

Modelling diversity: Cultural district policies in Doha and Singapore

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Abstract: Over the last twenty years, cities around the world have seen the multiplication of cultural district projects, which aim to concentrate cultural organisations in a circumscribed urban space, or to label a neighbourhood's cultural scene. This paper examines the adoption and adaptation of a globally circulating cultural policy model as an instrument of urban governance. Moving away from the notion of policy transfer, understood as a neutral and unidirectional process through which successful culture-led development models spread to other contexts, I show how local actors mobilise external references to position themselves in a transnational cultural policymaking field, and construct their city as a model. I compare the multi-scalar politics of urban modelling in Doha and Singapore, where globally circulating culture-led development models have been introduced not only as instruments of economic growth, but also as diversity management tools. On the one hand, cultural districts serve as discursive nation building/branding instruments to project an imagined identity locally and internationally. On the other hand, urban elites can mobilise cultural districts to make strategic shifts in the diversity management discourse, through an engagement with the urban environment, and the co-optation civil society actors at multiple scales.

Keywords

Cultural district, urban models, diversity management regime, policy instrument, place branding, multiculturalism

Introduction

Cultural districts have become a common feature within the staged competition of aspiring global cities: from the West Kowloon Cultural District in Hong Kong and the Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, which concentrate new world class institutions on reclaimed land, to Beijing's 798 art enclave or Taipei's creative parks, where artists, galleries and other creative activities have given a new life to old industrial buildings, or central urban neighbourhoods such as Maboneng in Johannesburg, Kala Ghoda in Mumbai, where street art, heritage, and cultural events have been promoted to attract visitors and enhance the city's reputation. Over the last twenty years, cities around the world have seen the multiplication of cultural district projects, which aim to concentrate cultural organisations in a circumscribed urban space, or to label a neighbourhood's cultural scene (Brooks & Kushner 2001, Molho & Morteau 2019). Most academic debates around cultural districts have revolved around the effects of such policies, their contribution to local cultural ecosystems, to gentrification, or their mobilisation as city marketing tools (Mommaas 2004). This paper examines the adoption and adaptation of this cultural policy model as an instrument of urban governance.

Drawing on the emerging literature on policy mobility, I approach the cultural district as a circulating policy model (McCann & Ward 2011). I argue that cultural districts emerge from local conditions, driven by actors that aim to position themselves within a transnational and multiscalar cultural policy field. I move beyond the Western-centric assumption of a precedence of cultural districts models coming from the West, and put forward the reciprocal nature of transnational policy knowledge exchanges, in line with the article of Peggy Levitt in this volume. Urban cultural policymakers, in various world regions, are informed by the same transnational cultural policy-making trends, and strive to draw on their knowledge about the particular cultural context where they operate to respond to local constraints and aspirations. In this article, I draw on Roy and Ong's (2011) concept of "modelling", which refers to "discursive and material activities that are inspired by particular models of urban achievements in other cities" (:14). I approach modelling as the actions of local actors aiming to position themselves in a transnational policy-making field by promoting their city as a model. I argue that urban elites can use modelling as a policy instrument (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2006) in order to establish a consensus around their action.

Doha and Singapore offer a rich matter for comparison. They have both risen, in a relatively short time as key hubs in the global economy. In the last decades, they have launched ambitious cultural plans and inaugurated large-scale cultural institutions. Doha and Singapore are modelling machines that import and export urban models in order to legitimize locally their management of the urban space, and build global prestige (Al Raouf 2016, Pow 2014). Both countries are characterised by illiberal governance systems, with a restricted press freedom and the absence of

political alternation. The two cities offer also interesting contrasts. In Qatar, which is highly dependent on gas exports, culture is part of wider scheme to diversify the economy and prepare for the post-oil era. Singapore has gained its position of global hub by gradually climbing the ladder of high-value added sectors, and considers culture as a strategic asset to attract talents and generate innovation. While both are highly diverse cities, their diversity management regimes differ (Levitt 2015). Singapore is proud of its multicultural model that recognises and celebrates its main ethnic communities (Chinese, Malays and Indians), whereas the Qatar model relies on the primacy of Arabness and the citizens of Persian and African descent are largely excluded from the national narrative.

To compare the cultural district policies of these two cities, I have analysed their cultural policy plans, which reflect the authorities' respective national visions. I have consulted of the cultural districts' promotional and policy documents¹, as well as the press dealing with these cultural projects. I have also conducted over fifty semi-structured interviews (thirty in Singapore and twenty in Doha) with policy makers and stakeholders involved in the planning and the cultural policies of these districts, asking questions on the elaboration of the projects, the collaboration networks among different urban actors, and their international relations².

While cultural districts are generally understood mainly as economic development tools, I suggest they can be mobilised as instruments to model urban diversity. In Doha and Singapore, cultural districts constitute instruments of projection and of negotiation of the diversity narrative. On the one hand, I show that cultural districts have been designed as spaces of promotion of an imagined diversity. Then I show that in order to promote their city as a diversity management model, urban elites have to go beyond the mere projection of a fixed discourse, and engage with the multiscalar politics of diversity.

Cultural districts, urban modelling and diversity management

The ubiquitous adoption of cultural districts went along with the rise of dominant policy narratives like the “creative city”, the “knowledge economy”, promoted throughout the world by global consultancy firms and international experts (Ponzini & Rossi 2010, O'Connor & Gu 2014). The global circulation of cultural districts has often been interpreted as a phenomenon of “policy transfer” (Gonzalez 2011). For instance, the 798 in Beijing, which attracted numerous galleries and artists in a former

¹ The content analysis of urban promotion and policy documents has focused, for Singapore, on the Singapore Tourism Board's Little India guide, and the National Heritage Board's Little India Heritage Trail. In Doha, I focused on the two catalogues published by Msheireb property in 2018: a commercial catalogue (addressed at investors) and a catalogue addressed at a more general public.

