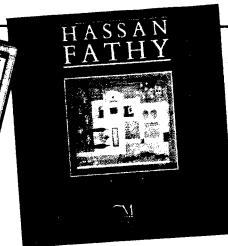


Observations continued

Books



California's Mission Revival, by Karen J. Weitze. Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1984, \$22.50.

The Mayan Revival Style, by Marjorie Ingle. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1984, \$15.95.

Reviewed by Paulina Borsook

The romanticizing of a tradition occurs when it begins to slip away. The English Romantic poets glorified nature as the British countryside began to suffer from the effects of the Industrial Revolution, and the Pre-Raphaelites tried to resurrect a medieval idea of craftsmanship that had become obsolete in a era of mass production. In this country the glorification of a past that never quite was is exemplified by the California Mission and Mayan revivals, two building modes that came into prominence early in the 20th century. Two recent books that began as their authors' graduate-school theses serve as solid introductions to any discussion of the styles. In dogged academic fashion the books document the commercial consequences of the revivals and show how the low cost and plasticity of reinforced concrete made the styles economically and artistically feasible.

California's Mission Revival delineates the rise of an architectural mode that took shape after the California missions had fallen into disrepair and the colonial Spanish and Mexican cultures had become remote enough to be viewed as a lost idyll instead of a political threat. Karen Weitze goes into excruciating detail to recount elements in the development of the style: boosterism, commissions for the California buildings at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, experimentation with a Western version of the Arts and Crafts movement, the founding of Stanford University.

The author shows how architects, in their struggle to move away from Eastern and Beaux-Arts training and to discover a building method appropriate to California's terrain, found ways to adapt the forms of the Franciscan mission to public and private structures. The homey virtues of patio living and the clean lines of adobe and tile were thought especially appropriate to the new land's gentle climate and open spaces. Weitze includes numerous sketches, elevations, and competition entries to demonstrate the Mission Revival's evolution as it moved from Richardsonian Romanesque to distinctively Spanish features.

Paulina Borsook is a writer based in New York City. She is a native Californian.

Many of the first Mission Revival houses and hotels were built for wealthy transplanted Easterners lured to the paradise promised in southern California resorts. While the Revival's reign as high style was relatively brief, it nonetheless spawned a way of ordinary building that became an integral part of California's real-estate development for years to come.

Perhaps because of its idiosyncratic ornamentation and nuance, the Mayan Revival's story has a different outcome. A curious variant of Art Deco, this mode was largely confined to such specialized building types as movie theaters, skyscrapers, museums, and a few privately commissioned houses. The color photographs and renderings in *The Mayan Revival Style* illustrate the intricacy of murals, mosaics, and friezework that often referred directly to Mexican archaeological originals—and suggest why efforts at reproducing the style in quantity met with limited success.

The book dates the genesis of the Mayan Revival from the 1908 competition for the Washington, D. C., headquarters of the Organization of American States. During the 1920s and '30s, the style's zigzags found a natural affinity with the requirements for skyscraper setbacks. Like the Mission Revival, the Mayan Revival stemmed from a romance with ruins, in this case the remnants of an enigmatic Mesoamerican civilization. Yet, as Marjorie Ingle's thesis explains, this manner of building and, more commonly, decoration had roots in a yearning for an artistic tradition native to the Western Hemisphere.

Ingle carefully lists the reasons behind the idolization of this native American exoticism. She pulls in a wide variety of sources, including Erich Von Daniken (author of the "Chariots of the Gods" series) and the writings of Viollet-le-Duc and Robert B. Stacy-Judd to explain the fascination with the Pre-Columbian. A 1927 pamphlet called "The Story of the Maya: The Greeks of the New World," written by an archaeologist and originally published for the opening of the Fisher Theater in Detroit, is reprinted as an appendix.

While both books cite numerous figures, *The Mayan Revival Style* scores a coup of a sort. As one might have predicted, the Mission and Mayan revivals intersected in California, and Ingle provides an example of both styles in a single building—the Neil Monroe House in Lake Sherwood. This structure is the offspring of cultures separated by time but united in nostalgia: two New World traditions blended as only romance and modern building methods can.

