In Focus n° 1: Large-Scale Urban Regeneration: A New “Heart” for Doha

Focus n° 1 : Revitalisation urbaine à grande échelle : un nouveau « cœur » pour Doha.

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Since the late 1990s, cities in Arab Gulf countries have been transformed and re-structured by large-scale urban development projects. While most of the projects are greenfield developments, only recently have some been implemented to redevelop older parts of the city fallen into decay. The Solidere-project in Beirut, in this context, is often cited as an example for the restoration of the historic core and the development of city centers as integrated business and commercial environments, and as gathering places. However, it should not be overlooked that the project has been criticized in principle for demolishing the old city center and erasing all memory of the civil war, with the aim to build a modern economic and cultural hub, the Beirut of Hariri’s dreams. The new downtown has priced out former residents who used to inhabit the old city and given way to luxury housing targeting investors from Arab Gulf states and expatriates. Yet one of the main criticisms is that the old downtown has lost its former charm and soul while the city is now divided.

Urban regeneration may be induced by various catalysts, such as the improvement of neighborhoods, the introduction of art and culture, the construction of iconic architecture or the revitalization of communities, to enhance the social, economic and physical configuration of an urban neighborhood. This process can include demolishing old run-down buildings and constructing new housing, or adding in new features and facilities (e.g. cultural institutions, entertainment) to upgrade the revamped part of the city scene. Urban renewal is usually undertaken for the purpose of attracting wealthier people to come live in that area while former residents are forced to move out due to a
rise in rents and living costs. A theoretical distinction is made between redevelopment and gentrification: while the construction of new buildings on previously developed land is considered redevelopment, the rehabilitation of old structures is generally known as “gentrification”.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century when modernization processes were introduced in cities of the Arab Gulf countries, traditional, narrow street patterns, the idea of the family neighborhood (arab. فريج) and building traditions (e.g. inward-looking two-story courtyard houses) in accordance to available materials (mud, coral, stone), local climate as well as social and cultural living traditions have been substituted rather than complemented by planning ideologies based on modern Western practices (e.g. geometric street system, car-oriented cities, functional separation, use of concrete, steel and glass for buildings). The permanent re-creation of values, symbols and ways of life, attained by mixing with and differing from others, meanwhile presents many challenges and opportunities for the local minority population. One is identity building on different levels (national, collective and/or individual) by setting limits on sensitive transformational issues. While new signature skylines and individual lifestyles represent significant steps away from local traditions and culture, intangible (cultural) steps are increasingly being taken to preserve an authentic charm.

This paper focuses on the “Msheireb” (for “Mushayrib”) Project, currently under construction to regenerate the old downtown area in Doha. Due to the very early stage of the project, it is impossible to analyze performance or initial results regarding its implementation, so this contribution rather briefly discusses the rhetoric surrounding its conception, underpinning vision and marketing strategies.

Regeneration of Wadi Mushayrib

Up until the mid-20th century, Doha, known as al-Bida’, consisted of nine neighborhoods on an area of less than 1.5 km² that stretched nearly three kilometers along the coastline, extended only a few hundred meters inland and was home to a population of around 20,000 inhabitants. At that time, سوق واقف was the place for commercial and social interaction. The housing pattern followed the tradition of gender segregation by strictly separating male from female spaces and supplied a high level of security and privacy. Irregular, unpaved streets and asymmetrically arranged residential areas with one to two-story buildings characterized the city’s morphology up until the end of the 1960s, when Doha’s modern urban character began to take shape.

