



**HAL**  
open science

## Modernity and its Posts in constructing an Arab capital.

Caecilia Pieri

► **To cite this version:**

Caecilia Pieri. Modernity and its Posts in constructing an Arab capital.: Baghdad's urban space and architecture, context and questions. Middle East Studies Association Bulletin, 2009, Vol. 42 (1-2), pp.32-39. halshs-00941172

**HAL Id: halshs-00941172**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00941172>**

Submitted on 5 Feb 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**“Modernity and its Posts in constructing an Arab capital:  
Baghdad’s urban space and architecture, contexts and questions”.**  
by Caecilia PIERI, (EHESS, Paris/ Amman Ahlia University, Jordan)<sup>1</sup>

**Paru dans**

***Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, vol. 42, n° 1&2,  
Summer/Winter 2008, pp. 32-39**  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23063540>

This paper raises the question of the connections between modernity and identity in the field of architecture and urban space of Baghdad, in the perspective of several contexts in the XXth century. Given that to a certain extent “westernization” is generally seen as embedded in “modernization” and even in modernity, I’ll attempt to define the ways and the limits within which architecture and urban space in Baghdad have been used by different narratives in affirming a modern “Arab” or “Iraqi” identity.

As a preliminary issue, one should stop leading the modernization/westernization debate in terms of influences, conflict East versus West, loss of “Arabity” and/or “Iraqi” identity, etc, to speak rather of cross-cultural references, exported or imported urbanism<sup>2</sup>, eventually interaction between colonial objectives and local objectives which entail the active role of the natives in local configurations.

Then, when compared with the technological modernization’s process, or modernism’s stylistic connotations (the Modern Movement), *modernity* implies a cultural condition in being a contingent concept, existing only through its manifestations in space and time<sup>3</sup>.

Last, one must deal with Baghdad as a literary trope, “object of desire, cause of disappointment”<sup>4</sup>: the burden of this orientalist prejudice’s mythical image has always been masking the real city, which is never seen for what it *is*, but fantasized for what it *could be* in terms of what it *was* and *is no longer* - a lack of *consideration* and thus of effective *vision* which denies any specific identity to the existing territory and has been inspiring, chronically, a demiurgic *tabula rasa*.

Therefore, can a city become modern that is to say « westernized », thus losing objectively its « oriental »/« Arab »/« Iraqi » quality, without for all that losing one’s identity<sup>5</sup>? And how can this apply to the instance of Baghdad’s urban space (public space’s management being often different than the private urban practice)?

**Urban space and nation-building: variations in instrumentalizing the colonial stakes**

<sup>1</sup> Presentation in the panel “Art without History? Evaluating Arab Art.”, organized by Nada Shabout and Dina Ramadan. MESA, Montreal, November 2007

<sup>2</sup> J. Nasr, M. Volait, (dir.), *Urbanism imported or exported? Native aspirations and Foreign Plans*, Chichester-Wiley, Academy, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> About the general terms of this debate, see K. D. Watenpugh, *Being Modern in the Middle-East*, Princeton, Princeton and Oxford University Press, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> M. Cooperson, « Baghdad in rhetoric and narrative », *Muqarnas*, vol.XIII, Leiden, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> See K. Watenpugh, *op.cit.*

Tracing a brief archaeology of this modernity brings us back to the establishment of a newly unified Iraq (1921)<sup>6</sup>, when architecture and urban planning were given the mission of affirming the specific institutional and political status of a “sovereign” monarchy under tutelage. The new city which is functionally designed on *extra-muros* areas witnesses a new kind of regular, rational and easily controlled urban space which is breaking with the Ottoman *zuqaq* and its system of traditional *mahallas*, as well as with the strict socio-sectarian spatial distribution related to it.

During the Thirties, the built extension of the capital develops in parallel to the expansion of the State. And in 1937 the Iraqi pavilion in the International Exhibition of Paris, although designed and built by the French Laprade and Bazin, joined later by the Iraqi Ahmad Mukhtar, becomes the emblem of a Renaissance that is claimed to be genuinely *Iraqi*, given its capacity to embody a nationalistic agenda. « Our pavilion shall have to meet the requirements of our national taste [...], our national sovereignty... ». (*Al Bilad*, 1936).

