

period, after repeating the things we have seeing, he adds the need for Historical studies in the architecture faculties. "One of the problems we are faced with today is how to teach history courses to the architect, many schools practically abolished these courses from their curriculums when Beaux Arts methods of teaching were replaced by our modern programs, as a result there is a generation of young architects that lack the essential knowledge of our architecture heritage, and I have heard many young architects tell how bad they feel about this. See: "The philosophy of architectural education" Handwritten lecture. Sert Collection D 106. 1957

- 35 The chronology of Baghdad Embassy is in the Sert Collection, Folder B 19 A, until Folder B 19 U. The first sketches date from 1955 and the last consulted plans are dated in March 1961.
- 36 Sert Collection. Dactylographied. Dated on 25.I.1961. It looks like a memoir for a possible publication.
- 37 Sert Collection. Dactylographied without date.
- 38 ISENSTADT, S. "Embajada de los EE.UU." In Josep M. Rovira (ed). "Sert medio siglo de arquitectura, 1928-1979". Actar. Barcelona, 2005. p. 207-217.
- 39 ROBIN, R. Cit. p. .162.
- 40 *National Security Council Directive*, 10th July 1950. Quoted by STONOR. Cit. p. 17.

BAGHDAD, FROM INTERNATIONAL STYLE TO POST-MODERNITY: ARCHITECTURE ÇAND REPRESENTATION

Juan Puebla

A series of urban and architectural projects of Western origin, assigned to a few masters of the modern movement as well as other renowned professionals, helped instigate a planned development of Baghdad in the 1950's and 1980's. One of these projects would link both periods: a work from Le Corbusier whose design was begun in the first decade, in 1953, and was constructed in the second, being finished in 1981.

These projects varied from urban planning to the building of housing and institutional, cultural, religious, commercial, sporting, and recreational facilities. Due to political changes and the recent wars that devastated Iraq, only a few have been built.

The proposals can be ordered and grouped according to two simultaneous criteria with regards to the assignment of the projects: the chronology, paying attention to the date of the design and the time period for its completion, and the typology, according to what type of urban approach- either those plans from which housing projects or public spaces were derived, versus those that became buildings, strictly speaking. From all of these, only a few were ever built, and those that were, at different times.

In the first place we have the projects commissioned by King Faisal II, some to the great masters of the modern movement, who could be classified as belonging to the so-called international method or style, though in slightly different ways.

The urban projects of this period consist of: The National Housing Plan and the residential zone of West Baghdad (1955-1959), entrusted to Constantinos Doxiadis; the University City and its Mosque (1957-1971) to Walter Gropius and TAC (The Architects' Collaborative); and the Plan for Greater Baghdad (1957-1958) of Frank Lloyd Wright, in which the architect included an opera house, a museum, an art gallery, a casino, commercial structures, a botanic garden, parks and a university city (although the latter had already been assigned to Gropius, as previously mentioned, and in the same location). Of all these, only the first two were partially constructed. Wright's project was never built, although since then the idea of building it now was suggested.

As for the public spaces, the American Embassy hired José Luis Sert in 1955; the Museum of Fine Arts and the post and telegraph office were given to Alvar Aalto (Wright also would present another proposal for this last project), all in 1957 and not built; the Ministry of Planning was given to Gio Ponti in 1958, and the gymnasium and sports complex (1953-1981) to Le Corbusier.

Secondly, beginning in 1982, and under Saddam Hussein's rule, are the proposals that form a part of the post-modernity, and are marked by a clear characteristic of historical reinterpretation due to the requirements of the commissions, in some cases, and by the actual architectural philosophy of some of the designers in addressing this issue: Ricardo Bofill and the *Taller de Arquitectura*, and the team of Robert Venturi, John Rauch and Denise Scott-Brown.

These last studios provided the proposal for the competition for the grand National Mosque and another for a residential district for each: one for Bab Al Sheik (1982-1987), from Bofill, and the building for Khulafa Street (1982), from Venturi, Rauch and Scott-Brown. Only the last one persevered and was constructed.