² I conducted my fieldwork in January and December 2018, respectively in Doha and Singapore. I also did some prior fieldwork in Singapore back in February 2015

industrial facility from the mid 2000s was compared to SoHo, in New York, where similar processes took place from the 1960s (Ren and Sun 2012).

But the policy transfer theory has limitations (McCann & Ward 2013). First, it overestimates the power of attraction of “Western” planning models. It derives from a tendency to believe that movements such as modernity, development or globalization stem from Western ideas, and have spread, for the better or the worse, to other parts of the world. Second, focusing on policy transfers overshadows the place-specific dynamics of power of particular cultural district projects.

As Çağlar and Glick-Schiller (2018) argue, the construction of local cultural policies needs to be situated in multi-scalar logics of power, which derive from an uneven access to economic resources, the different levels of institutions that take part in urban regulation, as well as hierarchies of status. The adoption of circulating policy models is influenced both by these transnational structures, and by local actors who adapt and vernacularize these models, based on their own constraints and resources (Levitt 2020).

Roy and Ong (2011) have introduced the notion of modelling to capture local actors’ efforts to adopt and craft urban models. In common language, modelling has two distinct meanings. On the one hand, it refers the fashioning of a material or the creation of a representation. On the other hand, it refers to the designation of a person or a system as an example to imitate. I propose an understanding of urban modelling that encompasses both of these meanings to capture the trial and error process by which urban policymakers strive to transform their city, materially and symbolically, in the light of transnational norms, with the intent to establish it as a blueprint for other cities.

Like branding, urban modelling goes beyond a mere operation of promotion or communication towards external audiences, and aims to influence the place’s identity and the inhabitants’ representations (Boisen et al., 2018). Urban modelling consists in reshaping the urban space to gain international status and recognition. But it goes beyond branding, as it is presented as an endeavour to experiment solutions to global issues such as the preservation of the environment or the promotion of cultural diversity.

Modelling is more than a professional practice; it is more than the emulation of forms and norms established elsewhere, or of invention of replicable solutions to global problems. Modelling is a process of “instrumentation” (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007), which enables urban elites to mobilise transnational symbolic resources to legitimize their action (Pinson 2009). Internationally sanctioned expertise and recognition contributes to establish a consensus around urban projects, marginalising actors that lack the capacity to position themselves on the transnational policy field, and diverting attention away from points of tensions.

In this paper, I will point out two ways in which local actors mobilise cultural districts as an instrument to model the city as a diversity management model. One is a unidirectional projection of a consensual diversity narrative, whereas the other engages with co-opted civil society actors, and allows for a controlled shift in the diversity management regime, as part of a strategy to gain international recognition.

The first modelling approach is disconnected from the city itself. It operates on a symbolic level, as a combination of circulating scripts of celebration of cultural diversity, and of elements of the national discourse. It reshapes the urban space as a vernacularized version of globally circulating discourse.

The second modelling approach is a pragmatic engagement with the place's material and symbolic resources. It uses transnationally connected cultural institutions to alter or sophisticate the diversity narrative, and respond to debates happening at different scales.

Planning cultural diversity in Doha and Singapore

In the last half-century Doha and Singapore have rapidly risen as key centres of the global economy. Qatar and Singapore rank respectively first and fourth in per capita GDP (PPP), with 128,703 and 98,014 dollars in 2018³. Doha and Singapore have been widely promoted as urban models (Sigler 2013, Chua 2013). The emergence of cultural district policies in Doha and Singapore can be traced to policy shifts that took place at the turn of the 1990s.

Cultural districts are key tools to promote the image of the city as a rich mix of cultures, and as a diversity management model. The promotion of diversity is in line with the international standards of cultural development, which have set cultural diversity as a global ideal (Isar 2006). In Doha and Singapore, it also derives from the aspiration to challenge negative discourses that have presented these cities as “cultural deserts” (Lee 2004, Exell & Rico 2013).

In both cities, cultural districts take part in wider plans to transform the city through culture. They are the manifestation of grand narratives elaborated by political elites. Cultural districts are instrumental to position the city in the global economy and compete with neighbouring rivals. In turn, they contribute to legitimize urban transformations.

Doha: staging the Modernity/Tradition dialectic

In Doha, in 1995, the accession to power of Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani constitutes a turning point. He created new institutions aimed at establishing the city as a cultural hub. In 1996, the Qatar Foundation was created to develop new education and research institutions of regional and global outreach. In the early 2000s, Qatar Tourism and Qatar Museum Authorities were launched and took an active role in the transformation of the urban and cultural landscape.

The Qatar National Vision 2030, elaborated between 1998 and 2008 spells out the framework of the cultural hub strategy. The main overarching narrative is to embrace modernity while preserving cultural tradition, “combine modern life with

³ <http://m.statisticstimes.com/economy/projected-world-gdp-capita-ranking.php>

values and culture”, or “balance the old and the new”. The document lay emphasis on culture and education as key instruments for the development, and for the promotion of the national identity: “The system will also encourage analytical and critical thinking, as well as creativity and innovation. It will promote social cohesion and respect for Qatari society’s values and heritage, and will advocate for constructive interaction with other nations” (Qatar National Vision 2030). This ambition was particularly put forward through the inauguration of a series of world-class museums like the Museum of Islamic Art (2008), Mathaf (2010) and the National Museum (2019).

