

Italian Architects and Modern Egypt

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“Exiles who, fleeing from the Pope or the Bourbons, had embarked at night in fishing boats from Barletta, or Taranto, or from the coast of Sicily, and after weeks at sea disembarked in Egypt. . . . I imagined them, the legendary fugitives of the last century, wrapped in their cloaks, with wide-brimmed hats and long beards: they were mostly professional men or intellectuals who, after a while, sent for their wives from Italy or else married local girls. Later on their children and grandchildren . . . founded charitable institutions in Alexandria, the people’s university, the civil cemetery. . . .” To the writer Fausta Cialente,¹ these were the first Italians who crossed the Mediterranean in the first half of the nineteenth century to reach what had survived of trading outposts founded in the Middle Ages.

Egypt, the meeting point between Africa and Asia, yet so accessible from Europe, was at that time the scene of fierce European rivalry. Within only a few years Mohamed Ali² had assumed control of the corridors to India, pressing forward with industrial development based on cotton. Having lost no time in inducing him to abandon the conquered territories and revoke his monopoly regime, the Great Powers became competitors on a

1 Fausta Cialente (Cagliari 1898 – London 1994), *Ballata levantina* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961), 127–128.

2 Mohamed Ali (Kavala, Macedonia 1769 – Cairo 1849) is considered to be the founder of modern Egypt. His mark on the country’s history is due to his extensive political and military action, as well as his administrative, economic, and cultural reforms. His vast program of public works included the digging of the Mahmudiyah canal from the Rosetta branch of the Nile to Alexandria, of fundamental importance in bringing the city into the orbit of the western world.

number of major projects for the transit of the road to the Indies across Egyptian territory.

Between the early nineteenth century and the 1940s, Italian emigration to Egypt was a matter of individual initiative and ambition. For many Italians Egypt was a second homeland, where their language was widely understood and spoken, where their fellow-countrymen held prominent posts enjoying the trust and esteem of the pashas, and where they could operate under particularly favorable conditions due to the Italian “imprint” left on many institutions by their successful and highly appreciated forerunners. For them Egypt was a land of promise partly on account of the many large-scale projects shaping the future structure of the country and its main cities against an international background where a vital stage in the development of a market economy was in progress.

Italian emigration to Egypt included a sizeable number of architects, engineers, and builders: pioneers who set to work for Mohamed Ali; political exiles who had been involved in the Risorgimento risings; emigrants seeking their fortune in and after the “golden days of the Khedives”; and up-and-coming professionals. Their influence began to make itself felt with the reconstruction of Alexandria (1819–1848), reaching a peak at the start of the twentieth century and lasting until the Nasserite period. They held a dominant role in the building industry and were to be found wherever construction was going on: in Alexandria and Cairo as well as in minor cities like Damanhour or Mansoura, or in the newly founded Helwan, Port Said, Ismailia, and Suez.

I have here chosen some examples to show how the approach frequently adopted by Italian architects in Egypt was one of courageous experimentation often producing results of great interest, a point that historians tend to neglect.³

In discussing the remodeling of Egyptian port areas (Alexandria and Bu-laq) and the building of theaters and schools in Alexandria and Cairo, I want to emphasize that both are factors that facilitate the creation of social cohesion: the port was the basic reason for founding a settlement, explaining the presence of many ethno-religious groups; theaters and schools were important features of the resulting social framework that was to foster composite, yet individual, cultural identities.

³ During the rise of modern architecture in the 1930s those who continued to practice eclectic architecture in Egypt tended to be ignored or forgotten by their Italian contemporaries.

1. Italian contribution in the building of ports and their environments

Italian poets who were born in Egypt or lived there for a considerable time may help us to visualize the life of Egyptian ports from ancient times to their flourishing development in the course of the nineteenth century.

