



Cairo Sketches

Prologue

In the early 1980s I had been asked to do a socio-economic analysis of the industrial and commercial opportunities presented by Sadat's Open Door policy. In 1984 I finally accepted the challenge and found myself living at the Palazzo of my partner's grandmother in the Garden City area of Cairo. This was a tree lined area of immense private houses that dated to the end of the Nineteenth Century and the beginning of the Twentieth, most of which are now Embassies. With all that has been going on in this area since the turn of the Twenty First Century, this liberal and secular period of the 1980s is referred to as one of the Country's Golden ages.

Every day that I walked the streets, the crowded cacophonous streets, I was struck by the native warmth, the humanity, of the people who seemed animated by a relaxed pace in this dense urban setting, which required the patience so generously exhibited.

Scenes like the family filled Fiat bumping another car in traffic. The two drivers getting out and proceeding to apologize to each other, claiming the accident as their fault. Deferentially exchanging numbers of nephews and relatives who could make that dent disappear as if it never happened. All amidst the chorus of car horns blaring, the often sarcastically observed national anthem of modern Egypt.

Walking with Adel to the barber around the corner from the old Shepard's Hotel, where we would exchange American dollars at a better exchange rate than the banks offered.

Amidst it all the casual, laid back sense of a culture that had been around long enough to have seen it all.

Or the routine I used to run with shopkeepers. I'd walk in with my leather bound sketchbook. It was actually pebbled leatherette.

The shopkeeper would ask what I wanted in Arabic.

I would motion between my mouth and ears as if I was deaf and dumb. Then I would draw what I wanted.

Immediately they got it. They would smile, appreciating the extended respect of not garrulously repeating the name of some product in English, and tell me what it was called in Arabic.

I would write the phonetic pronunciation beneath the drawing.

Then the sharper ones would motion for my sketchbook and they would right the name of it in Arabic. That's how I learned to read the road signs.

Touring the exhibition halls of the Cairo museum, with its black marble architectural model of the Giza pyramids, so large it dwarfed the crowd marveling at its two-story height. The room of coins, with cases displaying the coinage stamped with the profile of Alexander the Great. Sacks of which were used to buy field force supplies.

Here was an atmosphere, a culture of relaxed casual confidence amidst the personal challenges of every day life, played out with perhaps different forms of transportation, operational infrastructure, employment, but played out as it had for Centuries.

It all seemed diametrically opposed to a culture where all the identifications of personal worth were the product of the myopic hustle of the immediate hour, day, within a perspective completely devoid of historic perspective. Where the less than valorous bellowed of American exceptionalism, while conducting themselves in a manner that completely belied the possibility.

Ah the Reagan years. The veritable inspiration for taking on this overseas project. To get away from a delusional economic policy, so aptly titled the Laffer Curve. An economic theory short on reality, blending with that new code of business conduct running rampant through every office and every soul therein who were making thirty grand for the first time, and didn't want to share.

And here I was, in a seeming parallel universe, a million miles away by a thousand years, envisioning the future.

I

Mahmoud and his Dad, Adel, had been in negotiation with Aymin Tahir for over two years.

Aymin's family had owned the land on the Red Sea at Hurghada for two generations. Aymin was probably the most acclaimed undersea photographer at the time. He consulted on a number of Bond movies and was a regular with National Geographic and numerous European travel and diving magazines.

There are a number of islands in that area of the Red Sea and through his connections he had gotten a lease hold for use on a number of them to build wood frame tilt-up, thatched shelters for overnight stays as part of diving expeditions that he had been leading for years.

From the beginning his concept had been to build a Euro winter marina and diving resort with hotel on the family site.

There were some major hurdles to be dealt with. Certainly one was water for the site. This would involve a major engineering analysis of how deep down it is and how to deliver it to the surface, the volume of water required daily in relation to the potential size of the hotel and marina.

Mahmoud and his Dad always saw the potential partners being Moevenpick, the Swiss hotel operation. They had some connections here, and it seemed to solve a multitude of site specific architectural design, construction and operational management problems. The relationship sounded solid, but I had my doubts about bringing in a Swiss hotel operation to Hurghada, just kind of a lost in translation situation.

The substantial expense of site analysis and engineering costs, and on-going financial relationship with Moevenpick had always, it seemed when I reviewed the situation, been the major sticking points in the ongoing negotiations with Aymin. I understood their strategy. Here we have this large and capable corporation behind us for this project and we're graciously bringing this level of international professionalism to you.

