

“Containing” Baghdad: Constantinos Doxiadis’ Program for a Developing Nation

Lefteris Theodosis

“Containment” was the one of the key words that appeared on the political stage after the announcement of the Truman Doctrine, on 12 March 1947, referring to the development strategy of the United States aiming to stop the political alignment of the “free” nations with the Soviet Union and the embracement of communism. The Undersecretary of State, Dean Acheson, portrayed the so-called ‘domino effect’ like “apples in a barrel infected by the rotten one”, fearing that “the corruption of Greece would infect Iran and all the east” carrying “the infection to Africa through Asia Minor and Egypt and to Europe through France and Italy.” Following the “containment policy”, the United States launched financial aid programs that extended its political influence outside the confines of the Iron Curtain; the European Recovery Program, commonly known as Marshall Plan was initially granted to Greece and Turkey, and the Point Four Program was destined to the “unstable” region of Iran.

No doubt, this was a turbulent period in the Middle East, as the escalation of the Cold War and the growing influence of the Pan Arab movement of the Egyptian President Gemal Abdel Nasser swayed the national policies of the neighbouring countries. In 1955, Britain, Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, signed the Central Treaty Organization (CTO), broadly known as Baghdad Pact, in order to prevent the infiltration of the Soviet Union and retain the influence of the British in the Middle East. Iraq, as the *par excellence* Arab member of the CTO, became the main rival of Nasser’s Egypt in the Middle East and West’s rampart in the fight for the containment of Communism.¹

Against this background, in 1950, the Prime Minister of Iraq, Nuri al-Said, created the

Development Board, a governmental organization that undertook the implementation of an extensive program of modernization. The program comprised of infrastructure, housing and public facilities projects, channelling the oil revenues that flowed into the country after the agreement with the foreign petroleum companies to share the oil profits with the State. The Board’s vision initiated modernization along Western standards,² effectively challenging the developmental model of Nasser and claiming the representation of the Arab world in the Middle East. Architecture and urbanism provided the means to face the nation’s housing crisis, while attempting to forge a modern identity able to incorporate the regional elements of postcolonial Iraq.

Among the western architects that were summoned for the reconstruction of Baghdad and the fulfilment of King Faisal II’s vision, the Greek planner Constantinos Doxiadis is the best example to represent the “vicissitudes” of urbanism and architecture in the context of the Cold War era.

The Commission

In August 1955 the Development Board commissioned Doxiadis Associates (DA) to deliver the National Housing Program of Iraq. At this time, the firm was starting its ventures in the world of planning. The Iraqi commission meant to be the first large-scale project of DA outside of Greece. It became the project that solidified Doxiadis’ reputation as a housing expert and after which many of the later firm’s projects in Middle East were modelled. Yet, Doxiadis’ abilities and skills were renowned in the international planning circles as he

had led the Greek Reconstruction effort after the Second World War and participated in the missions of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) in Syria and Jordan during 1954.

However, it was Jacob Crane, an American expert in housing, which pulled the strings for Doxiadis, using the “American member” of the Board as a “cable”.³ Crane officially began his collaboration with DA in 1955, acting as a Senior Consultant in the Iraq project among others, and became a key figure in formulating the policy of DA programs in the Middle East and a nodal point in Doxiadis’ network. He introduced Doxiadis as an expert on housing and development, at a time when the Iraqis needed “foreigners on policy and program”, since they had “plenty of competent architects and engineers for design”.⁴

In this respect, the National Housing Program of Iraq was conceived as a long-term territorial plan for the shaping of the country’s physical environment according to the economic policy of the developing nation. The first phase was a five-year plan called the Basic Foundation Program: its aim was to “satisfy the most urgent needs”, “to organize the public services concerned with housing and settlements”, and “to create a suitable framework for the further development of all the complex activities constituting the national housing effort”.⁵ It comprised of three broad project categories, namely of the urban, rural and special projects, spanning from the construction of new housing units and community facilities in existing cities, to the building of new villages in former desert areas for the location of industrial workers.

