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WHERE LOCAL MODERNITIES MEET: THE CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION IN IRAQ, 1957–1973

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Abstract.

The Gulbenkian Hall on Tayeran Square in Baghdad — one of the few venues there where works of Iraqi modern art can be seen today — was designed and built between 1957 and 1962 by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, aimed at supporting the city's budding modern arts scene with its first purpose-built gallery. Importantly, it was also intended as a demonstration of the foundation's seriousness of purposes in strengthening the cultural, educational, scientific and public health-related infrastructure of Iraq — a purpose to which the institution, established in Lisbon in 1956, had decided to channel part of its oil revenues, largely originated in the country. In the tight-rope exercise of combining its own financial viability with its philanthropism, the Foundation thereby helped establishing the material and intellectual backbone of modern-day Iraq, through very diverse means.

This exercise included approving around 250 'construction grants' in Iraq, 600 scholarships for graduate and post-graduate training, home and abroad, and material support ranging from library collections to television equipment. The operation peaked with al-Shaab Stadium in Baghdad (1957–1966), meant as a contribution for the advancement of Iraqi physical education. Focusing on the sports complex and arts centre initiatives as epitomes of post-colonial, soft-power diplomacy processes and products, this paper examines how the archive of a philanthropy in Portugal can shed light on the unseen history of ostensibly distant objects that, despite circumstances over the past three decades, have entered Iraqi collective memory as beacons of normality, while enquiring the ways by which seemingly unconnected cultures of modern built-environment production come into contact, yielding new, hybrid outputs.

The Gulbenkian Hall in Baghdad is now a virtual reliquary of modern Iraqi art. Its walls are lined with reproductions of original works that have either disappeared in the recent troubled past or are stored away for safety. It offers an overview of artistic activity over the last century and suggests how keeping this facility matters: a marker of normality in the city's daily life.

This gallery, designed as the Modern Arts Centre and completed in 1962, and the sports complex known as the People's Stadium, of 1966, were built by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Baghdad as part of a quid-pro-quo strategy to compensate Iraq for the proceeds from oil exploration, an activity in which Calouste Gulbenkian was a pioneer. The development of a modern cultural, educational, scientific and welfare infrastructure in Iraq

was a priority for this philanthropy, supporting the construction and equipment of facilities, formation of national elites and artistic production.

To mark the completion of the Stadium, in 1966 the Foundation organised the Gulbenkian Cultural Week in Baghdad, using the occasion to exhibit newly acquired Portuguese and international artworks (the genesis of the Foundation's Modern Collection), to promote local artistic creation (buying works that now form its rare section of Iraqi art), and to finance the training of young Iraqi artists in Lisbon.

In the exhibition *Art and Architecture between Lisbon and Baghdad*, curated by Patricia Rosas and myself at the Gulbenkian museum in 2018, the Cultural Week of 1966 was the starting point to reflect on the Foundation's operations in Iraq, and their implications both for a modernising Middle East country and for an institution seeking affirmation in the region. The promotion of artistic, technical and architectural cultures in Baghdad was, then, seen and shown through little-known artworks and unpublished documents from the Gulbenkian Collections in Lisbon. In what regards the built environment, a special focus was placed on the sports complex and the arts centre.¹

1. SPORTS AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The Al-Shaab Stadium ("the People's Stadium") in Baghdad was the *pièce de résistance* of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's strategy to further the cultural, educational, welfare and scientific development of Iraq, benefiting from earlier experiences such as increased support for local initiatives since 1957, and the 1962 completion of the Modern Arts Centre in particular. With a brief of significant scale and complexity, this was also the most important work undertaken by the Foundation outside Portugal in the 1960s — comparable only to the construction of the Foundation Headquarters and Museum in Lisbon.²

Because of its visibility and novelty, the complex was the central element of the public relations efforts that accompanied the Gulbenkian philanthropy operations in the country. The structure, a direct intervention by the Foundation which survived several changes of regime and government, was consistently presented as instrumental in developing a new national identity: physical activity and sport would play a fundamental role in the everyday life of the new Iraqi — and republican — citizenry.