The downtown area around Wadi Mushayrib today is still affected from the scope of contemporary housing policies of the time, as well as from the “urbanity of necessity”, as Khaled Adham aptly declares it, a tendency that lasted until the first half of the 1990s. Due to rapid construction work in order to supply housing for the growing population, this part of the city mainly hosts simple, functional and cost-effective buildings. Only a few houses were built with decorative and architectural elements; rather than preserving and modernizing old structures that did not meet modern standards, these were instead torn down and replaced.
Although Doha’s old core is a very lively spot today, it is losing its status as the cultural heart of the city\(^7\) and has been criticized by many European and Arab expats, residents and professionals (particularly urban planners and architects), as lacking “true evidence of an Islamic-Arabic city”.\(^1\) Qatari nationals have long left the city center to settle in suburbs in newly built settlements (e.g. Al-Muntaza, Al-Manṣūra, and Shamāl al-Madina al-Khalīfa) and the lively city center is now predominantly inhabited by Asian and Arab nationals of lower social status living in run-down traditional houses, hybrid structures or buildings from early modernization. This high-density area is composed of an eclectic mix of buildings of different heights, styles, and in varying condition (see Fig. 1), which reflect when they were built, starting from the 1950s until today. Interviews\(^2\) also showed that poor maintenance and facilities overuse reduced property value and led to urban blight. Due to the rapid development, change of lifestyle and introduction of new commercial forms (e.g. shopping centers, indoor facilities), Doha’s old center in Wadi Mushayrib has continuously lost its former economic and social significance to the vast part of population. The center, especially Sūq Waqīf\(^3\) which suffered a severe decline from its days as the city’s economic and social hub for most of Doha’s population, was not considered a competitive location anymore in comparison to other ‘globalized areas’ (e.g. West Bay, Education City, The Pearl, Lusail).

There is now very little left in Doha which is original building fabric or representative of the morphology and architecture that once existed in the mid-20th century. Furthermore, focused interviews with Qatari\(^4\) have suggested that metropolitan Doha, and the old center in particular, is seen as struggling with the same issues as other modern cities, such as congestion, pollution, traffic and noise, thus making the downtown...
area less attractive. Women in particular emphasized they felt uncomfortable due to the strong presence of male migrant workers (see fig. 2). Although the old city center is a dynamic spot, it no longer conforms to Doha’s ambitious attempts to create a vibrant image, as a hub for culture, arts, and sports. Qatar, and its capital Doha in particular, plays an increasing role as a leading political, economic and cultural center within the GCC as well as underpinning its international position through various activities. New development strategies to diversify the economy and the implementation of neoliberal development theories have led to further urban transformation. In December 2010, Qatar surprisingly won the bid to host the FIFA World Cup 2022, which has provided a new impetus, placing the country, and the capital Doha in particular, on a fast-track to develop its infrastructure.

Fig. 2: Masterplan Msheireb-project.

Qatar’s economic, urban and social development is guided by the “Qatar National Vision 2030” (launched in October 2008 following approval of Emiri decision 44) that defines the long-term goals for the country and provides a framework within which national strategies and implementation plans can be developed. In accordance with these ambitious goals, Qatar has recognized the need to establish a clear cultural identity expressed through urban planning and architecture and the old city center was designated to become one of the four future central areas of the capital city (West Bay, Education City, and Airport City). The former core will consequently undergo a complete facelift to meet the highest urban requirements which are formulated in the “Msheireb Project” (also known as the ‘Downtown Doha’, ‘Heart of Doha’) under the leadership and commitment of Msheireb Properties and Qatar Foundation.
10 The “Msheireb Project” in Doha (see fig. 3) is a regeneration initiative and a showcase example that aims to unite the city’s urban and architectural past with elements of a contemporary Arab city. The project is promoted by its developer as the “world’s first sustainable downtown regeneration project that will revive the former commercial district with a new architectural language that is modern, yet inspired by traditional Qatari heritage and architecture”\(^\text{17}\). Thus, the urban development project clearly rejects recent concepts of Arab Gulf (and Middle Eastern) energy-intensive urban centers with concrete and glass. Instead, the project focuses on technologies and materials that are geared towards the environment and the local climatic conditions.

