

Monuments, (by) *Architects*, (for) *Governments*

A stamp issued in 1962 celebrated the passage of 1200 years since the founding of Baghdad. The city was designed as a kilometre-wide circle, with rings of functional structures situated along the inside of its walls. It was not built until two astrologers advised on the most auspicious date and time for its construction: 30 July 762 at 1:57 pm.

In its recent history, numerous political powers have seized control of Baghdad, each proposing its own promise of an ideal future that materialised in plans for constructing new or destroying old monuments. Every handover of power was, in certain instances, called “a revolution”, and every revolution demanded its own monuments, reassigned names to existing structures, and appointed as interlocutors the laymen who designed, raised, or justified these changes. Figures and statues from pre-revolutionary times were not well received by their successors.

On 12 July 1958, a confident Le Corbusier was pleased but not surprised to receive a telegram informing him that his design for Baghdad’s Stadium and Sports Centre had been approved. Two days later, on 14 July, a military coup overthrew Iraq’s monarchy and announced the formation of the Republic. Ongoing correspondence with Le Corbusier would confirm that the new government would not give up on the commission, but reshape it based on the subsequent political, economical and diplomatic conditions. The lives of almost all the people who appear in this history would end shortly after their involvement, except for one—the architect Rifat Chadirji, whose role would continuously re-adapt, interplay and develop. The narratives presented in this text are related to my art project *Plan for Greater Baghdad* which takes the Saddam Hussein Gymnasium, designed by Le Corbusier, as a guide to an archive of governmental commissions, architectural inventions, mediation, construction, defiance, documentation, analysis and abandonment of monuments, particularly in the context of the recent history of Baghdad.¹

Following the 1958 coup, the Republic of Iraq’s first Prime Minister, Brigadier Abdel Karim Kassem, called Rifat Chadirji to his office to request immediate designs for three monuments, of which only two were built: the *Monument to the Unknown Soldier* and the *Liberty Monument*, the latter with artist Jewad Selim, who realised its bronze sculptures. A Philips lighting expert advised how to illuminate the *Liberty Monument* with yellow light to give it an Assyrian appearance, while the former was illuminated with blue light to give it a contemporary ambience.

In Ferdous Square, *The Monument to the Unknown Soldier* was built quickly according to an organised production plan. It looked like the ancient Arch of Ctesiphon—as understood from a sketch published by Chadirji—with the figure of a woman’s body bending forward to embrace her martyred son lying on the ground. The arch, completed in 1959, was made of concrete and was featured on stamps and postcards alongside other historical and modern monuments. Chadirji wrote of its completion; “...when the concrete casting was completed in its assigned moulds, and the scaffolds started to disappear, the monument became visible. I noticed that there was a slight difference between the half circular tip of the arch and its side that extends to the ground. How I aspired to find the final work free from impurities.”² He assumed the responsibility for such a defect, “so visible in a beautiful perfect body. I console myself by telling her that if those who will come after think this monument deserves to stay, they will have the time to fix its imperfection.”³ There would soon be people to emerge who would decide that this monument would have to be destroyed, and when they themselves were to disappear, there would be yet others who would propose this monument be built again.

Le Corbusier returned to Baghdad in 1959, this time with one hundred and twenty new plans, adapted to the new location assigned to the sports centre. The change in site was due to new master plans proposed for the city, including one from urbanist Constantinos Doxiadis. A small drawing in Le Corbusier’s archive shows the shift in the Stadium’s location between the English Minoprio, Spencely & P.W Macfarlane city planner’s orientation and that of Doxiadis. Additionally, there is an Iraqi report on answers given by Le Corbusier to questions he received while in Baghdad on the Stadium project and the suitability of the new location. (To exit Iraq, Le Corbusier needed a permit from its Military Governor.)

