

Globalizing the Local: The *Mashrabiya*'ya as a Universal Architectural Motif

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Traditional Arab society is on the surface fixated with the idea of hiding and preserving privacy: the public display of one's viewpoint is constrained, the movement of women restricted, and traditional Arab-Moslem cities generally lack the lively plazas and piazzas of their medieval European counterparts. But within these restrictions, mechanisms were developed that allowed for a filtered participation in public life and events, for the exercise of very subtle instances of a transparent behavior. These mechanisms found numerous manifestations. At the level of social conventions, the veil has stood as the most noticeable crystallization of transparency indeed. As a device that allowed women to partake in public life, while preserving their privacy, the veil has evoked remote participation. It allowed elite women to extend familial space and privacy into the streets beyond their homes and palaces. Women in long cloaks and face veils could not be approached or spoken to by men. Indeed, their veils made them socially invisible, which meant that the norms of gender segregation could be upheld while simultaneously giving women access to the streets and social life outside their homes. Unlike its Orthodox Christian counterpart as depicted in the quote, the Arab-Islamic veil is an unambiguous apparatus, the meaning of which may not be exhaustively defined (Figure 1).

Other manifestations can be found in the quintessential Middle Eastern device of the *mashrabiya*'ya – the wooden lattice window (Figure 2). Interpreted as a symbol of segregation and exclusion, it permits women "at the same time to see but not to be seen."¹ In different ways this logic is found in the articulation of religious and secular spaces. In mosques, women's prayer places are not just separated from men's, but are placed behind, or in a mezzanine, or to the side, where they are not visible. From these locations, women can still see the male worshippers and the imam.² While all of this might appear to be related exclusively to, and primarily associated with, "Islamic-Arabic" architecture we would like to argue that by examining the *mashrabiya*'ya device, in its etymology and relation to the veil, we may uncover some universal insights



Fig. 1. A veiled woman and her daughter in 19th century Cairo, a typical depiction of Oriental women. (Zangaki, ca. 1870. "Deux femmes arabes" University of Chicago, Reothstein Collection).

into the nature of architectural transparency, and the diverse ways it may manifest itself.

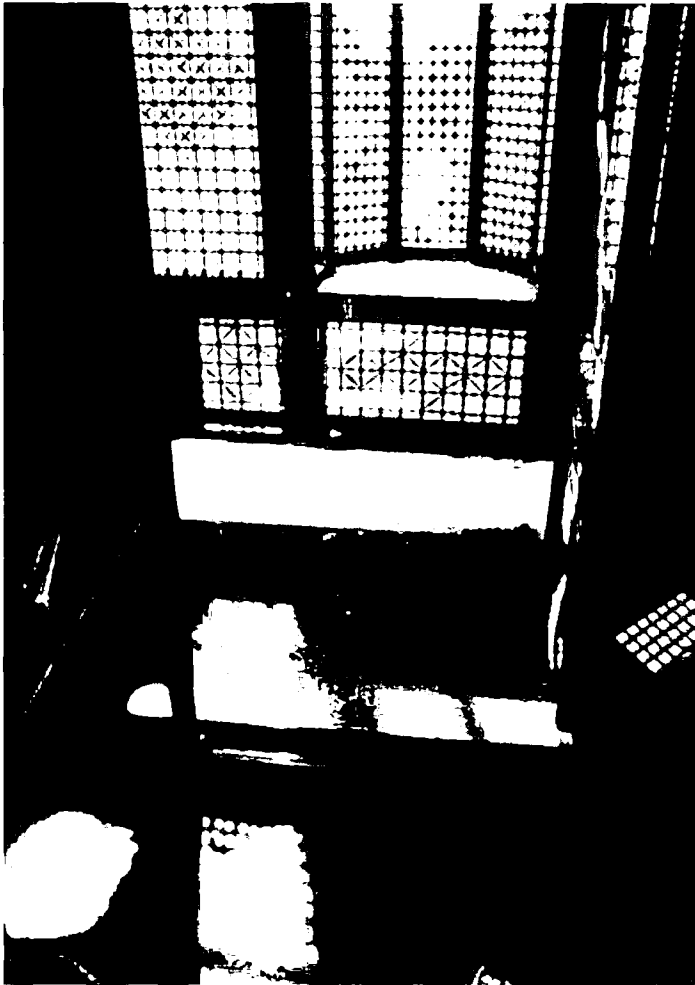


Fig. 2. The Mashrabiya – a lattice screen window covering usually made of wood as it appears in a modern residential building in Cairo (author).

