6. The Bab al-Sheikh Project, Baghdad

Rifat Chadirji and Carlfried Mutschler

1. Conceptual Aspects

In August 1980 I was called upon to assume responsibility for the design of the Bab al-Sheikh project, which originally covered only what are now areas 1 and 2 of the project which is being presented today. To treat this as just another billion-dollar development project and stop at that would be a grave injustice to the people who worked on it and formulated its concepts. The press has in fact treated it largely in that fashion and in so doing revealed its ignorance of the conceptual complexities involved, and in some cases even a misrepresentation of the facts.

Before I tackle the conceptual and procedural events that led to implementation, it might be useful to review the concepts I developed some twenty or twenty-five years before I was commissioned to do this work, because these concepts were instrumental in orienting the conceptual aspects of the project, though its cultural and political objectives were determined long before I joined the municipality.

In 1952-53 a group of Iraqi artists and architects formulated a concept of indigenous art that entailed using ancient and traditional Iraqi art forms in modern or contemporary art and architecture. By 1957 Iraqi art and architecture had developed the distinct indigenous and idiosyncratic style exemplified in the work of Jawad Salim and Mahmoud Sabri in painting and in my work and that of others in architecture. By 1965 the movement was widespread and mature enough to tackle the conceptual aspects of architecture, rather than simply the incorporation of traditional elements, and that too was evident in the architecture of the period. But by 1975 the movement had been partially suppressed, and only the most exceptional architects were able to keep up the momentum. Just before that, however, some basic concepts related to the problem of indigenous architecture or regionalism had been successfully formulated. I have described them in detail elsewhere, but it would be useful here to present a summary of them because they are of direct relevance to Bab al-Sheikh.

On September 16-19, 1980, some three weeks after I had received my commission, a very important conference was held in Baghdad, which addressed the problem of modernity and tradition in architecture. In my paper for that conference, which I entitled “Tradition Is Necessity,” I first defined tradition as “the reservoir of our culture.” The content of that reservoir, I believe, falls into two categories: what is living, and what has fallen into disuse; or, in other words, the active and the latent. From that reservoir I suggested that we should make a survey of both of these aspects of tradition and select out those concepts or elements we would like to interact with, or integrate into, our modern production. Two current methods are available for doing this: one is replication and incorporation; and the other is the synthesis of concepts. As I pointed out at the conference, I think that the first method is a dead end, while the second has unlimited potentiality.

These views were in turn based on premises I had formulated in 1951 to the effect that the end product of an artifact—which can be architecture as a material entity—results from a dialectical process whose poles are social requirements, on the one hand, and technology, on the other. If we accept this premise, then changes in technology will lead to the generation of different forms, and true replication becomes impossible. Nor is it desirable. Even if it is done in response to intense social pressure, it is bound to act as a constraint on the development of modern technology. By the same token, the dialectical process of architecture that I expounded will also make any reversion to traditional elements economically unviable, whatever the manner or method used to produce them. Reversion to tradition ought therefore to be considered solely as a national objective rather than as an economical proposition.

In the same paper I suggested that we should be clear as to why we revert to tradition to begin with: does it result from political demand and, once that demand is satisfied, does it lose its validity? I think not, because reversion to tradition has become a permanent necessity whose function is to add some indigenous character from the various regions or localities in a world whose production and media have otherwise become entirely globalized. If we do not do this, the nations of the world will soon lose whatever distinctive architectural traits they might still possess.

At the 1951 conference, the political leadership presented the idea of khususiya, a term derived from an extended meaning of the Arabic word for “character” or “trait.” In its new meaning it became an active rather than a merely descriptive term. Though its basic meaning is still derived from tradition, it has acquired a contemporary flavor insofar as it is associated with modernity or the modern social requirement of lending a contemporary character to either a political or a cultural image. The political leadership rejected tradition in the sense of a blind reversion to the past, stressing that it should only be one factor in the development of a national style. This idea became an effective catalyst in formulating the basic planning concepts that were generated after mid-1980 by the Amanat al-Assima (AAA), or Municipality of Baghdad. Another criterion in the planning process, and one which acted as a guiding principle for the decisions that were to follow, was high quality; it remained one of the main objectives of the AAA.

Sometime before 1980 the houses surrounding the two major Islamic shrines in Baghdad were torn down to clear the way for open plazas. Designs were prepared for these large open spaces, with fountains, kiosks, and shaded areas. Both projects were put to public tender before my arrival at the AAA. Prior to the September conference, I had already requested the mayor to halt
their implementation until we had had time to review and revise the designs. Directly after the conference, work on the two shrine projects was halted, and I contacted the RIBA in London and asked them to recommend a consultant experienced in the problems of traditional architecture. They made a number of suggestions, and I selected from among them John Warren, partly because he was already in Baghdad attending the conference. I asked him to prepare a conceptual study for the area surrounding the two shrines (Bab al-Sheikh was then coded as area 3), using the following design criteria: (1) The conceptual criteria already described should be utilized, particularly the principle that traditional features should be synthesized rather than replicated. For this purpose he was asked to acquaint himself with the research the Iraqi architects had done. (2) The development of the area was to be of high quality and not low-income housing, and therefore it should be provided with modern amenities, including car-parking for each housing unit. (3) A study should be made of ways to control environment, including problems of heating, cooling, ventilation, and so forth. This would involve expanding on the work already carried out by the Iraqi architects.

John Warren's planning studies were of remarkable quality and insight as regards the conceptual requirements. His solution to the car-parking requirement by providing an underground platform was excellent and instantly accepted. Some of the other problems such as insulation, heating, and cooling were not resolved, at least not to my satisfaction. I say "not to my satisfaction" even though I am aware of the research conducted by Subhi Azzawi, and in spite of the fact that some of the AAA's projects use solar cooling and heating and other complex and advanced methods on a very extensive scale.

