DESIGN IN PRACTICE

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Msheireb Heart of Doha: An Alternative Approach to Urbanism in the Gulf Region

Abstract
The objective of this article is to highlight some of the challenges faced by emerging Gulf nation states in modernizing their cities. The Msheireb Heart of Doha Masterplan is used as an exemplar project to offer an alternative approach in urban planning and regeneration in the region. The article describes how the challenges of land ownership, privatization, climate, social diversity and cultural relevance are dealt with in the masterplan, which seeks to create a modern Qatari homeland that is rooted in its local traditions and heritage. Towards the end of the article, reflections and evaluations are examined to prompt further thoughts and discussions.

The aim of the Msheireb project headed by Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser al-Missned and patronized by the Qatar Foundation, in the Qatari capital of Doha, is 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 not melt. Qatar is a proud nation that embraces an active role in the world stage. Qatar’s bold ambition is demonstrated by the creation of Al-Jazeera, the establishment of Education City as a regional higher educational hub, the hosting of international sports events and many other positive actions that result from participative and forward-thinking approaches. However, in a rapidly homogenizing world where the boundary of cultural identities and economic models are increasingly fused and blurred, Qatar recognizes the need to establish a clear cultural identity expressed through urban planning and architecture. The Msheireb Masterplan and the associated discourse on Qatari architecture is an attempt to address

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the question of what will make a modern homeland for this ambitious Arab nation. It is a thread that links the nation’s past with its future. It is a mirror that shows modernity in the face of tradition.

Modernization and progress are often misunderstood as ‘Westernization’. This is particularly evident in the urban development projects built in the countries around the Persian Gulf in recent decades. Driven by the need to diversify their economies and pave the way for non-oil-based service industries, the Gulf States poured investments into building ever-wider highways and taller skyscrapers. The urban design approach that typifies these developments is symptomatic of the political landscape, pattern of land ownership and field of vision of these nation states. The objective of this article is to highlight some of the challenges in the modernization process, demonstrate how attempts made in the Msheireb Masterplan can offer an alternative approach.

Figure 1: Msheireb Heart of Doha Masterplan.

AECOM.

Figure 1: Msheireb Heart of Doha Masterplan.
Msheireb Heart of Doha

in social, economic, cultural and environmental terms (Figure 1). The pragmatic objectives of the Msheireb Masterplan are:

- To promote a sustainable way of living within a compact city framework that reduces automobile usage, increases density and promotes public transport and mixed use
- To renew a piece of city infrastructure so as to reduce its reliance on fossil fuel
- To promote better integrated social communities at the heart of the city where locals and expatriate workers share walkable neighbourhoods, public spaces and amenities
- To modernize a piece of Qatar’s capital city in ways that will resonate with local history and cultures

In fulfilling these objectives, some of the following challenges of modernization are addressed through the masterplan:

- The short-term profit-driven motives
- Fragmented land ownership and its impact on the development pattern
- Local climate and its impact on movement and urban form
- The loss of community spirit and identity in the process of modernization
- Image of the city – creation not transposition

The Short-term View

For world-class cities such as New York and London, the presence of a city mayor seat is crucial in advocating the city’s interest. Unified political leadership and a comprehensive development framework are important contributing factors to a city’s success. This unified voice is often lacking in the Gulf States. Consequently, energies dedicated for urban development are dissipated and piecemeal developments lack continuity and a long-term view. With the fragmentation of land ownership and development control, commercial developers tend to focus their attention solely within the red-line boundary of a single commercial plot. Given the boundary constraints, commercial drivers ensure that floor to area ratios yield positive investment returns. The only option is to build vertically.

The Msheireb project offers a longer-term view with the leadership and commitment from the Qatar Foundation and its subsidiary Msheireb Properties. The Msheireb project is intended to be a long-term investment and endowment for the education charity. With this projected interest, Msheireb is to be a part of the city that is built to last and Msheireb Properties will maintain stewardship of the development for the foreseeable future.

