

The “American Embassy” building in Baghdad: The architect and architecture

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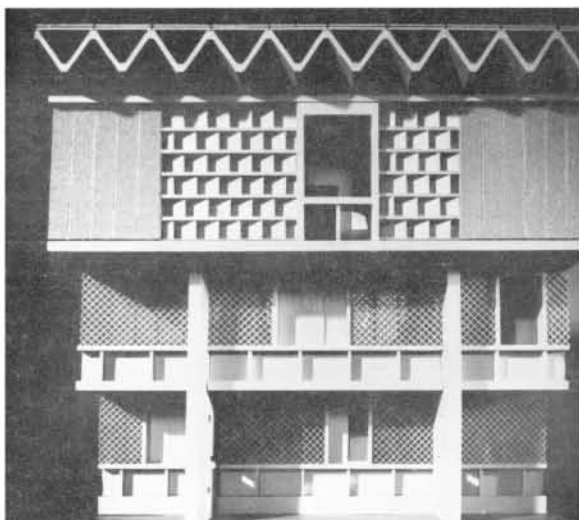
The present study seeks to provide a new architectural reading of the building of the American Embassy in Baghdad (1955-1961). In my opinion, we are before one of the most beautiful Modernist buildings and a prominent work in the regional architecture which has not been given the attention, study and fame it deserved as one of the most important architectural experiments in the international architectural landscape and the most impacting building in the international architectural trend due to the unique and new Modernist approach adopted in its construction. The reason for this lack of interest and antipathy towards this building, in my opinion, is due to two factors: firstly, the nature of the function of the building as an Embassy of the United States of America, whose name is associated, in the minds of the majority of the people of the region, with the despotic governments of the region, especially in the Middle East (let us recall the fifties decade and the prevailing image of the United States at the time, during the cold war, as a country apposed to social and economic freedom of oppressed nations). This fact pushed people to boycott the official American culture and repudiate all things American as much as possible, in response to the nationalist ideas prevailing in most emerging countries during that time, reflected in the progressive cultural discourse, and secondly, the particularities of the setting of the building in Baghdad, a desolate, God forsaken city in a Third World country.

The architecture of the building constitutes the birth of a new and impacting concept in the international architectural discourse. At the same time the building represents a specific fresh and serious cultural case, since its design was considered as an

efficient example of the phenomenon of the association of the Modernist principles and its values with local and regional structural concepts. This fact was seen as fundamental to the efficiency of the concept of deconstruction of the Western “centralization”, which gave birth to the creation of a modern epistemological trend called “post-colonialism”. Hassan Ihab, Jacques Derrida, Edward Saïd and other Post-Modernist theoreticians paved the way for the presence of this trend.

If the architectural solutions adopted in the building of the American Embassy in Al-Karkh, Baghdad, by the architect Josep Lluís Sert (1901-1983) are in harmony with the nature of the local architectural heritage, unlike the former Embassy premises in Al-Rossafa, which were characterized by an contradiction of the architectural heritage and its distinguished architectural language. The architecture of the building constructed near the park of the Opera, whose property was conveyed to the Iraqi Air Force Commandment lately, contains design elements which constitute an epistemological rupture with its surroundings; its triangular pediment on its façade, the arrangement of its columns –reminiscent of the White House in Washington– and its high flag mast in the front garden, they all seem to try to impose the awkwardness of the building, rather than integrate it in the surrounding context.

Yet the thing changed drastically when many architect were entrusted with designing other American Embassy Buildings during the fifties and sixties in various parts of the globe. The architects were asked to pay special attention to the characteristics of the surrounding context and the specificities of the local architectural heritage in the proposed designs. This instruction was expressly mentioned in



J. L. Sert, US Embassy, Baghdad, Iraq, 1955-1960.

a recommendation from the American Secretary of State in 1954, which stipulated the following: “the architects elected to design American Embassies abroad should show their foreign guests, through their architecture, the dignity, power of the United States of America and their amicable affection to their peoples, together with good intentions and respect towards the countries in which the embassies are built” (*Sert 1928-1979 Half a Century of Architecture*, Josep M. Rovira (ed), Barcelona, 2005, p. 207). These criteria have, in addition to the deep and sudden changes which took place on the international architectural scene, led to the adoption of a new architectural approach within a Modernist cultural framework known later as “new regional approach”.

Luckily for the region and its architectural culture, it was the architect Josep Llu s Sert who was entrusted with the design of the American Embassy in Baghdad during the fifties. He was born in Barcelona, Spain and graduated from the Higher School for Architecture in 1929 and joined Le Corbusier’s studio in Paris in 1929-1930. Then he set up his own architectural studio in Barcelona (1929-1937) and formed the first Spanish group in association with C.I.A.M. (the International Congress of Modernist Architecture). This group gave impor-

tance to teamwork and the emphasized the role of the architect in reforming urban planning. During his stay in Paris, he was entrusted with the design of the Spanish Pavilion during the 1937 Universal Exhibition in Paris; so his work came to be known in the whole world because he designed a space reserved for “Guernica”, the famous painting by Pablo Picasso. He also worked hand in hand with Mir , Calder and Gonzalez. In 1939 Sert emigrated to the United States of America and became an American citizen. He worked actively on the planning of many cities in both North and South America. As of 1953, he founded his own consultancy and later on in association with other architects.

