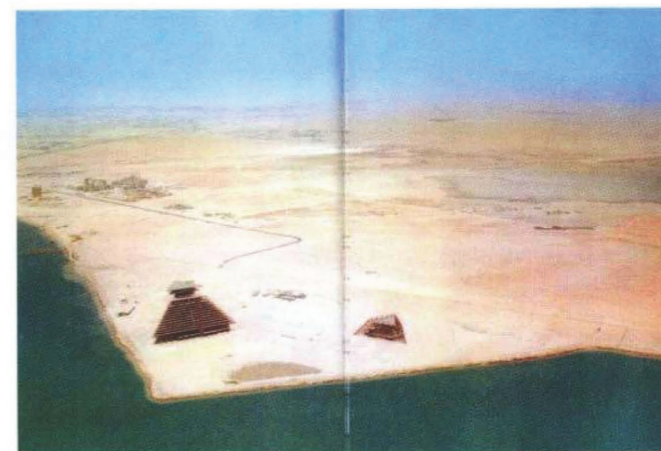




The Architectural Review

A map in search of lost territory

The development of Msheireb Downtown Doha is intended to recreate the cultural roots of the district while accepting the march of time, writes *Jay Merrick*



The modern urban development of Doha is a postwar phenomenon triggered by the discovery of onshore petroleum at Jebel Dukhan, Qatar, in 1939, and the start of oil exports in 1949. The discovery of the 25 trillion cubic metre North Field natural gas reserve came in 1971, a year after the publication of JG Ballard's novel-in-fragments, *The Atrocity Exhibition*. 'Deserts possess a particular magic', he noted in one of them, 'since they have exhausted their own futures, and are thus free of time. Anything erected there, a city, a pyramid, a motel, stands outside time.'

Doha exists in a self-generated, rapidly proliferating urban condition that threatens to break free from the delicate physical and cultural gravities of Qatar's past, which wasn't studied academically until the 1950s. The first history of the country's architecture, by Malika Bourennane and Mohamed Jaidah, was published in 2009, well after the start of Doha's most intense period of redevelopment.

The city echoes the phrase, Gulf Futurism, coined sardonically by the 35-year-old Qatari-American artist Sophia Al-Maria, who told *Dazed* magazine: 'One of the most ancient ways of living came head-on against extreme wealth and capitalism - glass and steel against wool and camels. There's been a quantum leap and there's a temporal gap. The two things have been stitched together and there's a missing piece of history.'

