

# Former American Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq Designed by Josep Lluís Sert (1957-1959): **A Ruin That Nobody Wants**

By Pedro Azara<sup>1</sup>

**T**HE future of Josep Lluís Sert's masterpiece, the former American Embassy in Baghdad built in 1957, is in jeopardy. Not too many people consider that it has to be kept and restored. The state of the premises of the building, situated by the River Tigris and inside the so-called Green Zone (part of the city closed off to the general public), is threatened by a danger that also menaces other instances of Modern architecture in Baghdad, such as the Saddam Hussein stadium, which was built in the 1980s on the basis of a project by Le Corbusier dating from the late 1950s.

**A**FTER the Second World War, the U.S. government decided to commission the design of new embassies to renowned Modern architects (such as Gropius, for instance)<sup>2</sup>, especially in Near Eastern countries that were beginning to become independent states. This policy was intended to underpin a series of political and cultural values that marked a difference from those of the society that took part in the war. The image of modern architecture chosen for the embassies was a clear sign that under North American protection all the benefits from Modern times would come. Until then, neo-classical style was most in favour: it was a style used in most public buildings that carried notions of respectability, security and stability. It was a style associated with the ancient Greek democracy, but also with Roman republican and imperial values: severe, imposing. "Modern Style", on the other side, indicated a shift from a past that was hard to accept. The lack of naturalistic decoration, and the use of white flat walls, indicated that new times

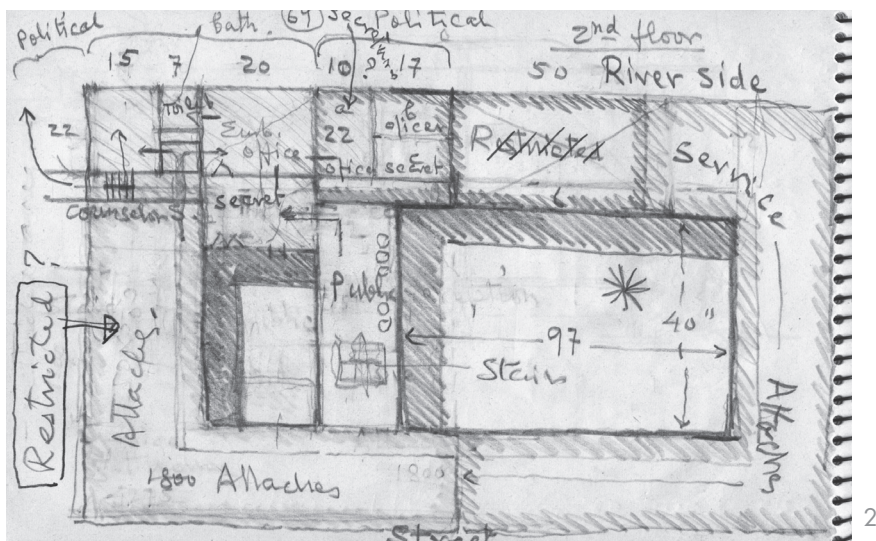
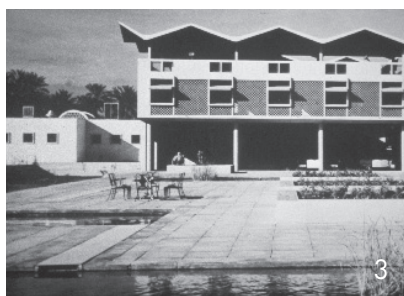
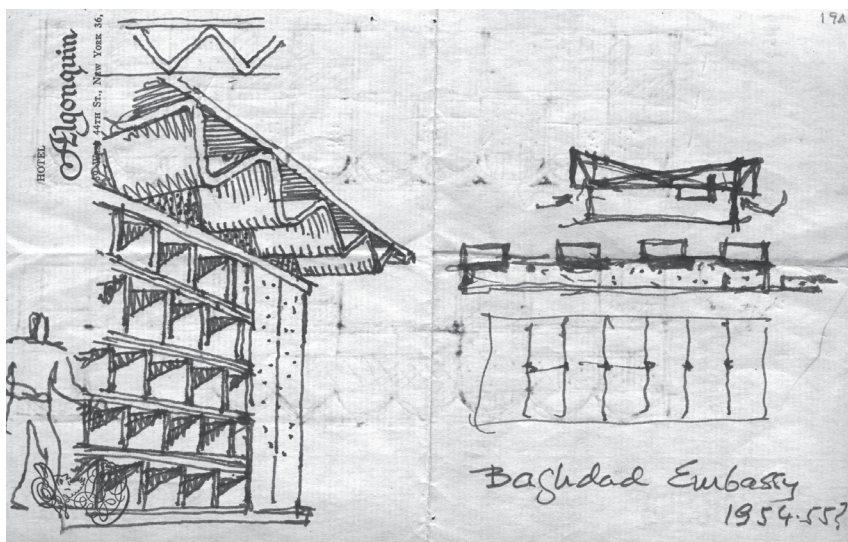




