

An Assessment of Housing Decisions among Shabia Residents

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Introduction

Mention the term “shabia,” or “social housing,” to any Omani, and a handful of associations come to mind: poverty, violence, lack of education. Social housing is a concept burdened with assumptions, assumptions that often reflect poorly upon its residents. Using the Asset-Based Community Development framework, this paper seeks to dispel notions regarding the Shabia by endeavoring to understand how its residents perceive their community and how this affects their housing decisions. What about the Shabia encourages residents to come, and remain, there? Why would they consider leaving? How have they addressed the challenges associated with living in social housing?

This research will contribute to the body of knowledge informing Oman’s housing policy and initiatives for low-income citizens, offering insight as to how government regulations can be altered in order to utilize community assets while addressing residents’ grievances. Additionally, the research will dispel misconceptions regarding social housing and its residents, offering new perspectives on how the government – and the nation as a whole – can accommodate low-income residents in ways that are sensitive to their true situation, not their perceived experience.

Terminology

For the purposes of this research, “social housing” refers to dwellings built by the Omani government and intended for low-income citizens. Omanis refer to these social housing projects as “the Shabia.” Both “shabia” and “social housing” have been employed interchangeably. “Home,” “unit,” and “house” have been used intentionally, with “unit” used more often to describe dwellings in the technical sense (as in policies), “home” usually employed to represent dwellings conceptually or as possessions, and “house” used to express dwellings in the physical sense. “Community” refers specifically to the Shabia Al-Khoud, the specific social housing

complex studied (see Methodology for more details). The community is composed of households connected by their physical proximity and shared objectives, including providing a safe home for their children, creating a network of neighbors, etc. Community members do not necessarily know each other or interact formally; however, they may engage in social interactions. “Neighborhood” and “community” have been used interchangeably.

It is necessary to place the community’s component households within the broader context of the Omani family. Families must first be understood on the organizational level in order to provide a foundation upon which the household can be studied.

In referencing the family and household, this study will draw upon the terminology established by Stevenson, with slight variations necessitated by the nature of the research (Stevenson “Family and Household: Variation and Definition”). “Family” will consist of three levels of diminishing membership (see Figure 1). The most basic unit of the family is the “nuclear family,” or “usra” in Arabic, and includes a mother, father, and their children. A group of nuclear families residing in the same dwelling constitutes a “household,” or “bayt” in Arabic. The extended family includes the primary household as well as any remaining nuclear families or individuals related through blood or marriage living outside of the home.

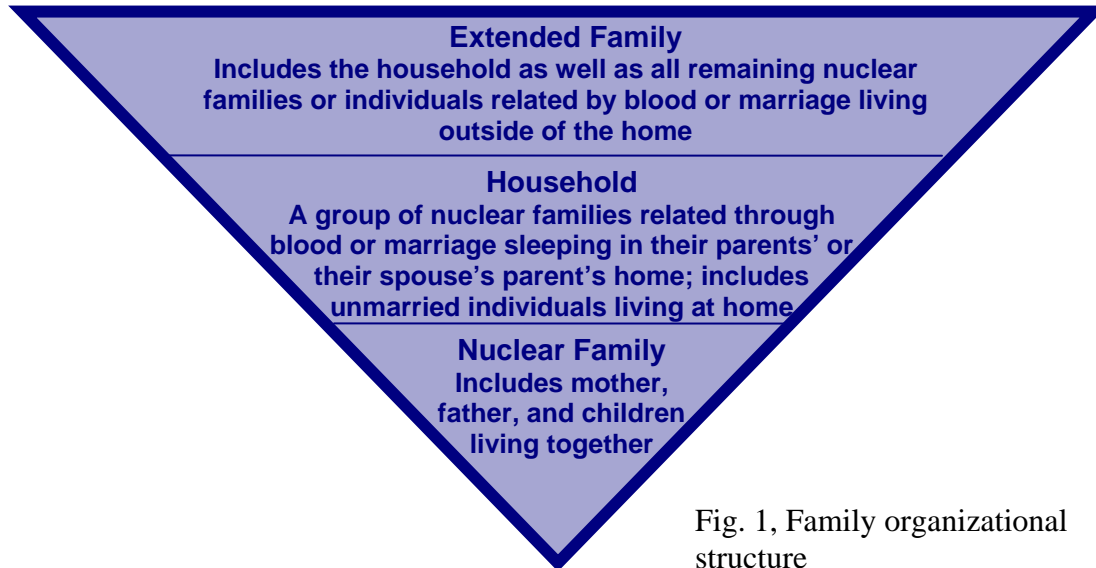


Fig. 1, Family organizational structure

A hypothetical example will help to demonstrate these relationships. Ahmed and Asma have four children, Fatma, Abdullah, Shya, and Sultan. Fatma and Abdullah are married and have children of their own. Abdullah and his nuclear family live with his parents. Shya is unmarried and lives at home. Sultan is unmarried and works in Dubai. Thus, Fatma's nuclear family and Abdullah's nuclear family constitute two overlapping nuclear families. Ahmed's household includes Ahmed, Asma, Shya, and Abdullah's nuclear family. The extended family includes all of Ahmed and Asma's children and grandchildren, as well as more distant relatives, such as Ahmed's siblings, Fatma's in-laws, etc.

As Stevenson indicates, these distinctions are necessary for research purposes although they may not be deemed necessary by the community being studied ("Family and Household: Variation and Definition"). Survey instruments and interview protocols have been sensitive to the cultural differences in the definition of "family" and employed the same terminology established herein. Generally, it should be assumed that the nuclear family supersedes the extended family in references to "family" in data presented in this research.

Social Services in Oman

The Omani government, as well as various charitable organizations, has created social safety nets for low-income citizens. Poverty combat and housing assistance programs are in place, as well as a social care program for special groups, such as the physically challenged (Oman: Human Development Report 2003 85). Oman's Social Security Law "contains provisions for individuals on benefits, including widows, orphans, those unable to work, divorced women, the nuclear families of prisoners and other categories who have no visible means of support." In 2005, this program granted 48,869 households a total of RO 27,228,338 (Oman: 2006-2007 149).

Two major charities in Oman, the Omani Charitable Organization and Omani Women's Society, augment government programs. Omani Charitable Organization directly addresses housing needs with its "accommodation aids." Between 1999 and 2002, the organization constructed 210 rooms for "the nomads inhabiting in remote areas." After receiving a sizable corporate donation in 2002, the project expanded to include "complete lodging units" with two or three rooms, utilities, and a patio. Beneficiaries are primarily households receiving social insurance or on the waiting list for social insurance ("Achievements"). The Omani Women's Society and its volunteers have established literacy programs, organized summer and children's clubs, built nurseries and kindergartens, and conducted dressmaking classes, pursuits benefitting local women and their children (Fakhro 411).

Social housing is one facet of Oman's growing social services. Social housing units are designed to be region-specific; houses in Muscat are different from those in Sur. The units are paid for in installments of RO 25 per month, with exemptions granted to beneficiaries who are injured or unable to work or who have regularly paid 75% of the installments and can justify an

exception. If the beneficiary deceases and his or her successors are minors who cannot earn an income, the installments will also be waived (Oman: Human Development Report 2003 90).

