

THE CRISES OF VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE: THE TALE OF TWO VERSIONS OF 'NEW GOURNA' IN UPPER EGYPT

أزمة العمارة المحلية -

دراسة تجربتين لتصميم قرية الجرنه الجديدة فى صعيد مصر

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ملخص: بنيت قرية القرنه فى صعيد مصر فوق موقع فرعونى تراثى. و لحماية الآثار الفرعونية من السرقة فقد كلفت الحكومة المصرية المعماري حسن فتحى فى الأربعينيات من القرن الماضى بتصميم قرية جديدة لسكان القرنه. و للأسف فقد فشل هذا المشروع حيث رفض معظم السكان الانتقال إلى القرية الجديدة. وقد أعادت الحكومة المصرية المحاولة مؤخرًا و لكن جاءت النسخة الثانية من القرنه الجديدة مختلفة تمامًا عن تجربة حسن فتحى. و يهدف البحث إلى معرفة ما إذا كانت هذه النسخة من القرنه الجديدة سوف تتغلب على المشاكل التي لازمت القرنه الجديدة الأولى و بالتالى تتعامل بشكل ناجح مع العمارة المحلية للمنطقة. و قد وجد البحث أن كلا التجريبتين كشفتنا كيف أن عمليات اتخاذ القرار الرسمية تنتهى غالبًا بتقليد سطحي للعمارة المحلية الأصيلة أو بفرض بيئة مبنية غريبة. و عليه فمن المتوقع أن المشروع الأخير سينتهى بفشل يماثل فشل المشروع الأول. و فى النهاية فالبحث يؤكد على ضرورة إيجاد مدخل بديل للتعامل مع المناطق ذات العمارة المحلية المتميزة لكي يحافظ على الخصائص الاجتماعية و الثقافية و الاقتصادية و البيئية لهذه المناطق.

Abstract: Gournah, a vernacular village in Upper Egypt was built above Pharonic heritage site. In order to protect the monuments from theft, the Egyptian government commissioned Hassan Fathy in 1940s to design a new settlement for The Gournah residents. Unfortunately the project failed as most of the residents refused to move to the new village. Recently the government repeated the attempt but this time the second version of the New Gournah came significantly different from the Fathy's one. The main objective of the paper is to investigate if the second version of New Gournah is going to overcome the problems associated with the Fathy's New Gournah and deals successfully with the vernacular architecture of the region. It has been found that both of the two 'New Gournah' projects reveal how the top-down official processes might end up with either a superficial mimicry to the authentic vernacular architecture or an imposed alien built environment. Thus, it is expected that the recent project is going to end up in failure as its predecessor. Finally, an alternative approach when dealing with the regions of vernacular architecture is desperately needed in order to sustain their social, cultural, economic and environmental essence.

Keywords: New Gournah, Vernacular Architecture, Upper Egypt.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gourna is a small village in Upper Egypt near to Luxor built by its residents about 100m to the east of the Temple of Seti I. Old Gourna was a thriving community of five hamlets built along the hills in West Luxor, on the ancient cemetery of Thebes. Until the early 19th century the community included at least parts of the Temple of Seti I. Edward William Lane relates in 1825 that the village was abandoned and not a single inhabitant lived there. Isabella Frances Romer suggests that the resettling started in the late 1840s^[1].

It is claimed that the Gournii for generations had made their livelihood by tunneling into the tombs, plundering the contents and selling the artifacts on the black market. They built their houses in front of the tunnels to accord a certain degree of security to their operations^[2]. Determined to stop the tomb robbing, the Department of Antiquities engaged Fathy in 1946 to design and construct a new village for the relocation of the Gournii. Recently and after the failure of Fathy's project the government repeated the attempt to move the residents on the same background.

The main objective of the research is to investigate if the second version of New Gourna is going to overcome the problems associated with Fathy's New Gourna and if

it is going to deal successfully with the vernacular architecture of the region or not. In order to undertake this investigation the paper first reviewed the vernacular architecture of Gourna and then discussed both Fathy's approach and the recent New Gourna Village's approach.

2. BACKGROUND ABOUT VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE OF GOURNA

Much of Gourna was originally built on the hillside with mud bricks and wood. The height of houses ranged from one to two stories. The houses were built next to each other following irregular urban patterns that reflected the decisions made by the residents. These decisions were influenced by the community traditions and values. Also, the built environment was mixed-use one where shops and workshops could be found on some of the ground floors of the houses especially in those which abut main streets (fig.1).

