



# THE HELL OF REINFORCED CONCRETE

by  
Hassan Fathy

Salon Suisse Biennale 2016



Wake up! A path towards better architecture

**Thursday 26 of May - 6.30 PM & 8.00 PM**  
Campo Sant'Agnese - Palcoterra (Terrabloc)



## THE HELL OF REINFORCED CONCRETE

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Thanks to Rachida Teymour for translation from Arabic to French



### Actors:

Natania Prezant & Nyan Storey

### Scenography:

Lucas Oettli



Hassan Fathy (1900-1989), Egyptian architect, wrote in Arabic a play called *The hell of reinforced concrete*, in 1964. The play consists mainly in a dialogue between two men: Hassan Kaf and Hassan Mim. The first militates for the modern city of New Bariz (Upper Egypt) built in the Occidental manner, in reinforced concrete. The second defends the traditional architecture of Egyptian oases. After visiting the traditional village of Old Bariz together, Hassan Kaf joins Hassan Mim's opinion and bewails selling his parents house for practically no money.

### Places:

the New Kharga & the Old Kharga

### List of characters:

Hassan Kaf, office employee of the society for the development of the desert.

Hassan Mim, architect commissioned to plan the village of Bariz.

### Act I

Hassan Kaf: Unfortunately there is no one around to teach them how to drink properly. They say it's out of fashion. Welcome, Mr architect! I trust you slept well last night.

Hassan Mim: Hamdullilah! I slept badly. And I thank you for having installed me in the director's pavilion. But the heat is suffocating. Even the fridge can't manage to cool the water. May God preserve us. I haven't slept at all, that's why I dither.

Hassan Kaf: It's a little hot these days, by the grace of God.

Hassan Mim: A little hot? A bit of an understatement that! What are the heatwaves like then? When it's really hot, what's the situation?

Hassan Kaf: To tell you the truth, Mr architect, there are far hotter days than

the ones we are going through. The weather ought to improve over the next few days.

Hassan Mim: These days, as you say, when will they come, God willing?

Hassan Kaf: In about eight months! The thought is very comforting! What a misfortune! We don't have electric ventilators to cool the atmosphere!

Hassan Mim: It's good that you have no ventilator to divert the wind and carry the stifling heat that's blocked above to the cool floors below. A simple fan made of straw from the oasis would have been enough. Nobody builds them anymore nowadays. They say it's out of fashion. It's a shame. There was something beautiful about them. Patterns used to be sown on the fabric. It's what was needed in a climate such as this.



Hassan Kaf: Have a Coca-Cola to cool you down a little.

Hassan Mim: Thanks, I've just had three glasses and my stomach is burning. That Coca-Cola leaves a taste of diluted acid in the throat.

Hassan Kaf: Is that true? We can't live without Coca-Cola. Even the little children!

Hassan Mim: Tell me, what did you do before you had Coca-Cola?

Hassan Kaf: To tell you the truth, I've never asked myself that question before. I can't even remember the time before Coca-Cola. I thought it had always existed. It seems it existed before my own birth... though it came only with the companies that dug the wells...

Hassan Mim: My friend, let us forget this Coca-Cola business. I have an important question. Tell me, what you think? Do you belong to the children of the oasis? What would be the best project for the streets of Bariz? Should we build them narrow and curved, and give them the form of the covered alleys in your ancient town? Or should we build them large and orthogonal, like those of the new town? What do you think is the best solution?

Hassan Kaf: Wide streets of course, approximately 20 to 30 meters, just like those of the new town, and houses aligned in orthogonal rows, the modern way!

Hassan Mim: Don't you think that the width of the streets is what causes the heat which stifles our throats. This is the reason why there is no shade, there is no awning to counter the hot wind coming from the Sahara, the dust which enters the houses. What do you think of the ancient streets?

Hassan Kaf: May God preserve us from them, my Bey! You want to bring us a hundred years back. That's an old fashion which doesn't exist anymore. Now, when inhabitants build for themselves, they do orthogonal streets as in the city, and at least twenty meters wide.

Hassan Mim: So you think your ancestors were idiots building tortuous and covered streets?

Hassan Kaf: The builders from ancient times weren't like the architects of today. And anyway they were peasants. How can we compare them to the architects who have studied in America and in Europe? May God protect them!

Hassan Mim: For my part, when I visit a new country for projects and other reasons, I always like to pay my respects to the works of the predecessors who built the country. Of course they are long dead, but when I walk in a neighbourhood in ruins, I get the impression that the people who built it are still alive and meet me at every street corner and I salute them and chat with them that way. I would like to visit the old Kharga

to meet your ancestors and see what they have done. Maybe they have something to tell us. How about it?

Hassan Kaf: These places are so old there's nothing worth studying and, besides, their narrow alleys reek of foul smells. They are infested with flies.

Hassan Mim: The foul smell doesn't come from the narrowness of the streets! I've seen the town of Capri visited by millionaires. The streets are narrow never more than 90 cm. They don't smell bad. The foul odour you talk about springs from the latrines open on the narrow street. And you would want them to smell nice? That there should be no flies? I want to visit the town of your ancestors. Let's go for I can't bear the heat of this room. It's an oven!

## Act 2

Hassan Kaf: Run! Run!

Hassan Mim: What's going on? Quick, get in! Ouch! Ouch! The sand is hitting my neck as the bullets of a hunting rifle.

