

Inspiration or folly? Iraqi-born architect planning Baghdad hotel

Only a serious optimist could build in Baghdad these days. Enter Dr. Hisham Ashkouri, AIA, a Baghdad native, who studied architecture at Baghdad University. Ashkouri left Iraq in 1972 to pursue more opportunities, starting his own firm, ARCADD, in Newton, Massachusetts, in 1986. He didn't return to the country until after the war in 2003, when the 57-year-old architect saw his old neighborhood in shambles. Familiar shops and friends' homes had been destroyed, roads were impassible, and sewers overflowing. Much of the city looked this way. "It was so painful to see," says Ashkouri, who vowed to help rebuild the country and take advantage of the opportunities presented by a free Iraq.

His promise may be close to reality, or at least that's how Ashkouri sees it. He has developed three major plans for the city. One is a mixed-use downtown development called Tahrir Square. The second is a \$115 million high-rise hotel and movie project called the Sinbad Hotel complex. The largest is a \$13 billion Central Business District master plan for cultural, educational, medical, and tech development along the Tigris River.

The Sinbad, which will be located downtown or south of the city center, is the closest to moving forward, having recently received a promise of funding, says Ashkouri, by the Al-Senussi's, the former royal family of Libya. The family has approved giving him \$300,000 to pay for schematics. Local investors approved the plan in July, he says. The local government, though, has not yet approved the building.

The Sinbad's design, Ashkouri says, will be a modern interpretation of ancient, local forms. Its arched colonnades, tentlike roof canopies, eight-point star patterning, and a protruding, curved facade echo vernacular forms, although the building still appears cut from the corporate-hotel mold. The building will also utilize the ancient Badgeer system, which employs large hollow shafts along the sides to allow hot air to escape. He says that, if built, the 32-story tower will be the largest steel tower in the city, where, because of the high cost of steel, most

structures are made of concrete. Now, says Ashkouri, most businessmen must rent apartments in order to do business outside the Green Zone.

Inside, the complex will include shopping, informal congregation spaces, and a cinema complex that he hopes will host Baghdad's first-ever film festival. Lobbies will include murals of Sinbad's seven voyages. Rooms will be brightly and colorfully

decorated, an aesthetic he says may be off-putting to Western tastes, but is necessary in war-torn Iraq. "You can't use a minimalist approach here. There's been too much sadness. We're trying to bring back life to a city that's experienced lots of repression."

Not surprisingly, the biggest added cost—almost doubling the price per square-foot—will be security. Ashkouri plans to erect a high perimeter fence around a large construction site. Armed guards and constant video surveillance will monitor the area. The final design, like the recently revised Freedom Tower in New York, will have a concrete base, although it will be ringed by a

window-lined pedestrian corridor. Windows near the base will be bulletproof and blastproof.

"If we wait to develop here, we will be waiting forever," says Ashkouri, who believes this to be the first major private development outside the Green Zone since the war. "We have to rebuild the city ourselves, with private development, and it has to be sustainable." The idea of constructing a project like this is "not a pipe dream at all," says Manjiv Vohra, the C.E.O. of a major construction company working on projects in Iraq. For increased security, he recommends hiring Iraqi construction workers and keeping a low profile.

Ashkouri is nothing if not ambitious about rebuilding shattered cities. He is also developing a master plan for Kabul, Afghanistan, called the City of Light, a \$9 billion, 3-square-mile urban development just informally approved by the country's minister of urban development and housing.

He plans to put part of the proceeds for the Iraq projects into rebuilding his old neighborhood, where he also hopes to establish an office. "People think I'm crazy building here, but I don't care," he says. "If I didn't think this was possible, I would have given up long ago." S.L.



The Sinbad Hotel complex will be located outside the Green Zone.