A FRAMEWORK FOR INVESTIGATING URBAN QUALITIES IN EMERGING KNOWLEDGE ECONOMIES: THE CASE OF DOHA.

Abstract

Over the last decade Qatar's capital city Doha has been undergoing a new period of urbanization that has created a new perception of the city as an emerging urban centre in the Gulf region. It has witnessed rapid urban growth driven by economic diversification strategies that have liberalised its markets. At the same time however the general urban consolidation has not kept pace and the liveability of many areas has decreased in quality despite the transformation of the city into a global hub because of large-scale projects. This paper aims to introduce a framework that can be utilized to analyse the complex interdependencies between Doha's recent economic transformation and the changing structure of its urban environment. It is designed to deliver insights into the various factors that produce urban space and their individual effects on urban qualities, taking as its basis Henri Lefebvre's triad of space production. The analyses resulting from the application of this framework have the potential to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the needs of a thriving knowledge economy and the emerging urban environment that accommodates it.

Introduction

In recent years, the on-going expansion of global networks has led to the emergence of new cities as contenders in the competition to establish international service hubs. Their main characteristic is the immense speed of their urban growth borne up by deregulation policies designed to attract investors (Stren, 2008, p. 57) While such rapid growth is necessary for becoming a viable market within global networks, many aspects of urban consolidation have been neglected because of extensive deregulations regarding urban developments. The resulting lack of public services and amenities has led to a gradual deterioration in urban qualities, which is reflected in traffic problems and fragmented urban structures. This in turn hinders qualified workforce from investing their lives for the long-term in such cities, causing a high employee turnover. Their investment however is essential to successfully establishing a knowledge economy, which depends to a large extent on an environment that allows companies to build on continuous human resources. Today, more serious consideration of urban development is urgently needed in the case of such emerging cities in order to understand the complex interdependencies between economic diversification and urban qualities.

Such consideration is particularly necessary for Gulf cities such as Doha, which in recent years has adopted global strategies to diversify its economy. As a consequence, the real-estate market was liberalised and many companies together with their employees relocated to Doha, creating a huge impact on the city's population and urban structure (Adham, 2008, p. 236). Within only 10 years Doha's population has tripled from about 500,000 to over 1.5 million inhabitants to date, and while in the past Doha constituted of two main elements, namely, a mixed-use centre and residential suburbs, the complexity of its new phase of urbanism driven by many different interdependent factors is generating a more diverse urban structure. Since investors generally prefer coastal areas, most of the recent developments have been concentrated along Doha's shoreline. The iconic 'Pearl' development has expanded the city to the north along the coast and a new CBD and city skyline has emerged in West Bay (Figure 1), connected by the Corniche – the highlight of Doha's urban structure – to the old city centre. However, beyond the architectural theatricality of the coast, urban qualities decrease further inland, creating a perception of Doha as a segregated and fragmented city.

The important factor that generates comprehensive urban qualities is the active participation of a society that demands these high standards in their surroundings (Pieterse, 2000). In the case of emerging cities such as Doha the society is still evolving, which leads to increasing responsibility on the part of planners and decision makers to understand the needs of the developing society regarding its space. Doha's economic diversification is dependent on a large group of qualified workforce to sustain newly established knowledge economies. Thus, it relies heavily on its urban qualities, which are an important factor in preventing its international workforce from relocating to other competing cities within the global networks and within the Gulf region itself. Doha has initially attracted these human resources due to high salaries and a generally tax-free environment but in the long term a generation of a knowledge population has to consider the city as its home for various other reasons in order to sustain the economic balance. In addition, continuity in the society will be necessary in order to develop innovation and the competence needed to become a service centre competing on a global level. While in the past and present wealth from fossil fuels has been key to sustaining immigration, future developments will depend on an emerging society who identifies Doha with a high standard of liveability.

In order to produce strategies and plans that can serve as the basis for the development of liveable cities, the current urbanisation process needs to be analysed in a way that goes beyond the usual examination of the physical environment. Thus, a framework is needed which takes into account all of the multi-layered factors that impact urban space in order to determine more accurately the urban potentials and deficits that affect the emergence of knowledge economies. For these purposes, the framework analyses urban governance, examines the direction of investments in development projects and identifies interlocking