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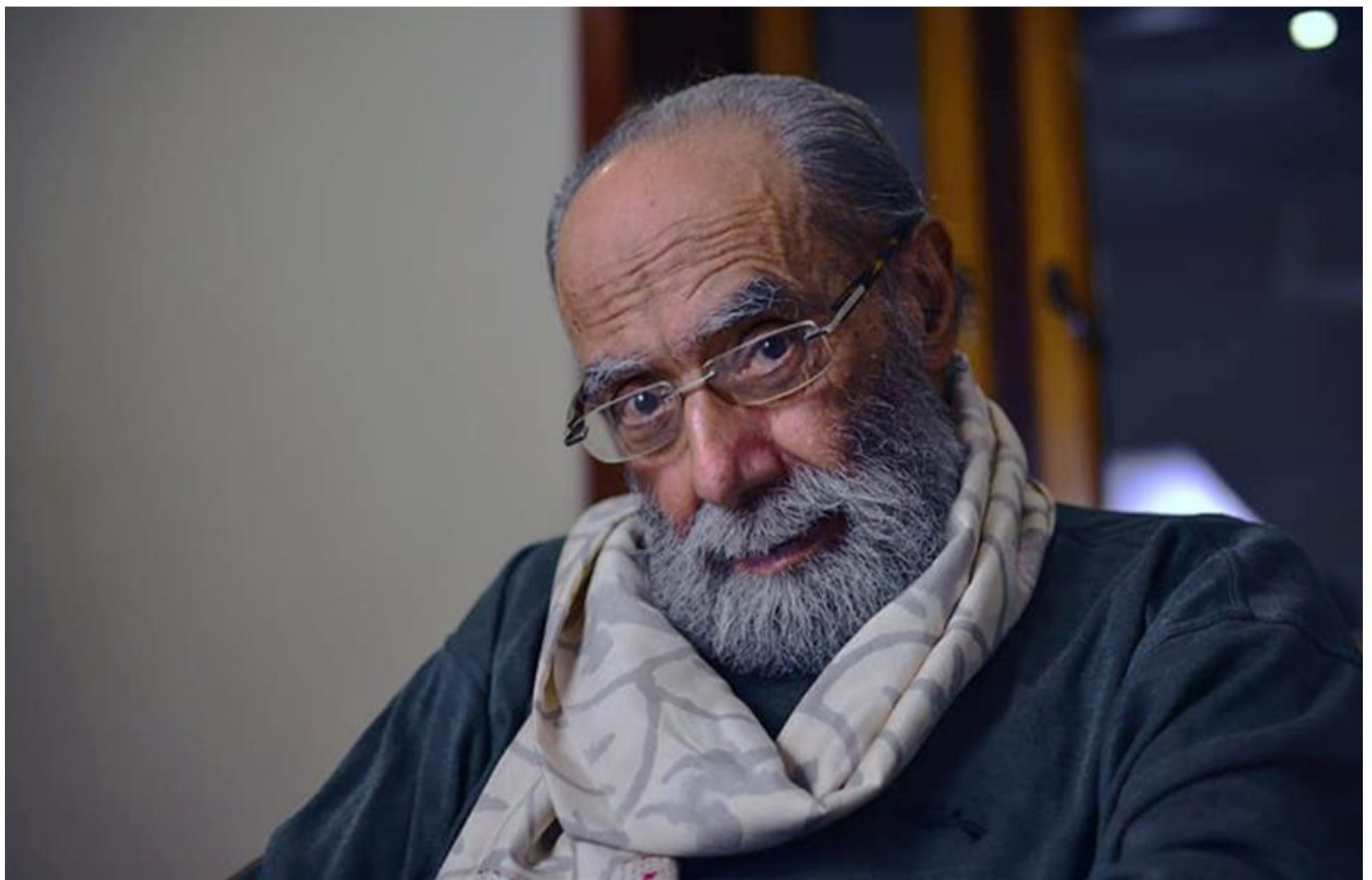
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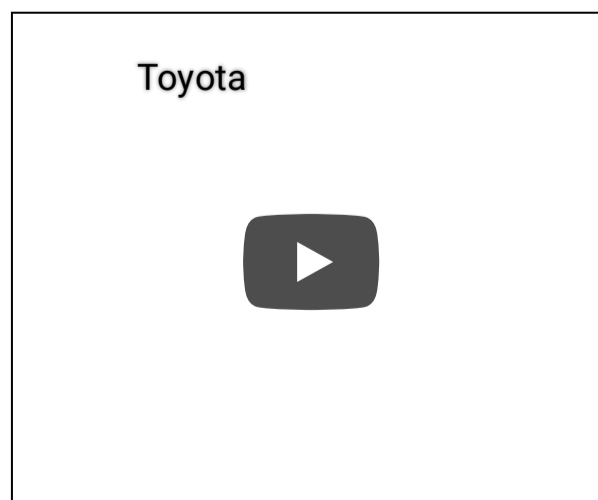
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An architect inspired by community: Abdelhalim Ibrahim Abdelhalim (1941-2021)

