

5

Textos en inglés y árabe



PROLOGUE

Pedro Azara

"Given the extraordinary cast of personalities involved, it is surprising that no one has written about the topic of those jobs, and that the majority of those facts continue to be shrouded in mystery."¹ This quotation, from twelve years ago (in 1996) acted as a spell. Since then, articles about Western architecture in Baghdad in the 50's and about the work of certain architects in the Iraqi capital, such as Le Corbusier, Wright, Sert and Gropius, have begun to stand out. Today, Western architecture in Baghdad is a burning question that has been incompletely covered, and is still not well known.

Without a doubt, Levine's comment was not completely accurate. Specialists in Irak, and in exile throughout the world had already performed detailed analyses of this topic, although it is true that these studies, written primarily in Arabic, were difficult to spread throughout Europe and the United States, due, more than anything, to the war between Iraq and Iran in the eighties, as well as the embargo and the conflicts that still divide the country.

This exposition and catalog are not the definitive work on this topic; that is still to be written. That being said, there are many innovations here: included are three works that Dudok did for the Baghdad Civic Center, which are almost never cited. In fact, to the best of our knowledge, only one Iraqi documental (included in the exhibition), filmed in the eighties, includes detailed commentary on these writings. This same documentary includes unedited graphic information recently discovered in a box at Harvard University, about Sert's project for the old North American embassy. The written documentation is primarily letters, brochures, papers, and archived reports from Athens (Doxiadis), Cambridge and Massachusetts (Gropius, Sert, Smithson), Helsinki and Jyväskylä (Aalto), London (Chadirji), Paris (Le Corbusier), Parma (Ponti), Rotterdam (Dudok) and Taliesin (Wright), many of which were unpublished (primarily in the cases of Aalto and Dudok), and which deserve a more detailed analysis, comparing the correspondence exchanged between Aalto, Sert, Dudok, Le Corbusier, etc. which is scattered in different archives, and offers different points of view over one event. These varied texts are now being reconstructed, like a mosaic, a story that is vanishing, whose last direct witnesses and participants disappear day by day. Finally, the bibliography incorporates some titles published in Iraq since the eighties, sent from the University of Baghdad² (with one

important limitation; we have only been able to take into account texts in English or with summaries in English).

However, it is possible that the definitive work about the topic of this exposition can never be written. Archives, libraries, antique bookstores, the film library of Baghdad have been looted. Weapons of mass destruction have made it impossible to uncover the true and complete memory of Iraq, for now, and perhaps forever, eliminating lives, texts, images and works.

This exposition and publication could not have been carried out without the interest and the effort of Manel Parés and the Area of Culture of the Delegation of Barcelona of the COAC, the dedicated and amicable support and contacts of Manel Vila, the dedication of the architecture students from the University of Baghdad and the Polytechnic University of Catalunya in Barcelona, who constructed the models included in the display (directed by Juan Puebla in Barcelona, with the infrastructure and knowledge of the model workshop of Tort i Anna), the assistance of many institutions, universities and departments (especially the Department of Architectural Composition, and its director Manel Guardia, and the Department of Graphic Expression from the School of Architecture of Barcelona), ministries (especially the Minister of Foreign Affairs), city councils (of Barcelona, and the Agency of Cooperation and Solidarity), cultural centers (the Arab House and director Gema Martín, overall), state owned companies (P4R Apertura Española) and private companies (Cortizo), and architects (Octavio Learco Borgatello, from the United States), especially the Iraqi architects (Mouafaq Jawad Ahmed Al-Tai and hisham Al Madfaai) who agreed to collaborate; the selfless provision of graphic material from the archives (such as the Aga Khan Foundation, the Constantine A. Doxiadis Archives, the Rifat Chadirji Foundation, the Alvar Aalto Museum and the Alvar Aalto Foundation) and architects (Ricardo Bofill and Robert Venturi), and the help of all of the archives consulted; the blogs, both essential and enlightening, edited in Iraq, *Bagdad Burning*, *Great Bagdad* and *Baghdad Treasure* (and the people in charge such as Al-Rasheed, and Raed Jarrar), and to those who put us in contact with the University of Baghdad at an extremely disheartening moment in 2006, and, overall, a very special expression of gratitude to H.E. Spanish Ambassador to Iraq until 2008, Mr. D. Ignacio Rupérez, who worked tirelessly to see that the project was carried out; for all the graphic and written information provided (in very difficult conditions due to the black-outs, the loss of information, and the insecurity that it made it difficult to travel safely through the city), Dr. Ghada Siliq and the department of Architecture from the School of Engineering

of the University of Baghdad; and finally, thank you to *la Presidencia de Honor de Su Alteza Real la Infanta Da Cristina*, without whose constant collaboration and encouragement this project would have been greatly diminished. Overall, we have tried to make sure that this be a project of collaboration, between Spain and Iraq.

