

Wright's Baghdad: Ziggurats and green visions

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[A] phantasmagoria of mountains, watercourses, and exotic objects culminating in a scintillating spire. The aggregation of the forms no longer shows the slightest necessity. The experience of the gratuitous aims to liberate the forms, at the ultimate to make them levitate, transforming them into nothing more nor less than improbable future fiction flying objects.¹

With these words, Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co in 1986 dismissed Frank Lloyd Wright's 1958 *oeuvre* of unbuilt designs for Baghdad. Later scholarship, too, has characterized the project as a mere flight of fantasy into the architect's boyhood fascination with *The Arabian Nights*.² In the 1950s, however, Wright's Iraqi clients found his designs less fantastic than outdated, at odds with the values of their emerging nation-state. Who was right? While it is not entirely unjust to associate the work with fantasy rather than realism, to see it as culturally imperialistic rather than culturally sensitive, to adjudge it behind the curve of international modernism rather than ahead of it, these views are partial, that is, limited by single angles of vision. When we engage with Wright, we can see these dissonant readings of his work —fantasy or relic— as signs of his ability to create architecture as provocation in the best sense. As is usually the case, Wright's Baghdad plan resists reduction to a single dimension as it rewards closer inspection.

In his enthusiastic response to the Development Board's invitation, Wright expanded the opera house commission he had been awarded into plans for an

elaborate cultural center, a university, and an office building.³ In a letter to a client just before he embarked on his trip to Baghdad, Wright had already re-imagined the commission:

We are off to IRAQ, invited by King Faisal to help spend the one billion four hundred eighty million public improvement fun. Our assignment— Opera on the Tigris and World-resort in the Garden of Eden down at the tip of Iraq. The King is a good ruler— wants the oil-increment to go to the people.⁴

Taken as a whole, his concepts for a «Greater Baghdad»⁵ blur lines between fantasy and realism, reach into the past and gesture toward the future while partaking of both cultural imperialism and respect, and at once reflect, reject and leap beyond postwar modernism. (Fig. 1) To look seriously at Wright's Baghdad drawings is to begin to consider a complex, fascinating set of questions, salient today, that lay beneath the surface in the 1950s. A promising entry point is Wright's use of the ziggurat. It may be taken as what the anthropologist Victor Turner called a condensing symbol, a form bringing together many meanings, not all of them at ease with each other.⁶ The ziggurat was the organizing center of his cultural hub—an island in the Tigris he named Edena— and of his proposed university campus.⁷ It appeared famously in the Guggenheim Museum, then under construction. For Wright there was nothing more emblematic than the ziggurat, the Sumerian genius of which he brought under the aegis of what he meant by organic architecture:

This pride we take in organic architecture is just as natural, would be absolutely natural, to the



Fig. 1

Overall design titled Aerial view of Isle of Edena, and University at height of 1000 feet: Plan for Greater Baghdad, dedicated to Sumeria, Isin, Larsa and Babylon;

Frank Lloyd Wright Architect. [5733.008]

Wright presented his comprehensive design with a dedication that paid homage to the ancient sites of human civilization. His design proposed an island paradise and tourist resort long before his clients considered such uses.

Sumerians. I think it would be the ideal in, surely, what they did. Didn't they do the ziggurat? What's more organic than the ziggurat?⁸

The question was not rhetorical, as any review of Wright's work, then past or still to come, built or on paper, reveals. The evolution of the ziggurat—and related spiral, terraced and circle-within-circle forms—in Wright's designs, from relatively early in his career, reveals his awareness of the historical roots of the form and his apprehension of its practical genius. The ziggurat shape in all its variations promoted his many ideas. Citing the 1947 Pittsburgh «Golden Triangle» project, the Guggenheim and the 1948 Jacobs house, Vincent Scully commented about this period that «[m]any projects by Wright then explored the curve, its continuities, and its engulfments», suggesting both «his escape from 'International' pressure» and a move «beyond time and infinity.»⁹ In fact, Wright's ziggurats traversed time. They alluded to an ancient Assyrian and Mesopotamian heritage as they addressed contemporary concerns. As early as the 1920s, Wright offered the ziggurat as an organic, environmentally grounded use of space in response to an urgent need: to incorporate the automobile into building. He acknowledged the inevitability of the automobile in urban settings, the need to control its flow, the intrusiveness of parking, but he met the challenges with the ziggurat-inspired concept of ramping, a practice currently so mundane that its

