

Being Modern, Building Modern: L'Union Féministe Egyptienne's Headquarters in Cairo in 1932

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BEING MODERN, BUILDING MODERN. L'UNION FÉMINISTE EGYPTIENNE'S HEADQUARTERS IN CAIRO IN 1932

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ABSTRACT

The interpretation of what modern ideas and modern architecture mean varies significantly across different regions and historical contexts. At the same time, definitions of modernity and modern architecture evolve over time, reflecting cultural, social, and political contemporary challenges. This paper explores the architectural project of the professional school and headquarters of *L'Union Féministe Egyptienne* (UFE) in Cairo, to reflect on how modern articulations of architectural design programs intersected with ideals of first wave feminism and their local expressions. Founded by Egyptian feminist Huda Sha'arawi and her peers in 1923, the UFE successfully established its headquarters and a vocational school on Kasr-al-Aini street in Cairo by 1932, realized through the designs of Egyptian architect Moustapha Fahmy. Based on archival information from the UFE mouthpiece, *L'Egyptienne* – a monthly on feminism, sociology and art – this paper primarily investigates the rationale behind the design and construction of the union's headquarters. As a journalist and a member of the UFE, Ceza Nabarawi, described the building in 1932 in *L'Egyptienne*: "For it is not only the purely artistic monuments that should hold our attention, but everything - ancient or modern - that has been erected with the noble purpose of alleviating human suffering and contributing to the enrichment and progress of civilization". From this particular case study, the discussion seeks to contribute to remapping modernisms from a feminist and postcolonial perspective that considers, makes visible, and values women's contribution to the history of the built environment, also in North Africa. Lastly, this paper traces the recent history of the building and its transformations over the preceding years, adding to the discourse on the public perception of modernist landmarks in the Middle East and beyond, as well as the challenges of maintaining historical narratives for these structures to ensure their conservation and preservation for future generations.

1. INTRODUCTION

*"For it is not only the purely artistic monuments that should hold our attention, but everything - ancient or modern - that has been erected with the noble purpose of alleviating human suffering and contributing to the enrichment and progress of civilization"*¹

The notion of modernity and what it means to be modern, has been interpreted differently across various regions and historical periods. The exploration of the story of the construction of the headquarters of the Egyptian Feminist Union [*L'Union Féministe Egyptienne* (UFE)] in Cairo during the 1930's contributes to documenting the architectural representations of social movements which often claimed to promote "modernization" — especially the women's movement. Founded by Egyptian feminist Huda Sha'arawi and her peers, the UFE building in the center of Cairo stands as a symbol of both architectural innovation and feminist ideals in the early 20th century. From the intimate gatherings where revolutionary ideas took root to the relatively opulent scale of the UFE's building, this research traces the journey of feminist thought and its spatial manifestation within Egypt in the first decades of the 20th century, aiming to make visible the often-overlooked contributions of women to the built environment in the Middle East, while also contemplating the challenges of preserving these landmarks for future generations in the face of changing social values, surging real-estate market prices and inefficient heritage preservation policies. To achieve this, the research firstly presents the spatial transition of emancipatory ideas from private salons to the metropolis, towards the activism of Huda Sha'arawi and the proposal to establish the UFE headquarters, as a social and architectural response to the need of bringing feminist issues on a public scale. The second part focuses on the architectural project designed by architect Moustapha Fahmy, aiming to explore the notions of modern society and architectural ideals within the Cairene society at that time. All in all, the research emphasizes the necessity of broadening the notions of modernity to reveal the histories of visionary women in architecture and society.

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2. THE [SPATIAL] TRANSITION OF IDEAS: FROM SALONS TO THE PUBLIC

2.1. HUDA SHA'ARAWI AND L'UNION FÉMINISTE EGYPTIENNE

Egyptian feminism after the 1919 Revolution represented a continuation of actions undertaken in earlier decades, setting the basis for the formation of women's organizations in the 1920s.² In this context, Huda Sha'arawi (1879-1947) occupies a central position, being strongly influenced by her mentor, French intellectual Eugenie Le Brun in the 1890s. Sha'arawi was a significant figure practicing salon culture, where Egyptian upper-class women organized lectures and discussed public matters in the private sphere.³ In the early 1920s, the meetings became more massing. Her influential leadership led her and her peers to establish the UFE in 1923.

1. Coza Nabaroui, "L'École Professionnelle et Ménagère de l'Union Féministe Egyptienne," *L'Égyptienne* 8, no. 77 (February 1932): 5-10.

2. Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1994), 3.

