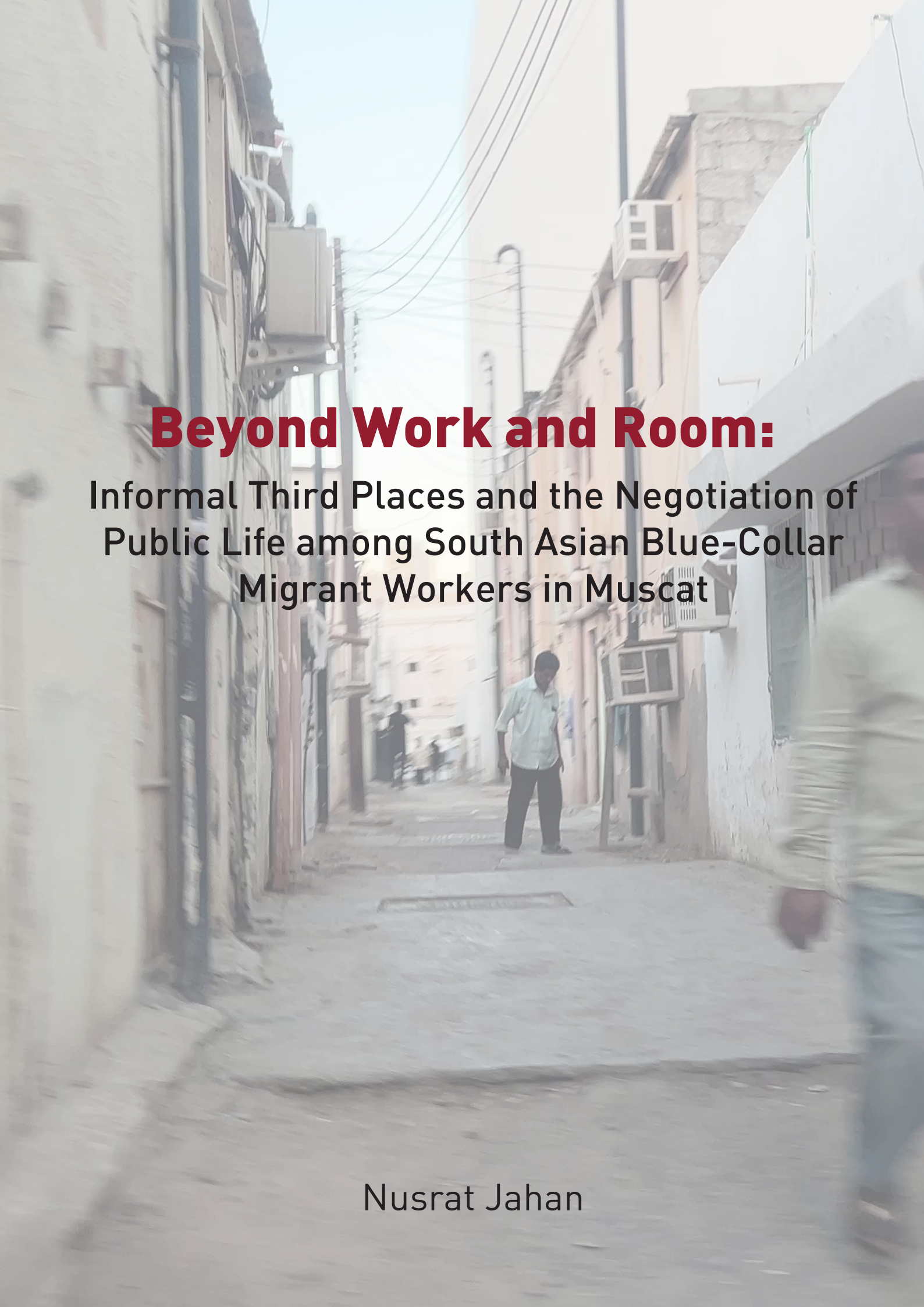




Beyond Work and Room:

Informal Third Places and the Negotiation of
Public Life among South Asian Blue-Collar
Migrant Workers in Muscat

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Abstract

This thesis examines how South Asian blue-collar migrants in Muscat engage with informal social spaces beyond work and accommodation, and what these practices reveal about the conditions shaping everyday public life under temporality and unbalanced urban access. Situated within the context of rapid urbanisation, labour migration, and car-oriented planning in Oman, the study moves beyond site-based or design-centric approaches to public space by adopting a people-centred qualitative framework.

Drawing on field observations conducted across multiple urban contexts in Muscat and semi-structured interviews with blue-collar migrants, white-collar migrants, and a policy analyst, the research traces how informal social life is produced, constrained, and recalibrated within daily routines of work, mobility, and rest. The findings show that everyday public life is organised through proximate micro-settings embedded in routes between work and accommodation, including shopfront edges, tea stalls, thresholds, and semi-private building spaces. These settings function as informal social infrastructure not because of design quality, but because they align with compressed leisure time, limited mobility, and the need to manage visibility.

The analysis further demonstrates that public presence is shaped by time scarcity, household form, social coding of space, and perceived enforcement ambiguity. Formal public spaces remain underused not due to absence or distance, but because their social norms and visibility costs render them unevenly accessible. Where street-level gathering becomes demanding, public life is reconfigured inward through the appropriation of rooftops and stairwells, revealing withdrawal as a spatial practice rather than an absence of placemaking.

By foregrounding everyday practice rather than formal provision, the thesis re-frames informal social spaces as negotiated and provisional responses to structurally constrained urban conditions. In doing so, it contributes a grounded account of migrant urban life in Muscat and offers analytical insights into how public life is sustained, limited, and withdrawn under conditions of extended temporariness.

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Glossary

Adda (Hindi/Bangla) - Informal social gathering or conversation

Arbab (Arabic) - Colloquial term commonly used by expatriate workers to refer to their employer or sponsor

Bachelor - Term used locally to describe single men living without their families, often in shared accommodation. In the Gulf context, the term denotes household form rather than marital status alone and carries spatial and social connotations.

Carrom - A tabletop board game originating in South Asia

Desh (Hindi/Bangla) - “country” or “homeland”

Eid - Major Islamic religious festivals, including Eid al-Fitr (marking the end of Ramadan) and Eid al-Adha (associated with pilgrimage and sacrifice)

Jumah - Arabic term for Friday; commonly used to refer specifically to Salat al-Jumah, the congregational Friday prayer

Kafala - Sponsorship-based labour migration system used in Gulf countries

Kafeel - Arabic term meaning “sponsor” within the kafala system; the individual or entity legally responsible for a migrant worker.

Karak - refers to Karak chai, originating from the Hindi word “Kadhak” meaning strong

Maghrib – Sunset prayer

Ramadan - Islamic holy month marked by fasting

Sina’iya – Arabic term for “industrial area,” commonly used to denote zones of workshops, garages, and light industry.

Souq – Marketplace.

Wilayat – Administrative district in Oman.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Over the past five decades, cities in the Gulf region have undergone rapid urban and economic transformation, emerging as key metropolitan centres shaped by state-led development, large-scale infrastructure investment, and regional labour mobility. Oman, one of the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), has experienced particularly significant change since the 1970s, as oil revenues enabled extensive modernisation and urban expansion (Al Shueili, 2015; Benkari, 2017). Within this trajectory, Muscat has developed as the country's primary administrative, economic, and logistical hub, concentrating public institutions, private-sector employment, and transport infrastructure, while attracting substantial migrant populations to meet labour demands across construction, services, retail, and logistics sectors (De Bel-Air, 2018).

Foreign nationals today constitute over 40% of Oman's total population and more than 60% of Muscat's population, forming much of the private-sector workforce (De Bel-Air, 2018; National Centre for Statistics and Information, 2025b). Within this demographic landscape, South Asian migrants from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan comprise the largest share of low-income and blue-collar employment (Farooq et al., 2025; Rahman, 2015). Migration has therefore been central to the everyday functioning and growth of Omani cities, shaping not only labour markets but also residential patterns, mobility, and daily urban life.

The organisation of labour migration in the Gulf plays a key role in structuring how migrant presence is accommodated and governed within urban space. Oman's migration is shaped by the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, which ties residency to employment and restricted pathways to long-term settlement regardless of duration of stay (AlShehabi, 2021; Lori, 2012). Although recent labour reforms have expanded formal protections, sponsor-based dependency and job insecurity remain intact, reinforcing a condition of extended temporariness (Katyayani, 2024; Reda et al., 2023). For low-income migrant populations, this temporariness translates into restricted mobility, limited family reunification, and heightened exposure to surveillance, all of which shape how and where everyday social life unfolds.

These governance structures intersect with Muscat's urban form. Since the 1970s, the city has developed through a low-density, car-oriented, and functionally zoned planning paradigm that prioritises infrastructure, visual order, and symbolic aesthetics over inclusive public life (Al Shueili, 2015; Aljabri, 2014; Benkari, 2017). Public space provision has largely taken the form of landscaped parks, traffic islands, and curated plazas, often oriented toward family leisure and car access. At the same time, labour-dense districts remain under-served by pedestrian infrastructure and everyday communal spaces (Aljabri, 2014; Hegazy, 2019). As a result, informal settings such as shopfronts, residual plots, and circulation edges become

key sites where migrant social life may take place.

Existing scholarship on Gulf urbanism has documented patterns of spatial segregation, labour enclavisation, and managed non-integration, showing how migrant populations are economically central yet socially peripheral within host cities (Fernandez, 2021; Lori, 2012; Yeoh & Lam, 2022). Parallel research on spatial appropriation and informality shows how marginalised groups often respond to exclusion through tactical, everyday uses of loosely regulated or leftover spaces (Farooq et al., 2025; Lara-Hernandez & Melis, 2018). These practices have frequently been conceptualised through notions of spatial appropriation, informal placemaking and “third places,” understood as settings beyond home and work where social life becomes possible (Bosman & Dolley, 2019; Oldenburg, 1989).

1.2 Problem Statement

For many South Asian blue-collar migrants in Muscat, however, everyday life unfolds within a narrow spatial and temporal corridor structured by work schedules (6 days per week and ca. 10-12 hours per day) and shared accommodation. Time outside labour is limited, mobility is constrained, and access to formally designated public spaces is uneven. Yet between work and room, small pockets of informal activities of standing at the shop-fronts, chatting, and occupation of building edges intermittently emerge.

These spaces along shopfronts and tea stalls, and between alleys, parking edges and building thresholds, are often recognised as potential sites of rest, conversation, and familiarity, but they are neither stable nor consistently used. Examining these in-between practices is therefore central to understanding how everyday social life is negotiated under conditions of extended temporariness and constrained urban access in Muscat.

However, much of the existing literature implicitly assumes that informal third places are active, sociable, and consistently used. What remains under-examined, particularly in the context of the Gulf, is how such spaces are unevenly inhabited, selectively avoided, or abandoned altogether under conditions of time scarcity, mobility, and institutional ambiguity. In Muscat, informal social spaces may be widely recognised as potential gathering sites, yet they are not always actively used. Instead, public life often appears compressed, episodic, and highly sensitive to work schedules, mobility constraints, and perceived risk.

This gap points to a broader problem: informal migrant social spaces are often interpreted either as evidence of cultural resilience or as deficits to be corrected through design, without sufficient attention to the everyday conditions that shape

their emergence, fragility, and limits. There remains limited empirical work that foregrounds how blue-collar migrants themselves navigate these spaces in practice, how often such spaces are actually used, and how institutional perceptions and governance frameworks influence patterns of visibility and retreat. This thesis addresses this gap, moving beyond site-based or design-centric analyses toward a people-centred examination of everyday spatial practices.

1.3 Objective and Research Questions

The objective of this thesis is to examine how South Asian blue-collar migrants in Muscat engage with informal social spaces beyond work and accommodation, and to understand the everyday conditions that shape the emergence and limits of such practices. Rather than treating public space as a fixed category or assuming the presence of stable “third places,” the study approaches informal social spaces as provisional, negotiated, and unevenly inhabited settings embedded within everyday routines of work, rest, and mobility.

The research adopts a people-centred qualitative approach that foregrounds everyday practices rather than formally designated sites. Through field observations conducted across multiple urban contexts in Muscat and semi-structured interviews with blue-collar migrants, white-collar migrants, and a policy analyst, the study traces how informal social life is produced, constrained, and recalibrated under conditions of extended temporariness. Particular attention is paid to time scarcity, mobility, household form, surveillance, and institutional perceptions, all of which emerged inductively through the research process.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

“How do South Asian blue-collar migrants in Muscat engage with informal social spaces beyond work and accommodation? What do these practices reveal about the conditions shaping everyday social life for these migrants?”

Together, these questions allow the thesis to document everyday spatial practices while situating them within the broader urban and institutional structures that shape migrant life in Muscat. Rather than advancing normative claims about inclusion or design solutions, the study aims to provide a grounded account of how public life is negotiated under constraint, and how informal social spaces function as both possibilities and limits within this context.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study documents a comparatively under-examined aspect of urban life in Oman: the everyday social and spatial practices of South Asian blue-collar migrants beyond work and accommodation. While existing research on Oman and the Gulf has extensively examined migration governance, labour regulation, demographic change, and urban development, there is limited empirical work that closely documents how low-income migrants themselves organise social life in the city on a day-to-day basis. In particular, sustained qualitative attention to informal social spaces by blue-collar migrants in Muscat remains scarce within the literature reviewed for this thesis.

By focusing on informal social spaces as lived, provisional, and unevenly inhabited, the study also adds to third place and appropriation debates by treating non-use and withdrawal as analytically central rather than as noise or failure. Rather than advancing design prescriptions, the thesis contributes a grounded account of the everyday conditions under which informal social life becomes possible or constrained in Muscat, providing a clearer empirical basis for future research on migrant urban life in the Gulf.

1.5 Thesis Structure

This thesis progresses from conceptual and structural contexts toward a grounded analysis of everyday spatial practices among South Asian blue-collar migrants in Muscat. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 outlines the methodological approach and analytical framework, explaining the qualitative, people-centred design and how observations and interviews were used to trace everyday spatial practices across Muscat. Chapter 3 develops the theoretical framework, drawing on literatures of placemaking, cultural practices, and spatial agency, followed by Chapter 4 situating the study within Oman's migration governance, labour systems, and planning logics.

Chapter 5 follows by locating these dynamics within Muscat's urban form, mobility conditions, and residential geographies. Chapter 6 presents the empirical findings from observations and interviews, and Chapter 7 discusses these findings through themes of temporality, visibility, and negotiated access to public life. Finally, Chapter 8 concludes by synthesising the argument, reflecting on scope, outlining implications and directions for future research.



Fig. 1 Crowds using stores setup in between alleyways in Hamriya (Photographed on the author's behalf)

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine everyday spatial practices of South Asian blue-collar migrants within their social and urban context. It is structured as a people-centric collective study, drawing on qualitative case study principles outlined by Baxter and Jack (2008).

The methodological framework was developed iteratively alongside a staged literature review. The research began with a theoretical review of spatial appropriation, informal placemaking, and third places, which established the conceptual vocabulary used to identify and interpret everyday spatial practices, as elaborated in Chapter 3. In parallel, preliminary plans for field observation and semi-structured interviews were developed, outlining candidate neighbourhoods, indicative place types (e.g., alleys, road medians, vacant plots, and other under-used edges), and initial interview prompts. As the theoretical review clarified how informality, “thirdness,” and spatial agency might manifest under conditions of constraint, the empirical strategy was refined accordingly.

The literature review then expanded to contextual frameworks shaping the thesis’s target group in Chapter 4, including the kafala system, migration and labour systems in the Gulf, and Oman-specific governance and policy conditions. These perspectives are subsequently situated within Muscat’s spatial context in Chapter 5, drawing on scholarly and official sources to examine the city’s geography, linear urban structure, transport dependency, demographic composition, and lived environments through which labour and everyday life are organised.

Across these stages, the analytical framework evolved through a reciprocal process in which emerging concepts informed observation and questioning, while empirical encounters sharpened the relevance of specific theoretical and contextual dimensions. The research therefore followed an iterative logic aligned with grounded theory, with data collection and analysis conducted concurrently to allow early insights to inform subsequent field visits and refine interview guides (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Muscat is treated as a collective case not as a set of fixed sites, but as a constellation of recurring urban contexts in which similar conditions of access, oversight, density, and mobility generate comparable everyday spatial practices.

2.2 Field Observations

Field observations were the primary method used to document everyday spatial practices of blue-collar migrant workers in Muscat. The observation strategy combined in-depth engagement in a small set of core contexts with shorter comparative reconnaissance in additional settings. This approach supported a pat-

tern-based reading across Muscat's fragmented, car-oriented urban structure, allowing recurring practices to be traced under different spatial and regulatory conditions without treating any single location as a bounded "case site."

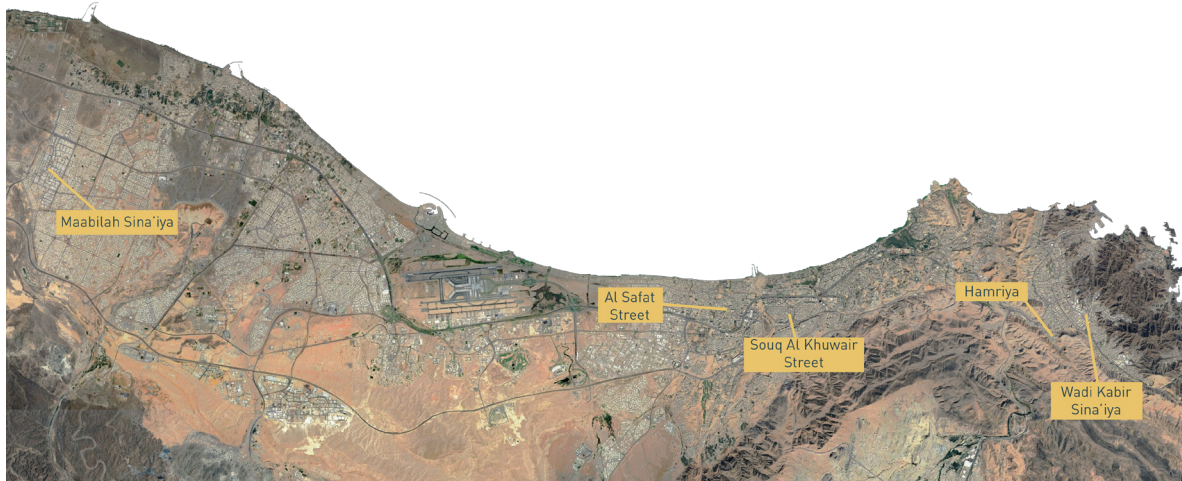


Fig. 2 Observational contexts across Muscat (Created by Author using Google Earth imagery)

Observational contexts and urban setting descriptors

The observational material draws on a set of recurring urban contexts across Muscat rather than a single fixed site. This subsection outlines the logic of context selection and the relevant spatial characteristics, while detailed descriptors are provided in Table 2.1 below. Behavioural patterns are reported separately in Chapter 6.

Three contexts formed the initial in-depth observation frame: Maabilah Sina'iya, Hamriyah, and Wadi Kabir Sina'iya. These contexts were selected to capture contrasting yet recurrent urban conditions through which blue-collar everyday life is organised, including industrial districts with embedded accommodation, compact inner-city mixed-use areas, and older industrial fabrics closely linked to adjacent residential zones. Two additional contexts were included for comparative reconnaissance: Al Safat Street (Ghubrah) and Souq Al Khuwair Street (Al Khuwair). Both are tertiary mixed-use commercial streets with more formalised pedestrian infrastructure and a concentration of retail, services, and food outlets. These settings provided a comparative contrast between formal public-space provision and everyday patterns of use observed elsewhere.

Observation procedure, timing, and documentation

Initial observations focused on Maabilah Sina'iya and Hamriyah and were conducted on a weekday and weekend during morning-to-midday (9:00-11:00) and late afternoon-to-evening periods (16:00-19:00). Field notes recorded movement pat-

terns, demographic presence, recurring activities, and how street interfaces and micro-settings enabled or constrained stopping and social interaction. Detailed on-site field notes documenting pedestrian counts and moving traffic conditions for Hamriyah and Maabilah Sina'iya are provided in Appendix A.1.

As fieldwork progressed, it became evident that informal spatial practices were shaped less by neighbourhood boundaries than by work routines, transport routes, and repeated use across the city. Observation therefore expanded to include the two comparative streets along with the initial selection of Wadi Kabir Sina'iya, approached as urban contexts rather than discrete case sites. Later observations adopted a more flexible, activity-led approach, prioritising the documentation of recurring spatial interfaces when they became legible in use.

Photographic documentation was used as a supplementary method to record spatial configurations relevant to later interpretation. Where direct photography risked heightening attention or discomfort, a male peer assisted in capturing selected images in public space. Images were used solely to support spatial interpretation rather than to identify individuals.

Table 2.1: Observational Contexts, Urban Characteristics, and Field Coverage

Context	Urban Type	Approx. Extent*	Dominant Land Use & Typology	Observation Role
Maabilah Sina'iya	Peripheral industrial district	~5 km ² (approx. 3.4 km × 1.5 km)	Automobile service and repair workshops; metal and carpentry workshops; low-rise garages with integrated or adjacent worker accommodation	Core in-depth observation
Hamriyah	Inner-city mixed-use district	~0.36 km ²	Dense residential fabric with continuous commercial ground floors; ethnic retail and service shops; narrow internal alleys	Core in-depth observation
Wadi Kabir Sina'iya	Inner industrial district (older fabric)	~1.5 km ²	Industrial workshops, warehouses, and service corridors embedded in incrementally developed urban fabric	Comparative reconnaissance
Al Safat Street (Ghubrah)	Tertiary mixed-use high street	~2 km linear stretch	Linear commercial frontage with immediately adjacent residential blocks; formalised sidewalks and parking	Comparative reconnaissance
Souq Al Khuwair Street	High-intensity commercial street	~600 m linear stretch	Dense restaurant and café frontage; convenience retail; high pickup and delivery turnover	Comparative reconnaissance

**Approximate extents are based on desk-based measurement using Google Maps and are indicative rather than cadastral.*

2.3 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine everyday spatial practices from the perspective of migrants themselves. The initial interview plan included an expert interview with a governance/policy practitioner alongside the blue-collar worker interviews to contextualise regulation and institutional framings of migrant presence. However, as fieldwork progressed, interviews with blue-collar migrants indicated that everyday access to public life in Muscat is also relational and comparative, shaped not only by income and visa status, but by how other migrant groups navigate the city. On this basis, the interview structure expanded to include white-collar migrant workers to provide contrast in mobility, housing autonomy, work-life balance, and access to formal leisure infrastructure.

