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I

Why We Build

I used to keep a photograph torn from a tabloid pinned up over my desk. Through the blotchy newsprint you could make out the blurred image of an architectural model the size of a small car, jacked up to eye level. Left to themselves architects use non-committal shades of grey for their models, but this one was painted in glossy lipstick colours, suggesting it was made to impress a client with an attention span shorter than most.

Strips of cardboard and balsa wood stood in for a mosque with a squat dome fenced in by concentric circles of spiky minarets. The gaudy shapes, and the reduction of an intricate decorative tradition to a cartoon, not much different from a hundred other attempts at having it both ways, tried and failed to be simultaneously boldly modern and respectfully rooted in the past. The questionable architectural details weren't what made it such an unsettling image. What really grabbed my attention was the glimpse of the darker aspects of building that the picture captured. None of the uniformed figures clustered respectfully around the model looked like architects, who usually feature conspicuously in this kind of picture; but there wasn't much doubt about the identity of the thickset man with the heavy-moustache, looking disorientatingly like a World War Two British army major in his vintage khaki sweater and beret, or the unblinking fascination with which he was gazing so adoringly at his model.

Saddam Hussein, like many authoritarians, was an enthusiastic patron of architecture. Unlike Napoleon III, however, whose fastidious tastes are still clearly visible in the parade-ground tidiness of the boulevards of Paris, or Mussolini with his contradictory passions for modernism and Caesar Augustus, Hussein had no obvious preference

for any specific architectural style. He did, however, have an instinctive grasp of how to use architecture to glorify himself and his regime and to intimidate his opponents.

From the moment of its conception, the Mother of all Battles mosque had a very clear purpose: to claim the first Gulf War as a victory for Iraq. Hussein was humiliated in that war. His army was expelled from Kuwait. Its desperate flight home left the highway disfigured by the grotesque train of incinerated Iraqi conscripts, trapped in their burnt-out plundered cars, the roadside strewn with loot. Hussein wanted to build his own reality to try and wipe out that image of defeat – just as the Kuwaitis used their meaningless toy parliament, designed by Jorn Utzon, architect of the Sydney Opera House no less, to suggest that they were a Scandinavian democracy rather than a Gulf oligarchy. Building anything at all while Iraq struggled with the deprivations brought about by Hussein's manipulation of United Nations sanctions was a calculated gesture of defiance. And the mosque itself came loaded with an iconography that made this defiance all the more explicit.

The message of the newspaper picture of Hussein's mosque is unambiguous. Architecture is about power. The powerful build because that is what the powerful do. On the most basic level, building creates jobs that are useful to keep a restless workforce quiet. But it also reflects well on the capability and decisiveness – and the determination – of the powerful. Above all, architecture is the means to tell a story about those who build it.

Architecture is used by political leaders to seduce, to impress, and to intimidate. Certainly those were the underlying reasons for Saddam Hussein's building campaign. His palaces and monuments were tattooed all over Iraq, less indelibly than he would have liked, in an attempt to present the entire country as his personal property both to his external and to his internal foes.

In the south, outside Basra, lines of bronze effigies ten feet tall follow the shoreline: they depict Iraqi officers killed in the meat-grinder war against Iran pointing across the gulf toward the old enemy. An enemy with its own taste for monument-building in the days of the Shah, the product of a failed attempt to construct a pedigree for the Pahlavi dynasty.

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In Baghdad itself, the notorious outsize crossed swords span the highway into the city, gripped by giant bronze hands modelled on Hussein's own, but cast in the quintessentially English suburbia of Basingstoke. In Saddam's day, nets filled with shoals of captured Iranian helmets dangled from the two hilts. Such monuments, kitsch as they are, are universal. They date from the victory memorials of the Peloponnesian wars, and the triumphs imperial Rome granted its favoured generals. The same ritual celebration of the defeat of an enemy is reflected in the monumental sculptures cast from captured Napoleonic cannon that adorn the centres of London and Berlin. The idea of the crossed swords was filched without acknowledgement from Mike Gold, an architect based in London who originally proposed it, minus the helmets, as an innocuously whimsical civic landmark for a motorway in Saudi Arabia. In Iraq, its meaning was completely transformed. Versace's inflammatory caricature of sex and money could be worn with a sense of irony in Milan, but not in Milosevic's Belgrade, where the bandit classes took the glitter and leopard-skin look at face value. And in Baghdad, a piece of ironic postmodernism becomes the most literal kind of architectural propaganda. But Hussein had an objective wider than celebrating his questionable victories, and intimidating his enemies. His mosque-building campaign can be seen as an overcompensation for the essentially secular nature of his regime, demonstrating his credentials as a devout defender of the faith despite his taste for whisky and murder.

