

## **“A PLACEMAKING IN POST-CONFLICT CONTEXTS: A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO REBUILDING SOCIAL COHISION IN AI- QAWARISHAH, BENGHAZI”**

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**Abstract:**

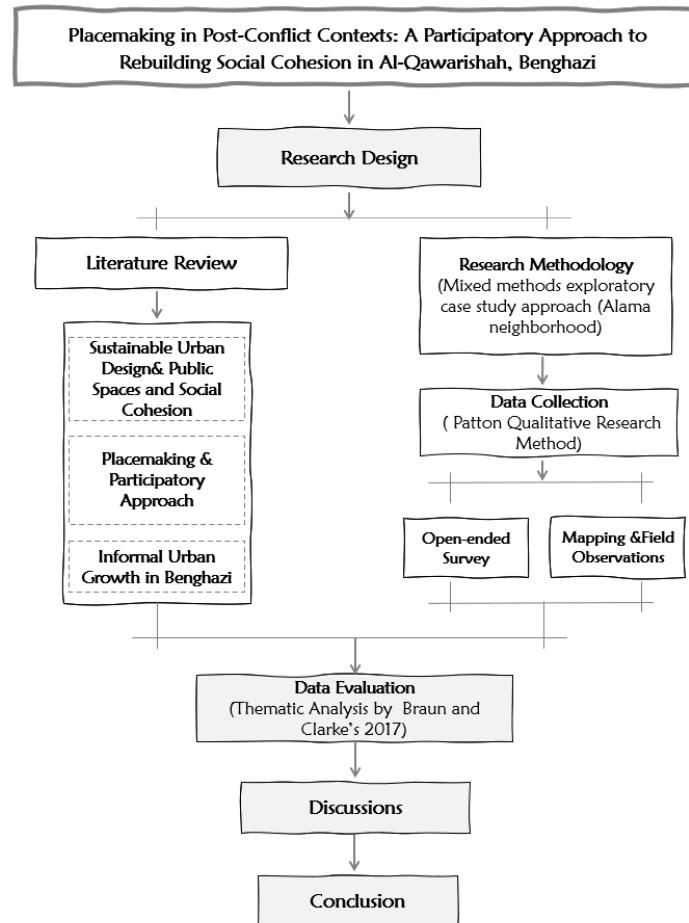
Post-conflict urban environments face critical challenges in rebuilding social cohesion, particularly in rapidly growing informal neighborhoods where the lack and poor quality of public spaces undermine everyday social interaction and collective life. Although placemaking has gained attention as a strategy to enhance social cohesion, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of participatory placemaking in post-conflict and informal urban contexts remains limited. This study investigates participatory placemaking as an effective tool for rebuilding social cohesion in a post-conflict urban setting. Employing a qualitative and exploratory research design, the study integrates an extensive literature review with an in-depth neighborhood-scale case study. Data were collected through open-ended surveys, participatory mapping, and on-site observations and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings demonstrate that participatory placemaking strengthens social cohesion by fostering social interaction, enhancing place attachment, and reinforcing collective identity, while the participatory process itself contributes to rebuilding trust and a sense of ownership among residents. The study offers context-specific insights and practical recommendations for planners, designers, and policymakers, highlighting participatory placemaking as a socially sustainable approach to improving public space quality and supporting post-conflict urban recovery.

**Keywords:**

Public Space, Participatory Placemaking, Social Cohesion, Post-Conflict Benghazi, Sustainable Urban Development.

**1. Introduction:**

Social cohesion is a crucial aspect of the quality of life and long-term health in residential neighborhoods. Public spaces foster trust and enable residents to interact with others regularly (Carmona, 2021). However, informal communities following conflicts often lack social interaction as a result of unplanned urban growth and the absence of planning standards (UN-Habitat, 2022). This was clearly apparent in the city of Benghazi following the 2011 conflict, where unregulated expansion led to the growth of residential areas lacking shared open spaces and social engagement areas that promote community life and support local identity (Valdeolmillos & Almogrebe, 2025). Alamal neighborhood in Al-Qawarishah is one of many residential areas in Benghazi that expanded rapidly after the 2011 conflict. This area has developed informally from agricultural lands within the city's green belt to a residential settlement designed by the landowners themselves. The unplanned growth has resulted in dense housing patterns, limited accessibility, and the complete absence of community spaces, which is negatively affecting residents' quality of life and social well-being. Despite the essential role of such elements in promoting social cohesion and supporting sustainable urban environments, no effort has been made to determine what types of spaces are most needed and how their absence influences residents' daily lives. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by exploring residents' needs, priorities, and perceptions, and by proposing design and planning strategies based on participatory placemaking principles to guide future urban development. By analyzing data through a placemaking-oriented qualitative approach, the study identifies key special and social gaps and opportunities within the neighborhood. Based on the research findings, the research suggests sustainable, context-sensitive strategies to enhance public spaces in informal urban areas. Figure 1 presents the overall research design and methodological framework adopted in this study



**Figure 1: Research Design Diagram, Source: the researcher**

## 2. Public space in the context of sustainable urban development

in urban planning and design, sustainability refers to the creation and management of an urban environment that integrates environmental protection, social justice, and economic viability to improve quality of life and ensure long-term resilience(Almusaed et al., 2020; Sharifi & Yamagata, 2018; UN-Habitat, 2022).