Residents used to utilize open spaces in front of their houses in different social and economic activities such as sitting areas for housewives, play areas for children, cooking and other domestic uses. Also, they used to raise poultry and other farm animals that they can afford to feed in these open spaces (fig.2). These resulted in demarcation and appropriation of the open areas in the outer spaces juxtaposed to the

house front and thus shaped livable and vivid urban spaces within the residential context. (fig. 3)

Many of the people in Gourma were working in carving alabaster where they were actively carving various objects from slabs of alabaster to sell to the tourists visiting the surrounding monuments^[2].

People of Gourma used to ornament the facades of their houses in a way that reflects their significant occasions such as performing pilgrimage (fig.4-c) or to attract the attention for their shops which are usually occupying the ground floors of their homes (fig.4-a,b).

Residents actually paid attention to the facades of their houses especially in formation of has the entrances and the skylines of their houses (fig.5). Some motives can easily be identified which constitute a common convention among Gournii regarding the formation of the architecture mass. Colors also played a key role in having this sense of diversity within unity in the urban fabric of old Gourma.

3. FIRST VERSION OF NEW GOURNA: HASSAN FATHY'S GOURNA

New Gourna village designed by the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy was partially built between 1945 and 1948, laying roughly midway between the Colossi of Memnon and el-Gezira on the

Nile. The main road to the Theban Necropolis runs right through it^[1]. Fathy attempted to make the people of Gourna live into a harmonious social structure, free from abject poverty, disease and illiteracy, devote to the pursuit of folk art, and frame by an appropriate and relevant architectural setting. In order to realize these goals Fathy planned the housing in irregular allotments (fig.6).

In his view, these allotments would force variation in house plans while shaping a network of angular streets that turn on themselves to create broken vistas. Much of the lives of households are played out in these small, quiet streets that serve as extensions to the home as workplaces and as play areas for children. The smallest unit in the hierarchy of open space is the multi purpose courtyard incorporated into each house (fig.7). The village design began with this spatial unit. A man is led through an ascending scale of space that begin with privacy of his small courtyard, leading to the semi-public neighbourhood street, to the larger avenue, then the village square and finally the open fields of the Nile Valley.

On the other hand the main route to the village interior widens to create a kind of public square around which many of the community functions were to take place including prayer, shopping and entertainment housed by the mosque, khan

and theatre respectively. Informal socializing occurs in the streets or under the Byzantine domes that cover the village water wells (there is no running water in individual houses) (fig.8)^[2].

Rather than subscribing to the current conventional idea of using a limited number of unit types, Fathy took the unprecedented approach of seeking to satisfy the individual needs of each family in the design. As he said in *Architecture for the Poor*^[10], "In Nature, no two men are alike. Even if they are twins and physically identical, they will differ in their dreams. The architecture of the house emerges from the dream; this is why in villages built by their inhabitants we will find no two houses identical. This variety grew naturally as men designed and built their many thousands of dwellings through the millennia." Fathy^[10] argues that "the architect can consider the family size, the wealth, the social status, the profession, the climate, and at last, the hopes and aspirations of those he shall house. As he cannot hold a thousand individuals in his mind at one time, let him begin with the comprehensible, with a handful of people or a natural group of families which will bring the design within his power. Once he is dealing with a manageable group of say twenty or thirty families, then the desired variety will naturally and logically follow in the housing."

But even with this noble goal Steele^[11] raises the extremely important question of how to create a culturally and environmentally valid architecture that is sensitive to ethnic and regional traditions without allowing subjective values and images to intervene in the design process. Additionally, the flexibility of the house to accommodate its residents' changing needs and the applicability of incremental development remains questionable issues in Fathy's design. Unfortunately Fathy's approach failed to stand the test of reality. Despite his sincere effort to design the New Gourma in an environmentally and socially-responsive manner, the residents of Gourma refused to move to their new village. Now most of the project has turned into ruins (fig.9 and fig.10).

Originally planned for a population of 900 families, the completed project has a current population of approximately 130 families and covers one fifth of the original site. The Gournii, content with their living situation, resented the project and therefore were reluctant to cooperate. The final result was a partial realization of the master plan^[2]. All that remains today of the original New Gourma is the mosque, market and a couple of houses. Most other houses in the village today are of newer origin^[1]. In the end, many of the social services, such as the dispenser and women's social center, and the *hammam* (public bath), were

neither provided nor facilitated, nor was all the proposed housing constructed. Several of the community buildings- the crafts exhibition hall, village hall and the *khan* (market) -- though built, have never supported their intended functions and are now used as housing or workshop space^[2].

4. SECOND VERSION OF NEW GOURNA

After many decades from its first attempt to move the residents from old Gourna, the government repeated the attempt on the same background of protecting monuments. The second version of the New Gourna, called Al Taref in the outset, came significantly different from that of the Fathy's one. The work in this new village began in 1997 and has been finished in 2006. Transferring residents to their new homes began in the 15th of August 2006. In order to force the residents to move, the government demolished most of the houses in old Gourna and left only a few number of houses to be re-used later as museums for the vernacular architecture of Gourna.

