Coping with Temporariness:
Space Appropriation by South Asian Migrants in Muscat, Oman

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Rest in peace.
The meaning of your lives
is still
unfolding.

Rest in peace.
In me
the meaning of your lives
is still
unfolding.

Rest in peace, in me.
The meaning of your lives
is still
unfolding.

Rest. In me
the meaning of your lives
is still
unfolding.

Rest. In peace
in me
the meaning of our lives
is still
unfolding.

Rest.

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Glossary

Abaya	A loose-fitted modest attire, resembling a cloak, worn by Muslim women. This is usually black in the Arab Gulf states
Alhamdulillah	An Arabic phrase which translates to "Praise be to God". It is commonly used by Muslims as an expression of gratitude, however it is also used by non-Muslims, particularly those that reside in the Arab Gulf states
Eid	An Islamic holiday which occurs twice is the Islamic calendar; Eid al-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan, while Eid al-Adha marks the end of the Hajj pilgrimage.
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
Kabaddi	A sport that traditionally practiced in South Asia. It incorporates elements of wrestling and tag.
Kafeel	An Arabic word which translates to "warrantor", understood in the Arab Gulf countries as "sponsor", which refers to the person who is responsible for a migrant worker's legal status and employment.
Majboori	A Hindi and Urdu word meaning "compulsion" or the feeling of being helpless without alternatives.
Mashallah	An Arabic phrase which translates to "God has willed it". It is commonly used by Muslims as an expression of appreciation and admiration, however it is also used by non-Muslims, particularly those that reside in the Arab Gulf states
Muluk	A term used by South Asians which can be translated as "homeland". It is often used to refer to one’s country of origin and holds an emotional significance.
Neem tree	A species of trees commonly found in South Asia, known for its resilience and traditional medicinal properties.
Pardes	A term used by South Asians which can be translated as "foreign land". It is often used to refer to a foreign country and holds an emotional significance.
Pathani suit	A two-pieced traditional attire consisting of a tunic and loose-fitted trousers, commonly worn by South Asian men, particularly in Pakistan.
Salwar kameez	A three-pieced traditional attire consisting of a tunic, loose-fitted trousers, and a long scarf, commonly worn by South Asian women. It is commonly worn in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal

Sari	A three-pieced traditional attire consisting of a short top and an inner skirt, draped with a long piece of fabric around the body and over the shoulder, commonly worn by South Asian women. It is commonly worn in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal
Selfie stick	An extendable handheld contraption devised to take selfies with a smartphone.
Selfie	A photograph taken by an individual of themselves, commonly with a smartphone.
Time-pass	A colloquial term used by South Asians to refer to activities done without much engagement, in order to kill time.
UAE	United Arab Emirates
Wadi	A topographic feature commonly found in Oman, characterised by a dry riverbed that channels rainwater to the sea. It remains dry for most of the year, except during seasonal rainfall.

1 Introduction

While driving down the Sultan Qaboos highway in Muscat, whether as a resident or a visitor, one is often drawn to admire the city's beauty along with marvelling at its rapid urban developments. These highways tell a story of a country that underwent a notable transformation — from famously having less than 10 km of paved roads before the 1970's to becoming a modern metropolis. Today, Muscat's pristine motorways are carefully landscaped with flowerbeds, date palm trees and bright green lawns — an astonishing sight for a desert city.

However, if one takes a closer look, there is another story to be told. The purely decorative landscapes along the highways are occasionally occupied by South Asian migrant workers, resting under the palm trees, or making phone calls to their loved ones back home (see Figure 1.1). Occasionally migrant workers can be spotted driving their bicycles in the opposite direction of traffic, taking photographs in the middle of traffic roundabouts with a decorative monument, or playing cricket on undeveloped land. While these acts of appropriation remain largely overlooked, they tell a story about the temporary migrants employed to transform this city. More specifically, these actions call for the investigation of a central issue: the need for space in a fragmented car-oriented city.

As Lefebvre noted, the most basic human needs of a worker boil down to the need for space, for fresh air and freedom. What happens when one lacks access to these necessities? How do individuals appropriate their surroundings to fulfil their needs?



Figure 1.1 A migrant worker seated by the Sultan Qaboos highway, Muscat (photo by Author).

1.1 Problem Statement

This research examines a multifaceted interconnection of issues on three levels: the structural level, the spatial level and the social level. Addressing the challenges on the structural level, necessitates a closer look at temporary migration in Muscat. As of 2024, the population of Muscat was estimated at 1,455,696, of which 60% were foreigners. Furthermore, 86% of the foreign workers originated from South Asian countries, mainly India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Oman Monthly Statistical Bulletin, 2024). While this included high-skilled workers, the majority of migrants were low-skilled temporary workers (Statistical Yearbook, 2023). Consequently, temporary migrants from South Asian countries are often placed at the bottom of a "racialized economic hierarchy" shaped by their limited access to the labour market due to the *Kafala* system (Lori, 2013, p. 657), which will be elaborated in Chapter 3. Therefore, despite their significant numbers, South Asian migrants often lack agency in various aspects of life.

To address the challenges on the spatial level, it is essential to address Muscat's rapid urbanisation process (Deffner & Pfaffenbach, 2015; Didero et al., 2019) which resulted in a sprawling city punctuated with residual spaces. In addition, top-down urban planning methods have resulted in monotypic spaces that are suited to a narrow stratum of society and fail to reflect and serve the diverse needs of broader population. Moreover, economic constraints limit workers from living in and accessing central public areas, that are often commercially driven. As urban development has largely focused on creating urban imageries that appeal to investors and wealthier expatriates, the everyday needs of temporary migrants remain invisible and disregarded. Moreover, urban planning policies intentionally allocate certain spaces and neighbourhoods for families and wealthier expatriates, situating migrant accommodations on the periphery of cities. This approach ensures that national identity is preserved through spaces that reflect a curated image, rather than acknowledging the presence of a large population of temporary workers in the city. As a result, migrant workers often face spatial segregation through restricted mobility and limited access out of the peripheries of the cities. Subsequently, bound by temporary contracts, limited free time, and economic constraints, they navigate life in a city that was not designed to accommodate their spatial needs. Chapter 3 will provide an in-depth discussion on this subject.

Segregation also manifests at the social level, since, as Lefebvre notes, the right to participate in urban life is as fundamental as the right to belong in society. Therefore, to be marginalised from urban life, is to be marginalised from society itself (Lefebvre, 1996). Chapter 2 will provide further insights on this concept. Moreover, living away from their families and cultures for indeterminate periods of time, in a place that views them as temporary workers, leaves migrant workers grappling with their sense of belonging and a yearning for community, often questioning whether they are insiders or outsiders in their environment. Collectively, the above stated factors contribute to South Asian migrants' urgent

need for space, agency and social inclusion.

While extensive studies have been conducted on temporary migration in the Gulf, much of the focus has been on Qatar and UAE (United Arab Emirates). Therefore, examinations focused on Oman remain understudied. Moreover, while place attachment has been widely studied, there is a notable gap in addressing the needs that drive it. According to Lefebvre, the study of appropriation is closely linked to the study of needs (Lefebvre, 1991a). Therefore, it is crucial to examine the emotions and the motivations behind appropriation to gain a better understanding of the relationship between people and their environment, particularly through the lens of temporary migration.

Building on the above-mentioned challenges faced by temporary migrant workers and research gaps, this research focuses on space appropriation of South Asian migrants in Muscat as a response and presents its objectives in the following subchapter.

1.2 Objectives and Research Questions

This research is centred around five main objectives. While there is extensive research on the lived realities of highly paid temporary migrants and expatriates, there is a significant gap in knowledge concerning the experiences of low-income and middle-income migrants, particularly in the context of Oman. Therefore, as the first aim, this research seeks to address this gap by examining the socio-spatial dynamics of South Asian migrants in Muscat. Second, it aims to shed light on the spaces that are appropriated by the South Asian migrant communities in Muscat, as these spaces remain largely overlooked. Raising awareness on these spaces can facilitate their safeguarding during urban transformation processes ensure long-term sustainability. The third objective of the research is to gain a deeper understanding of the needs and motivations that drive space appropriation. The fourth objective is to intricately examine the spatial practices and strategies used by South Asian migrant workers to appropriate space in Muscat. Through this lens, the research aims to demonstrate the underlying complexities that shape spaces created by temporary migrants. Lastly, the research aims to underscore the role of temporality in the lives of South Asian migrants and in their practices of the appropriation of space.

In order to address the above objectives, the research is framed by the following questions:

1. What are the key needs and motivations that drive South Asian migrants to appropriate space in Muscat?

2. Where and how do South Asian migrants appropriate space within Muscat?

3. What opportunities and limitations do South Asian migrants experience as they appropriate space in Muscat?

4. What role does temporariness play in the appropriation of space and in the daily lives of South Asian migrants in Muscat?

1.3 Chapter Overview and Outline of the Study

This research is structured in seven chapters, each contributing to a comprehensive part of understanding the research topic. The introductory chapter has laid the foundation by outlining the problem statements and establishing the research objectives and questions. Chapter 2 follows by outlining the conceptual framework of the study. This chapter begins with a conceptual discussion, adopting concepts from critical thinkers on space, presenting space as a dynamic process-oriented concept. This is followed by a definition-driven overview of spatial categories, highlighting public, private and loose space, which is essential in understanding the distinct spaces and their categorisations in later chapters. The chapter then explores the need for space followed by the critical role of agency in the production of space offering a vital lens for this study. Moreover, the chapter draws attention to the fact that although our needs for space may be the same, our rights to access it may differ greatly. The chapter concludes with a closer look at the core of the research: space appropriation. The sub-section begins with the definitions of space appropriation, followed by its contextualization in the current state of the art, and ends with tangible descriptions of space appropriation. These conceptual ideas establish the framework to analyse the acts of appropriation which will be presented in later chapters.

Chapter 3 provides the socio-economic, demographical and spatial developments of the context within which the research area is situated. Although the research is situated in Muscat, the chapter draws data from the broader GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) region in order to situate the patterns in Oman within a regional context. First, the chapter begins with outlining the economic diversification to explain the

focus on grand developmental schemes. Second, the chapter outlines the structural framework that governs temporary migration in the region: the *Kafala* system. While highlighting the migration patterns, the chapter also delves into the labour hierarchies and its impact on the daily lives of migrants. Third, the chapter exemplifies the urban developments of the broader region, with a specific emphasis on the city of Muscat, which are both characterised by urban sprawl. This context highlights issues relating to inequality and agency in shaping the urban environment and is crucial to understanding the last part of the chapter which explains how South Asian migrants may face both social and spatial exclusion, emphasising their need for space and its associated benefits.

Chapter 4 outlines the empirical methods adopted to examine the process of space appropriation in this study. This chapter outlines the process of identifying appropriated spaces in Muscat, categorising them, and then selecting case studies to represent each category, resulting in six case studies, which will be presented in Chapter 5. Moreover, the methods adopted to examine the case studies are explained, including qualitative interviews, participant observation with photography, and cartography. The chapter then proceeds to underline the methods of analysis. Finally, the chapter concludes with accounts on my motivations and positionality as a researcher. This is essential, given that, through a critical lens, all data is produced from a particular perspective (Watson, 2021).

Chapter 5 presents the core findings of the research and is organised into six sub chapters, each focusing on one case study. These sub chapters provide an extensive and in-depth examination of the selected spaces appropriated by South Asian migrants in Muscat. Each of the sub chapters are structured in a similar format to make comparisons easier. Consequently, each sub chapter begins with the approach to the space and the reasons for its selection. Following this, the specific methods that were modified to suit the case study are stated. The chapter then describes the physical attributes of the case study to highlight the potentials and obstacles to appropriation. Central to each sub chapter, a detailed account describes the appropriation practices, the demographics, and the routines observed at the site, while emphasising the emotions and meanings imbued in the practices. The sub chapters also address the presence of conflicts and negotiations and finally conclude with an analytical perspective to discuss and interpret the observations. Chapter 5 ends with a short summary and brief comparison of the case studies.

While chapter 5 presents the empirical data gathered at the case-study areas, Chapter 6 presents a combination of results and discussions from interviews conducted with participants from the case studies, as well as additional participants from the South Asian migrant community. While Chapter 5 adopts a spatial lens, Chapter 6 offers an analysis based in themes surrounding broader topics such as the participants' daily lives, their socio-cultural backgrounds, leisure time, social networks and mobility patterns. The chapter then addresses the themes of temporariness and belonging within the context of

temporariness. It ends by revisiting and reflecting on the themes of temporality and agency previously outlined in the conceptual framework in Chapter 2. To conclude the study, Chapter 7 summarises the findings of the research and outlines avenues for further research and further actions to ensure the aims of the research are met.

2 Conceptual Framework

To construct the conceptual framework for research that focuses on the dynamics of space appropriation, it is important to unpack the concept of space. Is it merely a physical backdrop for human activity? How can space be understood in social and temporal terms? By exploring its theoretical underpinnings, this section describes space, not only as a social construct, but as a relational source and product of human agency, particularly through the lens of temporary migration.

It is important to note that I will use the term *space* in this section rather than *place* to build the conceptual framework of this research. I will shortly explain the reason for this choice, without delving into the existing broader debate on terminology surrounding these terms. As Hubbard and Kitchin (2011) indicate in their book, "Key thinkers on Space and Place", the terms *space* and *place* are often used interchangeably in everyday language, but hold distinct connotations in academic discourse. Essentially, *place* is a *space* which has acquired meaning. "Thus, space is turned into place. Your place" (Cresswell, 2015, p. 7). While the term *place* holds an evident significance within the field of geography, inferring meaning for identity, belonging and familiarity, the term *space* allows for a broader integration of concepts derived from neighbouring disciplines such as urban studies and sociology (Cresswell, 2015). Moreover, critical thinkers on space and place, such as Lefebvre (1991b), Harvey (1990), Massey (1991) and Soja (1980) have urged to adopt a spatial and temporal lens to understand the dynamics of appropriated space. The term *space* therefore allows a more flexible examination for a research based on *space* appropriation and the implications of space-time relations related to temporary migration. The case studies presented in the results chapter will present places that have experienced this transformation and hold significant meaning.

2.1 Space as Process: Concepts and Considerations

Scholars such as Lefebvre (1991b), Castell (1991), Massey (2005), Soja (1985), and Harvey (1990) have pioneered the concept that space is far more than an empty container to be filled, and have emphasised the need to conceptualise space as a process and a product of social relations, cautioning against reducing it to a fixed concept. Consequently, in the last decades, it is widely recognised in the field of geography, as well as in sociology and other neighbouring disciplines, that space is referred to as a social

product, not only in the sense that spaces are designed and constructed by people, but more so that people and their social interactions are what produce space (Löw, 2016).

Lefebvre critiques urban planning disciplines for taking spatiality for granted and for underestimating the importance of the lived experience of space (Lefebvre, 2003). Looking beyond abstract spatial theories, Lefebvre urges for space to be understood as formed and reformed through grassroots experiences and interactions, rather than from a top-down perspective (Lefebvre, 1991b). These experiences, he claims, come about as the simultaneous intersections of capitalism's various elements, where goods and people meet (Lefebvre, 1991b). In this sense, Lefebvre portrays space as a product, but he also reminds us that space must be viewed as the medium for this exchange. Therefore, from the vantage point of the production of space, he argues that space "results from relationships of production that are taken control of by an active group" (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 154).

Harvey's contributions to the discourse on space build on Lefebvre's work as he observes urban spaces through the structural dynamics of capitalism. However, Harvey reframes the question from "what is space?" to "how is it that different human practices create and make use of distinctive conceptualizations of space?"(Harvey, 1988, p. 13). According to Harvey, social practices shape space, which in turn, support or restrict social practices; a symbiotic relationship which Soja refers to as "socio-spatial dialectic" (Soja, 1980). If space is social and socially produced, in order to examine space, a socio-spatial lens is necessary. Because space is intrinsically constituted by relational dynamics, it must be conceptualised with consideration to social relations. This means, considering the role of the people who occupy space and imbue space with meaning through everyday life (Gottdiener, 1993; Löw, 2016; D. Massey, 1991).

Considering that space is socially constructed, it remains in constant flux. This dynamic is particularly relevant in the context of temporary migration – a key focus of this research. Migration has been at the core of human geographical studies, and the relationship between migrant diasporas and space has been observed through various lenses taking uni-directional migration as well as translocal migration into consideration (R. King, 2012, 2020). According to King (2012) and Mavroudis (2007), the strength of the cultural and geographical approach lies in the ability to additionally view spaces of diaspora as malleable and subject to constant transformation, as opposed to viewing them only as static physical locations or as the result of fixed temporal and spatial factors. By creating a dichotomy of migration processes and their products, King argues that we run the risk of inadequately examining the connections between them (R. King, 2002). He suggests that their connection unravels in the "lived reality" of migrants (R. King, 2002, p. 91) in their new environments and requests that everyday practices of diaspora should not be overlooked (R. King, 2012).

King's observations are further corroborated by Massey (1991), who highlights the need for a progressive understanding of place; one that acknowledges its simultaneity. She argues that moving through space means moving through the layers that constitute it, which include the assemblages of social relations, intertwining at a certain point. In this context, she refers to space as a "conjunction of many histories and many spaces" (D. Massey, 1995, p. 191). Places are ultimately processes, she argues.

In contrast to Massey, Jones (2009) warns us against such "non-territorial" views of space. In discussing the notion of "phase space", Jones calls for a more than relational view on space, but also asserts the context-specific restrictions at play here. Within a framework of both flexibility and rigidity, phase space becomes a container for possibilities (Jones, 2009). Jones' (2022) ideas on the "plasticity of places" derived from Malabou's (2008) observations on brain malleability, describe the predicament of places that are subject to constant changes, but endure these changes through a balancing act between their acceptance and resistance to change. In this context, he points to the "tension born of the resistance that constancy and creation mutually pose to one another" (Jones, 2022, p. 51). During these constantly unravelling processes, at any given time, a place can be referred to as a "temporary permanency" (Jones, 2022, p. 55). Incorporating his ideas, rigidity and flexibility will be revisited as constraints faced by South Asian migrants in the production of space in the discussion of this research.

Emotions are a key aspect of this research, as they play a pivotal role in how individuals perceive and engage with their spatial environments. Tuan's work (Tuan, 1976, 1979, 2002) prompted geographers to investigate the emotional aspects of space, making his work relevant in this context, as he explores the emotional attachments and personal meanings involved as a space transforms to a place. He argued that places were not defined by scales or boundaries but rather by "fields of care" (Tuan, 1979, p. 416). Interestingly, Tuan argues that these attachments may be temporary and in accordance with needs being met in a particular situation. In this research, the case studies presented in Chapter 5 are conceptualised as fields of care as they underpin South Asian migrants' relationships to their spatial environment through the lens of temporality. Tuan additionally indicates that fields of care are unknown to outsiders, and only known from within by those for whom these places hold a significance. This perspective established a framework for the field work of this research as the empirical research was conducted by interviewing individuals who hold experiential knowledge of the case-study areas with strong emotional connections to them.

Therefore, it can be concluded that space is a relational, social construct which is often in flux, but also has its constraints. Hence, the above-mentioned theoretical concepts direct this research to consider the social and transformational aspects of the case studies, including aspects of limitations and constraint. It further calls for the examination of the emotional and lived reality of the users of the case studies.

2.2 Public, Private, and Loose Space

Moving beyond the abstract characteristics of space, the focus now turns to briefly outline and categorise the distinct spatial categories of public space and private space, as these are the contexts in which some of the case studies are situated. This overview will establish a reference point and offer parametres to engage in a discussion on the concept of loose space, where most of the case studies exist. It is important to discuss these typologies of spaces, as they offer the basis of spatial appropriation for South Asia migrant in this research.

Private spaces are marked and defined by ownership and boundaries, that restrict public access, affording individuals, groups or the state control and privacy over a certain space that is regulated by law (Low & Smith, 2006; Madanipour, 2003). They are protected spaces that offer a secluded medium for private processes, such as business operations, for example, and offer refuge for private life to unfold away from public sight and observation, as in the case with homes. Private spaces, although not free of all regulation, to a large extent offer its occupants to exist outside the sphere of state control and to remain shielded from external influence by the laws of private property usage (Madanipour, 2003). Therefore, private space is determined by the limitations and boundaries of its access, the basis and the nature of the control over this access, and the regulations of its usage (Low & Smith, 2006).

In contrast to private space, public space constitutes the various environments that are afforded to the public sphere. Carr (1992), Low and Smith (2006) offer us a basis for the definition of public space by demonstrating that it serves as the setting for the routines of daily life to unfold, which include individual and communal life, where mediums of movement exist, and where meeting points of communication connect. They further suggest, that in addition to functionality, public spaces serve as a medium for their occupants to meet certain needs, which will be discussed in the following section. Public spaces are easily identifiable in the form of parks, streets, squares, and neighbourhoods while less commonly identified as spaces including the media, online platforms and certain government institutions, as long as they serve as a space for some form of social interaction. Therefore, public spaces can encompass a broad range of locations, from smaller tangible locations to larger intangible ones, making them heterogenous and highly influenced by cultural, technological, political and economic systems (Carr, 1992; Low & Smith, 2006).

This has so far clarified the nature and the definition of public space. Carr however expands on this by addressing what we should expect from public spaces, stating that: “There are three primary values that guide the development of our perspective: We believe that public places should be responsive, democratic, and meaningful” (Carr, 1992, p. 19), a statement which centers around this research and

offers themes which will be further discussed in this section through the concepts of agency and the attribution of meaning to space, through its appropriation.

In the debate on public space, several authors have questioned what qualifies as a public space. Scholars such as Carmona (2010a), Madanipour (2003), Low and Smith (2006) have argued that, over the past decades, the lines between private and public space have started to become blurry as the privatisation of urban spaces has increased. They demonstrate how this has come about as the result of corporate and commercial interests gaining priority over the needs of people who use space. This results in spaces that might look public, but are in fact regulated under private control through specific management strategies, surveillance, and commercial and consumer driven planning (Low & Smith, 2006; Madanipour, 2003). Carmona (2010a) calls for a shift of focus away from this dichotomy of critiquing public space for being too planned, or critiquing public spaces for not being planned enough, which he argues, are two sides of the same coin as they eventually lead to a lack of public spaces that fulfil the criteria or withstand the critique of the above mentioned authors.

Moreover, the definitions, distinctions and nature of private and public space have been extensively studied and dichotomised across time and disciplines. Some scholars have suggested steering away from this dichotomy too, as a new approach to studying space (Carmona, 2010b; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1996; Mitchell, 1995; Trancik, 1986). Why is it important to identify spaces as beyond the under-planned or over-planned criterion, or beyond private or public? With the ongoing rise in capitalism, the privatisation of space has increased, while public spaces tend to be increasingly consumer-oriented, marginalising certain demographics to the peripheries of these spaces and disabling their agency in their lived environments (Madanipour, 2003). Consequently, Franck and Stevens developed a concept for adaptable space that can be used for a variety of activities that are decided by its users. They coined the term as “loose space” (Franck & Stevens, 2013a).

In his article on contemporary public space, Carmona (2010b) offers nuanced classifications of space: twenty classifications of spaces to be exact, forming a spectrum of spaces from public to private space, including terms such as “left-over space”, “undefined space” and “semi-natural urban space” (Carmona, 2010b, p. 169). This nuanced lens allows the emergence of potential solutions to bridge the growing gap between inhabitants and their spatial needs. Compared to public and private space, not much light has been shed on loose space which can exist within realms of public space, occasionally within the realms of private space (though less commonly), or even outside both realms entirely. Urban studies have yet to establish a typology out of loose space. This type of space is central to this research, making it imperative to discuss its definitions, parametres, and most importantly, its potential for space appropriation: the core focus of this research. Looking passed the binary of public and private space, the conceptual framework of this research draws attention to the emergence of loose spaces which

have been overlooked by official planners and decision makers (Akkerman & Cornfeld, 2009), because they hold the potential to be transformed into fields of care (Tuan, 1979), or in other words, to be appropriated, particularly by marginalised groups that lack the access to more conventional public or private spaces (Madanipour, 2003).

Nuanced typologies of space have been studied by a handful of authors and have been designated with various terms such as “lost space” (Trancik, 1986), “crack in the city” (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1996), “found space” (Rivlin, 2006), “loose space” (Franck & Stevens, 2013b), and “residual space” (Carmona, 2010b). In his discussion on “lost space”, Trancik refers to the function of the space as unused, space that is uncared for and unmaintained, space that was never developed and space that does not serve its planned purpose. Some examples he offers in his text are “the leftover unstructured landscape at the base of high-rise towers” and “the unused sunken plaza away from the flow of pedestrian activity in the city” in addition to parking lots and space along the highways “that nobody cares about maintaining, much less using” (Trancik, 1986, p. 3).

Aside from his terminological contribution, he defines reasons why lost spaces come about, of which some include: a high dependency on automobiles, the approach of decision makers and planners towards public space and their lack of responsibility towards the public environment and land-use policies that create a fragmented city (Trancik, 1986). Loukaitou-Sideris agrees with Trancik that these “cracks in the city” or “in-between” spaces are unused and undeveloped spaces that can be situated along networks such as highways or situated in central areas which lack public parks. These are typically situated in sprawling cities which are fragmented by highways and dotted with walled or gated homes and developments (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1996, p. 92). Both Trancik and Loukaitou-Sideris are referring to American cities in their studies, but their observations are relevant for other car-dependent cities, including Muscat, the focus of this research.

On one hand Trancik refers to lost space as “undesirable” but on the other hand, he notices its potential. He demonstrates that lost spaces offer opportunities to be found space, because they present opportunities for design and (re)invention (Akkerman & Cornfeld, 2009; Trancik, 1986). Consequently, found space is a term that was used by Rivlin to describe public settings that “users locate and appropriate… for uses that they serve effectively but which they were not originally designed to serve” and that offer “alternative places for public life since their uses spring from a complex matrix of needs brought to them by users” (Rivlin, 2013, p. 52). Along the same lines, “loose space” is described as space where activities occur that differ from the spaces’ planned purpose; activities that are not focused on being productive or accomplishing necessary tasks, but centre around leisure, social interaction, and political and self-expression (Franck & Stevens, 2013a). It is a space which sets itself “apart from the aesthetically and behaviourally controlled and homogeneous “themed” environments of leisure and

consumption where nothing unpredictable must occur", giving rise to new possibilities and opportunities (Franck & Stevens, 2013a, p. 3). These ideas resonate with the concept of space appropriation, which will be explored further in this chapter.

2.3 The Right to Space

Up until now I have discussed both the abstract and the descriptive definitions and typologies of space. This section focuses on the right to space, or to be more specific to the context to this research, and as Lefebvre famously put it, the right to the city. But first, we must start with the simple question, why does one need space, or rather, why does one need public space?

Within the scope of this research, three core motivations for the need for space are identified. The first, the pursuit of leisure, the second, fulfilling social and communal needs, and the third, the freedom to exercise agency. Addressing the first, Lefebvre noted that, "the stress of modern life makes amusements, distractions and relaxation a necessity" (Lefebvre, 1971, p. 57). In like manner, Carr noted that, in contrast to the structured daily routines consisting of work and home life, public spaces offer a dynamic space for play, movement, and active interactions as well as for relaxation and passive interactions (Carr, 1992). He further noted that engaging in leisure activities in public space such as exercise, caring for a garden, or engaging in conversation with other people can contribute positively towards mental and physical well-being.

Addressing the second motivation, the need for public space is centred around social needs, as "public space is the stage upon which the drama of communal life unfolds. The streets, squares, and parks of a city give form to the ebb and flow of human exchange" (Carr, 1992, p. 3). Public spaces provide the medium for social interactions, building community and community-related identities by accommodating space for social cohesion and negotiations, which, in turn, cater to the collective needs of everyday urban life. Lefebvre and Tuan suggest that, when dissected more closely, social needs include socio-cultural needs (Lefebvre, 1971; Tuan, 2002). This aspect is particularly relevant to this research as the South Asian migrant community under study seeks to maintain cultural continuity in addition to fostering social interaction.

Finally, turning to the third motivation, Lefebvre states that the most basic human needs of a worker boil down to "the need for space, for fresh air and freedom" (Lefebvre, 1991a, p. 162). Tuan reinforces

Lefebvre's view by demonstrating that ultimately, space represents freedom (Tuan, 2002). He elaborates that space correlates with the experience and the sensation of freedom because it grants the individual the stage and power in which to perform action. In corroboration, several authors bridge a link between physical environments and agency (Carr, 1992; Harvey, 2003; Lefebvre, 1991b; Tuan, 2002). For example, Carr states that, "There are pressing needs that public space can help people to satisfy, significant human rights that it can be shaped to define and protect, and special cultural meanings that it can best convey" (Carr, 1992, p. 3). Lefebvre takes this a step further, by not only spatializing the basic aspects of human needs, but by describing public space as a medium to practice citizenship (Hubbard & Kitchin, 2011; Lefebvre, 1971) as individuals and groups actively seek to meet their needs through the participation in interactions and activities in their physical environments (Franck & Stevens, 2013b). Lefebvre sums up that, "The more needs a human being has, the more he exists. The more powers and aptitudes he is able to exercise, the more he is free" (Lefebvre, 1991a, p. 161), underscoring the role of space in catering to human needs.

Now that this section has clarified the reasons why we need space, we move on to the aspect of the right to space. The field of critical geography has demonstrated that the much-studied inequalities and processes of marginalization are deeply spatial processes and lead to spatial problems, resulting in the recognition that not everyone has equal access and rights to space. In the subsequent part of this section, the following questions are posed: what is the right to space? Who has the right to space? Who possesses the agency to shape their space?

In the third point on the need for space, I noted that we need space to practice agency and freedom and that this was spatialized by Lefebvre. Lefebvre (1996) argues that although public spaces are presented as open and free space, they are often planned and designed to reflect and to reinforce certain social structures which warrant certain activities while excluding others (Lefebvre, 1991b), which raises the question: what is considered as appropriate behaviour in space and who is considered an appropriate user? His spatialization of this concept is famously known as the "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1996). What Lefebvre is really asking is who has the right to be in these spaces and who has the right to shape these spaces? He questions the right to participate, to perform activities, to be present and to appropriate urban spaces.

Lefebvre claims that the right to participate in urban life is as fundamental as the right to belong in society. Therefore, to be marginalised from urban life, is to be marginalised from society itself (Lefebvre, 1996). As described by Lefebvre, "The right to the city legitimates the refusal to allow oneself to be removed from urban reality by a discriminatory and segregative organization" (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 195). Consequently, according to Lefebvre, the right to the city involves the claim to urban life, and urban centers, which he describes as the social and cultural cores of society. It should be noted here that, in

the case of Muscat, the focus of this research, there are no typical city centers. Instead, the term "centre" is understood as the predominant type of public space which is often catered to a specific stratum of society and is often consume oriented, shaped by the socio-cultural and economic structures of the city.

Furthermore, in the following passage, Mitchell demonstrates that although public spaces are subject to societal and cultural norms and have boundaries set for certain occupants to enter, he argues that public spaces should serve as stages for representation, in other words, by claiming and appropriating spaces as their own and by creating their own environments, users identify as a part of the public:

> "By claiming space in public, by creating public spaces, social groups themselves become public. Only in public spaces can the homeless, for example, represent themselves as a legitimate part of 'the public'. Insofar as homeless people or other marginalised groups remain invisible to society, they fail to be counted as legitimate members of the polity" (Mitchell, 1995, p. 115).

Harvey concurs with Lefebvre and Mitchell on this point and takes it a step further to demonstrate that:

> "The right to the city is far more than the individual citizen to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights" (Harvey, 2008).

Do we all experience this right equally? Critical theorists have long demonstrated how differences and inequalities pertaining to class, age, gender, dis/ability and so on are closely linked to spatio-temporal processes and levels of agency (Harvey, 1988, 1990; Lefebvre, 1991b, 2003; D. Massey, 1995, 2005; Sewell, 1992). Consequently, these differences dictate the capacity to use, appropriate and navigate space, creating evident disparities in agency amongst groups and individuals. Although power relations and agency are abstract concepts, they play concrete roles in the negotiations and "struggles over the use and meaning of space and time" (Pred, 1990, p. 12). In Tuan's words: "The *big man* occupies and

has access to more space than lesser beings" (Tuan, 2002, p. 58). His work suggests that space itself can become a symbol of power as those with higher social positions have greater access to space. Inevitably, spatial advantages not only reflect but also reinforce social inequality. When one imagines a "lesser being" one might imagine a marginalised minority. However, interestingly, Certeau asserts that marginalization is not limited to minority groups, or small isolated groups, it can affect large and diverse populations, such as migrant worker communities (Certeau et al., 1984). As will be demonstrated in Chapter 3, the large and diverse demographic of South Asian migrant workers in Muscat, some of which are constrained by limited access and financial means, exemplify how "a marginal group has now become a silent majority" (Certeau et al., 1984, p. xvii). It can be concluded that the degree of agency possessed by individuals and groups is determined by their social positions in broader and more abstract structures and that factors such as class, ethnicity, gender, education and so on afford people the access to varying resources, therefore enabling varying levels of agency for transformative action and participation in space. This highlights the relational and unequal relationships between agency and space which will be examined through the case studies presented in Chapter 5.

2.4 Space Appropriation

The preceding sections of this chapter have addressed the inherent need for space. In the efforts to fulfil those needs, to gain agency and to establish a balance, various social processes are initiated. It was further established that space transforms into place through social processes. Some scholars have underscored the appropriation of space as a pivotal mechanism through which a space is transformed into place, which is the main focus of this chapter (Benages-Albert et al., 2015; Rioux et al., 2017; Vidal & Pol, 2005).

Space appropriation has received less attention, not only as a term, likely due to its ambiguous meaning in English (Benages-Albert et al., 2015), but conceptually, as a process. Comparable concepts such as place-attachment (Lewicka, 2011) or sense of place (Gustafson, 2001) have received more scholarly attention in comparison. While we understand what place attachment is, there is comparatively limited research on how these attachments are formed. In other words, further exploration is necessary to understand the processes through which those attachments are created, particularly within the framework of temporary migration. In her comprehensive review on the progress of *place attachment* as a term in the last 40 years, Lewicka (2011) determines the main gaps in the field. She concludes that

future research on the relationship between people and their environment should examine three key areas. First, she calls for an emphasis on the role of social capital in this relationship. Second, Lewicka calls for a process-oriented approach in addition to a theoretical approach and to clearly and accurately study and explain these processes. Third, the physical characteristics of these meaningful places should be studied to understand how they are open to social processes (Lewicka, 2011). These concluding aspects of her research are considered in this research, with Chapter 3 addressing the sociopolitical context of the case studies and Chapter 5 underscoring the processes and acts of space appropriation in addition to exploring the physical characteristics of the case studies.

The following section explores three main queries: First, why space is appropriated. Here the section examines space appropriation through its motivations, focusing on the previously mentioned needs for space. Second, how space is appropriated, with a focus on abstract processes that include imbuing meaning, using tactics, and engaging in the production of space. The third query focuses on the concrete processes and products of space appropriation, addressing more tangible processes of appropriation.

The concept of space appropriation has transformed over time, with its roots in psychology during the 1970's, before it was gradually brought up in fields such as sociology, ethnology, architecture and eventually in geography — through studies on lived space in social geography (Ripoll & Veschambre, 2023). Some scholars have argued that space is appropriated by people when they merely exist in the space or pass through it, while others have argued that there are more conditions to be met for space to be appropriated. The latter have argued that the appropriation of space necessitates some form of *using* the space (Graumann, 1976), either in the form of activities or by a transformation in identity, either of the space or the users, or both (Melis et al., 2020). This research aligns with the latter perspective and will delve into this further through the contributions of authors such as Lefebvre (1991a, 1991b), Certeau (1984), Tuan (2002), and Rioux et al. (2017).

To address the first point of this section, space is primarily appropriated to fulfil needs, to gain agency and to find a balance between private and public life. To elaborate, the appropriation of space arises from human needs, both material and immaterial, including both the need to feel safety but also the need to belong to one's environment or have a sense of agency in one's environment (Benages-Albert et al., 2015; Lefebvre, 1991b). The needs for space have been elaborated in this chapter in accordance with Lefebvre's theories. Lefebvre suggests that the study of appropriation is in fact a study of the theory of needs. Consequently, he calls for a more critical study of space, one that includes the needs that lead groups and individuals to appropriate space (Lefebvre, 1991a).

In their renowned works on the right to the city, both Lefebvre and Harvey use the word *right*, indicating the ability to assert one's agency. Here they are not just referring to the ability to access space or to

physically exist in space (Capron, 2002), but to practice freedom in everyday life by having "full and complete usage" of space (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 179). They argue that space is appropriated to become a medium through which people can express their autonomy (Purcell, 2002). Additionally, appropriation results from an attempt to restore balance in spatial life, as people seek for a balance between their personal and work life, as well as public and private life; a balance that is negotiated through appropriation (Lefebvre, 1991a). These concepts have significantly shaped this research, guiding empirical methods that examine the human needs of individuals and groups that drive acts of space appropriation.

Space can be appropriated through various processes that instigate the transformation of a neutral meaningless space into a meaningful place (Chiesi, 2016; Rioux et al., 2017). In his work on the production of space Lefebvre highlighted the crucial role of adding meaning (Lefebvre, 1991b). The gist of his theory on the production of space underlines three main aspects of production: first, on a material level, second on a knowledge level and third on the level of meaning. Drawing parallels between the appropriation and the production of space, he argued that space can serve as a medium to carry meaning through the principles, experiences and cultures represented in a space (Kipfer et al., 2008; Lefebvre, 1991b). He emphasises that space is not to be understood as a static arrangement of objects but rather as a network of relations, and their resulting meaning, that are constantly configured and reconfigured —a process consistent with appropriation. These meanings may not always be self-evident to an outsider, as they are deeply connected to the experiences of those who appropriate and produce space. Accordingly, Lefebvre explains that these meanings and representations may consist of "complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life" (Lefebvre, 1991b, p. 33). It can be summed up that, for Lefebvre, the study of space is inseparable from the study of meaning and social relations, particularly through the lens of power and agency. This aspect is relevant to this research as the case studies that are presented in Chapter 5 are often spaces that are meaningful to the migrants who appropriate them and participate in the production of space, and this meaning may not always be extended to non-participants.

At this juncture, considering the context and structures surrounding South Asian migrants in Muscat which are discussed in depth in Chapter 3, it is necessary to address the question: how do individuals and groups appropriate space and add meaning to space when they lack agency and have limited resources? A theoretical framework that aligns with this inquiry is Certeau's concept of "making do". When compared, both Lefebvre and Certeau call for a deeper examination of everyday life and the practices of the "ordinary man" (Certeau et al., 1984, p. I), however Certeau offers a more concrete concept for the mechanisms of asserting agency in everyday life. He explains that, in order to meet their material and immaterial needs, individuals and groups use native cultural experiences to adapt to new

places and exercise their agency. Certeau explains that institutions and bodies of power can assert agency through what he calls *strategy*, while individuals who are not afforded the same agency act through what he calls *tactics*. He draws a distinction between actors based on their varying levels of agency, a distinction that is adopted in this research. He further explains how establishments with agency can exercise strategies for long-term development, whereas in the absence of power, the *other* must resort to *tactics* of smaller actions, one at a time, each responding to changes out of their control (Certeau et al., 1984). This concept is applicable to this research, as the process of urban planning can be conceptualized as a kind of strategy, while the acts of space appropriation presented in the case studies can be conceptualized as tactics. Certeau claims that "tactic is an art of the weak" (Certeau et al., 1984, p. 37). This research will demonstrate how weakness, or a lack of agency, can be challenged and how agency can be reclaimed through the process of space appropriation. This process, which necessitates creativity and perseverance, results in spaces, and ultimately cities, that are meaningful.

In psychology, the term appropriation concerns itself with appropriation of knowledge in the context of learning, while in philosophy, appropriation concerns the determination and creation of the living conditions of human beings (Mameli et al., 2018). According to Graumann and Bourdieu, in the contexts of social sciences, appropriation, amongst other determinants, involves the manipulation or the transformation of space through a creative process, which is directly comparable to the appropriation of urban space through informal interventions to transform a space to temporarily serve the users' daily needs (Graumann, 1976; Rioux et al., 2017). Whereas according to Lefebvre, "Only by means of the critical study of space, in fact, can the concept of appropriation be clarified. It may be said of a natural space modified in order to serve the needs and possibilities of a group that it has been appropriated by that group" (Lefebvre, 1991b, p. 165). In an urban context, on a more concrete level, the appropriation of space occurs through differing processes in private, public, and loose space (Franck & Stevens, 2013b). Both private and public spaces can be appropriated through demarcations. However, while private spaces may communicate aspects of status or degree of privacy, public spaces are often appropriated by activities imbued with meaning, for example: "a group of men who get together every Sunday at a corner of a public square to discuss football and politics" (Noschis et al., 1978, p. 452). The process of appropriation in an urban context often involves the modification, caring of, usage or intervention in space (Noschis et al., 1978; Rioux et al., 2017). It often involves daily activities, usually outdoors, that are a part of a routine, that usually go unnoticed by planners and architects that overlook the social contexts of spaces (Certeau et al., 1984; Melis et al., 2020).

In a recent study on appropriation of public spaces in Latin American cities undertaken by Lara-Hernandez et al. (2020), activities in public space were categorised into three categories: commercial, leisure and sacralization. Commercial appropriation was related to work and trade and included the sale

or advertising of products in public space for commercial benefit. Appropriation related to leisure was related to sports, artistic expression or rest. Sacralization was related to appropriating space to pray or express religious symbolisms and rituals. This categorization is pertinent to gain a concrete understanding of what space appropriation in an urban context could entail and aligns with the appropriation that was observed in Muscat for the purpose of this study. In accordance with this categorization, this research focuses on space appropriation for leisure purposes, which will be demonstrated in Chapter 5.

As Lefebvre aptly pointed out in the following passage, "social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others" (Lefebvre, 1991b, p. 73), these processes evidently involve the inclusion and exclusion of certain individuals, and therefore call for negotiations. At this juncture, it should be questioned how well these negotiations are studied and understood by geographers. In their work on GIS methods in social geography, Ostermann et al. (2009), identified that there is a gap in knowledge concerning these "invisible conflicts" that have been overlooked by the initial theorists on space appropriation in the fields of sociology, social geography, anthropologists and psychologists. Moreover, they highlighted a gap in methods to study processes of domination and exclusion in space appropriation. This research acknowledges and addresses this gap, and in contrast to the previously stated quantitative research, adopts a qualitative approach to study these negotiations, which will be elaborated on in Chapter 4.

According to Tuan, "Space has temporal meaning in the reflections of a poet, in the mystique of exploration, and in the drama of migration" (Tuan, 2002, p. 126). Consequently, he noted,

> "Modern society has its nomads—hoboes, migrant workers, and merchant seamen, among others. What are the consequences of rootlessness? Do they long for a permanent place, and if so, how is this longing expressed? Migrant workers with their families adapt to the nomadic life out of necessity, not choice" (Tuan, 2002, p. 158).

In these passages, Tuan underscores a key concept for this research: the role of temporality in the lives of migrant workers. Critical theorists, referenced at the beginning of this chapter (Harvey, 1990; Lefebvre, 1991a; D. Massey, 1991) have advocated for a spatio-temporal understanding of space — one that equates time with space as a crucial factor to be considered in the research on space. However, although there is plentiful research on appropriation, there is less research on temporary, non-permanent, daily appropriation practices, particularly in the context of temporary migrants (Lara-

Hernandez et al., 2020; Melis et al., 2020; Ye & Yeoh, 2022). According to Massey, the identity of a space is highly dependent on time. She states how its identity is constantly being reconstructed, to the extent that, at any given time, the identity of a place is “temporary, uncertain and in process” (D. Massey, 1995, p. 190). Her ideas on time and space emphasise the importance of past, present, and future in shaping space, which will be examined in the discussion of this research. Referring back to Jones’s theory on phase space (Jones, 2009), one that calls for a more than relational view of space, while strongly asserting the context-specific restrictions at play, this research explores the extent to which time functions as one of these restrictions.

The research situates time as a limiting but constructive factor, while exemplifying the role of temporality in the production, destruction, and reconstruction of space as a result of dynamic and temporary migration in chapter 6. Time challenges the motives and agency of actors in space, substantially affecting the resulting social activities. To observe how actors create possibilities despite, or perhaps due to, such limitations, we must bring the equation of space-time-migration to its most reduced denominator, which is daily life (Soja, 1985).

3 Urban Development and Migration Patterns in the GCC: Placing Oman in the Regional Context

A quick Google Image search for "Dubai before and after" sums up the extent of the radical transformation of Arab Gulf cities. Landscapes of expansive deserts and modest communities were rapidly transformed into modern metropolitan cities that are best known to be global hubs of interconnectivity. The exponential developments in the region lead to accelerated urbanisation and a steep migrant population surge, making it a compelling subject for researchers in the last decades, with some referring to it as "sand to silicon" (Sampler & Eigner, 2003). Although the majority of the studies have been focused on celebrity cities like Dubai and its grand plans, there still seem to be gaps in the research (Wippel & Steiner, 2019). Considering the complexity of growth in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) cities, it is essential to delve deeper into topics beyond grand developmental schemes, and to focus on issues relating to inequality and agency in shaping the urban environment, particularly when it comes to migrant populations.

Accordingly, this research examines the spatial appropriation practices of South Asian migrants in Muscat. Such practices come as a result of responses to certain structural opportunities and constraints, which will be presented in the form of case studies in Chapter 5. The following chapter aims to provide the essential context for these case studies, exploring the migration and urbanisation patterns that are crucial for analysing how South Asian migrants navigate and transform their environment in Muscat. Research on Oman is however relatively limited in both availability and consistency. A large portion of the existing research on migration and urbanisation in the GCC focuses on the UAE and Qatar, as the countries with the largest global attention and resources in the region. Data from the GCC region establishes a crucial backdrop, as Oman is often referenced alongside GCC states and, in selected aspects, seeks to align with its GCC counterparts' benchmarks. Therefore, this chapter incorporates data from broader GCC-focused resources to situate patterns in Oman within its regional context.

This chapter aims to establish the contextual framework for the research by addressing: economic developments (section 3.1), population growth, migration trends and migrant experiences (section 3.2), and urban developments (section 3.3) in the GCC countries. The chapter concludes with an observation on the social and spatial exclusion caused by the economic, demographic and urban transformations discussed (section 3.4)

3.1 Economy and Diversification in the GCC

It is a well-known fact that the discovery of oil and gas reserves in the GCC countries, and the consequential development of their natural resources production industries has been the main facilitator of the rapid transformation that the GCC countries witnessed in a matter of a few decades (Fasano & Iqbal, 2003; F. Scholz, 1985). The first oil and natural gas discoveries took place in the 1930's. In order to ensure a feasible and smooth oil trading process, political stability in the region was crucial (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). After several decades of international diplomatic efforts and military actions, in the 1960's, the GCC states were established and granted independence, consequently, building nations and developing infrastructure for the production and the export of natural resources became the primary goal for GCC countries (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). In a short span of about three decades, between the 1970's and the 2000's, the GCC countries, which comprise of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, underwent unprecedented social economic and urban transformations (Fasano & Iqbal, 2003; F. Scholz, 1985; Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). The economic growth generated from the oil and gas sectors was primarily allocated towards building infrastructure, with a focus on the capital cities of the GCC countries (F. Scholz, 1985).

Within this time, these nations have modernised to rank highly in most development indicators. To name a few: the life expectancy increased by 10 years, literacy rates increased to 80% and the average capita income for GCC countries was around $12,000 in 2002 (Fasano & Iqbal, 2003). Despite the radical transformations, the countries managed to keep their debts low in this time and even continue to be vital benefactors to impoverished regions (Fasano & Iqbal, 2003). The economic growth in the GCC countries was accompanied by a population surge, which necessitated substantial urban expansion to accommodate the increasing local and foreign population. The population surge, which was largely a result of migration, will be discussed further in this chapter.

The GCC countries are some of the most recently industrialised countries in the world which means that when they entered the competitive global market in the 1970's, they were newcomers that faced stark competition with other nations that had already established their global trade processes (Hvidt, 2014). One way to cope with their late arrival to the market was to leverage state resources, such as gas and oil, and to lean into fast-track government decision-making (Hvidt, 2014). Another strategy was to steer away from replicating former economic models demonstrated by other successful states, and to create a unique niche economy instead. Dubai, being an oil deficient city in comparison to its neighbours, primarily pioneered and developed an exemplary strategy, referred to as the "Dubai model", by creating ambitious long-term developmental visions involving risky investments (Hvidt, 2009). Although deemed risky, aspects of the Dubai model have been very influential in shaping the other GCC countries'

developmental strategies, as well as countries outside the Arab and Islamic world (Elsheshtawy, 2011b; Wippel et al., 2014a). Some of the key urban development elements of the strategy adopted by other GCC cities included five main points (Hvidt, 2009, p. 401):

- "Government-led development"
- "Creation of investment opportunities"
- "Flexible labour force"
- "Development in cooperation with international partners"
- "Market positioning via branding"

Government-led developments and the creation of investment opportunities will be addressed in this section by examining the concept of *visions* followed by the diversification strategies. The flexible labour force will be addressed in section 3.2 by examining the role of migration in the GCC's development. Development in cooperation with international partners and marketing positioning via branding will be addressed in section 3.3 by examining the influence of foreign planners and sensational architecture.

Most of the GCC cities followed this model to some extent, and went on to promise their local populations prosperity and attract foreign investors with their *visions*, such as the Kuwait Development Plan 2010-2014, Vision 2030 in Qatar and Abu Dhabi and Vision 2020 in Oman (Nebel, 2014). These visions are essentially long-term plans or a framework for the future development of a city, including ambitious goals that claim to meet the needs of the economy and society (Wippel et al., 2014a; Wippel & Steiner, 2019). However, these primarily top-down vision-oriented processes have little to do with the citizens' opinions, daily life or engagements (Cummings & von Richthofen, 2017; Jensen, 2014). It is argued that visions can be read as a consequence of undemocratic urban planning (Wippel & Steiner, 2019). However, the citizens of these cities have come to trust these visions, and to accept and expect the state to take over the responsibility of planning their cities without much resistance. This stems from the recognition that the developments are beneficial to citizens in both the short and long term (Nagy, 2000). While benefits are perceived as an advantageous for citizens, it remains questionable if they are extended to the millions of temporary migrant workers who also reside in GCC cities, which will be further discussed in this chapter.

Despite being the driving force of the economy and its visions, oil is undoubtedly a non-renewable resource with an often and highly fluctuating price, making it unfeasible for the GGC countries to rely

on this source of revenue alone to carry the visions of their new cities forward. Therefore, economic diversification and attracting foreign investors became an imminent strategy for all the GCC countries (Fasano & Iqbal, 2003). According to economists and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, diversification is defined as the process by which countries reduce their financial dependence on oil and gas based sectors and develop non-oil sectors by encouraging production, industrialisation and the broadening of exports to accelerate a sustainable non-oil economy (Fasano & Iqbal, 2003; Mande, 2023). Consequently, developmental plans and visions focused on diversification (Hvidt, 2014). Diversification necessitated job creation in various sectors, which was perceived as achievable primarily through the involvement of foreign design firms, foreign businesses, and foreign experts. As a result, it became imperative to create a more global and international environment (Hvidt, 2014). Therefore, in the context of GCC countries and their urban development, diversification played a major role in widening the real estate market to foreigners and non-residents, and handing over real estate development to the private sector in efforts to attract foreign investors (Fasano & Iqbal, 2003).

The next main aim for GCC countries became attracting foreign investments. Accordingly, in recent years, the GCC countries have increasingly focused on developing unique and iconic large scale projects and striking attractions to gain the attention of foreign investments and diversifying the national economy (Ponzini, 2019; Steiner, 2014).

Compared to other GCC countries, Oman experienced a delayed start in oil production and nation-building due to civil unrest and an initially "haphazard path to development" (Peterson, 2004, p. 131). However, with the production of oil that commenced in 1967 (Wippel, 2014) and the leadership of Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, which commenced in 1970, the Sultanate of Oman witnessed a radical transformation, from being an undeveloped and politically unsettled land to becoming a modernised and developed nation (Al Shueili, 2015; Nebel & von Richthofen, 2016; Shouman, 2017). In 1970, despite a population nearing one million, the country only had 3 primary schools, one hospital, approximately 10 kilometres of paved road, no water system and no televisions or newspapers (Al Shueili, 2015; Funsch, 2015; Library of Congress & Federal Research Division, 2004). However, within a span of 40 years, the population rose steeply from under 700,000 in 1970, to approximately four times the size with 2.8 million inhabitants in 2010 (Nebel, 2014). Fascinatingly, this demographic growth was not known until the first census was conducted in 1993 (De Bel-Air, 2018b). In this time, the government prioritised and channelled its revenues from oil production towards large scale development plans, including infrastructure, industry, defence, and expanding and creating urban settlements (Al Shueili, 2015).

While Oman's economy and urban development surged, just as other GCC countries, Oman recognised the finite nature of its main source of revenue and aimed at diversification strategies (Fasano & Iqbal,

2003). Additionally, following the patterns of other GCC cities, Oman also formulated its own vision: *Vision 2020* was conceived in 1995. However, unlike its neighbouring GCC countries, Oman boasts diverse and attractive natural landscapes, which it aimed to leverage by prioritising tourism as a key aspect of its economic diversification strategy and Vision 2020 (Gutberlet, 2017; Nebel, 2014; Wippel, 2014). By 1998, Oman received approximately half a million tourists and those numbers have only increased with time (Peterson, 2004). Furthermore, in the following Vision 2040, a long-term tourism strategy was developed by the Ministry of Tourism with foreign consultants mainly from Spain and Germany (Gutberlet, 2017). Oman primarily focused on attracting tourists of high socio-economic backgrounds in attempts to increase the tourism sectors contribution to the GDP from 0,7% in 2005 to 15% in 2020 (Nebel, 2014). In efforts to develop its tourism industry, in 2004, Oman established its Ministry of Tourism. A year later, Omran LLC (Oman Tourism Development Company) was established to oversee infrastructure developments for tourism, which included a growing number of luxury hotels and Integrated Tourism Complexes (ITCs) (Gutberlet, 2017; Nebel, 2014), further solidifying the top-down planning process of Oman. ITCs are development projects that include hotels, high-end accommodation and leisure facilities to cater to the population boom and the needs of the growing tourism industry (Nebel, 2014). One such example of an ITC in Muscat is Al Mouj Muscat, formerly known as The Wave Muscat, which expands over 2.6 kilometres squared and houses over 19,000 residents (*Al Mouj Muscat - Luxury Residential Community*, 2024). On its website, Al Mouj boasts of 7 luxury hotels, a golf course, oceanfront dining and luxury accommodation including “mansions” while inviting visitors to enjoy “a world class lifestyle” (*Al Mouj Muscat*, 2024).

3.2 Population and Migration in the GCC

The GCC countries have experienced a major surge in population, mainly driven by large scale labour importation since the 1970’s. Within a short span of three decades, the population of the GCC countries grew by 6-fold from an estimated 2.7 million to 16.2 million (Winckler, 2010), with an average annual growth of approximately 5.5% (see Figure 3.1). This was a consequence of the oil boom and the countries’ insufficiency in local labour and expertise (Fargues, 2011; Malecki & Ewers, 2007). In recent years, the Arab Gulf countries attracted the highest influx of migrants per year, after North America and Europe (Lori, 2012). Particularly, the migration corridor between South Asian countries and the GCC countries is one of the most active globally. Consequently, by 2021, Saudi Arabia was the third largest recipient of international migrants in the world, with 13 million foreigners (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou,

2021). Moreover, in 2024, the number of migrants born in India and residing in the UAE reached up to 4 million making it the fourth most active corridor in the world (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). Subsequently, Arab Gulf countries have emerged as “new global migration destinations” through the establishment of long-term economic and social exchange relations and ongoing labour recruitment agreements (Haas et al., 2019).

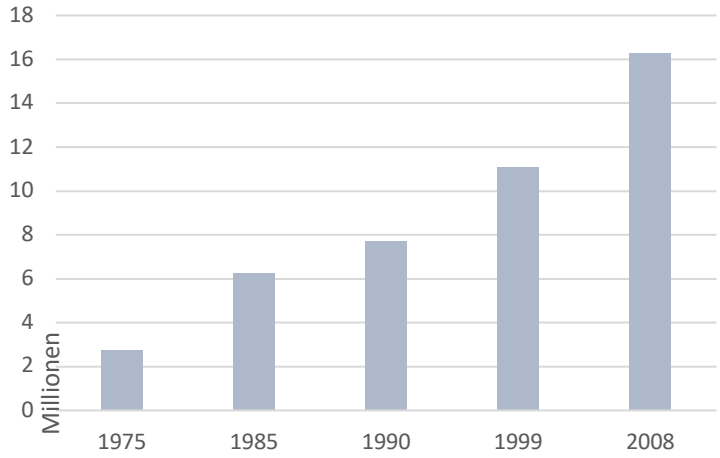

Figure 3.1 Population surge in the GCC countries. Figure created by author based on data from (Winckler, 2010).