TRANSPARENCY AND WEAVING

In Arabic, transparency (*Shafafiyah*) directly recalls the old origin and type of the veil and curtain. The word is thus *Shafafiyah*, from the root *shaffa*. In his *Lisan-Al-Arab*, the celebrated lexicographer *Ibn Mandhur* defines the meanings of the root *Shaffa*, which signifies that a thin, fine, or delicate garment, or a piece of cloth is such that what is behind it is visible; or so as to tell what was beneath it (one says “*shaffa-athauabu*” meaning that a dress is transparent). *Ash-shaffu* (pl. *shufuf*) is defined as a certain thin, fine, or delicate garment, or veil, generally red in color and is made of wool, through which one sees what is behind.³ By this definition the concept of transparency ceases to be that which is related to the clarity of the material glass and, instead, becomes an attribute of certain forms of woven fabrics.

This preliminary start leads us to posit an essential hypothesis, namely that transparency in architecture possibly found its historical genesis (and meaning) not through the use of glass but in weaving. Since glass was first used in windows only in

Roman times – and yet in a very crude form⁴ – one should be able to trace the architectural origins of transparency in the lattices which emerged from the braided or woven wall mats that hung vertically and were invented before clothing. Following Semper’s classical thesis that the beginning of building coincides with the beginning of textiles, it is possible to argue that the first architectural applications of transparency must have first emerged in the crude intertwining of tree branches for fences and pens which evolved into the art of weaving with bast and wicker, and later with woven threads. Carla Gottlieb reports in this sense that early windows were covered with plaited mats, as suggested by a container discovered in Suza (2700/2500 B.C.).⁵ The shift to, and the perfection of, the textile phase of this motive took place in ancient Assyria and Persia, cultures that were famed for their colorful tents and tapestries. As a solid structure or a more durable backdrop to the textile-motivated product became necessary, the textile hanging or its substitute assumed an additional role to its spatial one – that of a dressing. From the surviving *mashrabiyyas* in Egypt, for example, we can still detect the traces of weaving and embroidery transposed as it were on the walls (Figure 3). This is no surprise since Egyptian sculpture and painting, according to Semper, was an embroidery in cross stitch executed on the walls with all the attributes of the latter’s style.⁶ Similarly, the style of the figures chiseled in the gypsum of the Assyrian alabaster bas-reliefs imitated the style of the textile dressings that preceded them. With the need for warmer, more solid, or more durable walls behind, the textile hanging became a “dressing” and subsequently it was replaced by other “surrogate dressings,” such as stucco, wood and metal plaques, terra cotta facings, and alabaster and granite paneling. Of these, wood became the ideal material to fabricate *mashrabiyyas*.

THE MASHRABIY’YA: AN ARCHITECTURAL VEIL

As noted in the introduction we would like to argue that the *mashrabiyya* (the lattice screen window) constitutes an architectural veil, similar in function to its textile counterpart. It serves both a social purpose, ensuring gender segregation, but also has socio/religious connotations.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, *mashrabiyya* “designates a technique of turned wood used to produce lattice-like panels – to adorn the windows in traditional domestic architecture.”⁷ The term itself has become associated with lattice windows in Egypt although it is being referred to differently depending on locale. It is known in Yemen as (*takhrima* – that which is full of holes); in Tunis as *Barmaqli*; in Algeria it is primarily associated with Ottoman/Turkish architecture. In Baghdad (Iraq) such devices are referred to as *shamashil*, which are wooden, boxed screens supported on brackets with a projecting, shading cornice. The degree of decoration varies, depending on the owner’s social status. In Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, a *mashrabiyya* is known as *roushim*, which in its simplest form is a framework with panel infill but without