When planning for area 3 was complete, the next step was to deal with areas 1 and 2. For this phase of the project, I felt that a competition among pre-selected architects would be appropriate, so that I would be made aware of design potentialities and the then current international trends. George Dudley of New York was my coordinator, and John Warren was appointed competition officer. Four architects were invited to compete. The competition was won by Arup Associates of London, but because I felt the designs submitted by Carl Mutschler, who came in second, were of equal experimental interest to the project, I requested the mayor to include them both. Hence area 1 was awarded to Arup Associates and area 2 to Mutschler. That was a planning decision which, in retrospect, I regard as one of the most propitious, because both schemes are of excellent quality and valuable contributions to experimental work.

*For a detailed presentation of this project, see John Warren and Roy Worsdell, "Conservation and Redevelopment of the Kadhimiyeh Area in Baghdad," Adaptive Reuse (Designing in Islamic Culture 3), pp 32-46.
The outcome of all this was exceptionally gratifying. Though the project had been divided into six areas, with a different architect representing a variety of styles and trends selected for each, in the end the various designs were not only compatible with each other—a situation which is usually dramatically lacking in modern urban stylistic patterns—but remarkably harmonious as a whole with the traditional architecture still extant in the neighborhood.

When I presented my paper to the conference in September 1980, I mentioned the importance of identifying and classifying the various architectural styles which form our heritage. One category was the Baghdadi house, although I was not aware of the varieties or nuances of style within that category until I met Azam al-Ani. Hence the designs prepared by John Warren for both Bab al-Sheikh and Kadhimain did not have a stylistic articulation influenced by, or derived from, the local idiosyncratic differentiations of style, for two reasons: first, we lacked a proper classification of the various local stylistic nuances; and second, responding to the particulars of a traditional synthesisization, rather than to its general character, required a level of education on the part of the consultants, both Iraqis and non-Iraqis, which is not available in Iraq, or any other Arab country, as far as I am aware.

If you reflect a moment on what I have said, you will realize that my presentation has so far been confined to development in a neighborhood of traditional symbolism and quality. But what about the traditional houses remaining there? John Warren was commissioned to identify the houses of quality in the neighborhoods surrounding the Bab al-Sheikh and the Kadhimain shrine. He chose some twenty around the first and eighty around the second. Some of these were selected for preservation—or it is probably more accurate to say conservation—and that work commenced on a large scale. Conservation was not, however, an isolated activity, but was integrated with a comprehensive conservation program for Baghdad. Some twelve sectors of the city were involved, and a number of consultants were commissioned to carry out conservation studies; Bab al-Sheikh and Kadhimain represented only parts of two of those sectors.

Here I would like to digress for a moment to say something about the conceptual policy and administration of the AAA. I held the position of counsellor to the mayor for a period of some twenty-six months. I commenced my work by writing reports to the mayor regarding some 150 projects under his jurisdiction, planned, designed, or actually being implemented. To give you an idea of the magnitude of the work we had undertaken, the entire Bab al-Sheikh project comprises only 7 of the 150 total; Abu Nuwas, another example, only 2, although it alone will cost more than $1.5 billion; Kadhimain 3; and so on.

Each report submitted to the mayor was divided into three sections: the first concerned the philosophical and conceptual aspects of the project; the second the strategies necessary to implement the project—phasing, the selection of consultants, and the project’s interrelationships with other projects; and the third covered procedural matters, including finance and authorization to implement the program.
To handle projects of such a magnitude, and with such intense participation on the part of the AAA, required a special mechanism for administration. The one established for the purpose was a centralized administrative body which had the authority to make instant decisions. That minimized red tape, but enabled the AAA to intervene whenever they felt it appropriate. That was a planning decision which, in retrospect, I regard as one of the most propitious, because both schemes are of excellent quality and valuable contributions to experimental work.

This comprehensive conservation program was in turn integrated with the development projects and consequently the urban development of central Baghdad. Conservation studies were by no means confined to the AAA; the Department of Antiquities did some extensive and remarkable surveys in at least two of the sectors, and checked the consultants' work in the identification of traditional houses for the benefit of the AAA.

The interrelationship between urban development and conservation was based on a number of premises and objectives. The mayor's objectives were to revive and reconstruct Baghdad to create not only a capital worthy of modern Iraq, but an active cultural center for the entire Arab Middle East. These objectives required a policy of development in which the concept of khususiya was combined with modernity of high quality; those objectives corresponded admirably with conclusions I had reached way back in the early sixties.

One of these conclusions was that reversion to tradition is motivated by a variety of factors, which can be either contradictory or complementary. The first of these is social, and can take the form either of a reaction to contemporary events, that is to say, to modernity and the negative aspects of growth, or of an inclination toward variety, reflected in nostalgic, touristic, and other popular activities. The second factor is historical, and includes archaeological, anthropological, and other studies. The third factor is political, and involves emphasizing a certain characteristic of a nation as part of a strategy to support some political phase or movement or requirement. The fourth factor is cultural, and seeks to establish a relatively permanent national or local or regional trait, feature, or character as an integral part of international growth and development.

I also pointed out that these factors can generate some very destructive negative forces. In dealing with tradition or heritage, we should therefore identify these negative aspects, so as to minimize or mitigate their destructive forces.

No culture of excellence can be achieved — or was ever achieved in the past — in the absence of a supporting technology. For this reason, the globalization of technology militates against the continuity, revival, or establishment of a national culture. From this, one can conclude that to achieve an urban development of excellence, worthy of a nation with a great historical past and an eminent culture, the planner should prepare a strategy that integrates the various cultural constituents. The AAA planners were to some extent able to integrate cultural constituents in their planning in the form of modernity and khususiya, and compatibility between new projects and the extant traditional buildings. The Bab al-Sheikh project in its totality was part of that achievement.

