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The Baghdad Affair.

How diplomacy supplanted one of the last major projects by Le Corbusier

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Abstract: After the Iraqi Republican Revolution of 1958, the resultant government commissioned two parallel projects for two great Stadiums in Baghdad, with similar complementary features: one to the Swiss architect Le Corbusier – who had developed a previous project (1955-1958) for the monarch Faisal II –, continuously designed in his Paris studio until his death in 1965; another to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, in Lisbon, entirely funded and supervised by this institution, and designed by two prominent Portuguese architects at the time: F. Keil do Amaral and Carlos M. Ramos. Facing a progressive administrative and financial chaos in the country, the Iraqi authorities opted for the Gulbenkian Foundation's solution – built between 1962-1965 and inaugurated in 1966, after an intriguing diplomatic process –, postponing Le Corbusier's proposals yet without breaking their contract with him. This essay presents an explanation for this mysterious "affair" based on a recent research conducted at the Presidency Archive of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, but also at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) where different documents reveal the continuous mismatch between Le Corbusier's will and the Iraqi authorities procedures.

Resumen: Después de la Revolución Republicana iraquí de 1958, el gobierno resultante encargó dos proyectos paralelos para dos grandes estadios en Bagdad con características similares: uno a lo arquitecto suizo Le Corbusier - que había desarrollado un proyecto anterior para el monarca Faisal II (entre 1955 y 1958) -, diseñado de forma continua en su estudio de París hasta su muerte en 1965; otro a la Fundación Calouste Gulbenkian, en Lisboa, totalmente financiado y supervisado por esta institución, y diseñado por dos destacados arquitectos portugueses de la época: F. Keil do Amaral y Carlos M. Ramos. Frente a un caos administrativo y financiero progresivo en el país, las autoridades iraquíes optaron por el proyecto presentado por la Fundación Gulbenkian – construido entre 1962-1965 e inaugurado en 1966, después de un intrigante proceso diplomático –, posponiendo las propuestas de Le Corbusier todavía sin romper su contrato con él. Este ensayo presenta una explicación para esta "trama" misteriosa, basado en una investigación reciente - llevada a cabo en el Archivo de la Presidencia de la Fundación Calouste Gulbenkian, sino también en el Centro Canadiense de Arquitectura (CCA) -, en la que los diferentes elementos documentales revelan la falta de correspondencia continua entre la voluntad de Le Corbusier y los procedimientos de las autoridades iraquíes.

Keywords: Le Corbusier; Baghdad Stadium complex; Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

Palabras clave: Le Corbusier; Estadio de Bagdad; Fundación Calouste Gulbenkian.

1. Introduction

The Baghdad Stadium complex, for which the renowned Swiss architect Le Corbusier was first commissioned in 1955, is one of the most fascinating non-built projects of the last decade of his life, but it has also become one of the most mysterious affairs of his long career. Scholars like Rémi Baudouï¹, Mina Marefat² or Caecilia Pieri³

¹ Rémi Baudouï, "Bâtir un stade : Le projet de Le Corbusier pour Bagdad, 1955-1973", in Azara (ed.) *Ciudad del Espejismo: Bagdad, de Wright a Ventury*. Barcelona: Azara, 2008, pp.91-102.

² Mina Marefat, "Mise au Point for Le Corbusier's Baghdad Stadium", *Docomomo Journal* 41, September 2009, pp.30-40.

³ Caecilia Pieri, "The Le Corbusier Gymnasium in Bagdad: Discovery of Construction Archives (1974-1980)", *Les Carnets de L'IFPO*, May 30, 2012.

who have researched this subject, had wondered how such a major project could have been indefinitely postponed, especially considering the effort dedicated to it in the form of hundreds of drawings produced at Le Corbusier's atelier, at rue de Sèvres, in Paris, from 1957 to 1965.

This essay proposes an explanation to this long-lasting mystery⁴, based on a recent research using the archive of the first Chairman of the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon⁵. The Foundation was initially involved as a sponsor for Le Corbusier's Baghdad Sport City in the early 1960s, but in fact, played a decisive diplomatic role in supplanting the project for another one of similar programme designed by two prominent Portuguese architects of the time – Francisco Keil do Amaral (1910-1975) and Carlos Manuel Ramos (1922-2012).

Another recent research was led by us at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), where different archive elements (letters, drawings, model photographs) from the personal collection of one of the last Le Corbusier's collaborators on the Baghdad project – Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente (1931-2008)⁶ – reveal the continuous mismatch between the architect's will and the Iraqi authorities procedures.

The most intriguing aspect of this tale is that the Keil and Ramos project was designed and built between 1960 and 1966, while Le Corbusier and his collaborators were still developing their third proposal for the same client – the Iraqi Government –, being one of the proposals most probably designed for the same site of the Portuguese project, as we will try to describe in this essay.

2. Two main actors, two different roles

2.1 The involvement of Le Corbusier: a struggle for the right placement

“Paris, September, 5th, 1960

(...)

Mr. Director-General, this is the third study you have asked me to make. The first, on the site of the English urban planners, the second on the site of the Greek urbanist, and the third, after the rather dictatorial propositions of the Railway authorities... I have pursued this study with sufficient care so that the present letter can enable you to assume your responsibilities. If disorder should reign in the Stadium [project], this disorder should exist each week in the future.

Please accept the expression of my highest compliments,

Le Corbusier⁷”.

In September 1960, through this firm message addressed to Nouraddin Muhiaddin, Director General of Buildings of the Ministry of Works and Housing, Le Corbusier expressed his clear irritation about the “disordered” development of his project for the new Baghdad Stadium, in face of successive changes of plans and locations suggested by the government authorities, at least since his first proposal dated May 1958. In fact,

⁴ See Nuno Grande, “Gulbenkian vs. Le Corbusier. Estádio de Bagdade: “Mil e uma noites” de diplomacia política e cultural”, *Jornal Arquitectos* 250, Mai-Ago 2014, pp.414-417.

⁵ Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon, Arquivo da Presidência [Presidency Archive], 1956-1966.

⁶ Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal, Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente Collection.

⁷ Le Corbusier, letter addressed to the Director-General of Buildings of the Ministry of Works and Housing of Iraq, Baghdad, September, 5, 1960. Montreal: CCA, Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente Collection, DR1993:0127, (author's translation).

during this period, the Iraqi political *status quo* had undergone drastic changes which affected the pursuit of several public commissions and investments. Let us see how.

As Mina Marefat describes in her essay, “Baghdad: a Sports City That Might Have Been”⁸, the commission awarded to the Swiss architect to design an Olympic Stadium had come about in 1955, as a result of the policy for the building of great public works, pursued throughout that decade by the young Iraqi King Faisal II. His aim was to endow the Iraqi Capital with grandiose buildings by renowned western architects, such as Le Corbusier, but also Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, Alvar Aalto and Gio Ponti. Respectively, they were commissioned to design the Sports City complex, an Opera House, a State University Campus, a National Museum, and the new Ministry of Development Headquarters.

After his first trip to the Iraqi capital, on November 1957, Le Corbusier elaborated his proposal for the ambitious complex to be built on the right bank of the Tigris River, including: an Olympic size Stadium with a capacity for 50.000 spectators, a sports hall for 3.500 spectators, an exterior volleyball court with seats for 3.000, and a set of swimming pools with stands for 5.000, as well as tennis courts and a restaurant. These “pieces” were to be placed on a trapezoidal shaped terrain, with a North-South orientation, covered by grass lawns bordered by trees and punctuated with canals fed from the river waters⁹.

