Building a Public Realm: Imagining a Future for Old Doha

Michelle Dezember

Interior of Al Ansari House, Al Asmakh, Doha, Qatar. Courtesy of Alia Farid.

Qatar's staggering pace of construction due to its booming economy has become the subject of international scrutiny, especially in the lead-up to the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup. Development projects account for one-tenth of the national GDP. These range from Education City, Qatar Foundation's educational district on the edge of the city, including work by architects such as Ricardo Legoretta, Arata Isozaki and Rem Koolhaas, to Msheireb Properties' complete renovation of the old city centre.

My conversation with architects and designers Ameena Ahmadi and Fatma Al Sahlawi revealed the local optimism and some of the debates and questions surrounding the built environment and the public realm. Both Ahmadi and Al Sahlawi were facilitators of the Old Doha Prize, an ideas competition for proposals of 'heritage-led regeneration in Old Doha'. Teams comprised of both British and Qatari-based architects competed in a one-week design charette, the results of which were displayed in a small exhibition at Mathaf as part of 'Future City: Doha'.

Michelle Dezember: You both work for major projects that are shaping Doha's urban landscape. What role do you see arts and culture playing in the development of the city?

Fatma Al Sahlawi: Qatar has done very well in growing its health, education, sports and political sectors, but what's been left behind is the arts and culture sector. It was very important for organisations like the Qatar Museums Authority (QMA), Katara, and Qatar Foundation (QF) to be established, not just to check a box, but to create a community of people who are interested in art and culture and attract people from abroad who can add to the diverse nature of Qatar.

Ameena Ahmadi: From a QF perspective, what's been happening in Education City is an attempt to create something different from commercial buildings, so it's really a process of creating architecture and setting role models for what contemporary architecture models in Qatar could be, and what needs they could serve. QF in this sense is setting an example by doing, and architecture becomes a physical manifestation of the organisation's ambitions and objectives.

MD: Are there 'good' and 'bad' kinds of development?

AA: I would say that there are two ways of measuring development: a critique of formal and organisational qualities, and an assessment of the programmatic allocation of a particular development. We can create what might be referred to as a 'great' piece of architecture that's empty of people or has

destroyed something of historical value. The challenge then becomes how to mesh these two ways of looking at a development, its impact, how people are drawn to it, and what comes out of it.

FS: Going back to the term 'design' is really important, because by 'design' I mean taking into consideration designing projects that are contextually responsive to the spatial conditions that you're working within, but also the social conditions. When both spatial and social considerations are taken into account, it's place-making and not just space-making. I would judge developments in Doha based on whether they're imported ideas, mega developments, gated communities or typologies of suburban communities, or if they're developments that have taken into consideration the socio-political and spatial conditions that exist in Qatar, catering to them and adopting successful means that work with the given context and situation.

MD: What do you think 'place-making' means within the context of Doha? Who are we trying to draw to these developments and why?

AA: I believe that what's adding to the urban malaise in Doha is the segregated developments taking place at the moment. The city feels like a collection of disjointed destinations. Our daily experience entails spending quite a significant time in the car between one destination and another. Place-making can't just be about a single place, destination or development; it has to take into consideration urban connectivity. In my opinion, the key is integration. Spread-out development is a natural by-product of the car, but a degree of integration at certain scales is essential for social, economic and cultural forms of life to be fostered. Otherwise, the burden then lies on individual and organisational power to drive such activities into life, excluding natural serendipities. Place-making isn't just about the architecture of a place; it's also the creation of opportunities, the activities that places afford, how they meet the needs of the communities that inhabit them and to what extent they contribute to their wellbeing. In a diverse city like Doha, place-making should contribute to bringing cohesion, respect and integration at various levels. It's a multifaceted process that needs to address the sensitivities of our diverse pieces.

MD: You were both involved as facilitators and judges for the Old Doha Prize, which was piloted this year. [1] Could you explain how the idea emerged and if there were any surprising outcomes?

