



## 2010 On Site Review Report

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by *Hassan Radoine*

# Souk Waqif

*Doha, Qatar*



### **Architect**

*Private Engineering Office, Mohamed Ali Abdullah*

### **Client**

*Amiri Diwan*

### **Design**

*2004 - 2007*

### **Completed**

*2008*



## **Souk Waqif \***

*Doha, Qatar*

### **I. Introduction**

The project of Souk Waqif is a unique architectural revival of one of the most important heritage sites in the city of Doha. Exploring remaining dilapidated structures of an overused souk, the designer was able to rejuvenate the memory of the place through highly artistic mediums and thorough field research. It is more a rehabilitation action than a restoration one that restructures the urban layout of the souk, and organizes its functions to meet the contemporary needs. On the contrary of heritage theme parks known in the Gulf cities, the designer succeeded in creating an original experience around the site of the project that most visitors see as authentic. It represents truly the Qatari cultural memory.

### **II. Contextual Information**

#### **A. *Brief Historical Background***

Souk Waqif is an ancient local market in Doha that reflects the close trade and cultural exchange with Iranian southern borders and other Gulf countries. Located on one of the banks of Wadi Mishrieh (river) that connects the sea to the land, Souk Waqif played a major role in the development of the city of Doha. Its name “Standing Market” derived from the fact that merchants sold their goods while standing when the banks were often wet during wintertime. This topographical condition created a buffer zone between the souk and the sea known as Kharis (a land full with water). This Kharis was used according to water movement throughout the year. The souk was mentioned first in historic documents around 1766 AD. With the gradual development of the little town of Doha, most merchants transformed their plots and houses in the souk to shops, and formed an attractive and dynamic permanent market for all sorts of goods. Its organization consisted of 3 parts:

- Storage and large areas, known as ‘amayer’, for wholesale and retail for construction materials, dates and rice.
- Craft shops.
- Ambulant merchants’ open air stalls.

The goods sold in the market were imported from Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, India, and Persia. Among these goods, there was an essential construction material: a timber called “dangeel” that was used for roofing and changed dramatically the building typology of this Gulf region. The souk attracted traders from all different mentioned places. With time some settled in Doha forever, which explains the very diverse ethnic background of the owners of shops.

## **B. *Local Architectural Character***

The architecture of Souk Waqif is typical of the northern part of Arabian Peninsula that is deeply influenced by the southern architecture of Iran. The building system applied consists of walls formed with series of bearing incorporated columns with a span of 90cm. The gaps between the pillars are filled with seashore stone creating alternatively windows and blind arched plastered latticed panels for decorative purpose. The main joint used in these structures was a mortar obtained from mixing mud and gypsum. The roofs were often flat composed of mangrove poles and covered with woven bamboo fixed with ropes.

The facades were and are rich though their architectural simplicity. The apparent structural skeleton with rough coating is a key feature of all the facades around the souk. The scarcity of the wood 'dangeel' made it sacred to the level that when it is used for roofing whatever remains outside the borders of the walls is maintained and hanging with different sizes. This attitude is a proof of the importance of wood as a rare material in the local environment. It was often imported from East Africa or India. This has defined the character of buildings, and through the location of these flying beams one could determine the different stories and create a nice crowning part of the façade.

Most buildings do not exceed two to three floors, and their urban layout is not as complex as other souks in the Muslim world. The urban pattern is more spontaneous as the souk was first built following a market distribution of shops that were gradually constructed.

## **C. *Climatic Conditions***

The climate in Doha is Saharan and temperature varies throughout the year from 12°C in January and 45°C in July. During most of the year the weather is dry and dusty. The rain is scarce, and humidity is high during the summer.

## **E. *Topography of the Project Site***

Souk Waqif is located behind the corniche next to Grand Hamed Street. The whole site is flat though it was not the case in the past as described above. The shoreline has been pushed forward, and a whole constructible area has been added by filling in the shore perimeter. This has changed the morphology of the location as well as the topographical condition of the surrounding of the souk.

# **III. Programme**

## **A. *History of the Inception of the Project***

Due to the oil economy, most Gulf countries have destroyed their heritage and their cities have become very global. Doha is an example of this phenomenon. The local rulers and decision makers have realized this utter destruction that occurred from 1950 to 1980. Therefore, the

idea of rejuvenating and reconstructing lost heritage. The Emir of Qatar His Highness (Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani) invited around 2,000 and 2,002 number of international experts to propose a design for the reconstruction of the souk, but he was not pleased with the results. While walking around the streets of Doha, he noticed a private villa constructed in the local architectural style that he admired. He invited the owner of this villa to investigate on the designer, and the discovery was the owner is the designer: a reputable Qatari artist, Mohamed Ali Abdullah.