The new village which cost about 100 million Egyptian Pound has been planned to accommodate the 20,000 residents of the 7 regions (Nogoa) of old Gourna who were living in about 4,000 housing units. New Gourna contains more than 2000 houses which were given to the moving residents for free. Additionally, about 1500 plots

have been distributed to some better-off residents for free in order to enable them to build 4 story walk up residential blocks by themselves according to a unified design models sharing the same architectural style. Services such as two schools, police station, youth center, mosque, health center and bakeries (fig.11 and fig.13)^[12]. The layout followed the criteria of the design of conventional residential districts where mixed-uses has been avoided with most of the services are accumulating in one central area. The central market (fig 13) seems to be driven from Fathy's Gourna but with superficial items such as the concrete vaults and domes only meant to give a specific appearance rather than to achieve a functional goal.

The area of the typical house model equals about 175 m² and consists of one floor only. The houses are all identical in design and have 3 bedrooms, a seating area, a kitchen and a bathroom. Outside there is a small yard at the back and at the front a porch way and little *mastaba* in front of the main bedroom which has a door leading outside (fig.12).

The criticism for New Gourna is pivoted around many issues. First, it is located some kilometers away from old Gourna and from any tourist sites. It is far into the desert and residents who used to work in alabaster factories could not afford the

service car so walked there, approx 3 kilometers.

It has been claimed that residents have been not fairly compensated. Whereas in the past they were offered big houses and more space, right now no matter how big their old house was or how many family members they have they are offered only one storey, two bedroom houses that look like makeshift sea side chalets. The houses are very regimented and box like. In an interview with one of the villagers he pointed out that it is not a question of compensation but of the fact that this is his home, this is the place where his great grandparents have lived and nobody has the right to force him out^[8].

The allocation of the new houses had followed rules which residents could not understand. On the other hand, it is obvious that everything is going to have to come from outside. For instance, the landscaping is supplied with water by truck. Also, everything has been provided by the government including the furniture. Residents said they had been promised to get even electrical equipments which they hadn't got yet like a washing machine, TV and fans. People were concerned that after the Egyptian president had visited all the contents would be taken away and I have heard this from other sources^[9].

5. THE TWO VERSIONS OF NEW GOURNA AND THE CRISES OF VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

In contrast to Fathy's Gournia, the new Gournia have been designed and built totally away from the local residents who had no chance to participate in any process. Fathy argued in his book 'Architecture for the Poor' that when the architect is faced with the job of designing a thousand houses at one time, rather than dream for the thousand whom he must shelter, he designs one house and puts three zeros to its right, denying creativity to himself and humanity to man. As if he were a portraitist with a thousand commissions and painted only one picture and made nine hundred and ninety nine photocopies. This describes well the situation in the second version of new Gournia. Only one housing model is repeated with no consideration for individual needs and preferences that once shaped the old Gournia which the government are demolishing but at the same time leave a couple of houses from it to be used as a museum for the vernacular architecture of Gournia. People have not only been alienated from the design process but also they cannot adapt or change anything in their houses as long as this might compromise the appearance of facades.

Even with this office-prepared prototype design, many of the architectural motives

of the vernacular architecture of Gourna, especially those of the entrances and skyline (fig.5), have not been incorporated. Pseudo-design of Fathy's Gourna in the design of the central market makes the situation even worse. In Fathy's design the vaults and domes came as appropriate techniques where people can build them by themselves using local materials. But in New Gourna vaults and domes are merely meant for superficial appearance and are built using alien building materials and techniques imported to the region from far away locations. In addition, professionals actually leave no room for people to share in the construction process.

Although the designers are claiming that they took the residents needs into consideration they actually ended up with a total destruction of the process that produced vernacular architecture of Gourna.

Thus, it might be claimed here that both of the two attempts to build a New Gourna reveal how the top-down official processes might end up with a superficial mimic to the authentic vernacular architecture or even impose a totally different built environment on it. Even with Fathy's dream to take individual needs into consideration, the research argue that the two cases share to some extent the negligence of the native residents as the main expert of vernacular architecture and

