

The Reflection of Euro- Mediterranean Historical Culture on Contemporary Architecture in Alexandria

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Abstract

During the past thirty years, interest in vernacular and traditional architecture all over the world has grown rapidly and in diverse directions. Architects and all those concerned with the building industry started to realize that buildings at their new current status does not fit properly with their environments in its global term. They realized how most traditional architecture met the needs of the local, worked with the environment and added to the value and culture of their place.

Scholars and architects now apply the term "vernacular architecture" to traditional buildings, and "Neo-Vernacular" to concepts that aims to advance recognition and application of vernacular architecture traditions worldwide. Although not all vernacular architecture is climatically responsive, as sometimes social and cultural aspects dominate and govern the needs from climate. However, it is considered more indigenous to a particular place along with its climate. This paper is concerned with the traditional architecture and heritage of Alexandria's buildings, skyline and facades along the Mediterranean coastal line. This is discussed through an analysis carried out on the buildings of the coastal line of Alexandria, and the timeline influence upon their Architecture.

Introduction

Alexandria, the second largest city in Egypt, extends 32km along the Mediterranean coastline, and is the primary seaport of the country [1]. However, its roots go a long way back to prehistoric times, when Alexandria was originally a small fishing village named Rakotis, before Alexander the Great conquered the city in B.C 332 [2]. Alexander then turned Alexandria into a typically-designed linear Greek city with similar attributes to that of cities found on the mainland [3] as shown in Fig.1. Alexandria, for example, is greatly comparable to a Greek city such as Miletus in aspects such as its linear grid-iron planning system shown in Fig.2.



Figure 1: Photos depict the Eastern Harbour during Ancient Greek Times and the Hepastadion Mainland Development during Modern Times

Dinocrates and Hipodamus, Greek planners and architects, contributed greatly in the design of Alexandria by creating a causeway, the Heptastadion, linking the island of Pharos, previously home of the ancient Alexandria lighthouse, to the mainland [3]. This divided the coastline of the city into two; the Eastern and Western Harbours. Over the centuries, further development took place, infilling the areas around the causeway, transforming it into a continuation of the mainland, into the landform we are familiar with today as shown in Fig. 1.



Figure 2: The Planning of Alexandria and Miletus, a Greek City, are Very Comparable

Since the establishment of the city, a lot of growth and expansion has taken place. Over the centuries, settlers came and went and, during the late 1800s and early 1900s, several European communities settled mainly in Alexandria [4]. This was a reason of Egypt integration as a principal cotton exporter into the world economic system, and Alexandria being the country’s largest port and principal export and financial centre [5]. Marks of their culture and lifestyle are still clearly visible in the city, particularly in their architecture, which is still in quite a good condition now.

This paper aims to highlight the architectural character of Alexandria, as a Mediterranean city on the waterfront. The European architecture of the early 20th Century and its influence can be easily considered a symbol of Alexandria’s past, its culture, tradition and history.

Alexandria – Background Information:

The architectural construction of early Alexandria can be mostly considered European renaissance style that flourished in the ages of conforming city counsels between 1858 – 1890 [3]. The architecture can be characterized by fine and abundant detailed architectural elements, their consistency yet variation relative to their analogous altitudes. The skyline of Alexandria’s city centre, seen from what was once the Island of Pharos and is now the Anfoushi Bay, depicts a style of building that is rhythmic, orderly and regular, a reflection of the flourishing communities that previously resided in the city shown in Fig. 3. Despite the focus on intricate details in the building facades, the style of architecture can generally be characterized as simple, uncomplicated and superbly exquisite in composition. Furthermore, the composition of the urban pattern of the central part of the city similarly reflects this simple yet very detailed town planning of the city, also revealing orderly streets and squares that have survived several centuries and generations.

Alexandria- Development of the City

The construction of this style of architecture, in the form of both residential and public buildings, and in coordination with symmetrical and systematic landscape features continued up until approximately the middle of the 20th Century. Some of the buildings that were left in a poor, deteriorated condition by the Europeans were promptly demolished, and 'matchbox buildings' were erected in all free spaces and in what used to be the lavish gardens of old villas. With the start of the era of modernism, box-like structures began to be constructed all over the world, including Alexandria. In addition, with overpopulation and the limited available number of spaces left to build in, architects, contractors and clients were all encouraged to construct these box-like structures, without putting issues such as character, heights and consistency of design into consideration as shown in Fig. 3.

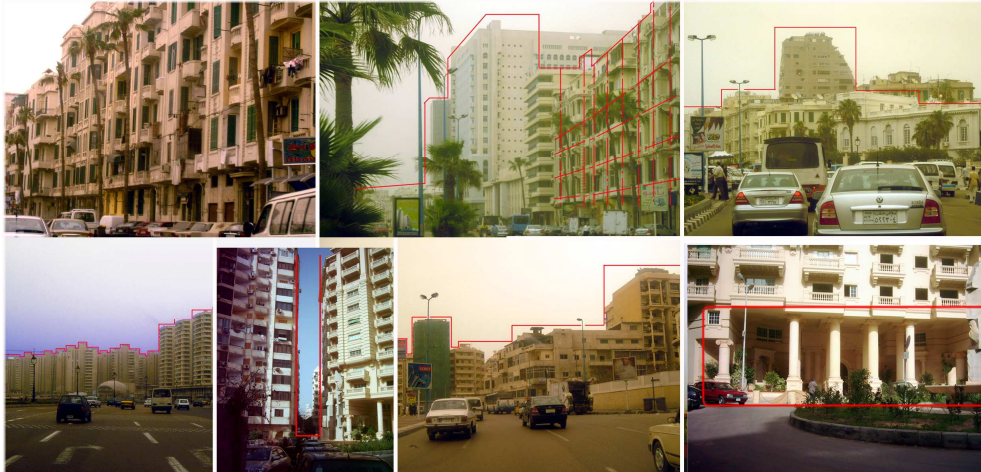


Figure 3: Photos Depict the Overturn in the Skyline Heights and Rhythm through the Overall Pattern of Alexandria's Coastal Line

