

in Baghdad. Some surmise that this was due to the good relations the U.S. government maintained with Harvard University, and the university's predisposition to promote a determined conception of society in the Middle East, inspired by small communities of workers and puritans, for whom the austere modern architecture, free from ornaments and aristocratic references, constitutes an adequate frame and symbol. The location consists of a thin strip of land perpendicular to the Tigris River, in the "new part", expanding in the fifties, in front of the old city. This zone, a bit isolated, was chosen by the bourgeois for the construction of houses, and by the Soviet Union, China, and the USA, for their embassies in the fifties.

The enclosure, of large dimensions, is composed of various light colored buildings, spread over a wide garden facing the river: the ambassador's house, housing for the employees, and administrative buildings, among others. While the administrative and representative functions are located close to the entrance, the housing, along with more private recreational areas, are located in front of the river, whose flooding, which used to periodically devastate the city, was definitively controlled after the 1950's, thanks to dams built up river. A canal, which even passes below one of the building, runs throughout the premises, feeding fountains and ponds.

The harshness of the climate, especially in summer, required the use of all types of lattices, pronounced eaves and separate double roofs, which allow air circulation. The presence of trees, which were preserved, influenced and helped in the placement of the buildings.

These, despite being insulated, contrary to what happens in the dense traditional urban Arab style, have interior patios with fountains, and do not face the garden. The North American Embassy was only located in this complex for a few years. At the beginning of the seventies, with the first crisis between the United States and Iraq, the complex was first under control of the Iraqi Minister of the Interior, and, afterwards, directly under control of President Saddam Hussein, who lived in a nearby palace and used Sert's complex for his own private use, and for meetings with high ranking military personnel. The same was done with a nearby property of Nourri Al Seed, Prime Minister for King Faisal II, which was converted into a recreation area with a pool.

Until recently, officials hoped to restore and rehabilitate the complex: after the fall of Saddam Hussein, and while the new North American Embassy was (and is) being built right in front, on the opposite bank (a massive, fortified complex), the U.S. Government used Saddam Hussein's palace as their headquar-

ters, and Sert's buildings are used as a reception area for those who were not authorized to enter the embassy. When the new location is finished, Sert's buildings, in relatively good condition (at least until recently), and whose interiors have not been modified, will be returned to the Iraqi government.

However, since a few months ago, the complex (which has been bombed), is closed, abandoned, surrounded by tall cement walls; the North American authorities in Baghdad are not aware that the complex was the headquarters of their own embassy, nor do they know who José Luis Sert is: it may even be too late to recover what may well have been his finest work of art.

### **PLAN FOR A GREATER BAGHDAD (1957-1959)**

**Frank Lloyd Wright**

*"Art, architecture and religion are still the soul of any true civilization. They are the elements which determine for how long a civilization will survive..." (F. L. Wright)*

*"Iraq turned out to be a fabulous country, but quite real. King Faisal has given me an island of a nice size in the Tigris for the cultural projects of the state: the opera, the art gallery, the university; and wide bridges that connect to the city on one side, and to the university on the other." (F. L. Wright)*

In January of 1957, Frank Lloyd Wright received the assignment of designing an Opera House for Baghdad. Even though his name had not been chosen by the Development Board, his indirect friendship with both the Iraqi Prime Minister, who was an acquaintance of Frances Nertin, one of Wright's assistants in his workshop in Taliesin, and with the architect Rifat Chadirji, facilitated his being welcomed to the Iraqi capital.

The choice of Wright to design a large public building could be surprising, given his typical attention to intimate, interior spaces (contrary to Le Corbusier, who sculpted enormous exterior designs). However, as Wright showed upon visiting the Mesopotamian collections of the Archeological Museum in Baghdad, shortly after arriving, his enthusiasm for Sumerian art, characterized by its introspection (and the fact that in the conference he gave in Baghdad, Wright declared that Sumerian art had influenced Greek art), and his consider-

ation of *One Thousand and One Nights* made him the right choice for the job.

While flying over the capital, Wright soon discovered an island, Pig Island, in the middle of the Tigris, on the edge of the still undeveloped part of the city. This island formed part of the royal properties, and, theoretically, could not be ceded. However, Wright managed to turn the initial plot he was given, a small part in the Civic Center, into the island and an ample surrounding zone.

