

The Historic City of Doha in Qatar; Tourism as a Catalyst for a Sustainable Urban Regeneration

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Abstract

Heritage and tourism have become during the last two decades dynamic areas of development in the world. The idea of heritage is crucial to the critical decision-making process as to how irreplaceable resources are to be utilized by people of the present or conserved for future generations. In view of the importance of 'heritage' to the development of a tourist destination the emphasis on developing appropriate adaptive reuse strategies cannot be overemphasized. In October 1999, the 12th general assembly of the ICOMOS in Mexico stated, that in the context of sustainable development, two interrelated issues need urgent attention, cultural tourism and historic towns and cities. These two issues underscore the fact that historic resources are non-renewable, belonging to all of humanity. Without adequate adaptive reuse actions to ensure a sustainable future for these historic resources, may lead to their complete vanishing. According to the World Tourism Organization, natural and cultural heritage resources are and will remain motivating factors for travel in the near future. According to the experts, people choose travel destinations where they can learn about traditional and distinct cultures in their historic context. This paper focuses on the role of heritage tourism and its implications for urban regeneration in the context of Old Doha. Therefore, in order to use heritage wisely, it will be necessary to position heritage as an essential element of sustainability and resilience in a global environment, giving particular attention to heritage tourism. The research methodology is based on the case study approach. The Souk Waqif urban regeneration project in old Doha will be explored. A thorough onsite investigation will be carried out through observation and formal and informal discussions with the local and global tourists. The findings of this research is to propose an appropriate strategy for cultural heritage tourism in Doha and Qatar.

Keywords: urban regeneration; resilience; cultural heritage tourism; identity; sustainability

1. Introduction

Historic urban centres are major economic resources and irreplaceable capital assets. Tourism is considered a major economic generator through earnings of foreign exchange, local employment and government taxation. Countries use tourism in multiple disciplines of educational, commercial, natural and most

importantly cultural as the most sought out destination for travellers. It was believed that tourism is a non-consuming industry where visitors gaze places of interest and minimum changes are done to polish the counter effect. However, reality of this industry has proven the opposite, with the growth of tourism activities, social patterns, resources and quality of local identity and urban stability has been disrupted.

Tourist industries are now well aware of the significant role they play in ensuring a balance between demand and local integrity of tourism destinations. Additionally, in relation to heritage tourism specifically, a high level of coordination is needed between the local planning authorities, archaeologists and tourism stakeholders. It is important to highlight the different strategies and agendas to avoid conflicting results and keeping the local identity and community wellbeing at the forefront (Rodwell, 2002).

Through place marketing, sense of place has become a valuable commodity and cultural heritage has become a potential economic activity. Striving to be competitive within the globalizing economy, many places have tried to increase their distinctiveness and character. In so doing, people created cosmopolitan cultural facilities, shopping festivals, sport facilities, media and conference centres. There are many approaches for the exploitation of culture inside historic cities; these may include funding for facilities of the arts, investment in public spaces, recreation and refurbishment of waterfronts and the regeneration of historic districts.

Globalization exposure and urban development have put cultural heritage areas under the spotlight in both positive and negative contexts. The change in production and consumption characteristics shifted built environments and changed local cultures slowly transforming many local heritage sites to tourist attractions. However, in some cases the intangible values they possess have been undermined, where development planning over rides the conservation of local values. Today, cultural heritage tourism is a rapid growing sector that offers new destinations yet to be discovered globally. With heavy tourist consumption and demand for leisure, hotels, restaurants and other supportive services sprang around these hot spots. Therefore, planning management while considering cultural and community agendas and the conservation responsibility these sites require, has become a major concern to cultural heritage tourism.

