



A Comparative Analysis of the Iraqi Architecture According to the Concept of the Icon

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<https://doi.org/10.18280/ijstdp.210333>

ABSTRACT

Received: 8 January 2026

Revised: 3 March 2026

Accepted: 18 March 2026

Available online: 31 March 2026

Keywords:

architectural education, urban identity, city image, iconic architecture, Iraq, Iraqi architecture, Iraqi identity, national belonging

Over recent decades, substantial architectural transformations have been observed across Iraqi cities, resulting in significant alterations to their visual character, identity, and urban fabric. Within this context, iconic architecture has increasingly been recognized as a critical driver in shaping urban identity, contributing both aesthetic value and symbolic meaning to the city image. In this study, the relationship between urban image and public perception of iconic architectural landmarks in Iraq was systematically examined. A descriptive-analytical approach was adopted, and data were collected through an online questionnaire administered to 102 participants from central and southern Iraqi governorates. Based on the exploratory nature of the research, analytical emphasis was placed on Baghdad, which was identified by 85.3% of respondents ($n = 87$) as the primary locus of iconic architectural representation. A comparative evaluation was conducted on three prominent projects—the Central Bank of Iraq Tower, the Martyrs' Monument, and the Heart of the World Hotel—using a five-dimensional analytical framework encompassing architectural design, technological expression, symbolic significance, media representation, and urban impact. The findings indicate that the Central Bank of Iraq Tower was most strongly perceived as iconic (41.4%), followed by the Martyrs' Monument (19.5%) and the Heart of the World Hotel (11.5%). Furthermore, iconicity was predominantly associated with design distinctiveness by 73.6% of participants, whereas only 1.1% attributed it to environmental sustainability considerations. These results suggest that, within the Iraqi context, the perception of iconic architecture is primarily driven by formal clarity, visual prominence, and symbolic resonance, rather than by environmental performance. Consequently, iconic architecture is inferred to play a pivotal role in reinforcing urban identity and enhancing the global image and competitiveness of Iraqi cities.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has become common to view iconic buildings as tangible embodiments of an imagined (or contested) urban future. Urban buildings contribute to reshaping a city's image and symbolic identity, as well as altering its urban landscape by portraying cities as creative, pioneering, or sustainable. In this way, these buildings constitute unique urban markers that distinguish cities worldwide [1]. The physical and visual characteristics of these buildings produce symbolic systems that influence public opinion and enhance the experiential value of areas for both local residents and tourists, creating new cultural and social dimensions [2-4].

In the Iraqi context, architecture has historically been a tool of civilizational expression; it helps build the nation's cultural identity and foster a sense of belonging as it manages to amalgamate between emphasizing local specificity on the one hand and reflecting transforming global influences on the other hand. In Iraq, traditional Iraqi architecture, as in other contexts, is shaped by dynamic interactions between environmental conditions and social structures, exhibiting adaptive flexibility that supports a functionally grounded and culturally embedded identity [5]. Although the country has a

long history of grand architectural projects, and iconic buildings dominate many urban skylines around the world, little empirical research exists on how iconic architecture can contribute to defining urban identity and city image in Iraq—especially within post-crisis cities where built forms might shape collective memory and future urban visions.

Amid rapid political, economic, and technological transformations, iconic architecture in Iraq has emerged not merely as a functional trend but as a cultural and symbolic tool capable of reshaping urban identity [6]. Within this framework, this study investigates whether contemporary Iraqi architecture can produce iconic exemplars that authentically reflect Iraqi society and historical richness, or whether increasing globalization has led to architectural forms that weaken local symbolic identity.

The research question posed is that specific architectural experiences in Iraq have a degree of balance between modernization and national identity patternmaking, which can be tested empirically. The research is descriptive and analytical in nature, involving a field survey of 102 randomized interview respondents from central and southern Iraq with comparative case study analysis of three major architectural projects in Baghdad: the Central Bank of Iraq

building, the Martyrs' Monument and the Heart of the World Hotel. This study argues that while these projects exhibit significant characteristics of iconic architecture, their contribution to identity formation depends on the extent to which their design strategies align with locally relevant cultural and environmental indicators, supported by planning and design frameworks.

In order to specify the analytic scope and conceptual limits of this study, it is driven by the following research questions:

- What are the architectural features characterizing an iconic building?
- How do participants' preferences and experiences influence the identification of iconic buildings?
- To what extent does iconic architecture influence the perceived image of Baghdad and its urban identity?

These are the research questions informing the analytical framework of this research and directing its methodological approach to an investigation into iconic architecture and city image and identity.

1.1 Iraqi architecture

The variety of elements that are closely related to the climatic and social environment of the country characterizes traditional Iraqi architecture in comparison to other states. Gelernter, in his work about the origin and sources of the traditional forms of architecture, mentioned that the early master builders used an incremental technique of trial and error. This practice helped them to develop better architectural solutions that were socially suitable and environmentally responsive in the face of changing generations. A failure was succeeded by a better one. When a success model was created, it was passed over to the subsequent generation as a conventional practice [5].



Figure 1. Main components of the traditional house in historic Al-Kadhimiya [7]

Environmental and social conditions in this way became core forces in influencing the design and planning of traditional architecture in Iraq, ranging from fine-grained architectural details to spatial configurations. The example of this relationship is the traditional Iraqi house, the inner arrangement of which is designed around the central courtyard. This yard serves as the central area where households are organized, ensuring a pleasant interior microclimate, a high level of privacy and social and visual contact of various sections of the residence [7]. Figure 1 shows the main components of the traditional house in Al-Kadhimiya—such as the iwan, the sardab, the kafish kan, and the ursi reflecting climatic adaptation and internal spatial

organization.

The old Iraqi architecture was subsequently altered by the foreign culture that brought in the Western ideas and concepts that exerted a profound influence on the local society. The impact was demonstrated through the wholesale importation and replication of world architectures, which to a large extent compromised the functional and cultural appropriateness of local building traditions [8]. In this atmosphere of an age-old vernacular tradition, the slow influx of outside ideas, technologies, and customs prepared the ground for the advent of modern architecture in Iraq.

1.2 Modern architecture in Iraq

The earliest emergence of modern architecture in Iraq is linked to the late nineteenth century, when the Ottoman government commissioned Germany to construct a railway line connecting Europe with the Middle East. This project marked the actual starting point of the Orient Express and the Berlin–Baghdad railway. Through this process, German engineers contributed to the introduction of modern design concepts and new building materials into Iraq and supervised the construction of a number of facilities, most notably railway stations. In this context, Baghdad Central Station (Figure 2) represents an early example reflecting the transfer of European architectural influence into the Iraqi urban environment [9].



