



Spring 2009

Department of Architecture

4.628: Modernization and Colonization: Cairo in the Long 19th century

Steeped in history and tradition, but also open and cosmopolitan, Cairo experienced an expansive yet distinct revival during the long 19th century. Starting with the Napoleonic invasion of 1799, the city went through a series of extensive urban, political, cultural, and economic transmutations. Muhammad 'Ali Pasha (1805-48) sought to modernize it in an ultimately unsuccessful bid to catch up with the West. His grandson, Khedive Isma'il (1868-76), fanatically "progress"-minded, quickened the pace of modernization and "Hausmannized" Cairo, which drastically altered its size, layout, and future development. In the process, he ruined Egypt's finances, which opened the way for direct British rule in 1882. Colonization tied the city to a vast imperial network, which spurred a new urban expansion spearheaded by a multitude of adventurous immigrants who came from all around the Mediterranean and beyond. New districts were planned and scores of buildings were built in hybrid styles that borrowed freely from the varied repertoires of the past and blended them with various European styles. This phase ended with the Revolution of 1952 that toppled the monarchy and shifted to nationalism and socialism as framers of the city's identity.

This seminar will address the emergence of the colonial metropolis in the 19th century by examining Cairo as one of its paradigmatic examples. It will trace the city's urban, social, and cultural transformations and consider its changing architectural character from the perspective of the intense cross-cultural activity that marked its development. Challenging the standard binary framing strategies such as East vs. West, traditional vs. modern, and local vs. global, the seminar will focus instead on the profound dialectical relationship of modernity with colonization. With its particular recent history where indigenous modernization preceded colonization, Cairo in fact forces us to reconsider that relationship and to cast it in a totally new interpretive framework.

The course includes weekly reading and writing/documentation assignments and requires participation in discussions. For their research, students will choose an urban phase, a district, or a building type/style, document it, analyze it, and interpret it in the context of Cairo's cosmopolitanism. Student research will be presented in class and will be the basis of the paper to be submitted at the end of the term.

Instructor: Nasser Rabbat

Time: Thursdays from 2 to 5 in room 5-216

Prerequisite: Permission of Instructors. open to advanced undergraduates