

Traditional versus a global, international style: Aarbil, Iraq

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Abstract

Now that the regime of Saddam Hussein came to an end, Kurdish people in North Iraq start to rebuild their cities, one of them being Aarbil. Contemporary urban regeneration follows design principles imported from the west and thus contrasts the traditional urban fabric of the city. This development is a result of the cities latest history when the old parts of Aarbil were bombed and hosted very poor refugees and victims of war. Especially the Qala'a, the ancient citadel in the centre is seen by the original inhabitants as run down, old, dirty and not worth living in. As a result, the leading families start big enterprises such as big shopping malls, office buildings, luxury hotels, apartment buildings and so forth. Among these projects is a shopping mall combined with office units of superlative dimensions just outside the old citadel. These mostly new types of buildings, however are imported from the West. Especially cities such as Dubai and its new, modern features – based on American and European design standards - stand as role models. Such concepts are imported, however, without a deeper understanding of the underlying traditions of European town planning and architecture. Thus, only images are produced that end in a “Disney-world” urban environment. In the turn, the traditional way of town planning, deeply rooted in culture and religion, is in danger of getting lost and with it the particular way of living in a Muslim city which has its roots in Mesopotamian times.

This particular contribution will look at the old citadel, the Qala'a, which marks the “heart” of the town and creates identity and a sense of belonging for its inhabitants. For such a long time the spatial concept and architecture of the Qala'a was representing the very powerful and independent culture of Kurdistan. Just outside of this traditional centre a shopping mall is being built, contrasting the citadel not only in terms of its architecture but also by the concept and way of use. It will be discussed how much such an enterprise will effect both, the traditional way of life and the old urban fabric of Aarbil.

1. Introduction

The discourses about globalisation and the importance of international relationships have been amongst the major issues of countries since few decades. Thus also town planning and architecture nowadays are affected. Increasing international relation led, too, to a practice that western oriented architecture and urban design influences almost all parts of the world.

The process of globalisations is clearly recognizable in the way cities evolve currently. Not only the rapid proliferation of certain building types such as shopping malls, resort hotels or office buildings are concrete examples of global city development. Such urban features contrast

the historic evolution of city development, especially in non-European countries with a different cultural background. However, western concepts in city planning are being implemented in almost all developing or post-war countries. Local planners and architects as well as political authorities push the import of urban development features from the West ahead, but international agencies such as the World Bank or the UN support these ideas, too. The urban form and the changes of it are not being considered by international agencies although it is stated by scholars that the urban fabric has an essential role in the social structure (Mumford, 1970) and thus in its economic development. This leads to the question about the impact of foreign urban planning generally.

Like in many other cultures world wide the Islamic idea of cities, too, is radically opposed to contemporary western ideas of town planning and clash with traditional concepts. Western cities are structured alongside a network of roads and public open spaces that connect structural and social different areas and buildings which are seen as functional containers arranged geometrically along public open spaces. The focus in this paper lays on a case study in Aarbil, Iraq, a traditional Islamic city that currently experiences a significant change of its urban structure by aggressive interventions from the west. By looking at one of the currently built western style facilities, a shopping mall adjacent to the ancient citadel, it will be discussed how well it matches to both, the old urban fabric and the social demands of Aarbil citizens.

2. The city of Aarbil

Aarbil or Erbil, a commercial, agricultural and administrative centre with predominately Kurdish population, is one of the main cities of the Iraqi-Kurdish region and the fourth-largest city in the whole country. It lies 350 km north of Iraq's capital Baghdad in a fertile and rich plain between the Great and Lesser Zab rivers. Rugged mountains, further away the Iranian plateau and the Zagros ranges to the East and the Anatolian plateau to the North and North West, enclose the Aarbil plain.



Fig. 1: Aarbil in the regional context. Fig. 2: A lively commercial street on the Qala'a with the main entrance to the fortress on the back. Fig. 3: View over the city from the fortress.

