

RETHINKING PARADISE

In the Seminar on Islamic Gardens, the theme of *Paradise* was the most repeated as a paradigm for the design of the Islamic gardens. As I sat through the presentation, I was thinking of the two gardens I designed in Egypt, one is about 2-1/2 acres, located in a dense urban community in Cairo, and designed for children as a cultural park, and the other is, a huge 3000 acres of oasis development in the deep Egyptian Western Desert.

I really never thought of these gardens as Islamic, nor of paradise as I was designing them. Yet, as the several presentations continued, from the mere historical accounting for the themes, their places, time, etc..., to the more esoteric and then to some analytical presentations, I began to realise that my two parks, the tiny one in Cairo and the enormous oasis in the desert are not apart from the concept of *Paradise*.

Yet, the most important realization that one makes while working on gardens is that they are not really a resemblance, or approximates, or simulation of a particular image of the *Paradise*, rather I contend that the garden in Islamic thought and tradition *is not as the Paradise, it is a paradise*. A real one, created by man..., requiring a very significant preparation and involving a very unique work.

The following comments and drawings illustrate some aspects the concept and the configuration of these two gardens.

Located in the ancient neighbourhood of the Sayeda Zinab in the old quarters of Cairo, the Park consist of three main elements: a museum, a library and a theater in addition to many gardens, and playgrounds. The site of the Park is the grounds of a historical garden next to the famous Ibn Tulun mosque. Hence existing trees acted as the poles for the conceived geometry of the Park, its organization was drawn from the interpretation of the form of Ibn Tulun minaretes. The spiral of the minarete, clearly visible from the site symbolizes the idea of growth, which was taken as the main theme for the Park, to give form to what is common between children and the Park... life. This theme was developed architecturally in varying degrees of complexities, from the simple spiral walls of the entrance, to the complex cascades of vaults and domes forming the spiral Museum.

In contrast to the urban garden of Sayeda Zinab in Cairo, this second proposal represents a return to a much more ancient tradition of transforming the desert into a

garden. It is not only different in type but also in scale: 3000 acres of land to be reclaimed from the desert and developed as an agro-industrial community for nearly 3000 young university graduates.

Farafra oasis is located 600 miles southwest of Cairo and in the western Sahara region of Egypt. Among the most fertile, yet least populated and underdeveloped of Egyptian oasis, Farafra consisted in a single settlement of 1700 persons called Asr El Farafra. The total population of about 2000 in the oasis has remained stable for the last 50 years and reflects the vital relationship that has been maintained between people and water, which is the source of life.

