Narratives of Baghdad
An ethnographic study through five public spaces in Baghdad, Iraq

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Preface

Before you lies the paper "Narratives of Baghdad", a study concerning the development public spaces in conflict zone. It has been written for the graduation studio Explore at Delft University of Technology faculty of Architecture.

The paper consists of five narratives, each written with enthusiasm and leading to new findings about the development of the public spaces in Baghdad.

I would like to thank my tutor Ir. E. van Dooren for her guidance and support during this process. Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude in advance for an accelerated review of my work.

I hope you enjoy your reading.

Achmed Ali

Delft, 1 April, 2019
Abstract

Baghdad, once the cultural and social centre of the Arab world, has become a theatre of violence and devastation. Simultaneously, altering people lives, social interaction, urban fabric and Iraqi’s identity. This paper examines this situation by sharing five narratives of five places in Baghdad. Those places are public spaces, each different in function, but all essential to the urban fabric and all historically charged. The five public spaces are:

1. Swords of Qadisiyah
2. Nasb Al-Hurriyah
3. Al Mutannabi Street
4. Al-Khilani Mosque
5. AL Zawraa park

The analysis is based upon an ethnographic case study, which is grounded upon fieldwork, interviews and plan analysis. The main objective of this paper is to evaluate the development of the five places, allowing the reader to grasp an idea of the recent events and the meaning of the public space in conflict environment. The narrative presented has shown that the public spaces are neglected, in shortage and segregated, which results in decrease of social life and aggravation of sectarianism.

Keywords: Development of public spaces in Baghdad, meaning of public spaces, sectarianism, architecture in conflict places.
Footnote

Throughout history, Iraq has been affected by both external and internal threats and crises. Equally so has the capital Baghdad undergone a considerable transformation, due to socio-economic factors, wars and colonial control.

In the last four decades Iraq has experienced many destructive events, to name a few; Ba’ath regime, two Gulf wars, invasion of US, Civil War, and ISIS. Shown in Appendix I History. All these events had devastated impact on the country. Together resulting in millions of casualties and displaced people, loss of heritage, segregation, and loss of identity. However, the consequences are still ongoing and impacting the country’s future; the latter issue plays a pivotal role in the development of Iraq. This also evident in the book; Modern history of Iraq written by the Middle Eastern historian Phebe Marr and stating that one of the most notable trends in post-2003 Iraq was a search for a common Iraqi identity among Iraq’s ethnic and sectarian communities. Nowadays this identity is still not clear, ask someone in Iraq who they are and, likely as not, they will not reply, as in the past, “Iraqi.” Instead, it will be another identity. Sunni. Shiite. Kurd. As many as 18 groups. This inflicts the country itself, as no unity in political and social grounds are established making undertaking today’s challenges impossible.

Looking at this from an architectural perspective one can imagine that a search towards this identity starts from investigating the cornerstone of a city; the public space. A space were the society and culture come together and interact. For example, Al-Rashid Street in Baghdad contributes not only as a thoroughfare, but also as a market, a meeting place, and a place of resistance and celebration of several local cultures. Hence by focusing on this macro spatial scale and giving these spaces the floor to narrate their past, present, architecture and meaning, a better understanding can be obtained about the developments of the public spaces in the last decades. In doing so, a clearer image will be created exemplifying society’s reaction to the events. Thereby contributing to an under-researched area of the consequences of conflict on public spaces in Baghdad. As a result, these spaces derive a narrative that identifies the social and cultural identity from a bottom-up approach, which leads to a better understanding of the city Baghdad and the common identity.
Footnote

Context

Baghdad a city characterised by; its colourful souks, its horizontal skyline punctuated with vertical minarets, its narrow shaded alleyways with ambiguous spaces, and its inward-looking houses, has undergone various transformation as a result of conflict between religions, politics and ethnicities in the last decades.²

Presently, Baghdad has changed into a city of walled neighbourhoods controlled by army, if not militias, who are like local neighbourhood watch crew, only equipped with AK-47s. The areas are marked by religious flags waving from the rooftops and streets. The boundaries are shaped by massive concrete blast walls or also known as T-walls. The open streets, transformed into cordons. Statues and monuments hidden if not falling apart.

To get a better understanding of these developments and their consequences on the public spaces, a range of five places are selected based upon three criteria. Firstly, the place has to consists of different function, such as; street, park, square, building, and monument. Secondly, the place has to play an essential role in the urban fabric, making it a part of Baghdad’s daily life. Finally, the place to be charged with historical events that affected the space and its environment. With this criteria in mind, the following five places have been selected, see Figure 1.

