PETRO URBANISM: THE GEO-POLITICS OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN DOHA, QATAR

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ABSTRACT

This work attempts to consider some basic principles of structural design and material properties of bricks and brickwork to carry out the architectural design of a complete building in structural masonry. The paper deals with the architectural conception itself, including design requirements, walls layout, and the simplification of the design. Design and detailing including modular planning, door and window openings, service design, facade and aesthetics are also discussed. It is shown that a clear understanding of the construction process together with the flexibility offered by the material can contribute to a better use of structural masonry.

Key words: Doha, Qatar, Globalization, Urban Development, Late Capitalism.

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, Doha has experienced a rapid urbanization and building frenzy, which is characterized by an immense expansion of the existing city in almost all spatial coordinates. These recent developments represent the largest urban and real estate explosion Doha has ever seen. To understand the recent urban explosion of
Doha, I shall attempt in this paper to briefly capture three paradigmatic scenes from the history of the city and link it to global geopolitics, particularly as they are related to the discovery of oil. The first scene depicts the city during the decline of the pearl industry in the 1930’s and its impact on urbanization and development. The second scene is highlighted by the discovery of oil, which transformed the country between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s from a poor British protectorate into an independent modern state. Not unlike many other cities in the world, Doha’s development has always been tied to the global geopolitics and prevailing economic conditions. Thus, we find the city experiencing periodically times of relative austerity and slow down in construction activities due to sharp declines in oil prices such as the period between the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. In the third paradigmatic scene, between the late 1990’s and our present time, however, an economic upsurge marked a watershed in the country’s modern history. Instigated by some geopolitical imperatives, the government, once again, searched in the surrounding sea for sources of capital, which it found not only in the extracted natural gas from the North Field, but also in real estate developments. Several scholarly works and theories as well as concrete examples from Doha will be used as backdrop for developing these observations.

Scene I: Colonialism and the Urbanity of the Pearl Industry

During the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth century, the urban conditions of Doha were tremendously influenced by two interrelated socio-economic forces: tribal affiliations and pearling. While the social structure of the population remained, similar to elsewhere in the Persian Gulf, tied to the tribal social system brought along with the migrant clan from central Arabia, it was during this period that a significant transformation in the economic structure began to take shape, which in turn led to what I shall call a ‘fledgling capitalism.’ Certainly, it was a transformation from a Bedouin economy based on tribes roaming, along with their camels, sheep, and goats, the unending sea of sand in search for grazing, to an economy based on chaffing the gulf sea with boats in search for pearl banks lying offshore. During these days, the total inhabited urban area was about one and a quarter square kilometers, which extended only a few hundred meters inland from the south side of Doha bay in an almost treeless environment. While in the first half of the nineteenth century, the settlements along the bay were limited to one specific area, Al-Bidaa, a century later they had metastasized into eight distinct Ferejan, or districts. Each Fereej was occupied by a certain tribe or a large family (Figure 1).
These Ferjan stretched parallel to the irregular indentation of the salt marshes and tidal flats, which constituted large segments along the Arabian Gulf shoreline [1]. Mahmoud al-Kourdy tells us that most alleyways that penetrated the Ferejan of the urban area lead to the harbor, which was the busiest part of the city, particularly during the preparations for the diving season between May and October [2]. It is important to note that the social relations were determined more by blood and tribal affiliations rather than income and wealth. This is particularly apparent in the urbanization pattern, which put members of one tribe, regardless of their economic situations, in one area of the city.

The housing stock was composed of a few hundred simple one floor dwellings huddled closely together along narrow, winding alleys. Other structures that dotted the cityscape include the ‘barasti’—a house built from Palm tree fronds—and the Bedouin tents [3]. Members of the tribe were given land by the sheikh upon their request, usually to accommodate a large increase in the family or for newlyweds to start a new one. A master mason was responsible for the design and execution of the house with a few workers. Although we do not have accounts of the background of these workers, it is assumed that they were originally from Persia or other parts where masonry construction was the norm. This is attested by the fact that some house features, such as the Barajeel, wind towers, were first developed in and then imported from Persia. In all houses, however, there were limited ornamentations in the façade, and the architectural style was similar to the architecture one would find elsewhere in the gulf region. The most prominent house during these days was the old Shiekh Abdallah Bin Jasim Palace, built in the first decade of the twentieth century, and was used for both living and governance [4].

