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The Le Corbusier Gymnasium in Baghdad: discovery of construction archives (1974 - 1980)

30 mai 2012 - <http://ifpo.hypotheses.org/3560>

Par [Caecilia Pieri](#)



© Fondation Le Corbusier/ ADAGP/ Caecilia Pieri, 2011. Main façade.

Version française : <http://ifpo.hypotheses.org/3706>; Arabic عربي
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The story begins end 2004, along with the very first research engaged for a thesis –concerning the urban and architectural transformations of the XXth century Baghdad, after three successive stays in Baghdad since June 2003. In June 1955, commissions were passed to world-famous architects by Nuri Said’s government via the Development Board, a governmental body created in 1950 in charge of developing new infrastructures throughout the whole country. There was a huge University campus by Walter Gropius, an opera-house by Frank Lloyd Wright, a building for the Ministry of Planning by the Italian Gio Ponti, a Civic Center by the Dutch Marinus Dudok, a Museum by the Finnish Alvar Aalto, etc. The aim of such a series of grand constructions was to endow the Iraqi capital with a modernist development, an ambition amply justified at the time by the country’s petrol booming revenues¹. As concerns Le Corbusier he was to build an Olympic city, including a 50000 people capacity stadium, a gymnasium with a stage holding 3500 spectators, a pool for 5000 spectators, but also a basin with a “wave mechanism”, an outdoors amphitheater, several training grounds, “nautical amusements”. If indeed, some of these schemes were implemented in the following ten years, others, for instance those of Wright or Aalto, never came to be. As for Le Corbusier’s commission, it was only implemented partially and much later, with finally only the gymnasium being built in the spring of 1980. Yet this construction’s destiny is singular.

Posthumous, mysterious, controversial: a work fallen into oblivion

Researchers having worked on the subject are very rare and this is all the more surprising given Le Corbusier's abundantly commented work as author and architect in the Western world. Yet the Gymnasium suffers from the plight of being a posthumous work. Like the Saint-Pierre de Firminy Church (France), which was completed in 2006 by one of Le Corbusier's collaborators, José Oubrière, the gymnasium which was completed in 1980 does not bear the master's signature. Which is why its attribution is controversial: a "controversial", "mysterious" work², it is neither listed in *L'Œuvre complete*, the "bible" of corbusean studies which was printed in several volumes between 1957 and 1965, nor in the catalogue of the 1987 Retrospective organized by the Pompidou Centre in Paris. In 2008, it was presented in an exhibition in Barcelona among some other great architectural schemes presented above; yet however pioneering this could seem, the event which was inaugurated by the Queen was perhaps a political gesture as much as a cultural one³.

Contested by the purists, built just before the war against Iran, the Gymnasium, what with many other aspects of modern Iraq, fell into oblivion because the country was isolated, manipulated by the dictatorship, and this was made worse by the wars and the thirteen years ravages caused by the embargo⁴. One of the paradoxes, and not the least, of the American invasion of 2003, is thus to have allowed Iraq and the Le Corbusier Gymnasium to break free from this imposed silence.

From oblivion to the paradoxes of renovation

In 2004, rare were the articles mentioning the *completed* Gymnasium. American troops were occupying the place as well as the Sha'ab district, which is off-centre, already had a reputation as being unsafe given the many violent sectarian skirmishes; it was at the time impossible to risk a visit of the "*mal'ab Saddam*", or "Saddam Gymnasium". Yet, as soon as the troops had left, during a first visit in January 2005, it was possible to see that the building was intact. Notwithstanding its sheer bulk – all the more impressive given its stark surroundings, isolated between freeways and unbuilt areas – its vaulted roof, its outdoors amphitheatre, the exceptional quality of its concrete "skin" or texture, its interior spaces with their zenithal lighting and the characteristic polychromia formed indeed a dignified if posthumous work by the master, well executed enough to have resisted to 25 years of constant strife.



© Fondation Le Corbusier/ ADAGP/ Caecilia Pieri, 2005. Interior of a dressing-room in January 2005, shortly after the US troops left the building.

