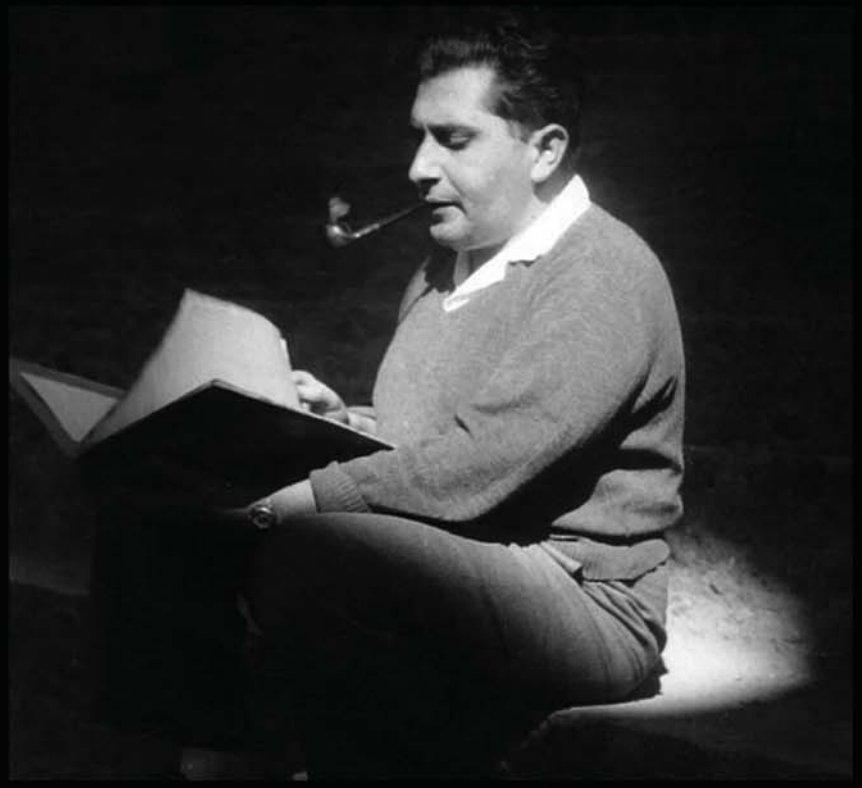
Egyptian Architects

100 Years of Architecture



Naoum Shebib (1915 - 1985)

Egyptian Architects

Naoum Shebib 2016

Architecture constitutes a fundamental determinant of a society's civilization, serving as the material expression of the peoples culture. The landmarks and antiquities for which Egypt is justifiably proud today—bequeathed by our history, encompassing pyramids, temples, churches, mosques, houses, and palaces—are all architectural achievements masterfully crafted by our ancestors. Through these works, they chronicled the civilization of their era and documented the history of the Egyptian individual and society. The contributions of the Egyptian architect have persisted to the present day, enduring even through periods of civilizational setbacks that may have punctuated its extensive seven-thousand-year historical journey.

Egypt entered a new historical cycle at the close of the eighteenth and the dawn of the nineteenth century. This era commenced with a revolution against the decline experienced by Egypt under its status as a relatively peripheral province within the centralized Caliphate. The subsequent phase began at the turn of the twentieth century, catalyzed by the shock of the centralized Caliphate's decline and the West's mobilization for dominance and control over the East. Egypt underwent this historical transformation both internally and externally. Muhammad Ali's drive for development, followed by the members of the Muhammad Ali dynasty throughout the nineteenth century, involved attempts at civilizational engagement between Egypt (the historical land and place)and Europe (the center of modern civilization and enlightenment).

These endeavors occasionally succeeded and, at other times, suffered setbacks. The anticipated or expected culmination was the declaration of the Caliphate's fall and the remapping of the East through a colonial Western perspective dictated by the global powers of the time: Britain and France. Conversely, in Egypt, the heart of the East, national movements and tendencies emerged across all domains (political, economic, and intellectual) and at all levels, including architecture, as a cultural tributary of society. The early twentieth century saw the prominence of figures such as Mustafa Kamel, Talaat Harb, Muhammad Abduh, Ahmed Lutfi El-Sayed, and Taha Hussein.