Figure 2. Baghdad Central Station [10]

A clearly defined and coherent architectural identity in Iraq did not emerge until after 1921, when significant urban transformations accompanied the establishment of the modern Iraqi state. During this period, British military engineers were appointed to official positions, including that of “Government Architect,” and were responsible for the design of numerous public buildings that responded to the requirements of the emerging administrative system. Ahmad Mukhtar Ibrahim was subsequently appointed as the first Iraqi government architect, while simultaneously serving as head of the Public Works Directorate. At this critical stage in the development of local architecture, both foreign expertise and emerging national professionals contributed to shaping the design processes and architectural character of buildings in Iraq [8].

These accumulated transformations in political, economic, and social structures over successive decades resulted in a substantial reshaping of Iraqi architecture, which evolved not as a linear process but as a dynamic development driven by the continuous introduction of new influencing factors. This in turn gave rise to new architectural expressions, along with distinct trends and schools, which can be categorized into identifiable historical periods [11]. Based on these premises, the history of the national architecture in Iraq in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be divided into five main periods [5, 12].

1.2.1 Colonial era and early transition (1914–1930)

This phase reflects the movement from traditional Iraqi architecture towards the introduction of modern planning and construction during British occupation and the building of a contemporary Iraqi nation. During this period, European design systems and architectural fashions were imported to satisfy institutional needs and also urban growth, while certain local traditions influencing building configurations were retained. The integration of site-specific references with imported architectural models led to a hybrid that directly influenced the modern architectural identity; such transformation is, for example, described in the Aal-Al-bait School (Figure 3) where one can observe how classical elements were accommodated into new architectural perception.



Figure 3. Aal Al-Bait School, Baghdad (1922) [5]

1.2.2 Early modern Iraqi architecture (1930–1950)

During this period, the consolidation of new architectural practices in Iraqi cities centered on administrative expansion, which shaped the transformation of urban forms and fabric. The transitional nature of this period is evident in Figure 4, which integrates traditional architectural elements into a modern spatial organization. Laws, such as the Municipalities Law of 1931 and the Roads and Buildings Law of 1935, also had a significant impact on building regulations and the creation of a local architectural style that later paved the way for the emergence of iconic urban features.



Figure 4. Industrial Exhibition, Baghdad (1932) [5]

1.2.3 Advanced modernist transformation (1950–1960)

This phase was characterized by a broadening of design experimentation and a focus on modernist ideas. Architects concentrated on creating a modern architectural language based on contemporary principles, employing new materials and construction methods, as well as innovative approaches to facades. Furthermore, climate responsiveness became a fundamental criterion in building design, combining climatic performance with modern design, as clearly demonstrated in the Rafidain Bank building (Figure 5), which reflects the integration of environmental performance within a modern design framework that balances functionality and aesthetics.



Figure 5. Al-Rafidain Bank, Baghdad (1954) [5]

1.2.4 Architectural identity reinterpretation (1960–1980)

This period represented a conceptual shift towards redefining architectural identity by incorporating historical references into modern design. To support the expression of local identity, architects gradually reintroduced cultural and historical features instead of simply adopting elements of modernity. This trend is clearly evident in the design of the Federation of Industries building (Figure 6), where traditional elements are reinterpreted in a contemporary style, reflecting "a blend of respect for heritage, the spirit of the age, and modernity."



Figure 6. Federation of Industries, Baghdad (1966) [5]

1.2.5 Contemporary Iraqi architecture (1980–Present)

This phase represents a pivotal stage in the history of Iraqi architecture, heavily influenced by political and economic conditions, as well as by the increasing impact of globalization. Since 2003, many urban projects have adopted a global architectural style, characterized by skyscrapers, glass structures, and the use of new materials that lend the architecture an international character. These modifications have played a significant role in reshaping the urban fabric, with iconic buildings becoming visual and symbolic elements in the city's renewal process. Figure 7 illustrates this shift towards a stronger visual presence in the urban environment.



Figure 7. Modern architecture in Basra City [12]

1.3 Iconic architecture

The terms “icon” and “iconic” are closely related, with ‘iconic’ denoting the quality of possessing strong symbolic significance and high recognizability [13]. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2011), an icon is a picture, sculpture or image of a person who is highly regarded or regarded as a god. On the same note, Merriam-Webster (2017) describes an icon as a visual image or symbol which is treated with a great degree of reverence and says that “iconic” is a term used to designate something that is commonly recognized and globally acclaimed because of its distinctiveness and cultural influence.

The term “iconic” is typical of architecture, where it refers to buildings that have unusual, symbolical shapes, convey a clear conceptual message, and stand out through exceptional design quality and precise execution [14]. A widely cited example is the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, whose striking design is linked to wider debates on urban revitalization and the reshaping of city image, often discussed under the label of the “Bilbao effect” [15]. According to the literature review, it becomes evident that academics and professionals provide a variety of definitions for iconic architecture. A selection of the most cited definitions of iconic architecture is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the main definitions and conceptualizations of iconic architecture

Reference	Definition of Iconic Architecture
[16]	Buildings with significant visual symbolism, frequently created for commercial or promotional reasons, and distinguished by unique shapes and conspicuous positions that depart from conventional architectural evaluation standards are referred to as iconic architecture.
[17]	Iconic buildings are defined as structures that embody the identity of a city or region and act as visual landmarks through which people recognize a place and connect with it and its cultural memory.
[18]	The iconic architecture contains buildings that go beyond their practical purpose into cultural or historical meaning and their worth lies in symbolic and aesthetic meaning.
[19]	Iconic architecture is the modern buildings created by highly reputable artists, where bright visual statements are used to add more value to the building and lift its popularity among the masses.
[20]	Iconic architecture shows its spatial and time-specificity and becomes iconic due to the design, symbolism, or purpose. It also represents an embodiment of cultural identity and national pride, exerting a clear influence on the urban and social context.
[21]	Iconic architecture comprises distinctive structures that represent symbolic, aesthetic, cultural or religious connotations, whose significance is derived from both public and professional recognition, often as a result of their scale, location, or innovative structural design.

