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Rapid urban development and national master planning in Arab Gulf countries. Qatar as a case study



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ABSTRACT

In this article we review past and current master planning efforts in Qatar, highlighting the country's inability to manage rapid urban development. We will argue that the failure to implement sound urban planning in Qatar – and by extension, in the rest of the Arab Gulf Region – is the result of a detachment between the master planning phase – usually sub-contracted to external consultants that are insensitive to Gulf dynamics – and the implementation phase – usually carried out by incapable and redundant local government agencies – all in absence of a serious discussion of ongoing mega-projects.

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Introduction

Among countries of the Arabian Peninsula, the State of Qatar – a narrow peninsula located in the center of the Persian Gulf between Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – is emerging as a regional and global powerhouse. Qatar's ruling class's geopolitical ambitions (e.g., Qatar's active role in both NATO's intervention in Libya and in shaping public opinion through its Al Jazeera news channel) and appetite for prestigious high-profile events (e.g., 2006 Asian Olympic Games, 2022 FIFA World Cup) have garnered the country attention from the media and the international community. Thanks to its vast gas reserves and associated economic growth, according to the latest economic and demographic figures (2010), Qatar's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita is the highest in the world (US \$179,000),¹ although wealth is unevenly distributed between Qataris and the burgeoning expatriate community (Financial Times, 2011). In addition, due to migration inflow of workers mainly from South, South-East Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, between 2004 and 2010 Qatar's population has more than doubled (from 750,000 to 1.7 million inhabitants – Qatar Statistics Authority, 2010).

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¹ Luxembourg is second in the world rank with US\$ 82,600 per capita (CIA World Factbook, 2010).

Prior to the discovery of oil, the population of Qatar did not reach 30,000; Doha, the capital of Qatar, had a population of 12,000 inhabitants (Adham, 2008: 222). However, with the influx of petrodollars starting from the 1950s, urban patterns in the country began to change towards more uncontrolled growth (Adham, 2008: 223). The dramatic urban revolution was further accelerated due to increased oil revenues after 1971. Today, metropolitan Doha is a sprawling conurbation of 1.4 million inhabitants expanding over the municipalities of Doha, Al Wakra, Al Rayyan, Umm Salal and Al Dayeen (Rizzo, 2013).

In recent years, the government of Qatar has implemented several megaprojects that have provided for modern urban facilities and increased tourism (Rizzo, 2013: 540). However, the implementation of such large-scale projects in the absence of a national planning framework has contributed to Doha's urban primacy (Rizzo, 2013) and therefore to more traffic congestion, localized environmental impacts, affordable housing shortages, and land value inflation (Al Buainain, 1999: 406). To confront these issues, since 2005, the Ministry of Municipality and Urban Planning (MMUP) has worked on a new Qatar National Development Framework (QNDF); a strategic document to be followed by a more detailed national master plan.

In the following sections, we will see that despite the many ambitious attempts to manage rapid urban growth (Section 2) and to provide Doha with modern urban standards – in line with recent planning experiences carried out in the region (Section 3) – urban planning in Qatar has failed to be enforced. Based on our analysis

of available planning documents and ongoing developments in Qatar and the Gulf Region, we will argue in Section 4 that the inability to implement sound urban planning in Qatar – and by extension, in the rest of the Arab Gulf Region – is the result of a detachment between the master planning phase – usually sub-contracted to external consultants that are insensitive to Gulf dynamics – and the implementation phase – usually carried out by incapable and redundant local government agencies – all in the absence of a serious discussion of ongoing megaprojects. In the conclusion, we summarize results and highlight the importance of the education and training of local planners as a crucial component of sound urban planning implementation in the Gulf Region.

Urban development and master planning in Qatar and the Gulf Region between post-colonialism and globalization

Similarly to Pacione's (2005: 259–260) and Elsheshtawy's (2004: 178–179) accounts of Dubai, Khaled Adham (2008: 225) suggests four different phases for Doha between 1949 and the early 1990s: urbanity of “transition”, “necessity”, “modernization”, and “stagnation” (see Fig. 1). In a recent paper, Rizzo (2013) has introduced a newer stage of urban development called the “mega-project phase” to highlight the government tendency to build large, themed urban projects in an effort to emulate similar, popular developments taking shape in the rest of the Gulf region (e.g., Dubai and Abu Dhabi). In the following paragraphs, we will discuss urban development and planning in Qatar and the Gulf Region since their independence from the British Empire (1971).

Urban development and planning in post-colonial Qatar: the “modernization” and “stagnation” phases

The 1960s and 1970s marked the beginning of extensive oil exploitation and increasing allocation of government revenues to fund major urban projects for modernizing Doha (Adham, 2008: 225). According to Adham (2008: 225), the phase “urbanity of modernization” (1972–1984) denotes major urban developments in the city, particularly with the implementation of large projects to locate the ministries and other government buildings of the newly independent State of Qatar.