11 The genesis of the “Msheireb Project” dates back to 2007 when Qatar Foundation, under the leadership of Shaykha Mūza bint Nāṣir Al-Misnid (wife of the ruling Emir), commissioned a complete revitalization to turn this part of the city (adjacent to the Emiri Diwān) into a characteristic and positive place, taking into consideration ecological, economic and social aspects. Central to the master plan is the reinterpretation of traditional design elements that reflect and recreate Qatari building heritage.\(^\text{18}\) Over three years of research in cooperation with several renowned British architect agencies like British Arup, AECOM (EDAW), and Allies & Morrison led to the conception of a unique framework for "modern, highly functional and sustainable development"\(^\text{19}\). The QR20 billion (USD 5.5 billion)\(^\text{20}\) mixed-use project will feature townhouses, homes and apartments in intimate neighborhoods, landscaped open spaces (with greenery and water features), arcaded streets, retail and commercial areas, dining and entertainment facilities, and a rich mix of cultural and business services to serve the needs of residents and visitors in a contemporary Arab city.\(^\text{21}\) Although the 31ha-site faced demolition, at least four of the historic buildings (Al Radwani House, Shell Company House, Al Jalmud...
House, Mohammad bin Jassim House) have been preserved and will be restored and converted into museums.

**Two sides of the coin – promising sustainable downtown regeneration?**

12 The urban regeneration of an area like Mushayrib is considerably more complex than the development of an area on a greenfield site. Offering an attractive environment and lifestyle, affordable services and housing that represent much of the future demand, dealing with existing infrastructure and buildings, and the relocation of population and facilities while not interrupting service are only some of the many constraints and challenges for developers and planners. Thus, "the regeneration project involves meticulous attention to detail from a sustainable design perspective." When Msheireb Properties was established "with a mandate to address a gap in the architectural history of Qatar and rediscover a unique form of Qatari urban development," the focus was given "to create a modern Qatari landscape that is rooted in traditions," to respect the natural elements, to evoke "local culture to find social meaning and values that were once embedded in local life," and, finally, to establish a long overdue discourse on Qatari architecture.

13 There is no doubt that "Msheireb" is a luxury project, both in regards of its financial framework conditions and its outcomes, as well as of its requested measures and standards in sensitive urban planning. "After years of a car-driven urban expansion, the project reverses the trend by putting people first and cars second within a thriving community." In order to fight the strong demographic imbalance, the mixed-use project provides adequate housing for nationals and non-nationals, office buildings, social institutions, extensive retail areas and an environment of "privacy and security with generous indoor and outdoor spaces" that will come to life at different times of the day. Though developers stated they aimed to create a place "where global cultures meet but not melt", the project will probably correspond to a central theme, which is to bring back Qatari nationals – even temporarily for working and leisure purposes, if not permanently – to the old city center.

14 The introduction of "this mid-rise high-density model of a compact city both contrasts sharply with that of other modern areas in Doha, like West Bay and The Pearl’s crescent high rises, as well as with the old districts. Once finished, however, it will serve as an essential link between the old and the new city." Demonstrating that there is a strong desire for healthy outdoor activities, the project developers behind "Msheireb" are trying to find a convenient alternative to an air-conditioned existence in energy-intensive steel and glass structures, by introducing features like natural shading and cleaning of the air in accordance with local climatic conditions, and by creating social outdoor spaces "to implement a walkable city" – an awareness that has long been lacking in the modern urban development processes in Arab Gulf countries. Nevertheless, it seems that "Msheireb" presents itself as a prime example that deals with a supply-driven approach to implement primarily its developer’s well-intentioned interests on behalf of the publics.
One of the major negative impacts caused by demolition and rebuilding is the dislocation of 7,000 to 9,000 residents. When “Msheireb” will be open to public, rents are expected to progressively rise even in the surroundings and pressure the costs of living, the retail sector in particular. Most of the recent inhabitants and (labor) visitors will probably no longer be in the position to afford the expenses and, depending on their financial situation and social status, will gradually move into housing projects in remote areas (e.g. Industrial area, Barwa Village, Barwa City) in Doha Metropolitan Area. Although it is argued that displaced residents will easily get reconnected in their new location, retailers, service providers and small shopkeepers are likely to end up losing their established clientele due to an irreversible destruction of currently existing economic and social supportive networks and customer relationships.