Josep Llu s Sert’s influence lies in the architectural field. Even if he assumed prominent professional, organizational and academic positions (he occupied the position of president of the C.I.A.M. during nearly ten years (1947-1956), and he was dean of the School of Design in Harvard (1953)), his work on an architectural approach converted him into one of the Modernist architecture symbols and creators. Even if his approach pertained to the Modernist trend, it included additional concepts drawn from massive readings from a variety of cultural backgrounds. His Spanish origin helped him develop a personal method in the Modernist architectural legacy. His Spanish roots converted him into an architect who knew in depth the richness of the Mediterranean basin culture. He was acquainted with the value of the genuineness of the designs of that part and has sufficient knowledge of its architectural legacy and mastered the vocabulary of its structural language. Add to that the work of this influential architect and his designs, which rank high, have given to regional architecture a new life.

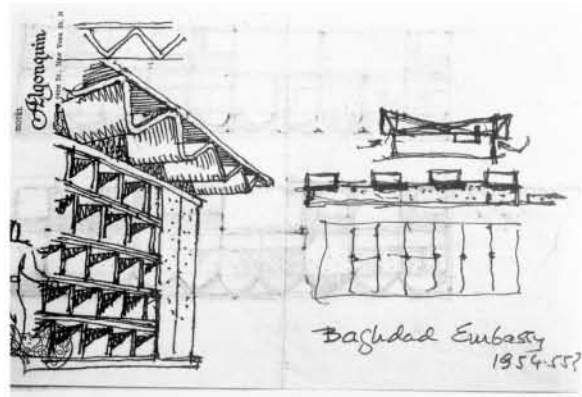
Sert’s architectural rich achievements range from designs of modest proportions of weekend houses and plans for multi-functional big complexes to the planning of entire cities. Let us recall the residential building in Muntaner Street, with its duplexes in Barcelona (1931), as the first Modernist building in a city whose name was associated to the name of the Art Nouveau architect Antoni Gaud  (1852-1926), the Weekend House of Garraf, Spain (1935), whose

design is pregnant with a Modernist flavour; the Casa Bloc huge residential complex in Barcelona (1934-1936), the Pavilion of Republican Spain in the Paris Universal Exposition mentioned above, the numerous urban planning projects in Peru (1948), Bogota, Colombia (1951-1953) and La Havana, Cuba (1955-1959), his eloquent design of the Palace of the Republic in the Cuban Capital (1955-1957), the refined design of his Cambridge residence, United States of America (1956-1958), his designs of his artist friends' residences such as Georges Braque (1960), Chagall (1961), as well as the preparation of designs for the artistic centres and studios of Margaret and Amy Maeght (1959-1964) and Joan Miró's Museum and studio (1975) in France. All these constructions are considered, in the opinion of many critics, as important events in the Modernist architecture. Add to these his numerous works in the Harvard campus such as the married-students' housing (1962-1964), Harvard's Science Center (1970-1972), Martin Luther King School at Cambridge (1972), and other achievements which enrich the architectural panorama of the place in which they are built. However, the trait which characterizes Sert's architecture is his tireless efforts to mix all types of arts in his designs, so that the sculpted pieces and works of art come to form part of the architectural solution, which give this latter a high expressive transcendence.

Architect Walter Gropius (1886-1969), a leading figure of Modernist architecture, wrote in 1969 to Sert an emotive letter on the occasion of the fortieth year of professional career of this latter in which he paid an eloquent tribute to Sert's architectural achievements. Gropius wrote to his friend: "...greetings to the intellectual president of the C.I.A.M. and the friend of the *crème* of architects and artist, the hero of cooperation between the different literary genres and honours to one of the Vanguardists who claimed the integration of building and arts in general (...). The models of your creative works are a motive of pride for Europe, the Middle East and South America. You have enhanced the skyline of the area of the Charles River which passes through Harvard and Boston. You have united the Mediterranean spirit and the Newfoundland, giving



J. L. Sert, US Embassy, Baghdad, Iraq, 1955-1960.



the old concept of Patio in residential building a new meaning. In all your numerous works, the genuine human interest was the predominant trait and I look forward to see your future creations with impatience" (*Josep Lluís Sert 1901- 1983*, Josep M. Rovira. Electa Architecture. Milano, 2003, p. 7). Even if Gropius died that very year and could not see the Modernist architect's achievements, his eloquent and sincere words were only a premonition of what might have been said of the subsequent works by that influential architect.

