

Two Great Humanitarians Who Were Also Architects

By William R. Polk

Although not an architect, I have been privileged to know a wide range of leaders in the field. Even better, watching them at work and discussing their ideas, I was able to see their reactions to the challenges they faced in trying to encapsulate the aims and desires of those for whom they designed their projects. Here I would like to single out two who, for me, were particularly interesting.

Walter Gropius was nearing the end of his long and varied career when I met him. He had just retired as dean of the School of Architecture at Harvard and was the *primus inter pares* of The Architects Collaborative in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His firm had been awarded a contract to design a new university in Baghdad when the 1958 *coup d'état* caused the cancellation of the contract.

As it happened, I had just returned from Baghdad where I had lived as a fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation a few years earlier. As I was studying Iraqi politics, I knew all of the civilians who had overthrown the monarchy, and wrote two articles for *The Atlantic* on the aspirations of the new government. Gropius read my pieces and asked me to come and talk. The meeting was the start of a long and delightful friendship.

Soon afterwards, we went to Baghdad together where we resurrected (and indeed greatly enlarged) the university design contract. That was the positive part of our mission; the negative part was that the government, under a different leadership, exhibited some of the ugly features that would mark the later regime of Saddam Hussein. These characteristics horrified "Gropie" (as all his American friends affectionately knew him). They reminded him of his days in Germany in the early 1930s when megalomania was state policy. And so reminded, he poured forth a stream of his memories of those times during the days we sat holed up in a hotel awaiting the final stage of our negotiations.

The final stage was profoundly disturbing to him but was, I admit, profoundly amusing to me. When everything had been agreed "at the working level," we were summoned to the office of the then "Sole Leader," Prime Minister Abdul Karim Qasim, for what we had been told would be the signing of the contract. I warned Gropie that he must expect trouble. It quickly came.

When we took our seats at the cabinet table, klieg lights blazed forth and television cameras began to whirl. We were being informed, not so subtly, that the prestige of the Prime Minister was on exhibit before the entire nation.

Qasim began with a short statement complimenting Gropius on his preliminary work but said that the agreed fee was far too high: the Iraqi people demanded that it be scaled down.

Gropius turned to me, dismayed, and whispered, "what shall I do?" I suggested that as a good will gesture – since in fact the fee was really more than any of us had

expected – he offer to reduce it by half a percent. He nodded and asked me to translate that to Qasim.

When I did, Qasim waived the concession aside, saying, “I do not deal in half percentages.”

I relayed that to Gropius who sighed, “You do whatever you think best.” His (and my) worry was that whatever concession was made, it too would be regarded as insufficient. Once on that slippery slope, we would find no firm ground.

By this time, I had guessed that the television cameras making such a clatter in the room were, in fact, empty. They were just a prop for the bargaining. So I smiled and said that I fully understood the Prime Minister’s position. Half percentages were clearly not worth his time. What was important to the Iraqi people was that the magnificent new project go ahead rapidly to meet the needs and desires of their youth. So, I suggested, let us just get on with the job at the agreed fee.

Qasim appeared startled, turned and glared at the Iraqi officials with whom we had negotiated and then looked at me and burst out laughing. I too laughed. Although he didn’t know what had happened, Gropius nervously joined us. Then Qasim gestured to the cameramen to stop the clatter and douse the lights. That done, he pointed his finger at me and said, “you really must make a concession.” “Yes, your excellency,” I said. “You are right. Let’s agree on one percent.” “Done,” he replied and we all shook hands. Somewhat bewildered, Gropius whispered to me, “did you agree that we would do it...free?”

With that essential first step out of the way, Gropius turned to the really important tasks. One that particularly engaged him was what was to be the center piece of the new campus, the mosque.

What really was a mosque? He and I discussed that almost endlessly, and he poured over books of illustrations of what had been built under the Mamluk regime in the early Middle Ages in Egypt, under the Umayyads and others in Islamic Spain (*al-Andalus*), in Safavid Iran, Mughal India and Ottoman Turkey.

He found, of course, enormous variety in detail, but he finally convinced himself that, in essence – what it seems to me he was always seeking as an architect, the essence – a mosque was really very simple: it was composed of three elements.

