

Wright's Vision For The Capitals: Baghdad and Phoenix

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In 1957, Frank Lloyd Wright was commissioned to design the Opera House for Baghdad as part of his Master Plan for the capital of Iraq. The same year, he proposed a design statement- an "Oasis" for Arizona State Capital in Phoenix, Arizona. Although both buildings were never realized, they continue to inspire their respective city. This study compares the two buildings as a case study to disclose the differences and unique similarities of Wright's modern design approach to eastern culture compared to the western context.

BACKGROUND

Baghdad, the birthplace of ancient civilization was a laboratory for modernist architects to infuse modern designs and ideology into the city. During the 1950s, eleven western architects were selected by the Iraqi leadership and Iraq's Development Board (IDB) to reshape and re-construct the image of Baghdad into modernity.¹ This study investigates the question of the modernist approach towards eastern versus western context- using one prominent architect's designs as a case study to shed light on how the architect dealt with the eastern context (city of Baghdad) to similar buildings designed by the same architect in the western context (Phoenix, Arizona). American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright's unbuilt project of the Opera House of Baghdad (1957) is compared to Wright's proposal for the Arizona State Capital- "Oasis" (1957).

At first glance, the two buildings might be different, based on unrelated architectural formal and functional purposes. However, the selection of the two buildings is based on inherent similarities- appropriate to compare the context of the eastern with the western approach to design. Although both buildings were never realized and remained as envisioned by the architect but continue to inspire their respective city time after time. The two buildings are proposed in the same year- 1957; in almost the same climate conditions- hot and arid weather environment;² both to be situated in an important site location- the capital of the country and capital of the State- act as an essential factor to transform the city. Both buildings are

proposed in the transitional period of the city with architecture typology as the driving force fusing the new and emerging internationalism with the heritage in their respective region.

VISIONS

MODERNISM

Frank Lloyd Wright was disappointed with the new officially approved capital for Arizona with the Nineteenth-century design that excluded the rich landscape with colorful contours of Arizona. Without commission, Wright envisioned Arizona's capital building that reflects the simple, direct, and materials characteristic of the State with methods of economics and modern techniques that signify and develop Arizona's destiny into becoming a "playground of the United States of America."³ The new proposal by Wright creates a sheltered air-conditioned spaciousness with a new freedom that would resemble the modern times for Arizona as the Alhambra once stood in Spain. He addresses the citizens of Arizona "The State is your home! Your spirit should there find appropriate expression."⁴ Wright proposed an architectural statement or an architectural edifice as more suitable to the unique character and beauty of the Arizona landscape.

REGIONALISM

The urban designer and architect, Mina Marefat has eloquently shed light on Wright's Greater Plan for Baghdad. This study investigates one of the projects proposed by Wright- the design of the Crescent Opera Civic Auditorium in Baghdad. It was the opportunity for Wright to explore an urban scale project and apply his childhood interest in the tales of the Arabian Night- A Thousand and One Nights, to capture the spirit of Baghdad. Wright envisioned a building form associated with Mesopotamia as "the birthplace of civilized life and the source of compelling symbols, narratives, and persons, any and all of which could be materials for imagining a unique modern identity."⁵ He saw the

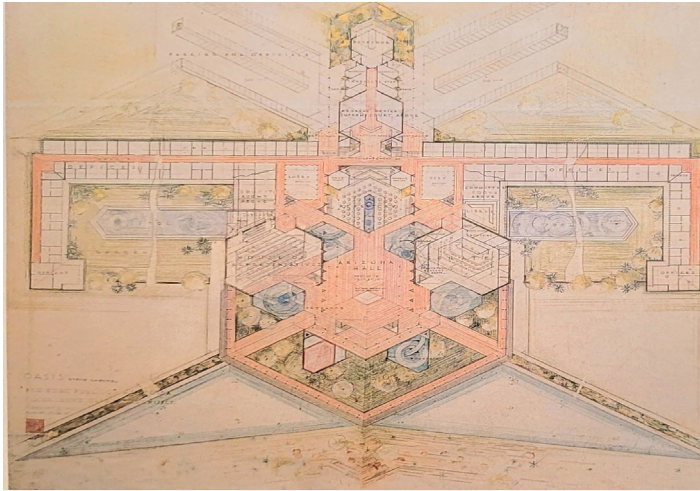


Figure 1. Plan- Arizona State Capitol, Phoenix, Arizona, 1957 by Bruce Brook Pfeiffer FLLW FDN #5732.

