

FAME, IMPRISONMENT & REBIRTH:
**THE STORY OF
RIFAT CHADIRJI**
AN IRAQI MODERNIST ARCHITECT

Professor Rifat Chadirji is one of Iraq's and the region's most prominent international architectural thinkers of the twentieth century. Chadirji has been at the vanguard of those grappling with how to reconcile modernity with the vernacular traditions of the Middle East. However, Chadirji's life reflects closely the tragic story of the region. Instead of being celebrated for these noble attempts, the free thinking involved in such a pursuit meant that he was perceived as a danger to those in power. Rifat Chadirji would spend two years in an Iraqi jail and would consume a large part of his intellectual life not in the Middle East but in America.





“ THE BASIC PHILOSOPHY
WAS THAT I WANTED
MODERN ARCHITECTURE
TO BE REGIONALIZED ”



Rifat Chadirji was arrested in October in 1978 on the charge of high treason, a sentence that carried life imprisonment. Chadirji is now 83 years old and talks in a soft clear tone. His keen eyes show the depth of a sharp mind, as he reflects on the details leading to his being arrested. "The [ostensible] reason that I was sent to prison was because I refused to collaborate on a project with a British firm called Wimpy," Chadirji stated. "Because I did not collaborate with them, Wimpy did not submit an offer to the Iraqi government. This caused 'economic damage' to the country which the government considered an offense of high treason due to the fact that we were at war with Israel at the time." One morning, while he was having breakfast, government troops arrived and incarcerated him. "He lost two years of his life behind bars," Balqis Sharara, Rifat Chadirji's wife stated.

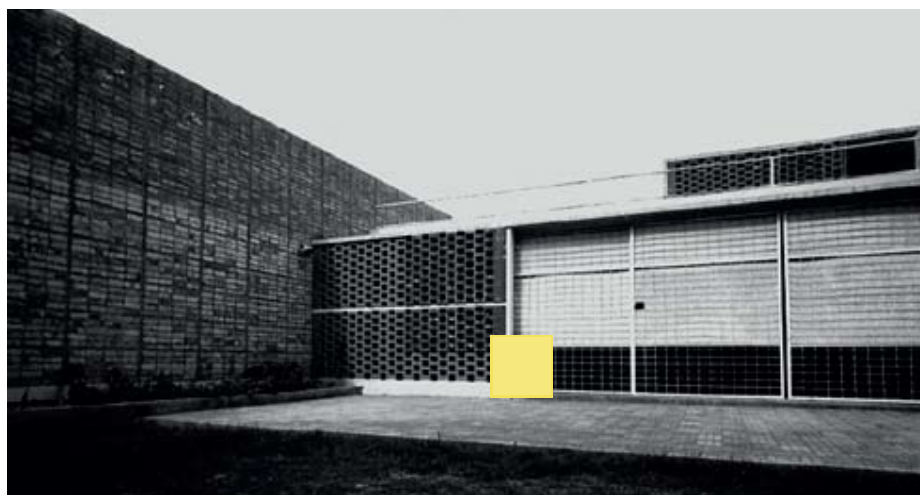
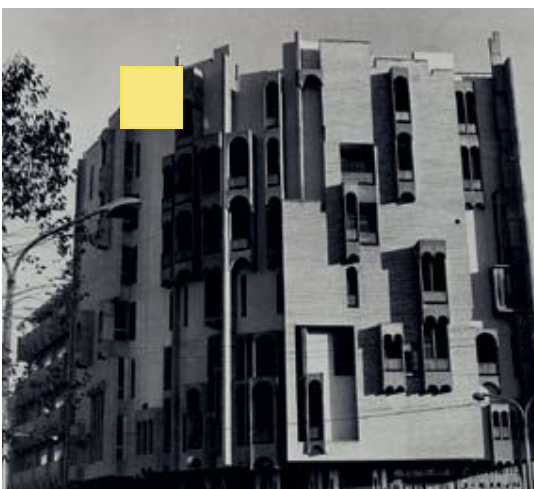
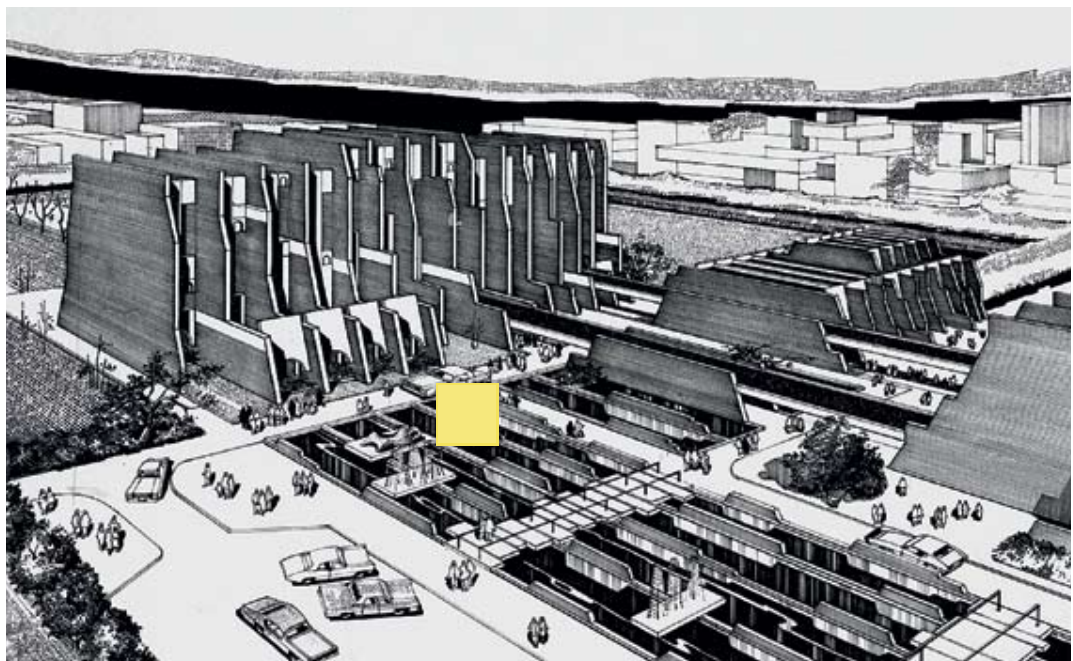
Sharara and Chadirji have written a joint account, in Arabic, of his time in prison: *Jida Bayn Dhulmatain* (A Wall Between Two Darknesses). The book details the trauma of being locked in a cell 2 meters long and 1.7 meters wide and Sharara's trauma trying to cope being left isolated and separated from her husband. Chadirji suspects he was sent to prison because then President Bakr did not like his father who founded the first secular party in Iraq: the National Democratic Party (NDP). But even the academic, Chadirji feels uncomfortable speculating and adds: "I do not know exactly why the President Ahmad Hasan al Bakr sent me to prison."

