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**Socio-spatial Practice of Migrant Communities in Doha's Traditional Core:**

*The Case of Al Asmakh District*

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# Socio-spatial Practice of Migrant Communities in Doha's Traditional Core *The Case of Al Asmakh District*

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is based on an extensive research undertaken at Qatar University in 2014 with the aim of exploring the social-spatial practice of migrant communities in Doha's traditional core. Since new development strategies have been initiated in Gulf cities, the old historic centres have faced a rapid transformation process. Today, large scale investments in new developments in Doha's traditional centre have led to a new challenge to prevent the complete social restructuring and the move of all residing migrant communities, particularly those who have settled in Doha for generations, from the centre to other newly urbanized areas. While large-scale projects, such as Msheireb regeneration and redevelopment, have led to the replacement of an entire district, there have been fragmented development initiatives to gradually upgrade existing urban structures in central areas. The district of the Al Asmakh is one of the most important examples that manifest the current conflict to mediate between rising investment pressures and preserving the local identity including the particular urban life and spatial economic settings, which have evolved over several decades. The paper presents new research outcomes with respect to the lived urban spaces of the Al Asmakh in order to illustrate the potential loss of very distinctive neighbourhoods and to introduce particular characteristics of urban spaces and the way migrant communities appropriate them. The socio-spatial practice of these communities is explored to identify their impact on contemporary urban spaces as well as the future challenges of providing efficient urban environments for social groups with limited purchasing power. Methodologically, as part of a learning experiment undertaken at Qatar University, structured field surveys, environmental systematic observations as well as behavioural mapping are adopted as important approaches to investigation. While the investigation reveals interesting dynamics between migrant communities and their environments, it also postulate that city residents have capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness in spite of a domineering and hampering context. The paper concludes with projections of how contemporary transformation processes in Gulf cities will have to be based on social inclusion and the recognition that migrant communities need to have access to develop their own settings that relate to their needs and routine spatial practices while securing the economic basis of many migrants and providing better living standards for all communities. The initiation of holistic and integrated development strategies is of high significance for both the preservation of historic districts in order to secure the roots of Doha as well as for migrant communities, who are facing the potential loss of their businesses and familiar surroundings.

**KEYWORDS:** *Urban space, migrants, environment-behaviour studies, everyday urbanism, social-spatial practice, Doha*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the oil production commenced, migrants have settled in the historic city cores of Gulf cities due to the move of local populations to new suburban neighbourhoods.<sup>1</sup> The rapid shift from compact vernacular desert settlements to automotive cities characterized by urban sprawl led to a strong separation of historic city cores and new urban extensions.<sup>2</sup> The historic cores gradually lost their importance due to out-dated infrastructure and rather limited accessibility, which has led to the move of main retail centres towards the urban periphery and the newly urbanized areas. While shopping malls on city outskirts began to cater to higher income groups, the mixed-use central areas accommodated the various services and shops for migrant communities leading to a rather distinctive economic environment of direct exchange and interaction between groups with lower income.<sup>3</sup>

Most migrant communities residing in historic city cores have been from Indian, South-Asian and Middle Eastern origins and in addition to a large percentage of migrants, who only dwell a limited number of years in Gulf cities without their families, a stable and growing community has remained from the first generations of migrants who decided to settle after the oil production commenced. Both the settled and the continuously exchanging majority of migrants have created distinctive neighbourhoods and particular ways of urban life, induced by their own cultures.<sup>4</sup> The contemporary street life in downtown areas is thus an expression of a large part of the overall population of Gulf cities, who have experienced an increasing struggle to be heard and to be integrated within today's urbanism.<sup>5</sup>

In most recent years, downtown areas have begun to attract a new dimension of investment interests due to their central location and the still existing built heritage from the pre-oil era, which was rediscovered by decision-makers as an important factor for attracting investments and tourism as well as establishing general urban identity.<sup>6</sup> Large-scale projects, such as Souq Waqif and Msheireb redevelopment in Doha or Bastakiyah in Dubai, have led to an urban transformation process instigating gentrification and leading to higher rental rates and a subsequent move of lower income migrant communities to urban peripheries.<sup>7</sup> This gradual replacement of communities, who have had a significant impact on these urban spaces for decades based on their daily needs and cultural backgrounds, will subsequently lead to the end of a significant element of contemporary Gulf cities rooted in long-term migration characterized by a particular spatial-economic structure and a high level of spatial diversity.

While the study presented here is undertaken based on a western understanding of the contemporary city and its urban environment, the interest in Gulf urbanism is increasing as evidenced in the growing body of knowledge that aims to provide insights into the relationship between various communities and the urban settings they use.<sup>8</sup> Our aim is to contribute to the ongoing discussions on Gulf urbanism. Therefore, the paper is based on recent research efforts to analyse and evaluate the last remaining historic urban spaces, which are still an expression of both traditional spatial environment and migrant communities by focusing on the Al Asmakh district as a case study that represents Doha's traditional urban core.