With the advent of the new century, a cultural discourse arose concerning the inherited versus the imported, framed within the conflict between the national liberation movement and its aspirations, and the movement for modernization and its inevitability. At the core of this dialogue, a generation of pioneering Egyptian architects emerged in the early twentieth century.

Two parallel trajectories were established, charting the course for the societal and cultural transformation of the community and its creative manifestations, with architecture at the forefront:

The first approach oriented itself toward self examination and discovery, and the authentication of architecture; sometimes adopting a traditional, purely derivative approach, and at other times seeking to evolve the inherited legacy to achieve contemporary relevance. It initially manifested in revivals of Pharaonic architecture, such as the University of Alexandria, or Islamic architecture, exemplified by the Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and the Physicians' Syndicate in Qasr Al-Ainy, among others. While this movement was initially, albeit temporarily, led by numerous foreign, Orientalist architects, it subsequently launched into successive cycles and directions driven by pioneering Egyptian architects, such as Mustafa Pasha Fahmy. This trajectory was later profoundly deepened by the two poles of Egyptian traditional architecture, Ramses Wissa Wassef and Hassan Fathy. The movement did not cease with them; rather, its scope continued to expand, sometimes with considerable depth and, at other times, with superficial, even comical, imitation, persisting to this day.

The second approach pursued the modernization of architectural visions within the framework of renewing the then-contemporary

discourse and engaging with the multiple tributaries and cultures of Western European civilization. The cultural enlightenment journeys of the pioneering generation of architects to Europe exerted a direct influence on Egyptian architecture during the first quarter of the twentieth century. All returned, each carrying their vision and aspirations for modernizing the architectural movement through what they had learned, experienced, and practiced abroad. The creative output of these architects constituted the cornerstone and turning point for contemporary Egyptian architecture, as generally understood. Returning figures included Ali Labib Gabr, Muhammad Sherif Noaman, Mahmoud Riad, Muhammad Raafat, and Mahmoud El-Hakim, who completed their studies in England and carried the torches of enlightenment and change from their perspective. They were contemporaries of the brothers Hassan and Hussein Shafie, Ahmed Sharmi, Ahmed Sidky, and others who completed their studies at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. The architectural movement and the returning architects devoted their energies to advancing the development process and consciously bridging the civilizational gap with contemporary developments, striving to keep pace with the accelerating movement of civilization. The architectural movement experienced a cultural dynamism until the mid-twentieth century, sourced from a diversity of intellectual tributaries, existing not in conflict but in a harmonious coexistence. This momentum continued with the generation of architects returning from new sources of Modernism, such as those inspired by figures like Le Corbusier, whose ideas were adapted and localized by pioneers such as Sayed Karim, who returned from his studies in Switzerland to constitute a new, advanced tributary.

Egypt and its architecture have never been insular, particularly during periods of cultural growth. The Egyptian architectural movement was not confined to its own architects; consistently, it maintained an open stance and played a regional role in the East. This national architectural renaissance was contemporary with, influenced by, and engaged with foreign architects, some of whom were Orientalists and others who became “Egyptianized” (Mutamassirun). Many of these individuals became integrated into Egyptian society and its cultural movement, examples being Antoine Nahas, Albert Zananiri, Raymond Antonious, and Charles Ayrout, among others.

Thus, the first half of the twentieth century in Egypt, spanning the period between World War I and the end of World War II, witnessed a serious articulation of the issue of architectural cultural and civilizational identity. The Egyptian architectural movement achieved progressive surges and revolutions at times, and foundational or traditional ones at others. Yet, all were seeking a new crystallization to position architecture among the determinants of a new society’s civilization in its new world. Regardless of the critical assessment of these attempts and their relative successes or failures, they authentically expressed the requirements of the era and society with its intellectual and social duality between traditionalism and modernization , between the imported and the indigenous perception, thereby shaping, alongside other cultural and creative tributaries, a distinct state of “Zamnyat Masriya” in the twentieth century.

Naoum Shebib

Life

- Born on November 28, 1915, in Cairo, Egypt.
- Died on May 13, 1985, in Montreal, Canada.

Graduation and Academic Qualifications

- Obtained a Bachelor's degree in Architecture with High Distinction and Honors from the Faculty of Engineering at Fouad I University (currently Cairo University) in 1937.
- Obtained a Master's degree in Engineering and Soil Mechanics from Cairo University in 1954.
- Obtained a Master's degree in Structural Engineering from Cairo University in 1956.

