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ESSAY

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Rifat al-Chadirji (1926–2020): Designing a transhistorical Iraq

In the middle of the twentieth century, a group of young architects who studied abroad, mostly in Britain, returned to Baghdad imbued with patriotic spirit and modernist soul. Hailing from leading families, these architects aspired to actively share in the building of a new Iraq. They engaged both in the national struggle to achieve independence from the British and in the introduction of modernism through their practice and their involvement in the budding art and culture debates in the country. They all contributed, each in his own way, to laying the foundations of modern architecture in Iraq. And although they were very much devoted to the tenets of international modern architecture, they were also eager to reconnect, formally and materially, with the heritage of architecture in the country from Ancient Mesopotamia to the Abbasid Caliphate and beyond. In their design and writing, these architects wanted to reconcile modernist design with a rationalized historical and cultural rootedness. Merging these two endeavours was an expression of their search for a distinct architectural identity at an age of national liberation and progressive

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1. The Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT is the repository of Rifat al-Chadirji's archives. For further information see: <https://libraries.mit.edu/akdc/collections/>. Accessed 30 June 2021.
2. Interview in Arabic with Ricardo Karam on 11 March 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31bxM1c5Xgo&vl=en>. Accessed 20 April 2020.

politics. It was also a function of their continuous dialogue with the international modern architecture movement, which was then experiencing a strong push to bring back history and the local to design in response to the placelessness and formal starkness of some of early modernism's canonical examples.

Rising to the top of the profession in Baghdad in the 1960s and 1970s, these pioneering architects energized the architectural scene in Iraq, and managed to influence the development of modern architecture elsewhere in the region, especially in Iraq's Gulf neighbourhood. But having benefitted from the moments of hope in the torturous journey of modern Iraq, they, like many Iraqi intellectuals, ultimately fell victims to the caprices of the extreme dictatorial regime installed in the early 1980s. After the failure of their initial attempts at compromising with the regime in order to save their practices, they were finally driven to leave their homeland. In their exile, however, they all carried the love of their Iraq, intensified by nostalgia, in their hearts and in their architectural imagination, even when they were designing projects for other cities and other countries.

The most influential of these architects was undoubtedly Rifat Chadirji (1926–2020). He was an accomplished designer, photographer, memoirist and theorist of architecture who continued until late in his life to expound on his views on architecture, culture, modernism, history, religion and Iraq. His design days may have been behind him: he had not built anything in the last 38 years of his life, most of which spent in self-imposed exile. But with many books, countless articles and interviews, and vast photographic collection covering every aspect of life in mid-century Iraq, he had ensured that his influence on an expansive notion of modern architecture infused with bold regional experiments would never fade away.¹

Chadirji studied architecture (by accident as he says in a wonderful interview with the Lebanese anchor Ricardo Karam in 2014 uploaded to YouTube)² at Hammersmith School of Art and Architecture between 1946 and 1952. Those were the days of hopeful modernism amid the severe austerity following Second World War and Chadirji imbibed its messages of optimism, redemption and can-do architecture. He returned to Iraq to establish the Iraqi Consultative Office and to start working as an architect in the private and public sectors. In the usual trajectory, his office began by designing inspired modernist villas for some of the country's most influential people who were generally friends of the Chadirji family. But within ten years, the practice became one of the top architectural firms in the country, garnering commissions for important official buildings in Baghdad and other cities of Iraq. During that same period, Rifat kept a direct involvement in government through midrange positions in architecture and urbanism in the Ministries of Awqaf (Endowments) and Housing. It was in that capacity that he met the premier international architects of the time like Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, who had each been commissioned to design a major building in Baghdad as part of the government's attempt to modernize the city following a substantial increase in oil revenues in the mid-1950s.

His break as an architect came in 1959, when General Abdul Karim Qasim, the leader of the revolutionary coup against the monarchy, commissioned him to design several memorials in Baghdad aimed at embellishing the image of the new regime and inscribing it in the history of Iraq. Two of these monuments were completed. The first was the Freedom Monument, completed in 1961, whose dramatic figural bas-reliefs, cast in bronze, were

designed by Iraq's premier sculptor Jewad Selim. Selim was a close friend and collaborator of Chadirji's and the founder of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, of which Chadirji was an early member and which advocated a modernism rooted in the country's artistic heritage. Chadirji, out of reverence for the artistic genius of Selim, decided to limit his architectural intervention to a kind of monumental placard upon which the bas-reliefs were fixed to tell the story of Iraq in condensed, abstracted compositions. The monument still stands in the centre of Baghdad today, and is celebrated as a symbol of modern Iraq.

