

## **A Moment in the American Desert: Hassan Fathy's Dar al-Islam**

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Dar al-Islam is the realized vision of an American-born Muslim, an American-educated Saudi businessman, the award-winning architect Hassan Fathy (1900-89). The purpose-built educational center and mosque was built in the early 1980s, sits in New Mexico's mesa landscape, and today functions as an educational retreat.

During the late 1970s Abdullah Nurdin Durkee and his wife Nura envisioned the construction of an Islamic village in the United States. During a trip to Makkah they met Sahl Kabbani, a Saudi businessman educated in the United States who felt a connection and desired to contribute in some manner. Together they decided to create an Islamic village that would also function as an educational center and retreat. Later on Nura Durkee, while also praying in Makkah, met Mothie and Johara, daughters of the Saudi king at the time, both of whom offered a financial gift to start the project. The group searched for a suitable site and eventually settled on Abiquiu, NM, due to the abundance of available land for a relatively low cost, the remote location, and the landscape's similar qualities with those in the Middle East.

In Abiquiu, 3,450 hectares were purchased in the rugged backcountry, populated with flat-topped mesas and a verdant valley near the Chama river. Abdullah Naseef, then rector of the King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah,

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joined and co-founded Dar al-Islam's incorporation with Kabbani and Durkee. Already in Abiquiu there was a small Muslim population who wished to have a purpose-built mosque.

The vision for a new Muslim community required the design conceptualization by an architect interested in the unique qualities of the project and the site. It was serendipitous that Durkee, while in Cairo, was introduced to Hassan Fathy – an architect who was just gaining notoriety for his far-reaching architectural approaches that carefully considered environment and tradition. Fathy was so enthusiastic about the project that he offered his expertise without charge.

Educated in the European beaux-arts tradition of design at King Fuad University (now Cairo University) in 1926, the architect eventually and decisively shed these lessons and embraced the history and traditions of construction of his native Egypt. He believed that architecture should look to vernacular and traditional approaches and used local materials, and that architects should enable and collaborate with those for whom they build, especially the poor – all very radical ideas at the time.

Fathy's revolutionary *Architecture for the Poor* (University of Chicago Press: 1976) encapsulated his vision of design and the role of designers: architecture should be built from what lies underfoot and architects should look to generations of traditional methods that embodied symbiosis with the context and thus were able to create comfortable environments. *Architecture* focused on his experiences with designing a mud-construction village in Gournia (Egypt) during the mid-1940s that utilized ancient Nubian catenary vault and dome construction and the local residents' participation. All of this was a profound departure from the prevailing architectural language of the time.

When Fathy won an Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1980 and the International Union of Architects (UIA) award in 1984, he finally gained acclaim in his home country. Until this international recognition his mud constructions had not been taken seriously by mainstream design, which was dominated by western influence and approaches. Fathy's language of design was seen as lowly and shunned by all, including peasants. However, with this increased recognition and publication of his works and ideas, architectural movements began to emerge that focused on small-scale, locally rooted designs that empowered various communities worldwide.

Dar al-Islam, which turned out to be Fathy's only North American project, most fortunately occurred during the height of his career. Enamored with the similarities of landscape and adobe construction to his homeland,

he spent months on the design in his studio-home-architecture hub-guest house in Darb al-Labbana in old Cairo and received the daily feedback of Abiquiu resident Walter Abdur Ra'uf Declerck, who stayed with him.

In the summer of 1980 Fathy came to Abiquiu and brought with him two Nubian masons (*mu'allimīn*) from Upper Egypt who had worked with him on the Gournia project. These masons demonstrated and taught locals and the various people present all of the relevant ancient techniques of mud brick construction of Nubian catenary vaults and domes as well as the methods passed down by generations of masons.

Throughout the construction process, the project's costs escalated because of the necessary additions to the materials required to meet local building code requirements and accommodate Abiquiu's much cooler nights and winters, which mandated, among other items, concrete exterior finishes and embedded heated electric meshes. Only the mosque and the madrasa structures were completed. In addition to the increased costs, the number of residents never grew to the anticipated 150 families. As a result, the master plan for the "First Islamic Village" in the United States was not realized. Originally incorporated as a non-profit educational compound, Dar al-Islam continued robustly as an educational center on Islam and host for retreats and educational groups. It managed to sustain itself through lucrative sales of some of its land.

