MODERNISM IN QATAR

Survival through reuse

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Introduction

The heritage industry in the state of Qatar has grown exponentially over the last decade. In fact, heritage preservation now forms part of the 2030 Qatar National Vision, a government framework for economic, cultural, and social development drafted in 2008. In this document, the need for heritage preservation is balanced against the need for progress in Qatar, which includes the more familiar goals of economic development and sustainability.¹ A concern with the preservation of cultural heritage was articulated as early as 1980 when the administration of tourism and antiquity at the Ministry of Information of Qatar issued the Law on Antiquities No. 2 for the year 1980.² In line with a series of existing legal edicts and in consultation with the Majlis Al-Shura (consultative assembly), then Emir of Qatar Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani (ruled 1995–2013) decreed that

...any item inherited from past civilizations or generations that has been found or excavated is regarded as antiquity. It could be a building or a passed-on knowledge of science, arts, literature, moral values or beliefs, daily life or public events and otherwise that pre-dates 40 years or more that holds artistic or historical value.³

Therefore, “antiquity” and, by association, ‘heritage value’ was at the time defined chronologically as having the temporal limit of the year 1940. This window of time that defined the heritage value of tangible and intangible heritage objects and practices embraced, at the time, any surviving traditional (pre-modern) architecture but did not necessarily address the arrival of modernist styles as an architectural period that contained potential or actual heritage value. A review of the preservation practices responsible for maintaining the existence of different historical periods across the built landscape of the capital city of Doha today suggests that state policies have placed the architectural remains of the second half of the twentieth century at odds with other heritage preservation agendas in Qatar.

A modernist turn in Qatar is, on the one hand, unmistakable: the prominence of the iconic Sheraton Hotel, a 1978 modernist landmark designed by William L. Pereira Associates, has defined since its construction the skyline and the waterfront landscape of Doha. ▲ However, I would argue, its noteworthy presence is not an indication of the value placed on modernism in the heritage preservation practices of Qatar. While the portfolio of cultural heritage preservation efforts in this country since the 1980s ruling is diverse, it shows some marked tendencies that help bring clarity to a neglect for the heritage of the second half of the twentieth century. For example, historic preservation projects focus on the conservation and promotion of pre-oil sites and aesthetics more than any other historical period for Qatar. Overall, archaeological

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and heritage preservation efforts here have followed a trajectory that emphasizes more local or regional rather than global heritage constructs. The onus of the work remains on a preservation of heritage places that buttress the earlier phases and narratives of nation-building. The establishment of the first National Museum and accompanying concerns with heritage preservation in the 1970s was followed by systematic preservation of sites of historical-political significance such as Barzan Towers and Al-Zubarah Fort and of socio-historical significance such as Souq Waqif and Al-Wakrah Village and Souk. In addition, the emergence of a national heritage discourse is marked by the preparatory archaeological and museological work that supports the nomination of Al-Zubarah – an eighteenth-century pearling town – to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2013. This trend is followed, more recently, with the reopening of the National Museum as part of a broad network of thematic museums across the city. The heritage-making narratives in these projects follow similar principles of preservation of historic structures that are uniquely local and locally coherent: while they do not necessarily align with Western practices of preservation in their approach to material authenticity and integrity, they nonetheless capture a vernacular language and thus participate in the crafting of a heritage narrative and visual language. Under the patronage of two state institutions, Qatar Museums (QM) and the Private Engineering Office of the Emir (PEO), these efforts create the cultural heritage assemblage that defines an official visual and discursive heritage sensibility in this country.