imposing the architects' viewpoints on them. All the assets historically embedded in the Gourna vernacular architecture has been compromised and the vision of professionals and politicians eventually dominated the whole decision making process. As a result of this attitude, people who used to historically produce their own living environment have become extremely dependant on the government to do everything for them. Thus, it is expected that the project is going to end up in failure as its predecessor.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The research argues that the second version of New Gourna, as well as the first version of it of course with some major differences, has demolished the vernacular architecture of the region as it leaves no room for people to act. This shed the light on the fact that no real appropriate vision has been realized so far in dealing with the dichotomy of development on one hand and sustaining the vernacular architecture on the other hand. Based on that, the research draws the attention to the urgent need for an alternative approach when dealing with the regions that have vernacular architecture in order to sustain their social, cultural, economic and environmental essence not to sustain their architectural characteristics in a superficial and cosmetic manner. This proposed approach should

leave real room for people's actions and interactions without imposing office-prepared solutions on them. Instead, professionals and officials should give hand for people to help them to find solutions for their own problems including the appropriate way to develop themselves in a way that match the era of our time and at the mean time to preserve their values and traditions which would help them sustain their vernacular architecture.

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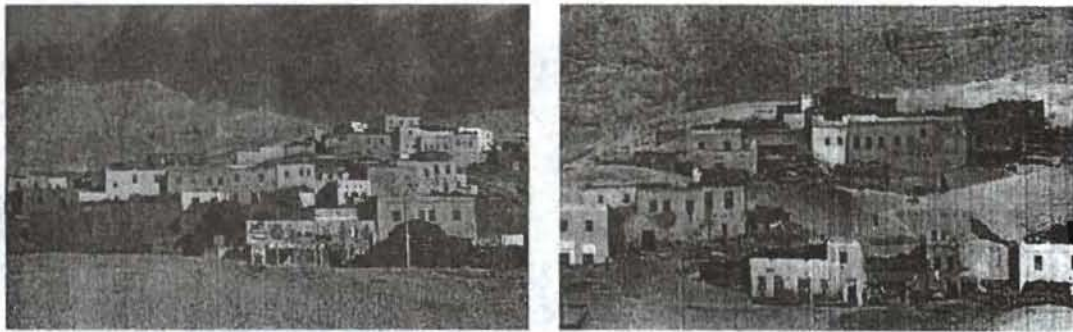


Fig.1: The urban form of the old Gournah, near the Valley of the Kings^[3,4].

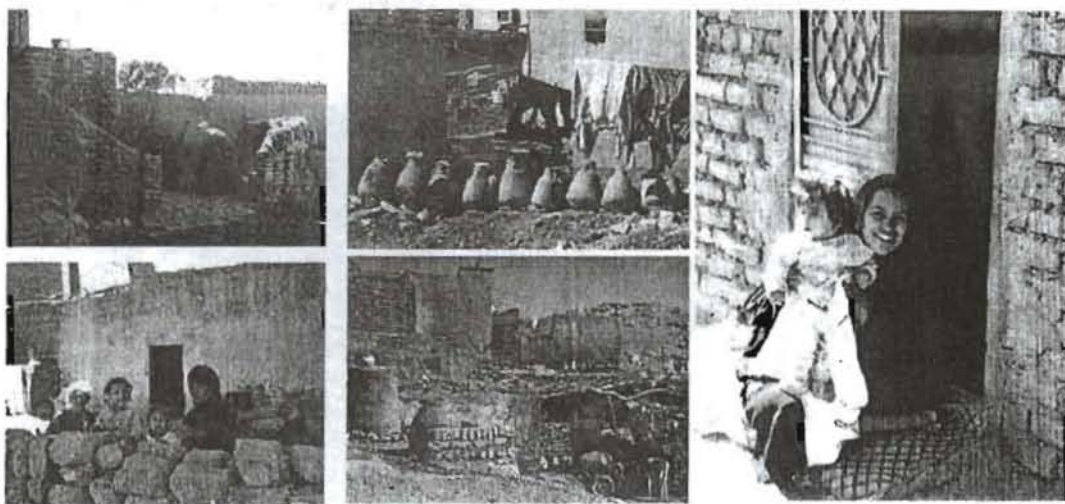


Fig.2: Demarcation and appropriation of open spaces in the outside space juxtaposed to the house front^[5].