The second, and the more architecturally stunning work is the Monument to the Unknown Soldier, completed in 1959 and demolished by Saddam Hussein in 1982 (Figure 1). Ironically, Chadirji recorded the demolition in a mixture of documentary zeal and painful reckoning. This monument, in my opinion, encapsulates the architectural identity of Rifat Chadirji as it was taken shape before its translation into recognizable forms and patterns. A tapering, attenuated alcove of brick-encased concrete, the monument, whose outline is said to have been inspired by an image of a mother lifting the body of her martyred son, actually referenced two iconic architectural types developed in Mesopotamia, or ancient Iraq. First is the reed vault of Southern Iraq – a marshland known as al-Ahwar today and teetering on the brink of extinction – where the Sumerians discovered the tensile quality of reed bundles and used them in assembling vaulted halls in the third



Figure 1: Photograph of Unknown Soldier Monument, Baghdad, 1959 (Kamil and Rifat Chadirji Photographic Archive). Courtesy of Aga Khan Documentation Center, MIT Libraries.

millennium BCE. The practice persevered until very recently in the form of the *mudhif*, a monumental ceremonial hall used for public gatherings, receptions and funerals.

Second is the *iwan*, a vaulted hall open at one end, which was the dominant architectural form in Mesopotamia and Persia for at least three millennia. Its most imposing example, the Iwan Kisra (Khosroe), most probably dates back to the third-century CE and still stands today in the ruins of Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sasanian Empire, south of Baghdad. The iwan has evolved in Islamic architecture as a spatial organizer to serve multiple functions in various types of structures. But it never lost its denotation of monumentality or connotation of glory. Chadirji forged from these primordial models an abstract representation of Iraq, the cradle of civilization, the land of the confluence of the two rivers – the Tigris and the Euphrates – and the original home of arcuate architecture.

Chadirji went on to use the ideal form of the iwan in a few memorial structures. But his next architectural breakthrough was to distil from the arcuate form a foundational element for the composition of his elevations, which became the landmark of his subsequent public buildings in the 1960s and 70s. Recalling the geometric abstract paintings of a Piet Mondrian or a Paul Klee in their rhythmic or syncopated arrangements, Chadirji's façades cleverly deploy arches and alcoves to proclaim their local identity, in a style that he will later dub 'International Regionalism'. Thus, the Federation of Industries Building