Alexandria

The buried port (1916): “The poet reaches it / then rises to the light / sowing his song.” To Giuseppe Ungaretti⁴ the discovery of a pre-Ptolemaic port, proving that Alexandria had been a port even before 332 BC, suggests a metaphor expressing the very essence of poetry. On returning to Alexandria in 1930, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti vividly expresses the dynamism of the port area spreading rearward along the Mahmudiyyah canal: “crowded in the pool above the lock, the boats are restless, anxious to be off with their load of raw cotton: groaning, grumbling, creaking in their aversion for that European trap!”⁵ The poet Giuseppe Regaldi emphasizes the presence of an extraterritorial settlement, “the place where the Franks are most often to be found . . . a quadrangle commonly known as the Place des Consuls.”⁶ (*Fig. 1*)

This long rectangular square was created in the 1840s under the joint supervision of Ibrahim Pasha⁷ and the Italian engineer Francesco Mancini, both playing a leading part in the Commission of Ornament.⁸ Old photographs and maps enable us to see the square in detail as Giuseppe Regaldi saw it in 1850. At the southeast corner stands the Okelle of St. Mark and the Neo-Byzantine/Neo-Moorish Anglican church by the London architect James William Wildt. Along its eastern side are the Neoclassical Okelle d’Abro and Okelle de France, the traditional-style Okelle Moharrem Bey, and the

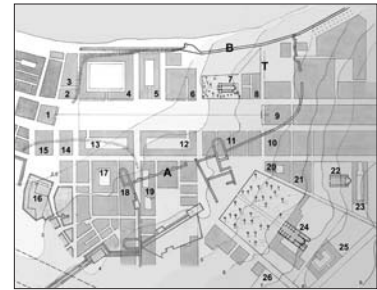


Fig. 1 Alexandria: Place des Consuls around 1850 (author’s reconstruction). Legend:

1. Okelle du Café de l’Europe; 2. Okelle Zizinia, Antonio Lucovich; 3. Mixed Tribunals; 4. Okelle Moharrem Bey/Neuve (including the Italian Theater), 1820 c.; 5. Okelle de France; 6. Okelle Abro; 7. Anglican church, James William Wildt, 1845–1854; 8. Okelle St. Mark; 9. Tossizza Palace, Francesco Mancini; 10. Okelle des Enchères Publiques; 11. Okelle Prince Ibrahim Pasha; 12. Okelle Domaines de l’Etat; 13. Hotel d’Europe (including an hammam); 14. Okelle d’Anastasy (including a collection of antiquities); 15. Okelle Gibarra; 16. Cheikh Ibrahim Mosque; 17. New Bazaar; 18. Convent of the Lazarists, 1844–1848; 19. Convent of the Sisters of Charity, 1844–1848; 20. Hotel Abbat; 21. Okelle Caruana; 22. Greek-Orthodox Church, 1847–1856; 23. Tossizza Schools, 1854; 24. Roman Catholic Church, Serafino da Baceno, 1847–1856 (and School of the Frères des Écoles Chretiennes); 25. European Hospital, founded in 1816 and rebuilt in 1857. A. Old sea-walls, demolished in 1842; B. New sea-walls built around 1840 and demolished before 1865. T. Location proposed for the Italian Theater in 1858.

4 Giuseppe Ungaretti (Alexandria 1888 – Milan 1970).

5 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (Alexandria 1876 – Bellagio, Como 1944), *Il Fascino dell’Egitto* (Mondadori: Milan, 1981, original 1933), 77–78.

6 Giuseppe Regaldi (Novara 1809 – Bologna 1883), *L’Egitto antico e moderno* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1884), 59–60.

7 Ibrahim Pasha (Kavala, Macedonia 1789 – Cairo 1848) was the son of Mohamed and commander in chief of the Egyptian army.

