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# Social influence on architectural styles in Egypt (1952-2012)

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**ABSTRACT:** Ever since the early nineteenth century, Egyptian architecture and arts used inside buildings in main cities such as Cairo and Alexandria have been influenced by their European counterparts. Public buildings and the houses of royalty were often designed or built by foreign architects and handicraftsmen. Such influences were evident only in the properties of the royalties. This fact is understandable considering the existence of a large foreign society with the royalty such as the Khedive Ismail – Egyptian former ruler - who was raised in France and wanted to turn Cairo into a city of European style.

This study aims at finding out if there is any relationship between different social structures, and what determines the type of relationship between them (whether it is a correlation or a causation), in order to have a better understanding of the Egyptian community preferences in the field of architecture, from 1952 till now. The study tests for this relationship by means of a descriptive methodology (in which documentation of architectural and artistic observations takes place), collecting demographic information about the owners, and then analysing the gathered data, in order to find out if there is any link between the recorded social change and preferences in architectural styles, during the given time interval.

**Conference Theme:** General: Human Behaviour/ Lifestyles  
**Keywords:** Social Structure, Architectural Styles, European Influence, Egyptian Community, Socialism, Open Market, Capitalism

## INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday morning, 23 July 1952, a military coup occurred in Egypt, carried out by “The Free Officers” movement. This movement targeted command, control, and communications posts of the Army and Internal Ministry. Several police sections that had been successfully penetrated, aided in rounding up key personnel of the royal government. That revolution was a turning-point in Egyptian history, changing the social structure of Egypt. ; The republic of Egypt has changed social standards, and therefore there are changes in characteristic Egyptian architectural taste and style.

## 1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### 1.1. Political history

From 22–26 July 1952, a group of army officers (The Free Officers movement) overthrew King Farouk, whom the military blamed for Egypt's poor performance in the 1948 war with Israel. Popular expectations for immediate reforms led to the workers' riots in Kafr El-Dawar on 12 August 1952, which resulted in two death sentences. Following a brief experiment with civilian rule, the Free Officers abrogated the 1953 constitution and declared Egypt a republic on 18 June 1953.

Nasser evolved into a charismatic leader, not only of Egypt but of the Arab world, promoting and implementing "Arab socialism."

In 1958 Egypt joined with the Republic of Syria to form a state called the United Arab Republic. It existed until Syria's secession in 1961, although Egypt continued to be known as the UAR until 1971.

Nasser ruled as an autocrat but remained extremely popular within Egypt and throughout the Arab world. His willingness to stand up to the Western powers and to Israel won him support throughout the region. However, Nasser's foreign and military policies were central in provoking the Six Day War in 1967. This conflict saw the Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armed forces routed by the Israelis.

## SFC1238

In foreign relations, Sadat also launched momentous change from the Nasser era. President Sadat shifted Egypt from a policy of confrontation with Israel to one of peaceful accommodation through negotiations. Following the Sinai Disengagement Agreements of 1974 and 1975, Sadat created a fresh opening for progress by his dramatic visit to Jerusalem in November 1977. This led to the invitation from President Jimmy Carter of the United States to President Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Begin to enter trilateral negotiations at Camp David.

Sadat used his immense popularity with the Egyptian people to try to push through vast economic reforms that ended the socialistic controls of Nasserism. Sadat introduced greater political freedom and a new economic policy, the most important aspect of which was the *infatah* or "open door". This relaxed government controls over the economy and encouraged private investment. While the reforms created a wealthy and successful upper class and a small middle class, these reforms had little effect upon the average Egyptian who began to grow dissatisfied with Sadat's rule. In 1977, *Infatah* policies led to massive spontaneous riots ('Bread Riots') involving hundreds of thousands of Egyptians when the state announced that it was retiring subsidies on basic foodstuffs.

Liberalization also included the reinstatement of due process and the legal banning of torture. Sadat dismantled much of the existing political machine and brought to trial a number of former government officials accused of criminal excesses during the Nasser era. Sadat tried to expand participation in the political process in the mid-1970s but later abandoned this effort. In the last years of his life, Egypt was wracked by violence arising from discontent with Sadat's rule and sectarian tensions, and it experienced a renewed measure of repression, including extra-judicial arrests.

