István Ormos
Cairo in Chigago: Cairo Street at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893

Le Caire, Institut français d'archéologie orientale (Études urbaines, 11)
2021, 449 p.,168 ill.
ISBN : 9782724707663

Mots-clés : Chicago, exposition universelle, style néo-mamelouk, architecture, Herz Paça, danse du ventre

Keywords: Chicago, World Fair, neo-Mamluk style, architecture, Herz Pasha, belly dancing

The Cairo Street of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 was the most successful of its kind. Preceded by the Cairo Street of the Exposition Universelle at Paris in 1889, this was a much grander affair. It was the most successful commercial enterprise of the Midway Plaisance, an addition to the main Fair, the White City, that was established as a way to control the lucrative entertainment industry that invariably accompanied World Fairs.

As Ormos explains in his introduction, the book grew out of his monograph on the work of his compatriot the Hungarian architect Max Herz, the director of the Arab Museum in Cairo and of the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe. Herz, in a private capacity, was the designer of Cairo street, at the invitation of George Pangalo, its organizer.

The literature on World Fairs in general, and the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in particular, is vast. Ormos's approach is a comprehensive one, dedicated to studying the Fair and Cairo Street within their historical, social and political contexts. This involves examination of a number of related disciplines including anthropology and art history, and the exploration of fascinating byways such as neo-Mamluk architecture, Arab literature and the history of the belly dance.

One should say first of all that the work is a triumph: Ormos's comprehensive approach makes it is hard to think of any aspect of the Fair and Cairo Street which has not been analysed in sufficient detail.[1] The contextual approach also produces conclusions significantly different from that of many previous commentators on the Oriental presence at World Fairs such as Mitchell and Çelik,[2] whose Saidian bias leads to entirely negative views.

The neo-Mamluk style[3] was used for most of the buildings in Cairo Street; Ormos gives a useful summary of its European manifestations. Possibly adding to its popularity was the success of the *1001 Nights*, many of whose stories were associated with Cairo.

In the chapter on the general background to the Fair, the fascinating link between the architecture of the White City (the official section of the Fair) and later buildings such as the Manhattan Municipal Building in New York (1915), Stalinist architecture in Moscow and Cairo's Mogamma Building is shown, including the often-erroneous interpretation of the latter, erected in 1951 in the reign of King Faruq, as deriving from Nasser's rapprochement with the Soviets.

The prestige of exhibitions in the Midway Plaisance (the commercial and entertainment section of the Fair, not usually financed by governments) is shown by the number of buildings designed by the foremost architects of the countries (mostly European) involved. Here too technology was celebrated with the local rival to the Eiffel Tower of the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889: the original Ferris Wheel. I was intrigued (as an Irishman) to find that Ireland was represented by two separate villages – and that no other countries of the "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland" were present. Presumably the very large amount of Irish emigration to the USA in general and Chicago in particular was a factor, as well as the Home Rule debate that was then raging in Ireland.[4] Turkey also had two pavilions, and fascinatingly, the dedication of the mosque was accompanied by 2000 or more member of the Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (in colloquial parlance the 'Shriners'). The latter, as Ormos points out, was just one of the exotically named fraternities popular in late 19th century USA, including the "Dramatic Order of Knights of Khorassan" none of whom, I imagine, had ever been near Khorassan.

(1) The bibliography, which includes many unpublished dissertations and archival sources, is exemplary in its comprehensiveness.

(2) Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, Cambridge, 1988, Zaynep Çelik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs*, Berkeley, 1992.

(3) One to which Ormos made a significant contribution earlier in his *Max Herz Pasha (1856-1919). His Life and Career*, Cairo, 2009, pp. 372-391.

(4) On the latter see Christopher Quinn, *The Irish Villages at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition: Constructing, Consuming and Contesting Ireland at Chicago*, PhD dissertation, University of Guelph, 2011.

BCAI 38 (2024) István Ormos: Cairo in Chigago: Cairo Street at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, recensé par Bernard O'Kane
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net

It is hard to keep track of all the World Fairs to which this one was a rival (they were particularly popular in France, as Expositions Universelles), but similar projects to Chicago's Cairo Street are outlined by Ormos. Perhaps only in the detailed account of the failed competitors to George Pangalo's successful bid might one feel that an overload of information is given. It was Pangalo who successfully recruited the architects Max Herz, and Matasek, an Austrian of Czech extraction, later a member of the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe, to whom a very useful biographical notice is given.