![Figure 1: overview selected places in Baghdad; above an image of the locations, below the list of the places](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Places</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Swords of Qadisīyah</td>
<td>Monument</td>
<td>replicas of Saddam Hussein’s hand holding a sword and marking the entrance of the Grand Festival Square.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Nasb Al-Hurriyah</td>
<td>Square and monument</td>
<td>a national monument depicting the culture and history through fourteen statues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Al Mutannabi Street</td>
<td>Street</td>
<td>one of the oldest streets in Baghdad and located at the cultural and intellectual centre of Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Al-Kilani Mosque</td>
<td>Public building</td>
<td>a historic mosque in the centre of the city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Al Zawraa park</td>
<td>Park</td>
<td>most well-known park in Baghdad. The park includes an amusement park, zoo, lake and various cafes and restaurants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Method

This paper seeks to investigate the development of public spaces in relation to the recent events occurred in Baghdad through an ethnographic case study. A methodology based upon two layers: the study of people and analysis of architecture. By combing both layers, a description of the place uncovers that's grounded upon the past, present, architecture and meaning. Together these elements shape a narrative of the public space. This is approach is also illustrated in Figure 2.

The analyses is based upon the following methods; observation, interview, plan analysis and literature. The observation took place in December 2018. The focus relied upon distinctive patterns, interactions, and the use of the space. This method allowed us to tap into local perspectives and identify significant categories of human experience up close and personal, which in turn enhances the bottom-up insights. Secondly, an interview is conducted with a head architect located at Karbala and various conversations with citizens near the five places. Thirdly, the plan analysis focuses upon the architecture and urbanism of the place. Fourthly, literature is used to get a better understanding of the context and culture and to support the findings of the fieldwork and plan analysis.
The narratives

In this chapter the five selected places will narrate their story in the following order: The past; as an introduction of the place and its existence, and how the place was used till 2003. The present; will explain the changes that occurred to place and how people use it now. The architecture, explains the architectural representation of space. The meaning; will summarise and highlight the relevance of the place.

[While reading the narrative please feel free to use appendixes as a support to the narratives]

"Iraq has developed a hybrid regime, characterised by a democratic façade but undermined by systemic authoritarianism and corruption." Marr and Al-Marashi. 2017. Page 342

After the invasion questions were raised about the relics of the tyranny. In February 2007, the new Iraqi government had organised a Committee to remove Saddam’s symbols, the same year they began dismantling the hands. In February 2011, the government reversed its earlier plans to demolish the monument and began the restoration of the monument. Van de Ven, Annelies. 2018. Page 21.

The first sketch is shown on the invitation card of the opening, next to the drawing an extract of his speech: “The worst condition is for a person to pass under a sword which is not his own or to be forced down a road which is not willed by him. From this, and because brave Iraqi have recorded the most legendary exploits in defense of their land and holy beliefs against the Persian enemy in the era of the liar Khomeini... we have chosen that Iraqis will pass under their fluttering flag protected by their swords which have cut through the necks of the aggressors. And so we have willed it an arch to victory, and a symbol to this Qadisiyah...” Al-Khalil & Makya. Page 3.

The ‘elements’ of the Victory Arch are divided over five points, see appendix Swords of Qadisiyah for further information.

In this context, the monument does precisely what a triumphal arch should do, namely, raising the person represented above all others. Van de Ven, Annelies. 2018. Page 7.

The monument was seen a demonic machination – a strategy to terrorise the country by his rule – by the outside world, as well as, the Iraqi population. Al-Khalil, S., & Makya, K. Page 134.

Relics of power
Swords of Qadisiyah

Past
The Swords of Qadisiyah, also called the Victory Arch, are a pair of triumphal monuments in the Karkh district in the Green Zone area. Both shaped like an arch and consisting of a couple of hands holding crossed swords. The two monuments mark the entrances to Grand Festival Square and the parade area for military and civic purposes. A district that purpose as an emblem of the government's architectural repertoire. Commissioned in the climax of the devastating eight-year Iraq-Iran war. A period critical to the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, when the legitimacy was being questioned by the international community as well as its own population.\(^1\) In 1989, one year after the war Saddam responded with this monument as he paraded through the arches on his white stallion to celebrate its opening.\(^2\) But more importantly to claim triumph against his challengers.

