

Preservation or Commercialisation: Resident Experiences of Heritage in Ahmedabad's Walled City

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i09.015 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i09.015>

Received: 28 August 2026 / Accepted: 11 September 2026 / Published: 19 September 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how UNESCO World Heritage designation affects the lives of pol residents. The pols are traditional gated residential neighbourhoods within Ahmedabad's Walled City, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage property in July 2017. While those implementing conservation policy generally agree that world heritage listing benefits all stakeholders, little consideration has been given to the lived friction experienced by the people who actually live in these homes. This study used a qualitative research methodology, drawing on semi-structured interviews with fifteen residents spanning four stakeholder categories: long-term owners, artisans and shopkeepers, younger-generation residents, and community or pol panch leaders, distributed across ten pols. Reflexive thematic analysis identified four axial categories: commercialisation and market pressure; bureaucratic and regulatory friction; psycho-spatial displacement and domestic alienation; and heritage identity, attachment and community erosion. Bureaucratic friction, meaning the extended time periods required for municipal approval and the expense of mandated restoration, was the most prevalent pressure and acted as the mechanism driving displacement: long-term residents who hold assets but lack access to capital cannot lawfully maintain their properties, and are therefore funnelled toward developers and commercial conversion. Concurrently, the tourist gaze recodes private spaces such as the opla and the chowk into public spectacle, creating a living-museum alienation that is particularly evident among women and the elderly. These results suggest that preservation as it is currently administered manufactures the very commercialisation it claims to prevent, and that humane, participative governance is needed if heritage and habitation are to coexist.

Keywords: Ahmedabad, Commodification of heritage, Heritage conservation, Pol houses, Psycho-spatial displacement, Tourist gaze, Touristification

1. Introduction

On the 8th of July 2017, during the 41st Session of the World Heritage Committee, the Walled

City of Ahmedabad was inscribed onto the UNESCO World Heritage List. Designated as the 'Historic City of Ahmadabad', it became India's first city and the third in Asia to be granted such a status [1].

The walled city was founded by Sultan Ahmad Shah I in 1411 on the eastern bank of the Sabarmati river. Rather than being known for grand monuments, its historic centre is defined primarily by its living urban structure. The historic area consists of a high density of timber homes arranged within pols (gated residential streets) and puras (neighbourhoods), entered through khadki, and characterised by bird feeders (chabutaras), public wells and common courtyards [1]. The walled city contains a substantial stock of such houses, of which 2,236 residential buildings were formally listed as heritage structures by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation in 2016 [2]. This continued occupation, this continued way of life, is what the listing celebrated. It is also what the present research finds to be under stress.

Heritage designation is often portrayed as a major civic victory, and residents are certainly proud of it. However, when a built form is effectively frozen in its current state while the world around it changes economically and socially, significant and unevenly distributed costs can be imposed upon the very households that constitute the heritage of the area. The major conflict investigated by this paper is therefore between preservation and commercialisation: the competing pressures to maintain the pol in its authentic condition for an expanding tourism market, and to make the pol profitable for moneyed interests. Other World Heritage cities have seen designation lead to touristification, increasing property values and transforming homes into retail and lodging space, including cafés and hotels, with residents reporting both material and symbolic displacement [3]. What remains largely unexplored in the Indian context is how the residents of the pols themselves describe this conflict in their own language.

To examine how heritage status, conservation regulation, tourist activity and commercial pressure together shape the experience of living in the walled city, this research examines resident perceptions of autonomy, privacy and belonging. It investigates how people maintain and inhabit a heritage house while being watched within it, and it considers what happens when administrative measures intended to protect cultural heritage generate conflicts that lead some families to remain in their homes, others to commercialise them, and others to leave.

2. Literature Review

Critical heritage studies have long argued that heritage is constructed in the present. Smith [4] defines an Authorized Heritage Discourse in which experts and government institutions frame our understanding of heritage primarily through monuments, physical fabric and visual authenticity. This discourse becomes institutionalised when it is codified into law and regulation,

and the needs of the people living within these spaces are therefore often subordinated to the preservation of an idealised physical representation of the space.