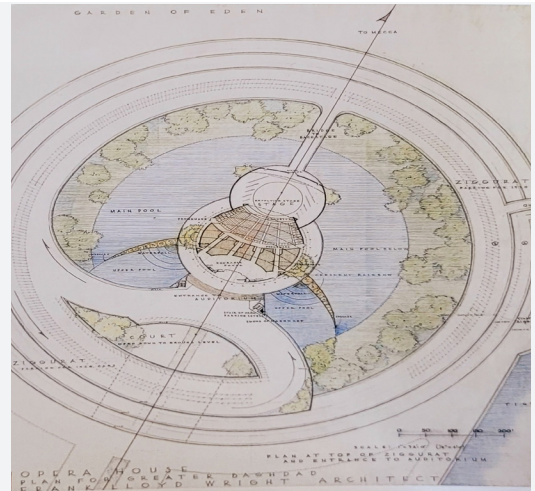


Figure 2. Plan- Crescent Opera House, Baghdad, Iraq 1957 by Bruce Brook Pfeiffer FLLW FDN # 5733

opportunity for Iraqis as a chance to reinvent itself on its own term- the term in which Rifat Chadirji (Baghdad architect) would later call a regionalized international architecture of Iraq- based on “acceptance of modern Western aesthetic values and technology as part of an international cultural and a global economic system.”⁶ As well as a consciousness of the regional traditional values, influence, and designs that were congenial to the values of ancient and traditional cultures intending to generate a modern regional architecture.⁷

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S VISION

For Arizona- “I present a true twentieth Century economical building of a character suited to grace Arizona landscape as seen, for instance, in unique Papago Park- a park near enough to an urban center to be convenient but yet be unspoiled by mediocrity- its appropriate use thus heightening its beauty. The park and the capital together as here presented make a harmonious circumstance of which future Arizona will have good reason to be proud.”⁸

—Frank Lloyd Wright to Citizens of Arizona

For Baghdad- “[My role] is not only to develop but to preserve what is characteristic of the place and its rich and long history. No architect should come here and put a western cliché to work”⁹

—Frank Lloyd Wright to Society of Engineers of Baghdad

This study focuses on four comparative analyses of both buildings in terms of the plan (organizational structure), circulation and orientation (movement & light in space), façade (building elevation and perspective), and material selection & color used in the respective projects. Theoretically, the research explores the influence of local architects in a process to enrich the design and de-colonizing phenomenon of western influence or what is considered ‘other’ cultures in the eastern context.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

PLAN- ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The plan organization of the Opera House is a series of elaborate concentric circles tapering to an almost dome-shaped building intersected by a large horseshoe crescent (Figure 2). The Opera contains a revolving stage, promenade, orchestra, foyer, auditorium, main pool Ziggurat parking, and bridge to the backstage, and beneath the main opera house is a planetarium- all in circular form. At the center of these intersects a principal axis oriented towards Mecca. This complex geometry of nature, the rhythmic repetition of the same form, the circles, the spheres, and ziggurats is Wright’s attempt at a harmonious unity pervading all realms- natural, spiritual, and social. His conceptual approach to spatial circular geometry is based on Baghdad’s original plan of circular forms proposed in the 8th century. The Opera House at the heart of the Plan for Greater Baghdad is the culmination of a Wrightian spatial symbolism of wholeness and harmony; with interlocking circles of Garden of Eden Park based on circles-within-circles pattern representing cultures of the world. The parking further encircling the opera house is Wright’s solution to the ever-vexing parking problem.¹⁰ It is Wright’s way of encouraging the Iraqi people to value “the priceless heritage of your own ancient intelligence and preserve your own spiritual integrity according to the best of the great oriental philosophies, the spirit which has inspired both East and West.”¹¹ Wright dives into history and draws precedence to find a meaningful presence in architecture within the modern world for the new Baghdad.