This traveling exhibition was conceived with the goal of spreading word of these Western architectural projects in Baghdad, which are little known and rarely studied in their whole. The exposition includes models built from the proposals and projects previously mentioned (Sert, whose project already had a model, and the postal building of Aalto and Wright, of which we have no documentation), as well as from drawings, maps, texts etc. and complementary activities such as conferences, interviews and plans.

For the construction of the models, we analyzed and interpreted the architecture based on our study of the entire project, and the previous two-dimensional digital graphic representations, as well as the three-dimensional model, useful in many cases for deducing the morphological and geometrical aspects. The constructive process covered everything from the scale drawing of the project, with a descriptive level focused on the previously represented model, to the different levels of decorative engraving, as well as the development of all the different components, using the chromatic line codes of Autocad to cut or inscribe, generally using a laser. Additionally, the different materials were selected with the criterion of maintaining a certain unity between the different subjects. The drawing of the support materials and the corresponding shadowing to give the effect of depth at times imply the size, due to the need to use different scales which may require very reduced sizes in order to be adapted to a unified format for the exhibition.

We have used an adequate amount of abstraction with regards to the scale and the information we had, which was diverse, but partial and incomplete. When dealing with unfinished projects many times the plans and the initial mock ups found in architecture publications tend to be scarce, and rarely sufficient to build even a model. From these publications we have taken the plans (in the case of projects that were built), since, in general, it has not been possible to get anything directly from the studios or the site itself, due to communication difficulties. The Internet has facilitated the calculations as to the location of many projects. In these cases, the photographs often show modified versions of the original projects, as in the case of the building on Khulafa Street, which was erected so long after the initial design that even Venturi himself was surprised, especially considering that he did not participate in the construction process! In other cases, buildings have aged considerably, and not for the best. Of course, the worst-case scenario is that a building is bombed, as in the case of the Minister of Planning, by Gio Ponti.

This study is the fruit of a collaboration between the Department of Architectural Composition, on the part of Pedro Azara, the Department of Graphic Architectural Expression, thanks to the students who completed their monographic project for the 2007-2008 academic year in the class *Architectural Models*, and the Model Workshop, including Ramon Tort, from the Superior School of Technical Architecture of Barcelona in the Polytechnic University of Catalonia. The results are also registered in the Research Group of the UPC: *The Expression of an Architecture Project: Analysis and Evolution*. EDPA, Coordinator: Juan Puebla).

URBAN PLANNING AND THE INTERNATIONAL STYLE PROJECTS

After the Second World War, the increased demographics, social changes and geographic mobility created the need for new housing. The Greek urban planner Constantinos Doxiadis was responsible for the most important contributions to the planning of developing areas, which was what he did in Iraq.

In 1955, Doxiadis was commissioned to develop not only plans for the immediate construction of housing, but also for long-term urban development. Thus was born the National Housing Program of Iraq (1955-1960). The architect worked in Iraq until the fall of the monarchy and the change of regime in 1959. He studied the housing problems in the important cities (Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, etc.) and in rural areas. Overall, his actions would eventually affect 1,000,000 people, spread between the cities (40%) and the agricultural regions (60%). In 1973 he was in charge of the development of Kirkuk, which he would continue until his death in 1975.

In the case of Baghdad, he was granted the contract for the application of his plan for construction of housing in the large Western part of the city. The urbanization was organized into sectors that were accessible by car and by foot, and was composed of residential zones, of different types, and of public spaces, such as markets, Mosques, schools, theaters, parks, etc. The housing was designed according to different models, adaptable for different types of families and their future evolution, with standardized criterion used in their construction, as well as simple materials, local techniques, and consideration of the environmental and cultural conditions of the location.

Based on the original project, the communal sector of Western Baghdad was constructed, based on a scale of 1/1,250, made of balsa wood and methacrylate. For this model, we made examples of the many different types of residences that are found on the various plots of land. The housing models represent three different types of plots, all on a scale of 1/100. Two are possible on the parcels of land in this sector. One is 12 x 12 meters, with an interior patio, and one that is 9 x 15 meters, with two patios, one used for access to the residence, and one behind. The building of this last type could also correspond to the detailed model of the plot that is 9 x 18 meters, with the rear patio made a bit smaller (this model also includes the main floor, so the whole is more cohesive).