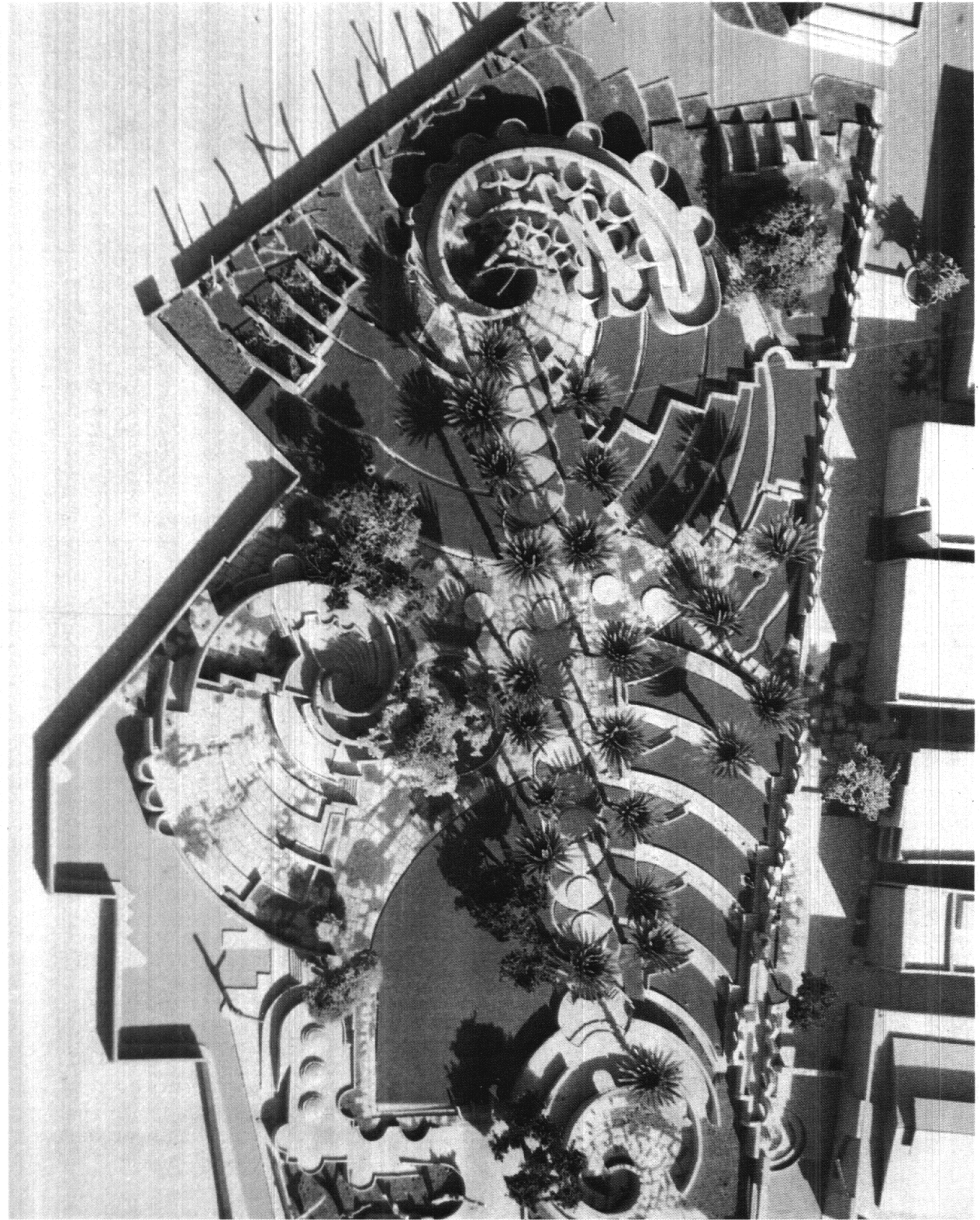
The configuration of the settlement is determined by soil classification. The form of the northern settlement (2000 acres) and the southern one (1000 acres) follows certain fundamental laws which governed the formation and life of the oasis. First of all, we learned that water circumscribes and defines life in the desert. The flow of water from wells determines the organisation for the community. People do not own land; they own a share in the well. The share is defined through an extremely sophisticated system: total output of the well is divided into 24 units, called *habbah*, or lots. Each *habbah* is in turn divided into 60 *qatrah*, which literally means drops. Water flows from the well 24 hours a day which corresponds to the *habbah* scale and then to the *qatrah* scale. A person or a family may own one or more *habbah*, or less. Clearly, this determines how much land can be cultivated, primarily as gardens or else what are called *hettia* or small settlements. A settlement as a whole is therefore organised around water sources. Each well delimits a domain of agricultural and gardening land, and hence the location of a village.