Career Progression

- Founded Al-Mimar General Contracting Company, an architectural, structural engineering, and contracting firm, in 1940.
- Worked as a construction consultant for SNC Lavalin in Canada between 1974 and 1977.

Structural Innovations

- Obtained a patent for what is known as the Shebib Dome, a concrete structure designed to cover wide spans in buildings.
- Invented a special type of foundation suitable for use in soils that cannot withstand concentrated loads.
- Developed a type of pile equipped with a high-strength arm for use in soil leveling.

Architectural Works

Residential Buildings

- Radio Tower, the first skyscraper in Downtown Cairo - 1954.
- Thabet Thabet Tower (Belmont Building, the second skyscraper in Cairo) in Garden City - 1958.
- Charles Quenetz Building - 5 Bolis Hanna Street, Dokki.

Public Buildings

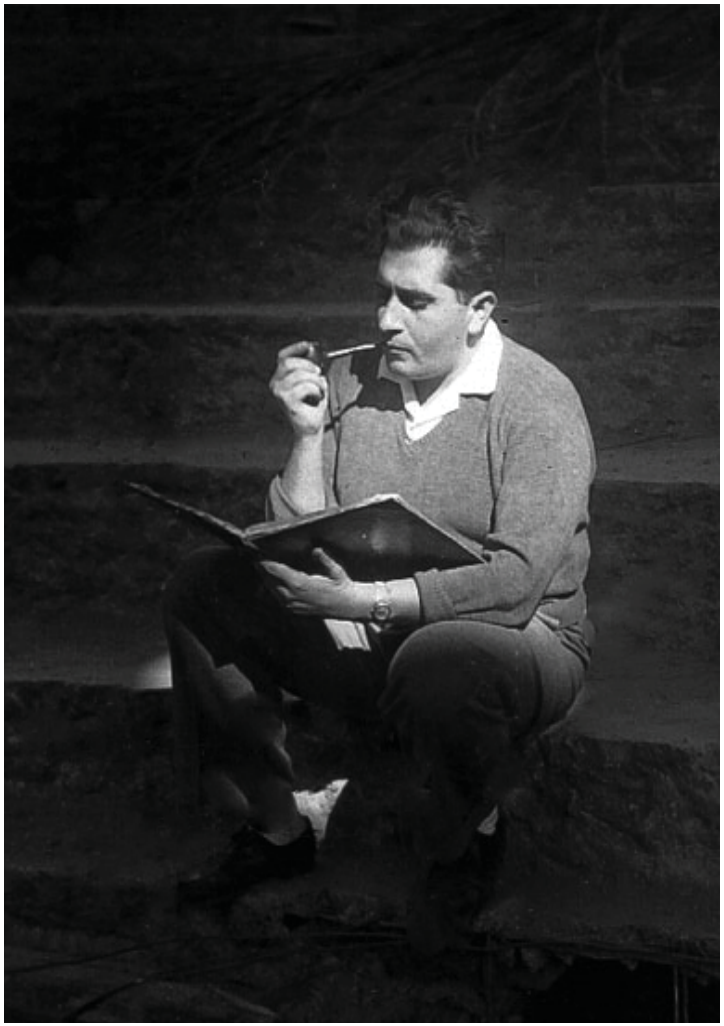
- New Corsair Cinema (Ali Baba Cinema) in Bulaq Abu El-Ela - 1946.
- Cairo Motor Company Building and Showroom - 1947.
- Cairo Tower in Zamalek - 1961.
- Al-Ahram Newspaper Building in Downtown Cairo - 1968.

Churches

- Saint Therese Church in Port Said - 1948.
- Saint Catherine Church in Heliopolis - 1950.
- Virgin Mary Church in Heliopolis.

Schools

- El-Qalaly Charity School in El-Qalaly District (demolished).



