

Appeal to save embassy launched

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“We have recently learnt of the decision made by your government to demolish the villa currently occupied by your Embassy in Cairo, and to replace it with a new building. Whilst not familiar with all the reasons behind the decision, we would like to take this opportunity to deplore such an action...” (part of a letter sent to Dr. N. Van Dam, Dutch Ambassador on 14 May, 1996)

Architect Nicholas Warner and social historian Samir Rifaat are up in arms over the planned demolition of the present Dutch embassy in Cairo.

Despite the fact that the demolition order has been recently approved by the Egyptian government and that plans for the new building will shortly be put out to tender, the battle continues to save the modest but attractive white villa which stands as a landmark of Egypt's heritage at the north end of Hassan Sabry street on the Nile island of Zamalek.

With six new employees arriving later this year and some of the existing staff temporarily accommodated in port-a-cabins within the embassy grounds, a lack of space has led the Dutch government to make the drastic decision to raze one building and erect another.

“We submitted the request [for demolition, to the Egyptian government] more than one year ago,” says Bert Ronhar, Deputy Head of Mission. “We have gone through all the relevant committees, and everybody has been involved.” All options were considered by the Dutch government to save the existing building, he said, but the only feasible solution was to demolish it.

But architect Nicholas Warner says this argument is weak. He is adamant that the site is large enough to allow an extension to the existing villa, either horizontally or vertically. “The embassy can be adapted successfully to house the embassy's needs in terms of office space,” he said.

So what action can be taken to save the villa?

“We've made an initial start in organizing a petition to try to save the building,” says Warner. “We are sending a copy of the letter that was presented to the ambassador, together with the petition and a brief history of the building of the street, to the minister for development and cooperation and the minister of foreign affairs in the Netherlands, in hope that they will reconsider the decision that has been made.”

Warner decried the decision, made from the Netherlands, to pull down the old property and replace it.

“Such an attitude is sad because the past is worth preserving and does have a price tag attached to it; nobody has ever said that the past comes cheap.”

Moreover, it is ironic that across the road from the embassy the Egyptian government has recently restored a building to house the offices of RITSEC (the Cabinet information decision support center). “This is a very encouraging sign,” says Warner. “The Egyptians have made attempts recently to preserve such buildings. The libraries that Mrs. Susan Mubarak has sponsored have been very good demonstrations of how you can reuse old buildings and in effect call them part of contemporary life. We expect the Dutch government to adopt a similar line.”

For a government which has a policy to adapt and reuse ancient monuments with architectural character rather than demolish and replace them, the Dutch appear to have been caught with their pants down. The Dutch government, in particular, is focusing in a big way on local cultural funds in Egypt.

As yet, officials at the embassy are still unsure of when the new embassy will be built, but as Ronhar says, “Whatever we are going to build, it will definitely not be a bunker, in terms of concrete, glass and iron. It will be of a classical style that will fit in very well with the surrounding environment.

“Part of our procedure is that two architects will always be involved, one from Holland and the other from Egypt. We want to avoid the kind of [new] distasteful buildings that we find around us.”

For Warner and Rifaat, the immediate concern is to save the villa. But more importantly they argue, with the Germans, Koreans and Romanians having

already pulled down and rebuilt their embassies, what will happen if they fail in their quest? Will this set a precedent for other embassies to follow?

Says social historian Samir Rifaat: “During the 60s European countries and the US had the opportunity of buying and turning into embassies some of the most beautiful houses in Egypt — those belonging to the rich merchant class (former Pashas and Beys) — at a time when real estate was going very cheap and people were selling.” As a result of economic and political forces these houses were being vacated, and the best way to save a house was to sell it to an embassy.