Thus, Wright christened the island Edena, a Sumerian term meaning flatlands (compared with the steep mountains, and, therefore, appropriate for life, farming, and settlements), and which gave its name to Eden. Starting from this spot, he organized a much more ambitious project than originally intended. In addition to the Opera House, he added an archaeological museum, a contemporary art gallery, a bazaar, a large number of parks and gardens, a post office building and a university (despite the fact that the first had been assigned to Aalto and the second to Gropius). The university campus was made up of 12 circular buildings, evenly distributed like the numbers on a clock, in a concentric design, reminiscent of the original design of Baghdad and the complex celestial map the day the city was founded. Extremely tall communication towers in the center evoke minarets (which are a means of communication between the sanctuary and the followers). This Greater Plan for Baghdad somehow replaces the previous plan, prepared the year before, from the English firm of Minoprio, Spencely and Macfarlane.

Wright's project was dedicated to "Larsa, Isin, Sumer and Babylon", that is to say, to some of the most important cultures (Sumer, Babylon) and cities (Larsa, Isin) of Mesopotamia, about which Wright surely must have learned at the Oriental Institute in Chicago. This dedication helps us to understand Wright's wishes, which his later declarations cleared up and completed: the project was to combine the Orient and the West, the past and the present, tradition and innovation. Of course, the term "Orient" that Wright used was imprecise and reflected a dreaminess (or perhaps confusion), since Wright mixed Buddhism and Islam, Persia, Sumer and the *One Thousand and One Nights*. On more than one occasion he praised the virtues of Persian architecture, which had nothing to do with Arab architecture, which raised more than just an eyebrow. Another time he complimented the figure of the Caliph, of Persian origin, Harun Al-Rashid as the founder of Baghdad (under whose rule the city did definitely prosper), to whom he dedicated a gigantic statue in the middle of the water, when in reality Al Mansur created the city. Finally, the entire project was

designed on an axis pointing towards Mecca, when such orientation is only permissibly in sacred buildings, which irritated a society that was mostly secular.

This project, receiving little appreciation from Iraqi and Western specialists (although the current Iraqi government would like to resurrect it<sup>1</sup>), is made of circular shaped floor plans, placed circularly, like bubbles, which evoke the original design of Bagdad in the IX century A.C. The massive size is inspired by the *tells*, (artificial hills commonly found in the Middle East, which are the result of the sediments of one settlement on top of another in the same place, constructed with sun-dried mud walls) and the ...combine the staggered shape of the Mesopotamian ziggurats with the Ottoman domes and spheres inspired by Aladdin's lamp. The procession of vehicles (whose number Wright tried to lessen to avoid the traffic and the pollution which paralyzed Western cities) climbed majestic spiral lanes, like ancient Babylonian priests. The many sharp television antennas provided the vertical counterpoint evoking minarets also of the Ottoman style.

When Wrights received the job he was ninety years old. He knew that he had little time left. However, he personally designed and drew up the project in a short time.<sup>2</sup> His death, two years later, and the coup in 1958 (Wright, like the majority of the architects, never managed to get paid<sup>3</sup>) ended a project that, according to some experts, would have improved a link between two cultures that many present as opposites.

There is clearly an echo of the Baghdad Opera House resounding in the later project of the Gammage Auditorium in Tempe, Arizona, (United States), constructed in 1964, after Wright's death.

*"In the end, beauty and happiness are the goals in life. To achieve these ideals, the West has been affected by one war after another. Materialism is the cause of war, and to develop Iraq, we should turn our backs on materialism and base the future on spiritual matters."*

(F. L. Wright, conference in Baghdad on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1957, transcribed by M.J.A. Al-Tai, whom we thank for having sent the text)

#### Notes

- 1 Letter from Frank Lloyd Wright to Walter Jodok Kohler, on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1957, archived in the Wright Foundation, Taliesin. Document found and sent by Octavio Learco Borgatello
- 2 "Might Wright, in his better times, have thought that those enormous, gaudy, and curiously effeminate playthings for the project for Baghdad were an adequate tribute to the king and the culture to which Baghdad gave birth? Wouldn't they be judged,

rather, as a parody of that culture, as a type of Disneyland which actually treated his clientele with condescension instead of paying homage?" (GILL, Brendon: *Many Masks. A Life of Frank Lloyd Wright*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1987, ps. 479-480). Besides being condescending (which other authors have corroborated, such as TWOMBLY, Robert C.: *Frank Lloyd Wright. An Interpretative Biography*, Harper & Row, New York, 1973, p. 262) Wright referred to Iraq sarcastically, and even insultingly, despite his declared devotion to Mesopotamia, as expressed in the text "A Journey to Baghdad" (PFEIFFER, Bruce Brooks (ed.): *Frank Lloyd Wright. His Living Voice*, The Press at California State University, Fresno, 1987, ps. 50-52). Of course, in that article Wright also happily manipulates certain historical facts: he considers that the Assyrians preceded the Egyptians (*ibid.*, p. 50).

