The Search for Baghdad

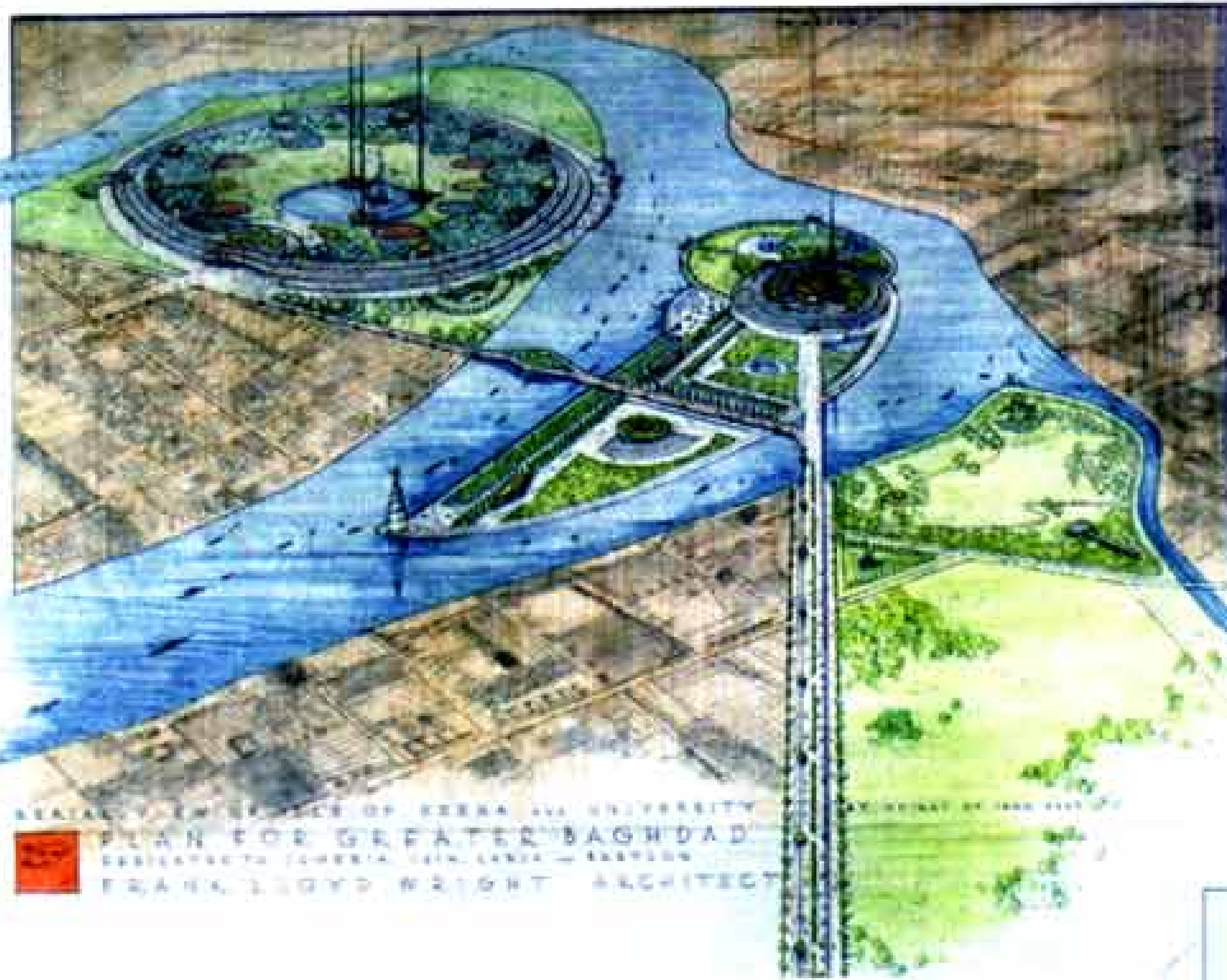
WILLIAM BRANTLEY

Baghdad serves as a blank slate for seemingly endless numbers of visions and agendas.