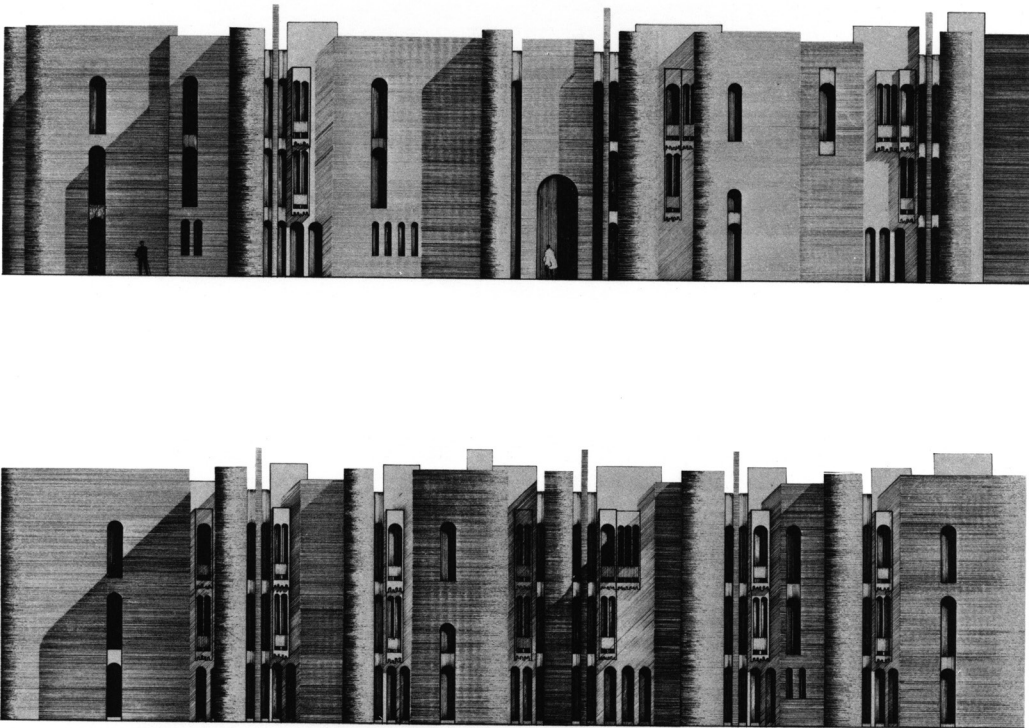


Figure 2: Etching of the Rafidain Bank-Baghdad (Rifat Chadirji Archive). Courtesy of Aga Khan Documentation Center, MIT Libraries.

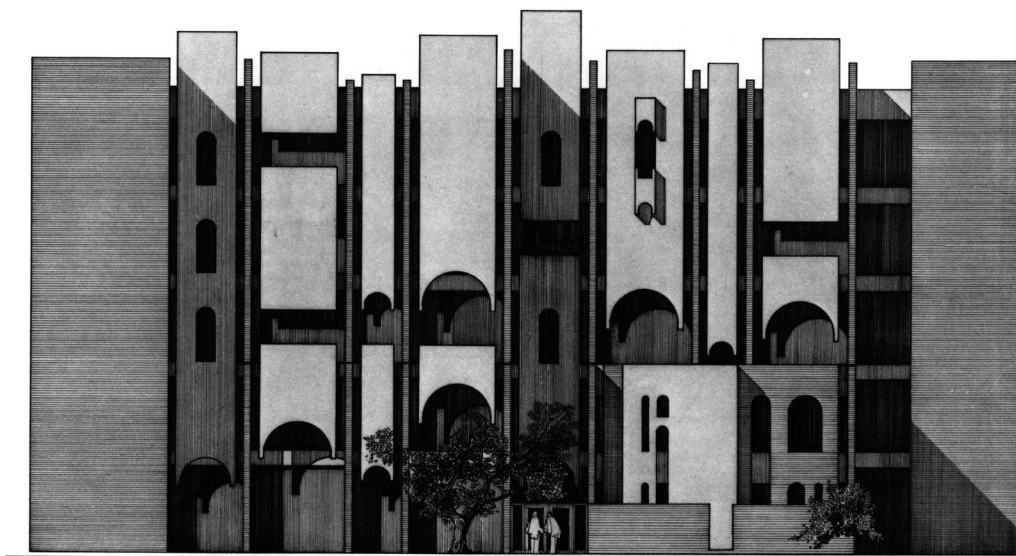


Figure 3: Etching of the Tobacco Monopoly Offices and Warehouses (1967–69) (Rifat Chadirji Archive). Courtesy of Aga Khan Documentation Center, MIT Libraries.

(1966), the Tobacco Monopoly Offices and Warehouses (1967–69) (Figure 3) and the Rafidain Bank (1970) (Figure 2), all in Baghdad, and the National Insurance Company building in Mosul (1966, which ISIS used during its occupation of Mosul to dump those it condemned for homosexuality from above and which was destroyed in the subsequent bombardment) are all experiments in the best application of arches in various configurations on pure modernist façades. This preoccupation will remain with him in his later designs, such as the Regional Command Council Administration Building (1975) and the Central Post, Telephone, and Telegraph Building (1979) (Figure 4), although his compositions began to slowly move towards more regularity and linearity, allowing the arches to invade the entire surface of the façades.

All along, Chadirji, like his father Kamel, the well-known journalist and politician and founder of the National Democratic Party, pursued a long-term photographic project to record the rituals, crafts and architecture of Iraq (including his own). Kamel Chadirji (1897–1968) was in fact the first Iraqi to have documented daily life in Iraq with a tender and sympathetic humanistic eye. There is in his work a sense of discovery and fascination with the nearby but unknown ordinary Iraqi life to this scion of an affluent and powerful family in a country that was rife with poverty, destitution and obsolete traditions. Years later, Rifat would publish two of Kamel's photographic collections following the biographical book he dedicated to his memories of life in his father's house and published under the title *Surat Abb: al-Hayat al-Yawmiyya fi-Dar al-Siyasi Kamel al-Chadirji* ('A father's image: Daily life in the house of the politician Kamel al-Chadirji') (1985).