1.1. Strategic definition of the project (1958–1959)

The construction of an "imposing building for a Sports Stadium", designed according to the latest techniques and financed by the Foundation in honour of King Faisal II, had been suggested by Azeredo Perdigão to Prime Minister Nuri Pasha in March 1958, only four months before the revolution that would depose the king. The project survived not only a regime change (and the so-called Ramadan Revolution, which in February 1963

replaced the government of Qasim with that of Ahmed al-Bakr of the Ba'ath Party), but also strategic readjustments by leaders seeking to satisfy the national interest through the management of oil revenues.

Initially, the Foundation was only to be a source of finance: either for the construction of a large stadium designed by Le Corbusier; or for three stadiums in Iraq's major cities; or finally for a single stadium in Baghdad designed by Portuguese architects.³ By the end of 1959, however, the Foundation had also taken on responsibility for the overall planning and management of construction and its turnkey delivery to the Iraqi State. In order to deploy the initial grant of £1,050,000 provided under the Foundation's remit in the area of Education, its Projects and Works Department (SPO) launched a complex and meticulous study of local conditions.

1.2. Developing the Keil-Ramos project (1960–1961)

The functional programme for the flagship project of the Gulbenkian operations in Iraq was demanding and complex: a 35,000-seat stadium for football, athletics, parades and gymnastics; an adjoining football training pitch; an Olympic-sized swimming pool for competition and recreation with seating for 1,000 spectators; a smaller 2,500-seat stadium for volleyball, basketball, boxing and wrestling and three supplementary training fields.

The architects involved were Francisco Keil do Amaral, a consultant for the Foundation's Headquarters and Museum scheme in Lisbon⁴, and Carlos Ventura Ramos, architect alongside Jorge Viana of the Restelo Stadium in 1952–1956. Structural engineering and other specialities were the responsibility of Alderico Santos Machado, Mário Gomes Páscoa and Carlos Barros Vidal, with consultancy by Ihsan Sherzad (the SPO's local technical representative) and coordination by João Vaz Raposo.

The sports complex project took full advantage of the possibilities of carefully calibrated exposed reinforced concrete structures, designed with the support of the Foundation's Centre for Scientific Calculus, a contribution which enabled not only notable efficiency and economy in construction, but also their remarkably slender, almost delicate, architectural forms.

1.3. Construction and delivery (1963–1966)

The initiative was presented by Iraqis and Portuguese alike as part of a strategy to construct a new national identity in Republican Iraq — where physical activity and sport would play a fundamental role — and placed under the remit of the director-general of Physical Education by the Iraqi government. The process comprised intense reciprocal working visits and constant negotiations to address day-to-day problems: the normal development of a project made more demanding through distance. Its every step was followed locally by engineer-architect Sherzad and from Lisbon by SPO staff engineers Guimarães Lobato (director) and Vaz Raposo. Visible

from 1963, construction was also scrutinised on a daily basis by the local population and government officials, seduced perhaps by its striking visual language and structural boldness.

The architectural “play of volumes” employed formal vocabulary characteristic of post-war international modernism, in particular that of Keil do Amaral, who employed vaulted shell-like roofs in the swimming pool facilities in Baghdad and other coeval works; the administration floor louvres directly quoted Le Corbusier and the modern canon. Above all, the design recurred to simple gestures and a clear sculptural intent, defining volumes by section — an effect maximised by the size and repetition of a few reinforced concrete profiles (*Fig. 1*).

This sports complex acquired a somewhat iconic quality, emphasised with singular, self-standing sculptural objects, both evidently functional (the swimming pool’s diving tower) and more enigmatic (the memorial tower commending the complex to Iraq). Keil and Ramos avoided technical challenges by keeping finishes to a minimum; finally, they were rewarded with the quality of the exposed concrete, of considerably high standard.

The inauguration in 1966 meant, in itself, a logistical test for the Foundation. Organising the Gulbenkian Cultural Week in Baghdad was an opportunity to mark the occasion with a clear demonstration of the central place given by the Foundation to fostering artistic creation within the framework of its actions. Above all, however, it was a unique chance for the Gulbenkian operations in Iraq to gain the public visibility that lacked in 1962, when opening the Modern Arts Centre: the long-awaited football match — where the presence of a top Portuguese team played on the growing popularity of the sport in Iraq — was followed with enthusiasm by a crowd of twice the stadium’s nominal capacity.