The site had been designated in the 1956 Baghdad’s Master Plan designed by the firm Minoprio, Spencely & P.W Macfarlane – the “English urban planners” as mentioned by Le Corbusier in his letter of 1960.

To ensure the success of the enterprise, at a time when he was still intensely involved in the Chandigarh plan in India, Le Corbusier established a strategic partnership with the French engineer Georges-Marc Presenté, based in Paris, who was then developing an industrial compound plan in Bassora, Iraq¹⁰.

After their agreement, Le Corbusier sent his first project proposal to Baghdad - delivered by Presenté himself in May 1958 -, which was then approved by the Iraqi authorities on July 12, precisely two days before an unexpected Revolutionary Coup that led to the overthrow and brutal assassination of King Faisal II by a unit of pro-republican militaries.

Thereafter, taking into account not only the political and economic instability that had taken root in Iraq, but also the greater animosity of the new governors towards Western countries - specially Anglo-Saxon -, many of the projects that had been launched by the previous monarchy were either abandoned or postponed *sine die*. That was not the case of the Stadium complex, as the new Iraqi authorities, headed by General Abdul al-Karim Kassen, remained interested in proceeding with the enterprise, while pondering its construction in new locations. Thus describes Mina Marefat:

"In the spring of 1959, Le Corbusier received a telegram inviting him to an urgent visit to Baghdad: the main motive was a change in the choice of the site. The British agency Minoprio, Spencely and MacFarlane had been fired after the revolution of 1958 and the Greek planner Konstantin Doxiadis, already present in Iraq for two years, was the responsible for preparing the new master plan"¹¹.

⁸ Mina Marefat, “Baghdad: a Sports City That Might Have Been”, in Jean-Louis Cohen (ed.), *Le Corbusier, An Atlas of Modern Landscapes*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2013, pp.385-391.

⁹ *Idem*, p.388.

¹⁰ Mina Marefat, “À la rencontre du Gymnase de Le Corbusier à Bagdad”, in *Le Gymnase de Le Corbusier à Bagdad*. Paris: Editions du patrimoine, Centre des Monuments Nationaux, 2014, p.6.

¹¹ *Idem*, p.10.

The new master plan by Doxiadis, completed in 1958, established an expansion strategy for Baghdad, based on an extensive grid of large rectangular sectors, side-lined by new roads, according to the prevailing direction northwest-southeast. This direction was parallel to the course of the Tigris River which became the central axis of this new "Dyapolis" (dynamic city), as Doxiadis referred to it. The architect Panayota Pyla, who has extensively studied this plan, describes it as follows:

"This rectangular area was not only subdivided by a system of road patterns that incorporated some of the existing major roads but also suggested the opening of new ones that would adopt a rectilinear pattern. The new road system was to provide "an easy connection of the city to the country", to tie the city into a larger regional schema. Residential sectors and subsectors were also arranged according to a rectangular grid system, modified in the middle, to accommodate the commercial district. The commercial district included the existing old city centre and also new commercial centres expected to emerge along the main axis of the Dyapolis¹²."

In his brief visit to Baghdad, between the 3rd and 6th of April 1959, Le Corbusier was confronted with the proposal of new locations for the Olympic Stadium within the "rectilinear pattern" of Doxiadis. Some sites were then considered, either on the left bank of the Tigris, at the expansion grid towards Sadr City, or on the right bank, at Al-Mansour, also under the planned network. None of the locations pleased Le Corbusier who, nevertheless, accepted this new commission based on the constraints pointed by the "Greek urbanist" - as labelled in his letter of 1960.

Back in Paris, the architect designed a new solution for the complex, based on abstract rectangular shaped areas – first of 900 x 550 m; latter of 700 x 550 m - with a northwest-southeast dominant orientation, as proposed in the master plan. Interestingly, this was also the kind of regular pattern proposed in his plan for Chandigarh, eight years before, with which Le Corbusier distributed the different new city sectors. Somehow, this recent urban experience allowed him to face the Baghdad plan restrictions with a clear pragmatism.

Le Corbusier adopted a final rectangular abstract area - approx. 700 x 550 meters -, as a support for the different venues: stadium, gymnasium, swimming pool and tennis courts. At the atelier, and as in a playful collage game, these ideas were represented by elementary cardboard models, cut at the same scale and cyclically repositioned over the rectangle area, testing the best accesses and insolation exposures. This strategy enabled Le Corbusier and his collaborators to develop and refine the project over the next months, while its definitive location was still being negotiated with the Iraqi authorities.

On June 20, 1960, Le Corbusier wrote to G. M. Presenté confirming his agreement on the type of location implied by the Doxiadis plan, and describing his recent studies:

"Dear Mr. Presenté,

- 1. Today a decision was taken by both sides for the acceptance of the new location (Greek urbanist) replacing the first location (English urban planner). This new field is now labelled "terrain 700 meters."*
- 2. I have implanted the key elements: a) the stadium; b) the pool; c) the gym pavilion; d) the tennis courts.*

¹² Panayota Pyla, "Back to the Future: Doxiadis's Plans for Baghdad", *Journal of Planning History*, Vol. 7, n°1, Sage Publications, 2008, p.9.

These four main buildings are now oriented north-south and east-west¹³.”

Given the abstract outlines of those studies, it is difficult to figure out which of the locations was then chosen to perform the design tests, once the northwest-southeast orientation, indicated in his plans, fit strategically in any of the expansion grids designed by Doxiadis on both banks of the Tigris River.

However, and as described by Mina Marefat¹⁴, Le Corbusier had the ambition to return to the first project’s site, as proposed in 1958, near the centre of Baghdad. In the late summer of 1960, and fulfilling his ambition, that same site was reassessed, as mentioned in the letter sent by Le Corbusier to Nouraddin Muhiaddin, Director-General of the Ministry of Works and Housing. In that message, the location was then identified as the "third study” for the Stadium complex, on a terrain negotiated with the Railway authorities, close to the actual Baghdad International Station.

In the rectangular schemes that follow the letter, Le Corbusier indicated the minimum length needed for the terrain – 750 m (being 50 m for parking as demanded by the Railway authorities) – traced according to the northwest-southeast direction of Doxiadis’ plan. Analysing those schemes, we can conclude that Le Corbusier was, in fact, imagining his new Olympic Stadium complex as a hub point of the Baghdad centre, reinforcing its connection to the master plan, but also to the East bank, through Al-Jumariyah Bridge, to the airport area, in the West, and to Mosul in the North.

On March 1st, 1961, Le Corbusier wrote to Igor Platounoff, Director-General of Buildings, at the Ministry of Works & Housing, in Baghdad, stating:

“My definitive plans are completed. I agree with you to maintain on the site the small parking 50 meters width. The delicate question is to know where it should be located on the site in connection with the axis of the road leading to the [Al-Jumariyah] bridge¹⁵”.

But the most interesting part of this letter is its conclusion, intentionally underlined by Le Corbusier, which reveals his total impatience with the way the project was being led, also with regard to payment:

“Dear Mr. Platounoff, this is the fourth time the site is changed and your Ministry has not yet effected the payments which are due; this is hardly conceivable!

I take the liberty of asking you to kindly obtain this payment without further delay.

Yours sincerely

LE CORBUSIER¹⁶”.