8 My biographical details about Francesco Mancini are still incomplete. He came from the Papal States in Italy, arriving in Egypt in 1820, an exile for having served under Eugene Beauharnais in the Napoleonic Regno d’Italia. After a period of participation in Mohamed Ali’s military campaigns, he undertook civilian works, subsequently becoming chief engineer to Ibrahim Pasha, with whom he planned the Place des Consuls. In 1834 he proposed institution of the Commission of Ornament in Alexandria, later taking it over as chief engineer. This may have reflected Mancini’s involvement in the Commissions of Ornament set up in Italy under Napoleon and operating in Milan (capital of the Regno d’Italia) and

Venice.



Fig. 2 Alexandria: Tossizza Palace, Francesco Mancini. The original façade.

Neo-Moorish Okelle Zizinia by the Venetian architect Antonio Lucovich.⁹ Bordering the old Frank Quarter are the Café d'Europe and the Okelle Gibarra. The western side of the square is lined with the elegant Okelle d'Anastasy and three large blocks similar in size, the Hotel de l'Europe, and the Okelles Domaines de l'Etat and Ibrahim Pasha. At the highest point, dominating the square from its southern end, stands the temple-like edifice of the Tossizza Palace. (Fig. 2)

The square was the “court” of trading-consuls, merchants, and financiers with whom Mohamed Ali associated.¹⁰ With the sole exception of the Anglican church, all other buildings are okelles, a westernized form of the Arabic word *wikala* indicating commercial structures traditionally used in Egypt for warehousing and trade, also serving as a hostelry for dealers.¹¹ All compact blocks of approximately the same height, some have a traditional layout, such as the vast Okelle Moharrem Bey, while others look more like European mansions.

Francesco Mancini, who excavated the whole area to lay the foundations for these okelles,¹² is also believed to have designed their Neoclassical façades with a base, central body, coping or pediment, and introduced Doric and Ionic ornamental pilasters or semi-columns. It may be asked why he so extensively adopted a Neoclassical style in contrast with the Turkish town and with the other styles then being introduced. This may have merely reflected his training in Italy during the Napoleonic period, but may also have been a classicist revival attempting to link this new stage

9 Antonio Lucovich (b. 1815), engineer, architect, and entrepreneur, arrived in Alexandria in 1837. Reference to Antonio Lucovich's Italian origin can be found in Ersilio Michiel, *Esuli Italiani in Egitto (1815-1861)* (Pisa, 1958), 130.

10 While Moharrem Bey was Mohamed Ali's son-in-law, Abram d'Abro was an Armenian financier who settled in Trieste and was related to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Boghos Bey Yussufian; Giorgio Gibarra was a rich Italian merchant, an Austro-Hungarian subject, head of the Administration of Commerce. Michali Tossizza, a Greek from Metzovo, was consul-general of Greece and president of the Commission of Ornament; Etienne Zizinia, a Greek from Chios, was a French protégé and consul-general of Belgium; and Jean d'Anastasy, a Greek merchant, was consul-general of Sweden and member of the Commission of Ornament. Tossizza, Zizinia, and d'Anastasy were three of Mohamed Ali's “Greek agents,” providing him with ships, weapons, and munitions from Malta, Leghorn, Trieste, Genoa, and Marseille.

11 An okelle is a square building with a single entrance, whose open inner courtyard is lined with arched-over spaces for wholesale trading; facing onto the streets are structures for retail trade, and access to the upper floors is gained through porticoed galleries lined with rooms to house merchants and temporary settlers.

12 See Sir John Gardner Wilkinson, *Modern Egypt and Thebes* (London: John Murray, 1843), 166.

in the life of the port-city with its mythical Hellenistic past, or again may have been the means for establishing a lingua franca to give a European touch to the new Alexandria.

While Alexandria's flourishing development in the 1840s explains how Mancini's city planning in the Commission of Ornament had to cope with the changing needs of an expanding population in continuous movement, the final layout of the European town wedged between the Turkish and Arab towns—its main streets following the orientation of the square to reach Ras el-Tin palace, the canal port, and the ancient Canopic street—shows that the square was conceived both as the city center and as its ultimate form in embryo. Mancini, known to have extensively explored the still visible vestiges of the ancient city and to have discovered the remains of a Roman stadium,¹³ may have found inspiration for his long rectangular square from the famous Heptastadium,¹⁴ from the shape and size of a Hippodrome,¹⁵ or from the Qaramaydan at the foot of the Citadel in Cairo.

