

Half a century after the creation of the “Wright” projects in Baghdad: Plans for the imagined architecture

Khaled Al-Sultany



In Iraq, some decades ago, a series of events took place which caused profound effects on the lives of Iraqis and on the destiny of their country; of course I mean both civilizational and cultural events. The effects of said events marked and set the nature of the future and outlined its open horizon. In this respect the nineteen fifties could have been the most radiant, powerful and important years in Iraq’s modern history. In this sense, the nineteen fifties were a more valuable and terrible decade than the twenties, which witnessed the foundation of the modern State and the profound and all-embracing changes which stemmed from it and which affected all classes of Iraqi society — a society which came into being suddenly, with specific characteristics and pertaining to the borders of the geographical map of the modern State.

We maintain, thus, that the nineteen fifties had a special flavour and a specific importance, enhanced by the fact that nothing in Iraq’s modern history has equalled what was achieved at that time: neither before that decade nor after it. The development and urbanization projects planned and executed during those few years were, in effect, the materialization of the ambitions of numerous Iraqis who saw their dreams coming true through a change for the better on social, economic and cultural levels. Despite a corrupt government and the tendency of politicians toward exercising absolute power, this did not affect the rhythm of change in all aspects of life. These unique circumstances led to a rare situation in which the “superstructures” (in Marxist terminology) shaped and controlled the “infrastructures” which

backed away and renounced their vanguard role, leaving the door open before the hegemony of the former, giving that “unique decade” the characteristic it deserved, that of the “heroic decade”, fraught with edification and leadership! Can we overlook all those achievements in many creative fields such as plastic arts, literature (poetry in particular), music, education and, of course, architecture? No need to mention the importance and reality of the achievements in the Iraq of the fifties and the role of those achievements and their consequences on the consolidation of all the creative genres of cultural modernism, not only on the Iraqi scene, but also on the global cultural scene of the Middle Eastern countries, to the extent that these truths became a “classic” of the approach to the modern history in our area.

The phenomenon of inviting architects of international fame during the fifties to work in Iraq was a distinguished (and rare) one in the international architectural practice. It is a very significant act which denotes an elevated, multifaceted, multithematic and varied cultural movement which marked the nineteen fifties. While the international architectural world had seen invitations of other architectures to a number of countries, this simultaneous invitation of a “group” of architectures to the same site, as occurred in Baghdad during the nineteen fifties, was undoubtedly an unprecedented act. It was a cutting-edge action from many points of view. It is equalled in its importance and presence only by the “Interbau” exposition held in Berlin in 1957. However, the organization of the latter, as everybody might know, was a consequence of the cold war which saw in architecture an appropriate battlefield for the ideological conflicts of the time, meanwhile

the presence of the international architectures in Baghdad was intended to find real solutions to a city which strived for modernity, confirmed the humane side of urbanization and resuscitated the understanding of “architecture” as an important tool to solve a global and functional –and even social– problem.

Among the architects invited to participate in the preparation of the Baghdad projects were Frank Lloyd Wright (1869-1959). Wright, a leading exponent of organic architecture, was considered at the time one of the most famous active international architects. His career started when he joined the Adler & Sullivan, Architects, for the first time as an assistant architect in Chicago at the end of the eighteen eighties and lasted for

seven decades, until he became the “number one architect” of the United States of America, according to the press. Wright gained renown and drew the attention of architectural circles in the whole world due to his numerous and varied projects, which came to be considered as symbols of Modernism. His designs include the “Prairie Houses” before and during the nineteen twenties, his “Fallingwater House” (1935) near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the “Johnson Wax Building” (1939-1956) in Racine, Wisconsin, his masterpiece “Guggenheim Museum” (1959) in New York, his distinguished designs for the city of Baghdad (1957), and many other important projects, which amounted, according to some sources, to a thousand, of which he executed 45% (B. B. Pfeiffer, *Treasures of Taliesin*, London, 1985).

However, the importance of Wright does not reside only in his designing of many projects, but also in his being one the symbols of Modernism and the creator of an architectural approach he called “Organic Architecture”. He worked restlessly to give it a prominent position in the modernist architec-

tural sphere and gave it a specific particularity which made his a unique architecture. All this led many a specialist to consider him as working outside the conventional trends in architecture, if not above them! In relation to this last trait, even if he never expressed it in public, he longed to make it a component of his charismatic personality and he often reminded us, through his “vitriolic” statements, that he did not recognize anybody else, but himself and his mentor (Louis Sullivan, 1856-1924), as the only true representatives of modernist architecture.

His constant tendency to act as the “Master” and commander of the designing process made him create the Taliesin Association in Wisconsin, from where he would take his students to South Arizona every winter. Taliesin organized training sessions based upon the

“Master” and apprentice model common in creative professions since the Renaissance era until the beginning of the twentieth century, when this system was replaced with architectural firms, in which every member had to specialize in a specific field. In Taliesin, in addition to permanent members, there were numerous candidates who wished to rub elbows with the “legendary” architect and get acquainted with his way of thinking and working. Unlike the permanent assistants, these candidates did not receive any wages. In Taliesin Wright was considered a leader and a teacher: a teacher of the organic approach to architecture. He transmitted knowledge and explained the “secrets” of architecture to those who accepted to become his pupils, within an atmosphere of respect and veneration and according to a strict hierarchy.

