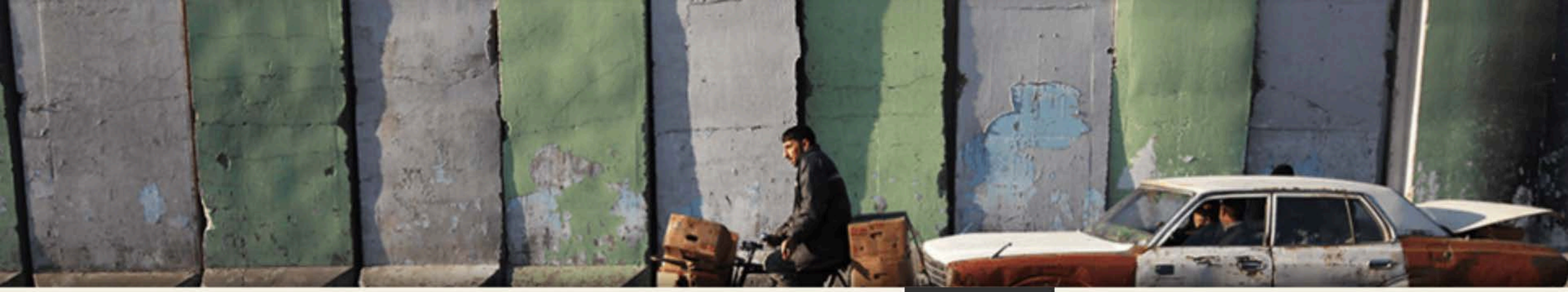

11.07.2016

Baghdad as Antiopticon

Mutating security walls in a two-dimensional city

by Amanda Wasielewski and Agri Ismail

In 1983, at the height of the Lebanese Civil War, two suicide bombers drove trucks filled with explosives into the military barracks of the Multinational Force in Lebanon. As the bodies of 241 American soldiers were swiftly repatriated, Ronald Reagan rushed to appoint a committee

to investigate the attacks. The Department of Defense concluded in its report that more substantial barriers around the barracks could have significantly reduced the number of casualties. As a consequence, “an integrated obstacle and barrier plan has been devised to complement the other security measures.” The new plan utilized Jersey barriers, 81 cm tall slabs of steel-reinforced concrete — developed in the 1950s to temporarily reroute traffic. These repurposed barriers were implemented in the security setting along roads, in alternating patterns, forcing approaching vehicles to slowly zig-zag their way to any given entrance. And so, the modular security wall was born.

Walls are one of the oldest and most persistent pieces of military technology. Even the etymology of ‘machine’ has a relationship to walls: a machine, in ancient times, was more narrowly defined as the siege engine used to attack walled cities. Our persistent faith in the ability of a wall to keep us safe can be seen today in the inflammatory rhetoric of Donald Trump and his proposed wall along the Mexican border, echoing Israel’s West Bank barrier and Saudi Arabia’s wall along its border with Yemen. No contemporary city, however, has been defined by the security wall quite as much as Baghdad after the US invasion of 2003.

In April of that year, the US military took control of the Al-Karkh district in Baghdad and renamed it the Green Zone. The location was chosen for reasons both symbolic and practical; this was the area where Saddam Hussein's Republican Palace and Baath party offices had been located, so it sent a clear signal that Saddam was no longer in control, while providing a host of already fortified buildings. Outside of the few entry points to the Green Zone, which had colorful names like "Assassin's Gate," the US military erected a maze of Jersey barriers and placed soldiers with loaded guns, tasked with identifying any approaching vehicle as friend or foe.