Yet architectural propaganda is not the exclusive domain of those commissioning a building. As the United States dispatched two more aircraft carriers toward Iraq at the end of 2002, the *New York Times* published a photograph of Saddam Hussein's Mother of All Battles mosque on its front page. Here, four years after the design was first unveiled, was the completed building. Without a hint of scepticism, the paper baldly repeated the conventional media wisdom that the minarets, an outer ring of four and an inner, slightly shorter group of four more, are literal representations, respectively, of Kalashnikov assault rifles and Scud missiles. It's an assertion that existed mainly in the minds of the Western media and their taxi drivers, and which might be a little more convincing if the minarets had tail fins, or were decorated with olive-drab camouflage paint rather than white

limestone embellished with blue mosaic. Nor does the outer ring come equipped with gun sights or the distinctive curved magazine and walnut stock of a Kalashnikov. They look much less martial – and much less elegant – than the pencil-slim Ottoman minarets of Istanbul, which certainly do look like rockets. The paper's reporter sounded disappointed after his tour of the mosque: 'Where once visitors were told what seems obvious, how the cylinders of the inner minarets slim to an aerodynamic peak, like a ballistic missile tapering at the nose cone, they are now assured that no such references were ever in the architects' minds.' But by then America already felt itself at war, and such a bombastic interpretation of the mosque was too much of a propaganda gift.

Although the mosque does not use literally militaristic metaphors, its underlying message is hardly reassuring. The image of the exterior is less a howl of defiance than a conventional piece of laboured Gulf hotel glitz, looking more like a police academy in drag than a national monument. More telling was the paper's photograph of the glass showcase at the heart of the mosque with a 650-page transcription of the Koran inside. According to the *New York Times*, the mosque's Imam, Sheik Tahir Ibrahim Shammariu, claimed that the calligrapher used Hussein's own blood, donated over a period of two years at the scarcely believable rate of a pint every fortnight, to fill his pen. Another photograph shows the reflecting pool that encircles the mosque, allegedly shaped like a map of the Arab world. At one end, a blue mosaic plinth juts out of the water to form an island. The paper claimed that this irregular mound took the shape of Hussein's thumbprint. The paper doesn't go into how it could be so sure that it had correctly identified the thumb as distinctively Hussein's own. If true, it carries a message that could not be clearer. The mosque's Imam was disappointingly reluctant to confirm the warlike iconography of the mosque to the *New York Times*, but he was obligingly ready to spell out some of its more occult meanings. The outer minarets are 43 metres high, he pointed out, supposedly for the forty-three days of bombing at the start of the first Gulf War. The four minarets of the inner ring, representing April, the fourth month, are 37 metres high, for the year 1937. The twenty-eight water jets in the pool symbolize the 28th day of the month. Together they spell out 28 April 1937, Hussein's birthday.

In the flesh, the mosque is not a particularly effective way of demonstrating Iraqi defiance; and since Hussein's purpose was to present himself as a devout Muslim, it seems unlikely that he would use the Christian calendar to do it. This emphasis on the power of numbers, if it really is intentional, was uncomfortably echoed in some of the seven plans to rebuild the World Trade Center, revealed in New York in the same week that the story appeared. Richard Meier and Peter Eisenman designed a tower 1,111 feet high, presumably on the basis that a mere 911 feet would have been too short to attract enough attention. Daniel Libeskind famously went for 1,776 feet.

One interpretation of Hussein's enthusiasm for building could be to see him simply as following in the tradition common all over Asia and the Middle East, of employing fashionable Western architects to design prestige projects to demonstrate how up to date he was. Indeed Baghdad had a history of planning gargantuan architectural monuments throughout much of the twentieth century. In 1957 King Faisal II commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design an opera house in the manner of Moscow's unbuilt Palace of the Soviets. A colossal thirty-storey-high memorial sculpture of Iraq's greatest Caliph, Haroun al-Rashid, grandson of Baghdad's founder, took Lenin's place as its centrepiece. It would have been a piece of nation-building on an epic scale by an Iraq still emerging from British colonial rule. A commission for Walter Gropius to design a university was actually built. Le Corbusier also secured a commission in Baghdad from Faisal in 1956, designing an arena only completed after his death, when it became known as the Saddam Hussein Sports Centre.

But Saddam Hussein wanted to do more than look modern. He was also attempting to co-opt a much older heritage of monument-making stretching back five thousand years to Ur and the first urban civilizations on the Euphrates. He initiated a series of damaging 'restorations' of Iraq's ancient sites, not flinching from reconstructing the Hanging Gardens of Babylon using materials more commonly found on a suburban housing estate. He had each brick stamped with his own name in the manner of the ancient emperors, to demonstrate that he was their natural successor. He even posted guards in period costume, and equipped with spears, at his version of Ishtar's gate in his Babylonian theme park.