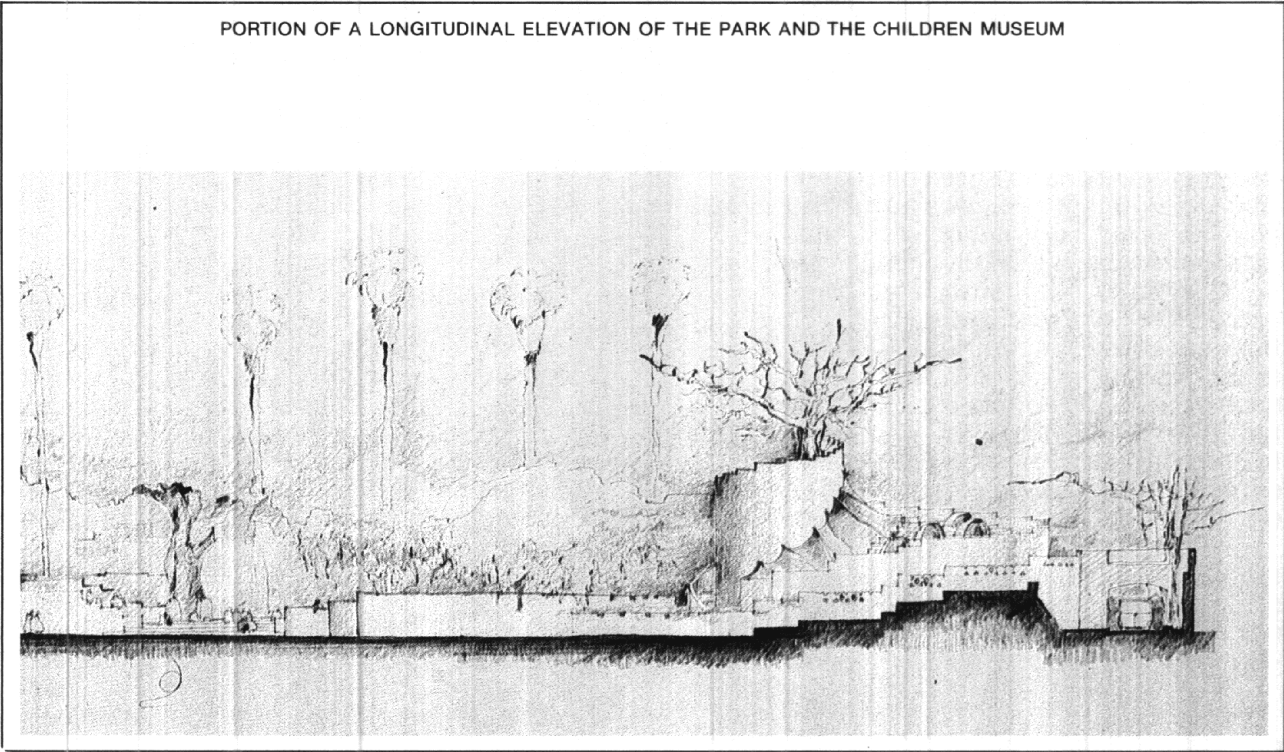
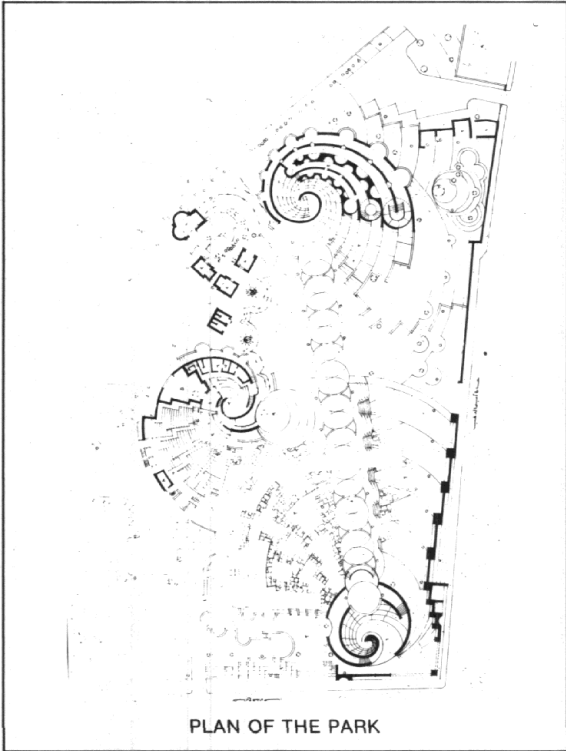
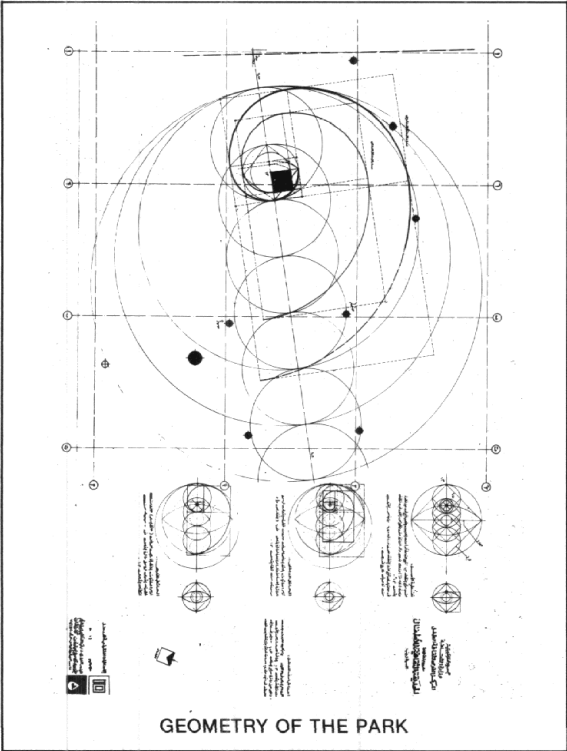
Secondly, we learned that the balance between irrigation and drainage lies at the heart of sedentarised life in the desert. Large drainage lakes are placed adjacent to each *hettia* (garden) so that water will not penetrate the soil, increasing its salt content and thereby causing decay. Location of the drainage lake is at the lowest point on the northwest side of settlements.