As discussed in the literature review, iconic architecture has been considered from various perspectives that focus on visual uniqueness, symbolic significance, and potential to impact city image and identity. Academics have pointed out that such iconic buildings are based on not only aesthetic

exceptionalism or formal innovation but also the power to express cultural value, establish worldwide recognizability and develop social and urban performance.

Based on these views, a locally adapted operational definition is used in this study. An iconic building is defined as a structure that possesses an iconic architectural form and distinctive characteristics and has a tangible urban impact on the image and identity of cities. Contrary to approaches that understand iconicity solely in terms of global visibility, aesthetic uniqueness, or exclusivity, the concept of iconicity is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing technical innovation and originality in design, cultural significance and symbolic value, media impact, and the potential to shape urban identity.

1.3.1 Characteristics and classification of iconic architecture

Multiple approaches have been used to classify the characteristics of iconic architecture. Sklair [22] emphasized fame and symbolism, suggesting that iconic buildings gain recognition through function, location, or size and represent a specific culture or historical period. Jencks [16] highlighted uniqueness (in height, design, or location) and expressive power, which together generate strong visual and symbolic impact. Betsky [23] proposed eleven criteria, including visual impressiveness, audience interaction, unity of form, fluidity, monumentality, transparency, ideal symbolism, and mystery. Nagy [24] categorized iconicity in relation to globalization and unique design, modern technologies, and wider religious, political, and economic factors. Tomlinson [25] identified key factors such as long historical background, unique design, and record-breaking milestones. Gaber et al. [26] identified seven categories, including stunning representation, contextual challenge, symbolism, durability, simplicity, harmony, and metaphorical forms. Kuyrukçu [27] focused on uniqueness, monumental scale, modern technologies, landmark visibility, and symbolism. Ibrahim and Abdul-Salam [21] highlighted visual impressiveness, uniqueness and symbolism, architectural creativity, global recognition, and modern technologies. Brizotti-Pasquotto and Medrano [28] further noted that commissioning a world-renowned architect can be a decisive factor in producing an iconic building.

Overall, this review suggests that the core characteristics of iconic architecture can be grouped into five main categories, forming a comprehensive framework for analysis, as summarized in Table 2.

Starting from these specific characteristics, the research is grounded in an overarching theoretical framework that follows the logic of iconic architecture theory, place branding and city image. This framework combines three main pillars. First of all, iconic architecture theory, as developed by Jencks [16], helps to comprehend the architectural iconicity in terms of visual identity, historic meaning and identification with place. Second, the theory of place branding developed by Kavaratzis and Hatch [3] is used to interpret iconic buildings and their contribution as effective instruments for creating a city’s image and strengthening its identity. Third, the notion of city image and urban perception relating to Kevin Lynch’s theory helps in learning about the role of architectural landmarks in shaping the collective image of cities. These views constitute an extensive theoretical platform on which the present analysis is based.

Table 2. Key characteristics of iconic architecture

Category	Characteristics
Design	Distinct architectural form, unique location and scale, and overall design concept
Technology	Using cutting-edge building technology, creative materials, contemporary façade systems, and high-performance building solutions
Symbolism	The project is built with reference to cultural or national identity, representing values and ideas related to place, history, and context.
Media & Marketing Influence	Strong media and visual presence, worldwide awareness, and the architect's or project's reputation
Urban Impact	Contribution to the city's image and identity, landmark visibility, tourist and economic impact, and interaction or contrast with the urban setting

Participants' opinions of architectural uniqueness, symbolic importance, landmark recognizability, and their perceived role in forming city image and urban identity were used in this study to gauge these concepts.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To incorporate both quantitative and qualitative perspectives, an exploratory descriptive–analytical approach was adopted to collect data through an online survey. A non-probability sampling method was used, in which volunteers from central and southern governorates of Iraq were enrolled through social networks (Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp). The survey was administered via the internet through Google Forms and was conducted over a two-week period in December 2025; a total of 102 eligible participants were included. Demographic characteristics among respondents such as gender, age and residential governorates are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Demographic study of participants (n = 102)

Variables	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	50
	Female	51
	Total	102
Age (year)	Less than 20	15.7
	20-29	31.4
	30-39	26
	40-49	15
	≥ 50	13
Residence	Total	102
	Babylon	15
	Baghdad	19
	Karbala	20
	Najaf	12
	Al-Muthanna	13
	Maysan	14
	Basrah	9
	Total	102

The questionnaire was administered in simplified Modern Standard Arabic and consisted of single-item questions designed to explore participants' perceptions of iconic architecture in Iraq and its relationship to city image and urban identity. The survey questions were organized according to an

exploratory analytical sequence aimed at developing a progressive analytical path, beginning with the identification of the governorate perceived to contain the largest number of contemporary architectural landmarks, which served as the primary reference for subsequent analysis. Based on the selected governorate, subsequent questions addressed preferred landmarks for photographic activities, visitation patterns and motivations, as well as architectural features perceived as distinctive, with certain items permitting multiple responses.

As the questionnaire relied on single-item measures rather than multi-item scales, reliability statistics such as Cronbach's alpha were not applicable. It was voluntary to participate and all participants provided informed consent regarding the response anonymity. Data were processed in a secure manner, and access followed the regular academically acceptable ethical guidelines.

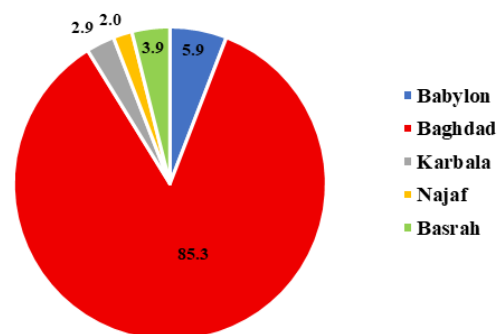
3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey included a set of items designed to assess participants' knowledge and perceptions of iconic buildings in Iraq, with a focus on their geographical distribution and the architectural features that contribute to their distinctiveness.

The first question asked participants to identify the Iraqi governorate that contained the largest number of modern architectural landmarks. The results (n = 102) showed a clear concentration in favor of Baghdad, which was selected by 87 participants (85.3%). Other governorates received considerably lower percentages, including Babylon (5.9%), Karbala (3.9%), Basrah (2.9%), and Najaf (2.0%) (Table 4 and Figure 8).

