

## Premio Internazionale Carlo Scarpa per il Giardino

16th edition, 2005

**Deir Abu Maqar**

Wadi en-Natrun, Egypt

Carlo Scarpa Prize 2005  
Jury report

The jury of the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens has decided to dedicate the 2005 Prize to Deir Abu Maqar, the Egyptian monastery of Saint Macarius which, together with Deir el Baramus, Deir Amba Bishoi and Deir es Su-riani, makes up a group of Coptic Christian monastic settlements founded in the second half of the iv century in the Wadi en-Natrun, a saltpetre-rich depression on the desert road between Alexandria and Cairo to the west of the Nile delta.

The uninterrupted history of Coptic Christian monasticism over a period of seventeen centuries is of crucial importance, also from the point of view of the physical form and life of the places where it developed and flourished.

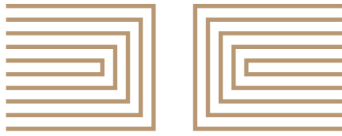
Their foundation marks one of the later stages of a movement that started in the early centuries of the Christian era with the restive and critical attitude of part of the peasant class, their enthusiastic embracing of the Christian message, their rejection of the existing order and their devising of an alternative based on an ascetic lifestyle pursued outside the social physical framework of the village, first nearby and then further and further away, in the desert.

The desert thus ceased to be perceived as a boundless void and became, first in the experience of St. Anthony the Anchorite and increasingly in the cœnobitic stirrings of St. Pachomius and in the regulated but free relationship between solitude and community conceived by Macarius, a vital space that was fundamentally different from the city, replete in its own, alternative way, soothing, even hierophantic.

The desert fathers were therefore also the inventors of an idea of landscape. The jury underlines the enduring force of this invention in its appreciation of the richness and beauty of the desert as fertile ground for the growth of a comprehensive set of values: the balance between silent, strenuous solitude, among books or in the fields, and collective, choral dialogue in chants and in the refectory; the reduction of self to the barest essential; the need for an intimate knowledge of nature and the internal workings of its laws, however severe, however extreme; and finally the profound perception of space and time.

The long experience of Coptic monasticism embraces a dramatic variety of historical events and conditions and beside its substantial continuity, reflected in the spatial organization of the monasteries, there is a visible oscillation between times of peace and development and times of attack and decay. During the former, the monasteries tended to spread out into the desert with cells and residential microcosms (*manshopi*), towards an anchorite dimension in which the monk acquired an ever-greater degree of self-governing freedom in solitude, established by his spiritual father and experienced as an honour and privilege. In times of strife the monks tended to retreat within a walled area and communicate with the outside only through a small door, or even to withdraw into the unassailable shelter of the fortress (*qasr*). The contrasting periods varied considerably in length but never, not even in the most extreme confinement of months cramped in a tiny fortress, was the search abandoned for a balance between seclusion and social harmony.

For those concerned with the safeguarding and enhancement of landscapes and with the arts and sciences needed to design and maintain them, and more generally those who exercise various degrees of responsibility in working on the relationship between the condition of places and the quality of life of the people and communities that inhabit them, Deir Abu Maqar prompts renewed consideration as a place which has been entirely reconceived and redesigned in contemporary times to accommodate new life that is at once consistent with monastic rules and able to take account of changed historical, social, economic and political conditions.



In the space of two decades, starting with 1969, every aspect of the monastery has been transformed with astonishing inventiveness, practical skills and energy. Coordinated by its spiritual father, the monk Matta El Meskin, the site proved able to mobilize the professional and operative abilities of the monks, many of whom had degrees or were otherwise highly educated; to dialogue with the State of Egypt, which was already fully committed to reclaiming the desert as part of agrarian reform; to involve relevant specialists, in particular hydro-geologists, archaeologists, agronomists, engineers, architects and veterinary experts. Within a decade, the monastery bequeathed by history – no more than a small, walled rectangle with abandoned cells inside and out – was reinvented. The overall area was greatly enlarged, as was the floorspace of the monastery. The great outer building, which was further enlarged during the work, contains 200 individual cells, all facing outwards towards the fields and the desert and all with rooms and facilities enough to allow their occupants to follow a solitary life, even for quite long periods. All the other communal facilities, except for the churches and the library, are also placed along the impressive ovoidal building that encloses and protects the remains of the ancient monastery without constituting a separate enclosure; on the contrary, seen from outside and from a distance it looks like a tenement building. The area occupied by the historical monumental complex was then cleared of all the extraneous buildings and materials that had accumulated there over time, to the point where original levels and spaces were no longer distinguishable. This led to the rediscovery of significant remains of an artistic heritage that had been in part buried and some of which was suffering from decay. The three churches and the fortress were seen to define a communal space, a sort of agora or cloister that comprised several different sectors yet strongly proclaimed its unity, a unity that was underlined by the patterned flooring and a distinctively harmonious overall atmosphere. At the same time, the surrounding land was divided into a Cartesian grid of square spaces protected by high, wind-shielding hedges, and work proceeded in transforming the desert into cultivated fields, vegetable plots, orchards, gardens and pastures. First, a few hundred *feddan* donated by the government (a *feddan* corresponds to 0.42 hectares), growing until there were 2,350 *feddan* (about a thousand hectares) by the beginning of 2005; in large part these have already been reclaimed from the desert and placed within a 13-kilometre-long enclosure which was completed in 1987. A water supply and irrigation system was begun in 1979 with the new tower of the monastery doubling as a reserve tank and an increasing number of 100 m.-deep well shafts, now reaching several dozen, sunk to ensure efficient crop irrigation using constantly evolving experimental technologies.

Deir Abu Maqar is therefore a place where the transmission of a conserved corpus of values is taking place also (perhaps only) through innovation, with radical changes in the size of the community, with surprising enlargement of the area reclaimed from the desert, with agricultural and economic experiments and with new stability, assured not so much by walls and enclosures as by the interdependent and wide-ranging relationships with the surrounding communities, irrespective of religious convictions or allegiances, that involve the collaboration of at least seven hundred workers and thereby ensure reliable incomes for at least seven hundred families in the villages of Upper Egypt.