



Cultural Heritage Tourism as a Catalyst for Urban Regeneration: Case of the Doha Historic Center in Qatar

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Abstract

Heritage and tourism have become during the last two decades dynamic areas of development in the world. The idea of heritage is crucial to the critical decision-making process as to how irreplaceable resources are to be utilized by people of the present or conserved for future generations in a fast changing world. In view of the importance of 'heritage' to the development of a tourist destination the emphasis on developing appropriate adaptive reuse strategies cannot be overemphasized. In October 1999, the 12th general assembly of the ICOMOS in Mexico stated, that in the context of sustainable development, two interrelated issues need urgent attention, cultural tourism and historic towns and cities. Without adequate rehabilitation actions to ensure a sustainable future for these historic resources, may lead to their complete vanishing. According to the World Tourism Organization, natural and cultural heritage resources are and will remain motivating factors for travel in the near future. According to the experts, people choose travel destinations where they can learn about traditional and distinct cultures in their historic context. Historic centers in the Gulf are now being recognized as valuable resources for sustainable development. This paper focuses on the role of heritage tourism and its implications for urban regeneration in the context of Doha in Qatar and Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, in order to use heritage wisely, it will be necessary to position heritage as an essential element of sustainable development, giving particular attention to heritage tourism.

Keywords: Cultural heritage tourism; Urban regeneration; Development; Sustainability; Historic centres

1 Introduction

The world's urban population is expected to reach 61% by 2030. Tourism generates foreign exchange that can be used to contribute in the local economic development of cities. International records show that tourist arrivals exceeded 800 million in 2005 while generating revenues estimated at 680 billion \$ (UNWTO, 2006). Non-tourist areas can also benefit indirectly from tourism through an equitable distribution and share of the wealth generated. In many developing countries, travel emerged as an important source of growth and prosperity, which directly and indirectly affects related tourism activities. The World Tourism Organization (2004) stated that tourism doubled between 1995 and 2005 and has become a major source of foreign exchange for some small and medium-sized countries such as Qatar, thus contributing significantly to their national economic growth (Kim, Chen & Jang, 2006).

With the rapid expansion of globalization, as well as the development of transportation and communication, the attention of many city stakeholders and local government officials has been directed to tourism as a strategic catalyst for urban regeneration. Cultural heritage is a valuable asset for both the local and global visitors to a particular area. Visitors to such sites provide significant revenues that can be used to regenerate the resilient historic cities in the Gulf. Tourism can be more efficient when the host community is the first beneficiary of the financial returns.

Tourism is a major contributor to foreign exchange, but if not carefully managed, it can have many negative consequences. Tourists make extensive use of the historic center and practice a variety of cultural activities during their visits, which often overlap with the pursuit of locals for their daily activities. In compact historic cities such as Old Doha, the increase in visitors if not properly controlled may lead to overcrowding, mobility and parking problems and queues of people in malls, cafes and restaurants. Mass tourism can give rise to the perception of congestion, but visitors can see it as a normal aspect of tourist destinations (Popp, 2012).

2 Cultural Heritage Tourism and Urban Regeneration

Cultural heritage, historical landscapes, recreation and tourism are interrelated phenomena; Timothy (2011) argues that there is very little difference between cultural and heritage tourism. Cultural heritage resources are largely seen as powerful tools in social and economic dimensions, a means towards urban regeneration and a positive asset for innovation (Timothy, 2011). Therefore, historic cities and centres can stimulate urban regeneration, provide new experiences and enrich the tourism experience. Urban regeneration often underestimates the value of culture to the people of a place. In historic cities of the Gulf “respect of local traditions” is a very sensitive issue, which should not be excluded when initiating any tourism led regeneration strategy. The main concern is to preserve the local cultural identity while reusing the history city or district for tourism (Boussaa, 2014 a, Boussaa, 2014b, Boussaa 2018 & Boussaa, 2020).

Ashworth and Page (2011) pointed out an important issue: “the more unique the urban attraction is, the less likely is the visit to be repeated and will tend to be a once-in-a-life-time experience”. They further conclude, “a more generalized way of selling an ambiance or ‘way of life’ (Paris, Vienna, New York) is likely to generate more repeat visits than a specific attraction”. It is thus important to consider this when applying a regeneration approach for the resilient historic cities in the Gulf to be constantly revisited as a way to sustain their liability.

Tourism led regeneration should not only focus on spatial regeneration to provide benefits to its users, it should aim to improve the socio-economic conditions of the local inhabitants, who are the real custodians of the area. Moreover, tourism led regeneration may provide a solution to the problem of social marginalization of the low income inhabitants. This can happen by strengthening the relations between residents of the area, tourists and also between its residents and public authorities, as will be explored in the historic city of Doha. Achieving sustainability in historic areas requires meeting various needs and balancing the economic, social and environmental dimensions (Wall, 2009).