The transformation of heritage into something to be bought has also been theorised. MacCannell [5] examined how tourists seek authenticity during their travels, and the staged authenticity that tourism-related sites create in order to appeal to travelers. AlSayyad [6] analysed the way traditions have become objects of consumption, creating a form of heritage produced specifically for visitor markets. The tourist gaze developed by Urry [7] is particularly applicable to residential heritage. Rather than being an incidental element of the viewing experience, the gaze itself organises the space around what can be seen and photographed. When the subject of the tourist gaze is a resident's home, the resident is transformed from a person occupying a dwelling into a component of the spectacle, a dynamic this study found clearly evident in the pols.

Urban scholarship connects these processes to displacement. Lefebvre's [8] theory of the social production of space, and Harvey's [9] conception of the right to the city, both present access to and control over urban space as contested entitlements rather than unproblematic givens. Zukin [10] illustrates how authentic urban spaces may be simultaneously pursued and lost, hollowed out as the populations whose presence created that authenticity are displaced. Herzfeld [11] describes the neoliberal capture of history, in which conservation regimes and tourism combine to evict the long-term residents who embody the past being celebrated.

Empirical research studies on World Heritage Cities provide evidence for this theory. In particular, UNESCO listing of Valparaíso was shown to create tourism in that city resulting in houses being converted into hotel shops, and creating a tourist bubble inside residential neighbourhoods, thus creating both material and symbolic pressures toward resident displacement [3]. Additionally, studies of historic centres such as Rome and Venice indicate the same phenomenon. Herzfeld's [12] account of Rome and Bertocchi and Visentin's [13] analysis of Venice both show that conservation of buildings in those centres' historic districts has maintained much of the physical structure of the building itself, while the social structures of the area are greatly altered and the original social composition of the area is continuously disassembled. The common thread throughout all of the previously mentioned examples is that there exists a difference between the urban conservation policies implemented and the social realities experienced by residents. In terms of the city of Ahmedabad, existing literature has focused primarily on the architecture and space of pol houses, including how they are socially organised [14], designed, constructed and neighbourhood characteristics [15].

Policy-focused work has begun to document the administrative dimension. Routh and Bhavsar [2] evaluated the Heritage Transfer of Development Rights scheme introduced to fund the restoration of privately owned heritage properties, and found very low uptake, limited awareness of the

application process, lengthy file clearance, and instances in which owners reported being asked for bribes to move their files. Their study also records that owners who cannot afford basic restoration frequently see their properties converted to commercial use or demolished. These findings converge closely with the resident accounts reported here, and establish that the administrative burden is a documented feature of the Ahmedabad context rather than an artefact of this sample.

Two knowledge gaps motivate the present study. First, work on the residential heritage of South Asian walled cities remains comparatively limited from the standpoint of resident experience, and qualitative, experience-centred studies of how pol residents interact with the formal regulatory environment governing their homes are especially scarce. Second, while the regulatory dimension of conservation is often examined at the level of policy design, less attention has been given to how those regulations are encountered as lived procedure by ordinary owners, many of them elderly and on fixed incomes. This paper addresses both gaps by examining how preservation regulation, market pressure and the tourist gaze are experienced together in daily life.

3. Objectives

To research how heritage designation, conservation regulation, and tourism and marketplace pressures all together affect the way that residents view their autonomy, meaning their ability to make decisions, their right to privacy, and their sense of belonging in Ahmedabad's old city area under a socially and emotionally dislocating official celebratory framework. Specifically:

1. What are the daily ways that residents experience maintaining and living in the space of their homes in terms of local government rules and regulations intended to preserve heritage buildings?
2. In what ways do the growing financial pressures of property purchases and rising rent rates, as well as the changes in residents' use of products and spaces for tourists, limit or shape the options available to residents?
3. In what ways does tourism transform residents' experiences of privacy, safety and the distinction between private living space and public display?
4. What roles do attachment to property, generational change and community erosion play in determining whether residents remain, commercialise or move out, and is there a disconnect between celebrating heritage and living it?

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A qualitative and interpretivist research design enabled the study to investigate how heritage regulation, market pressure and tourism together influence residents' perceptions of their autonomy, their private space and their sense of belonging within Ahmedabad's walled city. The qualitative nature of the research allows participant experiences and meanings relating to heritage and to the notion of home to be captured, drawing on participant interpretation rather than structured quantitative instruments.