Table 4. Distribution of perceived architectural landmarks by governorate (n = 102)

Governorate	Number	Percentage (%)
Baghdad	87	85.3
Babylon	6	5.9
Basrah	4	3.9
Karbala	3	2.9
Najaf	2	2.0
Total	102	100

**Figure 8.** Percentage distribution of perceived architectural landmarks by governorate (n = 102)

The strong concentration in Baghdad observed may be attributed to the fact that it is the political and administrative capital of Iraq, with many government bodies as well as large economic and cultural entities. This centrality contributes to

its media presence and visibility in the visible public sphere, where it is seen as an urban symbol in the realm of city image. Furthermore, its central position within the national urban system, combined with a high concentration of modern architectural landmarks, reinforces its dominant role. However, it should be noted that the sample distribution and the individuals' close proximity to Baghdad may result in a bias in favor of this city. Based on these findings, Baghdad was selected as the reference case for subsequent sub-analyses, and the analytical sample was restricted to participants who selected this option (n = 87). This approach is consistent with an exploratory research design, as it focuses on the most representative pattern identified in the data.

The subsequent question examined participants' preferred modern landmarks or buildings within the selected governorate for photographic purposes. Since the majority chose Baghdad (n = 87), the analysis focused only on those respondents. Participants were allowed to select multiple landmarks. Therefore, the total percentages exceeded 100%. The results show that the Central Bank of Iraq was the most frequently chosen landmark, selected by approximately 36 participants, representing 41.4% of the total. This was followed by the Martyrs' Monument (19.5%) and then the Heart of the World Hotel (11.5%). The percentages were lower for other landmarks, with 18 mentioned only once (1.1% of the total mentions each), such as the Baghdad University Gate, the Abbasid Palace, and the Jadriya Bridge, among many others (Table 5 and Figure 9).

Table 5. Preferred modern landmarks among Baghdad respondents (n = 87; multiple responses allowed)

Modern Landmarks	Number	Percentage (%)
Central Bank of Iraq	36	41.4
Martyrs' Monument	17	19.5
Heart of the World Hotel	10	11.5
Baghdad Tower	4	4.6
Al-Mutanabbi Street	3	3.4
Baghdad Mall	2	2.3
Umm Al-Tubul Mosque	2	2.3
Freedom Monument	2	2.3
Al-Mansour Mall	2	2.3
Federation of Iraqi Industries	1	1.1
Khan Murjan	1	1.1
Prime Minister's Office Building	1	1.1
Al-Jadriya Bridge	1	1.1
University of Baghdad Gate	1	1.1
One Thousand and One Nights Resort and Park	1	1.1
Shrine of Imam Musa Al-Kadhim	1	1.1
Tahrir Square	1	1.1
Unknown Soldier Monument	1	1.1
Ministry of Interior	1	1.1
Shiite Endowment Building	1	1.1
Babylon Hotel	1	1.1
Abbasid Palace	1	1.1
Baghdad International Airport	1	1.1

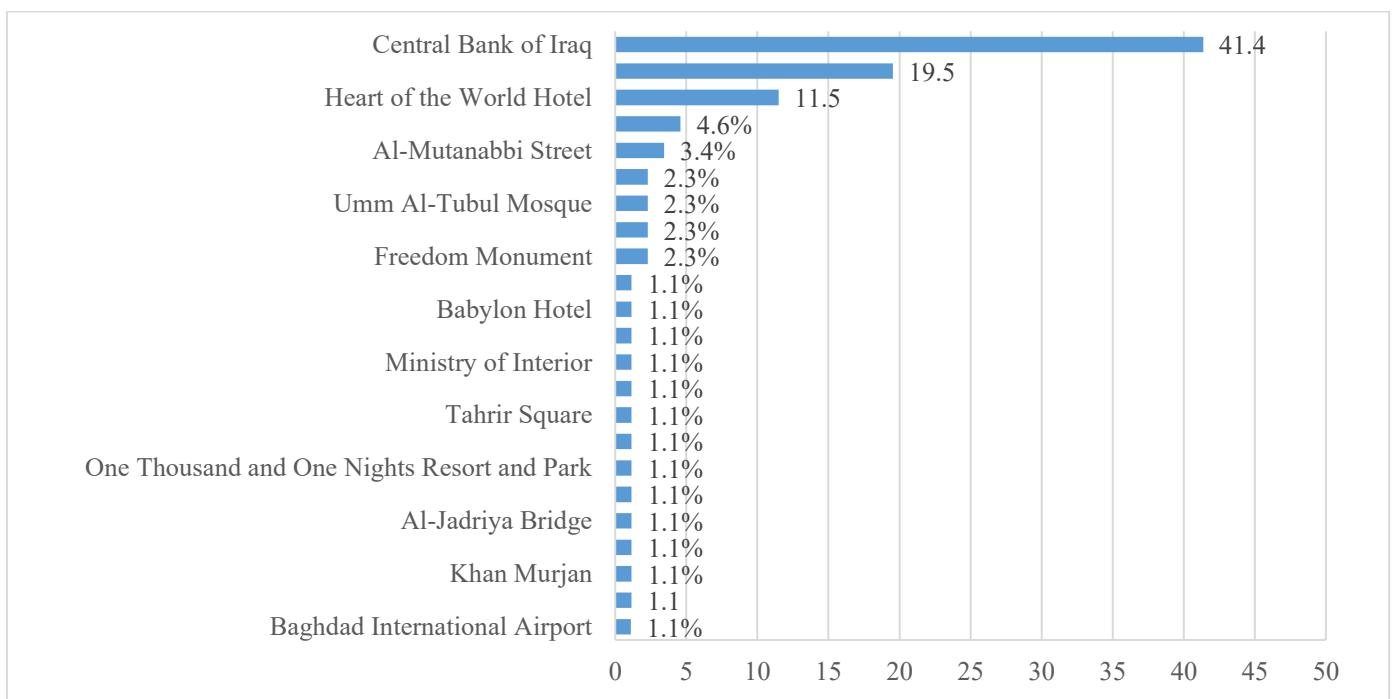


Figure 9. Distribution of preferred modern landmarks among Baghdad respondents (n = 87; multiple responses allowed)

The survey revealed that the Central Bank of Iraq was the most popular choice, demonstrating participants' preference for distinctive, modern design and a strong institutional presence. The Martyrs' Monument highlights the enduring importance of national symbolism in the collective memory. The Heart of the World Hotel, on the other hand, represents a modern landmark of luxury and commercial architecture, particularly relevant in a local context lacking similar prominent hotels within the city's fabric. Furthermore, this wide variety of architectural landmarks and symbols chosen

by participants reflects individual differences in architectural perception, demonstrating that symbolism and iconicity are shaped not only by public recognition but also by cultural familiarity and personal connection within the collective memory.