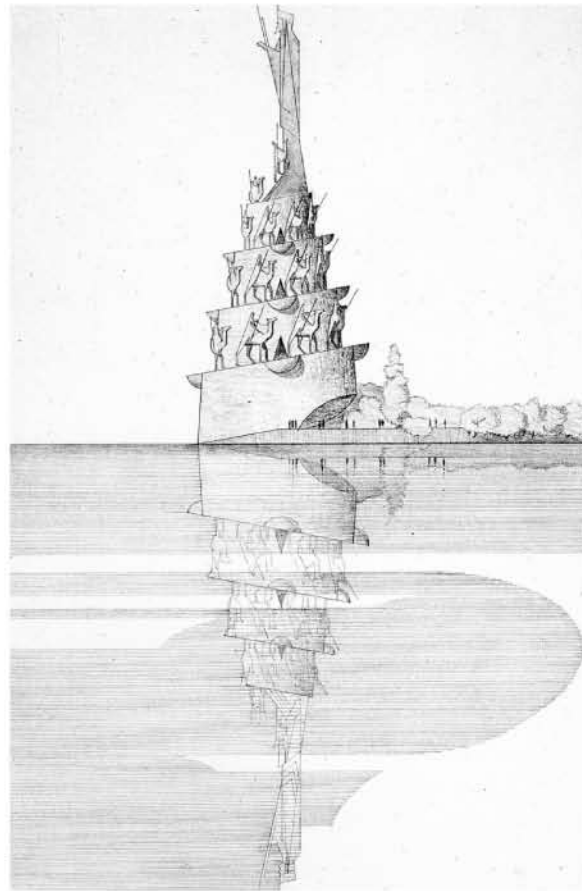
If I have talked of Taliesin with a certain amount of detail, my intention was to emphasize two aspects: the evocation of the Taliesin atmosphere in which the blueprints of the Baghdad projects were designed, on the one hand, and the personal and



Frank Lloyd Wright in Baghdad.

professional relationship I had with a Taliesin member, on the other: my late friend Diran Nasser (1930-1994) (I have written this paper in his memory), who used to be a lecturer in the University of Baghdad and who joined the Taliesin Association in the fifties, when Wright was designing the Baghdad projects. Despite the fact that Diran Nasser specialized in constructive architecture and worked with Wright in that quality, he found the way to love urbanism and to appreciate its creative importance in Taliesin. Later he became known as one of the most competent teachers who was conscious of the value of “creation” in urbanism. He gained widespread respect and affection and was always welcome in the department of urbanism where he taught creation, geometrical structures to future architects for many years.

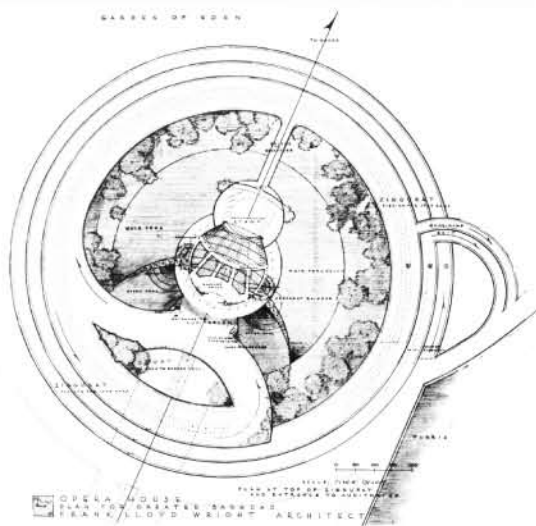
In addition to the above, Diran Nasser used to respond to my invitation and give lectures to my students, in the department of urbanism of the University of Baghdad, within the framework of the “theory of urbanism” which I taught to 4th year students, with an important section dedicated to the creative work of Wright. The remote atmospheres of the Taliesin Association were evoked through the fascinating lectures of Diran Nasser, pregnant with everyday life details of that professional association, which brought Wright closer to the students and made them understand more his creations. Even if those lectures took place in a very intimate atmosphere, the shadow of the “Master” on his “pedestal” and at the top of the hierarchic organization was omnipresent. From the type of the talks given by the former Taliesin member and through his description of the everyday life style, the “distance” which the architect/teacher sought to create between him and his student was born. This is reflected by the nature of his professional production, which was often described as intending to make exceptional designs marked by heaviness of the architectural language, uniqueness and eccentricity in its structural solutions. All of these traits made Wright’s creations impossible to emulate or approach, as if he claimed the topmost position on that pyramid through the uniqueness of his designs and the hierarchical day-to-day relations with his students and apprentices. It



Haroun al-Rasheed Monument.

is needless to say that this exaggeration in achieving uniqueness in design might act as a hindrance to urban development. This is why I have always repeated to my pupils the expression that “with his genius, Wright slowed down architecture!” This last sentence seems paradoxical, but we will not treat its result as an established truth, rather we will check its validity through a deep and massive verification of Wright’s architectural approaches expressed in part in the Baghdad Projects. We will also pay special attention to the conclusions drawn from certain hypotheses which may illuminate the nature of the Wrightian legacy and its importance in the international architectural discourse.

Frank Lloyd Wright designed some architectural projects in Baghdad at the end of the fifties.



Opera House

However, these projects which have never been executed were replicated in numerous constructions in many American cities and we will mention their location and importance later on in this paper. However, we would like to point out that the type of the Baghdadi projects and their architectural language constituted an important page in the production of this influential architect and the blueprints of the projects constitute valuable documents in the famous architect's life, in spite of the fact that they have never been executed. The importance of these documents lies in that they documented that specific lapse of time and represent valuable technical information provided by an architect with an international projection and are characterized with a unique style in drawing, colouring, and editing. Unfortunately, the original blueprints drawn by Wright in person and given to the Iraqi authorities have been discarded and forgotten due to the poor documentary awareness of the persons in charge of such prints, and to a lack of the sufficient and adequate equipment and resources. Add to that the poorness and obsolescence of the follow-up and filing procedure of the State, which continues to this day. Constant transfers of the location of the authority in charge of these documents led to the

deterioration and loss of many of them. Some of the public servants who were in charge of such documents failed to recognize the technical and artistic importance and relevance of the documents to the history of architecture in Iraq, let alone their carelessness and ignorance of the author of such masterpieces, whose moral and material legacy is recognized beyond American borders and came to form part of the international human heritage.