Public places have a critical impact on quality of life and urban sustainability. They are important places for social interaction, cultural exchange and culture-led regeneration, as well as cultivating a sense of identity and community(Carmona, 2021). Public space design can also act as a form of environmental remediation by creating green spaces and habitats in urban settings that support urban biodiversity, improve local climatic conditions and encourage physical activity such as walking and cycling(UN-Habitat, 2022). Furthermore, (Carmona, 2021) highlights those effective public areas should be accessible and flexible, enabling both routine activities and more general urban resilience. Together, these studies demonstrate that public spaces are not just physical settings but also crucial elements of urban social and environmental well-being.

## 2.1 Placemaking:

Placemaking is a concept and process in urban design that focuses on creating meaningful, inclusive, and vibrant public spaces that reflect the identity, needs, and culture of the community through collaboration among citizens, designers, and policymakers (Ellery et al., 2021). Rather than focusing only on the physical form, placemaking highlights the social, cultural, and emotional connections that people establish with their environment (PPS, 2019), while emphasizing the importance of environmental sustainability for making life in cities more enjoyable (Mujahed Hassan et al., 2023). The first emergence of placemaking was in the 1960s and 1970s through the work of urban thinkers Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte, who advocated for human-centered public spaces. Since the 1990s, the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has had an essential meaning in improving and popularizing the concept globally (PPS, 2019).

Placemaking has grown into more than just a design concept; it seeks to create spaces that feel alive and meaningful to the people who use them. According to (PPS, 2019; Wyckoff, 2014) there are four main types of placemaking: standard placemaking, which improves already-existing public spaces; strategic placemaking, which is in line with more general economic or development objectives; creative placemaking, which incorporates art and culture into public spaces; and tactical placemaking, which depends on inexpensive, transient interventions that stimulate urban life. All four types share the same principles, including participatory design, flexible use of spaces, reinforcement of local identity, and promotion of sustainability (PPS, 2019). Project for Public Spaces also introduced the Place Diagram as a tool for evaluating public spaces. It consists of three rings: the inner ring represents the key physical attributes, the middle ring reflects the intangible qualities, and the outer ring shows measurable indicators of performance, as illustrated in Figure 2 (PPS, 2019). Fred London argues that society poses the greatest threats to public health. He emphasizes that architecture and urban design are vital for preventing illness by creating healthier streets that promote healthier lifestyles (London, 2020).



**Figure 2: The Place Diagram of PPS, Source: PPS, 2019**

### 2.1.1 Participatory Approach:

The participatory approach has become a significant method in contemporary urban planning and design, emphasizing local communities' active participation in shaping their environments (Sanoff, 2022). This approach originated from early planning ideas in the late twentieth century and has evolved into a variety of tools and methods, where both planners and local communities collaborate in decision-making (Almusaed, 2023).

Decision-making in urban planning commonly follows two primary directions. In top-down decision-making style, government authorities or experts take decisions, they then transmitted to the community, often resulting in limited citizen influence on outcomes, Bottom-up decisions, on the other hand, are community driven and focus on the ability and resources of the local citizenry to determine problems and solutions and even redirect resources to affect the formal planning of the community (Gattupalli, 2023; Semeraro et al., 2020). Each of these planning decision-making incorporates various participatory processes for the construction and management of public spaces. Co-design involves engaging community members directly in the design phase, enabling them to share ideas, layouts, and spatial solutions. Co-creating is a more overall cooperation process where stakeholders are together creating insights, priorities, and solutions in different project phases. Finally, co-production focuses on shared implementation, where residents participate in delivering, managing, or maintaining public spaces (Lee et al., 2024).

In practice, participatory approaches are implemented through a variety of tools, including community workshops, participatory mapping, focus groups, and open-ended surveys (Durán-Díaz, 2024). Social media and digital platforms can also be used effectively to increase residents' engagement, fostering more inclusive and widespread participation (Maptionnaire, 2025; Viswanath, 2025). It has the potential to prevent possible future conflicts through identifying and accepting the opinions and needs of various groups of society in different ages, genders, abilities, potential, and talents, whether individually or within groups such as families (Hes & Hernandez-Santin, 2020). The main advantages of participatory approaches are improved social inclusion, community empowerment, more transparency in governance, and building stronger communities (Nehra, 2023). Involvement helps create a sense of ownership and sustainability, as people who shape spaces are more likely to take care of them (Directory, 2025; PPS, 2019). Carmona's recent studies highlight the importance of participation in fostering urban resilience in post-conflict and fast-growing urban areas, where participatory activities can help rebuild trust and local identities (Carmona, 2021). Implementing a co-design participatory strategy will provide a useful tool that can facilitate a bottom-up approach in constructing public spaces in Al-Qawarishah that are flexible and based on the needs of the community.