The high fertility rates in the GCC led to an increase in domestic workers recruitment, thereby easing the responsibilities of childcare. This has enabled national women to have more children, even when choosing to join the workforce, thus maintaining relatively high fertility rates in the region and contributing to rising populations (Fargues, 2011). While migration has enabled the region to meet its growing demand for labour and economic expansion, it has also resulted in structural frameworks and challenges that are critical to observe in this research. Therefore, this section first examines the migration patterns in the GCC countries and the Kafala system as the mechanism through which migrants remain in a temporary status. Second, the population and migration patterns of Oman are examined. Third, this section underscores the hierarchies amongst migrant communities while specifically highlighting the position of South Asian migrants. Fourth, it discusses the work-centric nature of migrant lives.

3.2.1 Migration and the Kafala System in the GCC

What distinguishes the Arab Gulf countries from other migration destinations is the high proportion of temporary migrant workers (Fargues, 2011). Today, the GCC represents one of the most extreme cases where the local populations constitute only a small fraction of the total population (Fargues, 2011). In their capital cities, foreign populations often outnumber local populations, as exemplified by Dubai where foreigners constitute approximately 91% of the population (Dubai Statistics Centre, 2021).

Despite their large numbers, these migrant populations are only temporary residents (Diop et al., 2018). In developing nations, like India, for example, temporary labour emigration is a well-practiced strategy to overcome poverty (Rajan et al., 2023). In developed receiving countries, temporary labour migration is regulated through guest worker programs with the intention to expand their workforce and maximise productivity while keeping their social welfare and liability to migrant workers at a minimum (Lori, 2012), in other words, to increase a countries labour force without increasing its permanent residents (Lori, 2019). Due to the great demand for labour, it is relatively easy for migrant workers to receive a temporary visit visa in the GCC, but it is almost impossible to remain or obtain permanent residence or citizenship.

The Gulf countries employ temporary migrants on fixed-term work contracts, typically lasting 1-2 years and subject to renewal, which could lead to cumulative residence for up to several decades, in some cases, until retirement (Chowdhury & Irudaya Rajan, 2018). However, not all migrants have the same opportunities to prolong their stays or to settle (Fargues, 2018). Highly skilled migrants with higher salaries are more likely to prolong their employment status and extend their residency until retirement when compared to low-income migrants (Deffner & Pfaffenbach, 2015; Fargues, 2018). Thus, the maximum length of stay depends to a considerable extent on education, professional position, and income. Moreover, income levels also determine family reunification and settlement. The legislations in GCC countries limit the possibility of family reunification to migrants with higher incomes while low-income migrants face restrictions on family relocation (Deffner & Pfaffenbach, 2015; Fargues, 2018). This means that temporary migrants fall into two categories: longer-term migrants who bring along or establish a family in the receiving country and shorter-term migrants who leave their families behind and have no intention or opportunities to prolong their stays; a distinction which implies that some migrants are granted a greater social inclusion in the receiving countries society than others (Fargues, 2018).

Some migrants reside long enough to build families and create a second-generation of migrants in the GCC countries, who are not considered typical migrants, as they did not migrate. However, they remain

non-citizens because regardless of their length of stay, and place of birth these migrants do not have access to citizenship (Fargues, 2018). To ease the limitations on residency and to allow for further foreign investment, the GCC countries permitted foreigners to buy land in specifically designated areas which allowed wealthy migrants to own property for 99 years, including a residency for that exact period of time (Khadri, 2018). However, this policy does not apply to the large part of migrant workers, which consist of low-income workers (Khadri, 2018). These processes resulted in the emergence of three distinct segments of society in the GCC countries: the first consists of low-income migrants with short temporary contracts in the receiving GCC country; the second includes middle-income or high-income migrants entitled to longer-term contracts or the access to permanent residency; and the third is composed of local citizens (Fargues, 2018; Khadri, 2018). Despite the terms *temporary* or *permanent*, the distinction resides not only in the length of stay but in the formal and legal structures of the guest worker system that defines migrants' stays in the GCC countries (Lori, 2019).

Interestingly, the term *guest worker* is a literal translation from the German word *Gastarbeiter*. The German guest worker system in the 1960's and 1970's is exemplary in the struggle that governments face in preventing the long-term settlement of temporary migrant workers (Lori, 2019). As Max Frisch aptly summed up, "We asked for workers, and we got people" (cited in Lori, 2019, p.139). Therefore, although the GCC countries had initially intended for guest workers to return to their home countries, reality was evidently far from this. During the same years that European countries had decided to discontinue their guest worker programs (Castles, 2000), the Arab Gulf countries began to establish their own guest worker system building on the Kafala system (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011; Lori, 2012; Vora & Koch, 2015); a system rooted in the British empires' strategy to regulate foreign labour in the 1920's in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly for pearl diving (Hamadah, 2022).

Today, the Kafala system is the governing structure that manages migrant labour in the GCC countries. With minor variations subject to individual regulations, this system is adopted across all GCC countries, where the fundamental structure remains consistent (Hamadah, 2022). Essentially, the system ties migrant workers' residency to their employment contracts, which, in turn are tied to a sponsor or a *kafeel*, which can be an individual or a company (Hamadah, 2022). Under the Kafala system, the sponsor is legally, economically and socially responsible for the migrant during the employment contract period (De Bel-Air, 2018d). This also means that the sponsoring entity is responsible for ensuring that the migrant worker returns to his or her country of origin at the end of the contract (Lori, 2012). The Kafala system has evolved into restricting the mobility of migrants, while facilitating the accumulation of capital and economic growth in the receiving country (Hamadah, 2022). Moreover, the system allows the GCC countries to consume the benefits of labour without having to bear the responsibility for the workers' social welfare, long-term social benefits or liabilities, which all remain the responsibility of the labour-

exporting country (Hamadah, 2022). For the countries of origin, the remittances received from their exported migrant workers is essential to the economy (Hamadah, 2022). Therefore, the entire migration process, including its economic implications, originates with recruiting agencies in the countries of origin (Diop et al., 2018), as migrant workers compete for higher paid jobs and employers compete for cheaper or more skilled labour. This process results in a limited contract and a limited residence visa (Longva, 1999). Once the migrant enters the receiving country, they remain bound to the corresponding sponsor, or employer, with limited freedom to move within the labour market (Diop et al., 2018; Longva, 1999).

Like all other GCC countries, migration policies in Oman follow the framework of the Kafala system. As a consequence, migrant workers' residencies are connected to their sponsors and employment contracts, making them temporary migrants and placing them in a precarious status with an uncertain duration of stay in the country (Mehta & Onley, 2015). However, in some cases, migrants obtain a so called *free visa*, which is an illegal arrangement resulting from Omanis selling visas for a profit under false and non-existent company profiles. This status allows migrant workers to illegally work at multiple workplaces, under the condition that they pay their sponsor, who is usually an Omani or a wealthy non-Omani, a monthly fee. While this allows a limited amount of freedom in the labour market, the migrants' illegal status renders them vulnerable. This practice is found across all GCC countries, though more prevalent in Oman, and is most common among Bangladeshi migrant workers in the fisheries industry (Percot, 2022). With regard to female domestic workers, this arrangement allows them to work in multiple homes instead of living with one family and allowing them to gain a salary from up to eight households simultaneously. Interestingly, these domestic workers are often low-income South Asian migrant workers, that work in middle-income South Asian families' homes (Mehta, 2017), highlighting the socioeconomic diversity among South Asian migrants. While this research does not include illegal migrants in its empirical phase, and accurate data on irregular migration and undocumented workers is challenging to attain (Safar & Levaillant, 2017), it is necessary to acknowledge their existence in Oman to illustrate the diverse forms of migrant employment.

It has been argued that the economic prosperity and high quality of life led by the citizens of the GCC countries are predominantly facilitated by the Kafala system (Diop et al., 2018). Therefore, migrant workers sustain economic growth in the GCC countries while maintaining the role of outsiders. Lori sums it up aptly: "the institution of citizenship, since its earliest manifestations, has critically depended upon the labour of those who are outside the body politic while remaining inside that polity's territory and playing an integral role in its economy" (Lori, 2013, p. 657).

It is crucial to emphasise that this research centres on the fact that the Kafala system establishes an imbalance in power and agency between migrants and their sponsors. This is due to three factors: first, the migrants' restricted mobility in the labour market, second, their structural dependency, and third,

their lack of legal rights. To address the first, one of the most prominent and criticised features of the Kafala system is the migrants' lack of mobility once they enter the receiving country. They are not permitted to change jobs or leave the country without the employer's consent (Hamadah, 2022; Lori, 2019). In many cases, this additionally includes the highly criticised passport confiscation (Hamadah, 2022). Secondly, the power of the sponsor over the migrant creates a structural dependency (Longva, 1999) where migrant workers have little room to bargain or negotiate their living and working conditions. This creates a power imbalance that leaves migrant workers vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (Kanchana, 2018). This is particularly true in the case of domestic workers, for example, who reside in their employers' home and are cut off from other workers, leaving no room for collectivisation. Additionally, this makes migrant workers prone to invisibility, which is reflected in the lack and inconsistency of data on migrant labour in the GCC (Hamadah, 2022). Third, the Kafala system limits workers' legal rights and the possibility for recourse. Some of the common ways this can impact workers includes: delayed pay, a lack of wages for extended periods of time, lack of a legitimate contract or illegal modifications to the contract, and the unjustified criminalisation of the worker including disproportionate sentencings or deportation (Kanchana, 2018).

Expectedly, the Kafala system creates a structural division between migrants and local populations, stratifying the society on the basis of their status and position within the migration governance framework (Hamadah, 2022). The differences are underlined by the socio-economic powers the sponsors hold over the migrants, creating a hierarchical structure that leads to a dual society where a migrant labour force is necessary and integral to the economy but is subjected to social exclusion and disempowerment (De Bel-Air, 2018d; Kanchana, 2018). As Lori effectively states: "it becomes clear that migrant incorporation is contentious because at stake is power itself" (Lori, 2013, p. 658). Essentially, the Kafala system bestows privilege to local citizens while limiting the power of migrants (Kanchana, 2018). Power and agency are central themes in this research, as demonstrated in the case studies in Chapter 5, where migrant workers exercise their agency on a socio-spatial level.

3.2.2 Population and Migration Patterns in Oman

Comparable to the rest of the GCC countries, Oman has similarly witnessed significant changes in population following the oil boom. The pattern of population surge in Oman, as in the other GCC countries, dates back to the early 1970's as a result of its economic development, when 70,000 foreigners constituted the labour force alongside 99,000 national Omanis (Pradhan, 2013). Given that

Omanis traditionally worked as fishermen and farmers, the early labour force consisted of a very large portion of foreigners. Coupled with a diverse local population, including Balochis, Swahili and Zanzibari populations as well as Iranian and Indian merchants, this resulted in the Omani society becoming the most culturally diverse society in the GCC (Pradhan, 2013). Within a span of 40 years, the population in Oman increased from under 700,000 in 1970, to approximately four times the size with 2.8 million inhabitants in 2010 (Nebel, 2014) and has persisted on an upward trajectory to the present day (see Figure 3.2). Additionally, as a result of increasing population growth and declining mortality rates since the 1970's, 45% of Oman's population was below the age of 15 until 1990.

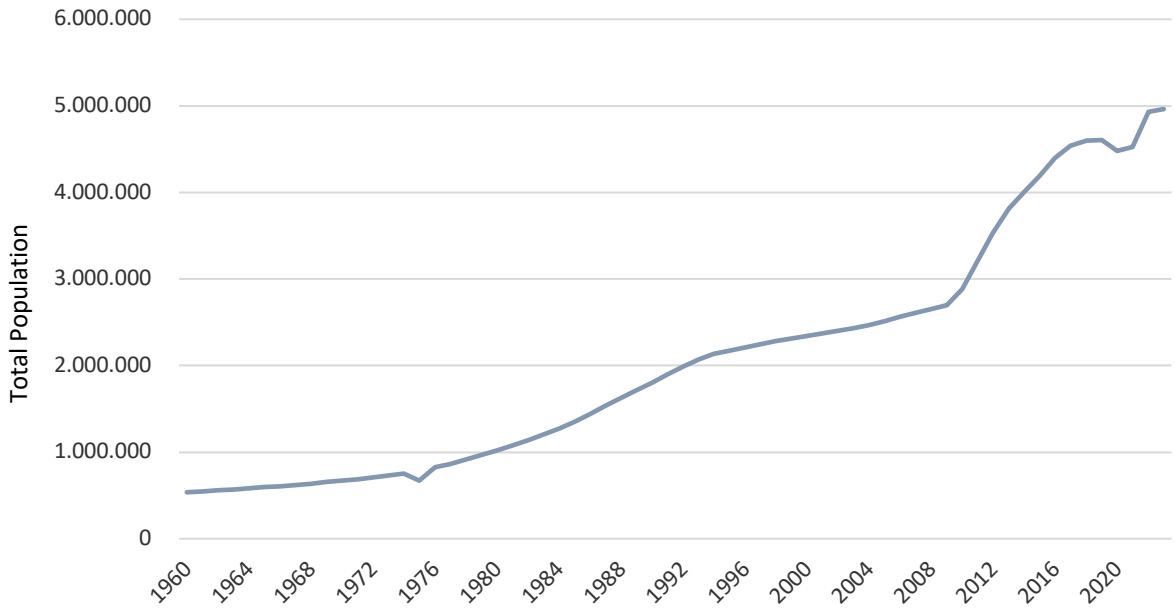

Figure 3.2 Total population of Oman from the year 1960 to 2022. Figure created by author based on data from (*World Bank Open Data*, 2024).

As in the case of other GCC countries, Oman's population growth can largely be attributed to the importation of foreign migrant workers following the oil boom of the 1970's. Notably, Oman faced an economic setback during the first Gulf War in 1990-1991 , which significantly reduced the number of foreign workers in its labour market (Mansour, 2017). However, Oman witnessed a rise in migrant workers once its economic status improved, particularly around 2009. This is reflected in the graph which indicates that the migrant population doubled between 2010 to 2016, and then continued to rise (see Figure 3.3). In 2024, Oman is reported to have a population of 5,165,602, of which 43% are foreign workers. However, in the capital city of Muscat, where the case-studies of this research are based, foreign workers constitute nearly 58% of the total population of 1,310,181 residents, positioning them

as the predominant demographic group (National Center for Statistical Information, 2024).

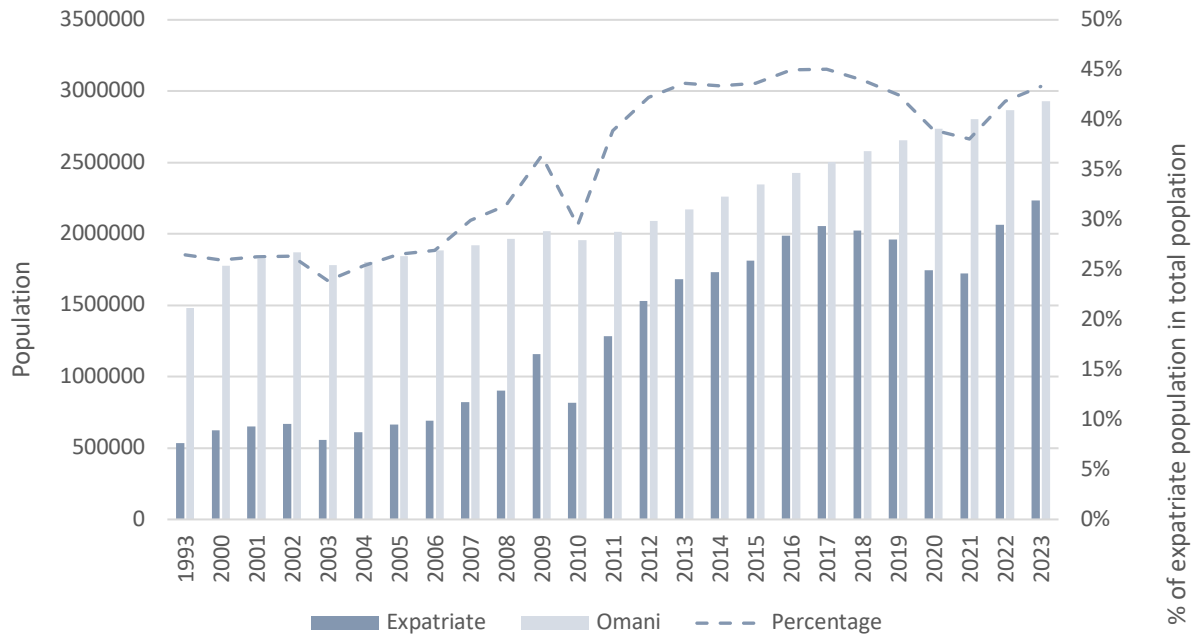

Figure 3.3 Total population of Oman from the year 1960 to 2022. Figure created by author based on data from (National Center for Statistical Information, 2024).

Furthermore, in 2023, the total workforce in Oman, including both nationals and non-nationals, was predominantly composed of foreign workers, who accounted for 65% of all employed individuals in the country (National Center for Statistical Information, 2024). Oman's migration demographics are significantly shaped by low-skilled labour (De Bel-Air, 2018c). 70% of all non-Omani workers were reported to be low-skilled workers and over 83% were men (National Center for Statistical Information, 2024). These demographics will be reflected in the case studies in Chapter 5, which includes spaces predominantly occupied by men. A large portion of the migrant labour force arrives with low education levels— specifically, 70% of foreign workers in Oman have an education level below a General Diploma, which can be compared to a high school graduation (National Center for Statistical Information, 2024). Consequently, only a small percentage of migrant workers are employed in highly skilled occupations, which are otherwise reserved for local populations or Western expatriates (De Bel-Air, 2018c). Approximately 30% of all foreign workers were employed in the construction sector (National Center for Statistical Information, 2024). Notably, the construction sector in Oman is characterised by a substantial reliance on foreign labour, with foreign workers comprising approximately 85% of the total

workforce within the industry. Apart from construction, low-income migrant men are primarily employed in other manual and industrial sectors such as industry, repair of motor vehicles , mining, quarrying and manufacturing, while female migrants frequently occupy positions in domestic work, and service related sectors such as beauty, wellness and gastronomy (De Bel-Air, 2018c; National Center for Statistical Information, 2024).

In efforts to minimise dependence on foreign labour, ensure employment opportunities for Omanis, and to some extent address the cultural imbalances caused by the surge in foreign migrants, the Omani government adopted a strategy to localise labour, referred to as Omanisation (Al-Lamki, 1998; De Bel-Air, 2018c). This strategy was introduced as early as 1991 to replace expatriate workers with Omani nationals by enforcing policies that mandate a certain quota of Omanis in both government and private sector work places (Al-Lamki, 1998). The significant growth in Oman's youth population, in combination with increased education levels, created a substantial demand for employment opportunities within the local Omani community. The demand became particularly evident as this young demographic cohort entered the job market, revealing a lack of employment opportunities (De Bel-Air, 2018b). The unemployment crisis was largely attributed to the high percentage of foreign workers in the job market, particularly South Asian migrant workers. This perception intensified during the surprising protests of the Arab Spring, where some Omanis accused the government of enabling an *Indian Colonization* of local employment opportunities (De Bel-Air, 2018b). Despite the policies enforced by the Omanisation strategy, there are still gaps in terms of skill and willingness among Omanis to occupy certain positions of work (Nebel, 2014). Although the quota percentages have fluctuated over time, Omanisation is an ongoing process that continues today as the Omani government seeks to achieve a balance between providing employment opportunities for the local population and retaining foreign labour and specialised skills.

3.2.3 Expatriate Hierarchy and South Asian Dominance

The discourse on the Kafala system tends to focus on the low-income and low-skill migrants, however, the Kafala system also regulates the residency and legal terms of employment for high-skilled labour (Diop et al., 2018). However, notably, not all migrants under the Kafala system experience the same levels of agency and mobility, which will be discussed in the following section.

The hierarchical structure of the labour market in Arab Gulf countries appears to be reflected in the status of the migrants' nationalities and ethnicities (Gardner, 2011). The apex is represented by a small number of Western experts, who earn the highest salaries and benefit from the corresponding privileges. They are followed by GCC nationals, then by migrants from Arab countries, and finally by Asian migrants, who typically face the lowest incomes and the least privileges (Gardner, 2011; D. S. Massey et al., 2009). In this "racialised economic hierarchy" South Asians rank lower than GCC nationals and lower than other expatriates including Europeans, Americans and Arabs (Lori, 2013, p. 657), which is reflected in migrant wages. In most GCC countries, including Oman, Western expatriates earn the highest salaries, followed by Arab migrants, and then by Asian migrants who sometimes earn 40% less than Western expatriates (De Bel-Air, 2018c; Palik, 2018).

Moreover, migrant occupations and skill levels vary greatly by nationality, with Western and Arab nationals making up a large proportion of the skilled workforce, while Asian workers are predominantly employed in low-skilled jobs, rendering the large population of low-skilled Asian workers "invisible" through their association with blue-collar labour, despite their irreplaceable economic power (De Bel-Air, 2018a, p. 24). This unequal distribution of labour according to nationality, where low-skilled Asian migrants are subjected to vulnerable job categories while high-skilled Western and Arab migrants enjoy more societal benefits, creates differences and tensions that lead to social othering, further stratifying societies (Naweed, 2023; Palik, 2018). Conclusively, rather than encouraging transnational identity and creating community amongst migrants, the labour policies have contributed to class divisions between migrants based on skill, nationality and income (Lori, 2019). The social and spatial implications of this divide will be discussed in Section 3.4.

Although the migrant population in the GCC countries is highly diverse, South Asians constitute the largest proportion of the migrant labour force (Hamza, 2015). Approximately two-third of the migrant workers in GCC countries stem from South Asian countries including India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan (Chowdhury & Wadood, 2023). This migration corridor has intensified over the last decades leading the GCC countries to host almost 15 million migrants from South Asia in 2018 (Rajan, 2023). South Asian migrants constitute one of the largest diaspora in the world, with the GCC

countries being their predominant destination (Rajan, 2023). Notably, South Asian migrants in the GCC play a key economic role not only in the GCC but also in their countries of origin through remittances (Chowdhury & Wadood, 2023). As a result, remittances can account for large percentages of the GDP of South Asian countries, of which 61% originate from GCC countries (Rajan, 2023).

Crucially, this research notes that 86% of foreign workers in Oman originate from South Asian countries which, amongst other factors, can be attributed to Oman's well documented ties with South Asian countries (De Bel-Air, 2018b). In 2023, this constituted of migrants from mainly India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Oman Monthly Statistical Bulletin, 2024)(see Figure 3.4). Indian migrants in Oman are an especially socio-economically diverse demographic including unskilled workers, semi-skilled workers, professionals, and businessmen (Pradhan, 2013).

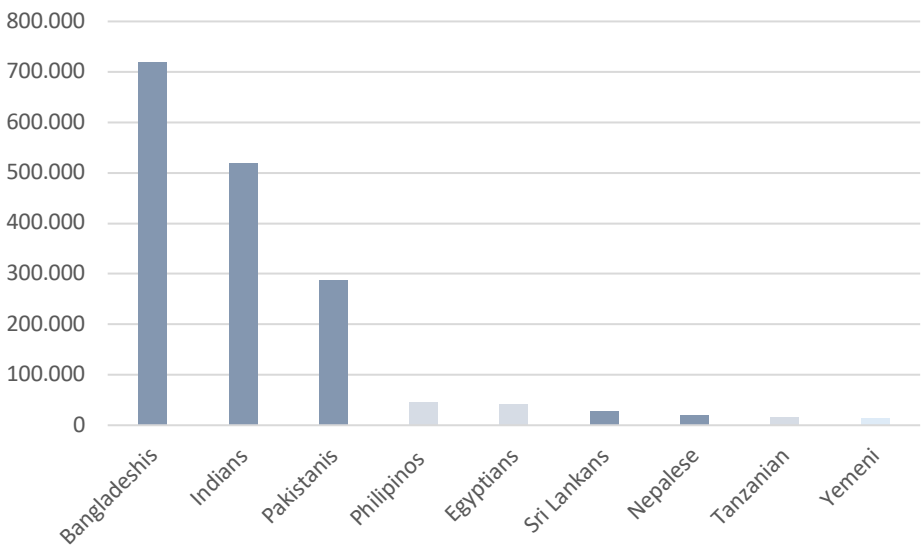

Figure 3.4 Leading nationalities among migrant workers in Oman in 2023. Figure created by author based on data from (National Center for Statistical Information, 2024).

Despite offering lower wages than neighbouring GCC countries, and despite recent Omanisation policies, Oman remains a popular destination for South Asian migrant workers, particularly low-skilled workers (Pradhan, 2013). This can be attributed to three main aspects, the first being that wages in Oman remain higher than those in their home countries. The second aspect is the geographical proximity to South Asian countries and the third is historical and cultural entrenchment between Oman and South Asia, particularly India (Pradhan, 2013).

3.2.4 Migrants' Work-Focused Lives

South Asian migrants in the GCC countries, particularly those working in low-income jobs, are typically employed in labour intensive sectors. Low-income migrants in these sectors have reported working long hours under challenging conditions. Construction workers for example may work for up to 12 hours a day with only one day of rest per week (Hamza, 2015). Although legal frameworks attempt to regulate total working hours between 8 to 9 hours, in Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia, migrant workers were officially reported to work an average of 9.2 to 9.6 hours a day (Diop et al., 2018), not accounting for unofficial figures. In many cases, despite the law guaranteeing one day off per week, workers were reported to have worked 7 days a week, sometimes due to holding more than one job at a time (Diop et al., 2018). Another study conducted on the working and living conditions of low-income migrant workers in the hospitality and construction sectors found that about half of the workers that worked overtime were not compensated for the extra hours (Fargues et al., 2019). Despite the harshness of the working conditions, they were perceived as tolerable in comparison to the job market in the migrants' home countries. This was more true for male workers than female workers, and more true for mid-skilled workers than low-skilled or unskilled workers (Fargues et al., 2019). Aside from harsh working hours, workers, particularly in the construction sector, face challenging working conditions with suboptimal safety regulations, leading to avoidable injuries and deaths (Al Mawli et al., 2021).

Due to the long working hours, sometimes in multiple jobs, harsh working conditions, and limited income, low-income migrant workers face significant restrictions in free-time or leisure activities. When low-income migrant workers are afforded free time, it is often spent in public spaces or shopping malls, where the main goal is to gather and interact with others of similar cultural backgrounds, rather than to participate in consumption (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). However, such gatherings are not received well by GCC societies and are therefore restricted in certain places, driving low-income migrants to seek alternatives (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019); a key contextual factor for this research. These constraints further limit leisure activities, leaving low-income migrants with daily routines that mainly revolve around work (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). Comparatively, South Asian migrant workers with higher incomes are afforded more free time. This includes well settled migrants and newly arrived migrant families that do not only centre their lives entirely around work, but also around family and were found to spend their leisure time predominantly with family members (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). These patterns will be further explored in the findings and analysis of migrants' daily lives in Chapters 5 and 6.

3.3 Urban Development Process of the GCC Cities

The Gulf peninsula is known to be one of the most urbanised areas in the world with more than 90% of its populations living in cities (Mohammad & Sidaway, 2012). What factors led to this fast-paced radical growth and what are the impacts that are relevant to this research on space appropriation?

To answer these questions, this chapter examines the urban development processes in the GCC cities to underscore the key factors that shaped its growth and its implications. The first two sections of this chapter focus on the planning processes in the larger GCC region and explore the urban sprawl and car-dependency in the GCC cities. The third and fourth sections of this chapter shift the focus to Muscat, where the case studies of this research are situated, examining its urban planning processes and highlighting Muscat's sprawl and car dependency. The chapter concludes with an examination of what these cities offer spatially to their growing migrant populations, raising the question: where does every-day migrant life unfold in the context of sprawling cities?

3.3.1 Planning Processes in the GCC Cities

Given the economic and population growth discussed in the previous sections, the demand for settlements, modern infrastructure, transportation networks, public amenities and over all urban development increased exponentially (Wippel et al., 2014b). To cope with these demands, the GCC countries set forward ambitious plans to expand and transform existing cities, while creating new ones (Elsheshtawy, 2011b; Molotch & Ponzini, 2019; Wippel et al., 2014b). The initial projects centred around developing seaports, airports, main roads and highways linking oil extraction, production sites, and urban areas (F. Scholz, 1985). Consequently, narrow paths transformed to multi-lane carriageways, and vernacular architecture was replaced by modern architecture of a new and grander scale (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). On a structural level, smaller scale public administrations were expanded into municipalities and ministries (Elsheshtawy, 2011b; Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). These institutions were then responsible for overlooking and prioritising the planning and urbanisation of their respective GCC cities, resulting in a largely top-down planning process that continues to this day (Cummings & von Richthofen, 2017; Wiedmann & Salama, 2019), which will be discussed further in the following sub-section.

As stated in the section on economic development, the GCC countries adopted a series of strategies from the *Dubai model* (Hvidt, 2009), including government led top-down planning. Such planning processes are common in the GCC, where a few members of the ruling family make the vast majority of the decisions that affect urban development (Hvidt, 2009). This raises questions about agency in urban planning in the GCC cities. Moreover, to compensate for the lack of urban planning expertise in the region, foreign planners were appointed to devise strategic master plans for never before seen urban expansions (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019; Nagy, 2000). Although there are only limited sources to map out the early planning processes that took place in GCC countries, the influence of foreign planning practices remains evident and palpable to visitors even today (Cummings & von Richthofen, 2017). In his work about Doha's urban development, Khaled Adham (2011) describes several phenomena about the city's transformation that are applicable to other GCC capital cities. For example, Adham describes how foreign design consultancies were hired to meet the demand for fast and expansive accommodation. Consequently, British planner Llewelyn Davis was consulted to create a master plan for Doha in the early 90's (Adham, 2011; Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). During this period, not only were American and Lebanese firms hired to design the development of the new city centre and settlements, but foreign designers were also employed in Doha's planning ministries (Nagy, 2000). However, these grand master plans were not always followed through or implemented accurately due to the frequent turnover of foreign hired consultants (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019). Notably, the influence of temporary planners further perpetuates the role of temporality in the haphazard process of place making in GCC cities. It can be concluded that the growing role of authorities in the planning processes places a large part of the agency in the hands of the government and takes away from residents as urban actors in shaping their environment (Adham, 2011; Stadnicki, 2023; Wippel & Steiner, 2019). This prompts an examination of the role of residents, particularly migrant workers, in shaping GCC cities, which remains the central focus of this research.

The GCC cities have, for decades, mastered the art of sensationalisation through transforming their settlements from modest desert landscapes to famed and recognisable skylines dotted with skyscrapers, reputed with superlatives such as: *tallest in the world*, *first in the world* and *largest in the world* amongst other striking feats. In the case of Doha, Sharon Nagy (2000) describes the city's transformation as *dressing up downtown* in order to create an iconic skyline which has become a symbol for the city in itself. Waterfront developments are another example of large-scale projects that coastal GCC cities have turned to in order to establish themselves as global experts in development and construction (Ponzini, 2019). Notable examples include: The Palm in Dubai, Al Mouj in Muscat, Saadiat Islands in Abu Dhabi or The Pearl in Doha (Ponzini, 2019). Fuelled by oil revenues, the exponential urban, economic and social expansion, coupled with the looming finiteness of oil reserves, landed the GCC cities with the label of "petro-boom" cities (Mohammad & Sidaway, 2016, p. 1400). The sensational

projects range from museums like the Louvre in Abu Dhabi to expansive malls like Dubai Mall. These so called lavish construction schemes are funded by the GCC states in efforts to glamourise and brand the city (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). The focus on branding directs planning efforts towards attracting private and foreign investors, by creating environments that represent and promise wealth and opportunity (Wippel & Steiner, 2019).

Significant efforts have been made to make GCC cities attractive to foreign investors. However, branding a city was an unfamiliar and daunting task for the small local populations of the GCC countries, therefore, foreign consultants were hired to advise local governments on how to enhance the cities' attractiveness to foreigners (Stadnicki, 2023; Wippel, 2023). Branding oriented mega-projects, although differing in function, share an excessively lavish nature in an effort to attract a certain demographic that can afford luxury. Hvidt (2014) refers to such projects as "lavish construction schemes". However, these lavish developments have contributed to the fragmentation of GCC cities, not only in terms of the physical urban fabric, but also in terms of socio-economic and cultural fragmentation and segregation (Wippel & Steiner, 2019). In such cities, urban spaces are characterised by consumption, where marginalised groups, including migrant workers are systemically excluded (Wippel & Steiner, 2019), which further deepens the divide between the elite and the broader population. This raises the question of who is planning these cities and whose needs they cater to. It appears that in GCC cities, the emphasis on outward images and visions often comes at the expense of creating meaningful and inclusive urban environments for residents (Stadnicki, 2023; Wippel & Steiner, 2019).

3.3.2 Urban Sprawl and Car-Dependency in GCC Cities

In most countries in the world, where a large percentage of the population lives in urban settlements, urbanisation has been a gradual process, however in the Gulf, cities were born urban (Elgendy & Abaza, 2020). With a rapid and significant population surge and foreign planning practices coupled with disorganised planning processes, the highly and rapidly urbanised GCC cities were already on their way to becoming sprawling cities. While sprawling cities seem to be an inevitable consequence of rapid urbanisation, being part of a consumer-based global network, they have become a prominent threat to the quality of life in modern GCC cities due to their unsustainable structure characterised by fragmentation (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019).

Urban sprawl in GCC cities is distinctly different from urban sprawl in other cities in the West. While

Western cities sprawled as a result of industrialisation and established urban densities, urban sprawl in GCC cities resulted from four main factors: the population boom, Western and car-based planning principles, indulgent private land ownership schemes and a lack of effective and sustainable long-term planning processes (Garba, 2004; Molotch & Ponzini, 2019; Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). In addition, urban sprawl in the GCC cities impacted everyday life in four key aspects relevant to this research, namely: it caused long distances between destinations, it created a car-dependant society, it caused a lack of quality in urban spaces, and it created a fragmented city with isolated islands of function with left-over spaces in between (Didero et al., 2019; Nebel & von Richthofen, 2016; Wippel, 2023)(see Figure 3.5).

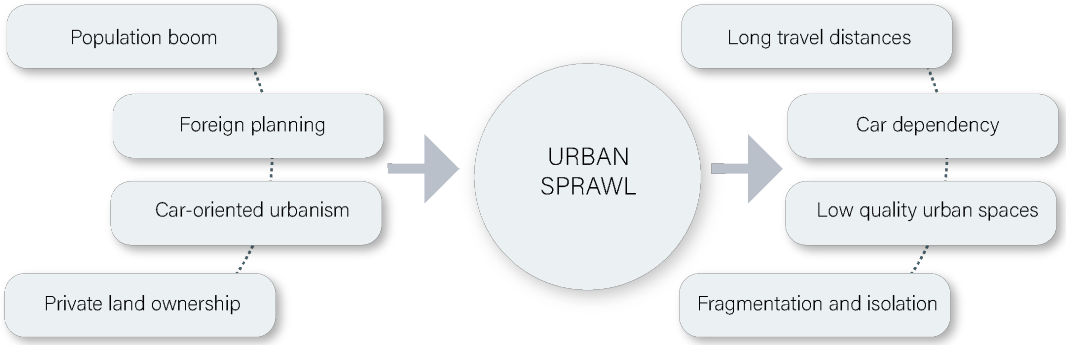

Figure 3.5 Drivers and impacts of urban sprawl in GCC cities. Figure created by author.

3.3.2.1 Car Oriented Planning and Urbanism

Today, GCC cities are characterised by heavy car dependency. The initial master plans for these cities were influenced by car-centric planning principles that placed rigid road structures at the centre of the plans, combined with a functional distribution of land use (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). In the case of Manama, for example, the impact of car dependency was evident in the early design phases. Roads were prioritised in development because they were frequently being used by British officers, royal family members and affluent tradesmen, leaving other aspects of urban planning deprioritised (Ben Hamouche, 2011). The city witnessed a steady rise in the number of cars from 394 in the year 1944, to 3,379 within a decade in 1953 and to 18,372 cars in 1970, which resulted in a focus on the expansion of road networks, widening of roads and an increase in parking spaces in the city, making motorisation one

of the key determinants in planning new settlement areas (Ben Hamouche, 2011).

Moreover, the preference and entitlement to private land ownership, combined with cars as the preferred means of transport, resulted in urban sprawl (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). The GCC lifestyle witnessed a paradigm shift with a significant increase in the purchase of houses and cars, which are the main elements that enable sprawl (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019). This shift was reinforced by government petrol subsidies and heavy investment in highway infrastructure. This caused a number of problems for emerging GCC cities, namely: repetitive monofunctional areas, often fragmented in the urban fabric, separated and isolated by large highways (Kendall, 2012; Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). This resulted in a lifestyle change that involved long commutes and large cars to accommodate growing families with significant shopping needs (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019). As a result, the car became a space where residents spent an increasing amount of time and did not seem to complain about it, as it allowed them to move freely through the expanding distances that needed to be covered. Furthermore, the car offered comfort and luxury to some travellers. For example, due to the comfort of an air conditioner, shelter from direct sun and the privacy of a tinted glass, the car even offered a retreat to some women to take off headscarves, which would typically be inappropriate under other circumstances (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019).

Nevertheless, these comforts and benefits were not perceived equally across the social strata. As with numerous rapid developments in the GCC cities, car-centric planning practices did not consider and therefore adversely affected migrant workers in the region (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019). The GCC cities are heavily populated by migrant working populations that lack housing in areas of work, do not own cars, and have minimal access to public transportation, which is mostly left to be utilised by migrant workers of lower socio-economic backgrounds (Mahgoub, 2011; Molotch & Ponzini, 2019). As GCC cities did not evolve to develop pedestrian pathways, but to replace narrow shaded alleys with widened roadways of up to 8 lanes (Mahgoub, 2011), they left pedestrians to navigate precarious pathways and crossings with speeding cars driving down wide roads (Kendall, 2012; Molotch & Ponzini, 2019)(see Figure 3.6). Correspondingly, Kendall (2012, p. 45) describes Dubai, in a GCC representative example, as a place where: “Highways dominate the landscape, and within this infrastructure walking is discouraged. Roads become walls, boundaries, and lines to be navigated, alienating pedestrians”.



Figure 3.7 Migrant workers crossing a highway in Muscat. Photo by author.

The highways of the GCC cities were not only abundant in quantity, but they also had to meet high standards of quality in terms of aesthetics. This transpired when foreign planning consultants introduced the idea of garden cities and *beautification*, which were quickly adopted as the new standard by local authorities and local populations (Akbar, 1988), regardless of the arid nature of these regions. Under the aim of beautification, in addition to parks, roundabouts and highways were carpeted in green landscapes and adorned with symbolic monuments and installations to signify a people that have overcome hardships to now prosper (Exell & Rico, 2016). In the case of Abu Dhabi, for example, highway landscaping resulted in an annual water consumption of 21 billion cubic metres, which exceeded the consumption of the United Kingdom (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019). In another example, the mayor of Jeddah is reported to have spent over 120 million Riyals in efforts to beautify roads less than 10 kilometres in length with landscaping, marble seating and sculptures (Akbar, 1981). This indicates the importance placed on highways and, by extension, on the experience of car owners and drivers. In most cases, these beautified areas, created only for visual appeal, are neither accessible nor functional for practical daily use. Akbar critiques this by commenting that “the wealth of the society is spent on space which is not inhabited” (Akbar, 1981, p. 328).

3.3.2.2 Land Management and Ownership

While Western design principles contributed to the conditions fostering urban sprawl, the cultural context of the GCC cities also played its role. It remained important to maintain certain traditional design practices, such as building large walls around homes to ensure for privacy (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). This factor, coupled with the increased private land ownership and the preference of the local population to invest in real estate over other assets, further exacerbated the problems of urban sprawl (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). In Dubai, for example, this lead to suburban sprawl in the outskirts of the cities, which was further supported by heavy government funding for road infrastructure and petrol subsidies (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019).

In the case of Doha, the former city centre had irregular streets and complex and traditional lawn ownership systems (Nagy, 2000). British consultants Llewellyn-Davies advised the Qatari government to purchase this former city centre and relocate its residents to suburban areas in the periphery of the city so that the government could focus on the urban development of the city's new commercial centre (Nagy, 2000). This relocation was not an easy process as the residents refused to relocate unless compensated premium prices. This was the beginning of the Qatari government establishing a land acquisition policy with a massive relocation of Qatari citizens to suburban areas, leading to an inflation of real estate values and an entitlement to government-issued land and housing, which is still palpable in the GCC countries today (Nagy, 2000). Land speculation was another factor that determined the land ownership patterns in GCC cities. In Kuwait for example, when several cycles of master planning were deemed financially unfeasible, wealthy citizens took to land speculation to secure their generational wealth as the construction sector surged and land values rose (Molotch & Ponzini, 2019; Nagy, 2000). In addition to this, as a consequence of land distribution strategies, GCC cities faced the emergence of "White Land" which can be defined as "plots of land, small or large, that are undeveloped and not in the market for sale, and owners of those plots of land intentionally leave them as they are and take them out of the market to decrease supply to raise the price of land" (Shouman, 2017, p. 131). White land results from plots of land allocated to elite and influential citizens to preserve capital, who may have no intention of developing the land or using it (Shouman, 2017). White land can be conceptualised as residual space (Carmona, 2010b), which was discussed in Chapter 2.

The mismanagement of land and the resulting accumulation of unused land and numerous sites in the planning stage led to what can be described as "a dominance of empty sites" within an urban boundary in GCC cities (Elsheshtawy, 2019, p. 244), further exacerbating urban fragmentation. It is important to note that during the early decades of development of GCC cities, processes related to land ownership, land compensation, and land speculation did not benefit migrant workers. Furthermore, even today,

land ownership in the GCC cities remains an unattainable feat for the vast majority of migrant workers.

3.3.3 Planning Processes in Muscat

As indicated in the section above, a large part of the literature about the GCC focuses predominantly on Qatar and the UAE, while research on Oman has been conducted by only a handful of researchers. This leaves gaps in the story of the development of Oman's urban fabric and highlights the need to document the processes shaping space in Omani cities. This section focuses on Oman's comparable urban growth to the GCC cities, while underscoring its main aspects in relevance to the research, namely: its rapid and haphazard urban development and its attempts in community participation in planning processes. These aspects aim to examine the marginalisation of the migrant experience and the absence of the migrant perspective in space shaping processes in Muscat.

Planning processes in Oman, similar to neighbouring GCC countries, have been hindered by frequent changes of foreign planners, the application of Western design methods in a context where they are not applicable and top-down planning processes (Al Shueili, 2015). In a manner comparable to the neighbouring GCC capital cities, Muscat also experienced a series of evolving and alternating master plans, each designed by a succession of foreign planners over different periods in time (Al Shueili, 2015). However, in his extensive work on the analysis of urban planning processes in Oman and the reasons the master plans fell short, amongst other factors, Al Shueili (2015) attributes a major part of the fault on a lack of successful implementation strategies.

The first five-year plan was designed in 1976 with the primary aim to develop infrastructure, focusing on Muscat as the seat of the government, the capital city, the fastest growing population and the location of the main sea and airport (Peterson, 2004). Additionally, in 1991, German consultants Weidleplan designed the plan for Muscat, dividing it by function separating residential areas from areas of work (Richthofen, 2015). During this early developmental phase, residential settlements were constructed in a hurried manner to house the influx of foreign labour and the local population that relocated to the capital cities (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). This expeditious process led to what Adham also describes as a "haphazard" urban growth, void of any long term plan for the city (Adham, 2011, p. 227). Consequently, urban expansion plans frequently fell short and were often unable to meet the demands of the booming population. Peterson (2004, p. 128) describes in the case of Ruwi and Muttrah, "Demand soon outstripped the Greater Matrah plan, and a haphazard complex of offices, shops,

warehouses, homes, and apartment buildings completely transformed the small village of Ruwi behind Matrah. Emphasis was also laid on creating suitable housing for the various government offices, which had been scattered about Muscat in old buildings, cramped quarters and commandeered schools". Here, Peterson describes the demands and outcomes of rapid urbanisation. In Muscat's case, this was a result of several factors including inadequate local expertise in urban planning, outdated plans, and poor coordination between government agencies (Al Shueili, 2015; Nebel & von Richthofen, 2016). It can be summed up that several authors have used the term *haphazard* (Adham, 2011; Garba, 2004; Peterson, 2004) or other forms of the word to describe a chaotic and unorganised path to urban development in Muscat and the other GCC cities.

Comparable to its GCC neighbours, Muscat flourished as a new cosmopolitan city during its years of economic growth and urban expansion, while its citizens experienced a shift in lifestyle paradigms, with the introduction of luxurious ITC developments, discussed earlier in this chapter. This emergence of luxury and a shift in lifestyle was not confined to ITC's and tourism; it permeated other aspects of life in Muscat, which was undergoing rapid change. The increase in population, urbanisation, increased purchasing power, the development of highway networks, foreign tourism and the need for economic diversification also led to a shift in retail practices, resulting in the emergence of large shopping centres and malls (Abdelghani, 2013). Although shopping malls are considered a main factor in the rapid land consumption observed in Muscat (Al Gharibi, 2015), these consumer driven spaces are perceived as attractive destinations for many residents of Muscat (Didero et al., 2019). However, one might question to whom these developments are affordable and accessible, and who is excluded from them, in addition to questioning their sustainability.

Despite utilising substantial financial and planning resources, the intense and blatant focus on a single stratum of society runs the risk of creating places that do not integrate well with the existing urban fabric and do not cater to the needs of a large part of Muscat's residents. Amid the emergence of modern urban developments in the Global South, Wiedmann and Salama (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019, p. 26) sum up the impact of top-down planning by concluding that "The dominant role of top-down envisioned and planned urbanisation has resulted in the general conflict between quantity and quality due to the very limited access of majorities to impact spatial structures". The challenges of the haphazard and rapid urbanisation summed up with the focus on high-end tourism and its consequential large-scale developments have raised concern in terms of environmental sustainability, the quality of public spaces in the city and social inclusivity (Nebel, 2014). Almost all of the high-end development projects claim to be sustainable, while at the same time converting public coastal areas into private, consumer-driven luxury developments that are only accessible to certain upper strata of society and lacking in cultural, social and spatial integration (Nebel, 2014; Wippel et al., 2014b).

Redirecting attention to planning processes, it became evident that planning and creating visions were not enough to ensure a sustainable economic and urban growth, therefore, in 2016, after the 9th Five-Year plan was set in motion, the Supreme Council for Planning launched "Tanfeedh" (Gutberlet, 2017; Tanfeedh Handbook, 2017), also known as The National Program for Enhancing Economic Diversification. This initiative was established to oversee the economic diversification plans through a more coherent communication among stakeholders in development projects (Tanfeedh Handbook, 2017). As its name suggests, *Tanfeedh* is an Arabic word that translates to "implementation" in English. In order to counterbalance the top-down planning processes, one of the methods of Tanfeedh included "labs": a series of workshops aimed at community participation (Klinger, 2023; Tanfeedh Handbook, 2017). According to their handbook, 81% of the participants in the labs were Omani nationals, which increased the amount of Omani input to balance out foreign planners' principles. The remaining 19% of the participants were non-Omani. In relation to this research, it is worth questioning the demographics of the non-Omani participants, given that most of Tanfeedh's correspondence is conducted in Arabic, and a large majority of non-Omanis living in Oman, including South Asians migrants, do not speak Arabic at a proficiency level required to participate in such a workshop. Moreover, only 10% of participants did not have a higher diploma or university degree, which indicates that low-income workers were probably not present at these workshops. This raises the question about the role and position of the large South Asian migrant workers' community within society and their ability and agency to influence the planning processes of the cities that they help build— often, quite literally, with their own hands. Therefore, the extent of genuine public participation and its impact on everyday spaces in Muscat remains questionable (Klinger, 2023).

3.3.4 Urban Sprawl and Car-Dependency in Muscat

To accommodate the housing demand of the migrant influx and population boom of recent decades, Muscat witnessed a rapid urbanisation process (Deffner & Pfaffenbach, 2015; Didero et al., 2019). By 2010, urban dwelling in Oman had grown to 72.8%, a notable increase from 47.6% in 1980 (Nebel & von Richthofen, 2016). This growth was characterised by low-density buildings and rapid land consumption, leading to a sprawling city. In an analytical study of urban growth in Muscat, Al Awadhi (2008) determined that the selected urban growth area demonstrated an urban expansion of up to 650% between the years 1960 and 2003 (see Figure 3.7).

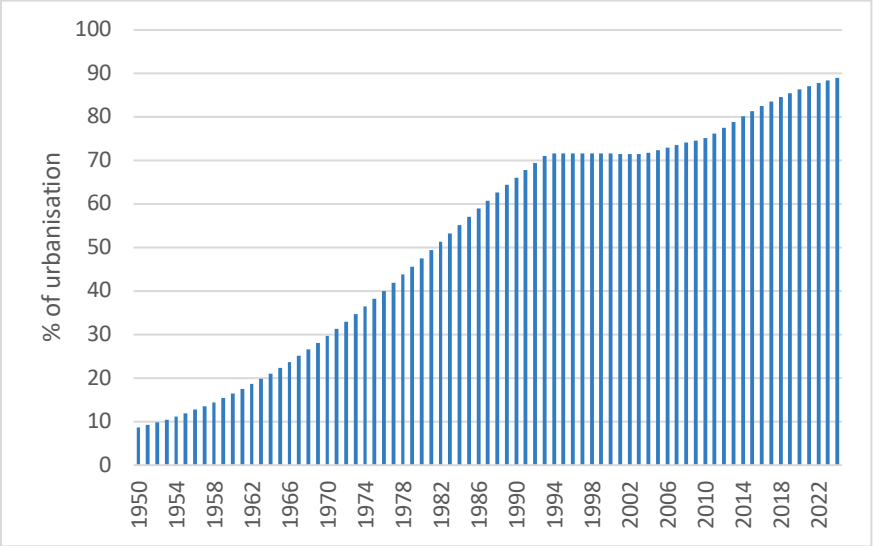

Figure 3.8 Level of urbanisation (%) in Oman. Authors figure created from data from (UN, 2018).

Muscat's exorbitant growth in land consumption can be attributed to poor land management strategies. In a study conducted on urban density in Muscat, it was discovered that 70 to 95% of the respondents preferred a single family villa with a peripheral wall, over any other housing type, regardless of the irreversible destruction that sprawl has caused towards the landscape and society (Richthofen, 2015; W. Scholz, 2021)(see Figure 3.8). This led to a "patchy and scattered" urban fabric (Al Gharibi, 2015, p. 185) of monofunctional parcels within the city framework (Didero et al., 2019). What exacerbated the land consumption was a land allocation system based on lottery. The lottery system was a random allocation system used to assign plots of land to eligible Omanis, regardless of their current residential location and regardless of whether the newly allocated plot was accessible or surrounded by infrastructure (Al Gharibi, 2015; Nebel & von Richthofen, 2016; W. Scholz & Langer, 2019). Once acquired, the owner faced no obligation to develop the plot. In some cases, this resulted in landowners holding and reserving their plot of land until the surrounding infrastructure improved, allowing them to sell the land for a much higher price (Al Gharibi, 2015). As a consequence, a large portion of the plots has remained undeveloped and vacant (Deffner & Pfaffenbach, 2015). If the land was developed, residents may have found themselves owning plots of land in distant parts of the city, far away from their workplaces. On the other hand, if the plots remain undeveloped, it resulted in a patchy and fragmented urban fabric. As a consequence, much like its neighbouring cities, Muscat was left with white land and residual spaces in the city and was characterised by empty plots of unused land (Ben-Hamouche, 2013). Although seen as an obstacle to urban density, these empty lands offered opportunities for migrant workers to appropriate space in Muscat. This will be elaborated through a case study in Chapter 5.

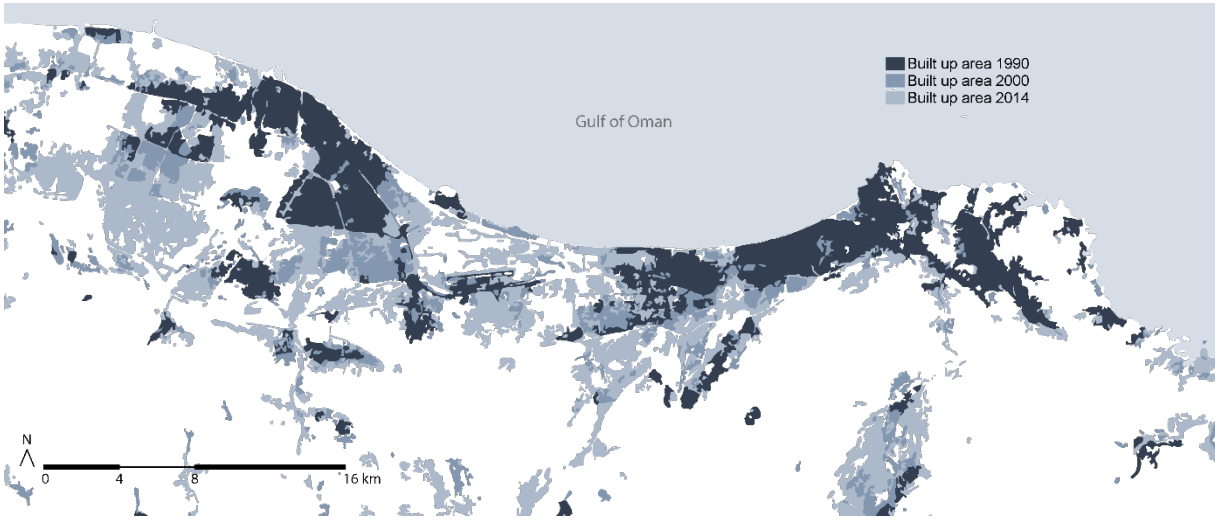

Figure 3.9 Urbanisation and expansion of Muscat over time. Authors figure based on data from (Richthofen & Langer, 2015, p. 5)

Additionally, Muscat's longitudinal growth was characterised by car-oriented urbanism expanding along continuously extending highways (Al Shueili, 2015; Nebel & von Richthofen, 2016). However, specific to its own geography, it was constrained by the Hajar Mountains to the south, the sea to the north, and the wadis (Al Shueili, 2015; Peterson, 2016). Due to Muscat's east-west formation between mountains and the sea, wadis run perpendicularly in a north-south direction. Wadi land is unsuitable for building and development (W. Scholz et al., 2021) and consequently, in the context of urban development in Muscat, wadis are often viewed as "inconvenient obstacles to expansion" (Nebel & von Richthofen, 2016, p. 117) that segregate neighbourhoods with vacant land. They are rarely seen as a potential natural feature to integrate into urban plans. However, vacant wadi beds offer additional opportunities for migrant communities to appropriate space. In Chapter 5, a case study elaborates on how a neighbourhood wadi was integrated into the neighbourhood through space appropriation.

3.3.4.1 Car Oriented Planning and Urbanism

Muscat has been described as a car-dependent city by numerous researchers (Al Gharibi, 2015; Didero et al., 2019; Nebel & von Richthofen, 2016; W. Scholz & Langer, 2019). This sprawling city often demands long trips between destinations, which are achieved most easily with a private car, making it a city in favour of cars, or rather, car owners (Al Gharibi, 2015; Didero et al., 2019; W. Scholz & Langer, 2019). The long trips involve commuting between home, typically located in a residential area, and work,

typically located in an office district, like, for example, the district of Ministries in Al Khuwair. Many functions, such as shopping, are clustered in specific locations, such as malls. Another relevant example is the cluster of temples and churches in Ruwi, which requires migrant workers to travel long distances if they reside outside the area of Ruwi. In one of the few studies on the mobility patterns of Muscat's residents, Didero, Nebel and Pfaffenbach (2019) demonstrated that only 2% of the polled households did not own a car, and 87% of respondents commuted to work using a private car. Moreover, Omani households owned 2.7 cars on average while Indian households averaged less than half that figure with 1.4 cars. The few households without cars were predominantly in the lower-income brackets (Didero et al., 2019). Additionally, in his study on transportation problems in Muscat, Al Rawas (1989) demonstrated that 90% of low-income migrant workers did not own a car. In a city designed primarily for cars, how are the mobility needs of those without cars catered for? Al Rawas's study showed that most of the trips made by public transport or commercial vehicles were made by migrant workers (Al Rawas, 1989). They have been known to resort to taking taxis, shared taxis, and baiza buses for their daily trips, which are all quite unaffordable and provide very limited accessibility (W. Scholz & Langer, 2019). Only very recently have the public transportation issues been addressed with the introduction of the first public transport system in Muscat in 2015 (Didero et al., 2019).

