The church, being the house of God, is naturally the dwelling of God with His people, in them and for their interest. The church community constructs the church building as an oblation of love to God, who accepts it, sanctifies it, and turns it into his heavenly and holy temple. Within it, the community receives God’s mysteries and gifts in order to become the active and living body of Christ.

R. Schwarz (In Exod. Hom 9) reckons that the construction of church buildings is a holy accomplishment and should be founded not purely on architectural bases, but also on authentic sacred facts of creed. Robert Maguire (in De Princi 10, 2) says, “If you are going to build a church, you are going to create a thing which speaks. It will speak of meanings, and of values. And if it speaks of the wrong values it will go on -destroying! There is responsibility here!”

Coptic Churches in History

It is most certain, that Egypt played a vital role in the life of the Early Church. It is worthy to note that church buildings in Egypt were exposed to a number of successive waves of demolition, destruction, and burning throughout history. Not a single church in the whole of Alexandria could be related to the first three centuries. Even the ancient churches of Old Cairo and other monuments of Upper and Lower Egypt are known to be built sometime after the 3rd century. However, architects confirm that Egypt must have possessed a good collection of large and valuable churches, and distinctly influenced the architecture and arts of the early church.
Dr. A. S. Atya, in his book “History of Eastern Christianity,” states, “Though many ancient Coptic monuments suffered greatly from hostile incursions, and many more fell into disuse and were ruined, a representative number of monastic and church structures have survived in their early original forms. Consequently, the archaeologist has been able to reconstruct a fair picture of the essentials of Coptic architecture. Literature on this interesting facet of Coptic history had been growing steadily, but much remains to be done on the sites and mounds which fill the length and breadth of the Nile valley. Some of these are known, but unexcavated; while innumerable others are still undiscovered and untouched”.

Now we may raise the question, what was the style of the churches built latter on in Egypt? Or in other words, what is the style of Coptic Architecture?

The Copts took pride in their Pharaonic culture which made them act in such a way as to oppose the cultures of various invaders. When the Copts began to erect their own churches, it was normal for their architects to copy the existing temple models of the master builders of antiquity, more especially as these seemed to fulfill the requirement of the new faith during the first four centuries. Thus, in spite of the fact that the invaders, whether they were Greeks, Romans, Persians or Byzantine, left their marks on the Egyptian culture, it would be a grave error to assume that Egyptian art was affected by any of these at any time. Hamilton affirms that Egyptian churches could be categorized as a distinct entity, i.e. the “Coptic Architecture”. Its
Coptic Architecture

character was dictated by its liturgical and ecclesiastical traditions, and its structure bears the mark of its national feelings.

Butler, in the book “Ancient Churches of Egypt,” confirms that in spite of the similarity that may seem apparent between our churches and the Roman Basilica style, it is beyond all doubt that Coptic architecture had its own independent origin. It really had nothing to do with Basilica, nor had it copied any of the Roman Basilica features. In fact, Alexandria knew “domes” before Christianity, and as Butler says, “Domes originated in the East, and it is more probable that Byzantium borrowed them from Alexandria than the other way around.” In addition, the ancient Coptic Church buildings never knew the cruciform design, which was the most preferred Byzantine architectural style.

The Pharaonic Influence

The topography of the ancient Egyptian temple has already been shown to have consisted of three main divisions:

- The outer gate led into an open court surrounded by two rows of columns with narrow stone roofing.

- Beyond that huge quadrangle devoted to general worshippers, the hypostyle hall followed. This space was filled with crowded columns in close rows supporting a massive stone roof and
reserved for the royal family and the aristocracy.

· The third section of the temple, at the end, was a closed and rather dimly lit small chamber, wrapped in great mystery. This constituted the inner shrine, the “sanctum sanctorum” or holy of holies, where the deity resided, and which was accessible only to the high priest or Pharaoh.

The primitive Coptic churches appear to have retained this triple division, which may still be witnessed in some of the chapels of the ancient monasteries. The innermost part behind the iconostasis was the sanctuary where the priests and deacons alone were admitted to officiate the Liturgy. Outside the sanctuary, the central part of the church was reserved for baptized Christians, while a third section at the narthex or entrance was left open for the un-baptized Catechumens. At an unknown date, the distinction between the baptized Christian and the Catechumen began to disappear, and with it the divisions of the church gave way to the perpendicular triple sections of nave and aisles.

Shape of the Coptic Church

The church building consistently conforms to one of three designs to reveal a substantial aspect of the nature of the church, her character and message:
· The cruciform: It uncovers the church’s mystical nature, as being the Crucified Body of Christ. Its prime draw is to take all mankind to Golgotha, in order to gain unity with the Beloved Savior.

· The circle: It refers to the eternal nature of the church, as being an endless line (without beginning and without end). She bears the nature of her Bridegroom.

· The Ship: It is the most common shape in our Coptic churches. The Pharaohs, who believed in immortality, regarded death as a journey in a ship to the other world. In the Old Testament, Noah’s ark was a symbol of God’s salvation and love. Therefore St. Cyprian says, “No salvation can be achieved for anybody outside the church.” Christians are like those who are sailing among frightful danger, i.e. persecution and temptations; but as long as they remain within the Lord’s ship, i.e. His Church, they are filled with the hope of reaching the Eternal rest.

The Church Towers

The church represents the Lord’s ship voyaging towards heaven, similar to the ship’s guard-tower; the church has a belfry or two, where bells are normally hung. In the Church, the bells replaced the trumpets of the Old Testament.

The Baptistry Font
The baptistery and its font receive an excessive veneration from the Copts, like the sacred sanctuary and its altar. The font is considered as the Church’s womb; through it, she brings forth sons of the heavenly Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the merits of the Blood of the Son. The baptistery should be built at the north western side of the church, i.e. at the left hand side of the entrance, where the passage from the world of darkness, represented by the west, to the world of light, represented by the east, was accomplished, and to pass from the left side (north) among the rejected goats to be among the accepted flock, represented by the right (south) side.

Until the 4th century, the most commonly used shape of baptisteries was the quadrilateral. By the beginning of the 5th century, other shapes began to appear, such as the hexagonal, the octagonal, the circular and the cruciform (the last was probably eastern, introduced in North Africa and then to Europe). In any case, these various types symbolize the theological concept of baptism and its effect. The quadrilateral resembles the shape of tomb for sharing death, burial and resurrection with Christ through the baptism (Rom 6:4). The hexagonal (six sided) refers to the 6th day after the previous week, i.e. Friday, in which Christ was crucified and buried (Col 2:12). The octagonal (eight sided) symbolizes the resurrection day of Christ (Sunday is the 8th day of the week). The emphasis here is on the co-resurrection with Christ in baptism. The round type directs our minds to the concepts of the Church’s womb, and it simulates the circle of eternity ready for the baptized person. The cruciform reminds us with Christ’s death, declaring the reality of baptism as a Cross.

The Dome
The view of the dome above the baptized believers is meant to attract his thoughts to heaven. It expresses the Church beliefs that baptism is the beginning of a heavenly life, whereby the newly-baptized partakes of the Kingdom of God.

Church Consecration

Thus, despite the fact that people use such finite materials and utilize architecture designs decorating arts, and painting etc., the building will not possess its ecclesiastical features unless it is consecrated to receive the Holy Spirit, who grants it a heavenly nature.