Another change Sadat made from the Nasser era was a bow towards the Islamic revival. Sadat loosened restrictions on the Muslim Brotherhood, allowing it to publish a monthly magazine, *al-Dawa*, which appeared regularly until September 1981.

On 6 October 1981, President Sadat was assassinated by Islamic extremists. Hosni Mubarak, Vice-President since 1975 and Air Force commander during the October 1973 war, was elected President later that month. He was subsequently confirmed by popular referendum for three more 6-year terms, most recently in September 2005. The results of the referendums are however of questionable validity as they, with the exception of the one conducted in September 2005, listed only Mubarak as the sole candidate.

From 1991, Mubarak undertook an ambitious domestic economic reform program to reduce the size of the public sector and expand the role of the private sector. During the 1990s, a series of International Monetary Fund arrangements, coupled with massive external debt relief resulting from Egypt's participation in the Gulf War coalition, helped Egypt improve its macroeconomic performance. The economy of Egypt flourished during the 1990s and 2000s. The Government of Egypt tamed inflation bringing it down from double-digit to a single digit. Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita based on purchasing-power-parity (PPP) increased fourfold between 1981 and 2006, from US\$ 1355 in 1981, to US\$ 2525 in 1991, to US\$ 3686 in 2001 and to an estimated US\$ 4535 in 2006. The opposition parties have been weak and divided and are not yet credible alternatives to the NDP. The Egyptian political opposition also includes groups and popular movements such as *Kefaya* and the April 6 Youth Movement, although they are somewhat less organized than officially registered political parties.

Beginning on 25 January 2011, a series of street demonstrations and protests started over police brutality, state of emergency laws, unemployment, desire to raise the minimum wage, lack of housing, food inflation, corruption, lack of freedom of speech, and poor living conditions. The protests' main goal was to oust President Hosni Mubarak's regime. On 11 February 2011, President Mubarak resigned, relinquishing power to an interim military authority.

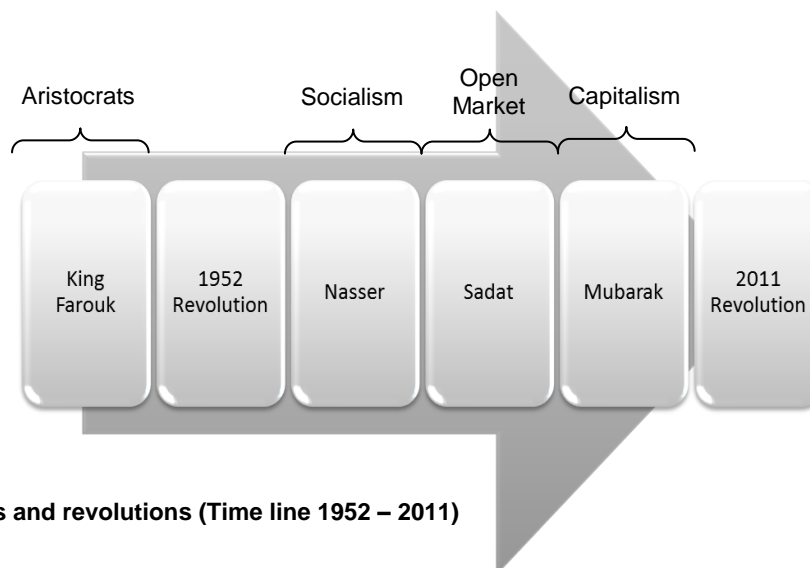


Figure 1: Egypt's rulers and revolutions (Time line 1952 – 2011)

(Gabr, 2012)

## 1.2 Social structure according to the political status

The Egyptian novelist and Nobel Prize laureate Naguib Mahfouz, whose novels are mainly about the Egyptian social life, when asked about Egypt said:

Egypt is not just a piece of land. Egypt is the inventor of civilisation... The strange thing is that this country of great history and unsurpassed civilisation is nothing but a thin strip along the banks of the Nile... This thin strip of land created moral values, launched the concept of monotheism, developed arts, invented science and gave the world a stunning administration. These factors enabled the Egyptians to survive while other cultures and nations withered and died... Throughout history Egyptians have felt that their mission is to tend to life. They were proud to turn the land green, to make it blossom with life. The other thing is that Egyptians invented morality long before the major religions appeared on earth. Morality is not just a system for control but a protection against chaos and death... Egypt gave Islam a new voice. It didn't change the basic tenets of Islam, but its cultural weight gave Islam a new voice, one it didn't have back in Arabia. Egypt embraced an Islam that was moderate, tolerant and non-extremist. Egyptians are very pious, but they know how to mix piety with joy, just as their ancestors did centuries ago. Egyptians celebrate religious occasions with flair. For them, religious festivals and the month of Ramadan are occasions to celebrate life.

