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The Urban Imaginary in Doha, Qatar

Qatar, Ontology, Urbanism, Hermeneutics, Modernity

/Abstract

This article examines the urban and architectural development of Doha, Qatar since 1950 with a focus on the last few decades and the construction of a modernist skyscraper skyline. It views the city stereoscopically, as both fact and symbol. From one perspective the city is a basic architectonic and morphologic fact; from another view it is a powerful ontological and epistemological symbol. My main contention is that both aspects are needed to understand how the rapid urbanization of the Arabian Gulf city uses the built environment to find an orientation in history, particularly when 'history' in this context seems in its own right a tool fraught with contradictions.

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> From its offices come the commands that put the world in order. In fact, the skyscrapers are the brain of the city, the brain of the whole country. They embody the work of elaboration and command on which all activities depend. Everything is concentrated there: the tools that conquer time and space – telephones, telegraphs, radios, the banks, trading houses, the organs of decision for the factories: finance, technology, commerce.
>
> – Le Corbusier[1]

Cities the world over are often known by their icons. Paris and the Eiffel Tower, London's Big Ben and New York's Twin Towers – an icon so powerful its destruction on 9/11 reshaped American foreign policy and much of the global world order. These skyscraper images place the viewer in the city and the city in the world whether or not we have ever visited them. The iconography of the skyscraper offers clues as to the urban lifeworld of those who experience them; New York's unrelenting focus on commerce and its inexorable impulse to constantly sweep aside the old and replace it with new, shinning and more stunning monuments, for example. On the other hand, writing about a city from only the standpoint of its skyscraper image threatens to reduce our understanding of the rich complexity of urban life to a familiar postcard snapshot. Yet, it is my hope that understanding the stratification of architectural embodiments - from abstract symbol to concrete situation - of a rapidly developing high-rise cityscape will illuminate a central concern of the modern Arabian metropolis, namely, its search for an ontological orientation in history. [Fig. 1]

Fig. 1

West Bay skyline at night: Burj Qatar in the centre illuminated in red (Source: Arendt Kuester, 2017).

1 Le Corbusier. *The City of To-morrow and Its Planning*. Translated by Frederick Etchells. (New York: Dover Publications, 1987). Originally published as *Urbanisme* (Paris: Editions G. Crès & C., 1924), 7.

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were often portrayed through grainy black and white photos as the heroic protagonists of the Arabian saga. As those images and way of life faded, a new picture emerged upon the very same landscape, the exploitation of seabed oil, and a decade later in the 1980s natural gas, and with it the rise of the modern city.

Until the 1950s, Doha was a meagre coastal entrepôt, clinging precariously to the muddy shores of the Arabian Gulf. Its 12,000 souls made their living through fishing, pearl diving, and slave trading. With almost no modern institutions or infrastructure until the eve of oil, Doha existed much as had for thousands of years.[2]

The interwar period was particularly hard on Doha. Japan's introduction of the cultured pearl, together with the Great Depression, collapsed the Arabian Gulf pearl industry resulting in a mass migration and nearly halving Doha's population. The situation improved after World War II and by 1949 when the first oil tanker left Qatar, the peninsula was poised for rapid development.[3]

By the 1970s Qatar was awash in cash and its emir, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al-Thani (b.1932-2016, r.1972-1995) desired a modern metropolis. Khalifa hired one of Britain's most respected architecture and planning firms, Llewelyn-Davies,

2 J.G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia* (Calcutta, India: Superintendent Government Printing, 1915). Republished by Gregg International, Westmead, United Kingdom, 1970, 57-119.

3 Ali Ajjaj, "Social Development of the Pirate Coast", *Middle East Forum 38* (1962): 75-80; and Rosemarie Janet Said Zahlan, The Creation of Qatar, (London: Croom Helm, 1979).

Fig. 2

Aerial image of Doha (Source: Hunting Aerosurvey, 1956).

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Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor (hereafter Llewelyn-Davies) to remake Doha.[4] With extensive Middle East planning experience, Llewelyn-Davies drew up Qatar's first and only officially adopted urban masterplan. Based upon a ring and radial road system, the new city plan formalized the urban edge with a corniche motorway holding back the muddy and feted Arabian Gulf. The excavated soil was dumped on the sand bars to the north of the city creating what is commonly called 'West Bay' **[Fig. 2]**. Such a plan and its enactment presented a radical reconceptualization of the city's infrastructure, setting the stage for its breath-taking development that began in the 1990s.[5] **[Fig. 2, 3, 4]**

Fuelled by revenue from exploiting the world's largest natural gas field lying just offshore from Doha, the city was poised to enact massive socio-cultural change, a historic reorientation across nearly every register of its institutional order.[6] In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens points out the essential underlying causes of contemporary discontinuities that fit well with our analysis of Qatar: the pace of change, the scope of change, and the nature of modern institutions.[7] All facets are clearly expressed in the emerging high-rise architecture of West Bay. The fact that it simply did not exist before 1975 is testimony enough to illustrate Giddens' point. More particularly, and in keeping with our stereoscopic analysis of the skyline as an architectural fact, West Bay's high-rise buildings enable new government, commercial, and residential

4 1972 Report from the British Embassy in Qatar to the Foreign Office 8/1891.

5 Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor, State of Qatar Planning Study (London, 1972-1974).

6 British Petroleum, *Statistical Review of World Energy*, (69th Edition, 2020): 32.

7 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

Fig. 3

Aerial image of Doha showing the pre-1950 coast edge and the West Bay central business district (Source: Google Earth, 2020).

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enterprises. As a symbol, West Bay announces a constitutive interconnection to other waves of social transformation happening across the globe, embodying institutions simply not found in any prior historical Arab-Islamic epoch. The skyscraper invokes an urban image of a capitalist, neo-liberal, open access society: wage labour, global finance, international brands, and the freedom to choose where one lives, and works are all conjured by the skyscraper. Even the very idea of living or working in an urban high-rise building is anathema to a desert-bound encampment that undergirds Bedouin social relations but has since become an object of pride as it takes its place among the many other skyscraper silhouettes of the modern, urban world.

Giddens specifically cites the city as an example of such discontinuities: 'Modern urban settlements often incorporate the sites of traditional cities, and it may look as though they have merely spread out from them. In fact, modern urbanism is ordered according to quite different principles from those which set off the pre-modern city from the countryside in prior periods.[8] In West Bay we see the role of the high-rise building – a uniquely modern fact and symbol – as a manifestation of the tensions wrought by socio-architectonic discontinuities that underly Doha's institutional and urban order.

