

MODERN COPTIC:

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COPTIC CHURCHES FROM THE 20TH TO THE 21ST CENTURY.

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ABSTRACT

This paper researches the evolution of Coptic churches in Cairo from the 20th to the 21st century. It focuses on the political and social dynamics that affect the design and construction process. Through an interdisciplinary approach including archival research, legal and political analysis, on-site analysis and interviews with architects the socio-political dynamics affecting the church construction are explored. The paper is divided into two major parts, the first covering the political dynamic starting from the imperial edict of 1856, all through The church construction and renovation law of 2016. One of the major finds shows a big gap in the legal context whereas from 1934 to 2005, there is little to no legal discourse concerning the church construction giving space to the political and social context to affect the decisions in relation to the design and construction. Leading to the second part, the form development of the Coptic churches in Cairo is explored through a social and architecture lens focusing on contexts that affected the construction of some churches. The research includes case studies from both eras such as St. Mark Cleopatra by Ramses Wissa Wassef and El Karouz church by Maher Andraws.

KEYWORDS

Coptic churches - Traditional churches - Modern churches - Contemporary churches- Construction - Church regulation

INTRODUCTION

On the 15th of August 2013, Al Ahram Newspaper mentioned 7 church attacks in midst of other attacks on government institutions.¹ Within the context of a revolution, a period marked with increased political violence, more than 45 churches were bombed or attacked in various locations in Egypt². Some of the heavier attacks affected the integrity of the overall structure, which were planned to be restored by efforts of the military as announced by the military commander-in-chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.³ More recently, the AhramOnline newspaper writes on the 7th of February, 2016 that the engineering unit of the Armed Forces started renovating some of the remaining churches since August 2013.⁴ These series of events exemplify the political forces that influence the construction of churches consequently demonstrating one of multiple forces shaping the Coptic church.

The research on Christianity in Egypt often follow a religious account or a historical account of specific churches. Milad Zaki, who's writing focus on a wider religious aspect beyond the design of churches.⁵ Moreover, Marcus Aziz Khalil, a priest in the Coptic church, focus on the historical approach of churches, counting the construction and often regulatory challenges of a religious area or church.⁶

Extending beyond the religious analysis, architects such as Sherif Morgan & Sami Sabri Shaker study and theorize the classification of Coptic Orthodox church typologies.⁷ Many of the typologies are based on churches built in the first few centuries as demonstrated by Morgan in applying Shaker's typology on churches in Old Cairo⁸ and while many of the modern churches can be categorized following those typologies, there remains a gap in the field of Coptic architectural studies: a comprehensive study tracing the development of Coptic church architecture over the past century, particularly in juxtaposition with the legal, political and social dynamics.

This research explores the modern history of churches design and construction in Cairo, in the aim of comparing and analyzing churches leading to the characteristics and process of the newest Coptic churches. To develop a comprehensive understanding of the construction and design of Coptic churches in Cairo this study offers two perspectives. On one hand, the complications faced by the architects from a political as well as social dynamic offers one perspective. On the other hand, the form development and design approach offer a different perspective. To address the latter approach, a number of both modern and contemporary churches are studied. The modern churches include churches from mid to late-twentieth century studied in order to create the basis of transformation in church design in comparison to the contemporary churches designed since the beginning of the 21st century. The contemporary churches, includes the Nativity church in the New Administrative capital demonstrating a larger scale project and the Karouz church highlighting the social dynamic.

By following this approach, the research aims to answer three key questions: how does the social and political

1 Iman Farouk, "Martyrdom of 43 policemen, including two generals and two colonels, and 211 others injured," Al Ahram, August 15, 2013.

2 Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, "Unprecedented Expansion of Sectarian Violence and Acts of Revenge Against Copts - the Interim President and Prime Minister Must Protect the Lives, Property, and Places of Worship of Egyptians.," EIPR, August 20, 2013, <https://eipr.org/press/2013/08/%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%82-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%86%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A>.

3 "Sisi: Military to Restore Mosque, Churches Damaged in Wednesday Violence," Mada, August 15, 2013.

4 Sherry El Gergawi, "Egypt Military Restoring Churches Destroyed Following Morsi's Ouster," AhramOnline, February 7, 2016, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/185985/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-military-restoring-churches-destroyed-follow.aspx>.

5 Milad Zaki, *The Church, What We See Inside and Outside of It*, 3rd ed., 1990.

6 Marcos Aziz Khalil, *The Principal Ancient Coptic Churches of Old Cairo, the Fort of Babylon and Ben Ezra "Synagogue,"* 1985.

7 Sherif Morgan, "The Various Typologies of Historic Coptic Orthodox Church Design," *Engineering Research Journal*, September 2016.

8 Sherif Morgan, "Shaker's Typological Classification of Coptic Orthodox Church Design: An Application on Historic Coptic Churches of Old Cairo and Fustat," *Engineering Research Journal*, vol. 151, September 2016.

context affect the design and construction of Coptic churches in Cairo? What are the main transformations in the architectural and structural style from the modern to contemporary churches? What are the main challenges of the current design and construction process?

The research employs a methodology that brings together multiple historical research tools. Archival research in Al Ahram provides insight into the political dynamic. Which is contextualized by means of discourse analysis. Those tools mostly form the first part of the thesis, creating a historical overview of the legal context. Moreover, in-site visual analysis forms the basis of the second part focusing on form development, once more contextualized and clarified with the means of interviews.

LEGAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

This chapter is not a historical narrative of the laws and regulations relating to church construction in Egypt, as this topic is to date researched in depth. Alternatively, it aims to situate laws and regulations – from the Hatt-ı Hümayun to the present day – within the broader social and political context as well as their implementation in practice through legal, regulatory and discourse analysis. Such topics include the factors that affected the building of churches, their form, location and on a case-by-case basis their associated narrative.