[See other pictures of the Gymnasium](#) (Fondation Le Corbusier on Facebook)

The Le Corbusier Foundation in Paris had practically no implementation documents or photographs of the work in progress. Nothing had been kept on the spot and those in charge had no idea what had happened to the documentation. Another visit, in May 2005, was also in vain, nothing new to add to the previous investigations.

The years went by. In February 2011, at first glance, it was possible to measure the scope of the transformations: a triumphal gate, celebrating the Iraqi victory at the Asian Football Cup, now partially encloses the exterior; the immediate surroundings are now parasited by a heterogeneous series of constructions, amongst which colored plastic fittings, a mini stadium for children was added to the rear façade as well as, a more touching detail, a mausoleum which had been erected in memory of Ammo Baba, a football coach, of Christian confession.



© Fondation Le Corbusier/ ADAGP/ Caecilia Pieri 2011. A view of the immediate surroundings occupied since 2011 by heterogeneous additions: the Ammo Baba “mausoleum”.



© Fondation Le Corbusier/ ADAGP/ Caecilia Pieri 2011. Triumphal gate celebrating Iraq's victory in 2007, at the Asian Football Cup.

May 2011 – another visit, this time with Jacques Sbriglio, vice-president of the Le Corbusier Foundation, followed by a meeting led at the Sports Faculty within Baghdad University. An agreement was found to attempt to implement a cooperation between the Foundation, as owner of the intellectual and artistic rights of the Gymnasium, the cultural services of the French Embassy, and the University of Baghdad, as concerns the Gymnasium and the specificity of modern concrete work heritage. Yet a fifth solitary visit led in January 2012 confirmed the ongoing renovation: hanging ceilings have been added everywhere, blocking the indirect or zenithal lighting, coloured glass panes, such as are found in traditional Iraqi houses have been added to some windows, multicoloured seats now adorn the bleachers, the railings have become golden tubes set with carved glass pommels, marble has replaced the original metal in the central staircase.



Fondation Le Corbusier/ ADAGP/ Caecilia Pieri 2012. Modifications due to the ongoing renovation: coloured seats in the outdoors amphitheatre.



Fondation Le Corbusier/ ADAGP/ Caecilia Pieri 2012. Modifications due to the ongoing renovation: internal hanging ceilings.



Fondation Le Corbusier/ ADAGP/ Caecilia Pieri, 2012. Modifications due to the ongoing renovation: air vents for AC in front of the façade.

In which time accelerates as does the press: denaturations...

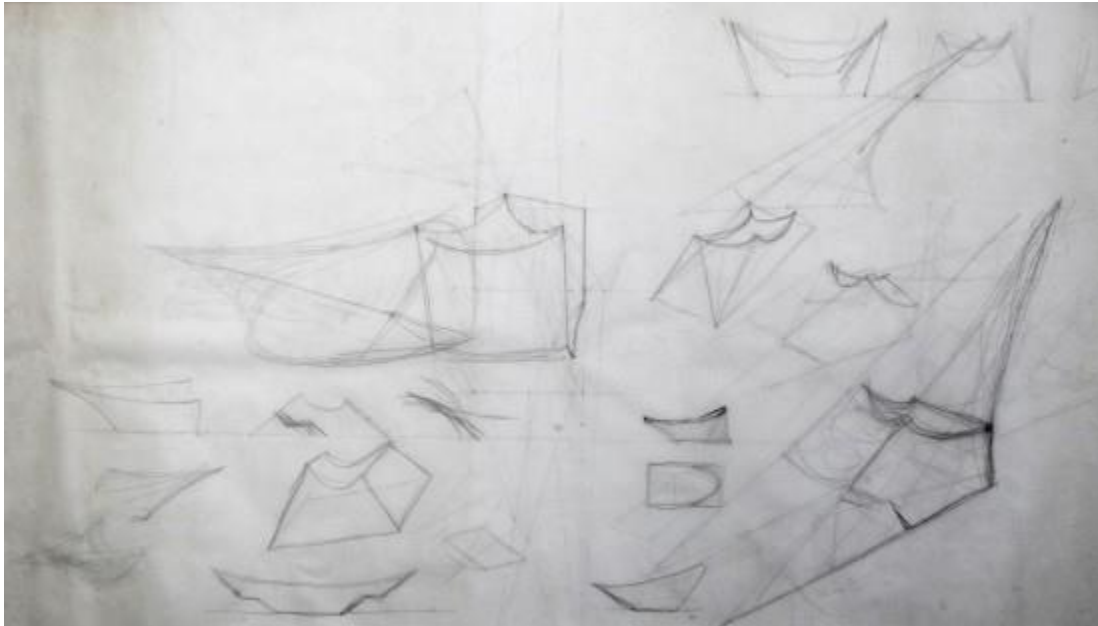
On April 5, 2012, a team of journalists belonging to the AFP- Agence France Presse, of which a journalist found of architecture, came with me to the Gymnasium: [the director was interviewed](#). The title of the article was "[A forgotten work by Le Corbusier comes to light in Baghdad](#)"; it related the essence of the Gymnasium's singular destiny, and mentioned the cooperation projects with the usual concise efficiency, which is the hallmark of the agency's press service wires. This is when time starts its acceleration.

