

Embedded in History

BY TIM EIGO

Works from Frank Lloyd Wright's "New Babylon" project. Clockwise from top: Art Gallery; Opera House overview; statue of Haroun Al Rashid, Baghdad's original city planner.

All drawings of Frank Lloyd Wright are ©2008 The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Ariz.



Typically, a law firm is not your first stop on the road to cultural enlightenment. That's why an exception is a rare pleasure.

In September, an intriguing missive emerged from Snell & Wilmer's International Industry Group. They were hosting the President and CEO of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. He would speak on a little-known aspect of Wright's legacy: his design for a "new Babylon"—in 1950s Baghdad, Iraq.

The Group's Co-Chair, Snell partner Barb Dawson, confirmed that the presentation would be on architecture, history, international relations—no law. The heart races.

And so for an hour, a law firm conference room was the venue for Philip Allsopp to explain how a man of the prairie came to—almost—transform a city on the Tigris.

How did that come to be? A 1950s oil boom led to a huge increase in revenue for the desert city. King Faisal II put out a global call for architects and urban planners, among them Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Wright. Originally commissioned to design an opera house, Wright eventually designed far more.


His personality was evident from his first arrival. The king had indicated that he wanted the opera housed downtown. But as Wright's plane wheeled over the city on its approach, the architect spotted a tract known to the locals as "Pig Island." There, he declared, the opera would be sited best. As Allsopp says, the king acquiesced: "Mr. Wright, the island is yours." But the plans were stalled by violence, and the structures were never built.

In 1958, the king was killed in a coup, while waiting at the airport for a Wright assistant bearing the latest drawings. Wright died a year later.

More impressive even than Wright's ability to persuade royalty was his vision for a new city. Among the invitees, Wright was the only one, says Allsopp, who "paid attention to the Babylonian and Sumerian roots" of

the region. Recalling the Garden of Eden, Wright named the site the Isle of Edena. He also impressed Faisal by being alert to "the cultural drivers in that part of the world." In fact, he planned a massive sculpture of Baghdad's original urban planner, Haroun Al Rashid—a monument both to architects and to the Middle East.

Most intriguing, though, was Allsopp's question: What if Wright's ideas—and his ability to look, listen and integrate local sensibilities and history—had been implemented in Iraq? How might things be different today if a leading American had cared for the other's culture, and built a new capital? How would the Middle Eastern view of the West have been changed?

We have an entirely different Baghdad today. But for a local version of Wright's opera house design, visit the Grady Gammage Memorial Auditorium at ASU. 



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