

## THE PALACES OF CAIRO'S BELLE ÉPOQUE

*Nasser Rabbat*

MIT, Cambridge, MA

Many visitors to Cairo, driving from the airport to the city on Salāḥ Sālim Road, would notice a strange stupa-like structure, standing in the middle of a large empty plot on the left of the road in Miṣr al-Ġadīda (Heliopolis). This is the Palace of Baron Empain (1852–1929), built in 1907 for this rich, eccentric investor, who was in the process of planning a whole new suburb north of Cairo for an exclusively foreign community. His palace is but one of the city's many notable turn-of-the-century palaces spread all over town and into the suburbs, which, despite their run-down state today, still reflect unmistakable majesty and opulence. Together with other splendid but equally neglected architectural gems from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they constitute the visual remnants of an extraordinary chapter in the life of the Egyptian capital, an era that has been evocatively – and somewhat arrogantly – called “la Belle Époque” in literature about modern Egypt.<sup>1</sup>

The Belle Époque architecture of Cairo is concentrated in what is known today as Wasaṭ al-Balad (Middle of the City or Downtown), and its surrounding early 20th-century residential extensions, such as Ḥilmiyya, ‘Ābdīn, Garden City, Būlāq, Šubra, and Zamālik on the island of al-Gazīra, in addition to the uniquely gracious suburbs of Heliopolis, a few kilometres to the north, and Ma‘ādī, another few kilometres to the south. These neighbourhoods burst with outstanding structures that cover a panoply of architectural styles from the Neo-Moorish, Neo-Classical, and Neo-Baroque palaces and mansions of the late 19th century, to Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and Neo-Mamluk villas and apartment buildings of the early 20th century, to the rarer modernist villas of the 1940s and 1950s, in addition to a smattering of Rococo, Italian Renaissance, and Neo-Pharaonic religious and commercial buildings.<sup>2</sup>

Until recently, the Belle Époque architecture received little attention in a country where time is measured by millennia, not centuries, and where historical architecture dates back at least to 3000 BC. In fact, only a few hasty studies dealt with it before the *infitāḥ* or the economic opening and shift away from socialism, initiated by President Anwar as-Sādāt (r. 1970–1981) in the 1970s. Since then, the interest in the – now nostalgically remembered – architectural vestiges predating the 1952 revolution

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<sup>1</sup> Mostyn 2006: 52–82, 129–59; Volait 2009b (English version: 2014); 2013.

<sup>2</sup> For an off-the-press guide to the modern architecture of Cairo, including that of the Belle Époque, see, Elshahed 2019, which surveys more than 220 buildings and sites.

has steadily increased.<sup>3</sup> The 1980s and 1990s saw the publication of a couple of beautifully illustrated coffee-table books and a number of scholarly studies.<sup>4</sup> Noteworthy is the passionate work of Samir Raafat, who wrote two books and numerous articles on the architecture of Cairo's 'glory years' (the title of his second book), and has maintained a well-stocked website on the subject, even though he has not added any new material for many years.<sup>5</sup> Of a more academic bent is the work of a small number of Cairo-lovers, like the Egyptian-German scholar Mohamed Scharabi, Suhayr Ḥawwās, and Mohamed El-Shahed, the French scholar Mercedes Volait, and our friend István Ormos, to whom this essay is offered on his 70th birthday.

The pioneering study by Mohamed Scharabi (1989) is a meticulous catalogue raisonné of sorts with plans, façades, and historical blurbs of the main buildings of Cairo during the colonial period (1880s–1940s). It led the way to more sustained architectural investigations of Belle Époque architecture.<sup>6</sup> Two graduate students from the American University in Cairo, Tarek Sakr and Nihal Tamraz, published their award-winning masters' theses in 1993 and 1998, respectively, on the early 20th-century Islamic architecture and the 19th-century mansions of Cairo, many of which fall within the timeframe of the Belle Époque. Then came Suhayr Ḥawwās's book on the architecture of khedivial Cairo in the late 19th century. Published in 2002, it is one of the rare serious studies in Arabic on the architecture of this important, yet still neglected, period.<sup>7</sup>

Among the non-Egyptian scholars, Mercedes Volait is undoubtedly the premier interpreter of the visual and urban milieu of modernising Cairo in the long 19th century. In several published books and numerous articles, she has focused her attention primarily on the work of French architects and scholars, and some Egyptian architects who were active during that time frame.<sup>8</sup> István Ormos, on the other hand, has focused his meticulous research on the work of Max Herz Pasha (1856–1919), the Hungarian architect, conservator, and author, who spent his active career in Egypt. He became the chief architect of the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe between 1890 and 1914, responsible for the restoration and preservation of countless Fatimid, Ayyubid, and especially Mamluk monuments. He also ran a private practice in Cairo, and designed a large number of villas, palaces, and mosques, many in a Neo-Mamluk style (Ormos 2002; 2009; 2013; 2016).

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the context of this rising interest, see El Kadi and ElKerdany 2006; Volait 2013.

<sup>4</sup> A good example of the coffee-table books is Myntti 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Raafat 1994; 2003. His website is [www.egy.com](http://www.egy.com).

