

## Ornamentation and Modern Architecture in Iraq

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the history of Baghdad city extends into a long history, most of the contemporary buildings of Baghdad have been shaped in the era of modernity. Furthermore, most of the buildings of modernity in Baghdad are types of modernity buildings in Iraq as a whole, and due to all the joints of change and development are taking place in Iraq starts from Baghdad. Accordingly, all selected buildings, which would be presented as case studies of modernity will be exclusively in Baghdad. Although the importance of this significant modernist product, which represents the identity of Baghdad, which should be preserved by the renewal and preservation policies, **the problem of research was emerged as follow:** new finishing materials have been used to cover their exterior facades, which are unrelated to the notion of modernity.

**The aim of this research** is highlighting this Phenomena, which occurred after 2003 in Iraq, and characterized by changing the monuments of modernity buildings. This change was either by undergoing a lot of changes of their facades design or by covering them with new materials. Thus, the use of these materials, specifically plates of aluminum will be analyzed and then, discussed the effects implications, since these buildings represent a cultural and architectural heritage that establishes architectural successes. Consequently, the research methodology will depend on the choice of buildings that built in an important era (between 1950s and 1960s), analysis their facades before and after changes, in order to identify the reasons that resulted to the usage of such materials and suggest recommendations, which can address their negative impacts.

**Keywords:** Ornamentations, Heritage, modification, Iraqi architecture, Modernity

## التزيين والعمارة الحديثة في العراق

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### الخلاصة

تمثل الحداثة في العراق بكل اجناسها المتنوعة ومنها العمارة، انجازا معرفيا هاما ومميزا، وقد اعتبر كثيرون حصيلة تلك الحداثة ونتائجها بمثابة اضافة حضارية يفتخر بها المجتمع العراقي. ولعل المنتج المعماري الحداثي البغدادي هو الابرز وربما الاعم، لان اغلب مباني الحداثة في بغداد تمثل النمط الحداثي في العراق عموما ولان كل مفاصل التغير والتطور التي تحدث في العراق تبدأ من بغداد. وعليه سوف تكون الحالات الدراسية المنتخبة لابنية تعود الى عمارة الحداثة في بغداد. ولكن وبرغم اهمية هذا المنتج الحداثي المهم والذي يمثل هوية بغداد التي ينبغي الحفاظ عليها، وضمن سياسة التجديد والحفاظ التي طالت تلك الصروح المعمارية العائدة لتلك الحقبة، الا ان الكثير من تلك السياسات لم تحافظ على اهمية تلك الابنية من خلال تغليفها بالالواح المعدنية الملونة وبذلك تحددت مشكلة البحث في (استخدام مواد تغليف حديثة (الالواح المعدنية) والتي لا تمت لفكر الحداثة بصلة). اما هدف البحث فهو مناقشة الآثار المترتبة على هذه الممارسات والتي ادت الى تغيير واجهة بغداد الحديثة كون هذه الابنية تمثل ارثا حضاريا ومعماريا. وبناءا على ذلك، فان منهجية البحث ستعتمد اختيار ابنية يعود انشائها لتلك الحقبة

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المهمة (الخمسينات والستينات من القرن العشرين) وتحليل واجهاتها قبل وبعد عملية التجديد لغرض التوصل الى الاسباب التي ادت الى استخدام مثل هكذا مواد وتقديم التوصيات لمعالجة تلك النتائج. وقد توصل البحث الى نتائج اكدت على تعرض تلك الابنية الى سياسة تجديد مثار للجدل، اذ يرى البعض انها قد تؤدي الى قطع المسار التاريخي للعقد الاستثنائي الحداثي للعمارة العراقية. **الكلمات الرئيسية:** التزيين، العمارة العراقية، التجديد، الحداثة.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although Iraq is the historical land of two rivers (Mesopotamia) which is considered the cradle of civilization, modern state of Iraq was established in 1921, (after the Ottomans left Iraq and British troops entered in during WW2-1917). King Faisal 1<sup>st</sup>, became the first king of modern kingdom of Iraq which stayed under British mandate until 1932.

With this establishment, modernity emerged and flourished during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Iraqi architecture.

## 2. MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN IRAQ

In late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman government asked Germany to build a railway line from Europe to the middle east, that was the beginning of the (Orient Express) and the Berlin Baghdad line. German engineers brought modern designs and building materials to Iraq and did few buildings specially railway stations (**Fig.1**), **Al-Sultany, 2013.** , but it was not until 1921 that architectural activity got its entity and witnessed huge change, this took place with the work of British army architects who took the position of (GA), government architect, and designed many buildings which were needed by the new state of Iraq. First Iraq architect to take this position and become the director of the public works office was Ahmed Mukhtar Ibrahim in 1939, yet British architecture kept working In Iraq in that period, **Al-Sultany, 2000**



**Figure 1.** Baghdad central station, designed by J.M.

Wilson (<https://almadapaper.net/Details/126119>)

We can distinguish three periods in modern architecture in Iraq

- The 30s when local architecture met the classic and art deco European to form a unique style.
- The 50s when masters of Modern architecture designed certain buildings with the cultural atmosphere of modernity.
- The 60s, 70s \_80s with the work of Iraqi architects in their approach to create contemporary Iraqi architecture linked to its historical and local past.

