



SPRING 2009

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE

4.617: Balancing Globalism and Regionalism: The Heart of Doha Project

Instructor: Nasser Rabbat

Prerequisite: Permission of Instructor

Wednesday from 2 to 5 in Room 5-216

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**Submit two paragraph statement of intent to Nasser Rabbat,
via email <nasser@mit.edu>, by Jan. 20th. Enrollment limited to 10**

In the last two decades, the Arabian Gulf experienced an extraordinary urban boom fueled by a global economy looking for new, profitable outlets and an accumulated oil wealth seeking easy and safe investments at home. The combined capital found its ideal prospect in developing gargantuan business parks and malls, luxury housing and hotels, and touristic, cultural, and entertainment complexes. Architecture at once assumed the role of branding instrument and spectacular wrapping for these new lavish enterprises, which swiftly sprang up in cities like Dubai, Doha, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Manama, Riyadh, and Kuwait.

Yet, not all recent architecture in the Gulf readily fits what Joseph Rykwert matter-of-factly calls the "Emirate Style," a style whose extravagant flights of fancy seem to depend only on the unbridled imagination of the designers and the willingness of their patrons to bankroll those fantasies. Various large-scale projects are trying to reverse the trend by judiciously using the vast financial resources available to produce quality design that tackles some of the most urgent social, cultural, and environmental issues facing those countries today. These urban and architectural experiments, like Masdar City in Abu Dhabi, the Heart of Doha in Qatar, and KAUST Campus in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, hailed as design tours de force, have yet to be studied from a historical and sociocultural perspective. Their design and technological innovations need to be examined from the angle of their assumptions, appropriateness, and impact on the environment, as well as from that of their avant-gardism, desirability, and aims.

This seminar seeks to establish a critical framework for the study of the Arabian Gulf cities and their quest for architectural identity and urban stability. The focus of the investigation will be the Heart of Doha Project in Doha, Qatar, an ambitious project of urban renewal that covers approximately 35 hectares in the center of the city. By advocating simple design principles such as respect for topography and ecology, thoughtful adaptation of regional norms and environmental strategies, and promotion of contemporaneity rooted in heritage, the Heart of Doha aspires to regenerate the historic core of the city and to act as a stimulus for future wider city renaissance. Its ultimate objective, however, is to propose a new paradigm of architecture and planning for the cities of the Arabian Gulf.

The seminar is open to graduate students with some knowledge of Islamic and/or contemporary architecture in the Gulf region. The course includes weekly reading and writing assignments and/or design mini-projects. It requires active participation in weekly discussions. Class assignments and final papers will be used in a report to be published on AKPIA@MIT website. A print publication may be considered.

The class will take a trip to Doha during Spring Break 2009. We will tour major projects in the city including the Heart of Doha site, visit Doha Land, Qatar Foundation, ARUP, and some top architectural firms in the city and organize discussions with officials in those agencies. The final project, which may be pursued individually or collaboratively, will take the lessons learned from our investigation and develop them into position papers/designs. Final projects will be presented during the last two weeks of the semester.