The concept of social housing in Oman first emerged in 1970 (Al-Saqlawi 23), although it was not until 1977 that an ample housing solution for low-income Omanis was established. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, which was responsible for social housing at the time, had funded pilot projects in Muscat, Sur, and Nizwa in 1974, but the efforts were not part of a comprehensive national housing policy. Finally, in 1977, Royal Decree No. 35/77 – also known as the 1977 Social Housing Act – was put forth. The Act defined eligibility, house type, cost, application requirements, and a distribution system, authorizing the government to build and distribute social housing units among eligible Omanis (Al-Saqlawi 61).

Under the 1977 Social Housing Act, every Omani citizen between twenty one and sixty years of age whose income did not exceed RO 1200 was eligible to benefit from social housing units. The applicant could not “enjoy any housing scheme from any housing institution” and was required to disown any other house or residential land. The applicant agreed to repay the cost of the housing unit within a period determined by the government, with a maximum repayment period of twenty years. During this period, the applicant could not sell, rent, or modify the house; however, he or she was responsible for its maintenance. When the cost of the unit was repaid, the house would be re-registered in the applicant’s name. The Ministry of Housing could withdraw the house if these conditions were not met (Al-Saqlawi 62).

Royal Decrees Nos. 27/88 and 92/88 altered the 1977 Social Housing Act slightly, reducing the eligible age range to twenty one to fifty and increasing the maximum income to RO 3000. The repayment period changed from a maximum of twenty years to an open-ended period at the discretion of the Ministry of Housing (Al-Saqlawi 62).

Under these various housing schemes, the government constructed 7754 social housing units for low-income Omanis between 1970 and 1991, an annual average of 369 units. The majority of these efforts occurred under Sultan Qaboos' First through Third Five-Year Plans, which included goals for the construction of social housing units. The First Five-Year Plan (1976-1980), promised to build 2244 units (Al-Saqlawi 23). Oman exceeded its goal, completing 3167 units, an annual average of 633, at a cost of RO 67,940,417. Numbers dwindled, however, and by the Third Five-Year Plan (1986-1990), only 1575 units were erected during the term (Al-Saqlawi 25). Between 1970 and 1989, the majority of these units, 43.9%, were built in Muscat (Al-Saqlawi 26).

Social housing in Oman essentially ceased to exist as it originally had by 1991. The Fourth Five-Year Plan (1991-1996) put an end to government-constructed units. Instead, it provided for loans to be given to Omanis for building houses themselves (Al-Saqlawi 25). The new scheme increased public participation in housing design, but Omanis' increased involvement came at a high cost. Land was not always available, resulting in decreased housing production and a decreased number of eligible applicants receiving the benefits of the housing loan scheme. Further, additional costs, including utilities and building insurance, were paid for by the applicant, limiting applicants' ability to build a house with the allocated loan (Al-Saqlawi 63). The eligible income range was also limited to between RO 130 and 150 per month, or RO 1560 to 1800 annually (Al-Saqlawi 64).

Although the Omani government was no longer responsible for building houses for low-income citizens, the nation's spending on housing actually increased during the period following the declaration put forth in the Fourth Five-Year Plan. Between 1991 and 1995, 8.42% of Oman's expenditures were devoted to housing, up from 4.19% in the period from 1986 to 1990.

National expenditure was, further, significantly higher than that in neighboring countries (see Figure 2) (Islam 104).

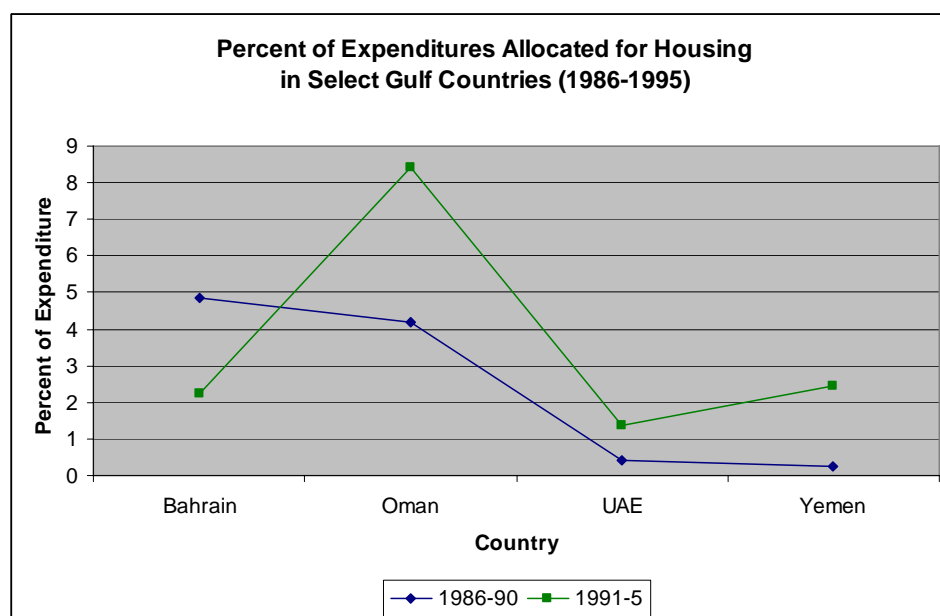


Fig. 2 Percent of Expenditures Allocated for Housing in Select Gulf Countries (1986-1995), adapted from table from Islam, Muhammad Q. “Fiscal Policy and Social Welfare in Selected MENA Countries.” Earnings Inequality, Unemployment, and Poverty in the Middle East and North Africa. Eds. Wassim Shahin and Ghassan Dibeh. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000. 95-110.

Although the 1991 policy attempted to give loans in lieu of social housing units, the Ministry of Housing, Electricity, and Water has since chosen to augment social housing with both housing benefits and housing loans programs. Under the housing benefits program, the government offers RO 10,000 grants to households with a monthly income below RO 129 in need of housing or renovations to their current home, as well as individuals on social assistance who are not benefitting from another government housing program. Four hundred sixty households received grants totaling RO 4,751,000 from this initiative in 2005 (Oman: 2006-2007 265). In 2006, a total of RO 1,129,000 was distributed to ninety one households; that November, Sultan Qaboos authorized the construction of 1000 units for Omanis eligible for the housing benefits program as well (“Environment and Services, Part 2” 203).

The housing loans program, introduced in 1991, currently aids Omanis in a slightly higher income bracket, earning between RO 130 and 250 a month (Oman: 2006-2007 265-6). Eligible Omanis may use the loans – of up to RO 15,000 – for building, purchasing, or expanding a house (“Environment and Services, Part 2” 203). From 2005 to 2006, RO 2,635,304 was distributed to eligible households (Oman: 2006-2007 265-6). In 2006, only RO 1,251,000 was distributed to one hundred households (“Environment and Services, Part 2” 203).

