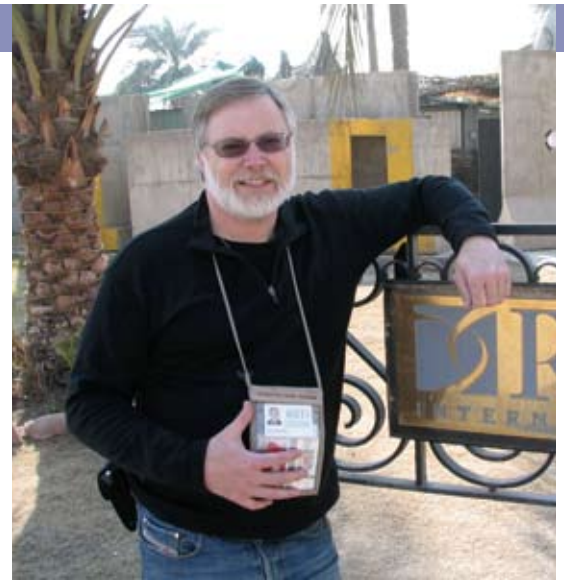


Nigel Atkin

Rebuilding Iraq on *Sound Geographical Data*



From Iraq

Town planning, accurate surveying, and keeping records safe have an ancient and ongoing tradition in many societies.

And it is rapidly evolving—in both British Columbia and in Iraq.

As British Columbia moves ahead in its ability to serve society with up-to-date electronic surveys, it is important to reflect that for only the last century-and-a-half has the stability of modern communities in British Columbia been supported by written surveys, titles, and deeds. Prior to written records, oral tradition resident in trained First Nations speakers and respected Elders denoted traditional family sites.

A modern sense of stability in BC communities has been, in part, due to the early surveys carried out by



“explorers” working for their respective executives at The Hudson’s Bay Company or for colonial governments. The surveyors provided important data on the natural geology, geography, existing and potential transportation routes, the kinds of forests, the potential for agriculture, and places for immigrant settlement.

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Based on today’s accelerating rate of change, it is not hard to predict that existing data will evolve over time, in quantity, quality, breadth, and depth. For instance, as First Nations in British Columbia re-emerge with more powers for self-government, they will be driven by their own communities’ needs for services as well as their desire for economic development.

Municipalities will also build capacity and find newer uses for electronic surveys and mapping. Perhaps historic flooding, landslide risk, the measuring of earthquake potential, reverse 911, and global positioning data can be developed for many more delivered goods and security services and will become commonplace.

As interdependent societies in British Columbia move onward from oral traditions and from those involving writing by hand, the

world as well increases its ability to embrace technology to ensure accurate geographical reference. Today, planning involves many people with ancient roots in contemporary societies.

This is true at home and abroad where people seek the stability of owning real property, the hard infrastructure that underpins a community’s wealth and public institutions and businesses services that deliver a life in which people can live freely, and prosper.

Iraq’s Provincial Development Strategies

In The Republic of Iraq, after nearly three decades of repression, war, and other strife, the country is emerging from a totalitarian dictatorship into a decentralized model driven by more public participation and free elections. In many ways Iraq is starting from scratch after the war with Iran (1980 to 1988), the First Gulf War (1991 to 1992), the internal repression and international embargo in the 1990s, the 2003 War, and the present insurgency, terrorism, and sectarian violence. Despite all this, there has been recent progress in rebuilding Iraq.

One of the current Iraq reconstruction projects involves the introduction of development planning at the provincial level. National elections have lead to citizen-driven provincial development strategies (PDS) in each



Examples of paper records being transferred to electronic records in Basrah

of Iraq's 18 provinces. The next phase of the PDS is prioritizing a vast array of projects for water, sewer, electricity infrastructure, and health, education, and social services.

On the heels of setting priorities, resource allocation from the National government will be needed to implement the projects to get communities up and working. As well, the PDS will provide a clear outline of how international donors can align their humanitarian and economic development funds to provide communities in Iraq with the services that Iraqis have prioritized to serve their people. This is leading to a time when all service delivery will be between Iraq and itself, as represented by the collective wishes of the Iraqi people.

While public awareness, understanding, and acceptance are critical to the success of the PDS, so too are the authentic base documents from which to plan and implement desired community projects.



Old Basrah maps take extreme patience and care to accurately transform in scanned images.

Planning in Basrah

In ancient Mesopotamia—where the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers flow to the Arabian Gulf, where the “cradle” begat and became one foundation of human civilization, a place where the first alphabet is reputed to have originated, where cities grew up, literally raising the geography of the land through uninterrupted habitation and commerce for thousands of years—it is both an honour and surreal to review the development strategies of places like Babil and Basrah.

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From these early villages' beginnings, some ancient cities in Iraq go back 7000 years. And, some cities were very well planned.

One relatively recent example is Basrah, founded in the year 636 and considered to be the first experience in city planning in the Islamic era.

Its people built the mosque in the centre of the city and built markets close to them to enable people to contact their leaders and observe their religion. The planning took into consideration the needs of all the tribes that inhabited Basrah. The width of its main street was 60 arm-lengths. All other streets were 20 arm-lengths wide, while the width of an alley was 7 arms.