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Scharabi 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Sakr 1993; Tamraz 1998, a brief study of the palaces of the suburb of 'Abbāsiyya; Ḥawwās 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Volait 1988; 2001; 2005; 2009a; 2012; 2013a; 2013b; Crosnier Leconte and Volait 1998.

## 1 Palaces of the ambitious Khedive

Cairo witnessed two distinct urban booms between 1870 and 1952, a period starting with the reign of Khedive Ismā'īl (r. 1863–1879), covering the entirety of the British colonial rule, and ending with the Free Officers' Revolution. The first development was prompted by Ismā'īl's massive modernisation project, which had no less an ambition than to visually transpose Egypt – or at least its two major cities, Cairo and Alexandria – from Africa to Europe.<sup>9</sup> To that end, he created a New Cairo, named al-Ismā'īliyya after himself, and modelled after Baron Haussmann's Paris, which he greatly admired when he visited the *Exposition Universelle* there in 1867. He was also in a hurry: he wanted his city to be ready for the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869, when many European royals were expected to attend, providing him with an opportunity to grandstand. Hiring designers from all over Europe and Istanbul and spending huge sums of money (most of which he borrowed at exorbitant rates), Ismā'īl fashioned an alluring architectural spectacle fronting the old city, complete with all the accoutrements of modern urban living.<sup>10</sup> He built bridges, avenues lined with trees, star-shaped *mīdāns* (squares) *à la parisienne*, palaces with vast landscaped grounds, an opera house, a circus, hotels, various public buildings, and one stately mosque, the Rifā'ī Mosque, which was not completed until 1911, many years after Ismā'īl's death (al-Asad 1993; Rabbat 1997: 376–381). Of his many buildings, only a few altered palaces, such as 'Ābdīn and Gezira, the Rifā'ī Mosque, and some mausolea of patrician families remain.

As a modern monarch, Ismā'īl needed a modern seat of government, so he built the Palace of 'Ābdīn to replace the old Citadel of the Mountain (Qal'at al-Gabal), which was the main abode of Egypt's rulers since the 12th century. A behemoth of a structure with around 500 rooms, Ismā'īl wanted the palace to be ready for the inauguration of the Suez Canal, but the project was not finished until 1874.<sup>11</sup> The original, wooden palace was burned down ten years later, then rebuilt of stone, and has been renovated several times since then. Its actual façade, designed by the court architect Antonio Lasciac (1856–1946) between 1909 and 1911, is an imposing neo-classical composition meant to project a sense of modernity and European-style royal dignity (fig 1). Its ceremonial halls, on the other hand, are fascinating exercises in

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<sup>9</sup> Abu-Lughod 1965; Ahmed 2005. On Ismā'īl's personality and his fascination with Europe, see al-Ayyubi 1994, 1: 258–299; a somewhat dramatized and caricatured one is in Mostyn 2006: 42–124; Vatikiotis 1991: 83 calls him the “impatient modernizer.”

<sup>10</sup> Abu-Lughod 1971: 98–117; Berque 1972: 84–102; Raymond 2000: 309–338; AlSayyad 2011: 199–228.

<sup>11</sup> El-Gawhary 1954, though pioneering, is really a boastful inventory of the palaces that the 1952 revolution expropriated. For a socio-political and cross-cultural interpretation of the hybrid architecture built during Ismā'īl's reign, including the 'Ābdīn Palace, see El-Ashmouni 2014: 373–396.

eclectic, bombastic styles. The most impressive are the Byzantine Hall and the Mamluk Hall, constructed in the 1930s, long after Ismā‘īl’s passing. The palace today is an official residence of the president and visiting foreign dignitaries. Its ground floor houses several museums, all opened in the last twenty years, the most interesting of which are the Historical Documents Museum and the Royal Family Museum.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 1. The ‘Ābdīn Palace, as seen through its iron gate.

If the Palace of ‘Ābdīn is associated in the public mind with state pomp and officialdom, the Gezira Palace, built in Zamālik between 1864 and 1869, evokes a more romantic memory. Designed by several European architects under the direction of the German-born Austrian architect Julius Franz Pasha (1831–1915) and completed in time for the festivities of the Suez Canal’s inauguration, it is rumoured that Khedive Ismā‘īl spent lavishly on it to impress the French Empress Eugénie, for whom he allegedly held tender feelings (Naguib 2008; Scham 2013). There is no way to verify this charming tale, but we know that Eugénie used the so-called *selamlık* (men’s section) of the palace as her official residence during her visit to Cairo in September 1869. We know also that she was not the only European royal to stay there during that same year: the Prince and Princess of Wales preceded her in March, and the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph I (r. 1848–1916) succeeded her in November 1869. Ismā‘īl enlarged the palace and added new buildings in its vast landscaped grounds, which occupied most of the island of al-Gazīra, for the next ten years. It was the site of many an extraordinary celebration throughout the reign of

<sup>12</sup> For information on the museums, see *‘Abdine Palace Museums*.

