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# Monuments to Maritime Labor: the Dhow, Migration, and the Architecture of the 2022 Qatar World Cup

Early morning in Doha. From a vantage point high above the city, construction sites are visible in every direction. While most of the city is still cast in shadows, a lone figure walks across leveled ground prepared for construction. There are a cluster of low-rise buildings to his left, with crenellated rooftops and façades that are defined by a regular rhythm of arches. In the construction site, a nearby area is cordoned-off by temporary walls. Inside these walls are other figures identifiable as construction workers from the bright orange and green jackets they wear.

The confined space of construction abuts an area of the city that is far denser than these low-rise buildings. Just outside the site's walls, nearly twenty men sit in or beside the road, some on red-and-white barricades and others beside a yield sign in the middle of the street. Are these men about to start work on this site? Or are they waiting to potentially work elsewhere, on one of the other sites in Doha under construction? If they are some of the 1.4 million migrant workers in the city, which construction sites are they bound to day after day, during their years of contracted, temporary employment?

One of the largest construction sites in downtown Doha, the Msheireb, is barely visible to the east. Even from this distance, it is possible to see slender cranes in the empty air that will soon be filled in with residential buildings and stores. [1] These are not the only cranes in this urbanism

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[1] Will Hunter, "A Radical New Masterplan for Doha Cultivates a Sustainable Urban Model with Buildings that Embody a Modern Expression of Qatari Culture," the *Architectural Review* (May 2011), 72.



Construction site in Doha, 2013.



Men waiting outside the temporary walls of a Doha construction site, 2013.

of the future, which for now is marked mainly by voids and fragments as a promise of what is to come. There is a crane that is barely visible on the Persian Gulf piers of Dhow Harbour, a crane partially occluded by high-rises that have already been completed, and a crane high above the tallest buildings in downtown Doha. The cranes comprise a network of construction equipment, connected by a specific date: 2022.

In transit between the airport and the hotel, the number 2022 is visible everywhere, on screens hung from the façades of high-rise buildings to billboards along the road. Whether construction is overseen by a well-known or a comparatively unfamiliar architect, each site is part of the infrastructure being put in place for the 2022 World Cup, which is itself part of a more comprehensive building plan known as “Qatar National Vision 2030.” As with other World Cups, or the Olympic Games, the ephemerality of these events is preceded by years of fast-paced construction. Managers and workers race to meet deadlines as building materials are purchased and shipped from factories around the globe before being aggregated on countless construction sites. The preparations for a month of the World Cup are generally backed with more urgency and resources—political, economic, institutional—than other more modest urban initiatives.

Albert Speer Jr., whose firm prepared Qatar’s bid for the World Cup, recently spoke to this point: “Major events like the Olympics or the



View toward the Msheireb construction site in Doha, 2013.

World Cup make the unthinkable thinkable. There are no taboos. Fixed dates are very helpful when it comes to rebuilding a city.” [2] In Speer’s logic, the World Cup positively enables construction to proceed at a faster pace than would otherwise be possible. This optimism can be critiqued, however, by asking whether building for this onetime event will leave the city with structures that are actually necessary once the World Cup is over—a question partially answered by the city’s plan to ship portions of the stadia to developing nations after the event. [3] Should cities be built primarily to become the sites of short-lived sporting events? Does this type of construction result in civic spaces that are accessible to everyone who lives in the city, including the migrant workers who built them, or does it mostly lead to considerable profits for the many construction companies that are involved in the building process and the developers financing such construction? The answers seem obvious, but the way cities are being built around these events demands that we keep asking such questions and tracking who is profiting from construction. The potential for profit is enormous: Over the next decade, approximately \$220 billion will be spent on construction in Qatar. Despite this large budget for World Cup projects, the migrant construction workers building them will get paid as little as \$165 a month—or, in extreme cases, might not get paid at all for labor they have already done. [4]

While asking questions about the planned growth of cities, accessibility, and inequality, the ability to look at certain types of spaces—to visually claim an urban panorama—can be recognized as another form of social exclusion. The vantage points of the hotel rooftop or the car en route to the airport are views generally associated with a specific type of subject, the airline passenger in transit or the tourist. Construction sites produce these subjectivities and those of the migrant workers as well. The process continues again and again: As construction sites turn into completed buildings, roads, railways, or ports, these structures frame the view, or series of views, from which each subject can gaze back at other construction sites. Each subject does not, however, have access to the same set of views.