The article appears in French on April the 8th. In the next 48 hours it is quoted verbatim no less than a hundred times, in different media. Before its publication in Arabic ([see PDF](#)), on April 18th, [then in English](#) on April 23rd. The press becomes a bit too excited and, what with a word taken for another, the Gymnasium, erstwhile totally forgotten, is promoted "Historical window" (France 24)⁵. Where the AFP wire used the objective term of *renovation*, others use *restoration*, which, in terms of heritage preservation, is very specific, and implies, through a respectful restoration of the initial state of a building, the absolute contrary of the ongoing renovations taking place at the gymnasium (Dopimmo)⁶. The article united France and Iraq in a common effort to "give the building back its letters of nobility", perhaps subtly attempting to correct the effects of the renovation by awakening a local awareness of the rules governing concrete work heritage preservation... Alas! Exactly the opposite happened, and France appears now in other articles as being *asked by Iraq*, to help it *restore* the Gymnasium (Artinfo-Archdaily-Architizer)⁷. One has only to type "Baghdad/Le Corbusier/Gymnasium" on Google, at least whether in French or in English, to verify the damage done. Yet the initial words, which were correctly transcribed by the AFP, were without any ambiguity: the renovation was mentioned as developing in a manner foreign to the spirit of the master... but that was at the end of the article. Did the journalists read the wire till the end?

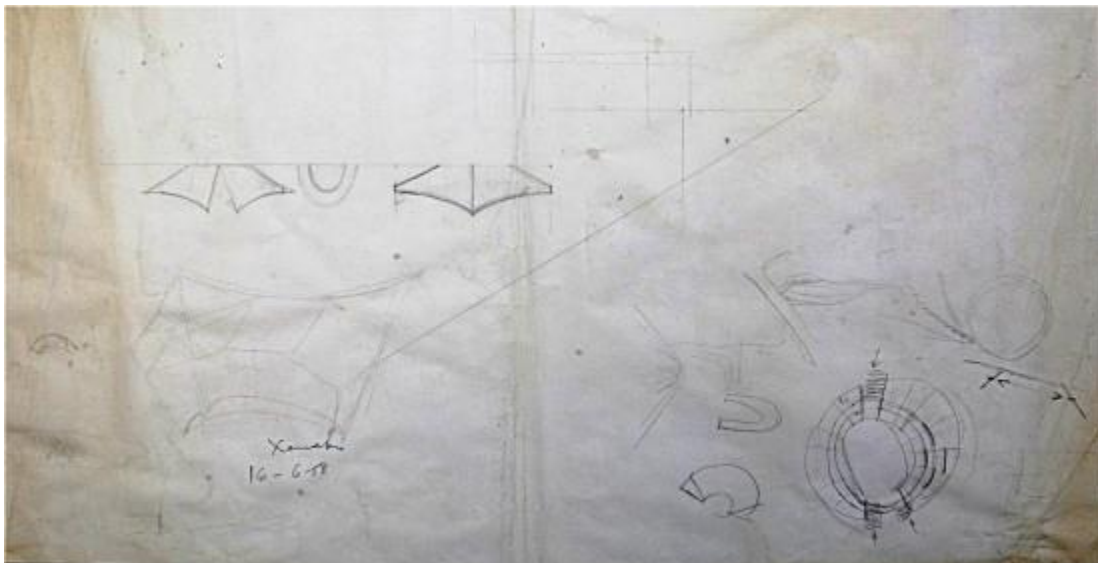
... and surprises: an authentic discovery, the construction site archives