By consolidating land ownership, Msheireb Properties brings fundamental and wholesale changes to this part of the city that would otherwise be piecemeal and inconsequential. This wholesale approach encourages a unified vision whereby spaces between buildings are as important as the buildings
themselves. The value of the real estate lies not just in the square footage of accommodation but in the places and urban setting created by the buildings. Streets and neighbourhoods are designed as collective entities rather than buildings being designed individually within their plots. The compact city model offers efficiencies and sustainable strategies at a masterplan scale that are not achievable at the individual building level. The scale of intervention allows the mid-rise high-density model of a compact city which contrasts sharply with that of the West Bay area of Doha.

**Movement and Distances in the Local Climate**

Cooling is a key challenge for any urban development in the Gulf region. In the past, the traditional *fereej* formed the building blocks of cities where families were clustered together as urban settlements (Figures 2 and 3). Common social values were shared within the neighbourhood and the *fereej* was an expression of clan lineage and a shared way of life. Its tight-knit pattern responded to both social as well as climatic needs. The narrow and naturally shaded *sikkat* network connected different parts of a *fereej* and also with the wider settlement. Unlike Haussmann’s notion of the public realm where boulevards cleanly define urban blocks, these *sikkats* are residual spaces shaped and sculpted by the internal functions of the private domain.

With the arrival of air-conditioning, this inextricable link between urban form and climate was broken. In a full reversal of the *fereej* figure ground, the sub-urban villa and skyscraper are positioned in the middle of the plot surrounded by car parks and are exposed to the sun (Figure 4). In a negative spiral, the spread of car ownership further fuels urban sprawl which in turn encourages more car journeys. As these skyscrapers mushroom to fulfil perceived demands, they create a no-man’s-land in between car parks, transportation networks and air-conditioned offices. Walking between these buildings has become a near impossible feat in the desert heat.

For Msheireb, the scale of intervention in the masterplan allows for a more comprehensive approach in solving problems associated with vehicles and walking distances. To establish a fine-grain urban fabric where streets are narrow and buildings on both sides create natural shade, vehicles – in

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*Figure 2: Doha fereej, aerial, 1952.*

*Figure 3: Doha fereej, oblique aerial, 1952.*

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particular, large trucks – are diverted underground for parking and servicing. This means that streets at ground level can be made narrower to create shade and sufficient vehicular access can bring urban life to this part of the city.

Fundamental to the Msheireb Masterplan is the concept of the grid and the lattice, which, in pragmatic terms, are movement networks for cars and people (Figures 5a–5b). Inspired by the figure ground pattern of the traditional fereej, the concept of sculpting the void was developed for the masterplan. The lattice of sikkats is designed to evoke memories and capture the incidental qualities of the fereej (Figures 6a–6b). In an age dominated by automobiles, the sikkats are intended to create enjoyable pedestrian experiences. Incidental spaces and intimate courtyards with shaded area seating are weaved into the sikkat routes, allowing people to pause and socialize.

The grid, on the other hand, allows vehicle access into the 31-hectare site from the wider modern city network. Rather than superimposing a standard and orthogonal city grid, the Msheireb Masterplan draws references from the historic street pattern, bringing together the new and the old (Figure 7). This street grid underpins a comprehensive transport strategy for the masterplan,
facilitating both public and private transport. A local tram route will allow residents and visitors an alternative to walking during the hottest months. Local bus stops and taxi drop-offs are interspersed across the streets of Msheireb. In addition to these public transport facilities within the site, the city-wide metro lines will connect Msheireb with other key destinations within Doha such as West Bay, the new airport and Education City. For private cars, a substantial basement parking garage is created to house circa 12,000 cars for local residents, businesses and visitors.