Doha positions itself as a cultural centre within the Arab world, and competes not only with established and historical centres such as Cairo or Beirut, but also with its Emirati neighbours like Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The vision promotes an “intensification of cultural exchange with the Arab peoples in particular and with other nations in general”



Figure 1. Cultural districts of Doha

Source: map drawn by the author

The regeneration of the historic centre and the creation of cultural enclaves from scratch, constitute the two legs Doha’s cultural district policy. In the centre, between 2004 and 2008, the Souq Waqif was transformed into a consumption and recreation area, conveying a romanticised image of the Arabian souk. In 2006, the nearby district of Msheireb was flagged for regeneration. It includes four heritage houses that were turned into museums.

On the outskirts of the city, the Katara art district was inaugurated in 2010, when Doha held the title of Arab Capital of Culture. It concentrates a number of art organisations ranging from galleries, to art societies, and performing art centres.

Established on reclaimed land, Katara was designed in reference to local customs and as an attempt to blend “Western” and “local” architectural traditions, with for example, an amphitheatre presented as a mix between Greek and Islamic architecture or an Opera house that combines ‘oriental and late Victorian’ styles. The cultural offer conveys a similar combination of a celebration of local Qatari heritage with the invitation of Western artists. Katara’s stated intention is to turn Doha into “cultural beacon a lighthouse of art, radiating in the Middle East through theatre, literature, music, visual art, conventions and exhibitions⁴”.

Katara is part of wide planning scheme to distribute different functions throughout the city. It aims to make Doha attractive for tourists and residents, providing them with entertainment, cultural activities, and showcasing local culture alongside foreign shows. The project uses these cultural amenities to generate real-estate value, as a large part of the project consists of residences. Thus, Katara is the manifestation of the use of the cultural district as an instrument to translate the national narrative into a concrete urban space, as a metaphor of the way the government wants the city to be perceived locally and globally: a combination of tradition and modernity, and a cultural leader in the Arab world.

Singapore: Staging the Southeast Asian cultural hub

From the 1980s, the Singapore government launched a number of plans putting arts, culture and heritage at the centre of its development strategy. As early as 1985, the Arts Housing Scheme started to convert warehouses and schools to provide space for artists. The 1989 Conservation Plan labelled three historic neighbourhoods: Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam (Henderson 2008). These ethnic neighbourhoods, a legacy of the colonial era, served as a basis for the exoticisation of the urban landscape and the promotion Singapore as a multicultural model.

The Singapore government launched a series of plans that paved the way for the multiplication of cultural institutions (Kong 2000). The 1989 report of the Advisory Council for Culture and the Arts (ACCA) led to the establishment of a museum precinct, in the Civic District, where landmark institutions were created, like the Singapore Art Museum (1996), dedicated to the promotion of Southeast Asian art. This was instrumental to promote Singapore as the entry point for Southeast Asia’s cultural scene. As the Culture Minister George’s Yeo explained in 1996, “Singapore hopes to do for the arts what it has done for banking, finance, manufacturing and commerce”⁵.

After the publication of the 2000 Renaissance City Plan, a number of iconic cultural institutions were built around the Marina Bay, like the Esplanade in 2003, which helped promote of Singapore as a touristic hub. These strategies are fed by a

⁴ <http://www.katara.net/en/about-katara>

⁵ George Yeo, cité dans : Singapore Tourism Promotion Board (STPB), 1996, Destination Singapore: The Arts Experience, STPB, Singapore.^[11]

constant look at other cities. The 2012 Arts and Culture Strategic Review notes that “many Asian cities have committed significant investment into arts and culture, making it an integral part of national development and positioning”, before citing references of ambitious cultural projects such as “Seoul’s “Vision 2015: Cultural City Seoul”, Hong Kong’s West Kowloon Cultural District, Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Island Cultural District”. The Review states the objective to “position Singapore as a major hub for contemporary visual art”, and “to attract top international and Asian players in the arts”.

