PLACE-MAKING, PUBLIC SPACE AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Urban Belonging, Community Life and Ecotourism

Editor:
Loid Karchava

PLACE-MAKING, PUBLIC SPACE AND SOCIAL CONTEXT: URBAN BELONGING, COMMUNITY LIFE AND ECOTOURISM- 2026

ISBN: 978-625-93102-2-0
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18304546

Edited By
Loid Karchava

January / 2026
İstanbul, Türkiye

Date: 19.01.2026

Halic Publishing House
İstanbul, Türkiye
www.halicyayinevi.com

adopted by ESRA KOÇAK
ISBN: 978-625-93102-2-0

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PREFACE

This volume brings together diverse perspectives on the relationship between space, identity, and community, highlighting how physical environments shape social experiences and cultural expression. Through case studies and conceptual frameworks, the chapters explore how urban and ecological spaces become sites of belonging, engagement, and sustainable development.

The first chapter delves into the concept of place-making, examining how urban design can foster a sense of belonging and enrich the social life of cities. The second chapter shifts focus to ecotourism, proposing a research model to assess the factors influencing its development in Tan Quy Islet, Vietnam—an area where environmental stewardship and community participation are key to sustainable growth.

The final chapter investigates the cultural and civic significance of Ojude, a traditional urban square in Ilorin, Nigeria. It reveals how such spaces serve as vital arenas for community identity and collective memory. Together, these contributions underscore the importance of thoughtful spatial design and cultural sensitivity in shaping inclusive, resilient, and vibrant communities.

Editorial Team
January 19, 2026
Türkiye

CHAPTER 1
DESIGNING BELONGING: PLACE-MAKING AND THE SOCIAL LIFE OF URBAN SPACE

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INTRODUCTION

Cities are not static assemblages of buildings, roads, and infrastructures; they are fluid social organisms whose vitality depends on the rhythms of human interaction and collective experience. Architecture, when reduced to form and function alone, risks losing its essential human purpose to create spaces that nurture connection, identity, and meaning. Every street corner, marketplace, and courtyard embodies more than physical design it encapsulates memory, aspiration, and the invisible threads of belonging that bind individuals to the collective life of the city. Urban space, therefore, is not merely *inhabited* but *lived*, not simply *constructed* but *experienced*.

The notion of place-making arises precisely from this distinction between *space* and *place*. While *space* denotes geometric extension and physical parameters, *place* represents lived experience, emotional attachment, and symbolic significance (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). The process of place-making transforms anonymous, interchangeable spaces into meaningful loci of social and cultural life. It is through place-making that cities evolve from physical infrastructures into complex social ecologies sites of memory, identity, and imagination. Architecture, in this view, becomes a medium through which societies narrate who they are and who they aspire to become.

As phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger and Christian Norberg-Schulz have argued, to dwell is not merely to reside but to establish a *meaningful relationship with the world*. In his essay *Building, Dwelling, thinking* (1971), Heidegger posits that "building is not merely a means to shelter, but the fundamental act of dwelling." This act of dwelling the human tendency to seek rootedness and identity in the environment is the foundation of place. Norberg-Schulz further develops this idea in *Genius Loci* (1980), suggesting that architecture must reveal and reinforce the "spirit of place," helping people orient themselves existentially within their surroundings. Place-making, therefore, is not just a technical or aesthetic exercise it is an ethical and phenomenological endeavor that responds to the human need for belonging. Yet, the contemporary urban condition complicates this relationship. Globalization and the rise of the "generic city" (Koolhaas, 1995) have blurred the distinctiveness of urban identities.

Homogenized skylines, standardized housing typologies, and privatized "public" spaces have created environments that are efficient yet emotionally sterile. In such spaces, individuals become consumers rather than citizens; encounters become transactions rather than relationships. The erosion of *place identity* results in what Marc Augé (1995) famously termed *non-places* transient, impersonal environments like airports, malls, and highways that facilitate movement but not meaning.

Against this backdrop, place-making emerges as a counter-narrative a humanistic reorientation of architecture and urban design toward *experiential richness* and *social cohesion*. It calls for spaces that foster interaction, memory, and inclusion; that respond not only to the physical context but also to the social, psychological, and cultural dimensions of human existence. The goal is not simply to design *for* people but *with* people to engage communities as co-authors in the creation of environments that reflect their values, histories, and aspirations.

The social life of urban space, a term popularized by William H. Whyte (1980) and further developed by Jan Gehl (2010), underscores that public spaces derive their vitality from how people *use* them rather than how they are merely designed. Benches, shade, walkability, visibility, and scale these seemingly small elements have profound effects on whether a space feels inviting or alienating. Successful place-making thus requires a deep understanding of human behavior, movement patterns, and social rituals. Architecture here acts as both *stage and participant* in the everyday drama of public life.

Furthermore, belonging in urban environments extends beyond physical accessibility; it involves symbolic inclusion the sense that one's culture, identity, and history are represented and respected within the built environment. Architecture can empower or marginalize; it can tell stories of pride or of neglect. Consider how community murals, memorials, or the adaptive reuse of heritage sites serve as collective anchors of identity. They connect past and present, enabling people to see themselves reflected in their surroundings. In this way, architecture becomes a vessel of continuity amid change a material expression of shared memory.

At the same time, place-making is not without tension. It exists within the intersections of power, economy, and culture. Who defines what a place should represent? Whose memories are preserved, and whose are erased? Urban development often privileges commercial value over social value, leading to displacement and gentrification. Thus, designing belonging requires an ethical awareness of inclusivity and justice. Architects and planners must navigate these complexities, balancing innovation with empathy, progress with preservation.

In the context of contemporary global cities, digital technology introduces new dimensions to place-making. Smart urbanism, augmented reality, and participatory design platforms now allow citizens to co-create spaces in virtual and physical ways. Yet, these technologies also risk producing hyper-individualized, fragmented experiences detached from collective meaning. The challenge for the 21st-century architect is to integrate technological innovation with human-centered design to ensure that connectivity enhances, rather than replaces, community.

Ultimately, to design belonging is to design relationships between people and space, memory and form, culture and context. It is to recognize that architecture carries both *material and moral weight*: it structures not only how we live but also how we understand ourselves in relation to others. Belonging is not simply an emotional state but a spatial practice cultivated through environments that invite participation, dialogue, and care.

This chapter, therefore, situates place-making at the intersection of architecture, phenomenology, and social theory. It examines how the built environment mediates human experience and identity formation, drawing upon interdisciplinary insights from sociology, environmental psychology, and cultural geography.

Through theoretical analysis and real-world examples, it argues that *designing belonging* is not a peripheral goal of architecture it is its very essence. In understanding how space becomes place, and how place becomes home, we rediscover architecture's most fundamental purpose: to create worlds where people not only exist but *belong*.

1. THE CONCEPT OF PLACE-MAKING

Place-making is more than an architectural strategy it is an evolving philosophy that redefines how humans relate to the built environment. It views urban space not as a backdrop for activity, but as an active participant in shaping social life, emotion, and identity (Relph, 1976). The concept finds its roots in mid-20th century urban thought, particularly in the writings of Jane Jacobs (1961) and Kevin Lynch (1960), who challenged modernist urban planning's focus on efficiency, monumentality, and segregation. They argued that cities should be designed around people, not merely around cars, grids, or abstract geometries (Jacobs, 1961; Lynch, 1960).

For Jacobs (1961), in her seminal work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, the vitality of urban life lay in "eyes on the street," mixed-use neighborhoods, and spontaneous social interactions. She celebrated the complexity and diversity of city streets, arguing that true urban order arises not from top-down planning but from organic social patterns. In contrast to the sterile, isolated superblocks of modernist planning, Jacobs envisioned cities as living ecosystems where social relationships and spatial configurations constantly co-evolve (Jacobs, 1961). Place-making, in this sense, becomes an act of restoring life and spontaneity to the city.

Kevin Lynch (1960), in *The Image of the City*, introduced the concept of imageability the quality that makes a place legible and memorable to its inhabitants. He identified five key elements paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks that shape how people perceive and navigate their urban environment. Lynch's framework revealed that people's mental maps of cities are not merely functional but emotional and symbolic. A "good city," he wrote, is one that can be imagined easily and vividly a place that enables people to construct meaning and identity (Lynch, 1960). Together, Jacobs and Lynch laid the groundwork for an urbanism that values experience, perception, and participation over abstraction and control (Jacobs, 1961; Lynch, 1960).

From Space to Place: Human Experience as the Core

The transformation from space to place occurs when physical environments become infused with meaning through human experience and memory (Tuan, 1977).

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) eloquently captured this shift in *Space and Place*, where he described space as movement and freedom, while place as pause and attachment. Place-making, then, is the process through which we invest physical space with emotional and symbolic significance (Tuan, 1977). This transformation is not achieved by design alone it is co-created through inhabitation, interaction, and storytelling. For example, a public square becomes a place not merely by its paving, seating, or landscaping, but by the rituals it hosts: markets, protests, festivals, and casual encounters. These repeated social practices inscribe meaning into the space, turning it into a repository of collective memory (Relph, 1976). Anthropologist Edward Relph (1976) further emphasized this phenomenon in his notion of place identity a fusion of physical setting, activities, and meanings. When these dimensions align, people experience *insideness*, a sense of belonging and familiarity. Conversely, when design ignores these human layers, places risk becoming alienating "non-places," as later described by Augé (1995).

Participatory and Social Dimensions of Place-Making

Contemporary interpretations of place-making have expanded beyond aesthetics to embrace participation and co-creation. The Project for Public Spaces (2025), building on Jacobs' legacy, defines place-making as "a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm to maximize shared value" (Project for Public Spaces, 2025). This participatory approach democratizes design, acknowledging that the knowledge of local communities how they use, perceive, and imagine their environment is indispensable in crafting meaningful places (Jacobs, 1961; Project for Public Spaces, 2025). In practice, participatory place-making may involve community workshops, temporary installations, tactical urbanism, or citizen-led design interventions. These actions give residents a voice in shaping their surroundings, fostering ownership and agency. A park co-designed by its users, for instance, is more likely to be cared for, frequented, and loved. The process transforms users from passive consumers of space into active makers of place. Such engagement strengthens the social fabric, creating environments that reflect diverse needs and narratives rather than imposed, one-size-fits-all visions (Jacobs, 1961; Project for Public Spaces, 2025).