Among these periods, the 50s is distinguished for its influence on the later decades and on the architectural thought in the country, **Chadirchi, 1991.**



### 3. BEGINNINGS

In the 40s the first multi-story buildings started to appear in the skyline of Baghdad (the main city in Iraq and the capital) as the city had the horizontal character since its establishment in 762-766 AD. the vertical elements in Baghdad were limited on the minarets and the domes of the mosques as the buildings did not exceed the height one floor or two. Suffair building (four stories), designed by Iraqi architect Midhat Ali Madhloum 1946 was one of them, **Al-Sultany, 2014.**

### 4. MODERN CULTURE AND ARCHITECTURE

By the 1950s the urban picture of Baghdad was turned upside down. New streets that cut through the traditional fabric increased and the suburbs expanded, prompting efforts to come up with basic urban planning for the city or parts of it. However, the influence of modernism thinking on the society has been the greatest.

All facets of life in Baghdad moved toward modernism and artistic groups were established and many galleries full of the works of Iraqi artists, such as Jawad Selim, Fa'iq Hasan, and Hafiz Al-Droubi opened its doors to exhibit works of art in expressionist, abstract, and cubism styles, **Shirzad, 1987**

Young Iraqi poets, such as Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab, Nazik Al-Malaikah, and Abdulwahab Al-Bayati engaged in a new experiment that took the traditional forms of Arab poetry to new horizons, creating a new form of Arabic poetry that became known as "free-verse" poetry. Writers experimented with new creations of the modern Arabic novel. Likewise, traditional Arabic music also went through modern transformations and similar attempts in cinema and television were made.

For instance, Baghdad was the first city to have broadcast television in the Middle East. Progress somehow was linked to the Western model or modern thinking, social habits and norms began to shed breakaway from the traditional limits, and the number of science colleges and institutes and their graduates greatly increased, **Architecture of Modernity in Baghdad, 2013**

This cultural evolution coincided with significant economic wealth that increased the state and society's coffers. As a result, a special council that was named the Development Council was created to build large factories, oil refineries, electric power stations, and dams that spared the valley of the two rivers the catastrophes of flooding. Baghdad's landscape became pierced by high rise buildings that changed its traditional look and with the introduction of new materials and methods of construction the horizontal line of the city changed and became filled with multi-story buildings and concrete structures with modern finishing materials that replaced the traditional forms and features, **Al-Silk, 2008.**

In this new atmosphere the most well-known architects in the world were invited to design buildings in Baghdad, including Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Gropius, Gio Ponti, Joseph Louis Sert, and Konstantinos Dioxides. Along with the visits of those great architects in Baghdad, new ideas and discussions in meetings and seminars in the city that was came in the height of its cultural activity.

International and Iraqi architects who studied in schools of modernity in Europe and the US, gave Baghdad, and the main two other cities in Iraq, Basrah and Mosul, their unique modern character, **Suad Abid Ali, 1987.** In 1953, Dafterdar building appeared to (break) the skyline of Baghdad this time with its height, which reached 15 floors, designed by Intercontinental German Company, **Al-Sultani, 2014.**

During this period there was a change in facade finishing methods through the use of sand and cement mixture for facade cladding, this new technique led to a receded in the implementation of the bricks and its paving, and became unwanted and unavailable after the spread of this

phenomenon. In this period, many uses of new and unknown finishing materials have emerged such as stone cladding and marble, **Shirzad, 1987**.

## 5. ORNAMENTATION OF MODERN FACADES IN IRAQ:

### 5.1 Screen Walls Ornamentations:

Dealing with the hot dry weather in Iraq, modern architects used different treatments to reduce sun rays and reduce heat gain, like screens mainly used by Iraqi architects abstracting local craft ornamentations and applying them to brick and hollow block screen walls in front of wide windows of modernity, this appeared in the campus of Mustansiryia designed by Qahtan Awni, and Perforated curtain walls in the Ministry of Industry and Minerals for Fadhil Ajina **Fig. 2**.



**Figure 2.** A. Mustansiryia University  
(author)



**B.** Ministry of Industry and Minerals  
(<https://www.alsumaria.tv/news>)

### 5.2 Facades Louvers:

Also meant to deal with weather influences but architects used different types and sizes of louvers in modern building in Baghdad, as we see in the campus of Baghdad university by Gropius, and mixture of louvers and screens in the elevations of the embassy of the United States in Baghdad by Sert **Fig.3**.



