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Reconstructing Meta-Doha

By Agatino Rizzo

The small emirate of Qatar, a narrow arid peninsula located at the centre of the Persian Gulf, has recently come to the attention of the media and the international community for its rising economic and geopolitical importance. Blessed with generous oil and gas reserves and enjoying rising oil prices, Qatar is aggressively buying stakes in US and EU troubled companies affected by the 2008 global credit. With assets under management for US$ 60bn, the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) owns 27% of Sainsbury (a large chain of supermarkets in the United Kingdom), 20% Chelsfield Partners (real estate and related businesses in the UK and Europe), 15% stake of the London Stock Exchange (UK), 10% stake of Epicure Qatar Equity Opportunities (UK), 6.4% stake of Barclays Bank (UK), 6% stake Lagardere (French-based multinational conglomerate largely focused on the media sector), and a undisclosed amount of stakes in Fortress Investment Group (an investment management firm based in New York) and in Credit Suisse (Switzerland) ¹.
Qatar Investment Authority also holds 17% of Volkswagen, while with others bought Miramax Films from The Walt Disney Company; it also acquired 70% of Paris Saint Germain, a French football club. Through Qatar Holding, an indirect subsidiary, QIA acquired the Harrods Group (UK) from Mohammed Al-Fayed, including the Knightsbridge department store. Yet in the strategic aviation sector, the government of Qatar owns directly 50% stakes of Qatar Airways, the national flight carrier, which along with Dubai’s Emirates and Abu Dhabi’s Etihad, is one of the fast growing airline companies in the world and one of the biggest customers for Airbus.

Also, Qatar is leveraging on the government owned Al Jazeera satellite news channel to extend its geopolitical sphere of influence into other Middle East countries. With its coverage of the Arab revolution, Al Jazeera has connected activists in Tunisia with those in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen in an effort to topple long running autocratic regimes. Moreover, while peaceful relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia secure its political stability and wealth, Qatar was one of the few Arab countries actively participating to the NATO strikes in Libya and presently demanding military intervention in Syria. In addition to this, Qatar is the only country hosting a Taliban political office which many expect to negotiate a future peace agreement with NATO forces over the Afghan conflict.

Despite its limited size (1.7 million inhabitants in 2010, 20% of which are Qatari citizens), as result of both Qatar’s increasing relevance in global politics and the emergence, after 2008 global crisis, of a wider global economic restructuring, a growing number of international companies are opening regional offices in Doha. Qatar’s capital city, which is in turn reshaping its cityscape with ambitious public funded mega-projects including, amongst others, the ongoing New Doha International Airport (NDIA), Mshereib redevelopment, Aspire Zone built for the 2006 Asian Olympics, Education City, and the ongoing Lusail City and the manmade island of The Pearl to attract firms and professionals of the knowledge industry to Qatar (figure 1). More government mega-projects such as a brand-new metro and railway network will be implemented in the next decade to cater for the 2022 FIFA World Cup and several other sports events.

Similarly to other Gulf capitals (notably Dubai and Abu Dhabi), while this mega-projects agenda has brought new useful infrastructures to cater for the country’s ambitious goals, at the same time, due to the poor planning regulations and in absence of democratic processes, it has been responsible for important physical and social fractures within the city – i.e. between who can and who cannot
access those infrastructures. As result of these fractures, urban and non-urban territories shape Doha’s fragmented urbanism made of massive public mega-projects surrounded by large patches of desert waiting to be developed.

However, while on the one hand Doha’s mega-projects contribute to further urban fragmentation in Qatar they also show better connection with other localities worldwide. In 1995 Francois Ascher has introduced the term “Metapolis” to describe:

"... a combination of spaces in which some or all of the inhabitants, economic activities or territories are integrated into the (ordinary) operations of the daily life of the metropolis. A metapolis generally constitutes only one sphere of employment, habitat and activities. The spaces which make up a metapolis are profoundly heterogeneous and not necessarily adjacent. A metapolis includes at least a few hundred thousand inhabitants."

Ascher’s Metapolis attempts to clarify the recent urban transformations which according to him have been classified with terms that are either too sectorial or too administrative or too specialised (e.g. conurbation, metropolitan region, and global city). The term Metapolis suggests a city made of non-contiguous parts which are connected across the globe through a flow of information (facilitated by IT infrastructures - e.g. fibre based internet, satellites, etc.), people and goods (facilitated by strategic transportation infrastructures - e.g. airports, ports, etc.). For instance, from a poor urbanised area of Doha, Qatar Foundation’s Education City is connected to other localities in US and Europe to facilitate Qatar’s transition from a carbon to a knowledge intensive economy.