Today Aarbil is the capital or *Muhafadeh* of the Aarbil governorate, one of the eighteen in Iraq. It is, too, the centre of the autonomous region of Kurdistan, comprising three regions, Aarbil itself, Dohuk and Sulaimaniya. With its 15 315 sq km it covers 3.5 % of the total area of Iraq. In 1977 only 540.000 people inhabited the city, while today the total number of inhabitants is 980.313, which is 67.4% of the total population of the governorate. It is the fourth-largest city in Iraq and serves as a centre of education, culture and trade.

Aarbil is said to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, for at least 4000 years. During its long and eventful history it had many names such as Urbilum, Arbilim, Arbeletis, Arbl, Arbaila or Arba-elo meaning “the city of Gods”. Nowadays officials equally use Aarbil, Arbil or Erbil. However, the local population prefers the name Hawler, the Kurdish expression.

Its first historic record dates back to Neo-Sumerian times when the kings of Ur attacked Aarbil from 2094 to 2046 BC and 2046 to 2038 BC, but failed to subject the city.

Nothing is known about Aarbil between 2000 and 1000 BC. It had its first heyday from 680 to 612 BC when Niniveh fell and Aarbil became a cultural and religious centre for the Esarhaddon and Assurbanepal region since Ishtar (the goddess of love and war) and Great Assur (national god of Assyria) were worshiped in the city. When in 401 BC the “Ten Thousand” of Xenophon marched across Assyria, Aarbil was the only city that survived the attacks. Later, the battle of Gangamela took place near Aarbil when Alexander the Great defeated the Persian king Darius in 331 BC.

Between 321 BC and 636 AD various families such as the Seleucides, Parathians or Sassanians ruled the city and the adjacent region. Between 640 and 1200 AD Aarbil was part of the Arabian Islamic region of Caliphate. Nevertheless, the city was successful in building up trade and markets and in 800 it was a well-known centre of economic activities. The loss of importance was already in the 13th century when the Mongol, Persian and Turkish conquest took place. In the following centuries Aarbil was of less importance and thus in the 19th century the population ranged between 3000 and 6000 inhabitants, mostly living in the fortress, the Qala’a (S. Sherzad 1979).

The last 30 years were stamped by the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. During this period Kurds lived in fear of pursuit, so many left the country and moved to the West. The majority of those who stayed fled to the mountains where they lived scattered in refugee camps¹ and lived in poverty. In the turn Aarbil and the other cities were deserted. The income from oil was spent on prestigious buildings by the central government in Baghdad. Demonstration of power, oppression and attempts to intimidate were the driving forces for the building projects in the last 30 years². In particular building luxury palaces for the leading families, i.e. all who supported Saddam Hussein (Arabs, Turks, Kurds and Christians) and military facilities as well as other prestigious buildings containing all luxury one can think of were the major projects of this time. As a role model for building activities stood the great monumental buildings from Mesopotamian times like Babylon or Ur with the difference that their contemporary successors were no more temples but private palaces of Saddam Hussein and his family.

¹ The shed like houses there were built from brick and clay, not the preferred building material. Saddam Hussein did not send any oil to the region and thus people had to use wood for heating. Therefore the area appeared stepp like at the end of the war but today several programs of reforestation are launched to improve the environment and particularly to attract tourists.

² Demonstration and representation of power were always important elements in traditional Islamic cities. They can be found in many cities such as Dubai, Isfahan and many more.

Since the Gulf or Kuwait war in the 1990-ies Kurdistan is a protectorate by the UNO³. In contrast to Baghdad and South Iraq, where sanctions stopped development, Kurdistan was soon after flourishing, at least to a certain extent. Infrastructure, buildings and markets were set up and most products were basically available⁴. After the dictatorship came to an end the city changes rapidly. Immigration from displaced Kurds on one hand and the wave of poor people from rural areas who came because better jobs were available in Aarbil made the city grow extremely fast. In 1977 only 540.000 people inhabited the city while today the total number of inhabitants is 908.313 (Rassam, Dezayi, 2006). The majority of the new citizens settled down alongside the main roads and in the suburbs in informal settlements. Although a few middle and upper class people are wealthy today and show this off by having one car, cell phones and luxury homes, the city faces a high percentage of urban poor. Thus, the city today faces big problems also forced by the rapid growth.