4.2 Research Approach

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This format provides an opportunity for participants to express their thoughts in their own way, while allowing the researcher to follow up with additional questions as they arise during the interview. It therefore produced rich, individualised responses as well as opportunities to compare respondents occupying different roles.

4.3 Sampling Design

Purposive and convenience sampling were employed in order to gather variation across resident role, age, property type and location. The sample consisted of fifteen respondents representing four stakeholder categories: long-term owners ($n = 5$), artisans and shopkeepers ($n = 4$), younger-generation residents ($n = 3$), and community or pol panch leaders ($n = 3$). Respondents were distributed across ten locations within and adjoining the walled city, namely Mandvi ni Pol, Dhal ni Pol, Khadia, Doshiwada ni Pol, Dhobi ni Pol, Lakha Patel ni Pol, Lambeshwar ni Pol, Kuvavala Khancha, Sankdi Sheri and the Manek Chowk fringe. Respondents were selected on the basis of their capacity to provide meaningful input on the research objectives. For a qualitative study focused on thematic insight rather than statistical generalisation, the sample size was considered sufficient, since later interviews did not add substantially new perspectives, indicating analytical sufficiency.

4.4 Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an established interview schedule covering renovation and maintenance, tourism and privacy, financial pressure, and decision-making regarding staying, commercialising or relocating. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's permission and supported by substantive written notes in order to provide an accurate representation of each account.

4.5 Data Analysis Technique

Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke [16], supported by QDA Miner Lite for code management and retrieval. Analysis moved from familiarisation, to line-by-line identification of patterns and meanings (open coding), to axial coding in which codes were grouped according to conceptual relationships and causal linkages, and finally to the identification of superordinate categories and cross-cutting emergent themes. Each transcript constituted the unit of analysis, with frequencies counted on a first-occurrence basis per respondent so that more voluble respondents did not exert disproportionate influence on the distribution. To support reproducibility, an explicit code-by-transcript audit was maintained, from which every reported frequency and percentage can be recomputed.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were followed throughout. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, consented to participate, and were aware that they could withdraw at any point. To maintain privacy, all direct identifiers were deleted from the data and respondents' quotes are labelled with their respondent number and role descriptor only. The researcher kept these files secure and they were available only to the researcher for use in this research.

4.7 Reliability and Validity

Credibility of the findings was based upon the quality of the participants' accounts that are being interpreted. Dependability was enhanced by having a two-step code and recode process where each round of coding was reviewed and revised as needed. A single operational codebook, which had a fixed set of definitions, was used to apply the same criteria to all of the interviews; this was done to enhance confirmability. Coding was methodical and traceable, and the themes that emerged from the interviews were determined by what was discussed during the interviews themselves instead of what was pre-determined.

4.8 Limitations of This Study

This study was descriptive of a single community. Therefore it is not possible to generalise the findings of this study statistically to any other communities. Also, because this study used purposive and convenience samples, there is a possibility that the sample may have been biased toward those who were selected, that is, selection bias. Additionally, the use of self-reporting as an instrument could also produce biased responses due to recall errors or social desirability biases. Since this study was limited to examining one community at a single point in time, the scope of this study can only be extended by conducting longitudinal studies, as well as comparative studies across multiple cities. However, given the qualitative nature of this study, the

methodology effectively met its intended interpretive objectives.

5. Analysis and Findings

This analysis examines how heritage management regulation, the increasing influence of the market and the tourist gaze together shape residents' sense of social and spatial dislocation in the pols, and how this affects their capacity to act autonomously within their own community and to feel that they belong there. Analysis began with an overview of the concepts appearing most frequently across the interviews, presented in Figure 1. A structural thematic matrix was then constructed from the codes present throughout the data set, presented in Table 1, after which the dominant codes were interpreted in narrative form.

Figure 1. Word chart of salient concepts across the fifteen transcripts



Note. Terms are sized by prevalence across the interview set

Several terms recur repeatedly, among them permission delay and red tape, buyout offers, rising rents, the tourist gaze, loss of privacy and otlá intrusion. These suggest that residents' expressed concerns cluster into three areas: a lengthy and expensive conservation process, an increasingly commercially driven market, and an increasing invasion of domestic privacy caused by tourism. These clusters anticipate the categories developed below.