FS: We didn't think that the Old Doha Prize would be the outcome of our conversations with the different stakeholders in the Al Asmakh area. My role started out as architect/master planner at QMA. We found it frustrating that each house was being acquired separately, which meant that the urban fabric wasn't going to be preserved. The value in this area is not in a single house: Al Asmakh, Al Hitmi, and Al Ghanem are the last remnants of what Old Doha was like, so it was important to us to preserve the urban fabric of the area as a whole. So the prize came together because stakeholders agreed that it was a feasible approach to respond to what's happening to Al Asmakh. We were surprised how the prize brought people together, and by the outcomes both in terms of the designs and the discussions that were raised.

AA: It all started with the enthusiasm of the organisers of this event; many have put in a lot of effort to make the Old Doha Prize a reality. The participants' tremendous work – both in terms of quantity and quality – that resulted afterwards was a true surprise. The discussions were so valuable, and although each team had really distinct proposals, you could map similar issues across all the submissions. The winning team was able to approach the subject holistically: the context, the architecture, who we're trying to serve in this regeneration scheme, how it's different from the rest of the city, and what value it adds to the city. Talking urbanism and architecture was a valuable experience – it wasn't just about doing something for the Al Asmakh area, but also about the architecture and urban-design professions in Doha: how such a programme builds the profession through a critical discourse.

MD: It's interesting that the holistic nature of the winning group's proposal is what made it successful. Is this an indication of what's needed for the wider field?

AA: Absolutely. When we're thinking of regeneration schemes or development in general, architects' egos sometimes kick in. Suad Amiry said it beautifully when she was talking about restoration projects in

Palestine through the Riwaq Centre for Architectural Conservation in Ramallah: when they were able to think of people and the spaces in between as opposed to just architecture or single buildings, that was when they were able to work successfully.

MD: Who are the people that architects and designers should be considering in the spaces, or 'urban fabric', as Fatma put it, of Old Doha?

AA: Old Doha is a complex part of the city that showcases to a great extent Doha's DNA. In Old Doha, you find a lot of memories of the Qatari population, you see traces of past stories, you see a large number of migrant workers who've come in search of ways to improve their lives and their families' conditions, you see some speciality commercial activities that attract clients from across the city. I don't think that any of the above should be excluded. The fact that all of this exists in Al Asmakh offers unique opportunities for the area.

FS: It's fortunate that some of the original inhabitants of the oldest parts of Doha are still alive. Their stories and memories, knowledge of the past, and presence today should be utilised and documented as a layer in the history of Old Doha. It's also fortunate to be able to come into contact with the current occupiers and residents of Old Doha, the migrant community. Documenting and analyzing their current occupation is critical to ensure that we don't erase another layer of history. A new layer of occupancy can initiate an overlay with the existing, and with the absent past, to build upon the rich heritage and history of the area. A complete wipeout and replacement of the people currently occupying Old Doha would injure the potential of creating an area with diverse layers of history, people and activities.

MD: What strikes me about the Old Doha Prize is that it calls for 'heritage-led regeneration proposals'. What does 'heritage' mean in a place like Doha, and why was this approach important?

FS: We can't say that the heritage of Doha is just the pre-concrete buildings from 1920–50, but rather a set of building typologies and means of construction that show the evolution of the city. But perhaps we need to let go of our attachment to the original uses of these buildings. We can't go either to the extreme of looking at these heritage houses as frozen objects in time like an urban museum, nor of completely demolishing them because our uses don't fit them. Being part of a governmental entity like QMA, it's very easy to create a masterplan that defines zoning but doesn't allow for the organic initiation of a new culture or new way of inhabiting these areas. I think the role of these governmental entities should be in envisioning the preservation of such areas and intervening in a humbler way by creating catalysts. It should be at a smaller scale.

