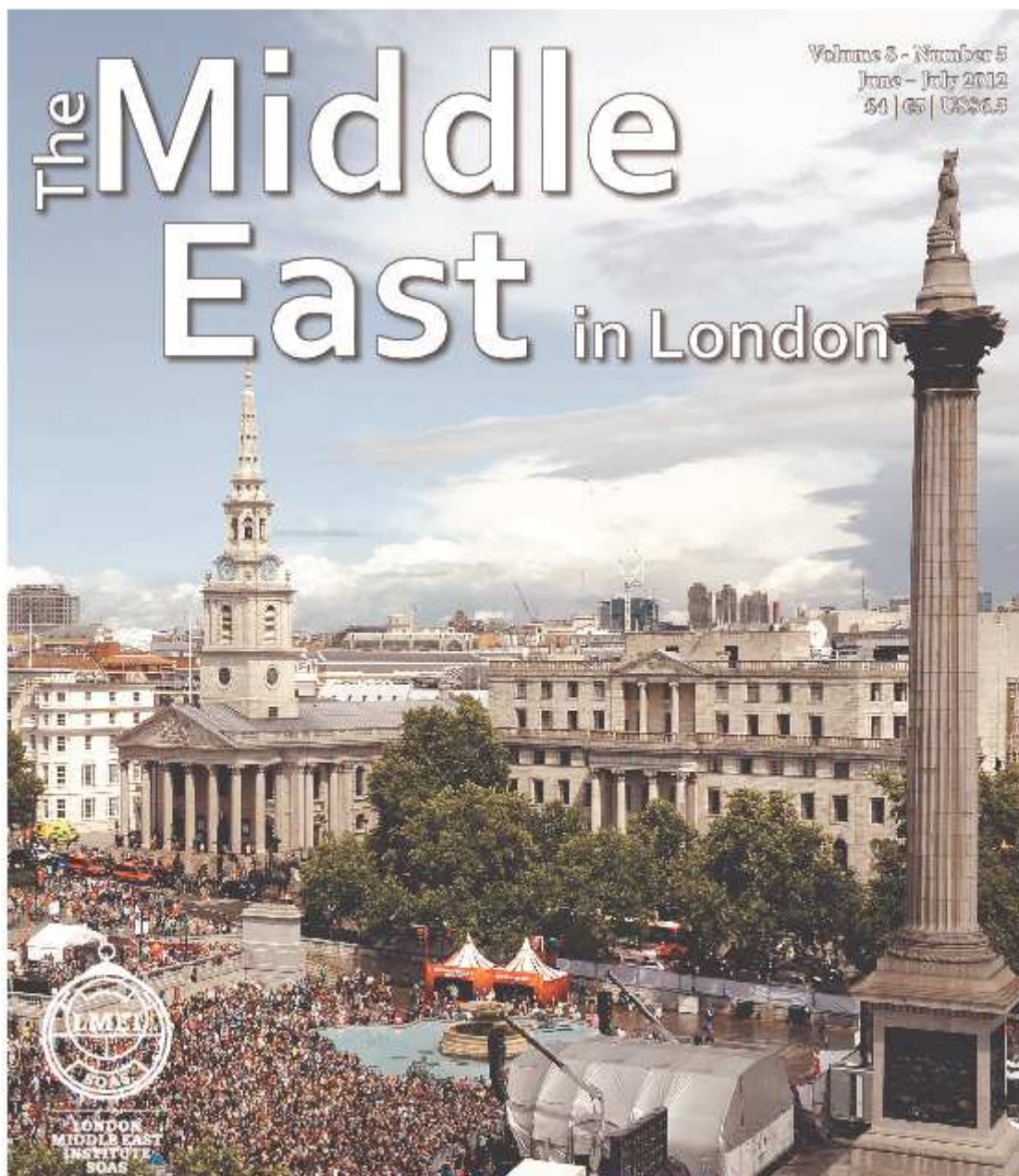


# The Middle East in London

Volumes 3 - Number 5

June - July 2012

54 | 65 | US\$26.5



LONDON  
MIDDLE EAST  
INSTITUTE  
SOAS

**THIS ISSUE: THE CULTURAL OLYMPIAD** • The world's stage • Shakespeare and the Middle East • Uniting the artist and the athlete • Music as the food of harmony: Daniel Barenboim and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra • Born of the wind: the Arabian horse and equestrianism • Le Corbusier's Gymnasium • The London Aquatics Centre • The burden of history: Algeria 50 years on • **PLUS** Reviews and events in London

*Mina Marefat and Caecilia Pieri*  
discuss the historical and architectural  
context of Le Corbusier's Olympic  
Gymnasium

# The modern landmark in Baghdad in search of its future: Le Corbusier's Gymnasium



Baghdad today is home to an impressive manifesto of modernism, a sports facility designed by Le Corbusier. The Baghdad Gymnasium is the only built part of a visionary Olympic City of Sport that was to serve as Iraq's national sports arena and recreational centre.

In 1955 Le Corbusier was Europe's most celebrated architect, having just completed two masterworks, the monastery at Ronchamp and the groundbreaking multi-family housing in Marseille, and was handpicked by Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to design the new city of Chandigarh. So it was not surprising that he was the first among the illustrious band of

architects to be chosen by the Iraqis. Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, Alvar Aalto, and Gio Ponti each were asked to contribute to the new Baghdad of Iraqi imagination with commissions that included an opera house, university, museum, and office headquarters, some of which were built, others not. For Iraq and for the architectural profession, it was a historic moment of transcultural dialogue, a time that encapsulated the triumph of modernism and the international appeal of modern architects.