Rifat Chadirji
2. Designing Bab al-Sheikh, Zone 2

When I accepted the invitation to Baghdad, it was an entirely new experience for me; I had never been to that part of the world. We flew from Frankfurt-am-Main to Amman and then rode by bus to Baghdad over a thousand kilometers of empty desert. When we arrived we quickly learned that Baghdad is no longer the town of the fabulous stories of Harun-al-Rashid. It is now a growing modern metropolis, with all the problems that entails. Rifat Chadirji, in response to my request for advice regarding background material, suggested we look around the country, look at Ctesiphon and Samarra, and the old suqs, madrasas, and houses of Baghdad, and then to use our experience and our response to what we had seen to discover a common ground between the local life and tradition and the functioning modern town.

I think there are seven criteria that can be used to measure any architecture anywhere in the world. First, obviously it has to fulfill all the social and cultural requirements asked of it. Second, it has to function as a building. Third, it has to be properly constructed with proper materials, proper technique, and proper technical equipment. Fourth, it has to have an esthetic spiritual structure, which requires discipline inside and outside. Fifth, it should have a web of spaces, with bright rooms and dark rooms, and a sculptural form to show in which way it was made. Sixth, however, the architect has to find the essence of the task, the totality of conception, because well-put-together rooms perfectly organized still don't make a good architecture if they do not mirror the fundamental experience of individual and social relations. Seventh, but not least, it has to express some connection between history and the existing urban fabric, or landscape, even if some people think that is a somewhat romantic notion.

As background we also had to study the Islamic city. One very difficult thing for us to learn, accustomed as we were to the European inclination to turn toward the sun and build for the greatest amount of light in every dwelling, was that here it was even more important to build for maximum shade. Of great help to us, incidentally, was Stefano Bianca's book on architecture and life in Islamic countries.

Bab al-Sheikh is an old residential quarter, south of central Baghdad, and of great national importance. It encompasses religious and historic buildings. The residential parts of the quarter are composed of two-story courtyard houses built in the regular pattern of the ancient Islamic city, but as a result of the new city development, a new street had become necessary, and it had been cut through this old organic structure. The problem was to develop the area south of the new road up to the remaining old buildings between al-Khulani Square and Sheikh Omar Square for both residential and commercial uses. A multistory building complex was envisaged, with a total area of some 200,000 square meters. The problem was to design an economically viable project that would fit the pattern of the old Islamic city, with its mosque and buildings.

Our design concept is based on the premise that the historical city structure of Baghdad mirrors the Islamic
Pl. 6  Zone 2 floor plans
way of life, that a significant unity was developed by long tradition, and that the responses to the demands of modern life—especially those posed by traffic—threatened the city with irrevocable loss. Its goal should be not only to conserve the remnants of the past but to integrate the new into what remained, and to build a bridge to the traditional by identifying those things that made up the essence of the old architectural traditions, and allow the new to grow from those original roots.

The site for the competition was located at the point of conflict between the old and the new. Our construction on the site was to create an organic web between the two bordering districts. To do that, the height of the new construction had to create a moderately slanting profile in order to even out the city silhouette, while providing an acceptable amount of space for living purposes. Taller structures on the edges of the site would create a restful space which emphasizes the unity of the quarter, and, in addition, protect the rest of the site from traffic. The various functions of the multipurpose quarter will be concentrated in an appropriate location: trade in the areas of the greatest pedestrian traffic along Kifah Street, at intersections, and along the new road; administration at locations most accessible from outside the quarter, perhaps up to the third level, directly over the parking places along the new road. Crafts are already established along Sheikh Omar Street, and we hope to continue them onto the new road. Functions needed by the dwellings—a school, playgrounds, a public garden, social facilities, meeting places—are concentrated together. The dwellings in the upper stories are protected from traffic by the barrier that the non-dwelling structures will create.

We had to work together with Arup Associates who were designing the surrounding areas: with John Warren and APP; with Rifat Chadirji and the design department; and, later, with Richard England. It was the decision of the Amanat al-Assima that the development should be provided with all modern amenities, including mechanical ventilation (cooling and heating), water, power and lighting, telephone, television, fire protection, and so on, at a good European standard. In the case of the commercial shops and other units where the nature of the tenancy would not be known until much later, a building shell was to be provided and equipped with primary services. It is assumed that the tenants will then fit out the premises with supplementary services as they require. Structural design will follow the regulations of the U.S. Uniform Building Code, and it is envisaged that mains, services, and other connections to municipal utilities will be made at regular intervals along the length of the new road.

An old man who has worked for thirty years at a building site on the Tigris said to us that architecture is like a poem, a remark that describes our impression as we became better acquainted with the architecture and the mentality of the people in Iraq. On the other hand, we knew we could not respond to it by naively reproducing preindustrial structures, imprinted as they are by the events of centuries, though neither would we have wished to be deprived of its inspiration in the conception of our work for Bab al-Sheikh. Every project for the development of the city of Baghdad must respond to the dialectics of the Islamic tradition and contemporary rationality, which is the self-realization of a dynamic society well aware of its history. Whoever intends to build upon the ground of a millennium-old culture has to combine its Arabian character and variety with the requirements of modern civilization. Proceeding from those premises, we tried to develop a concept for the regeneration of our section of Bab al-Sheikh that would introduce the knowledge and experience we had gained in Iraq and combine them with the insights we had gained from working with our own urban problems. Every architecture has to take patterns from the existing tradition and to define for individuals their specific place in this world so that they may survive in our otherwise faceless civilization.