Several days later, two successive emails revealed important clues for the inquiry about the works and archives. The first one was from a friend who was familiar with Iraq, who had read the AFP wire; it helped me find Axel Mesny, the architect in charge of the Gymnasium, onsite executive manager for more than a year; a Frenchman he then worked at the Georges-Marc Présenté agency, the associated engineer of Le Corbusier who had negotiated the initial contract signed with the Iraqis. The second email I received came from Mâkhi Xenakis, the daughter of the music composer, architect-engineer, who worked for several years in Le Corbusier's atelier. The AFP wire had enabled her to understand that some of her father's sketches were indeed studies for Baghdad. "Yes, she wrote, show the sketches made by my father (...). To establish a

form of paternity of his work, was very important for him, as well as for all of us !” (April 27th email).

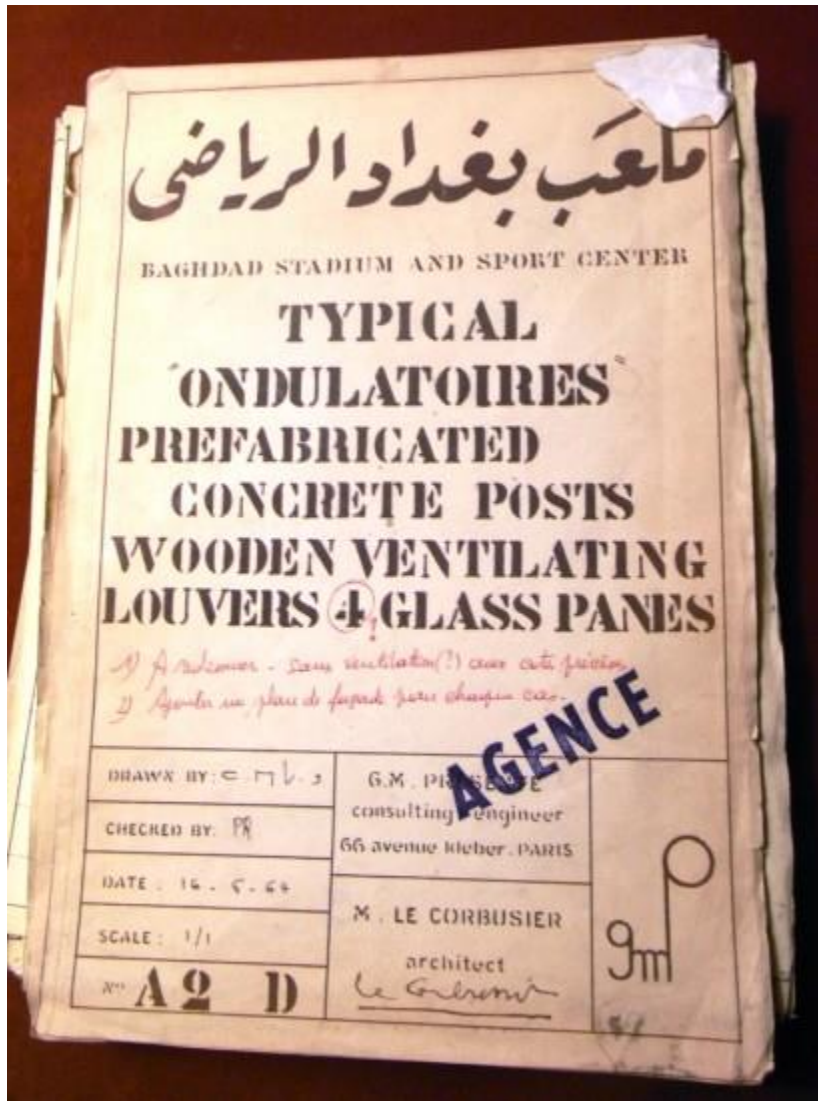


Mâkhi Xenakis's Collection. Sketches by Xenakis showing his reflections on Baghdad's Gymnasium.