Radio Tower 1954

Roushdy street - Downtown Cairo

Thabet Thabet Tower (Belmont building) 1958

Nile Corniche street - Garden city, Cairo

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Thabet Thabet Tower (Belmont building) 1958

Nile Corniche street - Garden city, Cairo

Documentation Number in the National Organization for Urban Harmony: 03180001208

Cairo Tower 1961

Al-Borg street - Zamalek, Cairo

Cairo Tower 1961

Al-Borg street - Zamalek, Cairo

New Corsair Cinema (Ali Baba Cinema) 1946

26 July street - Bulaq Abu El-Ela, Cairo

New Corsair Cinema (Ali Baba Cinema) 1946

26 July street - Bulaq Abu El-Ela, Cairo

New Corsair Cinema (Ali Baba Cinema) 1946

26 July street - Bulaq Abu El-Ela, Cairo

Al-Ahram Newspaper Building 1968

El-Galaa street - Downtown, Cairo

Al-Ahram Newspaper Building 1968

El-Galaa street - Downtown, Cairo

Saint Therese Church 1948

35 Abd El-Salam Aref street - Port Said

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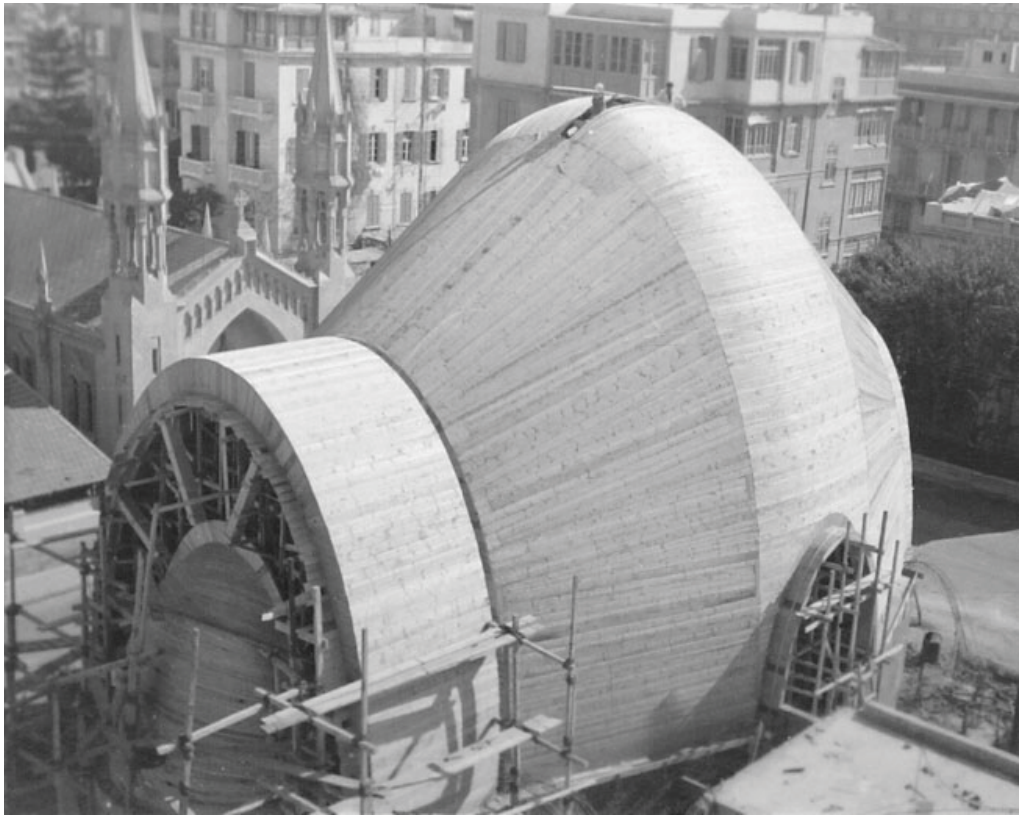
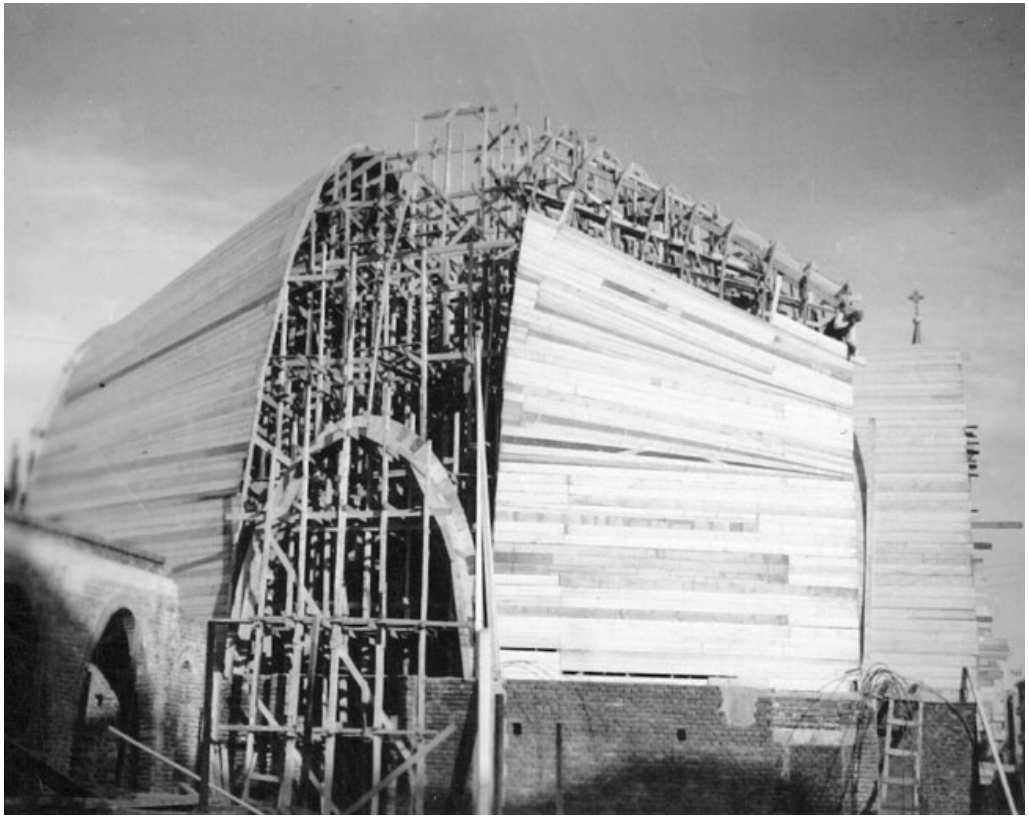
Saint Therese Church 1948