Figure 1  Urban development of Doha until the late 1970’s
While these urban scenes were almost unchanged during the first three decades of the twentieth century, the early 1930s came with some shattering developments that eventually caused the emergence of new urban and housing patterns. First, the worldwide economic depression and the Japanese discovery of the cultured pearl prompted a disaster for the Gulf’s pearl industry. In Qatar, the situation was very grim and extreme poverty forced people to either leave the peninsula or live in dismal conditions [5]. The eruption of World War II aggravated the situation even further, but the final blow to the industry came with India’s independence in 1947. One of the measures taken by India’s new national government was to ban all imports of luxury items, including pearls. With the decline of the pearl industry, a chapter of the city’s urban history was sealed and another had begun.

**Scene II: Modernization and the Urbanity of Petro-Dollars**

No doubt the oil wealth which began to pour in during the 1950’s acted as a catalyst for the urban development that started to overtake the country. Many observers comment that the changes were slow in the beginning. There was no apparatus in the system of governance to take responsibility for physical planning and the ruler remained directly involved, for example, in allocating lots for houses, with the size and location determined by the resident’s social and political position in society. What is interesting to note from this era is the direction of urban development in the city. While during the early years the city grew like an arc around and in relation to the harbor, the source of work, after the discovery and exploitation of oil—which was first inland before American Oil giants were granted concessions in the Gulf sea—the city began to expand to the south and west, and in a matter of a few years the area of Doha had quadrupled.

It was around 1955 that a true sense of development began to be felt in the city. Asphalt roads were extended and lit; a new desalination water plant was constructed with pipes connecting it to many houses nearby; an electric plant was built; new schools began admitting students; and a new hospital, al-Remailah, opened its doors for the first time in the country, followed by maternity and school hospitals. The urban expansion of the built-up area of Doha during the two decades following the discovery of oil increased by ten-fold, reaching around twelve square kilometers [ibid.]. Simultaneous to this unprecedented urban expansion, was an extraordinary demographic increase [6]. Of course, the construction activities as well as the expansion of governmental services necessitated the use of foreign skilled and unskilled labor. We know from one governmental source that in 1970, the population of Doha reached around eighty-five thousand inhabitant, with foreigners constituting around sixty-seven percent of the population. Thus the period between 1949 and 1969 had witnessed an increase in Doha’s population of nearly six-hundred percent and in foreign presence more than a thousand percent. The increase in immigration patterns
from abroad was echoed, with much smaller numbers, by the flight many Qataries
took from the surrounding villages and small towns towards Doha [ibid.].

With the exception of the period between 1966 and 1971, when a foreign office began
to introduce some planning consultations to the authorities, the urban expansion of
this period could best be described as haphazard, without any preconceived plan. The
housing and public buildings reflected specific necessary needs to ease life for the
increasing population of both locals and expatriates. True, the urban character of the
city began to take shape around the end of the 1960’s with developments taking place
along the gulf shores, such as the construction of al-Corniche Road, the opening of
new routes through the city, and the construction of two new hotels, Gulf and Oasis.
These hotels were not built to accommodate tourists visiting Doha, but rather to
supply the increasing number of businessmen and high ranking employees from
Europe and US oil companies. Moreover, a new type of housing, the apartment
building, began to appear. This new type reflected the increasing presence of an
emerging social stratum of expatriate families within the city. During these days,
Doha had a new apparatus in the government with a mandate to provide infrastructure
and municipal services as well as take charge of some of the city’s built environment.
Its first task was to establish and implement a system of housing for the low-income
Qatars.

