BAGHDAD: AN URBAN HISTORY THROUGH THE LENS OF LITERATURE

Iman Al-Attar
Baghdad: An Urban History through the Lens of Literature

In recent years, Baghdad has been viewed as a battleground for political conflicts; this interpretation has heavily influenced writings on the city. This book moves away from these perspectives to present an interdisciplinary exploration into the urban history of Baghdad through the lens of literature. It argues that urban literature is an effective complementary source to conventional historiography, using in-depth analysis of texts, poems and historical narratives of non-monumental urban spaces to reveal an underexamined facet of the city’s development.

The book focuses on three key themes, spatial, nostalgic and reflective, to offer a new approach to the study of Baghdad’s history, with a view to establishing and informing further strategies for future urban developments. Beginning with the first planned city in the eighth century, it looks at the urban transformations that influenced building trends and architectural styles until the nineteenth century.

It will appeal to academics and researchers in interdisciplinary fields such as architecture, urban history, Islamic studies and Arabic literature.

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Iman Al-Attar
To my daughters
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Preface

This book presents long years of devotion to explore the architectural and urban history of Baghdad. Since the early years of my study in architecture, I have developed a passion and interest in discovering the ‘real story’ behind historical forms. I studied architecture at the University of Baghdad in the eighties of the twentieth century. Compared with new building styles, ‘old’ housing schemes, which belonged to the early decades of the twentieth century and the preceding period, were outlined as ‘heritage’. At that time, there was a serious movement to protect ‘heritage’ and initiate planning guidelines to save what could be saved, and to implement original design patterns in new projects. Although conservation policies were relatively effective, they were mainly focused on the physical qualities of single buildings, with a little focus on social and nonphysical qualities. Subsequently, Baghdad’s urban image continued to deform and lose its identity.

One of the projects in my second year of study was to document some unique historical houses in central Baghdad. These houses belonged to the late nineteenth century. While we took the measurements of every corner and drew concise architectural drawings, I felt the forms were mute and did not inform us much about the social circumstances and the inner meaning of this architecture. Every student admired the fascinating building styles and the unique ornamentations, in addition to the clever ideas that resolved weather and construction problems. Later, students started to embrace these styles into their design projects. Personally, I loved the idea of the courtyard and I started to incorporate it into my own projects. However, due to the lack of understanding of historical forms and the absence of strategies that utilise architectural history constructively, these attempts did not result in meaningful design schemes.

After graduating, and while I was working at the National Urban Planning Authority in Baghdad, these issues were challenged daily, but on a bigger scale that involved the design of the whole city. I started to write about heritage and conservation issues, and before I started my master’s
study in New Zealand, I participated in a conference that dealt with these issues. When I started my doctoral research in Australia in 2006, the topic of “textual representation of the socio-urban history of Baghdad” was suggested as the main focus of my thesis. As an architect whose way of thinking is related to science and geometry, I found it a complex and strange idea to represent the urban history of Baghdad by examining literature, which, as a discipline, has no direct connection to architecture or urban history. However, after a deep observation, I was fascinated by the method of literature interrogation, and the concept of opening architecture to other disciplines to enrich our understanding of architectural and urban history. This concept enabled me to find answers for many questions concerning the urban history of Baghdad.

This book verifies the effective role of literature as a ‘complement’ to other sources in Baghdad’s historiography. It represents an attempt to discover more themes that would unveil the mysterious aspects of various urban experiences. The aim is to increase the understanding of the specific characteristics of Baghdad’s urban history, and establish further strategies for future urban developments of Baghdad, based on this understanding. The book contains a few parts of my doctoral thesis; however, I have re-written everything and developed the contents to fulfil its objectives. Although this book focusses on the history of Baghdad in particular, I believe the method of investigation and the idea of interrogating literature can enrich urban history studies in general. The understanding of Baghdad’s urban history before the twentieth century denotes more understanding of the urban history of other adjacent cities, such as Damascus and Istanbul, that shared similar circumstances with Baghdad. Besides, themes such as ‘taste’, ‘smell’, ‘affection’, ‘friendship’ and ‘beauty’ apply to other urban experiences all over the world, which adds to the significance of this study.

I would like to thank the staff of the University of Tasmania who contributed to the development and efficiency of this inquiry by providing books and resources. I would also like to extend my gratitude to my family and friends in Baghdad for their help in obtaining rare and old books. I obtained a precious old poetry book from my father’s collection, which was invaluable to my research. Also thanks to my small family here in Australia for their support. Particular gratitude goes to my daughters Naba and Noor for their care and tolerance during the busy times of writing this book. In Australia, there is a significant body of architectural scholarship focusing on original eighteenth and nineteenth century Arabic sources emerging, and this book is a contribution to these studies. I hope this book enhances the efficiency and compatibility of future development plans that deeply consider the specific requirements of particular places, in Baghdad and everywhere.
All translations from Arabic sources are mine, unless otherwise stated. The translations of poems are intended to convey the meaning of these poems rather than provide a literal translation. Where translations of the same text by others have been used, appropriate reference is given in the endnotes.

In transliteration, I have followed the system of IJMES. According to this system, diacritics are not added to personal names and place names. Diacritical scripts are used on technical terms, which are italicised and translated. Arabic terms known to English readers are italicised without translation.

All single dates are of the Common Era (CE) or Anno Domini (AD). Double dates are included to show additional hijrī dates (based on the Islamic calendar) in the following format: AH (hijrī)/AD. Alongside every name of an Arabic scholar there is the year when he died, in this format: (d. AH/AD).
Introduction

Baghdad is an ancient city with a unique urban history. It is the second largest city in the Arab world after Cairo. Due to the continuous political change in Baghdad, there is an increasing interest in its historical issues. This city has endured a fair share of damage over the centuries. However, the echo of its remarkable reputation in history still exists, which carries hopes of rebuilding it on a basis of solid and well-planned principles. Today, Baghdad is still experiencing constant destruction as a result of incessant wars. Yet, among the remarkable features of this city is its perseverance and its ability to survive various tribulations throughout history. The writings on Baghdad’s urban history are few compared to other cities such as Cairo and Damascus. Even the available writings unevenly present different stages of the city’s development. These issues motivate the researchers to delve deeper into this city’s urban history.

The history of Baghdad encompasses enigmatic and mysterious aspects through its contradictory character of brilliance and gloominess in historical writings. Conventional historiography regards the availability of direct indications of urban developments in the literature of the early centuries of Baghdad’s formation (mainly ninth and tenth centuries) as a sign of its prosperity. It also considers the decrease of such indications in the literature of the period after the fifteenth century as a sign of its decline. It is an inevitable fact that the history of cities is a connected chain of events that cannot be separated. Yet the lack of evidence of urban developments in literature does not necessarily imply a total absence of the city’s advancement in reality. Rather, it indicates insufficient implementation of various techniques in the historical inquiry.

In historical studies, history has been questioned in terms of its capability to reveal the truth. The indefinite nature of history writing allows modification, depending on the purpose of writing; whether it be for political purposes, entertainment or just a documentation of events. In many cases, truth and fiction are neatly intertwined. This blurring can be dangerous