Figure 1. Chancery building sketch by **Josep Lluís Sert**.

Figure 2. Notebook sketch by **Josep Lluís Sert**.

Figure 3. Ambassadors Residence. Sert Archive at Harvard University, Cambridge.

Figure 4. Chancery building. Sert Archive at Harvard University, Cambridge.

Figure 5. Sert in Baghdad. Anonymous picture sent by Mouafaq Jawad Ahmed Al-Tai, Baghdad.

Figure 6. Amabassador's house. Photo by Ghada Siliq, 2011.

Figures 7, 8, 9, 10. Chancery building. Photo by Ghada Siliq, 2011.

were coming. It was the style of a house: a place where it was easy to enter, a space opened to everybody. And this freedom of movement was guaranteed by the North American government that was choosing a style which was not related to the past, any past. The freedom from the burden of classical conventions, shown in the new embassies built in the 50s, was a symbol of the freedom brought by the United States (meanwhile, the neo-classical style was heavily used by the Soviet Union). It was then that Josep Lluís Sert, a Spanish architect in exile and dean of Harvard University (an institution which, like the Ford Foundation, was close to the

republican government), was chosen to build the U.S. embassy in the capital of the new kingdom of Iraq, which emerged after the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I and following the withdrawal of the United Kingdom, which then ruled what had been the cradle of Mesopotamian culture in ancient times (Iraq had been an English colony, under the control of the Secretary of State for India, even using Indian currency from 1918 until 1921—the city Basrah became an English colony even before, in 1914. It became a controlled monarchy, with a king, Faysal I, chosen by the Great Britain, until 1948 when Iraq became a totally independent country).

The new U.S. embassy was located on the right bank of the River Tigris in a sparsely populated, open area, as compared to the dense old city built of mud and wood in Ottoman times on the opposite bank. The right bank was much in favour of a new class that wanted to be free of the traditional values of the old and traditional city. On an elongated site, perpendicular to the river, with a small jetty, Sert built several independent blocks with different functions: the chancery, administrative offices, staff accommodation and the ambassador's house with adjacent lodgings for guests, distributed around a garden intersected by a narrow canal that

flowed into a pond from the river. Side canals, arranged like the veins of leaf, carried water to other parts of the premises, also dotted with areas of water, including a swimming pool for guests near the ambassador's house.

The design of the buildings, as the one of most of these embassies, was influenced by the climate which in summer is dry and extremely hot. Layers of latticework screening—which became the style of all American embassies in warm foreign countries in the fifties—were used and air spaces under the roof-top terraces were incorporated for ventilation. But the screens were used not only for climatic reasons but also because they were giving a “modern” look to the buildings. The division between walls and windows, opaque and transparent plans, closed and opened panels, disappeared. The screens were at the same time a closure and an entrance, and a structural and decorative element. However, the lax distribution of the buildings, scattered around the site, made it impossible for these to shade each other and create wind tunnels, which is essential in central Iraq (the layout of the central part of Middle Eastern cities is deliberately dense in order to create shaded pockets of cooler air, as it happens in the Shiite neighbourhood of Khadimiya in Baghdad, with a lace of lanes). The postulates of the Modern Movement, which conceived buildings as splendid isolated objects under the sun, located in green areas, suited (north and central) Europe well (and north-America too), but not cities like Baghdad with its harsh and excessively dry climate. The plan was not suitable for the functions of an embassy, as it was not for a so warm country as Iraq.

