NEW ARCHITECTURE WITH OLD IDEAS: AN EGYPTIAN ACCULTURATION.

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Abstract
A product of any culture, such as architecture, becomes a travelling icon upon migrating to another culture. By the time the travelling icon reaches the host culture, it loses much of its original content keeping primarily its form. The host culture starts giving it new meanings and interpretations; and even working around its limitations through a process of acculturation.

I argue throughout the article that the travelling icon despite losing most of its original content still maintained its power to disseminate among the newly rising elite of Egypt. The power to disseminate was based on a consistent campaign carried out by Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi (and successive intellectuals) on issues of progress and modernity. al-Tahtawi devised a theory of progress that triggered a huge process of acculturation. This led to the evolution of the new villa so particular to the Egyptian society. It was not a mere copy of the Palladian villa but an acculturated one that had no precedence.

Introduction
The debate on how to accommodate progress within the local tradition started to materialize when Egyptians travelled to Europe for higher education in the nineteenth century. Since then, comparing local and foreign cultures became a common practice among Egyptian intellectuals of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Their critical writings never doubted Western ideals as the source of progress for Egypt, yet those ideals had to reciprocate with their local counterparts to come up with a pairing situation suitable for the Egyptians.

The design of the 19th century villa in Cairo showed one facet of this pairing: local abstract ideas with a foreign physical form, traditional social behavior within a Palladian villa type. This pairing required compromise: the foreign type had to make concessions to local values.

The idea of borrowing from other cultures is a global mechanism. There are some critics who believe that the mechanism of borrowing must lead to misreading of the original, or contamination of the master model (Said,
1983, p. 39). Here the sense of misreading means degeneration in quality. There are other critics, such as Edward Said (1983, p. 236) and Mohamed al-Jabri (1985, pp. 51-52), believe that these misreadings are historic transfer of ideas from one setting to another and have the right to be judged on their own merit. They should not be seen as a continuous shadow of the original but another original. The borrowed idea do interact with different circumstance upon transfer, giving birth to interpretations so particular and so private to the new setting, that it would seem credible to give the outcome self-sustainable realization.

The term “worldliness” of Edward Said becomes important to the understanding of this point because it acknowledges the small world outside the borrowed idea as distinct from one setting to another, and which exerts different pressure and limitations on the borrowed idea in every new setting. The term in this way liberates the borrowed idea from its origins suggesting mutations (Said, 1983, pp. 25, 34-39, 237).

The theoretical position of Edward Said suggests that a product of any culture, such as architecture, becomes a travelling icon upon migrating to another culture. By the time the travelling icon reaches the host culture, it loses much of its original content keeping primarily its form. The host culture starts giving it new meanings and interpretations, and even working around its limitations through a process of acculturation.

The villa type that travelled to Egypt was a product of a long-standing tradition in Europe that could be traced to the sixteenth-century theoretician Andrea Palladio who practiced in the Venetian lands. Palladio (1570 / 1965) theorized his plan as follows:

The rooms ought to be distributed on each side of the entry and the hall, and it is to be observed that those on the right correspond with those on the left. (p. 31).

In his mind, there was a necessity to upgrade the status of the dwelling; hence symmetry perfectly served this ideal in both plan and façade. Palladio elaborated on this idea saying:

have made in all the villa buildings... a pediment on columns for the front façade in which there are the principal portals. The reason is that these porches announce the entrance of houses and lend much to their grandeur and magnificence. (p. 53)

This rationale had a social meaning. The presence of a colonnaded loggia with a pediment on top in the context of a symmetric facade, clearly recalled religious buildings, and by this treatment his design became a hallmark of honorary status for residential architecture. (Constant, 1985, p. 4) Palladio (1570 / 1965) then regarded this whole setting in his treatise to be for a “great man” whose villa would impress those “who shall wait to salute or ask him [the master of the house] some favor” (p. 40).

This elevated status of the villa had never been idealized with such intensity before Palladio (Ackerman, 1967, p. 13). Since his time, the Palladio’s theory on villa architecture became an icon of wealth, power and prestige.

