
Very few informative books have been produced regarding the development of the State of Qatar and its emerging capital city Doha until this recent book ‘Demystifying Doha: On Architecture and Urbanism in an Emerging City’ has been published by Ashgate Publishing Limited at the end of 2013. This book reflects on the rapid urban development process in an era of globalizing architecture and urbanism with in-depth focus on the various trends of urban evolution, governance, image-making and socio-cultural sustainability. Ashraf M. Salama and Florian Wiedmann, the authors, approach such a developmental case by a strong conceptual organization of research and a rich analytical methodology that unveils morphological transformations. While the title of the book promotes Doha, the book is essential for every planner, architect, and academic to read and explore its scientific and empirical methodologies, and their implementation. In essence these can be utilized in other cities of similar vision and pace of growth. This solid production delivers an overview study and analytical investigations on architecture and urbanism of a city, which competes with other cities in the region such as Dubai and Abu-Dhabi. The book interrogates three main questions: (1) how the city’s urban structure was shaped and managed from its beginning until its being a key player in the global arena; (2) what are the models of governance utilized to transform the city’s built environment and its physical image; and (3) how place-making and city-branding mechanisms define the city’s image and impact on the urban development tendencies and their relationship the city’s inhabitants.

Salama and Wiedmann reflect on the urban development-architecture-branding conflux and its impacts on urban society. Therefore, I argue that the book meets the expectations and interests of academics, scholars, practitioners and the public; it serves as manual for future empirical investigations and goes beyond the contemporary notions and visions.

The book consists of eight chapters; each of which ends by an important outlook that highlights the various ideas and issues analyzed and presented while offering key lessons learned. The first chapter is the introduction, which establishes the fundamental base of the various topics presented. It presents the core of the interdisciplinary approach the book is adopting. The introduction offers a brief overview on the beginnings of Doha city, yet, the second chapter addresses the Arabian Peninsula as a whole which exploring its development eras before and after the production of Oil and the resulted wealth. In depth, this chapter investigates the rapid growth and urban developments of various Gulf cities and how the aspirations of these
competing cities are materialized through their architecture. It explores various challenging notions such as the struggle to construct an urban identity, and how various urban interventions tend to react to each other. The end of the chapter raises major questions, which the book answers in subsequent chapters. These questions are critical in nature and relate to the tension between traditional representation and global flows of architecture and most important to the impacts on governance, socio-cultural and socio-behavioral dimensions.

By the third chapter, the authors go deeper and focus on the city of Doha. This chapter provides an exploratory analysis of the urban evolution of the city and reveals the successive economic transformations of its wealth and consequentially urban developments. Such analysis is coupled with the key governance techniques implemented during the various economic phases. The fourth chapter investigates the various services the city offers toward its social composition, such as the expansion of real estate, development of infrastructures and local services, visions of education and research, enriching the cultural aspects and sports knowledge, and the control and delivery of international media. In addition, this chapter discusses the systems of governance behind the services provided and the introduction of private initiatives in the urban structure to enhance the transformation of urban typologies under the centralized vision of development and expansion. Among the notions explored in this chapter notions is the aspect of interlocking different types of services and investment strategies to provide a global service hub with highly educated population and on-going urban expansion with a unique architectural identity.

Chapter 5 starts demonstrating the various tools utilized to place Doha on the international arena. It primarily investigates image-making practices through the contemporary architecture of the city. The chapter presents key contemporary elements that are considered major developments with unique architectural significance. Nevertheless, the authors analyze the relationships of these architectural products to reveal a major struggle in the concept of making and exporting the image of Doha. By the input of various commentaries by decision-makers and educated audiences of Doha, the authors conclude that the image and aesthetic struggle represents a sustained and persistent endeavor to construct a unique identity.

Chapter 6 offers another empirical tool utilized to focus on testing the relationship between the residents of Doha and their spatial experience in various urban nodes and public spaces. The empirical approach adopted in the chapter is derived from environmental behavioral studies, surveys, assessment tools, photographic interviews, and walkthrough analytical techniques. The chapter in general gives strength and solid value to the book in total, especially when compared to the body of literature and recent publications on other cities in the region. Methodologically, the chapter includes studies of the movement experience by applying different spatial techniques, the perception toward various open spaces, the aspects of urban diversity, and the degrees of cultural diversity within the city’s spaces. In addition, the chapter stretches the scientific value by deploying all of these extensive tools on twelve major case studies within the city of Doha, resulting in rich behavioral mapping analyses in addition to the quantitative findings toward a scientific-based commentary.

The third challenging ground within this book is ‘Sustainability,’ this book approaches it by studying the challenges and limitations that might result from the rapid urban growth and impact negatively on different aspects of urban morphologies and social compositions. The study of sustainability outlined in chapter 7 focuses on the aspects of real estate and social segregation and its effect on the geographical urban positioning of the different types of residents and the modes of movement among the various districts of the city. Since sustainability also concerns the aspects of the natural environments the study discusses the limitations of increasing emissions due to the high levels of energy consumption and the urgent need to address the efforts poured by the government to control the hazardous effects and waste. However, the chapter fosters the development of strategic solutions of these challenges by stating three major directions, first by the establishment of economic diversification, implementation of a new form of urban governance, and finally the development of a cohesive society.
By the end of this exquisite addition to the literature on Doha’s development and growth, the book ends by chapter 8, which provides an analytical framework for emerging cities in general. The framework introduces and summarizes the various factors that shape contemporary and future urban morphologies by distinguishing governance, collective spatial practices and subjective identification. The analytical framework provides a condensed model of investigating the urban qualities that should be available in emerging cities to ensure sustainability. The model presents the aspects of urban identity, urban diversity, and urban efficiency. In addition, it presents the tools required to investigate each of these aspects and the methodology to utilize them for further findings.

Despite the fact that the book places emphasis on Doha, it makes a significant scholarly contribution to the contemporary architecture and urban literature by vividly examining various aspects of urban development, which are applicable to emerging cities worldwide. It promotes the interdisciplinary analytical approach to understand the emerging city, its urban structure, and the place and image making strategies involved while clearly identifying factors that contribute to the success and the sustainability of those cities. This book is a must read for academics, scholars, professional architects and urban planners and to students in these fields who would like to expand their knowledge on designing and planning for emerging cities.

Author:

Remah Y. Gharib
Assistant Professor of Urban Design,
Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies,
Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Doha, Qatar
rgharib@qfis.edu.qa