Muscat, much like its neighbouring GCC cities, focused on car-oriented planning, including highway beautification. This emphasis was so pronounced that development plans included requirements for highways to be landscaped as part of the beautification strategies, the earliest of which were implemented by the Ministry of Land Affairs and Municipalities in 1984 by British civil engineering consultants Gibb Petermuller & Partners and Sir Alexander Gibb & Partners (Al Shueili, 2015). In a similar vein to other beautified GCC cities, the beautification landscapes of Muscat lacked functionality and accessibility, as they were merely designed to make the highways look aesthetically pleasing. However, these inaccessible spaces offered the migrant community opportunities for space appropriation. This will be elaborated through a case study in Chapter 5.

In addition to economic problems and accessibility issues, Al Gharibi (2015) indicates in his work on urban sprawl in Muscat that automobile dependence can cause a number of social problems as well, including a loss of street life, a lack of a sense of community, and accessibility constraints for those unable to afford a car. With commuters now spending over two hours a day in their cars (Richthofen, 2015), Al Gharibi argues that over the four decades of urban transformation that commenced in the 1970s, the society of Oman has faced a gradual loss in enthusiasm towards social connectedness due to the city's auto-dependent fragmentation (Al Gharibi, 2015).

In conclusion, urban developments in the GCC cities have been characterised by branding to attract the interests of foreign investors and offering sensationalistic architecture, mega-projects and tourism

(Ponzini, 2019). This focus on nation- and brand building has appeared at the cost of the consideration of everyday spaces in GCC cities (Elsheshtawy, 2008). Furthermore, the rapid and haphazard urban growth marked by sprawling cities and car dependency has had adverse effects on the creation of public spaces that reflect the needs of the communities that reside in them (Al Gharibi, 2015; Elsheshtawy, 2008). The urgency to meet the needs of a growing economy and population has left little room for the processes that consider the integration of local cultures and local contexts, resulting in environments that are disconnected from their surroundings (Ponzini, 2019). Furthermore, the focus on sensational large-scale projects has contributed to an environment driven by spectacle rather than functionality, where public space is often designed for visual appeal rather than daily needs (Akbar, 1981). As a result, the growing investments in modern infrastructure and the increase in the population's purchasing power have led to the disappearance of culturally and traditionally significant urban spaces (Wiedmann & Salama, 2019).

However, despite the urban sprawl, lack of quality in urban space and car dependency, "fields of care" (Tuan, 1979, p. 416) emerge in all GCC cities (Elsheshtawy, 2010), and spaces that represent and fulfil the needs of other demographics do exist in the GCC cities (Mohammad & Sidaway, 2016). While extensive research on urban growth in GCC cities exists, smaller informal spaces that cater to the needs of migrant communities have not been as thoroughly examined. Among the studies that do focus on smaller spaces, the UAE and Qatar are the most frequently studied as examples to represent the GCC, consistent with trends in broader urban studies. For example, Elsheshtawy has worked on shifting the spotlight from the UAE's grand spectacles to its informal urbanism in Abu Dhabi (Elsheshtawy, 2011a) and the "forgotten urban spaces" in Dubai (Elsheshtawy, 2008). In a similar vein, the everyday urbanisms of migrant workers have been studied in Doha (Mohammad & Sidaway, 2016; Salama et al., 2017). However, the informal spatial practices and the fields of care of Muscat are yet to be examined. This research aims to bridge this knowledge gap by exploring how the appropriation of space is facilitated by the obstacles and opportunities that migrant communities encounter within the challenging context of the urban developments discussed in this chapter.

3.4 Social and Spatial Exclusion and the Need for Space

The marginalisation of South Asian migrants is impacted not only by the legal structures discussed earlier in this chapter, but by social and spatial structures as well (Hamza, 2015). In GCC countries, the social interaction between local and foreign populations, as well as between elite expatriates and non-elite migrant workers, remains minimal, leading critics to argue that efforts to socially integrate and assimilate migrant populations are deliberately avoided to foster exclusion instead (Fargues, 2011; Gardner, 2011). This section examines how GCC countries facilitate the influx of migrant labour while simultaneously adopting organic and planned mechanisms and policies that spatially and socially exclude non-citizens from integration.

Examining the migration policies and the resulting hierarchical structures mentioned earlier in this chapter, it is evident that nationality, class, and ethnicity play a large role in the distribution of migrants in the economic hierarchy of the GCC countries; however, the following three factors also play a role in their social and spatial distribution (Gardner, 2011). First, nationality influences spatial distribution, and national identity is preserved through this spatial organisation. Second, wealthy nationals are insulated from non-wealthy foreigners. Thirdly, families are segregated from single male members of society. To elaborate on the first aspect of social segregation, one can consider the case of the UAE where a clear distinction is made between housing for foreigners and nationals, by allocating each to separate areas within the city of Dubai (Elsheshtawy, 2008). Moreover, it is commonly observed that GCC nationals live in walled compounds or walled homes (Gardner, 2011). These walls have been criticised for serving not only as physical barriers but also to serve as social barriers planned to protect national culture and identity from the external influences of foreigners, while additionally avoiding the perceived threat posed by foreign workers, particularly, low-income migrant men (Gardner, 2011; Mohammad & Sidaway, 2016). Secondly, luxurious accommodations and gated communities serve as spaces to insulate the wealthy upper-class, including both national citizens and elite expatriates, from the non-elite strata of society (Gardner, 2011; Hamza, 2015; Ponzini, 2019). Thirdly, this insulation extends itself to public spaces as well. Commercial spaces, such as malls, have imposed restrictions that limit access for migrant workers by designating “family days” on weekends, when low-income migrants typically have time off. Such policies aim to prevent single migrant workers, who are not entitled to family reunification, from sharing the same space with other strata of society (Lori, 2019; Wiedmann & Salama, 2019). It is important to note that this policy is aimed primarily at South Asian men, while Arab and white men are not prohibited from malls even when they are unaccompanied (Lori, 2019). Diop, Johnston and Le concluded aptly: “*The presence of a large, permanent foreign population produces myriad social problems but this population is indispensable to the economy and citizens’ quality of life*”

(Diop et al., 2018).

In terms of spatial segregation, migrant workers face exclusion in three main ways: first, urban planning policies intentionally situate migrant accommodations, such as labour camps, on the periphery of cities. Second, restricted mobility limits their access from the peripheries. Third, their economic constraints limit workers from living and accessing central public areas. As GCC cities modernised and expanded, the cost of living increased significantly in central areas, which led to an organic form of exclusion, preventing low-income migrants from affording accommodation or consumption in these areas of the city (Hamza, 2015; Lori, 2019; Nagy, 2000). For instance, low-income migrant workers cannot afford simple purchases, such as a beverage at a mall, effectively being excluded from such places due to economic barriers in consumption (Hamza, 2015; Longva, 1997). In many GCC cities, wealthier residents, including nationals and high-earning expatriates, reside in the city centres and desirable areas of the city while low-income migrant workers are forced to reside in the more affordable peripheries, further exacerbating the social fragmentation (Gardner, 2011; Hamza, 2015). However, this process of exclusion does not occur entirely organically, highlighting the second point: labour camps are strategically located on the outskirts of the city in order to keep accommodation costs down for employers and to keep the large low-income migrant populations at a distance from other populations (Gardner, 2011; Hamza, 2015). This distance also prevents migrant workers from utilising their limited free time for activities beyond work, such as grocery shopping, socialising or simply participating in urban life (Gardner, 2011). And lastly, even if migrant workers wished to travel to central public spaces in the city during their free time, they often face limitations in mobility. Across all GCC countries, a large portion of low-income migrant workers are provided transportation by their employers, from their accommodations to their workplace and back (Diop et al., 2018). In a few cases, company transportation is provided to urban areas at certain times during the work week for purposes unrelated to work (Gardner, 2011). However, with minimal wages, and company-provided transportation usually restricted to work trips, most migrant workers cannot afford their own means of transportation for leisure trips, as they do not typically own a car and cannot afford taxi fares on a regular basis (Hamza, 2015). In order to get around the city, low-income migrant workers often walk or use a bicycle when the climatic conditions allow (see Figure 3.9).



Figure 3.10 Migrant workers waiting for company-transportation and migrant workers riding a bicycle in Muscat. Photos by author.

Due to their demanding work hours, harsh working conditions, limited financial means and lack of affordable transportation options, migrant workers resort to spending leisure time in close proximity to their accommodation, often in small affordable tea shops (Hamza, 2015). This section can be concluded with a quote from an interview from Bristol-Rhys's (2012) work on the socio spatial boundaries of migrant workers in Abu Dhabi. During an interview she found that a migrant worker was not aware of the concept of public spaces and responded by stating "No, Madam, no, this is not the case because we are not people of the city, we live in the labour camp and are not public" (Bristol-Rhys, 2012, p. 77). In Chapter 5, this research will demonstrate how middle-income and low-income South Asian migrants challenge socio-spatial segregations by appropriating space.

4 Methodological Approach and Research Design

Examining the space appropriation practices of South Asian migrants in Muscat and understanding the implications of this production of space within the framework of temporality requires a comprehensive approach — one that not only deals with socio-spatial practices, but the underlying emotional meanings attached to them. This chapter is dedicated to outlining the methodological framework adopted for this examination, in which I discuss: the approach to case study selection, observation, and interviews. These approaches and methods form the empirical framework and are discussed in detail followed by the data analysis process. Finally, I reflect on my own positionality as a researcher.

While urban life is often studied through a quantitative lens — to identify trends and quantify our environments (Baum, 2021), in this research, a qualitative approach was adopted to "understand people's experiences, gain a sense of context, improve people's lives, and address injustices" (Hay & Cope, 2021, p. 37). A qualitative approach provided a comprehensive examination by producing explanations and context through the underlying circumstances, the individual lived experiences and the emotions that shape the symbiotic relationship between migrants and their environment in Muscat. The study furthermore employed grounded theory as its methodological framework to address theoretical considerations that emerge through the analysis of empirical findings (Charmaz, 2006), as grounded theory generally refers to the process of inducting theory from empirical data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, as proposed by several thinkers such as Michael Burawoy (1998) and Steve Herbert (2010), the stringency of grounded theory can be challenged to acknowledge that researchers often enter the field with some level of theoretical considerations and knowledge which helps us determine where to find data and what it looks like, as was the case with this research. Moreover, the research process was iterative, involving cycles of data collection, analysis and returning to the field, consistent with the description of grounded theory being a "comparative, iterative and interactive method"(Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 347).

To ensure credibility in data collection and data analysis authors Jamie Baxter and John Eyles (1997), present rigorous strategies in empirical practices, of which triangulation is stated as the most powerful one to support validity (Eisenhardt, 2024). Triangulation was developed as a way to improve objectivity and validation, particularly in social research, and involves the cross-verification of data from multiple sources and/or using multiple research methods (Denzin, 2017). This research adopted methodological triangulation to confirm data findings primarily through data methods including qualitative interviews

and participant observation, additionally adopting photography and field notes (Ridder et al., 2016)(see Figure 4.1). While the framework of triangulation allows researchers to understand "how" spaces might be used, the detailed descriptive aspect of multiple case studies, interviews and observations allow us to understand the "who" "what" and "why" of the same circumstances (Burawoy, 1998; Ridder et al., 2016).



Figure 4.1 Methodological framework. Figure created by author.

The field work was conducted in several parts over time, namely, in February 2021, September 2021, between January and March in 2022, and September 2022. The rationale behind conducting field work over different rounds developed as a combination of three main factors. The first being my transnational residence between Oman and Germany. The second being COVID-19 related restrictions that began approximately around April 2020 and were partially lifted around May 2022 (Yousuf, 2022), which had a significant influence on public space activity in Muscat. The third being the intention to revisit sites to compare them over seasons and over time and to consequently readjust my observation and interview guidelines.

4.1 Case Study Selection and Defining Categories

Field work periods	[February 2021] [September 2021]
Methods	Informal conversations, observation, photography
Data obtained	6 selected case studies with field notes, photos and maps

To examine the space appropriation practices of South Asian migrants in Muscat and draw conclusions from their comparison, I adopted a combination of a multiple case study approach and comparative analysis methods (Hay & Cope, 2021; Yin, 2007). Comparative case study is a commonly adopted approach amongst human geographers, where they focus on place as a basis for comparison (Baxter, 2021). Correspondingly, Kevin Dunn (2008) highlights the impact of comparative analysis particularly to study how transnationalism or migration has an impact on both migrants and the places which they occupy. Furthermore, the comparative approach has enabled researchers to identify the connections between places and social factors, further deepening our understanding of this relationship and helping us contribute to the discourse on trans-local geographies (Herbert, 2010). Additionally, adopting multiple case studies in this research allowed for the examination and comparisons of commonalities and variations between the case studies to highlight their distinctive features. The criteria of comparisons were developed in an inductive method following a grounded theory framework, and therefore will be presented in the results section in Chapter 5. With the process of, first, developing categories for the types of public spaces appropriated by South Asian migrants in Muscat, and second, selecting a representative case study for each category, the dissertation aims to further ensure rigor and credibility.

To identify spaces appropriated by South Asian migrants in Muscat, I initially adopted an exploratory approach to determine what these spaces look like and where they are located around the city. This involved unsystematic observations to identify instances of space appropriation by South Asian migrants. I conducted my observations in an iterative manner, focusing on revisiting locations to verify their patterns of usage. Areas that were in daily or weekly usage were added to my list of areas of interest. Alongside field notes, I also photographed these spaces of interest making sure to capture the surrounding environments and their users. In order to document where these photographs were taken, I annotated the location of the photographs on digital maps on my mobile phone. Additionally, I conducted informal conversations with individuals to gain further insight into the activities they engaged in and how often they visited the space. These conversations enabled me to determine whether these

informal activities were an isolated occurrence or a pattern, and consequently influenced the decision to revisit the area to observe and photograph them. Areas that were unoccupied on the second or third visit were discarded from the list. For larger areas of interest, I utilized archived Google imagery to trace possible transformations or changes in use over time. The above methods enabled a comprehensive exploration of spaces appropriated by South Asian migrants in Muscat, laying the groundwork to determine what types of places offer opportunities for space appropriation.

I proceeded to categorise the spaces of interest based on common characteristics. The first characteristic that distinguished the spaces was whether the space was *developed* or *undeveloped*, in other words, spaces that are built-up or un-built. This led to the first delineation of the two primary categories. Furthermore, undeveloped spaces denote spaces that remain unbuilt due to unsuitability for construction, hereinafter categorised as the subcategory of *natural* spaces. This category comprises of natural spaces which are incompatible for building, including dry wadi beds or beaches that do not fall under the maintenance of the Muscat municipality. In contrast, undeveloped spaces that are suitable for building but are not built upon due to the owner's delay in development, or simply a lack of ownership, are categorised as *vacant* spaces. Vacant spaces include empty plots of land belonging to owners that lack the financial means to develop their plot, for example. Returning to the alternate primary category, *developed* spaces comprise of four subcategories, namely, *infrastructure*, *urban*, *public leisure* and *beautification* spaces. *Infrastructural* spaces include parking lots, drainage basins, or highways, for example. *Urban* spaces are categorised as spaces found within built urban settings, and include pedestrian walkways, building arcades, courtyards, or markets. *Public leisure* spaces include spaces that have been developed by the Muscat Municipality for public use, such as public beaches or parks. *Beautification* spaces lend their name from the term "*beautification*" which is coined by the Muscat municipality to describe the process of green landscaping along the main highways in order to enhance their aesthetic appearance. It encompasses continuous stretches of lawn lined with trees and flower beds aligned parallel to the main carriageways. The categories are listed in the Figure (4.2) below.

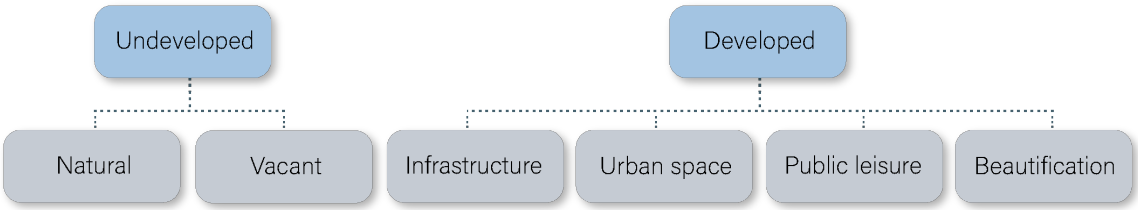

Figure 4.2 Categories of appropriated spaces in Muscat. Figure created by author.

Once the categories were established, the next phase involved the identification of six case-study areas,

each representing one category of spaces. Robert Yin (2009) suggests that the foundation of field work and research design is based on the research questions. Therefore, the selection of the case studies was guided by the following research questions, namely:

1. What are the key needs and motivations that drive South Asian migrants to appropriate space in Muscat?
2. Where and how do South Asian migrants appropriate space within Muscat?
3. What opportunities and limitations do South Asian migrants experience as they appropriate space in Muscat?

The spaces that could best address these questions and offer variation and comparisons were selected for further investigation. Moreover, the case studies that were selected aimed to be exemplary (Yin, 2009) ensuring a fair representation of appropriated spaces in Muscat. The criteria developed to select a case study included: a daily or weekly frequency of usage, a gender balance which allowed for comfortable field work, a manageable physical area for study, its degree of usage flexibility, a diversity of locations in Muscat, accessibility, change in use over time and elements of temporality, and lastly, the diversity of users and activity. The details of why each case study was selected for a particular category are elaborated on in Chapter 5.

To study the *natural* category, Wadi Al Ghubrah was selected as a case study, as it demonstrated a regular daily frequency of usage, enough to allow for several interview partners. It also displayed a large diversity in activities, allowing for insights on the flexibility of a space. Furthermore, Wadi Al Ghubrah is located in a dense and diversely populated area, which makes it noteworthy for its predominantly South Asian users. To study the *vacant* category, the cricket grounds in Al Ghubrah were selected, serving as an ideal example combining a dominant activity, in this case cricket, and a ground that was manageable in size due to its urban context. The *infrastructure* category is represented by the Ministries district parking lot. Aside from its regular frequency of usage, accessibility and diverse activities, it was selected due to its flexibility doubling as an official government building land as well as a public space for children. To examine the *urban space* category, a breakout space was selected in the neighbourhood of Al Ghubrah. Amongst other factors, it was selected due to its situation in a residential area and its high levels of temporality. The *public leisure* category is represented by Athaibah beach. Athaibah beach was selected due to its diverse activities, covering multiple zones and featuring diverse visitor demographics.

To study the *beautification* category, Sahwa Lawn was chosen due to its daily usage and manageable size.

It should be noted here that, while appropriated spaces in Ruwi and Wadi Kabir were listed in the initial exploratory field work and contributed to the development of the six categories of appropriated spaces, they were not selected as case studies due to two reasons: First, their situation in Indian-dominated neighbourhoods. The case studies were selected from diversely populated neighbourhoods to illustrate that South Asians dominated certain spaces over other demographics, not due to the absence of other demographics in the area, but due to additional factors, which are part of the analysis. The second factor in this selection was distance and convenience. To guarantee flexibility and spontaneity in interview appointments, which are imperative for field work in Muscat, I selected central areas in Muscat rather than areas on the extreme east or west of the city (see Figure 4.3).

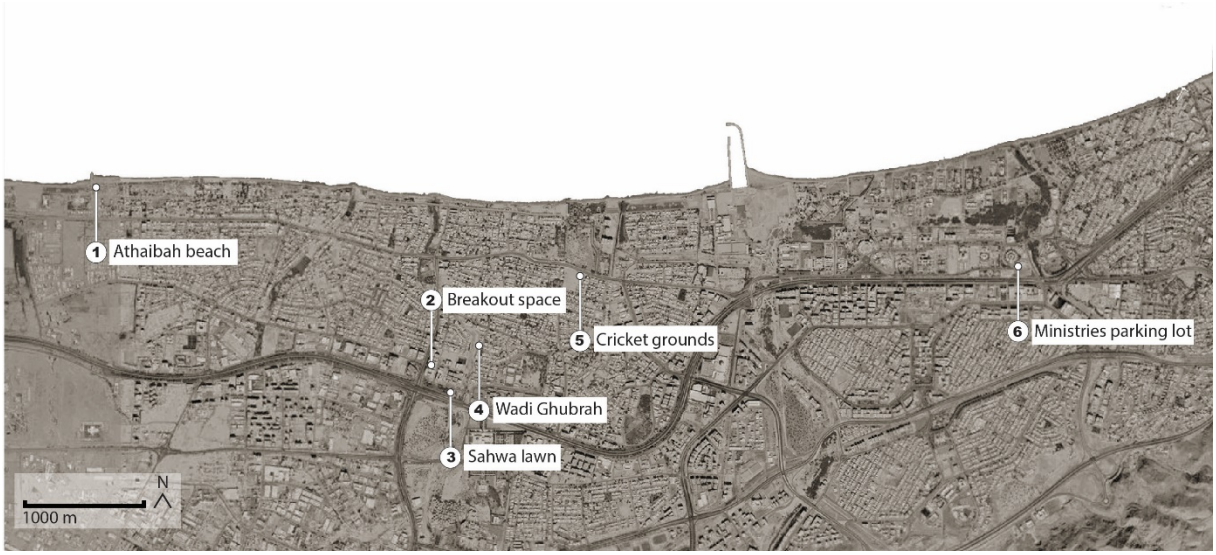

Figure 4.3 Map of case-study areas in Muscat. Figure created by author.

4.2 Understanding Spatial Practices Through Observation

Field work periods	[January-March 2022]
Methods	Participant observation
Data obtained	Field notes, photos, videos

Case study research often entails participant observation as a typical research method. Participant observation can be defined as "a method to turn witnessed actions and experiences into qualitative data" (Watson, 2021, p. 125). This approach involves the researcher spending large amounts of time in the field, oftentimes in close proximity to the participants and their activities (Ridder et al., 2016). The method requires a researcher to observe people in a particular environment over an extended period, while, to some degree, participating in the activities being observed, and then to take field notes on their observations on the social life and processes that take place in a certain environment (Emerson et al., 2014; Watson, 2021).

While direct observation is often a quantitative method involving the counting or mapping of specific metrics, participant observation is essentially qualitative and generally more unstructured and focuses more on elucidating explanations when compared to direct observation (Emerson et al., 2014; Watson, 2021). This is not to say that the process should not be structured — quite the contrary, participant observation can be quite a conscious and selective process as the researcher selects the factors that are most relevant to note, while excluding factors that seem irrelevant (Emerson et al., 2014; Watson, 2021). Moreover, observation goes beyond merely taking field notes and presenting them, it is a rather investigative approach in which the researcher identifies patterns of activity in specific places, including the interaction between people and places as well as the underlying emotional experiences (Watson & Till, 2010; Zeisel, 1997). John Zeisel (1997) suggests a method of observation which allows researchers to comprehend the dynamics between people and their environments by systematically identifying patterns in activities and behaviours observed. To achieve this, he asks six main questions illustrated in the table below.

Table 4.1 Observation categories adopted from (Zeisel, 1997).

Who is	Doing what	With whom?	In what relationship,	In what context,	And where?
Actor	Act	Significant others	Relationships	Sociocultural context	Physical setting

By employing Zeisel's (1997) methodological framework, I approached the selected case studies as a participant observer to take field notes on the visitors, their activities, the physical attributes of the case study, and their relationships. I expanded on this approach by delving into the specifics to identify the visitors' sociodemographic background, the different zones of activities within individual case studies, the distribution of visitors among these zones, the time of day, the visitors' duration of stay, the weather and the season.

Gold (1958) offers an expanded version of the dichotomy between participant and non-participant observation by outlining four types of possible approaches instead of two, namely: complete observer, observer-as-participant, participant-as-observer and complete participation. I employed two of these methods interchangeably, depending on the requirements of the case study, specifically: observer-as-participant and participant-as-observer. To elaborate, the observer-as-participant method could be employed for shorter visits to a site and a more formal relationship with the informants (Gold, 1958), for example, when a researcher visits a sports game as a spectator (Kearns, 2010). This method was employed when observing case studies dominated by male sports activities. On the other hand, the participant-as-observer is described as an approach where the relationship between the researcher and the participants grows over time (Gold, 1958), for example, when a researcher sets out to investigate social dynamics within his or her own immediate surroundings (Kearns, 2010). This method was adopted in case studies where I engaged more actively in the participants daily activities, such as walking or sitting in the same space during the research. It was also adopted for case studies that were located closer to my residence and with informants that I saw and spoke to more than once.

I based the frequency of my observations on the previously observed activity patterns during the case study selection period. For example, during the initial selection period, if the site was appropriated on a daily basis, I conducted field work on both weekdays and weekends. Correspondingly, if the site was used only on the weekends, my observation periods were concentrated on the weekends. This approach also applied to the time of day. For example, case studies with shaded areas could be appropriated during the early afternoons, whereas other case studies were not due to high temperatures. Such patterns determined my observation timings. The observation periods lasted between 30-80 minutes, depending on the activity taking place at the given time.

Field notes were recorded on my phone, to avoid unwarranted attention, especially when I was not engaged in conversations with people. I did not aim for the field notes to be objectively thorough or to record everything I saw. Following the approach of participant observation, the field notes were selective, capturing observations that were relevant to the observation categories or other interconnected factors. I also took photos on my phone of the spaces and individuals engaged in activities. If an individual's face or identity would be revealed in the photos, I asked for their consent prior to capturing the images. Photos taken to capture the space, where people could be seen as figures in the distance, did not require such consent. Using photography as a method in the field work aids in improving observational focus and facilitates in capturing fleeting moments for analysis later (Watson & Till, 2010).

It should be noted here that during the observations, I made assumptions about the socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds of the visitors in the case studies. I based these assumptions on visible indicators such as clothing, their company or their belongings, which could all be indicators of their membership in certain subpopulations (Emerson et al., 2011; Guest et al., 2013). For example, I identified Pakistani men by their traditional *salwar kameez* attire. Additionally, I identified middle-income participants by noting the presence of their family, which indicated the financial means to sponsor them, and observed their arrival or departure in a car, which further indicated a measure of economic status. In his work on migration studies, Dirk Jacobs (2018) discusses how the ethics of such a process can be questioned, but argues that it is necessary, not only to classify the visitors and their groups for the sake of note-taking but moreover to classify how they may be perceived to one another, because the latter could impact the interaction between groups negotiating their presence in same place. He sums it up by paradoxically concluding: "The classification of ethnic groups in our view, however, constitutes a necessary evil in the construction of an efficient policy aiming at equal opportunities and in the struggle against racism" (Jacobs, 2018, p. 140). However, to further mitigate the ethical concerns about the assumptions, I conducted both informal conversations and in-depth interviews with visitors, through which these assumptions were later validated. Therefore, I was provided with a more accurate and nuanced understanding and perspective which informed the consequential field work and analysis of the empirical data.

4.3 The Interview Approach: Conversations with South Asian migrants in Muscat

Field work periods	[January-March 2022] [September 2022]
Methods	Qualitative semi-structured interviews
Data obtained	Voice recordings, field notes

Case study research often and typically involves interviews as a research method (Ridder et al., 2016). Consequently, I employed qualitative interviews (N. King et al., 2019) to gather data on the practices of space appropriation of South Asian migrants in Muscat. I conducted interviews with participants approached at the site of the case study, referred to as case study participants, and I conducted interviews with participants based on their occupation, referred to as occupational participants. This distinction will be explained further in this chapter whereas the complete list of both types of participants can be found in Chapter 6. Moreover, the interviews were designed as semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews are a form of interviewing where the researcher guides the conversation based on the essential themes of the interview guidelines, while allowing the interviewee to explore other ideas, enabling the development and hierarchisation of themes (Aurini et al., 2016). The semi-structured approach enabled me to maintain flexibility and adapt to the interviewees' responses while still keeping the conversation aligned to the main themes of the project. This approach enabled me to gain comprehensive insight to draw connections between the practices of space appropriation and the underlying socioeconomic, sociocultural, and emotional factors experienced by the interviewees.

4.3.1 Interview Guidelines and Structure

The first themes that were addressed in the interview guideline aimed to create a profile of the interviewee and to establish rapport, before asking more detailed questions about their presence in the case study, their activities and their relationship to the space. This ordering of questions was chosen to establish a relationship of trust with the interviewee (Dunn, 2021). I followed this up with inquiring about their general thoughts on public spaces in Muscat, in order to draw comparisons to the case study we were discussing. I finally concluded by asking about their notions of home and belonging. The main

themes of discussion can be found in the table below (see Table 4.2). These themes informed the formation of the primary questions. While primary questions were used to begin conversations and define topics in an interview guideline, secondary questions were used to prompt an interviewee to elaborate on the topic being discussed (Dunn, 2021), were unplanned and occurred naturally during the interview when a clarification or elaboration was required.

Table 4.2 Table of main themes and interview topics.

THEMES	KEY WORDS/TOPICS OF QUESTIONS
BACKGROUND AND WORK	Origins and migration Name, Age, Languages Profession and place of work
RESIDENCE	Details on residential situation Reasons for the choice if there was one
FAMILY AND COMMUNITY	Presence of family, friends and community in Muscat and how these connections were formed Contact with family in country of origin Remittances
DAILY LIFE	Descriptions of weekdays and weekends Questions on free time
MOBILITY	Descriptions of daily and weekly trips and modes of transport
CASE-STUDY AREA	Discovery of and opinions on the space Activities, duration and company The presence of other users and negotiations or conflict The importance of the space The future of the space
PUBLIC SPACES IN MUSCAT	Comparing the space with alternatives in Muscat
HOME AND BELONGING	Plans to stay in Muscat Omanisation Meanings of home and belonging

According to Dunn (2021), interview guidelines can consist of a combination of types of primary questions, of which I adopted five types in the interview guideline. First, “descriptive questions”, which focus on circumstances, people and spaces, were used in almost every theme of the interview. Second, “storytelling” questions, which focus on the links between events, were used to ask interviewees about their migration process and the process of how they use the case-study area, for example. Third, “opinion” questions, which focus on judgments and feelings, were employed to ask interviewees their opinions and sentiments on the spaces they appropriated. Fourth, “contrast or hypothetical” questions, which focus on comparisons and proposed circumstances, were used to ask interviewees about their alternatives to appropriation if the currently appropriated space did not exist. Fifth, “Devil’s advocate” questions, which are used to approach controversial topics, were used to discuss the process of Omanisation, a sensitive topic for non-Omanis living in Oman.

4.3.2 Sampling Strategy: Selecting Migrant Participants

During the process of participant selection, the primary aim was to interview participants who frequently appropriated case-study areas or had an impact on the activities and socio-dynamics in the case study. To ensure an in-depth study, Michael Patton (2002) underscores the importance of selecting information-rich participants or cases which can be described as cases with in-depth knowledge about the research topic, reflect the research topic or are related to theoretical knowledge (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). This approach to sampling is called purposive sampling and has been branched out by Patton (2002) into 15 sampling strategies plus a 16th strategy that is a combination of more than one strategy (Stratford & Bradshaw, 2021). To select participants, I adopted three sampling strategies. First, I adopted typical case sampling (Patton, 2002) where I focused on the typical participants and activities in which they engaged in the case study. Second, I adopted snowball sampling (N. King et al., 2019; Stratford & Bradshaw, 2021) where the contact established with one interviewee leads to contact with another interviewee. Third, I adopted emergent sampling (Patton, 2002) which involves flexibility and responds to unexpected circumstances during field work. This combination of sampling strategies further enables a successful way of connecting the interviewees to their socio-spatial environment and their networks (Barglowski, 2018; Scott, 2021).

Initially all the interviewees were selected from observation periods in the case studies using a typical case sampling method. Therefore, I approached people who were engaging in activities at the time of

the observation. This led to a sample size and demographic that reflected the activities and their frequency in the case study. If the interviewees decided they would like to take part in an in-depth interview, they could choose to participate either on site at the moment, on site at a later scheduled time, or whether they prefer to give an interview on the phone or in another location. Consequently, all the interviewees were selected from the study site and the sample reflected South Asian migrants who had access to such places. I refer to them in the research as case study participants. However, during the field work phase, I reflected on the data from my observations and wondered about what I am not observing, what I am not seeing. This can be described as an irrational question considering the infinite possibilities of what does not occur (Patton, 2002). However, this question led me to expand my sample to be more inclusive towards low-income women and men who lacked access to the study sites. This adjustment aimed to examine their underrepresentation in the selected case studies and to include them in the examination of what home means to low-income migrants living in Muscat, including those who face the most limitations in the access to public spaces. This approach required a change in the initial sampling method which focused on the space and led me instead to seeking interview partners through their professions instead. Therefore, I aimed to interview women who worked as beauticians and domestic workers. Additionally, I aimed to interview men who worked as gardeners and sanitation workers. I refer to these interviewees in the research as occupational participants. These participants were found by visiting their workplaces and, in some cases, by asking case study participants for contacts. In total, 67 participants were interviewed. The interviews were conducted, in order of frequency, in English or Indian-English, Hindi and Urdu. All of the interviews and some informal conversations were voice recorded on my phone. All recordings were made with consent of the participant. A large portion of the interviews had to be translated for research purposes. This process is detailed in the analysis section of this chapter.

4.4 Interpreting Data: Process of Analysis

Contrary to assumptions, the analysis of the collected data does not necessarily take place in a singular phase of the research. This is particularly true for grounded theory research, in which case the analysis is an iterative process that can begin during the field work in the form of the researcher's intuitions and intentions (Aurini et al., 2016; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2010). Correspondingly, during each period of field work, I returned to Muscat with clearer ideas on where and how to collect data, which was an outcome of constantly analysing what I was experiencing in the field. The empirical

field work finally generated a large amount of qualitative data gathered from the interviews and observation periods. This data needed to be examined and evaluated in order to address the research aims of the study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2010). As highlighted by Marshall and Rossman (2015), the objective of the analysis of qualitative data is to identify themes and connections which produce a framework in the interpretation of the data.

In order to analyse the recorded interviews in a qualitative data analysis program, I first transcribed the interviews. This was a lengthy process which involved extensive translating. I attempted to utilize AI technology to automatically transcribe some interviews, but this process was hindered by the voice recordings containing foreign languages, foreign accents and poor quality of sound due to recordings made in public spaces. The interviews were therefore manually transcribed in a qualitative analysis software. During this process, I was often faced with the questions of whether I should translate the texts in a "literal" translation manner, which is to translate all terms literally, or whether I should translate the text in a "free" manner, which involves changing the structure or editing the words to make it more understandable to an outsider (Birbili, 2000; Filep, 2009). In most instances during the translation process, I preferred to use the literal manner in order to do justice to the participants' contribution. However, in some cases, this was not an option because the literal translation would lead to more misinterpretations rather than contribute to meaning and clarifications. In that case, I used the free manner of translation.

The transcription of the interviews was followed by uploading them in the qualitative analysis software, along with the field notes according to the case studies and research themes. The observational field notes were vital in triangulating the data collected from the interviews, as personal field notes can offer comprehensive and profound insights (Saldaña, 2013). According to Charmaz (2006), coding is the fundamental connection between the collected data and its underlying meaning. Much like the general analysis, the specific process of coding is also an iterative process which develops as the analysis progresses (Aurini et al., 2016; Saldaña, 2013). However, coding can take place in identifiable stages. According to Saldaña (2013), this takes place in stages called pre-coding, first cycle coding and second cycle coding. Accordingly, the preliminary codes to my collected data were assigned according to the selected case studies. Following this, the subsequent codes were assigned related to the questionnaire guidelines. As the analysis process progressed, new revealing themes emerged from the data. These themes were assigned the final codes and led to the development of theoretical considerations which were integrated into the results section.

4.5 Methodological Limitations and Field Work Challenges

Conducting research in any urban environment can present challenges that affect the field work and its outcomes. My research on space appropriation in Muscat, involving field work with a migrant community as a female researcher during a pandemic, was no exception and came with its challenges and limitations. This section underscores the challenges faced during field work and its consequential limitations on the research. The challenges addressed include language barriers, challenges in building trust and willingness to talk, unreliable communication, gender dynamics and communicating the research purpose.

To address the first challenge, there were two types of language barriers during my research. The first was between me and the interviewees during interviews, while the second type was between what the interviewees told me and how I was to translate this into my writing, particularly while translating and transcribing. To address the first, it should be noted that despite my South Asian ethnicity, my first language is English, not my mother tongue. Although a large portion of the interviewees spoke English, it was almost never their first language. Their mother tongues were, in order of frequency, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Hindi. Since I only speak Hindi out of the six languages mentioned, the interviewees rarely spoke their mother tongue with me. Most of the interviews with middle-income interviewees were conducted in English, which was effective due to their fluency in the language. However, some interviewees spoke what is known as Indian English. This did not cause any language barrier between me and the interviewee, but parts of the interviews were translated to British English, the language of publication, for the purpose of transcribing. As the national language of India and a commonly spoken language among South Asian migrants to communicate with each other, particularly in the Gulf states, Hindi was commonly spoken among the interviewees, albeit not always fluently. Therefore, Hindi was the second most common language of my interviews. The third most commonly spoken language during the interviews was Urdu, as most of the Pakistani interviewees were fluent in it, as I am. The fourth, more surprising language spoken during the informal conversations was Arabic, when the interviewees could not speak English or any of the three Indian languages that I speak. These remained informal conversations in order to gather information on the case-study area and relevant activities and did not develop into in-depth interviews due to both the interviewees' and my lack of proficiency in Arabic.

In order to mitigate any misunderstandings through language, particularly with the more complex topics in the second half of the in-depth interviews relating to the feelings of home and belonging, I printed out cards in Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu and Bengali explaining the themes. I used online translators for the texts. This method worked effectively in terms of the interviewees understanding that more depth

was required from their answers, which they answered in our common language.

The second challenge faced during field work was selecting participants to take part in the research. Convincing people to participate in interviews was challenging due to several factors. First, the COVID-19 restrictions did not allow for comfortable face-to-face interactions with strangers. Thus, being approached in public spaces was already a reason for alarm amongst individuals. This was mitigated through the use of safe distance and face masks for the first periods of the field work. In the later periods, the restrictions had relaxed, and so had people's inhibitions. Second, individuals engaged in activities with their friends or families during their limited free time did not express interest in spending this time talking to a researcher. Many people insisted on avoiding a conversation or keeping it very brief so as to maximise their leisure time. Third, many interviewees were clearly hesitant to speak freely and voice their opinions on current situations, fearing the potential consequences of being critical. Although this was a struggle with most of the interviewees, it was most challenging with low-income interviewees who feared that I could not be trusted, and that their criticism could put their jobs and visas at risk.

The third challenge involved interviewees' unreliable communication styles. To present an example, individuals approached on-site agreed to participate in the research and offered their phone numbers to arrange for an eventual interview, but did not respond with further interest when contacted again. They either did not answer phone calls or messages or continuously postponed interview dates when contacted. It was quite a common experience during the field work to follow up with a potential interviewee for weeks before ultimately being rejected. This could be a result of the individuals' initial hesitation to reject me when they were first approached, in order to be polite. This unreliable communication was later mitigated by specifically requesting individuals to only share their number if they felt a genuine interest in the topic and wish to share their experience and assuring them that I would find an alternative participant and would not be offended if they preferred not to participate.

The fourth challenge revolved around gender dynamics, particularly in male-dominated case studies. On one hand, research in male dominated spaces was challenging in terms of finding people to speak to as it is considered uncustomary for a woman to approach men in such settings. On the other hand, there were times my work was not taken seriously due to my gender. Aside from the challenges in approaching and securing participants, I also felt unsafe and uncomfortable in certain spaces. These factors were mitigated through choosing study areas which made me feel more comfortable as a researcher, ensuring effective field work. For example, when it came to choosing a cricket ground, I chose an urban one which was bordered by residential homes and a busy street instead of the more popular cricket fields in remote areas of Muscat. I further mitigated challenges in gender dynamics by occasionally conducting field work with a male member of my family, by wearing modest clothing or by

asking the participants to conduct the interviews in a mixed-gender setting like a coffee shop. The challenges were however not restricted to men. Some women exhibited fear to speak with me when approached, claiming they require permission from their spouse to ensure it was safe to participate. On one occasion during field work, I approached a woman at the Sahwa lawn who seemed willing and interested to talk to me, but she was forbidden to share information by her husband who frequently interrupted our conversation and eventually ended it. Such circumstances could not be mitigated and simply led to an alternative participant, evidently posing certain limitations on the sample.

The fifth challenge emerged when attempting to explain the research to participants. Explaining the objectives of the project was especially difficult with low-income migrants without a background in education. Among several factors, due to their unfamiliarity with research processes, they could not imagine how their contribution could be beneficial to research and whether that was important at all, which hindered their motivation to participate. In order to mitigate this, I often referred to myself as a student and emphasised my relationship to educational institutions. In some cases, this made me appear less threatening and encouraged the interviewees to speak with me. However, in other cases, the individuals took my work less seriously as I was perceived as "just a student". Navigating such juxtapositions did not come easily to me at first. It took some experience to understand the dynamics of the field and to overcome the general lack of interest and hesitation from the people I approached. Despite numerous rejections, the setbacks taught me about the field and prepared me to approach people more effectively.

Although it was not always easy to establish trust, once it was established, it seemed as though the interviewees were waiting eagerly to talk to someone and be heard. This was evident in the ways some interviewees revealed profound personal stories. The stories were not always relevant to my work on space appropriation. Nonetheless, they moved me to better comprehend the migrants' decisions and experiences. After the field work phase, some interviewees remained in contact with me via social media, whether this was to ask how I was doing, to wish me "Eid Mubarak", to send me photos of their children or even to invite me for dinner with their family, the latter of which I politely declined as it was considered methodologically inappropriate.

It should be noted here that I did not monetarily compensate all the interviewees for the interviews. However, particularly with low-income interviewees, I expressed my gratitude through financial and alternative means. For example, I often offered bottled water and snacks to men who were working. On other occasions, the interviewees themselves made requests, such as asking me advice on recommended money exchange services or asking if I could assist their friends or family members with employment in my social circles, all of which I complied with willingly.

4.6 Situating the Researcher in the Research: A Reflection on Positionality

In this section, it is important to note that I am a South Asian woman who was born and raised in the Gulf states. Additionally, I have lived a large part of my life in Muscat, particularly in close proximity to some of the case-study areas. The commonalities between my study population and me matter because, through a critical viewpoint, it is assumed that all data is produced from a certain perspective (Watson, 2021). Therefore, it is important to address my positionality as a researcher.

My motivation to conduct this research is rooted in my interests and concerns about the temporary nature of South Asian migrants' lives in Muscat. However, I am also driven by motives which relate more specifically to my own identity. First, I am driven by my own questions regarding the city of Muscat and how it invites and excludes people from my diaspora. Second, I am driven by my own questions about temporariness in the notions of home and belonging. Third, I wish to address the scarcity of research on South Asian migrants in the Gulf, written by South Asian migrants from the Gulf. And lastly, through the on-going western and international context of my formal education and professional experiences, I was more and more drawn "to study my own kind" as Kanuha (2000) phrases it, in her work on insider research.

During the research, my positionality was far from static, given the spectrum of diversity of the study population. To elaborate, when conducting research with migrants of a similar socioeconomic and sociocultural backgrounds as my own, I embodied the role of an insider, giving rise to considerations on insider research, which will be discussed in the following section. On the other hand, conducting research with migrants of dissimilar socioeconomic and sociocultural backgrounds no longer placed me as an insider and instead highlighted my privilege as a researcher.

Insider research occurs when the researcher and the participants share characteristics and knowledge related to their identities which result in the participants' experiences resonating with the researcher (Catungal & Dowling, 2021). On one hand, insider research can result in high quality qualitative data due to the researcher's subjective understandings of the environment, access to participants and places through language and local knowledge, and convenient location for research. As a consequence, the researcher arrives at a project from a well-informed and influential position (Kanuha, 2000). However, insider research is expectedly criticised for its lack of objectivity in field work and analysis (Greene, 2014; Kanuha, 2000). After considerable reflection on my own position as a researcher, I believe I have mitigated the risk of a lack of objectivity through my work being continuously reviewed by the academic community throughout the study. To elaborate, I have been a part of a competent research institute

and team throughout the study. Moreover, my institute is based in Europe, and I have presented my work at international conferences and forums, including the ones organised by my scholarship programme, while additionally submitting my work to peer reviewers of a high-ranking journal in the field of geography. Consequently, my work is transparently and continuously being corrected and guided by experts in the field, which significantly diminishes the concerns with the scientific objectivity of this research.

Although I am a member of the South Asian diaspora in Muscat, I do not always share culture, language or socioeconomic background with my participants. Particularly in the case of low-income migrants, as mentioned previously in this section, my reality as a researcher is far from the realities of their daily lives. The awareness of my relatively privileged position during the field work urged me further to accurately represent the participants who had trusted me, against their own fears, and participated in this research. It was clear that the participants wished to be heard and seen and for their perseverance to be appreciated, not just despite, but because of their struggles. This recognition compelled me to approach my writing comprehensively and in-depth, not shying away from emotional sentiments. I have also ensured the participants that I will share my findings with them in whichever phase they request it to be shared, to ensure that I represent them fairly and truthfully.

5 Everyday Spaces: Case studies of South Asian Migrants Appropriating Space in Muscat[1]

The complexity of the growth of the GCC countries, including Oman, was established in Chapter 3. While extensive research has addressed the dynamics of this growth, issues pertaining to inequality in the accessibility of and the agency in shaping one's environment have received far less attention. Power and agency are central themes in this research, as described in Chapter 2, which addresses the right to the city and highlights the relational and unequal relationships between agency and space. Moreover, it was concluded that the study of space is inseparable from the study of meaning, as spatial dynamics and sociocultural significance are strongly correlated.

This chapter dissects how South Asian migrants in Muscat respond to the structural and spatial constraints and opportunities presented during their temporary stay in Oman and explores how migrants exercise agency through socio-spatial practices. In other words, this chapter demonstrates how South Asian migrant workers in Muscat appropriate space to fulfil their daily needs, particularly as these needs are not met by current urban sprawling patterns and top-down planning processes. Consequently, this chapter depicts how South Asian migrant workers imbue space with meaning through the acts and processes of the appropriation of space, turning them into "fields of care" (Tuan, 1979, p. 416), a term highly relevant to this research. Chapter 4 outlined the process of selecting case studies, which included the development of categories and the selection of one case-study area for each category, referenced in the figure below (see Figure 5.1). This chapter introduces the case studies, with each subchapter dedicated to a specific case study.

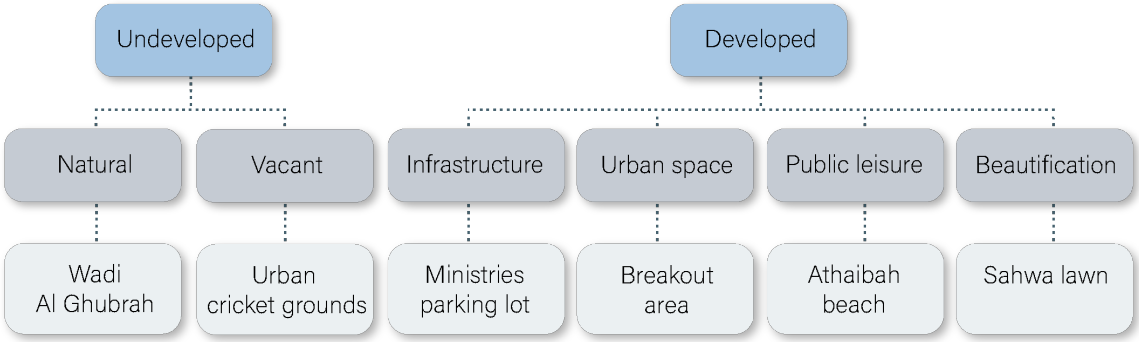

Figure 5.1 Categories of appropriated space and representative case studies. Figure created by author.

[1] Part of the results presented in this chapter have been published in the journal *Population, Space and Place* (Farooq & Pfaffenbach, 2025)

Each subsection begins with an introduction to the case-study area, outlining my approach to the space, followed by a brief descriptive profile to provide an overview of what is to be expected from the case study. This is followed by a description of the methods adopted for the case study. While the methods are outlined in Chapter 4, certain case studies required unique adjustments to the methods to accommodate the activities, timings or the people in the case study. The adjustments are noted accordingly to ensure scientific integrity and transparency. The methods are then followed by a description of the physical attributes of the case study. This includes the urban setting and location of the case study, its historical background (if applicable), its degree of development and the originally intended use of the space. This context is essential to gain an understanding of the space and to emphasise that in most cases, it was not originally planned for the appropriated activities. Subsequently, a timeline is provided, detailing the formal and informal uses of the space, together with an overview of the notable socio-demographic characteristics of the individuals and groups that engaged with the space. Next, the subchapter delves into the key aspects of the case study to identify the acts of space appropriation. This includes a description of the activities taking place, how people are distributed within the space, and whether any conflicts emerge in the case study. It further analyses the interviews to determine the underlying motivations and unmet needs behind the activities, including the reasons behind the particular activities, time, and persons participating. Subsequently, the subchapter expands on the emotions and the meaning imbued in these activities. In continuation, the chapter aims to identify where users claim stake in ownership, access and participation in the case-study area. This is then followed by an analysis aimed at providing interpretations and reasoning for the previous points. Finally, a conclusion is drawn including a summary and a brief comparison to other case studies. Consequently, each subchapter intends to present an in-depth account of the contexts, practices and meaning behind the acts of space appropriation in the context of the opportunities and constraints faced by the occupants. The subchapters further seek to offer a vivid portrayal of the space, through direct quotes from the interviewees and photography, enabling the reader to understand the experiences of the users and to grasp the atmosphere they have shaped through appropriation.

5.1 Wadi Al Ghubrah: a Landscape Remnant of Rice Fields

Urban wadis in Muscat pose a threat of flooding during annual rainfalls and are perceived as an obstacle to urban development. During dry months, urban wadis typically lie barren and unused. However, unlike most wadis in Muscat, Wadi Al Ghubrah has been transformed into a central public space by its visitors and is a vital part of their lives, making it a hidden neighbourhood treasure. To explore this, the following chapter examines the acts of appropriation at Wadi Al Ghubrah. There are a few factors that set this case study apart from the others in this research. First, it is one of the most active spaces studied in terms of frequency of visits, variety of activities and demographic diversity. Second, it is an inherently communal place. Third, it is one of the larger sample areas. Fourth, it is a place which is self-governed and presents cases of conflict and significant territorial negotiation. It attracts its users mainly on foot, which is quite unusual for public places in Muscat. Although there are a variety of activities taking place in this wadi, the common denominator of the activities is fitness and sports oriented, making it a male-dominated space. However, it is still very welcoming to female residents, which is another feature that distinguishes Wadi Al Ghubrah from other male-dominated spaces in Muscat.

Wadi Al Ghubrah is classified as an undeveloped natural area within this project's categorisation. Wadi Al Ghubrah is not recognised as a public space by those who do not have a relationship with the neighbourhood of Al Ghubrah or its surroundings.

This chapter will examine the physical factors that constitute Wadi Al Ghubrah. It will break down the activities that take place there on weekdays and weekends. It will also examine the everyday practices of visitors in order to study the relationship between the users and their environment and how this brings about meaning to their everyday lives in the context of temporariness.

5.1.1 Methods

The methods adopted to study this case study were observation, qualitative interviews, and photography. Additionally, archived Google imagery was used to analyse the history and development of the wadi over time. In total, 15 people were interviewed, out of which, 9 were cricket players from two different teams, one was a basketball player, four were joggers, and one was an on-looker. Out of the sample, only two interview partners were women while the rest were men. Details of the

participants are listed in the table below (see Table 5.1). Of the two cricket teams interviewed for this case study, one was the local neighbourhood team comprising several low-income migrant workers. The second team was a guest team that sometimes visited the wadi at the invitation of the local team. The second team included a larger proportion of men from middle income backgrounds. I observed the Wadi on weekdays and weekends while typically spending an average of one and a half hours there, depending on activity or the possibility for an interview. Most of the interviews, particularly with the cricketers, were conducted in Urdu or Hindi. The other interviews were conducted in English and Indian English.

Table 5.1 Table of participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Occupation	Years in Muscat
Zain	M	48	Indian	Unemployed	10
Idris	M	40	Indian	Driver	15
Suresh	M	31	Indian	Cook	11
Simran	F	41	Indian	Home-maker	41
Kawthar	F	38	Indian	Home-maker	15
Harun	M	36	Indian	Car insurance	12
Harith	M	34	Indian	IT technician	13
Nirav	M	42	Indian	IT technician	10
Jamal	M	47	Indian	Quality control coordinator	25
Martin	M	22	Indian	Student	21
Prabhu	M	42	Indian	IT technician	15
Shaikh	M	30	Bangladeshi	Procurement	10
Mohi	M	29	Bangladeshi	Car cleaner	3
Sabir	M	25	Pakistani	Unemployed	1
Jundee	M	40	Filipino	Shop keeper	N/A

During the observations, I walked along the footpath on the perimeter of the wadi and occasionally sat on the ledge to observe the games of cricket or football. To find interview partners, I approached visitors as they walked by but was more successful in finding interview partners who were waiting for their turn to play a sport or were just watching the games. Evidently, people who were in the middle of an activity were more difficult to approach and there was insufficient time to explain the purpose of the research project or to build trust. In this case, I noted the phone numbers of people to reach them at a later time. Most of the interviews were conducted on site. Some of the on-site interviews were conducted on the spot, on first contact, some of them were scheduled for another time at the same place. The rest of the interviews were conducted on the phone. For example, one female interviewee, who was a homemaker and primary caregiver to her children, preferred to be interviewed on the phone from the comfort of her home, where she was close to her child.

For this case study it was necessary to establish a gatekeeper to approach more interviewees, especially in the case of the cricket players. I initially made several attempts to approach team members of the cricket teams, but there was little to no understanding or interest from their side to hear about the research. As it is unusual for a woman to sit at the ledge with other men to watch the cricket game, my behaviour might have invoked reasons for suspicion amongst the men. After several failed attempts to establish an interview partner, one of the members of the cricket team eventually directed me to their team captain, who seemed not only to be an authoritative figure in sports but also commanded an influence over the rest of the team and their behaviour around me. Additionally, he seemed almost protective of his team. I continued to explain the project and proceeded to request interviews with him and his team, to which he initially agreed and offered a date to watch their game and conduct interviews. However, the match did not take place on the agreed date. I was also refused interviews, attributed to a lack of time. This occurred several times over a period of two to three weeks. Nevertheless, I remained consistent in my visits and observations, which I believe may have proved my dedication and persistence, as this was eventually rewarded with an interview with the team captain. This interview was then quickly and straightforwardly followed by interviews with his team members. The captain of the team also made phone calls to non-participating team members, requesting them to meet me at the wadi specifically for the interview. The team members eventually began to open up and engage in conversations about their activities at the wadi. On one occasion I was invited to play cricket with them, which I declined due to my lack of experience in the sport. I was additionally invited for dinner with the captain and his family, which I declined due to conflict of interest and to maintain the objectivity of the research.

5.1.2 Physical Attributes of Wadi Al Ghubrah

The case study presented in this chapter lies within a wadi, which is a topographic feature that carries rainwater during seasonal rains and storms (W. Scholz et al., 2021). Despite their arid nature for most of the year, due to seasonal flooding, wadis are ill-suited for building and development (W. Scholz et al., 2021). Due to Muscat's east-west orientation between the mountains and the sea, wadis run perpendicularly in a north-south direction, segregating neighbourhoods with vacant land. For most of the year, wadi beds remain dry and dusty.

This chapter focuses on one section of the wadi that runs from the south-eastern mountains, through Bowsher and meets the sea in the neighbourhood of Athaibah. The segment runs through the neighbourhood of Al Ghubrah North and is, therefore referred to as Wadi Al Ghubrah. The surrounding neighbourhood has a mixed density, with some low-rise single-standing homes, low-rise apartment buildings and some high-rise apartment buildings. Al Ghubrah North is a mixed-use neighbourhood. Its urban parcels are commercial on the perimeters and residential within.

Wadi Al Ghubrah runs along the south-western border of Al Ghubrah North. The section in focus measures approximately 43,000 square meters in area. It is bordered by a paved pedestrian pathway of approximately 1.7 kilometres in perimeter. The path is enclosed in a loop, except for a narrow break in the pavement in the northern section of the wadi, where it meets the street. The embankments of the wadi are made of a mixture of concrete and stone, sloping gently downwards to the bed of the wadi below. This is the only section of the wadi that is reinforced with an embankment to keep the stream in control. This may be due to its proximity to the built residential area around it.

The natural bed of Wadi Al Ghubrah is approximately two to three metres below street level and consists mainly of dry ground, rocks, and some shrubs. The ground has been manually levelled in some areas to form a flatter and compressed surface. When rain falls, the physical appearance of the wadi changes. After the initial wadi stream has passed, the water stagnates in the deeper areas of the wadi, sometimes for days and sometimes for weeks. In the weeks following, this causes wild grass to grow sporadically in the landscape into green and marsh-like areas (see Figure 5.2).