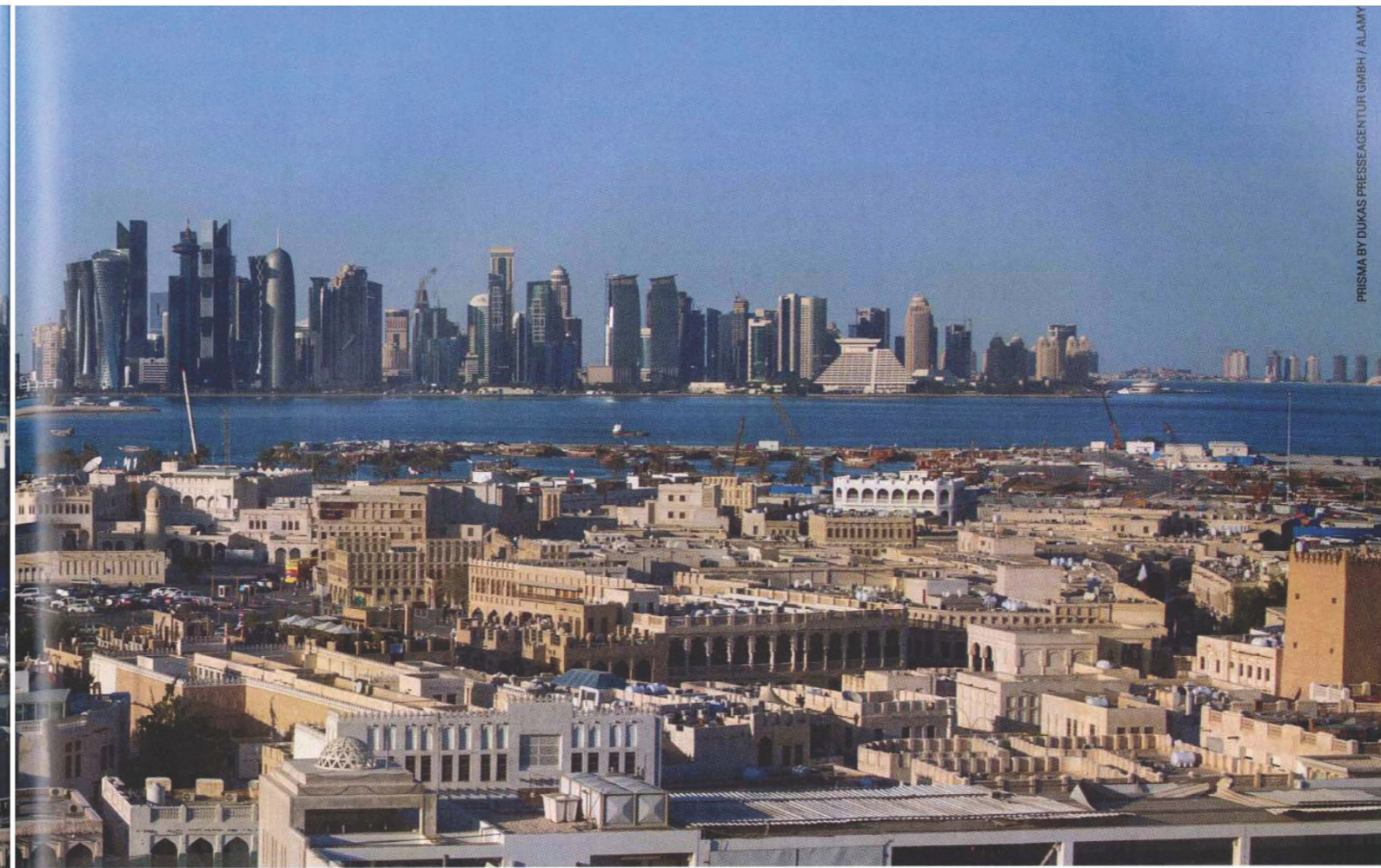
In the early 1950s, most of Doha's population of 20,000 lived in simple single-storey courtyard dwellings of mud-rendered stone arranged in asymmetrical clusters intersected by *sikka* alleys. Aziza Plant, the wife of a British advisor at the time, described Doha as 'a big village in which everyone knew one another.'

There was no telephone, and very few people even had radios. There was hardly enough water for washing or cooking, and the little there was came from wells in the desert, which we used to boil and filter. There was no electricity.'

Doha's urban quantum jump, from S to XL, began via Llewellyn Davies's original masterplan in 1972, with William Pereira Associates delegated to set out the New District of Doha to the north of the original conurbation, and the bay-side area known as the Corniche. This is when the city's modern structural, prefabrication and finishing standards were perfected, producing buildings such as the 1982 Sheraton Hotel, a superb Brutalist ziggurat designed by Pereira's CY Lee; equally impressive was the tightly packed grid of octagonally planned, concrete-clad pavilions of the Qatar University complex, designed by Kamal el Kafrawi, with Arup.

By 1970, Doha's population had risen to more than 80,000, with foreigners making up the majority of the working population. A new ring-road system and suburban areas appeared, and by 1997 the population had grown to nearly half a million in a city that covered 7,100 hectares, more than 50 times its land area in 1950. One effect of the masterplanning was to reduce the central Msheireb district into a scruffy shopping and eating area, and erase much of the original traditional housing there.

Today, more than half of Qatar's 2.6m population live in Doha, and about 80 per cent are expatriate workers and professionals. Ongoing projects such as the 38km² Lusail City and Pearl-Qatar developments will eventually absorb more than 500,000 new residents, visitors and workers; by 2022, the 100-station Doha Metro network will be complete; so, too, will the expansion of Doha's



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Hamad International Airport, which will become an air-freight and tourist hub capable of processing 50 million travellers a year.