The interview process was thus organised across three participant categories: blue-collar migrant workers, white-collar migrant workers, and one expert participant from a policy and governance background. Each group was approached using a tailored interview guide reflecting their social position, work conditions, and relationship to urban space. Interviews were planned for approximately 30 minutes, though durations varied: some lasted around 15 minutes, while the policy interview extended beyond one hour due to follow-up discussion. Details of the participants are summarised in the table below (see table 2.2).

Seven interviews were conducted with South Asian blue-collar migrant workers. Participants were approached near workplaces or accommodations, and interviews took place in familiar settings such as shop fronts and work-adjacent edges. Questions focused on daily routines, life in Muscat beyond work, social activities, use of public and informal spaces, constraints on mobility and comfort, and the tactics used to sustain social life under limited time and resources. To preserve confidentiality, names were not recorded; interviewees are identified through anonymised tags in the thesis.

Two interviews were conducted with white-collar migrant workers to provide contextual contrast. These interviews addressed similar themes of daily routines, social life, and use of urban space, while exploring differences in discretionary time, transport access, and the use of formal third-place settings.

In addition, one interview was conducted with Mr. Ahmed Al Mukhaini, a policy analyst working in governance and policy in Oman. This interview focused on institutional perspectives on migrant communities, urban regulation, and the management of everyday and informal spatial practices.

Given the study's focus on South Asian expatriate populations, interviews were conducted in multiple languages depending on the participants' ease. Interviews with

Bangladeshi blue-collar workers were primarily conducted in Bangla; Pakistani participants were interviewed in Urdu; and English was used for interviews with white-collar participants and the policy analyst. Audio recording and note-taking were used subject to participant consent. The interview guides for each participant category are provided in the appendix B.1.

Table 1.2: Participant Overview

Category	ID/Name	Age	Nationality	Occupation	Interview type	Years in Oman
Blue collar	P1	35	Bangladeshi	Mechanic	Individual	14
	P2	35	Bangladeshi	Grocery store staff	Individual	4
	P3	37	Bangladeshi	Workshop Foreman	Individual	17
	P4	41	Bangladeshi	Workshop owner	Individual	15
	P5	38	Pakistani	Mechanic	Group	17
	P6	29	Pakistani	Mechanic		3
	P7	55	Pakistani	Butcher		8
White collar	P8	32	Pakistani	Finance Officer	Individual	8
	P9	26	Bangladeshi	Accountant	Individual	20
Expert	Ahmed Al Mukhaini	-	Omani	Policy Analyst	Individual	-

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted alongside data collection. Observation notes and interview material were reviewed iteratively to identify emerging patterns, refine analytical categories, and adjust subsequent observation and interview focus.

Interviews were transcribed and analytically edited for clarity and relevance. The ones conducted in English were transcribed using online transcription tools, while interviews in Bangla and Urdu were transcribed manually to retain conversational flow and linguistic nuance that automated tools did not capture reliably. Coding was undertaken through MAXQDA to connect reported experiences to observed practices and to relate both to the conceptual and contextual frameworks established through the staged literature review. To ensure readability and avoid unnecessary repetition, interview material included in the appendix is presented as condensed thematic summaries with selected quotations rather than full verbatim transcripts.

2.5 Research Positionality

This research is shaped by my positionality as a Bangladeshi woman raised in Muscat. Long-term familiarity with the city's migrant-dominant districts, every-

day settings, and shared languages shaped the practical conditions of access and interaction during fieldwork. This familiarity facilitated informal conversation and reduced social distance in some encounters, while also requiring reflexive attention to how prior knowledge might shape interpretation.

At the same time, my institutional affiliation and access to higher education positioned me differently from many participants, particularly blue-collar workers whose everyday life is structured by dependency, limited time, and heightened risk associated with public visibility. This study therefore treats participant consent, confidentiality, and situational safety as central ethical concerns. Names were not collected; identifiers were used consistently; and interview engagement was shaped by participants' comfort, time availability, and willingness to be recorded.

Reflexivity was maintained through systematic reliance on fieldnotes, transcripts, and cross-checking between observation and interview material. Personal familiarity is treated as contextual sensitivity rather than as evidence, and claims in the findings chapters are grounded in the empirical material gathered through the methods described above.

2.6 Limitations

The study focuses on South Asian blue-collar migrant workers, with interviews conducted primarily with participants of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin. While these groups constitute a significant proportion of the blue-collar migrant population in Muscat, given the time duration of the study and demographic density of these South Asian blue-collar communities in the observed sites, other South Asian blue-collar migrants such as Indian, Sri Lankan, Nepali, and Burmese workers were not included. As a result, this limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised and does not represent the full diversity of South Asian blue-collar migrant experiences in Muscat.

All interview participants and individuals documented during field observations were male. This is due to the primary group of the study being blue-collar workers in construction and service sectors, both of which primarily consists of male workers, and the difficulty of accessing female blue-collar migrant workers, many of whom are employed as domestic workers and live within private households. These conditions significantly limit opportunities for public interaction and made inclusion in this study impractical. Consequently, the study does not address gendered differences in migrant spatial practices.

Access to participants was also constrained by broader socio-political and regulatory conditions. Fieldwork was conducted during a period of heightened labour checks in several migrant-dominant areas of Muscat, which affected patterns of

public presence and limited opportunities for sustained engagement. It also contributed to hesitation and suspicion among potential participants, with some individuals unwilling to engage due to concerns around visibility and possible repercussions. These conditions affected both the depth of certain interviews and the consistency of engagement across sites.

Finally, time constraints further limited the research process. Most blue-collar workers work in segmented shifts with an afternoon break between 13:30 to 15:30, and many blue-collar migrant workers work extended or irregular hours, often beyond regular working times. This restricted the availability of participants and, in some cases, required interviews to be conducted during short breaks or alongside work activities. Fatigue and time pressure occasionally led to shorter interviews or more guarded responses.

3. Theoretical Framework : Placemaking, Informality, and Spatial Agency

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework for analysing migrant spatial practices in Muscat. Drawing on urban theory, migration studies, and placemaking literature, it conceptualises space as socially produced and politically mediated through everyday practice rather than as a neutral backdrop. By bringing together literature on spatial appropriation, informality, third places, and visibility, the chapter foregrounds how migrants exercise spatial agency under conditions of constraint and limited formal recognition. Informal placemaking is approached not as a residual phenomenon, but as a constitutive element of contemporary urban life, providing the conceptual foundation for the empirical analysis that follows.

3.1 Spatial Appropriation and the “Right to the City”

Spatial Appropriation as a Mode of Urban Engagement

Spatial appropriation is a key concept for understanding how marginalised populations engage with and actively reshape urban environments. Unlike the mere “use” of space, appropriation refers to a dynamic process through which individuals or groups gain mastery over their surroundings and adapt them to meet specific material and immaterial needs, including safety, autonomy, belonging, and sociality (Lefebvre, 1991; Veschambre, 2023). Through appropriation, abstract or neutral space is transformed into lived and meaningful place, often referred to as “fields of care” that supports everyday life under conditions of constraint (Farooq et al., 2025). This process reflects a fundamental human need to anchor social existence spatially, particularly where formal planning frameworks fail to accommodate diverse forms of everyday life (Lara-Hernandez & Melis, 2018).

The significance of appropriation lies in its capacity to reveal how urban life is produced beyond formal design and regulation. Rather than being marginal or residual, appropriative practices constitute an essential dimension of lived urbanism, especially for groups whose access to formally designated spaces is limited or conditional.

The Right to the City, Informality, and Everyday Agency

The political relevance of spatial appropriation is grounded in Henri Lefebvre’s formulation of the “right to the city.” Lefebvre conceptualises this right not as a legal entitlement, but as the right to participate in the meaningful production and use of urban space (Lara-Hernandez & Melis, 2018; Lefebvre, 1991). To be excluded from urban life, in this sense, is to be excluded from social existence itself. Appropriation becomes central within this framework, as it embodies the right to “full and complete usage of space”, moving beyond passive occupancy toward active engagement

that enables autonomy and everyday agency (Farooq et al., 2025). The right to the city thus legitimates practices through which individuals refuse spatial exclusion, even in the absence of formal recognition.

For migrant populations, particularly those subject to temporary or precarious residency arrangements, appropriation assumes heightened importance. Where migrants are positioned as transient or peripheral urban actors, appropriation functions as a means of asserting presence and belonging within cities that are not structured to accommodate their everyday needs (Fernandez, 2021; Katyayani, 2024; Lori, 2012). These practices should not be read as claims to permanence, but as transient and adaptive modes of inhabiting urban space (Farooq et al., 2025; Farooq & Pfaffenbach, 2024)

In such contexts, appropriation is closely linked to informality. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's notion of "tactics," informal spatial practices can be understood as the "art of the weak": everyday actions that operate within dominant spatial and institutional structures without directly confronting them (Farooq et al., 2025). These practices are often driven by necessity rather than overt political resistance. Informality thus emerges as a pragmatic form of spatial agency through which individuals respond to inflexible urban environments.

Loose Space and the Temporality of Appropriation

Appropriative practices are frequently enabled by what has been described as "loose" or leftover spaces: areas characterised by functional ambiguity, weak regulation, or indeterminate programming (Lara-Hernandez & Melis, 2018). In the case of Muscat, spaces such as wadi beds or empty plots offer "interactive potential," inviting diversity and activities not originally planned for those locations (Lewicka, 2011). Loose spaces therefore play a critical role in facilitating everyday forms of place-making that are otherwise spatially displaced.

Temporality is a defining dimension of these appropriations. For populations whose urban presence is shaped by uncertainty and short-term horizons, spatial interventions are typically non-permanent and reversible (Farooq et al., 2025). Rather than investing in durable structures, users rely on temporary material arrangements that can be adapted, relocated, or abandoned as circumstances change (Farooq & Pfaffenbach, 2024). This condition of "temporary permanency" reflects a mode of spatial production rooted in repetition and everyday rhythms rather than lasting physical inscription. Place, in this sense, is continuously produced through practice rather than fixed form.

3.2 Placemaking, Informality, and the Limits of the Third Place

Third Places and Social Infrastructure

Ray Oldenburg's concept of the "third place" describes informal public gathering settings distinct from home (first place) and work (second place), widely treated as indicators of social health and community cohesion (Bosman & Dolley, 2019; Oldenburg, 1989).

In Oldenburg's ideal type, third places operate as "levelers": spaces of relative neutrality where participation is not determined by formal status and conversation becomes the primary social activity. Within placemaking debates, this framing positions third places as crucial sites where everyday conviviality, social support, and weak-tie connections develop through routine co-presence rather than formal institutional provision (Bosman & Dolley, 2019; Zhuang & Lok, 2023).

At the same time, the third place concept is not simply descriptive but normative: it assumes accessibility, affordability, and a degree of openness that may not hold in contexts where public space is tightly managed or commodified. This matters for studies of migrant urbanism, where the question is often not whether social gathering occurs, but under what constraints it is produced and sustained.

Critiques and Adaptations in Gulf Urban Contexts

In Gulf cities, the "neutral ground" assumed by classic third place theory rarely holds. Formal gathering settings that exist in most Gulf cities such as malls, cafés, and curated plazas may be publicly accessible in principle yet socially selective in practice, particularly where participation is mediated through consumption and normative expectations of visibility and comportment (Aljabri, 2014; Farooq et al., 2025). In such settings, third place participation becomes unevenly distributed, and the "leveling" function of third places risks being replaced by stratified spatial etiquette and economic filtering. The "neutral ground" of a high-end mall or a landscaped plaza is often inaccessible to the 90% of low-income migrants who do not own cars (Farooq et al., 2025).

These critiques do not invalidate third place theory; rather, they indicate the need to treat "thirdness" as a relational quality that emerges under specific conditions of access. For blue-collar migrants whose everyday life is shaped by precarity and constrained mobility, this necessitates a redefinition of the third place to include

informal “migrant hot-spots” where shared ethnicity and social networks create a sense of safety and “home away from home” (Farooq & Pfaffenbach, 2024; Zhuang & Lok, 2023). This reframing aligns with broader accounts of managed (non-)integration, where migrants’ urban presence is tolerated yet channelled into bounded or semi-informal spatial arrangements (Yeoh & Lam, 2022).

Informal Third Places as Social and Cultural “Third Spaces”

For migrant populations, third places often function less as leisure amenities and more as “survival infrastructure”: settings where information circulates, mutual aid becomes possible, and social ties support everyday coping (Bosman & Dolley, 2019; Zhuang & Lok, 2023). In this sense, third places can be understood as enabling social reproduction, emotional support, practical coordination, and everyday stability, rather than recreational consumption alone (Aldrich et al., 2024; Bosman & Dolley, 2019). Migrant third places may therefore be highly localised and materially modest: a tea shop, a street corner, or a routinely occupied threshold. Their significance lies not in physical form but in repeated use, recognisability, and social reliability (Wessendorf & Farrer, 2021).

Beyond their material and social functions, migrant third places can also be read through Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of the “third space.” Rather than denoting a physical location, Bhabha conceptualises third space as a relational and interpretive domain in which cultural meanings are negotiated, translated, and reconfigured (Bhabha, 1994). From this perspective, informal migrant third places operate as spaces of hybridity, where practices of belonging emerge neither from the host society nor from the place of origin alone, but through everyday negotiation. These spaces do not resolve questions of identity or integration; instead, they sustain ambivalence, partial belonging, and pragmatic coexistence. Read in this way, migrant third places function simultaneously as social infrastructure and as cultural third spaces, where spatial appropriation enables migrants to inhabit the city without fully assimilating into its dominant norms (Wessendorf & Farrer, 2021).

This understanding also clarifies the boundaries between formal and informal placemaking. Modern planning in Oman has traditionally followed Western modernist models, resulting in “visual placelessness” and the loss of traditional gathering spaces (Aljabri, 2014; Benkari, 2017; Relph, 2025). This study advocates for a broader definition of placemaking that includes the grassroots actions of residents who transform in-between spaces into “quasi-public” hubs where use is negotiated through community norms rather than guaranteed rights (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017; Bosman & Dolley, 2019; Project for Public Spaces, 2007).

3.3 Cultural Practices and Placemaking Among South Asian Migrants

Building on the discussion of informal third places, this section foregrounds the cultural practices through which such spaces are animated and differentiated. South Asian migrants enter urban environments with culturally embedded social practices, spatial norms, and communal routines that shape how place is produced in contexts of migration. In their analysis of migrant-run eateries in London and Tokyo, Wessendorf and Farrer (2021) show how culturally specific routines generate “intercultural third places” that are neither formally planned nor explicitly political, yet vital for everyday coexistence. Building on this perspective, placemaking among South Asian migrants can be understood as a culturally informed strategy for navigating unfamiliar urban environments and sustaining continuity under conditions of displacement and temporariness (Farooq et al., 2025).

Social Norms, Cultural Memory, and the Recreation of Communal Routines

Everyday placemaking among South Asian migrants is strongly informed by social norms rooted in home-country practices. Informal gathering traditions such as *adda* (informal intellectual or social gathering), or congregating at *chai dhabas* (tea stalls) are frequently re-enacted in migrant settings as a means of sustaining familiar rhythms of social life (Farooq et al., 2025; Wessendorf & Farrer, 2021). For many low-income men, these communal gatherings provide a counterbalance to demanding work schedules and restricted private space.



Fig. 3 Tea shop between building edges near Souq Al Khuwair; inhabited by expats and citizens alike (Photographed on the author's behalf)

These practices occasionally extend beyond migrant-only settings and enter the wider urban cultural landscape in fragmentary and uneven ways. One illustrative example is the widespread popularity of “karak chai” (derived from the Hindi word *kadak*, meaning strong tea), which has become a routine feature of everyday life among diverse groups, particularly younger residents. While traditional forms of hospitality such as *kahwa* (Omani coffee) remain central to domestic hospitality, and specialty cafés increasingly shape youth leisure cultures, *karak chai* occupies a different register: inexpensive, mobile, and embedded in everyday rhythms. Its circulation across social groups reflects moments of cultural crossing and proximity rather than evidence of full social inclusion, underscoring how migrant practices can be selectively absorbed into urban life while broader hierarchies of belonging remain intact.

The selection of sites for these gatherings is rarely arbitrary. Migrants often appropriate locations whose physical characteristics resonate effectively with remembered landscapes, such as open ground, greenery, or coastal edges (Farooq et al., 2025). This process reflects forms of *topophilia*, in which emotional attachment to place is shaped by memory and embodied experience rather than formal designation (Lara-Hernandez & Melis, 2018; Lewicka, 2011). Cultural memory thus plays a central role not only in how migrants gather, but also in where communal life is re-established.



Fig. 4 Large picnic gatherings on the “greenery” at the Ruwi roundabout junction (Photo by Author)

Nationality, Class, and the Uneven Geographies of Informal Placemaking

Cultural placemaking among South Asian migrants is internally differentiated along lines of nationality, class, and gender. Class plays a particularly decisive role in shaping how culture is expressed spatially. Middle-income migrants tend to access more formalised ethnic spaces such as community organisations, private schools, or social clubs, which are economically accessible to them and provide established settings for cultural reproduction and social networking (Didero et al., 2019; Scholz, 2015). In contrast, low-income workers are largely restricted to marginal or leftover spaces such as wadis or highway service lanes (Farooq et al., 2025). These differences contribute to the emergence of loosely defined ethnic micro-territories within the city, even in the absence of formally recognised enclaves.

Gender further complicates these dynamics. While male migrants are more visible in public and semi-public gathering spaces, low-income women (commonly domestic workers) often experience severe constraints on mobility, privacy, and discretionary time (Farooq et al., 2025). As a result, their social worlds are frequently sustained through religious spaces, employer-mediated environments, or digital networks rather than street-level placemaking.

In essence, placemaking among South Asian migrants emerges at the intersection of cultural memory, social differentiation, and urban informality. Rather than reproducing home cultures intact, migrants selectively adapt familiar routines to the constraints and affordances of the host city, producing forms of place that are provisional, relational, and deeply embedded in everyday survival.

3.4 Migration, Identity, and Space

Migrant workers in Gulf cities occupy a paradoxical socio-spatial position that has been described as one of being “visibly invisible.” Their labour is highly visible in the construction, maintenance, and servicing of urban environments, yet their social presence and spatial needs remain marginal within dominant planning and governance frameworks (Farooq et al., 2025; Fernandez, 2021). This condition reflects a broader disjunction between economic dependence on migrant labour and the systematic exclusion of migrants from full participation in urban life (Lori, 2012; Reda et al., 2023).

Visibility, State Narratives, and Spatial Exclusion

Urban exclusion is not only produced through physical segregation, but also through state narratives and symbolic boundary-making. In Gulf contexts, dis-

courses of national identity, “Omanisation,” and cultural preservation frequently prioritise the visual coherence and symbolic ownership of central urban spaces (Farooq et al., 2025). Within such narratives, migrant gathering is often framed as excessive, disorderly, or culturally incongruent, particularly when it occurs in highly visible or central locations.

These dynamics resonate with broader scholarship on “out-of-placeness,” where migrant presence in certain urban settings is perceived as a disruption to normative spatial expectations (Wessendorf, 2019; Wessendorf & Farrer, 2021). Visibility, in this sense, becomes conditional: migrants are expected to remain present as workers but inconspicuous as social actors. When informal gatherings challenge this expectation, they may be subject to regulation, displacement, or moral scrutiny, reinforcing a spatial hierarchy of who is entitled to occupy public space and under what conditions.

Surveillance, Stigma, and Negotiated Belonging

The politics of visibility are closely intertwined with practices of surveillance and informal stigma. Migrant spatial practices are shaped by an acute awareness of regulatory oversight, ranging from formal policing and municipal regulations to informal monitoring by residents and employers. Migrants are aware that their presence in “loose spaces” is transient and subject to sudden displacement (Farooq et al., 2025; Farooq & Pfaffenbach, 2024). As a result, many forms of migrant placemaking are provisional, mobile, and strategically low-profile. Such negotiations reflect what Relph (2026) describes as weakened place attachment under conditions of displacement, where spatial engagement is transactional rather than durational.

Rather than expressing claims to long-term urban membership, socio-spatial practices in these contexts function as negotiated acts of coexistence. Through careful calibration of visibility and informality, migrants sustain social life while minimising risk. These dynamics highlight that placemaking is not only about creating place, but also about managing exposure within uneven systems of power and belonging (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017; Yeoh & Lam, 2022).

Visibility and exclusion are key dimensions through which spatial agency is exercised in migrant contexts. Everyday decisions about when to appear, withdraw, or remain inconspicuous reveal that urban governance operates as much through symbolic and social regulation as through formal planning and policy. This perspective sets the stage for the next chapter, which analyses how migration governance and urban planning in Oman structure these negotiated conditions of presence.

3.5 Summary of the Theoretical Approach

This chapter sets out the theoretical position from which this research approaches migrant spatial practices in Muscat. Rather than treating public space as something produced primarily through formal planning, design, or policy, the framework adopted here starts from everyday practice. Informal appropriation and placemaking are understood as the principal ways through which migrants engage with the city, make life workable, and assert presence under conditions of constraint. Looking at loose, leftover, and informally used spaces is therefore not a methodological choice of convenience, but a deliberate reframing of where urban life is actually produced for those excluded from formal public realms.

Theories of placemaking and third place help articulate how these appropriations function socially and culturally, particularly when classic notions of accessibility and neutrality do not hold. In the Gulf context, informal third places operate less as sites of leisure and more as survival-oriented social infrastructure, while also functioning as cultural “third spaces” where belonging is partial, negotiated, and pragmatic rather than resolved. This theoretical lens frames the chapters that follow, shifting attention from visibility as design intent to visibility as negotiation, and from planning as provision to planning as a condition that migrants continuously work around.