## 2. THEORETICAL TENETS FOR UNDERSTANDING SOCIO-SPATIAL PRACTICE

A review of a number of concepts provides a theoretical reference for understanding the notion of '*socio-spatial practice*.' These concepts emerge from disciplines and areas of interest that include environmental psychology or

environment-behaviour studies, new urbanism and sociology. Within the field of environment-behaviour studies, Amos Rapoport argues that the physical elements of an environment are of direct influence on the relationships and activities that happen within them.<sup>9</sup> The built environment is thus both a force defining human movements as well as a result of the overall human spatial practice in one place.<sup>10</sup> The long-term relationship between actual residents and their surroundings will inevitably lead to a spatial expression of the social structure and eventually to a representation of their various needs and preferences of the community.

Everyday urbanism is a concept that has been widely theorised in contemporary literature<sup>11</sup> with three main qualities: it is portrayed as *non-utopian* since it capitalises on the everyday reality of ordinary life with little or no interest in debating the ideal built environment; as *conversational* since it incorporates multiplicity and simultaneity with openness to populist informality, and as *non-structuralist* since it softens the relationship between the designed environment and socio-spatial practice.<sup>12</sup> In relation to everyday urbanism, reference should be made to the conceived-perceived-lived triad of Henri Lefebvre.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, *conceived space* is based on decisions made by the public sector exemplified by practitioners, decision-makers and others who are in a position to impose their personal notion of 'order' on the concrete world. *Perceived space* represents the interactions between people and institutions: the space where movement and interaction take place and where networks develop and materialise. *Lived space*, which represents our focus in this programme, is the way people actually live and interact with their environment; the direct unconscious, non-verbal relationship of humans to space. Everyday urbanism describes everyday life as a receptacle of all types of meanings that range from the ordinary to the extraordinary.<sup>14</sup> It focuses on the everyday environment of public activity while exploring the typically oversimplified domains of daily existence as a crucial field in contemporary culture.<sup>15</sup> It involves shifting from the elite decision-maker and the egoist/pragmatist professional architect-planner to the ordinary layperson.

'*The right to the city*' is another concept that was originally coined by Lefebvre as an emotional petition for a new and radical kind of urban politics; it is currently in widespread discussion and usage, particularly in more activist contexts. In his essay 'The Right to the City,' Harvey rearticulated Lefebvre's core belief, arguing that "*the right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city.*"<sup>16</sup> Rooted in imagination, the 'lived space' is essentially subjective, a passive experience wherein the outer physical space resonates with the inner imagination, which makes symbolic use of outer objects, retaining or rejecting them according to an arbitrary, because subjective, though often cohesive system of priorities and preferences. Specific locations within a given vicinity can, for example, become focal points due to their position and status within the representational space of the particular community of people who use that vicinity – a church, a graveyard, a square.<sup>17</sup> Although products of representational space are often symbolic works such as art, poetry and aesthetic trends, the public realm of urban spaces can express the inner relationships between inhabitants and their built environment by being either used or abandoned. Thus, Lefebvre (2003) argued that the complex relationship between inhabitants and existing urban spaces will lead to another evolutionary chapter within urban development patterns due to the rising public opinion and the subsequent resistance to top-down decision-making. This view was further reinforced in the environment behaviour and community planning literature. Yet, the realm of environment-behaviour studies took a different turn expressed in the systematic examination of human behaviour as it relates to the everyday urban environment.

Human behaviour is thus a clear indicator of whether urban spaces are important factors in everyday life or if they are rejected and avoided. While the absence of any street life can have various reasons, such as security concerns or introverted lifestyles rooted in cultural particularities, the actual activities can be observed and evaluated to gather in-depth insights if public urban spaces are perceived as attractive or repulsive environments. Subsequently, urban spaces can be identified as either key centres inviting a wide range of social groups to interact or as segregated spaces with limited access to any form of social inclusion and thus often abused and neglected.<sup>18</sup> In essence, behavioural studies need to be combined with various analyses of the local built environment, its historic roots as well as its various components in order to gain insights into the particular factors, which are leading to the complex social-spatial practice of communities.

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The methodology was developed as part of the elective class ARCT 420: Environment-Behaviour Studies, offered to fourth year architecture students. The class adopted the theoretical underpinnings outlined above with a focus on the conjecture that the built environment is not simply a background against which human actions take place, but reflects and shapes human assumptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours. Coupled with the typical format of delivery of lectures and presentations, the class offered a series of in-class and out-of-class exercises and assignments that employ various learning styles that prepare students to a more comprehensive structured learning experience in the form of a group research project. Entitled “Understanding the Socio-spatial Practices of Migrant Communities in the Traditional Core of Doha,” the project was an endeavour to learn about the dynamics of those communities in relation to the everyday urban environment.

In addition to the socio-behavioural phenomena discussed during the lectures that included *privacy, territoriality and personal space*, students were asked to reflect on the functional, social and perceptual attributes for assessing urban open spaces. Adopting various methods of environment behaviour studies, the project involved the application of a number of tools and information gathering techniques as an attempt to answer three key questions: a) How do migrant communities appropriate their environment to meet their needs? b) What are the aspects in the environment that support or inhibit functional and behavioural opportunities? and c) How are the factors of adaptability and flexibility manifested in different environmental settings? Two hypotheses were conceived to derive the investigation and can be represented as follows:

- Migrant communities have established ways to integrate their immediate needs in urban spaces or residential buildings despite public monitoring and licensing.
- The lack of public realm and leisure spaces has led to the use of the ‘in-between’ spaces and un-built sites such as, for instance, the establishment of informal cricket fields in parking spaces, or the use of a sidewalk or a street corner as a social space.

