The Effects of Political Modernisation on Baghdad

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Abstract

Throughout its ancient history, Baghdad's urban development had been influenced by different schemes that interfered with its urban development in history. By mid-nineteenth century, Baghdad flourished greatly due to relevant political stability and to the efforts of prominent people and religious scholars. However, after the British occupation of Iraq in 1917, Baghdad's urban forms started to change drastically, under further policies, and in the name of modernisation. These changes continued to influence the urban development of Baghdad until today. This paper examines the major transformation in urban forms that took place in Baghdad and many cities in the Muslim world, due to the 'political modernisation' scheme.

Theoretically, modernity implies advancement and positive change in the society. Yet unfortunately the concept of modernity and its emerging paradigms were applied in line with political plans to control the occupied lands, and to substitute the Islamic model of urban development. This situation created discrepancy between original and the proposed schemes. Subsequently new terms, such as 'culture' and 'tradition', were confusingly introduced to label religion-related norms. In addition, the word 'public' was introduced to differentiate non-Islamic schools from Islamic ones. This paper questions these issues in relation to the urban planning of Baghdad. It also investigates whether urban forms are scripted by any political ideology, and could these forms be subjective and universal at the same time. Lastly, it explores the principles that would shape the urban forms within a specific environment.

The concept of political modernisation

Before delving into the specific issues of Baghdad it is important to elaborate on the concept of political modernisation. In general, modernity could be defined as a concept that implies new ways of building, working and thinking, in order to advance humanity and improve the quality of life on earth. This definition suggests two basic points; firstly, offering new ideas, and secondly, the new ideas should serve humanity and ensure a real progression in the society. Accordingly, modernity should be a positive historical concept. However, once it has been politically utilised to enhance Westernisation, this notion took a different passage and established other meanings. These limitations led to a huge contradiction between theory and practice; "when one talks of modern life or modern age, one has already assumed that modernity is shared by the inhabitants of the entire civilised world, fully developed or in the process of development. This assumption is not, however, totally correct"[1].

Accordingly, old Western habits were applied to the occupied lands and they were labelled as 'new' because people in these lands did not used to them. Also, instead of initiating ideas that are related to the future progression of societies, modernity has been associated with a specific era; that is the Enlightenment. Thus, modernity took a different direction that is completely opposite to its hypothetic definition. Subsequently, conventional understanding of modernity interconnected it to the specific Enlightenment era, considering it a historical period, and a collective tool of particular socio-cultural norms, attitudes and practices that arose in the wake of the Renaissance. Terms like pre-modernism and post-modernism that emerged gradually established a cut in the time flow and restricted modernism to a specific period, giving the impression of separated periods that lack continuity. In this context, modernity is not capable of representing 'new' things.

Among the approaches of political modernisation is the underestimation of the achievements of the past of 'others', and at the same time exaggerating positive impacts of particular events, and modifying history. In this case, powers "seek to improve or conceal their undistinguished beginnings and attach themselves to something older and greater"[2]. Lewis calls this approach a 'recovery of history' noting this phenomenon began in Europe at the time of the Renaissance and remains to the present day a concern of European civilisation. He recognises the writing of colonial, post-colonial, and pre-colonial histories as outstanding examples of the purposeful use of historiography[3]. Consequently, official myths about barbarism and backwardness that were challenged and criticised became obvious examples of inventive historiography that reflects a psychological dissatisfaction with their own past, which leads them to deliberately underestimate others[4].

Another problematic issue of modernity is the implementation of puzzling terminologies, which has heavily impacted the representation of history. While language "attained a central position within the philosophy of our century"[5], modern methods often freeze terminologies in abstract linguistic frames. For example, the term 'civilisation' that generally refers to an advanced state of any human society, currently it does not refer to particular cultures in a historically relevant way, but instead it denotes the historical superiority of the West as the producer of modernity[6]. Another example is the introduction of the phenomenon of 'culture' as a substitute for specific norms associated with religion. The idea of culture is initially related to a distinct locale or habitat that represents a pre-existent harmony between people and the surroundings, which implies that culture has links to specific geographies, when people make their own history and extend it to geography. However, with time, the term 'conditions of existence' have replaced habitat and have appeared in the social realm with a new meaning[7].

