The Rationale of Architectural Discourses in Post-Independence Egypt: A Contrapuntal Reading of *'Alam Al-Bena'a* (1980-2000)

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Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present. What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps. This problem animates all sorts of discussions—about influence, about blame and judgment, about present actualities and future priorities.

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism,* 3.

Table of Contents

Notes....v
Abstract....vi
Keywords....vii
Declaration....viii
Acknowledgments....ix
List of Figures....x

PART I: Theoretical Framework

1 Introduction
1.1 Influence and Resistance: An Overview....15
1.2 Discourse and the Crystallization of Identity....15
1.3 Theoretical Background and Framework....17
1.4 Aims and Questions of the Research....19
1.5 Scope and Limitations of the Research....19
1.6 Literature Review....21
1.6.1 The Discourses under Examination....21
1.6.2 Architecture within History....22
1.6.3 Studies of Postcolonialism and Nation Building....23
1.6.4 Similar Studies of Magazine-based Discourse....24
1.7 Importance of the Research....26
1.8 Thesis Outline....26

2 The Methodology of Edward Said: Contrapuntal Reading
2.1 Introduction....29
2.2 Representation, Institutional Power, and Said's Resistance....30
2.3 *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*....32
2.4 Architecture and *Orientalism*....35
2.5 Contrapuntality of Knowledge....38
2.6 The Research Method....42

3 Modernism and Identity
3.1 Introduction....46
3.2 Tradition/Modernity: A Polyphonic Debate....46
3.3 Modernity/Tradition: Evolution/Revolution....52
3.4 Multiple Modernisms: Multiple Identities....59

PART II: OVERLAPPING TERRITORIES OF INFLUENCE

4 Historical Territory
4.1 Introduction....66
4.1.1 Contextual Influences....66
4.2 Intense Influence: West Comes East....68
4.3 Discursive Influence: Western Supremacy through Eastern Monarchy....76
4.4 Egypt for the Egyptians: Embracing Resistance....85
4.5 Western Influence through Egyptian Rulers....92
4.5.1 Nasser (1952-1970).....92
4.5.2 Sadat (1970-1981)....98
4.5.3 Mubarak (1981-2012)....101

5 Western Territory: Deconstructing Boundaries
5.1 Introduction....108
5.2 The Western Canon....109

5.3 The Representation of the Contemporary Context 114
5.4 Attitude of Reference 123
5.4.1 Institutionalizing 'Identity' 123
5.4.2 Influence and Resistance 130

PART III: THE RATIONALE OF THE LOCAL DISCOURSE

6 Harvest of Sixty Years: Local Architectural Discourse
6.1 Introduction: Contrapuntality and the Local Discourse 139
6.2 *Al-'Imarah* (1939-1959) 139
6.2.1 Influence and Resistance: The Resurgence of the Architectural Discourse. 139
6.2.2 Beyond *al-'Imarah*: Reconfiguration of Space 141
6.2.3 Attitude of Reference: Boundaries of *al-'Imarah* 150
6.2.4 The Demise of *al-'Imarah* 157
6.3 The Sixties and the Dispersion of Discourse 158
6.3.1 Outside the Boundaries of the Sixties Discourse 162
6.3.2 The Sixties' Attitude of Reference 165
6.3.3 Infitah Impact: Shared Resistance 170
6.4 Rebirth of Local Architectural Discourse (1980-2000) 175
6.4.1 *Al-M'imaryah* (1982-1989) 175
6.4.2 *Medina* (1998-2002) 185

7 Introduction to *'Alam al-Bena'a* عالم البناء
7.1 Introduction 201
7.2 '*Alam al Bena'a*'s Board and Objectives 201
7.3 The Context of '*Alam al-Bena'a* 204

8 *'Alam al-Bena'a* عالم البناء
8.1 Introduction 211
8.2 The Local/Contemporary Voice 211
8.2.1 Contemporary Trends 214
8.3 Attitude of Reference: Past and Western Canons 229
8.3.1 The Historical Voice in *'Alam al-Bena'a* 229
8.3.2 The Western Voice 237
8.4 The Editorial Voice 257
8.4.1 Reformulating a Local Theory: The Return Call 257
8.4.2 Essentials of Return: Self-Referent Resistance 260

9 Conclusion: The Rationale of the Discourse
9.1 Intertwined Histories and Perspectives 276
9.2 Recommendations for Further Study ..... 281.

