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CONNECTING DESIGN AND CULTURE OF TERRITORIES

Fatimid Secular Architecture: a Visual Reconstruction

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Keywords

Historical Architecture, Fatimid, Egypt, Illustrations, Written Description, Secular

Abstract

The Fatimid dynasty was established in the Tenth century in what is modern day Tunis. Their capital was founded in the city of Al-Mahdya from which they expanded their realm to encompass North Africa and Egypt. They founded Cairo in 969 AD and moved the capital to this newly established centre of what was the Fatimid Caliphate. The Fatimids were known to be a lavish dynasty with a lot of pomp and exuberance. They initiated a lot of cultural activities that are still part of the Egyptian inherited culture up till today. The Fatimids also had many exchanges and influences on Sicily and Southern Italy. The Fatimids as a shi'i dynasty have left a lot of religious buildings that are still standing and functioning today, however their secular architecture is long gone. Despite many accounts on the Fatimid double palaces of Cairo, the manzaras, and the amazing throne halls, none of these buildings survive today. Consequently, this paper focuses on reconstructing the Fatimid secular architecture through historical textual narratives in books and traveller testimonials and descriptions. A visual presentation of Fatimid secular architecture is achieved through creating illustrated frames that can serve in backgrounds in printed material, or studio setups for media purposes such as television series or movies.
A meticulous frame of enquiry is used in order to define the characteristics of Fatimid secular monuments and details by comparing to neighbouring regions and styles of the time. Furthermore, building techniques and terminology were examined. The resulting data is transformed into a visual language using manual sketching techniques with colored pencil and ink and edited digitally using photo editing software.

Introduction

Fatimid Islamic arts are manifested clearly in Architecture as well as in the decorative arts.

However, Architecture can be labelled as either religious like mosques, schools, *Khanqah* (sufi establishment), *Tekaya* (a place to distribute free food) and tombs, or Secular like houses, palaces, *Bimarestan* (hospital), public water taps, agencies, hotels, *khans* (shops) and animal troughs.

The Fatimid dynasty was established in the Tenth century in what is modern day Tunis. Their capital was founded in the city of *Al-Mahdya* from which they expanded their realm to encompass North Africa and Egypt. They founded Cairo in 969 AD (*Anno Domini*) or 358 AH (*Anno Hegirae*) and moved the capital to this newly established centre of what was the Fatimid Caliphate. The Fatimids were known to be a lavish dynasty with a lot of pomp and exuberance. They initiated a lot of cultural activities that are still part of the Egyptian inherited culture up till today. The Fatimids also had many exchanges and influences on Sicily and Southern Italy. Their life style was also reflected on their architecture mainly the secular buildings. However, a visitor to Cairo will be surprised by the abundance of Fatimid mosques yet the total absence of any of the secular buildings today. The reasons for this is mainly due to the destruction campaign by the Ayyubids once they conquered the city. All our knowledge of the Fatimid palaces that once stood proudly in the centre of Cairo is owed to description accounts mentioned in the history books. Examples of these palaces are the great Eastern palace and the small Western palace as described by Al Maqrizi in his book *Al-Khitat*.

In addition, the Persian traveller Nasir-i Khusraw who visited Fatimid Cairo in the fifth century AH, He described the city as being developed to be one of the elegant cities of its time, it had stylish neighbourhoods with lofty building of fourteen levels, associated with gardens and flowers of all types. It is clear that luxury and richness was not limited only to palaces, but to the whole capital and its surroundings.

Over the course of time, new buildings were erected adjacent to the two main palaces as Al Aziz son of Al Mo'iz constructed the gold palace, the great divan and Pearl palace. Other caliphs and ministers added other buildings and repaired earlier existing ones. Fatimid palaces were designed with great audience halls, in addition to a conduit system with adequate water supplies to resist any potential fire. The luxury state of these palaces was extraordinary as the gold palace, was fitted with two halls: the "gold hall" and the "silver hall", the former was allocated for the throne and the latter was designated for the meetings. The walls were reported to have been coated in gold and the throne itself was encrusted with gems and elevated on a golden table, surrounded by gold palms with fruits and flowers made of precious stones. Nasir-i Khusraw added:

> when I entered the palace gate, I saw a great number of buildings and halls if I describe them, my book would swell pages. There are 12 free-standing square structures connected to each other by subterranean passages. Each structure is about one hundred cubic square (40 meters), except one of them which was sixty cubic square (24 meters). In the last kiosk, the throne was fixed and three faces of it were coated in gold, above it is a triangle of hunting scenes, knights on their horses and other subjects. The throne

is surrounded with an amazing fence of gold and there are steps of silver behind the throne and very close to the wall. If we wanted to describe the throne in details, one book of description will not be enough. (Khusraw, 2001, p. 56-57)

In light of the absence of any physical remains of the Fatimid palaces in Cairo, it was logical to shift the attention to North Africa for the analysis of any comparable examples, of which the Qal'at *Bani Hammad*, in Masila, Algeria stands out as a fitting example. This castle contained three palaces: *Qasr Al-Manar, Qasr Al-Bahr* and *Qasr Al-Tahyaa*.