What is certain is that the Place des Consuls became the scene of many historical events. In 1882, it became the main target for British bombardment and the site of executions of Orabi Pasha's nationalists. Reconstruction of the new blocks, similar to the European galleries of the nineteenth century, marked a decisive change; originally so vital to the port, the square had now become mainly a financial center. The Bourse—the former Tosizza Palace—provided the background for Nasser's speeches to the masses, eventually to be destroyed by fire during the Bread Riots of 1977 and completely pulled down in the early 1980s.

Bulaq

“Where the first pyramid hides the other two,” writes Luigi Odescalchi, “you will find Bulaq, more or less a suburb of Cairo for which it acts as a storage point, port and customs house; it also has a remarkable museum.”¹⁶ Odescalchi describes the Bulaq of the early 1860s as a place in

13 Wilkinson, *Modern Egypt and Thebes*, 171,172.

14 The Heptastadium was a seven-stadia-long dike (7 x 185 m. = 1295 m.) built by the Ptolemies to join the mainland to the island of Pharos. In the Arab period the Heptastadium silted up and became a neck of land, where the Turkish town was later to grow up.

15 Mohamed Ali's intention to evoke the cityscape of the Bosphorus—his Ras el-Tin Palace in Alexandria built à la Constantinopolitaine, his Alabaster Mosque in Cairo closely resembling the Sultan Ahmed Mosque—might also have influenced Mancini in designing

the elongated square, similar to that of the Istanbul Hippodrome.

16 Odescalchi, *L'Egitto Antico Illustrato e l'Egitto Moderno* (Alexandria: Tipografia Anglo-Egiziana, 1865), 264.

transition: from a major Nile port, given new life by the presence of the Alexandria–Suez overland route, to a settlement near Cairo becoming little more than a suburb of the city. Most probably he also saw what still remained at Bulaq of the main manufacturing site set up by Mohamed Ali in his plan to industrialize Egypt: the naval arsenal and docks, the textile factories (1818), the great foundry (1820), the government printing house (1822), and the School for Civil Engineers (1821), later to become the Polytechnic (1834).

While Carlo Rossetti, a trader from Trieste, had made a collection of antiquities in his country house at Bulaq as early as 1800,¹⁷ Giuseppe Bocti, a mechanic and a veteran of the Egyptian Expedition, also from Trieste, was one of the European experts who discussed with Mohamed Ali his projects for liberating Egypt from dependency on foreign industry, also aiding him in setting up his cotton industries at Bulaq, in Cairo, and in the provinces.¹⁸ Pietro Avoscani, from Leghorn,¹⁹ was engaged in urban development south of Bulaq as early as 1865. When Ismail Pasha²⁰ began planning a modern Cairo close to the old city, Avoscani was among the investors who acquired plots of land on which he intended to build an *école mutuelle* and a School of Arts and Crafts; in 1873 he also intended

17 Carlo Rossetti (Trieste 1736 – Cairo 1820) arrived in Egypt around 1780, started as a trader, later becoming consul general of Austria and Russia, while maintaining a close relationship with Murad Bey, one of the Mamluk beys who controlled Egypt in the last quarter

of the eighteenth century.

18 See L. A. Balboni, *Gli Italiani nella Civiltà Egiziana del Secolo XIX*, vol. 1 (Alexandria, 1906), 229-30, and John Bowring, *Report on Egypt and Candia* (London, 1840), 31.