Appendix I
Index of Twentieth-Century Architectural Discourse in Egypt 283
Appendix II
Interview Synopses 363
Appendix III
Plates of the Work of the First Generation of Egyptian Architects 384
Bibliography 405

Notes

For the convenience of the Arabic non-specialist, the Arabic transliteration or the Anglicized names were simplified according to the Egyptian pronunciation. The only Arabic diacritical marks used here are the ‘ayn (‘) and the hamza (’). Also, the letter gim, in the Egyptian pronunciation, has been transliterated as (j). All Arabic translations, unless indicated, are by author. The articles originally written in English in the local discourse will be identified with (E) in the footnote. The French-English translation, specifically for Mercedes Volait’s text, is revised by Dr. Peter Scriver.

Abstract

This research analyses the rationale of the local architectural discourse in Egypt and how it reframes both local and global paradigms facing the profession within the local context. An unprecedented increase in the production of such discourse coincides with the process of establishing an Egyptian identity amidst an increasingly independent modern society.

The study focuses on '*Alam al-Bena'a* [*World of Construction*] (1980-2000), a specialized monthly journal, whose timely establishment coincided with the culmination of the infitah policy [openness to the foreign], a period which precipitated an upheaval of religious and national identities. Given this context, this study privileges the magnum opus of the eminent critic Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), and his method of 'contrapuntal reading.' According to Said, in the discourse, colonial experiences precipitated a "structure of attitude and reference" which seeks interactively to produce two discursive forces of 'influence' and 'resistance.' Inspired by Greig Crysler in *Writing Spaces* (2003), I argue that these discursive forces generated "space(s) of knowledge," which must be understood through the contrapuntal reading against the backdrop of Egypt's complex history and key international ideas and practices.

To analyse '*Alam al-Bena'a*, the contrapuntal reading as a way to read the text within its historical and contemporary contexts will be undertaken in a tripartite process which considers: Egypt's modern history, the evolution of local discourse since its inception in 1939, and the analysis of the international proceedings of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture and *MIMAR*. Firstly, the analysis of Egyptian modern history since the French expedition (1798-1801) will trace the origins of the two forces of 'influence' and 'resistance' until the close of the twentieth century. Secondly, the evolution of the two forces of 'influence' and 'resistance' is traced through the analysis of the local architectural discourse since *al-'Imarah* [*The Architecture*] (1939-1959), and journals published in the 1960s, specifically, the *Journal of Egyptian Society of Engineers* and the few available issues of the *Architectural Bulletin*. Thirdly, the interplay between 'influence' and 'resistance' is analysed in the international discourse of the AKAA (1978-) and *MIMAR* (1981-1992), with a particular focus on their representation of the Egyptian context.

This analysis reveals a potent shift in attitude, while *al-'Imarah* championed international architecture, through the 1960s this emphasis was consistently eroded until the publication of '*Alam al-Bena'a* called for a 'return' to 'Islamic' architecture. Therefore, a "consolidated vision"[1] of modern Egyptian architecture unfolds to reveal the consensus between national and international canons. Hence, the tri-fold contrapuntal analysis provides an objective reading of twentieth century Egyptian architecture as it explores the relationship between intellectual individuality and global values. Furthermore, it reveals discursive historical encounters which are characterised by an unconscious adoption of the principles of the colonial past and, simultaneously, conscious resistance to dominant forces originating beyond Egypt and represented in internal regimes.

In this way, this research examines the multiple overt and covert influences which led to a shift in the Egyptian architectural discourses. The research thus highlights questions of imperialism and national identity and the concomitant, polarising discourses—tradition/modernity, East/West, global/local. This thesis interrogates the rationale of the local discourse and '*Alam al-Bena'a* in this context to highlight imperialism, as a global process, that has become a conduit for intellectual production in the professional sphere.