Thirdly, we came to realise that an oasis takes the shape of a boat floating against the wind; in other words, its shape resists the forces of desertification: wind and the movement of sand.

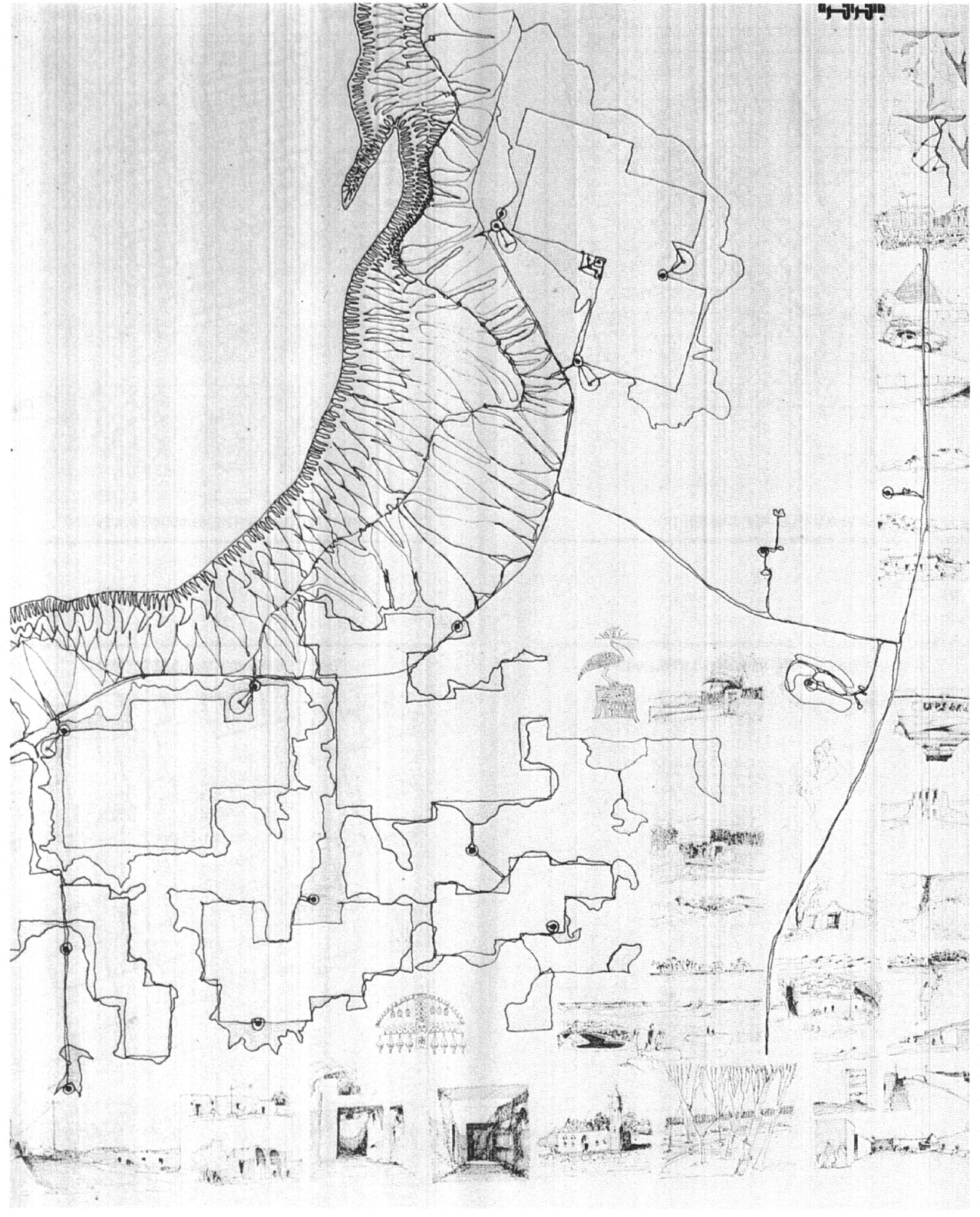
