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Between Home and Street: Constructing Belonging in the Bhatti Gate, Walled City of Lahore

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Abstract

The study focuses on exploring how women construct a sense of belonging in a male-dominated urban space and assert their presence through the case study of Bhatti Gate, Walled City of Lahore. It employs qualitative methods, including interviews with women across different age groups, as well as observations of everyday street life. The study aims to investigate how emotional, social, and sensory connections influence women's experiences of public and domestic spaces. It argues that cultural norms in Pakistan often confine women to the home; however, it makes a case that these restrictions also prompt the development of alternative spatial strategies rooted in the architectural proximity and verticality of the walled city. In this context, homes become a site of resistance, connection, and engagement. Streets represent subtle forms of gendered control in this context, while reflecting cultural values and social hierarchies. Yet, women engage with this built environment by walking, watching, conversing, or just being present, and challenge the conventional spatial boundaries through these visible and invisible acts. The research highlights how women are not only participants but producers of urban space, forging belonging through lived, embodied experiences.

Keywords: Gendered Space, Urban Belonging, Women in Public Space, Spatial Agency, Walled City Lahore.

Introduction

Urban space is more than just a physical setting. It is a lived and experienced environment, shaped by people's daily activities, social roles, and personal identities. For many women, especially those living in old and crowded areas like the Bhatti Gate, Walled City of Lahore, space is not neutral. It shows power structures, gender roles, and cultural expectations. Men often move freely in these spaces, but women experience and use them differently. Their movements are shaped by both clear and hidden boundaries. This research looks at how women

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claim space in the streets of the Bhatti Gate. It tries to understand how their sense of belonging, safety, and identity is formed through their daily actions in public urban spaces. The study sees the lived experiences of women as important for understanding how they use space. It also questions the common belief that public spaces mainly belong to men. Using interviews, direct observations, and related literature, this paper shows that women are not just passive users of space. Instead, they actively deal with, adjust to, and shape the spaces they live in, even when facing social limits. The Walled City of Lahore is a meaningful place for this study. With its tight alleys, packed housing, and old buildings, it shows both tradition and change in urban life. While many studies talk about its architecture and cultural history, fewer explore how everyday users, especially women, move through and live in this space. This paper argues that women's presence in the streets is not accidental. It is shaped by cultural values, age, gender roles, and daily practices that are often ignored in typical urban research. By walking with women through these neighbourhoods and hearing their stories, the paper tries to understand how women experience the city. These personal experiences show how women find small ways to take up space, create comfort, and resist control in everyday life. The aim is not to find fixed answers, but to listen closely and learn from what women see, feel, and remember as they move through public and private spaces.

The idea of "claiming space" is central to this work. It means more than just being physically present. It also includes emotional and symbolic connections to a place. Claiming space can involve repeated visits, feeling at ease, talking with others, or acting like the space belongs to you, even if only for a short time. For women in male-dominated areas, this claim is not simple. Sometimes it is quiet, like choosing a route at a certain hour. Other times it is more visible, like sitting, working, or chatting in public. These acts push back against silent rules about who can be seen, where, and when. The theoretical background of this study uses ideas from several key thinkers. Maurice Merleau-Ponty talks about "embodied experience." He explains that people do not just see space, they feel and understand it with their bodies. Locke and McCann (2016) build on this idea. They say that when people use their senses, the space becomes personal and meaningful. It becomes a place. For the women in this study, streets and corners become familiar through repeated contact.

This turns abstract space into places filled with meaning, routine, and relationships. Yi-Fu Tuan (2021), in his theory of "Space and Place," adds that movement, stopping, memory, and feelings change space into place. For Tuan, a space becomes a place when people give it value. In this study, the women's regular presence gives value to areas that are usually seen as male spaces. Gaston Bachelard (2014) writes about how imagination and memory fill a space with

personal meaning. For women, remembering certain sounds, paths, or events makes their bond with the space stronger.

Edward Casey (1983) also agrees. He explains that memory does not live only in the mind; it lives in places, too. The spaces we walk through, return to, and think about help shape how we see ourselves. In this research, women link certain shops, streets, or corners with personal memories, whether happy, everyday, or difficult. These memories give meaning to the space and help them feel that they belong there, even if the environment feels limited or controlled by others. This study uses qualitative methods. These include interviews and observing daily life to understand the real and complex experiences of women in the Walled City. It focuses on women from different age groups. This helps show how their experience with space changes over time. Young girls, adult women, and older women all use the space differently. Their experiences depend on their needs, social rules, and how freely they can move. For example, younger women may feel more restricted, while older women might have more freedom because of social acceptance or long-term familiarity with the area.