Present
Once a place of parading authority, now an empty remnant of the past. Remembering the people of their autocratic ruler, but also of picnics, festival, cinemas and art performances. A place that is now inaccessible to the Iraqi citizens. For its located in the Green Zone district, a highly fortified area amid the city centre, which houses the governing body of the country. Speaking with the taxi driver, one hears the frustration of the checkpoints and detours he has to make daily, due to the forbidden area. As he sighed and added that the representation of the Grand Festival Square as an extension of power hasn’t changed at all, if not aggrandised after 2003. While he elaborates, he points at the substitutes of power and corruption,\(^3\) who are only occupied with dismantling and reinstalling the hands of the Victory Arch.\(^4\) Instead of working on the infrastructure and people rights.

Architecture
Although the Victory arch was built by the famed Iraqi sculptor Khaled Al-Rahal, one thing can safely be assumed; the true architect was Saddam himself. This can be seen in Saddam’s first sketches.\(^5\) The monument shares the similarity of Arc de Triumph in the Champs-Élysées. The forearms and fists, sixteen-meter height – the same height as the Arc de triumph – sprouts out of the ground holding the swords in a shape of an arc. The swords references to the historical battle Al Qadisiyah - when Arabs defeated the Persians on the same plot it’s standing on. The forty metres height swords symbolise inclusion by embracing and protecting the people and exclusion by violence against the opposer of the regime.\(^6\) The latter meaning can also be found in the nets hanging on the fists, which holds 2,500 Iranian helmets collected from the battlefield. To look at the helmets in the knowledge that their dents, scratches and holes are made by real bullets, killing a real man is horrifying as the knowledge that these are not anybody’s forearms holding the swords, but the dictator’s own. Or, for the matter that the swords are not made by any steel, but simply taken from the weapons of the Iraqi martyrs.\(^7\) Saddam attempts to claim an authentic appearance by creating an umbrella of Iraqi narratives, via interweaving historical figures, places and events, while inscribing it with a modernistic identity coinciding with his own vision for Iraq. This approach is deeply rooted in the elements of the victory arch.\(^8\) Each element with the same purpose, namely, raising the person represented above all others.\(^9\) Perhaps even above the country, as seen in the case of the Iraqi flag – on top of the arc – being dwarfed by the massive swords and hands invisible to the human eye.

Meaning
This self-aggrandising meaning of the space or as Deyan Sudjic implies “Edifice complexes” can be found in various places in Baghdad.\(^10\) To name a few the Monument to the Unknown Soldier (1982), The Shahid Monument (1983), Baghdad State Mosque (uncompleted) and Al Rahman mosque (uncompleted). All unfeeling and anonymous, as they contribute to a demonic machination of the regime.\(^11\) A testimony to the nation’s disgrace that pastiches the nation and culture, instead of being rooted in creativity or genuine expression.\(^12\) These self-orientalising “kitsch” structures and events held within them allow the government to lay claim to the spaces of the city, guiding social interactions and movement.\(^13\) Hence, impacting people’s daily lives.\(^14\)
Footnote

1. Al-Khalil, S., & Makya, K. Page 82.
2. Sudjic, D. 2005
3. Demonstration against corruption http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/160520184
6. Negligence of the heritage and not repairing the destructed resemble a certain weakness of the state and disintegrate the proudness of the nation.
7. Militaries and policeman stand along the perimeter of the square, within this area no one is allowed to leave his car parked, due to the threats of car bombings.
8. The scale of the monument overwhelms the adjacent square making the spectator impossible to read the entire story from one point. The only way is to drive by. Besides the monument is raised six metres off the ground, which removes the chance to see the statues in detail. Al-Khalil, S., & Makya, K. Page 88.
9. While this part is the most crucial section of the panorama, it’s also the weakest. Because the commissioner (the Government) wanted to depict themselves as savours of the people. In the first instance, they wanted a portrait of Brigadier ‘Abdul Karim Qassem in the monument, but Jewad Salim ultimately pursued them to put a soldier as a centrepiece. In short, the monument of freedom was subordinate to the government and acted as a tool of expression of power. Al-Khalil, S., & Makya, K. Page 87.
10. Al-Khalil, S., & Makya, K. Page 83-87. See Appendix Nasb Al-Hurriyah for an explanation of the statues.
11. Iraqi citizens spoke to in front of the square.
12. A young Iraqi music band stood in front of the monument as the photographer took a picture of them for their album cover. See Appendix Nasb Al-Hurriyah for the image.
History in decay
Nasb Al-Hurriyah

