Rebuilding Iraq
1955–58

MODERNIST HOUSING, NATIONAL ASPIRATIONS, AND GLOBAL AMBITIONS

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Among the grand modernization programs that shaped the socio-spatial landscapes of post-World War II Middle East, the national program of Iraq stood out for its ambition and intensity.¹ To the eyes of Western development experts that flooded the region, Iraq provided an unusually favorable ground for modernization, because of its low population density, abundant water supply, large tracts of fallow land, and most important, its oil reserves that promised to meet the country’s capital requirements for the foreseeable future.²

SEEN AS AN IMPORTANT Middle Eastern bastion against communism, Iraq was given abundant Western support for development, with the hope that it would not replicate the experience of Egypt, where a 1952 revolt brought to power Gamal Abdel Nasser with his Soviet-allied policies.³ For similar reasons, the increasingly unpopular Iraqi government, which operated under Hashimite Kings installed by the British in 1921, was eager to advance socioeconomic reform, hoping to weld the young nation together and secure social stability.

WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT IN 1950 of the “Iraq Development Board,” a quasi-governmental body, an accelerated program was implemented to advance the modernizing agendas of the State and its foreign advisors. Chaired by Iraq’s premier himself and supported by British and American consultants, the Iraq Development Board had at its disposal the lion’s share of the oil revenues (which increased dramatically in the early 1950s as foreign ownership of the Iraqi petroleum diminished), and it initially focused on agricultural and industrial growth, by funding the construction of dams, irrigation and drainage systems, power plants, bridges, roads, and factories.⁴ By the middle of the 1950s, however, the Development Board was also increasing its attention to shaping physical environment. One of its strategies was to invite famous Western architects (including Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto, and Frank Lloyd Wright among others) to design public buildings particularly in Baghdad, the administrative center of the new nation and a magnet for new business. Charged with introducing modern architecture as both a symbol and an instrument of modernization, these architects turned the Iraqi capital into a site of ambitious modernist experimentation.⁵

A second important strategy for shaping the physical environment focused not on individual built forms by world famous signature-designers, but instead on mass housing, town and country planning, and community development. Several Western consultants proposed plans for urban and rural areas to facilitate the spreading...
of the population around the land and help locate workers (especially for oil production) where needed. Housing, in particular, was given special importance because it was increasingly recognized as a means to reach out to the wider public which was "becoming impatient for more visible signs of progress than the Board has been able to show." The need for gestures of reform appeared particularly urgent, because some government circles were beginning to see "uncomfortably obvious" parallels between Iraq and Czarist Russia, and were nervously hoping to secure the regime's future. With this urgent desire to improve housing, the Iraq

Fig. 1. Doxiadis Associates, Plan for Model Community, West Baghdad, 1958

Development Board once again sought to align its nation-building aspirations with the social and formal agenda of modern architecture and urbanism. This essay investigates the role of mass housing projects within the larger modernization program of Iraq. It focuses on the work of the Athens-based firm, Doxiadis Associates, which was solicited by the Iraq Development Board in 1955 to outline a comprehensive housing program for the entire country. It examines, in particular, one of the firm’s first projects, the model community for West Baghdad. Moving from general planning principles to the design of specific housing units and public squares, the essay demonstrates how Doxiadis’s conceptions of social reform and regional particularity became intertwined with the Iraqi regime’s aspirations to assert a young nation’s modernity and nurture pride among its citizens. Ultimately, these reflections on mass housing add another perspective to recent studies on modern architecture in Iraq, which primarily examine civic buildings in Baghdad.⁹