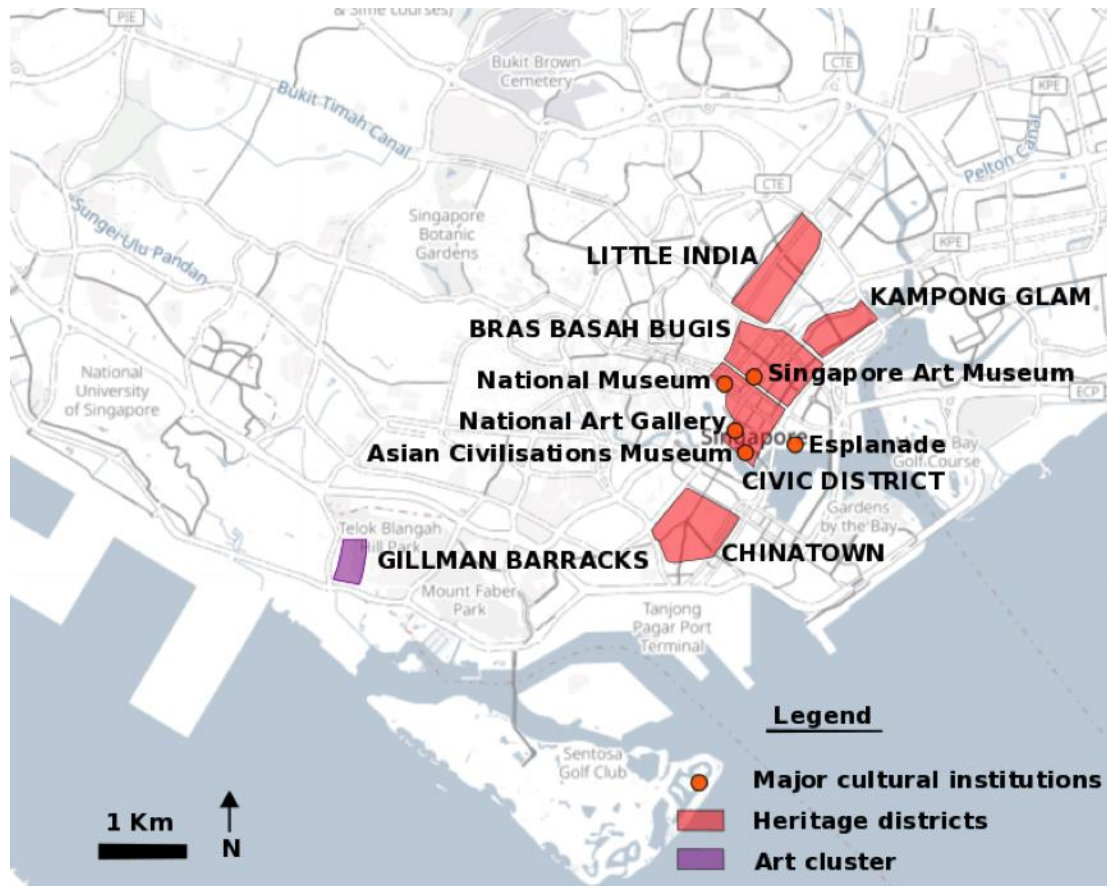


Figure 2. Cultural districts of Singapore

Source: map drawn by the author

One of the key instruments mobilised to implement the cultural hub strategy has been the creation of the Gillman Barracks art cluster (Molho 2018). This project inaugurated by the Economic Development Board in 2013 settled more than ten international art galleries, artist residencies and a Centre for Contemporary Art in a former British military barracks complex of 6.4 hectares. It was planned to become a key destination for the Southeast Asian art market. This project enabled to give a new use to heritage buildings, while staging the emergence of Singapore as a cultural hub for Southeast Asia: “We wanted to design an area where international galleries can come together. And because they are unfamiliar with the market, the cluster effect is

important to them⁶”. Thus, the Gillman Barracks reflects how cultural districts can be mobilised as instruments to materialise in the urban space a centrally established urban narrative.

Modelling diversity

In the previous section, we have seen that the production of cultural districts is a way to model the city’s diversity, by projecting an imagined identity within the urban landscape. They articulate physical and symbolic interventions to create a showcase of the national diversity discourse. In this section, I turn to a more complex modelling process, which relies on cultural actors’ engagement with the urban space.

Cultural policies in both cities have to negotiate between the promotion of an established national narrative and the expression of civic aspirations to push its boundaries and make way for more plural interpretations that better portray the city’s actual diversity. The modelling of urban diversity puts top-down strategies that project rigid cultural categories and identity narratives in tension with bottom-up efforts to promote a more complex understanding of the city’s culture. In their ambition to promote themselves as models on the world stage, Doha and Singapore are driven to reshape their diversity narratives, keeping it under control while allowing the expression of a plurality of voices.

Doha’s new Downtown

The Msheireb district derives not only from a grand cultural strategy aimed at projecting an imagined diversity onto the urban space, but also on a site specific discourse. It mobilises the excavation of the urban landscape as a resource to participate in global urban and cultural conversations.

The project is led by Msheireb Properties, a profit-making entity under the aegis of the Qatar Foundation, chaired by the well-known wife of the father Emir, Moza al Missned. The foundation plays a key role in spearheading the promotion of Qatar as a hub for culture and higher education. The regeneration of the urban core serves as an instrument to affirm this leading role, by experimenting with a new urban planning paradigm, in a city that has been dominated by car-oriented urbanism for decades:

“The overall strategic objective of the Msheireb project is to reverse the pattern of real estate development in Doha in recent years, which has tended to encourage isolated and energy-intensive land use, urban sprawl, and an over-reliance on car transport.⁷”

⁶ Interview with a employee of the EDB Lifestyle office, in 2015

⁷ Excerpt from the Msheireb Catalogue

This new paradigm is not only presented as a response to a global concern for sustainability, but also as a return to local traditions. It relies on an imagined traditional way of life, reconstructed in the light sustainability concerns. In a city that had expanded extensively but lacked of a downtown, the intent was to reinvent the urban core.

The Msheireb neighbourhood dates back to the colonial era (Boussaa 2014). The remaining four heritage houses were built in the 1920s. At the time, the economy of this 20 000 inhabitants city relied essentially on the pearl trade. After the start of oil exports in 1949, the city initiates a movement of urbanisation, which takes off after independence in 1971, and the 1973 boom in oil prices. Numerous foreign experts were hired to design and build the city. In 1972, the British urban planner Llewellyn Davis was invited to prepare a master plan that oriented the developments of the city for nearly two decades. Following his recommendations, the Qatari government redeveloped historical areas in the centre and relocated local populations in residential neighbourhoods. In 1977, the American urban planner William Pereira was hired to design the city's new business district on reclaimed land. From the beginning of the 1990s, the modern district of West Bay was planned to concentrate a number of financial institutions, towers, malls and hotels. As the director of Msheireb Museums suggests, planners designed the Msheireb district as a spatial intermediary: "this place is going to be a transition, between Souq Waqif and West Bay, between the past and the future"⁸.

The Msheireb project was initiated in 2006. With the exception of four heritage houses, all of the buildings that were in this area were demolished. The project represents an investment of 4.18 billion Euros and covers an area of thirty-one hectares. It started out with a three-year study phase, which was key to the modelling of the new downtown:

Many consultants came from Paris, and different areas. The team visited cities to take ideas, to see smart cities, downtowns, to see what was the best way to design a city. It was a comparison to try to make a new model⁹.