With so many basic postwar needs still unmet in the Iraqi capital—security, jobs, and a steady current of electricity foremost among them—it is difficult to imagine at this stage how Baghdad might become a properly functioning city, much less what it has been in the past—a city of the world, a capital of a civilization. But that act of imagination is an important and necessary step the city must take, even as the murky reconstruction process must focus on infrastructure issues such as the restoration of basic utilities.

Last December, Nicolai Ouroussoff, the then–architecture critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, published a four-part series on the city of Baghdad, called appropriately, "In Search of Baghdad." Ouroussoff toured the city, "sifting through the layers of historical memory," piecing together clues from Baghdad's past—both distant and near—to create some sort of "cultural narrative" to follow for clues about how the city might move forward. But, as Ouroussoff noted, "searching for Baghdad's past can be an exercise in frustration."

Though few historically valuable buildings were damaged during the American air strikes last year, the reconstruction process has been hard, in part because so much of what needs to be fixed is the result of what has happened to the city



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Frank Lloyd Wright's Plan for Greater Baghdad (left and below), commissioned in 1956 by the Iraq Development Board, found inspiration in the Round City, *Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*, and the ziggurats—terraced mounds—of the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians. Wright took it upon himself to design an entire cultural center, moving it from the Iraqis' original site in town to an area southwest of central Baghdad that covered both banks and an island in a sharp bend of the Tigris. The board recommended a list of who's who of modernist architects to remake Baghdad: Le Corbusier, Walter Cropius, Gio Ponti, Alvar Aalto, and Frank Lloyd Wright

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over a long period of time. Nearly a quarter century of war and more than a decade of sanctions have left Baghdad both dysfunctional and in disrepair. Political manipulation has trumped sound urban policy. And in many ways, what once made Baghdad a spectacular capital—its tradition as a gateway among cultures, its vivid social and artistic history, its embrace of both the regional and the international—now stands in its way. With no common cultural focal point upon which everyone can fix and with such an unsteady political past, "Baghdad has neither the benefit of an unbroken history," wrote Ouroussoff, "nor the freedom that comes with youth."

Power in Iraq has officially changed hands, but violence continues to strike the capital. The reconstruction process limps forward, amid uneasy questions about the speed and spirit of the work, as the new Iraqi government finds its feet and the process of restoring and reviving Baghdad goes on. The city has been called "the world's largest construction site," and though there is looming evidence that much of that construction has yet to really begin since investment shies away from conflict, Baghdad still serves as a blank slate for a seemingly endless number of visions and agendas.

Iraq is a young nation, first instated as a British mandate after the post–World War I breakup of the Ottoman Empire. The region, known historically as Mesopotamia, was the stomping ground of the ancient Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian societies. The Arabs conquered the area in the 7th century A.D., and some 100 years later, the Islamic Abbasid sect, which had overthrown the initially dominant Umayyads, set up its capital along the Tigris River.

Though archaeological records show that humans had lived there before, Baghdad was officially born on the western banks of the Tigris between 760 A.D. and 770 A.D., as the seat of the Abbasid Caliph Al Mansur, who built what is known as the Round City. Baghdad gradually spread out from the Round City, across the river to the eastern banks of the Tigris. *Tales from a Thousand and One Nights* about Aladdin, Sinbad, and Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves are the legacy left from this era in Baghdad.

No buildings from this earliest period remain in the city, having either been destroyed or lost to the swelling Tigris, but the Abbasid dynasty endured—and, at times, flourished—in some form for almost 500 years. The minaret of the Khulafa Mosque is perhaps the oldest surviving remnant; in the 1960s, it was worked into a new mosque designed by Mohammed Makiya, one of Iraq's best-known contemporary architects (see "Giving Baghdad a Sense of Place" page 144). Other remaining buildings—the Abbasid Palace and the Madrasa al-Mustansiriyya among them—date from 13th-century Baghdad.

In the middle of the 13th century, the Mongols leveled much of the city. After an initial restoration, Baghdad languished, falling to more attacks and eventually to Ottoman rule, under which it remained until the end of World War I.

