

## Modernism in Baghdad

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Excuse me for being a little sentimental or even personal here... Writing this article takes me back to the mid 1980's when I was working on my master's thesis entitled *Foreign Architects' Works in Baghdad*, which was done under very dire circumstances. With the war going on, we were cut off from the rest of the world, and had very limited resources to work with, not to mention the limited and very restricted access to whatever little was available. To make things worse, every time I chose a building from my long list to visit and photograph, it would get hit by a bomb or a missile, either before or after I was there! Nevertheless, the ancient books, journals and drawings buried deep inside the local libraries, archives, and the like, proved to be very useful. It was a joy unparalleled to be able to delve into them and dig up the treasures hidden there for decades; they were indeed precious and true witnesses of their times.

As the years went by I have come to regret not taking the chance to publish all that work in a book before leaving the country, and I regret it even more now. It is painful enough to watch on live TV your hometown being bombarded and set ablaze, without the additional pain of being an architect who can't help sympathizing with familiar buildings as if they were old acquaintances. I don't think I will ever forget the sight of Gio Ponti's elegant Ministry of Planning, being persistently bombarded against the fiery nighttime skyline, and then left to smolder for days for the whole world to see. But, I would like here to salute all parties involved in preparing this exhibition as a tribute to the architecture of Baghdad, and I feel honored for taking a part in it. Ironically enough, while I now have what I desperately wanted back in the 1980's – a chance to

be abroad and to have open communications with anywhere in the world, I wish I had now what I had back there and then: to see those buildings at least once more, and to get hold of all the research documents I had to leave behind. Anyway...

The architecture of Baghdad during the twentieth century was obviously dominated by foreign (mostly western) influences one way or another. It entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the Ottomans, who introduced German military architecture just before WW1. During WW1 the British campaign entailed British Colonial architecture which continued through the '20's and '30's under the rule of the Iraqi Monarchy and the British Mandate. In the '40's a number of British architects were invited back to design more buildings, while Baghdad was welcoming the pioneer Iraqi architects graduating from British schools. During the '50's, the Iraqi Development Board invited a number of world famous architects, the Masters of Modernism, to offer their designs for numerous architectural and planning projects. After overthrowing the Monarchy in 1958, there was a lull in the official dependence on foreign architects, but the Modern influence continued. The Iraqi Modernists tried to incorporate the Modernism of the time in their attempts to create a national architecture, which continued into the '70's. Yet, this and the previous decade witnessed the revival of some projects dating back to the '50's. In the early 1980's the Iraqi government turned again to a number of the worldwide famous architects, the renowned Masters of Post-Modernism and others, for more grand-scale projects. Finally in the '90's everything came to a standstill with the series of Gulf-Wars, the sanctions, etc., until the finale with the invasion in 2003. This article is an analytical to



**Fig. 1 Philip Hirst**

(left to right): The Rafidain Bank with its tower, the Rafidain Bank in foreground with other banks at Bank Street



review of the most prominent works of the Modern Masters during the late 1940's and 1950's in Baghdad.

## Modernism

In general, although International Modern architecture during the late 1940's was burdened with the heavy task of dealing with the aftermath of WW2,<sup>1</sup> that didn't stop it from quickly spreading around the world at the hands of the Masters themselves, their disciples, and their followers. The 1950's, that decade of great economic, political, and cultural development, witnessed 'High' Modernism spread its tall prismatic buildings clad with glass curtain walls around the world at an even quicker rate.

... And so Modernism also came to Baghdad. It was officially introduced to the country in the late 1940's through some governmental institutions, and in the 1950's through the Development Board as it planned to undertake a number of ambitious projects to be designed by no less than the best and most renowned architects and planners in the world: Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Gio Ponti, Alvar Aalto, Willem Dudok, and others (surprisingly, no Mies?!) As for town planning and housing, the most prominent then was Constantine

Doxiades, with proposals for new master plans for the whole city, in addition to a number of housing projects. Some Modernists had non-Iraqi clients, as did Jos Luis Sert, Ellen Jawdet,<sup>2</sup> and others. But the following number of coups from 1958 onward all had their toll on this campaign, as mentioned above, and many projects were canceled. Among the survivors were the public housing projects, the University of Baghdad, the Medical City, and a number of factories. Most of these projects were large complexes as previously unknown in the country, and they were wholly implemented – even expanded through the years. A few projects were revived later on - although only partially - as Le Corbusier's gymnasium, the only building in his sports complex to see the light.<sup>3</sup>

Although the term 'Modernism' usually evokes the usual images of the well-known formal style of that era, Modernism was not merely a formal style. Like all architecture in general it was, of course, a combination of numerous formal, technical, functional, and other aspects brought together in sync and harmony, within an urban context. So if we are to examine the Modern architecture of Baghdad, it would be only fair to adopt a wider outlook.