The Forties witness a sudden trend of abstract geometry of rational, functional, even Bauhaus aesthetics, which marks the end of the British model’s hegemony, at least in the external decor. This opening to changing references might be the result of contacts between Iraqis and various European countries, as well as a violent anti colonial feeling, becoming increasingly prevalent in Iraq<sup>7</sup>.

Either under or against British control, urban space should therefore belong to these “artefacts which emerged as a useful and crucial foundation for the nation to build for itself a modern present”<sup>8</sup>.

### **International visibility as a tool for nationalism: the explosive Fifties**

With the soaring revenues of oil, *national* pride becomes an essential dynamics: « The rising tide of nationalism (...) determined a radical change in the orientation of the industry to change it from a symbol of Western superiority into a cooperative enterprise of which the Iraqi can also be proud”<sup>9</sup>.

On the other hand, the Baghdad Pact (1955) as an axis against Cairo-Moscow, and the search for international legitimacy incite the government to make the capital a magnet for international investments. After the building of the Samarra Dam above Baghdad (1956) the control of the Tigris floodings allows a large-scale extension. Foreign competitions are launched by the Development Board for Baghdad’s city-planning, for the first time considered globally and with theoretical stakes, especially the Modern Movement theories. The Doxiadis’ designs<sup>10</sup> for Baghdad (1958), like other local realisations<sup>11</sup>, are breaking with the major Iraqi building traditions founded on two socio-climatic imperatives: habitat for extensive families, and horizontality. Only part of these prestigious commissions were built, others remained as mere projects (Frank Lloyd Wright’s opera house, Alvar Aalto’s museum, among others) or as delayed achievements (Le Corbusier’s gymnasium, Gropius and The Architect Collaborative’s Baghdad University Campus, Gio Ponti’s Ministry of Planning).

---

<sup>6</sup> I. Fethi, *Process Architecture*, 58, Tokyo, may 1985 : « The establishment of the Kingdom in 1921 marked the beginning of the National era ».

<sup>7</sup> 1941 Ghailani’s coup, 1947 *Wathbah* (revolt), reject of the 1948 treaty...

<sup>8</sup> M.T. Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a plundered past: archaeology and nation building in modern Iraq*, Austin, Univ. of Texas Press, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> F. Qubain, *The Re-construction of Irak 1950-1957*, University of Pennsylvania, 1958.

<sup>10</sup> The Greek architect Konstantin Doxiadis had been in charge of the Marshall plan for the Middle-East.

<sup>11</sup> By Abdullah Ihsan Kamil, Jaafar Allawi, Qahtan al Madfai, among others.

And yet in such a context of displaying international modernism, this modernist urban practice appears in Baghdad (like in other ex-colonies at the same period) as a tool in a narrative where the reference to Iraq and to the Arab Nation increasingly and inexorably becomes the pivot of a nationalistic discourse.

### **The Republic's new iconic rhetoric**

The Revolution has been seen as “ the most significant impact on Iraqi architecture because not only the strong ties with the West were suddenly shattered, but also it created a tremendous pride and nationalism”<sup>12</sup>. In 1959, the Department of Engineering of the University of Baghdad marks the birth of the first Iraqi school of architecture. In the center of Baghdad, public space is punctuated with three symbolic monumental « statements »: on Tahrir square, the bas-relief of Liberty (1961), huge « banner » conceived by Jawad Selim and built by Rifat Chadirji; on Tayyaran Square, a fresco by Faik Hassan (1960); and on Firdaus Square, the monument to the Unknown soldier by Rifat Chadirji,, inaugurated on July 14th 1959, which was explicitly claimed as a symbol of the globally Iraqi past by referring to the Arch of Ctesiphon, (capital of the Sassanids, pre-Islamic period) but also implicitly assimilating contemporary references such as arches in Le Corbusier or Niemeyer's style <sup>13</sup>. The three of them were attempts to carry a new iconography as a synthesis between the national repertory and an “up-to-date expression” (Jabra Ibrahim Jabra)..

### **The birth of a modern “Iraqi” architecture**

The 1960's witness the rise of the first generation of Iraqi architects –foreign educated but decided to build a new Iraq by founding the principles of a new urban landscape.