Hassan Fathy, by J. M. Richards, Ismail Serageldin, and Darl Rastorfer. Singapore: Concept Media Pte. Ltd., in joint venture with The Architectural Press, London, 1985.

Reviewed by Roger Kimball

This lavishly illustrated appreciation of the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy is the second in a series of monographs on "Architects of the Third World." Replete with over 100 color plates and 130 black-and-white drawings and photographs, three critical essays, excerpts from Fathy's reflections on the tasks of contemporary architecture, testimonials by admirers, and a detailed chronology of his works, the book succeeds in providing the Western reader with a vivid introduction to the sensibility and accomplishments of this controversial architect.

The first essay, by the English architect and critic J. M. Richards, situates Fathy in the international context and shows how his reaction against the anonymous, "transhistorical" character of much modern architecture led him to embrace various indigenous building techniques in his search for a workable regional vernacular. The Egyptian architect and planner Ismail Serageldin then provides a brief overview of Fathy's place in the life of Arab-Egyptian architecture, stressing the important influence of his traditionalist, craft-oriented planning theories on the development of contemporary Egyptian rural architecture. In Serageldin's estimation, Fathy is "the dominant figure in the Egyptian architecture of the 20th century." The final, most detailed, essay, by RECORD associate editor Darl Rastorfer, includes a précis of Fathy's career and an examination of his major building projects.

Born in 1900 to a wealthy Egyptian family, Fathy studied architecture at the University of Cairo, where he was graduated in 1926. His earliest projects date from the late 1930s, but his first completed commission—a spacious private residence in Giza—was not until 1940. Fathy soon found himself in rebellion against the homogenizing, technologically oriented incursions of advanced Western architecture in his homeland. Of "international architecture," he asked, "is it not international ill-respect of art and international loss of culture?" In his search for an architectural idiom that was at once indigenous yet

Roger Kimball is a frequent contributor to RECORD and other magazines.

practical, Fathy's work pioneered the combination of traditional Egyptian mud-brick village architecture with ancient Nubian arch and vaulting techniques. His self-consciously traditionalist architectural values stressed building that returned to a human scale and affirmed the heritage and way of life of the people it is meant to serve. "Every building should add to the culture of man," he wrote. "But how can it do this when it does not respect human reference and human scale? We should reintroduce man into our architecture; we must reintroduce human scale, human needs, and human tradition."

While Fathy has devoted much of his effort to private residences for the well-to-do, his most influential work has been his relatively small-scale village architecture for the rural poor. Probably his best known work is New Gourna Village (1948), a government-sponsored planned community near Luxor. Originally designed for some 900 families, the project as built accommodates only 130 families and occupies one fifth of the site. Nevertheless, the village, carefully planned to reflect Fathy's emphasis on traditional Egyptian architecture, is widely held to be a landmark solution to improving the living conditions of an impoverished, rural population.

During his long career, Fathy has seen a modest total of 30 projects built—most of them in Egypt—and has designed approximately 20 others. But his considerable influence in the Middle East would seem to have its source more in his efforts as a teacher and proselytizer than in his completed works. "His strength," as Ismail Serageldin observes in his essay, "is the strength of ideas more than buildings." Indeed, according to J. M. Richards, Fathy has become "a kind of guru" for young Egyptian architects. His commitment to the legacy of traditional Egyptian architecture, insistence on serving simple, well-defined human needs, and a healthy dose of Islamic-inspired mysticism combine to give his teaching a strong native appeal.

In the end, as Darl Rastorfer suggests, what we see in Fathy is a "mixture of social realism and utopian vision." His completed body of work, small and parochially rural, is frankly too marginal to be considered a major force in 20th-century architecture. But, by providing an economical, indigenously based alternative to modern Western architecture, he has articulated building principles that are at once humane, sensitive to local tradition, and widely applicable in less developed areas of the Third World.