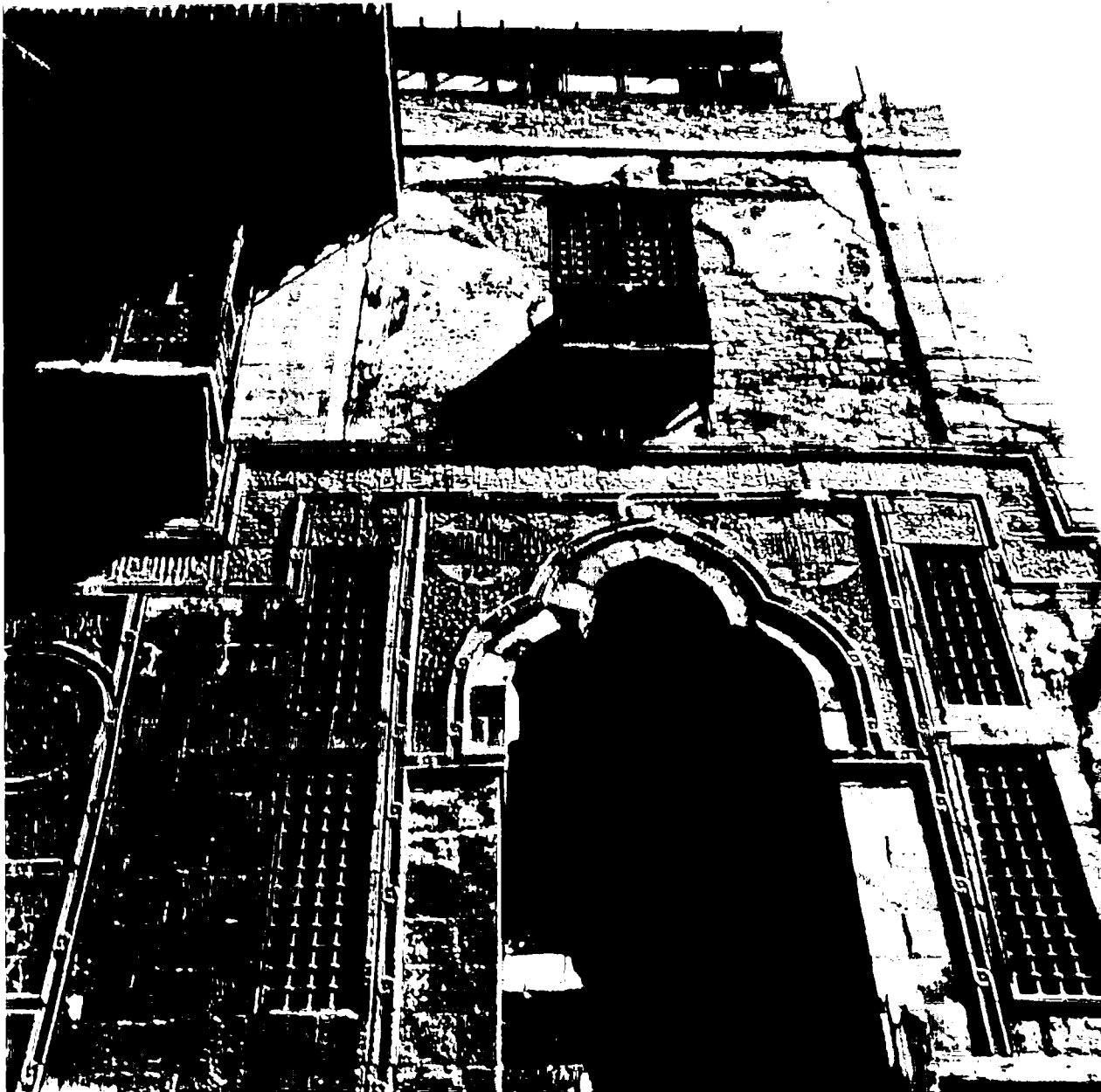


Fig. 3. A Mashrabiyya superimposed on a Mamluk residential building in Cairo. Its various details evoke textile and embroidery elements (author).

carving.³ Similar devices are used in Japan in the form of blinds of split bamboo (*sudare*). Among Arabic speaking nations the common word for a wooden-lattice window is the Egyptian *mashrabiyya*. Interestingly, such devices, perhaps due to the Spanish and Moorish influence, are also found in South America. It is, therefore, a truly transcultural device that transcends cultures, religions and faiths!

Since there is no clear indication in the literature as to the origin of the use of the *mashrabiyyas*, we have to rely on few anecdotes. Some references suggest that the first use of wooden screens were in a mosque sub-space, termed *maqsurah*. The *maqsurah* is an enclosure within a mosque in which a ruler prays while being protected from the public through wooden screens.