The American Embassy complex in Baghdad occupies a near-rectangular strip of land which measures 65 meters wide on the western part, 120 wide on the eastern part near the waterfront, and 430 meters long. The site is limited, in the west, by



J. L. Sert, US Embassy, Baghdad, Iraq, 1955-1960.

Al-Mansour Avenue which leads to the Palace of the Republic in Karrada in Baghdad and, in the east, by the Tigris. The architect divided the site in several parts, each one with its own patio; the architects most favourite concept. The main administrative building of the Embassy is located in the beginning of the site, followed by the installations reserved for services, the staff residences, leisure facilities and finally the Ambassador's residence whose wide balcony gives to the Tigris River.

Seen from above, the main building of the Embassy looks like the letter "U", with a spacious hall and opened in the northern part, interspersed with a series of decorative ponds and gardens. This hall is overlooked by the passageways which link the different administrative facilities of the Embassy. There is a large pond in front of the main faade of the building which serves to regulate the traffic of vehicles coming to the Embassy in addition to its aesthetic and climatic functions. The southern part of the Embassy consists of a wide built zone which surrounds an open space in the middle. The building has three floors topped with a corrugated roof. The floors are achieved by recesses with determined dimensions. The treatment of the two faades of the lowermost floors is similar in the front/western side

and the back/eastern part, in which he used a perforated screen made of blue ceramic plates in the front part and orange and red plated in the rear part. There is a concrete white-painted concrete band which extends horizontally in both lower floors on which the perforated screen rests. This concrete band is "cut" in the front part where the main entrance is located within one of the spans of the faade. On both sides of the building, these spans are formed by concrete vertical walls whose thickness represents vertical repeated patterns.

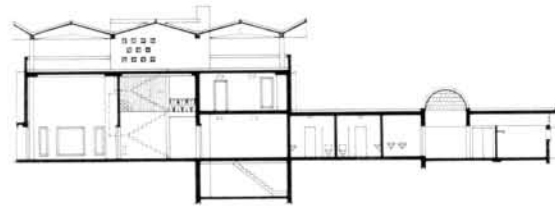
The front faade of the third (and last) floor of the Embassy building was treated with another type of sunbreakers based on "louvers" made of seven rows of inclined pieces of white ceramic, marked with white horizontal lines which divide the whole faade. The rear faade reproduces the same design, with the exception of a difference: it has a wide and deep balcony, divided by horizontal and vertical concrete slabs which limit the ceramic screen which extend on the whole faade. It should be pointed out that the sunbreaker was put at a distance from the crystal panes of the windows and walls in this floor, whereas it was nearly stuck to the wall in the two lowermost floors.

There is a two-floor block in the extremity of the southern part of the site reserved for the security of the Embassy and for services. This block is enclosed in a white wall with concrete protuberances. The wall defines the patio formed by that block, the building of the Embassy and staff housing which is parallel to the building of the Embassy. The staff housing is the highest building in the Embassy premises: it consists of four floors. However, only three floors are used to house the staff of the Embassy (Knud Bastlund, *J. L. Sert*, Zurich 1987, p. 98), because the ground floor is partly empty and contains halls and stairways leading to the upper floors. The concrete walls have been put transversally and act as walls which support the whole structure. The two lowermost floors consist of two-bedroom and three-bedroom apartments and their dependencies. The third floor consists of single-bedroom apartments, their dependencies and relatively spacious balconies. These apartments have a vaulted roof which, at the same time, constitutes the roof of the whole building.

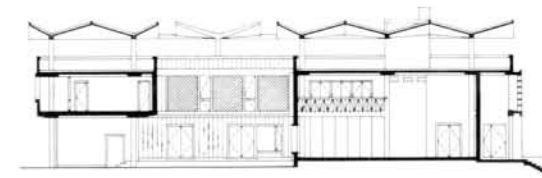
The wide openings in the housing facilities have been protected with a ceramic screen similar to the one in the administrative premises, yet with different colors. The two façades of the housing block are characterized by a multitude and richness of design decisions. The western façade is different from the eastern one. This difference is due, basically, to the location and function of each of side. The western façade contains regular and narrow openings, “drawn” on a white uniform surface. However, the architect felt the monotony of the elements of this façade and added a decorative element to it, enriching it through the repetition of the same pattern over and over. This pattern consists of a net of concrete ribs the form of which is reminiscent of the artistic treatment widely used in the traditional residential architecture in Baghdad. Meanwhile the other façade –the eastern one– is characterized by an alternation of solid and open spaces, whose contrast is enhanced by the colors of each part. The large openings have been covered with ceramic screens put on a concrete net whose ribs have been painted in white, whereas the solid parts contain oblong openings with small windows.

There is a swimming pool near this building destined to be used by the residents who occupy this block and those of the other residential building located on the southern part of the site which consists of larger apartments than those of this residential block. These buildings communicate with the city through portals which open on small streets, far from the main entrance to the Embassy which is reserved for official use. Here, there is another patio which is formed by the buildings and by an earth barrier on the eastern side which served as a dike to protect the site from the Tigris floods in times past, before dams were built upriver to control the levels of river waters.