Only those architects who worked in the institutions which received the Wright documents (and prints by other important international architects who worked for Iraq), together with some enlightened engineers who draw the attention of other decision-makers to their professional importance and emphasized their artistic relevance to the history of the country and to the history of international architecture. Their calls were not heard or ignored and the documents were like "orphans". People either avoided the responsibility or did not know the importance of the projects. With this kind of "follow up" Iraq has lost important material which "documented" its real and genuine history, which is different from the illusions of that oral and hypothetical "history" which the successive leaders of Iraq are fond of creating and promoting!

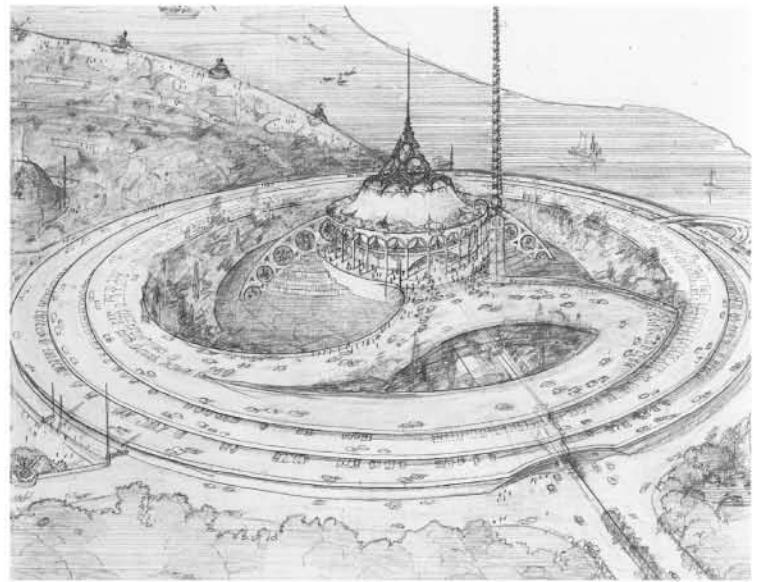
The architect Maath Al-Alousi (1938) mentioned, in one of his manuscripts I had the opportunity to see lately, that he had found in the "terrace" of the General Directorate for Urbanism many blueprints of important projects prepared for Iraq by influential architects, including some of the famous projects designed by Wright himself; they were exposed to the harsh weather of Baghdad. He mentioned that he assumed the responsibility of rescuing and saving these documents from the tragic end which awaited them. (See Maath Al-Alousi: "Haifa Street Development"; blueprint, Cyprus 2007) (*). The architect Saad Al-Zoubeidi (1944) took similar actions when he was in charge of the Housing Department. He fought to place what remained of the valuable blueprints in a safe spot. I still remember when he showed me, at the beginning of the nineties, Wright's original plate of the "Opera House" since he knew of my personal and professional interest in the architecture of the nineteen

fifties. He had it on the wall of a small room contiguous to his office so as to be sure of its safety whenever he passed by. I ignore the fate of the print and of many other documents which were under the custody of the General Directorate of Urbanism. I hope that they are in a safe place to guarantee the safety of the Iraq's architectural "memory", that memory which we are all responsible for preserving and perpetuating.

Frank Lloyd Wright designed many projects in Baghdad in the year 1957, which he included under the name of "Baghdad Cultural Center", and which included many buildings with varied functions such as the famous "Opera House", the "Planetarium", a special museum designed to house the big carved pieces from ancient Iraqi civilizations, another nearby museum designed to house modern Iraqi art, in addition to a huge Mall with many supermarkets, and other cultural services such the "Harun Al-Rashid Monument" and its dependencies. He also designed a complex for the University of Baghdad, which was then in its early years, the Postal Telegraph Building, and the planning of the city of Baghdad (Robert McCarter, Frank Lloyd Wright, London/New York, 2001, p. 358).

There are numerous drawings and detailed studies done by Wright to explain his many architectural ideas which he accepted to execute in the mythical city of Baghdad (in the opinion of the architect) with an unheard of enthusiasm, knowing that he never carried out any projects outside the borders of his country, except on one occasion when he designed and executed the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo (1912-23), whose photos were published all over the world after an earthquake in 1923 destroyed the Japanese capital with the exception of the hotel and a few other buildings. With the exception of this important building (unfortunately demolished in 1968), I do not think that Wright designed any other buildings outside the United States of America, despite the fact that in his projects portfolio there are a number of small scale buildings executed in Panama and Teheran (Iran) and other few cities (Ibid. pp. 344-359).

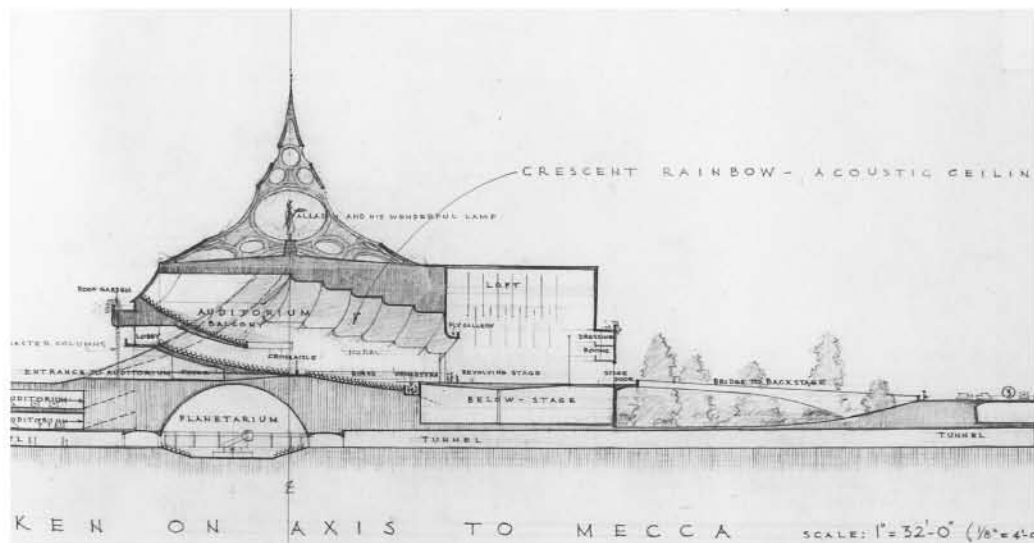
Before we start reading the Baghdad projects from a critical point of view, we should first specify



