

HASSAN FATHY EARTH AND UTOPIA

Salma Samar Damluji, Viola Bertini

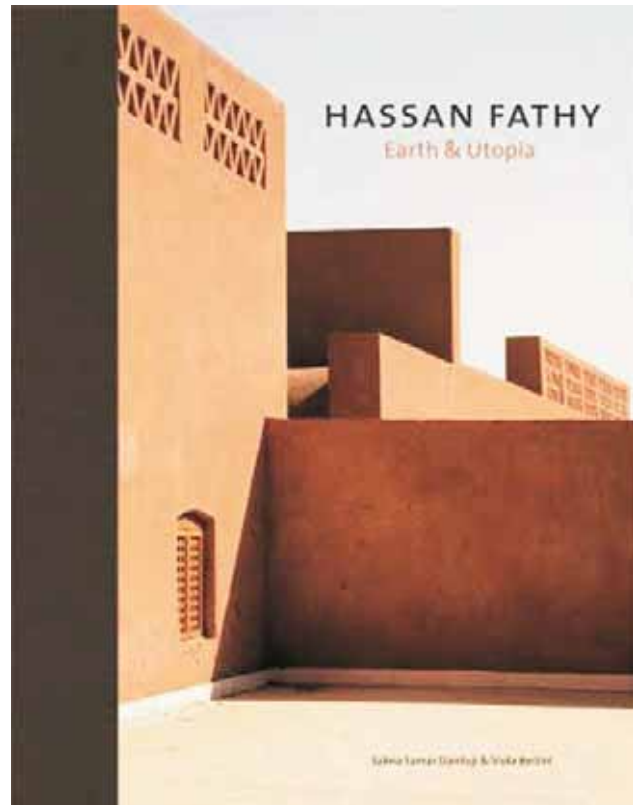
Reviewed by Saadia Bano*

BOOK REVIEW

“Hassan Fathy: Earth and Utopia” is a true labor of love carried out by the duo, Ms. Salma Samar Damluji and Ms. Viola Bertini. Ms. Damluji had a long working association with Hassan Bey (Bey formerly used in Turkey and Egypt as a courtesy title). She got introduced to Hassan Fathy (HF) during her student life at Architectural Associates. Since then, she spent a considerable amount of constructive time working with him on his text and unfinished writings. They completed Mud Brick Manual, Vault and Dome Construction and Mosque Architecture and play “*The story of Al-Mashrabiyyah*” in English. On the other hand, Ms. Bertini is a keen researcher on works of Hassan Fathy did her doctoral research on the subject (2010 - 13).

This book gives a complete insight into the enormous struggle faced by HF due to his design approach, which advocates dome and vault structures with courtyards as temperature regulators for a hot and arid zone like Egypt. This design approach is like swimming against the stream as the mainstream practice has a massive following of modern international architectural design. This book efficiently displays that HF was not only able to swim against the mainstream practice but also creatively portrayed the picture of society and its cultural confusion, self-colonization, and the tale of corrupt bureaucracy in anecdotes and stories like “*The story of al-mashrabiyyah, The land of utopia and The monkeys and the giraffes.*”

According to HF, Arab countries fell into the pit of self-colonization because of their fascination with the international style of architecture (self-colonization is a term coined by Gaston Bouthoul; a process by which a nation copies the civilization of another nation). This betrayal from earth architecture is predominantly an unsustainable and capital-intensive way of construction, which inappropriately became part of the political manifesto of leading political powers,



who promised concrete houses in the context of the desert as a benchmark of modernization.

The book is divided into two parts; Part one: “*The culture and philosophy*” and Part two: “*Design, planning, and earth construction*”. The first part, “*The culture and philosophy*” is an interesting combination of HF’s interviews cladded with thought-provoking dialogue on poetics of space, crafts, geometry and reflections on Arab architecture especially on building for the poor.