19 Son of a nobleman ruined by risky trading enterprises with the Indies, Pietro Avoscani (Leghorn 1816 – Alexandria 1890) emigrated to Alexandria in 1837, perhaps because of a charge of conspiracy for having joined Mazzini's *Giovine Italia* movement. Avoscani arrived in Egypt already trained as a goldsmith, fresco painter, and decorator and his work on the Ras el Tin palace soon won him the esteem of Mohamed Ali. In 1839 he left for Athens, Constantinople, Odessa, Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Vienna on a diplomatic mission. This was also a pilgrimage in the field of art. In front of monuments like the Acropolis, Avoscani came to realize his real vocation as an architect. His experience as an architect and artist was interwoven with his many journeys, with his patriotic activity, and with his work as entrepreneur. Before Ismail's visit to the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris Avoscani was asked to prepare a project for a new quarter designed to join Cairo to Bulaq; see L. A. Balboni, *Gli Italiani nella Civiltà Egiziana del Secolo XIX*, vol. I: 407.

20 A grandson of Mohamed Ali, Ismail Pasha (Cairo 1830 – Istanbul 1895) became the fifth independent sovereign of Egypt, the first Khedive. He took power in 1863, abdicating in 1879 in favor of his son Tewfiq. His reign saw the establishment of European influences in Egyptian political life. He initiated an extensive program of public works. The opening of the Suez canal in 1869 gave him an opportunity to transform Cairo into a capital comparable with those of European countries.

to build warehouses, a market, and public stables to promote industrial development close to Bulaq along the Ismailia canal.²¹ Augusto Cesari of Ancona,²² an architect-draftsman employed by the management of Ismail's properties, was asked in the early 1870s to draw up a project for the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Bulaq, which had been housed since 1863 in a building on the banks of the Nile that had served as offices for the Nile Steam Navigation Company. Though it is still unknown what Cesari's project really consisted of, we do know that the Museum did much to restore the attractions of Bulaq, becoming both a school of archaeology and a place where Egyptians could visit exhibitions and learn to appreciate the history of their country. Later on Cesari again worked in Bulaq to restore the School of Fine Arts.

2. Theaters

Introduction of the theater into Egypt was important in promoting development of social life, embodying, as it did, aspects of collective activity.

Alexandria

Pietro Avoscani guides us through events that led to building a theater on the road to the Rosetta Gate in Alexandria, and another at the Ezbekiyya park in Cairo. For Avoscani the theater was a real passion. On returning from his first diplomatic mission in 1841 he produced "Gemma di Vergy" by Donizzetti, "Ernani" by Verdi, and the "Barber of Seville" by Rossini at the Gabbari palace in Alexandria, arousing the enthusiasm of Mohamed Ali. Shortly later he successfully produced a patriotic piece at the Italian Theater (located in the Okelle Moharrem Bey), highly appreciated by his compatriots. In the 1840s he designed a theater that was also to house the Stock Exchange, a club, and a reading room, although this was never built. In July 1856 he organized a grand public festival at the Gabbari where he put on operas, tragedies, ballets, and gymnastic shows during the three days of the event.²³ A year later, together with other Italians, he asked permission to build a new Italian Theater and organize a competition for its design, eventually won by the Florence architect Mariano Falcini.²⁴ (Fig. 3) This project was never implemented, but in 1862 Etienne Zizinia, the powerful Greek consular representative for Belgium, finally entrusted Avoscani with the design for a theater to be built on the road to the Rosetta Gate. Avoscani's building closely resembled the Teatro

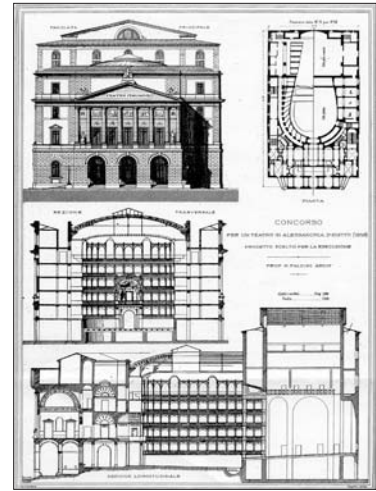


Fig. 3 Alexandria: competition project for the Italian Theater, Mariano Falcini, 1858. The image is taken from *Ricordi di Architettura*, 1882 (V), n. II, plate V.

