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# 'If you build it, they will come?' – Future oriented sense-making and the politics of urban space in Qatar

Kristin Eggeling

## Abstract

Since the early 2000s, the capital cities of the Arab Gulf have experienced extraordinary urban growth. In this chapter, I analyse the discursive logics that underlie local justifications for boosterist megaprojects, which are often built despite a lack of obvious local demand. Focusing on the case of Qatar, I argue for the salience of a form of 'future oriented sense-making' that portrays major construction projects as leading the country into a new era of economic prosperity, international prestige and social harmony. More specifically, I trace the emergence and consolidation of references to 'the future' as a central sense-making mechanism, and argue that justifying urban development in relation to the state's overall development plans consolidates the position and underlines the necessity of those who devised these plans. A major political implication of justifying urban development according to its future value is that the local political leadership ties its legacy to both the material development of the city, and uses urban growth to claim the necessity, benevolence and ultimately the inevitability of its rule. Empirically, the chapter is informed by data collected through both desk- and fieldwork, and focuses on the Lusail City project, Qatar's largest urban development project that has so far received only little attention in the literature.

## Introduction

Since in the early 2000s, the capital cities of the Arab Gulf have experienced extraordinary urban growth. Where just a few decades ago life took place against the background of low-rise buildings adapted to their natural environment, the urban landscape of the Gulf city today is characterised by gleaming skyscrapers, artificial shorelines and spectacular urban mega-structures. To justify these projects in the context of small indigenous populations

and a lack of obvious demand, governments and urban planners frequently point to their projects' future worth for achieving national progress and gaining international prestige. While references to the future can be found in descriptions of urban mega-projects across the region, this chapter specifically focuses on the use of 'future oriented sense-making' in the urban development discourse in Qatar, where virtually all major construction projects are portrayed as leading the country into a new era of economic prosperity and social harmony. Based on a social constructivist approach that takes urban development as a purposefully administered form of spectacle, I argue that the use of the future as a justification for urban build-up in and around Qatar's capital city Doha reflects the state's top-down political system. As the developers of urban mega-projects like Msheireb, The Pearl-Qatar, or most notably Lusail City, refer to the future to justify their projects' existence, we have to ask whose version of the future it is they are referring to. Upon closer examination, it quickly becomes apparent that 'the future' as imagined in Doha's urban landscape reflects the dominant state development vision of the ruling elite. Lending tangible form to this vision and foreclosing the possibility to imagine alternatives, urban development in Qatar emerges as an elite-driven practice to signal state authority, as well as its concern and care for the people. Presenting urban development as guided by a visionary interpretation of the future the political leadership ties its legacy to the material development of the city, thereby consolidating its present position and constructing a sense of the long-term necessity and inevitability of its rule. The analysis is guided by the central research question how spectacular urban development is justified in Qatar, and what the political implications of this justification are. To engage with this question, the chapter proceeds in two parts. In the first part, I review relevant literature on urban development in Qatar, introduce future oriented sense-making as the theoretical framework, lay out my argument, and explain how the research was carried out in a short methodological note. In the second part, I continue with an empirical analysis of the use of future oriented sense-making and its surfacing in the urban development discourse to justify urban mega-projects. The main focus of the empirical analysis lies on the use of the future as a justification for one of Qatar's largest urban development project, Lusail City. In the conclusion, I sum up the findings and comment on the continued value of references to the future, as once distant future dates start coming closer.

### Understanding 'spectacular' urban development in Qatar

The Arab capitals of the Gulf are developing in a fast and unprecedented way. Labelled as 'petro-' or 'instant urbanism', urban development in the Gulf is commonly understood as the result of the convergence of natural resource riches, globalisation, and local desires for international recognition.<sup>1</sup> Qatar's capital city Doha is no exception to this development.

<sup>1</sup> see Riad, "Some Aspects of Petro-Urbanism in the Arab Gulf States", 1981.; Bagaen, "Brand Dubai: The Instant City; or the Instantly Recognizable City"; 2007.; Scharfenort, "Urban Development and Social Change in Qatar: The Qatar National Vision 2030 and the 2022 FIFA World Cup", 2012.; Wippel, Bromber, Steiner and Krawietz, "Under Construction: Logics of Urbanism in the Gulf Region", 2014.; Koch, "Building Glass Refrigerators in the Desert": Discourses of Urban Sustainability and Nation Building in Qatar", 2014.; Gardner, "How the City Grows: Urban Growth and Challenges to Sustainable Development in Doha, Qatar", 2014.

Fuelled by rising revenues from Qatar's natural gas sector, the city has since the late 1990s experienced immense expansion in size, spectacular changes to its visual appearance, and a population increase from less than 400,000 to more than 2 million residents.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, some five years before Qatar is due to host the FIFA World Cup, urban development in and around Doha has reached a staggering stage. Over the course of the last decade or so, the government has announced (and abandoned) so many construction projects that it has become difficult to assess the primacy of one mega-project over another, and virtually impossible to calculate exact costs. According to the Qatar National Development Strategy (QNDS), public investment plans for the period 2011-2016 comprised some US\$ 95 billion - a number likely to be much higher in unofficial accounts.