Place-Making as Cultural Continuity

Beyond its spatial and social roles, place-making is also an act of cultural preservation. Places carry the imprints of history, tradition, and collective identity (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). In many indigenous and vernacular cultures, architecture is inseparable from the landscape, embodying local materials, climate, and rituals. Modern place-making seeks to rekindle this connection by integrating cultural memory into contemporary design (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Consider the adaptive reuse of heritage sites such as the conversion of abandoned industrial buildings into cultural centers or creative hubs. These projects retain the spirit of place (*genius loci*) while introducing new layers of meaning (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). They reflect the evolving identity of a community while respecting its past. According to Norberg-Schulz (1980), this continuity between memory and modernity is essential for existential orientation helping people find their place in a rapidly changing world. When architecture honors cultural context, it becomes a vessel of belonging that transcends time.

Emotional and Psychological Foundations

From an environmental psychology perspective, place-making is deeply tied to human emotion and cognitive well-being. Studies have shown that well-designed public spaces can reduce stress, foster trust, and increase feelings of safety and happiness (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Spaces that evoke beauty, coherence, and accessibility contribute to what Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) call *restorative environments* places where people recover from mental fatigue and reconnect with nature or community. Moreover, emotional attachment to place, often termed *place attachment*, has been identified as a critical factor in resilience and community solidarity. After natural disasters or urban displacement, people often mourn the loss of place as they would a loved one (Relph, 1976). This demonstrates that built environments are not neutral—they are repositories of emotion and identity. Thus, place-making must consider not only physical usability but also psychological comfort and symbolic resonance (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).

Place-Making in the Age of Global Urbanization

In today's globalized world, cities face a paradox: while they expand physically and technologically, they often contract emotionally. The spread of homogenized urban landscapes glass towers, shopping malls, and gated communities has produced environments that feel placeless and interchangeable (Koolhaas, 1995). This "global aesthetic," as Koolhaas (1995) terms it, strips cities of their uniqueness, replacing character with uniformity. Place-making resists this tendency by re-centering design around local identity. It advocates for contextual architecture that draws inspiration from local materials, climate, and community narratives. Projects like the High Line in New York or Jan Gehl's Copenhagen Street redesigns illustrate how rehumanizing urban design through walkability, greenery, and sociability can restore a sense of belonging even in dense, modern cities (Gehl, 2010). At the same time, digital technologies have introduced new forms of place-making. Online platforms enable crowdsourced design ideas, while augmented reality layers new meanings onto physical spaces. Yet, these technologies also risk alienation if they replace, rather than enhance, real-world connection. The challenge lies in integrating digital participation without sacrificing the embodied experience of place (Project for Public Spaces, 2025).

Toward an Integrative Understanding

Ultimately, place-making is an integrative practice bridging design, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. It acknowledges that architecture cannot exist in isolation from its users and contexts. Successful place-making requires balancing three interdependent dimensions:

- **Spatial Design**: physical form, layout, and sensory experience (Lynch, 1960).
- **Social Interaction**: the behaviors, encounters, and relationships that animate space (Jacobs, 1961).
- **Cultural Continuity**: the symbolic and historical meanings embedded within place (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

When these dimensions converge, a space evolves into a living place one that reflects collective identity, invites participation, and fosters belonging (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977).

In this way, place-making is both a process and a philosophy: a continuous act of negotiation between people and environment, memory and innovation, individuality and community. As the following sections will explore, place-making not only transforms urban landscapes but also redefines the social life of cities. It invites us to rethink architecture as a form of civic empathy a design ethic that prioritizes human connection, inclusivity, and meaning over mere spectacle or efficiency (Gehl, 2010; Jacobs, 1961).

2. THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF URBAN SPACE

The city is not merely a constellation of buildings, roads, and boundaries it is an active social organism, a dynamic fabric woven from the rhythms of human interaction. Urban space functions as both a container and a producer of social life. Every square, market, street corner, and park is imbued with stories, memories, and gestures that transform spatial geometry into lived experience. Henri Lefebvre's idea of the "production of space" (1974) reveals that space is not a neutral backdrop but a social construct continuously shaped by cultural practices, political power, and collective desires. In this view, architecture becomes a medium of social negotiation a tangible expression of how communities define inclusion, visibility, and belonging. The way people occupy, modify, and imagine their surroundings transforms built form into a language of identity and resistance.

Ray Oldenburg's notion of "third places" (1989) further illuminates this relationship. Between the intimacy of home (the first place) and the productivity of work (the second), third places cafés, courtyards, teahouses, libraries, and sidewalks serve as neutral grounds for dialogue, laughter, and cultural exchange. These informal social anchors nurture spontaneity and equality, enabling interaction across class, gender, and ethnic lines. Such places humanize the metropolis by making participation and presence visible. Yet, the erosion of publicness in many modern cities threatens this delicate ecology. Privatized plazas, securitized complexes, and gated enclaves replace open commons, leading to what Marc Augé (1995) describes as the rise of "non-places" transitory environments like airports or malls that facilitate movement but not meaning. In these sterile zones of circulation, the possibility of encounter diminishes, and with it, the sense of shared belonging.

Conversely, when design cultivates porosity, inclusivity, and spatial empathy, urban spaces evolve into arenas of coexistence. Jane Jacobs (1961) celebrated the "sidewalk ballet" of city life an intricate choreography of observation, interaction, and trust that emerges organically in diverse neighbourhoods. Architecture that encourages this ballet transforms strangers into participants in a collective rhythm of recognition. The social vitality of urban space thus depends on its ability to accommodate ambiguity and multiplicity. A truly public space does not impose uniformity it invites difference. It allows for festivals and protests, solitude and solidarity, commerce and contemplation. Such spaces are not designed merely to be seen but to be inhabited, remembered, and reimagined.

Ultimately, the social dimension of urban space lies in its power to transform proximity into community. When people gather not by necessity but by choice when they imprint their laughter, movement, and rituals onto stone and street the city transcends its material form. It becomes a social memory, a living archive of human connection. In this sense, architecture and urban design are ethical acts. They shape the conditions of coexistence who feels seen, who feels safe, and who feels silenced. To design cities, therefore, is to design the possibility of belonging itself.

3. ARCHITECTURE AND EMOTIONAL GEOGRAPHY

Human attachment to place often called *topophilia* is not an accidental by-product of architecture but a primary design outcome: the emotional geography of a city emerges from repeated sensory experiences, social rituals, and mnemonic inscriptions that link bodies and built form (Tuan, 1974). If place-making asks *how* people come to belong, emotional geography asks *why* certain places feel like home: what combinations of light, material, scale, movement, and narrative produce intimacy, safety, and identity?

Foundations: Phenomenology, Environmental Psychology, and Neuroaesthetics

Three intellectual strands help explain how architecture evokes affective responses.

- **Phenomenology** (Heidegger, Norberg-Schulz, Pallasmaa) foregrounds lived, embodied experience: the way a threshold is crossed, a hand touches a balustrade, or a gaze registers a distant skyline are existential events that orient the self in the world. Juhani Pallasmaa emphasizes the primacy of the multisensory body in architectural perception: touch, smell, and proprioception matter as much as vision.
- **Environmental psychology** operationalizes attachment and restorative qualities. Kaplan & Kaplan's work on *restorative environments* shows that coherence, complexity, and fascination in a setting reduce cognitive fatigue and increase well-being (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Place attachment research identifies dimensions place dependence, place identity, social bonds that mediate belonging.
- **Neuroaesthetics** connects sensory design to brain response: environmental features that afford safety, predictability, and social contact influence neural systems for reward and threat (amygdala, ventral striatum), bodily simulation, and affective regulation. Though this field is emergent, it supports the embodied claim that architecture enacts feeling through sensorimotor resonance.

Sensory and Material Drivers of Belonging

Certain architectural characteristics reliably support positive emotional attachment:

- **Light and Liminality:** Daylight quality direction, softness, and modulation shapes mood and temporal orientation. Soft northern light evokes contemplation; warm oblique light at dusk fosters intimacy. Thresholds and transitional spaces (porches, covered arcades) tune daylight into moments of arrival and departure, ritualizing daily experience.
- **Materiality and Tactility:** Natural, textured materials (wood, stone, fired earth) invite touch and signal endurance and warmth. Materials age visibly; their patina accrues memory. Tactile legibility low parapets, worn steps encourage bodily use and collective inscription.
- **Scale, Enclosure, and Prospect–Refuge:** Human scale and proportion determine comfort.

Prospect–refuge configurations open vistas (prospect) coupled with sheltered niches (refuge) support exploration while offering psychological safety (Appleton). Courtyards, small plazas with peripheral seating, and tree canopies instantiate this balance.

- **Acoustics and Microclimate:** Soundscapes water features, vegetation, distant traffic mediate perceived tranquility. Thermal comfort (microclimates produced by shading, thermal mass) enables longer, more pleasurable occupation. Together, these physical conditions create affordances for social interaction.
- **Movement and Seriality:** Sequenced spatial experiences threshold, approach, reveal produce narrative journeys that embed memory. Processional routes in historic urban fabric and contemporary designed promenades both create expectant attention and recurring rituals.
- **Olfactory and Multisensory Cues:** Smell is a powerful mnemonic: food markets, incense, wet earth after rain anchor memory and identity. Integrating multisensory cues makes places more memorable and emotionally resonant.

Social Practices, Memory, and Symbolic Anchors

Emotional geography is co-produced: material affordances only become meaningful through social use. Markets, festivals, commemorations, and informal daily rituals inscribe places with stories. Design can intentionally create *mnemonic anchors* memorials, murals, adapted industrial relics that help communities narrate continuity between past and present. Adaptive reuse projects that retain traces of former uses (beams, signage, machinery) often show higher levels of attachment, because they preserve the narrative strata of place.