The paper also examines how women define safety in public spaces. Safety is not only about the absence of harm; it is also about emotional comfort, predictability, and control. For many women, safety comes from being known in the community, from using specific paths, or from being accompanied by children or elders. This study argues that their sense of safety is highly contextual, tied to personal experiences and neighbourhood dynamics. Importantly, their sense of safety also influences how much they feel they belong in the space and whether they can perform their daily activities freely. Architecture and urban form are not neutral either. The narrowness of the streets, the presence of shops and homes, and the proximity of other people shape how women move and behave. These physical elements can either enable or limit their activities. For example, A bench offers rest and observation; a busy corner may feel social or unsafe. In both cases, the design of the environment influences behaviour and contributes to how women relate to the space.

Lastly, this paper challenges the idea that streets are only for movement or transport. Streets in the Walled City are transitional spaces, but they also serve as sites of interaction, negotiation, and belonging. They are cultural arenas where gender roles, social expectations, and power relations play out visibly and invisibly. Women's everyday acts of passing, pausing, or interacting in these streets offer insight into broader social patterns and urban life. By bringing attention to these acts, this research highlights how women are not just users but also quiet producers of urban space. In conclusion, this study sets out to understand how women in the Walled City of Lahore claim and belong to urban public spaces. Drawing on theories of lived space, sensory perception, and

memory, it argues that women form strong but often unnoticed relationships with their environments. These relationships help them navigate and negotiate spaces that are not always welcoming. The paper contributes to the growing body of research on gender and urbanism by focusing on lived experience, emphasizing the agency of women, and recognizing the subtle ways in which they shape, and are shaped by, the cities they inhabit.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is based on gender studies, spatial theories, urban sociology, and phenomenology. It focuses on the concept of *belonging* and examines how this sense of belonging differs for women due to social, cultural, and hegemonic dynamics. The study investigates how women navigate, claim, and reshape urban spaces, paying particular attention to how gendered experiences influence their access to and interaction with both public and private spaces. Drawing on the works of scholars like Fenster (2005), Whitzman (2007), the research explores the intersectionality of gender, power, and space, and how these factors affect women's relationships with urban spaces such as streets, homes, and markets. The theories of Locke and McCann (2016), Tuan (2021), and Bachelard (2014) help to frame and interpret women lived experiences and highlight the role of architecture in shaping both personal and collective senses of belonging, particularly in the context of the streets of Bhatti Gate, Walled City, Lahore.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how women claim urban space and create a sense of belonging in male-dominated environments.

2. To understand how the architecture and the built urban environment help women make independent decisions and develop better social and personal connections with the environment.

3. To understand how the sense of belonging is different for women at different ages.

Significance of the Study

This study helps us understand how women in the Bhatti Gate, Walled City of Lahore, define and experience a sense of belonging in both private and public

spaces in their daily lives. Unlike other studies, it does not define gendered spaces merely as safe spaces, but instead explores them through the lens of lived experience. These phenomenological experiences have not been previously evaluated, especially in the context of Pakistan.

Limitations of the Research

This research has several limitations that should be considered:

1. **Geographical Scope**: The study focuses on a specific urban area, which may not fully represent other cities or regions, especially those in the wider Global South. The findings may not apply universally.

2. **Access to Participants**: It can be difficult to reach women who actively reclaim urban space, as many of these actions are informal and often happen on the margins of society. This may limit the range of voices included in the study.

3. **Time Constraints**: The research was conducted over a limited period. This short time frame does not allow for long-term or repeated observation, which may be necessary to understand the lasting impact of women's presence and participation in public space.

4. **Socio-Cultural Differences**: Women's experiences in urban spaces are shaped by culture, religion, class, and age. Since these factors vary widely between communities, the study may not capture the full range of experiences.

Review of the Literature

The paper examines and synthesizes the concepts developed and mentioned in the theoretical framework section to clearly link the study with each other. Crisp (2010) describes that individuals try to make connections with others who share similar views in many settings, such as families, friend groups, religious organizations, sports clubs, political movements, workplaces, schools, local communities, and even nations. This need for connection shows the natural human desire to be part of something bigger than oneself. Belonging can be formal,

through contracts, fees, or joining ceremonies, but it often happens informally through shared experiences and values. The experience of belonging is not always straightforward, as individuals may feel like outsiders in places where they are expected to fit in, or they may find belonging in unexpected circumstances. Antonsich (2010) gives a geographical view and defines belonging as an emotional attachment to a place or group, showing how people feel they belong in different contexts. Hagerty et al. (1993) see belonging as being personally involved and feeling valued in a system or environment. Filstad, Traavik, and Gorli (2019) add that belonging is not fixed; instead, it is a process that changes over time and is shaped by both physical things and social relationships. Terkenli (1995) explains these larger ideas of belonging by confining it to the idea of home as that "home" is more than just a physical place; it is a personally meaningful and emotionally significant space shaped by cultural, social, and psychological factors. She argues that people experience and construct home as a unique kind of region, influenced by memory, identity, and daily life.