21 Avoscani never managed to implement these projects. See Jean-Luc Arnaud, *Le Caire—Mise en place d'une ville moderne, 1867-1907. Des intérêts khédiviaux aux sociétés privées*, Ph.D. dissertation, Université de Provence, December 1993: 60-64.

22 Balboni, *Gli Italiani nella Civiltà Egiziana del Secolo XIX*, vol. II: 236.

23 "Les fêtes d'Alexandrie," in *L'Illustration*, a. 28 n. 70, 16 August 1856: 103-106.

24 Mariano Falcini (Campi Bisenzio 1804 – Florence 1885).



Fig. 4 Cairo: Khedivial Opera House, Pietro Avoscani, 1869 (photo J. P. Sebah). Harvard Semitic Museum Photographic Archive

alla Scala in Milan. In contrast with the Scala's Neoclassical style he used terracotta decorations, typical of Milanese buildings of the Risorgimento period, perhaps to celebrate the accomplishment of his patriotic ideals after Italian Unity was proclaimed in 1861. Although the city contained other theaters, it was his Zizinia Theater that marked the line of the road to the Rosetta Gate as a main urban axis of the European quarter, along which consulates and villas came to be built a few years later.

Cairo

Avoscani's great opportunity arrived when Ismail decided that Cairo must appear as a European capital for the Suez Canal opening ceremonies in 1869. He had almost completed the Opera when in the fall of that year he took the poet Giuseppe Regaldi to see the Ezbekiyya park, telling him how that very spot had been a depression forming a lake during the Nile flood until Mohamed Ali reclaimed it and turned it into a garden of acclimatization.²⁵

The Opera, the most important of the new public buildings financed by Ismail to transform the Ezbekiyya park into a showplace for the new Cairo, stood isolated, dominating a small square, its longer side facing onto the park. (*Fig. 4*) For its main façade Avoscani seems to have experimented with a monumental version of the Zizinia Theater in Alexandria: a tripartite composition with a central portico supported by Ionic columns, and a loggia with arched doorways framed by terracotta decorations and decorative pilasters. With its interplay of volumes, a central loggia, and horizontal cornices, the great frontage of the Opera facing onto the Ezbekiyya park visually balanced those of the new hotels.

It might seem that in designing his theaters Avoscani was merely aiming to please foreigners. The views of Abou Naddara, considered the founder of the Arab theater in Egypt, may however help us to avoid hasty judgments. His ideas for plays of topical interest developed after going to the Ezbekiyya theaters, the Opera and the Comédie Française. He said, "at that time, in 1870, a good French troupe of musicians, singers and comedians, and an excellent company of Italian players were the joy of the European colonies in Cairo. . . . Seeing the farces, comedies, operettas and dramas acted here gave me the idea of creating my own Arab theater, and with God's help I have carried it out."²⁶

²⁵ Giuseppe Regaldi, *L'Egitto antico e moderno*, 144-145.

²⁶ Interview given in 1877 by Abou Naddara, published in Jannet Tagher, "Les débus due théâtre moderne en Égypte," in *Cahiers d'Histoire Égyptienne* I, 2: 192-207.

3. Schools

While theaters provided focal points of social life for upper-class members of the different ethno-religious groups, schools and hospitals became community buildings par excellence, furthering cohesion of the social fabric to which large entrepreneurs were giving an economic impetus. Schools in particular—where every group could teach its own language, history, and traditions—were not only the expression of a community's presence, but also of its permanence, prosperity, and culture. One of the key periods to illustrate school building in Egypt is the 1930s when increasing nationalistic tendencies were causing some communities to become mere groups of mutually hostile nationals.

