

## Architectural Identity in the Iraq Within 100 Year Ago

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**ABSTRACT:** *The concept of identity and the aspects related to it within the built environment have been discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter will, instead, examine the issue of identity in the Iraqi built environment and the factors that influenced its formation and its transformation. In order to achieve this aim, the chapter starts with a brief description of the historical background of Iraq and subsequently with the description of its local environment and the main components of which it consists. Identity in Iraq has been deeply affected by the Islamic religion and its regulations, which had great influence on the Iraqi city planning. The political factor also played a significant role in the transformation that happened in the local environment, particularly, during the colonial period.*

**KEYWORDS:** *historical architectural, Iraq, city planning.*

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### I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF IRAQ

As it is widely known, present-day Iraq coincides with roughly the greater part of the area once known as Mesopotamia, the Greek word (Μεσοποταμία) meaning “[land] between the rivers”, used to designate the territory encompassing the basin of the rivers Euphrates and Tigris until the Arab Muslim conquests of the seventh century AD, when Arabic names like Syria, Iraq and Jezirah began to be used to describe the region. It is largely referred to as the cradle of Civilization by archaeologists and, more in general, scholars of various disciplines [1 & 2]. The invention of writing by the Sumerians (2700-2400 BC) represented an event of paramount importance for Mankind. During the period of Hammurabi, monarch of the Babylonian kingdom (1792 -1750 BC), the first legislation in the world was enacted [1]. The Assyrians (1115 - 1077BC), who lived in the north of Mesopotamia, played a main role in the history of the whole Middle-eastern region during the periods of King Tiglath-Pileser I, and after him, the kings Assur-Nasirpal II, Shalamansar III, Sargon II and Ashur-Banipal (668-626 BC), the latter of whom established the illustrious library housed in the royal palace of the capital city of Niniveh, the oldest surviving library in the world, which had among its holdings the baked clay tablets inscribed with the cuneiform characters telling the Babylonian epic poem of Gilgamesh. Now in the British Museum [3]. During the period of Caliph Omar (634 – 644 AD), Iraq was conquered by the Arab Muslims who established two new garrison towns, Basra and Kufa, the latter of which subsequently became the capital of the Caliphate. During the period of the fourth Caliph, Ali. In 762, the second Abbasid Caliph, Al-Mansur, chose a site few miles north from where ancient Babylon once stood and not far from the former Parthian and then Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon (taken in 636-7 AD), in order to build the “Round City”, that was the original core of Baghdad, intended to be the official residence of the Abbasid court and the new capital of the Arab Empire. In 1258, a landmark year for the Islamic world and not only for Iraq, Baghdad was destroyed by the Mongols under the command of Hulagu Khan, who attacked Iraq, laid siege to the city and overturned the Abbasid Caliphate, which was a great blow to the Arab civilisation, from that moment onwards fragmented into several different States. Two centuries and a half of turbulence followed. After the sack, Baghdad was part of the Ilkhanate, a breakaway state of the Mongol Empire, ruling from Iran. In 1401, the city was sacked again, this time by the Central Asian Turkic conqueror Timur (“Tamerlane”), and became a provincial capital controlled by Mongol (1401–1411) and Turkic (1411–1508) rulers and, eventually, by the Iranian Safavid dynasty. From 1509 the Ottomans staged a war against the Safavids, which ended with their conquest of the country and the triumphal entrance in Baghdad of Suleiman “the Magnificent”, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, in 1534. Basra fell in 1546. Over the next few decades, the Ottomans solidified their control of the region, incorporating it into their empire and dividing present-day Iraq in three “eyalets”, whose capitals

where, respectively, Mosul, Baghdad and Basra. During their rule, there was almost no development regarding economic, agricultural and architectural aspects unless a few mosques which reflected the Turkish style. In 1917, the British occupied Iraq and divided it into three provinces called "wilayah" whose capitals were, respectively, Mosul, Baghdad and Basra, as at the times of the Ottomans. In 1921, the Iraq became an independent country, and Faisal I was crowned as the first King of the Hashimite Monarchy in Iraq. However, the new State still remained under the British mandate until 1932, when it became a member of the League of Nations. Iraq became a republic in 1958 after the revolution that ended the Hashemite monarchy.