The Hatt-ı Hümayun & The Conditions of Al-Ezabi

One of the most notable documented legislations for regulating church construction in modern Egypt was the Imperial Edict of 1856 (Hatt-ı Hümayun) that was issued on the 18th of February 1856. This Edict was issued by Ottoman Sultan Abdulmejid I (Figure 1). It had the aim of regulating the religious and cultural imbalances in the pretext of equality for all.⁹ It was a tactic to strength the state by increasing European connection. At the time, Egypt was under the Muhammad 'Ali dynasty. After the disorder created due to the French decolonization in 1801, Muhammad 'Ali Pasha seized the opportunity and was assigned governor (Wali) of Egypt by the Ottomans. During that period, Egypt became increasingly independent.¹⁰

At the specific year of the decree, Sai'd Pasha, a descendant of Muhammed 'Ali, was the governor. Sai'd Pasha's period had seen a lot of developments, those developments were made possible due to his reliance on European partnership, creating an increasingly rising power of the british.¹¹

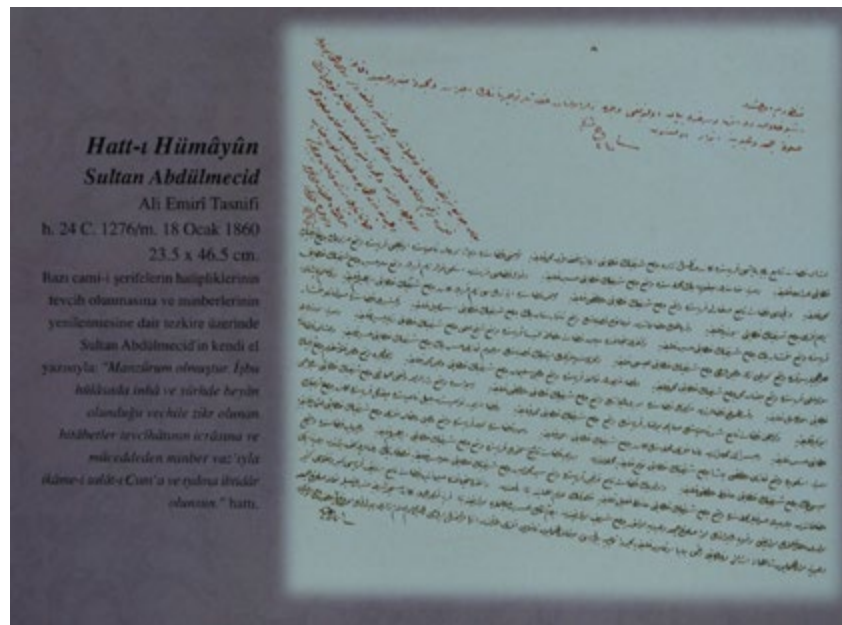


Figure 1: Hatt-i Humuyun by Sultan Abdulmegid. Source: From Muteverrih, "Hatt-ı Hümayun," *Tarih Ve Medeniyet*, September 8, 2009. Archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140830083819/http://tarihvemedenyet.org/2009/08/hatt-i-humayun/?nggpage=2>.

9 Boğaziçi University, Atatürk Institute of Modern Turkish History, "The Rescript of Reform, 1856," n.d., <https://www.anayasa.gen.tr/reform.htm>

10 Khaled Fahmy, "The Era of Muhammad 'Ali Pasha, 1805–1848," in Cambridge University Press eBooks, 1998, 139–79, <https://doi.org/10.1017/chol9780521472111.007>.

11 Hunter, "Egypt Under the Successors of Muhammad Ali," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt* (Cambridge University Press,



Figure 2: The Priest of the Hanging church's reply to the 2005 article. Source: Al Ahram, December 8, 2005

One of the first notable reforms by Sai'd Pasha in relation to Christian was the removal of the Jizya tax previously imposed on Christians in Egypt, and shortly after, included them in the military service, another notable reform, is the formation of committees' representative of each Christian denomination which plays a key role in the social dynamic that will be discussed at a later stage.¹² Nonetheless, in 1934, Al-Ezabi Pasha, Deputy Minister of the Interior in Egypt, issued 10 additional conditions to be added to the Hatt-ı Hümayun. These conditions were formulated in the form of a question rather than a legal article, some of the conditions focused on the distance of the church from surrounding churches of the same denomination and from surrounding mosques without providing a definite indication of the preferable outcome,¹³ those conditions focusing on distances and density of churches affected in theory the urban fabric of the city at the time.

This issue often created tensions between the church leadership and the political leadership where promises were often made but rarely delivered, moreover Pope Shenouda III mentions social tensions arising during the construction process of some churches which would lead to postponement or full neglect of the obtained permits to build¹⁴. Despite the political context, some permissions were obtained through vague rules, many prominent architects managed to exercise progressive design approaches, moving beyond traditional designs and experimenting with new structures all while preserving the heritage through iconography and symbolism, which will be demonstrated in depth in the second part.

The Church Construction Laws Under the presidency

The Ottoman conditions dominated for several years, officially until 9 December 2005, when President

1998), 180–97, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521472111.008>.

12 Maher Hassan, "On This Day: The Imperial Edict Law Was Issued on February 18, 1856.," Almasrya Elyoum, February 18, 2023, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2821718>.

13 Christian Fastenrath and Corin Kazanjian, "Important Factors for Church Building in Egypt," ed. Cornelis Hulsman and Clare Turner (Arab-West Report Paper, April 2008), https://www.dialogueacrossborders.com/sites/default/files/Arab-West%20Report%20Paper%204%2C%20April%202008_churchbuilding.pdf.

14 Pope Shenouda III Interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzeVrD55dbI>



Figure 3: Media reacting to the 2016 Church Construction and Renovation Law. Source: facebook posts, <https://www.facebook.com/CopticSP>

Mubarak issued a new article, 291/2005, concerning church regulations. The most significant change in the regulations is the shift from direct governmental control to the jurisdiction of local governors. The article dictates that for a church to be demolished and rebuilt in the same location, a permit is needed. Moreover, any renovation or additions to any existing church also needs a permit.¹⁵ Al Ahram publishes an article in which the title highlights equality between mosques and churches, demonstrating the state-sponsored media highlighting this as a milestone worth of celebrating, often featuring comments by church leaders and highlighting their acceptance of the new decree, utilizing notions such as equality, yet Father Marcos Aziz explicitly refers to the lack of a unifying law applicable on all places of worship (Figure 2). It is important to highlight that the separation of the laws concerning the churches was also evident in the Edict of 1856, yet perceived as an advantage rather than a segregation, demonstrating the path dependency leading to the political context on 2005.