Doha's master planning and skyscraper history

Since 1972 two different emirs have commissioned six different master plans from four different firms to envision a future Doha. One of Sheikh Khalifa's first acts when becoming emir after wresting control in a bloodless coup from his cousin was to set about reorganizing the government and replanning the city. The tandem acts of enlarging the Cabinet by appointing more ministers and

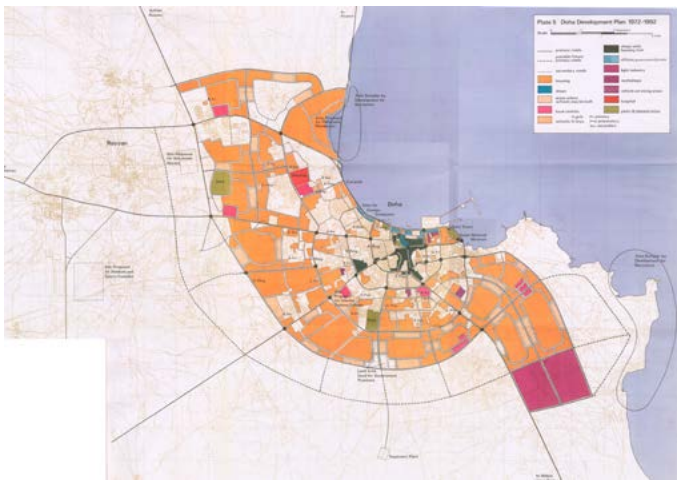
Fig. 4

Aerial photograph of West Bay (Source: Peter Chomowicz, 2015)

8 Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 6.

hiring the British architecture and planning firm Llewelyn-Davies, gave Khalifa the means to create a new city.

The 1972 Llewelyn-Davies plan addressed all the levers necessary to build a 'modern' state. The master plan focused primarily on Doha, but also on smaller cities in the peninsula, weaving together planning concepts, financial mechanisms, implementation strategy, and governmental oversight. The plan was a clear reflection of Khalifa's desire to right what he publicly described as his predecessor's inability to improve the lives of everyday Qataris. The master plan stressed the need to create a city conducive to living and working. Since the 1950s Qatari's were enticed to vacate their ancestral homes in the city centre for newly built homes, called 'villas' on the city's outskirts. Fuelled by low interest loans, land grants, and a 'social allowance' paid to Qataris according to clan stature, created a city devoid of Qatari nationals. The humble mud-brick and concrete block homes they left were rented to Iranian, Indian, and Pakistani immigrants who ran shops and lived in Qatar for years, even generations, without hope of citizenship. This left Doha a sprawling city of low-paid laborers and crumbling infrastructure, something the Llewelyn-Davies plan sought to change.



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Sadly, the financial windfall from the oil price boom of the 1970s did little to improve the existing city. We can speculate regarding why, but in the end the emir preferred to create his modern capital from scratch upon the vacant land – and water – that lay just north of Doha. Three recommendations from the Llewelyn-Davies plan were adopted and very much continue to contribute to the city's development: enhancing the city's main road system of concentric rings and crossing radials, building the Corniche to formalize and pedestrianize the city's coastal edge, and the creation of West Bay.[9]

We do not know if it was a conscious decision or just coincidence that the emir chose a California planning firm to succeed Llewelyn-Davies to design the 'New Doha'. An upstart from a 'non-city' had now outdone a London-based firm who had planned much of the urban Middle East. The Llewelyn-Davies plan called for sweeping social and architectural change to the original tight-knit fabric of Doha. Their civic, sustainable approach that championed public policy, pedestrian passage, and a sensitive balance between old and new could perhaps have only come from a Keynesian era British firm. Likewise, a spontaneous

Fig. 5
1972 Llewelyn-Davies master plan (Source: Llewelyn-Davies Architects)

Fig. 6
1975 William L. Pereira West Bay master plan (Source: William L. Pereira Architects)

9 Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor, State of Qatar Planning Study (no publisher, 1972-1974).

plan to pit the old city against the new one; a new city built with new wealth, to be experienced from behind the wheel of an automobile, and built literally upon the sea itself, an imagined city whooshing up from the ocean's depth, could perhaps only come from a place like the New World's Los Angeles suburban sprawl. [Fig. 5, 6]

William Pereira was charged with imaging a 'New Doha' directly north of the existing city. His was not a repudiation of the Llewelyn-Davies plan as it had little to do with rehabilitating Doha's existing condition. The only place Pereira's plan referenced Doha is where the new plan must, almost unfortunately, overlap the old. The essence of the Pereira plan lay in several bold strokes. First, extend the ring-road system to the north creating a linkage from the historic centre of Doha to the new development areas to the north. Second, he proposed a series of cul-de-sac residential neighbourhoods very much on the Western suburban model. Third, continue Llewelyn-Davies' earlier proposal to complete the waterfront Corniche by deep dredging of the low-lying sand deposits that stretch north of Doha harbour. This sand, together with other excavations, was used to create much of what is today called 'West Bay' but is in fact the north end of the city. Many residents still refer to the housing area of West Bay by its Arabic descriptive – if somewhat pejorative – term *dafna* (literally burial), meaning landfill. *Dafna* would be home to the first national university – Qatar University – a new central business district, housing for 'senior Qatari managers', and a hotel and resort area.[10] The Sheraton Hotel, which was to be Doha's largest and tallest structure for many years, first appeared here in 1981. The entire area was linked to old Doha by a series of north–south primary roads and secondary transverse connectors. [Fig. 7]

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Fig. 7
Doha, QGPC in the lower left, Sheraton Hotel in the upper right, early 1980s (source: MMUP).

10 For a detailed description of Qatar's senior staff housing see Hassan Rashid H. Al-Derham "The Establishment of Performance Criteria for the Evaluation of Procurement of Senior Staff and Private Housing Projects in the State of Qatar" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Glamorgan, 1999).

In short, New Doha was everything old Doha was not: progressive, educated, home to wealthy 'senior government officials', with a beautiful view of the conquered sea. New Doha represents the moment when Doha decided it no longer needed or wanted a past. Engineering feats funded by oil wealth meant anything was possible. This is the moment when Qataris threw off their traditional understanding of being at the environment's mercy and picked up the new Western mantra that they could be masters over any resource: land, sea, concrete, asphalt, people and, most especially, history. [11]

Although the Pereira plan never received an official Emiri Decree, as had the Llewelyn-Davies plan, the Emir nonetheless thrust it upon the Qatari people in one quick step. New Doha sprang up quite literally from the sea floor, coming to represent both the emir's vision for his nation and the endless possibilities to refashion the future. Today, much of *Dafna*'s luxury housing looks tired and shabby. The land plots and villas originally built to house the government elite are minuscule by contemporary standards of 'luxury'. The waterfront is still very much under development and the skyline of nearly 100 high-rise office and apartment towers – none, except the Sheraton, also designed by Pereira, more than ten years old – continues to change almost weekly.

Method

My desire to understand the Doha skyscraper stereoscopically, from one perspective as an architectural fact and, from another, as a powerful ontological symbol, means observing the ways in which its inhabitants 'see' and 'use' the city. By observing how West Bay functions as an image and as an imaginary reveals how people situate themselves in the meaningful world of social action, deriving an orientation toward sources of meaning. Methodologically, by closely observing everyday intersubjective interactions as grounded in an urban neighbourhood that many consider the image of the city par excellence, reveals how architects, their patrons, and participants understand, navigate, and find meaning and stability in a topography undergoing constant change.