¹³ Le Corbusier, letter to Georges-Marc Presenté, June 20, 1960. Montreal: CCA, Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente Collection, DR1993:0127, (author’s translation).

¹⁴ Mina Marefat, “À la recontre du Gymnase de Le Corbusier à Bagdad”, in *Le Gymnase de Le Corbusier à Bagdad*. Paris: Editions du patrimoine, Centre des Monuments Nationaux, 2014, p.10.

¹⁵ Le Corbusier, letter to Igor Platounoff, Director-General of Buildings, Ministry of Works & Housing in Iraq, March 1, 1961. Montreal: CCA, Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente Collection, DR1993:0127, (translation by Le Corbusier’s office).

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

The project sent to Platounoff in 1961, defined the last options for the Stadium complex, successively detailed up to the most complete version presented in 1964, a year before Le Corbusier's death. In both versions, the main buildings were distributed according to a north-south direction on a rectangular layout sector with a northwest-southeast orientation, as already mentioned. This "rotation" effect - non-existent in the first project of 1958 - made the general proposal become more "organic", especially considering the design of the "in-between" spaces among the buildings, filled by sweeping lawns or "islands" of trees.

This same "organicism" allowed Le Corbusier to return to his longstanding concept of *promenade architectural*, linking the meandering paths between the green spaces to four elegant curved ramps with which he envisioned the public accesses to the Olympic Stadium. These ramped "promenades", also developed in another project of his at that time – the Carpenter Centre in Massachusetts, USA – smoothly integrated the majestic building in the park, "moulding" it to the overall landscape design. As we shall see further on, this "organic", or sometimes even "animalistic" shapes, so present in various forms designed for the Baghdad project, reveal a matured and uncomplicated facet of Le Corbusier towards the end of his life, which led him to freely play with the relation between "artificial" and "natural", architecture and landscape.

However, if the project gained progressively new shapes, the relations of Le Corbusier with the Iraqi government worsened from year to year due to constant delays, not only in the payment of his fees but also in the building calendar of the Olympic Stadium complex. The political unrest in Iraq in those early years of the 1960s – that would lead to the removal of General Abdul al-Karim Kassen in 1963 and the replacement of several governmental ministers – intensified the discrepancies between Le Corbusier and the Iraqi authorities, despite the constant letters and drawings sent from his studio to Baghdad.

Curiously, as described by Mina Marefat¹⁷, one of the few great enthusiasts of Le Corbusier within the government technical staff was the active and talented Iraqi architect Rifat Chadirji, whose training in Europe allowed him to recognise the seminal importance of the Swiss architect on the world stage. Comparing the status of Le Corbusier in the twentieth century with the one Michelangelo had in the Renaissance, Chadirji wrote, in the early 1960's, to the Minister of Works & Housing, stating that the Baghdad Stadium was "*one of those rare ideal constructions of all times*"¹⁸. Apparently, the letter did not produce the desired effect.

The death of Le Corbusier in 1965 put an end to his struggle against the bureaucratic and technocratic Iraqi systems. However, and as we will see below, the local bureaucracy and technocracy were also accompanied by foreign diplomacy, in particular that from Portuguese institutions, which, we believe, had the most decisive role in the outcome of this intriguing "affair".

2.2 The involvement of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation: a diplomatic struggle

"Lisbon, July, 4th, 1958

Dear Ambassador and Friend

(...)

¹⁷ Mina Marefat, "À la rencontre du Gymnase de Le Corbusier à Bagdad", in *Le Gymnase de Le Corbusier à Bagdad*. Paris: Editions du patrimoine, Centre des Monuments Nationaux, 2014, p.17.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*

During a talk held with Dr. Jaffar Dhia [the Iraqi Minister of Development], he addressed us the suggestion of building a Stadium in Baghdad, asserting that this is a very well regarded project among the Iraqi monarchy, and that it [the funding of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation] would be greatly appreciated.

(...)

There is no doubt that Le Corbusier is an exceptional architect, but his services will certainly be expensive, since they are greatly sought after by central and local governments all around the world. Furthermore, there is no certainty that he is an expert in the building of stadia.

It occurred to us that the best qualified and most up-to-date technicians for carrying out this work are some of the Portuguese architects to whom we are indebted for the magnificent stadia that we have in Lisbon and Porto.

Whatever however we address the question, my dear Friend, you will certainly agree that there are great advantages that the task of erecting such a building should be trusted to one of our compatriots. Moreover, it would create a current between the two countries that should be improved.

(...)

I would like to know if you could meet with Dr. Dhia Jaffar, before he enters the hospital, formally inviting him to visit Lisbon on behalf of our Foundation; during that visit, we would be most delighted to show him the kind of excellent buildings that we owe to the talented work of our national architects. We might be able to arrange a meeting between them and Dhia Jafar, to exchange views on the project, and I am sure that we would then be able to supplant Mr. Le Corbusier and make progress in gaining acceptance for our bid”.

(...)

Friendly Regards

José de Azeredo Perdigão¹⁹”.

This letter of July 1958, belonging to the Presidential Archive of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, reveals the debut of a strategic relationship between this institution and the Iraqi Government, related to the funding of the Olympic Stadium in Baghdad, commissioned to Le Corbusier, as we have described. Addressed by the Chairman of the Foundation, José de Azeredo Perdigão, to the Ambassador of Portugal in London, Pedro Theotónio Pereira, the letter suggests the deepening of diplomatic negotiations on the subject with the Iraqi Minister of Development, Dhia Jafar, who was then, coincidentally, receiving medical treatment in England.

The negotiations with Minister Jafar had begun some months before, through an exchange of letters with the Delegation in London of the Gulbenkian Foundation, supervisor of the institution's shares in British oil companies based in Iraq. This close liaison with the Middle East resulted from the substantial profits that the mentor of the Foundation – the Armenian millionaire Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian²⁰ – received from his oil business investments, which represented, at the time of his death (1955), about 5% of the Iraq Petroleum Company revenues. The Foundation, created in 1956 as a result of his testamentary wish, and based in Lisbon -

¹⁹ José de Azeredo Perdigão, Chairman of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, letter to the Portuguese Ambassador in London, July 4, 1958. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Arquivo da Presidência, [Presidency Archive], 1956-1966, (author's translation).

²⁰ For further reading see Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, *Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian. The Man and His Achievements*. Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1999

where he had lived since 1942 -, had the mission of funding the Arts, Sciences, Social Charity and the Armenian Communities around the world, seeking to maintain the best diplomatic relations with all the countries where the founder had left his legacy.

In that sense, Azeredo Perdigão – to whom Calouste Gulbenkian entrusted the presidency of the Foundation before his death – had the will to sponsor the construction of a large public building in Baghdad, like the Olympic Stadium, as a way to repay the monarch Faisal II for the financial dividends of the institution in that country. His letter to the Portuguese Ambassador in London revealed, however, another personal wish: that the building should be erected by Portuguese architects, commissioned directly by the Gulbenkian Foundation, who should also control the whole building process in order to diminish the funding costs. In his words, in its negotiations with the Iraqi authorities the Gulbenkian Foundation should “*be able to supplant Mr. Le Corbusier*”.