4. Context - Migration, Governance, and Urban Form in Oman

Building on the theoretical framework of the previous chapter, this chapter situates migrant spatial practices within the legal, political, and urban structures shaping everyday life in Oman. It shows how migration governance, labour systems, and planning frameworks actively produce conditions of extended temporariness, spatial segmentation, and limited access to public life. By outlining the kafala system, labour reforms, migration histories, and urban development patterns in Muscat, the chapter establishes the structural context in which informal appropriation becomes necessary, preparing the ground for the collective case analysis of Muscat that follows.

4.1 The Kafala System and Temporary Migration in the Gulf

The kafala (sponsorship) system is the legal mechanism that governs labor migration in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Oman (Farooq et al., 2025; Lori, 2012). The term derives from the Arabic root k-f-l, meaning “to guarantee” or “to take responsibility for.” Under this model, a migrant worker’s legal status is directly tied to a sponsor (kafeel), an individual or company who acts as their guarantor throughout their stay (Fernandez, 2021; Katyayani, 2024). Entry, employment, and legal residence all hinge on the continued support of this sponsor (AlShehabi, 2021; Katyayani, 2024). This setup effectively outsources migration management to the private sector, with limited state intervention once the worker is inside the country. While the system allows employers to meet labor needs quickly and flexibly, it places migrants in a dependent and non-autonomous position. Workers cannot change jobs or exit the country freely without the sponsor’s permission and are rarely eligible for long-term residence or citizenship (Katyayani, 2024; Lori, 2012).

The kafala system is not just an administrative tool, it has become a structural feature of labor migration in the Gulf. It formalizes temporary labor without formal integration. This systematically extends out to even addressing migrants exclusively as ‘expatriates’, individuals who temporarily reside out of their native country, as opposed to ‘immigrants’, who relocate to another country indefinitely. As a result, migrants, particularly those in low-income and low-skilled sectors, often live and work in Oman for years, in many cases, decades, without gaining permanent residency or citizenship, limiting their social welfare and political rights (Reda et al., 2023).

This separation is reinforced by legal, spatial, and economic boundaries. Though formal in structure, the system also functions through informal mechanisms. A common example is the “free visa” arrangement, in which migrants pay a fee to a sponsor in exchange for the right to find work independently in the informal economy, despite the practice being legally ambiguous (Damir-Geilsdorf & Pelican,

2019; Lori, 2012). While unofficial, this practice is widespread and tolerated in some cases, especially when it meets market demand.

The roots of this structure date back to British colonial administration, when sponsorship requirements were introduced for pearl divers and oil workers (AlShehabi, 2021). Post-independence, GCC states formalized these practices into national labor systems, maintaining the temporary and employer-dependent status of foreign workers. In practice, kafala is not simply a policy, it is a social architecture that shapes how migration happens, how long migrants stay, what spaces they access, and how they are perceived in public life (Farooq et al., 2025). For low-income workers, it creates a condition of extended impermanence: you live in the city, often for decades, but never fully belong to it.

4.2 Oman-Specific Labour Migration Policies and Reforms

While the kafala system provides the overarching legal architecture for labour migration in Oman, its contemporary operation has been reshaped by Oman-specific localisation policies, labour-law reforms, and post-pandemic restructuring, all of which are formally embedded within the long-term development framework articulated in Oman Vision 2040 (Reda et al., 2023; Tabti & Troug, 2025). Central to this is Omanisation, first enacted in 1994 through quota requirements mandating the employment of Omani nationals in private-sector firms (Apergis & Apergis, 2022). Despite successive iterations, Omanisation has not eliminated reliance on expatriate labour. Instead, it has entrenched a segmented labour market in which nationals are concentrated in public-sector and managerial roles, while expatriates remain dominant in low-skill and service sectors that are spatially clustered within the city (Tabti & Troug, 2025).

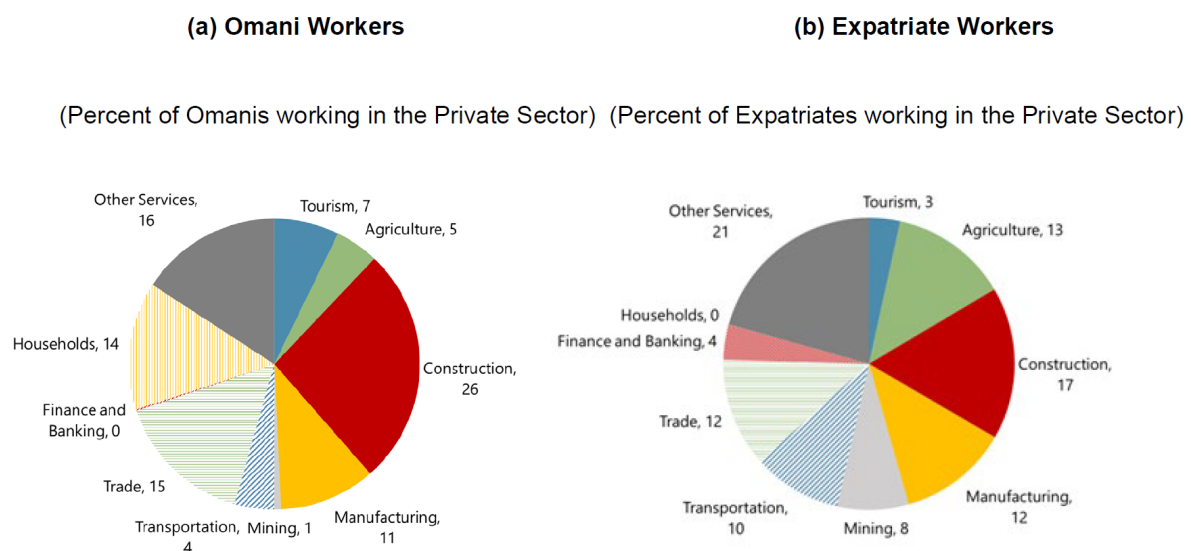


Fig. 5 Distribution of workers in the private sector, 2023 [Source: Tabti & Troug, 2025]

This segmentation has intensified as Oman confronts demographic pressure to generate approximately 220,000 jobs for nationals by 2032 (Tabti & Troug, 2025). With public-sector employment increasingly constrained, localisation efforts have shifted toward private-sector jobs historically sustained by low-cost migrants (Farooq et al., 2025; Tabti & Troug, 2025). Quota enforcement remains uneven: firms face stricter requirements for senior positions, while expatriate-heavy sectors continue to operate with looser thresholds. As a result, Omanisation operates less as workforce substitution than as a mechanism that redistributes precarity, shaping where migrants live, how long they remain, and how cautiously they invest in urban space.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the instability of this arrangement. While the overall expatriate population declined sharply between 2017 and 2021, the impact was uneven across nationalities: workers from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan experienced disproportionate losses, while other groups demonstrated greater retention (Apergis & Apergis, 2022). Pandemic-era restrictions on mobility and gathering disrupted informal migrant social spaces, revealing the provisional nature of the “fields of care” and everyday gathering sites that migrants establish within leftover and interstitial urban spaces (Farooq et al., 2025).

Legal reforms introduced via the new Labour Law, established by Royal Decree 53/2023 expanded formal protections for expatriates while reinforcing national employment priorities. Although the revised Labour Law introduced anti-discrimination provisions, regulated redundancy, and alternative dispute-resolution mechanisms, sponsor-based residency links remain intact, reaffirming restricted layoffs of Omanis in favour of expatriates, and required firms to formalise Omanisation plans subject to state approval in parallel (Tabti & Troug, 2025). From an urban perspective, these labour and policy dynamics produce a predictable spatial outcome: because Omanisation quotas remain relaxed in low-skill sectors, large concentrations of migrant workers persist in industrial and commercial/service sectors, while informal practices such as the “free-visa” arrangement sustain parallel labour and spatial economies outside formal planning frameworks (Damir-Geilsdorf & Pelican, 2019; Lori, 2012; Tabti & Troug, 2025).

4.3 Migration History and Demographics in Oman/Muscat

Oman’s labor migration history mirrors the broader Gulf trajectory, though it carries its own national particularities. Prior to the 1970s, migration to Oman was relatively limited and consisted largely of Arab migrants, merchants, and informal regional flows. Large-scale labor migration only accelerated after Sultan Qaboos’ ascent to power in 1970, when oil revenues began to fund sweeping modernization and infrastructure projects (Farooq et al., 2025). This transformation required an external labor force that Oman’s small citizen population could not supply. Upon

gaining independence, Oman formalized these sponsor-based entry systems into state labor law, giving citizens the exclusive right to sponsor migrant workers and like other GCC states, turned to South Asia as a primary labor pool, drawing workers predominantly from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan through formal bilateral recruitment mechanisms (AlShehabi, 2021). Over the next five decades, this system helped facilitate large inflows of workers, mainly from South Asia, into construction, domestic work, and service sectors.

Today, foreign nationals constitute over 40% of Oman's total population and over 60% of Muscat's population, with the majority employed in the private sector (Aref, 2021; Farooq et al., 2025). A breakdown of the expatriate labor force reveals sharp divisions across lines of nationality, visa category, gender, and income level. Over 90% of all low-wage expatriates come from South Asia, with Bangladeshis alone accounting for one-third of all labor migrants (Farooq et al., 2025). By contrast, managerial and professional roles in finance, oil, or education are dominated by Western and Arab expatriates (Aref, 2021; Katyayani, 2024).

These distinctions are embedded in the visa system itself. Migrant workers are recruited on time-bound, sponsor-tied visas that heavily restrict mobility, labor rights, and family reunification (AlShehabi, 2021; Katyayani, 2024). The lack of long-term residency options reinforces the perception of such workers as permanently temporary: a status that persists regardless of duration of stay.

Importantly, this legal temporariness intersects with economic vulnerability. Migrants, such as Bangladeshis, often arrive already burdened by recruitment debt, having paid exorbitant sums to informal brokers for placement—sometimes over a year's worth of wages (Rahman, 2015). These upfront costs deepen their dependency on employers and limit their ability to challenge exploitative conditions (Fernandez, 2021; Lori, 2012). Migrant workers are aware of the risks, but also of the opportunities Gulf jobs offer in comparison to unemployment or economic stagnation back home. Given their visa conditions and salary levels, most low-income male migrants also face challenged sponsoring dependents, leading to a widespread absence of family life within migrant neighborhoods (Aref, 2021).

The result is a deeply hierarchical expatriate order: at the top, Western and Arab expatriates who live in segregated compounds or gated communities with car access and leisure amenities; at the bottom, South Asian laborers occupying crowded, low-cost housing in industrial or marginal zones (Farooq et al., 2025). While they visibly build and service the city, these migrants remain structurally excluded from public life spatially, economically, and politically (Reda et al., 2023).

4.4 Urban Development and Spatial Planning in Muscat

Since the 1970s, Muscat has undergone a profound urban transformation. The city expanded from a cluster of coastal settlements into a sprawling metropolitan region, driven by oil revenues and state-led modernization (Benkari, 2017; Farooq et al., 2025). Urban development has largely followed a top-down planning paradigm, characterized by low-density expansion, zoning segregation, and heavy reliance on private vehicular infrastructure (Al Shueili, 2015; Hegazy, 2019). This pattern has produced what several scholars term a fragmented urban fabric: disconnected land uses, car-oriented mobility, and a lack of inclusive, human-scale design in many districts (Farooq et al., 2025; Scholz, 2015).

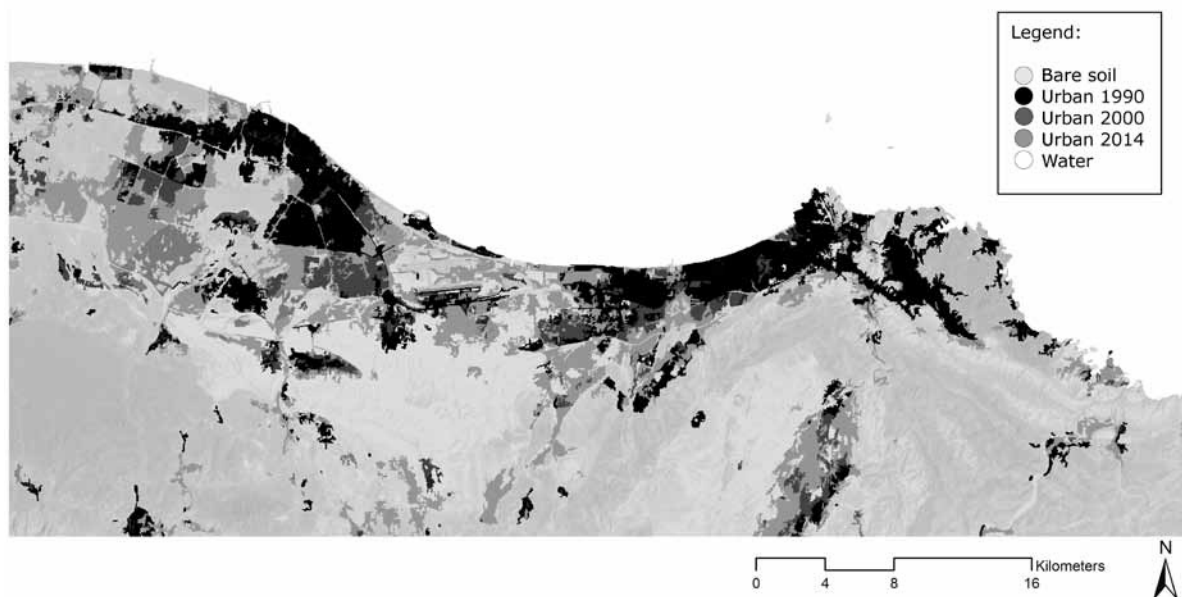


Fig. 6 Urbanisation of Muscat 1984-2014 [Source: Richthofen & Langer, 2015: 5]

State planning priorities have historically favored symbolic aesthetics and infrastructure over integrative or socially inclusive urbanism. Scholars note that public space investments in Muscat often prioritize beautification such as manicured green spaces, traffic islands, or landmark parks while neglecting practical accessibility, walkability, or everyday usability (Aljabri, 2014; Benkari, 2017). This has led to a proliferation of what are known in planning literature as “residual” or “loose” spaces: vacant lots, unused buffers, or interstitial zones between developments that are neither formally programmed nor effectively maintained (Farooq et al., 2025).

For many low-income migrants housed in peripheral or industrial zones, such spaces become crucial to everyday social life. These labor-dense zones are char-

acterized by limited green space, few designated communal areas, and inadequate pedestrian infrastructure. Unable to afford leisure infrastructure or easily access distant parks, these groups informally appropriate Muscat's leftover spaces for rest, conversation, prayer, or recreation (Farooq et al., 2025).

The Oman National Spatial Strategy (ONSS), launched as part of Oman Vision 2040, aims to guide long-term spatial development across the Sultanate. Although the strategy identifies the need for improved livability and public realm design, migrant-dominated districts are rarely mentioned explicitly, and the practical translation of inclusive principles into these neighborhoods remains minimal. As Hegazy (2019) notes, urban livability in the Omani context remains tied to car ownership, access to shade, and proximity to private consumption zones, which inherently exclude low-income users. As such, while ONSS marks a shift toward strategic urbanism, its impact on blue-collar spatial experience has yet to materialize in tangible improvements

This uneven development trajectory has a socio-spatial impact. Affluent neighborhoods in Muscat benefit from paved sidewalks, lighting, and proximity to shopping or parks. By contrast, many labor-dense areas remain under-served, with poor pedestrian infrastructure and few safe or designated communal zones (Aljabri, 2014; Scholz, 2015). Rather than formal interventions, it is often the informal spatial practices of marginalized groups that animate Muscat's peripheries. Through daily use, routine congregation, and tactical adaptation, migrants convert indeterminate edges into micro-scale community nodes.

These spaces may not register on city maps or planning blueprints, but they function as critical elements of placemaking in the lives of residents who are otherwise excluded from the city's formal leisure geography. In this way, Oman's modern urbanism inadvertently produces the very spatial voids that marginalized residents transform into meaningful zones of sociability.

4.5 Housing Geographies and Residential Patterns

The spatial distribution of migrant housing in Muscat reflects broader planning and labor dynamics shaped by economic necessity, legal structures, and evolving national development goals. As the city expanded rapidly after the 1970s, residential zones for different population groups became increasingly differentiated, with low-income migrant workers, particularly in construction, manufacturing, and service sectors, concentrated in peripheral and industrial districts such as many parts of the Wilayat of Muttrah, Mabilah, Ghala and much more (Farooq et al., 2025; Katyayani, 2024).

Housing arrangements for these workers typically fall into two categories: employer-provided labor accommodations, or informal shared rentals in low-cost neighborhoods. Shared villas or flats may offer more flexibility but are frequently overcrowded and precarious, especially for workers employed informally or on “free visas.” In both cases, the function of housing is tied closely to labor productivity rather than social or familial life.

Legal frameworks reinforce these patterns of spatial separation. The underlying stigma around restriction of “bachelor” workers, mostly unaccompanied, single men, from family-oriented or upscale neighborhoods, and income-based thresholds for family reunification, limit where low-income workers can reside (AlShehabi, 2021; Katyayani, 2024). These exclusions contribute to a bifurcated urban experience: one characterized by formal integration, and another by containment and limited visibility. As Aref (2021) notes, planning regulations often reflect a narrow conception of the urban resident, privileging citizens and high-income expatriates as the default user.

While Oman Vision 2040 and the Oman National Spatial Strategy (ONSS) emphasize inclusive urban development and social cohesion, implementation remains uneven in addressing the spatial realities of migrant-majority districts. The ONSS outlines strategic goals to improve housing quality and spatial equity across governorates, but much of this remains focused on citizen housing schemes, with limited interventions targeting the conditions of expatriate enclaves (Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, 2021; Scholz, 2015).

Nonetheless, these residential zones are not devoid of social life. Within constrained settings, migrant workers repurpose available spaces for communal practices: rooftops used for socializing or prayer, shaded alleys as makeshift gathering areas, and shopfronts as informal meeting spots. Such adaptations reflect grounded responses to planning absences. Though shaped by structural exclusion, they reveal alternative ways urban space is lived, appropriated, and made meaningful from below (Farooq et al., 2025).

The interplay between legal boundaries, economic constraints, and spatial adaptation in these districts sets the foundation for understanding Muscat’s migrant geographies at a finer grain. As the next chapter explores the urban morphology of the city, its road networks, zoning patterns, and spatial hierarchies, both reflect and reinforces these residential dynamics. Examining the structure of Muscat and the specific neighborhood typologies where migrants reside allows for a more situated reading of the city’s built environment and the spatial conditions that shape migrant everyday life.

5. Muscat: Urban Geography, Population Distribution, and Everyday Spatial Use

This chapter bridges the macro-scale governance and migration frameworks outlined in Chapter 4 with the micro-scale spatial practices examined in later analytical chapters. While the previous chapter established how migration regimes, labour governance, and planning logics structure migrant life in Oman, the present chapter situates these dynamics within the physical and social geography of Muscat. Rather than approaching the city through discrete “case sites” alone, the chapter frames Muscat as a continuous urban field in which migrant workers navigate, appropriate, and inhabit space under uneven conditions of access, mobility, and visibility.

5.1 Geographic and Demographic Context: Oman and the Capital Region

Oman occupies approximately 309,000 km² on the south-eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, bounded by the United Arab Emirates to the northwest, Saudi Arabia to the west, and Yemen to the southwest (National Centre for Statistics and Information, 2025b). The country’s physical geography is characterised by an extensive arid interior dominated by desert and gravel plains, contrasted with the Hajar mountain range in the north and a narrow but strategically significant coastal plain along the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea (Al Shueili, 2015; Benkari, 2017). Since the 1970s, population settlement, infrastructure investment, and urban development have been heavily concentrated along the northern coastal belt, where ports, highways, airports, and industrial zones have been established (Benkari, 2017; De Bel-Air, 2018).

Oman’s coastal position has historically connected it to regional and transoceanic trade networks, a role that has been reinforced in contemporary planning frameworks through the development of logistics corridors and port cities such as Muscat and Sohar, alongside newer hubs including Duqm (Al Shueili, 2015; Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, 2024). These coastal urban centres function as key nodes within national economic strategy, concentrating administrative functions, employment opportunities, and transport infrastructure in contrast to the sparsely populated interior (Hegazy, 2019).

Demographically, expatriates form a substantial share of the population in Oman, a pattern closely linked to labour-intensive development and significant population on migrant labour across construction, services, logistics, and domestic work (Aljabri, 2014; De Bel-Air, 2018). Since the early 2010s, expatriates have made up two-fifths of residents nationally, with the 2013 census recording 44% expatriates (De Bel-Air, 2018), while the 2025 statistical year-book reports 43% expatriates

nationally (National Centre for Statistics and Information, 2025b). However, earlier data indicated a steeper difference between the populations of Omanis vs expatriates with 70.6% Omanis and 29.4% expatriates in 2010 (Aljabri, 2014). This demographic composition is spatially uneven, with expatriate populations disproportionately concentrated in urban and coastal governorates, particularly within the capital region (Didero et al., 2019).