The building in which the Ambassador’s residence is located occupy the last part of the site comprised between the earth barrier and the Tigris. It consists of two floors with a double roof; the upper one resembles a concrete pergola, supported by the pillar of the whole structure. This house was designed as a private residence for the ambassador and his family. It can also be used to celebrate official



AMBASSADOR'S RESIDENCE: SECTION



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and diplomatic ceremonies. The architect has managed to achieve these contradictory functions through the use of the concept of patio in the house, whereby he separated the private and public needs. The spacious living room looks out into large gardens. As to the bedrooms, they occupy the upper floor. There are wide balconies which extend on the façade of the house and others on the terrace under the corrugated concrete pergola, whose lower was painted blue. There is space for up to 100 guests in the house whose spaces are extended by opening accordion doors. However, the areas of the many balconies, and particularly those in the upper floors, can host more than one thousand guests (*Ibid.*, p. 98).

The open spaces in the Embassy premises are characterized with a distinguished architectural concept, namely the “canal”, which crosses the site from end to end: it starts from the Tigris, its source, and ends in the pond in front of the Administrative building of the Embassy in the other extremity of the site. The canal has an irrigational function, in addition to uniting the different components of the project. From the main canal other smaller canals branch off, perpendicular to the main one and parallel to one another. The role of these canals is to carry water to the trees and plants of that large site.

* * *

The architectural decisions and reference of the American Embassy in Baghdad complex obey to a Modernist language in its style and structure; a language which makes use of the application of a pure technique and which relies mostly on a typology of the design being built and on a massive functionality, while paying special attention to the rationality in the choices of the structure and the materials used as an essential element in the aesthetics of the building. The architecture of the complex tends to represent all these values in an eloquent manner. The values which have been established and consolidated by Sert and many other architects, whose names have been associated with the advent of Modernist architecture during the twenties of the past century, such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Mies Van der Rohe and many others whose legacy contributed to the creation of that concept: the concept of Modernist architecture in its functional version.

Josep Lluís Sert was conscious of the artistic taste of the mid-fifties –the period for which he was designing– was different from the taste prevailing during the period in which Modernist architecture was born. Big changes have taken place in the concept and value of architecture due to the modification of aesthetic and artistic approaches which were behind the qualitative transformation of structural / spatial solutions of architecture. Even if we recognize the existence of that change, the Embassy complex still draws its value from the concepts which appeared and prospered after the First World War. This language seeks: first, to make the buildings of the Embassy complex as they really are and, second, as a representation of a certain set of values. In other words, these are buildings which transmit a “meaning” and a “message”, according to Peter Eisenman. The premises of the Embassy tend to confirm their formal uniqueness through the consolidation of their various functions and their architectural style falls within the Modernist trend and observes its principles.

The architect paid a special attention to the location of each building inside the complex. While

taking his planning decisions he relied on a clear rationality due to the hierarchy of the typological use of each building. He placed the Administrative building, the main representative building of the complex, in front of the recipient’s eye (the visitor or the passerby who walks on the main crowded street of the city –our mention of the “crowded road” refers, of course, to the period before the decaying dictators usurped most of the lands in the Karrada Maryam area, including the buildings and streets in that part of town-). Behind it, in a remote corner, there are the services facilities, followed by the residential blocks with their entrances, outlets and services and leisure facilities, and finally the Ambassador’s distinguished residence which directly overlooks the Tigris River.

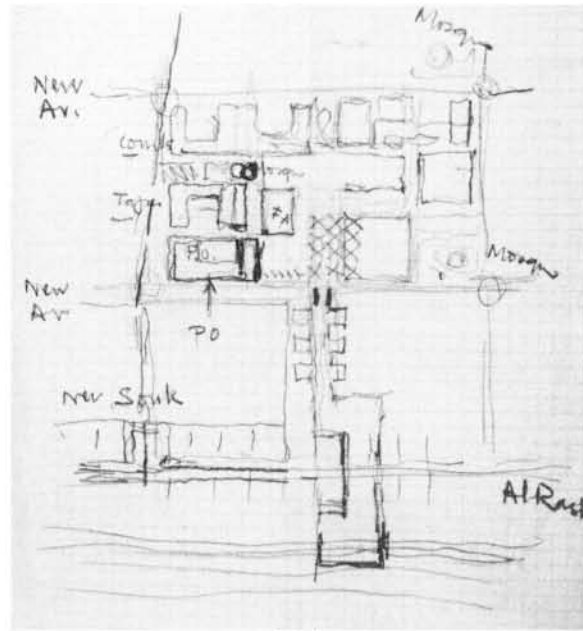
The style of the buildings of the complex is based on the tradition established by C.I.A.M. in the Athens Charter, where Sert was considered as one of the most influential theoreticians (we should remember that the architect occupied the position of director of the C.I.A.M. when he prepared the Embassy plans). The said tradition pursued the application of a theoretical approach which consists in the zoning of everyday life activities of the human being: work, housing, leisure, etc. Of course Sert dealt with planning decisions of the American Embassy complex with the integrated planning system promoted by C.I.A.M. for town planning in mind.