No doubt, the years following Qatar’s declaration of independence in 1972 were
decisive to the modern urban history of the Middle East, perhaps, for decades to
come. The use of the oil weapon during the 1973 October war sent shock waves to the
western hemisphere and caused an unprecedented leap in oil prices. To provide a cue
of the scale of the increase, in 1972 Qatar’s revenue from selling oil slightly passed
the six-hundred million US dollars mark, two years later it tripled, and by 1980 it was
more than five billions [7]. The incredible surge in oil prices swelled the government
budget and fueled a construction boom that continued for the next decade. What made
this period different from earlier booms was not only the magnitude of construction,
or even the quality of buildings produced, but also the direct involvement of foreign,
mainly western planners and designers in shaping the future development of the city.
In what follows in this section, I shall concentrate on one planning project from these
days: the reclamation of new lands from the sea.

To accommodate the population growth and the changing urban life, the government
of Qatar in 1972 contracted the first foreign planning consultant, the British-based
Llewelyn-Davies, to supply a master plan for Doha extending through 1990. Llewelyn-Davies presented several proposals for different parts of the city and
advised the planning department of the ministry of Municipal Affairs on planning
legislations. Among the many recommendations proposed by Llewelyn-Davies was a
proposal to develop and reclaim a large area located north-west of the city center
along the shores of the gulf, The New District of Doha. Sharon Nagy tells us that the
new project was meant not only to enhance Doha’s new image of prosperity and
development, but also allowed the state to possess “large parcels of serviced residential and commercial land, which could be granted or leased to political allies” [8]. Moreover, Llewelyn-Davies’ original project proposal covered two thousand hectares, of which seven-hundred-fifty were reclaimed land. It also suggested the reclaimed land used for up-scale housing and leisure facilities, but “the Emiri Diwan expanded the project to include housing for approximately 6000 residents (mostly Qatari) [ibid.]. In fact, much of the construction activities during the 1980’s were taking place in the New District of Doha. Housing projects for Qatars, new diplomatic quarter, the University, residential blocks for expatriates, compounds for Gulf Air employees, a football stadium, and the Sheraton Hotel were among the most prominent examples from this era. In the decade following the independence, the area of the capital city doubled to reach over twenty square kilometers, with a population estimate around two-hundred thousands, of which nearly seventy percent were expatriate workers. By the early 1980’s, a drop in the oil prices caused the government to either cancel or put to a halt many of the infrastructure and building projects. For example, large areas designated in the original proposal by William Periera, another planning office from the USA, for commercial and leisure developments, particularly in the new reclaimed land, remained undeveloped.

The development of Doha during the years following independence was interwoven with the recycling of the petro-dollars earned by the government, which amounted to five billion dollars at the dawn of the drop of oil prices and recession period [ibid.]. At that time, the economy was not insulated against the inevitable swings in oil prices and the troublesome changes in government revenues that come with them. Functioning as a welfare state for its citizens, the government’s policy was to supply every Qatari with a plot of land and an interest free loan for building a house, which was usually very large by western standards. The expatriate workers also usually received free housing as part of their work contracts. According to one estimate, the governments of the Middle East spent eighty percent of their increase in revenue during the 1970’s boom either in modernization projects or purchasing goods from the United States and Europe. Only the remaining twenty percent were saved in the form of equities or loans to developing countries, particularly in South America [9]. I will argue that much of what was spent in construction activities, either in the sphere of housing, infrastructure, or public amenities was necessary to accommodate the increase in population growth and modernize the capital city. It was during the second half of the 1990’s that another type of urban development began to dominate the city as elsewhere in the gulf region.