Opera House

the type of plans we intend to discuss and their style and method of execution, with a view to throw more light on the rare architectural event and show its high cultural value at a local and international level, which marked the end of the fifties. What I discovered is that Wright acted like other creative "Masters" in that he relied on his professional competence and personal energy to create his designs, which conveyed to them an additional artistic value. One of his students and assistants remembered the steps followed before the drawing was executed in his office. He mentioned that the idea of the design of the project "fermented" in the brain of the architect, then it was "expressed" on paper. Afterwards, the assistants received it and entered the different details under his supervision (B. B. Pfeiffer, Treasures of Taliesin, London, 1985.p. 8).

The drawings of the Baghdad project underwent the same execution process. They are many plates which show views, plans of floors, cross-sections, façades and details. Usually these drawings are executed through the use of varied materials such as pencils, colour pencils, blue and golden ink, all on transparent paper glued to a wooden plate. The dimensions of these plates are fairly big: for instance



Opera House

the “Opera House” overall plate was 32 inches and 3/4 of an inch x 57 inches and 1/4 of an inch (83,19 x 145,42 cm.), whereas the plate of the “Big Baghdad” with the Civic Center and the universities was 36 x 53 inches (91,44 x 134,62 cm), and the plate of the Baghdad Museum was 18 x 55 inches (45,72 x 139,7 cm.) and the façade of the Harun Al-Rashid Monument was 60 x 28 inches (152,4 x 71,12). Nearly all of those projects were done in June 1957. That is to say, nearly a month after Wright returned from Baghdad to the United States of America in April 1957. Moreover, most of those plates were exhibited, for the first time, in a museum which housed the drawing executed by the international architect Museum of Modern Art in New York (1962). (Frank Lloyd Wright in his renderings {1887-1959}, Tom (12). Edited by Yukio Futagawa, A.D.A. EDITA, Tokyo, 1984. Plates: 191, 192, 193, 194,). It seems that the execution of those plates was carried out in more than one copy, since the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation possesses original drawings exactly the same as those sent to Baghdad at the time.

The Baghdad Wrightian projects contain an architectural vocabulary which constitutes an unusual “phenomenon” in the Baghdadi society of the nineteen fifties. In this respect, I would like to

mention the “Opera House” for example; the artistic facility which does not exist anywhere up to date, bearing in mind that it was designed half a century ago! Even the buildings of the museums were something new in the local cultural and architectural panorama at that time, because the only existing museum was the “Iraq Museum” and it was an ancient building in Al-Rossafa, with naïve architecture and a primitive way of displaying its materials. (I do not want to talk of the “Museum of Natural History” which existed at the time, because it exiguous “room-like” spaces were not designed to house a museum). The parking lots also constituted a new vision in architecture. The same could be said of the huge central “Mall”, the likes of which Baghdad has not seen to the present day, neither at the level of capacity or at the level of architectural approach. As for the Harun Al-Rashid Monument, its gigantic dimensions and the variety of its dependencies made it an important and novel architectural event in the architectural Baghdad panorama of the fifties; its size and technique surely exceeded those of the three existing monuments, namely the statue of King Fayçal the 1st in Salhiya (1933) and before it, the General Maude Monument in Al-Karkh (1922), and the “Abdelmohsen As-Saadoun” near the East Gate in Al-Rossafa (1936). Moreover, the parks,

fountains, waterfalls, vertical decorative elements, and other components which acquire an eloquent presence in the landscapes of the wide spaces designed, are also considered as distinguished, unusual and new to the Iraqi urban panorama at the time.

As mentioned above, one of the projects entrusted to Wright was the Postal Telegraph Building. However, I will not deal with it in this paper and will limit myself to what later came to be called the “Baghdad Civic Cultural Center”. The name “Plan for Greater Baghdad” recurs in the projects prepared by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Iraqi Capital and we find this name expressly in literature dealing with the legacy of the famous American architect. However, the reality was different from that, because it was all about urban planning of a part of Baghdad and not a general planning of same. For there are no surviving manuscripts or documents which indicate that the architect executed a general plan of the Iraqi capital, and specially a “Plan for Greater Baghdad”. In any case, the origin of that misconception, at least in my opinion, lies in Wright’s proposal to choose the sites of his huge buildings personally and the considerable efforts he deployed in designing the open spaces, which conveyed on his architectural discourse an urban planning dimension. It is known that the choice of the site of the Opera House and the remainder of dependencies of the Cultural Center was his and not the customer’s, i.e. that of the Iraqi Authority which invited Wright.

There is an anecdote in illustration of this, which Frank Lloyd Wright often used to tell: when he accepted the invitation of the urbanism authority of Iraq to design the Opera House, he paid special attention to the location of the building and the specificities of the spot with a view to emphasize the uniqueness and functional importance of the style of the building, and one day when he was with his wife on board the plane on the landing runway at Baghdad airport (renamed Al-Muthanna Airport afterwards), his attention was drawn to a wide island in the Tigris River and he thought it was the right spot for the construction. He asked for the owner of the island and he was told that it belonged to the

Crown. And when he met the king of Iraq, he tried to demonstrate the appropriateness of the island for the Opera House and explained to the young monarch the reasons behind his choice, stressing that it was the ideal spot and that it was far away from the noise and the rush of the center of the compactness of the buildings of the city. Once he heard that the king took his wrist and got closer to Wright and told him: “It is yours, Mr. Wright!” (B. B. Pfeiffer, *Treasures of Taliesin*, London, 1985.p. 68a).

