When Frank Lloyd Wright flew to Baghdad last May to design a Grand Opera and Civic Auditorium, he was, in a sense, coming to familiar ground; for he has known and loved from boyhood the tales of the “Arabian Nights.” These classic tales celebrate the glorious days of Baghdad during the eighth-century rule of Caliph Haroun Al-Rashid. The results of the trip, shown here, reach far beyond a mere auditorium, for they would celebrate the glorious days of a modern Baghdad.

The alluvial plain of the Tigris and Euphrates on which the city is built has a history of civilization older than Egypt or Palestine. On this plain, legend has it, once stood the Garden of Eden. Here too were the ancient cities of Sumeria, Isin, Larsa, and Babylon, where, perhaps, architecture began.

The Development Board of Iraq, which called Wright to Baghdad, has at its disposal 70 per cent of the country’s enormous oil revenues (equal to $1.4 billion in a six-year program). Already, the Board’s completed projects of irrigation and flood control are causing the flat desert plain to bloom again, as it did in the days of the hanging gardens and ziggurat towers of legendary Babylon.

Last year, with the river safely contained behind great new dams and with large-scale educational projects, housing, and irrigation work well underway, the Development Board could turn its attention to public buildings. For Frank Lloyd Wright, here was a chance to demonstrate what he had tried to teach in Japan and to preach in the U.S.—that a great culture deserves not only an architecture of its time, but of its own.

The island in the Tigris he selected for his demonstration was owned by King Feisal II and had remained undeveloped because of the floods which periodically inundated it until flood control dams were completed upstream in 1954. For this site he sketched not only an opera auditorium, but a cultural center befitting a great city of one million people (twice as many as ten years ago). From the island he projected a great esplanade into the old city center, while across the Tigris, on the site reserved for the University of Baghdad, he suggested that a circular, ziggurat-surrounded campus be built—and, though not commissioned to work on the University, Wright submitted a basic development plan.

On the following pages are the sketches of Wright’s imaginative proposals for the Opera and the University as well as the preliminary plans for a new Baghdad Post and Telegraph Building (which is a second commission from the Development Board). The text is excerpted from Wright’s own submission to the Board.
Plan of the Cultural Center for Greater Baghdad... Opera Auditorium on Isle of Edena...
University of Baghdad across the Tigris ... earth-mound ziggurats used for parking.

FLW: These designs demonstrate that if we are able to understand and interpret our ancestors, there is no need to copy them. Nor need Baghdad adopt the materialistic structures called “modern” now barging in from the West upon the East. The designs shown here revive the natural beauty of form, the ancient crafts of ceramics and metal, and the use of the ground that produced the architecture of the Middle East.

The original city of Baghdad, built in the eighth century by Haroun Al-Rashid, was circular in plan and contained a population of 2 million people in a surrounding and protecting ziggurat of earth and masonry. Today, instead of flood or invasion, Baghdad is threatened by the increasing thousands of motor cars. (The city now has 30,000 cars, six times as many as ten years ago. Most are American makes.)

Thus, Baghdad is in danger, and I have here hoped to see the Middle East put first things first. As modern civilization proceeds and advances, this most pressing problem requires a basic solution or the modern city will become impractical.

When the ancients wanted dignity in architecture, they piled upward great mounds of earth with the labor of thousands of men for many years. Today, with modern road-making machinery, we accomplish as much in a few weeks. Modern machinery is here used to raise the ancient ziggurat to a new use as a plastic and plausible means of absorbing and harboring the motor car. Safety and pleasure in transit are thus accomplished instead of the dangers, the vexation, and the growing frustration of crisscross on the ground with one-level approach to buildings. Thus, fine buildings may be built with spirit and enjoyed without seeing them flooded by acres of antipathetic motor cars.

The drawings show ziggurats of three levels surrounding the Opera Auditorium and the University Campus. Initially, these ziggurats could be reduced to two levels or even one, with additional levels added as traffic increased. Earth fill can be obtained from cutting down the size of the island and (in the case of the University) by grading on the site.

The Grand Opera and Civic Auditorium is at the head of a great esplanade oriented toward Mecca. A second avenue crosses the Tigris to link the great arch entrance of the University campus with the esplanade. At the head of the island itself, behind the Opera Auditorium, is a “Garden of Eden,” with two fountains symbolizing Adam and Eve. From the garden another avenue reaches toward the base of the island, where a 300-foot-high statue of Haroun Al-Rashid has been placed. On the way, an art gallery and museum are located.
Grand Opera and Civic Auditorium... set in natural water gardens surrounded by a motor ziggurat... the proscenium curves over the audience and sweeps out on either side of...
of the building as a crescent arch decorated with scenes from the *Arabian Nights*.

FLLW: The Grand Opera and Civic Auditorium for Greater Baghdad should be a beautiful expression of historic nature and therefore as inspiring to the culture of Iraq as any religious edifice ever was. But the specific form is of no previous known pattern.

From the focal point of the proscenium at the stage, the auditorium ceiling curves upward and out, carrying sound as would the hand cupped above the mouth. This curved ceiling and the crenelated dome above is carried not only on the walls of the auditorium but by the bracing walls of the stagehouse and the great crescent arch which shows outside. Each wing of the arch descends behind a series of fountain-waterfalls to the gardens. These wings, as poetic extensions of the acoustic principle involved, are decorated with metal-sculptured scenes from the classic "Thousand and One Nights." This sculpture can be viewed from the promenades around the opera hall.

