

TRAVELLING TO POST-WAR IRAQ IN 2010-11: HISTORIES AND DESIGNS IN CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

Since I left Iraq in 1991, I have made only two trips back to visit family; politics, uncertain situations and instability are the main reasons keeping me in exile (*ghurba* or *manfa* in Arabic). I made the first trip back to Iraq at the end of December 2003 and early January 2004. This timing was repeated for the second trip, at the end of December 2010 and early January 2011. On both trips I stayed in the family home in Fallujah.¹



Figure 1. Flight path to Baghdad; the total flying time from Dunedin to Baghdad is 24 hours one way.

The period between the two trips was associated with great tragedy for us as a family, as well as for the entire population of Fallujah, resulting from the first and second battles fought by the US army in the city during mid-to-late 2004. On 3 April 2004, a few days before Fallujah was plunged into the first battle, my family and I experienced a massive loss when our mother passed away; her death reflected the absence in Iraq of basic health services, which she needed to treat her diabetes.

Then shortly after, during November and December 2004, the entire civilian population of Fallujah was forced to leave the city before the second battle took place, one since described as the “bloodiest battle of the Iraq War.”² After two months in exile, my family returned to Fallujah to find the family home destroyed by fire, while the building housing our factory which produced domestic furniture had been bombed. For more than a year during these tragedies, I had no way of communicating with my family.



Figure 2. The Saad family home in Fallujah; the main entrance following the 2004 battle.

In this paper, I will consider my experience as a designer – thinking of design within its wider contexts – in post-war Iraq, discussing issues and presenting examples collected during my most recent trip to Iraq with the aim of articulating this travel experience from my position as a person “out of place.”³

HOME – TRADITIONS AND MATERIALITY

My memories of the design of our home were disrupted during this last trip. After my family had returned from their period of exile in 2005, the first job they did was to rebuild the family home, as well as their business. Because of the large size of our extended family, the original structure of our old family home was restored after the fire to accommodate my younger brothers' families. A new house was built on a section created by joining a small part of the original family home with land taken from its 'front garden.' This new house now accommodates the family of my third younger brother, as well as my three sisters, and is again known as the 'family home.'

My hardest task during my last trip was to familiarise myself with this 'new' family home. I kept asking where this and that was, and walking between the two houses in order to retrieve memories associated with specific spots, designs and material objects from the previous home. My memories of our earlier home keep my strongest emotions anchored there. I had personally designed and crafted all the joinery for it, as well as most of the indoor furniture, which had long remained a model of style and quality workmanship. Unfortunately, none of these objects had survived, except for a few pieces that were located on the second storey. “When our home is destroyed, or irrevocably changed, or is inaccessible to us (after emigration, for example), it can seem as if we ourselves are no longer whole, or are suffering bereavement.”⁴

The designs of newly built domestic houses in Iraq as I saw them during my last trip were totally different from the styles that were dominant from the 1950s to the 1980s. During these decades, Iraqis lived in an atmosphere of modernisation and the implementation of energetic state policies for economic development, activity reflected in their transformed lifestyles, especially in urban areas.⁵ New architectural styles were created to fill the massive demand for modern constructions in both public buildings and private houses. Certainly, local technical skills were stretched during this modification process, resulting in hybrid styles of modern architecture influencing the design of domestic houses — throughout the Middle East and in Iraq especially.

Iraqi families are used to living collectively. Because they comprise large extended families (my family, for example, has 12 members: two grandparents, two parents, and eight brothers and sisters), the traditional design of Iraqi houses provided creative solutions to the problem of accommodating large numbers of people living together. One solution was the 'open courtyard' (*houshe* in Arabic), designed to provide the family with a central meeting place during the day.⁶ This area was surrounded by utility rooms and bedrooms, and had effective links to the hospitality section of the house, to ensure privacy for the family and hospitality for their guests. The design of houses built since



Figure 3. Hybrid styles of modern architecture influenced the design of domestic houses in Iraq during the 1950s-1980s.

the 1950s has not coped well with the traditional lifestyle of Iraqi families, especially regarding their collective way of living – despite the many studies undertaken by respected Iraqi architects (such as Rfiat al-chadirji) to create unique designs for domestic houses in Iraq.