Hassan Kaf: Shut the window on your side, please, ya Osta! It's not dust but stones this wind carries in its trail. Driver, take us to the Old town and bring us to the street of our old household, by Eyin.

*The Jeep starts with a blow of the horn.*



## Act 3

*One of the old streets, an alley, narrow and covered. The air is agreeable and without any dust.*

Hassan Mim: Grace be to God! God's salvation be yours, residents of these buildings. May salvation be yours, builders of the houses of this town. It's a paradise. Truly, it's a very good thing. It's a gift from God! Neither heat, nor hot winds, nor dust hitting our necks! Those are the true architects!

Hassan Kaf: You are right, this is magnificent.

Hassan Mim: Your ancestors, may their souls rest in peace, were right; they weren't idiots! They made their narrow streets tortuous and covered. They were really first class workers!

Hassan Kaf: It's true. How come I haven't noticed even though I am native of this country? If you hadn't brought it to my attention, I would never have become aware of it. This coolness is wonderful. Here we can breathe and there is no need for Coca-Cola.

Hassan Mim: You mean to say that you have come to see that your ancestors weren't backward-minded idiots as has been commonly supposed, but that we are the benighted ones... and we aren't even conscious of it!



Hassan Kaf: That's it, that's it! We are idiots! How come I haven't felt this coolness before? It's as if we had been hypnotised. Cooked by the heat, we drink Coca-Cola until our bellies are ready to burst! And take delight in becoming modern by drinking Coca-Cola like the Americans!

Hassan Mim: You mean to say that they have hypnotised you? It's true. They have brainwashed you to make you accept this furnace instead of staying in paradise. Because they sell you the furnace. And paradise comes from God. It can't be sold, or bought!

Hassan Kaf: So be it. As the holy Quran says, "We have become atheists and have inverted divine providence." We have changed all this with the fire of Hell by building our modern houses in reinforced concrete. May God spare us from building in concrete!

Hassan Mim: I have an idea. We should change this verse for another: "The blind and the seer, night and day, neither shadow, nor heat, and the living and the dead are equal. God listens and you can't hear those that lie in the cemetery."

Hassan Kaf: So be it! [Very moved by what he has seen.] It's true, we, the living, have become the inhabitants of tombs not our ancestors, for we neither feel, nor listen; shadows and heat have fallen on us.

Hassan Mim: By the grace of God you have started to understand!

Hassan Kaf [*Crying and lamenting for his ancestors, he turns his face left and right from side to side*]: What happened to me for me to sell the house of my ancestors? We are in front of the building. I have sold, for 150 pounds, the big house in which I was born and where I have grown up. It's true it was made of raw earth, but it was spacious and fresh. We played hide and seek inside, we ran. I sold it for 150 pounds and bought a house made of cemented bricks: two bedrooms and a living room. We can't move inside and it's as hot as in the director's house. The children can't sleep anymore and they cry because of the heat. They are covered in rashes. I put the price of the old house in down payment and I still have 800 pounds of debts. And each month I pay half my salary. And the children cry and have rashes. So they cry and shout. What a shame! I have swapped a gift from God against a house of perdition in reinforced concrete, one from the street of a town where the air throws stones at us. Ah! what a shame, our old house!

Hassan Mim: Calm down Effendi! It's not your fault. But ours, us architects who have led you into error building you concrete houses, telling you that yours was old fashioned and that the streets had to be broad. It is your ancestors who have made you come to terms with the fact that you are simme-

ring, without being aware of it, in the fire of your reinforced concrete house of perdition, as you call it.

Hassan Kaf: May God burn the architects in hell-fire for having put us, me and my children, in there! They are atheists, they are atheists, they are atheists. May the wrath of God hit architects and entrepreneurs!

Hassan Mim: Calm down! Don't forget that I am architect myself and that I am the one who, for the last ten minutes, has been opening your eyes and made you feel the difference in the reinforced concrete house you have bought and the Coca-Cola that you can't even remember when you have begun drinking. You were perfectly happy.

Hassan Kaf: God forgive me, Mr architect, it's my frustration at having lost all my money, and the house of my ancestors... and the illness of my children. Ah! my money! Ah my ancestors!

Hassan Mim: May your ancestors rest in peace! Today I have learnt a lot from them, more than I have learnt from school. Myself I was blind like my colleagues the architects, and I was about to build broad streets in Bariz. Not only 30, but 35 meters wide, for the pavements. I worried about the car drivers who wouldn't be able to enter the alleys for the next 30 years, and for the highway inspectors coming every ten years... I was about to let the gusts of wind come in. Winds which blow as



hell-fire in each household! Grace be to God and thanks be to your ancestors! You know how much good this visit did us!

Hassan Kaf: Ah! my ancestors! Ah my money! My family's money is lost! Ya nas! And everyone told me to be modern! I have been mocked! And I sold the house of my ancestors for 150 pounds and they sold me the house of perdition, two and a half rooms, for 950 pounds! Oh! my money! Oh! my ancestors!

Hassan Mim: Stop whining! God made you the answer to this problem. I was blind. As the Quran says, "He takes the living out of the dead."

Hassan Kaf [*cries louder and louder, striking his head*]: It's true he's taken the living Hassan out of the dead one. Only the price was too high considering the money I make, father of children. What is their fault? They can't sleep and have their rashes. Ah! my children!

Hassan Mim: Well. Let us return to the office and see what we can do for each time you glance at your former household, frustration gets the better of you. Calm down and thank God for having opened your eyes to your hypnotisation, and hope that the Minister of Housing will do the same.