“Cultural—and economic—penetration is of paramount importance in the programs of the Great Powers in Egypt. . . . Till now Italian cultural policy has only been aimed at Italian communities. No plan whatever has been made to promote Italian culture in Egypt, and diffuse its spirit among the Egyptian ruling classes.”²⁷ Addressed in 1931 by Roberto Cantalupo, Minister of Italy in Cairo, to Piero Parini, General Director of Schools abroad, these words express an appeal for change. Projects such as the Royal Littorie Schools in Alexandria (1931–1933), the Italian Schools in Cairo (1934), and the Casa d'Italia in Port Said (1936)—all designed by Clemente Busiri Vici²⁸—were vitally important for the fascist regime, aimed as they were at strengthening the links between Italians in Egypt and their homeland while associating fascist ideology with a new spirit of national identity.

Italian journals and newspapers circulating in Egypt at the time show how the Littorie Schools in Alexandria were both an experiment and a manifesto²⁹: a community building of a new kind, where most of the social,

27 See *Situazione scolastica in Alto Egitto*, Cairo, 5 June 1931, Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Esteri, Affari politici, Egitto 2 (1931): 8-9. This reference is taken from Simonetta Ciranna's article “Italian Architecture in Egypt in the Thirties. The Works of Clemente Busiri Vici,” in *Amate Sponde . . . Presence of Italy in the Architecture of the Islamic Mediterranean*. *Environmental Design* 9-10 (1992): 118-119.

28 Born in a family of architects, and graduating in 1912 at the School of Applied Engineering, Clemente Busiri Vici (Rome 1887 – Rome 1965) expresses the combined figures of the technician-builder and of the architect-artist. He was becoming known even before the outbreak of the First World War. Later, in the 1930s, he worked extensively for the *Fasci Italiani all'Estero*, an institution—begun in the early 1920s and ratified by Mussolini in 1928—that reflected the nationalist attitude innate in fascist philosophy and the new political concept applied to emigration (emigrants were supposed to form a compact political force, subject to the authorities of Rome to further the interests of the mother country).

29 In particular *Il Legionario*, the weekly for Italians abroad, and the special issue of *Il Giornale d'Oriente* published in February-March 1933 marking a visit to Egypt by King Vittorio Emanuele III.



Fig. 5 Cairo, Italian Schools at Shubra, Clemente Busiri Vici, 1934. The image is taken from A. Regagioli, "Scuole italiane in Egitto," *L'Ingegnere*, n. 22, Dec. 1935, p. 928.

cultural, and recreational activities of the Italian community were concentrated and where new behavioral patterns—athletics and fascist youth associations—were encouraged. The school had to function as a piece of the homeland, its extremely plain style intended to mark a clean break with the revivalist architecture of the past.³⁰

The ground chosen for this complex was situated in the Chatby area, where the British Boys' School, the Greek complex, the St. Mark College, and the Lycée Français already formed a "city of education." Exceptional in size, the Littorie Schools were to house the nursery, the primary and boarding schools, high schools, a library, a theater for 2000 people, and extensive sports facilities. Busiri Vici concentrated the building in the higher half of the area, leaving the lower half for sports grounds. A symmetrical layout gave coordination to the spacing of building volumes, which consisted of a series of pavilions connected by walkways to form a single structural complex.

In 1934 Clemente Busiri Vici designed a new Italian School complex in Cairo. (*Fig. 5*) Located on the great Shubra road, at that time a major route to a rapidly developing area, this building included many forms of activity: sports facilities around an open-air gymnasium, a garden for recreation, the nursery school and the Casa del Balilla facing onto a common open space, and the primary school facing onto a great courtyard overlooking the Shubra road.

While the Cairo complex embodies Busiri Vici's idea of the school as an all-inclusive citadel, the Littorie Schools seem to show that Busiri Vici was aiming at a strong evocative effect, inventing what he intended to appear as an example of modern (fascist) Italy. Here his architecture is full of symbolic features, all aimed at arousing emotional feelings among the users: arched walkways, porticoed courtyards recalling those in convents, plain and simple volumes evoking the works of Italian metaphysical painters, with the school overlooking the sports grounds as eighteenth century Italian suburban villas overlooked their parks.