Figure 5.2 Left: photo of Wadi Al Ghubrah in its dry season. Right: photo of Wadi Al Ghubrah two days after a rainfall. Photos by author.

Wadi Ghubrah can be accessed by car through the surrounding neighbourhood streets, which are equipped with small, infrequent formal and informal parking spots along the edges of the wadi. Additionally, its location in the centre of a neighbourhood makes it easily accessible on foot for the surrounding residents. As Wadi Al Ghubrah runs through the Al Ghubrah neighbourhood, it is predominantly bordered by residential buildings and their backyards, including high-rise apartment buildings on the south-western border and low-rise residential buildings on the remaining periphery. Additionally, three sports fields, enclosed by a high fence, can be found at the western edge of the wadi. Apart from minimal flood control measures such as the concrete and stone embankment, Wadi Al Ghubrah is an undeveloped space lacking formal infrastructure and does not fall under the maintenance of Muscat Municipality. Although a paved pedestrian pathway lines the perimeter, there are no streetlamps, resting places or benches along the walkway. There are also no stairs or provisions facilitating access to the wadi, indicating that the wadi was not designated or designed for access or use.

However, man-made interventions can be observed in the wadi bed, such as a concrete pitch to facilitate cricket matches, accompanied by a carpet placed on levelled ground nearby. The area around this pitch is sometimes marked with chalk or with stones placed to create a boundary. In addition, a makeshift basketball court has been constructed in the southern part of the wadi using inexpensive construction methods and materials. It is equipped with a painted concrete floor, lighting and wooden basketball hoops.

5.1.3 Appropriation Practices at Wadi Al Ghubrah

This section begins by addressing the timeline of activities at the case study, followed by the different zones of activities, and then the factors impacting the appropriation of space. Consequently, the section ends with a closer look at the significance these activities hold in the participants' lives.

The landscape and appearance of the wadi vary significantly depending on the season, due to water stagnation, and the time of day, due to the appropriation practices. On weekdays, the paved pedestrian walkway is a popular route for early morning walks and jogging. The predominant visitors are South Asian women and men who typically arrive on foot at around 6:00 am, with the last visitors departing by 7:30 am. Visitor numbers peak between 4:00 pm and 6:00 pm and then decrease but continue until 10:30 pm. Later in the evening, under the dim lights of the surrounding neighbourhood, people can still be observed strolling along the path that surrounds the wadi. The second area of activity at the wadi is the cricket pitch and its surrounding field, which is located in the south-eastern part of the wadi bed and will be the focus of this chapter, as it is the most active zone at the wadi. The cricket field draws the highest number of regular visitors in total. On weekdays, up to 12 players play cricket every afternoon with several spectators attending.

Wadi Al Ghubrah activities draw a higher number of male visitors, with fewer women observed in comparison, for activities that revolve primarily around fitness and sports. Moreover, an overwhelming percentage of visitors are migrants, a large proportion of whom are South Asian migrants. The wadi attracts mostly adult visitors, but children are sometimes observed participating in informal sports or riding their bikes with their parents.

During the field work, there were three main areas of activity at the wadi: the pedestrian pathway, the cricket field and the basketball court (see Figure 5.3). While the basketball court plays a role in the development of the wadi and will be included to provide an overview of the wadi, this chapter will focus primarily on the cricket grounds and the walking paths as they attract the highest number of daily visitors and are occupied by South Asian migrants.



Figure 5.3 Indication of Wadi Al Ghubrah within dotted line and its 3 main areas of activity. Map by author using Google Earth Imagery.

The pedestrian pathway bordering this section of the wadi is a popular route for early morning walkers and joggers, who typically arrive at the wadi on foot. The majority of these visitors were South Asian men and women, although a few Omanis were also observed. The visitors arrived alone, in pairs, or sometimes in groups of up to 4 women. Both Omani and South Indian women were dressed in traditional clothes or an abaya, along with sports shoes, while the men usually dressed in sportswear. They took about an hour to complete two rounds around the wadi's perimeter and left the wadi when the sun came out. After around 7:30 am there were no more visitors at the pathway.

In the afternoon, the pedestrian pathway is once again occupied, with the highest numbers of visitors during the day at around 4:00 pm. Similar to the morning times, the predominant users are middle aged South Asian adults, with some Omani visitors. Visitors continue to sporadically occupy the wadi until 10:30 pm. Later in the evening, when the atmosphere is quieter and the wadi is dimly lit by the surrounding neighbourhood, visitors still circle along the path surrounding the wadi. These late-night visitors are mostly South Asian couples or single males. It was rare to see single females walking at the later hours of the night.

The second area of activity at the wadi is the cricket pitch located in the wadi bed. This area attracted the highest number of visitors per week, all of whom were South Asian males aged between 15 and 55. The Pakistani and Indian men could be identified by their clothing. The cricket players rarely practiced cricket in the early mornings on weekdays, but they regularly practiced cricket in the afternoons at about 4:30 pm. This activity attracted a large number of visitors to the cricket pitch, including both players and spectators. The players were not the same every day and neither were the spectators. The cricket pitch

emptied as the sun set by 7:00 pm.

The third area of activity at the wadi is the basketball court. This area attracted the second highest number of visitors per week. Featuring make-shift basketball hoops, the area was developed and used by the Filipino migrant community, including men aged between 25 and 45 years old, on weekdays, between 4:30 pm and 8:00 pm. Some of the men arrived at the court on foot, some by car, and others by bicycle. While the players took a break or waited their turn, they sat at the embankment of the wadi and watched the game. Other Filipino men passing by also sometimes stopped to watch the match.

In addition to sports, fitness, and group activities, other activities attract visitors to the wadi, including people-watching. Low-income South Asian migrants passing by the wadi, occasionally stopped to watch the games. They parked their bikes on the path and sat down at the ledge, alongside other low-income migrants dressed in South Asian attire. Additionally, some South Asian men made phone calls to their loved ones back home while sitting on the ledge. The wadi was a popular spot to make phone calls, even during the night. Visitors were also drawn to the wadi due to its situation as it divides the neighbourhood and became a typical path for pedestrians to cross. Migrant workers were observed carefully making their way down the makeshift stairs or embankment of the wadi, walking to the other side, making sure they did not get in the way of a cricket ball, to make their way back up the embankment to the other side of the wadi.

The interviews revealed five main attributes that attracted visitors to Wadi Al Ghubrah. For the cricket players the first advantage was its availability. The cricket players noted that Wadi Al Ghubrah was not their first choice for a cricket ground. However, the spaces that they preferred were not available to appropriate, and thus, they settled for Wadi Al Ghubrah as an alternative. One Bangladeshi cricketer commented on this situation as follows: “If we do not get any other land to play, what to do?... It is not comfortable, but we adjusted”. The second attribute was the size of the wadi. The wadi bed is large enough to host games of cricket, which normally require large empty grounds that are hard to find in densely populated areas. Therefore, Wadi Al Ghubrah served as a suitable space for sports.

Thirdly, the wadi is situated close to the visitors’ homes which facilitated convenient access for most of the participants, mostly on foot. As walking to one’s destination is typically uncommon for the residents of Muscat, it was particularly valued by the participants in this case study. The fourth aspect is that the wadi was described as a quiet, peaceful and safe place, situated away from the sound of traffic. This also meant that the visitors did not have to be cautious of being next to a street, as is often the case while walking in Muscat. Several participants noted that they appreciated the fresh and clear air at the wadi, and it was described as a safe space, especially for women and children.

Fifth, the attribute that attracted visitors to the wadi is its role as a natural landscape situated in an urban setting. Visitors often noted that they enjoyed the occasional greenery and water that presented itself at the wadi. Sajitha, a 38-year-old homemaker, summed up the atmosphere at the wadi as follows: "*It is a really nice, cozy place and because the beach is nearby so good wind comes from there, so it's very good to walk there and people are also very friendly and we can see the greenery while walking, it is very good.*"

The activities at Wadi Al Ghubrah are imbued with emotions and meanings. The underlying motivations for the appropriation of space at the wadi became evident through interviews with the migrants who frequent the wadi for cricket and for walking. Cricket is part of the daily life of many of the participants in this case study including low- and middle-income members of the neighbourhood. The men gathered their resources to construct a concrete pitch, along with a carpeted wicket area and stone or chalk boundaries to improve the playing conditions (see Figure 5.4). Formally organised matches took place at weekends, with external teams invited to play against the local neighbourhood team. These matches were coordinated entirely on WhatsApp, where groups of cricketers and team captains connect with thousands of cricket teams and players across the city, and sometimes across Oman.



Figure 5.4 Photo of a weekday cricket practice session at Wadi Al Ghubrah. Photo by Author.

When asked about cricket, most of the players, unsurprisingly, reminisced about its origins in their childhood and home countries. They recalled seeking vacant grounds for cricket, in both rural and urban settings, and making use of whatever space was available. They referred to "gully cricket" or "alley

cricket", an informal version of the game that accommodates a lack of space and spontaneity. Although cricket is best played on grass lawns, enthusiasts play informal games on any available ground. The appeal lies in cost-free accessibility and proximity to their residence, which is the case for South Asian migrant workers in Wadi Al Ghubrah, who demonstrate cultural continuity through this practice. Cricket games are also a daily source of joy, a sanitary worker from Bangladesh said. Being part of a team that shared an emotional connection to cricket offered him a sense of unity. Despite originating from different countries and sharing no common languages, the daily cricket games compel players to learn each other's languages to efficiently communicate as a team. Additionally, this facilitates connections between players from different countries, such as India and Pakistan; a political relationship burdened with tension. On the cricket field, however, teamwork and camaraderie took precedence over strife. One of the Pakistani men shared his experience of playing in a culturally diverse team:

> "It is a mixed team, India and Pakistan. I am Pakistani, but this team has a lot of Indians, we all play like brothers. We do not feel any difference, because one is Indian and one is Pakistani, or one is Hindu and the other is Muslim. We consider each other human and respect each other a lot. Usually, people ask and wonder if you are in Indian or Pakistani, but this mentality has been ingrained by politicians to earn a position. I think we are all one, like brothers, with our neighbouring countries. We should treat each other like neighbours, keeping humanity at the forefront."

Furthermore, the settings of team sports and communal spaces evoked feelings of nostalgia. For instance, a 34-year-old Indian technician reflected on his time playing cricket on rice fields in Kerala. He explained how, due to a 6-month harvest cycle in the rice fields, his local cricket team had to wait 6 months to play cricket on these grounds. He compared this process to the situation in Wadi Al Ghubrah after rainfall. The rains cause water to stagnate which takes weeks to dry up, thereby rendering it challenging to commence cricket games. Therefore, the teams must wait for the ground to dry out before they can re-construct and prepare the ground for sports.

The appropriation of space becomes essential in the daily routines of migrant life. All participants expressed that Wadi Al Ghubrah is a part of their daily life and most of them participated in an activity related to a group or a community. Several participants referred to fitness, health and weight loss as a motivation to incorporate activities at the wadi into their daily lives. Some references were also made to the sedentary lifestyle in Muscat, sitting at home or in the car with the air conditioning on. Simran, a 41-year-old home maker shared, *"Also, about your health, not exercising and always eating and just*

sitting that under the AC, I think that is very harmful for your health also. So, I think we need to come out". The activities of the wadi not only offer the visitors a source of exercise, but they also provide them a routine in their day. For example, Kawthar noted, *"If I skip one day of walking, I feel like I missed something, you understand? Even if I missed one day, so it is an important part of my life."*

Several participants felt a sense of community at the wadi. For instance, a 25-year-old Pakistani construction worker recalled stumbling upon the cricket grounds during an afternoon stroll on his day off. Observing a cricket match in progress, he was invited to play and has since become a daily participant. Another visitor described how she met other mothers like herself on her walks and exchanged phone numbers to meet again, which resulted in another WhatsApp group for women in the neighbourhood. It becomes evident that the wadi serves as a meeting place for South Asian migrants to connect and forge or join communities with individuals in the same neighbourhood sharing similar interests and backgrounds. Once these connections are made, the construction worker explained: *"It feels like the village atmosphere because everyone comes and goes, people meet and greet each other, they sit and chitchat and make small talk."* Complimenting this sentiment, a 22-year-old participant shared,

> "So, in that sense, the people also, if you look at them, and used to wave at them, or do you smile at them, they respond, just a casual high, that's enough. It gives you a sense of belonging in this place, a small community in itself."

The wadi is, however, not only a place where people gather to play sports, but also a place to relax and spend time with a partner, a friend or quite often, just by oneself. A 36-year-old Indian insurance company employee draws a comparison between the wadi and his past, describing how the smell of the wadi often reminds him of the smell of the soil in his village. Some days he sits on the wadi ledge, alone, to reminisce. When asked about how this experience transports him back to his origins, he answered with a laugh: *"It will come. If you have the right mood, it will come"*. When asked if he likes to go there with a friend he answered, "*if you want to be in your thoughts, better go alone...together with someone, we didn't get that same atmosphere".*

5.1.4 Conflicts and Negotiations at Wadi Al Ghubrah

Within groups of visitors engaged in the same activity, interactions were mostly cordial. However, between different demographics, territorial negotiations were more common. In general, there was a first-come, first-served rule at Wadi Al Ghubrah which granted priority to those who invested in interventions and maintenance of a certain space. However, this was overruled by the laws of land ownership and nationality. For example, although the South Asian cricket team had already invested in levelling one section of land to establish a cricket pitch, a small team of young Omani men exercised their priority on the basis of their nationality and long-standing residence in the neighbourhood, to use the same space for their football matches instead. This forced the cricket team to relocate their field towards the south. However, the new area did not suffice and eventually led to a dispute between the two teams, which remained unresolved until the local *Sheikh*, who owns substantial land in the neighbourhood, intervened to resolve the matter amicably. He requested the young Omani men to share the grounds and was quoted to say: *"The Indians are good people, do not fight, share it (the grounds), half and half."* Despite his good intentions, there was no favourable outcome for the cricket team, as they gave up parts of their field to the Omani football team and continued to play on inadequate grounds. Although the Sheikh does not engage in activities at the wadi, his status as an Omani landowner and esteemed member of the community grants him decision-making authority in a conflict that does not directly concern him. This example highlights the power dynamics at play, which allow more powerful demographic cohorts to create more formal structures, while less powerful ones exert informal control over the space. It illustrates that although South Asian migrant workers exercise their agency at the wadi through community agreements, shared responsibility, and self-imposed rules, they have little to no authority when it comes to other non-migrants. This indicates a nuanced yet indisputable spatial injustice through marginalisation and exclusion, despite South Asian migrant workers comprising the majority of wadi visitors.

Expanding on the compromises the cricket team makes at the wadi, the physical landscape presented an additional challenge. The vast majority of the interviewees stated that the wadi grounds were far from ideal for a real game of cricket. Due to the limited space between the wadi boundaries, the cricket zone was reduced to half the size of a standard field. This affects the rules of the game, never allowing it to reach its full potential. Furthermore, landing on rugged grounds leads to frequent injuries, occasionally severe enough to require hospitalisation.

Despite their acts of appropriation being met with negotiations, constraints, and cycles of natural destruction, the migrant workers still appropriated the wadi every day. This indicates that their presence at the wadi is not only based on appeal but primarily on availability and accessibility. Migrant workers

with an advantage of mobility, resources, and free time are presented with greater choices when it comes to spaces they can appropriate. That is not the case for migrant workers who are restricted to places within a certain radius due to their lack of mobility or lack of time. A Bangladeshi sanitary worker explained his choice of the wadi and commented on the alternatives and their availability:

> "There is (another) place next to the Athaibah Garden, but there are lorries and trucks parked there. There is some space […] but it is not good for playing. Before, I went there once, but there were some Indian guys who have been playing there previously, so they did not let us play there. So that is why we came here. […] This is the government's land, if they will come and say we cannot play here, we will not play here. But if no one says anything, we will play here."

It becomes evident that despite the suboptimal conditions, migrant workers compromise and occupy the spaces available to them. This suggests a level of adaptability and resilience in the face of constraints as they coexist with, or in spite of, other cohorts to make the most of the space available and establish a presence at the wadi. It also highlights structural barriers and their marginalised position within larger social structures with an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. The case study therefore highlights the necessity to consider these wider social and spatial inequalities when examining migrant space appropriation.

5.1.5 Examining Space Appropriation at Wadi Al Ghubrah

Compared to other case studies in this research, Wadi Al Ghubrah is unique because it is considered a neighbourhood treasure, unknown to the residents of the rest of the city unless they are invited. It is also unique in the sense that it is self-managed and maintained by the visitors who do not rely on Municipality services for daily sanitation or maintenance after a flood. It exemplifies one of the most extensively transformed appropriated spaces, highlighting the impact of temporary human interventions in altering a once barren landscape. Additionally, the wadi facilitates spontaneous interactions, fostering a communal atmosphere, which is a rarity in public spaces in Muscat. This could stem from the sense of enclosure and security provided by the wadi. On the other hand, Wadi Al Ghubrah shares some similarities with other appropriated places in this research, notably in its

predominantly male demographic.

The predominance of low-income and middle income migrant men can be attributed to the fact that the wadi is a sports-oriented public space, and the most frequently played sport is cricket, which is known to be a sport played predominantly informally by men, not women, in South Asia. Even though some women do play cricket informally, it is uncommon to observe low-income migrant women participating in sports in public spaces. This rarity is attributed not only to cultural norms but also to the fact that low-income migrant women are afforded less free time than their male counterparts. As a result, they prioritise essential chores or religious activities over fitness-related or social activities.

It becomes evident that although a large part of the activities at the wadi are about fulfilling physical needs of fitness, health and space, there are also non-physical needs that are fulfilled here. The visitors at the wadi feel a sense of belonging attributed to their inclusion in community. Furthermore, while present at the wadi, migrants remain connected to their past through cultural habits, childhood memories, and nostalgia for a home that exists in another time and place. Nostalgia is a vital resource in this process as it is used to embed and spatialise their notions of home and childhood into their present reality and environment (Legg, 2004). Activities at the wadi, such as playing childhood sports, speaking native languages, reminiscing about the motherland and making phone calls to loved ones, not only maintain continuity in migrants' "lifepaths" (R. King, 2012) and connect their local and global worlds, but also foster this connection when, for example, historically strained political tensions between certain nationalities are exchanged for camaraderie and learning each other's languages on the cricket field.

Although the wadi is a place to feel part of a community and to meet other people, some visitors also come to the wadi for solitude. Low-income migrants who sit on the ledge of the wadi and speak to their families back home, find a degree of privacy for their phone calls compared to their often overcrowded accommodations. In this way, paradoxically, the expanse of space at the wadi allows migrant workers the discretion they need for private phone calls. Some interviewees mentioned that the wadi also provides a better background for their video calls to their loved ones.

5.1.6 Key Insights

In this chapter, the physical attributes, visitors and activities of Wadi Al Ghubrah were examined to illustrate its importance in the daily lives of its users. The analysis of the case study revealed that South Asian migrant workers residing in the neighbourhood of Al Ghubrah turned a barren wadi bed into a central public space. They responded to constraints such as limited mobility, a lack of resources and free time, and unspoken hierarchies by appropriating residual space in the neighbourhood, exercising agency to produce a space tailored to their needs. Wadi Al Ghubrah has become an integral part of the daily lives of South Asian migrant workers. A place where they establish networks of communities and build provisional structures, such as cricket pitches, to accommodate their activities.

Falling under the category of underdeveloped nature, Wadi Al Ghubrah is situated in an urban setting in a residential neighbourhood and is considered a large case study within the framework of this dissertation. It is easily accessible by foot to the residents of the neighbourhood who are the main visitors in the area. The visitors are predominantly South Asian male migrant workers, stemming from lower-middle-income and low-income backgrounds, but also other nationalities such as Filipino, Omani and other Arab visitors. Women and children also frequent the case study.

The wadi is appropriated daily, but similar to other unshaded case study areas, it is only used during the early hours of the morning before sunrise and again around sunset, as visitors avoid the peak heat hours. There is a sense of familiarity amongst visitors, making Wadi Al Ghubrah a place where people meet new individuals and greet known visitors. There have been conflicts between certain demographic cohorts such as the South Asian cricket players and Omani football players that were settled by a local Omani Sheikh, a respected figure in the community. Moreover, the wadi is shaped, regulated and maintained by its visitors with little to no influence or assistance from planning or maintenance authorities, making it a case study where the users claim a high stake in ownership and participation in regulation. The migrant visitors of Wadi Al Ghubrah have found a place where they can exercise their agency to create a meaningful space which serves their daily physical and non-physical needs. The differences in the social and financial capital of the different visitors form the structure within which activities are organised. This is perceived as a resilient yet flexible structure that can endure the damages caused by flooding and withstand the negotiations between visitors.

Compared to other case studies of appropriated places in Muscat, Wadi Al Ghubrah is unique for a number of reasons. First, because it is perceived as a neighbourhood treasure, unknown to the inhabitants of the rest of the city, unless they are invited there. Second, it is one of the most manually transformed case studies through man-made interventions. Third, in a city dominated by cars, it is one

of the few public spaces within walking distance of participants' homes. Lastly, it is a place where people can experience unplanned encounters with others and form friendships, which is rare for public spaces in Muscat. This could be a result of the enclosure and safety the wadi provides. Wadi Al Ghubrah also shares some similarities with other appropriated sites, such as the fact that its visitors are predominantly male. This can be attributed to the male dominance of the migrant labour sector. It is worth noting that among low-income migrant workers, finding a community was more feasible for men than for women. Domestic work positions, predominantly occupied by women, impose constraints on leisure time and mobility, which explains the absence of a community or activity for low-income migrant women at Wadi Al Ghubrah. In addition, middle-income migrant women rarely play informal cricket as it is typically a male-dominated sport. Furthermore, while the wadi is a place for group activities, similar to other appropriated places in the research, it is also a place for individuals to reflect and enjoy time in solitude.

If the wadi is developed into a park or a formal sports field in the future, as has happened in other urban wadis in Muscat (W. Scholz et al., 2021), the migrant communities will lose their sports grounds and will likely move to find alternative places to appropriate. As in Tuan's example of groups of young people, they will abandon their territory for another "field of care", for a place that offers appropriation possibilities with fewer compromises (Tuan, 1979, p. 417).

5.2 Athaibah beach: a Place for Fun and Contemplation

Athaibah beach first caught my eye during a visit on the first day of Eid. On that day, what I knew to be a beach that hosts a wide variety of visitors, was occupied entirely by South Asian low-income migrants, a rare and unusual scene. I also observed an Omani family arriving at the beach in a large car. However, as they lowered their windows and noticed the main occupants of the beach, they turned the car around and left. It was evident that the beach was appropriated by low-income migrants on the first day of Eid. This intrigued me to enquire how space appropriation and territorial establishment work on other days at Athaibah beach and if there were special times or special spaces at Athaibah beach that South Asian migrants could claim as their own.

There are three factors that separate Athaibah beach compared to the other case-studies. The first is that it is the only case study in this research that is an official public space. The second is that it attracts a large variety of visitors from different parts of the city. The third factor is the type of activities which are unique to this case study, such as photoshoots by the beach, swimming, and fishing, all evidently due to the proximity to the sea.

Within this research, Athaibah beach falls under the subcategory of designated leisure spaces under the category of developed spaces. It lies on the western border of Athaibah and is situated at the edge of a low-density, affluent, sea-side residential area and is most easily accessible by a car which can be parked at three different parking zones. This is a large case study with five identified zones of activity. These zones include a park, two beach areas, a pier, and a gastronomic centre. Most of the interview partners arrived by car to the area, some by bicycle, and only one on foot. Athaibah beach attracts a wide variety of visitors. Given that it is a popular beach in the city, low-income South Asian migrants, middle-income families, and Omani visitors can be observed in the case study. The activities taking place are mainly leisure oriented and include picnics and walks on the beach, but also include kite surfing and jet skiing. Negotiations on the beach of Athaibah were minimal and accepted by most visitors without conflict. This was possible because Athaibah beach consists of multiple zones, each appropriated for certain activities. This chapter examines how South Asian migrants appropriate the beach and pier area. In heartfelt interviews with emotional weight and intimate details, this chapter reveals the role that Athaibah beach played in the daily lives of the 11 participants who were interviewed for this case study.

The following chapter presents the methods, the various zones at Athaibah beach and the developments that have affected the activity and development of the focus of the case study. Following this, an overview of visitors and activities in the specific zones is outlined. This is followed by the results of the interviews, which highlight the reasons why this beach was selected by the participants for leisure

activities, the significance it holds in their daily lives, and the negotiations occurring between the visitors. The chapter concludes with an analysis of these results and a summary.

5.2.1 Methods

The Athaibah beach has undergone significant developments in recent decades. These changes were observed with the use of archived Google satellite imagery. It was interesting to observe both the zones that developed simultaneously and those that were the result of specific developments. This will be further elaborated on in the next section. In addition to comparing Google imagery, qualitative interviews were conducted with 11 participants (see Table 5.2).

The interviews took place primarily over the phone and at the workplace of the participants. Of all the interviews, only one was conducted on site. Of the sample of interviewees, six participants were low-income migrants and five were middle- to upper middle-income migrants. In addition, five of the participants were women and six men. To document appropriation practices at Athaibah Beach, systematic observation, photography and video were adopted. The observations were made on weekdays and weekends at peak visiting hours and non-peak hours.

It should be noted here that the field work in this case study presented some challenges. For example, it was challenging to approach low-income migrant men, particularly during peak hours of activity, due to cultural reasons. It was also challenging to approach low-income migrant women, as they often exhibited fear and mistrust, which they expressed by walking away hastily when approached. For these reasons, some of the participants were not approached in the field during observation periods but were selected from their workplaces or through a gate keeper, from other case study samples.

Table 5.2 Table of participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Occupation	Years in Muscat
Sita	F	57	Indian	Parlor Beautician	30
Sunita	F	40	Indian	Parlor Beautician	6
Vasu	M	30	Indian	Garage repairman	3
Sheena	F	36	Indian	Financial Analyst	13
Hussain	M	45	Indian	Architect	21
Shabana	F	42	Indian	Electrical engineer	15
Ahmed Zahran	M	27	Indian	Quality surveyor	1
Syed Shaikh	M	30	Bangladeshi	Procurement	11
Mohi	M	29	Bangladeshi	Car cleaner	3
Ahmed Hussain	M	41	Pakistan	Driver for restaurant	5
Renitta	F	52	Sri Lankan	Housekeeper	4

5.2.2 Physical Attributes of Athaibah Beach

The case-study area is located on the north western border of the neighbourhood of Athaibah North. The most significant building in this area is the Muscat International Airport, which is located within a ten-minute drive westward. This neighbourhood, in particular the area surrounding the case study, is an affluent residential area. The houses here are built on plots that sometimes are larger than 2,500 square metres, accommodating ten to twelve bedrooms, along with several other recreational rooms and swimming pools. The sea-side plots east of the case-study area are mostly undeveloped and privately owned. This affluent neighbourhood hosts a low-density population and is best accessed by a private car. The building that stands out in this area is the palace of the Qatari Emir; a development that includes a large palace in the north of the plot and eight guest villas in the south of the plot. In addition to being landscaped, it includes several swimming pools. It can be clearly seen from the case-study area, as it overlooks the sea.

The Athaibah beach can be reached by two streets: the 18 November street and an inner

neighbourhood street; both lead to a cul-de-sac parking lot, in the centre of Athaibah beach.

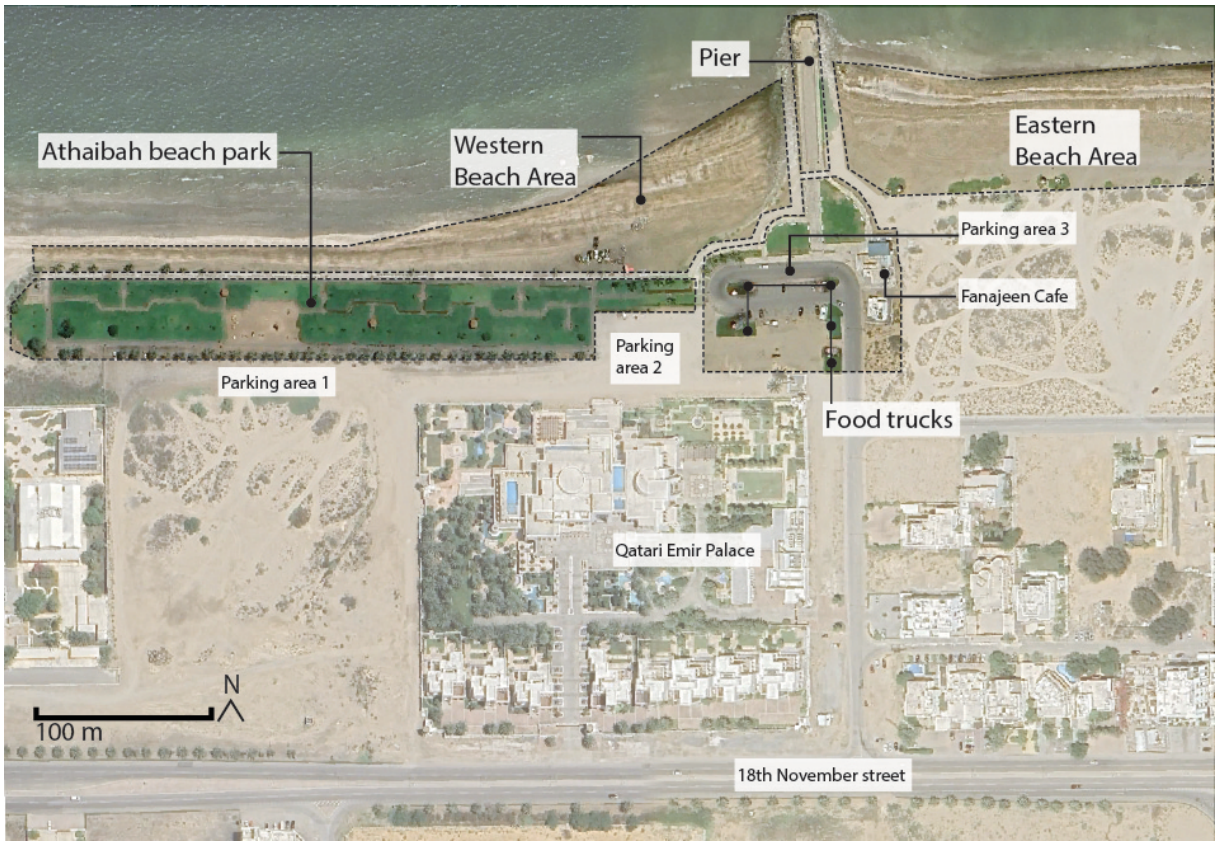

Figure 5.5 Indication of activity zones within dotted lines. Map by author using Google Earth Imagery.

The case-study area consists of several zones that are labelled on the map above (see Figure 5.5). The Athaibah beach park was the first area to be formally developed into a public park that spans approximately 300 metres in length and 40 metres in breadth. It comprises lawn areas connected with paved pathways and is lined with palm trees on its southern border. It also offers a few gazebos, benches for visitors, and a children's playground on a large patch of sand. This park is lined with an informal parking strip on the southern border, surfaced with sand (Parking Area 1). The park is the only zone that provides lighting and an inviting atmosphere for visitors at night. The western beach area is narrow and subject to significant changes by tides. The eastern beach, however, is wider and is bordered by dunes and vegetation.

The pier, on the other hand, stretches 130 metres in length, of which 30 metres is surrounded by water at low tide. The northern tip of the pier offers a pentagonal viewing deck area with a step below to get closer to the water. The trunk of the pier is lined with protective railing on the edge and a concrete ledge for seating. Two lawn areas are located at the southern base of the pier, each with several benches. The café is also located at the base of the pier offering shaded outdoor seating overlooking the beach, whereas the central parking lot is lined with food trucks and their surrounding seating areas

are surfaced with Astroturf.

Paying attention to the development history of Athaibah beach can provide valuable information on the impact of public interest on the development of public spaces in Muscat. In 2003, Google satellite imagery revealed that palm trees and a few gazebos were already established in the area that now makes up Athaibah park. Furthermore, at the location of the current pier, a partially developed jetty was built to mitigate coastal erosion. This structure appeared to be informally appropriated by visitors, as evidenced by the presence of cars parked around it in archived satellite imagery. However, there was no paved road accessible to this area until 2010 when an access road and parking were built, which is still in use today. In 2012, the park was developed to incorporate the lawn. Between 2014 and 2016 the Qatari Emir's palace was built. At the same time, the pier was developed along with the lawn area and café at its foot. This demonstrates that the developments on Athaibah beach may have been the result of a combination of the interest shown by informal visitors and the plans to develop and beautify the surroundings of the Emir's palace.

5.2.3 Appropriation Practices at Athaibah beach

This section first addresses the timeline of activity, then the different zones of activity, followed by the factors that impact space appropriation in the case study. Consequently, the section ends with a closer look at the significance of these activities in the lives of the participants.

The municipal cleaner arrives at Athaibah beach at 6:00 am every morning, tasked with collecting rubbish along the entire stretch of beach until 12:00 pm. During this time, the beach attracts very few visitors, primarily Omani men and sometimes Omani couples or women, after which it remains relatively empty until around 4:00 pm, when the visitor numbers peak. On weekend mornings, the beach is occupied by local water sports businesses. Occasionally, migrant visitors can also occupy the beach at this time. Between 4:00 pm and 6:30 pm, Athaibah beach is the most crowded on both weekdays and weekends. At this time, a variety of different visitors can be observed in the area, such as Omani and migrant families with children of all ages, Omani men between the ages of about 18 to 60, and South Asian men between the ages 25 to 40. Seldom, female low-income migrants are also seen in pairs or groups, these are rarely South Asian and mostly Filipino women.

The food trucks begin grilling around 5:00 pm and continue until midnight on almost all days. This brings families and older Omani men together in the seating areas provided by the food trucks. On weekends,

some zones of Athaibah beach are occupied by South Asian male migrants for long hours during the night, which continues until 3:00 am the next morning.

The case study comprises five main zones of activity. The Athaibah Park, the western beach area, the pier, the eastern beach area, and the gastronomy centre consisting of a café and food trucks (see Figure 5.6).

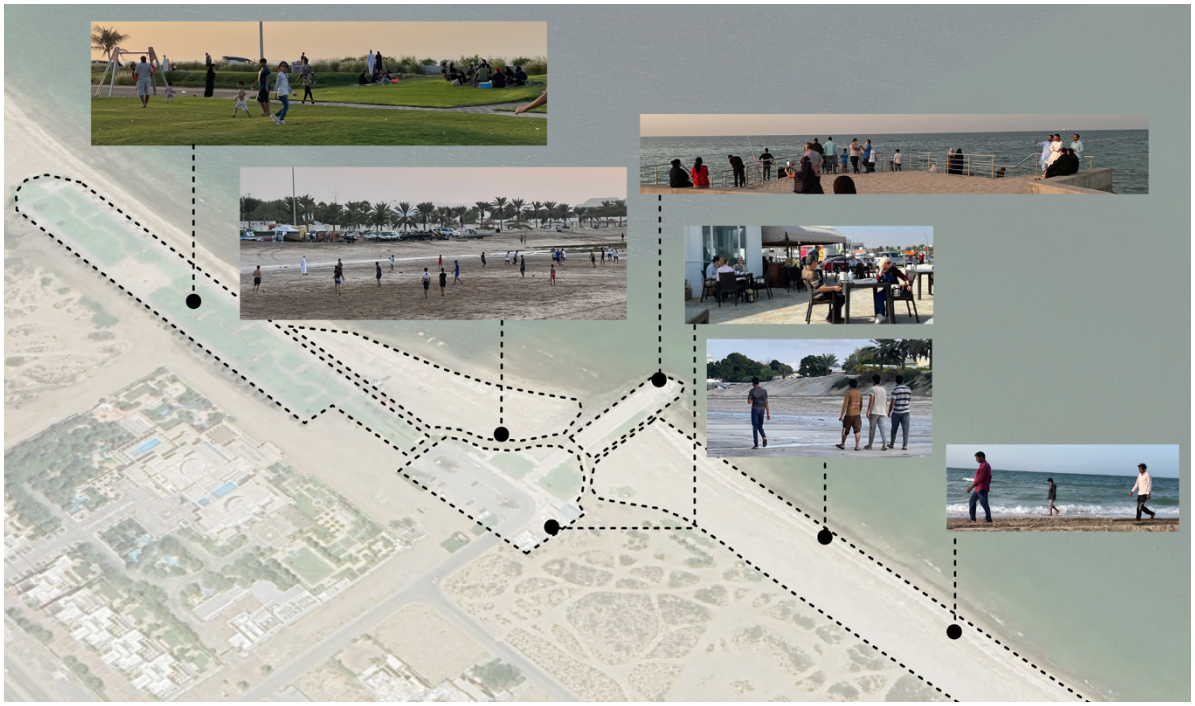

Figure 5.6 Indication of activity zones and their photos within dotted lines. Photos by author. Map by author using Google Earth Imagery, 2022.

The Athaibah park is primarily occupied by Omani families who picnic near the playground with their children. Other migrant families from Levant countries can occasionally be observed here too, with home-cooked food on large picnic mats. Families usually arrive in groups of 5 to 10 people. Omani men can be observed training and warming up for football matches that take place in the western beach area. Omani couples and other migrant couples can be observed walking and jogging laps on the pathways around the park. This area is occupied for long hours on the weekend nights of Thursday and Friday. Visitors sometimes remain in the park until midnight.

The western beach can be viewed as an extension of the park because it attracts similar visitors and activities. However, several additional activities take place at the beach; the first being photo shoots. Second, during sunset hour, a large group of Omani men play football when the tide is low. Third, a jet ski rental business is set up in this area on weekends. Fourth, children can ride along the beach on a

pony through a service offered by young Omani men.

The food trucks and the café zone serve as the gastronomical centre of Athaibah beach. The café is usually occupied by middle-income to upper-income visitors, including both Omanis and non-Omanis. The food trucks attract Omani men and families that either take away grilled food to the beach or sit by the food trucks in plastic chairs and tables for a quick bite.

The pier is one of the main attractions of the Athaibah beach due to its scenic views of the sea and the coastline of Athaibah beach (see Figure 5.7). It is also the most important zone in this case study. In particular around sunset, the pier attracts visitors to experience and take photos of the changing sky. It is a popular spot for South Asian migrants, who are the predominant visitors in this zone on weekends. During the week, the pier attracts diverse visitors of various nationalities. South Asian families can also be observed here regularly. It is an area where Omani families and Omani women are observed in close proximity to other demographics, such as low-income migrant workers, with whom they would typically not share the same space.



Figure 5.7 Visitors at the edge of the pier. Photos by author.

During the weekends, South Asians are the dominant visitors in this zone, but visitors from other nationalities also walk to this area to get a glimpse of the view. The most popular activity at the viewing deck is taking photos. This includes South Asian low-income workers taking *selfies* of themselves with the sea in the background or groups of men being photographed by their friends, each taking a turn to be the photographer. Some migrant workers make video calls from this spot, while other families and groups of visitors walk to the end of the pier and turn around to walk back. This is not an area that is occupied for extended periods of time compared to the Athaibah beach park, for example, where visitors are known to spend some hours. Most visitors spend about 15 minutes on average at the pier. However, an exception to this observation is the South Asian low-income migrants that appropriate the

pier to fish. The men typically start to fish at the end of the week on Thursday nights at around 10:00 pm. Additionally, they bring along food and tea, set up foldable chairs at the end of the pier, and fish together until the early hours of the morning up to 3:00 am. The freshly caught fish is then grilled on a Barbeque to make a rewarding meal.

The eastern beach area is similar in some ways to the western beach, as it attracts people who typically walk along the beach, take photos, or swim. This includes Omani men, women, and families, but this is also a popular zone for South Asian men to take walks in the afternoon in groups or pairs. They often stop by the water to take photos of each other individually or in groups and occasionally record videos of each other in the water. This sometimes turns into a playful activity that includes songs and dance too. Occasionally, South Asian migrants and other migrant nationalities bring food and set up small picnics at the beach, typically in groups of three to five. On early mornings during the weekends, when this beach area is almost deserted, occasionally, low-income migrants, stroll along this part of the beach. Additionally, on particular weekend mornings, this beach is taken over by a single activity —kite surfing. During kite surfing, Omani families are not seen much in this area, but migrant workers walk down the beach, sometimes stopping to take photos of kite surfing activities (see Figure 5.8).



Figure 5.8 South Asian visitors observing Kite surfing at the eastern beach area. Photo by author.

The two areas that South Asian migrants, particularly low-income men, appropriate most frequently are the pier and the eastern beach area. Whereas the park, the western beach area and the food trucks and café area are occupied mainly by other visitors. The above-described distribution has been observed on regular weekdays and weekends. It should be noted that this distribution is completely altered during

public holidays, particularly on Eid. On such occasions, all zones at Athaibah beach are occupied predominantly by low-income South Asian migrants (this does not include the gastronomic centre which is closed during Eid day). Their arrival begins shortly after the early morning Eid prayer at the mosque, a time when typically, most families, especially Omani families, gather at home with extended family members. The beach is then entirely occupied by low-income South Asian workers, who reside in Muscat without families. They gather to celebrate with each other while swimming, taking photos and walking on the beach (see Figure 5.9).



Figure 5.9 South Asian visitors at Athaibah beach on Eid. Photo by author.

The three main factors that contribute to the appropriation of Athaibah beach include its physical and natural characteristics, its atmosphere, and the fact that it is open to the public.

When asked about their reasons for visiting Athaibah beach park, most of the participants referred to the sea and made references to views of the water and the horizon, particularly during sunset. A majority of the participants visited the beach around sunset and made their way down to the pier to view it clearly. Others referred to climatic conditions, such as cool breezes. When asked whether he listens to music on his walks on the beach, Vasu, a 30-year-old repairman, answered

> “Mostly I do not listen to music at the beach. I don't like it during walking, because (I) will enjoy the natural beach, sand, the ocean smells... And fresh wind is there so (I) will enjoy that. While hearing music it is not possible to enjoy the beach climate, so I avoid (it)”.

In addition to the natural attributes of the beach, participants frequently highlighted the various activities and interactions among people, which contributed to the unique atmosphere of Athaibah beach. The presence of boats and jet skis in the water, in addition to aeroplanes flying over the sky, landing and taking off from the airport nearby, was perceived as a part of a busy and lively atmosphere by some participants. The presence of families and constant activity made visitors, especially female visitors, feel a sense of safety at the Athaibah beach, as one female interviewee highlighted,

> “Athaibah Beach is quite secured, and you see a lot of families and everybody there. So, even if you're walking alone, you don't feel little a bit worried, but I don't go late evenings, I go in early evening. So, it’s okay for me”.

Similarly, when Sunita, a 40-year-old beautician, was asked how she feels as a woman at Athaibah beach she replied,

> “Nobody interferes with the other. That is the good thing here. They see one another but they do not comment on each other. They do not stare like they do in India. That is not here. There (in India), they stare at girls or ladies in such a way that she feels embarrassed. But here the people are good. There is no fear here. Even if I go for a walk at 10:30, we feel comfortable. Whether people know you or not, they will say "Assalamualaikum" as they pass. And if someone is in trouble, they will ask about him, ask to help him”.

In this passage, Sunita’s comparison between India and Oman reveals how her cultural background influences her perception of her experiences. This perspective is also echoed by other participants. Several of the participants originally came from coastal regions in India and some of them made comparisons between the beaches of their hometowns and Athaibah beach. When asked about beaches

in India, Hussain, a 45-year-old architect, replied, *"But the difference between those Indian beaches, and the Omani beaches, is Omani beaches are quite clean".*

Low-income migrants are drawn to the case-study area, in contrast to other waterfront developments in Muscat, primarily because it is attractive and free of cost. Additionally, it is not as commercialised as other waterfront developments. All participants mentioned that they preferred to bring their own food instead of eating in the café or food trucks because it was cheaper and more to their liking.

Although Athaibah beach is a public beach, it should be noted that it is in fact not accessible to everyone. It is most accessible to visitors who can arrive with a car. Most of the interviewees arrived at the beach by car. Low-income participants reported to share a taxi, have a friend drop them off as a group, or ride a bicycle to the beach in the case that they lived close by, and the climate allowed it.

Athaibah beach is a common gathering place for families, football teams, friends walking together and men fishing together. However, amidst the crowds, it is also notably appropriated by individuals seeking solitude. For the vast majority of participants, Athaibah beach was a place for contemplation, self-reflection and to experience getting in touch with one's own thoughts. The natural environment, such as the sound of the waves and the beauty of the view, was noted to help this inner contemplation. Some participants reported leaving their phone in the car when walking on the beach. Furthermore, an interviewee shared that he avoids bringing his family to Athaibah beach and takes them to other beaches instead, so that he can have this one place for himself. He shared, *"I've kept this Athaibah beach for myself. I try to get her (my wife) very little here, because you need to be someplace where you need to keep it for yourself, not share with the world".*

In addition to contemplation and supporting mental health, physical health was also underlined as a factor that drew participants to Athaibah beach. Participants that engaged in walking or jogging in this case study referred to health and weight loss as primary daily goals. Shabana, a 42-year-old engineer and mother of two children, highlighted the connection between the two factors in the following quote:

> "Because it's not only about your weight, it's about your mind. Lose weight in the mind, because sometimes you need to do that to enjoy yourself… People carry a lot of burden in their minds. A lot of thinking. We have a lot of expectations in life, and we keep running behind things. So, it's better to just walk and be in the present and just keep doing something, that's a relaxing thing where you're not connected to your children, you're not connected to your husband, you're not connected to anybody, it's just you and that's a good 45 minutes for you to lose some weight from

> your mind and body… So, you can ground yourself otherwise you will get carried away with everything in this world".

Unlike Shabana, Renitta lived in Muscat without any family members and resided with the family of her employer as their housekeeper. Considering her long working hours, she reported that she valued her rare days off and often used the opportunity to visit the church. However, on some Fridays, due to transportation problems, she was unable to get to the church in Ruwi, which is 25 kilometres away from her "Madam's house". On those particular Fridays, Renitta made her way to Athaibah beach on foot. Once she arrived, she went for a walk on her own while the beach was mostly unoccupied. She typically went into the water to feel the salt water on her feet and took photos and videos of herself with a *selfie stick* (see Figure 5.10). However, her time in the water was not limited to taking photos. When asked why she entered the water despite not being able to swim, she responded that she loved to go into the sea "*to give thanks to God*". She prayed in the water and felt connected to God at that time, which served as an alternative to her church visit.



Figure 5.10 Rita at an empty Athaibah beach on a weekend morning. Photo by author.

Similarly to domestic workers, as a salon beautician, Sunita and her colleagues spent more than 12 hours a day at work, at a salon which operated 7 days a week. When asked what her visits to Athaibah beach mean to her, she replied:

> "The whole time we stay indoors in the parlour, we do not go out, so when we go out, our mind gets free, it feels good to see the beach, and to breath the fresh air. If you stay in one place the whole time, your mind will get upset".

Sunita typically visited Athaibah beach with her salon colleagues. While some interviewees preferred to be alone at the beach, others preferred company. Mohi, a 29-year-old cleaner who sometimes rides his bike to the beach, explained what determined his decision to stay at the beach in the following quote:

> "When my heart is sad and heavy, I go alone. When I feel good, I go with my friends… Sometimes my heart is sad, my mind is not good, then I go to the beach alone. There, looking far into the sea, my mind feels better, "fresh". It feels better in my heart. That is one thing. Sometimes when things are good, I do not have too much work, or too much stress, then also I go. The beach always feels good".

Mohi was one of the many migrants who took photos of himself at the beach. When asked about what he does with the photos, Mohi shared,

> "I put it on Facebook. I send it to my relatives to show them 'look we also have a sea here, like we have a sea in my country, I live close to the sea here'. So, they also get happy to see that, they say it is good".

This passage demonstrates how Athaibah beach serves as a place where visitors can connect with their personal notions of home, be it through a connection with their families in their home countries, or by revisiting their childhood memories. Generally, the interviewees reported using photos as a way to render an image of what life abroad means and to communicate this to those they left behind (see Figure 5.11). For example, Ahmed Hussain, a 41-year-old driver, felt differently about his photos at the beach compared to Mohi. When asked whether he sent his beach photos to his family he responded,

> "I do not send those to my family, they will say 'you guys are not working there, you are just enjoying and going around' so that is why we do not send those. I will send them photos from my restaurant, so they think 'okay he is working'. If I sent them the swimming videos, they will think we do not work here (in Oman)".



Figure 5.11 South Asian migrants taking photos at the pier at Athaibah beach. Photo by author.

In the south of India, where a large majority of participants originate, fish is a staple part of the daily diet. While Ahmed Zahran, a 27-year-old quality surveyor, commented on his fishing activities saying, *"Since my childhood I like it, I don't even know the reason",* other participants communicated more precisely that fishing was of significant importance in their lives. Some participants referred to it as their biggest passion and hobby and even formed teams that organised gatherings to fish together. Other participants noted a feeling of accomplishment in catching one's own meal and cooking it together, which felt more meaningful than eating at a restaurant and saved them some money.

5.2.4 Negotiations and Compromise at Athaibah beach

The case study did not reveal any observable conflicts between visitors during the time of field work. However, an organically organised zoning emerged in the case study, possibly driven by visitors with specific needs appropriating certain zones, according to their requirements. For example, families occupy the grass area to find a soft area to lay their picnic blankets down, with trash cans close by and a playground for their children to play. Consequently, the grass area is family dominated and is a place where people spend a longer amount of time. The pier, which does not invite people to stay for long,

due to its lack of seating and lighting, attracts visitors who stay for shorter time for quicker activities, such as taking photos. Consequently, the pier is dominated by low-income migrant workers for whom these photos are important.

The presence of families was predominantly highlighted as a positive aspect in the interviews, contributing to an appreciated atmosphere at Athaibah beach. Particularly for single female visitors, regardless of their nationality or income bracket. However, the dominance of families in certain zones had consequences for other visitors, in particular single low-income migrant men. On the one hand, some single male migrants reported feeling good to share a place with other families present because this was a rare occurrence in their daily lives, where they are usually surrounded by other low-income migrant men. On the other hand, some participants understood that some areas were meant for families and consequently avoided those areas. While this was mainly due to low-income migrants feeling unwelcome in such places, some participants reported that they do not like to go to the family-dominated areas of Athaibah beach because it reminded them of the distance between them and their own families— an unpleasant reminder, particularly while at the beach for leisure.

Similarly understanding the organic zoning in the case study, low-income migrant women understood that the pier was a male dominated area. When asked if she likes to spend time at the pier, Sita, a 57-year-old beautician, answered, *"the area you are talking about (the pier), that area is for the boys, it is not for families. But the families are on the park side".* Sita's coworker at the beauty salon spoke about her earlier experiences swimming at the Athaibah beach, where she recalled Athaibah beach before its recent developments. In this recollection, she noted that the beach was more comfortable to swim when it was empty and not as crowded as it has gotten in the last years, especially during the weekends. When asked if they would go swimming there now, Sunita replied,

> "It does not feel good when there are men there. Us ladies, when we get wet, then our body can be seen...it does not feel good. But when there is not much crowd, then we go swim, we enjoy, to lighten the heart a bit".

However, not all women shared the same thoughts about the male-dominated pier. Shabana, for example, shared a more empathetic perspective on the same situation:

> “Yeah, I've seen lots of workers there. I was watching them enjoy the beach as well. So, I saw that these workers actually don't have much place to go anywhere. So, I see them coming together and standing there taking photos... So that was, at first, a little bit worrying to see because I don't know these people. But when I saw them enjoying and relaxing, I understood that they also have a life and they need a break. So, they were having some good time with their friends. I could see that. It is good actually for them because other entertainments, everybody has to pay a huge price for it. But this what they have made (the pier), is for everybody, so, even the workers can enjoy the scenic view without paying anything there, which is good..”

Shabana’s view on the unspoken segregation at Athaibah beach is one that offers an empathetic understanding of space appropriation. She acknowledges that the pier is appropriated by low-income migrant men at the cost of excluding others, while considering that this process may be a response to the fact that low-income migrant workers are excluded from other places in Muscat.

5.2.5 Examining Space Appropriation at Athaibah Beach

Compared to the other case studies in this dissertation, Athaibah beach attracts visitors from a much larger catchment area. It is nestled in a low-density area of the city and therefore its visitors are not limited to neighbouring inhabitants; they include inhabitants of various parts of the city that have formed a bond with the place and deem it worthy to travel to. Therefore, most visitors drive there with a private car. This makes it particularly noteworthy that low-income workers find and organise a means of transport to access Athaibah beach, despite their limited mobility; this serves as a testament to the attractiveness of Athaibah beach. However, this is a determining factor in who can access Athaibah beach, distinguishing and favouring certain visitors over others, which means visitors who cannot reach the beach with a car, most probably not be able to visit it.

In further comparison to other waterfront attractions, Athaibah beach presents a unique degree of development. In recent years, it has developed enough to be attractive to large and diverse crowds and activities. However, it still leaves room and possibilities to be appropriated in accordance to individual needs, such as bringing one’s own food and sitting on one’s own mat, for free of charge. Such activities would not be possible in more commercially developed waterfront areas. Furthermore, Athaibah beach

offers a comparatively wider range of zones that are distinct to one another, attracting heterogeneous demographics to the case study, as observed, for example, at the pier.

Recent developments on Athaibah beach have a mixed impact on participants. On the one hand, some participants, such as low-income migrant men, appreciated being surrounded by families and people from various nationalities, as this allowed them to experience being part of a larger society. Although they refrained from actively participating with the families, the mere possibility of sharing the same space with a larger social fabric was perceived positively. On the other hand, the developments proved disadvantageous for other visitors, such as low-income migrant women like Renitta, who preferred privacy on the beach, or like Sunita, who did not swim at the beach anymore due to the large number of visitors in recent years.

When comparing the various activity zones at Athaibah beach, it was evident that the pier and the eastern beach area were areas where low-income migrant men felt most welcome and spent most of their time. This could stem from the fact that the park and the western beach areas are mostly occupied by walkers, joggers, families, and football players. Therefore, those zones were established as family areas or areas occupied by other visitors, primarily Omani visitors. Consequently, low-income migrant workers may have moved to areas that they felt were still open to be appropriated, such as the pier and the eastern beach. The pier attracts migrant workers to take photos and enjoy the view, activities which can be carried out alone. Moreover, the eastern beach has fewer families and does not attract Omani football teams, therefore, migrant workers could swim and walk in that zone. Due to the compartmentalisation mentioned above, the lack of conflict in this case-study area can be attributed to the diversity of zones offered at Athaibah beach and the distribution of visitors allowing them to fulfil their spatial needs in specific zones without having to negotiate much with others. Although there are subtle compromises to be made, they rarely escalated to a conflict.

To conclude the examination of this case study, it is worth noting that the interviews in this case study have been particularly emotional and reveal the deepest thoughts and feelings of the interviewees. Moreover, despite attracting large crowds, Athaibah beach has offered the participants a place for personal contemplation and introspection. This could be attributed to the fact that the beach feels distant from their daily reality and visually reminiscent of their childhoods in coastal cities in India, such as Kerala. Additionally, the interviews revealed that being alone allowed visitors to reflect and gain perspective on their lives, allowing interviewees like Renitta to substitute church for the beach. While the beach allows one to reflect more when alone, a different necessity is fulfilled when one is in company. When visited with friends, the beach offered the interviewees a space to play, in contrast to the seriousness required from their daily life. Amidst the daily struggles of migrant workers, taking playful photos, going for a swim, or walking by the beach to watch kite surfers served as a means to

detach from the worries of the future and the difficulties of the present, and enabled them to enjoy the moment.

5.2.6 Key Insights

The Athaibah beach is located in the most affluent and most western part of the neighbourhood of Athaibah. It is a public place that includes two strips of beaches, a park, a pier, a gastronomy area and some parking spaces for visitors. Although most of the case-study areas in this project are highlighted because visitors had turned a residual space into a public space, it is an officially recognised public space that hosts a diverse range of activities that are mostly leisure oriented. Consequently, it falls under the category of designated leisure spaces and developed spaces. Although Athaibah beach is located in a low-density neighbourhood with affluent residents and large homes, its neighbours are not the main visitors to the space. The beach attracts visitors from different parts of the city, who mostly arrive with their private car, which is the most convenient means to access the beach. The visitors in the case study are diverse in socioeconomic background, age and nationalities, and are distinctly distributed among the different zones of the case-study area. For example, the beach park is primarily occupied by Omani families with children and Omanis and expats who practice sports. Observations and interviews revealed that South Asian migrants were more likely to use the pier and the eastern beach area. In general, Athaibah beach was visited most often for leisure activities such as picnicking, taking walks, and spending time with other people. South Asian migrants also appropriated the beach for leisure practices, namely taking photos together, taking walks, fishing, and sometimes exercising. Athaibah beach is frequently used, during both weekdays and weekends. It is not a place where people meet new people, but it is a place where people are friendly and can greet each other.