In the same year, opposing members of the Ba’ath Party including Saddam Hussein unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Prime Minister Abdel Karim Kassem in Baghdad. Chadirji took a four-metre illustration of the Baghdad Master Plan to Kassem in the hospital, to convince him to not change the Stadium’s location. Kassem inquired about a blue line that he could see in the master plan. Since he has just survived the failed assassination attempt, he needed to appear soon after to greet and comfort the public as to his condition. There he announced a “future water canal that will link the Tigris to the Diyala Rivers.” The assassination attempt appears in a later state-produced film written by Saddam Hussein, televised widely in 1980s. In *The Long Days*⁴, the protagonist is a young Saddam Hussein dreaming of a public realm where “people dream and work in freedom”.⁵ The lead actor was Saddam’s cousin, guard and future son-in-law. The film depicts women taking to the streets calling Baghdad to revolt, to overthrow ‘the tyrant’ like it had done once before (the Prime Minister at the time of the monarchy toppled in 1958). Chadirji referred to those demonstrations in Baghdad around and after the events of the Revolution of July 1958, and how they inspired the base for *The Liberty Monument*.⁶ He visualised the banners people carried as a fifty-two metre wide concrete base lifted off the ground on two wedges. He called Jewad Selim to collaborate by envisioning the artistic inscriptions upon it. Selim illustrated the pre- and post-Revolution eras in a long mural of expressive bronze figures. Critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra writes on eleven figurate concepts in the monument,⁷ beginning from the far right with a galloping horse that invokes incidents on the morning of the 14 July 1958 when people began tearing down two statues of men on horses, being the British General Frederick Stanley Maude and the Iraqi monarch King Faisal, both responsible for the establishment of the post-First World War “State of Iraq”.⁸ In the mural, Jewad leaves the horse without a knight, as Jabra describes—the people toppled the rider, his icon was destroyed, and the horse, or Iraq, reclaims its freedom and authenticity.



Jabra also mentions how the Prime Minister somewhat incautiously implied that he should be depicted in the mural. In Chadirji's accounts, he names specifically a fellow artist as the one who mentions to Kassem that his image is not in the preparatory drawings or sample figures Selim has prepared prior to casting them in bronze. Chadirji speaks of the distress he and artist Jewad Selim felt over 'implied' demands by Prime Minister Kassem including a depiction of him in the commissioned *Liberty Monument*. News travelled faster to Selim in his workshop than Chadirji—by the time the latter arrived to visit Selim in Florence, the artist was already affected by worry and stress. To protect their monuments for posterity, they envisaged it necessary for them to be free from any depiction of a ruler, as any future revolution would bring about their destruction.

Jabra's mention of a second feature towards the far left of the mural was the portrayal of revolutionaries with raised arms and clenched fists, banners flying above their heads, with a bearing of facing towards the future. They are passing a child and a weeping woman who looks toward the direction of the rebellion, a mother embracing her child, a fallen martyr; and then an intellectual prisoner. Then there is an eighth feature, 'The Soldier', a strongly built man with a helmet, also with a similar forwards-facing appearance; he "jumps, his muscles tense, and his fists destroy all prison rods from every side. His body emerges from that of the people as if it's an explosion, and his hand carries a machinegun that will give a hand to those of the people."⁹ In the centre of the mural a sun disc adorns this soldier, and the shadows of all the three-dimensional figures rotate around the clock under the bright sun of Baghdad. 'Liberty' stands behind the bars that are about to be broken by the hand of 'The Soldier', with 'Peace' and 'Prosperity' to follow, accompanied by Mesopotamia's two rivers with their associated agricultural and industrial projects.