As such, DA surveyed the country and prepared housing, transportation and infrastructure studies for Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk and Mosul, as well as a study for the Greater Musayyib area, at the south of Baghdad, where the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy designed rural settlements for the recently irrigated and drained land.⁶ The housing program was complemented by the establishment of vocational schools for building trades in the main cities, in order to educate skilled workers for the (re)construction of the country.⁷

The Housing crisis of Baghdad

Initially for Baghdad, Doxiadis was asked to plan a new model community for 100,000 inhabitants, on the western side of Tigris. The so-called “Western Baghdad Development Program” was destined to address the housing crisis that emerged as a consequence of the Second World War in many countries. In the early 1950s, Baghdad began to experience problems of population growth when migration flows abandoned the rural areas of the country and flocked to the big cities. At that time, an increasing number of squatter settlements (sarifas) made their appearance at the periphery and within the open spaces of the old city.⁸

The issue of housing acquired political significance and the new State was urged to manifest progress in a “readable” way, especially for the low-income classes. The Housing Program was destined to appease the rural migrants and prevent social unrest, as the Development Board and its Western allies strived to sustain a welfare state able to rival the Communist developmental model and silence the siren call of Nasser’s anti-colonial Arab nationalism. The “containment” of Baghdad’s housing crisis had to precede every architectural effort; More than a question of beautification, the modernization of Baghdad was a political issue that required imperative measures. Doxiadis was aware of the issues at stake. In a letter to Crane, written during the preliminary discussions with the Development Board, Doxiadis confirms the Iraqi commission and argues for a change of policy in the proposed Housing Program:

By reading it (*this letter*) you will understand that a major change has taken place in our discussions with the Iraq Government; it is the introduction of the SPA or the Special Program of Action. The introduction of this element is something which was not necessary as public opinion has been mobilized now in favour of housing and it would be impossible to tell to the public of Iraq that they have hired housing experts who will come back in 12 months time with some big volumes on housing but without having built anything yet.⁹

However, this wasn't the first time the Iraqi state was trying to control the growth and deal with the housing problems of Baghdad. In 1954, the Iraqi Development Board commissioned the British firm of Minoprio, Spencely, and Macfarlane to prepare the master plan of Baghdad, so as to study the old parts of the city and provide a comprehensive plan for urban expansion. The plan was completed in 1956 and proposed land uses, a slum clearance program, the creation of a rural belt, and an overall transportation system, while making explicit references on sites designated for building projects by western architects.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the managerial skills of Doxiadis and the multidisciplinary approach of Ekistics, a planning methodology that Doxiadis coined the science of human settlements,¹¹ composed an appealing formula that the Iraqi state couldn't bypass. In part, it was Doxiadis' Greek nationality that gave him a "competitive advantage" over the rival planning firms;¹² in the turmoil of Cold War the foreign assistance had to be treated with caution,¹³ especially since Iraq was under regional pressure for adopting an "Arab" stance against its western "mentors".

During the four years of his collaboration with the Development Board, Doxiadis not only managed to deliver every commission he was given, but was able to convince the Board for the necessity of "master programs" (instead of master plans) effectively expanding his own contact. In 1958 the Development Board assigned to DA the preparation of regulatory plans for those towns in which housing projects were under implementation. As it was characteristically said, "in the Middle East the letter "D" stands for Development and Doxiadis".¹⁴

The Promise of Doxiadis: the Program

Doxiadis successfully responded to the agenda of the Iraqi government, promising to provide housing for the population in need and a framework for the development of the nation in accordance to the principles of Ekistics. DA showed an unprecedented technocratic efficiency; they established a branch

office and the Housing and Settlement Research Centre in Baghdad¹⁵ in order to conduct experimental housing projects that would "give a purely national character to the overall housing activity". The research concerned various aspects of the construction process (application of new methods of construction, the introduction of new materials, the training of technicians and the improvement of traditional systems) but at the same time extended to the social and economic plane.

The Special Program of Action comprised of government-funded housing and "aided self-help housing" schemes, where the individuals were called to supplement a roofed nucleus or in cases build on plots "with necessary facilities such as water, electricity, sewerage and streets".¹⁶ The program called for the contribution of the "beneficiaries towards the satisfaction of their own needs" and appealed to the participation of the citizens to "avoid uniformity and monotony" in the shaping of their environment.¹⁷ Beyond doubt, Doxiadis' claim for a planning policy based on the "freedom of choice" of the inhabitants and the community spirit was in tune with the government's demands and western aspirations for the territorial development of Iraq and its positioning in the Middle East.