Said suggests that "both geographical and cultural entities, such as locales, regions, geographical sectors as Orient and Occident are manmade"[8]. He considers Orientalism a 'cultural and political fact'[9] that constructed a lens through which the 'other' was represented. He wonders if the notions of a distinct culture, race, religion, or civilisation are useful ones[10]. He has two fears in relation to these terms; 'distortion and inaccuracy'[11]. On the other hand, Gadamer tried to justify the idea of culture recognising it a "historical character of preservation"[12] that belongs to the historical constitution of man[13]. He emphasises the role of culture as a compound element of people's religious heritage and their own history, because both are "part of one's distinctive character"[14]. Identity, for him, is "the inseparable belonging together of the real and the ideal, as it is conceived in the principle of intellectual intuition"[15].

In fact, considering spiritual responsibilities as part of the past that have no place in the present time, has turned the focus to culture as the source of historical achievements. Also, outlining heritage as 'ritual architecture', 'religious architecture', or 'the memory of one's sacred history'[16], and associating Islamic architecture with a 'sacred pattern'[17] exemplify the attitudes of creating a big gap between religion and modernity. These secular approaches detect modernity as a method "toward the vexing problems of the nature of human history"[18]. Moreover, the phenomenon of 'classical culture' that views inherited architecture as an extension to people's identity[19] plays a double role in the investigation of collective memory and the writing of history[20]. It is true that people and places have distinct character, yet associating religious actions with history is dangerous, since religion is a law for life that cannot be outdated.

Moreover, employing culture as a substitute for religious models implies perceiving religion as an obstacle to modernity because it "inherently rejects change"[21]. Historians acknowledge that "Islamic culture is unquestionably one of the greater cultures in the history of mankind and of the world today"[22], and Islamic ideas have radiated to other nations, though it is deliberately planned to be absent in modern life. By rejecting religion, political modernisation detached people's lives from

divine laws and values, causing historical problems in relation to social relations, education, identity, and place. Nevertheless, while rejecting Islamic norms and considering them 'old' in the name of modernity, political modernisation brings up old norms from the pre-Islamic era and associates them with modernity, which shows the double standards of this concept.

Along with culture, the term 'traditional' has also been a product of political modernisation. This term refers to human communities that are linked to religion as a form of social organisation. According to Fuller, anthropologists and sociologists use religion as "a residual term designed to cover so called traditional forms of social life"[23]. Once again, modernity brings a problematic issue by labelling religious actions as something belonging to the past. According to Fukuyama, the use of words "like 'primitive' or 'advanced', 'traditional' or 'modern' … applies that history is understood as a single and coherent evolutionary process[24].

It is worth noting that, while the term 'tradition' is frequently used by Eurocentric historiography to define specific entities such as art, architecture and even cities, the term 'culture' is used to label general actions and education. Conversely, in Arabic, the word *taqlidi* that complies with 'traditional', identifies inherited norms and customs. In this sense, *taqlidi* in Arabic complies with the term 'culture' in the global understanding of this word rather than 'traditional'. Also 'culture' refers to *hadhara* in Arabic, which complies with civilisation rather than norms. These linguistic contradictions reflect the fragility of these terms. While the word 'traditional' was created to outline original experiences of societies, on the contrary, other words like barbarism and backwardness were used to describe same societies. Lewis states these terms were effectively used by the French to legitimise their occupation of North Africa[25]. Thus, the reason of implementing these conflicting terminologies has always been political rather than ideological.

Baghdad in the 19th century

The urban fabric of nineteenth century Baghdad is the typical fabric of many cities in the area. Historical materials highlight particular urban settings of Baghdad in this period, including linear markets, *maydāns* (public squares), *masjids* (mosques), *madrasas* (schools), gardens, khans, coffee shops, and river-banks. The city also contained compact clusters of non-geometrical attached houses centred on courtyards. The houses were often built to similar heights, and the dominant features of the skyline were domes and minarets. What distinguishes these settings is their interconnectivity, sociability, and multi-functionality. For example, the *masjid* embraced learning and social activities in addition to worshipping activities. Likewise, houses of prominent people were partially transformed into venues for regular gatherings that were intended to educate, entertain, and embrace innovative ideas.