this most extravagant of Egypt's rulers. Sold under duress in 1889 and its grounds diminishing over time, the palace became in turn a fancy hotel, a British military hospital, a British administrative complex, a hotel again, a private residence for the wealthy Luṭfallāh family, then a hotel again after the 1952 revolution, with the evocative name Omar Khayyam, before its *selamlık* was incorporated in the new Cairo Marriott Hotel in the late 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

Refurbished and used as the lobby and eateries complex at the Marriott Hotel today, the *selamlık* of the Gezira Palace still retains many of its architectural and decorative marvels. The most outstanding and inventive are the slender cast-iron porticoes designed in a pronounced Alhambraesque style by the German Carl von Diebitsch (1819–1869), who had them prefabricated in Germany and reassembled on site (fig. 2) (Pflugradt-Abdel Aziz 1998: 55–77; 2009: 69–88). Von Diebitsch, today a regrettably little-known figure, was a particularly innovative architect of the mid-19th century.<sup>14</sup> He was fascinated by Moorish architecture after he had spent several years (1844–1848) travelling first in Sicily and then all over Spain, and produced a series of elaborate watercolours of various Andalusī monuments.<sup>15</sup> The impression of Moorish architecture never left him, and he is repeatedly depicted in later surveys of German architecture as the architect of a “Moorish” style inspired by the Alhambra.<sup>16</sup> In the 1850s, he began to experiment with intricate Andalusī patterns in cast iron, a favourite new material of the ‘moderns’, such as Joseph Paxton (1803–1865), the architect of the Crystal Palace in London (1851), and Gustave Eiffel (1832–1923), the designer of the Eiffel Tower in Paris (1889). Von Diebitsch developed a system of decorative and structural elements based on Moorish geometric patterns, which, he argued, could lend themselves effectively and economically to standardised industrial production.<sup>17</sup> Since the German public did not seem to be ready to have Alhambresque architecture in its homes and public buildings, Von Diebitsch sought his fortunes elsewhere. After receiving a medal for a huge zinc vase he exhibited at the International Fair in London in 1862, he obtained a series of small

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<sup>13</sup> Mostyn 2006: 83–88; Raafat 2003: 143–146; El Kadi and ElKerdany 2006: 362; Frizzell 1984: 108–111.

<sup>14</sup> Elke Pflugradt-Abdel Aziz has devoted most of her scholarship to studying the life and work of von Diebitsch from her dissertation (2003), which dealt principally with his work in Egypt, to her many articles on his various projects in Egypt. A recent PhD dissertation from MIT attempted to restore von Diebitsch to his proper place in the historiography of modern German architecture, see Hedrick 2014; and also 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Pflugradt-Abdel Aziz 2009 discusses in detail von Diebitsch's travels and sketches and their relation to his later designs. For a general discussion of the architectural fascination with the Alhambra in the 19th century and a stylistic distinction between Moorish and Alhambresque, see McSweeney 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Hedrick 2018; Alexis 1857; Koppelkamm 1987: 91.

<sup>17</sup> Pflugradt-Abdelaziz 2004; 1993; 2009: 86–87; Volait 2009a: 202–203; Sazatornil Ruiz 2012.

commissions in Cairo, culminating in the porticoes of the Gezira Palace, and died there in 1869.



Fig. 2. The Gezira Palace, iron portico designed by Von Diebitsch.

Von Diebitsch had other opportunities to display his pioneering Moorish cast-iron architecture in Cairo. The one example still standing is the magnificent mausoleum of Sulaymān Pāšā al-Firansāwī, a.k.a. Colonel Sève (1788–1860), the chief of staff of the Egyptian army under Muḥammad ‘Alī (r. 1805–1848) and the great-grandfather of Queen Nazlī Šabrī (1894–1978), the wife of King Fu’ād I (r. 1917–1936) (fig. 3) (Fahmy 2002: 80; Konrad 2013: 89–114). Recently restored, this small and simple cast-iron structure with a zinc sheathed dome and an octagonal, filigreed arcade resting on Alhambresque capitals has a Neo-Gothic feel. Its plan, however, is reminiscent of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. It stands today at the end of a narrow alley on the corniche to Ma’ādī, directly opposite the Nilometer.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Guémard 1927: 72–73; Pflugradt Abdel-Aziz 1988: 205–214.



Fig. 3. The Mausoleum of Sulaymān Pāšā al-Firansāwī, designed by Von Diebitsch.

At the Gezira Palace, there was a clear desire for Andalusī touches, for Von Diebitsch's porticoes are not the only Moorish elements surviving today. The opulent Salon Royal with its magnificent staircase in veined white Carrara marble, designed by the Italian architect Pietro Avoscani (1816–1891), who also designed the Cairo Opera House, has a number of Moorish elements (Tagher 1949: 306–314). Most notable among them are the interlacing arches of the marble balustrades, whose form can be traced back to the façade of the Great Mosque of Cordoba. But the most intriguing and potentially important for architectural history are the two magnificent wood coffered, patterned, and coloured ceilings in the present Saraya Café, and various cabinets and pieces of furniture in the different salons of the hotel (fig. 4). John Kresten Jespersen believes them to be the work of Owen Jones (1809–1874), arguably the premier theorist of ornament of the 19th century, and another 'modernist'