Abdelhalim I. Abdelhalim

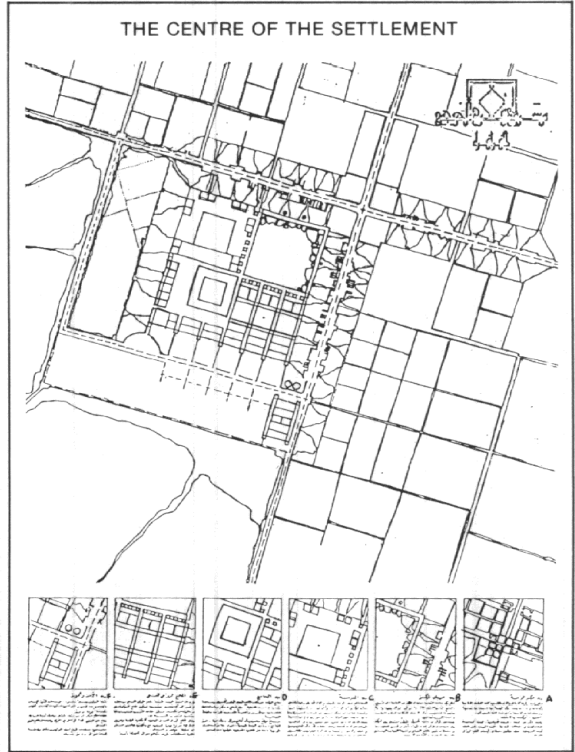
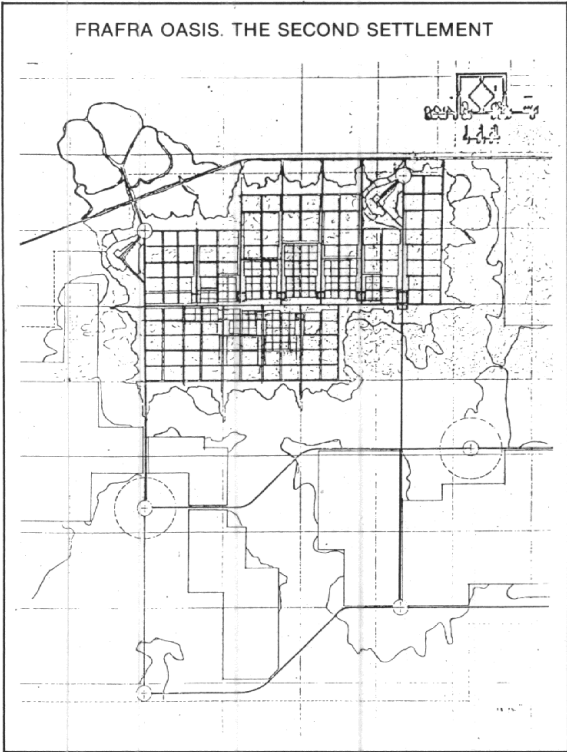
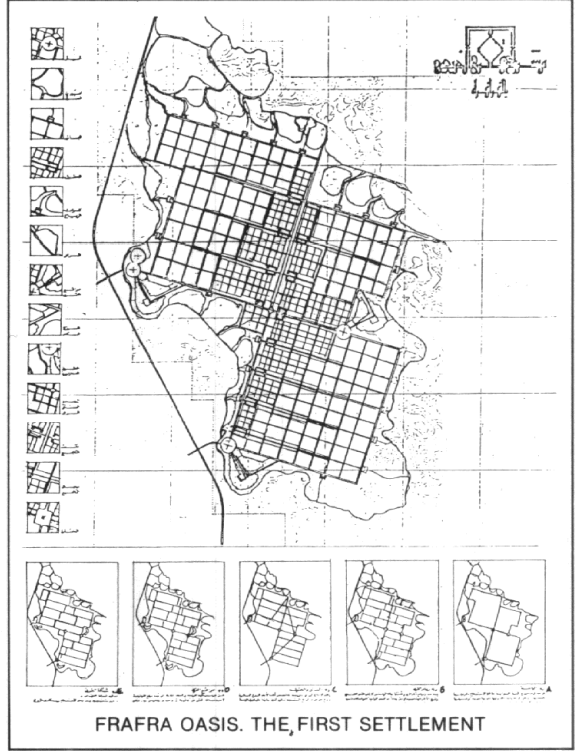
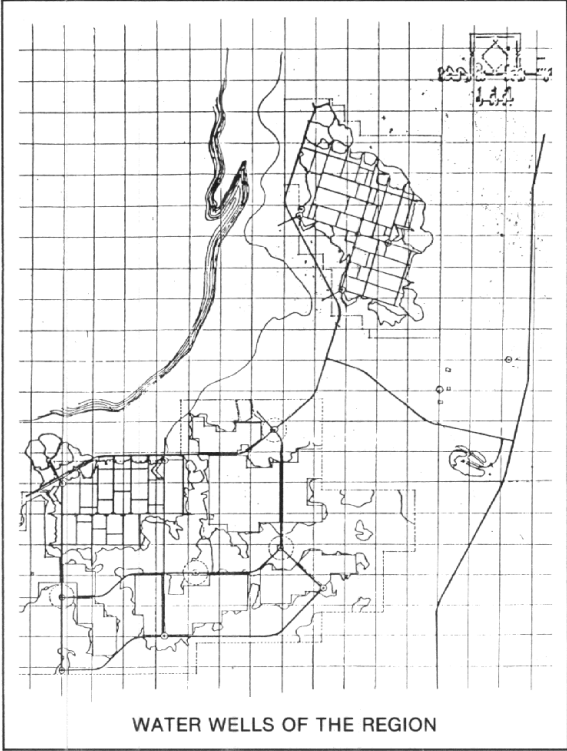
THE PARK AND CHILDREN MUSEUM, MODEL