progenitor is forgotten. In the 1925 Gordon Strong Planetarium (unbuilt), his ziggurat celebrated mobility by spiraling up Maryland's Sugarloaf Mountain to offer vistas to drivers. He would again use the spiral in Pittsburgh Point civic Center (1948) and the Guggenheim museum (1956-1959). But there was another, earlier use of the spiral on a large urban scale, where Wright specific used the term «ziggurat»— his remarkable 1940 designs for Crystal Heights, a city-within-a city complex of buildings in northwest Washington, D.C. Crystal Heights culminated many visionary urban design concepts of Frank Lloyd Wright far more imaginatively than has been acknowledged. He put into practice broad concepts that had been diagrammatic in Broadacre City (1932, unbuilt), encapsulating them in an urban vision that brought together residential, hotel, retail and entertainment in a combination then unprecedented and, he asserted, inspired by the «Arabian Nights entertainment» of his childhood.¹⁰ It is not surprising that when designing Baghdad Wright would recall Crystal Heights where he had 17 years earlier introduced the multilayered ziggurat parking understructure.¹¹

In Wright's design universe, especially as seen in Baghdad, the ziggurat was both a lively solution and a lively critique of modernist universalism. In the preface to his design for the University of Baghdad, he wrote:

It is worth noting here that the original city of Baghdad—built by Harun al Rashid was circular and walled when the ziggurat of earth and masonry was a “natural.”¹²

Wright chose an ancient design to resolve a modern problem. He warned that traffic «now concerns all efforts of architects, East or West»¹³ and that “this most pressing architectural problem today requires some such basic solution else the modern city must be called impractical and be abandoned.”¹⁴ The basic solution Wright proposed for Baghdad was the ziggurat of one, two or three ramps “according to traffic pressures.” The Edena ziggurat was a multi-layered parking structure, using «this basic principle of the continuous plan of the ancient Ziggurat. Thus achieved is a new pleasure in the mobilization itself—smooth in free-space.»¹⁵ The ziggurat was also a modern solution to the problem of recurrent flooding that had made the island uninhabitable. Wright proposed practical underpinnings, concrete reinforced with steel rods or mesh on which to raise the earthen mounds of the ziggurat. As he saw it, the multivalent «ziggurat is practicable and economic in itself but would also add dignity and beauty to the building of a new joy-giving urban environment,” and “an element of beauty to adjacent buildings”¹⁶ particularly in «this basic principle: the continuous flow of the ancient ziggurat.»¹⁷

Wright’s darkest vision of Western modernity saw an unhappy civilization «[d]estroyed by greedy commercialism, by an organized materialism».¹⁸ He offered his design to the Development Board as «an attempt to see beyond the materialistic structures called ‘modern’ and barging in from the West upon the East, typical of capitalism.»¹⁹ These structures annihilated the spirit he found in the care for culture, history and undervalued forms, such as the ziggurat, which reflected an ‘organic’ relation of architecture to people and place. Wright expressed his appreciation for Middle Eastern design as pertinent to contemporary concerns.

Planning here begins with this novel but reasonable acceptance of the traffic problem in Baghdad. A



Fig. 2

Memorial Garden, Adam and Eve, Man, Woman and Child of all Races, Fruit Trees of all Climes. Crescent Opera and Auditorium, Parking Ziggurat; Frank Lloyd Wright Architect. [5733.024] Wright’s garden paradise was called Edena inspired by the garden of Eden, encapsulating the popular fascination with Mesopotamia and Babylon publicized by the media of the time.

new way of using ancient means to give safe free approach to all buildings great or small as well as spacious parking and free exit. A new dignity also.²⁰

Besides solving traffic congestion and flooding concerns, the ziggurat was one of Wright’s elegant solutions to blending architecture and landscape into a holistic vision. A note on the plan reads: «Seen here as proper basis featuring the building and the native landscape itself—the wide quiet surrounding flows of the ancient ramp Ziggurat itself is respectively natural. A splendid feature of the architecture and landscape.»²¹ His buildings were grand but the landscape was equally impressive with giant fountains and exotic flora and fauna that evoked the Garden of Eden he had in mind. (Fig. 2) Indeed, his holistic blending of architecture and landscape vision encompassed the entire island cultural center:

