The Architecture and Representation of Andreaos and Nora

Edited by Amale AKawi
Janet Abu-Lughod, my late mother, would have loved to be at a conference on architecture and the representation of Arab cities, and she would have loved to see the discussions that followed it in this publication. She loved cities, and Arab cities held a special place for her. We all belong to intellectual lineages. We hope that we will be remembered by those who come after. Many of us believe that books carry our legacies. Her books on Cairo and Rabat are part of her legacy. But so is her personal library, which now is housed in Amman, at Columbia University’s Global Center, where new generations will have access to the books she learned from and loved.

My mother loved architecture. It was a family joke to mimic her enthusiasm about Islamic art and architecture by exclaiming, after a trip we took across North Africa in 1969, “Look at that beautiful doorway!” Yet she had little patience for “representation,” except to critique Orientalist representations of “the Islamic city,” whose isnad (chain of authority) she traced back to an article published in 1928 by William Marçais titled “L’islamisme et la vie urbaine” and whose continuing influence she feared in the misguided efforts of contemporary Arab planners to recreate “Islamic cities” by edict.¹ Later, her deep knowledge of the histories of Arab cities would make her question Eurocentric representations of the world’s networks.² Cities were, for her, for living in, and people made cities over time within social, legal, and political contexts. That is what interested her, as well as the comparisons to be made among urban forms and functions.

In this essay, I draw from an unpublished intellectual memoir my mother wrote when in her seventies to offer some insight into how she came to work on Arab cities and what she studied about them. She traced her interest in cities to her early concerns with prejudice and poverty and her opposition to racial segregation in US cities, starting with the place she grew up, Newark, New Jersey. When she moved to Chicago as a young college student, she was horrified by the white ghetto she found herself in (Hyde Park) and remembers picketing all-white skating rinks. “Like many other young idealists eventually drawn into sociology—a field I had never even heard of when I set out for the University of Chicago in 1945, just barely turned seventeen and decidedly wet behind the ears—I wanted to fight injustice.”
She explained her next move, into urban planning, as follows. She met a young man at a dance and politely asked him what he was doing. He told her about a new program being established at the university. It was 1948. The new program was in planning.

This appealed to me because it was then believed that social pathologies were "caused" by bad housing environments (ah, innocence!). What better way to solve the problems of the world than by putting knowledge to use in action. I soon transferred from sociology to planning, filled with the hubris (and unrealistic hopes) of having found my métier. Our three-year program of study focused on two issues: first, planning housing, cities, and even river basins in the United States; and second (to me a complete revelation), planning economic development for "backward" nations. This latter was as exotic as anthropology, but I remember feeling very uncomfortable about our presumptuousness... In our small collaborative workshops we laid out ambitious research projects and, in God-like fashion, translated our values into "solutions," independent of economic constraints, the realities of political implementation, and (I am ashamed to say) the participation and guidance of those being planned for!

Fairly quickly she became disillusioned. She realized she had taken a wrong turn.

City planners at best were "servants" of politicians and beholden to real estate interests and financiers; the "public good" I thought planning could achieve was not uppermost on their minds. This became clear when as director of research for the American Society of Planning Officials I read racialized zoning ordinances and recognized that the chief purpose of planning was to segregate people by class and to "protect" and enhance returns on investment. It was also becoming clearer that the good intentions of housing reformers who should have known better were likely to end in disaster.

It was around then that she met and married my father, a Palestinian refugee from Jaffa, an Arab city much beloved by its inhabitants. Coincidentally, one of her planning projects for "exotic" locations had been a water project for Palestine, so she was not unfamiliar with the place. A few years later, after he
finished his undergraduate degree and then his PhD at Princeton, she moved to Egypt with him and her two small children—my sister and myself. It was 1957. He had been offered a job with UNESCO. A city kid, she couldn’t stand living at the rural development center in Sirs al-Layyar, where he worked. So she moved us to Cairo and began to teach urban sociology at the American University in Cairo.