Qatar-sponsored research on Doha, by academics at Strathclyde University and UCL, confirms that the early masterplans failed to deliver a coherently differentiated urban structure, noting that the 'strong foreground network dissects the city into equally segregated urban enclaves ... a result of extensive post-1970s top-down planning, which has almost annihilated the potential for organic growth of spatial complexities'.

The original masterplan, and others in the 1980s, were compromised because bureaucratic ministerial oversight was then an alien phenomenon in a country where the more private *majlis* system of dealings was the norm. As Alan Fromherz, a past assistant professor of Middle Eastern history at Qatar University puts it: 'Just below the gleaming surface of commercialised modernity, the political, social, and cultural realities of Qatar remain deeply rooted despite the seeming anomic whiplash of economic change.'

The two urban developments in Doha that exemplify the polarities of architectural and placemaking intensity since the beginning of the 21st century are the West Bay business and diplomatic district, built on a 1,900 acre arc of land reclaimed from the sea, and the 31ha Msheireb Downtown Doha development, which is almost complete after 18 years of construction.

The business district is a lurid Notopian Hydra-head composed of more than 80 glimmering and often desperately, if not comically, overwrought towers. It's a traffic-dominated failure in planning and public realm terms, and the only building of indisputable architectural quality is Jean Nouvel's 2012 Burj Doha, whose penile

outline and tight sheath of filigreed metal *mashrabiya* screens conveys what the architect refers to as its 'fully assumed virility'. A short drive north, the architecture of Katara Cultural Village, delivered by Consult Maunsell AECOM, recalls both Charles Moore's and Perez & Associates' 1978 Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, and Clough Williams-Ellis's Portmeirion, as filmed in the hallucinatory 1960s psychodrama, *The Prisoner*.

The intense PoMo strangeness of Katara is more than balanced by the intensely ambitious Education City, on a 14km² site on the western side of Doha - the first project of its kind in the Gulf region. Masterplanned by Arata Isozaki, it contains campuses for eight notable overseas universities designed by architects including Legorreta + Legorreta and OMA. The most dramatic building-form here is Mangera Yvar's Qatar Faculty of Islamic Studies, a swirling, parametricised coalescence of teaching and prayer spaces inspired by Cairo's 14th-century Sultan Hassan Mosque and Madrassa.

External perceptions of modern architecture in Doha have largely focused on two culturally significant buildings: the 2008 Museum of Islamic Art, designed by IM Pei, whose central form is a monumentally poetic homage to the geometry of the fountain structure at the Ibn Tulun Mosque, Cairo; and Nouvel's National Museum of Qatar, due to open later this year, which literally expresses the randomly formed crystals known as desert roses.

But the most strategically important of Doha's placemaking projects is Msheireb Downtown Doha, which is due to deliver more than a hundred buildings and accommodation for 25,000 people. It's the first large-scale city scheme in the Gulf whose architecture and urban morphology are generated specifically by local historical vernaculars and spatial precedents. The project is led by Msheireb



- 1 Baharat Al-Nouq Square by Mossessian Architecture
- 2 Diwan Annexe by Allies and Morrison
- 3 Amiri Guard Headquarters by Allies and Morrison
- 4 Qatar National Archive by Allies and Morrison
- 5 Msheireb Museums by John McAslan + Partners

(Above) traditional architecture in Doha, Qatar, contrasts sharply with the more modern city in the background

'Anything erected there, a city, a pyramid, a motel, stands outside time'

AECOM

(Right) Eid celebrations spill out into the streets of the old Doha from Allies and Morrison's Eid Prayer Ground as early morning prayers commence



FATMA AL SAHLAWI

Properties, part of the Al Thani ruling family's Qatar Foundation, which dictates urban, educational and cultural development. The masterplan for the Msheireb was by AECOM and Arup, with Allies and Morrison as lead architectural consultant, and Tim Makower as architectural language advisor.

They devised the Seven Steps, a set of imperatives supporting the translation of local architectural and urban precedents into a coherent Qatari Modern manner. The project's original quartet of design architects were Allies and Morrison, Mossessian Architecture, John McAslan + Partners, and Adjaye Associates; subsequent players include Squire and Partners, Eric Parry Architects, Gensler and HOK.