When the construction site is viewed from above, its organization is clearly visible, with structural supports and slabs as a skeleton for the building that will gradually be completed by adding pipes, telecommunications cables, insulation, and all of the other elements that are considered necessary for a building to be considered part of a “modern” skyline. But unlike the sealed spaces that proliferate around the city and make it possible for the human body to survive in the dry desert air of Qatar, the construction site is, at least in its early stages, open to any weather condition.

This openness to the surrounding air defines what the construction worker experiences, day in and day out, for as long as he remains in the city. The view that he sees (from within the temporary walls that only he and a controlled group of people can access) is framed by the heat of this air—often, his eyes and some of his face are the only parts of his body that are not covered by hard hats; draped cloth around the head and neck; and the heavy orange uniform, gloves, and boots construction companies are legally mandated to provide their workers. With his eyes exposed, his vision is tempered by the sensation of contact with dry air that can often reach 120 degrees. What he sees are the bodies of other workers, alongside

[2] Alexander Smoltczyk, “2022 World Cup in Qatar: The Desert Dreams of German Architect Albert Speer,” *Spiegel Online* (June 1, 2012), (link: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/german-architect-albert-speer-plans-for-the-2022-world-cup-in-qatar-a-836154.html> text: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/german-architect-albert-speer-plans-for-the-2022-world-cup-in-qatar-a-836154.html>).

[3] Smoltczyk, “2022 World Cup in Qatar,” 4. Of the stadia being taken apart once the World Cup is over, Speer has stated: “...we designed the stadiums to be disassembled and removed so they could later be given to poorer countries as smaller sports venues.”

[4] Amnesty International, *The Dark Side of Migration: Spotlight on Qatar’s Construction Sector Ahead of the World Cup* (London: Amnesty International Ltd., 2013), 5 and 33.

machinery, performing various types of labor, working around the clock as architects and their consultants attempt to keep construction sites active for ever-shortening periods of time, in response to the demands of capital financing the operations. Capital, debt, and profit are inextricably linked at the construction site—a shorter time frame for construction produces more profit and less debt for the entities that fund building. The pressure of time from the fixed 2022 World Cup date adds to the pressure of time from the logic of capitalism.

The workers who will build the World Cup stadia and who are currently building the other projects that are necessary for the sporting event are mostly from South Asian countries. Over the last forty years, as Gulf countries have become wealthier from their oil profits, the number of migrant workers from South Asia, who mostly labor in construction, has increased dramatically. [5] In Qatar, the ratio between migrant workers and citizens is the most extreme of any country worldwide, with 94 percent of the working population made up by migrants. Most of the workers are from India and Pakistan, but other countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are also well-represented. [6] In some cases, before these migrant workers leave their countries, they are protected by juridical constructs that offer a degree of oversight for these workers, but once they arrive in Qatar, they are bound by a different legal system: the *kafala*.

In Nepal—a country whose migrant workers have been the focus of numerous newspaper articles in *The Guardian* and other publications over the last year—laws and treaties regulating Nepali migration have been instituted since the early nineteenth century. The newspaper articles published about the working conditions of Nepali construction workers in Qatar describe a contemporary situation that is part of a long history of Nepalis emigrating in order to find work. [7] The known history of migration out of Nepal starts in 500 BCE, along trade routes between India, Nepal, Tibet, and China. Prior to the nineteenth century, most of the migration in and out of Nepal took place between Tibet and Nepal. In May of 1815, during the Anglo-Gorkha War, Nepali migration was formally codified by a treaty that allowed Nepalis to fight for the British army, although this agreement was not realized in practice until 1886. [8] Migration for countries other than Tibet and India did not start until “hundreds of thousands of Nepali youth fought in the First and Second World Wars on the side of the British, which were the earliest instances of a concerted recruitment of Nepali men to work abroad.” [9] The conditions Nepalis encounter on construction sites and in workers’ housing in Qatar, where around 200 or more Nepalis are currently dying each year, are part of a long history of their dangerous work outside of their home country. Today, the physical risks Nepalis face are matched by newfound financial risks, as migrant workers incur large amounts of debt in the process of finding work abroad.