Jabra writes,
*For an artist to have completed this enormous complex monument (which he cast in Florence) in less than eighteen months was indeed a spectacular achievement. Spread out in fourteen eight-metre high groups over a fifty-metre long frieze, it stands in the heart of the capital, dominating Liberation Square. It embodies Jewad Selim's peculiar combination of power and lyricism, of the Iraqi and the Universal, together with a mystical tragic love for his country. In style, it is the final result of twenty years of study, experimentation and heart-searching.*¹⁰

Selim realised the monument's bronze sculptures, returned with them to Baghdad, but didn't live to install them. He died in 1961. Up until the inauguration day, Chadirji notes, the installed parts of the monument's mural were covered with gypsum so as to prevent artist Khaled Rahhal from reporting them to Kassem. Chadirji left Baghdad the day before the inauguration, and the monument survives until today. Rahhal did produce a statue of Kassem. Perhaps it was the statue that was dragged through Baghdad's streets following another military coup in 1963, or the one that was cut in half and stored in the National Museum's backyard, only to be rediscovered in the aftermath of the events of the USA-led invasion of 2003. The same year, and in the same square where Chadirji had once installed his Kassem-commissioned, Saddam-demolished, and Rahhal-replaced *Monument to the Unknown Soldier*, a statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled down at the Fall of Baghdad in 2003.

Chadirji was in prison serving a life sentence for declining to work on a government-financed¹¹ British project during the Ahmad Hassan Al-Bakr presidency¹², when Al Bakr's deputy Saddam Hussein became President in 1979, and when Le Corbusier's gymnasium was being built. Saddam released Chadirji to participate in a grand project of face-lifting of Baghdad, in preparation to host the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in 1983. Some time later Chadirji rushed to the site of *The Monument to the Unknown Soldier* upon hearing a presidential order for it to be demolished. He took a photo of himself near the rubble of the monument he designed and built in 1959. Chadirji says Saddam "was very well read, and very, very clever—but not as a politician, because you can't be both dictator and clever."¹³ As a young president, Saddam attended full day conferences on architecture organised in Baghdad. He had a preference for some arches and architectural styles but not others. Military officers rushed in and out of one of these conferences with papers for him to sign. These documents related to the Iraq-Iran war that erupted later in 1980. He cancelled the Summit project. Saddam continued to commission statues and monuments around Iraq, including those by Rahhal—a *Tomb of the Unknown Soldier*, the *Swords of Qadisiyah* or *Baghdad's Victory Arches*, and other public works. One of Rahhal's monuments was torn down in 2006.

Did Saddam desire to have his image on the *Liberty Monument*, or his name to mark the end of the battles fought to build the Gymnasium? In answer to Saddam's inquiries to whom Babylon's historical sites had belonged, archaeologists showed him the king's stamp on its bricks. Accordingly, he ordered the phrase, "To King Nebuchadnezzar in the reign of Saddam Hussein" to be inscribed on bricks inserted into the walls of the ancient city of Babylon during its reconstruction project. There was also a mural depicting Saddam Hussein, in military garb, humbly receiving a palm tree from the mighty Nebuchadnezzar. Blue skies lay behind them, and below are scenes of desert battles from different epochs.