Azeredo Perdigão’s letter was sent ten days before the Iraqi revolution of July 14, 1958, which led, as we described, to King Faisal’s assassination and the establishment of a republican government controlled by the military. As a result of this political change, the Iraq monarchic structure was dismantled, the minister Dhia Jafar exiled himself in London, and the Gulbenkian Foundation proposal seemed to be definitively condemned to failure. Surprisingly, on October 6, 1958, Sayed Fu-ad al-Rikabi, the new Iraqi Minister of Development, addressed a letter to Azeredo Perdigão, expressing the interest of the new Republic of Iraq in maintaining the project for a great stadium in Baghdad, designed by Le Corbusier, relying, for this purpose, on the Gulbenkian Foundation previous financing proposal. Despite his secret wish, the Chairman of the Foundation reiterated his enthusiasm for the initiative, proposing an exchange of missions between Iraqi and Portuguese technicians, to be held in both countries, in order to guarantee a mutual support. Azeredo Perdigão was, in fact, trying to defend the Foundation’s interests and shares in the Iraq Petroleum Company, then affected by the threat of a possible nationalisation process by the new revolutionary regime. In this sense, the Foundation’s diplomatic charm had to be maintained at all costs.

On December 31, 1958, two technicians of the new Iraqi Government arrived in Lisbon, invited by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, to learn more about the institution and visit some sports venues recently built in Portugal. The Portuguese newspaper *Mundo Desportivo* (*World Sports*) highlighted this visit in its daily edition: “*Two individuals of great importance in Iraq came to visit the stadiums of Portugal*²¹”. They were: A. Fahimi, Director-General of Physical Education of the Iraq Government and Rifat Chadirji, architect, managing director of Fifth Technical Section of the Ministry of Development and, as described, one of the great enthusiasts of the Stadium designed by Le Corbusier.

After visiting all the venues, Chadirji confessed to be very pleased with what he saw, especially with the recent Restelo Stadium in Lisbon, designed by Carlos Manuel Ramos and Jorge Viana:

*"This stadium impressed me particularly for two reasons: first by the way the problem of the public internal movement was solved; secondly, by its magnificent coverage over the public stands. It is undoubtedly the first major coverage in aluminium I see, among those which I already knew*²²".

²¹ Article at *Mundo Desportivo*, Lisbon, December 31, 1958 (author’s translation).

²² Small testimony by Rifat Chadirji, *Mundo Desportivo*, Lisbon, December 31, 1958, p.7 (author’s translation).

At the end of their visit, although generally impressed with Portuguese architectural skills, the two Iraqi technicians reaffirmed the will of the Ministry of Development in Iraq in maintaining the project presented by Le Corbusier in that very same year, for which they were counting on the support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. In a quick response, Azeredo Perdigão wrote to the Iraqi Minister of Development, in January 1959, stating that he would only be able to bear the cost of Le Corbusier's Olympic Stadium (valued at 1 million and 50 thousand pounds) and not the total charge for the Sports complex, which included the gymnasium pavilion, the outdoor sports field, the swimming pool and the tennis courts (estimated at 2 million 400 thousand pounds)²³.

During the following months, throughout different courteous letters and telegrams, Azeredo Perdigão tried to convince the Iraqi government to suspend Le Corbusier's Sports complex and to commission another less ambitious and less expensive project, totally financed by the Foundation and headed by a group of Portuguese designers, to be gathered under the auspices of his institution²⁴. We should remember that the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation was then launching the building process of its new Headquarters in Lisbon, involving an extensive multidisciplinary team of designers and external consultants.

On November 1959, the Foundation sent two of its best technicians to Baghdad – the architect José Sommer Ribeiro and the engineer João Vaz Raposo – with the purpose, not only to repay the visit of the Iraqis, but also to clarify the institution's role on the financing of the new Sports complex, its possible location and other logistic conditions. In their various meetings with the Iraqi technicians, the Portuguese were confronted with three alternatives: a) the financing of Le Corbusier Stadium complex; b) the financing and construction of three smaller stadiums in Mosul, Baghdad and Kirkuk; c) the financing and construction of a single stadium in Baghdad designed by Portuguese architects and built on the left bank of the Tigris River.

Those different alternatives indicated a lack of clear policies of Iraqi public investments, as noted in the technical report that Sommer Ribeiro and Vaz Raposo wrote after their trip:

"The complete isolation in which the country finds itself since the Revolution, the quality of the Revolution itself, the people's ambitions, and the demagogic process in which they were instructed, has largely contributed to the confusion that exists inside the Iraqi administration, and to the alarming increase on the cost of living.

The "People's Revolution", and the rights that all claim to have won with it, do not easily combine with the immense needs of this Republic which nothing has done, virtually, and which will have to face serious health problems as tuberculosis and misery in a desperate scale.

It is incomprehensible how a city of 1 million inhabitants, where more than 250.000 live miserably, wishes to build two stadiums, especially when the problems of housing, elementary education and hunger are so clear²⁵".

The several uncertainties created during those technical meetings, would finally be solved by an autocratic decision of the Chief of Government, General Abdul Kassem, as described in the same report:

²³ Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa: Arquivo da Presidência, Correspondência de 1959 [Presidency Archive, Mail correspondence of 1959].

²⁴ Throughout 1959, several messages were exchanged between José de Azeredo Perdigão and the Iraqi Minister of Development. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian Arquivo da Presidência, Correspondência de 1959 [Presidency Archive, Mail correspondence of 1959].

²⁵ José Sommer Ribeiro and João Vaz Raposo, *Missão Técnica a Bagdad, Novembro de 1959* [Technical Mission to Baghdad, November 1959]. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Arquivo da Presidência, 1956-1966 [Presidency Archive, 1956-1966], 1959, p.3 (author's translation).

“The exchange of views in the Office of the Minister of Public Works, our statement that we had come to Iraq to study technical problems related to the Baghdad Stadium, and the insistence of the Iraqi technicians on the construction of three stadiums, led the Minister to ask for an audience with General Kassem, which was held immediately, confirming the Cabinet decision about the construction of a single stadium, and naming the architect [Rifat] Chadirji as the representative of the Government in this endeavour. (...) On the other hand, it was confirmed that the project should be designed by Portuguese architects, with the consultancy of an Iraqi architect, something we accepted with great pleasure. For that task Chadirji suggested the architect Kamil²⁶”

Suddenly, the Portuguese technical mission gained a diplomatic dimension: obtained the guarantee from the Iraqi leadership that a “single stadium” would be built, with a determined location, and that it “should be designed by Portuguese architects” under the logistical and financial control of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, as a kind of turnkey project.

So, just seven months after the visit of Le Corbusier to Baghdad (April 1959), the Iraqi Government took an internal measure that apparently would make it impossible for him to erect his Olympic Stadium in the coming years. After that resolution, and as we described before, the Swiss architect would face constant changes of locations, delays on the payment of his fees, and bureaucratic difficulties imposed on his project, which were not the result of the Iraqi administrative chaos alone. In fact, all these actions appeared to be manoeuvres to conceal a political decision from Le Corbusier that could severely affect his reputation. Even if thwarted by the hard circumstances, the role of the governmental architects thorough this process - especially of the prominent consultant Rifat Chadirji - became obviously ambiguous.

Before their departure from Baghdad, Sommer Ribeiro and Vaz Raposo visited the predicted site for the new Stadium complex to be built under the Gulbenkian Foundation sponsoring and supervision. The terrain was located on the Tigris left bank, between the traditional centre and the new urban expansion towards Sadr City, as planned by Doxiadis. In fact, the site followed the master plan rules, integrating its regular pattern with a northwest-southeast orientation. It is our conviction that this was one of the locations suggested to Le Corbusier in his visit to Baghdad, some months before, which supported his second experimental study but also the design grid for the third and definitive project, on the other bank of the river.