In place of the 'open courtyard' of traditional designs, architects of modern houses introduced a 'living area' created by joining the kitchen, dining and family sitting room together. However; from the point of view of practicality, in many houses this 'living area' failed to fully accommodate Iraqi customs and traditional ways of living – a subject addressed in numerous architectural and anthropological studies of the living practices of Iraqi families. Although these modern houses provided sound, durable structures, improved utility rooms and many modern conveniences, they failed to meet the needs of family members for appropriate interaction.

In design terms, these modern houses were functionally structured, mainly built from flat-planed walls clad in cement and brick or stone, with steel-framed glass windows on the exterior. In average-sized houses (3-4 bedrooms), the interior spaces were divided between two storeys; the first floor was dedicated to living and hospitality areas which covered 30-50 percent of this part of the building. Families sought to provide the best-quality furniture and accessories suitable for the hospitality activities of sitting and dining. The bedrooms were divided between the two storeys.

However, the new designs of domestic houses in some Iraqi cities and towns that I saw on my visits home have totally changed from my memories of previous architectural styles. The exterior façades of these new buildings

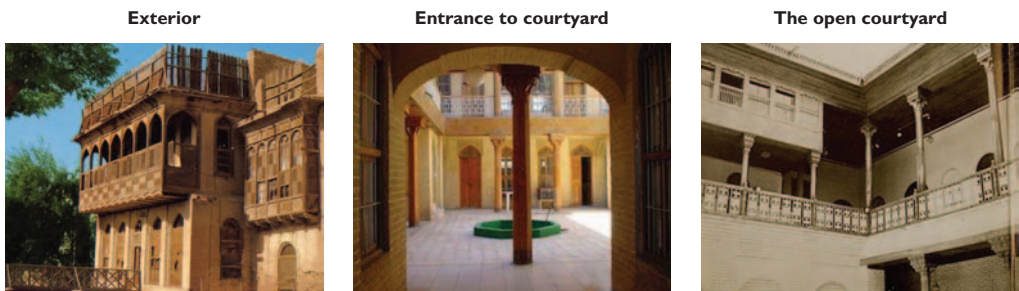


Figure 4. Some traditional designs of domestic houses in Iraq during the 18th and early 19th centuries.

display a style of heterogeneous architectural composition obtained by borrowing and modifying – with reference to local tastes and construction techniques – classical elements from ancient Western architectural styles mixed with traditional Iraqi ornamental elements. One popular current design features two long columns dominating the house entrance associated with both flat and curved walls, the whole edifice rising to two storeys and exhibiting a spontaneous mix of natural and synthetic construction materials such as marble, ceramic tiles, cement and wood, with large aluminium windows and lots of ready-made accessories. The interior design shows an attempt to restore the concept of the 'open courtyard' – although the open space in the contemporary version lies between the two wings of the house and is covered by a flat or dome-shaped roof. At the same time, these new houses maintain old traditions by dedicating an even larger proportion of the site for hospitality purposes than their predecessors, areas furnished extensively with accessories in a mix of styles.

There is no doubt that the contemporary design of houses in Iraq is addressing local experience – but in the sense that experience “is not something that is exclusively internal to the individual but is affected by the environment.”¹⁷ By attending to their inhabitants' collective ways of living, these new designs offer a way of adapting individuality to the living environment. The rebirth of tradition in the design of Iraqi houses exemplifies Dewey's dictum: “every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, from a design perspective, many contemporary buildings are disfigured by the use of fakes and poor imitations, reflecting the country's profound, long-term deprivation and isolation, weakening its continuity and connection with the past. Essentially, political and administrative corruption in Iraq is hindering progress towards developing policies and building codes based on consultation with professional designers with a view to accommodating the country's current needs and lifestyles.



Figure 5. An example of the contemporary design of domestic houses in Iraq.

THE TRANSITION OF MATERIAL OBJECTS

The process by which humans give value to products is a fascinating subject. The sophisticated philosophical arguments that fuel the constant debate on this subject in design studies circles are aimed at very practical solutions – to help manufacturers produce quality products and allow designers continued recourse to classical solutions through modifying the product's physical characteristics of form, function, materials and production methods, with the ultimate aim of producing consumer satisfaction.⁹ However, the principles of human-centred design (HCD) are introducing designers to the new phenomenon of 'user experience.' This approach offers specific design methods for designers to enhance the relationship between objects and people. The concept of experience, according to Margolin, is about 'the Human interaction with products – material or immaterial things that are conceived and planned. This interaction has two dimensions: Operative and Reflective. The operative refers to the way we make use of products for our activities. The reflective addresses the way we think or feel about a product and give it meaning.'¹⁰

At this point I would like to present an interesting example that helps us reflect on the subject of user experience. My example relates to the potential of a consumerist lifestyle which now faces Iraqis. The realities of war and economic sanctions greatly limited the importation of new products, and Iraqis managed to sustain themselves very well with what was available in their homes — especially 'old-fashioned' and 'quality branded' consumer products. However, since 2003, a massive flood of cheap and imitation-brand products has suddenly appeared and continues

to fill the markets, forcing Iraqis to change their buying habits in the direction of a voracious consumerism.