To link the idea of belonging with gender, it is important to understand that belonging can feel different for different genders. Allen et al. (2021) explain how social rules and roles influence how people experience belonging. Gender, as a key part of identity, affects how people see and move through their social world, shaping their sense of inclusion. It also influences what behaviour and emotions are seen as acceptable for each gender. These different expectations lead to different experiences of acceptance. Youkhana (2015) adds that the feeling of belonging is shaped by many things, such as social connections, personal emotions, and physical experiences. These feelings are always changing throughout everyday life. When it comes to gender and belonging in the space, it becomes a comprehensive area to study. This process involves facing boundaries and trying to act, engage, and take part in a certain environment. Place plays an important role in shaping lives, building personal and group identities, and either helping or blocking social connections. Feeling attached to something beyond oneself, such as a place, shared values, or social ties, shows that belonging is active and shaped through relationships (Gasparini, 2010). Hayden (1997) and Morokvasic (2013) explain that the relationship between gender and space is a multifaceted and dynamic area of study, encompassing various dimensions of human experience, including mobility, access, comfort, and alienation.

Gendered experiences in both public and private spaces are shaped by social norms, cultural expectations, and power relations. These norms set rules for how different genders should behave in certain places (Bell, 1999). They often lead to unequal access to resources and opportunities, which affects how safe and comfortable people feel in those spaces (Morokvasic, 2013). In many societies, women and gender minorities face more risk in public areas because of gender-based violence and harassment. This leads them to place limits on where they go

and how they behave. For example, they may avoid going out at night, stay away from certain places, or change how they dress to avoid attention (Yadav & Kumari, 2021). Feminist scholars have criticized the split between public and private spaces. They argue that this division has pushed women into the home, kept them out of public life, and supported male-dominated systems (Begum, 2008). The way public spaces are built and used plays an important part in the fight for justice and equality (Begum, Hossain, and Stevens, 2021). Urban design often ignores the needs of different genders. This results in spaces that favour one gender, usually cisgender men (Uteng, 2021). When cities lack good lighting, gender-neutral restrooms, or safe transport systems, women and others may feel unsafe and excluded (Terraza et al. 2020). Research shows women want safe, clean, and comfortable spaces. Men usually care more about fast routes and being on time. Urban planning must include gender concerns from the start, during data collection, design, and after spaces are built (Kareem & Lwasa, 2014). Also, comfort and vulnerability are key to understanding how people feel they belong in a space. These feelings depend on past experiences, social identity, and the design of the space. For example, women may feel safer in spaces with other women. Features like lighting, clear visibility, and access to toilets can help people feel more at ease. A well-lit bus stop, for example, can lower stress for everyone (Ceccato, 2017).

To get the full picture, we must understand how men tend to control public spaces. This bias shows up not only in city design but also in daily actions and power relations, which can push women out and make them feel unsafe (Yadav & Kumari, 2021). In the past, cities were built mainly to meet the needs of men (Beebeejaun-Muslum, 2024). This has led to deep-rooted male control, which affects women's safety, access to services, and sense of belonging in cities. This limits their quality of life (McDowell, 1983). In public spaces, everyday actions help men stay in control, reinforcing gender-based rules and systems. This control can be seen in subtle threats or open violence. The "male gaze" matters here. Cities are often shaped by how men see the world, making women appear as watchers, not full users of public space. Women's actions are judged by male-centered norms, which makes them act cautiously and feel unsafe. These pressures create fear and reduce women's freedom in public life. Gender also affects how people use services. Women want safe and clean spaces. Men focus more on speed and efficiency (Kareem & Lwasa, 2014).

Ranade (2007) introduces the idea of "way losing" to explain how women often feel lost or uncomfortable in public spaces due to fear, the male gaze, and social pressure. Using mapping, she shows how women change their routes and behaviours to stay safe, revealing how cities are not equally accessible to everyone. This highlights the gendered nature of urban spaces and the need for more inclusive planning. Fesenko (2017) elaborates that Gender mainstreaming in

urban planning is important to create safe and inclusive cities for people of all genders and ages. It means making sure women, girls, and gender minorities are included in planning and design decisions. When women are not part of decision-making, gender bias continues in the built environment. Women's activism has long fought for equal rights and continues to push for safer, more inclusive urban spaces (Parker, 2021). By being involved in shaping cities, women can help ensure their needs are met. This includes challenging the idea that public space belongs to men and claiming their right to move freely and safely. Urban design should consider different needs based on gender (Kareem & Lwasa, 2014). Women's safety should be part of all city planning, not treated as a separate issue (Moser, 2012). Fear of violence or harassment often limits women's access to public spaces and reduces their ability to work, socialize, or take part in cultural life. Urban planning must reduce this fear by improving lighting, visibility, and safe transport, and by encouraging community action. Many city projects still fail to address women's safety (Uteng, 2021).