There was no conflict presented in this case study. This is probably due to the fact that there are several zones that offer various visitors their own particular needs. Due to this, an unspoken distribution of visitors emerges, where some areas are understood as family areas, such as the beach park, and other areas are reserved for low-income migrant workers, such as the pier, especially during weekends. These rules are, however, overridden on special occasions like Eid, when all the zones of the case study are appropriated by South Asian migrant workers and there are very few or almost no other Omani visitors.

The zones of the case study are not flexible in their usage due to their physical attributes. This explains why families who wish to set up a picnic are only drawn to the grass area, migrants who fish are only

drawn to the pier, and Omani men who play football are only drawn to the western beach area. Each zone offers a specific physical attribute that determines its predominant visitor.

The participants in this case study do not claim ownership or stake in their appropriation practices, as they do not physically transform the space. They also do not visit it regularly enough to claim ownership. While other case studies have been appropriated daily or weekly, Athaibah beach is visited once a month or less frequently.

Although Athaibah beach fits the profile for a potential area to develop into a more commercial waterfront, similarly to other beaches in Muscat, this development may not materialise due to the presence of the Qatari Emir's palace. However, if these developments did materialise, they would most likely attract more affluent crowds and a higher number of families. This change might not affect middle-income South Asian visitors, but it will most likely drive out low-income migrant visitors, both men and women, who currently come to Athaibah beach for privacy with their thoughts, photo shoots with their friends, fishing through the night, and spiritual connection with God in the water.

5.3 Al Ghubrah Breakout Space: Under the Shade of a Tree

The following chapter is dedicated to the socio-spatial examination of a neighbourhood breakout space located in Al Ghubrah. I first noticed that this area was appropriated by South Asian men during the evenings, with arbitrary pieces of furniture and empty teacups lying around the next morning. However, one day the area was suddenly void of visitors and furniture. On further investigation, I learnt that despite its fluctuating state, this seating area was a vital meeting point for the men who worked in the neighbourhood. This is what drew my interest in this space as a possible case study for research. Being the smallest area studied in this research, it is comprised entirely of the space underneath and around a medium sized Neem tree, which is located in the alleyway between large apartment buildings. Due to the close proximity of my own residence to this area, I was able to observe the frequent changes in activity and the placement of furniture under this tree. This area was selected as a case study to investigate the factors that contributed to these changes and to identify the drivers behind their reoccurring emergence and disappearance. The breakout space sets itself apart from the other case studies due to three main factors. First, it is the smallest area of all the spaces studied. Second, it is located in a dense urban setting. Third, given its size and number of engaged users, it exhibits a high incidence of conflict.

Within this project, the breakout space falls into the subcategory of urban spaces under the category of undeveloped spaces. This case study is wedged between apartment buildings in Al Ghubrah, in an area dense with residential apartments and commercial activity on the ground and first floors. This is a small case-study area with only one zone of activity. The users of this case study are all South Asian male migrants, with a few exceptions of older Omani men who occasionally visit the space as well. All users accessed the area on foot and the activities carried out in this space are only related to leisure and break times, such as sitting, people-watching, drinking tea, and making phone calls to loved ones back home.

This chapter presents the methods used to gather data, a description of the urban context, a timeline, and a detailed account of its users and their activities. It then provides an understanding of why this seating area is an important part of the daily lives of migrant workers and presents the conflicts which arise due to their appropriation of this place. This is followed by an analysis of the practices and a conclusion.

5.3.1 Methods

The methods used to study this area were based on photographs taken over three years, qualitative interviews conducted on site, informal conversations, and systematic observations. Six participants were interviewed, who are listed in the table below (see Table 5.3). All these participants are closely familiar with the seating area because they have used or observed the area on a daily basis. Some of them have watched this area change over the course of several years. Of the six interviewees, only one was a woman. Four of the interviewees were South Asian and two were Omanis. Although it was not previously planned, it was necessary to have the perspective of Omani nationals in this case study due to an existing conflict that occurred during field work.

The case study is situated in a narrow space and is a male-dominated area. These two factors make it a rather intimate space and thus made it impractical for me to spend extended amounts of time observing its activity, as I could have done in other case studies that were larger and more open to the public. Consequently, instead of conducting a few sessions of extended observations, I frequently passed by the area and documented photos and notes of the observations. This was possible because of its close proximity to my residence. I was only able to spend extended periods of time in this area while conducting the qualitative interviews. However, this was not always a comfortable experience. Harun, for example, a 36-year-old insurance agent, mentioned feeling uncomfortable about the fact that we were talking to each other at the seating area and was concerned about people passing by and looking at us. He wondered what people would say about a man and woman speaking alone in that setting considering that he is married.

Yasir, a 28-year-old janitor, had been the janitor of the building in which I lived at the time of the interviews, and therefore had little difficulty trusting the sincerity of my intentions. Therefore, he was the first person I interviewed for this case study, and he inadvertently became a gatekeeper for the interviewees that followed. This helped me gain confidence in the male-dominated space and approach another janitor, followed by the bakery salesman to request an interview. The men, who were at first sceptical of my photography in this area, were later convinced by Yasir that there was nothing to be afraid of. The interviews with the two Pakistani janitors were conducted in Urdu, while the rest were conducted in English.

Table 5.3 Table of participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Occupation	Years in Muscat
Mubashir	M	47	Indian	Bakery salesman	25
Harun	M	36	Indian	Car Insurance	12
Maryam	F	25	Omani	Administrator	25
Khalid	M	39	Omani	Administrator	39
Yaseen	M	40	Pakistani	Building janitor	1
Yasir	M	28	Pakistani	Building janitor	11

5.3.2 Physical Attributes of Al Ghubrah Breakout Space

The breakout space is located in one of the most densely populated neighbourhoods of Ghubrah North. It is surrounded by apartment buildings that house both residential and commercial functions. In recent years, it has become somewhat of an urban marketplace for shops and businesses, decked with bright retail signboards stacked on top of each other on the building facades. The breakout space is nestled behind the storefronts, centred around a *Neem* tree that is situated at the meeting point between four large plots, each measuring around 1,000 square metres, three of which are occupied by apartment buildings and one of which remains undeveloped (see Figure 5.12). This undeveloped plot of land has remained untidy, unpaved, and dusty. Over the last few years, the area has transformed from a large vacant patch of sand into a heavily used informal parking area, as a response to the recent boom in density in the neighbourhood and the lack of planned parking areas. The corner of this unused plot, where the three apartment buildings meet, is where the Neem tree is situated. A narrow alley is formed between two neighbouring buildings, creating a kind of corridor leading to the tree (see Figure 5.13).

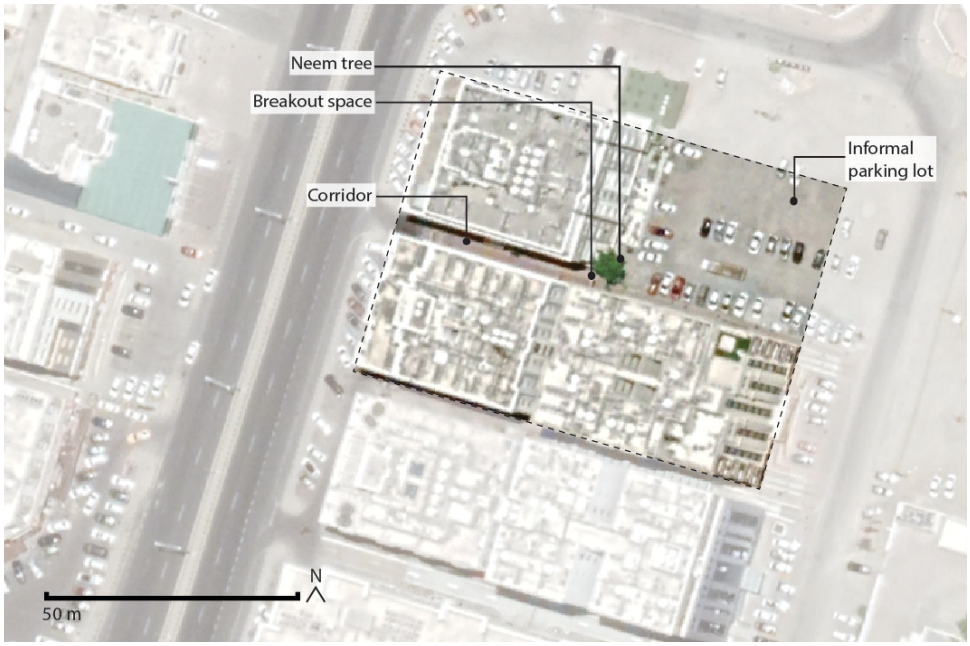

Figure 5.12 Indication of the breakout space and neem tree in the centre of the dotted area. Map by author using Google Earth Imagery.



Figure 5.13 A building caretaker sweeps the corridor leading to the Neem tree. Photo by Author.

The corridor, which measures approximately 35 metres in length and approximately 4 metres wide, is lined with commercial offices and shops on the ground floor, such as insurance offices, government service centres, and a graphic printing shop that eventually closed down due to lack of business during the COVID-19 pandemic, during the field work period. A gas tank storage area, belonging to the southern building, shares a wall with the seating area. The corridor between the buildings results in a wind tunnel

effect that creates a breeze in the area and under the tree. Therefore, the breakout space provides shaded and airy relief from hot and humid days in Muscat.

For several years, furniture has been placed under the tree to create a seating area. Most of these pieces of furniture look tattered and timeworn (see Figure 5.14). In one of the earlier observations, a PC chair, missing its legs and wheels, was hoisted onto the tree with wooden brackets that held it up like a shelf. Chairs added to the setting are sometimes unused office chairs or even dining chairs. Later on, a wooden box was built on the floor to provide additional seating, which was then painted blue. The open pipe next to it was painted yellow. As an extension to the seating area, old carpets were sometimes laid under the tree, over the sand and gravel ground at the corner of the informal parking lot where it meets the seating area. Not all the furniture remains on site. On observation, plastic chairs are brought in by some men just for an evening and then later taken back to their accommodation. In the photos below, the case-study area is represented at different times during the three-year observation period. Each time illustrating a different setting of furniture.



Figure 5.14 The case-study area observed on various observation presenting a different furniture arrangement each time. Photo by author.

5.3.3 Appropriation Practices at the Seating Area

This section first addresses the timeline of activity, then the different zones of activity, followed by the factors that impact space appropriation in the case study. Consequently, the section ends with a closer look at the significance of these activities in the participants' lives.

The corridor of the case-study area is typically understood as a dynamic space rather than a static one; a transitional corridor which is only briefly occupied to get from one point to another. However, South Asian migrant workers, who are residents of the area, have appropriated the space under the tree at the end of the corridor and transformed it into a place where one can remain for extended periods of time: a static place of rest rather than a dynamic transitional space.

In the early hours of the morning, this area is mainly occupied by residents of apartments leaving for work, and employees of the offices close to them arriving to work. During the hottest hours of the day, around noon, the area is primarily occupied by South Asian male migrants. It remains occupied by the same demographic until late into the night. Although the breakout space is frequently visited throughout the day, its peak usage occurs at night, typically between 8 pm and midnight (see Figure 5.15).



Figure 5.15 South Asian migrant workers occupying the breakout space at around 10pm. Point of view from the parking lot. Photos by Author.

Yasir, together with another janitor, had first planted the young Neem tree at this spot several years ago. Ever since then, he said, he has watered it with one bucket of water every morning. He and his uncle built the blue box together in order to make a seating area under the tree. On a daily basis, this

area is cleaned, maintained, and improved by the janitors of the neighbouring buildings. On an occasional basis, South Asian migrants who live close by, bring furniture to the area temporarily when gathering together.

The seating area is not a place that attracts residents from other parts of the city. It is an intimate enclave that is known and cared for by the visitors who visit it daily. The area is most used by the people who work and live close to it, but it also includes workers who are called to this area for repairs or other services. This means that the daily users usually occupy professions such as building janitors or watchmen, salesmen at nearby commercial shops, insurance offices and optical glasses shops, and waiters at nearby restaurants, but it also includes occasional visitors such as repairmen, plumbers, or carpenters. For many of these men, their work is on-demand contractual labour subject to requirement. Therefore, their work times are irregular. On most days, their jobs are demanding, however, during some pockets of time, the shops are emptier, or there are fewer repairs needed in the buildings. In such times, men may take a break from work but cannot stray too far as the timings of their next task remain uncertain. Additionally, due to their limited mobility, they cannot travel far. What they require is a place close by to take a break, while remaining on standby. The seating area in this case study is the place where they retreat. At night, this area is free of the noise surrounding the nearby commercial activity and is quiet, making it a fitting place to make phone calls to loved ones. As with other case studies, such as Wadi Ghubrah, it serves as a place to make phone calls in a better atmosphere than the crowded shared accommodation of most of the South Asian migrant workers. When the seating area is not too crowded, men can be heard making phone calls on loudspeaker to their families back home or watching music videos and movies on their phones.

When asked about the visitors in the breakout space, Yaseen, a 40-year-old janitor, shared that it is mostly the local migrant workers who use this seating area whereas the “office people” and “Omani people” do not occupy it because:

> “They do not have time; they sit in their office. When they are done with their office, they go home. But these guys (migrant workers) are here... They get extra time in the evenings, or they are free now. They can sit in the room (shared accommodation) or here, but here is better. There is some fresh air. So, they sit here.”

Whether they take a break during work hours or relax under the tree after work hours, all the activities in this case-study area revolve around leisure, relaxation, and socialising (see Figure 5.16). When asked

about how he spends his time in the seating area, Yasir replied, "*we sit here and watch people, we meet people, we say salaam to people passing by. It makes one happy to sit here*". Men are often seen alone or gathered with others, having a quick tea at the restaurant/café close by, watching people pass by, or greeting people that pass by, resting, smoking cigarettes, making phone calls, or using Facebook and scrolling on their phones through the Internet. The latter is made possible by Wi-Fi access through neighbouring offices or accommodations where men or their friends work and live. The seating area is also a social space where outsiders can ask for directions from locals to find their destinations in the neighbourhood.



Figure 5.16 South Asian migrant workers taking breaks at the seating area during office hours. Photo by author.

It was made evident from the very beginning of the observation phase and in every interview that the Neem tree was the central factor in transforming an overlooked residual urban corner into a central hangout spot for relaxation and socialising. The position of the tree plays a large role in its significance. It is situated at the meeting point of pedestrian passages and is situated in a physical setting that allows for cool shade and breeze, in an otherwise warm and urban concrete setting.

The Neem tree does not shed its leaves easily, making it a lower maintenance preference compared to other trees. Apart from its physical setting and low maintenance, the Neem tree is associated with

positive associations in the home countries of South Asian migrant workers. Traditionally, it is associated with medicinal and healing properties against several ailments. It is also known to help smokers eliminate the unpleasant taste of tobacco after chewing on its leaf. Furthermore, the shade under the Neem tree is culturally known to be comforting and available throughout the year. Yasir confirmed this by saying: "This *place is very nice, I like to sit here. The Neem tree gives a lot of peace and tranquillity".* He had been sitting under the Neem tree at the breakout space for the last eleven years at the time of our interview and felt a great sense of pride that his intervention had turned into such an inviting spot for him and his friends. Yaseen had only been in Muscat for a year when I interviewed him about this space. He conveyed,

> "I like it. When I am free, I sit there. There is a beautiful shade there, in Punjabi, we call it 'Derek', Neem. The shade of this tree is very well known. It is known to be rich and cool. We have this tree in our village too, and we gather under its shade in my village. So, when I sit under it, those memories are revived".

Maintaining, governing, and cleaning the appropriated space together created a shared sense of responsibility among the men in the area. During the field work phase, Yaseen was offered an indoor office space by his employer. Although he had been offered an alternative area to sit in, he continued to maintain and clean the area under the tree as if he were responsible for it. When asked why, he answered,

> "If this place was not here, where would we all sit? I mean at least I have my own office, if I am free, I can also sit in my room. But for those who do not have a place, for those people, where should they sit? In the sun? Allah has given them this shade, so we should value it. We should keep it clean".

Just as Yasir was proud of the growth of his tree, Yaseen proudly shared how his social connections have grown in the last year through sitting together around the tree. He pointed out, *"I think it is because of the tree area that we have become acquaintances. When we sit there together, our friendship grows".* Mubashir, a 47-year-old salesman, said that spending time in the seating area makes him feel better because it feels like home to him. He has spent more than 15 years working in the same neighbourhood and taking breaks in the same seating area. His familiarity had led him to create a bond with the place that contributes to his feelings of belonging. He shared,

> “So many years here, these 15 years, one area, one building, and the people also are very nice people. I am feeling like India, like it is my country. Ghubrah, it is like my country. No tension. Every day you see someone, ‘Assalamualaikum’. Omani also! So many friends here”.

For most of these men, a life without a family close by means that most of their days are spent working at their jobs and then returning to a small, shared accommodation at the end of the day. This limits the possibilities for personal and social contact. Harun explains how the seating area tackles this deficiency in daily life,

> “How long can one stay in the flat (apartment)? I can't just sit more than one hour or two hours watching TV. So, (I) went out. Every person has the same mind, so they're coming there, we are talking, we are sitting…. So that time, we don't have any pressure in the mind. All people is coming for only this reduced pressure [laughs]. Because next day, they're starting the same mechanical life”.

5.3.4 Conflict and Resolution at the Seating Area

The seating area is far from being merely a refuge of ease; it also carries its share of conflicts and challenges, which will be examined in three dimensions. The first occurs between the users of the space and the property owners. The second exists between the users of the space and the female employees of the offices in the corridor. The third is amongst different user demographics. They will be explained in this order since they develop in this order.

The first conflict emerged when the owners of the buildings expressed their intention to cut the tree. They justified this with the fact that the maintenance of the tree was demanding too much labour from their building caretakers. Namely, the tree must be watered, fallen leaves must be brushed away, and litter around the tree needs to be cleaned up the day after South Asian men gather around it. Another concern raised by the owners was the presence of visitors who smoked in the area. Smoking around the gas tank storage area next to the seating area could pose a hazardous safety threat and, therefore, raises a justified cause for concern. To resolve their concerns, the janitor assured the building owners

that they would stop smoking in the area and prevent other visitors from doing so. They argued with the building owners to preserve the tree by highlighting its importance in their daily lives. Fortunately, the building owners agreed to preserve the tree. However, the users of this space did not always manage to communicate effectively and reach resolutions through promises.

The second conflict in the case-study area arose between South Asian workers and Omani female employees working in the surrounding offices. Maryam, a 25-year-old administrator, had been working at a government service centre office at the time of the interview. Her office was neither equipped with a restroom nor a prayer room, which required her to use the facilities in the neighbouring building. To reach the next building, she had to walk past the seating area. She expressed her feelings of discomfort caused by the men who sat outside her office, explaining that she felt like they were watching her.

> "See, if the weather is like now, there is a wind, we cannot feel comfortable while we are walking to the toilet. Of course, we are wearing our abayas but sometimes it will open, and we are wearing jeans or short dresses so they will look at us, definitely. Sometimes the abaya will stretch on our body, so it is not comfortable at all. And the person who (sits) there, he does not watch the men. But with the ladies, he will look up and down, like he is doing X-Ray."

On many occasions, Maryam has avoided going to the parking lot, using the bathroom or praying to avoid confronting the men on the way there. On other occasions, she has asked a friend, who lives in a building nearby, if she could use her bathroom instead. On some occasions, she asked her boss, who is an Omani man, to ask the men to leave so she could pass by the seating area without feeling uncomfortable. Maryam and other Omani female employees did not remain silent about their discomfort and confronted the South Asian men. Maryam reported,

> "I talked to some of them. I don't know his name, but I just talked to ask them 'why you're sitting here? What you're doing? You don't have any work to do?'. It is a public place, but why they are making crowds? This is the question. What is the use to sit here?"

After interviewing the participants, it became clear that the situation was more nuanced than initially appeared. The women set conditions under which they would allow the use of the space. The women

were not entirely against any man sitting in the seating area, but they were particularly against the presence of unknown foreign men. Similarly, there were no objections to the presence of one or two men, but they were opposed to the gathering of larger groups of men. Along the same lines, they were not against someone having a short break there, but they were against men gathering there for extended periods of time. Additionally, they were against smoking in the area. Over the years, some of the women working in the office and the caretakers of the building had come to a resolution. But as the offices changed, or the staff changed, which happened often in the last years, the situation had to be renegotiated; a process that was not always successful.

After some confrontations, such as the one described in the previous quote, the users of the space felt obliged, sometimes of their own accord, and sometimes urged by the building owners, to make changes to the situation. When asked about his opinion on the situation, Mubashir answered, *"It is private property. That's not allowed, more time sitting is not allowed, or smoking, then problems…"*. He understood that some rules had to be put in place, and if they were not followed, it would lead to conflict. Daily visitors of the seating area found it relatively feasible to adhere to the new rules and conditions, but problems arose when trying to communicate these rules with occasional visitors to the seating area.

The third conflict in the case-study area emerged between daily visitors, namely the janitors and salesmen working in the area, and occasional users of the area, which would arrive on demand and sporadically for repairs or other services needed in the area. Occasional users that were unaware of the established rules and the negotiated terms agreed upon by the local users, expectedly, acted as they pleased. They continued to gather in the area, smoke, litter, or watch people passing by. These actions rekindled concerns, leading to renewed calls for the seating area to be removed. Harun and Yaseen commented on this:

> "I usually tell these people (occasional users) to keep it (seating area) clean. They smoke cigarettes and then throw them there…. When I get time, I clean it up myself. I want this place to be clean so whoever comes here should feel good. But when these guys sit here and smoke, they leave their garbage there. I even kept a box for them to dispose their cigarettes and told them not to throw it down."

> "We are sitting there for fresh air and the mind it will be free. For reducing our work stress. But some construction people… they are coming and sitting there. They are looking at Omani ladies. And they are having cigarettes… Now because of that, our place is gone."

The daily users of the seating area must negotiate terms with building owners, with neighbouring employees, and with occasional visiting users to be able to create and retain a viable breakout space. The negotiations are not formally organised or documented, of course. They happen organically, through word of mouth, often navigating challenging language barriers. The negotiations are nuanced and subject to modification as the conditions and as labour force changes. When this elaborate process is successful, the seating area persists, and appropriation can take place. However, when unsuccessful, the seating area disintegrated. This process was further strained by the reoccurring pandemic regulations during COVID-19.

5.3.5 A Compromised Appropriation and its Examination

Within the context of a bustling urban corridor where people shuttle between offices and their apartments, the seating area offers a contrast: a place to pause. While furniture is added and subtracted from the space corresponding to the variables of micro-conflicts and negotiations, the tree remains as a constant. For people like Yaseen, who have recently migrated to Oman, the Neem tree offers not only a place for rest, but a nostalgic harbour reminding him of home.

Living in an automobile-dependent city without a car, most low-income migrant workers have limited options for places to visit in their free time. The participants revealed that, if they had a greater array of mobility choices, they would have preferred to spend their free time at a beach rather than at the seating area under the tree. However, this was not a possibility due to their lack of mobility options. This distinguishes the case study from other case studies, such as Athaibah beach, which is, in contrast, a more desirable destination, but is best accessed by car. The seating area in Ghubrah, however, offers a convenient alternative to desirable hot spots like the beach. It is not designated for a planned activity. It is rather a place to exercise daily acts of belonging in an urban situation. Thus, it offers a familiar place to cultivate attachments and relationships both spatially and socially.

Although this case-study area is distinct for its intimate social connectedness and its long-standing familiarity with some of the participants, summing up to over a decade, this does not automatically translate to a feeling of ownership amongst visitors. This was expressed in the interviews and is indicated by the conflicts and negotiations mentioned earlier. It does, however, offer the users a form of agency to reshape, maintain, clean, and revisit the place on a daily basis.

Although it is part of the duties of building janitors is to keep watch, they must remain cautious and selective as to where their attention and sight lands, since the female employees do not appreciate their attention. It was evident through the interviews that the women lacked empathy or understanding towards the men who gathered at the breakout space. Their compassion was surpassed by their own discomfort in the situation. The roles of cultural and social gender, as well as language barriers further widened the gap between them and strained their relationship, so that there was little room for a solution.

The seating area, unlike other case-study areas in this project, has only one zone of activity and one main demographic of users. Despite this, it presents a high degree of conflict. It is noteworthy that this conflict involves actors who do not participate in the appropriation of the space. However, despite their lack of participation in the place, they can govern and stake claim in ownership in a way that the active users cannot. Given the imbalance of power in these dynamics and the absence of alternative users in favour of the seating area, its fate is inevitably determined by those with greater authority and agency: in this case, the building owners and the female Omani employees.

It is important to highlight here that the ongoing rise in Omanisation has led to a drop in migrant workers in the area and a rise in Omani female employees in nearby offices. This has had a significant effect on the socio-dynamics of this case-study area. A few years ago, there was little or no conflict in this area. There were almost no women working there, and the migrant workers shaped and utilised the place with more agency. When I made the connection between Omanisation and the increase in negotiations and asked one of the participants about his opinion on this idea, he hesitated with a nervous laugh and admitted, *“I didn't tell you like that. But this is the point (laughs)”* in fear of criticising the process of Omanisation. When the heat of the conflict subsides and tension eventually dissipates, the migrant workers find opportunities to reclaim and appropriate the space under the tree. It must be noted that it is neither in the nature nor in the capacity of the migrant workers to assert their presence through conflict. They do not persist to appropriate the space to impose supremacy or to display power as an act of resistance, but rather to merely fulfil their daily needs. In other words, their acts of appropriation are not considered acts of rebellion but rather an act of necessity, taken with caution and consideration towards the needs of others.

5.3.6 Key Insights

This chapter has presented the empirical findings and their analysis of a small enclave of urban life in the form of a neighbourhood breakout space. The area under a Neem tree, wedged between tall apartment buildings and an empty building lot, has been appropriated and transformed from a neglected alleyway into a meeting point and a place of rest for the low-income migrant workers that work and live close by. They actively participate in the shaping and caring of the space on a daily basis.

Within the framework of the research, this case study is regarded as a small-scale case study with a low degree of development. Therefore, under the category of undeveloped spaces, it falls into the subcategory of vacant spaces. As a result of its small size, it contains only one zone of activity. It also presented only one form of activity: leisure. This included resting, talking on the phone, drinking tea, and people watching, most of which are performed by one user demographic: low-income South Asian male migrant workers. The area is located in a dense commercial and residential area of Al Ghubrah and is accessed primarily by pedestrians who do not own a car. It is used frequently by migrant workers throughout the day. Although it is not a place where users travel from afar to find, it is a place for local inhabitants and workers to network and socialise. Users of the area stake a claim in shaping and maintaining the area, for example, by building and placing temporary furniture in the seating area. However, they do not possess a sense of ownership due to the presence of conflict with neighbouring employees. The repeating presence of conflict causes the users of the space to withdraw their interventions from time to time in order to resolve conflict. Consequently, the case-study area presents a significant degree of temporality and flexibility as its physical attributes alter depending on usage and conflict.

This particular neighbourhood space was chosen as a case study despite or rather particularly because of its small physical boundary and its large impact on the lives of the interview partners and their communities. The appropriation of this space resulted from a combination of a lack of mobility, a lack of planned spaces for leisure, and the presence of a tree. The appropriation is, however, hindered by cultural clashes, by unequal rights to stake claim in ownership of urban places, and by uncontainable factors such as pandemic regulations and Omanisation. Due to Omanisation, many of the migrant workers who shaped this space into a place returned to their home countries. At the same time, workplaces witnessed an increase in female employment which caused a rise in conflict between the two demographics, among others. The absence of migrant workers and the presence of conflict causes the social hot spot to revert back to a mere tree next to a parking lot: an unoccupied residual urban space.

In conclusion, this case study offers an understanding of the subtle but influential social dynamics that shape our environment. It illustrates the importance of public spaces in the daily lives of South Asian migrant workers and their identity, but also highlights the importance of marginalised communities that create liveable social fields of care out of meaningless or unused urban corners.

5.4 The Ministries' Parking Lot: A Weekend Spot for Migrant Families

Between the hours of 7:00 am and 3:00 pm, the ministries district and its colossal buildings situated in Al Khuwair are a hub for government-related bureaucratic activity, causing traffic and congestion in parking lots. However, after work hours and during weekends, this large expanse drastically loses its bustling activity and falls empty. Interestingly, during the afternoons, South Asian migrant families turn the empty parking lot at the Ministry of Housing into a playground for their children and incorporate it into their evening walking routes. This parking lot will be examined as a case study in this chapter. What distinguishes this case study, compared to the others, is that it is the only case study where the predominant users are migrant children. It also displays a high level of flexibility as its visitors turn government-owned infrastructure into informal playgrounds.

Within the categories of case studies in this research, the ministries parking lot falls under the category of developed infrastructure and is considered a medium-sized case-study area. It is located in a monofunctional urban district and is separated from residential areas by a highway. It was primarily appropriated by middle-income South Asian families with young children during weekends. The activities that take place here revolve around childcare, play, and light fitness. Most of the visitors live near the site and arrive at the area by car because there is no other convenient way to access this area. Compared to other case studies, there is little or no conflict between different demographics in this case study.

This chapter investigates how migrant families appropriate the parking lot when it is not used for its infrastructure purposes. This chapter presents the physical attributes of the parking lot, its original purpose, its informal users, and a timeline of its visitors. This is followed by the methods, the results of the interviews and observations, and the analysis of the process of space appropriation in the case-study area. The chapter concludes with a summary to highlight the special spatial characteristics of the area and what attracts visitors to appropriate this space.

5.4.1 Methods

The methods adopted to study this case-study area included observation, qualitative interviews, and photography. Initially, archived Google imagery was used to analyse the continuous alterations of the

parking lot over the last decade. Seven participants were interviewed, of whom four were women and three were men, including five parents and one teenager. Most of the interview partners came from middle-income South Asian migrant families. Details of the participants are listed in the table below (see Table 5.4). It was not necessary or possible to have a gatekeeper for interviews because the visitors did not present themselves as groups. The case-study area is predominantly occupied by middle-income South Asian families, which makes the sample of participants representative of the visitors. The interviews were conducted in English and Indian-English.

Table 5.4 Table of participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Occupation	Years in Muscat
Pradeep	M	37	Indian	Technical support engineer	7
Dilip	M	40	Indian	Mechanical engineer	30
Deepika	F	40	Indian	Sales coordinator for engineering products	15
Saira	F	36	Indian	Architect	7
Mohammed	M	38	Indian	Factory operator	12
Mariam	F	15	Bangladeshi	Student	2
Bushra	F	31	Omani	Urban planner	31

On certain days, observations were conducted from within a parked car; a method which fit the setting more than observing people while standing in the parking lot. During field work, it appeared that the participants did not visibly change their behaviour due to research being conducted in the area. Almost all of the interview partners were approached in the space, while one interview partner was found through another case study. Although the interview partners were approachable and easy to talk to since most of them were middle-income migrants who were fluent in English and grasped the intention of the research project quite easily, some parents hesitated to participate in the interviews because they were caring for their children. Due to these circumstances, while parents agreed to an interview on site, they were interrupted by children reclaiming their attention. Therefore, two of the interviews had to continue on the phone at a later time. This turned out to be beneficial, as it allowed them to speak in depth without interruptions.

5.4.2 Physical Attributes of the Ministries' Parking Lot

In Chapter 3, the development of Muscat has been described as "patchy and scattered" (Al Gharibi, 2015, p. 185) and is characterised by monofunctional parcels (Didero et al., 2019). The ministries' district is a prime example of such parcels. This area of Muscat is dominated by large buildings, each dedicated to a specific ministry. Outside of working hours, the atmosphere is quiet and there is little to no activity in this district. The area is disconnected from the other parts of the city, and, like most monofunctional parcels, it is best accessible by car. Therefore, the district is an exclusive enclave, largely cut off from the larger urban community, which significantly restricts the number and type of people who access it.

The ministries' parking lot measures approximately 7750 m^2 in area and can accommodate approximately 300 cars. It is separated from the Sultan Qaboos highway by a narrow slope that rises upwards towards the highway. The parking lot is asphalt-paved and marked with parking lot indicators on the ground. Within the perimeter of the parking lot, there are no pavements or landscaping to designate traffic flow or organise sections of the parking lot, resulting in an open-plan layout (see Figure 5.17).



Figure 5.17 The ministries' parking lot during working hours. Photo by author.

In contrast to the large asphalt surface, the southern border of the ministries parking lot is landscaped

with lawn and dotted with palm trees in an effort to *beautify* the Sultan Qaboos Highway, as mentioned in Chapter 3. It is evident from the physical attributes of the case-study area that it was not planned to attract visitors. Although the main focus of this case study is on the parking lot, the public park, the streets within the ministries' district and the surrounding landscaped areas are inevitably linked to the case-study area and will therefore be referred to in this chapter (see Figure 5.18).

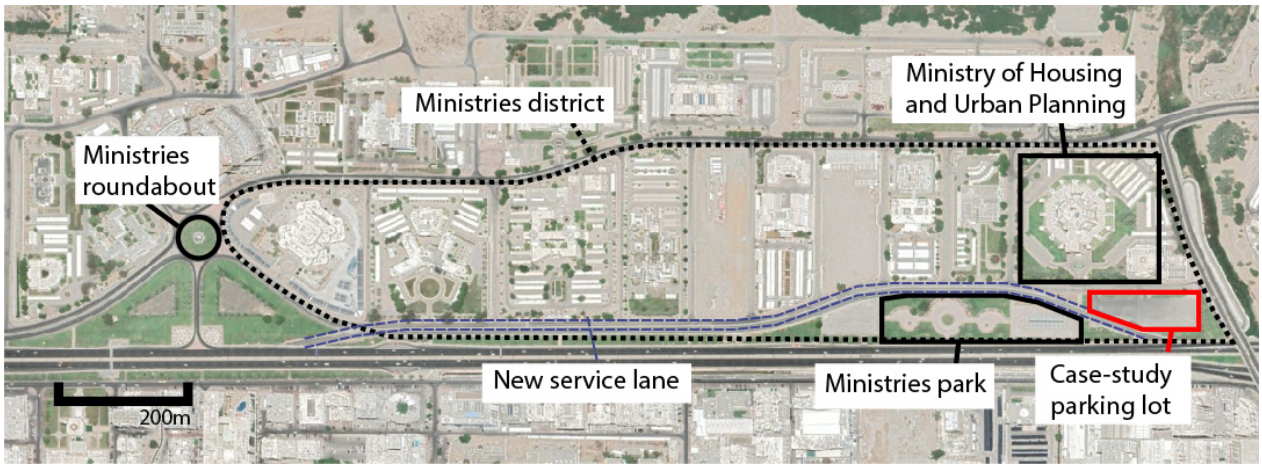

Figure 5.18 Indication of the ministries' district. Map by author using Google Earth Imagery.

5.4.3 Appropriation Practices at the Ministries' Parking Lot

This section first addresses the timeline of activity, then the different zones of activity, followed by the factors that impact space appropriation in the case study. Consequently, the section ends with a closer look at the significance of these activities in the participants' lives.

During weekdays, from Sunday to Thursday, the ministries officially operate between 7:00 am and 2:00 pm. During work hours, as pedestrians pass through parking lots between ministries, the parking lots are occupied with visitors' and employees' cars, resulting in substantial traffic. During this time, traffic jams occupy the inner streets and the roundabout. Eventually, in the early afternoon, the parking lot is cleared out as the ministries officially close. Between approximately 3:00 pm and 4:30 pm the ministries area experiences minimal activity, as this expansive district serves no function. However, shortly before sunset, a few families or individuals can be observed driving in the parking lot, and it becomes evident that the southern part of the ministries district is being appropriated for leisure activities.

On weekends, Friday and Saturday, the parking lot remains empty for most of the day and starts to

attract visitors around 4:00 pm, for leisure. This is when the parking lot attracts the highest number of visitors. Around sunset, depending on the season, the number of visitors peaks, and active users who participate in physical activities occupy the area until dark. The duration of stay changes throughout the year depending on when the sun sets. Visitors who arrive with children typically leave as the sun starts to set, while adults that are not accompanied by children typically arrive later and stay later than families. On weekdays, the visitor crowds are notably smaller compared to weekends, and during summers, there are fewer users compared to winters.

On Friday and Saturday afternoons, the parking lot is dominated by South Asian families. They usually arrive at the parking lot with their private cars parked on the periphery of the parking lot, leaving space in the middle for activities to take place. Once in the parking lot, parents typically empty the car and unload bicycles, scooters, or roller skates (see Figure 5.19). On a typical weekend, up to 16 cars have been observed parked in the afternoon.



Figure 5.19 The ministries' parking lot during working hours. Photo by author.

During the hours of leisure activity in the late afternoons, the parking lot was primarily visited by families with children. Adults between the ages of approximately 30 and 50, accompanied by children between the ages of 5 and 13, were the most common demographics observed in the parking lot; it was uncommon to see toddlers or elderly visitors.

The families observed were typically middle-income families from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, judging by their belongings and the cars they arrived in. Among the families, the predominant demographic was Indian Hindus. Families commonly spoke Malayalam, Hindi, and English. Some parents

who actively participated in activities with their children wore sports clothes. Although South Asians were the predominant demographic in the parking lot area, visitors also included Arab Levant families.

A variety of activities were observed in the parking lot, with the most common among the children being riding bikes, riding scooters, rollerblading and inline skating (see Figure 5.20). These children were always accompanied by their parents who kept an eye on them. Some parents jogged behind their children on the bicycle, and some parents biked alongside their children. In both cases, they remained close in proximity.



Figure 5.20 The ministries' parking lot and its informal visitors. Photo by author.

During the evenings, this area is dimly lit. However, visitors were observed walking on the inner streets of the ministry, passing by the parking lot. These visitors were predominantly South Asian couples, but also included Omani couples. Some men were also observed walking alone. Evening visitors were typically over the age of 35 and always arrived by car.

The interviews revealed several reasons for the predominant presence of South Asian migrants in the parking lot, but none was stronger than the location. The close proximity to their residences not only saved travel time, but also offered the advantage of having home close by in case a restroom was needed, especially considering the lack of public facilities in the ministries' district. However, it is not only the proximity to home that attracts users to this area. Once familiarised, users have also continued to visit the parking lot for leisure activities despite having moved to other residential neighbourhoods.

Considering that all visitors arrived with their private cars, the proximity to their parked cars was also perceived as an advantage. The participants highlighted the convenience of quick and easy accessibility to their belongings in their cars parked in the parking lot. This allowed the children to engage in various

activities during one visit. For example, a bicycle could be exchanged with roller blades once the child wished to switch the activity, and this could be done rather quickly, due to the close proximity of the gear in the car. This allowed flexibility in activities, which was appreciated by both parents and children. In addition, food, drink and childcare bags were also brought along and within easy reach. Visitors mentioned their increased mobility in the area as they did not have to carry or find a space to store their belongings. *"I will keep everything in my vehicle so that I can go around",* one father shared.

Several participants also appreciated the close proximity to alternative areas that the ministries district offered, namely the grass lawn area and the inner ministry lane. This offered alternatives in the event that the parking lot reached capacity. If the change in location required a change in activity, the alternate gear was readily accessible. For example, Deepika, a 40-year-old sales coordinator, commented on the varieties of activities that her family participated in:

> "We play badminton, we play catch… I mean the tennis ball catch because normal tennis you cannot play. We play football. Sometimes we used to play cricket. (On) the other side where there is concrete, we used to play cricket".

Deepika's family chose their area according to the intended activity. On days they wished to play cricket, a sport that requires a firm paved surface, they stayed in the parking lot. However, on days when they wanted to play football, they moved to the grass area. Some participants chose their activity based on the availability of space. When the parking lot was too crowded, they occupied adjacent grass areas instead, which determined their activity for that afternoon. Several participants appreciated the flexibility of both location and activity that was possible in the case study.

Not only was the possibility of using the lawn area attractive in case of an overcrowded parking lot, but the presence of grass, flower beds and palm trees on the parking lot was another factor that attracted visitors. The participants made several references to nature. For example, Deepika noted, "The look of it, the green colour, basically green is a pleasing colour… It adds freshness". She added that being in close proximity to the "green" makes the parking lot a "good outer place for playing".

Several participants highlighted that the parking lot is "open" and "plain" with flat terrain, which made it ideal for children and adults alike to carry out activities that required space and flat terrain, such as cycling and playing cricket; activities which otherwise cannot be carried out in a landscaped park with paths, such as the ministries' park. Interestingly, some participants drew comparisons to paved streets in India which were characterised with many "ups and downs" in contrast to the well paved parking lot.

The openness mentioned by the visitors was also associated with fresh air and the advantage of being outdoors. Several participants drew a comparison between the parking lot to "closed area games" in malls, referring to indoor playgrounds, asserting that they preferred their children to play outside rather than within a mall. This was increasingly significant during COVID-19, when malls were restricted in access, particularly for children.

Although the parking lot is a large expanse, it only has two entrances. Parents indicated that this was a factor in providing visibility over their children. Furthermore, although it is a large area, it is contained and protected from traffic. In other words, it is "open" enough to be able to ride bicycles freely but "closed" and sheltered enough from other cars so that parents feel safe to let their children ride through the large area. Before carrying out activities, the families often sought a spot which was not occupied by other visitors. The interviewees often mentioned the word "availability" and the fact that the parking lot was "not too crowded". This was another key attraction point for families when compared to designed leisure areas such as beaches and parks. Moreover, some participants preferred places where they had "enough privacy".

It is worth noting that COVID-19 has influenced the occupancy of the parking lot. Activity during pre-COVID times was learned through the interviews, whereas the activity in post-COVID times was assessed by revisiting and observing the site during a later stage of the dissertation. On the one hand, users reported a decrease in activity in the parking lot due to initial lockdowns and general precautions against crowded public areas. Cricket players, for example, have feared being evicted by the authorities for their large gatherings; a fear that also stems from former cricket activities that were prohibited in the ministries parking lot, amongst other parking lots (see Figure 5.21). On the other hand, considering the limitations of indoor activities such as visits to the mall or gatherings at home, and considering the restrictions on visiting formal public areas such as beaches and parks, the parking lot witnessed an increase in visitors during COVID-19 as parents sought places where their children play. The unregulated parking lot offered opportunities for appropriation, without the intervention of the authorities, as long as the gatherings were not too large. This worked in favour of the visitors who remained in small gatherings of their own nuclear families, as opposed to larger gatherings of organised sports.

When examining the factors that drew visitors to the parking lot, four main factors were identified. The first was its proximity to their homes, which offered reduced travel time. The second was the convenience of having their car close by. The third was the large, paved area, which allowed for various activities. The fourth was the surrounding areas that provided alternatives for visitors to participate in other activities.



Figure 5.21 A sign prohibiting cricket in a parking lot in Al Qurum. Photo by author.

The interviews and observations demonstrated that the parking lot served primarily as a place for families to spend time together. This included parents both actively participating in the children's activities or merely supervising them. In the former, parents valued their time in the case study as an opportunity to bond with their children. In this case, families engaged in activities together, either in a sport or riding bikes together (see Figure 5.22).



Figure 5.22 Parents accompany their child on bicycles. Photo by author.

Deepika reported using this time to savour the fleeting moments of her son's youth. She expressed her concern that when her son is older, he may no longer be interested in spending time with her and her husband, as they did in the parking lot. Therefore, their time together was perceived as a period to cherish and make the most of her son's childhood. Deepika explained, *"Once my child grows, or, for that matter, any child grows, he will not even have time for that again, he will be busy with his own activities in life".* Deepika and her husband offered their son a wide variety of activities to play together each weekend in the parking lot, depending on his wishes on that particular day. She noted, *"So that time, even if you don't talk with each other, (it) is more than enough…you are together*".

However, parents that supervised their children playing often referred to parenting as an activity in and of itself. Keeping watch over and chasing after their children was described as their share of physical activity for the day. For some parents, it had less to do with their own interests, less to do with family bonding and more to do with their children getting some fresh air and being entertained so as to "*not get bored at home*". Parents perceived child supervision as an act of responsibility rather than a leisure activity or bonding time, indicating that they did not benefit from it themselves. When asked about his visit to the parking lot, Dilip, a 40-year-old engineer, unenthusiastically stated, *"It's good for the kids".* When asked about the power dynamics in the parking lot and if one demographic had more say over the other, he replied, *"No. It is owned by the kids".*

Although most of the visitors pointed towards a family-related purpose of visit, some participants also perceived their time in the parking lot as a time away from their screens: phones, tabs, TVs, and laptops. One parent raised concerns that her family was "*hooked to screens*". Therefore, spending time outdoors offered an alternative to a sedentary indoor lifestyle, offering opportunities for mental and physical stimulation through exercise in the fresh air.

Moreover, some participants reported listening to podcasts or music while walking alone while others calculated their step counts; referring to an app that tracks how many steps have been taken during the day. The visitors aimed to reach their daily target of step counts on the app while walking through the ministries district. Most of the interviewees referred to health and fitness through exercise in the parking lot. Some parents who did not necessarily take walks, but chased behind their children, also tracked their steps during the day. Deepika noted how she expected that her current fitness levels may decline with age and that she wished to enjoy what her age allowed her to currently accomplish. She explained *"And we will not have that energy again, because as we age, I don't think everything you can do then as you do now (laughs). So how much ever is possible, we get along with it, that's it."*

In addition to fitness motivations, some interviewees revealed stress relief as a key factor behind their visits to the parking lot. They expressed valuing this time as a temporary escape from daily concerns to "not think about anything else". This time was perceived not only as family-time but also as *me-time*. For visitors who worked full-time jobs and cared for children simultaneously, the afternoons in the parking lot provided a break from the routines of the workweek. When asked about his visit to the parking lot and what meaning this had for him, Dilip summed it up shortly by saying *"it's good for enjoyment, it's good for children. It is good for stress reliever. It's all in there."*

Mariam, a 15-year-old student, referred to her time in the parking lot as *time-pass. Time-pass* is an Indian English term that refers to the act of engaging in an activity that is neither important nor enjoyable; an act undertaken to quite simply pass the time. *Time-pass* is, however, understood as a part of one's daily life. In Mariam's family gathering, the younger children ran around the parking lot, the men enjoyed a short game of cricket, and the women sat in portable folding chairs close to the car and chatted with one another. Mariam occasionally took a break from her phone to retrieve the cricket ball and bring it back to her father or uncle. Although the parking lot was not the ideal place for a teenager, she accepted it as part of her weekend and as a way to participate as a member of her family.

5.4.4 Negotiations and Compromise at the Ministries' Parking Lot

Throughout field work, including interviews and observations, no conflicts were identified in the parking lot. Visitors found places suitable for their activities and appropriated the spaces according to availability and activity. While there was limited interaction between the visitors in this case study, they were aware of each other. When asked about the other visitors in the parking lot, Pradeep, a 37-year-old engineer, had observed families from Asian countries and the Middle east, but not Europeans. Most visitors described the parking lot as a family-oriented space and did not report seeing single low-income migrant workers there during leisure hours. Ramathan further added that "everyone has their own territory", referring to the adjacent areas of the parking lot as well. Families assessed the activity at the parking lot before deciding where and whether to stay. For example, if the parking lot was too busy, Deepika's family moved to the grass area instead. She noted, *"We used to play cricket, but then many people started walking there and the children also started cycling and walking, and in order not to hurt them we shifted to this place".*

The majority of interviewees did not express a need for modifications to the parking lot. When asked about their wishes to alter the space, participants were aware that this was an appropriated space and therefore felt it was irrelevant to request for improvements. However, some participants spoke about the parking lot as if it were a formal public space and complained about the lack of public facilities, such as restrooms. Mariam, who was the only teenager interviewed, enjoyed the place the least. She complained that there was not much to do there as a teenager and wished to meet someone new. However, the parking lot does not serve as a place for a teenager to meet others their age. She called the space "*plain*" several times, indicating it was empty and void of what she considers important for a public space. When asked to describe the place, Mariam pointed out that there was *"nothing…like trees or buildings*".

5.4.5 Examining Space Appropriation at the Ministries' Parking Lot

Most of the families who visited the parking lot resided in nearby apartments and did not own backyard spaces. Moreover, they lived in areas without pocket parks. Therefore, it can be deduced that visitors perceived the parking lot as an extension of their residence; a kind of backyard large enough for children to play, yet contained enough for parents to supervise them safely.

The parking lot was visited most frequently by families, particularly, South Asian families with children and access to a car. These families live in Al Khuwair, a neighbourhood with a large population of South Asian families. All the families interviewed displayed a connection to their communities and social circles, including extended families or friends, or both. This can be deduced as a reason why the families did not interact with other visitors or make new connections on site. The parking lot was not perceived as a place where families plan to meet other families. It was mainly occupied by small families who spent time with each other, mostly with their own children, somewhere close to their home.

Although the parking lot was primarily visited by children and their parents, it suited a specific age group of children. Toddlers, preteens, and teenagers were less likely to use the space: toddlers because of the lack of soft surfaces or equipment, and older children because they had outgrown the stage of running freely in open areas. It was, however, an attractive place for children who were old enough and interested to ride a bike, roller blade or ride a scooter. In addition, it was not a place for unsupervised children, because access to the parking lot required a car. Therefore, the parking lot attracted children whose parents could accompany them there with a car.

Considering the limitations in accessibility and the general user profile of the parking lot area, it was evident that low-income workers did not appropriate the space, primarily because they lacked car access. Furthermore, the parking lot was a family-dominated space, which may not have been socially or culturally inviting for single male low-income workers.

When investigating why the predominant activities in the parking lot were related to forms of mobility, such as biking, walking or riding scooters, it can be inferred that Muscat's car-oriented lifestyle and its lack of pedestrian paths and cycling infrastructure, limits daily mobility options. As a consequence, the parking lot served as a place where such activities could be carried out as weekend activity to substitute daily activity.

5.4.6 Key Insights

This chapter examined how the parking lot of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning of Muscat transformed into a place for children and families in the afternoons. After examining the physical attributes, activities and the visitors of the case study, the analysis revealed that the ministries parking lot offered an expansive and convenient alternative to parks for South Asian migrant families living in the neighbouring area of Al Khuwair. It offered them a flexible place to spend family time together participating in activities oriented around fitness, play, and sports. Moreover, its primary visitors were children. A majority of interview partners expressed the importance of staying active and how their presence at the parking lot was mainly motivated by the intention to bring their children outside to play freely in a large area. This was to compensate for the lack of larger play areas in Al Khuwair. Accessing the parking lot without a car was inconvenient, which largely determined who could access the parking lot and who was restricted from it.

To summarise, the case study of the ministries' parking lot falls under the category of developed spaces and the subcategory of infrastructure. It is considered a medium-sized area compared to the other case studies and is located in a special urban district dedicated to ministries, which is only accessible by car. Outside of work hours, the parking lot was appropriated by middle-income South Asian migrant families with children. Serving such varied purposes made it a highly flexible and adaptable space. Consequently, the primary activities were related to children's leisure and included bicycling, riding scooters, and roller blading. The parking lot was most frequently occupied on weekends in the afternoon but was also occupied during weekday afternoons, particularly by adults walking on the inner ministry streets. The

visitors were primarily residents of the neighbouring area of Al Khuwair. Additionally, the case study did not present conflict between its visitors. Visitors did not claim a stake in ownership of this area, as they typically appropriated it once a week with no physical interventions.

Outside of official working hours, South Asian families in Al Khuwair appropriated the parking lot to meet their spatial needs. A decade ago, the parking lot was a place for South Asian men to play cricket. During the field work period, it was a place for parents to bring their children to play. It can be assumed that this space could be appropriated by other users for different activities in the future depending on the needs and circumstances of its future visitors.

5.5 Sahwa Lawn: An Urban Oasis that Resembles Kerala

This case study focuses on a section of the beautification of the Sultan Qaboos highway between Athaibah and Ghubrah north, referred to as the *Sahwa lawn* by its visitors. Although not originally intended as a park, Sahwa lawn has been transformed into a park-like public space by migrant residents in the neighbourhood. Compared to other case studies in the dissertation, activity in this area remained constant even during peak heat hours due to the shade provided by large banyan trees and a microclimate that resembles memories of Kerala for some of its visitors. Additionally, it is the sole location where women feel at ease spending time alone, rendering it unique not only among other case study sites but also among public spaces in Muscat.

The Sahwa lawn area falls into the subcategory of beautification under the category of developed spaces because it is designed and maintained by Muscat Municipality. This is a medium-sized case study with a high degree of maintenance and development. It is situated in a heavily urban and mixed-use environment. Although it is very easily accessible by foot and car, visitors mostly arrived by foot. It attracted a large variety of users compared to the other case-study areas and a wide variety of activities, second to the case study at Athaibah beach. Low-income migrants, middle-income migrants, families as well as single men or groups of single men, and most surprisingly single women, were all visitors to this case-study area. The various activities carried out at the Sahwa lawn are mostly leisurely and include sports, gatherings, and lunch breaks. Although there were negotiations about usage between these different users, there was little to no conflict between them.

This chapter presents the physical attributes that constitute the case-study area, its usage timeline throughout the day, and a detailed insight on visitor profiles and the activities they took park in. This is followed by the advantages of the Sahwa lawn that attract users there, and the importance and meaning of this place in the daily lives of its visitors. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the practices of appropriation and a summary.

5.5.1 Methods

The methods adopted to study this area were based on qualitative interviews, conducted on site and on the phone, systematic participant observations, photography, and videos. 11 participants were

interviewed for this case study (see Table 5.5), most of whom have been visiting the case-study area for several years. Of all the participants, seven were men and four were women. All participants were from India except one who was from Bangladesh. About half of the participants were of middle-income backgrounds, two were from upper-income backgrounds, and two were low-income migrants.

The participant observations were conducted during regular visits to the Sahwa lawn area as I took walks around the area or sat in one area at a time. I approached all interview partners on site. Most of the interviews were conducted spontaneously on site; others were scheduled in the same area at another time. In this case, the interview partner and I laid out some chairs, or a blanket on the grass, and I conducted the interview. Additionally, some of the interviews were conducted over the phone. It is worth noting here that no gatekeeper was required for this case study, as the interviewee sample consisted mainly of individuals or families that could be approached directly on site. The interviews were held in English, Hindi, and Indian English.

Table 5.5 Table of participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Occupation	Years in Muscat
Rashab	M	20	Indian	Student in Chicago (visiting Muscat)	20
Smiti	F	48	Indian	Lecturer at local college	23
Rimmi	F	39	Indian	Engineer and mother of two	16
Nayana	F	20	Indian	Student	20
Raj	M	44	Indian	Quality control	14
Reshma	F	36	Indian	Home maker and mother of two	8
Indrajath	M	49	Indian	Pharmaceutical sales	21
Amisha	F	32	Indian	Home maker and mother of two	6
Prateek	M	35	Indian	Pharmacist and father of two	13
Mahesh	M	22	Indian	Gardener	5
Abdul Karim	M	31	Bangladeshi	Sanitation worker	10

5.5.2 Physical Attributes of Sahwa Lawn

The case study is located at a central and busy junction where Athaibah and Ghubrah meet, situated on the southwestern corner of Ghubrah North. Some of the interviewees have referred to it as the *Sahwa lawn*. It lends its name to its proximity to the Sahwa Towers, an agglomeration of apartments and one of the most dense residential blocks in the area, which lies north of the case-study area (see Figure 5.23). This area is a densely populated residential neighbourhood with commercial activities on the main streets. The south of the area is bordered by the Sultan Qaboos highway and a flyover. A Mwasalat[2] bus stop for short-haul buses is located on the southern border of the case-study area. Further westward along the continuation of the beautification zone, another bus stop and taxi stand can be found, accommodating long distance shared taxis. The headquarters of the National Bank of Oman is located in the west of the area and the Supreme Court of Oman is in the east.

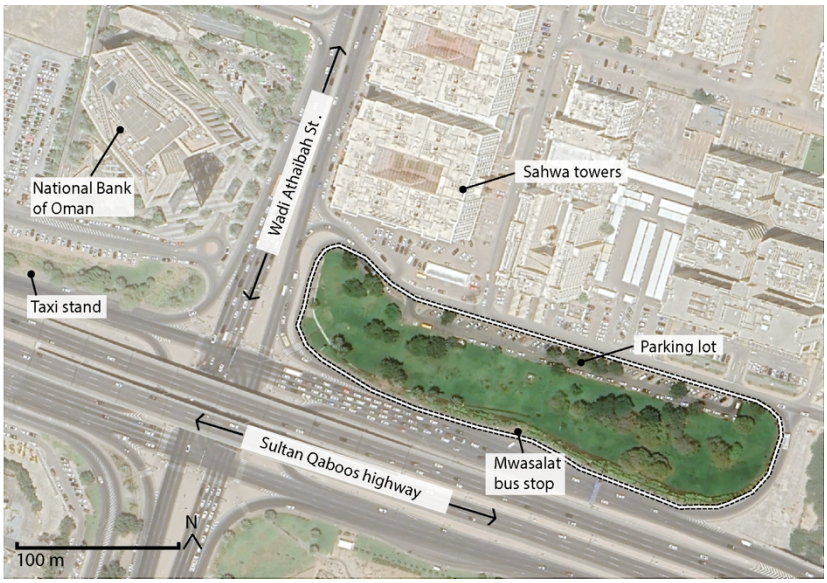

Figure 5.23 Indication of Sahwa lawn within dotted line. Map by author using Google Earth Imagery.