During my stay at home I noticed a brand-new water cooler in the house; my family clearly appreciated it very much, and had even covered it with a nice hand-stitched cloth. They told me that this was the best brand of the many available in the local market, and then my sister said:

“Qassim, have you noticed?”

I said, “Noticed what?”

“Your laptop [a MacBook] has the same logo that’s on our water cooler!”



Figure 6. The brand-new water cooler! The Saad family home in Fallujah, 2011.

POLITICS AND ART EDUCATION

During my stay in Iraq, I received some unexpected and unwelcome news regarding the future of art education in the higher Iraqi arts institutions. Here is the news as I heard it on the radio, and cited as commentary from bloggers:

The Iraqi Ministry of Education has banned theater and music classes in Baghdad’s Fine Arts Institute, and ordered the removal of statues showcased at the entrance of the institute. No explanation was given for the move.

Some students consider religious reasons to be the real motive.

“Prohibiting theatre and music in the institute for its so called ‘violation’ of religion is only an individual opinion touted by some people hailing from religious parties, but it is contradictory to the opinion of most religious clerics and scholars,” writer and politician Dhaya al-Shakarchi told Alarabiya.net.

Students also fear that the ban will extend to include other arts such as photography, directing, sculpting, and drawing.¹¹

Living in modern Iraq means being prepared to face all the problems that may arise from the absence of basic services, including security and safety for oneself and one’s family. Or, to put it another way, one must always be ready to accept the worst possible scenario, any time and anywhere. This is the reality of life for the majority of Iraqis today. However, at the time of my last visit I was temporarily ‘in place’ – a departure from my almost permanent situation of being ‘out of place.’ My peculiar circumstances caused me to spontaneously retrieve my previous memories in order to evaluate and deal with issues that arose while I was there.

However, this news of the banning of specific disciplines from being taught in Baghdad’s Fine Arts Institute probably did not mean a great deal to many Iraqis. For them, it is only one tiny issue amidst a mountain of contradictions. In fact, I failed to detect a serious reaction even from Iraqi artists to this move by the Ministry of Education. Irrespective of the criticism directed by some at the extensive role played by turbaned mullahs in the present process of overhauling education and rethinking educational philosophy in Iraq, their participation is part of a larger project aimed at rebuilding the education system. This project is sponsored by USAID and began following the occupation of the country in 2003. It also has the support of UNESCO, which directed participants at an international conference held in 2008 “to turn the education system around, reclaiming education’s capacity to reconstruct the intellectual, cultural and social quality of Iraq society.”¹² What, I wonder, will be the shape of such a future?

There was a time, which I and many Iraqis still remember, when Baghdad was a famous capital in the region, well known for its vibrant cultural life and particularly for the numbers of large-scale statues scattered throughout its urban fabric. In fact, Iraqis are still proud of their 'liberty' statue, situated in the biggest square at the busiest intersection in Baghdad. Sculpted by Jawad Salem, founder of the first sculpture programme in the Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts, the statue tells the story of the 'epic of liberty' from ancient Iraq. I used to pass it every day, driving from my home to the Academy of Fine Arts to study and then to work during the 1980s. I also drove past the building housing the Fine Arts Institute, the country's first modern art school, established in 1941 and teaching the disciplines of painting, sculpture and music with the aim of supplying schools with fine arts teachers. The institute, which is the cornerstone of the contemporary art movement in Iraq, still plays a unique role in promoting the arts in the region. I remember the pleasure I often felt just looking at the building, which was surrounded by large trees and had many statues from student projects displayed in and around it.¹³



Figure 7. Jawad Salem, *Liberty Monument* 1961, Nusub Al-Hurreya-in Arabic, Baghdad.