Busiri Vici's focus on experimenting with buildings of a new kind—such as the "new school" and the "casa d'Italia"—all aimed at transforming the Italian individual emigrant into a member of an Italian-fascist colony abroad, seems to have led to a highly original form of figurative research, even to the point of challenging the constructional principles of architec-

³⁰ It is an extraordinary thing that construction of the Royal Littorie Schools should have been started only 16 years after the huge neo-renaissance building of the Italian Schools had been opened; this emphasizes the urgent need felt by Italians to mark the beginning of a new stage in the life of the community.

ture, aiming as he did at creating an allegorical representation of Italy as the homeland.

Concluding remarks

Italian architects, engineers, and builders emigrated from places of widely different historical origins, each with its own marked cultural identity and political and economic role. They came from ports and capital cities of the single states existing prior to unification, from Leghorn (Avoscani), Trieste (Bocti), Venice (Lucovich), Genoa, Ancona (Cesari), Bari, Catania, Palermo, Turin, Florence (Falcini), Naples; from towns like Voghera, Ferrara, Bologna, Modena, Carrara, Siena, and Ascoli Piceno; from territories like Trento, Udine, and Gorizia. As time went on, arrivals from Rome and Milan increased, while many were second- or third-generation Italians born in Egypt. Only a few never went to Egypt but prepared their projects in Italy.

The training and cultural backgrounds of these Italians ranged between two extremes: architect-artist (Avoscani) and technician-builder (Bocti), whether possessing a regular qualification, or knowledge acquired solely through practice. Some had risen from the ranks of apprentices to more traditionally trained artists, for others the family cultural background fulfilled a fundamental role. Some of these pioneers (Mancini) came from military careers, but the later arrivals had been trained in academies of fine arts and in polytechnic schools, each dominated by some emerging personality, architectural teaching having become a separate national curriculum only in the 1920s. Few had a European-style education, while several were trained entirely in Egypt.

Rather than seeking what Edward Said called “a way of coming to terms with the Orient . . . based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience,”³¹ Italian architects, engineers, and builders espoused a non-Eurocentric attitude, their diverse cultural and academic backgrounds proving to be a factor for integration. Even after unification of the country in 1861, Italy still had to face a complex process of integrating widely differing local cultures. For the Italian architects in Egypt there was no single concept of the meaning of architecture; their approach to design and urban development was greatly influenced by their individual origins, diversified training, and academic experiences, and also by their cultural levels and professional opportunities.

31 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1995, original 1977), 1.

On arriving in Egypt, they tended to seek some kind of balance between personal backgrounds, local traditions, and their clients' demands. At such a crucial time when a physical and social environment had to be rebuilt, they found new ways of using traditional types, experimenting with architectural styles to give an identity to some new urban settlements (Mancini). While Egyptian cities were being "Europeanized," these architects were seeking fresh interpretations for major western institutions such as the theater and the museum (Avoscani, Cesari). At a later stage they experimented extensively with new building types, such as the all-inclusive modern schools (Busiri Vici). Most of these architectural features reflected the original kind of sociocultural environment that distinguished Egyptian cities between the early nineteenth century and the 1940s.

Gaetano Moretti, a prominent Italian architect who visited Egypt around 1900, said that the other European architects there were mere adventurers, capable of little else than reproducing in Egypt popular features from their own countries, regardless of their fitness for the Egyptian context.³² I hope that I have here managed to challenge such severe judgments. Two aspects were decisive for a successful outcome: the architect's imagination and the client's demand for an architecture that people could understand. I believe that a consideration of the experiences of Italian architects in Egypt is not only a matter of historical interest, but it may also suggest some criteria that architects can usefully adopt in approaching problems of architectural design in dealing with major changes in progress.

32 See Gaetano Moretti, "La villa Zogheb al Cairo. Due parole sull'architettura moderna in Egitto," *L'Edilizia Moderna*, January 1903: 1-3.