But unlike his father, Rifat saw photography not only as an attempt to preserve the memories of a world fast changing under the double impact of chaotic modernization and tightening political despotism. He also enlisted it as a fundamental tool of research and study for the sake of architectural

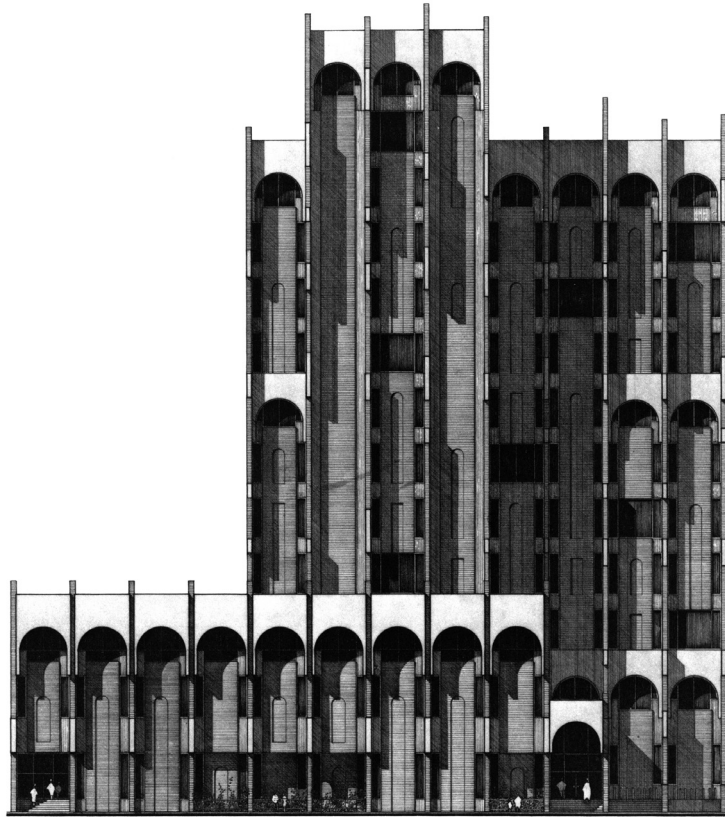


Figure 4: Etching of the Central Post, Telephone and Telegraph Building (1979) (Rifat Chadirji Archive). Courtesy of Aga Khan Documentation Center, MIT Libraries.

design, which was his most important concern throughout his life in Iraq. In Chadirji's façades, there is indeed a desire to translate the forms he had carefully captured in his photographic studies of the components of the typical Baghdadi street into modern, balanced and abstracted structures in space. There is also an underlying sensitivity that can only be understood through Chadirji's lifelong unbridled commitment to the aesthetics of modernity, which permeated his beliefs and choices at all levels from architecture to religion, personal life, and human relations and marked his dealings with people with a mix of moral exactitude and snobbish scepticism that rubbed some powerful apparatchiks the wrong way.

Chadirji became a victim of his unyielding principles when he was thrown in prison in 1978 on the life-threatening accusation of high treason. The charges were drummed-up and possibly vindictive. Chadirji was never political except from a broad philosophical point of view. He was nonetheless sentenced to life imprisonment, but was inexplicably released after twenty dire months when the newly minted tyrant, Saddam Hussein, wanted to use his expertise to give Baghdad a facelift in preparation for the conference of non-aligned countries to be held in Baghdad in 1983. Rifat al-Chadirji was

appointed as an advisor to the Amanat al-Asimah (Baghdad Municipality) in 1980 and charged with organizing an international architectural competition to build an enormous state mosque in preparation for the non-aligned conference. The mosque was never built, and the conference was never held because of the ongoing war between Iraq and Iran. But the competition and the projects that made it to the final cut by the likes of Ricardo Bofill, Robert Venturi and Rasem Badran are still taught to this day as models for the design of modern mosques.