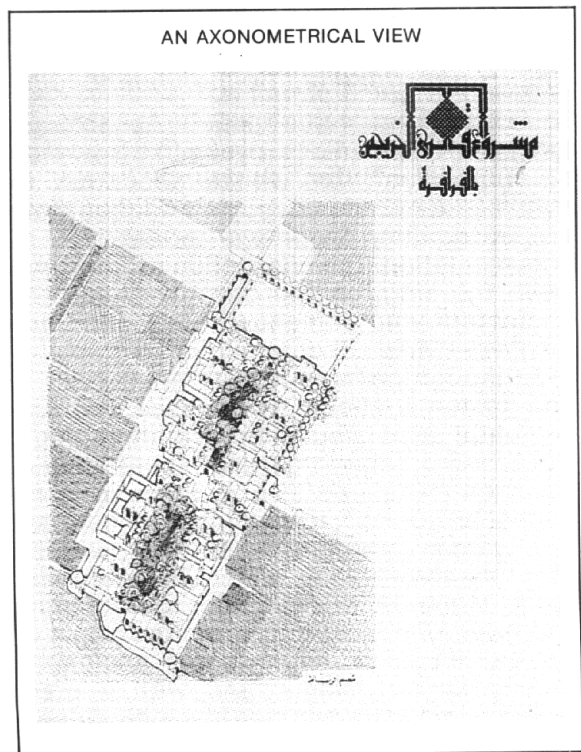
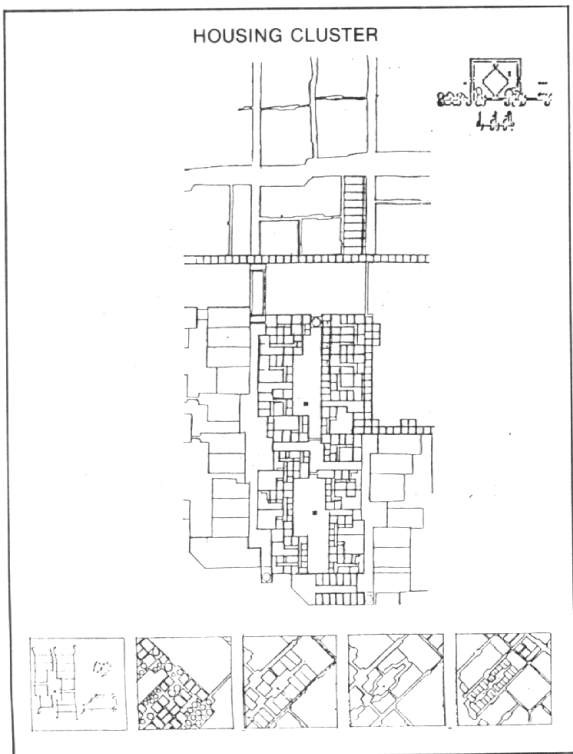
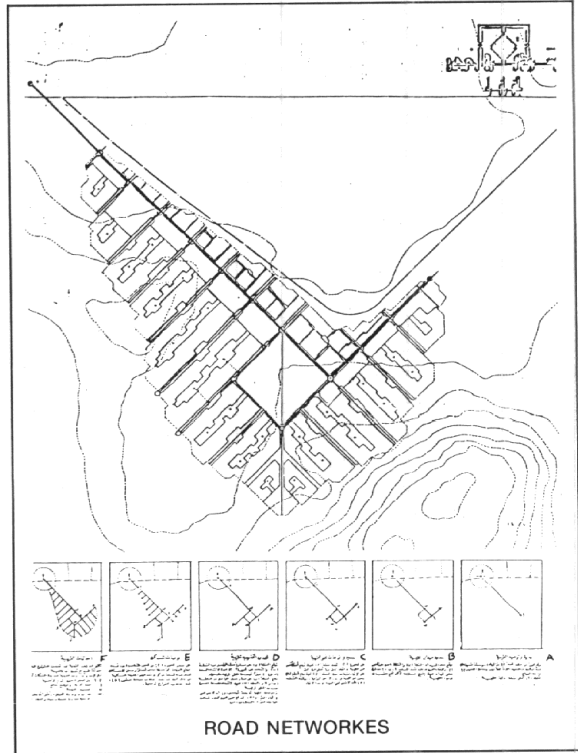
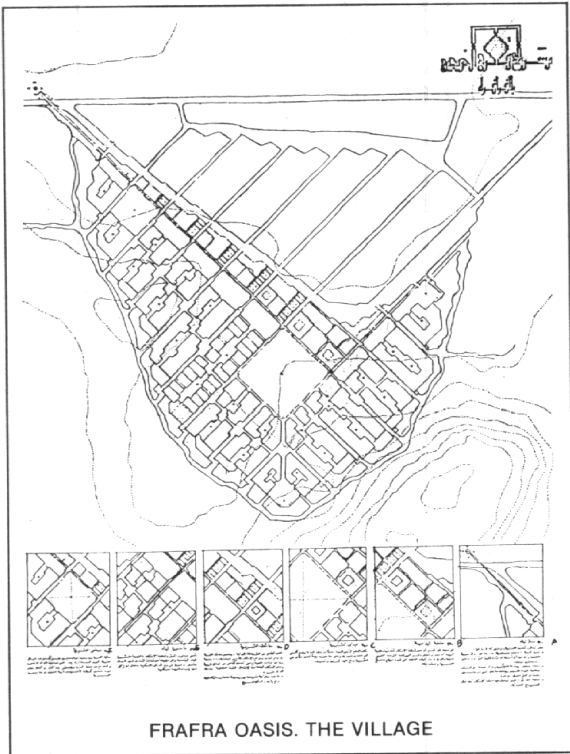