In 1979 Saddam Hussein came to power and he wanted Baghdad to be prepared for the planned conference of the Non Aligned

Countries (NAM) in 1982. In the late 1980s, 152 days after his imprisonment, Chadirji was driven, still in his prison clothes, to the President. Chadirji was then given a choice by Saddam to either remain in prison or to prepare Baghdad for the NAM conference. The very next day, Chadirji was back to work. "I would not design any of the works myself," Chadirji stated. "Instead I would advise the government and I compiled a list of the best international architects that included Venturi from the United States, Bo from Denmark and Richard England from Malta, among many others."

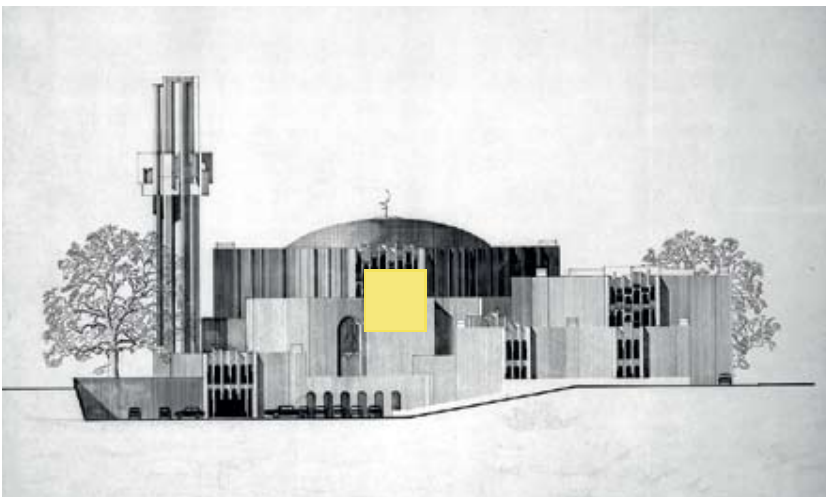
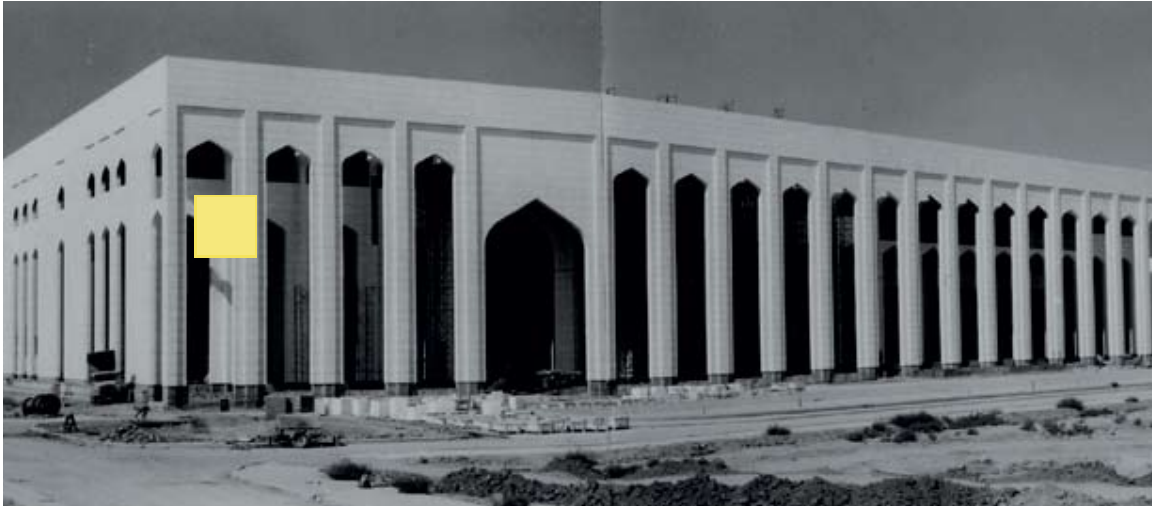
However, the Iran-Iraq war would destroy Saddam's grand plans, and for Chadirji this would be the end of his association with his homeland. "I told the Palace Director that I would work for two years and not a day more. After I did my two years, I left Baghdad for London and then went on to Boston where I spent the next twelve years at Harvard." He would not return to Iraq until 2009 when he was invited by President Jalal al Talabani.