Seif El Rashidi, Tuesday 19 Oct 2021



Abdelhalim Ibrahim Abdelhalim



Abdelhalim Ibrahim Abdelhalim was an Egyptian architect who saw his role as social enabler, working for community betterment through design. His work was inspired by its context, and often by the concepts he saw fitting to the projects at hand. Through a combination of diplomacy and persistence he successfully navigated the challenges of implementing large projects in his native Egypt at a time when functionalism was the order of the day.



Born just outside Cairo in 1941, Abdelhalim developed a career in which an interest in community and ritual underpinned the way he approached design. Following studies at Cairo University he later went on to the US. There, he obtained a masters from Oregon, and a PhD from Berkeley, before returning to Egypt in 1978 after a decade's absence.

“This coincided with the annual exhibition of the work of outstanding architecture students. I stood there mesmerised: it was as if I hadn't left at all — the same panels, the same obedience to the modernist grid. When I asked one student to explain the thinking behind his glass-fronted building, his response was simply ‘Universal Space’. My thought was why, rather than take Western modularity as his reference, he wasn't taught to understand the principles of his own culture towards organising space.”

Summarising his own approach to his work he said: “Every community has its own concept of order — in designing, one must strike a balance between analysis, abstraction and rationality on one hand, and faith and the submission to a community's ideas about order, on the other.”

****A version of this article appears in print in the 21 October, 2021 edition of Al-Ahram Weekly***

While the architectural practice he established, Community Design Collaborative, worked on a wide range of projects, those that actually revolved around the idea of a local, preexisting community excited him most. One of his best known is his children's park in the Sayeda Zainab neighbourhood of Cairo. He sought to create a space where children could discover, interact, and develop their personalities. He also envisaged the street alongside the park as a place where adult members of the community would have stalls, and host community events.

The urban park was produced through an unusual process — mocking up the design using a life-size model, getting the community to interact with it and then give feedback, which was then used to refine the design. The design elements were based on Abdelhalim's “reading” of the site — taking inspiration from the existing rows of palm trees, and incorporating a wide array of forms, some spiralling round, inspired simultaneously by the staircase of the nearby minaret of Ibn Tulun, the Milky Way, and a more personal spiral, the ultrasound scan of his soon-to-be-born twins. Such were the forms of his architecture — influenced by signs he saw around him, which he read as meaningful.

The park, which earned him a much-coveted Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1992, ultimately encountered challenges related to sustainability, management, and maintenance — but lies testament to the unconventional way in which he approached design.

“The point of departure was to find links between the growth of a child and the growth of the park, and we searched for events, objects and symbols in the culture that could give this idea expression,” he once said.

Other key projects include the Nile Gallery Palace of the Arts, an exhibition space in the grounds of the Cairo Opera House, used for the display of modern art, the masterplan and some of the buildings of the new American University in Cairo, and projects in the Gulf, including the Mohamed Ibn Saud Mosque in Diriyah, Saudi Arabia, and the Egyptian Consulate in Jeddah.

Omar Nagati, who worked with Abdelhalim in the 90s and 2000s, says that what was significant was his unwavering position that architects were social enablers — not just the makers of attractive places. To that end, “his method was rigorous — it was research-based, taking the context, and the community seriously, but also investing time in developing a concept. All this took place before the design process would even start.”

His architectural forms often developed from the inherent patterns of the social and physical landscape he found through this preparatory process. Abdelhalim’s buildings are distinctive — many unashamedly eye catching and sculptural with geometric shapes featuring prominently. His work often draws on personal inspiration from historic buildings — some clad in the yellow and white stone stripes typical of mediaeval Egypt.