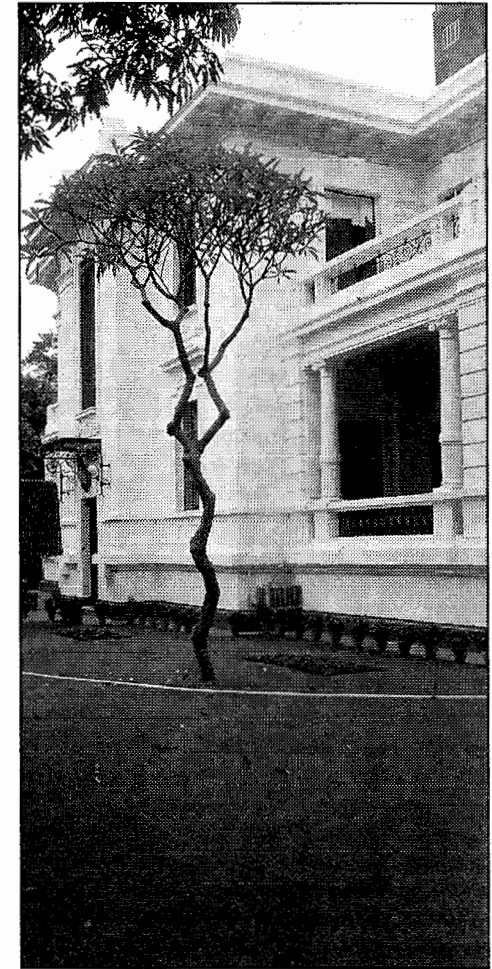
“If the Dutch manage to pull down their house, others will do the same,” adds Rifaat. “The area has some of the most beautiful houses in Egypt, which thankfully have been preserved because they are embassies.”

So if the Dutch require more space, why don't they simply move into empty offices in one of the many new buildings that daily alter the Cairo skyline? “We want to remain in Zamalek,” said Ronhar.

Adrian Stock, counselor at the Dutch Mission, adds: “Consider what would happen if we moved out. Who would we sell to? A developer? Imagine what he will do with the embassy after a few years. Do you not think it would be better for us to rebuild something that is more pleasing than for a developer to move in and build a high-rise block of flats?”

A hypothetical answer, but it is true that more stringent rules need to be applied governing development in Egypt, as old villas are pulled down by unscrupulous developers. Both Ronhar and Stock agree that in Europe an embassy in a listed building would even have problems changing the color of its shutters.

“In Britain, English Heritage would be brought in immediately if there was any suggestion that a listed building was to be demolished or altered,” says Warner. “And similarly, there's a very rigorous planning process. Discussions would have to have taken place with the planning department and plans submitted for approval before any such decision could be made. Once a plan has been submitted, notices are



Here today, gone tomorrow?

placed on the street that there are plans to do certain works asking anyone with objections to raise them.”

Hussein Fayeze, General Manager of the Housing Sector under whose jurisdiction the embassy comes, explains that there is a decree against pulling down houses which are more than 40 years old. However, he adds that it has become a policy that when an embassy applies to the Foreign Office the decree is overruled as part of protocol. “At first I refused permission to the Dutch embassy,” said Fayeze. “And then I am overruled,” after the procedure.

Fayeze then concluded that “we have just granted permission to the Canadian embassy (in Garden City) to demolish.” So the blight goes on.

A gentleman and a scholar

Diana Digges

Middle East Times staff

Dr. Nikolaos van Dam, the Netherlands' ambassador to Egypt, is not the usual diplomat, dropping in on Cairo for a few years before being posted to another far-flung corner of the world. He has deep roots in the region, having served in Lebanon, Libya and Iraq before his arrival in Cairo in 1991. He is a distinguished scholar of modern Arab history and politics, equally at home in Dutch, English and Arabic. His book on the struggle for power in Syria was a bestseller that sold out within a matter of months. But now the scholarly diplomat finds himself in a difficult position as the Dutch Embassy comes under increasing attack for its decision to demolish the gracious, 1920s-era villa it has occupied in Zamalek since the early 1950s.

A tall, thin man with thoughtful blue eyes, the ambassador sighs with frustration. "Of course, I like the building. It's tasteful, it's traditional, it's a lovely place to work." On a brief tour, he points out the generously proportioned rooms, the dentilled ceiling of the grand meeting hall, and the impressive spiral staircase. But Holland's relationship with Egypt — already the most diversified of its missions in the Middle East — is growing, says van Dam. The Dutch Ministry of Development Cooperation is sending more people to Cairo, "and we simply need more space." The embassy staff now numbers 50, but soon expects another 6 to 8 people.

Holland's presence in Egypt is already quite strong. Ranked as the seventh investor in Egypt and the seventh in exports, Holland has six of its 10 largest multinationals represented here. It gives

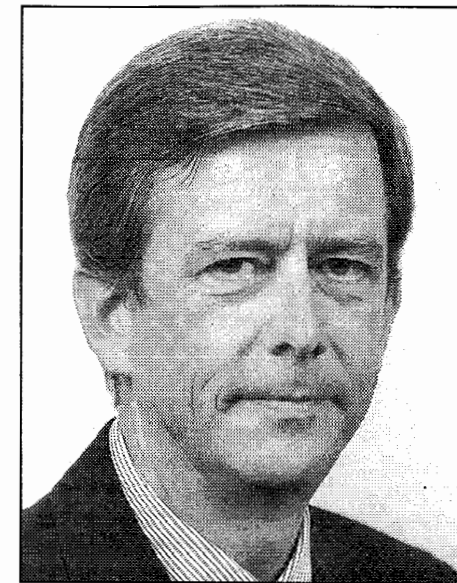
£E80 million in aid to Egypt annually. It shares its expertise in water resources management, irrigation techniques and agricultural production.