Carlfried Mutschler
COMMENT: Again we see the tendency to employ too many foreign consultants. There are two ways one has of making use of this kind of expertise. One way can be compared to a Washington hostess making up a guest list for dinner: she decides she needs a Supreme Court judge, a member of the Cabinet, a general, several foreign dignitaries, and a few celebrities and socialities for a nice balanced list. The second can be compared to a man in bad health who is ministered to by a general practitioner and a whole array of specialists. The choice in the two situations rests on very different criteria. The situation in the third world ought more closely to resemble the dying man than the Washington hostess; the number of consultants on any project should as a general rule be limited and their skills precise. But this case appears to be more like the dinner party, although admittedly the strong coordination on the part of the client has made the thing work. But if it has worked, it is the exception.

You obviously have given a lot of thought to the project, but this is the type of project that also needs experimental support in the form of smaller pilot projects. If you had had to face the results of a natural catastrophe such as an earthquake and had hundreds of thousands of people to house all of a sudden, you would be justified in this large-scale approach. But here you could tread gingerly, and however strongly you feel that your theoretical approach is correct, you still ought to have had some experimental support. Start with a small area and one architect; have something built, and see how it reacts, especially how it affects traffic — because you can never accurately predict how traffic will react to new projects — and, of course, how it will affect people.

CHADIRJI: First, I am not proposing that my role in this project be used as a model for other places. This was a particular situation, and I tackled it in a particular way. It was in itself an experiment. It could work — or it could not work — elsewhere, depending on the circumstances. But you cannot specify any particular number of consultants and say that anything else is too few or too many. Who can say that five is better than twenty? If you have plenty of time, why not twenty? What number you choose depends on the circumstances of the particular area or project. The cost of the Bab al-Sheikh project will be, I think, about $1.5 billion. Now, to put all that in the hands of one or two consultants would not be wise. While I selected six or seven, that was purely my decision, based on my own interpretation of the problem. It is true that without good control and an integrated mechanism things may go wrong, but once that integration is achieved, the number doesn’t matter.

My decision resulted entirely from the circumstances; it really was a special case. But then I would say that most planning should be treated as a special case. It is no good generalizing in planning. I don’t believe in models, really, because unless we really understand the forces of change — and I believe we do not — we cannot make a viable model. Change is so rapid that the next day the model does not work. One has to look afresh at each project.

Why not start with a pilot project? That is a reasonable question, because one should. But in this case a political urgency represented a far more serious crisis than an earthquake. An earthquake one can ignore, but not a nation pressed by time and a one-party administration that chooses to demonstrate to the people that it is achieving something and is sincerely committed to the nation’s development. One alternative would have been to turn it over to mediocre architects; the second alternative would have been to choose a variety of architects and let each work on his own; and the third alternative, which
was the one I chose, was to select a group of competent architects — or at least those I judged to be competent architects — and have them work together under one coordinated policy and philosophy.

COMMENT: I am the conservation consultant with John Warren's firm, and was intimately involved in this process as far as the areas immediately adjacent to the shrine were concerned. My colleague's questions were certainly questions we posed to ourselves during the course of the work. The political exigency of the proposed Non-aligned Nations Conference in Baghdad in September of last year dictated a schedule that made it virtually impossible for us to achieve reasonable standards in the conservation work and surveying which the job required. To undertake conservation, as opposed to new construction, under the pressures of political exigency, is unfortunate. We turned in the best job we could under the circumstances, I think, and we did provide certain criteria for other architects to use as points of departure, in terms of both style and construction.

I have to agree with Mr. Chadirji's comment about our studies of solar heating and cooling, particularly for the new construction. They were certainly inadequate. Generally speaking, however, we were proud of what we did, and all of us on the Baghdad team would like nothing more than to see our work further along than it is at the moment.

CHADIRJI: When I mentioned that the problem of environmental control was not solved in John Warren's project, I did not mean it was not adequately dealt with. We did quite a lot of experimental work on this particular aspect of architecture; we did not air condition the buildings and leave it at that. But the technology available represents a complete change from our traditional ways of tackling the environment. For example, air conditioning was conceived and developed for a totally different stylistic environment and represents a complete change from our ways of tackling environmental control. I could even say that modern technology is not the technology of our part of the world. It was for that reason that in the end we were not able to resolve the problem, and it may be a long time before we are able to do so.

CHARLES CORREA: You may be right in saying that we do not have the technology, but we cannot for that reason just finance development and let it happen to us. If we participate, it will have a quite different outcome than if an outsider does it alone. What is important is the dedication that the people of Baghdad, the authorities, brought to the project. It represents the kind of morality I tried to describe yesterday.

On the question of consultant participation, the analogy of the dinner party has some validity. Without trying to set Chandigarh up as a model, I would point out that Corbusier's contract required that he come to India twice a year for one month at a time and work with the local architect. Lutyens came for three or four months. Louis Kahn did all his building design in Ahmadabad at the National Institute of Design, where it was their policy to train local people.

Now, many things stemmed from that. First of all, you get much better participation. Second, you can influence people like Kahn, Corbusier, and Lutyens. Lutyens did not know anything about Moghul architecture; in fact, he despised it, as you can read in his journal. But he was forced, over a period of three or four years, to acknowledge how much it had to teach him. Bringing in a number of people can add excitement, provide the feeling of a marvelous experiment. Chandigarh was designed by more than one architect, including Maxwell Frye and Jane Drew, not just Corbusier. But they were not dispersed around the world; they were concentrated in one place, and the excitement they generated was useful to us in India, just as your project made Baghdad the exciting place to be in.

It seems to me that the client's attitudes are as important as the architect's because he is the second main actor in the process. I wonder if you have any comment to make on this business of participation, in terms both of time and of the local people?

CHADIRJI: Local participation in Iraq gets us into political issues, and I am not here to deal with politics. It is a very sad story, similar to the situation in the Soviet Union in the middle and late nineteen-twenties. By 1980, when I came to the municipality, I was able to convince the authorities to reverse that process and involve local consultants officially and contractually, but their input was not very great because they had lost some six to eight years of practice and were either not ready or not available to undertake the task. But by mid-1982, the situation had improved; at least it was back to where it had been in, let's say, 1965.