Data collection for this article comes from a variety of sources. From 2011 to 2016 I conducted forty-one in-depth personal, semi-structured interviews across a wide spectrum of Doha residents. The individuals interviewed ranged in age from twenty-two to eighty-two years, with an average of forty-six years; 43 per cent female and 57 per cent male. Qatari nationals formed half with the rest coming predominately from other Arab countries and the Indian subcontinent. Lengths of time in Doha ranged from two years to sixty-eight with an average of thirty-four years. Roughly 85 per cent were Muslim, 10 per cent Hindi and 5 per cent of no practicing faith. Within the Muslim fraction nearly all were Sunni, though several came from the Shir'ah, Baha'i and Alewite traditions.

11 This view is supported by interviews with Qatari research participants: male, age 50, engineer; male, age 60, government official; male, age 73, retired military officer; female, age 63, homemaker; male, age 59, oil executive.

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The interviewees ranged in social and economic status from members of the royal family to a household of Filipina maids who have 'absconded', to use the local parlance, from their kafala sponsors, and gone into hiding. Levels of literacy, status, and nationality indicated degrees of access to urban institutions and the West Bay enclave. Gender seemed to be the first determinant of spatial or institutional access. Fewer distinctions were made on religious grounds as nearly all were Sunni Muslims, as are the majority of Qatari nationals.

Subscribing to methods rooted in grounded theory and the phenomenology of perception meant maintaining a consistent line of semi-structured questions related to the build environment. The interviews were transcribed and coded at the paragraph level giving me insight into the role West Bay plays in their everyday lives and how the skyscraper topology and typology as fact and symbol orients a personal ontology against or because of its rapidly changing nature.

Dislocation of space, place and time

A hallmark of the modern age is our ability to control time and space independently. For all of human history until the invention of mechanical clocks, events occurred in a physically specific situation, rooted in fundamental natural conditions and the belief in a divinely created cosmos. The clock and concomitant rise of industrial production and economic specialization broke this ancient relationship. Few images in our social imaginary conjure this notion more powerfully than the glowing office tower. One imagines thousands of workers toiling behind computer terminals, connected to global markets, trading commodities, or simply exchanging information the world over. Day or night shifts of arbitrageurs trade the world's resources.

We do not know if West Bay's current high-rises are truly occupied by fleets of

Fig. 8

QDP. Qatar Petroleum District and billboard for Msheireb. The representation of the 'real' in one mega-development flows together with 'real' in another (Source: Peter Chomowicz, 2015).

financial wizards as in large global cities, but West Bay now has its own financial centre, the Qatar Petroleum District (QPD). The QPD financial enclave comprises almost 700,000 square metres of gross floor area, including hotels, corporate training centres, banks, food and retail outlets and prayer rooms. Though nearly in the heart of West Bay, it is nonetheless advertised as forming its own district, much in the way we think of peripheral financial centres like London's Canary Wharf, or New York's World Financial Center. The concentric architectural rings reinforce its insular image, almost as if a nascent financial 'centre' must be hermetic and on the city's fringe. **[Fig. 8 - 9]**

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Comparing the billboard image of the QDP [Fig. 8] with the actual building itself in the background [Fig. 9], we wonder about the role each plays in the image of Doha, what I shall refer to below as the 'urban imaginary', a term borrowed from Charles Taylor's essay 'Modern Social Imaginaries'.[12] Taylor's term, in turn taken from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, is a framework for probing the ways in which societies think of social reality not in a disengaged mode, but rather, as Taylor says, in 'the ways in which they imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations'.[13]

Taylor's view moves beyond social theory because to speak of an 'imaginary' means to interrogate how everyday people 'imagine' their surroundings; it expresses what is widely shared in a culture; and the social imaginary 'is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy'.[14] My extension of Taylor's 'social' imaginary to 'urban' imaginary focuses our attention on the spectrum of symbolic articulation embodied in architectural language ranging from pure form to projected image. In the case of the QPD, the image of a definitive financial district seems to matter most; its 'realness', whether traders are trading, seems less important.

The business activities of many global financial districts often enjoy little direct connection to localized activities, yet they remain indebted to nearby cultural centres, for example Wall Street to Tribeca, or Canary Wharf to the West End. But, in the high-rise district itself, space, place, and time operate semi-autonomously, fostering relations between absent partners. As Giddens rightly says:

In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly phantasmagoric: that

12 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press Harvard University, 2007).

13 Taylor, *A Secular Age*,171 and Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (London: Verso, 2006).

14 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 172.

Fig. 9

Photograph of QDP under construction (Source: Peter Chomowicz, 2013).

is to say, locals are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them. What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the 'visible form' of the locale conceals the distanciated relations which determine its nature.[15]

For Giddens, the separation of space, place, and time is crucial to modernity's extreme dynamism because it provides the fundamental mechanism of modern social life, namely, the rational bureaucratic organization (state, corporate, etc.) through a 'disembedding' of social activity from its situated context. Modern organizations depend on vast, interconnected networks, what Sassen characterizes as flow: the movement of bits, bytes, money, and men across the globe at the behest of global capital centres such as those mentioned above.[16] Such a 'disembedding' of social systems, says Giddens, lifts out social relations from local contexts and restructures them across immense spans of time-space.

Giddens' characterization of urban evolution fits Doha well. Doha harbour embodies both the city's historic locus and the contemporary view of the city's centre. Around the Corniche we find the three main nodes of Doha master planning: the airport in the south, government and culture in the mid-arc, and the commercial district in West Bay at the northern tip [Fig. 10].

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The dialectic of urban fragments, embodied in the high-rise skyline when seen from the Corniche promenade, pits the new against the old; the image of modernity in glass and steel seems to rise from the sea itself (which it is given West Bay is an artificial peninsula of seabed reclamation) against the image of tradition in dusty and dilapidated concrete blocks sprawling out towards the desert's expanse. Horizontal: earthen, tribal, ancient, Islamic. Vertical: glass, democratic, modern, bureaucratic. However, ancient tribal practices and Islamic customs are still very much alive within the glass towers across the bay. Visiting government ministries, as I often did while living in Doha for many years, readily exposed me to the more obvious hierarchies and segregations, for example women-only lifts and areas within open plan offices for women, their cubicle walls higher than those of their male colleagues. Less

Fig. 10

Map of Doha harbour highlighting the three primary zones of activity (Source: Google Earth, 2015).

15 Giddens, The Consequences of Modernity, 19.

16 Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: The New Press, 1998); Saskia Sassen, *The Global City* (2nd ed. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001); Saskia Sassen, *A Sociology of Globalization* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2007).