Eligible individuals may instead choose to participate in the government’s social housing program. In 2004 and 2005, 748 and 480 units, respectively, were constructed across the country (Oman: 2005-2006 182, Oman: 2006-2007 265). Many of the houses were funded by the Omani Charitable Organization; however, the government provided most of the funding. After the 2006 Royal Tour, Sultan Qaboos ordered the construction of 1203 units to “ensure social housing stocks do not become depleted” (Oman: 2006-2007 265). The number of units built in 2006, 1129, is consequently considerably higher than in previous years (“Environment and Services, Part 2” 203).

Theory

Information specific to the Sultanate of Oman is scarce; however, community development research completed in other countries provided a framework for assessing assets and challenges in the Shabia. Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is a theory that seeks to eliminate needs-based thinking, a perspective dictating that community members perceive only the problems in their neighborhood. A resident operating under a needs-based perspective would define his or her community by its high crime rate or low income level. As a result of needs-based thinking, residents become overwhelmed by the list of seemingly unsolvable problems in their neighborhood. When imposed by outsiders, the needs-based

perspective can cause community-members to adopt this “we are deficient” attitude. They begin to think that they are powerless to affect positive change (4 Feb.).

As an alternative to needs-based thinking, ABCD connects six types of community assets, including talents, skills, and passions, community groups and networks, government and non-governmental organizations, physical assets, economic assets, and stories, heritage, and local identity and values (4 Feb.). A community-member utilizing the ABCD approach would describe his or her neighborhood’s numerous church groups, diverse history, or stunning mountains, focusing on his or her community’s assets instead of deficiencies. Once residents recognize their community’s inherent value, they can begin to “promote economic growth...organize local community-building activities...facilitate citizen action around critical issues...and rebuild relationships, trust, and ‘social capital’” (Kretzmann and McKnight 3).

As its name implies, ABCD comes from a community development standpoint. Its objective is to improve the standard of living in communities worldwide by lowering crime, stimulating the economy, and so on. This research merely draws upon the basic assessment of community assets suggested by ABCD by asking social housing residents to consider what brought them, and keeps them, in the community. What does the Shabia offer that no other place does? How does residents’ experience in the neighborhood differ from outsiders’ perceptions of their experience? What challenges face residents in the Shabia, and how have they addressed them?

Hypothesis

Based upon the prevalence of needs-based thinking implied in the ABCD approach, I had assumed that I would encounter a bleak community in the Shabia Al-Khoud. I had heard comments from other Omanis about residents’ economic status, ethnicity, and education level; I

knew that the Shabia was initially intended for low-income Omanis and that Sultan Qaboos had simply given units to many households there. Based upon this knowledge, I assumed that most households would have come to the Shabia for economic reasons, and remained there for economic reasons. Further, I expected that interviewees would express a desire to “get out” of the Shabia in order to secure a better life.

Methods

This research was conducted from September to December 2008 in the Shabia Al-Khoud, a group of approximately 700 social housing units located in Muscat, the capital of the Sultanate of Oman. The units were initially constructed in 1985. Through personal connections, I first met with a nuclear family living in the Shabia in September 2008, during which time I visited four homes with Ahlam, my host mother. I collected observations and conducted informal conversations in which I asked general questions about family, personal history, and social housing in order to gauge the feasibility of research.

In November 2008, I lived with the same family for one week in order to conduct the majority of my interviews; I returned for one night in early December 2008 in order to complete my work. During these visits, Ahlam and I visited fifteen homes and conducted nine interviews. I employed snowball sampling, utilizing Ahlam’s network. She accompanied me on every visit, introducing me to residents and explaining who I was and what I was doing. Her presence was also intended to increase my legitimacy among residents. I hoped that if they knew that I was living with a family in the Shabia, they would be more responsive to my research and less likely to assume that I had an ulterior motive. Initially, homes were visited regardless of language spoken; however, interviews were then conducted only with English-speaking residents.

During each interview, Ahlam engaged in friendly conversation, and then introduced me to the respondent in Arabic. I explained my research and rationale for interviewing the individual in English. The formal interview portion would then begin; I generally followed the interview protocol (see Appendix), but often asked for details depending on responses. Ahlam, as well as other household members, were usually present; I found this set up to be an asset. The presence of other people created a comfortable atmosphere for interviewees and allowed me to observe normal household function. Additionally, interviewees often asked their siblings or parents questions that they could not answer, especially those relating to why they initially moved into the Shabia. I took notes by hand throughout the interviews, which varied in length depending on the respondent's personality. At the conclusion of the formal interview, I asked for consent usually using a form in Arabic. I usually asked for permission to take photographs of the house, which helped me to remember the home and gauge the interviewee's comfort level. We then ate or drank and engaged in informal conversation, during which time I asked less threatening questions such as, "When did you finish school?" By ending the interview this way, I hoped that I would leave respondents feeling comfortable with the information they had just shared.

After returning home, I wrote field notes on what I had observed, paying particular attention to the interior and exterior of the house, other people I had seen in the house, and general perceptions of the interview experience. I also drew a floor plan with the parts of the house that I had seen; in some cases, floor plans included only the front door and sitting room. Floor plans helped me to keep track of the homes and look for patterns in the interior spatial structure of houses in the Shabia. I augmented these observations with field notes I had collected from living with the family in the Shabia Al-Khoud, such as notes from an engagement party I

had attended with Ahlam, and external photographs of houses in the Shabia. I typed interview notes and coded them first by question (for example, “Why did you come to the Shabia?”), then by theme (given the house, family reasons, economic reasons, other). Themes were apparent after conducting a handful of interviews.

In addition to studying the Shabia Al-Khoud, I also utilized contacts in Mabella, where another social housing complex is located. Questionnaires in Arabic with inquiries similar to the interview protocol were distributed to two households (see Appendix for English translation). Unfortunately, the scope of the study did not facilitate further investigation in this community. The information gathered in these surveys was merely used to aid the researcher in achieving a more comprehensive understanding of social housing.

The methodology employed in this study draws upon strategies used in Álvarez-Rivadulla and Zetter and DeSouza’s previous housing research. Álvarez-Rivadulla studied housing decisions among residents of gated communities in Montevideo, Uruguay (47). Zetter and DeSouza established a methodology for ethnographic research among low-income group housing residents using a community in Recife, Brazil as a case study (149).

Álvarez-Rivadulla utilized interviews, advertisements, informal conversations, documents (state regulations, etc.), field notes, observations, pictures, and secondary data (statistics) in order to achieve a holistic perspective of the area (49). I employed a similar method, relying on casual conversations, photographs, field notes, observations, drawings, government publications, and scholarly sources in an attempt to fully comprehend the living situation in the Shabia.

My research was also guided by the frameworks established regarding sensitive topics in Zetter and DeSouza. I emphasized that the objective of this research was to “understand the

'reality' from households' perspectives" (Zetter and DeSouza 150). I was interested in participants' "individual ideas and perceptions," and assured them of such throughout the interview (Zetter and DeSouza 155). I also employed Zetter and DeSouza's strategy of taking photographs and drawing floor plans (157), but doing so during the interview so as to avoid drawing further attention to participants' homes (160). By manipulating these strategies, I hoped to limit the psychological affects of the research on both individual interviewees and the community as a whole.