[1] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1993), 75.

Keywords

Egyptian architecture, Modernism, *'Alam al-Bena'a, al-'Imarah*, *Medina*, *M'imaryah*, *Journal of Egyptian Society of Engineers, MIMAR,* Aga Khan Award for Architecture, Edward Said, discourse analysis.

Declaration

I, Marwa El-Ashmouni, certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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……..... (Marwa El-Ashmouni)

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List of Figures

Chapter 1.

Figure 1. The Discourse Timeline. By author.

Chapter 2.

Figure 2. Frontispiece to *Description de l'Egypte*. Sourced from Donald Malcolm Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I*, 3

Chapter 3.

Figure 3. Map of the Islamic World. Sourced from http://www.joshuaproject.net/10-40-window.php and modified by author.

Chapter 4.

Figure 4. The Headquarters of the French Army in Al-Azbakiyah District in the Eighteenth-century. Sourced from AlSayyad, Cairo: *Histories of a City*, 181. Also cited as the palace of al-Alfi bey in Lesley Kitchen Lababidi, *Cairo's Street Stories: Exploring the City's Statues, Squares, Bridges, Gardens, and Sidewalk Cafés,* 31.
Figure 5. Shepheard's Hotel in 1870. Image sourced from the archives of Memory of Modern Egypt, http://www.modernegypt.bibalex.org.
Figure 6. Kasr al-Nīl / the British Barracks. Sourced from the archives of Memory of Modern Egypt, http:// modernegypt.bibalex.org .
Figure 7. Lord Cromer's Residence and Workplace. Image sourced from Shirley Johnston, *Egyptian Palaces and Villas: Pashas, Khedives, and Kings*(New York: Abrams, 2006), 78.
Figure 8. The French inspired buildings during the British colonization. Sourced from Flicker Creative Common License Groppi: http://www.flickr.com/photos/fouadgm/3966465056/in/set-72157622465296796/ Omar Effendi: http://www.flicker.com/photos/cultnat/6028905040/in-photostream//.
Figure 9. The old Semiramis Hotel built in 1906. Sourced from Samir Raafat; and see *Cairo's Street Stories: Exploring the City's Statues, Squares, Bridges,* 33.
Figure 10. Muhammad 'Alī's Mosque. The mosque sourced from Flicker Creative Common License: http://www.flickr.com/photos/seyerce/357199677/sizes/l/in/photostream/ the design of Coste in Pascal-Xavier Coste, "Les Mémoires d'un Artiste en Égypte," in *Toutes les Égypte* ed. Dominique Jacobi (Marseille: Éditions Parenthèses,1998), 113.
Figure 11. Railway Station, known as Bab al Hadid. By author.
Figure 12. Gezira Palace of Khedive Isma'aīl at the end of Nineteenth century. Sourced from the archives of Memory of Modern Egypt, http://modernegypt.bibalex.org.
Figure 13. 'Abdin Palace of the Khedive Isma'īl at the end of Nineteenth century. Sourced from AlSayyad, *Cairo*, 213.
Figure 14. Khedivial Opera House. Sourced from the archives of Memory of Modern Egypt, http://modernegypt.bibalex.org.
Figure 15. The Egyptian Museum in 1908. Sourced from the archives of Memory of Modern Egypt, http://modernegypt.bibalex.org.
Figure 16. Buildings in Heliopolis. Sourced from Jaroslaw Dobrowolski, *Heliopolis: The Rebirth of the City of the Sun*, 136.
Figure 17. The 1920s Neo-Islamic Architecture. Prince 'Amr Ibrahīm Palace image sourced from Samir Raafat,www.egy.com. Institute of Arab Music, image sourced from Flicker: http://www.flickr.com/ photos/fouadgm/3966451914/.
Figure 18. Classical and Neo-classical Designs in 1920s-1930s. Images courtesy of *al-'Imarah 2* (3-4): 1940.
Figure 19. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Alexandria. By author.
Figure 20. Public Housing in Imbaba. Image sourced from AlSayyad, *Cairo*, 250.
Figure 21. Modernist Buildings in Nasser's era. The image of Saha Street building from Naum Shebib's website collection from his archives by his family: http://naoumshebib.com/pages_en/gratte_ciel_1_ en.html; the Image of Radio and TV Building sourced from *Al-Ahram Gazette.* http://213.158.162.45/ ~egyptian/index.php?action=news&id=19231&title= What%20would%20Gaston%20Maspero%20think?
Figure 22. The Hilton Hotel. The Image of the exterior sourced from http://archimaps.tumblr.com/post/ 25309596087/the-nile-hilton-hotel-in-the-1960s-cairo; and the interior sourced from *The Glory of Cairo: An Illustrated History*, ed. André Raymond.
Figure 23. The Cairo Tower and the Symbol of Friendship. The image of the tower by author and the image of the friendship symbol sourced from Flicker by memphistouregypt.