Iraq lies in latitude  $44^{\circ}14'$  E and longitude  $33^{\circ}14'$  N. The sea level altitude is 34 m, which is about 112 ft. Figure 1-1 shows the location of the country on the world map. Iraq borders with Iran to the east, with Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia on the west, with Turkey to the north, with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to the south where a narrow strip of land gives it access to the Arabian Gulf.

Iraq is a diverse country in regard to topography and climate. Accordingly, three main different regions in Iraq can be identified. In the north, there are mountains, with a constant cold weather, in the south there are green forests and marshes, in the west is the desert, which covers about 60 percent of the country and is characterized by dry and hot weather for most of the days of the year.

There are two main rivers in Iraq, which are Tigris and Euphrates. They merge at a confluence to the north of Basra, creating the river called Shat Al-Arab, which flows into the Arabian Gulf. For this reason, in Antiquity, the country was called with the Greek word "Mesopotamia", which means the land between the two rivers.

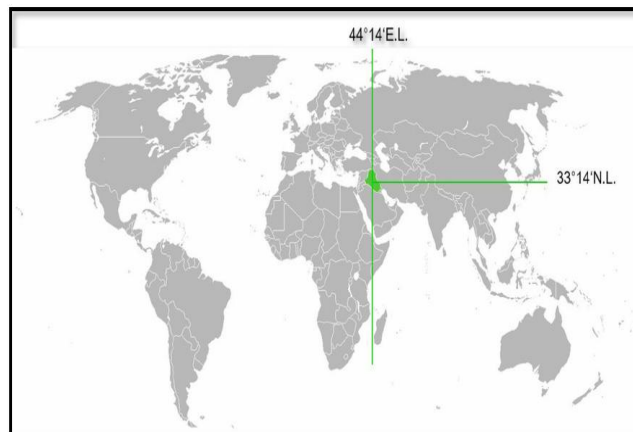


Fig.1. The Location of Iraq in the world Map

## II. THE IRAQI ARCHITECTURE

The traditional Iraqi Architecture differs from the architecture of other countries thanks to a richness of elements that are in harmony with the specific climatic and social conditions of the country. In his general study on the source and the references of shapes in traditional architecture, Gelernter states that the building pioneers worked according to a principle of trial and error, then, through succession phases, acquired the expertise that allowed them to develop architectural forms in harmony with the climate and the social system: anytime they failed, they tried to find the most efficient alternative, and, as soon as they succeeded in finding one, they handed it down to the subsequent generation as a pattern [4]. The local environmental and social factors have constituted the main influences for the design and the planning of traditional architecture in Iraq, from the large scale to the smallest detail. For instance, the traditional Iraqi house is characterized by distinctive features that are appropriate to the local climate and the social aspects, in so representing an ideal solution providing the Iraqi family with an indoor environment of absolute privacy [5].

The traditional Iraqi architecture has suffered the introduction of foreign practices, which resulted in a large influence of the Western ideas and concepts on the local society. This effect can clearly be seen in the unconscious adoption and imitation of global trends and patterns in a complete disregard for the benefits of the local building tradition and cultural heritage.

- **Transformation of the Iraqi Architecture in the 20th Century:**
  - (a) **Colonial Era 1914-1930:**

The period subsequent to the British occupation of Iraq (1914-1918), from the independence until the Second World War, was of paramount importance in the Iraqi architectural history [6]. It was marked with the adoption of different architectural styles of foreign origin as well as with the use of new construction materials never used earlier in local architecture, so as to meet the requirements of the newborn State which, still in the

making, lacked both the appropriate buildings to house its institutions and the infrastructures necessary for a modern and independent country [7].

Accordingly, in this period, different buildings and infrastructures were created which were not known in the past in the country, such as the airport, the Government House, special circuits for mail, telegraph and telephone, several cinemas, along with many other facilities [8].

The major themes that have influenced the architecture in Iraq after the British occupation are:

□ Persistence of the distinctive features of the Iraqi architecture prior to the British occupation in the architecture that followed the occupation and the establishment of the independent State. It is possible to sense an overall continuance in the architecture treatments and in the use of the materials, which were those already prevalent in the traditional Iraqi buildings.