Chadirji was invited back to Iraq in 2009 to rebuild one of his famous monuments, the 'Unknown Soldier'. This monument used to be located in Baghdad square, until it was demolished and replaced by a statue of Saddam Hussein. That statue would become globally famous when it was pulled down by Iraqis and US marines in 2003. Now the Iraqi government would like to rebuild Chadirji's original monument. "I am very happy about this commission and the interest in rebuilding the Unknown Soldier, which was so rudely removed," Chadirji stated when he was in Iraq last year.



KHOURY'S
CONFRONTATIONAL
AND DRAMATIC
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ARCHITECT





CHADIRJI THE ARCHITECT

Unfortunately the violent conflicts that have all too frequently been present in Iraq have meant that the Unknown Soldier is not the only piece of Chadirji's architecture that has received rude treatment. However, and despite this, Chadirji has left a rich heritage behind him both in the Iraqi landscape and in the many books he has produced. Architectural theory as well as the actual practice of architecture make up a huge part of his body of work.

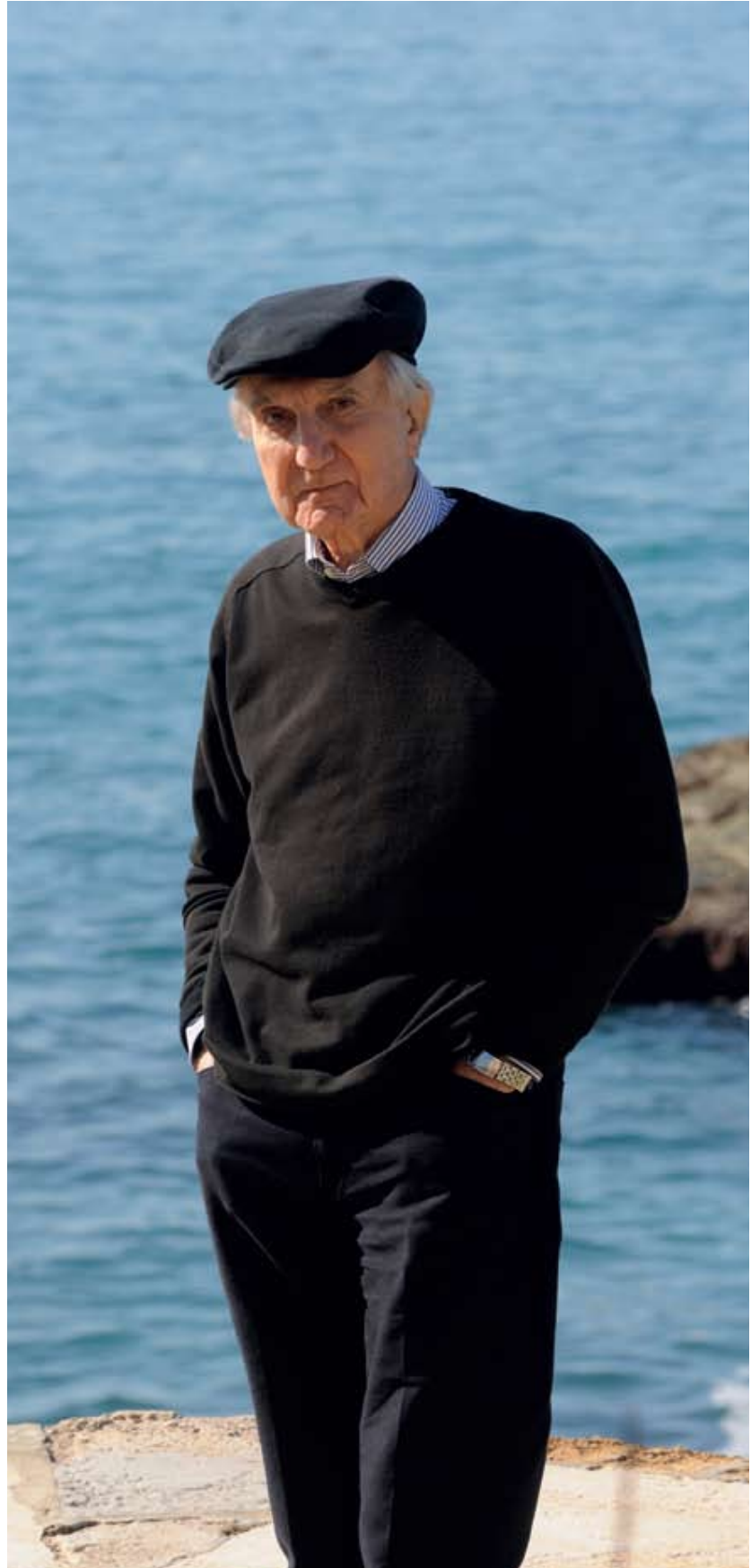
Rifat Chadirji trained in Britain and returned to Iraq in 1952 where he formed the architectural practice Iraq Consult. The central idea of the practice was to create architecture that fused modernist architectural styles, such as the Bauhaus, with the Iraqi and regional vernacular. "The basic philosophy was that I wanted modern architecture to be regionalized," Chadirji explained.