The intention of this grid and lattice urban structure is to encourage people to leave their cars, use more public transport and walk in relative comfort, particularly in the winter and the ‘shoulder’ months. The new streets largely

*Figure 7: Historic streets and grain.*
follow the direction of the prevailing sea breeze to help clear pollution and heat generated by vehicles. The width of these north–south streets are kept narrow so that buildings naturally cast shadows onto the streets and thus reduce the ambient temperature of the area (Figure 8). East–west-oriented streets are more exposed to the high midday sun and colonnades are introduced to provide shading.

In addition to its response to the local climate, the grid and the lattice also give rise to a masterful composition of spaces within the masterplan. Grand and straight streets are a short distance from the quiet and hidden sikkats; the regimented formality of main squares is a block away from the incidental barakhas adjacent to town-house clusters; the contemplative heritage houses are a minute away from the hustle and bustle of Barahat Al Nouq (Figures 9–11).
Figures 10a and 10b: Proposal-sikkat characters.

Figure 11: Masterplan temporary/indicative street names.
Unlike city spaces based on the scale of cars, well-crafted moments within the masterplan further encourage people to walk and explore Msheireb and bring a human scale and pace to this part of the city. However, formal beauty is an empty vessel without the programmes and functions that bring the city to life.

**Loss of Community Spirit**

The lack of a comprehensive development framework has led to the piecemeal development of single-use compounds of villas, shopping malls and resorts surrounded by car parks. Social spaces such as barahais next to mosques and sikkats embedded within the tradition fereej have been replaced by car parks and drive-through fast-food outlets. To recreate social spaces in this part of Doha, a mixed-use strategy has been proposed. Cities come to life at different times of the day because of the mix of activities associated with programmes, functions and uses. The mix of uses in Msheireb aims to bring not only long-term economic diversity into the area but richness and variety in the demographic mix.

To attract various family and household sizes, different designs of residential neighbourhoods are created within Msheireb. One of the retained historic streets is Al Kahraba Street. ‘Kahraba’ means electricity in Arabic, and it was the first street with electric lighting in the heart of the city. It has since been a focal point for the local communities and it continues to evolve into new residential neighbourhoods within the masterplan. At the northern end of Al Kahraba Street where buildings are low and the urban grain is fine, the town-house fereej is the most appropriate typology given their low-rise massing and compact form. Their adjacency to the ceremonial Al Rayyan Road and the lack of destinations immediately north of Msheireb make this a quieter part of Msheireb suitable for family living. At the southern end of Al Kahraba Street is another residential neighbourhood with a focus on apartment buildings that fit well with the medium-rise massing in this area. Apartments are more suitable for young families from both Qatari and other expatriate communities. The third residential area is located above the main shopping streets. Activities here are more intense and the apartment mix caters to a younger generation who would enjoy the intensity of the city, especially in the evening. It is important to note that the apartments are not the dominant model for Qatari families but early consultations suggest that there is a demand for urban living for the young and educated professionals. These residential neighbourhoods are served by local mosques, primary schools, nurseries, medical facilities and local walking and cycling networks. This is intended to create a critical mass of residents in Msheireb in the evening.

During business hours, office workers will come to Msheireb to work. To cater to businesses from small offices to corporate addresses, a variety of office floor plates are available. Being more resilient to noise and traffic than residential uses, offices are generally located along the edges of Msheireb Street, Al Diwan Street and Al-Rayyan Road. With the anticipated arrival of the future metro, office headquarters are created along Msheireb Street where an undulating skyline marks the presence of Msheireb within the wider city and views from Doha Bay. These large-floor-plate buildings gather towards a crescendo at the junction of Al Diwan Street and Msheireb Street and create a strong vista terminating in Al Kahraba Street. Unique office uses such as Diwan Annex, an extension of the administrative function of the Emiri Diwan, is positioned on Al Rayyan Road immediately south of the seat of power. Other offices with smaller floor plates are located at prominent addresses...
within Msheireb such as Barahat Al Nouq and New Ukaz Street. This interspersing of smaller-scale offices amongst other uses can bring life to the heart of Msheireb to ensure the place is animated throughout the day.