Mâkhi Xenakis's Collection. The workshop work which implies Xenakis's participation on the Baghdad project as well as Firminy, has already been shown by G. Ragot; but these as yet unpublished sketches by Xenakis also illustrate a particular stage in his personal reflection on the links between the vaulted roof (Baghdad, Firminy) and the Philips Pavilion (Brussels World Fair, 1958).

On April 24th, after having interviewed Axel Mesny at length, who had trusted me enough to bring me his archives, I was able to deposit in person an important bulk of material, at the Le Corbusier Foundation in Paris. This fills in a 32-year gap of almost complete black-out about the construction of the Gymnasium: 320 color slides and four sheets of black and white photographs of the building site, several agency prints of architectural blueprints, of which, one signed by Le Corbusier, as well as the three notebooks of execution plans by the Japanese company Mitsui.



Axel Mesny’s Collection, deposited at the Fondation Le Corbusier. © Caecilia Pieri. One of the agency prints concerning the “undulating glass panels”, a window system invented around 1951, then patented by Xenakis: the untreated glass panes are directly inserted in the concrete, and their width was calculated using certain proportions belonging to the Modulor.

Moreover, Axel Mesny had also kept several carbon copies of letters by Le Corbusier, one of which bearing autograph comments. The resurrection of this past also enabled him to contact Georges-Marc Présenté’s son, who had also kept his father’s archives. Thus the building’s

history has yet to be completed, what with these new archives, without forgetting those we might discover some day in Baghdad.

LE CORBUSIER

Exp. le 31 Janvier
Paris, le 26 Janvier 1963

31 JAN 1963

Monsieur G.M. PRÉSENTE
Ingénieur-Conseil
66, avenue Kléber
P A R I S (16^e)

OBJET : Stade de Bagdad

Cher Monsieur Présenté,

- 1^o/ Piscine : Je vous serais obligé de bien vouloir me faire porter les plans d'étude architecturale que Oubrie avait remis à Gardien en son temps (Octobre 1961).
- 2^o/ Gymnase : Veuillez nous remettre les plans d'étude : Tavès qui vous ont été communiqués. Je ne peux rien corriger sans ces documents.
- 3^o/ Tennis : Pas d'observation.
- 4^o/ Stade : Pas d'observation.

Veillez agréer, cher Monsieur Présenté, mes meilleures salutations.

Le Corbusier

*je compte sur vous
car je dois finir
dans les actives*

LE CORBUSIER

35, RUE DE SÈVRES - PARIS (8^e)
TEL. : LITRE 99-62

*nos amis conviens d'ensemble
merci*

Le Corbusier

Axel Mesny's Collection. As pertains to the work's genesis, Le Corbusier's comments on this letter dated from 1963 confirm M. Marefat's analysis according to which, until a very late date, the architect having died in 1965, did indeed show his interest for detail of a work which evidently was not at all a minor work of his, rather the opposite in fact.

Such are the paradoxes of the links between the media and research: far from the sensationalism linked to an Indiana Jones-type researcher, brilliantly uncovering the unknown masterpiece, the researcher has simply, thanks to modern technology (and to the intelligent curiosity of a good quality journalism), been able to retrieve a lost link several elements of which will allow the establishment of certain facts or definitely help get rid of certain legends. Thanks to the quasi-immediacy of the internet, the information relayed by the press has opened a new phase in the data gathering on this work by Le Corbusier. It is now the duty of the architect's commentators

to analyse precisely which type of links will be woven between these archives and the rest of the corpus.