Rifat Chadirji's work on fusing 20th century architecture with the traditional would produce startling buildings in the heart of Baghdad. In 1953 Chadirji was to build his first block of flats that tried to combine the ideas of Le Corbusier and modern aesthetics with local features. However, it would be in the 1960s that saw his golden period of construction flourish. In this period, three buildings, all in Baghdad, would define Chadirji's work: the Iraq Consult offices (1965), the building for the Iraqi Federation of Industries (1966), and offices for the Central Post, Telegraph and Telephone Administration (1971).

The Central Post, Telegraph and Telephone Administration building articulate the new vocabulary of architectural style that Chadirji developed. The modernist influence is immediately recognizable while simultaneously the 'Iraqiness' of the building also shines through. The distinctive arches and the focus on geometry achieve the regional modernism that Chadirji sought. The Villa Hamada also shows Chadirji's unique vision of modern architecture that draws on regional influences. Unfortunately, Iraq would not see any more buildings constructed by Chadirji after his Telephone Administration building.



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LE CORBUSIER AND THE INTERNATIONAL STARTS

In the happier periods of relations between Rifat Chadirji and the Iraqi government in the 1950s he was the first to draw up a list of international star architects. He made a list to design a stadium, an opera house, a post office and a royal palace. The list of architects included Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Oscar Neimeyer, Alvar Alto, Mies Van der Rohe, Gropius and Gio Ponti. Oscar Neimeyer would however reject the offer to work for the Iraqi government stating its oppressive nature. Only the buildings by Gropius and Gio Ponti were completed; Le Corbusier's sport stadium was partially built. However, Frank Lloyd Wright's plans for an opera house which was never built were probably the most renowned. His grandiose design for an opera house is still marveled at today.

One of Chadirji's favorite stories from this period is when he met the famous Swiss French architect Le Corbusier. It was in rather embarrassing circumstances. "Le Corbusier had written a rather rude letter to the Minister who had not paid his fees." A radiating pride emanates from Chadirji as he recalls his meeting with the master. "The first thing he said to me was "Don't you give food to your camels?" And then, "When are you going to give me some of your black gold?" Chadirji then showed Corbusier his work to display that he was not just a government official but a practicing architect. "Corbusier told me that if I am now 30 years old, in ten years'time I will either be a great architect or a failure."

MAINTAINING CONTACT

There is no doubt that Chadirji has made a significant contribution to his profession. But it is the tragedy of the region that he did not get the chance to build more in Iraq or the region at large. Most of his contribution to architecture was done through his work on

architectural theory at Harvard, far from the chaos that Saddam would impose on Iraq. Nevertheless, Chadirji never lost contact with his region. In the early 1990s, he and Sharara came to settle in Lebanon for the winter months, in a house they had previously had to abandon due to the Lebanese Civil War.

In the small village of Halat, just south of Byblos, the Chadirji house delicately plays with vernacular styles alongside the sharp edges of modernist architecture. Built using local stones, the Halat house radiates a soft whiteness that blends subtly into the rock face that the house is perched on. This house is a significant but overlooked architectural gem on the Lebanese coast that is being threatened by ever increasing speculative developments.

GENERATION NEXT

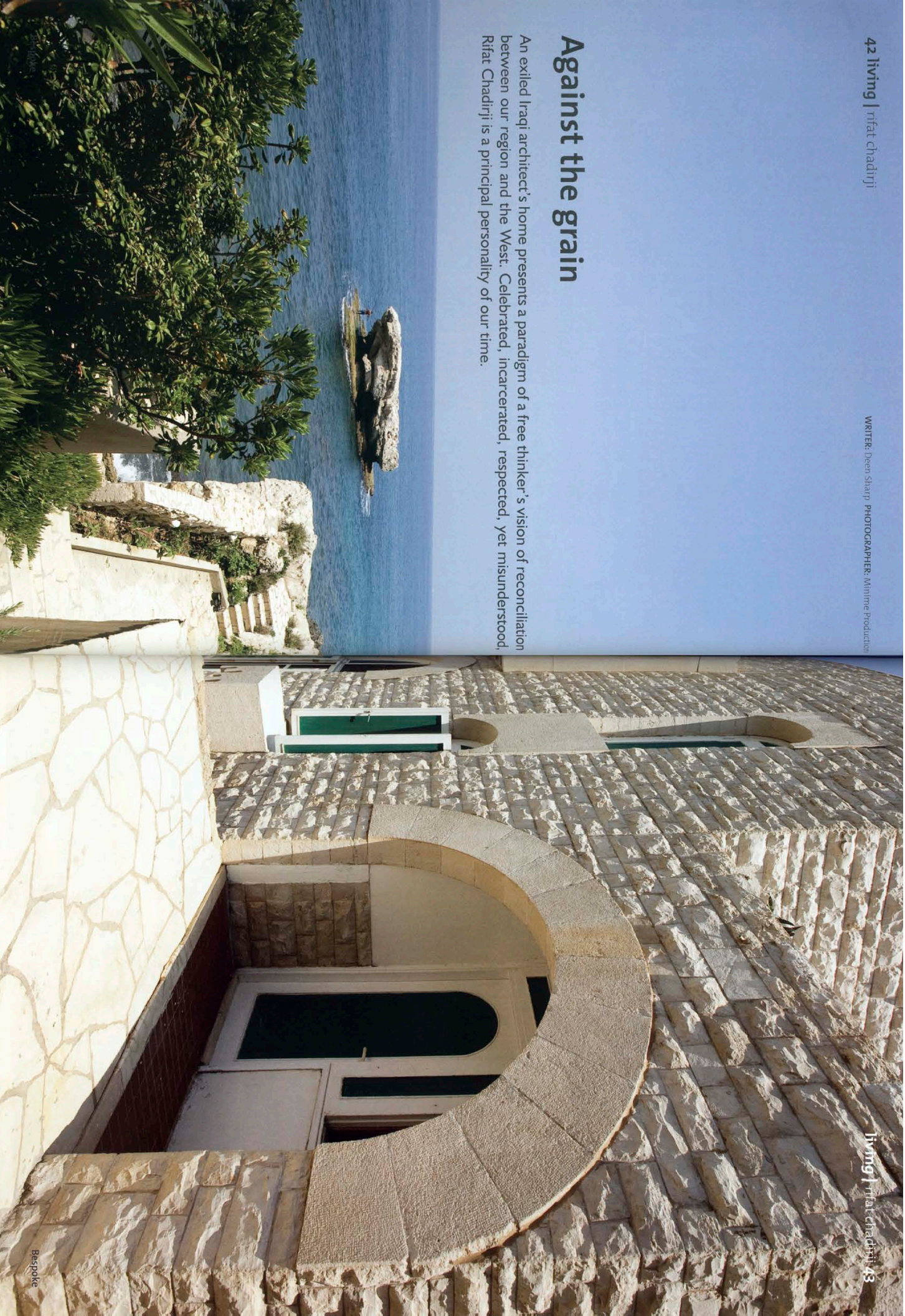
The deteriorating state of architecture today is something that is of central concern to Chadirji. "We have thousands of university graduates today but everything being built is very ugly. Why is this?" To encourage a new wave of modernist architecture in the region, Chadirji has launched the Chadirji award at AUB. Chadirji launched this award primarily because he feels something very wrong is going on in the built environment of Lebanon today. "The award that consists of a committee of five academics asks students to submit their schemes that focus on how we should think about architecture in the future and what the role of architecture is, or should be, in our societies," Chadirji stated.