All features are here seen together as one.... greenery of parks, great wide highways and bridges, the great historical river.... Lakes, forest-parks, botanical gardens, great fountains, sculpture, bridle paths and country-clubs join to become appropriate to mercantile interests and all interwoven to preserve overall beauty and make Baghdad citizens daily-life better worth living.”²²



Fig. 3
Crescent Opera, Civic Auditorium, Garden of Eden:
Plan for Greater Baghdad;
Frank Lloyd Wright, Architect. [5733.007]
The Opera was the principal building commissioned to Wright by the Iraqi Development Board and the centerpiece of his vision for the grand cultural center. The iconography and landscaping reinforce the symbolic and cultural mythology Wright was evoking.

It is not surprising, then, that Wright set his centerpiece opera house (the only building Iraq's Development Board actually commissioned him to design) «in a natural water garden surrounded by the motor ziggurat» and conceived its main feature, the ceiling, as «a great horn» extending outward and a crescent shape over the proscenium «to carry sound as hands would be cupped above the mouth.»²³ The crescent curve of the ceiling allowed the space to be divided into two parts, a 1,600 seat area for opera and an additional space for 7,500 more seats. Conceiving the building to be used for civic events, conventions and political gatherings in addition to music, he believed that «a building of this sort is, as it should be, the apex of our Western Culture and would become increasingly useful to the East.»²⁴ An oval courtyard marked the main entrance, with ramps extending from the parking ziggurat. (Fig. 3)

Beyond the opera house, the circular Garden of Edena was counterbalanced on the narrow northern tip of the island by a statue of Harun al Rashid raising his sword atop a three hundred foot ziggurat meant to be seen from a distance, a beacon for Baghdad. The base was like a small tower of Babel, proportioned much like the minaret of the Mosque of Samarra, with a sculpted relief of a procession of mounted camels spiraling upward toward the feet of Wright's favorite caliph.²⁵ (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4
Harun al Rashid preliminary design for a monument by Frank Lloyd Wright. [5751.001] Wright professed his admiration for Harun al Rashid, the legendary king and hero of many of the 1001 night's stories and the ziggurat base of the monument is inspired by the minaret at Samarra.



Fig. 5
Aerial View of the University at height of 300 feet: Plan for Greater Baghdad dedicated to Sumeria, Isin, Larsa and Babylon;
Frank Lloyd Wright Architect. [5759. 005] Wright designed a university campus knowing full well that Walter Gropius already had the commission but he may have been hopeful

The Baghdad University campus -another perfect circle—rose from a three tiered parking ziggurat, keeping the campus automobile-free and maintaining its relationship with the riverfront. The site housed twelve faculties on the outer perimeter, centered by a circular lake with three television/radio transmission towers rising from a floating triangular base. His design premise for the circular campus was flexibility. Wright noted that expansion could be achieved by joining new buildings with additional rounds of the ziggurat. (Fig. 5)

The ziggurat, so creatively re-imagined and incorporated, tells us much about Wright's genuine

regard for Middle Eastern building traditions. Yet there are tinges of cultural imperialism in his appropriations of a particular history of the East and hints of reductionist rhetoric in his critique of modernism. He displayed both in a wide-ranging, often bombastic address to Iraqi engineers and architects on his May 1957 visit to Baghdad.²⁶ In language that has affinities with Orientalism as we now see it, Wright announced to his audience his allegiance to the Caliph, Haroun al Rashid, by way of the stories of *A Thousand and One Nights* and his intent «to preserve the characteristic romance» the Caliph created in the heart of the Middle East.²⁷ In the early twentieth century, Baghdad's fame in the U.S. was strongly rooted in the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*, through which Wright, like many, confused it with ancient Babylon. These tales were immensely popular during his youth and inspired symphonies, ballets, musicals and films.²⁸ Living near Hollywood in the 1920s, Wright might also have been influenced by witnessing the making of dreamlike settings for such elaborate productions as *The Thief of Baghdad*. This was also the golden age of archaeology²⁹ and Middle Eastern excavations were avidly publicized in stories purveying impressionistic ideas of the region's exotic life as well as its ancient historical and Biblical associations. *National Geographic*, at that time still black-and-white, featured an exceptional 27-page color spread for a 1922 article on Mesopotamia.³⁰ It reinforced ideas that the Middle East «will remain the East, the land of color and dreams.»³¹ The difficulties of travel coupled with political instability in the region further intensified the mystique.