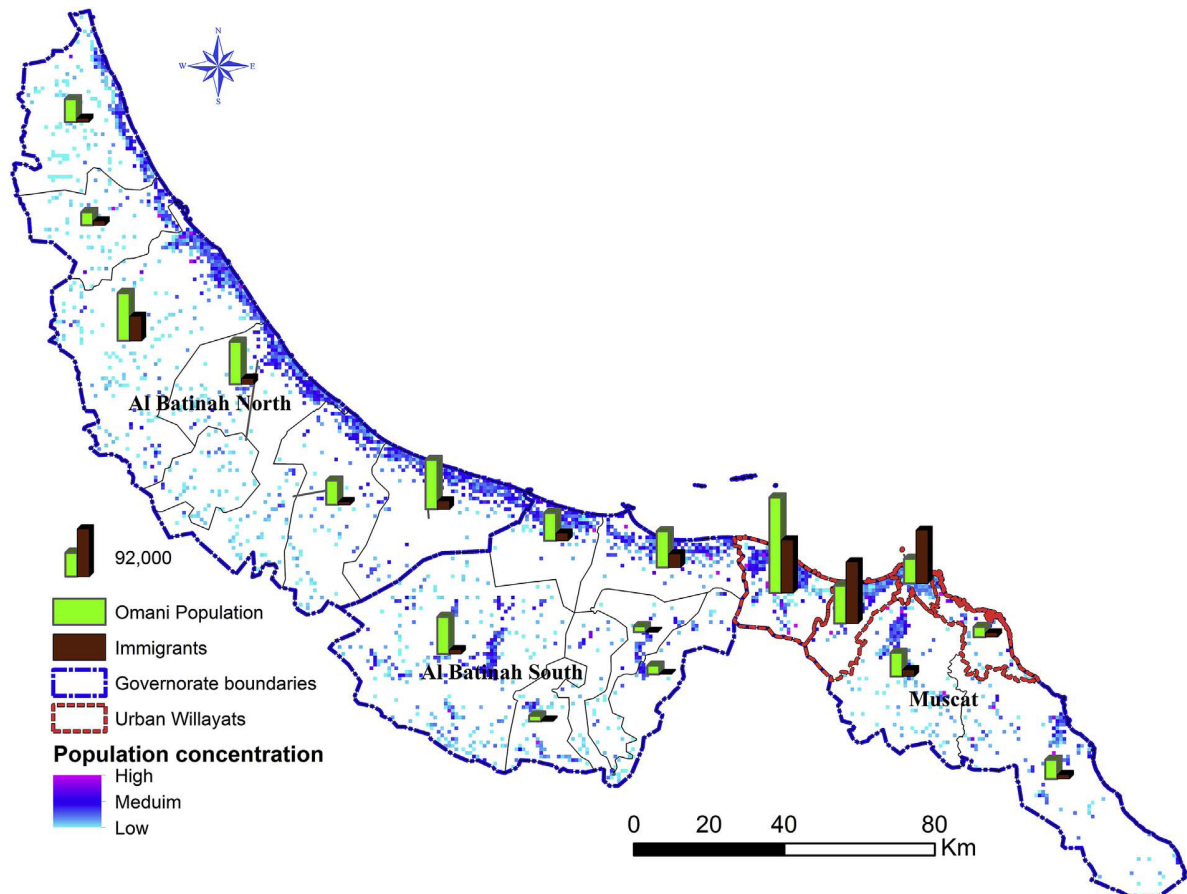


Fig. 7 Omani versus non-Omani population across Willayats of Muscat and Al-Batnah governorates
[Source: Mansour, 2017: 123]

Muscat Governorate, comprising six *Wilayah* (administrative boundaries), functions as the administrative centre of the state and the principal locus of population density, public services, and employment. It hosts national ministries, major hospitals, higher-education institutions, and the country's primary international airport, alongside the largest concentration of private-sector employment (National Centre for Statistics and Information, 2025b). As a result, Muscat absorbs a significant share of both internal migration and international labour inflows, with expatriate workers forming much of the workforce in several key sectors (Al Shueili, 2015; Aljabri, 2014; Benkari, 2017). Within this national configuration, Muscat functions not only as the administrative capital but as the primary spatial container for migrant labour, economic activity, and everyday urban life.

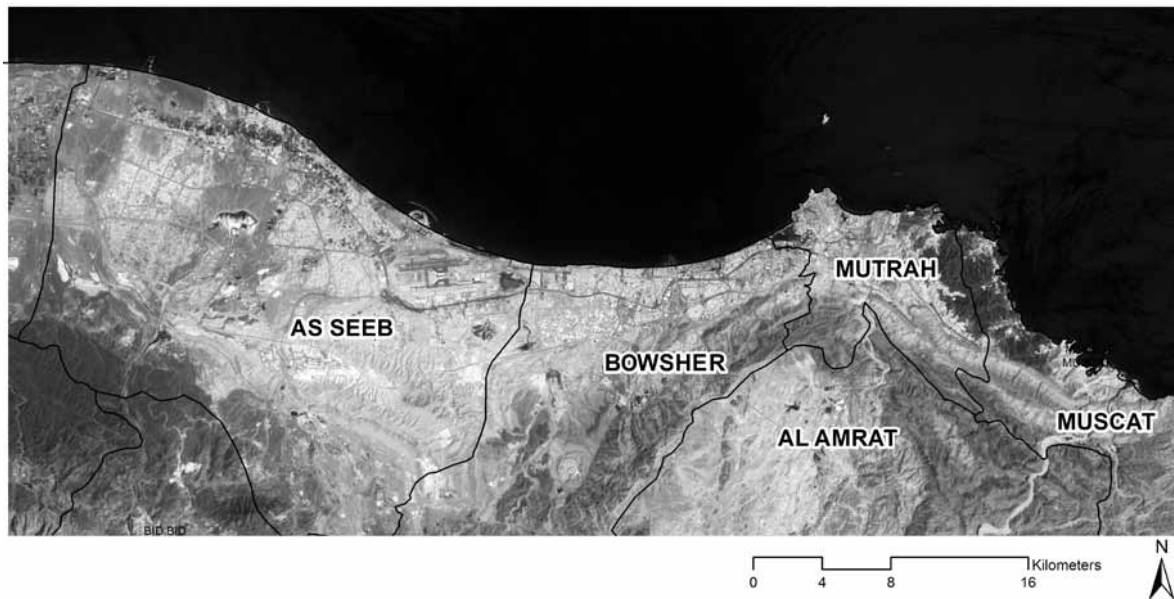


Fig. 8 Administrative boundaries (Wilayah) of Muscat governorate in 2014 [Source: Richthofen & Langer, 2015: 4]

5.2 Muscat's Urban Structure and Spatial Logic

The urban form of Muscat is strongly shaped by its physical geography. The built-up metropolitan area extends along a narrow coastal strip bordered by the Gulf of Oman to the north and the Hajar Mountains to the south, producing a predominantly linear urban morphology. Rather than expanding concentrically, Muscat has developed as a “linear” city with an elongated urban corridor stretching roughly 80 km from the historic core of Old Muscat and Muttrah in the east to Al-Seeb and Al-Mabela in the west (Al Shueili, 2015; Aljabri, 2014; Didero et al., 2019). This linear configuration has constrained land availability, encouraged longitudinal expansion, and reinforced spatial separation between residential, commercial, and administrative zones (Aljabri, 2014; Benkari, 2017).

Within this coastal corridor, Muscat does not exhibit a single downtown, as reported by the residents. Instead, it is composed of a series of functionally differentiated districts and nodes, each associated with particular economic, administrative, or residential roles (Al Shueili, 2015; Aljabri, 2014). Ruwi has historically functioned as a commercial and financial centre, Al-Khuwair as an administrative and ministerial district, and Ghala as a mixed industrial-commercial zone, while Muttrah retains port-related and historic functions (Aljabri, 2014; Didero et al., 2019). The absence of a dominant downtown core has resulted in a fragmented urban structure, characterised by multiple centres connected primarily through arterial road networks rather than through continuous pedestrian-oriented urban fabric.

This spatial fragmentation is reinforced by zoning and planning logics that emphasise functional separation. Planning has produced residential enclaves, commercial centres and industrial corridors: small commercial plots appear every ≈ 150 residential units (Al Shueili, 2015), ministries cluster in Al-Khuwair, the

central business district concentrates banks in Ruwi, and commercial-office mixes develop in Al Athaiba and Al-Ghubra (Didero et al., 2019). National and regional planning instruments, including the Oman National Spatial Strategy (ONSS), designate specific zones for business (Ghala), knowledge/innovation (Al Khoud, Halban) and clean industry (Al Misfah, Al Rusayl) amongst many more, further formalizing this logic across the metropolitan region (Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, 2021). Like other Gulf cities, this planning approach has produced urban environments oriented toward order, legibility, and infrastructural efficiency rather than spatial integration or mixed-use intensity (Scholz, 2015).

Mobility patterns within Muscat are closely aligned with this spatial logic. The city exhibits a high degree of automobile dependency, with daily mobility dominated by private vehicles ($\approx 91\%$ of commuters; 87% of surveyed respondents regularly drive) while public transport is under-used due to limited coverage and comfort (Al Shueili, 2015; Didero et al., 2019). Road infrastructure prioritises vehicular circulation across long distances, linking dispersed districts through highways and multi-lane arterial roads. Pedestrian infrastructure remains uneven and discontinuous, with sidewalks often fragmented, poorly shaded, or absent, particularly outside planned residential neighbourhoods and commercial zones (Al Shueili, 2015; Aljabri, 2014). As a result, everyday movement within the city is structured around speed, distance, and vehicular access rather than walkability or spatial proximity (Didero et al., 2019; Farooq et al., 2025).

Despite Muscat Regional Plan envisioning a polycentric and ordered metropolitan form, the realised urban landscape reflects a more complex outcome. Planned centres have been overtaken by incremental ribbon-like densification along transport corridors, producing a spatial configuration that is formally zoned while the reality is a fragmented experience for the residents (Al Shueili, 2015; Aljabri, 2014).

Taken together, Muscat can be characterised as a city designed primarily for circulation and separation. Urban space is organised around functional zoning, long-distance mobility, and controlled land-use allocation, while formally designated public spaces remain limited in number and narrowly programmed (Al Shueili, 2015; Aljabri, 2014). This structural context provides the conditions within which everyday spatial practices unfold and sets the groundwork for understanding why informal appropriation, adaptive use, and negotiated presence emerge as necessary strategies in later chapters.

5.3 Population Distribution and Everyday Urban Users

The everyday use of Muscat is shaped by a combination of population distribution, labour organisation, and temporal rhythms linked to work and rest. Daily mobility within the city is dominated by work-related travel, with weekday movement structured around commuting to industrial areas, commercial districts, construction sites, and service-sector workplaces (Didero et al., 2019). Outside these peak periods, particularly in the evenings and on *Fridays* (official weekend structured around the Friday congregational prayer), patterns of movement shift toward limited leisure, shopping, and social activities, producing distinct temporal variations in how different parts of the city are occupied and used (Didero et al., 2019).

Census and administrative data indicate that population distribution within Muscat Governorate reflects a pronounced demographic imbalance alongside uneven residential organisation. As of December 2025 statistical bulletin, expatriates constitute approximately 61.2% of the governorate's population, while Omani citizens account for 38.8%, underscoring the centrality of migrant populations within the metropolitan region (National Centre for Statistics and Information, 2025a).

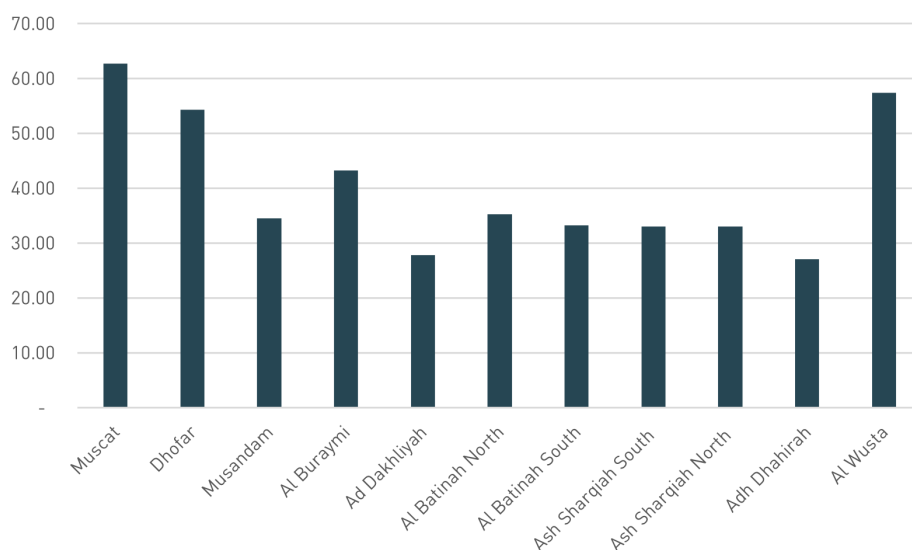


Fig. 9 Percentage expatriate population across governorates (Nov. 2025). Figure created by author based on data from [National Centre for Statistics and Information, 2025a].

Despite this numerical predominance, residential geographies remain sharply differentiated. Low-income expatriate quarters are concentrated in peripheral districts and older urban areas where housing densities are higher and residential environments are closely aligned with industrial and logistical zones, while higher-income Omani households are concentrated in planned residential neighbourhoods along the coastal corridor, such as Al-Qurum and Madinat Al Ilam, characterised by lower densities and greater access to amenities and services (Benkari, 2017).

These spatial patterns reflect planning, housing allocation, and arrangements that produce a clear separation between citizen residential areas and migrant living zones, irrespective of overall population share.

Temporal patterns of urban use further differentiate everyday experiences across population groups. Expatriate workers, particularly those employed in construction, logistics, and services, typically follow fixed work schedules extending from early morning to evening, with limited flexibility in time or location (Didero et al., 2019; Farooq et al., 2025). After work hours and on Fridays, these populations become more visible in specific parts of the city, including commercial streets, informal gathering areas, and residual spaces near housing and workplaces. These temporal concentrations contrast with the relative quietness of many planned residential neighbourhoods during the same periods, reinforcing the uneven occupation of urban space over the course of the week.

Access to mobility and urban amenities is similarly differentiated. Muscat's strong reliance on private vehicles structures access to employment and services, but this model disadvantages populations without consistent access to cars (Al Shueili, 2015; Aljabri, 2014). While many expatriate workers rely on employer-provided transport for commuting, access to leisure spaces, waterfronts, and public facilities outside work hours remain constrained by limited public transport coverage and underdeveloped pedestrian and cycling infrastructure (Didero et al., 2019; Hegazy, 2019). As a result, everyday urban use is shaped not only by where people live and work, but by their capacity to move across the city beyond functional necessity.

These spatial and temporal dynamics produce uneven patterns of visibility across Muscat's urban landscape. Blue-collar migrant workers are highly visible in commercial districts, industrial areas, and transport corridors during working hours and peak commuting periods, while remaining largely absent from upscale residential enclaves and formally designated leisure spaces, unless they commute using private vehicle or taxi-sharing (Al Shueili, 2015; Aljabri, 2014). This selective visibility reflects the organisation of labour, housing, and mobility rather than population size alone, contributing to a city in which different social groups encounter and use urban space under markedly different conditions.

5.4 Lived Environments: Housing, Work, and Spatial Proximity

The organisation of residential areas in relation to employment zones constitutes a defining feature of Muscat's urban geography for low-income and blue-collar migrant populations. Worker accommodation is commonly located within or adjacent

to industrial and service corridors, reducing metropolitan-scale distance between residence and work while producing a fragmented neighbourhood-scale experience of access. Even where accommodation is proximate to industrial activity, job sites and services are periodically separated by arterial roads, service lanes, or discontinuous pedestrian networks, necessitating daily movement across highways or between dispersed facilities and reinforcing dependence on employer-arranged transport and car-oriented mobility systems (Didero et al., 2019).

These residential environments are characterised by a limited provision of formally planned amenities. In contrast to planned citizen neighbourhoods, labour-dense areas typically lack public parks, recreational facilities, and well-distributed educational or health services (Aljabri, 2014; Hegazy, 2019). The absence of such infrastructure shapes everyday spatial use, as residents rely on informal and semi-formal commercial outlets, small grocery shops, temporary stalls, and makeshift social spaces that emerge on “left-over” plots or road medians embedded within residential-industrial landscapes (Aljabri, 2014).



Fig. 10 Outdoor vegetable market in Ghala Sina'iya (Photographed on the author's behalf)

Within these settings, informal commercial and social infrastructures emerge as functional extensions of the built environment. Studies document the routine appropriation of alleys, under-used parcels, and traffic medians for street vending, informal sports, resting, and collective gathering, particularly during evenings and on Fridays (Farooq et al., 2025). These practices are shaped by long working hours, crowded living conditions, and the spatial distance to formally designated leisure

spaces. Their visibility is often time-bound and situational, occurring during periods of reduced surveillance or lower traffic intensity and remaining subject to tolerance rather than formal recognition (Al Shueili, 2015; Scholz, 2015).

To conceptualise these lived environments without relying on neighbourhood-specific accounts, Muscat's migrant geographies can be abstracted into a set of recurring place types. Inner-city mixed-use districts on the east combine residential, commercial, and administrative functions within compact urban fabrics, allowing for proximity but often involving overcrowding and ageing infrastructure (e.g., Muttrah, Ruwi). Peripheral industrial zones (*sina'iya*) integrate workshops, warehouses, and clusters of low-cost worker housing, typically with limited access to planned public amenities and weak pedestrian infrastructure (e.g., Al-Mabela, Misfah, Rusayl). Transitional commercial-industrial corridors in "central" Muscat bring together offices, retail, and emerging mixed-use developments under recent planning frameworks and urban transformation initiatives (e.g., Ghala, Al-Khuwair) (Al Shueili, 2015; Didero et al., 2019; Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, 2021).

Across these place types, lived environments are structured by proximity to work, uneven service provision, and the limited availability of low-threshold settings for rest and social contact within the public realm. This framing provides the spatial bridge between Muscat's macro-scale urban structure and the empirical chapters that follow: Chapter 2 specifies the observational and interview approach, while Chapter 6 reports the behavioural patterns through which these conditions become visible in everyday practice.

6. Everyday Life in Urban Space: Observation and Interview Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, bringing together field observations and interview material to document how everyday public life is produced, negotiated, and constrained for migrant workers in Muscat. Rather than treating public space as a fixed set of locations, the analysis traces recurring spatial rhythms, settings, and practices across different urban contexts, from industrial zones and dense inner-city districts to mixed-use commercial streets. Section 6.1 draws on systematic field observations to map how street interfaces, temporal cycles, and spatial anchors shape where activity concentrates, when it intensifies, and how informal placemaking emerges under varying conditions of visibility and comfort. Section 6.2 then extends these observations through interview findings, foregrounding how time scarcity, mobility, work regimes, household form, surveillance, and institutional framings structure everyday choices and limit or enable access to public life. The behavioural patterns reported here draw on the observation contexts summarised in Chapter 2 (Maabilah Sina'iya, Hamriyah, Wadi Kabir Sina'iya, and comparative reconnaissance in Al Safat Street and Souq Al Khuwair Street). Accordingly, the findings focus on recurring interfaces and practices rather than comprehensive site description. Together, these findings establish a grounded account of migrant spatial practices as relational, situational, and shaped by structural constraints, setting the foundation for the interpretive discussion that follows.

6.1 Field observations: spatial rhythms and recurring settings

Urban setting and interface conditions

Across sites, the most legible divider in everyday use was the quality of the street interface: whether the ground plane visibly “invites” stopping or only permits passing. In the industrial areas (Maabilah Sina'iya; Wadi Kabir Sina'iya), the streetscape functioned primarily for vehicular infrastructure, with streets and parking expanses with limited pedestrian provision. In Maabilah, paved sidewalks were largely absent in the observed zone with no visible street lighting except for the secondary and tertiary streets; some parking surfaces appeared paved while others were not, and an outdoor fish-market operated on an unpaved vacant plot typically used for parking. Buildings were predominantly one-storey workshops/garages and small retail units, with accommodation in internal compounds or above shops (two-storey blocks with shared quarters), producing frequent thresholds but few pedestrian amenities.

In Hamriyah, the interface was more “walkable by default” due to density and proximity of destinations. Commercial ground floors along the high street and two feeder streets created continuous edges and multiple narrow alleyways where informal stopping was visible. The inner residential streets, however, alternated between

active pockets and quiet stretches with limited through movement. On tertiary mixed-use high streets (Al Safat Street, Ghubrah; Souq Al Khuwair Street), the public realm appeared more formally developed: paved pedestrian walkways, organized parking, and retail frontages oriented to the street. In Al Khuwair, three formal public spaces/plazas sit within walking distance of the street edge, while the street itself functions as a continuous commercial frontage with restaurants and cafés.



Fig. 11 & 12 Streetscape in Mabilah Sina'iya (top) and Souq Al Khuwair Street (bottom) [Photographed on the author's behalf]

Temporal rhythms and intensity

Observed rhythms were structured by work cycles, prayer peaks, and evening climate, but the pattern diverged sharply by site type. In industrial areas, weekday intensity was higher and more function driven, with customers and service vehicles circulating the workshops. Maabilah exhibited high traffic and movement on weekdays, with a midday peak, a lull around afternoon break (13:00-15:30), and renewed momentum from approximately 16:00 onward. Weekends were comparatively quieter: fewer service vehicles, fewer pedestrians, and more retreat into indoor rooms/quarters, with limited visible street use beyond specific nodes, concentrated at the commercial strip near the intersection with the secondary roads. Wadi Kabir Sina'iya showed a similar weekday customer influx that visibly “jammed” the area, with the weekend bringing a noticeable decrease in on-street intensity.

By contrast, Hamriyah sustained social intensity across both weekdays and weekends, with a pronounced Friday rhythm. Restaurants and tea shops were crowded on weekdays and weekends, but the concentration increased on Fridays, when casual standing, chatting, and edge-occupation became especially visible. The Friday congregational prayer produced a distinct temporal interruption: worshippers expanded into open spaces and toward the main street, temporarily blocking movement and rendering the street inaccessible during the prayer window, with traffic returning afterward and often increasing after sunset.



Fig. 13 Friday prayer halting the streets in Hamriyah, turning sidewalks and parkings into prayer grounds (Photo by Author)

In the mixed-use high streets (Al Safat; Al Khuwair), evening was the most legible “activation” period. Gatherings started after approximately 17:00, increasing after Maghrib (prayer after sunset), recurring on weekdays and intensifying on weekends. In Al Khuwair, activity built through late afternoon and increased after sunset, sustained by dining, pickup traffic, and delivery movement. Overall, the sites display an evening-centered public life, but with markedly different weekend effects: “weekend quiet” in industrial zones versus “weekend crowding” in dense residential-commercial enclaves.

Nodes, anchors, and attractors

Across the observations, a limited set of anchors consistently structured movement and stopping, often more effectively than formally designed public spaces. In Hamriyah, informal conversations characterized the area as a Bangladeshi “ethnic enclave” or “bazaar,” due to the visible concentration of Bangladeshi-owned retail along one street and a more fragmented distribution of ethnic shops elsewhere. Observationally, the mosque emerged as the primary temporal and spatial attractor, alongside the inner parking lot and its adjoining restaurants and tea shops, where Friday prayers generated large congregations that spilled into surrounding open spaces, reshaped circulation patterns, and temporarily rendered the street inaccessible.

