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# URBAN SPACE DIVERSITY IN DOHA

Ashraf Salama examines the city's public spaces through different perceptions



Cities have always been highly differentiated places expressive of heterogeneity, a diversity of activities, entertainment, excitement, and pleasure. They have been and still are the melting pots for formulating and experimenting with new philosophies, and religious and social practices. They produce, reproduce, represent, and convey much of what counts today as culture, knowledge, and politics. Urban spaces within cities are no exception; they are places for the pursuit of freedom, un-oppressed activities and desires, but also ones characterised by power, systematic oppression, domination, exclusion, and segregation. In dealing with these polar qualities, diversity has become one of the new doctrines of city planners, urban designers and architects. It continues to be at the centre of recent urban debates. Little is known, however, about how planned public urban spaces produce social diversity, which aspects of diversity can be planned for, and what can be achieved spontaneously. This article examines some of these ideas within the context of the City of Doha, capital of Qatar.

## WHAT IS URBAN DIVERSITY?

In recent rhetoric, diversity denotes a mosaic of people who bring a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, styles, perspectives, values and beliefs as assets to the groups and organisations with which they interact. However, in urban discourse it also has multiple meanings such as mixing building types, physical forms, and people of different social classes, racial and ethnic backgrounds. While some theorists attribute diversity to homogeneity within heterogeneity, social differentiation without exclusion, others associate it with socio-political aspects of assimilation, integration and segregation.

Contemporary literature suggests that urban space diversity involves the creation of vital urban places while offering functional and behavioural

opportunities for different socio-economic groups. It involves three dimensions: the first is the physical, the second the social and emotional, and the third is about types of activities and use. Investigating these three dimensions gives a comprehensive insight into urban space diversity.

## THE CITY OF DOHA

Historically, Doha was a fishing and pearl diving town. Today, it is home to more than 90 per cent of Qatar's 1.7 million people, and over 80 per cent are professional expatriates from other countries. Until the mid-1960s, the majority of buildings were individual traditional houses, and during the 1970s, Doha was transformed into a modern city. However, in the 1980s and early 1990s the development process slowed, due in part to the political atmosphere, the first Gulf War and a reliance on the resources and economy of neighbouring countries.

Current pervasive development in Doha is characterised by fast-track urbanisation, resulting in new urban nodes used by different groups for different purposes. While this unprecedented urban growth continues to be the subject of discussion, little attention has been paid to other issues, i.e. the resulting spatial experience, attitudes towards emerging urbanised spaces, and whether these spaces are diverse enough to accommodate the multicultural society that the city enjoys.

## APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Using an attitude survey, Doha's urban spaces have been studied as perceived spaces and experienced spaces by different groups. The urban spaces have been selected according to the development density, commercial activity, and public accessibility, and 490 survey responses were received from Doha's inhabitants. The methodology adopted is multi-layered and involves two investigations: first, an analytical description of

↑ Doha, Qatar



eight spaces that are believed to represent different urban and spatial qualities for different groups; and second, an attitude survey, which explores how the identified urban spaces are perceived and experienced. Using definitions of the spaces as a city 'centre' or 'periphery', two major questions were posed:

- How does the city's population perceive the identified key spaces – as centre(s) or peripheries, and
- How are centre(s) and peripheries experienced by different genders, age groups, and cultural backgrounds?

The term centre here means an urban node visited most by the inhabitants, while the periphery is an urban area rarely visited. The spaces selected reflect different spatial qualities, these are: Aspire/ Villagio Mall; Al-Sadd Commercial Strip; Musheireb Intersection; Ramada Junction; Water Front a: Near the Sheraton Hotel; Water Front b: Near the Main Restaurant; Water Front c: Near Museum of Islamic Art; and Souq Waqif (traditional marketplace).

Fortunately, the respondents actually represented the city's population in their overall profile, with 260 males and 230 females; the age groups were also well represented with 12 per cent being 15-20 year olds, 47 per cent as 20-30

year olds, 21 per cent 30-45 year olds, and 18 per cent 45-60 year olds. As the population of the city is so young, the over-60 age group is just 2 per cent – the same as in the population. Cultural groups were generically classified as Africans, Americans, Arabs, Asians, Europeans and Qataris. Representation of these groups broadly reflected the figures currently estimated for the city's population: 37 per cent Qataris, 28 per cent Arabs, 14 per cent Asians, 11 per cent Africans, 5 per cent Europeans, and 5 per cent Americans, but Qataris in the city generally do not exceed 20 per cent.

#### PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The findings based on the gender, cultural background and age group were analysed and major differences between males and females were revealed. For example, while 35 per cent of males believe that the city has one centre, only 8 per cent of the females agree. Yet, there is agreement between males and females on perceiving the peripheries, where 64 per cent of males and 69 per cent of females believe that the city has several peripheries.

Similarities were found in male and female respondents' perceptions of the Aspire/ Villagio and Souq Waqif locations as centres. Differences were found however in responses to the peripheries – 35 per cent of female respondents identify Ramada Junction as a periphery, while only 10 per cent of male respondents agree. Strikingly, while male respondents identify each of the Water Front spaces (a, b) near the Sheraton Hotel and nearby Main Restaurant as peripheries, none of the female respondents identify them as peripheral spaces. This is due to the openness, green and tiled areas, opportunities for walking, jogging, biking, sitting and enjoying the scenic view of Doha's skyline, and taking photographs.

The age groups revealed dramatic differences in their responses. Souq Waqif is perceived as a centre by 65 per cent in the 20-30 age group, while to all other older groups it received 100 per cent of the responses. By contrast, the Musheireb Intersection perceived as a periphery by 83 per cent of the 15-20 age group, had between 26-33 per cent of responses by the 20-30, 30-45 and 45-60 age groups. Yet the two spaces are in the same vicinity.

Amongst respondents from different backgrounds more differences exist. While 73 per cent of Arabs, 75 per cent of Qataris, and 85 per cent of Asians believe that the city has more than one centre, less than 40 per cent of Americans and Europeans agreed. Similarities were found in perceiving peripheries however; virtually all believed that the city has several peripheries.

The majority of Qataris identified Souq Waqif as a centre, which can be attributed to the historical significance of the Souq in a rapidly growing city. All Americans, most Asians and Africans identify the Aspire/Villagio urban space as a centre, due to the familiar mall atmosphere and availability of sport facilities. Respondents from Arab and Asian backgrounds identify Al Sadd Commercial Strip and Ramada Junction as centres, reflecting a tendency to favour dense urban areas, similar to the environments that they are from. Despite their geographical location, the majority of respondents from European and American backgrounds identify the Water Front spaces as centres, perhaps

↑ Souq Waqif, Doha  
 ↑↑ Ramada Hotel Junction, Doha

due to tendency to favour open spaces and an association with natural settings rather than with dense urban fabric.

### REFLECTIONS

The results show that urban spaces lack clear conditions amenable to creating urban diversity. Nevertheless, they corroborate the initial inquiry that urban spaces are perceived and experienced differently by different groups based on their gender, age, and cultural background. However, the lack of previous empirical studies on urban spaces in Doha represents an important limitation. While these are based on a perceptual approach, there are limits to the conclusions that can be drawn from the results of a questionnaire where there is room for subjectivity. Other approaches could be through focused interviews, systematic observations, and behavioural mapping studies.

Urban spaces mean different things to different communities within the city of Doha and are used differently. The juxtaposition of the results with an understanding of urban space diversity shows that the urban spaces lack one or more of the three important conditions that contribute to the achievement of diversity. The results reflect the dynamic nature of urban spaces identified as centres, supporting the assumption that urban spaces in the centre are not necessarily unique. The results, however, indicate that urban spaces on the peripheries are emerging to compete with those in the centre. Understanding what constitutes centres and peripheries in the minds of the city's inhabitants will contribute to understanding their spatial experiences and attitudes.

While future development plans for the city may seem to address particular sections of the population and cater to specific age groups or cultural backgrounds, a more responsive approach to the design of urban spaces is needed. Urban design focuses on creating built environments that promote opportunities and experiences for all city inhabitants. Therefore, it is crucial that most urban spaces and activities are accepted and enjoyed by the majority of the population. Urban development processes must consider the development of spaces based on the perception and understanding of different groups, in order to make successful inclusive urban places that are relevant to the diversity of the city of Doha. ●

