

# Contemporary Arab Architecture

## *The Architects of Iraq*

*This is the third article of a series which covers the work of contemporary architects from different parts of the Arab World.*

*Iraq has an ancient architectural history dating back to 7000 B.C. and the still existing ruins of the Sumerian Culture and the Babylonian Empire are a testament of their tradition. The culmination of Iraq architecture took place during the Caliphate of the 9th Century; but from then on Baghdad's importance declined as Istanbul became the centre of the Ottoman Empire, and it is only in the past four decades that there has been a revival of art and architecture in the country.*

Developments in the 20th Century architecture of Iraq have been a sequence of outside interferences, mostly dominated by the interests of Colonial powers. In 1921 Iraq was declared a Kingdom, but it was not until July 14, 1958 that Iraq became fully independent. The Baath party came into power, and still rules the country today. The earlier source of Iraq's income and main employment of the country was agriculture, but it is oil that makes Iraq wealthy today. The war between Iran and Iraq has damaged the economic situation in general, and the outcome of the cultural renewal will, to a large extent, depend on the direction the country will take in the future.

The renewal of the country's identity, which began before the revolution of 1958, was concentrated on the capital of Baghdad. Famous international architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Alvar Aalto and Pier Luigi Nervi were invited to develop spectacular projects which would put Iraq into the mainstream of modern architectural development. Gropius and his team The Architects Collaborative (TAC) was commissioned to build the new University City in Baghdad which was not begun until years later and which today still is not fully completed. All the other projects were never realised. The ensemble of projects by these architects was conceived to bridge the gap between underdeveloped and developed countries.

From the point of view of the time around 1960 the failure of these gigantic projects was a great disappointment, but from today's viewpoint the artificiality of their schemes and their alien language becomes clear and their failure to materialise has to be seen as fortunate.

Iraqi political and architectural development since 1958 was strongly influenced by technological assistance programmes from Eastern European countries, specially the USSR, Hungary, East Germany, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia, as well as by international planning firms, such as Doxiadis from Athens who was invited to

work out a master plan for Baghdad and build low-cost housing schemes as model cases. There were only few Iraqi architects in the first years after the revolution of 1958, such as Kahtan Awani, Medhat Ali Madhloom and his brother Said Ali Madhloom, who had the opportunity to experiment in forms of a new Iraqi architecture. Their work often resembles the buildings which were earlier established in the industrial countries.

Architectural education was intensely changed by the founding of the School of Architecture at Baghdad University in 1959. It was one of the earliest educational centres in the Middle East, and has had a strong impact beyond the borders of the country. Together with the Schools of Architecture in Cairo, Beirut, Damascus and Amman it soon became one of the most important institutions of higher learning in the field of architecture in the region. The importance of this school, as well as the changes in the Iraqi attitude toward architecture in general, can be attributed to the activities of the teacher, author and architect Mohamed Saleh Makiya. In the liberation of Iraq's contemporary architecture from foreign influences and in his pioneering attempt to create an Arab identity in contemporary architecture, Makiya's importance can only be compared with the importance of Hassan Fathy in Egypt.

From the beginning it was Makiya's goal to establish the basis for a contemporary Iraqi architecture with roots in his country's tradition. Makiya devoted much of his energies in the following years to teaching at Baghdad University, of which he was one of the co-founders. Between 1959 and 1968 he taught Islamic Architecture and the study of the Iraqi tradition, which he also writes about in his books, "The Arab Village" (Cairo, 1951), and "The Architecture of Baghdad. Historical Survey" (Baghdad, 1969). Both emphasise the re-evaluating of the tradition of Islam.

The same concern for harmonising local traditions and contemporary needs can be found in the buildings by Makiya in the years after 1958. His 1963 Khulafa Mosque in Baghdad relates new and contemporary parts of existing older forms, such as the old minaret which was made the centre of the total complex. Kufic writings have become part of the new structure and a unity has been reached which never would have been achieved by the employment of exclusively "modern" forms.

In Makiya's State Mosque in Kuwait on a site of 45,000 square metres near the Sief Palace, these earlier developments are taken a step further. Makiya sees this building as the culmination of his work as an architect. Here again the dominant concept of open

*Article by Professor Udo Kultermann. Photographs and drawings courtesy of respective architectural firms.*

and enclosed spaces follows the aim to articulate the core of the task: religious architecture for contemporary needs. The large central prayer hall is carried by means of four monumental columns, making the interior space appear extraordinarily high. Toward the north is a small courtyard (*sahan*) and beside it a special entrance for the Emir of Kuwait. Toward the east is a large *sahan* with a fountain for ritual washings, and toward the south is a third *sahan* adjacent to the religious library and conference centre. The complex is crowned by the large dome, 30 metres in diameter and 40 metres above ground, which will be clad on the outside with white alabaster and white marble chips. A hierarchical ensemble has been achieved which in character is both traditional and contemporary at the same time.

