

# MSHEIREB, DOHA: THE URBAN REGENERATION OF A DETERIORATED HERAT. AUTHENTIC CONTEMPORARY AND CULTURAL LOCALISM

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**Abstract.** Doha, the capital of Qatar, used to be a port town on the eastern part of the peninsula of Qatar. Historically, the town shared cultural commonalities with other Gulf cities, particularly relying on fishing and pearl diving as the main feature of its economy. The old town, which was characterised by compact urbanism, extended families living in courtyard houses and shaded allies, was totally abandoned after the oil discovery and the flow of unprecedented financial resources in the late '70s and early '80s. This paper provides a critical narrative of the urban regeneration process that took place in the heart of Doha. It interrogates the new vision that was articulated to revitalise the old heart of the city and bring people back to such a valuable part of its urban fabric. The paper examines the Design Strategies used in the project to move from adaptive reuse to holistic urban regeneration. It analyses the use of oil and Gas revenues to help the city go beyond the western illusions and urban spectacle, and argues that the project is a manifestation of a needed transformation from the urbanity of an image to the urbanity of meaning. Such city transformation is essential for constructing a more dynamic and vibrant identity for the city.

**Keywords:** Urban Regeneration; Doha Qatar; Architecture and urban heritage; Cultural localism; Authenticity; Cultural continuity in urbanism.

## Introduction

Unlike plenty of architectural and urban projects in Qatar and Gulf cities, the Msheireb project is creating a tangible impact. Interviews conducted with local people and expatriates living or visiting the project revealed interesting outcomes. Most of the urban projects in the Gulf are moving between the Western model, particularly when designed by western architects and designers, or the fake representation of traditional architecture. Yet, the results of the interviews illustrated a new category, which can be best described as the authentic contemporary structured on cultural localisation. The interviewed local people's narratives were inspirational because they reasoned about a different set of lessons learned from the project. These lessons are relatively different from what architects and urban designers are interested in, they while analyse or research the project. An old Qatari man sitting at Sahat Al Wadi, proudly said: «his project shows how westerners can learn from us, instead of us imitating them all the time».

## The Gulf context

While each city on the Gulf has its own narrative, yet the similarities in main governing factors led to common issues and challenges particularly in the domain of urban development. A prime factor is the radical shift in all Gulf states' economy due to the discovery of oil. For the first time in their history, Gulf States began to get regular revenues from selling oil. This trade was amplified during the first oil boom in the '70s. The availability of such unprecedented financial resources coupled with a desire to imitate the west and reject the old and traditional built environment resulted in a deliberate process of heritage destruction, erasing full chapters

from the urban fabric of Gulf cities. The intimacy of the Gulf city is lost. More recently, Gulf cities, under the effect of the urban development model constructed by Dubai, were engaged in a regional competition to build the highest, the biggest and the tallest.

At present, Gulf cities are facing new urban complexities and challenges. Hence, envisioning the future is particularly significant, considering two fundamental challenges, namely the post-oil era and the post-COVID era. The Post-Oil Era suggests providing an answer to the essential question of how to decarbonise cities. Multiple strategies emerge in Gulf cities, and the process of planning and adopting can be observed with considerable concentration and determination. A prime factor is moving towards Transit-Oriented development (TOD). The move toward TOD facilitated the decentralisation process of metropolitan urbanity (Wippel, 2014; Alraouf, 2019). The coherence of Gulf cities began to focus on avoiding urban fragmentation and city sprawl by restitching the urban fabric via public and green spaces. Revisiting the concept of streets in Gulf cities and how to consider streets as places for people, and not highways for cars, is another indication of city transformation. As for the post-COVID era, a new urban condition was experienced during the COVID crisis, particularly the imposed lockdown. Hence, emphasising the humanisation process of urban settings in contemporary cities is essential. Public spaces are city saviours, a notion which was proved right during the COVID period. There were plenty of behavioural and functional changes observed during COVID, including the increasing interest in walkability, green spaces, transforming roofs into family roof gardens and gathering spaces. In sum, Gulf cities are transforming on different levels, and a new architectural and planning discourse is significantly needed.

