Urban Transformation
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Islamization and Secularization through Architecture:
the Case of Ismailia

Muslim societies are confronted with the problem of conciliation between 'permanence' as taught by religious tradition and 'changes' as imposed by modernization. One facet of modernization of the Muslim world is habitat. This term encompasses all human creations and starts from the fundamental need to inhabit. This latter is manifest at various levels, ranging from house to city.

The city of Ismailia, founded in 1862 and managed by the Suez Canal Company until it was nationalized in 1956, was appropriated and managed afterwards by the Egyptian Government up to the present day. The following will look at how the Egyptians (understood as: Orientals, Arabs, Muslims, Traditionals) appropriate and develop a habitat conceived and formed by the French (understood as: Occidentals, Europeans, Christians, Moderns).

The problematic of modernization

The modernization of the Muslim world is problematic, because it is provoked, at least it was at the beginning, by an external force: modernity of the West. In the Arab World, the signs of this issue seem to be more obvious when compared to the non-Arab Muslim world. This may be explained by the former having made its civilization sacred during many centuries to such extent that all the elements of this civilization (systems of politics, economy, society, space) seem to be derived from a sacred law, namely 'Islamic'. At least in theory, all the elements of civilization coming from outside which might enter into the sacred space of Islamic civilization (*dar al-islam*) have first to be examined. If found to be suitable, they become Islamized, or at least subordinate to the sacred law of Islam; otherwise the penetration of the foreign elements would be considered as a violation/profanation/secularization of the sacred space of Islam. The problem is that the rigour of examination is not always homogenous in time and space (it depends on the existing political regime, the role of *ulema*, Islamic thought, etc.) and the elements to be examined are not always simple (political models, technical projects, economic enterprises, etc.). Moreover, there are elements which enter by force (e.g. Bonaparte's expedition in Egypt and the French occupation of Algeria) or by charm (e.g. that of Ferdinand de Lesseps and the attractive image of a civilized Europe). In this way, the guardians of the sacred space (such as the Vice-Roy Mohammed Said and the Khedive Ismail in the case of Egypt) have proven unable to resist.

The case of Ismailia can be seen in light of the choices made in response to modernization. The city of Ismailia is a 'modern' work, designed by the engineers of l'Ecole Poly-

1. Pre-WWII traditional house

2. Popular developing house, post-1967 war

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technique or l'Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées educated in the rising spirit of rationalism, positivism and functionalism at the beginning of 19th century. There is no mythical, symbolic or religious reference in its design. The city was considered as an object of design whose form was shaped according to geometric rules. The habitat was conceived according to scientific and hygienic considerations – although certain aspects of design escape the conceptual reasoning of the designers, such as the choice of the geometrical form of layout and the architectural language of buildings. Moreover, behind that spatial concept, there were utopian ideas of Modern Man and Society (inspired by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, Saint-Simonism, and 19th century Utopians), for example: *égalité* in the spatial layout of the different quarters and the rights to different cultural expression; *liberté* in religion; and *fraternité* in such domains as those related to social work, including schools, hospitals, and religious buildings. The reaction of the Arab society of Ismailia to that modernity is particularly noteworthy.

Islamization

Modernization, as carried out by the importation of elements of foreign civilization, was felt as a threat, or at least a disturbance, to the Islamic unity of community (*umma*) and territory (*dar al-islam*). Although this was tempered for a long time by Western presence, it was expressed for the first time (in the case of Ismailia) in the epoch of Nasserism. It is under Nasser that the Egyptian Government constructed the first state mosque of Ismailia (called Al-Isma^cily) in the northern part of the city. But it was under Sadat, and subsequently Mubarak, that the signs of Islamization became more obvious. The number of mosques increased rapidly and continuously, the most outstanding of which is the newest state mosque, under construction since the end of the 1980s. It stands exactly in the middle of the old city centre, which was previously dominated by

a Catholic church founded by the Suez Canal Company. The size, position and name of this mosque merit attention. It is gigantic, with twin towers whose height surpasses that of the church. It is located beside Midan Jumhuriyya (previously Place Champollion), the previous living centre of Europeans. It carries the name Abu Bakr As-Siddiq (the first caliph successor of the Prophet Mohammed).

These points show the distinctive spirit of the epoch of Sadat-Mubarak, as compared to its preceding epoch. While the epoch of Nasserism is characterized by 'Arabism' (the name of the mosque refers to the ancestor of the Arabs) and 'secularity' (by maintaining the European character of urban centre), the epoch of Sadat-Mubarak is characterized by 'fundamentalism' (the name of the mosque refers to the fundamental epoch of Islamic history) and 'Islamity' (by Islamizing the European character of the urban centre).

Secularization

Modernization provokes, however, not only 'Islamization', but also at the same time, 'secularization'. Until 1930, for example, the construction of Arab houses in Ismailia still expressed more or less the traditional way of life of Arab society in accordance with religious tradition. The spatial organization shows a clear separation between the family space and that of visitors (exactly the same case as in *salamlik* and *haramlik* in traditional 'Cairene' houses influenced by the Ottoman tradition). There are always two doors: one leads to the *salon* (borrowed French term used in Arabic, referring to a normal living room) for visitors, the other leads to the *sala* or *fasaha* (a kind of central hall) which distributes the flow into the corridor and rooms belonging to family members. The *salon* is completely separated from the rest of the house; visitors have no view into the house. An interesting phenomenon in terms of formal language is at hand. The rich Arabs of Ismailia constructed houses in the same style as cer-

tain Europeans (Greeks, Italians, and French). This is mostly evident in their façades, characterized by a wooden balcony, supported by columns standing on the sidewalk, and protected by an inclined roof covered with ceramic tiles. But there is a clear difference. While the balcony of European houses is open, that of the Arabs is covered with *musharabiyya*, the famous dense wooden grill enabling inhabitants to see outside without being seen (see photo 1). Today, and mainly since the epoch of Nasserism, all those traditional rules are broken. There is no longer any clear separation between the space for visitors and the space for family. The *salon* no longer forms an autonomous space. Rather it is integrated into the house, enabling visitors to communicate, or to see, at least, the other parts of the house. The house has only one door, through which both visitors and family members enter. In terms of formal language, the balcony is still there, but is not covered: the *musharabiyya* has disappeared. From the balcony, one can interact with a passer-by on the street (see photo 2). In other words, in constructing houses, people do not refer anymore, or perhaps never have, to the orthodox teachings of Islam. They separate housing culture from religious tradition. This implies secularization, at least in the field of habitat. ◆

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