architect fascinated by Moorish patterns.<sup>19</sup> Like Von Diebitsch, whom he met in Cairo, Jones spent time studying Andalusī architecture in Spain, and published, with the French architect Jules Goury (1803–1834), the extensive two-volume study *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Details of the Alhambra* (1842–1845). This was one of the earliest chromolithographic publications in England (Ferry 2003). Jones was commissioned by Khedive Ismā‘īl to work on the interior decoration of the Gezira Palace in 1864, which makes Jespersen’s assertion very plausible.<sup>20</sup> These delicately composed ceilings indeed bear heavy Moorish traces. But, more importantly, their proportional colouring in blue, red, and gold would be one of the purest manifestations anywhere of Jones’s theory of colour, which he propounded in his influential treatise *The Grammar of Ornament* of 1856.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 4. The Gezira Palace, patterned wooden ceiling designed by Owen Jones.

<sup>19</sup> Jespersen 2008: 143–153; McSweeney 2015: 53–56; Hrvol Flores 2006: 190 suggests that Jones and von Diebitsch knew each other while they were in Cairo.

<sup>20</sup> See Crinson 1996: 176–177, note no. 18 for the commissions of Jones at the Gezira Palace; and Bush 2017: 70–76 for a stylistic comparison between the work of Jones and von Diebitsch at the Gezira Palace.

<sup>21</sup> Jespersen 2008. It is interesting that the work of Jones and von Diebitsch at the Gezira Palace, though clearly “Moorish,” does not make it into architectural books that deal with the style, probably because the palace is in the ‘Orient’. Cf. Sweetman 1988: 160–168; Danby 1995: 149–199.



## 2 Stone dreams of princes and entrepreneurs

The second and more accelerated expansion of Cairo came after the privatisation of land ownership, following the sale of the khedivial land holding company (*ad-dā'ira as-saniyya*) at the end of the 19th century, and the incorporation of Colonial Egypt into the international trade network.<sup>22</sup> The new economic opportunities and preferential legal codes privileging non-Egyptians attracted large numbers of European and Levantine merchants, investors, and adventurers, who settled in the city and sought their fortunes there (Toledano 1998: 254–255; Diana Barillari 2001). The successful among them (and they were many), in addition to a handful of major land owners from the Egyptian aristocracy and ruling family, were responsible for the outstanding examples of grand residential architecture that are hard to find gathered together in any other city, even those famous for their Belle Époque architecture like Vienna, Prague, or Paris.<sup>23</sup> The difference is that the Belle Époque architecture of these cities is well-studied, documented, restored, and adaptively reused, whereas the architecture of Belle Époque Cairo is barely known, rundown, and constantly assaulted by developers and speculators, who, unfortunately, have been quite successful in their demolition mission in the last three decades despite the few recent efforts to save that heritage.<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 5. The Palace of Sa'īd Ḥalīm Pāšā, façade.

<sup>22</sup> Hunter 1999: 179–232; Toledano 1998: 252–284. The story of Egypt's prosperity and bankruptcy, and the role of European adventurers in both, is told through the figure of Édouard Dervieu, a special banker to the Khedive in Landes 1958.

<sup>23</sup> Johnston 2007; Claval 1995; Topp 2004; Blau 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Volait 2007; 2013: *passim*; El Kadi and ElKerdany 2006: 362–366; Davidson 2008.

Numerous palaces and villas came up in Cairo around the turn of the 20th century, a period of relative stability and abundant economic openings, especially for the enterprising among the European and Levantine immigrants. Many of these structures have already been bulldozed to make way for large and more profitable buildings. But what is left is still exhilarating in its splendour and variety. The most extravagant palaces predictably belong to members of the royal family, whose wealth derived primarily from huge agricultural properties. Palaces like that of Prince Saʿīd Ḥalīm on Champollion Street (1899), the Palace of Sultan Ḥusayn Kāmil in Heliopolis (1908), and the Palace of his son Prince Kamāl ad-Dīn Ḥusayn in Qaṣr ad-Dūbāra (1906–1913) (now belonging to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), in addition to the royal palaces, have no equivalent among the palaces of the entrepreneurs and merchants. But what the latter lack in grandeur, they compensate for in character. Original, playful, even funky, they were built as statements both of their owners' business success and their eclectic global perspective. Thus, we find *faux* Rococo, Orientalised Neo-Gothic, Arabian Nights' Neo-Islamic, and even a Neo-Hindu palace, all erected by non-Egyptian tycoons, who made their fortunes in Egypt, and who, in many instances, lived, died, and were buried there (Raafat 2003: 41–44, 71–73, 180–209, 245–297). I will illustrate the variety of palaces with three examples from the dozens still standing today, although many are suffering from prolonged neglect and may, in all likelihood, end up being demolished for real-estate profit, the way many villas and palaces have gone in the last few decades.