However, Aarbil leaders want the city to be leading in the region and make it an attractive place for both, business and tourism. To meet these demands it is important how the city development and urban regeneration is done and how old and new will match to make it an attractive and liveable place for both, foreigners and citizens.

3. Urban management in Aarbil

Before Kurdistan became an independent governorate the master plans for Aarbil were prepared in the centralised ministry in Baghdad. This planning was mostly inadequate due to the lack of proper information from local officials. Local officials had little input and civil society groups could not evolve at all, which lead to master plans – still being in use – that fail to be sufficient for the real needs of the city (Rassam & Dezayi, 2006).

Today the responsibility of urban management lies in the community, however municipal councils lack experience in urban management. There are a number of inadequacies, such as shortage of housing, especially for the urban poor, a lack of health service, educational infrastructure, inadequate municipal services and poorly maintained physical environment (Chilmeran & Amman, 2006). Besides, municipal councils have overlaps and a clear vision for the city is generally missing (Rassam & Dezayi, 2006). There are several ministries (Urban planning is the responsibility of the Kurdistan Ministry of Municipally; planning and implementation of schemes as well as housing lies in the hands of the Ministry of Construction and housing; preparation and directing budgets is directed by the Ministry of Finance with overlaps and a lack of information flow as well as lack of coordination. Community participation is not known and the development of civil society groups was hindered during the dictatorship and could not evolve since. These problems coupled with the rapid urban growth as well as a lack of a vision for the city development led to inadequate urban planning policies and frameworks. No objectives, goals and priorities are defined. The only existing master plan was prepared in 1984 by the Directorate General of Physical Planning in Baghdad. Later, in 1994 the master plan was expanded and updated to the demands of the fast growth by local authorities, namely the

³ Basra in the South was, too, a protectorate by the UNO, nevertheless did not develop so quickly than Kurdistan. One of the reasons for the flourishing protectorate of Kurdistan is its geographic situation: it lies close to the borders of Iran and Turkey, and both states supported smuggle in first place and later on trade between the countries.

⁴ Since all goods were imported via Turkey and Lorries sometimes were stopped for longer times at the border delays of delivering were common.

Kurdistan Council of Ministers and was envisioned to be effective in 2015. Unfortunately, this plan does not respond to the current situation and needs of the city, especially for its role as the capital of Kurdistan as well as the aims for being an attraction for tourists (Rassam & Dezayi, 2006). Especially the city centre would need a clear vision and plan for future development.

4. A case study: Aarbil City Centre Development

“Aarbeel City Centre Development – Designing the future“ by Al Bayaty Architects, an Iraqi architect, and a Lebanese developer, will soon be one of the biggest shopping malls in Iraq. It was started by the government in April 2003, only shortly after the fall of the dictatorship. Main sponsor of the project is one person, a close friend of a member of the government. By now the complex is under construction and will be finished after a seven-year building phase.



Fig 4: Aarbil City and its Qala'a. Fig 5: typical small fruit market on the street. Fig 6: Aarbil City Centre

The building complex lies next to the citadel, the Qala'a, and comprises four office towers being 15 to 22 storeys high. The towers will host 320 offices with 200sqm per unit and will be connected by bridges. On ground level 5000 shop units are planned on three levels, which are grouped around roofed courtyards that bring natural light to the inner parts of the shopping area. Besides, from the shopping arcade the Qala'a can be overlooked. Underground parking is provided for more than 5000 cars. A “piazza” is planned in front of the massive main entrance and an extensive green zone shall embed the complex.

On the northern side of “Aarbeel City Centre” another multi – storey building with 400 store units and 260 offices is planned. The proposed style is aimed to imitate western architecture with “contemporary” materials such as glass and steel. A massive plaza in front of the main entrance shall invite people to come into a shopping word that leaves all the noise and dirt and heat outside in order to give visitors a totally new experience of shopping.

