

Brooklyn Daily Eagle

Posted 3/25/2004

Architect Here Describes Project for Baghdad

By Francesca Norsen

While many people marked the first anniversary of the war in Iraq by protesting U.S. policy, one Iraqi-born architect has instead chosen to move forward with the reconstruction of his homeland.

Dr. Hisham Ashkouri, who was raised in Baghdad, left his homeland in 1970 for America where he continued his studies, pursued an architectural career, and married.

Dr. Ashkouri and his firm ARCADD, are progressing on specific development plans there, and he returned to Iraq this past January for the first time in 30 years. Now a parishioner at Grace Church Brooklyn Heights, he described his two projects Sunday as part of that parish's Middle East Peace Initiative Project.

During his Middle East visit, during which he gave lectures in Amman, Jordan, Dr. Ashkouri saw the original Sinbad, site one he had visited many times as a youth riding his bicycle to the movies and parking it inside the building.

“If I show you this building today, just look at the rest of the city and imagine it. Every single building in this city is in very bad shape,” he said. He pointed out wet ground in one visual of the current Cinema Sindbad, which he said was not rain but actually sewage. “People are living in substandard conditions. If I see a building like this as an architect, I'll condemn it. I will not allow it to be used. But people use it. This is so typical of all the buildings in Baghdad.”

Using a slide show of photos and diagrams he described the plans that his firm has developed for a 31-story Cinema Sindbad Sheraton complex as well as for the Baghdad central business district. The proposed complex includes movie theaters on the lower two floors, a conference center, a hotel and luxury suites that corporations or other organizations could use for conferences, to meet the need of business leaders who have had no place to convene. Dr. Ashkouri explained that Baghdad's five major hotels, built about two decades ago, are occupied by government personnel. He expects the Cinema Sindbad design, construction, and operation to generate 1,404 jobs for Iraqis. The cost of this entire project is \$115 million. His plan has already received considerable corporate response, judging by the fact that it already bears the

Sheraton name.

“I have received already an interest from one of the Middle Eastern organizations to rent the bottom three floors above the movie theater,” he said. “As far as I'm concerned this is a real hot item. People are really interested in seeing this done.”

Ashkouri added that there is also federal government support, which makes it waster to solicit private investment.

Security Provisions

Some of the plans he showed on Sunday had already been amended, and he described necessary changes made to bolster security and protect against terror.

“The movie theater got pushed in by six feet; there will be a corridor around the perimeter to allow for any exterior explosion. If there is any explosion, it will be in the corridor and not in the actual movie theater where people are,” he said. Also important was the need to budget in the cost of hiring trained guards to protect the work site.

Another project, the Baghdad Renaissance Plan, is expected to generate 364,000 jobs during the design, construction, and occupancy phases. The cost of this entire project is \$13 to 15 billion over 20 years. He showed animated diagrams of a road network, private hospitals, and a Broadcast Technology Center.

“It's important for Iraq to stand as a 21st-century country. And it will also make the Iraqi government more democratic in the sense that, yes, the whole area is owned by the state, but you can actually give it as a 40-year lease to a private developer who will build it. The developer will own the structure, and through that, we'll have people invited from all over the world to come in and build. There are so many countries that are outside the U.S. that are interested-- especially in the Gulf.”

Ashkouri aims to have his budget approved by May of this year, and he hopes for a groundbreaking by May 2005.

“Part of our agreement will be to hire and train Iraqis,” Ashkouri said. “In order for us to plan to reduce the violence, we go ahead with a plan like this. That's the only way you can bring in money to the country, and you can begin to disburse salaries and people will be living easier. To me, the violence is really a result of lack of employment. This is the way to counteract it. I do believe that you have to have that passion to rebuild the country. I have a responsibility, and feel a lot more, because I was raised in Baghdad. The key to success in rebuilding this country is in what I am doing right here.”