Chadirji's life has been one where his intellectual strength was able to surpass that of the brutal forces that tried to suppress and control it. The fact that he was never allowed to practice fully in his own country however, is a great loss to the region.



Against the grain

An exiled Iraqi architect's home presents a paradigm of a free thinker's vision of reconciliation between our region and the West. Celebrated, incarcerated, respected, yet misunderstood, Rifat Chadirji is a principal personality of our time.





"Architecture is not just one entity, it has three functions: firstly, it must be utilitarian, secondly, it must be symbolic and finally it must achieve pleasure and happiness."

The Chadiri family has played a monumental role in Iraq's contemporary history, making significant contributions to the world of politics, architecture, philosophy, literature and photography. One of the most famous members of the family is Kamil Chadiri (1897-1968) a lawyer, photojournalist and political statesman who founded the secular National Democratic Party (NDP) in Iraq. While Kamil's lasting legacy is the NDP, which is carried on by his son Naseer Chadiri, he also left a vast photographic legacy documenting scenes of 1920s to 1940s Iraq. Much of this photography focuses on the architecture of the time and thus it should not come as a surprise that his son, Rifat Chadiri, became an internationally renowned architect and architectural theorist.

Rifat Chadiri was trained in Britain and returned to Iraq in 1952 where he formed the architectural practice Iraq Consult. The central idea of the practice was to create a style of architecture that fused modernist architectural styles, such as the Bauhaus, with the Iraqi and regional vernacular. Architectural theory, as well as the actual

practice of architecture, makes up a substantial part of Rifat Chadiri's body of work.

"Architecture is not just one entity, it has three functions: firstly it must be utilitarian, secondly it must be symbolic and finally it must achieve pleasure and happiness," Chadiri said.

Symbolism dominates much of Chadiri's work. "Symbolism is important because it is how we satisfy our human need for identity," he stated. For Chadiri this meant the search for a visual language that fused the ideas of the traditional with the key concepts of Twentieth Century architecture. "The basic philosophy was that I wanted modern architecture to be regionalised," he explained. Regionalising modernity would become a lifetime obsession for Rifat Chadiri and, one could argue, for his family as a whole.

Chadiri's work on fusing Twentieth Century architecture with the traditional would produce startling buildings in the heart of Baghdad. As soon as Rifat returned to Iraq in 1952 he began to change the built environment of the country almost immediately. >





In 1953 Rifat was to build his first block of flats, combining the ideas of Le Corbusier and modern aesthetics with local features. However, the 1960s was Rifat's golden period of construction and design. During this period, three buildings - the Iraq Consult offices (1965), the building for the Iraqi Federation of Industries (1966), and offices for the Central Post, Telegraph and Telephone Administration (1971), all in Baghdad, would define Chadirji's built work.

The Central Post, Telegraph and Telephone Administration building articulated the new vocabulary of architectural style that Chadirji had developed. The modernist influence is immediately recognisable while simultaneously the 'Iraqiness' of the building also shines through. The distinctive arches and the focus on geometry

achieved the regional modernism that Chadirji sought. The Villa Hamada also shows Chadirji's unique vision of modern architecture that draws on regional influences.

Unfortunately, Iraq would not see any more Chadirji designs after this golden period in the 1960s as he was arrested in October of 1978, while he was eating his breakfast. Chadirji explained to the New York Times in an interview just before the United States occupied Iraq in 2003 just how his arrest came about.

"My firm had offices all over the Gulf States, and Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, who was the president before Saddam, wanted to use them for intelligence. I said I would not do it... I had a trial that lasted one-minute-and-a-half, and I was sentenced to life in prison. >

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Bakr wanted to execute me, but I was saved by Saddam's brother, who knew I was innocent," Chadriji explained.

