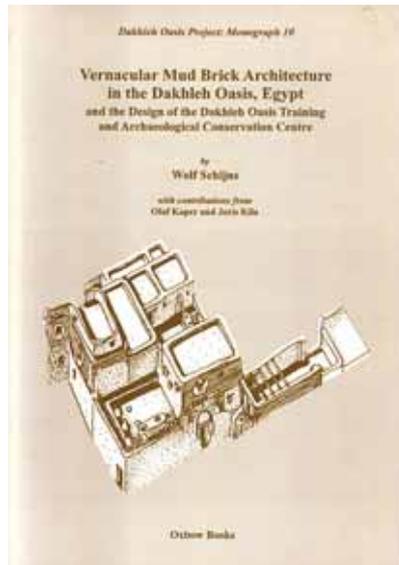




BOOK REVIEWS

Schijns, W. With contributions from O. Kaper & J. Kila. 2008.
Vernacular Mud Brick Architecture in the Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt
and the Design of the Dakhleh Oasis Training and Archaeological
Conservation Centre. - Oxford, Oxbow (Dakhleh Oasis Project
Monograph 10)

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Much has changed in the environment of the Dakhleh Oasis since the research published in this monograph was carried out in 1997, but this does not diminish its value. Rather it emphasizes the need for further thorough documentation of traditional habitats in Egypt before they disappear entirely, swept away by a tide of structures of concrete, steel, fired brick and cheap limestone blocks. The impetus for this study was provided by the design and construction, in traditional materials, of a centre for training and archaeological conservation: a laudable ambition although one that has subsequently proved difficult to sustain. The intro-

duction notes the still 'lively' tradition of building in mud brick in the oasis while commenting on the threat of modern forms of construction. As a regular visitor to the oasis over the past decade, I would observe that the architectural tradition discussed in this monograph is now virtually dead, being tenuously sustained by the conservation activities of Dr. Fred Leemhuis in the town of al-Qasr and a few other individuals concerned with the use of mud brick in archaeological contexts.

Chapter 2 of the monograph gives the geographical and historical background to the building of the conservation and training centre. This

is an excellent, concise and extremely informative overview of the material. The authors have included at the end of this chapter an introduction to the work of Hassan Fathy with particular reference to his buildings in the Oases of Dakhleh and Khargeh. This appears to be an afterthought, and sits rather oddly within the chapter: it would have been better off in the following chapter dedicated to a description of the mud brick architecture of the oasis. Although the authors observe correctly (p. 12) that Fathy's work suffered from a lack of cultural awareness (people did not want to live in domed structures they associated with funerary architecture), they do not address the fact that Fathy's architecture, though built of mud brick, also represented an alien intrusion within the oasis. The use of multiple cross-ventilated shell vaults that is the key visual and structural component of his architecture has no historical precedent in Dakhleh, being an import from Nubia. Traditional domestic architecture in Dakhleh is flat roofed. One has to go back to late-antique prototypes to find elliptical vaulting being used ubiquitously, and then as part of massively insulated, often multi-storey, structures in which there is no external expression of the vaulting. Fathy's cross-ventilated vaults represent a completely different environmental approach to the problem of building in such hot and arid contexts to that adopted historically in Dakhleh.

Chapter 3 discusses the history of the study of mud brick architecture in the oasis, the distribution of the ancient settlements in the oasis and their urban fabric as well as offering a typology of buildings and a survey of construction techniques. Particularly startling are the aerial photographs of the older settlements dating from 1965 in comparison to modern satellite imagery that can be viewed on GoogleEarth. We learn (p. 17) that it is generally assumed that the traditional domestic architecture of the oases is a direct descendant from ancient Egypt. Once again, however, any meaningful discussion about the place of late-antique domestic architecture in this sequence is absent: peculiar given the prevalence of these sites in the oases (Roman vaulting is only mentioned briefly in Chapter 2 [p. 9] and in this chapter on p. 25). This architecture is of course dominated by the use of the elliptical vault and spherical pendentive dome. Why did it fall out of use, being eminently suited to an environment where wood

has always been a precious resource? The proposed continuity between pharaonic and mediæval/Islamic structures was clearly interrupted by new forms of architecture, at least in the domain of dwellings, and this is something that should not be allowed to pass unremarked.

The organisation of the material related to the typology of buildings in the ancient settlements in Chapter 3 is also haphazard (as is the selection of images): surely an element such as the minaret should have been included within this section together with a fuller treatment of mosques rather than being tacked on to the end of the chapter. Also absent is any developed discussion of funerary architecture, though one photograph (figure 30) of tombs in the cemetery at Hindaw is included, clearly demonstrating the major cultural value of these structures. Obviously the main focus of the monograph is domestic architecture, but in a chapter entitled a 'Description of the Mud Brick Architecture of Dakhleh' one would expect to find more information on other typologies. The authors are generally good at giving transliterations of the Arabic terms for particular architectural features, but more could have been done. Names for a palm-rib fence (*zariba*), palm ribs (*jarrid*), acacia (*sunt*) might have been useful additions to the given vocabulary, for example, as would words for different types of plaster finish, and door and window elements.

The overlap between ethnography and architecture is explored further in Chapter 4, dedicated to case studies of three houses in Bishendi and Balat. Valuable though these studies are, the architectural drawings are not always arranged to facilitate comprehension. It was particularly hard, for example, to correlate the (partial and at a different scale) north elevation of House 1 with the plans as drawn (facing pages 34 & 35). This may be a problem to do with the design of the monograph, but the effort involved in making the drawings (both in two- and three-dimensions) is not matched by any corresponding effort to present them in a legible manner where they can be easily cross-referenced. A consistency in scaling would also have been a desideratum. This chapter does, however, contain some evocative pencil sketches and photographs that amply demonstrate the wonderful plastic qualities of the mud brick buildings it focuses on.

Chapter 5 briefly presents the completed structure of the centre for training and archaeological conservation. This is a functional and understated structure, built entirely out of local materials and well-adapted to its sloping site. The plans provided unfortunately lack a scale. The bibliography provided at the end of the monograph is extremely thorough and most useful for anyone interested in pursuing the subject further.

The opinion of this reviewer is that, in the absence of a more complete study of the vernacular architecture of Dakhleh, this monograph makes a valuable contribution to the subject. It is to be hoped that the task of carrying out a fuller architectural survey that also considers in greater detail the ethnographic aspects of this vanishing habitat is taken up before those few remaining builders working with the technology of mud brick have all passed on.

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