The following notable article enacting the previous article was issued on the 30th of August 2016. A new church construction law was issued by the current president in the goal to facilitate the bureaucratic process. The new law dictates that the Minister of Housing is responsible to issue permits related to construction, extension (Horizontal or vertical), renovation, demolition or exterior finishing of the church or a building related to the church. It also dictates that a representative of the given Christian denomination must present papers with all the changes and drawings concerning the project as well as land ownership papers.¹⁶ In figure 3, a series of media posts by an anonymous user under the name of the Coptic Orthodox Representative highlight a problematic meeting a fortnight before the official issue date of the article, followed by congratulatory posts following the release of the article demonstrating a tension and uncertainty towards the law.¹⁷ Moreover, the new law was met with a critique claiming that the legal process was still slow a year after its release.¹⁸

Having established the political and legal perspectives affecting the construction of Coptic churches, the following chapter shifts focus to the development of architectural form, highlighting its social context through visual analysis and exploring its challenges through interviews with architects who have specialized in church design.

15 “Priest of the Hanging Church: The Decision Strengthens Our Sense of Egyptian Citizenship,” Al Ahram, December 8, 2005.

16 “Church Construction & Renovation Law,” Sis, January 4, 2023, <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/248856/%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B3?lang=ar#:~:text=%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B5%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9%20%3A%20%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%89%20%D8%A3%D9%86,%D9%85%D9%86%20%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%86%20%D9%88%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A9%20%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D9%88%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9>.

17 Coptic Solidarity Project, Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/CopticSP>.

18 Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, “The Law on the Construction and Renovation of Churches One Year Later,” December 3, 2017, <https://eipr.org/en/publications/law-construction-and-renovation-churches-one-year-later>.

FORM DEVELOPMENT OF COPTIC CHURCHES



Figure 4: Map indicating the locations of the churches examined in this study.

Modern churches

- 1- Virgin Mary Church, Zamalek, Ramses Wissa Wassef
- 2- St. Mercurius Church, Old Cairo, Maher Andraws
[Renovation]
- 3- St. Mark Church Cleopatra, Heliopolis, Ramses Wissa Wassef
- 4- St. George and Ava Ebram Church, Heliopolis, Ramses Wissa Wassef
- 5- St. Georgios and Ava Anotnios Church, Heliopolis, Girgis Assad Farag
- 6- Archangel Michael Church, Sheraton, Mourad Bebawy

Contemporary churches

- 7- St. Mercurius Church, New Cairo,
- 8- St. Mary Elmasreya Church, New Cairo
- 9- El Karouz Church, New Cairo, Maher Andraws
- 10- St. Mary and St. George Church, El sherouk, NG design office
- 11- The Nativity of Christ Cathedral, New Administrative Capital, Mounir Abddofam

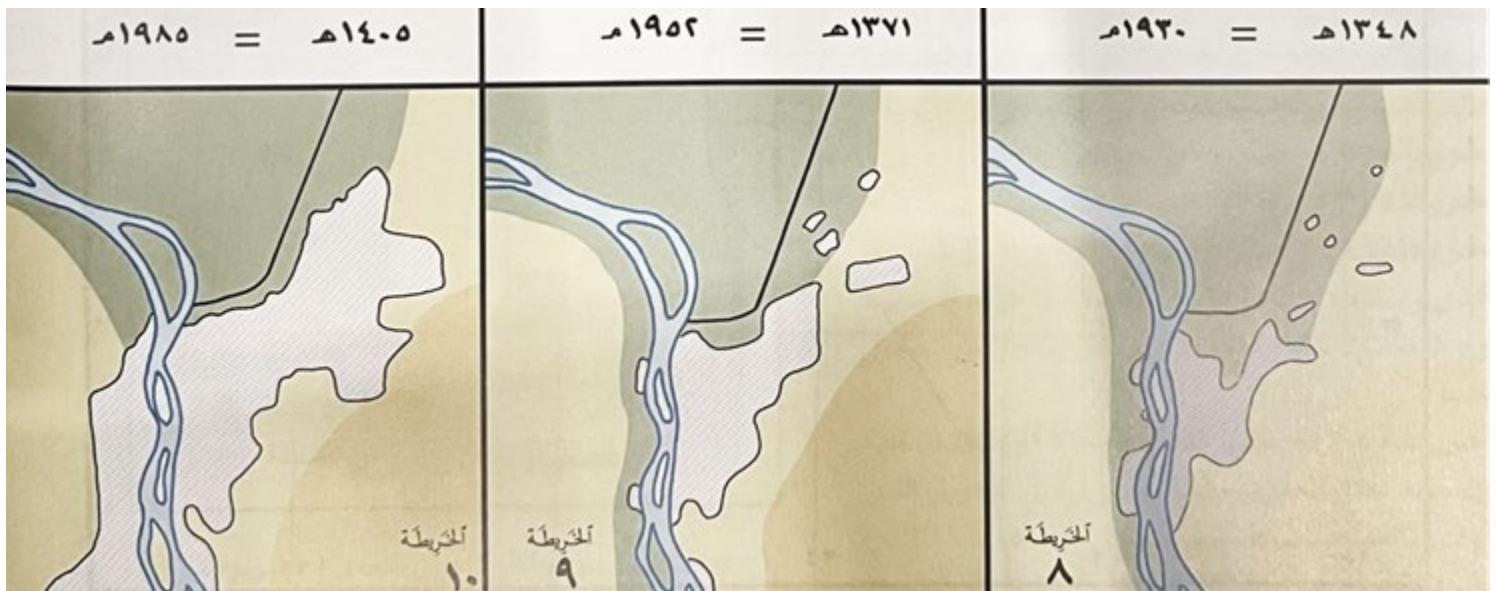


Figure 5: Series of maps highlighting the urban grows in Cairo in the years 1930, 1952 and 1985 (From right to left), Source: Ahmed Adel Kamal, Atlas History of Cairo, Dar El Salam.