They also invited international academic experts from prestigious American Universities like Harvard, Yale and MIT, who were mobilised to confer legitimacy and prestige to the project and spell out planning principles that were labelled as a Qatari architectural "language". On this basis, Msheireb has been marketed as a combination between local tradition and global know-how.

The first phase, which corresponds to the quarter of the Diwan Amiri – near the government's headquarter – comprises public buildings such as the National Archive and the museums, and has been distinguished by international prizes. In 2018, the London-based architect Michel Mossessian received the MIPIM Architectural Review Future Projects Award for the design of the mixed use area surrounding the

⁸ Interview with the director of Msheireb Museums

⁹ Idem

Al Baharat square, for his attempt to create “a contemporary vernacular architecture in the Gulf”¹⁰. This phase was therefore instrumental to attract international attention and rebrand the district. The subsequent phases correspond to the more profit-oriented programmes, and include fancy hotels, luxury residence and retail projects.

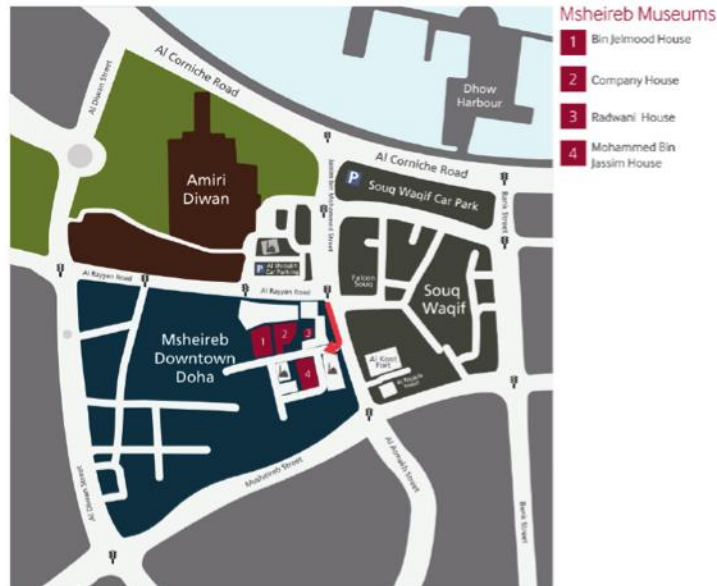


Figure 3. Layout of the Msheireb project

Source: Msheireb.com

The modelling of the Msheireb district addresses different audiences. One part of the story has nationalistic accents. It addresses the local population, and invites them to ‘come back to their roots’, resettle in an area that they had left as a result of modernist urban developments. The other part of the story is addressed at international investors, and praises a world standard cultural offer and vibrancy. Indeed, while the royal family has overseen the conception of Msheireb, the district has been conceived as the profit-making arm of the Qatar foundation, and needs to respond to commercial logics.

This double language, meant to address both the national population and an international audience, is particularly present in the cultural project at the heart of district. In order to establish a modern exhibition space in the four remaining heritage houses of the district, major conservation and rehabilitation works were needed. These heritage houses were then turned into museums, under the aegis of an adhoc organisation: Msheireb museums. As a subsidiary of the Qatar Foundation, it benefitted from collaborations with various academic institutions, including with the local branches of UCL and Georgetown. The involvement of transnationally connected cultural and academic actors in the modelling of the project allows the incorporation of global cultural practices and favours the recognition of its contribution in the global cultural field.

¹⁰ <https://www.archdaily.com/111028/musheireb-master-plan-mossessian-partners>

- (1) Site specificity: The conception of different museum projects took into account the specific history of each house. The Company House, which was the base of the first Anglo-Persian company that initiated oil exploration, has an exhibition on the history of oil extraction. The Radwani House, which was a family house that was progressively extended, has been dedicated to vernacular architecture. The Mohammad Bin Jassim House, which was a community space owned by the son of the founding ruler of Qatar is about the neighbourhood's history. Finally, the Bin Jelmoood House, which used to be the property of a slave trader, is dedicated to the history of slavery.
- (2) The excavation of the city's past: In 2012 Msheireb Properties invited a team of UCL archaeologists, working on a large project funded by the Qatar National Research Fund on the *Origins of Doha* to conduct an assessment of archaeological deposits in the remaining heritage houses. Their findings provided information on the lives of local inhabitants in the early 20th century, and were mobilised in the development of the exhibition projects.
- (3) A social history museum: The exhibition projects have relied strongly on the collection of testimonies from inhabitants. They display video interviews where citizens share their memories. As the director of Msheireb museum stressed, the houses are dedicated to the city's living and oral history, and incorporates various sorts of inputs from the public, from comments to artefacts: "We receive a lot of feedbacks. So we keep on researching to see how to fit it"¹¹.

The Msheireb museums project reflects Doha's modelling strategy. It draws on globalised museum and heritage management practices, by hiring transnational professionals to design and implement the project. But it also strives to excavate the local history and the memories of local inhabitants to show the world the wealth and the complexity of Qatari heritage.

Along with other Gulf rentier states, which rely on religious legitimacy and a glorification of tribal leaders, Qatar is characterised by a restrictive and exclusive national discourse (Erskine-Loftus et al. 2016). It emphasizes the role of the Bedouin tradition over the heritage of its maritime and merchant culture (Cole 2003). It downplays the cultural influences that the long history of exchanges with the Indian, African and Persian worlds has had on its national culture (Nagy 2006).

