Global Tourism, Hyper-Traditions, and the Fractal Condition of the Sign

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Since the early 1990s the tourism industry in Egypt has opened a new geographic territory in the Red Sea region for investment. In new commodified spaces there it has remained preoccupied with providing an exotic, “authentic,” cultural experience for international tourists, similar to that they have long desired from trips along the Nile. In this essay I will discuss how the developers and designers of Kafr al-Gouna, part of al-Gouna integrated town-resort, have used architectural forms to reinvent heritage in this new location in order to simulate an authentic experience for tourists. Through discussion of this case I want to, first, problematize the concepts of authenticity and tradition as they are practiced and theorized, and, second, shed light on a specific urban strategy used to produce tourist spaces in today’s Egypt.

For after the natural, commodity, and structural stages of value comes the fractal stage. The first of these stages had a natural referent, and value developed on the basis of a natural use of the world. The second was founded on a general equivalence, and value developed by reference to a logic of the commodity. The third is governed by a code, and value develops here by reference to a set of models. At the fourth, the fractal (or viral, or radiant) stage of value, there is no point of reference at all, and value radiates in all directions, occupying all interstices, without reference to anything whatsoever, by virtue of pure contiguity.

—Jean Baudrillard

With the inception of the tourist industry in nineteenth-century Egypt, the paintings, writings and travelogues of scores of European scholars, writers, adventurers and artists created the dreamscape, and thereby the desire, to travel and personally experience the “exotic Orient.” During this era, Egypt’s tourism industry was based on its heritage along the River Nile, and the experience of the visitor was, to a great extent, imbricated into the fabric of the place — its everyday life, work relations, culture and nature, and architectural

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heritage. Since the end of the 1980s, however, another phase of tourism development has emerged in Egypt, one based on mass entertainment, highlighting not only the cultural component of visits to historical sites along the Nile but newly developed areas, such as pristine and sparsely populated regions along the Red Sea and in the southern Sinai. These new geographic destinations are rapidly opening to investment that targets a market niche relatively new to Egypt — beach, leisure-oriented tourism. Though it is difficult to speak in terms of actual figures due to classification problems, there is no doubt this new type of tourism now constitutes the largest market among the various sectors within the tourism industry in Egypt.

Because the tourism industry revels in perceptions of difference and otherness, many developments in the Red Sea region are preoccupied with reinventing the illusion or fantasy of these qualities. Thus, developers have been constructing themed, artificial environments that copy from other places and times. Such theming of local architectural heritage follows what is becoming an increasingly prominent theme in tourist developments worldwide. It also follows the pattern by which many cities are striving to rebuild their economies based on tourism. The resulting ocularscape of fantasy places, however, only provides a movie reel of images for visual consumption, and it places international tourists at the center of both public and private urban development and regeneration schemes.

The amount of investment in (and revenue from) new tourist projects in the Middle East attests to these trends. The United Nations World Tourism Organization predicts that in 2006 travel and tourism will have generated close to $150 billion worth of activity in the Middle East region alone, accounting for nearly 10 percent of both GDP and total employment. Moreover, it is estimated that spending on leisure and tourism projects in the Middle East will hit $3 trillion over the next twenty years.

Mike Robinson has rightly pointed out that tourism, as a force of change in the built environment like other economic endeavors, is not easy to disentangle from other globalizing influences. His premise, however, is that “tourism has become an increasingly significant driver of cultural remaking and reinvention.” In this essay, I want to build on this premise. Specifically, I want to trace the story of the proliferation in Egypt and beyond of a specific reinvented architectural tradition. I also want to discuss the conditions of its emergence, recent rise, and global spread, which I will suggest are due to the late-twentieth-century expansion of global cultural tourism and an industry of “authenticity.” I will give particular weight to the story of how the developers and designers of Kaf al-Gouna, part of al-Gouna integrated town-resort by the Red Sea, have used this reinvented tradition to simulate an authentic cultural experience for their international clientele.

One must keep in mind that any discussion of the cultural remaking and reinvention of tradition will be knitted with more general cultural and political debates concerning authenticity, heritage, tradition, culture, and identity formation. In Egypt, these debates have been further interwoven with a wider discussion of the role Western countries have played in shaping the challenges faced by its contemporary society. This relationship has triggered various reactions at different times.

In general terms, Nezar AlSayyad has distinguished three main phases in the change of attitude toward heritage and tradition in the past two centuries — and, by inference, other closely related conceptual corollaries. While the first phase corresponded with the end of colonialism and was characterized by an increasing interest in local heritage, the second phase corresponded with postcolonial nationalism and was marked by rising demands for resorting to heritage as a form of resistance against the homogenizing forces of modernity. The third period, according to AlSayyad, has corresponded with globalization, and is characterized by an “outright manufacture of heritage coupled with the active consumption of tradition in the built environment.” No tradition in the built environment, one can deduce, now holds permanent meaning; traditions can become whatever particular societies want to make of them.

This is also the lesson of the seminal work of Edward Shils on the subject. It is often argued, however, that in the past two centuries modernity has not only freed societies from tradition, but established it as its antimony. John Tomlinson has declared that this tradition-modern dualism has become “the single, universal story of human development.” For reasons related to the history of colonization and postcolonization in Egypt, we have become heirs to this same antimony of al-assala versus al-mu’asara (originality versus contemporaneity) and al-taqlidiya versus al-hadatha (traditionalism versus modernism). And since the middle of the nineteenth century this antimony has created fierce debate between two intellectual camps, traditionalists and modernists, according to which it has been customary to find tradition either scorned or lamented.