When it comes to women's reclamation of urban spaces, this act is not only about physically occupying space but also a symbolic and political action that reshapes the social fabric of cities (Kirmani, 2020). Fenster (2005) discusses how women in Israeli cities navigate gendered restrictions while asserting their presence in public spaces through activities like shopping and social gatherings. Women also reclaim urban space through cultural and symbolic acts like public art and protests that challenge male control and offer new stories of inclusion. Gender audits of public space help identify what changes are needed to make cities fairer (Uteng, 2021). To succeed, gender-sensitive planning must include physical, social, and policy-level action. Though change is difficult in today's political systems, including women in planning supports global goals for fair and resilient cities (Ceccato, 2017; Yadav & Kumari, 2021; Cobbinah, 2021). The experience of inhabiting and navigating urban streets profoundly shapes a woman's relationship with space, influencing her perceptions, interactions, and sense of belonging within the urban fabric. This relationship is not merely passive but is actively constructed through daily encounters, social interactions, and the negotiation of power dynamics inherent in the urban environment (Castán Broto & Neves Alves, 2018). Amin (2002) provides insight into how individuals in diverse cities reaffirm their belonging through everyday interactions. In his study of multicultural cities, he illustrates how markets and social networks serve as everyday practices that help people feel connected to the city, they collectively shape.

McFarlane and Robinson (2012) and Kapsali and Katsikana (2024) focus on how small-scale social infrastructures, such as community centers and informal gathering spaces, support urban life. These spaces serve as everyday institutions where local residents express collective claims on the city, showing how spatial claims are continuously produced and maintained through daily life. The lived

experience of space is closely connected to the sense of belonging. As discussed earlier, the sense of belonging depends on many factors that come together to shape identity, which in turn defines a person's lived experience, as well as socially defined norms.

Locke and McCann (2016), drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas, relate the perception of space to sensory experience. They describe a place as a space where the senses are deeply involved, transforming spatial experience and creating a sense of ownership. This process shapes both identity and the feeling of belonging. Tuan (2021) and Bachelard (2014) use design language and perception to explain how these ideas help us understand women lived experiences in the streets of Bhatti Gate. Casey (1983) explains that memory is not only held in the mind but also in the body and the places around us. He argues that we remember not just by thinking, but by being in meaningful spaces. Familiar places, such as streets or homes, help keep the past alive. Memory is both active and passive, and closely linked to how we live our daily lives. This helps us understand how women create a sense of belonging in different spaces through their lived experiences.

Research Methodology

The current research is an outcome of a graduate studio at the Department of Architecture, University of Engineering and Technology (UET), the studio named Analysis of Architectural Precedent was designed in collaboration with Women in Architecture Pakistan (WAP). It focused on understanding the role of the built environment in defining the experiences of different genders in a city, with a focus on different areas of Lahore.

The studio's curriculum provided the methodological framework for the project explained in this paper. The current research used qualitative methods to understand the experiences of women in Bhatti Gate, Lahore. Bhatti Gate was chosen among all the gates because it is primarily a residential area, providing the greatest opportunity to analyze women who are rooted in a culturally rich environment. This included a deep study of literature to find important ideas and develop concepts, which helped the researcher learn about the bigger picture and synthesize the usage of space by women. Mapping was carried out to categorize different street typologies and analyze how they promote certain cultures and activities. Photography has been used as visual proof to support and explain the findings. Semi-structured interviews were held to understand women's experiences.

A simple random method was used to choose the participants (women) for interviews. From the analysis of the interviews, they were then categorized into

three age categories for better understanding. This categorization gave useful ideas about how women of different ages develop a sense of belonging with the places at personal and social levels. By analyzing what was said in the interviews, the research looked at women's mental, emotional, and physical links to space. The study does not follow quantitative methods as it focuses more on real-life experiences and how space is connected to identity. The experiences and ideas collected have also been shown using Photography, conceptual maps, and illustrations to help the reader clearly understand the analysis.

Discussion and Analysis

This section looks at how women in the Bhatti Gate Walled City of Lahore feel a sense of belonging in their everyday lives. As Gasparini (2010) says, feeling attached to something beyond oneself, such as a place, shared values, or social ties, shows that belonging is active and shaped through relationships. Hence, belonging is not only a feeling but something women create through their daily routines, relationships, and the spaces they use. Similarly, Locke and McCann (2016), drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas, explain the concepts of space and place. According to them, space is a sensory, measurable area, whereas place is a space that becomes so closely aligned with its user that it begins to embed itself into their lifestyle, eventually becoming part of their identity. This process adds deep meaning and contributes to the development of their sense of belonging. This idea is also supported by Terkenli (1995). In order to understand the wholesome spatial paradigms, the transformations of meanings developed through the areas of their life, the following methodologies were used.