Whether from his early readings of *A Thousand and One Nights* or his likely familiarity with popular literature, then, the romance of the Orient was very much alive for Wright when he embarked on his journey to a land long and eloquently shaped in the moonlight of his imagination. Inviting him to this scene of creative inspirations surely set the stage for a culminating urban project that would engage all of Wright's creative ideas and influences. He arrived in Baghdad with an already formed concept of what the city was in the past and what could be in the future. He clearly

intended his visionary designs to reintroduce Iraqis to Baghdad's creative legacy, their own culture seen through *his* eyes. Yet Wright's understanding of the Middle East was not wholly enmeshed in Orientalism. Nor was he merely a consumer of popular tales. Baghdad also embodied for him an ancient tradition that the West had ignored to its own impoverishment. He had a long and well-established interest in the cultures of the East and was attentive to Middle Eastern aesthetic and building traditions as a student of Persian building and decorative arts.³² Even though he committed the contemporaneous *faux pas* of collapsing Iraq and Baghdad wholly into the pre-Islamic Persian tradition, Wright's perception of the regional culture as Persian honored a remarkable civilization he contrasted less with the Arab than with the Western heritage traced to Greek civilization, which he thought overvalued.³³ Uninterested in elaborating Arab and Persian cultural differences, he instead recalled the Sumerian precursors of Arab and Persian arts.

All of this was allied to his critique of modernity and International Style modernism. He committed to an architecture suited to and rising from native conditions and inclusive of local pasts. Rooted in its contextual condition, what Wright saw as organic architecture was about not only cultural context but also «spiritual» content. By this he meant the interior life of a space, the intangible qualities of space. This appreciation of space was integrated with a respect for nature, a combination he called «the center line of truth» of which he found Far and Middle Eastern builders to be much more aware. This spiritual quality confronted its antithesis, materialism. The very basis of Wright's definition of the organic was the filtration of Eastern spirit into the West. Throughout his career he critiqued the classical Western tradition of Greco-Roman lineage. He was equally unsympathetic to what he found to be a reactionary International style. Not only did Western modernity lack the spatial spirit he saw in the East but it also succumbed to and exported a materialist obsession with money and what it could buy. The West had already infected the East, Wright lamented, chiefly by way of «greedy commercialism, by an

organized materialism» and through depredations from numbing standardization to modern war.³⁴

Arguably, Wright misapprehended some of the reality of Baghdad insofar as he viewed it through the screen of the fabulous. But he also allowed the sense of the fantastic city, the city of possibilities rendered in *A Thousand and One Nights* to infuse his imagination and inspire him throughout his long career to investigate and envision uncommon ways to answer modern problems posed to urban design and building. Wright brought a specific framework to his Baghdad designs that eludes those who assume them to be «gratuitous» expressions of an entirely fanciful or Orientalist reinterpretation of the ancient East. Looking at the development of the ziggurat and his paradigmatic earlier projects enables us to see Wright's Baghdad not as indulgence or infantilization, but as a late point on a continuum in the architect's quest for redefining the meaning of buildings and reshaping the cityscape to embody a joyous spirit and a sustainable style of life.

His isle of Edena was a culminating and anticipatory disclosure of the city as a cultural destination, an urban node, a place of pleasure. *A Thousand and One Nights* was likely a vital source of Wright's pivotal concept of urban entertainment—the intentional integration of fantasy into architecture. In Wright's view, the delightful city did not belong to an imaginary past or future. When he called Crystal Heights «this new «Arabian Nights Entertainment» he expressed his deep appreciation for how the Baghdad of *A Thousand and One Nights* revealed the potential for joy, amazement and delight in urban space, the city as quasi-magical character that could traverse time.