The Emir asked Mohamed Abdullah to provide him with his vision on the reconstruction of souk Waqif. After a short period, Mohamed presented three or four watercolour drawings on how the souk would look like. The Emir was astonished with these primary renderings, and ordered Mohamed to start immediately the works. After researching and studying the history, architecture, culture, and environment of souk Waqif, the artist had a clear comprehensive image of the souk. As it will be shown through the illustrations, Mohamed's talent is beyond grasp as to how he generated all lost spaces and reconstructed all missing parts. He travelled across the Arabian Gulf (Arabic and Persian sides), and collected extraordinary visual materials in order to assure the authenticity of his proposal for the souk. He relied as well on archival aerial photos that demonstrate how souk Waqif was exactly before destruction and misuse.

***B. How were the Architects and Specialists chosen?***

As mentioned earlier, the Amiri Diwan chose the artist Mohamed Ali Abdullah, who proved his talent to the Emir about the possibility of generating a first experience around the Souk Waqif. The Private Engineering Office of the Amiri Diwan supervised the technical process and execution of works.

***C. General Program Objectives***

The artist's strategy relied mainly on the following objectives in order to synergize the souk again:

- Reconstruct the lost image of historic Doha through the rehabilitation of its authentic Souk Waqif.
- Protect the area of the souk and its surrounding from real estate development.
- Create an open air public area totally pedestrianised.
- Establish a vibrant souk with its original layout and goods.

***D. Functional Requirements***

This urban renovation project had to resolve the following issues:

- Augment the human dimension and users' experience.
- Conserve the activities of the souk and distribution of its specialized areas.

- Activate the social memory.
- Update and modernize its services.
- Maintain an authentic environment.
- Restore the dilapidated buildings.
- Remove alterations and random additions.
- Reconstruct the lost parts.
- Create organic pathways and alleys.
- Provide maximum shaded area.

#### **IV. Description**

##### **A. *Building Data***

The Souk Waqif covers an area of 164,000m<sup>2</sup>. Following the site visit, the souk could be divided to areas that differ in terms of historical value as well as urban layout.

- Old Souk that encompasses Bo Sieda hotel, souk al Tamween, and al Nesaa Majlis. This section is the most authentic of the souk in terms of architectural vocabulary as well forms. However, there are sections that were added and were not existent historically.
- Al Ahmed area that encompasses souk Al Ahmed, souk al Toyour, al Ahmed Plaza, al Ahmed mosque, souk al Baker, and Bism Allah Hotel. This area is located around Al Ahmed Street. Originally this section was Kharis (wet land and shoreline) separated from the original old souk by Wadi (river) Mishrieb. It is totally newly made and has no authenticity, but created a pedestrian promenade by covering the river that divided the whole area to two.
- Al Nagada area that encompasses Qaisariah, restaurants, souk al Mahra, Fakhro House, and al Quot Fort. It is located around al Nagada Street, and al Bank al Arabi roundabout. It is partially original. Mohamed Abdullah considers it as a continuum of the souk Waqif that stretches the main current created pedestrian artery.
- Al Jassrah area that encompasses souk al Mane', Jasem al Meslemani House, al Jassrah souk, poetry majlis, al Jassrah mosque, and al Abd al Wahab mosque. It is located between Abd Allah ben Jassim Street and al Jassrah Street. What is authentic here is the historic house of Meslemani and the mosques. The urban pattern was fully recreated with new functions added.
- Horses stable area that encompasses a second Meslemani house, horses stable, Private Engineering Office, and al Owegan house. It is located around al Jassrah Street and al Souk Street on the West side of the whole area of the project. It is totally recreated and it is not as well designed as the previous sections. It is more formal area for Emiri technical staff in the Private Engineering Office.

In addition to these divisions and spatial disposition, the accessibility both vehicular and pedestrian is well studied. However, the parings' vast areas create a non-authentic experience, and contradict the whole purpose of the site. The heights do not exceed 3 levels with a meticulous volumetric composition that enhances the added value of Souk Waqif aesthetic dimension that is widely appreciated by professionals and users.

### ***B. Evolution of Design Concepts***

The design concept in souk Waqif consists of bringing back the memory of the place through rehabilitation, renovation or reconstruction actions. Based on the remaining dilapidated structures the artist Mohamed Abdullah restituted a lost place once vibrant with its activities and people. The project started out as a set of drawings to convince the Emir about the possibility of reviving Souk Waqif, and ended up with an investment of 1 billion Qatari Riyals, making it one of the biggest heritage projects in the Gulf region. This proves the success of the design story locally and how the designer's talent ignited a whole interest of decision makers on the richness of their heritage and its potential development.