With that quick, wise and generous decision the ex Iraqi monarch showed a quality which denoted the deepness of his interest in public matters and the patronage of culture. Iraqis ignored this side of his personality (they also ignored many things related to him), but, undoubtedly, they know that he was unlike any one of the numerous leaders who governed Iraq after him!

Frank Lloyd Wright chose the end of the western part of the fluvial island, which he called the Isle of Edena, instead of the popular and vulgar name “Um Al-Khanazir Island¹”, as a site for the Opera House with a capacity of 3000 seats located, along with the other dependencies, in a circular space surrounded by an external column-supported gallery. Adjacent to this circular space there is a semi-circular building, reminiscent of an amphitheater. As to the Planetarium contained in the Opera body, it was designed to occupy the basement floor, under the main auditorium. The roof of the Opera raises high in the form of a tent and on its upper part there is a hollow pyramid with wide circular openings on three sides. On top of that row there is another row of smaller openings. The whole scheme was supported with a high central pillar. The architect put a sculpture of “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp” in the hollow space of the pyramid. On the right side of the main entrance of the Opera House, he put a high and finely decorated obelisk.

The Opera House building is surrounded by a lake and a system of waterfalls on several levels. In addition to that, Wright designed two aqueducts descending from the roof of the Opera House to the lake to carry water downward. There are two circular openings under the aqueducts, one on each side of the main entrance. Beyond the lake there is a

green spot with trees, surrounded on all its sides by three spiralling streets (ziggurats). The shady spaces under the ziggurats were used as parking lots.

One can reach the main entrance of the Opera House through a high ramp coming from the ziggurat. The site of the entrance was chosen in such a way as to form an extension of the main street coming from the north, which passes near the civil airport premises and also near the site of the sports complex (whose design was entrusted to Le Corbusier in 1957). If you draw a hypothetical line from that street and past the auditorium, you will find out that it oriented towards Mecca.

Along the right bank of the island on the east-west axis, from the east side of the Opera House building, extends the commercial centre (Mall) until the end of the island at the spiral foot of the Harun Al-Rashid monument. The vertical faces would depict camels climbing the spiraling ramp. An avenue runs the length of the island from the statue to the opera house. The central market is a two-floor hollow building. Commercial transactions would take place in the hollow space planted with trees and interspersed with ponds. There are some shady spots with roofs made of tents which could be taken away if need be. The façades of the mall are covered with recurrent and continuous patterns.

Moreover, there are two building designed by Wright on the same spot, which were destined to house the big sculptures of artists from ancient Mesopotamia, namely the sculptures by Assyrians (winged bulls, huge lions, etc.). The façades of this museum contained bas relief in the upper and lower parts. The lower part has a continuous skirting board except in the openings of the doors. As to the upper floor contains vertical concrete sunbreakers interspersed with glass plates which indirectly allow the sunlight in. The museum was designed near the three spirals which surround the Opera House building and the premises of the central market.

The other construction was destined to house modern plastic arts. It is located on the opposite half of the wide esplanade, near the Mall building which leads to the Harun Al-Rashid monument. Its overall shape is elliptic, with a round shape in the middle which serves as an entrance hall. Its roof is made of

intricate concrete bridges, with the hollow parts covered with glass plates. The main block of the museum, or the "gallery" as Wright use to call it, is characterized by two rows of small regular windows which form the "pattern" of the façade. The roof of the gallery is in the form of a flat dome which floats directly on the openings of the upper windows, in such a way as to reflect light, before it lets it enter through those openings. Wright relied a lot on this technique to solve the issue of Baghdad's sandy weather, known for its excess of light and high temperatures. There are hollow spaces at the foot of the museum wall in which the architect put sculpted pieces surrounded by water ponds. (B. B. Pfeiffer, *Treasures of Taliesin*, London, 1985, p68d).

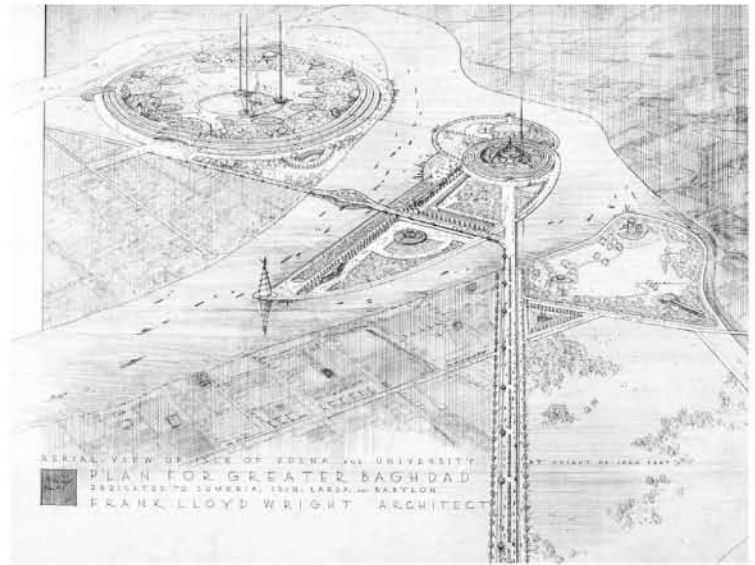
The projects described in the sections above were not all of Wright's contribution to the Plan for Greater Baghdad. He also addressed a part of the island at the place where the river makes a curve to the left, which he reserved for the university campus. He returned to the same design concepts that he had used in the Opera House project, but on a larger scale: the three spiral streets, the base which support obelisks higher than the one near the entrance of the Opera House. These obelisks form the three sides of a triangle and mark the position of the campus buildings, surrounded by a circular alleyway that communicates all of the blocks. Beyond the alleyway there are wide zones with many ponds and fountains, interspersed with huge green areas. It seems that the design of the plans for that part were sketchy in the first stages. Of course we know that the design of the Baghdad University Campus was entrusted to Walter Gropius (1883-1969) and his "The Architects Collaborative" (TAC) on the same site. However, we do not know who chose that distinguished spot for the campus of the present-day colleges of the University of Baghdad in Al-Jadiriyya, but we do know that the basic design of Baghdad in 1956 proposed the construction of the main east Karrada avenue, which leads to that unique site.