The class was divided into two groups, each is composed of 8 students where each groups was assigned to investigate a specific area within the Al Asmakh neighbourhood in the traditional core of the city: *Wadi Msheireb Street* and *Al Asmakh Street*. Four key urban spaces were detected by the two student groups in the Al Asmakh district, which are representative urban spaces along the two main streets. Each group was asked to follow a set of

procedures that included conducting systematic observations and developing a general profile of the area. However, the application of two main research tools was requested from each group.

The first tool was introduced as a ‘Walking Tour’ procedure for exploring the urban space of the street selected.<sup>19</sup> This procedure involves a classification of attributes of urban open spaces into three categories (Figure 1) that can be outlined as follows:

- *Functional Attributes:* Diversity of use; environmental responsiveness; appropriateness of form in relation to use; contextual accessibility; diversity of gathering nodes; visibility and inclusion of iconic elements; clarity of edges and boundaries; quality of architectural and landscape elements; adaptability and opportunities for appropriation.
- *Social Attributes:* Promoting effective user experience; social inclusivity; engaging diverse social groups with space; accommodating diverse social activities; promoting interaction among different social groups in terms of age, cultural/ethnic background, or gender; serving different social groups in terms of food option and landscape elements; and social accessibility in terms of location and transportation options.
- *Perceptual Attributes:* Human experience; comfort and relaxation; personal space and privacy; safety and security in terms of boundaries, availability of security personnel and cameras; memorable architectural character; signage system; navigation and movement; spatial experience; reflecting local identity; and attractiveness.

Functional Attributes	Social Attributes	Perceptual Attributes
Highly Appropriate    4 3 2 1    Highly Inappropriate	Highly Appropriate    4 3 2 1    Highly Inappropriate	Highly Appropriate    4 3 2 1    Highly Inappropriate
1- To what degree does the space involve different uses?	1- To what degree does the space promote human direct experience while supporting the activities of and interaction among people?	1- To what degree does the space foster users' attachment to it while offering opportunities for an intensive human experience?
2- To what degree could the design of this space be described as environmentally responsive?	2- To what degree could this space be described as being socially inclusive?	2- To what degree does the physical design of space foster the feeling of comfort and relaxation?
3- To what extent is the form of the space appropriate for the existing uses?	3- To what degree does the space encourage the use of several social groups? Age - Cultural/ethnic background - Gender	3- To what degree does the space consider the dimensions of personal space and privacy?
4- To what extent is this space accessible from the street/s?	4- To what degree does this space accommodate diverse social activities?	4- To what degree does the space offer the feeling of safety and security to its users? Boundaries - Security personnel - Security cameras
5- To what degree does this space include multiple gathering nodes?	5- To what extent does this space promote interaction between different social groups? Age - Cultural/ethnic background - Gender	5- To what degree is the architectural character of this space being memorable?
6- To what degree does this space include iconic elements that make it visible from a distance?	6- To what extent do the uses in this space serve different social groups? Food - Landscape elements	6- To what extent do the signs in this space consider different ethnics?
7- To what degree does this space have clear boundaries/edges?	7- To what extent is this space accessible to diverse social groups? Location - Transportation options	7- To what degree is it easy to navigate in this space?
8- How would you rate the quality of architectural and landscape elements in this space?		8- To what degree could the spatial experience in this space be described as being interesting?
9- To what degree does the design of space allow for an environment that users can modify and adapt according to emerging needs and wants?		9- To what degree does the architectural character of this space reflect the identity of Doha?
		10- To what degree could this place be described as a major attraction in the city?

**Figure 1:** The Walking Tour tool and its three main criteria (Source: Authors -- after Salama and Azzali, 2015).

Each category involves checklists with a scoring system. Checklists are phrased in the form of questions underlying each category. Questions are designed in a manner that reflects the essence of each attribute. Numerical scores are assigned to the questions to represent the degree of appropriateness using four-points scale where 1 represents highly inappropriate and 4 represents highly appropriate. Scores are averaged and an overall score for each urban space is

then calculated. Concluding observations-based comments together with supporting illustrations are developed, while highlighting positive and negative attributes in each space. In order to ensure objectivity and reliability, students were requested to conduct the assessment individually and collectively.