Despite the accomplishments of the UFE, as Liina Mustonen has written referring to the work of Sania Lanfranchi, Huda Sha'arawi faced difficulties in bridging the gap between her privileged status as an upper-class Egyptian woman and the broader societal issues faced by the working class.⁴ However, contemporary feminists perceive their historical legacy as an intrinsic component of the nation's identity since Sha'arawi resisted appropriation by both the hyper-masculine authoritarian state and sought transnational feminist alliances with women from the global North.⁵ As a prove, in March 1919, she led the largest women's demonstration against the British colonial state and the success of the march prompted the establishment of the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC) in 1920.

On the other hand, the UFE was criticized for attempting to impose Western-style modernization on Egyptian women,⁶ who were influenced by pacifist feminist western figures such as Margery Corbett Ashby, Germaine Malaterre-Sellier, Christine Bakker von Bosse or Rosa Manus. However, it could be argued that even if Huda Sha'arawi did not initially emphasize the differences between Arab and Western women with the aim of establishing female networks of alliance, she anchored her feminist discourse in a progressive Islamic voice to articulate a new feminism within an Islamic context.⁷ This is evident in her subsequent activism beyond the establishment of the UFE. In 1938, Sha'arawi organised the Eastern Women's Conference to bolster connections between Palestinian women and the broader Arab feminist movement. In 1944, Sha'arawi led the Arab Women's Congress in Cairo, and in 1945, she became the founding president of the Arab Feminist Union.⁸ She died in 1947, without observing how Egyptian constitutions of 1956 and 1962 guaranteed equal opportunities to all Egyptians—at least in a theoretical sense.⁹

2.2. FROM SALONS TO THE UFE HEADQUARTERS

The UFE was established for both international and national reasons, aligning with women from around the globe in their advocacy for equality, social and political rights, moral upliftment, the protection of children and the abolition of "houses of tolerance".¹⁰ In its first years the UFE participated in international congresses held in Rome,¹¹ Graz, Paris, Amsterdam, Geneva and Berlin between 1923-29. The UFE demands included equality in education, setting the minimum age for marriage at 16 years and reforming marriage and divorce laws. In 1925, they established their monthly magazine *L'Egyptienne*, and twelve years later, in 1937 its bimonthly "younger sister" *Al Masria*, published in Arabic.¹² The UFE headquarters building stood in 1932 as the culmination of nine years of effort. Yet, the UFE also lacked consistent broad-based support and sympathy, facing instead, "the hostility of certain circles to the ideas of progress and emancipation."¹³

Members of the UFE operated through other buildings before establishing its headquarters in Kasr-al-Aini Street.¹⁴ Once the war ended and the nationalist movement became strong, Egyptian women that had fought together with men for peace and equality, finally funded the UFE on the eve of the International Congress in Rome in March 1923, affiliating

3. Fariza Iztounene and Nassima Melaba, "The Notion of Space in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and Huda Shaarawi's *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)*" (Doctoral Thesis, Université Mouloud Mammeri Tizi Ouzou, 2020), 37.

4. Liina Mustonen, "The Gender Dimension of the Authoritarian Backlash in Egypt," *Turkish policy quarterly* 14, no. 1 (2015): 181.

5. Basuli Deb, "Cutting across imperial feminisms toward transnational feminist solidarities," *Meridians* 13, no. 2 (2016): 164-188, <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.13.2.09>.

6. Safaa Monqid, "Mouvements féminins et féministes en Égypte: rétrospective et histoire d'une évolution (fin XIXème siècle à nos jours)," *Insaniyat. Revue algérienne d'anthropologie et de sciences sociales* 74 (2016): 49-73, <https://journals.openedition.org/insaniyat/16591>.

7. Rula B. Quawas, "'A Sea Captain in Her Own Right': Navigating the Feminist Thought of Huda Shaarawi," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8, no. 1 (2006), <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol8/iss1/17>.

8. Deb, "Cutting across imperial feminisms."

9. James L. Gelvin, *The modern Middle East: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 283.

10. "Discourse de Mme Charaoui Pacha à la cérémonie d'inauguration de l'école de l'U.F.E." *L'Egyptienne* 8, no. 79 (April-May 1932): 11-14.

11. Huda Shaarawi and Margot Badran, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 2001), 129.

12. Ceza Nabaroui, "A l'Union Féministe Égyptienne"

L'Egyptienne 8, no. 86 (December 1932): 2-6.

13. Nabaroui, "L'École Professionnelle et Ménangère."

14. "Pose de la première pierre de l'École Professionnelle et Ménangère de l'Union Féministe Égyptienne, 2 Avril 1931." *L'Egyptienne* 7, no. 68 (April 1932): 2-9.

15. Nabaroui, "A l'Union Féministe Égyptienne."

16. Florie Bavard, "Politiques du dénuement dans les luttes nationalistes et féministes en Égypte (1882-1956)." *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* (2022): 101-127.

17. "RAPPORT: La Secrétaire de l'UFE." *L'Egyptienne* 9, no. 96 (November 1933): 2-7.