In this chapter, I consider that an emphasis on pre-oil traditional architectural styles in the preservation efforts of Qatar has happened at the expense of a specific exclusion in this assemblage that corresponds to a broad ‘modernist’ period. The most characteristic of these practices amongst the projects listed above is the famed reconstruction of Souq Waqif (2004–2007). Reimagined as a pre-modern urban centre that largely erases traces of post-1940s use and reuse, it stands as a dramatic case of selective restoration that favours pre-oil aesthetics, erasing latter periods from its architectural fabric. Accordingly, the period of cultural production not preserved, in this case, corresponds with a period not clearly articulated as a matter of concern in modern preservation policy. This temporal imprecision that falls through the cracks of heritage policy is echoed in the way in which I refer to a ‘modernist’ period and aesthetic throughout this chapter. I do not seek to define the modernist turn in strict architectural or art historical terms except through the views of the interlocutors themselves, that is, experts who are concerned with the erasure of architectural features from the very broad period that spans the 1920s to the 1980s. This discussion stems from a five-year ethnographic project that examines the emergence of heritage preservation instruments in contemporary Qatar, bringing attention

to preservation practices that may not invoke famous architectural authors or visible contemporary patron institutions yet contribute to a cultural heritage landscape nonetheless. These narratives fall under practices of reuse: that is, continuity or revival of a historic structure for contemporary purposes and uses that is not carried out in accordance with any defined preservation standard. In examining these narratives and practices, I invoke various intersecting discourses: the establishment of state-sponsored attitudes towards modernization in general; imported value-systems brought about by projects of urban development and their experts; and local agency and innovation that remix all of the above. This work does not seek to construct an overarching and total narrative that justifies the direction and appreciation of modernism in this country but rather aims to highlight the distinction between formal and informal ways in which a concern for specific and idealized pasts is carried out independently of national initiatives.

Heritage revivals

Despite constituting the core of heritage preservation strategies, mobilizing pre-oil traditional architectural languages in restoration projects has received mixed reviews in Qatar, which may suggest a general discomfort with the artificiality of excluding the better part of the twentieth-century modernizing experience. For example, some refer to the restored Barzan Towers as 'Barzan 2008', highlighting the year of its rebirth as a heritage site through restoration and, in doing so, somewhat mocking its authentic origins in a deeper past. Similarly, Souq Waqif has been described quite openly as a "Disney version of Qatar's past",⁴ despite having been shortlisted for the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2010 for constituting a "unique architectural revival".⁵ There are different degrees of acceptance between expert and public circles when it comes to restoration and reuse practices such as these ones. In the case of Souq Waqif, efforts to homogenize a pre-oil 'sense of place' involved the removal of post-oil architectural additions and features such as bulky air conditioning units alongside the elimination of entire additions and decorative features that correspond to less desirable historical periods. This type of selective practice of preservation is not unique to Qatar as heritage preservation discourse generally promotes single-period 'heritagization'. It is not difficult to conclude that a whole generational experience of the built landscape has been erased, drawing criticism from Qatari and non-Qatari residents alike who have experienced the authenticity of a place as a palimpsest of features and life-histories that accompany the fast-growing nation.

At the other end of the chronological spectrum, and taking a gigantic leap in the historical timeline of Qatar, traditional architectural languages are carried forward in the form of ultra-modern works of infrastructure designed to reflect the production

fig.1 Fire Station, Civil Defense Building before the recent rehabilitation works that transformed it into a cultural hub, Doha, Qatar (Photo: Arab Engineering Bureau, 2011. Reuse not permitted).

of heritage of the country as a continuous process. For example, the new metro stations inaugurated across Doha in 2019–2020 were designed as vaulted spaces to reflect traditional Bedouin tents. Supporting the mobilization of heritage languages across temporal boundaries, Qatari architect Ibrahim Jaidah, CEO and chief architect at Arab Engineering Bureau, has advocated for a new architectural movement which combines the far-reaching influences of Islamic art with modern styles. His firm is responsible for the realization of several landmark structures in the modern skyline of Doha, such as the Kempinski Residences and Suites tower (completed in 2009), which reflects an exploration of scale, shape, and proportion of the traditional “wind tower”.⁶ An admirer of the work of modernist British architect John Harris who designed the State Hospital of Doha in 1952 and then moved on to design the master plan of Dubai, Jaidah also supports an architectural vocabulary that brings together climatic and environmental concerns, traditional forms, and economic and social needs.