The middle section of the lawn area spans about 45 metres in width and 300 metres in total length, covering an area of about 15,000 square metres. The case-study area also includes a narrow parking lot on the north border, which is used by residents, people visiting the commercial spaces in the neighbourhood, and taxi drivers. Additionally, a small bicycle parking can be found on the northwestern border of the case-study area. The western wing of the lawn is relatively flat in topography, whereas the eastern wing inclines slightly upward to meet the highway which is elevated about 2 metres above

[2] The largest public transportation service in Oman.

the level of the case-study area. The southeastern corner of the case study is surrounded by bushes that serve as a buffer against highway noise and visibility, creating an enclosed and private atmosphere in the corner. This contrasts with the flatter, more open and exposed area on the western end of the case-study area. The lawn area stands out as a distinctive green oasis within a dense urban setting. The space is covered in grass lawn, bordered by palm trees and interspersed with large banyan trees that create rhythmic punctuations of shade in the space (see Figure 5.24). Bushes on the periphery buffer the presence of the highway and thus create a microclimate in the enclosed space.

From Sahwa lawn, there is a clear view of the Hajar Mountains and the Grand Mosque, beyond the flyover (see figure 5.24). Although there is a constant hum from the highway in the background, during the day, one could also hear the continuous chirping of birds.



Figure 5.24 Left: Sahwa lawn from Wadi Athaibah Street. Right: Sahwa lawn with southern mountain range and Sultan Qaboos Mosque in background. Photo by author.

The case-study area, designed to beautify the highway, does not offer rest areas, benches, facilities, or even lighting, for that matter. The only provision includes trash cans that are disproportionately small to the area they serve. When the sun sets, the area remains lit by the streetlamps and the lights of the bright advertisement signs around the busy intersection. The design of the area clearly indicates that it was not intended to attract visitors. Instead, it was designed purely for aesthetic purposes, similarly to other beautification zones along the Sultan Qaboos Highway.

5.5.3 Appropriation Practices at Sahwa Lawn

This section first addresses the timeline of activity, then the different zones of activity, followed by the factors that impact space appropriation in the case study. Consequently, the section ends with a closer

look at the significance of these activities in the participants' lives.

Sahwa lawn is first occupied by Municipal gardeners between 5:00 am and 3:00 pm. The landscape is meticulously maintained by them for six days a week throughout the year, similar to other beautification landscapes along the roads in Muscat. They trim trees and bushes and ensure that the lawn remains green throughout the year despite the dry Omani climate. During their breaks, or after work hours, the workers frequently gather in the lawn area. During the first half of the day, in addition to gardeners, the area received only occasional visits from informal users, such as middle-income men and women who arrive as early as 6:00 pm to about 7:00 am for sports or fitness-related activities.

In the afternoon, the formal maintenance activities and landscape upkeep come to a halt, and from 4:00 pm until sunset, the frequency of visitors increases. This is the case throughout the week, regardless of weekdays, weekends, or public holidays, making this case study one of the most frequented areas in the sample. During peak hours, Sahwa Lawn attracts diverse visitors, including low- and middle-income migrants, men and women, both individually and in groups. While the majority of visitors are South Asian, Filipino migrants are also observed in this area. This is also a popular place for South Asian middle-income migrants and young Omani men. Unlike other case studies in the sample, and in Muscat at large, South Asian migrant women, both low-income and middle-income, are often observed spending time alone at Sahwa Lawn. Furthermore, children in the area are usually accompanied by their parents.

Once the sun has set, the lawn remains occupied by the same groups as the peak timing, but in a lower frequency with fewer younger children. The area is used until 11:00 pm or even later during weekends. It is uncommon to observe women alone at night, but they are often seen in the company of others. Like most other case studies, the frequency of visitors is higher in winter than in summer. However, unlike other case-study areas, this area remains occupied throughout the day, even during the peak of the sun. This can be attributed to the trees providing shade for visitors in the afternoon.

The case-study area is divided into four main zones of activity. The first is the western end of the lawn, which is the most exposed to the traffic junction, with no bushes, but some trees. The second is the middle section of the lawn that has the most open space with fewer trees and is protected from the highway by bushes. The third is the eastern end, which offers the most privacy from the highway, with many trees and bushes at the edges. The fourth is the paved parking lot on the northern border.

The western end is usually occupied by low-income workers, as they rest under the shade of the trees in the daytime, alone or in company. During this time, workers typically engage in activities such as using their phones, taking a nap (see Figure 5.25), or eating a meal. Additionally, this is a popular spot for migrants to wait for a bus.



Figure 5.25 Left: Migrant worker resting on the lawn. Right: Migrant women gathering after a visit to the church. Photos by author.

During weekends, the lawn area is a popular place for low-income migrant groups to gather after Friday prayers at the mosque or a visit to the church. The vast majority of these visitors wear traditional clothing. South Asian men can be identified in *pathani suits* and women in *saris* (see figure 5.25). The visits at the western end are usually short, either to wait for transport, have a stopover during a journey, have a quick chat or a quick meal.

The middle section of the Sahwa lawn includes the above-mentioned activities, however, during the peak activity time, it is additionally occupied by men who play sports, most commonly football. Young Omani men, middle-income Indian men and low-income workers have been observed playing football in this section. On weekdays, young Omani men occupy the informal football field, while Friday afternoons and other weekends or public holidays are reserved for low-income workers. Other fitness or sports related activities include badminton, yoga, *kabaddi* and small games of cricket. These activities are carried out by middle-income South Asian migrants and some low-income South Asian migrants. When there are no sports activities, the area is used by families and/or migrant women for social gatherings. These groups sometimes bring chairs or blankets for seating, and usually bring food to share. These visits typically last between 30 minutes and 2 hours. However, not all visitors stay long, some visitors occupy the lawn area briefly to walk their dog, or in some cases, their cat.

The eastern end of Sahwa Lawn predominantly attracts migrant families and low-income workers in groups and as individuals, depending on the time of day (see Figure 5.26). Visits in this section are similar in length to the middle section. In this zone, it is common to see families posing for photos, individually or in groups. No sports are played in this section of the lawn.




Figure 5.26 Left: A group of low-income migrants play football while one watches the game in the middle section. Right: A group of low-income migrants gather with their shoes set aside in the eastern section. Photos by author.

Lastly, the parking lot area is appropriated by visitors who take walks, most commonly during the early morning hours or late evenings. These visitors are typically middle-income South Asian men or women dressed in comfortable clothes and sports shoes. Sometimes these visitors take a seat on the edge of the pavement to take a break from their walks.

The interviews revealed several factors that drew visitors to the area. The first was the proximity to their homes. Most of the interviewees in this case study reside in the neighbouring area. Moreover, as the name of the lawn area suggests, many of the visitors reside in the collection of Sahwa tower apartment buildings, which is less than a five-minute walk away. Therefore, a majority of the visitors walk to this area. Additionally, other migrant workers arrived by bike and stopped at the lawn area on their way home, for which the bike parking area proved to be convenient.

The second factor that attracted visitors to this area was the greenery. Several interview partners used the word "*green*" when describing what they enjoyed the most and what drew them to Sahwa Lawn. It was described as, "t*he only green space that we have here in this locality…".* Although it is close to the street and in the middle of an urban setting, it was described as having a microclimate of its own, with a relatively cooler temperature and less humidity, breezes in the evening, and better quality of air. Rashabh, a 20-year-old student shares, "*Even though you can see cars over there, it still feels good, feels different from other places and then it has this cool atmosphere".* In addition to the climatic aspects, several interviewees noted that playing sports on the grass lawn was gentler on their knees. An interviewee shared that she is part of a marathon practice group that practices in this area every year before the Muscat Marathon.

In addition to its convenience and availability, greenery held deeper meanings and importance for its

visitors. It was not only a factor that offered the sports players a relief to their knees, and children a soft ground to play on, but it also played a part in invoking nostalgia, particularly for those interviewees who made references to their hometowns in Kerala. They spoke of a longing for such a green landscape and for the feeling of moist ground under their feet, as is common in South India with its monsoon seasons. An interviewee pointed out the Banyan trees in the area, because they are native and commonly found in South Asia. Nayana explained, *"…it's probably because of my ethnicity. I'm Indian, and in Kerala, it's always very green, I tend to instantly feel better when I'm around green".* Amisha, a 32-year-old homemaker, went further to link what her parents taught her about the feeling of grass on her feet and how she would like to pass this on to the next generation:

> "It's nice, it's nice. It reminds me of my hometown where we used to walk in the morning, we would remove the slippers… I was in Delhi. There, when I was small, my parents used to go for a walk in the morning with us. So there, my parents always say, 'whenever you walk in the grass remove your slippers and walk'. It's give you a good feeling no? It gives me a good feeling. Yeah, so I want my children to learn this same thing".

The third factor of safety extends far beyond the green surface. Parents felt safe to bring their children to this space due to the familiarity of the visitors in the area. Prateek, a 35-year-old father shared that he feels safe to let his children play on soft grass without the fear of injury. When asked what brings his family to the Sahwa lawn, he responded,

> "…children can go far and play safely. Other people, like outside people, they will not come here, only who are staying nearby next to this. Because this is not a big park or something. Only whoever knows this place they will come here. So mostly, known people will be here, like daily regular people. Like this family (points) regularly I used to see. So mostly known people will be here, so it's safe, when they're playing."

Most of the women interviewed reported feeling safe at Sahwa lawn, which was corroborated by the observations of women seen at the lawn alone. Nayana, a 20-year-old student, attributed this to the family-oriented characteristics of space. She elaborated,

> "…this place is almost always a family space. It's always kids and right now there's people playing football. In another section, you will see people sitting with chairs and eating and then another section, you'll see maybe (a) family playing badminton and then on this pathway, in this parking lot, there will be people walking up and down. So, there is never a moment where I felt unsafe, even if I was to come at 1:00 am, 2:00 am".

Nayana highlights an additional factor that draws people to the lawn area: the variety of activities in the different zones of the space. This is possible at Sahwa lawn because it consists of different areas with varying characteristics, fit for specific activities. Additionally, throughout the day, it also offers different ambiences. As the temperature changes, as light changes, and as the users interchange, the space undergoes changes in atmosphere. When asked why one of the interviewees preferred to walk here at night, he responded, *"that's a different atmosphere at 10:00 pm when these lights of the signboard and the streetlamps are off, then things are calmer"*. He elaborates further to explain how he experiences different moods and different ambiences in the same space, depending on whether he is alone, or with friends, depending on how loud it is at the lawn area, or if he has music in his ears. These observations demonstrate that the case study is a flexible and adaptable space that accommodates the varying needs expressed by the South Asian migrant workers who occupy it.

The fact that the Sahwa lawn area is part of the Municipality's beautification plan poses some advantages and disadvantages to users. An advantage noted by some interviewees was the clean condition of the area, which contributed to their comfort in bringing their families there and leaving their children on the ground. An obvious disadvantage of the Sahwa Lawn, as a beautification area designed for aesthetic purposes, was its lack of public facilities, such as benches and restrooms. This, however, did not appear to be a disadvantage for the visitors, considering most of them lived close by. Additionally, to compensate for the lack of seating provisions, visitors brought chairs or picnic blankets with them. Furthermore, the majority of visitors enjoyed the contact and proximity to the grass and did not express the need for benches. However, the lack of restrooms presented a challenge for the low-income migrant visitors who did not live in the area and the Municipal gardeners who work there. Therefore, gardeners resorted to nearby mosques or stores where they have befriended the salesmen.

Abdul Karim, a 31-year-old sanitation worker, plays football every week with other Bangladeshi men. In his interview he explained how, through social connections, the players gained access to a formal football field for a discounted price unofficially, during its off-hours. This arrangement allowed the men to play the sport on a formal sports field for one hour, after which, they made their way to Sahwa lawn

to continue their matches late into the night, free of cost. For low-income migrants interested in football but unable to afford renting a field space, the middle zone of Sahwa lawn serves as an alternative, due to the presence of lawn and the absence of trees, where they face no fees, no time limit and no other visitors to share the space with.

Rimmi, a 39-year-old engineer, shared that the lawn area provided the perfect setting for walks with her husband, giving them valuable time without the children to improve their marriage and make decisions about the household. When asked further about the topics of their talks she answered,

> "Personal, emotional and work-related stress. What is bothering each other and what can be done. Lots of things we discuss, and such discussions normally happen on these walks, and it feels good in a way. Because we are fully busy in our work life, we feel connected only during these walks where we both are emotionally connected. When you share so much, you feel connected to each other in that way. When you go home you feel that the connection is rebuilt. It's like a reboot".

While Sahwa lawn hosts a large variety of group and couple activities, it is also frequently occupied by individuals. Some interview partners reported spending time alone to reflect on their thoughts. It has been described as a place with "*positivity*", a place that is "*soothing*", and a place to "*introspect*". Furthermore, it was portrayed as a calm place, in contrast to the busy schedule, which most of the interviewees reported having throughout the week. An interviewee noted that the place helped him "*accept reality*", while another interviewee, interviewed on the same day, noted that he would often "*imagine and daydream*" in this space. This demonstrates that the participants derived various benefits from Sahwa Lawn, depending on their distinct needs, highlighting the case study's capacity to meet both the mental and physical needs of the migrants who appropriate it.

5.5.4 Negotiations and Compromise at the Sahwa Lawn

The analysis of the interviews and observations demonstrates that this case-study area did not present any conflicts and that, compared to other case-study areas, minimum negotiations were made between individual visitors and groups. However, there were unspoken compromises made by the groups. For

example, when I approached him, Raj, a 44-year-old single man, was a part of a gathering with other South Asian migrant men at the lawn area. When asked about why they had chosen the eastern part of the lawn to gather, he replied, "*Actually, we are bachelors, and (there) they are families, so we keep distance and sit on the other side. As you saw us that day, we were away from the families".*

Similarly, sports groups were also aware of the unsaid territorial boundaries at the lawn area. However, these rules were based less on family status and more on nationality. For example, Abdul Karim made it clear that negotiations with South Asian sports groups were easy to manage. His team held precedence over the Indian sports group because they had constructed and transported their own goal post in the lawn area, which was regularly used during Friday matches. This served as an indication to mark their territory. He explained, "*Sometimes the Indians come, if they are playing and they see us coming, they will move, because we play here all the time and we have a goal post".* He goes on to compare his interactions between other South Asian teams and the Omani teams.

> "See, these guys here are Bengali. If we say we want to play, they will say no problem, we can play together. But if an Omani says it, it is a problem. It has never happened, but if an Omani ever comes and says he wants to play, then we will say okay go ahead. We will compromise. If anyone comes and wants to play it is fine. We know alternative fields in Muscat. We will go there; it is not a problem."

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Abdul Karim's team cannot leave their goal posts unattended in the lawn area for two reasons. Firstly, due to regulations and secondly due to other sports teams. Muscat Municipality regulates Sahwa lawn and does not permit visitors to build interventions in the area. When Abdul Karim's team left their goal post at the lawn, to their misfortune, they later found it damaged by other teams. This resulted in great disappointment as acquiring funds for the construction of a goal post is a challenging endeavour for a sports team of low-income migrant workers. Because it is inconvenient to transport the goal posts from the lawn area, and store them in the workers' cramped accommodations, the men decided to hide the goal post in the bushes of the lawn area when it was not in use. Therefore, after every game, the goal posts are tucked away in the bushes, away from the sight of the Municipality inspection officers and other sports teams. This demonstrates how migrants navigate agency in a space regulated by and shared with others.

5.5.5 Examining Space Appropriation at Sahwa Lawn

Why does Sahwa lawn attract diverse demographics compared to other beautification areas? This can be answered by comparing Sahwa Lawn to an adjacent beautification zone, for example, the beautification zone at the long-haul bus stop and taxi stand located west of the Wadi Athaibah Street. That area attracts predominately low-income migrant men who wait for a bus or have just completed a journey. They typically rest under the shade of palm trees while waiting for transport or taking a break during or after work hours. The visitors' demographics of that area differ from those at Sahwa Lawn for three main reasons. First, the Sahwa lawn area is closer to the residential area and does not require users to cross a large street with heavy traffic. This makes it more attractive for families. Second, the Sahwa lawn area is further away from the main bus and taxi stand, where most of the passengers are low-income workers. Another factor which makes the lawn area a popular area for families and women is familiarising with other regular visitors. This familiarity offers an aspect of safety. Safety is also achieved by the visibility of the area, which prevents crime or precarious activity.

Interestingly, the lawn area is the only case-study area where users are present throughout the day, including peak hours of heat. This is attributed to the trees, which provide shade for visitors throughout the day. Additionally, the trees also prevent Sahwa lawn from turning into a primarily sports ground, as other wide beautification zones have transformed into, catering mainly to large Omani football teams.

Unlike in other case studies, such as Wadi Al Ghubrah, for example, the users of the Sahwa lawn do not leave behind built interventions to mark their territory. Therefore, territories cannot be claimed physically. In this case study, territorial marking is not imperative for almost all the activities. For example, if one area is crowded, a visitor can move to another area of the lawn. The only activity where a negotiation is needed is sports, which takes place in the centre area. This area is regulated timewise through unspoken rules. Each sports team has a designated time at which they play during the week. In case the rule is broken by another team, the decision will depend primarily on nationality. An Omani team has the first say in the situation. If the teams are of the same nationality, they may play together. And if they are of differing nationality, the second determinant comes into play; that is how often the team has played in that area.

When analysing the activities and the reasons that draw visitors to the lawn area, it becomes evident that the lawn area serves as an extension of other places. For example, for the residents of Sahwa towers, it serves as an extension of their homes serving as a substitute backyard. Although the residential towers offer a central inner courtyard, this courtyard has no lawn or trees and has formal play areas and sports infrastructure. However, wedged between buildings, it does not give residents the

feeling of "openness" that they so often refer to when describing the Sahwa lawn. The lawn also serves as an extension of mosques and churches, as low-income migrants take the bus back to this area after their religious visits and then spend time together on the lawn. This kind of gathering is not encouraged outside mosques and churches in Muscat and therefore, takes place at Sahwa lawn instead[3]. The area can also be considered an extension of the bus stop because the shade of a tree and some grass is perceived as a much more comfortable area to wait for a bus than a narrow concrete pavement. On a more abstract level, the Sahwa lawn acts as an extension of time and culture for some of its visitors. For example, it allows some visitors to re-live their time in South India where the greenery resembles that of the case-study area. Between the past memories of their childhood in Kerala and the thoughts of their future return to their home countries, Sahwa lawn offers a small piece of home through its foliage. For the younger generation that grew up in Muscat, it offers them a place to revisit their childhood neighbourhood park when they return from studies abroad. For the even younger visitors who are accompanied by their parents, new memories are made, which is what their parents want for them: memories associated with and in nature, like their own memories formed in Kerala.

5.5.6 Key Insights

The findings of the interviews and the observations reveal that the residents of North Ghubrah and North Athaibah use the Sahwa lawn area as a substitute for a park to compensate for the lack of public space in the neighbourhood. Sahwa lawn offers the perfect balance between being secluded enough from the urban parts of the neighbourhood but being accessible and close enough to it that it is easily reached, making it the neighbourhood's very own little oasis. Originally designed to beautify the highway, it also offers beauty to its visitors who bring their families there for photoshoots, for low-income migrants who use the greenery as a backdrop for their video calls, and for daily visitors who wish to experience a pocket of nature in an urban neighbourhood.

Sahwa lawn is a section of a continuous greenway of beautification along the Sultan Qaboos Highway. The case study is therefore a developed area that falls under the category of developed spaces and the subcategory of beautification. Due to its prime location in a densely urban area, situated at a major junction with two bus and taxi stops close to it, it is easily accessible by car. However, most of its visitors are residents of the neighbourhood and, thus, arrive by foot. The main visitors to the space are South

[3] During the preliminary search for appropriated areas, migrant workers gathered outside the church in Ruwi on a beautification zone next to a bus stop. These gatherings were later prohibited during COVID-19 and have been prohibited ever since.

Asian migrants. This includes a large variety of demographics of low-income and middle- income migrants, both male and female adults, including families with children. Visitors are typically engaged in leisure activities, such as lying in the grass, sitting under a tree, making phone calls, having picnics and gatherings with family and friends. It is also however used for playing sports and sometimes used as a waiting area for the buses and taxis. It presents little to no conflict as most of the user groups have found their own territory or their own time to use the Sahwa lawn to suit their needs without compromising others'. This can be attributed to the flexibility of the case study, as it offers particular physical attributes for particular activities and even varying atmospheres throughout the day, making it ideal to be appropriated by different users for different needs. For example, the shaded area with trees offers a perfect resting spot for a low-income migrant on a break from work, while the open area without trees offers a football ground to Bangladeshi workers on a Friday evening. Users do not claim a stake in ownership of this area because it is owned and maintained regularly by the Muscat Municipality. Therefore, they cannot build and leave behind interventions to mark territories or materially shape the area according to their needs.

Compared to other case studies of appropriated places in Muscat, the Sahwa lawn area stands out due to its variety of users and activities. It offers opportunities for leisure and sports in the same area and is the only case study in which the list of activities includes taking naps. It also stands out because it is the only area that was used throughout the day and remains occupied for the greatest number of hours a day. Informal activity typically took place at Sahwa Lawn between 5:00 am and 12:00 am. Unlike other case-study areas, there is no break in activity during the peak hours of heat, attributed to the fact that it offers shade under its trees and a general microclimate that is considerably cooler than its neighbouring urban areas. This is also the only case study where women feel comfortable enough to spend time alone. This quality makes it a special place not only compared to other case-study areas but also compared to any other public space in Muscat. Although the lawn resembles the landscape and function of a park, it was not designated or recognised as a park. Under the maintenance of Muscat Municipalities, it is identified as a beautification zone. At this juncture, it must be asked: what happens if Sahwa Lawn is developed to serve another function, or if gatherings are forbidden here as they have been forbidden at Ruwi Church street? The more mobile and resilient users, such as middle-income families or migrant worker football teams, will use their advantage in mobility or advantage in adaptation to find new grounds to appropriate. However, less mobile users, such as housewives or children may have to resort to staying indoors more often and single migrant workers resort to fewer breaks at work or breaks that do not involve a nap under the shade of a tree.

5.6 The Urban Cricket Grounds of Al Ghubrah

Friday mornings in Muscat are a distinct time, as they mark the first day of the weekend. The city slumbers in stillness as most businesses are closed and the highways remain empty. While most families stay home to rest on the first day of the weekend, a certain demographic defies this norm, or rather, utilised this pocket of inactivity for a specific purpose; namely: as early as 5:00 am in the morning, South Asian men gather in large groups around the city to occupy vacant grounds to play cricket. In these, sometimes secret, spaces, their shrieks and laughter of joy pierce through the silence of the city. Before the city gets busy at noon for the congregational Friday prayers at noon, the men wrap up their matches and head home, while most of their games go unnoticed by the average citizen of Muscat.

In this chapter, an informal cricket ground is examined in Al Ghubrah North. This case study is distinct compared to the other case studies due to three main factors. First, it is appropriated by a single demographic: South Asian men. It is not visited by women, children, or migrants of other nationalities. Second, only one activity is carried out in this case study: cricket. The cricket ground consists of five cricket fields and, therefore, five matches are played simultaneously. Third, it attracts the highest number of visitors performing a planned activity simultaneously, with more than 100 men on the grounds at a given time.

Within the framework of the project, the cricket ground falls in the subcategory of vacant spaces under the category of undeveloped spaces. It is one of the larger case-study areas and is situated on a private plot of land, along the increasingly commercial 18th November Street, in Al Ghubrah. Its visitors access the area by private car and carpool. The space is usually appropriated only once a week and is left barren at other times. Its usage is punctually scheduled and involves significant prior organisation. A singular demographic, paired with a singular activity, at a singular time during the week, renders the case study with a distinctive social dynamic, making it a significant case for further analysis.

The following chapter presents the methods adopted to examine the case study, its urban context, a description of activity, its timeline and a more detailed view on the cricket teams' demographics and the organisation of their games. This is followed by an analysis of why the cricket ground is an important part of their lives and the compromises that arise in the appropriation process. The chapter concludes with a summary.

5.6.1 Methods

This case study was examined adopting qualitative methods such as photography and videos, qualitative interviews which were mostly conducted off the cricket grounds, informal conversations on the cricket grounds and systematic observations on Friday mornings. Nine male cricketers were interviewed for this case study. Of the nine cricket players interviewed, four were Indian, two were Bangladeshi, two were Sri Lankan, and one was Pakistani (see Table 5.6). This is the only case study in which no women were interviewed. While only some of the interviewees were weekly visitors at the cricket grounds, all of the interviewees could offer valuable insight into this case study by drawing comparisons to other cricket fields in Muscat.

During field work on Friday mornings, the cricket grounds were occupied by over 100 men, with no other woman present other than me. Cricket players ran across the grounds at all times. Consequently, I stayed at the periphery of the cricket ground to conduct my observations and informal conversations. I had first visited the field alone, in traditional Indian attire, to approach the men and enquire about the games. After some unsuccessful attempts, I decided to dress in the attire most commonly worn by Omani women, an *abaya*. Additionally, I was accompanied by a male member of my family. This time, it was easier to attain attention and recognition for the research. Later, I learned that my attire, combined with the company of a man, gave the impression that I was conducting an official survey.

Table 5.6 Table of participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Occupation	Years in Muscat
Mohamed Rashid	M	36	Indian	Factory manager	13
Prabhu	M	38	Indian	Data Analysist	1
Nagarajun	M	40	Indian	Cleaner	8
Dilip	M	38	Indian	Chemical engineer	10
Syed Shaikh	M	30	Bangladeshi	Marketing	11
Ali Hussain	M	36	Bangladeshi	Cashier in supermarket	8
Ahmed Zahran	M	27	Sri Lankan	Quantity Surveyor	1
Ahmed Shihan	M	29	Sri Lankan	Quantity Surveyor	8
Ahmed Hussain	M	41	Pakistani	Driver	5

The initial observations were made while I was seated in a car. Eventually, I approached the field and spoke to the men who were not playing but were either waiting for their turn to play, resting, or keeping track of scores. I asked them if I could take photographs and videos of them and the games, which they agreed to once they understood the aims of the research. Once acquainted with the teams, I carried out systematic observations on the periphery of the grounds and gathered contacts for in-depth interviews with the cricket players based on language compatibility and their willingness to participate.

When I was able to establish a good understanding with the captain of a team or a trusted member of the team, they often assumed the role of a gate keeper, which facilitated interviews with other members of the team. Gatekeepers also helped to translate informal conversations with low-income workers, which helped bridge language barriers and ease workers' fears of talking to a stranger about their informal activities. Interviews with middle-income cricket players were conducted largely in English, whereas interviews with low-income interviewees were conducted in Hindi or Urdu. None of the in-depth interviews were conducted on the cricket grounds, as the men were hesitant to dedicate time to an interview during their limited free time that was reserved for cricket. Consequently, the interviews were conducted at a later time, either in a coffee shop or on the phone.

5.6.2 Physical Attributes of the Cricket Grounds

The cricket grounds are situated along the busy and frequently traversed 18th November Street. Over the years, this street has undergone a transformation, as several residential buildings were repurposed for commercial activity. However, on a far eastern segment, the street is bordered by two large undeveloped plots of land. As noted in Chapter 2, it is not unusual to spot large undeveloped land plots in the urban fabric of Muscat. This is typically the result of private owners leaving their lands undeveloped due to the high costs associated with development and construction. Consequently, this chapter focuses on the vacant plot on the south side of the street (see Figure 5.27) that South Asian men appropriate as a cricket field. The grounds northern boundary is directly adjacent to 18th November street, while the other 3 borders are adjacent to residential villas, residential apartments, and their boundary walls. Due to the lack of official parking spots around this plot of land, the outer periphery is used as parking. The entire expanse measures approximately 170 metres in width and 180 metres in depth, rounding it up to approximately 30,000 square metres in total area. As this plot of land remains undeveloped, it lacks municipal maintenance and therefore lacks access to a drainage system. As a

consequence, during heavy rains or winds, the grounds collect stagnant water and broken branches from nearby trees.



Figure 5.27 Indication of the cricket grounds within the dotted line. Map by author using Google Earth Imagery.

During the interview phase, the grounds were arid and barren, void of any trees in the centre of the ground but bordered by trees and larger bushes on the periphery. The landscape at the grounds resembled that of a desert landscape characterised by a mixture of sand, dust, small and larger rocks, dustier in some parts, and rockier in other parts and occasionally dotted with weeds and sparse dry desert bushes. In the central zone of the grounds, five concrete pitches were developed which can be identified as white strips of concrete on the plot (see Figures 5.27 and 5.28). Each of these pitches measured about 23 metres in length and about 2.5 metres in width. Furthermore, and interestingly, according to Google imagery archives, the pitches were constructed around 2015 and some of them were labelled on Google Maps according to the cricket teams they belong to. All pitches were developed in the middle of the plot leaving the peripheries of the plot of land empty. This could be to maintain a distance from residential homes and the street. Although it is common to see barren lands turned into large cricket grounds on the outskirts of Muscat, it is rather unusual to find cricket grounds with multiple fields concentrated in such a small area located in a central and urban area.



Figure 5.28 A typical concrete pitch. Photo by author.

On some days, the markings of the cricket field boundaries surrounding each pitch were subtle, including markings on the ground in chalk. When the grounds were being appropriated, the interventions were more evident. For example, plastic cones were laid out to mark individual game fields and foldable chairs were placed around the peripheries of the grounds, sometimes under the shade of a tree. It is worth noting that one year after the field work, the concrete pitches were cleared by developers, as the plot was being prepared for construction and development.

5.6.3 Appropriation Practices at the Cricket Grounds

This section begins by outlining the timeline of activity, followed by a description of the physical interventions involved in appropriating the grounds for cricket. Next, it underlines the factors influencing the cricket players' selection and appropriation of this case study. The section ends with an examination of the significance these activities hold in the participants' lives.

From Sunday to Thursday, the standard work week in Muscat, the grounds typically remained barren as they were not appropriated for cricket or any other activities. However, on Fridays, around 5:00 am in summer, and around 6:00 am in winter, the grounds were occupied as teams of cricket players arrived to engage in matches. The games lasted for about three hours in total duration. After the games, the grounds returned to their barren nature, with no sign of the games remaining, except for the concrete pitches. Additionally, on Saturday mornings, around the same time, the grounds were occasionally

appropriated for cricket. However, the matches on Saturday were irregularly scheduled and attracted much fewer visitors compared to Friday matches. Therefore, the field work and this chapter focuses on the planned and scheduled activities of Friday mornings in the case study.

Cricket is widely recognised as the dominating sport in South Asian countries. Similarly to the sport itself, the appropriation activities in the case study were also male dominated. Notably, women and children did not participate in the cricket games on Friday. On Friday mornings, five matches took place simultaneously, involving 10 teams, each equipped with 11 players. This resulted in 110 players occupying the grounds at a time (see figure 5.29). All of the players were South Asian men between the ages of 24 to 45 from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Cricket players arrived by carpooling with members of the team that own a car. In some teams, only a small number of players had access to private transport. Consequently, those team members were responsible to pick up up to five other players from their homes. Moreover, most of the men wore cricket uniforms, also referred to as *kits*, corresponding to their teams. The teams were either formed by colleagues in a company, or were established through social networks, which often encompassed team members sharing the same nationality. In both cases, the socio-economic status of team members varied. For instance, this can occur when a team built around an engineering consultancy may have recruited an engineer and a janitor from the same office.



Figure 5.29 Impressions of the cricket matches on Friday morning at Al Ghubrah cricket grounds. Photos by author.

Although there were no women or children on the playing field at first site, the interviews revealed that on rare occasions, some players brought their wives or other family members to watch the games on Friday. Ali, a 36-year-old cashier, reveals in his interview:

> "They are staying inside the car, and they are seeing the match from inside the car. Also, another one of my friends, he brings his wife. We park the car in a place where they can watch the match together".

Access to a car was an essential prerequisite to play cricket in most large-scale grounds in Muscat. Low-income migrants with limited mobility and limited free time, usually resorted to small-scale games close to their accommodations. The cricket games at Wadi Al Ghubrah are such an example. However, middle-income migrants with increased mobility, free time and resources, had the opportunity to play cricket on larger grounds located on the outskirts of the city or even play cricket in stadiums. The cricket teams in this case study often shared a carpool system, which could be time consuming. Consequently, distant grounds could not be reached on time, and the players who have to work on Friday afternoon could not make it back in time for work either. Therefore, the team sought a place which was relatively close to their residences.

5.6.3.1 Physical Interventions at the Cricket Grounds

Some cricket teams in Muscat play matches on their own designated grounds every Friday, while others travel to new grounds every week, based on invitations to a match and availability. Five teams secured the case study grounds to be their "home" ground. Each of the five teams invested time, money, and manual labour into creating their dedicated pitch. Once constructed, the pitch granted them an informal ownership of the field surrounding it, which indicated their priority over the pitch every week and their ability to invite external teams to play against them. The construction of the pitches was facilitated by team members who worked in construction and had access to materials such as concrete, concrete mixers and levellers. In this case, the players kept an account of company projects with a surplus of materials and requested colleagues with construction expertise to assist in fabricating the pitch, who were then compensated with a small fee for their labour. Typically, building concrete pitches on barren land in the absence of an official permit is not a punishable offence. However, once the land is slated

for development, the pitches are removed without notice or discourse.

The cricket players marked their fields before each game to indicate the boundaries of their match. The inner fields were marked with either chalk, plastic-coloured cones, rocks, bricks, or by marking a line in the ground with a hard object. A game of cricket involves a central pitch where the bowling and batting takes place. This is surrounded by circular offset areas around the pitch to mark the close infield, the infield, and the outfield. However, due to the high number of simultaneous matches within a limited ground, there was not enough room for each game to encompass all the necessary fields.

Given that the case-study area is not categorised as a public space, it did not fall under the maintenance of Muscat Municipality. Therefore, the responsibility to keep the area clean remained with the cricket teams who were motivated to maintain its cleanliness and further motivated by the threat of losing access to the ground if it was found littered. This responsibility included keeping the area clean after bad weather conditions, which occur during rainy seasons. To elaborate, following seasonal rains, sandstorms, or winds, the grounds flooded with stagnant water and debris (see Figure 5.30). Moreover, after the water cleared, shrubs emerged along with piles of mud, leaving the ground uneven and pitted, and therefore unsuited for cricket games. As nothing could be done against stagnated water, the men waited for the water to dry and halted their cricket matches. Once dry, the men worked on the grounds to flatten it, a task carried out by hand, with limited tools, during their free time.



Figure 5.30 Cricket grounds flooded after seasonal rains. Photo by author.

5.6.3.2 Factors Influencing Appropriation at the Cricket Grounds

Despite the imperfections and limitations of the grounds, surprisingly, five teams had claimed this space as their own. There were several reported reasons for their choice. First, the grounds were available free of charge. The teams could play cricket at the grounds without a rental fee. Second, the undeveloped plot was sufficiently large to host games of cricket. Third, the area was accessible; unlike many undeveloped private plots in Muscat, which are typically enclosed by a wall. Fourth, the terrain was flat and void of hills or inclinations. Fifth, the grounds were located in an urban area within the city, which was within a convenient distance of the players residences in adjacent neighbourhoods, reducing travel time and easing transportation problems.

The interviews revealed that cricket players in Muscat did not choose their grounds based solely on their appeal, but ultimately based their selection on availability and accessibility. The dominant reason for their choice of the cricket grounds was the lack of a better alternative. Therefore, in order to understand why the cricket players were at these specific grounds, it is important to ask why they were not elsewhere. The interviewees stated four key factors that led them to their current grounds. First, although the players' first choice would be to play at rented stadiums or grass grounds, this was only accessible through a fee, which was an unaffordable option. Second, some participants had been banned from playing in other public places by the police, such as parks. Third, in some cases, residents complained about matches that took place in residential areas. And lastly, other sports teams took informally established grounds. In one specific example, a football team of Omani men had placed their goal posts on previous cricket grounds. These scenarios highlight the difficulty the teams faced in finding a place to play cricket in Muscat. Therefore, participants were aware that their current grounds may not be available indefinitely. When I asked the Dilip, a 38-year-old chemical engineer, about the possibility of the case-study area being developed, he answered,

> "…if they build something, then where will we go? Because there are other places like… there are some stadiums, but we can't go there and play. That is for the official teams, division leagues A, B, C. And they are under the Omani Ministry of sports. They have their own place. But we are normal people, we just play for fun. But if they keep on building on these lands, where will we go to play?"

5.6.3.3 Unpacking Meaning through the Players' Narratives

As explained in Chapter 3, a large majority of South Asian migrant men arrive in Oman without their families. Middle- and upper-income migrants' families have the possibility to obtain visas in Oman eventually, however, this is not extended to low-income migrant families. Consequently, low-income migrants experience isolation and homesickness in addition to being positioned at the bottom of a socio-economic hierarchy when they arrive in Muscat. The captain of one of the teams recalls his arrival in Muscat, before his family joined him and before he found a cricket team to participate in the following quote: *"I do remember when I was not with my family, a bachelor. I never laughed... I would take all the tensions from work and go back to home, just watch the TV and sleep".* Interviewees reported that it took them one year, on average, to integrate into a cricket team. Another participant expressed his joy upon being able to play cricket and how this facilitated social connection and cultural continuity:

> "See, in Oman, we get happy from cricket, it means a lot for us. We never thought that we would be able to play cricket in Oman! I thought that I will only work when I come here. But when I came, I saw that people also play cricket here! I was pleased! I am so attached to cricket. South Asian people, we play it so much. The biggest thing is that we can make friends... When we play cricket, we do not differentiate between ones that do big jobs or small jobs. When we play, we are all friends. That is the mentality, it is a positive one. We are all equal".



Figure 5.31 Players watch and keep score of the cricket matches. Photo by author.

Cricket teams often formed around social networks constituting players from the same country, or sometimes, the same city or village. These social interactions allowed cricket players to interact with people from the same socio-cultural background, speak native languages, and eat traditional food after

the games, facilitating access to root cultures and notions of home. Cricket not only served as a medium for social connections and leisure, but it also served as an outlet for stress relief, providing a stark contrast to their daily lives. Most of the low-income migrants on the teams worked 6 days a week, and several of them worked 7 days a week, with only Friday morning off. One participant referred to his life as otherwise "*mechanical*" and reported that the few hours of cricket every week were the best moments of his entire week. When asked about the relationship between stress and cricket, Mohamed, a 36-year-old factory manager, answered:

> "(the stress) all vanishes within this two hours' time when we play cricket. You come back as a new person. You're playing, you're laughing, you're running, your body is okay, everything is okay. I will say it is very important... The Friday morning is very important for me at the moment in my life. It gives you some sort of motivation. It gives you a fighting spirit. Somebody told me, 'Nowadays I'm living only because the Friday is there. I'm waiting for the Friday to come'. Some say ,'I am not even that excited for the salary. I am not waiting for the next salary, I am waiting for the next Friday".

Although for most people, sports are centred around exercise and physical fitness, interviewees stated exercise as a secondary benefit. Instead, they primarily valued the enjoyment and pleasure resulting from the weekly games. Several of the interviewees used the word *"passion"* when talking about the reason they play cricket every weekend. Two such examples from the interviews are shared below:

> "We are here to work, not to play, but we find some space some time to spend together and enjoy our passion".
> "Our passion is cricket. I told you, if I have to wake up at five o'clock on a (weekday), my wife has to call on me several times, she goes crazy when she has to wake me up. But if tomorrow I have to play cricket, if it is even two o'clock in the morning, within one alarm, I will rise up".

Within two to three hours of cricket on Friday mornings, the expression of their passion for cricket, their social connectedness, their team spirits, the motivation gained from winning and their "fighting spirit", all contributed to the men feeling charged and prepared to face the challenges of the coming week.

5.6.4 Negotiations and Compromise at the Cricket Grounds

Given that the cricket grounds are appropriated by a single demographic engaging in a single activity, it may seem unlikely that conflict emerges in this context. However, the case study presented conflicts resulting from uninvited cricket teams that attempted to play on the home teams' grounds. For example, Ali Hussain, a 36-year-old cashier, recalls an incident on Friday morning, when he and his teammates found another team playing on his team's pitch. When his team urged the uninvited team to leave, a disagreement developed which resulted in the police being called. He recalled the situation as follows,

> "We told them you cannot do this, because you can ask anyone, this is our pitch. They said 'this is not your property, its government property. Anyone can use it'. So, it was a big problem. Then we started fighting. The other teams also stopped playing and came (to us). They explained that we are all making our pitches. 'So, why are you making problem?.' They did not listen. Then they called the police. Police came and asked us what happened. We told them 'This is our pitch, we made this one. And they are not letting us play. We have a match planned. We have only one day to play. How can we give it to them?' The Police said we should negotiate. So, they asked us, 'okay what do you want?' We said, 'we will finish our match then we will give them the pitch'. But they did not agree. They said we want to play first. Then the police made signal for all the teams to stop playing. So, this week, no play. Everyone was very angry at those people, and we all left".

This incident demonstrates how self-governed spaces do not necessarily guarantee a clear distinction of territories, especially when the claim is informal, and unrecognised by the law. In this case and in other such cases, the police found it easier to shut down the informal activity as a whole, rather than to formally regulate it. Consequently, individuals involved in such situations are often collectively restricted from carrying out any further activities.

In recent times, many teams have unofficially claimed certain areas as their own. Dilip comments that it was not always the case:

> "Now the thing is that all people have their own place, it's like their own property… That is the biggest challenge. Before it was not like this. Before it was open, nobody was saying 'this is mine'. Now everyone's putting their stamps".

While the cricket teams expressed attachment and sense of ownership of their grounds, when asked about the physical conditions of the area, surprisingly, a large majority of the players were unsatisfied with the grounds, for two main reasons: first, the rocky surface of the ground and second, the overcrowding of the grounds. In order to win the game of cricket and attain high scores, cricket players must run at high speeds to catch a ball that has just been hit by a bat. Many times, a successful catch requires a player to land on the ground, which explains why cricket is typically played on grass lawn. However, informal cricket, such as the one in the case study, was played on a ground that the interviewees perceived as dangerous and injurious. Furthermore, they reported injuries due to falls, which led to cuts against sharp rocks or even fractured or broken bones. Two participants shared their experiences with injuries during games in the following quotes:

> "Normally, what I have seen in this time, it is not just like a finger injury, I know someone who has lost their eyesight! If you're facing a ball that has bounced unevenly on the ground, it can come and hit you…"
> "Yeah, but the ground is so bad honestly, because of the stones and everything. You fall down and you have to take two days off (work). Today also, two guys were injured. One was from my team and the other was from another team… So, the ground is very bad condition, but we have only that ground in the nearby area. We don't have any other options".

The interviewees repeatedly reported that the grounds were overcrowded and that the pitches were placed too close to each other, causing fields from different games to overlap. This caused collisions between players running towards cricket balls landing in the same area, further increasing the risk of injury. Ali commented on the overcrowding: "*But the problem is there are so many teammates and there are overlapping boundaries. The fielders are not comfortable. They cannot focus on the game, because the other game is right next to them".* The limited size and uneven surface of the grounds led to a compromised game format, in which players could not experience the full extent of the game's potential without the risk of injury. However, for most participants, this was a risk worth taking. Additionally, some of the organised matches and cricket tournaments offered internal cash prizes to the winners. Consequently, there was an incentive for some players, particularly low-income players, to take the risk

of an injury against a good catch that held the potential to win the game for the team.

Considering the limitations the grounds present; it is important to ask why the cricket players continuously appropriated the grounds every week. The answer could be found in an Urdu word often used by the interviewees: *Majboori*. *Majboori* cannot be directly or easily translated to English, but it can be described as a state of compulsion paired with powerlessness and constraint; a notion that was present in the comments about the grounds, which often concluded with the fact that the players could not find a better alternative.

5.6.5 Appropriation and Competition at the Cricket Grounds

In other case studies, conflict arose between different demographics competing to engage in diverse activities; however, in this case study, similar demographics intending to carry out the same activity were involved in conflict due to scarcity of time. To elaborate, Friday morning was the only time all the teams' players were free from work duties. This resulted in a high demand for cricket grounds during a very narrow window of three hours every week. Additionally, there are many barren lands in Muscat, however, many of the lands do not meet the requirements of the players. This demonstrates an additional scarcity of desirable grounds. A combination of both these scarcities led to a high-stakes competition between teams to secure their cricket grounds and claim their territories. Amongst the cricket teams, ultimately, a first come-first-served concept guided the process. To elaborate, whichever team managed to find a suitable ground and find the resources to construct a pitch at the earliest could claim its territory. On an individual level, this meant that low-income workers who were part of teams with middle-income migrants or professionals had a greater chance to play cricket than low-income migrants who could not become a part of a resourceful team.

Although cricket is an activity carried out in their free time, its relationship to the migrant workers' employment cannot be overlooked. To clarify further, the importance of cricket is magnified by the long working hours the men endure during the week. The contrast between their demanding jobs and the stress relief provided by cricket, highlights the sport's essential role in their lives, as it serves as an escape from daily pressures. This further explains why the participants were willing to tolerate the shortcomings and the conflicts at the cricket grounds in order to ensure their participation in the sport.

Another connection to their employment emerged through the process of building a cricket team. To

unpack this, companies with large percentages of South Asian male workers supported the development of cricket teams as it encouraged team building and competitiveness within the company. In a trade-off, the cricket team used the resources of the company, such as company-provided cars or construction material to facilitate their cricket games. Some teams also sought sponsorship from other companies, in return for an advertisement on their cricket uniform, which was beneficial to the sponsors. Given the limited number of spaces to play cricket in Muscat, teams with more resources and more sponsorship had better chances of securing their own cricket pitch and participating in informal tournaments around Muscat.

5.6.6 Key Insights

This chapter has examined the cricket grounds of Al Ghubrah North by presenting its urban context, its appropriation practices, its development through physical interventions, and its meaning in the lives of its migrant worker participants. It explored a large empty plot of land, soon to be developed, that had been used as a cricket ground for multiple games of cricket every Friday morning, and thus has been transformed from a barren and dusty space to a vibrant sports field for three hours.

Within the framework of the project, the cricket ground is classified as a large case study which, under the category of undeveloped spaces, falls into the subcategory of vacant spaces. Although five different matches were played simultaneously at the grounds, this is understood as the same activity. Therefore, the case study is considered to have only one main zone of activity and one activity: cricket. Consequently, it is understood as sports-oriented case study. Additionally, it was appropriated only by South Asian migrant men, including low-income workers and middle-income professionals. The case study was located in an urban area; however, its visitors did not live within walking distance. Therefore, it was only accessible by private car. A carpool system organised by the teams ensured that all team members arrived on the field on time. Moreover, the grounds were easily visible to any driver that passed by the popular 18th November Street, but the cricket games took place in the early hours of a weekend, therefore, this activity remained relatively unknown to non-participants. The case study did not witness a high daily frequency of visitors, as it was used for about three hours a week. The visitors staked a claim in shaping and maintaining the area by building concrete pitches and cleaning the area after use. They also possessed a strong sense of ownership towards their respective pitches and did not let other teams use their pitches during Friday mornings, which occasionally resulted in conflicts

amongst teams that did not agree with the informal ownership of private property. The case study did not present much flexibility in its usage as it was used for only one activity. Additionally, it presented a strong sense of temporality being a private plot that was due to be developed soon.

A cricket ground with multiple pitches was chosen as a case study because it is impossible to talk about space appropriation in Muscat by South Asian migrants without talking about informal cricket grounds, as cricket plays a central role in cultural continuity and social connectedness amongst the South Asian migrant community. The cricket ground in Ghubrah was chosen as a case study for this sport, due to its unique disposition of being a large-scale informal ground in an urban area. Furthermore, its mix of low- and middle-income migrants illustrated a comparison between their opportunities and interdependencies. Although the players had to compromise on unsafe grounds and overcrowding, they chose to appropriate the grounds because of a lack of other options, which were either too far away for them to reach with limited transport, too expensive to rent, or were already claimed by other cricket teams. Despite the compromises, the men looked forward to their Friday mornings of cricket with great anticipation. Aside from offering a form of stress-relief from six- or even seven-day working weeks, cricket also offered the men a space to build community and friendships. This was facilitated by teams built around singular companies or communities of the same nationalities.

At the beginning of 2023, the concrete pitches were removed from the case study site in the process of preparing the plot for development and construction. Therefore, after almost 10 years, the weekly Friday matches have come to an abrupt halt. The five teams, whose members mostly reside around Ghubrah and neighbouring areas, are now challenged to find teams that will invite them to their own pitches to play cricket. However, these grounds will typically be located on the outskirts of Muscat, which will be a challenge to reach with the limited mobility of most members. It will also pose an obstacle for members who work on Friday, as they might not make it back in time for their shift. All the players were aware of the risks and uncertainties involved in their temporary appropriation of the cricket grounds in Muscat. The awareness of the temporality was one of the reasons they played with such passion and made the most of their limited space on the grounds and their limited time in the week.

5.7 Overview of the Case Studies and Emerging Insights

Through the case studies presented in the preceding chapters, this study demonstrates the process of space appropriation by South Asian migrants in Muscat. It highlights the needs and motivations that drove the acts of appropriation, profiled the key actors involved, outlined timelines of their activities, and uncovered the obstacles and opportunities that shaped appropriation practices. By doing this, the study addresses the research objective to uncover and shed light on these often-overlooked spaces that are created by South Asian migrants. It fulfils the objective to examine the underlying complexities that shape migrant spaces and addresses the roles of temporality, agency, and socio-cultural factors in the appropriation of space. This section serves as a summary by providing a brief comparative analysis of the case studies and a concise synthesis, while the following chapter offers a more detailed analysis addressing the fourth research question regarding the role of temporariness in the appropriation of space and in the daily lives of South Asian migrants in Muscat.

5.7.1 Key Features and Processes of the Case Studies

A comparative analysis of the presented case studies provides deeper insight into the dynamics of space appropriation. To demonstrate a comparison, the following table (see Table 5.7) provides an overview of the features of each case study including, for example, insights on actors, activities, accessibility, and the presence of interventions.

To summarise the key characteristics of each case study, Wadi Al Ghubrah presented a high frequency of visitors compared to other case studies and served as a communal space for South Asian migrants living in the neighbourhood. Moreover, it hosted team sports and walking groups fostering community in the neighbourhood. The second case study, Athaibah beach, was the only public space among the case studies and attracted South Asian migrants from various parts of the city. Situated at the beach, it served as the only natural attraction and therefore, was the only case study where activities such as swimming and fishing occurred. The third case study, the neighbourhood breakout space of Al Ghubrah, was the smallest case study in the research, situated under the shade of one tree. However, it demonstrated a deep significance for its visitors, who were exclusively South Asian low-income migrant men. It also presented conflict that explained its high precarity. The fourth case study, the parking lot at the ministries' district, was the only children-dominated case study, offering a place for play and

sports for South Asian migrant families. The fifth case study, the Sahwa lawn, featured a high number of activities, similarly to Athaibah beach. However, it was the only case study where women, particularly low-income South Asian migrant women, felt safe to spend time alone. Lastly, the cricket grounds stood out as the sixth case study which attracted the highest number of visitors, primarily a single demographic - South Asian men- who gathered for a single activity: cricket.

Table 5.7 Table of case studies

	Wadi Al Ghubrah	Athaibah Beach	Breakout space	Ministries Parking Lot	Sahwa Lawn	Cricket Grounds
Category	Undeveloped	Developed	Developed	Developed	Developed	Undeveloped
Subcategory	Natural	Public leisure	Urban	Infrastructure	Beautification	Vacant
Area (sqm)	43,000	12,000	30	7,750	15,000	30,000
Size	Large	Medium	Small	Small	Medium	Large
Official maintenance	Low	High	Low	Low	High	Low
Urban situation	Dense urban setting	Affluent neighbourhood	Dense urban setting	Ministries district	Dense urban setting	Urban setting
Access by visitors	Foot	Car	Foot	Car	Foot	Car
User profile	Diverse, predominantly South Asian migrants	Diverse	South Asian low-income men	Diverse, predominantly South Asian families with children	Diverse, predominantly South Asian migrants	South Asian men
Peak user numbers	High	High	Low	Low	High	High
Usage frequency	Daily	Weekends	Daily	Weekends	Daily	Weekends
Catchment radius	Small	Large	Small	Medium	Small	Medium
Activity	Walking and team sports (cricket)	Photoshoots, walking, fishing, and swimming	Rest, gathering, and phone calls	Children's play and walking	Rest, gathering, team sports (cricket and football), walking, and photoshoots	Team sports (cricket)

Conflict	Medium	Low	High	Low	Low	Medium
Precarity	Low	Medium	High	High	Low	High
Flexibility	High	Low	Low	High	Medium	Low
Users stake claim	High	Low	High	Low	Low	High
Intervention	High	Low	Medium	Low	Low	High

As illustrated in the table above, most of the places represented in the case studies were not intended to be appropriated or used as public spaces. This is indicated by the lack of, or the type of, maintenance and provisions provided by the Muscat Municipality in these areas. Moreover, the case-study areas were typically situated close to urban settings, where the users usually resided. This was the case with areas which were accessed by foot and areas accessed by car. However, the only exception to this was Athaibah beach, where most of the users did not reside in the affluent low-density neighbourhood where the case study is located. Additionally, nearly all the selected case studies were predominantly occupied by South Asian migrant visitors, with the exception of one case study: Athaibah beach. However, the Athaibah beach case study encompassed specific zones that were primarily occupied by South Asian migrants that formed the focus of the case study. While all the case studies attracted diverse South Asian visitors including men and women, singles and families, children and adults and included migrants from varying socio-economic backgrounds, some case studies featured distinct demographics. For example, the parking lot in the ministries district attracted mainly families with children. In other examples, the breakout space and the cricket grounds were appropriated exclusively by South Asian men. The activities observed at the case studies revolved primarily around leisure, rest, sports, exercise, and gathering, often including an element of social connection. Whether the activity was a game of cricket, or a phone call made to a loved one, participants often sought social interaction. However, not all activities were motivated by a need for social connection; some were driven by the need for solitude and personal reflection.

Upon examination of the interplay between accessibility modes, the frequency of use, and the catchment area from which the visitors arrived, a clear pattern emerged. Namely, half of the case studies were active during the entire week, including Sahwa lawn, Wadi Al Ghubrah, and the neighbourhood breakout space, while the other half, including Athaibah beach, the parking lot, and the cricket grounds, were typically appropriated during weekends. The former three case studies were best accessed on foot and attracted visitors who lived close by. While the latter three case studies were visited by migrants from more dispersed areas in Muscat and were best accessed by car. This interplay

underscores how spaces in close proximity to the users' residence, encourage walking and daily usage, demonstrating the relationship between accessibility, space appropriation and how mobility determines the frequency and the catchment area of the case studies.

Regarding the interplay between the types of activities and the physical attributes of the case study, it was evident that activities such as resting and gathering were most common in case studies that provided shade, while team sports were most common in places that provided large surface areas. Moreover, photoshoots were often observed in places which featured elements of nature, such as the sea in the case of Athaibah beach and large banyan trees and greenery in the case of Sahwa Lawn, both natural features which reminded migrants of their home countries.

Moreover, further interplays emerged between the visitors' agency to construct interventions in the case study and their sense of ownership or staking a claim in the area. As demonstrated by the table, when groups and individuals were able to shape their environment through physical interventions, whether that was placing a chair under a tree, as was the case with the breakout space, or constructing a concrete pitch at the cricket grounds, they were able to stake a higher claim to the space that they appropriated. This establishes that by possessing the agency to actively shape their environment, migrants asserted their presence and perceived a sense of ownership of the place, suggesting that space appropriation is influenced by material engagement.

Analysing the space appropriation through the case studies highlights the factors driving these processes, the spatial practices involved, and the resulting outcomes (see Figure 5.32). Five driving factors emerge that contributed to space appropriation in the case studies. First, accessibility determined how participants approached a space and how often. For example, spaces that were closer to the participants' home were preferred and frequented more often compared to spaces that were farther away. Second, the physical attributes of the space were crucial in determining if the desired activities were feasible in the space. This was particularly important for sports teams, for example, who demonstrated that the attributes did not have to be ideal, but just adequate, for a space to be appropriated. Third, socio-cultural influences played a role in motivating migrants to appropriate space as individuals and groups drew on their cultural experiences to navigate new environments. This was demonstrated when South Asian men typically engaged in South Asian sports such as cricket, or when participants attributed cultural significance to trees native in South Asia, such as Neem or Banyan trees. Fourth, availability was a determining factor, as the space could not be appropriated if it was occupied by other individuals or groups and if the resulting conflicts were irreconcilable. Fifth, temporal factors played a key role in shaping the processes of space appropriation in the case studies, as the spaces themselves were often temporary. To elaborate, the residual spaces presented in this chapter have often been subjected to constant flux resulting from land use changes and weather conditions.