In sharp contrast, the plan organization for the Arizona state capital was inspired by the landscape of the desert plain and red rock mountains of Phoenix. The central portion of Wright’s capital is in a hexagonal shape plan and symmetrical design

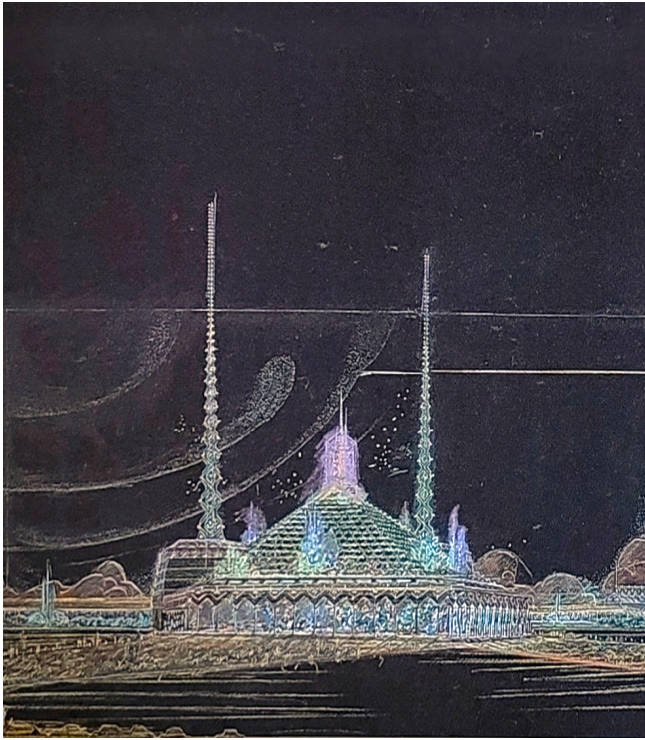


Figure 3. "Oasis" Arizona State Capital by Bruce Brook Pfeiffer

rectilinear form divides the house of the representative from the senate sections and is subdivided by gardens and office space. Described as the "Oasis" by Wright the plan also contains Arizona Hall, a portico, detached two houses of the legislature, offices, and colonnade, and gardens with a pool on both sides—all in rectilinear form (Figure 1). "Over the entire structure was a great lattice dome of cast concrete copper, acting as a "shade tree" for the court below. The parking location is further enforced by straight diagonal lines almost 45 degrees from the state supreme court and governor's office extended beyond the hexagonal shape in the middle. This court was to be dedicated to the citizens of Arizona and to have exhibition spaces, a restaurant, and gardens with fountains."¹² While the Opera House in Baghdad plans draw inspiration from the history and evolution of Sumerian, Babylonian, and Abbasid architecture of great ramps, geometry, and fictionalized Islamic style, the capital plan is inspired by the beautiful park at the city's edge, the red rock mountains, and the desert plains of Phoenix, Arizona. Both plans envisioned a transitional period of the city, for Baghdad into regional modernism, and in Phoenix's case to use its indigenous form with the simplicity that corresponds with the state's economy over the industrial and technologically driven design pained with congestion problems.