Figure 1. Picture shows the Maquette of the whole castle in the museum of Algeria. Retrieved April 25, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beni_Hammad_Fort#/media/File:Maquette_de_Kalaa_de_Beni_Hammad.jpg.

Considering one of the palaces as an example (*Qasr Al Manar*) is reconstructed as an example of Fatimid palatial architecture. The resulting three-dimensional representation was based on several aspects: a reconstruction of the Castle as shown in the

video (Figure 2), the openings for ventilation and lighting as Shown in the cross section of the same palace (Figure 3), the plan of the palace (Figure 4) and an aerial photograph showing archaeological remains of the pillars (Figure 5).

Figure 2. Screen shot from a video Al Qala of Beni Hammad shows a reconstruction of the castle. Retrieved April 26, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wznWksgJ2Zc
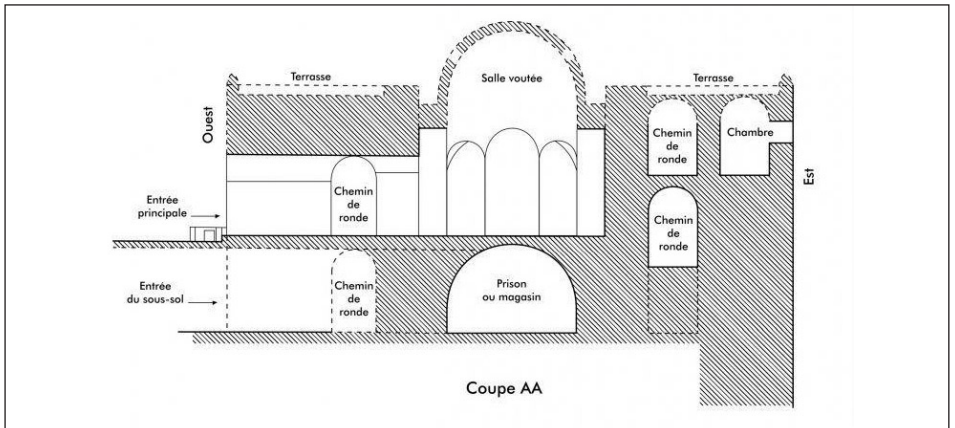
Figure 3. A cross section view of Al-Manar palace shows the openings for ventilation and lighting. Retrieved April 26, 2019. http://islamicart.museumwnf.org/database_item.php?id=monument;ISL;dz;Mon01;26;en.
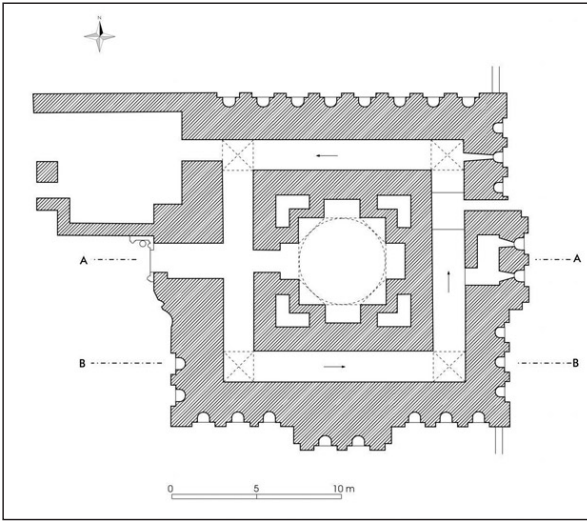
Figure 4. A plan of Al-Manar palace. Retrieved April 26, 2019. http://islamicart.museumwnf.org/database_item.php?id=monument;ISL;dz;Mon01;26;en.

Figure 5. An aerial view of the original palace site shows the square plan that the palace followed, also the pillars and how they are parallel to each other. Retrieved April 26, 2019. https://archnet.org/sites/16740/media_contents/106668.

As per the decorations of both the pillars and drawings of scenes on the walls, they were inspired by Figure 6, 7 and 8 respectively.
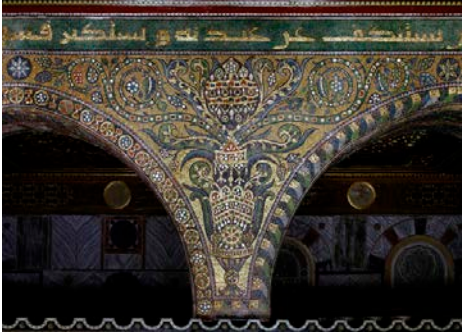
Figure 6. Dome of the Rock, Qubbat As-Sakhrah, Jerusalem, completed 691/692 AD; detail of the interior mosaics showing hanging crowns, jewellery, and inscriptions. Retrieved July 22, 2012, from http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/byzantium-and-islam/blog/where-in-the-world/posts/dome-of-the-rock.