Perhaps the most important use that brings activities to the streets is retail, including cafes and restaurants. Most of the ground floor within Msheireb is dedicated for retail use, which ranges from corner shops to international brands and luxury goods. The hierarchy of retail is implicit within the urban framework and a figure-eight-shaped retail loop connects the primary retail streets. This loop is connected with Souk Waqif along Sikkat Al Wadi and to the new proposed city park via Al Kahraba Street. This retail loop brings together many key spaces and sikkats within the masterplan connecting residential and commercial uses. Finer-grain retail units catering to traditional clothing and accessories are located along Al Kahraba Street. Home-furnishing stores, which require larger floor plates are located along New Ukaz Street, the shop windows along which provide good retail visibility. Large-format family shopping demands an even larger floor plate and they tend to create blank external facades, which are deliberately positioned in the basement. International brands are located within The Galleria, a north–south sikkat that can be sealed off and air-conditioned during the hottest months of the year. The most luxurious retail shops are positioned immediately south of Barahat Al Nouq, along Reemas Street. The variety of spaces within the masterplan will create a range of retail opportunities and thus bring a broad spectrum of clientele to Msheireb. Complementing the retail uses are the cultural forum, galleries, hotels and museums, which are conceived as destinations in their own right.

In addition to these newly crafted destinations, important heritage areas such as the Eid Ground has been preserved and renewed. A number of heritage houses are restored as part of the masterplan, maintaining a historical dimension in an otherwise ‘instant’ city. This heritage quarter creates another destination and experience within Doha where cultural exchange could take centre stage at the very heart of the city. This mix of uses has emerged organically with the urban framework to create a multiplicity of urban grain that is distinctive and memorable. The union of the physical urban framework with the choreography of urban activities is what makes the Msheireb Masterplan convincing and organic.

Image of Doha

Another dimension of the challenges of modernization relates to Kevin Lynch’s notion of the image of the city. Keen to position themselves in the global economy, emerging nations such as Qatar need to be seen as promising locations for businesses and foreign investments. A new postcard with soaring skylines similar to those of Hong Kong and Manhattan is perceived to be the quick fix for modernity. Ring roads and high rises are facsimiles from another culture. This imposition of ready-made solutions has the potential to stifle local creativity in formulating first-hand questions and the search for answers that are rooted in local culture. Image creation is needed, not transposition. Images of cities vary. Some images are centred on signature architecture such as the Sydney Opera House and the Guggenheim in Bilbao, others draw inspiration from public spaces such as Trafalgar Square in London, Las Ramblas in Barcelona and Place Vendome in Paris. Some relate to special activities and festive events on the annual calendar, such as the bull fighting in Catalonia, Spain. Heritage and history such as the Great Wall of China are equally iconic. Other city images emerge from intersecting moments within the city grid, for example the Flatiron building on Fifth Avenue in New York City.
The new image of Doha and Msheireb is to emerge from the site features, the merging of the old and new streets, the mix of uses that re-energize the old heart, a series of well-connected and memorable public spaces and a new language of architecture. Far from a cover image make-over exercise, the Msheireb project taps into the collective memories of Doha and the Msheireb site to find urban traces which refuse to be erased by waves of modernization. Tracing back to the aerial photo of 1947, the people of Qatar lived close to the sea coast and traditional fereej were clearly discernible (Figures 12 and 13). The reliance on fresh water in a desert environment is further reinforced by the presence of a natural wadi (in Arabic, a wadi is a dry riverbed that contains water only during times of heavy rain) which followed the contour of the land and ran along the current Souk Waqif alignment towards the sea (Figure 14). The memory of this wadi is still lodged in the name of the very street along which the wadi used to run: Msheireb Street – the Arabic word ‘msheireb’ means ‘channel’. Msheireb Street defines the southern edge of the Msheireb project and a new wadi route was introduced one block back to evoke memories and bring microclimatic benefits. The name of this district as well as the masterplan project owes their origin to this natural landscape feature.

