"Medievalism as Progress? The Case of 19th Century Cairo"

Eva-Maria Troelenberg (Research Group Leader, Max Planck Institute)

The development of Cairo during the 19th century is largely considered a dualistic phenomenon, resulting in a janus-headed 'oriental' metropolis between innovation and tradition: on the one hand, the expanding capital took part of a global urbanization process resulting in modernized infrastructures and a public space characterized by large boulevards and open squares. In the case of Cairo, this development has typically been understood as a step towards modernization, but also as a symptom of the imperial age with its incitements for 'westernization'.

However, the same period also saw increasing attention for the Arab heritage within the urban landscape of the city. Old Cairo with its Fatimid and Mamluk buildings was rediscovered by both Egyptians and Europeans for different, yet interrelated reasons. The resulting vogue of Neo-Mamluk style has been described in terms of a kind of 'invention of tradition', yet always with a strong emphasis on its traditionalist character which also seems to be closely related to nostalgic Orientalist clichés of an Orient devoid of progress and disconnected from modernity. More recent research (Rabbat, Sanders) has maintained the main premise of 'Medievalism', but also has hinted at the significance of this '(re-)invented tradition' for the reformist definition of a both modern and Muslim society in 19th century Egypt.

In my paper I will follow in this vein, yet I would like to re-examine more closely the premise of urban ‘Medievalism’ within the context of social reform embodied in architecture. I will look at some 19th century image sources and construction projects and suggest reading them not only as expressions of traditionalist historicism, but at the same time as media of social and cultural renewal or even utopia, serving particular purposes for the Egyptian society of this era by means of citation. It thus describes revivalism as part of a modern narrative, not as opposed to it.

Methodologically, my paper also presents a cross-cultural case study related to recent approaches of the anachronic and polytemporal in art history (Wood, Nagel) and against this background critically examines concepts of innovation and progress as epistemological fulcra.