Figure 24. Intercontinental Hotel. By author.
Figure 25. Unauthorized Settlement on Agricultural Land. Sourced from AlSayyad, *Cairo,* 264.
Figure 26. Sadat's Tomb. By author.
Figure 27. Design Themes in the Eighties and Nineties, Oriental and Modern. The image of the mosque in Dreamland sourced from AlSayyad, *Cairo*, 270; and image of Conrad Hotel sourced from Flickr http://www.flicker.com/photos/justinminns/2446342441//.
Figure 28. Miscellaneous Vocabulary in the Malls of 1990s.Sourced from: http://www.flickr.com/photos/ vagabondblogger/482957477/sizes/o/in/photostream/; and http://www.egynews.net/wps/portal/news? params=101242 .
Figure 29. The Complex of the Gezira Museum and Egyptian Civilization. By author.
Figure 30. The Rhetoric of Resistance.The Image of the Egyptian Supreme Constitutional Court sourced from Aga Khan Archives http://archnet.org/library/images/one-image.jsp?location_id=11711&image_id =99913; and The photo of The Nubian Museum sourced from archnet digital library: http://archnet.org/ library/images/one-image.jsp?location_id=2710&image_id=74839.

Chapter 5.

Figure 31. The Aga Khan Programs in the Islamic Countries. Chart sourced from ArchNet Report Building a Global Community: http://www.akdn.org/publications/archnet.pdf .
Figure 32. Buildings in 1970s Celebrated in International Journals. Sourced from journal of *Middle East Construction* in 1978.
Figure 33. The Institutional Dimensions of Modernity. Sourced from Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity*, modified by author.
Figure 34. Egyptian Architects' Work Profiled in *Mimar*. Sourced from *Mimar* (no.39 1991; and no.35, 1990).
Figure 35. Bitter Lakes Villa in Egypt by Architect al-Husseiny.Sourced from*Mimar* (no.39, 1991).
Figure 36. Abdelhalim design of a garden in one of Cairo's historical districts.Sourced from*Mimar* (no. 36, 1990).
Figure 37. World Trade Tower, Cairo. Image sourced from the website of Japan International Cooperation Agency, http://www.jica.go.jp/egypt/english/office/about/index.html.
Figure 38. Representation of the Megaprojects in the Middle East. Image sourced from ArchNet: http://archnet.org/library/images/one-image-large.jsp?location_id=2042&image_id=15189.
Figure 39. Neo-Arab Renaissance in 1920s.*Mimar* (no.13, 1984).

Chapter 6.