Table 1. Thematic coding matrix, axial categories and code prevalence (N = 15)

Axial category	Open code	Axial link: what the code isolates	f	%	Emergent theme
<i>Category 1: Commercialisation and market pressure</i>					
Commercialisation	Buyout solicitation	Active developer, hotel or homestay offers to purchase or convert the property	9	60	Commercial capture
Commercialisation	Rent and value escalation	Rising rents and land values pricing out tenants and small shopkeepers	9	60	Commercial capture
Commercialisation	Commodification and café-ification	Everyday goods and spaces reborn as premium tourist experiences at heritage prices	8	53	Spatial commodification
Commercialisation	Artisanal devaluation	Machine-made or imported substitutes undercutting genuine craft the visitor cannot distinguish	3	20	Spatial commodification
Commercialisation	Commerce as preservation finance	Commercial revenue framed as the only realistic source of funds for mandated upkeep	2	13	Commercial capture
<i>Category 2: Bureaucratic and regulatory friction</i>					
Bureaucracy	Permission delay and paralysis	Protracted, repetitive municipal approval obstructing ordinary repair and maintenance	13	87	Bureaucratic friction
Bureaucracy	Cost of compliance	Mandated materials, architects and documentation outstripping pensions and fixed incomes	5	33	Bureaucratic friction
Bureaucracy	Regulatory inequity	Rules applied rigidly to small owners and flexibly to capitalised actors; bribery and connection	7	47	Bureaucratic friction
Bureaucracy	Governance exclusion	Pol panch and associations consulted nominally but denied enforcement authority	3	20	Hollowing of community
<i>Category 3: Psycho-spatial displacement and domestic alienation</i>					
Psycho-spatial	Tourist gaze and surveillance	Non-consensual photography and filming rendering the home an object of the gaze	8	53	Erosion of domestic sanctuary
Psycho-spatial	Spatial encroachment	Otla and chowk occupied as bench, prop or photo studio; private space becoming semi-public	8	53	Erosion of domestic sanctuary
Psycho-spatial	Museumification of self	Residents perceiving themselves as exhibits expected to perform an authentic life	4	27	Living-museum alienation
Psycho-spatial	Safety and gendered vulnerability	Loss of the pol's protective enclosure, reported as feeling watched or unsafe	3	20	Erosion of domestic sanctuary
Psycho-spatial	Affective ambivalence	Pride and entrapment held together; the sense of being caught in the middle	7	47	Living-museum alienation

Category 4: Heritage identity, attachment and community erosion

Identity	Ancestral attachment and custodianship	Refusal to sell rooted in lineage, memory and a duty of trusteeship	5	33	Custodial attachment against exit
Identity	Generational discontinuity	Younger generation unwilling or unable to continue the craft or the residence	7	47	Custodial attachment against exit
Identity	Livability deficit	Sanitation, parking and emergency access unmet within preservation constraints	5	33	Custodial attachment against exit
Identity	Hollowing out and stage-set anxiety	Fear of preserved shells emptied of the families who give them meaning	5	33	Hollowing of community
Identity	Community fabric and mutual care	Festivals, mutual aid and care for the elderly as the endangered social substance	5	33	Hollowing of community

Note. f is the number of transcripts, out of fifteen, in which the code was manifested; the transcript is the unit of analysis and each code is counted once per transcript. Percentage is f divided by 15, multiplied by 100 and rounded to the nearest whole number. Because qualitative coding is multiple, codes are not mutually exclusive and the column does not sum to 100. Categories and codes were derived through open and axial coding; emergent themes group codes across categories by shared causal conditions and consequences.

5.1 Friction due to bureaucracy and regulation

Across the fifteen interviews, the dominant concern was neither the camera nor the buyer; it was the file. Thirteen out of the fifteen residents interviewed said that there was too much time spent on repetitive approvals to make a historic home habitable. For example, a long-time owner expressed frustration about pursuing a single repair:

“I went four times to the Heritage Cell for one window. One window. Same window that was rotting and pigeons were making nuisance inside.”