CIRCULATION & ORIENTATION- (MOVEMENT & LIGHT)

Wright oriented the Opera house towards the direction of Mecca, with clearly defined arrow marks in both perspective and plan drawings To Mecca. If the intent was to connect the

Opera with Islamic architecture and philosophy to context the building in eastern ideology, that would suggest an ambiguity in concepts of local tradition and heritage. This would be an obvious example of Orientalism described by Edward Said. Orientalism is a way of seeing and distorting differences between Arab people and culture compared to European and western culture. A stereotyped way that is regarded as embodying a colonialist attitude, is particularly significant to understanding, interpreting, and revealing the impact of Western superiority's attitude, dominating, and having authority towards the Orient (the Near East). Said argues that "the orient was almost a European invention and had been a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes remarkable experience since antiquity."¹³ Apart from mosques, commercial and civic buildings have no significance to face the direction of Mecca. Therefore, orienting a building to face Mecca direction as a way to link it with local heritage would only show the naïve nature of design within the eastern context. Where instead of the design being viewed as a "fantastic" project, rather would simply imply the project is fantastical- unrealized and confusing ideas and enforcing ideological views of the western architect towards the eastern building context.¹³

However, if the design is meant to have Mecca direction as a way of implying southern orientation, then the building would fit into its appropriate context- a southern-facing building to gain maximum exposure to the sun and therefore has nothing to do with religious significance. Consequently, the southern-facing design (still Mecca direction) would be in its right orientation to allow light to funnel into the spaces. Other architectural works by Wright give importance to a southern-facing building, the case in point is Fallingwater with its south-eastern orientation with maximum exposure to the sun, and the Tonkens House residential- south-facing project built a few years before the Baghdad commission.

Wright first hand experience with the indigenous nature of the Arizona land, and more than familiar with the Phoenix context from his own Taliesin as well as other notable project. suggested the Arizona State Capitol be moved a few miles away from the urban density of downtown Phoenix to avoid the city's congestion problem into a more picturesque area near Papago park backed by red rock mountains and in the open plains of the desert area. This would allow easy access to the building, take advantage of the terrain of the area, and provide an Oasis- a shining light, a jewel of the desert within the desert plains of Phoenix, Arizona (Figure 3).¹⁴ The hexagonal shape in the middle encourages diagonal circulation with the separation of legislative branches allowing linear movement to reach each court. Contrary, the Opera House in Baghdad has an inward focus creating a circular movement almost like a ziggurat formation and conceptually encouraging Iraqi to look inward and focus on their tradition and heritage. Unlike the Arizona capital, light is not the main feature, but rather acoustic is the dominating factor for the Opera building.

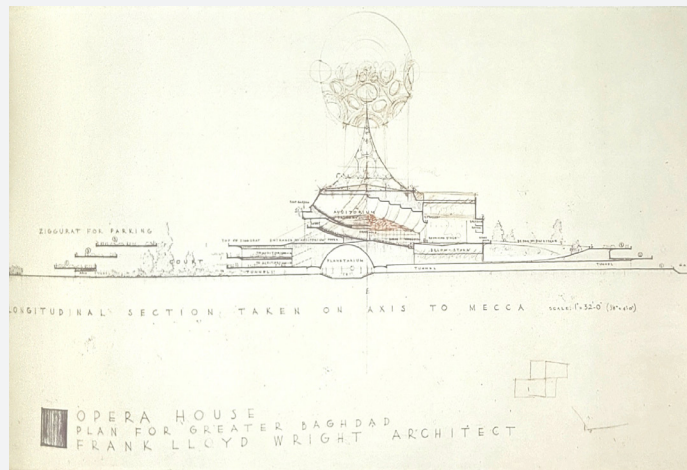
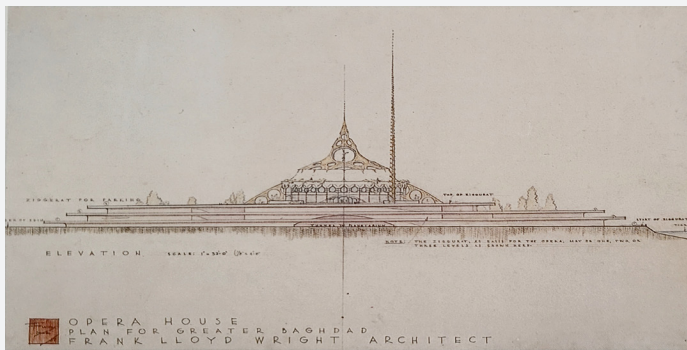


Figure 4. Section and Elevation of Opera House, Baghdad
By Bruce Brook Pfeiffer FLL WFDN # 5733.

