

# Residential interrelationship: The case study of the Sylheti and Dhaka communities of Whitechapel

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## Abstract

Ethnic and religious groups have become a salient factor of urban residential dynamics in Western society. The residential decisions of the residents follow, at least in part, by their desire to live where their 'friends'—neighbours from the same or close group live, and/or relying on communal networks. However, the geographical proximity of the areas of origin, and as a result, the cultural similarities, seems to be able to overcome the political barriers. And so our western cities have witnessed a set of mixed neighbourhoods and shared communal spaces with both Turks and Greeks, Chinese and Koreans, Israelis and Iranian, who are known for their political, ethnic or religious conflicts. Based on an in-depth field survey, this paper explores what the 'push' and 'pull' factors are that affects the spatial relationship between the Sylheti and Dhaka communities in Whitechapel.

Keywords: Residential decisions; Networks; 'push' and 'pull' factors; Spatial competition; Communities; Whitechapel

## 1 Introduction

Host countries for immigrant have witnessed some mixed neighbourhoods and shared communal spaces with whom are known for their different and opposing political, ethnic or religious conflicts. Building upon extensive shared social, cultural and historical practices (Ashery, 2019), the main objective of this study is to recognise latent orders that determine micro-residential dynamics between Bangladeshi Sylheti and Dhaka communities and the general population. Distinctive conditions in Whitechapel, the traditional absorption area of East London providing insight into the spatial effect of intra- and inter-group relations. Similar to most 'first port' neighbourhoods around the world, Whitechapel developed gradually into a spatial minority's enclave. It is populated mainly by Muslims, Hindus and Christians of African, British, South-Asian, East-Asian and European origin. The study will focus on the residential relations between the Sylheti and Dhaka communities of Whitechapel that are quite similar in their wish to live in a traditional environment. However, they differ in terms of their self-identity, status within Bangladeshi society. As part of the tension between the groups, each group wish to live among "friends"—that is, among other members of the same group to which they belong.

The profound role of religious rituals in the daily life of Bangladeshi people has motivated voluntary territorial separation of the Bangladeshi population into a ghetto of sorts characterized by clear boundaries. The spatial division allows religiously based lives to remain cut off from external influences and safeguards the younger generation from the perceived threats of western culture. Expression of the Bangladeshi communal self-awareness is found in the clear tendency to form sizeable enclaves in major cities around the

globe. The driving force behind this residential behaviour is high awareness of particularities of social affiliation, and it could thus be specifically relevant for the residential patterns of tightly bonded religious groups and national/ideological minorities. The study further claims that the communal competition processes and the resulting residential patterns as exposed in Whitechapel could be characteristic of other culturally-mixed urban areas, where people of various social groups live in close proximity and share apartment buildings, streets, and city blocks.

## 2. The communities of Whitechapel

While untrained eyes might see the Bangladeshi-Muslims as a homogeneous Sunni population, a closer look reveals a complex communal structure, run by precise rules and conventions. Clans play a central role in the Bangladeshi community, politics and identity formation, providing both a system of rights and social support (Eade and Garbin 2001). Desai (2011) explains that the Bangladeshis can form a largely homogeneous community. Despite identification with the clan being intense and overt, and a tendency to marry inside the community, Sylhetis are highly integrated within general society, and many are establishing themselves in the mainstream of London commerce and politics. In recent years, a growing numbers of Dhaka Bangladeshis have settled in the neighborhood. For these communities, the Imams (religious leaders) have a central position in the organization of communal daily life in addition to their spiritual role. In terms of leadership, social dependencies are a means for preserving the community's structure (Forman 1989). Belonging and residing in the group's territory and relying on its institutions is a source of "social capital", mutual assistance and support for

individuals. The individuals' intense awareness of identity motivates them to cooperate in order to maintain their community identity and congregate in a voluntary territorial separation of clans along Whitechapel Road.

Whitechapel Road (Figure 1) is a part of the historic Roman Road from London to Colchester. Now, there are notable numbers of office buildings and several institutions along the road, such as the Whitechapel Art Gallery, the East London Mosque and the established street market next to Whitechapel tube station selling a range of authentic Asian food and clothes. Towards the end of the 20th century, the street, along with the nearby Brick Lane, became the centre of the British Bangladeshi community. Most of the residents along the road live in and above shops in houses divided as flats, both in private ownership and renting.