By mid-nineteenth century, various construction schemes were initiated, and old buildings were either renovated or rebuilt. The markets were effective venues for socialising; they contained specialised shops, *maydāns*, khans and coffee shops that incorporated educational and social interaction. The tradition of specialised linear markets proved their effectiveness throughout thousands of years. These qualities made them significant urban components in a 'market-place city' like Baghdad. The Tigris River had also been a major public space in Baghdad, serving as a mediator between the two sides of the city, and interrelating with other urban settings. The gardens in this period were not limited to a specific locale, and they were accessible to all. The broad meaning of gardens that interlock with the river, proves their significant role as a major public space in the city. The literature of this period that was composed by Baghdadi scholars expresses multiple meanings of gardens that go beyond physical limits, presenting social pleasure, wisdom, knowledge, and spiritual qualities. Other urban spaces in Baghdad incorporated various gardens within their boundaries, including waterfront mosques, coffee shops and large houses.

The *masjid* in the nineteenth century, and in the preceding centuries, was the heart of the community and the hub of the main activities in the city. In addition to worshipping events, it served as a learning venue, a community centre, a social and relaxing place. These *masjids* followed the typical example of the *masjid* of Prophet Muhammad in Madinah. This *masjid* was a central institution for the Muslims, and a gathering place where people receive important community sermons. In addition, it was a "legal centre for court hearings … and even a venue for conducting the affairs of the Islamic government, such as managing the treasury and strategic planning"[26]. Moreover, it was a shelter for the homeless, needy, hungry, poor travellers, and a health clinic, caring for the injured. The multiple functions of *masjids*, and their unique standards, contributed to the advancement of learning and writing, in addition to the maintenance of the society wellbeing in general.

These functions continued to shape almost all central *masjids* that were constructed after Prophet Muhammed's time. Cities were structured as such that the *masjid* was typically the central architectural feature, and Baghdad was no exception. When the cities expand, smaller clusters would form in the same pattern around local *masjids*. Main streets were designed to emphasise the accessibility and connectivity with the *masjids*. The *masjids* and *madrasas* formed great learning complexes in Baghdad, and they were the initial places for composing and publishing. The *madrasas* of Baghdad -that were usually attached to the *masjids*- made many scholars eager to reside there, because of the unique qualities of teaching in these learning venues[27]. The book culture in Baghdad and other Muslim cities "excelled for a long time without printing presses, generating not only unsurpassed quantities of manuscript books, but also establishing institutions and networks related to the world of the book that functioned sufficiently well, prompting in turn a vivid book culture"[28].

The streets of Baghdad prior to and in the nineteenth century were typically narrow, in order to maximise living spaces inside the houses. In this century, housing styles became more decorative, with lots of ornamentations and fine architectural details[29], specifically the semi-public rooms that were designated to cater for guests or for holding weekly educational gatherings. Extensive ornamentation in these rooms indicates the prominence of learning and social relations in the society of Baghdad. The houses often had wide open courtyards, where families would have privacy within a large open space. The courtyards were multifunctional, encompassing many activities, such as work, gathering, and entertainment. Instead of one open air public square, like in medieval European cities, Baghdad had hundreds of open internal squares at the centre of the houses (figure 1).

Figure 1: Housing style in the 19th century [Warren & Fethi 1982]

The courtyards and the upper terraces of houses provided semi-private space for the family, especially women, to work while enjoying social life. These parts of the house functioned as an alternative public realm that extended over the entire city, opening up to the sky and to the Tigris River, providing their own means of sociability within the larger public space. Thus, in nineteenth century, almost every urban space contributed to the social life of Baghdad, either fully or partially. These qualities made the urban design of Baghdad -and other cities in the area- the best design that could conform to the specific needs of people and place. With their interlocking capacities, flexibility, openness and sociability, these quality urban spaces ensured that social life was catered for to a degree unmatched by modern city designs and architypes introduced in the twentieth century.