QUESTION: How many individual households are going to be displaced by all these projects? Is alternative housing proposed for them and, if so, what kind of housing? How are those project houses going to be distributed?

CHADIRJI: The Ministry of Housing is tackling this problem. The municipality does not ordinarily build houses. It has involved itself in the Bab al-Sheikh project to create prestigious housing projects to dress up Baghdad, but what we are doing, and what we are showing, was not intended to resolve the housing problem.

QUESTION: Any project of this size can lead to housing displacement. If that is one of the consequences, the people who are going to be displaced should be taken care of.
CHADIRJI: In Kadhimiya and Bab al-Sheikh it was too late. Demolition occurred some years ago. In others, displacement of residents is being dealt with using a lot of research work, surveys, studies, and strategies.

ISMAIL SERAGELDIN: This project comes very close to the heart of our theme: continuity and change. It represents a deliberate intervention with at the same time an effort to preserve a certain element of continuity, not through a pastiche, but by trying to reinvent something suitable in contemporary terms. This expression of directional will, of conscious search, is precisely what I find missing in some of the other projects we have seen, where in effect the client has said, “Give me the best,” whatever “the best” means. This intervention represents a particular philosophical statement which — I think Mr. Chadirji will agree with me, though a number of architects who are perhaps more conservative in their interpretation of continuity may not — has not always been stated by clients. And it behooves us to ask therefore a little more about the organizational aspects of the Baghdad project. Not so much the question of the consultant selection process — how and why and how many you chose — but the way the brief was prepared. The consultants’ brief really sets the tone for the interaction that will take place later on.

The second question relates to the decision-making apparatus: to what extent were the political exigencies to which you referred allowed to override technical considerations? One could argue that political pressure can be a salutary and a very useful and positive influence, if it helps break down red tape and other obstacles. It tends to be a very negative one where decisions are made simply because so-and-so wants such-and-such a thing in a certain place, without regard to its suitability. How the role of the political authorities on the client’s side related to the problems of the technicians on the consultant’s side I think deserves attention.

CHADIRJI: What I am going to say is rather embarrassing. We had a very short time to prepare Baghdad for the conference, so essentially projects were either based on necessity as determined by a very primitive survey carried out by the administration and the municipality, or suggested by some political body through the mayor, or were the mayor’s own ideas; or were my ideas. My department consisted of a secretary or two, three first-year graduate architects, one person who corrects my Arabic, and myself — that’s all. For every project, we prepared a very primitive brief for the consultant, indicating the cost, more or less the number of housing units involved, and that sort of thing. I invited the consultants to dinners or private meetings, and there we went into the philosophical and the conceptual aspects of what should be done. I was with them throughout the design process, but made no contribution whatsoever to the design. My contribution was on the conceptual side only. That was how I was able to integrate the various projects. Some, like the Haifa, were far more complex than others, like the Bab al-Sheikh, and far more consultants were employed, or commissioned, for them.

I cannot say there was much administration. The mayor came every day to my room. I prepared reports in which, on two or three pages, I explained the philosophy and, on another two or three, why I had selected this or that consultant. There was no procedure for selecting the consultants; I just asked them whether they would come and do the project. I chose them because of their competence and because I thought a particular one would be suitable for a particular project and would work well with the other consultants in the area. There were no competitive bids. I selected Boffil because I thought his work would look just right next to the work of Warren and facing the work of Van Tiek. Whether that decision was right or wrong is something for history to decide, but that is the way it was done.

CORREA: But the fact remains, if the discussion could have been extended to more people — in Baghdad there were reasons why it could not, but let us consider all the other projects in the Islamic world — the potential for any development to act as a catalyst within that society is increased. But that would require contracts stipulating that outside architects have to come and live in the project area for a stipulated period. Charrettes are wonderful experiences; all architects know that. The morale of the whole office goes up. The excitement generated by Chandigarh in the 1950s was electrifying to architects all over the world; everyone was part of a great experiment, building a Brave New World. Now, Chandigarh was nothing compared to the size of the projects going on in the Gulf today, and it is a shame that we are missing this much bigger opportunity to act as catalysts for society. The hardware is unimportant; it can be dropped by parachute. But the opportunity for a change of attitude like the one the Gulf presents comes once in two or three centuries, and I think it is a great tragedy that we are missing that opportunity.

CHADIRJI: I said I considered the projects of Arup and Mutschler to be good experimental work. Now, why did I use the word “experimental”? I firmly believe that no culture can build its own urban fabric or build its own culture if it does not have its own technology. By technology I don’t mean tools or know-how; I mean the modes of production, which include local expertise. At the present time, unfortunately, that does not exist, and there are very serious political implications or drawbacks to involving local people. Between 1970 and the present, the Iraqi government did not encourage local contractors: they operated everywhere in the world except in Baghdad. To reverse that trend is a very complex political affair. To create a local consultancy, because of the cultural gap and political problems, will take a very long time. But even then we will need interaction with the rest of the world, and local expertise also cannot exist isolated from academic circles. All these must be integrated somehow; at the present time even in some developing countries it has not yet been accomplished.

QUESTION: It was stated in the brief to the consultants that they would be building prestigious houses for high-income groups. In my childhood, my next-door neighbor on one side was one of the richest men in the town and on the other side one of the poorest. The children grew up together. The social structure allowed that. Here, the
municipality is deciding who is to live where by ordering the building of large complexes restricted to a particular income group. By itself this leads to architecture that will introduce a foreign social structure into that particular city, with or without foreign consultants. Can you tell me whether this was a decision taken by the municipality?

