

The city of Doha keeps repositioning itself on the map of international architecture and urbanism. But, while the rapid urban growth of the city continues

to be a subject of debate, little attention has been paid to the nature of change and intervention in the old city core.

'Art requires a delicate adjustment of outer and inner worlds in such a way that, without changing their nature, they can be seen through each other. To know oneself is to know one's region. It is also to know the world, and it is also, paradoxically, a form of exile from that world'.¹

I interrogate these processes in the light of three questions: Can an urban intervention be simultaneously local and global? Can it demonstrate international best practices without ignoring traditional knowledge? Would a prioritisation of local influences or an interest in heritage conservation represent narrow-mindedness?

Rulers and government officials classically advocate 'traditional imaging' to remind the local society of its roots, to invigorate the profile of the capital city and to impress the global community.² These aspirations are manifested in three types of change visible in Doha's old centre:³

- 1 'iconic architectural change', where a building or portion of the urban environment imposes a powerful new visual statement;
- 2 'remanufacturing of urban heritage', where an urban intervention engages directly with traditional knowledge; and
- 3 'iconic urban change', where an urban regeneration intervention integrates tradition and modernity in spatial, social and material terms.

In Doha, the first type is manifested in I. M. Pei's Museum of Islamic Art. Its exposed location makes it visible from many directions, creating a visual reconnection between the old centre and the waterfront.⁴ Sited at the eastern end of Doha's historic settlement, it sets an intended juxtaposition with the high-rise cluster of development across the water at West Bay; while facing inland, the museum connects to the old centre at the end of an urban spine. The design aspiration is to present a new image of the city while evoking a new interpretation of the regional heritage.

The 'remanufacturing of urban heritage' is revealed in the reconstruction of the traditional market, Souq Waqif, which represents an aspirational positioning of traditional knowledge. Historically, it contained different types of sub-markets for wholesale

INTERVENTION URBANISM: THE DELICACY OF ASPIRATIONAL CHANGE IN THE OLD CENTRE OF DOHA



Iconic architectural change: Museum of Islamic Art.
Photo by Ashraf M. Salama, 2013.





Remanufacturing urban heritage: Souq Waqif.
Photo by Fatma Khalfani, 2012.

**THE MUSEUM AND THE SOUQ BOTH
GENERATE A NEW URBAN DISCOURSE
IN THE CITY ON DIVERSITY, USABILITY,
ACCESSIBILITY AND CONNECTIVITY**

ment made plans for the modernisation of the city centre, it fell into a state of dereliction. However, it has recently assumed a new image, following reconstruction and renovation based on original materials and skills. While it

retains its old function as a marketplace, new art galleries, traditional cafés and restaurants, cultural events and local concerts have also been introduced to attract most of the city's residents and tourists.

Within close proximity to Souq Waqif, the Msheireb development represents 'iconic urban change'. An urban regeneration mega-project currently under construction on the remains of a

historic residential site, it includes a few intact traditional courtyard houses and others which had deteriorated and are being rebuilt. Decision-makers were concerned with the impact of the site on the city's image. The driving philosophy was to deliver a sustainable mixed-use intervention that combined an authentic representation and spatial experience of Qatari culture and heritage. It is designed to reduce the use of cars and to create a walkable public realm, supported by sustainable environmental technologies, which will attract locals back to the old centre. The intervention, described by masterplanners EDAW-AECOM, 'is



Iconic urban change: Msheireb urban regeneration, with museum and souk at top right-hand corner. Photo courtesy of Arch. Fatima Fawzi © Msheireb Properties, 2013.

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to initiate large-scale, inner-city regeneration that will create a modern Qatari homeland rooted in traditions, and to renew a piece of the city where global cultures meet but do not melt'.⁵

Decisions on urban change are made by Qatar Museums in the first case; by the Private Engineering



1 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1969), p.31.

2 Ashraf M. Salama, 'Architectural Identity Demystified: Visual Voices from the Arab World', in Paul Emmons, et al (eds.), *The Cultural Role of Architecture: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 175–84.

3 R. Y. Gharib and Ashraf M. Salama, 'The Nature of Urban Interventions in the Changing Old Center of Globalizing Doha', in Cheramie, Kristi M. and Jeffrey A Carney (eds), *Building with Change: Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Environmental Design Research Association, EDRA-45* (New Orleans, La.: EDRA, 2014).

4 Ashraf M. Salama, 'Identity Flows: The Arabian Peninsula, Emerging Metropolises', in Luis Fernández-Galiano (ed.), *Atlas Architectures of the 21st Century: Africa and Middle East* (Madrid: BBVA Foundation, 2011), pp.175–221.

5 Rosanna Law and Kevin Underwood, 'Msheireb Heart of Doha: An Alternative Approach to Urbanism in the Gulf Region', *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, 1 (1) (2012): 131–47.

Office of the Amiri Diwan in the second case; and by a high-profile real-estate company in the third case. These three types of change in Doha's old centre are typologically different, but they all, to varying degrees, positively answer the question, 'Can an urban intervention be simultaneously local and global?' The museum and its park consciously responds to global cultural flows, translating the cultural aspirations of a country into a manifestation that speaks to world architecture while addressing demands placed on the design by the context and the regional culture. Souq Waqif validates the notion of simultaneity of the global and the local through the wide spectrum of activities and the diversity of users it enjoys, while the aspirational place-making evident in Msheireb's urban regeneration anchors a global perspective in the local vernacular and heritage. I argue that all three interventions demonstrably integrate international standards of best practice with sources of traditional knowledge. Furthermore, the Museum and the Souq both generate a new urban discourse in the city on diversity, usability, accessibility and connectivity that creates a harmonious balance between global and local aspirations, without prejudice towards either. They serve people of different age groups and many different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, even though the absence of sufficient children's activities in the Souq, and its restricted use to middle- and upper-income groups should be noted. It

remains to be seen how the Msheireb urban-regeneration project addresses these notions and whether it will achieve its promises.

Were these delicate adjustments? While the Museum and Msheireb urban-regeneration interventions have eradicated an important part of the memory of the old centre, the reconstruction of Souq Waqif seems to have enhanced it. It is hoped that the parts of old Doha which remain, such as the neighbourhoods of Al-Asmakh and Al-Najada which accommodate low-income groups and migrant workers, are also treated as important place typologies in the memory and history

of the city. While demolition and eviction notices have been issued for around half the buildings in Al-Asmakh area, the debate generated by the recent charette for revitalising these neighbourhoods may offer possibilities for fulfilling this hope. Future aspirational change in Doha's old centre could then be based not only on top-down decisions but also via initiatives generated by interest groups or the local community, employing bottom-up strategies.



Locations of neighbourhoods under discussion for future development. Source: Google Earth and Ashraf M. Salama.