In architectural and urban planning theories and practices in Egypt, a similar, but not identical, dualism thesis has circulated for some time. Khaled Asfour has thus observed that even though architects in the Arab world come from a wide variety and backgrounds, most critics attempt to lump current architectural trends there under the convenient labels “traditionalist” or “modernist.” Contemporary Arab cities, it is often claimed, represent a physical duality between traditional Islamic and modern Western design. Yet, while this interpretive model may have been productive in explaining the problems facing architecture and cities at the crossroads of decolonization, I would echo Janet Abu-Lughod, who has argued that the distinction no longer provides a sufficient framework with which to decipher the current situation. Moreover, I want to suggest that unless we can go beyond this dualism, the fields of architecture and urban planning in Egypt will remain trapped within a vicious circle.
Hegel taught that the position contrary to a point of view is always trapped in the framework of that point of view. I shall contend that this is clearly evident in the contrast of traditional versus modern — or their interchangeable binary oppositions, Islamic versus Western, or authentic versus inauthentic — in the architectural theories and practices in Egypt.

In order to disentangle the maze of problems involved in this antinomy (all of which it will, unfortunately, be impossible to touch on in this essay), I shall select one thread and pursue one major aim: the possibility that today’s practicing architectural traditionalists (who at the surface might appear opposed to modernity) are, indeed, producing hybrid architecture and urbanity — not the “pure,” “uncontaminated,” “authentic” buildings they usually claim to be designing.

I shall address this issue by looking at the one precedent most often cited to demonstrate a traditional approach to architecture in Egypt. This is the work of Hassan Fathy, which his students (among whom are the architects of Kafr al-Gouna) have continued to propagate as an authentic Egyptian architecture. As we shall see, this tradition has developed during two of the phases in the changing attitude toward heritage and tradition described by AlSayyad: first, with Egyptian and Arab nationalism; and, second, with the expansion of the global forces of cultural tourism and the authenticity industry.

The imagery of this approach owes much to Fathy’s innovation in combining two building traditions by twinning the forms of the dome and the barrel vault. It was through Fathy that this couplet began a tour in place and time which has led to its current status as a representational tool, or sign, of traditional heritage. As a consequence of this transformation, this couplet is now being widely adopted by the tourist and authenticity industries in Egypt — and perhaps, as we shall see, by practitioners abroad.

As a prelude to the story of Kafr al-Gouna, I will begin with a brief history of this reinvented architectural tradition.

TRADITION FROM NECESSITY TO SPECTACLE

The story begins in 1945 when the Egyptian Department of Antiquities commissioned Fathy to design and build a village to which to relocate the inhabitants of Gourna, across the Nile from Luxor, who presumably lived by robbing the nearby ancient rock-cut tombs of the Theban necropolis (fig. 1). While “old” Gourna was located near these tombs, New Gourna would be set amid the sugarcane fields halfway between the ancient hills of the Valley of the Kings and the River Nile.

As Timothy Mitchell has pointed out, Fathy considered the New Gourna commission an opportunity to build a model village that would launch a complete regeneration of the Egyptian countryside. Toward this goal he would develop an inexpensive architectural style for the rural poor, which he could advocate as an alternative to modern Western architectural styles. In particular, Fathy imagined that a regional reappropriation of tradition and technology might stem the tide of the International Style, which was then gaining momentum in Egypt. This was also the time of the nationalist movement in Egypt, which eventually led to the end of the monarchy and the establishment of a nation-state in 1952.
Mitchell has argued that in his search for a national village architecture, Fathy discovered and drew upon the architectural style of the Kenuzi Nubians. Nubia is a region located along the Nile south of Aswan, straddling the political border between Egypt and Sudan. In ancient times, Nubia was an independent kingdom; and in modern times, Mitchell pointed out, the Nubians hardly considered themselves Egyptians. But nowhere within the political boundaries of Egypt did Fathy find the idyllic countryside of his imagination. What he found in the Nubian villages of ghurb Aswan, however, was a particular roof construction method that created an aesthetically pleasing character — namely, barrel vaults built with mud bricks.

Interestingly, when Fathy discovered it there, barrel-vault residential construction had only existed in Nubia for less than four decades. It had arrived, according to Yasser Mahgoub, from another region to the north, known as Daraw. When the First Aswan Dam was constructed in 1902, the northern parts of Nubia, where the Nubian Kenuzi resided, were flooded, forcing them to move their villages to higher ground. The Kenuzi were faced with rebuilding their houses quickly, and they adapted the barrel-vaulted roof system popular in Daraw, twenty miles north of Aswan. Until this time, there is no evidence this method, which had disappeared from the rest of the region, had never been popular with the Nubians, particularly for houses.

In essence, then, the barrel-vault method embodied the revival of an old technique under duress; it did not represent local symbolic or aesthetic desire. Nevertheless, to Fathy it had great appeal, and he combined it with the domes he knew from the mosques of Islamic Cairo to form a new architectural language, which he used to build New Gourna. In subsequent years, although the settlement of New Gourna failed for reasons that are not relevant here, its architectural language, particularly the twinning of the dome and vault, survived. However, quite separate from Fathy’s original intent, during the 1950s and the 1960s (with the exception of another model village built in the western desert) it was used exclusively in the design of custom residences for upper-class Egyptians inside and around Cairo. For practical and symbolic reasons, despite the fact Fathy had invented this architecture for them, peasants did not adopt the domes and vaults for their houses. First, the forms presented an obstacle to expanding houses vertically; and, second, they were associated with graves. Other possible reasons the domes and vaults were not more widely adopted included successful lobbying by modern contracting companies and a desire by the national government to appear modern in the design of state-subsidized projects.