The next question asked whether the participant had ever visited the selected landmark/building in Baghdad. The findings showed a nearly even split: 51.7% of respondents had visited the landmark, while 48.3% had not (Table 6 and Figure 10).

Table 6. Visitation status of the selected landmark among Baghdad respondents (n = 87)

Visits	Number	Percentage (%)
Yes	45	51.7
No	42	48.3
Total	87	100

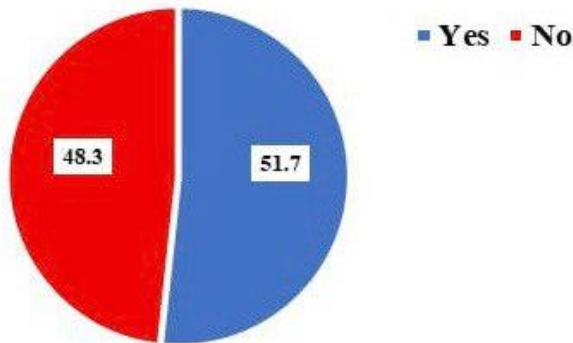


Figure 10. Self-reported visits to the selected landmark (n = 87)

The survey results show that architectural symbolic perceptions are not primarily based on direct physical interaction. In many cases, these associations are formed through visual exposure, media representation, or symbolic presence in public discourse.

The next question examined the main factors that motivated participants to travel to the chosen architectural monument in Baghdad. Only those participants (n = 45) who reported having visited the chosen landmark responded to this question. The findings show that 48.9% of respondents chose leisure or tourism as their primary motivator. Curiosity or exploration came in second (22.2%). Attending an event or occasion and going with friends or family each made up 13.3%, while studying or working made up 15.6%. At 6.7%, religious motive was the least common (Table 7 and Figure 11).

Table 7. Motivations for visiting the selected architectural landmark among Baghdad participants (n = 45; multiple responses allowed)

Reasons	Number	Percentage (%)
Tourism or Leisure	22	48.9
Curiosity/Exploration	10	22.2
Study or Work	7	15.6
Accompanying Friends/Family	6	13.3
Event or Occasion	6	13.3
Religious Reasons	3	6.7

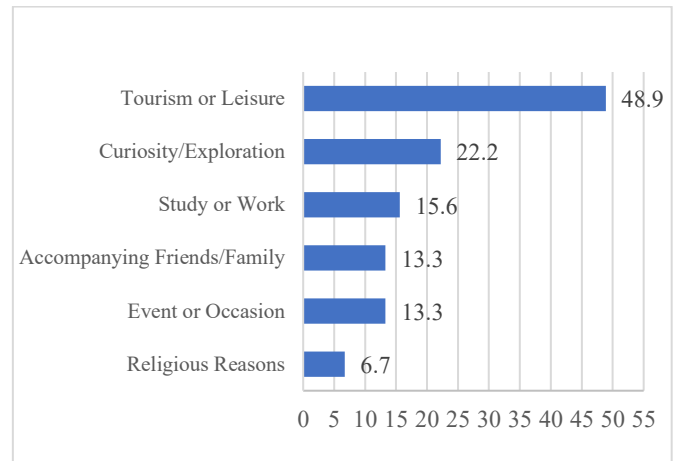


Figure 11. Reasons for visiting the selected landmark (n = 45; multiple responses allowed)

The prevalence of tourism and leisure motivations indicates that these landmarks are not merely iconic or symbolic structures, but rather preferred destinations within the city's urban experience. It also reveals the existence of other motivations, such as curiosity, attending events, or professional purposes, highlighting the multiple functions these buildings perform in fostering individual interaction with the built environment.

Table 8. Association between gender and reasons for visiting (n = 45)

Reasons	Male (n=23)		Female (n = 22)		χ^2 (P-Value)	Cramer's V
	Selected	Not Selected	Selected	Not Selected		
Tourism or Leisure	11 (47.8%)	12 (52.2%)	11 (50%)	11 (50%)	0.884	0.022
Religious Reasons	3 (13%)	20 (87%)	0	22 (100%)	0.080	0.261
Event or Occasion	3 (13%)	20 (87%)	3 (13.6%)	19 (86.4%)	0.953	0.009
Accompanying Friends/Family	2 (8.7%)	21 (91.3%)	4 (18.2%)	18 (81.8%)	0.349	0.139
Study or Work	3 (13%)	20 (87%)	4 (18.2%)	18 (81.8%)	0.634	0.071
Curiosity/Exploration	6 (26.1%)	17 (73.9%)	4 (18.2%)	18 (81.8%)	0.524	0.095

The chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between gender and reasons for visiting among participants who reported visiting the selected landmark (n = 45), with a significance level of $p \leq 0.05$ and the use of Cramer's V coefficient to estimate the effect size (Table 8).

The results showed no statistically significant relationship between gender and reasons for visiting (all p values > 0.05), indicating that differences in motivation were not gender-related within the sample under study.

Finally, the last question addressed the main reasons behind participants' choice of a specific architectural landmark in Baghdad. The results also indicate that unique architectural

design was the most prominent factor, cited by 73.6% of participants. This was followed by the fact that the building was designed by a well-known architect (36.8%). Representing identity or history and being located in a popular and well-known area were mentioned equally (25.3% each). Additional motivations included the location's suitability for photography (17.2%) and its potential for social media presence (14.9%). The least common factors were environmental sustainability and the expression of a philosophical idea, each chosen by only 1.1% of participants (Table 9 and Figure 12).

