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003	EDITORIAL
009	ALEXA FÄRBER TRACES OF THE FUTURE: URBAN TRANSFORMATION AND THE PROMISSORY MULTIPLICITY OF PHOTOBOOKS
023	MARY N. WOODS THE CITY HAS MEMORY: IMAGES OF RUIN AND RECLAMATION IN BOMBAY/MUMBAI
037	LARD BUURMAN MEDIATED PHOTOGRAPHY
055	DAVIDE DERIU PORTRAITS OF PLACES: GABRIELE BASILICO AND THE SLOWNESS OF THE GAZE
073	NICHOLAS BOYARSKY THE EPHEMERAL IMAGINATION: THE POSTCARD AND CONSTRUCTION OF URBAN MEMORY
087	CLARE MELHUISH TRANSFORMING DOHA
105	BIRGIT SCHILLAK-HAMMERS PICTURES OF BERLIN: CONSTRUCTION AND CONSERVATION OF A 1920S METROPOLIS
119	ELA KAÇEL SELF-LOCALIZATION OF MIGRANTS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS IN CITIES VIA SELF-IMAGES
137	MARKUS LANZ BRASÍLIA. PHOTOGRAPHING AGAINST THE IMAGE
155	BETTINA LOCKEMANN EXPLORING THE URBAN SPACE: METHODS FOR VISUAL URBAN RESEARCH
173	ELISABETH NEUDÖRFL PHOTOGRAPHER'S DILEMMA: "GOOD" PHOTOGRAPHY VS. "GOOD" PLANNING
191	ROMAN BEZJAK MODERN LANGUAGE AND ITS MULTIPLE DIALECTS

Transforming Doha

CLARE MELHUIISH

Biography

Clare Melhuish is Director and Principal Research Fellow at the UCL Urban Laboratory, London. She joined University College London in 2013 to continue research on the processes and impacts of large-scale urban transformation from a spatial, social, and design perspective. Her background is transdisciplinary, covering architectural history, social anthropology, material culture, and human geography, and her research draws on ethnographic and visual methods to interpret and understand architecture and the built environment as a social and cultural setting. Her particular areas of interest and expertise include Modern Movement and contemporary architecture and planning, postcolonial urban aesthetics and heritage, and urban regeneration policy and practice, with specializations in architecture and planning in the United Kingdom, France, the Gulf, and the Caribbean.

Prologue

These fieldwork images were taken in 2012 while conducting ethnographic research in Doha, Qatar, into the agency of computer-generated images (CGIs) in the realization of a large redevelopment project, Msheireb Downtown. Originally launched as “Heart of Doha,” this initiative was central to the Qatari government’s program of economic diversification and the re-positioning of the city as a modern, cosmopolitan center for education, culture, and tourism. The image sequence aims to provide insights into the scale and impact on ordinary city dwellers of the physical remaking of the urban environment, the loss of communities, and the technical and aesthetic processes involved in realizing a vision of a new kind of city.



Vision and Eviction

The Msheireb project was an enormous construction site in 2012, radically transforming the small-scale, dusty, dilapidated center of Doha, made up of small shops, old courtyard houses, shady *sikats* (alleys), and some modest new apartment blocks. The mainly Keralan (people from southwest India) and Bangladeshi residents, and small business owners who had occupied the site since the 1970s were evicted, while on the north edge of the site there are the Al-Diwan Al-Amiri (government offices) and several large houses belonging to various sheikhs who will benefit from the redevelopment of what some have described as slums.







Demolition and Loss

It should have taken five minutes to reach the client's office by car, but there was a long traffic jam up Wadi Msheireb, the road leading from Souq Waqif, along the edge of the construction site. This would form the edge of "Phase 4" of the development, where the tallest buildings will be located—a huge contrast in scale to the intimate urban and social fabric extending away from it on the other side of the street. The sheer scale and social implications of the project signal the state-led developer's intent to re-invent Doha at the heart of the city center.





Tools and Techniques

The project delivery office was on the point of moving to a new location off-site that would house a special “Mock-Ups Farm,” in which full-size mock-ups of building details would be installed, as well as a hangar-like building for presentations to Her Highness the Sheikha as the project progresses. For now, progress is marked on a whiteboard covered with rows of views hand sketched in 3D with black felt pen. There is also a room full of printed renders in different stages of development: “We’re working so fast—just trying to get it done—we’re trying,” comments an employee. The images must be “accurate, and not confusing,” I’m told, creating a tangible idea of place before it exists.





Relics and Memories

Nearby is a beautiful old double-courtyard building painted pale green in which various rooms are being used to store a huge collection of found objects and personal items left behind by the displaced community from the Msheireb site: photographs never collected, letters home, pieces of shop equipment and goods; a letter from a daughter in Bangladesh to her father begging him to come home, whatever the cost.

These residents and shop owners were given two months notice to leave and offered new accommodation in Barwa Village, at the edge of the city, where there is no passing footfall. The objects were collected from the site just before demolition began by artists from the Prince's Drawing School in London. They produced sketches based on their findings, some of which were exhibited on the walls of the site office. The plan is for the objects to be displayed one day in a museum on the site.





Reinventing Community

Within the Msheireb site, now a huge hole in the ground the size of a whole city neighborhood, enlarged CGIs are mounted on billboards with physical mock-ups made of proposed landscaping materials laid out in front of them. Digital technology means that “romanticized Msheireb is something that’s happening ... People look at the renders and say: ‘these streets are really tight, these alleys are really close’ ... That’s the essence of community” (marketing official). Guest workers keep the site and its images clean and tidy.



Epilogue

We visit at noon on a Saturday, passing through the “big buildings”—the new government facilities under construction at the northern edge of the site—and visiting the “heritage houses” that have been rebuilt for conversion into museums. One of these is intended to house the material culture retrieved from the site prior to redevelopment. The architect’s commentary focuses on massing, molding, and intuition. It is always defined by the “views” through the new urban landscape that is being digitally designed and visualized at speed, and at a distance, from London. Meanwhile, embedded on site, construction workers labor in very different conditions to materialize a vision of a new kind of place in Doha that tells a different story from the city they know, and one they will not be part of.





Notes:

All photos © Clare Melhuish 2012. Dr. Clare Melhuish was Research Assistant on the research project "Architectural Atmospheres, Branding and the Social: The impact of digital visualising technologies on contemporary architectural practice" (2011–13), which was led by Professor Gillian Rose and Dr. Monica Degen, and funded by a grant from the UK Economic and Social Research Council (RES-062-23-3305). Findings and analyses from the project were presented in the exhibition curated by Clare Melhuish and accompanying conference *Visualising Atmospheres: Digital Placemaking in the 21st century* (2013) at the Building Centre, London, and have been published in *Tasmeem* (2014), *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (2014), *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2015), *City and Society* (2016), and in the book *Cities Interrupted: Visual Culture and Urban Space* (eds. Christoph Lindner and Shirley Jordan, 2015).

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