In order to accomplish positive economical tourist activities whilst conserving the unique cultural heritage, socio-cultural needs and values these places provide both locally and universally, planners can play a significant role in sustaining heritage hotspots and local cultures. The three focus elements, cultural heritage, tourism and sustainability in planning decisions should all be equally considered and may be related concepts are discussed. Variables for consideration are explored as a means of examining the guiding principles that influence cultural heritage tourism where the author uses a qualitative approach to discuss it from a sustainability perspective. To achieve this, the approach consists of highlighting major points such as definition, significance, categories, challenges and urban context of cultural heritage and tourism.

In many historic cities of the Gulf, numerous irreplaceable historic centres and buildings are being compromised and left to die because local authorities failed to give them enough economic consideration. In Qatar, for instance, Al Zubarah fort, which was listed on the world heritage, list since 2013, has not yet been reused. Since these heritage resources do not generate any income through tourism or any other activities, they will create an additional burden for the local authorities to maintain them. This might consequently lead to future disinterest in conserving them and may result in their further neglect, decay leading to vanishing (Boussaa, 2014, 2015, 2018).

2. Cultural heritage tourism: concept and definition

The United Nations as the legacy of “tangible” artefacts defines cultural heritage and physical structures whether historic towns or single buildings that are valued as a vital physical piece of evidence from the past and “intangible” traditions, knowledge and skills inherited from past generations. The latter hold a significant value in the representation of a specific culture and should be conserved for future generations to

benefit from. Cultural heritage sites are significant to archaeologists, planners, scientists from multidisciplinary points of interest. They represent a vast area of human history layers, knowledge of early settlements and are considered a vital part of cultural stability as well as a measuring tool for development.

In tourism, while so much is spent on transportation, accommodation and dining, relatively little is spent on conserving the cultural heritage resources on which tourism mainly rely. Economic benefits include creation of jobs and the direct and indirect benefits of visitors' expenditure. In contrast, when tourism is poorly managed it can involve negative impacts on the host communities, such as gentrification and the neglect of local traditions and patterns of life.

With increased knowledge worldwide, many heritage places started to face some sort of tourism activity, which poses a risk of heritage areas deteriorating due to increased tourist activities in or around them. "Heritage tourism" relies predominantly on the physical built elements of past culture as well as the intangible skills and performing arts of the past, which eventually require a physical, secure well managed place to be presented. shown in this template.

3. Cultural heritage tourism: management and authenticity

Management of change is the integration of heritage management into strategic planning. Intangible values cannot be dealt with technically but need strategic assessment, consequently heritage becomes a matter of political consideration and decision-making. Conservation for cultural tourism is not a freezing of time; rather it is the conservation of areas and monuments by linking history of a valuable location to its people and culture.

emphasis lies on the possibility of a transformation, not as a falsification of the past, but as a remake where accessibility of the past and history are maintained. In one sense, this

approach is highlighting the past because the contrast makes it the focus. An unsuccessful tourism development approach could lead to diminishing unique cultural heritage assets and death of historic cores. Modern development is more monotonous and homogeneous compared to traditional quarters, as is the scale of modern development that may overwhelm the original compactness of traditional spots thus eliminating the original sense of place and thus possibly discouraging tourism. New building design needs to consider the original identity of the area as well as consider the durability of old street fabric to withstand the increased pressure on them due to growing numbers of visitors as well as transport movement.

It is crucial for the stakeholders to understand conservation from a broader view, the relationship between continuity of the architectural facade and the congruent relationship of old and new. Without this understanding, many regeneration projects have failed to include urban heritage as part of the scheme and have usually resulted in the demolition of old buildings and their replacement by new buildings. The new development creates a new identity to the city and thus loses the significant physical fabric of the city (Boussaa et al, 2021).

Historic areas disrupted by the invasion of office tower blocks and large blocks of shopping complexes altering the existing atmosphere of the area and modern developments such as hotels and service apartments were introduced in the area redevelopment. This could lead to gentrification, thus affecting the cultural stability of the population and attracting less authentic market development. Gentrification is also one of the common cases in fast decision making for cultural tourism, when decayed areas are reinvented without sensitivity to the deep connection its original occupants had to offer in terms of authentic cultural experience. This can develop tourism city centers that lack the social stability in relation to the historical monuments they offer.