Past
Nasb Al-Hurriyah (the freedom monument) is a visual narrative of the 1958 Iraqi Coup d’état, told through fourteen statues on a 50 metres long panorama. Located at the western shore of the Tigris river in front of the Tahrir square (liberation square). The Nasb Al-Hurriyah came to existence in 1961 when fledgeling Iraqi government commissioned the architect Rifat Chadirji and the artist Jewad Salam to celebrate the revolution in a new monumental sculpture. The place was designed to express and represent the Iraqi culture, history and citizens. However, soon after its establishment, Nasb Al-Hurriyah like many other places were claimed by one person only and used as an edifice complex. The place acted as a décor for the government. Neat and orchestrated, only to be observed and not to be used by the citizens as it was intended for in 1961.

Present
Presently, Nasb Al-Hurriyah and Tahrir square are reclaimed by society and used as a platform to celebrate and to demonstrate. On one day one might find the square filled with Kurds, music and white-red-green flags celebrating the Nawroz. While on the next day one hears loud voices of the youth about their struggles with corruption and unemployment. Voices that echo through the streets of the nearby Municipality of Baghdad, but turned with a deaf ear.

Architecture
The ignorance’s towards the society can even be seen in the spaces themselves, in which the architectural heritage including Nasb Al-Hurriyah are in decay. Hence, the architecture expresses a curtain nationalism and proudness, at the same time, it shows devastation and weakness. An effect demonstrated by the soldiers, barricades, punctured walls and checkpoints congesting the space. Suggesting a feeling as if the unpredictable could happen any time amid the swarm of vehicles and people at the Tahrir square. Simultaneously, the square which withholds a distinct treasured activity is congested by the three lanes roundabout surrounding the space. As a result, this infrastructure eliminates the only possibility to see the whole narrative of the panorama.

Meaning
Reading the poetry depicted in the statues on the panorama, in Arabic manner – from right to left – one genuinely understand the meaning of the place. On the right the events leading to the revolution. In the centre, the revolution itself, where “the prisoners of thoughts” are broken free from the bars by the soldiers. On the left the harmony, illustration the peace between groups, fertility and reconstruction of the country. A vision portrayed by the artist that still isn’t fulfilled or according to some citizens a dream that will never come through. Though, they do share the notion that the monument represents, namely freedom – may it be in a background of an album cover of a young Iraqi music band or in a platform to share a particular thought.
Weekends in Iraq start on Thursday and Friday.

Robert Bevan argues that the systemized eradications of certain types of buildings (churches, mosques, libraries) are often carefully executed to erase a cultural identity. Or as he stated in his book: people are replaceable, but their culture was not. Bevan, Robert. 2006. The Destruction of Memory, architecture at war. London: Reaktion Books. Page 28.

There has always been another war against architecture going on – the destruction of the cultural artefacts of an opposing group or nation as a means of dominating, terrorising, dividing or eradicating it altogether." Bevan, 2006. Page 8.

The shanasheel is a vernacular architectural element of Iraq. Shanasheel is basically a balcony made out of wood protruding through the buildings; they provide privacy and cool air for their inhabitants. There are entire neighbourhoods in Baghdad consisting of shanasheel, creating ambiguous alleys and traditional atmospheres.

Anonymous, interview by Achmed Ali. 5-1-2019. Conversation with the bookshop keeper and witness of the explosion.

Footnote


2. Weekend In Iraq start on Thursday and Friday.


5. Shabandar Cafe is a cultural landmark in the old centre of Baghdad founded in 1917. The café has been meeting spot for generations, where Iraqis come to discuss ideas, politics and literature. Ali, E. (Director). 2007. A candle for the Shabandar café [Motion Picture].

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13. Ibid
Books on the street
Al Mutannabi street

Past
Al Mutannabi street is a 300 meters long pathway with roots tracing back to the Abbasid Caliphate, hence the street named after 10th-century Iraqi poet Al-Mutannabi. The street, located at the Rusafa district, is often referred to as the heart and soul of Baghdad’s cultural and intellectual community, for its outdoor bookstalls, cafés, cultural activities and institutions. A street that welcomes every person to participate and witness events for centuries ago. Everyday visited but overflown on Fridays. When visitors set out to search for a book, an old issued journal or even a “banned document” — an endeavour for truth that played till 2003. In which the readers had to be alert for the whispers of the bookshop keepers who might entrust you with a piece of information. Whereas, security personnel in plain clothes were walking by as they did in every street.