18. Nabaroui, "L'École Professionnelle et Ménangère."

19. "Echos d'Orient." *L'Egyptienne* 7, no. 70 (Juni 1931): 29-32.

20. "Pose de la première pierre."

21. Ceza Nabaroui, "La maison de la femme." *L'Egyptienne* 8, no. 79 (April-May 1932): 2-10.

22. Huda Shaarawi and Margot Badran, quoting the interview to Saiza Nabarawi published by Myriam Harrey in "La femme orientale et son destin: L'Egyptienne," *Journal de la Femme* (1934), and personal communication from Saiza Nabarawi in 1972. *Harem Years*, 129.

23. "Discourse de Mme Charaoui Pach," 11.

24. Mercedes Volait, "Une lignée d'architectes entre plusieurs mondes: les Fahmy d'Égypte," *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, no. 82 (2011): 251-266, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cdm.5743>.

to the "Alliance Internationale des Femmes pour le Suffrage". To fulfil its aim of assisting the masses of women they located a "modest" space in Al-Sayeda Zeinab in Cairo: a dispensary, to assist sick women and children, and a workshop, where both female and male teachers taught basic notions of Arabic, French, arithmetic, hygiene, dressing, religion, sewing, manual works, tapestry work and "tricotage". Although the UFE claimed to the government for the acceptance of young women in all grades of education,¹⁵ this remained distant from becoming a reality in the academic realm where in 1922 enrolled boys were still four times more than girls.¹⁶ The transformation of the workshop model into a professional school was therefore one of their pivotal goals, leading them to name their headquarters building *L'Ecole Professionnelle et Ménangère de l'UFE*. In the meantime, at the dispensary, the amount of voluntary work was commendable; treating a total of 18,830 women and children during the years 1927 and 1928.¹⁷ Thus, this space was not enough to fulfil the UFE ambitions.

The aim of the UFE with this new building was "to reinforce the feminine solidarity that must exist between the different class societies."¹⁸ However, the classes were still segregated between affluent and non-affluent young women. They secured the collaboration of the Ministry of Public Instruction to ensure that the future school would be tuition-free and provide free books and materials¹⁹ and got granted a plot. Architect Moustapha Fahmy, who had experience in working with civil organisations, was offered the project. After nine years of fund-raising in a context of huge international crisis, in Spring 1931 Huda Sha'arawi placed the first stone.²⁰ The building was built in 10 months, and "feminists from diverse careers" such as "men of letters, journalists, lawyers, doctors and notables" gathered during the opening ceremony on April 7th, 1932, in what the media named: "La Maison de la Femme."²¹ The UFE had intended to engrave this message on the facade of the building, but due to significant public objection, ultimately did not do it.²² Sha'arawi stated: "This day is one of the happiest of our association as it marks a new page in the annals of the national evolution of the Egyptian women."²³

3. MOUSTAPHA FAHMY, THE UFE'S HEADQUARTERS AND BEYOND

3.1. MOUSTAPHA FAHMY AND THE UFE'S HEADQUARTERS (1932)

As researched by Mercedes Volait,²⁴ the Fahmy family, spanning four generations and multiple continents, has left a notable mark in architecture. Mahmoud Fahmy (1856-1924) received one-year training in France and developed a unique position following an itinerary of technical expertise and political function in engineering career. His son, Moustapha Fahmy (1886-1972), followed a similar path, with a career primarily focused on public works but with broader international engagements. Having graduated from the Special School of Public Works of Paris (ESTP) in 1912, Moustapha was one of the founding members of the Society of Egyptian Architects in 1917 and became the first Egyptian professor to teach architecture at the Polytechnic School of Cairo in 1923. In 1948, he contributed to establish the Egyptian section of the International Union of Architects (UIA), which established itself

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to represent the profession in the Middle East. His architectural works ranged from public buildings to buildings developed by civil associations, such as the hospital for the Muslim Benevolent Association (1932) and the headquarters of the doctor's syndicate (1940) as part of Egypt's alleged "modernization process".²⁵ The UFE headquarters was also designed in this context.

Following Fahmy's designs, the UFE headquarters was built on Kasr-al-Aini street in Cairo by 1932 (**Fig. 1**). This move signified a transition from their former model of working-class districts' workshop and clinic to an architectural symbol of the movement. The school, envisioned by wealthy class women for their working-class peers, aimed to train them in feminised manual jobs such as cooking or sewing, while also offering spaces for public encounter, including conferences and annual parties. The two-floor building also included multiple offices and "salons", as well as a grand conference hall with a podium, an exhibition shop and childcare facilities for working women.