According to Creswell such devices were introduced in the first half of the eleventh century following a series of assassination attempts against Moslem rulers.⁴ In eighteenth-century Egypt, the society's need for privacy and familial space was linked to the practices of gender segregation and female seclusion whose aim was to protect marriageable females from men unrelated to them beyond a certain degree of consanguinity. Within the homes of the dignitaries, the family quarters of the household was known as the *haramlik*. Although the palaces of the grandees were divided into *haramlik* (women's or family quarters) and *salamlik* (men's quarters), women had access, in some cases indirectly, to all parts of the house through various architectural devices including screens of turned wood known as *mashrabiyyas*. "Indirect" access because women could not

mingle with men in the *salamlik* including the men's indoor reception room called the *mandara*. However, women had access to it by way of the overhanging gallery enclosed in *mashrabiya* that allowed them to observe the men and the activities in the *mandara*. *Mashrabiya*s allowed women to observe without being observed and alerted men to the presence of women they were not allowed to see. Thus, women could gain access to male space while maintaining the norms of gender segregation but there were no devices – architectural or otherwise – that permitted men to penetrate female space.¹⁰

The word *mashrabiya* derives from the Arabic *shariba* (drinking) since the window contained a niche in which jars of water could be stored for drinking.¹¹ According to Paccard, "This word, as we are told by May Herz, is probably derived from the verb "chariba": "to drink." *Moucharabieh* would therefore mean the "place where we drink." The designation perhaps comes from the tiny cornices of turned wood which hang outside facades, and which are meant to receive small jars

(*qolla*), porous vessels whose function is to cool water by a flow of air."¹²

The definition is further confirmed by deed documents from the 16th century, which refer to such windows as *mashraba* or *mashrabiya*. Initially applied during the *Mamluk* period in Egypt to other architectural objects and furniture pieces, the use of turned wood for windows is mentioned sparsely in late *Mamluk* deeds.¹³ During that time, palace windows were covered with iron or bronze grills whereas houses of the poor used wooden screens. Arabic historian *Al-Maqrizi* illustrating the demise of palaces laments that their iron windows were replaced by wooden ones.¹⁴ During the Ottoman reign in Egypt, which started in 1517, the use of *mashrabiya*s in domestic architecture became more common. Screen windows dominate Orientalists' paintings and in later periods, photographs, upon depicting urban scenes in the 18th and 19th century (Figure 4). During the famous *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, a street representing Cairo was constructed and, to depict the essentially oriental character, windows were covered with *mashrabiya*s.¹⁵



Fig. 4. *Mashrabiya*'s as they appear in a 19th century photograph of a street in Cairo (Sebah, ca. 1870; University of Chicago, Rothstein Collection).

In the 19th century, under the pretext of modernization, the ruler of Egypt, Mohamed Ali, banned the use of *mashrabiyyas* in Cairo. Modernization also included other measures, such as widening of streets and the introduction of new boulevards which slice through old and existing neighborhoods. Such efforts were undertaken under various health and safety pretexts such as prevention of fire (*mashrabiyyas* are made of wood.) The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a revival in the use of *mashrabiyyas*; as it became more fashionable to use them in various furniture pieces (also termed arabesque) especially in houses for the rich. But their use as screens for outdoor windows is extremely rare. They were eventually replaced by glass windows and Venetian shutters.

THE CONTROLLING GAZE

Interpreting the *mashrabiyya* as a way to subjugate women behind closed openings offers only a limited explanation to the ingenious nature of this device. The *mashrabiyya* has been designed not only to cover and separate spaces but also to facilitate and warrant certain degrees of controlled vision. Like the veil, the *mashrabiyya* allows one to see but not to be seen; the requirements of a transparent setting are met but in a non-symmetrical sense. By the mere nature of its fabric and design, it was thus possible to seize upon the lattice screen in order to secure some appealing optical effects, effects that emanate from a profound need for intimacy and seclusion. From the outside, the *mashrabiyya* hides everything behind it. From the inside, the ingredients to promote quasi-voyeuristic presentations are highlighted to their maximum, and one is therefore left free to behold the universe of outside scenes, or to ignore it at will.

Unlike the standard glazed window, therefore, the *mashrabiyya* does not recognize the "looking in" and "looking out" polarity; it does not constitute in this sense a poetic face of the concept of visual *symmetry* (Figure 5). Thus defined, it allows a controlled form of transparency whereby the gaze is permitted to access another realm (generally forbidden) without the use of glass and, which is even more important, without the destruction of the viewer's intimacy. The use of the lattice screen supports the materiality of this form of transparency, but it is not the material itself that defines the transparent situation, it is rather the spatial position of the viewer in relation to the screen. The position of the viewer is primordial in that one either sees or is seen. Spatial locations are not neutral anymore, but framed and manipulated by the viewer. Transparency in this case involves a motivated perception of different spatial locations, a viewpoint, a stand and an intention. It becomes closely linked to phenomenological transparency, as defined by Colin Rowe in their seminal "Transparency." Here too, transparency implies more than a material characteristic: "the transparent ceases to be that which is perfectly clear and becomes instead that which is clearly ambiguous."¹⁶

