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Bridge in the Gulf



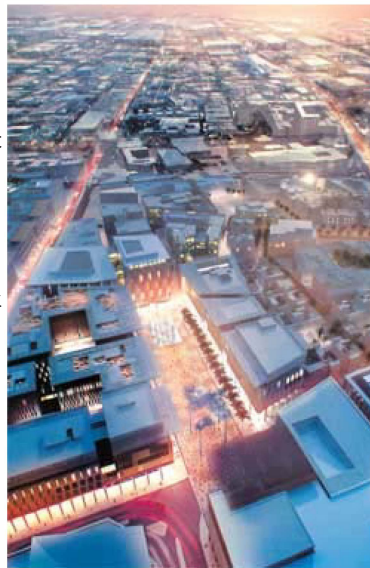
By Edwin Heathcote

An aimless stroll around the narrow lanes and intimate courtyards of Doha's souk, through smoky clouds of scented *sheesha*, is a fine, easy way to spend a warm evening. But it gives nothing of the flavour of the city beyond. These old streets have been rebuilt or restored, extended and expanded in a thankfully minimal pastiche of an Arabian night. But once you get beyond the vast car park, the babble and the hubble bubble reverts to the incessant roar of traffic, dusty pavements which appear and disappear like mirages among a petrified forest of glass, dumb clusters of silly-shaped towers.

Doha is not Dubai, but still its cityscape smacks of the same developer greed, the same architectural autism in which buildings ascend as if alone, not on speaking terms with their neighbours. All that has been learnt from New York or Hong Kong is the profile, the spiky skyline: nothing has been learnt from the successful spaces of everyday urban life, the things that make a city work.

On the other side of the souk is a huge dusty pit full of diggers. In this scene of ferocious activity, of round-the-clock construction, it seems the city centre has been obliterated. This is the site of a 35-hectare (86.5-acre) development known as the Musheireb and it posits a very different view of a second- or even third-generation Gulf city; it is perhaps one of the world's most promising urban experiments.

Built on the site of the first scrappy city that emerged in the wake of the discovery of oil reserves after the second world war (a city built, badly, by mostly British engineers), the Musheireb is a serious-minded attempt to build a contemporary Gulf city centre. It is one that learns from traditional urban models and uses modern architecture a world away from the dim glass towers of the business district.



Architects' CGI impressions of the Musheireb development in Doha

There have been attempts before to build on traditional Middle-Eastern city structures, notably Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy's superb New Gurna outside Cairo. There is also Foster & Partners' much-touted eco-city Masdar, currently under construction in nearby Abu Dhabi. But while both of those have attempted to build brand new cities on desert sites, the Musheireb is an attempt to tie together a bitty established city by constructing a coherent centre around which it can rebuild itself in the future.

The \$5.5bn project has been intelligently masterplanned by AECOM, Arup and Allies & Morrison, using the tropes of the ancient Arabic city: narrow, shady streets, arcades, courtyards and small, irregular blocks, eschewing deeply inappropriate glazed walls. So where Abu Dhabi apes a broad Manhattan-style city grid, Doha's Musheireb adopts tight, discontinuous streets and alleys – so that the hot wind which gathers heat as it blows is diverted and coerced into a cooling breeze.

At its heart will be a group of buildings by French-born, London-based architect Michel Mossessian that will define the style of the city. Inspired by the Arabic *majlis*, a generous social space in the traditional house, the new Al Barahat Square provides a public forum whose surrounding buildings become subsumed into the space, rather than stand-alone structures in the more usual Gulf-modernist manner.

Mossessian refers to the square (which will be comparable in size to the Piazza San Marco in Venice) as an "urban room", forming the interior of the city. It is a highly original reinterpretation of a domestic and cultural archetype in an urban setting, shaded by intricately pierced overhanging eaves to cast changing shadows on the ground.

Around the new square is a mix of uses more characteristic of the traditional than the contemporary city. Wealthy Qataris have become used to living in big suburban houses, so attracting them back to live in city-centre apartments may prove difficult: this puts the onus on the development to be even more attractive, to present a version of city life so compelling that citizens are willing to change. There will be a mix of commercial, residential and retail in a reaction to the familiar model of a central business district – malls and houses each a car ride away. And while the car won't be abandoned, the city centre will be resolutely walkable.

It is not only the uses that are mixed, but the architectural styles as well. Mossessian in particular has refined a sophisticated vocabulary using distinctly contemporary motifs that nevertheless evoke traditional forms, an urbanism in which shady arcades can simultaneously refer to Venice or 20th-century Louis Kahn, in which a mosaic floor becomes a carpet and an atrium becomes a shaded courtyard.

Elsewhere, other architects are constructing the rest of the city: John McAslan with a cultural forum, David Adjaye a series of apartment buildings, Mangera Yvars a mosque and Allies & Morrison the first building to emerge, the national archive. In a curious reflection of the city's earlier manifestation, all the architects finally chosen are based in London, yet there was no decision to choose British – the developers say it was more to do with a long tradition of working overseas and an openness to learning from foreign cultures.

Unusually for the neophile Gulf, there have been restorations of a few original courtyard houses scattered around the site, one of which will become a museum of slavery. These maintain the site's traditional texture and a sense of continuity, an idea also being pursued in the form of an archive of found objects intended to enrich an understanding of the physical feel of the city that was once there.

There are a few issues; the city centre remains immune to public transport – although a subway line will eventually be constructed – and despite the mix of uses, social class here looks likely to be decidedly unmixed. There is little room for the migrant labourers who are building it or indeed for the traders whose tatty shops occupied the now-demolished structures.

Some of this drive to the top end is justified by its function as an endowment for the Qatar Foundation, which supports schools and learning and the ambitious attempt to make Doha the centre of Middle Eastern further education.

There is no shortage of self-consciously iconic architecture in Doha – the look-at-me skyline, the “starchitect”-designed mega-structures at Education City, Jean Nouvel's phallic tower and IM Pei's regal Museum of Islamic Arts – but this scheme suggests a different kind of building. It is an architecture of deference to the bigger city, modest, contemporary and specific to the city's fierce climate. It is, in its quiet way, the most radical thing in the Gulf.

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