Present
Years followed by as whispers became loud voices and security personnel disappeared from the streets. When, people felt relatively “safe” as they walked, browsed books, arranged for printing, bought stationery or sat in the historical Shabandar café. The same people somehow believed that this place of knowledge, culture and history “protected” them from the encroaching chaos that shadows the country to this day with devastation. A blast disguised in a car has reached the street of Mutannabi seeking to attack the thought and ideas latent in each book. Trying to kill the emotion that someone might be free to say something not sanctioned by them. Even if the idea was in a children’s book, a music note, a poem, or even more dangerous a blank notebook. On 5th of March 2007 in the early morning thirty people were killed and more than a hundred were wounded as half of the street was in smothered with ashes. Speaking with the bookseller, who stood in the midst of the dust as grey ashes of papers swift in the sky, he catches a page illuminating with heat and for a moment to read, whilst the heat dissipates and stories disappear. An image he recalls as one asks about that day.

Architecture
Simultaneously, this attack was also against the architecture and its representation as a cultural artefact. Artefacts that can be found throughout historical streets of Baghdad, such as Al Mutanabbi street. The colonnades, for example, aren’t just providing shade from Iraqi sun. But shelter’s the bookshops and retails as well as their interactions and unsuspected encounters. For one might wander through these ambiguous spaces for hours and perhaps finding himself discovering an inner court. Spaces that are familiar to whom who wants to debate or read their newest addition. While drinking a cup of chai, one slowly witness the shanasheel — the traditional Iraqi Bay windows. Each window urging to share its story, but all too familiar to the decay caused by negligence.

Meaning
The Al Mutannabi street has a symbolic meaning, for it brings the past and present into sharp relief. It acts as a testament to the resilience of the country, its capital and its people. For people like Haji Mohammed Kazem Al-Khashali – who lost besides its Shabandar café, four sons and a grandson that day — rebuilt its café two years later with a new name Martyrs café. Setting an example of the resilience and strength of the place and its people. This is also evident in the street’s activity, for its even more thriving than before. This is furthermore enhanced by its cultural and intellectual characteristics, welcoming everyone to participate despite one’s ethnicity. After all, Al Mutannabi street, together with the adjacent Saray market and Al Rasheed street, are the lungs through which the city breathes its cultural life.
According to Shiite tradition, a figure who was one of four deputies appointed by the Imam Mohammed al-Mahdi, who vanished in the 9th century. It is believed that he will return to restore justice to humanity.


After 2003, little by little, violence gained ground on the land of Iraq. As the tension between the communities where being tested by Sunni insurgencies, driven to regain political control. The sectarian war became prevalent in February 2006, when Sunni organisation Al-Qaeda in Iraq bombed one of the holiest sites in the Shiite region – the mosque of Al-Askari in Samarra. This set a wave of hit and counterattacks between the Shia and Sunni Muslims, which escalated in 2007. Although, it declined from 2008, attacks based upon ethnic backgrounds, still occurs in the streets to this day.


Baghdad is formerly known for its cosmopolitan characteristics; tolerant with different religions and cultures, such as foreigners who worked and lived next to each other. Contrary, nowadays Baghdad is compartmentalised in various sections based upon ethnicities. Hence, during the sectarian war, the more mixed an area is, the more sectarian violence there is likely to be. Marr and Al-Marashi. 2017. Page 245.


After the surge of 2003, several sectarian driven attacks followed on various mosques on both sides (Shi’i and Sunni), such as Imam Ali mosque, Buratha mosque and Al-Askari mosque. Or more recently the destruction of the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul by ISIS.


Footnote

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2 Page 57.


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The Al-Khilani Mosque is a historic building located at the western shore of the Tigris River next to the Baghdadi Municipal and Sinak district. The mosque preserves the shrine and tomb of Abu Jaffar Muhammad ibn Uthman or is also known as Al-Khilani. Although the construction date of the mosque is unknown, the oldest record of the mosque can be traced to 1726. The place is used for daily prayers and the surrounded by a working-class neighbourhood of Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds who have lived next to each other’s sides, worshipped at each other’s mosques and grieved each other’s losses.