In the academic literature, different arguments to explain urban development in Qatar and the Gulf more broadly persist. According to Khaled Adham<sup>3</sup>, there are four dominant theoretical perspectives that frame the dynamics of urban growth in the region. First, the global rise of 'cultural capitalism' has pushed the Qatari government to invest in the building up of the local cultural scene, for instance through urban showcase projects such as the Museum of Islamic Art, or the Katara Cultural Village. Second, urban development in Qatar is seen as part of a global 'sign war', in which local actors attempt to use architecture as a means of nation branding to increase international investments and tourist numbers. This practice includes the commissioning of international star-architects to design iconic landmarks, such as Jean Nouvel's New National Museum, or Rem Koolhaas' National Library. Third, Doha's urban built-up is understood in competition with other Gulf capitals, most notably Dubai, which is generally considered the region's first and most spectacular urban centre. And fourth, urban development is interpreted as an identity-building mechanisms, reflected in prestige projects as The Pearl-Qatar and Lusail City, which are designed to reflect a lifestyle of 'festivity' and promote official narratives of 'sustainability' and 'modernity'.

Scholarly interest in urban development in the Gulf has grown steadily over the last years, resulting in a number of important publications. While a review of all relevant work goes beyond the scope of this chapter, it has properly been carried out by others.<sup>3</sup> What this chapter seeks to do, is to further contribute to understanding urban development in Qatar by critically examining the political dynamics and implications behind it. To do so, I build and extend on existing arguments of urban development as a 'spectacle', a tangible manifestation of political power that reflects a broader development vision for the state. According to Laura Adams<sup>4</sup>, 'spectacles' are practices that monopolize discourse by privileging a definition of truth and reality usually belonging to the elite. As such, they create a one-way flow of communication

<sup>2</sup> Adham, "Rediscovering the Island: Doha's Urbanity from Pearls to Spectacle", 2009.; Salama and Wiedmann, *Demystifying Doha: On Architecture and Urbanism in an Emerging City*, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Adham, "Rediscovering the Island: Doha's Urbanity from Pearls to Spectacle", 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Elsheshtawy, *Planning Middle Eastern Cities: An Urban Kaleidoscope in a Globalizing World*, 2004.; Elsheshtawy, *Planning Middle Eastern Cities: An Urban Kaleidoscope in a Globalizing World*, 2008.; Salama and Wiedmann, *Demystifying Doha: On Architecture and Urbanism in an Emerging City*, 2013.; Koch, "Building Glass Refrigerators in the Desert": Discourses of Urban Sustainability and Nation Building in Qatar", 2014.; Gardner, "How the City Grows: Urban Growth and Challenges to Sustainable Development in Doha, Qatar", 2014.; Rizzo, "Rapid Urban Development and National Master Planning in Arab Gulf Countries. Qatar as a Case Study", 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan*, 2010.

that turns participants into spectators, and enables elites to close opportunities for input from below without actually making the masses feel left out. Interpreting urban development as spectacle, means underlining its elite-driven, exclusive, and hence inherently political character. Throughout the chapter, I focus on one aspect of the discourse surrounding the spectacle of urban development in Qatar in particular, namely on how it is justified as a sensible investment into the state's future.

### Future oriented sense-making and the justification of urban development

#### Making sense, making worlds

Following a broad inter-disciplinary 'interpretivist turn' towards the end of the 20th century, much social and political science research has since adopted a constructivist lens to study social phenomena. One proponent of this view is International Relations (IR) scholar Nicholas Onuf, who argues that

'fundamental to constructivism is the proposition that human beings are social beings, and we would not be human but for our social relations. In other words, social relations make or construct people –ourselves– into the kind of beings that we are. Conversely, we make the world what it is, from the raw materials that nature provides, by doing what we do with each other, and saying what we say to each other' (emphasis in original).<sup>6</sup>

Building on the basic argument of social constructivism, I understand urban development in this chapter as the result of a social sense-making process that reflects how social agents give meaning to the world around them. Onuf further tells us that 'the world thus made will always work to the advantage of some at the expense of others'<sup>7</sup>, noting that the construction of meaning is far from a neutral process, but a reproduction of dominant views of the social world. The dual emphasis constructivism puts on the social construction of reality and on how certain interpretations of the world come to dominate over others are crucial in addressing the question how spectacular urban development is justified in Qatar, and what the political implications of this justification are. Adopting this framework allows for a critical assessment of how, by whom, and with what effects practices of urban development contribute to the fixture of a dominant view of the social world in which only certain things are possible to be said and done.

#### Future-oriented sense making

The study of political communication and rhetoric has long identified a number of discursive tools that political actors use to persuade others to accept a particular interpretation of the world. Among these tools are temporal references to past and future. According to Ruth Wodak and J.R. Martin<sup>8</sup>, most interpretive studies focus on how discourses justify social behaviour according to a certain reading of the past. This temporal focus, however, can also be turned around to pay attention to the discursive construction of the future. As explained

<sup>6</sup> Onuf, *Making Sense, Making Worlds: Constructivism in Social Theory and International Relations*, 2013, 3f.

<sup>7</sup> Onuf, *Making Sense, Making Worlds: Constructivism in Social Theory and International Relations*, 2013, xv.

<sup>8</sup> Wodak and Martin, *Re/reading the Past: Critical and Functional Perspectives on Time and Value*, 2003.

by Murray Edelman<sup>9</sup>, the potency of political language does not only stem from re-constructing the past, but similarly depends on its evocations of potentials in the future. Rhetorical references to a remote time can therefore have immediate effects on legitimating proposals and policies that serve the promotion of particular goals and interests in the present.