Moreover, Doxiadis' program incorporated real estate values, assuming that "private ownership is more in keeping with the tradition of the people". In this respect, the experimental housing program postulated the sale of the houses in order to ensure the "proper maintenance" of the settlements, even of the public space and, *more significantly*, produce "a revolving fund which guarantees the indefinite expansion and continuation of the housing program".¹⁸ Along the same line, the private sector was expected to continue the initiatives of the State and, as such, the program promoted competitions for building contracts that resulted to the construction of numerous houses by local and international contractors in Western Baghdad.¹⁹

In this way, urbanism and architecture became strategic means for the social and economic reform of postcolonial Iraq, a Trojan horse that introduced a free market development model as an alternative to Communism and its radical ideal of redistribution of

human and material resources. As other applications of modernization theory,²⁰ the science of Ekistics was developed and promoted as an ecumenical system freed from political scopes that came to sustain “the evolving utopian realist vision within the modern movement”. In fact, Ekistics unfolded the principles of modernism and the *canonical* planning of CIAM to a global plane, taking its modernity to an extreme level. Beyond doubt, Ekistics was a modern “remedy” destined to contain Baghdad’s urban crisis and ensure its “proper” future development.

“Containing” Baghdad: the Plan

The Master Plan of Baghdad was based on the planning principle of linear expansion, a model that later on Doxiadis would call “Dyropolis”. According to the plan, the city should develop along the central axis of the Tigris River, the most prominent natural element in the landscape that historically has been determinant for the evolution of the city. The urban elements of the future Baghdad were expected to develop bi-directionally along the axis, constituting a rectangular grid pattern. The proposed road system incorporated the existing streets and expanded by a rectilinear logic to the surrounding landscape, “engraving” the limits of the prospective residential sectors that were subdivided hierarchically to Communities of respective classes. One of the most interesting implemented proposals of DA was the opening up of a canal that connected two points of Tigris River. Realizing the importance of water for the development of Baghdad, DA’s Master Plan proposed the construction of a canal network in order to “create better climatic conditions for the more remote parts” of the city.²¹

On 14 July 1958, the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown by the Nasser-inspired Free Officers movement and the attempts for the modernization of the country were brought to an end (as the life of their inspirers, King Faisal II and Nuri as-Said). DA was one of the few firms that was permitted to stay in the country after the coup d’ état and submit its plans one year later.²² Since then, the Master Plan of Baghdad has been a subject of speculation in regards

to the creation of large peripheral housing projects, and rather controversially connected to the “phenomenon” of Madinat al-Thawra (City of the Revolution), the notorious Sadr City.²³

The district of Madinat al-Thawra was built in 1959 by Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul Karim Qassim and apparently formed part of Doxiadis Associates’ Master Plan and its future interventions in Eastern Baghdad. Nevertheless, there are great differences between the original Plan and the constructed reality, namely the built houses and the provisioned urban density.²⁴ A draft by G. Papageorgiou, one of the closest collaborators of Doxiadis, dated October 1971, sheds some light on the case.²⁵ While revisiting the projects of DA, Papageorgiou reports on the living conditions of Sector 10 in Western Baghdad and on the up-to-date progress of the Slum Clearance Program and construction works in Eastern Baghdad where DA principally designed houses for the Iraqi Officers. As in numerous cases in planning history, the firm’s Master Plan was used as a guide for development, while implemented partially or mimetically, thus provoking an a posteriori critique.

However, one could parallel the “self-contained urbanism” of Doxiadis’ residential sectors and the characterization of Sadr City as “a state within a state”.²⁶ The autonomy of Doxiadis’ human sectors, with their community facilities and public buildings accessed by a pedestrian network of cul-de-sacs, failed to promote the integration of the Shiite migrants and absorb ethnic, cultural and ideological differences of the inhabitants in favour of community cohesion, in the same way that modern planning and welfare state norms failed to produce a sustainable environment for developing nations. Beyond doubt, the study of Baghdad’s urban history emerges anew among the paradigms of modern planning to raise significant questions for the formation of the contemporary city.