The country villa was usually set in the midst of large green fields (farming estates and gardens) where the family enjoyed the privileged sense
of repose from the dense fabric of the city (Ackerman, 1990, p. 10). It was a second house for the family that fulfilled their psychological need for a dolce vita (Muraro, 1986, p. 20). The sixteenth century villa continued over the centuries to act as a place for amusement but its farming aspect gradually diminished (Muraro, p. 90).

The nineteenth century, gave rise to a new social elite of industrial entrepreneurs, urban bureaucrats and commercial bourgeoisie. These groups, bent on acquiring fortunes, sought to create their own miniaturized version of aristocracy. The Palladian villa as an icon was no longer limited to the countryside. It was erected in suburban neighborhoods and even inside the urban fabric of the city.

The villa in its new format was a compacted version of what used to be found in large estates. The icon suggested that the past that used to belong to the “real” aristocracy was now idealized and revered by the new social elite (Olsen, 1986, p. 126). It cannot be reached nor entirely reconstructed, but perhaps it can be hinted at.

The villa type not only became an icon among the upper urban elites of Europe but also a formal source of inspiration to the Beaux Arts theoreticians. They sought the innovative organization of spaces, parti, suitable to every building program, after studying the relative works of the “masters” such as Vitruvius and Palladio (Levine, 1982, p. 102).

The Beaux Arts theory continued the antiquity’s tradition of deriving organizing principles from Nature such as symmetry, hierarchy and proportions (Panofsky, 1968, p.26). The notion of character could have metaphorical expressions such as “noble” and “severe” that could be derived from system of orders and styles that best suit the building program and the patron’s background (Levine, p. 102). Villa Rotunda of Palladio was an ideal prototype because of its double symmetry and choice of orders that gave the appropriate “noble” character to the building.

When the villa migrated to Cairo, much of those ideals pertaining to Palladio and later Beaux Arts were discarded. The villa in its originating culture represented a four-century-tradition of architectural theory. It also represented authentic aristocracy and later urban elites who understood the metaphorical expressions behind different orders and styles. All this was almost lost upon migration. The travelling icon only kept its formal look: the central hall flanked by symmetric arrangement of rooms with a projecting loggia.

Devoid from its content, the Palladian villa was ready for the process of acculturation. Instead of representing its original hefty baggage of traditions, the villa in the new setting represented modern thinking of the Egyptian rising elite. They were the upper classes that flourished after a law was passed in 1858 that allowed Egyptians (for the first time) to possess any amount of agricultural land, a privilege that used to be limited to the ruling Turks (Awad, 1980, pp. 326-336). Well-educated and high ranking officials in the government formed another elite class (Serageldin, 1972, pp. 90, 220). By the end of the century, both groups, still maintaining their traditional ethics, were still relatively newcomers to the world of aristocracy, and tried to enhance their position with status symbols that look new and modern; the Palladian villa was the icon to them.
In light of this presentation, I argue throughout the article that the travelling icon despite losing most of its original content still maintained its power to disseminate among the newly rising elite of the hosting culture. The power to disseminate was based on a consistent campaign carried out by local intellectuals on issues of progress and modernity. The final product was not a mere copy of the original model but an acculturated one that had no precedence.

Living in a Palladian villa assumed certain modes of living that did not exist in the traditional Egyptian lifestyle. These were necessary details that deal with arranging and using the spaces of the house. In traditional houses, the living room, locally called qa’a, in a family quarter was a space used not only for daily living but also for eating and sleeping. Beds and tables are packed away when not in use (Ibrahim, 1984). Those functions in a new dwelling type took place in separate rooms: a living room, a bedroom and a dining room, each with its own permanent set of furniture that was not ordinarily shifted about. How to manage this dwelling could no longer be passed from mothers to daughters by word-of-mouth, now it was through the printed word.

The manual Rabbat al-Dar (Mistress of the House) on how to housekeep a Palladian villa was introduced to the Egyptian market in 1915 as literature for women. The book came after almost three decades of introducing the new model of dwelling. It was a manual that instructed the housewife (or the potential one) on how to perform domestic tasks such as furnishing, cleaning, sewing; managing a house lived budget, and cooking.