Although we are conscious, nowadays, of drawbacks of a coercive division in planning and know the disadvantages of the interpenetration of the different activities, the assessment of that decision should be done in the framework of the historical architectural event, i.e. it should be viewed in its specific temporal context, taking into consideration the specificities of the sources of that period of time which made the decisions seem as the most rational and modern. This will help us understand that the style of the building of the Embassy is inspired in the concepts promoted by “C.I.A.M.” in the architectural practice. However, Sert, who was a serious architect, tried to create an additional effect, through which he would move from “the necessity of the necessary” to the “necessity of the unnecessary”.

This explains the nature of the other side of the planning decisions taken on which the architect relied to avoid summarizing his endeavour as a mere mechanical application of these concepts. Such an interpretation of the architect, in our opinion, is frivolous and unjust and even distorts the understanding of his architectural approach.

The element of “canal” is present as a link between the different parts of the complex. It was the architect’s response to the severity of the composition used and a creative transgression of its negative effects. The canal goes beyond its useful function as an irrigational element, whose existence is vital and necessary in the hot dry climate of Baghdad, to become the predominant architectural trait due to its organic interpenetration with some components of the project and to the linking of the rest of them. In this sense, it can be considered as the column of the design which supports the various structural components, hence its planning importance and architectural uniqueness and high artistic value. Its strong and impacting presence in the design reveals mastery in the use of water and the canal as fundamental elements in the proposed plans. Did we say “mastery”? Of course the architect was acquainted with the former architectural applications which place the canal in the nucleus of their design. Here we want to mention in particular the work of Andalusian architects, whose major preoccupation was water and channels. The most representative examples of this technique are Seville’s mosque courtyard (1175) in Spain with its twisted ever-flowing stream. In that unique courtyard water plays a kind of hide-and-seek game, depending on the decision of the architect to cover parts of the stream and leave others uncovered in a pleasant visual picture, which makes of the Courtyard of the orange trees an adequate rest or waiting space, in addition to its being a platform from which one can gain access to the mosque. Moreover, the application of these two concepts by the Andalusian architects in the famous Alhambra Palace (thirteenth century) is unanimously considered as one of the greatest architectural achievements in the world.

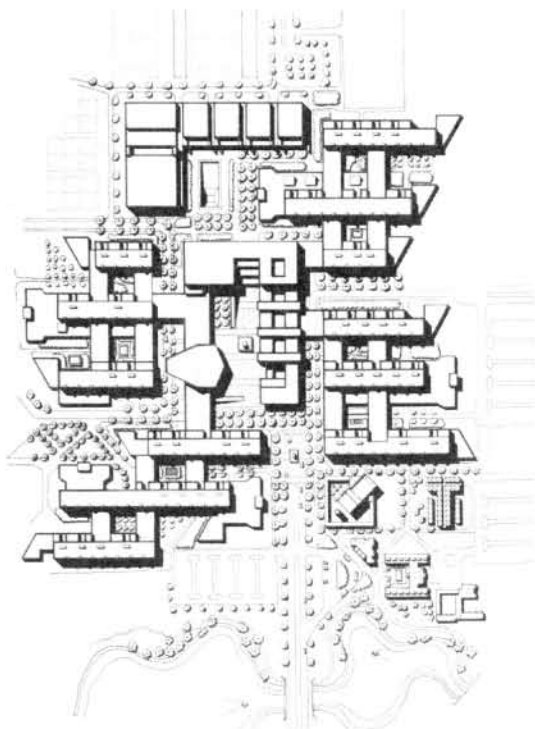
The legitimate question which occurs to the mind is: “could the Spanish Josep Lluís Sert, during his



J. L. Sert, Civic Center, Baghdad, Iraq, 1955.

design of his Baghdad project, easily ignore the exceptional architectural culture created by his old “colleagues” and Andalusian “fellow citizens” who invented, some day, an architectural treatment fraught with beauty and creativity? As we all know, the architect was obsessed with finding structural decisions drawn from the popular structural instinct, through mechanisms pertaining to the principles and mechanisms of Modernist architectural trend to which Sert belonged. The existence of the channel in the plans of the Embassy (we repeat) had a very important role. It bears its structural power within it and in the way it presents itself to us: utterly geometrical, scaled, and flowing easily, giving the project a sense of unity and cohesion, which create in us an impression of vitality and joy. It is amazing how Sert managed to express these feelings with the highest professionalism.

In this context we will recall architectural examples of the appearance of the canal as a clear innovative element in Modernist design with the same form and role fixed by Sert in the American Embassy in Baghdad. The presence of the canal (the stream, in this case) in the Baghdad University



J. L. Sert, Technological University, Baghdad, Iraq, 1974.

campus in Al-Jadiriya (Walter Gropius and TAC, 1957-1961) as an essential element in the design of the campus is, undoubtedly, due to the influence of the canal in the American Embassy. Even if the aim of the stream at the Bagdad University campus was to create a simultaneous sense of unity and discontinuity between specific structural elements and other components which differ in their function and size, this does not change the legitimacy of its being inspired by that elegant element created one day and executed in the plans of the American Embassy in Baghdad.