Demographics

Participants represented a variety of age cohorts, ethnic groups, occupations, and household types. Because interviewees were required to speak English, most participants were between the ages of nineteen and twenty five. As a result of their young age, most participants were single and living with their parents. However, Sumaya was twenty five, married, and just visiting her parents' home in the Shabia. Two other respondents, Mona and Ali, were middle-aged and married. About half of the respondents' parents were not originally from Oman: Hyat and Aziza's mothers were from India, Qassim's parents were from Zanzibar, and Mona herself lived in Bahrain until 1986.

Eight respondents were either working or students. Participants were employed at reputable organizations, including Halliburton, The Grand Hyatt, the Royal Army, and the Royal Hospital. Most interviewees had not attended a university, but had completed their studies at an institute or training center, such as Muscat Nursing Institute. Aziza had attended a university in India and was currently employed at Halliburton. Ali studied in Morocco and was working at the Royal Army. Mona, age fifty, was currently a homemaker.

Households varied in composition. All unmarried interviewees lived with at least one parent; Layma and Rashida's fathers had died. The largest household included ten people, while the smallest was composed of three. Most consisted of six, seven, or eight nuclear or extended family members. Layma and Iffat's grandmothers lived in the home with them. In Ali and Sumaya's parents' households, sons' nuclear families also lived with their parents' nuclear family. Many participants had at least one sibling who was married or working and living in another home, or completing their studies abroad.

People I spoke to had lived in the Shabia for between four and twenty-two years, meaning that they had moved in between 1986 and 2004. One respondent, Aziza, had lived in the Shabia as a child, left in 1992, but returned in 2006. Eight of the participating households had bought or been given the unit, and currently owned the house. Only Ali rented the dwelling from his father, who lived next door, at RO 335 per month.

Findings

Public Opinion

Social housing residents are not immune to the stigma attached to their living situation. Participants overwhelmingly believed that outsiders maintained negative ideas about the Shabia and its residents. Almost all participants felt that they were assumed to be uneducated because they lived in the Shabia. Layma, a nurse at the Royal Hospital, explained that when she tells people where she lives, they often say, "You don't look like you're from the Shabia!" When I asked Layma what she thought people meant by this, she replied that outsiders think that residents are "uneducated, traditional, and talk impolitely."

Two participants emphasized that Omanis believe that violence is prevalent in social housing. Qassim believed that this assumption was merely because residents were assumed to be

“poor.” Layma, however, offered a more nuanced explanation. After saying that people thought that there was a lot of fighting in the Shabia, she added that outsiders believed that everyone who lived there was Balushi. As evidenced by the order of her remarks, Layma associated violence with Balushis. Her association is not unfounded: she explained that, in the past, many Balushis lived in Jibroo, where violence was known to be a common occurrence. When the government decided to take over land in Jibroo for its own purposes, it compensated residents with land in the Shabia Al-Khoud, accounting for outsiders’ logic.

Interviewees’ beliefs about outsiders’ perceptions of their living situation demonstrate that a complex chain of assumptions facilitates the construction of popular opinion towards the Shabia. Omanis construct ideas about social housing residents’ education level and ethnicity, and then attach behaviors such as “talking impolitely” or “fighting” to these perceived truths.

What accounts, then, for the *conception* of the image of residents as uneducated Balushis? Although, by definition, social housing is intended for the “needy,” references to poverty were noticeably absent from responses, mentioned in only two interviews. Qassim said that people thought shabia residents were violent because they were poor; Iffat said that outsiders might believe that people could not pay more for their housing. Arguably, the absence of words such as “money,” “needy, and “poor” in interviews indicates that the association between the Shabia and poverty is so engrained in Omanis that it was assumed that the researcher would inherently understand its influence on outsiders’ opinions, or were ashamed to identify themselves as “poor” or even living with others who are. The assumption that even the researcher, an American unfamiliar with Omani cultural norms, would be familiar with the association between the Shabia and poverty implies that this connection is deep-seeded in the national psyche and, therefore, may be the tacit impetus for peoples’ ideas about social housing.

While outsiders' assumptions did not apply to the individuals interviewed – only two respondents were Indian, and all but two respondents had completed secondary school as well as a training program or university – participants seemed to accept people's incorrect ideas. Only one respondent, Rashida, indicated a desire to reform popular understanding of the Shabia:

Rashida: Some people don't like the Shabia because they don't know it. You've [the researcher] seen the Shabia. Do you like it?

Researcher: Yes. I like it here a lot.

Rashida: See? Everyone who sees it likes it. I want everyone to see it here.

Remarks like this beg the question: what makes residents so accepting of outsiders' untrue ideas about their home or, in Rashida's case, so defensive of their community? What is it about the Shabia that makes households move there, and remain there, despite being so stigmatized?

The Decision to Come to the Shabia

Although it may seem that all residents come to, and remain in, the Shabia due to their economic situation, ascertaining why households initially chose to come to the Shabia is a complicated task. When the units were built in 1985, they were intended only for low-income individuals. However, over time, the houses were sold at market rate, making it impossible for outsiders to distinguish whether residents received the house from the government or chose to live there for another reason. Respondents identified three major reasons for coming to the Shabia: housing gifts, family, and economic necessity.

Housing Gifts

Three households were given the units from the Omani government after they were forced to move from their previous residences. Hyat and Sumaya explained that their parents

had homes in Mutrah and Athaiba, respectively, but the government bought their land. As compensation, Oman provided the households with units in the Shabia Al-Khoud. Layma had a similar experience; her father was a policeman and the government provided her parents and siblings with housing in an area only for policemen's wives and children. When her father died in 1992, they were forced to move. The Omani government provided them with a house in the Shabia, for which they paid only RO 25 a month, a "symbolic payment," for about two years. After this period, Sultan Qaboos simply gave them the unit.

Family

Aziza and Ali's households were influenced by their extended families when making their housing decisions. Aziza's nuclear family had come to the Shabia in order to be with their extended family. As a child, Aziza lived with her grandparents, uncle, mother, father, siblings, and her father's second wife in the Shabia Al-Khoud. The family had two homes next door to each other – one for her father and his two wives, and another for her grandparents and uncle. Ali said that he had moved here because he needed another home in order to accommodate his growing nuclear family, however, it is apparent that he chose to move into this particular residence because his father lives next door and owns the house. Ali simply rents his father's second home for his own nuclear family.

Economic Necessity

Other respondents reported a more predictable reason for coming into the Shabia: economic necessity. Iffat explained that her father worked in Muscat and had a salary of only RO 180 a month. The RO 25 per month rent was feasible for the household, however, on the 25th National Day, the Omani government gave them the house.