35 Abd El-Salam Aref street - Port Said





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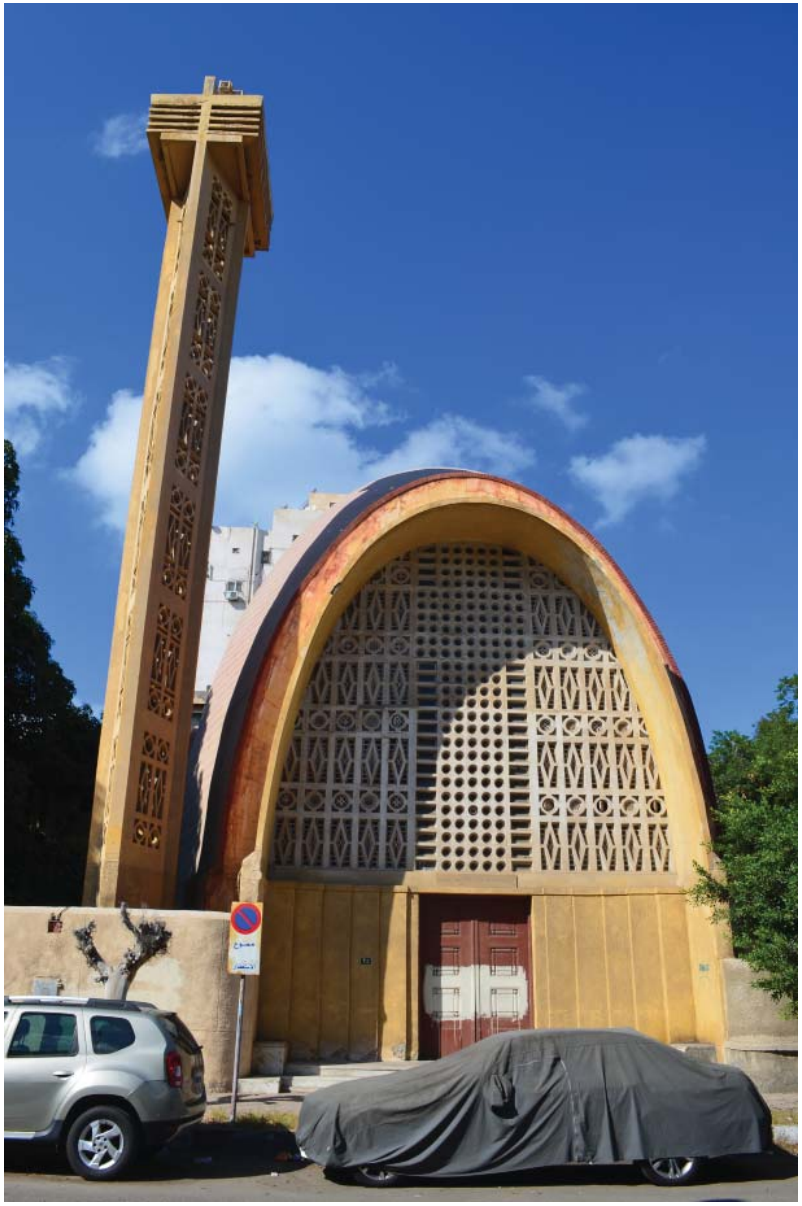
for Urban Harmony: 162