What we have here is precisely a dialectic of the eye and gaze: the subject of desire (man) sees the screen behind which the woman (object of desire) may or may not be sitting, and this provokes a certain form of anxiety, an obscure feeling that the house/ *mashrabiyya* itself is somehow already gazing at him, gazing at him from a point that totally escapes his view and thus makes him utterly helpless. This situation is rendered perfectly by Lacan's phrase "You never look at me from the same place from which I see you."¹⁷ What we encounter here is also the interconnection between gaze and power. In this respect, the *mashrabiyya* reads like an ironic reversal of Bentham's "Panopticon" as exploited by Foucault. For Bentham, the dreadful effectiveness of the Panopticon is due to the fact that the subjects (prisoners, patients, schoolboys, factory workers) can never know for sure if they are actually observed from the all-seeing central control tower – this very uncertainty intensifies the feeling of menace, of the impossibility of escape from the gaze of the Other. Through the use of the *mashrabiyya*, men walking on the other side of the screen are actually observed all the time by the female watchful eye, but far from being terrorized, they simply ignore it and go on with his daily business. From the woman's standpoint, of course, because of her physical closeness to the screen, the gaze denotes at the same time power (it enables her to exert control over the situation, to occupy the position of the master) and impotence: as bearer of the gaze, she is reduced to the role of a passive witness. The gaze, within this context, is a perfect personification of the "impotent Master," the impotent observer who captures perfectly the real suggestion of the act, but is nonetheless appointed to the function of a passive eyewitness, since her counteraction would stir the suspicion of the innocent, ignorant big Other.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Interpreting the *mashrabiyya* as a pure optical device is not universally shared, of course. Western writers early last century, as acknowledged in writings, photographs and paintings, saw in the apparatus a mark of subjugation and confinement. Calls for freedom followed. As a result, the search for *mashrabiyya* symbolism has become beset by danger, and it is impossible to defend its pure content unequivocally, although a score of daily practices look suggestive in this respect. The *mashrabiyya* as a theme, and as an architectural type that was consecrated throughout centuries, now appears suspicious. Like the veil, it calls for the end of confinement.¹⁹

And yet, by trying to etymologically and historically link it to weaving, to the veil and its uplifting, to the gaze and its subtleties, we have attempted to liberate this device from excessive interpretations and to present it as an idea. Not so much as a political idea but as an architectural motif which, for a long time, was the only means to crystallize transparency in its spatial, architectural sense. Beyond the Orientalist reading of it

as a symbol of the "East," of secrecy and subjugation of women, of hidden pleasures and surprises, the *mashrabiyya* is essentially an architectural device that crystallizes the desire for visual traveling and communication.

It is also worthy of note that the contemporary fascination with the theme of "seduction", with all its intricacies, does echo the enticing experience of going through the stages and layers, real or perceived, of materials and sensations in order to unravel or unlock the secrets behind a building façade covered with *mashrabiyyas*. With the difference that what the *mashrabiyya* expresses is the open formulation of the building skin, allowing it to act from the outside in and from the inside out, without necessarily being translucent. As we have shown, transparency is a property of a process, unfolding as a result of the changing position of the observer, rather than of a material. A building becomes transparent as a result of use: stepping across thresholds and utilizing interfaces, without having to cross through the spatial boundary of the building skin. Here, transparency arises from a communicative act between private and public, between light and dark, between movement and stillness, between living and working.

NOTES

¹ Afaf Mahfouz & Ismail Serageldin, "Women and Space in Muslim Societies," in Robert Powell, ed., *Expressions of Islam in Buildings* (Singapore: Concept Media/The Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1990), p.86.

² *ibid.*, p. 86

³ Ibn-Mandhur, *Lisan-Al-Arab* (Dar Sader, Beirut/Lebanon, Volume 9), pp.179-183. Other meanings: *Shaffa*: is said of a lean, emaciated body, especially as the result of love or grief. One says in this sense somebody "*shaffa-hul-huznu wal-hubbu*." Whereas "*Istashaffa ma-vara-hu*" means he saw what was behind it. One says "a garment *shaffa* upon somebody", meaning that this garment was thin. In a famous guidance by the Caliph Umar: "Do not let your wives wear the Egyptian *Cabuti* as it *yashaffu*", meaning it describes what is beneath it. *Shufafa*: a portion of water remaining in a vessel, or the last drop remaining in a vessel. "*Istashaffa-al-ma*": he drank what was in the vessel, all of it, even the *shufafa*, or the last drop or remains, not leaving any of it remaining.