Figure 40. Two Portraits of Karim and Cover of the First Issue of *Al-'Imarah*. Protraits of Karim, Dust jacket of *Dr.Sayed Karim* by Ahmad al-Ghamarawy, 2004.
Figure 41. Islamic Revivalism. Bank Misr, photo by Nasser Rabbat, 1985, Courtesy of the MIT Libraries, Aga Khan Visual Archive; Al-Azhar administration by Joseph Hill courtesy of Flickr Common Creative license http://www.flickr.com/photos/nebedaay/2902478278/sizes/o/in/photostream/; Entrance of Society of Egyptian Engineers, photo by author.
Figure 42. Pharaonic Revivalism. Saad Zaghlul Mauseleum photo courtesy of Flicker http://www.flickr.com/photos/gabindu/3735903728/ Flicker's photos under creative common license: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/deed.en ; Giza Railway station by author.
Figure 43. Examples of Art Deco. Images courtesy of *al-'Imarah* (1939, no.10) and 1941.
Figure 44. Different Vocabularies: Mediterranean References. Images courtesy of *al-'Imarah*(1939, no.1); (1940, no.9/10).
Figure 45. Modernist Approach. Images courtesy of *al-'Imarah* (1939, no.1); and (1941, no.2).
Figure 46. High-rises in *al-'Imarah*. (1939, no.6); (1940 no.7/8); (1939, no1); and Cultnat website.
Figure 47. Designs by Sayed Karim. *al-'Imarah* (1941, no.1); (1941, no 7/8); (1949, no.3); (1949, no.1/2); (1957, no.1); and (1957, no.3).
Figure 48. Designs by the New Generation of Egyptian Architects. *Al-'Imarah* (1952, no.6/7); (1950, no. 8/9/10); (1957, no.3); (1949, no.4/5); (1957, no.6).
Figure 49. Muslim Brotherhood Printing House. *Al-'Imarah* (1946, no. 5/6).
Figure 50. *Al-'Imarah*'s Special Issues. By author.
Figure 51. The Socialization of the Villa by Karim. *Al-'Imarah* 13 (1957, no.1/2).
Figure 52. Karim's Village Model, *al-'Imarah* (1941, no.2); and Gourna plan sourced from book *Architecture for the Poor* first published by the Egyptian cultural ministry in 1969 under the title: *Gourna, A Tale of Two Villages*. It was then republished under the title *The Architecture for the Poor* (Chicago, 1973).
Figure 53. Origins of Reinforcement System and Pitched Roofs in Pharaonic Buildings. *Al-'Imarah* (1957, no.4/5).
Figure 54. Desert Skyscrapers in Hadramout. *Al-'Imarah* (1940, no. 3/4).
Figure 55. Western Pioneers in *al-'Imarah*. Frank Lloyd Wright, *Al-'Imarah* (1957, no.5), Le Corbusier, *Al-'Imarah* (1946, no.1/2).

Figure 56. The Opening of the Society of Egyptian Engineers by the King, *al-Musawer* (1922, no.382).
Figure 57. The Table of Contents of the First Issue of *Architectural Bulletin* 1964 ; and *Al-Ahram* August 1963.
Figure 58. List of New Companies Established after the 1952 Revolution. *Architectural Bulletin*, April, 1964.
Figure 59. Building Typology in the Sixties. Proceeding of Sherkat al-Ta'ameer wa al-Masaken al-Sha'byah' [The Headquarters of Development and Public Housing].
Figure 60. High-rise Buildings Overlooking the Nile, Built in the Seventies. By author.
Figure 61. Examples for Serious Architecture, as Abdel-Gawad perceived, *J.E.S.E* (1976, no.2).
Figure 62. Projects Perceived as being Inspired by the Arab Heritage, *J.E.S.E* (1976, no.2).
Figure 63. Covers of *al-M'imaryah.*
Figure 64. View of the Egyptian Village in the Twentieth-century, *Al-M'imaryah* (1984, no. 5).
Figure 65. New Cities Proposal, *Al-M'imaryah* (1989, no.11/12).
Figure 66. The Zoning of Contemporary House According to Privacy Levels, *Al-M'imaryah* (1984, no.5).
Figure 67. Examples of the Open System, *Al-M'imaryah* (1984, no.5).
Figure 68. The Cover of *Medina*'s Premier and Second Issues.
Figure 69. Examples of Landscape Projects Reviewed in *Medina*. Shallot Hilton *Medina* (1998, no.3), and Historic Park of Port Said, *Medina*(1999, no.8).
Figure 70. The Incorporation of Historical Elements in Tourist Villages. Sheraton Soma, *Medina* (2000, no.15), and Coral Bay Resort, *Medina* (no.15, 2000) .
Figure 71. The Work of Fathy's Disciples. *Medina* (2000, no.15), Present photo of Fustat Pottery Center sourced from www.Archnet.org.
Figure 72. Examples of Implementing Green Architecture with Traditional Vocabulary. *Medina* (2000, no.11). Helwan Univeristy, Muhammad Tawfik 'Abdel-Gawad website. American University, Wikipedia Creative Common Licence http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Campus_in_New_Cairo.jpg.
Figure 73. Design Trends in Egypt. *Medina* (2001,no.19), coloured images by author.
Figure 74. El-Gouna Resort by Graves. Michael Graves website: http://www.michaelgraves.com/ architecture/project/el-gouna-golf-hotel.html.
Figure 75. Le Corbusier's Tunisian Experiment, *Medina* (2001, no.18).
Figure 76. Preservation projects in *Medina.*Sabil Al-Nasir Muhammad Ibn Qalawun, *Medina* (1998, no. 2), and Aziza Fahmy Palace, *Medina* (1999, no.5).