In 'Knowing and Controlling the Future', Patricia Dunmire argues that 'the future represents a contested rhetorical domain through which partisans attempt to wield ideological and political power by supplanting the notion of the future as the site of the possible with the notion of the future as the inevitable'.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, an 'open and uncertain future' is a potential threat to the status of those in power, which is why extensive efforts are put into managing, controlling and delimitating the potentiality of the future.<sup>11</sup> Through drawing up grand visions and pretending to know the unknown, politicians and governments attempt to extend their influence and power beyond the present by projecting the future as certain and their strategies to deal with it as a necessity. As such, rhetoric control over the future endows state authorities with political power, which ultimately resides in their control of a public discourse that only allows for one interpretation of the future to be accepted as 'true'. Controlling and spreading dominant representations of the future becomes a means to create a social reality that -by denying alternatives- presents the option of 'trusting the elites' as the only viable choice.<sup>12</sup>

As recognizable and readily observable practices of future oriented sense-making, Lee Clarke<sup>13</sup> has identified the construction of 'fantasy documents' and 'task-oriented plans' filled with pragmatic and ideational references to the future. According to him, all politics is fundamentally rhetorical, and in an attempt to justify their own actions and instil a sense of order and stability among the public, governments devise 'fantasy documents' to inspire confidence in their long-term vision and leadership. As rhetorical tools designed to convince the public of what the government says, fantasy documents are 'imaginative fictions' that reflect what certain people hope will happen. As such, they are often short, vague and refer to a distant future. Making things more concrete, elites additionally devise more detailed, 'task-oriented plans' that are often written in a technical language, project tangible resources into the future, claim expertise and use significant political interests including national interests to persuade audiences of their legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Tor Hernes and Sally Maitlis have argued that future oriented sense-making is an especially important practice where different actors have a salient interest in creating 'interpretative schemes and produce one rather than another scheme as dominant in a given setting'.<sup>15</sup> Keeping this in mind, the closed political context of Qatar and the other Gulf States appears like a natural arena in which those in power will try

<sup>9</sup>Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, 1988.

<sup>10</sup>Dunmire, 'Knowing and Controlling the Future', 2010a, 241.

<sup>11</sup>Dunmire, *Projecting the Future Through Political Discourse: The Case of the Bush Doctrine*, 2010b, 4

<sup>12</sup>see also Inyatullah, "Reorienting Future Studies", 1999; Reyes, "Strategies of Legitimization in Political Discourse: From Words to Actions", 2011.

<sup>13</sup>Clarke, *Mission Probable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster*, 1999.

<sup>14</sup>ibid. 16

<sup>15</sup>Hernes and Maitlis, "Process, Sensemaking, and Organization", 2010, 19f.

to consolidate their position not only by controlling past and present, but also by devising 'fantasy documents' and 'projective plans' to ensure their control will extend into the future.

### 'The future' as a justification for urban development

In the field of urban studies, 'the future' has long been identified as a justification for urban development. For the purpose of this chapter, a specific body of scholarship stands out that assesses its meaning in non-democratic political contexts. Here, two interpretations of how the future is employed as a sense-making tool dominate the debate. On the one hand, urban spectacles are understood as symbolic structures that embody elite visions of a bright future. On the other hand, they are portrayed as bringing about economic success through increased direct foreign investment, lucrative real estate revenue and growing tourist numbers. In practice, these justifications are often intertwined, leading to a portrayal of urban development as the realisation of a larger social objective that is purposefully administered from above. In 'Urban reconstruction and autocratic regimes', Maria Cavalcanti<sup>16</sup> surveys how from the mid-19th century onwards autocratic political leaders have used the building up of their cities to project a forward-looking and future-oriented mode of governance. Looking forward rather than backward, urban (re)construction became a display of political aspirations, and an expression of the grandeur and future vision of the political regime. Importantly, these visions often grossly simplify the city as urban space and primarily come to serve the interests of particular stakeholders. Similarly, David Wachsmuth reminds us that 'the city-as-a-representation is not neutral or innocent, but rather is ideological, in the sense that its partiality helps obscure and reproduce relations of power and domination'.<sup>17</sup>

The idea that urban development promotes certain political orientations has been argued for by Aihwa Ong, stating that practices of 'hyperbuilding' in contemporary Asia are designed to 'rais[e] hopes and expectations about urban futures, and by extension the nation's growth'.<sup>18</sup> State-sponsored construction of hypermodern urban spaces in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Dubai, she argues, should be seen as reflections of their leaders' claim to geopolitical status and intense desire for world recognition. Writing on urban development in the Caspian capitals Astana, Ashgabat and Baku, Natalie Koch and Anar Valiyev moreover argue that boosterist urban projects -especially those that lack obvious demand- are typically justified according to the cliché claim 'built it and they will come'.<sup>19</sup> According to the authors, this logic builds on the local leadership's wish to advertise their capitalist and business-oriented orientations, as well as on the promotion of the image of a benevolent and 'magical state' that cares about the internal development and international standing of its people. Boosterist projects picked with references to the future therefore take on a distinct political

<sup>16</sup> Cavalcanti, "Urban Reconstruction and Autocratic Regimes: Ceausescu's Bucharest in Its Historic Context", 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Wachsmuth, "City as Ideology: Reconciling the Explosion of the City Form with the Tenacity of the City Concept", 2014, 76.

<sup>18</sup> Ong, "Hyperbuilding: Spectacle, Speculation, and the Hyperspace of Sovereignty", 2011, 209.