But Ibrahim Jaidah’s legacy is more far reaching than the contributions he has made to the new skyline of Doha. He is co-author of *The History of Qatari Architecture: From 1800 to 1950*,⁷ a compendium that defines a unique visual culture and architectural history for Qatar. He has also contributed to the emerging discussion on the value of modernism in the built landscape of Qatar in various ways. At a public panel that accompanied the opening of the National Museum of Qatar in 2019 (but held at the Qatar National Library), titled *Architecture as a Face of a Nation*,⁸ he called attention to the loss of architecture of modernism, starting with structures from the 1920s, and all the way through the 50s, 60s, and 70s. While he adds that demolition of these types of architectural remains has dramatically decreased in recent times, he concludes that “we [Qataris] tend to forget our early modern history”. A few years before, giving a lecture in the Georgetown School of Foreign Service in Qatar in September 2016, Jaidah called for a more careful consideration of what it means to think in traditional or vernacular terms, adding that “it doesn’t have to be a mud house to become history”. Recognizing the selective marginalization of some styles in the preservation efforts of Qatar, Jaidah was also involved in the documentation of the remains of an ‘Arabian Deco’ (what British architect Tim Makower calls the ‘Doha Deco’) in anticipation of large-scale demolition that was carried out at the Msheireb area. He intends to highlight its significance and relationship to Art Deco expressions across the Middle East in a future publication. In addition, his advocacy has been reflected in his firm’s restoration work of the former Civil Defence Building with its iconic honeycomb façade, now renovated and converted into the Fire Station: a complex of 24 artists’ studios, a gallery, and a café that hosts the Qatar Museums Artists-in-Residence Program. ●

Built in 1982, the building was vacated in 2012 in order to make

fig.1

way for its preservation and conservation under the patronage of Qatar Museums. This project joins other efforts at upkeep and ensuring the continuous use of other structures within this broad but neglected period of architectural expression: the old Ministry of Education, Marmar Palace, the Old Emiri Diwan, and various mosques across Qatar.

Yet, considering both formal preservation projects and more informal reuse practices, the survival of modernist architecture in the contemporary landscape of Doha and across the countryside of Qatar is rare. Besides the much-publicized project of refurbishment of the Fire Station building that resulted in a thriving centre for the arts, many of these practices of reuse happen more casually, with an emphasis on function and practicality rather than on the value of preserving modernist aesthetics. One could even say this accidental act of safeguarding is hidden in plain sight without the publicity afforded by contemporary modes of cultural production attached to the heritagization of traditional pre-oil architecture. These projects of accidental preservation are found primarily in residential areas of the city and involve the repurposing of modernist residential structures for new commercial uses in areas of Doha that were once residential but have been transformed into mixed residential-commercial thoroughways. In this way, much of the modernist architecture that survives in some way across the city of Doha has survived driven by profit, that is, repurposed and often significantly altered while avoiding the cost of demolition and rebuilding, as Jaidah points out. As such, they remain unincorporated to a preservation sensitivity for Qatar. For example and notably, businesses across the *fareej* (neighbourhood) Al-Sadd reuse or, rather, continue to use modernist-style residential villas either as actual residences or transformed into cafés and restaurants. The practicality of reuse/continuity for villas dating to the 1970s and 1980s here is concurrent to an accelerated process of demolition across this fareej in order to make way for high-density, mid-rise residential structures that accommodate expat workers. An informal and unregulated preservation trend, therefore, is the natural result of a financial rationale and practical appreciation for existing structures, enabled by the transformation of residential-to-mixed use or commercial zoning in this part of the city.

However, I would like to draw attention to an intentional practice of reuse and beautification that preserves and celebrates modernist features in two specific buildings in the neighbourhood of Al-Sadd around the year 2015: the opening of a Caribou Coffee shop on C-Ring Road and the relocation of Lo Spaghetti restaurant to a villa on Al-Kinana Street in Al-Sadd. ● Aerial photography of Doha during the 1970s shows that these structures were built sometime between 1971 and 1977, a time when Doha expanded outward, towards and past the annular road called C-Ring (or, its literal translation, Third Ring Road). The Caribou Coffee shop now

fig.2/3

Façade of Caribou Coffee on C-Ring, Al-Sadd, Doha, Qatar (Photo: Trinidad Rico, 2019).