The architect of the Embassy deals with pilot concepts in design whose function was still unknown in the architectural spheres. We are amazed at Josep Llus Sert's professional capacity in dealing with such an architectural problematic and how he managed to end up with distinguished and fresh designs. The architectural event we are examining now implies

concepts and approaches which might have already been dealt before in Finland, Japan, and Brazil, but these experiments were not common and were very rare in what was known as the Third World countries; poor economically and marginalized culturally. Thus, the architect's achievement shows clearly his commitment to principles and concepts which were considered out of context and devoid of any scientific value, in a period where nobody dared to adopt such theses. Such an attitude was not intended to overcome prejudices promoted by the European centralism in the cultural discourse, rather it was an "epistemological" attempt to interpret the concepts of the rich cultural heritage of the Middle Eastern countries and explore the core of that heritage.

Josep Llus Sert, in his architectural approach to the Embassy building, resorted to values and ideas belonging to the rich and refined architectural heritage of the region through the use of Islamic architectural models since they constitute the main "safe" which protects, develops, and promotes such values. In his quest to identify the mechanisms to communicate with Islamic architecture he did not rely on the quick Pastiche opposition, but rather he tried to interpret the intellectual contribution of that heritage. Hence the "voluptuousness" of the cultural memory which characterizes the building and the unique "acculturation" between two different cultural systems, the "intertextuality" of the ideas adopted, to use the concepts of the "deconstructionist" method in criticism.

There is a predominant presence of the importance of the site –or the "spirit of the place", according to the expression used by the Norwegian critic Christian Schultz– in the kind of architectural treatment given to the American Embassy complex. This presence is made obvious through the use of the concept of courtyard or "patio" in Spanish. The use of such concept is very eloquent. The architect, who has Spanish roots, was one of the first Modernist architects who applied that clever concept and used it widely in the design of many towns belonging to different cultures. Let us consider the apartment buildings of the new residential area in Chimbote (1948) in Peru, where the patio concept is present in

the designs prepared by Sert for that coastal city. The same concept is present in the designs of the apartments of “Beach Resort” in Cuba in the fifties, in the plans for the Tropics housing project on which Sert worked in several South American countries in the fifties, especially the plans for the Pomona city, Venezuela (we will deal with this project later in this paper). The patio concept constitutes the core of the structure of the housing project in Cambridge, U.S.A. (1958), it is also obvious in the designs for the Margaret and Amy Maeght Museum and Foundation (1959-1964) in France, in G. Braque’s residence and studio in Saint-Paul-de-Vence in France (1960), and many other projects designed by the architect in different periods. In all these examples, there is a continuous insistence on the part of the architect on the use of that concept in Modernist designs as if he intended to recall its structural importance.

It is known that the patio as a structural concept was used throughout history and in different places and cultures. The patio is present in Hindi, Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and in most Mediterranean civilizations, in addition to its wide use in South American cultures and Mexico. However, according to numerous sources the concept was invented and developed in the city of Ur (third millennium B.C.) and taken roots in Mesopotamia in spite of the radical changes which took place in that geographic during five thousand years of history. The patio (or *Haouch* in the Baghdadi dialect) is not a past historical fact in Mesopotamia; it is an everyday life concept, clearly present in the structure of most architectural variations of that region up to the present day. Thus, it would have been an injustice towards the culture of the place, had the architect ignored the importance of that concept, bearing in mind his quest to interpret the local architectural symbols and use them in his designs.

Sert was conscious of the fact that the representation of his would-be patio in the Embassy complex should transgress the implications of a mere patio and its “intimate” dimensions and the “domestic” meaning of Baghdadi “*Haouch*”. The very nature of the relatively huge buildings the architect worked on

and their location on the large site gave him the opportunity to deal with that structural concept in a special style, a style which is in agreement with the dimensions and functions of the buildings of the complex. The patio is not only present both on the structural and planning levels in a unique “translation”, it is also present in the form of numerous formal and plastic variations in the design of the building of the complex, achieving a creative function and paying a respectful tribute to the architectural heritage of the place, while preserving its semantic and symbolic content.

Evidently we do not claim that the architect’s treatment of the patio concept in the design of the American Embassy was a direct inspiration from the particularity of the place. He already had dealt with that structural concept in many projects as was mentioned before. However, we think that Baghdad’s atmosphere and architectural symbolism, and the architect’s first-hand knowledge of the vitality and variations of that concept in the local architecture acted as additional motive. This is why it is hard to accept the thesis of the critic S. Giedion that the source of the way Sert composed the Embassy was due to the method used in his personal residence in Cambridge, U.S.A. (*Ibid.*, p. 8) and our opinion is completely contradictory to that of the famous Modernist critic. Baghdad’s atmosphere and the nature of its architectural culture which widely resorts to use of the patio concept “reminded” the architect of his design “findings”, since the residence Giedion talked about –finished in 1958– was designed by Sert in 1956 (J. Rovira, *J. L. Sert*, p. 395), i.e. at least one year after the Embassy complex in Baghdad was finished.