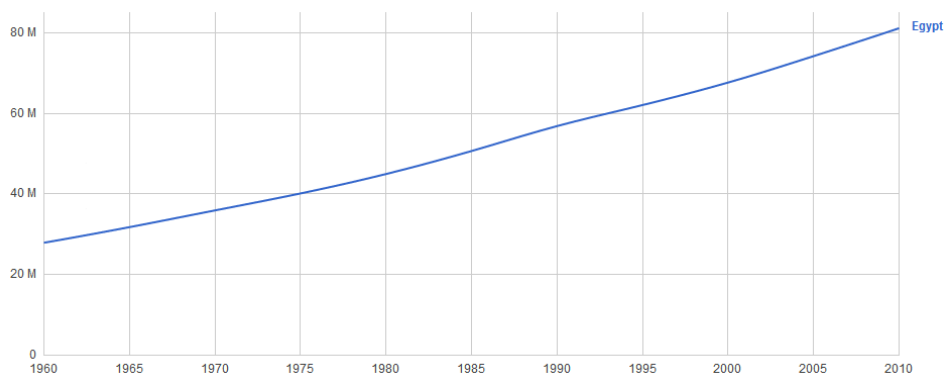
During the era of king Farouk, Egypt was a monarchy with a parliament (according to the 1923 constitution); the increased involvement by King Farouk in parliamentary affairs, government corruption, and the widening gap between the country's rich and poor, led to the eventual toppling of the monarchy and the dissolution of the parliament through a coup d'état by a group of army officers in 1952. The Egyptian Republic was declared on June 18, 1953 with General Muhammad Naguib as the first President of the Republic. After Naguib was forced to resign in 1954 and later put under house arrest by Gamal Abdel Nasser, mass protests by Egyptians erupted against the forced resignation of what became a popular symbol of the new regime. Nasser assumed power as President and began a nationalization process that initially had profound effects on the socio-economic strata of Egyptian society. According to one historian, "Egypt had, for the first time since 343 BC, been ruled not by a Macedonian Greek, nor a Roman, nor an Arab, nor a Turk, but by an Egyptian."

## 2. CHANGE IN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The censuses conducted during the twentieth century show that the volume of Egypt's population continues to increase. While the number in the late nineteenth century (i.e. in 1897) was about 9.7 million people, the number was double this number almost over the past fifty years following up to about 19 million people in 1947, then doubled again in less than thirty years, reaching approximately 36.6 million in 1976. Then the government started to carry out periodic censuses every ten years, and the number of population in the census in 1986 (in homeland and abroad) reached about 50.4 million people.

The government of Egypt began conducting the largest census in the history of Egypt from June 2006, to count population numbers and characteristics of families in order to recruit human resources and highlight them, and in the census done by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics 2006, the population within the country and abroad was 76,480,426 while, the number at home was only 72,579,030, giving an increase of 37.22% from the 1996 census

It was announced that the number of unemployed reached 2.1 million, and the number of workers 19.8 million, of the total labour force of 22 million. The number of permanent employment was 13,891,515, while the number of temporary workers was 1,580,323; the number of seasonal workers was 821,397, while intermittent employment totalled 3,584,094.



(World bank,2011)

Figure 2: Egypt Population growth 1950 – 2010

The great change in the social structure of Egypt through these sixty years, allowed a big middle class population to emerge from the low-income class in the sixties and seventies and then a small high-income class population to emerge from middle class in the eighties and nineties (Amin, 2004).