fig.2

occupies an adapted residential structure in a one-of-a-kind compound of different modernist buildings. Initially, its reuse as a café stood out for maintaining its smaller original footprint and arcaded windows, but these have now been replaced and the footprint expanded, making it less recognizable as a modernist structure over time. The other structures in the compound of which it was once part have also undergone dramatic transformations, erasing their original unique features. Meanwhile, Lo Spaghetti has been built in a single-storey villa (*bayt shaabi*), part of a cluster of villas in a former gated community in Al-Sadd. Before the restaurant, the building had already been transformed into a commercial structure that maintained its open floor plan and landscaping similar to its original design. However, the Italian owners of the restaurant specifically sought a modernist villa that could be adapted to their needs, confirming an interest in maintaining and enhancing its remaining modernist features, including the outdoor dimensions. One of the features of this villa that adds to its authenticity is the surrounding cluster of original villas just like this one, most of which are in a visible state of decay except for the quaint Green Door – an antique, architectural salvage, and trinket store housed in one of the residential villas nearby. Beyond the intimacy of these clusters of contemporaneous structures, the city of Doha advances with much taller and overwhelming architecture that would take away from maintaining the modernist feel of these particular places, their façades, and surrounding landscaping.

fig.3

Lo Spaghetti on Al-Kinana Street, Al-Sadd, Doha, Qatar (Photo: Trinidad Rico, 2019).

Heritage languages in flux

Emerging heritage preservation languages in Qatar can, therefore, be observed and documented in both institutional/formal and non-institutional/informal ways. But the informal way in which heritage languages are preserved in urban development *not* intended to carry forward a heritage preservation agenda is difficult to capture. I would argue that this is due to two factors in Qatar: a heritage preservation expertise concerned exclusively with institutional/formal cultural agendas and a relative absence of a civil society to create a complementary narrative of heritage value along less represented heritage languages. Therefore, there is potential for a study of expanded heritage languages with a broader institutional agenda that could incorporate practices of reuse into practices of heritage preservation.

As an example of observing heritage as a potential rather than an actual place, I refer to my first fieldwork impressions arriving in the state of Qatar in the middle of the summer of 2011, a preliminary look into the construction of Qatari heritage assemblages on both formal and informal scales. On the one hand, the urban landscape at the time was marked by an ongoing process through which apparently abandoned or neglected landscapes were being restored and rebuilt to take their rightful place in a coherent cultural heritage narrative, for example, the 'ruins' of the Umm Salal Mohammed historic farm outside of Doha were undergoing the early stages of restoration which appeared to include a

Stored remnants of a modernist city, Industrial City, Qatar (Photo: Trinidad Rico, 2012).

fig.4

removal of modernist features. But, less visibly, a heritage narrative was waiting to be forged in Industrial City – a location outside of the capital city comprised of body shops and mechanics, wholesale stores, storage facilities, and housing for a large number of migrant workers. In this unglamorous and functional urban environment unrelated to the heritage renaissance of Qatar, in a giant storage room, rested disassembled remains of the fareej Msheireb, now a 31-hectare, downtown redevelopment project adjacent to Souq Waqif that was, at the time, already undergoing a dramatic urban renewal. Msheireb is also the name of the subsidiary of Qatar Foundation that carried out the redevelopment of this neighbourhood – Msheireb Properties. Originally called Dohaland, then the Heart of Doha, and finally Msheireb Downtown Doha, the project involved large-scale demolition of most of the existing urban fabric, but it preserved most of its original layout (e.g. the original ‘electricity street’) as well as few original structures. Four historic buildings were spared from demolition, to be incorporated into the new master plan in situ: the Radwani, Mohammed Bin Jassim, Bin Jelmoood, and Company Houses. The movable features of the old neighbourhood after it had been vacated had not been entirely destroyed; rather, many had been redistributed and put away. What was once part of the urban landscape, ornamentation, and, generally speaking, visual culture of this area of the city was represented by the contents of this storage facility: wooden and metal doors, light fixtures, *mashrabiyya*-style coverings, decorative fences, shop signage, bundles of denchel (also called chendel) wood

fig.4

beams, bits of masonry, columns, entire arches and walls, old TV units, mannequins, and so on. These fragments once constituted the urban fabric and last chapter of the life-history of Msheireb and thus represent different historical periods of Qatar up until the eve of the demolition. ● After this transformation, the neighbourhood was reborn as a modern sustainable city, deploying a new vernacular architectural language⁹ that centres on a pre-modernist, cross-temporal citation instead.

