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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.

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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.

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Keywords

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.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Signed

...................................................................................................................... (Marwa El-Ashmouni)
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