On Tuesday 19th of June 2007, as people were heading towards their work just as they finished their afternoon prayer – like any ordinary day – a truck filled with explosives and cooking gas bursts in front of the mosque taking 78 lives and injuring 218 civilians. Instantly the bright sky – that was already carved by dark grey trails of yesterday’s smouldering remains – darkens again as a screen of black smoke dim the neighbourhood. A time when Baghdad was at war with itself, inflamed by sectarian tension. When families were driven out of their own neighbourhood, as they found a bullet in front of their doorstep – knowing that they had to flee like the other 1.6 million internally displaced people. While the streets of various religions, cultures and languages became home to violence through assassinations, kidnapping and ethnic cleansing by Sunni or Shi’i militias. Whereas one group attacked public buildings and people on the street, the other group responded in kind with use of explosion on markets and mosques – an effort by religious extremists to inflame sectarian divisions and mistrust. ‘People here realise that there is a conspiracy to sow hatred between us,’ explained Mr Jalal Jaff, a Sunni Kurd who lives around the corner and ran to the scene to pull people out of burning vehicles.

Unfortunately, attempts to strife hatred between people continue for they seeking solely for differences within each other to abolish, with architecture as one of the primary targets. For architecture represent those differences, an embodiment of history, culture and traditions – a cultural artefact. Consequently, Al-Khilani Mosque wasn’t the first to be used as a medium for ethnic cleansing and was certainly not the last one. Hence, the attack on Al-Khilani Mosque wasn’t just to create hatred or an additional death count, it was an attack on its symbolic quality, driven by a political agenda to gain or regain the power over the country since the fall of the regime. The mosque represents the legitimacy of an ethnic group, it acts as evidence of the past and validate current presence and on into the future. This, in turn, is a sign of threat to its enemies. Furthermore, these attacks may still be affecting the current life of Baghdad physically and mentally. Hence, on that Tuesday, half of the mosque was brought to rubble, while another half including the minaret and turquoise dome were still intact. Today the reconstructed mosque is still a half mosque. The rubble still surrounds the mosque, only now in concrete walls allowing just the minaret and dome to protrude. While the rest is hidden from the daily and vibrant lives of the busy Sinak district.

During the sectarianism all spaces representing a meaning of diversity received atrocity. Consequently, damaging the whole urban fabric of cultural interactions. While the walls became rubble and rubble became barricades, the city of Baghdad was balkanised by concrete blast walls, within this enclaves the same militias protecting their own community from outsiders. Consequently, as those terrorists have left and casualties have declined, the barricades still stand, segregating the city and people – a remembrance of violence and mistrust between neighbours. This similarly evident in Al Khilani mosque, which supposed to be open for people and its worshippers, is now surrounded by concrete blocks hiding its entrance to optimism and unity during hardship.
Footnote


3. See picture in Appendix Al Zawraa park.

4. During the invasion, people were afraid of the food shortage that Global security. 2019

5. A research done about the park in Baghdad, including Al Zawraa, show the following factors affect the social interaction; crowded and noise, Quality safety, Accessibility, Design and image, and Management and maintenance. With negligence by the government as one of the primary cause. Salih, Sarah, and Sumarni Ismail. 2018. "Determining the factors affecting social interaction in the parks of Baghdad city, Iraq," Archnet-IJAR: International Journal of Architectural Research 40-62.


Playgrounds in scarcity

Al Zawraa Park

Past

Al Zawraa park is located at the eastern shore of the Tigris in the Karkh district, next to the Grand Festival square. The park of a 2.7 km² area consists of an amusement park, zoo, waterbeds and gardens. Al Zawraa was opened by the former president Ahmed Hassan Al Baker in 1971 - a period of prosperity and modernisation. Henceforward the park became the largest park in Baghdad and loved by the people. Amid the city centre and close to its citizens it provided coolness in the hot Iraqi summers where families met and children played. However, years after the opening, the park suffered from the economic crisis and sanctions enforced on Iraq. Finally, Saddam imposed for renovations and closed the park in 2002.¹ Before the park got the chance to be reopened again, it got occupied by the invasion of 2003. When the battleground was taken to Al Zawraa, as mortars and tanks destroyed parts of the park.

Present

Years followed as reconstructions took place and animals once again took shelter in the zoo. Visiting the park today one stumble upon the large gate with a mural depicting the Abbasside period. Referencing to Baghdad as the pinnacle of Islamic civilisation, characterised by orchards, gardens and social and cultural diversity.² Remarkably in the corner of the mural yellow tiles – mistaken for gold – were carved out.³ A reminiscence of the plundering that besieged the city during the invasion of 2003. When civilians advanced into the zoo, looking for animals to sell or eat.⁴ Once entering the gate and being checked for explosives or weapons, calmness hits as the bustle and noise of the Baghdadi streets fade away. In the foreground children playing, in the background the “Flying Horse” sculpture in the midst of an orchestra of fountains. A view that’s being admired by the visitors sitting on the benches in the shadow created by various palm trees. Onward these trees transform into pergolas allowing cool breezes of air to flow through the pathways as the smell of home-cooked dishes is scent and voices of various languages and dialects are heard.