The U.S. government only occupied the complex designed by Sert for a few years. The unenclosed site and the scattered arrangement of buildings made surveillance of the whole complex difficult. Finally, in 1967, after the Six Day War between Israel and the Arab countries, the U.S. embassy was moved across the river to a new site. During the eighties and nineties, relations between the United States and Iraq broke down. Finally, after the end of the Second Gulf War and until the recent completion of a huge—but low—new embassy—a walled and almost invisible city within a city—the United States occupied a kitsch Babylonian palace, previously used by the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

What happened to the complex following its abandonment by the United States delegation is still unclear. The destruction of records, the fact that the embassy is in the so-called Green Zone (a high security area, created by Saddam Hussein, in which government institutions, the homes of senior officials and presidential palaces were located, and

off-limits to the people of Baghdad—and this is still the case, which has forced Sert's work into oblivion, unfamiliar even to some high members of the U.S. military), and the dispersal of government staff in the times of Saddam Hussein, makes it impossible as yet to find out what the current situation is. The complex was transferred to the Iraqi government, which used it as the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 1973 and 1983. Having been abandoned, the U.S. government finally handed over ownership of the property to the new Iraqi government in 2008, which ceded the buildings, but not the land, to Baghdad City Council. Then, the Barcelona City Council, which had begun a process of twinning with Baghdad, offered to restore the complex (those were the days when Barcelona was acting as a rich city managing and financing urban projects in third world cities or cities damaged by war or violence such as Gaza); the idea was to install a Cervantes Institute there, together with a pioneering centre for Baghdad studies, at the request of the mayor of Baghdad. Then, in 2009, there was even talk of moving the small Spanish embassy, located in the relatively safe Red Zone, to the Sert premises (for security reasons, the Spanish ambassador's house and the Spanish embassy in Iraq are located in the same building in order to avoid moves, which are still dangerous, in Baghdad). However, because of doubts about the implications for Spain's image in Iraq if old U.S. government buildings were occupied, the idea was dropped. The economic crisis and uncertainty about the final purpose of the complex (even if restoration was undertaken by the Spanish government, because, it seems, this does not imply a say in the use of the premises), has resulted in the postponement of any of the repair work so badly needed after years of neglect and the severe damage (which must be evaluated to see if it has affected the structure of any of the buildings) caused by a suicide bomb attack. Nowadays, the Iraqi government is using again some of the buildings for some second rate offices, while the garden, in a poor state, is a neglected parking lot, but no restoration has been undertaken. The administration is using the complex mainly as a storage space: for this reason, it does not spend any funds in any improvement, and it does not see the need to do so. The fact that no one knows what to do with the complex and what will happen to it is a good reason for letting it as it is. So the buildings are deteriorating rather quickly. This led some Iraqi authorities and experts to suggest in April of this year that Sert's work—evoking times they would rather forget—should be demolished. Even some well-known and respected north-American scholars, who have been against the war and the inva-

sion, consider surprisingly that the embassy, which for them is the worst building in Baghdad, should have been more heavily bombed, in order to tear it down without any moral problem. So, the future of the Sert masterpiece is in jeopardy. Not too many people consider that it has to be kept and restored.

For this reason, and as it is almost certain that restoration is still possible (it seems that there are no heavy structural problems, and that the destruction affects more walls and decoration that can be repaired), some architects at the University of Baghdad have appealed for help from abroad to generate reports and projects to halt the plans for demolition, which would suppose a serious loss not only for Baghdad, but also for the architectural heritage of the twentieth century, since the former U.S. embassy is possibly Sert's best work.

We would like to thank Dr. Josep M<sup>a</sup> Rovira (UPC, Barcelona) —who has worked extensively on Sert, Dr. Khaled Al-Sultany, Dr. Caecilia Pieri, Mouafaq Jawad Ahmed Al-Tai, Octavio Learco Borgatello, the Spanish Embassy in Iraq (and the ex-Spanish ambassador, Excmo. Sr. D. Ignacio Rupérez), El Amana (Baghdad City Council), the Mayoralty of Barcelona (and most especially Manel Vila) and the Sert archive at Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., for all the graphic and written documentation they have provided, and especially Dr. Ghada Siliq (Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, Baghdad University), who, among other things, has been able to get a permission, so difficult to obtain, in order to visit the embassy.

#### Notes

1. Ph. D. Architect and Professor at ETSAB.
2. Loeffler, Jane C., *The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America's Embassies*, New York, Princeton University Press, 1998, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, 2010.