As his office matured, it became known for masterplanning large cultural and educational complexes, some of which he also implemented. He saw space as a vehicle for interaction, and in planning projects like the American University in Cairo campus carefully thought of the informal spaces where the academic community would mingle. There, he saw his role as an enabler of an environment for a liberal arts discourse.

Abdelhalim was also known as an educator, both as a professor at Cairo University’s Department of Architectural Engineering, and less formally, in the context of his practice.

“The special quality of working with him is that he created an inspiring work environment. He gave guidelines and then carefully selected a range of different people who would contribute to different facets of the process. We would all be working together in the same room, in an atmosphere that he enriched by his presence. This environment affected the end product: you couldn’t really tell who had done what exactly, because you never worked alone,” says Ayman Al-Gohary, who worked with Abdelhalim on and off since 1992.

Referred to by all in his office as “Al-Duktur” (The Doctor) Abdelhalim came across as a wise and approachable patriarch, with grey beard, slightly wild hair, booming voice, and a calm, grounded presence.

Meetings with his team were something between an audience and a family gathering, in which he actively engaged at length, mainly with his more senior architects. Some of them would have temporarily disappeared into the big wide world of their own endeavours, only to return like homing pigeons to take part in “big projects” and competitions, usually after a friendly phone call enticing them back.

Younger members of the team would sit awestruck as he exposed them and the other sitters to a whirlwind of thoughts and ideas. These were often drawn from his travels and long experience, and, of course his fascination with community rituals — be it the rebuilding of Japanese Shinto shrines once a generation to ensure their construction knowledge was not forgotten, or the inherited wisdom of his own family elders, remembered from boyhood.

He was a conversationalist par excellence, simultaneously expansive, and inspiring in his bringing together of disparate anecdotes, often to make a point about why a particular bridge or octagonal form made sense. He was also astute and witty, wildly conceptual and yet well aware of the politics of the world in which he worked. More guru than diva, he took an interest in what the youthful had to say. A doodle or a caricature he came across in the office was enough to spark a conversation with a new team member, launching a relationship that lasted decades.

Such conversations were perhaps what was most memorable thing about him: in a field dominated by functionalism, efficiency, and impatience, he took the time to labour over “ideas” and to reflect.

Even in his twilight years, as he endured the debilitating trembles of Parkinson’s Disease which forced him to deliver the fruits of his active mind through slurred and muffled speech, he remained attentive and interested, and heavily involved in the workings of Community Design Collaborative.

Apart from a legacy of large building projects, mainly in the Middle East, he leaves behind a community of former and current “students” both in the literal and the metaphoric sense. And, as per the name of his practice, his collaborators were many, including the eminent Jordanian architect, Rasem Badran, a long-time soulmate.

“To the receptive, meeting him, even briefly, was an exposure to a completely different way of looking at the world — to ideas you’d never really have thought about before. He was also a fighter, whose convictions constantly propelled him on” says Dr Ashraf Botros, a former staff member.

Abdelhalim is survived by his son, Nour, who has run the Community Design Collaborative office for the past five years, and his daughter Amar, an architect and textile designer.

More of his work can be further explored through *An Architecture of Collective Memory* by James Steele, published by AUC Press in 2019.

The writer is an architectural historian and heritage specialist, currently director of The Barakat Trust.

****A version of this article appears in print in the 21 October, 2021 edition of Al-Ahram Weekly***

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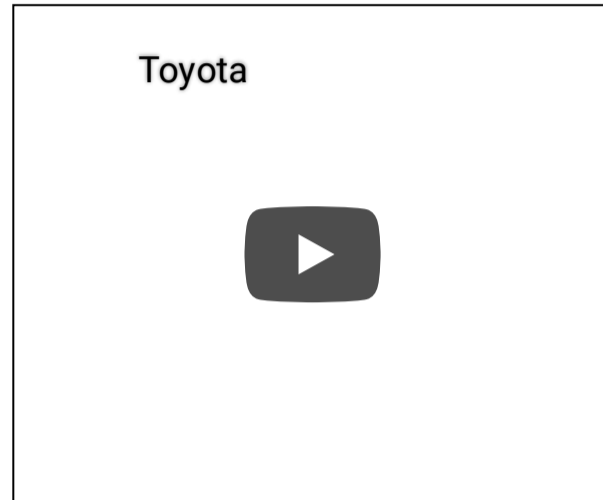
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