

Time on the Site of Josep Lluís Sert's American Embassy in Baghdad, 1955-1961

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TEMPORAL IMPLICATIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

An embassy is a type of building with a heavy representational load. By definition, it is an outpost of one nation in the middle of another nation. It cannot help but acknowledge the country that hosts it, whether in terms of form, method of construction, or its place in an urban order. Inevitably though, it also stands in for the country it serves. It functions symbolically, whether intended to or not, either through the presence of functionaries, an insignia over the front door, or the mere knowledge of its being there, which is why embassies are often targets of protest throughout the world. But the way a building represents nationhood goes well beyond any signs pasted on the facade. More than just a building, an embassy is also an institution: a set of people and resources organized to carry on specific activities.

Making a building is one of the more important things an institution can do for itself, since it fits activities into a spatial pattern that accommodates, or that frustrates, them. By organizing activities in terms of space, architecture gives shape to social relations; it also affects how time is organized. If activities follow some preferred sequence, architecture formalizes it, making certain sequences not inevitable exactly, but more likely. Architecture promotes institutional ends by creating a setting where its operations take place, and where they become visible, both to its own members, as well as to a larger audience.

The setting is "not just a passive backdrop," though. Rather, the setting, at its best, can facilitate actions, support relationships, and lubricate whatever processes are supposed to occur. The setting can be an active factor for an institution, in carrying on its mission on a day to day basis, and in perpetuating it over the years. In many cases, knowledge of ancient institutions comes exclusively through material remains like buildings, whose purposes are reckoned by the configuration of space, whether patterns of circulation, or location of storage areas. A setting may even become an institution itself, with fixed purposes, governing rules, even supervising agencies. The institution does not just occur in its setting, it takes form in its setting, and as form, the setting shapes that institution further; in other words, any institution is different after it builds.

With an embassy, especially before security concerns became predominant, the setting could play a prominent part in its representational chores. An embassy is especially useful in this regard since it fits closely with sociologist Erving Goffman's definition of a "total institution," that is, "a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life." In this talk, I revisit some of my earlier research on Josep Lluís Sert's American Embassy in Baghdad, built from 1955-1961, to focus on how Sert configured the site to promote a culturally specific way of understanding time and used that understanding as part of an overall program of national representation.

THE AMERICAN EMBASSY PROGRAM

Beginning in 1954, the United States' Embassy program sought to build overseas markets for American exports and to consolidate footholds in countries rich in resources America needed, especially oil. At the same time, it tried to balance American needs with political respect for other nations. Architects were called upon explicitly to exhibit "neighborly sympathy," that is, to respect local architectural culture. Just as important, was the need to demonstrate American "dignity and strength." The American government explicitly called for an architecture to connect with a particular region and at the same time imply the advantages of cooperating with the United States.

Sert, for his part, moved easily through various institutions during his career. He was head of CIAM, and started a regional chapter in Barcelona, and served as Dean of Harvard University's School of Design. His position at Harvard led to his selection by the Embassy Program, which was headed by Pietro Belluschi, another Dean at a neighboring school of architecture. Just after the embassy was completed in 1963, Sert explained to the Royal Institute of British Architects, at that institution's "Annual Discourse," his belief in governmental directives, along with his concern for regional development. He compared the course of state-sponsored development to the course of a river: both need to be regulated to be made useful.

EMBASSY DESCRIPTION

The Embassy site occupies an east-west oriented sliver of land across the Tigris from old Baghdad. It consisted of a chancery, staff apartments, ambassador's residence with attached servants' quarters, a large utility building, several smaller service buildings, surface parking and access roads, all within a series of courts and landscaped gardens. The chancery, at the west end of the site facing a main road, was the administrative center and the only place uninvited public could enter. Prominent features include its concrete structure, overhangs, double roof, ventilation screens and colorful window surrounds. As Sert described it, the building came from the climate: the double roof protected against heat; occasional downpours were channeled along the self-flashing concrete troughs of the roof; ceramic-tile infill screens allowed ventilation while offering shade; projections at each level shaded the floor below; and the concrete piers likewise served as sunbreaks. With its concrete screens and deep overhangs, the chancery, in effect, monumentalized the place of climate.