□ Emergence of a modular design unit aimed at creating a connection between Iraq and the other Arab countries in spite of the regional differences in architectural forms, also taking into account the many similarities that nonetheless already existed, due not only to the common socio-economic factors but also to the climate and building materials [9].

□ The cultural background, approach and goals of the English architects who occupied senior positions in the institutions of the new Iraqi State after its inception, and, previously, during the occupation period. They designed and constructed many multifunctional buildings, which the newborn State needed, and focused on maintaining the classical styles, rejecting the new currents [10].

□ Reinterpretation of the policy carried out by the British in India, aimed at creating a specific architectural style, through a selection process of the elements of the local architectural heritage. Many English architects who worked in Iraq in the period between the wars, such as Colson, Mason and others, had previously worked in India, and, for this reason, their influences were clear on the local architecture in Iraq [7].

All the factors above had a clear impact on the Iraqi architecture in the period between the two wars, and can clarify the design techniques of the buildings erected in the country by the British, which are devoid of any trace of understanding or awareness of the importance that the architectural heritage and the local techniques and building tradition held consequently, the style of this period was later called "Colonial architectural style [7].

It should also be noted that for the design of the facades of the edifices built by the British, a European Neoclassical style was adopted, to the extent that many of them were copied from British buildings [11]. The designers opted for an extreme complexity in the external form of the buildings, for the use of many materials, including luxury ones, that had been previously unknown in Iraq, as well as for decorative elements belonging to diverse and conflicting architectural styles forced together in the composition of the buildings.

The buildings erected in this period were conceived as isolated entity after the fashion of other classical buildings hence according to design patterns which did not take into account either the features of the surrounding site or its architectural specificity, in so doing being detached from the rest of the urban landscape and not having any positive impact on it. This is due to two reasons:

□ Scant architectural, technical, and historical value of the neighboring buildings, which allowed the designers to ignore and neglect the surrounding environment.

□ An architectural practice based on the conception of edifices as single, isolated compositions, designed according to foreign stylistic parameters, as it is clear, for instance, in cases as the Royal Court, the Women's College (1925) and the Royal Hospital (1934), all in Baghdad [12].

A significant feature characterizing the buildings of this period is the emphasis put on the main facade, where the richness of the architectural details was concentrated, whilst the other elevations of the buildings were left almost or completely shorn of any ornament. At this stage, the global architectural practice had created new trends based on the interconnection between the pre-design or the attractiveness of the pre-planning and the characteristics and knowledge of each architect, to the extent that gathering the difference between them became very complex or even impossible due to the difficulty of knowing which one has affected the other: the characteristic of the architect or the attractiveness of the pre-planning. Accordingly, this stage has been deemed the beginning of modern architecture in Iraq [13].



Fig.2.Aal Al-bait school – Baghdad 1922

### (b) The Architecture in Iraq 1930-1950

The architecture of this period was a continuation of the new architectural concepts that had emerged earlier on in the third decade of the century, although an interpretation of these concepts and ideas was carried out in order to channel them into the tangible urban environment: in other words, if the 1920s were the spring of the new architectural thought that had embraced the values of Modernity, the architecture of the 1930s was the maturation of such thought [14].

Although in the 1920s the architectural practices had involved an overlapping of traditional construction methods and new architectural styles, and not seldom even a conflict between them, the urban environment of the 1930s was distinguished by a general aspect of pure and clear homogeneity due to the adoption of the modern architectural language. Thus, what had been difficult to achieve and had been deemed as strange in the 1920s, had become real, familiar and even ordinary in the following decade [15]. The need to create edifices to house the new governmental institutions led to the construction of a great number of them, which enriched the urban landscape by means of monuments and landmarks whose forms were not known before [16]. A significant aspect that accelerated the creation of a new urban built environment in the 1930s was the presence of institutions specifically aimed at organizing the building process and improving its quality. The role of these institutions was not only that of monitoring the construction process, but also of offering suggestions and recommendations that eventually led to the enactment of laws and regulations which played a key role in the creation, arrangement and organization of a new architectural environment, such as the Municipalities Law of 1931 or the code for buildings and highways issued in 1935, which is considered as a reference for all the subsequent building codes, due to its significant impact on architecture and construction in Iraq [15]. The main feature of the Iraqi architecture of the 1930s was the emergence, for the first time, of a significant presence of Iraqi architects in the design process: Ahmed Mukhtar Ibrahim, the first professional and academically qualified architect, arrived from the UK in 1936, and was then followed by a large number of Iraqi architects such as Hazim Namik, Jaffar Allawi, Abdullah Ahsan kamal, Medhat Ali Madhloom, and Sami Kirdar [15].

