

# **Nostalgia in Contemporary Egyptian Architecture**

## **“A Case Study of Residential Architecture Expression”**

**Assist. Prof. Dr. Hossam Eldin Moustafa ElNour Saleh**

**Professor Associate of Architecture – Faculty of Engineering – Menoufia University**

[husam.saleh@sh-eng.menofia.edu.eg](mailto:husam.saleh@sh-eng.menofia.edu.eg)

### **1- Introduction and the Research Problem**

Architecture is the most accurate method to record the intellectual progress of a society's culture. It is the true mirror that reflects the morals, culture and aspirations of a society. It has been noticed recently, since the beginning of the third millennium, that the architectural expression in Egypt has deviated towards the historical attitude or nostalgic architecture, through using of historical elements belonging to previous civilizations. This is obvious by reviewing the recent buildings in any Egyptian cities. This attitude is not apparent in residential architecture only, but in all other types of buildings, whether governmental, public, administrative, or even universities. There is a close relationship between nostalgia and the current architectural reality. Nostalgia has appreciated a great place in international arts. The architecture has not differed from this rule. The nostalgic architecture appeared in contemporary architecture through the historicism, which is one of the most prominent attitudes of the postmodernism in contemporary architecture.

#### **1-1 Research Problem**

The research studies the synchronized relationship between the nostalgia and the local architectural expression of residential architecture. This kind of architecture directly expresses the society culture. The research monitors, analyzes and attempts to understand the phenomenon of nostalgic architecture that is spreading in the Egyptian urbanism. Accordingly, the research presents a set of questions, as follows:

A- What is the form of the nostalgic architecture expression for residential architecture? To what style does this expression belong?

b- What are the reasons that led to the emergence of nostalgic architecture in the local residential architecture?

C- What is the architect's responsibility towards the phenomenon of nostalgic architecture?

The main aim of the research is to monitor and document the phenomenon of nostalgia architecture in contemporary residential architecture. As well as study the psychological dimension of architecture, by monitoring the feeling of nostalgia that prevails in society through the architecture. The research tries to create a discussion about the impact of the historical attitude in architecture, and does it achieve a communication between man and the architecture? The research belongs to the cultural sustainability studies, through the preservation of the culture and community identity. This study can continue our confrontation to preserve the national identity, especially after the revolutions of the Arab Spring. The importance of the research becomes clear with the current rapid architectural movement in Egypt, whether in the new administrative capital or other fourth-generation cities.

## 1-2 Methodology

The research uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The main result of the research was extracted in determining the form of nostalgic architecture expression of residential architecture, through the quantitative approach. The research used the descriptive method based on incomplete induction, by selecting a quota deliberate sample of residential buildings covers the selection criteria. The research selected a group of cities representing the Egyptian urbanization. The research followed the case study approach based on the critical method, through the qualitative approach to discuss the results.

The research is dealing with residential architecture for the middle class of urban society. The reason for choosing the middle class because it constitutes the backbone of any society. As well as the residential architecture is the real architecture that expresses the community. It clearly reflects its cultural, social and economic reality. Even the expression of residential architecture reflects the desire of the real estate owners for the building appearance they wish. On the other hand, the research chooses residential buildings with the historical expression. The research time determinants depended on the period of the two decades extending from the beginning of the third millennium until now.

## 2-The Concept of Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a term derived from the Greek expression νόστος ἄλγος, meaning the pain of desire. It refers to homesickness. It is used to describe desiring feels for a time or place. Nostalgia attracts us to previous times, or old places, in which we knew moments of happiness. Perhaps those moments relate to a homeland we left, or people we lost, or simple life features lost in a complex present, or even when we search for ourselves before change. In most cases, nostalgia stems from the rejection of the present, with the inability to change it, or from a feeling of isolation and absence of belonging to reality.

Nostalgia is embedded in the feelings of the cerebral cortex. It is associated with an emotional phenomenon called "Reminiscence Bump". This phenomenon prompts the person to remember the events in the age group from 15 to 30 years. These years are associated in the lives of most people with a period of happiness and new experiences. Where the first love, true friendships, the first work experience and the beginning of making money. The latest definition of Nostalgia is state of emotional recall of happy memories, which a person resorts when he is surrounded by the present pressures. Where the mind responds to cognitive stimuli stemming from memory related to happy moments in the past. As if it were a defense mechanism used by the mind to improve the psychological state of a man.