### *The Palace of Saʿīd Ḥalīm*

As an outstanding example of princely palaces, the Palace of Saʿīd Ḥalīm surpasses most others in its grandstand poise, despite its derelict status today (fig. 5).<sup>25</sup> Its patron, Saʿīd Ḥalīm Pasha (1865–1921), was a remarkable reformist Islamist thinker and a grandson of Muḥammad ʿAlī, the founder of modern Egypt. Having followed his father into exile, Ḥalīm lived most of his life in Istanbul, became heavily involved in politics at the heart of the Ottoman Empire, wrote profusely in French on the problems facing the Empire, and attained the position of Grand Vizier in the Empire's waning days (1913–1916), before being sent to exile in Malta after World War I. An Armenian revolutionary nationalist later assassinated him in Rome in 1921 for his role in the Armenian Genocide.<sup>26</sup> His palace in Cairo, designed by the architect of the royal family Antonio Lasciac between 1896 and 1899,<sup>27</sup> nods in the direction of

<sup>25</sup> Raafat 2003: 41–44; also 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Şeyhun 2014: 147–63; Guida 2007; Wasti 2008 offers an analysis of Ḥalīm's essays and thoughts.

<sup>27</sup> On Lasciac and his work in Egypt, see Godoli 2006: 9–18; Volait 1989; Kajfež 2006: 13–18. A fuller biography in Slovenian is Mamič 2008: 71–84. El-Wakil 2016 offers an analysis of the mature "Arab" style of Lasciac, which is totally absent in his earlier work, such the Palace of Saʿīd Ḥalīm. Kuzmin 2015: 198–208 argues that Lasciac was gradually

Baroque palaces in Istanbul, like Çırağan, Dolmabahçe, and Beylerbeyi Sarayı. But its detailing is more carefully Baroque, probably because Sa'īd Ḥalīm, a serious Romanophile, wanted his architect to go back to the source, Rome. This Lasciac did splendidly, although the winds of the rising Art Nouveau style softened his lines in various places, most notably in the elegant interior iron double-staircase (fig. 6), the decorative crenellations on the roof, and the entry portal and fence wall.<sup>28</sup> The rectangular edifice itself, with its colonnaded façades and the two long wings extending on its sides to enclose part of the garden, on the other hand, is executed in a strict Baroque style, contrasted by the vividness of the precious veined pink marble covering all surfaces, which the prince had imported from Italy, along with most building materials and furniture of the palace.

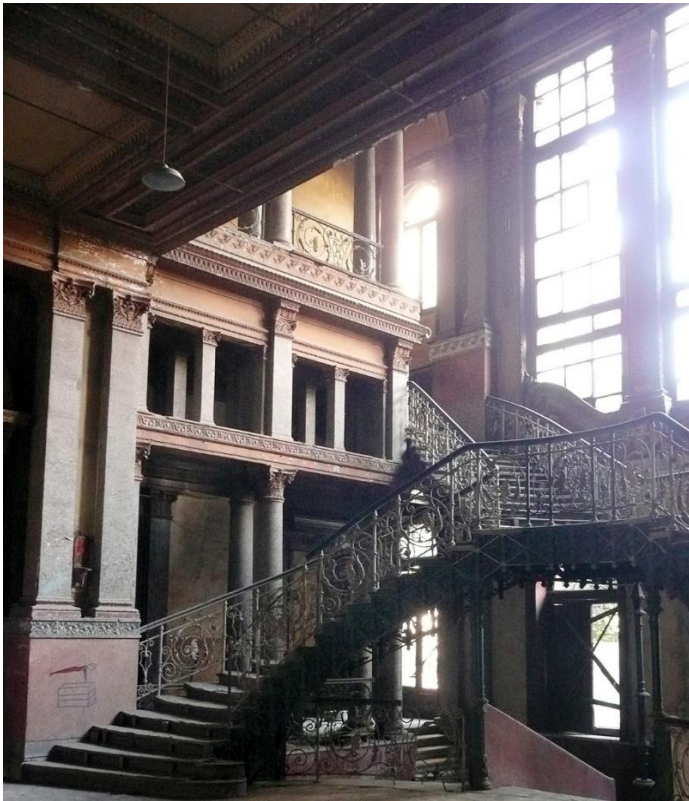


Fig. 6. The Palace of Sa'īd Ḥalīm Pāšā, staircase.

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adopting the eclectic Islamic styles popular among architects in Egypt at the time, but was accommodating the taste of his clients among the ruling class, like Sa'īd Ḥalīm, who demanded the prevalent European styles for their buildings.

<sup>28</sup> Chiozza 2005 characterizes Lasciac's architecture in general as an amalgam of Art Nouveau and 'Oriental' styles.



Fig. 7. The Palace of Sa'īd Ḥalīm Pāšā, insignia of the prince on elements of a portal.