Contrarily to what public rumour says, and contrarily to what its former name might imply, the Gymnasium's construction was not commissioned by Saddam Hussein. The studies were resumed in the Présenté agency in 1974; the construction proper began in November 1978 and lasted till the Spring of 1980.



© Fondation Le Corbusier/ ADAGP/ Axel Mesny, 1979. Different phases of the raising of the building : the flights of benches.



© Fondation Le Corbusier/ ADAGP/ Axel Mesny, 1979. Different phases of the raising of the building : the interior



© Fondation Le Corbusier/ ADAGP/ Axel Mesny, 1979. Different phases of the raising of the building. The ramp.

Rifat Chadirji's agency, Iraq Consult, was in charge of the coordination between the architect and the Ministry of Sports, the legal owner of the building, and between notably a certain Adnan Sharif who was the "boss" of the department, such as several Iraqi engineers in charge of supervising the quality controls. The Japanese study agency engaged workers from Thailand for the heavy work, which explains the presence of panels on the site in the Thai language instead of Arabic... Globalisation was already at work in Iraq.



Fondation Le Corbusier/ ADAGP/ Axel Mesny, 1979. Working staff on the construction site: three employees of the Japanese firm Mitsui, Iraqi engineers (with sunglasses: Eng. Abbas). The girl on the right was a student in civil engineering.

Saddam Hussein did not attend the inauguration. Axel Mesny's memories of that particular moment are ambiguous, at once anecdotal and forceful. It was raining heavily and as is the custom, in honour of the celebration, sheep's throats were regularly being slit as the official procession led by Tareq Aziz (at that time Prime Minister and in charge of Youth and Sports) advanced: the vision remains, of the streams of rain tinted with the sacrificial blood...

I would like to thank here and express my utmost gratitude to Axel Mesny and Mâkhi Xenakis for having so generously contributed their private archives, as well as to extend these thanks to the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris – Michel Richard and Bénédicte Gandini – for allowing me to use some of these exceptional and as yet unpublished documents. CP.

English version: Wendy Parramore

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Notes

1. This commitment to modernity was also part of an internal political agenda searching for more legitimacy in a context of protests and demonstrations coming from political parties, unions and civil society. The project's essential history was published in three articles: one by Rémi Boudouï, architect et professor at the University of Geneva, who was able to get a glance at the Gymnasium during a visit to Baghdad in 2002, the others by Mina Marefat, architect and professor at Georgetown University, only researcher to have devoted six months of a Fulbright scholarship in 2008 to explore as extensively as possible the archives of the project existing at the Le Corbusier Foundation in Paris ; M. Marefat is also the author of the text which will be published on the Gymnasium in the catalogue of the Le Corbusier exhibition organized by MOMA in 2013, whose title will be "Le Corbusier's patient research for Baghdad". See references/notes at the end of the article. [[↔](#)]
2. Terms of the introduction to the article by M. Marefat in *Docomomo Magazine*. [[↔](#)]
3. The exhibition "Ciudad del Espejismo", is currently shown in New-York. See bibliographic references. [[↔](#)]
4. See for example "Arch.net" in 2005:
https://archnet.org/forum/view.jsp?message_id=150495 [[↔](#)]
5. <http://www.france24.com/fr/20120419-irak-gymnase-le-corbusier-vitrine-histoire-bagdad-echappe-oubli-hussein-faycal> [[↔](#)]
6. <http://www.dopimmo.com/2012/04/17/rehabilitation-du-gymnase-cree-par-le-corbusier-a-bagdad-ns-640.html> [[↔](#)]
7. <http://fr.artinfo.com/news/story/801814/les-irakiens-s%E2%80%99allient-aux-fran%C3%A7ais-pour-restaurer-le-gymnase-de-le-corbusier-construit-pendant-le-r%C3%A8gne-de-saddam-hussein>; <http://www.archdaily.com/228601/lost-le-corbusier-building-sparks-preservation-movement-in-iraq/>; <http://www.archit>