As in respondents' comments regarding public opinion of the Shabia, discussion of economic need was noticeably absent from interviews. Although only Iffat said that her parents had entered social housing due to financial reasons, it is probable that any participant who moved into the Shabia Al-Khoud before the early 1990s was there due to financial necessity. The units were built in 1985 and distributed shortly thereafter. According to Oman's social housing policy at the time, residents were required to repay the cost of the unit before they could sell or rent the house (Al-Saqlawi 62). It is unlikely that a low-income household would have the resources to pay off their home within the first ten years, meaning that most of the units remained under government control until the 25th National Day in 1995, when Sultan Qaboos gave shabia residents their homes. Thus, most of the interviewees came to the Shabia because they were having financial difficulty, before the houses could be sold at market rate. Only Rashida's parents had gained ownership after the early 1990s and before Rashida's father died, meaning that they probably bought the house at market rate.

The Decision to Stay in the Shabia

Residents expressed a variety of reasons for choosing to remain in the Shabia. Aziza mentioned that she liked the location of the Shabia; it is near the market and school. Iffat similarly explained that she liked the Shabia because "everything is available." Aziza also noted that the Shabia Al-Khoud is quiet, with no cars or pollution. Despite the variety in responses, residents expressed three major reasons for staying in the Shabia, two of which were similar to their reasons for choosing to initially move into social housing: family, neighbors, and economic necessity.

Family

As suggested by the term “household,” as used in this research, many families in Oman are “patrilocal,” indicating that a son and his nuclear family live in the same dwelling as his father. According to McCann, patrilocal households are “a three-generational domestic group in which parents and the nuclear families of their married sons occupy a common set of dwellings” (“Introduction”).

The nuclear families composing a patrilocal household are similar to nuclear families living independently in that they tend to be physically separated from the rest of the household in some way, perhaps with separate bedrooms, bathrooms, or kitchens, and therefore perform many daily activities, such as eating, sleeping, and cleaning, separately. Nuclear families living in patrilocal households are distinct from their independent counterparts, however, in that they create a unified household. Fathers and sons may own a home jointly, for example. Additionally, married sons living with their parents often provide them with valuable financial benefits in the form of a monthly payment or perhaps medical insurance. Most obviously, yet also most importantly, the near constant interaction between the members of the household creates a cohesive social structure despite the existence of multiple nuclear families (McCann “Introduction”).

McCann found that the disadvantages to patrilocal residence were relatively minimal, citing a lack of privacy for couples and pressure on sons to contribute to extended family projects (“Conclusion”). Additionally, living with or near a spouse’s parents can also create tensions, particularly evident in child rearing (Al-Barwani 138). The advantages to the patrilocal household far outweigh its challenges, though, as the arrangement provides “help and support, especially when the family faces difficulties” (Al-Barwani 138).

Yet the belief that patrilocal households exist merely to provide moral support or perpetuate tradition is largely an oversimplification. As McCann asserts, “Tradition does not persist without material support” (“Conclusion”). Nuclear families would not choose to reside in the same household if there was not a deeper, socio-economic catalyst to do so.

Historically, when agriculture was the prevalent source of income, fathers invited their sons to live with them in order to secure their labor. Further, because sons would inherit the land, they were personally invested in the success of their father’s business and, therefore, wanted to remain on their father’s land. Even if sons *did* choose to leave their fathers’ household, they would be faced with an insecure future, as land was scarce and most commercial jobs were in the city (Stevenson “Household Composition: Variability in Conduct of Basic Activities: Corresidence”).

Research by McCann and Stevenson in Jordan and Yemen, respectively, emphasizes that the motive behind patrilocal households remains principally economic (McCann “Conclusion;” Stevenson “The Extended Family Household as the Cultural Ideal”). Home-sharing between the generations is a cheap housing solution, especially for newlyweds or the elderly, who may not have a reliable source of income (McCann “Conclusion”). Stevenson describes one research participant who owned a home with a kitchen, bathroom, and two rooms. His son, who had no full-time employment, lived in his father’s home with his wife and two children. After the son gained employment, though, he and his nuclear family relocated a few houses away (Stevenson “The Extended Family Household as the Cultural Ideal”). The persistence of the patrilocal household is, therefore, not merely due to tradition or culture. It is an economic necessity. As McCann aptly summarizes, “The norm of patrilocality is not so much the reason why people

choose to remain members of PCUs [patrilocal households] as it is a rationalization or after-the-fact justification of it” (“Conclusion”).

Stevenson, however, believes that certain “cultural preferences” *encourage* the creation of patrilocal households. Patrilocal households serve to cement an extended family’s social standing. Large household size suggests that a family is of high status. The belief that Islam frowns upon birth control and encourages large families, as well as the expectation that sons co-residing with their parents should care for their mother and father as they age also ideologically contribute to patrilocalism. Finally, the norm dictating that brothers, especially those residing in the same home, should protect each other’s wives, sisters, and daughters further encourages patrilocal households, as this structure offers an environment with more men present to protect the women in the extended family (Stevenson “The Extended Family Household as the Cultural Ideal”).

Respondents indicated that both economic and cultural factors influence many Omani nuclear families to utilize a patrilocal living arrangement. Although Ali was the only resident living in a patrilocal household, in lieu of talking to patrilocal residents, all interviewees were asked why they thought people lived in a patrilocal household. For some, patrilocalism indicated the perpetuation of tradition; Rashida remarked that people decide to move in with their extended family because “that’s the rule.” Qassim similarly explained that Balushis like patrilocal living, Swahilis do not, and Omanis are “stuck to tradition” like Balushis. Ali chose to live next door to his father because his father is growing old and his mother died; he feels obligated to take care of his father by remaining close by and providing financial support. Layma and Iffat’s grandmothers’ presence in the home also represented the continuation of the cultural norm dictating that sons cared for their parents. Layma’s father was the only son in his father’s

nuclear family, so his mother lived with him. Even after her son died, she continued residing with Layma's mother and siblings. Iffat's grandmother similarly lived with Iffat, her parents, and siblings because Iffat's father is the eldest son. When Iffat's grandfather died, her grandmother remarried, and then divorced. She's lived with the nuclear family in Muscat in the thirteen years since. Iffat noted that sometimes parents force their son to remain in their home with his wife, especially if he is the only son in his father's nuclear family. Further, brothers are needed even after they are married to help their sisters at home; his sisters "want to see him daily," a desire fulfilled by a patrilocal living arrangement. These comments are in accordance with Stevenson's findings on the "cultural preferences," especially regarding the roles of sons and brothers, which encourage the formation of a patrilocal household (Stevenson "The Extended Family Household as the Cultural Ideal").

A patrilocal living arrangement does not necessarily imply traditionalism. Iffat also explained the patrilocal household as the result of current social norms. People live with their parents, she said, because "life is different now." If both parents work, they want to leave their child with his or her grandparents. Hence, the patrilocal household persists because traditional ideologies encourage it and modern conditions necessitate it. This was the reason why Sumaya's brothers' wives and children were currently living with her parents; one brother was studying in Jordan and wanted his parents to help look after his wife and children and another was building a new house. In both cases, the situation necessitated a patrilocal living arrangement that was otherwise not preferable.