FACADE- BUILDING ELEVATION

The Opera House is ring-shaped by a series of circular forms hovered in a circular pool covered by a giant crescent external arc in the shape of a covered in scenes from *Thousand and One Night*. The building façade features a series of proscenium arches internally and externally, with the giant massive over-arching arch piercing the roof of the building. At the top of the auditorium, Wright positioned the golden figure of Aladdin enclosed by a crenelated dome structure. The ziggurat feature is used to base the foundation for the opera house adjusted with one, two, or three levels of the Ziggurat. The elevation also shows a tunnel to the planetarium and a tall structure standing by the opera- perhaps a telecommunication tower (Figure 4).

The "Oasis" of Arizona state capital façade contains a colonnade with great public space supported by a slim row of double columns creating various types of onyx all covered by the lattice dome with two vertical towers for television antenna. In the night-rendering elevation (Figure 3), the building reveals "the magic and charm of the project: a glowing, glistening jewel of the desert."¹⁵ Both buildings are remarkably similar in building elevation, both having colonnade features with dome structures. Although Arizona's capital is designed in a lattice dome with



Figure 5. Elevation of Arizona State Capital, Phoenix, Arizona
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hexagonal space converging from multiple focal points and the Opera building is shaped in a crenelated dome with have giant arc structure exposed in the exterior and piercing the roof. They are still very similar in facade design and similar in aesthetics from elevation and aerial perspectives (Figure 5).

MATERIAL SELECTION AND COLOR USE

Wright's building designs for Baghdad are technically sophisticated. The Opera elaborately explores shades of cupped hands to provide maximum acoustics, a crescent shape from an Islamic symbol covering the proscenium, and a domed roof with a single spire. Neil Levine, Harvard professor of History of Art and Architecture and author of *Urbanism by Frank Lloyd Wright* said the Opera House of Baghdad is "one of the most elaborate, symbolically charged buildings Wright designed."¹⁶ For example, the Opera House contrives groundbreaking construction methods and materials selection, melting together architecture, philosophy, and religion into one organic architecture. The use of new materials proposed to encourage the envelope of architecture with new emerging terrain of modernist architectural practices and new methods of construction.