Saint Therese Church 1948

35 Abd El-Salam Aref street - Port Said



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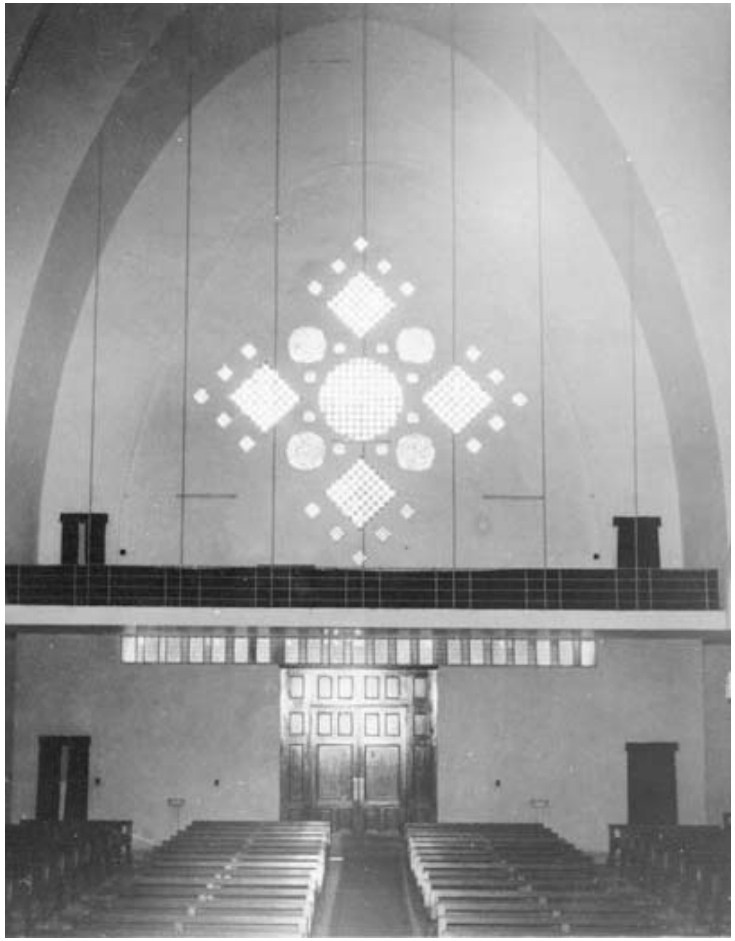
Saint Catherine Church 1950