Malaka Sa‘d (1915), the author of Rabbat al-Dar, introduced the canons of each space by taking a medium-size house as a case study (p. 20). The central hall, according to her, represented the image of the house. On either sides of the hall, Indian chairs should be placed; in the center there should be a table. In the corner was a vase of flowers, near the doorway, a mirror, and a coat-rack (p. 21).

The reception room should have a wooden floor or be covered with a carpet. At the corners there are vases of flowers, on the wall pictures of the husband and wife, on another pictures painted by the wife herself. In the center is a table covered with an embroidered cloth with lace. Family or historical pictures can be displayed on the table. The room must contain a mirror and another three tables with ashtrays (p. 28). The windows should be covered with curtains. For the glass panes, the curtains are of lace, for the shutters they are of jute (p. 29).

The bedroom has one or two beds, a wardrobe with a mirror that contains formal clothes, washbasin (lavomano), drawers for underwear and linen, hangers for daily clothes, curtains of lace. It is possible to keep some of those items in the dressing room (pp. 21-22).

The study should be in a quiet corner of the house. It should contain a desk with drawers, an American revolving chair, some chairs made of leather, a grand clock facing the desk, a calendar, stationary, a cupboard for books, shelves for daily newspapers and frequently used books, lace curtains on glass windows, a thermometer, a waste basket and maps decorating the walls. The desk should be placed in such a way as to admit daylight from the left.
side of its occupant (pp. 23-24).

This is a sample of how meticulous Malaka described the interior. She also discussed the etiquette that was associated with some rooms. In the dining room, for example, table manners ranged from how to fold a napkin to where the father should sit in relation to his son to how to make the guest feel at ease during the meal (pp. 33-38).

The book in this way represented the Palladian villa before travelling to its new destination and for this reason not every recipe was acceptable to the culture. There were two facets of the European lifestyle: one of which quickly became part of the social conventions such as table manners, furniture style and interior layout. The other facet that dealt with social relations was more difficult to accept.

There was not sufficient differentiation between the agreeable and disagreeable facets of European lifestyle. She recommended that the reception room should be as close as possible to the hall so the guest could be led inside passing through the hall. She also advised the housewife to keep some newspapers and magazines on the table in the hall for the visitor to browse while he was waiting for the master. In Malaka’s world, visitors are admitted first to a central hall then to a reception room. She was only reflecting the three-century-old Palladian theory of a guest being overwhelmed by the spaciousness and decoration of the central hall while waiting for the host to show up (Palladio, 1570 / 1965, p. 40). This image making that Palladio orchestrated in his design was dismantled when transferred to the Cairene community of the 19th century. Local customs allowed only for this space to be the inner sanctuary of the house, only to be seen by members of the family. Non-relatives were not allowed in.

Malaka’s book showed another discrepancy between theory and practice. She suggested that the bedrooms should be aired on a daily basis. The shutters would be wide open from morning till ten o’clock, then closed to reduce heat infiltration during the day, then reopened at sunset (Sa’d, p. 22).

Opening shutters was for strictly “hygienic” reasons; nevertheless, social implications could not have been avoided. The “unveiling” of the facades also meant the unveiling of the woman, and to link this act with the notion of progress in her introduction to the book (Sa’d pp. 18-19) meant a package-deal offer: new product with new ideals.

Actual social conventions had to revise this segment of the travelling icon in order to accommodate a social value of the hosting culture. The housewife opened the shutters only during cleaning the room, then kept it closed for the rest of the day and night. Second-generation inhabitants of modern Cairene neighborhoods, remember that even ajar shutters were regarded as scandalous. Through the moving slats of the shutter women could view the outside world without being seen.

The construction detail of the shutter enabled the women to push a handle up and down which in tum caused the slats of the shutter to swing on a horizontal axes. With this detail, the woman saw a renewed segment of the outside world every time she turned the handle to a particular angle. (Fig.1).
The shutter was divided into at least two sections: The smaller portion was at the eye level and contained the rotating slats while the upper portion had the fixed ones. The shutter remained similar to a traditional latticed wooden screen, locally named mashrabiyya, which was also divided into two basic sections. In the lower section, smaller openings acted as a veil, permitting the woman to see the world without being seen.