Today, the element of fantasy in urban projects is implicit and often expected. The bold, fanciful elements of Wright's earlier designs, however, once seemed to have affinities only to the ephemeral architecture of World's Fairs. In the 1940s and '50s, when functionalism reigned, to incorporate the fantastic in permanent public buildings and civic monuments was well beyond the realm of accepted practice. From the unbuilt 1895 Wolf Lake Amusement Park near Chicago, through Midway Gardens (1911, unbuilt) and a Lake Tahoe Summer

Colony (1922, unbuilt) with floating barges inspired by natural landscape, all the way through the plans for the Gordon Strong Planetarium, Maryland (1925), the Pittsburgh Point Park Civic Center (1947), and the Monona Terrace Civic Center in Madison, Wisconsin (1938, 1955), the Civic Center for Phoenix (1956-7, unbuilt) Wright attempted to define a new type of drive in, accessible urban pleasure destination. Until Baghdad, the apex was Crystal Heights, where he matter-of-factly fashioned an enchanted urban fairyland of glass spires as an organic American expression.

To turn from these experiments to 1957 Baghdad is to see a city and a Middle Eastern narrative tradition richly appropriated into, and vitally informing, an architect's guiding vision. Clearly, Wright saw his Edena Island culture center as a tourist mecca in the city, for the region and the world. It is interesting that a purportedly fanciful Wright was practical in recognizing the allure of commercial possibilities and was acutely aware of opportunities for tourism and profit. His plan consciously links mercantile activity, citizenship and tourism:

[T]he scheme creates the merchant interests fresh opportunity with dignity. A new success ideal to the merchant and his client the citizen. A new convenience and lively interest for tourists.³⁵

Such tourists, he thought, would be likely to embrace exotic landscapes, especially those incited by their own real (or fictional) pasts. Wright intended to stage the rich, storied heritage of Baghdad and Mesopotamia upon the admirable building traditions of the Middle East. This idea he integrated into the commercial framework he envisioned through a bazaar laid out in an L shape around a landscaped court for pedestrian use:

[B]y the inclusion of the Grand Bazaar on the Island the general scheme for the Cultural Center of greater Baghdad aims her, as elsewhere, to recognize and preserve, in modern terms, not only the spirit and glory of the ancient Eastern civilization that characterized the ancient IRAQ of Haroun al

Rashid but to make not unbecoming the many merchant-bazaars selling all kinds of manufacturing to the tourists and the people in general.

Islam in principle honors the merchant and in cities throughout the Islamic world the bazaar, the principal commercial zone, is in close proximity to the mosque. Wright was thus quite on target proposing a centrally located grand bazaar on the island. Here, we might see him merging a feeling for Middle Eastern traditions with a pragmatic American business model in a way that foreshadows what is now materializing in the deserts of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Today Baghdad as fanciful tourist city seems less fantastic, more simply ahead of its time.

Frank Lloyd Wright's profound respect for the Middle East—imagined in literature, encoded in built forms such as the ziggurat—was genuinely formative of his approach to urban questions in general and to his designs for Baghdad in particular. His expansive imagination of urban life after 1940 occurred at a time when the city was imaged as almost machinelike in its functionality. It is remarkable that he was actually able to see—perhaps because of his *Arabian Nights* reading—that one of the city's functions is precisely to be the stage of excitement, human action, story-making, a place of amazement. The capacity for childlike joy, his «own amazement»³⁶ at the possibilities of building were still alive in Wright at age 90, when he was invited to Baghdad.

This element of play and fantasy, however, Wright's anticipation of a postmodern urban sensibility, does not overshadow his finely tuned attention to practical, sustainable building. Wright's Post and Telegraph building was the one project he designed for a site specified by the Development Board, which already had in hand a design for the building. It is also the one Baghdad plan Wright took to a level of completion close to construction documentation. Interestingly, *Time* contrasted the Post and Telegraph with Edena as «his more mundane second commission».³⁷ In fact, very little about the Post and Telegraph was mundane. His 1957 minimalist design, a standard rectangular



Fig. 6
Perspective of the Postal Telegraph Building in Baghdad.
[5734.007]

Wright received the commission to build Baghdad's Post and Telegraph building during his 1957 visit to Baghdad. The simplicity of the orthogonal building underplays the ecological and technological innovations he proposed.

building, camouflages a revolutionary conception of a completely controlled bioclimatic building that is ecologically responsive long before such intentions became pervasive. The compact structure, consonant with the urban center of a densely populated capital in the hot and dry climate of the Middle East, stands as one of the earliest examples of a major genre of the end of the 20th century: green building. Rarely has it been considered in discussions of green building and sustainable design or evaluated in relation to Wright's *oeuvre* and organic architecture. (Fig. 6)