Moreover, another determining temporal factor that emerged was the amount of free time afforded to migrants. Their free time determined the effort they were willing to invest in accessing and shaping the spaces. Time also played a role in the motivations as many migrants were driven by nostalgia- whether this was for greenery, the sea, or for childhood sports. And lastly, the migrants' perception of temporariness pertaining to their precarious residence in Muscat shaped their approach to interventions. To elaborate, rather than investing in long-term spatial and material interventions, they sought after creating temporary solutions.

The spatial practices surrounding space appropriation included four key practices. Activities formed the first key practice and included sports, rest, walking, running, fishing, taking photos, swimming, and playing amongst others. Routines formed the second key practice and involved daily patterns in usage, weekly patterns in usage typically on the weekends, and even annual routines, as demonstrated in the case of Athaibah Beach occupied primarily by South Asian men without families on the morning of Eid. Social construction formed the third practice and included gatherings, sports teams, connecting with loved ones through phone calls, the creation of WhatsApp groups and forming walking or marathon groups. Material interventions formed the fourth practice and included the maintenance and care of spaces. For example, this included creating seating areas and sports fields to facilitate activities. In addition, it involved cleaning spaces and repairing interventions after they had been affected by weather conditions or other external factors.

These processes of space appropriation resulted in the creation of valuable and meaningful places that catered to the needs of its users and reflected their daily lives. Migrant workers produce temporary spaces as they transform existing materiality through interventions and appropriation. As the context continues to change, semi-permanent layers of this production are (re)used to temporarily appropriate space again. This cycle perpetuates over time, with each group and circumstance contributing to the process by introducing additional layers of products that accumulate over time. Massey's ideas on space corroborate this process as she refers to space as a "product of interrelations" (Massey, 2005, p. 9) that is never complete. In line with Massey's framework, this research supports her view that the process of space production begins through the relationship between time and space and its culmination through the preservation of its identity through agency (Massey, 1995). Moreover, through this process, migrants created networks of community and social connections, which enhanced their sense of belonging, a vital resource in the context of temporary migration. Most importantly, through the process of space appropriation, migrants were able to bridge the gap between their needs and their environment by exercising their freedom and agency in shaping their own spaces.

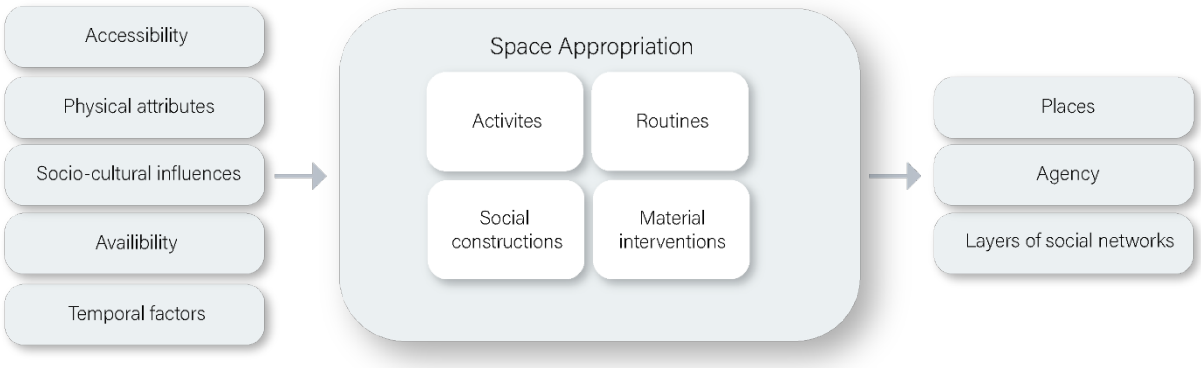

Figure 5.32 Mechanisms of space appropriation: overview of case studies. Figure created by author.

5.7.2 Identifying Emerging Themes of Case Studies

Having established commonalities and interplays that emerged from the features of the case study, this section precedes to highlight trends and commonalties, laying the foundation for the themes discussed in the next chapter which extend beyond the features of the case study.

The case studies underscore the importance of spaces created by migrants in several ways. To begin with, they are a source of relief from the migrants' often stressful and mechanical daily lives. For migrants grappling with demanding jobs while being separated from their families, these places offer joy and playfulness in the face of challenges. Moreover, for migrants who are employed in less demanding jobs and reside with their families, the case studies remained an essential part of their daily lives offering a break from the routines of their lives. Additionally, the places in the case studies offered a medium to foster and practice community building. This was observed through the creation of WhatsApp groups, cricket teams, and female walking groups, demonstrating that these places not only create community, but facilitate frameworks to organise gatherings. Furthermore, when the case studies represented spaces that were appropriated in diverse ways or spaces in conjunction with public spaces, they enabled migrants to experience belonging and a sense of inclusion within larger society — an experience which is occasionally threatened by spatial and social exclusion. It is worth noting here that in the case of low-income migrants, men were more likely to create community than women. This gender disparity is attributed to the limited leisure time and mobility faced by women working in labour intensive occupations, such as domestic work and the beauty industry, which accounts for the underrepresentation of low-income migrant women in the case studies.

Furthermore, the case studies demonstrated that migrants made up for the lack of pedestrian pathways and bicycle lanes by creating spaces where they could walk and use their bikes, consequently transforming these typically necessary modes of mobility into leisure activities. Moreover, the case studies demonstrated how migrants created meaningful spaces within walking distances to their residences to compensate for the lack of public spaces in their proximities. Therefore, through these acts of appropriation, they cultivated the practice of walking and biking as meaningful daily or weekly practices, reforming mobility in Muscat. Considering that themes of daily life, social and communal connections, and mobility emerged in Chapter 5, Chapter 6 will address these aspects to highlight the daily realities of South Asian migrant workers in Muscat and how they affect spatial dynamics.

The case studies also illustrate the workings of agency within negotiations and regulations in migrant places. They reveal how migrants employed tactics to respond to their precarious environments, drawing on Certeau's concepts of "making do" (Certeau et al., 1984). The participants used their cultural experiences and exercised their agency to respond to structures and an environment over which they largely had little control. Moreover, the case studies illustrate how, amongst South Asian migrant workers, individual agency and accessibility was influenced by group inclusion. This was demonstrated, for example, when migrants with limited resources could exercise more agency as a member of a sports team. Another example includes how migrants with limited mobility could share mobility costs when part of a group. Moreover, the negotiations in the case studies were often complex and characterised by language barriers in addition to cultural differences. It was often observed that regardless of their stake in claim in a place, an individual's socio-cultural background, gender, and class often played a role in their agency and control over their environment, echoing on the works of critical theorists (Harvey, 1988, 1990; Lefebvre, 1991b, 2003; D. Massey, 1995, 2005; Sewell, 1992) and calling for further examination of these inequalities. Despite unequal agency and the presence of conflicts, migrants persevered and negotiated to maintain their places, not as an act of resistance or with the intention of making a statement, but rather in efforts to facilitate daily life, considering the needs of others. In cases like the cricket teams, hierarchies created by the labour market and existing rifts between nations sharing borders, were often flattened and reconciled in these places, fostering equality and a feeling of being part of a shared collective. Chapter 5 illustrates that agency and opportunity are unequally distributed along demographics, differentiating not only between Omani and non-Omani participants but amongst South Asian migrants. Therefore, Chapter 6 will examine the previously mentioned themes of daily life, while considering the differences amongst South Asian demographic cohorts.

All the case studies presented in this research reflect places that were characterised by precarity and temporality. This is demonstrated in two ways: first, through the inherent vulnerability of the space itself and second, through the interventions constructed by migrant workers. The characteristics of

impermanence emerged as a result of various factors, namely: dynamic urban developments, the occupation or restriction to occupation by other individuals or groups, environmental factors, and regulations restricting appropriation practices. Regardless of the source of precarity, the case studies were fundamentally dynamic and subject to change. The case studies did not display perpetuity or permanence, but rather reflected places that were in constant flux, being shaped and reshaped, negotiated and re-emerging, and sometimes phasing out entirely. Importantly, recent observations demonstrated that some of these places no longer exist, reaffirming their impermanence and transient nature.

When focusing on the interventions in the case study, they were found to be strongly subject to transformation whether in the case of Wadi Al Ghubrah where the cricket teams pitches and fields were washed away with seasonal rains or in the case of the neighbourhood breakout space where furniture was placed, replaced, and removed, dependent on the resistance from other individuals who share the same space. It is worth noting here that non-tangible structures were equally susceptible to transience, such as the WhatsApp groups created by cricket teams or walking groups, which underwent frequent changes in members as they experienced change in employment and relocation and new members were integrated, again, temporarily. This demonstrates how migrant spaces are not to be understood as static, but rather as social processes constantly subject to configuration and reconfiguration, as Lefebvre and Massey have argued (Lefebvre, 1991b; D. Massey, 1991).

Moreover, South Asian migrants' behaviours are significantly shaped by cultural identity and experiences in their home countries, echoing Carr's argument that public spaces serve as mediums for people not only to convey their human rights but also to imbue cultural meaning into their practices (Carr, 1992). This was commonly illustrated in the case studies through activities shaped by childhood, such as cricket, an affinity for the sea reminiscent of that in India, or through nostalgia and longing for previously experienced practices. While engaging in such activities, migrants remained connected to their past through cultural habits, childhood memories, and nostalgia for a home that exists in another time and place. Nostalgia is a vital resource in this process, as it serves to embed and spatialise their notions of home and childhood into their present reality and environment (Legg, 2004). These practices can also be understood as means to maintain ties to the places to which they will inevitably return, given the temporary nature of their residence in Muscat. Consequently, positioned within a temporal framework, shaped by both past and future, migrants strive to make the most of their time in Muscat, and the places presented in the case studies offer them extensions and connections across time and culture. Chapter 5 has illustrated that temporality plays a crucial role in the appropriation of space in Muscat, making it a key concept in this research. Furthermore, it elucidated that South Asian migrants inhabit an in-between, liminal space, of temporary residence in Muscat, which shapes their sense of

belonging. To explore this theme further, Chapter 6 will examine temporariness and belonging through the lens of temporary migration.

6 Daily Realities, Temporariness, and Belonging Across Migrant Experiences[4]

The previous chapter encompassed the selected case-study areas in Muscat with a focus on place-specific space appropriation. In this chapter, the focus shifts from the spatial context to the socio-cultural and structural context in order to determine what factors play a role in migrants' need for space beyond the spatial context of the case studies. Through gaining a deeper understanding of the daily lived realities of South Asian migrants in Muscat, Chapter 6.1 aims to underscore the opportunities and challenges the participants face in meeting their socio-spatial needs. This is examined through the lens of their daily routines, social connections and mobility. As explained in Chapter 3, South Asian migrants in Muscat do not have a clear pathway to citizenship or long-term stays in Oman. Consequently, all of the interviewees considered themselves as temporary migrants in Muscat facing uncertainty regarding their duration of stay. Although the interviewees' durations of stays in Muscat varied greatly, they shared their inevitable departure from Oman in common. To explore this further, Chapter 6.2 and 6.3 delve into the interplay between the interviewees' feelings of belonging and temporariness in the context of their temporary residence in Muscat. Through the analysis of the interviews, these chapters underscore their experiences and perceptions to examine the factors influencing the duration of their stay and their desire to remain in Muscat. This helps to distinguish between migrants who intend to establish long-term residence in Muscat and those who plan to return to their homeland sooner. Moreover, these chapters uncover the interviewees' agency in their temporariness and their ability to feel a sense of belonging despite their temporariness.

This chapter utilises the same dataset as the previous chapter, in addition to interviews conducted with South Asian migrants from professional and socio-economic backgrounds that were less represented in the initial dataset. The complete list of interviewees is provided in the table below (see Table 6.1). This expanded sample includes a greater representation of women and low-income migrants offering a more inclusive and broader perspective. The interviews were conducted with housekeepers and beauticians, professions predominantly occupied by women, to capture the experiences of low-income migrant women. Additionally, interviews were conducted with salon owners to draw comparisons to middle-income migrant women. Interviews were conducted with gardeners and labourers, typically male dominated professions, to gain further insight into the perspective of labour workers. This additional

[4] Part of the results presented in this chapter have been published in the journal *Population, Space and Place* (Farooq & Pfaffenbach, 2025)

set of interviewees are referred to as “occupational participants” in the table (see Table 6.1)

Table 6.1 Table of participants.

Name	Sex	Age	Nationality	Profession
Sahwa Lawn				
Rashab	M	20	Indian	Student
Smiti	F	48	Indian	Lecturer at local college
Rimmi	F	39	Indian	Engineer
Nayana	F	20	Indian	Student
Raj	M	44	Indian	Quality control
Reshma	F	36	Indian	Home maker
Indrajath	M	49	Indian	Pharmaceutical sales
Amisha	F	32	Indian	Home maker
Prateek	M	35	Indian	Pharmacist
Mahesh	M	22	Indian	Gardener
Abdul Karim	M	31	Bangladeshi	Cleaner
Athaibah beach				
Ahmed Hussain	M	41	Pakistan	Driver for restaurant
Renitta	F	52	Sri Lankan	Housekeeper
Vasu	M	30	Indian	Works in a garage
Sheena	F	36	Indian	Financial Analyst
Hussain	M	45	Indian	Architect
Shabana	F	42	Indian	Electrical engineer
Sita	F	57	Indian	Parlor Beautician
Sunita	F	40	Indian	Parlor Beautician
Mohi	M	29	Bangladeshi	Car cleaner
Urban Cricket Grounds				

Mohamed Rashid	M	36	Indian	Factory manager
Prabhu	M	38	Indian	Data Analysist
Nagarajun	M	40	Indian	Cleaner
Ali Hussain	M	36	Bangladeshi	Cashier in supermarket
Dilip	M	38	Indian	Chemical engineer
Ahmed Zahran	M	27	Sri Lankan	Quantity Surveyor
Ahmed Shihan	M	29	Sri Lankan	Quantity Surveyor
Syed Shaikh	M	30	Bangladeshi	Marketing

Ministries Parking Lot

Pradeep	M	37	Indian	Technical support engineer
Dilip	M	40	Indian	Mechanical engineer
Mariam	F	15	Bangladeshi	Student
Deepika	F	40	Indian	Sales coordinator for engineering products
Saira	F	36	Indian	Architect
Bushra	F	31	Omani	Urban planner

Wadi Al Ghubrah

Zain	M	48	Indian	Unemployed
Idris	M	40	Indian	Driver
Suresh	M	31	Indian	Cook
Sabir	M	25	Pakistani	Unemployed
Harith	M	34	Indian	IT technician
Nirav	M	42	Indian	IT technician
Jamal	M	47	Indian	Quality control coordinator
Shaikh	M	30	Bangladeshi	Procurement
Martin	M	22	Indian	Student
Prabhu	M	42	Indian	IT technician
Jundee	M	40	Filipino	Shop keeper
Simran	F	41	Indian	Homemaker

Kawthar	F	38	Indian	Homemaker

Breakout space

Yasir	M	28	Pakistani	Building Watchman
Maryam	F	25	Omani	Administrator
Khalid	M	39	Omani	Administrator
Mubashir	M	47	Indian	Bakery salesman
Harun	M	36	Indian	Car Insurance
Yaseen	M	40	Pakistani	Building watchman

Occupational participants

Mary	F	40	Indian	Housekeeper
Indra	F	42	Indian	Housekeeper
Devi	F	42	Indian	Housekeeper
Sally	F	60	Indian	Parlor Beautician
Neethi	F	39	Indian	Parlor Beautician
Rumana	F	51	Indian	Parlor Beautician
Jay	M	53	Indian	Sales coordinator
Matthew	M	30	Indian	Film maker
Anuratha	F	35	Indian	Film maker
Srinu	M	42	Indian	Gardener
Ramesh	M	40	Indian	Gardener
Mohammed Jahangir	M	41	Indian	Gardener
Lalanyadad	M	45	Indian	Gardener
Mahmood	M	33	Omani	Urban planner

6.1 Daily Realities of South Asian migrants in Muscat

The appropriation of space is driven by the necessity for space, and facilitated by the agency and means to appropriate it. In the previous chapter, the interviewees revealed their need for public space and their practices of appropriation. This chapter, however, focuses on the factors that determine the agency and possibilities to appropriate space, revealing why certain individuals ultimately claimed spaces and others did not. Through the interviews, a distinct pattern of three migrant cohorts emerged: middle-income migrants, low-income migrant men and low-income migrant women. These patterns illustrated similar experiences of opportunity and constraint within each cohort, which will inform the presentation of results in Chapter 6, organised according to these three cohorts. Furthermore, through the previous chapter and its analysis, three main themes emerged in illustrating the interplay between migrant's daily lives and space appropriation: the interviewees' leisure time, social connectedness, and mobility, each of which will be examined in subchapters to highlight variations amongst the demographic cohorts and to compare their related needs, motivations, opportunities, and limitations, in terms of space appropriation.

6.1.1 Daily Routines and Leisure Time

The following subchapter examines the first theme with regards to space appropriation by focusing on the temporal role in space appropriation in the most literal form: by examining the daily routines of the South Asian migrants to discern which demographic cohorts had free time for leisure, how much free time was available to them, and if they were able to make the most of this time. The terms *leisure time* and *free time* in this chapter are understood as the time that is remaining after attending to the responsibilities of official work hours and the responsibilities towards the interviewees' respective households.

The first demographic cohort under examination is middle-income South Asian migrants. This comprises a socioeconomic spectrum including double-income households and families with a single, usually male, earning member. All the working interviewees reported having a standard five-day work week with two days off each week. When asked about their free time, most of the interviewees stated they had very little free time and described their work weeks and their weekends as "busy". During the week, they reported having a few hours of free time in the evenings, and more during the weekend—typically two half days or more. Prateek, a 35-year-old pharmacist, described his workday as "busy day like a computer life only", explaining that his workday is systematic with no room for spontaneity. This was

also the case with Deepika, a 40-year-old working mother, who emphasised how she experienced a lack of free time in her daily routines between work and household responsibilities but stressed the importance of finding time away from her responsibilities, to spend with herself or with her family. She shared,

> "That is the most important thing actually in life because… there are two worlds…one is inside the office where (we) don't get time to even talk to parents or children or whatever, because everybody's busy in that world. And when you come home again, you're busy in some other work, which is kitchen or whatever.... So, you need that "me-time", or you need that family time. So, this is very important, and you should ensure that you have it… this time is very important".

Similarly, most of the interviewees prioritised family-oriented activities during the weekend. This was further corroborated when I asked Kawthar, a 38-year-old homemaker, if she does anything else during her weekend, for example, see her friends. She insisted that family time was a priority and shook her head to say:

> "No, no, no, weekend is family time. My husband will be home. So, we're shopping, going outside, and visiting beaches".

Although most of the middle-income interviewees used the word "busy" to describe their weeks, more than half of the interviewees integrated daily exercise into their weekday routine. Moreover, on weekends, most of the middle-income interviewees spent their leisure time visiting scenic places, both within Muscat and beyond, such as beaches and wadis. They additionally mentioned trips to other public leisure areas like shopping malls or visits to the church or temple. The interviewees typically spoke positively about their activities, indicating that they enjoyed this time. Middle-income interviewees appeared to have autonomy over their free time and engaged in activities of their choice and interest.

Almost half of the middle-income interviewees had employed a housekeeper, or had their parents visit them in Muscat to support them with childcare. These interviewees appeared to have the most free time, even during weekdays. One such family was Rimmi's, a 39-year-old engineer, whose response on her free time stood out as she reported having free time both on weekdays and weekends although she had a full-time job and two children. During the week, she had free time available for hobbies such as dance classes and marathon training. In addition, she reported spontaneous activities during her

weekdays that depended on her and her husband's mood, which included a walk together, eating ice cream, or meeting with friends. Her relative surplus of leisure time can be attributed to her family's employment of a full-time housekeeper, which was shared in her response about her typical weekday morning routine:

> "So, the alarm starts ringing from 6:30 am. We have a live-in maid, she takes care of everything, she's been with us for almost 10 years, she's like a grandmother I would say, she takes care of everything. She is from Kerala. I just have to wake up, get ready and go to office… The kids, they're big, they don't need much of my attention, they get ready. My office starts at 07:30… my lunch break is from 12:30 to 01:30 pm. So, I come home, I have a one-hour break. It's pretty much near, 10 minutes. I have the time to come home, have lunch. Then my husband picks up my son, and then he will also join us for lunch. Then, by around 1:15, 1:20, I will again leave and will come back home by around 5:15 pm. Then, I sit down, and watch T.V. Two days in a week I have dance classes, from eight to nine. My daughter also has dance classes. So, I drop her also. My kids, they go to the play area to play by around six o'clock they go. They'll come back by eight. If I'm not doing anything else, I will start teaching my younger one. I get free time from 5:30pm to 8:00pm, I don't have anything else to do. So, I sit at home watch T.V".

In contrast, from the standpoint of low-income migrant men, leisure time was a more limited resource within their daily routines. Most of the low-income male interviewees reported having a six-day workweek with only Friday off. However, in some cases, the men only had half the day off on Friday. In a few cases, the men reported having Friday off and being on-call on Saturdays, reporting for duty when required, as was the case with the Municipality hired gardeners. Other jobs, like a janitor's, required the worker to be available on-call at all times, with no official time off work. Contractually, the gardeners interviewed were expected to work eight hours a day; however, there was often overtime required, which was usually compensated. Srinu, a 42-year-old gardener, who was previously a sanitation worker, shared his experiences as follows:

> "From 6:00-6:30 am to 10:00 am I pick up garbage, Madam. In the afternoon, from 3:00 pm to 5:00 pm I brush the sand, in the evening. Then I am finished with my duty. In the evening, we all do brushing, on the main road, wherever there is a lot of sand, we pick it up, In total I work eight hours duty Madam. Eight hours, because

> now I do cleaning. When I was gardening, I did more hours, sometimes 12 hours, sometimes 16 hours, but we got more money then. We got over-time compensation."

During their leisure time, all of the low-income migrant men interviewees preferred visiting places that were close to their residence and cost free, if they were to leave their accommodation at all. However, most of the interviewees preferred to stay home. The word *free time* was most associated with the word *rest*. Several of the men reported working physically demanding jobs that required time to recover from. When asked about his daily activities Mahesh, a 22-year-old gardener, replied:

> "Where should I go? If I get work, I would go out, but otherwise, no. The whole day I am out and about. I have to walk such long distances during work... It is all very tiring going from one place to the other, so I am tired. I just go home and make food and then I get sleepy. I get ready since 4 am, to start working by 5 am. So, I do not go anywhere at night".

Similarly, when asked about his preferred leisure time activities on weekdays, Mubashir, a 47-year-old salesman, shared, "*I am sitting at home, and going for prayer, reading and using Facebook*". Most of the men responded unenthusiastically about their daily routine and lack of free time, indicating that there was nothing much to talk about when it came to free time during the week. However, during the weekends, the men had more leisure time. Reluctantly, a few men expressed that having one day off was not enough to rest and carry out other activities. For example, when asked if he sees his friends on the weekend, one of the gardeners replied: *"Not really, I do not have time. I get one day off, Friday. Where is the time...?".* However, in the case of Srinu, who had lived in Muscat for twenty years and established a social circle, weekend activities sometimes included socialising. He summed up his weekend plans as follows:

> "If my friend comes over, I will make some chicken or make some biryani. I will drink Pepsi with my friends. If my friends come over, we do that. If nobody comes over, then I will eat alone, but I will make the food special, and then I will sleep some more. I will talk to my wife and kids on the phone".

When time allowed, when energy levels allowed, and when the interviewees could share a taxi with other friends, most of them reported enjoying being outdoors, to drink a tea with their friends or play a sport like cricket. Most of the interviewees reported that their favourite leisure time activity was to visit the beach, where they could take photos, swim, catch fish or just take a walk with their friends; activities which have been elaborated in Chapter 5. A few of the low-income men mentioned visiting the church or temple in Ruwi, a district on the eastern side of Muscat known for its concentrated cluster of temples and churches. One of the gardeners shared his experience as follows:

> "Daily I get up at 4 am on weekdays, so on Friday I will get up around 7:00-8:00 am. Four or five of us guys will go together, maybe to the temple or next to the sea. We used to work there before with our company for gardening. We used to take care of the coconut trees there. Wherever our mind gets free, we like to go there."

The low-income migrant men's leisure time priorities can be summed up in rest being the most important, speaking with family on the phone being the second most important and going out for leisure or sports being the third. However, an exception to these priorities was illegal employment in order to earn an additional salary. Mahesh, who earlier in the interview had stressed how tired he was on his day off, was later very adamant about working in his free time if the opportunity arose. He stated with conviction, "*Even if it is far, I will go with taxi. As long as I get work, I will go*".

When examining the experiences of low-income migrant women, leisure time was distinctly limited compared to the other demographic cohorts. While some women reported having half a day off per week, others reported having only one day off per month. Women in domestic work, for example, typically reside with their employers and are expected to be available to work at all hours of the day. Between intervals of housework, they may rest in their rooms, but this arrangement does not allow for any planned activities that require leaving the house. This was evident in Renitta's case, a 52-year-old domestic worker, when she explained her daily routine as a housekeeper:

> "Morning six o'clock, I get up. After then, they (employers) will go work and I clean the house and start my job. I clean the house and everything. After that I'm cooking. Two o'clock, I'm finished. I have free time. Then at four o'clock I start again. Then six o'clock finish. Again, I start at 7:30. Again work till nine o'clock, then finish".

In this segment, Renitta explained how her routine was closely tied to the employing family's routine. She woke up at 6:00 am to prepare breakfasts and made sure the family was ready to leave for work and schools, and only started to clean the house when everyone was away. She cooked to make sure that food was ready to serve when the family returned home. She was once again required in the kitchen for dinner time and once she had cleared the kitchen and the family was served, she could rest. Her daily schedule allowed only small pockets of rest between continuous responsibilities over a 15-hour working day.

An examination of the working hours at beauty salons reveals that, in order to maximise their revenue, the salons aimed to remain open for walk-in customers as long as possible during the day. In one interview, a co-manager of a salon explained that she had no days off officially. Therefore, when the opportunity presented itself, she tried to leave the salon for a few hours spontaneously. For women employed in lower positions at the salon, however, this was not an option. Beauticians typically were allowed one weekday off, rather than the typical Friday or Saturday. Therefore, on each day of the week, an employee had a day off, making it impossible for her to socialise with other women working at the salon or with friends outside the workplace, due to the lack of coinciding holidays. When asked about her free time, Neethi, a 39-year-old parlour beautician, found it futile to talk about, as reflected in the interview segment below:

> Interviewer: Do you wish you had more free time to go out?
> Neethi: I wish
> Interviewer: If you had more time, what would you like to?
> Neethi: I don't know because I never thought that I will get it. Because we are not going to get any time. I'm not getting time to think "if there is more time what I will do?" After I get the time, then I will think about what I can do.

The above segment demonstrates the extreme lack of time and lack of agency experienced by some female migrant workers. Neethi's reluctance and inability to merely contemplate about free time illustrates a difficult reality. Moreover, similarly to the low-income migrant men, most of the women repeated the fact that they were too tired to do anything in their time off, as revealed in an interview segment below with a 42-year-old housekeeper:

> Devi: I don't do anything, I sit at home (laughs), I don't like going out, I work all day, I get so tired, how can I go out? I get only one day for rest.
> Interviewer: What do you do on Friday?

Devi: I just want to rest madam.

Interviewer: Do you have friends here?

Devi: I know people, but I don't see them. Everyone is busy. No time.

To sum up the aspect of a lack of time and to underscore the difficulty experienced by some of the participants, Neethi sums up the interview by saying:

> "Here there is no life because, you know, all the time work. You understand what I mean? There is no time to breath".

The interviews with low-income migrant women reveal harsh realities of neglected needs. Due to their working conditions and distance from their families, on their days off, low-income migrant women prioritised rest and speaking to their families. Additionally, when possible, it was important for most of the female interviewees to visit the church or temple on their day off. However, very few women reported socialising in their free time due to factors such as fatigue, lack of mobility, and the difficulty in planning and coordinating with other female migrant workers with similarly limited free time.

In conclusion, leisure time was experienced and understood differently amongst the three demographic cohorts. Although almost all the middle-income interviewees used the word "busy" to describe their weekdays and weekends, their daily life included regular leisure activities. With the most amount of free time amongst the three demographic cohorts, middle-income migrants typically used this time to be with their family, travel around Oman to explore nature, exercise or play sports, and visit the temple or church. In contrast, low-income migrant men's description of a "busy" day or week did not include leisure activities. Most of the men reported limited activity in their free time due to a lack of energy, mobility, and financial means. However, the men did occasionally visit outdoor leisure areas, play sports or meet other low-income migrant workers. Despite all demographic cohorts indicating to some extent that they lead busy lives with minimal free time, middle-income interviewees exercised the most agency over their time, efficiently and effectively making the most of their free time, while reporting higher satisfaction. Whereas low-income migrant men typically prioritised work or rest over leisure time. When no additional illegal employment opportunities were available, the men spent their free time socialising in the company of other South Asian low-income migrant workers. With the least amount of free time, low-income migrant women struggled the most to make the best of their time off work. This was attributed to constraints similar to the male workers', with an additional difficulty in coordinating leisure time activities with other low-income women who faced similar restrictions during their scarce free

time. Additionally, they expressed the least enthusiasm about this topic, indicating that even when afforded free time, they lacked the resources and the means to utilise it for leisure and recreation.

This section has highlighted the participants' need for time with family, time for oneself, and particularly in the case of low-income migrants: time for rest, a neglected need in the study of space appropriation. As discussed in Chapter 2, Lefebvre (1971) and Carr (1992) understood that the stresses of modern work life are to be alleviated by leisure. However, their works do not examine the possibility that one's working conditions and lack of resources can shape their ability and will to engage in leisure. This research demonstrates that when access to leisure places was limited, some migrants often prioritised rest over leisure, as a response to physical and mental exhaustion. This finding suggests that leisure time is not only determined by the availability of space or access, but it is also impacted by broader structural factors at play. By acknowledging the disparities in leisure time and the opportunities available to the different demographic cohorts of South Asian migrants during this time, a deeper understanding is gained on the migrants' capacities to appropriate space in Muscat.

6.1.2 Social Networks and Community

The following subchapter examines the second theme with regard to space appropriation, focusing on the interviewees' social connections in their daily lives and the development of social networks over time, encompassing both physical and virtual interactions. Specifically, this chapter examines how the participants form and maintain social connections and the spaces that facilitate them. It also determines to what extent the participants rely on their social connections and their impact on agency, opportunities and daily life in Muscat. To conclude, comparisons are drawn between the various demographic cohorts, for example, determining how much the cohorts rely on physical social networks as opposed to virtual ones, to underscore the role of socioeconomic factors in limitations and opportunities to form and preserve social connections.

The first demographic cohort examined in terms of their social connectedness is the middle-income migrants. Of the three cohorts, they had the broadest social circles including family, colleagues from work and friends. Most of the interviewees reported having immediate and extended family members residing in Muscat. This can be attributed to job recommendations by family members. Typically, participants were encouraged by a family member to migrate to Muscat, or they had encouraged family members to migrate to Muscat, resulting in the frequently observed familial networks among middle-

income South Asian migrants. Additionally, as previously explained in Chapter 3, middle-income migrants can obtain short-term and long-term visas to sponsor their family members for visits to Muscat, which can add up to several months a year. One such case was Amisha's, a 32-year-old homemaker, who sponsored her parents and explained,

> "My parents are here. They are visiting. From last one year they're here. I have called them when my child was born for some help, so they are here. They will leave in next month".

Most of the middle-income interviewees prioritised spending time with family over spending time with friends or colleagues. In most cases, the families kept in touch with each other by frequently planning trips and gatherings during the weekends. In the following response, Amisha explained how this diminishes the need to go out frequently, particularly to places where social networks can be expanded:

> "We're family people. My husband is also very family oriented, kids also. So, we mostly spend time together. Actually, we don't want any other thing to go like malls and pubs and cafes. We spend mostly time with each other."

Apart from family in Muscat, most of the participants reported having large extended families residing in their home countries. All of the interviewees reported keeping in touch with that part of their families on a regular basis through social media platforms including audio and video calls. When asked if he misses his family and if he keeps in touch with them, Nirav, 42-year-old IT technician, explained:

> "So, we are constantly in touch with each other, even though I live in Muscat, they never miss me. So, it's a good bonding. The only benefit of what I see over here is that from Muscat to Mumbai is just a three-hour flight. So, we can go whenever you feel like it, maybe even if you want to go on a weekend or something like that, just say hello to your friends, or meet your parents and everything, it is still very much possible".

In this interview segment Nirav explains that a flight from Muscat to Mumbai is feasible in terms of time, but also reveals that it is economically feasible. This view is shared by other middle-income migrants who can typically afford multiple flights to India per year due to the frequent and affordable flights between the Gulf cities and South Asian cities. In the course of the interviews with South Asian middle-income migrants, it became apparent that they maintain strong ties and frequent contact with their family, facilitated by family members residing in Muscat, whom they can meet regularly, in addition to keeping in touch with family members in their home countries through virtual contact, frequent trips to visit them and the possibility to sponsor their visits to Muscat. Consequently, the middle-income interviewees did not seem to experience significant amounts of distress from being separated from their families.

Apart from familial contact, middle-income interviewees were very successful in making and maintaining friendships in Muscat. These contacts were established primarily through workplaces, clubs and associations, and residential proximity. Interviewees seldom reported meeting friends through church or temple visits. Rimmi explained how middle-income South Asian migrants like herself could meet other migrants stemming from the same state or city in their home countries as well as the same professional background:

> "We have this engineering association here for our community… We have get-togethers and annual meetups and sports festivals and things like that. So, I think from October to mid-February (the cooler months of the year), there is a lot of activity happening in these associations. So, these associations are a very key element from where we have found our friends and like-minded people who share the same interest… and we have bonded over so many years. It's actually for people who have studied in Kerala, who have done their engineering in Kerala, and we have an association for Keralites who have studied outside of Kerala and abroad".

This interview segment reveals the significant opportunities available to middle-income migrants for forming social connections. The events and clubs provide allocated time and space for these connections to foster and grow over time, playing a vital role in the social integration of the participants. Several other interviewees reported being members of clubs pertaining to certain professions and cities in South Asia, for example, Ahmed explained that he was part of a club for Sri Lankan quantity surveyors, where he found most of his friends in Muscat. Furthermore, Amisha explained how she found friends through living in an apartment block occupied predominantly by Indian families and used the word "community" to refer to her residential situation:

> "People are good here. And it's mostly Indians... It's an Indian community. So, 90% Indians are here, and age group is same for the kids, his group people are same age, children are same. So, we are comfortable here… We have many friends here from India. (From the) same state, from North India and from Gujarat, we have many friends here. So, it's like a family, no? (laughs)".

Additionally, middle-income migrants expanded their social networks through their spouses. Amisha explains how she found friends in Muscat in the following segment:

> "Mostly through work. I'm not working. My husband is working. So, through his work in office, his department, all the colleagues are there so their families are there. So, like this."

This was the case for both genders, as women met the wives of their husbands' colleagues, and men met the husbands of their wives' colleagues or neighbours. Additionally, opportunities arose to expand social circles through their children, specifically through school and playground exchanges. Consequently, middle-income families have more opportunities to encounter new social contacts due to relatively more intersecting networks within the family unit compared to low-income workers, for example, who resided without their families.

When considering virtual social networks, middle-income interviewees frequently reported using social media networks to remain in touch with family members in their home countries. Most of the interviewees reported texting their families almost daily on WhatsApp and having regular video calls on weekends. Additionally, some of the interviewees used social media platforms to post photos of themselves and their families. In Harun's case, this was to convince his parents and siblings to visit him in Muscat. In Rimmi's case, however, there was an additional effort made to record and edit Bollywood-like short videos of herself, her family and friends. She reported enjoying the activity of dedicating a considerable amount of time planning the locations, attires, music and setting for these videos. She later posted them on her social media profiles to let her family and friends know that she is leading a fulfilling and amusing life in Muscat. Overall, for the middle-income interviewees, it appeared that social media was not just a practical necessity, but an enjoyable means of maintaining social connections and portraying their life in a positive light to their extended social circles.

Turning our attention to the low-income migrant men, their social connections, both physical and virtual, were notably distinct from middle-income migrants', both in terms of how they were established and maintained. This was primarily attributed to low-income migrants lacking family connections in Muscat as their salaries and corresponding visa conditions do not allow them to sponsor family members in Muscat. Therefore, as expected, most of the interviewees reported having no family members living in Muscat. In his interview, Yasir, a 28-year-old janitor who shared accommodation with other men, explained how this was connected to the nature of his employment and living conditions:

> "Maybe if I had my own business here, then I could have my own flat, I could bring my family here. If I have enough income, I can bring my family here. But in this labour work we do; we cannot do that."

Some interviewees attempted to bring their families by securing employment for their spouse. However these efforts often ended in challenges and complications due to visa and job instability. Turning to another aspect, although some of the low-income participants reported having an extended family member residing in Oman, in many cases, this family member was stationed in another city in Oman. Consequently, it was challenging for them to meet regularly due to their limitations in free time and mobility. The lack of family in Muscat undoubtedly motivated the interviewees to visit their families in their home countries. However, contractually, this was typically permitted only once every two years for most of the low-income migrant interviewees. In a poignant interview segment, Abdul Karim, a 31-year-old sanitation worker, recounts his challenging experience:

> "I have not had a vacation in all this time, I have only been to Bangladesh once in the last 10 years".

This statement underscores the deeply emotional and psychological stress experienced by migrants separated from their family and reflects the reality of most low-income migrants under their employment contracts. It illustrates the lack of mobility and lack of agency faced by workers echoing on broader discussions on the interplay between racialised economies, exploitation and isolation.

Despite their unfortunate familial circumstances, low-income migrant men experienced better opportunities to establish social connections through friendships. Yasir enthusiastically replied to my question about friends by saying, "*yes Mashallah I have a lot of friends here!".* To my surprise, all of the

low-income migrant men reported establishing considerable social networks and a large circle of friends and acquaintances. These were typically established through sharing accommodation, working for the same company, playing sports, or meeting other men in spaces that were appropriated predominantly by low-income male workers. Harun, a 36-year-old car insurance dealer, speaks of his experience in one such space:

> "See in Athaibah there is a lot of places... like this wadi for example, in the backside of my office, or there is the 'Bengali market' place. If you are going there on a weekend, like Friday or Thursday night, you can see there is lots of people there, so I met one person. He's one of my friends. So, he has other friends. So, then we are making a group. So, next time if I didn't meet my friend, I'm seeing his friend only, so maybe we'll be friends... Alhamdulillah, like this we are making relationships".

In this segment, Harun explains how easily an individual can form social networks simply by being present in one place and knowing one person. In another interview segment, Mohi, a 29-year-old cleaner, recalls befriending someone while making phoning his family in a public neighbourhood space; a space comparable to the breakout space case study previously examined in Chapter 5:

> "I was just talking to someone sitting here, his room is here too. One day he heard I am talking in Bangla, the second time too, then the third time he asked 'brother, how are you?', this is how it starts".

In this segment, Mohi describes how sharing the same space and speaking the same language helped him establish social contacts. This is a common avenue for low-income workers to expand and establish social circles: through their living situation. Most of the interviewees reported living in shared housing with other men. In some cases, apartments were privately rented, but more commonly the workers resided in company-provided camps or multi-unit dwellings. Among the participants' accounts of shared accommodation, one stood out as particularly positive:

Abdul Karim: We are 7 people

Interviewer: And how many rooms?

Abdul Karim: 1 room, one hall, one kitchen, two bathrooms

Interviewer: What is the sleeping arrangement?

Abdul Karim: We have bunk beds

Interviewer: 7 people in one room?

Abdul Karim: Yes, it is good!

Interviewer: Can you tell me why it is good?

Abdul Karim: It is good. Imagine if we all slept in our own rooms, then we cannot talk. Before we go to bed, we talk, we laugh and make jokes. We listen to songs, it feels nice.

Interviewer: So, you do not feel like you need your space?

Abdul Karim: No, not at all. I do not want to stay alone, I do not like it, I like to stay with everyone.

Interviewer: Do you cook together?

Abdul Karim: Yes, we cook. Cooking has a system, everyday one person cooks.

Interviewer: So, when you cook, you cook for 7 people?

Abdul Karim: Yes, for two meals at a time.

Interviewer: For so many people?

Abdul Karim: It is just one dish, like one curry, and some rice, it is enough.

Interviewer: So, you have to cook once a week...

Abdul Karim: Yes, and if someone is sick, then we cook for him, no problem! This is my family here.

This segment demonstrates the vital role of social support in the daily lives of migrants. Despite the challenges of overcrowded accommodations, Abdul Karim valued the ability to share tasks, recieve care and experience a sense of community, underscoring how social support mitigates the challenges faced by temporary migrant workers, particularly those residing without families. Most of the interviewees established strong ties with other migrant workers in similar situations. Furthermore, they successfully connected with people stemming from their own countries, cities and even the same villages, in some cases. This can be attributed to their dominance in the low-income employment sector in Oman, which increases the likelihood of encountering others from similar backgrounds. Additionally, with frequent use of the words *mashallah* and *alhamdulillah* to describe their social circles, many men expressed gratitude for the opportunity to foster and sustain these social connections.

In the investigation of virtual social contact, the interviews revealed that low-income migrant men presented a higher dependency on virtual contact, when compared to middle-income migrants. This result was expected due to their separation from their families. Most of the low-income migrant men reported daily calls to their family, preferring video calls when possible. Mohi, for example, shared: *"My favourite thing is to call home, to speak to my family, I sit here and call them".* Yasir additionally explained how calling them served as an alternative to seeing them: "*When I miss them a lot, I do video calls, then I get relaxed, as if I have seen them in person".*

When examining the experiences of low-income migrant women, their familial connections, both physical and virtual, were similar to low-income migrant men; familial connections were limited due to the inability to sponsor their families in Muscat. However, the low-income migrant women expressed significantly higher levels of distress due to their familial separation compared to their male counterparts. All of the women who expressed high levels of distress were mothers separated from their children. For example, Devi explains how this hinders her physical well-being:

> "I am here every day without my family, every single day. Sometimes I cannot sleep, sometimes I do not eat, I have so many problems from missing them".

Similarly to low-income men, most low-income women expressed that they were allowed to visit their families only once every two years, and that this was not enough. Renitta, for example, who was separated from her children and grandchildren, expressed how her family members wished for her to visit them in the following quote:

> "My mother-in-law liked me a lot. She had not forgotten me, every day she told me, 'Daughter, before I die, I want to see you, please come back, now my son is not drinking, now your children also have babies'. I don't like to break my mother-in-law heart, so I went to see her. After I came back, in 6 months she died (cries). More than my own mother I liked my mother-in-law"

This segment demonstrates Renitta's temporal dislocation due to her prolonged absence and underscores the losses experienced by migrants like her. As time moves forward but migrants remain distant, they miss the milestones and the losses of their families, paying a high price for their precarious employment abroad. Unlike low-income migrant men, low-income migrant women did not successfully

compensate for a lack of familial ties through friendships. The reasons for this have been elaborated on in the previous subchapter, pertaining to a lack of free time and a lack of energy due to demanding jobs. In addition to which, unlike the low-income migrant men, female migrants did not reside in large groups with opportunities to meet other women of the same demographic. Domestic workers, for example, typically resided with their employer's family in their home. Due to the nature of their employment and daily lives, the women also did not partake in weekly sports activities or spend time outdoors, which significantly reduced their chances of creating new social contacts.

During the interviews, a 51-year-old beauty salon owner claimed to employ young women who were timid and submissive. The interviews revealed that this was a strategy to control the young women's social contacts and mobility. According to the salon owner, her employees' parents were in arrangement with her to keep the girls at work or in their room, and to not let them "out of sight", further isolating them from the chance to meet people in Muscat or be outdoors, unless they were supervised by the salon owner. The young women's social dependency on their employers and the consequent isolation is revealed by the salon owner in the following interview segment:

> Rumana (salon owner): One girl takes her day off on Friday, and the other one takes her day off on Saturday. Like that, one day, one day. But then they prefer to come back to salon and work. They say, 'what will we do in the house?'. They don't want to go out alone. They usually come (to Muscat) alone. They don't know anybody here. They don't have any anybody here, but I take them to beaches or take them to restaurants or take them out to wherever.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah, because you are their only contact. They don't know other people, right?
>
> Rumana: No, they don't know. And I don't allow them to. Because anything can happen. We are whole and sole responsible for these girls. If anything goes wrong. We answer to the parents.

What further distinguished the low-income migrant women from the other demographic cohorts was their heightened connection to religious institutions, in this case churches and temples. Most of the domestic workers were allowed to visit the church or temple once a month, usually on a Friday. Some domestic workers attempted to coordinate with others to align their church or temple visits, requesting the same day off from their employers each month. However, this was a rare and special occurrence, rather than a regular one.

When asked if she has friends, Renitta replied, “I don't have friends, only church”, and went on to describe how her church pastor served as a crucial source of support and strength in her life. During the case study selection phase, I conducted investigative observations in spaces outside the church and temple vicinity in Ruwi, an eastern part of Muscat commonly inhabited by the South Asian community. During these observations, after the prayers, low-income migrant women congregated on the grass lawn areas around the main bus and taxi stop. In these spaces, they awaited transportation, frequently arranged by their employers. While they waited, they gathered in small groups with other women and often brought food and drink. During an interview with one group of women, it became apparent that these gatherings were one of the only times in the entire month that they could meet other women in public spaces in Muscat. The importance of these rare gatherings was further evident in the women’s positive mood and demeanour, especially when compared to interviews that took place in other locations, where the women rarely displayed enthusiasm or positive emotions.

The interview with Sunita, a 40-year-old parlour beautician, particularly highlighted the importance of religious institutions. Soon into the interview at her beauty salon, Sunita revealed that she had lost her 7-year-old daughter to a sudden illness two years ago. In a poignant segment of her interview, she shared the difficulty she experienced and how the church provided her with support during the adverse times:

> "I would not go in the kitchen because that is where she used to be with me in the evenings ‘mummy can I help you with this?’ she used to ask. And it was always us two in the kitchen. It took me a long time to get better. I told myself eventually that I need to get better for my son. If I fall ill then who will take care of my son, I cannot abandon him. So, I said I will live for him. I know I can never forget my daughter... But I tried to be strong. And now I feel a little better… Slowly, slowly I got closer to God. I started to pray. The church community is very good. They used to keep me on the call and recite prayers with me, we had church meetings on the call, even during COVID. They would keep me busy. But it still affected me a lot of course, it hurt me a lot. Their calls used to help my mind..."

The research reveals how the different demographic cohorts accessed social support in various forms. While middle-income migrants relied on their families, low-income migrant men found support through friendships, and low-income migrant women resorted to places of worship for comfort and to build resilience against their difficult circumstances. Moreover, in this segment, Sunita refers to video calls with members of the church, to compensate for her inability to make regular visits to the church. This

highlights the significance of virtual social networks in low-income migrant women's daily lives, particularly as a compensation for their lack of mobility. In comparison to the other demographic cohorts, low-income migrant women exhibited the highest usage of virtual social connection. Some of the interviewees revealed using their phones in every moment they were not working. In the case of the beauticians for example, this was when there were no customers in the salon. In the case of domestic workers, it was when their employers were not home, and the worker had completed her tasks. These virtual connections played a central role in bonding with friends, families and community members. This is not only attributed to their own dependence on virtual social connections for support, but also the needs of their family members, particularly the children they left behind, who rely on their mothers for support through the phone. Mary, a 40-year-old domestic worker, explains in this interview segment:

> "It is difficult for the children you know? They do not have their mothers… The children will be good if they see their mother strong. There is no use of crying. Do not think too much. If you keep thinking, then you cannot work well!".

The frequent video calls offered support to both the participant and her family back home by easing the stress of familial separation and by allowing her to fulfil her role as the breadwinner of the family. Sat outside the church with her friends, Mary expressed her gratitude for the calls in the following quote:

> "Before, there was no telephone, so I was missing them. Now there is video call, so I am not missing them! (laughs) Before we had photos, now we have video. No more crying! Now it is good, alhamdulillah"

The significance of the video calls is tied to the women's wish to remain at home or in a space where they have access to a stable Wi-Fi connection, further alienating them from the chances to be outdoors and appropriate spaces. The women felt responsible to be available for their children when they were needed. This was expressed by several interviewees alike:

> Devi: that's why I like staying in the room, so I can talk to them. I have to talk to them. My girl is 13 years old, and my boy is 11 years old. They still miss me, since 6 years… so I wish to see them.

In conclusion, the three demographic cohorts established and maintained their social connections quite distinctly when compared with each other. Middle-income migrants often had family members in Muscat, due to job recommendations and being able to sponsor family visas. This was not the case for low-income migrants whose salaries did not afford family sponsorships. Middle-income migrants also had more opportunities to meet other migrants stemming from the same countries, cities and in many cases, from the same professions, with the help of associations and clubs dedicated to forming such networks. Additionally, the middle-income interviewees often reported residing in South Asian majority neighbourhoods which increased the likelihood of forming social networks with people of similar backgrounds. They experienced far greater opportunities to foster social connections due to their family-centred networks. In comparison, low-income migrant men also had opportunities to meet others like themselves, due to their accommodation situations, opportunities to play team sports and spending time in male dominated public spaces during their free time. These social connections and support helped low-income migrant men mitigate the stress of harsh living and working conditions under precarious circumstances. However, low-income migrant women struggled to meet other women like themselves due to their confinement to the workplace, making it challenging to foster community or belong to society. To compensate for the lack of family and friendships, the women often found support and community through religious institutions and presented a higher dependency on religious communities compared to low-income men and middle-income migrants. Additionally, comparing low-income migrants, it was easier for the men to establish social contacts than for women, because there are more men in the low-income working sector than women. When it came to virtual social networks, all of the demographic cohorts reported frequent usage of social media apps. The middle-income interviewees used the apps primarily to keep in touch with family and share impressions of their life, but did not display a high dependency on these platforms and spent significantly more time with family and in social gatherings. In contrast, the low-income migrant men were not able to visit their families in their home countries as often as the middle-income interviewees and therefore presented a higher dependency on virtual networks. However, due to their extensive social networks in Muscat, the men allocated nearly an equal amount of their time to physical and virtual social connections. The same could not be said for the low-income migrant women who exhibited a strong dependence on virtual connections compared to physical ones.

This section has underscored the critical role of social capital in allowing the migrants to meet their social needs. Echoing on the works of Bourdieu (2018) and de Haas (2010), the results of the research demonstrate how migrants relied on their communities to assert agency, reinforcing the argument that social connections and social capital are vital resources for agency and empowerment in the experience of a migrant. However, the research demonstrates how starkly different the experiences of South Asian

migrants are across the socio-economic spectrum. Social networks and a perceived sense of belonging play a vital role in the wellbeing of migrant communities while providing them with a sense of being part of society, which is particularly important for a community that runs the risk of navigating cultural adaptation, economic pressures and exclusions on a social and urban level. The theme of belonging will be further explored in Section 6.2 of this chapter.

6.1.3 Mobility and Accessibility

In his renowned works on the right to the city, elaborated on in Chapter 2, Lefebvre (1996) often emphasises the claim to urban life through the experience of the city but pays limited attention to the examination of physical access to the city, a perspective which is critical to this research. The following subchapter delves into the third theme regarding space appropriation focusing on the mobility options of the three demographic cohorts. The daily and leisure mobility patterns of migrants are observed and compared to identify their opportunities and constraints in mobility. By recognizing the migrants' mobility options and how they navigate limitations, this subchapter aims to underscore the role of mobility in space appropriation in a car-dominated city like Muscat. This aims to determine the extent to which the demographic cohorts exercise agency and autonomy in accessing the city and how these variations in agency give rise to spatial inequalities.

First, the mobility patterns of middle-income interviewees are examined. This cohort exhibited increased mobility compared to the others, as expected. All of the interviewees stemmed from households that owned either one or more private vehicles. In many cases, the primary household car was provided by the employer, and in some cases, the interviewees owned their car privately. All of the men reported owning a car, and some of the women owned cars. All of the interviewees also reported selecting their place of residence based on the distance to their workplaces and their children's school. Additionally, in some cases, interviewees also considered the proximity to essential facilities.

Shabana, a 42-year-old engineer, was offered the choice to live in a company provided accommodation or to receive compensation for an alternative accommodation of her choice instead. She chose to live in the company provided accommodation and explains her reasons as mentioned in the interview segment below:

> "For me, this is actually a good choice. I really love to stay in this place. But this is an accommodation given to me by my company and it's a good place. It has all the facilities close by and it is very close to my work as well. So, I choose to live here. I find this area greener and there are parks around and the beach is close by and it's a well-maintained area. So, I consider this area to be a little more luxurious area than the areas that I lived in Oman".

When the interviewees had to choose between a higher rent for a better location or a lower rent for a

more distant location, most middle-income interviewees were able to afford the higher rent. Harun, explains his choice to live closer to his workplace so he could go back home for his lunch breaks in the following quote:

> "That's why I chose here, because within two minutes I can reach my home. So, I'm caring for my family. See if I go to Muttrah area, I can save like 30 to 50 Rial in rent, but, in this present situation... I'm considering my family not 40 Rials. I can save my time. I'm finishing here (office) at 1:30, if I am going for lunch to Maabelah, I need at least 20 minutes and fuel…l and the traffic… so instead, in that 20 minutes I can sleep (at home), I can sit with my family so I'm not considering that 40 Rials difference".

Most of the middle-income interviewees appeared to be satisfied with their daily mobility options, having chosen convenient residential locations, and having the means to own at least one car. During the weekends, in addition to driving to popular spots like public beaches, they often drove to distant locations outside of Muscat to enjoy some natural landscapes. For example, Mohamed Rashid, a 36-year-old factory manager, received a four-wheel drive car from his company, which was ideal for off-road driving. He often travelled around Oman as he explains in the following segment:

> "Because as I told you, I've been in Oman for 13 years, I have explored many areas. Like apart from Cricket, my next passion is driving off-road. I explored many areas. Whenever I get the opportunity to see in the social media or newspapers about these places, I prefer to go there".

Concerning pedestrian mobility, some middle-income interviewees had the option to walk to daily destinations because they often lived in areas with facilities or public spaces in close proximity. However, they did not walk very often due to inconveniences in accessing these areas. For example, Saira, a 36-year-old architect, explained why she used her car for short distances within her neighbourhood:

> "Sometimes it is about accessing the space… So, say like if I'm going from my house to the Al Khuwair park, I have to cross a series of roads. So that's a reason I don't

walk with the kids to the park".

Female middle-income interviewees often expressed the desire to walk in their neighbourhood for leisure, but felt discouraged by the fear of harassment. Therefore, they drove to places which were safer for women to walk in, like public beaches, for example. Anuratha, a 35-year-old film maker, explained her experiences walking in her neighbourhood in the following segment from her interview:

> "People used to slow down (their cars), and they used to catcall. Even sometimes creepily used to park way ahead and wait. That used to be very scary. They would stop the car a few steps ahead and then look out of the window. So, you would have to eventually cross (the street) and then it was very scary. I would just go walk faster and thankfully, nobody's stepped out (of the car). So, hence I think, my mother asks us to walk on the main road, because there's at least a chance of calling out to somebody for help…But never by the beach, that never has happened there. So, also probably why we were a little more excited about the beach".

The middle-income interviewees had the option to reduce their daily traveling distances during weekdays and had the option to explore farther destinations during the weekends. They could also evade pedestrian restrictions in their neighbourhood or in the city by owning a car. When examining the mobility patterns of low-income men, stark distinctions emerged in comparison to the first demographic cohort, as expected. The first and greatest distinction was that none of the low- migrant men owned a car and almost half of them owned a bicycle. Additionally, most of the men lived in company-provided accommodation and had no control over their residential location. As a result, some men lived in camps on the outskirts of Muscat or in other cities, commuting long distances to work. Some men worked in Samail, which is 75 kilometres away from Muscat, and commuted to Muscat every day for work. Therefore, a large portion of the low-income men typically arrived at work by company-provided buses, which transports about 40 men in every trip. Only a few of the low-income men had the choice to live independently and share a flat with other men working in the same area. These men either walked to work or biked to work. None of the men used public transport for their daily work trips, as they preferred cost-free options.