The participation of cultural actors, historians, and archaeologists to the cultural dimension of the Msheireb project made it contribute to the diversification of the national narrative. In particular, the Bin Jelmoood House tackles the history of slave trade in the Indian Ocean and in Qatar, as well as modern day slavery. As the house had belonged to a slave trader, and given that Msheireb Museums wished to develop museum projects in accordance to the houses' histories, they were confronted

¹¹ Interview with the director of Msheireb Museums

with this difficult subject. The creation of a museum of slavery in Qatar has been widely welcomed as a bold move and as an important contribution to Doha's cultural landscape.

- (1) It brings a decentred view on slavery. The history of slave trade, which constitutes the most part of the exhibition, is a topic of global importance, because of the long-lasting effects of the displacements and exploitation of African slaves, especially as part of the transatlantic slave trade. Numerous initiatives have been launched in Africa, in Europe and in the Americas to commemorate and reflect on the legacy of slavery. Transnational initiatives like the UNESCO Slave Route project try to raise global awareness on this difficult memory. The Bin Jelmood House brings a singular perspective as it reminds the importance of flows of slaves who were displaced from East Africa throughout the Indian Ocean, and in particular, to the Arabian Gulf.
- (2) The museum endeavours to integrate slavery and slaves in the Qatari history. In addition to the display of factual data, it contains visual installations showing the environments where slaves came from and their work. It connects slavery with core elements of the Qatari national identity, such as pearling or Arabic coffee. More importantly, the exhibition features an interview with a descendant of slaves, who shares her memories. She explains how members of her family were sold, describes scenes of torture. She also speaks about her own experience of racism and discriminations.
- (3) What makes the museum particularly stand out in the Qatari context is the fact that it deals with modern slavery, which has been a burning issue in Qatar and in neighbouring Gulf States for decades. Qatar was ranked 5th out of 167 in the 2016 Global Slavery Index, which it was estimated that more than thirty thousand people were living in conditions of modern slavery in the country¹². This situation, often brought up in the international media, is generally concealed and denied locally. The project team had to navigate between contradicting views: on the one hand, local populations voiced their opposition on social media to what appeared as a self-critique, on the other hand, the exhibition provided a response to the global outrage triggered by the situation of migrant workers, documented by international NGOs and journalists.

The Bin Jelmood house is an example of Doha's strategy to model its diversity. Not only has it been developed with cutting edge museum management techniques. It pushes local boundaries and takes part in global debates. It creates a controlled civic space where co-opted experts bring informed knowledge, where selected testimonies tackle an issue, which despite its central importance in the national identity, remains largely taboo. By introducing such a discussion in an open but restricted space, the Qatari state intends to prevent it from becoming a disrupting factor. The political

¹² Global Slavery Index (2016) Country Study: Qatar
<https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/country/qatar/>

elites aim to counter the critiques in the international press on the situation of migrant workers in Qatar, and set themselves as moral leaders by tackling a difficult topic.

A Singaporean Little India

Little India is one of the three ethnic neighbourhoods that were labelled in the 1980s to promote Singapore's multicultural identity. The modelling of a Singaporean Little India lies at the intersection of different sectorial interests. For the Singapore Tourism Board, which aimed to brand Singapore for global audiences, the use of the globally circulating reference of Little India, was instrumental to enhance the city's attractiveness to travellers and achieve its goal to turn Singapore into a regional touristic hub. For the Urban Redevelopment Authority, in charge of planning the city, the labelling of this ethnic neighbourhood offered a useful counterpoint to defuse the critique voiced against the destruction of vernacular heritage and the homogenization of the urban space. Statutory boards in charge of culture and heritage, the National Heritage Board and the National Art Council, created in the 1990s, gradually took a central role in the fabric of the narrative of this cultural district. They engaged with cultural actors, artists, academics to create a more sophisticated understanding of the Singaporean Indian identity, and respond to the critiques against a rigid multicultural discourse that reifies ethnic categories.

The history of the Little India neighbourhood can be traced to the early times of the colonial era (Hee 2017). In 1822, the Raffles Plan, separated the European city from Chinatown, and the Malay neighbourhood of Kampong Glam. While it did not include a Little India, it led to the development of a racially segregated city. Early Indian settlers developed a cattle industry along the Serangoon road, due to the proximity of the Indian convicts prison that provided labour, and to the adequate natural resources that could be found in this area. This neighbourhood emerged progressively as a centre for Indians' social and economic life, and remained so despite the decline of the cattle industry in the first half of the 20th century.

As Singapore became an independent Republic in 1965, the People's Action Party, which has been in power until today, endeavoured to prevent racial segregation. The Housing Development Board (HDB) resettled the majority of the population in ethnically mixed estates, where the proportion of each ethnic group corresponds to its proportion within the whole population. The existence of ethnic neighbourhoods seemed in contradiction with this agenda. Therefore, up until the early 1980s, they were partly demolished to build HDB estates. For instance, the historic Tekka market, which represented a key tangible and intangible heritage of Little India was torn down (Siddique and Sholam 1982).

In the 1980s, the ethnic heritage of historical neighbourhoods started to be viewed as an asset for the tourism development strategy. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) was keen to draw on the exotic imaginary inherited from the colonial era (Henderson 2005). The 1986 Conservation Masterplan included the Little India Conservation Area; and the 1989 Tourism Masterplan recognised the 13 ha Little

India district, with 900 shophouses – traditional architecture comprising residence on the upper floor and retail on the first floor.

The regeneration of Little India followed a similar project in Chinatown, which generated a lot of resistance against the commodification and the exoticization of the urban space (Chang 2000). The scheme was viewed as a key example of the commodification of culture, denying the complexity of the local Chinese identity to make it fit for global touristic consumption, while contributing to expel traditional cultural activities from the space. In the wake of this conflict, the planners of Little India have been weary to develop a soft planning approach.