Until 1970, therefore, the use of Fathy’s domes and barrel vaults was extremely limited. However, in that year Fathy was given a significant commission to design a tourist village on part of the land set aside for, but never occupied by, New Gourna, and that would allow Fathy to complete his vision of a traditional village. In the tourist complex, however, linear pedestrian walkways would largely replace the diagonal pathways of the original village. And as James Steele has pointed out, where the focal point of New Gourna had been a mosque, it would here be a restaurant. Although this project was never realized, the seeds for the later use of its style as a thematic representation of authentic heritage were most definitely sown.

**Figure 2.** The market plaza in New Gourna.
The cultural basis for that growth had already been established. In 1962 the government merged Egypt's Ministry of Culture— the political body invented after the 1952 revolution to develop and promote national culture and preserve local heritage— with its Ministry of Information and Tourism. Tharwat Aukasha, who headed the Information and Tourism Ministry from its establishment in 1958 until this merger, commented that this decision would thereafter imbue culture and heritage "with excessive touristic and media influences." However, in the early 1960s Nasser had committed Egypt to an ambitious modernization program that could not be achieved without hard currency to purchase technology from abroad, and one way to earn this currency was to support the tourist industry. Nevertheless, in hindsight, this sudden change in orientation appears to be a precursor to the government's later decision to assume a much more elaborate role in mobilizing the country in the service of the foreign spectator, or traveler.

The late 1970s and early 1980s also ushered in an era when Fathy's architectural vocabulary would travel from Egypt, across the deserts of Arabia, to the booming new states of the Persian Gulf. The spread came in the aftermath of independence and a first modernization wave in these countries. For some ruling families in the Gulf region, Fathy's domes and vaults symbolized their struggle to retain a sense of identity against the tide of change— even though this type of construction had never existed on the Arabian Peninsula before. And during this time, Fathy and a group of his disciples built fancy palaces and villas in the Gulf states, exporting the style of twinned domes and vaults and effectively internationalizing it. Mitchell has subsequently argued that these projects should not discredit Fathy's earlier endeavor to establish a new vernacular Egyptian architecture. I agree with this position. However, I want to raise the following question: if the Daraw (or Nubian Kanuzi) architectural heritage could be adapted to represent a traditional, authentic architecture for all of Egypt, what did it mean to consciously export it to other Arabian lands? Even more of a conceptual problem was Fathy's decision to use this same architecture in 1980 to build the Dar al-Islam School in New Mexico, U.S.A. — a total despatialization and decontextualization of the "authentic" (FIG. 3). Curiously, what began as a local, rediscovered method of construction for poor Egyptian peasants could now provide the architectural language for a group of Muslim Americans who wanted to distinguish their buildings from the adobe constructions of the Navaho Indians. Defenders of Fathy argue that adobe has always been used in New Mexico, and that the weather conditions there are similar to Egypt— particularly in the summer. Yet, while the first point may be true, the second is certainly not. When I visited Fathy's school building in the summer of 1995, the temperature inside was very comfortable in comparison to the simmering heat of the surrounding desert. But its occupants told me that during the winter the inside temperature dropped to such an extent that they had to wear winter coats indoors. It was clear that Fathy was using this invented tradition as a way to anchor a group of Muslim Americans within a larger Muslim world. But in doing so, the design process no longer privileged an actual building tradition, but the ideology of its users.

What began as a regional, traditional and authentic architecture was thus first generalized to represent a national, authentic heritage, and then internationalized as an authentic prototype to be adopted anywhere, regardless of the local environment or aesthetic traditions. Isn't this the same critique that has been raised with regard to the Modern Movement?

GLOBAL TOURISM AND CULTURAL INDUSTRY

In Egypt, Fathy's domes and vaults continued to be used on only a limited scale in cities and villages until about the end of the 1980s. However, in 1986 they were applied for the first time to the design of a major tourist facility. This was the Movenpick Hotel near al-Qusair in the Red Sea region. Its architects were the husband and wife team of Ramy al-Dahan and Sohair Farid, disciples of Fathy who would later play a great role in propagating the style through their work on Kafr-al-Gouna.

It was around the same time, as many social commentators have observed, that a transformation in the global force of capitalism began to be felt. And to locate and make sense of the impulse in Egypt to reinvent heritage in the production of tourist spaces in the two decades since, I want to make a short detour and broadly sketch the forces reshaping today's tourism industry.

It has been argued that since the late 1980s and early 90s the drive for capital accumulation in advanced, industrial societies — and in their corollary, loosely connected socioeco-
nomic and political nodes or clones in developing countries — has established a second economic tier, where capital is accumulated through cultural rather than industrial production. The main activity in this expanding tier is not the manufacture of material goods in factories but the provision and consumption of services and the production of cultural experience. This takes place in specific spaces in the city, and a significant portion of these new hyperspaces of capital have been claimed for the ever-expanding entertainment, culture and tourism industries. Some scholars have gone so far as to claim that many contemporary cities are metamorphosing completely to accommodate these new spaces.