The second tool was direct observation and behavioural mapping; systematic methods for describing what users of a space actually do there. This is a direct approach that aims at understanding the dynamics of people and their interaction with the urban environment; it views people as 'objects' by recording their periodic behaviour. Valuable information can be obtained when behaviour is systematically recorded.<sup>20</sup> Unplanned observation may result in inadequate findings that may reveal only what seems to be already obvious. Systematic observation of behaviour involves four aspects: people, activities, setting or space and timing. In this research, a combined unobtrusive mapping technique, which integrates 'place-centred' mapping and 'individual-centred' mapping, is used. Place-centred mapping aims at observing actions in a particular setting or portion of a public space; these are recorded on floor plans, maps or diagrams. Individual-centred mapping records the tasks, activities, and movements of people throughout the investigated space: it represents a systematic learning about a particular group of individuals whose activities are distributed throughout a specific period of time.<sup>21</sup> The studies aimed at the documentation of different migrant communities behaviours within different lived urban spaces in the Al Asmakh district. A number of criteria were examined to distinguish between public spaces in street corners and along streets and to understand periodic behaviour during week days and weekends as well as in afternoons and evenings in order to detect key characteristics about the dialectics of migrant communities in relation to their environment.

#### **4. THE AL ASMAKH DISTRICT**

The Al Asmakh district is part of the traditional settlement area built before the oil production commenced during the late 1930s.<sup>22</sup> The district covers an area of approximately 30 hectares and it was originally used as a residential area encompassing a number of traditional neighbourhoods, known as *fereej*. The vernacular built environment was a direct expression of the local climate and culture. The small port and the main market, known as Souq Waqif (the standing market), were easily accessible for all inhabitants leading to a distinctive main road structure, which was defined by the general wind direction to enable the natural cooling of the district.<sup>23</sup> The building clusters were formed by courtyard houses in various sizes expressing the traditional emphasis on privacy as well as the need to use land along the coast as efficient as possible to enable access to the few water sources along the dry riverbed (Figure 2).

Due to the emerging pearl trade, which has led to the first phase of migration at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Doha has witnessed a rather early diversification of its population.<sup>24</sup> Merchant families from India and Iran as well as East-African slaves led to various social groups living in segregated areas. This first migrant generation was granted the Qatari nationality once Qatar declared independence in 1971.<sup>25</sup> The main transformation process however was initiated by the oil production, which began in the 1940s and led to a rigid and extensive modernisation period.<sup>26</sup> The first modern infrastructural networks were planned by Western consultants and built by South-Asian labourers. The first schools were established and teachers from North Africa and the Levant settled in Doha.<sup>27</sup> The rapid

urbanisation led to the end of desert and nomad communities while the rise of Doha as a capital city instigated a concentration of all major infrastructural developments in the new capital.



Figure 2: The dense built structure of the historic Al Asmakh District  
(Source: Courtesy of MMUP-Ministry of Municipality and Urban Planning).

The move of the local population to newly built suburban districts, which offered the best infrastructural supply and the ability to use imported cars as the desired mode of transportation as well as a highly increased living urban area per person, led to the subsequent move of migrants to the traditional neighbourhoods, such as Al Asmakh. In many areas, the traditional courtyard buildings were replaced by multi-story apartment buildings as well as one-story commercial developments.<sup>28</sup> The first zoning efforts inhibited the spread of commercial land-use, which has only been permitted along the main road grid.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, the inner district's residential layout was mainly preserved. The limited access by car also prevented higher urban densities and thus a substantial part of historic buildings was not replaced during the various phases of modernisation. The lack of investment however led to a state of continuous deterioration.

Since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new development vision was introduced in various realms to transform Doha into a regional hub city.<sup>30</sup> Large-scale public investments led to rapid urban growth and thus new migration patterns. While the construction boom caused the move of significant numbers of construction workers from South-Asia, the real-estate associated services and the newly emerging economies led to the arrival of new migrant groups

with medium to high income from different parts of the world. These new potential tenants led to a rather new phenomenon, the initiative of establishing housing for higher income groups in the city core.

The first development step to revitalise the traditional core of the city was the reconstruction of the Souq Waqif in 2004, which was opened in 2006. The well-received project led to a new leisure and tourism centre and thus a rediscovery of central urban areas as key urban spaces representing Doha and its origins. The next step was the launch of the Msheireb project, which has been developed on more than 30 hectares of land in the North of the Al Asmakh district (Figure 3). In order to develop a large-scale mixed-use project with state-of-the-art infrastructure, the entire historic building substance as well as the previous road grid were demolished.<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, all former residents had to move to other districts and the long-term evolution of the Msheireb district, as a representative of traditional neighbourhoods and their migrant communities, was lost.

In recent years, various initiatives have been launched to redevelop the Al Asmakh district. While the Msheireb approach was followed in many aspects due to the introduction of large-scale master plans, a certain level of preservation initiatives was integrated. Nevertheless, the future upgrading of the district will inevitably lead to the move of migrant communities due to the expected rise of rental prices in central and well accessible areas.<sup>32</sup> Due to the narrow streets and the complex land ownership by a large number of landlords most inner district areas of the Al Asmakh district have however not been replaced yet by modern developments and a large amount of historic residential buildings can still be found. The lack of modern infrastructure in combination with the need of low-income labourers to find affordable housing is now leading to further deterioration.



Figure 3: The Al Asmakh district and the surrounding sites of mega projects in the historic core (Source: Authors based on Google Earth).

The Wadi Msheireb Street in the North has become an important investment focus due to its role as the main access urban artery to large development sites, such as Souq Waqif and the emerging Msheireb project. The Al Asmakh Street is another key access road since it links the A-Ring Road with the historic core. Abdullah Bin Thani Street is the main inner access road separating the district in two main areas. Due to the concentration of services and commercial developments along the main road grid, which provides a certain level of accessibility by car, the inner residential areas have remained densely built with hardly any public realm.

