

“The Modern Regionalized: A Tribute to Rifat Chadirji”

By Dr. Sharon C. Smith, 30 April 2020

What did it mean for the Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT (AKDC@MIT) to be chosen as the home of Rifat Chadirji’s archive?¹ Personally, as the founding director, the honor was enormous and surreal: An unthinkable dream realized less than five years from the founding of the re-envisioned Center at MIT. Amazing as his gift was, in conjunction with that of Mohamed Makiya and Hisham Munir, Chadirji’s donation allowed for the intellectual reconnection of three prominent Iraqi architects who worked to found the School of Architecture at the University of Baghdad.² (Fig. 1)



Figure 1: Example from The Rifat Chadirji Archive at AKDC@MIT Open House, 2016.
(Photo: Sharon C. Smith, Ph.D.)

Rifat Chadirji was one of the most influential Iraqi architects of the twentieth century and this was not lost on me or anyone in the Aga Khan Programs.³ Furthermore, Chadirji was an accomplished photographer, author, teacher, and critic, a profound intellectual and thinker: He was a polymath.

Much has been written about Dr. Rifat Chadirji and his work as the scholarly and architectural world learns of his passing on 10 April 2020.⁴ He, as so many others, succumbed to the new and deadly Covid-19 virus sweeping the world.⁵ This brief essay, however, is not an obituary, rather I seek to position Chadirji in his historical moment of modernism in Middle Eastern architecture and the cultural landscape of the same. Born in Baghdad in 1926, Chadirji was educated in the UK (Fig. 2), and returned to Iraq upon

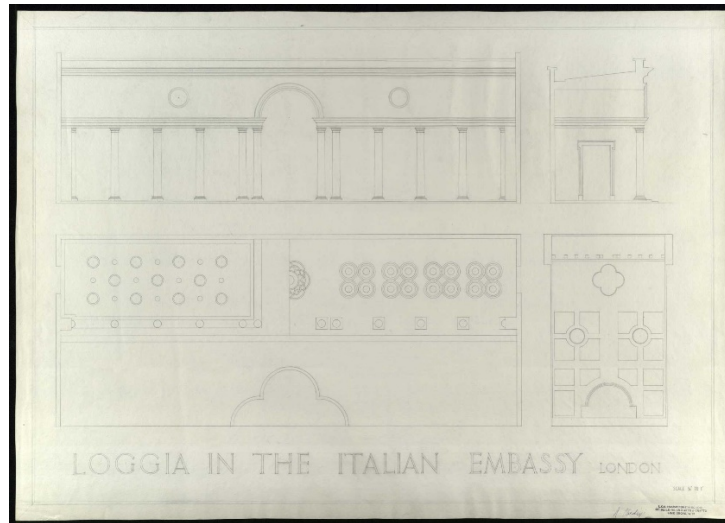


Figure 2: Student drawing by Rifat Chadirji.
 (Image courtesy of the Rifat Chadirji Archive, Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT)

graduating as an active participant in the modernization of the country, working with notable architects and designers from Europe, the United States, and Iraq including, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Alvar Aalto, and Mohamed Makiya.⁶ Informed by his time in London; the relationships he and his wife, Balkis Sharara, held with influential social and intellectual circles of artists and architects (Fig. 3); and his role in The Baghdad Modern Art Group⁷ (Fig.4) -- a group founded in 1951 by Jewad Selim and Shakir Hassan Al Said, the group's theorem "seeking inspiration from tradition" driving them to develop an artistic vision which remained related to cultural history as well as tectonically modern and pan-Arab⁸ -- all led



Figure 3: Balkis Sharara and Rifat Chadirji dancing, ca. 1954.
 (Image courtesy of Kamil and Rifat Chadirji Photographic Archive, Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT)



Figure 4: The Baghdad Group of Modern Art.

(Image: Dr. Nada Shabout, powerpoint)

Between the Modern and Provincial in the Arab World--The Case of Iraq

<https://www.slideshare.net/mathafmodern/between-the-modern-and-provincial-in-the-arab-worldthe-case-of-iraq-by-dr-nada-shabout>

Chadirji to dedicate his life to the search for an appropriate contemporary architectural expression synthesizing elements of the rich Islamic cultural heritage with key principles of the international architecture of the twentieth century. Chadirji believed that architecture’s future was found in lessons learned from its past. His designs transformed regional forms seeking to express, by means of abstraction, the construction technologies in almost universal use today, while all the while affirming more traditional aesthetic values.⁹ Evinced in his architecture archive, Rifat Chadirji imbued his work with a deep understanding of the roots of authentic regional expression, as well as a true appreciation of modernism and its principles. Chadirji’s archive illustrates his success and unique capacity for the synthesis of form and function that translates traditional architectural idioms into contemporary expressions. His work embodied an approach he called “international regionalism.”¹⁰ (Fig. 5-8)