Although the conception and strong rhetoric behind the project leaves the impression of a well-planned venture, nevertheless “Msheireb” does not correspond, either architecturally or functionally, to its adjacent neighborhood (see fig. 4). Besides, as an individual enterprise under the umbrella of Qatar Foundation, it is also excluded from the master planning scheme currently developed by the Ministry of Municipalities and Urban Planning, thus underlining its special status. As drawn from interviews, Msheireb Properties is involved in buying land in the very neighborhood of the project’s site. In most cases, the plots show complex ownership structures: although they usually belong to one national family branch, they are further subdivided among several members who in some cases disagree on the usage of the land and thus could prevent its sale (although a generous financial compensation can be expected). When Qatar Foundation, a private, non-profit organization but partly government-funded, expands ownership, it will also increase its already strong political influence and competence for decision-making.
In conclusion, it has, however, become routine in the postmodern Arab Gulf coastal cities to copy details, patterns, and structures of traditional or historic buildings to artificially maintain a local sense in newer buildings and gradually combine them with simplistic Western designs. The concept behind “Msheireb” at least leaves faith in future responsible and sensitive urban planning that finds a synthesis between traditional and contemporary design, something important for local heritage and culture. Doha’s authorities, however, think the city has the potential to become a regional paradigm of a modern Arab city within the next 10 to 20 years.

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NOTES

1. SCHARFENORT, 2009, p. 246-249.
2. SMITH, 1982, p. 139.
12. Interviews during field research trips in April 2012, October 2012 and March/April 2013.
13. In the meantime, Sūq Waqīf has been completely revitalized and was reopened to public in 2008. The restoration was based on a thorough study of the history of the market and its buildings, and aimed to reverse the dilapidation of the historic structures and remove inappropriate alterations and additions. In contrast to the ‘theme and amusement parks’ that are becoming common in the Gulf’s heritage industry, Sūq Waqīf kept its function as a working marketplace in the less visible parts off the main street, but has also turned into a lively and frequented open-air public space with new art galleries, traditional cafes and restaurants, cultural events, and local concerts that attract residents and visitors alike.
17. Website Msheireb Downtown Doha.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Msheireb Properties, “Fact Sheet”.

ABSTRACTS

Similar to regional pioneer Dubai, Qatar has adopted, through neoliberal policies, to create a global urban image although the Emirate also endeavours to provide a counterexample to the much discussed “Dubai-Model”. There is now little left in Doha which is truly original or representative of the traditional architecture and townscape that once existed. One attempt is to revitalize a 35-ha site of the historic core to find a “new architectural language” for the 21st century and to fill the gap in the architectural history of Qatar. The Msheireb-project (designed as the “heart of Doha”) constrains a unified vision of the principles of a contemporary Arab City and redefines urban design according to traditional habits (e.g. public spaces, walkable neighborhoods) to bring people (Qatari in particular) back to the city. In this contribution the quality of this new concept of urban revitalization and its potential success shall be critically analyzed.

À l’instar de Dubaï, pionnière de la région en la matière, le Qatar a choisi, à travers des politiques néolibérales, de créer sa propre image d’urbanité au niveau mondial, tout en fournissant un contre-exemple du controversé « modèle Dubaï ». À Doha, il ne reste presque plus rien d’original ni de représentatif de l’architecture et du paysage urbain traditionnels. Un des objectifs actuels est de tenter de combler le vide dans le patrimoine architectural qatari par la revitalisation d’un
site historique de 35 hectares, afin de trouver un « nouveau langage architectural » pour le XXI\textsuperscript{e} siècle. Le projet « Msheireb » (désigné comme le « cœur de Doha ») impose une vision unifiée des principes de la ville arabe moderne, et redéfinit le design urbain en fonction d’habitudes traditionnelles (dans l’espace public, les quartiers piétons, etc.), pour ramener les populations (surtout les Qataris) au cœur de leur ville. Cet article propose une analyse de la qualité de ce nouveau concept de revitalisation urbaine, ainsi que de son succès potentiel.

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