Villa Mesopotamia 2002-2020

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Villa Mesopotamia – 2002-2020

Introduction:

This project is a personal investigation in architectural design: One that allows the outdoors to determine the indoors? How views, Sunlight, context, utility and zeitgeist can define the form of Architecture.

Le Corbusier viewed architecture; “there does exist this thing called ARCHITECTURE, an admirable thing, the loveliest of all. A product of happy peoples and a thing which in itself produces happy people”.

Can we make happy Architecture that inspires people’s souls without overwhelming them?

Site Location

I selected a unique site (land owned by family for hundreds of years) in my home town that offered the proper elements to achieve the task at hand: open expansive views, oriented west to capture dramatic light, sitting on the river bank of Euphrates’s crystal clear waters (River from Heaven) at the western frontier of Ancient Mesopotamia.

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1 Towards new Architecture. P15.
Building materials will be local as well as building techniques and technology. Local skills will be employed to execute the project. This is necessary in order for locals to understand that such building can be built by them.
I encouraged them to be involved in design when appropriate, and guided them to challenge their traditional ideas and believes when necessary. Their imperfections were part of the process which defines the buildings locality.

I knew from the outset that the local tradition was to build high and away from the mighty river of Euphrates; between summer and rainy season it could rise up to 8m in height and expands from 300m in summer to 1000m in flood season. The river became the focal point of the project not only because it was massive and spectacular at the site, but because it holds holy and historical significance to locals and world culture.

Euphrates River must become integral part of the project where it could rise and recede seamlessly without a threat to the project. Fortunately, local skills from the Mesopotamian times continue in nearby 6000 years old city of Hit. It is also home of the ancient Tar pits used to build the streets of Ancient city of Babylon.
Context:

The project is located in town of Furat, 15 KM south east the ancient city of Hit. The town sits on the western side (Aljezear- Mesopotamia) of Euphrates River. Lush agricultural river basin lined with palm groves and fruit trees such as oranges, apples, grapes, figs, apricots and lemons are typical of the region. Most products are organic and have very natural strong taste. River basin remains under developed. This part of Iraq remains agrarian society from ancient times.

Figure 6 Site at Euphrates river with desert to east

Figure 7 Town of Furat with site in center

Figure 8 Palm groves in Euphrates river basin

Figure 9 Aljazera desert to east is natural grazing fields

Figure 10 Aljazera desert Blooms in the spring (2020)
Internet and Netflix has reached the homes of local inhabitants. They watch what is happening in the world, and peoples aspirations are growing.

Modern farming techniques has arrived. Life is becoming more demanding and complex.

Modern phones with all types of applications are available to kids and adults alike. The world is only a click away.

No more boundaries, and one is amazed at the level of social media penetration in these agrarian communities.

People no longer want to live in mud houses or tents. They aspire for more permanent homes fulfilling their dreams.

Architectural design remains for the rich and affluent, and many people adopt typical builder’s houses that are economic and meets their basic needs.

Fig. 13 is a typical example of $40K houses (300m²) that are very popular in Iraqi towns and villages.

Other example with basic plans but variations on façade treatment using very strong tile cladding designed for kitchens and bathroom walls and floors?!!! Local Iraqi architects faced with economic constraints produce these designs, and when one is successful, its copied everywhere.

As shown in (Fig.14) nouveau riche are moving from mud huts to large popular houses.
Master Plan:

The project consists of two houses mirroring each other turned at 45 degree facing the river and sit on both sides of the main axis that leads to multilevel embankment on the river. This central Axis create a plaza defined by the houses on each side, and a dense palm Grove one must go through in order to reach it. The western side is defined by the expansive view of the Euphrates River framing the sunset every day.

I added central building that links the two houses. This new building was a large reception hall (Dewan) to receive large number of visitors. A tradition in Iraq and Arab world. The Dewan frames the river plaza to the east creating a transitional space between main arrival plaza and the river. The Dewan was built in the same architectural style of the houses.
The Palm tree is symbol of life and prosperity in Mesopotamia. It remains so till today. The use of palm trees is extensive in the project to keep with local traditions. I wanted to celebrate the tree as economic provider and as a heritage. This will manifest its self in everyday life in the project where visitors are offered fresh dates from the grove all year round.