The mashrabiyya and the shutter still maintained a fundamental difference: the first reflected established tradition, the second evolving tradition that offered choices. The mashrabiyya had fixed spaced interstices, no more than 3 cm wide thus resonating with centuries of unquestionable social traditions. It was a permanent architectural solution for a permanent cultural value. The shutter was a different case. It had the potential of being left wide open or firmly closed. Until the first two decades of this century, the society chose the last solution, disregarding advocates of the first option such as Malaka. With this choice they consciously decided on the demarcation line between traditional ideals that should continue and those that can change.

Ideals of constancy were further enhanced by the introduction of the shutter-screen to embrace terraces and balconies located in the upper stories where the family lived. (Fig. 2) The Palladian and later the Beaux Arts theory of placing the terrace in the center of symmetrically arranged façade in order to heighten the status of the patron when standing visible in this space had a weaker impact with this newly added screen. The formal look of the villa became diminutive. But this did not matter to the hosting culture, for the woman still enjoyed sitting in an open-air terrace, while shunning herself from the public eye.

To shy away from public eye was not part of the Palladian theory, nor was a parapet of shutters located over the terrace balustrade. The combination was quite stunning. (Fig.3) No attempt to suppress one at the expense of another, the terrace and the screen were equally needed; one satisfied a new social status, the other local social values. The combination had no precedents, but was an overwhelmingly positive solution for a society that gently acculturated a travelling icon. (Fig 4).
Malaka’s book was widely distributed in girls’ schools by orders of Ministry of Education (Baron, 1988, pp. 107-108) despite the discrepancy between theory and practice. Nevertheless, Egyptian families did not just read Malaka’s book then walk in to live a new form of dwelling. They were attentive to ideologies of social reformers who assessed local and foreign ideals together. The result was that in less than two decades it was the dream of every Egyptian to live in a modern dwelling eradicating in the process many centuries of traditional dwelling.

Reformers of this period almost had in common the tendency to avoid favoring completely one ideal over the other. They neither wanted to appear as foreigners to their local audience nor as antiquarians. The question then became what to keep from the local cultural systems and what to introduce from the foreign ones. The answer to this became a typical exercise for the intellectual of every theoretical discipline.
To pursue this exercise the intellectual had to pass through a cycle that started in the homeland, went to Europe and returned home again. In the first phase, the intellectual was young and inexperienced, and completed religious education in al-Azhar Mosque in his homeland. In the second phase, he was in Europe for a different education and in contact with the host culture primarily through Ideologies found in books (Laroui, 1976, p 117); yet he never failed to notice its tangible representations in built-form, social behavior and customs. In this phase, his intellect was in the making, his ideas and concepts were being formed according to current idiosyncrasies. By the end of this phase his mind was stocked with new ideas. He was now an intellectual ready to deliver manifestoes. In the third phase, he returned home full of hopes for reform. He deluged his society with his thoughts in the form of books, novels, and even legislations, depending on his government position.

In this cycle it was the middle stage that made him not only an intellectual but also a reformer. The trip to Europe did not always end with an academic degree but it still gave him the opportunity to be critical, which was the prime tool of a reformer. In this final phase, reformers felt obliged to come out with solutions that promised improvement to the usually unsatisfactory conditions at home. In doing this, they ended up dealing with the notion of duality that can be summarized as “us and them”.

The first and most famous intellectual who went through this cycle was Rifa’a al-Tahtawi. He was a prefect for a group of students who were officially sent to France between 1826 and 1831, during Muhammad Ali’s rule. Members of those state missions were seen as agents of modernization. The ruler expected them to learn Western science then return home to use it. Al-Tahtawi’s task was to master the French language and to become a translator.