DOXIADIS AND THE IRAQ DEVELOPMENT BOARD

Constantinos Doxiadis, who during the late 1940s had administered the Marshall Plan aid to Greece, was well known among international development circles, and he secured the commission in Iraq after the recommendation of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.¹⁰ His Greek background made him free of “an imperialist stigma” and distinguished him from most other Western consultants, advisers, and technicians that were streaming into Iraq.¹¹ What made him even more appealing to the Iraq Development Board was his planning approach of “Ekistics,” which emphasized a rational and scientific version of architecture and endowed his proposals with an apolitical authority. Defined as “the science of human settlements,” Ekistics rejected the earlier modernist emphasis on individual artistic expression, and—drawing on post-WWII architectural debates in Europe that challenged mechanistic views of functionalism—it emphasized the role of architecture as a container of multiple human needs, meant to encompass physical and economic, as well as social and psychological needs. Ekistics’ claims to comprehensiveness and scientific detachment opportunely obscured its ideological leanings, which were largely aligned with the agenda of international development institutions to restructure the so-called underdeveloped countries of the globe according to the paradigm of the industrialized West. In fact, Doxiadis’s standard claim was that his clients were simply the “common people” of any society, “communist and capitalist alike.”¹² From the perspective of the Iraq Development Board, such claims to apolitical neutrality conveniently concealed the anticommunist fears and pro-Western alliances that motivated the board’s own modernizing agenda.

**Fig. 2. Doxiadis Associates, Plan of Community Sector, West Baghdad, 1955–1958**

**Fig. 3. Doxiadis Associates, Model of Community Sector, West Baghdad, 1955–1958**
on each situation’s needs and potentials, Ekistics promised to overcome the homogenizing, and ultimately Eurocentric, preoccupations of other modernist approaches. His dual claims to a scientific legitimacy and cultural sensitivity constituted the right combination for the Iraq Development Board, whose eagerness in providing architectural symbols of a modern state was inextricably linked with a desire to champion a shared ideal of national identity and pride.

**MODEL COMMUNITY IN WEST BAGHDAD**

Doxiadis’s initial charge in 1955 was to create a national five-year plan for the improvement of housing conditions throughout the country, and his firm began with projects in Mosul, Kirkuk, Musayyib, and Baghdad. One of his firm’s first housing experiments was a model community in the Western part of the Iraqi capital, in an area enclosed by the roads to Damascus on the south and to Mosul on the east (fig. 1). The “Western Baghdad Development Scheme” was to house a population of 100,000, either through government-funded housing, or through self-help housing. The scheme comprised different “community sectors” of 7 to 10 thousand people, and each sector provided for administrative, social, educational, health and other community buildings, shopping centers, green areas, coffee houses and mosques. Echoing the social and functionalist logic of the “neighborhood units” of postwar British New Towns, the plan provided key social facilities within walking distance, favoring pedestrian movement (figs. 2 and 3).

Doxiadis Associates’ logic of functional separation extended to the system of local ordering. Each community sector of Western Baghdad was broken down into smaller socio-spatial units arranged hierarchically. The smallest, called “community class 1,” was constituted by ten to twenty families of similar income. A group of three to seven such communities made a community “class II,” also having a homogenous economic status. House types also corresponded to the income-based hierarchy, each promising to provide the basics of sanitation and safety. The hierarchical logic continued: an agglomeration of class II communities plus an elementary school was designated as a community “class III.” Class III communities of different income groups, plus a market, shops, a teahouse and a mosque, could constitute a community “class IV,” namely the “community sector” of 7 to 10 thousand. Doxiadis Associates’ overall plan for West Baghdad was actually a plan for a community class V (combining a group of sectors class IV), which was imagined as part of an even larger future urban and regional network.