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The second section of part one: *Nubia, the original matrix* gives a deep insight into Nubian architecture and how it inspired young HF to revive and endorse traditional forms and construction methods of building with mud bricks. This chapter gives a complete picture that how he visited Nubia with some students and professors along with his friend Ramses Wissa Wassef from the Academy of fine arts, which opened a new trajectory of architectural practice for him. The simple layout of settlements inspired him which consists of mosque, post office, shop, guest houses, and regular houses. During his visit, he made lifelong contacts with master masons, who construct Catenary vaults and domes without formwork, with whom he continued to work in his professional career. He deeply analyzed regular houses with a courtyard as the nucleus of family intimacy, which was sometimes divided into several parts to accommodate livestock or service areas like kitchens and bathrooms.

Later on, HF penned down a memorandum on the design of the higher folk-art institute to the Ministry of Culture, Egypt challenging the design proposal of the open-air Nubian Museum and other sections of the High Institute of Social Anthropology and Folk Art. HF clearly identified the relationless adaptation of the Italian Renaissance style in the design proposal of the museum and fostered the importance of Nubian architecture and decorative arts as Nubian heritage.

The third and fourth sections of part one give a deep understanding of his work association and learning experience with Constantinos Doxiadis and pieces of his creative writing respectively. Dr. Bertini carefully covered HF's work portfolio with Doxiadis in the chapter on the Greek period 1957-1961, in which she showcases works carried out by Doxiadis and Fathy in Pakistan and Iraq. This chapter also includes a very interesting exchange of letters between Doxiadis and Fathy. It also comprises a very thought-provoking chapter on the city of the future: Fragment of an Idea of the City.

Part two of the book titled "*Design, Planning and Earth Construction*", begins with a lengthy letter written by HF to President Gamal Abdel Nasser on Rural housing. This letter is fascinating proof of HF's vigorous advocacy for architecture for the poor. This part also includes a paper written by Hassan Fathy "Comprehensive Design for Rural Living" at the invitation of the American Association for the advancement of science.

This part covers HF's variety of village projects including New Gournah, New Baris, Daral Islam in Mexico, Al Mashrabiyyah Ekistic Village in Cairo along with a major cultural project of Nile Festival village. All these villages

are deeply rooted with references to climate consideration in planning and design, air circulation, pedestrian and vehicular connections, response demographics considering village centres, public buildings, and amenities in relation to the planning of quarters. This chapter is enriched with several hand-drawn and computer-aided architectural drawings.

The chapter on private housing project, "Spatial Invariant System" by Ms. Bertini presents an amazing account of housing designed by HF at the initial stage of his professional practice. Those houses were reflecting HF's beaux-art educational background. The Hamed Said house was the turning point in his architectural practice, before that almost his four years of practice reflect the so-called international style. This chapter also includes the housing project HF carried out for very rich and famous clients at the later stage of his career. Those projects help him to carry out experiments with other sustainable materials beyond mud brick.

A blueprint for Mosque Architectural Design is a very interesting manual on Mosque Architecture (HF unpublished writing), also included in this book. This detailed manual not only sheds light on the spatial requirements of mosque architecture but also interestingly questions the contemporary design elements of mosque design.

Lastly, the chapter "Earth Construction" consists of the memorandum on the creation of the International Institute for Appropriate Technology, which is a concept paper for an institute that disseminates HF's research and practice. This chapter is further enriched with a detailed manual of mud brick construction by HF and Ms. Damluji in 1984 along with an interview of master mason/builder Ala al-Din Mustafa.

Overall, this collaborative venture by Ms. Damluji and Ms. Bertini has resulted in a holistic and comprehensive account of Hassan Fathy's well-conceived and boxed projects with interesting drawings and photographs, along with some priceless unpublished papers, interviews, and correspondence to various governmental agencies. Additionally, this book offers a concise graphic timeline of HF's projects along with a short biography. All this valuable content is creatively crafted in a hardback book with fascinating colored pictures and a rich bibliography. With amazing details, this book is an invaluable source of information for academics, professionals, researchers, and practitioners, who are interested in exploring the development of Arab vernacular architecture and the roots of regional architecture.