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obvious is the primacy of face-to-face communication, trust built from personal relationships. Deal making and decision making are, in my personal experience, and as expressed by all my research participants working within or alongside government ministries, very much beholden to traditional clan affiliations and animosities, some dating back generations. **[Fig. 11]**

One cannot mistake West Bay as being made for and by Westerners. In addition to the many American and European hotels, banks, and company headquarters, most foreign embassies are also found here (West Bay's alternative name is the Diplomatic District), along with dozens of apartment towers. All these institutions and for the most part their equally foreign architects vividly paint a distanciated portrait. Each building is in its own way a disembedding 'symbolic token', the medium of interchange that we might find in any city the world over.[17] This reminds us of the early work of Diller and Scofidio in *Back to the Front: Tourisms of War*: the further tourists travel and the more exotic their surroundings, the greater the desire for the familiar. [18] Coming to Doha in the early 1980s may not have been exotic but it held a certain Gulf-Arabian authenticity. At the time of its construction in the 1980s, the pyramid motif seems at home on a barren desert plain, reminding one of its Egyptian forebearers, but without any other context for the hotel it no doubt felt as if a spaceship had landed. Nearly all my participants in their mid-thirties and older, vividly describe life alongside the new hotel. Some view it as a lodestone of sorts, a temporal and directional compass to judge urban development and one's location within the constantly changing landscape. One's location among the new streets and buildings springing up around Doha is ascertained by referencing the hotel, they say. And one could easily see the rapidity of West Bay's development as the Sheraton became engulfed by its surroundings. The younger interviewees in this group, particularly women, remember fondly family picnics on the sandy peninsula accompanied only by the hotel. In Giddens' parlance the Sheraton Hotel is a symbolic token by which the city's inhabitants reflect on the rapidity of distanciation.

Distanciated symbolic tokens abound in West Bay, none more potent than the economic image of the skyscraper. Anyone can inhabit the office tower provided

Fig. 11

West Bay seen against the traditional Arabian dhow sailboat (Source: Peter Chomowicz, 2013).

17 Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 22

18 Ricardo Scofidio and Elizabeth Diller, *Back to the Front: Tourisms of War* (F.R.A.C. Basse-Normandie, 1996).

they pay rent, performing activities within that are always based on electronic commerce and information exchange, instantiating the symbolic token of money.[19]. For Marx, money, the 'universal whore', broke the personal relationship between exchanging partners by substituting an abstract medium. Anything can be traded for anything through money's universality as a pure commodity.[20] The rise of financial engineering over the last few decades, particularly futures contracts, points to money's space-place-time distanciation mechanism. It is Georg Simmel, however, who gives Giddens a view of money's spatial implications:

> The role of money is associated with the spatial distance between the individual and his possession … Only if the profit of an enterprise takes a form that can be easily transferred to any other place does it guarantee to property and the owner, through their spatial separation, a high degree of independence or, in other words, self-mobility… the power of money to bridge distances enables the owner and his possessions to exist so far apart that each of them may follow their own precepts to a greater extent than in the period when the owner and his possessions still stood in a direct mutual relationship, when every economic engagement was also a personal one.[21]

Simmel and Giddens move us beyond the generalizing rubric of West Bay's high-rise landscape as representing a neo-liberal economic model (which it does) and dive deeper into money's ability to hold disparate events simultaneously. This is a new institutional horizon in Qatar's history.[22]

In *Dubai: The City as Corporation*, Ahmed Kanna compellingly argues for an understanding of Dubai's urban morphology as a capitalist, profit-seeking enterprise. Says Kanna, the 'urbanscape of the contemporary Emirati city is envisioned by rulers and urbanists… as a visualized and imagistic city' – meaning the emir must have architectural icons designed by internationally renowned 'starchitects', and these structures, when taken in aggregate as a cityscape, in turn represent a neo-liberal, free-market-driven form of globalization that is both a kind of family-state power and inclusive cosmopolitanism.[23] Dubai's current emir, Sheikh Muhammad bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, often refers to himself as Dubai's CEO, a reference, Kanna believes, that extends across the city creating an image of the ruler as entrepreneurial, efficient, and always acting in the best interests of his 'shareholders'; the shareholders, Dubai residents, national and

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19 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994); and Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* (vols. 1–3. London: Verso, 1991).

20 Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973) quoted in Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 22-23.

21 Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 2011) quoted in Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 24-25.

22 For a full treatment of the development in human history from limited access or natural states to open access orders see Douglas C. North et al., *Violence and Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

23 Ahmed Kanna, *Dubai: The City as Corporation* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 137.

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expatriate alike, are similarly inspiredtowards a life of commercial business interests.

Though both Dubai and Doha share a history of emirs cultivating family members and prominent clans towards the creation of family corporations, Dubai ultimately chose a different path, one that encouraged foreign direct investment to offset dwindling oil extraction. As a result, Dubai enjoys several enormous free-trade zones that exempt employees from UAE employment and visa requirements, and media censorship, while allowing foreign corporations full ownership and profit repatriation of their Dubai operations. By contrast, Doha has only one free-trade zone, the Qatar Science and Technology Park (QSTP), which operates under the Qatar Foundation on a different model from Dubai's. Furthermore, Qatar's highly restrictive *kafala* labour laws bind expatriate employees of any status - from domestic maid to managerial professional - to their employers. While Doha may appear as capitalist and freewheeling as Dubai, in reality its business climate is far more insular, and highly controlled by the emir.[24]

The Architecture of West Bay

In the architecture of West Bay, we often see motifs extracted from across the Arab world and used in ways foreign to their origins. The desire of the – mostly Western – architects to appear 'local' and knowledgeable about 'Islamic'

Fig. 12
The Burj Qatar (Source: Peter Chomowicz, 2013).

Fig. 13
The facade of the Burj Qatar illuminated with one of several computer-controlled lighting patterns (Source: Peter Chomowicz, 2013).

24 Matthew Gray, *Qatar: Politics and the Challenges of Development* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2013).

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customs requires the importation of the motif from elsewhere in what, to a Westerner, is 'Islamic architecture's' cultural field; a practice acceptable to Qatari clients who wish to appear 'cultured' to the global audience and respectful of traditions to locals. The architectural situations seen in Figures 12 through 18 are chosen as examples of these tensions underlying the institutional and urban order of Doha's development.

It is probably safe to say Doha's most 'iconic' (that is both widely recognized and admired) building **[Fig. 12, 13]** is the Burj Qatar (Qatar Tower) designed by French architect Jean Nouvel and completed in 2012. According to Hafid Rakem, a partner in the Office Jean Nouvel, the façade's star-shaped pattern **[Fig. 14]** was inspired by a column in a local Doha mosque, and its *mashrabiya* skin permits the use of clear glass, which is highly unusual in the Middle East.[25] The *mashrabiya* referred to by Rakem is a simple screening device found throughout the Islamic world but particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean **[Fig. 15]**.[26] When combined with geometric patterning the *mashrabiya* is now one of the Gulf's most ubiquitous architectural motifs. Everything from window shades, fences, gates, and even etched patterns on highway underpasses to the supreme example of the Burj Qatar are adorned with interlocking star patterns. With Doha lacking a richly developed iconography of its own, most Western designers use southern Spain, Iran or ancient Baghdad and Damascus for inspiration for their highly evolved aesthetic innovations rather than the humble motifs of Gulf origin.