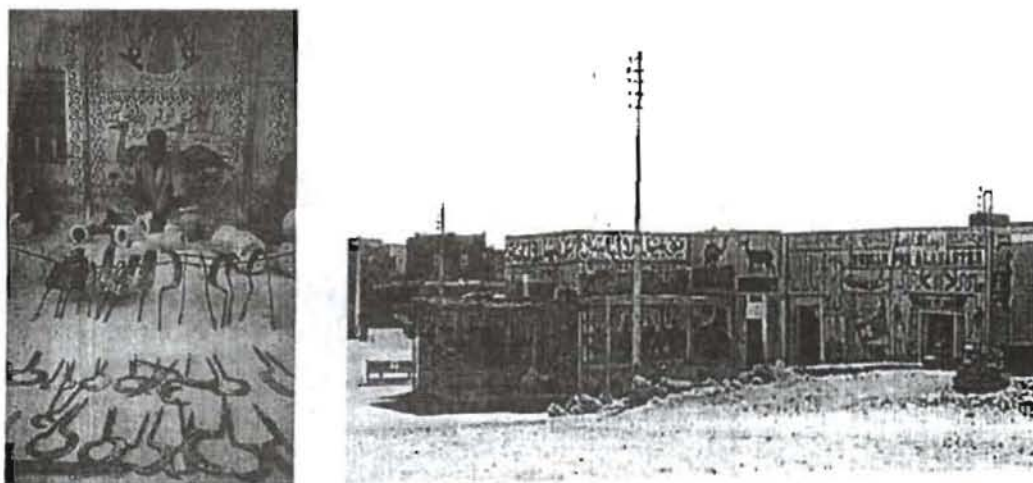


Fig.3: Working in carving alabaster^[6,5].

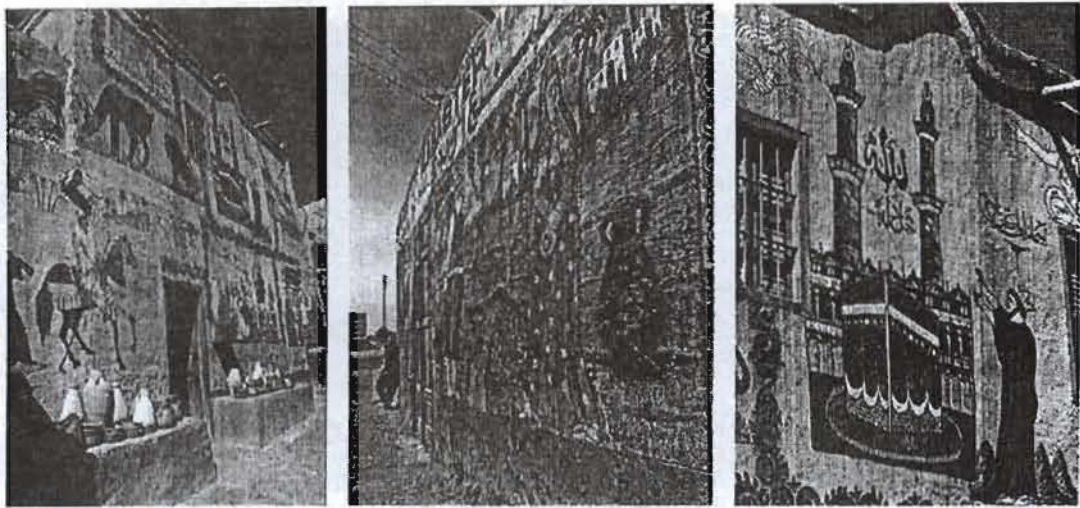


Fig.4: Vernacular ornaments on the exterior walls of houses^[7].

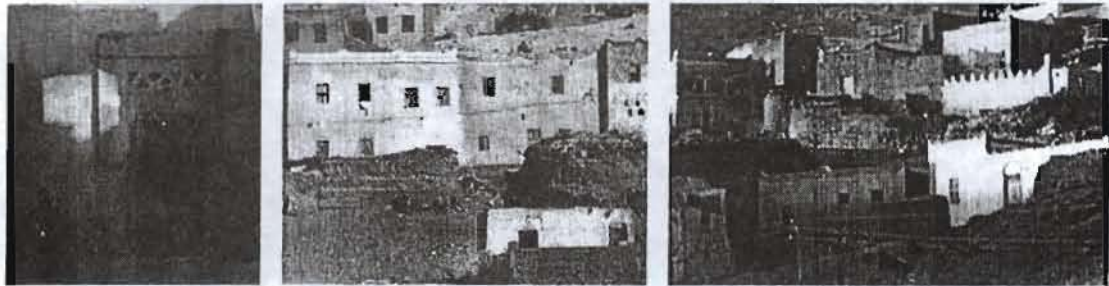


Fig.5: Some examples of vernacular architectural treatment in the entrances and skylines of the Gourna houses^[7].