Respondent 1, long-time owner, Mandvi ni Pol

Institutional paralysis occurs when a conservation process is so cumbersome in nature that instead of conserving the building materials, deterioration continues while owners spend all their resources trying to get the necessary repairs done. When the compliance costs increase due to bureaucratic delays, many residents felt overwhelmed. An example of this is a 72-year-old widow who noted, “My pension does not even cover the architect they insist on” (Respondent 4, owner, Khadia). Furthermore, residents believed the regulatory burden was disproportionate. One third-generation shopkeeper stated simply: “Rule is strict for small Pravinbhai, flexible for big money” (Respondent 5, shopkeeper, Manek Chowk). As seen above, residents perceive inequality in enforcement among the regulations. Conservation regulation thus produces the commercialisation it is intended to prevent, because developers can absorb the paperwork and the waiting periods that ordinary owners cannot. One well-resourced homeowner stated that the

policy “manufactures the very commercialization it pretends to prevent” (Respondent 13). Residents’ comments mirror those in the documented history of Ahmedabad. Heritage homeowners in Ahmedabad have reported lengthy file clearance for their heritage homes, and in some cases have been asked to provide bribes to speed up processing of their application [2].

5.2 Buying out homeowners, rent escalation and the commercialisation of everyday life

Both buyout solicitations and rent escalations were documented in nine out of the fifteen responses, representing the highest frequency after permission delay. Homeowners describe repeated contact from hotel and homestay operators:

“Builders circle like crows. ‘Madam, prime heritage location, boutique potential.’”

Respondent 4, owner, Khadia

Shopkeepers report having their rents increased based upon the value created by their property receiving a heritage designation. An eatery owner reported that his “landlord doubled it, because now this is ‘prime heritage frontage’” (Respondent 14, Manek Chowk fringe). Daily items become premium experiences within the same movement: “A simple nashta place became a 250-rupee ‘pol thali experience’” (Respondent 6, younger resident, Kuvavala Khancha). This corresponds to the commodification of heritage described by Urry [7] and AlSayyad [6], in which people’s day-to-day lives are transformed into items that tourists can purchase or take photos of. However, a smaller group of respondents took a contrarian view, stating that commercial development is the most practical method to finance preservation efforts. One homestay owner stated that “in a way, commercialization is funding preservation” (Respondent 8, Doshiwada ni Pol). While this viewpoint captures the real dilemma faced by residents, it does not resolve the issue.

5.3 Residential spaces become tourist attractions

For eight of the fifteen residents, the tourist gaze and the invasion of residential privacy produced two connected forms of alienation. One was psycho-spatial alienation, where residents experienced a disconnect regarding their perception of themselves and their surroundings. The other was domestic alienation, which resulted in the functional transformation of the home into an attraction. Residents could no longer experience the *otla*, the threshold or border area between the private residence and the public space, and the *chowk*, the shared open space within a residential complex, as transitional domestic spaces, but rather as stages upon which to perform for visitors and benches upon which to sit. An owner spoke of how his wife had been photographed by a tourist while sipping her morning tea on the *otla*. He concluded by stating that “a camera is going click click. Like she is also an exhibit.” He remembered a tourist walking into

his courtyard without invitation to take photographs of the ancient well, and responded to this intrusion with the comment, “Behen, this is my home, not a museum” (Respondent 1, Mandvi ni Pol).

This results in what can be referred to as a museumification of the self, in which residents begin to see themselves as having an expectation to preserve their own lives as exhibits. A young professional expressed this feeling precisely when she stated, “that’s what it feels like sometimes, that I’m expected to preserve my own life” (Respondent 3, younger resident, Dhal ni Pol). Seven of the fifteen residents reported an affective ambivalence, holding pride and entrapment together at once. One artisan expressed this with unusual clarity:

“The fame keeps me alive and threatens to evict me, both.”

Respondent 9, textile artisan, Dhobi ni Pol

The loss of the pol’s protective enclosure was reported unevenly. Three respondents, all speaking about women and girls, described the opening of the previously semi-private lane network as a safety concern. As one put it, “As a girl, alone, late night... Heritage doesn’t walk me home” (Respondent 3). A community organiser reported that older women felt watched during ordinary domestic work in the chowk (Respondent 12). On this evidence, the conversion of private space into semi-public spectacle is experienced as a disproportionate cost by women, whose daily routines were previously conducted within the enclosure the pol provided.