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Wrapping the tower in a *mashrabiya* accomplishes several

25 Oliver Ephgrave, "Site visit: Burj Qatar," Construction Week Online, 10 October, 2012. https://www.constructionweekonline.com/article-18872-site-visit-burj-qatar

26 Linguistically, the word stem, shrbt, means 'to drink', which reveals the word's architectural origin denoting an oriel window cantilevering from a second floor room that holds cool water. The projecting space, which is surrounded by a wooden lattice on three sides, allows ventilation to cool the stored water, and promotes cross-ventilation for the entire floor, eliminates direct solar heat gain and in the ultraconservative Gulf enables women to see what is going on in the street below without permitting foreign eyes to see inside their homes. A more extreme version of the mashrabiya is found in an architectural device particular to the Gulf, the tarma, from the Arabic word for dumb or mute, which is a small earthen or wooden box protruding from an upper story into the 'public' alley or sikka below. The tarma allowed women to perch themselves above their front door to hear life outside their cloistered home without revealing themselves. As the name implies the women could not speak to or see the people below. And of course, those on the street never knew when someone might be listening from within the tarma. For a lengthy discussion of the tarma and other privacy practices in the Arabian fereej of Saudi Arabia see Mahary A. Al-Naim, "The Home Environment in Saudi Arabia and Gulf States: Growth of Identity Crises and Origins of Identity", *Crissma Working Paper* No. 10 (Milano: Pubblicazioni dell'I.S.U., Università Cattolica, 2006), 222.

Fig. 14

The Burj Qatar mashrabiya skin (Source: Peter Chomowicz, 2013).

Fig. 15

Example of an Egyptian mashrabiya from the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Egypt (Source: Milad Moawad, 2021).

16|

practical goals. First, it greatly helps reduce solar heat gain by limiting the sun's direct contact with the inner glass curtain wall.[27] Varying the density of the *mashrabiya* to correspond with the sun's arching intensity helps reduce the façade's monotony while improving the interior view and increasing natural daylight. Like the original *sikka mashrabiya* (narrow alleyway mashrabiya) that prevented strangers from peering inside domestic interiors, Nouvel's façade similarly helps keep public eyes from peering into the lit interior spaces at night. And, of course, the polished aluminium skin when combined with programmable exterior lighting creates its dramatic night-time image.

The Burj, like Norman Foster's similarly shaped AIG tower in London, makes no attempt to create a public realm connected to the street. Indeed, the Burj's main lobby, submerged one level below the street **[Fig. 16]**, further enhances its separation from the city. Dappled light filtering through the aluminium canopy and water vapour from the irrigation sprayers create a grotto-like atmosphere. Entry to the Burj's main lobby through a submerged, hidden garden removes the building's connection to the street in two senses: from the physical street of cars, traffic, and pedestrians, and from the street of human interaction. Creating a verdant oasis in the middle of arid, sandy Doha is somewhat of an Orientalist cliché: Howard Roark reading *Tales of the Arabian Nights* under a Najd date palm.

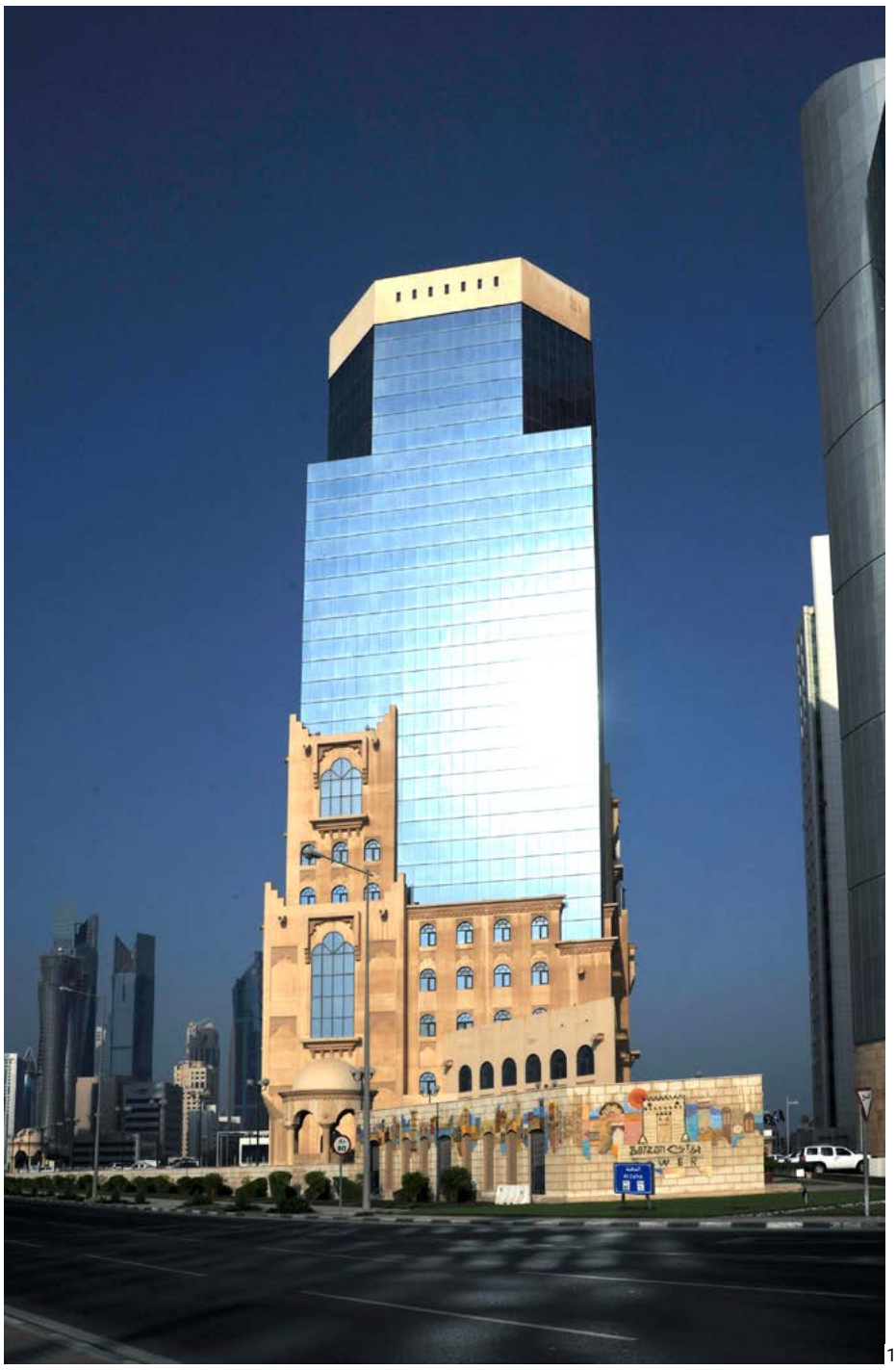
The Burj Qatar's architectural language, rooted in cultural signs such as the *mashrabiya*, makes the foreign high-rise form intelligible through its connection to the background language operating in the culture, even if we understand 'local culture' to come from distant Arab lands.[28] The building clearly expresses

27 Despite the aluminium outer skin designed to reduce solar heat gain, the building's enormous elevator core placed on the north side of the circular plan misses the easiest and least expensive opportunity to shade the south-facing interior, likely a decision based upon the desire to maintain the more dramatic view over the harbour to the south.