Hussein's determination to use architecture as a propaganda tool to glorify his state and consolidate his hold on it was clear enough. Though it was hardly effective, when measured against his objectives, architecture stands clearly incriminated for the part it played in his brutal regime. But what can you say about those commissioned to execute his ideas? The mosque is certainly a banal piece of architecture, and those who designed it are clearly guilty of a lack of imagination, but does the use to which Hussein has put it necessarily implicate the architect in anything worse?

Architecture has an existence independent of those who pay for it. Simply because the architect of the mosque worked for one of the more brutal of recent leaders, there is no reason to assume that he is himself culpable, as we did of Albert Speer when he was convicted by the Nuremburg war crimes court. The mosque is not itself committing an act of violence; its architectural forms need not in themselves be the embodiment of a dictatorship.

It is still an open question, though one that is often asked, whether architecture can project an inherent meaning at all. Is there, in fact, such a thing as a totalitarian, or a democratic, or a nationalistic building? And if they do exist, what is it that gives architecture such meanings? Can classical columns or glass walls really be described as the signs of fascist or democratic buildings, as some have claimed? Are these fixed and permanent meanings, or can they be changed over time?

If Saddam Hussein had shown the wit, or the cunning, to invite Zaha Hadid, the most celebrated woman architect in the world, and herself born in Baghdad, to design that mosque, we might have been briefly distracted enough to see his regime in a different light. If Hadid had accepted, we would certainly see her differently: at best a political innocent, at worst a naive compromiser. Certainly her chances of getting to build anything in America would have been dramatically diminished. A Hadid mosque would have sent another kind of message, still a glorification of Hussein's state, still an act of defiance, but a claim for the cultural high ground too. It would have suggested a regime more sophisticated than the one that countenanced the cold-blooded murder of Hussein's two sons-in-law and the gassing of thousands of its own citizens. But would Hadid, in the unlikely event

that she had been asked, and even more unlikely event that she had accepted, have been seen as playing a part in reasserting a more civilized Iraq? Or would she have been condemned as a pawn in a game of state, prepared to subordinate every other consideration in the pursuit of the chance to build?

It is not only architects who are driven by the overwhelming urge to build at any cost. Saddam Hussein's obsession with building raises a series of questions about the psychology that motivated him. To explore the question of why he, and others like him, invested so much in building, we need to consider whether architecture is an end itself, or a means to an end.

We build for emotional and psychological purposes, as well for ideological and practical reasons. The language of architecture is used by software billionaires endowing a museum in return for naming rights to project power, as much as by sociopathic dictators. Architecture has been shaped by the ego, and by the fear of death, as well as by political and religious impulses. And it in turn serves to give them shape and form. Trying to make sense of the world without acknowledging architecture's psychological impact on it is to miss a fundamental aspect of its nature. To do so would be like ignoring the impact of warfare on the history of technology, and vice versa.

Unlike science and technology, which have conventionally been presented as being free of ideological connotations, architecture is both a practical tool and an expressive language, capable of carrying highly specific messages. Yet the difficulty in establishing the precise political meanings of buildings, and the elusive nature of the political content of architecture, has led today's generation of architects to claim that their work is autonomous, or neutral, or else to believe that if there is such a thing as overtly 'political' architecture, it is confined to an isolated ghetto, no more representative of the concerns of high-culture architecture than a shopping mall or a Las Vegas casino.

It is a flawed assumption. There may be no fixed political meaning to a given architectural language, but that does not mean that architecture lacks the potential to assume a political aspect. Few successful architects can avoid producing buildings with a political dimension at some point in their career, whether they want to or not. And

almost all political leaders find themselves using architects for political purposes. It is a relationship that recurs in almost every kind of regime and appeals to egotists of every description. That is why there are photographs of Tony Blair, and François Mitterrand, and Winston Churchill, and countless mayors and archbishops and chief executives and billionaire robber barons each bowed over their own, equally elaborate, architectural models looking just as narcissistically transfixed as the beatific Saddam Hussein beaming over his mosque.

This is not to equate George Bush the Elder's presidential library, or Tony Blair's Millennium Dome or his Wembley Stadium, or any Olympic arena that Britain may or may not get around to building for the 2012 games, with Hussein's mosque. To manoeuvre at the court of an elected prime minister to secure the chance to build involves an altogether less corrosive kind of compromise than the potentially lethal survival dance demanded by a dictatorship. But democratic regimes are just as likely to deploy architecture as an instrument of statecraft as totalitarians.

Versailles was built as a court whose architectural splendour and physical location were meant to neutralize the power base of the nobility in the French provinces. Two centuries later, Napoleon III was once more using architecture as an instrument of political power when he engaged Georges-Eugène Haussmann to rebuild Paris on a monumental scale – not so much to curb the power of the Parisian mob as to legitimize his questionable claims to an imperial title. And François Mitterrand saw a Paris adorned by a transformed Louvre, and the Grande Arche at La Défense, as an essential part of his strategy to make the city the undisputed capital of a modern Europe. For all three rulers, how those monuments looked was as much part of the strategy as what they contained. Mitterrand adopted an aggressive architecture of simplified geometric forms in steel and glass to symbolize French commitment to modernity, just as the Sun King made Versailles a temple to a royal cult to demonstrate the divine right of kings.

