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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS





Seen from the guest cottage, the pavilion nestles beneath date palms, with a smoking room to its left. Rugs are laid out in the sand like stepping stones between the rooms, which stand isolated in the grounds

Desert Rose

Salvaged from the remains of a Turkish palace, Belle Epoque France and an Anglican cathedral, Hugh Sowden's multifaceted home, lying like an oasis in the shadow of pyramids, provides an intriguing retreat from the hustle and bustle of Cairo. Text: Olivia Temple. Photography: Tim Beddow

The 28 windows in the pavilion were originally used in the wind tower of a Turkish palace at Mazrouna. The Belle Epoque four-poster is draped with a silk damask curtain, and has an ula – a traditional conical water pot – at its foot





This page, clockwise from top left: Hugh Sowden outside the temple with his personal staff, Ismail and Wagdi; the temple consists of pieces from a variety of different buildings; the ground outside the pavilion is laid with carpets; the guest cottage has a mashrabeya screen, designed to give women privacy while they watch the outside world; the outdoor bath is by Baehler, the architect who redesigned Cairo; the pavilion's stained-glass door is from a Turkish palace. Opposite: the guest living room has been built around the palm trees. The 19th-century Turkish gilt chairs have their original silk brocade.





Above: the dining-room table is covered in Spanish lace and a silk brocade bought in Lebanon. The large painting is by Hugh. Opposite: the kitchen's sand floor is covered in rush mats and rag rugs. Punch bowls stand on a bow-fronted Napoleonic dresser rescued from a local farmer

Driving through Cairo in Hugh Sowden's 1952 Mercedes on a baking hot day in November is a surreal experience. Cars, donkeys, camels and pedestrians sway like dervishes on the verge of collision; sweating policemen blow whistles and wave wands to no magical effect; traffic lights change unnoticed and buses stagger lopsided like drunks under their load. We are going to the ancient port area of Cairo, to Bulaq, where spare parts for cars can be found among the crumbling alleys of Belle Epoque houses. 'I need a new wing mirror, since this one fell off,' says Hugh with all the confidence of a man going to pick up a prescription from Boots.

Picking our way through airless alleys, we aim for the car parts area, past motorcycle helmets piled up like watermelons, doors for Volvos and steering wheels for Fords attached to the walls. I am incredulous when, after ten minutes shuffling among piles of old parts, the dour Egyptian returns from his search with an undamaged 1952 wing mirror. 'I told you they would have one,' says Hugh, and he even has the nerve to barter the price down. A mongoose has made its larder under the bonnet of the Mercedes so there is often a chicken carcass or a loaf of bread hidden behind the radiator. Surprisingly, it doesn't seem to affect the engine.

Hugh Sowden has been living in Cairo for 20 years and has taken on the patina of a native Cairene. Despite his Western clothes and dark red curls he slips through the crowd without the usual attention given to tourists, and speaks Arabic fluently. A well-known artist and interior decorator in Cairo, Sowden has had a remarkable life in various countries worldwide, and counts being captured and tortured by terrorists in Zimbabwe as only one of his many life-threatening adventures. He has a huge flat in Zamalek, the island in the middle of the Nile favoured by embassies, archaeological institutes and artists, in a house designed by the architect Baehler. But it is his remarkable house at Dashour, 14 miles west of Cairo, that is his most extraordinary achievement.

'It's five years since I moved in,' explains Hugh. 'I had lived nearby for some years and started creating a Japanese-style garden. Then that land was flooded so I bought about an acre off a local farmer. Several huge old date palms dictated the plan and I added orange and mandarin trees, loofahs, jasmine, bougainvillea and herbs as well as masses of wild flowers. Watering is done by dykes and channels dug by hoe - it is a method which has been used for thousands of years. I started with the cottage, which was inspired by a balustrade taken from an old house in Port Said. An outside staircase leads to a balcony with a flat roof for watching the sunset beneath which I built a kitchen area, dining room half open to the sky, and bedroom.'



Local labour and materials have helped to ensure that the place is in keeping with Egyptian life. Having rescued more and more parts from old buildings which were being demolished, Hugh decided to build several separate structures throughout the garden, each one leading to another so that the whole is part of the larger landscape, roofed by palm-tree tops and, above that, the sky. He resisted the temptation to bring in electricity and piped water, so all water is drawn from a pump and as dusk falls the glow of oil lamps lights up the garden.

Sowden sees his creation at Dashour as a three-dimensional painting which he constantly adds to. He heard of a Turkish palace that was being destroyed which had a wind-tower on the top. He bought the tower and redesigned its wooden panels to make the second room, which became the pavilion. This large saloon has faded Belle Epoque, 'Louis Farouk' furniture and a four-poster bed. There are 26 windows and shutters in all, and the gnarled grey trunks of date palms and whispering reeds become part of the room. Hoopoes, black-

headed bulbuls, thrushes and finches fly in and out freely, brushing the bed with their wingtips.

The third room is the bath house, built from Egyptian mud bricks with a little domed ceiling to keep it cool. The weathered double doors are Classical Roman-style with triangular pediments and the *mashraba* windows, through which one can see out but not in, were from an old house in Cairo. A pink dove has her nest above the door post. Hugh likes to use fabric and tablecloths from the local market which have a slight touch of old-fashioned England – lots of colour, flowers and checks. These are draped over four-poster beds, made into cooling curtains in doorways, or thrown over tables or on the ground for meals.

'I found two lovely old columns from the portico of a French Belle Epoque house as well as heavy double doors and they inspired the fourth room, which I call the temple. It is my reading room and bedroom. There are good breezes and it is cool at night. The overhead vegetation creates a moving picture and I can lie in bed and watch the changing shapes in the morning. There is the rustle of palms and different birdsong every day.' The temple's furniture came from the old Anglican cathedral in Cairo, designed by Adrian Gilbert Scott.

At the end of the garden is the studio, where Hugh takes art classes, with a palm ceiling and sand floor. Students sit Arab-style on rugs and draw or paint. Hugh also sits here with friends in the evening and smokes his *shisha* water pipe. Beyond that, near the huge entrance doors, is a circle of old discarded Islamic burial headstones. He has placed them around an ancient palm and arranged small stones on top of them.

Trees grow through several of the rooms and the whole complex is surrounded by a screen made from woven reeds like a palisade. Outside are lush green cornfields with water buffalo and donkeys pulling the same design of plough that their distant ancestors would have worked. The neighbouring farmer and his sons provide Hugh with all the vegetables and fruit, bread and eggs that he needs, as well as chicken and lamb. When they know that he is arriving from Cairo they shake all the rugs which line the garden paths and bring him water for tea and freshly baked flat bread.

Beyond the fertile area is open desert. Sheep nibble discarded onion skins and are watched over by a solitary child leaning on a stick. Two miles away the pyramids of Saqqara and Dashour shimmer like mirages in the heat. Hugh often walks there through the mangroves and palm trees where the light seems to glow and the scenery is purely biblical. And the picture is not finished. Hugh has plans for a pool in the centre of the garden which will provide irrigation and another dimension to the indoor-outdoor palace in paradise ■

Above: the bath house seen from the pavilion. Below left: the temple contains Sowden's brass four-poster and gold slippers from Baghdad. Below right: sari fabric billows at the window. Opposite: the bath house is made from whitewashed Nile-mud bricks. An oil lamp stands on a Corinthian pillar