28 The main criticism of the Burj Qatar is its striking resemblance to Jean Nouvel's previous tower in Barcelona, Spain: the Torre Agbar.

Fig. 16

Burj Qatar 'grotto' one level below street level (Source: Peter Chomowicz, 2013).



17|

a Western, highly technological modernity, yet its façade pattern consciously acknowledges the humble domestic screen. Like the Burj Qatar, the two examples seen in Figures 17 and 18 of West Bay skyscrapers are chosen to illustrate different architectural attempts to bridge cultural meanings. The Barzan Tower [Fig. 17], completed in 2000, houses the Ministry of Labour (MOL) and was designed by Qatari architect Ibrahim Jaidah of the Arab Engineering Bureau.[29]

29 'The building is known by its developer name, Barzan Tower. A multistory office building clad in deep-blue reflective glass and aluminium curtain walls, with rental office space of 13,600 square metres. The first nine floors are treated in a traditional architectural style, in contrast to the 21-story glass-clad tower above. A rigid central cast in-situ reinforced concrete core was developed around a central vertical service shaft that contains lifts, staircases and services. The architect's challenge was to achieve a balance between the requirements of a modern office building while preserving traditional Qatari architectural methods'. "Barzan Tower," Aga Khan Trust for Culture, accessed March 2015, https://archnet.org/sites/5126

Fig. 17

Barzan Tower hosting the Ministry of Labour offices (Source: Peter Chomowicz, 2013).

18|

A short distance away is the Supreme Educational Council (SEC) headquarters [Fig. 18], designed by Ashghal, the Qatar Public Works Authority.[30] Both buildings attempt to synthesize a modernist high-rise and Arabic heritage; the resulting hodgepodge of vocabularies underscores Doha's reliance on architectural image to reconcile iconographic differences and the more deeply held beliefs they represent. Vesely points out that nineteenth-century European architecture found it increasingly difficult to relate a contemporary 'style' to its past.[31] Overshadowed by historists who held history as discrete epochs, the only arc of continuity relating one period to another is the change in style and not in underlying concepts. In both Europe and Doha, the problem of style corresponds to the conflict between ideas as ahistorical representations of tradition and the historically bound uniqueness of an epoch.[32]

The Barzan Tower makes no apology for creating an 'Arab street' façade that gives way to a featureless curtain wall above. The blue glass skin seems embarrassed by its own presence, seeking to dissolve into the colour of the sky. The SEC building aggrandizes and abstracts the parapet crenulations of Arab mud-brick forts found mostly in Oman, completing the architectural pot-pourri with a mosque-like structure embedded midway on the façade. The two examples act as co-determiners of action, to use Charles Taylor's words. They act as high-rise buildings, what is expected in West Bay, but still seek intelligibility to an

30 Date of the building's completion unknown.

31 Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 261.

32 Veseley, *Architecture in the Age,* 262.

Fig. 18
Supreme Educational Council (SEC) building (Sources: Peter Chomowicz, 2015)

Arab-Islamic social construction. Each is an individual actor, but through their agglomerative design approach help co-determine each other's presence.

19

All cities the world over express varying degrees of the 'consequences of modernity'. What I wish to add is the notion that cities like Doha express through architecture a restless dynamism between the divine order – what, from Taylor, I call a vertically oriented culture – and a separate human order, the horizontal. The tension between the two orders as centres of power is manifest in the architectural dialectic across the bay: ordered and rational Western-inflected buildings on one side of the bay and, to use a phrase from the Msheireb redevelopment architect Tim Makower, a higgledy-piggledy, chaotic neighbourhood, on the other side. A 2008 view of the Msheireb fereej neighbourhood with the West Bay skyline in the distance illustrates the dialectic of what I am calling the horizontal versus vertical urban and institutional order **[Fig. 19]**. 2010 digital rendering of Msheireb development **[Fig.**

20

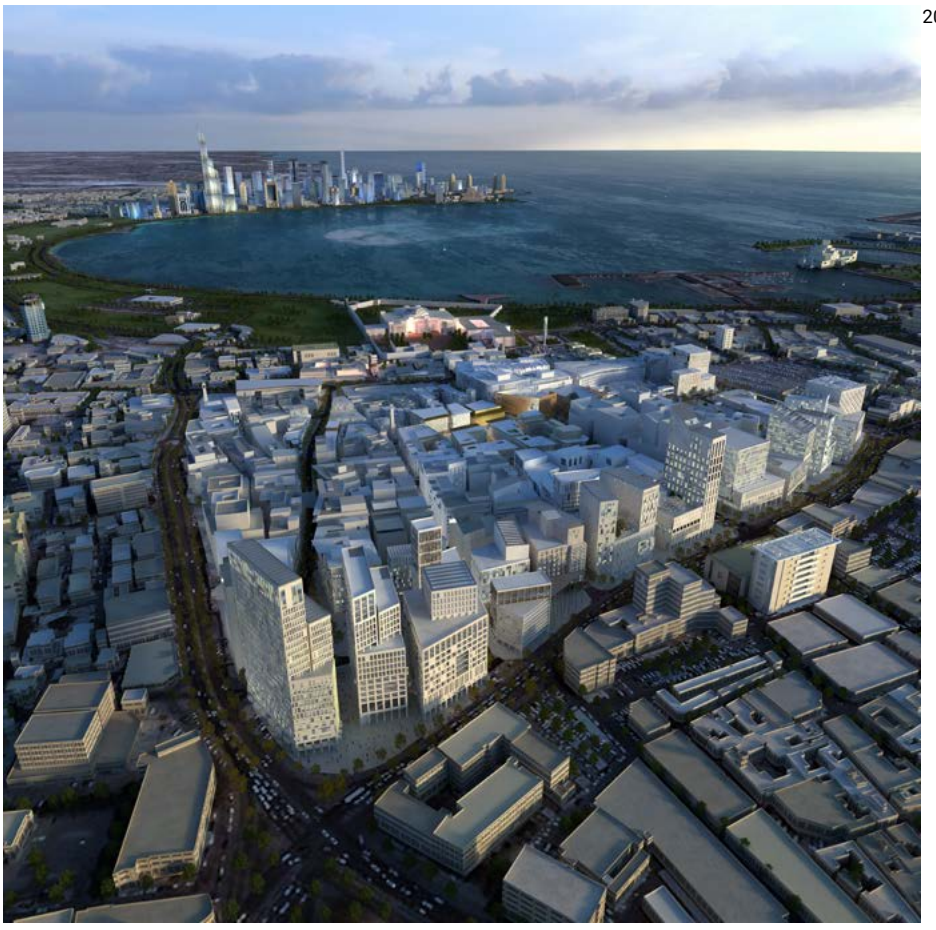


Fig. 19

In the foreground, Msheireb fereej (Source: Peter Chomowicz, 2009).