<sup>19</sup> Koch and Valiyev, "Urban Boosterism in Closed Contexts", 2015, 575.

tone, as they 'materialized the prevailing political system' and set in motion 'a particular economy of prestige promoting the presidential persona.'<sup>20</sup>

In a number of important publications, Natalie Koch and Andrew Gardner<sup>21</sup> moreover make similar observations in relation to urban development in the Gulf. What is still missing, however, is a sustained, single-focused analysis of the political implications of 'the future' as a sense-making tool to justify the building boom of this region. The usefulness of such an analysis is particularly apparent in the case of Qatar's capital city Doha, where virtually all major projects are portrayed as leading the country into a new era of economic prosperity, social harmony, and political stability. What is needed is an in-depth analysis of how a certain interpretation of the future is employed as a justification for urban construction, thereby only allowing a specific vision to be evoked in relation to the city's development. In Qatar, this vision is far from neutral, but invariably bound up with the legitimacy of Al Thani rule. Building on this literature, I argue in this chapter that as sense-making practices create interpretative schemes that favour one interpretation of social reality over another, they play an important part in processes of political consolidation and legitimation. In this context, I understand legitimacy not as a fixed property of the government, but as a quality of rule that emerges out of a continuing process. When studying urban development in Qatar, we have to ask whose interpretation of the future it is that these projects represent. While underlining the supposedly objective worth of their future potential, practices of urban development in Qatar are simultaneously made possible by and materialize the development visions of the ruling elite. Enjoying high levels of inter-textual dissemination, these visions have become so powerful that the future has lost its uncertainty, as it has been defined as a natural extension and desirable improvement of the status quo. As such, change becomes increasingly difficult and the local regime has found a powerful means to consolidate its rule. Through urban development, the vision of the ruling elite attains both a distinct symbolic and spatial form. Using iconic architecture and innovative construction techniques, the government brands the city, and by claiming that it is all for the future it ties itself and its legacy to the material development of the state. As such, urban development emerges as an ever-expanding basis for legitimation, as the development of the city for years and decades to come is officially bound to the visions created by the elite.

## Methodological Note

Research for this chapter first started with in situ observations during fieldwork in Qatar between 2015 and 2016, in which 'the future' was identified as a commonly used justification for large-scale urban development projects. Subsequently, the research process traced reference to the future across relevant parts of the local urban development discourse in the

<sup>20</sup> Koch and Valiyev, "Urban Boosterism in Closed Contexts, 2015, 578.

<sup>21</sup> Koch, "Building Glass Refrigerators in the Desert": Discourses of Urban Sustainability and Nation Building in Qatar" 2014.; Koch and Valiyev, "Urban Boosterism in Closed Contexts: Spectacular Urbanization and Second-Tier Mega-Events in Three Caspian Capitals", 2015.; Gardner, "The Transforming Landscape of Doha: An Essay on Urbanism and Urbanization in Qatar", 2013.; Gardner, "How the City Grows: Urban Growth and Challenges to Sustainable Development in Doha, Qatar", 2014.



form of a textual analysis of official, corporate and media documents from Qatar. The texts were collected during fieldwork, through standard internet searches, and through targeted LexisNexis searches. Overall, over 75 documents were analysed and coded according to emerging tropes with the help of the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. In the process, key terms and repeatedly used semantic structures pointing to the importance of the future worth of urban development were identified. Crucially, the analysis has shown that references to the future are limited to an interpretation of the future as anticipated in the government's national development plans. As such, while urban developers use references to the official discourse of the future to justify their own projects, they invariably re-produce the authority and consolidate the position of those who devised these plans. The aim of the analysis is therefore to uncover how meanings are fixed and to point to the inherent claims to power in the language describing urban mega-projects in Qatar. Eventually, this approach builds on the idea that we do not live in an objective world that exists 'out there' for us to discover, but in a social world of our own making.

### Envisioning the future - Building up Qatar for generations to come

'Qatar National Vision 2030 builds a bridge between the past and the future. It envisages a vibrant and prosperous country in which there is economic and social justice for all... Qatar's National Vision is authentic... It reflects the aspirations of the Qatari people and the resolve of their political leadership. Qatar National Vision belongs to the government, the private sector, civil society and to all Qatari citizens. I call on all to work hard and utilize your expertise to help achieve the goals of the Vision and to advance our nation's development. In this way, we will build a bright future for the people of Qatar.'

Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani<sup>22</sup>

The 'Qatar National Vision 2030' (QNV 2030), devised in 2008 by the General Secretariat for Development and Planning (GSDP) is Qatar's equivalent to Clarke's 'fantasy document'.<sup>23</sup> It is a comprehensive, 35-page short, and relatively vague document that in confident, inclusive and summoning language describes how the leadership envisions the future development of the state. It sets out to provide a framework based on the four pillars of human, social, economic and environmental development for how to transform Qatar into an advanced country by 2030. 'By shedding light on the future' the Vision claims, it 'illuminates the fundamental choices that are available to Qatari society' today.<sup>24</sup> Concerning urban development, it states that as Qatar has experienced massive population growth due to high levels of economic growth, it is necessary to devise a comprehensive urban development plan that 'adopts a sustainable policy with regard to urban expansion and population distribution'.<sup>25</sup> Since its publication, the QNV 2030 has developed into a major reference point of official discourse and public life in Qatar. Through high levels of intertextual dissemination, it is virtually omnipresent in

<sup>22</sup> GSDP "Qatar National Vision 2030", 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Clarke, *Mission Probable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster*, 1999.