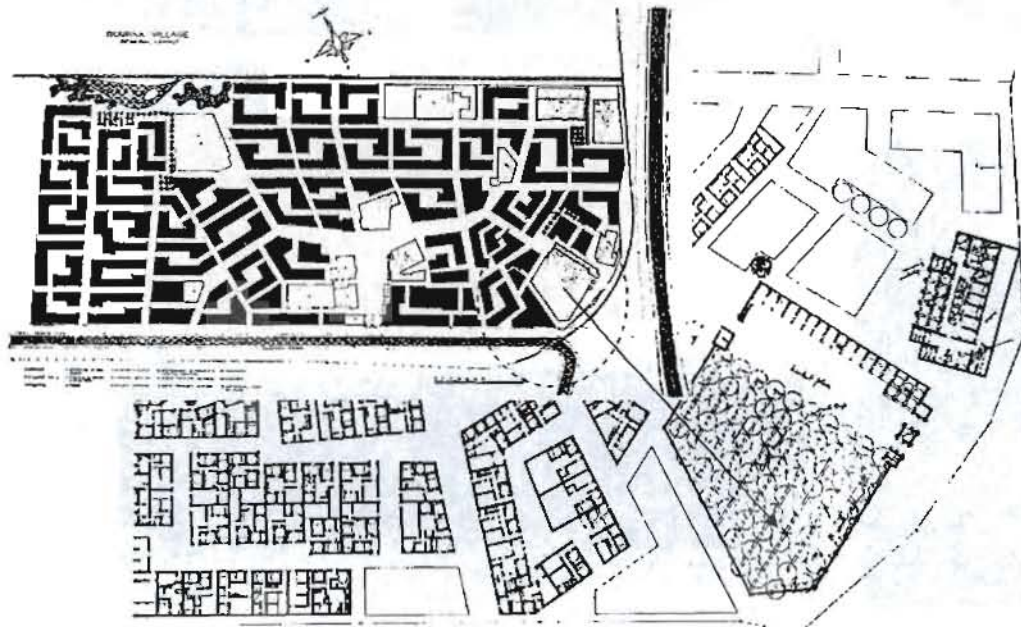


Fig.6: New Gourna Master Plan 1948 and Master Plan Implementation^[2].

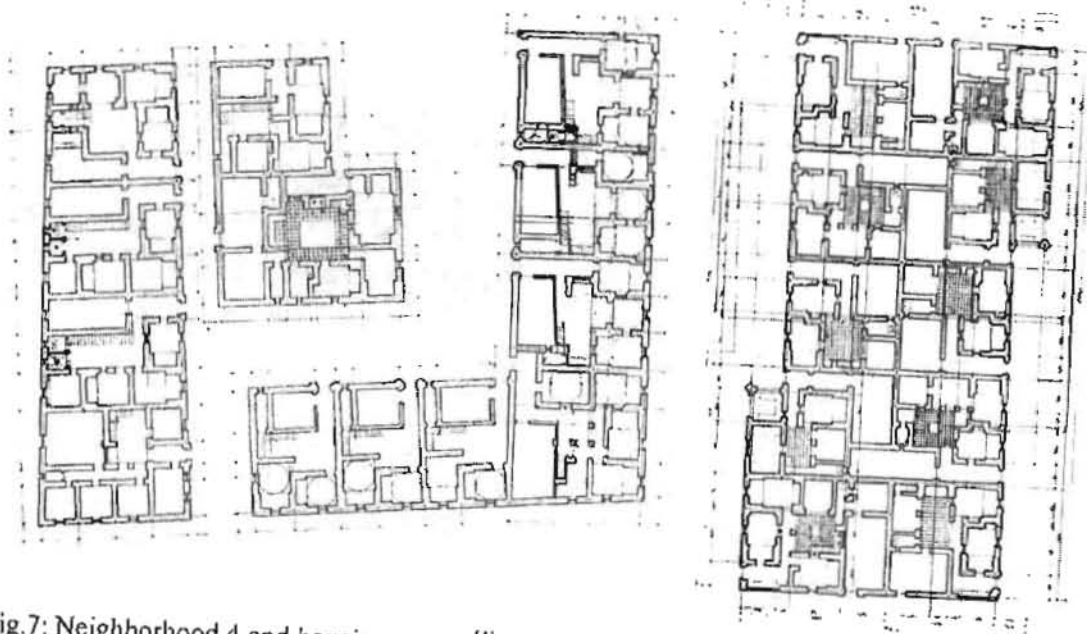


Fig.7: Neighborhood 4 and housing pattern^[4].



Fig.8: View to the village^[4].