Another important project is the University City, commissioned in 1957 and partially constructed from 1962 until 1971. Carried out by Gropius and TAC (The Architects' Collaborative),

the university, whose design included classrooms, equipment and housing for the students, is divided into two separate buildings of two or three floors that form groupings with interior patios, and a central plaza with bigger and taller buildings. It also contains a mosque.

From an urban point of view, the project was modeled to a scale of 1/4,500 based on DM for the sizes constructed, and methacrylate for those that were designed, but not built. The criteria were to represent a combination of reality and design, to be faithful to both aspects. The central plaza, for which we had documentation of two buildings, of which the taller was constructed, were made to a scale of 1/200 in methacrylate: white, painted afterwards to avoid reflections, and transparent, for the carpenters with laser inscribed guides.

Gropius designed the mosque to be completely below the shape of a dome, resting on three points over a sheet of water. The model of the "skin", or covering, on a scale of 1/150, was made in two parts, which later were joined with resins over a screen placed on two plaster molds (manufactured from impressions of polyurethane with the corresponding revolution profiles) the result of which is covered with putty, sanded, cut out, and finally painted white. The cylindrical glass enclosure is made of tinted methacrylate, so as not to be transparent, with the arabesques' frames marked. The exterior pavement, not built, is interpreted based on the drawings from the architect's plans, with the different pieces also engraved in balsa wood.

Also in 1957, the Iraqi Agency of Development assigned an urban project to include other buildings, such as an Opera Theater, to Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright, who was almost ninety years old when he was needed in Baghdad, accepted enthusiastically. While the other architects hired by the agency opted to follow western functionalism, Wright defended the idea that ambitious architectural projects should be adapted to historical context and the relevant elements of the location, which one could consider the precursor to what would become modern theme parks.

The architect, upon arriving in the city, discovered what would be the perfect location while flying over the zone: an island in the Tigris river, property of King Faisal II, with all the natural characteristics which would allow the location to stand out due to the project. The site was connected to both sides of the river, one of which was the end of a meander in the river.

The king eventually handed over the island, which Wright renamed "Edena", in reference to the Garden of Eden. The island was redesigned in order to have curved geometric shapes surrounding the Opera, which were central to the design. The circular building, with a planetarium below, had a type of

ziggurat which functioned as the access and, at the same time, contained a parking lot. This was connected to another circular free space: "The Garden in Memory of Adam and Eve", a sculpture park. Additionally, there was an art gallery and a museum arranged in a transverse pathway, ending in a monument-ziggurat in honor of Harun Al Rashid, where boats approaching from the river could dock. There was also an open-air amphitheater, and a market in the form of separate kiosks distributed along the aforementioned pathway, as well as perpendicularly arranged along a transversal avenue, connected with the end of the meander through a bridge.

The university campus was situated on the meander, with twelve schools in the form of semi-circular buildings, entered from another ziggurat similar to that of the Opera. There were also three buildings in the central gardens with tall telecommunication antennae. On the other side of the island, connected by another bridge (an extension of an important commercial center that connects the city with the Opera, and which is facing Mecca, a detail for which Wright received deserved criticism, for only religious buildings may be oriented in such a way), there are various parks which contain a botanical garden and a zoo.

Wright makes many references to the history of the location. One of the floors was inspired by the circular plan upon which Al Mansur founded the city in the VIII Century, forms of ziggurat allude to Mesopotamian architecture (although, on the other hand, Wright had already used this in an inverted form in the Guggenheim, for example), the monuments to historical figures, and in reference to the surroundings, the terraces which were made from natural sediments in the region left by the river. As for the symbolic aspect, Wright gambled on a personal reinterpretation of the Islamic tradition, based on myth and legend more than history, influenced by the exoticism of *One Thousand and One Nights*, stimulating and incorporating the work of local artists with the most advanced technology of the time. Of course this attitude led to some detractors, especially among the intellectuals of the country, as much for Wright's architectural point of view as for the peculiar and inadequate religious references in the design.

Finally, a military coup ended the monarchy with the assassination of the king and Prince Abdul, and in less than one year, in 1959, Wright would die. The resulting regime was not open to the project and it was abandoned.