In the early months of 1960, a final plan for the Stadium complex was agreed between the Gulbenkian Foundation and the Iraqi authorities, which included many of the features previously requested from Le Corbusier: an Olympic swimming pool with covered stands (now with 2000 seats), a volleyball court also with coerture (1000 seats), three tennis courts and a new Stadium’s capacity (then reduced to 30.000 seats). Only the Gymnasium building project was left out of the plan. This size reduction made it possible to maintain the budget close to the one proposed by the Foundation (1 million and 50 thousand pounds)²⁷.

In the same year, Azeredo Perdigão put together a cohesive team of design specialists from various fields, including the architects Francisco Keil do Amaral (a long-time adviser to the Foundation) and his colleague Carlos Manuel Ramos, and the engineers Luís Guimarães Lobato, João Vaz Raposo and Alderico Machado, at that time deeply involved in the building of the Foundation’s new Headquarters. Keil do Amaral and Carlos

²⁶ *Idem*, pp.12-13 (author’s translation).

²⁷ Luis Guimarães Lobato, Consultant Engineer, *Report on Baghdad Stadium*, February, 16, 1960. Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian: Arquivo da Presidência [Presidency Archive], 1956-1966, (translation by the Foundation’s services).

Manuel Ramos worked in partnership since 1958 on the project of the monumental “City Palace” for the Arts and Congresses (not built) and on the landscape design of the north front of Park Eduardo VII, both for the Municipality of Lisbon²⁸.

Keil had been a municipal architect in Lisbon, between 1943 and 1947, where he developed seminal works, such as the extension of the Portela Airport, the design of the parks Eduardo VII Park and Campo Grande, several facilities at the Monsanto Park, the Park Metro Station, and later, as a liberal architect, the notable building for the Portuguese Industries Fair. Twelve years younger, Carlos Manuel Ramos was mainly known for his impressive project for the Restelo Stadium, one of the buildings most appreciated by the Iraqi technicians in their visit to Lisbon.

In the first months of 1960, the team worked under pressure to attain a preliminary project and a large scale model of the Stadium complex. During the same period, the Foundation received in Lisbon an Iraqi technical mission – led once again by A. Fahmi, the engineer Mahmoud and the architects Chadirji and Kamil – to oversee the ongoing proposals. In May 1960, General Abdul Kassem approved the preliminary project, and, during the following year, Keil and Ramos worked hard to complete the detailing drawings, essential for the assessing of the final budget and the signing of the building contracts.

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation agreed with the Baghdad authorities to choose an Iraqi constructor for that purpose, based on an open competition. The construction was finally attributed to the local company of the entrepreneur Mohamed Makzoumi who started the preliminary works by the end of 1961. After the piles had been laid for the foundations, the “first stone” was symbolically placed on July 14, 1962, evoking the fourth anniversary of the Republican Revolution.

The construction took place over a four-year period, supervised by the Portuguese team with the support of the mentioned Iraqi technicians. By the third visit of Keil and Ramos to the building site, on April 1966, the main features of the Sports complex had been already completed, and the Stadium’s east stand emerged above ground²⁹. This had a horseshoe shape, a solution that Ramos had already tried out at the Restelo Stadium, while the covered west stand displayed its structural skeleton of elegant curved concrete beams, formally used by Keil in his earlier project for the Lisbon Industrial Fair.

The Baghdad Stadium complex was finally inaugurated on November 6, 1966, at a ceremony attended by the highest Iraqi dignitaries, especially the new republican leader Abdul Rhaman Arif, in power since 1963, after another military coup that led to the arrest, trial and death penalty condemnation of General Abdul Kassem. The despotic “creator” had not survived to see his political “creation”.

The key moment of the Stadium opening ceremony was a football match between the Iraqi National Team and Benfica, by then the biggest soccer club in Portugal, whose travel expenses were entirely paid by the Foundation. The Chairman Azeredo Perdigão, accompanied by a large entourage, was particularly delighted to see the immense crowd visiting the new arena, then baptised by the local authorities as “The People’s Stadium” (Al-Shaab). The next day, the Baghdad newspapers announced the result - Iraq 1/Benfica 2 - with another fine performance by Eusébio, the world famous Benfica player. However, the Portuguese victory had not only been

²⁸ For further reading see *Keil do Amaral, O Arquitecto e o Humanista*, (coord. A. Tostões, F. Amaral, I. Moita). Lisboa: Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, 1999.

²⁹ Francisco Keil do Amaral e Carlos M. Ramos, *Viagem a Bagdad, em Abril de 1966, para assistência às obras do “People’s Stadium”* [Trip to Baghdad in April 1966 to supervise the works of the “People’s Stadium”]. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Arquivo da Presidência, [Presidency Archive], 1956-1966, (author’s translation).

accomplished at the sporting level; the Gulbenkian Foundation's artful diplomacy had also attained a winning score.

3. Two parallel projects: vicinities and variances

As a result of our research, we now understand that the unusual Iraqi Government that arose from the 1958 Republican Revolution also unusually managed to commission two parallel projects for two great Stadiums in Baghdad with similar complementary features: one to the Swiss architect Le Corbusier - who had developed a previous project (1955-1958) for the monarch Faisal II -, continuously designed in his Paris studio until his death in 1965; another to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, developed in its premises in Lisbon, until 1966, by Portuguese architects Keil do Amaral and Carlos M. Ramos. We have also described how the new Iraqi Republic, then facing a progressive administrative and financial chaos, opted for the funding requirements imposed by the Gulbenkian Foundation for the whole project, delaying or even abandoning Le Corbusier's proposals, yet without breaking their contract with him.

Since both preliminary projects were developed in parallel – in the case of Le Corbusier, from his second version adjusted to the master plan of Konstantin Doxiadis –, it is worth taking the risk to analyse the vicinities and the variances one can find between these two proposals. We do not wish to compare the historical significance of the authors and their works – always undisputed in the exceptional case of Le Corbusier – but only to realise how their professional skills, forged within Modern Internationalism, “adapted” themselves to the peculiar circumstances of the assignment.

The main principles of Le Corbusier's 1964 proposal were already set out in his preliminary project of 1961. As mentioned in chapter 2.1, his integration of the Sports complex in the regular grid imposed by the Doxiadis plan, was based on the rotation and alignment of the different facilities in a North-South direction. Thus, and with the exception of the tennis courts and the training soccer fields, all other precincts were distributed according to the rectangular site's diagonal, headed by the great Stadium at its northwest side.

Curiously enough, the plan by Keil and Ramos – also integrated into the Doxiadis grid – proposed an identical diagonal composition and the same North-South alignment for the different volumes; however using less length to do so, due to the inclusion of an extended car parking areas within the lot. Confined to a smaller area, the Portuguese architects implanted the great Stadium at the southwest front surrounded by all other sports facilities.

The major differences between the two proposals can be found, above all, in the architecture of the Stadium and in its public access systems.

Le Corbusier Stadium – planned for a large capacity (50,000 seats) – was a compact and homogeneous volume. Its oval shape was supported by a modular structure based on massive “beam-walls” rhythmically settled along its elliptical perimeter. These structural “ribs” generated the facade composition exposing the depth of the stands, the layers of internal galleries, but also the main building materiality: *le beton brut*, the elected material for most of Le Corbusier's post-war works. In this project, the Swiss architect evoked the magnificent Roman circuses, and especially the Rome Coliseum, as suggested in one of the numerous existing sketches in the CCA archive.