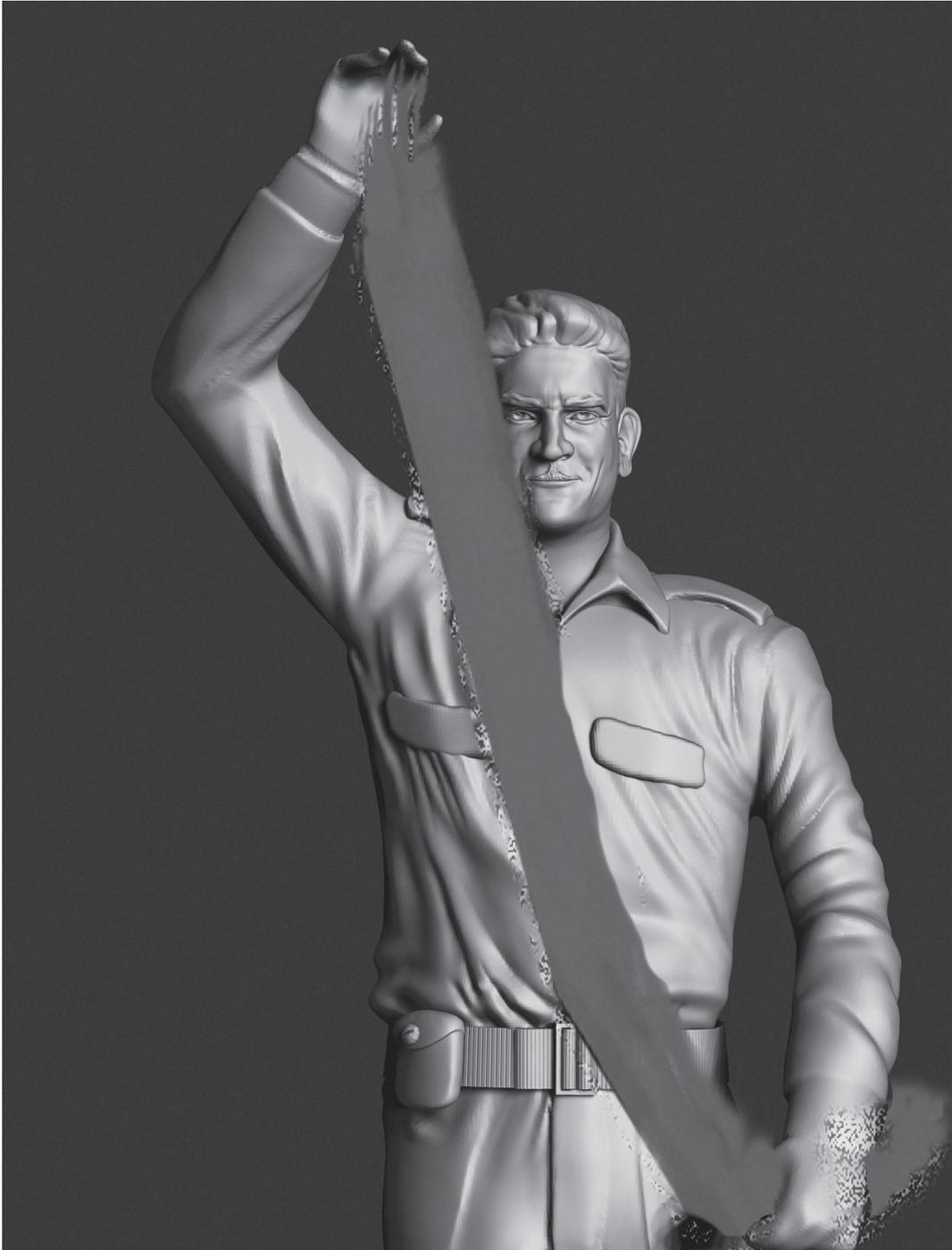
Le Corbusier's building was eventually completed after metamorphosing over twenty-five years of military coups, master plans, changes in state departments, and through local and international interventions. It became the Saddam Hussein Gymnasium with stamps, posters and brochures issued bearing his name and/or his image. A 1980 brochure states that the project cost 6.5 million Iraqi Dinars, its total built area 8,980 square metres, and seating 3,000 spectators between its indoor and outdoor viewing platforms, 1,800 of them indoors. The building has its own gardens, fountain, pedestrian walkways and parking, and was equipped with radio and colour television broadcast facilities. That this structure, and its history, is perceived as a monument for 'the Revolution' and for its sportspeople is confirmed in the 1980 brochure introduction:

*Here is why such a gymnasium is an essential need for our youth: this gymnasium is one of the most essential outcomes of the Revolution, for Iraq's young people and for supporting and developing its sportsmanship... Of the most special characteristics of this gymnasium is its novelty in Iraq. Together with the Al-Shaab Stadium and the Olympic Pool, which will be built next to the Gymnasium, the complex will mark the beginning of a Sport Centre. The State Commission for Buildings is proud to present this Gymnasium to our sportsmen.*¹⁴