These stored objects were not simply disposed of in a storage facility: some of these fragments were labelled, carefully supported, and wrapped in plastic film while others were collected by type: wood with wood, doors with doors, shop fittings with shop fittings – a collapsed stratigraphy. The haphazard collection of fragments was, in fact, curated by members of the Echo Memory Project, or *Sadaa thakerat al-makan*, an artist-led initiative that collected, documented, and safeguarded found objects. It was launched in 2009 by Issa Al-Mohannadi, then CEO of Msheireb Properties, in collaboration with the Architectural Language Advisor for Msheireb, Tim Makower, and two London-based artists. Accompanying the demolition and later redevelopment of Msheireb, this initiative aimed to provide an archive of the material culture of the area which could be eventually used as a foundation for the generation of new artwork for Msheireb once it (re)opened. This vision was never realized, for Msheireb is currently being populated by public art unrelated to its past materiality. The Echo Memory Project set up its base at the Msheireb Arts Centre (MAC), located in the Al-Asmakh neighbourhood, adjacent to the bustling construction site that Msheireb has been for the larger part of the last decade. The MAC occupies a very distinct pale green modernist building in the middle of the Al-Asmakh area: a former school building from the 1950s (the old Girls' School, Al-Wassad), abandoned in 2005 and renovated by Msheireb properties to host some of these collections. An estimated 3,000 to 4,000 objects had been gathered as part of this project, many of which were displayed and stored at MAC while others remained in the aforementioned, oversized storage facility in Industrial City.¹⁰ According to Karen Exell's interpretation of the curatorial decisions that gave rise to this collection, these remnants of the built landscape, which once constructed the façades and sense of place of the bustling streets of Msheireb, held no intrinsic value beyond being intended to support the state agenda of 'Qatarizing' or 'Arabizing' Doha's history through objects that represented a Qatari past. However, I would argue instead, decisions to build this unusual historical archive for Qatar that puts emphasis on a modernist aesthetic were carried out by the individuals in the curatorial team, comprised of various nationalities and artistic agendas not necessarily in alignment with a 'Qatarizing' agenda as she speculates. The collection, therefore, was valorized through a specific lens in the

process of its formation. Furthermore, the transformation of this relatively raw assortment of portable objects into the displays that can be seen at the museums today was approved by the CEO and the Director of Museums of Msheireb. In her work, Exell further argues that “the only genuine Qatari elements were the architectural fragments, which reflected an earlier Qatari architectural aesthetic dating to the period when more affluent settled lifestyles were possible following the discovery of oil in 1939”.¹¹

Overall, this assessment of what is and is not genuine narrows down authenticity to an imagined undisturbed Qatari aesthetic, detached from the cosmopolitan cultural contact that defines the history of the region, and ignores the ability of a Qatari audience to appreciate and experience its own cosmopolitan engagement with this type of material culture. In preventing Qataris from channeling their experience of the modernist turn (as well as a more general modernization) through these objects, such an assessment demonstrates the way in which foreign expertise intervenes to designate what is and what is not a genuine Qatari experience, contributing to the marginalization and even erasure of modernism. The reality is also that the remains in question are not easy to attribute to a single architectural period because they represent a palimpsest of design styles over a long period of time. Therefore, establishing their place in a timeline of architectural history to make claims about their ability to represent authenticity is not accurate or useful to advance discussions of indigeneity in the cultural heritage languages and practices of Qatar. Furthermore, archaeologists from the Old Doha project have examined aerial and satellite imagery of Msheireb and indicated that Msheireb proper was not built until 1953, with most of the area filled in during the 1960s and 1970s – firmly constituting a ‘modernist’ urban expansion. But the footprint of what today is called Msheireb includes other districts (fareej Mohammed bin Jassim and a western extension of Jasra that includes the current Radwani and Company heritage houses), allowing the timeline of construction of this district to be pushed to an even earlier date.¹² Stylistically, and stratigraphically, most of these structures fall into a palimpsest of styles, making the identification of structures pertaining to different styles and periods challenging. On the one hand, this challenge manifests as a problem of identifying what the transition to early modernism looks like in Qatar. On the other hand, this challenge sets up an interesting framework for examining the preservation of different historical and cultural periods in the history of Qatar. Safeguarding efforts, therefore, can simultaneously preserve pre-oil architecture and aesthetics as well as post-oil additions to the spaces and material culture of the city that may be preserved unintentionally. In this sense, these suspended collections have the potential to represent a continuity and heterogeneity of use by different segments of the population through time, including various phases of modernism.