CHADIRJI: It was a decision reached by two or three people, that is all. Whether it was correct or not is another matter. I don't claim it as a model, but simply as a response to a particular situation. But I did not look at it in terms of its being a Muslim town. Especially at the present time in Iraq, religion does not function as a criterion for planning. Perhaps it does in some other Islamic countries, but not in ours. The way of life is changing, for better or for worse. Other social considerations were taken into account insofar as possible through surveys made by either the municipality or the consultants. Whether the decisions that resulted were right or wrong, only time will tell.

CORREA: The fact remains that if the consultants had been in Baghdad for a longer period they might have been exposed to other opinions, and therefore have had a richer brief, a better idea; and if six of them had been there simultaneously they might have helped you convince the political powers to do something else. It is very difficult for any government to override the combined effort of outside superstars. Corbusier had direct access to Nehru, and he more or less got his way. But leaving aside Baghdad, if all you people would in your future commissions consider requiring these great architects to spend time in the place they are to build in for subsequent generations, for such enormous fees, to sit down and learn about those societies, it would help. The disturbing thing about these projects is not so much that they are ego trips, but that they were done in two afternoons. That is a terrible thing to say, but looking at them that is my honest reaction as a designer.

CHADIRJI: It is no use, really, hypothesizing an ideal situation for the developing countries. Our situations are more or less imposed on us, either politically or for some other reason. What were the alternatives in Baghdad? Accept third-rate architecture, or accept consultants working under a very difficult, intensive work schedule, without sufficient time. An ideal situation would have been entirely different from either. I believe absolutely that no outsider can resolve the internal problems of a nation. He can help, he can provide perspective, imagination, and expertise, but the real solutions must come from the local people.

COMMENT: I think Charles is a bit too concerned with the importance of how long the consultant stays around. Considering the political realities, I really have to congratulate Mr. Chadirji for the examples we have seen here of successfully integrated design. Mr. Chadirji, you are a good client. If all clients — for the client is one of the two actors on this stage — were as enlightened as you are, we would all achieve better results.

CORREA: You should have spoken up earlier. That's true, actually; we were giving him too rough a time.

IAIN CHRISTIE: I have enjoyed these presentations on Baghdad, but the question always lurks in the back of my mind (although these are prestige projects and funded initially by the government), what did the feasibility studies show in terms of cost recovery over the next few years?

CHADIRJI: The study for zone 2 assumed the cost of housing units at about 400 Iraqi dinars per square meter; we considered that to be feasible for a middle-class Baghdadi family.

QUESTION: The foundations are huge — almost 1.20 meters in diameter, and ranging from 12 to 20 meters underground. Was all that necessary?

CHADIRJI: Yes, the soil is a problem. Tigris River ground begins with about 20 meters of mud, and a six- or seven-story building will require foundations of that magnitude.

SAME SPEAKER: What type of survey was used to determine the foundation required? Couldn't you have substituted a simpler foundation?

CHADIRJI: The zone 1 and 2 area happened to be infill for about 30 or 40 meters, so the pipes and all the rest of that very complex structure were needed.

CORREA: Before we become too involved in costs and engineering, let us return to the main theme. The lesson I see in this project is that an intelligent, thoughtful client and a similarly endowed architect can together produce good results that show sensitivity to the culture. It may even be that having seven or eight architects working on it together was an advantage in that it avoided endless repetition all over the street. It may be that that was a virtue of your scheme: the architects were given a block small enough to treat as so many individual units. I could not help noticing it every time you showed the master plan.

CHADIRJI: As a matter of fact, that was my policy. As you know, we had about seven major sites in Baghdad, of which this is only one. I treated all of them this way.

QUESTION: I was very impressed by the skill with which Mr. Mutschler managed to fit the design into the existing fabric, but it sort of begs the question — especially with middle-class people moving into this area in Bab al-Sheikh — of what will happen to the old structures you have so skillfully integrated into. Who will live in the existing housing, and what in your opinion is their future, once this new project is completed?

CHADIRJI: Bab al-Sheikh is one of the two main centers of Baghdad. Until the 1920s it was inhabited by middle-and upper-class people. By now, between 30 and 35 percent are immigrants to the area, but still 65 to 70 percent are indigenous inhabitants, who are very proud of the area. They are middle class, and they can afford these houses (that is not the case in other areas of Baghdad — Haifa, for example), so we can expect and hope that middle-income people from other parts of the city will move into those areas.

SAME SPEAKER: My concern was the great contrast between the new construction and what is basically sub-standard housing. The contrast will probably result in demands for a renewal of the whole area, including the
part that was adjacent to the project under construction now.

CHADIRJI: Of course, What was shown by Dr. Mutschler is only zone 2. We now have planned or under construction six zones, but by the time the project is completed it will be far more extensive; it will include a civic center, and will take up a good part of the center of Baghdad.

QUESTION: The planning principles related to the automobile are very different here from what they were in the plans seen for Abuja, yet both cities are being planned for the twenty-first century. What place was given for the automobile in your design, and what criteria were used in planning for future automobile use?

CARLFRID MUTSCHLER: We planned the parking areas using the standards we use in Germany, which is one parking place for every unit plus an additional 20 or 30 percent for the people who come to the area to shop.

CHADIRJI: Different zones were treated in different ways. Zone 1 is similar to this one, but zone 4 allowed no parking at all. John Warren worked on criteria similar to zones 1 and 2. Specifications depended on the cost of the unit, its location, and the availability of space in the area.

QUESTION: I assume that the land for these projects was taken from the owners. What is the reaction of these individuals when they see the same land sold to the government or to the project? Somebody else is really reaping the benefits.

A second question pertains to the density of the area. I assume that the density in the old housing is much lower than in the new project. This increasing density will have its impact on the major utilities in the area. What have you done to meet this problem?