Baghdad in the 20th century

Political modernisation and Westernisation in Iraq and other Muslim cities took place before the twentieth century, when European agents tried to influence a number of late Ottoman governors to initiate few urban schemes in the name of modernity. Then the direct impact of western culture, commerce, and military power modified and shaped the identities of these cities[30]. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Western outlooks strongly influenced Baghdad's urban forms. As modernisation has overtaken these cities, including Baghdad, their historic urban fabric witnessed gradual alteration "leaving little of the urban heritage and urban memory or identity for the new generations"[31]. Regardless, sensitive changes supported by secular and capitalistic platforms are continuously implied until present time in the name of modernity.

The British occupation of Baghdad led to significant changes to the urban system, and this came about in a number of ways; it influenced Baghdad's urban planning by impacting both the physical forms of the city and people's views. For instance, the role of the *masjid* was transformed; it was no longer a hub that provide educational, social or legal services. Also the *madrasas* that were associated with the *masjids* were gradually separated from them, which confined the *masjid* to merely a single purpose building; a place for prayer. The physical devastation of the city's urban landscape, "which ousted the *masjid* as the capital institute, continues to be felt as a vestige of colonial occupation"[32].

The centrality of the *masjid* to people's life made cities like Baghdad different from medieval European cities. In those cities, although religious institutions ran the schools, clinics and in some cases owned some markets, the church was physically separate from the town square, and it had a single task; a worshipping place. Later on, the decline in the power of the Catholic Church signified the separation of religion and state in all dimensions. It seems that this experience was politically transmitted to the occupied lands with no consideration of the history of particular societies and their needs. Consequently, the masjid became an architectural heritage icon rather than a central place in people's life. Secular ideas played a double role in this matter; while they instigated the limitation of the masjid's functions, the shift of the masjid's activities paved the way for secularisation in the society.

Among other urban settings of Baghdad that were transformed in this period are the gardens that acted as social public hangouts during the nineteenth century. These gardens were also transformed by limiting them to single or private purposes[33]. While the literature written by Baghdadi scholars in the nineteenth century indicates metaphoric images that express the whole city as a magnificent garden filled with flowers, these changes restricted people's capability of owning gardens to rich people. Subsequently, in the twentieth century, public gardens in Baghdad outlined autonomous urban features that lack flexibility and encompass simulated social phenomena.

Furthermore, colonial housing typologies that were gradually imposed on the society of Baghdad incorporated unfamiliar models that are not compatible with the specific requirements of place and

people. For instance, the size of houses in general was diminished, and courtyards were misplaced. In addition, the use of Islamic decorations and ornamentations greatly decreased[34]. Instead of opening to a unified internal space, the houses started to open to multiple exterior spaces. From the 1930s, Western plans of systemic residential complexes were initiated. Subsequently, residential complexes that contained small and identical units were constructed. These houses were not suitable for typical large Baghdadi families, and they lacked privacy and identity, causing continuous social and urban problems. The narrow streets in the neighbourhoods were replaced by wide and straight streets to cater for the use of cars. Although it is important to respond to new changes, those schemes did not consider all other aspects of the society. Rather, they brought more complexities to the urban life of Baghdad.

Another major damage to the urban system of Baghdad is the demolition of the city wall. According to Ghaidan, there had been cases of destruction in Baghdad during wars and disasters, but breaking down the city's wall in peace time is "an unmistakable act of cultural vandalism"[35]. Apart from its direct effects on Baghdad's urban development, political modernisation and secularisation indirectly contributed to the transformation of cities through other means such as the re-writing of history and changing learning techniques. An example of the harmful effects of re-writing history is the Orientalists' writings that drew a gloomy picture of Baghdad before the twentieth century, to highlight the benefits of colonial systems. Yet the most destructive technique was the influence on people's mindsets and perspectives, by picturing secular modernisation as the only way to advance the society. In the name of modernity everything from the past was considered 'old' and useless, and everything introduced by the West was considered 'modern' and ideal. These ideas impacted every aspect of life, including clothing, food, and language, in addition to urbanism.