The model for this important proposal was undertaken based on the global urbanization at a scale of 1/5,000 and with the principal building and driving force for the whole, the building of the Opera, on a scale of 1/700. The first mock up of

the entire project was made from a combination of engraving and raised surfaces due to the size, the level of existing information, and the priority assigned to the geometry of the infrastructure and the buildings as defining the whole. The material employed is balsa wood, Canson paper which was drawn upon for the forest and gardens, methacrylate painted white for the buildings, and metal plates for the water.

Based on the scant drawings of Wright that have been interpreted through two and three dimensional analysis to deduce the definitive formalization (since many of the different orthogonal and perspective plans are contradictory at times, as is to be expected from a previous level of study that was not sufficiently prepared or described), we constructed the model of the Opera. The primary difficulties consisted in finalizing the building and the complex geometry of the ziggurat; the decision and graphic analysis of the square or hexagonal base upon which sits the statue of Aladdin; and in the construction of the structural arch of the amphitheater which protrudes laterally, in the shape of a half moon as an Islamic reference, with its circular perforations to place the figures from the iconography of *One Thousand and One Nights* which the architect had planned. The basic materials are sycamore and aluminum for the water.

Other buildings which did not involve the urbanization of large areas, such as a museum, the headquarters of a ministry, a gymnasium and a sports complex, not to mention an embassy and a mail center (which are not included in the models, as previously mentioned), were also assigned by the agency.

The Museum of Fine Arts was entrusted to Alvar Aalto in 1957. There is no definitive and completely descriptive documentation of the project. What plans there are end up, at times, being contradictory, as occurs with the position of the rooftop amphitheater. This project does, however, develop the concept started by Reval in 1934, which offers visitors the possibility to choose a tour through the sectors that interest them, visualizing the entrances to the different rooms as independent circuits, although they are all connected to each other. This same idea also appears in the Shiraz Museum in Iran, in 1970, with the premises in a fan shape.

The most contrastive version of the project, especially regarding the previously mentioned amphitheater, is reflected in the 1/150 scale model which recreates the blue covering of the ceramic pieces and the pergolas of moveable plates of the covering, done in the *brise-soleil*, using the color white as an abstraction. The materials are balsa wood and painted methacrylate.

Gio Ponti was given the responsibility for the headquarters of the Ministry of Planning in 1958. The architect, in collaboration with Valtolina-Dell'Orto Studio, poses the idea of a group of building formed from two unequal blocks determined by the height of the passages, and from above, by a pergola surrounded by porticos which houses a parking lot on the upper part, as well. The larger block, destined for administrative offices (symmetrical in terms of volume, although not so in terms of the windows from the plans which form the adjoining walls), the singularized treatment of the plans, and their inclinations from above softens the concept of the box, making the building seem more svelte, as occurred in Pirelli's, which the Milanese architect had planned for his city in 1955, and whose construction was in the final stages when he undertook this job. The windows retract and filter the light and sunlight through a base of *brise-soleils* of aluminum.

The other block encompasses the noblest part of the institution: the meeting and reception rooms, together with the offices of those in charge. Here the symmetry is not conserved, due to a gesture which opens the building, generating a larger façade facing the Tigris River. *Brise-soleil* is also used, and the façade is like a large lattice which provides shadow for the terraces.

The model required an interpretation of the project. Due to its size, we adopted a mixed approach between the real volume, by means of cutting, and the suggested volume (which affects the details related to depth, window spaces, *brise-soleils*, etc.), by laser engraving. This was all done in balsa wood to a scale of 1/250.

Finally, linking with the final period is the project of Le Corbusier, which was on par with the others, and whose construction would be started and completed years later, in 1981. In 1955, the architect, who was carrying out projects such as Chandigarh, the chapel of Ronchamp and the convent of La Tourette, received the commission from the Ministry of Development to build a stadium for 50,000 people, with a soccer field, space for track and field, pools, gymnasium etc.