Most columns and many decorative reliefs on the façades are monogrammed by superimposed ‘S’ and ‘H’, alternating with the Ottoman emblem (fig. 7), a cautionary gesture that did not prevent the palace from being seized by the British in 1915, along with all of Ḥalīm’s and his siblings’ assets in Egypt. They had been declared enemy subjects on account of their residing in Istanbul and their close association with the Ottomans, who had just entered World War I against Britain and its allies. Sa'īd Ḥalīm never had the chance to live in his Cairene palace. A few years later, the palace was turned into a boys’ school, al-Nāṣiriyya, which graduated many famous Egyptian statesmen in its long history before closing down in 2004 (Guida 2007). Now the palace is empty and slowly crumbling, after it had long lost a sizeable part of its garden and its dainty marble fixtures to apartment buildings fronting the main street. Ahmad el-Bendari, a specialist of Cairene Belle Époque architecture, however, has recently discovered that the fanciful Art Nouveau portal, believed to have been demolished when the garden was truncated, survived as the portal of another villa in Garden City, the Villa Boulad, currently occupied by the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs.<sup>29</sup> How the portal moved to Garden City is not known. What is known, however, is that, despite having been listed as a protected monument by the Supreme Council of Antiquities, the palace lingers in negligence. It is now mired in some legal shenanigans that might result in its demolition through a notorious legal trick called *tasqī'*, that is, leaving a building deserted and without any maintenance

<sup>29</sup> Personal communication, December 2008.

for a number of years until it can be declared as *ā'il li-s-suqūṭ* ('ramshackle' or 'falling apart'), a condition that warrants its removal to be replaced by more lucrative structures in this central area of Cairo.<sup>30</sup>



Fig. 8. The Sakākīnī Palace, general view.

### *The Sakākīnī Palace*

Two years older than the palace of Sa'īd Ḥalīm, the Sakākīnī Palace follows a style, the Rococo, that emerged historically from the late Baroque, and is much more frou-frou and ostentatious than its ancestor (fig. 8).<sup>31</sup> Built by unnamed Italian architects for Count Gabriel Ḥabīb Sakākīnī Pasha (1841–1923), a Levantine entrepreneur who

<sup>30</sup> For a series of photos showing the pitiable current status of the palace, see “Abandoned Said Halim”. Multiple articles give contradictory information about the legal status of the palace, cf. ‘Abd ar-Ra’ūf 2015; Riyād 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Raafat 2003: 287–289; also 1997; Lababidi and Sabbahy 2001: 58–61.

gained his wealth working as a contractor for Khedive Ismā‘īl, the palace is said to have been a faithful copy of an unspecified palace that Sakākīnī saw in Italy and adored. Whatever the veracity of this report, it tells us much about the taste of the hero of this rags-to-riches saga, Ḥabīb Sakākīnī, who started life as a daily worker in Port Said after emigrating from Damascus at the age of 16. What the anecdote does not reveal, however, is the steely determination and careful calculation of this shrewd businessman, who planted his fairy-tale palace at the centre of a square, named after himself, where eight roads converge in aḏ-Ḍāḥir, a traditional neighbourhood northeast of the Fatimid city, that he was then developing into a modern one, making a fortune in the process (Raafat, 2003: 287).



Fig. 9. The Sakākīnī Palace, corner niche.

Square in plan with four circular turrets cupped with ribbed bulbous domes at the four corners and a central dome high above a tiered octagonal pavilion, the palace cuts a fantastic profile in the skyline of present-day Cairo. With its colourful decoration and diverse statuary comprising around 300 specimens inside and outside the

building, the showy fantasy is carried into every detail of the palace. There are urns, garlands, festoons, and floriated corbelling everywhere. There are busts of Ḥabīb Sakākīnī himself and probably of Mrs Sakākīnī, as well as four pairs of statues of their children, possibly at different ages, perched on the balustrades of the first-floor bedrooms' balconies. But the most eye-catching figures are the four maidens representing the four seasons, each standing on a large urn within a niche with a scalloped conch flanked on each side by a pair of caryatides (fig. 9). The four statues and their niches articulate the bases of the four turrets and soften the square palace's edges, while giving it the effect of an octagon, whose sides command one of the eight roads radiating from the palace. Each niche is also surmounted by a huge stone shield on which are monogrammed the two Latin letters 'H' and 'S' in four different eclectic styles, whereas the full name of Ḥabīb Sakākīnī is inscribed in Arabic script with the date 1897 above the palace's western entrance.

As an exhibitionist domicile, the Sakākīnī Palace blithely recalls the much more famous – and no less eccentric – Neuschwanstein Castle of Ludwig II of Bavaria (1845–1886), the Swan King. It was completed in 1892, only five years before the building of Count Sakākīnī's palace.<sup>32</sup> Like Neuschwanstein, which, because of its fame at the time, may have been its visual archetype, the Sakākīnī Palace may be considered as a precursor to Disneyland's Sleeping Beauty Castle. In fact, they share a quality that Neuschwanstein was not meant to have when it was first constructed. Both the Sakākīnī Palace and the Sleeping Beauty Castle skilfully deploy fanciful architecture in the service of business, one as a real-estate incentive, and the other as a vacation destination for families (Bayless 2012). But the manoeuvre is carried out at a much more spectacular and sustained scale in the American folly, and now that Ludwig's palaces have become premier tourist attractions, in the Bavarian castle as well (Herford 2017).