A shopping mall with the adjacent office units is a totally new feature in Aarbil. It not only contrasts the Qala'a and its traditional design and spatial concept. It also introduces a new way of use. Trade was one of the leading businesses in Islamic cities and a very particular layout of such a trading unit was formed over the centuries, the suq. Due to its importance the main suq was always located in the very centre. Certainly, the Qala'a had a traditional suq itself. Therefore, it is important to compare the suq and the new and adjacent shopping mall and to have a close look to the Qala'a.

The Qala'a

The Qala'a is a fort lying some 25m above ground level. In medieval times until the begin of the 20th century Aarbil people lived in this fortification with town walls and gates that were closed at night time. It is said that people living here appeared as one, big extended family and the whole fort was seen as the living room of the entire group.

Later, poor people from the countryside came to work for citizens and settled around the fortress. To build homes for these new settlers was an additional source of income for Aarbil citizens and in the course of time they became even wealthier. Later they started to build new bigger houses and villas outside the fortress for their own use and left the citadel. Thus the Qala'a appeared more and more deserted and made way for poor people to settle here. Gangs controlled the streets and fought one another. To improve the situation the government bought the whole fortress in 1970 and launched council housing for the poor and undereducated people making even more old Aarbil citizens leave.

The brother war between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) between 1994 and 1997 (already at the time of the UN protectorate) forced many people living in the countryside to flee either to Sulemaniyah (PUK) or to Aarbil's very heart, the Qala'a (KDP). These very poor, undereducated victims of war are the last immigration wave and still live there.

However, in the view of Aarbil citizens, it still is the centre and heart of the town and acts as a creator of identity and belonging. It is an unwritten law that nothing should tower above the citadel. Its appearance, too, influences many architects and planner for example by incorporating architectural details (such as windows, doors, courtyards).

The Suq: the traditional way of shopping

"In every genuine cultural tradition, architecture and urban form can be seen as a natural expression of prevailing spiritual values and beliefs which are intimately related to the acknowledged cosmic order of the world" (Bianca: 2000, p. 23). This general statement is, too, true in Muslim cities in the Arabic world. Islam rules every day life and thus the urban environment. In Muslim cities particularly the differentiation between private and public is a major challenge in town planning which can be explained by the background and history of the Arabic world.

In the beginning Muslim countries in the Arab world held the monopoly of international trade of the at that time known world. All goods were transported along the major routes by sea or on land and passed the big cities such as Tunis, Cairo, Damascus, Isfahan, Samarkand or Baghdad as well as Aarbil (Bianca, 2000). The resulting network of these cities not only had economic but religious functions, too. Not only goods were distributed, but also the ideas of the young religion of Islam. Trade therefore was an important issue of Muslim culture from the very beginning. Based on Beduin traditions Islamic towns and cities were formed around the needs of commercial centres and markets. Basically the cities are parted in public open spaces and private retreats. The public open area lay around the main or Friday Mosque with its related welfare buildings such as Koran schools, hamams, the seat of the city representatives and the like. Adjacent to this central part of the cities lays the Suq or Bâzâr, the Persian expression. Due to the importance of commerce in Islamic cities the trade centre had a prominent spot in the centres. Both, the suq and the mosque with its related buildings were public and contrasted to the private

areas of the residential quarters where people lived in absolute privacy. Private meant that no one should be able to catch a glimpse from the outside and only family members were allowed to enter. These private areas were separated from the public sector by walls and gates which led to a layout of the private where it is aimed that no one can overlook the private homes of the individuals (Bianca: 1991).

For this contribution is particularly interesting to look more closely to the suq, since it is the trading centre and market and competes with the proposed shopping mall. It shall be discussed how old shopping habits match to the new concept of malls. Besides, it will be highlighted that the traditional suq was more than a big centre of commerce.

The whole suq complex with its many functions was parted from the residential areas. One of the most important town planning rules in Muslim cities was and is to hinder insights from the public parts of the city to the very private retreat of the residential areas. Not only all private houses were enclosed by walls to protect the inhabitants from any intruding activities, the residential quarters, each belonging to a lineage or clan, had surrounding walls gated by doors as well. The privacy of the residential areas and the loudness of the public areas were thus neatly separated from each other, although neighbouring each other. Often the outer walls of the residential parts were at the same time used to attach the stables and boxes of the shops of the suq. This layout was convenient since ways between the different sectors (between merchant and craftsmen, between production place and private retreat) were very short and not too much additional traffic was produced. The design of the individual homes and the public area made a life with Islamic traditions possible.

