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Old Gourna: The complexity of vernacular architecture/urbanism and cultural heritage

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Abstract

The ruins of Old Gourna in Luxor amid the Theban Necropolis evoke a lot of questions. The complexity and success of its vernacular architecture/urbanism continue to perplex experts till today. After several attempts to relocate its residents, first at Hassan Fathi's new Gourna, then in the 2nd New Gourna, Old Gourniis are still nostalgic about their old village. The main objective of this paper is to demonstrate the authentic urban/architectural particularity and cultural heritage of the Old Gourna compared to the other two New Gournas. This will be achieved via the analyses of Urban Design Dimensions in relation to the social production of urban spaces in the 3 Gournas.

Keywords: Old Gourna; Vernacular Architecture/Urbanism; Urban Desing Dimensions; Social Production of Space; New Gourna; Hassan Fathi

1. Introduction

GI	Old Gourna
GII	The New Gourna of Hassan Fathi
GIII	The second New Gourna "Al-Taref"

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1.1. The Three Gournas

Al Gourna, or Al Qurnah, is the same name used for three related villages that exist on Luxor's Left Bank, not far away from the Colossi of Memnon. The First Village or "Old Gourna" is a vernacular village that was completely designed and constructed by its inhabitants on the Theban Hill near Deir al-Bahari. More than 200 years ago, local families went to settle down amid the hills of the mountain "Al Qurn" (the horn in English). It is believed that these families were originally tomb robbers that used to sell the stolen Egyptian antiquities in the black market. Each few families, that form a tribe, used to choose an ancient Egyptian necropolis to settle down on and to build their houses. They would use the empty tombs as cellars, or as a private room for the big man of the family and his wife to sleep in when the weather is really hot; they used to call it "Bab Al Hagar" or the "Door of the Stone". Therefore, the Old Gourna contains more than one settlement or nag' as locals call them. These settlements are seven in total: Deir al-Medina, el-Assasif, el-Khokha, Al-Taref, Dra' Abu el-Naga', Gournet Marei and Sheikh Abd el-Qurna. Urban settlements that remain from Old Gourna today are considered as real traces of vernacular architecture/urbanism. The way these settlements were urbanised by its inhabitants, the architecture and the materials used in their houses are real treasures that need to be conserved.

The second village is the New Gourna of Hassan Fathi. In 1945, the great architect Hassan Fathi was accorded by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities to design a new settlement to which the inhabitants of the Old Gourna were to be relocated. The Egyptian government wanted to save the Theban Necropolis from theft and to facilitate the development of tourism. Therefore, 50 Acres of agricultural land were purchased for the operation of the new settlement: the New Gourna (World Monuments Fund, 2011). Hassan Fathi did a lot of research in the course of preparation for his design. He consulted the Old Gourniis themselves about their culture and their way of living. Hassan Fathi was also inspired by the local architecture and historical tombs in his designs. However, due to political and financial complications plus the rejection of Old Gourniis for the new site and the new architecture, New Gourna wasn't completed; only a part of Fathi's plan was realized. Out of 900 families only 130 were relocated to New Gourna (Ahmed & Elgizawi, 2009). What remain currently of Hassan Fathi's designs in the new Gourna are a couple of houses, the mosque and the market. Fathi's remained buildings also need conservation at Gourna II as concrete structures already replaced most of them.

The third village is the Second New Gourna or Gournet Al-Taref. It is a second governmental attempt in the hope of relocating Old Gourniis for the same old reason. Between 1997 and 2006, at 5 kilometres from the Old one, the second New Gourna was achieved but was also rejected by the Old Gourniis. In order to force People of Old Gourna to move to their new homes, the government demolished many houses and only few were left as evidence of a vernacular urbanism that existed one day on the hilly side. The second New Gourna contains more than 2000 houses that supposed to accommodate the 20,000 inhabitants from the seven negou' or settlements of Old Gourna. Its new urban space is of a conventional residential area where most of the services are concentrated in one neighbourhood. Depending on their socio-economic status, the Old Gourniis were offered whether to exchange their old houses for new houses in the second New Gourna or to have a piece of land in "Houd Al-Raml" on the island near the river side. This New Gourna is considered as a failure from its residents' point of view. Till today they can't adapt themselves to the idea of living in box-like houses built with concrete and facing each other. They also miss the quality of their old urban spaces and the climatic adaptability of their old houses.

1.2. Research Interest and Objectives

The urban space is a complex product of an ongoing process. It's simultaneously considered as an action of production of social urban space that implicates fully or partly the six Dimensions of Urban Design. The aim of this paper is to achieve a holistic view concerning the urbanization process of an area. It's an attempt to obtain a matrix that can elucidate the interrelationship between the Urban Design Dimensions and the Social production of Space. This is in order to reach a set of principles that will help us to understand the complexity of an urbanization process.

Our choice of Old Gourna is because of its architecture and urban spaces perplexing experts till today. The complexity of its existence and success bring to mind a lot of questions. The main objective of this research is to understand and scrutinize the convolution of vernacular architecture/urbanism as well as cultural heritage of Old