In his book, *Concepts and Influences*, Iraqi architect Rifat Chadirji, who now lives in London, described the emergence of Iraq from the shadow of the Ottoman rule and the ensuing artistic prosperity between the available technology from Europe and the traditional Iraqi crafts.

Ouroussoff found evidence of this harmony on, among other places, Haifa Street, the main road in Baghdad's Al Karkh district (on the city's western bank, roughly the site of the Round City). There, "a small cluster of houses faces the British Embassy along an otherwise sterile strip of concrete office buildings and apartment

complexes. The houses' covered loggias and Doric columns bring to mind images of Colonial-era decorum.

"But the facade is only a public mask," wrote Ouroussoff. "In one, a series of rooms leads into a traditional *hosh*, the open-air courtyard that was once the center of family life in Baghdad. From here, one descends a narrow stairway to [an] underground room where Baghdadis retreated during sweltering afternoons—a tradition that is now virtually forgotten."

Though that period of symbiosis between the imported technology and the local know-how was brief, Baghdad began making up for it in the decade following World War II.

Makiya, born in Baghdad on the cusp of World War I, in the last years of Ottoman rule, grew up in Baghdad and later attended the Liverpool School of Architecture and Cambridge University. When he returned to Baghdad in 1946 to set up a private practice, Iraq was on the verge of tapping into significantly more oil than it had ever had before. More oil meant more money. The revenues from that oil went mostly into a newly created development board, which, by 1951, had begun undertaking massive infrastructure projects, like flood control.

MARK JUERGENSMEYER

CAPTAIN STEVE ALVAREZ, U.S. ARMY

During Iraq's war with Iran in the 1980s, far-reaching urban projects took a back seat to Saddam Hussein's "projects of folly" as seen here in this unfinished mosque, and below in the base of the Hands of Victory Monument, built to commemorate victory in the war with Iran. The helmets came from dead Iranian soldiers.

By the mid-1950s, the board had turned its attention to more politically valuable projects—civic and cultural institutions. A master plan was drawn late in 1954. The board held competitions for some projects, and by 1956, it had compiled a list of "architects of world fame" whom it wished to commission for the various components of its larger plan to remake Baghdad. The list was a who's who of modernist architects: Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Gio Ponti, Alvar Aalto, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

"Only two other major cities in the region—Tehran [Iran] and Ankara [Turkey]—had as important an engagement with modernism as Baghdad," says Heghnar Watenpaugh, an assistant professor of the history of architecture at MIT. "The greatest practitioners of modernism either worked or tried to work in Baghdad."

The assignments from the development board included a modern art museum (Aalto), a stadium (Le Corbusier), a new university (Gropius), and headquarters for the Ministry of Development (Ponti).

In his book, *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright*, Neil Levine, a professor in the department of art history and the department of architecture at Harvard, recounts how only Wright—who was commissioned to design Baghdad's new opera house—became involved with the conventions of local tradition. While the others took little other than climate into account—for example, Ponti's design for the Ministry of Development generally is considered to be a carbon copy of the Pirelli skyscraper he had designed for Milan—Wright struggled to find the local spirit of Baghdad and to incorporate that spirit into his work.

Wright immersed himself in Baghdad's cultural and literary history, found inspiration in the Round City, *Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*, and the ziggurats—terraced mounds—of the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians. That research, wrote Levine, was directed by a desire "to remake what [Wright] referred to as the 'historic nature' of Baghdad in contemporary terms"—a process Levine calls "archeourbanism."

Wright also took it upon himself to expand the scope of his assignment beyond that of an opera house, designing an entire cultural center, moving it from the Iraqis' original site in town to an area southwest of central Baghdad that covered both banks and an island in a sharp bend of the Tigris. He called his design the "Plan for Greater Baghdad."

To many then and now, Wright's design—which included a statue of Aladdin and a minaret-inspired tower—seems kitschy. With

Baghdad's CBD master plan adopted in the 1970s established two main longitudinal thoroughfares along the Tigris River.

50 years of hindsight, Ouroussoff wrote that the Plan for Greater Baghdad is "an embarrassing example of Western chauvinism."