This paper seeks to go beyond the common critical trend, which tends to reflect only the successes of the architect. It does not intend to deal in depth with the background of the design decisions and their stylistic references. Rather it seeks, as much as

possible, to reveal the meanings and signification of his designs, in order to know the hidden secrets which make him a unique architect in the international architectural panorama, through the use of methods of criticism used in the post-modernist architectural discourse. We will use the concepts of the different methods and will not rely on one specific method, whose limited ideological framework may prevent us from giving Wright's legacy a conscientious and thorough reading. In other words, we will seek to use these methods effectively and to exploit their different concepts, in order to cast a light upon the project that we are dealing with. At the same time we wish to make use of the deconstructive "freeplay" method of criticism, which permits one to move from one method to another and sometimes justifies backing away from the "text" being studied. This notwithstanding, we will remain within the framework of the Wrightian legacy and attempt to stick to the study which concerns us: the Iraqi Capital project in the nineteen fifties.

The language of the projects prepared for Baghdad almost constitutes a favourable opportunity for the architect to illustrate his unique architectural approach and show his high professional competence through a rich functional variety. We should not forget that the grandeur of the Baghdad projects, the variety of construction methods employed in it, and the numerous decisions aimed at finding professional solutions to important urban and architectural issues make it a unique project or even a rare project in Wright's life. The discussion here is not about a lonely building, it is not even about a "complex", rather it is about an urban project which, in fact, corresponds to the name Wright gave to the project: "Plan for Greater Baghdad".

However, this distinguished architectural language, which seems in harmony with the nature of the place and its high cultural standards, is intricately linked to the architect's design discoveries on which he had worked in the past and which was associated to numerous plans he executed during his final years. Moreover, most of Baghdad's architectural elements and their structure types had been



Plan of Greater Baghdad with the Edena Island

applied in various projects that he executed in many cities in the United States of America. This point has symbolic connotations that need exploring, in order to understand the language of the Baghdad designs and to appreciate their architectural importance. But we also must point out that we are dealing with a very singular and unique architectural approach, as compared to common and conventional architectural practice, since the historical hegemony, and consequently the architectural memory influences which normally can be seen through the specificity of the site, has come to be considered –from a modernist theoretical point of view– as a question which falls outside the practical preoccupations of Modernism and should not be dealt with.

The designs by Wright, in his Baghdad projects, the Mexicans and the Japanese before him, in addition to the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto and probably some of Josep Lluís Sert in the present architectural Modernist panorama are marked with the presence of the culture of the place as an architectural aspect added to the elements which normally form the Modernist structure. However, the culture of the place here should be understood through interpretive effectiveness, i.e. through conveying new

Modernist meanings and concepts to the common architectural elements with a view to enrich the creations with the flavour of the site or what Christian Norbert-Schultz called the *Genius Loci*.

Circular forms eloquently prevail in all the elements of the design of the Civic Center of Baghdad. The circular form is Wright's most favourite form in the treatment of the spaces and volumes of those places and their open spaces. There are ordered circular roads, circular constructions, and half circles near other circles which define the organization of open spaces. With the exception of the body of the Central Market and the building of Ancient Sculptures, the circular form is predominant in all the remaining designs. This was the way Wright treated the volumes of the buildings. As to the organization of open spaces, it is said that Wright's fondness for the circular form in his plan for Baghdad was due to his desire to invoke the image of the Al-Mansour's circular Baghdad, which dated back to mid eighth century (N. Levine, *The Architecture of F. L. Wright*. Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 397). This means that we are before a distinguished intertextuality, applied by the architect in order to make us feel the variety of architectural sources upon which he relied. Nonetheless, we think that this was not the only reason for such an approach. It is known that circular shapes fell into disuse in Modernist design after Le Corbusier (1887-1965) published his "manifesto" on the poem of the right angle, during the nineteen twenties, which set the pace for many leading Modernist architects. However, Wright did not succumb to these declarations which tended to monitor architectural effectiveness and define its formats (later on, Le Corbusier himself repudiated his famous Manifesto and adopted a language devoid of any right angles he used in Ronchamp — a building with modest proportions which constituted the onset of a new architectural era). Wright, in spite of his tendency to be different from the rest, remained faithful to circular forms in his designs and made them his favourite format in most of his works.

In addition to these two reasons — that of his tendency to show off and to be different from the rest — Wright's old fondness for the symbolism of

geometric shapes led him to make use of them to achieve a specific meaning and to obtain a symbolic element of the type of geometrical shape. A researcher pointed out that Wright wrote an article in his beginnings (1912) titled "Japanese Printing" in which he explained the symbolism of geometric shapes and the amount of force and magic which they can transmit. In this article, Wright wrote that "geometric shapes can carry a symbolic value, suggest humane thoughts, provoke in us certain moods and evoke specific feelings. For instance, the circle represents infinity; the triangle means a structural unit, whereas the spiral shape denotes organic evolution..." (Ibid, p 301). During many years Wright developed these references and widened their use. The triangle, which he saw as intertwined hands in prayer, represented, in his opinion, meditation and humility, whereas the circle referred to the sun, the moon or even to the other planets, and hence symbolized wholeness or universality. In general, Wright gave a special attention to shapes because they were reminiscent of the archetype representing the basics of the architectural space. The circular shape, according to his view, evoked the concepts of "continuity" or "embracefullness", and the absolute appearance of uniqueness and the essence of perfection! Hence the need to understand the meaning of presence of circular shapes in the Baghdad project, as if the circles in his designs bear individual meanings and give them an additional structural strength: completely ordered and completely amazing, adding an extra dimension to the importance of the building, or the buildings.