The Stadium designed by Keil and Ramos was smaller (30,000 seats), and based on a dual composition, dividing the two main stands: the big “popular stand”, with a horseshoe shape sprawled over the terrain; and the “noble stand”, with a squared and monumental composition. In both cases, the structural system was also supported by a regular set of concrete “porticos”, more internalized at the popular stand, and more externalised at the noble one. This “ribbed” structure supported the curved roof of the noble stand while, under the popular stand, the covered

foyer was protected by an elegant concrete *brise-soleil*, suspended on the main façade, probably detailed by Carlos M. Ramos.

In terms of public access to the Stadium, the differences were even clearer. As described before, Le Corbusier integrated his arena within a *promenade architecturale*, through different "artificial" and "natural" meanders. This "organic" design transformed his buildings into a set of "creatures" moving over a green park. Assuming that "animal" condition, his Stadium plan resembled a giant "turtle" with four curved long "legs" - the four public access ramps - leading to the interior of its "shell".

Again, in the design of the roof "shell", Le Corbusier echoed that very same zoomorphic metaphor. In several sketches, the profile of the stands' "beam-walls" assumed the shape of giant "antelopes" whose "heads" supported a crossed structure of steel cables, over which Le Corbusier extended a light shield, made of translucent canopies or, in another solution, of prefabricated metal plates. Several of his non concluded studies on the subject can also be consulted in the CCA archive, revealing some proximity with similar solutions used for the covering of the Maison de la Jeunesse et de la Culture, at Firminy, a project that Le Corbusier was also developing at that time.

In the proposal by Keil and Ramos, the public accesses to the Stadium were designed in a more conventional way. In a probable response to the autocratic wish of the Iraqi leader, the public entries assumed the aforementioned dual character: the prominent access gate to the "noble stand" was located at the end of a monumental alley, set in a west-east direction according to the Stadiums central axis; the access to the "popular stand" was placed at the back and separated in two gates (North and South). As we described before, only the noble stand received coverage, made of curved metal plates, applied to the crossed concrete "ribbed" structure, linking the roof to the main facade. This dual condition became clear in the nicely detailed section drawings of the two stands, which can be consulted at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation archives.

Finally, it is important to compare how the remaining areas of these sports complexes were developed within their terrains.

In the layout of Le Corbusier, the swimming pools were implanted according to freely set open spaces and water tanks, with various shapes and sizes, joined in a clear "pictorial" composition. The outdoor pool stand, with its "boomerang" shape, followed this expressionist configuration. More conventional, the volleyball field was located in the middle of a square enclosure, composed of a set of ramps accessing two opposite stands. The gymnasium project – perhaps the most studied plan apart from the Stadium itself – underwent several versions, always dependent on the type of coverage desired by Le Corbusier. Here too, he designed a cable system structure, covered by an inclined "light" ceiling – once more evoking the project for Firminy – which would be finally replaced, in the 1964 version, by a curved rigid roof adapted to the climatic and logistic conditions found in Baghdad. In his various studies, the accesses to the interior of this compact volume were based on an external ramp system, prolonging the "promenade" effect designed for the complex³⁰.

In the layout proposed by Keil and Ramos, we find an identical harmonic match between the different volumes around the Stadium, which readapted some of the constructive solutions we have described for the big arena. The 50 meters olympic pool was surrounded by an elegant suspended stand, which seemed to "float" over the ground. The different volumes designed for the pool spas were covered by delicate domed caps, a solution that Keil had

³⁰ For further reading see Mina Marefat, "À la rencontre du Gymnase de Le Corbusier à Bagdad", in *Le Gymnase de Le Corbusier à Bagdad*. Paris: Editions du patrimoine, Centre des Monuments Nationaux, 2014.

rehearsed, a few years earlier, in his project for the Park Metro Station in Lisbon. The volleyball field was also flanked by two opposing stalls, one of which was covered by an extensive portico of stately curved concrete beams, creating another gateway to the precinct.

The Keil and Ramos Stadium complex did not foresee the construction of a gymnasium, because at the time of the agreement with the Iraqi authorities its construction would have caused a significant increase in the Gulbenkian Foundation funding. However, two decades after the inauguration of the complex sponsored by the Foundation, the gymnasium designed by Le Corbusier was built in a park immediately adjacent to it, by a new leader of the Iraqi government: Saddam Hussein. This posthumous work of Le Corbusier, detailed and built by his associate – the engineer Georges-Marc Présenté –, and inaugurated in 1980, became neighbour of the Stadium designed by Keil do Amaral and Carlos Ramos.

So, time has played its last ironic card in this “Baghdad Affair”: several years later and for the first time, two parallel “plays”, separated by the same political and diplomatic “plot”, came to occupy the same “stage”.

4. Conclusion: how diplomacy does not supplant memory

In the life of all great architects, as in the life of many other creators, “success” alternates with “failure”, although few pages have been dedicated to such failures in most of the Architectural History books. Only recently, and based on extensive academic researches, conducted through institutional or personal archives, we have begun to understand the seminal importance of such unrealised projects in the conceptual path of the great architects who have built masterpieces all over the world. This is certainly the case of Le Corbusier, of whom it is possible to say that the quality of his unbuilt projects is comparable to his existing works; and that many of his failures were ultimately significant in changing his way of “thinking” and “making” architecture. This immaterial legacy is what we usually call “memory”.

The Baghdad Olympic Stadium is one of these major unrealised projects, as were other stadiums planned by Le Corbusier before, in Paris or Chandigarh. Designed at the end of his life, this “failed” project must have generated insufficient new perspectives in his career, but, on the other hand, allowed that an important page could be written in the career of the Portuguese architects Keil do Amaral and Carlos Manuel Ramos, and therefore, in the history of Portuguese Architecture.

In Baghdad, the shrewd diplomacy of José Azeredo Perdigão, the funds emanating from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, and the climate of political instability in the country, supplanted what could have been the last built masterpiece of Le Corbusier’s life. But no diplomacy is able to supplant the latent “memory” that this project has left, as an immaterial legacy, to his disciples and admirers of different generations; who, before and after his death, have learned and still learn today with his brilliance.

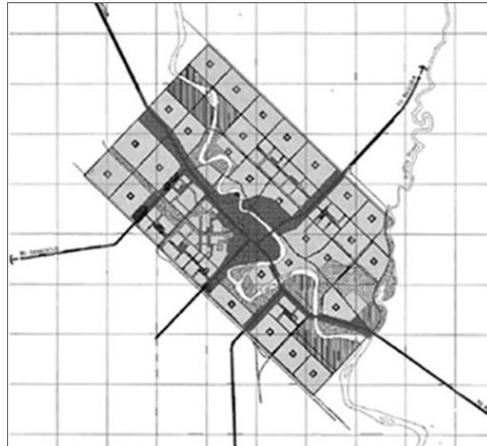
In fact, it is even possible to say that the Le Corbusier’s Baghdad Stadium, in its physical simplicity, in its structural audacity, in its iconic presence, has somehow resurfaced in other similar works of other key architects.