After five years in Paris al-Tahtawi became...
more than just a translator. He returned with a theory that became a doctrine for successive generations. It became the worldliness that affected the Egyptian dwelling for the next century. It was the magic stick that was used to acculturate the traveling icon. Any civilized progress of a nation, al-Tahtawi told us, had to include simultaneously the material and the metaphysical spheres. The first included progress in public benefits (manafi ‘ama) such as agriculture, commerce, industry and communications. The second included progress in the morality, manners and customs governed by religion and jurisprudence (al-Tahtawi, 1870 / 1912, pp. 9-10). Progress cannot be achieved through one sphere alone.

Al-Tahtawi’s theory of progress must have come from his contact with authors of the French Enlightenment such as Montesquieu (al-Tahtawi, 1834 / 1849) p. 159; Hourani, 1962 / 1983, pp.70-71). However, this particular version of progress that combined the metaphysical and the material could not have come from his Paris experience. Al-Tahtawi saw Paris as an intellectual city dominated by the positivist movement of Saint-Simon and Comte who advocated the scientific reevaluation of traditional religions. Apostles for them were the bankers and industrialists (al-Tahtawi, 1834 / 1849, p. 57). They saw science as the sole generator of progress (Charlton, 1968; Manuel, 1962). There was no room in their ideas for the metaphysical sphere that seemed necessary in al-Tahtawi’s theory on progress.

In order to understand the origins of al-Tahtawi’s theory we need to analyze the first phase of his intellectual cycle. Before leaving for Paris he studied eight years at al-Azhar Mosque (Higazi, 1974, p. 12) and became a jurisconsult (faqih). He even taught in this institution of learning for two years.

One of the Islamic sciences that al-Tahtawi had studied at al-Azhar was Legal Theory and Methodology (usul al-fiqh), which allowed the scholar to research the sources of Islamic Law (ijtihad) and issue legal opinions and prescriptions (fatwa) in religious and civil matters (Makdisi, 1981, pp. 276-277). These sources were arranged according to their importance: the Scripture, the sayings and precedents of the Prophet (sunna), then consensus (al-ijma’). He should use the strongest source possible and only moved to the next one in hierarchy if he did not find enough evidence. If the jurisconsult did not find direct answers from these sources, he could apply analogical reasoning (qiyas) to measure an unknown case against another one whose verdict was known (Khallaf, 1978, pp. 20-22).

The idea was to allow a continuous interaction between jurisprudence and every new situation. To ensure custom-made prescriptions and to avoid stagnant interpretations, the jurisconsult might not follow precedent. He was encouraged to conduct his own research based on his own interpretation of the sources. If he dissented from another opinion, of past or present times, both were equally valid and the layman could follow either or none of them (Maqdisi, 1990, p. 31). The jurisconsult had nothing to fear then, even if the problem at hand had no precedent (Maqdisi, p. 126).

With this in mind, al-Tahtawi went to Paris; to him it was the unknown world. Everything he saw was measured according to usul al-fiqh. All of French
culture he filed and indexed accordingly. Some facets clearly contradicted Islamic law, others coincided. There were also facets that fell in the grey area and which demanded ijtihad of the first degree. In the last case, al-Tahtawi did not find direct answers from any of the first three sources, he had to use analogical reasoning or even less direct sources, such as preference by assessment (istihsan) (al-Shawkani, [d. 1839] 1928, p. 5; Khallaf, 1978, pp. 14-20, 90) that require greater logical deduction (al-Tahtawi, 1870 / 1912, p. 441).

Azhar education had already faced the unknown West when Napoleon invaded Egypt at the end of the eighteenth century. Hasan al-Attar, an Azhar professor of al-Tahtawi, together with his peer Abdel Rahman al-Jabarti (1798 / 1975), practiced the rational techniques of usul al-fiqh on Napoleon’s proclamation that asked the local communities to revolt against the Ottoman government (p. 41). After scrutinizing the proclamation they came with a conclusion that Napoleon was not sincere in his words (pp. 42-47).