The Plaza is elevated 8m above lowest water level, opens to the Majestic Euphrates River with breath taking sunset that offers spectacular skies every day especially during the months of Oct. to May. (Fig.20).
House Design:

White minimalist modern style with expansive ceiling to floor windows facing the river. Continuous white marble floor inside - outside emphasizing the outdoor indoor relationship. The house has transparent side to the River, and solid protected side to the desert; the palm grove.

The house Skewed 45 degrees to maximize the view of the river from 2 sides of each room. 2m cantilevers covering the expansive windows offering protection from the elements, at the same time creating outdoor terraces facing the river side. All glass facades are sliding doors allowing access visually and physically to the outdoors. The foot print of the house located on the edge of the top terrace of embankment in order to allow the river becomes part of interior space visually.

The house is terraced and jetting into the river like a boat. Its transparent facades offer continuously changing views as sunlight moves from east to west, changing its angle and brightness, thus constantly changes the landscape. The effect of natural light redefine the interior as well the exterior.
The house terraces down towards the plaza in order to continue the outdoor river embankment terracing system. The different levels of embankment necessary to allow each level to flood and yet keep them usable throughout the seasons.

The house become solid on the northern facade, facing the cold winds of winter. It also houses the services and support functions of the house.

As the house turns to north east, it maintains it’s solid form, with two type of balconies are introduced: one as projection dominating the corner of North-eastern facade. The projection offers shading and protection for the large windows. This added mass hangs in the air operating as watch tower looking at the palm grove.

As the house turns east, it maintains the solid facade. The only exception are the upper bedroom balcony and lower kitchen windows and its service entrance are carved from the solid mass of the house. It is instructive architectural exercise of how to protect an opening and create a balcony.
The Balconies emphasize the outdoor - indoor space relationship, besides protecting the large windows. The feel of the house is one of continuous sailing in the Euphrates river. This is further improved by the sharp drop off by the embankment, giving the illusion of water being at the edge of the house.

This feeling is also true at the ground level as well. Maintaining the indoor- outdoor relationship both visually and physically is very important. The indoor space is defined by the outdoor. This magnificent river becomes the focal point of every room as the water surrounds each space from two sides.

The relationship with the river was emphasized by 45 degree position of the house provoking the illusion of a ship sailing in the water as seen from below.

From above, the feeling is exhilarating as there is nothing but water ahead. There is no doubt that for a moment and surely when sitting down, the house is sailing up the Euphrates river as seen from the terrace above.
**Interior Design:**

The interior opens to the outdoors visually and physically. The river becomes the focus of interior spaces and they redefine each other.

*Figure 31 View from inside lower floor*

*Figure 32 View facing south (plaza and river)*

*Figure 33 View from inside to plaza*

*Figure 34 Upper sitting room with full view of river*

*Figure 35 Dining room seems floating*
Figure 36 Wide windows offer panoramic views

Figure 37 Sunset always dramatic

Figure 38 Sunlight changes the indoor and outdoor views

Figure 39 Upper level office with expansive view

Figure 40 Lower level reception hall redefined by sunset

Figure 41 Interior space is dominated by outdoor views
Dewan:

This building is the main male gathering space for locals and visitors. Traditionally it is a standalone structure that is open to visitors from 8 am till 10 pm. Visitors are served water and Arabic coffee. I added fresh dates to be served with the coffee.

Dewan location and relationship to the houses must be carefully planned. One must consider privacy and accessibility to the houses.

The simple modern white stone structure which has large windows covered by continuous front colonnade provides shaded space to receive guests. The Entrance pavilion is located to right side of the Dewan preserving an old Arabic-Islamic tradition.

The entrance pavilion leads to a courtyard that is not formal, but it is a positive space that is defined by positioning of the Dewan and the house. This court leads to the main entrance of the Dewan.

The court is intimate and landscaped with colorful Bougainvillea flowering plants (uncommonly used in the area even though the weather is ideal) and provides a glimpse of the plaza overlooking the river on the back side.
The Palm tree stand centered between the Dewan and the house looking west towards the river. The Glimpse of the River is revealed for the first time.