Figure 1: The research area of Whitechapel Rd.



### 3. Construction of Whitechapel's spatio-temporal population GIS

To investigate residential relationships in the research area among Whitechapel's population groups, a detailed spatio-temporal database that contains exact geo-referenced data on family affiliation was constructed. The research methods combine data analysis of (1) Field-survey; (2) in-depth interviews; and (3) observations.

**Field-survey:** The field research was conducted during 2011-12 at the level of individual families and flats. Together with a local interviewer, a young male from the Bangladeshi community (who has requested anonymity), the author conducted a door-to-door survey and interviewed 4656 Families living in 3186 Flats. As the interviewer was already familiar with the Bangladeshi civil community, and the author speaks Bengali, they were able to gather rich data by this means. The households were asked to identify themselves as well as the apartment's former dwellers, going back to 2010. All other questions asked related to the present occupants in order to ascertain their socio-spatial behaviour.

Householders were also questioned about motives for choosing the apartment, and asked to rank the relative importance of the flat's price, their neighbours' identity and

institutional (e.g., Churches and schools) proximity (stated preferences). This field survey also collected data about the apartment cost, the location of institutes and services that the families attend (revealed preferences), ownership versus rental of the apartment, and the source of information about apartments prior to buying or renting. Despite early apprehensions regarding cooperation, the response rate reached 83 percent. A high level of cooperation with the survey enables a comparison between stated and revealed preferences and recognizes similar preferences amongst the groups.

**In-depth interviews:** The interview was conducted in "naturalistic" fashion, often as a conversation, with the specific content and length of the interview being flexible and variable across the respondents. 33 Local key figures, relators, Tower Hamlet's representatives and local planners, were interviewed in order to clarify responses and the social processes that gave rise to spatial patterns (Scheurich, 2007).

**Observations:** For an entire week (4-10 June 2018), an observation was taken from the Idea Store tower on the pedestrians walking by the market and allowed me to map the use of Whitechapel market by users according to their gender and occupation. Although children were noted on all the days of observation, only children who were observed as holding defined roles and responsibilities (trading, gathering with the men, helped in stalls, arranged products etc.) were considered in this study.

Construction of the Whitechapel GIS was based on layers updated to 2011 and provided by the [ordnancesurvey.co.uk/opendatadownload/products.html](http://ordnancesurvey.co.uk/opendatadownload/products.html). The characteristics of all the research area's apartments and households were organized as GIS layers, in which every record in the table is related to the corresponding building. The layer was then included in the area's high-resolution GIS. Whitechapel's GIS contains additional layers pertaining to topography, roads, land parcel, and buildings, the latter characterized by use and number of floors. There are 1,149 families in 47 communal buildings and 3,507 families in 1,615 privately owned apartments in 241 buildings. Taken as a whole, the survey's spatiotemporal GIS enables investigation of the residential patterns in Whitechapel empirically possible.

### 4. Communal Competition between the Sylheti and Dhaka communities of Whitechapel

Although a Bangladeshi Sylheti community has lived in the Whitechapel neighbourhood for decades, only the recent experience of gentrification and 21st-century migration - first from Ireland, Greece and Austria, and since May 2004 also from Eastern Europe - followed by significant socio-economic change, motivated a Spatial competition between the Sylheti and the Dhaka communities along Whitechapel Road. Examining the occupation process of Whitechapel by Bangladeshi Dhaka people between 2010 and 2012 (table 1) can indicate the abilities and limitations of a community in the creation of a defined enclave within a relatively free market.