Besides his major religious buildings, Makiya has also worked on the design and construction of educational complexes. His architecture follows the lines of Iraqi tradition, but his 1967 design for the Foreign Ministry in Baghdad unfortunately shows elements of foreign influences, especially from Boston City Hall.

Since 1971 Makiya has expanded his work predominantly to Bahrain and the Sultanate of Oman, and now operating out of his main office established in London in 1975. In 1972 he opened a new office in Oman where he is presently occupied with the preservation of the old character of the city of Muscat.

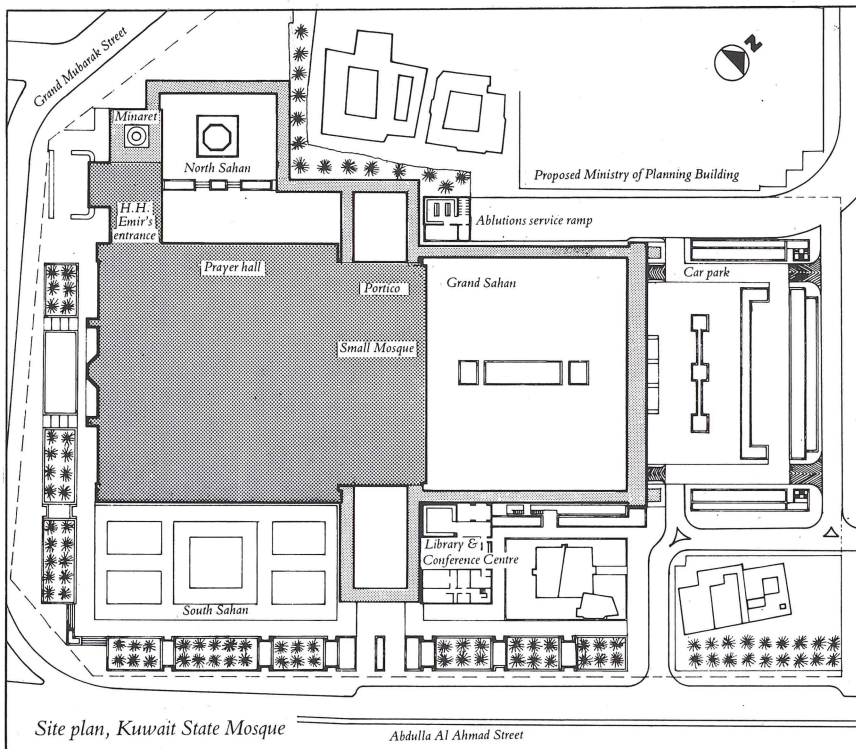
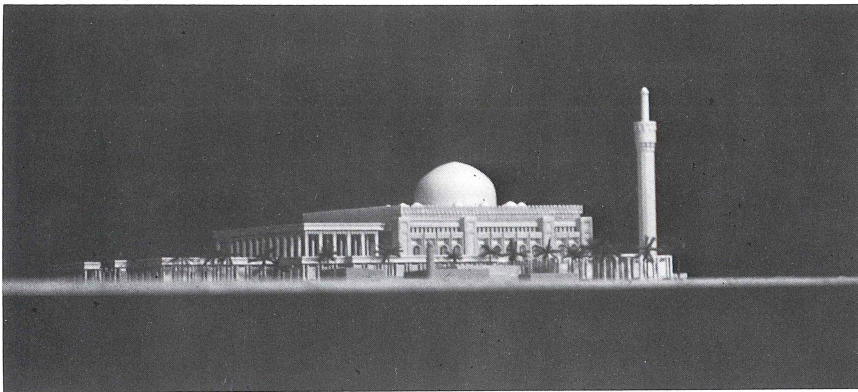
Makiya's goals as a city planner follow those he developed as historian and architect to respect the historic environment and transform it only insofar as it continues to identify the human endeavours of the people for which it is used. The old and narrow streets of Muscat were kept as often as possible and integrated into the requirements of the contemporary automobile traffic.

**A** concept unlike Makiya's was developed by the architect Hisham A. Munir, who posed an alternative architectural philosophy which also deals with the solutions of specific problems and a contemporary articulation of Iraqi architecture. Since 1959 Munir has been a professor at the University of Baghdad and was crucial in the foundation of the Department of Architecture, for which he served as Director in the years between 1968 and 1972.

