

Architecture and Urbanism in Twentieth Century Iraq: The Enduring Legacy of Gertrude Bell

Dramatic changes in spatial strategies and the built environment over the last hundred years have greatly contributed to the current cultural and political instability in Iraq. This dissertation explores the enduring spatial implications of Gertrude Bell's vision, which not only shaped post-WWI British Mandate Iraq, but also continued to inform the actions and policies of consecutive governments, despite their profound ideological differences. Bell's strategic use of her expertise in Middle Eastern culture and history to devise the post-WWI partition of Ottoman-Arab lands to serve British interests is already well known, but the profound social and political consequences of her spatial interventions have hitherto been overlooked.

My three-pronged enquiry addresses this significant gap in scholarship. First, I examine how Bell mobilized the Abbasid heritage as a foundation narrative to split Iraq from the Ottoman Empire. I show how she then tactically changed this historic narrative to one appropriating the Mesopotamian past with the aim of further splitting Iraq from other Arab countries. Both tactics were carried out while simultaneously advancing a modernising agenda aimed at positioning Iraq firmly in Britain's orbit. Notably the architectural languages generated to fit these narratives would also be used by subsequent regimes to legitimize their authority.

Second, I trace how Bell's reinstatement of nineteenth-century Ottoman land reforms and her support for the introduction of semi-feudal laws in the countryside transformed long-standing tribal traditions and land-tenure patterns, spurring massive waves of landless peasants to migrate to cities. Over the decades, Iraq's successive rulers sought to alleviate the resulting tensions through various land reallocation policies. However, as I demonstrate, through the example of Baghdad, their efforts exacerbated social fragmentation and reinforced segregation.

Finally, I consider Bell's superimposition of British notions of "modernity" and "class" onto Iraq's urban society, as embodied in new socio-spatial practices and alien architectural typologies. These ideas also permeated the spheres of domestic life and leisure as evidenced in straightening street layouts, changing residential designs in affluent neighbourhoods and the emergence of exclusive social clubs such as the Alwiyah Club.

All three lines of enquiry draw upon the close ideological link between Bell and the Scottish architect James Mollison Wilson, who worked as the Government Architect and arguably had the greatest role in shaping the architecture of twentieth century Iraq. These interventions, starting with the British Mandate, disrupted Iraq's socio-spatial formations and continue to inform contemporary tensions. Considering architecture and spatial strategies as "actants" enable us to identify the physical forms that these interventions took, how and when they happened, how they affected

existing spatial forms and practices, and how they can be traced back to Bell's initial policies.