The quest of the architect and his yearning to achieve a high symbolism in his designs led to the omnipresence of the circle in the Baghdad project, as was the case in his pre-Baghdad and post-Baghdad projects. Let us consider his Florida Southern College project (1938), the Burlingham House project in Texas (1941-1943), the Herbert Jacob House in Wisconsin (1938), the huntsman sports club and hotel project in Hollywood, California (1946-1948), the Civic Center project in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (1946-1948), the Morris Gift Shop in San Francisco, California (1948-1949), the Robert Llewelyn Wright House in Maryland (1953-1957),

the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Wisconsin (1955-1961), and, of course, his masterpiece, the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New York (1943-1959), and many other projects, both completed and uncompleted, in which the circle or the rounded shape form the main pattern of the structural treatment. This means that the architect's decision to choose the eloquent round shape was not incidental or arbitrary, but rather based in the evocation of a symbolic connotation he wished to prevail in his choices. It is hence necessary to read the Baghdad Projects also from this perspective in addition to the ones mentioned above.

Frank Lloyd Wright does not want to relinquish easily his role as the founder of the organic approach in architecture, in which the specificities of the surrounding environment transcend and become a basic feature in the formulation of the structure of the proposed designs. In other words, we are before a clear endeavour to achieve harmony between the site and the type of building. This will help us understand the huge spacious buildings he proposed to organize and define the shape of the island on the Tigris and which will house the most important building: the Opera House. In order to achieve this organic flavour, the architect recurred to the "trimming" of the shape of the island by transforming its borders and limits into curves and rounded shapes, with a view to convince us that the rounded shapes — and their symbolism — that he was fond of were inspired by the specificities of the site. As for the other bank of the river, where the university campus is located, he exploited the acute bend of the river to justify the legitimacy of the looping wide avenues surrounding the components of the campus, thus increasing the organic "dose" in the proposed structure.

Wright overwhelmed his Baghdad projects with symbols which refer to the different periods of the Iraqi civilization. He applied in the structures he designed many concepts drawn from the local cultural memory, on the one hand, and he tended to be inspired by the ancient forms of old buildings such as the Ziggurat, or spirals, or the Baghdad circular outline, on the other, thus seeking to apply them in many buildings he designed. The Plan for

Greater Baghdad, for instance, was dedicated to Sumer, Larsa, and Babel. Again, the use of such expressions as the "Isle of Edena", "Thousand and One Nights", "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp" and other mythical expressions are intended as a tribute to those myths. He did not hesitate to call the theatre of Baghdad the "Crescent Opera" to convey specific cultural and geographical indications on his proposed design. The many tiers of the spiral avenues surrounding the main building in the opera house are reminiscent of the ancient Ziggurat and of the tiers surrounding the temple. The spiral form of the Harun Al-Rashid monument reminds us of the spiralling minaret of the Al-Moutawakkil mosque in Samarra (848-852). The role of the vertiginous vertical obelisks, which mark the location of the most important buildings in the Plan for Greater Baghdad, is similar to the artistic role played by the high minarets which soar high and mark the skyline of Muslim cities and the exact location of important mosques. Let alone the existence of many other elements which the architect used in the structure of his designs and which he drew from the cultural symbols of the place. This leads us to the conclusion that we are before an architect who applies a known approach which uses history and collective memory in the structure of the proposed designs. However, the results of this approach may seem ordinary or even vulgar had it been applied by another architect, but here the architect is Wright, Frank Lloyd Wright, one of the masters of Modernism and its most important founder. This conveyed on the Baghdad project a high level of professionalism mingled with a uniqueness of structural solutions. It is clear that the theme of historical inspiration does not have any importance anymore. What is really important is the interpretation process inherent to the effectiveness of creativity in addition to the capacity to create fantasy, a fantasy which led the most renowned American architect to take part in the project, which constituted an exceptional event in the international architectural field.

Modernist criticism tools allow a «view» of the architecture studied in new and creative ways, susceptible to enrich the value of the design and bring to the front its stylistic successes. They give the

critical deconstructionist approach the possibility to “read” the text of the creative architecture and visualize it as images. However, the event of that «reading» is always exposed to the influence of the interpretation of the “receiver” (in this case: the seer of the building). This kind of interpretation may lead, in the final analysis, to the identification of intertextuality and then to the explanation of the different cultural references used by the architect to execute his creation. This procedure gives many meanings to the text under study, besides the unique meaning which the architect may have sought to emphasize in his creations. It is a meaning and a message: the underlying message in those designs according to their typology and the message transmitted through the specific formats and their specific visual reference. This makes the reading of the visual event in Wright’s Baghdad design pile up in many ways in the receiver’s imagination.

Suppose that the receiver, in this case, has sufficient knowledge about the importance of the architectural event under study and has a cultural and professional background which enables him to carry out such readings. If the Modernist critical approach gives the receiver/knower the role of another parallel “designer” and “creator” of the architectural event, then the result of this exercise will participate to make the Baghdad designs part of the context of the common visual culture and an element belonging to the surroundings. This is achieved through the plurality of readings of such designs, among which we find what Wisenman called «displacement», or the theoretical dissociation of the signifier and the significant. (P. Eisenman, *Re-Working Eisenman*, London, 1993, p. 51). If we approach Wright’s Baghdad project according to this view, then we disclose our capability to dissociate the intertwined architectural meanings and understand them as forming a one-to-one relationship, i.e. the relationships between meaning and form, meaning and content, meaning and symbolism, which will enable us to visualize the Baghdad designs free of their ordinary architectural characteristics, and finally accept their unusual forms and justify the strangeness of their structures.