<sup>24</sup> GSDP, "Qatar National Vision 2030", 2008, 2.

<sup>25</sup> GSDP, "Qatar National Vision 2030", 2008, 33.

everyday life, where it constantly (re)produces a complex set of beliefs, assumptions and representations of where the state is moving, and who is moving it forward.

Making the QNV 2030 more concrete is the 'Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016' (QNDS) published by GSDP in 2011.<sup>26</sup> A comprehensive, 270-page long document written in a more technical language, it represents Clarke's conception of a 'task-oriented plan'.<sup>27</sup> Portrayed as the 'product of consultation with all segments of Qatari society'<sup>28</sup> and as being devised in coordination with 'expertise from around the world'<sup>29</sup>, the QNDS is presented as a legitimate future plan based on popular inclusion and objective expertise. It announces total gross domestic investments of QR 820bn [approx. US\$ 22bn] between 2011-2016, and estimates central government ('public') investments at QR 347bn [US\$ 9bn].<sup>30</sup> Concerning urban development, it anticipates that public infrastructure spending will peak in 2012, which 'reflects existing plans for the launch of mega projects'<sup>31</sup>. The QNDS justifies these substantial investments on the grounds of 'a genuine desire for reform that is in the best interest of the country'<sup>32</sup> and as building a 'solid foundation for the future'.<sup>33</sup> While recognizing that 'predicting the future is always a hazardous activity'<sup>34</sup>, the QNDS nevertheless underlines its concern for 'future generations' and 'future economic benefit' on almost every page. Overall, the term 'future' appears 196 times in the document.<sup>35</sup>

Anyone who has been to Doha, visited some of its sights or talked to some locals, is likely to have heard references to these documents to explain and justify practices as diverse as the hosting of art exhibitions, the expansion of a street, or the opening of a recreational park. As such, QNV 2030 and QNDS have acquired 'common sense' status, with their authority and knowledge claims going largely unchallenged. They have emerged as dominant rhetorical tools that quickly justify behaviour without having to explain it further. Since they are endowed with the authority of the leaders of the state, challenging the vision becomes equivalent to challenging the political authorities. Disguised as inclusive visions that illuminate choices and possibilities, they are actually powerful discursive tools that produce a dominant interpretation of present and future, thereby actively closing down opportunities for opposition and change.

<sup>26</sup> GSDP, "Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016", 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Clarke, *Mission Probable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster*, 1999.

<sup>28</sup> GSDP, "Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016", 2011, iii.

<sup>29</sup> GSDP, "Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016", 2011, 23.

<sup>30</sup> GSDP, "Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016", 2011, 5.

<sup>31</sup> GSDP, "Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016", 2011, 5.

<sup>32</sup> GSDP, "Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016", 2011, 3.

<sup>33</sup> GSDP, "Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016", 2011, 44.

<sup>34</sup> GSDP, "Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016", 2011, 5.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to the QNV 2030 and the QNDS, researchers and practitioners of urban development have for a number of years been speaking about the imminent publication of a 'Qatar National Master Plan' (see Salama and Wiedmann 2013; Rizzo 2014). At the time of writing, no such document exists in Qatar and it is unclear when and whether the Qatari government will publish such a plan, especially after the recent re-structuring of the former Ministry of Municipality and Urban Development, which in January 2016 was merged with the former Ministry of Environment to form the Ministry of Municipality and the Environment (Kovessy, Fahmy and Walker 2016).

As urban developers across Qatar's mega-projects refer to the QNV 2030 and the QNDS to legitimate their projects, urban development takes on the form of a spectacle, the material translation of a dominant *Weltanschauung*, the objectified existence of a dominant vision. Through promoting urban mega-projects as tangible practices to achieve more abstract development visions, the Qatari leadership materializes and projects its power into the future and invariably binds its legacy to the material development of the state. In a way, the logic of 'build it and they will come' is implicitly replaced by the logic of 'build it and we will stay'. For the present analysis, this logic is especially relevant in relation to urban development projects that seem to lack obvious demand, and can be described as 'vanity projects' aiming to showcase Qatar as a progressive, modern and innovative state.<sup>36</sup>

Take for example the 'Msheireb Downtown Doha' project currently underway to re-furbish Doha's old town centre. The developer of the project, Msheireb Properties (MP), is a subsidiary of the royal-family run Qatar Foundation (QF) and was officially 'established as a commercial venture to support the Foundation's aims and the Qatar National Vision 2030'.<sup>37</sup> According to MP, 'the Msheireb Project can be summarised in one phrase: 'rooted in the past while looking into the future'.<sup>38</sup> Aiming to develop a 'new architectural language' to express Qatar's unique national identity while simultaneously utilising the latest sustainable construction practices, the mixed-used development will comprise more than 100 buildings upon completion. According to corporate communications, it is designed to 'unite the Doha of yesterday with the vision of Doha tomorrow', and will become an 'iconic landmark for Doha – a globally recognisable community where people live, work and thrive'.<sup>39</sup> The notion of the future worth of the project is perhaps most clearly expressed in a 2009 publication of the Qatar Foundation newsletter 'The Foundation' which describes the project on its title page as 'building the future of Qatar'.<sup>40</sup> Marketing the development as 'a long-term endowment for Qatar Foundation', it moreover underlines its 'lasting, sustained value to the people of Qatar'.<sup>41</sup>

Striking an inclusive tone, Msheireb Downtown Doha is portrayed as the outcome of the 'collective vision of the Emir of Qatar, His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, and Her Highness Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned, supporting the principles of progress and tradition, freedom and responsibility, new and old cultures, innovation and stability'.<sup>42</sup> By furthermore stating that Msheireb unveils the 'extraordinary plans for the future of Doha' and that it is a necessary project to engage with Qatar's rapid development, the project serves as a tangible expression of the inevitability of the future as envisioned by the elite.