The ambassador's residence is at the opposite end of the site, overlooking the Tigris. It borrows more directly from local architecture that Sert saw on his visit to Baghdad. In particular, the three-sided court plan with a gallery at the second floor, a decorative roof, recessed entry, and especially the large projecting screened windows, all recall

aspects of traditional Iraqi houses. Members of Iraqi elite society were regularly invited there for diplomatic and social gatherings in the reception hall and on surrounding terraces and gardens.

The whole compound is divided in half, with the main road and public access on one side; and on the other side, facing the river and historic Baghdad, the ambassador and his family, domestic servants, and invited guests. Inbetween the two sides is the staff residence, set perpendicular to the main axis and the tallest building on the site. Sert put recreational activities on the river side: swimming pool, tennis courts, social center, a building for naps, and residences for senior staff. Even the entrance drive, while a practical affair off the main road to the west, here incorporated an allee with a view across the river and a curve that swept the visitor's gaze across the gardens. The two worlds within the one project can thus be portrayed as a world of work and connection to the city and a world of recreation and leisure, tied to the Tigris.

TIME ON THE SITE

The halves are formally consistent and are surrounded by perimeter walls, which marked off American from Iraqi territory and both protected and constricted the embassy's daily operations. In fact, the walls signaled a change in language, customs, and even legal status from adjacent property. But it is the central canal that really pulls the site together and most reveals Sert's interweaving of temporalities. Sert himself called it the "backbone of the whole layout," and also called attention to its endpoint at the reflecting pool in front of the chancery, and to its source at the pumphouse on the bank of the Tigris.

The canal articulates time at the Embassy, and it does so in a very particular way. First, though, it's necessary to identify levels of temporality: briefly, a level of daily activities, bounded by cycles of day and night; seasonal variations that recur annually or every few years; a longer lifespan, which in an institutional context, might be a term of service, and is marked by life-cycle events like arrival and departure, or other memorable occurrences; there is also the time of the institution itself, which may well exceed the life of any individual; and finally, there is a time that exceeds human agency altogether and applies only to the workings of nature or God. These are not so much phenomenological distinctions as they are structural: they set up temporal categories for how activities are organized, and so provide a context for social relations.

The canal, running alongside the path between home and office, is present throughout the daily movement between work and leisure; thus, it registers a daily passage between duty and privilege. This precise temporal alternation replaces traditional rhythms, which in the case of Iraq, have been described as a change in the location of work led daily by the sun and seasonally by the weather. A more cosmic temporal level was hinted at when Sert compared the canal with the ancient Tigris: both were necessary for irrigation and both were a source of the project's identity. In fact, the Tigris was crucial for agriculture, which in the >50s was Iraq's second largest industry, after oil. But it could only become the focus of Sert's design once it had been controlled by a major flood control project, which included the Samarra Barrage ninety miles upstream, built as part of an American-sponsored "demonstration project," with the word "demonstration" calculated to contrast with former and overt British colonial authority and to compete with current propaganda for Soviet-style revolution. Control over the flow of the Tigris accomplished two things important to the embassy: it helped prevent the floods that inundated Baghdad from time to time—as recently as 1954—and dynamos at the Barrage generated electricity to power the mechanical systems that condition buildings, making climate less of an influence on daily spatial practices. With the river regulated and its flow turned into energy to mitigate climatic variation, an intermediate scale of seasonal change disappears.

PUMPHOUSE FUTURE

The upstream Samarra Barrage regulates the flow of the Tigris and makes electricity also to power the pump that regulates the flow of the canal at the Embassy. Both structures guarantee the reliable movement of water by incrementalizing it, by channeling it into manageable bits, much as a clock subdivides the flow of time into discrete units. In effect, the pump and the Barrage measure natural phenomena and so bring them to a human scale. It is a function that Sert highlighted with a figurative enclosure for the pump: a sculptural four-cornered pavilion freestanding amid gardens and terraces, the only built object between the Ambassador's residence and the river. At this end of the site, the only other thing so visibly at work are the servants.