Doxiadis contextualized his abstractions of “scales” and “hierarchies” by arguing that the smaller, class I, II, and III communities corresponded to sizes found in Iraqi towns and villages. The larger scales, then, were justified as necessitated by advanced transportation and communication technologies. These multiple scales aimed at the efficient ordering of the city, and also meant to dictate the organization of social groups. The smallest homogeneous residential communities were supposed to then interact among them on a “class III” level and beyond in a controlled intermixing of social classes that would gradually develop a “social balance amongst the several classes of the citizens.” This was Doxiadis Associates’ attempt at social engineering, in tune with the Iraqi regime’s campaign to eliminate sectarian and tribal divisions. Doxiadis Associates’ proposals, however, avoided any specific reflection on the city’s intricate tribal, nomadic, ethnic, and other social formations that created tight communities inside the city, and entirely overlooked recent radical demographic changes in the city (such as the influx of highly diverse rural population from North and South). Confident as they were that social, economic, racial and ethnic inequalities could be dealt away with by benevolent technocrats, the firm’s proposals were confined to vague references to a “proper” grouping amongst different communities that would allegedly create “a healthy community spirit.” A look at the plan can give an insight into what “proper” grouping of social groups actually meant: middle class housing was usually inserted between upper and lower income neighborhoods, as though to prevent direct contact between opposite sides of the economic spectrum. Some residential sectors were even separated with “green spaces” that acted as soft barriers between classes. In short, the proposed design strategies had more to do with an administrative ordering of the society, than with any vision of social equity. Such preoccupations with the rational ordering of both the urban fabric and the
society, understood more in visual and aesthetic terms, was typical of twentieth century high modernist urbanism and its grand visions for the rational engineering of social life. The irony in Doxiadis’s particular case is that he systematically framed Ekistics as an anti-stylistic approach that de-emphasized aesthetics in favor of addressing basic human needs.

LOCAL PARTICULARITY IN MASS HOUSING

Certain gestures within the overall plan attempted to accommodate local social habits and formal vocabularies, as though to insert local character into the rational methodology of housing. One such gesture was rural Arab knew in his ancestral home. The article went even further, conferring Doxiadis Associates’ interventions with an anti-communist spirit. By nurturing a strong sense of community, the article argued, the new housing opposed the “void and loneliness” felt in other, unsuccessful urban environments, which were threatening to make urban dwellers “overly susceptible to conversion by Communist agents.” In other words: the desire for harmony and community spirit was intimately tied to the anxieties of the cold war. The “gossip square” was accompanied by a few other gestures, such as the inclusion of hamams and mosques in each sector or the occasional covered market with a roof shape reminiscent of traditional souqs. Such

Fig. 5. Doxiadis Associates, House Types, West Baghdad, 1955–1956

the introduction of the so-called “gossip square” for each group of ten to fifteen attached houses that was to serve as “a modern substitute for the traditional gathering places of tribal life” and to facilitate the transformation of the village dweller into an urban dweller (fig. 4). Overlooking the deep-rooted orientalist biases implied in the name, the firm embraced the “gossip square” as an element that demonstrated its cultural sensitivity, and indeed, the strategy was effective in attracting favorable press. The New York Times referred to the gossip square to illustrate how Doxiadis’s housing in Baghdad compared favorably to other modernist interventions, by reproducing “the close family and tribal relationship the gestures, however, were still overpowered by the modular functional plan, and ultimately spoke more for orientalist nostalgias than for any profound understanding of Iraq’s public life, the intense heterogeneity of its society, or its aspirations to modernity. A similar criticism could be extended to Doxiadis Associates’ exhaustive studies of local climate and formal vocabularies. Climatic conditions were treated abstractly in terms of solar exposures, wind patterns, and rainfall data, never really becoming an integral part of material choices, spatial conceptions, or larger design sensibilities. Doxiadis Associates may have recognized the open-air courtyard and colonnaded upper gallery as typical of the region’s residential architecture,
but the firm’s own reinterpretations in its standardized “house types” pushed courtyards to the side or to the back of each unit, thereby doing away with any of its climatic benefits and secluded qualities (figs. 5 and 6). Similarly, Doshiadis Associates’ attempts to reinterpret wooden window screens with reinforced concrete produced larger patterns of openings that were not nearly as effective in increasing ventilation, in softening sunlight, or in providing a sense of privacy. This is why, despite all the research and experimentation, Doshiadis Associates’ housing units unfavorably compared to the old city’s mud huts with movable roofs, in terms of their microclimate. All in all, courtyards and screens were compartmentalized into elements that could be utilized in mass production. What ultimately prevailed was an aesthetic imperative of standardization (fig. 7), which left little opportunity to contemplate a more cultured conception of the human subject, or to perceive development itself as a cultural process tied to the locale.