The crescent arch allows the 1,600-seat opera auditorium to be separated from the additional 3,700 seats available for conventions or patriotic celebrations. To achieve this flexibility, sliding screens are hung to the curve of the crescent as it shows itself inside. (Similar acoustic principles and flexible seating were used in the Chicago Auditorium built by Adler and Sullivan—still recognized as the most successful room for opera in existence.)

The low enveloping ziggurat provides parking for 1,920 cars under cover. From each level, entrance to the auditorium is obtained by way of stairways up to the entrance foyer. The stage is entered from a bridge over the garden at the rear, and ample storage for stock scenery is available below the stage. Under the auditorium proper are rest rooms, music libraries, and offices. Above the auditorium, a crenelated dome shelters a golden figure of Aladdin and his wonderful lamp, the symbol of human imagination.
The University of Baghdad ... a circular campus free of cars surrounded by a traffic and parking ziggurat ... semicircular university buildings abut the inner circles.
FLLW: These drawings are voluntarily submitted to the Development Board prompted by the respect and admiration I have for the culture of the Middle East, which is now in danger. The use of the ziggurat has been explained elsewhere. Here, the ziggurat is the generic form for parking the entire traffic of the various buildings of the university. The campus itself is thus free of cars with entrances easily available from each level by way of multilevel courts in the various department buildings, which are placed at the inner circumference (curriculum) of the ziggurat. As a matter of course, as many buildings as are necessary could join the curriculum.

The central features of the campus are radio and television studios (Baghdad now has the first television station in the Middle East) arranged around a reflecting pool with fountains. The necessary antenna towers thus become vertical features of the design.

The diameter of the campus and the number of levels in the ziggurat could vary depending on the needs of the University. The ziggurat winds in full view of the Tigris and travel to and fro would not only be safe but a pleasure. Three quick access ramps would allow short cuts going outward or inward from any level.
Post and Telegraph Building: concrete filled steel tubes support cantilever floors.

FLLW: The basic aim of this design has been to produce a building by extremely economical methods and greatly simplified construction. The basis of the construction is the hollow steel tube filled with concrete during construction (similar to the so-called "Lally" column). The floors are concrete slabs cast hollow to receive wiring and air-conditioning ducts.

The building is designed around a central court with a green garden at the basement level. Public rooms, offices, and equipment rooms are arranged around the court on the various floors, which cantilever beyond the columns to form balconies or sunshades. The roof slab is insulated with 16 inches of earth planted to greenery.

From the terrace level, a suspended arbor of steel tubes is hung in front of the great glass walls to afford additional shading from the sun. The terrace itself is sheltered by an overhead trellis of the same steel tubes which continues over the garden court as a sun shelter.

The whole structure provides a translucent, well-lighted interior space under adequate shelter in the hot climate of Baghdad. Trees planted in the interior court may be seen from the street through the diaphanous structure.
Post and Telegraph Building... glass walls sheltered under cantilever floor.
and roof slabs...central court shaded by an overhead trellis of steel tubes.

FLLW: In order to make the building more agreeable both inside and outside, the building line has been set back from the street. In all stories the glass walls—set in mastic free of the structure itself—are placed well back under shelter to avoid sun heat and glare. An arbor of steel rods suspended from overhead is arranged as an outer pattern to carry suitable greenery.
WHAT IS ARCHITECTURE?

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT
from the London Lectures, 1939

What is architecture anyway? Is it the vast collection of the various buildings which have been built to please the varying taste of the various lords of mankind? I think not. No, I know that architecture is life; or at least it is life itself taking form and therefore it is the truest record of life as it was lived in the world yesterday, as it is lived today or ever will be lived. So architecture I know to be a great spirit. It can never be something which consists of the buildings which have been built by man on earth—mostly now rubbish heaps or soon to be. Architecture is that great living creative spirit which, from generation to generation, from age to age, proceeds, persists, creates, according to the nature of man and his circumstances. That is really architecture.

In all buildings that man has built out of earth and upon the earth, his spirit—the pattern of him—rose great or small. It lived in his buildings. It still shows there.... Today we look back upon the endless succession of ruins that are no more than the geological deposits washed into shore formation by the sea—landscape formed by the cosmic elements. These ancient buildings were similarly formed by the human spirit. This is the spirit elemental of architecture....

Any building is a by-product of eternal living force, a spiritual force taking forms in time and place appropriate to man. They constitute a record to be interpreted—no letter to be imitated. We carelessly call these ancient aggregations architecture. Looking back upon this enormous deposit to man’s credit, and keeping in mind that just as man was in his own time and place so was his building in its time and place, we must remember that architecture is not these buildings in themselves but far greater. We must believe architecture to be the living spirit that made buildings what they were. It is a spirit by and for man, a spirit of time and place. And we must perceive architecture, if we are to understand it at all, to be of the spirit of man that will live as long as man lives. It begins always at the beginning. It continues to bestrew the years with forms destined to change and to be strange to men yet to come.