Figure 5: Baghdad, Chadirji Home, exterior view of a side patio covered by an arbor.
(Image courtesy of the Rifat Chadirji Archive, Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT)



Figure 6: Baghdad, Chadirji Home, view of interior of screened porch.
(Image courtesy of the Rifat Chadirji Archive, Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT)

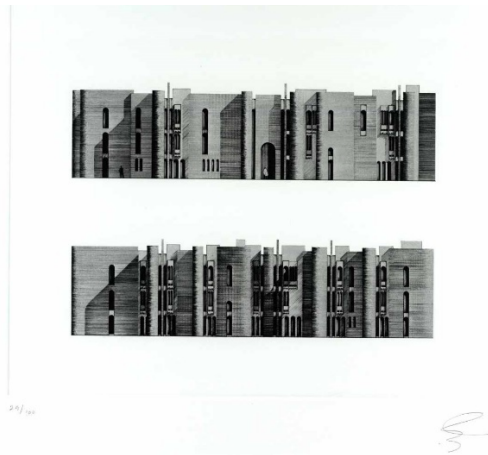


Figure 7: Baghdad, Elevation of Tobacco Monopoly Offices and Stores, 1967.
(Etching courtesy of the Rifat Chadirji Archive, Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT)



Figure 8: Baghdad, elevation of Federation of Industries, 1966.
(Etching courtesy of the Rifat Chadirji Archive, Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT)

I got to know Rifat Chadirji and his wife Balkis in my capacity as the founding program head of AKDC@MIT and one who worked tirelessly, along with the Chadirjis, to retrieve the archive from Baghdad. Over the years, I met with them in their home outside of London. Gazing out upon a softer, calmer Thames River than one finds in London proper, I was always warmly received -- with tea and delicious pastries – abating the ever-too-hurried way of the American academic’s desire to get to the facts. Occasionally, we would head down the path to a local pub for lunch; other days, stayed in and chatted for hours. The pace of our meetings was calm, yet the lessons were intense, and facts came quickly, sometimes faster than I could track.



Figure 9: Rifat Chadirji at home.
(Image: Tamayouz Excellence Award)

Often situated between Rifat on one side (Fig. 9), in his chair now made famous by images found throughout the internet,¹¹ and his Aga Khan Chairman’s Award for Lifetime Achievements on the other,¹² it was easy to be intimidated, yet I was not and what I had known to be true became evident. Rifat Chadirji was truly a gentleman, an architect, and a scholar. Together, Rifat and Balkis, an acclaimed author herself and with a keen memory for each project her husband worked on, made me feel very welcome. Rifat would sketch, clarifying the schema he created to streamline workflows at his firm; along with Balkis, we examined photographs and memorabilia; I admired the award he designed for student work in Lebanon (Fig. 10)¹³; and throughout all, they retold stories of their life together with its many unique twists and turns, including the well-known imprisonment of Rifat Chadirji.¹⁴



Figure 10: Balkis Sharara holding medal for student work in Lebanon.
(Photo: Sharon C. Smith, Ph.D.)

In 1978, under former Iraqi President, Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, Rifat Chadirji was arrested and was given an unjust life sentence for trumped up charges including treason. Two years later, when the next Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's guards came to take him from his cell at Abu Ghraib prison, Rifat thought surely he would be executed. Much to his surprise, however, he was taken to the presidential palace for a much different reason. Hussein offered freedom in return for a new city plan to beautify Baghdad. (Fig.11) Rifat Chadirji was given the position of Special Advisor to the Mayor of Baghdad and the authority to create a new urban plan for the city in preparation for the 1982 conference of the leaders of the Non-Aligned countries. Chadirji remained in Iraq for two more years, after which he and Balkis moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Rifat began teaching at Harvard University. The Baghdad conference of Non-Aligned countries never happened because of the Iran-Iraq war.¹⁵