This was but one of the projects under review when I got to Cairo. I had not met Aymin as of yet. In preparation of such I researched his work, read the existing documents and listened to Adel, MC's Dad, speak about him and past conversations.

I got the impression that Aymin was far less impressed with the grand Swiss Dog-&-Pony than his dream of a really cool diving resort. An operation more humble perhaps, keyed off of his reputation and the potential of diving with the foremost undersea photographer. A singular expedition into some of the world's greatest diving grounds, which would have the flavor of a photographic seminar.

These two elements were not necessarily mutually exclusive, but thus far, they hadn't been cohesive. Certainly not enough to have the agreement in the file cabinet signed.

It was about a fortnight after I had been in country that a meeting was set up. By this time I had heard all of the 'Americans in Cairo' business stories. The stories of the boys from Big Blue showing up in town. Being put up at the Ramses Hilton, right there by the 6th of October bridge. And basically being wined and dined and blown off by the local corporate community. I had early on learned that the way to do business in Egypt of the period was to become friends. It was felt friends would make the right decision for friends in an unfolding business deal of any complexity for the long term.

The meeting was set for the early afternoon on a Tuesday. It was your typical summer swelter, as we made our way across the 6th October bridge over to Zamalik and Aymin's apartment.

It was a newer building of contemporary design. His place was on the fifth floor if memory serves. He shared it with his wife, son and daughter.

Aymin was the size you'd expect of an expert diver, large and well muscled beneath a loose fitting Hawaiian shirt and shorts. He had the smile of a man comfortable in his skin as he opened the door and greeted us in the warm and generous manner I had come to understand as so characteristic of the Egyptians. For Adel there was that ever present touch of respectful reverence for his station in this grand and ancient society.

After introductions and hand shakes, without losing the thread of the conversation of warm greeting, I reached in my brief case, took out the contract, unfolded it, laid it out flat on the coffee table and walked over to a wall of Aymin's photographs.

For an hour and a half Aymin and I talked of his work as he showed me photos from numerous oceanic projects around the world. Peripherally I saw Adel sitting uncertainly on the couch or roaming on the edge of our conversation. Occasionally graciously accepting tea from Aymin's lovely wife. She was obviously a swimmer too.

It is to be appreciated here that this was a very handsome and modern woman. During this period in Cairo there were very few women in the streets, shops, restaurants or any public setting who wore a head scarf, much less the full primitive regalia. This was a time of comfortable modernity in Egypt.

Aymin's work was masterful. And the guy had really risked his hide getting some of these images. Compositionally they were all international publication quality. I was completely intrigued. As we went on I was becoming more and more enthusiastic about the fact that at the heart of this project was a real heart. This was someone who could bring a real veracity of purpose to this entire project. Or shall I say in full mid-eighties corporate speak, honest to the mission statement. After an hour and a half I really could have cared less. It had been an honor to meet this guy, in this private setting, where he felt so comfortable to take me through the meaning of his creative intent and the professional results.

"Scott, I have to apologize," Aymin said, looking at his watch, "I have to go pickup my son from school and get him over to soccer."

"No problem, it's been a great way to spend an afternoon. Thanks for showing me your work."

"It was my pleasure. Especially to share it with someone who knows what's behind all of this." His sweeping motion took in all of the compositions that covered his walls and the portfolios that lay open on his large drafting table like surface in the center of the studio off the living room.

As we headed back through the living room I turned to his wife and thanked her for the hospitality extended, as I turned toward the coffee table to pickup the

contract Aymin smiled at me, took out his pen, leaned over the table, signed the contract, folded it and handed it to me without a word. Just a smile and a hand shake.

Our departing comments were still echoing in the hall when the bell rang and the elevator door opened. When the door had slid shut Adel, not often at a loss for words, looked at me with near paternal pride. "Scott, that was incredible. I would say young man, you have officially become an Egyptian."

II

...And that's where I was, as was the constant reminder as in, 'Egypt is not in the Middle East, Egypt is in Africa'...

What was to finally inspire me to go see the Pyramids at Giza was the confluence of a couple of things then current, at least in my circle.

Almost every evening during the summer a group of us, dubbed the Cairo Wrecking Crew, would meet at my friend Raouf's house. It was rather an Architectural Digest kind of pad in the Zamalek district on Gezira, the Island in midtown Cairo. Zamalek is the arts district, the Modern art museum, opera house, etc.