## Contextualising Qatar urbanity

The major transformation in Qatar's urbanity was the direct result of structuring Qatar Vision 2030, the document guiding the development process in the state, acknowledging the post-oil challenges (QNV 2008; QNDF, 2016). The second major transformation was winning the bid for hosting the FIFA World Cup 2022, which was declared in 2010. Such accelerated transformations paved the way for a new identity for Qatar's emerging urbanity. A move from oil-based economy to knowledge-based economy facilitated the creation of a strong direction towards projects like universities, museums and research centres, in addition to heritage preservation (Kamrava, 2013; Roberts, 2015; Alraouf, 2018; 2022). The new move replaced the old construction trend or more accurately imitated western cities in building skyscrapers and giant shopping malls.

### **The narrative of Msheireb, the heart of Doha**

After the first oil boom in the '70s, Qatari Families moved rapidly from the old city centre to the suburbs of Doha to areas where they can exhibit their wealth and enjoy modern lifestyle (Al-Buainain, 1999; Alraouf, 2012). With the passing of time, the area lost most of its affluent community to migration as people moved to other regions, leaving much of the historic neighbourhood neglected. In the early 21st century, crucial questions were formulated addressing such a unique part of Doha. Why was the heart abandoned and left to be deteriorated? How to restore, repair and re-weave the city? Msheireb was analysed on different platforms as a case of urban regeneration (Gharib, 2014; Alraouf, 2021). Historically, Msheireb was the real heart of Doha and one of its more vibrant places. Yet, the active heart was abandoned because of a dominant dream for Qatari families to leave the old part of the city and move to the peripheries to build new western villas and replace their old, traditional houses.

The Heart of Doha (Msheireb) aims to bring Qataris back to the severely abandoned old centre of Doha. "Bringing people back to the heart of Doha" was the initial slogan used to promote Msheireb's mega mixed-use development when first declared in 2008 by HH Sheikha Mozah Al Missned, The Qatari first lady at the time (Sh Moza, 2006). The aim of the project was to bring local people back to their roots to rediscover a sense of community and togetherness. The project's slogan was regeneration of an inner city that will create a modern Qatari centre embedded in tradition, where global cultures will meet but not melt (Melhuish, Degan and Rose, 2016). A focus on challenges like social diversity and cultural relevance was considered in the evolution of the Masterplan (Law and Underwood, 2012). In doing so, the consultant and developers incorporated traditional patterns of Gulf architecture and urbanism to create a contemporary Qatari architectural and urban language in a scheme that innovatively balances modernity with traditionalism (Jaidah and Bourennane, 2009; Alraouf, 2016; Jodido, 2014). Msheireb is a mixed-use development project comprising office space, retail, leisure facilities, different housing types, hotels, museums, as well as cultural and recreational places. According to Msheireb properties, Msheireb covers 31 hectares, but the gross floor area (GFA) reaches 76 hectares (760,000 m<sup>2</sup>). It is located in the Mohamed Bin Jassim District at the heart of Doha, adjacent to Amiri Diwan, Souq Waqif, and Al Koot Fort. The project consists of five main quarters comprising three extended governmental buildings including the National Archive. Msheireb project is designed as urban villages for future residents to satisfy their needs within walking distance. The layout is planned to allow a pedestrian-friendly environment, hence social interaction. As Gharib (2014) argues, the project is a step

to move from locality to globalisation as Qatar is consistent in balancing its local assets with global aspirations (Fig. 1).

The project aspires to restore the lost shine to a location that is close to the hearts of all Qataris. Hence, it is crucial to bring it back to life. The project was also marketed as it aims to reduce the city's urban sprawl and revitalise the old centre. The project, which was initially named "Heart of Doha", was described as a "city within a city" that merges the best characteristics of the past with the modern technologies. Most of the Gulf real estate companies use slogans to emphasise the sustainable nature of their new projects. For example, Msheireb presents itself as the world's first sustainable downtown regeneration project, which uses traditional Qatari architectural language and aims to achieve one of the highest concentrations of LEED certified buildings in the world. The developers emphasise their commitment to using timeless techniques inherited from the traditional built environment.