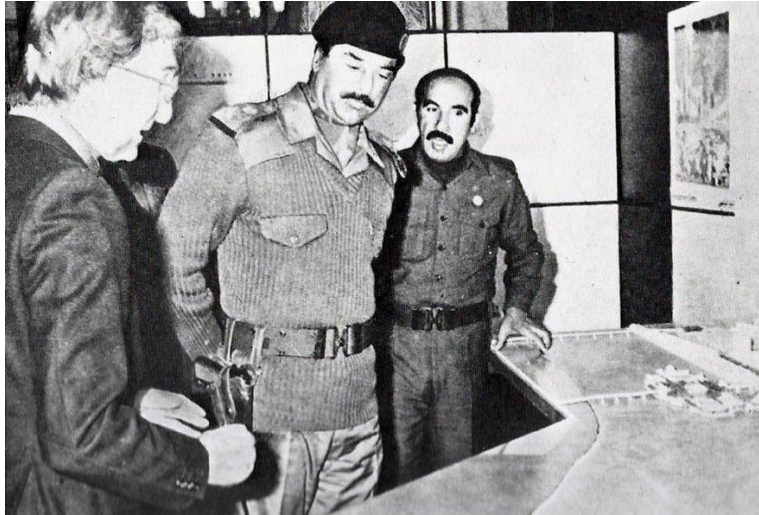


Figure 11: Rifat Chadirji (left) with Saddam Hussein reviewing city plan.
(Image: Public Domain)

When AKDC@MIT was awarded the Rifat Chadirji Archive, few believed we would ever see it. Left in Baghdad when they fled the country, the archive languished. Thousands of pages, papers, drawings, blueprints, etc. were left, untouched for decades. We, at AKDC, did not even know what to expect. When the parcels started to arrive, the staff of the center and I were mesmerized. Document after document, each a tribute to Rifat's ability as an architect and planner, with his own system of documenting projects with precision and deliberate consideration. The seemingly impossible had been accomplished; Rifat Chadirji's archive was delivered with the Iraqi Ministry of Culture's stamp of approval and left for us to sort. None of this would have been possible without the diligent and painstaking work of Rifat's brother, Nassir Chadirji. The Aga Khan Programs at MIT are forever grateful.

In addition to receiving the Aga Khan Chairman's Award for Lifetime Achievement in 1986, in 2015, Dr. Chadirji received an honorary doctorate from Coventry University, UK. In the same year he was awarded the Tamayouz Architectural Lifetime Achievement Award, an award that celebrates the pioneers of Iraqi architecture and is "presented annually to an individual who has had a significant contribution towards the advancement of architecture in Iraq."¹⁶ (Fig. 12)



Figure 12: Rifat Chadirji receiving the 2015 Tamayouz Architectural Life in his home.
NB: Aga Khan Chairman's Award for Lifetime Achievement in center.
(Image: Tamayouz Excellence Award)

Until now, Iraq – Baghdad -- has remained in a precarious state. Without infrastructure to protect and preserve the archives of the Iraqi architects, who formed and informed the urban landscape of what was once known as the City of Peace, they sought safe haven for their archives and to ensure access for future generations. It was in this spirit that Dr. Rifat Chadirji donated his vast archive to AKDC@MIT, along with other notable architects of mid-century Baghdad.

For AKDC this honor came with a self-imposed commitment to “return” these archives to Iraq in ways that students and scholars could use in approaching their cultural heritage. Our mission, to provide access of all our holdings, was magnified by our desire to provide digital access of Iraqi architects’ archives to Iraqis utilizing traditional and emerging pedagogical and information praxes and technologies. We never forgot that this is their history.



Rifat and Balkis at home.
(Image: Courtesy of Patricia Karallis)

I wish to thank Suliman Chadirji for graciously answering all my questions, providing constructive feedback, and reading an early version of this essay. All remaining errors are my own.

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¹ Smith, Sharon C., *Archnet*, 2017, <https://perma.cc/M7DG-W9RQ>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.tamayouz-award.com/news/dr-rifat-chadirji-obituary> (accessed 29 April 2020)

⁵ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

⁶ <https://libraries.mit.edu/akdc/2017/01/07/pioneering-iraqi-architect-rifat-chadirji-donates-archive-to-akdc/>

⁷ Greenberg, Nathaniel. "Political Modernism, Jabrā, and the Baghdad Modern Art Group." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.2 (2010): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1603> (accessed 29 April 2020)

⁸ Shabout, N., "Jewad Selim: On Abstraction and Symbolism," in *Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World, Online*: <http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/essays/Pages/Jewad-Selim,-On-Abstraction-and-Symbolism.aspx> (accessed 30 April 2020)

⁹ <https://www.akdn.org/taxonomy/term/3881/architecture/project/revitalisation-muharraq?page=21>

¹⁰ Rabbat, Nasser, *Archnet* (landing page; accessed 17 April 2020)

¹¹ <https://www.tamayouz-award.com/news/dr-rifat-chadirji-obituary>

¹² One of only four awarded to date, Rifāt Chadirji received his award in 1986, <https://www.akdn.org/architecture>

¹³ Chadirji designed the medal personally.

¹⁴ Personal conversation with Balkis Sharara and Rifat Chadirji, 2017.

¹⁵ Ibid, and personal correspondence with Suliman Chadirji, 2017 and 2020 respectively.

¹⁶ Tamayouz, <https://www.tamayouz-award.com/>