The works of Munir clearly show the close connection he had established with American architects specifically TAC in Boston and the language of architecture which was developed in a highly industrial-



Right: Khulafa Mosque Baghdad, 1963, relates new structures to existing older forms.



ised country. Munir defended these connections, and although he later adapted local and traditional forms and motifs from the Iraqi past, he mainly searched for the most appropriate technological and architecture solution for a given project.

The main work in the first years of his professional career was the University City in Baghdad. In the original plan of 1957 no less than 273 buildings were to be built in a vast area of open and enclosed spaces. The University City was planned by the Ministry of Housing and Works in Baghdad and was designed to be built in three phases: the first to accommodate 5,000 students, the second 8,000 students and when completed 12,000 students. The main auditorium has a seating capacity of 18,000 seats. The site is around a South-East loop of the river Tigris and is 1,600,000 spare metres large.

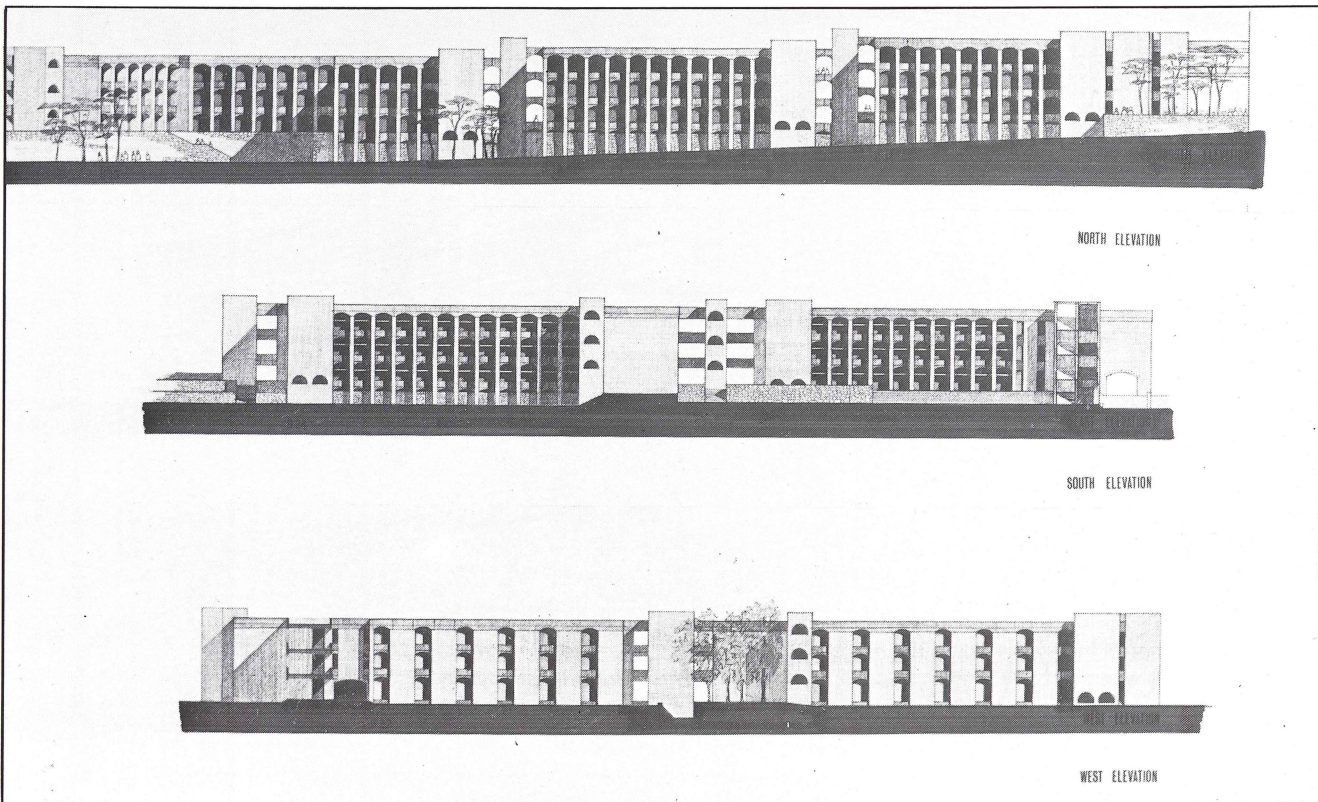
Designed as a small city the campus consists of three faculties: Engineering, Science and the Humanities. Surrounding the central plaza is defined as the academic nucleus. The buildings are designed to stand close together in order to create areas of shadow necessary for the very hot climate. The windows are mostly on the North and South of the buildings and some of the roofs and walls are watered for cooling purposes. Great flexibility was maintained to allow for new developments and for overbridging of disciplines in the further growth of the campus. Since 1966 Munir, and The Architects Collaborative, have been engaged in the planning and building of another large university complex, the University of Mosul, the second largest city in the country. In comparison with the master plan and individual buildings in Baghdad, here a stronger assimilation of Islamic elements is visible. This is especially evident in the central library with the use of vertical elements of organisation and in the mosque with the contemporary use of a domed structure.