The principles outlined in the Seven Steps dictate that architecture and planning demonstrates a continuity between Doha's past and future; that individual buildings should form distinct groups; that relationships of space and form should have what Makower calls the 'soft informality' of the pre-modern plan of Doha; that domestic neighbourhoods and public and private spaces should reflect traditional arrangements; that streets and squares have an asymmetrical complexity of spaces, details and atmospheres; that historic and contemporary environment-buffering techniques should be used; and that the creation of a modern Qatari architectural language is based on the key features of historic dwellings and settings.

In essence, then, the architecture and plan of the Msheireb is a series of giant-order modulations of the characteristics of the mostly humble, single-storey courtyard houses and spaces that once covered Doha in physically compacted *fareej* neighbourhoods. There were other, more singular, precedents: historic forts; Al

Wakrah, a historically preserved seaside town south of Doha; and the Souk Waqif, a largely reconstructed version of the original souk which, like the original Msheireb, had been allowed to degrade. The souk, designed by Mohamed Ali Abdullah and the Private Engineering Office, is an attempt to evoke *thikrayat al makan* - memory of place - and presumably explains why its reinvention, and the creation of Msheireb Downtown Doha, were monitored by the Father Emir and his wife, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser al-Missned, who remains a dynamic force in Qatar's cultural development.

However, only the Msheireb Museums' courtyard buildings possess genuinely historic fabric; and only one of them, Bin Radwani House, remains essentially as it was - a simple domestic dwelling, where one can imagine penned goats in the courtyard, cooking and washing taking place, wheat being ground using a *raha* stone, perhaps a static-riddled news broadcast from a 1950s radio, and children playing games in the courtyard, surfaced with a thick layer of tiny *sabban* seashells.

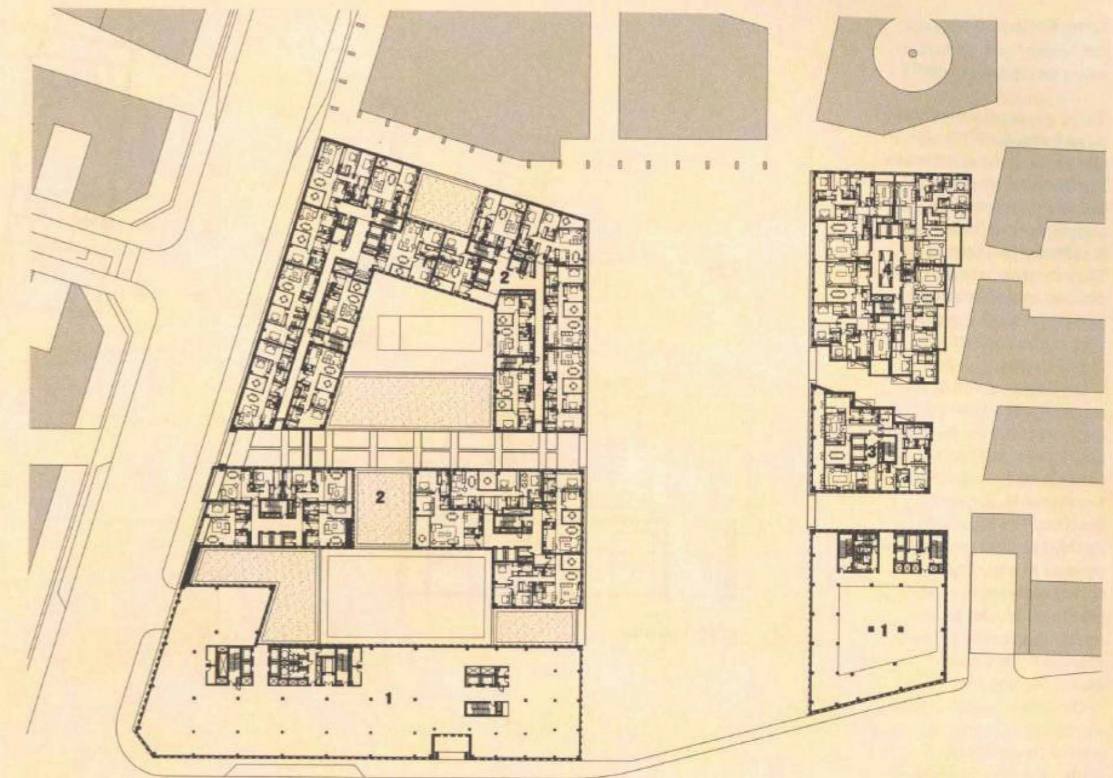
It is too soon to judge whether the unfinished Msheireb Downtown Doha development can succeed as a modern, contextually resonant urban organism. The significant loss of Doha's historic fabric over the last 60 years or so suggests that this may indeed be difficult to achieve. For the moment, the Msheireb stands outside time, a new map for a territory that may not exist. However, it remains an important attempt to demonstrate an architectural, cultural and commercial alternative to the generically internationalised placemaking that so often produces questionable, if not culturally toxic expressions of timeless placemaking.