In 1950, the Nepal–India Treaty of Peace and Friendship enabled Nepalis and Indians to move back and forth between the two countries without either passports or visas. [10] After the Foreign Employment Act was passed in 1985, Nepalis continued to emigrate to India, but also started emigrating to Europe and North America. Such geographical movement has been better documented than Indian emigration since the 1985 act required

[5] Amnesty International, *The Dark Side of Migration*, 201–202.

[6] Mona Chalabi, “Qatar’s Migrants: How Have They Changed the Country?” *The Guardian* (September 26, 2013), (link: <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/sep/26/qatar-migrants-how-changed-the-country> text: <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/sep/26/qatar-migrants-how-changed-the-country>.)

[7] There have been numerous articles but perhaps the most prominent of these has been the article and video by Pete Pattison, “Qatar’s World Cup ‘Slaves’,” *The Guardian* (September 25, 2013), (link: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/25/revealed-qatars-world-cup-slaves> text: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/25/revealed-qatars-world-cup-slaves>.)

[8] Bandita Sijapati and Amrita Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal: An Analysis of Existing Policies and Institutional Mechanisms* (Kathmandu, Nepal: Himal Books, published for the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility, 2012), 5–6.

[9] Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, 6.

[10] Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, 7.

oversight and paperwork that is not necessary when Nepalis cross the Indian border. By 2001, there was another demographic shift as many Nepalis started migrating to the Gulf for the first time. [11] This migration to the Gulf coincided with an uptick in violence during Nepal's Maoist war, which started in 1996 and did not formally end until 2006. [12] A person living in Nepal during the year 2001 who intended to migrate to the Gulf was under rather different legal provisions than someone about to leave for the Gulf today. In recent years, the migrant worker as a subject has been refigured in multiple ways as juridical constructs have been rewritten. [13] In 2007, an act was passed that made it easier for Nepalis to migrate out of the country while offering some protection from unscrupulous brokers who might falsify documents or commit other crimes as defined by the law. [14] Migration out of Nepal and the country's reliance on remittances, which account for roughly a quarter of Nepal's economy, have therefore been increasingly codified. [15]

As such movement out of the country becomes legally possible for a larger number of Nepalis headed to a greater number of countries, the juridical structure in place for people who intend to cross a border and become migrant workers ceases to function at the moment those Nepalis have actually crossed that border. The person preparing to leave the country is not yet a migrant but is legally covered by certain protections because of his intent to travel out of the country for work. Once that person becomes a migrant worker by crossing borders during the trip to the Gulf, he or she is no longer a subject as defined by the legal constructs of Nepal. For this reason, "despite having adequate national laws to govern foreign employment, Nepal cannot exercise extraterritorial jurisdiction to protect its migrant workers in destination countries or prosecute foreign individuals or organizations under its law. There is very little Nepal can do in terms of protecting the rights of workers in a foreign country." [16] Once a Nepali has crossed over borders into the Gulf for work, he or she becomes a migrant worker as bound by the *kafala* system in Qatar.

The *kafala* is the dominant legal structure determining the everyday conditions of more than 200,000 Nepalis who are construction workers in Qatar today. Due to the *kafala* system, once these migrant workers have entered the country under a contract for a specific employer, they cannot legally change employers without the employers' consent. They are not able to leave the country without permission from their employer, they cannot form unions, they are not subject to regulations limiting the number of hours they can work, and they must live in housing provided by their employer. [17] The *kafala* therefore severely restricts the migrant worker and leaves him or her without any legal recourse to hold employers accountable if they delay payment for months or stop payment altogether for work already completed. In order to bring a complaint against employers, workers must continue their employment with the same company and must be able to navigate the Qatari legal system—which is, of course, conducted in Arabic, a language many Nepali migrant workers do not speak. [18]

As modern as it might seem to apply for a passport and visa, board a plane, and travel to the Gulf for work, these Nepali workers are part of a long history of transnational movement across the Indian Ocean region.

