

Simona Azzali



Abstract:

Building a Lasting Legacy: Beyond Qatar 2022

Doha, the capital city of Qatar, was a tiny, sleepy urban settlement with an economy based on fishing and pearling until the 1970s, when the discovery of oil and natural gas triggered unprecedented and rapid urbanization. During the second half of the 20th century, Doha transformed itself from a small village to an emerging international urban centre with a population of more than 2 million people. After this first urbanisation process, linked to the increasing oil production, Doha is now facing a second urban transformation led by a new development strategy, which has been implemented to diversify its economy. Tourism has been identified as a fundamental pillar to diversify the local economy as well as to brand the city to attract new international investments. Sport has also a key role, and it is indicated in the country's 2030 National Vision as an example of economic diversification from the oil-based model. The Qatari government has been investing heavily to transform the country into a sporting hub and has facilitated this process by encouraging the migration of international athletes and trainers towards its capital city, and by hosting several international sport events every year. This process of transforming Doha into a sports city has started with the Asian Games held in 2006 and will culminate with the stage of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

With an estimated expenditure of 220 billion US dollars, four times the cost of the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games - evaluated in 55 billion US dollars and considered the most expensive Winter Olympics ever- and more than five times the total expenditure of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing – estimated in 40 billion US dollars, the economic impact of the World Cup on the country is unprecedented. These costs are also aggravated by the critical economic and political context that accompanied the preparations of the Cup, characterised by the crisis in oil prices, between 2014 and 2020, and by the challenging diplomatic relations Qatar faced with some of the Gulf neighbourhood countries between June 2017 and January 2021.

What is the rationale behind the host of mega sporting events? What will be left after the 2022 World Cup is over? How to leverage this event as a momentum for experimentation and sustainable growth of its capital city, Doha? Are there any contemporary best practices or useful trends promoting urban liveability and sustainability that can be adopted by future hosting cities? What is the future, and the legacies, of the eight stadiums and sporting infrastructure built on purpose for the 2022 World Cup? And most importantly, how can Qatar's and specifically Doha's residents benefit from the stage of this events?

Based on the analysis of official documentation and accessible planning documents, particularly of the bid book, interviews with experts, and site visits of the stadiums' precincts and selected area within metropolitan Doha, this research attempts at answering those questions by appraising the urban legacies of the 2022 World Cup and the impact of the event on the urban environment in the city of Doha.

Results show a risky approach of using mega-events to trigger the implementation of massive construction plans, especially when developing at the same time both new sporting venues and new city-level infrastructure. The Cup, as many sporting events did in the past, is at risk of generating white elephants and unnecessary infrastructures, with a large consumption of economic resources and land. If long-term legacies and a wise post-event use of venues are not carefully planned, it may indeed erode the opportunities to implement more sustainable urbanism projects.

Recommendations and strategies for shifting towards more capable, and sustainable planning of mega sporting events and post-event legacies are suggested in the research.

Bio:

Simona Azzali is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Architecture at Prince Sultan University, Riyadh. She is an interdisciplinary researcher with a background in urban planning and design. Her research crosses a wide spectrum including urban spaces in tropical Asia and the Middle East: liveability and social sustainability of public spaces; place making; mega sporting events and their impact on the built environment. Simona Azzali is passionate about cities and a strong advocate of a people-oriented and participatory design approach to build better cities by design. Prior to commencing her appointment at PSU, she worked and researched for various renowned academic institutions as James Cook University Singapore, the National University of Singapore, UCL London, Politecnico di Milano, and Qatar University.