Bordering the Wadi Kabir Sina’iya, a hypermarket operated as a recognizable destination for everyday errands and weekend outings, drawing both blue-collar workers and families in visible co-presence. The hypermarket’s pull appeared to concentrate weekend activity into a single node rather than distributing it across the broader industrial fabric, producing a “magnet” effect that reduced the need for other public spaces.

In Maabilah, a distinctive attractor was the street fish market occupying a vacant plot used for parking. Even where overall weekend street life appeared limited, this node concentrated relative activity and served as a localized draw for residents and customers. Tea shops and grocery stores also acted as smaller-scale anchors, but gatherings remained relatively contained.

In the mixed-use high streets (Al Safat; Al Khuwair), restaurants, cafés, and convenience retail formed a continuous chain of micro-attractors along the street edge, with activity concentrating near intersections and commercial clusters. Notably in Al Khuwair, while formally designed public spaces/plazas were within walking distance, their observed use appeared uneven: some plazas had limited users stopping briefly, while one plaza (Al Khuwair Square) remained comparatively deserted despite proximity to a major street “hotspot.” This contrast foregrounds an empiri-

cal distinction between “designed attractors” and “used attractors,” where proximity alone did not guarantee uptake.



Fig. 13 & 14 Crowds at the main node of Souq Al Khuwair (top), in contrast to Al Khuwair Square next to it (bottom)
(Photographed on the author’s behalf)

Informal spatial practices and micro-placemaking

Informal practices ranged from high-intensity edge occupation to near-absence, depending on setting and perceived exposure. In Hamriyah, micro-placemaking was frequent and varied: people sat and chatted in alleyways, along sidewalks, and

at thresholds; a parking lot functioned simultaneously as passage, resting space, and play space, including football by children while men gathered on the street curbs nearby. One street vendor appeared as part of the street economy, and card games and carrom were somewhat visible as social infrastructure. A repeated phenomenon was standing in open areas between shops and in front of shops to talk, particularly on Fridays when the street edge became densely occupied. An observed instance of a group of Bangladeshi men singing near a bus, linked to a shared outing to watch an organised football match in a club, illustrates how collective leisure can temporarily “claim” a small pocket of space.



Fig. 15 Weekend bustle in alleyway tea stalls and outdoor seating in Hamriyah (Photographed on the author's behalf)

In Wadi Kabir Sina'iya, gatherings were visible in tea stalls and in front of shops, including game-playing, but these practices appeared more guarded and less expressive. The shopfront and tea-stall edge operated as the primary third-place interface rather than open public space.

In Maabilah, informal practices were comparatively limited. Alleyways were often empty except for passing pedestrians. The most prominent weekend use concentrated around mechanic shops near commercial strips near the Northern perimeter, with smaller gatherings at tea shops and grocery stores. The fish-market vacant lot served as a temporary market-and-parking hybrid, creating a periodic public space through commerce rather than design.

In Al Safat and Al Khuwair, evening gatherings and board games were associated

with semi-enclosed edges of alleyways, open pockets near cafés, and shopfront spill-out, often starting after sunset. In Al Khuwair, delivery cyclists and pickup traffic formed part of the public realm's daily choreography, while some local workers gathered in less-visible interstitial spaces between buildings. Overall, informal placemaking was most durable where edges allowed lingering without requiring formal seating or explicit permission.



Fig. 16 & 17 Carrom matches and interstitial spaces - Al Safat Street (left) ; Souq Al Khuwair (right) (Photographed on the author's behalf)

Visibility, Discomfort, and Selective Access

A consistent observed condition across sites was heightened social visibility and the negotiation of being watched, which shaped both public life and what could be documented. In Maabilah, people repeatedly stared toward the observing car and signaled to others about it, indicating a sensitivity to unfamiliar observation. The street was almost entirely male in the observed periods, with rare instances of women seen as customers. In Wadi Kabir Sina'iya, similar wariness was visible: people were suspicious of being observed and were not receptive to being photographed, especially around gatherings near tea stalls and shop fronts. This produced a public life that existed, but under conditions of caution.

Hamriyah showed the strongest visibility effects. People were visibly alarmed and individuals sometimes left space when they noticed being watched. The area was overwhelmingly male in composition, with few women and only occasional children present. Constraints on documentation were also gendered: access to inner gath-

erings between buildings was discouraged on several occasions, citing unfamiliarity and perceived territoriality. Due to this, a male peer obtained photographs of public space use where the researcher's presence was likely to heighten attention or discomfort. These conditions extend beyond methodological limitation; they reflect the social production of space, where belonging, familiarity, and perceived legitimacy shape who can linger and who cannot.

In Al Safat Street (Ghubrah) and Souq Al Khuwair, visibility dynamics were less confrontational within commercial frontages, yet remained patterned. Gatherings were largely concentrated after sunset and tended to recur in predictable pockets along the street edge and interstitial spaces. In Souq Al Khuwair, certain groups (largely customers arriving by car to visit restaurants) were more consistently visible in open spaces than others. By contrast, in Al Safat Street, coffee shops and restaurants were more openly occupied by blue-collar migrant workers, while other residents of the area and customers from outside the neighborhood appeared less present in these settings.

6.2 Interview Findings: Interpreting Observed Spatial Practices

Time scarcity and “work-room” routines

Across the blue-collar interviews, leisure time emerged as a narrow margin shaped by long working hours, split shifts, and limited or inconsistent days off. When asked about spending time outside work and accommodation, one participant (P2), a 35-year-old grocery store worker, responded bluntly: “Where do I get that time?”. Another reduced daily life to a single line: “Yes just work and room” (P3, 38-year-old foreman). These statements recur across the interviews and frame time outside work not as routine, but as something that had to be extracted from fatigue, chores, and work obligations.

When participants did describe being outside, it was usually brief, repetitive, and close to where they lived or worked. In a group interview conducted with three men (P5, 38-year-old mechanic, P6, 29-year-old mechanic and P7, 55-year-old butcher), one participant (P5) estimated the daily range as 1 hour outside work. Another (P6) described a routine that rarely moves beyond the building itself: “I go up (accommodation) from here directly, bas (that's it/just) from work to home... when I need to sit, I go to the roof. sometimes roof, sometimes staircase”. In this framing, the boundary between “home” and a third place blurred; the immediate building environment functioned as the primary setting for downtime.

Friday did not consistently translate into meaningful time off. One participant (P3) explained that “most people work on Fridays till 11am... the weekend starts after Jumah prayer,” adding that “the day is practically over”. Even when time opened up, it was frequently absorbed by recovery, errands, and maintaining transnational ties. P1, a 35-year-old mechanic, described the time-off selection as “either we go to the markets and roam around, or stay in the room, or call back home. The time passes in the calls back home... 1–2 hours pass in that”. Across multiple interviews, phone calls to family were not incidental; they were described as a central routine that filled scarce downtime after work (P1; P2; P3).



Fig. 18 Businesses open on Friday evening, near the commercial strip in Maabilah Sina'iyah (Photo by Author)

Time scarcity also varied by job role and sector, shaping access to holidays. In the group interview, P7 described having no leave even on Eid. When asked directly: “Not even on Eid?”, he replied: “I am a butcher, how can a butcher have off on Eid?... there are orders... I have to give their orders on Eid”. Time off was narrated as structurally incompatible with the demands of the job rather than a negotiable choice.

In contrast, the white-collar interviews described more predictable schedules and clearer separations between work and leisure. Participants spoke about evenings and weekends spent in malls, parks, beaches, camping areas, and restaurants: “go to the malls, go to the park, and sometime camping, sometime beaches... go for dine-in”, described by P8, a 32-year-old finance officer.

Mobility as a condition for accessing public space

Mobility further narrowed the scope of everyday life for many blue-collar participants by determining where time outside work could realistically be spent. Across interviews, access to leisure and social settings was repeatedly framed as dependent on independent travel: most often whether one had access to a car.

In Maabilah's industrial area, movement beyond the immediate work-home radius toward Seeb, shopping areas, or other parts of the city, was subsequently framed as "completely dependent on cars". Under these conditions, mobility structured the feasible "range" of everyday life and the likelihood that any distant third place could become routine. By contrast, white-collar interviews treated car access as an assumed background condition rather than a constraint. When asked about travel, P9, a 26-year-old accountant, responded simply: "Car". Leisure routines described by white-collar participants presupposed city-wide reach and flexible routing (P8; P9), while transport barriers were framed as affecting others rather than themselves.

Several blue-collar participants also described mobility as shaped by reported enforcement practices that make shared travel feel risky. In the group interview, participants explained that shared car travel can be restricted by sponsorship arrangements: "the people in the car need to have the same Arbab (sponsor)... if we take a 3rd person with us, we will get fined" (P5; P6). Even compliance did not guarantee safety, as "sometimes they stop you even if you have the same Arbab" (P6). Similar concerns were raised by P1, who described fines and questioning as common experiences shaping everyday movement. When asked about travelling with relatives, the participant noted that it can still be questioned because people are attached to different companies: "we are two people... from different companies... they will say to take taxi". In these accounts, mobility becomes conditional not only on infrastructure, but on perceived legitimacy.

Alternatives appeared limited and unevenly enabling. While cycling allowed limited movement within industrial areas, it rarely expanded access beyond proximate routines. Taxis were described as a necessary option for many, but implicitly constrained by cost and coverage. Mr. Ahmed Al Mukhaini, a policy analyst, echoes this proximity logic through observation: on Fridays, "roundabouts... pavements... wherever there is a greenery" fill with blue-collar workers, reflecting how limited options and near-to-home reach shape where gathering is feasible.

Third places as micro-spaces near work and home

Interview accounts described “third places” less as formal destinations and more as small, everyday settings embedded into the edges of work and accommodation. For many blue-collar participants, social life was anchored in proximate, low-cost settings such as tea shops in the immediate area, shop-front edges, and semi-private building spaces. When asked whether they go anywhere beyond tea shops, one participant (P5) responded: “just the tea shops what else? There’s nothing else here no ‘spot’”. As noted earlier, rooftops and staircases often substituted for external public space, blurring the boundary between home and leisure.

Within industrial areas, these micro-spaces function as informal social infrastructure. One participant (P3) noted that tea shops sometimes become places “where you may find people playing carrom and cards”, suggesting that leisure is sustained through familiarity and repetition rather than destination travel.

White-collar participants also described regular “third place” routines, but assumed a much wider spatial range. Leisure was articulated through malls, parks, beaches, camping areas, and restaurants (P8), and described as occurring several times a week or on weekends (P8; P9). Even when activities overlapped with blue-collar descriptions, such as meeting friends or sitting in cafés, the difference lay in the range of destinations assumed as feasible and in the expectation of city-wide mobility.

When formal parks entered blue-collar narratives, they were often framed as socially coded or purposeless. Participants questioned their relevance, “what is our purpose going there?”, and associated them with families or exercise rather than with bachelor routines (P5). One participant explained that while larger public parks feel less “imposing,” smaller neighbourhood gardens are perceived as “made for kids” and closely associated with family settings (P3).



Fig. 19 Make-shift seating under a tree - Mabilah Sina'iya (Photo by Author)

Comfort, belonging, and bounded social circles

Many interviews described social life as organised through small, familiar networks rather than open-ended participation in public spaces. For several blue-collar participants, “going out” was closely tied to meeting people they already knew, most often through work, shared accommodation, or long-term presence in the same area. P2 explained that when he sits outside, it is typically in places where “all the people are known/acquaintances”, even when the setting was socially mixed in terms of nationality. Familiarity, rather than openness, shaped where people felt comfortable spending time.

This pattern was closely linked to how friendships form under migrant conditions. P9 described this as a common trajectory: “most people when they come to Oman, they don’t have friends or relatives, so they make friendships through their work life... their circle consists of people of the same industry or connected industries”. As a result, everyday social worlds remain spatially concentrated and closely aligned with workplaces and nearby residential areas, rather than through leisure-oriented public settings.

P9 further distinguished between migrants who arrived as adults and those who grew up in Oman. Reflecting on bachelor populations in Hamriya, he noted that many “don’t have any kind of memory to hold on to for this country,” and therefore created belonging within co-national circles in the same area.

In contrast, P9’s own account, as someone who grew up in Muscat, reflected a more layered social geography. He described how those “who grow up here... have our friendships from school so we mostly carry them into adulthood and then once we are working, we make friends there as well”. Even so, belonging was still described as something maintained through repetition, shared histories, and routine encounters. Across interviews, comfort emerged not from openness, but from predictability of familiar settings, shared language and cultural cues.

Household form and “family/non-family” as a spatial condition

Household form emerged across interviews as a secondary but persistent factor shaping where leisure felt socially appropriate. Participants repeatedly distinguished between spaces associated with family presence and those perceived as suitable for bachelor groups.

Among blue-collar participants, leisure was often framed through the absence of family. P1 explained that “those who have families here they go to Naseem Garden... usually ‘bachelors’ don’t go out like that”. Parks and gardens were described as family-oriented environments where bachelor presence felt socially awkward,

even without explicit restrictions. As one participant put it, “if there’s no family here, it’s bekar” (P5). Here, bekar (pointless) did not refer to the physical quality of the space, but to the lack of a social logic that makes the outing meaningful or comfortable.

These distinctions shaped everyday spatial choices. Tea shops, shop-front edges, and spaces near accommodation were preferred not only because they were proximate, but because they allowed bachelor presence without attracting attention. Family-oriented spaces were avoided not through formal exclusion, but through internalised norms of appropriateness.

White-collar interviews also framed leisure strongly through household form, though under different conditions. Leisure was repeatedly described as “family time”, with destinations shifting after marriage to include malls, parks, beaches, and camping areas (P8). These outings were narrated as routine and intentional, tied to spending time with children or partners rather than to proximity or affordability. In this context, family presence expanded the range of spaces considered suitable for leisure.

Importantly, household form did not override classed constraints. While family presence influenced comfort and destination choice across both groups, blue-collar participants remained limited by long working hours, mobility, and income constraints. Family status did not fundamentally alter access to time or movement.

Visibility, checks, and self-limiting behaviour

Across the blue-collar interviews, visibility emerged not as an abstract concern but as an everyday calculation shaped by labour raids and checks, questioning, and the anticipation of being stopped. Participants described these encounters as frequent enough to influence routine behaviour, including decisions about where to sit and whether to linger at all.

In Wadi Kabir, P4, a 41-year-old small business owner, described recent checks as draining even for documented workers, noting that people were stopped even while going to the mosque and the cumulative effect of repeated questioning led many to rather stay in the rooms. Similar dynamics appeared in Maabilah’s industrial area, where one participant explained that coffee-shop gatherings had declined because of increased raids, even among those carrying valid ID cards (P3). In this account, reduced public presence was framed as a practical response to ongoing scrutiny rather than fear of illegality. P1 echoed this sense of routine interruption, describing checks as constant and noting that even when documents are “all sorted,” the process “still exhaust people out a lot”.

Mr. Ahmed's interview confounds this perception by introducing a clear distinction between enforcement protocols and how they are experienced on the ground. While labour raids are described as information-led and primarily directed toward camps and accommodation rather than public space, this procedural logic does not align with the everyday realities described by interview participants. Even when checks are conducted on documented workers, repeated questioning and visible enforcement during routine activities of sitting at tea shops or walking to the mosque produce fatigue and, at times, moments of tension or confrontation within leisure settings.

However, he emphasised that among blue-collar workers, the perception of risk remains decisive. According to Mr. Ahmed, many workers internalise the idea that "the less visible, the more durable", regulating their own behaviour to avoid friction, scrutiny, or conflict even in spaces where access is technically permitted. He further linked this self-limiting behaviour to a broader mindset shaped by work intensity and moral economies of effort. Leisure and pleasure were described as secondary to endurance, with workers seeing themselves as "here to work" rather than to seek enjoyment. This orientation, he noted, places psychological pressure on everyday choices, where even minor expenditures or time spent outside can feel unjustifiable. These accounts point to a disconnection between enforcement protocols and lived experience, where even routine or non-punitive checks accumulate into fatigue during scarce leisure time, leading many to shorten time outside and retreat into indoor or semi-private spaces.

Institutional perspective: how planning and policy "see" migrant presence

Mr. Ahmed's remarks are presented as the views of an individual policy analyst with professional exposure to governance and planning processes; they are included for contextual insight and should not be read as an official institutional position. From Mr. Ahmed's perspective, migrant presence is commonly interpreted through planning categories related to zoning, household form, and neighbourhood stability. He explained that distinctions between "family" and "non-family" populations frequently shape how areas are evaluated, particularly when residential patterns begin to shift. Changes in neighbourhood composition, especially the concentration of bachelor workers, were described as triggering concern among long-term residents and prompting discussions around redistribution or relocation.

Mr. Ahmed framed everyday coexistence in Muscat shaped from pre-existing practices between Omani tribal districts (Harat), through what he termed a logic of "bubbling". In this model, the logic behind co-existence in Muscat is that different social groups occupy adjacent but socially bounded districts, with limited overlap in daily life. Proximity is tolerated, but shared use of public space remains constrained. Rather than integration, the city operates through parallel social worlds,

where expectations are shaped by separation and managed distance. This model surprisingly aligns with the bounded social worlds described earlier in interview accounts

He also highlighted a recurring gap between planning assumptions and actual outcomes, noting that some neighbourhoods changed faster or differently than anticipated. Public parks and beaches were described as residual leisure outlets, particularly on holidays, when migrants have few alternatives. Finally, he points at migrants being taken into considerations in planning predictions while distinguishing between migrants as a durable “mass” sustaining the city’s labour needs and migrants as temporary individuals, a contradiction that continues to shape cautious approaches to housing and infrastructure provision.

Reported aspirations and everyday priorities

Participants articulated aspirations closely tied to the constraints outlined in the preceding sections. These priorities were modest, practical, and oriented toward immediate conditions rather than long-term urban visions.

Time and rest emerged as a recurring concern. P2 expressed a simple wish for a “weekend holiday,” framing time off as necessary for recovery rather than leisure in an expansive sense. This was reinforced by accounts of uninterrupted work schedules, including the absence of leave during Eid (P7). Here, the aspiration was not framed as entitlement to leisure activities, but as a desire for predictable rest within demanding work regimes.

Spatial aspirations focused on proximity and usability. P9 mentioned wanting a park near home emphasising convenience, while blue-collar participants described surrounding areas as having “nothing...nowhere to go here” (P1) or noted the loss of informal play spaces following construction (P3). These comments highlight the importance of nearby, informal spaces rather than large-scale amenities.

Legal and visa-related issues also surfaced as aspirations. P4 described ongoing anxiety around sponsorship, fines, and enforcement, expressing a desire for greater flexibility and security to move and work without fear. In a more affective register, some participants pointed to issues of recognition and dignity. P1 remarked that “they don’t care much about us,” while Mr. Ahmed described how migrant workers are often shocked when acknowledged in public, suggesting that everyday recognition itself was perceived as scarce.

7. Discussion: Conditions Shaping Everyday Public Life

7.1 Temporal Compression and the Reconfiguration of Public Life

Leisure as an Afterthought: Time Scarcity and Moral Economies of Work

Across interviews and observations, public space and leisure did not emerge as explicit aspirations for most blue-collar workers. Participants frequently struggled to answer questions about time outside work, returning instead to descriptions of fatigue, split shifts, and short routines confined to work and accommodation. The findings suggest that leisure among blue-collar migrant workers is not merely limited but structurally disregarded. It is not a stable category of everyday life but appears as an afterthought, not readily recognised as legitimate or expected. This condition reflects a moral economy of work, in which value is attached to constant availability and endurance rather than rest. Even Fridays became functionally compressed, with downtime beginning only after Friday prayer. Leisure thus unfolds as brief, opportunistic intervals embedded within fatigue rather than as extended or anticipatory time.

Mr. Ahmed's interview addresses the question of whether stronger regulation of work timings and sponsor control could alter everyday conditions, but his response shifts the focus from regulatory adequacy to enforceability under precarity. While he stressed that labour law in Oman already guarantees rest and limits working hours, "the law is very clear. They are entitled to rest, two-day rest per week... and at least two weeks per year of leaves for recuperation... the shift should not go beyond 12 hours and they should be compensated for the extra four hours because the law says only eight hours", he emphasised that these protections rarely operate as lived entitlements.

Drawing on his experience with migrant support initiatives, he noted that even when workers are informed of their rights, they see little room to act: "they say, what can we do? ...they don't want to do that because the easiest thing their employer would do is to fire them, send them back home." As a result, workers become "imprisoned in that difficult choice," where "no matter you change the law, it will not be enforced because people who have the right to claim damages, they are not willing to claim their rights".

Rest and recuperation are therefore not widely internalised as legitimate claims on time or space, but are subordinated to the imperative of remaining employable and inconspicuous, outweighing the practical value of legal protection (Fernandez, 2021; Katayani, 2024; Lori, 2012). The contrast with white-collar interviewees who described predictable schedules and clearly bounded leisure underscores that time

scarcity is structurally produced through labour segmentation, shaping who can convert urban provision into lived publicness (Al Shueili, 2015; Didero et al., 2019).

From Destinations to Edges: The Compression of Third Places

Under conditions of limited time, third places are not approached as destinations but as proximate micro-spaces. The findings indicate that social interaction gravitates toward spaces that can be entered and exited with minimal temporal investment, financial cost, or social justification. The blue-collar migrants thus anchor public life to proximate, routine settings that sit along daily paths between work and accommodation, rather than through diversity of choice.



Fig. 20 Sidewalks observed to be used as seating and gathering spot in Hamriya (Photo by Author)

This reconfiguration challenges classic third-place theory, which presumes leisure-oriented participation, neutrality, and extended presence (Bosman & Dolley, 2019; Oldenburg, 1989). In Muscat's migrant-dominated districts, informal third places function less as sites of casual sociability and more as everyday social infrastructure, enabling brief rest, conversation, and emotional support within tight temporal limits (Aldrich et al., 2024; Zhuang & Lok, 2023).

