

Foreign Ministry, came by. They discussed the latest news: the Americans had bombed the family home, in the town of Ramadi, of Barzan Al Tikriti, Saddam's half brother. There was speculation that Barzan had been killed in the bombing, but Khairi assured me that it was not true and that Barzan was still alive. He did not say how he knew this. Both he and Bashir said they believed that Saddam was also alive. Bashir pointed out that the Adamiya mosque, where Saddam had been sighted on Wednesday, April 9th, was not far from Saddam's secret clinic. They were both situated along the river, which offered an avenue of escape. Upriver, in the country outside Baghdad, there was an area that was the fiefdom of a tribal leader who

daughter in Amman and handed him the phone when it began ringing, then walked away. His sister and her husband and children and Samir Khairi had come out of the house to watch. Bashir spoke in a soft, reassuring voice and laughed a lot during the conversation. When he handed the phone back to me, he said that his family was very relieved, since everyone had thought he was dead. "What is it about people, that they cry when they are happy?" he said, and shook his head.

I visited Ala Bashir every day after that. We sat in the family room, left more or less alone by his relatives, except when, every so often, they brought us small cups of Turkish coffee

roses. His sister, a stout woman with a pleasant, wide face and short, silver hair covered with a black head scarf, was protective and watchful. When Bashir said that we were going to go to his own house to talk, she became very upset. Her husband told Sabah they feared that Bashir might be assassinated because of his close relationship with Saddam Hussein. A few years ago, a man had stabbed him twice. The assailant was incarcerated in Abu Ghraib prison, but he was released in October, during the general amnesty. Bashir had told me this story before, but he had said that the would-be assassin was a former patient who had become mentally unbalanced. "I had done a hair transplant for him," he explained. "And about six

a joke, but later, after he attacked me, I realized that it was serious. This sort of thing is quite common, you know, for plastic surgeons, even in the United States." In any case, I told Bashir, it was fine with me to keep on meeting at his sister's.

Bashir had last seen Saddam about two months earlier, around the time that Colin Powell was presenting the American case against Iraq to the U.N. and King Abdullah of Jordan was trying to get the U.S. to offer Saddam safe haven in an Arab country. "He came to the hospital to visit his aunt," he said. "She was seriously ill. He asked me how I was, and how the construction of the new Saddam Center was going." A new hospital building was being put up next

me. In fact, from the condition of his skin and the wrinkles on his hands, I think he is actually older than his declared age. Officially, he was born in 1937, but I believe he is older. A person's hands can tell you a great deal about his true age." It was said that Bashir had done plastic surgery on Saddam's body doubles and also on Saddam himself, but he had several times told me that this was not true. Saddam came to him for the treatment of minor ailments, things like skin lesions and corns. "The President noticed that I was looking at the nevus, a black spot, on his left cheek," he said. This was the black mark that connoisseurs of the body-double theory were obsessed by. "We were supposed to have removed it a few months

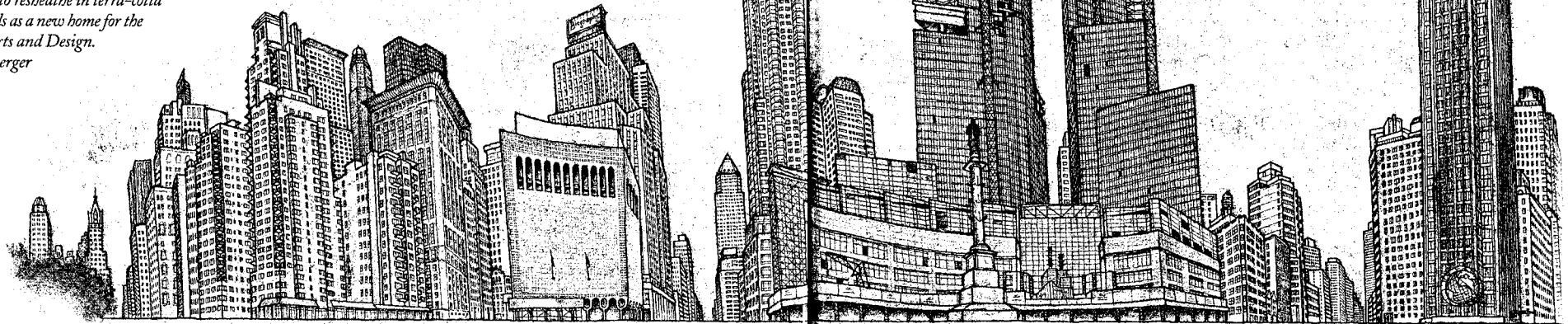
Bashir. "We'll remember"—he meant "is over."

Bashir said that he knew Saddam not only for his political expertise but also for his mired his art. "In fact," he said, "when Saddam was the Vice-President and military adviser, he was a very brave man who was killed later by course. There were paintings, and Saddam was about it in the museum. My art was 'unique' and he took me to see him. He liked this thing about cause they are pe

SKETCHBOOK BY MATTEO PERICOLI

Columbus Circle increasingly feels like an architectural battleground. First came the long struggle over the gargantuan AOL Time Warner towers, which are turning out to be garish glass structures better suited to Houston than to Central Park West. Now preservationists are preparing to fight for Edward Durell Stone's strangely endearing 2 Columbus Circle, a white marble box that the architect Brad Cloepfil plans to resheathe in terra-cotta and glass panels as a new home for the Museum of Arts and Design.

—Paul Goldberger



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