Architecture

While passing by the cafes, where young adults sit and have conversations as they do hookah; or the open air cinema and mini golf, where children’s excitement can be heard from distance away; or the ferries, where families share a boat for 30 minutes as well as pleasantries, one appreciate the social essence of this space. It allows people to meet and interact on a mutual ground intentionally and unintentionally. Consequently, these spaces contribute to cohesion between various communities, for they wouldn’t meet each other outside the park or in their own segregated neighbourhoods. However Al Zawraa park doesn’t perform its role effectively.⁵ The park needs maintenance and quality improvement as well as its lack to accommodate the volume of visitors. Whereas Al Zawraa performs ineffectively, other open places are in a poorer state. Many local parks have become collection area for sewage, stagnant water and dumping site for garbage. Besides, the parks in Baghdad are also insufficient in area and number, and the facilities – especially children’s facilities – within these parks are outdated and unsafe.⁶ Meanwhile, responsible authorities reply with negligence.⁷ Hence the lack and ineffectiveness of these places, in turn, reflects on the interaction and cohesion of the communities.⁸

Meaning

During the last decades, Baghdad endured multiple changes as a result of the political and sectarian conflict, and the parks are no exception. Recreation spaces such as city gardens and stadium and activities such as walking around or boating on the Tigris River have been shut down or off limits since 2003.⁹ Although the overcrowded Al Zawraa park offers these opportunities, it can’t fulfil the need of an entire city with 7,2 million citizens. This absence of these spaces means that families have little to respite from difficulties of their daily life, this eventually lowers the quality of life and social interactions, further aggravating the complex social diseases Iraq is facing today.
Conclusion

By reflecting upon the five narratives, a comprehensible image appears, which describe the life of Baghdad through the perspective of streets, parks, buildings, and squares. Each public space supplementary to the other while introducing a new event or element to the narrative.

Whereas Swords of Qadisiyah may narrate the notion behind its existence, it highlights the frustration of the people about their government. The same government that allows their culture and history to go in decay as they do so to Nasb Al-Hurriyah, which represent the national identity and pride. A monument held dear by the Iraq’s, but now in decay as well as being subordinate to the threats placing the country in disarray. Circumstance that are too familiar with places of diversity such as Al Mutannabi street and Al-khilani mosque. Despite that Al Mutannabi street has bounce forward, the other retains by the past; the sectarianism. The invasion of 2003 had ended one threat – an aggressive regional regime – but created another, a potentially failing state with segregated cities. This resulted, in public spaces that are still searching for their purpose in the urban fabric, meanwhile, that fabric has become even more fragmented in recent decades. Besides, the potentials to improve the cohesion between the society are in scarcity. For parks like Al Zawraa who offer social interaction and a way out from the tragedies are scarce and not well maintained.

Nevertheless, it can be stated that the adversities; daily human loss, loss of social life, destruction of infrastructure, and conflict between various groups still take place and will continue as you read. In turn, these four characteristics can be found in the spaces themselves as a result of political conflicts, sectarianism, corruption, and negligence. However one should consider that the negative state of the public space might even aggravate the source of these tragedies even more. This inflicts the country itself, making undertaking today’s challenges impossible.
Footnote


Discussion

This study began with the search towards the identity of the public spaces, but during the process it developed towards the relevance of those public spaces and public space of Baghdad in general. A relevance that could only be described through sharing their narratives. By looking back at these stories one might sense a certain drama or a poetic description, but this is a mere reflection of the spaces and their atmosphere as I observed during field research. However, the five public spaces don’t represent the whole city, they do shape an image of the public space in Baghdad. Allowing the reader to understand the characteristics and the life of city. This runs parallel with the main purpose of the paper; to share the story of the space, as Tschumi once said “actions qualify spaces as much as spaces qualify actions; that space and actions are inseparable”.

Limitation

However, this study is tied to some limitations. Firstly, the fieldwork was limited to a day per public space, due to the short time frame. Secondly, two of the five places weren’t accessible; the Swords of Qadisiyah and Al Khilani mosque for security reasons. Thirdly, the literature study was limited to previous studies that were published in English language only, therefore excluding the Arabic literature which could be more profound in research.