Therapeutic and Restorative Design Applications

Architectural strategies that intentionally target well-being *therapeutic landscapes*—are increasingly adopted in hospitals, schools, and public housing. Principles include access to nature; clear wayfinding; opportunities for social interaction; and daylight optimization.

Research links such design to measurable outcomes: reduced stress, faster recovery in healthcare contexts, and increased pro-social behavior in public spaces.

Design Practices for Evoking Belonging

Practitioners can operationalize emotional geography through a set of strategies:

Design for Ritual: Provide simple, repeatable settings for everyday ritual (benches, kiosks, communal worktables). Ritual repetition is a primary engine of attachment.

Layered Legibility: Employ landmarks, edges, and nodes to create mental maps (Lynch), enabling orientation and predictability.

Material Continuity: Use durable, local materials that age gracefully; design details that invite touch and repair.

Spatial Diversity: Combine open gathering spaces with smaller niches to support both sociability and solitude.

Tactical Temporality: Use temporary installations and events (tactical urbanism) to catalyze appropriation before committing to permanent change.

Multisensory Design: Consider sound, smell, and tactile surfaces as primary design inputs, not afterthoughts.

Participatory Narrative-Making: Co-design elements with communities so that symbols and programs reflect shared identity.

Measuring Emotional Geography

Evaluating affective outcomes requires mixed methods: qualitative ethnography (participant observation, interviews), place attachment scales, behavioral mapping, and physiological indicators (where appropriate and ethical). Designers should couple pre- and post-intervention studies to assess how spatial changes affect use patterns, dwell time, and subjective wellbeing.

Risks and Ethical Considerations

Design that intentionally shapes emotion carries ethical responsibilities. Strategies that manipulate affect for commercial ends (e.g., engineered atmospheres that displace locals) can erode authenticity and equity.

Sensitive place-making requires reflexivity: whose memories are honored? Whose rituals are enabled? Equitable emotional geographies are inclusive, adaptable, and contested in constructive ways. Architecture's power to evoke belonging lies in its capacity to orchestrate lived experience: to choreograph light and shadow, texture and tactility, movement and memory into environments that people choose to inhabit and remember.

Emotional geography is both a diagnostic lens and a design ambition one that insists architects attend as carefully to feeling as to form. When design aligns with the sensory and social rhythms of a community, urban spaces become more than places to pass through: they become places to belong.

4. PLACE-MAKING AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Architecture operates not merely as a functional or aesthetic practice but as a vessel of cultural meaning a language through which societies narrate their collective memory and evolving identity. In this sense, place-making becomes a process of cultural articulation: it translates intangible heritage, local traditions, and shared values into spatial form. The city, therefore, is not only a built environment but also a *cultural text*, where every façade, street pattern, and public square embodies layers of historical, social, and symbolic significance.

Architecture as a Repository of Cultural Memory

Buildings and urban spaces serve as repositories of collective memory, preserving traces of the past that sustain continuity across generations. As theorist Aldo Rossi (1982) noted in *The Architecture of the City*, the urban fabric carries a "collective memory" that gives meaning to civic life.

Vernacular architecture rooted in local materials, climate, and craftsmanship encodes cultural wisdom and environmental adaptation accumulated over centuries. When architects draw upon these vernacular vocabularies, they reaffirm a community's sense of identity while reinterpreting tradition for contemporary use. The adaptive reuse of heritage structures further embodies this dynamic continuity. Transforming old factories into cultural centers, or ancestral homes into community hubs, allows spaces to evolve without erasing their narrative past.

Such interventions do not fossilize heritage but *revitalize* it, embedding new layers of meaning while retaining the authenticity that anchors local identity.

Multiculturalism and the Plural City

Modern urban environments are increasingly multicultural composed of diverse ethnicities, religions, and social groups whose identities overlap and intersect. In these contexts, inclusive place-making resists the homogenizing tendencies of globalized architecture. Instead, it promotes spatial pluralism, where multiple identities can coexist and be visibly represented in the built environment. This pluralism can manifest through architectural hybridity where global forms dialogue with local materials or through symbolic representation, such as murals, community installations, or the preservation of sacred spaces amidst urban redevelopment. In cities like Singapore, Istanbul, or Delhi, such hybrid landscapes illustrate how identity negotiation is spatially enacted, allowing cultural difference to coexist without hierarchy. Inclusive place-making acknowledges that *belonging* is not a universal condition but a negotiated experience shaped by recognition, visibility, and participation. A truly plural city celebrates difference through design that invites interaction rather than segregation.

Participation, Co-Creation, and Empowerment

The process of place-making gains cultural depth when it becomes participatory—when local communities, artisans, and residents contribute actively to shaping their environments. This approach, aligned with the ideas of Henri Lefebvre's *Right to the City* (1968), democratizes spatial production by recognizing people as co-authors rather than passive users of urban space. Participatory design workshops, community mapping exercises, and collaborative art projects help translate cultural narratives into built form. For instance, neighborhood murals depicting local histories or co-designed pavilions using indigenous construction techniques not only create meaningful spaces but also strengthen community ownership. This participatory authorship ensures that urban design reflects *lived culture* rather than imposed aesthetics.

Negotiating Heritage and Modernity

One of the central tensions in contemporary urban design lies in balancing modernization with the preservation of cultural identity. Global architectural trends glass façades, high-rise typologies, modular grids often risk erasing local distinctiveness in pursuit of efficiency and spectacle. Yet, innovation and heritage need not be oppositional. Architects such as Balkrishna Doshi and Wang Shu have demonstrated how modern design can engage critically with tradition through reinterpretation rather than imitation. By integrating local materials, climate-responsive techniques, and cultural symbols into modern frameworks, designers craft spaces that are both forward-looking and deeply rooted. This synthesis creates "glocal" architectures globally conversant but locally resonant ensuring that progress does not come at the cost of identity.

Space, Symbol, and Ritual

Cultural identity is also enacted through rituals the repeated practices that invest space with meaning. Festivals, markets, pilgrimages, and public ceremonies transform ordinary spaces into sacred or symbolic ones. Architecture that accommodates such temporal events open courtyards, flexible plazas, shaded verandahs becomes an *enabler* of cultural expression. The spatial design of these rituals often carries metaphorical resonance: thresholds symbolize transition, courtyards represent community, and temples or mosques embody the axis between the earthly and the divine. Through such symbolic structures, culture is not merely represented it is continuously performed and renewed.

Toward Inclusive Cultural Urbanism

Ultimately, place-making and cultural identity converge in the idea of inclusive cultural urbanism an approach that recognizes the city as a living archive of its people's experiences. This framework calls for:

- **Cultural Mapping:** documenting local narratives, practices, and symbols as part of the design process.
- **Participatory Governance:** involving communities in urban decision-making.

- **Cultural Sustainability:** ensuring that development respects the continuity of traditions while allowing adaptive transformation.
- **Design Equity:** preventing cultural erasure by giving marginalized groups spatial representation.

In this way, the architectural practice of place-making becomes an act of *cultural stewardship* one that safeguards diversity, fosters belonging, and reaffirms the social contract between people and place. Place-making is inseparable from cultural identity because the essence of belonging lies not only in physical comfort but in symbolic recognition. When architecture engages with the textures of culture its rituals, stories, materials, and memories—it transforms space into a mirror of the human condition. The resulting city is not an anonymous grid of functions but a mosaic of identities layered, dynamic, and profoundly human.

5. DIGITAL URBANISM AND SMART PLACE-MAKING

The evolution of urban life in the twenty-first century is inseparable from the digital revolution. Smart technologies ranging from sensor networks and geospatial analytics to participatory mobile applications have transformed both the experience and governance of cities, creating new layers of interaction between citizens, infrastructure, and urban design. This phenomenon, often referred to as digital urbanism, expands the concept of place-making from purely physical and social dimensions into hybrid digital-physical landscapes, where data, interactivity, and real-time responsiveness shape human engagement.

Data-Driven Design and Urban Intelligence

Digital tools enable urban planners and architects to analyze cities with unprecedented granularity. Geospatial mapping, real-time environmental sensors, and predictive modeling provide insights into pedestrian movement, traffic patterns, air quality, noise, and energy use. Such data-driven intelligence informs decisions about spatial layout, microclimate optimization, and accessibility, allowing designers to craft spaces that respond dynamically to human needs.

For example, sensor-informed plazas can adjust lighting, water features, or ventilation according to crowd density or environmental conditions, enhancing both comfort and safety. Similarly, geospatial tools can reveal underutilized public spaces, informing interventions that increase social engagement or ecological function. In this sense, technology functions as a feedback loop, helping urban designers calibrate interventions in real time based on actual patterns of use.

Participatory Digital Platforms and Civic Engagement

Beyond technical optimization, digital urbanism enables participatory place-making. Mobile applications, social media platforms, and collaborative mapping tools allow citizens to contribute ideas, report maintenance issues, and co-manage public spaces. Platforms like *Streetmix*, *Neighborland*, and *Commonplace* empower communities to co-design street layouts, public art, or neighborhood amenities, giving voice to those who are traditionally excluded from urban planning processes. These participatory mechanisms foster democratic engagement and enhance social ownership of space. When residents see their input reflected in the built environment through redesigned streets, community gardens, or pop-up markets they develop a stronger emotional attachment and a sense of responsibility toward their surroundings. Digital tools thus amplify the social dimension of urban life, bridging technology and lived experience.

Smart Infrastructure and Human-Centric Design

Smart place-making emphasizes that technological sophistication should serve human needs, not supplant them. While digital infrastructure can optimize energy efficiency, traffic flow, or waste management, it cannot generate the affective qualities of belonging, memory, and cultural resonance on its own. A plaza equipped with Wi-Fi and sensor-controlled lighting may be efficient, but it becomes meaningful only when it accommodates social rituals, spontaneous encounters, and sensory engagement. Designers must therefore strike a careful balance between automation and agency. Tangible elements trees, benches, textures, water features, and human-scaled circulation must coexist with digital overlays that enhance experience rather than dominate it.

Smart place-making is not about replacing human perception with algorithmic control; it is about augmenting human spatial intelligence, enabling cities that are both responsive and emotionally resonant.