The Post and Telegraph building is an eloquent example of what Wright meant by the practice of organic architecture. He signals his fundamental sensitivity to conditions in a summarizing note calling his environmentally responsive structure «quiet in style, organic in character. Worthy to be called 'modern' architecture.»³⁸ In the development drawings and detailed specifications, Wright leaves no doubt that he intended a climatically and culturally suitable building. Certainly, it was his own interpretation of the culture gleaned from observations he made in two important cities, Baghdad and Cairo, and also from his reading and prior knowledge. As with other aspects of his work

in Baghdad, his clients were not the source of contextual, cultural or even environmental information. The very simplicity of the design belies the complex nature of the issues Wright handled, resolving a practical solution not only in terms of the technical and functional requirements of addressing telephone and telegraph administration for the city but also in terms of its urban and environmental suitability.

Wright elucidates his overall conception by specifying the hollow steel tube filled with concrete as «[t]he basis of all the construction features», commenting that «[t]he basic aim in this design has been to produce a building by extremely economic (if unusual) method greatly simplifying construction, one more suitable to IRAQ climate than any yet built.³⁹ The rectangular plan occupies the entire site, including forming a covered arcade along the street. The three-level structure has two mezzanines of offices above ground, a street-level garden courtyard, and one basement level for mechanical equipment, postal access and delivery. The scale is in keeping with existing structures and the pedestrian nature of Rashid Street, all in all, a modest and functional rectangular structure.

This subtle urban building, however, follows a detailed green concept. The roof is insulated with a deep layer of earth planted with greenery above which a trellis provides shelter. The building's glass façade, too, is green, designed so that the glass would not be exposed to direct sun. Each elevation features an overhead arbor structured to carry suitable greenery. Extending the play of shelter and shade, another trellis forms a green mesh frame over the sidewalk all around the building. Inside, a sunken courtyard, visible from the street, embraces pools, fountains, and more greenery, as vital to heat mitigation as the roof and exterior designs. Although he provided for air conditioning, Wright's strategy was to reduce the need through passive or organic means. The insulated green roof, with the courtyard and fountain enables evaporative cooling or an «organic air conditioning system» that Wright consciously designed after seeing local wind towers.⁴⁰ The overall shape and internal court and roof garden of the Post and Telegraph building has much in

common with courtyard houses of the Middle East, which Wright had experienced in Baghdad and Cairo. Perhaps the only thing «improbable» about the Post and Telegraph building is that it reveals Frank Lloyd Wright still pioneering significant ideas at age 90.

It is clear that, long before he was invited to Baghdad, Wright took ziggurats and spirals, greenery and gardens, fantasy and delight seriously as functional aspects of a grounded twentieth-century art of building, elements neither gratuitous nor without «the slightest necessity». His long engagement with Baghdad reminds us that the Baghdad of *A Thousand and One Nights* was a real city inspiring stories and elaborate fantasies that remain part of widely shared, if differently and endlessly interpreted, narratives known around the world. Alone among the famed architects invited to Baghdad, Wright seemed capable of recognizing that a fabled, many-faceted city still existed in the collective imaginations and memories of both East and West. Tales revealing the multilayered delights, fantastic beings and memorable places that made up the character of Baghdad early in his practice influenced his mature perspectives on urban space and the more exciting, entertaining potentialities reflected in his later work in urban design.

Perhaps in May 1957, the project's trajectory looked promising. But upon his return from Baghdad, Wright presciently tempered his flamboyant optimism, telling his Taliesin apprentices:

Well, anyhow, I do not know that there is very much hope for the Baghdad project... ..I am in great haste to pull it all together and let them have it, before it's too late... I sort of came in on the tail end of things, so what impression I can make now I do not knowbut I am going to try.⁴¹

In today's global village, his plans and pronouncements seem far from radical but in the late 1950s, such culturally sophisticated ideas were practically revolutionary. Contextualism was the last thing on the minds of his Iraqi clients. His deafness to the appropriated values of the elite who guided

the emerging nation-state conspired with Iraqi political events to virtually guarantee that none of Wright's Baghdad designs would be built.

