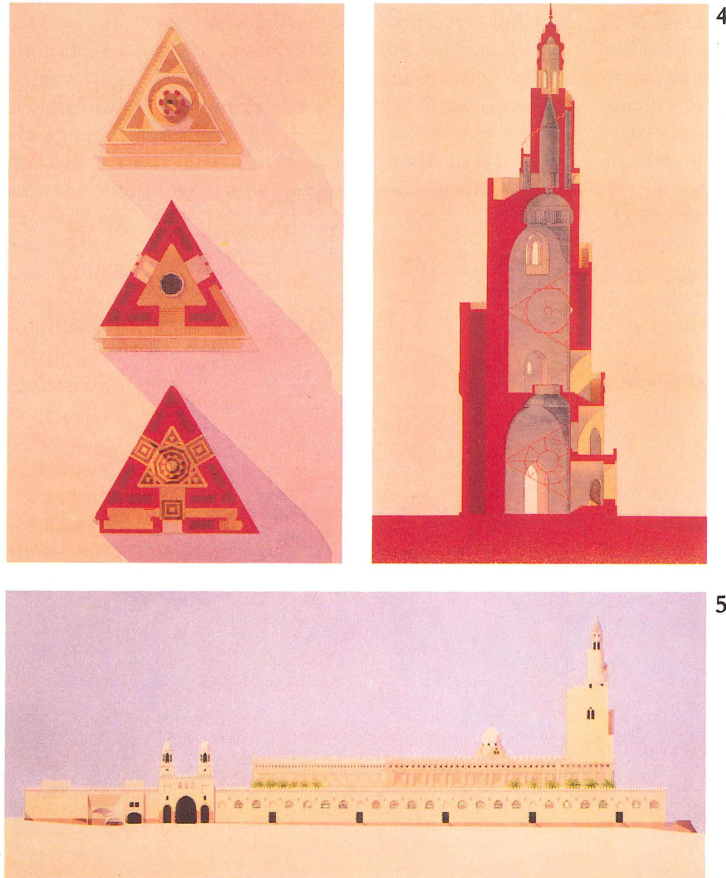
Rasem Badran, who was born in Jerusalem in 1945, is of the same

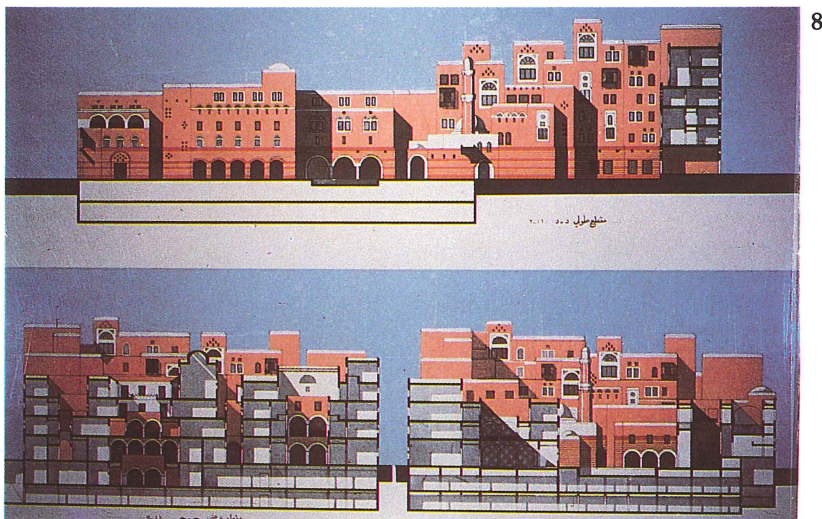
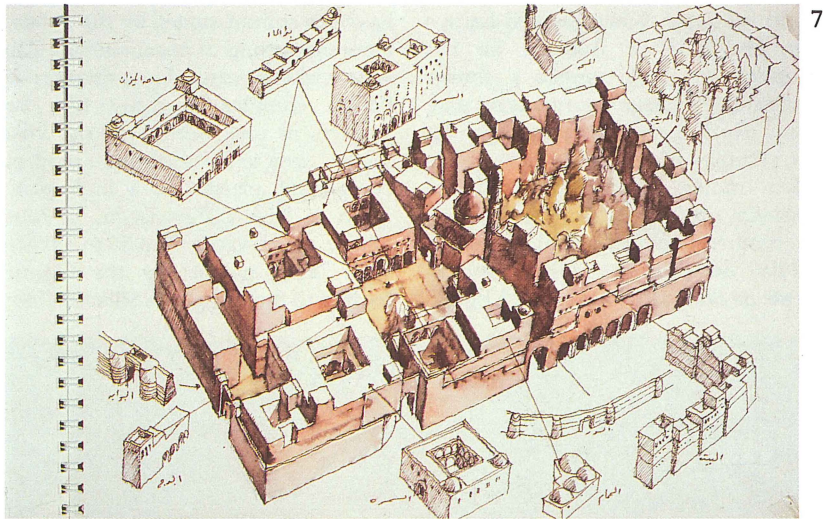
4. *Plan and section of the minaret of Al Miqat Mosque, Medinah, Saudi Arabia. (Rendering by Ed Venn.)*