Qatar Foundation is a non-profit organisation created by the Emir of Qatar in 1995 that is investing billions of dollars in the futuristic Education City campus to attract top western universities, renowned researchers, and knowledge sector companies to Qatar. Qatar Foundation has invited architects from all over the world to work on this ambitious project. When completed, the 14 square-kilometre campus will include 15 American and European universities, a major specialised teaching hospital, central library, convention centre, equestrian academy, 18 hole golf club, large scale on-campus housing, and a science & technology park. Texas A&M University, Weill Cornell Medical College, Georgetown University, Virginia Commonwealth University, Carnegie Mellon University, Northwestern University, HEC Paris, and University College London have already based their activities in Education City. The Science and Technology Park, also located in Education City area, is working with dozens of multi-
national corporations including Exxon-Mobil, Cisco, and Microsoft to deliver Qatar’s ambitions to be a Knowledge Intensive hub.

Inspired by similar educational and R&D campuses in the US, Education City provides for a self-contained habitat with residential areas (for both students and staff), hotels, restaurants, offices, sports facilities, etc. The campus is a gigantic gated community with very few, heavy guarded access gates\(^1\). All around the built up area an incoherent landscape of non-urbanised or poor urbanised desert areas encircle the campus (figure 2). Moreover, the campus’s buildings, most of them designed by international star architects, sharply contrast with the surrounding repetitive cheap urban landscape: in the campus fountains, greenery, and parade routes celebrate the high objectives of QF: outside, no comparable features can be found. Inhabitants inside and outside the campus have different skills and incomes too: the Education City’s scientists, teachers, and managers have salaries that are several times higher than that people living outside the campus (usually South-East and South Asians), although many of these latter work in Education City as construction workers or janitors\(^1\).

However, as suggested by Francois Ascher’s Metapolis concept, despite the physical and discursive isolation of Education City from the rest of Doha there are ample evidences that the campus is connected with the wider network of global cities. For instance, by interviewing staff in one of the American college in Education City (the Weill Cornell Medical College at Qatar) we have found that emails and other more sophisticated forms of remote communication are deployed by the college to manage daily communications with the mother campus in the US. Also, periodical exchanges of documents, staff, faculty, and students between Doha’s and New York’s campuses facilitate the transfer and production of knowledge aimed by QF. Similarly, companies in the adjacent Qatar Science and Technology Park are better connected with their mother companies in the US and Europe, rather than with localities within Qatar, to develop critical research (figure 3). To this end, IT as well as strategic transportation infrastructures such as airports and ports are crucial to facilitate the growing flows of visitors and commuters into Qatar. While Qatar is investing in fibre communication, it is at the same time implementing a new airport to raise its capacity from today’s 12 to 50 million passengers a year. Similar efforts are being made by Dubai and Abu Dhabi too. Dubai is planning a brand new airport in Jebel Ali area to raise its capacity from today’s 42 to 160 million passengers; Abu Dhabi is also doubling its capacity from today’s 20 to 40 million passengers\(^1\).

Finally, Francois Ascher’s Metapolis may be a useful concept to understand recent urbanisation in the Arab Gulf Region. It also shows us that while globalisation produces local, physical and social unbalances between urban and non-urban territories it provides for better connectivity with the wider network of Global Cities\(^1\). While this connectivity is conducive to Qatar’s geopolitical aspirations, it may create unwanted socio-economic stresses in the local urban tissue. At the moment, social strains are minimised by a generous redistribution of the country’s oil/gas wealth among nationals\(^4\). However, given the current regional uprisings in countries as close as Bahrain, it is in the interest of Qatar to put in place a better planning system which is capable to retune dangerous urban/non-urban tensions.

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Notes:
1. Source: www.SovereignWealthFundsNews.com
9. KEO (US) for the master plan, HOK (US) for the Extension of the Convention Centre, Arata Isozaki (Japan) for the Weill Cornell Medical College, the Liberal Arts and Sciences, the National Convention Centre, and the Ceremonial Court; Woods Bagot (Australia) for the OITP, Pelli, Clarke, Pelli (US) for the Sidra Medical and Research Centre; Ricardo Legorreta (Mexico) for Georgetown School of Foreign Services, Texas A&M College of engineering and the Student Centre, Ren Koolhaas & OMA (The Netherlands) for the central library, QF offices and the Strategic Studies Centre, Mangurian (Spain) & ARUP (US) for the Faculty of Islamic Arts, Nabil Ghadim (Lebanon) for the Social development Centre, EDW/AECOM (US) for the Oxygen Park, Atkins (UK) for the National Data Centre and QNCC Car Park, Burns & McDonnell (US) for the General electrical research Centre and the Female & Male Student Housing, and O&G Architects (Hong Kong) for the Eventim Centre (Rizzo, 2012: 16b).
11. While a Westerner or western educated professional earns on the average US$ 10,000 a South Asian laborer earns on the average US$ 150-300 (Financial Times, 2011: 16b; Rizzo, 2012: 16b).
14. In 2011 government employees’ wages were raised by 60%, while military got a 120% pay raise.