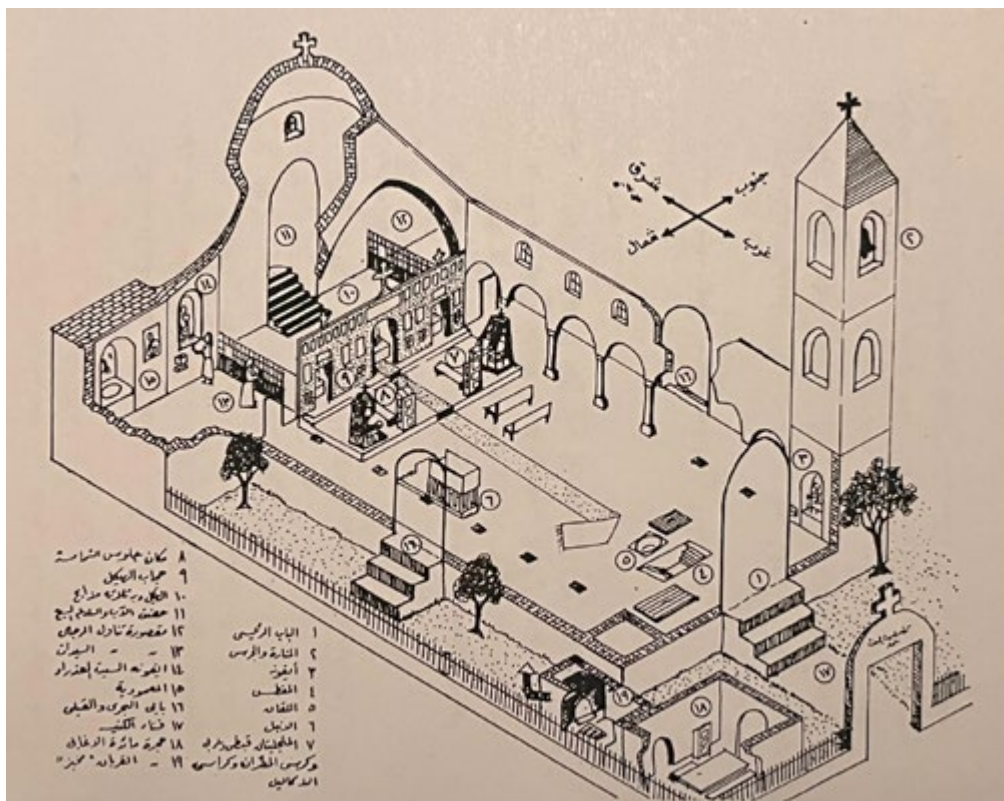


Figure 6: Axonometric section highlighting the main elements composing a church, Source: Milad Zaki, *The Church, What We See Inside and Outside of It*, page 5.

Multiple research and historical accounts focused on Coptic churches dating back from the 5th century to the 20th century. From the religious approach, Milad Zaki approaches the design observes that Coptic churches are either built following a Byzantine approach noticed in the various domes design or a Basilican approach referring to the vaults. He generalizes by describing the presence of either one or two minarets, and the overall layout being either rectangular facing East or square in the form of a cross (Figure 6).¹⁹ The academic approach transcends that generalization. One of the more recent typologies, theorized by Sami Sabri Shaker in 2012, based on the nave's placement alongside the roof design. His approach takes a step further from preceding typologies by the consideration that some churches are a variation to the Basilican plan.²⁰ Analyzing both symbolic and academic approach, they cover a wide historical element in relation to architectural style and spatial development. Moreover, they create a basis to the traditional form of a Coptic church. However, this chapter aims to demonstrate the form development focusing on architectural qualities that are neglected in the previous approaches such as materiality and tectonics, the usage of lighting and control of sound and the variation of structures used.

Modern Churches (Mid. to late 20th century)

As, observed in figure 4, the modern churches in Cairo were often built in Heliopolis, in comparison to Figure 5, the churches chosen for the study follow the urban growth of Cairo. In relation to the first chapter, these churches were built under the Ezabi conditions but mostly in an early republican phase after years of colonialism. The church construction law was still undefined however as demonstrated previously, many of these churches were established through informal agreements with the president.

However, Despite the political difficulties demonstrated in the previous chapter, multiple churches were built during the mid-1900 designed by architects such as Ramses Wissa Wassef and Micheal Bachoum. The design approach of this period was called a traditionalist approach which focused on keeping the heritage and traditions of the Coptic church design such as demonstrated in Zaki's writings all while evolving and keeping up with the newest technologies.²¹

Such innovation can be demonstrated in the structure used in the church of Archangel Michael in Sheraton (Figure 7). Designed around the year 1990 by Kamal Nassif.²² The concrete shell spans around 25 meters without

19 Zaki, *The Church, What We See Inside and Outside of It*, page 4-7

20 Morgan, "Shaker's Typological Classification"

21 Sherif Morgan, phone conversation with author, Mars 9, 2025

22 Ibrahim Gerges, "History of the Establishment of the Church," n.d., https://stmichaelsheraton.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/about_church_2.pdf.



Figure 7: The interior of the Archangel Michael church showing the span of the structure and the iconography

Figure 8: Skeleton of the Archangel Michael church, retrieved from google maps

any columns²³ (Figure 7), this modern structure is potentially inspired by to the work of Franz Dischinger, demonstrating the Such innovation can be demonstrated in the structure used in the church of Archangel Michael in Sheraton. Designed around the year 1990 by Kamal Nassif, (Ibrahim, “History of the Establishment of the Church.”). The concrete shell spans around 25 meters without any columns (Figure 8) (“About the Church.”), this modern structure is potentially inspired by to the work of Franz Dischinger, demonstrating the technological orientation of the church design. The church was a bare structure for 23 years before the interior was designed with a rich iconography on the inside (Figure 7-8) which was considered by the architect Maher Andraws a poor reflection of the impressive structure.²⁴

