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Rifat Chadirji's work: building modern Iraqi identity and *hadara*

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Architecture as a dialectic

Rifat Chadirji is considered to be one of the major XXth century Iraqi architects, not only through his realizations but also through the considerable bulk of his work in the fields of architectural practice, theory, teaching and photography. He belongs to the second generation of Iraqi architects who studied abroad and returned just after graduating, in order to build a modern country.¹

At that time Iraq was implementing an ambitious modernist development which it could afford given the booming oil revenues. As of 1952 Rifat Chadirji was to take part actively in the renewal and redefinition of architectural practices, aims and spirit, by playing a prominent role in several concomitant fields: as an advisor in the Ministry of Public Works he became familiar with construction policies and strategies; as the founder of his own private company, Iraq Consult, he could use the opportunities given by private commissions to freely express formal experimentations; as belonging to a prominent family of political leaders and intellectuals, he was in close touch and permanent dialogue with artists, writers and academics, all involved in the major debate: how to attain an artistic language able to be both Iraqi and modern at the same time.

For Chadirji, the debate inherited from the ancient Greek tradition that had determined an antagonistic polarity between idealism and materialism - opposition between form and contents – became obsolete and meaningless in the modern times. Architecture, in

¹ Chadirji graduated from Hammersmith School of Arts and Crafts, London, 1952. The first Iraqi school of architecture was established in 1959 within the College of Engineering of Baghdad University.

his eyes, is at the intersection of three poles: the individual, social needs and technological imperatives. It is simultaneously a *construct* – a variable item in time and space, as it depends on context and culture - and *structure* – the relationships between all these different components, to quote him: “*construct, i.e. the material body of the artifact, variable in time and space, and structure, i.e., relationships of various constituents*”.²

This balance between socio-cultural references, local context, and potential technical functionalism underwent several phases. During an initial period, before the Iraqi revolution of 1958, he brilliantly exploited the principles of the Modern movement, of architectural rationalism but also of Mies Van Der Rohe’s minimalism. Then the national revolution provided him with the opportunity to create monumental “gestures”, in a plastic style embodying a refined, abstract and innovative symbiosis between pre-Islamic symbolism and modern inspiration.

Then, from the turning point of the 1960s-1970s, his work on architectural structure and vocabulary - material, shape, volume –evolved toward what he conceptualized as “international regionalism”: an architectural language, which would be at equal distance of what he considers on the one hand as “narrow regionalism” and on the other, as “naïve internationalism”, and which would express an essential Iraqi identity revisited by international modernity.³

In Chadirji’s architectural production, brickwork, concrete, the oriel, curves, reflections on light and shadow, circulations and eventually spatial relationships between the individual and the group are combined within a dialectic movement through which modernity, identity and authenticity are thought to be inseparable: in a way, this combination is a personification of the modern Iraqi *hadara*.

² From « The Dialectics of Architecture », unpublished text sent to the author; August 17, 2008.

³ R. Chadirji, *Concepts and Influences: Towards a Regionalized International Architecture*, KPI Publishing, London, 1986.

Photography: a unique anthropological and ethnological witness of vanished XXth century Iraq

Rifat Chadirji is also the author of a huge photographic production (about 90 000 photographs).⁴ This collection is interesting first in that it documents his own architectural production. The other remarkable aspect of his photographic collection is that it is the result of a perfect marriage between an architectural sensibility and an ethnographic, if not anthropological, sensibility. Clearly photography means more to him than an artistic practice: it is a research tool, both anthropologically speaking, as concerns man's structural functioning within society, and ethnographically speaking and centered on the specificity of a given context, namely in this case, that of Iraq in the late Seventies. Such an approach is close to his dialectic vision and practice of architecture, between the "construct", as variable in space and time, and the structural.

Kamil Chadirji, Rifat's father's, was a politician, the founder of the Iraqi National Democratic. He had traveled throughout Iraq and taken about 3 000 photographs. His work evokes a talented, cultivated photographic perambulation which has immortalized landscapes, portraits and anecdotal or typical everyday life scenes in a style which is somewhere in between the style of Orientalist travelers and that of humanist photographers. Rifat's work is marked both by structuralism and by the will to bear testimony to a country whose identity, whose very existence, he feels are threatened.

It goes without saying that the photographer's "*techne*" in the Greek definition of the word, at once art and technique, is perfectly mastered; the choice of the subjects, the efficiency of the focus, the mastery of light effects, shadow and volumes all speak of a highly referenced visual and pictorial culture. Yet the historical significance of the bulk of this work is also due to the exceptional documentary value of certain series; for instance, in 1979 he could shoot the nocturnal ceremony of the Ashura in Kadhimiya, Baghdad, with the special permission from the Shi'a leader Sheikh al-Khalisy; yet praying at night was forbidden. The series was taken from the top of a police car, then from a roof, amidst firefighting; and this happened to be the last occurrence before it was forbidden by Saddam Hussein. Finally the willful, systematic, all-inclusive

⁴ Currently in the process of being classified and restored within the Arab Foundation for Image, Beirut : <http://www.fai.org.lb/home.aspx>

dimension of this documentary intent and curiosity, *mutatis mutandis* remind one of another ambitious project: that of the Grimm brothers who, a century earlier, became the precursors of modern linguistic anthropology when they collected throughout Germany, all the popular tales, oral memories and archives of a threatened way of thinking and language.

Scrutinizing the relevant signs of a society

Georges Perec, the French author and philosopher has written that architectural perspectives when painted al fresco represented the “relevant signs of the tridimensional”. Likewise, photography for Rifat Chadirji is not only a way of looking at the world, it’s a way of selecting the “relevant signs” of Iraqi society, its built, historical, environmental, cultural elements in the same way that his architectures aims at expressing the “relevant signs” of Iraqi identity. In Chadirji’s work, photography and architecture represent two aspects of a unique all-inclusive approach situated at the crossroads of art and social sciences. And both, photography and architecture, have contributed to the building of an authentically modern Iraqi identity.⁵

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⁵ A shorter version of this text, concerning R. Chadirji’s photographic work, was first published in *The Modern Heritage Observer*, Arab Foundation for Image- Heinrich Böll Foundation, Beirut, Fall 2013.