

# **A Subaltern Solution: Interstice Dwellings and Future of Spatial in Lahore**

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I want to contribute to the emerging scholars on interstices by Stéphane Tonnelat, Don Mitchell, Ananya Roy, Marina Warner considering the useful suggestions of Nicholas A. Phelps and Cristian Silva's 2017 piece "Mind the Gaps! A Research Agenda for Urban Interstices," through the highly insightful case of Lahore. With the urban land becoming highly expansive; luxury villas and housing societies being protected by retrofitted gates, barriers, railing, and armed security guards; land hoarding and land speculation growing; and, squatting opportunities shrinking; the poorest and marginalized such as gypsies, daily wage laborers, scavengers, and nightlife workers have setup their dwellings in interstices. It had to happen given the spatial injustice in the city: according to the Punjab Cities Growth Atlas of 2015, the poor in the city (30%) live on 6% of the city land.

There are four kinds of interstices: abandoned railway tracks; bed of dried River Ravi; graveyards; and, monsoon drains. The increasing policing, regulation, and vigilance of the homeless in and around the spaces of ancient Sufi shrines in the city has also moved the homeless to the interstices. I have seen dwellings in the interstices of Lahore gradually increasing in my fieldwork among the migrants, gypsies, and homeless people. These dwellings are visible within and on the fringes of Lahore but the urban planning agencies are increasingly invisibilizing them by erecting road fences and walls outside the housing societies. Some of these dwellings are moving beyond merely tents to rudimentary built structures. The dwellers here undertake economic activities such as solid waste recycling, cattle breeding, contract labor, and, to some extent take part in illegal activities to protect them from eviction, albeit the chance of eviction is lower because of stigma of these spaces.

It is my hypothesis that there is a correlation between growth of privatized, gated housing and interstice dwellings in Lahore as in other metropolitan cities of Pakistan. I want to explore my hypothesis with the intention to produce anticipatory knowledge of the future of these dwellings and their relation to the city. I want to explore questions such as: whether the dwellings in interstices are becoming a new mode of housing like the setting up of Katchi Abadis (informal settlements) from later 1960s to 1990s?; how will urban bureaucrats and elite engage with dwellers of interstices when city expands to their border? what kind of political and spatial conflicts will be likely to erupt in the city?

An inquiry into these questions is likely to contribute to the emerging scholarship on the occupation of interstices by the subalterns. The findings can also help open avenues of debate and dialogue and activist engagements on housing policy, real estate, and spatial justice in Pakistani cities.

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## **Authors Profile**

A PhD in public policy, Dr. Imdad Hussain researches and advocates problems of the urban poor through Punjab Urban Resource Centre since 2001. He is also a director of Saiban, a Habitat Award winner NGO working on housing for the poor in Pakistan. He teaches courses on urban policy analysis, urban policy research, and urbanism. He has recently completed his research project on the everyday lives of the urban refugees in Malaysia as a part of his postdoctoral research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As an advisor to the Government of Punjab, he has contributed to formulation of policies on drinking water, transport, urban governance, solid waste management, and especially urban housing.