Many of the modernist designs, including Wright's, were delayed or abandoned after the nationalist coup in 1958. Gropius's university and Ponti's ministry building were built, as were modified versions of some of the other designs. And though the monarchy that commissioned the projects was toppled in the coup, the city's embrace of international architecture carried it into two decades of heavy building. "More construction took place in Baghdad during the second half of the 20th century," wrote Ouroussoff, "than at any time since the Golden Age of the Abbasid dynasty came to a close nearly 750 years ago."

And the cultural wrangling over how to mix the global with the local architecture continued on in the work of Iraq's new generation of architects, Makiya and Chadirji, the two most celebrated among them.

From 1958 to 1963, Chadirji acted as the director general of housing at the Ministry of Planning. In 1959, Makiya founded Iraq's first department of architecture, as part of the College of Engineering at Baghdad University, with an eye toward continuing the dialogue between modernism and the area's vernacular.

Though Makiya and Chadirji approached the problem in significantly different ways, both architects shone in the 1960s and early 1970s, trying to develop what the jury for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (in recognizing Chadirji in 1986) called "an appropriate contemporary architectural expression that synthesizes elements of the rich Islamic cultural heritage with key principles of the international architecture of the 20th century."

*"During **Saddam's** era, heritage, national identity, modernism, and culture were misappropriated and haphazardly used in towns and cities in ill-defined, irrational, and erroneous applications, often in contradiction to the evolutionary processes of a city's **'natural'** development."*

Many ambitious plans to modernize Baghdad surfaced in the 1970s, but political unrest kept them from being realized. By the time Saddam Hussein took over Iraq in 1979, Chadirji was working as the adviser to the municipality of Baghdad, which in the mid-1970s had adopted a new master plan and was eyeing major urban redevelopment.

In 1980, Maath Alousi, an Iraqi architect who was living in Beirut at the time, was invited by Chadirji to oversee management of the Al Karkh redevelopment project. Alousi had worked for Chadirji's firm, Iraq Consult, for ten years before leaving Iraq in 1974. In 1980, his firm won the design competition for the Al Karkh project, and at Chadirji's invitation, Alousi was returning to supervise management of what was to be the first major urban planning project in the city. Recognized as one of the most significant Iraqi architects in the generation following Makiya and Chadirji, Alousi today lives in Cyprus.

"The city's master plan, adopted in the mid-1970s, incorporates a decision that was originally implemented in the mid-1950s by the development [board]," notes Alousi. "This decision established two main longitudinal thoroughfares along the Tigris River, in Al Rasafa (today's Al-Jumhuriya Street) and in Al Karkh (today's Haifa Street).

"[The Haifa Street] extension originally ran along the Royal Palace, the National Assembly, and the Ministry of Planning, in addition to two hospitals. Later, this area became known as the Presidential Palace zone and is today referred to as the Green Zone, housing the new American Embassy," he explains.

In the late 1970s, these two areas were being cleared in preparation for the new plans. This, according to Alousi, "caused irreparable damage to the urban fabric of Baghdad. A number of early 19th-century structures were lost, including mosques, schools, public baths, souks, and individual houses. Demolition continued until 1980," he notes. "Al Karkh's urban design exercise was dictated by the urgency of developing Haifa Street itself. The urban design of Al Karkh was awarded to our team." The project was illustrative of much of the urban development that happened under Hussein.

"Historically, planners and politicians have attempted to address Iraq's urban problems superficially and through centrally mandated directives without the benefit of long-term strategic planning,"

In 1980, Maath Alousi, an Iraqi architect, was invited to oversee management of the Al Karkh Development project, part of the CBD master plan and the first major urban planning project in the city (left). The project is illustrative of much of the urban development that happened under Hussein, which caused "irreparable damage to the urban fabric of Baghdad." Demolition caused the loss of a number of early 19th century structures.

explains Alousi. "During Saddam's era, heritage, national identity, modernism, and culture were misappropriated and haphazardly used in towns and cities in ill-defined, irrational, and erroneous applications, often in contradiction to the evolutionary processes of a city's 'natural' development."

