In the twenty-first century, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have used oil wealth to fund the construction of an array of museums designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architects to house global collections of art. This denotes a marked shift in the Gulf’s urban development that focuses on arts infrastructure and coincides with national rebranding efforts. While superficially similar, the museological endeavors in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are driven by distinct motivations. An analysis of the architectural vocabularies and urban characteristics of the museological development in Doha and Abu Dhabi reveal significant differences in the two ventures, challenging the traditional narrative that sees both nations following identical trajectories.

CURRENT APPROACHES
Critics and journalists commenting on the museological endeavors in Doha and Abu Dhabi largely fixate on the confluence of Western professionals and Gulf petrodollars. The result is an Orientalist approach that tends to portray the Gulf as a region devoid of material heritage and largely fixate on the confluence of Western professionals and Gulf petrodollars. The result is an engagement.

PROPOSED CORRECTIVE
In an effort to challenge scholarship that positions museological developments in Qatar and Abu Dhabi as products of similar trajectories, my research attends closely to the visual qualities of each city’s museums, their relationship to urban space, and their respective approaches to audience. These close-readings, which employ the skills I have developed as a History of Art major, allow for a discussion that reaches beyond the focus on the superficiality of oil-supported

ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have used oil wealth to fund the construction of an array of museums designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architects to house global collections of art. This denotes a marked shift in the Gulf’s urban development that focuses on arts infrastructure and coincides with national rebranding efforts. While superficially similar, the museological endeavors in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are driven by distinct motivations. An analysis of the architectural vocabularies and urban characteristics of the museological development in Doha and Abu Dhabi reveal significant differences in the two ventures, challenging the traditional narrative that sees both nations following identical trajectories.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODS
My research takes explicitly the cultural claims of Doha and Abu Dhabi’s museums by investigating and comparing the architecture, urban topography, and publications of both. I aim to understand both shared and more distinctive aspects of each city’s cultural development in the twenty-first century. An effort to characterize how Qatari and Emirati cultural projects negotiate the relationship between the local and the global.

My approach gathered data in four key areas:

1. I began my research with an exploration of the architectural vocabularies of the major museums in the Gulf—the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) and the National Museum of Qatar in Doha and the Louvre, the Guggenheim, and the Sheikh Zayed National Museum in Abu Dhabi. These explorations revealed similar narratives between the projects in Doha and Abu Dhabi—the commissioning of Western Pritzker Prize-winning architects and the construction of buildings that fuse a universalist, modern vocabulary with identifiably Arab tropes. These characteristics suggest a shared interest in engaging with a global audience through the construction of monumental architectural structures. And yet, a subsequent analysis of the exhibition and working spaces of Qatar Museums challenges this reading. For example, Jean Nouvel references the desert rose—crystal clusters found throughout the Gulf—through the di-chrome planes of the National Museum. And yet, this modernist structure enunciates the twentieth century palace of the Al Thani family, denoting a museological practices that balances new construction with the preservation of the city’s architectural heritage. In the UAE, the current state of Saadiyat Island denotes an antithetical response. Museums are built in new, undeveloped zones, creating museological monuments that exist outside of Abu Dhabi’s architectural history.

2. I sought to understand the museums’ relationship to the social media activities of each institution. (2) I sought historical and cross-cultural comparisons for Doha and Abu Dhabi’s projects. I traveled to Paris and Berlin to visit the Islamic art collections in the Louvre and the Pergamon Museum and to identify and deeper topographic parallels that would compare with the positioning of Doha and Abu Dhabi’s nascent museums.

3. Through the architectural and topographical analysis of Doha and Abu Dhabi’s museological landscapes, the positioning endeavors of both Gulf States are revealed as markedly different undertakings. Contrary to scholarship that positions the museums of Doha and Saadiyat Island as identical exploitations of petrodollars and cultural commodities, my research exposes the museological practices of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates as decidedly unique manifestions. Qatar employs a largely inward-looking approach to place-making, utilizing museums and galleries to enfor urban spaces throughout Doha. And yet, these practices are supplemented by the construction of monumental museums that exist outside of the city.