Fig. 20

Nearly the same perspective as fig. 19, a computer rendering of Msheireb Downtown Doha, with the West Bay skyline in the distance (Source: Msheireb Properties, 2010).

20], reveals why the regime wished to erase the image of the historic fabric seen in Figure 19 and replace it with a 'modern' version, or, according to Msheireb's own marketing strap line attributed to the emir's wife Sheikha Moza, 'A rising homeland that confidently embraces modernization and proudly observes tradition'.[33] In the cross-bay dialectic we indeed see both homelands rising, in that the buildings are getting taller, and both are struggling against their own height and scale to remain 'traditional'. The key point I wish to emphasize is the institutional order within both 'rising' landscapes struggles to remain ontologically Islamic against its modern embodiment.

The speed of creating West Bay's skyscraper landscape testifies to the regime's ability to easily overcome the kinds of resistances we might expect in other vertically oriented cities: money, planning and nature. Creating an image of modernism, we might say 'cut and pasted' from the icons of late capitalist cities and combining it with a similar view of Islamic iconography's transportability ostensibly describes a vast planning matrix whose warp of traffic movements and weft of historical references attempt to synthesize the modern with the traditional. Underlining West Bay's grand plan are the remnants of antique custom that claim to observe and preserve power. However, the resulting city is no more local than its models such as Canary Wharf or the World Financial District. In its search for a 'city' commensurate to its historical orientation, Doha's leaders neglect the manner in which the 'actor' is claimed by the stratification of contexts, the claims made by culture.

The rapid creation of West Bay's institutional depth begins with an abrupt rise from primordial conditions – the sea – to establishing earth, supporting a city, comprised of architecture, enabling customs embodied in typical situations, culminating in *praxis*, authentic action within a culture's commonly held concerns. The full arc of the institutional horizon from what is most common to all – earth – to *praxis* connects the particular to the universal, bridging the 'actor' to her lifeworld of meaningful social action. Within urban topography and its structure of differentiation, architecture provides the immediate horizon of praxis. Yet in West Bay this stratification as I have just outlined omits the deeply held connection between articulation and embodiment. Instead of finding a range of articulations from the most abstract to the most concrete and a corresponding spectrum of architectural and symbolic embodiments we find instead an ambiguity that veers between ancient Islamic hierarchies and modernism's nihilism. The irony of West Bay is it seems every bit as much a 'city' as its high-rise contemporaries but, lacking a coherent institutional horizon, what remains is a continual search for what a 'city' truly is.

Ceremony in the urban order

Fashion in Qatar gives everyone an instant understanding of rights, privileges,

33 Fay Sweet, *Heart of Doha: A Blueprint for the Future* (London: EDAW/Aecom, 2009).

and normative behaviours within an ancient hierarchy. For example, the emir, and men from the royal family or wealthy sheikhs, wear crisp white *thobes*, and on special occasions a gold embroidered *bisht* (robe). Next in the social hierarchy is the typical male Qatari national, who wears a white *thobe* and head covering, the *guttra*, and for women a black *abaya* and some form of head or face covering. Western managerial expatriates typically wear business attire; their wives dressing modestly in loose-fitting skirts. At the bottom of the chain sit the 2 million Asian workers in bright coloured coveralls. However, on certain occasions the urban landscape transforms our understanding of Doha's caste system.

Take for example 'National Day', the annual celebration of Qatar's independence **[Fig. 21]**. Since 2007 the country's residents have thronged to the Cornice to enjoy a spectacular firework display, wave flags, and parade along the coastal highway. The event has become so massive that the entire city is gridlocked for hours by the thousands of cars pouring towards the coastal urban edge. The great collective ritual of a cheering crowd suspends for a moment class and caste; we unite in common action to cheer the nation but, given that the spectacle takes place within the urban representation of the West Bay backdrop, we cheer just as loudly for the city and the emir who made it all possible. We imagine ourselves to be living in a triumphant metropolis, one that started to rise from the sea only a few years before. Fireworks and crowds once a year do not make a city. But the common, shared action, in a shared public sphere, tends towards the key horizontal forms of the social imaginary.

21

Fig. 21

National Day Parade (Source: Al Jazeera News, 2014).

Benedict Anderson refers to events like Qatar's National Day celebration as emblematic of national identity, in stark contrast to religious or regnal identity.[34] The actual event that National Day celebrates is not widely known. One might imagine that memorable dates such as 3 September 1971 when Qatar ended its protection treaty with the British and became independent, or 22 February 1972 when Sheikh Khalifa overthrew his cousin would be worth celebrating. Why then did Sheikh Hamad in 2007 declare 18 December as National Day? Officially, the date commemorates the historic day in 1878 when Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed Al-Thani succeeded his father as leader of the tribes of Qatar. This day in history is every bit as much a national fiction as the contemporary celebration. Better to cheer an historic transition of power rooted in clan supremacy than either its colonial underpinnings or history of internecine conflict and political coups. Architecture and its image are used cleverly to further implant the regime's political legitimacy. Everyone, regardless of class, gender, ethnicity, or nationality,

34 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006).

celebrates an urban triumph made possible by the seamless power handling of the Al-Thani. Conversely, the urban high-rise backdrop that literally shadows National Day symbolizes Al-Thani rule. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century leading Qatari families often used real estate, vacant land, and architecture in the formation of national identity and political power consolidation. West Bay moves this impulse to an international level.

In the celebration of National Day what is shared is not common action as we might expect but rather common emotion. The spectacle of the event, enjoyed by millions, magnifies our attachment. We are caught up in the moment, something larger than ourselves drawing from us a deeper sense of belonging. Nearly all of Qatar's 2 million migrant workers are 'bachelors', single young men, living and working in Qatar solely to support families in India, Nepal or the Philippines. I routinely ask my taxi driver, whom I use almost every afternoon to drive home from work, how his day is going. His answer is always the same, 'just work sir, nothing else. My life is only work and money.'[35] The middle-aged Qataris I interviewed, particularly women, feel intensely the push of modernity: education, career, leadership; and the pull of tradition: marriage, children, family, spending their day in the constant negotiation between work and home. Both social segments – the Indian bachelor and the Qatari female – spend much of their lives deeply embedded within the bounded confines of their socially constructed life-worlds.[36] This is hardly unusual in any city, though in Qatar the highly segregated nature of the culture accentuates life's insularity. The emir and his urban imaginary help attune the nation to something outside themselves, lifting the widely divergent social segments out of common, everyday life and uniting them in an urban spectacle. The high-rises give us a belief that our hard work is contributing to something larger than just ourselves. When we celebrate the city we cheer the emir and the urban institutions.