This new wadi sikkat connects Msheireb with Souk Waqif which is a pedestrianized street packed with small shops, cafes and restaurants. Open spaces and informal squares are sculpted along this new wadi to create serial visions and interesting places where people can meet and socialize comfortably in shade and in public without the obligations for purchase. These serial visions create dynamic views within Msheireb and add another scale in seeing the city based on walking, not driving. Connected to this new east–west wadi are three north–south-running sikkats, which in turn connects other key public spaces, notably Barahat Al Nouq, the main square within Msheireb. Public squares have a long tradition in Western civilization with association with markets, balances of power, justice and punishments. Its insertion into downtown Doha not only demonstrates the demand and need for people

Figure 12: Doha flash flood after a storm (date unknown).
Qatar Museum Authority.

*Figure 13: Doha aerial photograph, 1947.*

Allies & Morrison.

*Figure 14: Old wadi alignment – Souk Waqif today.*
spaces in a car-based city, it also questions the meaning and role of the public realm within an Arabic context. The metamorphosis from a desert cross-path in the 1940s, through the introduction of the first roundabout in Doha, to the grand public square within Msheireb, the journey of Barahat Al Nouq is the story where a nation renews her image in a changing world.

Another key aspect fundamental to the image and identity of Msheireb is its form that has been shaped by the introduction of cars. Conspicuous in their absence in the 1947 photo are roads. With the discovery of natural gas and the advancing technology in liquid petroleum gas, Doha expanded exponentially from the 1950s onward with motor cars. New roads were carved hard into the urban landscape and important long-distance routes such as al-Rayyan Road began to appear in the 1952 aerial photo. The alignments of old streets are retained and new streets were introduced in between. The intersection of new and old geometries creates interesting moments within the masterplan with strong vistas and visual deflections. Drama is intrinsically embedded within the masterplan geometries onto which a new architecture will graft and flourish.

The need to establish an architectural identity and character for Msheireb is fundamental in creating a new image for the city. Instead of transcribing from the past, influences are drawn from studying the architectural heritage, archaeology, craft traditions, natural environment and the landscape of Qatar. The study is culminated in the ‘Seven Steps of Architecture’, which attempts to summarize the architectural origin and principles for a new Qatari architecture. The intention is not to impose a single answer but to establish a creative dialogue for pluralistic and creative responses. The themes of the Seven Steps are timelessness, diversity and unity, form and geometry, aspect of home, aspect of street, designing for climate and elements of architecture. To illustrate these principles, two examples from the private and public domains are discussed here: places of dwelling and places of meeting.

**Places of Dwelling and Meeting**

Like English country houses, social life, etiquette and hierarchy are written into the architecture of the traditional fereej. Social propriety was engrained within the internal layout that illustrates how these living quarters are related to each other. Understanding the structure of the traditional neighbourhood and fereej has allowed architects to create a new fereej which reflects Qatari values and encourages families to move back to the heart of the city, away from the suburban villas. The spatial layering from public to private domain extends seamlessly from the public sikkats to a raised central courtyard shared by a cluster of town houses. A common majlis forms part of the cluster and marks the interface between the public and the private domains. The threshold between the central courtyard and the town house is screened to provide the transitional space where women can pull down their hijab just before they enter the public domain. Once within the house, the second layer of threshold is a liwan (reception space) filled with air and natural light where family guests are welcomed into the public part of the house. The liwan itself is lined with a patterned screen where the strong natural light is filtered. Similar to the traditional courtyard house, a woman’s domain penetrates deep within the layout but visual connections from private to public domains are maintained between the haram and the liwan. Similar to traditional Qatari architecture, the facades are plain and simple, using traditional off-white
render materials which weather well in the local desert climate. The plain facades are punctuated by projected or angled planes that allow light into the living quarters and yet maintain privacy (Figures 15a–15f).

