

Abigail Johnson (Architecture) - Doha (Qatar), September 2014

I visited Doha (Qatar) for 2 weeks in order to conduct research for my Architecture dissertation. I am studying the social segregation of the city, particularly looking at a current development of 34 hectares in the centre of the old town (Msheireb), and the role of the architect and the state in this environment. The construction industry in Qatar is currently particularly relevant in the news, in relation to the investigation into the inhumane living conditions of the thousands of migrant workers involved in the construction of the country's infrastructure for the 2020 World Cup.

I was based within the research department of Virginia Commonwealth University Qatar, and spent the time speaking to staff members, students, architects, engineers, project managers and residents, conducting primary research into the structure of the city and the current construction developments. My time in Doha allowed me to visit the main offices of Msheireb Properties, study the plans and designs and gain access to the building site and the development that wasn't yet open to the public. The research that I conducted whilst visiting has led me to interview English architects involved in the development project upon return to the UK, gathering opinions on the unique project and conditions of working in the Middle East.

During the trip, I spent a few days within Qatar University department of Architecture and Urban Planning, gaining knowledge from staff members with a great deal of experience of the city and participating in the studio classes of 4th year Architecture students. It was an interesting insight into the studies of the subject abroad, in a female-only environment where students were learning design strategies within a city with no historical context (due to the frequency of demolition).

The most valuable element that I gained from the trip was an insight into the culture- a city formed of over 80% expatriates and migrant workers. Everyday customs and anecdotes have become a valuable primary source within my dissertation, as I've evaluated the segregation of different social groups and ethnicities within the city, and the influence of the state and the professional architect on the construction of this environment. I have also formed contacts with academics and professionals which could prove very useful in the future if I was to aim to gain experience in Qatar and the Middle East.