Rifat Chadriji would languish in prison for 20 months, 152 days of the prison sentence would be in a cell two meters long and 1.7 meters wide without light and proper food. He was then transferred to the now infamous Abu Ghraib Prison.

Chadriji has released a book entitled *A Wall Between Two Dark-nesses* which he co-authored with his wife Balqis Sharara that gives an intimate portrait of his time in prison. In the book, Chadriji describes the "inner world" of the prisons while Sharara sheds light upon the "outer world" and how she was also imprisoned as an outcast in Iraqi society.

Chadriji would be released just as rapidly as he was detained. In 1979 Saddam Hussein came to power and wanted Baghdad to be prepared for the planned Conference of the Nonaligned Countries in 1982. Thus, in 1980 Chadriji was driven, still in his prison clothes, to the President and was given the choice of either remaining in prison or preparing Baghdad, with unlimited resources, for the Nonaligned Conferences. The very next day Chadriji set to work.

In other circumstances it would be a dream project for an architect. However, Chadriji did not wallow in his bizarre and tragic situation and began cleaning the streets of Baghdad, renovating historic parts of the city, building theaters and inviting famous modernist architects such as, Robert Venturi from the United States to consult. The Iran-Iraq war would interrupt this utopian dream of Saddam's and the more real work of Chadriji: the Nonaligned Conference was never held.

It was in 1982 that Chadriji finally left for London with his wife, never to return to Iraq again. Soon afterwards however he moved again, this time to the United States where he ended up teaching at Harvard in the philosophy department working on his architectural theories and stopping his work as a practicing architect.

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Bespoke





"Chadiri has created a body of work that outlines the possibility of a more hopeful and constructive relationship between the West and the Middle East, one that offers insights for the next generation of free thinkers."


From the 1980s Chadiri produced a large amount of work on architectural theory. His most famous works from this period include *al-Uhtridar* and the *Crystal Palace* and *A Dialogue on the Structure of Art and Architecture*.

To encourage a new wave of modernist architecture in the region Chadiri launched the Chadiri Award for architects in Lebanon. He created the award primarily because he felt something was going wrong in the built environment of Lebanon.

"We have thousands of university graduates today but everything getting built is very ugly. Why is this? So the award, that consists of a committee of five academics, asks students to submit their schemes that focus on how we should think about architecture in the future and what the role of architecture is, or should be, in our societies."

Most of all Chadiri wishes to establish an architecture that "promotes healthy social relations and which encourages an affinity between the individual architect and the public."

The monumental size of that task in the regional context of today was illustrated to Chadiri when he was asked to design a new flag for Iraq to replace the current one designed by Saddam. The final submission that he chose to submit to the public was a white banner with a blue crescent that had three stripes at the bottom. "Of the three stripes the two outer stripes were blue to represent the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the yellow stripe in the middle was supposed to represent the Kurds," Chadiri said. This flag however, was attacked straight away for appearing to be too similar to the Israeli flag.

Sadly, the relationship between Chadiri and his homeland has never been repaired and as a result one of the most significant thinkers on how to reconcile modernity with Iraq, and the region at large, has continued to remain in exile. True to his spirit Chadiri now spends his time between the West and the Middle East spending the summer in Brian and the winter in Lebanon. Nevertheless, Chadiri has created a body of work that outlines the possibility of a more hopeful and constructive relationship between the two regions, one that offers insights for the next generation of free thinkers. 

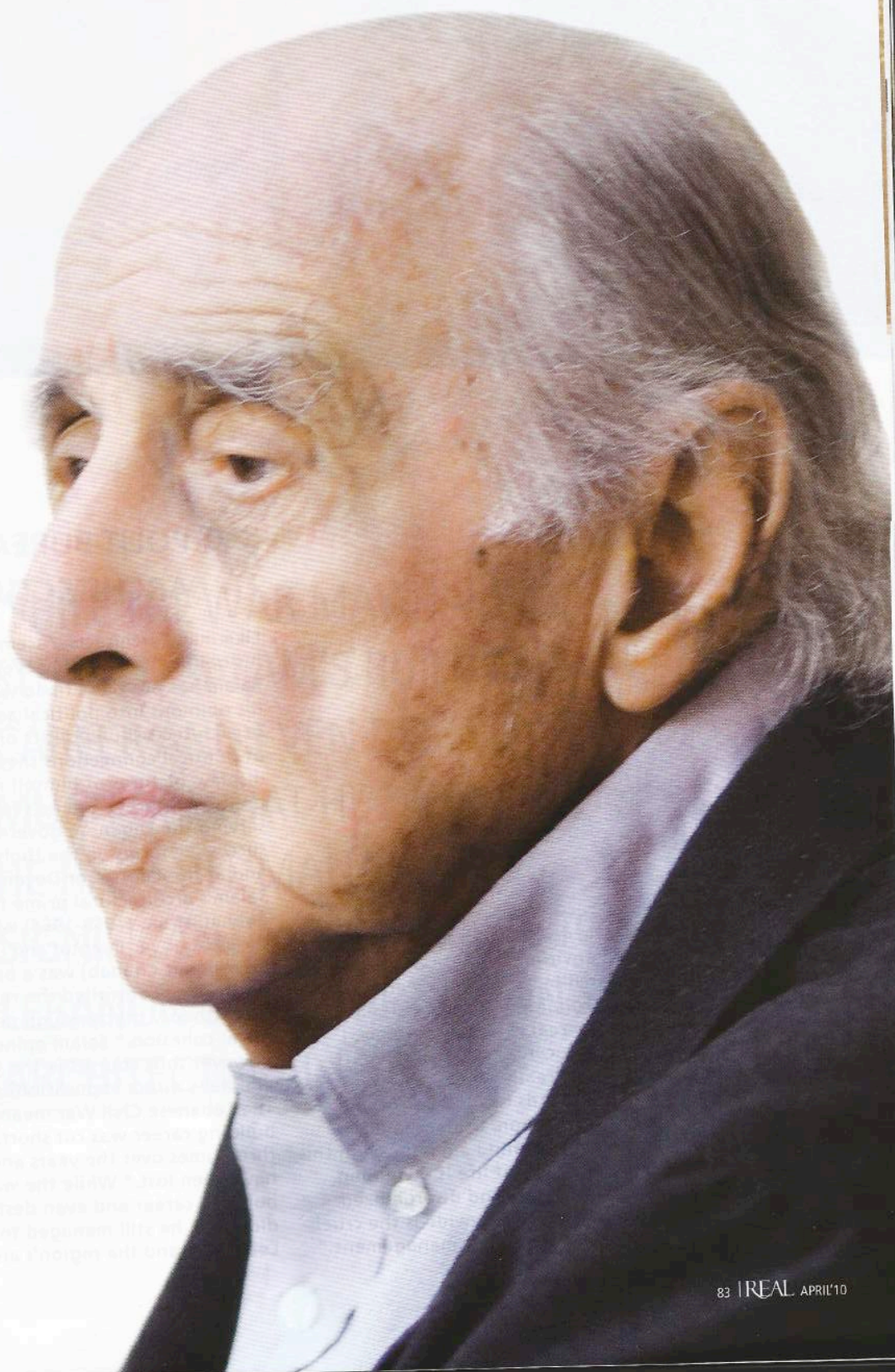
THE GODFATHER OF CURRENT ARCHITECTS:

