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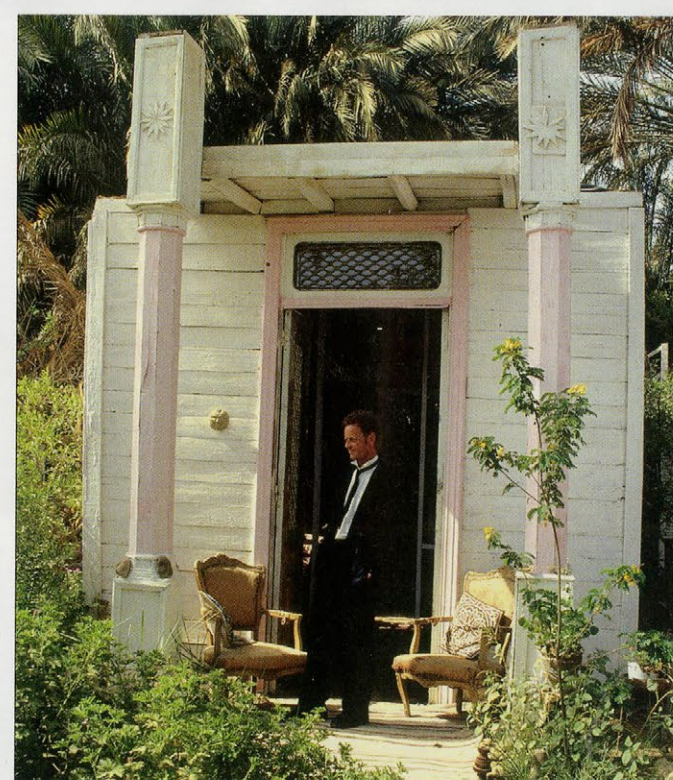
Seen from behind the guest balcony's railings, which Hugh found on one of his trips to Port Said, the pavilion nestles in the shade of date palms. Boughs heavy with oleander flowers hang over a fabric 'roof'

# Life on the Nile

In Hugh Sowden's complex in rural Egypt, built of wood and river mud, flowers creep along trellises, while Belle Epoque furniture nestles among palm trees growing through the roof. It's no mystery the artist comes here seeking leafy respite from the madness of Cairo. Text: Olivia Temple. Photography: Tim Beddow. First published: September 2003



This page, clockwise from top: the dining-room table is covered with Spanish lace and a Lebanese damask square. Beside it, a palm tree grows up through the ceiling; a sugar-cane fence, renewed annually, surrounds the property; in the kitchen, English bentwood chairs sit on either side of a table covered with 1950s cloth – a market find. The floor is covered with rag rugs and rush mats. Opposite: the guest living room is also built around trees. The 19th-century Turkish gilt chairs still have their original silk-brocade upholstery



This page, clockwise from top: Hugh calls this room the 'harem salon' and has designed it with a feminine feel. At the foot of the pavilion's Belle Epoque four-poster is a locally made brass water pot; oleander blossoms festoon the trellis at the entrance to the outside bathhouse. Hugh painted the picture, which is of the artist in his bath; the pavilion was once the wind tower of a local Ottoman palace. Hugh saved it from demolition and adapted it - the trellised walls and 12 stained-glass windows let the air circulate

This page, clockwise from top: 'Louis Farouk'-style chairs and a sofa are covered in their original orange-velvet moquette. The bed curtains are silk damask. On the sand floor 19th-century carpets and a Bedouin rug are laid over reed matting; Hugh stands outside his 'temple', constructed in recycled wood. The fourth structure in the property, it is the artist's private suite, housing his bedroom and reading room; the bathhouse as seen from the pavilion. Carpets line the ground between the two buildings



## 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 magic 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 of cars can be found among 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 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 normal 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 Swiss architect Charles Baehler. But it is his remarkable house at Dashur, 40km south 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 the local farmer. Several huge 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's a method that has been used for thousands of years. I started with the cottage, which was inspired

by a balustrade of an old house in Port Said. An outside staircase leads to a balcony 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 ensure that the place is in keeping with Egyptian life. Having rescued more and more parts from buildings that were being demolished, Hugh built several different 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 light up the garden.

Sowden sees his creation at Dashur 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 bathhouse, built from Egyptian mud bricks with a little domed ceiling to keep it cool. The weathered double doors are in the Classical Roman style with triangular pediments, and the *mashrabiya* windows, through which one can see out but not in, came from an old house in Cairo. A pink dove has her nest above the door post. Hugh likes going to local markets to find fabric and tablecloths, for they have a touch of old-fashioned England about them – lots of colour, flowers and checks. They 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 cold 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 bird song everyday.' 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 on rugs, and draw or paint. Hugh also sits here in the evening and smokes his shisha pipe. Beyond that, near the huge entrance doors, is a circle of old discarded Islamic burial headstones. He has placed them round 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 sugar cane 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 pulled. 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 that line the garden paths and bring him water for tea and freshly baked flatbread.

Beyond the fertile area is an open desert. Sheep nibble discarded onion skins and are watched over by a solitary child leaning on a stick. Five kilometres away the pyramids of Saqqara and Dashur shimmer in the heat. Hugh often walks there through the mangroves and palm trees, where the light glows and the scenery is purely biblical. But the picture is not finished – Hugh has plans for a pool in his garden, one that will provide irrigation and another dimension to the indoor/outdoor palace in paradise ■

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Opposite: golden slippers from Baghdad 'are lined up at the foot of Hugh's four-poster in the 'temple'. This page: the bathhouse is made from whitewashed bricks made of mud from the River Nile