The first element is what is known in Arabic as the *mihrab*. A *mihrab* can exist independent of any building. To pray, bedouin customarily draw a line in the sand with a half circle in the middle pointing toward Mecca. For them, that plot of land is an ephemeral mosque. When incorporated in a building, the *mihrab* is, for the Muslim architect, the heart of the place of worship, but, for the non-Muslim architect, it is of minor “design” importance. It does, however, have a fascinating history.

The tradition from which the *mihrab* derives is very ancient, deriving, probably, from the ancient Egyptian “door of heaven” through Sassassian palace throne rooms to later Christian niches. It is surely one of the most enduring and important of architectural forms although one that is physically not particularly impressive. I think it is fair to say that it did not much interest Gropius.

The second, and to Gropius, the important element was what we call a “minaret.” The word minaret comes from *man_ra* which, like most Arabic words, has multiple meanings – candlestick, lighthouse, signpost and watchtower. The earliest mosques did not have minarets. Tradition holds that the first man to summon worshipers to prayer (Arabic: *mu^ʿazzin*) just climbed up onto a roof. But, from the building of the first great mosque in Qairawan when Islam was less than a century old, minarets became a standard feature. Like the bell-tower of a church, it also came, over the centuries, to be the very symbol of the place of worship. For Gropius, it was the key element in the mosque.

The third element was the space for worshippers to assemble. In the earliest mosques, and in many of the larger modern buildings, the space is not covered. However, for the Baghdad University project, Gropius designed a stunningly beautiful dome, cast in concrete and flying almost like a tent, with the supporting corners set in pools of water to reflect inward on the ceiling. This piece of the university was actually built as planned, but, alas, as I saw in the days I visited Baghdad before the American incursion in February 2003, it is already cracked, peeling and fading. Although it is, in my opinion, one of the most beautiful of mosques, like one of the great ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia, it is subsiding into a ruin. I am glad Grope is not alive to see it today.

It would be difficult to conjure a figure more different from Walter Gropius than Hassan Fathy. In a curious way, I suppose, I was the link between them. Not only did I introduce them, but I tried, not very successfully, to make each appreciate the art of the other.

I first met Hassan in 1954 when, on behalf of the Ford Foundation, I was editing a supplement to a magazine entitled “Perspective of the Arab World.” My task was to illustrate contemporary trends in the Arab countries. That task took me all over the area trying to identify interesting but then little-known people in the arts. I found Hassan almost by accident. Although several mutual friends suggested his name, we actually met when I visited the apartment in which I had lived years before in an old Mamluk palace. Hassan was then living there. He invited me in for tea.

A born teacher, Hassan had one consuming passion. It was to recapture architecture from the architects, to give it back to the people. In his Egypt, that meant enabling poor people to build their dwellings more or less like the ancient Egyptians had done, with the mud of the Nile. “His” Egyptians had forgotten how, and those who guided them had adopted both Western designs and Western materials.

Would I like to go with him to a village he was helping to build to see what his “alternative” architecture meant? Of course I would.

So we went up river to “New” Gourna near the great archaeological site of Luxor. Interspersed with tea and cookies (Hassan’s weakness) and bouts of listening to scratchy recordings of Bach (Hassan’s other weakness) on a hand-cranked record player, he laid out for me his philosophy of architecture.

His was a philosophy constrained by the harsh realities of life for contemporary Egyptians. At that time, the vast majority lived below the money economy. Statisticians thought of them as earning far less than a dollar a day, but the reality was that they earned virtually no money at all. It wasn’t just that modern building materials, cement and steel, and even wood which had to be imported, were a drain on the country’s “hard” currency, but that almost anything that required even “soft” money was beyond their reach.

Egypt was not alone in this harsh reality. A newly completed study for the World Bank showed that at least a billion people in the “Third World” would die early deaths and live stunted lives because of unsanitary, uneconomic and ugly housing. And it wasn’t only the Third World: America was beginning to realize the terrible costs of its slums. But America had an option: it could spend large amounts of money, as it soon was doing in its “urban renewal” program to upgrade housing. Egypt did not have that option.