These approaches caused confusion to the original concept of modernity, and damaged patriotic values. Accordingly, the past was treated as "something to be quoted selectively, something already deracinated"[36]. As a result, the urban schemes of the early decades of the twentieth century witnessed a major turn; that is rejecting 'original' urban system and implementing what is called the 'modern urban system'. The 'modern urban system' was launched by initiating a project to widen a road in eastern Baghdad, supposedly to allow more space for carriages, and to connect the north part of the city with the business centre in the south part. This road was constructed in the name of modernisation, yet Ghaidan suggests another reason for its construction; for the purpose of control[37]. This project resulted in a great damage to the urban heritage of the central Baghdad, which have had unique historical buildings. A number of *masjids* were partially destroyed, and "hundreds of Baghdad's old houses were lost forever"[38]. The new street was called *al-shāri' al-jadid*[39]. Later, it took the name *al-rashid* street.

Instead of constructing places for worshipping, learning and other beneficial activities, the new wide street embraced other activities, such as cinemas and bars, which affected the purity of the society. This street; *al-rashid* street -that was constructed in 1916- is among three major streets that were planned and constructed gradually in the first half of the twentieth century. The other two streets are *al-kifah* street that was constructed in 1936, and *al-jumhūriyya* street that was built in 1956. Those three streets were tragically cut through the historical urban fabric of Baghdad in a process similar to slicing a cake[40]. The new system of wide streets unfortunately fragmented the historical district, affected the specialised markets badly, and accelerated the process of outward migration from the central area, resulting in a dramatic change of the central city layout and function. Sometimes it is easy to draw a line on a map (a street), yet in urban schemes some people may never imagine how big the impact is created by these lines (*figure 2*).
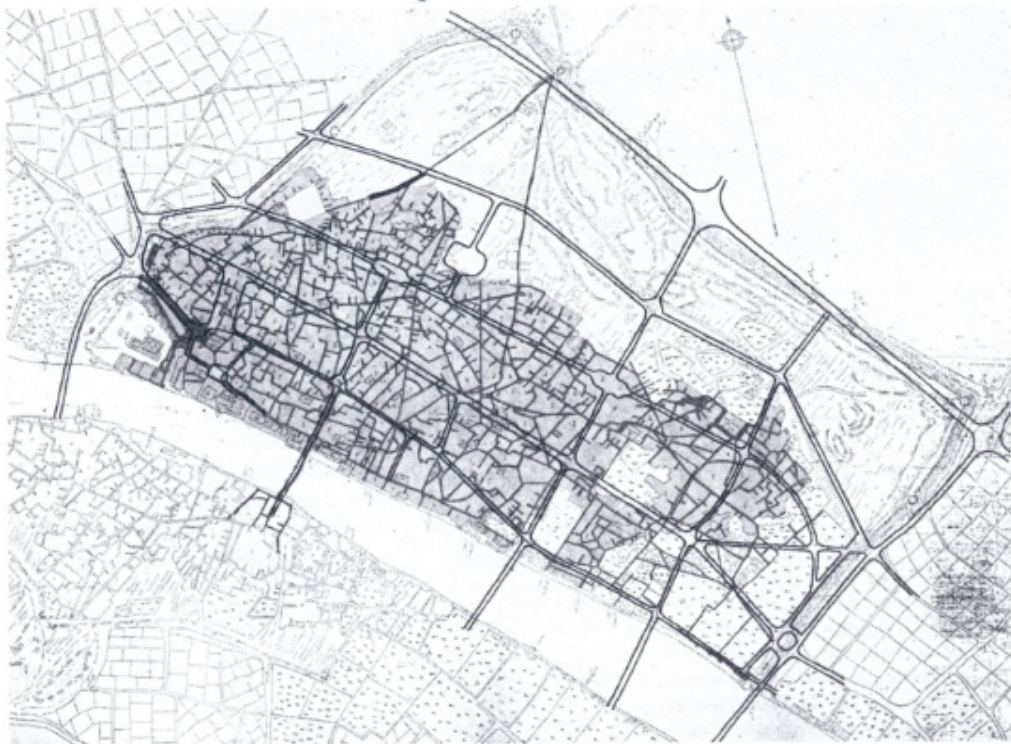
Figure 2: The historical district of Baghdad and the three major roads [Bianca 2000]

Can we overcome political modernisation issues?