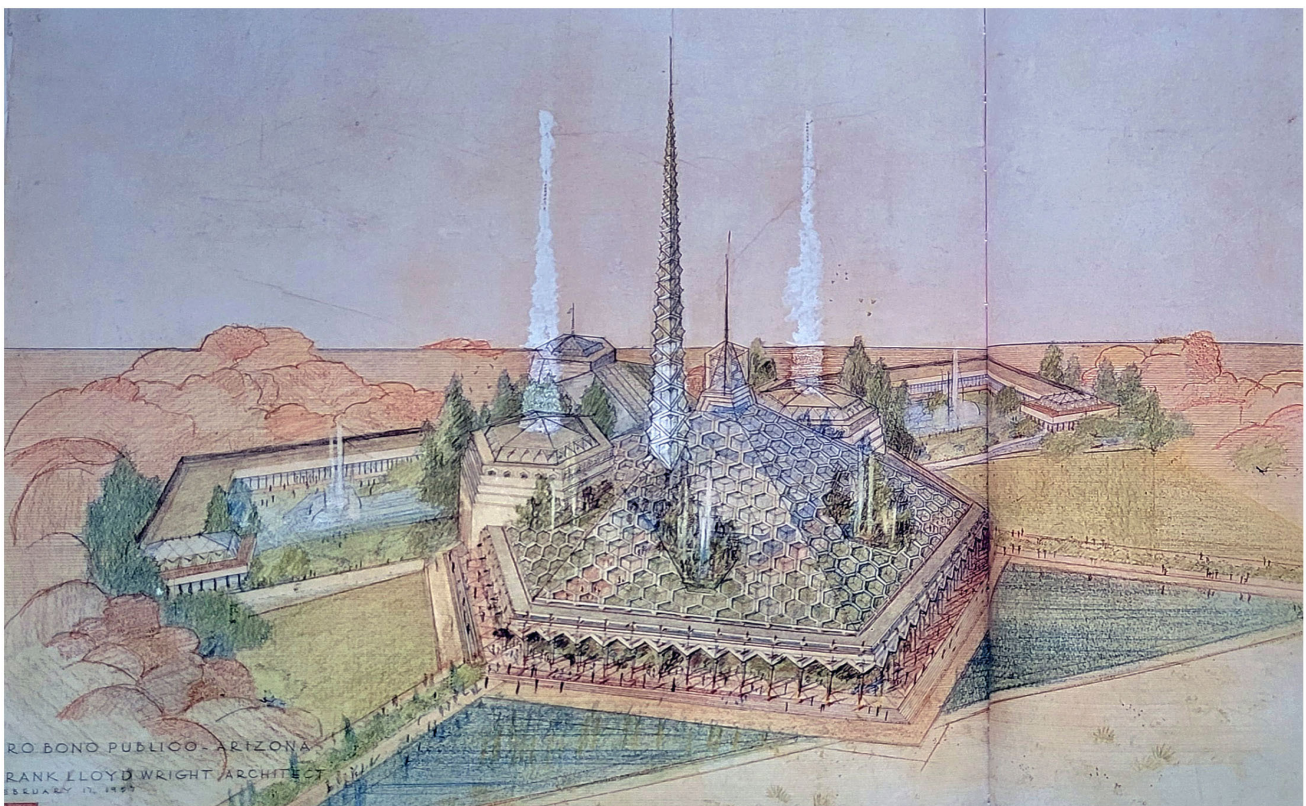
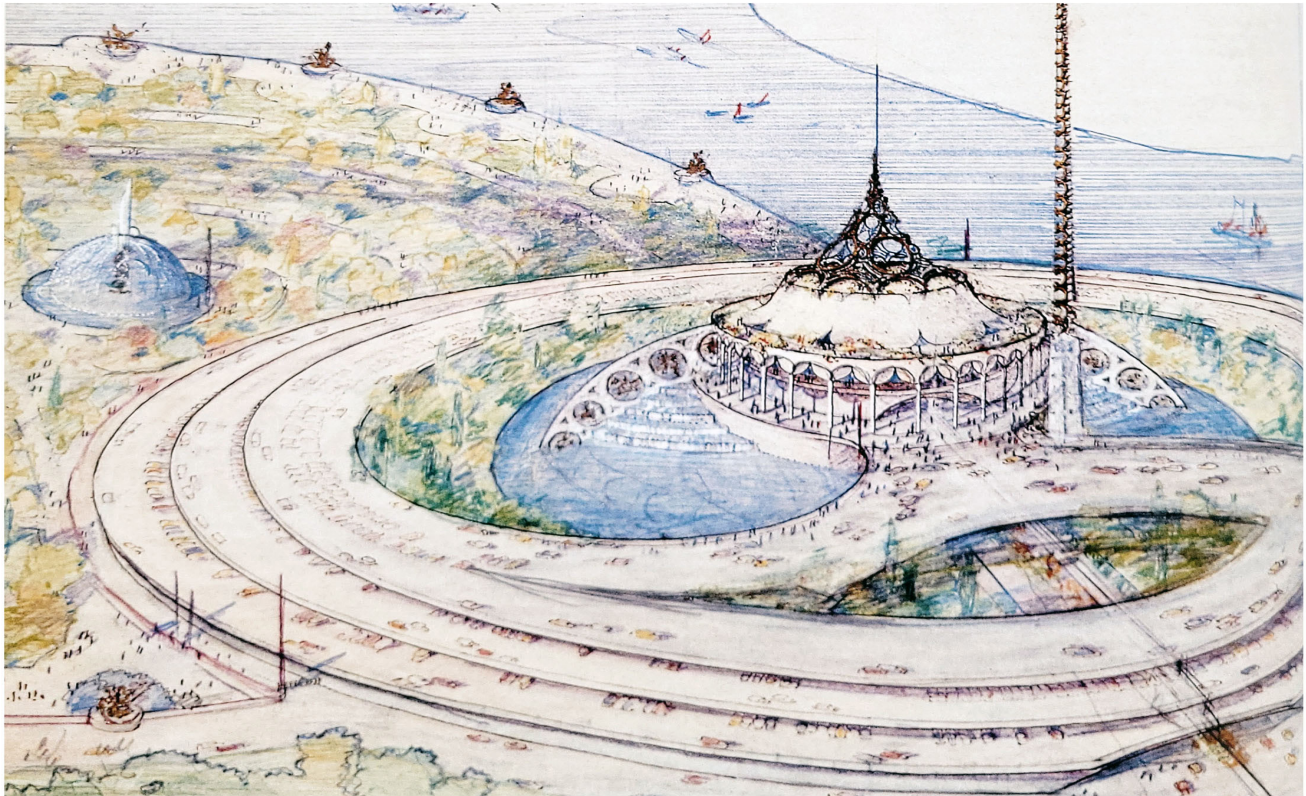