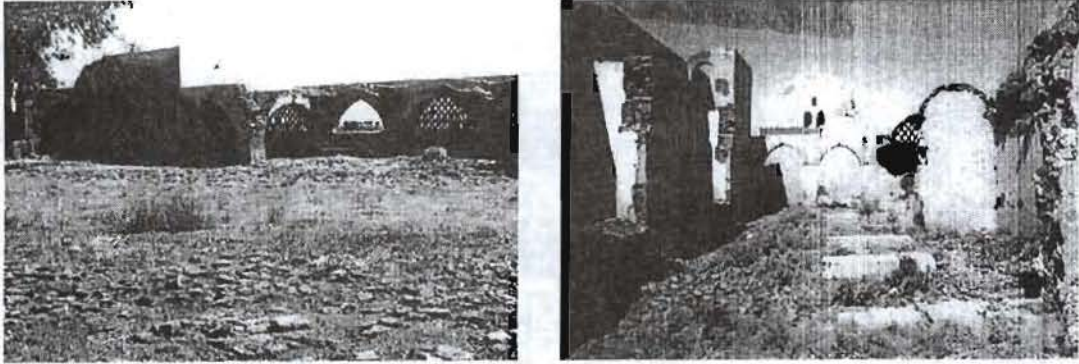


Fig.9: The New Gourna village turned into ruins^[4].

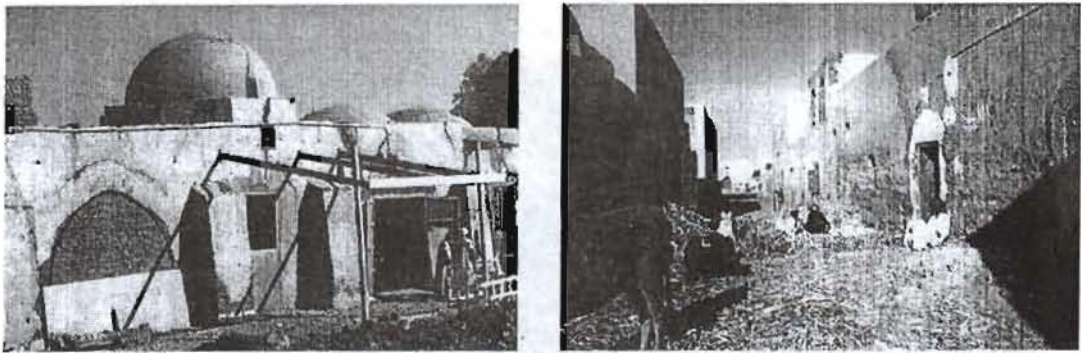


Fig.10: Adaptation of the original buildings of the village^[4]

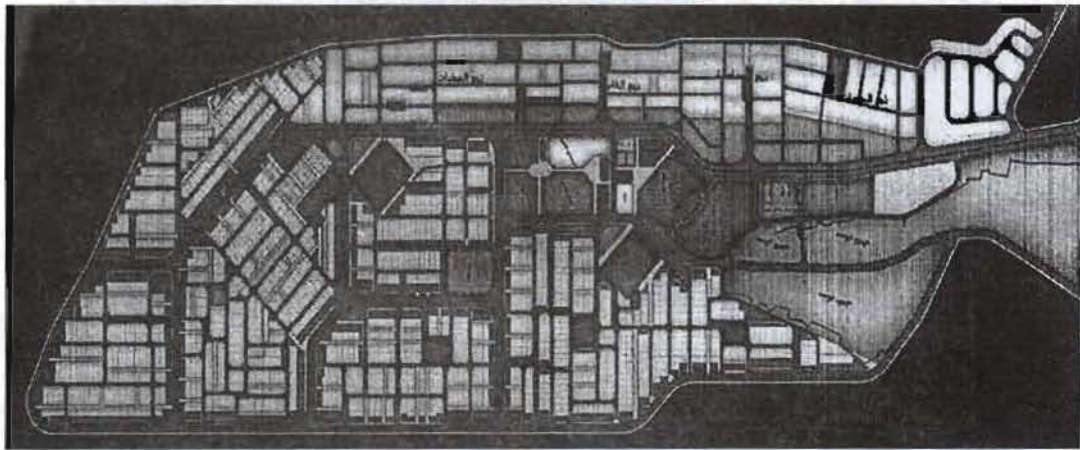


Fig.11: Al Taref, the layout of the village^[13].