As a result, the order of the skyline began to overturn, the rhythmic tempo of the floor heights ruined and the overall pattern started to become more and more disorderly with the continuing construction of these buildings, during the late 1970s and 80s as seen in Fig. 3. However, it was not until the 1990s that the government began to realize the disadvantageous effect the construction of these contemporary, modernist buildings were having on the skyline and the general urban form and fabric of the city. Therefore, it began to apply strict building codes and regulations on the demolition of buildings in poor conditions. Regulations were also furnished for the rehabilitation of significant historic buildings and the reconstruction of buildings in the remaining plots of land, which must now clearly respect the width to height ratios.

Alexandria's Coastal Mediterranean Line

In the Mediterranean region, issues that pertain to identity, character, and architectural trends of the built environment have been in debate for several decades [6]. In Alexandria the fact of its being an Islamic country and the issue of sacred Symbolism that make it even much more difficult to behold or comprehend. This differentiating style, reflecting the different eras in Alexandria's history, can clearly be seen on the seafront of Alexandria. The city centre of Bahari and Anfoushi, which was once the Heptastadion, as well as what was once known as the prestigious area of Elmanshiya is still characterized by European-style buildings [7]. Although newer additions, modifications as well as poorly-designed signage on the building facades draw a lot of attention away from the beautiful intricate detail of the architecture itself. It is unfortunate that their conditions continue to depreciate year after year, because of a lack of cultural awareness of the significance of these buildings, which have led to poor maintenance of these buildings and further deteriorating conditions as time goes by.

Some architects have attempted to achieve equilibrium between utilizing the available plots of land available to the utmost extent, while creating what they feel are beautiful facades that may reflect the history and culture of the city [8]. Yet, they do not have a proper understanding of the historic symbolism of the architectural vocabulary. However, in an attempt to develop and individualize the character of these 'new neo-classic' buildings, as they are sometimes labeled, the sacred proportions of certain architectural elements of the façade, such as Ionic and Corinthian columns, cornices and pediments have all been ruined. The result of this misunderstanding can be seen in various parts of the city, in a confused blending of matchbox structures hanging very high above tight and compact streets, with a false curtain of disproportionate modifications of so-called Greek and Roman architectural elements.

The change and development of the architectural character are very visible when one continues to progress along the waterfront of the city. As one starts moving from the edge of the city, one can still witness the obvious regularity in the pattern of the façades of the buildings, before a change starts to be seen further to the east. The clear beat is abruptly interrupted every now and again, and at unplanned intervals, with the sudden appearance of soaring, high-rise buildings shown in Fig.4. As one continues to move, the hasty yet indistinctive style of newer, modernist buildings continue to appear. Until we reach a point where those historic buildings so important for the inscription of Alexandria's history, culture and tradition, cease to appear, and all one can see is the undisrupted irregular pattern of unplanned and poorly-designed buildings.



Figure 4: Photos depict the old San Stefano Hotel & Casino and the New San Stefano Towers built on the ruins of the old one

The Designer's Responsibility

The polarity influencing the shape and use of buildings in the historic context is the designer whose behavior is governed by a factor, an awareness of historic circumstance and a sense of responsibility to historic evidence. In some of the Egyptian designers this is sufficiently undeveloped, due to a number of facts and mainly their deep influence of the western curtain wall boxes. These boxes do not by any means fit our Mediterranean culture or climatic issues. This is thought to be a serious impediment. A professionally responsible designer may, in such a circumstance, pass the burden to a colleague better endowed with historical knowledge or sensitivity.

The term responsibility indicates an accentuated sense of duty to the community expressing itself perhaps as a sense of privilege and this in itself becomes a constraint on the designer. Beyond that designers are driven by responsibility to their clients, (who usually have a poor understanding of history, culture and architecture and their influence on the environment and whole society). Social duty at large and, that plague of all artists, the sense of their own artistry or artistic self importance, this may in itself lead to arrogance or the personal self interest of reputation making. These two incentives may themselves be in conflict with the interests of the community in the rich historic Mediterranean context. Designers with sensitivity to the quality, or flavor, of the historic Mediterranean environment will find themselves exercising special care over the impact of their work. They will be conscious that the environment represents a statement in time and that their work can affect the apparent time in history that the environment displays.

Herein lays the important principle: that it lies within the power of the designer to amend by reduction or enhancement the historic context. The constraint is the designer's own sense of responsibility, respect of Alexandria's established Mediterranean character and environment and attitude to change.

Conclusion:

It is imperative for designers with increasing commercial pressures, to be sensitive to the historic settings of a Mediterranean city like Alexandria and to recognize the delicate balance that is required between personal innovation and the character of extant buildings and landscapes. Warren [9] argues that designing in an historic environment requires an 'awareness of historic circumstances and a sense of responsibility to historic evidence.' The designer with sensitivity to the historic environment is working within a fine balance. The main concern of Alexandria's Mediterranean architecture like that found on the eastern harbour, is that the design is unduly historic, full of details that it may cause the environment to take on a greater historic appearance than is justified. If material is injected that is vigorously new and disruptive the historic quality of the environment will be diminished, thus each and every detail must be added with great care and precision.

Finally, strict building codes and regulations have to be added to the Egyptian building codes regarding the conservation and rehabilitation of such buildings. As stated earlier there are regulations that prevent the demolition of such buildings but then, nothing that clearly states what to be done regarding conservation and preservation in some of their very poor situations.

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