- (1) They relied on private owners for rehabilitation, with certain norms and indications on how to rehabilitate the heritage of the neighbourhood. The URA provided detailed conservation manuals, with guidelines for the preservation of the architectural heritage, as well as recommendations on its commercial use. It contributed to the ethnic theming of Little India, by explicitly requesting to “introduce appropriate new features to further enhance the identity of the area; retain and enhance ethnic-based activities while consolidating the area with new and compatible activities.”¹³
- (2) The URA concentrated on strategic but limited “flagship projects”, designed to bring about wider regeneration processes. In 1995, the Little India shopping arcade gathered retailers with an Indian theme. Twenty years later, the NHB inaugurated the Indian Heritage Centre.
- (3) Artists were also part of the making of Singapore’s Little India: The NAC provided spaces for art companies within the neighbourhood as part of the Arts Housing Scheme, and encouraged art organisations that promote traditional cultural practices.
- (4) Numerous cultural events and pop up urban interventions have been set up to celebrate Indian heritage in the district. From 1985 onwards, a Street Light Up festival was organised in Serangoon Road as an annual event, on the occasion of the Deepavali festival. In the 2010s, the STB and Lasalle College of the Arts launched the “Little India art walk”, an annual event with artistic installations, in collaboration with local shop owners.

¹³ URA (1995) Little India Historic District. Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority.



Figure 4. Public art projects in Little India

Source: Photographs taken by the author in December 2018

The district was shaped so as to convey a plurality of messages. It addresses an external audience, with an explicit objective to boost the city's tourism industry, and brand Singapore as a culturally rich city, full of exotic destinations. At the same time, internal audiences are addressed as well. The conservation of the neighbourhood's heritage constituted a response to the fear that the modernist agenda would cause the disappearance of Singapore's vernacular heritage. Despite the harms that the commercialisation of the neighbourhood caused to traditional activities, the numerous cultural initiatives that were launched were framed as an attempt to celebrate and revive the local heritage.

The development of Little India aims to project a positive image of Singapore's multiculturalist model. In Singapore, the so-called CMIO¹⁴ model (standing for Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other) has guided numerous state policies to create a balance between the city-state's main ethnic groups (Yeoh 2004). But it relies on the simplification of diversity within broad categories, which gather people with different languages and migratory backgrounds (Leong 1997). The initiatives developed by cultural actors in the Little India district take part in the effort to sophisticate this narrative.

Drawing on the space's history, cultural actors have striven to show the specificity of Singapore's Little India, as opposed to other Little India's, to emphasize a Singaporean Indian identity characterised by cultural mixing. In particular, two projects developed by the NHB reflect this objective:

- (1) The Little India Heritage Trail debunks the vision of a homogeneous ethnic neighbourhood. Heritage markers highlight mutual exchanges between the different communities. For example the Abdul Gafoor Mosque, is presented as a "fusion architecture reflecting Arabic and Renaissance influences", while the Sakya Muni Buddha Gaya Temple is said to reflect an "eclectic mix of Chinese, Thai and Indian cultural influences". As for the Kampong Kapor

¹⁴ The three main officially recognised ethnic groups that compose the Singaporean population are the Chinese (74%), the Malays (13%) and the Indians (9%).

Methodist Church, it is indicated that it “conducts Peranakan, English, Mandarin and Tamil services, a reminder of the rich cultural diversity that characterises the Little India district”. Furthermore, the trail explores the diversity hidden behind what the CMIO model recognises as the “Indian” category. The Little India Heritage Trail refers to the associations that promote the specific Indian cultures of different parts of India, such as the Singapore Khalsa Association, which has “programmes and talks on Sikh religion, culture and education”, the Singapore Gujarati Society and the Bengali Association Singapore.

- (2) The Indian Heritage Centre “aims to promote a greater understanding and appreciation of Singapore’s Indian heritage and culture, and to showcase the Indian community’s roles and contributions in multicultural Singapore”¹⁵. This institution, inaugurated in 2015 by the NHB follows the creation of the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, for the Chinese community, and of the Malay Heritage Centre, in order to provide each of Singapore’s main ethnic groups a heritage institution that tells their story and stresses their contribution to the national community. The permanent exhibition traces the origins of the Singaporean Indian community, their transnational links with their home country. It provides information on their traditional culture and the evolutions in their customs from the 19th century to the present. It also highlights that after independence “many Indians entered public life and contributed in diverse areas such as politics, civil service, business and banking, legal and judicial, healthcare, science and technology, visual and performing arts, education, nursing, trade union, information technology, social work, religion among others.” It provides many portraits of successful figures from the Indian community. The Indian Heritage Centre also uses its temporary exhibitions programme, to document the heritage of specific Singaporean Indian communities. For example, the special exhibition on the ‘Peranakan Indians’, organised in 2018, provided an account on a community which is constituted of only 5 000 individuals in Singapore. This exhibition aims to raise awareness, but also to gather scattered knowledge on this community that has been living in the Straits of Malacca for centuries. The exhibition emphasises the processes of cultural mixing that have constituted this community’s distinctiveness. For example, it explains that the “Chetti Melaka cuisine is a fascinating blend of Indian, Malay and Chinese culinary styles”. The language is also described as a reflect of the community’s diversity: “The mother tongue of the Chetti Melaka is a Malay-based creole which reflects the diverse roots of the community... it is a rare mixture of the predominant languages of the Straits comprising Bazaar Malay, Tamil and Chinese ... Hindu Chetti Melaka still pray in Malay while retaining some common Sanskrit and Tamil religious terms.” The focus on this community results

¹⁵ Presentation of the Indian Heritage Centre in the Little India Brochure

from a concern to show the diversity behind what has been categorised as the Singapore Indian community, and a willingness to promote the dynamics of cultural mixing dating back to the precolonial era.