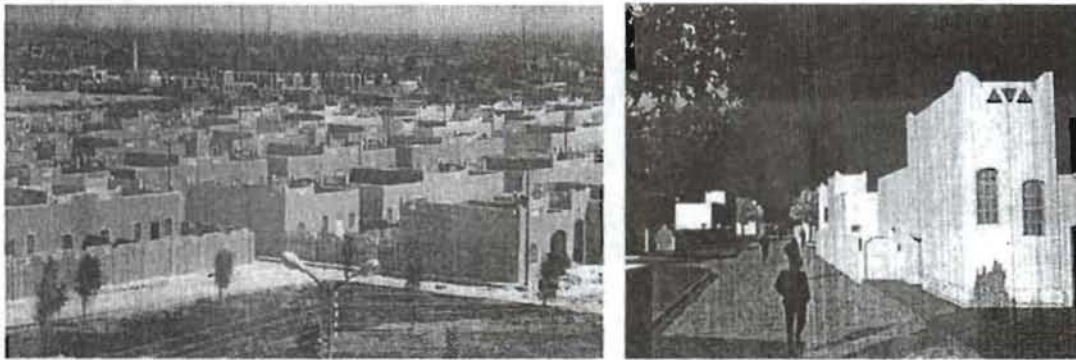
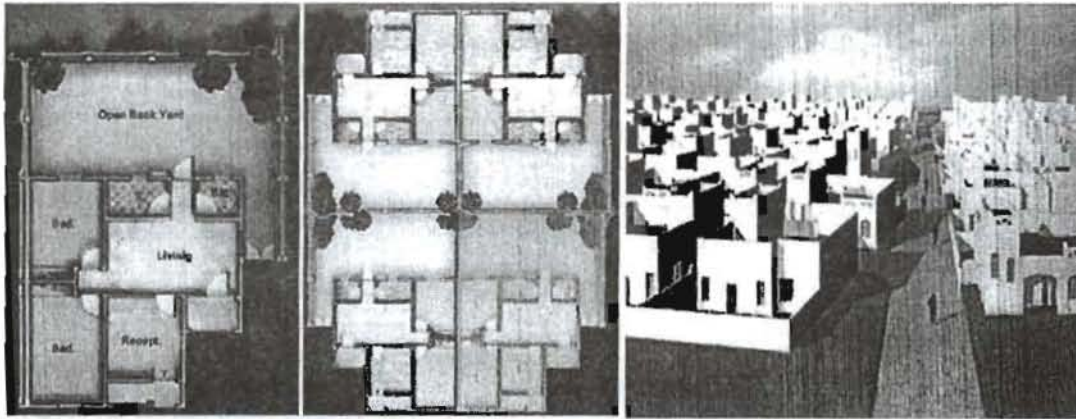


Fig.12: Al Taref, the houses^[13].

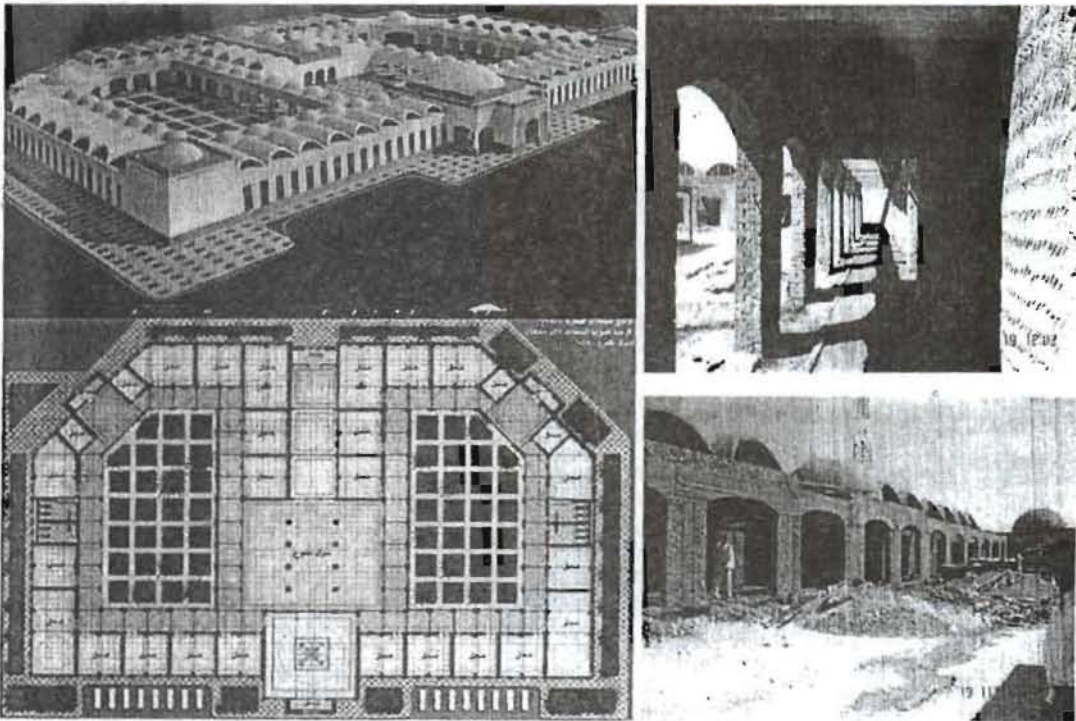


Fig.13: Al Taref, the market pseudo-Fathy's design^[13].