Ethical and Social Considerations in Digital Urbanism

While digital technologies offer opportunities for efficiency and participation, they also raise critical ethical concerns. Data collection can inadvertently reinforce social inequities if sensors and digital platforms are concentrated in affluent neighborhoods, leaving marginalized communities underrepresented. Privacy, surveillance, and algorithmic bias pose additional risks. Therefore, ethical smart place-making requires:

- **Equitable Data Access:** Ensuring all residents can contribute to and benefit from digital platforms.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Making algorithmic processes understandable and contestable.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Designing systems that respect local practices, traditions, and vernacular behaviors.

Inclusion and justice must remain at the forefront; otherwise, smart cities risk becoming technologically sophisticated but socially sterile landscapes.

Hybrid Place-Making: Integrating Digital and Physical Layers

The most compelling examples of smart place-making emerge when digital and physical dimensions converge. Consider interactive public art that responds to environmental or human activity, sensor-informed gardens that adjust irrigation according to community use, or mobile apps that guide heritage walks while collecting citizen-generated narratives. These hybrid spaces mediate between virtual and real-world experience, allowing residents to participate actively in the production of place while remaining anchored in sensory, social, and cultural realities.

Future Directions

Looking forward, digital urbanism is likely to evolve in several key ways:

- **Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR):** Enabling residents to visualize urban transformations and interact with historical narratives embedded in space.
- **Artificial Intelligence for Social Design:** Using machine learning to identify patterns in social use, anticipate needs, and suggest inclusive interventions.
- **Multisensory Digital Interfaces:** Integrating soundscapes, lighting, and environmental feedback into participatory platforms to enhance emotional engagement.

The challenge for architects and urban designers will be to harness these tools without losing the human essence of place. Smart cities must remain empathic, culturally aware, and socially inclusive, ensuring that technological augmentation amplifies rather than replaces lived experience. Digital urbanism does not supplant traditional place-making it redefines its scope. By integrating data, technology, and participatory platforms with human-centered design, cities can become responsive, adaptive, and co-authored. Yet, the core principle remains unchanged: the ultimate measure of a successful urban space is not the sophistication of its sensors or algorithms, but the depth of belonging, engagement, and cultural resonance it fosters among its citizens. In smart place-making, technology is a tool, but human experience remains the foundation of urban life.

6. CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN DESIGN

While contemporary urban design has made remarkable strides in theory and technology, the lived realities of modern cities often reveal persistent challenges that undermine the very goals of belonging, cultural continuity, and social equity. Urbanization, when driven by market forces, rapid densification, and top-down planning, frequently produces alienation, spatial fragmentation, and inequitable access to public life. Understanding these challenges is critical for architects and urban planners committed to socially and culturally responsive design.

Privatization of Public Space and Social Fragmentation

One of the most pressing issues in contemporary urbanism is the privatization of public space. Gated communities, corporate plazas, and shopping malls dominate the urban landscape, limiting the accessibility of shared spaces to a select demographic. While these spaces often offer safety, amenities, and aesthetic appeal, they simultaneously restrict spontaneous social interaction across diverse communities. Saskia Sassen (2001) warns that privatized urban landscapes can transform cities into "fortress-like enclaves", where socio-economic stratification is inscribed into spatial form. Streets that were once sites of casual encounter become mere thoroughfares, and plazas become commercially dominated rather than socially inclusive. Such fragmentation erodes the informal, everyday encounters the "sidewalk ballet" (Jacobs, 1961) that are essential to civic vitality and a sense of urban belonging.

Homogenization and the Loss of Identity

Globalization and rapid development often produce homogenized urban aesthetics: glass-and-steel towers, repetitive street grids, and standardized residential complexes. While these designs are efficient and visually coherent, they flatten local character and diminish the symbolic cues that foster cultural memory. Kevin Lynch (1960) emphasized the importance of distinctiveness, legibility, and imageability in cities; without these elements, residents may struggle to locate themselves psychologically within the urban fabric. This standardization not only weakens the city's narrative capacity but also undermines intergenerational continuity, disconnecting younger inhabitants from the material and symbolic traces of their cultural heritage. Urban spaces risk becoming functional but emotionally sterile, supporting movement and consumption rather than attachment and identity.

Gentrification and Cultural Displacement

Gentrification presents a particularly complex challenge. Redevelopment and speculative investment often lead to the displacement of long-standing communities, breaking social networks and erasing localized knowledge, practices, and traditions.

What might be framed as "urban renewal" can simultaneously be experienced by affected residents as cultural erasure, where historical neighborhoods are converted into sanitized, high-income enclaves. Sharon Zukin (2010) highlights how such processes privilege capital over culture, transforming cities into commodities rather than living, inclusive social systems. Displaced populations lose access to meaningful social spaces, and neighborhoods lose their cultural memory, disrupting the continuity that underpins communal belonging. Architects and planners face the ethical dilemma of balancing development, economic growth, and the preservation of intangible social and cultural assets.

Accessibility, Equity, and the Right to the City

Henri Lefebvre's (1968) concept of the "Right to the City" underscores the moral imperative that urban spaces must be inclusive and participatory, granting all citizens not just elites' access to public life, decision-making, and cultural expression. Modern design often fails this principle, whether through the physical inaccessibility of public infrastructure, lack of provision for marginalized groups, or absence of participatory processes in planning. Challenges in accessibility are not purely physical. Urban experiences are mediated by socio-economic, gendered, and cultural dimensions. Women, children, the elderly, and differently-abled individuals often experience city spaces differently due to safety, mobility, and social norms. Inclusive urban design must therefore anticipate diverse needs and embed them in the spatial, social, and programmatic logic of the city.

Environmental and Temporal Pressures

Rapid urbanization also brings ecological and temporal pressures. Dense construction, insufficient green space, and car-centric planning compromise environmental quality and the resilience of public spaces. Temporally, the pace of urban transformation often outstrips communities' capacity to adapt, leaving them disoriented in ever-changing landscapes. The ephemeral nature of such developments can further destabilize residents' sense of permanence, weakening psychological and social attachment to place.

Ethical Imperatives for Urban Design

Given these multifaceted challenges, architects and urban planners must adopt ethical design frameworks that prioritize:

- **Inclusivity:** Ensuring equitable access to public space and participation in decision-making.
- **Cultural Continuity:** Preserving historical and vernacular elements while allowing adaptive evolution.
- **Social Resilience:** Designing spaces that support diverse social interactions and intergenerational engagement.
- **Sustainability:** Balancing urban growth with ecological stewardship and environmental justice.
- **Participatory Co-Creation:** Recognizing that belonging emerges from collective engagement rather than top-down prescription.

Belonging cannot be imposed; it is co-created through iterative, context-sensitive, and socially attentive design practices. Ethical urbanism requires acknowledging that design interventions carry long-term social consequences, shaping not only the physical environment but also the moral, cultural, and emotional life of the city. Contemporary urban design exists at the intersection of opportunity and responsibility. While technological innovation, architectural sophistication, and aesthetic vision offer tools to craft vibrant cities, they also risk reinforcing inequality, alienation, and cultural erasure if applied without critical reflection. To nurture belonging in the modern metropolis, architects and planners must approach urban design as a moral as well as spatial practice, embedding principles of equity, inclusivity, and cultural stewardship at every scale. In doing so, cities can transform from alienating constructs into living ecosystems of identity, memory, and community life.

7. TOWARD A FRAMEWORK OF SOCIALLY SUSTAINABLE ARCHITECTURE

As urbanization accelerates and cities become increasingly complex, the role of architecture transcends functional utility or aesthetic expression. Contemporary urban design must prioritize social sustainability, ensuring that spaces not only meet immediate physical needs but also nurture long-term communal vitality, cultural continuity, and psychological well-being.

A socially sustainable architectural framework requires a holistic integration of physical, social, and psychological dimensions, wherein each dimension reinforces the others to produce environments that are meaningful, inclusive, and resilient.

Physical Dimension: Human-Scale and Ecologically Sensitive Design

The physical form of architecture lays the foundation for sustainable social engagement. Human-scale design characterized by walkable streets, appropriately proportioned public spaces, and legible urban layouts—fosters accessibility, safety, and comfort. Lynch's (1960) principles of imageability and legibility remain critical: streets, nodes, and landmarks guide movement, orient perception, and create familiarity, enabling residents to form spatial attachment and mental maps of their environment. Ecological sensitivity is an equally essential component. Green infrastructure, urban forests, water-sensitive landscapes, and climate-responsive building techniques not only mitigate environmental stressors but also enhance the quality of life and promote interaction within public spaces. By integrating sustainable design with human-scale principles, architects create environments where ecological stewardship and social vitality are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive.

Social Dimension: Participation, Inclusivity, and Community Engagement

Social sustainability is realized when architecture empowers communities to actively participate in shaping their environments. Participatory design methodologies including co-creation workshops, interactive urban mapping, and collaborative governance platforms enable residents to articulate needs, preserve cultural memory, and co-author the narratives of their neighborhoods. Inclusive design extends beyond participation; it encompasses equitable access for all demographic groups, including marginalized populations, differently-abled individuals, and economically disadvantaged communities.

Spatial diversity ranging from flexible public plazas to "third places" (Oldenburg, 1989) facilitates interaction across age, gender, and socio-economic lines, strengthening social networks and enhancing a collective sense of belonging. By foregrounding dialogue, equity, and collaboration, socially sustainable architecture transforms static spaces into dynamic arenas of civic life.

Psychological Dimension: Empathy, Sensory Design, and Symbolism

The psychological dimension addresses the emotional and cognitive experience of place, emphasizing that meaningful architecture resonates with human perception, memory, and identity. Sensory-rich environments—through the careful manipulation of light, texture, materiality, sound, and scale—evoke affective responses that encourage attachment, comfort, and psychological well-being. Tuan's (1974) notion of topophilia, the emotional bond between people and place, underscores the importance of crafting environments that engage the body, mind, and imagination simultaneously. Symbolic design further enhances psychological resonance. Architectural forms, patterns, and materials that reference local narratives, heritage, or cultural motifs serve as anchors of identity, enabling residents to perceive themselves within broader social and historical contexts. Through such spatial storytelling, architecture becomes not merely functional, but mnemonic, embedding collective memory into the lived environment.