5. *Elevation of Al Miqat Mosque, Medinah, Saudi Arabia. (Rendering by Ed Venn.)*

6. *Al Miqat Mosque, under construction. (Sinan Ortugan.)*

generation as El-Wakil, but he did not work in the Fathy atelier. Rather than looking at history as a pool of physical forms to be adapted, Badran looks at the process behind these forms and studies the social forces behind typologies. In this way, his view of typology is similar to that of Italian architect Aldo Rossi. In *Architecture of the City*, Rossi states that typology must be determined by principles and should not be followed





literally. Badran's extraordinary artistic ability allows him to study these principles graphically, and to assimilate them in a kind of visual and tactile osmosis that transmutes a particular historical context into a living part of his architecture. In his Al Bayt Foundation Headquarters, intended for a hilly site overlooking Amman, Badran broke down the scale of a potentially monumental building by dividing it into a series of internal courtyards. These, in turn, were based on a cross-section of examples of structures such as the Sultan Hassan Mosque and Citadel in Cairo, as well as many other regional paradigms that were related to the building type and its parts.⁷ The result appeals to cultural sensibilities, and yet is very contemporary. This technique of using place-related precedents to establish basic principles as well as symbolic forms through analogy is not totally rationalistic, relying as it does upon personal interpretation and selection, and has been identified as being "heuristic."⁸

A recent proposal for housing in the middle of Sana'a, Yemen, shows this kind of synthesis in operation within a

7. Proposal for Sana'a, Yemen. (Rasem Badran.)

8. Elevation and Section of Housing Proposal for Yemen. (Rasem Badran.)

fragile and highly distinctive urban environment that has remained virtually unchanged in the face of increasing pressure. With characteristic thoroughness, Badran began by looking at general, national architectural characteristics related to geography and environment before even considering a design solution for the area. Through this general study, he found that the basic historical characteristics of Yemeni cities are a logical extension of the rural environment, as well as tribal groups. Rural towns were established according to these groups, and were being related to the fertility of the land, in which each plays a major role in defining the compositional principles of the town and its dwellings. The vertical form of each residential unit was found to have developed from defensive considerations, as well as social requirements of privacy. Spaces were layered from bottom to top in each

according to the need, and importance of each room. Badran found that in these rural areas, the ground floor of tower houses was usually reserved for livestock and storage, while floors above were kept for guests, and the topmost private areas were used only by the family. From this he derived five principles with which to begin his design: 1. residential units would be vertical and stratified for privacy, grouped around gardens; 2. the mosque would be prominent due to its important role in the urban area; 3. a *samsara*, the local equivalent to a *khan* and *wekala*, would be recreated; 4. public baths and wells, which are very different from similar building types in other Islamic cities, would be an essential part of this new community; 5. moderate climatic conditions in Sana'a have allowed open markets in contrast to the shaded souks of hotter areas, and these would be incorporated in the design (Fig. 7, 8). In its final form, the housing that results is obviously in the same family as that of the past, while still conforming to all contemporary needs.

