

# A Doha debate

**ANDREW TORRES** on the changing landscape of Qatar's capital



## Designer educator

Andrew Torres is a designer and educator based in Barcelona and New York and an active collaborator with Forsite Studio, a sustainable design-build practice based in Austin, Texas. He earned an A.B. from Harvard University and a Master of Architecture from the University of Texas at Austin. He has worked with SHoP Architects and Soluri Architecture in New York City, Estudio Carme Pinós in Barcelona, and Miró Rivera Architects in Austin and was an Assistant Professor in the School of Architecture and Design at the New York Institute of Technology in Bahrain.

Recently, I was given a private tour of the new Islamic art galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The galleries, the result of an eight-year renovation and re-organisation project, comprised both understated exhibition spaces and immersive architectural installations displaying a sweeping array of Islamic art work from the vast collection of one of the world's preeminent museums.

I could not help but draw comparisons to the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha. Where the Met galleries are neutral and sedate, the Doha galleries are bold and dramatic. The exhibition design, by Jean-Michel Wilmotte, employs strong chiaroscuro, deeply textured black granite walls, and ruthlessly minimal displays to create a powerfully striking environment for art quite unlike the Met. Basically, if the Met's galleries are beige, the Museum of Islamic Art's are black. The distinction is telling.

Opened just over three years ago, the Museum of Islamic Art has become Doha's most recognisable landmark. Similar to the Guggenheim in Bilbao, it introduced Doha to the wider world and marked it as a serious patron of art and culture. Designed by I M Pei after an exhaustive study of Islamic buildings, the museum stands as an icon of contemporary Islamic architecture. And as a symbol of the city, it represents Doha. It is bold but not brash, grandiose but not gaudy, studied but not staid.

Doha is under construction, in both a physical and theoretical sense. The idea of what the city should be is contested daily as development relentlessly reshapes the urban landscape with no single ideal as the goal.

Yet thought has clearly been given to the kind of city Doha hopes to become. The impressive Museum of Islamic Art, the egalitarian Corniche, and the lively Souq Waqif can all be seen as complementary elements in a vision of the city that values civic space, culture and art. But as the city develops,

it is not at all certain that those values will prevail or even survive. With breathtaking speed, wide swaths of the city are torn down to make way for new development, much of it not particularly sympathetic. Walking near Souq Waqif, I encountered a poignant tableau as towering cranes and construction fences advertising a new luxury development ominously overlooked the camel pens of the old souq. A better metaphor for Doha I could not imagine.

Souq Waqif can serve as a useful case study however. An historic souq that has undergone extensive renovation and modernisation, Souq Waqif mediates between different worlds. While the renovated souq can at times feel somewhat Disney-esque, it remains a vibrant destination for a broad cross section of Doha's population. It is a civic space, and a remarkably successful one at that. The same could not be said for the West Bay. And while its veracity can certainly be debated, the souq nevertheless retains some semblance of authentic place, of local history, of local culture, things that are typically torn asunder along with the fabric of the city in the name of progress.

Of course, it is possible to manufacture a wholly new urban fabric and with it a new urban life based on uncoordinated planning, utterly non-contextual architecture, and strictly financial concerns. The identity of the place then derives directly from the isolating sprawl, the soulless buildings, and the vacuous opulence of the city itself. It is an identity to be sure, but one need only look to Dubai to see its pitfalls.

Unlike most of its peer cities in the region, Doha has built up a substantial amount of cultural credibility through key investments like the Museum of Islamic Art, Education City, and the progressive works of the Qatar Foundation. But if Doha hopes to take its place as one of the world's great cities, it must capitalise on these investments to create an authentic place that fulfills the promise of its ambition.