Despite the area already being occupied by the Sylheti group members, a clear behavioural code enabled an organised process that created high confidence among Dhaka residents regarding the group identities of newcomers and veteran residents. A high percentage of families reside in flats vacated

by householders of their own group. Following the in-depth survey, the probability of replacing a family belonging to a different group is calculated as  $DReplacing\_NOT\_D/NOT\_DLeft$ , where  $DReplacing\_NOT\_D$  denotes the families of a group D that replaced families of other groups, and  $NOT\_DLeft$  denotes the overall number of Sylheti families that left their flats. The probability of leaving a flat is calculated as  $DLeft/DOccupied$ , where  $DOccupied$  is the number of flats occupied by families belonging to a group D in the beginning of the year. The replacement of a tenant of the same group is a strong candidate mechanism for gaining cultural dominance in time. The transfer of flats to Dhaka newcomers, both owned and rented, is significantly higher than with other groups. It seems that the Sylhetis also apply this mechanism, which can be viewed as a powerful generative order, organizing residential patterns through the long term. This practice creates a residential continuum in respective buildings. Dhaka families can thus be assured that the level of community members in their building will not decrease following some instance of non-standard residential behaviour.

Table 1: the averaged probability to replace the family of the other group in an apartment, Renting

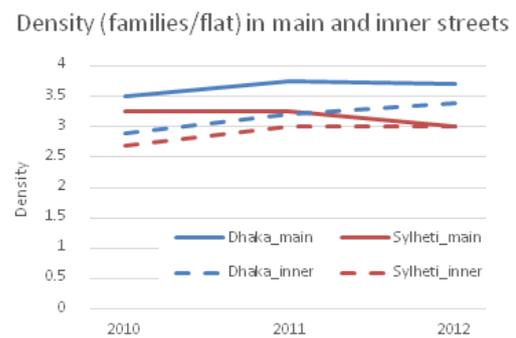
Year							Sylheti	Dhaka
	British	West European	East European	South Asian	East Asian	African		
2010-2	0.24	0.16	0.41	0.04	0.34	0.00	0.57	0.84

The need of communities for their own ethno-religious congregation leads to further examination of the dynamics of residential patterns by religious affiliation according to Moran I index. Given the high cooperation of the dwellers with the survey, disaggregated data is available at the resolution of apartments and buildings, enables evaluation of the residential relations between households and neighbours in the same and neighbouring buildings. Unlike the standard measures of segregation (e.g The Dissimilarity Index, Rey and Folch 2011; Sharma 2012), the high-resolution data of this study enabled direct estimation of the relation between characteristics of the household and its neighbours at the resolution of apartments and buildings. According to the analysis, Moran’s I index seems comparably high for both Sylhetis ( $MI_{2010}=0.4$ ;  $MI_{2012}=0.45$ ) and Dhaka ( $MI_{2010}=0.4$ ;  $MI_{2012}=0.48$ ) communities, and mainly for 2012, and that they are the most highly segregated groups in Whitechapel, although the residential segregation of the other religious groups has been steadily growing over the years (Flint 2017).

The study will, therefore, compare the residential density between the community of Dhaka and the community of Sylhet, living along Whitechapel Rd and in the inner streets of the neighbourhood. Perceived density emphasize the relations between individuals and the environment in addition to the spatial characteristic and the relative relationships between individual and space. Whitechapel Rd’s density defines by the ratio between the numbers of surveyed families per unoccupied

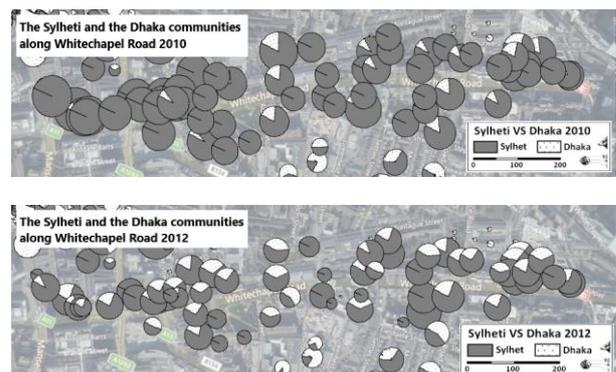
residential units. Figure 2 shows that in the inner streets of Whitechapel the level of densities increased during the years both for Sylheti’s and Dhaka’s families, although the level of density is higher for the Dhaka’s. Along Whitechapel Rd, Dhaka’s families are able to maintain and even increase the level of density over the years. The level of densities for Sylheti families, however, maintained between 2010 and 2011 and then declined to 3 families per flat on average. In total, in 2012, the average density in Whitechapel neighbourhood was 1.9 families per flat, and about 72 per cent of the buildings characterised by more than one family per flat.