Notes

- 1 Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1983): p. 140.
- 2 Nasser's politics were rather ambiguous as he called for the Arab world to follow a policy of «positive neutralism» in regard to the Cold War and thus maintain valuable relationships with the West as well as the East. However, it was Nasser's massive armament from the Soviet bloc in 1955 that might have alerted the Eisenhower administration, while changing the status of power in the region, acting as a catalyst to the Suez Canal Crisis. For a fresh study on the issue see Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (The New Cold War History Series, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
- 3 In fact, the Development Board incorporated western consultants, like the Point Four Program Administrator Clifford Wilson, who on March 23, 1957, replaced the American Member, Wesley Nelson. For a further analysis of the Development Board's role, see Mina Marefat "1950s Baghdad-Modern and International", *TAARII Newsletter*, issue No 2-2, (Fall 2007): pp. 1-7.
- 4 Letter from Crane to Doxiadis, dated 25-04-1955, Document 19255, Archive files (C.A. Doxiadis Archives). Crane have served as a consultant in several "New Deal" programs during Roosevelt's administration and worked for several international and U.S. agencies throughout the developing world in the late 1940s. For a brief curriculum see *DA* newsletter, Vol. 2, Number 9, September 1962. For his role in "aided self-housing programs" see Richard Harris, «The Silence of the Experts: 'Aided Self-Help Housing' 1939-1954,» *Habitat International*, Volume 22, Number 2 (June 1998): pp. 165-189.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 See the pamphlet "Iraq Housing Program", No 5-September 1959, Published by Doxiadis Associates, Athens, Greece (C.A. Doxiadis Archives)
- 7 Hassan Fathy was incorporated in Doxiadis Associates in 1957. For a detailed study on his collaboration with DA in Iraq see Panayiota Pyla, "Hassan Fathy Revisited: Postwar Discourses on Science, Development, and Vernacular Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* 60, no. 3 (February 2007): pp. 28-39. Interestingly enough, the allocation of the communities in the study of the Greater Musayyib area was based on hexagonal patterns following the theory of Christaller. See *Architectoniki* 13 (January-February 1959): pp. 42-46.
- 8 Doxiadis employed the vocational schools with builders from the north of Greece in order to teach the craft of stone. See Nasos Chatzopoulos, "The National Housing Program of Iraq", lecture in the symposium "Constantinos Doxiadis and His Work", January 2007 (forthcoming publication by Constantinos and Emma Doxiadis Foundation)
- 9 In the 1950s, Baghdad had some 44,000 sarifa (reed and mud houses) which accounted for about 45 per cent of the total number of houses in the city. For a description of Baghdad's urban transformations, see Hoshiar Nooraddin, "Globalization and the Search for Modern Local Architecture: Learning from Baghdad" in Yasser Elsheshawy, ed., *Planning Middle Eastern Cities - An urban Kaleidoscope in a globalizing world*, (Routledge, 2004): pp. 59-84.
- 10 Letter from Doxiadis to Crane, dated 30-07-1955, Document 19255, Archive files (C. A. Doxiadis Archives).
- 11 This was the coloured plan that Wright would use as the base map of his own schemes for Baghdad, promoting the opera house project. See Mina Marefat, "Wright's Baghdad," in Anthony Alofsin, ed., *Frank Lloyd Wright: Europe and Beyond*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): pp. 184-213.
- 12 Doxiadis developed a rational system of study, design and engineering coined Ekistics, the science of human settlements. Ekistics called for the unification of several sciences like regional, city and community planning, geography, ecology, anthropology, economics, politics and administration, under the auspice of an overall system. Ekistics used extensively statistics in order to analyze the human environment. After a systematic classification of the human settlements in the hierarchical scale of the Ekistic grid, Ekistics moved to the formulation of policies, programs and plans. See, Lefteris Theodosis "Notes on the urbanism in the Cold War Era: The work and Theory of Constantinos Doxiadis", Master Thesis, 2007 (unpublished)
- 13 See Ray Bromley, "Towards Global Human Settlements: Constantinos Doxiadis as Entrepreneur, Coalition-BUILDER and Visionary," in Joe Nasr and Mercedes Volait, eds., *Urbanism-Imported or Exported? Native Aspirations and Foreign Plans*, (London: Wiley, Chichester, 2003): p. 325.
- 14 For an insightful analysis of C.A.