Usul al-Fiqh led the Azhar professors of al-Tahtawi to methodologically analyze the arguments of Napoleon. The degree of objectivity and step-by-step deduction in the midst of chaos were also reflected in their explicit admiration to their colonizers’ scientific advancements on visiting their laboratories and libraries (al-Jabarti, p. 117).

The ability to scrutinize under pressure in a foreign environment was passed to their student who had to cope with the center of modern civilization, Paris, while retaining his cultural identity. His Azhar education gave him the self-confidence and the critical mind to observe and filter the French culture. There was no antagonism in the process of screening rather tolerance, no polarization in thought but moderation.

Al-Tahtawi’s theory of progress assumed that the acquisition of science was favored in Islam as long as it benefited people in terms of enhancing their quality of living. Beneficial science was not only religious but also secular, and practical such as mathematics and architecture (al-Tahtawi, p. 49). The theory also assumed that knowledge could be neutralized, or rather stripped of its original cultural content. Hence there was no package deal, as in the case of Malaka’s book, and because of this it was possible to practice the process of acculturation on the travelling icon. It was possible to empty the icon from its original content and to replace it with another that made sense to the hosting culture.

Al-Tahtawi’s theory became a genre in the intellectual history of Egypt. Successive thinkers such as Ali Mubarak presented the theory in a series of anecdotes that involve a dialogue between an Azhar sheikh and an English gentleman. The argument between the two ended with the message that “we had to scrutinize the West and only take what was good for us” (Shadhli, 1988, p. 25). Those simple-minded plots appealed to the public audience giving them reassurance that they can reshape the imported model according to their own prerogatives.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the theory was no longer a private matter seen only in books, but became a wide public debate that involved international participation of French
intellectuals. There was the debate between Ernest Renan and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (Hourani, pp. 120-123; Stoddard, 1921, pp. 63-65), Gabriel Hanotaux (Adams, 1933 / 1968, p. 87) and Mohammad Abdu, Charles François le duc d’Harcourt (Jid’an, 1979 / 1988, p. 472) and Qasem Amin (‘Emara, 1988, p. 220). Of the three debates, Hanotaux-Abdu had more than one round. It started by Hanotaux writing “Face to Face with Islam and the Muslim Question” in Journal de Paris, in early 1900. The article was translated into Arabic in al-Mu’ayyad, which also published a reply from Abdu. Al-Ahraam (another local newspaper, opposing al-Mu’ayyad) wrote an article defending Hanotaux and published a reply by him as well as an interview. Abdu then replied in al-Mu’ayyad by three articles. This oscillating international debate, in local and foreign journals, clearly reflected that the process of acculturation was on the move and the topic was of a prime concern among the educated elite in Egypt (‘Emara, 1982, pp. 15-22).

Al-Tahtawi’s theory of progress was the center of all this debate. It was the worldliness in which the new domestic architecture had evolved. Its influence laid not only in preserving the society’s core values while allowing for innovation, but also in the fact that the lapse in time between introducing the theory and actually practicing was very short. In the case of al-Tahtawi, his book Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz (1834) (generally referred to as Journey to Paris) in which he presented his theory of progress was published shortly after his return and was distributed to all the state officials by order of Muhammad Ali, the ruler of Egypt. He then founded and headed a translation school in 1836 that contributed to the establishing of a cultural elite that valued both sides of his theory of progress (Dunne, 1939 / 1968, pp. 265-268).

Ali Mubarak held several ministries, one of them the Ministry of Education. He organized a college to train men as teachers of geometry, physics, geography, history, calligraphy and Islamic sciences such as jurisprudence and exegesis. The college also offered public lectures on a weekly basis in 1871. Seminars were conducted in a big lecture hall, located next to Hilmiya, in which both European and Egyptian teachers taught. The idea was new and attracted the educated elite that aspired to the new type of dwelling. Talks that were delivered to the public were on literature, astronomy, jurisprudence, physics, chemistry, railways, architecture, mechanics, botany and history. Either as teachers or students, turbaned sheikhs of al-Azhar sat side by side with Westem-educated individuals exchanging thoughts and ideas (Dunne, pp. 376-378). In so doing, Mubarak practiced his character the Azhar sheik who was open to the West and exchanged ideas with his respectable English gentleman about East and West civilizations.