Jennifer Craik has pointed out that at about the same time that the physical environment was changing, another phase of tourism, highlighting the cultural component of the tourist experience, was beginning to emerge. She has contended that this happened precisely because tourism fit with the emerging trend within economic development toward service-based, consumer-oriented industries. Similarly, Timothy Mitchell has noted that “tourism is an industry of consumption, and the consumption not of individual goods but of a more complex commodity, experiences.”

Tourism is one of the modern era’s oldest cultural industries. And ever since it was launched in a formal way by Thomas Cook in the mid-nineteenth century, it has involved the packaging of cultural experiences. Yet, today, from its beginnings as a only bud in the bark of the capitalist tree, the branch of cultural capitalism has grown to where it may soon eclipse the original tree. Like the industrialist tier of the capitalist system, the culture and tourism tier is also increasingly being subject to a global regime of free markets. In its new trajectory, involving the development of mass tourism, the use value of the tourist services, experiences and spaces (or “products,” as the tourist marketers like to call them) have become commodities to be advertised, marketed and sold, as Karl Marx would have argued, much like any other commodity. And because in global high capitalism, cultural production in general, and tourist “products” in particular, are increasingly standardized, there is an increasing demand for built environments that “attach themselves to signs that carry an additional element of value.”

It was this additional element of value in the resort of Movenpick al-Qusair that quickly gave it the exotic character tourists so enjoyed. Ultimately, I want to suggest, the domes and vaults of Movenpick set a model not for the poor villages of Egypt, as Fathy had intended, but for a new breed of tourist resorts and hotels, particularly those striving to create an experience of authenticity. However, a total simulated authentic experience using this style was not fully embraced until the development of the integrated tourist resort-town of al-Gouna. More than any other tourist project, al-Gouna introduced domes and vaults forcefully to the age of hyper-signification, where architectural forms and spaces constitute a stage for the mercantile activity of entertaining and pleasing ever-expanding numbers of tourists.

KAFR AL-GOUNA

The year to be remembered for al-Gouna integrated city-resort is 1989. In that year, Orascom, a leading Egyptian construction company, established a sister company, Orascom Projects and Tourist Developments, to develop approximately 3,000 acres of land about twenty kilometers (thirteen miles) north of the sprawling town of Hurghada. Like many other developers, Orascom intended to capitalize on the area’s delightful climate as well as the crystal waters and coral reefs of the Red Sea. However, unlike the others, the company — inspired by the vision of its chairman, Sameeh Sawiris — came to envision al-Gouna as a fully independent resort-town, with hotels, villas, shopping boutiques, golf courses, a marina, an airport, a school, a hospital, two factories, housing for workers, and other support facilities.

Sawiris’s original vision had been relatively humble, limited to few villas designed by the local architect Shehab Mazhar for family and friends. But, according to Hani ‘Ayad, director of architecture and site planning for OPTD, a bigger concept of al-Gouna gradually developed in Sawiris’s mind over the last few years of the 1980s. Probably because of a new law prohibiting the development of areas directly by the sea for nontourist projects, Sawiris was also forced to consider a different approach to the company’s land north of Hurghada. This led him to purchase an even larger tract and hire a French architect, Alfredo Freda, to develop a master plan for an integrated resort-town.

From the beginning, there were several dominant design principles for this new fully independent resort community. One was a system of inland artificial lagoons containing islands connected by bridges and promenades. Sawiris also envisioned the resort-town as sprawling around Kaf al-Gouna, which he wanted to resemble a vernacular fishing village that had existed long before the resort was built. In other words, since the place did not have any human history, he would invent one.

Of course, cities do usually grow over a long period of time around such historic cores. This is a pattern evident in the fabric of most villages and cities in Egypt, as well as in many other Mediterranean resort towns. What Sawiris wanted to do was emulate this pattern. Indeed, so faithful was he to the idea of inventing history that his first inclination was actually to move fishermen and their families to the resort village and use them to create a new al-Kaf hamlet. Had this plan been implemented, it would have embodied a total simulation of the vernacular, creating a showcase community to enthrall tourists. Many difficulties intervened, however, and the idea was eventually abandoned and replaced by another, more practical one — one that would also save the company money.

When construction began in al-Gouna, Orascom initially accommodated its staff and engineers in Hurghada, a condition that most new resorts had to face during construction. However, Sawiris soon thought of saving money by housing
his staff in the center of the development in cheap new buildings that would afford the image of authentic life for visiting tourists. To make the “old fishing hamlet” occupied by resort workers look as if it had been there for many generations, the architecture would have to look spontaneous and vernacular — carefully and orderly chaotic.

What Sawiris wanted was that the village look organic, as if the people had built it themselves. And in 1992 he hired al-Dahan and Farid, designers of the Movenpick al-Qusair, to design and supervise construction of seventy houses on one of the islands, which he designated as the old city center, Kafr al-Gouna. This was the biggest commission al-Dahan and Farid had received since they had set up their own office in the mid-1980s to pursue work in the tradition of their mentor.

More than anything else, it is its intended, all-pervasive image that distinguishes Kafr al-Gouna from other attempts to simulate “authenticity.” According to ‘Ayad, Sawiris envisioned houses that did not follow any formal architectural rules, yet evinced a very strong character. To achieve this effect, he had al-Dahan and Farid design the houses directly on the site with only rough sketches. The architects overall scheme also involved arranging the houses and support facilities along a labyrinth of winding alleys (FIG. 5).