Though it is hard to remember now, there was an initial period of calm after Baghdad fell. Photo-ops were arranged: scenes of Iraqis welcoming US troops, Bush's premature "Mission Accomplished" banner, and the toppling of the Saddam statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square — an image that media theorist WJT Mitchell argues "possessed at least a minimal kind of symmetry with [9/11], countering the destruction of the headless twin icons of global capitalism with the bringing down of the dictatorial head of the Iraqi government." Yet, after Paul Bremer had been selected by Bush to replace Jay Garner as Director of the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, the country quickly

by Bush to replace Jay Garner as Director of the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, the country quickly descended into the quagmire in which it still finds itself. Bremer instituted two disastrous policies: disbanding the entire Iraqi army and firing all the country's civil servants. This ensured that hundreds of thousands of trained soldiers were suddenly unemployed and available to the insurgency, and that the government was unable to function, having lost the very people who could ensure that the country would keep running with minimal disruptions. Explosions became a common occurrence, many of them emanating from street-side IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices). Bremer's enduring physical legacy in Iraq turned out to be the amended solution devised for the contemporary city at war: the so-called Bremer wall, a modular blast wall that is like the Jersey wall but much taller (over 3.7 meters high). Overnight, neighborhoods were divided by these concrete walls, which snaked around the areas outside the already fortified Green Zone. The city of Baghdad morphed into a modular maze, the Bremer walls creating ever-new paths and layouts to respond to the latest security concerns.

"No contemporary city has

been defined by the security wall quite as much as Baghdad after the US invasion of 2003."

To imagine Baghdad now is to visualize these cement corridors, a uniformity tying the city together under the constant surveillance of the security apparatus. Through this process, Baghdad has now become the antiopticon. Whereas the panopticon devised by Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century was a structure designed to create the feeling of constant observation among inmates in a prison, the antiopticon created by the concrete security walls and corridors creates a sense of blindness to dimensionality, control enforced by a lack of vision. Insurgents and terrorists cannot see beyond the walls and those inside the walls devise self-sufficient communities, such as the one found within the Green Zone. The implied safety, such as it is, is derived from the limited geography to which each individual is privy. The antiopticon is a two-dimensional flatland, bringing to mind the mythical Labyrinth of ancient Knossos: the Baghdad security walls, like the Labyrinth, are defined by

their two dimensions. A person approaching a security checkpoint is only a vector of approach or retreat as the walls only allow for one pathway to move away from or towards any given checkpoint.

The craftsman Daedalus of Greek myth, who created a Labyrinth so skillfully that he himself could not escape it, was later imprisoned there with his son Icarus and found that the only way out was by fashioning wings to take to the sky. Baghdad International Airport has, amidst security concerns, been reimagined as a place almost impossible to gain entry to — both in terms of the airport's grueling and invasive checkpoints, and also due to the incredible difficulty for Iraqis to get a visa to go anywhere else in the world. The airport is, in effect, reserved exclusively for elite politicians and businessmen, to the extent that the terminal's VIP room is constantly overcrowded, necessitating a "VVIP room" next to it. The potential escape that the sky could provide is reserved for the alien drone, hovering above with its unblinking eye, constantly providing what a senior Pentagon official termed "due diligence," as this is the one eye not restricted by the city's walls.

Baghdad wasn't always like this—divided between security forces,

security threats, and flying foreign automatons. As recently as the 1950s it was a rapidly growing, cosmopolitan city. Iraq had recently become a wealthy nation state due to the repatriation of oil profits from foreign investors after the last British military units departed in 1954. This influx of money was used to establish an autonomous governmental organization, the Iraq Development Board, which oversaw a broad national modernization program. The city recruited an impressive roll call of aging modernist architects to construct key civic amenities: Walter Gropius and his architecture firm TAC planned the Baghdad University campus, Frank Lloyd Wright designed the opera house, Alvar Aalto was to build the art museum, and Le Corbusier designed a huge sporting complex. The late ‘50s also saw several competing modernist planning visions for the city of Baghdad: the British firm Minoprio, Spencely, and Macfarlane developed a master plan for Baghdad in 1956, while Wright laid out a futuristic city plan around the site of his planned opera house in 1957. Perhaps the most ambitious plan was that of the Greek urban planner Constantinos A. Doxiadis in 1958, who was initially hired to plan a housing program in Baghdad but was soon tasked with taking over the planning of the city from Minoprio, Spencely, and Macfarlane. Of course, none of these plans came fully to fruition, as the monarchical government of King Faisal II was overthrown in July 1958, resulting in

decades of military coups, revolutions and invasions.