Figure 7. Palermo, Zisa castle, 12th century, Fatimid art mosaic. Sicily. Credits: Melania Messina Photojournalist. Retrieved April 26, 2019. https://melaniamessina.photoshelter.com/image/I0000KkGwxm-LIEE0.

Figure 8. The emblem of Hisham Palace in Jericho Arabic Umayyad mosaic called the Tree of Life in the audience room of the bathhouse (125 AH - 743 AD). Retrieved April 26, 2019 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hisham's_Palace#/media/File:Arabischer_Mosaizist_um_735_001.jpg.

As a result of the careful study and inspection of the above mentioned items, an illustration of the Fatimid throne hall is produced. The Hall has a square plan. Rays of light can be seen in the illustration reflecting the ventilation openings in the dome. Parallel pillars surrounding decorated with patterns from the original figure; scenes painted on the walls were also taken from the original scenes can be seen in the following comic panel (Figure 9):
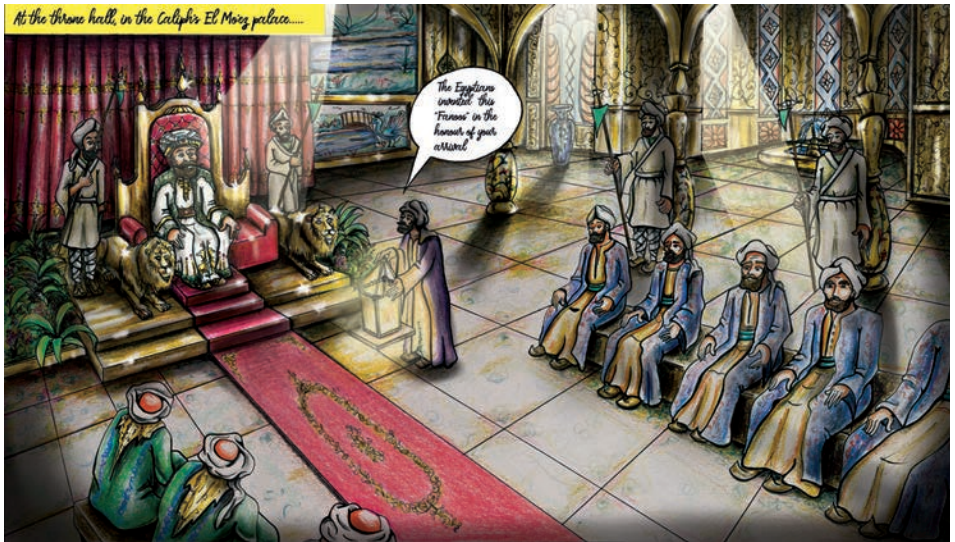
Figure 9. Illustration shows the reconstruction of the "Throne Hall" (Marie, 2015, p.78).

Another element of architecture appeared in this era called *Al Manazer* (similar to a balcony), They were originally used before this era only in military purposes as monitoring points linked to the palaces and built in the highest places facing the sea in order to oversee the boats of enemies before coming close to the coast. They also were considered communication tools as a lighthouse. In Egypt and the East, they were com-

mon as civilian structures such as the outlets above the gates of the city of Baghdad in the middle of the second century A.H. and the Fatimid Manazer in the fourth century A.H.

In the Fatimid era, *Al Manazer* were highly considered and placed in very significant locations of the palaces. In some locations they served religious purposes such as those built in the palace infront of *Al Azhar* Mosque where celebrations were held. One example is the celebration of *layaly Al Waqood* (nights of fire).

Manazer were constructed out of stone and wood. Some assumed the forms of kiosks. These balconies were well groomed, they were well decorated and furnished with luxury fittings and furniture to be used around the year. *Al Manzara* disappeared completely from the Cairene architectural repertoire by the end of the Fatimid era. However, these structures remained in use up till the present in Egyptian villages and morphed into *Almanadera,* which are rooms created in Grand mansions that overlook the street and connected with the external spaces the ground floor level. Here too, a visualization was created based on the written descriptions and images (Figure 10).

Dar Al Fetra was the first sweet factory built in Cairo by the caliph *"Al-Aziz B Allah"* outside his palace and It had a secret passage linked to the caliph's palace directly. This establishment was essential in the preparation of the holy *Mawlid* day of the Prophet (birthday) in the Fatimid era. The illustration was created based on descriptions and images (Figure 11).

Figure 10. Illustration shows the reconstruction of Al Manzara (Marie, 2015, p. 104).

Figure 11. Illustration shows the reconstruction of Dar Al Fetra (Marie, 2015, p. 102).

A visual presentation of Fatimid secular architecture is achieved through creating illustrated frames to reflect the era characteristics that can serve in any visual mean like, backgrounds in printed material, or studio setups for media purposes such as television series or movies. A meticulous frame of enquiry was used in order to define the characteristics of Fatimid secular monuments and details by comparing to neighbouring regions and styles of the time.

Furthermore, building techniques and terminology were examined. The resulting data is transformed into a visual language using manual sketching techniques with coloured pencil and ink and edited digitally using photo editing software.

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