The unfortunate fate of Wright's project obscures its key virtue: complicating the decontextualizing universality of modernism with respect for and attention to the historical and cultural import of building. Modernist internationalism had largely rejected history. Wright definitely swam against that tide with his historicizing images and integral reliance on Middle Eastern forms and ideas. Characterizing his Baghdad project as a flight of fantasy into the architect's boyhood realm of *The Thousand and One Nights* trivializes the duration of his interest in Eastern traditions and the seriousness of the cross-cultural influences and possibilities implicit in his Baghdad *oeuvre*. Of all the invited architects, only Wright's Baghdad involvement was accented by his desire to build in a region that encompassed a historically deep, yet living and vital building tradition. He combined historic tenets, historical imaginings and modern principles to produce an unusual and complex plan that was simultaneously metaphoric and didactic, futuristic and practical, religious and profane and far more productive of possibilities than the eclectic colonial approach or the *tabula rasa* International Style in which a purported functionalist response to climate resulted in a routine proliferation ad nauseam of the *brise soleil* throughout the Middle East.

Preceding the postmodern movement by more than a decade, Wright's designs could appear as nothing else but «fantasy». What he prepared for

Baghdad, however, was a rare interleaving of regard for the past and the future. It was neither fantastic nor dated, and it was anything but arbitrary in its use of regional idioms, most especially the ziggurat and green solutions. Wright's inventiveness opened the possibility of mutuality, of relating East and West in acknowledged, reciprocated influence and shared memory. As he put it, "The general scheme for the Cultural Center of greater Baghdad preserves in modern terms the spirit and glory of the Eastern civilization that characterized the Iraq of Harun al Rashid."⁴²

That Frank Lloyd's work for Baghdad has been dismissed by critics and admirers alike as mere fantasy is as unfortunate as it would have been had Fallingwater remained what it first seemed: an imaginative fiction, lovely but unbuildable. The Baghdad *oeuvre*, an exercise in Wright's organic architecture and forward-looking, sustainable design, if built, might have stood as Wright's definitive urban creation, what the fantastic Falling Water became to house design.

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Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.
I am very grateful to Margo Stipe
and Oscar Munez for their help.

Notes

- 1 Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture, vol. 2* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986: p. 328). Among scholars and students of Wright, this seems to have been the accepted assessment until very recently.
- 2 Neil Levine's *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) dedicates pages 383-404 to the Baghdad project, providing valuable information and new research by students in his 1992 Baghdad Seminar at Harvard, but his final analysis reduces the project to 'fantasmatic'; see p. 401.
- 3 In a letter from the Iraqi Development Board dated 15 January 1957 and signed by Dhia Jafar, Minister of Development, Frank Lloyd Wright received the commission for the "preparation of designs and the supervision of constructing the Opera for the city of Baghdad." FLLW Archives. I am grateful to the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, especially Margo Stipe and Oscar Munez, for the many years of research I have been able to conduct there. This paper continues a long-term research project that began with the publication of "Wright's Baghdad" in Anthony Alofsin's *Frank Lloyd Wright, Europe and Beyond*. I have continued work with support from NEH and TAARIL.
- 4 Frank Lloyd Wright letter to Ray-Bettina, May 7, 1957. Wright, last invited to build in Baghdad, was the first Western architects appear in person. He arrived in Baghdad within four months of the invitation, having clearly obtained some detailed information, especially about the country's new oil revenue.
- 5 Wright dedicated his drawings for Baghdad "to ancient Sumeria, Isin, Larsa and Babylon". He presented a "proposed nine-year plan for the cultural center of Greater Baghdad." Frank Lloyd Wright, Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives (hereafter referred to as FLLW) 2401.379M, p.1. At this stage of life, the project was also to have greater meaning for Wright himself: bringing together many of his own ideas for the design of cities that he had explored for so long without a direct commission.
- 6 Turner, Victor W. *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967.
- 7 Edena was derived from the biblical Garden of Eden; the island uninhabited due to flooding, had been called Pig Island. In Wright's plan, the proposed ziggurat effectively shored up the island against flooding.
- 8 Wright, "America and Ancient 'Sumer'" in *His Living Voice*, Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, California State University Press, Fresno CA, 1987, transcript of Frank Lloyd Wright talk, December 28, 1958.
- 9 Vincent Scully, Frank Lloyd Wright, *Masters of World Architecture* series, George Braziller, NY, 1960, pp. 30, 31. Scully played on Wright's own words: "Space. The continual becoming: invisible fountain from which all rhythms flow and to which they must pass. Beyond time and Infinity." Wright, "The language of Organic Architecture," *Architectural Forum*, May 1953: 106; quoted by Scully, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1, 30.
- 10 Letter to R. Thurman, August 1940.
- 11 Crystal Heights was one of the few large urban commissions Wright received in his life. It was larger than the Rockefeller Center in New York, then under construction
- 12 Frank Lloyd Wright, Foreword to drawings submitted to Baghdad, June-July 1957, FLLW 2401.379M, p. 1.
- 13 Wright, FLLW, preface, 2401.378 EE p. 5.
- 14 Wright, FLLW 2401.379M, p. 2. Both in his comments on specifications to the Baghdad drawings and in his lecture to Iraqi professionals, Wright was critical of the devotion to Westernization he witnessed during his time in Baghdad and Cairo.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 2
- 16 FLLW 2401.379M, p. 2.
- 17 FLLW 2401.378.EE, p. 5.
- 18 FLLW 2401.379M, p. 2.
- 19 Wright, specifications for the University of Baghdad, p. 1 (Typed manuscript of Wright's handwritten notes; Wright's corrections on multiple typed versions of these are at the FLLW archives.)
- 20 FLLW 2401.378.EE, p. 6.
- 21 FLLW 2401.378.EE, p. 5.
- 22 FLLW 2401.378.EE, pp. 7-8.
- 23 FLLW 2401.378.EE, p.11. Wright here emphasized, as on other occasions, that he brought to the project his experience with the Chicago Auditorium by Adler and Sullivan which used similar acoustics and which, he claimed, "is recognized as the most successful room for opera and large audience in existence."
- 24 FLLW 2401.378.EE, pp. 7-8.
- 25 Wright saw the camel as an animal of dignity, a symbol of the ancient culture he so admired. To his Iraqi audience, the camel was a symbol of backwardness. Hisham Munir, then a young Iraqi architect, recalled how he cringed when he saw Wright's camels. Interview with author, August 2007.
- 26 Wright address to the Society of Baghdad Engineers and Architects, 21 May 1957 (hereafter referenced