Eventually, in more recent years, elements of these collections-in-waiting in Industrial City and the MAC made their way to the museum universe of the Msheireb development where new museums display today the curios of modernization itself. The Company House is set in the actual headquarters of Qatar's first oil company, holding objects and stories of oil discovery and exploitation, and featuring narratives of petroleum industry workers who accompanied the process of industrialization that took place in Qatar during the pioneering years of oil exploration. This narrative of progress is kept distinct and physically separate from the cultural and heritage narratives represented by the other three museums projected and already opened in Msheireb, despite the temporal, spatial, and cultural overlap of their respective themes during the course of the twentieth century. The Radwani House is a residential structure built in the 1920s in the traditional courtyard style and located between Al-Jasrah and Msheireb. Today, it has been restored and incorporated into the Msheireb master plan to present a snapshot of traditional Qatari family life before the advent of the oil era and the modern conveniences that it brought about. In contrast, the Mohammed bin Jassim house was built originally by Sheikh Mohammed bin Jassim Al-Thani, son of the founder of modern Qatar. In this restored, traditional courtyard house, the transformation of the urban fabric of Msheireb – and therefore, Doha – is featured through interactive models, archives of the first iconic structures of Qatar, and objects from the Echo Memory Art Project. Finally, the Bin Jelmood House, informally called 'the slavery museum', raises awareness of formerly enslaved people in Qatar, across the Indian Ocean, and the world.

The Msheireb museums are set in buildings that reflect traditional pre-oil architecture, holding pre-oil and post-oil material culture, and restored to be surrounded by cutting-edge architectural design, the "new architectural language ... created to counteract the depletion of Qatar's unique cultural and architectural heritage",¹³ and used "to create buildings of a shared DNA, reviving local heritage and culture through a unified architectural idiom".¹⁴ In this sense, the Msheireb project represents an excellent prototype of the complexity of studying heritage preservation narratives and efforts in Qatar during 2011–2016: it systematically erased pre-modern and modernist architecture to make space for a new architectural fabric that is, ironically, informed by those endangered structures, sprinkled with the restoration and reuse of select pre-oil features. But in the careful exercise of curating the aesthetics and spaces of tradition in the face of modernization, what was lost first and foremost was the landscape of modernization itself, except in the cases in which modernism hitched a ride on the preservation of so-called pre-oil architecture – considering the frequency of transitional styles.¹⁵ An adjacent initiative exemplifies the practical aspects of operationalizing continuous or mixed

periods of occupation into stricter categories used in architectural surveys. The Mapping Old Doha project launched by Qatar Museums aimed to pre-emptively assess heritage value in the fareej immediately bordering Msheireb, Al-Asmakh, and Najada. During the period 2012–2014, this Qatar Museums initiative aimed to record the old urban fabric of these areas comprehensively. Launched by the Restoration Department of Qatar Museums, the emphasis of this initiative appeared to revolve around traditional buildings from the first half of the twentieth century, followed by some attention paid to early modern buildings (mid-1950s to 1970). The survey forms that were used to capture these resources show evidence of a strict architectural periodicity that underpins the initiative, asking surveyors to mark each structure as belonging to one of four categories: “traditional with inner courtyard without arcades”, “traditional with inner courtyard and with arcades”, “early modern”, and “modern”. The volunteers and professionals coordinating this initiative were not given much instruction on how to translate the complex palimpsest of styles into these fixed categories, inevitably resulting in a database that is forcefully periodic – that is, erasing mixed-period occupation and styles.