Table 9. Perceived factors that make a landmark unique (n = 87; multiple responses allowed)

Factors	Number	Percentage (%)
Distinctive Architectural Design	64	73.6
Designed by a Renowned Architect	32	36.8
Represents Identify or History	22	25.3
Famous and Well-Known Location	22	25.3
Suitable for Photography	15	17.2
Seen on Social Media	13	14.9
Environmentally Sustainable Design	1	1.1
Smart Expression of Philosophical Idea	1	1.1

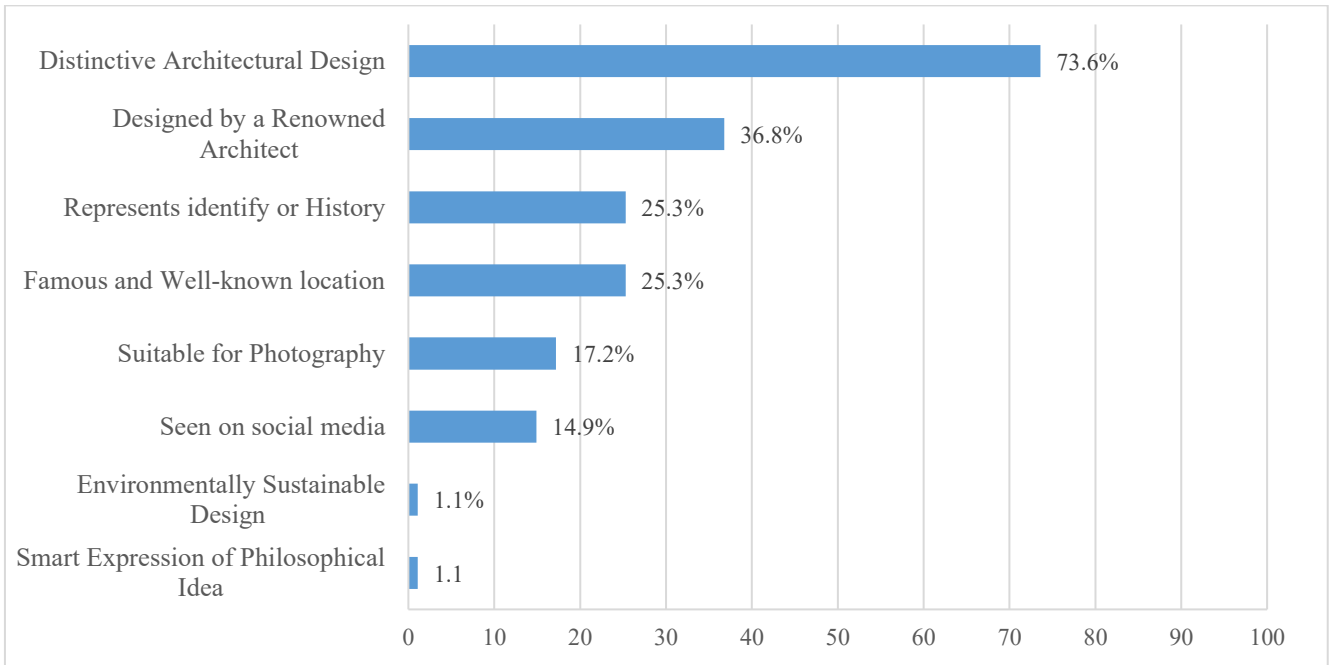


Figure 12. Distribution of perceived factors that make a landmark unique among Baghdad participants (n = 87; multiple responses allowed)

The results indicate that aesthetics and visual distinctiveness are the two main characteristics participants consider when evaluating iconic buildings. This aligns with the theoretical point made by Jencks [16], which emphasizes uniqueness, visual contrast, and expressive value as key features of iconic architecture. It also relates to the literature on symbolic architecture, including the "Bilbao effect," where visually iconic buildings are used to reshape a city's identity and enhance its symbolic media presence through design, sometimes at the expense of environmental or functional considerations. Participants undoubtedly praised the distinctive architectural style, the symbolic significance of its meaning, and its connection to prominent architects. This interpretation is consistent with the arguments of Betsky [23], who considers visual and symbolic value as essential elements in the iconicity of any building. This approach also reflects spatial marketing tactics, where iconic architecture is used to enhance a city's global image, without necessarily prioritizing sustainability.

The low rate of sustainability being identified as a key factor

in these responses (less than 1.1%) highlights the prevailing view of iconicity as a model that links distinctive architectural character with symbolic and aesthetic values rather than environmental or performance criteria. This weak tendency may be attributed to low public awareness of sustainable design, the scarcity of environmentally friendly buildings in Iraq, and the limited institutional and media focus on sustainability as a means of defining architectural identity. Therefore, the preference for aesthetics over sustainability, as demonstrated in this study, can be seen as indicative of a broader range of cultural, educational, and cognitive orientations that shape how architecture is perceived and evaluated in Iraq today.

An inferential analysis using the chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between visitor status and preference for distinctive architectural design. A p-value ≤ 0.05 was considered statistically significant, and the strength of the relationship was assessed using Cramer's V coefficient (Table 10).

Table 10. Association between visitation status and preference for distinctive architectural design among participants (n = 87)

Factors	Visiting		P-Value	Cramer's V
	Yes	No		
Distinctive Architectural Design	28 (32.2%)	17 (19.5%)	0.006	0.297

The results showed a statistically significant relationship between visit status and preference for distinctive architectural design ($p = 0.006$, Cramer's $V = 0.297$), indicating that participants with direct experience of the landmark were more likely to consider architectural distinctiveness an important factor in shaping its symbolism. The Cramer's V value indicates a small to moderate effect size.

4. ICONIC BUILDING ANALYSIS

Building on the survey findings, three prominent landmarks were selected for qualitative analysis. Selection was guided by their high rankings in respondents' preferences and their relevance to the study's iconicity criteria:

- Central Bank of Iraq Tower (Zaha Hadid Architects)
- Al-Shaheed (Martyrs') Monument (Ismail Fattah al-Turk, in association with architect Saman Kamal)
- Heart of the World Hotel, Baghdad (operated/managed under Dex Squared Hospitality)

The following subsections analyze these three case studies across five key dimensions of iconicity: design, technology, symbolism, media/marketing influence, and urban impact.

4.1 Central Bank Tower, Baghdad

The new headquarters of the Central Bank of Iraq is regarded as one of the most significant contemporary architectural achievements in Baghdad and represents the first building designed by the late architect Zaha Hadid within Iraq. It is situated on the shores of the Tigris River, where it has acquired a certain level of significance as the highest skyscraper that is under construction in the country. The site area of the project is about 19,000 m² and it consists of 37 stories up to a height of about 170 m. It houses a diversified assortment of purposes, such as administrative offices, conference halls, currency and gold stores in vaults, a museum, a theater, and landscaped open spaces all around. The Central Bank of Iraq commissioned the building in 2012 and it was built by the Azerbaijani firm Daax Construction at a contract worth approximately US\$800 million [29].