In 1955 Baghdad was a city aspiring to become the centre of a new Middle East, a showcase capital of a new Iraq ruled as

a Hashemite kingdom. The renegotiated 1950 oil deal with Britain provided an opportunity for the country's infrastructure and within five years the Iraqi Development Board, infused with the energy and influence of a younger, Western-educated generation of Iraqis, was ready to re-imagine Baghdad as a modern international capital. Midhat Madhloom summarised more than his own sentiment when he told Le Corbusier in 1956 how much he was 'Looking forward with utmost pleasure to the opportunity of meeting an architect whose work we admire tremendously'. There was already a first Olympic Club built in the Adharniya neighbourhood in Baghdad, in the late 1930s, by Ahmad Mukhtar Ibrahim, the first Iraqi architect in charge of the Public Works Department. The Iraqi desire for an Olympic Stadium was not unreasonable since Beirut had

*In 1955 Baghdad was a city aspiring to become  
the centre of a new Middle East, a showcase capital  
of a new Iraq ruled as a Hashemite kingdom*

## *The Baghdad Gymnasium is a veritable catalogue of Le Corbusier signatures, the only one of its kind in the Middle East*

just completed a large stadium designed by French architect Michel Ecochard. How better to outshine a rival capital and manifest modernity than to invite Le Corbusier, an avid advocate of sports as an integrated part of the modern lifestyle? His Sports City included a stadium, gymnasium, multiple swimming pools, amphitheatre, restaurant, parking, and public gardens. The extant drawings testify that Le Corbusier personally sketched designs for Baghdad and reworked numerous iterations, signing his name to hundreds of drawings.

Despite difficulties with his Iraqi client who kept changing the site, and his own obsession with his remuneration, his machinations with both French and Swiss Embassies to ensure payment of his fees, and even more critically, despite political volatility and numerous regime changes, the project continued and Le Corbusier remained personally committed to the Baghdad project for almost a decade until the end of his life. Meanwhile, his own office also underwent a transformation during the Baghdad years as he fired longtime associates, including Iannis Xenakis, and permanently restructured his office. In response to contractual requirements, Le Corbusier began a new association with French engineer and international practitioner Georges-Marc Présenté as his partner on the Baghdad Stadium as well as several other commissions. Throughout the process and despite the shared responsibilities, Le Corbusier never abdicated his position as principal architect and chastised Présenté if he dared make even modest architectural changes. Not long before his death in 1965, despite his best efforts, mere functionaries within the Iraqi Development Board hierarchy delayed the construction of his City of Sport.

The Olympic Stadium Le Corbusier designed as a state-of-the-art sports arena, with its carefully calculated gradients that ensured views to each and every spectator and with its ultra-modern projection screens, was never built. Nor were the swimming pools with waves, another technical innovation proposed

by Le Corbusier, as was linking the pools to the Tigris. Nor were the amphitheatre, restaurants, and outdoor gardens that were to be open to the public.

Only the Gymnasium was constructed in the eastern part of Baghdad and that long after Le Corbusier's death. It was inaugurated in 1980. Despite the complexity of its structurally ambitious concrete roof, its signature curved ramps, and other challenging details, G M Présenté, in collaboration with his Iraqi consulting partner Rifat Chadiji faithfully constructed the Gymnasium in strict accordance with Le Corbusier's design, honouring the integrity of the master architect's intent.

With its sweeping concrete roof, external ramp or 'architectural promenade,' undulating panels that recall his collaborator, music composer Iannis Xenakis, with its subtle use of natural and indirect light and framed perspectives, its articulated details, and finally its engraved 'Modulor' man, the Baghdad Gymnasium is a veritable catalogue of Le Corbusier signatures, the only one of its kind in the Middle East.

Yet the current renovation is a departure from the original vision of the architect. Fake ceilings block natural light, coloured stained-glass panels appear to recall urbis-style windows of traditional Iraqi houses, and bright-coloured seats have been added.

The purism of modern form clashes with local practices; functional decisions often challenge the value of architecture as work of art – a fact not unique to Baghdad. Similar encroachments have occurred in the works of other architects as well as in Le Corbusier works, for example in the open spaces of India's Chandigarh or in some altered flats in France's Rezé.

The Gymnasium presently serves as the headquarters of the Iraqi National Federation of Basketball. Except during the two years (2003–04) of its occupation by US troops, it has also been used regularly for national and international competitions in sports such as volleyball. Despite the sectarian violence that spread throughout its surrounding neighbourhood and witnessed assassinations of many Iraqi sportsmen between 2005 and 2008, the Gymnasium is back in use, albeit sporadically.

The scheduled June 1 inauguration of the renovated building marks an important turning point. Perhaps Le Corbusier's work might deservedly become a living landmark in a country that is still in search of its future.

*Dr Mina Marefat, AIA is Architect and Principal at Design Research in Washington and faculty at Georgetown University*

*Dr Caecilia Pieri is Head of the Urban Observatory and member of the Ifpo French Institute of the Near-East, Beirut*

(Opposite) Plan of the project for an Olympic City in Baghdad

(Right) Front façade of the Le Corbusier's Gymnasium, designed late 1950s and built in the early 1980s in the Sha'ab neighbourhood in Baghdad



© Caecilia Pieri/Forbidden/Le Corbusier Paris/ADAP 2012