In the mid-seventies Munir was commissioned to build large governmental structures in Baghdad. His buildings are more or less independent from regional and local conditions, and from his point of view tradition can be continued only after the most advanced forms of technological knowledge have been applied.

**W**hile the emphasis of Makiya's work is based on tradition and the emphasis of Munir's work is based on contemporary requirements, the work of the Iraqi architect Rifat Chadirji attempts to bring

*Left, above: Kuwait State Mosque presently under construction since 1979.*

*Left: Rafidain Bank, Kufa 1968. Architects: Makiya Associates.*



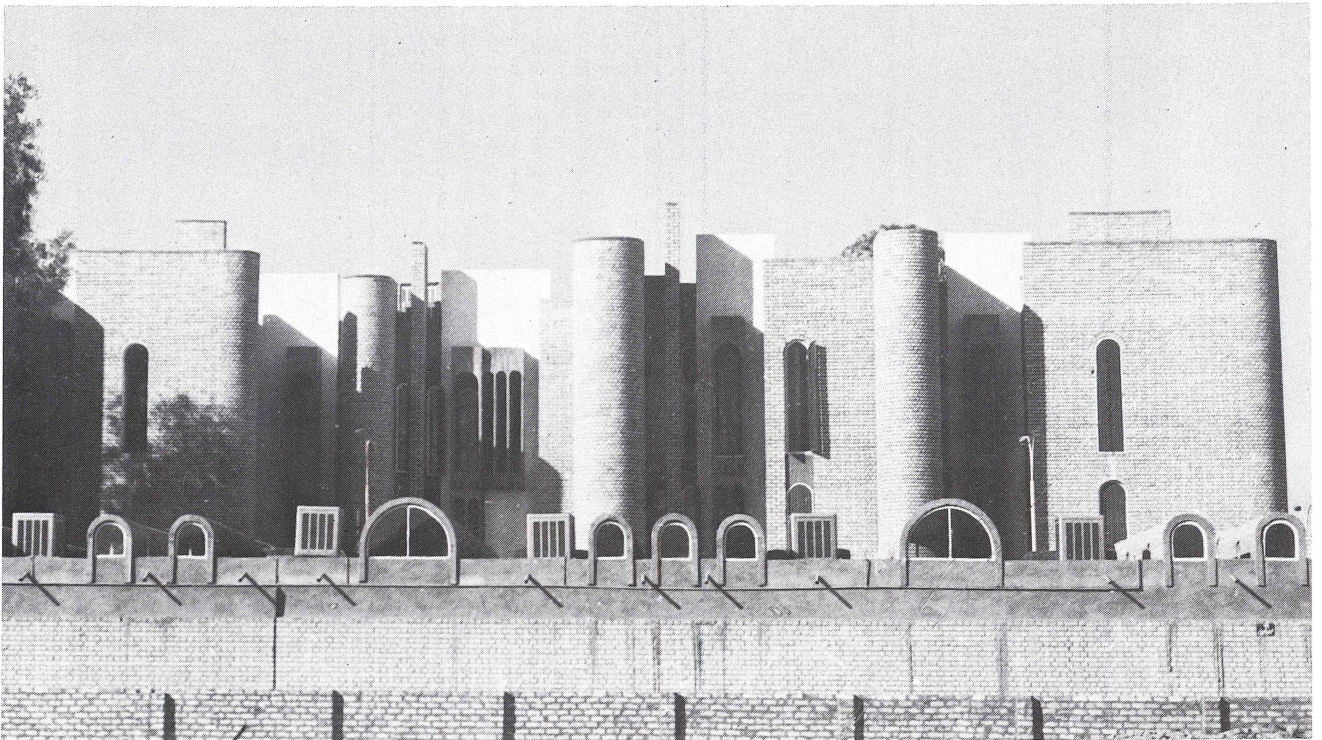
Above: University of Mosul, Engineering School.  
 Right: University of Baghdad, masterplan for College of Athletics. Architects: TAC and Hisham A. Munir and Associates.

both, tradition and contemporary needs, to a synthesis. It is his presence which dominates the present situation in Iraq, and the fact that he is in the service of the government opens up perspectives which in other countries are rare.