The various plans for Baghdad in the ‘50s were all based on rationalist urban planning models, devised to create broad, open, interconnected boulevards to replace the narrow medieval streets and bazaars of old Baghdad. Doxiadis was seen as a more palatable candidate for devising a plan for the city because, as a Greek, he was judged not to be as tainted by western imperialism as other modernist firms and architects. He developed a system he called Ekistics, a supposedly objective, scientific method of planning that was designed to be rational and apolitical while also paying attention to local context. This modernist vision of Baghdad provides a stark contrast to the antiopticon being formed ad hoc throughout the city today. Instead of the modernist city planning ideals of clean air, light, open space, and towers in parks, the Baghdad concrete security walls are barren blinders, constantly reconstituting themselves and limiting movement through the city in extreme ways. As dystopian as the artist Constant Nieuwenhuys’ New Babylon was utopian, and equally as mutable, Baghdad is scarred by an evolving labyrinth, protecting whoever is deemed to be in need of protection at that moment, while keeping out whoever is considered dangerous. Since the Bremer walls were first erected, they have been moved many times, each

Bremer walls were first erected, they have been moved many times, each time reshaping the city: first they walled in the wealthy neighborhoods where Iraq's politicians lived, then the Sunni neighborhoods in order to "protect" them from Shias, and now the intention is to wall in the whole city to protect it from the terrorist group Daesh, the latter being a sad echo of Baghdad's medieval walls which surrounded the city back when it was the cultural and economic capital of the world.

> ***"Baghdad is scarred by an evolving labyrinth, protecting whoever is deemed to be in need of protection at that moment, while keeping out whoever is considered dangerous. "***

The modular nature of these walls grants the illusion that once they are removed the neighborhood can revert back to its former identity, but, of course, removing such walls leaves scars. In Berlin, a city divided by a concrete 'security' wall for three decades, the scar that the wall left behind did not quickly fade away after reunification. Indeed, the wall still defines the city nearly three decades later: the jagged cut through the center of Berlin is still marked, in part, by a snaking wasteland and abrupt changes in street names. While the walls of Baghdad are evolving, their pathways will remain, even when they are wholly dismantled. Apart from providing a security-fueled antiopticon, the logic of walls also creates an anti-plan. Urban planners are focused on the future of a city, its projected growth and development, the best uses of space, and the most appropriate organization for the needs of the residents. The anti-plan of Baghdad, on the other hand, operates in a constant present, merely reacting rather than planning.

Walls are a blunt tool. The stark divisions these walls create, between rich and poor, military and civilian, Sunni and Shia, or the city and Daesh, entrench difference. Walls force an identity on a neighborhood: what was once predominantly a Sunni neighborhood becomes an *exclusively* Sunni neighborhood, as any Shiites who reside there will find

exclusively Sunni neighborhood, as any Shiites who reside there will find themselves in the wrong place.

Ultimately, the arbitrariness and brutality of security walls mirror the arbitrary and brutal colonial imposition of national borders, which have left countries like Iraq in a stalemate of sectarianism. Even if the Republic of Iraq was divided tomorrow into multiple nation states, there would be no clean lines within which to place each group and no way to erase the old colonial borders, forged out of ignorance and self-interested apathy. That the rhetoric of Daesh speaks of a return to pre-Sykes-Picot borders is not a coincidence: the only solution that they are able to see is the wholesale eradication of actual history, before the invisible walls of the nation-state border separated families and forced enemies to live under each other's rule. Lest, however, they gain access to an actual time-machine, no amount of blood will wash away these borders.

The spatial geography of a city is often determined by the inherited collective memory of its residents. So, a checkpoint for a non-existent wall remains in Berlin, one of the most expensive streets in London is called Cheapside, and a neighborhood in Slemani is still named after the

spot where a burnt tree used to stand some thirty years ago. The oscillating configurations of the antiopticon in Baghdad will also leave a mark, though its precise nature is hard to foresee considering that this constantly-shifting, cement labyrinth, weaving in and out and around the city, is the first of its kind.

RELATED CONTENT