Integrating the Three Dimensions: Toward Holistic Social Sustainability

The strength of a socially sustainable framework lies in the synergistic integration of physical, social, and psychological dimensions. Physical accessibility and ecological design support social interaction; social engagement reinforces community attachment; and psychological resonance strengthens the meaning and identity of place. When aligned, these dimensions produce urban environments that are resilient, inclusive, and emotionally compelling, capable of sustaining communal life even amidst rapid urban transformation.

For example, consider a renovated public square in a multicultural neighborhood. Its human-scale layout encourages spontaneous gatherings (physical), participatory programming reflects local narratives (social), and culturally sensitive materials and forms evoke belonging and memory (psychological). Such integrated design ensures that the square functions as a hub of civic vitality, cultural continuity, and individual well-being—the essence of socially sustainable architecture.

Future Implications for Practice

Implementing socially sustainable architecture requires architects and urban planners to adopt interdisciplinary and reflective practices:

- Engaging with urban sociology, psychology, and cultural studies to understand the nuanced dynamics of human behavior.
- Incorporating digital and participatory tools to co-create and monitor urban interventions in real-time.
- Ensuring that ecological, social, and cultural values are embedded within legal, financial, and governance frameworks.
- Viewing urban design as an ongoing, adaptive process rather than a static, one-time intervention.

Such approaches reframe architecture as an ethical and civic practice, one that mediates between human needs, social justice, environmental stewardship, and cultural expression.

Socially sustainable architecture recognizes that the built environment is inseparable from human experience. It goes beyond aesthetics and functionality, attending to the ways spaces foster interaction, support identity, and evoke emotional attachment. By integrating physical design, social participation, and psychological resonance, architects can create cities that are not only livable but meaningful, inclusive, and resilient—spaces where individuals and communities alike can thrive. In essence, social sustainability is both the goal and the guiding principle of contemporary urban design, ensuring that cities remain human-centered ecosystems of belonging in an ever-changing world.

8.THE ETHICS AND POETICS OF PLACE-MAKING

Place-making represents more than a design methodology it is a moral, cultural, and social endeavor that situates architecture within the lived experiences of communities. At its core, place-making is an act of mediation: it bridges people, memory, and environment, translating abstract social values and collective histories into tangible and inhabitable forms. This process underscores the ethical responsibility of architects and urban planners to design spaces that do more than accommodate human activity they must nurture belonging, foster identity, and sustain cultural continuity.

Architecture as a Social Dialogue

Architecture, when approached as place-making, becomes a dynamic dialogue between humans and their environment. Streets, plazas, parks, and courtyards are not inert constructs; they are arenas where social norms, rituals, and cultural narratives unfold. The materiality of space its texture, scale, light, and orientation—communicates meaning as powerfully as words or gestures. Through these elements, architects participate in an ongoing conversation with society, mediating the tensions between globalized homogenization and local cultural specificity. This dialogue is reciprocal. Residents and communities respond, adapt, and reinterpret the spaces around them, making the city a living, evolving ecosystem of co-authored meaning. Such a framework positions architecture as an ethical practice, where design decisions carry long-term social, cultural, and emotional consequences.

Globalization, Digitalization, and Urban Belonging

Contemporary cities operate under the dual pressures of globalization and digitalization, which can both enrich and destabilize urban life. Homogenized aesthetics, rapid redevelopment, and digitally mediated interactions often threaten the very social and cultural fabrics that enable belonging. At the same time, digital tools offer unprecedented opportunities for participatory engagement, real-time feedback, and hybridized physical-digital experiences. The challenge for urban designers lies in balancing technological innovation with human-centered principles.

Digital and smart infrastructures should enhance social interaction, cultural representation, and emotional resonance rather than erode them. Architecture must integrate these tools without compromising sensory, emotional, and cultural depth, ensuring that cities remain places of memory, identity, and interpersonal connection.

Place-Making as Moral and Cultural Practice

Place-making is fundamentally a moral act, rooted in questions of equity, inclusion, and justice. Urban spaces must reflect the diversity of experiences and identities within a city, providing equitable access to social, cultural, and environmental resources.

Culturally responsive design whether through vernacular forms, adaptive reuse, or symbolic storytelling reinforces community identity and continuity, counteracting the alienation often produced by top-down, market-driven development. Moreover, place-making embodies a cultural responsibility: architects and planners are custodians of collective memory, tasked with integrating heritage, narrative, and ritual into the evolving cityscape. Spaces become repositories of social knowledge, where cultural memory, civic life, and environmental stewardship intersect.

The Invisible Architecture of Human Experience

While buildings, plazas, and streets constitute the visible layer of the city, the invisible architecture of human experience—trust, belonging, social cohesion, and memory defines the true success of urban design. Cities are not simply networks of infrastructure; they are ecosystems of interaction, identity, and emotion.

Design interventions must therefore attend to these intangible dimensions, ensuring that spaces enable connection, empathy, and shared purpose. By emphasizing inclusivity, cultural resonance, and participatory engagement, socially sustainable place-making fosters resilient communities capable of navigating change, negotiating diversity, and cultivating a sense of home within the urban fabric.

Toward a Human-Centered Urban Future

The future of urban life depends not merely on constructing buildings or infrastructure but on designing environments that cultivate relational, cultural, and emotional bonds. Human-centered urbanism, informed by principles of social sustainability, ethical design, and cultural continuity, positions architecture as a practice of belonging-making. In this vision, architects and planners serve as mediators between people, place, and culture, shaping spaces that are simultaneously functional, meaningful, and emotionally resonant. Ultimately, place-making transforms cities into living mosaics of human experience, where the material and immaterial converge to create environments that are equitable, vibrant, and socially sustainable. The task of architecture, then, is not only to build structures but to nurture the invisible connections that make urban life rich, inclusive, and profoundly human.

CONCLUSION

Place-making is far more than a matter of aesthetics or functionality; it is fundamentally a moral, social, and cultural practice that positions architecture as an active agent in shaping human experience. By mediating the relationship between people, memory, and environment, architecture transforms neutral spaces into living places sites where social interaction, cultural identity, and emotional resonance converge.

In the contemporary city, rapid globalization, technological proliferation, and urban densification pose both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, smart technologies, digital platforms, and participatory design tools allow communities to co-create, manage, and experience urban space in innovative ways. On the other hand, homogenized development, privatization of public spaces, and gentrification threaten to fragment social networks, erase cultural memory, and diminish a sense of belonging. Architects and urban planners are therefore tasked with balancing innovation with empathy, efficiency with inclusivity, and growth with social equity.

Central to socially sustainable architecture is the recognition that belonging cannot be imposed from above; it must emerge through co-creation, dialogue, and responsiveness to human needs. This requires integrating three interdependent dimensions:

Physical: Human-scale, accessible, and ecologically sensitive spaces that facilitate interaction and comfort.

Social: Inclusive, participatory processes that amplify diverse voices and foster community ownership.

Psychological: Sensory, symbolic, and culturally resonant design that nurtures attachment, identity, and well-being.

When these dimensions are thoughtfully combined, urban spaces become resilient, inclusive, and emotionally meaningful, capable of supporting both individual well-being and collective vitality. Streets, plazas, parks, and public squares transform into arenas for cultural expression, social engagement, and shared memory places where citizens can feel both rooted and connected in a rapidly changing urban landscape. Ultimately, the success of urban design is measured not merely by the structures it produces, but by the invisible networks of belonging, identity, and social cohesion that it fosters.

Architecture becomes a practice of belonging-making, crafting spaces that resonate with human experience, celebrate cultural diversity, and cultivate empathy. By embracing this holistic and human-centered approach, architects and planners can shape cities that are not only functional and beautiful but profoundly humane, where every intervention contributes to the moral, cultural, and social fabric of urban life. Place-making, therefore, is the art and ethics of designing for connection transforming cities from mere collections of buildings into vibrant ecosystems of human experience, memory, and belonging.

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CHAPTER 2
A PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL FOR ASSESSING FACTORS AFFECTING ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN TAN QUY ISLET, VINH LONG PROVINCE

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INTRODUCTION

In the trend of modern tourism development, ecotourism is becoming one of the most favored types due to its closeness to nature, high experiential value, and ability to connect with local cultural life (Fennell, 2014). Particularly, in the Mekong Delta region, with its unique riverine culture and diverse ecosystem, ecotourism not only generates large revenue but also contributes to preserving traditional values and promoting sustainable development (Industry and Trade Magazine, 2025). According to 2024 statistics, the Mekong Delta region welcomed over 52 million tourists, with estimated total revenue reaching over 62 trillion VND (Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Dong Thap Province, 2024). These impressive figures demonstrate the enormous potential of the tourism industry, while also reflecting the increasing interest of visitors in the region's characteristic tourism products.

Among these, Vinh Long province is gradually becoming a favorite destination thanks to its favorable geographical location, well-connected transportation system, along the richness of traditional craft villages and characteristic fruit orchards. Tan Quy Islet, located in A Phu Tan Commune, Vinh Long province, is one of the islets situated in the middle of the Hau River, boasting characteristic riverine landscapes, abundant fruit orchards, and unique garden-region cultural life. However, reality shows that the development of ecotourism here is facing many challenges. The region's potential and advantages are assessed as highly suitable for developing community-based tourism, but there are still bottlenecks that need to be addressed regarding infrastructure, human resources, management mechanisms, and inter-local linkage (Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Dong Thap Province, 2024). In terms of policy, tourism has been identified as a key economic sector in the Vinh Long Provincial Master Plan for the period 2021-2030, with a vision to 2050, approved by Decision 1759/QD-TTg dated December 31, 2023. At the Conference announcing the Master Plan and investment promotion in 2024, provincial leaders also emphasized ecotourism as a driving force for sustainable economic development. In particular, the merger of provincial-level administrative units according to Resolution 1687/NQ-UBTVQH15 in 2025 has created new opportunities for restructuring the tourism development strategy towards regional linkage.