Lately, the participatory approach has become central to effective placemaking (Viswanath, 2025). This approach values the active involvement of residents, community groups, and local stakeholders throughout the design and decision-making process. According to (Parkins, 2024), participatory placemaking not only leads to more context-sensitive and sustainable urban outcomes but also strengthens social cohesion and fosters a sense of ownership among citizens. By integrating community knowledge with professional expertise, this method ensures that urban interventions align with local needs, aspirations, and cultural values (Viswanath, 2025).

One of the most prominent examples of the application of a participatory approach to placemaking is the High Line, New York City, USA. It is an old railway that has been converted, through placemaking and participatory planning, into a public park. Residents of the area, through Friends of the High Line, were able to influence the design of the park through workshops and consultations to meet the needs of the community. The project is a great park that includes greenery, public art, and places for social interaction, an example of participatory placemaking which has been able to repurpose and revitalize an underused piece of urban infrastructure (Urban Design Lab, 2025). Participatory placemaking was also developed in Copenhagen, Denmark, in Superkilen Park, where residents from more than 60 different countries were given the opportunity to choose the cultural symbols, the colors, and the design elements of the park. This collaborative approach embraced cultural diversity and social inclusion simultaneously, and contributed to community ownership of the public space, which came to reflect the identity of the community (Højlund, 2025). In conclusion, adopting a participatory placemaking approach is essential for cities like Benghazi, where involving residents in shaping their environment can help define their needs for public spaces, foster social cohesion, rebuild trust, and guide the development of more inclusive and sustainable urban spaces.

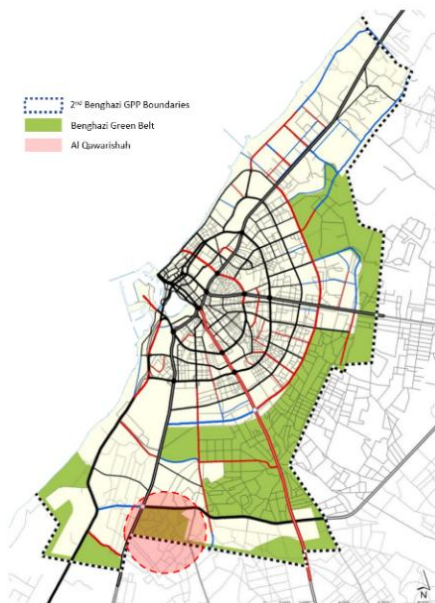
**3. The Case Study: Al-Qawarishah, Benghazi:** The selected area is known as Alamal neighborhood, in Al-Qawarishah, southwest of Benghazi. According to Benghazi's 2nd General Plan Project (AOEC, 2009), Alamal located within the former green belt of the city, which historically functioned as a transitional agricultural zone separating the city's urban core from the surrounding lands (Fig. 2). The landowners in the Alqawarshah began dividing their farms into small plots after the 2011 conflict, mostly about 500 square meters each, and selling them individually. Alamal neighborhood, one of the new settlements in Alqawarishah, even though its name was chosen by its residents and has not yet been officially registered, remains the commonly used name among the city's residents.



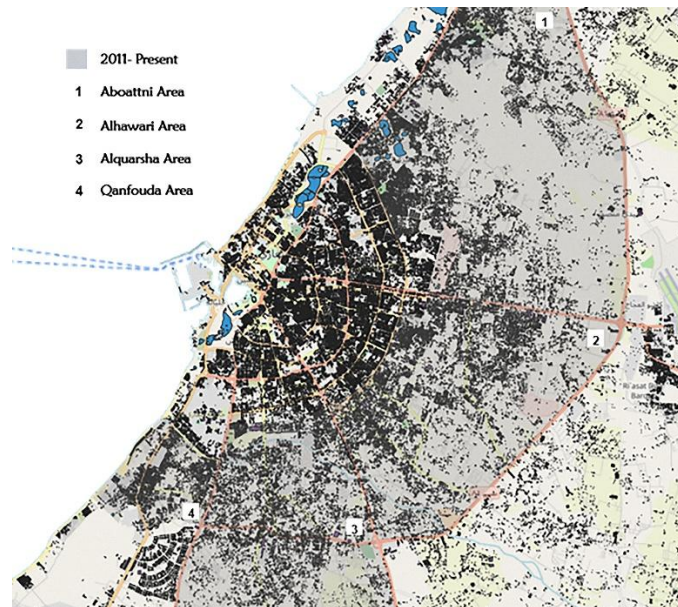
### 3.1 Informal Urban Growth in Post-Conflict Benghazi:

Since the 2011 conflict in Libya, many cities have experienced significant spatial and social changes due to weak government institutions and the absence of effective urban planning systems (Elhassi, 2020; LATHRAM et al., 2024). Benghazi, Libya's second-largest city, has been particularly affected by the rapid, unregulated urban growth that has expanded outside its planned boundaries (Fig.3). This growth has transformed the entire green belt around the city into informal settlements, which are characterized by poor infrastructure, a lack of public spaces and services that promote social interaction.

The consequences of this post-conflict urbanization in Benghazi expand beyond the physical environment, reflecting the challenge of restoring social cohesion and urban resilience (Aljanjan, 2023). These circumstances highlight the urgent need for comprehensive, community-oriented urban strategies to help restore social cohesion and redefine the role of public spaces in rebuilding urban life.

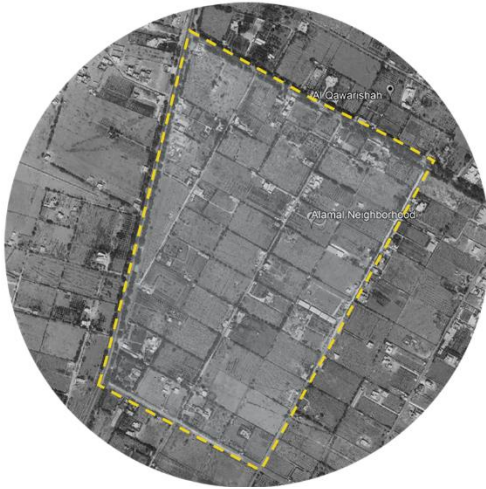


**Figure 2: Benghazi's 2<sup>nd</sup> GPP, green belt, and the study area, Source: AOEC, 2009, edited by the researcher**

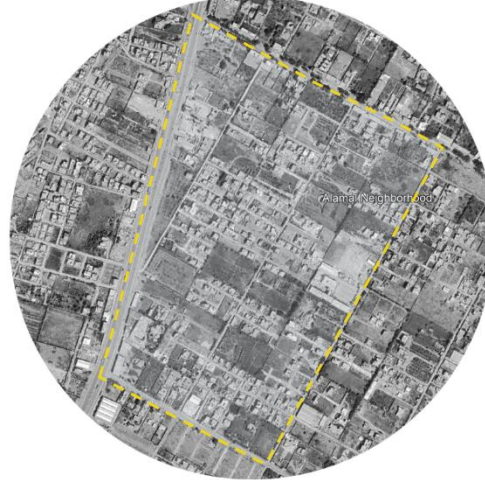


**Figure 3: Benghazi's Informal Growth Areas After 2011, Source: GIS map, edited by the researcher**

As illustrated in Figure 4, the 2011 aerial image shows that the site was an agricultural land, divided into small farms of approximately 1 hectare each, with a small family house in each farm. Until the end of 2014, the area maintained a rural character, with limited built-up development and strong landscape continuity.



**Fig. 4: ALamal Area in 2011, Source: Source: Google Maps, edited by the researcher**



**Fig. 5: ALamal Neighborhood in 2025, Source: Google Maps, edited by the researcher**

However, by 2025 the neighborhood had undergone a rapid and unplanned urban transformation, as shown in Figure 5. Driven by population growth and housing demand following the conflict, construction expanded beyond the official urban boundary. Agricultural lands were converted into dense residential clusters, developed informally in the absence of regulations and standards. The planning of Al-Amal was based on the existing agricultural grid, unlike many of the informal settlements that have recently emerged in Benghazi. The existing agricultural network in Alamal served as the basis for the area's division, producing a master plan that was generally consistent. However, the subdivision of each farm was undertaken by the landowners themselves (fig. 6), each according to their own vision, likely influenced by the number of plots and economic considerations.

This process has resulted in a fragmented urban fabric characterized by irregular street patterns, limited accessibility, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of properly distributed public spaces and community facilities. These spatial and social deficiencies make Alamal a representative example of informal urban growth in Benghazi, offering a valuable context for exploring residents' needs and priorities for public spaces through a participatory placemaking approach.



**Fig. 6: ALamal neighborhood; special analysis showing building density, road network, and public services in the present, Source: the researcher.**

#### 4.Methods:

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to investigate how placemaking can contribute to rebuilding the social fabric in the post-conflict context of Al-Qawarishah, Benghazi. The methodology, as shown in Figure 1, is structured around two main components: an extensive literature review and an empirical qualitative case study.