Le Corbusier believed in the importance of sport for the new modern man, and, at the same time, he realized that this required specific equipment. This can be seen in his proposal, in 1937 for an Olympic stadium in Paris for 100,000 people, adequate for public events, such as the projection of movies and musical auditions, and with annexes for swimming, tennis, cycling etc. In 1940, due to political changes, his project would be rejected, and, after other proposals, such as one for a stadium of 4,000 people in Firminy, also in 1955, the project for

Baghdad presented an opportunity to put into practice his theories about the relationship between the city and sport on a considerable scale, much like his project in Paris.

Remi Baudouï explains that, in 1957, Le Corbusier traveled to Baghdad and was presented with a very ambitious project: a stadium for competition with training camps, pools (one for diving and one wave pool), and a gymnasium for 3,500 people, which would be integrated with the exterior through a large door. Even though, at first glance, there were problems finding a location, he began the job and he began researching the stadiums of Tokyo, Beirut, Berlin, Vienna, Rome, Rio de Janeiro and Bogota; the gymnasiums of Stockholm, Tokyo and Dortmund; and finally, the pool of Helsinki. In Le Corbusier's studio, while the schedule was being configured, simultaneously the project was being defined, becoming more and more ambitious, and eventually would be transformed into a veritable entertainment and relaxation complex, with different nautical attractions, gardens, parks, and complementary services, such as restaurants, etc.

In 1958, when Faisal II fell and the republic was proclaimed, Le Corbusier had just received the job from the ministry. In 1963 he revised the project, and specified what the actual appearance of the building would be. Many initial ideas were abandoned, such as the wave pool, the translucent and flexible roof connected with cables to the gymnasium, as well as the large door as an entryway, due to problems of temperature control and maintenance. In 1965 the architect died, and many years later, in 1979 (primarily under control of the office of Le Corbusier's old associate, the engineer Présenté), construction was begun, promoted by Saddam Hussein. Finally, in 1981 the gymnasium and sports complex that bears his name was inaugurated.

The public enters the building through a grand ramp which accesses the middle level of the main stands (from which another exterior ramp which curves around a wall gives access to the upper level), as well as the two side stands. This is complemented by the amphitheater in front of the opposite façade, connected through the large opening of the door.

The modelistic representation focuses on the building and is completely made of balsa wood, which can be adapted to the changes in curvature upon using it streaked vertically, like the engraved textures of pavement, roofs etc. The 1/250 scale is sufficient to adjust to the format and to be able to understand the general size, the stands, and to show the interior through the grand opening of the door.

THE POSTMODERN PROPOSALS

This stage is about some of the proposals for the competition for the State Mosque of Iraq, in Baghdad (called for during Saddam Hussein's government and whose results were presented by Hussein himself during an international symposium in 1983) and for residential housing. In fact, it is about the contributions to both by Bofill and his *Taller de Arquitectura* team and the team of Venturi, Rauch and Scott-Brown.

As for the Mosque, the architect Rifat Chadirji, adviser to the president of the country, among others, suggested the possibility of opening an international competition for this project, with the objective of combining the rich architectural history of the country with recent technological developments, due to the socio-economic conditions, as well as favoring the creation of a contemporary architectural style based on modern designs, but with a marked regional component.

The basic aspects of the competition already mentioned the necessity to include stylistic characteristics of Muslim architecture (although, as Chadirji mentions, in Islam there was no style per se, rather only references that were from the classic period of Abassid), leaving the question of the placement and usage of such characteristics to the competitors themselves. In this sense, the previously mentioned architects adapted their styles as such, given the fact that they came from positions which provided a different connotation and a reinterpreted language in each case: the classic style, in the case of Bofill, and the vernacular, ornamental and commercial style in the case of Venturi. Both were inspired by Islamic architecture through a free stylistic practice, based more on the decorative aspect in the case of the American architect.

The location was a bit isolated, but with the possibility to absorb between 15,000 and 40,000 people, well connected and accessible through modern means of transportation, with the possibility to be converted into a new main center, and to join together the develop of the area.

Once the competition was called, of the 22 firms that were initially chosen, besides the two already mentioned, three Iraqi and one Jordanian firm were pre-selected. The first prize was for the Jordanian architect Rasem Badran. The Spaniard Ricardo Bofill was nominated to collaborate with the winning proposal, along with the Iraqi Maath Alousi.