- Defining public and private Realms.
- Interviews with women (qualitative insight)

Defining public and private realms:

In order to understand the navigation of women in space, it was a primary task to grasp the understanding of the public and private domains. The two defined domains are.

- The Home- Developing culture through Proximity
- Spatial mapping of street typologies

To understand navigation and the claim of space, it was important to explore how and in what ways these streets promote culture and identity. This cannot be fully understood without identifying the typology of the streets, as the street form eventually generates the activities. By closely examining different types of streets in the Walled City (Figure 01), three main typologies were identified. Each typology reflects and promotes distinct cultural patterns and social interactions, which will be discussed in the following sections.



Figure 01*: The Typology of the Streets.*
Source: Hashim Saeed, 2024.

The Three Major Typologies of the streets found are

i. Streets with Dead End- Cul-de-sac
ii. The Residential streets
iii. The Mix Used Streets

Interviews: The women's sense of belonging and their ways of claiming space were explored through interviews. For this purpose, 30 women from the Walled City of Lahore were interviewed. The participants were then categorized based on age, as age emerged as an important factor in shaping how women experience belonging and claim space in their surroundings. Categories of women in reference to age are shared below.

Category 1:

Age Bracket: 55 and Above

Living in the Walled City: Since Birth

Category 2:

Age Bracket: 35 and Above

Living in the Walled City: 20 Years

Category 3:

Age Bracket: 15 and Above

Living in the Walled City: Since Birth

The findings drawn from interviews, documentation, and spatial analysis are presented as follows.

Home as the Primary Realm of Belonging

Hagerty et al. (1993) see belonging as being personally involved and feeling valued within a system or environment. In this context, the home becomes the most important place for developing a sense of belonging. Women from all categories described the home as their primary identity. As Youkhana (2015) explains, the feeling of belonging is shaped by many factors such as social connections, personal emotions, and physical experiences. The women of the Walled City emphasize their homes as the core of their social relationships and emotional well-being. The women in Category 1, those of older age, whether born in the Walled City or having moved there after marriage, associate belonging with safety, routine, and control within the home. They identify themselves through their homes. Although the neighbourhood is important, they consider their homes their personal domains. Even when offered relocation, many refused to leave because their homes gave them a sense of power and stability. Women in Category 2 were also socially connected to their surroundings. However, the younger women (aged 15 and above) showed less attachment to the area but still defined their homes as their only secure territory. Terkenli (1995) explains that home is not just a physical place; it is a personally meaningful and emotionally rich space, shaped by cultural, social, and psychological elements. She argues that people experience home as a unique kind of region, deeply connected to memory, identity, and daily life. This idea is clearly supported by the women of the Walled City—most of whom are housewives, who define

their lives through relationships with their husbands, in-laws, children, and especially their neighbours. Their sense of belonging is deeply rooted in their homes.

We can understand this better by looking at how women describe the architectural elements of their houses:

- **Windows:** A secret source of connection between two women, one house whispering to another.
- **Doors:** They connect when opening onto the street, but disconnect when opening into the busy bazaar.
- **Roofs:** A space for sharing with other women—a place for conversation, sometimes even for secret meetings between lovers.
- **Stairs:** They mark the movement from public areas to more private family spaces.

In the Walled City, women's sense of belonging is shaped by spatial verticality. They spend most of their time inside their homes, and their main interactions with the outside world happen through architectural elements like windows, doors, and the chobara (upper floor space). These elements act as tools for communication and connection, forming a quiet but strong dialogue between women across different homes. Hence, a single home becomes the origin of belonging for every woman. However, as Terkenli (1995) explains, the quality of the home should not be confined by walls and physical boundaries. Instead, it is an emotional sphere that expands the sense of belonging beyond rigid material limits, allowing the home to be understood in a broader, more expansive way. This raises an important question: how can a person sitting or living in a single unit claim a sense of belonging in a space beyond its physical boundary?

Tuan (2021) and Bachelard (2014) address this question by emphasizing the power of sensory experiences, which have the ability to reshape and transform one's perception of space. In this way, a woman who lives within the physical and spatial verticality of her home is still able to connect with other women in the same environment through shared sensory experiences, such as sound, sight, and even taste. These sensory connections extend the boundaries of home and create a shared emotional and spatial experience.