Barahat Al-Nouq Square, Mossessian Architecture, 2014

Barahat Al-Nouq Square, the centrepiece of Msheireb, takes the idea of the *majlis* - normally a private, men-only meeting room in Islamic culture - and reinvents it as a public urban room. The practice has also delivered nine mixed-use buildings around most of the perimeter of the 65,000m² open space.

The main square-facing facades of the biggest buildings are rather heavily ordered, with onyx-finned elevations above slightly expressed arcade bases. Cantilevered wings oversail these elevations, these are joined by cables that carry retractable, light-filtering canopies. As per the Seven Steps design guide for the Msheireb development as a whole, the architecture attempts to evoke historic Qatari spatial and architectural precedents, but apart from the layered facades, the general effect is Modernist.

However, the design of the *sikka* passages off the square are an interesting modulation of the traditional projecting, oriel-like window structures known as *mashrabiya*. Mossessian's versions jut out angularly, casting interesting (and very necessary) shadows. He has also taken a sculpted-void approach to other spaces between buildings to produce interlocking vertical and horizontal spaces designed to generate unusual effects of both light and colour.



typical floor plan



- 1 office
- 2 expat apartments
- 3 Qatari family apartments
- 4 Qatari apartments



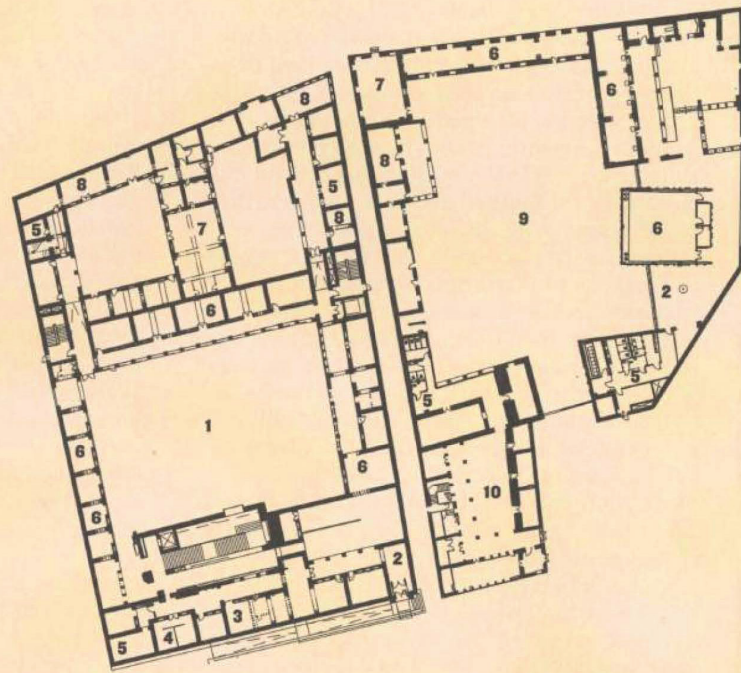
(Right) the design of Barahat Al-Nouq Square derives from Mossessian Architecture's studies on Arabic geometry and specifically *mashrabiya* screens found in traditional Qatari architecture

Msheireb Museums, John McAslan + Partners with Ralph Appelbaum, 2011-

The museums are in a group of four traditional courtyard buildings, the oldest of which dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. The subjects of the museums reflect the activities of the original owners of the houses – a member of the ruling family, in relation to the new Msheireb; a legendary trader and slaver; the original British oil company HQ; and a family house.