The main two floor plans were published in *L'Egyptienne* in February 1932 (**Fig. 2**). The first floor included two magazines in the two corners of the front facade, and the main spaces of the school including offices, rooms for sports, toilets, and the biggest room, the refectory. The second floor hosted the "grand conference hall" and its podium, more offices, classrooms, and toilets, with two salons on both sides of the main entrance, facing the front facade. The entire setup represented the tangible realisation of spaces designed to contribute to women's emancipation in line with the UFE's main concerns.

3.2. "MODERN" ACHIEVEMENTS AT THE UFE'S HEADQUARTERS

At the UFE's Headquarters, the private became more explicitly political, and public achievements in relation to "modern" civilization were constantly highlighted. Notably, students' works were showcased and sold at exhibits in Cairo in 1926 and 1931, as well as at the International Exhibition in Liege in 1930. By 1933, the school boasted a total of 150 students over the age of 12, with a preparatory class dedicated to orphans aged 10. Additionally, significant strides were made in the fight for women's admission to universities. That year, the UFE celebrated the first female laureates from the University, recognising them as the "names of modern Egypt" across faculties such as Humanities, Sciences, Medicine, and European Universities, literally marking a "joyful effect in the evolution of the modern Egypt".²⁶ It is clear that for their members, the UFE represented Egyptian modern ideals, as did their building. Thus, what constituted modernity in Cairo in the 1930s?

As James L. Gelvin has written, the concept of "modernity" has been a fixture in the lexicon of social sciences for centuries. Originating in the eighteenth century, European and North American scholars distinguished between societies deemed "civilized," having achieved modernity, and those perceived as lagging on the path to civilization. Modern societies were characterized by a replication of the European experience, assuming that the trajectory of European society and its form of modernity could serve as a universal model. In this context, throughout the nineteenth century, the Middle East experienced significant socio-economic, and cultural

Figure 1: Main façade of the Professional School of the UFE designed by architect Moustapha Fahmy in Cairo, published in *L'Egyptienne* 8, no. 79 (April 1932): 4.

Figure 2: Floorplans of architect Moustapha Fahmy's design for the UFE in Cairo, Egypt, published in *L'Egyptienne* 8, no. 77 (February 1932): 5-10.

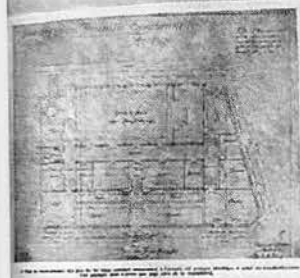
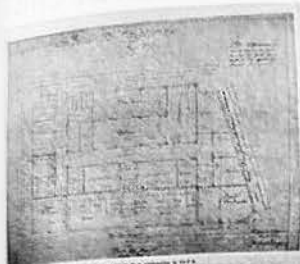
Figure 3: Moustapha Fahmy's UFE building in Cairo, Egypt. © John Hanna, May 2024.

25. Mohamed Elshahed, "Egypt Here and There: The Architectures and Images of National Exhibitions and Pavilions, 1926-1964," *Annales islamologiques*, no. 50 (2016): 107-143. <https://doi.org/10.4000/anisl.2138>.

26. Nabaroui, "Al'Union Féministe Egyptienne."



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transformations, often through defensive developmentalism, such as rulers adopting European governance methods alongside the influence of (in this case, both British and French) imperialism.²⁷ Yet, as the history of the UFE Headquarters demonstrates, along with the lives and work of Moustapha Fahmy and Huda Sha'arawi, Egyptian modernity transitioned from an intellectual movement to a socio-political project, with anti-imperialist ideas permeating its very establishment by local elites—the same elites who constructed architecture as the material embodiment of modernism.

Still, the prevailing notion of [European] modern heritage might have influenced the recent history and preservation of the UFE's building, shaping its transformations over the preceding years (Fig. 3). Presently, the discourse on the public perception of modernist landmarks in the Middle East and beyond might overlook buildings like the UFE Headquarters. However, its significance is probably greater than commonly thought.

4. BEING MODERN, BUILDING MODERN

Huda Sha'arawi's transition from private salons to the public arena represents a spatial transgression of feminist concerns in Cairo. In this context, examining the history and narratives surrounding the UFE Headquarters not only prompts us to reconsider the notion of modernism through feminist and decolonial lenses but also invites reflection on the diverse manifestations of modernity across geographical contexts, particularly in discussions regarding the preservation of historical spaces.

In the process, the experience of researching the history and stories surrounding the UFE Headquarters reveals the current urgency of documenting buildings that have actively been built to pursue the ideals of social justice, prosperity, and peace. ■

27. Gelvin, *The modern Middle East*, 69 and 90.

BIOGRAPHY

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María Novas Ferradás is an architect and researcher specialised in exploring the intersections of social and political history and cultural studies with the built environment. Novas has published and edited articles and books that delve into how feminist movements have shaped architecture and urban design. Her book "Arquitectura y género: una introducción posible" (2021) received recognition at the 16th Spanish Architecture and Urbanism Biennial.