The long delays in the commissioning process were alleviated by the minimal time spent on its construction. "Finished in record time", exactly twenty-two months from March 1978 to January 1980, "the Gymnasium's utmost architectural distinction is considered a great example of the contemporary architectural arts in Iraq. We wish for our sportsmen's efforts to succeed, and here is an initiative that furthers our support and giving."¹⁵ The Gymnasium site is in close proximity to another stadium. In his second visit to Baghdad, the Ministry of Public Works and Housing asked Le Corbusier, "What do you think about the creation of a second stadium in Baghdad?" He answered; "In principle it appears to me to be quite useless as it minimises the one or the other by a sterile competition between them."¹⁶ Was Le Corbusier aware the stadium was also being fought over by a Portuguese team of experts? The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation had offered to sponsor the building of a stadium, but not before it was removed from the scope of Le Corbusier's Sport Centre project. In 1958, the Foundation had a conversation with the Iraqi Minister of Development regarding sponsorship of the building of a stadium in Baghdad with their Portuguese expertise, following which the Foundation's president wrote to the Portuguese Ambassador in London;

*"There is no doubt that Le Corbusier is an exceptional architect, but his services will certainly be expensive, since they are greatly sought after by central and local governments all around the world. Furthermore, there is no certainty that he is an expert in the building of stadia... However we address the question, my dear Friend, you will certainly agree that there are great advantages that the task of erecting such a building should be trusted to one of our compatriots. Moreover, it would create a current between the two countries that should be improved. We might be able to arrange a meeting to exchange views... we would then be able to supplant Mr. Le Corbusier and make progress in gaining acceptance for our bid."*¹⁷

Chadirji was named the "representative of the government" in this agreement, and the first stone was symbolically placed on 14 July, 1962 to celebrate the fourth year of the Revolution.¹⁸ The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's winning stadium was named "Malaab Al Shaab" (The People's Stadium).





There is no equivalent word for “gymnasium” in Arabic, therefore terms like “indoor sports hall” and “sports hall” are given to this facility. Between 1980 and the present, the Gymnasium’s functions involved more than just sports: in addition to organising competitions and training, it hosted concerts, meetings and rallies for political parties. In 1990, the public danced at a concert for the first time. In 2014, The Sadrist Movement covered the walls and floors of the building with orange banners that read “Electors for Construction” for its parliamentary election campaign. Posted online there is a photo of a blacked out cover of the Saddam Hussein Gymnasium pamphlet published by the Iraqi Tourism Board in the 1980s. Similarly a Wikipedia page originally created in 2008 was altered in 2014, when a user succeeded in renaming the page on the project as “Baghdad Gymnasium”. As with Selim’s monument, on the walls of the gymnasium are Le Corbusier’s iconic modulators and another sun. There is also a clear Arabic inscription that reads, “Order is the key to life”.

Chadirji left Iraq in 1982, carrying with him the manuscript of his seminal book on Iraq’s modern architecture, *Al Ukbaidar and the Crystal Palace*—which he wrote and edited, with material smuggled into Abu Ghraib Prison by his wife as he served several months of his life sentence—in which one could read many of the processes of monument construction in Iraq. In another book, *A Wall Between Two Darkesses*, Chadirji wrote on repeated interrogations in the first phase of his detention, and an eventual unspoken understanding with his two interrogators; he once tried to ask them to grant permission to photograph monuments in Iraq upon his release. Whether through permission or not, in Chadirji’s multi-thousand collection of his own photography is a set of 35mm photographs of the Saddam Hussein Gymnasium taken in 1982.