Alousi was directed to plan an environment for "The New Iraqi," an idea he says that was "part of a series of repeated slogans prevalent in most political forums that was intended to control and direct Iraqis in all aspects of life."

Though Alousi's design team realized that the trickle-down approach to planning was a "remedial and short-sighted endeavor," it worked to modify here and preserve there, in an effort to steer the process towards something resembling a livable and human-scale space. The experience was personally and professionally harrowing. Working in an "overwhelming environment of fear and paranoia," Alousi's team was "closely watched, followed, and often denied access to classified information and documents [that they] required to make correct and informed decisions." In 1981, during a project-related trip to Baghdad, Alousi was detained and forbidden to leave Iraq for almost one year. Under those conditions, work suffered and, though the project was completed in 1987, political will won out over sensible urban policy.

What it did not help was the fact that Iraq was at war with Iran during most of the 1980s, or that these far-reaching urban projects took a back seat to what Alousi called Hussein's "projects of folly." Much has rightly been made of the monuments Hussein ordered built: the statues and busts of himself, the Victory Arch (built before the end of the war whose victory the arch was meant to honor), the nostalgic ornamentation intended to link the leader to Baghdad's former glories. Levine wrote in his book on Wright that the architect's Plan for Greater Baghdad predicted "in certain ways the public art of the later Ba'th regime of Saddam Hussein. As part of that regime's appeal to popular taste, sculptures of characters from

said that these projects also contradicted the sociocultural and economic environments during that period and were consequently shunned by the majority of the people who had suffered economic sanctions, poverty, and loss." [For a look into Hussein's penchant for erecting structures, see *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity and Responsibility in Iraq*, a book by Samir Al-Khalil, the pseudonym of Makiya's son, Kanan Makiya.] Still, as wrote Ouroussoff in his *Los Angeles Times* article, "Hussein's greatest urban crime . . . was his war against the public realm," his sealing off and poisoning the very heart of the city.

Any effort to restore Baghdad must resuscitate that heart. But Baghdad is not just its core. "It is tempting to be idealistic," Babar Mumtaz, a London-based development economist and planner, notes, "but I would warn against being too sentimental or romantic when it comes to dealing with megacities like Baghdad."

Mumtaz, the director of the development planning unit at the University College London, has worked on urban development and housing issues throughout the Middle East. Though some centralized planning controls will be necessary in Baghdad, "in the end, it will be the private individuals who will put their houses and their lives together piece by piece and brick by brick," explains Mumtaz.

"I would like to hope that the [larger reconstruction] response would be one that allowed for the development of housing areas and neighborhoods that are people friendly, mixed use, low- and medium-rise, connected with public transport—buses or some form of light rail—to each other and to half a dozen or more district centers," Mumtaz says. "I would also welcome the return of the Islamic urban planning principle of incremental, infill-development-by-accretion within the local areas rather than an infrastructure matrix delineating city blocks."

Iraqi architect Alousi agrees that because of Baghdad's size and sprawl, breaking the city into small planning nodes would be the best way to arrive at real solutions. "Baghdad's neighborhoods have multiple and indigenous characteristics—succinct in their identi-

Tales from a Thousand and One Nights, for instance—succinct in their identi-
ties. The city has the ability to effectively incorporate and sustain both new and old, with minimal disruption to its character and to the identity of [Baghdadis]," he points out.

"The scale by which [Baghdad] should be rebuilt is not one delineated primarily by physical dimensions and economic forces.

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Rather, it should be calibrated by a number of criteria," he believes. "Key among them is the realization that any proposed vision must germinate from people's basic needs and be interpreted, through policy, by planners and decision makers." No more mention of "The New Iraq," emphasizes Alousi. "Above all else, the reconstruction should make every effort to ensure the highest possible regard for the human dimension," he maintains.