Figure 6. Top- Crescent Opera House, Baghdad by Bruce Brook Pfeiffer
Bottom- Arizona State Capital, Phoenix by Bruce Brook Pfeiffer

The exterior spiral's structure pattern as the ancient ziggurat construction planned to embellish the scheme's reinforced concrete structure with fired and glazed ceramics to revive the traditional Arab crafts of the kiln.¹⁷ The building also housed a metal crown statue of Aladdin on the upper floor sided by a colonnade the design was intended to "glorify Iraq" by echoing al-Mansur's city. The historical Round City in the eighth-century design of Baghdad under Abu Jafar Al-Mansur was the pinnacle phase of Bagdad (Figure 7).¹⁸ All the color use and décor would depict scenes from Arab history and myth. Wright again drew inspiration from the history of the region for material selection and décor of the building. Contrary, Wright's materials selection for the "Oasis" Arizona state capital uses various types of onyx and other stones indigenous to the state along with generous use of copper over the dome. All materials are abundantly available or products of Arizona.¹⁹ This is evident that Wright was trying to build in its appropriate context, the Opera from its history of the region, the capital from the local availability of materials used (Figure 6).

LOCAL ARCHITECTS' PERSPECTIVE

Nezam Amery, though an Iranian architect was Frank Lloyd Wright's representative in the Middle East, particularly for Baghdad. He states, "Mr. Wright designed something that belongs to and has evolved out of Iraqi culture."²⁰ Wright's plans certainly drew heavily on Mesopotamian and Islamic architecture, history, and tradition of the region. Marefat assesses Wright's designs as "the definition of cultural heritage has finally been expanded beyond physical objects and buildings and now includes crafts, customs, social habits, and collective memory, [which] Wright intuitively recognized half a century ago."²¹ Wright told the local architects and Society of Engineers that he had come too late to save the country from "the invasions of the professional architects of the West."²² It was Wright's vision to explore the cultural richness of the country with a keen sense of breaking new ground. It was also a project that Wright wanted to implement his vision of a large urban project on the world stage at nearly ninety years old. Others like the Le-Corbusier Chandigarh project had already been realized in India; therefore, Baghdad was to become the India of Frank Lloyd Wright's stage at an urban scale.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE

With all the careful thought processes by the architect/ Wright's design as well as sensitivity to the cultural context, combined with the Iraqi's investment into the new infrastructure to push the boundaries of the city into the new era of modernity. Why was Wright's design never realized or at least partially designed in Baghdad?