Low-income people inhabit most of the historic cities in the Gulf. The latter have replaced the original owners, who moved out to live in more laborious villas and apartments at the periphery. Since the current tenants cannot afford to restore or maintain their dilapidated houses, there is a need to seek for an urgent regeneration strategy. The surviving historic cities are mainly residential, with some few public facilities, like souks, mosques and forts. The latter have been converted into museums and cultural centers. Therefore, what should be done with the surviving houses in the remaining historic neighbourhoods, which are in a desperate situation? This paper aims to explore the concept of “cultural heritage tourism” as a vector to regenerate these historic cities.

This paper utilises an exploratory case study approach to discover the key tourism issues in the city of Doha. The study of these two cities aims to generate lessons that will be the basis to develop strategies that can be adopted to revive them as well as other historic cities in the Gulf and the Arab world. This research uses of a variety of data sources, including publicly available relevant documents, websites, presentation reviews, field observations and follow-up communication by phone and email.

3 Historic Cities and Tourism

Many historic sites in the Gulf disappeared because local authorities were not aware of their potential economic value. With the involvement of UNESCO to discover potential sites for inclusion on the world heritage list, many countries are striving to include their historical cities on that list. This will increase people's pride towards their localities while hosting their international and local visitors' home. Regeneration of historic districts tends to attract a variety of economic activities and competition, therefore encouraging both new inhabitants and visitors to visit and discover these areas. In addition, upgrading the physical built environment, social fabric and urban spaces within the historical urban structure all contribute towards increasing their adoption as places for local-global tourist's integration.



Fig. 1: Pressures of economic forces resulting in the erosion of many historic districts, leaving only a few patches in old Doha

The challenge for regeneration is to develop strategies, which not only ensure the continuing contribution of heritage to the present and the future, however it should be responsive to the historic environment and collective needs. Such strategies will lead to more equitable and sustainable solutions to the problems currently faced by the historic quarters in the Gulf. Many strategies for the manipulation and exploitation of culture inside the historical cities can be found. These may include funding for facilities of the arts; investment in public spaces; recreation and refurbishment of distinctive settings as waterfronts and historic districts. Other kinds of intervention may comprise the expansion and improvement of museums and the conservation of historical landmarks, which are needed to promote tourism. Working to be competitive within a global world, many places have tried to increase their distinctiveness and character to attract flows of tourists and visitors.

In many historical cities, a “local fatigue” may result from over-consumption of local infrastructure, and fragile historical buildings. These issues are pertinent in the Gulf, where the conflict between conservation and development is at its apex, and a need to create a balance between these two forces is crucial for a sustainable future of the historical city. Therefore, to sustain the surviving historical cities, enough modernization of the urban fabric should be provided to avoid disrupting the community life.

The economic role tourism plays in the industry and global growth is highly important. Historic cities

and urban centers attract skillful occupants, as they are the core of economic activities, which creates an agglomeration of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds triggering fragmentation of the social fabric, and bonds, which are essential for cultural sustainability. From that sense, cultural heritage tourism finds a fertile ground to grow as means to salvage cultural identity and generating adequate products and services for the demand in these growing city cores. This cycle in return increases the diversity of occupants and visitors in the area, which plays a significant role towards a local-global integration (Madanipour et al., 2013), (Sharpley & Telfer, 2014).

Countries such as in the gulf area have had rapid development booms resulting in less sustainable decision making towards the conservation of valuable heritage sites undermined or destroyed during the process of modernization, development and physical growth of the cities fabric. As planning becomes a tool to sustain cultural heritage whilst ensuring the continuity of financial security needed to conserve and regenerate heritage destinations, identification of urban physical characteristics and the cohesive collaboration of multidisciplinary professionals involved in establishing these features is measured crucial.

Tourism introduces many values within its context; the value chain involves direct and indirect contributors and beneficiaries in the process. These include social values through exposure to norms and standards of diverse cultures, exploration, knowledge sharing and reference to the past layers of physical and cultural lifestyles. The economic value of tourism is considerably dominant in directing the approach to development. According to UNWTO, tourism will face a 43million/3.3percentage increase yearly. Despite the growing cost of transportation and travel in the past decade compared to earlier periods, international tourist activities are expected to range at 1.8 billion in 2030, a considerable 80% growth in the coming 2 decades ranking MENA region as most visited region worldwide (Beyer, 2014).