## The Technical

One of the most important structural developments in Baghdad in the 1940's and 1950's was the introduction and extensive use of reinforced concrete, whether for skeleton structures, or for various individual elements. This led to the emergence of a building type new to the city: the high-rise or multi-story building, and later to tall buildings, causing a dramatic change in the skyline of the city, previously merely punctuated by minarets and palm trees. The first tall building was Philip Hirst's Rafidain Bank Tower at the central business district (fig. 1), and was later followed by the University Of Baghdad Tower a few kilometers down the river (fig. 2). Reinforced concrete was also used for roof vaults and folded slabs as in Sert's American Embassy Complex (fig. 3a), and for domes as in Gropius' mosque at the University of Baghdad (fig. 2), or even for whole walls, whether pre-fab as in Doxiades' Housing project near Al-Mansour, or cast in-situ as in Le Corbusier's Gymnasium (fig. 4a) and the various buildings of the University of Baghdad.

Of course concrete was also used as a finishing material in many forms: smooth, sandblasted, or 'brutal' as in Le Corbusier's 'bton brut', which was the finishing material of his gymnasium inside and outside.<sup>4</sup> There were also other new finishing materials attributed to Modernism, like glass mosaic, best exemplified by Ponti's Ministry of Planning in the color maroon (fig. 5). And as an extension of Modern architecture elsewhere, the Modernists also introduced the wide use of steel, glass, and aluminum, in addition to promoting that famous Modernist trick of 'covering up' the whole building with cement plastering and white paint.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the introduction of the high-rise and tall buildings also promoted the use of modern mechanical services, especially elevators, and air-conditioning, the latter of which led to reduction of the role of the traditional climatic design elements to mere decoration, or the predominantly decoration.



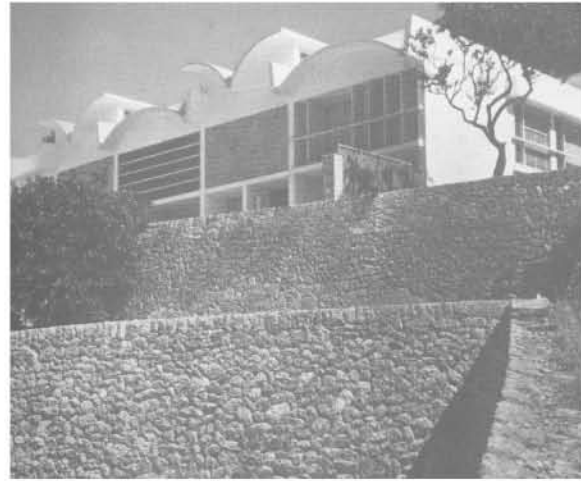
**Fig. 2 Walter Gropius**  
University of Baghdad Office Tower

## The Formal

Apart from being all 'Modernists' in the sense of belonging to the Modern Movement, and all being invited to design for Baghdad during the same period, one may easily conclude after a quick glance at the whole body of these Masters' works here that they didn't really have much in common. Moreover, most of them, namely the Masters invited in the '50's - had nothing to do with Baghdad itself prior to this 'mass invitation'. Besides, this invitation came to some of them at a time in life when their own personal styles were taking a sharp turn in new directions. Consequently, there was a large a number



**Fig. 3a José Lluis Sert**  
American Embassy in Baghdad.



**Fig. 3b José Lluis Sert**  
Sert's Studio in Palma.

of projects that neither belonged to one overall style, nor were they classifiable into any definite number of them. Even as 'Modernists', some of the Masters suddenly veered off to new directions as they tried to produce a Modern architecture with an Iraqi or Islamic, character, as they stated.

Yet again, Modernism had a great impact: there were a number of Modern formal characteristics which soon took over the city, in addition to the multi-story and towering structures mentioned above. The concept of the free-standing building had of course already been introduced to Baghdad through Ottoman Neo-Classicism and British Colonialism, among other styles during the past decades, but the Modern Masters' works for the city highly promoted the concept of the 'Greek Temple' building, i.e. the extrovert free-standing building with sculptural qualities that dominated its urban context. Rare were the Modern examples that still followed the traditional architecture of attached or contiguous buildings with the effective use of courtyards. The buildings at the University of Baghdad, for instance, are contiguous and do have courtyards, but they are more detached than attached, more extrovert than introvert, and the courtyards do nothing that they are usually supposed to do (fig. 2). They are rarely used and their presence

is hardly ever felt by the users. Another new formalistic feature is the combination of the 'low-structure + adjacent tall structure' building, especially in office buildings. This is best exemplified by the Hirst's Rafidain Bank after the completion of its three phases (fig. 1), and Ponti's Ministry of Planning (actually Ministry and Board of Planning), in the form of two neighboring buildings joined by a raised deck for the ground floor and open parking lot, probably because of the site being next to a bridge.