2. THE ARTS

The idea of supporting the construction of a modern arts centre committed to the “civilising potential” of contemporary artistic production in Baghdad, was perfectly in keeping with the Foundation’s objectives of financing educational, cultural, welfare and scientific projects in Iraq. The Modern Arts Centre was the calling-card project for its operations in Iraq: a technically simple and pragmatic project that responded to an unquestionable need with clear cultural aims. A direct intervention — and not the provision of a grant, as would become the norm from then on — would quickly demonstrate the institution’s capacity for serious accomplishment. It would also serve as a rehearsal for the other work built directly by the Foundation, the considerably more ambitious Al-Shaab sports complex.

2.1. First steps of the project (1957–1959)

In 1957, the Iraqi Artists Society requested support for the construction of a modern art centre with a permanent exhibition hall in

Baghdad, an infrastructure they deemed indispensable for the development of a cohesive “artistic movement” in Iraq. Through the Foundation’s Middle East Affairs Department, the initiative was ranked among its earliest “priority projects”, securing its involvement.

Architect Rifat Chadirji, involved in the architectural renovation of Iraq and an influential government official, suggested the Baghdad City Council should carry the initiative. In January 1959, he presented the functional brief and suggested that a Portuguese architect be invited to prepare a proposal. The Foundation decided to develop the project directly and to invite local figures to Lisbon, thereby forging ties between the two countries. It also ensured that the municipality provided a “large and central” site for the building and took responsibility for hosting artistic events there.

2.2. From draft to execution design (1960)

The Modern Arts Centre (MAC), deserving a grant of £60,000 from the Foundation’s Board of Trustees in April 1959, was designed between August 1959 (preliminary scheme) and December 1960 (execution documents). Architect Jorge Sotomayor de Almeida and engineers João Vaz Raposo, Alderico Santos Machado, Mário Gomes Páscoa, Carlos Barros Vidal, Sabah Hamdi and António Lopes de Sousa, from Portugal, worked in close collaboration with engineers Hassan Rifaat Mahmoud, director of the technical division of Baghdad City Council, and Abdullah Ihsan Kamil, professor at the Faculty of Engineering and a city councillor.

The design included two exhibition halls (for temporary shows on the ground floor, with the possibility of extension to the public gardens; and permanent on the upper floor, a more secluded position), a library and slides archive (for education purposes), offices and storage.

Visits by Iraqi politicians and officials to Lisbon, traineeships of Iraqi technicians in Portugal and technical missions of the SPO to Baghdad, were evidence of a sustained exchange between the Foundation and local actors in this (westernised) developmental effort. Engineer-architect Ihsan Sherzad, a technical consultant to the Foundation, and Sabah Hamdi, a resident engineer, were put in charge of the completion of both the stadium and the arts centre, with near-daily correspondence exchange on project guidelines and adjustments to construction, materials, procedures and structures. Aware of the opportunities that its operations might open up in the Middle East for Portuguese building materials, the MAC designers specified the use of marble, cork and tile, also responding to requests from their Iraqi counterparts.

2.3. Construction, completion and use (1961–1966)

The MAC project gained urgency in the context of political and social instability in Iraq and was sustained under the pragmatism of the SPO, who simplified construction to streamline completion. The MAC was instrumental

in domestic and international politics, from the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone by Prime Minister Qasim, on 14 July 1961, the third anniversary of the republican revolution, to the opening of the building, one year later.

Using the structural frame as a composition device, the MAC employs simple and expressive formal mechanisms that also provided thermal control: claustra-block façades, thin concrete louvres and intricate skylights in exhibition halls (*Fig. 2*). The eminent simplicity of the proposal did not, however, leave out stereotypical features of Middle Eastern architecture: most notably, polygonal geometries in horizontal support bars, claustra blocks and honeycomb-pattern roof slabs.

From 1962 on, the MAC hosted numerous exhibitions: modern Swedish and Spanish art, Middle Eastern artists, Iraqi architecture and photography, among many other subjects. In 1973, the Foundation's fifteen-year long effort to keep the oil running in the Gulbenkian concessions through the support of arts and architecture ended, with overnight nationalization by the Iraqi government. In 2016, the so-called Gulbenkian Hall had survived the waves of looting and destruction that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the ensuing troubled years: because of security concerns, the ground-floor exhibition room housed a display of copies — not originals — of Iraqi art of the twentieth century. While normal life in Baghdad remained difficult to ensure, the building had been maintained as a beacon of normality, allowing for the Iraqi public to have some understanding of the country's arts scene in the past century.