- Doxiadis' work in the Middle East, see Hashim Sarkis, *Circa 1958 – Lebanon in the Pictures and Plans of Constantinos Doxiadis*, (Dar An-Nahar, 2003).
- 15 "How Doxiadis is changing the face of the Middle East", *Middle East Business Digest*, June 25 (1958): pp. 21-23, Document 15146, Articles-Papers (C. A. Doxiadis Archives).
 - 16 Apart from the Iraqi workers, Doxiadis Associates' office in Baghdad employed approximately one hundred Greek engineers, see N. Chatzopoulos' lecture "The National Housing Program of Iraq". "The new Housing and Settlement Research Center will be equipped with a library, a small museum, and an information service. The Centre will deal with housing problems and their solutions" and "will be built in the Western Baghdad Development quarter, exactly opposite the large Administrative and Economic Centre". See the pamphlet "Experimental Housing Projects", Government of Iraq-Doxiadis Associates, (Baghdad – march 1957), (C. A. Doxiadis Archives).
 - 17 "The National Housing Program of Iraq," *Architectoniki* 13 (January-February 1959): 42-46, (quotation on 45). Beyond any doubt, the input of Crane in the program was significant.
 - 18 "The freedom of each individual owner to decide on the colour and decoration of his "house" or on any addition to the building, the participation of the citizens in the laying out of squares and gardens, the decoration of cities and erection of monuments, are points that should be the objects of careful examination", see the pamphlet "Experimental Housing Projects", Government of Iraq-Doxiadis Associates, (Baghdad – march 1957), (C.A. Doxiadis Archives)
 - 19 *Architectoniki* 13 (January-February 1959): pp. 42-46.
 - 20 The competitions were part of the research program and were held since 1956 in an attempt to "determine the relation of price fluctuations and market sensitivity to contract size when the projects range from a few dozen houses to hundred of buildings", among other objectives. See the pamphlet "Experimental Housing Projects".
 - 21 Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
 - 22 See Shoshkes, "East-West: Interactions between the United States and Japan and Their Effect on Utopian Realism", *Journal of planning history*, Vol. 3 No. 3 (August 2004): pp. 215-240.
 - 23 See "The Master Plan of Baghdad", Monthly bulletin No 9 – January 1960, Published by Doxiadis Associates, Athens, Greece (C. A. Doxiadis Archives).
 - 24 N. Chatzopoulos, "The National Housing Program of Iraq".
 - 25 Madinat al-Thawra was later unofficially renamed Sadr City after the deceased Shiite leader Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr. On the issue of Sadr city and the work of Constantinos Doxiadis in relation to the Ford Foundation see Crimson, Michelle Provoost, "New Towns on the Cold war Frontier", *Archplus*, (May 2007): pp. 63-68. However, Provoost's text can be misleading: "Sadr City was designed by Doxiadis as part of his 1958 master plan for Baghdad. The largest number of houses was realized in Baghdad, on the eastbank of the Tigris... This is the area called Sadr City".
 - 26 As mentioned before, the building typology was provided by DA but the houses were constructed by various contractors after competition that naturally brought about changes. Moreover, "the whole area of the Master Plan, including the land needed for the future expansion of the city, covers approximately 500 sq. kms and is expected to serve 3,000,000 people", a far lower density of today's Baghdad. See "The Master Plan of Baghdad," Monthly bulletin No 9 – January 1960, Published by Doxiadis Associates, Athens, Greece.
 - 27 Document 28978, Archive Files (C. A. Doxiadis Archives).
 - 28 "Sector 10, of the Western Baghdad Development, is a Community Class IV comprising 1150 houses and all the facilities and requisite public buildings... It is a self-contained residential community since it includes all functions excepting work areas which are indispensable for a happy and harmonious life of its inhabitants", "The Master Plan of Baghdad", Monthly bulletin No 9 – January 1960, Published by Doxiadis Associates, Athens, Greece. For an extensive analysis of Doxiadis Associates' Master Plan, see Panayiota Pyla, "Back to the Future: Doxiadis's Plans for Baghdad", *Journal Of Planning History*, Vol. 7, No 1, (february 2008): pp. 3-19.