Chapter 7.

Figure 77. The founders of *'Alam al-Bena'a*. CPAS website http://www.cpasegypt.com/AR/Hazem_ Wr_ar.htm.
Figure 78. Hassan Fathy and CPAS, *AB* (1989, no.100).
Figure 79. First Advisory Board, started in (1981, no.13). *AB* from the short autobiographies in different issues.
Figure 80. Front Cover of the First Three Issues of *AB*.
Figure 81. The CPAS Façade and Central Courtyard. Archnet: http://archnet.org/library/images/ oneimage.jsp?location_id=5318&image_id=14504.
Figure 82. 'A.Ibrahim's Designs. Booklet of the CPAS projects, printed by the centre; Al-Zahraa Mosque, Archnet: http://archnet.org/library/images/one-image.jsp?location_id=3018&image_id=24097.
Figure 83. 'A.Ibrahim receiving his 'Architect Award' at the Organization of Arab and Islamic Capitals, *AB* (1987, no.78-88), 30.

Chapter 8.

Figure 84. The Constitutional Court by Ahmad Mitto, absent from the discourse of *AB*.
Figure 85. Competition organized by *'Alam al-Bena'a*'s editors for affordable housing. *AB* (1995, no. 169).
Figure 86. Hassan Fathy's Work Published in *'Alam al-Bena'a*. *AB* (1982, no.22).
Figure 87. The Work of Hassan Fathy's apprentices. Serena Beach at al-Qusair *AB* (1999, no. 215); and Abdelwahid al-Wakil's Halawa House *AB* (1981, no.9).
Figure 88. Further Designs Inspired by Fathy. Officers' Rest house, *AB* (1990, no. 116); Cultural Centre in Kafr al-Shurafa, *AB* (1990, no.110); Villa by Mukhtar, *AB* (1991, no. 121); Hurgada Village, *AB* (1990, no.110).
Figure 89. Islamic Style in Public Buildings. Dar al-Ifta'a al-Masryah *AB* (1991, no. 123); The two photographs of al-'Azhar Unversity and Mashyakhet al-Azhar are by author.
Figure 90. Islamic Vocabulary in Residential Buildings. Residential by Abo-Seif, *AB* (1993, no.140); Residential by Murad Bebawy, *AB* (1987, no.80).
Figure 91. Abstract Resistance. Centre at al-Mariotyah, *A B* (1998, no. 204); Tebah Integrated Language, *AB* (1991, no.119); and Gamal Bakry's design and Farouk al-Gohary *AB* (1991, 123).
Figure 92. Criticized Postmodernism, *AB* (1991, 123).
Figure 93. Western Trends in *'Alam al-Bena'a*. Miscellaneous buildings, *AB* (1986, no.73); Hilton Ramsees *AB* (1980, no. 9); Evergreen *AB* (1982, no. 20) Sheraton Alexandria *AB* (1982, no.24).
Figure 94. The Details of the Norwegian Wining Project in *AB*, *AB* (1998, no.155).