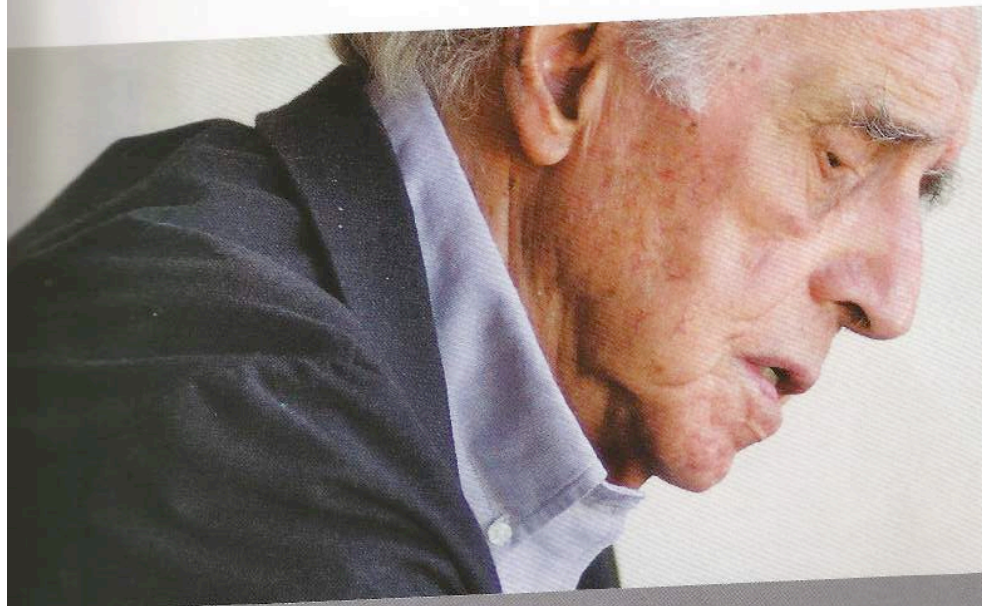
ASSEM SALAM

AN ARCHITECT FOR ALL TIMES

words Deen Sharp

Hidden away in the tightly woven streets of the Zuqaq al-Blatt district in Beirut is the understated Ottoman house of the prominent Lebanese architect Assem Salam. Large, unplanned and dominating towers surround the house that once would have been the principal building in the district.





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The irony that such chaotic new developments should dominate the residential environment of Assem Salam's house is not lost on the architect, who has been fighting such anarchic buildings throughout his professional life. "I blame the politicians, the real estate developers; I blame the architecture, the local communities, and I mostly blame ignorance. I am really depressed about this chaotic situation that extends beyond Beirut and into many urban regions in Lebanon," Salam said frustratingly. "This is too evident and I am not saying this nostalgically, but a certain quality of life is dwindling away to one that is unhealthy, ugly and disorganized. The urban sprawl of Beirut and countrywide is the cruel result of this country's independence mismanagement."