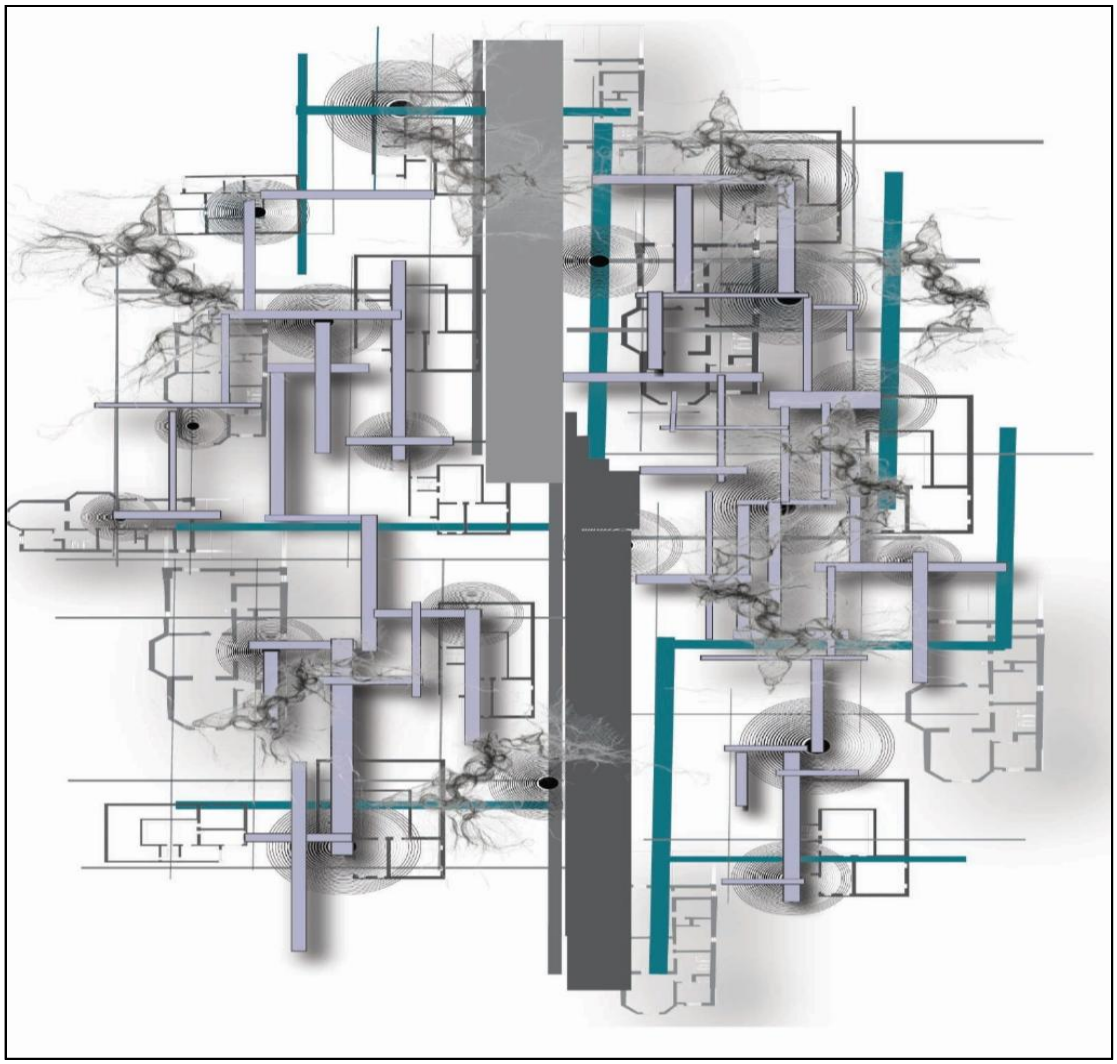


Figure 02: *The Negotiation Between The Houses Through Sensory Experiences*
(Source: Author)

Figure 02 is a map based on data collected through observation, photography, and field notes. It mainly shows how different street types and the closeness of houses affect the sensory experiences of women, redefining their private reality. Figure 02 maps the links between houses, streets, and senses to show how women feel at home beyond their own walls. Thick and thin lines trace three street types. The widest grey band is Tibbi Gali Bazaar, busy and loud. Crimson-blue lines mark the main residential arteries. Street form shapes sense strength: the closer and more sheltered the lane, the stronger the shared smells, sights, and sounds. Cloud symbols mark drifting cooking smells that pass easily between tightly packed houses, giving neighbors a daily reminder of one another. Straight lines show visual contact; women can see across windows, doors, and rooftops, exchanging quick glances or gestures

without leaving home. Wheel-like icons mark sounds, representing children's voices that echo through every street. This constant sound acts as a social thread.