The first night I went with Adel to meet him, I noticed little things, like in his backyard there was an area in the middle of his lawn that was demarcated by eight columns, topped by a cotton gauze roof of sorts flowing in the wind within its frames. Very Fellini. I walked over to the columns on the way to a scotch, as I was inspecting them, with eyes and fingertips, a voice over my shoulder said, "Yes, Scott they are. Roman, 50 BC, I think you would say."

When we went in and relaxed into a couple of leather club chairs, I set my freshened glass of single malt on an end table next to the chair. To do so, I had to move a small sculpture. Marble. It was a hand from wrist forward, fingers extended and relaxed, holding a ball, life size. Exquisite.

"Greek. Came from up near Alex," was his comment.

As I looked about the living room, he took me on an archeological tour of sorts, fully explaining his brick a brack. The Assyrian period wall pieces were intriguing, as in the origins of man are mildly of interest.

We were introduced because his business was building clean rooms to keep the computers in-country safe from the sand, smog and airborne detritus of the centuries. One of my projects was computer based.

A month or so after that first meeting, and many more, socially and professionally since, he and I organized a party for some of the regulars. He had been wanting to take us all out to his land by the Dahshur pyramids. The full moon seemed like a good night. So we all saddled up, all the old royals, some of the local theater and movie crowd, the bunch from AP, UPI, the international news print journalists and the embassy crowd, British, German, Swiss, Italian, that made up our little group, and headed south along the Canal road, with the moon raising into the twilight on the other side of the river. It was quite a little drive. Even rather attention getting in my 1943 Willys US Army surplus jeep, much less the rest of the crew in their BMW 3 series and Peugeots. Raoulf drove a Lada, one of those Fiat based, miniature Russian-made SUVs.

As soon as we all got out there, it was obvious his household staff had preceded us and prepared our field campsite and picnic. Sitting on our Persian and Turkish carpets, irregularly describing the sand they were sitting upon, drinks in hand, food grilling in the center of our little circle of friends on his 200 or so acres, we all picked up our conversation of earlier that evening, or was it yesterday? Our laughter and banter swirling on a soft warm southern breeze toward the Dahshur Pyramids in the near distance, which looked to be lit by DeMille in the full moon's clear light.

Nearing midnight some of his lieutenants, came out and began preparing the palm charcoals for some Gozas, the Egyptian hookah specific to hash smoking. Having not smoked but Camels since the seventies, I was intrigued by the formality of what seemed a traditional process afoot, and amused by Raoulf's wink when I looked over at him.

And so the second aspect of this week's tale comes into focus.

That week, only two days before, some undersea archeologists had found the French fleet in the waters off of Alexandria. The next day the cartoon in Al Ahram was a diver holding a Goza above the water, with the caption, "Well, now we know how Nelson snuck up on them!"

Raoulf stood up, raised one of the Goza, and toasted, "To the French Fleet!"

III

One afternoon, after the usual luncheon guests of foreign correspondents, members of the long faded royal family and friends visiting from Europe had all headed out into the lengthening blue shadows of the pale sunlit Cairo streets, I turned to Adel, Mahmoud's dad.

"You know, if I don't go see the damn Pyramid's, when I get home I'll never hear the end of it from my friends. How do I get there?"

"Here let me show you."

We were standing in the office. It was a room of great proportion, the immense arched belle Époque windows and French doors illuminated the aging silk wallpaper and detail of carved moldings outlining the walls. On one wall was an enormous map of the Cairo area.

"Here, head south along the Corniche, turn right here at El Rawda, over the Abbas bridge which blends right onto Al Haram. Follow it up the hill. You can't miss them."

He said this last with that great, winning, weary smile of having seen it all through eyes sophisticated by the humour of time and event.

"Right. Can't miss them. Always with a little humour, Adel," I said to myself, closing the tall glass doors of the foyer, pounding down the worn marble front steps, jumping in the old US army surplus Willy's jeep, waving my returned greeting to the Egyptian soldiers guarding Embassy row, with their automatic weapons so casually slug over their shoulders, and headed west into the afternoon glare toward the Shepard's Hotel and merged left onto the Corniche.

I had been there long enough now that I could read the Arabic boulevard signs. In no time I was across the Abbas and ascending Al Haram. AH was a boulevard of great proportion. Four vaguely marked lanes on each side of the palmed boulevard strip. In my local timed-ralley driving style, I weaved between tourist rental Fords, Mercedes and Peugeot taxi, trucks of all sizes and vintage, and innumerable donkey carts piled with household goods and produce.