Figure 95. Technical Report Criticizing the Winning Design of Alexandria Library, *AB* (1990, no.109).
Figure 96. Contrasting Two Different Trends in Adjacent Buildings, *AB* (1991, no.123).
Figure 97. Architectural Influences from Different Eras in Egypt, *AB* (1990, no.107); and *AB* (1990, no.106).
Figure 98. The Origins of the Courtyard House in Pharaonic and Roman Architecture, *AB* (1984, no. 49).
Figure 99. The Roots of Modern Art Theories within the Islamic Arts, *AB* (1984, no.41).
Figure 100. Al-Razaz House, *AB* (1980, no.7).
Figure 101. Islamic Architecture Preservation in *'Alam al-Bena'a*. Mithqaal school, *AB* (1983, no.31); Daraweesh theatre, *AB* (1993, no.145).
Figure 102. Revitalization Projects in *AB*. Main Library of Cairo, *AB* (1995, no. 166); Islamic Museum of Porcelain, *AB* (1999, no.216); Museum of Mahmud Khaleel, *AB* (1996, no.180).
Figure 103. The Influence of Technology in Egypt and Abroad, *AB* (1997, no. 195).
Figure 104. The Century Tower, Tokyo, *AB* (1992, no. 129).
Figure 105. Western Experience in Building in a Historical Context. Law Library, Michigan *AB* (1982, no.25) and recent photo sourced from http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/71/Law_ School_Facade_2009.JPG ; Arts Gallery, Munich, *AB* (1981, no.15); and Hotel in Budapest, *AB* (1987, no.82).
Figure 106. Islamic Centers in the West in *'Alam al-Bena'a*, *AB* (1987, no.78).
Figure 107. The Islamic Art Centre London University SOAS, *AB* (1998, no. 202).
Figure 108. Islamic Architecture in Facade Treatments, Western Buildings. Dormitory in Cambridge, *AB* (1980, no.4); Tumours Centre in Houston (1982, no. 28).
Figure 109. Courtyards or Atriums in Western Countries. Images courtesy of *AB*: Mixed use building, Illinois (1984, no.42); Hyatt Regency, *AB* (1982, no. 25) Sussex University, *AB* (1983, no.32) Internal Courts and Gardens, *AB* (1987, no.80).
Figure 110. Interiors of Western Private Houses, *AB* (1981, no.12).
Figure 111. Foreign Firms in the Arab Countries, *AB* (1982, no.25).
Figure 112. Western Projects with Islamic Claims. The Commercial Bank, Jeddah, *AB* (1980, no.4); Hajj Terminal, Jeddah, *AB* (1980, no.1).
Figure 113. Cairo International Fair, *AB* (1980, no.2).
Figure 114. Critique of Implication of Islamic Architecture in the West. The images on the left hand side are sourced from Archnet: Above: http://archnet.org/library/images/one-image-large.jsp?location_id=2465&image_id=43416 below: http://archnet.org/library/images/one-image-large.jsp?location_id=2465&image_id=14724.
Figure 115. Islamic Architecture, Solutions to Climate, Noise, and Space, *AB* (1987, no.81).
Figure 116. Qatar University. Recent images Archnet: http://archnet.org/library/images/one-image.jsp?image_id=15152&location_id=1786.

Appendix II.

Figure 117. The Educational Structures in Egypt throughout the History (2006) since the Pharaonic Ages until the Twentieth-Century.
Figure 118. The Architecture at the Crossroad.
Figure 119. Designs of 'Aly Ra'afat: the Gumhurya Building and the Central library in Cairo University.
Figure 120. Positive Examples of the Egyptian Architecture, Projects Awarded Hassan Fathy Award.
Figure 121. Egyptian Embassy in Syria; and Oracle's Headquarters in Cairo.
Figure 122. Designs of AlSayyad in Egypt from left: Shubra 1979, and Hadaik Tower 1996.
Figure 123. Designs of Gamal Bakry.

Appendix III

Twenty Plates of the Work of First Generation of Egyptian Architects. Sourced from Tarek Waly Center, Architecture & Heritage.