

Tommaso Lolli

The case of Mosul. Between urban reading and reconstruction

Abstract

The interest that can spring from an urban study on Mosul and from a reflection on its reconstruction does not lie in the definition of specific and local solutions, due to the emergency state in which the city lies, but rather in the possibility of operating a disciplinary self-interrogation on the needs imposed by the same process of reconstruction, to be understood neither as a temporary solution nor as an apology for reiteration or restoration. The reading we wish to propose is to include destruction (and consequent reconstruction) in the processes proper to the *dynamics* of cities, and therefore to promote a study of the same dynamics from which to deduce typical generative processes. Therefore, starting from a study of the context, a critical reading, up to the formation of an appropriate vocabulary, we will analyse some ways of approaching urban reconstruction through procedural and design references.

Keywords

Mosul — Architectural reading — Urban reconstruction

The term *re-construction* carries in its etymological root enough evocative power to define without further specification what its role is in urban contexts subject to traumatic events such as natural disasters or wars, i.e. the re-planning of destroyed parts of the city, accompanied by the consequent evaluation of the project or strategy proposed as its replacement. However, the prefix *re-* may be susceptible to an iterative and/or duplicative interpretation that is not necessarily included within such a process; instead, a path could hopefully be traced that deepens the theme of reconstruction in a more veiled and less etymologically punctual way than a reconstruction *as it was, where it was*.

«Thus, the images, engravings and photographs of disembowelment offer us this vision; destruction and disembowelment, expropriation and abrupt changes in land use [...] are among the best known means of urban dynamics», writes Aldo Rossi (1966, p. 14); and this statement, despite its apparent recklessness, suggests how the process of destruction – and consequently of *re-construction* – can be ascribed to the processes of a city's *dynamics*, of its change – as much as earthquakes and other catastrophic events. Assuming, thus, reconstruction to be an evolutionary component of the urban fabric, a new interpretation is derived, which also opens up the possibility of modifying the forms and functions by the reconstructive project; rebuilding is therefore configured as the project of the *new* within an already existing urban fabric, historically and morphologically recognisable. Once the alterity with respect to the urban context has been ascertained, it will then be the project's task to respond to certain needs for integration, recognisability and consonance, without neglecting the technical adaptation of structures, roads and any changes in the way of life

imposed by the normal flow of time.

The knowledge of the context becomes therefore a necessary tool to operate in a conscious way and to understand the generative logic of the project area, in order to intervene with a confirming and/or oppositional dialectic with respect to the urban morphology. Since we are dealing with architecture – and more specifically with architectural design – knowledge of the context comes mainly from a study of history, considered here, however, in its synchronic vision, as a repertoire of forms and solutions, witnesses of habitual settlement modes. A repertoire of forms and solutions that, from a disorderly arrangement, needs to be categorised and classified in order to become an operational tool, through architecture's most proper categorisation device – the type – which, from this point of view, turns out to be the *decipherable code* for understanding and deepening history. «The classificatory characteristics of type can only be a provisional step towards a structuring of thoughts: classification cannot also be the result»¹. The type, therefore, understood as a means, as a typological series of transformations, appears to be the most precise reading strategy for linking the structure of a city to its overall morphology and for grasping its various peculiarities and modifications; the type as an abstract category of «equality, similarity or affinity»² or of their opposites represents the possibility of an elastic set of categories that allows the identification of *homogeneous fields*. Consequently, all the categorizable qualities of architecture can be ascribed to type: in addition to the planimetric layout, all other geometric properties of a building are included – starting from the consideration that a section can be categorised in the same way as a plan, referring here to Colin Rowe's (1999) vision of a building as a dice thrown on the table³ – but also «each of the various aspects of a configuration: including the generators of spaces, surfaces and their treatments, construction details, decorative elements, and – this is very important – the ways in which spaces are experienced or, in other words, how spaces become places: three-dimensional events that stimulate social events» (De Carlo 1985, p. 46). These preliminary operations allow the drafting of a *vocabulary* to refer to, that permits the organisation of urban facts into ecosystems that are autonomous in their recognisability and urban role.

In this respect, the city of Mosul is a case study considerably less explored than other Islamic contexts in North Africa or the Middle East, since it has not been subject of studies aimed at an overall investigation – and restitution – of the urban structure.