### **The alternative development process: a research-based architectural and urban strategy**

Unlike most of the projects in Gulf cities where the element of time is almost irrelevant due to the overwhelming desire to build swiftly, Msheireb adopted another route. This route was characterised by extensive research to articulate planning, urban design, and architectural guidelines. How can planning and design be deferred to focus on governing standards and guidelines, and the production of the language of architecture and urbanism that are unique for both the context and the project (Melhuish, 2014)? A major factor in the success story of the project is the outcome of the significant decision to divide the development process into two stages. The first one is about conducting a holistic research journey to understand cultural, social, economic and architectural values and use it to formulate comprehensive architectural and planning guidelines (Gharib, 2014). The second is providing all architects and planners working in the project with these guidelines, and hence guarantee a common understanding between all the participants in planning and designing the project in a harmonious manner.

The research process started with holistic resources compiling the different narratives about architecture and urbanism in the Gulf and in Qatar, including anthropological, maritime, and social studies. It includes a search for a more contemporary language of architecture. This emerging language of architecture is new and contemporary. It stems from meticulous analysis of the Gulf and Qatari traditional architecture. Consequently, the research journey ended up with two sets of integrated languages for the architecture and urban nature of the project. These





languages will guarantee harmony in spatial, social, formal, environmental aspects of the project without compromising the creativity and the individuality of every architect involved. The value of this research journey and its outcomes were not only reflected in the planning and design of Msheireb but open a wide spectrum of future research and practice.

#### **The mature interpretation of heritage in Msheireb**

The project provides a mature understanding of the value of heritage on different levels.

This can be seen on four main levels as illustrated below. Qatar's heritage is represented in every traditional building in different eras, and is not limited to a specific timeframe. The conceptual approach of the project refrained from the classical way of copying the tradition by adhering, instead, to four levels of mature interpretation of the heritage. A four-level matrix of understanding the value of Qatari heritage, instead of a direct interpretation of what existed.

*The First Level: Respect All History Chapters and Avoid Selecting* Doha transformed from its existence as small fishing village to the early days of oil exploration, to a capital city for energy within six decades of development. Such a process of transformation and change was the first level of our understanding of the value of the heritage. The Msheireb project is concerned with the importance and the acknowledgement of each chapter of our history. So, it refrains from selecting a single timeframe or an era of the city's history. Rather, it adopted a more holistic understanding of heritage as the accumulation of the country's history that continues to evolve.

#### *The Second Level: Re-establishing Heritage Value*

The project is calling for the positive manifestation of local heritage. It avoids conserving or preserving the heritage buildings, and leaving them as closed monuments within the city centre. Heritage buildings are telling their story at Msheireb. They exhibit the value of their existence by having contemporary roles

where it can serve the local community. For instance, four traditional houses were preserved and rehabilitated to contribute to the contemporary life of the city as well as tell their history. The four heritage buildings transformed into museums stand at Msheireb to exhibit not only their historical value but also the anatomy of the space, the beauty of using local materials, the courtyard, the harmony of new and old, besides respect for history and modern technology.

#### *The Third Level: Heritage as a Source of Inspiration*

The value of heritage as a creativity inspiration platform is of paramount significance in the narrative of Msheireb. The project provides a model for how to use heritage as a platform for a new creative chapter, a chapter of today that is a continuation of the past, and is yet modern. At Msheireb, the past was looked at as a source of inspiration, a reference book one learns from to create a new chapter in the ever-evolving history of the city.

#### *The Fourth Level: Heritage Stimulating, Creating a new Narrative for the Context of Msheireb*

Project integration and coherence were a great challenge. Hence, a research-based design and planning process were adopted to guarantee the harmonious and integrated outcome. Therefore, three-year process research with the support of researchers, academics, professionals, architects and urban planners, both local and international, gathered to come up with the guidelines and principles on what the project would build upon. The result was a unique creation of new architectural language, which formulates the guidelines for over one hundred architects and engineers working on the project. The new architectural language is just like any spoken language. Every architect can use its vocabulary to create his or her poem, words or building. This is what gave Msheireb its diversity with unity, and unity with diversity. Such harmony cannot be created without the new architectural language, and it was clearly achieved at Msheireb.