**Figure 3.** A. embassy of U.S.A  
Al-Sultani 2014, p.78



**B.** University of Baghdad  
(author)

### 5.3 Glazed and Unglazed Ceramic Facings:

Color appear in modernity buildings in Iraq in small and specific areas to balance the fare face concrete walls and glass areas, glazed ceramics is a historical traditional treatment used in Mesopotamian architecture, Islamic architecture and the vernacular architecture. In modernity it was used without lavish ornamentation but abstract ways. This appears in Mustansiryia University



by Awni and Baghdad University by Gropius, unglazed ceramic is used in the whole facing of the ministry of planning building by Gio Ponti **Fig. 4.**



**Figure 4.** A. ministry of planning  
<https://www.almaalomah.com>



**B. Mustansiriyah University**  
(author)

#### 5.4 Abstractions of Traditional Architecture:

The goal of Iraqi architects is not to convey the values of modernity prevailing in a particular country, nor copy a common architectural composition and planting it in different regions of climate and topographical nature, different in historical values and national characteristics, but the local architectural heritage is used to extrapolate positive elements and revive them under technological progress. Some architects have used this technique intelligently through a look at the international style to blend intelligently with the elements of modernity to create a style of architecture with Iraqi specificity. The result was a modern architecture, but it is influenced and adapted to local architecture, **Al-Mulla Hwaish, 1988.**

Iraqi modernists worked on abstracting the heritage elements like historical Islamic arches and the traditional vernacular ones in many ways to fit them into regionalized modern architecture, each architect had his own way of doing that in elevations. Mohamad Makyia, Rifaat Chaderchi and Nasir Al Asadi were the main architects to work with modernizing arches **Fig. 5.**



**Figure 5.** A. Faculty of Education



**B. Morality of Baghdad**

#### 6. MODIFICATIONS OF FACADES OF MODERN BUILDINGS:

During late 80s and the 90s, Iraqi architects turned into stone facing, due to the stop of the production of brick and the economic sanctions on Iraq, so stone facing (which not strange to the Iraqi cities as it is the main building material in northern Iraq) was added to the urban scene in the cities in middle and southern Iraq, Baghdad is one of them of course. Some of the façade treatments were European classic inspired while others were modern plane with little ceramic additions.



After the war in 2003 and the collapse of the regime in Iraq, there were periods of lack of control and lack of security, some bank and official buildings were robbed and set into fire, but gradually with the return of normal life (still with security problems) and with some improvement in the economy, and the rise of new needs beside the needs of rehabilitating and maintaining of the modern buildings, many modern buildings were modified either by painting them with bright shiny contrasting colors or by facing them with color metal sheets.

The Mesopotamian nature produced the fired brick color forming the urban façade theme which depends on shaded features and certain ceramic elements, continued to exist even in modernity, with the addition of fair face concrete walls. But after 2003 Iraqi cities mainly Baghdad urban scene witnessed the rise of all shiny colors, in chaotic way.