<sup>36</sup> Focusing on these projects allows for the exclusion of a number of other urban mega-projects such as the new Hamad International Airport or the Education City campus, which next to adding to Qatar's spectacular architecture are furthermore built with intrinsic future benefits in mind, such as the establishment of Doha as a transportation hub and the promotion of higher education and knowledge.

<sup>37</sup> Msheireb Properties, "Msheireb Properties - About", 2016a.

<sup>38</sup> Msheireb Properties, "Msheireb Properties - Projects", 2016b.

<sup>39</sup> Msheireb Properties, "Msheireb Properties - Projects", 2016b; Msheireb Properties, "Msheireb Downtown Doha", 2016c.

<sup>40</sup> The Foundation, 2009, 26.

<sup>41</sup> The Foundation, 2009, 28.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 28.

Another of Doha's urban mega-project that is marketed as a crucial investment into the state's future is the artificial island 'The Pearl-Qatar'. Its developer, the United Development Company (UDC), understands its mission to 'identify and invest in long-term projects contributing to Qatar's growth'.<sup>43</sup> 'In an economic environment made possible by the skilled leadership of His Highness the Emir of the State of Qatar', The Pearl is UDC's showcase project, officially 'designed and engineered to be an everlasting icon for Qatar' while at the same time aspiring to become 'one of the most desirable addresses in the Gulf region'.<sup>44</sup> Marketing the island as an 'investment in a place of outstanding beauty and cosmopolitan charm', UDC presents the Pearl as a place that will 'redefine an entire nation' as 'a destination of qualities which are unique in the region'.<sup>45</sup> To justify investments currently estimated to reach up to US\$ 15bn, UDC refers to the 'Promising Future' of the entire region, and the big ambitions of Qatar in which a place like The Pearl is 'just the beginning'.<sup>46</sup>

What these examples show is that large-scale urban development projects in Qatar are similarly justified as contributing to the realization of the state's bright and shiny future. While these interpretations correspond to the future as envisioned by the regime, they leave pressing questions of social segregation, economic inequality, or transport issues unthinkable and unanswered. In this context, the power of the future-oriented narrative lies in the fact that it can transcend the problems of today by placing its accountability onto undefined future reference points. As long as the projects are not completed, the discursive resource of referring to the future remains; and even once they have been completed, established as well as new fantasy documents and future plans remain as powerful references and prescriptions for further action. As an effect of the employment of the future as a sense-making tool, places like Msheireb or The Pearl emerge as self-contained spaces embodying anticipated, virtual realities that reflect the unchallenged power of their visionary producers. Throughout Qatar's urban development landscape, however, the use of 'the future' as a justifying sense-making tool is most apparent in its to-date single largest construction project, Lusail City.

<sup>43</sup> United Development Company, "Corporate Profile", 2016a.

<sup>44</sup> United Development Company, "Our People", 2016b; United Development Company, "The Pearl-Qatar (TPQ)", 2016c.

<sup>45</sup> Brochure Madina Centrale no date.

<sup>46</sup> Ali, "Qatar Shows It Is Not a One-Track Economy", 2015.