Scene III: Globalization and the Urbanity of the Spectacle

Since the late 1990s, we observe a rapid urbanization and building frenzy in Doha that has been characterized by explosive expansion of the existing city in almost all spatial coordinates: building skyscrapers, constructing malls and gated residential
communities, establishing iconic museums and libraries, erecting new stadia and sports facilities, importing water inland, and creating artificial lakes and islands. These recent developments represent the largest urban and real estate explosion Doha has ever seen. It is customary to find almost every week one of Qatar’s growing numbers of real estate developers either unveiling a new project or announcing the completion of a stage of an on-going one. Since the turn of the millennium an upward trend characterizes the total number of building and demolition permits issued across the city. While the building permits granted in 1999 slightly exceeded 1,500, in 2004 they reached over 1000 in the first few months [10]. Every previously-vacant lot appears to have been fenced for some construction activities; old houses and commercial blocks are being demolished to make space for higher-income earning towers, and the face of the city is changing from day to day. One needs only to observe the changing skyline of the West Bay area, which will host, when completed, more than 180 high-rise buildings. A tell-tale sign of the magnitude of the construction activities in Qatar is to recall that the ambitious projects being built or in the pipeline for the next decade are worth some US$130 billion. This construction boom is backed by the fact that Qatar is blessed with the largest non-associated gas field in the world [11]. Why these developments in their urban and physical environments are happening at this magnitude at this historical juncture is a question often asked with the usual answer given by the authorities: to diversify the economy. Since the beginning of this real estate boom a few years ago, the idea of diversifying the economy provided a mode of seeing, a way of diagnosing, and a remedy for improving and reaching a sustainable urban and economic growth. Of course, there are other interrelated possible answers to this question. In what follows, I will limit myself to only two other possible answers. Other explanations were examined elsewhere [12].

First, akin to its urban expansion in the 1970s, the development of Doha during the past few years is interwoven with the recycling of the petrodollars earned by the government. Mohsen Khan, the Director of the Middle East and Central Asia Department at the International Monetary Fund, suggested that the export revenues collected by the oil-producing countries of the Middle East, particularly the Gulf region, would be shown to have exceeded US$500 billion in 2006 [13]. By subtracting the import expenditures from the revenue accumulated from selling oil, Khan says that over US$200 billion would be available for saving or spending. If one’s first reaction was amazement at the scale of wealth accumulated in short time span, one soon begins to wonder about how this money is invested. Khan states that although it is difficult to trace the money, ‘we can say that a large share has been likely invested in US dollar financial assets’ [ibid.]. There is no mention in the IMF of the frenzied explosion of cities and the financing of many mega real estate projects around the Gulf as a possible explanation for the missing petrodollars.

In a similar vein, Jad Mouawad and Eduardo Porter of the New York Times contend that after the 1973 oil shock, governments in the Middle East spent 80 per cent of
their increase in revenue; by contrast, between 2003 and 2005, they spent less than 40 per cent of their new revenue [14]. Other reports contradict these possible answers. For example, an online project tracker report published in the Gulf News estimates the value of the projects planned or underdevelopment in the Gulf to exceed one trillion US dollars [15]. ‘The value of more than 1400 projects’, states the report, ‘rose by more than 250 billion US dollars in the first quarter of 2006 and exceeded one trillion in the first week of April’ [Ibid]. While it is true that historically oil revenue has been converted into dollars or dollar-denominated assets, this time around, it is possible that a large portion of the petrodollars is invested in stock markets around the Gulf, financing large real estate developments. Ironically, as Mike Davis [16] has observed, terrorism deserves some of the credit for this real estate boom. According to him, ‘since 9/11, many Middle Eastern investors, fearing possible lawsuits or sanctions, have pulled up stakes in the West’ [Ibid.]. Estimates suggest, Davis contends, that ‘the Saudis alone have repatriated one-third of their trillion-dollar overseas portfolio’ [Ibid.]. It is also possible to assume that much of the petrodollar surpluses are pumped back into the global economy, to the oil exporting countries. A glimpse at the number of Western companies operating in the construction as well as other industries in the Gulf attests to this observation.