#### **Cultural continuity, connectivity and inclusiveness in Msheireb**

One of the strong aspects of the project is related to urban and visual connectivity with the adjacent Souq Waqif, the most significant heritage area in Doha. The levels of connectivity can be seen in the architectural language extended from the façades of Souq Waqif and the Heritage quarters to the façades of Msheireb buildings but in a very abstract and modern way. Another level of connectivity is related to cultural amenities. From the galleries and cultural centres at the Souq, the connection is extended to the project via the presence of four museums occupying four traditional houses that were preserved and rehabilitated during the construction of the project. A third level of

connectivity can be seen in the actual urban and movement relations between the Souq and the project. A major urban public space is connecting the two projects and allowing for excellent visual adaptation and preparation for a better perception of the project. Hence, the project is providing an excellent case of a vibrant urban centre characterised by mixed-use development, namely urban diversity. The significance of the project is related to its ability to provide a successful example of the needed mixed use development coupled with transit-oriented development, and open to diversified community and user groups. Such features are substantially needed for Qatar's future, particularly the principle of moving towards a post-carbon paradigm and more reliance on sustainable and people-friendly modes of development and urbanity.

#### **The architectural and urban significance of Msheireb**

The project is characterised by authentic yet contemporary architecture. The language, which is called contemporary Qatari architectural language, resulted from analysing the old traditional architecture of Doha and other Gulf cities to understand its concepts, principles and deep layers, rather than merely focus on visual vocabulary and copying the past. On the urban level and as opposed to plenty of projects in the Gulf, the project has no leftover spaces that can be pointed out. The fact that the project has No leftovers is a result of a planning process to produce an integrated project, not a typical land division that produces fragmented and scattered urbanisation. All the voids of the project are positive and encompass the qualities which Alexander (1979, 2012) discussed. The voids are an integral part of the project's urban fabric where all of them are playing crucial rules in attaining the vibrancy of public life. Therefore, the availability of small public spaces and pocket gardens is an additional positive feature of the project and its focus on people (Fig. 2).

#### **Conclusions and final thoughts**

The Importance of the Project can be seen from different aspects:

- creating an unprecedented sense of belonging to the previously abandoned heart of the city;
- achieving a sense of pride. The project is not a group of skyscrapers as seen in different Gulf cities. A new level of pride emerged between local community members as they realised that the project is not the tallest tower, but a balanced approach between valuing the past and considering the future. Additionally, the project won heritage conservation and sustainability awards both regionally and globally;
- raising awareness about the available "Metro as a mode of





urban movement and Walkability as a healthier way of life. A new level of social awareness regarding the vitality of public transportation” (walking/public transport/connection to the metro network);

- providing new architectural and urban aesthetics: the new modern, the authentic, the creative vocabulary. A new level of aesthetics of construction and urbanism has changed the taste and mentality of society.

Influencing the rest of the city, particularly the adjacent context, and creating a model for local people to adopt. In this sense, I would argue that Msheireb sets a precedent for the needed social paradigm shift from consumers to citizens. Advocating happier instead of stressed city dwellers by optimising integration, socialisation, slower city rhythm and nurturing the city is immensely important. The projects, as numbers illustrate, achieved density without high rise, which is the future of cities to be more human-based, compact, walkable and, hence, healthier. For the first time since the official start of urban plan-

ning activities in Qatar, the project moved beyond the typical process of subdivision, implementing principles and concepts generated from the old traditional city fabric. Msheireb is a project of reinvented historic fabric rather than land subdivisions. While preserving its own identity and character, the project managed to avoid the extravaganza clearly observed in most Gulf cities. A real mixed-use development, which is not a gated community but rather a public centre accessible to all and adjacent to public transportation. A manifestation of a precedent in the built environment development in the Middle East and the Gulf where a real estate development company “Msheireb” is sponsoring such a profound research study. But more significantly, to use its findings in an actual project to come up with a new paradigm in the notion of urban regeneration within the Middle East and the Gulf.

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