It is intriguing to find that, in addition to the thirty-one animals that accompanied the 175 persons in the Egyptian contingent, forty snakes were brought, ranging up to seven feet in length. More surprising was the separate arrival of a Sudanese contingent – just eight years since the fall of General Gordon's forces in Khartoum, when country was still under Mahdist control. Their successful struggle with British forces seems to have resonated with the American audience.

The layout of Cairo Street is examined in detail, with particular attention given to the mosque, based mostly on the Qaytbay complex in the Northern cemetery. Ormos follows the passionate arguments in the Comité *Bulletin*s regarding the roofing of the courtyard of Qaytbay's funerary mosque, with valuable information from the Comité archives (now housed, but difficult to access, in the citadel of Cairo) showing that Herz added a roof to the courtyard of the Abu Bakr ibn Muzhir mosque in Cairo. The latter building was purportedly the source of the design of the minaret of the Cairo Street mosque, although, as Ormos shows, this was not quite accurate. His discussion of this matter is exceptionally detailed,(5) but perhaps overestimates the ability of not just non-specialists but even specialists of the history of Islamic art to retain in their memory the architectural details of such structures: this can only be accomplished with the aid of a photographic archive (rare in 1893!) or now, a copy of Doris Behren-Abouseif's book on Cairo minarets(6) at hand.

A fascinating digression on the neo-Mamluk villa of Gianaclis, now part of the American University in Cairo but originally a tobacco factory, explains the surprising relationship between the Orient and tobacco products – and why the Yenidze tobacco factory in Dresden, for instance, was in the form of a neo-Mamluk mosque. Apparently, it was through Ottoman exports that cigarettes became popular in Europe, and in the late nineteenth century 10 % of Egyptian tax revenue was from tobacco products, made in Egypt from tobacco imported from Greece and the Balkans.

A copy of the *sabil maktab* of 'Abd al-Rahman Katkhuda was made for Cairo Street. Ormos effectively demolishes the urban legend, repeated by scholars who should have known better, that Herz removed the window grilles and tiles from the original Cairo building and shipped them to Chicago for the replica.

The longest chapter in the book is that devoted to the belly dance. Ormos explores not only its reception in Chicago, but the whole history, as well as the much wider setting of factors around its reception, incorporating racism, social Darwinism, biology, medicine, sexuality, and the place of women in society. It becomes clear that what was performed in Chicago was very different from what we now see in Cairo nightclubs or other venues around the world. It is also clear that the modern adage of "no publicity is bad publicity" was turned to great advantage by the proprietors of the theatre where it was shown: those railing against its impropriety (even the lack of corsets was considered highly immoral!) fueled attendance figures.

A short chapter considers the opinions of Egyptian and other Arabs towards the World's Columbian Exposition, but, as Ormos concludes, they are too meagre to be of much value. We look forward to his announced forthcoming study of Arab attitudes towards World Fairs in general.

The chapter on "Photography at the Fair" reveals a major problem, the mistaken captions of many of them. Fortunately, the author is as hand to rectify these. After his detailed study it is hard to see who might want to undertake "a new exhaustive examination of all available photographs made in Cairo Street" recommended by him.

The IFAO publications section has honoured the project with excellent production values: it has footnotes rather than endnotes, prolific illustrations of good quality, all in a large size with good design and quality paper.

Ormos concludes by hoping that "the reader will find here a balanced in-depth presentation and

(5) One quibble: Ormos refers (p. 108) to the striped pattern which, he says, is now visible on only one side of the Qaytbay minaret, and which is reproduced in an earlier lithograph. He notes that the stripes on the Cairo Street minaret were apparently the result of painting. The stripes on the Qaytbay minaret (and earlier, the whole building) were in fact also produced by painting, a common practice in 19th century Cairo (painted chequerboard patterns also being popular) that was frequently railed against in the Comité *Bulletin*s under the slightly misleading term of *badigeon* (whitewash – or daubing).

(6) *The Minarets of Cairo*, London, 1020.

BCAI 38 (2024) István Ormos: Cairo in Chigago: Cairo Street at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, recensé par Bernard O'Kane
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net

interpretation of a contradictory and controversial yet highly important project, with all its major facets, which formed a link between East and West, and yet at the same time connected them and which, in the broadest sense educated Americans, as well as entertaining them, while simultaneously serving as excellent means of publicity for Egypt." This was indeed an ambitious project, and one can happily say that the author has succeeded magnificently in his objectives.

Bernard O'Kane
The American University in Cairo

BCAI 38 (2024) István Ormos: Cairo in Chigago: Cairo Street at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, recensé par Bernard O'Kane
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net