Nostalgia has ability to attract attention of people with different cultures and social levels. The majority still believe that the past was more beautiful. Nostalgia becomes clear by seeing an old photograph, or places visited after a long period. Thus, a temporal dimension is created in our awareness through which we move to reconciliation with the rejected reality. In this context, we find that things related to the past evokes feelings of nostalgia. The image that we see in movies of the forties and fifties, often creates positive feelings about those times, but was that time beautiful? or is it just a false picture drawn by the media? We cannot find an answer to these questions except that the obsession with the past has become a lifestyle. In these daydreaming, decision-making skills can be shaken. Nostalgia appears to be a kind of self-deception, in which

the truth is positively distorted, turning the past into a haven from the suffering of reality. This paradox is heightened by the selective nature of nostalgic memory, which focuses on the positives of the past and ignores its negatives. This dilemma turns into a tragedy when individual nostalgia turns into a collective nostalgia that controls the consciousness of a society.

Nostalgia is closely related to arts. It has become a terrific topic that is literary and artistic, according to the romantic touch that characterizes it. As rejecting or contradicting reality is the simplest form of artistic interaction, based on the dialectic between reality and imagination. This is a fact that writers, poets and artists have realized, starting from the ancient Greek literature in the poems of the "Odyssey", all the way to the modern literature. Even film makers have reproduced new versions of old films. Of course, architecture did not break this rule. The nostalgia architecture emerged in contemporary architecture through the historicism.

### **3- The Concept of Nostalgic Architecture**

Postmodernism formed under complex political and economic conditions in Western Europe and U.S.A during the sixties of the twentieth century. The economic and social changes followed Paradoxically, from the austerity society after World War II, to the Welfare State in the seventies. The rapid economic growth permitted the consumer society growth. During the nineties, both globalization and late capitalism became the active forces in international politics. When power becomes in the hands of capitalism, the postmodernism solutions will always be preferred. It is easy to find a public that adopts poor arts. In the absence of standards, appreciation of artworks values is usually based on their profits. Postmodernism was fascinated by the culture of cheap and vulgar artwork. Nostalgia became a ploy used by manufacturers and advertisers, by reusing old ideas, that represent the past.

At the architectural field, the doubts increased about the feasibility of the continuity of modern architecture due to its multiple failures. Depending on the weakness of the architectural treatment, and the absence of the architectural product personality. The nostalgic architecture is one of the attempts that attracts the public feelings. By using the history items to find a communication between architecture and public. The theoretical framework of this attitude assumes that the past is a legacy owned by the contemporary architect. This heritage should not be separated from architecture because it carries morals and authenticity. The historical elements also carry many psychological meanings that can express the spirit of the architectural work. The attempt to achieve reconciliation between the past and architecture can push the architect to new creativity horizons.

The nostalgia architecture is characterized by two main features. The first is the duality of expression, by using historical features and elements in a hybrid style with the modern architecture. The second feature is eclecticism, where the historicism is not considered an explicit revival attitude but to select the historical elements, to benefit from the past production and create a new architectural product. The historical elements generate a kind of ambiguity and contradiction in expression or may generate a kind of symbolism acquired from the culture of society. The nostalgic architecture aims to liberate from single global cultural perspective. It builds new standards through pluralism and diversity, and the free use of historical and popular features.

The expression of nostalgic architecture is divided into two main directions, the first: the simple style, by adding one or two historical items to the modern facade, as a kind of expressionism that

does not affect the general context of the facade. The second: the confused style, by using several items belonging to one style or a different group of styles, and clearly affect the facade expression.

## **4- The Nostalgia Features in Contemporary Egyptian Architecture**

### **4-1 Societal Transformations Accompanying the Emergence of Nostalgic Architecture**

The similarity of circumstances in Egypt with Western societies led to the emergence of a postmodern movement concurrent with its counterpart in the West. In the mid-seventies of the twentieth century, the state's orientation was changed from socialism to a market economy. The country headed towards a stage that seemed to be a transition towards the mystery. Despite the failure of capitalism as a development model in underdeveloped countries because it does not lead to the independence of local capitalism but links it to global capitalism. Capitalism also pushes significant parts of the population to marginal conditions. Egyptian society witnessed dramatic changes at all levels. These transformations continued to grow over four decades, until the explosion occurred at the end of the first decade of the third millennium.

The most important transformation was the class distortion, and the spreading of distances between social strata. The upper class became full of the new rich, whose birth came “unnatural” in the era of globalization, without a significant historical balance, compared to its predecessor, which was based on a solid production base represented in the agricultural land ownership. As most of the new rich created their wealth through the fields of trading, brokerage, contracting and the relationship with foreign capitalism. This class has adopted a new housing style, by living in closed residential communities. This spatial and class separation has strongly reflected on the quality of life and services. This class began to seek ill fantasies to enhance its new social status, by using classical architectural styles. Even one who walks through the luxurious elite compounds that surround Cairo recently will feel that he suddenly transported in space-time into a comic image of a European city in the nineteenth century. Most of this class do not have the culture to make the appropriate choice, as if they are a group that is interested in change without being aware of how this change will take place.