CONCLUSION: THE “WICKED PROBLEMS” THAT PERSIST

My visit home in 2010-11 was pleasant and enjoyable; I loved seeing my home after a long period of exile, and enjoyed staying with my family and meeting new generations of adults and children – ‘new’ members of my family whom I had never seen before, even though they all know me through photos and phone calls. Also during this trip, I met up with many of my friends; they are all older than the images I have of them in my memory. Here again, I found myself in places I had left behind for decades. Some of these places now seem very different and even gloomy – in fact, I felt very sad being ‘in place’ in particular locations, especially when I visited the industrial design studios in my old college.

Design specialist Richard Buchanan has coined the term ‘wicked problems’ in an attempt to address the massive contradictions facing contemporary social systems. According to Rittel (cited by Buchanan), these meta-problems constitute “a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing.”¹⁴ Furthermore, in his analysis of the types of problems impeding efforts to improve these systems, Banathy shows how these obstacles form a “system of problems rather than a collection of problems.”¹⁵ Peccie went further in analysing the nature of these problems or, as he termed it, ‘problematique,’ and was cited by Banathy: “Within the problematique, it is difficult to pinpoint individual problems and propose individual solutions. Each problem is related to every other problem; each apparent solution to a problem may aggravate or interfere with others; and none of these problems or their combinations can be tackled using the linear and sequential methods of the past.”¹⁶ One of the tasks of design studies is to propose new methods and practices that can help facilitate other disciplines’ efforts to achieve a better understanding of the problems aligned against the development of social systems.

In my current doctoral studies in industrial design, my research is focused on creating new design methods and adapting existing methods to help solve these complex and seemingly intractable kinds of problems embedded in social systems – specifically for the benefit of Iraqis. The interdisciplinary nature of my research is directing me to the importance of human development studies and the theory of the “capability approach.” According to Sen, this theory “is a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements ... The core characteristic of the capability approach is its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be; that is, on their capabilities.”¹⁷



Figure 8. The shape of the electricity grid in Iraq – the linesman's view.

In conclusion, I remain optimistic and look forward to the day when Iraqis will redirect their energies to find their way out of the dark tunnel they are living in right now. This time of darkness is not new for Iraqis; historical narratives from ancient times to the present tell of the many dark times through which Iraq has passed – a history of suffering reflected most poignantly in their love of sad songs.

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- 1 "Fallujah (Arabic: [فَلْجَة](#)) is a city in the Iraqi province of Al Anbar, located roughly 69 kilometers (43 miles) west of Baghdad on the Euphrates. Fallujah dates from Babylonian times and was host to important Jewish academies for many centuries." A small town in 1947, the city grew to a pre-war population of about 425,774 in 2003; in 2006 the population was estimated at 250,000-300,000. Within Iraq, it is known as the "city of mosques" for the more than 200 mosques found in the city and surrounding villages. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallujah>.
- 2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Battle_of_Fallujah (accessed 24 Jan 2011).
- 3 Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (London: Granta Books, 1999).
- 4 Elizabeth Teather, "Introduction: Geographies of Personal Discovery," in *Embodied Geographies: Spaces, Bodies, and Rites of Passage*, ed. EK Teather (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). Cited in Rose McLeod, "Te Waka me te Haerenga: An Artist's Journey to Te Waipounamu," *Scope: Art 3* (2008), 32-41.
- 5 Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).
- 6 Elizabeth Fernea, *Guests of the Sheikh: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989).
- 7 Victor Margolin, *The Politics of the Artificial: Essays on Design and Design Studies* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
- 8 *Ibid.*, 40-41.
- 9 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 2002).
- 10 Margolin, *The Politics of the Artificial*, 41-2.
- 11 http://www.thememriblog.org/blog_personal/en/print32654.htm (accessed 20 Jan 2011). See also <http://www.bassamsebti.com/2010/12/new-islamic-republic-of-iraq.html#more> (accessed 20 Jan 2011).
- 12 UNESCO, "Stop Jeopardizing the Future of Iraq," *International Conference on the Right to Education in Crisis-Affected Countries* (Paris, 2008), 4.
- 13 Stop press 2010: the new minister of education (from the opposition party) has cancelled the former minister's resolution on the banning of the teaching of specific disciplines in the Baghdad Fine Arts Institute.
- 14 Richard Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," in *The Idea of Design*, eds Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 14.
- 15 Bela Banathy, *Designing Social Systems in a Changing World* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1996), 29.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Ingrid Robeyns, "The Capability Approach: A Theoretical Survey," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 6:1 (2005), 93-117 at 94.