As shown in Figure 02, the conceptual illustration of sensory experiences suggests that houses are engaged in a kind of communication, developing an ongoing negotiation with one another through human aesthetics, namely, the five senses. The interviewees shared that the close proximity of homes allows women to interact with one another with ease. They can often look into each other's houses and even overhear personal conversations. This sensory invasion creates an unseen bond, for which architecture is primarily responsible. The women also mentioned that, through smell, they can often tell what is being cooked in their neighbours' homes. This everyday sensory sharing forms a culture of connection, where knowing, sharing, and communicating go beyond the physical walls. It transforms the rigid definition of "home" into a more fluid and collective experience, one that assures safety and creates an invisible ring of belonging. However, the Category 1 interviewees (older women) noted that this bond is slowly weakening. The younger women in Category 3 did not fully embrace this sense of closeness, although they acknowledged that the architectural proximity still allows them to connect and communicate with others in the alleyways and nearby houses, as also shown in Figure 03.



Figure 03: *Close Proximity of the Houses of Bhatti Gate, Lahore*
Source: Author.

The Public Realm and the Sense of Belonging

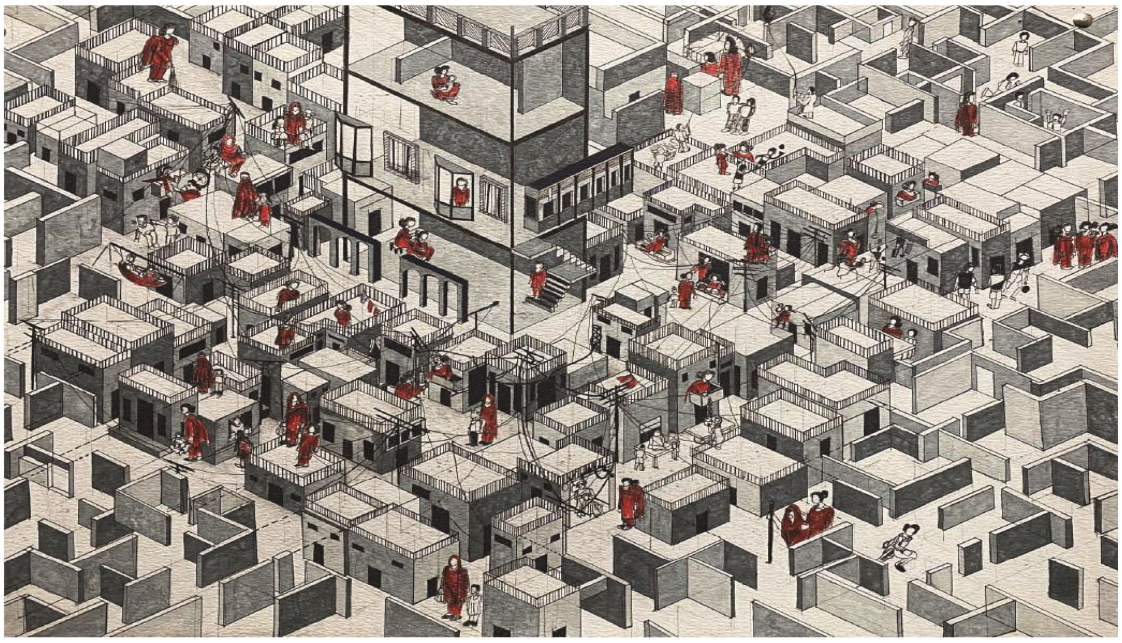


Figure 04: *Illustration depicting Children as Bridges to Space*
Source: Author.

As observed in all three street typologies, children play a critical role in shaping how women interact with public space. Figure 04 highlights that children, especially those of school-going age, are constant participants across residential, semi-private, and mixed-use streets. Their presence enables women to enter, navigate, and remain in public spaces in a culturally accepted way. This reflects the broader societal framework in which women rarely claim space for themselves alone. Instead, they are often only allowed to move freely or be in certain spaces if they are caring for someone, like being a mother, or if they are with someone else, usually a man, to make them comfortable. The image not only shows children actively occupying the street space but also reveals the roof culture. The rooftops, often referred to as chatt, form an elevated, semi-private sphere where women feel a heightened sense of belonging and control. These spaces, situated on the top floors, extend the domestic sphere vertically and offer a refuge from the gaze and constraints of the public street below. Women engage in everyday activities like drying laundry, sitting, socializing, and even watching over the street from above. This verticality allows them to claim space without direct confrontation with the public gaze, reinforcing a layered notion of home. At the same time, the horizontal expanse of the street becomes another crucial layer in women's spatial experience. This dual occupation, of rooftop and street, highlights how women navigate both vertical and horizontal dimensions of urban space to cultivate a sense of belonging, and it's a constant cultural loop in which the women are embedded.