The interventions include accurate restorations, new architectural and technical additions and, in one case, a complete rebuilding based on '50s aerial site photos. The museological atmospheres and architectural additions are particularly effective at Company House, which tells the story of Qatari petroleum industry pioneers, and Bin Jelmoed House slavery museum.

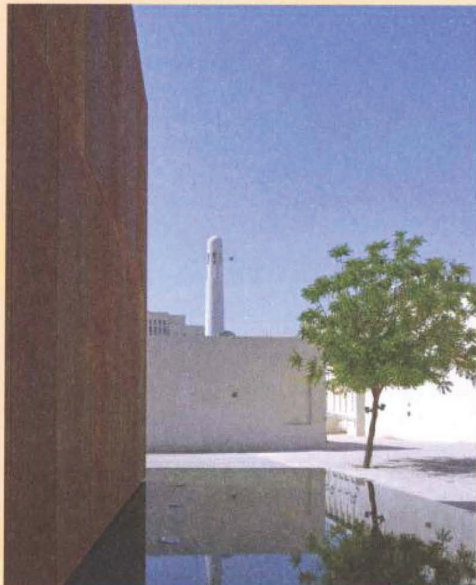
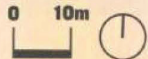
The two most obviously modern interventions are at Bin Jelmoed House and Company House (pictured below). In the case of the domestic museum, Bin Radwani House, the interventions were minimal to ensure that the traditional, passively mediated environmental conditions remained.



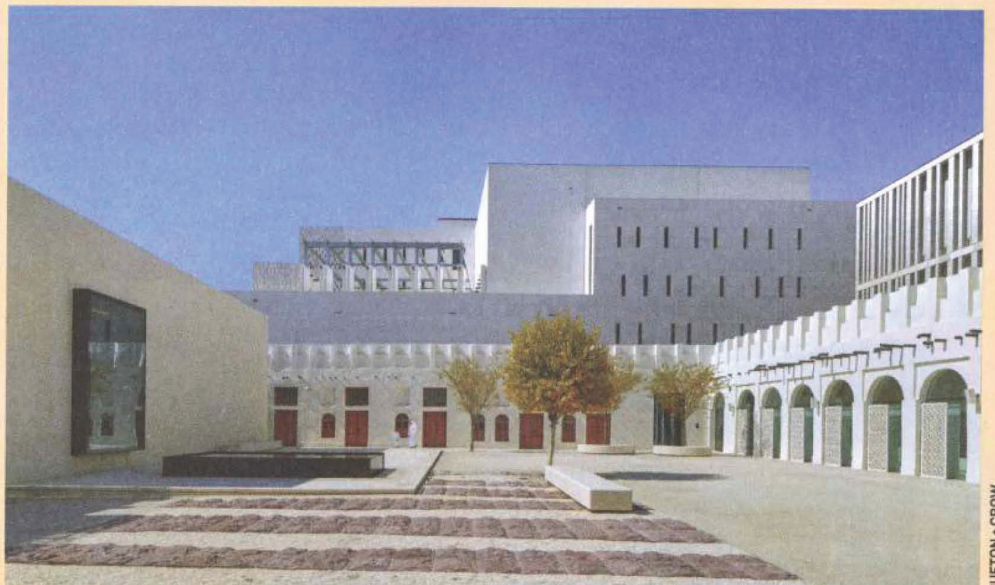
ground floor plan

(Below left) Company House is at the centre of the Cultural Quarter and the external courtyard accommodates large-scale events and exhibitions. A substantial, deliberately 'industrial' metal-sheathed video theatre projects into the courtyard
(Below right) Bin Jelmoed House explores Islam's role in providing guidance for the humane treatment of enslaved people. It has a massive, column-free underground exhibition and conference volume beneath its main courtyard.

- 1 Bin Jelmoed House courtyard
- 2 entrance lobby
- 3 bookshop
- 4 prayer room
- 5 WCs
- 6 exhibition space
- 7 education space
- 8 office
- 9 Company House courtyard
- 10 restaurant



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