Cultural heritage tourism is a vital part of the tourism industry and is highly dependent on the movement pattern of people in search of diverse authentic experiences; the commitment needs to be towards balancing the needs of three categories: (1) resource, (2) resident, (3) visitor in order to sustain them based on benefits from cultural tourism industry. "Authentic resource is defined by an entire "sense of place"-inclusive of the gateway, the built environment, the landscape, the cuisine and cultural traditions, and the souvenirs to purchase. Therefore, the industry is challenged by rapid development and realization of the true values and traditional lifestyles and industries in the planning and management approach essential for the complex development of heritage-oriented tourism. Planners are held accountable to provide the best argument that favors maximum authentic conservation while claiming clashing benefits of political or stakeholders involved in the growth of tourism industry.

Cultural heritage tourism development requires that both heritage and development speak the same language. Based on that, decision-making is far more than just the site its self, it relies on effective coordination between various political stakeholders, private organizations representatives and NGO's. Sustainable management and development tourism sectors depend on the collaboration and communication between these multiple players. Mediating organizations work to negotiate appropriate solutions through educational activities, programs related to development policies aiming to raise awareness between tourism industries and multiple actors ranging from transport to hospitality, entertainment and legal networks to minimize negative outcomes about cultural differences (Loulanski, 2006).

Developing tourism products based on historical resources is now a strategic target for many cities in the Gulf, such as Dubai, Doha and Jeddah, which are diversifying their economy away from reliance on oil. One important aspect of the

influence of heritage industry on spaces, places, and landscapes is the tendency for historic districts and settings to be re-created, imitated, simulated, and even reinvented according to commercial considerations rather than principles of conservation. This trend may lead many historic areas to position themselves on the market place by changing their historic environment and townscape for the sake of attracting more tourists (Madandola and Boussaa. 2023, Boussaa & Madandola, 2024).

Historic cities in the Gulf endure intensified urban challenges because of a rapid increase in population numbers, urban decisions and economic status. This puts pressure on the government to provide spaces and develop new townships for the population. Newly introduced enterprises mainly focused on central areas of the city where most heritage locations are found as city centres are commonly the oldest part of a city where in most cases they failed to generate harmony with the historic urban fabric. Rapid development schemes included demolishing the old and building the new. However, this has raised concerns of developers versus society perceptions of a place, as well as the level of awareness afforded its original occupants cultural values and connection to heritage physical places (Boussaa et al, 2023).

4. Doha: historical overview

Doha, Qatar's capital and largest urban centre, is home to more than 80% of the country's inhabitants, who reside within either the city or its neighbouring suburbs. Serving as the nation's administrative and economic hub, Doha had a population of 3,069,631 individuals as of October 2024 (QSA, 2024). Doha experienced three significant bombardments, leading to the loss of many of its historical structures and districts. Initially, the British ship Vestal attacked the city in 1821. A second bombing occurred in 1841, followed by the destruction of the village in 1847 after a conflict with Bahrain's Al Khalifa near Fuweirat.

In 1916, Doha was recognized as the capital of the British protectorate in Qatar. The early 20th century saw Qatar's economy heavily reliant on fishing and pearling, with Doha boasting approximately 350 pearling vessels. However, the introduction of Japanese cultured pearls in the 1930s led to a severe economic downturn, plunging Qatar and Doha into poverty.

Before the discovery of oil, Doha was confined to one area called "Al Bidaa". One hundred years later Al Bidaa expanded to include 9 districts (furjan): Al Hitmi, Al Slata, Al Jasra, Mohamed Bin Jassim, Al Ghanem, Al Asmakh and Al Najada and Abdul Aziz. The total urban area reached 1.5 Km² and 3 km along the coast, with only a few hundred meters inland. The population reached 20,000 persons, living in irregular and unpaved streets in one to two stories districts until 1950. Although oil was discovered in 1939, its exploitation was halted from 1942 to 1947 due to World War II and the Bahrain embargo. The year 1949 marked a turning point for Qatar, as oil exports and offshore rights payments commenced. Under British guidance, the 1950s witnessed the gradual development of government structures and public services in the country.