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Figure 05: Streets with Dead End- Cul-de-sac
(Source: Author*)*

In purely residential cul-de-sacs (Figure 05), the spatial configuration resembles an open courtyard where both rooftops and streets serve as extensions of the home. Women of all ages, particularly older residents who have lived in the area for

decades, assert a strong sense of spatial authority. The absence of vehicular traffic and the familiar network of neighbours enhance the perception of safety and community. These women, as Fenster (2005) suggests, are actively claiming space through repeated social practices like chatting, sitting outside, or keeping doors open during power outages. Children playing freely here only further deepen women's engagement and confidence in the spaces.



Figure 06: *The Open-Ended Residential Streets*
(Source: Author)

In narrow residential streets (Figure 06), where homes are closely built and streets are small in scale, the built environment naturally supports a semi-private atmosphere. Women use this space cautiously, often limiting their presence to directly outside their homes. However, the social presence of children acts as a bridge, offering them more comfort and a legitimate reason to linger or interact. As Amin (2002) notes, such micro-level interactions are key to forming a sense of urban belonging, and in these tight-knit environments, the combination of children's activity and vertical visibility (from windows or rooftops) creates a layered comfort zone.



Figure 07: *The Mixed Used Street*
(Source: Author)

In contrast, the mixed-use streets (Figure 07) present more challenges. These spaces are dominated by male shopkeepers, street vendors, and heavy traffic, limiting the sense of comfort and control women experience. Yet even here, children serve as entry points. When accompanied by children, women can navigate these otherwise male-dominated spaces with greater social acceptability. However, as Kareem and Lwasa (2014) emphasize, male-centered systems and the male gaze restrict women's autonomy and redefine their presence as secondary or reactive. In these streets, women's movements become cautious and strategic rather than fluid and confident.

Women's relationship with the street, whether in cul-de-sacs, residential alleys, or mixed-use environments, is shaped by how the space is built, how it is used, and how it is perceived through social roles. Through the lens of children, women navigate these complex terrains, reclaiming a presence in the public realm within culturally acceptable norms. This layered process of spatial negotiation echoes the argument that claiming space goes far beyond ownership; it is an act deeply rooted in social relations, lived experience, and everyday practices.

The difference in gender roles is strongly connected to how the social environment controls access, behaviour, and visibility. Women’s movement in public is usually limited by unspoken cultural rules. Their presence is mostly accepted when it is linked to family or household responsibilities, such as buying groceries, accompanying children, or visiting relatives. Men, on the other hand, can move and spend time in public spaces without these limits, which strengthens their visible presence and influence in the urban setting.

Even with these restrictions, women are not passive. Although they may have less physical mobility, they quietly hold together and manage the social fabric of the community. The domestic sphere, with its relationships, routines, and mutual support networks, is largely organized and sustained by women. Through everyday acts of care, hospitality, and neighbourly interaction, they maintain the smooth running of both the household and the wider neighbourhood.

Women also develop ways to work around these limits. They take part in rooftop activities, plan their outings for certain times, and often use children as a way to access public spaces. These strategies allow them to extend their presence and influence, shaping both domestic life and the urban environment in subtle but lasting ways.

This constant negotiation between visibility and acceptance develops a consciousness that is both careful and adaptive. Women learn to read subtle social cues, manage their timing and movement, and balance tradition with personal agency. In this way, the social environment not only limits their mobility but also trains their capacity for resilience, negotiation, and silent influence over the shared urban and domestic fabric.

Conclusion

This paper does not conclude with bold solutions or strong claims. Instead, it focuses on the quiet actions and everyday choices through which women shape their presence in the Walled City. By walking alongside, we begin to see that their ways of knowing and moving through space are not always visible on maps or in planning documents. Their routes are guided by memories, smells, pauses, and emotions, not just by destinations. In a city often seen through the eyes of men, women offer a different, more sensitive, and personal understanding of space. These daily negotiations are not signs of weakness. They are wise and careful responses to a complex and often challenging environment. The women in this study are not claiming space through dramatic acts. They are doing so slowly and thoughtfully, by stopping at a familiar shop, speaking with neighbours, or remembering a quiet rooftop. These small actions show care, respect, and quiet strength. One important way women claim space is through relationships, especially with their children. In places where a woman cannot go herself, her child may still be able to go. Through this connection, her presence and identity are extended. In this way, the act of claiming space becomes larger than the individual. It becomes shared, reaching across families and generations.

Listening to these small and often unnoticed experiences shows us that cities are not only made by buildings, roads, and policies. They are also shaped by emotions, memories, relationships, and the quiet courage of those who move through them with care. This understanding invites us to see the city not only as a physical space but as a living place full of meaning, shaped by the everyday lives of women.

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