The ascent up Al Haram was progressive and impressive. I could feel, for I dared not look away from traffic ahead, that the valley of the Nile at midtown was dropping away behind me. This impression was amplified by the vision before me. The Pyramids of Giza rising from the desert beyond this five mile asphalt ascent. A vision of progressive revelation. Ancient architecture on a scale so vast it challenged mental calibration, so magnetic I nearly collected a donkey cart, produce and all.

Once I passed the old Oberoi Hotel and golf course I was on the ring road that circles the Great Pyramid. It was jammed with cars bearing plates from around Africa and the Middle East, taxi, tourists and locals selling camel rides to the unwary. The entire cast of local hustlers and the wide eyed that dated to coinage stamped with Alexander's profile.

I turned the jeep off the road and on to the sand, circled around behind the Giza Necropolis and the second pyramid. Made a tight loop around toward the east and the way I'd come, turned off the engine, laid the windshield down flat on the hood and lit a Camel.

Yep, there they were. The Great Pyramid on my left, the second on my right, and the Sphinx guarding the valley. OK. I'd imprinted it, and could now respond in the affirmative over drinks, that yes, I had gone to see the bloody pyramids. The bet money of my friends' wagers could be exchanged. I've fulfilled this traveler's responsibility I was thinking, when this old man, walking bent with apparent arthritis and cane, approached the Jeep.

Oh boy I thought, here we go, the hustle.

"Are you American?" he asked looking at me through milky eyes.

I was going to treat him to a crisp bit of Arabic, which loosely translates to, 'hey Jack, take a hike, I live here,' when I noticed the ridiculous irony that this guy was wearing a Grateful Dead T Shirt under his jalabiya. They had done a concert over there at the foot of the Great Pyramid last summer.

"Why, yes I am," I politely, surprisingly, replied.

"I Love Americans!" he exclaimed opening his jalabiya to more fully reveal the psychedelic eye in the pyramid with wings T shirt and proudly pounding his chest in punctuation.

"Let me show you the Pyramids."

I raised my right hand palm out and swept my left hand palm up level toward the Great One on the left and looked toward the Great One on the right and said, "I can see them from here..."

"No, I am not guide for hire here," he said, spitting, looking toward some of the hustlers. "I am a guard here..."

"Theft a problem?"

He went right on without missing a beat. "Come I show you.

"No charge, not like those dogs," again indicating all the camel ride sellers with his angry cane, "I am guard here. Come. I show you."

I was about to blow him off a little more definitely, rubbing my hands together in that clapping motion that means, No, in the Arabic affirmative, when I thought, 'hey, what the hell. You're only going to pass this way once.'

"Ok, my friend," I said in Arabic, "lead on."

I grabbed the ignition key, my cigs and lighter and stepped down.

"No one will bother your Jeep. They see you with me." The look in his eye was definite and reassuring in a humorous sort of way.

"First I show you beneath the pyramid."

He led me around the front of the second great pyramid on the right, beyond a rope barrier and the really big signs that says 'Go No Further' in every language except perhaps Sanskrit.

We walked to an entrance at the great stone footing, that led down beneath the bloody pyramid and in through a carved passage. There were bare bulbs strung between old wires along the uneven and irregular ceilings, in the manner of an old archeological dig. The clear glass bulbs seemed to have dated to the thirties. Their vague light vanished into the cragged surface depth of the passages through which we descended. A few yards in I started looking around the surrounding sand floor and stone block corridors for bones of the last fool that followed him down here. With none in sight I continued to follow my guide, I mean guard.

It had been probably 90f or so outside when we dropped in here. There was a constant descending cool breeze from vents between the slabs, I was guessing. It was quite comfortable if unsettling. This was no polished museum exhibition. This was more like the builders' passages, which made apparent the manner this baby was build. Solid.

When we reached the deepest point, he sat on his heels and gave me the international sign for a cigarette.

I sat on my heels, handed him a Camel and lit us both up. This is why one smokes. To reflect on a moment that should not pass without complete comprehension and recognition.

About twenty minutes of this rustic, but cool and refreshing tour, during which he never stopped telling me about where we were, which he made clear was kind of like the builder's passages beneath the pyramid, we were back outside.

"Come, I'll take you to the top of the pyramid."

Now right next to the sign that says, Go No Further, was a really big sign, about the size of an Oklahoma roadside billboard, that forbade anyone from climbing the pyramids under threat of arrest and prosecution. And yes, this one had the full language spread, with not only German, but Dutch and Swiss for the truly pedantic.

I looked at it. He looked at it, waved his hand and said, "I took them up." Them, of course, was made clear by left thumb pointing to T shirt.