A first sketch for the pumphouse design, in fact, links it with the curved vault directly over the servants' quarters, specifically above the "Turkish toilets," as they are labelled on the plans. It is a unique and direct reference to a cultural difference between Iraqi domestic servants and their American employers, who had the benefit of flush toilets and mechanical ventilation. As it was built, however, the pump house foregoes the cultural references and settles on an abstract, more neutral form, more consistent with the rest of the Embassy.

Now, a pump is a pretty banal piece of technology, also like a clock: both are ancient in conception, but become ubiquitous with modernization. In a sense, they are both instruments of planning, since they make possible an orientation to the future that is otherwise difficult to maintain. In the writing of a number of Western sociologists, a sustained orientation to the future is itself a product of modernization, which distributes material rewards for more efficient use of time, and leads to future-oriented behavior like investing for expected profits, or saving income toward retirement. Clocks make time visible and give it a fixed structure. Sert's figurative housing for the pump might be compared to the clocks set in towers above nineteenth-century European train stations, as a means of calling attention to a natural flow that has been incrementalized and so turned into a resource for development.

Moreover, orientation toward the future is internalized in what historian E.P. Thompson has called "work-discipline," that is, the isolation of productive labor from other sorts of activities. Thompson was cautious in his 1963 essay regarding its extent, but its importance is apparent, he said, in the way industrialized countries explain to developing countries the advantages of modernization. Adapting casual or flexible time commitments to an industrial standard that separates work from leisure is crucial, since the "transition to mature industrial society" occurs, he said, through spatial and temporal zoning. For Western countries it is an historical model; it is presented to developing countries as a model to emulate. Thus, Western-style modernization requires not just specific building methods and large-scale public works. It also requires that citizens internalize an approach to time, an approach that facilitates the administration of a materially complex society.

Concern for the future is evident at a number of other points in Western encounters with other nations. A Master Plan for Baghdad was completed in 1956 by a London-based firm to "establish[ing] broad principles for future development." The Plan was commissioned by the Iraqi Development Agency, which was established in 1951 to direct the flow of streams of income promised by American oil companies. And it appears even in the work of some anthropologists who proposed an orientation toward the future as a means to overcome present cultural differences. Margaret Mead, for instance, in a 1965 essay titled, "The Future as the Basis for Establishing a Shared Culture," suggested using common knowledge and familiar tools to "create a ground plan for the future on which all peoples of the earth can build." The future, she said, is "the appropriate setting for our shared world-wide views." Strikingly, Sert himself claimed in a talk delivered at the time of the embassy commission that "faith in a better future" was the factor most notably lacking in modern architecture.

Such an orientation may help explain the change in Sert's design for the pumphouse. With the pumphouse like the Samarra Barrage in function, and with both made of concrete, then the favored material of modernization in Iraq, and with both built to demonstrate American engineering skills and the advantages of a technocratic and secularized society, especially in the Middle East, where memories of British colonialism were fresh and the idea of communist revolution compelling: in such a complicated situation, implying that the fountainhead of modernization was located, however vaguely, somewhere in an Arab past, or even among current Iraqi customs, would have made little sense. Instead, Sert replaced a reference to Iraqi origins with a modest cheer for technical proficiency, a kind of baldacchino for a pump.

Thus, the embassy did not affirm existing power but, like the American government's image of itself, provided, in President Kennedy's words, "the practical management of a modern economy. [Government offers] technical answers—not political answers." Nonetheless, it was a new form of political legitimation: with a Western sense of time internalized by the Iraqi elite who visited the site, the course of modernization could appear to be self-determined, rather than imposed, as in colonialism, or revolutionary, like communism.

Like the Tigris newly controlled, the canal pointed to a place of mutual advantage where American and Iraqi geographic boundaries were superseded by a shared technical ability to control natural resources and manage day to day practicalities. In this way, the American Embassy served as a government-mandated articulation of a modern America that, at the same time, could be presented as a model for future Iraqi development.

NOTE

Though focused more explicitly on questions of time, this talk is based on my essay "Faith in a Better Future': Sert's American Embassy in Baghdad," *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol.50, no.9, (February 1997), pp. 172-188, which contains citations relevant here.