Bernard Huet, participant of the symposium mentioned earlier, upon speaking about the proposals from Bofill and Venturi, explained that there were aspects that contrasted with the traditional concept of a Mosque, such as the monumental

size due to the gigantic scale used in both projects, and the spaciality obtained: based on the axial composition, symmetry, the effects of perspective and the hierarchy of volumes regarding a center in the case of the first project; and in the decorative accumulation and the sumptuousness of materials used, which produced a "total semantic saturation of the space" in the second case, considering that Arab architecture relegates the ornamental aspects to doors and structures such as minarets and domes.

One of the other problems, which, undoubtedly, was implicitly contradictory in the establishment of the competition itself and which constituted a difficulty for the Western contribution were the criteria of modernization of a typology that was rigorously established in sacred texts and in the history of Islam, which were not always adequate, and, among other topics, made reference to: the orientation towards *Ka'ba*, and the alignment of the faithful parallel to the *quibla*, to the patio that precedes the prayer hall (which should be adequately protected from the exterior along the lateral axis, and which only Bofill and Alousi would give the adequate nature), and the places of ablution (purification through the use of water) which either simply disappeared or were converted into modern washrooms.

Bofill's mosque, with a great hipostile hall and the dome over the *mihrab*, has the annexes situated to the north, and is inspired by the mosque of Samarra. The prayer hall has 300 columns and is illuminated by skylights. The water forms a long canal that extends from the exterior minaret to the interior of the patio, to the ablution fountain and towards some interior ponds, ending in a lake behind the *mihrab*. According to the architects, the geometry of the gardens reinforces the sacred character of the construction.

Through plans and photos of a model the building was recreated, reduced to pieces of simple geometry and a leveled size (through the previous graphic reinterpretation and analytical modeling which helps to elaborate the graphics for the engraving and laser cutting of the parts), on a scale of 1/900 due to the extreme size of the project. The materials are balsa wood, methacrylate for the skylights, which are painted blue (the same color as the dome made from polyurethane), aluminum plates for the water, and poster board for the palm trees and gardens.

The proposal from Venturi's team had an interior prayer space for 30,000 people, a patio for 5,000, covered by the dome placed there, and an exterior patio for 40,000 more people. It was inspired by the hipostilic mosque with rows of arches to provide cover, which modern techniques allow the

architect to be free of columns, leaving the decorated arcades suspended, and allowing the entrance of light and ventilation through the roof. The auxiliary constructions and housing are concentrated outside, at the foot of the mosque, as are the ablution areas and the kiosks for visitors to leave their shoes, parallel to the exterior walls.

The principal architectural objective was to reconcile the monumental size of the large events with a human scale. Through their project, the architects demonstrated what had been their ideology all along, "Form and ornamentation, reinterpreted in this way, can be easily recognized, not as literal reproductions, but as a new sign that represents the meaning of the old. In this way the building becomes both modern and familiar at the same time".

The form, on a scale of 1/400, is represented in balsa wood cut with a laser, and the ornamental elements, including the inscription in Islamic characters above the façade, are based on the previous graphic representation. The complicated dome is synthesized and expressed analytically by its geometric design, which also makes its generation possible. Canson paper was used for the decorative elements.

As for the housing, both studios came up with two typologically different proposals, without participating in their subsequent construction: Bofill's, the entire neighborhood of single family dwelling of Bab Al Sheikh (1982-1987), and that of Venturi, a block in height and length for multipurpose use in Khulafa Street, in 1981.

Bofill's project was situated close to the Al Gaylani mosque and integrated a series of old buildings to be conserved. The typology is that of single family dwellings, of three floors, and the buildings are connected primarily by walkways. There is also a series of parallel streets with one perpendicular, which the architect called the dorsal spine of the design, with porticos, and buildings with two more floors, and respecting the Islamic tradition by respecting the already existing structures.

In this case, the scale model of 1/450 recreates the size of the buildings, and represents the windows, doors and other spaces on the façades, as in the patios as well, through engravings and cut from balsa wood, based on the scarce documentation to which we had access (a three dimensional description and photos of a model) including what was available from the architect.