The historical sources on Mosul mostly concern colonial cartography and the description of some superficial urban aspects and the customs of the inhabitants, noted in travel diaries to the East, as was the custom in nineteenth-century Europe.⁴ An important exception is represented by the volumes of the German archaeologist Ernst Hertzfeld (1920), who deals in depth with the survey of some of the city's monuments and urban structures such as the defensive perimeter walls. Contemporary sources, on the other hand, mention Mosul and its history, but without investigating in depth its specificity. Nonetheless, by bringing together the information and proceeding by contrast and affinity with other cases, it is considered admissible to hypothesise an intervention strategy based on the identification of a number of urban facts that are substantially homogeneous in order to be considered as self-sufficient reference systems.

At the methodological level, it was considered legitimate to identify some urban facts that seemed to present an identity in themselves, far beyond the



Fig. 1

Plan of Mosul based on the cartographic survey drawn up by Felix Jones in 1848. In evidence the wall system, historically protected by a water moat and the main internal connection route. In black the main Mosque of Al Nouri, in dark gray the Souk. (Design by the author).

mere architectural body: these are devices, memories, real urban attitudes that make up the history of Mosul and its ways of life, thus becoming part of the city's identity itself and, as such, a possible point of emphasis for the analysis of the city (Fig. 1). The first system examined is the axis that connects the main historical entrance to the city, *Bab Sindjar*, with the pontoon bridge, historically a strategic point for crossing the Tigris River. The main Mosque of Al Nouri (to which the well-known Al-Hadba minaret was attached), the Suq as well as other numerous notable buildings are scattered along this axis; it is therefore reasonable to imagine that this axis was home to a high concentration of accessory services, institutions and places central to the liveability of the urban core. The second isolated system, on the other hand, is the complex mechanism of the perimeter walls of the city of Mosul, a feature that has strongly identified the city throughout history – as evidenced by the variety of representations that have been made of the walls – and paradoxically ended in a very western solution such as conversion into a traffic ring. The walls, in addition to being themselves representative of the most widespread settlement archetype in the Islamic world, the enclosure, play an important identity role: both externally – as the basis of the parallaxic and oppositional relationship with the city of Nineveh, a very frequent dynamic of urban growth in the Islamic world (Cuneo 1986) – and internally, assuming different configurations – topographically in relief, open on the river, integrated with the Suq and the city gates – so as to be occasionally detectable even in the residential fabric. The two systems shown here exemplify what may be an initial selection strategy for the city, its reading by compatible and similar areas; the identification of matrices and traces of identity to connect with, and from which to deduce generative structures and mechanisms. In a historical period in which it is necessary to decide priorities before intervening with the reconstruction of buildings, these systems can serve as *leitmotifs* for the location of punctual, thematic and highly symbolic interventions, which

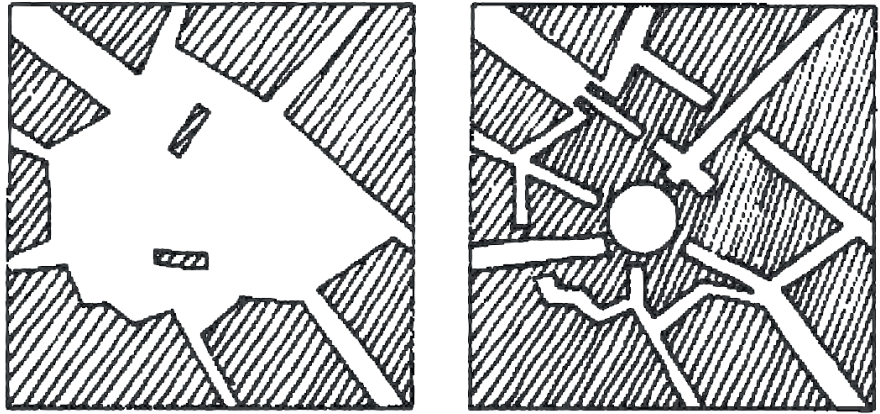


Fig. 2

Urban axis considered in the project proposed by Stefano Bianca for Baghdad. (Bianca 2000).

have the dual objective of both interpreting the city's own formal logic and being containers and propulsors of significant and public functions that aspire to the restitution of an optimistic scenario for the future. Should it be necessary, we specify the non-uniqueness of the selection, leaving open the possibility of recognising new and different urban systems that might respond equivalently to the – necessarily hypothetical – approach strategy proposed here.