As a construction method, al-Dahan and Farid proposed the same brick bearing-wall system they had used in most of their earlier works. Such building materials and construction methods fitted with Sawiris’s intended effect; indeed, it was a major reason the architectural pair had been hired. On many earlier occasions, the architects had also argued for reviving traditions by using local materials and forms. For them, local materials were “more healthy than concrete.” Sounding like her mentor, Farid argued that “everyone is building in an international way today. We have a tradition in Egypt. Why not revive it?”

Employing this novel approach was not without its problems. Although Orascom is one of Egypt’s largest construction and engineering companies, it was inexperienced with this type of construction. With the architects’ help, however, the company hired skilled artisans to teach its workers to build whitewashed domes and vaults. Many of these workers had been involved with earlier such projects, particularly the Movenpick al-Qusair. Nevertheless, according to ‘Ayad, the construction process proved to be “a very tedious and costly experience, twenty percent more expensive than the conventional concrete method.” However, al-Dahan and Farid maintained that their method was actually quicker and easier and “work[ed] out to be cheaper than concrete.”

The difference of opinion presents a typical confrontation between two systems of building, and it would be wrong to rush to any conclusion concerning it. Among the factors
complicating construction of Kafr al-Gouna was that it was hard to control nonstandard methods of construction (the almost lost knowledge of traditional building techniques) with modern management systems. In addition, the process required a different division of labor and lacked, to an extent, the standardization of building types which would allow Fordist ease, efficiency, and speed of assembly. This situation changed, at least slightly, when the method was integrated with the company’s conventional approach to construction. According to ‘Ayad, at the beginning, the architects’ involvement was tremendous. But eventually, Orascom’s own workers learned the method and started building without the direct help of al-Dahan and Farid. Despite the additional time and expense of construction, the finished houses were so impressive to Sawiris and to foreign visitors that the company moved its staff housing elsewhere and transformed the entire island into a village-resort composed of villas and hotels for wealthy visitors (FIGS. 6, 7). This change required some architectural adaptations. But the technique employed by the architects also meant they could adjust the plans to meet the developer’s shifting needs — something that would have been impossible had they used reinforced concrete. In time, the entire kafir was redesigned to include new tourist-oriented spaces, such as Souq al-Balad (a marketplace in the assumed style of a traditional Oriental market) and al-Khayamia shopping arcade (a clone of the historical
Khayamia cloth-market outside Bab Zewaila, the south gate of old Cairo (Fig. 8). With these changes, al-Kafr pivoted suddenly to become the focal point of the development, showcasing a collage of names and images selected from elements of formal or vernacular Arab, Islamic, or Egyptian heritage.

Dawar al-’Umda hotel was one example of the new tourist facilities in which styles, names, and cultures were mixed (Fig. 9). Sawiris contended that every small village in Egypt had an ‘umda — a chief or mayor, who lived in a dawar, a big house, where he could host villagers and visitors. Therefore, Kafr al-Gouna had to have one too. Sawiris imagined this as a small building with about 25 rooms that would look as if it had been transformed at some point from the mayor’s house into a hotel run by a family. Once again, to design the building, the origin was first reinvented, then copied. “Authenticity” was manufactured to accentuate the all-encompassing feeling and impression of history and of the vernacular.

According to ‘Ayad, the hotel was originally built to this vision. But additional rooms had to be added later for reasons of feasibility. Interestingly, this involved an exercise in mimicry that crossed the Mediterranean Sea to the Italian peninsula (Fig. 10). Inspired by the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, the architects designed the additional rooms to extend partially out over a lagoon, creating a spectacular effect that would have made a real Nile Valley ‘umda blush.40 Except in its name, therefore, Dawar al-‘Umda hotel copies an original that never existed. Yet in the pamphlet promoting al-Gouna it is described as “authentic to the core.”

The effect of the hotel’s exterior was further complemented in its interior. Here the designers Shahira Fahmy and Mona Hussien mixed pieces and images from vernacular Egypt and Islamic Cairo. These included meticulously chosen antique furniture and handcrafted chandeliers, gas lamps, and beds with corner posts and overhead canopies. Meanwhile, outside the hotel, in Tamr Henna, or Kafr al-Gouna Center, the architects designed yet another interesting simulation of the vernacular, an Egyptian-style cafe. Called al-Qahwa, it mimicked an imagined “original” coffee shop, where Egyptians would sit to smoke water pipes and drink tea. So careful was this simulation that graffiti was intentionally painted over the pastel colors of the interior walls (Fig. 11).

In several important regards, however, the impulse to create an “authentic experience” for the tourist (who now occupied the center, instead of gazing at it from a distance) seems to have overruled important considerations. For example, the original idea had been that the construction method would make modern, electric cooling systems unnecessary. In addition to insulating the walls, the domes and vaults were supposed to provide natural cooling in a desert environment. However, for the international tourist, this natural cooling system was not enough, and the searing summer temperatures required installation of air conditioning units (Fig. 12).
Ayad’s observations here are very revealing. In describing the houses at the end of the construction process, he concluded that they “ended up with form and not function.” In other words, material objects and images of vernacular architecture could provide an emotionally powerful illusion of authenticity, but the tourist never really wanted to feel what it was to live in a vernacular building or sit in a vernacular coffee shop. To begin, such an authentic experience would have involved sweating. Instead, the vernacular, or the “original,” if this could really refer to something, needed to be decontextualized and cleansed so it could more effectively re-present the real.