In general, the Plan for Greater Baghdad may, in our opinion, be read through creative and innovative methods as long as there are new critical approaches concerned with casting a light on the visual artistic event under different angles. These different readings, regardless of their reference, confirm the importance of the architectural event created in the nineteen fifties, and grant the Baghdad project its status as a highly significant event in the universal Modernist architectural discourse. That event imbued with sympathy for the place and its culture, which led to the capture of the imagined photograph of the building and converted it into an architectural achievement, was endowed with the best elements of Wright’s distinguished architectural approach, namely his attention as to the specificities of the site and his ability to create unique formats impregnated with a high aesthetical feeling.

What is unfortunate in this architectural “drama” was that the Wrightian project was never executed, due to the dramatic events which took place in the Iraqi political scene after the 1958 revolution. Thus, the Iraqi capital missed a rare historical opportunity to convert its land into the “site” of a gigantic, exceptional, and multi-functional project designed by an influential architect, in spite of the fact that Baghdad was at the time the scene of many projects executed, wholly or in part, by other internationally renowned architects. What is really unfortunate is the complete disinformation which has accompanied Wright’s Baghdad project in local critical literature. As we have noted, it was not mentioned for half a century. It was ignored as a rare distinguished project in the local architectural practice and as an architectural event to be analyzed with all its strong and weak points. What we witnessed was a total lack, on the part of decision-makers, of interest, with the exception of some references from Iraqi authors.

A great effort such as the one made in the elaboration of the Baghdad designs cannot be discarded just because these projects have not been carried out. As in many other unexecuted projects (in this case Wright was treated the same as other architects) some of the creative and structural concepts of these designs were applied in other projects. In this respect

we can mention the Marin County Civic Center (1957-1962) in San Raphael, California, in which one can see a clear association with the commercial center in the Plan for Greater Baghdad. Its 880-square-foot surface is approximately similar to that of the commercial center in Baghdad. The well-trained eye can easily detect structural similarities between the two projects. The 172 feet high Golden Tower in California is similar to the one in the Baghdad plan in the form of a vertiginous obelisk next to the entrance of the Opera House. The Grady Gammage Memorial Auditorium (1959) in Tempe, Arizona, which consists of fifty five concrete columns which support the round roof with its pattern of interlocking circles, resembles the circular hall in the entrance of the Baghdad Modern Art Museum in the Civic Center Plans. (Maria Constantino, *The Life and Works of Frank Lloyd Wright*, London, 1998, pp. 142-145). The fact that Wright designed the two projects nearly in the same period made the structural similarities even more patent, to the point of using the same mechanisms (and even the same elements) to solve the problems which the architect faced at the time.

Another project, the Pittsburgh Point Park Civic Center (1947-1948) in Pennsylvania (also unexecuted) in which he made use of spirals around a central theme (F. L. Wright Architect, *The Museum of Modern Art*, New York, 1994, p 282-285), is reminiscent of the architectural atmosphere of the Baghdad project. This design might be the inspiration for the solutions used by the architect to treat open spaces in the Baghdad plans. We can also mention many other projects which served as references for the Plan for Greater Baghdad, but we will limit ourselves to those mentioned above to confirm the opinion that Wright –like many other architects– resorted to architectural approaches and structural solutions that he had already used in other designs, for which he had developed a fondness and to which he resorted to provide solutions to the problems that he encountered.

Finally, we are firmly convinced that had Wright's Baghdad Projects been executed, this might have enhanced the presence of Modernist architecture at a local and a regional level. The execution of the projects could have inspired many a local architect to create other projects using similar elements and solutions.

Our present reading of those projects after half a century can be seen as additional proof of their architectural importance, due to their innovative ideas which serve to enrich the local and regional architectural discourse, and to the charismatic and influential personality of the international architect who created them: Frank Lloyd Wright.

** To "Diran Nasser":*

My colleague lecturer at the University of Baghdad

School of Architecture /
Royal Academy of Arts
Copenhagen / Denmark

* Maath Al-Alousi wrote in “Haifa Street Development” that “(...) when the Department moved to the new premises in the mid-sixties, I had the opportunity to examine the contents of the archives of drawings and designs, and especially the big projects, a part of which I found on the roof of the Department. What pained me much were the works by Frank Lloyd Wright: the Opera house designs, the proposal for the campus in the “Um Al-Khanazir Island”. I kept part of those documents immediately; I hope they are still in a safe place. The rest was painted with white paint when I went on holiday in summer. During my absence for a month, the ignorant and incompetent seized the opportunity to assassinate them with ink and flowing ignorance. It was corruption of a different kind, incompetence to the limits of criminality at times; I am overwhelmed with a feeling of regret, especially when I needed the plans to consult them in my research and conferences before the Internet was made available. Nowadays most of these plans are available in many websites.”

Bibliography:

- Maria Costantino, *The Life and Works of Frank Lloyd Wright*, London, 1998.
- Frank Lloyd Wright in his renderings (1887-1959)*, Tom (12). Edited by Yukio Futagawa, A.D.A. EDITA, Tokyo, 1984.
- F. Ll. Wright Architect*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1994.
- P. Eisenman, *Re- Working Eisenman*, London, 1993.
- N. Levine, *The Architecture of F. Ll. Wright*. Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Robert McCarter, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, London/New York, 2001.
- B. B. Pfeiffer, *Treasures of Taliesin*, London, 1985.
- Maath Al-Alousi: “Haifa Street Development”; blueprint, *Cyprus*, 2007.

Notes

- 1 Note from the translator: in Arabic, *Um Al-Khanazir* means “mother of pigs”.