From another perspective, the second ingredient in a traditionalist approach is the reservation of heritage and traditions, Andraws renovation of St. Mercurius church (Abu Seifein) in the religious complex in Old Cairo serves as a good example, although the church dates back to the first centuries, it underwent a renovation in the late 20th century. The architect approached it in a restorative manner. He made the decision to revert from the white painted wall to bare the brick façade, demonstrating the preference to showcase the pure material. Moreover, to highlight the pre-existing features he used contextual lighting thus designed three instances of lighting (Figure 9): days of festivity, the rest of the year and special lighting for the icons and architecture features he deemed important such as the vault, symbolizing Noah’s arch (Figure 10. Such an approach highlights the importance of iconography in church design which goes hand in hand with Morgan’s description of a traditionalist approach. The iconography is to be used as a tool and symbolic element within the church rather than an artwork covering the tectonics of the structure, as observed in the church of Archangel Michael. Another notable approach is the importance of symbolism shown in his insistence on designing a vault in newer churches despite it being of a higher price and complication, he criticized the use of flat roof.²⁵

On the same note, the dome design of Ava Antonious and Saint Georgios church demonstrates both a heritage and still yet innovative approach. The dome, also used in Saint George and Ava Ebram church, can be classified under the academic typologies briefly mentioned previously, yet what is not highlighted is the dome’s capacity to eliminate eco yet magnify the sound (Figure 12). Moreover, a strong approach in designing the iconography in relation to the dome plays a role visualized by the architect in a perspective (Figure 11).²⁶

23 “About The Church,” Archangel Michael Church Sheraton, December 26, 2019, <https://stmichaelsheraton.com/about/>.

24 Maher Andraws, interview with author, January 14, 2025

25 Maher Andraws, interview with author, January 14, 2025

26 Alphons Girgis, personal communication, February 20, 2025.

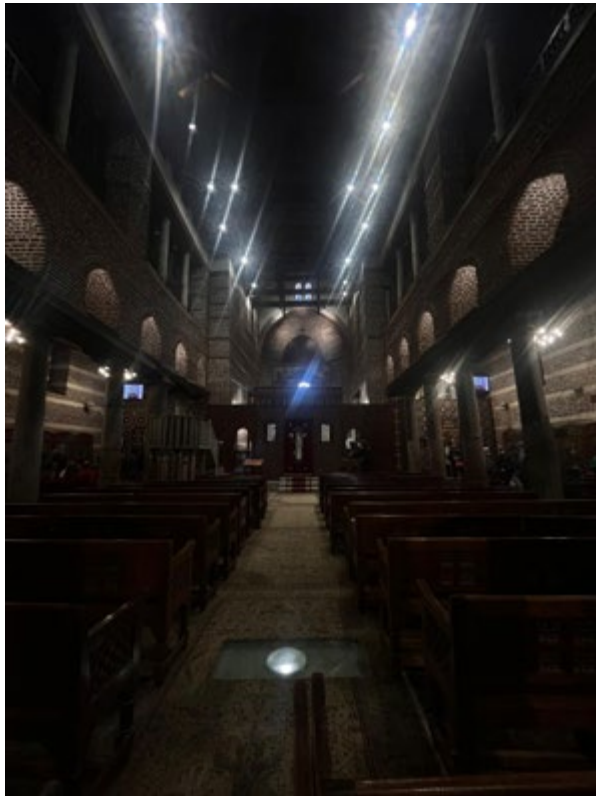


Figure 9: Photo of St. Mercurius church demonstrating the museum like lighting and bare brick wall



Figure 10: Cross section of St. Mercurius church highlighting the vault and the traditional skeleton of the Coptic church. Source: Maher Andraws, interview with author, January 14, 2025



Figure 11: Sketch of the altar by the architect of St. Georgios church showing the iconography placement in relation to the dome. Source: Alphons Girgis, personal communication, February 20, 2025.

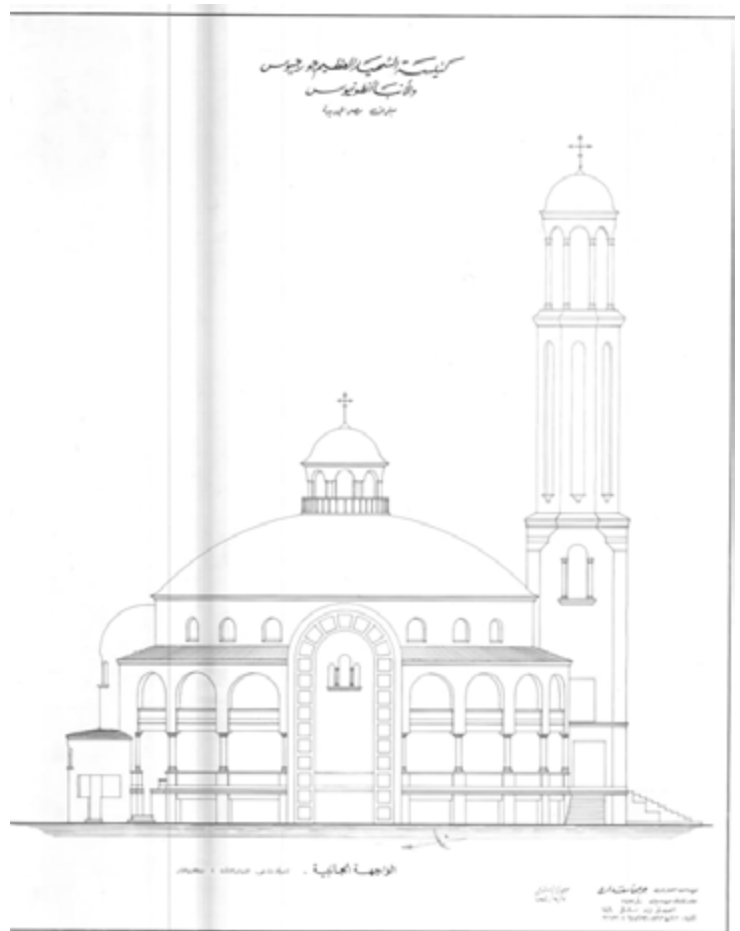


Figure 12: Elevation of St. Georgios church showing the dome openings leading to the control of eco. Source: Alphons Girgis, personal communication, February 20, 2025.