## Lusail – ‘The visionary future city of Qatar’

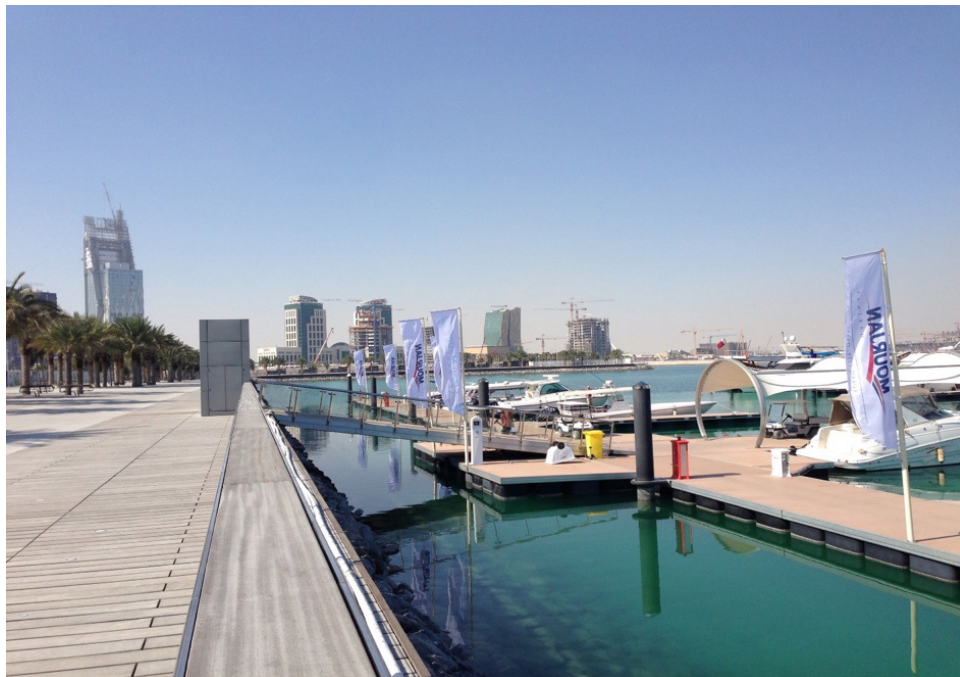


Figure 1: The Lusail City Marina in January 2016<sup>47</sup>

Lusail City is an urban mega-project without obvious demand. This, at least, is the impression one gets when visiting Doha and engaging with citizens and residents in a conversation about the need to build a new, self-contained city just outside of the capital. Based on this initial observation, the question emerges how the Lusail City project has become possible and constructed as a sensible project for Qatar’s urban growth. Since the project was launched in 2005, academic analyses have primarily focused on the city as an elite exercise in showcasing Qatar’s commitment to sustainable development and green energy.<sup>48,49</sup> While questions of urban sustainability certainly do merit detailed academic attention as a long-term issue faced by all Gulf states, in the context of this chapter I want to pay attention to another feature of the Lusail project, namely the political implications behind repeated references to ‘the future’

<sup>47</sup> Author’s photo.

<sup>48</sup> see Adham, “Rediscovering the Island: Doha’s Urbanity from Pearls to Spectacle”, 2008.; Wiedmann et al 2012.; Kamrava 2012.; Koch, “Building Glass Refrigerators in the Desert: Discourses of Urban Sustainability and Nation Building in Qatar”, 2014.; MEED - Middle East Business Intelligence, “Qatari Diar”, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Besides its much discussed emphasis on sustainability, Lusail City can moreover be seen as an identity-building mechanisms given that the name ‘Lusail’ refers to an old Arabian desert flower, and the city is being constructed in same place where the founder of the modern state of Qatar, Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed Al Thani, had built Lusail Castle (see Kamrava 2012).

as a justification for its existence. In line with the general argument of the paper, I argue that the portrayal of Lusail City as 'Qatar's future city' has to be understood as a form of spectacle that embodies, re-produces and projects the continuous validity of the development vision of the Al Thani elite, hence serving as both a symbolic and material base for the long-term legitimization of its rule.

A look at the project's main developers, and an analysis of their corporate communication strategy supports this argument. Lusail City was first conceived by Qatari Diar, one of Qatar's biggest and wholly government-owned real estate companies. As a government entity, Qatari Diar does not report annual profits or losses, which makes it difficult to assess its projects on purely commercial grounds. While concrete numbers on the cost of Lusail City remain obscure, it has been valued between US\$ 33bn and US\$ 45bn by outside observers.<sup>50</sup> To oversee its development, Qatari Diar set up a subsidiary, the Lusail Real Estate Development Company (LREDC), in 2006. Since then, the meaning of Lusail for Qatar's urban development has progressed through a number of stages.

Initially imagined to serve the rising demand for residential, commercial and retail space in the country,<sup>51</sup> the project was subsequently re-interpreted as an important step to transform Qatar into a 'hub' for energy businesses in the Gulf and broader Middle East region, giving rise to the idea of an 'Energy City'.<sup>52</sup> Over time, this emphasis on energy consolidated and received a major boost with the declaration of Lusail as a sustainable project in the late 2000s.<sup>53</sup> Around the same time, two additional new reference points to justify the project emerged with the publication of the QNV 2030 in 2008, and the decision in favour of Qatar to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup in 2010.<sup>54</sup> Especially the latter has contributed to the the importance of the Lusail City project for Qatar's future, as the yet-to-be-built Lusail City Stadium was selected as the venue for both the opening and closing ceremonies of the World Cup. Promising to become a 'spectacular venue inspired by Qatari tradition and culture', the stadium will be the biggest of six stadia currently under construction in Qatar, with a capacity to hold 80,000 spectators.<sup>55</sup> To justify the construction of the stadium, and more broadly the construction of the city with which it 'has been designed to be in harmony with'<sup>56</sup>, the Lusail Stadium is presented as a 'an important part of Qatar's future as a sports hub'.<sup>57</sup> Eventually, linking the existence of stadium and city to the future identity of Qatar as an energy and sports hub is a discursive move that strategically constructs these urban mega-projects as part of the state's broader, more long-term developments.

<sup>50</sup> MEED - Middle East Business Intelligence, "Qatari Diar", 2016.; Manfred, 2014.

<sup>51</sup> see Financial Times, "Cityscape: Qatar - The Gleaming Towers of Doha", 2006; MEED, "ABB Secures \$ 25.4m Order for the New Lusail City in Qatar", 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Energy City, "Energy City Qatar - Home - About Us - Vision", 2012.

<sup>53</sup> see Qatar Tribune, "Lusail City to Be 'Green, Sustainable Venture", 2010.; Qatar News Agency, "First Green Building Solutions Conference & Exhibition Doha 2011 on", 2011.

<sup>54</sup> see Qatar News Agency, "Qatari Investments in UK More than GBP30 Billion - Minister", 2014.; MEED - Middle East Business Intelligence, "Qatari Diar", 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Al Thani, "Lusail: A Link between Qatar's Rich Heritage and Future", 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Al Thani, "Lusail: A Link between Qatar's Rich Heritage and Future", 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Al Thani, "Lusail: A Link between Qatar's Rich Heritage and Future", 2015.