Because of its relative proximity to Iraq and its recent experience putting the pieces back together, Beirut has often been mentioned as a possible model for Baghdad. Yet, according to Yasser Tabbaa, a visiting assistant professor of art history at Oberlin College in Ohio and the creator of the online photo archive, *Visions of Iraq: Images of a Changing Land*, "that is not an apt comparison. Baghdad will never resemble Beirut," he maintains. "Baghdad is a huge, sprawling, internal city with a multiethnic, multireligious population. Iraqis are not now and have never been especially warm to foreigners. It's partly due to the land-locked nature of their country and certainly due to their history," explains the Syrian native.

"As far as I can remember, Beirut has always had a decidedly Western orientation. Previously, this orientation was French, but more recently has become American. Beirutis will probably deny that and speak of their own cultural mélange, but, especially in the post– Civil War years, Americanization has accelerated," says Tabbaa. "So the café society has been replaced by Starbucks; the little elegant shops lining Hamra Street have turned seedy and been replaced with urban malls at Verdun Street; and so on. It's not a huge American 'plot' or anything, just a demographic shift [brought on by a destructive war] that was capitalized on by multinational companies."

MIT's Watenpaugh, a native of Lebanon, says that if Baghdad is to be compared with Beirut, the similarity between the two cities is that they share the tradition of intensely vetting architectural and planning matters. "The planners and architects of Baghdad have been grappling with modernism since the 1950s," she explains. "There's a very important local debate about how to deal with the influences of the West and how to adapt to them. The results haven't always been good, but the debate is there, and that's important."

Watenpaugh compares the spirit of that ongoing debate in Baghdad with the more acute one that has entangled Beirut. For 15 years, between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, Lebanon was devastated by civil war that left Beirut in shambles. Since 1994, one company—SOLIDERE—has been responsible for redeveloping the Beirut Central District.

"Like a lot of people, I'm very upset that the reconstruction of the downtown core in Beirut has been monopolized by a single company that has close ties to the prime minister," explains Watenpaugh. "But what I find wonderful is that a big debate about the city's future has been possible. We've had a very local, very impassioned,

(continued from above)

very vibrant debate about the reconstruction of downtown. Unfortunately, that debate has had no effect on the outcome," she adds.

In the case of Baghdad, "local" encompasses all corners of the globe. Many of Iraq's top minds have been living outside of the country for years, even decades. For example, much hoopla was made last spring over the newly designed Iraqi flag, which was done by Iraqi architect Chadirji. Having been asked by the then–governing council to rethink the former flag, Chadirji came up with a design that was met, according to dispatches from the Iraqi "street," with widespread disgust. Not only because of its design, but because it was done in the first place—and by someone living in England.

Alousi, who has maintained what he calls a "remote presence" in Iraq because of his office in Baghdad, takes issue with the idea that any one group should have more authority—moral, aesthetic, real—than another. Such a distinction, Alousi explains, is "detrimental and produces a polarizing effect on all parties involved in the reconstruction process." Instead, he insists, all energies should be focused on hashing out sound urban planning and development policies. "Baghdad has many outstanding and urgent issues that can only be successfully addressed by the collective community both inside and outside the country," he maintains.

"From recent experience," Alousi continues, "while working with a team of Iraqi experts with a wide range of disciplines, I discovered that the debate of the 'exiled' versus 'in-country' seems to apply only to those with a political agenda. Technocrats, doctors, academics, social workers, economists, and other professionals are working collectively and complementarily in very hopeful and supportive ways. If there is a competitive spirit these people share, it is a highly scientific and ethical one, contrary to what is happening today in Iraq's political arena," adds Alousi.

Having worked in many areas where this question comes up, Mumtaz observes: "I always worry when 'outsiders' control local destinies. I use quotation marks because obviously not all Baghdadis are insiders, nor all foreigners outsiders. However, for the meaningful development of the city, the local population must make the decisions about how they want to live," he stresses. "It has to be a decentralized, localized, participatory process—whoever facilitates it."