However, globally and in Vietnam, research studies on ecotourism on islets remain limited, especially concerning Tan Quy Islet in the context of a rapidly developing and increasingly competitive tourism industry. Identifying and evaluating the factors affecting ecotourism development is a crucial foundation for providing clear management directions, supporting businesses to optimize investment, and simultaneously building a sustainable, environmentally responsible ecotourism model that facilitates long-term participation and benefits for residents. Stemming from the practical requirements mentioned above, this study aims to propose a model for evaluating the factors affecting ecotourism development at Tan Quy Islet, thereby contributing to enhancing the effectiveness of ecotourism development and promoting the sustainable growth of Vinh Long province's tourism sector.

1. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF ECOTOURISM AND INFLUENCE FACTORS

1.1 Theoretical basis of ecotourism

Concept of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a type of tourism based on nature and indigenous culture, associated with environmental education, contributes to conservation and sustainable development efforts, and emphasizes the active participation of local communities (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, 1999).

According to Ceballos-Lascuráin (1987), who first coined the term, ecotourism is understood as "a form of responsible travel to relatively pristine and undisturbed natural areas, to study, admire and enjoy the landscape, wild flora and fauna as well as the existing cultural characteristics of these areas."

Fennell (2014) expanded the concept of ecotourism to emphasize sustainability and ethics in management, stating that: "ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism based on natural resources, focusing primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, managed ethically to minimize negative impacts, and benefiting conservation and the well-being of local communities."

Characteristics of Ecotourism

According to Buckley (2009), ecotourism has the following basic characteristics:

- Nature-based: Natural resources are the foundation and main attraction
- Educational: Raising awareness of environmental protection and indigenous culture
- Environmentally sustainable: Minimizing negative impacts on ecosystems
- Beneficial to local communities: Creating livelihoods and improving people's lives
- Weaver (2001) adds the following characteristics:
- Small scale and carefully managed: Controlling the number of visitors and environmental impact
- Highly experiential: Visitors directly participate in activities
- Socially responsible: Respecting culture and contributing to the community
- Interactive: Exchange between visitors, community, and nature

Conditions for Developing Ecotourism

According to IUCN (1996) and Scheyvens (1999), for ecotourism to develop effectively and sustainably, the following groups of conditions need to converge:

Conditions on natural resources:

- Diverse and pristine ecosystems
- Attractive natural landscapes
- Endemic flora and fauna

Conditions on cultural and social environment:

- Empowered local communities
- Traditional culture associated with nature
- Local knowledge and skills

Conditions on policies and management:

- Clear support policies
- Effective management systems
- Regular monitoring and evaluation

Conditions on infrastructure:

- Environmentally friendly infrastructure
- High-quality services
- Convenient accessibility

1.2 Theoretical Basis of Influencing Factors

Tourism Resources

According to Clause 4, Article 3 of the Vietnam Tourism Law (2017), tourism resources are defined as natural landscapes, environmental elements, and cultural values that serve as the foundation for developing tourism products, tourist sites, and destinations that cater to tourist demands. Research conducted by Ba et al. (2022) on A Binh Islet, Vinh Long Province, shows that natural resources such as river landscapes, orchards, and diverse ecosystems are key drivers of sustainable ecotourism development. Similarly, Baloch et al. (2022) emphasized that protecting natural resources and minimizing negative environmental impacts are fundamental to maintaining a balance between economic growth and ecological conservation. Kumar et al. (2023) identified three groups of environmental factors that influence the sustainability of ecotourism development: ecosystem integrity, biodiversity, landscape quality, accessibility to ecological zones, and levels of environmental pollution.

Physical Infrastructure

Tourism infrastructure serves as a crucial foundation for the sustainable development of ecotourism. According to Upadhaya et al. (2022), local communities perceive that ecotourism development generates tangible economic and infrastructural benefits (such as improved roads, access to clean water, and waste management systems). When infrastructure is upgraded appropriately, tourists will have easier access to tourist destinations, while both service quality and community satisfaction are simultaneously enhanced. Huang et al. (2023) pointed out that sustainable ecotourism development requires a shift in the infrastructure approach—from expansion in scale to improvement in quality, ensuring harmony between economic development and environmental conservation.

Research conducted by Nguyen et al. (2023) on Mount Chua Chan shows that accessibility to tourist sites and destination carrying capacity are important factors promoting tourism development.

Participation of Local Communities

Chan et al. (2021) emphasized the crucial role of local communities in promoting sustainable ecotourism development. Specifically, local communities are well aware of the potential for ecotourism development in their areas and the associated economic benefits. The study affirmed that for ecotourism to develop sustainably, the active participation of local communities is indispensable—from management and ownership to service provision and resource conservation. Maryani et al. (2022) pointed out that community participation is closely related to the level of education and awareness of ecotourism. Communities with higher levels of awareness tend to participate more actively in resource management and conservation activities. Phan and Dao (2016) affirmed that local communities are not only beneficiaries but also active participants in environmental protection, providing accommodation, food, and beverage services, as well as guiding experiences for tourists.

Cuisine and Specialty Products

Okumus et al. (2021) showed that the number of studies on cuisine and tourism has grown significantly in recent years. Local cuisine plays an important role in shaping cultural identity and attracting tourists. Pamukcu et al. (2021) emphasized the role of local cuisine and specialty products with geographical indications in developing culinary tourism. Specialty products with geographical indications significantly influence the development of culinary tourism, accounting for up to 60% of its overall growth. Da Silva et al. (2025) pointed out that local cuisine is not only a consumer product, but also a symbol of culture, associated with indigenous knowledge, farming history, and local customs - thereby creating a unique tourism experience. Nguyen et al. (2021) stated that traditional cuisine at ecotourism destinations represents a highly valuable form of intangible cultural heritage, contributing to shaping local cultural identity.

Security, Safety and Social Order

Farmaki et al. (2021) stated that factors related to security and social order directly affect the operation of community-based tourism and ecotourism. When a safe environment is guaranteed, tourists will feel more secure throughout their trip. Toker & Emir (2023) found that safety and security are fundamental needs of tourists, directly affecting destination choice, satisfaction levels, and revisit intentions. Safety is not only a physical factor but also a psychological and social feeling experienced by tourists, especially in experiential forms of tourism such as ecotourism and community-based tourism. (Le et al., 2024) show that the level of safety assurance in tourist areas is highly valued, contributing to enhancing the destination's image and creating a positive experience for tourists.

1.3 Characteristics of Tan Quy Islet

Tan Quy Islet is a small islet situated on the Hau River in the lower Mekong River basin region. To the north, it borders Tra On Commune; to the northwest, Luc Si Thanh Commune; to the southeast, An Phu Tan Commune; and to the southwest, Phong Nam Commune of Can Tho. Administratively, according to Resolution 1687/NQ-UBTVQH15 (2025), the three provinces of Vinh Long, Tra Vinh, and Ben Tre were merged into Vinh Long Province, placing Tan Quy Islet under the jurisdiction of An Phu Tan Commune. It is situated along a major waterway connecting Can Tho and Vinh Long provinces. It is approximately 60–65 km from Vinh Long city center by road and about 50 km from Can Tho via waterway. Located near the Hau River—a key transportation route in the Mekong Delta—Tan Quy Islet offers favorable conditions for the development of agriculture, commerce, and tourism.

2. HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH MODEL

2.1 Research Hypotheses

Tourism Resources

Natural resources are a fundamental factor determining the development and formation of ecotourism products. The more diverse, pristine, and ecologically valuable the ecosystem, the more tourists it tends to attract (Buckley, 2009).

Research by Ba et al. (2022) at A Binh Islet indicates that natural resources such as river landscapes and orchards are key elements contributing to sustainable ecotourism development. Chen and Cheung (2025) also emphasize that landscape aesthetics, biodiversity levels, and ecosystem resilience are crucial components enhancing the attractiveness of tourist destinations. Hypothesis H1: Tourism resources are hypothesized to have a positive impact on ecotourism development at Tan Quy Islet.

Physical Infrastructure

Infrastructure is a factor that directly supports ecotourism activities. According to research by Vuong & Huyen (2021), the quality of accommodation, food and beverage services, and experience activities has a direct impact on tourist satisfaction. Upadhaya et al. (2022) showed that infrastructure such as transportation, clean water, and environmental sanitation not only improve access to destinations but also contribute to improving the quality of life of local people. Huang et al. (2023) emphasized that sustainable ecotourism development needs to shift from expanding scale to improving infrastructure quality.

Hypothesis H2: Physical infrastructure has a positive impact on ecotourism development in Cu Lao Tan Quy.

Participation of Local Communities

Scheyvens (1999) asserts that when communities are empowered and benefit from tourism, sustainability will be strongly strengthened. Chan et al. (2021) point out that the active participation of local communities is indispensable, from management, ownership, to service provision and resource conservation. Maryani et al. (2022) add that the level of education and awareness of ecotourism affects the level of community participation. Phan and Dao (2016) also emphasize that the active participation of people contributes to maintaining regional cultural identity, creating unique characteristics for each tourist destination.

Hypothesis H3: Participation of local communities has a positive impact on ecotourism development in Cu Lao Tan Quy.

Cuisine and Typical Products

Okumus et al. (2021) show that cuisine plays an important role in attracting tourists and building destination image. Pamukcu et al. (2021) stated that specialty products with geographical indications are a factor that influences the development of culinary tourism, with an impact of up to 60%. Da Silva et al. (2025) affirmed that local cuisine is a symbol of culture, associated with indigenous knowledge and farming history, creating a unique tourism experience. Nguyen (2021) also believes that products associated with traditional craft villages and typical orchards are competitive advantages that need to be effectively exploited.

Hypothesis H4: Cuisine and specialty products have a positive impact on the development of ecotourism in Tan Quy Islet.

Safety, security, and social order

Le et al. (2024) argued that safety, security, and social order play a fundamental role in fostering tourists' trust in ecologically sensitive areas. Research in Can Gio indicated that safety levels enhance the destination's image, although limitations remain in organization, human resources, and service management. Toker and Emir (2023) affirmed that safety is a fundamental need of tourists, directly affecting destination choice, satisfaction levels, and revisit intentions, while highlighting common threats, including crime, natural disasters, epidemics, terrorism, and social instability. Farmaki et al. (2021) emphasized that security and social order directly influence the operation of community-based and ecotourism activities, but the research mainly focused on policy and governance aspects, lacking quantitative data on their influence on tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions.