As McCann predicted, economics were the fundamental reason necessitating a patrilocal living arrangement. Iffat concluded her comments on the patrilocal household with, "It's also really expensive to live alone;" Hyat echoed these sentiments, saying that married people live

with their parents because “life is expensive.” Interestingly, however, Ali was paying his father market rate rent, meaning that the arrangement was not financially beneficial to him. Arguably, the arrangement benefitted Ali’s father, and therefore benefitted the extended family as a whole, implying that the reason why Ali chose to live in a patrilocal household was ultimately financial. The economic conditions in Oman necessitating Ali’s decision to employ a patrilocal living arrangement will be discussed further in the economics section.

Neighbors

For Omani women, neighbors are the primary means of socialization outside of the home. Women’s mobility is limited by both cultural and logistical forces, resulting in the cultivation of relationships with those living near the home. As Wikan explains in her ethnographic study of women in Sohar, Oman, “Modesty imposes limitations on the physical distance that women are able to travel unchaperoned; thus, their contacts must be narrowly, locally based.” Additionally, the hot climate and expense associated with taxi rides often deter women from venturing outside of their immediate surroundings to socialize (Wikan 114).

Women place a high value on their neighbors, as evidenced by the saying, “‘A neighbor is better than a mother who is far away – for, if I fall ill, who will do my housework and care for my children?’” (qtd. in Wikan 117). Neighbors thus take on the idealized role described in the Family section above, offering “help and support” in times of need (Al-Barwani 138).

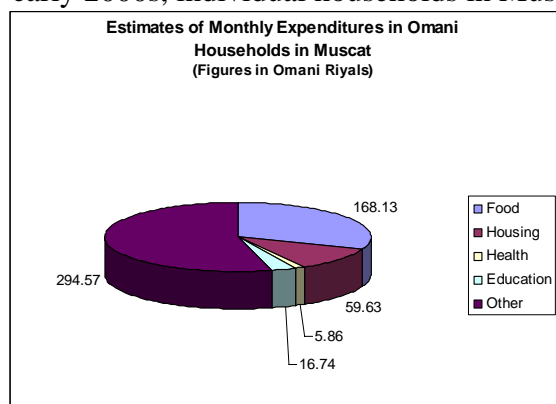
In accordance with Wikan’s observations, respondents overwhelmingly cited their neighbors as the aspect of life in the Shabia that they benefit from the most. Some interviewees described their interactions with their neighbors abstractly: Hyat remarked that the biggest benefit is that “people share love,” and explained that she liked the environment in social housing because people still got together. Rashida echoed these sentiments, saying that the best

thing about the Shabia was the people; they are “friendly” and sometimes “sit and eat together.” Mona and Ali went so far as to say that their neighbors were “like family.”

Other respondents described the tangible activities neighbors engaged in. Although she left the Shabia over a decade ago, Aziza’s mother wanted to return so that she could be with her friends while her children went to work. Aziza described how the women in her mother’s network get together for coffee every morning and sew together every afternoon. When describing a typical day in the household, Iffat’s sister emphasized that evenings often included visiting neighbors, especially if someone is sick. Iffat said that she usually visited people about twice a week, depending on the situation, and that neighbors often attended parties together. I attended an engagement party during my stay in the Shabia Al-Khoud, and was struck by the fact that it was neighbors – not family – who were the first to arrive and remained at the party until the groom’s family came. Other visitors simply came in to greet the future bride and left, but the neighbors remained throughout the evening. Qassim indicated that similar networks exist among males in the Shabia: he and his friends “chill” together and one writes songs with him.

Economic Necessity

Currently, over 89% of Omani households live in their own homes (Oman: 2006-2007 149). The government, as well as individual households, prioritizes housing needs. As of the early 2000s, individual households in Muscat spent an average of RO 59.63, or 8% of their



monthly income, on housing (see Figure 3) (Al-Lawati 67).

Fig. 3 Estimates of Monthly Expenditures in Omani Households in Muscat, adapted from table from Al-Lawati, Sawsan Dawood Mahmood. “A Study of Household Expenditure and Income in Sultanate of Oman.” Diss. Sultan Qaboos U, 2002.

Oman has experienced rapid price inflation in recent years. Inflation reached 13.7%, an eighteen-year high, in June 2008 (see Figure 4). Inflation has also affected the costs associated with housing. According to real estate analysts, land prices have increased tenfold since 2005. Al Mazaya Holding Co., a real estate shareholding company, claims that residential land prices rose approximately 400%, from RO 16.3 to RO 81 per square mile, between 2006 and 2008. Rents have similarly soared, particularly in Muscat. In Ruwi, Muscat's business district, monthly rents for one-bedroom apartments are now between RO 250 and RO 300. One year ago, rent was as low as RO 100.

The dramatic increase in housing costs led the Omani government to enact rental regulations in June 2008. The new law stipulated that landlords could only increase rent every three years by a maximum of 7% of the annual rent listed in the lease contract. Additionally, landlords were prohibited from evicting tenants before the expiration of the agreed lease period – a minimum of four years for residential property (“Real Estate Boom Continues in Oman”).

Individuals who I spoke to were not immune to the skyrocketing cost of living in Oman. They perceived that current economic conditions prevented them from living somewhere else. In many cases they had been given the house after paying only RO 25 per month; to begin paying RO 250 or more a month for housing outside of the Shabia would present an enormous burden on households' budgets.

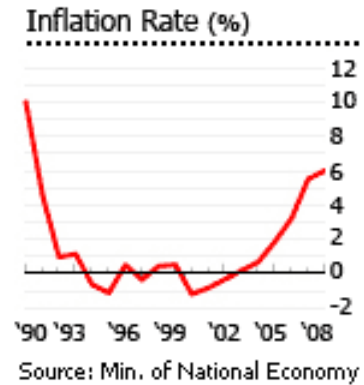


Fig. 4, Graph of inflation rate in Oman, from “Real Estate Boom Continues in Oman.” Oman: Price History. 30 Sept. 2008. Global Property Guide. 25 Nov. 2008 <<http://www.globalpropertyguide.com/Middle-East/Oman/Price-History>>.

Interviewees chose a patrilocal living situation, to remain in the Shabia, or both, in order to cope with the high cost of living in Oman. In addition to participants who claimed that the patrilocal household was the result of economic necessity, both Iffat and Layma emphasized that some people choose to remain in the Shabia because they could not afford to live anywhere else. Iffat explained that economics were the primary reason why people remained in the Shabia; Layma said that residents might not have the money to buy a house somewhere else. These remarks indicate that rapid inflation in Oman has affected social housing residents, as well as their perceptions regarding the ability to afford a house at market rate.

Challenges in the Shabia

Despite residents' many reasons for remaining in the Shabia, they had numerous complaints about their situation, which were generally involving the spatial composition of the units in the community. When asked what they disliked about their home, Iffat and Hyat responded that they disliked some neighbors because they were noisy. Iffat also mentioned that her sister dislikes their neighbor because he smokes; the houses are so close together that the smoke comes into their home. The houses in the Shabia were also described as "small" and/or "old" in six interviews. Mona said that her home was so small that she would not want her sons to live with her after they married; Sumaya indicated that there is no privacy in the Shabia. Iffat said that "rich people" might not like the Shabia because it is crowded and old, then showed me a wall in her sitting room where, when it rains, water streams down the wall.