Chadirji has practiced in Baghdad since 1952 when he returned from England. In Iraq, the young architect was confronted with the concepts of the international architects who, in the same decade were invited to do prominent works in the country. There was little emphasis on traditional Iraqi architecture at that time and only the writings and teaching of Mohamed Saleh Makiya was a force in this direction.

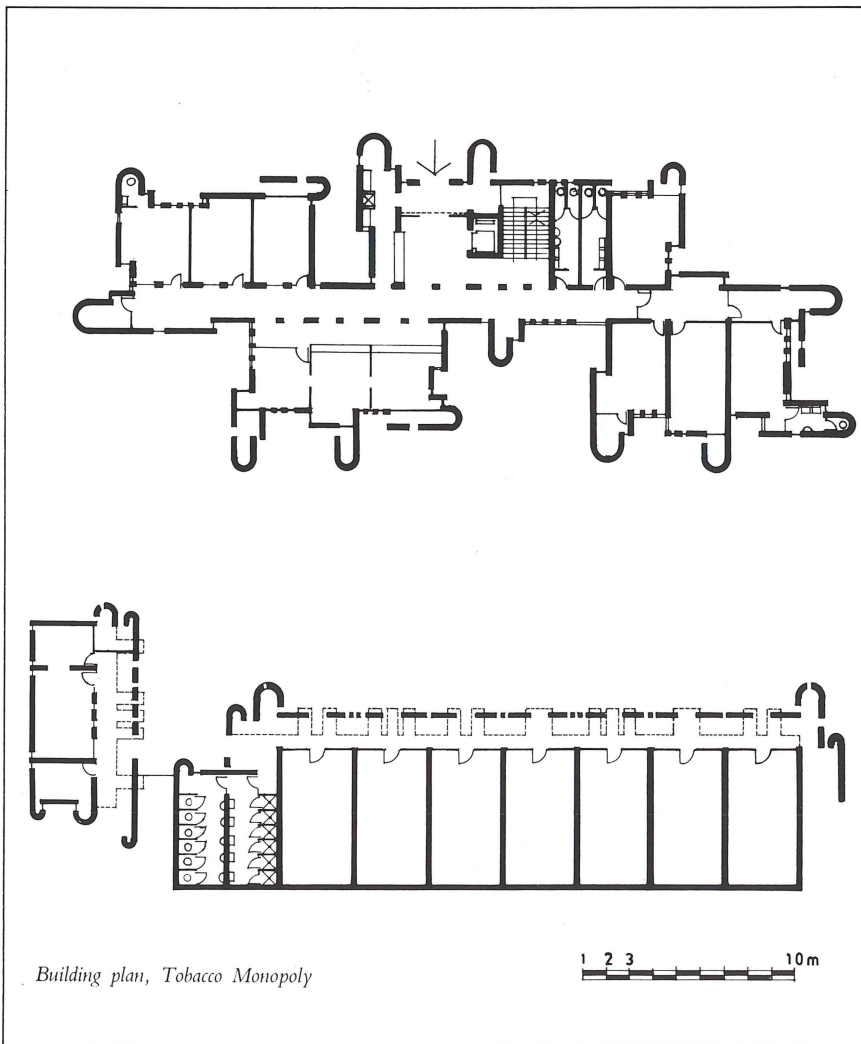
The first phase of Rifat Chadirji's work between the years 1956 and 1962 was dominated by houses which reveal the European education of the architect and his adherence to ideals which in principle were alien to his country. The first steps toward a recognition of local values and regional traditional necessities were taken in the Wahab House in Baghdad of 1953. The change came about as the architect began paying more attention to old buildings which was intensified by his appointment as director of the architectural department of the Waqaf, the government agency in charge of the preservation of old mosques, khans and houses.





Above: Tobacco Monopoly offices and stores, Baghdad, 1966.

Right: H.H. Hamood Villa, Baghdad, 1972. Architects: Iraq Consult (R. Chadirji).