They built squares for horses and for animal stalls and stables. Houses were close together. Because of its geographic position, lying midway between Sham and Persia, it was well positioned for commercial purposes.

Its growth accelerated and due to this, and by its authority, the Emirate of Iraq—during the Umayyad State—took Basrah as its headquarters. For many years it developed and prospered to become a commercial centre, with ships docked in its ports carrying all



Cities in Iraq are moving toward GIS technology to record existing data electronically and to plan new infrastructure services including electricity, water, and sewerage.

sorts of cargo. People flocked to it for trade and residence purposes and built palaces and planted gardens and parks.

For scholars and potential tourists in years to come, the centuries before and after this early planning era are fascinating, as it is today, with many ancient sites yet unexplored and the future potential only dreamt of, not yet tangibly imagined.

GIS in IRAQ

Good planning today involves using Information Age tools. Basrah, like BC and many other provinces in Iraq and Canada, is using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) with effect.

The Basrah Provincial Council recently requested GIS assistance in the ambitious rebuilding of Iraq's second-largest city of the same name. More than 2.5 million people live in Iraq's strategic seaport.



Basrah city staff work diligently to convert existing maps to new electronic mapping systems for planning, maintenance, and service delivery.

Considered a pilot project, the GIS initiative builds upon map scanning as part of the Local Governance Program (LGP) funded by USAID. LGP is staffed by international mapping professionals and other advisors training Iraqis and quickly building government capacity.

Developing an electronic map base compatible with modern engineering software is a time-consuming and exacting process. Many thousands of cloth maps and small paper maps—many in disrepair from neglect, floods, and wars, often dating back 100 years and more—are being carefully scanned to preserve data and prevent valuable information from being lost.

As in other societies, the scanning of the old maps will create images that can be converted to vector maps by the latest and continually evolving software programs. Some maps are too delicate or badly damaged to be scanned accurately and require patient redrawing. Some areas of the city are actually missing hard-copy maps and require resurveying. In many circumstances, aerial photography is also being used.

All Basrah city departments have been participating to produce the electronic base maps for water and sewer services, electricity distribution, urban renewal and development, and for mapping real estate interests. To date more than 150 municipal maps and upwards of 13,000 real estate maps are involved in the project.

An LGP municipal advisor placed the project in perspective, stating that GIS is a necessary tool for any development that is to be done in Basrah. The equipment for scanning, plotting, and surveying and the computers and software have been supplied by USAID.

When the Basrah GIS project is completed, the equipment will be used to train staff and produce similar maps for cities in all four provinces in the southern region of the country, the others being Maysan, Al Muthanna, and Dhi Qar.

Cities in these provinces will rise and flourish again, resurveyed and well positioned for economic growth and community stability. Basrah and many other cities from Ancient Mesopotamia are successfully using 21st century digital technology to help chart a new future in a new Iraq.

Accurate mapping to help people live better lives in comfort, safety, and economic prosperity is needed in all communities—across Iraq, where 18 GIS centres are now being established, and back home in BC.

For more on the Local Governance Program, visit www.lgp-iraq.org. ▲

Nigel Atkin, MA, is a regular contributor to *The Scrivener*. He teaches in the University of Victoria's Certificate Program in Public Relations and works as an onsite instructor and communication consultant.

Working in Iraq

In the adjacent article, Nigel Atkin shares his perspective as a regional public affairs advisor currently working in Iraq on the Local Governance Program for RTI International, a not-for-profit contractor to the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

His work involves a range of activity from capacity-building to helping Iraqis at different levels of government improve relationships, plan strategically, and effectively disseminate public information.

He is posted to a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), joining MultiNational Force—Iraq military personnel, US State Department Foreign Service officers, Department of Justice, Foreign Agricultural Services, and other civilian contractors. In the field, he works directly with PRT peers, provincial, and district level elected representatives, appointed officials, and people in local communities.

Nigel says that while violent events continue to capture global media attention, other important stories are unfolding in Iraq—those that involve community and economic development, public participation, leadership, and the ongoing initiative to strengthen government at all levels.

Local government is working in Iraq and there are hundreds of ongoing development projects across the country. After so much conflict and destruction, however, the basic needs for infrastructure and community services are daunting.

To move forward, many projects require citizen participation and government support. As in other parts of the world, women's leadership is increasing. There are many aspects to governance and those who steer their communities need public institutions to support their goals. Public finance, urban planning, and agricultural development are all part of strategic planning and implementation.

It is a complex situation. It is still a war zone and requires dealing effectively with the reality of security issues. Nigel is working with many courageous Iraqis who are eager to establish a better place to raise their families.

While serving in what is considered to be one of the most difficult working environments in the world, Nigel points out he is not alone. People from 24 countries are working for LGP with local citizens, officials, and elected representatives to help sovereign Iraq develop provincial and local governments that are functional, efficient, and transparent. As well, there is solid support from Iraqi and expatriate colleagues and soldiers in Iraq, and from relatives and friends. ▲