In a continuous cross-reference with the city of Baghdad, and especially with the historical settlement of Rusafa – which will prove to be of extreme importance at a methodological level due to the aforementioned need for parallels – it is considered useful to compare the previous strategic reading with the design operations proposed for the Iraqi capital by Stefano Bianca, in which, after the preparation of an overall structural plan, the study of more specific plans is hypothesised: while on the one hand a “passive control” over the residential fabric is foreseen – therefore the endowment of a cautelative urban regulation for private interventions – on the other hand, “active” interventions of architectural design, linked precisely by belonging to coherent and recognisable systems, as in the case represented by the street that connects the Tigris river to the sanctuary of Gaylani (Fig. 2). While the theme of reconstruction has been introduced from a strategic point of view, it must now be acknowledged that destruction due to a traumatic event – war and/or natural catastrophes – raises specific questions compared to other types of reconstruction. Recalling Aldo Rossi's above-mentioned statement, between expropriations (or, similarly, *brownfield* interventions) and post-traumatic reconstructions there is a question linked to the identity and symbols in which a population can recognise itself. Assuming as possible a comparison between the European situation after the Second World War and the current situation in the Middle East, some reflections of Rob Krier open a strand of morphological studies on the reconstruction of a city according to the existing spatial dynamics: «Par-

**Fig. 3**

Scheme that opens the chapter “Ricostruzione di spazi urbani distrutti”. (Krier 1982).

particular attention is paid in these studies to restoring the continuity of spatial experience within an urban context. I have designed streets and squares for the pedestrian, harmonised as closely as possible with the existing structure and showing the utmost consideration for the legacy of the past» (Krier 1982, p. 140), studies brilliantly summarised in the image attached to the beginning of the chapter in which the subject is discussed (Fig. 3). In his polemic against the urbanistic dream of “naive functionalism”, Krier accentuates the importance of spatial considerations – the term “tailoring” adequately indicates the objective – and at the same time does not preclude the technical adjustments necessary for the city to continue functioning.⁵ What we would like to add, here, is to underline the importance of considering also the symbolic, evocative and representative character of buildings in addition to their morphological correspondence, especially when the original depositaries of these values, the destroyed buildings, disappear in a traumatic way.

In the Islamic context, in which form clearly prevails over function – it could be enough to recall the spread of introverted courtyard types in mosques, madrasas and residential buildings – and in which a precise articulation of *social patterns* (Bianca 2000) identifies the ways in which buildings are used, the symbolic importance of the construction, the layout and the choice of location become extremely important variables in the reading – and writing – of architecture.

Just as Hassan Fathy’s work seeks to update the linguistic and constructive characteristics of the Islamic tradition,⁶ and Fernand Pouillon’s work proposes a renewed interpretation of the relationship between built environment and open space at the settlement level,⁷ there are many projects, both well or less known, that deal with aspects of this complexity. We would now like to propose two case studies that, despite their conceptual distance, address the question of identifying a possible balance between recognisability and change, which could be translated in “roweian” terms as the dialectic between the *theatre of memory* and the *theatre of prophecy*: on the one hand, the project for the Khulafa mosque by Mohamed Makiya (1960) and, on the other, the project for the Abu Nawas riverfront by Arthur Erickson (1981). Both, although in opposite ways, represent the bivalent desire to enhance the existing architectural heritage, while at the same time allowing the urban fabric to accommodate, with its forms, the change in lifestyles. The Khulafa Mosque project by Makiya (Fig. 4) deals with the construction of a new religious building on the site of a 10th century Abbasid mosque, of which only the minaret of Suq Al Ghazl remained as historical evidence. The project takes the minaret as the central focus

Fig. 4

Mohamed Makiya's Khulafa Mosque Project (Hasan 2015).