Importantly, these spaces remain fragile. The compression of third places into edges and thresholds reflects an adaptive response to time scarcity. Their viability depends on continued tolerance, limited visibility, and alignment with work rhythms. Public life thus becomes spatially thin but temporally efficient, sustained through

repeated micro-encounters rather than extended occupation (Wessendorf & Farrer, 2021).

Retreat and Reconfiguration: Vertical and Inward Appropriations

Where even proximate street-level spaces become demanding, whether due to exhaustion, surveillance, or social exposure, public life is further reconfigured inward. The increasing appropriation of rooftops, stairwells, and semi-private thresholds reflects a shift away from open public settings toward liminal environments that allow social presence without full visibility (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017). Such appropriations reflect a reconfiguration rather than a disappearance of public life. In contexts where lingering in open public space entails heightened visibility or scrutiny, inward-facing spaces offer a degree of privacy and control while still enabling social contact. They exemplify forms of spatial agency that are tactical, reversible, and oriented toward immediate needs rather than durable claims (Farooq et al., 2025; Lara-Hernandez & Melis, 2018).

Conceptually, such spaces resonate with scholarship on thresholds and in-between domains, where domesticity, commonality, and publicness overlap (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017), as well as with notions of “third space” as a site of negotiated presence rather than stable belonging (Bhabha, 1994; Wessendorf & Farrer, 2021). Here, public life is neither fully private nor conventionally public; it is situational, contingent, and shaped by the need to minimise exposure while sustaining social ties.

This section reframes the empirical findings by showing that public life for blue-collar migrants in Muscat is not absent but compressed, redistributed, and reconfigured. Time scarcity operates as the primary structuring force, shaping not only where social interaction occurs, but how long it can last and how visible it can be. This interpretation provides a necessary bridge to the next section, which examines how visibility, mobility, and governance further condition the limits of public presence in the city.

7.2 Access, Visibility, and Governance through Ambiguity

When Provision Does Not Mean Access: Formal Public Space and Social Coding

The findings indicate that the underuse of formally provided public spaces cannot be explained by absence, distance, or physical inaccessibility alone. While parks, plazas, and landscaped areas exist within reasonable proximity to some districts

(Souq Al Khuwair Street, Al Safat Street, Wadi Kabir) yet they remain unevenly used by blue-collar workers. This gap points to the social coding of public space, where environments are organised around normative expectations of household form, leisure, and visibility.

Formal public spaces in Muscat are closely associated with family life, consumption, and respectability. Bachelor presence is not explicitly prohibited, but is often perceived as socially awkward, purposeless, or out of place. This aligns with scholarship on “out-of-placeness,” where migrant presence becomes unsettling through moral and symbolic boundary-making rather than rule violation (Wessendorf, 2019; Wessendorf & Farrer, 2021). Access thus depends less on entitlement than on social legibility.

Mr. Ahmed’s observation that migrant workers gravitate toward greenery adds an affective dimension to this dynamic. Green spaces resonate with cultural memory and nostalgic associations of rest and outing. However, the presence of greenery alone does not guarantee use when the surrounding social context signals surveillance or family-oriented norms. This helps explain why aesthetic or environmental interventions often fail to translate into lived publicness.

Informal and semi-public settings therefore remain preferable not because they are better designed, but because they offer predictable norms, familiar social cues, and lower exposure. Public space, in this sense, operates as a socially stratified field in which availability does not ensure usability.

Mobility, Surveillance, and the Production of Self-Limiting Behaviour

Access to public life is further shaped by mobility and the governance of movement. The findings suggest that everyday travel, particularly shared travel, is governed less by formal regulation than by uncertainty, surveillance, and perceived risk. Interview accounts point to fears of being stopped, questioned, or fined when travelling with peers who are not under the same sponsor, regardless of legal clarity.

What matters analytically is not the law itself, but how ambiguity becomes a governing mechanism. While interview accounts frequently referenced restrictions on travelling with peers under different sponsors, a review of the relevant traffic and transport regulations indicates that such constraints are not explicitly codified in law; the discrepancy between formal regulation and lived enforcement is summarised in Appendix D. Unclear enforcement boundaries and inconsistent checks produce a climate in which migrants self-regulate movement to minimise exposure and the lived effect is that rights remain underused because their exercise is perceived as risky.

Mr. Ahmed's remark that "the laws change, but the ecosystem has not changed" regarding the presence of the Kafala system even after dissolution of the sponsor-based system captures this disjunction. Formal reforms do not alter everyday practice when employment precarity and enforcement cultures remain intact. Migrants' reluctance to contest fines or submit grievances reflects calculations in which the risk of termination or repatriation outweighs potential redress (Fernandez, 2021; Katyayani, 2024; Lori, 2012).

These dynamics are reinforced through peer narratives that circulate accounts of checks and penalties, often detached from legal specificity but powerful in shaping behaviour. Similar patterns of self-limiting conduct under surveillance have been documented in other Gulf cities, where uncertainty governs presence without constant enforcement (Farooq et al., 2025; Yeoh & Lam, 2022).

Importantly, these constraints are unevenly distributed. White-collar migrants and families navigate the same urban infrastructure with far greater ease, rarely encountering comparable scrutiny. Mobility thus operates as a classed and racialised filter, contracting social worlds and anchoring everyday life to proximate, low-visibility spaces (Didero et al., 2019).

This section shows that access to public life in Muscat is governed through ambiguity, visibility, and risk perception rather than explicit exclusion. Formal spaces and rights remain underused not because they are unavailable, but because their use requires navigating social coding and absorbing risk. Public presence, under these conditions, becomes a negotiated achievement rather than a guaranteed entitlement, setting the stage for the final discussion on urban intervention and livability.

7.3 From Fragmented Practices to Livability: Rethinking Urban Intervention

Why Isolated Interventions Are Insufficient

A central implication of the findings is that isolated spatial interventions are insufficient to address the constraints shaping migrant public life. While greenery, seating, and plazas are often advanced as inclusive design solutions, their effectiveness depends on broader conditions of access, legitimacy, and temporal availability. Where time scarcity, mobility anxiety, and social coding persist, such interventions risk remaining underused regardless of design quality.

This complicates placemaking frameworks that equate livability with spatial quality or isolated improvements, often assuming that provision will naturally translate into use, and instead aligns with accounts that locate everyday livability in manageability, proximity, and temporary use (Farooq et al., 2025; Madanipour, 2017). In Muscat, the underuse of certain formal public spaces reflects not a lack of need for leisure or rest, but a mismatch between the social expectations embedded in these spaces and the lived realities of bachelor migrant life. Public space equity, in this sense, cannot be achieved through additive interventions alone; it requires attention to the systemic conditions that shape who can inhabit space without scrutiny or justification.

Practitioner Insight and the Limits of Regulatory Change

Insights from policy and practice further underscore the limits of relying on regulatory reform or formal provision alone. Mr. Ahmed's reflections highlight a recurring disconnect between rights as codified and rights as lived. Even where labour protections, rest entitlements, or mobility allowances formally exist, their uptake remains constrained by employment precarity, fear of retaliation, and weak institutional trust. Regulation, in this context, does not automatically translate into empowerment.

This observation resonates with scholarship on migrant governance in the Gulf, which emphasises how pre-disposed fear combined with enforcement cultures, sponsorship systems, and informal power relations often outweigh formal legal frameworks in shaping everyday behaviour (Fernandez, 2021; Lori, 2012). The persistence of self-limiting practices despite legal reform suggests that improving access to public life requires more than policy adjustment. It calls for environments that reduce the perceived cost of presence and lower the risks associated with visibility.

Mr. Ahmed's emphasis on supportive environments rather than legal change points toward a shift in planning responsibility: from enforcing compliance to enabling ease. His suggestions such as recognising informal sports practices, improving seating and shading in tolerated spaces, or reducing barriers to affordable transport are less about redesigning the city than about legitimising existing practices. These insights reinforce the argument that livability is produced through alignment with everyday routines rather than through regulatory abstraction.

Public Space as Negotiated Presence

Seen through the lens of the findings, public space is neither simply accessible nor inaccessible but continuously negotiated. Participants described adjusting when and where they appeared in public from gathering after sunset and avoiding fami-

ly-oriented spaces, to retreating indoors during periods of heightened checks and selecting overlooked locations where scrutiny felt lower. Observations confirmed that public life was most visible in marginal or semi-private settings and during specific temporal windows, rather than in designated public spaces.

This framing builds on relational understandings of publicness that emphasise practice over entitlement and negotiation over permanence (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017). While theories of the “right to the city” emphasise participation and visibility (Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 1991), the empirical material shows that, under conditions of precarity, spatial agency is often exercised through withdrawal and containment. Public space functions as a field of calibration, where migrants weigh the benefits of social interaction against the risks of exposure.

Informal placemaking, inward retreat, and proximity-based routines are not failures of integration, but rational responses to structurally constrained conditions. Understanding public space as negotiated presence carries important implications for urban theory and practice. Livability, from this perspective, is not achieved through spectacle or formal inclusion, but through everyday arrangements that allow people to occupy space without fear, justification, or exhaustion.

7.4 Principles Emerging from the Study

Rather than advancing prescriptive solutions, this thesis concludes by distilling a set of principles that emerge directly from the empirical findings. These principles articulate the conditions under which everyday social life becomes possible for South Asian blue-collar migrants in Muscat and clarify what must be considered when assessing livability, access, and inclusion in migrant-dense urban contexts.

First, everyday public life is structured primarily by time availability rather than spatial supply. Leisure and social interaction are shaped by compressed work schedules, fatigue, and fragmented days off, resulting in public life that unfolds in brief, opportunistic intervals rather than sustained engagement with formally designated spaces. Evaluations that overlook temporal constraint risk interpreting non-use as disinterest rather than as a structurally produced outcome.

Second, proximity outweighs destination quality. Informal social life consistently gravitates toward spaces embedded within daily routines between work and accommodation. Micro-spaces function as viable social infrastructure not because of their design attributes, but because they are immediately accessible, affordable, and repeatable within limited time budgets. Even modest distance significantly reduces the likelihood of use.

Third, access is socially mediated, not guaranteed by openness or provision. Parks, plazas, and landscaped areas may exist within reach, yet remain unevenly inhabited when they are socially coded around family leisure, consumption, or normative expectations of comportment.

Fourth, visibility carries cost, and public presence is calibrated accordingly. Decisions about where and when to gather are influenced by anticipated scrutiny and questioning, producing selective, time-bound, and low-profile forms of public life that favour edges, overlooked pockets, and inward-facing spaces.

Fifth, withdrawal constitutes a spatial practice rather than an absence of one. Retreat into rooftops, stairwells, and semi-private interiors reflects an adaptive response to fatigue, exposure, and risk, extending the social function of the built environment beyond conventional public-private distinctions. Recognising such practices is essential to understanding how social life persists under constraint.

Finally, livability is relational and conditional, produced through alignment with everyday circumstances rather than through isolated interventions. Improvements in material quality or aesthetic enhancement alone remain insufficient where time scarcity, mobility constraints, social coding, and enforcement ambiguity continue to shape how space can be occupied. From the perspective of migrant everyday life, livability depends on whether presence can be sustained without exhaustion, justification, or fear.

In the end, these principles do not propose a model to be implemented, but offer a lens through which migrant-dense urban environments can be more accurately read. They shift attention away from visibility or use as endpoints, toward the everyday conditions that allow presence to be sustained, negotiated, or strategically withdrawn.

8. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how South Asian blue-collar migrants in Muscat engage with informal social spaces beyond work and accommodation, and what these practices reveal about the conditions shaping everyday social life under temporality and uneven urban access. Rather than approaching public space as a fixed category or evaluating a bounded set of “sites,” the study adopted a people-centred qualitative approach that followed recurring practices across different urban contexts, combining field observations with semi-structured interviews. This framing was necessary because the everyday social life documented here does not reliably register in formally designated public spaces, nor does it unfold as stable, destination-based “third place” participation. Instead, it appears as provisional, proximate, and contingent on timing, tolerance, and perceived exposure.

The findings show that blue-collar migrants’ engagement with informal social space is organised primarily through micro-settings embedded in daily routes between work and accommodation. Tea shops, shopfront edges, alleyways, thresholds, and small leftover pockets repeatedly operate as the most feasible settings for brief rest and social contact. These spaces were not used because they were better designed, but because they were immediately accessible within compressed leisure time, required little financial expenditure, and allowed quick entry and exit without extended justification. In industrial areas, informal street life remained comparatively thin and function-driven, with activity clustering around commercial anchors rather than diffusing across the broader fabric. In denser residential-commercial enclaves, public presence became more visible, especially on Fridays, yet even here it remained sensitive to observation, scrutiny, and local social codes.

Where street-level gathering became demanding, whether due to fatigue, heightened visibility, or increased checks, public life did not disappear but reconfigured inward. Participants described rooftops and stairwells as routine settings for sitting, talking, or recuperation, indicating that third-place functions often migrated into liminal, semi-private environments that offered greater control over exposure. These vertical and inward appropriations blur the boundary between “home” and “public space,” suggesting that social life under constraint is less about choosing among destinations and more about assembling workable pockets of presence within the immediate built envelope.

Interpreting what these practices reveal about everyday conditions in Muscat requires foregrounding time scarcity as a structuring force rather than a secondary constraint. Across interviews, leisure emerged not as a stable expectation but as a narrow remainder after long hours, split shifts, and fatigue, frequently articulated as “work and room” routines. Fridays did not consistently function as full days off; they often began only after Friday prayer and were quickly absorbed by recovery, errands, and phone calls “back home”. Mr. Ahmed’s reflections sharpen this point by distinguishing between formal labour protections and their practical uptake.

While he emphasised that the law guarantees rest and limits working hours, he noted that such rights rarely operate as lived entitlements when workers perceive that claiming them risks termination and repatriation. This disjunction reinforces the thesis's broader argument: access to public life cannot be understood through provision and entitlement alone when time, vulnerability, and risk shape what people can realistically do with the city.

Mobility further conditions the feasibility of everyday public life. The findings indicate that access to leisure and social settings is shaped by car dependence, cost, and perceived enforcement risks, producing sharply different spatial ranges across labour strata. White-collar interviewees described city-wide mobility as routine, while blue-collar participants articulated a far narrower radius anchored to work and accommodation. In this context, mobility constraints do not merely limit movement; they contract social worlds and intensify reliance on proximate micro-spaces, reinforcing why third-place functions in labour-dense districts gravitate toward edges, thresholds, and low-cost everyday settings.

The study also demonstrates that the underuse of formal public spaces by blue-collar migrants cannot be explained by distance or aesthetic quality alone. Parks, plazas, and landscaped areas may exist nearby yet remain socially inaccessible due to their association with family leisure, consumption, and normative expectations of presence. Interview responses questioning the "purpose" of going to parks, alongside repeated distinctions between family and bachelor spaces, indicate that access is mediated by social legibility and appropriateness rather than physical openness.

Finally, the findings underscore that visibility and ambiguity operate as governing conditions shaping everyday spatial practice. Participants described checks, questioning, and the anticipation of being stopped as frequent enough to influence routine behaviour, encouraging retreat and reduced presence. The analytical point is not enforcement alone, but the cumulative effect of uncertainty: when boundaries of permissibility are experienced as unstable, migrants self-regulate toward lower visibility and lower risk.

Ultimately, these dynamics recast informal social space as the primary medium through which everyday public life becomes possible for South Asian blue-collar migrants in Muscat. Public presence emerges not as a stable entitlement or a function of spatial provision, but as a negotiated achievement calibrated through proximity, brevity, and low visibility, and withdrawn when fatigue, exposure, or ambiguity render it unsustainable. Informal social spaces thus function as survival-oriented social infrastructure that enables minimal rest and connection, yet their episodic and fragile character reflects the broader conditions of extended temporality, labour segmentation, and a city whose accessibility remains strongly

mediated by car ownership, social coding, and perceived risk. Understanding the blue-collar migrant urban life through this lens shifts attention away from formal provision and visible use, toward the conditions that determine whether presence can be sustained at all.

8.1 Implications of the Study

The implications of this study are empirical, conceptual, and methodological. Empirically, it documents an under-examined dimension of urban life in Oman by showing how low-income migrants organise social life beyond work and accommodation through provisional, low-visibility practices. By focusing on micro-settings rather than formal sites, the study makes visible forms of public life that are often overlooked in policy, planning, and design-oriented accounts of the city.

Conceptually, the findings refine understandings of third places and spatial appropriation under conditions of constraint. Third-place functions appear not as stable, leisure-oriented settings but as compressed, fragile, and often inwardly reconfigured forms of social infrastructure. Non-use, withdrawal, and avoidance emerge as patterned practices rather than absences, revealing how migrants exercise spatial agency through calibration and retreat. This perspective complicates celebratory readings of informality by foregrounding the conditions that limit, reshape, and sometimes suppress public life.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of following everyday practices across multiple urban contexts in a fragmented, car-oriented city. The people-centred approach allowed repetition to be traced without assuming uniformity, while multilingual interviewing enabled access to tacit routines and risk perceptions that would likely remain obscured in English-only research. Together, these choices support a more grounded understanding of how public life is lived rather than presumed.

For planning and governance evaluation, the study implies that livability and public-space access cannot be assessed through provision alone. The gap between designed and used spaces indicates that proximity and aesthetic improvement do not guarantee uptake when time is scarce, mobility is constrained, and visibility is calculated. Any serious account of urban livability in migrant-dense districts must therefore attend to everyday usability, predictability, and legitimacy, rather than relying on additive interventions or formal inclusion narratives.

8.2 Reflections on Scope and Future Research

The scope of this study shaped both its strengths and its limitations. The empirical material reflects the experiences of male blue-collar migrants, primarily of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin, and does not capture the spatial lives of women or other migrant groups. Access was further shaped by heightened checks during the fieldwork period, time constraints linked to long working hours, and participants' understandable caution around visibility. These conditions limit the generalisability of the findings but also reflect the very constraints under analysis.

Future research could extend this work in several directions. Gendered migrant spatial life remains a critical gap: studying domestic workers and other low-income women would likely reveal distinct patterns of mobility, sociality, and vulnerability, and would extend the thesis's focus on how public life is negotiated. Comparative studies across Gulf cities or across different Omani governorates could clarify which dynamics are specific to Muscat's urban form and which reflect broader governance structures. Longitudinal and seasonal research could further illuminate how temporal cycles, Ramadan rhythms, policy shifts, or life-stage changes alter everyday practices of gathering and retreat. Finally, institutional research examining how enforcement cultures, grievance mechanisms, and legal knowledge circulate in practice would deepen understanding of how ambiguity shapes behaviour beyond formal regulation.

Closing Remarks

By foregrounding everyday practice rather than formal provision, this thesis demonstrates that migrant public life in Muscat for many is shaped less by the presence of space than by the conditions under which presence becomes manageable. Understanding informal social spaces as negotiated, provisional, and sometimes withdrawn offers a more accurate lens on migrant urban life: one that recognises both agency and constraint without reducing either to absence or failure.

Epilogue: Between Presence and Passing

As a Bangladeshi expatriate raised in Oman from infancy, my relationship to the spaces and practices examined in this thesis is both intimate and unsettled. Long before this research took form, I had spent years observing everyday scenes across Muscat: men playing *carrom* in front of coffee shops, informal cricket matches unfolding in inner streets during afternoon breaks or late evenings, and badminton nets pulled out during winter nights, turning building compounds into temporary courts. These scenes were not exceptional; they were part of the city's everyday rhythm, and they formed the experiential ground from which this research design and methodology emerged.

Growing up as a second-generation expatriate meant inhabiting a conjunct cultural position shaped by overlapping practices and attachments. As a Bangladeshi, this meant *Eid-ul Adha* meals explicitly eaten with *Chaal'er Ruti* (rice flour flatbread) and rejoicing in *Deshi* celebrations and rituals carried across borders. At the same time, it meant feeling equally oriented toward wadis and coastlines of Oman, marking *Omani National Day*, and recognising familiarity in coastal rhythms rather than the riverside landscapes of Bangladesh I was taught to associate with "home". These attachments did not replace one another; they accumulated, producing a sense of belonging made through layering rather than rootedness, partially legible in each context yet fully settled in none.

This condition of partial belonging also clarified the limits of my own position in the social framework around me. While my upbringing and access to education enabled me to move through many of Muscat's social and spatial settings with relative ease, the lives described by blue-collar workers in this study were shaped by far narrower margins of time, mobility, and visibility. Conducting this research made more explicit the distance between migrant lives that are often flattened under the shared category of "expatriate," and it sharpened an ethical responsibility to attend to forms of urban presence that are central to the city's functioning yet marginal to its representations.

This thesis also sits alongside emerging efforts to document South Asian migrant presence in Oman, including academic work such as Farooq's (2025), and initiatives like *In Their Wake – Oman*, a visual and narrative archive developed by Hassan Haider (@hassanofarabia). Together, these efforts point to a shared concern with absence: the limited inscription of migrant histories in Oman's collective urban memory, and the limited recognition of migrant everyday life within dominant conceptions of public space. The thresholds, rooftops, and residual pockets documented in this study are not only settings of social reproduction; they are fragile traces of urban presence that can disappear without record. Attending to these everyday acts of presence does not resolve questions of integration or inclusion; it acknowledges the forms of life that persist in their absence.

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10. Appendix

Appendix A - Field observation logs: pedestrian counts and traffic conditions

Appendix A.1 Hamriyah

9/11/25 field journal

location - Hamriya commercial street/
Bazdar

Friday - 9am - 11am (weekend)

9:30 - 26 men, 1 woman → local } 1 minute
↳ 23 expats, 3 local

traffic → low to none
↳ mostly personal cars, few delivery trucks

9:33 → 9:43 → moving traffic
↳ 24 cars, one truck

parked cars ~ 340 ~~cars~~ vehicles

most men are walking by, some are headed to shops, some are headed to restaurants for breakfast → more in voss

10:00 - 10:10 - moving traffic → 28 cars

10:30 - 10:45 - " → 34 private cars
3 service cars, 1 police car

10:48 - 10:53 → 5 minutes → 67 men + 1 woman
↳ close to jumrah prayer
↳ 1 man cycling
↳ 19 people/min.

