

A Life on His Personal Orient Express

Text: Björn Rösen



Thomas Meyer-Wieser in front of a map of the Egyptian capital. 'In Cairo, the crisis is permanent,' says the Swiss architect. 'Everything is getting worse, but everything has always got worse. People have lived with it for generations. The city, which had a population of just 500,000 in 1900, was bursting at the seams with sewers and water pipes when it was home to nearly 4 million people in the 1970s. Today it is home to some 22 million people. Cairo is a place for the obsessed.'

His fascination for the Arab and Muslim world drew him to Egypt again and again – now Thomas Meyer-Wieser’s architectural guide to Cairo has finally been published in English.

In 2003, his routine looked like this for a month: cramming Arabic in the morning, then working his way around the buildings of Egypt’s capital from 2 p.m. to 2 a.m. ‘I had a taxi driver called Tariq, who not only took me from one building to the next, but also sometimes organised a key so that I could get into a mosque in the middle of the night,’ says Thomas Meyer-Wieser. DOM publishers had not yet been founded at the time, and Meyer-Wieser had no intention of writing a book. He had been on sabbatical in Egypt – something he could afford thanks to a well-paid job renovating a church in his native Switzerland. ‘I researched the architecture of Cairo purely out of personal interest’. But years later that extensive research became the basis for an architectural guide, first published in German and now finally available in English (see bottom right). ‘I know 95 per cent of the buildings in the book from back then.’

If you look at the DOM publishers programme, you will see that Meyer-Wieser, who lives on the tranquil shores of Lake Zurich, is represented with other titles on the Arab and Muslim world: a German-language book on the Algerian capital Algiers and an architectural guide to Iran, which is available in German and English. ‘For me, growing up on the line of the Simplon-Orient-Express, this part of the world has always felt very close,’ he says. The railway line connected Istanbul and Paris via Venice for many years after the Second World War. ‘The Middle East, not Europe, has set the pace of world history for thousands of years. It was here that the first advanced civilisations emerged – a wealth of goods, culture, and knowledge that always made old Europe look longingly to the East. Orient and Occident are historically much more closely linked than we realise,’ he says. Meyer-Wieser comes from the Valais in German-speaking

Switzerland and grew up close to the French-speaking part of the country, so he is also very familiar with French architecture and culture. He had actually wanted to become an archaeologist but was afraid he wouldn’t be able to earn any money. And he had been just as fascinated by the work of architects since his parents had their own house built. So, he ended up studying architecture at ETH Zurich: ‘That was simply fantastic back then, in the early 1970s’. Together with a partner, he eventually ran an office, planning public and industrial buildings – such as a city administration building on the outskirts of Zurich, ‘with a parliament hall that can also be used for public theatre performances.’

After graduating from secondary school, and then during and after his studies, he travelled a lot: to Turkey, Afghanistan, Persia ... While working on the consolidation and restoration of the Sassanid palace Ghala Dokhtar in Firuzabad, Meyer-Wieser witnessed the Iranian revolution in 1979. He first spent several months in Cairo in 1972. He wrote a university thesis on the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy – a pioneer in restoring the use of clay and traditional mud construction as opposed to Western designs – whom he also met personally. In all, he has been to the city a dozen times. His favourite place is the Mosque of Amir al-Maridani, built in 1340 CE, with huge columns and a beautiful courtyard. ‘It dates from a period that I find particularly interesting,’ he says. ‘Because at that time Cairo was the capital of the Islamic world.’

Architectural Guides by Thomas Meyer-Wieser

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