CHADIRJI: To answer your first question, there is no uniform reaction. Some people think the traditional houses in the area are unhygienic and uncivilized, and they are more than happy to move. Others just love the area because of family ties and relationships, and they want to stay there, no matter what. People come there from all over Iraq — from all over the world — because of the religious significance of the area. Some people hope that these housing projects will make life better in the area. And some people I interviewed who left the neighborhood are now thinking of coming back. There are no clear-cut categories of people saying they like it or they don’t like it; there is a whole range of reactions. What the reaction will be when the projects are completed, nobody knows.

SAME SPEAKER: My question was a little different. Let’s say I own a house. You come and take it from me and build another house on my lot. Why should somebody else have the privilege of living in this very choice religious area, while I am forced to move away? How did you treat this kind of problem?

CHADIRJI: We don’t have to treat that problem; it will be a question of supply and demand. If you have enough money, you can buy a flat there; if you don’t, you must live elsewhere.

STEFANO BIANCA: I think this project is a very good synthesis of modern needs and traditional principles. Confronting such a project, one understands why the theme of the conference is “continuity and change,” because in the case of a bad project it turns into a choice between “continuity or change,” between a kind of fossilizing or sterile conservation of something which cannot live unassisted, and a change to something new which has nothing to do with the old context. The minute you start treating the new as if it were a transplantation into an existing urban structure, things become compatible. Then, even if you replace part of the old fabric, if you reconnect it like a good surgeon when he makes an intervention into a human body, it is viable again, the unity is reestablished, and the results are indeed continuity and change. There is no dichotomy between them.

FRANÇOIS VIGIER: Stefano Bianca has just taken the first half of my comment from me, but I still have the second half. What is interesting about this exciting project is that it contains a paradox. The old tissue is composed of a very large number of very small additions that developed over the years. Here, with one large megastructure you have managed to achieve a transition between the contemporary scale of the large vehicular street and the old tissue behind it. I somehow cannot imagine that it could have been achieved except through an intervention at that scale. The alternative we have seen umpteen times both in existing cities and in the new capital city of Abuja. It essentially consists of individual, medium-scale interventions — the 10-story building, the 20-story skyscraper — at a scale that is completely alien to the old tissue, but which in and of itself has no possible way of achieving any reconciliation of scale. I don’t know if there is a lesson to be drawn from that — there probably is. But what I find absolutely unique, not only about the planning concept, but about the zone 2 approach, is the use of a very large scale to reestablish the bridge with the small scale of the traditional fabric.

ABDULAC: My question is also related to the point of contact between the new urban fabric and the older one. You have certainly managed a good transition between the two fabrics on the physical level, but there are other kinds of transition that are equally important and that occur on the social level. From experience, we know that conflict can arise between different populations in situations of this kind. That is why, in Tunis, for example, the authorities are rehabilitating a kind of belt between the renovated area and the rest of the traditional urban fabric, so the transition on both the physical and the social
level would be gradual. I wonder if ideas of that kind were
developed in Baghdad.

CHADIRJI: It was not taken into consideration in the
Bab al-Sheikh project. I did not consider it to be part of
the immediate planning, but something to be tackled later
on. I was aware of it, but did not regard it as urgent. How-
ever, in other projects of Baghdad, let us say Haifa, it was
considered, because Haifa, although basically conceived
again in mid-1980, was much larger and more complex.
Extensive studies were done; we introduced the concept of
graded buffer zones, with each grade or category treated
in a different way.

In Bab al-Sheikh it was not tackled, because it was
not clear in my mind when I started in 1980 that the prob-
lem needed resolution. By the beginning of 1982 the
magnitude of the social problem had become clear to me,
and I stressed to the government in many reports that a
new, very competent organization should be established,
maned by people trained to control and manage these
large projects. I hope they are doing something about it. If
they do not, socially these large projects will probably be
complete failures.

BIANCA: The whole social question can only be solved in
a comprehensive context, looking at all the remaining bits
of the historic fabric in correlation with the modern proj-
ects that are now implemented. Rifat was too modest to
mention it, but he was the one who initiated the new pro-
ject for the Rusafa area whose objective was to establish a
correlation between what is left of the historic fabric and
the new development and to harmonize both within a
comprehensive project. He worked on it for about eight
months.

DORUK PAMIR: Certainly Mr. Mutschler's is a very
charming project, but I see it as a restoration project and
not as a possible housing solution for an Islamic society.
It is large-scale, if we add the old part, and it very sensi-
tively follows the order that was once there. But what if the
commission had been to design a housing quarter for a
totally new place, one that was not part of an old texture
or historic area? Would one build something like that?
Mr. Chadirji remarked that unless there is some kind of
technological involvement or technological development
in a society, it cannot create a viable culture. That, I think,
is a terribly important and terribly correct diagnosis of
the situation. But elsewhere the prevailing attitude, especi-
ally when dealing with Islamic—which are technologically
backward—countries, is that technological imagery is out
doing context. Tange's proposal did not receive tremendous
support from this group; if it had been more rural, every-
body would have been happy. But we know that the reason
why Islamic societies are in their present situation is
precisely because of their criminal neglect of technology
over the past three hundred years.

So one wonders: should not designers somehow start
introducing technology straightforwardly, on its own
terms, and not disguised behind mud brick or a mash-
rabiyya? A vast ugly parking lot is much more education-
to a society of that nature than a very well-hidden traffic
pattern. We are somehow mixing up the issues. This kind
of attitude is probably extremely helpful in Western soci-
eties, which are up to their necks in technology. It at least
represents some kind of relieving balance. But in develop-
ing societies we should not be so scared of introducing a
certain display of technology. We are told that the Pomp-
dou Center is very hard to maintain, so we should not
experiment with such things any more. But if you look at
past history, the glorious times, people were always able
to cope with whatever the highest technology was that
they had. They made art out of a dialogue with the tech-
nology that was available.