The artist and designer before embarking on the revival of souk Waqif was acquainted with the cultural history of Doha through an illustrated story he made. The hand drawn illustrations depict the daily life of Qatari people and their close interaction with sea. This imaginary story will become a background for a real project that would serve Mohamed Abdullah to recreate a concrete cultural environment around the souk. From reconstruction of the urban pattern to architectural renewal, the souk was fully conceived at its highest urban maturity that once existed. The souk faced continuous alterations and transformations, and became clandestine.

After finalizing the conceptual proposal, the designer was provided by a team of technicians and craftsmen to conduct the works from 2004 to 2007.

### ***C. Structure, Materials, Technology***

In the old souk, the construction techniques are not advanced as in other Islamic cities. All buildings had the same structural system as described earlier. A skeleton constituted of a series of pillars in sun-backed bricks supporting light beams of "dangeel" wood. The roofs are made of bamboo covered with matting and a layer of clay that serves as a stabilizer and a ground for the upper floors. As Gulf Arabian countries are more nomadic, most of their settlements are a mixture of imported techniques from all over Arabia and Persia. Although certain know-how was developed in situ, building structural elements are traceable elsewhere.

### ***D. Origins of Technology, Materials, Labour Force, Professionals***

The Souk Waqif project relied on a team of multi-ethnic background supervised by a local designer. Most craftsmen and labour force are from Asia. During the project several skills were acquired, and are currently being explored for the renovation of a complete lost city in Doha, Wakra.

Not all parts of souk Waqif are made out of traditional materials. In some extensions, concrete and cement were used heavily to speed up the construction. Because of continuous critics among professionals outside and inside about the use of concrete, the Emir intervene personally to stop its use and made sudden visits to assure that the renovation is carried out with traditional materials.

## **V. Construction Schedule and Costs**

### **A. *History of Project Design and Implementation***

2004-2007

### **B. *Total Costs***

Cost of purchase of the whole souk:	1 billion Qatari Riyals
Cost of renovation works:	300 million Qatari Riyals
Total cost:	1,300,000,000 Qatari Riyals

## **VI. Technical Assessment**

### **A. *Functional Assessment***

Souk Waqif is functioning very well. It is a high destination in the city of Doha and becomes one of its key landmarks. The souk provides an authentic experience that is rare in this kind of projects that are often very superficial and portray a theme park image such as in the case of Bastakiya in Dubai. This is due mainly to the preservation of the original activities of the souk that attracts locals and visitors for shopping and entertainment.

### **B. *Climatic Performance***

The addition of shaded areas around the souk created more cooled walking spaces without altering the historic image of the place. In some cases, alleys were covered to guarantee more tolerable pedestrian pathways to heat. Air conditioning systems are well studied and inserted in a genuine way for not disturb the facades nor the streets. They are often located in terraces. The materials serve also an efficient means of insulation between inside and outside which optimizes the use of energy.

### **C. *Response to, and Planning for, Emergency Situations***

The project is highly equipped with emergency and evacuation infrastructure. The alleys are all with an exit, and their width though is original in some areas are sufficient to drive small

vehicle through. Measures to avoid flooding are taken by keeping the traditional channels between buildings. The security is very high during night and daytime.

***D. Ageing and Maintenance***

The project has generated unprecedented awareness among municipality officials about the value of Qatari Heritage. Therefore, all resources are explored continuously to maintain its physical and environmental aspects.

***E. Design Features***

The most important design feature in this project is that a local artist has generated a real human and authentic around the renovated souk. This is due mainly to his grasp of the human scale and memory that he tried to interpret throughout the development of the project. What is special in his design that should be highly appreciated is that he did not rely only on architectural drawing to impress, but rather on providing contextual interpretation of Qatari heritage through years of research in the region. Although the project cannot be assessed as a restoration project as it does not meet the international and regional standards, its innovative side resides in rehabilitating its old structures and creating around them a genuine place. This design based-rehabilitation has generated a new path for the reconstruction of heritage in the Gulf countries that are known for their spread architectural pastiche.

***F. Impact of the Project on the Site***

The project of renovation of Souk Waqif has a great impact on the city of Doha. It has enhanced its sense of identity and place. The success of the project has convinced local decision makers to extend its scope from the old souk to its lost surroundings as described in the 5 parts that constitute its site in Building Data.