15/11/23

Observation 4 Location :- Hamriya Bazaar

Saturday → 4:30 - 6:30 pm (weekend)

5:15 - 5:20 → 17 + IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII
IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII

1 child on cycle → 2 women IIII IIII

⇒ 116 men + 2 women + 1 child on cycle

5:25 - 5:30 → 3 + IIII IIII I ⇒ 13 private + 1 service car

5:45 - 5:50 → 55 + 20 + 12 + 69 = 156 men

5:51 - 5:56 → 3 + IIII IIII IIII ⇒ 12 private + 6 service cars

Parking lot

→ child → IIII I

6:15 - 6:20 → 21 + 16 + 6 + IIII IIII IIII IIII + 10
→ 17 sitting [IIII IIII IIII]

cycle → 1

→ 85 men walking by + 17 sitting + 6 children + 1 child on cycle

6:30 - 6:35 → IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII I

→ 22 private + 4 service vehicles

Observation ^{11:21} → same location,
friday → 4:00 - 7:00pm

4:40-4:45 → ~~50~~ 55 men walking by,
1 on a cycle

4:50-4:55 - moving traffic - 5 cars
↳ almost no traffic → all personal cars

~~5:35~~ 5:40 - 6:00-6:05 - 106 men + 1 child

6:06-6:11 → moving traffic → 15 personal cars
parking lot area

6:30 pm - 6:35 - moving traffic - ~~20~~ 33 p. cars,
↳ 3-4 service vehicles

6:42 - people sitting and socialising
↳ ~ 31 ⇒ restaurants, sidewalks

6:44-6:49 → people walking by/standing
↳ 109 men

Appendix A.2 Maabilah Sina'iya

13/11/95

Observation #2.

Location :- Mabilah Industrial Area

[2:1] → Thursday → 10 → 11:30 ^{10:10 - 10:15} 23 men +
(weekday) 6 men on cycle.

10:17 - 10:22 → moving traffic → 43 total
28 private + 15 service vehicles.

10:55 - 11:00 → 16 + IIII IIII IIII I. Area II

cycle → IIII
→ 57 men walking + 5 on cycle.

11:05 → 11:10 → 6 + IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII
IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII
→ 122 total
→ 13 service + 109 private vehicles

Area 2 → light traffic of people on foot + bike

↓

5-6:30pm
5-7pm 5:15 - 5:20 → 45 men walking by +
4 on cycle
↳ mostly customers

5:25 - 5:30 → 5 + IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII
5:30 - 5:35 IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII IIII
IIII IIII I. → 91 total
↳ 11 service + 100 private vehicles

Area 1

→ + 2 children
5:45 - 5:50 → 4 + ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~
↳ cycle - ||||
⇒ 59 total → 1 woman, 2 children,
52 men walking + 4 people
on cycle.

5:55 - 6:00 → moving traffic
↳ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ | → 41 total
→ 7 service + 34 private
vehicles

Observation 3 location :- Makilah

Friday 9:30-11:30 (weekday)

Area 2
10:20-10:25 → 3 + ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ | → 19 men.
↓
moving traffic
→ 3 + ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ || → 30 total → 27 private
+ 3 service vehicles

Area 1 → 1 woman
11:20-25 → 3 + ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~
→ ||| → cycle II
→ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ~~|||||~~ ⇒ 50 men + 1 woman +
3 on cycle
⇒ 14 private + 1 service vehicle

[illegible]

Appendix B - Interview guides

Appendix B.1: Interview Guide (Blue-Collar Migrant Workers: P1–P7)

This guide presents the interview prompts used with blue-collar migrant workers (P1–P7). It was used across interviews C1 to C5 [see appendix C], with minor variation depending on setting, time constraints, and participant responses. The guide is included to document the empirical basis of the interview conversations and the question-route used during data collection.

Section 1: Introduction and consent

- Explanation of the research topic and purpose
- Clarification that participation is voluntary
- Assurance of confidentiality and anonymity
- Explanation that no names would be recorded; age and background information requested for demographic context

Section 2: Demographic and background information - age, nationality, occupation, length of residence in Oman, pathway of arrival (through recruitment or family), living arrangements in Oman

Section 3: Work patterns and daily routine

- What are your usual working hours?
- How many days a week do you work?
- Do you have any days off during the week?
- What does a typical workday look like for you?

Section 4: Time outside work and home

- How much time do you usually have outside of work and home on a normal day?
- What about on Fridays or weekends?
- What do you usually do during this time?

Section 5: Social life and everyday practices

- Do you meet or spend time with friends outside of work?
- Do you usually talk to or call your family back home during your free time?
- Are there places nearby where people usually gather or sit together?

Section 6: Use of social, informal, and public spaces

- Do you spend time in places such as coffee shops, streets, shopfronts, or building compounds?
- Are there places where people play games such as carrom, cards, cricket, or

badminton?

- How often do you go to these places?
- At what time of day do people usually gather there?

Section 7: Mobility and access

- How do you usually commute (walking, bicycle, taxi, bus, car)?
- Does not having a car affect where you can go or how often you go out?

Section 8: Use of formal public spaces

- Do you go to parks, beaches, malls, or other public spaces?
- If yes, how often do you go there?
- If not, what are the reasons for not using these places?

Section 9: Constraints and challenges

- Do you face any difficulties or challenges when spending time outside (for example, time, work, transport, checks, or comfort)?
- Are there times when people prefer to stay indoors rather than go out? Why?

Section 10: Aspirations and reflections - Is there anything you wish existed here that would make daily life better? If you could change one thing about life outside work, what would it be?

Section 11: Closing - Is there anything else you would like to share about your daily life or how people spend time here?

Note:

Interviews were conversational and adapted to participants' availability and work conditions. Not all questions were asked verbatim in every interview. Follow-up prompts were used where participants introduced relevant topics.

Appendix B.2: Interview Guide (White-Collar Migrant Workers: P8 and P9)

This guide presents the interview prompts used with white-collar migrant workers (P8–P9). It was used in interviews conducted with participants working in corporate and professional settings (see Appendix C6 and C7). While the interview followed a similar opening structure to the blue-collar interviews, additional questions addressed work-life balance, career trajectories, and interpretations of third places in relation to professional life and upbringing. Minor variation occurred depending on participant background and the flow of conversation. The guide is included to document the empirical basis of the interview conversations and the question-route used during data collection.

Section 1: Introduction and consent

- Explanation of the research topic and purpose
- Assurance of confidentiality and anonymity
- Confirmation of voluntary participation and consent

Section 2: Demographic and background information

- How old are you?
- What is your nationality?
- Where do you currently live in Muscat?
- What is your current occupation?
- Is your workplace locally owned or international?
- How long have you been living in Oman?
- Did you move to Oman alone or with family?
- What are your current living arrangements?

Section 3: Work patterns and daily routine

- What are your usual working hours?
- How many days a week do you work?
- Do you receive public holidays or days off?
- How would you describe your current work–life balance?

Section 4: Time outside work and everyday activities

- On a typical weekday, how much time do you spend outside of work and home?
- How does this differ on weekends?
- What do you usually do during this time?

Section 5: Social life and third-place use

- Do you have places where you relax or socialise outside of work and home?
- What types of places are these (e.g., cafés, beaches, parks, streets)?
- How often do you visit these places?

-
- At what time of day do you usually use them?
 - Who do you usually spend time with in these spaces?

Section 6: Mobility and access

- What is your typical mode of transportation?
- Does access to transport affect which places you use or how often you visit them?

Section 7: Activities and meaning of spaces

- What activities do you usually engage in when you are in these spaces?
- How important are these places in your daily life?
- What do you enjoy most about spending time there?

Section 8: Professional background and comparison

- Have you worked in a non-corporate or non-office setting before?
- How did that experience differ from your current work situation?
- Do you think it is possible to move from non-corporate to corporate work in Oman?

Section 9: Understanding of “third place”

- What does the idea of a “third place” mean to you personally?
- Do you think culture influences how people use social spaces in Oman?
- Do circumstances such as work hours or income affect the kinds of places people use?

Section 10: Reflections and closing

- Are there any challenges you face in accessing or using social spaces?
- Is there anything you wish existed or was different in terms of places for relaxation or socialising?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Notes

Not all questions were asked verbatim in every interview.

Follow-up questions were used where relevant based on participant responses.

Appendix B.3: Interview Guide – Policy and Governance Expert

This guide presents the interview prompts used during the expert interview conducted with Mr. Ahmed Al Mukhaini, a policy analyst working in governance and policy in Oman (transcript in Appendix C8). The interview was designed to capture institutional and governance-level perspectives on migrant populations, urban regulation, and everyday spatial practices. While the interview followed a semi-structured format, it was more open-ended and exploratory, allowing for extended responses and follow-up discussion. The guide is included to document the empirical basis of the interview conversation and the question-route used during data collection.

Section 1: Introduction and consent

- Explanation of the research topic and purpose
- Clarification of voluntary participation
- Assurance of confidentiality and appropriate attribution

Section 2: Professional background - Could you briefly describe your professional background and current role?

Section 3: Migrant populations and urban life - From your perspective, how are migrant communities generally understood within the urban context of Oman?

Section 4: Planning, zoning, and regulation

- Are migrant populations taken into consideration in urban planning and zoning decisions?
- How do planning frameworks respond to areas with high concentrations of migrant residents?
- How are changes in land use or zoning typically perceived by local communities?

Section 5: Informal and everyday spatial practices

- How are informal gatherings and everyday uses of space by migrant workers generally perceived?
- Are spaces such as streets, shopfronts, pavements, or leftover green areas discussed within planning or governance contexts?
- Are these practices understood as responses to need, proximity, or circumstance?

Section 6: Integration and coexistence

- How is the idea of integration understood in the Omani context?
- Is coexistence between different social groups actively planned, passively ac-

cepted, or structurally limited?

Section 7: Constraints, monitoring, and regulation

- Are informal spatial practices by migrant communities monitored or regulated?
- Under what conditions do these practices become a concern for authorities?
- How are issues of safety, visibility, and control discussed in relation to these spaces?

Section 8: Labour, mobility, and everyday life

- How do labour structures and working conditions affect everyday life and spatial behaviour of migrant workers?
- Are work schedules, mobility, or visa systems seen as influencing how and where people spend time outside work?

Section 9: Unmet needs and future considerations

- What do these everyday spatial practices indicate about unmet needs in the urban environment?
- Are there discussions around accommodating these needs through planning, design, or policy?
- How are migrant workers generally perceived in terms of permanence or temporariness within the city?

Section 10: Reflections for research and practice

- From your perspective, what should researchers and designers pay closer attention to when studying migrant life in Oman?
- Are there common misunderstandings or oversimplifications regarding migrant spatial practices?

Section 11: Closing - Is there anything else you would like to add regarding migrant communities, urban life, or public space in Oman?

Notes

- The interview was longer and more exploratory than other interviews in the study.
- Follow-up questions were used extensively to clarify and expand on responses.
- Not all questions were asked verbatim or in the same order.

Appendix C - Interview transcripts

Appendix C1: Participant 1, Maabilah Sina'iya

Participant profile - Male; 35 years old; Bangladeshi nationality ; Occupation: Mechanic ; Length of Residence: 14 years in Oman; Household Form: Shared accomodation

C1.1 Typical non-work time and daily routine

When asked what he does in his time outside work, the participant described the main routine as:

- Going to markets and roaming
- Staying in the room
- Calling family back home ("bari"), often for one to two hours after duty ends

He added that cooking also takes up time and described this as a common pattern for many workers after work.

When asked about leisure beyond these routines, he stated that people go outside mainly if they leave the industrial area to roam, typically requiring access to a car.

C1.2 Places visited and reasons for leaving the area

The participant stated that there is not much to do within the industrial area. He described that: those with families in Oman may go to Naseem Garden ; "Bachelors" usually do not go out to such places

He noted that many people go "that side" toward Muttrah, Qurum, or the Corniche, or they go to Seeb because it is relatively close.

He stated that trips are often not for sitting at the beach but for: work-related reasons ,errands and groceries, visiting Seeb souq, visiting relatives

He stated that visits to relatives are often done around Friday schedules, noting that many workers have half duty on Fridays (either morning or evening), so visits are time-limited and aligned with duty.

C1.3 Socialising practices and coffee-shop presence

In response to discussion about coffee shops, the participant stated that many people sit for "adda" (informal socialising) and play games such as: Carrom and Cards

He noted that some workers return late (1–2 a.m.) after sitting outside.

He confirmed the presence of a nearby supermarket and coffee shop around the corner from the building.

C1.4 Checks, surveillance, and effects on routine

The participant stated that there are frequent checks in the area and described them as exhausting even when documents are in order. He stated that this discourages people from spending time outside.

He also referred to fines related to travel, stating that:

- People (including delivery drivers) are being fined
- Travel with family is treated differently than travel as bachelors
- A reported fine amount mentioned was 35 OMR when travelling with others

C1.5 Travel to relatives and commuting choices

When asked how he travels to meet relatives, the participant stated he uses taxi and occasionally travel with a relative

He described that travel with relatives can still be questioned because individuals may be from different companies, and he stated that authorities may instruct people to take a taxi instead. He noted that he personally had not faced this directly and suggested that checks might be more likely when travelling in work attire, though he described his own experience as uneventful “by God’s grace.”

C1.6 Desires, amenities, and perceptions of development

When asked what he would want if something could be provided, he stated that bachelor workers “don’t have desires,” contrasting this with those who have families, who may wish for a nearby garden.

He described Maabilah Sina’iya and its surroundings as having “nothing.” He referenced development activity in nearby areas (including Haitham City) but stated it is not for “commoners.” He added that authorities “don’t care much about us” and “don’t respect us.”

He also mentioned a higher-activity area near the Maabilah street fish market and stated they go there for groceries.

C1.7 Social life within workplace groups (past and present)

The participant stated that in earlier work locations (Sinaw and Wadi Kabir), leisure and social life occurred largely within workplace groups. He described:

- Being part of a group of 8–10 people
- Socialising and playing carrom within the garage itself
- Not needing to go outside to socialise because time could be spent within the group

He stated that in Sinaw, when Fridays were off, he and others would wake late and then go to the Sinaw souq.

C1.8 Work autonomy and change in workplace relations

Toward the end of the interview, the participant stated that he now has his own business and feels more independent. He contrasted this with past experiences working under a foreman, describing that:

- The foreman disliked him speaking to people during work
- The foreman objected to relatives visiting during work hours

He described his current condition as having greater independence and fewer constraints on speaking with others.

Appendix C2: Participant 2, Hamriya

Participant profile - Male; 35 years old Bangladeshi nationality ; Occupation: Grocery store worker ; Length of Residence: 4 years in Oman; Household Form: Shared accomodation

C2.1 Working hours and daily routine

The participant stated that he works 12 hours per day, from 1:00 pm to 1:00 am, and that he works seven days a week with no off days.

He stated that mornings are spent cooking and completing household chores.

He stated that after finishing work at 1:00 am, he sleeps, wakes after the morning prayer (fajr), and then continues with daily routines before returning to work.

C2.2 Time outside work and home

When asked about spending time outside work and home, the participant responded that he does not have time.

He restated that he does not have weekends or days off.

On further questioning, he stated that when free time occurs, he speaks with his family back home.

C2.3 Occasional leisure and social spaces

When asked specifically about coffee shops, the participant stated that he sometimes goes, approximately once or twice a week.

He stated that he does not go outside Hamriya and does not visit parks.

He clarified that his accommodation is in Walja, across the hill, and that he

sometimes sits there.

He stated that there is a tea shop in his residential area where he sits a few times a week.

C2.4 Mobility and commuting - The participant stated that he commutes to work using his own bicycle.

C2.5 Social interaction

When asked about who he gathers with, the participant stated that gatherings are mixed, not limited to one nationality.

When asked why he sits at the tea shop, he stated that the people there are known or acquainted to him.

C2.6 Interview conditions

Parts of the interview were interrupted by customers, and the interviewer adjusted pacing accordingly.

Toward the end of the interview, the participant indicated the need to conclude quickly as the manager was observing the interaction.

C2.7 Closing question

When asked if he had any wishes or desired changes related to life in Hamriya, the participant smiled and stated that it would be nice to have a weekend holiday.

Appendix C3: Participant 3, Maabilah Sina'iya

Participant profile - Male; 37 years old Bangladeshi nationality ; Occupation: Steel workshop foreman ; Length of Residence: 17 years in Oman; Household Form: Shared accomodation

Participant context (as stated in the interview)

The participant identified as someone familiar with the area and stated that he knows many people in the street and nearby alleys ("gulleys").

He described most social connections as being within the immediate street network.

C3.1 Changes in informal play and gathering spaces

In response to the interviewer's opening question about informal activities (e.g., carrom, badminton, cricket), the participant stated that similar activities existed in the past but no longer occur.

He stated that people previously played cricket and badminton behind a petrol station, but these activities stopped after construction related to Haitham City began.

He stated that such open spaces no longer exist in the immediate area.

C3.2 Existing formal open space

The participant stated that a jogging and walking garden has been built in Mabilah No. 12, near the periphery of the industrial area.

He stated that access to this garden is mostly limited to those with cars because it is far to walk.

He stated that people without cars mostly work and do not go out much due to heavy work duties.

C3.3 Coffee shop use and decline in gatherings

When asked about coffee shop gatherings, the participant stated that people used to gather frequently in coffee shops but no longer do so as much.

He stated that people previously played carrom at coffee shops but have stopped.

He attributed this change to labour checks and frequent document checking, stating that this creates exhaustion and discourages people from sitting outside.

C3.4 Mobility and transport

The participant stated that most people in the area rely on taxis for transport.

He stated that access to most destinations is completely dependent on having a car.

C3.5 Residential composition

The participant stated that families do live in the broader area but mostly in shabia neighbourhoods, described as Omani areas.

He stated that the industrial area itself is mainly populated by bachelors.

He stated that there are some Bangladeshi families and very few Indian families.

He stated that within the large sanaiya area, bachelors greatly outnumber families, estimating approximately “one family in one hundred bachelor flats.”

C3.6 Availability of public places

When asked about public places, the participant stated that usage depends on preference.

He stated that on Fridays, some people go to Seeb or to grocery stores (e.g., Nesto).

He stated that these trips depend on access to a car.

C3.7 Comparison with other areas

The participant compared the area with Wadi Kabir, stating that Wadi Kabir has a garden where people can sit, whereas no equivalent space exists nearby in this sanaiya.

He stated that there is a small garden in the shabia area mainly used by Omani families.

He stated that bachelors can technically go there, but it is not feasible due to the small size and presence of families, and that there is a sense of discomfort rather than a formal restriction.

C3.8 Work schedules and time availability

The participant stated that many people work until 11:00 am on Fridays, with the weekend effectively starting after midday.

He stated that Friday work hours are typically from 7:00 am to 11:00 am, until the Friday congregational prayer.

He stated that on regular days, work hours are from 7:00 am to 1:00 pm, followed by a break from 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm, and then work resumes from 3:00 pm to 8:00 pm.

He stated that after 8:00 pm, movement in the area decreases and people return to their rooms and talk to family on their phones.

C3.9 Traffic patterns

The participant described peak traffic periods as: 11:00 am–1:00 pm: heavy traffic ; 2:00 pm–4:00 pm: lighter traffic ; 4:00 pm–8:00/9:00 pm: heavy traffic

He stated that mornings are lighter because people are driving away from the area

C3.10 Comparison with other neighbourhoods

When asked to compare with Hamriya and Wadi Kabir, the participant stated that those areas are different, with fewer people and a “nicer” environment.

He described the sanaiya as very crowded, comparing it to densely populated settlements in Bangladesh.

C3.11 Final clarification on small neighbourhood parks

The participant stated that smaller gardens in family neighbourhoods are generally intended for children.

He stated that larger gardens (e.g., Naseem Garden, Rusayl Garden, as mentioned by him) do not create the same sense of discomfort, whereas smaller ones do.

Closing

The interview concluded with brief discussion about the age of shops in the area (stated as existing for more than 10–15 years). The interviewer thanked the participant, and the conversation ended.

Appendix C4: Participant 4, Wadi Kabir

Participant profile - Male; 41 years old ; Bangladeshi nationality ; Occupation: Steel workshop owner / businessman ; Length of Residence: 15 years in Oman; Household Form: Shared accomodation

C4.1 Work schedule

The participant stated that he works six days a week.

Typical working hours were described as: morning: approximately 7:00/8:00 am to 1:00 pm ; evening: approximately 3:30/4:00 pm to 7:00/8:00 pm

C4.2 Time outside work and home

The participant stated that on regular days he spends about one hour outside work and home.

On Fridays, he stated that he goes out for approximately 5–6 hours.

He described Fridays as involving rest after prayers, occasional work if required, going out if there is no work, and speaking with family by phone.

C4.3 Places used for socialising

When asked about places where he spends time outside, the participant identified a coffee shop as one such place.

He stated that in the past there were more areas used for playing badminton and carrom.

He stated that earlier in life he spent most of Fridays outside, but that this has changed with age.

He described age as the main reason for reduced outdoor activity.

C4.4 Sports and leisure activities

The participant stated that sports activities still occur nearby, mostly involving Indian residents.

He stated that he no longer participates in these activities.

He described current Fridays as focused mainly on family communication, resting after an afternoon nap, and spending limited time at the coffee shop.

C4.5 Social networks

When asked about socialising patterns, the participant stated that he socialises with a mixed group, including people from different nationalities and Omanis.

He described the social environment as diverse.

C4.6 Reason for using this location

The participant stated that he spends time in this location because his house is nearby.

He stated that going elsewhere depends on urgent needs or work requirements.

C4.7 Social events and gatherings

The participant stated that he attends social events if invited, such as dawat (social or religious functions) held in designated halls (e.g., Bangladeshi community venues)

C4.8 Visiting public spaces

The participant stated that his interest in visiting public spaces has changed with age.

He stated that he still visits places such as malls and parks, including grocery stores and destinations such as Al Mouj, usually on a weekly or bi-weekly basis.

He described a recent outing involving a short trip by car with friends for shopping.

C4.9 Role of car access

The participant stated that having a car is essential for moving between places.

C4.10 Experiences of socialising and comparison with other cities

The participant stated that he has not faced challenges related to socialising in Oman.

He stated that he previously lived in Dubai and described it as more congested and expensive.

He described Oman as quieter, safer, more affordable, and preferable for daily life.

He stated that although development in Dubai may be greater, he prefers life in Oman.