The discussion of political modernisation issues proves its fabricated nature, and shows the vulnerability of diverting original meanings and implementing specific terms politically. It also confirms that urban forms are often scripted by political ideologies. The comparison between nineteenth century and twentieth century urban forms in Baghdad approves the vague and purposeful use of modernity schemes. It also indicates how the construction of political ideologies have led to the destruction of the identity and function of urban spaces. In the nineteenth century, urban spaces of Baghdad were versatile and integrated, and the urban planning was compatible with people's standards, needs and beliefs, and it was interconnected to their conscience and desires. On the contrary, twentieth century urbanism of Baghdad that was introduced concurrently with the British occupation brought about devastating effects. This situation makes it urgent to search for a solution to the problems that arose subsequently.

So, do we need to bring back all the qualities of the nineteenth century urban spaces and reject the twentieth century's policies? While it is impossible to fully go back to how things where and try to progress things correctly, it is important to distinguish the modernisation policies that brought dangerous effects to the society, to avoid such damages in the future. In general, scholars proposed some ideas to overcome the problems of modernity. For instance, Said suggests that we should be critical and sensitive "to what is involved in representation, in studying the other, in racial thinking, in unthinking and uncritical acceptance of authority and authoritative ideas"41. Whereas Bozdogan recommends introducing new interpretations "that problematise distinct and mutually exclusive boundaries between the Western canon and other cultures"42. Further, Malpas suggests to change the linguistic use of this sensitive term, as if 'modern' represents the authority of Western power,

we should then use the term 'new' or any other similar term instead43. Moreover, Akkach proposes shifting the focus from "the unchanging essentiality of form, style and aesthetics onto the multiple and changing concepts of self and place that arise in cross-cultural encounters"[44]. He indicates two strategies that might be fruitfully tested in this matter; learning about comparative philosophy, and also about literature.

These suggestions indicate various ideas to overcome the problem. For example, while some scholars emphasise the urgent need to place barriers to Western ideas, others recommend more solidarity and cross-cultural attention. The notion of cross-culturalism might look appealing to many people. However, this concept proved incapable of the fair exchange of ideas, by enhancing the superiority of particular ideas over other ideas, which promotes dominance rather than collaboration. This situation urges the need to establish firm rules to ensure fair exchange of ideas. In this way, cross-culturalism might be beneficial and helpful. Said's suggestion of racial thinking and to be aware of uncritical acceptance of authority and authoritative ideas is powerful and significant, since it promotes self-awareness and instructive development.

Since spiritual, historical, environmental and geographical attributes of place determine its identity, I suggest emphasising these matters to enhance a better understanding of the process, and ensure healthy future developments. This approach would establish a positive relationship with the past, maintain spiritual qualities of place and provide great city designs that correspond to particular environmental qualities and geographical conditions. In addition, this approach would eliminate inventive historiographies, and place history in a practical position that brings benefits and prevents any damage to the future progress of cities. In this manner, external ideas are examined to determine if they meet the conditions applied by the four identifiers of the place, before implementing them. These procedures would ensure the coherence and positive progress of urban developments.

In regards to Baghdad in particular, although we cannot bring back all the nineteenth century qualities, it is important to revive social life and the multi-functionality of urban places. So, it is crucial to initiate strategic plans that consider spiritual, historical, environmental and geographical settings of Baghdad. Whilst we may not be able to replicate the architectural centrality of the masjid and its strong connection to the madrasa, for instance, in the same manner of the past, we nevertheless need to consider how to redesign Baghdad so that the masjid is returns to its previous important position; a central urban node and a hub of education and public life. In the same way, we need to rethink the meaning of gardens so they would be integrated with other components of the city, with less restrictions and more flexibility. The three wide streets that fragmented the old city's fabric, creating parallel lines of amassed businesses with many cars and chaos, need to be reformed to enhance the quality of the social realm and to prevent more damage to the urban structure of the city in the future.

In short, we need to be conscious of political modernisation issues to avoid their destructive consequences. In viewing the accumulated experience of the past as being no more than a page in a history book, and in implementing imported plans instead, we have denied ourselves the opportunity to use the successful achievements of humanity, and we have created more barriers to the city's continuous development. While some urban planning techniques could be shared universally, it is essential to maintain the identity of place all together. Thus, before initiating any plans for the future, we need to redefine the urban spaces and outline their main criteria, to attain harmony between the specific requirements of place and its history, and to generate quality urban spaces that celebrate balance and continuity between past, present and future needs.

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