I read *Architecture* as a young architecture student visiting Egypt during the early 1990s and, like many others, was overwhelmed by the clear simplicity and beauty of Fathy's vision. During graduate school, I looked closely at his projects, especially Dar al-Islam, in order to understand various approaches and the phenomena of designing mosques in the West. Although I visited Gournia and some of his other projects, I had never visited Dar al-Islam until this year. I wondered what would remain after nearly four decades. It was therefore exhilarating for me to finally visit this site during my recent participation in the Architecture Culture Spirituality (ACS) 7 symposium held nearby in Abiquiu, NM.

Settlements in New Mexico are spread out, and the route to Dar al-Islam was a journey. Arriving at the base of the mesa, we then had a ten-minute walk on a gravel path heading upward in order to arrive at the mosque and madrasa, located on a plateau. Our small group was greeted by one of the original residents and Muslim community members who had witnessed the project's construction, the Belgian-born American convert Walter Abdur Ra'uf Declerck. Today, the mosque and madrasa are opened only for scheduled retreats, meetings, or tours, and thus we had the premises completely to ourselves.

The low-rising structures with the updated pale stucco finish were nestled brightly in the desert landscape composed of table-topped mesa land formations and desert flora. As was the case in Egypt, the harsh sunlight was a perfect compliment to the sculptural forms because the sharp shadows emphasized the roofline of vaults and domes as well as the wall surface's detailing. The windows and doors were all framed with either triangulated claustra openings or recesses in the wall to accentuate them. The finely crafted wooden doors, each with geometric motifs reminiscent of the Islamic world, were all fabricated locally.

The mosque interior was as intimate and calm as imagined. As Fathy espoused in his *Architecture*, the domes and vaults increased the height of the spaces and improved air circulation. Moreover, the construction of thick walls has enabled the physical building to passively create much cooler spaces than the harsh temperatures outside. The focus in the prayer hall – the *mihrāb* – was composed of a series of three recessed sculptural arches and an adjacent low-rising wooden *minbar*. Overhead, the domes and vaults created a sculpted verticality that, like the exterior, utilized natural daylight to emphasize the forms. The prayer hall was furnished with simple hand-made carpets, and the designated women's prayer area in the back was separated by arches and wooden lattices. However, Declerck informed us that often the numbers of worshippers was small and that the women pray in the main space behind the men. Located behind the women's area is a small triangulated room with built-in benches, copies of the Qur'an, and Islamic literature, all of which makes the space conducive for teaching and reading. The washroom facilities' beautiful interior tile work highlights the built-in ablution stations.

While the community and architect were considering the mosque's location, they contacted the Army for the shortest path to orienting the building toward Makkah. According to Declerck the response was that due polar NNE to Makkah was the shortest route, a decision that could not be derived from a flattened map of the world.

The madrasa complex, a far larger structure than the mosque, was populated with posters, drawings, and works by students who had stayed there and evidenced its continuous usage. The mosque and madrasa buildings have been meticulously maintained with a keen eye on leakages and exterior finishes through vigilant conservation campaigns two to three times a year.

Evocative spatial moments in the madrasa included the masonry dome room and the sculpted recesses formed by the arches. The school's heart proved to be the oasis-like courtyard, with its built-in benches on the perimeter,

tiled floor, and surrounding fruit trees. The harsh New Mexico sun was further augmented with the lightweight screen covering the courtyard opening, but one that still allowed in a generous amount of natural light.

Like other small remote and extraordinary spaces, there are conflicting reactions to such a place: the desire for more accessibility and use and the understanding that it is precisely the difficulty in arriving and the hidden location that underscore Dar al-Islam's intimate and enduring qualities.

The vision of Durkee, Kabbani, and Fathy for an ideal Muslim space in the United States has grown. Today, this small desert complex sustains itself with the belief that education is paramount and thus functions as a small hub of sharing and educating Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam.

Declerck is still there. Should you decide to visit (by appointment), he will greet you with his careful smile and tell you of the site's history and of his time with "Hassan Bey." The mosque and madrasa have been carefully maintained and sit majestically in the landscape. Yet they disappear once you walk down the winding path. However, driving away on the highway, the pale undulating vaulted and domed roofline emerge momentarily and elusively disappear again within the mesa landscape of New Mexico's Chama valley.

Sharp New Mexico Desert light on the undulating forms of Dar al-Islam's Mosque and Madrasa complex designed by Hassan Fathy.