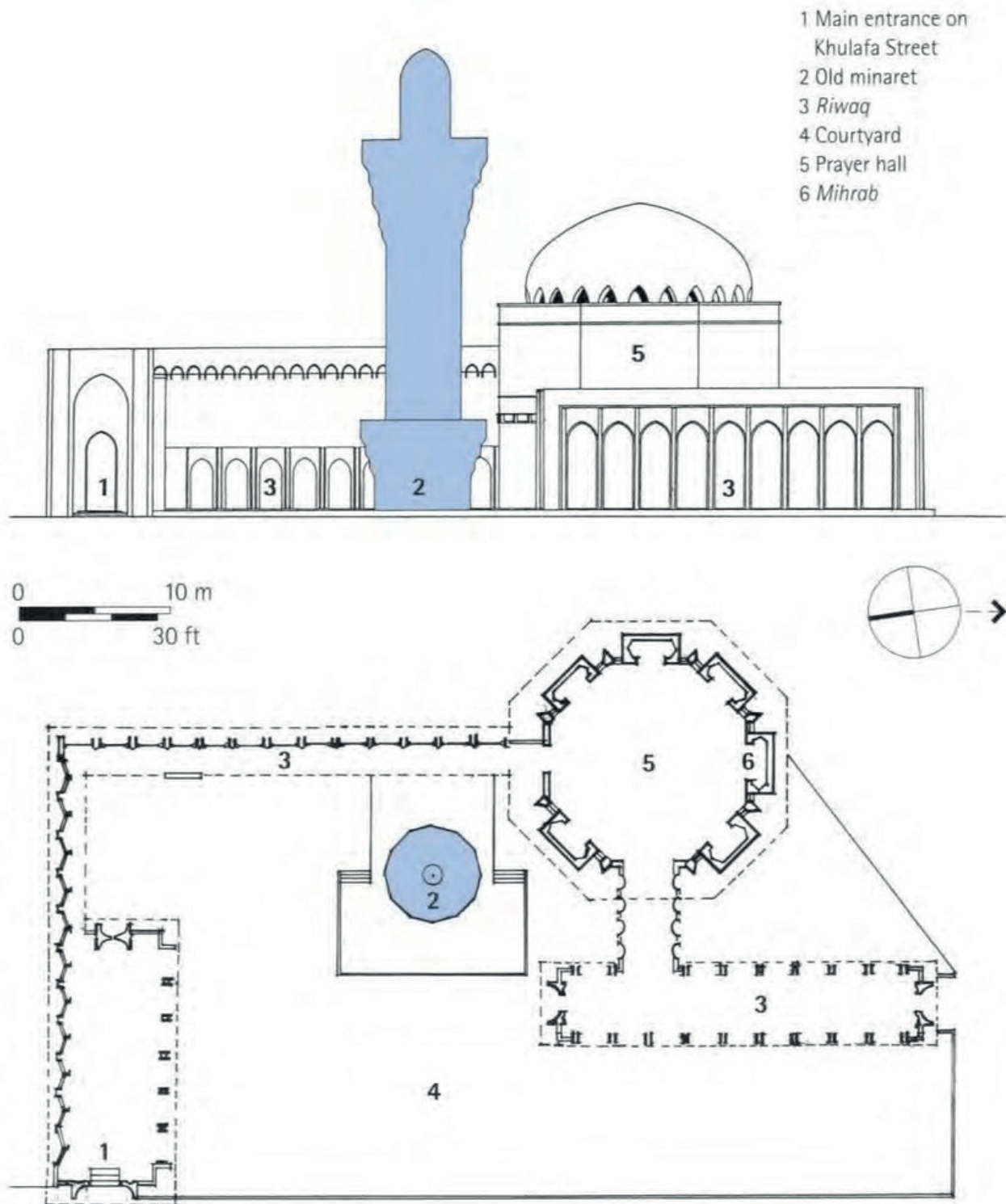




Fig. 5
Arthur Erickson's Abu Nawas
Long River Project (Ditmars
2016).

of the new mosque and provides the displacement of the new buildings around it. What is interesting, apart from the operation of enhancing the minaret and the building's language and construction, is the positioning of the new buildings themselves: the three *riwaqs* (porticoes) link the space with the prayer dome and form a background for the minaret, but they also open onto the city, generating a progressive series of thresholds mediating between the street and the interior of the dome, thus opening up – albeit in a calibrated, gradual way – the introversion typical of Islamic places of worship. The project, despite its perhaps compressed dimensional proportions,⁸ remains interesting for its attempt to reach a compromise between integration with history and openness to typological deformation. On the other hand, instead of an intimate and measured project, there is a colossal proposal, requested in its imaginative dimension by Saddam Hussein himself at the beginning of the 1980s, with the intention of restoring Baghdad to the splendour of the Abbasid era: the project (Fig. 5) involves the renovation of approximately 3km of riverfront and the insertion of a bridge that would cross an artificial island.⁹ Trying to refrain from value judgments, we want instead to emphasise the relationship of force operated on the surrounding city. Promoted not only by the political class but also by important architects such as Rifat Chadirji, the intervention conveys values attributable more to the world of symbols than to content: the need to integrate the function park with new uses, new possibilities and the awareness that, just as in the West we speak of the risk of musealisation, the Islamic city too will face the need to generate new visions.