The two reformers, among others, had the chance to practice the progress equation from a top official position. The result was overwhelming success. If an Egyptian family just lived in a villa with a central hall arrangement, this meant that the family was already satisfying half this theory, and would satisfy the other half if the dwelling mutated in response to their social habits.

The Palladian plan was welcomed in the Egyptian society along with notions of modernity and progress, yet it was not fully accepted because it seriously violated family privacy. Society rejected the arrangement of a central hall located behind the entrance porch and flanked by rooms with no intermediary space.
Consequently, the idea of a separate reception room locally called Salamlek was a novel addition to the Palladian plan. The combination allowed the visitor to be received in a room that still maintained its traditional importance without disrupting the privacy of the family. (Fig 5).

This architectural modification to the European plan showed that the tradition of excluding the visitor from familial life persisted in the new form of dwelling. The refusal to alter the central-hall plan was as strong as the insistence on having a salamlek. The attempt to include both ideals, one architectural, one social, resulted in the separation of the two domains. The salamlek was placed in the garden as a separate entity. (Fig. 6).

The separation of the salamlek from the house did not mean that it had an inferior status. It was raised from the ground by one flight of stairs to give it an honorary status. It was also located

Figure 5: Front garden of a villa showing the separate room (locally named salamlek) with a portico to received guests (Source: Author’s photography).
in the front yard, and the host could notice its facade treatment being similar to that of the house. The interior was lavishly decorated and well furnished like any other reception room inside the house. Thus the locally added component of the new dwelling was equally appreciated. This appreciation was amplified if the land was large enough, for the house could have more than one salamlek (house No. 2 in Fig. 6). In some cases the salamlek was so large it had its own garden (house No. 1 in Fig. 6).

The presence of a detached room in the garden suggested that visitors were screened into two distinct categories, relatives and strangers.

More developed plans offered richer version of the acculturation process. In addition to the detached room, the visitor could be admitted from the entrance porch to flanking reception rooms without passing through the central hall. Once the plan offered more than one option for entertaining the guest, classification of visitors could be broadened. It was no longer limited to two main categories: relatives and non-relatives, but also intimate friends, professional peers and business associates (Fig. 7).

When any of these three categories were admitted to the house the following design solutions were invented for the purpose of

Figure 6: The phenomenon of Salamlek was spreading throughout complete neighborhoods (Source: Portion of historic map from Cairo Survey Department, 1911).
privacy. The staircase that led to the upper storey was screened from the central hall by a wall or a corridor. Thus the wife could go to the kitchen and supervise her maids without passing through the central hall.

Neﬁsa, who was the grand daughter Rifai al-Tahtawi, had a house that overlooked two main streets. Thus the liability of having a visitor approaching the villa from both entrances was equal which prompted another layer of precaution. At the side of the family entrance was a reception room with two doorways: one opened onto the staircase, the other connected with the interior. The front reception halls could not be approached from the entrance porch. So, no male visitors were admitted through the main entrance. Instead they went to the salamlek on the left hand side of the garden gateway. (Fig. 7).

Other houses offered greater flexibility. The Zahwi brothers, who were merchants, had their salamleks integrated into their villas. Located at the entrance to an alley, the salamlek of the first house is approached from both a square and an alley. Another reception room directly approached from the entrance porch gave the owner another choice for entertaining his guests. Compared to a typical house with just one salamlek, the Zahwi residences reflect a worldliness full of reciprocity with the local milieu, after all they were merchants. (Fig. 8).

Acculturation of the original model suggested that a physician could have his professional practice as a family doctor inside his dwelling. Dr. Muhammad Nashid, had one section of his house as a clinic, with entrances at opposite ends, one for women, another for men patients. Another section of his house was the salamlek. A third section with a separate entrance led to the family quarters upstairs. (Fig. 9).