A ‘negative heritage’ of modernization?

Confronted with such a complex built environment and landscape of expertise, the challenge of encountering modernism and putting it into dialogue with other heritage languages is magnified by heritage preservation policy documents produced so far in Qatar that fail to address the marginalization of early and late modernist aesthetics. Because of this, the study of heritage preservation practices has to rely on the analysis of approaches, debates, and in particular an examination of the allocation of resources that build specific tendencies in the heritage profile of contemporary Qatar. The intentional exclusion of modernism in the growth of heritage assemblages could be interpreted through the lens of ‘negative heritage’, that is, heritage that “becomes the repository of negative memory in the collective imaginary”.¹⁶ Ian Simpson has argued that the disparity in the way in which different pasts are presented across the heritage landscapes of the Gulf is associated with the relative value of the industrial cultures of pearling and of petroleum exploitation measured against each other in heritage discourses.¹⁷ This contrasting attitude, he argues, has been exacerbated by mounting discussions of pollution, environmental damage, and unsustainable consumption that magnifies the different types of livelihoods and puts post-oil lifestyles at odds with modern discourses of progress. Therefore, he observes that, across the GCC, heritage practices and cultural references to natural pearls and pearl-diving thrive due to the social and environmental values, political histories of resource exploitation, and human-environment interactions that they invoke. Meanwhile,

the production of heritage of the oil era – what would be represented in the heritage of modernism – has been actively marginalized as impure. This is also intimately related to the way that pearling is seen as a heritage of citizens while oil exploitation and thereafter is inevitably a heritage that has to navigate an exponential input of migrants.

On the other hand, academic and disciplinary debates on the topic of a heritage of modernization observe complex and perhaps contradictory narratives for the relative value of modernity as it may be reflected in the built landscape. Karen Exell and I have argued prior that the interaction between these two distinct periods in heritage practices does not reflect an opposition but rather an assimilation of modernization into more traditional heritage assemblages.¹⁸ In this argument, we saw heritage preservation in Qatar undergoing conceptual changes since its formal emergence in the 1970s as a reaction and in adaptation to fast-paced economic development and urbanization. Today, I would propose a different argument after a more thorough examination of heritage discourse and practice in Qatar in addition to a much longer period of ethnographic engagement in the region. I would argue instead that the allocation of effort and resources for heritage preservation is not reflective of a clear embrace of modernization. The uneasy management of modernization continues to be obstructed by coexisting legacies that marginalize post-oil architectural appreciation and its incorporation into the fabric of heritage resources in Qatar. Evidently, European expertise dominates heritage preservation efforts in Qatar, not necessarily due to the actual nationality of experts but mostly to the source of this expertise, which continues to be grounded in European knowledge and values.¹⁹

But there are other historical, social, and political processes that need to be further explored and taken into consideration in any discussion of the marginalization of modernism in the heritage assemblage of Qatar: first, I consider Farah Al-Nakib's detailed exploration of different urban planning policies that were instituted throughout the modernization of Kuwait, explaining the way in which Kuwaitis are made to detach from their own urban heritage.²⁰ With the past becoming a hindrance to the modernist planning in Kuwait, she argues, "Reaching the imagined future required the removal of all historical context".²¹ Likewise, I suggest that the modernization of the city of Doha and of the country overall may have required a discursive and affective detachment from pre-modern and modern landscapes during mass relocation away from the old city.²² The land that comprises a neighbourhood like Msheireb was acquired by the state for eventual redevelopment projects, and a transitional use of these structures as rental properties made stewards of migrant workers who occupied them, further detaching these spaces from the discourse of traditional authentic heritage that followed.²³

Al-Jumail Mosque, circa 1940, Al-Jumail, Qatar (Photo: Trinidad Rico, 2016).