DESPITE THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT’S attempts at securing political stability, a military coup in July 1958 led by General Abd al-Karim al-Qasim brought about the brutal deposition of the Hashemite monarchy and its replacement by a revolutionary republic with socialist leanings. New national modernization plans were characterized by a more overtly anti-Western spirit, and under these circumstances, Doshiadis Associates’ commission was cancelled in May 1959, leaving the Athens-based firm out of the new building boom of Baghdad in the following decade. By the time they left, however, Doshiadis Associates had completed the construction of hundreds of units, (in Baghdad, and elsewhere), that would become the precedent for many of the firm’s future projects.

FROM TODAY’S perspective, it is certainly easy to dismiss Doshiadis’s technocratic optimism that oversimplified the complexities of the urban environment, by assuming that communities and sub-communities could hierarchically fit into each other, and by jumping too precipitously onto a notion of social and economic harmony of parts and wholes. One will have to concede, nonetheless, that for all its pitfalls, Doshiadis’s interventions attempted to contemplate the dilemmas of Iraq’s post-imperialist identity in ways that perhaps compare favorably to rigid appropriations of local heritage—see, for example, Frank Lloyd Wright’s orientalizing references to Tales From a Thousand and One Nights, or the later Ba’th regime’s populist distortions of the country’s cultural heritage. Despite its flaws, Doshiadis Associates’ proposal significantly endorsed the role of post-WWII modern architecture in the messy realities of postcolonial nationhood. And, in fact, because of the ironies of his intervention, Doshiadis’s tactics of physical and social restructuring gain an altogether new relevance today, when new strategies for reconstruction and nation-building in Iraq are being debated all over again.

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NOTES
1 Iraq was described as “a country which finds itself suddenly propelled on a tremendous program of expansion and development” in Ellen Jawdat, “The New Architecture in Iraq,” Architectural Design 27 (March 1957): 79-80 (quotation on 79). See also Waldo Bowman, “Iraq’s Operation Boonstop: A Modern Mesopotamia is Molded,” Engineering News-Record (December 12, 1957): 34-54, which argues that “No similarly complete program for an underdeveloped country is underway anywhere else in the world” (quotation on 35).
5 Le Corbusier was invited to design a mammoth sports stadium, Walter Gropius with The Architects Collaborative, to design a
university campus, Alvar Aalto to design a civic center. Frank Lloyd Wright to design an Opera House, among others. For Western coverage of these projects at that time see Christian Science Monitor, “Architects Build Modern Baghdad,” Second Section (April 2, 1938). For a more recent overview of the modernization of Baghdad at that time, see Nicolai Ouroussoff, “In Search of Baghdad,” The Los Angeles Times (December 14–16, 2003). Current scholarship has begun to examine these projects in greater depth. See no. 9 below.


7 Bowman, “Iraq’s Operation Bootstrap,” 34. The importance of housing was initially emphasized by the British consultant Lord Arthur Scarfe, in his 1955 report to the Iraq Development Board, The Development of Iraq: A Plan of Action. Similar arguments were also made in The Economist, “Development in Iraq: Special Survey” mentioned above.


11 As Floyd Ratcliff, the American development consultant who collaborated with Doshiadis in Iraq, would put it, Doshiadis ‘represents something new on the international “technical assistance” scene.” A later New Yorker article would explain Doshiadis’s success as follows: “Doshiadis has the sort of European abilities that are needed—he is up on the latest planning techniques, and he runs his firm with Northern (or, “Western”) efficiency—but, being a Greek, he is free of the imperialist stigma. ...” Christopher Rand, “The Elstic World,” The New Yorker (1963): 12.


13 Ibid.


18 Ibid.

19 The pitfalls of High Modernist urbanism and its technocratic utopianism are insightfully examined in James Scott, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).


22 Ibid.


25 In the 1960s local firms took on a huge volume of work, and after the creation of the first school of architecture in Iraq in 1959, the number of local professionals grew dramatically.


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