I started to collect images of the rich and powerful leaning over architectural models in a more systematic way after I suddenly found myself in the middle of one. The elder statesman of Japanese architec-

ture, Arata Isozaki, had hired an art gallery in Milan owned by Miuccia Prada for a presentation to an important client. Outside, two black Mercedes saloons full of bodyguards were parked on either side of the entrance, alongside a vanload of *carabinieri*. Inside was another of those room-size models. Isozaki described it as a villa. In fact it's a palace for a Qatari sheik, his country's Minister for Culture. And the palace has to do rather more than accommodate the sheik, his family, his collection of rare-breed animals and his Ferraris, his Bridget Rileys and his Hockney swimming pool, as well as his Richard Serra landscape installation. It is a deliberate effort to inject a sense of cultural depth into a desert sheikdom with little urban tradition. Each piece of the building has been allocated to an individual architect or designer, and Isozaki's assistants are marshalling them for an audience with the sheik to present their projects. The architects wait, and they wait, drinking coffee and eating pastries dispensed by waiters in black tie until the Sheik finally arrives, almost two hours late. Here is the relationship between power and architecture in its most naked form, a relationship of subservience to the mighty as clear as if the architect were a hairdresser or a tailor. The villa was never built. I last heard of the Sheik when the London newspapers reported that he was under house arrest, suspected of abusing the culture ministry's budget.

We are used to discussing architecture in terms of its relationship to art history, or as a reflection of technological change, or as an expression of social anthropology. We know how to categorize buildings by the shapes of their windows, or the decorative detail of their column capitals. We understand them as the products of available materials and skills. What we are not so comfortable with is coming to grips with the wider political dimensions of a building, why they exist in fact, rather than how. It's an omission that is surprising, given the closeness of the relationship between architecture and power. Architecture has always been dependent on the allocation of precious resources and scarce manpower. As such, its execution has always been at the discretion of those with their hands on the levers of power rather than that of architects. Pharaonic Egypt did not devote the surplus from its harvests to the construction of the pyramids, rather than to road building or abolishing slavery, because of any creative urge of the Pharaoh's architects.

Despite a certain amount of pious rhetoric in recent years about architecture's duty to serve the community, to work at all in any culture the architect has to establish a relationship with the rich and the powerful. There is nobody else with the resources to build. And it is the genetically predetermined destiny of the architect to do anything he can to try to build, just as it is the mission of migrating salmon to make one last exhausting upriver trip to spawn before expiring. The architectural profession can be seen, then, not as well meaning, but ready to enter into a Faustian bargain. They have no alternative but to trim and compromise with whatever regime is in power.

Every kind of political culture uses architecture for what can, at heart, be understood as rational, pragmatic purposes, even when it is used to make a symbolic point. But when the line between political calculation and psychopathology breaks down, architecture becomes not just a matter of practical politics, but a fantasy, even a sickness that consumes its victims.

There is a psychological parallel between making a mark on the landscape with a building and the exercise of political power. Both depend on the imposition of will. Seeing their world view confirmed by reducing an entire city to the scale of a doll's house in an architectural model certainly has an inherent appeal for those who regard the individual as being of no account. Even more attractive is the possibility of imposing their will in the physical sense on a city by reshaping it in the way that Haussmann did in Paris. Architecture feeds the egos of the susceptible. They grow more and more dependent on it to the point where architecture becomes an end in itself, seducing its addicts as they build more and more on an ever larger scale. Building is the means by which the egotism of the individual is expressed in its most naked form: the Edifice Complex.

On balance, Haussmann's Paris steered clear of megalomania. Ceaușescu's Bucharest did not. In both these cities, demolition was almost as essential a part of the process of transformation as new building. And destruction and construction can be seen as closely related. Whatever else it was, the assault on the twin towers of the World Trade Center, driven by visceral hatred, was a literal acceptance of the iconic power of architecture, and an attempt to destabilize that power even more forcefully through erasure. The fact that one of the

hijackers at the controls of the airliners was himself an architecture graduate only serves to underline the point.

This book is an exploration of what it is that makes individuals and societies build in the way that they do, what their buildings mean, and the uses to which they are put. It looks in some detail at a selection of buildings, architects, billionaires, politicians and dictators, mostly from the twentieth century, in the belief that understanding the nature of their shared obsessions can help us protect ourselves from their more malevolent ambitions. These are buildings that can tell us a great deal about our fears and passions, about the symbols that serve to define a society and about the way that we all live our lives.