► POLIT-BUREAU OF ARCHITECTURE

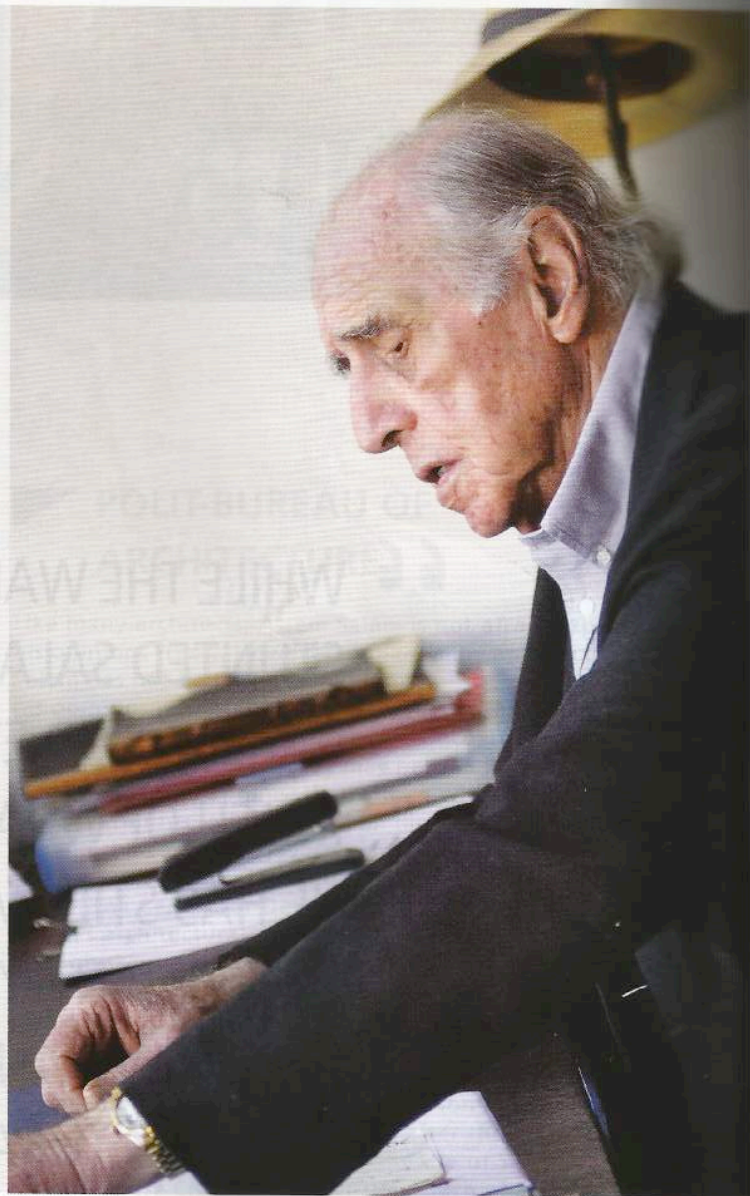
Like many architects, Assem Salam is not afraid to express his opinions freely. However, unlike many architects, Salam has not been timid when it comes to turning his opinions into political action. The vast majority of architects shun politics or try to conceal any sort of political connections they may have. Salam openly displays pictures of himself mixing in with Lebanese political figures. And he's had an illustrious career serving the Lebanese government. Salam served successive terms on the Higher Council of Urban Planning and at the Centre for Development and Research (CDR). Salam's architectural prime flourished during the Chehabist era (1958-1964) when he was assigned to do a series of governmental and institutional buildings. "[President Chehab] was a president that was bent on reform and controlled the resources of the country. He had a theory that through development you could create social cohesion," Salam opined. Lebanon's history would however shift courses in the years after the Chehab rule and have direct implications on the life of Salam. The Lebanese Civil War meant that much of Salam's building career was cut short. "My office burned down three times over the years and many of my drawings have been lost." While the war may have stunted Salam's building career and even destroyed much of what he did build, he still managed to significantly contribute to Lebanon's and the region's architectural heritage.

CREATING ARCHITECTURE AT AUB AND APSAD

There were very few architects in the region and Lebanon up until the early 1960s. Instead, those who designed buildings were architectural engineers. Salam, who graduated from Cambridge University in the UK in 1950, was among the first to come back to the region as a fully trained and specialized architect. It was this generation of mainly European trained architects that would start to create a differentiation in the region between engineering and architecture. "In the early '60s we started the school of architecture at AUB [the American University of Beirut] and local architects began to emerge," Salam said. Now the AUB Faculty of Architecture is one of the region's foremost architectural institutions, although still in partnership with the engineering department.

As well as being a pioneer in the making of the region's modern architects, Salam has also worked to protect Lebanon's vernacular architecture. It was Salam and others that founded APSAD in the 1960s, an organization that works on preserving Lebanon's traditional architecture and also the Ottoman style. Salam has a deep respect and commitment to preserving Lebanese architecture:

"I find all Lebanese architecture very beautiful, elegant, well built, and sensitive in the use of materials. To me this architecture that spread over 200 years covering



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most of the 19th Century until the mandate period represents a wealth that is worth preserving as a treasure,” Salam prided. “But the most important part for me is to preserve a certain kind of identity as this architecture cuts across all communities. The Muslims and the Christians all built in the same style. These buildings should be a source of inspiration and an important part of our heritage, from the proportional use of materials, to the grace of the buildings and the lack of plot specifications.”

Salam is an ardent believer that architecture is a reflection of the human being, where buildings tell us who we are. Therefore, the passion with which Salam strives to protect Lebanese architecture comes from a perspective that these buildings are not just bricks and mortar but Lebanon itself. “The preservation of heritage is essential,” Salam says. “But unfortunately we did not succeed. The conflict was between the preservation of these buildings and the aggressive approach by the landowners in terms of land use and specifications of the property.”

Assem Salam may feel that he has been defeated in preserving and contributing to a higher quality built environment for Beirut and Lebanon as a whole, yet there is a lot to celebrate, not only in the creation of the architectural school at AUB but also in promoting architecture as a career. Salam has contributed greatly in giving Lebanon the possibility, if it so chooses, to remove itself from its current architectural unpleasantness. What is needed now is an architectural and yes, a political will. No wonder Salam is interested in both.