Because of this cultural project, the whole site of the souk and its urban periphery are protected. No skyscrapers are allowed in its wide perimeter where the famous Islamic Arts Museum is situated.

***G. Durability and Long-term Viability of the Project***

On the contrary of heritage areas that are sold to private developers in Dubai, souk Waqif is currently the property of the Municipality of Doha under the auspices of Emiri Diwan. This has given a high value to the souk as a national Qatari treasure. According to a local person, “souk Waqif is the only place where we can breathe our history”.

## **VII. Users**

### **A. *Description of those who use or Benefit from the Project***

Different groups use the renovated souk: shoppers, tourists, merchants, and residents. Outside the environment of mega malls, this is the only open-air public shopping space in Doha. It provides a long walking itinerary, which is animated with quality restaurants and coffee shops. Educational materials are displayed in different spots to remind the passerby on the memory of the souk. All services are within walking distance. The vehicular circulation is managed outside the pedestrian zones, which encourages people to walk and shop.

### **B. *Response to Project by Clients, Users, Community***

After conducting several interviews with users in the souk, I have gathered the following reactions. The national Qatari people express their appreciation both to their ruler who has showed determination to rejuvenate their common heritage and to the success of the souk after renovation. The number of nationals visiting the site is remarkable in comparison with other heritage sites in the Gulf countries. They shop, eat, and stay in the souk till late in the night every day of the week. The tourists and visitors enjoy the souk for it is the only still alive heritage place in Doha. Most heritage sites are dead or archaeological without users. Thus, souk Waqif provides a vibrant cultural image. It is also an anchor to local communities to be identified around a shared heritage.

The architectural professionals welcomed the project. Although some architects criticized the fact that an artist and not an educated architect design it, they also confessed that they learned from this project about the lost local architectural vocabulary. Mohammed Abdullah is becoming a reference for private architects who consult with him whenever a project requires contextual knowledge. The National Qatari Mosque in Doha was a collaborative design of Mohamed Abdullah with reputed local practicing architect.

Another group of professional that could not fully accept the project is of archaeologists who criticize the restoration method of the souk. Specialized in archaeological sites, these archaeologists could not grasp the revival of heritage to be updated for contemporary use. However, the souk gradually is becoming an integrated part of the cityscape of Doha.

The neighbours in the immediate vicinity praise the project as it provides them with quality shopping and entertaining hub. It human scale engenders as well a sense of tranquillity and open sight that is often absent in Gulf cities that are dense with skyscrapers.

The last group that is under question to use the souk is that of labourers. Recently due to complaints to shoppers about the large of masses of workers who flood the souk on holidays, the municipality has limited the access of workers in groups or big masses.