Three major currents do exist in this modernity/tradition debate: Mohammed Makiya (b. 1911), for whom “there is no nationalism in art” <sup>14</sup>, since the Iraqi identity has to be transcended in an Arab-islamic universalism; at the opposite end, Hisham Munir (b.1930) explicitly claims its connections with the international architectural features of industrialized countries; between the two, Rifat Chadirji (b.1926) attempts to conceptualize the “International Regionalism”: « From the very outset of my practice, I thought it imperative that, sooner or later, Iraq create for itself an architecture regional in character yet simultaneously modern, part of the current international avant-garde style<sup>15</sup>. » Other interesting examples of synthesis can be found with Qahtan Al Awni (such as Mustansiriya University, 1969), Saïd and Midhat Madhloom.

Generally speaking, the anonymous vernacular built expansion still balances the socio-climatic traditional features<sup>16</sup> with a modernized way of life: the basic urban grid is the one adopted in the 20's (detached houses with gardens), the centred plan is not frequently used anymore, and materials are concrete, stones and glassed panels as well as brickwork.

### **Baathist Iraq : the creation/reinforcement of a “national-territorial consciousness”<sup>17</sup>**

Several concomitant phenomena mark the nationalistic discourse in Iraq as a new Arab leadership. At that time, a post “re-iraqisation” of values entails a re-evaluation of the

---

<sup>12</sup> I. Fethi, *op.cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Destroyed in 1982 by Saddam Hussein, to be replaced by a statue in his likeness.

<sup>14</sup> M. Makiya, *Focus on Arab architecture*, Conference Proceedings, Arab-British Chamber of Commerce, London, 1984.

<sup>15</sup> R. Chadirji, *Process Architecture*, 58, Tokyo, May 1985.

<sup>16</sup> Presence of the *serdab* and the flat roof.

<sup>17</sup> A. Baram, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'athist Iraq, 1968-1989*, Haifa, 1990.

city's history: modern housing is systematically seen as in "disregard", "discrepancy", "disharmony" with the traditional "Iraqi" or "Arab" socio-climatic features<sup>18</sup>. The public space becomes of a voluntarily composite, even schizophrenic symbolism: « European » style of sculpture in its inspiration by its soviet-style rhetoric (K. ar-Rahal), but also with a markedly orientalist reintegration of the Iraqi past as well as Arab global icons (statues by Mohammed Ghani inspired either from Akkad or the *1001 Nights*). The first comprehensive urban master plan is attributed to the PolService, a Polish consultant, in the early 1970s; its main realization (it was interrupted by the war against Iran) was the fast traffic lanes grid through the old urban fabric – according to the global exclusion of the pedestrians from the urban space all over the world at that time. Public housing for low-income takes the shape of 6/8 storeys buildings; and yet, in the new suburbs the private real-estate shows a distortion from it, by keeping the individual dimension and the principles of a low-flat housing.

### **The 1980's. The imposture of a fake grandeur**

Since 1979 - Saddam Hussein's personal rise to power-, the launching of major public works transforms the capital into a gigantic building yard, all the while attempting to attract major foreign investors while stating its freedom from international tutelage<sup>19</sup>. Foreign or Iraqi architects are given the mission of translating political ends through a monumental architecture - which once again poses the embarrassing question of the relationship between the power and the architect.

In parallel to the re-shaping of the city, the claim of an Iraqi identity entails a huge preliminary survey and the first administrative framing of the heritage. But "lots of architects abuse heritage to justify the use of modern techniques in design, materials and construction within the framework of Traditional Arab architecture. (...) this concept has been used many times by architects trying to gain acceptance of their designs"<sup>20</sup>.

Hence the multiplication of high-rise monumental buildings, which, although in total discrepancy with the surrounding horizontal built work, officially claim a deep understanding of Iraqi society. In some areas this new urbanism has been erasing (Haifa Street) or literally privatizing (Karradat Maryam, and, facing it on the other bank of the river, Abu Nawas developments) whole sectors of the public space<sup>21</sup>. International competitions tend to develop some trends within the monumental style and the iconography of the excessive, by re-using historical iconic landmarks – sometimes for the worst or the most kitsch (Venturi's neo-islamic competition for the Grand Mosque, for instance, or the Unknown Soldier's Monument by Marcello d'Olivo, 1982) sometimes for the best (Al Shaheed Monument, Ismail Fattah al Turk, 1985). Among the most demonstrative are the Baghdad Gate's Swords by K. ar-Rahal and M. Ghani (1989), a wondrous prodigy of post-modern kitsch and warlike symbolism linking « Nuremberg and Las Vegas »<sup>22</sup>.

