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Tahani Rached's "Giran"

Imperialist Architecture in Egypt

By LARRY PORTIS

It should be amusing to hear or read someone tell of an "architect of foreign policy", as if the establishment of a structure of power relationships is a work of construction with its technical and artistic expertise like any other. It is an aspect newspeak that comes to mind when viewing Tahani Rached's new documentary film *Giran* (Neighbors). For the subject is ominous in revealing the continuity of imperialist presence in Egypt —the keystone of Western control in the Middle East.

Rached reveals these relations by simply recounting the history of the diplomatic and upper-class quarter in Cairo constructed from plans elaborated in 1905 and completed by the 1920s. The idea was to situate the British embassy in an area removed and protected from the squalid humanity typical of Cairo, a city where misery prevails and where governance has traditionally meant rampant corruption and a lack of urban infrastructure, where buildings often simply collapse. Garden City was the name given to the site because the idea was to provide trees and gardens through which curving streets would wind between palatial residences and official buildings constructed in the most elegant fusion of art-deco and oriental splendor. Located near the bank of the Nile in central Cairo, it was a romantic setting where strollers dallied along the river in romantic, perfumed surroundings without fear of the populace.

It might be said that the construction of Garden City was symbolic of the transition between the long administrative suzerainty of Lord Cromer (Evelyn Baring) who fronted the British presence in Egypt for almost three decades until 1907, and the beginning of "independence" following the First World War. In principle, of course, Egypt was already a sovereign country, but the British simply could not leave the unfortunately irresponsible Egyptians to their own devices. The essence of Lord Cromer's policy was to ensure a minimum of food for the masses and to punish them severely and collectively should revolts occur. In addition, the Egyptian elites must be provided for and protected as titular equals to The Lord (as Baring was called by his aristocratic compatriots). Security was the watchword. Nothing should impede the economic and strategic benefits accruing to the British thanks to their controlling presence in Egypt.

It is mainly the survivors of this gentile world that Tahari Rached interviews in her arresting film. Most of them are of the generation remembering the golden years preceding the "National Revolution". The military coup d'état led by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1952 evicted a constitutional Egyptian monarchy still presided over discreetly by its English masters, as Britain lay powerless in the wake of a world war that put an end to the British Empire.

Here, a short historical review is perhaps necessary in order to put the fate of Garden City in perspective.

It was John Foster Dulles, President Eisenhower's powerful Secretary of State, who designated Egypt the key to U.S. control over the Middle East. Immediately after assuming his function in early 1953, he undertook a tour in the region in attempting to forge a "Northern Tier" of friendly Muslim countries. Having failed to accomplish that, he confided that the separation of Egypt from the rest of the Arab world was the vital step to be taken. But this persistent goal was not accomplished until 1978, when President Jimmy Carter presided over the first Camp David agreements resulting in diplomatic relations between Egypt and Israel, effectively severing Egypt's association with Syria and other countries with which it was allied. In return, the U.S. committed itself to generous transfers of capital—"foreign aid"—to Egypt, which meant that Israel and Egypt came to receive one-third of all U.S. assistance to foreign countries. This is still the case (unless we include expenditures in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan as "foreign aid"...). The money is used most essentially to maintain Egyptian elites in comfort and to provide sufficient armed forces to keep the population in line. Lord Cromer would have understood.

Now, the future of Garden City was determined by subsequent events. Because the Camp David agreements allowed Israel to attack Lebanon in 1982 without fear of retaliation from Syria, Jordan and Egypt, the U.S. intervened with troops and battle ships in order to "restore order" after having supported the murderous Israeli onslaught. This led to the car-bombing of the U.S. Embassy in April 1983. In October, buildings housing U.S. and French soldiers were truck-bombed with great loss of life.

The shock waves were received in Cairo. The U.S. Embassy building there, located in Garden City, was quickly razed to the ground and rebuilt by 1985 as a 17-story blockhouse. This disfigurement then led to additional destructions and the building of banks and other office buildings in a security-enhanced environment.