As for the style and source of the forms, one can safely state here that all the Modern architects invited to design for Baghdad – Masters or no Masters - have produced designs which were direct reflections of their respective styles; some works can even be regarded as replicas of some of their other works at the time.<sup>6</sup> Le Corbusier's gymnasium, 1957 (fig. 4a), undoubtedly follows the same Neo-Expressionism, or Neo-Plasticism of his church of Notre-dame-de-haut at Ronchamp, 1950-1955, his buildings for Chandigarh, 1950's (fig. 4b), and even some features from his Unité d' Habitation in Marseille from the previous decade. Ponti's Ministry of Planning (the higher of the two masses), 1958, may easily be regarded as a shorter version of his Pirelli Tower in Milan, 1956 (fig. 5), with the similar



**Fig. 3c José Luis Sert**

Fundación Maeght, Saint Paul de Vence. Foto: Judith Gabriel

plan and his characteristic use of broken lines, surfaces, and masses.<sup>7</sup>

José Luis Sert's style of the late 1950's and early '60's was once again evident in his complex for the American Embassy, 1955-1960, overlooking the Tigris in Baghdad (fig. 3a), in spite of his claims to borrowing elements from local vernacular architecture. It is quite clear that these buildings were more closely related to the Modernism of the time than they were to the local vernacular. In fact the closest architecture to the buildings of this complex may be that of his own Studio in Palma, 1955-1956 (fig. 3b), and his Maeght Foundation in France, 1959 (fig. 3c), and even some contemporary works by Gropius whom he succeeded at Harvard. Nevertheless, Sert's buildings seem to blend in nicely with their context; yet that may also be partly attributed to his special care in designing the site and its landscape, and the role of the date-palms giving the buildings a familiar – even romantic look as the famous photos usually show.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, there were some Masters with screaming attempts to derive from the local heritage, like Frank Lloyd Wright in his project for a cultural center with an opera house, 1957, on an island in the Tigris where it bends around the campus of the University of Baghdad. Although this great Master is well-known for his bold new statements and original ideas, which are usually quite reasonable, one can



**Fig. 4a Le Corbusier**

Gymnasium in Baghdad, main facade.



**Fig. 4b Le Corbusier**

Ronchamp

safely say that this work here is a shocking departure from his reasonability, and way into the land of 'sheer fantasy', in spite of its similarity to some of his other projects at the time, e.g. his Marin County Civic Center in California, 1957, and some of his churches from the '50's (fig. 6). Sometimes he even trespasses on some very sensitive and sacred territory, like his misuse of religious concepts from Islam: what can an opera house possibly have in common with a «mosque»? Definitely not being both aligned with Mecca!!

However, this formalistic approach to design was one of the prevalent trends of Modernism then, and that's the style most of the Masters ended up with in





**Fig. 5 Gio Ponti**  
The Pirelli Tower in Milan.

that's the style most of the Masters ended up with in spite of their calls for an organic, functional, or rational architecture. In his *Modern Movements in Architecture* (1973), Charles Jencks explained this phenomenon stating that in spite of their previous statements, Wright and Gropius were producing in the '50's far-from-organic works with contradictory aesthetic and structural aspects, and obviously unidentifiable functions. He added that it was ironic how both have designed their most inorganic projects for Baghdad, but it was probably because its tales of the thousand and one nights stimulate designers to conjure up their most imaginative and formalistic approaches.

The Gropius project Jencks was referring to was of course the University of Baghdad. Here again, as with the others, Gropius gives a work that represents his style: his Pragmatic style, if it may so be called. Obviously, at the time, Gropius wasn't adhering to



**Figure 6 Frank Lloyd Wright**  
Marin County Civic Center, California, 1957.

any single individual formal style as the other Masters usually did, because of his belief in teamwork, collaboration, and the 'relativity' of the truth. This may explain the unpredictability of his designs and his occasional turnovers. In his original designs for various buildings at this campus he produced a variety of forms that ranged between the strictly rectilinear and boxlike (even with boxlike sun-breakers) for the departments and the strictly curvilinear and fanciful as in the mosque, with a middle range of forms combining both for the other buildings.