The second explanation is related to the fact that branding cities has become part of promoting national economic issues. Today the selection of brands has become an important factor in defining people’s identities and lifestyles [17]. Simon Anholt tells us that what is different in today’s globalized, networked world is that every city has to compete with every other city for the share of the world’s tourists, consumers, businesses, capital, and so on [18]. Cities with powerful and positive brands find it easier to attract investment and tourists. Consider the negative image given to Qatar by the famous Lonely Planet guidebook of the 1980s which tells us that Doha has earned a reputation as the dullest place on earth. One cannot help but think that much of what is happening today has been instigated as a response to this negative image. In order to gain a share in the global economy, therefore, cities are consciously striving to construct, manage, and maintain a brand image. In this brand-setting of cities, architecture seems to have assumed the role of forging the backdrop for brand experiences with a high entertainment value, from flagship stores to themed residential gated communities, from innovative museum and mall concepts to spectacular, iconic office towers and hotels. Thus we find the Qatari authorities branding Doha using iconic architecture. The centrepiece of these endeavours in branding Doha is the iconic ‘The Pearl-Qatar’. The US$2.5 billion Riviera-style, offshore island covers some 400 hectares of reclaimed land and will triple, when completed in 2009, Doha’s coastline. Built 350 metres offshore in the West Bay Lagoon area, the island is promising to house more than 35,000 inhabitants in an exclusive retreat, yet closely integrated with the mainland by an eight-lane, palm-tree lined super highway [19]. It is worth mentioning that in keeping with the iconic rivalries and brand setting of cities in the Gulf States, The Pearl-Qatar is one of a series of emerging artificial or natural islands used to advance specific images:
Bahrain has the Amwag Islands, Oman has the Wave, Dubai has three Palm islands and The World, and Kuwait is planning a major tourist investment on its existing island of Failaka.

The Seattle-based Callison Architecture Inc provided the master planning and conceptual design services for the whole reclaimed island. Clearly, Callison’s main goal was to differentiate the island from the other islands in the Gulf and to create an iconic brand image for the country. In addition, both the island’s name and location are of great complex significance. The Pearl-Qatar is supposedly being built on a reclaimed former pearl diving site. The name, therefore, alludes to the previous mainstay commodity of the economy, pearls. While the project clearly addresses global audiences, its progenitors waste no time in evoking a link between the cultural identity of the emerging spaces and the historical legacies of skills, stories, music, art, and poetry of the past times on the basis of their overlay with the old pearl-fishing site. Moreover, the shape of the island mirrors this illusion of pearls huddled together, extending into the Gulf waters. Now the old commodity of pearls is no longer a key economic factor. Its abstracted image and connotation, however, has become a circulating iconic fiction, while its actual spaces have been virtually non-existent until reclaimed from the sea, a reclaimed/recreated space-commodity to be conquered and sold by an ever growing global real estate market. Apparently, for the developers of The Pearl, it is not sufficient for the new global cosmopolitan citizens to live in local historical times. Thus, we find the island encompassing ten variously themed residential and commercial districts, promising the ‘ambience and lifestyle of the Mediterranean to the heart of Arabia’. As an incentive to attract people from across the globe, the property owners of The Pearl will automatically receive Qatari residency visas and will be granted unrestricted freehold titles to their property. According to official publications, The Pearl-Qatar is one of the designated areas that falls under the Prime Ministerial decree to allow non-Qatars to own residential units in Doha.

Conclusion

My first thought is precisely that what has been emerging out of the social and material production of Doha’s new spaces is a specific urbnity, which functions as the city’s membership card for joining the club of global cities. In a sense, the concept of ‘a global city’ is akin to a brand image bestowed upon some world cities, which have managed to create new spaces for work and leisure that cater for global audiences. Several of the on-going and finished projects suggest that the strategies of urban development in the past decade reflect a conscious approach to enhancing the city’s global image through the construction of cultural, tourist, and commercial projects. Moreover, the creation of Doha’s global image through the creation of spectacular, iconic built-environments seems to have helped the city to conjure up an image to be marketed to tourists and visitors. This is how cities are competing under
today’s global capitalist system. In this iconic global-brand war, the success of architectural forms and spaces is contingent on their entertainment and fantasy qualities. Could it be that in the contemporary economic paradigm, the brand ‘global city’ is late-capitalism’s way of expanding its grip over new territories by ‘making others desire what we want them to desire’, to paraphrase Joseph Nye? [20] But one must not forget that changes in urban and architectural spaces are generated by agents and forces both local and global. Certainly, the interaction of Qatari and international capitalism is not new. What is new, however, is that in this phase of interaction, desires and new urban values and images have been enticed to stoke the construction boom.

References