So what to do about it? What really differentiated Hassan from others, I believe, was that he embraced this reality as an opportunity.

He started with a simple fact: like all animals, human beings always managed to create some form of shelter for themselves. The art of the architect was to help them do a better job of it. That task he approached in three ways: design, labor and materials.

For materials, he had little choice. Wood was unobtainable. Since before the First Dynasty, Egypt had to import what it could not do without. The beautiful “arabesque” panelled doors we see in the Egyptian museums were made of scraps that a Western carpenter would have thrown away. For the peasant house builder, wooden beams were beyond luxury. Steel was even more precious. Whatever Egypt produced went into the modern economy. The peasant who had an iron tip on his plow was a rich man. And concrete, although increasingly produced in Egypt, was expensive and then still-scarce.

Concrete was Hassan’s pet hate. He liked to quote statistics proving that it was not only expensive but inefficient. It offered little protection from the intense heat of the Egyptian summer. Houses built of it, he scoffed, were more ovens than homes. So what was left. Mud.

Hassan's colleagues and responsible government officials were dismissive: he was backward, not modern, and, worse, he was treating the people as little better than animals. Concrete was modern; mud was humiliating. Worse, it would collapse.

Hassan countered by arranging tours of ancient Egyptian sites (where mudbrick structures were still standing after several thousand years) and by demonstrating that mudbrick was a much better insulator than concrete. As we sat in the living room he had built for himself in "his" village, New Gourna, I believed him. The room was pleasantly cool despite the fierce outside heat.

Best of all, he argued, mud was available under the peasant's feet. He didn't have to buy it. He just had to dig it up as he was constantly doing to make irrigation ditches and ponds in which he raised fish and kept ducks, shape it into bricks, leave them in the sun to dry and stack them up.

Stacking them up as walls was simple; what was difficult was making roofs. The ancients had found a way to do it without supporting beams, but their technique had been forgotten. Resurrecting and refining it was the architect's task.

The trick was a dome. Against a mud plaster parabola as guide, a man could stack bricks in a way that each supported the next. Best of all, he could be taught this method in a few hours. Then, by leaving a small hole in the top of the resulting dome, perhaps capped with a piece of black metal, warm air would be sucked out and replaced by cooler air from the ground level. As I found in Hassan's room, it worked.

Trying to put a money scale on such work was difficult but Hassan estimated that with the few things the peasant could not supply like water pipes and sanitary fittings, his typical house cost about 15% of the cheapest contract-built housing in Egypt.

Hassan's houses were not only affordable and comfortable; they were beautiful. Technique and materials lent themselves to moulded, plastic, flowing forms. New Gourna was a delight to the eye.

Alas, the eye was not enough. Although Hassan never wavered in his belief, and has since become something of a cult figure, his project failed. Not unlike Gropius, he died an unfulfilled artist. Each was, in his different way, defeated by human nature. Few of Gropius's grand ideas were realized and his most famous housing project, it must be admitted, displays a certain disdain for those who would live in it. They quickly did what they could to alter it in ways he found ugly. Hassan, to the contrary, was profoundly respectful, but respectful of an idealized people. The people of Old Gourna were not ideal, and they did not want to move to his ideal village. They did not care that New Gourna was beautiful. What they cared about was that Old Gourna lay atop an archaeological site whose tombs they robbed for saleable treasures. Old Gourna was not only their home but their livelihood. So Hassan's Gourna, like Gropius's Mosque, is today a ruin.

Failure or unfulfilled vision that these experiences may have been, I look back upon the lives of these two friends, these two noble men, with a certain sadness, but with gratitude for the visions they shared with me.

© William R. Polk, April 16, 2004

William R. Polk is the senior director of the W.P. Carey Foundation. After studies at Harvard and Oxford, he taught for several years at Harvard University. Then, in 1961, President Kennedy appointed him a Member of the Policy Planning Council of the U.S. Department of State. There, he was in charge of planning American policy for most of the Islamic world until 1965 when he became professor of history at the University of Chicago and founded its Middle Eastern Studies Center. Later he also became president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. Among his many books are *The United States and the Arab World*; *The Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century*; *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs*; *Polk's Folly*, *An American Family History*; and (in press) *The Birth of America*.