To summarize, the fourth decade of the 20th century represented such a significant period in the evolution of modern architecture in Iraq, that it can be considered an establishment period, because it was clearly distinguished by a marked homogeneity of design language. However, this language, in spite of its modernity and the fact of representing a new trend compared with what had been built earlier, remained related to a neoclassical style, still rooted in the architecture of the mid-nineteenth century.



Fig.3. The Industrial Exhibition in Baghdad – 1932 Fig.4. King Faisal II Square - 1944





**Fig.6. The central Train station in Baghdad 1949**

**(c) Iraqi Architecture between 1950 and 1960**

A significant originality distinguished the Iraqi architecture of the aftermath of the Second World War and of the 1950s, to the extent that this period represented a pioneering architectural period. The issues of the identification of the architectural periods and of the transformation of the architectural styles are no easy task and also require intuition. It is difficult to determine the exact beginning of a style in architecture. Accordingly, in modern architecture, ascertaining the specific moment of birth of a new style is generally complicated and relying on approximation [8]. Nevertheless, the case of modern Iraqi architecture is different: there was a clear disconnection from the previous production, which entailed not only the adoption of modern architectural components, but also a whole change of the types and of the architectural scale of the buildings, as well as a change in the choice of the building materials [17].

In the beginning, particularly in the 1930s, the modern ideas in architecture, had seemed to many people as an attempt to deform the bases of architecture. The refusal of the architectural forms which had been holy for such a long time, the rejection of the classical architectural approaches and tools, the overuse of complexity and ornamental richness on the facades, were a shock for all those tied to the traditional architectural styles and their concepts [18]. The attempts of the young architects to introduce a new architecture had to face a great opposition due to the conservatism of both the employers and of the local society, besides the criticisms of many architects still attached to tradition. Along with that, the lethargy of the building activities of this period, led many new architects to focus on pursuing a thorough process of examination of the local materials and, more in general, of the specific character of the Iraqi environment, channeling it into a professional architectural vision. It was also a period in which many of them had the chance to get in touch with the foreign architects who were working in Iraq [19].

In the 1950s, circumstances suitable for an architectural development occurred, since the Iraqi cultural landscape in Iraq changed rapidly during these years, as reflected in other creation fields such as drawing, poetry and literature [8]. In this period, there was a significant development in the techniques of finishing the facades of the buildings, such as the use of covering them with plaster, either made of a mixture of lime and sand or made of a mixture of cement and sand. The spread of this phenomenon led to serious repercussions in the design style of the facades [20]. Another new feature that characterized the buildings in this decade was the introduction of some new architectural elements, such as curtains and screens made of different shapes and material for the finishing of the buildings [8].



Fig.6. Al -Rafidain Bank – 1954 Fig.7. Merjan Building - 1954

**(d) Iraqi Architecture between 1960 and 1980:**

In this period, which ensued the one that established a special and unique character for architecture in Iraq, the modern architectural treatments were focused on establishing and deepening such a character, through a careful examination of the specificity of the local environment and through a conscious use of the vocabulary developed in such environment, which was related to the local climate and the local materials, along with the employment of local traditional craftsmen to erect the buildings, so that the designs of the Iraqi architect, in this period, became more professional than before [10].