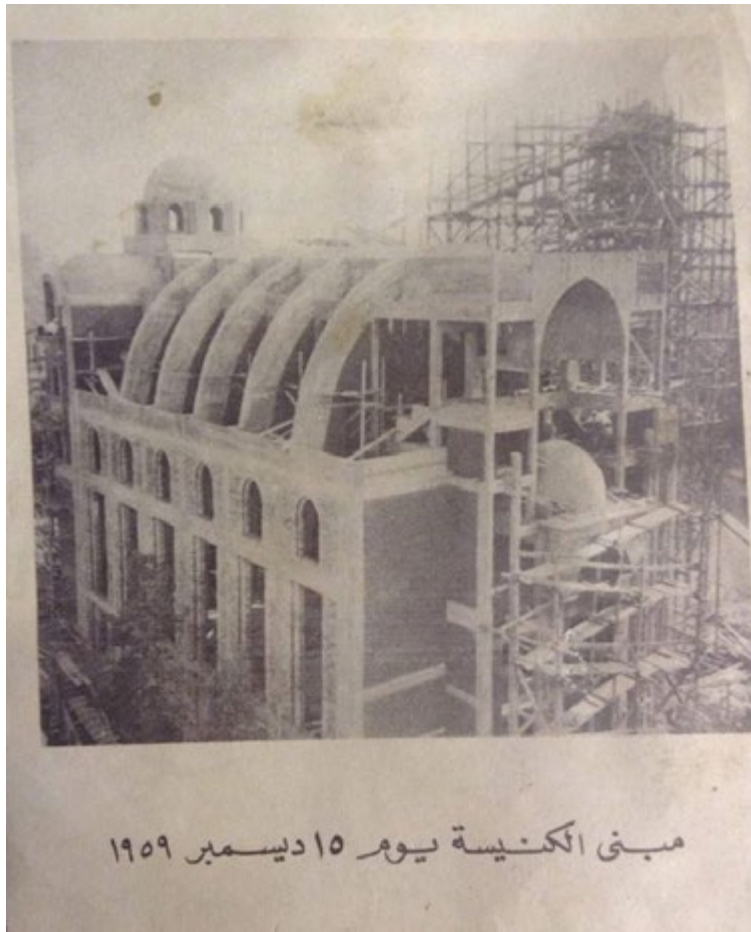


Figure 13: Construction photo of St. Mary church in Zamalek showing the modernist vernacular architecture designed by Ramses Wissa Wassef. Source: retrieved from pinterest

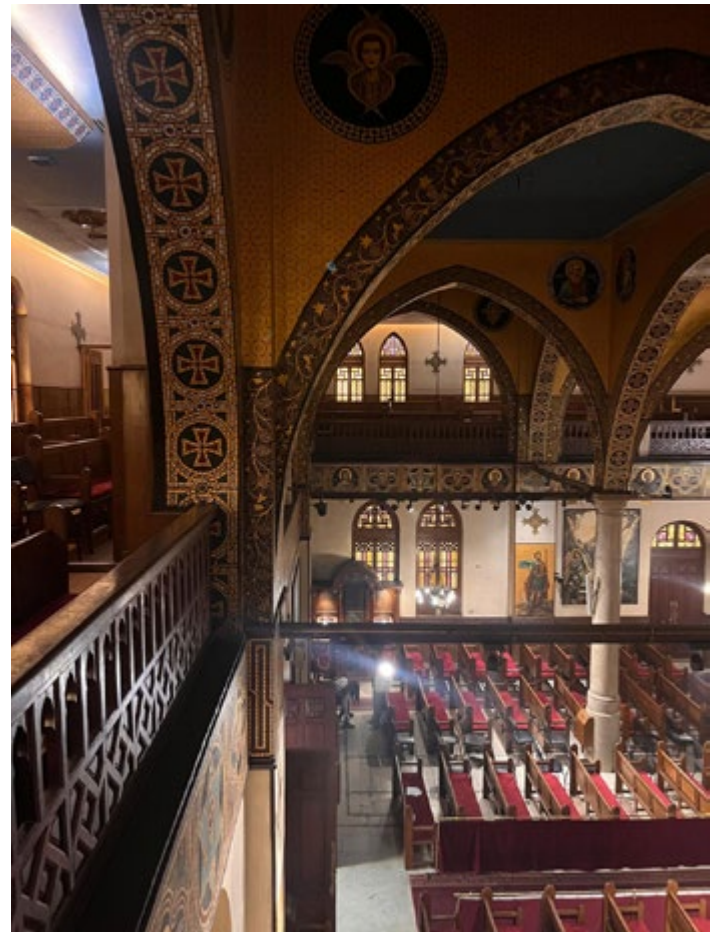


Figure 14: Photo from the mezzanine of St. Mark church in Heliopolis highlighting the structure and the scale of the mezzanine.

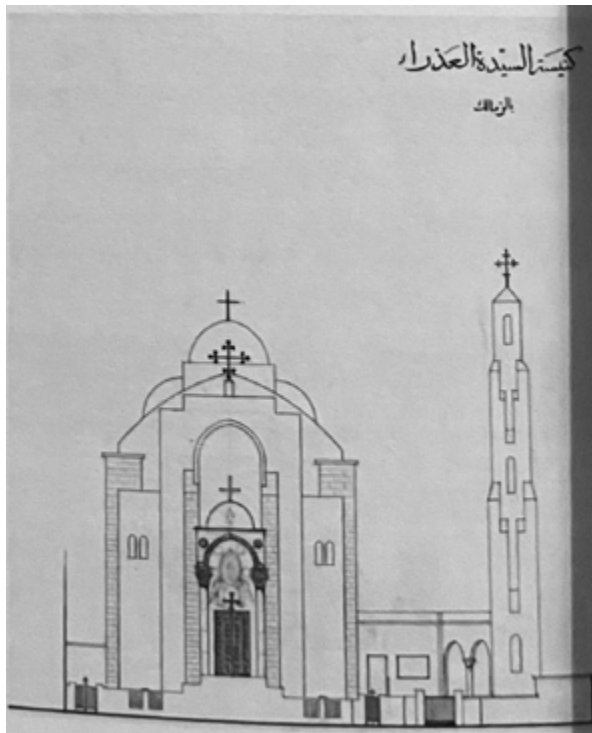


Figure 15: Facade of St. Mary church showing the simple layering of the facade. Source: Cairo Since 1900, page 280