Let us just highlight three examples designed by major creators, among those recently awarded with the Pritzker Prize: the Olympic Stadium for the Munich Games, by the German architect Otto Frey (built in 1972), the Serra Dourada Stadium in Goiania, by the Brazilian architect Paulo Mendes da Rocha (1975), and the Municipal Stadium in Braga by the Portuguese architect Eduardo Souto de Moura (2004). In the latter case, and safeguarding the differences of site, scale and shape, there are some remarkable crossovers between Souto de Moura’s work and the one by Le Corbusier: the way the Stadium is supported by massive concrete “beam-walls” rhythmically settled along its perimeter and perforated by several layers of galleries; the way that its coverage is

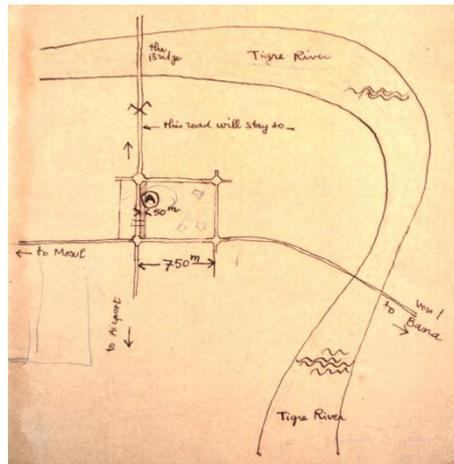
based on steel tensioned cables tied to the “heads” of the stands; and the way the building launches its ramps into its surroundings inviting us to freely enter.

Somehow, Portuguese Architecture will always be indebted to this non-built work of Le Corbusier. Actually, and as an architectural “memory” this failure became a resounding success.

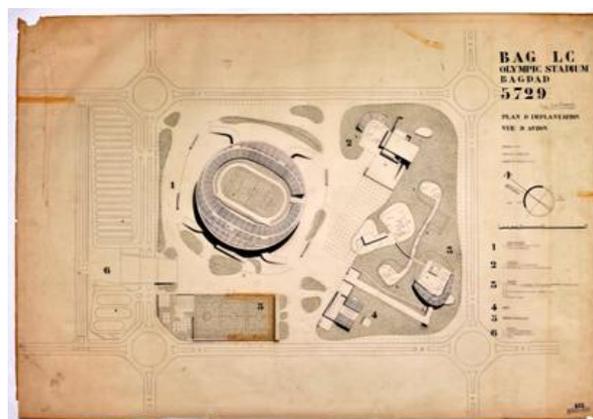
5. Images



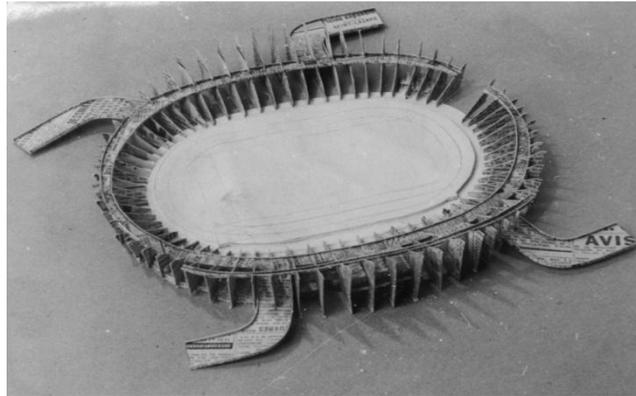
1. Baghdad Master Plan (*Dynapolis*), by Konstantin Doxiadis, 1958



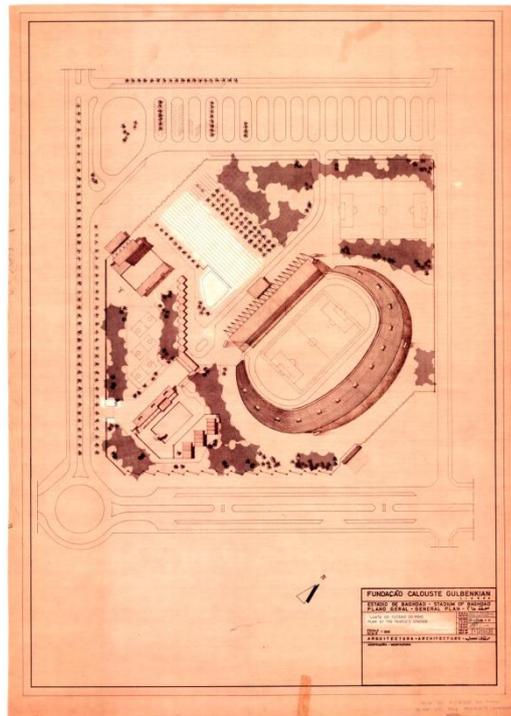
2. Urban scheme by Le Corbusier, integrating the Stadium terrain at Doxiadi's Master Plan grid (detail), 1959



3. Le Corbusier, implantation of the Baghdad's Olympic Stadium complex, 1961



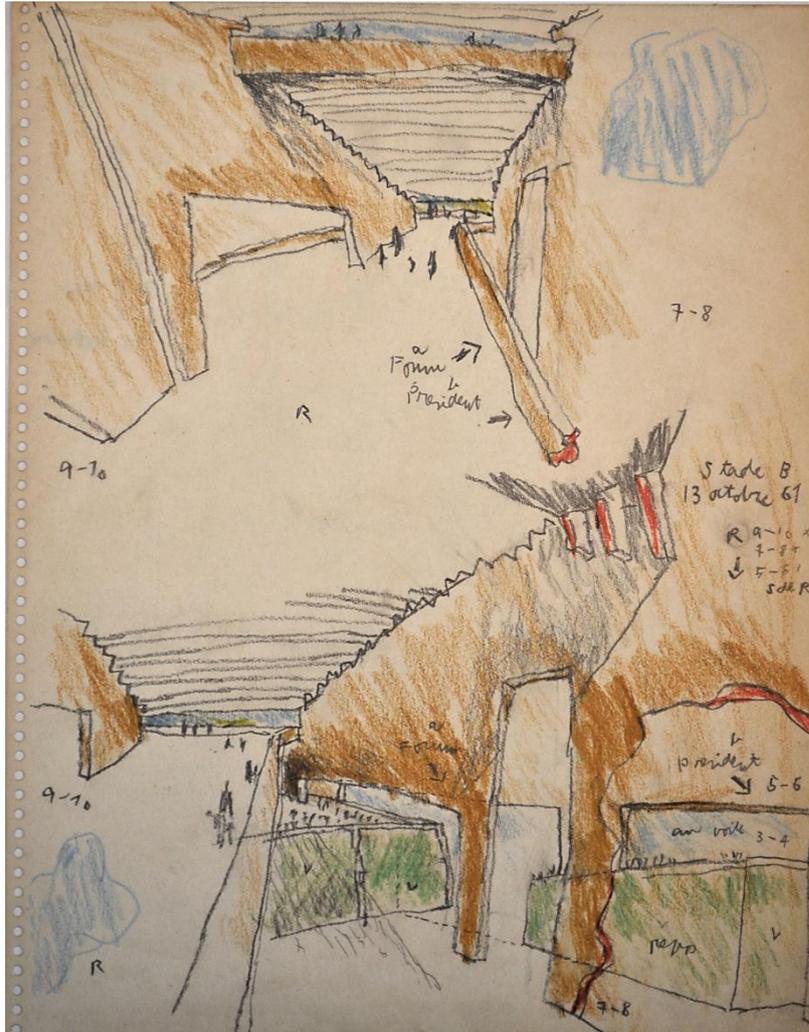
4. Le Corbusier, Model of the Baghdad's Olympic Stadium, with its "turtle" shape. Not dated