Figure 45 View from Courtyard looking west to the River

The western façade maintains the same architectural design theme, with full height windows opening to the river. The deep western sun demanded the additions of shading devise, thus a canopy was added in 2018 that provided deep shade of summer western sun. The Shade covered the plaza and created a protected seating area thus adding a multiuse space with spectacular views.

Figure 46 Dewan western façade overlooking the Euphrates river with deep canopy protecting the glass facade
The Main reception hall has an Arabic seating style with traditional Iraqi wool matts. The seating layout flexible and can be rearranged or added to depending on the event or expected visitors. This flexibility is necessary for such a multipurpose hall. To the western side is full height windows opening to the river view. The space can hold up to 100 seated visitors.
It is traditional practice to meet after dinner (which is normally at sundown) or after Night prayer. This traditional nightly practice is the way to discuss daily matters and solve tribal problems. It is also an opportunity to recite poetry in Nabataean style and recall tribal stories and history. This is fundamental learning process to the young generation to re-affirm their identity.

The outdoor Plaza became popular space to gather or even to feast out. It offers a spectacular view of the river and fresh air.
Msanayeh (River Embankment): This is the Iraqi term used to describe the stone work covering and stabilization work for river embankment.

This is the most difficult and complex work of the project. The Msanayeh required over 4000 Tons of large stones from a Quarry near city of Hit. Alma’amura stones are well known from ancient times as solid water resistance stone used in building water wheels and Msanayeh for thousands of years. Water front Msanayeh is 250m in length, and has 3 main levels. Each level is 2.5m higher than the other.

Middle level has a traditional Arabic stone seating area that can seat 40 people. All stone work and motifs were the work of local craftsman from Hit. This level floods during flood season. The seating area sits on the main axis of the plaza. And provides excellent setting for viewing.
Figure 55 View from midlevel Msanayeh to the upper plaza and the house

Figure 56 View from Upper plaza towards the river

Figure 57 View from Midlevel of Msanayeh
Figure 58 The River challenges the Msanayeh

Figure 59 Euphrates concurs 2nd level of Msanayeh

Figure 60 The River more threatening

Figure 61 Euphrates over takes planters

Figure 62 Euphrates submerges the Msanayeh creating beautiful view of its pedestals railing
The canopy was an important addition to provide more shading to the plaza and provide comfortable outdoor sitting area. I have designed the canopy with modern materials and light weight. Local fabricator and local help were used to accomplish this project.

Figure 63 Canopy from plaza level

Figure 64 Canopy under construction

Figure 65 Light weight steel structure

Figure 66 Steel, wood and fabrics
Figure 67 View from midlevel Msanayeh to canopy and Dewan beyond

Figure 68 View of Majestic Euphrates River From the Plaza
Colonnades, outdoor landscaping and People:

The region has hot summer and mild winter. This year we had significant amount of rain and many days of below 0°C temperature. The harsh summer sun requires all windows to be protected. This tradition was adopted by colonial British architecture. It proved very effective. All windows in the project are covered and well protected.

Figure 69 Dewan entrance Pavilion

Figure 70 Colonnade connecting the house to Dewan

Figure 71 Colonnade covered by local materials

Figure 72 Entrance

Figure 73 Traditional wood

Figure 74 Local Reed

Figure 75 Front of Dewan
Figure 76 Courtyard and Bongavillea

Figure 77 Palm tree and flower beds with the river beyond

Figure 78 Palm Trees are main feature of the project

Figure 79 Tree of life for Mesopotamia

Figure 80 Villa Mesopotamia from the River Euphrates
Architecture is for the people. It is amazing how architecture can influence people’s mood and behavior. Happy architecture makes people happy.

Figure 81 Guest enjoying the River View

Figure 82 Taking pictures with house and view

Figure 83 Enjoying tea on the Euphrates River

Figure 84 Relaxing under the canopy overlooking the River

Figure 85 Bongavillea offers great background for a photo

Figure 86 Guests enjoying the shade and the view