The middle class shrank and weakened, and began to suffer from the deterioration of the lifestyle, and the lack of services. It lost a large part of its pride. The middle class has become an exhausted class, living in a painful situation. So a large part of it migrated temporarily to the Gulf countries, in search of a new source of livelihood, or to escape from the difficult reality. The rest submitted to the power of the existing conditions. The tragedy peculiarity of the middle class was the fading of its dreams, and it was natural for this class to drift into nostalgia day after day, regurgitating the memories of the old days. They found in nostalgia a New Haven to escape from the difficult reality. The middle class began trying to imitate the new rich architecture to find its desired imaginary past, which the research will study during the case study.

The social distortions in the Egyptian society reflected themselves through the urban and architectural distortions in the urbanization context. The architecture became expressing of our psychological disorders and our sick imaginations, as if it were a kind of bipolar disorder ranging from mania to depression.

#### 4-2 The emergence and growth of nostalgic architecture in Egypt

The nostalgic architecture appeared within the framework of the postmodernism in Egyptian architecture in the seventies of the twentieth century, coinciding with the emergence of the same attitude in the West, and linked to local societal transformations. This movement seemed to be a case of cultural discourse within the framework of the search for identity. The Egyptian nostalgic architecture went through three stages, as follows:

**The first stage (the seventies):** The stage of emergence and formation, where the historical movement was adopted by a group of architects who departed from the influence of modernism. The beginning was through the theoretical framework developed by Abdel-Baqi Ibrahim, whose architectural approach represented the consolidation of the idea of rooting Islamic principles in contemporary Egyptian architecture.

**The second stage (the eighties):** The stage of spread, where the features of historical architecture based on Islamic items began to spread in Egypt within the framework of many successful works. During these two stages, we did not find a clear reflection of nostalgic architecture in residential architecture, except some insignificant examples. This could be explained that the society had not yet reached the complete conviction of the idea.

**The third stage (from the nineties until now):** The stage of confusion, where the nostalgic architecture began to move towards a new direction. It relied on the classical items without any reflection of the real Egyptian civilizational principles. This attitude spread clearly in the Egyptian urbanization with all its functional classifications, especially in residential architecture.

### 5- The Case study

The case study was determined by selecting 180 examples of residential buildings from eight locations. These locations distributed over the regions of Egypt. The examples were chosen within the framework of the middle-class housing. The date of their establishment is after 2000 AD. The expression of their facades follows the complex style of nostalgia architecture. The examples were digitally photographed in the period from 2008 to 2019. The examples were analyzed at the time of preparing the research in 2020.

### 6- The Results

The case study facades were analyzed to determine the most important elements used in the architectural expression which determines the form of the classic style used currently in contemporary residential architecture. The results of the analysis were as follows:

- The expression of all cases was hybrid of modern architecture and heterogeneous mixture of classical elements -Greek and Roman- without regarding proportions of the styles. The expression does not follow any rules could be subjected to study, just a classical combination that are not joined by any link or reason.
- The expression is similar in most of the case study locations, despite locations difference.
- The classical columns were one of the strongest elements used, and they were used in two forms, either attached to the facade wall, or detached from it. Most of these columns do not follow the style proportions. The attached columns were used in 37% of the total study cases. The detached columns were used in 70% of the total cases.

- The largest percentage of classical columns that were used was Corinthian columns by 51% of the total cases. This could be explained by the richness of the of Corinthian capitals with ornaments. The Doric columns came in second rank with 23% of the cases. The unspecified style columns - that do not follow any known style- came in third rank with 15%. The Ionic columns came in the last rank with 6%.
- The arches were used on the top of windows or entrances with 84% of the total cases. Most of these arches are segmental, which are easier to construct than pointed or semi-circular.
- Balusters were used, whether in the formation of the terrace's handrails or the roof deck, with 68% of the cases.
- The classic pediment, whether in its usual form, or with some modification, was used to form the rooftop or distinguish the entrance, with a ratio 48% of the cases.
- The classical ornaments were used in 94% of the total cases. The place of these ornaments varied, whether on top of window, on the roof, or in the solid parts of the facade, and sometimes in the formation of the terrace's balustrades. The construction of most ornaments was by installed gypsum units.
- The facade plaster was formed to give a classic sense, whether by horizontal lines or divided courses to inspire stone courses or cladding the facade corners with pharaonic stone to inspire the idea of quoin stone walls. The ratio of forming the facade plaster was 44% of the cases.
- The highest used elements are the ornaments by 94%, followed by arches by 84%, then the detached columns by 70%, then the attached columns by 37%, the most obvious used columns are the Corinthian by 51%, then using the pediment by 48%, then plaster forming by 44%.