That, too, is the conclusion that *Los Angeles Times* critic Ouroussoff came to: "An imaginative discussion about reconstruction, in fact, would provide a welcome forum for working out Baghdad's identity, in terms of repairing Hussein's brutal architectural legacy and hammering out the city's collective values. . . . Baghdad can be resurrected only by tapping the depths of its own historical experience. Iraqis will have to negotiate a delicate path between neglect of the past and hostility toward the present—and forge their own identity in relation to the outside world." ■

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Addressing Baghdad's Needs

Born and raised in Baghdad, Hisham Ashkouri has lived and worked in Boston since the mid-1970s. After obtaining a bachelor of architecture degree from the University of Baghdad, Ashkouri did work on a master's in architecture at the University of Pennsylvania and, later, in urban design studies at Harvard and M.I.T. Last year, Ashkouri's design firm, ARCADD, was commissioned to redesign a theater/hotel/conference center in Baghdad. He is also pursuing private investment for a major urban development project he calls the Baghdad Renaissance Plan.

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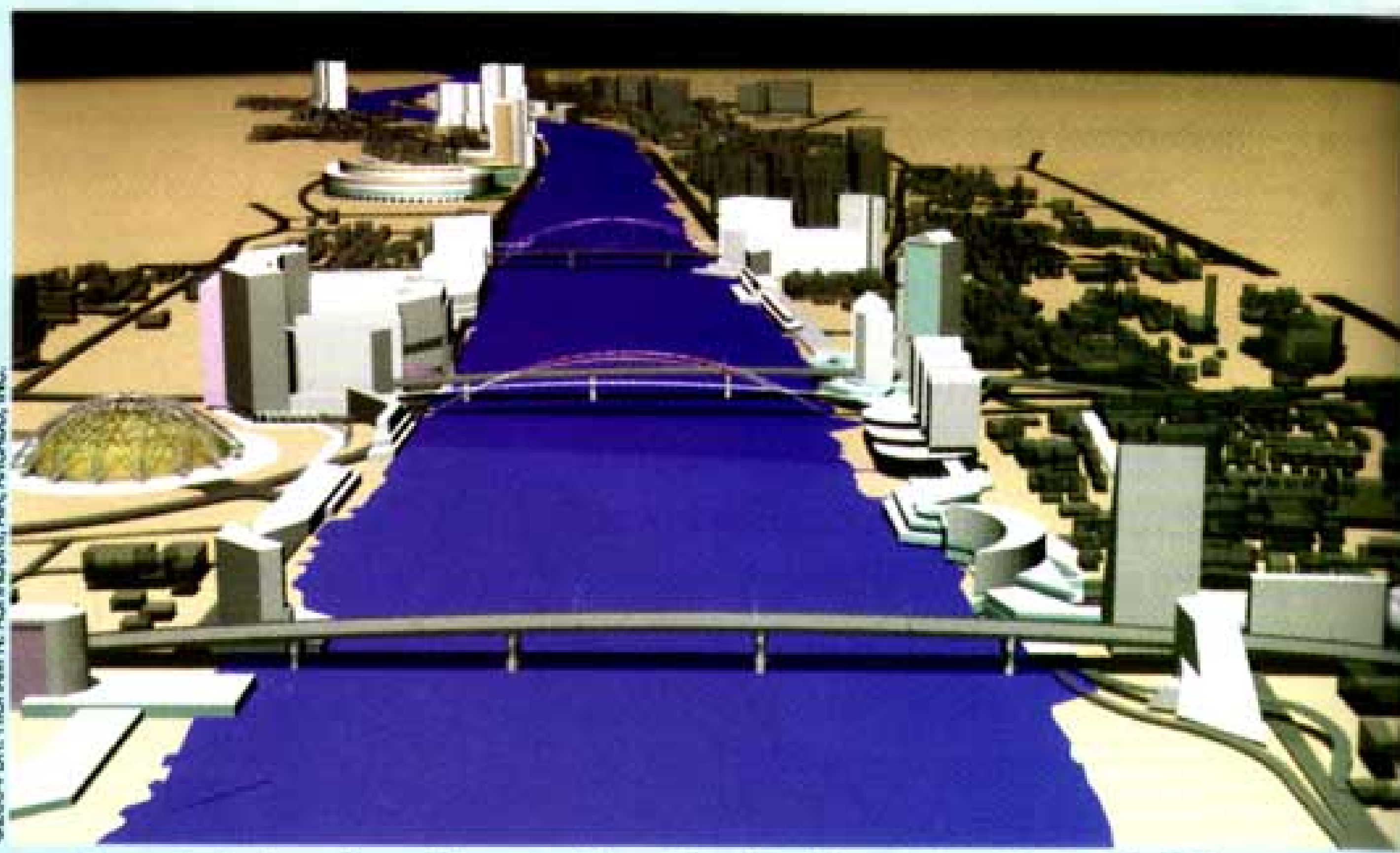