[11] Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, 9.

[12] Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, 10 and 18.

[13] One of the major differences between Nepali migration in 2001 and today is that women can legally migrate out of the country. Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, 28.

[14] Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, and 49–51.

[15] Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, 16–18.

[16] Sijapati and Limbu, *Governing Labour Migration in Nepal*, 67.

[17] Amnesty International, *The Dark Side of Migration*, 15.

[18] Amnesty International, *The Dark Side of Migration*, 17–124.

Since the shift in Nepali migration toward the Gulf in 2001, the borders of the Indian Ocean's hinterlands have been slowly reconfigured. Unlike a map of nation-states—where borders might be contested and redrawn but are rarely theoretical—the borders of an ocean's hinterlands are far more abstract and the space covered by particular oceans is even open to interpretation. In the Indian Ocean, the focus is often on the waters between Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the western coast of India, and Sri Lanka. However, the edge of the Indian Ocean extends far to the east as well, to the Bay of Bengal, which meets the Andaman Sea and the countries of Southeast Asia; in this part of the sea, the history of trade and migration with China dominates. Along with questions of where one ocean ends and another begins is the question of how far inland the Indian Ocean's hinterlands reach. Technology plays a central role here—with air travel, the extents of the hinterlands are far larger than when ships were the only vessels moving people and goods across the ocean. Even as a landlocked country, it could be said that Nepal has become part of the western Indian Ocean region over the last thirteen or so years, because of the numbers of workers who are migrating to the Gulf as well as the amount of remittances from Qatar to Nepal.

As technologies of migration have taken different forms, there have also been changes to the juridical structures that regulate the labor of workers who have traveled across borders in the region, as evident from the way the subject of the migrant worker has been refigured through Nepali law. The recent revisions to laws that define the subject of the migrant worker in a particular way coexist with legal systems, such as the *kafala*, that have grown out of far older labor practices. There are numerous theories about the history of the *kafala*, but one of the most persuasive is that it came out of the pearl trade in the Gulf and the indebtedness of pearl divers to the captains of dhow pearling boats. [19] The *kafala* is therefore connected to labor practices in the Gulf that lasted for approximately two millennia, until the middle of the twentieth century when the pearl trade collapsed, rendering obsolete the pearling dhows that can be seen as something of an infrastructure in their own right.

The *kafala* was influenced not only by particular labor practices but by a spatial organization of that labor. The amount of debt divers took on to pay for their food and support their families (who stayed on land) during the months of the pearling season always exceeded their profits after a summer of diving. Debts passed from one season to the next and divers had to continue working for the same captain, or *nakhuda*. The divers could not start working on another dhow without receiving permission from their *nakhuda*. [20] Pearl divers therefore became tied to what could be considered a floating factory, where divers gathered oysters from the beds of the Persian Gulf and removed the pearls from the oysters before *nakhudas* prepared the pearls for buyers who traveled from dhow to dhow during the pearling season. [21] [22] At the height of the pearl trade, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were thousands of pearling dhows in the Persian Gulf, and the mobility of these small-scale factories would have made it relatively easy for divers to escape their debts were it not for strict measures in place to prevent this from happening. [23] These spatial and technological histories of labor need to be considered as public debate

[19] Anh Nga Longva, *Walls Built on Sand: Migration, Exclusion, and Society in Kuwait* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 103–107.

[20] Longva, *Walls Built on Sand*, 105–106.

[21] In reading the dhow as a factory, I have been inspired by the work of Allan Sekula and his projects *Fish Story*, *The Forgotten Space*, and *Facing the Music*.

[22] Anita L.P. Burdett, ed., *Records of the Persian Gulf Pearl Fisheries 1857-1962* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Archive Editions, 1995).