Since cultural complex (Opera House being part of it) designed to glorify the authoritative ruling party of King Faisal II, and Wright's cultural complex was directly designed to be worthy

of a king Projects built via western architects are a political statement of the ruling party, and a movement toward western ideologies, generally not viewed as regional or international style. Wright saw in Baghdad project as an "indigenous culture" comprising a dense overlay of literary and archaeological references that could provide a key for the educated Iraqis for the future.²³ Wright's plan vision of Baghdad drew on the ancient theme- "the ambitious grandeur of Wright's plans evokes the fantasies and imaginings of Orientalists through the ages."²⁴ However, Although Wright was well informed of the eastern context, especially the city of Baghdad, however, projects were never realized due to political changes and impacts of social and political transformation of the country. His design continues to inspire western designers to be aware of the social, cultural, and political vitality when building in the eastern context.

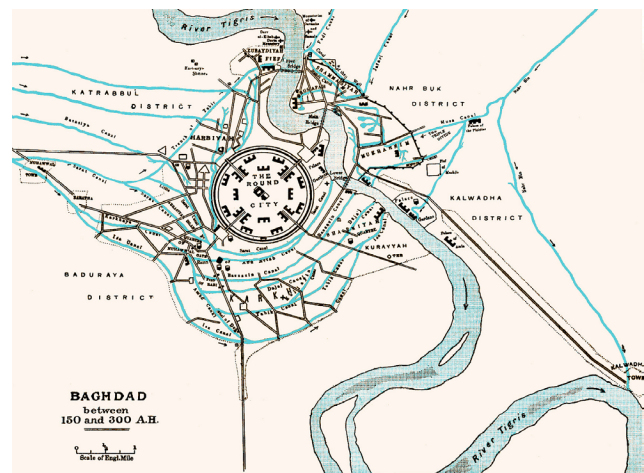


Figure 7. Original Plan of Baghdad. The Round City of Baghdad 150-300 AH by William Muir (1819-1905).

CONCLUSION

While Wright was aware of the different contexts and environmental challenges and concerns present in the city of Baghdad. Through design, he began to question social challenges through international and modern designs. However, he neglected the user and cultural challenges of the people during the 1950s. People were demanding their government for the fundamental necessities of life including food, water, and basic infrastructure of the city and their essential civic rights. Local people and architects were never in favor or against the modernist approach to design, rather were much more concerned with social and political security.²⁵ This issue remains the case in the contemporary context. Perhaps, when the political arena finds stability, Frank Lloyd Wright's design might come to inspire the city again and future architectural works.

SUMMARY

Lenses	Arizona State Capital "Oasis" Phoenix, Arizona, 1957	Crescent Opera, Civic Auditorium, Baghdad, Iraq, 1957
Plan-Organizational Structure	- Hexagonal center with symmetrical and rectilinear wings. - Separated gardens on both sides - Parking placed on North	- Circular shape base on the 8th century Baghdad original plan. - Combination of natural, spiritual, and social elements. - parking placed around the entire building appropriated from Ziggurat.
Circulation and Orientation Movement & Light	- Linear and diagonal movement is subdivided with legislative branches- House of Representative and Senate. - South facing building with large open hall in hexagonal shape. - A jewel of the desert "Oasis"	- Oriented towards Mecca. - Circular movement with inward focused building. - Encouraging Iraqis to look at their tradition and heritage - Acoustic is the main feature, not light.
Facade-Building Elevation	- A colonnade with a lattice dome structure. Double column design in South facing facade around hexagonal shape - Two long, slim towers with central hexagonal space converging. - Multiple focal points.	- Giant arch structure with crenated dome. - One enclosed structure with internal and external arches. - Only one tower - Main structure as the central focus.
Material & Color Use	- Various types of onyx and stone materials used from indigenous of the State of Arizona - Use of Copper over dome	- Reinforced concrete structure with fired and glazed ceramics. - Revive traditional Arab crafts kiln.

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