AA: From an experiential point of view, when you walk through an old part of the city that gives you comfort in terms of its scale, for example, or the memories it evokes, or you feel at ease because of how your surroundings are clustered, this is an aspect of the importance of preserving heritage put in simple terms. This kind of preservation, by which I don't mean freezing but rather bringing to life and building on heritage, helps inform and inspire our design decisions today for new developments as well.

MD: How have architectural practices shaped life in Doha?

FS: Looking at Al Asmakh, which was made up of both Qataris and non-Qataris, we saw that they were living in a mixed-use community. It was a residential community but they had economic generators like bakeries and shops. But since the 1980s there's been a movement of people away from the centre that's created sterile zones, single-use districts of the city. So if you drive around Madinat Khalifa or West Bay, you only find houses and not much encouragement for interaction between inhabitants. That's where I see a shortcoming in the way that master planning has happened on the large scale; it's forgotten what happens at the smaller scale of everyday life.

AA: There are architects who've been drawn to commercial developments, as Clare Melhuish mentioned during 'Future City: Doha', that create visuals more than actually building them and thinking about lived conditions. You walk around our neighbourhoods and there isn't even a pavement, except where people have bothered to extend and pave the area in front of their houses. Some people plant a tree,

some put in a bench, and if such elements repeat, then we're building a public life. Being in the public sphere is about a shared responsibility. When you're out walking on the pavement, you start feeling responsible for it: I'm not going to throw trash on it because I'm going to use it and it constitutes a part of my daily life. Building a public realm and being conscious of these things is about allowing people to take ownership of space and feel responsible for it. Those pieces of the city that are in between our daily destinations basically have a huge impact on shaping our lives and experiences; knitting them through considerate and participatory urban design and planning could improve our life patterns immensely. I hope that initiatives like the Doha Architecture Forum and Mathaf's 'Future City' symposium can better inform practices and spread awareness of these important notions.

MD: What role can architects play in imagining better ways of urban life? Is it possible to build a public realm?

FS: With architects, there's often an egocentric approach to focusing on the building you're designing regardless of what's happening around you. If we keep following that approach, even if we're the 'best' designers, we won't create the 'best' places. We'll only achieve the isolated nature of the cities that are developing at such a fast pace. There needs to be an overlapping of target users and cultures, understanding them from various points of view. Overlapping is a great responsibility of the architects who are dealing with the fragmented spatial nature of the city today, and the complex social structures as well.

AA: If we consider the presentation that Rami El Samahy delivered, for example, in 'Future City: Doha', he started by saying that even though he's presenting extreme and hypothetical scenarios, he usually asks his students to be sensible designers. As an undergraduate student, I struggled to think beyond real or common-life scenarios, even though I was learning in studios led by a very experimental approach. Nonetheless, as I reflect back on such work and on the three speculations that Rami presented, I think it's great to work on imaginative scenarios. Sometimes the role of architects and urban designers is to imagine things or visualise surreal conditions in order to push the architectural discourse forward and help inform the decisions we make today. Seeing those hypothetical projects makes you ask 'What if?' Imagining in this sense helps create better realities.

I'm not sure there's a short answer to the second part of your question. Building or creating a public realm is a multifarious process rather than a product. Such a process requires recognition of the need for what a public realm entails. Some of what's expected to take place within a public realm is already happening in Doha, for example, but in isolation or within allocated spaces or even within what's considered a private sphere. Developing a public realm must start with defining what a public realm in Doha is. It definitely can't be based on pure imported models, because in essence, the public realm is the source of the unique properties of any city.

FS: A public realm isn't achievable solely by a developing entity. It's an adjoined process that entails the developer and designer, but most importantly the people who will be the users and occupiers of such places. The 'public' is a critical ingredient in building the 'public realm'.

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1. The Old Doha Prize is an ideas competition organised in November 2013 by the British Council and Qatar Museums Authority with the support of Msheireb Properties in Qatar, and the RIBA and the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, in the UK.

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