C4.11 Personal wishes and aspirations

When asked about wishes that could improve his life, the participant stated that his primary wish is to bring his family to Oman.

He stated that financially he is satisfied, but that family separation is what he feels is missing.

C4.12 Reflections on migration and return

He stated that because citizenship is not possible, returning to Bangladesh is inevitable in the long term.

He described Oman as good as long as one is fit to work, after which returning home becomes necessary.

C4.13 Restrictions and visa-related experiences

The participant stated that he has not faced restrictions when using public or outdoor spaces.

He identified visa-related issues as the main challenge he has experienced.

He described past difficulties related to disputes with his sponsor (arbab), including prolonged visa issues, involvement with immigration authorities, and financial penalties.

He stated that recent legal changes allowing easier sponsor transfer are better for workers.

He expressed a wish for greater freedom of work, such as a freelance or flexible work permit, allowing him to work across multiple trades without fear of penalties.

C4.14 Labour checks and daily behaviour

In response to discussion about fear of labour inspections, the participant stated that labour police checks are frequent.

He described being stopped and questioned even when going to the mosque.

He stated that although documentation may be in order, the frequency of checks is exhausting and contributes to people preferring to stay in their rooms.

Appendix C5: Group Interview - Participant 5,6, and 7, Maabilah Sina'iya

Participant profiles

All participants: Pakistani nationality ; Household Form: Shared accommodation

P5: Male, 38 years old; Mechanic; living in Oman for 17 years

P6: Male, 29 years old; Mechanic; living in Oman for 3 years

P7: Male, 55 years old; Butcher and shop manager; living in Oman for 8 years

All participants reported working six or more days per week. P7 reported working seven days per week, including Fridays and religious holidays.

C5.1 General description of life outside work

When asked about life in Maabilah outside work, one participant described life as “pointless,” stating that daily routines are dominated by work. The conversation then focused on how time outside work is spent rather than on leisure in a recreational sense.

C5.2 Daily routines outside work and home

Participants P5 and P6 reported spending approximately one hour per day outside work and accommodation. This time was described as part of a daily routine.

Participant P7 stated that he generally remains at the shop and does not have regular time outside work due to continuous work obligations.

Participants P5 and P6 stated that they go outside daily, usually to sit at nearby tea or coffee shops. When not outside, they reported sitting in their rooms. P7 was described by the others as having no regular days off and rarely leaving the shop except under specific circumstances.

C5.3 Work schedules and absence of leave

Participants described long and continuous work schedules. P7 stated that he does not take leave on Fridays or during Eid holidays, explaining that his occupation as a butcher requires him to fulfil orders, particularly during religious festivals.

When asked whether other employees were present at the shop, P7 confirmed that there were additional workers but stated that, as the manager, he is required to be present regardless.

C5.4 Friday visits and inter-area movement

One participant (P7) was visiting Maabilah from Ghala Sina'iya at the time of the interview. This visit was described as occasional, occurring once every two to three months.

Participants explained that such visits often depend on work conditions and, in some cases, on whether a sponsor (arbab) is temporarily absent from the country.

C5.5 Common places used outside work

Participants identified tea and coffee shops as the primary places where they spend time outside work. When asked about other locations, participants stated that there were no other places they regularly go to in the area.

One participant (P5) stated that since arriving in 2008, his everyday routine has remained limited to the same building, shop, and nearby tea shops.

Occasional trips outside Maabilah were mentioned, including visits toward Seeb (near the beach), Qurum, or Old Muscat, though these were described as infrequent and irregular.

C5.6 Mobility and transport conditions

Participants stated that access to a private car is necessary to travel beyond the immediate area. Without a car, they reported that they do not go anywhere.

They explained that shared travel is restricted by sponsorship arrangements, stating that passengers in a car must be under the same sponsor. Participants reported that taking an additional person could result in fines, and that stops and questioning sometimes occur even when passengers share the same sponsor.

C5.7 Use of accommodation and semi-private spaces

Participants described spending time in semi-private spaces within their accommodation buildings when not at tea shops. These included rooftops, staircases and their rooms.

One participant (P6) explained that after work he typically goes directly to the accommodation and sits either on the roof or in the staircase when he wants to sit outside.

C5.8 Family absence and communication with home

Participants referred to the absence of family in Oman when describing daily life. One participant stated that without family, spending time outside feels “bekar” (pointless).

They mentioned spending time sleeping or talking to family members back home on the phone. Annual travel back to their home country was described as necessary, with one participant emphasising that returning home every year is compulsory.

C5.9 Perceptions of nearby formal public spaces

Participants mentioned the presence of a public park near Maabilah but stated that they do not go there. The park was described as being used mainly by families or by people exercising. One participant questioned the purpose of going to a park, stating that it does not suit their age or daily routine.

C5.10 Social composition and everyday interactions

Participants described Maabilah Sina’iya as an area with a predominantly migrant population. They provided informal estimates of local demographics, mentioning Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Iranian, Yemeni, and Omani residents.

They stated that daily socialising at tea shops involves people from multiple nationalities, particularly those working in nearby garages, workshops, and restaurants.

C5.11 Reflections on long-term stay

Participants spoke about long-term residence in Oman in relation to work and responsibility. They described daily concerns related to work, food, finances, and family back home. One participant stated that rest is experienced only when returning to the home country, while life in Oman is associated with ongoing responsibility and worry.

Appendix C6: Participant 8, Wadi Kabir

Participant profile - Male; 32 years old ; Pakistani nationality ; Occupation: Senior Finance officer ; Length of Residence: 8 years in Oman; Household Form: Family household (wife and children); previously lived in bachelor accommodation ; Working Hours: 09:00–17:00, six days per week ; Primary Mode of Transport: Private car

C6.1 Daily routine and time outside work and home

On weekdays, the participant estimated that he spends less than one hour per day outside work and home. This time was described as limited and primarily spent with family.

On weekends (Friday), he reported spending several hours outside, at times exceeding five hours, allowing for longer outings and activities.

C6.2 Places used outside work and home

The participant reported regular use of formal public and semi-public spaces, including shopping malls, public parks, beaches, camping areas, restaurants and dine-in venues

He stated that these places are used several times per week, though not on a daily basis.

C6.3 Social companions

At the time of the interview, the participant stated that leisure activities are undertaken entirely with family.

Prior to bringing his family to Oman, he reported spending time outside work with colleagues and friends, describing these groups as consisting of mixed nationalities, primarily Asian.

C6.4 Purposes of spending time outside

When asked about reasons for going out, the participant mentioned socialising, rest and relaxation after work, spending time with family, particularly children

He stated that the specific destination is less important than being able to spend time with family.

C6.5 Timing of activities

The participant described different timing patterns for leisure:

Weekdays: outings typically begin around sunset

Weekends: outings may begin earlier in the day, including morning hours

C6.6 Access and constraints

The participant stated that he has not experienced restrictions or discomfort related to accessing public spaces in Oman, either as a bachelor or as a family household.

He identified access to private transport as an important condition for using leisure spaces, noting that lack of transport would limit mobility.

C6.7 Work-life balance and prior work experience

The participant described his work-life balance in Oman as positive, noting that his workplace allows flexibility and respects personal time.

He compared this to his previous work experience in Pakistan, where he worked in the banking sector and described working conditions as more demanding, with longer hours and higher pressure.

C6.8 Safety and everyday comfort

The participant stated that safety and stability in Oman influence his use of public spaces. He described feeling comfortable taking his family to outdoor settings such as beaches and camping areas, citing a sense of security in everyday public life.

C6.9 Change in space use across life stages

The participant described differences between his bachelor life and family life in Oman:

As a bachelor, he reported more frequent use of outdoor activities such as walking tracks, beaches, and camping areas, with less use of malls.

As a family household, he reported more frequent visits to malls and parks, shaped by family routines and children's needs.

Appendix C7: Participant 9, Hamriyah

Participant profile - Male; 26 years old ; Bangladeshi nationality ; Occupation: Accountant ; Length of Residence: 20 years in Oman; Household Form: Family household (Moved with family in childhood due to father's employment) ; previously lived in bachelor accommodation ; Current Working Hours: 08:00–17:00, five days per week ; Primary Mode of Transport: Private car

C7.1 Time outside work and home

The participant estimated that on weekdays he spends approximately one to two hours outside work and home. On weekends he estimated five to six hours outside work and home. He described weekends as primarily “hangout time,” alongside completing errands when needed.

C7.2 Places used outside work and home

When asked about places used for relaxation and socialising, the participant mentioned coffee shops and beaches (noting increased use during winter)

He stated he uses these places approximately two to three times per week. He also referred to using malls, public parks, and beaches as part of weekly routines.

C7.3 Social companions and group composition

The participant reported that when he spends time in coffee shops or at the beach, he typically does so with people of the same nationality. He described these settings as involving a community element. He also stated that in some public places (e.g., malls, public parks, beaches), people of different nationalities and families are present.

C7.4 Activities undertaken in these places

The participant stated that he and his friends engage in board games when spending time in these settings. When asked what he enjoys most about these places, he identified rest and relaxation.

He rated the importance of these spaces in his daily life as 8/10, stating they are relevant to his ability to relax from day-to-day life.

C7.5 Timing of use

The participant reported a typical time pattern:

Weekdays: usually goes out around 20:00

Weekends: goes out earlier, around 18:00

C7.6 Challenges and suggested improvements

The participant stated that he does not face specific challenges when using the

places where he socialises and relaxes. He described current options as feasible and nearby.

When asked what he would wish to add or improve, he mentioned wanting a park near his house in the Hamriyah area.

C7.7 Public holidays and employment conditions (current and previous work)

The participant stated that his current job provides public holidays off. He added that not all companies provide public holidays, especially smaller businesses, and stated that this can relate to visa and employment arrangements.

He described a previous private-sector job where:

National employees received holidays while others worked

Some workers did not receive adequate additional pay for extra working days

He described this earlier job as involving longer working days due to a three-hour break mid-day, resulting in finishing work around 21:00, whereas his current work day typically ends by 17:30–18:00.

He also stated that he previously undertook non-corporate work on rare, temporary occasions (typically weekends), describing these as inconsistent and short-term.

C7.8 Participant's description of "third place" and social routines

When asked what "third place" means for him in Oman, the participant described it as meeting friends in common settings, including weekly football meetups and meeting former school friends (including people he may not see for several months or longer), followed by time spent sitting and talking after playing

He described having attended a Bangladeshi school while growing up in Oman and stated that meeting old friends in such settings is part of his understanding of third places.

C7.9 Cultural influence on leisure routines

The participant stated that certain leisure habits (especially football meetups) are influenced by Omani local culture, describing football as widely practiced across neighbourhoods in Oman. He described developing these habits while growing up in Oman and maintaining them into adulthood, though the frequency varies (sometimes weekly, sometimes monthly) depending on people's availability.

C7.10 Circumstances, group presence, and family proximity in public settings

The participant described that some gathering places are typically male-dominated and rarely include families. He stated that when families are present, groups of men tend to sit farther away as a matter of respect, describing this as a social practice rather than a formal rule.

He also stated that in other public spaces such as malls, public parks, and beaches, there is no set rule, and these spaces are used by mixed groups including families from different countries. He stated that, if choosing, he would prefer a place with more privacy to sit with friends.

C7.11 Observations and opinions about Hamriyah and bachelor livelihoods

In response to a question about perceptions of Hamriyah and the presence of bachelors in the area, the participant stated that the livelihood of many bachelor workers in Hamriyah differs from his own background, describing a distinction between those who grew up in Oman and those who arrived later on work visas.

He stated that many bachelor workers:

- Spend much of their lives in their home country before coming to Oman
- Form belonging through co-national circles in the same area
- Often have limited transport access and lower income
- Rely on nearby markets and services within Hamriyah
- Tend to remain within the area unless leaving is necessary for work

He described public transport as limited and Oman as car-centric, noting that taxis often remain on main roads and do not enter some residential or industrial areas. He also described common activities in Hamriyah as sitting for tea, playing cards or board games, and talking about topics such as politics and family.

The participant also commented on Friday prayer practices in Hamriyah, stating that many people pray at nearby mosques in the area and that prayer lines can extend into the road. He suggested that the availability of a local mosque for Friday prayers has contributed to this pattern, and added that some local families may prefer that bachelor workers use separate spaces, though he stated he could not comment definitively for others.

C7.12 Notes on friendship formation and workplace social networks (participant-added comments)

In additional comments, the participant described:

Differences in work schedules between industrial shop work (with mid-day breaks and later closing times) and construction/site work (often ending earlier)

Friendship formation in Oman as often originating through workplaces, with social circles commonly consisting of co-workers or people in connected industries

Income variation across nationalities and its influence on lifestyle and spending

Supporting families back home as a common financial responsibility affecting spending habits

Maintaining long-term friendships formed through work over extended periods, including examples from his father's social ties

Appendix C8: Key-Informant Interview with Policy Analyst - Ahmed Al Mukhaini

Participant profile (as stated in the interview)

Occupation: Policy analyst

Work described by participant: Policy analysis, policy development, stakeholder engagement; working with various organisations in policy-related capacities.

C8.1 Opening and clarification of "placemaking"

The interviewer described the study topic as third places/placemaking and how people use spaces outside home and work, with emphasis on migrant communities in Muscat.

The participant asked the interviewer to define what "placemaking" meant in this context.

The interviewer explained placemaking as how public/social spaces emerge and are used, including examples such as cafés/cafeterias becoming common social spaces.

The participant summarised possible angles of placemaking as: (1) intentional/structural (urban planning/decision-making), (2) evolutionary/user-created based on needs, and (3) the designation/labeling of areas (the participant used the term "ghetto" in his question).

The interviewer confirmed that these angles aligned with the study focus.

C8.2 Migrant presence in zoning and neighbourhood change (participant response)

In response to the interviewer asking how migrant communities shape urban life beyond economic contribution, the participant stated:

Migrant workers are considered in zoning and in decisions about mixed-use commercial/residential areas.

He stated there is concern about high concentration of migrant workers and "bachelors" affecting what he called the "Omani sense of neighborhood."

He gave examples of areas in Al Khoud (numbers mentioned by the participant included 3, 6, and 7) to illustrate differences in perceived change in neighbourhood composition.

He stated that when zoning changes and commercialisation occurs, some residents move out rather than remain, and that those closest to the rezoned strip may

benefit commercially while those behind experience impacts and may complain or relocate.

He said there were discussions about creating separate areas/cities for migrant workers (the participant referenced the UAE as an example raised in such discussions) and that such proposals were put on hold.

C8.3 Zoning decisions vs reactions (participant clarification)

In response to a follow-up question about whether rezoning is driven by migrants or by planning:

The participant stated rezoning is primarily an urban/economic planning decision (e.g., changing from residential to mixed-use), and that planners take into account possible influx of expatriates while planning.

He stated that planners sometimes expected certain housing to attract young Omanis working nearby but later observed different outcomes, including that some Omanis preferred larger housing elsewhere.

He stated that discussions then shifted to reviving areas and relocating migrant populations elsewhere (the participant called this “inhumane” as his personal view).

C8.4 Example from participant’s residential area (participant account)

The participant described where he lives (he referenced “Al Khoud number three”) and stated it was previously residential.

He said a strip adjacent to the street was changed to commercial/mixed-use, and flats were occupied by groups of mostly men, including Omanis, Gulf nationals, and non-Omanis, including restaurant and petrol-station workers, and also professionals sharing apartments.

He stated that after about a year, prostitution became visible in the area (as he described it), and he and neighbours filed complaints to police/municipality.

He stated that the presence of nearby outlets made the area more convenient for errands (e.g., walking for groceries), while also stating that some women did not feel safe walking alone at night.

C8.5 Definitions of blue-collar and white-collar (participant response)

The participant said that “blue-collar” includes semi-skilled/unskilled work not requiring education (examples he listed: construction workers, cleaners, janitors, garbage collectors).

He added that some roles like petrol station workers or restaurant waiters may be included to some extent, but he distinguished them as “a different kind.”

He said he used “white-collar” to refer to desk-oriented professional work (examples he listed: accountants, managers, lawyers), and mentioned that some live in shared apartments and do not have families with them.

C8.6 Integration and “bubbling” (participant response)

In response to what “integration” means and whether it is pursued:

The participant said integration is not intentionally designed or pursued, but is accepted for some white-collar groups (he mentioned Arab-speaking workers and gave examples such as teachers from Syria, Jordan, Egypt).

He said that in Oman, coexistence historically occurred through what he called “bubbling,” describing Omani districts organised by tribe or profession and having boundaries.

He described certain shared areas (he listed markets, wells, grazing areas, fishing areas) as managed as public goods by civic systems, while other life remained within districts.

He said that assimilation in a Western sense is not desired or pursued, and described contemporary neighbours from different Omani regions/backgrounds and the need to be cautious in communication.

He said people often return to their own communities for social/religious occasions.

C8.7 Public spaces and Friday patterns (participant response)

In response to questions about informal gatherings and public spaces:

The participant stated that public parks/gardens and beaches are known to be used by blue-collar workers during public holidays and Fridays.

He stated that families may avoid these places at those times.

He stated that policymakers are aware that such spaces may become the primary available leisure option for blue-collar workers due to camp/room conditions and perceived unwelcomeness elsewhere.

He described a recurring Friday pattern where roundabouts, pavements, and greenery areas become filled with blue-collar workers.

He stated this is common and accepted, and said some people advocate for providing other facilities.

C8.8 Visibility and “self-imposed inhibition” (participant statements)

The participant stated that workers may practice “self-imposed inhibition” and “don’t want to be visible.”

He said they may avoid being seen as a threat and try to reduce visibility.

C8.9 Regulation vs “natural response” and proximity (participant response)

The participant stated he has not seen informal gatherings framed as a regulation issue and that it is viewed as a natural response.

He stated that workers often gather in greenery and clean areas and associate sitting on grass with outings/picnics.

He stated he thinks it is more about proximity than transport cost.

He also mentioned that among migrant workers there can be “animosity” if someone comes to seek work in another area, and suggested similar “bounded” patterns may apply to leisure places.

C8.10 Tolerance, monitoring, and incidents (participant statements)

The participant stated these patterns are discussed and monitored, and said they would be “entertained” as long as there is no perceived danger to safety or movement.

He stated there were discussions about redesigning areas within Maabilah and shifting some populations (he referenced an area “before Kazakh”).

He stated he has noticed small garden-like interventions in some areas.

He referenced incidents in parts of Al Hail and Wadi Kabir involving fights and stated one case ended in death (as he described it), saying such scenes worry government.

C8.11 Kafala, raids/checks, and perceptions (participant response)

The participant stated the Kafala system is “almost done with,” but practices persist because “the ecosystem” has not changed.

He stated labour raids occur but are typically directed at camps/homes rather than public spaces and are information-led through informants.

He said fear among workers is often driven by perception/misperception.

He described a work-focused mindset among many workers, stating they see themselves as “here to work,” and mentioned the idea “the less visible, the more durable.”

He said workers may be surprised when someone acknowledges them (he gave examples of greeting them at supermarkets).

A5.12 Work hours, entitlements, and reluctance to claim rights (participant statements)

The participant stated labour law entitles workers to rest days, leave for recuperation, and limits working hours (he mentioned eight hours plus up to four overtime, and a maximum 12-hour shift).

He stated that when workers are informed of rights, many say they cannot act because employers could fire them and send them home.

He stated that he believes changing laws alone does not ensure enforcement because workers are reluctant to claim rights.

He suggested creating supportive environments and gave examples: legitimising places for cricket, providing seating, discounts for public transport, and CSR/municipality initiatives.

C8.13 Minimum wage and wage payments (participant statements)

The participant stated minimum wage applies to Omanis and not expatriates.

He stated wage payment oversight has improved and referenced requirements for bank transfers and penalties for non-compliance.

He referenced past cases where workers were unpaid for months and used credit for food, and commented on low daily food spending among blue-collar workers.

He compared this to the Philippines' overseas worker standards and said India/Sri Lanka discussed similar approaches in forums he participated in.

C8.14 Planning: temporary individuals and durable "mass" (participant statements)

The participant stated blue-collar workers are generally perceived as temporary users.

He stated that individuals may be temporary but the "mass" (overall labour reliance) is durable, and referenced planning work where housing plans were adjusted to projected expatriate labour reliance.

He stated planning considers migrant profiles, and gave a male-to-female ratio figure for the expatriate population (as he stated in the interview).

Appendix D – Passenger Transport Law, Sponsorship, and Enforcement Ambiguity

Purpose: This box clarifies the formal legal framework governing passenger transport in Oman in relation to interview claims that blue-collar migrant workers are restricted from travelling with peers under different sponsors.

Formal Legal Framework

Royal Oman Police (ROP) traffic regulations identify passenger-related violations including:

- Exceeding the seating capacity specified in a vehicle licence
- Transporting passengers in vehicles with learner (teaching) plates
- Carrying passengers in cargo areas

These violations are listed in ROP traffic fine schedules and do not reference passenger sponsorship status (Royal Oman Police, Traffic Law and Penalties Schedule).

More severe penalties (up to 300 OMR) fall under the Land Transport Law, which regulates unlicensed commercial transport, including transporting passengers or goods for financial gain without authorisation (Sultani Decree No. 10/2016; Executive Regulations of the Land Transport Law).

Official Administrative Clarification

In 2023, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MTCIT) issued a public clarification stating that:

- Land Transport Law penalties apply only to transport conducted for commercial or financial gain
- Transporting friends, relatives, or acquaintances without remuneration does not constitute a violation
- Individuals penalised incorrectly may submit grievances for review within the prescribed period

(MTCIT Official Statement, 2023).

Discrepancy with Lived Practice

Despite the absence of any codified restriction based on sponsorship, interview participants reported widespread fear of penalties when travelling with non-sponsor peers. This suggests that everyday mobility is shaped less by formal law than

by enforcement ambiguity, limited legal literacy, and employment precarity.

Relevance to the Main Analysis

This discrepancy supports the discussion in Section 7.2 by illustrating how uncertainty functions as a governing mechanism, producing self-limiting mobility even where formal rights exist.

Eidesstattliche Erklärung

Statutory Declaration

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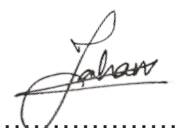
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