Figure 16: Photo of the front of St. Mark church highlighting the facade design

Such a round floor plan is also noticed in Saint George Church designed by Ramsis Wissa Wassef, Morgan argues that his designs are considered the most innovative yet traditionalist in this period.²⁷ One notable example of Wissa Wassef's work is Virgin Mary Church in Al-Maraashli which highlights a more spatial approach. Starting at the main entrance, the stairs create a visual perspective affecting one's perception of the scale also observed more prominently in St. Mark Cleopatra. One remarkable approach on Wissa Wassef is the use of reinforced concrete skeleton (Figure 13) that highlights the modernist vernacular approach.²⁸ This allowed for an interior that holds big mezzanines, such as seen in the interior of St. Mark church (Figure 14), which overcomes the challenge of designing big churches without losing human scale as the church itself becomes vertically layered instead of prolonged away from the altar. Moreover, Wissa Wassef's façade design is composed of layered elements as seen in the elevation of St. Mary Church (Figure 15) and St. Mark church (Figure 16) which created a simple façade.²⁹ The architectural significance of St. Mark's church extends beyond its original context when the Karouz church is designed to mirror it.

Contemporary Churches (21st century)

Given the extension of the urban fragment of Cairo towards the suburbs as observed in figure 5, and even beyond. Churches were constructed under the 2005 and later 2016 legal articles. One notable observation is the presence of mainly one or two churches per area (Figure 4), which could be traced back to El Ezabi conditions taking into consideration the distance between churches and density of the population in the area, indirectly affecting the development of the urban fragment.

This urban expansion, as prior mentioned lead to the construction of newer churches one of which is El Karouz church which aims to replicate St. Mark church. Which illustrates the Christian community's intent to reproduce a familiar space along with the social and emblematic meanings with it. This social intent creates a dissonance within the architectural context.³⁰ One of the first challenges faced in designing a replication is the sites orientation, as previously mentioned in Zaki's writing the church design faces the East direction, but in the context, due to the street direction, the entrance would be placed on the side of the altar (Figure 17), thus eliminating the iconic entrance of Wissa Wassef. Another challenge that highlights the dissonance of the community's intention in contrast with the architect's is the roof design, as the demonstrated in St. Mercurius church, the architect is inclined towards the design of vaulted roof, while St. Mark church has 9 domes (Figure 18), following a Byzantine rather than a Basilican approach.³¹ Those challenges highlight the social dynamic at force where the community's wishes do not align with the architect's vision. Moreover, Andraws discussed the challenge of human scale in relation to the function of a church as spiritual and intimate.

Whereas modern churches reflect an engagement with human scale as demonstrated in the previous chapter, some of the contemporary churches overlook that aspect resulting is spaces that detaches the user from the embodied experience of prayer.

Such a challenge can be demonstrated in the new cathedral, the Nativity church in the New Administrative Capital, the church was to be designed and constructed within a year as part of the plan of prospering the new capital. As a solution the assigned architect, chose another design as a basis which he started adapting, and that can be noticed in the dimensionality of the church where human scale is not taken into consideration.³² The church hall is one floor without a mezzanine, as seen in figure 19, the entrance to the church extends more than a 100 meters from the altar creating an even visual disconnection from the embodied experience.

In comparison a church that would be deemed intimate extending to approximately 25 meters only, is the new St. Mary Elmasreya church in Mivida. The church has a very simple form, it is divided into three distinct parts, getting wider and higher towards the altar (Figure 20). The use of elongated transparent windows almost from ground to top creates an openness rarely observed in Coptic churches. Moreover, the use polished marble and white paint for materiality hints to the concept of whitewashing of le Corbusier. (Figure 21). The lack of multiple

27 Sherif Morgan, phone conversation with author, Mars 9, 2025.

28 Mohamed Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900: An Architectural Guide* (AUC press, 2020), page 280

29 Mohamed Elshahed, *Cairo Since 1900: An Architectural Guide* (AUC press, 2020), page 280

30 Maher Andraws, interview with author, January 14, 2025.

31 Maher Andraws, interview with author, January 14, 2025.

32 Personal communication, 2025



Figure 17: Photo of El karouz church in New Cairo, showing the challenge of the front entrance in comparison to St. Mark church in figure 16. Retrieved from google maps

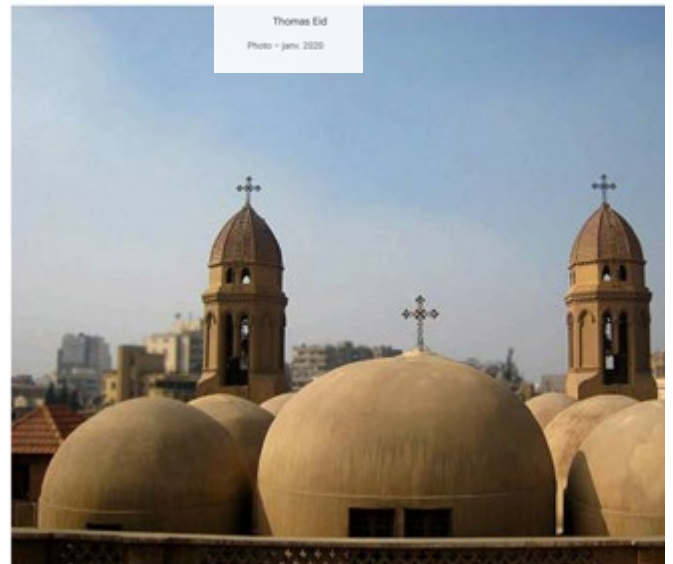


Figure 18: Photo of the 9 domes of St. Mark in Heliopolis, showing the contrast to El karouz church. Retrieved from google maps