The Modern Arts Centre in Baghdad and the al-Shaab Stadium were devised as emphatic demonstrations of the Gulbenkian Foundation's seriousness of purpose in strengthening the cultural, educational, scientific and public health-related infrastructure of Iraq while maintaining its own interests: to ensure that the oil concessions that fed it remained operative. The public symbolism of these two direct initiatives, and of all the other works subsidised in the trust's pragmatic operation, was mostly successful — at least, until 1973.

Beyond that, however, lies the meaning of this 15-year experiment in periphery-to-periphery development aid for the architectural and technical cultures in Portugal and Iraq. In Portugal, the Gulbenkian was pushing for such cultures to be modernised, strategically matching its financial might with the substantial design, technological and managerial knowledge that its Projects and Works Department made available. Extending such push to Iraq — where this knowledge exchange was complexified by the vital economic importance of the whole operation — became a meaningful exercise in post-colonial diplomacy, in which buildings, finishes, construction details and artworks were all called to play their part.

Fig. 1. Francisco Keil do Amaral & Carlos Ventura Ramos with SPO, al-Shaab Stadium, Baghdad, Iraq, 1958–1966, backside of the covered stands. © Gulbenkian Archives, anon., 1966.

Fig. 2. Jorge Sotto-Mayor de Almeida (SPO), Modern Arts Centre, Baghdad, Iraq, 1957–1962, interior view of the main gallery. © Gulbenkian Archives, anon., n.d. [1966].

Biography

Ricardo Costa Agarez, Senior Researcher at Iscte - University Institute of Lisbon, architect and architectural historian, currently PI of the ERC Starting Grant project “ReARQ.IB - Built Environment Knowledge for Resilient, Sustainable Communities: Understanding Everyday Modern Architecture and Urban Design in the Iberian Peninsula (1939-1985)” and co-editor-in-chief of *ABE Journal*. PhD dissertation (Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, 2013 RIBA President’s Award for Research) published 2016. Giles Worsley Fellow of the British School at Rome (British Academy) 2014; FWO Pegasus Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellow, Ghent University 2015; postdoctoral researcher at KU Leuven (Belgium), 2016–2017; Assistant Professor Évora University (Portugal), 2017-2021.

¹ On this topic, see also my short text for the exhibition catalogue: Ricardo Agarez, “Arte Moderna e Desporto ‘para o Povo’ na Ação da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian no Iraque”, Carla Paulino, & Ana Campino (eds.), *Arte e Arquitetura Entre Lisboa e Bagdade: A Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian no Iraque, 1957–1973*, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2018, 18–32. For a discussion of the arts’ facet of this operation, see Patrícia Rosas, “Origem e Circunstâncias — A Formação do Núcleo de Arte Moderna Iraquiana da Coleção Moderna da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian”, *idem*, 8–17.

² On the work of the foundation’s Projects and Works Department (SPO) in delivering the philanthropy’s bricks-and-mortar initiatives, see my recent article “Philanthropy, Diplomacy and Built Environment Expertise at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in the 1960s and 1970s”, *The Journal of Architecture*, 24:7, 2019, 950–981.

³ The process of replacing Le Corbusier’s project with one by Portuguese designers is thoroughly discussed by Nuno Grande in his article “The Baghdad Affair: How diplomacy supplanted one of the last major projects by Le Corbusier”, *Le Corbusier, 50 Years Later*, conference proceedings, 2015, online publication (<http://dx.doi.org/10.4995/LC2015.2015.645>), accessed 18 March 2018. The same author included the sports complex of Baghdad in the exhibition *Les universalistes*, which he curated for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and was first presented at the Cité de l’Architecture & du Patrimoine (Paris, 2016).

⁴ On the design and construction process of the Headquarters and Museum scheme in Lisbon, see e.g. Ana Tostões & Central Services of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (ed.), *Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation: The Buildings*, Lisbon, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2012.