According to the Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 4,128 inhabitants are currently residing in the Al Asmakh district, of which almost 94% are male.<sup>33</sup> In total, there are 264 buildings, of which 251 are currently used. Due to the fact that there are only 432 apartments/units, there is a high occupancy rate per housing unit and migrants usually share accommodation. The high urban density and the lack of living area per resident have led to a rather extensive use of the urban space/outdoors. The low income of residents and the lack of higher income groups visiting the area have resulted in that integrated commercial services are reduced to minimum needs and demands, such as barber shops, small cafes or restaurants. The resulting economic activities have thus led to very particular spatial conditions and a strong differentiation between main roads and back-sided inner district areas.

## **5. ATTRIBUTES OF THE AL ASMAKH URBAN ENVIRONMENT**

The application of the 'Walking Tour' assessment procedure reveals key characteristics relevant to the functional, social and perceptual attributes of the urban environment in the district. The functional attributes of key areas within the district included the analysis of land-use integration in the two streets: Wadi Msheireb Street and Al Asmakh Street (Figure 4). In both cases, the land-use integration can be regarded as sufficient due to the earlier zoning plans permitting mixed-use developments along all main access roads and establishing the integration of basic services and commercial activities. While the general accessibility to the key areas along the main road grid can be seen as rather high, there are no iconic landmarks structuring the corridors and leading to an enhanced orientation. Although there are various possible gathering points along both main roads, the general quality of the built environment and missing landscaping elements have led to a rather limited amount of spaces, which can be immediately perceived as potential social spaces or areas for leisure activities.

By observing the general backgrounds of users and visitors, social attributes were explored. It can be stated that the district lacks social inclusion and that certain areas are mainly inhabited by particular cultural groups due to the general practice of 'company housing', which has led to large blocks of migrant workers with the same country of origin. As a result, most urban spaces are used by similar age groups from the same cultural backgrounds. Due to the fact that a large percentage of the migrant community only resides a limited period of time in Qatar based on short-term contracts, language barriers have a direct impact on spatial practice and certain places have become the main meeting points for particular migrant groups. The lack of parks, sport grounds and sitting areas has however led to a very limited number of social activities, which are mainly reduced to exchanging news, trading, visiting barber shops, drinking tea as well as gathering around mosques after prayer times. In spite of the proximity to main tourist centres, such as Souq Waqif, hardly any tourists can be observed in the area. As result of the dominance of the male population in the area, a very small number of women and children can be observed. Both roads and their public

realm are only used as transitional spaces between homes and shops, though various groups appropriate key areas for social use.

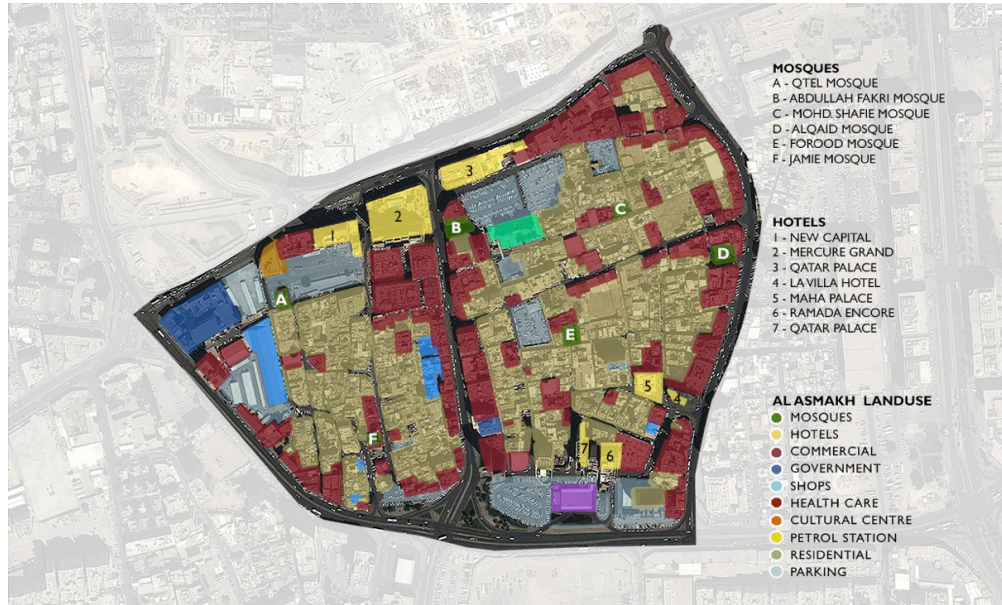


Figure 4: Land use map of the Al Asmakh district (Source: Authors).