Omar El-Farouk another member of this generation, has now begun to have

a wider influence. While less well-known than El-Wakil or Badran, he has continued to work within a similar architectural language since studying with Hassan Fathy nearly 25 years ago. He now practises in Maadi, outside Cairo, dealing mostly with commercial and residential projects of increasing scope. The most recent of these, designed for the rapidly developing resort city of Hurghada on the Red Sea coast of Egypt,

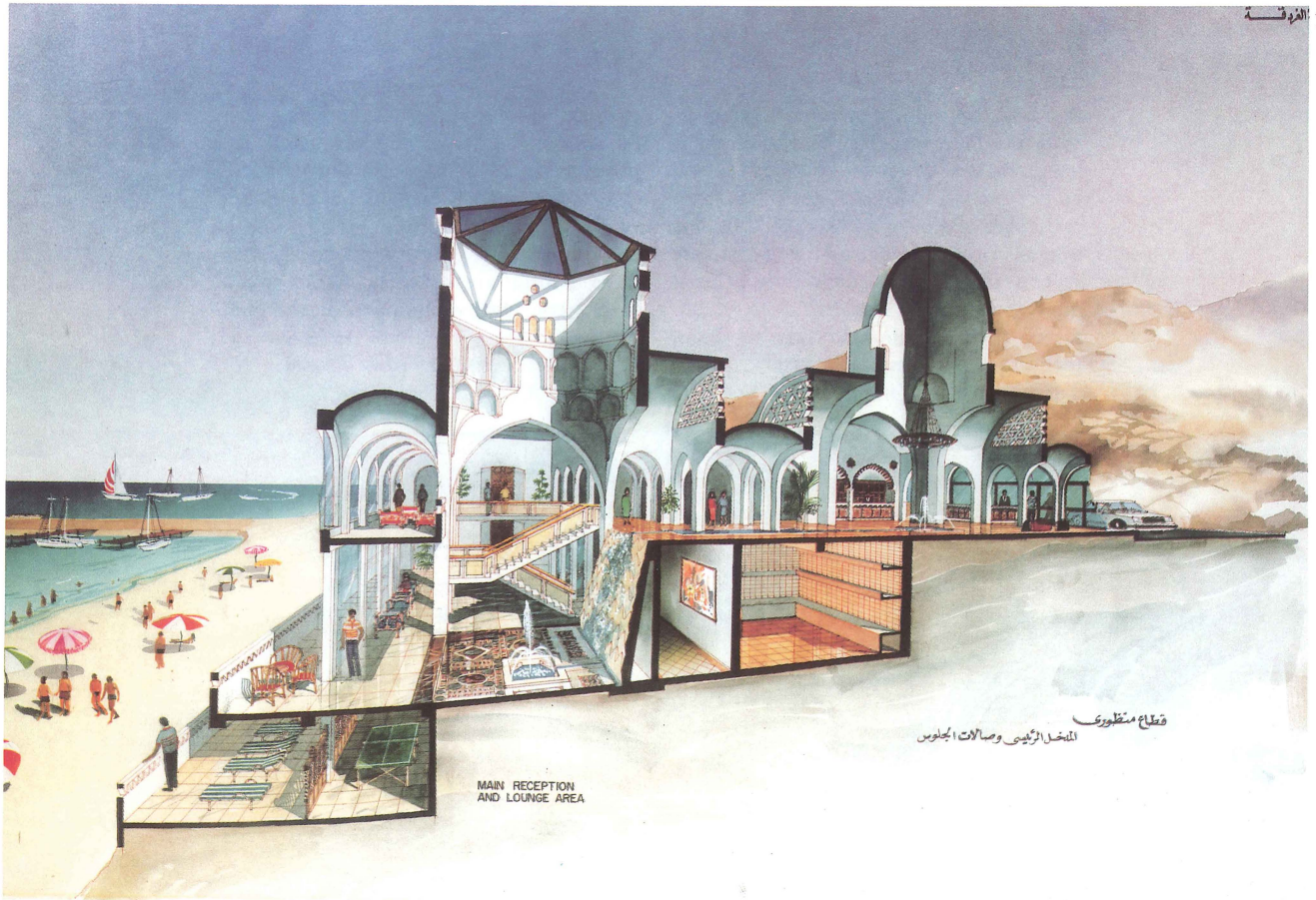
has been commissioned by the owner of a popular group of restaurants in Cairo, who wishes to expand into this area. The Fefela complex is really two large projects in one: with a tourist village located close to the beach and a residential component placed on a high plateau above it. The 'Caravanserai,' or tourist village, which varies from 35 to 55 metres wide, runs parallel to the Corniche leading to the Hurghada Sheraton Hotel,