In fact, not only did most Iraqi architects have the aim of finding solutions for the problems of the architectural components in their designs, but also the ambition to make their architectural products an effective tool apt to enrich the national culture and capable of being a significant tool to build the future [13]. On the other hand, other architects followed other parameters, resorting to the vocabulary of modern architecture, rather than to the traditional one, in order to create architectural forms, nevertheless still taking into account, for their designs, the specific features of the local environment, such as the clarity of the spaces or the flexibility and rationality of movement, with the final aim, though, of using modern construction techniques to make their building influential elements of the urban space. In the mid-1960s, in the Iraqi architectural scene a new trend emerged, characterized by an overmuch use of elements taken from the Arab-Islamic architectural heritage in many of the buildings that were erected during that period [11]. Such trend was characterized by the lack of a clear overall vision of global architecture as well as a lack of clarity in regard to its origins and aims, along with the concurrent spread of postmodern architecture that started in the very same decade. That led to a strong impact of this style and its values on the practices of the Iraqi architects, but more specifically led to the tendency of the postmodern style to use historical architectural symbols in contemporary architectural compositions [21]. The designs and the studies of an Iraqi architect, in particular, Mohamed Makiya, who was born in 1917, in this period helped to strengthen the impact of the Iraqi architectural style as his work showed a great interest as well as a nostalgia for the traditional Iraqi architectural symbols [22].



Fig.8. AL-Rashid Street in Baghdad -1961 Fig.9. Federation of Industries - 1966

### III. CONCLUSION

Based on the details that illustrated in this research. It was found that the results were unexpected due to the growth and spread of this trend in the architectural practices. In fact, the supporters of this trend pursued an excessive use of signs and symbols, which were copied from traditional buildings and used in the facades of the new buildings (Shirzad, 1987). Because of this approach, the designs that were executed happened to lack aspects as, for instance, a rational distribution of the spaces, nor did they manage to meet the requirements of the people for whom these buildings were destined, in so doing, missing one of the main goals of Modernism. Excessive emphasis was put on the design and treatment of the facades, with the particular aim of recalling the traditional architecture. For this reason, these architects adopted solutions recalling those of the traditional buildings of the local heritage, which, though, were mostly low buildings of one or two stories. Multi-story buildings were hence covered by facades aimed at altering the perception of their real dimensions in order to render them similar to the small-scale buildings of the past despite their large scale. This, along with increasing the costs, resulted in an undue loftiness that not seldom even conflicted with the functions for which the buildings had been commissioned. [22]. This new architectural trend might have been positive and useful, had its architects aimed at finding rational and logical solutions for their designs, which unfortunately was not the case. The search for an architectural style that might belong to the Iraqi local environment and befit the surrounding architectural heritage was the main aim of the architects of this period. However, most architectural practices prevailing in Iraq were negatively affected by the overmuch use of forms imitating the symbols of the architectural heritage, regardless of the nature and the quality of the buildings. For this reason, most of the young designers, despite having been influenced by this trend in their designs, were able, after a short time, to understand and realise the impossibility of achieving their aims and obtaining satisfying results, had they kept on following that way. It seemed clear that the practise of selecting elements from the vocabulary of the architectural heritage in order to use them slavishly in modern buildings, specifically for their elevations, had revealed itself dull, as well as expensive [15]. Therefore, Mohamed Makiya's late production considers as a reaction of how architecture had lost any content or message, which led the style to be ignored and then be forgotten in the Iraqi architectural practice. After this experience, the Iraqi architects aimed at pursuing clarity in the design theme:

they became convinced that architecture might belong to the local environment by means of a deep perception and thorough understanding of the values and principles of the historical architectural compositions rather than through a slavish imitation. In other words, they began to aim at a modern process of interpretation of elements from the past that might be suitable for a new era, at the same time taking into account, rather than opposing, the significant success of global architecture [10]. The table below summarizes the periods of Iraqi architecture and their features.

**Table 1: The Main Periods of Iraqi Architecture**

Period	Architectural Style	Elements Style	Relations Style	Material
Colonial period	New-classical	Hybrid (Local + modern)	Modern	Traditional Local materials (bricks)
1930s	New-classical	Hybrid (Local + modern)	Hybrid	Traditional Local materials (bricks)
1950s	Modernist	Modern	Modern	New materials (concrete)
1970s	Modernist + local	Generated from local and modern	Modern Abstract	Traditional local and new materials (bricks + concrete)

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