Hypothesis H5: Safety, security, and social order are hypothesized to have a positive impact on ecotourism development.

2.2 Proposed Research Model

Based on the aforementioned research hypotheses, the author develops a research model of factors influencing the development of ecotourism on Tan Quy Island.

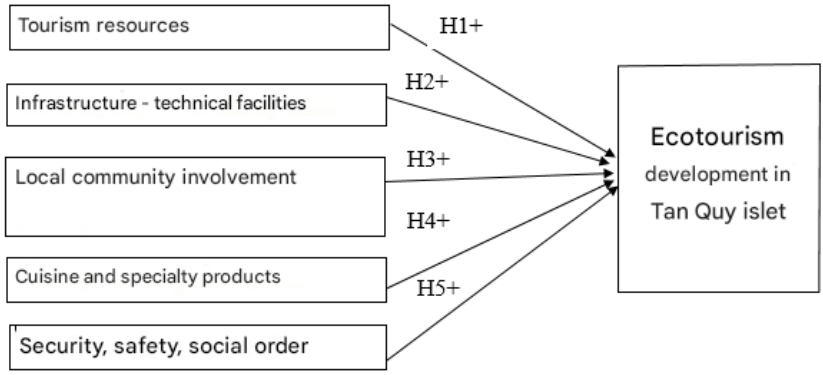

Figure 1. Research model proposing factors affecting ecotourism development in Tan Quy islet (Author's synthesis and proposal (2025)

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. The qualitative component involves synthesizing secondary sources, including reports, legal documents, and scientific studies from 2015 to 2025, to systematize the theoretical foundations of ecotourism and the factors influencing its development at Tan Quy Islet, Vinh Long Province. The documents were analyzed to establish the theoretical framework, develop a research model, and guide the design of the survey instrument.

The quantitative component was implemented through a primary survey administered to tourists visiting Tan Quy Islet. The questionnaire was structured around key influencing factors, including natural resources, infrastructure, community participation, specific products, and safety, security, and social order. Data were collected via both direct and online methods between September and November 2025. Following data collection, the data were processed using SPSS software, including descriptive statistics, scale reliability assessment via Cronbach's Alpha, and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to ensure the reliability and validity of the scales prior to testing the research model.

CONCLUSION

The study aims to enhance the effectiveness of ecotourism development at Tan Quy Islet, a potential ecotourism destination in Vinh Long Province, by identifying core influencing factors. The proposed model of factors affecting ecotourism development helps identify the key aspects that local authorities and tourism businesses should prioritize to effectively utilize resources sustainably, enhance service quality, and promote community participation. Through this model, the study establishes a foundation for the survey and validation phase, ensuring accuracy and practical applicability when applied to similar ecotourism destinations in the Mekong Delta. The research results are expected to support managers in formulating appropriate tourism development policies, contributing to enhancing destination image, promoting local livelihoods, and advancing the sustainable development of the ecotourism sector in Vietnam.

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CHAPTER 3
URBAN SQUARES AND CIVIC LIFE: INVESTIGATING OJUDE'S ROLE IN SHAPING COMMUNITY IDENTITY AND ENGAGEMENT IN ILORIN, NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

Urban squares, or plazas, have long been recognized as critical loci of civic life and public sociability globally, these spaces serve not only as geometric centers of cities but also as vibrant forums for social interaction, political expression, and collective identity. Historically, urban squares in Europe and beyond have hosted marketplaces, public speeches, and festivals, thereby becoming symbolic nodes around which civic life revolves (Oxford Academic, 2024). These public spaces sustain spontaneous and face-to-face interactions, functioning as "public outdoor rooms" framed by surrounding architecture (Oxford Academic, 2024). In modern cosmopolitan contexts, plazas remain instrumental in shaping the public realm: they provide places where community values are enacted, where belonging is negotiated, and where people convene to participate in shared social and political practices.

At the continental level, particularly across Africa, urban squares often embody cultural, historical, and political narratives that are distinctive to local contexts. In many African cities, public squares are not mere physical voids; they embed layers of meaning rooted in tradition, heritage, and communal governance. For instance, public squares in Nigerian cities often carry strong cultural resonances, functioning as arenas for festivals, ritual events, and markets, thereby anchoring community identity. However, recent analyses caution that the design of contemporary public open spaces in Nigeria tends to prioritize visual aesthetics over socio-cultural substance, undermining their role as genuine civic spaces (Adebara, Sisi Afrika Magazine, 2025). Consequently, there is increasing scholarly and public concern about how public squares can better reflect the cultural traditions of the communities they serve, rather than tapping into more globalized, Westernized design languages.

Regionally, in West Africa, public squares have historically been bound up with political authority and social governance. They are often adjacent to symbolic institutions—royal palaces, mosques, and assembly halls—that situate political power, social order, and ritual life in immediate proximity. Such spatial arrangements reinforce civic identity, signaling not only social cohesion but also the legitimacy of public authority. In contemporary West African cities, as urbanization accelerates, these squares face pressures from changing land uses, commercial development, and governance transformations.

The shifting urban fabric raises important questions about whether traditional squares still play their historic role as sites of communal gathering, or whether they have become marginalized in the face of modernization. The concept of placemaking provides a useful lens to understand how urban squares mediate identity and civic engagement. Placemaking, broadly, involves designing public spaces in ways that harness local assets, community values, and desires to foster more vibrant, inclusive, and contextually meaningful places (Wikipedia, Placemaking). When effectively done, placemaking in squares can translate into places that support civic life, encourage social interaction, and sustain local identity. Conversely, failure in placemaking can result in public squares that feel alien or disconnected from the everyday life and traditions of local communities.

The social importance of urban squares is also seen through their role in nurturing social capital. These public places facilitate repeated and informal interactions between residents, which builds trust, shared norms, and a sense of belonging (Urban Design, 2022). Such repeated interactions—whether casual conversations, community celebrations, or simple resting in shared space—enable civic engagement and reinforce communal identity. Public squares therefore operate not only as physical venues but as social infrastructure of community life.

At the political level, public squares are powerful symbols of democracy and participation. Historically, they have provided arenas for protests, public debate, and expressions of dissent. As noted in global contexts, squares like Cairo's Tahrir or European piazzas have become emblematic of collective political action (Urban Design, 2022). These spaces ensure that public discourse does not happen only in formal or institutional settings, but also in everyday common ground, accessible to all.

However, in many modern cities, including in Nigeria, planning for public participation in urban design is challenging. Research on urban planners' perspectives in Nigeria reveals that although public participation is formally mandated in planning frameworks, actual engagement is often limited (SN Social Sciences, 2023). This gap points to a deeper tension: civic spaces like squares are theoretically for the public, but the process by which they are created and governed may not always reflect the voices of ordinary citizens.

Ilorin, a historic city in Nigeria's Kwara State, offers a compelling context to explore these dynamics. As part of a broader discourse on urban development, the city has recently embarked on an ambitious master plan, unveiling plans for a "smart city" with significant commitments to green space (ICIR, 2022; ThePatriotNG, 2024). In this context, examining the role of an urban square—such as what is referred to here as "Ojude" square—becomes particularly timely. Amid rapid urbanization, land-use change, and modernization, understanding how public squares contribute to civic life, community identity, and social engagement reveals much about the interplay between tradition and transformation in Ilorin's urban fabric.

Ilorin itself is culturally heterogeneous. The city is made up of multiple ethnic groups including Yoruba, Fulani, Hausa, and others, and its civic identity is not purely ethnic but rather civic in nature (Oloso, 2017). Language, religion, and political affiliation all intersect in complex ways, making identity formation in Ilorin a vibrant social process (Oloso, 2017). This mosaic of identities means that public spaces in Ilorin have the potential to be powerful sites for cross-cultural interaction and shared belonging—but they must be sensitive to this complexity.

Moreover, Ilorin's urban planning history highlights the tension between modern planning imperatives and social needs. Studies assessing livability in Ilorin show that residents value green spaces, transportation networks, and public amenities, but planning institutions sometimes fall short of fully integrating these elements into cohesive, community-responsive designs (Yekeen & Misnan, 2024). This gap suggests that public squares, if well designed, could mediate between planning goals and community aspirations, serving as both social infrastructure and identity anchors.

At the same time, Ilorin is experiencing rapid environmental transformation. A recent land-use and land-cover study projects significant urban growth, raising concerns for environmental sustainability and green infrastructure (Ademuyiwa & Babalola, 2024). Within this fast-changing urban landscape, public squares can serve as key green pillars—providing shade, ecological benefit, and social functions all in one. They can act as both ecological and civic nodes, reinforcing community identity while contributing to environmental resilience.

Further, the neglect of socio-cultural values in the design of public spaces in Nigeria—a point raised by local scholars—is particularly salient in Ilorin. Traditional squares in other parts of Nigeria retain deep associations with ceremonies, markets, and communal rituals, whereas newer public spaces sometimes feel disconnected from these functions (Sisia Afrika Magazine, 2025). Therefore, exploring how an urban square like Ojude in Ilorin functions in local life requires examining not just its physical design but also how it is socially programmed, governed, and perceived by residents.

In terms of civic engagement, an operational square may foster participation by offering a venue for community gatherings, political meetings, and public celebrations. Through such activities, residents build a shared sense of place, and often, a shared sense of agency. Engagement in these spaces may feed into broader forms of civic participation, such as involvement in local governance or planning processes.

Interrelationships among community identity, civic engagement, and the physical presence of the square—are key. A well-designed square nurtures social interaction, which builds identity. That identity, in turn, motivates community engagement and collective action; and active civic life reinforces the legitimacy and vitality of the square. Conversely, neglecting the square can weaken social ties, fragment identity, and dampen civic participation.

Public squares—or urban squares—play a critical role in shaping civic life, community identity, and social cohesion. However, many such spaces in Nigerian cities, including Ilorin, are failing to fulfill their potential as inclusive civic arenas. In Ilorin specifically, the square known colloquially as “Ojude” appears underused or under-leveraged, raising questions about its contribution to community identity and civic engagement.