Contrasting within this intense interior private domain is Barahat Al Nouq, which was conceived as the ‘urban majlis’ – a room where visitors to Msheireb are welcomed and received (Figure 16). Drawing on the traditional majlis, Barahat Al Nouq is ordered, simple and elegant. In the same way that hosts and guests are seated on the cushioned floor around the perimeter of the traditional majlis, Barahat Al Nouq is edged by a highly ordered colonnade where people can inhabit the perimeter in restaurants and cafes. Reflected light through the traditional malqaf (in Arabic: wind-catcher) is reinterpreted in the form of the suspended roof where natural light is filtered through. The richness
in colourful and geometric decorations within the traditional *majlis* is reinterpreted in the architecture around the square. Using microclimatic modelling these façade patterns are intelligent responses to solar exposure. Lesser perforated patterns are located where more shade is needed and highly perforated patterns are positioned where more daylight will benefit the internal layout.

Mossessian & Partners.

*Figure 16: Main square, Barahat Al Nouq.*
Food for Thought

The Msheireb Masterplan represents a pivotal moment in urban planning and architecture in the region. It is an attempt to instigate a debate about the apparent stagnation in the field of urbanism and architecture in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the project does leave open questions. Alongside the merit of single land ownership, what are the potential drawbacks of such monolithic control? Within the foreseeable future, Msheireb will be a private development managed by Msheireb Properties. The question remains if the streets, barahas and sikkats are genuinely public spaces with universal access. Although the Msheireb Masterplan is porous and knitted into the surrounding urban fabric in terms of connectivity and uses, the management of Msheireb will determine if a true public realm will emerge.

Another open question is the social implications of Msheireb. Implicit within the agenda of bringing families and Qatari communities back to the heart of the city, Msheireb is a social experiment where the concentration of expat communities is replaced by more balanced demographics. Currently, most Qatari live in villas located outside the downtown area. The introduction of town-house clusters and apartments for this sector of society is untested, though positive feedback was received upon consultation with young professionals. This is a scenario where the supply of suitable accommodation could create demand for urban living for Qatari communities. Nonetheless, a good proportion of residential accommodation within Msheireb is designed for expat communities, with an element of affordable housing. In time, the outcome of this social experiment will be played out and answers will emerge if supply will indeed create demand for urban living in Qatar.

With all the brave attempts in breaking the mould of urban development in the region, the question remains if the ‘Msheireb’ development model is replicable and transferable, particularly within the private sector. The financial return in the short run for small- to-medium-size buildings and the enormity of upfront capital investment are difficult to balance. However, Msheireb is built for the long run for the benefit of Doha and it is arguable if the city renewal of this magnitude should be solely a profit-driven private enterprise. Lastly, is Msheireb as hasty a development as others in the region and is an ‘instant city’ bad? One criticism of Msheireb is that in its execution, a piece of the downtown is wiped clean and a 3–5-storey basement is installed, despite the retention of key street alignment and references made to the old street pattern in the masterplan. It can be argued that more heritage buildings and structures could have been retained and a more surgical approach in repairing and renewing the city could have been adopted.

Clearly, not all answers can be found in one project alone, but the Msheireb Masterplan marks the beginning of a design discourse that brings the art of city-making to the fore over recent technocratic responses to the sustainability challenge. Cities evolve and masterplans form only a part of this continuum of change.

Suggested Citation

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Endnotes

1. Fereej (or neighbourhood as the simplistic English translation) is the building block of a traditional Arab settlement where family homes and extended family quarters are interconnected and grew in an apparent organic form over time. The fereej embodies the family-based social structure and it expresses the collective identity of the clan network as well as individual family lineage within it.

2. Sikkat or sikka are narrow pathways that connect different family clusters and areas within a fereej especially when walking was the only means of transport in the past.
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