Figure 19: Photo of the Nativity church highlighting scale



Figure 20: Photo St. Mary church showing the form. Retrieved from google maps

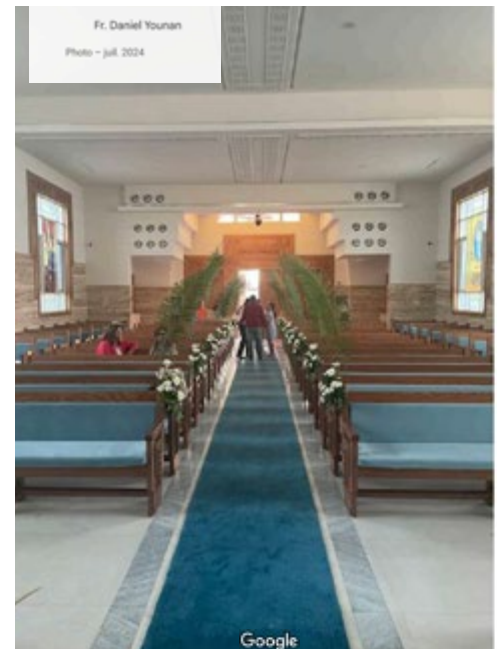


Figure 21: Photo of the interior of St. Mary church showing the material language used. Retrieved from google maps

symbolic elements as described in Zaki's writing such as the three entrances, the vault or dome and the limited presence of iconography defies the traditionalist approach in terms of showcasing the heritage, alongside its small scale diminish the church's symbolic gravity, the architectural language used deviate from the typological and symbolic characterization of a Coptic church.

Another example of such a design yet less prominent is the Church of the Martyred St. Mercurius in New Cairo, from the skeleton of the church, similarities to the modernist churches of mid-19th century can be noted, such as the domes and the minarets (Figure 22). Yet a big contrast can be noticed once finished as seen in the use of clear glass with a very standardized framing (Figure 24) and the lack of ornamentation and tectonics in the interior (Figure 25).

Lastly, St. Mary and St. George Church in El Sherouk, designed in 1999, exemplify the intervening phase. The church skeleton follows a traditional approach, yet the addition of the curved tilted wall offers a unique element, from observation of the design render (Figure 26), the aim could have been a stronger incorporation on an urban level. However, due to the presence of a wall surrounding the church and its location the church more is segregated than initially presented (Figure 27).



Figure 22: Construction photo of St. Mercurius church in New Cairo, showing the traditional structure. Retrieved from google maps



Figure 23: Photo of St. Mercurius showing the traditional form of the church



Figure 24: Photo of St. Mercurius church showing the use of clear glass. Retrieved from google maps

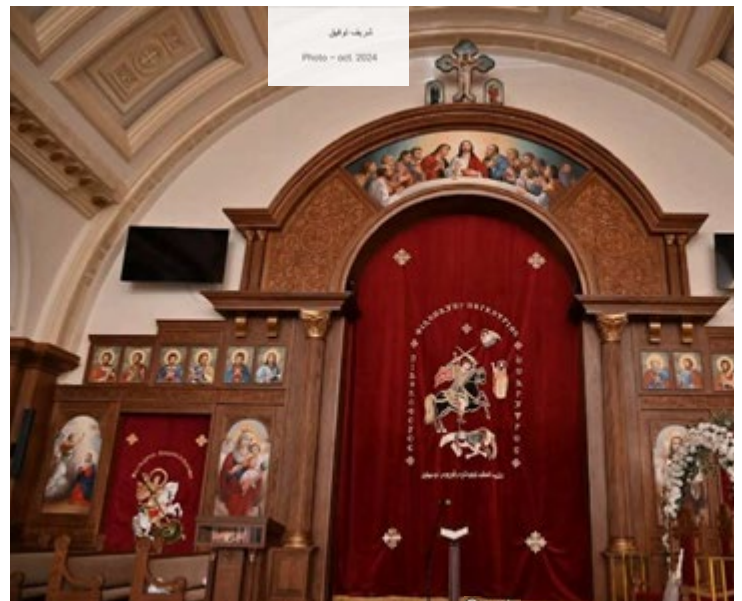


Figure 25: Photo of St. Mercurius interior showing the lack of ornamentation. Retrieved from google maps



Figure 26: Render of St. Mary church in El Sherouk showing the supposed urban context of the church. Source: NG design office, <https://ng-design-office.com/contact-us>



Figure 27: Photo of St. Mary church in El Sherouk showing the fencing and actual urban context of the church. Retrieved from google maps



Figure 28: Icon sketch by Ramses Wissa Wassef. Source: "St. George Coptic Orthodox Church," *The American University in Cairo*, 1954, <https://digitalcollections.aucegypt.edu/digital/collection/p15795coll5/id/166/rec/44>.



Figure 29: Alter sketch by Rasmsis Wissa Wassef. Source: "St. George Coptic Orthodox Church," *The American University in Cairo*, 1954, <https://digitalcollections.aucegypt.edu/digital/collection/p15795coll5/id/166/rec/44>.

Iconography

In the preceding parts, the form and materiality of the church are highlighted. However, another element that plays a key role in the design of a Coptic church is iconography. Together with the architectural language, iconography form the identity of the Coptic church.³³ Such iconography are both present in the modern and contemporary designs. In St. George and Ava Ebram Church, Wissa Wassef designed and drew the shape and layout of an icon (Figure 28) as well as the altar (Figure 29) showing their importance in the design of the church as much as the architectural language.

33 Sherif Morgan, phone conversation with author, Mars 9, 2025.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the construction and design of Coptic churches in Cairo is not an isolated practice, but as demonstrated in the paper, it is shaped by the political aspect affecting the urban fragment and the location of the churches but mostly it is shaped by the social dynamic of the Coptic Christian community. The architects face complications from a political as well as social perspective, such complications include the multitude of opinions, the budget and more importantly the balance between traditional and innovative approaches applied on churches during each specific period. The transition from the modern to contemporary churches shows a growing tension with the traditionalist approach. Both extremes are observed such as the attempt to replicate St. Mark Cleopatra in El karouz church, to the almost complete detachment in the small-scale church of St. Mary Elmasreya in Mivida.

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