[23] Burdett, ed., *Records of the Persian Gulf Pearl Fisheries*.



continues about ways to update or end the *kafala* system. There is not the same possibility of a migrant worker moving from one worksite to another and escaping debt through this movement when construction sites on land are fixed to a particular location, unlike the dhows that rather freely traveled around the sea. The workers' debt also has new geographical properties: Whereas pearl divers were indebted to the *nakhudas* in the Gulf, migrant construction workers and often their families are indebted to lenders in their home countries and cannot escape debt by working for a different employer once they have migrated to the Gulf.

The form of the floating dhows, as it happens, inspired the architecture of World Cup stadia from the start of the design process. When Albert Speer & Partner prepared Qatar's World Cup bid, their proposal included an animation that opens with a view looking up toward a dhow mast. With a slow pan downward, the lower portion of the boat becomes visible in the foreground and as the dhow gently bobs up and down in the waves, the view shifts to what is behind the boat—Al-Shamal Stadium. From the water, the geometry of the façade closely mimics the body of the boat and the varied hues of the stadium's façade look like the wooden dhow planks that were sourced from inland forests in the Indian or African hinterlands of the Indian Ocean. After multiple pans around the stadium from a position on land, the animation settles on an aerial view, with both Al-Shamal and the dhows in the shallow waters offshore in the frame. The upturned corner of the white stadium roof is another reference to the dhow, but instead of looking to the body of the boat, the roof alludes to the triangular shape of the dhow's distinctive lanteen sail.

After the first minute of the animation, there is no doubt that the World Cup is symbolically linked to Qatar's maritime history and location on the shores of the Persian Gulf. Looking more closely at the dhows from the side and overhead views, however, reveals something curious—there are no people in the rendered boats. There are people on land, walking toward the stadium and partially filling its seats, but the dhows appear to steer themselves, with a ghost crew that has been excised from the oceanic imagery. The World Cup architecture has therefore socially hollowed out the dhow by breaking it from its labor histories, presenting the forms of the sails and planks as an unpeopled fantasy of the past.



Albert Speer & Partner, Al-Shamal Stadium, 2009-2010.



Zaha Hadid Architects, Al-Wakrah Stadium, estimated completion by 2018.

In this fantasy, the histories of the laborers who cut trees in the forests along the western coasts of India and Africa, built boats along the shorelines, or shipped the timber to Gulf boatyards, sewed planks, and sailed vast distances from Africa to India and even to China are forgotten. [24] These histories can, however, be read into Speer's Al-Shamal and Zaha Hadid's Al-Wakrah Stadium, which also takes the form of the dhow. Hadid's Stadium, which will actually be built (unlike Speer's proposal), is an even more idealized form of the dhow. In a rendering of the stadium, there is no visible coastline. The dhow is now entirely on land and there are no planks, only curved lines, which suggest billowing sails. By removing the references to the lanteen sail, the Al-Wakrah Stadium becomes only a generalized version of the dhow, without any of the specificities that distinguished different types of dhows according to their functions and where they sailed. [25]

The lack of these geographical identifiers makes Al-Wakrah Stadium even more of a transnational form. The idea of the dhow and not the specificity of the dhow is what is monumentalized, and fundamental to this idea is the cross-cultural exchanges between the Gulf, Africa, India, and China that came from hundreds, if not thousands, of years of maritime travel. The transcultural form cannot be separated from the juridical processes that have governed migration and labor in this region as well as the histories of the labor practices. Hadid has famously claimed that "it's not my duty as an architect" to think about labor—but the labor histories associated with the dhow can be projected back into the architectural form she has given us. [26] In doing so, Al-Wakrah and Al-Shamal become monuments to a long history of maritime labor—unwittingly reinscribing the presence of those workers within the iconic imagery of the 2022 World Cup. [27]

[24] Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean*, 79–105.

[25] Sheriff, *Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean*, 93–99.

[26] James Riach, "Zaha Hadid Defends Qatar World Cup Role Following Migrant Worker Deaths," *The Guardian*, February 25, 2014, (link: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/25/zaha-hadid-qatar-world-cup-migrant-worker-deaths> text: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/25/zaha-hadid-qatar-world-cup-migrant-worker-deaths>).

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