**4.1. Data Collection:** This study adopted mainly a qualitative framework complemented by simple quantitative measures. Aligned with Patton's (2015) view that qualitative research should combine multiple sources to produce rich and credible findings, data collection for this study involves field observations, Google Maps spatial reading, and open-ended surveys with residents. Identifying the current condition of open areas, their physical characteristics, accessibility, and usage patterns is essential to ensure a comprehensive understanding of both spatial and social aspects. The basic quantitative techniques, including frequency counts and percentages, were applied to closed-ended survey questions, which together enable a deep understanding of residents lived experiences and the spatial conditions of Al-Qawarishah.

Bottom-up activity was applied through the open-ended survey, which was distributed to a representative sample of residents (target: 40-80 participants) to capture their experiences, preferences, and perceptions of existing and desired public spaces. The questionnaire was structured to evaluate three main dimensions: demographic information to ensure more accurate analysis and more inclusive, community-appropriate planning decisions (questions 1-7); the current situation of the public spaces in the Alamal neighborhood to assess residents' perceptions of existing conditions and to identify weaknesses, issues, or missing amenities (questions 8-15); and the last part covers the needs and preferences for future public spaces to understand residents' desires and expectations, ensuring that any proposed design or intervention aligns with their daily routines and priorities (questions 16-26). The questions were formulated as simple and clear open-ended questions to provide the residents a chance to express their thoughts and needs freely without limitations. That will help in capturing richer and more detailed information essential for participatory placemaking.

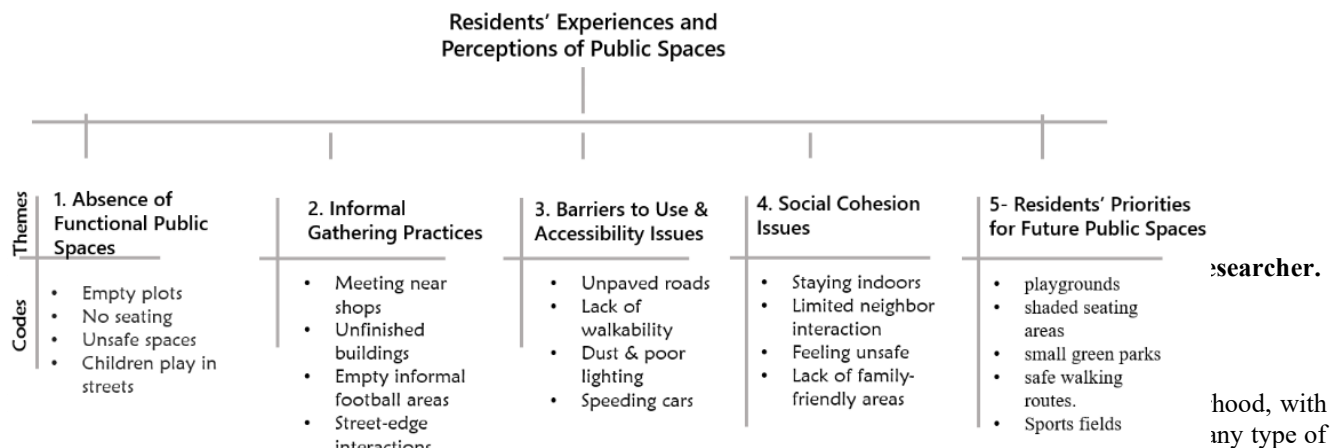


## 4.2. Data Analysis:

Data Analysis: The collected data were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. Basic quantitative techniques, including frequency counts and percentages, were applied to closed-ended survey questions to support and contextualize the qualitative findings. Open-ended responses were analyzed thematically following Clarke & Braun (2017). This approach involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, and the systematic development of themes that reflect recurring patterns in residents' responses. The themes were organized in relation to key placemaking dimensions, allowing for an interpretive understanding of how spatial conditions and the absence of public-space infrastructure shape residents lived experiences in Al-Qawarishah.

## 5.Results:

The results reveal clear patterns in residents' perceptions and experiences regarding public spaces in Al-Qawarishah, supported by spatial observations and linked to literature. Open-ended responses were analyzed thematically following (Clarke & Braun, 2017) through repeated reading, coding, and grouping into major themes that reflect the most common issues raised by participants as is it shown in diagram 1. Representative quotes are included to illustrate each theme. The number of questionnaires collected and analyzed is 42. The findings are discussed in relation to existing literature to highlight consistencies, differences, and contributions to current knowledge on public space provision in informal and newly developed neighborhoods. In addition to the survey results, a satellite image from Google Maps was visually examined to better understand the spatial context of Al-Qawarishah. The analysis clearly illustrates the rapid horizontal expansion of residential units, the fragmentation of open spaces, and the absence of designated public areas such as parks, playgrounds, or communal plazas. This spatial observation supports and emphasizes the residents' survey responses, providing visual confirmation of the scarcity of open private spaces and the increasing development pressure resulting from informal and unregulated growth. This mixed analytical structure allowed the study to capture both the subjective perspectives of residents and the broader spatial and demographic patterns shaping their neighborhood.