The cultural district is a malleable instrument. It allows different actors to take part in shaping of the narrative that defines the image of the neighbourhood. The involvement of cultural actors allows addressing different audiences. While the concept of multiculturalism has not been the object of the same level of critiques in Singapore as in Europe, this initiative does engage with the heavy discussions that have taken place on a global scale, which have highlighted the risk of a reification of cultural identities, and the importance of promoting intercultural interactions.

The Little India label, often used to refer to urban areas with high proportions of Indian migrants stems, in Singapore, from a top-down strategy to celebrate the heritage of the city's third main ethnic community. But the cultural policies in this neighbourhood appear to go beyond a touristic labelling, to unveil the space's complexity. Cultural and heritage actors strive to elaborate a more sophisticated description of the neighbourhood's diversity, to invite the Singapore Indian civil society to tell their own story. This process happens in circumscribed spaces, like the Indian Heritage Centre, which enables to control that these stories fit within the wider national narrative.

Conclusion

Rather than the global diffusion of a uniform model, the multiplication of cultural districts reflects the rise of a transnational and multiscalar cultural policy-making scene, where inter-connected actors strive to model their city. Along with the decline of clearly identifiable national integration models, like assimilation and multiculturalism, cities have seen the rise of circulating policy instruments like cultural districts, that get appropriated, vernacularized, modelled, and reshaped, to constantly reaffirm and shift local diversity management regimes. They can accommodate a variety of discourses, and address different audiences, locally and internationally. Through the construction of cultural districts, urban elites aim to project a coherent diversity discourse. At the same time, these cultural projects are sites where the diversity management regime gets tested and redefined, to incorporate a more cosmopolitan and attractive narrative, while maintaining the core framework.

On the one hand, cultural districts like Katara and Gillman Barracks are meant to stage a pre-established discourse. Katara symbolically situates Doha as an interface connecting different parts of the Arab world. The Gillman Barracks have been designed to promote Singapore as Southeast Asia's art hub, as a space where different national cultures come together. These geopolitical ambitions act as legitimizing forces to reconfigure the urban landscape.

On the other hand, the Msheireb and Little India districts are the sites of formation of new discourses. As part of the construction of these cultural districts,

local actors have promoted a more complex understanding of the city's diversity, taking a certain degree of distance with their respective national narratives. In Doha, the projects conducted under Msheireb museums have gone beyond the traditional understanding of Qatariness as a monolithic identity modelled on Bedouin Arabs, by excavating the neighbourhood's history, and examining local culture in the light of its external influences, highlighting, for instance, the specific experience of the descendants African slaves. The project has enabled to draw attention on a community that had so far been denied. In Singapore, the NHB went beyond the rigid categorisation of the country's ethnic groups and the creation of stereotypical ethnic districts and dug into the complexity of intercommunity exchanges, and in the diversity of each category. The involvement of cultural actors has been instrumental to engage with debates happening on a transnational level regarding shifting models of diversity management, while preserving, legitimizing, and reinforcing the existing national narrative.

More than branding the city, cultural districts in Doha and Singapore aim to set the city as a global blueprint. While constantly incorporating ideas and standards from elsewhere, urban elites aspire to gain recognition on the world stage. They intend to turn their experiments into replicable policies. This modelling process is highly controlled. It leaves just enough room to let civil society sophisticate the model, make it fit to be recognised in the transnational cultural policymaking arena, and contribute to the legitimisation of political elites.

Cultural policy circulation is not an apolitical process in which neutral scripts get adopted to reach universal goals. It responds to the need of urban elites to mobilise resources of legitimacy. The role of cultural policy modelling in Doha and Singapore is ambivalent. On the one hand, it can strengthen local progressive forces that strive to promote a more plural and inclusive identity narrative. On the other hand, it contributes to legitimise illiberal and exclusionary.

In both cities, a troubling convergence stands out. While cultural districts highlight diversity within the national population, they largely ignore the diversity that derives from the high proportion of foreign expatriates. In particular, low-skilled migrants, who constitute a significant part the population and are at the heart of the construction of these urban spaces, are virtually invisible in the narratives celebrating cultural diversity. Both in Msheireb and in Little India, public authorities have adopted measures to reduce the presence of low-skilled migrant communities. In the Msheireb area, the buildings that were used as migrant housings have been torn down, and new zoning regulations exclude them from the city centre. In Singapore, Little India has emerged since the 1980s as a community hub for South Asian migrants (Osterdag 2016). But the government has progressively developed measures to deter them from frequenting this neighbourhood.

Cultural districts bear the marks of these contradictions. The Msheireb museum denounces modern slavery and the exploitation of migrant workers at the heart of a construction site that employs these same workers. The Singapore Indian Heritage Centre, which is largely dedicated to tracing the history of migration from

India to Singapore, does not portray the situation of transient migrants from the Indian subcontinent, despite their dense presence in the Little India neighbourhood.

This contribution invites to consider the multiscale politics of modelling practices. Illiberal states like Qatar and Singapore need to diffuse consensual views among their populations, and avoid their development models and diversity management regimes from being challenged. At the same time, as they are also highly internationally interdependent and vulnerable, they need to maintain a good reputation friendly international relations, and hold their status in international arenas. They are therefore weary and attract attention towards positive aspects of their models, to defuse potential critiques.

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