The examination of the perceptual attributes included the degree to which urban spaces foster the users' attachment to them while offering opportunities for an intensive human experience. Due to the state of deterioration and general lack of landscaping as well as landmarks, most urban spaces can hardly be assessed as attractive environments fostering high levels of interaction and thus identification process between residents and their surroundings. A main deficit in this regard is the general lack of urban spaces generating a certain degree of comfort and relaxation by being less exposed to traffic and by being defined by certain design elements. While boundaries between more private residential and public areas along the two streets are defined to a certain extent, the general perception of urban safety suffers from hardly observed spaces within narrow side roads. Yet, the greatest potential can be found in areas, where historic buildings have remained.

By and large, the overall scoring resulting from the application of the 'Walking Tour' assessment procedure reveals a high degree of inappropriateness in both streets (Table 1). However, while social attributes in the two streets have scored lowest among the three categories, functional attributes appear to be appropriate as evidenced in the compiled average scores.

Spaces	Functional attributes (Total score/9)	Social attributes (Total score/13)	Perceptual attributes (Total score/12)	Average Score (Total/3)
Wadi Msheireb Street	2.5	1.32	1.65	1.82
Al Asmakh Street	2.4	1.80	2.00	2.07

Table 1: Walking Tour assessment results for Wadi Msheireb Street and Al Asmakh Street (Source: Authors).

## 6. DYNAMICS OF ENGAGING WITH THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

The movement and the social interaction behaviour of migrant communities was analysed in key sites along the two streets during weekdays as well as weekends and during afternoons and evenings. The sites were carefully chosen as a result of the previous ‘Walking Tour’ and include both typical public thoroughfares as well as street corners offering small squares as public spaces. During weekday afternoons, it can be observed that there is a certain tendency that small groups are gathering in certain spots waiting for their mates as well as for transportation pick up. These groups are typically male South-Asian labourers, who need to wait in certain areas in order to look for job opportunities. In general, it can be observed that there is a higher concentration of movements along the main roads due to commercial activities. There have hardly been any reported tourist activities in spite of the proximity of various hotels and only very few locals, who mainly visit the area for certain shops and to look after their properties, have been observed. Women and children can hardly be seen along the two streets, which is a clear expression of a family-friendly environment in the district itself (Figures 5, 6, 7).

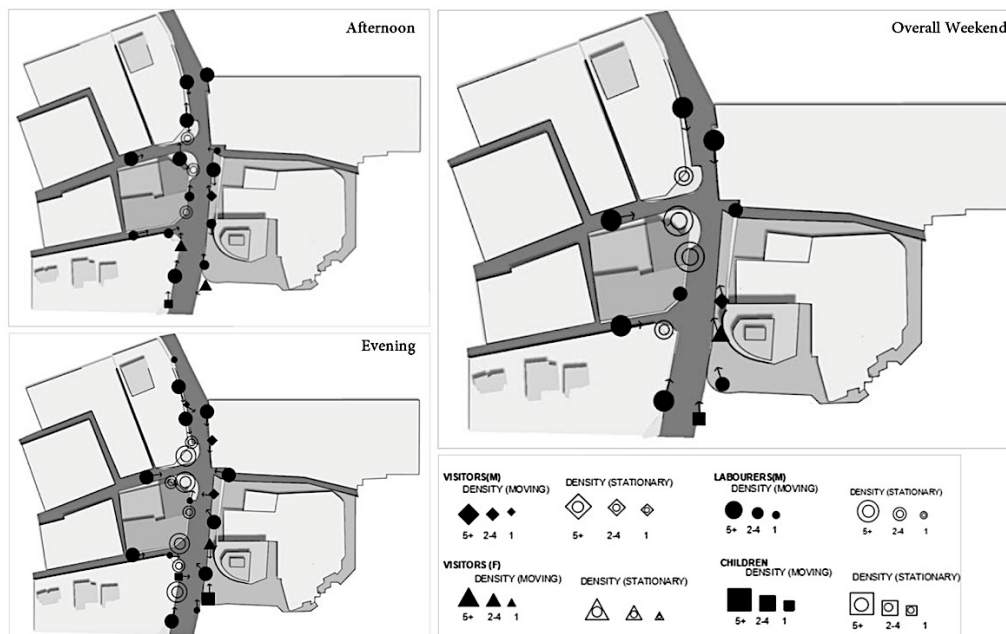


Figure 5: Behavioural mapping of a public thoroughfare during weekends (Source: Authors).

Towards the evenings the flow of people increases from different directions. Larger groups join for social interaction after their prayers in mosques. Due to limited living areas in residences, which are mainly used for sleeping, most labourers have adopted and appropriated their urban surroundings as an important space to socialise and to relax in spite of all spatial deficits. The proximity of the Msheireb construction sites has also resulted in crowds of construction workers waiting for their transportation during the evenings of the weekdays. Due to the lack of any purchasing power of this, social group shops along the main commercial roads hardly benefit from the new visitors. Their gathering in large groups has furthermore led to congested areas preventing efficient pedestrian movement and contributing to the particular circumstance of these urban spaces as neglected back-sided areas of the new mega projects along the coast. These boundaries between areas inviting all cultural and income groups are particularly

visible during evenings, when labourers come home to rest after a long day of work escaping in street corners to socialise with friends and acquaintances.



Figure 6: Spatial practice of migrants in Wadi Msheireb Street (Source: Authors).