Chadirji, who was waiting for an opportunity to escape Saddam's grip, left Iraq with his wife Balqis Sharara shortly after the contest and conference collapsed. He first went to Cambridge, Massachusetts on a Loeb Fellowship at Harvard's Graduate School of Design in 1983 and remained until 1992 as a visiting scholar in the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard and MIT. He received the Aga Khan Chairman's Award in 1986, followed by several international recognitions. He established a foundation, al Chadirji Foundation, in Lebanon in 2000, which supports promising young architects, and donated his archives to MIT's Aga Khan Documentation Center in 2017 (now available to all researchers). He and Balqis never returned to Baghdad except for one short visit in 2009 after the fall of Saddam Hussein but were disappointed by the breakdown of the country and its social fabric.

Chadirji's prison experience left indelible marks on his life and career. He abandoned design altogether and devoted himself to writing and photography. His first two archi-biographical books, *Taha Street to Hammersmith* (1985) and *al-Ukhaidir and the Crystal Palace* (1991), which were conceptualized in the isolation of the prison, recounted his architectural journey through humanistic, historical and philosophical lenses. A later memoir, *Jidar Baina Dhulmatain* ('A wall between two darkneses') (2004), written alternately by Rifat and his wife Balqis, narrated the painful prison episode, as the two of them faced it separately: one inside and one outside, both distressed by the cruel whimsy and deliberate opacity of the tyrannical regime.

Steadily developing a distinct style that merges biographical details with architectural analysis and philosophical, anthropological and historical musings, Chadirji published several additional books after leaving Cambridge to settle in London. Two in particular, *Hiwar fi Bunyawiiyyat al-Fann wal 'Imara* ('A dialogue on the structure of art and architecture') (1995) and *Fi Sababiyyat wa-Jadaliyyat al-'Imara* ('On the causality and dialectic of architecture') (2006) continued with the line of historical theorizing he began in *al-Ukhaidir and the Crystal Palace* but broadened the scope of his analysis historically and theoretically. In both books, his own work is seamlessly woven in the narrative with a confidence that is encountered only in the writing of a few architects from the Global South like Charles Correa and Jeffery Bawa. Rifat himself is present in all of his books, not only as a thoughtful and reflective architect, but also as an observer of the evolution of cultures and societies who derives from his status a transhistorical interpretive perspective.

Balqis's specialization in anthropology seems to have inspired Chadirji to try an anthropological approach in at least one of his books: *Maqam al-Julus fi Bayt 'Arif Agha* ('The seating order in the household of 'Arif Agha') (2001). Relying primarily on his photographic collection, architectural facility, and recollections of life in the house of his maternal great grandfather Mahmud 'Arif Agha, Chadirji constructs an elaborate reflection on the use of spaces and furniture at a transitional moment when Western lifestyles were introduced to an unevenly receptive Baghdadi upper class. Between *Maqam al-Julus fi Bayt*

'*Arif Agha*, *Surat Abb*, and *Taha Street to Hammersmith*, Chadirji completed a family saga of sorts that spans four generations of Iraqis from his great grandfather to himself. Although architecture is the ostensible reason for the writing of these books in the first place, the trilogy can be seen as an extended love letter to the Iraq Chadirji grew up in, lost and spent his exile years trying to reconstitute it as a whole from the fragments of his photos and memories.

In the early 2010s, Rifat and Balqis began to slowly withdraw from public life to devote themselves to writing and reading in their London home. Philosophical till the end, he took the long view when reflecting upon the fate of many of his masterpieces, destroyed by Saddam's vanity or the incessant war in Iraq since 2003. 'Our Bedouin culture glorifies the word and ignores the object, hence our monuments disappear', he observed in his interview with Ricardo Karam, echoing Ibn Khaldun, the great fourteenth-century theorist of history. What he so shrewdly omitted was that he has already insured the survival of his legacy through his autobiographically favoured architectural meditations, diffused over ten books, and his obsessive documentation of his own buildings in thousands of photographs, now housed at MIT. If his demolished or maimed architecture receded as a *lieu de mémoire* ('site of memory'), to use Pierre Nora's term, during his lifetime, Chadirji deftly reinvented it as a *milieu de mémoire* ('realm of memory') in profuse and beautifully crafted texts and images.

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