- as Baghdad address), 22 page typescript of recorded lecture, FLLW 2401.377.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 28 These stories may have led Wright to erroneously credit Haroun al Rashid with the founding of Baghdad, rather than al Mansur. Such misapprehensions occurred throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when first-hand knowledge was limited.
- 29 Wright lived in the Chicago area when it was the principal city for the display of artifacts excavated in Iran. For an excellent detailed analysis of the period, see Magnus Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2005.
- 30 "Modern Scenes in the Cradle of Civilization, with 16 full-color plates from photographs by Eric Keast Burke, (author not mentioned)" *National Geographic*, April 1922, Vol. XLI, No. 4, pp. 390-407.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 407 The journal was very popular and the views expressed are quite similar to those held by Wright and in all likelihood many others of his generation.
- 32 Wright collected Persian tiles and had great insight into and admiration for Persian architecture. For a discussion, see Mina Marefat, «Wright's Baghdad» in Anthony Alofsin's *Frank Lloyd Wright Europe and Beyond* (University of California Press, 1999) pp. 184-213 and 237-263.
- 33 "To me this opportunity to assist Persia is like a story to a boy fascinated by the Arabian Nights Entertainment as I was." Wright's letter of acceptance to the Minister of Development dated 24 January 1957, Frank Lloyd Wright Archives. Baghdad was, for some 600 years, part of the Persian empire. Wright was not totally incorrect but his error would not be easily overlooked by contemporary Iraqis proud of their new state.
- 34 Wright, Baghdad address, pp. 10, 11.
- 35 FLLW 2401.378.EE, p. 8.
- 36 FLLW letter to Roy Thurman, August 1940. Crystal Heights project file, Frank Lloyd Wright Archives.
- 37 "New Lights for Aladdin," *Time*, May 19, 1958, p. 80.
- 38 Wright, Specifications for the Post and Telegraph Building, FLLW 2401.378. KK 8.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 Transcript from video interview with William Wesley Peters by Indira Berndtson, Greg Williams, February 14, 1991, Taliesin West, p. 3.
- 41 Transcript of pp. 6-7.

