

Plots, Speculation, and Capital in Urban Pakistan

I am a first-year graduate student in anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. My dissertation project takes a historical and ethnographic view of housing schemes in Pakistan. I would like to better understand the specific struggles, conflicts, alliances, and exercises of power through which the housing scheme emerged as the quintessential form of urban planning in Pakistan, as well as explore that form as a node for speculative investment, national development, urban inequality, and resistance in the present. This summer, I plan to spend the months of July and August conducting preliminary fieldwork in the city of Lahore, primarily focusing on the housing scheme plot as a speculative asset.

Throughout Pakistan's major cities, housing schemes developed as early as the 1990s remain almost entirely vacant. The plots are sold, but they belong to professional speculators. These speculators decide whether to sell based upon the development of the scheme, the growth of the city around it, political changes, economic trends, personal finances, and a number of other factors. Further, the next buyer will very likely be another speculator, and if the plot ever does reach a genuine buyer, it will change ownership several times and rise dramatically in price before doing so, barring all but the most well-off in society from obtaining it.

Plots are generally seen as the most desirable form of investment in Pakistan. Interest bearing deposits are lower risk but also lower reward, and have historically been a source of controversy due to Islam's prohibition of usury. Stocks are largely viewed as requiring too much expertise and a greater risk than more stable (read tangible) plots. Thus, plots are the preferred form of investment, and accordingly, function as a speculative asset rather than a consumable good.

The urban poor are therefore left to build their houses on land that they do not own, in the ever-decreasing space between numerous state and privately developed housing schemes. These informal settlements, or *katchi abadis*, provide shelter for the street cleaners, domestic workers, taxi drivers, gardeners, tailors, food vendors, and most ironically, construction workers, who underpin the functioning of Pakistani cities but cannot afford to legally live in them. More than half of Pakistan's urban residents live in *katchi abadis*. It is estimated that there are well over 2,000 such settlements in the country housing 30-40 million people, or nearly a quarter of Pakistan's citizens. This is not a problem, it is an epidemic.

My primary research site this summer will be a well-known property portal based out of Lahore, a connection made while conducting fieldwork for my MA thesis in 2014. The company intersects the realms of developers and investors and will provide a unique opportunity to better understand the forms of speculation, exchange, and capital formation that emerge in Pakistan's property market – i.e. the stakes of the plot as a speculative investment. However, I also plan to use my time at the company as a platform to establish relationships with state regulators, architects, engineers, and city planners, potentially opening up further sites of inquiry. Through these engagements with the makers of Lahore's formal built environment, my hope is to become introduced to those of its informal one. Here, I hope to learn more about how residents of *katchi abadis* navigate, appropriate, and resist the city's speculative housing sector. Lastly, I intend to conduct preliminary research at the Punjab Provincial Archives and the National Documentation Center in Islamabad in order to begin the process of historically locating the emergence of the housing scheme form.

Because my project entails multiple sites and scales, it will be crucial to start refining my research questions and design at an early stage. The opportunity to conduct preliminary fieldwork in Pakistan this summer will be invaluable toward those ends.