## **VIII. Persons Involved**

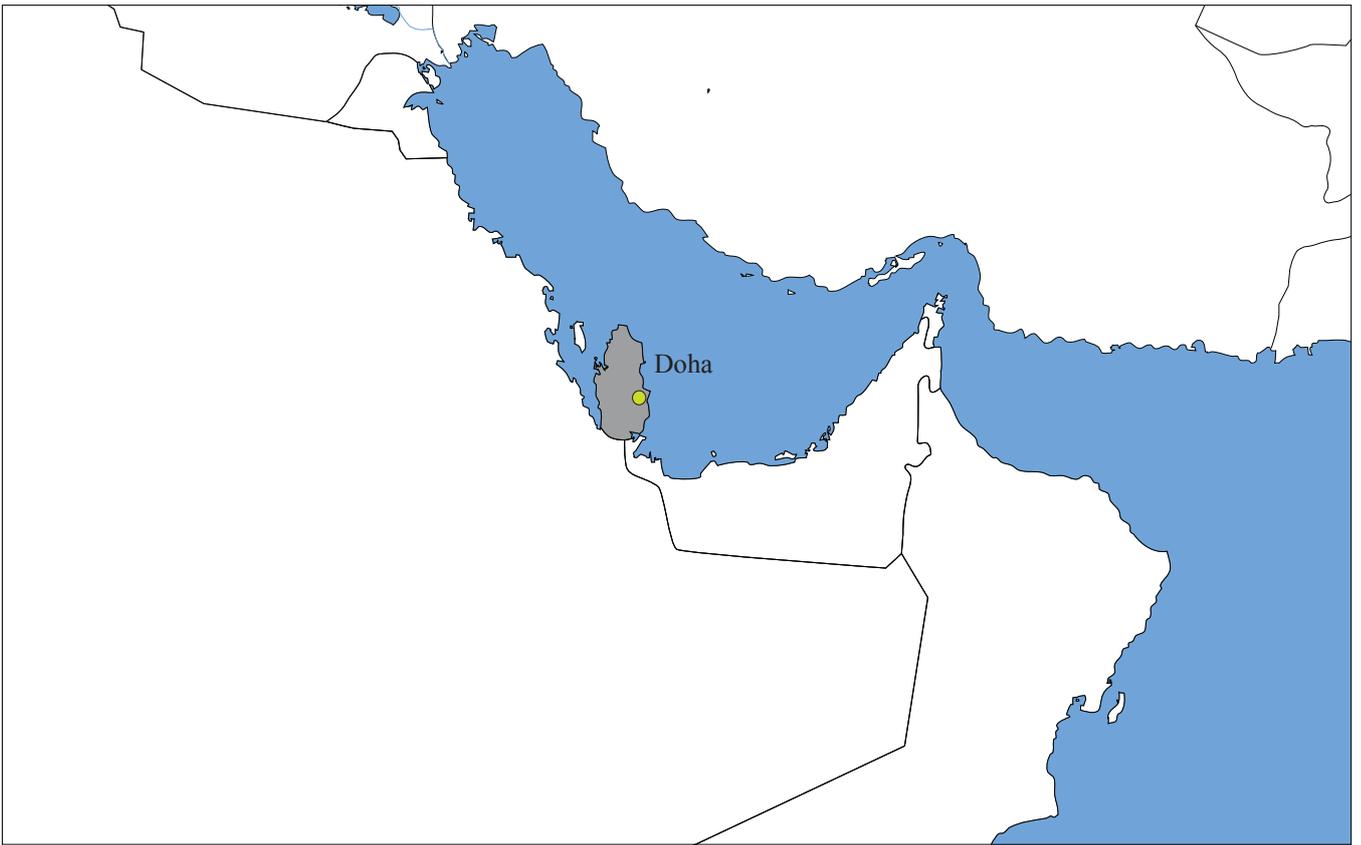
Owner & Developer: Emiri Diwan and its Private Engineering Office  
Designer: Mohamed Ali Abdullah

**Hassan Radoine**

*May 2010*

\* This report is the original, unedited version sent by the author on the 13<sup>th</sup> May 2010.









South part of the South-western façade.

Detail of Sout-western façade above the arched porch.





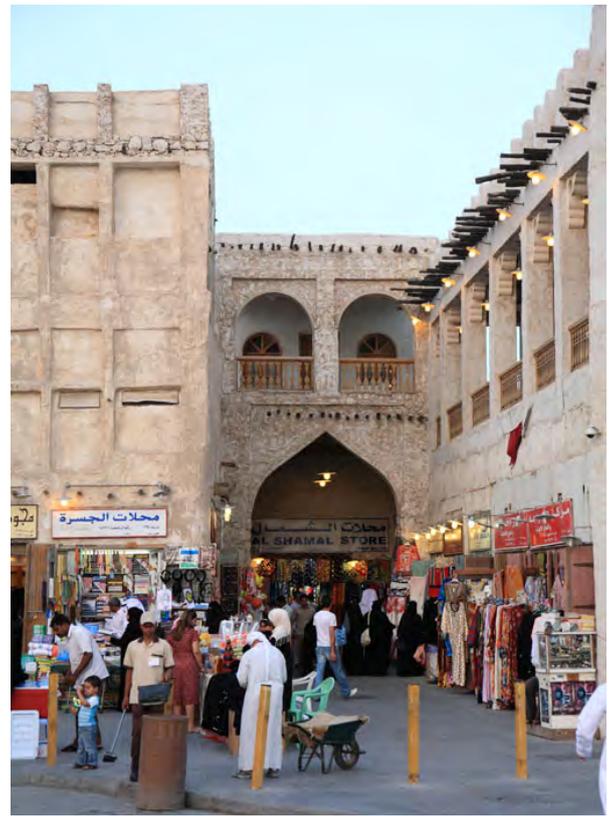
Detail showing small balcony and part of the arched porch of the South-western façade.



Traditional air cooling tower on the North western façade. West Bay towers in the background.

Roofs of the souk.





Entrance of the cloth market, next to the street food market yard, on the south western façade.

Street food market and entrance to the cloth market, at early evening.





Entrance of the Souk on the southern façade.

Pet market in the North internal space.





Street in the North internal space.



Antiques and collectible market in the South internal space.

Shops in the North internal space.





Restaurant area at night, in front of the Waqif Art Centre, in the southmost area.

Street between Souk Waqif and Souk Al-Ahmad at night.

