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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nature of urban interventions in changing the old center of a globalizing Doha



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Abstract

Doha, Qatar is continuously positioning itself at the forefront of international urbanism with different qualities of expression in terms of economy, culture, and global outlook, and is characterized by fast-tracked urban development process with large-scale urban interventions in the old center. Although the unprecedented urban growth of this city continues to be a subject of discussion, little attention has been given to investigate the new interventions and the resulting effects they have on the old center. This study aims to examine three important urban interventions, namely, the Museum of Islamic Art, the reconstruction of the traditional market called Souq Waqif, and the Msheireb urban regeneration project. It examines local and global issues, universal standard practices, and traditional knowledge. This study employs a descriptive analysis of these interventions to explore the impact of change in the old center, exemplified by socio-spatial and typo-morphological aspects. Reference is made to a number of empirical studies, including behavioral mapping, GIS population statistics, and analysis of historical maps. Results analytically narrate the reactions of these interventions to the possibility of simultaneously adopting universal practices with local knowledge, and whether prioritizing local influences would represent narrow-mindedness in shaping the city.

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1. Introduction

Historically, Doha, Qatar was a fishing and pearl diving hamlet. This city has acquired geostrategic importance since the discovery and production of liquefied natural gas in the mid-1990s, in addition to oil production. Today, this

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Figure 1 The new skyline of a globalizing Doha.
(Source: Authors).

capital city is home to more than 90% of the country's 1.8 million people, with over 80% comprising professional expatriates from other countries. Doha is portrayed as an important emerging global capital in the Persian Gulf, characterized by fast-tracked urban development processes, the highest global connectivity in this region (Wiedmann et al., 2012), and the strong presence of global flows of capital, people, media, education, and oil and gas industries (Salama, 2011a) (Figure 1).

After Qatar's national independence in 1971, the British consultant Llewelyn Davis was appointed by the new town planning authority to design the first master plan of Doha for 1990. His plan was based on a ring concept with a clear definition and a functional distribution of land uses for each ring, which emphasized the old settlement area as the main urban center. In the 1970s, the remaining Qatari neighborhoods were replaced and the indigenous population was relocated to the new suburban developments (Nagy, 2006). One main objective of the plan was to establish a modern city center to replace the old one. For this purpose, constructing informal commercial buildings was no longer possible and the last remaining traditional buildings were demolished to provide space for access roads and multistory developments. The Doha's prime business and administration center developed in proximity to the old center because of the presence of various office projects in areas adjacent to the latter. However, the historic district was home to a rapidly growing immigrant population in densely built areas. The rapid population growth from 89,000 in 1970 to over 434,000 in 1997 led to the establishment of numerous services outside the old center. Subsequently, new shopping malls in urban peripheries replaced the central retail districts, as the old city center witnessed a gradual deterioration process because of the high concentration of housing for low-income groups (Nagy, 2000). The waterfront with main commercial and administrative buildings remained the representative façade. However, the historic city center was exclusively used by low-income groups (Ahmadi, 2008). This situation resulted in Doha having no identifiable main center, and existing urban centers were perceived depending on income and cultural backgrounds (Salama, 2011b).

While the unprecedented urban growth of the city continues to be a subject of discussion, little attention has been given to examine urban interventions in the old city, including the understanding of the resulting impacts these interventions have on the old center. Therefore, this study aims to examine three important urban interventions in the old center, namely, the new Museum of Islamic Art, the reconstruction of the

traditional market place called Souq Waqif, and the large-scale Msheireb urban regeneration project (Figure 2).

This study examines local and global issues, universal standard practices, and traditional knowledge. Although the objective is not to compare the three cases, this study employs a descriptive analysis of these interventions to explore the impact of change in the old center, exemplified by socio-spatial and typo-morphological aspects. Reference is made to a number of empirical studies undertaken by the authors, including surveys of city residents, behavioral mapping, GIS population statistics, and analysis of historical maps. This paper concludes with analytical reflections that narrate the reactions of these interventions to the questions of simultaneously addressing local and global issues, adopting universal best practices without ignoring local knowledge, and whether prioritizing local influences would represent narrow-mindedness.

2. Three aspiring levels of urban interventions

Three types of change in the city's old center are envisioned. Each type represents a level of urban intervention. They are identified in terms of *iconic architectural change*, where a building or territory is projected to impose a visual and power statement; *remanufacturing urban heritage*, where an urban intervention engages local knowledge with its technical and social meanings; and *iconic urban change*, where an urban regeneration intervention integrates tradition and modernity. The three types represent aspirations that are typically adopted by rulers and government officials who advocate traditional imaging to impress upon the local society their origin and to boast the profile of the capital city while reacting to global conditions (Figure 3).

2.1. Aspiring image making: the museum of Islamic art

Designed by I.M. Pei, the Museum of Islamic Art was inaugurated in 2008. Its 30-hectare site extended the public realm along the Corniche¹, with a park surrounding its two

¹The definition of "Corniche" - a term taken from the French language - is "a road built along a coast or along the face of a cliff", and it is derived from the Latin word "Corniche" an architectural term that designates the top edge of a façade, where it meets the

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