Notes

- 1 LEVINE, Neil: "Plan for Greater Baghdad", *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996, p. 495, n. 67.
- 2 Thanks to Mouafaq Jawad Ahmed Al-Tai, Khaled Al-Sultany, Hisham Al Madfai, and especially to Ghada Siliq, for sending articles and Iraqi bibliographic references impossible to find in Spain.

PRESENTATION: ANOTHER TALE OF TWO CITIES

Ignacio Rupérez (Baghdad)

I would like to begin by clarifying two things; First, that the origin of this exhibition lies in e-mail conversations between Pedro Azara and myself. Second, that my eventual superiority compared with the majority of the readers/visitors is only due to my experiences living in Iraq, and in Baghdad in particular. I have gained my knowledge from books, from friends, and from travels while I lived there during the last years of Saddam Hussein, with only my books remaining after the invasion and occupation of the country. The time of travels and friends is over, but not the books, which, in the midst of disaster and war, can still explain how one can illuminate this chaos; not even people such as Pedro Azara have documented, even more than what we felt, that in Iraq there were better times, that there was a place for the best architects to work. Moreover, I have enjoyed the most pleasant days and a most interesting life in Baghdad, who of course is not in her best moment right now. The surprise upon discovering how much Baghdad had to offer in past decades is quite painful, because even in the nineties there were still remnants of the past glory of a city now forced to kneel; a city that would be humiliated time and again *this* century as well; being converted into a damned city, with an extremely difficult recovery ahead, whose misfortunes remind us of the Biblical curses upon Babylon and Nineveh, one destruction after another.

I am currently trying to keep the bibliography of Iraq up to date, though I am not trying to return to Basra or Mosul, or visit Babylon, Nineveh, Assur or Al-Hadr. I cannot even travel

through Baghdad as I once did, for today one should move about as little as possible, and never without armored cars, armed guards, and bulletproof vests. The protocol for journeys is so strict that it is preferable not to travel due to the extreme embarrassment of arriving at the host's house with all the required paraphernalia. The same happens when someone is invited to *your* house. It is also better not to try to leave Baghdad if not by airplane or helicopter. Helicopters are even used to journey from the airport to the Green Zone, which only intensifies the ridiculousness of people's claims to have "visited Baghdad", when, in fact, they barely set foot in the city, and never in the Red Zone. Fortunately, that is where I reside, in the Red Zone. I say fortunately because in the Red Zone I am more aware of the city. Besides, since it is supposedly the least secure and least desirable area, it is not targeted by mortar fire. The best thing to do in Baghdad these days is to go unnoticed, to live hidden, to not stand out, to hide behind the walls and books, connected to the Internet, leading a less than exemplary life, which would be unbearable without the knowledge that there had been a real life in the city of yesteryear.

That "real" life of before, however, was exactly the opposite of what life is like in the city of today. When I arrived in Baghdad the city was already affected by the international sanctions, and in December of 1998 it once again suffered bombings, this time in Operation Desert Fox. Destroyed on various occasions by the Mongols of Hulagu and Tamerlane in 1258 and 1400, by the Murat Ottomans in 1638, and by the allies of Schwarzkopf and Franks in 1991 and 2003, evidently all those barbarians left Baghdad with very little artistic patrimony. Besides, upon first glance, Baghdad seemed to be a city with little Arab influence, with low-lying houses and large avenues, highways and bridges, as if by design, the city were trying to be some sort of Los Angeles. Thus, Baghdad is not El Cairo or Damascus, with better historical luck. Of course the city suffered blackouts, but the nightlife was still bustling in summertime on the banks of the Tigris. The population, and the children and elders in particular, suffered from the accumulated deficits due to the years of sanctions, but nothing could be worse than what has come since then, what is being suffered now. Similar to Beirut, the city became accustomed to living with its sorrows, without knowing how deep they would eventually run. It was a lively city, inhabited by proud people. I toured the city from top to bottom, taking long walks through the neighborhoods without large avenues or highways; the streets of Karkh and Russafa, Kadhimain, the neighborhoods on both sides of Saddum Street. I was even able to gain entrance