The building from Venturi's studio represents an attempt, in the heart of Baghdad, to establish Khulafa Street as an important avenue. On top of two commercial floors are four floors of offices, and three more of apartments, with meeting rooms and community daycare.

Architecturally, due to the two longitudinal façades, the building could be described based on levels: the exterior, with *brise-soleils* to filter the light and protect from direct sun, which includes the verandas of the terraces, decorated archways with Islamic motifs on the lower part and wood screens at window level on the apartments; the interior of the terraces, with functional openings, and those of the businesses, set back to form porticos and with metal covered ceiling and transverse arches which contain the ornamentation.

The conceptual layers (which were elaborated in the three dimensional modeling process) constitute the elements, which were represented though engraving or laser cutting according to their function and dimension, as occurred with the ornamental details, to assemble them afterwards in the 1/200 scale model.

SADDAM HUSSEIN SPORTS COMPLEX (1955-1965, 1979-1983)

Le Corbusier and George Marc Présenté

"The old government had made a significant gesture by calling world renowned architects to Baghdad, that is to say, Gropius for the University, Aalto for the Museum, Ponti for the Minister of Development, Corbu (sic) for the Stadium. At the same time, Washington was hiring José Luis Sert (president of the CIAM and a fanatic of the workshop at 35 Sevres Street where he has worked for five years) for the construction of the American Embassy. We were not there simply by chance." (Letter to J.P. de Montmollin, September 7, 1959)¹

By chance...What must Le Corbusier have thought, he, implacable defender of the role of mathematical proportions in architecture, when they told him that they had discovered a Babylonian tablet from the XVII century B.C., inscribed with the Pythagorean theorem² (some thousand years before the Greek formulation) precisely on the plot of land chosen to build the Olympic Stadium?

However, it seems that this belated work, built after the death of the architect, does not exist. The studies published in the West do not always mention it. It is not even in the volumes written about the architect's complete works. That being said, the architect's workshop was responsible for more than one hundred and twenty designs.

We are talking here of a posthumous work, which was not completely constructed. The modifications were done during the architect's life, who dedicated almost ten years to the elaboration and adjustments of this project, and he traveled to Baghdad twice. Even Le Corbusier himself had predicted that he would not be in charge of the construction: that it would be supervised by another team, headed by Georges Marc Présenté, who was already working in Iraq. It was not the first time that Le Corbusier designed a project for an Islamic Mediterranean country. His fascination with the Orient (His "Grand Tour" arrived in Istanbul) was well known. Besides, he had already designed a general plan for the city of Argel where he lived in the 1930's.

Upon recommendation from Abdul Rahran Jalheli, former minister and administrator of the Development Board³, Le Corbusier was given a commission for a large Olympic size sports complex, in 1955 (according to Chadirji, Le Corbusier was, along with Callicrates and Ictinos, and Michelangelo, the best architect in history⁴). The project was to include different facilities such as a soccer stadium for 50,000 spectators (other sources say 100,000), space for track and field, tennis courts, various pools for 5000 users (among these, one with waves and one with an Olympic trampoline), and a large gym for 3500 athletes, exceeding the recently constructed stadium in Beirut (Lebanon). Le Corbusier requested documentation about different stadiums, among them the project from Francesc Mitjans (and José Soteras) which were being constructed in Barcelona, referred by Joan Prats⁵.

Le Corbusier suggested including the detachable pavilion that the musician Xenakis, who collaborated with Le Corbusier, and also worked on the stadium project in Baghdad, had built for the Universal Exposition of Brussels in 1958, and in whose interior were projected images and where an electronic music composition from Varese was played. Gardens, with different species of native trees, in the middle of an artificially irrigated area, as were already produced in Mesopotamia, and a restaurant, completed the project. This way, the project, which was initially a sports facility, fulfilled different leisure needs, as much athletically as musically and visually. A curved roof, inspired by the Phillips Pavilion, was to cover the stadium. The covering was to be tense and translucent, so that the gymnasium would evoke images of a large camping tent, implanted in an Eden.

Without a doubt, the project was diminishing as the years passed. After the death of King Faisal II the location was changed many times: initially it was to be situated on the right hand bank of the river⁶, just in front of the central station. It