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Iraqi architect Hisham Ashkouri is pursuing private investment for a major urban development project called the Baghdad Renaissance Plan (right, looking northwest up the Tigris river) where 10 percent of the profits of big building projects would go into restoring Baghdad's architectural heritage.

Q: *What do you see as the top priorities for the reconstruction effort in Baghdad?*

A: Employment is the single most important factor. And it's also critical to have continuous power. Power is a source of work, a way to preserve food, a way to maintain the home, so that people can start to build their lives again. That, of course, has to happen on a small scale, but small things can change people's attitudes.

Over the past 30 years, Baghdad has been totally ignored. The infrastructure is badly damaged, and repairing that infrastructure piece by piece is what needs to be done. That requires money.

Q: *As a native Baghdadi, you have a sense of the city that many involved in its redevelopment may not have. Do you worry about the ideas that will come with all that money?*

A: Baghdad is in real need of new development: hotels, offices, entertainment. There is no business center; the old business area was bombed and looted. And even if it were restored, it would not satisfy future needs. The government will provide seed money, of course, but it won't last a long time. The private sector will have to be the backbone.

There's always a concern—everywhere—that whoever puts up the money will have the upper hand and will use it unwisely. But there are ways to control the development in Baghdad.

Q: *How do you do that?*

(continued from above)

A: For example, you can tie into a lease agreement certain conditions for the property. One of the things I've worked into the Baghdad Renaissance Plan is an agreement that 10 percent of the profits will go into a fund to renovate old buildings and homes in the heart of Baghdad. By taking big building projects and setting aside some of their profits for this fund, you could mandate the restoration of Baghdad's architectural heritage.

An Iraqi, unlike other people in the world, is someone who is aware that his culture goes back to the cradle of civilization. You'll find that most Iraqi people feel very proud, regardless of their minority or majority population, because they are part of the Mesopotamian people. So while the bottom line is important for any project, that attachment to the culture is a consideration. In many instances, for example in the United States, developers don't have the same sensitivity to history.

Q: *It seems like Baghdad is, in some crucial ways, beyond "restoration." How possible is restoration in such a huge, sprawling city? Where do you start?*

A: Like a lot of people, I've been advocating the need for a new master plan for the city as a whole. But I think that it also is very important to focus on each component individually. If you look at the way I have designed the Baghdad Renaissance Plan, you'll see it is made up of very small pieces. There are a total of 13 nodes in the plan. You can take each one at a time and really focus on it.

And by "restoration," I don't mean that planners in Baghdad should try to mimic or remake historic buildings. Instead, we need to come up with new ideas that come from Iraqi culture but that address current needs. A building should not be a duplication of an old form, because that old form arose from a need at that time. But you can come up with a modern form that both addresses the needs of today's culture and takes advantage of modern technology.

Q: *Can you think of an example?*

A: Well, energy use is a major concern. For the Cinema Sinbad project, we're looking into self-sustaining technology. We've talked about using fuel cells, as they can generate a lot of power. A fuel cell is nothing but a box, so you can insert it without imposing on the design of the structure. Now they have photovoltaic units that are being designed to look like windows, so you can put them in with windows. There are also windmills, which can generate a lot of power but would have to be incorporated into the design. If you use smart energy technology, you can minimize the demand on the grid. Historic preservation of Baghdad doesn't mean that you can't use modern techniques.—**W.B.**

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The Cinema Sinbad project, which is projected to be designed with self-sustaining technology.