In the years following construction of Kafr al-Gouna the resort around it continued to grow. More than ten foreign and Egyptian architects have now worked on it. This use of multiple architects has been deliberate, intended to create diversity of styles, underpinning the idea that the place grew incrementally over a long span of time. However, it perhaps made it inevitable that the original copy would, itself, emerge as a source for copying, mimicking or recycling. Ironically, or perhaps significantly, this copying of the copy would come from one of the high priests of postmodern architecture.

When the time came to design a third hotel in al-Gouna, the Sheraton Miramar, the developer selected Michael Graves as its designer (Figs. 13, 14). And when Graves first visited al-Gouna he was not impressed with the Mediterranean style of its first hotel, the Paradiso. Nor did he like what he considered the European style of its second, the Movenpick al-Gouna, which he thought was out of context. Familiar with the work of Fathy, what he most admired was the work of al-Dahan and Farid.

Sawiris claims he deliberately took Graves to Kafr al-Gouna “so that [Graves] could refer to it as his source of Egyptian architecture.” Sawiris further related that he “asked [Graves] to design the new hotel in a modernized version of this style, as if the work of Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy was being reinterpreted two generations later.” For Graves, the architecture of Kafr al-Gouna became the springboard for his Sheraton Miramar design, as well as for other facilities he designed in al-Gouna. Thus, the domes and vaults Fathy intended as a model for a new peasant architecture have not only migrated to the Red sea region from the Nile valley, but been reinterpreted twice in less than ten years.

AUTHENTICITY AND THE FRACTAL VALUE OF THE SIGN

At this point, I want to bring this story of architectural heritage back to the question of authenticity and the transformation of value inherent in such cycles of reinvention. In particular, I want to suggest that the difference between the original, the copy, the simulation, and the simulacrum are all apparent in this story of invented traditions.

Consider the use of barrel-vaulted roofs of the Kenuzi villages. These emerged as a result of cultural exchange, of help received from the builders in Daraw to the north, embodying a revival of an old method due to an urgent necessity for houses. The architecture was largely determined by local forces; it was “the insular period” to use Nezar AlSayyad’s words. However, when Fathy designed el-Gourna near Luxor in the 1940s, his design diffused this traditional method of roofing belonging to people who lived in the Nubian region, while combining it with dome construction prevalent in Islamic architecture, particularly the Mamluke mosques in Cairo. This was clearly not the case of a tradition handed down, but of a tradition being invented.

As Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have pointed out, traditions that claim to be old are often quite recent in origin, and in many cases they are invented. Moreover, in mimicking traditional architectural elements and construction
methods, Fathy did not intend to reproduce an old-world environment; rather, he wanted to establish a national architectural style. Nevertheless, even though el-Gourna was an attempt to stand for something else, for a whole national heritage, it was not a mere thematizing, or commodification of an “authentic,” original. Although it was a copy, it still bore a semblance to traditional models, whether of Nubian, Daraw, or Mamluke architecture.

I also want to argue, however, that in this ambivalent condition of the architectural tradition emerging in New Gourna — of both having and not having a semblance with a model — its ability to acquire a sign value different from its former association was born. In displacing the sign value of the dome and the vault, Fathy transformed tradition. From the beginning, therefore, his pilot village marked the end of a Nubian building tradition and the beginning of a transformed version of it — one that, interestingly, has still not succeeded in being attractive to the rural poor. Rather, the subsequent years have witnessed the dome and vault acquiring a new romantic, nostalgic sign value appealing to the richest, most elite segment of society.

In this process of semiotic appropriation, al-Dahan’s and Farid’s designs for both the Movenpick al-Qusair and Kafr al-Gouna were first-order simulations. These buildings, to an extent, stand as separate from the model, whether that of Fathy’s el-Gourna, or of Nubian villages. The architects represented a vernacular which never existed in this form (think of the Dawar El-Umda hotel/house). The design is more real than the real; it is the vernacular cleansed, retouched, and refurbished.

It is also important to recognize that the architecture of Kafr al-Gouna distinguishes itself from Movenpick al-Qusair through an approach to the simulation of heritage and the vernacular that is all encompassing. Using domes and vaults, Kafr al-Gouna as a whole is akin to a theme park of appropriated vernacular and historical images and names. While the Movenpick al-Qusair does not conceal that it is architecture for scenography, Kafr al-Gouna represents itself as real. Like someone hiding behind a mask at a costume party, Movenpick al-Qusair pretends to be someone else, without the erasure of the pretense. By contrast, Kafr al-Gouna attempts a complete urban disguise.

In the Sheraton Miramar hotel the reality is even different. Here Graves mimicked a mimicry of a mimicry of an architecture that never existed in the Red Sea region. The production of the domes and vaults has no relation whatsoever with the production of the Nubian or Daraw house. In other words, it is a second-order simulation, a simulacrum. No longer is there a reference to the meaning or function of the model; architectural elements have been transformed into signifiers with no external referent. Neither do they have any practical use value. This is architecture for the sheer reason of being spectacle.