Alvar Aalto was another Master invited by the Development Board. He submitted designs for a bank, a fine art gallery and a museum, and a post and telegraph administration building, none of which was executed. Willem Dudok, was invited to design buildings for the Ministry of Justice and the Police, but those were never executed either. Not much information is available about the projects of either Aalto or Dudok, but from what little I could find, it seems that their designs here also followed their other designs at the time.

In addition to the Masters mentioned above, there were other Modern architects who may not necessarily be International celebrities. They usually were British architects who had previously worked in Baghdad and were invited back to design more



**Figure 7a Wilson & Mason**  
Baghdad Central Station.  
Photo: Latif el Ani.  
© Arab Image Foundation.



**Figure 7b Sir Edwin Lutyens**  
The Viceroy's Palace in New Delhi.

buildings during the late '40's and the '50's. Such was the case with J. M. Wilson, H. C. Mason, J. B. Cooper, and the already mentioned Philip Hirst, all of whom had been officers in the British army in Baghdad and had designed a number of distinct buildings.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned above, Hirst designed the three stages of the Rafidain Bank, in addition to the Ottoman Bank (fig. 1), while Cooper was back to design the new Royal Palace, the new Parliament Building, and the Arab Bank. The banks mentioned here had the famous combination of vertical and slanting horizontal sun-breakers to cover up their facades, that Corbusian 'brise-soleil' look that found its way all around the world. But my personal favorite among the works of the comeback British architects is Baghdad Central Station by Wilson and Mason (fig. 7a). This is an extremely grand and majestic building (in fact surprisingly too grand, majestic and huge for a railway station), done with very simple materials: local bricks, reinforced concrete, painted steel, some marble, and so on. The style of this building is what I would call 'Modern Colonial', more of a combination of the Neo-Classicism of British Colonial architecture with a taste of Art Deco. Yet what explains its grandeur and majestic feel here is the undoubtedly major influence on its design – or rather its designer. Wilson had been

a disciple of Sir Edwin Lutyens, and worked with him on the urban and architectural designs for New Delhi, India, incl. the new Viceroy's Palace (fig. 7b) (currently functioning as the Presidential Palace).<sup>10</sup> The resemblance between the two buildings is quite striking, but the big surprise was to discover that the plan of Baghdad Central Station was, in fact, a mirror image of that of the Viceroy's Palace!

### The Functional

As of that age-old form-function problematic relationship, it is quite obvious that in the Modern architecture of Baghdad, it was the formalistic aspect that had the upper hand here. In other words, the aesthetic function has triumphed over all the others. This is especially evident in Le Corbusier's Gymnasium (fig. 4a) and Gropius' Mosque on the Campus of the University of Baghdad (fig. 3). It is true that the plastic form of the Gymnasium provides a highly diversified number of spatial experiences, but it is obviously at the expense of the usage function of the building. The helical outdoor ramp leading to and from the upper public entrance, the abrupt outdoor seating, the frightening slope of the indoor seating, the strange shape of the roof, and the

roofless outdoor toilets on the top floor are far from practical - or logical. Besides, the locker rooms and other spaces in the basement form an unnecessarily intricate composition as a tortuous maze, the size and height of the indoor gym are not suitable for some of the indoor games, and the list goes on. I, for one, have often wondered: if anyone of us obscure designers had designed this building, would he have gotten away with it?! I don't think so! Nevertheless, this is an undeniably interesting building, providing a rare chance to experience the true spirit of its great Master!

As for the other example, Gropius' mosque, simply a pointed dome resting on the ground at three points with the whole perimeter open to the outside, it is the exact opposite of the most basic principles of mosque design,<sup>11</sup> in spite of the designer's alleged attempt to draw from the local heritage of Islamic architecture. But again, this is another monument to another Modern Master providing another unique spatial experience, besides functioning as an interesting focal point on the way into the campus from the main entrance.<sup>12</sup>

### **Urbanism**

As a planner, Doxiades is universally known to have his standard designs, which he would apply anywhere around the world in exactly the same manner, regardless of its local character or characteristics. He would simply superimpose his standard iron grid town plans on flat plains and hilly terrains just the same - as he did with his master plan for Baghdad, which wasn't implemented anyway. Yet, the Iraqi government went along with his

designs for the housing projects around the edges of the city in the late '50's and early '60's. Anyway, in spite of all the points against Doxiades, there still are a few others in his favor: that later on in the '70's he came to realize his mistake and confessed to being an 'architectural criminal' - but only one among many others - stating his reasons for such a surprising turnover. Moreover, in some of his low-income housing projects for Baghdad, he actually made use of some local traditional materials and elements like the inner courtyard, the structural and decorative use of traditional brickwork, roof jack-arching, etc. Yet it is undeniable, Doxiades' and the others' large-scale and loose plans for urbanism and housing were the catalysts of the urban sprawl far and wide in all directions over the following decades, turning Baghdad from a closely knit fabric to a weak net with huge holes on the one hand and loose ends on the other.