This public architecture neglected the fact that identity is a matter of sedimentation and not of decision: under the pretext of reviving the past Arab and Mesopotamian grandeur as the

---

<sup>18</sup> K. Al Ashab, *Urban Geography of Baghdad*, PhD., Newcastle, 1974.

<sup>19</sup> Oil had been nationalized in 1972.

<sup>20</sup> H. Sethom, « Urban Renaissance in Baghdad » *Albenna*, vol. 4, Riyadh, Dar al Funun al Saudiyya, 1985.

<sup>21</sup> Independently of the intrinsic architectural quality –or not- of the buildings.

<sup>22</sup> A reference to Venturi's *Learning from Las Vegas*; see K. Makia, *The Monument, Art and vulgarity in Saddam Hussein's Iraq*, London/N.Y., Tauris, 1991, 2004.

foundation of a newly built collective identity, more often than not it produced pastiche and “a soul-less parody of monumentality”<sup>23</sup>.

### **A composite identity challenging the attempts of ethnic cleansing.**

Today the main question lies in the progressive abandoning of the houses which transforms whole streets into ghost lands: how can one raise the issue of modernity and identity in a city which is emptying itself? Some reconstruction schemes might aim at «remodelling the skyline of Baghdad [sic]» in a deliberately destructive demiurgic impetus, although coming with a discourse on heritage and identity and using the pretext of a so-called “islamic architecture of the XXIst century”<sup>24</sup>.

\*

Since the first implementation of a European-style «modernization» Baghdad has no longer been an Arab-islamic city<sup>25</sup> given that its urban space was built *extra muros* and *ab novo*. Since Iraq began to control its destiny by repossessing its oil and its wealth (1950), it became the spear-head of modern nation-building, in affirming an international modernism/modernity, chronically dominant at certain times or through certain items. Yet it is also an Arab capital, thanks to a paradox due to several attempts at modelling its space to the image of a new regional leadership since 1960, and at the same time the permanence of persisting socio-climatic determinants in the city-making, which revive tradition in the midst of modernity itself: materials, built forms, different norms attached to habitat use, etc.

Baghdad is indeed *also* an Iraqi capital, eventually mostly for its environment and urban *continuum*, which cannot be given any precise definition since “the urban context provides something that is greater than the sum of its parts”<sup>26</sup>. Urban identity – this “something”- is a language “whose syntax is composed of realities both built and natural, palpable and impalpable, and contribute to create, around this architectural interweaving, its own urban alchemy, authentic and irreducible to any other place”<sup>27</sup>.

Until today, Baghdad’s urban modernity was the vulnerable sum of a composite history and a composite identity: a reality that should not fit any imposed definition in the future<sup>28</sup>.

---

<sup>23</sup> P.J. Luizard, « Bagdad, une métropole moderne et tribale... », *Maghreb-Machrek*, Paris, 1994. On architecture during the embargo, see S.Ali Mehdi, « Architecture in the Nineties in Iraq », november 1999, Aga Khan Award for Architecture/ AUB Beirut, [archnet.org/library](http://archnet.org/library).

<sup>24</sup> “A Renaissance for Baghdad”, by H. Al Ashkoury, *Architecture plus*, Dubai, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Although some pieces of late-Ottoman areas still remain all over the historical center.

<sup>26</sup> S. Bianca, «Designing Compatibility between new projects and the local urban tradition », *Conference proceedings*, Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, Cambridge, Mass., 1984.

<sup>27</sup> C. Pieri, *Baghdad Architecture* (to be published in 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Any future urban design must take into account the current forced sectarian homogenization of the city, and its repercussions in terms of habitat and urban practice. And this, *for the first time in its history*, given that Baghdad ever since its foundation was a cross-roads of identities, a dominantly Arab melting-pot perhaps, but one which was never homogeneous.