The last two examples are exceptional; nevertheless they show the extent by which the acculturation process developed, certainly not to the liking of the original theoreticians. In the central-hall plan, the ideals were focused on the overall scheme of organization of spaces.
The more symmetrical the arrangement was, the better it looked. Anything that offset the axially balanced form would shift the plan from ideal standards. Palladio (1570 / 1965) was very conscious of this dilemma.

But an architect is very often obliged, to conform more ... than to that which ought to be observed ... as most commonly in cities, either the neighbours walls, the streets, or public places, prescribe certain limits, which the architect cannot surpass, it is proper he should conform himself to the circumstances of the situation. (pp. 37-38).

Palladio, in one of his theoretical designs highlighted this attitude towards the less ideal situation. The notion of “conforming” to actual conditions rather than to what “ought to be” never suggested the discarding of ideals in response to less favorable conditions. On the contrary, the architect would proceed with his regular and symmetric arrangement of forms until they “run into” the irregular portion of the site. “Conforming” here means “colliding”. In this manner, the eye would read the ideal setting even when it was partially “hidden” by the actual condition of the site. This was precisely the effect experienced by a viewer walking from the main entrance to the chamfered courtyard in Palladio’s theoretical design (1570 / 1965, book 2, ch.17).

Once the central-hall plan migrated to Cairo, there was more of “what actually is” than “what ought to be.” The idea of conforming to irregular conditions meant engaging with cultural mechanisms such as the subdivision of the plan into more than one zone, private and public, thus creating multiple circulations. This required the offsetting of the axially balanced plan possibly to its farthest limit. Palladio’s
solution to the problem was not very effective for the situation did not just involve running into an irregular site. Thus for the plan to survive in its new environment, it could have constantly contained what defied its inner logic.

In the case of the physician’s house, putting his practice inside the house increased the circulation paths by two more, thus reducing the formal look of the house to a corner side overlooking the intersection of the two streets. In the case of merchants’ houses plenty of salamleks were inserted in the main buildings leading to a completely unbalanced plan with no clear arrangement. The result in both cases was the creation of a parti that could neither have existed under Paladian nor the Beaux Arts theories. Both cases show that even the form of the travelling icon was subject to changes not just the content.

Figure 9: Doctor accommodating his professional practice inside his house (Source: Author).

Conclusion

The travelling icon had come a long way since the 16th century. Palladio could never have anticipated what would become of his architecture. In his treatise he consciously referred to Vitruvius. He wanted to show that his ideas were not new but a continuation of what Vitruvius had started. Acknowledging old masters authenticated his ideas and anchored them in the heritage of intellectual history. When the icon travelled to Egypt the notions of heritage and tradition were totally replaced by opposite notions, namely modernity and progress. The same parti embodied opposite notions upon migration, and yet proved to be successful in the new culture. This suggests the ability of Palladian villas to strongly engage with masses at the level of imagery. To have two cultures of different histories embrace his architecture was a testimony to its visual quality. Composed of solid masses embracing the central shaded space of the portico the façade was very attractive. This balanced solid to void ratio strongly satisfied the notion of hierarchy that was the prime tool for appreciating a classical facade. Such appreciation transcended the original culture to assume validity wherever it went.

Palladio was not alone in his search for authentication. The 19th century society sought to live in his miniaturized version of dwelling with their eyes open on authentic aristocracy of the Baroque period. Villa owners wanted to authenticate their social position by referring to this great past. Upon transfer to the hosting culture, the villa became a social aspiration for a modern life. To live in one of those new dwellings meant progress, better future, and enlightened
mind. To replace the content of the travelling icon required this enlightened mind. Mohamed Ali, the first ruler to modernize Egypt since the medieval times, never envisioned what would become of an Azhar Sheikh travelling to France to learn French. Al-Tahtawi came back and just spoke his mind out in simple terms. He was a moderate critic who wanted to have it all: his traditions together with the civilized progress. His mindset suddenly became the heartbeat of the nation. Everyone listened to what he was saying, triggering a massive acculturation process. Villa architecture of this period was evidence to such process. Complete neighborhoods were built accordingly. Those who lived in those neighborhoods never viewed themselves as westernized, but from within their own perspective, they just wanted to live a modern life according to their own terms.

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