fig.5

Second, despite the unquestionable neglect that modernism endures as a style, not only in Doha, but also in the region and beyond,²⁴ there are recent institutional efforts that demonstrate an emerging interest and appreciation for modernism in the expansion of heritage assemblages of Qatar. For example, the heritage preservation of modernist features is implanted in the preservation of mosques across the country, some of which maintain their modernist features. The restoration division of Qatar Museums has identified and documented heritage mosques across the country, with dates of origin ranging from the nineteenth century (extremely few) to the mid-1960s, but most of these structures date to the 1940s. While the active restoration of these mosques is ongoing, there is no indication of whether pre-modern mosques are being prioritized over the (more numerous) modernist ones. However, with mosques being – according to one of the heritage experts in Qatar Museums involved in an initial survey of this historic resource – “the only heritage left in Qatar”, these comprise the largest assemblage of relatively undisturbed modernist architectural structures in Qatar. ● More recently, the Gulf Architecture Project under the rapidly expanding Qatar National Library has widened the conventional scope that heritage preservation discourse has on traditional pre-oil architecture. Through conferences and their ongoing collection of resources that includes architectural, archival, and oral resources, the emphasis of their work expands from the dominant concern with traditional/pre-oil

fig.5

architectural styles to include modernism and beyond. Ibrahim Jaidah is one of the key consultants in this project.

Private initiatives to raise awareness of the significance of modernism as a legitimate and valuable period in the architectural history of Qatar are also emerging. Fatma Al-Sahlawi, the founder and manager of the Atlas Bookstore in Qatar, curates a collection of resources and oral histories that together form an archive on the rise of modernism in Qatar. Although it once held a base in William L. Pereira's iconic Sheraton Hotel in Doha, she uses her transient book collection referencing the architecture and urbanism of the Middle East and North Africa to promote the study of and appreciation for the modernist turn. Her work captures both the structures and debates featured in various archives and publications as well as the narratives of expertise attached to them. In particular, Al-Sahlawi reconstructs through interviews and other resources the encounter and appreciation of modernist styles that took place during the modernization of Qatar itself, highlighting the figures and interests that were involved in this architectural turn – American, British, and even Japanese visions of modernity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examine the way in which cultural heritage preservation projects exclude post-oil heritage narratives in general, caught in between the charm of traditional and pre-modern aesthetics under the patronage of cultural institutions, on the one hand, and the allure of the ultra-modern and sustainable city, emerging by the hand of famous local and foreign architects and visionaries, on the other hand. The heritage preservation narratives of Qatar have, in different ways, erased the areas in between these two foci, either discursively or physically.

Against an examination of Qatari instruments for cultural heritage preservation and the debates and discourses that result from it, I bring attention to a handful of preservation efforts that bring to life the existence of modernist structures in the life-histories of the urban landscape. These are comprised of different initiatives both deliberate and unintentional in their efforts to preserve modernism. Some preservation projects target the disappearing modernist fabric of Qatar, often through isolated initiatives by local and foreign experts to bring value to the modern architectural fabric of the city and attach ideas of cultural heritage, safeguarding these otherwise undervalued styles and structures. Some of these are run by established architects who have taken an interest in the matter as part of a concern with the marginalization of modernism worldwide, for example, a local concern with Doha deco. Other conversations are fuelled by early career, Qatari interlocutors who seek to revalorize those periods obscured in the historical and economic development of the country yet hold significance in its cultural and social development. On the

other hand, there are also practical and economic efforts to reuse modernist structures across the city, a sort of accidental preservation of structures that would have otherwise been demolished to make way for commercial real estate. These may emerge from practical and economic reasons rather than in alignment with a historic preservation dogma and its strict ideas of authenticity that circulate globally; therefore, some or many of the original features could be erased in the process of reuse. The ongoing struggle of preservation of modernism in Qatar indicates that traditional studies of heritage preservation, focusing on institutional practices and policies, are not capable of capturing the informal spaces in which a preservation sensibility is being forged and practiced. The study of unofficial, emerging, and informal heritage languages and practices gives an indication of the future landscape of cultural heritage and completes an otherwise partial picture of the relationship between a people and a built landscape under constant construction.

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Notes

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