Few personal-cum-academic experiences were more profound! Virtually nothing I assumed I knew about cities (with Chicago the Ur prototype) had much relevance to the crowded, bustling, and to me, baffling metropolis of Cairo, whose physical, social, and cultural patterns had been laid down successively over its one thousand years of existence. How could I use the city as a “laboratory,” as I had been taught to do, when I had little of the language, almost no historical background, and kept getting lost? I needed so much! I had to give myself crash courses in history (discovering my affinity to a field I had never studied). I had to gain as much language immersion as I had time for... And I had to make sense of its spatial and social patterns, so different from cities I had known... The best part, however, was explorations with an intrepid band of bright, bilingual, upper-middle-class girls who had innocently signed up for my course in urban sociology. Since their protected lives made them as ignorant as I about large areas of the city, we learned together—wandering around on foot, driving through areas such as the unique City of the Dead that they had never seen, observing housing and street life—and talking to people.

Her four years in Egypt were utterly transformative.

Even after our return to the States in 1961, I continued to study and write until my book on Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious was finally finished in 1967. [This was her PhD thesis, written while she had, by this time, four children.] It was not published until 1971. I am deeply gratified that this book, now a “collector’s item,” is still considered the definitive study of that city. (At least, when I return to Cairo, I am greeted enthusiastically by many Egyptians who are unaware that I ever wrote anything before or after!)
Her interest in Arab cities broadened:

Ever since completing my book on Cairo, I had considered comparing Cairo to other cities in the Arab world, especially those in North Africa that had been transformed under French colonial rule.... The Europeanized quarters of Cairo had been planned even before British colonial rule. No legal attempts to separate European settlers from "natives" were imposed, although class differences served to "sift and sort." The situation was quite different in Algeria, Tunisia, and especially in the cities of the French "zone" of Morocco, where planned apartheid achieved its most remarkable "success." Although my original too ambitious plan had been to compare Algiers, Tunis, and Rabat, the book I eventually wrote dealt with "urban apartheid" in Morocco. I uncovered the full depth of French racism and was able to trace how law (and force) succeeded in constructing and maintaining radical segregation between "natives" and colonial settlers, thereby assuring the full exploitation of Moroccan labor and resources. I still think that this is the best book I ever wrote, although French scholars hated it.

Of her next major project, Before European Hegemony, she wrote:

Ever since my self-taught courses on world history when researching Cairo, I had become increasingly annoyed by Max Weber's dismissal of Islam and, in general, and with the self-congratulatory narratives about the "Rise of the West" written by Western historians, which took the superiority of Western culture for granted. I knew that China and Egypt, inter alia, had long been innovators in culture, literature, and technology, and that long-distance trade had connected those two centers of power with one another and with a large number of intermediary points—long before the West "rose." Furthermore, I had been reading urban histories over the years, just out of curiosity, and was struck with the fact that many of these places had important connections to one another. In addition, in my various travels I had casually visited many museums in Europe and Asia and had noticed that, regardless of where I went, many of the most beautiful objects I saw had been made between 900 and 1300 A.D., a time when Europe was still in shadow. I kept hoping I could find a book that described and explained the world in this period. I never expected to have to write it.
By the time she finished Before European Hegemony, she had moved to New York, having taught for almost twenty years at Northwestern University. For the next couple of decades, she would turn her gaze back to the United States. She embarked on major comparative studies of America’s global cities—New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Her final book was a comparative study of race riots in these three cities, returning her in the end to the interests that had driven her since high school in Newark: the injustices of racism and racial segregation. But she never lost her love of Cairo, returning there when she could and keeping up with the literature.

In the last year of her life, when she was mostly housebound, I hired a graduate student to go to my mother’s apartment and catalogue her library. She had agreed with my idea, enthusiastically endorsed by Safwan Masri, then director of the newly opened Columbia Global Center in Amman, that it would be wonderful to donate her books to the center. I had just visited and noticed that they had no books in their reading room. And I discovered that they were developing an urban studies and architecture focus, through the GSAPP’s Studio-X and its director, Nora Akawi. But when it came down to it, my mother was reluctant to part with her books. “Not now,” she said.