### *The Palace of Baron Empain*

No less idiosyncratic, though drawing its inspiration from an 'eastern' tradition, is the Palace of Baron Empain in Heliopolis, also known as 'the Hindu Palace' (fig. 10).<sup>33</sup> Commissioned in 1907, the palace, like the Sakākīnī Palace, formed a nodal point in the Baron's bold and visionary project to build a new garden-city in the desert outside Cairo. Baron-General Edouard Louis Joseph Empain (1852–1929), a successful Belgian entrepreneur who arrived in Egypt in 1904 after having made a fortune working in transportation systems, reserved his modern-day oasis of luxury

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<sup>32</sup> The Count earned this title from a Roman Pope, Leon XIII, in recognition of his services to the Catholic community in Cairo. On Neuschwanstein Castle, see Knapp 1999; Petzet, Thoma, and Kreisel 1970; Kühler 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Johnston 2006: 125–128; Raafat 2003: 289–291; also 1995. For a description of the current status of the palace, see Elyamani 2018: 53–73.

and leisure for a largely expatriate community.<sup>34</sup> He planned all sorts of services and attractions that would appeal to a wealthy elite, such as a racetrack, a golf course, a sports club, and parks, and introduced a tramway line, the first in Egypt, to provide Heliopolis with a fast connection to Cairo. For the architecture of the city centre, its luxurious hotel, the Heliopolis Palace Hotel (today a presidential palace named al-Ittihādiyya), and most of its villas, he favoured an eclectic Neo-Islamic style that he mostly entrusted to the young Belgian architect Ernest Jaspar (1876–1940), although it seems that many other architects contributed to the overall eclecticism of the city's styles.<sup>35</sup> But for his own palace, which he intended as a *piéd-à-terre* where he could entertain Egypt's socialites, he chose the French architect Alexandre Marcel (1860–1928).<sup>36</sup> Marcel had already made his fame designing several pavilions at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, including the Pavilion of Cambodia, ostensibly based on the 12th-century Angkor Wat Temple (though most probably inspired by south Indian temples),<sup>37</sup> and a Japanese tower.<sup>38</sup> King Leopold II of Belgium (r. 1865–1909) bought the tower and asked Marcel to rebuild it in his estate near Brussels, where Baron Empain first saw it and was taken by it. This was the beginning of his relationship with Marcel.

It is not clear why Empain asked Marcel to build him a mock Indian temple replete with Hindu and Buddhist statues, animal scenes, and Indonesian demons in a city for whose public buildings he had already selected a more suitable Neo- or Baroque-Islamic style (Sakr 1993: 63–66; Van Loo 1994: 350–352). But one possible reason is that the idea was Marcel's, not Empain's, for the architect had just returned from India in 1906, where he had built a French-inspired, eclectic palace, looking like a truncated Fontainebleau, for the Maharaja Jagatjit Singh of Kapurthala (r.

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<sup>34</sup> On the planning of Heliopolis, see Garret 2001: 109–19; Volait and Minnaert 2003; Ilbert 1981; Raymond 2000: 329–333.

<sup>35</sup> On the architecture of Heliopolis and the work of Jaspar, see Van Loo 1994: 344–353; 2001; Volait 2008. On the various architects who contributed to the creation of the heavily Neo-Islamic but eclectic styles of Heliopolis's buildings, see Dobrowolska and Dobrowolski 2006: 33–155, esp. 145–55.

<sup>36</sup> Garret 2001: 116–18; Morice, 1929. Morice raises the issue of the extent to which Marcel, who was a mature and well-known architect as opposed to the young Jaspar, was involved in the planning of Heliopolis and in developing several types of the villas and buildings, which were clearly designed by him; see Volait 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Despite what the architect claimed, Cambodia does not seem to have been his inspiration. The arch of the main entry of Empain Palace seem to be copied from the Ajanta caves, the tower from north Indian temples, e.g. Bhubaneswar; see Harle 1994: fig. 92 for the former, and fig. 188 for the latter. The 'Cambodian' pavilion in Paris too does not seem to be at all Cambodian in inspiration, but also south Indian; Harle 1994: figs. 247, 252.

<sup>38</sup> On the phenomenon of freely interpreting Asian architecture in the colonial period and the role the discovery of Angkor Wat Temple played, see Herbelin 2013: 171–188; Flour 2014: 63–82.



1877–1947), who was another one of those ‘Oriental’ princes initiating new experiments of urban renewal with the aspiration to turn his city into a “Paris in the East”, Punjab this time (Raulet 1997: 54–68; Sharma 2012: 277–279).



Fig. 10. The Palace of Baron Empain, general view.

The question becomes more perplexing when we examine the interior of Empain’s Palace, designed and decorated by Marcel’s colleague Georges-Louis Claude (1879–1963) in a cheerful Baroque style with a magnificent spiralling marble stair (Claude-Scheiber and Camus 2000: 18; Volait, 2019: 31–32). The acute contrast between the interior and exterior of the palace points to a desire on the part of Baron Empain to create a flamboyant landmark in his new city without compromising his own preference for a familiarly conventional European living space. This is a well-known pattern in the 19th-century fascination with ‘Oriental’ architecture, which was mostly used for spectacle, as stage sets for entertainment, or as thin façades at exhibitions.<sup>39</sup> The interior spaces, with very few notable exceptions, had to accommodate the proper living arrangements for modern Europeans or European-educated ‘Oriental’ princes.