These grievances are, fundamentally, the result of the physical makeup of the Shabia.

These complaints are well-founded, as evidenced by the exterior layout represented in Figure 5.

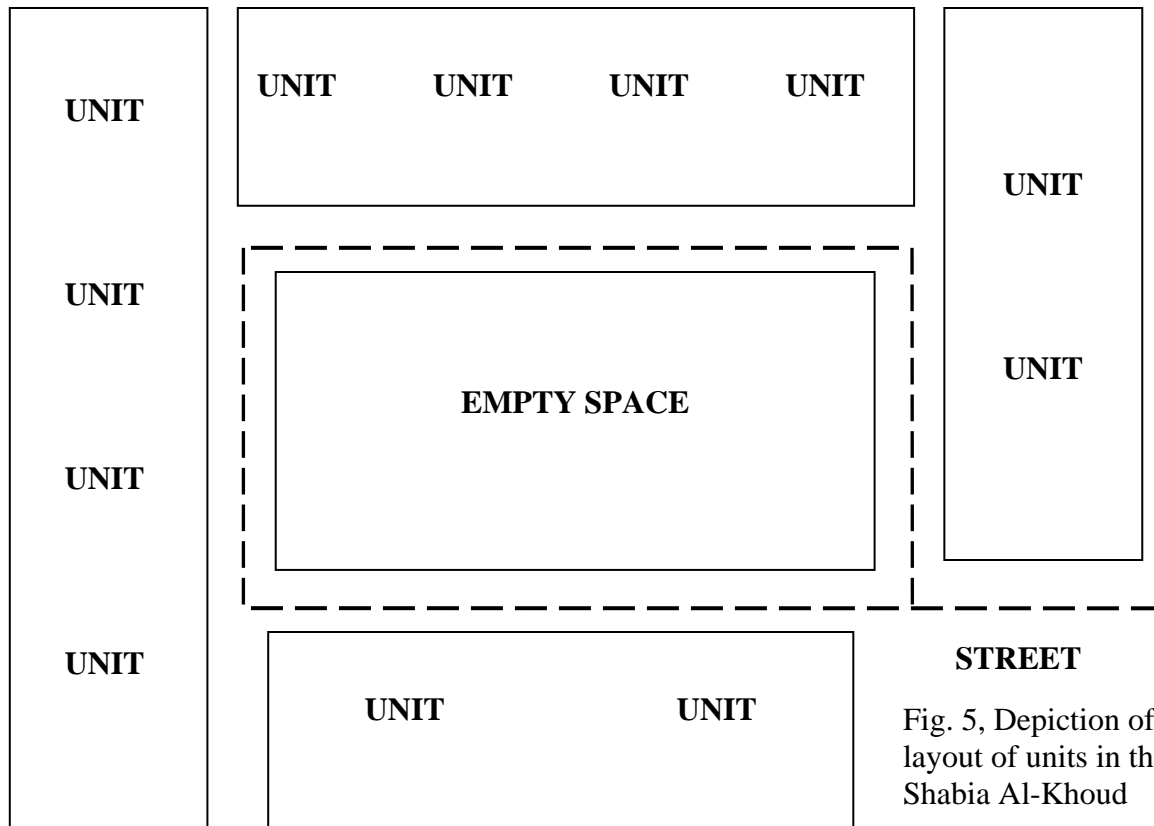


Fig. 5, Depiction of layout of units in the Shabia Al-Khoud

In the area studied, a rectangle-shaped space composed merely of rocks, dirt, and a single tree formed the centerpiece of the neighborhood. On two adjacent sides of the rectangle, there were four adjacent units. The other two sides included two adjacent units each, separated by the only street leading to the next part of the neighborhood. The following images depict the street leading to the next section of the community (Image 1) and a segment of the neighborhood layout, including the empty space and street (Image 2).



Image 1, Street in the Shabia Al-Khoud



Image 2, Segment of the neighborhood studied

The units often share a wall (Image 3), and are sometimes distinguishable as separate dwellings only by their gates (Image 4). This spatial organization of the houses in the Shabia results in residents living in extremely close quarters. Consequently, residents describe their community as “crowded,” “small,” or “noisy.”



Image 3, Units often share a wall



Image 4, Units are sometimes only distinguishable by their gate

Maintenance issues are similarly widespread. Because the houses were built in 1985, they are now beginning to deteriorate. During my visits to over a dozen homes, I noticed window screens with holes, peeling paint, and chips in the concrete walls. The outsides of homes were no different. As shown with the arrows in Image 5, paint is peeling on the exterior of houses as well. This particular home was missing an air conditioning unit and had rebuilt a portion of the cinderblock wall near the front gate.



Image 5, External maintenance issues

As a result of crowded conditions and maintenance issues, shabia residents express some dissatisfaction with their living situation. However, many interviewees developed strategies to eliminate the problems they experienced while, in all but one case, remaining in the Shabia. These strategies usually involved modifying the existing residence or, for two participants, building a new home in the Shabia Al-Khoud.

Aziza and Sumaya described how their parents renovated existing homes in the Shabia in order to make them newer and bigger. When Aziza's parents made the decision to return to the Shabia Al-Khoud two years ago, Aziza and her sister did not want to come back to their old home, which Aziza described as "small and old." They instead renovated a house only doors away from their previous home, thereby allowing them to retain their network while addressing the problems they experienced during their previous time in the Shabia. Sumaya's father

similarly built another sitting room and two additional bedrooms in 2001. Hyat's parents are currently building an addition to their home with a kitchen and another room in order to combat



Image 6,
Construction at
Hyat's home

the cramped quarters in their home (Image 6). Ali and Iffat's parents forewent renovations and instead chose to build completely new homes using land only doors away from their current residence. When I asked Iffat why her parents were building another home, she explained that she and her

siblings want a "special house" and a "nice house;" their mother had always "dreamed" of living in another home as well.

Interestingly, even the one interviewee I spoke to who hoped to move out of the Shabia was planning to retain her home there. Layma and her household were planning to build another home in Mabella using land that the Omani government provided to widows. Instead of selling their home in the Shabia Al-Khoud, the household was planning to simply rent their home in the Shabia for RO 250 a month – market rate.

Hence, despite widespread complaints affecting the quality of life in the Shabia, people I spoke to wanted to remain in their homes there. Even in the hypothetical, residents do not want to leave. I gave Mona the following scenario: if she were to come upon a great sum of money, would she move out of her current home? The answer was telling; she said that even if she had the money to do so, she would not buy another home. She would only use the money to make her current residence "bigger and nicer." Shabia Al-Khoud residents are so connected to their

community, for the reasons discussed previously, that they are willing to strategize in order to ensure that they comfortably remain in the Shabia. The benefits to living in the Shabia therefore trump both the stigma attached to the area as well as any grievances with the neighborhood.