Mohammed Shafeek street - Heliopolis

Saint Catherine Church 1950

Mohammed Shafeek street - Heliopolis



Saint Catherine Church 1950

Mohammed Shafeek street - Heliopolis

Virgin Mary Church 1942

42 Omar Ibn El-Khattab street - Heliopolis

Documentation Number in the National Organization for Urban Harmony: 02080000646

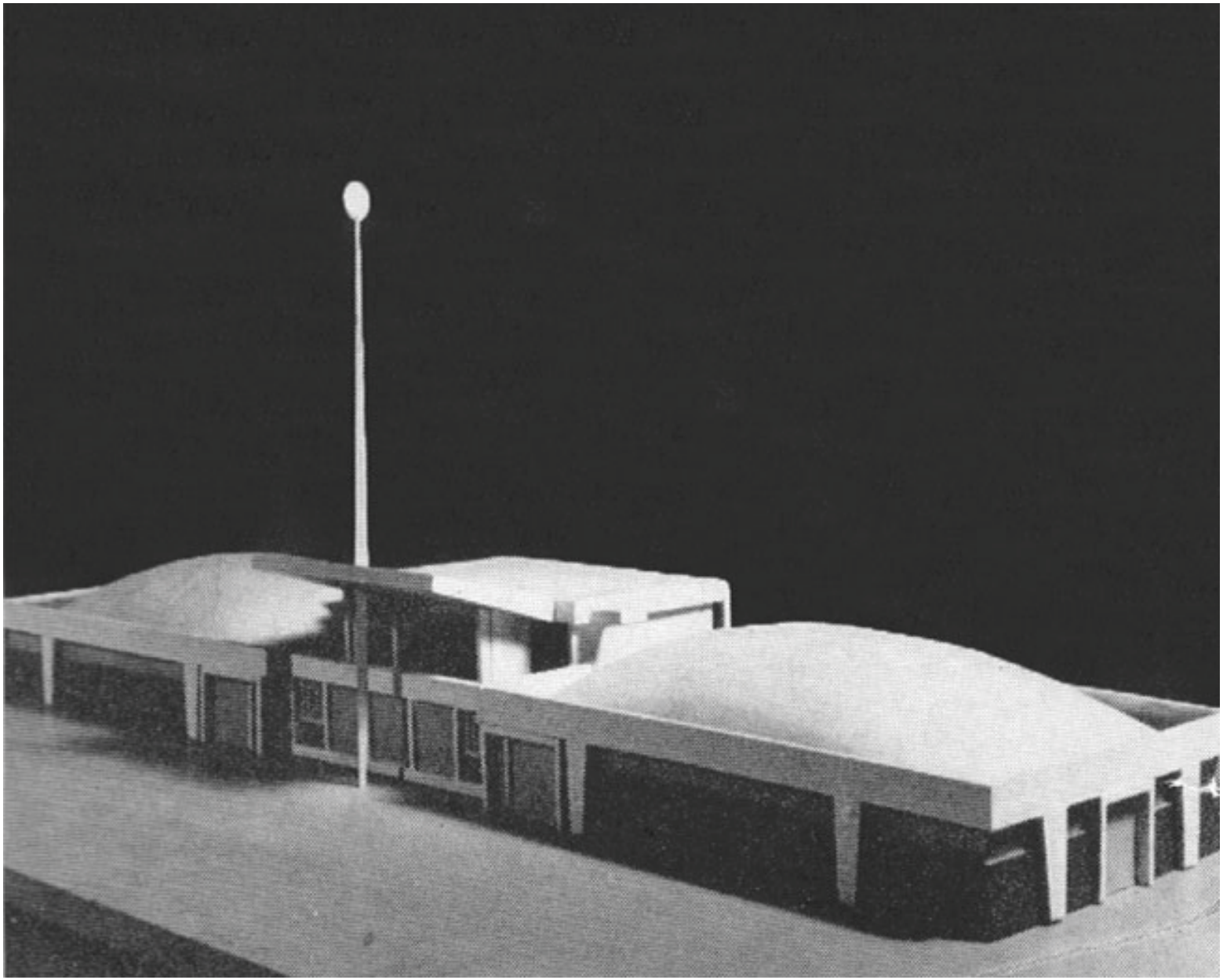
Virgin Mary Church 1942

42 Omar Ibn El-Khattab street - Heliopolis

Documentation Number in the National Organization for Urban Harmony: 02080000646

Cairo Motor Company building 1947

Cairo



Residential building
Cairo

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References

- Samir Raafat (2003), “Cairo, the Glory Years”
- Shaimaa Ashour (2012), “Pioneer Egyptian Architects during the Liberal Period between the Revolutions of 1919 and 1952”
- Architect Naoum Shebib’s website, https://naoumshebib.com/pages_en/index_en.html

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- Page 8, Personal Photos: Architect Naoum Shebib’s Website https://naoumshebib.com/pages_en/index_en.html
- Page 19, Saint Thérèse Church in Port Said: photographed by Heba El-Hanfi in August 2014.
- Page 23, Virgin Mary Church: photographed by Michel Hanna from panoramio.com
- Page 24, Virgin Mary Church: official church website, /https://www.egliseimmaculee.net

Team

- Tarek waly center, Architecture and Heritage