The architect had set some architectural conditions which he abided by in his structural decisions. Sert thought that the existence of such conditions help consolidate a conceptual reference for a distinguished building susceptible to fulfil the needs of the owner of the project, on the one hand, and to respond to the architect’s desire to consolidate his particular architectural approach. Sert recorded these conditions in machine-typed papers found by a specialized investigator (*Ibid.*, p. 361) in which he mentioned that “the design of the new American

Embassy in Baghdad is decided on the basis of the following: location, sun, river, trees" (*Ibid.*, p. 325). Sert used the word "sun" as a metaphor for the local "climate" and its consequences for which the architect had to find adequate answers not only at the level of usefulness, but of innovation as well. This is exactly what is seen through the clear positive design results he achieved in the American Embassy complex.

The Baghdadi climate, characterized by the excessively hot sun, became an essential tool in the hands of the architect in his attempt to mitigate the negative effects of the climate and to create aesthetic styles for the faades of the complex. In other words, the architect exploited a variety of types of protections and screens, concrete beams, the clever use of sun and shade zones, etc. to give the embassy complex an exceptional look: both Modernist and integrated in the architectural context of the place. The use of louvers during the fifties was the most favorite style available to obtain a wide plastic variety of faades. The Modernist architectural discourse of that time was not rich in architectural approaches due to the popularity and predominance of the functional trend which was living its golden age. This trend was based on a concentrated direct rationality in the methods of designs treatment and the presentation of the nature of vacant spaces and its function. The Modernist concept of louvers created by Le Corbusier during the thirties and forties was still fresh, elegant and useful in the fifties, hence the architect's fondness of its use and variation. In many cases we note that the architect resorted to many variations of that concept in the same building; this exactly the predominant trait of the complex architecture.

Sert dealt with the screens in his own style which seeks to avoid repeating or cloning Le Corbusier's designs in Alger or Rio de Janeiro. In the American Embassy he reproduced, one way or another, his plastic findings some of which could be seen in the Ponomo housing project in Venezuela (1953), where the screens appear in an independent and perforated wall, with round repeated units on the form of a grid within concrete vertical and horizontal beams. As we mentioned before, Sert also made use of different

types of perforations; however, in all his variations he stayed faithful to his main idea associated with his creative project: the creation of a second wall which not only serves as a protection from the hot sunrays, but to reduce the strong light as well. Sert's findings in this respect were a creative source for numerous architects who used the idea of the "second wall", namely Louis Kahn, Minoru Yamasaka, Edward Stone and others. Many local architects adopted the idea of the "second wall" and interpreted according to their personal architectural view, using it in many works: Rifat Jaderji, Kahtan Al-Midfai, Kahtan Aouny (especially his Al-Moustansiriya University campus in Baghdad, 1965).

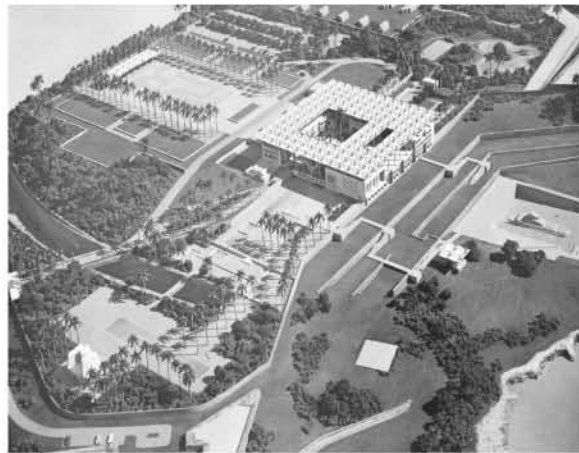
There is another element with a strong presence in the architecture of the Embassy which gives it a distinguished and unique expressive strength: the double roof. Sert did not invent this concept in the system of protection from direct sunrays. However, he managed to apply it expertly in his structural decisions, revealing to us his ability to create numerous variations of that element. The double roof in the administrative building of the complex is achieved through corrugated concrete plates which allow the free flow of air drafts. In the residential block, it consists of another surface which protects the domed roof. As to the Ambassador's residence building, that element has the form of a corrugated concrete umbrella which protects the building underneath. By creating numerous variations of the double roof the architect aims to emphasize its architectural importance in consolidating the aesthetic value of the building in which the double roof constitutes a new and fresh structural element.