The traditional suq was formed by the Bedouin rights to temporary occupy public ground for markets (Bianca, 2000). In the course of time box like stalls were put up along the major roads that connected the city gates with the centre, the main Mosque and its related buildings. A variety of small sheds and stalls not only hosted merchants but also teashops and stalls for craftsmen. The function of a suq was not only shopping, but also production place and centre for exchange of news and information. According to the very hot climate mats or cloth or more sophisticated tombs or a series of domes roofed the alleys. The alleys were subdivided into sectors, each for a particular sort of good, such as blacksmiths, cloth, food, jewels and other precious articles, tanneries, books and the like, but also hosted stalls for craftsmen. Each individual section had gates and could be locked by night and often was safeguarded by gatekeepers. Due to the fact that the suq lay adjacent to the mosque, the zoning of the suq was related to the sacral meaning of the mosque. The sacred place for prayers could not lie next to all businesses that involved loud and polluting products. Preferably “noble” trade was located next to the mosque, such as perfumes, spices, book binding (Bianca, 1999), while blacksmiths or tanneries lay close to the town walls.

At the entrances to the city big squares were common, a sort of transition space or “Eisodos” (Bornberg, 2003). On this square foreigners met citizens, goods were stored before being distributed elsewhere or were packed up for transporting them to other cities.

Certain parts of the suq were so called caravanserais. They served as storage space, wholesale, production and accommodation for merchants from abroad as well as stable areas for the animals. Caravanserais were enclosed by high walls and grouped around a central courtyard.

Another feature of the suq was the “qissariya”, a hybrid of store for the most precious articles of the suq, such as gold, jewellery, silk and often enough money and the treasure house of the city. This building, like all other parts in the suq, was gated, shut by night time and guarded by watchmen.

These structures were “spatial pockets” (Bianca, 2000) and independent from both, the surrounding suq and the residential quarters of the citizens. Foreign merchants were the only persons who stayed in the suq at night time. All other salesmen and craftsmen went home to their private retreats elsewhere in the city. Therefore the suq was solely for economic purpose and never was mixed with residential use.

5. Discussion

The concept of western shopping malls is obviously contrasting the old and for traditional Islamic cities so important suq. The suq, in particular the central suq, was not only a centre for shopping and retail. It was a complex of many functions such as trade with the many different products, wholesale, centre of exchange of information, meeting point for both, outsiders and citizens, area for handcraft, storage space and accommodation for merchants from abroad, the “mint” of the town, had tea and coffee houses and many more facilities. Together with the main Mosque and its related buildings it was the public area of the city. Public in this respect meant that all non-residence as well as citizens had the right to stay and get along with all sorts of businesses, as long as they matched with the Islamic rights.

A very important issue was the differentiation between private and public. This concept that rules societies and every day life is also part of the built environment. Each of the various sectors of the public area as well as the private realm of the clans up to the private houses of the nuclear families were neatly separated from the other parts by walls with no openings and windows. Only by narrow doors and gates that were locked by night time people could get in or out.

The “Aarbeel City Centre Development” does not correspond to these very old concepts of traditional layouts of towns in the region. On one hand it is unclear if the new shopping mall shall replace the central suq that once lay just outside the citadel. If so, it has an inadequate layout and concept. Sectors for each trade would be needed, combined with coffee and teashops. It, too, would be important that units are planned for craftsmen, as well as storage spaces and a caravanserai, which could be in modern terms a hotel.

Besides, it would be of extraordinary importance that the adjacent areas, currently mostly residential, cannot be overlooked from the proposed arcade and the office towers. So far all elements in Islamic town planning were oriented to the inside. They were grouped around big courtyards with water features, natural elements and the like. The shopping mall now is partly

oriented to the outside world as well ⁵. Even in advertising this view from the mall that overlooks the Qala'a is highlighted. Consequently, the adjacent residential properties are being sold although the prices are very high.