GENERAL PLAN OF THE OASIS OF FRAFRA







COMMENTS

Rosario Assunto: Regarding the issue of the definition of the term garden, the simplest is: "garden is nature that becomes art, art that becomes nature". Therefore I believe that historical materialism is the worst way of understanding gardens, for it has not succeeded in comprehending art and in acknowledging its autonomous values.

Giovanni M. D'Erme: I believe that many of the uncertainties which are revealed are caused by concentrating oneself solely on the more recent epiphenomena of a cultural institution which is at least six millennia old. Already the Elamites, set aside on substantial parts of the Iranian plateau beginning from the end of the IVth millennia B.C., appear to have had an extremely interesting religious structure; a triad formed by a *ziggurat* destined to the adoration of the gods, a House for the forefathers where the effigies of the sovereigns are kept, and a sacred wood, in other words the most archaic form, of the garden, a plot of flowers arranged by man for ends which are not immediately economic. If one adds to this that the Elamites were probably the inventors of the *qanat*, built and maintained up to Islamic times by craft corporations which were strongly characterized by gnostic-magic elements, then the garden appears to us, right from its origin, as the place for the coming together of three main issues: the adoration of the gods, the cult of royalty, the sacralization of the vegetation and waters which permit it.

This cultural apparatus continued on through the great Achemenides royal parks (*paradisa* or "paradises") on whose allocation to cultural, ritual and pedagogic practices there are no doubts, despite a certain lack of documentation. The connection existing between the king, on the one hand, and the characters who somehow recall our *Commedia dell'Arte* act out the human drama — even though perhaps in a different key. The garden, it should be stressed, is a fundamental point in our cultural anthropology. So the word "Islamic garden" is misleading. No such thing exists, just as there is no "Christian garden". If anything, we would call it a "garden in an Islamic setting", with its own phenomenology which is useful for study. However, to avoid misunderstanding and error, one must not forget the origin of the garden as a magic-sacred enclosure, essentially non-Islamic and with a great capacity to preserve its own ideological deep-set connotation.

Rolf Blakstad: The pre-Islamic concept of women being the embodiment of fertility and therefore as a garden has been mentioned. The Islamic tradition reinforces this metaphor; the Koran states: "As for your wives, let them be as field for cultivation". The girl's hair represents the pattern of channels of a field, the metaphor of plowing fields as a relationship between man and woman.

Rolf Blakstad: Babur was from Ferghana in Eastern Turkistan. Sir Aurel Stein in his travels through Turkistan found the remains of *bostans* with avenues of trees planted in the archetypal *bostan* with the cosmic cross design. The design is a most ancient one. So it is probable that Babur was designing something very deeply rooted in his experience.

