The Middle East in London

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

Baghdad today is home to an impressive manifest of modernism, a sports facility designed by Le Corbusier. The Baghdad Gymnasium is the only built part of an abortive 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 Tonohamp and the groundbreaking multi-family housing in Vassieux, and was hired 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 Iraq 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 transatlantic dialogue, a time that encapsulated the strength of modernism and the international appeal of modern architecture.

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 negotiated 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 an important international capital. Midhat Midibloom 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 AlRamsha neighbourhond in Baghdad. In the late 1950s, by Ahmad Midhat Ibrahim, the first Iraqi architect in charge of the Public Works Department. The Iraqi desire for an Olympic Stadium was not unreasonable since Nehru had..."
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 Scevaci, the Iraqi Gymnasium is an integrated part of the modern Baghdad City, comprising an indoor 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, his own obsession with his temperament, and machinery being both French and Swiss Embassy 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 transformation during the project years as he hired long-time associates, including Jivko Xenides, who promptly restructured his office. In response to contractual requirements, Le Corbusier began a new association, with French engineer and international practitioner Georges-Marc Prévost 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 chartered Prévost if he later made even minor 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 a state-of-the-art sporting 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 lifting the pools to the Isis. Nor were the amphitheatre, restaurant, 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 rigour of its structural ambition and concrete roof, its signature curved terraces, and other challenging details, G.M. Prévost, in collaboration with his Iraqi consulting partner Kifat Charity, faithfully constructed the Gymnasium in strict accordance with Le Corbusier's design, honouring the integrity of the master architect's intent.

With its sweeping curvilinear roof, external ramp, "architectural promenade," undulating panels that recall his collaborations, music composerannis Xenides, with its subtle use of natural and indirect light and framed perspectives, its articulated details, and finally his engraved "Modules" name, the Baghdad Gymnasium is a veritable catalogue of Le Corbusier signatures, the only one of its kind in the Middle East.

Yet the current situation is a departure from the original vision of the architect. False ceiling box, natural light, coloured stained-glass panels appear to recall similar windows of traditional Iraqi houses, and bright-coloured seas 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 to Le Corbusier works, for example, in the open spaces of Indira Gandhi or the some altered Arts in France.

The Gymnasium presently serves as the headquarters of the Iraqi National Federation of Basketball. Except during the two years (2003–05) of its occupation by UK troops, it has been used regularly for national and international competitions in sports such as volleyball. Despite the sectarian violence that spread throughout its surrounding neighborhood and witnessed assassinations of many Iraqi sportmen between 2005 and 2008, the Gymnasium is back in use, albeit sporadically.

The scheduled 1961 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.

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