In Edward William Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Part 4, Librairie du Liban, Beirut/Lebanon, 1968), pp.197-199, we also read : *Shaffaf*: Extremely (or very) thin or delicate, so that a thing behind it is visible. Applied to a gem, or the like; and to a garment, or piece of cloth. *Mushaffaf*: slender, shallow or weak, in intellect, and evil in disposition.

⁴ The largest known piece of Roman glass, a crudely cast sheet used for a window in a public bath at Pompeii, was nearly 3 feet by 4 feet (800 mm by 1100mm) in size. For a brief technical history of glass, see Edward Allen, *Fundamentals of Building Construction Materials and Methods* (John Wiley & Sons, New York, Third Edition, 1999), pp. 610-612.

⁵ This container, found in the temple of In-Shushinak at Susa, has been dated 2900-2700 or 2700-2500 B.C. (Early Dynastic III or II), and is now in the Louvre. It belongs to a group of vases decorated in very low relief which were discovered at Kafajeh, Tell-Hariri (Mari), and other Iranian sites, as well as in

the Indus Valley and Belutchistan. They are made of a green stone identified as steatite, a material rarely used before this time. Georges Contenau, followed by Ernst Heinrich and Pierre Amiet, classified the Susa vase as Flamite work.

The Susa container is fashioned in the form of two low cylinders joined together by a party wall. One twin portion reproduces the design of a building constructed in horizontal layers, apparently of twigs. It is divided into seven panels, into which are fitted three doors alternating with four windows. Each opening has a powerful double frame and incurved lintel. All seven are closed by plaited mats. The uppermost row of the wall construction seems also to be made of mats. The other twin portion has no openings and is constructed in interlace pattern, imitating wickerwork. As a design, the twin box is beautiful, particularly the sections with the windows. The doors are somewhat overdressed and fit too tightly into their sections, but the windows are little gems with sufficient background to set them off." See Carla Gottlieb, *From the Window of God to the Vanity of Man* (Abaris Books, New York, 1981), pp. 38-39.

⁶ Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 230.

⁷ Doris Behrens-Abouseif, "Mashrabiyya, I. In Egypt" in *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (2d edition, Vol. 6, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), p. 717

⁸ Paul Oliver, *Dwellings: The House across the World*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

⁹ Ibn Khaldun describes the *maqsura* as follows: "the enclosure in which the sultan stands during public prayers in an enclosure which includes the *mihrab* (praying niche) and its neighborhood." In K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* (The American University in Cairo Press, 1989), p. 9.

¹⁰ Mary Ann Fay, Virginia Military Institute: "From Warrior Grandees to Domesticated Bourgeoisie: The Transformation of the Elite Egyptian Household into a Western-style Nuclear Family," In *Family History in Middle Eastern Studies: An International Conference* (University of California, Berkeley, April 7-8, 2000).

¹¹ Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, (London: Dover Publications, 1973).

¹² "Peut-être ce mot, comme nous le dit May Herz, vient-il de "chariba": "boire." Moucharabieh voudrait donc dire "l'endroit où l'on boit." Cette dénomination proviendrait des petits encorbellements en bois tourné qui s'avancent en dehors des façades et qui sont destinés à recevoir la *qolla*, récipient poreux qui servait à rafraîchir l'eau par un système de courant d'air." See André Paccard, *Le Maroc et l'artisanat traditionnel islamique dans l'architecture* (Editions Atelier, 1974), pp. 225-226.

¹³ Behrens-Abouseif, *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, pp.717-719.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 718.

¹⁵ For a detailed description of this event and how it was used to ascertain western dominance over the East, see Zeynep Celic, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fair*, (Berkeley, 1992) and Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹⁶ Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, *Transparency*, (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1997), p. 22.

¹⁷ For further details on the gaze and power, see Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (MIT Press, 9th edition, Press 2000), p. 126.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.72

¹⁹ Notice the following account by a British traveler: "When one visits a show interior, such as that of the House of Gamal-ud-din at Cairo, and sees the pretty little shelves, and peeps through the lattices into the street, one feels that the bird is indeed flown, and that by no possibility can its plumage or song be reconstructed." Forster, 1923 as quoted in Bernard Lewis, *A Middle East Mosaic: Fragments of Life, Letters and History* (New York: Random House, 2000), p. 210.