Supporting observation from Google Maps: The satellite image shows dense (figs.5,6), contiguous housing blocks expanding rapidly over some of the former agricultural plots, other plots were widely open and neglected. No visible formal plazas, parks, green pockets, or playgrounds appear within walking distance of most homes.

Example quotes:

- "There is no place for children to play safely." (*Participant 18*)
- "All open land is private, neglected, and inappropriate to use." (*Participant 7*)

Link to literature: This pattern reflects literature findings, where informal expansion often eliminates community spaces due to self-built residential priorities(UN-Habitat, 2022).

## 5.2. Theme2: Informal Gathering Practices:

Survey findings: Participants indicated that, because the neighborhood lacks formal public spaces, social life takes place in informal and spontaneous locations. Common gathering points include mosque courtyards, the fronts of small shops, street edges, and house entrances. These areas, although not designed for social use, have become essential substitutes for community interaction.

Example quotes:

- “We meet at the corner shop; it’s the only place to sit together.” (*Participant 22*)
- “Children play in the mosque yard because no park exists.” (*Participant 5*)
- “Most gatherings happen in front of houses.” (*Participant 23*)

Supporting observation from Google Maps: Satellite image confirms the absence of planned communal spaces and highlights the presence of narrow residential lanes and dense housing clusters. No structured plazas or parks appear within walking distance (figs. 5,6). Instead, spatial expansions appear near mosques, shops on the surrounding streets of the neighborhood, and empty plots, some of which are shaded by trees. These small, irregular spaces act as unplanned social nodes within the neighborhood.

Link to literature: This part aligns with studies on informal urbanism, where communities find alternatives to public spaces when formal facilities are absent (Carmona, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2022). Such everyday informal public spaces are common in rapidly developing or underserved neighborhoods and play a key role in maintaining social interaction(Carmona, 2021; Gehl, 2010; UN-Habitat, 2022).

## 5.3. Theme 3: Barriers to Using Outdoor Spaces and Their Impact on Daily Life

Survey findings: A significant proportion of participants (around 68%) identified multiple barriers that prevent them from using outdoor areas, even when some open plots exist in the neighborhood. The most frequently reported barriers include: lack of safety, absence of facilities, and unshaded or unsuitable conditions for families. Many residents also highlighted that the scattered, unplanned layout makes even social gatherings uncomfortable or impractical.

Google Maps confirmation: Satellite view illustrates that most open spaces are either residual fragments of plots between houses or big farms, unused lands lacking any infrastructure. Their irregular shapes and poor accessibility make them unsuitable for social or family activities.

Example quotes:

- “Even if there are empty places, they are dusty, unsafe, and not meant for families to sit.” (Participant 11)
- “No lighting, no seating, no shade... so we avoid going out unless necessary.” (Participant 29)

Link to literature: These findings reflect previous studies showing that in informal settlements, the absence of basic outdoor amenities discourages social life and reduces the use of available land for community purposes(Gehl, 2010; UN-Habitat, 2022). Poor-quality or unsafe environments often lead to reinforcement of isolation and limiting opportunities for interaction.

#### 5.4. Theme 4: Social Isolation and Limited Opportunities for Interaction

Survey findings: Nearly 76% stated that the lack of public space limits social encounters, reduces neighborhood cohesion, and contributes to weaker social ties.

Google Maps confirmation: The absence of shared gathering nodes corresponds directly to the scattered urban pattern. No central communal points appear in the imagery, suggesting that the spatial form itself restricts opportunities for casual encounters.

Quotes: “We only meet neighbors at the mosque, or accidentally, there is no shared place to interact with neighbors.” (Participant 3)

#### 5.5. Theme 5: Residents’ Priorities for Future Public Spaces

Survey findings: Respondents emphasized playgrounds, shaded seating areas, small green parks, sports fields, and safe walking routes.

Google Maps relevance: Current land-use patterns show several neglected or empty spaces that could serve as strategic placemaking opportunities.

Quotes: “We need a small family park; nothing fancy, just something for kids and families.” (Participant 25)

Following the detailed presentation of the five themes, it becomes clear that residents' lived experiences are strongly influenced by the spatial constraints of Al-Qawarishah and the absence of appropriate public-space infrastructure. To provide a clear, organized overview of these findings, Table 1 summarizes all identified themes with supporting survey data, Google Maps observations, related participant quotes, and preliminary recommendations and directions that resulted directly from the qualitative data.