4 Doha; Rapid Growth and Globalization

Doha, the capital of Qatar is the largest city, with over 80% of the nation's population residing in Doha and its suburbs. It is also the administrative and economic centre of the country with a population of 2,718,227 persons in August 2023 (<https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/qatar-population>). Every year thousands of people migrate to Qatar, inciting an explosive growth rate in population. Prior to 1950, Doha was a small fishing and pearling village, today, it has become well known for its mega sports, conferences, and exhibition events. Prior to reaching this strategic, place in the region, Doha experienced a staggering rapid urban growth since the discovery of oil in 1940 and the beginning of its exportation in 1950.



Fig. 2: Location of Souk Waqif and Msheireb (Heart of Doha) in old Doha

Oil exports and payments for offshore rights started in early 1950s, and marked a major shift in Qatar's future. In parallel to oil exportation, the year 1949 saw the importation for the first time of the cement as a new building material. Cement provoked a major shift in construction trends from reliance on local building materials such as coral stones, and *Danchal* to the introduction of new materials based on cement. In order to meet the rising demand for housing, education facilities, shopping areas that followed the discovery of oil, large areas had to be prepared in the downtown area. Consequently, the bulldozer cleared away several historic areas, which usually contained significant heritage landmarks.

Due to the complex process of land expropriation that involved high costly compensations, planning started to move from downtown to the sea through land reclamation. This new trend left the old town with large empty areas to be used for informal parking and gathering areas for the low-income workers especially during weekends. During the period 1978-1981, the West bay was being prepared to become the new modern district in Doha, where a number of iconic towers started to emerge. The Sheraton hotel as a main landmark in the west bay of Doha was the first modern structure to be built during 1982-83. While the West bay has been given continuous consideration and attention by the development of "star-architecture" towers, designed by international consultants and famous architects such as Jean Nouvel, old Doha has been left to die slowly, through neglect, overcrowding, isolation and lack of active regeneration actions.

In 1980, the Government of Qatar established the first conservation law to preserve the archaeological and cultural heritage of the country. Since, then only piecemeal restoration work was implemented. A number of single monuments were restored such as the Zubarah fort which was added on the world heritage list in 2013 and the Mohamed said Nasrallah house; the only remaining wind-tower house in Doha. The first historic district to be rehabilitated in Doha and Qatar is Souk Waqif during the period 2004-2010.

5 Tourism Led Regeneration in Souk Waqif

The souk contains about 500 shops varying between pottery, traditional swords, daggers, handcrafts, jewellers and copper utensils. Entering the old Souk from the northern side, is accompanied with the oriental experience of smells, colours and the journey starts in Souk —Al Etem (darkness). Gold, wholesale, clothes, and the animals' souk are specialized and unique as much as the spices' market. Amenities have been distributed within two major areas, the old souk accessed from Abdullah Bin Thani Street and Grand Hamad Street. The new restaurants take place along Al Kharis Street in Al Najada area.

After long years of dilapidation and neglect the beginning of the 21st century, the souk fell into disrepair and decay. Moreover, the souk was intruded by unsympathetic buildings, of dense shops frontage, crowded entrances and clash of functions, leading to a hybrid environment of modern and old structures. The upgrading process was randomly done by the shopkeepers due to the absence of a common strategy of maintenance during that time. Alleyways were covered with temporary metal sheets as a quick and cheap solution to provide shade for the shoppers. The use of these metallic roofs increased heat gain and solar absorption, thus creating a condensed humid air and unpleasant spaces for the visitors and users of the souk.



Fig. 3: Picture is showing the state of the Souk before the beginning of restoration in 2004

Due to this critical situation, the Emir of Qatar, HH Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalida the present Emir's father asked the Art designer Mohamed Ali Abdulla to implement the rehabilitation of Souk Waqif. Before starting, Mohamed Ali Abdulla took his time to undertake research of the gulf architecture by visiting most of the Gulf countries and South of Iran. Based on his fieldwork and research he set up a challenge to achieve the following objectives:

- “Reconstruct the lost image of historic Doha through the rehabilitation of its authentic Souk Waqif,
- Protect the area of the souk and its surroundings from real estate development,
- Create an open-air public area totally pedestrianized,
- Establish a vibrant souk with its original layout and goods.”



Fig. 4: Showing the main areas in the Souk

This urban regeneration project had to resolve the following issues:

- “Augment the human dimension and users’ experience,
- Conserve the activities of the souk and distribution of its specialized areas,
- Activate the social memory,
- Update and modernize its services,
- Maintain an authentic environment,
- Restore the dilapidated buildings,
- Remove alterations and random additions,
- Reconstruct the lost parts,
- Create organic pathways and alleys,
- Provide maximum shaded area” (Radoine, 2010).

After complementing the restoration work and a comprehensive adaptive reuse program was implanted in Souk Waqif. The traditional crafts and activities deserve a special attention, as they need to be sustained for the future generations. Competing with the spacious shopping malls Souk Waqif offers a unique outdoor living heritage environment in Doha, which is used by the local inhabitants and visitors.