Despite the widely held belief in the West that our age is secular, most Doha residents are decidedly not. Religion plays the defining role in the understanding of being for the many Muslims, Hindus, and Christians in Qatar. This makes it even more possible to accept a 'calling' from a singular personality, such as the emir. In the vertical, higher-time society that I have been arguing is the structuring principle of Qatari society, despite its secular age imagery, the king fulfils his traditional and historical role as sovereign over his people and Allah sovereign over all things. John Calvet points out the incompatibility of this view with the modern doctrine of state sovereignty.[37] While the emir's political power seems absolute, he is theologically very much equal to his fellow co-religionists. However, the implication that his authority is divinely mandated further blurs in what ways his power is absolute. The emir's city is not Heavenly Jerusalem, but it is a singular imaginary, holding Qatar's vastly divergent populations in

35 Male, aged 54, from Karala, India, living in Qatar 33 years.

36 Female Qatari research participant demographics: age 33, management executive; 35 administrative assistant; 40 corporate official; 29 doctoral student; 60 homemaker.

37 John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 215.

common, at least for a moment. For the briefest instant when hundreds of thousands join on 18 December, the city becomes what Hannah Arendt describes as a public sphere of differences held in common.[38] The question thus arises: what is the 'city' on the other days of the year?

The drama of National Day set against the skyscraper backdrop looks tremendously like something that would happen in a democratic state, Macy's fireworks in New York City on the 4th of July for example. The strong sense of collective identity, solidarity, belief in the rule of law, and commitment to one another typical of democracy seems conspicuously on view during Qatar's National Day. Western expatriates often feel, perhaps through our association with our North Atlantic homelands, that the state is for the people, whose freedoms and expressions are guaranteed. Such an understanding was simply not possible in pre-modern societies. Doha's urban imaginary, particularly on National Day, fuses politics and religion in a bewildering way. Jurgen Habermas describes the historical dimension of religion in the public sphere:

> [The] law and the monarch's judicial power owe their sacred aura to mythical narratives that connected ruling dynasties with the divine. At the same time, archaic ritual practices were transformed into state rituals – society as a whole represents itself in the figure of the ruler. And it is this symbolic dimension of the fusion of politics and religion for the description of which the concept of 'the political' can properly be used. The collectivity sees itself mirrored in the ruler's self-representation as a political community that *intentionally* – i.e., consciously and deliberately – produces its social cohesion through the exercise of political power. Thus 'the political' means the symbolic representation and collective self-understanding of a community that differs from tribal societies through a reflexive turn to a conscious rather than spontaneous form of social integration. In the self-understanding of this kind of polity the locus of control shifts toward collective action. However, 'the political' as such could not become a topic of discourse as long as mythic narratives remained the sole means of symbolic representation.[39]

While I acknowledge that Habermas' theory of communicative action, outlined in the above quote, fails to distinguish levels of involvement, privileging rational thought excessively, he does remind us that 'the political' was inseparable from theology and political authority was defined and justified in sacred higher time. He further suggests that modern secular states operate without such an order. Since the seventeenth century the sacral foundation of 'the political' has been replaced with an egalitarian view of society. Habermas further notes, that 'the secularization of the state is not the same as the secularization of society'; nor

38 Hannah Arendt, Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006). See also Max Weber, *The City*, edited by Don Martindale and translated by Gertrud Neuwirth. (New York: The Free Press, 1966).

39 Jürgen Habermas, "The Political: The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, edited by Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 18.

in our case is the secularization of the image of a society the same as the secularization of the underlying society.[40] In the European transformation of political authority from cosmic-religious to secular, a void nonetheless remains at the central spot once held by the central authority. Claude Lefort suggests that in the course of the democratic transformation, 'the political' has not completely lost its association with religion: 'We can say that the advent of a society capable of organizing social relations can come about only if it can institute the conditions of their intelligibility, and only if it can use a multiplicity of signs to arrive at a quasi-representation of itself'.[41]

Paradoxically, Qatar inverts this formula. The emir very much retains his historic, cosmic-theology at the society's centre, but he goes to great lengths in creating the multiplicity of signs and symbols that represent not itself, as Lefort suggests, but rather its complete opposite, namely a secular, horizontal democracy.

The skyline on any given day represents our participation in some form of collective emotion. There is no football club, stadium, or hero without adoring fans. There is no corporation, skyline, or emir without a supplicant public. The role of the image allows adherence to God and belonging to the state at the same time. One need not belong to the institutions in the image. I can still adhere to God, and belong to the state, which seem contradictory, by not participating in the state's institutions. I enjoy, take pride in the image, but I do not find meaning in it.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to understand in what ways Doha residents are involved with their city through an analysis of the high-rise skyscraper. The analysis has been broadly sketched out across two axes: the first ranges from cultural engagement embodied within particular architectural situations to the opposite extreme of disembodied projection as a representation of a utopian imagination. The second axis looks at the difference between a vertical, higher-time oriented society and that of a horizontal, equidistant society: the difference between sacred and secular. Both dimensions of the analysis, seen through architecture's unique cultural role, begin to illuminate facets of Doha's particular urban order.

Unlike earlier historical epochs in which architecture and architectural space are represented in pictorial, perspectival images, Doha, because of Islam's prohibition on the image, is forced to rely on architecture as image; not the image of architecture, but architecture's ability to carry representational meaning in communicating differences held in common. In an era when media and images mediate our perception of social reality, we have, in Doha - a city stripped bare of

40 Jürgen Habermas, "The Political: The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology," 23.

41 Claude Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political," in Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, translated by David Macey, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 219.

visual references - a unique opportunity to understand the cultural and ontological legacy bequeathed to us through modernism in general and modern architecture in particular.

The modernist vertical skyline of West Bay set against the traditional, low-rise rambling residential neighbourhood across Doha Bay embodies a tension felt throughout Doha's institutional and urban order. We might, on the one hand, believe the city, and regime, have cultivated a kind of synthesis between the modern understanding of individual agency and a world divinely ordered. On the other hand, such glaring ontological juxtapositions could not be anything but unstable and destined to collapse. Seen another way, the search for historic orientation pits the hierarchy under Allah, embodied in the emir, enshrined in *sharī'ah*, and articulated in customs, against the absence of hierarchy – except of course the power that wealth brings. Power in free-market capitalism, as referenced in West Bay, is only that of wealth. In Doha's case the emir, his immediate family, and several mercantile clans therefore occupy the apex of both religious and economic hierarchies. Whatever the case, and I believe it is too early to formulate a telos for Doha, these tensions provide stability in its own right as a search to orient the culture amidst a bewildering and blistering pace of architectural and urban transformation. [Fig.22]

22

Fig. 22

The Emerald City (Source: Peter Chomowicz, 2013).

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