**Table 1. The Integrated Thematic Findings Table. (Summary of Themes, Supporting Evidence, and Recommendations)**

Theme	Main Findings	Google Evidence Maps	Example Quotes	Recommendations
<b>Theme 1: Absence of Formal Public Spaces &amp; Increasing Urban Density</b>	-Complete lack of functional public spaces. -High-density expansion reducing available land	Dense, contiguous housing blocks. - former agricultural land mostly built over. - no visible parks, plazas, or green pockets	“There is no place for children to play safely.” (P18)	Identify and secure some of the empty plots for future parks, playgrounds, and sports fields. - Introduce community planning guidelines to protect remaining lands from further informal divisions.

Theme	Main Findings	Google Evidence Maps	Example Quotes	Recommendations
<b>Theme 2: Informal Gathering Points</b>	Mosque, Corner shop, Cafes, Rooftop, Insufficient and unsafe existing open areas.	No formal gathering spaces, parks, plazas, or sports fields are visible.	“We meet at the corner shop, it's the only place left to sit together.” (P22)	Strengthen some of the existing informal gathering spots by adding seating, shade, and small improvements that support safe, casual social interaction
<b>Theme 3: Barriers to Using Outdoor Spaces and Accessibility Issues</b>	-Poor maintenance - Safety concerns -Lack of facilities, unshaded land, and unusable plots - Harmful reptiles, such as snakes from farms	-Open areas are dusty, irregular, unpaved, lacking lighting or seating -No walk side and unsafe edges near roads	“Even if there are empty places, they are dusty, unsafe, and not meant for families.” (P11)	Improve lighting, paving, shading; repurpose vacant land; introduce minimum public-space infrastructure standards
<b>Theme 4: Social Isolation and Limited Opportunities for Interaction</b>	-Weak neighbor relationships. - Few unplanned interactions. - lack of shared gathering points.	- No central communal nodes. - Scattered pattern of land divisions and roads prevents natural meetings.	“We only meet neighbors in the mosque or accidentally on the roads, there is no shared place.” (P3)	Develop shaded seating clusters, social corners, and walkable routes to promote interaction.
<b>Theme 5: Residents' Needs for Future Public Spaces</b>	High demand for playgrounds, family parks, sports fields, shaded seating, greenery, and safe pedestrian paths	Several vacant but unused lots suitable for intervention	“We need a small family park, nothing fancy.” (P25)	Use vacant plots for pocket parks; introduce shaded walkways; integrate simple family-oriented elements

The summarized themes and preliminary findings in Table 1 combine to provide a cohesive picture of the principal social and spatial issues facing the neighborhood. It's the basis for interpreting findings discussion within existing literature and urban practices. The next section expands on the implications of these findings for placemaking strategies and sustainable neighborhood development in post-conflict informal settlements.

## 6. Discussion:

The findings of this study indicate that residents in Alamal in Al-Qawarishah have been facing clear spatial and social challenges, reflecting conditions commonly found in post-conflict and informally developed settlements. The main issue found is the absence of formally planned public spaces, the majority of participants indicating that their neighborhood lacks safe, functional, and accessible areas for recreation, social interaction, and family activities. This result is strongly supported by Google Maps observations, which illustrate rapid residential expansion over former agricultural land, the disappearance of green pockets, and the complete absence of designated parks, playgrounds, plazas, or communal squares. This is consistent with previous studies that emphasize how informal urban growth often prioritizes residential expansion over community-

oriented spaces, which limits the opportunities for social interaction and restricts the possibility of performing everyday outdoor activities that usually take place in well-designed public spaces.(Carmona, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2022).In response to the absence of ideal public spaces, residents adapted to informal alternative gathering points such as mosques, corner shops, cafes, rooftops, and street edges. Although these spaces provide limited opportunities for social interactions, they remain insufficient and sometimes unsafe, particularly for children, women, and families. Although social life continues in the absence of planned public infrastructure, the lack of thoughtful design and basic facilities limits the social potential of these spaces, and this is clearly evident in the temporary and limited nature of their use.

In addition to the lack of designated public spaces, significant barriers further limit the use of available open land. Participants repeatedly cited poor maintenance, safety concerns, lack of lighting at night and shade during the day, unpaved roads and surfaces, and the presence of harmful reptiles, such as snakes, from neighboring farms. Spatial observations confirm that many open areas are dusty, unmarked, or unfenced, with unpaved and unsafe edges along roads and a lack of pedestrian infrastructure. These conditions limit the use of outdoor spaces and prevent vacant land from becoming effective public spaces, highlighting that accessibility, safety, and minimum infrastructure are as critical as spatial availability. These spatial limitations have a direct social effect on neighbors. Most of the residents described limited daily encounters and a growing sense of social isolation. The absence of shared gathering areas reduces the opportunities of regular neighbors interaction and collective activities. In the post-conflict context of Benghazi, where communities are still recovering from physical and social disruptions, the lack of public spaces has reduced opportunities to rebuild trust, social cohesion, and a sense of belonging. This finding is consistent with theories of social sustainability and public spaces that emphasize the role of everyday public environments in strengthening social capital(Gehl, 2010; PPS, 2019).