CHADIRJI: Sometimes we talk as designers and some-
times we talk as sociologists. We should distinguish
between them. The introduction of a high-tech building is
possible only if you can afford to maintain it as a good
example, as an exhibition to promote technology. But
sooner or later, in this century or next, standards of tech-
nology will level out somehow and be equally acceptable
in every part of the world. What I meant by indigenous
technology referred not to architecture as such, but to cul-
ture and production in general. I maintain that you can-
not really establish your own culture unless you have your
own technology, and by technology I do not mean partic-
ular tools or machines or know-how. I mean the modes of
production. The globalization of the modes of production
means that Europe and America are losing their individ-
ual cultures. In two centuries do we really want all build-
ings everywhere to look alike? It is already happening. All
over the world we have entered into another vicious circle
from function to stylist. We already lack indigenous
technology in car design. Italians have taken over the
design of Japanese, American, and British cars, and it is a
pity really that one can no longer distinguish one from
another. Variety is lost. It is the trend and the pace of
future production, no doubt about it. But for that very
reason we should make a determined effort to put an
indigenous stamp on things, and that is what I mean by
indigenous technology.

In the past it was possible to introduce features
because local technology was ready to absorb imported
technology; one can see this in the Renaissance. What
happened in England when Dutch technicians came
t here? The incoming expertise left little trace because the
local building technology was strong enough to absorb its
innovations. Only rarely in the history of mankind was
one technology overwhelmed by another, and when it
happened it happened because the local culture was not
strong. A very good example is Petra in Jordan, a city
built by nomads who suddenly became rich for one or
another reason, and whose architecture is not very refined
Roman architecture. Something like it is happening in our
own countries. We are simply importing international
globalized industry and technology without understand-
ing it or absorbing it, and this has caused a split between
culture and actual practice.

CORREA: That is a very good distinction. The techno-
logical can be shaped by the political and cultural. In the
nineteenth century, France had a railroad system, and so
did England, and so did Germany—in other words, their
technology was already pretty much the same—and still
they managed to retain their totally different identities. In
this century that has changed; cultures have become amalgamated. But does this mean it is no longer possible to do something which will be absolutely valid from a technological point of view and does not at the same time import some kind of cultural imperialism?

CHADIRJI: It depends entirely on the project, its cost, its rationale. Sometimes the most unreasonable, the most uneconomic project will be accepted if the nation wants it for reasons of prestige. Yes, I would accept it as a valid experiment. Why not? After all, all these projects, in my opinion, are experiments. We are trying to use international technology to solve local problems, and that is why I call them experiments. They are not part of the culture of the country, but that does not mean they could not form a basis for future work that would be indigenous.

MUTSCHLER: You cannot simply eliminate technology, nor do you have to. In German towns you can drive a car just as you can in American towns, but I don't think Germany has lost its character or culture just because it has accepted that American technology. So why can you not accept the fact that the Iraqi people want to have those things too? Our task is not to ignore that fact, but to fix up an area or a building with the technology people want to have in it and, in doing so, to create an environment in which they would like to live. That is all we can do.

QUESTION: I would like to have an idea of what materials were used in this project, especially for the façades, and why they were chosen.

MUTSCHLER: The main material for the exteriors will be brick. Rifat and I had a long discussion about the size of the brick. I insisted on a German measure, and he wanted a bigger one. We reached an agreement when he convinced me that the measure for European bricks had originally come from Baghdad.

CHADIRJI: It is true. I even went and measured the bricks in many buildings in that area, and I insisted that all consultants use that particular size. Then I discovered the size was no longer made in Baghdad, and no factory there was willing to make it. Next morning, I asked the mayor to establish a factory. The same day he agreed, and now we have a new factory producing correctly sized bricks for the project.

There is another point about the esthetics of these projects. In Baghdad around 1950 we started to try to synthesize traditional with modern features. Another trend was to follow the Egyptian or Lebanese model of replicating old forms and inserting those replications into a modern framework. The latter trend, which arose partly under the influence of the ruralism of Hassan Fathy, reached Baghdad about 1964, and the two — to synthesize or to replicate and insert — began to compete. I am very much against replication because I don't think it is technically possible, so wherever I could I promoted the syntheses process. The consultants for all these projects, without exception, were asked to synthesize rather than to replicate forms and insert them into a modern framework.

CORREA: Someone said, no building is better than the architect who designed it or the contractor who built it or, he added, the client who commissioned it. As we saw here, when one has an intelligent client with an intelligent brief, then the architect performs in a completely different way. I would venture to suggest that Professor Mutschler, working with some other client, might have produced quite a different design. We also learned from this presentation that having a large number of consultants, to the extent that it disaggregates the problem and gives smaller portions to each one, is actually a useful thing, especially when it comes to housing. One of the great failures of modern architecture is supposed to be housing, but that is unfair because only modern architects have had to attempt the problem of mass housing. The Greeks, the Romans, the Moghuls left it to the people to produce. The minute we try to produce huge quantities of housing (whole townships or whole cities), we find ourselves in a trap. This project avoided that trap through disaggregation. Involving a great many consultants also builds up momentum and excitement, and to the extent that they can interact with the local society, I feel they can act as catalysts, because the ultimate objective is to inspire the indigenous architects in that society — for they are the ones who are going to change it.

This project also showed us that we can have continuity and change; it does not have to be an either/or proposition, as Stefano has already pointed out. Once we admit that change and continuity are not mutually exclusive, the door is open to the possibility that the Islamic world can also produce something for this century. That door should be left open; not that we ought to disown our past — of course it must affect us. But the ability to free oneself from it now and again is the real strength of the West. However much they love their past, they — and the Japanese, too, for that matter — are always free to step out into the future.