A final note here... The Masters of Modernism were invited to design for Baghdad out of pride and ambition, of course, and it is - or shall I say 'was'? - lucky to have them as part of its modern history. But the question is: what if all those projects and designs were implemented, moreover implemented as originally designed and intended? Wouldn't Modern Baghdad have been a mishmash of irrelevant individual buildings - precious though each may be? But then again, it may have been proud to be the biggest, live, and full-scale Modern Architecture Museum ever - even if for a while?!

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## Notes

- 1 Namely, the large-scale destruction of major European cities, the public housing crisis, the shortage of materials and resources, etc. which the Modern Masters sought to overcome through mass production, pre-fabrication, and alternative building techniques and materials, to name a few.
- 2 Ellen Jawdet may not be as famous as the aforementioned Masters, but her designs are just as fine, e.g. the Iraqi Red Crescent building, the American School for Girls, a number of houses, etc. Besides, I've been told that one of her houses (abroad of course) was used for shooting one of the early James Bond movies.
- 3 See below.
- 4 The architect who supervised the implementation of the project was 'appalled' by the 'extra smoothness' of the concrete finish the proud Japanese builders had given to the building, thus completely ruining Le Corbusier's touch of 'béton brut'!
- 5 Soon enough, these construction and finishing materials spread all over and became the new vernacular.
- 6 A few days ago I came across a line in an article on the net to the effect that «any student of architecture can immediately tell that Gio Ponti's Ministry of Planning in Baghdad is an imitation of his Pirelli Tower in Milan, etc»! What struck me was that I didn't expect Ponti's work in Baghdad to be that well-known, not to mention that its similarity to his Milan Tower is that well-known - even taken for granted! To think of all the trouble I went through to discover that and similar facts back at the time when I was doing my thesis!
- 7 It is strange how Ponti's sister buildings in Milan and Baghdad also share some similar unfortunate incidents: not only does the Ministry in Baghdad usually get fiercely bombarded in every war, but back in the 80's, for instance, a car full of explosives was driven into its entrance lobby, and so on. As for the Pirelli Tower, a few years ago, a plane crashed into its upper floors, and according to the media this was not an accident...!
- 8 Since the location of this complex has been absolutely inaccessible for the past four decades due to its location near the Presidential Palace and other governmental offices, the only way to appreciate these buildings is through those carefully taken famous old (usually black and white) photos.
- 9 See the list of works above.
- 10 Wilson worked with Sir Edwin Lutyens prior to WW1, then it seems he went from India to Baghdad soon after the British campaign, thus becoming the first official architect in Iraq.
- 11 The circular plan itself does not help indicate the direction for prayers, it conflicts with the principle of equal lengths of the rows of prayers (people praying), it is bad acoustically and climatically, and its open perimeter does not provide the privacy and concentration required in a mosque.
- 12 Obviously, the design of this structure later proved to be such a problem that it was decided to override the original design and close its sides.

3 This is a list of the works discussed in this article, in chronological order:

Rafidain Bank	Philip Hirst	1945-57
Baghdad Central Station	Wilson & Mason	1947-51
Parliament Building	J. B. Cooper	1952
Royal Palace	J. B. Cooper	1952
American Embassy	José Luis Sert	1955-60
Arab Bank	J. B. Cooper	1955
Bank*	Alvar Aalto	1955
Sports City*	Le Corbusier	1955
Ottoman Bank	Philip Hirst	1956
Cultural Center*	F. Ll. Wright	1957
Post & Telegraph Adm.*	F. Ll. Wright	1957
Gymnasium	Le Corbusier	1957-64
Ministry of Justice*	Willem Dudok	1957
Police Stations*	Willem Dudok	1957
Medical City	Whiting, Letchfield & Panero	1958
Planning Board and Ministry	Gio Ponti	1958
Fine Art Gallery & Museum*	Alvar Aalto	1958
Post & Telegraph Adm.*	Alvar Aalto	1958
University of Baghdad	Walter Gropius + TAC	1960-80's

\*unbuilt projects