With all due caution regarding parallels, writing about Mosul involves a necessary theoretical oscillation in a constellation made up of references, affinities and divergences with histories that are, at least partially, similar. The text proposed here, far from identifying a univocal design solution to reconstruction, prefers a critical and exploratory look at certain dynamics from which to dialectically draw some problematic questions. While the text has often spoken of *reading* an architecture (or a piece of city), perhaps the conclusion is that, with the same degree of allusiveness, the city and

architecture can also be *written*, and in this specific case – using the same caution for the prefix *re-* adopted at the beginning – even rewritten. This is a very evocative operation, as complex as it is technically to describe in detail, but it offers valuable methodological indications when dealing with design themes: the reading of a text, its comprehension and the use of its internal rules for its continuation or integration. Identifying minimum characters, *traits*, which can have a reconnaissance-insiemic but also an operational value. Is an operation contrary to Queneau's *Exercises in Style* possible? Instead of writing the same episode a hundred times with different words, could we write a hundred different architectures with the same “words”, after having structured our own, adequate vocabulary? The fact that the design processes of architecture may include an affinity with linguistic processes opens up interesting interpretations and considerations, stimulating new and further reflection on both the communicative and strictly syntactic value of the concordance of the internal terms of a proposition. The question is obviously wide and fraught with obstacles, what we have wanted to propose here is more of a problematic reading and initial hypotheses of approach to the reconstructive question, hoping to be able to make a contribution, albeit collateral and partial, to the definition of a broader scenario overall, if not to the expansion of the scenario itself.

Notes

¹ Ungers, O. M., in Casabella 1985, p. 92

² Schweighofer, A., in Casabella 1985, p. 97

³ « ‘The floor which is really a horizontal wall’. Throwaway remark though this might be, it is, just possibly, Le Corbusier's most rewarding observation. For, if walls become floors, then sections become plans; and, as the building becomes a dice to be thrown on the table, then all the rest results. » (Rowe 1999, p. 192)

⁴ Among others, we can recall *Voyage en Perse* by Flandin e Coste (1851), *Through Asiatic Turkey Vol. 2* by Grattan Geary (1878), *Amurath to Amurath* by Gertrude Bell (1911).

⁵ « In my projects, I strive to return the centre of Stuttgart to pedestrians without eliminating cars » (Krier 1982, p. 139).

⁶ Let's think about New Baris project: both to the possibility of recognising a typological abacus of reference for the design, and to the constructive and identity-driven rediscovery of the Nubian vault.

⁷ This refers mainly to residential neighbourhoods built on Algerian soil between 1953 and 1957: Diar es Saada, Diar el Mahçoul and Climat de France.

⁸ As Makiya himself pointed out, since he would have liked to expand the project area to give importance to the location: «I had to build a cathedral in an area suitable for a chapel» (Makiya 1990, p. 43).

⁹ It should be noted that the project has various and different references: from Iraqi pontoon bridges, to Isola Bella on Lago Maggiore, to Frank Lloyd Wright's plan for *Greater Baghdad* (1957), which included an artificial island in the Tigris riverbed: the island of Edena.

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Tommaso Lolli graduated with top marks in the Faculty of Architecture at Politecnico di Milano with a thesis on the renovation of the Eni Children's Summer Camp by architect Edoardo Gellner. After graduation, he worked for two years as a design architect mainly focusing on museography (buildings and exhibitions). In 2019 he enters the PhD course DRACo (Architecture and Construction) at the Department of Architecture and Design of the University of Rome - La Sapienza, with a research project on urban reconstruction, aimed to study the relationship between new interventions and the built environment, urban morphology, and construction-related symbolic issues. He is assistant/tutor in Final Design Studio in Politecnico di Milano and works as a freelance architect.