Figure 2: Density over the inner neighbourhood and Whitechapel Rd



While the occupation process of Whitechapel Road by the Bangladeshi community happened in a few decades - as many houses were subdivided, making property affordable to Sylheti immigrants who arrived from Bangladesh from the late 1950s onwards - inner pressure inside the Bangladeshi community between the Sylheti and the Dhaka expedited this process. Today, the Bangladeshi community has succeeded in dominating Whitechapel Road, and most of the 642 families living there belong to the Sylheti community (Figure 3). Many Sylhetis have since moved further north, although some continue to operate or work in businesses here. However, a growing number of Dhaka entering the flat, maintained and increased the density, and established there as well. Although these groups have a history of rivalry, co-existence have been mostly peaceful as the communities strive to prove that the majority of their number are hardworking and respectable.

Figure 3: Spatial competition between the Sylheti and the Dhaka communities along Whitechapel Rd 2010 and 2012



## 5. Summary and conclusions

This research aims to address the conspicuous dearth of micro-resolution studies that identify and observe the micro-residential dynamics of communities, contending that in order to examine residential processes one must refer to the fundamental social structures and values from which affected communities draw their strength. This research is, therefore, aiming to shed light on the ways in which spatial and cultural logics intersect in the urban realm, to open up the possibility of an integrated understanding of the development of the city.

Religious identity appears to be the driving force behind the micro-dynamics in Whitechapel. Following Giddens' (1984) time-space distanciation, urban scholars focus on a-spatial networks and far-flung communities. However, it appears that traditional groups in large cities manage to reproduce their physical proximity in space and maintain their community. In addition, unlike the homogeneous communities of rural and suburban localities, urban religious communities often encompass various under-currents, each having a distinct title, heritage, and lifestyle characteristics. Whitechapel-like spatial dynamics are therefore expected to emerge in other enclaves. More specifically, we could expect micro-segregation mechanisms to operate in multi-cultural urban hubs as a result of people's urge to feel comfortable in their residential surroundings. It appears that residential decisions are primarily directed toward living with a sufficiently large circle of "friends" who match the person's self-identity. The very existence of a few neighbours belonging to the same actual or anticipated social group has the ability to create a satisfactory living environment and minimize the sense of unfamiliarity related to living among "others."

This study contributes two new ideas to the knowledge base of residential dynamics and planning. The first is the in-depth micro resolution construction of an explanation of real dynamic processes, which other studies in the field have overlooked as they have tended to work with more aggregate patterns. In this regard, estimates of the numbers of these communities' members are varied – there are no accurate figures available, in itself, an illustration of the failure of local government to address these groups' specific needs. Because their numbers are not significant nationally, Sylheti and Dhaka communities are not classified in the census. This has meant, in turn, that locally these groups have been rendered invisible. The second is an identification of space-culture-oriented directions within groups that will suggest an integrated understanding linking socio-cultural norms and the urban environment.

## 6. References

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## 7. Appendix

Moran's I index of spatial autocorrelation (Anselin 1995; Brown and Chung 2006) estimates the correlation between the fraction  $D_i$  of group D in building  $i$  and the average fraction of group D over the buildings within the neighbourhood  $U(i)$  of building  $i$ :

$$\frac{N \sum_i \sum_{j \in U(i)} w_{ij} (D_i - \bar{D})(D_j - \bar{D})}{(\sum_i \sum_{j \in U(i)} w_{ij}) \sum_i (D_i - \bar{D})^2}$$

Where  $N$  is the number of buildings in the area and the average fraction  $\bar{D}$  of a group D in Whitechapel. The influence  $w_{ij}$  of the neighbouring buildings  $j \in U(i)$  on  $i$  is calculated as  $w_{ij} = 1/NU(i)$ , where  $NU(i)$  is the number of buildings in  $U(i)$ . The proximity of buildings is defined by a Voronoi partition *diagram* constructed based on the buildings' central points (Benenson, Omer and Hatna, 2002). According to their description "two buildings are adjacent if the central points of their foundations are directly visible by the other".