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Doha and its Sports City: An Assessment of the Long-term Legacies of the Aspire Zone

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A growing phenomenon, which is gaining attention worldwide, is the rapid diffusion of themed-sport areas as legacies of mega-sporting events. An example of it is offered by the city of Doha. On the occasion of 2006 Asian Games, the capital of Qatar faced some significant urban transformations. The principal legacy left after staging the event is the implementation of the Aspire Zone, Doha's Sports City. Is this legacy beneficial in a long-term perspective? What is the value added to the city and its inhabitants? This study attempts at providing insight into the potential offered by themed-sport areas as legacies of mega events, and it aims at evaluating the rationale for the realization of sports dedicated zones, analysing their impact from a physical and social perspective. Specifically, the research offers an investigation into the long-term cost-benefit effect of the Aspire Zone, Doha Sports City, by conducting a post-occupancy evaluation. Conclusions show that there is a potential to realize sports-oriented area that are fully integrated into cities, but the design of a comprehensive and long-term plan is needed. Moreover, providing a sports city with a variety of different activities and functions will contribute to attracting different types of users and avoid occasional use. Mega-events have existed for a very long time, but it is only since the last century that they have been perceived and adopted as tools of urban transformation. Many scholars define the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome as the first example of event intentionally used for urban redevelopment purposes, while the Olympic Village set for the 1972 Olympics in Munich is considered an early case of event led sports city, as the village was concentrated in one main area (the Olympic Park), instead of being spread around the city, and as it was specifically designed for delivering urban leisure. Both Rome and Munich opened the way, and nowadays cities are increasingly competing and bidding to secure the hosting of mega-events, attracted by their potential urban regeneration effect. However, results are not encouraging, and literature shows how difficult is to transform event sites into well-integrated areas inside cities. These adverse outcomes are even exacerbated when events are used for the redevelopment of brownfield zones, or when events are held in suburban areas, because apart from sports

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activities, generally only a few other services are offered. This is the case of Sydney, which held the Olympics in 2000. Its sports site at Homebush Bay is about 15 km far from the city centre, and it has been under-utilised since the post-staging event. The Arabian Peninsula is not an exception in the desire of staging mega-events, being the area characterized by a massive sportification, expressed through the birth of several sports TV channels (Al Jazeera Sports, Dubai Sports, Saudi Sports, and Abu Dhabi Sport channels, among others), through the increasing migration flows of international athletes and trainers toward the region, and through the significant rise in the number of international sport events held (e.g.: Bahrain International Formula One Grand Prix, Doha Moto GP, Dubai World Cup of horse racing, Doha Tennis ATP Tournament, and many others). In the case of Doha, the phenomenon of sportification is translated into the desire of transforming the city into a sporting hub: looking at the official Qatar Tourism website, the first theme of the section “Activities” is dedicated to “Sports”, in which Qatar is defined as “Home to Sports”. Moreover, sport has a key role in the 2030 Qatar National Vision, in which sports tourism is indicated as an example of economy diversification from the oil-based model. Finally, Doha has bided and staged many international events: twenty-two international tournaments were hosted only in 2013 (Table 1), and this number will grow in the future. The process of transforming itself into an international sporting hub started with the Asian Games in 2006. In that occasion, the city faced some significant urban transformations. One of them, the principal legacy, is the implementation of the Aspire Zone, Doha’s Sports City (Figure 1). Is this legacy beneficial in a long-term perspective? What is the value added to City and its inhabitants? Did it worth to build it or not? Moreover, finally, does it fulfil the need for public spaces in Doha? These are the questions that framed this study, and that will be analysed in the next section of the research. In particular, the study investigates the lack of urban public spaces in Doha, and it argues that themed-sports area can fulfil this scarcity. The research analysed the main legacy left by 2006 Asian Games: the Aspire Zone, Doha’s sports-themed area. In particular, the study focused on the analysis of the physical and social impact on the city. According to the literature, sport-themed areas are extremely costly, underused, segregated spaces, which are far from being considered liveable, social and sustainable. These negative characteristics are often exacerbated by strict event specifications on design and high external pressure by event rights holders. The risk of this kind of developments is to increase the level of physical isolation and segregation. The study showed there is a potential to realize sports-oriented districts that are fully integrated into the hosting cities. But first, the locations chosen for the event need to be carefully selected according to the morphology and the needs of the city. Moreover, as Barcelona strategy showed, a more comprehensive and long-term plan can prevent these areas to be under-utilized, desolate and segregated, and regardless of where these sports facilities are placed, the best results in term of social impact can be reached if they are totally integrated into the city and fully used by residents. As the Aspire Zone in part accomplished, providing a sports city with a variety of different resources and functions will tend to attract different types of users and avoid occasional use. Adding to stadia and elitist venues more participatory sports facilities, green and open spaces, museums and exhibitions, shopping centres will increment the number of visitors, so that the sites will not be used only by athletes and passive spectators, creating liveable, self-sufficient, and socially inclusive urban areas. To conclude, when bidding for an event it is critical to have clear in mind the reasons why hosting it and to design the long-term legacies from the very beginning, at an early stage of the planning implementation. Cities as Doha, which lacks public spaces, can benefit from the creation of themed areas as legacies of events, but the risk is once again to focus on building iconic and spectacular physical venues at the expense of societal development that can improve the quality of life of its citizens. Looking at the future, staging the 2022 World Cup will be an unrepeatable occasion for transforming Doha into a more vibrant and liveable city: will the city take advantage of it? Hopefully, it will, but it cannot do it without learning from past experiences and mistakes, without looking at good examples and best practices, and without planning a long-term legacies strategy for it.

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