Well, I thought, our attorney is a member of the Egyptian Supreme court, so I stood a pretty fair chance of beating this rap.

Before I had finished following the full linear extent of this thought he said, "Follow me exactly. Step where I step only."

And this guy, who, the whole time walked arthritically with a cane, began an athlete's sprint up this forty story sandstone edifice. I imply both meanings: A building, especially a large and imposing one, and, A complex system of beliefs.

I followed his steps precisely. The stones, individually, were immense. About the size of a respectably sized mansion living room in height and width and depth. Perhaps larger. The only way it was possible to climb was that over the centuries, and there have been a few, the sandstone blocks had become worn into an ascendant path of sorts. But it seemed still to be architectural rock climbing.

And on we went. I never took my eyes off of my guide's feet, and tried to keep his pace.

I can't really say how long it took. I had been focusing mightily on not slipping right off into a coma and onto the front page, above the fold, of Al Ahram, like the French girl and her boyfriend of a few days before.

We finally made it to the top. It was a small area, edged by four stones upon which one could sit, amidst pieces of the top stones which had collapsed beneath weather perhaps, or age, or Napoleonic canon practice.

I stood at first, scanning the western desert, circling back to sit and gaze off at the Nile valley, as it ran through town. Spread before us was the green belt that defined civilization hereabouts, on this river's desert edge.

I took a moment from my immersion in the finite and the infinite, forty stories up and five thousand years before me, and turned to my friend.

"Shokran, Bey." This is 'thanks', with sincerity, and I added the honorific Bey, which is used as acknowledgement of social title, far beyond this man's position, but not as far as I was concerned at this moment.

He gave me a slight head bowed "La, La, La," to humbly dispel the greatness of the acknowledgement.

Then it came.

"Do you smoke the hashish?"

Wow, I thought, this has to be one of the greatest sales pitches I've ever been witness to. The guy gets me all the way to the top of one of the great pyramids, illegally of course, and, if I don't buy? What then? Oh what the hell, ride this baby back to the stable.

"I have seen how much you have to pay for hash here. It's so expensive. Especially considering it comes from..."

And I pointed northeast toward Lebanon, "...right over there."

When I turned back he was already opening a folded paper of what looked like red Lebanese.

"We smoke some." And he was making crumbling motions and pointing toward my pack of Camels.

So I pinched some tobacco out of the end of a Camel and handed it to him. He exactly mixed it with the hash in his palm, and I repacked the mixture into the end of the camel.

Couple of held puffs in and this entire experience became more expansive and more immediate. How cool is this? I'm sitting on top of one of the two great pyramids at Giza, taking in the entire scope of civilization, having precisely detailed realizations about the full scope of my purpose in this country, at this time in history, sending up smoke signals for the platoon of police that patrol this national monument, wondering whether our attorney can really get me out of this. Or hell, is the Jeep still there?

But why sweat the small stuff? The sun was warm. The perspective life affirming. And I had just earlier today, exchanged a bunch of USD for Egyptian pounds at Adel's barber for 50% over bank exchange rates. It was all in my pocket in denominations to make everyone happy. I sat back taking one last puff, five thousand years across and forty stories up.

Five silent minutes passed. I think I may have been smiling.

Not a word needed be said. It was time. We both got up.

My guide, guard of the pyramids, turned to me and said, "Step where I step...and don't look down."

So, like descending a ladder, we faced the great sandstones and climbed down.

Halfway down I looked. It was just what I expected. Twenty stories up with really big bumps.

Fifteen or so minutes later we were back on the sand.

"My friend." I said and counted out forty Pound Egyptian. We both tapped our heart with a clenched fist and nodded our heads slightly, into respect of the day.

He walked off toward the two policemen who had forced two Europeans off the pyramid, and were waiting to arrest them. He handed them some bills and walked on.

I walked past the two policemen as they waited on the two descending Europeans, they both touched their caps as I passed.

As I stepped up into the Jeep I absently noticed the sandstone dust on my khakis. I bent over and started brushing it off. And it struck me. I was brushing off the architectural dust of civilization that made two hundred years of American democracy look like but an instant in time.

IV

The Tom Waits songs echoing through the loft seemed only mildly incongruous. It went well with the fine single malt my host was pouring.

It was about half past one in the morning. We, the three of us, had been discussing the current design scene. Other than myself there was Sherif, a friend and architect with the firm I had been dealing with, and Hamid, an industrial designer, newly introduced by Sherif.