All services are distributed within a walking distance where vehicular circulation is prohibited. The parking area, which was a main issue witnessed several extensions since the souk started to be rehabilitated, it has changed several times with different extensions the parking capacity increased from 410 parking lots in 2003, to 440 in 2007 and 590 parking spaces, distributed in two parts in 2009. In addition, the parking roof enabled the creation of a green area facing the corniche, as an additional outdoor space facing the corniche for gatherings and recreation.

Local and global visitors come frequently to Souk Waqif, especially during weekends and holidays. Nowadays and after six years from the completion of the rehabilitation, Souk Waqif has been transformed from a derelict souk to a living environment in the present yet with a spirit of the past. This has been noticed during the recent FIFA world cup where Souk Waqif became one of the most attractive places for fans. During the year 2009/10 a comprehensive survey of 100 people chosen randomly, was undertaken to express what was missing in Souk Waqif. Furthermore, a series of informal interviews and discussion were held with a number of decisions makers from Qatar Museums, the Private Engineering Office and Msheireb Properties. The outcome of the survey and discussions enabled to highlight some recommendations to further enhance life in the Souk:

- A branch for the Qatari Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage to be approached easily by the public. This institution would provide people with cultural insights and events happening in Doha on a monthly and annual basis, as well as using Souk Waqif as a station to host these events.
- A Library specialized for historical records, archives, manuscripts retaining the history, emergence and development of Qatar’s heritage in general, Doha and Souk Waqif in particular.
- A Community Centre providing the public with classes and workshops about old Qatari handicrafts, pottery, bronze and metalwork.

- A Cultural centre specialized for creative and interactive events such as fashion shows for Qatari costumes, storytelling of pearl diving, different ways of city and Bedouin traditional ways of life;
- Exhibition spaces that are both stationary and travelling that help narrate the history of Doha and Souk Waqif.
- Children's Centre: a corner that might be designed as a courtyard house where old Qatari games can be practiced and revived.

One of the major drawbacks of the rehabilitation strategy in Souk waqif is the absence of housing in the adaptive reuse program as this prevented the souk from being active 24 hours a day living environment. However, this deficiency was reduced by the development of a number of boutique hotels. Souk Waqif has become a major attraction for both the local and global visitors. Despite a lack of authenticity in the way, a number of historic buildings have been restored; their adaptive reuse enabled the creation of a vibrant living environment to the once derelict area, and thus overshadowed the inauthentic physical additions.



Fig. 5: Souk Waqif; the restaurants' area provides a bustling life day and night

A combination of modern and traditional crafts has contributed greatly to the revival of the souk, thus in creating a destination that combines the past and present of Doha. Following the successful regeneration of Souk Waqif experience, it can be noticed that a wise adaptive reuse program was the main catalyst in establishing a sustainable urban conservation approach in the souk. Ultimately, this project layered the foundations to other conservation initiatives to take place in the adjacent districts such as Msheireb during the period 2008-2020.

6 Conclusion

In a growing world, fierce competition between cities is a driving force in promoting strategies to improve the operational performance of a city to attract more tourists and ensure their satisfaction. The emergence of the concept of tourism led regeneration has drawn the attention of tourists to the need to protect them from the negative effects of touristification such as gentrification. Developing

resource-based attractions, especially heritage sites, requires effective management systems and the development of an appropriate planning process to avoid mass tourism and gentrification.

This study has shown that a successful tourism cannot rely only on the primary cultural heritage attractions. A provision of secondary resources such as accommodation for tourists as was developed in Souk Waqif can help attract more visitors to stay in the historic city. In this way, more money can be generated to improve the local inhabitants' derelict living conditions. Consequently, more jobs can be created especially for the youth, who will be encouraged to contribute in sustaining life in their historic city. As an outcome of all these efforts, the historic centers will shift from being redundant to living heritage areas, where people can live, work, enjoy their time and most of all be proud of their old city.

Successful strategies for tourism development should not be evaluated solely in terms of increasing the number and income of tourists. Tourism must also be evaluated primarily in terms of its role in improving the overall quality of life of the host community. Too much emphasis on tourism can put new services and related development at risk, often at the detriment of the locals. Therefore, it is important to carefully manage and control tourism potential according to the local potentialities.

Cultural heritage tourism led regeneration is now a widely spread idea in the world. A city that values its cultural heritage gives itself the means to better prepare its future and recreates an idealized past. Theoretically, historic cities have all the means to develop a sustainable cultural heritage tourism, responsive first to the needs of their inhabitants and then for the visitors. Therefore, cultural heritage tourism remains a potential changing living space and a perfectible niche to explore. In this way, cultural heritage tourism led regeneration can form a blessing and not blight the resilient historic centers and their inhabitants, in the Gulf and worldwide.

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