What probably drew Baron Empain to Marcel and Claude was that their pavilions in 1900 and later in Brussels were exactly what he wanted his Hindu Palace to be: purposefully exotic from the outside and recognisably European from the inside (fig. 11). In fact, the Palace of Baron Empain, one of the first in Egypt built with the

<sup>39</sup> An excellent study is Crinson 1996; see also Sweetman 1988: 112–59; Edwards 2000; Çelik 1992: 1–15.

modern material of concrete, had as its undisputed model not some distant Cambodian or Indian temple, but the fanciful Cambodian Pavilion Marcel built for the 1900 Paris Universal Exhibition.<sup>40</sup> The wow effect was what Baron Empain went after, and Marcel delivered it, especially with the way he planted his lone edifice at the pinnacle of a large, ascending terraced garden excessively adorned with rare exotic plants and even more exotic and risqué statues. The approach was calculated to intensify the sense of wonder as the visitor moves closer to the palace and notices its details.



Fig. 11. The Palace of Baron Empain, tower.

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<sup>40</sup> Marcel was to advertise his eclectic exoticised approach in a short illustrated booklet containing most of his designs (but not the Palace of Baron Empain in Cairo): Marcel 1924; Herbelin 2013.

The frivolity and giddiness that the extravagant palace was meant to induce among the elite invited to the Baron's frequent parties turned into macabre overtones after it lay deserted for forty years following its sale by Empain's heirs in 1957. Undoubtedly because of its bizarre architecture and outlandish statuary, wild stories began to circulate among the people of Cairo about secret rooms and tunnels underneath it, loud noise and apparitions at night in its forsaken, dusty garden, probably of youths seeking a quiet place for illicit activities, and meetings of secret cults in its empty rooms. These urban legends were not put to rest until finally, in 2005, the Egyptian government resolved the legal battle over its ownership, put it on the list of protected monuments, and replanted parts of its desolate garden.<sup>41</sup> Today, like the palaces of Sa'īd Ḥalīm, Sakākīnī, and many others, the Hindu Palace is empty and under a protracted operation of restoration that may drag on for years.<sup>42</sup> It too is destined to become a memento of Cairo's Belle Époque.

### 3 And many more

The story of Belle Époque Cairo is obviously not only that of palaces and their affluent and larger-than-life owners. The rest of the story would require looking at the new city that Khedive Ismā'īl established, as it metamorphosed from a serene exhibition-like urban frontage of premodern Cairo to a bustling metropolis where the two halves, traditional and modern, have been joined by commerce, infrastructure, and people's movements.<sup>43</sup> The subsequent growth of the unified city created all sorts of opportunities that made the palaces possible in the first place, as expressions of enormous concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, and that sometimes had to remove them to accommodate new functions that reflected the development of a capitalised economy. Thus new Cairo acquired office buildings and banks where business was conducted; villas and apartment buildings where a growing bourgeoisie, some Egyptian but mostly expatriate, dwelt; top-notch foreign and national schools and a university where they were educated; fancy department stores and boutiques where they shopped; cinemas, sports clubs, gardens, and cafés where they were entertained; embassies, ministries, and courthouses where they were represented and governed; mosques, churches, and synagogues where they worshipped; cemeteries where they were buried.

Most of those buildings, however, were inaccessible to the common Cairene people, whose vast majority was Muslim and Arab, except for those who cleaned them and served in them. Moreover, the popular and traditional neighbourhoods, where

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<sup>41</sup> Volait 2009c; 2013; Elyamani 2018.

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance, this recent article: al-Kurdī and az-Zāhid 2018.

<sup>43</sup> On the urban development of Cairo between the age of Ismā'īl and the 1952 Revolution, see Abu-Lughod 1965; 1971: 98–142; Raymond 2000: 333–338; AlSayyad 2011: 222–228; Rodenbeck 1998: 173–188.

most of the common Cairenes lived, were usually left to their own devices with minimal municipal investment. Resentment was slowly brewing until it exploded in 1952, first with the Great Cairo Fire of January 1952, which targeted ‘foreign’ buildings, and then, more effectively, with the Free Officers’ Revolution of 23 July 1952. The new regime that ensued abolished the royal system and ultimately forced many members of the aristocracy, made up of predominantly Turko-Circassian stock, and the Levantine and European magnates who controlled Egypt’s economy under colonial rule, out of the country after the Suez War of 1956, and confiscated their properties. Numerous Belle Époque palaces became public schools, government agencies, or were left empty and entangled in legal limbo (Elsheshtawy 2014). Today, the remnants of that era, some salvaged and rehabilitated, have become the embodiment of a bygone, largely re-imagined, cosmopolitan Belle Époque Cairo. The city, as it perched at the confluence of the Nile Delta, has never ceased in its millenarian history to attract all sorts of people, dreams, and ideas, and to remember them in stone (or steel, glass, and concrete).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Singerman and Amar 2006; Volait 2013; Sims 2010: 14–15 calls it “Cairo as nostalgia”. For a lyrical though quite orientalisising memoir on the Belle Époque in Egypt, see Aciman 2007. Abaza 2011 alerts us to the overlapping of real-estate machinations and nostalgia in the capitalisation of Belle Époque Cairo; see also Denis 2006: 52–54.

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