5.4 Heritage identity, attachment and community erosion

Many owners refused to sell because of a custodial attachment to the house: “I am not its owner, I am its trustee for the next generation... You don’t sell your mother” (Respondent 13, restored-haveli owner, Doshiwada ni Pol). Generational discontinuity pulls in the opposite direction, however, as livability deficits make daily life difficult for younger residents: “I’m a software engineer earning decent money, and I’m sharing one common bathroom and bucket-heating water like it’s 1990” (Respondent 3). The concern shared across owners, artisans and leaders is that the living community will be hollowed out:

“Preserve the stone but lose the people, and you have built a very expensive cemetery.”

Respondent 13, owner, Doshiwada ni Pol

Community leaders reframed heritage as relational rather than purely material. As one mahila mandal organiser explained, “People think heritage is the carved door. For us heritage is also: does the elderly widow in the corner house have someone to check on her” (Respondent 12, Khadia). The president of a residents’ association concluded that families are now being forced to

choose between keeping a home and keeping a heritage property, and identified that forced choice as the central problem (Respondent 15, Mandvi ni Pol). Taken together, the findings describe a community whose architecture is legally protected while the social fabric that gives that architecture meaning continues to thin.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examines how world heritage designation and the practice of implementing this designation are viewed by residents of Ahmedabad's pols. There were four main themes that developed: commercialisation and market pressure; bureaucratic friction and regulatory barriers; psycho-spatial displacement and domestic alienation; and heritage identity and community erosion. These all relate to each other via a single structural mechanism. Bureaucratic friction was the most common condition reported by respondents, with thirteen of the fifteen respondents reporting delayed receipt of permits. In addition, bureaucratic friction acted as a pivot point converting commercial pressure to displacement. Individuals who possess assets but lack capital can neither maintain their housing legally nor affordably. Therefore, they are directed to developers and commercial entities that have greater ability to navigate the regulatory environment. At the same time, the tourist gaze transforms private thresholds into public spectacle, creating an alienating museum-living condition primarily experienced by women and older residents. The major discovery of this study is thus counterintuitive: preservation as currently administered generally creates the very commercialisation that preservation seeks to eliminate, and may produce attractive but socially vacuous pols.

In addition, there were several areas where interventions could occur based upon existing systems. First, a faster and less painful heritage approval process could be established. A one-stop-shop, deadline-based system with streamlined processes for ordinary like-for-like repairs would greatly reduce the amount of bureaucratic delay that now erodes elderly property owners. Routh and Bhavsar [2] report that a similar one-stop shop has already been initiated for the heritage development rights scheme, demonstrating that the process is administratively feasible. Second, a maintenance grant or low interest rate loan for ordinary property owners could assist with the asset-rich but cash-poor condition and disassociate preservation from required commercialisation. Third, the growth of tourism could be regulated as opposed to continuing in an unregulated fashion. Regulations could include ticketed and timed heritage walking tours, restrictions on the number of people per group, designated viewing locations, and standards of conduct for individuals entering private courtyard spaces. Fourth, a portion of tourism income should be returned to the individual residents maintaining the properties which generate the tourism attraction. Fifth, the pol panch and residents' association should be included as valid stakeholders in the governance of heritage as opposed to being used as ceremonial consultants. They are well-positioned to provide mediation between preservation and habitation given their

proximity to both issues.

Future studies could evaluate whether longitudinal measurements show out-migration and commercial conversions. Additional comparative studies could assess pols receiving different levels of tourists, as well as compare this study with other Indian and South Asian walled cities. Future studies could also explore the viewpoints of tour operators, local government officials and commercial entrants in order to map the total incentive structure surrounding the walled city, versus solely examining experiences of those residing within it. The testimony collected suggests that heritage and residence do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive choices. However, under current policies, families will likely be forced to make a decision about which they prefer. It is this forced decision making that a more humane participatory approach to conservation would resolve.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the residents of Ahmedabad's walled city who gave their time to be interviewed and who spoke openly about their homes.

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