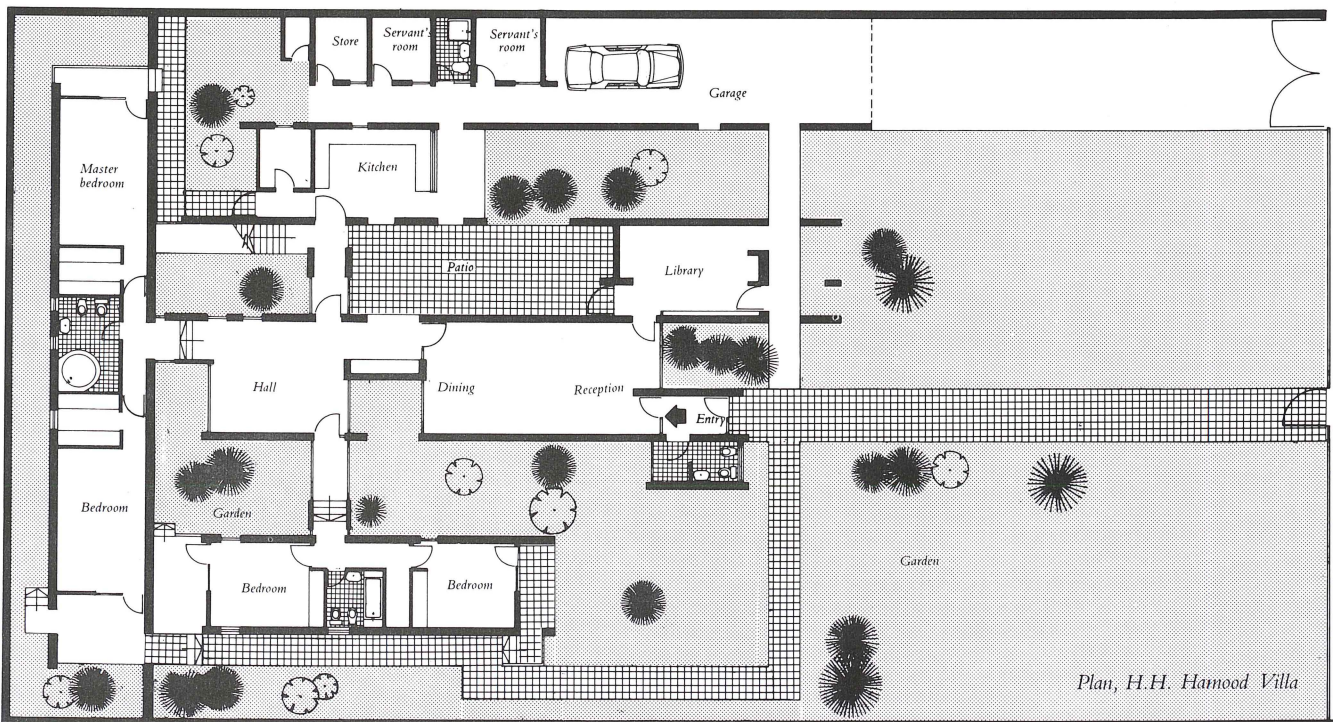
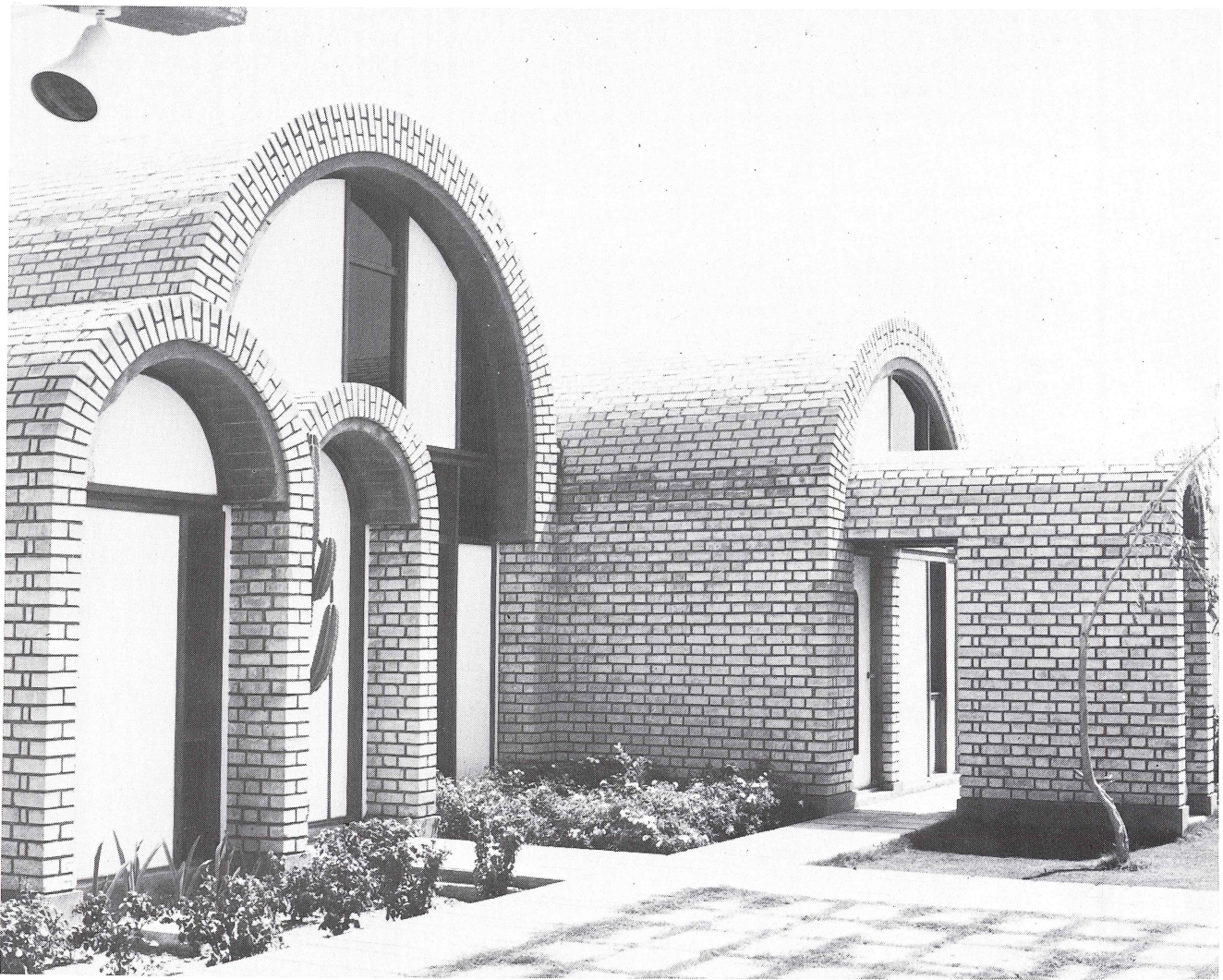