In addition to weekday evenings, the most social interaction was observed on weekends. The lack of street furniture led to informal sitting groups on walkways and on stops across shop fronts as well as the remarkable phenomenon of bringing own furniture to the outdoors, particularly in the case of older men in proximity to their businesses. This led to distinctive sitting arrangements rooted in the direct interaction and spatial practice of people. Furthermore, male labourers have been frequently observed to rest and sleep in corners creating a socially problematic atmosphere of a homeless and stranded community. At the same time, the weekends represent the qualities of a highly integrated residential district with mixed land uses in Doha. Various commercial activities can be observed, such as trading goods along the street and frequent visits of small cold stores. The large number of low-income guest workers has led to its own spatial economic setting of rather evenly distributed and well accessible services for everyday needs, which has led to a rather dynamic market, which is visible in various forms of human interaction during leisure periods.



Figure 7: Spatial practice of migrants in Al Asmagh Street (Source: Authors).

## 7. CONCLUSION -- PROJECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The exploration of the socio-spatial practice of migrant communities in the traditional core of Doha provides an excellent opportunity for students to learn about the history and profile of the city while understanding the unique particularities of issues relevant to environment-behaviour studies and the everyday urban environment including social interaction, appropriation, flexibility and adaptability. Nonetheless, the analysis and discussions offer important insights into planning and development efforts. Due to the fact that labourers, who are the large majority of residents in the Al Asmakh district, have limited access to shopping malls and high profile public spaces, the neighbourhood's surroundings have thus become the main public realm of any interaction and thus individual and collective spatial experience. The high concentration of social interaction during weekends has led to the survival of many small businesses and services accommodating various cultural groups from South-Asia based on the rather high level of land-use integration and low rental rates in deteriorating buildings. The overcrowded area and the resulting lack of private spaces have however transformed the Al Asmakh district into a highly conflicted urban space. While in the past, key areas, such as Souq Najada, were important nodal points for social interaction of residents in a very suitable public environment,<sup>34</sup> the rising investment interests have led to a gradual replacement of these areas by launching hotels and other commercial developments to benefit from the proximity to Souq Waqif and the Corniche promenade.

In essence, two opposed urban spaces are currently facing each other, which can be particularly observed in the case of the Al Asmakh district. While on the one hand, new mega projects generate globalised images appealing to investors and tourists, the bordering historic districts have first become a place of refuge for a large figure of labourers migrating to Qatar during a short period of time leading to highly overcrowded, informal and fragmented urban spatial conditions. In most recent years, these districts themselves have become objects of investment interests leading to a new era of potential gentrification in Doha's central areas and a subsequent move of migrant communities from areas they managed to spatially appropriate for their needs and wants.

The Msheireb development site can thus be seen as the clear antithesis to the neighbouring Al Asmakh district and all remaining historic urban spaces in downtown areas.<sup>35</sup> The new top-down master planned project proposed for the redevelopment of the Al Asmakh will create state-of-the-art urban environments with high rental prices and for social groups whose profiles will highly differ from those of previous residents (Figure 8).

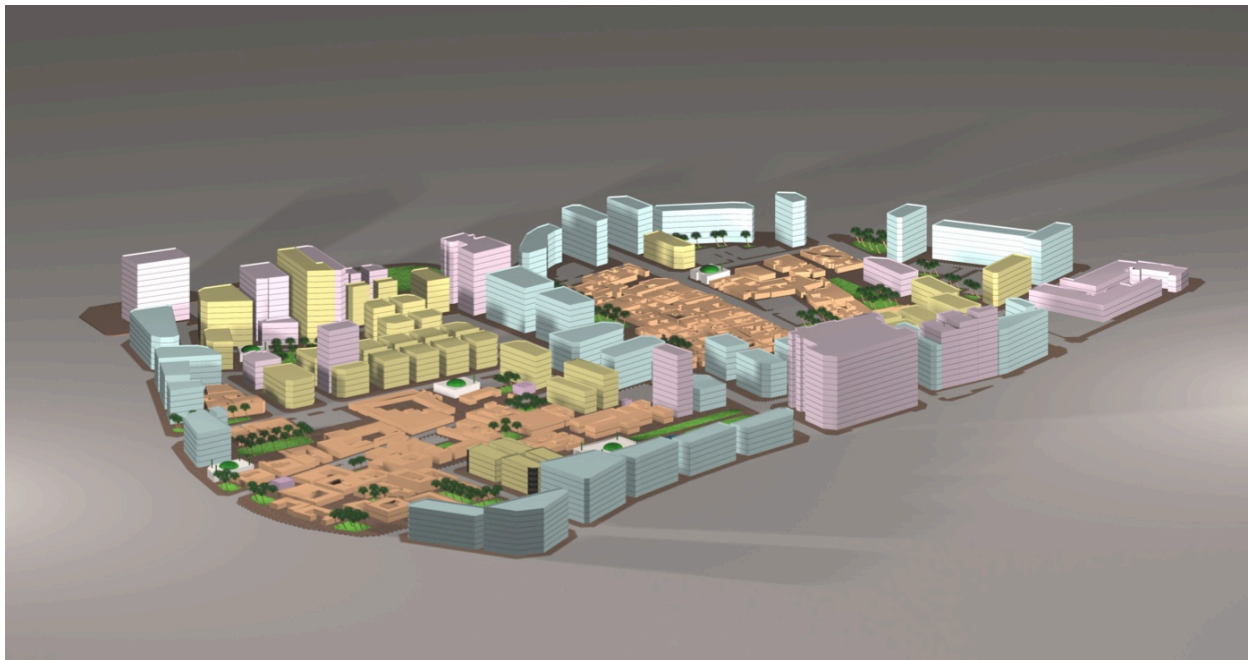


Figure 8: Preliminary proposed master plan for the redevelopment of the Al Asmakh District (Source: Authors).