3. BERNDTSON, Indira, WILLIAMS, Greg: Interviews with William Wesley Peters, February 13<sup>th</sup>, 1991, video, and text transcription by Indira Berndtson, p. 10, Wright Foundation, Taliesin. Document found and sent by Octavio Learco Borgatello
4. Typed letter from Olga Lazovich, third wife of Frank Lloyd Wright, to the Prime Minister Abdul Karim El-Kassem, after the coup, in which she reminds the Prime Minister of everything her husband did for Iraq (the designs and the long trip to Baghdad) without receiving any payment. The document was found in the Wright Foundation, Taliesin, and sent by Octavio Learco Borgatello.

## UNIVERSITY CAMPUS OF BAGHDAD (1957-)

### Walter Gropius, TAC and Hisham A. Munir

Walter Gropius and his office, TAC (The Architects' Collaborative), received the commission for the new university of Baghdad, secular, which was to differ from the religious one that had already existed until that point (the Al-alBait University). "It is unusual in the career of an architect", commented Gropius, "that he is given an opportunity to design a large complex of buildings on virgin ground, where one may establish the relation between the size and all the elements of the location, maintaining complete control over the design of every detail" (TAC: *The Heritage of Walter Gropius, Process Architecture* 19 (1980), p. 26).

The location was situated on the outskirts of the city (even though now, due to urban sprawl, it stands at the heart of the capital), close to the Tigris River; a mythical place, without a doubt: two of the rivers of Eden joined at this point. The initial project was conceived of by Gropius. An initial design was approved in February 1959, and a definitive version one year later. The turbulent political situation at the end of the fifties and during the seventies set back construction: at the beginning of the seventies, only the tower and the arch (whose gap at the highest point symbolizes the endlessness of existence of

the entry way, or according to another interpretation, open-mindedness) had been put up.

It was soon noted that the project was insufficient for the rising importance of the university. Trying to follow Gropius' directions (he passed away in 1969), the TAC and Hisham A. Munir expanded many times, and took the project up again, which had been continued through the seventies and eighties. Even nowadays, the "campus" (with centers along the river), the largest of all the Middle East, which already welcomes 55,000 students spread out through 273 buildings (classrooms, administrative necessities, dorms for men and for women, sports complexes etc.) has not been completed, even though the original guidelines of the project were maintained, and the university is still standing (despite the currently violent situation as of November, 2007, which influences daily work and classes, with a tight schedule, restricted at times to avoid danger, forced evacuations of class at four in the afternoon, and an uncertain number of professors and students, due to kidnappings, killings, and the growing exile).

At the end of the fifties, the university was made up of three branches: engineering (which included architecture), the sciences, and humanities. Today, only the sciences and engineering/architecture remain (the schools of engineering, sciences and physical education, as well as various research centers), since art and humanities, medicine and agriculture have been relocated to other parts of the city, and the university dorms were either closed or reduced in number in the eighties due to revolts in the male residences, have been given over to a new university, originally called Saddam, and now al-Nahrain.

"The basic concept lies in the balance between unity and diversity, integration and differentiation which offers the students both the intellectual and emotional experience of both the West and the East", Gropius wrote about the original project<sup>1</sup>. The plan called for a triple ringed form, able to accommodate, in three successive phases, a population of 5,000, then 8,000, and finally 12,000 students, around a central area, formally conceived of as a Mosque, in which would also have an open plaza which would contrast with the low, massive size of the library (planned to house a million books and 2,750 people). This was all to be situated behind the skyscrapers, the auditorium, a large, low multi-purpose building (with a natural science museum, art gallery, theater, and student center<sup>2</sup>), and a tall building that was reminiscent of (or symbolized) a minaret. The original project called for a small mosque, "traditionally" designed, rectangular, with a patio, and covered by a