In the 1960s, Qatar established new administrative hubs to handle its substantial income. The Government House, which opened in 1969, is now recognized as one of Qatar's most iconic structures. After the British departed, Qatar proclaimed its sovereignty on September 3, 1971. As the capital of the newly independent nation, Doha transformed into a massive construction zone, drawing numerous foreign specialists and laborers who found employment in the building industry.

In the years that followed, Doha experienced an unprecedented boom in property development, global finance, sports, and tourism sectors. This growth is evident in the numerous contemporary skyscrapers, shopping centres, luxury accommodations, and government buildings spread across the city. Additionally,

massive projects like the Pearl, an all-encompassing commercial, residential, tourist, and recreational complex situated beyond West Bay, further illustrate this expansion. However, the rapid urban development of Doha and its surrounding metropolitan areas has often come at the cost of Gulf cultural heritage. The extensive groundwork required for these developments has, on many occasions, resulted in the destruction of historically significant sites and structures.



Fig. 1 – Satellite image of Doha and its historic centers (Google Earth, 2025).

5. Souk Waqif rehabilitation project

Situated near the Corniche, off Grand Hamad Street, Souk Waqif highlights traditional architecture, crafts, and folk art. This area, which formerly served as a weekend marketplace for Bedouins, has its roots in Doha's early days when it was still a small village. Back then, residents would gather along the banks of the Msheireb (wadi) river to engage in trade.

The term "*Waqif*" in Arabic translates to "standing," referring to the merchants and locals who were forced to conduct their business while standing due to the flooding from Wadi Msheirib. This water would flow on both sides, passing through Al Khrais area of the souk before reaching the corniche.

Souk Waqif is an expansive network of narrow streets encompassing various specialized areas. These sections offer a diverse range of products, including fragrances, traditional Qatari attire, travel bags, hardware, gardening supplies, camping gear, kitchen utensils, seasonings, local confections, grains, and dried goods. This popular marketplace is famous for its array of conventional clothing, spices, artisanal crafts, and mementos. Additionally, it houses a multitude of restaurants featuring international cuisine. Despite its origins dating back to the 1850s, the market has undergone recent renovations to restore its authentic charm. Today, it stands as one of Doha's premier attractions for visitors.

In 2004, the Diwan Amiri's Private Engineering Office initiated a restoration project for Souk Waqif. To start the work, the government acquired privately owned buildings within the souk from their respective owners. A thorough assessment revealed that approximately two-thirds of the structures still maintained their original characteristics, while the remaining one-third had been torn down and substituted with contemporary constructions.

The restoration initiative was grounded in a comprehensive analysis of the market's history and architecture, with the goal of halting the decay of its historic buildings and eliminating recent, unsuitable modifications and extensions. The Private Engineering Office (PEO), tasked with renovating Souk Waqif, sought to retrieve the site's historical essence. To accomplish this goal, recently constructed buildings that did not fit the local aesthetic were torn down. Traditional roofing materials, such as danjal and bamboo with a mixture of clay and straw for insulation, replaced the modern metal sheets. Additionally, time-honoured techniques for protecting structures against extreme heat were reintroduced.



Fig. 2 – Site plan of Souk Waqif (Courtesy, Private Engineering Office).

In recent times, Souk Waqif has emerged as a significant center for artistic endeavours, featuring numerous galleries and workshops. The area hosts various art exhibitions and local musical performances during festive periods and special events. Alongside its array of shops, restaurants and hotels, the Souk Waqif Art Center is situated within the dining district. This facility incorporates a diverse selection of small art boutiques and multiple exhibition spaces, all arranged around a long, narrow streets (Sikkas).