Building plan, Tobacco Monopoly

Chadirji's interest in old Iraqi buildings grew and when he was commissioned to design the Monument for the Unknown Soldier in Baghdad in 1960 he chose a motif from the Iraqi past: the parabolic arch of the Sassanid Palace of Ctesiphon of the year 531, one of the most powerful documents of old architecture in Iraq. The choice was programmatic and in spite of the contemporary use of the old motif the turning point was clear. Chadirji openly verbalised this when he wrote: "... we selected the arch of Ctesiphon as our feature in designing the memorial. We thought, that we would like to work within a field that the people would understand and like".

After 1960 the firm Iraq Consult became involved in larger projects and with them the fruits of Rifat Chadirji's studies of the Iraqi past became visible.

Chadirji's building for the Tobacco Monopoly Company in Baghdad in 1966 became one of the most famous buildings of the firm. With it the architect entered a new phase of his career as here the traditional elements more strongly articulate and directly relate to buildings of the past, such as the Palace of Ukhaidir or the Great Mosque of Samarra. It is a three-storey building with floors and ceilings built with reinforced concrete. The inner organisation is linear and the office spaces arranged along the corridor. The characteristic form of the exterior walls is accentuated by half-round elements which directly resemble building



Plan, H.H. Hamood Villa

forms from the Iraqi tradition, but at the same time they can also be seen along the principles of Louis Kahn. By looking into the past Chadirji took a step forward and discovered architectural principles which transcended the language of "modern architecture".

This new architectural language would soon be applied by Chadirji to many other new buildings in different variations.

Two houses in the Seventies are especially significant as they express a clear sense of Iraqi identity and are unmistakably designed and conceived for Arab clients. The Villa Hamood in Baghdad of 1972 and the architect's own house in Baghdad of 1979 are mature works where tradition is rejuvenated.

After 1970 Rifat Chadirji received increasingly more commissions from outside Iraq: For a period of two years in the late 1970's Chadirji ceased architectural activities, but since 1980 he continues to devote his efforts to new buildings in Baghdad, where he has been working as a special advisor to the Governor in matters of architecture and urbanism.

Contemporary architecture in Iraq has matured in spite of interferences from outside and contemporary political difficulties.

The fact that foreign architects work in the country and continue to receive significant commissions does not outbalance the work of Iraqi architects who receive major commissions and leave their mark on the shaping of the urban environment. Unlike Egypt, where many of the architects of the younger generation have left the country, the government of Iraq employs its own architects.