### 3. ARCHITECTURAL STYLE ACCORDING TO SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Ever since the early nineteenth century, Egyptian architecture and arts used inside buildings in main cities such as Cairo and Alexandria have been influenced by their European counterparts. Public buildings and the houses of royalty and the elite were often designed or built by foreign architects and handicraftsmen. Facades, interiors, furniture, antiques and patterns were typically French, Italian, Belgian or Dutch. Such influences were evident only in the properties of royalty and the elite - the only segments of the community with high education and exposure to the western world and who can afford such luxuries. This fact is understandable considering

1. The presence of British colonization.
2. The existence of a large foreign society.
3. The westernization of the royalty of Egypt, such as the Khedive Ismail – Egyptian former ruler - who was raised in France.



(Surviving,2011)

**Figure 3: The rococo shingled-roof - bell-tower Villas**

However, the interesting phenomenon is the extension of this influence after the 1952 revolution, despite the elimination of those three factors and although the new system and public were against foreign influence and royal heritage in general. This European influence continued to spread among the technocrats and the evolving middle class as well as the high-income class until today. It is still evident in the facades of some private villas, apartment interiors, furniture, ornaments, arts and fabric patterns.



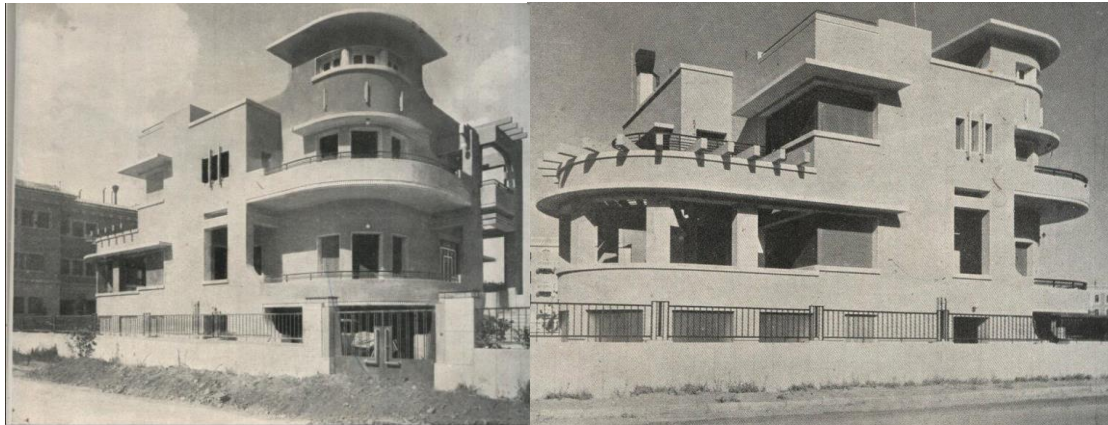
(Gabr,2012)

**Figure 4: high-income class (capitalist) apartment buildings in 2000s**



(World Bank, 2011)

**Figure 5: Manasterli pavilion (1945)**



**Figure 6: high-income class (capitalists) housing villas in 40s** (Gabr, 1945)

This is mainly due to the vast changes in the political system from anarchy to republic and changes in the economic system from capitalism to socialism to open market to capitalism again. For example, as a result of the free basic education policy adopted by the socialist government after the 1952 revolution and through the sixties and seventies, a generation of technocrats evolved from low-income class forming a base for an expanding middle class. Also, during the eighties and nineties a small population of middle class upgraded into high-income class due to the open market and capitalist policies (Amin, 2004). The newly established middle-class and high-income classes tend to copy architectural styles and motifs from the classic bourgeoisie as a sign of high-standard living.



(World Bank, 2011)

**Figure 7: Prince Saïid Halim Pasha Palace, by Antonio Lasciac Bey built in 1899**



(Ministry of Culture, 1969)

**Figure 8: The Giza square in the 60s**

This pattern has been evident through the last six decades in parallel to the middle-class multiple-storey condominiums that started during the socialist era, inspired by Russian constructivism. Both styles are still going strong meeting the demand of a continuously expanding, yet also continuously inhomogeneous society in Egypt. Today, the inspired youth of the 2011 revolution are expected to have their own influence on these patterns leaning them more towards a sustainable future for the coming generations.

## CONCLUSION

The vast changes in the political system from anarchy to republic and changes in the economic system from capitalism to socialism to open market to capitalism again, have made a dramatic change in the Egyptian architectural taste, according to the social structure reformed through the last 60 years. After the 2011 revolution, the current generation of Egyptian youth are expected to be more open to other trends leaning towards sustainable development in order to provide more social justice.

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