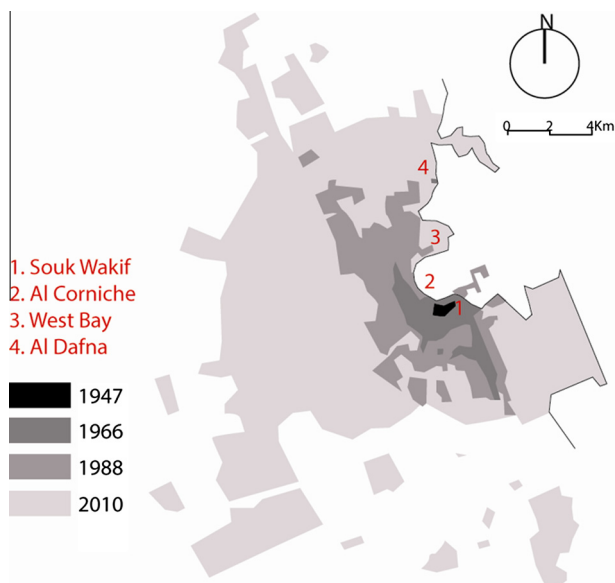


Fig. 1. Urban Growth Phases in Doha: 1947 – Urban Development Prior to Oil Exploitation; 1966 – Modernization Phase; 1988 – Petro-Urbanism Phase; 2010 – Megaproject Phase. *Source:* our elaboration based on MMUP data.

Among these projects, the most important for the future development of the city is the implementation of a large urban reclamation project known as the New District of Doha, comprising the areas of Al Corniche and Al Dafna. To deliver this massive development, in 1972, the central government invited the British planning firm Llewellyn-Davies to prepare the first master plan for the capital region (Nagy, 2000: 130). Llewellyn-Davies and the central government developed a proposal to decentralize urban areas within Doha's A ring (i.e. the old city center) while re-organizing it with large demolition programs to make space for roads and other basic public infrastructures (Adham, 2008: 228). Concurrently with this strategy was the suggestion to reclaim the shallow waters to the north of Doha in order to locate major government buildings (e.g., ministries and national bank-headquarters). During the 1970s, the American firm Pereira Architects shaped the new waterfront of Doha with the characteristic convex-like profile it maintains today. At the end of this super-imposed waterfront, the new Sheraton Hotel dominated the skyline of the city. The most popular areas of Doha (see Fig. 1) therefore “emerged” from the sea and are known today as Al Corniche (the promenade), West Bay (the central business district) and Al Dafna (location of the diplomatic district and several other prime developments). These major projects allowed the government to develop better urban standards to be used as examples for the rest of the city.

After a decade of strong economic growth triggered by increased oil revenues, plans had to be updated to allocate more space for the increasing expatriate community, which consisted mainly of Arabs, Indians, Pakistanis, and a small number of westerners (Adham, 2008: 225). Riad (1981: 7) labeled this phase “petro-urbanism” to describe the rapid change that “undermined, with unparalleled suddenness, the roots of an ecosystem [the Gulf's one] which reflected a perfect adaptation to an environment many generations old”. Thus, in 1979, to update Llewellyn-Davies' master plan, Shankland Cox Partnership was hired to propose urban strategies for the next 20-year period (Al Buainain, 1999: 210). During this period, the first systematic information archive for the capital city, the Qatar Area Referencing System, was established together with a planning database and an interim structure plan plus several action plans (Al Buainain, 1999).

Between the 1980s and 1990s, the country also engaged in a long series of consultancy projects with other foreign firms such as the 1983 Doha Landscape Master Plan, prepared by the global American planning firm HOK; the 1985 planning study of Doha's city center, prepared by Lebanese Dar Al-Handasah consultants; and the 1993–1997 Physical Development Plan, prepared by Louis Berger & HOK to propose new strategies for regulated urban development. Some of these plans differed in approach and scope. For example, HOK's plans addressed the provision of urban infrastructure to keep pace with Doha's rapid urban growth, while Dar Al-Handasah's plan focused on the conservation of the remaining building heritage in Doha's city center.

Due to plummeting oil prices in the 1980s and the subsequent political instability as result of the first Gulf War in the 1990s, none of these plans were ever implemented; Adham (2008: 225) calls this period the “urbanity of stagnation”. However, Lockerbie (2010) argues that these exercises helped develop some capacity within government agencies. Despite that, they still continue to be dependent on foreign input for planning and implementation (see Section 4).

Urban development in Qatar through the globalization age: the “megaproject” phase

To start to grasp Qatar's current “megaproject phase” (Rizzo, 2013), we need to examine contemporary developments in the Arab Gulf Region. In this context, several terms have been used

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