Following years of deterioration and abandonment, Souk Waqif has been revitalized as a thriving cultural landmark in central Doha. Heritage-based tourism is a valued pursuit for both travellers and local communities. While this interaction is crucial, it is essential to preserve the unique characteristics and identity of each urban centre and nation. Importantly, the development of heritage tourism should prioritize the local population's interests rather than solely catering to international visitors. This approach should enhance residents' appreciation of their urban heritage, fostering awareness about its preservation, encouraging them to inhabit these historic areas, and ultimately enabling them to transmit this legacy to the present and future generations.



Fig. 3 – Aerial view of Souk Waqif; a major tourist attraction in Doha (Author, 2015).

6. Conclusions

When opting for heritage tourism, a cautious approach is needed regarding a high respect to the local traditions and customs of the host community. Therefore, a strict management of heritage tourism should be established in order to maintain a balance between social and economic needs in old centres. Over-emphasis on the tourist function creates pressures for new services and associated development, sometimes to the detriment of the local population, and can lead to damage significant cultural assets. It is therefore important for the tourism capacity to be carefully managed and controlled in a sustainable manner.

Setting objectives for sustainable tourism is about establishing a sensitive balance between socio-cultural and economic interests, between conservation and development. Restoration of individual monuments without conserving or rehabilitating their historical contexts and economic forces is meaningless. It will eventually deprive the historic city of its “inhabitants” and will result as an open air and lifeless museum. One way to avoid this inclination is to see conservation as part of a much wider development process. The idea that effective action to promote the management and rehabilitation of the surviving historic centres requires the adoption of a holistic policy:

- Heritage tourism as a catalyst for urban regeneration;

- Improvement of neighbourhood amenities: action on housing, public areas and environmental amenities (façades, streets, squares, markets and the wider townscape) which contribute to the feeling of belonging;
- Strengthening of the notion of diversity: upgrading the various central functions (shops, housing, neighbourhood and district amenities) - a balanced mix of functions helps to maintain vitality and harmony;
- Action to promote economic development in old centres through sustainable tourism;

Tourism with environmental concerns is also a key feature of sustainable development policy in a historic area. This implies that development in a historic core should be limited, but not to the point of stifling its economic vitality. Most heritage players recognize that such places cannot revitalize themselves without some kind of intervention. These are meant to regulate and manage the physical and social fabric upon which their local identity and economic success are predicated.

The situation of historic centres in the Gulf is particularly alarming. The historic district is both the content and container, as it were, of heritage. Cultural heritage tourism is an important and desired activity for both visitors and hosts. The challenge to cultural resource managers is to mitigate the amount of damage that visitors can cause to sites. Based on the case of Doha, the following points emerge as principles for an appropriate sustainable tourism in historic areas:

- Comprehensive tourist development plans are essential as the pre-condition for developing any tourist potential;
- It should be a fundamental principle of any tourist development plan that both conservation, in its widest sense, and tourism benefit from it;
- The best long-term interests of people living and working in any host community should be

the primary determining factor in selecting options for tourist development;

- Educational programs should insist and invite tourists to respect and understand the local way of life, culture, history and religion;
- Adequate management should define the level of acceptable tourism development and provide controls to maintain that level;
- Develop adequate protective measures to keep visitors away from sensitive parts of the resource.

Urban regeneration strategies should envisage discouraging static preservation, which attempts to “fossilize” the past and turn our historic centres and districts into open-air museums. However, housing which is absent at the present remains a major drawback in providing a sustainable life Souk Waqif, while preserving the original identity of the quarter. There is a need to conserve and develop historic areas, to be thriving and bustling with life. To achieve this, sustainable development policies should be introduced through housing, tourism, trade and other economic activities. Cultural heritage tourism in Doha, Jeddah and Dubai is a way of fostering a major incentive for its survival and regeneration.

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