While the proposal considers the preservation of key traditional houses, it may result in eliminating an important chapter of the city's history. It is anticipated that, when higher income groups move into the newly developed project, they will hardly interact with neighbouring districts, if no major public interventions were created to support interaction and safety. Therefore, the move of new social groups to central areas has to be seen as a major opportunity to foster social interaction and to strengthen the small local businesses. This can however only be achieved with sensitive and gradual upgrading processes and a high level of integrated affordable housing for lower income groups based on both public investment and efficient legal interventions.

The major planning challenge of creating sustainable city centres in Gulf cities based on social inclusion rather than a fragmented agglomeration of segregated communities is rooted in the inner investment dynamics,

which have led to a rapid increase of land prices in central areas and thus a continuous tension between speculators keeping their land and deteriorating properties on the one hand and new government-supported project initiatives targeting short-term gains on the other. New planning regulations have thus faced an increasing struggle to accommodate the high demands of enhanced built densities and the reality of missing infrastructural capacities on the ground. The fragmented development of large-scale projects has contributed to a scattered urban environment lacking spatial cohesion and integration. The newly launched waterfront developments along the historic centres have thus triggered a rather complex situation between establishing new spatial realities during a short period of time by a small number of mega projects and the spatial results of decades of urban development driven by the general segregation between the residential areas for migrants and locals.

The previous low standard of infrastructure, the initial lack of accessibility due to narrow roads and the high demand for migrant housing have early defined historic cores of Gulf cities as the main residential areas for migrants. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the central districts have therefore accommodated a significant share of migrant labourers, which has led to urban spatial conditions reflecting various needs as well as the limited purchasing power and thus restricted economic growth thereby leading to a gradual deterioration of the built environment. The rapid replacement of traditional areas will inevitably lead to new mass housing areas in the urban periphery, which will hardly accommodate the high diversity of needs of migrant communities for affordable price tags. The moved communities will find themselves in a challenging newly built environment missing the long-term attachment, spatial appropriation and adaptation of previous generations of migrants in Gulf cities. While the spatial conditions and deteriorating buildings in districts, such as Al Asmakh, have permitted a certain level of informal adaptation of urban spaces, the newly developed housing projects and their surroundings on the peripheries and industrial areas hardly enable the individual spatial appropriation of migrant groups.

Thus, contemporary urban planning in the Gulf region has to respond to the emerging conflicting perceptions and values in historic centres, which are being envisioned and planned as mixed-use downtowns and new main hubs for services. The urban space diversity is however highly dependent on social inclusion and in turn the general invitation of all social groups to interact. The mediation between short-term investment interests and long-term community-driven development patterns is particularly challenging in the Gulf region due to the evident contrast between the small minority of locals and the large majority of guest workers with limited prospects to stay long-term. Urban spaces are consequently a direct expression of the inner problem of today's Gulf cities as being the result of large-scale investments and top-down strategies with hardly any demand-driven dynamics on the ground. The gradual replacement of inner city districts will erase the last remaining urban spaces that will become as part of a collective memory rather than actual physical environment.

Urban space diversity is seen worldwide as a precondition to overcome boundaries and it is particularly challenging to establish in fast growing emerging cities.<sup>36</sup> The rapid globalisation of the Gulf region has recently led to various rising conflicts between preserving the local identity and enabling the accommodation of migrant communities according to their needs as well as cultural preferences.<sup>37</sup> It is emphasised that decision-makers in multicultural cities need a high level of responsiveness and awareness to establish urban spaces attracting instead of alienating the various migrant groups.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, the investment in state-of-the-art public spaces along mixed-use streets can play an important role in establishing more sustainable communities by enhancing the economic

interaction and by initiating a continuous exchange between social groups.<sup>39</sup> While authorities, such as Qatar's General Secretariat of Development Planning (2009), have launched various programs to foster more sustainable communities, the major focus has remained on the native population.<sup>40</sup>

The indecisiveness of officially integrating migrant communities long-term has however led to the spatial reality of segregated parallel worlds. The gentrification of historic city cores via large scale mega projects will only lead to the relocation of the problem of social segregation with potentially more social, economic and environmental risks attached. Many examples worldwide suggest that new settlements along the urban periphery deprive large communities from the essential spatial needs, namely the high level of accessibility and direct contact to higher income groups in order to develop small businesses and thus to enable the opportunities of individual advancement. Subsequently, central districts, such as Al Asmakh in Doha, are key urban spaces to establish and nurture social equity.

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