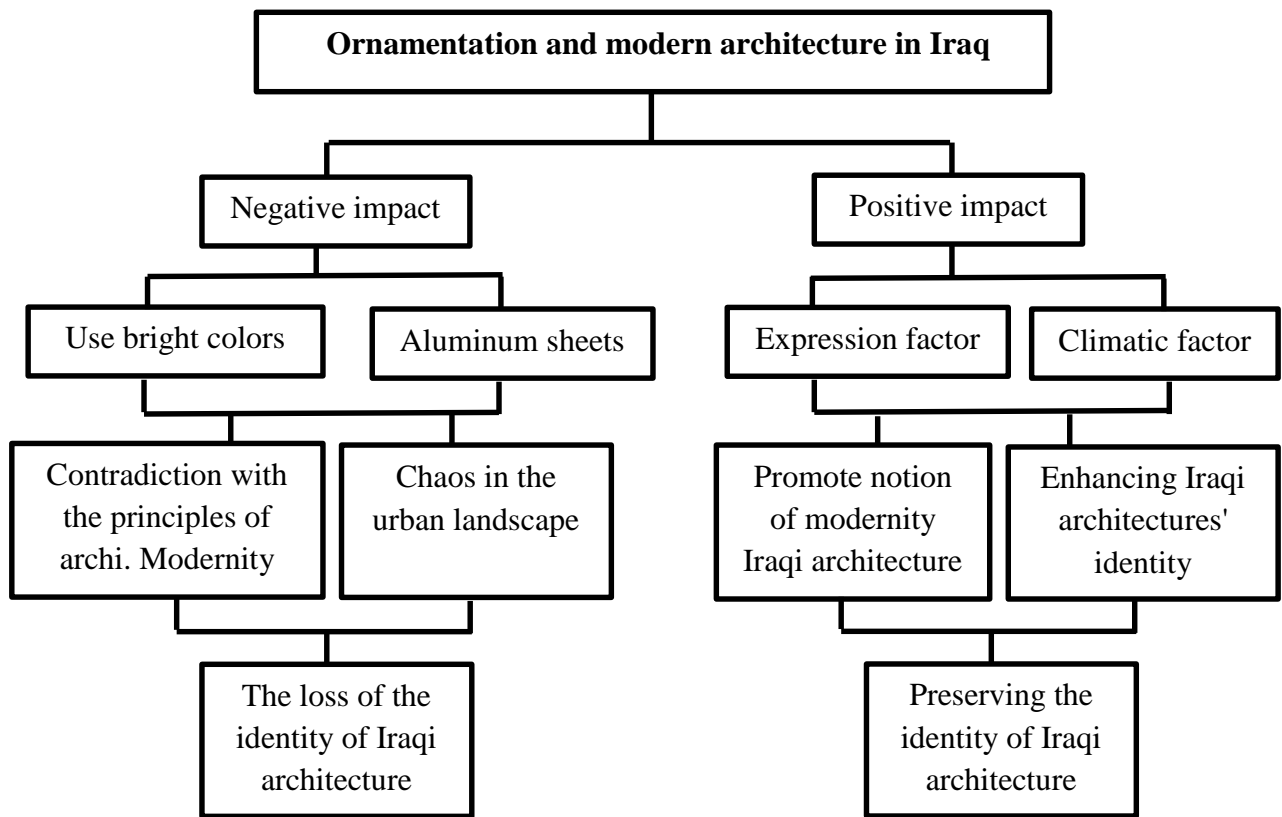
Cheap cost and ease of erecting might be behind the spread of the phenomenon, but the question which rose in the architectural community is about the (change in taste? Deterioration of public taste? Weakness of control of building regulations?)

We can see that colors not the material which is mainly disturbing the scene, beside another issue linked also to the weakness of applying building and urban regulations that is the huge size of type's advertisements urban wise.

Some of icons of modern building were totally faced with colored metal sheets, Rihoon bank and Rafidain bank and Daferdar Building for example. While others were partly covered, the bad influence is not for the building itself but for the urban surrounding too.

Modern Mass/ Space building esthetics is being replaced by shiny contrasting colors. In the University of Baghdad there was an attempt to face the central library, but architects could stand against that attempt, Expansions of modern building and campuses is another problem new building are being added to the campus of the University of Baghdad and the University of Mustansiriyah without considering the initial designs. The ministry of sport and youth is demanding to expand the Gymnasium by Le Corbusier, Iraqi architects attempt to work that with the Le Corbusier foundation succeeded and the expansion will be in coordination with the foundation.

We can classify the impact of above factors to positive or negative effects on the buildings of modernity through the following diagram:



A diagram showing the classification of ornamentation elements and their impact on the urban landscape (author)

## 7. CONCLUSIONS:

The research reached a number of points concerning with elements of ornamentation. The ornamentation in Iraqi contemporary architecture is influenced by many factors, such as intellectual, cultural, economic and social factors, which in return reflect its impact on the economic, social and cultural values of Iraqi society. Additionally, the environmental issue, which is considered as one of the important elements in respect to ornamentation treatments in the architecture of modernity in Iraq. In the sense, the local and cultural values of Iraqi traditional architecture have been combined with the new values of contemporary architecture to produce a new a combination of expressive values, which have given the Iraqi contemporary architecture a kind of enrichment in their façades, as it is summarized in following points: -

- 1- The Climatic factor: through the use of louvers and screens in order to reduce the sunlight and thermal gain, for instance using louvers in the buildings of Baghdad University.
- 2- The Expressive factor: using brick screens could be a good example for that, which are used to enhance the aesthetics values of the building through the brick ornamentation. This could be seen prevalently in local architecture, such as the building of AL-Mustansyria University.
- 3- The Renewal factor or economic factor: Painting the facades with bright colors or use aluminum sheets or in order to hide its defects because of the aging, changing the façade design or covering the wiring of shared generators.



4- This type of buildings could be seen in many public, administrative buildings such as banking buildings ... etc. The absence of building laws and legislations after 2003 has a critical effect on the spread of the packaging phenomenon of buildings with colored aluminum sheets.

This factor has a negative impact on the notion of modernity in Iraq, modernity emphasizes the simplicity and reduction of elements and colors, whereas the buildings that have been covered by aluminum sheets, where there has been an excessive use of colors and elements. All that, in turn and is against the less is more principle (the most important principle of modernity). From the urbanized point of view.

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