Kafr al-Gouna’s spaces are like staged commercial entertainment spectacles, replete with signs that, in addition to their function in differentiating the resort-town from others, communicate meanings which promote specific lifestyles and patterns of consumption. Mark Gottdiener, among others, has called attention to the fact that today lifestyles are intrinsic markers of “who one is and as a means to connect to others.” Akin to the individual’s possession of physical commodities, adopting the tourist lifestyle marks and conveys meaning, status and prestige within a peer group. In particular, within one’s own society it displays the acquisition of cultural capital. To put it differently, while the display function of commodity signs remains a significant source for individual identity-actualization and prestige, the accumulation of cultural experiences, such as travel to exotic places, represents an increasingly powerful alternative source for the acquisition of identity and status.
Illustrative of this force is the eagerness of many tourists in the resort-town of al-Gouna to take photographs in certain spots so that they can tell their peers back home that they were in a particular place. This is the “I have been there” feeling, to paraphrase what Baudrillard calls the “I did it” feeling. Furthermore, it is to gain cultural capital that a large segment of the traveling public is increasingly motivated to experience and consume differences and the exotic. And it is for supplying this exotic experience that the cultural and tourism industries in the Red Sea region of Egypt are manufacturing authenticity and reinventing tradition.

PARTING THOUGHTS

The hybrid mixture of al-Gouna’s various hotels and thematic spectacles has proven a business success, and become a recipe that has now been repeated by its developer. Today, al-Gouna’s domes and vaults are being exported, or cloned, for other fancy tourist resorts across the country, region, and maybe soon, the world. The list below includes all of Orascom’s projects operating, planned, or in the pipeline.

Al-Gouna . . . . . . . . . . . Egypt
Taba Heights . . . . . . . . . . Egypt
Bernice . . . . . . . . . . . . . Egypt
North Coast . . . . . . . . . . Egypt
Tala Bay . . . . . . . . . . . . Jordan
The Cove . . . . . . . . . . . . UAE
Wadi Al-Qurum . . . . . Oman
Salalah . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Oman
Al-Soda Island . . . . . Oman
Sifah . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Oman
Kamaran Island . . . . . . Yemen
Club Med . . . . . . . . . . . Mauritius
Invitation . . . . . . . . . . . Morocco

Al-Gouna now provides an architectural recipe that offers tourists snapshots of a history and an architectural tradition that did not exist prior to its inception in the early 1990s. However, if al-Gouna claims authenticity because it espouses visual association with some regional, vernacular or past architectural forms and elements — a visual authenticity, if you will — then, when considering the list above, one begins to wonder which history and which tradition these new cloned spaces represent. Islamic, Egyptian, Arab, Omani, Nubian! As small souvenirs and statuettes of Nubians fill the shelves of many tourist shops, their domes and vaults are also becoming available for appropriation in the global architectural supermarket, to paraphrase the words of Gordon Mathews (fig. 15).

Nezar AlSayyad has written that the emerging idea of a global cultural supermarket has cast further doubt on the legitimacy of tradition as a stable frame of reference and a harbinger of authenticity. According to AlSayyad, “tradition has become, like culture, a matter of choice, because both information and alternative identities are now available in this global supermarket.” The supermarket is today the perfect metaphorical space for our contemporary “experience economy” — and for our architectural imagination, particularly when dealing with history and the reinvention of architectural heritage.

Jorinde Seijdel has pointed out that the supermarket — an offspring of the department store — is a product of modernity. Dell Upton wrote that the adjective “tradition” and its corollary, “authenticity,” are also products of modernity — I should add, objectified through the modern institution of the museum. Like the museum, the department store (predecessor of the supermarket) fulfilled an important function within the new capitalist system: that of display. Walter Benjamin once described the Paris shopping arcade as a place where the merchandise had for the first time created a small world of its own, and he characterized it as a surrealistic dream. Today, according to Seijdel, the supermarket, or hyper-market, manifests itself rather as a hyper-realistic utopia. And in this utopian world of consumption (of commodities, signs, and spatial experiences), “the law that is imposed on us is the law of the confusion of categories.”
“Each category,” wrote Baudrillard, “is generalized to the greatest possible extent, so that it eventually loses all specificity and is reabsorbed by all other categories.”

In the realm of architecture and urbanism, some critics are beginning to recognize a similar confusion of categories and functions. Paul Virilio, for example, has declared that cities are becoming like airports. Following this thread, I would suggest that airports are looking more like shopping malls; shopping malls are becoming closer to theme parks; theme parks are looking more like resorts; and resorts are becoming the ultimate typology for cities. One can see this last link in Egypt, where al-Gouna is now the typology for a massive real estate development near Cairo called Dreamland, which I have previously described.

Or one may choose to look under the law of the confusion of categories at the concepts of authenticity and tradition, and ask whether both concepts may have also been conflated. I find it interesting that in their lexical meanings, both concepts use the hand to mark a temporal connection with a distant past, an origin. While Shils has defined tradition as anything which is handed down from the past to the present, authenticity derives from the ancient Greek authentes, which, according to Webster, meant “the one who did things with his or her own hands.”

With a certain trepidation, I want to pose the following questions. Could it be that the “invisible hand of the market” has conflated both concepts by putting them on the same shelf in the global hyper-market of ideas? Could it be that the framing of tradition as the antithesis of modernity has put their associated concepts of authentic and inauthentic on equal terms (or meanings) with them? Inspired by Jane Jacobs’s formula “tradition is (not) modern,” I want to suggest the following formula: “tradition is (not) authenticity.” If we conceive them as separate concepts, then the value of tradition will no longer be harbinger of or revered as the authentic.

The reinvented architectural tradition used in al-Gouna was never place-based. Nor was it a temporally situated heritage owned by certain people. Its value, therefore, lies not in its claim to authenticity, but in its fractal state as it makes images of the past available as objects of present attachment, or in its visual contiguity to other traditions in the global architectural supermarket.