"We're experts in food production, the 6th largest exporter of foodstuffs in the world," says van Dam. And, with Egypt, Holland shares first place in export of potatoes. "We even export potatoes to each other," quips Dr. Reinot Vos, second secretary for economic affairs.

Holland is also building the largest "cutter-dredger" in the world to widen and deepen the Suez Canal. In the cultural department, the Netherlands is no slouch either, with a long history of archaeological, artistic and conservation activities to its credit. It has restored Coptic icons and tombs at Saqqara, delivered sound and light systems to illuminate the pyramids of Giza and the temples of Luxor and soon will do the same for the statues of Abu Simbel and the crusader castle of Taba.

On a less spectacular but equally significant note, Holland has quietly pioneered the preservation and promotion of local culture, underwriting studies of regional customs and law among the Bedouin and supporting the North Sinai Preservation of Cultural and Social Heritage — Egypt's first museum dedicated solely to traditional culture and local history. It has furthered regional efforts to set up a network of small museums designed to preserve and promote indigenous culture by sending staff to Holland for training in surveying, acquisition, conservation and management techniques. Last but not least, it recently established a £E2.6 million cultural fund to award grants to non-governmental organizations and individuals working in the arts and conservation fields.

Given all this activity, it's no surprise that at the



recent symposium on the preservation of cultural heritage sponsored by the European Union, it was pointed out "how strange" it is that Holland supports so many cultural and material restoration activities, on the one hand, but is planning to tear down its own building, on the other.

So, the question is put to the ambassador: Have all the alternatives been explored? Could the building's interior be gutted, and its ample interior redesigned to accommodate the newcomers? Or could the facade be retained and an expansion built behind it? Could wings be added to the building, an option the Embassy entertained a few years ago? Has the Embassy called on the expertise of local architects interested in preservation? Could a design competition be arranged — one that would satisfy the Embassy's space needs and the community's desire to preserve the building? In short, even though the demolition permit has been issued, have the Dutch considered that they could get a lot of mileage by setting an innovative trend in preservation — as they have in other areas?

"The design competition is a good idea," agrees Dr. van Dam. He has asked the Dutch Ministry of

Foreign Affairs "to rethink [the project]—and not to exclude the option of the wings."

Though it would be a gross overstatement to say there is a ground swell of commitment to preservation in Cairo, there are signs of impatience with the ongoing destruction of the city's streetscapes. The Dutch Embassy by itself may have only a modest claim to architectural splendor in a city packed with structures worth preserving, but it does contribute considerably to the streetscape of Zamalek. And streetscape is a concept the ambassador is familiar with. His native Amsterdam owes much of its charm to the fact that the rows of dwellings of the *Centrum* — laid out by the city's 17th century burghers flush with mercantilist wealth — are still standing in all their gabled idiosyncratic charm. Not one of them alone can lay claim to splendor, but together they create the rhythmic streetscapes for which Amsterdam is justifiably famous.

But the scholar is eager to talk about Syria, his area of expertise. As unpretentious as he is accomplished, van Dam patiently explains Syria's peculiar history and slow move towards a consolidated national identity after decades of "sub-national" and "supra-national" ties. It's a complicated story, as Syria is "a country with many pasts." So is Egypt, I point out, nudging him back to the subject of the villa.

He sighs again. His affection for the region is apparent. He says he's traveled "to every corner of Egypt," he says he enjoys diving, hiking and bird-watching in Sinai. He came to the region as a student in 1964 and "experienced so much hospitality" that he has, in his diplomatic career, never left — except for a three-year stint back home with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as deputy director for African and Middle Eastern Affairs. "I've been lucky to be posted to Arab countries throughout my career," says van Dam. The Middle East, it appears, is his home away from home. He offers me an Arabic copy of his book, *Holland and the Arab World* from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century. "Here, you can practice your Arabic." And yes," he says thoughtfully, coming back to the subject of the villa's preservation, "I will ask the [Dutch] Ministry not to exclude any option."

zontally or vertically. "The embassy's needs in terms of office space," he said. "So what action can be taken to save the villa?"

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