Despite these challenges, locals clearly expressed their priorities for public spaces. Rather than demanding large or complex facilities, participants emphasized the need for small family gardens, shaded and well-lit setting areas, safe playgrounds, green spaces, sports fields, and safe pedestrian walkways with regular maintenance. Based on Google Maps images, there are several unused plots of land within the neighborhood, offering tangible opportunities for incremental, low-cost interventions. These objectives align closely with the principles of placemaking that prioritize comfort, inclusivity, and community-inspired design, suggesting that even modest public spaces at the neighborhood level can significantly improve social interaction and the quality of daily life.Overall, the findings demonstrate that the absence of public spaces is not the only challenge in Al-Qawarishah, but the lack of a socially responsive planning framework that can transform available plots of land and informal practices into inclusive communal environments. The compatibility between residents' perceptions, spatial observations, and existing literature strengthens the validity of the study and highlights the urgent need for participatory, context-sensitive public space strategies in informal and post-conflict neighborhoods of Benghazi.

## 7. Conclusion:

This study investigated the contribution of public spaces in enhancing social cohesion in the informal settlement of Alamal neighbourhood in Al-Quarsha, Benghazi. Qualitative and survey research, complemented with Google Maps spatial observations, revealed that the neighborhood's lack of formal public spaces and its gradual move toward denser residential structures have resulted in poor social interactions and reduced community well-being. Participants consistently highlighted the need for accessible, safe, and family-oriented outdoor areas that provide opportunities for gathering, recreation, and everyday social interactions.

The results contribute to a greater comprehension of spatial constraints on post-conflict informal areas that directly affect social cohesion according to global literature, but with specific context-based findings which could help inform Benghazi's urban recovery. The study finds and highlights residents' interests, as well as available vacant plots that could potentially become future public spaces, offering planners, municipalities and community groups bottoms-up suggestions.

In conclusion, improving public spaces in Al-Qawarishah requires a shift toward participatory placemaking planning that centers the residents' lived experiences. Even small interventions, such as small green spaces, shaded seating areas, and safe children's playgrounds, can have a positive impact, revitalizing community life and strengthening social cohesion in post-conflict communities. The study emphasizes that creating accessible public areas built on human needs is a direct way to support social resilience and the long-term well-being of neighborhoods, and it also contributes to sustainable urban development in Benghazi.





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## صناعة المكان في سياقات ما بعد الصراع: نهج تشاركي لإعادة بناء التماسك الاجتماعي في القوارشة، بنغازي

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### الملخص:

تواجه البيئات الحضرية في مرحلة ما بعد النزاعات تحديات جسيمة في إعادة بناء التماسك الاجتماعي، لا سيما في الأحياء العشوائية سريعة النمو حيث يُقوّض نقص المساحات العامة وضعف جودتها التفاعل الاجتماعي اليومي والحياة الجماعية. ورغم أن مفهوم "تصميم الأماكن" قد حظي باهتمام متزايد كاستراتيجية لتعزيز التماسك الاجتماعي، إلا أن الأدلة التجريبية على فعالية تصميم الأماكن التشاركي في سياقات ما بعد النزاعات والأحياء العشوائية لا تزال محدودة. تبحث هذه الدراسة في تصميم الأماكن التشاركي كأداة فعّالة لإعادة بناء التماسك الاجتماعي في بيئة حضرية ما بعد النزاع. وباستخدام تصميم بحثي نوعي واستكشافي، تدمج الدراسة مراجعة شاملة للأدبيات مع دراسة حالة معمقة على مستوى الحي. جُمعت البيانات من خلال استبيانات مفتوحة، ورسم خرائط تشاركي، وملاحظات ميدانية، وُحُلّت باستخدام التحليل الموضوعي. تُظهر النتائج أن تصميم الأماكن التشاركي يُعزز التماسك الاجتماعي من خلال تشجيع التفاعل الاجتماعي، وتعزيز الارتباط بالمكان، وترسيخ الهوية الجماعية، في حين تُسهم العملية التشاركية نفسها في إعادة بناء الثقة والشعور بالملكية لدى السكان. تقدم الدراسة رؤى خاصة بالسياق وتوصيات عملية للمخططين والمصممين وصناع السياسات، مع تسليط الضوء على صناعة الأماكن التشاركية كنهج مستدام اجتماعياً لتحسين جودة المساحات العامة ودعم التعافي الحضري بعد النزاعات.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الفضاء العام، التخطيط التشاركي للمكان، التماسك الاجتماعي، بنغازي ما بعد النزاع، التنمية الحضرية المستدامة.