Several low-income interviewees owned a bicycle, which offered them a number of advantages. First, the bike was an affordable option compared to owning any other vehicle. Second, the bike allowed the men to take short cuts in their routes, mainly possible due to the lack of bicycle infrastructure and

regulation. Consequently, the men could drive on the opposite direction of traffic on the side-lines of the street and could also cross streets perpendicularly, appropriating the streets according to their needs, something car owners cannot do. Some men saw this as an advantage to save time in their hectic days and responded positively towards owning a bike in Muscat. Ali, for example, a 36-year-old cashier, shares his experience in the following interview segment:

> Interviewer: Have you ever tried riding a bicycle?
> Ali: Yes, for the past two three years. Its good because I got one very good bicycle, for 70 Riyals and used it for 5 years!
> Interviewer: How are the Muscat roads for a bicycle?
> Ali: There are so many inside road, so there is no need to go on the main road. If you cross this area (points) you reach to another area. I can cross the main road.
> Interviewer: How about in summer with the weather?
> Ali: I use the bike in the morning or late afternoon.
> Interviewer: What did you use the bicycle for mostly?
> Ali: To meet friends, or if I need something from a longer distance. Or I go for prayer.

However, the bicycle came with its limitations as the weather in Muscat did not allow the men to ride a bicycle for long distances for the most part of the year. Therefore, the men used their bicycles for shorter distances and used taxis for longer distances. Taxis were seen as a last resort option for daily trips as most of the men reported it as unaffordable. Due to the lack of feasible options, the men sometimes chose not to be mobile at all. For example, Mubashir reduced his daily destinations to his work, the local mosque and a local coffee shop, all within walking distance. When asked if he would like to do other things in his free time, he replied: *"No, it is expensive for taxi, that is why I am sitting at home".*

However, during the weekend, the men exhibited a larger variety in their mobility options. For example, some men reported sharing taxis with their friends, using the public transport system offered by Mwasalat, and even car-pooling with a friend who was employed as a driver. When I asked Ali about his mobility and how he navigated a city like Muscat without a car, he replied by referring to his social circle. He once said: *"I know one Omani driver. He can help me with anything".* In another instance, I asked him how he visited his friends if he could not use the bicycle or a bus, and he replied: *"One other friend helped me. We have big circle of communities here. Also, we have good friends with some Pakistani, Indian also".* This segment demonstrates how low-income men compensated for their lack of mobility options through the support of their social network.

The interviews with low-income migrant men revealed that although the men faced challenges in their mobility, many of the men were resourceful in overcoming the challenges. They could walk and bike when the weather allowed, appropriating the streets. Additionally, they could use public transport, which is a male-dominated domain in Muscat. They could also reach out to their social circles which, for example, consisted of men who could share a taxi fare or men who were drivers and had access to a vehicle.

As for low-income migrant women, mobility was not a topic they could speak much on, as they were the most immobile of the three demographic cohorts. None of the low-income migrant women owned a car or had a driver's license. Additionally, none of the women owned a bicycle or used public transport. The women's reduced mobility was generally attributed to them working and living in the same location, minimizing their daily mobility needs during the week. To elaborate, domestic workers, for example, lived with their employers, and beauticians typically lived nearby in shared company provided accommodations. Moreover, as explained in the previous subchapters, the women's limitations in leisure time and social connections led to a reduced need for mobility.

Moreover, the women expressed a high dependency on their employer for their mobility. For example, Renitta, a domestic worker, expressed: *"If madam or sir do not agree, I'm not going anywhere. First, I ask madam if I can go there. If she says 'okay', then I go".* Comparably, Mary, a domestic worker who sat outside the church, explained: *"When I am done with prayer, then Madam comes to pick me up, she drops me and picks me. I don't need taxi, Madam will come".* Similarly to domestic workers, the beauticians' mobility was also tied to their employer. In the following interview segments, a salon owner explained how she felt responsible for and therefore controlled her employee's mobility:

> "In a taxi? I don't want them to go out like that, you know, in cabs and all that. I take them wherever they need, any shopping, or anything, any occasion, I take them out myself."

When I questioned why, she explained further:

> "You know, if they go out somewhere in a wrong place, something goes wrong, you know… so many incidents took place here (Muscat). So, I don't want them to face any problem. The parents (of the young salon employees), before bringing them over here, the parents, the first thing they say is, 'Don't let my daughter go out

> alone. If anything happens, you're responsible'. So, we have to tell them, 'Definitely! We take them take care of them, like you people took care of them. And we take them wherever'. Actually, back in India, they don't go out anywhere. They didn't go to school or anything. They just learn the work, then they used to work. They're very happy here. In fact, they got so much freedom here, going to restaurants, going to parks going to Mass and going to beaches. They never saw a beach in their life, they're so excited to see the beaches, you know".

It should be noted here that although the salon owner speaks of her employees' "happiness", none of the low-income migrant women expressed happiness about their mobility or freedom in Muscat. The degree of control exercised by salon owners over their employees emerged as a common pattern amongst salons.

Although most of the beauticians and domestic workers lived in close proximity to their workplaces, there were some women who needed to be more mobile, like Devi. Although Devi was employed as a domestic worker, she worked only part time at her primary employer's house. This meant that Devi lived in a privately rented accommodation and needed to be mobile to reach her other work commitments. To facilitate this, Devi relied on walking and using what she referred to as "a shared taxi service". She was reluctant to make any negative comments about her experience as a pedestrian in Muscat, but she commented as follows:

> "It is fine Madam. India is better, easier to walk. I live there so I like it. The weather is better there. But I don't feel scared to walk here".

Furthermore, I asked her to explain what she meant by a shared taxi, to which she replied:

> "I don't use normal taxi, I have my own taxi transport, it's a man from Kerala, he drops people like me every day, informal driver transport service, usually for maids. We know him so it feels safe. I don't like the normal taxi with the Omani men, I don't trust them".

Other low-income migrant women that commuted to work also used a private shared driver, and none of them used public transport for trips to work, due to its male dominance, its high cost, and insufficient

bus routes. Additionally, the women did not feel comfortable with Omani taxi drivers due to language barriers and the risks of harassment. Therefore, they preferred a driver from their home country, who spoke the same language, and who transported other women like themselves.

In conclusion, the three demographic cohorts presented distinct mobility needs in their daily lives and fulfilled these needs in distinct ways, some more successfully than others. In a car-dominated city like Muscat, which does not offer alternative infrastructure for car-free individuals, pedestrians and cyclists remain limited in their accessibility. This worked in favour of the first cohort, the middle-income interviewees, all of whom owned cars, either privately or provided by their companies. In this cohort, although not all the women owned cars or driver's licenses, their spouses could fulfil their mobility requirements. Moreover, middle-income interviewees had more choice when it came to their residential situation and could afford to live in locations to reduce daily travel distances. Additionally, during weekends, they could travel to their desired destinations regardless of the distances. Women who wished to walk outdoors evaded pedestrian restrictions in their neighbourhood or in the city by owning a car. On the other hand, none of the low-income migrant men owned a car. They were also restricted in their choice of residential location, which sometimes resulted in living far from work and leisure destinations. Their work trips were typically organised by their employers. For leisure trips, in comparison to the middle-income cohort, they resorted to a larger variety of modes of transport, including walking, bicycling, taking a bus, taking a taxi, sharing a taxi and carpooling with friends who owned or had access to a car. They interchanged their modes of transport depending on the activity, distance to their destination and even the weather. The men also appropriated streets to suit their needs and cut travel time by riding their bicycle across and in the opposite direction of traffic, for example. In comparison to the two cohorts above, low-income women presented the least daily mobility requirements as they typically lived close to work. When it came to leisure trips, which were already limited, the women were highly dependent on their employers. Moreover, compared to their low-income male counterparts, they were not as successful in establishing alternatives as none of the women rode or owned bicycles, used public transport, or felt comfortable walking long distances. However, women who required transportation to work arranged private drivers and shared the expenses with other women. These drivers shared nationality and language in common with the women, making this a safe and comfortable option for their daily trips.

This section has revealed the importance of shorter travel distances and easy accessibility in sprawling cities, particularly with regard to accessing public spaces. Moreover, it has demonstrated how migrants with private cars or alternative mobility options had more rights to the city, while migrants with limited mobility faced constraints in their access and rights to the city. This leaves marginalised migrants excluded from essential public spaces, feeding into the inequalities in terms of their spatial needs and

their ability to participate in urban life and society.

6.2 Belonging: Negotiating Home

The experiences of temporary migrants have long been examined in human geography. As Tuan (2002, p. 158) aptly questioned: "Modern society has its nomads—hoboes, migrant workers, and merchant seamen, among others. What are the consequences of rootlessness? Do they long for a permanent place, and if so, how is this longing expressed?". This chapter examines how South Asian migrants in Muscat experience belonging, exploring which factors shape their sense of belonging and space within the context of temporary migration.

At the end of each interview, the migrants were asked about their notions of home and belonging. Without exception, all the interviews conveyed that their home countries held the primary notion of what home means, regardless of their time spent abroad. Surprisingly, even the interviewees who had lived in Muscat long-term and did not feel comfortable staying in their home countries for long periods of time, still maintained that their home country was their primary place of belonging. When the topic of belonging arose in the interviews, several interviewees who spoke in English or a common Indian language, switched to their mother tongue to refer to their home countries, displaying a particular closeness to the meaning of the word for 'one's own country'. They made a distinction between Oman as a place of work and their home countries as the place where they belong. Some examples for interview segments are presented below:

> Mohi: "Of course I want to go back. I have to go back to my *muluk* (home country), my country, we call it *our country,* we have to go there. I am only here for work, to make money, nothing else. "
>
> Yasir: "This (Oman) is a foreign country *pardes* (foreign country), so it will not feel like home as much as your own country. It is out of necessity that we have to work, so we have to stay here."
>
> Mohammed Sabir: "It is very nice here! But our country *muluk* is our country. No one is like our own people."

Most of the low-income migrants did not feel a strong sense of belonging in Oman. Mahesh, for example, attributed this strong distinction to the harsh living circumstances and distance from his family in the following interview segment:

> "I have been here for 5 years. I know how difficult it is to stay here. It is very difficult, Madam. If someone gets sick here, there is no one to look after us. No one, not a brother, no one."

On the other hand, Jamal, a 47-year-old quality control coordinator, contributed his hesitation in calling Oman his home country to the absence of a route to citizenship in the following interview segment:

> "At the end of the day I need to go back to India. Oman is not going to keep us whole life. If Oman is going to make sure that we are going to get the passport, then Oman is my home country, yes, I can feel that. Otherwise, how I can feel that? If I will work here even for 50 or 60 years, at the end of the day I need to go back to India, how it could be home?"

While some interviewees drew a clear distinction between where they belong and where they do not, other interviewees struggled to do so and equated Oman with their home country. They identified both countries as places where they feel a sense of belonging, albeit with a hierarchical ordering, referring to Oman as their "second home", "like a home", "second motherland" or "adopted motherland" in the interviews. The interviewees in this case attributed their sense of belonging in Oman to five main aspects. First, their memories tied to places in Oman. Second, their memories of raising a family in Oman. Third, their social connections. Fourth, their prolonged time in Oman: the longer they lived in there, the more they felt attached to it and distanced from their home countries. Fifth, their ability to practice cultural continuity in Muscat, whether through food, sports, community or other cultural practices.

A majority of the interviewees who referred to Oman as their second home talked about the memories they have created in Oman with their family and community and also referred to creating these memories in specific places. For example, Shabana, who has been living in Oman for 15 years, talked about the importance of accumulated memories and how these create a bond with a particular place:

> "There are a lot of memories in Oman. The thing is, we have lived our life here. So, when you're young, when your children grow up in a particular country, you have a lot of memories, you have a lot of 'first things' (milestones) that they have done in the place. So, you have those photographs, you have those special things, you have

> friends and families that you have invited home, including Omanis and including Indians, including other people. So, you have a bond in that place with them. So, you have different memories in each place. Your success is celebrated by everybody, your failures are taken care of by everybody... I started my relationship here with my husband. I have lots of memories here because people helped us setting a new house then we had kids then they helped us when kids got sick, they helped us with the good doctors, where what to find, where what not to find."

In addition to Shabana, Pradeep, a 37-year-old engineer, expressed similar views on belonging through memories, but elaborated on the aspect of community and culture in the following segment from his interview:

> "First thing is, I'm living in the midst of an Asian community. Second thing is, the kids are also studying in the Indian schools. So, it's more like a kind of second home. But if you ask, okay, the roots are in Chennai, because (I am) born and brought up over there. But this city and this country and the people have made us more comfortable, (so) that we feel it like a home."

Several interviewees spoke about their community and their long-standing friendships in Muscat, such as Syed Shaikh, a 30-year-old working in procurement, for example. He however placed a significant importance on the time spent in Muscat as a pivotal factor contributing to his sense of belonging in Muscat. He shared:

> -income interviewees displayed a commonality in their limited access to such spaces and therefore lower degrees of belonging
> "10 years is not a small amount of time. If I am 30 years old now, and so 10 years here means that half my time is here (as an adult). So, it is normal that I am attached to Ghubrah, attached to cricket, attached to the friendships made through cricket, they are close to me, like family."

While several interviewees talked about cultural continuity through sports like cricket, contact with South Asian communities, schools, and clubs, these opportunities were not always accessible to other interviewees. Low-income interviewees, in particular, commonly reported limited access to such spaces

and therefore lower degrees of belonging. However, one interview that stood out as an exception amongst the low-income interviewees was with Ramesh, a 40-year-old gardener. He was one of the few low-income interviewees to speak about a strong sense of belonging in Oman, which could be attributed to the 15 years he spent in Oman, a notably long duration, diverging from the typical experience of low-income workers in Muscat. Ramesh had devised alternative means to cultural continuity by appropriating a space where he cultivated vegetables and herbs and raised animals within the confines of his labour camp. He explained his feelings about home and belonging in the following interview segment:

> Ramesh: In our camp, we grow coriander, mint, onions, and tomatoes. We have everything, chicken, and goats too (laughs). It feels like home! You know, Oman is my second mother. My first mother is India.
> Interviewer: Talk to me about home
> Ramesh: Oman is my second motherland. Until I have breath in my lungs, Oman will always be my motherland (cries). First mother is India, second mother is Oman. There are such good people here. I swear on it. I put my hand on my heart, I swear. I was born in India you know, that is why it is the first. Otherwise, I would say Oman is the first. The people here respect us so much, even if they are important people. I have seen it many times. They are so kind; it brings me to tears. They are such respectful people; you would not find such people in any other Gulf countries. I have lived here for 15 years, madam.

In terms of belonging and the notions of home, the interviewees unanimously prioritised their home countries as their primary place of belonging. Some of the interviewees made a clear distinction between Oman as a place of work and their home countries as the place where they truly belonged. Amongst the interviewees, low-income migrants attributed their lack of belonging to harsh working conditions and distance from their families, whereas middle-income migrants attributed their lack of belonging to the absence of a long-term residency and the unfeasible pathway to citizenship. While some interviewees made a clear statement about a lack of belonging, other interviewees called Oman their *second home*, expressing their feelings of belonging in Oman despite their uncertain future and despite their temporariness. This was attributed to five main factors, namely: memories bound to places in Muscat, memories of raising a family in Muscat, extended social networks established in Muscat, prolonged residence in Muscat over long periods of time and the ability to practice cultural continuity in Muscat. Considering the above factors, as expected, low-income migrants exhibited significantly

lower levels of belonging in Muscat compared to higher-income interviewees. This demonstrates that, despite the shared precarity of their stay in Muscat and their inevitable return, the experience of belonging was significantly shaped by the factors mentioned above and the socio-cultural and socio-economic aspects that the cohorts shared in common.

6.3 Temporariness: Navigating Uncertainty

While all of the interviewees responded with uncertainty about their future in Muscat, their desire to stay in Muscat varied. Middle-income interviewees often expressed a desire to stay as long as possible in Muscat. Amisha, for example, responded to my hypothetical question about her desire to stay in Muscat indefinitely:

> "Yeah. For sure. If I would get the citizenship I would love to stay here! (laughs) It's a good country you know, it's a good country for me. Everything is good here. Especially it's nearby from India, it's very near to India, so I can visit my relatives and my family, whenever I want."

Middle-income interviewees often began speaking about their desired duration of residence in Muscat with a reference to the lack of a pathway to an Omani citizenship or other means of a long-term stay in the country. For example, when asked about how long he plans to stay in Oman with his family, Hussain talked about the constant extension of his two-year work contract as an Architect in Muscat in the following interview segment:

> "Even though the government has given us the visas, there is no clear-cut rules of naturalization, or becoming a citizen. Those laws do not exist in Oman. So, the thing is, you're constantly living with these words hanging by your head, 'you got a two-year extension', and then it's two years more. It doesn't make you feel completely at home. You're always torn between packing your bag and buying a couch. You're always in between these two things. So, perhaps my own plan is to stay here until the kids' education is complete. Because they do not belong to India, they can't live on that side. But then I just need to see where my next contract or my next extension will be and how long it is valid for. We only make plans like that. Then, we hope things will all be fine. This is how 'two years' has got me down to 21 years (living in Muscat)."

In this segment, Hussain touches upon a key aspect of temporary migration by discussing a determinant of its duration — his children's education. This was a common determinant of the duration of stay

amongst middle-income interviewees living with their families in Muscat. Most of the interviewees were waiting for their children to reach certain educational milestones in Oman, whether that was primary school, secondary school, or the end of the school year. Additionally, a common determinant amongst the interviewees was the purchase or construction of a home in their home countries. However, in the case of low-income interviewees, the pressures to send remittances home were much higher than those faced by middle-income interviewees. In addition to the construction of a home and funding children's educations, their remittances often contributed towards siblings' marriages, medical treatments for family members, and financially supporting dependent family members. Mahesh, a gardener, confirms this in the following segment.

> "I want to go (back). Once my sister is married, I will go. Until then, my father needs to work too. Once my sister is married, my tension (stress) will be reduced, then I can go back. Even if I get little money in India, I prefer to stay there."

Similarly, when asked about how long he needs to stay, Srinu, who also works as a gardener replied,

> "How many ever days are left for me to eat from the blessings of Qaboos, that much (laughs). Look, my kids are studying, there are expenditures, what to do? We have to stay. I do not know how much longer I will be allowed to stay."

However, not all of the interviewees had a determinant factor. Some of them expressed their uncertainty more strongly than others. Such was the case with Renitta, as she wondered about whether she wants to go back to Sri Lanka:

> "I want to go back but sometimes I'm sad… I need the money also. I do not know. But I pray 'Jesus, tell me what do I do? What do I do... how my life…?"

The interviews revealed that migrants accompanied by their families in Muscat wished to reside in Oman longer than interviewees who were unable to sponsor their families. Most of the middle-income migrants who expressed a desire to prolong their residency in Muscat had been living in Oman for several years and felt unprepared to return to their home countries or relocate elsewhere. Their desire for a prolonged stay aligned with their personal preference to remain in Oman for as long as they could. In contrast, low-income migrants faced the pressure of family responsibilities and endured harsh

working conditions along with social isolation in many cases; challenges that reinforced their wish to return home as soon as possible; however, reluctantly found themselves compelled to extend their stay for the sake of their families.

Ultimately, the interviewees' aspirations were constrained by the reality of their job insecurities in Muscat, particularly in light of the rise in Omanisation, as explained in Chapter 2. A majority of the interviewees responded with an understanding for Omanisation and typically expressed gratitude for the employment opportunities that Oman had provided them so far. For example, Indrajath, a 49-year-old pharmacist, shared his opinion on Omanisation in the following segment:

> "Social changes are bound to happen over a period of years. Because in over a period of time when the local people get educated, they need to be placed in jobs. So many people I have heard complaining about localizing (Omanisation), but I don't. I believe, if it was in our country, we would not have been so generous, we wouldn't have been this patient. So, this is the time for them to step in slowly."

While a majority of the interviewees expressed gratitude for their opportunities to work in Muscat, only a few interviewees felt comfortable enough to voice a more critical view on Omanisation such as Hussain, who shared his concerns and questioned why local and foreign professionals could not work together to help expand the economy:

> "Yeah, it gets me worried. I always wonder, how long this philosophy will work? That you're going to replace one (foreign) member with another (local) member. When you're thinking and taking a call on the economy, there is this vessel, you can always replace blue balls with white balls. But then what happens if the vessel expands…? The blue balls and the white balls can coexist! So, if they tend to open up a bit on those terms, perhaps it is going to be a much better place."

Some interviewees coped with the temporariness and uncertainty better than others. Middle-income interviewees typically navigated their uncertainties with alternative securities such as properties in their home countries or savings. Their financial securities afforded them more time for decision-making and a degree of agency to pursue their desires to prolong their stay in Muscat, a benefit not afforded to low-income interviewees in comparison. Low-income interviewees, employed in low-skill sectors, were

more concerned about their replaceability in the unstable job market of Oman. For instance, Srinu recounted when he and his friends were abruptly reassigned from gardeners to sanitation workers, while others faced immediate unemployment. These changes occurred suddenly, with no warning or opportunity for negotiation, underscoring the precarity and lack of agency in low-income employment. Srinu explained:

> “Many of us got a "finish letter". We were 4 people, we all got relocated. One in Quriyat, one in Mawaleh, one of us in Muttrah. We 4 got changed. But the rest were sent off, fired. Now it has been almost 3-4 years since they all left Oman.”

To summarise, all of the interviewees shared a common trend of high levels of uncertainty when it came to the duration of their remaining time in Oman, however, their desires to remain in Oman varied greatly. Some of the middle-income interviewees wished to extend their stay based on family determinants, such as their children’s education. However, low-income interviewees experienced higher pressures to maintain employment in Oman, driven by the necessity to continue sending remittances to family members who relied on their financial support. Furthermore, the interviewees that were accompanied by their families expressed their desire to remain in Muscat for as long as possible, unlike those unable to sponsor their family’s residence. As a result, the latter felt compelled to extend their stay, despite wishing to return to their home countries. Despite the varied desires to remain in Muscat, most of the interviewees displayed high levels of gratitude for their opportunity to be in Muscat.

Low-income interviewees typically experienced higher reliance on their employers to determine their duration of stay in Muscat. Their desires and their personal responsibilities had to be adjusted according to the terms of their contracts, leaving them with little agency over their time in Muscat. On the other hand, migrants stemming from higher socio-economic backgrounds had more control and agency over the duration of their stay in Muscat. Through this observation, this section has underscored the varied experiences of temporariness within the South Asian migrant community. This demonstrates that the experiences of temporariness among the migrant community are shaped significantly by class, resulting in unequal experiences of agency and precarity, underscoring a broader discussion in human geography that questions how temporariness is shaped by socio-economic hierarchies, particularly within migrant communities.

7 Conclusion

This research demonstrates how South Asian migrants in Muscat appropriate space, despite, or rather precisely due to, forms of structural, social and spatial marginalisation. It examines the daily lives and lived experiences of low-income and middle-income temporary migrants to understand their spatial needs and demonstrate how they navigate and shape their environment through claiming agency.

This research surveys the migration patterns, urban development and economic developments of Oman and its context, identifying structural issues that shape its focus. In particular, it finds that the Kafala system, which regulates the employment and residence of temporary migrants, not only restricts migrant mobility but also reinforces power imbalances and social hierarchies while fostering structural dependencies (Fargues, 2018; Hamadah, 2022; Lori, 2019). These conditions have led to a large population of temporary migrants in Muscat with limited agency and heightened vulnerability. Another critical issue highlighted in this research includes the uncoordinated urban planning in Muscat, driven by the pressures of accommodating a rapid increase in population and employing foreign planners to attract foreign investors for economic diversification. The resulting developments often came at the cost of creating meaningful and inclusive urban spaces which represent the diverse population of the city (Stadnicki, 2023; Wippel & Steiner, 2019). A third issue concerns the sprawling character of Muscat, resulting in a car-centric city where 90% of low-income migrants do not own cars (Al Rawas, 1989). In a city designed for cars, or rather, car owners, migrant workers face mobility challenges in addition to the economic and social challenges. Furthermore, cities with a high dependence on cars often face a loss of street life and a lack of social connectedness (Al Gharibi, 2015). As a result of restrictive labour systems, top-down urban planning processes, transportation barriers, and social hierarchies, migrant workers in Muscat run the risk of facing social and spatial segregation.

While there is extensive scholarship on highly paid expatriates as temporary migrants or policies that regulate labour migration, there is a significant gap in knowledge pertaining to low-income and middle-income temporary migrants and their lived experiences, particularly concerning their precarity and how they navigate their right to the city. Additionally, despite the extensive research on Gulf countries like the UAE and Qatar, scholarship on Oman remains limited. This research bridges these gaps by analysing the socio-spatial dynamics of South Asian migrants in Muscat, specifically exploring the opportunities and constraints that shape their practices of space appropriation.

By shedding light on the complex processes of space appropriation under the framework of temporary migration, the research echoes broader themes in human geography and urban studies including

temporality, space production, agency, and rights to the city. The research aims not only to highlight the struggles faced by temporary migrants in their quest for space, but more so to highlight the successful tactics and creative practices that shape environments and create spaces that cater to the needs of their inhabitants, contributing to more sustainable cities.

7.1 Key Findings and Insights on Space Appropriation and Coping with Temporariness

In order to understand the complex processes behind space appropriation within the context of temporary migration in Muscat, this research orients itself towards the following research questions:

1. What are the key needs and motivations that drive South Asian migrants to appropriate space in Muscat?
2. Where and how do South Asian migrants appropriate space within Muscat?
3. What opportunities and limitations do South Asian migrants experience as they appropriate space in Muscat?
4. What role does temporariness play in the appropriation of space and in the daily lives of South Asian migrants in Muscat?

This section of the conclusion aims to address these questions. When examining the needs and motivations that drive space appropriation in this research, three clear factors emerge. First, the research reveals temporary migrants' innate need for leisure time to alleviate the stress from their daily lives. Particularly low-income migrants that worked demanding jobs with harsh working conditions, lived in undesired accommodations, faced familial separation or pressures to work to sustain families in their home countries, often sought after relief to momentarily escape the demanding realities of their daily lives, whether this was alone or in company. Considering their family and work commitments, which contributed to an often described "busy" life, middle-income migrants also sought after a break from the routines of their daily lives. Through practices of space appropriation, migrants incorporated play, movement and active interactions into their everyday lives, to support mental and physical wellbeing. However, the research also demonstrates that rest and relaxation were of equal significance to leisure, particularly for migrants that faced mental and physical exhaustion in their daily lives.

Second, the research demonstrates how migrants appropriated space to find and build community and, ultimately, to perceive a sense of social inclusion. Being separated from their larger communities and

families and, in some cases, experiencing isolation due to social and economic hierarchical structures, drove migrants to seek a sense of belonging within their host society. It was important for migrants to find individuals and groups that stemmed from similar backgrounds as their own and/or to meet people who shared similar interests. The appropriation of space fostered the creation of such community and additionally offered frameworks for social networks through WhatsApp groups, cricket teams, and walking groups for example. Interestingly, temporary migrants found social support in varying forms. While middle-income migrants primarily relied on their families, low-income migrant men found support through friendships, and low-income migrant women resorted to places of worship for comfort and support during difficult circumstances. The research highlights the importance of community, demonstrating that migrants rely on social capital to produce space, further reaffirming the crucial role of community in the migrant experience.

Third, the research demonstrates that one of the key motivations for space appropriation was the migrants' need to exercise freedom and agency to shape their own spaces and consequently shape their daily lives in accordance with their needs and their socio-cultural practices. Agency was crucial to navigate access to the city particularly in a car-dependent sprawling city. Overall, this underscores that space appropriation can be understood as a navigation strategy to assert presence and exercise agency.

To address the second research question, the research adopts a case study approach to present six case studies of appropriated space in Muscat. Conceptually, South Asian migrants in Muscat appropriate spaces which can be understood as "loose space" (Franck & Stevens, 2013b), referring to leftover or undefined spaces which do not necessarily serve their intended purpose. These spaces often emerge as a result of sprawl or haphazard planning processes, offering migrants opportunities for appropriation as they remain largely or partially unregulated and adaptable to the user's needs. This research identifies patterns in areas in Muscat that are appropriated and categorises them into developed and undeveloped spaces. Migrants appropriated four types of developed spaces: First, infrastructural spaces, which include parking lots and highways. Second, urban spaces, which include pedestrian walkways, building arcades, courtyards and markets. Third, public leisure spaces which include spaces within parks, public beaches and other recreational spaces. Fourth, beautification spaces, which include landscaped areas along the main highways in Muscat. With regard to undeveloped spaces, migrants appropriated two categories of spaces including natural spaces and vacant areas. Natural spaces include dry wadi beds and undeveloped beaches while vacant spaces include empty plots of land awaiting development. South Asian migrants in Muscat turned these spaces into places through the process of space appropriation and informal urban practices.

Migrants typically appropriated spaces in close proximity to their residence or spaces that were easily accessible. When such spaces were unavailable, they occupied more distant spaces, though this

happened less frequently. This was the case for spaces that were perceived as especially attractive, such as Athaibah Beach for example. Additionally, migrants sought spaces that evoked a sense of home, such as areas with greenery, reminiscent of their tropical home countries, beaches reminiscent of coastal regions, and informal sports areas reminiscent of residual spaces in their childhood neighbourhoods. In general, they also chose places with physical attributes that to some extent, though not always perfectly, fit the needs of their activities.

The analysis of the case studies reveals the determining factors, practices and processes through which South Asian migrants appropriate space in Muscat, as they transformed spaces to places. Through appropriation, spaces not originally designated for public use and neglected spaces were transformed into places that cater to their needs and add value to their daily lives. Five main determining factors emerged through the analysis: accessibility, physical attributes, socio-cultural influences, availability and temporality. The accessibility of a space influenced how easily, and therefore, how frequently participants occupied a space. The physical attributes of a space determined whether the space was feasible for the intended activities. The socio-cultural influences motivated migrants to choose activities that were embedded in cultural practices. The availability of a space was a key determinant as space appropriation was not feasible in the presence of conflict with other groups or individuals. Temporal factors shaped appropriation as the spaces were often subject to constant change through land use changes and natural factors. Moreover, the research demonstrates that migrants constructed temporary material interventions within appropriated spaces.

The case studies reveal key spatial practices, namely: activities, routines, social constructions and material interventions. These practices included numerous activities in sports, leisure, rest and socialising and took place in daily, weekly and even annual rhythms. Social connections played a crucial role in fostering community, facilitated through gatherings, sports teams and virtual connections with family members. Migrants invested in material interventions that facilitated these activities, including seating areas and sports fields. These processes ultimately resulted in three identified products: meaningful places that catered to the needs of the migrants, the freedom to exercise agency and bridge the gap between their needs and their environment, and lastly, the fostering of community and social connectedness, an invaluable outcome within the context of temporary migration.

To address the third research question, the focus shifts to the opportunities and obstacles that South Asian migrants encounter in the process of space appropriation in Muscat. The opportunities stem primarily from spatial and social factors: the material resources, as a result of the planning and natural landscapes of Muscat, and the sociocultural dynamics, as a result of temporary migration. While the urban planning processes and resulting sprawl have neglected to provide migrants with spaces that cater to their needs, these processes have resulted in opportunities for migrants to create their own

spaces. Several examples of such opportunities are demonstrated through case study examples, including residual land, wadi land, beautification landscapes and parking lots. Although residual space is understood as a result of poor planning strategies, wadi land is understood as an obstacle to urban expansion, beautification landscapes lack functional purpose, and parking lots are regarded as unattractive infrastructural space; migrants transformed these neglected spaces into viable public spaces as demonstrated in Chapter 5, highlighting their ability to identify potential within challenging or overlooked contexts. Moreover, the physical attributes of Muscat, such as its green spaces, spaces in close proximity to the sea, and vast expanses of land all presented attractive opportunities for space appropriation.

The second identified opportunity was rooted in social dynamics stemming from the presence of a large South Asian migrant community in Muscat, which played a key role in providing the support and resources required to appropriate space. For example, migrants were able to organise collective transportation arrangements: low-income migrant men shared the taxi fares, low-income migrant women organised shared private drivers stemming from their hometowns and middle-income women often relied on their husbands to drive them. Additionally, in sports teams comprised of members from varying socio-economic backgrounds, low-income migrants often contributed to the team through maintenance of the sports fields while middle-income migrants managed organisational tasks including coordinating matches, securing team sponsors and facilitating the construction of interventions on the sports fields. Ultimately, the resources shared by the migrant community were vital in helping them shape and claim their places. Furthermore, the research demonstrates how migrants relied on their communities to assert agency, reinforcing the argument that social connections and social capital are vital resources for agency and empowerment in the experience of a migrant. The research also underscores that this agency was unequally distributed across the South Asian demographic revealing stark differences in the experiences of South Asian migrants across the socio-economic spectrum.

The obstacles that South Asian migrants encountered in the process of space appropriation in Muscat stem from varying social, spatial, and structural factors which resulted in negotiations and compromises in efforts to establish meaningful places. The social obstacles included conflicts with other individuals and groups occupying the same space, regardless of whether they were actively appropriating space or simply sharing space as residents for example. Appropriating space was particularly challenging in the presence of tension between different social groups or individuals, especially amidst demographic differences. For example, women experienced exclusion in male-dominated spaces, single men experienced exclusion in family dominated spaces and South Asian sports teams competed with Omani sports teams for access to the same sports fields. Furthermore, low-income migrant women often spent their free time indoors to make phone calls to their families, particularly, their children, who depended

on this communication for support from their mothers. This suggests that broader social hierarchical structures influence spatial dynamics and agency. Moreover, in some cases, language barriers and cultural differences reinforced social segregations, limiting opportunities for access and agency ultimately hindering the process of space appropriation.

The spatial obstacles to appropriation included unsuitable physical conditions for intended activities such as improper grounds for sports activities, as well as environmental influences such as weather conditions, exemplified by flooded sports fields. Moreover, South Asian migrants faced constraints in appropriating space due to limited mobility in a car-dependent urban environment. Migrants with private cars or alternative mobility options had more rights to the city, while migrants with limited mobility faced constraints in their access and rights to the city. This left marginalised migrants excluded from essential public spaces, feeding into the inequalities in terms of their spatial needs and their ability to participate in urban life and society. Migrants with limited mobility were restricted to appropriating spaces in close proximity to their residence or spaces that are easily accessible. For example, low-income gardeners often appropriated their workplaces — the lawns and trees that they water — as these are the most accessible spaces available during their day. In addition to mobility, migrants struggled with limited free time and a lack of alternative spaces. To elaborate, when an accessible and available space was unsuited for their activities or needs, migrants typically continued occupying the space regardless, simply due to the lack of other options. Lastly, the research identifies that formal spatial regulations posed barriers to space appropriation. For example, migrants have been forbidden from gathering or using lawns in certain circumstances by government entities, and sports like cricket have been prohibited in empty parking lots.

It can be concluded that the obstacles to space appropriation are best understood by asking the question: who experiences a need for space but is unable to meet their needs? Or in other words, who has a need for space but is unable to appropriate it? To answer this, acknowledging the underrepresentation of low-income migrant women in the case studies and focusing on their experiences offers valuable insights. An examination of their daily lives has highlighted, and thus, exemplified, the broader issues central to this research: their primary obstacles to space appropriation emerged from a lack of time, a lack of mobility, a lack of energy and a lack of agency. Particularly domestic workers and parlour beauticians were restricted in their access to space due to the nature of their demanding jobs, often characterised by long working hours with limited time for leisure or personal activities, leading them to prioritise rest in their personal space. Moreover, their mobility was restricted, both by the absence of transportation options and by the rigid monitoring exerted by their employers. Their lack of energy was attributed to exhaustive working conditions, leaving little room for enthusiasm or interest towards leisure activities outdoors. The general lack of agency and structural

barriers limited the women's ability to appropriate space and shape their own environments. This demonstrates how structural inequalities and migrants' marginalised positions within larger social structures lead to an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, playing a role in shaping the spatial experiences of South Asian migrants.

To address the fourth and final research question, the focus shifts to the lived experiences of South Asian migrants in Muscat. As mentioned previously in this section, temporality was identified as a determining factor in the process of space appropriation. Within the context of temporary migration, this research focuses on how migrants, as temporary users of space, navigate the present moments of their daily lives, which are undoubtedly shaped by past experiences and the expected and eventual return to their home countries in the future. Within this dynamic situation in time, space, or rather place, can be understood as an anchor, offering grounding and a sense of stability in the moment. Due to the above stated temporal factors, migrants built temporary interventions to adapt to their environment while avoiding investing in permanent structures or assets that gain value over time, as their long-term residence in Muscat is not guaranteed.

Moreover, the element of temporariness plays a significant role in shaping the spaces studied in this research, as these are essentially temporary spaces. Many of the spaces presented in this research were transient and are no longer actively occupied, while other spaces have transformed either materially or socio-culturally, reinforcing their temporary character. Taking the example of Wadi Al Ghubrah, like other wadis in Muscat, in the future, this could be developed into a public park including formal sports facilities. This raises questions about its current informal users and their activities. If the wadi is transformed into a public park, the South Asian cricket team will lose its cost-free sports field and will most likely seek alternative spaces to appropriate, driven by necessity rather than territorial attachments — given that they engage in negotiation, compromise and competition for as long as a space meets their needs, moving elsewhere when those needs are no longer met. This demonstrates that their approach to space remains temporary, practical and prioritizes access and availability over long-term attachment, highlighting the transient character of their spatial experiences and underscoring their adaptability and capacity in shaping and reshaping public spaces in Muscat.

The research situates time as a limiting but constructive factor, while exemplifying the role of temporality in the production, destruction, and reconstruction of space as a result of dynamic and temporary migration. Time challenges the motives and agency of actors in space, substantially affecting the resulting social activities. To observe how actors create possibilities despite, or due to, such limitations, this research has brought the equation of space-time-migration to its most reduced

denominator: every day lived migrant experience.

Although all the participants of the research were temporary migrants, their time spent in Muscat varied and ranged from individuals who had recently arrived to those who had lived in the city for decades. The findings of the research underscore how temporariness impacted the migrants' sense of belonging in Muscat. Regardless of their duration of stay, South Asian migrants largely identified their home countries as their primary place of belonging. Many of the participants, especially low-income migrants, clearly identified Oman as their place of work rather than a place that feels like home, as their perceptions were strongly driven by harsh working conditions and being separated from their families. In contrast, middle-income migrants attributed their lack of belonging to the challenging road to citizenship and long-term residency in Oman. However, many migrants expressed a strong affinity for Oman, describing it as their "second home" and a source of comfort. This perception was primarily influenced by factors related to personal and family milestones and memories tied to places in Muscat, reinforcing the vital role of spatial and temporal interplay in the perceptions of belonging. Moreover, this positive perception was attributed to long-term residence, large social networks and the ability to practice cultural continuity during their stay in Muscat. The research demonstrates how low-income migrants experienced weaker feelings of belonging compared to higher-income migrants, as expected. These results established that while all migrants experience temporary and precarious residency in Muscat, their personal experiences and degrees of agency are distinctly shaped by economic status, social connectedness and broader structural frameworks.

7.2 Opportunities and Recommendations for Future Research

This research has intricately examined and presented the socio-spatial processes through which migrant spaces emerge by presenting "fields of care" (Tuan, 1976, p. 417) created by the South Asian migrant community in Muscat. It has emphasised their use of "tactics" (Certeau et al., 1984, p. 37) to exercise agency on a spatial stratum to appropriate space and create places that cater to their specific needs, informed by cultural experiences. By looking closely at their daily lives, this research illustrates how South Asian migrants navigate and shape their urban environments in response to structural and temporal constraints. Methodologically, this was achieved by triangulating qualitative interviews and participant observation along with photography and field notes to document the processes of space production in six case studies.

Conducting research in any urban environment can present itself with challenges that affect the field

work and its outcomes. Therefore, it was no exception that my research on space appropriation in Muscat, involving field work in a male-dominated migrant community, as a female researcher, during a pandemic, evidently presented challenges and limitations. My challenges included: language barriers, challenges in building trust and the participants' willingness to talk, unreliable communication, gender dynamics and communicating the research purpose in an effective way. To mitigate these challenges, I turned to online translators and chose interview languages based on shared commonality rather than fluency. I mitigated unreliable communication by adapting to the participants' preferences and aimed to be as clear as possible. Navigating such juxtapositions did not come easily to me at first. It required some experience before I understood the dynamics of the field and overcame the general lack of interest and hesitation from the people I approached. Despite numerous rejections, the setbacks taught me about the field and prepared me to approach people more effectively.

Considering my experiences on the field, for further research, I would recommend future researchers to adapt flexible and adaptive research methods particularly when approaching communication in multilingual settings. Language barriers can hinder meaningful conversations with participants and should be mitigated with the help of formal translators, informal interpreters or members of the community who could serve as a translator for example. To foster meaningful conversations, building trust should be the main aim of the conversations, whereas as data collection should be regarded as secondary. Moreover, trust can be built by spending time with the participants, or in the same spaces, while demonstrating an awareness and sensitivity to their socio-cultural norms.

To navigate gender dynamics, I recommend future researchers to account for gendered dynamics within the spaces they examine and recommend seeking gatekeepers to efficiently approach communities and to adopt a sensitivity towards gender norms within the community. Additionally, it may be beneficial to explore alternative methods to create more comfortable environments for participants such as group settings instead of one-on-one conversations and interviews.

Additionally, communicating the research purpose to the participants effectively is key in establishing a smooth research process. This involves transparency and clear explanations to explain the motivations behind the research. This can be better achieved through gatekeepers, or respected members of communities, organizations run by or for migrants or local institutions. Moreover, it is important to ensure that the research findings impact the community they concern, this includes both participants and decision makers alike. As part of this research process, interim results were presented to consultants engaged in the Oman National Spatial Strategy to highlight the informal use of spaces prone to development, such as urban wadis. Communicating these results in Muscat, amongst decision makers and members of the society, was crucial to maximize the impact of the research and to ensure that the participating community not only receives the representation that they deserve, but that they benefit

from participating in the research.

As a final, yet fundamental note on future research methods: this research could not have reached its depth and complexity without the consideration of its emotional dimensions, whether those pertained to my positionality as a researcher or to the participants. Therefore, I recommend that future researchers embrace, rather than shy away from engaging with emotions, as they are integral in understanding the workings of the world, including migration, geography, and even politics, as evidenced by the current geopolitical climate. Ultimately, research involving humans fundamentally involves engaging with emotions, and I conclude that it is more effective to approach this with intention and awareness during research, rather than encountering it incidentally. Acknowledging and incorporating emotional dimensions in human and cultural geography makes research stronger, not weaker.

7.3 Concluding Remarks

During the course of this research, I aimed to shed light on the spatial practices of a largely marginalised community impacted by structural inequalities and limited agency. While I have critically investigated the precarity and structural constraints faced by this community, I do not seek to merely emphasise their struggles but also wish to highlight their extraordinary resilience. This study underscores the structural barriers to agency faced by South Asian migrants only to emphasise their capacity to claim agency on a spatial stratum. Rather than representing this community as one void of power, I aim to provide evidence to their capacity for innovation, creativity, and resourcefulness and strive to demonstrate their profound ability to create value out of conditions of scarcity. Driven by their needs, they actively shaped their environment, claimed creative power and added value to the overlooked spaces of Muscat.

Furthermore, through this research, I challenge the idea that temporary migrants are absolutely powerless. Particularly in the case of low-income migrants who are perceived as the most marginalised demographic compared to their middle-income counterparts in this research, I would like to note that although their migration strips them of agency, this has been, for the most part, a strategic decision. In other words, this has been an act of sacrifice that extends further and holds more weight than exercising individual agency and exerting power in the present moment. These individuals sacrifice aspects of their current agency, willingly, in order to grant agency to their families back home, and to the children of the future generations, in the form of opportunity and stability. In doing so, temporary migrants gift their

own agency across time and space. This process underscores the interconnectedness of agency and time in temporary migration.

Ultimately, this research tells a story not just about hardship but about perseverance and transformation. It demonstrates how the South Asian migrant community navigates, in some cases, quite challenging situations, and create spatial, social, and economic value out of it. Their experiences represent the power of agency when it is claimed back, not as an act of resistance or a political statement, but as an act of survival, adaptation and invention. This community has demonstrated how to supersede succumbing to perceptions of scarcity and how to assert a perspective of choice and action instead, impacting not only their own lives, but their extended communities' and the urban spaces they populate. In the conceptual framework of this research, I described how Certeau (1984, p. 37) referred to these interventions and responses to environment as "tactics" , and described them as "an art of the weak". This research argues that the acts of space appropriation are in fact an art of the resilient.

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Abstract

The Arabian Gulf's oil boom and its exponential development led to accelerated urbanisation, a steep migrant population surge, and unparalleled economic growth. Today, almost half of its population is comprised of guest workers from South Asian countries. In an effort to grow the Gulf states' labour force without increasing their permanent residents, these transnational migrants are only temporarily welcome, with no eligibility for citizenship or permanent residency. While extensive studies have been conducted on temporary migration in the Gulf, much of the focus has been on Qatar and the UAE. This research focuses on Muscat, the capital city of Oman, where 86% of foreign workers originate from South Asian countries.

In the last few decades, the city of Muscat has prioritized highways, and by extension, the experience of car owners and drivers. Moreover, it has beautified areas created solely for visual appeal, which are neither accessible nor functional for daily use. The city is also subject to frequent land-use change and patchy development, resulting in unused residual spaces in the urban fabric. As long as these "loose spaces" remain temporarily unoccupied, they create opportunities for migrant workers to appropriate them according to their needs. In their efforts to navigate the city, migrant workers, who largely do not own cars, can be spotted driving their bicycles in the opposite direction of traffic, taking photographs in the middle of traffic roundabouts, or playing cricket on undeveloped land. While these acts of appropriation remain largely overlooked, they highlight a central issue: the need for space in a fragmented car-oriented city.

Drawing on Lefebvre's theories on the production of space and the right to the city, this research examines how migrant workers produce meaningful places by appropriating meaningless neglected spaces. The research aims to shed light on the spaces appropriated by the South Asian migrant communities in Muscat, as these spaces remain largely overlooked. It seeks to intricately examine the spatial practices and strategies used by South Asian migrant workers to appropriate space in Muscat. Furthermore, it aims to demonstrate the underlying complexities that shape spaces created by temporary migrants. Additionally, the research underscores the role of temporality in the lives of South Asian migrants and in their practices of space appropriation. In order to address the above objectives, the research is framed by the following questions:

1. What are the key needs and motivations that drive South Asian migrants to appropriate space in Muscat?

2. Where and how do South Asian migrants appropriate space within Muscat?

3. What opportunities and limitations do South Asian migrants experience as they appropriate space in Muscat?

4. What role does temporariness play in the appropriation of space and in the daily lives of South Asian migrants in Muscat?

To answer these questions, the research mapped and categorised appropriated spaces in Muscat, identifying case studies to represent each category. These categories included developed and undeveloped areas, encompassing natural spaces, infrastructural spaces, beautified spaces, urban spaces, public leisure spaces, and vacant spaces. For each of these categories, one case study was selected and further examined to demonstrate the complex processes that shape spaces created by temporary migrants. The methods adopted to examine the case studies included qualitative interviews and participant observation with photography and cartography. In total, 67 participants were interviewed. The interviews were conducted, in order of frequency, in English or Indian-English, Hindi,

and Urdu.

The research identified migrants' need for leisure time, their desire for social inclusion and their need to exercise freedom and agency to shape their own spaces and, therefore, their own daily lives in accordance with their needs and their socio-cultural practices. The analysis of the case studies revealed the determining factors, practices and processes through which South Asian migrants appropriate space in Muscat, transforming spaces into meaningful places. Five main determining factors emerged through the analysis: accessibility, physical attributes, socio-cultural influences, availability, and temporality. The case studies also illustrated the key spatial practices that migrants engaged in, namely: activities, routines, social constructions and material interventions.

The opportunities that South Asian migrants encounter in the process of space appropriation in Muscat stem primarily from spatial and social factors such as the presence of residual and available space. Additionally, the presence of a large South Asian migrant community in Muscat has played a key role in providing the support and resources required to appropriate space. Conversely, the obstacles migrants encounter stem from varying social, spatial, and structural factors which result in negotiations and compromises in efforts to establish meaningful places. These obstacles demonstrate how structural inequalities and migrants' marginalised positions within larger social structures contribute to an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, ultimately shaping the spatial experiences of South Asian migrants.

The case studies revealed how the process of space appropriation ultimately resulted in three outcomes: firstly, the creation of meaningful places that catered to the needs of the migrants, facilitating community and belonging. Secondly, the freedom to exercise agency and bridge the gap between their needs and their environment. Lastly, the fostering of community and social connectedness, an invaluable outcome within the context of temporary migration.

Moreover, the element of temporariness plays a significant role in shaping the spaces studied in this research, as these are essentially temporary spaces, occupied by temporary migrants, through temporary interventions. The results of this research ultimately establish that while all migrants experience temporary and precarious residency in Muscat, their personal experiences and degrees of agency are distinctly shaped by economic status, social connectedness, and broader structural frameworks.

Although critical theorists have described informal spatial practices as tactics of the weak, this research argues that the acts of space appropriation are in fact an art of the resilient.

Zusammenfassung

Der Ölboom am Arabischen Golf und seine exponentielle Entwicklung führten zu einer beschleunigten Urbanisierung, einem starken Anstieg der Anzahl von Migrant*innen und einem beispiellosen Wirtschaftswachstum. Heute machen Gastarbeiter*innen aus südasiatischen Ländern fast die Hälfte der Bevölkerung aus. Um die Erwerbsbevölkerung der Golfstaaten zu steigern, ohne die Zahl der ständigen Einwohner zu erhöhen, sind diese transnationalen Migrant*innen nur vorübergehend willkommen und haben keinen Anspruch auf die Staatsbürgerschaft oder einen ständigen Wohnsitz. In bisherigen umfangreichen Studien zur temporären Migration in den Golfstaaten lag der Schwerpunkt auf Katar und den VAE. Diese Untersuchung konzentriert sich auf Maskat, die Hauptstadt Omans, wo 86 % der ausländischen Arbeitskräfte aus südasiatischen Ländern stammen.

In den letzten Jahrzehnten hat die Stadt Maskat den Autobahnen und damit auch den Erfahrungen von Autobesitzern und -fahrern Vorrang eingeräumt. Darüber hinaus wurden Gebiete optisch verschönert, die für den täglichen Gebrauch jedoch weder zugänglich noch funktional sind. Die Stadt unterliegt außerdem häufigen Flächennutzungsänderungen und einer uneinheitlichen Entwicklung, was zu ungenutzten Restflächen im Stadtgefüge führt. Solange diese „losen Räume“ vorübergehend unbesetzt bleiben, bieten sie den migrantischen Arbeiter*innen die Möglichkeit, sie sich nach ihren Bedürfnissen anzueignen. Migrant*innen, die größtenteils keine Autos besitzen, navigieren die Stadt indem sie mit Fahrrädern entgegen der Fahrtrichtung fahren, in der Mitte von Kreisverkehren fotografieren oder auf unbebauten Flächen Kricket spielen. Diese Aneignungspraktiken werden zwar weitgehend übersehen, verweisen aber auf ein zentrales Problem: den Bedarf an Raum in einer fragmentierten, autoorientierten Stadt.

Ausgehend von Lefebvres Theorien über die Produktion von Raum und das Recht auf Stadt untersucht diese Studie, wie Arbeitsmigrant*innen sinnvolle Orte schaffen, indem sie sich bedeutungslose, vernachlässigte Räume aneignen. Ziel der Untersuchung ist es, die Räume zu beleuchten, die sich die südasiatischen Migrantengemeinschaften in Maskat aneignen, da diese Räume weitgehend unbeachtet bleiben. Dabei werden die räumlichen Praktiken und Strategien, die südasiatische Arbeitsmigranten bei der Aneignung von Räumen in Maskat anwenden, eingehend untersucht. Darüber hinaus werden die zugrundeliegenden komplexen Zusammenhänge aufgezeigt, die die von temporären Migranten*innen geschaffenen Räume prägen. Die Untersuchung unterstreicht die Rolle der Vergänglichkeit im Leben südasiatischer Migrant*innen und in ihren Praktiken der Raumaneignung. Dazu verfolgt die Untersuchung folgende Fragen:

1. Was sind die Hauptbedürfnisse und -motivationen, die südasiatische Migrant*innen zur Aneignung von Raum in Maskat bewegen?

2. Wo und wie eignen sich südasiatische Migrant*innen Raum in Maskat an?

3. Welche Möglichkeiten und Grenzen erfahren südasiatische Migrant*innen bei der Aneignung von Raum in Maskat?

4. Welche Rolle spielt Vergänglichkeit bei der Aneignung von Raum und im täglichen Leben südasiatischer Migrant*innen in Maskat?

Zur Beantwortung dieser Fragen wurden die angeeigneten Räume in Maskat kartiert und kategorisiert, wobei jede Kategorie durch Fallstudien repräsentiert wurde. Diese Kategorien umfassten bebaute und unbebaute Gebiete, natürliche Räume, infrastrukturelle Räume, verschönerte Räume, städtische Räume, öffentliche Freizeiträume und leere Räume. Für jede dieser Kategorien wurde eine Fallstudie

ausgewählt und näher untersucht, um die komplexen Prozesse aufzuzeigen, welche die von temporären Migrant*innen geschaffenen Räume prägen. Die zur Untersuchung der Fallstudien angewandten Methoden umfassten qualitative Interviews und teilnehmende Beobachtung mit Fotografie und Kartografie. Insgesamt wurden 67 Teilnehmer befragt. Die Interviews wurden, in der Reihenfolge ihrer Häufigkeit, in Englisch oder indischem Englisch, Hindi und Urdu geführt.

Im Rahmen der Untersuchung wurden das Freizeitbedürfnis der Migrant*innen, ihr Wunsch nach sozialer Eingliederung und ihr Bedürfnis nach Freiheit und Handlungsfähigkeit bei der Gestaltung ihrer eigenen Räume, und damit ihres eigenen täglichen Lebens entsprechend ihren Bedürfnissen und ihren soziokulturellen Praktiken, erhoben. Die Analyse der Fallstudien ergab die entscheidenden Faktoren, Praktiken und Prozesse, durch die sich südasiatische Migrant*innen Raum in Maskat aneignen und ihn in bedeutungsvolle Orte verwandeln, insbesondere fünf Hauptfaktoren: Zugänglichkeit, physische Eigenschaften, soziokulturelle Einflüsse, Verfügbarkeit und Vergänglichkeit. Die Fallstudien veranschaulichten auch die wichtigsten räumlichen Praktiken der Migrant*innen: Aktivitäten, Routinen, soziale Konstruktionen und materielle Interventionen.

Die Möglichkeiten von südasiatischen Migrant*innen im Prozess der Raumaneignung in Maskat ergeben sich in erster Linie aus räumlichen und sozialen Faktoren wie dem Vorhandensein von Restflächen und verfügbarem Raum. Darüber hinaus hat die Präsenz einer großen südasiatischen migrantischen Gemeinschaft in Maskat eine Schlüsselrolle bei der Bereitstellung der für die Raumaneignung erforderlichen Unterstützung und Ressourcen gespielt. Umgekehrt ergeben sich die Hindernisse, auf die Migrant*innen stoßen, aus verschiedenen sozialen, räumlichen und strukturellen Faktoren, die zu Verhandlungen und Kompromissen bei den Bemühungen führen, bedeutungsvolle Orte zu schaffen. Diese Hindernisse zeigen, wie strukturelle Ungleichheiten und die marginalisierte Position von Migrant*innen innerhalb größerer sozialer Strukturen zu einer ungleichen Verteilung von Ressourcen und Chancen beitragen und letztlich die räumlichen Erfahrungen südasiatischer Migrant*innen prägen.

Die Fallstudien zeigten, wie der Prozess der Raumaneignung letztlich zu drei Ergebnissen führte: Erstens die Schaffung von bedeutungsvollen Orten, die den Bedürfnissen der Migrant*innen entsprachen und Gemeinschaft und Zugehörigkeit förderten. Zweitens die Freiheit, selbstbestimmt zu handeln und die Kluft zwischen ihren Bedürfnissen und ihrer Umgebung zu überbrücken. Und schließlich die Förderung von Gemeinschaft und sozialer Verbundenheit, was im Kontext von temporärer Migration unschätzbar wertvoll ist.

Darüber hinaus spielt das Element der Vergänglichkeit eine wichtige Rolle bei der Gestaltung der in dieser Untersuchung untersuchten Räume, da es sich im Wesentlichen um temporäre Räume handelt, die von temporären Migrant*innen durch temporäre Interventionen genutzt werden. Die Ergebnisse dieser Untersuchung zeigen, dass zwar alle Migrant*innen einen temporären und prekären Aufenthalt in Maskat erleben, ihre persönlichen Erfahrungen und ihr Handlungsspielraum jedoch deutlich durch ihren wirtschaftlichen Status, ihre sozialen Bindungen und die breiteren strukturellen Rahmenbedingungen geprägt sind.

Obwohl kritische Theoretiker*innen informelle räumliche Praktiken als Taktiken der Schwachen beschrieben haben, argumentiert diese Untersuchung, dass die Praxis der Raumaneignung in Wirklichkeit eine Kunst der Unverwüstlichen ist.