The contemporary building situation in Baghdad is specifically dominated by large scale urban renewal schemes<sup>1</sup>, such as the projects for Haifa St., Kadthamiak and Gailani which to a large extent destroy the urban fabric and the character of the traditional architecture. Another field of construction in Baghdad is devoted to large buildings and building complexes in the centre of the city, such as the Conference Centre by the firm Skanska, the Medical Centre by Hisham A. Munir, and major hotel buildings, such as the Sheraton Hotel by The Architects Collaborative and Hisham A. Munir.

Bank buildings such as the Central Bank

of Iraq by the Danish architects Dissing and Weitling, educational complexes such as the University of Technology by the Chicago firm Perkins and Will, and embassies such as the US Embassy by Jose Luis Sert from Boston also have to be seen in this context, as well as two recent projects by the architect Richard England from Malta. One of the works by Richard England, the housing scheme around the Kheylnai Mosque, attempts to create a system of Arab terrace houses relating to the existing urban fabric of the old quarter.

A third area of construction in Baghdad to a large extent built by Iraqi architects, involves mostly smaller projects including individual houses, club buildings, schools and offices, in harmony with the existing tradition of the urban character. The fact that more and more of the local character of Iraqi cities is being recognised and understood, and a value system is being reintroduced which is based on local and traditional qualities, shows a positive development that will, hopefully, continue.

Right: Monument to the workers, Baghdad, 1969. Architects: Iraq Consult (R. Chadirji).

Right, below: Architect's own house, Baghdad, 1979. Architect: Rifat Chadirji.

<sup>1</sup>A special article on Baghdad's new 'super-projects' by Sherban Cantacuzino will be published in a future issue of MIMAR — Editors.

#### Mohamed Saleh Makiya



Born 1917 in Iraq. Architecture degree 1941 from Liverpool, Civic Design degree 1942, Ph. D. from Cambridge University 1946. In 1947 established his office in Baghdad.

#### Makiya Associates major projects

1963	Khulafa Mosque, Baghdad.
1965	Central Banks, Basra and Mosul. Museum of Antiquities, Mosul.
1966	College of Theology, Baghdad.
1967	Foreign Ministry Building, Baghdad.
1971	Government employees housing, Bahrain.
1972	Bushiki office Building, Bahrain. Shaikh Mohamed Bin Mubarek Building, Bahrain. Building for the handicapped, Isa Town, Bahrain. Monumental Arch for Isa Town, Bahrain.
1973	Beit Greiza, Oman. Beit Kharjiya, Oman. Bab-Al-Waljat Building, Oman. Ministry of Finance Building, Oman.
1974	Multi-storey car park, Dubai. Hilton Hotel, Dubai. National Library, Abu Dhabi. Wholesale Market, Doha.
Works in progress	Preservation of the old city of Muscat. Mosque for the Emir of Bahrain. Kuwait National Mosque.

#### Hisham A. Munir



Born 1930 in Baghdad. Studied architecture at the American University at Beirut. Graduated from University of Austin, Texas in 1953 and from the University of Southern California in 1956. Returned to Iraq in 1956 and founded his firm "Hisham A. Munir & Associates" in 1959 which is now one of the largest and most successful in the country.

#### Hisham A. Munir major projects

1957	(With TAC) University City, Baghdad.
1966	(With TAC) University of Mosul.
1974	Ministry of Justice, Baghdad.
1975	Iraqi Insurance Company Office, Baghdad.
1976	Agricultural Museum, Baghdad.
1976	Al-Sabah recreational and commercial complex, Kuwait. (With TAC) Hotels in Basra and Baghdad. (With Whiting, Rogers, Butter & Burgen) Medical Centre, Baghdad. (With Netherlands Airport Consultants) Buildings for the International Airport, Baghdad.

#### Rifat Chadirji



Born 1926 in Baghdad. Diploma of Architecture from the Hammersmith School of Arts and Crafts, London. In 1952 he returned to Baghdad as a partner in the firm Iraq Consult.

#### Iraq Consult major projects

1953	Wahab House, Baghdad.
1960	Monument to the Unknown Soldier, Baghdad.
1962	Al-Azzawi House, Baghdad.
1964	College of Veterinary Medicine, Baghdad.
1965	Iraqi Academy of Science, Baghdad.
1966	Tobacco Monopoly Company Building, Baghdad.
1968	President's Residential Palace, Baghdad.
1969	Workers Monument, Baghdad. Waqaf Building, Ahwja.
1970	Commercial Bank of Iraq, Baghdad.
1972	H.H. Hamood Villa, Baghdad. Cinema, Bahrain. Residences, Kuwait. Bank, Abu Dhabi.
1979	Architect's own house, Baghdad.