Still, I thought maybe my mother would enjoy the process of seeing her books taken off the shelves, one by one, for cataloguing. We went bookcase by bookcase. The volumes were arranged in terms of subject areas related to her shifting interests and projects. In the living room were the books she had worked on most recently. Books about American cities—particularly New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Berenice Abbott’s black-and-white photographs of New York. Books of maps. Encyclopedias. Books on globalization. Books on race relations. Books on housing policy and gentrification. These were related to her first New York–based research—a collective study with her graduate students at the New School of the Lower East Side, From Urban Village to East Village. Tucked in among these were a couple of precious shelves of books by her students and colleagues, personally inscribed to her.

In the front hallway were art books, mostly of Islamic art and architecture—those doorways (and carpets, mosques, and engraved metal urns) she had so admired. In the entrance to her apartment were books about medieval cities and trade networks. Her thirteenth-century world. Her bedroom held the oldest of them all. Here were the books about Cairo, Tunis, Baghdad, Damascus, and other Arab cities. Planning documents. Government statistical abstracts. Magazines from UNESCO, UN Habitat, and the Aga Khan Foundation, for which she had once served as a juror. She had given away many books to students when she retired and lost her office at the New School. These were in anthropology, psychology, and general sociology. And she had given me her very old
books about Egypt—like Winifred Blackman’s, *The Fellāhin of Upper Egypt*. There was no room for these in her apartment.

The final bookcase, crowding her bed, held her own publications and offprints and the books of family and family friends, from my first (*Veiled Sentiments*), to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (dedicated to her and my father), to my father’s, including the groundbreaking volume in which her famous article on “The Demographic Transformation of Palestine” appeared: *The Transformation of Palestine*. When he moved back to Palestine in 1992, my father had taken all the books in Arabic they had collected from the Cairo booksellers in the late 1950s and ’60s. He donated these, along with the rest of his academic library (and the bookshelves!), to the Birzeit University Library.

I had secretly hoped that the library would trigger memories and that my mother would be inspired to talk about her books and her life as we catalogued. Mostly she didn’t feel like it. But one day when I came by for a visit, I found her sitting with a very old book on the dining table that now doubled as her desk. She touched the beige cloth cover of this large volume with loving care. She turned the pages slowly to show me, her eyes alive. Carefully she opened up the delicate fold-out maps. I could see her handwritten notes penciled in the margins. She was clearly moved by seeing this book again.

I then remembered. When David Sims, a Cairo-based urban planner, had asked her to write a foreword to his book, *Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City out of Control*, she had been excited. It was, I believe, the last academic writing she did. She loved his social-spatial approach, was impressed with the maps and statistics, and endorsed his political-economic analysis of the city’s growth. It was use, function, and change in cities that interested her. She had an abiding interest in politics and finance that she had first explored as a budding urban planner, and these were the themes of David Sims’s book.

She had been shocked, though, that he had not cited one work that she considered crucial. It was the only real flaw, she believed, in his well-researched work. She told him so. I now recognized that this old book she was so fondly showing me was the book she had scolded him for not citing. It was Marcel Clerget’s dissertation, *Le Caire: étude de géographie urbaine et d’histoire économique*. She saw herself in a lineage that went back to Clerget. She saw David as carrying forward this lineage. My mother respected history. Not just the histories of Arab cities and those who have built them—from architects to planners to ordinary people—but also the histories of those who have tried to understand and write about them.

Our family is proud that Janet Abu-Lughod’s library has now found an excellent home in Amman, a city she visited many times as it was where her much-loved mother-in-law lived. Columbia’s Global Center will ensure that these treasures are made available to students and researchers in the region. I
had wanted to be able to donate Clerget’s *Le Caire* to the library as well. But this time, it is I who find myself not quite ready to let go. I can’t forget the look of love in my mother’s eyes as she showed me this book about Cairo.

But I did find a few more special books and pamphlets for the library. They include some original offprints of the work of André Raymond and some works by Nezar AlSayyad, a younger Egyptian colleague of whom she was fond. These are two scholars who are very much part of that family who have been drawn to study Cairo. And we are contributing a copy of her own book, long out of print, that has become what she called “a collector’s item”: *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious*. May the city have many more years and emerge victorious. And may those who have studied and loved this great Arab city live on through it.

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10 David Sims, *Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City out of Control* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010).