He complained about the lack of order in the gardens of Hindustan and stated that he wished to give order and regularity to his gardens. The Indian natives referred to the stretch of *junna* along which he built his first gardens as Kabul. He sent to Afghanistan and to Samarqand for seeds to plant to reproduce examples of existing traditions. The melons and pomogranates did not come up to the expectations. So these fruits continued to be imported to the Moghul court.

Yasser Tabba: Dr. Pietro Laureano gave an excellent analysis of water systems in North African oases. I would like to insist on the fact that these represent a self sufficient and peripheral agricultural system. The central agricultural systems in the Islamic and particularly pre-Islamic civilizations were located along major rivers (the Tigris, the Euphrate, the Nile, the Indus etc.) and relied on a complete system of canalizations. Such systems led to the creation of "monumental" gardens. These formal gardens differed in the scale, formalism and intent from those irrigated fields of the oases. Once this distinction is made it is important to examine the relationship between the two types.

Abdelhalim: There are tremendous similarities between what was presented on the oasis of Algeria and those in Egypt. All these communities existed before Islam; they organized their life and production through a model which one might think as a life-death opposition, from which all sort of myth, organization and forms emerged. Islam as well as other known religions can be seen as life-death continuum. This does not mean

erasing or denying all previous organization. What we have in an Islamic community today is a context in which many layers, including all previous models interact. Yet we might say that the regulating model is Islamic. Therefore I propose to see the rational model of our current thinking as part of a continuum that includes the religious and the primitive models.

Dr. Magdy Tewfik Saad: In the description of Algerian gardens there was a clear distinction between the area devoted to the plantations and that for the settlement. The concept of productive oasis does not in my view relate to the Islamic garden which is described in the Koran as the ideal space for rest, contemplation and pleasant reward.

Fairchild Ruggles: In the case of gardens, where the owner has been buried there Prof. Cresti mentioned that the garden became "public" and took a more contemplative leisure aspect. How is such a garden then maintained, by *Waqf*, by the whole community or by his family? Is there any change in form? Are the fruit trees cut down and does this garden of leisure cease to be productive? Ultimately I challenge the assertions made by the members of the audience that the productive aspect of the garden is entirely separate from its contemplative dimension.

Bernardini: Regarding the definition of "Islamic Garden", it is important to underline such "non Islamic" traditions as the golden age of Persian gardens in the Timuride period. With the introduction of such Moghol laws as *Soyurghal* the Mongols re-feudalize the Iranian-Central Asian society with the support of the Persian nobility. The term *Bagh* (garden), in this period, denotes also great plots and land properties, thus changing fundamentally the common concept of "Islamic Garden". Is it therefore legitimate to accept the concept of "Islamic Garden"?

Michael Brand: It would be interesting to know whether the former Maydan-i Shah in Ahmadabad was planted?

Kulbushan Jain: An Italian traveller of 1638 mentioned palm, date and citrus trees were planted there.

Michael Brand: Was the area around the two tombs to the north of the Jami Masjid originally planted as a garden?

Kulbushan Jain: The area to the north of this complex, and just outside the Tin Darvaza leading to the Bhadra Palace, which is now encroached upon by shops etc. was probably planted as it must have been one of the city's main public spaces.

Rolf Blakstad: Plants were chosen in the Mughal gardens where sitting during the day in the hot season would be uncomfortable, for characteristics which could be appreciated at night "for moonlight gardens". Colours could not therefore be appreciated, whereas flowers such as jasmin were chosen for their perfume. There is an ancient tradition in Persia of the symbolism of the cypress tree as evergreen, eternity, eternal life. And the flowering tree as the ephemeral manifestation of life. These were planted in alternation, in rows, avenues or in very small gardens only a pair. The rose represents the beloved, the *bulbul*, the lover.

Myrtle, the ancient plant associated with the goddess (Astrate) remained in the Islamic tradition as a symbol for love. Pomogranates as symbol of fecundity. Grapes of the *Umma* community. In the Mughal gardens, following ancient Hindu traditions certain plants through their affinity with each other were formally "married to each other". One sees the vine planted "embracing" larger trees often the plane tree. The date palm represented "baraka", the divine nourishment. The garden is an exterior representation of an interior mutual state. The fountain is the continuity source of divine inspiration that nourishes all existence, the cosmos of which the garden is the microcosmos, both in the physical manifestation and in its symbolic sense, as in the scale of evolution in the archetypal world.