## 7-The Discussion

### 7-1 The expression of Nostalgia architecture in contemporary residential architecture

Nostalgia architecture has clearly spread in the Egyptian residential architecture from the beginning of the third millennium, without any functional reason for it. It is strange that the historical elements used are derived from classical architecture, without any reflection of the true Egyptian cultural resources, whether Islamic or even ancient Egyptian. Theoretically, the modernism obliterated all historical patterns forms, while at the same time emphasizing the idea of building as a machine. on the other side, nostalgic architecture took the approach of returning to historic themes, elements and details, which supposed to remind us of the good old days.

Despite the spread of nostalgic architecture, it cannot be considered a real architectural style. The last real style that appeared in architectural history is modernism, which was associated with function and construction. The arrival to nostalgic architecture is just a quick aid of modernism.

### 7-2 The reasons of emergence of nostalgia architecture in contemporary residential architecture

The changes in architecture are related to economic and political conditions. The most important reason for the emergence of the postmodernism was the complex conditions that the Egyptian society suffered in the seventies. The middle-class society was exposed to economic and social pressures, which it could not deal with, and felt alienated within their reality. So, they found

only the path of nostalgia, to maintain its psychological stability. The path of ideal past, but what is the past? The past that they found around them in the architectural reality, the classical architecture that prevailed in the first half of the twentieth century. The past that they did not live, but they believe that it was ideal. For a society; classical architecture is the beautiful architecture, while Islamic architecture is associated only with mosques and religious architecture. This expression of nostalgic architecture derived from classical architecture, leads us to ask, why did nostalgia create a “false memory”? There are several possible answers to this question, which are as follows:

A- The classical architecture is the last architectural style that passed through Egypt before modernism. Classical architecture is a stage that extended from 1850 to 1950, in which Egyptian architecture was affected by the spread of New Classicism worldwide.

B- Perhaps the reason is a kind of rejection of our true history and heritage. This is apparent in the glorying of many people so far about their Turkish origin, and French culture.

C- The reason may be a kind of identity search, coinciding with the alienation within reality. As if the emergence of the nostalgic architecture is a step in the journey of searching for roots.

D- Perhaps the reason is a failure of the local modern architecture that was built in the sixties, due to the poor treatment, and the absence of the architectural product personality. This was not due to the modernism principles, but due to the poor creative thinking of the architect.

### **7-3 The Architect's Responsibility Towards the Nostalgic Architecture Phenomenon**

The current architectural reality confirms that the nostalgic architecture will continue for a long time. It is very difficult to determine whether should we allow society to express itself in its way? or must we intervene to correct this unsuccessful vision? Thus, the research discusses the architect's responsibility towards the phenomenon of nostalgia architecture, through the following points: -

A- Critically, the use of historical elements means the weakness of the architectural creative thought. Nostalgia is just a trick to play on the feeling chord. If it is necessary to rely on the historical attitude, at least it should be based on the real origins of Egyptian history. The classical architecture was never among the Egyptian history origins.

B- Our interest of authenticity could be the reason for the spread of nostalgic architecture. But the interest in this idea is directed to the facade only, or the issue related to westernization and cultural globalization.

C- Our responsibility as architects towards society requires our refuse to the wave of false nostalgia. Architecture has the rights to change, and to become familiar with transformations. We must build our architecture without going back to the past. We must break the chains of our imagination and creativity.

### **8- Recommendations**

Although the research falls under the philosophical research, there are many recommendations that could be derived from discussion regarding to the following authorities:

1. NOUH National Organization of Urban Harmony: It is necessary to activate the articles of law 119 of 2008 to give NOUH executive space to determine the character of each region.

2. Architecture departments in universities: If the nostalgic architecture will impose itself in the coming period, attention must be given to studying the principles of Islamic and ancient Egyptian architecture in a deep study through architectural education curricula.
3. Ministry of Culture: It is necessary to issue architectural periodicals directed to architects and those interested in artistic culture, which help in the continuous education for young architects.
4. Ministry of Housing: It is necessary to support the small-scale heritage architectural industries, such as gypsum, marble and timber industries, and encourage them to manufacture architectural elements and units derived from the Islamic history.
5. Ministry of Education: The attention must be offered to teach drawing and music courses in pre-university education and giving them more space in the study schedules.

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