Sherif and I had come over to Hamid's at about eleven thirty. Since, we had been discussing design trends around Europe and Egypt, and their cultural and climatic relevance to a location like Hurghada. It was a subject I had been wanting to explore in some depth recently. As I had become more regionally acclimated I had begun to see certain European design standards in current hotel architectural and interiors as not only irrelevant, but operationally counter productive.

Hamid's loft was a good setting to discuss all of this. It was the top floor of some old European company's manufacturing operation. It was a loft space in the late seventies, early eighties definition: wide open with all mechanicals in plain sight. Set amidst the five thousand or so square feet of space was an eclectic reflection of Hamid's taste and professional involvement. From the regionally ancient sculpture and Ottoman artwork to his own very contemporary furniture designs and modern paintings, accented by fabrics of timeless suggestion. One of the great qualities of the place were the huge expanse of windows with the view of the city running down to the Nile beyond. It was a good place to drink fine scotch and try and map out the future of a project that was nothing but sand and sea.

Standing looking toward the river, smoking a Camel, I addressed their table lamp lit reflections behind me on the couch.

"You know, I look at those post Bauhaus internationalist design hotels, and all I see is excessive air conditioning and constant maintenance costs of deteriorating interior fabric, curtains, bed covers, upholstery..."

"Like a constant unending replacement and maintenance cost built into the design."

"Come on Scott, say what you mean," said Hamid, smile turning into a dual exhale laugh.

"Sound's like someone has had somewhat of a regional architectural realization." Sherif, turned to Hamid with a sarcastic smile.

"Or maybe it's just a case of traveler's romance, like the English Orientalists." Hamid, chimed in.

"Right!" I replied brightly. Turning away from the window to face them laughing a toast on the couch. "That's it! Maybe we should put on Steely Dan. Don't think I'll be able to express this thought without the Fez on."

I walked over to the coffee table and put out my cig in the big brass ashtray that had been well used by all of us.

"No, you're right." Sherif said, catching his breath, indicating the hotels along the river with his drink, "The operation costs of these places back it up."

"That's right," Hamid added, "the Euro groups, like Moevenpick, come in, put up these hotels as if they're in Geneva or Milan, with little knowledge of local labor capability or environmental impact on operations, hand over the keys with a 'best of luck' pat on the back."

"And, that's another point. Their hotels suffer from such numbing sameness. You could be in Geneva or Milan...absolutely no regional character.

"You know that also got me thinking. It's such a pain in the ass to fly in from say, Paris, land in Cairo, get your connection..."

"Make sure you still have your connection..."

"Getting stuck in Heliopolis for a day waiting, after your travel agent in Paris had assured you it was a booked flight..."

"Right, then take the flight to Hurgghada and get over to the hotel...and where the hell are you, just another cut out Internationalist with a view of the sand and sea, and hopefully some air conditioning..."

"Or too much air conditioning."

"Right," I said, walking over to the bar and bring back the bottle of single malt. Passing it around.

"It just seems to me that if someone is going to go though that, they should arrive and actually be somewhere. Somewhere..."

"Unique?" Hamid's sarcastic tone belied the sincerity of his smile.

"...Hate that shop worn...but yes, somewhere interesting to experience and a memory to hold..."

"After the hassle to get there and back?" Sherif added.

"Like an expedition of old."

"Actually yes. You know what got me thinking about all of this..."

"Beyond how out of place all those hotels out there look?"

“...yeah, beyond that, it was that conversation we had the other day, “ I said, addressing Sherif, “...about the twin skinned dome, with the vents at the bottom to carry the desert wind up and over the structure, pulling the hot interior air through the stone pierce-work inner ceiling. Brilliant...”

“So Scott, what are you thinking? A traditional fourteenth century Arabesque?”

“Come forward to the Twentieth Century.”

“Twenty-first?” Smiled Hamid.

“Have to be ready with that Egyptian construction timeline in the prospectus...”

“Thanks Sherif, always ready with those comforting thoughts for the project’s leveraged funding...”

“So, Scott, what are you thinking?” Hamid encouraged.

“This, in broad terms.”

I opened my sketchbook to a blank page and gave a running dialogue to the pencil lines.

“Using the traditions of that structural ventilation system and local stone masons and materials...”

And from there the evening became morning and a rough idea took the shape of concepts traditional and modern, defined by architectural practicality of construction and current hospitality technology. In the service of creating vacation thoughts framed in by rough hewn stone walls, marble floors, simple plane of wooden window seat, pillowed, looking out upon a timeless turquoise Red Sea afternoon, beyond angled out carved wooden shutters.