4.1.1 Design concept

The architectural concept of the project of the headquarters of the Central Bank of Iraq is based on the symbolic vision inspired by the Tigris River which is a historical and cultural axis in Baghdad's identity. The building articulates the heart institutional values of the bank (solidity, stability and sustainability) through a modern global architecture language through a dynamic massing strategy. The tower is raised on a slender base that increases in width at the middle to maximize the functional performance, and subsequently decreases at the summit, giving an image of a clear compromise between the beauty and the functionality of the tower. An expansive inner yard creates a feeling of natural light in the center of the structure as well as supporting a symbolic and aesthetic relationship to the nearby riverfront. The façade is articulated with a systematic rhythm of closed and open sections which evoke the rippling and flowing of the Tigris, abstractly generating dynamic light patterns. The exoskeleton flanks upwards in the vertical bands towards the river, enhancing a visual relationship of the building with its context. Terraced gardens cascade to the street, thrusting the podium into its surrounds and thus connecting the project to the broader

context both functionally and aesthetically.

However, despite its apparent integration with the surrounding context, there are professional commentaries showing that this design fails to achieve a true link with local cultural identity. On the contrary, it is also generally perceived as an offshoot of the deconstructivist philosophy and design language of Zaha Hadid rather than a direct subsequent from Baghdad's vernacular or its traditional architecture. This tension has contributed to a mixed perception of the project. On the one hand, the building has gained widespread recognition and support due to its striking architectural expression. On the other hand, its global prominence is frequently attributed more to the reputation of its architect than to its contextual integration within the local urban and cultural fabric. Nevertheless, the headquarters of the Central Bank of Iraq can be regarded as a representative example of contemporary Iraqi architecture, reflecting aspirations for modernization and architectural innovation while offering an alternative to purely global-oriented design narratives [29]. As shown in Figures 13(a)-(c), the main external and internal views of the tower illustrate the massing strategy, façade articulation, and interior spatial organization discussed above.

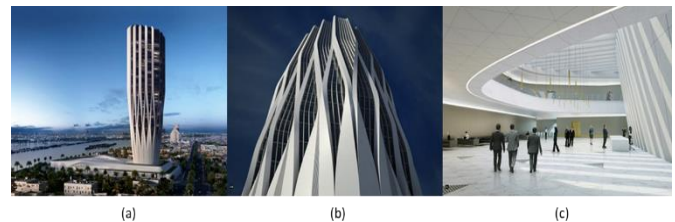


Figure 13. Views of the Central Bank Tower in Baghdad: (a) Overall riverfront view; (b) close-up of the sculpted façade and vertical exoskeleton; (c) interior view of the main lobby [30]

4.1.2 Distinctive achievements and iconic features

The Central Bank of Iraq building is regarded as a modern architectural masterpiece, distinguished by its strategic location along the banks of the Tigris River and a form that evokes the movement of water, in addition to its striking height as the tallest skyscraper currently under construction in Iraq. The design reflects a blend of architectural and structural openness, supported by advanced technologies that enhance operational efficiency and strengthen safety standards. The project marks a notable shift in contemporary architectural discourse in Baghdad and can be interpreted within the framework of deconstructivism, which lends the building a global symbolic character. However, this has, in turn, diminished its connection to local cultural identity.

The donation of assistance by the late architect Zaha Hadid greatly increased the symbolic nature of the building and raised its profile worldwide. Moreover, the Central Bank of Iraq Tower have received widespread media exposure and contributed to its status as a cultural icon of nationalism in the world.

4.2 Martyrs' Monument, Baghdad

One of the most relevant commemorative projects to consider when relating to the Iran-Iraq War is the Al-Shaheed Monument in Baghdad. Construction took place from 1981 to 1983, with the monument opening in 1986. This places it in a political and social context where an official interpretation of

the war, thoughts about sacrifice and its significance were reinforced through memorial architecture. The architecture consists of two half domes, slightly offset; each dome is 40 m high and constructed of a steel frame that is clad with turquoise blue glazed ceramic tiles. The monument consists of a central, circular platform about 190 m (623 ft) in diameter and walls between 0.9 and 1.5 m (3 to 4 ft) tall with an underground museum, conceived of as a large structure suspended from the sky and resting on large columns above an artificial lake. The structure of the space contributes to a ritual sense of the place, with positive marks and symbolism in the Baghdad urban environment [31].

4.2.1 Design concept

The Al-Shaheed Monument is designed based on the inherent symbolic approach in the design concept upon the premise of uniting the national references with the religious structures into one architectural construct. This purpose is inherently captured in the main form of two half-domes of which one has included a metal Iraqi flag that is seen to be frozen at the fluttering point. It can be translated as one of the symbols to visualize the soul of the martyr as it is lifted up at the moment of death. Simultaneously, the two domes are perceived as a recollection of the mosque-type dome in architecture, which places the concept of martyrdom in the sacred scale and strengthens the religious nature of the celebration area.

The commemorative image is thus stylized with the aid of water and an artificial lake as organizing principles that infuse a calming, contemplative tone into the monument and inscribe its interpretation into a discourse about eternity in martyrdom. Historically and semiotically, the turquoise glazed surface carries yet another meaning because it conjures up Mesopotamian heritage. This is communicated conceptually through direct reference to the Ishtar Gate as an early example of blue glazed facing in Babylonian architecture and underlines a semantic rhetoric of national identity today that is deeply rooted in historical imaginary. According to this definition, the memorial was erected in honor of the martyrs of Iraq in the Battle of Qadisiyah, which placed the project in the context of the discourse and simulation of war, and made it a memorial artifact that helps in building public memory through the use of architectural language and spatial symbols [31]. Figures 14(a)-(c) show the main views of the monument: the urban setting of the monument and the symbolic twin dome configuration, the lake and the circular platform. The representational role of the city derives from its function as a point where myth and history intersect.

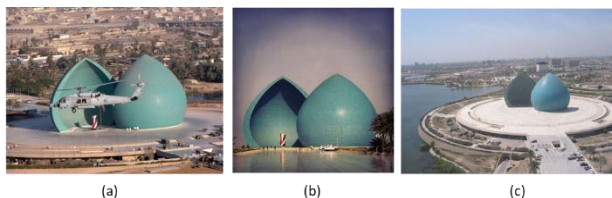


Figure 14. Views of the Martyrs' Monument in Baghdad: (a) Aerial view within its urban context; (b) frontal view of the twin domes; (c) aerial view of the circular platform and artificial lake [32]

4.2.2 Distinctive achievements and iconic features

The Martyrs' Monument stands proudly on the eastern bank

of the Tigris River and features two interlocking semi-domes, forming a unique landmark in the heart of Baghdad. The monument's symbolism is rooted in the memory of martyrs, while its blue ceramic facade evokes the cultural heritage of ancient Mesopotamia (particularly the Ishtar Gate), cementing its place as one of the deepest roots of Iraqi historical identity. Technically, it boasts a rich structure, employing a steel framework clad in glazed ceramic tiles, which enhances both the material's properties and its architectural impact. The building embodies a dual symbolism of national and spiritual identity. This phenomenon is closely linked to the collective memory of the Iran-Iraq War and foreshadows the symbolic presence of the Iraqi flag as a symbol of sacrifice and identity.