Discovering these photographs in 2010 activated my research for *Plan for Greater Baghdad*, which is heavily based on archival and found material, and the stories of its protagonists. The project examines the protection of monuments for posterity and executing plans for Baghdad as an expression of absolute power. As many of those documents that record such expressions of absolutism are missing, I pieced together fragments of images and records, and narratives by local artists (such as Jewad Selim). In the project they are digitally sculpted, printed and displayed next to a model of the Gymnasium on a sloping base. Laid over the sculpted bodies of three-dimensional prints of historical characters are two-dimensional printouts, which in essence resemble the found narratives. The project gives shape to non-existing documents pertaining to the men who appear in the *Plan for Greater Baghdad*, and interposes

existing documents culled from various archives, manipulating them to produce a multi-layered timeline that pits the developments in the Gymnasium story against those of other monuments, artistic and architectural practices, and the changes in the political and urban map of Baghdad. The project premiered at *La Biennale di Venezia* in 2015, and has continued to develop since.

The faithfulness to the architectural design, the name that was bestowed on the structure, the short interrupted lives of those who were involved in and around the Gymnasium, the strategies utilised in fighting battles of architectural and artistic processes in times of shifting politics, and the monuments that were raised and destroyed inspire this research. It collects these appearances and re-materialises them into timelines or performed moments, or a complex map of repercussions, looking at where monuments, (by) architects, and (for) governments, could illustrate processes utilised in times of shifting states.

Notes

¹ The research for *Plan for Greater Baghdad* began in 2010, and was shown in *All the World's Futures*, the main exhibition of the 56th *International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia*, 2015 curated by Okwui Enwezor. See <http://alayounis.com/PFGB/>

² Rifat Chadirji, *Al Ukhaidir and the Crystal Palace*, Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books Ltd, 1991, p. 99

³ Ibid.

⁴ Directed by Egyptian filmmaker Tewfic Saleh in 1980

⁵ Quote from *The Long Days* uttered by the main protagonist

⁶ In a talk he presented to an Arab speaking audience, at an unidentified location. Posted on YouTube; <https://youtu.be/0rIQdmC8CjE>

⁷ Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *Jewad Selim wa Nassab al Hurriya (Jewad Selim and the Liberty Monument)*, Baghdad: Ministry of Information, 1974, pp. 136-158

⁸ After the 1920 rebellion led by Iraqi nationalists the British installed Prince Faisal, Arab leader of the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans during the First World War, as King of Iraq

⁹ Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *Jewad Selim wa Nassab al Hurriya*, op cit., p. 150

¹⁰ Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *The Grass Roots of Iraqi Art*, St. Hellier Jersey: Wasit, 1983, p. 22

¹¹ 'Contributors – Rifat Chadirji', *Banipal (UK) Magazine of Modern Arab Literature*, 2016, accessed 1 August, 2016; <http://www.banipal.co.uk/contributors/1021/rifat-chadirji/>

¹² He was arrested in October 1978 and jailed for twenty months. Balqis Sharara and Rifat Chadirji, *Jidar Bayn Dhulmataan (A Wall Between Two Darknesses)*, Beirut/London: Dar al-Saqi, 2004

¹³ 'Rifat Chadirji', BROWNBOOK, May 2015, accessed 30 July, 2016; <http://brownbook.me/rifat-chadirji/>

¹⁴ George A. George and Ghaleb Mousa Al Ameen, *The Indoor Sports Hall*, Baghdad: State Commission for Buildings – Ministry of Housing and Constructions, 1980

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Report by Director General, Technical Section 2, Ministry of Development of Iraq, Baghdad, titled 'Baghdad Stadium, Notes: From Mr. Le Corbusier, Architect', 4 May, 1959. Found in the Fondation Le Corbusier archives

¹⁷ From letter by José de Azeredo Perdigão, Chairman of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, to the Portuguese Ambassador in London, 4 July, 1958. Nuno Grande, 'The Baghdad Affair. How Diplomacy Supplanted One of the Last Major Projects by Le Corbusier', *Le Corbusier, 50 years later*. Conference proceedings, 2015, p. 7. Accessed 30 July, 2016; <http://ocs.editorial.upv.es/index.php/LC2015/LC2015/paper/viewFile/645/1272>

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 10-11