With the concept of a shopping mall another feature gets lost: due to the fact that the alleys in suqs were narrow all products lay close to the customers. This has developed not only in suqs, but was also a main concern in European fresh markets (Sennett: 1994). To bring goods so close to customers was in first place a must, since advertising of all sorts were not available. However, to touch and smell goods, as well as the very close contact between reseller and customer adds to the atmosphere of a suq, not to forget the custom of bargaining, which is essential in a suq.

The new mall does not meet the demands of these so important functions of a suq. A shopping mall has shop units with goods displayed behind glass frontages, shopkeepers do not stand in the alleys to announce the products, talk and bargain with potential customers. Most of the flair of the traditional suq cannot be found in the mall⁶.

Another problem with the proposed shopping mall is its structure and outlook. It does not correspond with the urban fabric generally. Lying in such a prominent area – just a few hundred meters outside the Qala'a – it introduces a totally new architectural language: the high towers ⁷, its massive volume generally or the glass that is used in the facades. The latter is a particular problem: not only is the climate very hot and using such materials means to base on air condition and energy consumption⁸. The large glass frontages also allow gaining an insight of the adjacent private areas. In contemporary town planning this was never possible. Each sector was neatly divided from the rest. Therefore it was impossible to walk from one zone to another or to catch a glimpse, although all zones of the city lay in direct neighbourhood to each other.

6. Conclusions:

Aarbil is a post war city with a high growth rate of citizens. It was, too, a city governed in far away Baghdad for the last 30 years. Therefore, town planning instruments as well as skills to put them to practice did not develop. The demand for new housing and new buildings generally coupled with money from sponsors led to a series of prestigious building projects such as luxury hotels, luxury residential sites, office buildings and shopping malls. It is aimed to refurbish the city so that the old, neglected and bombed areas are not visible any more. Everything should be new and appear in modern, contemporary western style. The here discussed project of the

⁵ From the citadel it is possible to overlook the city as well. But from there only roofs of shops are visible and give not way to the inside private areas.

⁶ Apart from the main suq there was a series of smaller suqs for the local society. The main suq basically was the centre of trading businesses, for all goods that come into and out of the city. On the other hand, the local suq served more as a market for citizens who want to buy things for every day purpose. If this was planned than the complex with its 5000 shops is much too big. Besides, it will be far too expensive for most of the locals to do their shopping there.

⁷ Recently, after protests and later on discussions with local planners and architects, the height of the towers was reduced, so currently they are nearly the same height as the citadel.

⁸ Although only to a certain extend, traditional suqs were constructed such that a natural circulation of air together with water features helped to cool the air without the need of electric power.

“Aarbeel City Centre Development” must be seen in this light, too. Not only the advertising of the project on local broadcast every evening show a future that is clean, rich, modern and definitely does not remind of the last decades that were stamped by war, oppression and poverty. The Aarbil society, too, wants to live without fear, in an environment where life can be enjoyed.

Dubai with its modern western architecture and high technical standards is one of the role models and is admired by many. Looking closely to Dubai it turns out that the architectural features were imported from the US and Europe with little understanding of the history that led to the particular language of architecture (Arif, 2002). Generally speaking, the built environment always is formed by environmental factors such as geological and physical conditions, climate and the particular society with its religion, laws and rules. By implementing such architectural features and structures without the knowledge where and why a buildings serves its function a loss of identity must be feared.

This paper highlighted this loss of culture and the traditional way of usage by discussing one of the new enterprises, the shopping mall “Aarbeel City Centre Development”. It is shown above that the concept of a shopping mall does not easily match with traditional patterns of shopping in a Muslim Arabic city. Since the shopping mall is of immense dimensions it must be feared that many of the small traditional suqs have to close due to the absence of customers. This process then would lead to a loss of traditions; not only in architectural terms, but also every day life of citizens will be affected. Just copying concepts for buildings from the West without paying respect to the circumstances that led to the environment will not suffice.

Therefore, shopping malls as well as the other projects should be rethought in terms of traditional way of life. Architecture and building structures can be imported from abroad, but they have to pay respect to the local needs and way of life, to climate and physical environment.

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