Relevance

This paper doesn’t purpose to provide answers, but rather highlight the relevance of the public spaces, especially in the current situation of Baghdad, which is sectarian driven and in need for cohesion. For cities like Baghdad, who previously were known for their gardens and public buildings, have forgotten the term public space, explains Bassem Al Altai (CEO and head architect of a reformed architectural firm in Karbala, Iraq) during the interview in Iraq 2019. Furthermore, this research contribute to an under-researched area of the consequences of conflict on public spaces in Baghdad, since few researches have carried out during the current unstable environment. Which is essential to the field of architecture, for this period truly illustrate the true meaning of the spaces. Hence the relation of conflict and architecture.

Critics

As Altai explains the concept public space have been forgotten by the Iraqis, this also applies to the responsible authorities. For the government isn’t aware of the relevance of the public space. This is evident in all five narratives for instance in lack of maintenance, shortage of public space or segregation through borders. On the other hand, it has to be noted that in these times of instability, millions of displaced people, daily threats and a governing body that’s infected with corruption and political conflict the relevance of public spaces sounds far away from other issues.

Giveaway

However, as earlier described the Public spaces in Baghdad have to be improved and increased to enhance the social cohesion in Iraq, certainly during these times when sectarianism still has ground on the Iraq soil. An evident example of this is Al Zawraa park.
Narratives of Baghdad


Anonymous, interview by Achmed Ali. 2019. "Conversating with the bookshop keeper and witness of the explosion (5 1)."


Appendix

Appendix A
History

Appendix B
Geography and demography

Appendix C
Swords of Qadisiyah

Appendix D
Nasb Al-Huriyah

Appendix E
Al Mutannabi street

Appendix F
Al Khilani mosque

Appendix G
Al Zawraa park
In 1257 Mongols besieged Baghdad. Tigris ran black with the ink from the books that were thrown in the river.

The Golden Age of Islam with Baghdad, as the capital of knowledge and various cultures. Baghdad was known as "The House of Wisdom".

Kingdom of Iraq
1920 Hashemite Monarchy
King Faisal
1932 in end British Mandate

Persians & Greek

Roman

Abbasid Caliphate
The Golden Age of Islam with Baghdad, as the capital of knowledge and various cultures. Baghdad was known as "The House of Wisdom".

Mongols Empire
In 1257 Mongols besieged Baghdad. Tigris ran black with the ink from the books that were thrown in the river.

Abbasid Caliphate

Baghdad Gymnasium
- Le Corbusier

Iraqi Coup d'état
'58

Saddam Hussein
1963 Baath party took the power
1979 Saddam became president
Modernisation of Baghdad and Iraq

Gulf War
2nd of August Iraq invaded Kuwait
1991 Intifada I, Rebellion by the Kurds and Shias Trade Embargo
Oil for food program

Fall of the Regime
Operation Iraqi Freedom
2003 Saddam Captured

ISIS
2013 - 2017

Sectarian War
2006 - 2008
Segregation

Baghdad Gymnasium
- Le Corbusier

Saddam Husse
1963 Baath party took the power
1979 Saddam became president
Modernisation of Baghdad and Iraq

Iraq - Iran War
The war lasted for 8 years
Genocide of Kurds: 180,000 killed under the regime of Saddam.
Swords of Qādisīyah
Mutannabi Street
Al-Khilani Mosque
Al-Zawraa Park
Nasb Al-Hurriyah
Geography and Demography
Appendix B
Ethnic religious neighbourhood before the sectarian war
Geography and Demography
Appendix B
Overview selected places
1. Victory arch
2. Demonstration at the parade area
3. Aerial view of the parade area

Infrastructure
Theatre
Parade area
Podium
Program
Military checkpoint
Vehicles
Limited access
Pedestrians
Border
3. Front view panorama
1. Traffic around the square
3. Young Iraqi band, taking a picture in front of the monument for their album cover.
3. Tiles falling-off the monument

Closed Underground entrance

Infrastructure
Program
Markets
Hospital
Office
Storage
Bus station
Cafe

Military checkpoint
Vehicles
Limited access
Pedestrians
Border
1. Al Mutannabi street
2. Arcades in the Mutannabi street
3. People browsing books
4. After the terrorist attack of 2007

Markets
Bookshop and book stands
Storage
Cafe

Infrastructure
Program
Military checkpoint
Vehicles
Limited access
Pedestrians
Border
2. Aerial view of the Khilani Square and Al Khilani mosque
3. Al Khilani mosque on day of the Terrorist attack
3. Alumma Park behind the panorama