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Architect Envisions new Baghdad

By James Cox, USA TODAY

It had been 31 years since Hisham Ashkouri held the silty soil of Baghdad in his palm. So he was speechless last spring when a stranger at a Washington conference on Iraq approached to ask him if the loose sediment under the Iraqi capital could support a 25-story structure.

"I told him I didn't know. I would need a soil analysis," the Boston architect recalls.

In January, the bright Christian boy who grew up fatherless in Baghdad returned to his hometown after more than three decades in exile. He concluded that the building envisioned by the stranger could go even higher with the proper foundation.



Hisham Ashkouri is trying to raise money to build in Baghdad the 31-story theater/hotel complex represented by the model.

Today, Ashkouri and the man at the conference, a Baghdad businessman, are partners. Together, they're shopping their vision of Cinema Sinbad, a \$115 million luxury hotel and movie theater complex encased in an energy-efficient shell and topped with the flowing arches of the city's pre-Ottoman period. "A 21st century expression of Islamic architecture," Ashkouri calls it.

Photo: Tim Dillon, USA TODAY

Plan to remake Baghdad's skyline

His glittering 31-story building would replace a shabby movie house on the east side of the capital, remaking the Baghdad skyline in a single stroke and symbolizing opportunities offered by the new Iraq. But only if the scholarly Ashkouri, who has never had to raise money for his own projects, can transform himself into a hard-edged real estate developer.

The role of Donald Trump has been awkward for the gentle-spoken man given to wearing bow ties. Trump, for instance, has never had to sell investors on a project so

rife with security problems and concerns about the lack of a permanent local government to issue permits.

So far, though, Ashkouri says he has strong "expressions of interest" from American, Asian and Middle Eastern investors he won't name. He hopes to nail down commitments for half the project's value by late spring and finance the rest with bank loans. Sheraton has indicated a willingness to manage the hotel, he says.

Ashkouri left Iraq in 1972 after graduating No. 1 in his Baghdad University architecture class and working as a junior designer on ministry buildings and Baghdad's city hall. He left bitter. The Baathist regime had twice bypassed him and sent others to the USA for graduate studies at Cornell University's prestigious architecture school.

Ashkouri paid his own way to the University of Pennsylvania, getting a master's degree there and going on for graduate degrees at Harvard, MIT and Tufts. The regime kept close watch: Iraqi agents asked his Harvard instructors to urge him to return to Baghdad; in Iraq, they told his mother her son should come home.

Eventually, Ashkouri founded ARCADD, a West Newton, Mass., firm that has designed and renovated scores of public buildings — hospitals, schools, post offices, libraries and government offices — throughout the USA.

Ashkouri's portfolio tends toward the functional rather than the grand. One exception came in 1990, when he entered an international competition to design a home for the Baghdad symphony. Again, the regime snubbed him, and his design lost. Plans to construct the winning design were shelved after the 1990-1991 Gulf War and United Nations economic sanctions.

Reconnecting with his heritage

Since Saddam Hussein's defeat last spring, Ashkouri has been surprised by the intensity of his interest in his homeland. He has yet to earn a penny there, yet he spends 80% of his time conceptualizing projects intended to help it modernize.

"This work involves a passion that in many cases doesn't come from my U.S. work," he says. "It is a link to my heritage, my boyhood and my family."

When Ashkouri returned home in January, he barely had time to embrace the brother and sister he had not seen in decades and to meet his nephew for the first time. Soon, he was off to visit officials at the planning ministry.

He showed them drawings for Cinema Sinbad, then plans for a vastly more ambitious project: a \$13 billion development on the Tigris River. The flow of the river has been slowed by dams and flood-control projects upstream, he explained.

Satellite photos showed that 100 hectares of silt deposits had formed inside the city's dikes, reclaimed land perfect for new development, he told officials.

Ashkouri sees banks, hospitals, apartments, cultural centers and an information technology hub rising inside the dikes.

"The challenge is how to allow for imaginative, attractive development, make it financially viable and yet save the historic fabric of the city," Ashkouri says.

Most construction during the Saddam era consisted of ugly, utilitarian boxes and grand structures built to glorify the dictator and enhance his cult of personality. "Fascist, Hitler-esque designs. Very poor quality," Ashkouri says.

Yet he warns against hasty destruction of Saddam's architectural monuments to himself. "It's important to be careful and methodical about demolishing these buildings. They can be very useful until replacements can be built," Ashkouri says.