in a 550 metre-long group of buildings all facing the water (Fig. 9). Each level is staggered so as not to obstruct the sea view from the Corniche, as well as from each part of the complex itself. In this organization, internal pedestrian streets were designed to be an extension of the guest rooms and integral with them, rather than corridors leading to them, forming open, courtyard-like spaces. These spaces are intentionally oriented

to take advantage of the constant sea breezes, as well as having vegetation to provide shade. The streets onto which they open are all named to give the complex the identity of a small community. The guest-rooms themselves have sitting areas facing these small walkways, with vaults open on the end

9. Isometric Section of Fefela Tourist Complex. (Omar El-Farouk.)





10. Section through main reception area.
Felfela Village. (Omar El-Farouk.)

11. Villas of Felfela Complex. (Omar El-Farouk.)





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12. Pedestrian streets, guest rooms and courtyards, Felfela Tourist Village Complex. (Omar El-Farouk.)

to facilitate air movement into the interior. The bathrooms have domed roofs with glass *kamariyya* panels similar to those used in the *hammams* of old Cairo. Terraces in front of each room face the sea.

The main reception room of the village is designed around a high, central *qa'a*, with a *salsabil* fountain used to cool the air entering the interior (Fig. 10). The residential part of the complex, located behind the tourist village, on the opposite side of the Corniche, has 35 villas, which are divided into five different types, and includes a mosque, recreational area, swimming pools, a Turkish bath, and souk, with *malkaf* wind-catches.

The work of each of these architects, which seems to have expanded on several different but equally important themes stressed by Fathy, is indicative of the level of dedication and talent that is now concentrated on the reconciliation of the past with the present. Their efforts, and those of others who continue to search for a meaningful expression of the continuity between contemporaneity and tradition, seems to assure that such a link will finally be established.

Notes

1. *Alam Al Bena* (Cairo), No. 110, 1990. Devoted entirely to Fathy's methods, their future, and his followers.
2. Fathy, Hassan, *Architecture for the Poor*, University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 36.
3. See, for example, Guénon, René, *Symboles de la Science Sacré*, N. R. T. Gallimand, Paris, 1962 and De

Lubicz, R. A. Schwaller, *Le Temple de l'Homme Apet du Sud A Louqsor*, Vols I and II, Dervy-Livres, Paris, 1985.

4. Krier, Leon, 'Houses, Palaces, Mosques.' *Albena*, Riyadh, No. 34, Vol. 6, April/May 1987, p. 14. Special issue on the work of Abdul Wahed El-Wakil.
5. Porphyrrios, Demetri, *Classical Architecture*, Academy Editions, London. (In preparation.)
6. Steele, James, *Hassan Fathy*, Architectural Monograph, Academy Editions, London, 1988, p. 8.
7. See *MIMAR, Architecture in Development*, No. 25, September 1987, p. 50-70 for this architect's earlier work. See p. 65 for the Al-Bayt Foundation.
8. Rowe, Peter, *Design Thinking*, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1987 p. 75.

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