REFERENCE NOTES

2. I say “to an extent” because, as Derek Gregory has argued convincingly, with the exception of their contact with the Egyptian dragoman and the crew of the Nile barges, or dahabeah, Western travelers on the Nile during the nineteenth century were detached from the locals and their different happenings. D. Gregory, “Colonial Nostalgia and Cultures of Travel: Spaces of Constructed Visibility in Egypt,” in N. AlSayyad, ed., Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage (London: Routledge, 2001).
3. As an indication of its rise, one may point out that of the 100,000 hotel rooms in Egypt, there are 20,000 in Luxor, Aswan, and the floating boats; about the same in London: Routledge, 2001).
4. My use of the word industry follows that of Mike Robinson. He has argued that the tourism industry is fragmented into four broad areas: attractions, accommodations, transport and distribution. M. Robinson, “Tourism Encounters,” in AlSayyad, ed., Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage, p.35.
5. Editorial, “The Next Wave,” Gulf Business, Vol.11 No.2 (June 2006). In the Persian Gulf region, for example, recent studies show that in 2007 more than $300 billion is in the pipeline for tourist projects, with $170 billion committed to pure leisure projects, covering developments such as museums and theme parks. See B.D. Augustine, "UAE Leisure Ventures Hit $512b," Gulf News, January 20, 2008, p.33.
9. Ibid., p.3.
12. A classical example of this debate is the one that took place between Taha Hussien and Said Kotob concerning a book the former had published in the 1930s entitled “The Future of Culture in Egypt.” See T. Hussien, Mostaabal al-Thaqafa fi Misr (Cairo: al-Anglo, 1936).
14. This thesis has been put forward, for example, by Janet Abu-Lughod in her earlier analysis of Cairo. See, J. Abu-Lughod, Cairo (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1971).
16. The dome first appeared in Assyrian architecture, later becoming a feature of Islamic mosques throughout the region. Not unlike in the West, the dome had two main symbolic interpretations: first, a representation of the vault of heaven; and, second, a symbol of divine dominance engulfing the emotional and physical being of the faithful. In functional terms, it has been used to externally define Qibla (the direction of Mecca for prayers) and to provide a source of daylight for the interior of mosques.
23. According to Steele, the idea was to somehow “fulfill the unrealized potential of New Gourna’s close proximity to the ferry landings on the bank of the Nile and the main highway that sustains endless bus-loads of tourists traveling back and forth from these landings to the Valleys of the Kings and Queens.” J. Steele, “The Hassan Fathy Collection,” in A Catalogue of Visual Documents at the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (Bern: The Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 1989), p.18.
26. In fact, in their later additions to the complex, they have changed the style and the construction technique.
27. Many scholars have suggested this shift or expansion of the cultural capitalism. See, for example, J. Rifkin, The Age of Access (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Putnam, 2000); and S. Britton, “Tourism, Capital, and Place: Towards a Critical Geography of Tourism,” Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 9, pp.451–78.
28. See Rifkin, The Age of Access. Similarly, management consultants Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, for example, have argued that an advanced stage of the service economy is beginning to emerge where businesses are selling experiences rather than merely performing services. This, they suggest, is a natural progression in the value added by the business over and above its inputs. Their core argument is that because of digital technology and increasing competition, services today are starting to orchestrate memorable events for their customers, as memory itself is becoming the product — or, to be more accurate, the simulated experience. B.J. Pine II and J.H. Gilmore, The Experience Economy (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).
29. See, for example, J. Hannigan, Fantasy City (London: Routledge, 1998).
34. It is important to note that al-Gouna is partly funded by the World Bank.
35. My interview with the architect Hani ‘Ayad, Director of OPTD (Orascom Projects and Tourist Development) took place in September 1998.
37. During the 1980s, al-Dahan and Farid worked on a few resort commissions. Coincidentally, I happened to be working in their office during this time. Another big commission was in the city of Al-Qusair, 130 kilometers south of Hurghada. A local contractor commissioned them to build a small, low-profile hotel. The project stalled for a few years because of the death of the owner while the building was still under construction. Finally, it was taken over by the Movenpick hotel chain, and with Sabbour Contracting Company, the architects worked again to finish their earlier designs.
46. See M. Gottdiener, “Approaches to Consumption,” in M. Gottdiener, ed., New Forms of Consumption (Lanham: Roman, 2000), p.21. An excellent illustration of the importance of lifestyles in advanced capital- ist societies can be seen in the words of U.S. President George Bush in his first appearance after the 9/11 attacks on Washington and New York. His second sentence was “Our way of life, indeed our very freedom, came under attack.”
47. Quoted in S. Mestrovic, Postemotional Society (London: Sage, 1997), p.83. Similarly, I have noticed that more candidates seeking new jobs write their travels as part of their resumes.
48. More interesting is the fact that Sawiris has decided to invest more than 400 million Euros in Andermatt, Switzerland, to build a resort that would lift the tourism business in this small town in the Alps. It is not clear whether the dome and Nubian vault will be used in this resort, but if they are, this would be a true globalization of the style.
50. Ibid., p.23.
54. Ibid., p.9.
Recently, Rem Koolhaas has suggested that the ultimate typology of contemporary urbanism has become the resort. R. Koolhaas, “Frontline,” in Al Manakh (Amsterdam: Stichting Archis, 2007).

All photos are by the author except where otherwise indicated.