These ideas are reflected in the language that Qatari Diar uses to describe the project today. According to the company's website, Lusail 'embodies Qatar's National Vision in the field of real estate development', and 'signifies Qatar's progress on a grand scale'.<sup>58</sup> As a place where 'the art of real estate comes alive', the city is imagined as an 'exceptional', 'unique', and 'dedicated' to its community.<sup>59</sup> This interpretation is taken up in LREDC publications, which introduce Lusail as a visionary city that 'reinforces every facet of Qatar's national vision' and 'embodies the future aspirations' of the state.<sup>60</sup> Equipped with a visual language that underlines different aspects of Qatar's national identity, Lusail is justified as a project to safeguard local values and symbols in times of heightened globalisation, while simultaneously contributing to the establishment of Qatar as a globally recognized place of innovative and ground-breaking real estate development. In this context, the city is presented as a place where Qatar's broader ambitions to become a 'bridge' between East and West, modernity and tradition, becomes possible. In this context, Lusail is presented as an integral part of achieving the social, economic and environmental development pillars of the QNV 2030. On the one hand, Lusail is described as a 'smart', 'sustainable' and 'innovative' city that is supported by an 'infrastructure of the future'. On the other hand, is stylized into a place that will 'create diversity', and lead to the development of an 'integrated', 'modern' and 'ambitious' society.<sup>61</sup> Being much more than just a cluster of spectacular, expensive and potentially unnecessary material structures, official representations of Lusail construct the city as a place where Qatar's future hopes and dreams are about to come true.

Next to all these reference to how the project will contribute to Qatar's development some of the more practical aspects of Lusail City's future worth remain surprisingly vague. In corporate communications, as well as across a myriad of press and media documents, the project is generally described as a mixed, multi-purpose development that extends across an area of 38 square kilometres, includes four exclusive islands, 19 multi-purpose districts, and 22 hotels up to international standards. It is further portrayed as accommodating 200,000 residents, 170,000 employees, and 80,000 visitors, and as being supported by an infrastructure that will eventually sustain a population of 450,000 people. What is striking in reading these official plans, is that it remains largely unclear who these residents, employees and visitors are, what they will be doing and where they will be coming from. The same uncertainty shines through in conversations with locals of Doha. While it thus remains nebulous who the 'they' in 'build it and they will come' will be, there is no doubt concerning whose vision the construction of a place as spectacular as Lusail City supports. By presenting Lusail as the 'visionary future city of Qatar', the developers of the project reproduce a version of the future of the state as anticipated by the ruling elites, and quite literally participate in the construction of a future that can no longer be chosen, but that is already determined and beginning to unfold.

<sup>58</sup> Qatari Diar, "Lusail City", 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Qatari Diar, "Lusail City", 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Lusail Real Estate Development Company (LREDC), "Home» Who We Are» The Vision Is Taking Shape", 2016a.; Lusail Real Estate Development Company (LREDC), "Lusail City Information Brochure", no date, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Lusail Real Estate Development Company (LREDC), "Home» Who We Are» The Vision Is Taking Shape", 2016a.; Lusail Real Estate Development Company (LREDC), "Lusail City Information Brochure", no date, 9.

## Conclusion

Picked with references to 'the future', urban development in Qatar has taken on a distinct political dimension as it emerges as the tangible representation of a single, dominant development vision for the state. Crucially, this vision is far from being neutral and invariably linked to the continuous legitimation process of the incumbent Al Thani elite. While urban developers draw on documents like the QNV 2030 or the QNDS to justify their own projects they simultaneously re-produce and confirm the visionary authority of their creators. As urban mega-projects in and around Qatar's capital city Doha are being justified according to the state's broader development plans, they implicitly consolidate the position and underline the necessity of the staying in power of those who devised these plans. A major political implication of future oriented sense-making in justifications of urban development in Qatar are hence the limits it imposes on the possibility to imagine alternative futures both for the development of the urban landscape, and for the state and the society more broadly.

From a social constructivist point of view analysing the way we talk about the world can lead us to uncover the inherent power dynamics that shape it as a world of our making. What the above analysis has shown, is that the justification of urban mega-projects as anticipations of national progress and a bright future is closely linked to attempts by the ruling elite to disseminate a dominant interpretation of the state's development path. As the literature on future oriented sense-making has told us, an open and uncertain future is a potential threat to the status of those currently in power, which is why extensive efforts are put into managing, controlling and delimitating its uncertainty. A prominent tool to manage the future in Qatar- and arguably the Gulf more broadly- is the drafting of all-encompassing national development visions and plans that monopolize the discursive space and create long-term reference points and prescriptions for action. Crucially, these visions are constructed as belonging to the visionary leaders of the state, producing their authority as virtually unchallengeable. As a result, the future loses its potential as a site of the possible and potential and is transformed into an inevitable extension of the prevalent status quo.

Looking ahead, what is so powerful about these visionary documents in particular and 'the future' as a sense-making tool in general is that it cannot be falsified. Once the general idea that urban development can be justified according to its future potential becomes acceptable, those in power are free to replace and update their visions as soon as contexts change or once distant futures start coming closer. We have seen this in comparable settings of (soft) authoritarian rule and it is safe to expect that the Qatari government will replace its development visions every couple of years to further project the necessity and inevitability of its rule. As such, part of the regime's legitimation game is externalized into the future, where it is waiting to unfold much like a self-fulfilling prophecy.



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