Sert's fondness of and satisfaction with his architectural findings related to the use of the double roof and the emphasis he put on its positive results in the American Embassy in Baghdad moved him to use the same component (but this time in a different form, very similar to a palm tree) as a fundamental element in his project for the Presidential Palace in La Havana, Cuba (1955-1957), where it covers all the built parts of the building and acts as a link between the different components, add to that its high artistic value which gives the building its beauty and identity (K. Bastlund, *J.L.Sert*, pp. 122-131). However, the

most outstanding thing is that Sert reached that formula from the variations of the double roof concept while he was preparing the Civic Center project in Baghdad (1955). It is a project about which very few people know many things. Neither does it appear in the reference works I consulted and which deal with the architect's work. It appears in the book/catalogue of the exposition organized by the Joan Mir  Foundation in Barcelona in 2005, in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Sert's architectural works (the curator board of the exposition mentioned that they did not find any documents related to the order of the project or any report about it (Sert, p. 218). There we two quick sketches where the form of a palm-like double roof could be seen clearly. It could be deduced from some notes on the sketches that the site of the project was located in "Al-Owayna", a district in the center of Baghdad, and we know it was the location chosen for the Civic Center project in the fifties –Alvar Aalto, Franck Lloyd Wright, and Dudok initially worked on it– and that Sert also took part in that project. We will not be dealing with that theme in this paper (even though it is a fascinating one; by the way, Sert submitted a third project in Baghdad: the plans for the University of Technology in Baghdad –1974–. This project is also unknown to most local architects). Our concern is with to follow up the transformations which affected the double roof whose invention is associated with the Baghdad projects and which became one of the most essential components in numerous projects executed by Sert in different places.

Sert spared no effort to express and consolidate the integration of the Embassy complex in the surrounding context. The way he designed the garden, the style of the ponds and canals, as well as the predominant use of the turquoise blue color indicates, beyond any doubt, that we are before a refined creation completely different from any other Modernist design despite belong to that trend.

Sert's design of the American Embassy building in Baghdad consolidates the dialogue between the different cultures describe as "primitive" at that time. Compared to the prevailing architectural works, his achievement was a distinguished and



J. L. Sert, Presidential Palace, Havana, Cuba, 1955-1957.

unique event. While he was executing his project, many other renowned international architects responded to the invitation of the Iraqi Urban Authority in the fifties to design numerous building in the Iraqi Capital. Despite that the participating architects belonged to different trends, most of their designs expressly ignored the site and its culture. The projects they prepared for Iraq were a clear reflection of their professional orientation. The Italian Gio Ponti, entrusted with the preparation of the designs of the Housing Ministry, reproduced his project for the Pirelli headquarters in Milan (1956); for the Museum of Fine Arts, the Finnish Alvar Aalto submitted the same design he used in a museum in Tallin, Estonia (1939) and later on in Albo, Denmark (1963); the famous architect Le Corbusier, entrusted with the design of the Sports Complex repeated a design he prepared for a complex in Paris (1937); we do not have an idea of William Dudok's design, but we can guess that his project would not differ much from the Hilversum City Hall (1930), a design that was dear to him; even the founder of Bauhaus Walter Gropius reproduced in his refined design of the Baghdad University (1957-1961) many architectural elements he had used before in Harvard and Massachusetts, U.S.A.; add to that the fact that Gropius and his TAC colleagues' careful reading of Sert's architectural approach and solutions he adopted in the Embassy complex in Baghdad. All of



J. L. Sert, Apartment Block, Pomona, Venezuela, 1951.

these elements convert Sert's Baghdadi experiment into a unique vanguardist event.

As it was expected, Sert's architectural treatment of the Embassy complex was warmly welcome in the international architectural practice and influenced the whole architectural activity in a wide geographical area. This converted Sert's approach into one of the most important approaches to the Modernist architectural discourse and the most widely accepted in many developing countries, hence the strength of Sert's architectural legacy. Is not the importance of an architect measured by the scope and depth of his influence on his generation or in generations to come? The Iraqi architects, for instance, were fascinated by the perforated screen element in their designs during more than a decade. This component was used by Sert first time in the Embassy complex. The architectural treatment of Diwan Al-Waqf (Endowment Board), one of the most emblematic buildings designed by Hisham Munir and Associates in Al-Iwadiyah in Baghdad, shows a clear Sertian influence. Its design contains pleasurable variations of the screen element reminiscent of the Embassy complex. Moreover, the studio also used the same architectural element in the treatment of the facade of the Workers' Social Security Institution in Al-Joumhouriya Avenue during the seventies. Personally I was (in fact I am still) in love with Sert's design, in general, and his Baghdad project, in particular, and I have expressed my interest in his methods through adopting the double roof concept in the administra-

tive building of the Nasiriyah Electric Station I designed in the late seventies in the south of Iraq.

In spite of the importance and architectural richness of the Embassy complex at the local and international levels, it was lost in oblivion when the past totalitarian regime included it in the security belt of the President's Palace. The premises were used by the Iraqi Foreign Ministry during a short period and then it was confiscated by one of the dictator's many intelligence services who disfigured it beyond recognition, not to mention the numerous attempts to emulate its design which the totalitarian regime's partisans considered as a secret to be jealously guarded, to the point that many young architects and the public at large did not know that their city possessed one of the most important Modernist buildings and one of the first models of the trend called "the New Regional Architecture" in the Middle East region.

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