4.3 Heart of the World Hotel, Baghdad

Heart of the World Hotel in Baghdad is one of the key projects in regards to investing in the hospitality industry in Iraq, with the intention to launch the industry to a better level and provide a new standard of lavish accommodation. The development features a total of 320 units, comprising 285 rooms, 35 suites, and 54 serviced apartments suitable for long stay. The property is managed and operated by Dex Squared Hospitality, a major local operator known for its innovation and excellence in the hospitality trade across the Middle East. The hotel is strategically located in the pure heart of Baghdad and offers a panoramic view of the Tigris River, with various facilities to cater for hospitality or business events. The development includes a convention palace with a 240-seat auditorium, two big ballrooms and many high-tech meeting rooms. Besides this, there are branded restaurants and a shopping mall with 150 retail shops that further enhance the idea of the hotel as a multifunctional destination that can cater to leisure travelers [33].

4.3.1 Design concept

The architectural vision of the Heart of the World Hotel turns it into a new urban marker capable of offering panoramic views to the city while aiming for the glassy front to work as a world generator, which generates the main visual experience. It can be justified by a high-performance building-envelope strategy and innovative use of aluminum. The CW50 curtain wall and roof system is employed for its versatility, enhanced thermal performance, and simplified installation. The ES50 window and door system is characterized by a minimalist design language with hidden hinges, which aim at creating visual clarity combined with energy efficiency. In addition, the CP130 lift-and-slide system is utilized to provide seamless continuity between interior and exterior spaces, where functional performance is integrated with aesthetic expression.

The hotel architecture is defined with the aid of a deliberate balance between visible openness, design freedom and envelope performance. This is consistent with building a mixed-use destination that includes luxury hospitality, event space and commercial services. The Heart of the World Hotel is sited to become the first luxury five-star hotel in Baghdad which can be regarded as a strategic step to contribute to both the operational and service standards in the hospitality industry at both the local and regional levels in Iraq [34]. As shown in Figure 15, the overall form and external appearance of the project illustrate its monumental scale, curved massing strategy, and façade articulation, reinforcing its intended role as a contemporary urban landmark.



Figure 15. Heart of the World Hotel, Baghdad [34]

4.3.2 Distinctive achievements and iconic features

The Heart of the World Hotel is one of the modern manifestations of iconic architecture, which blends modernity and spatial uniqueness. Its visibility is fueled by its strategic location along the Tigris River and huge mixed program (hotel rooms, luxury suites, and serviced apartments), as this packs the project as a prestigious hospitality destination in Baghdad. From both design and operational perspectives, the combined arrangement of the functions and services facilitates the holistic visitor experience and aligns the development with contemporary hospitality standards. In this regard, the project is not only a contribution to the city in the form of a functional investment facility but also serves as a conspicuous urban marker related to the developing tourism and development agenda in the city. Based on this, the three iconic structures under analysis have a set of features, which define the impact of unique architecture in determining the place identity in the contemporary world.

According to the empirical findings, five criteria of iconicity (design, technology, symbolism and media and marketing influence and urban impact) articulated in Table 11 abstract the key attributes found among the case studies.

Table 11. Classification of the three buildings according to distinctive features of iconic architecture

Criterion	Central Bank of Iraq	Martyrs' Monument	Heart of the World Hotel
Design	•	•	•
High	•	○	•
Technology	•	○	•
Symbolism	○	•	✘
Media & Marketing	•	○	○
Impact	•	○	○
Urban	•	○	○
Contextual	○	•	•
Impact	○	•	•

Notes: • indicates that the criterion is fully achieved, ○ indicates that it is partially achieved, and ✘ indicates that it is not achieved. The symbols were assigned based on a qualitative assessment of architectural, technological, symbolic, media-related, and urban characteristics associated with each case study.

All three projects satisfy the key features of architectural iconicity, but the accentuations on each of those criteria are variable. Modernity of the architecture, high level of technology development and high symbolic presence throughout the world are hallmarks for the Central Bank building. The Martyrs' Monument is an exemplar of strong national significance and historical depth while maintaining a clear and recognizable architectural form. The Heart of the World Hotel is synonymous with the modern investment-driven metamorphosis that integrates both functional performance and economic and architectural influence and can be used as a prototype of a future urban icon in modern Iraq.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this survey indicate that Baghdad is a critical reference point for contemporary architectural landmarks within the sample under study, with a distinct emphasis on public perceptions of iconic architecture in Iraq. The empirical results suggest that participants prioritized architectural distinctiveness, symbolic significance, and media presence, while environmental sustainability received minimal consideration. These findings underscore the dominance of visual and symbolic determinants in shaping public interpretations of iconic architecture in Iraq. The analysis also suggests that perceptions of distinctive architecture may extend beyond direct physical interaction, as both visitors and non-visitors demonstrated multiple levels of recognition and preference. This pattern emphasizes the potential impact of collective imagery and mediated visual exposure on the construction of urban perception, which is consistent with the theoretical perspectives found in the literature on place branding and iconic architecture.

Iconic architecture may be perceived as a potential contributor to the formulation of perceived urban identity and urban image in the Iraqi context, rather than as a singular or deterministic driver of urban transformation. Although broader discussions regarding political transitions, globalization, or institutional planning frameworks offer valuable contextual lenses, these interpretations should be considered theoretical reflections rather than direct empirical outcomes of the currently conducted study. In general, this research provides empirical evidence to discussions regarding distinctive architecture in post-transformation urban environments and underscores the significance of comprehending public perception as a critical factor in evaluating the distinctive architectural character. Future research could benefit from expanding the sample size and conducting a more in-depth study of sustainability awareness within architectural discourse.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author acknowledges the academic support provided by the University of Babylon, College of Engineering, Department of Architecture, during the preparation of this study.

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