Conclusions

Participants were acutely aware of others' perceptions of the Shabia, and accepted outsiders' misconceptions without taking offense. Although other Omanis may consider social housing residents to be "poor," references to interviewees' financial status were conspicuously absent. Respondents' economic situation was, thus, not an important part of their identities.

Interviewees initially moved to the Shabia for three major reasons: they were given the house by the Omani government because their previous home was taken, their family lived in the Shabia, and economic necessity. Residents remained in the Shabia Al-Khoud primarily due to familial obligations, their relationship with their neighbors, and their financial situation.

In light of Oman's social housing policy and current housing situation, it is likely that a majority of respondents indeed came to, and stay in, the Shabia for economic reasons. However, this was only one reason of many. Throughout my time in the Shabia Al-Khoud, I saw residents utilizing the assets in their community despite outsiders' misconceptions, aware of its strengths and willing to work to ensure that they can continue to live in the community.

Hence, my initial hypothesis was only partially verified. I had expected that most households would have come to, and stayed in, the Shabia because it was financially necessary. On the contrary, economics did not play a major role in residents' housing decisions, nor was it a pivotal part of their identities. Arguably, interviewees may have felt uncomfortable reporting their financial situation, however, residents' strategies for addressing the challenges associated with living in the Shabia prove that they valued the Shabia for its community, not only its cost.

These conclusions may not be representative of all residents in the Shabia, though. Because all individuals interviewed were English-speakers, respondents were likely better educated than most other residents in the Shabia. Hence, their situation – financial, familial, and otherwise – is probably not indicative of all shabia residents. Due to cultural norms, I had limited access to men, possibly skewing my results as well. Additionally, most respondents were young and, therefore, their views cannot be considered representative of those of their parents'. They sometimes were not aware of the circumstances necessitating their nuclear family's move into the Shabia as well. While their parents' presence in the room during interviews may have allowed them to answer questions such as this, it could have also caused them to censor their answers, particularly relating to what they disliked about the Shabia.

This research was limited in scope, utilizing only one primary contact to network with participants. Only a small segment of the Shabia Al-Khoud was studied and, while I was living with a family in the neighborhood, due to time constraints I did not become a trusted community member.

Future research should be conducted in Arabic in order to reach a broader variety of respondents and achieve a more holistic view of life in the Shabia. Researchers should venture to utilize a cross-sectional methodology, with all age groups and genders represented. Further, this study can be replicated in different areas of the Shabia Al-Khoud, as well as in other social housing complexes throughout Oman.

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Appendix

English-Speaking Resident Interview Protocol

Please answer the following questions honestly. There are no wrong answers. I'm interested in your personal experiences and beliefs. Remember that you can refuse to answer any question, withdraw from the survey or interview at any time, and may rescind any or all responses during or after the interview by contacting me.

1. Is there a pseudonym you'd like me to use?
2. What is your address?
3. What is your phone number?
4. What is your marital status?
5. How old are you?
6. If applicable: how many dependents do you have? What are their names and ages, and what is their relationship to you?
7. Are you: widowed, disabled, veteran, orphan, elderly, divorced, or a member of the family of a prisoner?
8. Tell me about the people who live in your home with you. (Who currently sleeps in your home? Who owns the home?) What are your neighbor's families' like?
9. Tell me about a typical day in your life. (Make sure schooling or work is addressed and get appropriate details)
10. I'm studying married children who live with their parents in the Shabia. Tell me why this happens, how often it happens, and if you have any observations about families with this set up. Are you friends with any families living in this situation?

11. Now I'd like to ask you some questions about your own experiences in this community.

When and why did you or your family choose to move here? What process did you go through to get this house?

12. Where do you see yourself in ten years? (Make sure housing information is included)

13. What are the biggest benefits to living in this house? What are the biggest benefits to living in this community?

14. What are the biggest challenges to living in this house? What are the biggest benefits to living in this community?

15. What do you dislike about this house/community?

16. What do you like about this house/community?

17. How long do you plan to live at this residence?

18. Would you like to move? Why or why not? If unmarried, where do you plan to live after you get married?

19. How do you feel about living in the Shabia? How do your neighbors feel about living in the Shabia?

20. How do you think outsiders feel about the Shabia? How do you feel about their opinions?

Arabic-Speaking Resident Survey Translation

Please answer the following questions honestly. There are no wrong answers. The researcher is interested in your experiences and beliefs. The researcher will pick up the survey from your home on Saturday, November 22. Contact Allison Bream at 98148534 with any questions.

1. Marital status: Single, married, widowed, divorced
2. Age

3. How many dependents do you have? Please list their name, age, and relation to you.
4. Please circle if: widowed, disabled, veteran, orphan, elderly, divorced, family of prisoner
5. What is your monthly income?
6. What is your monthly household income?
7. What are the sources of your monthly income?
8. What are the sources of your monthly household income?
9. What are your monthly expenditures?
10. What are your monthly household expenditures?
11. How much do you contribute to the monthly household expenditures?
12. Which members of the household contribute to the monthly household income?
13. Are you currently employed? If so, where?
14. How long have you been employed there?
15. What is your monthly wage?
16. How many bedrooms are in your home?
17. How many people currently sleep in your home? Please list their name, age, and relation to you.
18. Why did you choose to move into this residence?
19. How long have you lived at this residence?
20. How long do you plan to live at this residence?
21. Would you like to move? Why or why not?
22. What social services are you receiving?
23. What charities do you receive aid from?
24. What charities or social services do you need aid from but are not receiving, if any?

Rate the following statements with strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree:

25. I like where I live
26. I feel content with my home
27. I want to live somewhere else
28. If my extended family did not live here, I would not live here
29. Even if I could afford to move, I would not because my extended family lives here
30. Other people look down on me because I live in government housing
31. Other people do not realize that I live in government housing
32. Other people do not care that I live in government housing
33. Other people think that I am lazy
34. Other people think that I am uneducated
35. Other people think that I am lucky
36. I could live somewhere else if I wanted to

37. I: a. own this home, b. am paying off this home, c. neither
38. If a.: How did you come to own this home?
39. If a.: How much did you pay in total for this home?
40. If a.: Do you think you could afford to own a home at market rate?
41. If a.: Would you want to own a home at market rate if you could afford it?
42. If a.: Would you want to own a home at market rate if your extended family lived in a home at market rate?
43. If b.: How much do you pay per month for this home?
44. If b.: Do you think you could afford to rent a home at market rate?

45. If b.: Would you want to rent a home at market rate if you could afford it?
46. If b.: Would you want to rent a home at market rate if your extended family lived in a home at market rate?
47. If c.: Who bought or rents the home?
48. If c.: Where would you have lived if not with the individual from question 35?
49. If c.: Do you think you could afford to live in a home with your extended family at market rate?
50. If c.: Do you think you could afford to live in a home without your extended family at market rate?
51. If c.: Would you want to live in a home at market rate if you and your family could afford it?
52. If c.: Would you want to live in a home at market rate if your extended family lived in a home at market rate?