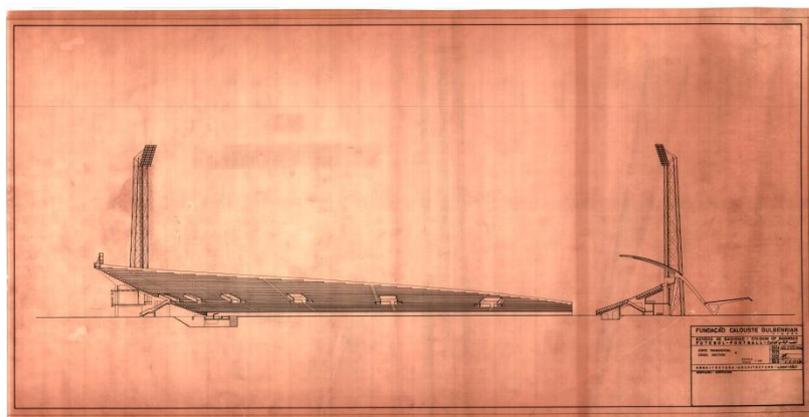
5. F. Keil do Amaral and Carlos M. Ramos, implantation of Baghdad's Stadium complex, 1961



6. F. Keil do Amaral and Carlos M. Ramos, model of Baghdad's Stadium complex, 1961



10. Sketch of the Baghdad Stadium interior proposed by Le Corbusier (drawing attributed to G. Jullian de la Fuente), 1961



11. Section of the Baghdad Stadium proposed by F. Keil do Amaral and Carlos M. Ramos, 1961



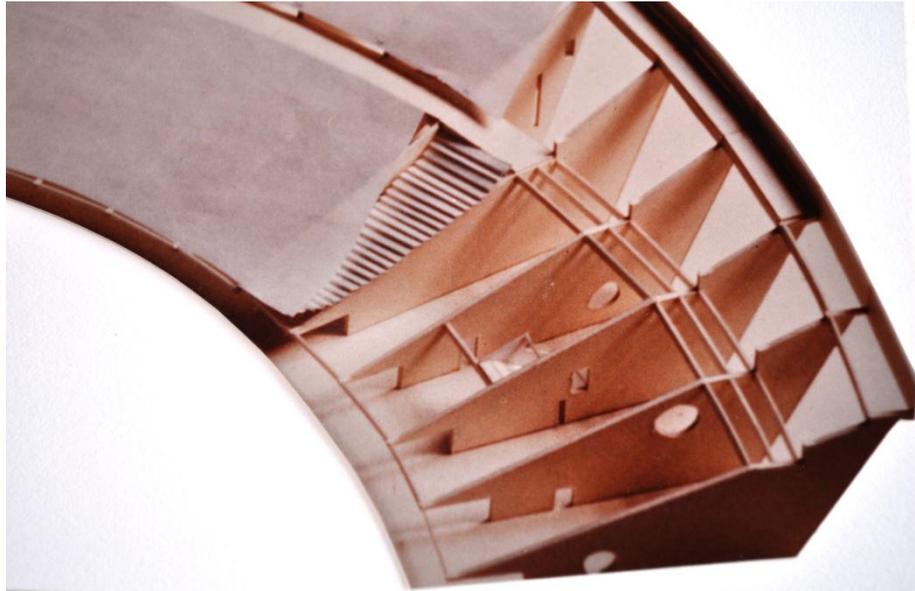
12. Baghdad Stadium by F. Keil do Amaral and Carlos M. Ramos. View of the “noble stand” from the outside, 1966



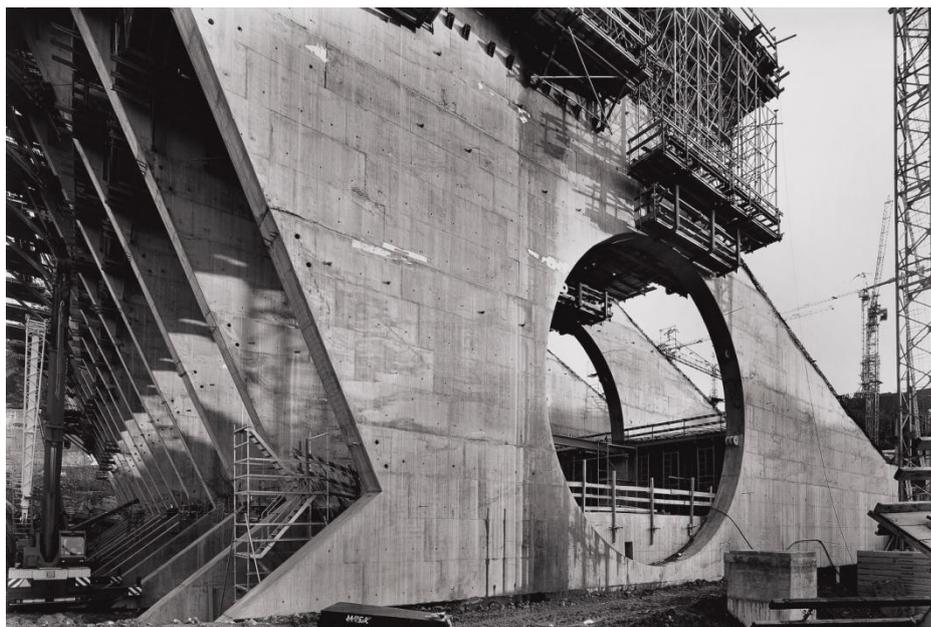
13. Baghdad Stadium by F. Keil do Amaral and Carlos M. Ramos. View of the “noble stand” from the inside, 1966



14. Baghdad Stadium by F. Keil do Amaral and Carlos M. Ramos. View of the swimming-pool spa areas, 1966



15. Le Corbusier, Study model of the “beam-walls” of the Baghdad’s Stadium. Not dated



16. Building of the “beam-walls” of the Braga Municipal Stadium, designed by Eduardo Souto de Moura, 2003

6. Source of images

Image 1 - Doxiadis Associates, The Master Plan for Baghdad, Iraq, 1958 [Doxiadis Associates, “Progress of the Housing Problem.” (May 1959), cover].

Image 2 - Fonds Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente. Collection Centre Canadien d’Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal. DR1993:0127:037:001

Image 3 - Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris, FLC 00425.

Image 4 - Fonds Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente. Collection Centre Canadien d’Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal. DR1993:0127:038:019

Image 5 - Arquivo do Serviço de Obras da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa.

Image 6 - Arquivo do Serviço de Obras da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa.

Image 7 - Fonds Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente. Collection Centre Canadien d’Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal. DR1993:0127:006

Image 8 - Fonds Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente. Collection Centre Canadien d’Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal. DR1993:0127:013

Image 9 - Fonds Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente. Collection Centre Canadien d’Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal. DR1993:0127:027

Image 10 - Fonds Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente. Collection Centre Canadien d’Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal. DR1993:0127:016

Image 11 - Arquivo do Serviço de Obras da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa.

Image 12 - Arquivo do Serviço de Obras da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa.

Image 13 - Arquivo do Serviço de Obras da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa.

Image 14 - Arquivo do Serviço de Obras da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisboa.

Image 15 - Fonds Guillaume Jullian de la Fuente. Collection Centre Canadien d’Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal. DR1993:0127:038:028

Image 16 - Photo by Alessandra Chemollo

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