A Window to Urban Arabia

Andrew M. Gardner

University of Puget Sound, gardner@pugetsound.edu

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A Window to Urban Arabia

Andrew Gardner

This set of images seeks to provide viewers with a window into Doha, Qatar, and into the urban heart of the modern Middle East that’s arisen on the Arabian Peninsula. Designed as an exhibit of photography, the images include overlapping themes that explore particular facets or threads of the urban landscape and life therein. In the final accounting, the collection as a whole is intended as an ode to the city itself.

Doha is both an astounding and confounding city. A century ago, it was a sleepy and sweltering seaside village on the shores of the Persian Gulf. The small port of Doha was a minor regional hub inhabited by a seafaring merchant class connected to the

Figure 1. Some migrant workers spend their day off fishing on the Corniche. The skyline of West Bay — the modern city center built atop land “reclaimed” from the sea — provides a stunning and contrasting backdrop. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2019.
Figure 2. Modernist texture. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2018.

Figure 3. Modernist texture. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2018.
Figure 4. Modernist texture. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2018.

Figure 5. This and the previous three images portray textures of the eroding, mid-century modernism found at the aging core of central Doha. Photographs by Andrew Gardner, 2018.
Figure 6. Although most transnational migrants now dwell in camps and enclaves found at the periphery of the city, some migrants still occupy the aging, modernist city center. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2019.

Figure 7. Portrayed here is one of the new peripheral enclaves where the migrant labor force is housed. In addition to these dormitories, the compound includes a sports field and various amenities, and is located next to an indoor shopping mall. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2020.
Figure 8. Most labor migrants are free from work Fridays. On that day, impromptu markets and social gatherings congeal at the periphery of the city. Here, thousands of migrants gather just beyond Asian Town, one of the new accommodations for transnational labor migrants. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2020.

Figure 9. Nepalese migrants put together a cricket match in the interstitial urban space just beyond their labor camps. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2018.
Figure 10. In the city center, migrants gather on the largely abandoned streets for Friday jumu’ah prayer. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2018.

Figure 11. Southeast Asian migrants gather for photographs in front of the Catholic Church, located in the Religious Complex, another sort of peripheral urban enclave found in Doha. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2018.
Figure 12. For migrants who work six days a week, Friday is special. Here, thousands of migrants congregate in the parking lot at the center of the old Industrial Area. Specific regions from South Asia command certain parts of the sidewalk, and new migrant arrivals can find a familiar language — and sometimes even friends — by searching the gathering for compatriots from home. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2018.

Figure 13. Qatar’s new National Library, designed by architect Rem Koolhaas, juts out into the sky. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2018.
sea, by bedouin pastoral nomads connected to the inland desert, and by a miscellany of others. The discovery of vast reservoirs of natural gas in the 20th century, the subsequent development of the technological capacity to condense and liquify that gas for shipment, and the small population of citizens that resided on the Qatari peninsula resulted in one of the wealthiest places in the contemporary world.

So very much of that wealth is plowed into the city itself. The city grows ceaselessly by leaps and bounds, by new “zones” and “districts,” and by islands and peninsulas “reclaimed” from the sea. Construction never ends. Fueled by migrant labor and by deep reservoirs of capital, the city continually renews itself. The task of building, rebuilding and operating this cosmopolitan urban entrepôt required a pool of labor and expertise not indigenous to the small peninsula.
As a result, the more than 300,000 citizens have been a minority in their own country for many decades now. Today, nearly nine of every 10 residents in contemporary Doha are temporary migrants.

The resulting city is extraordinarily diverse—diverse in ways that stretch the North American conceptualization of that term. Inequality is stark and visible throughout the city. The city is impressively safe. Altogether, Doha and its neighboring cities present a version of urban modernity without clear parallel in North America. It’s this urban modernity that enthralls and attracts millions of migrants from the Indian Ocean world and beyond. I am also transfixed.

One of the threads explored in these images concerns the textures of modernity—a granular and aesthetic exploration of modernism in Doha. This subset of images portrays the different textures of the eroding modernisms found at the aging city center. The buildings and neighborhoods from which these textures come were once the bright and contemporary epicenter of the midcentury city: the architecture, the designs, and the textures themselves were emblematic of progress, of growth, of a modernity from elsewhere, and of the reliable uniformity of industrial production. As it did on other continents, modernism promised a departure from the past. Now the eroding remnants of futures-past, these neighborhoods were first abandoned by citizens in their migration to the suburbs and then inhabited by the burgeoning legion of South Asian labor migrants who toil in the city. Although some of these latter inhabitants still reside in these aging structures, bulldozers steadily encroach on the weathered core of the city, and stand poised on the margins of these neighborhoods. The urban core is to be rebuilt—yet again—with steady infusions of capital, and by foreign hands.

Another thread explored in these images portrays the peripheral urban enclaves where much of the foreign workforce now dwells—the backstage realm of a city designed as a showcase for tourists and visitors. These workers, all transnational migrants and noncitizens, mostly come from South Asia. They both build and service the modern city. Although a few stragglers still dwell in the urban core of Doha, most of these foreign workers now occupy enclaves constructed at the periphery of the city. In the lifeworlds of these men and women, these migrations are, for most, an economic necessity for the households behind them. But these migrations also serve as a rite of passage, and they compose a great and difficult adventure that is sometimes rewarding. The cities of the Arabian Peninsula, such as the one portrayed here, are far from home for the millions of migrant men and women who inhabit them, and are simultaneously the backdrop for the collective social drama of the youthful lifeways in the greater Indian Ocean world.

A third and final thread that flickers through these photographs concerns the stararchitecture that peppers the city’s skyline and frontstage. Many of these buildings are the visions and creations of the world’s leading superstar architects and designers—people such as Rem Koolhaas, Arata Isozaki, Jean Nouvel, I. M. Pei and Zaha Hadid. Their attention-grabbing buildings are emblematic of humanity’s most prized and respected constructions, emanations from the creative frontiers of design. For those experts, Qatar is an ideal client, with money to spend and little of an urban past to...
crowd or adjust those architects’ respective visions. Provided for them is the tabula rasa—or blank slate—from which their creations might emerge, undisturbed. In one sense, the resulting city is like a gargantuan trophy case, a collection that speaks to the citizenry and to the leadership who steward a vision of modernity designed mostly by foreigners.

Altogether, these images seek to provide a window to urban modernity in Arabia—a vantage point, a glimpse from afar, a fragmentary grasp of a busy cosmopolitan hub that always spills beyond encapsulation. Proceed thoughtfully.

Andrew Gardner is a professor of anthropology at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. These images were first exhibited at Bluebeard Coffee Roasters in Tacoma, Washington, in the pandemic summer of 2020.