4. I studied the construction zone surrounding the Louvre Abu Dhabi in August, 2015. A map depicting the museums and galleries in Abu Dhabi. As the northern terminus, the city’s cultural institutions are woven among difference spaces and audiences. In Abu Dhabi, museums and galleries are concentrated in Saadiyat Island’s Cultural District—an entertainment hub, removed from the city’s lived-in zones, which principally accommodates the needs of tourists to the UAE. Mapping thus strengthens the inference that emerged from the architectural analysis, positioning Qatar as more locally focused while the United Arab Emirates targets a more international audience.

CASE STUDY ONE | ARCHITECTURE

I began my research with an exploration of the architectural vocabularies of the major museums in the Gulf—the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) and the National Museum of Qatar in Doha and the Louvre, the Guggenheim, and the Sheikh Zayed National Museum in Abu Dhabi. These explorations revealed similar narratives between the projects in Doha and Abu Dhabi—the commissioning of Western Pritzker Prize-winning architects and the construction of buildings that fuse a universalist, modern vocabulary with identifiably Arab tropes. These characteristics suggest a shared interest in engaging with a global audience through the construction of monumental architectural structures. And yet, a subsequent analysis of the exhibition and working spaces of Qatar Museums challenges this reading. For example, Jean Nouvel references the desert rose—crystal clusters found throughout the Gulf—through the di-chrome planes of the National Museum. And yet, this modernist structure enunciates the twentieth century palace of the Al Thani family, denoting a museological practices that balances new construction with the preservation of the city’s architectural heritage. In the UAE, the current state of Saadiyat Island denotes an antithetical response. Museums are built in new, undeveloped zones, creating museological monuments that exist outside of Abu Dhabi’s architectural history.

CASE STUDY TWO | MAPPING

The analysis of architectural patterns and practices led me to the hypothesis that Qatar has an inward cultural focus, integrating existing structures and spaces with new arts institutions, where the United Arab Emirates’ agenda is more internationally directed, enveloping vacant spaces with new museums that bear little relationship to the existing city. To confirm this, I investigated how the placement and development of each city’s museums relate to Doha and Abu Dhabi’s urban topography. I created maps of the cultural institutions within the two cities. In Doha, museums, galleries, and artists’ residences are positioned throughout the city, creating an urban fabric in which cultural institutions are woven among difference spaces and audiences. In Abu Dhabi, museums and galleries are concentrated in Saadiyat Island’s Cultural District—an entertainment hub, removed from the city’s lived-in zones, which principally accommodates the needs of tourists to the UAE. Mapping thus strengthens the inference that emerged from the architectural analysis, positioning Qatar as more locally focused while the United Arab Emirates targets a more international audience.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Gulf museums are still in development. Thus, it is difficult to characterize the nature of each project in its entirety at this stage, or to claim that the tendencies observed will continue through to the completion of Qatari and Emirati museums. A component that is absent from my research is an investigation into the collecting and display practices of each institution. Once the museums in Doha and Abu Dhabi are complete, it will be of interest to see how objects are displayed and what narratives are presented and obscured. Furthermore, I have relied heavily upon architectural mock-ups and models for my visual analyses. Due to recent legislative changes, the display of objects is governed by new regulations, affecting the form of displays that will be permitted.

CONCLUSION

Through the architectural and topographical analysis of Doha and Abu Dhabi’s museological landscapes, the positioning endeavors of both Gulf States are revealed as markedly different undertakings. Contrary to scholarship that positions the museums of Doha and Saadiyat Island as identical exploitations of petrodollars and cultural commodities, my research exposes the museological practices of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates as distinctly unique manifestions. Qatar employs a largely inward-looking approach to place-making, utilizing museums and galleries to enfor urban spaces throughout Doha. And yet, these practices are supplemented by the construction of monumental museums that exist outside of the city.

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