The events of 9-11 2001 completed the process. Massive steel barriers were constructed in streets near the U.S. Embassy and elsewhere, restricting public access and suffocating commercial activity. Conceived as an insulated elite community for diplomats and the bourgeoisie, Garden City is now basically a militarily protected enclave ruled by the United States. Any similarity with the new embassy building in Bagdad, for example, is entirely fortuitous.

After showing them a film of the original embassy building, Tahari Rached interviewed the former U.S. ambassador and his wife who had presided over the construction of the new building in the 1980s. "Wow," she exclaimed, "it was so beautiful!" "So why did we knock it down?" her husband disingenuously countered, as if he didn't know.

In effect, this is a film about the dishonesty, greed and blindness of several generations of imperialists whose perceptions are self-enclosed in accordance with their interests. Rached has uncovered cinematographic images of Garden City before its thrashing, and revealed transformations reflecting a total disregard for the Egyptian population, its interests and its cultural heritage.

Tahari Rached informed me, at the Mediterranean Film Festival (Montpellier, France, October 22-31), that she had never before "centered a film on the bourgeoisie". She did well to let this cultivated and articulate group express themselves without hindrance about their neighborhood. "Egypt was governed from Garden City," said one, and "Egypt belonged to us."

For the Egyptian residents of Garden City, the end of the monarchy was lived as a catastrophe. "After all," one says, "Egypt was a democracy before." There were different political parties, the university was coed and no climate of fear existed. For them, Egypt was open.

Nasser changed everything. Although many among the elite accepted the Revolution with equanimity, their efforts did not seem to be recognized. It is with a certain bitterness that they relate how property was seized, businesses were nationalized and the formerly privileged excluded from power. Bourgeois liberals were sometimes kept under house arrest.

For those with no political proclivities the shock was especially cultural. "In fact," said a still beautiful and gracious lady in French, "we were more European, more western than anything else." For her, Garden City was more an extension of Paris than part of Cairo. It is with bemused nostalgia, a sort of noblesse oblige that she reminisces: "we were so removed from the people, so totally Europeanized." Those were the good old days. "Religion was not oppressive" then, she continues. "I remember coming back to Egypt, and already at the airport I saw all these women wearing head scarves. 'Has Egypt become Christian?' I thought. 'Who are all these nuns that we see everywhere!'" Other former residents also explained: "if in the West we were Orientals, in Egypt we were considered to be Europeans."

Well, everything is relative. Time changes all. The people who remember the glory days of the inter-war period and those immediately following the Second World War would not have agreed with Sir Ronald Storrs— a young foreign service officer during the last years of Lord Cromer's tenure and then Military Governor General of Palestine during the first years of the British Mandate there. In his memoirs (*Orientalism*, 1937), Storrs called Garden City a "block of concrete" and compared it unfavorably with the garden neighborhoods of Alexandria. But he was really probably thinking of the luxuriant grounds of the family estates in England, the center of the world.

Still, the British residents of Garden City fared not too badly during Nasser's republic, in contrast to the Egyptian grandees, one family of whom lost its mansion in Garden City when the American Library in Cairo burned down in 1960. "Generously," its current patriarch explained sardonically to Tahari Rached, "the government gave the Americans our house to make up for their loss."

By contrast, Lord Cromer's palatial residence was not expropriated during Nasser's stewardship, merely the grounds nearest to the Nile. It is true, however, that Cromer's grandson did not return to live in it until the first war against Iraq. He is there now. It is his base in serving the cause in Iraq and elsewhere. This well-bred and, of course, well-spoken gentleman explains to Rached the role of diplomats in forging personal relationships between the greats of the world. Discrete, he did not mention how Garden City has been transformed, disfigured rather, by the United-Statesian ascendancy in Egypt.

At the end of her film, Tahari Rached visits the home of the revered, politically engaged intellectual Mahmoud Amin El Alem (1923-2009), a dissident who had the distinction of being imprisoned by both the Nasser and Sadat governments. After one hour 40 minutes of discussion by imperialist diplomats and other representatives of the ruling classes, a truly great Egyptian puts everything into humanistic and critical perspective.

Tahari Rached has also made films about Beirut, women in Egypt and in Palestine. *Giran* (Neighbors) is now being presented in festivals in Europe and North America. For more information contact: mona.assaad@studiomar.com

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