Without a clear understanding of how this space supports social interaction, its role in civic life remains ambiguous. As Nigerian urbanization accelerates, the neglect or mismanagement of such squares could erode vital social infrastructure, weaken civic bonds and diminish opportunities for collective action and shared identity. One major problem is the disconnect between contemporary public space design and local socio-cultural values.

In Nigeria, there has been a strong tendency to adopt Western-style landscape aesthetics—uniform lawns, ornamental plants, and formal layouts—at the expense of designs that resonate with indigenous cultural traditions. This mismatch can render public squares less meaningful to local communities, leading to underutilization, neglect, or even abandonment (Adebara, 2025; AllAfrica, 2025). When traditional practices, modes of gathering, and ritual life are not embedded into public space design, the spaces risk becoming alienated from the very citizens they are meant to serve. Studying how Ojude Square reflects local cultural identity in Ilorin could reveal the extent of this problem and suggest ways to realign design with community values, thereby enhancing the square's relevance and use.

By focusing on Ojude Square, this study can contribute to solving both of these problems. First, by documenting how design, space use, and cultural practices intersect, the research can provide concrete recommendations for more culturally grounded placemaking—making the square more socially vibrant, meaningful, and aligned with Ilorin's local traditions. Second, by examining governance mechanisms, participation structures, and community perceptions, the study can highlight barriers to civic engagement and propose mechanisms to foster more inclusive and sustained public involvement. In so doing, the research offers a model for transforming underused or culturally disconnected squares into genuine civic infrastructure that reinforces community identity and democratic engagement.

In sum, the study of Ojude square in Ilorin offers both empirical and theoretical value. Empirically, it can illuminate how a specific public space fosters community identity and civic participation in a Nigerian city undergoing rapid transformation. Theoretically, it can enrich debates in urban design, planning, and social theory about how public squares function in culturally diverse, rapidly urbanizing contexts. Such an investigation promises insights into the symbiotic interplay among place, identity, and civic life.

1. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design supported by field observation and contextual analysis of traditional public spaces (Ojudes) in Ilorin.

A qualitative approach is most suitable because traditional public spaces in Ilorin have not been empirically studied, and the socio-cultural, historical, and spatial meanings attached to them require an interpretive and exploratory orientation. Since literature reveals very limited documentation on the socio-cognitive and civic significance of traditional public spaces such as Ojudes (Omoiya, 2004; Chisholm, 1911), a qualitative design enables the researcher to capture historical narratives, spatial functions, community meanings, and cultural practices from both archival records and lived experiences of residents. This approach is justified because it allows for an in-depth examination of how these spaces influence community identity and civic engagement, rather than relying on purely quantitative surface-level measurements that would not adequately reflect their cultural depth.

The implications of selecting this design are significant. By foregrounding qualitative methods, the study directly addresses the empirical gap on Ojudes in Ilorin and documents knowledge previously transmitted through oral tradition and historical texts. This approach accommodates the diversity of Ojudes—ranging from Ojude Oba to Agbo-Ile—whose functions, accessibility, spatial characteristics, and social uses vary significantly across communities. It allows for thematic interpretation of how these spaces currently support or shape civic life, community gatherings, religious activities, children's play, and cultural continuity. The design therefore contributes not only to academic understanding but also to policy insights on how these indigenous spaces can be integrated into contemporary urban planning, place-making, and community development frameworks.

1.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative, qualitative and spatial observational approaches. The design enables a comprehensive understanding of how the Ojude (urban squares) in Ilorin support community identity and civic engagement. The quantitative survey captures broad user perceptions, the qualitative component explores deeper meanings attached to the Ojude, while non-participatory observation documents behavioural patterns and spatial use dynamics.

1.2 Study Area

The study is conducted in Ilorin, Kwara State, focusing specifically on selected traditional and contemporary Ojude sites within the metropolis (e.g., Ojude Oba, Ojude Gambari, Ojude Idi-Ape). These squares are historically significant communal spaces used for cultural events, everyday interaction, and public gatherings.

Ilorin is a guinea savannah region containing very scanty trees and little or no grass cover. The climate is usually warm, and temperatures range from 68° to 86°F (20 to 30°C). Savannah exists in areas with a 6 - 8months wet summer season and a 4 - 6months dry winter season. An important factor in the savannah is climate, which influences children's engagement in outdoor play and learning at Ojude. Ilorin city, Nigeria, is selected because it is an ancient city with many historical sites. These historical sites and *Ojude*s include *Ojude Oba* in Ilorin west*, Ojude Balogun Alanamu* in Ilorin West*, Ojude Balogun Ajikobi* Ilorin West*, Ojude Balogun Gambari* in Ilorin East and *Ojude Balogun Fulani* in Ilorin South (Omoiya, 2009). Most of these *Ojude*s were traditionally used for security (Omoiya, 200). The *Ojudes* were often populated and guarded by *Dongari* (the slaves) to protect the areas under each *Balogun* (the Warlord) against any external aggression and internal insurrection (Chisholm, 1911). The thinking was that the slaves would have incapacitated or weakened the enemies at the *Ojudes* before the *Baloguns* would finally destroy the intruders (Omoiya, 2009).

Ojude Oba is located in Ilorin West; it covers a considerable large expanse of land. It is completely tarred and floored. A large mosque - the central mosque - is built in a portion of the space. People from far and near often come to pray every Friday in this mosque. Also, the *Ojude Oba* is surrounded by two important markets in the city. These are *Oja Oba* and *Oja Ago*. Recently, *Durbar* festival was staged at *Ojude Oba* on the second day of *Eid-Kabir*. The festival is an annual event; this will considerably add glamour to this *Ojude*. Moreover, on every last day in the month of Ramadan, a religious festival is normally staged at the *Ojude Oba*. Based on the preceding discussion, it is argued that the *Ojude Oba* serves religious, socio-cultural and economic (*Oja-Oba* and *Oja-Ago*) functions. Table 3.4 shows the topology of Ojudes in Ilorin.

Ojude Balogun Fulani in Ilorin South is another important Ojude. It is not as big as Ojude Oba. Traditional buildings surround it; it is not tarred but sand-filled. Islamic and cultural events are normally organized in this Ojude. People from different areas often gather at the Ojude Balogun Fulani to witness some of these important events. One important event that is very common at this Ojude is Maolud Nabiy (the celebration of the birth of the Holy Prophet). Interestingly, this Ojude serves ceremonial, security and residential functions.

Table 1. Typology of Ojudes in Ilorin

	Names	Features(pictures)	Purpose	Children's activities
A	Ojude Oba		Durbar, horse riding, festival	
B	Ojudebalogun		Festival, football, playing.	
C	OjudeMagaji		Festival, children party, playing, meeting.	
D	OjudeWasi		Islamic sermon, wedding, playing.	
E	Agbo-ile		Family meeting, playground for children	

Another Ojude is Ojude Balogun Gambari. This Ojude is located in Ilorin East. It is not as big as Ojude Oba, and it is not tarred. Though it has a market, it is a residential area. In other words, there are many residents around these traditional public spaces. Also, Ojude Alanamu and Ojude Ajikobi are in Ilorin West. These Ojudes were not tarred. Many residential buildings characterise them. In these Ojudes, Islamic preaching is normally organised, especially during the month of Ramadhan. Apart from this, there are also some other traditional Ojudes. For instance, Ojude Waasi is characterised by a mosque very close to it with number of its type. Ojude Magaji, which is more of neighbourhood public space in the traditional concept with hundreds of its types available within Ilorin, are typical historical sites in Ilorin city, Figure 3.5 showcases the Ojudes in Ilorin. Agbo-ile is the public space within the setting of extended family bounded by houses around it. It is common and most accessible to children because more than two thousand of its type within Ilorin. Summarily, the above Ojudes (traditional public spaces) serve children's ceremonial, spiritual, socio-economic, and psychological purposes.

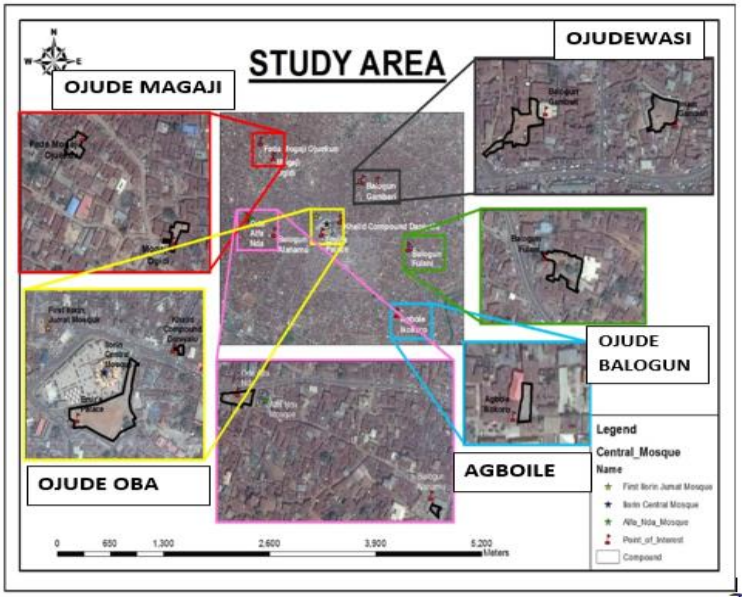

Figure 1. Map showing Ilorin City, Highlighting the Ojudes (Google map)

Hierarchical Classification of Ojude in Ilorin

Some authors have established hierarchical classification of public space through different methods, models and variables (Nochian, *et al.,*2015, Zhu, Y., *et al.,*2021). In contrast, the classification of traditional public space in Ilorin is done according to the traditional rulers' hierarchy, as depicted in Figure 1.0. Therefore, the existing hierarchical models may not be suitable for the culturally inclined traditional public space in Ilorin. The hierarchy is established through participatory observations. The following variables are employed to formulate the hierarchy; purpose and functions, access, size, location, design, and children's activities as depicted in Figure 1.

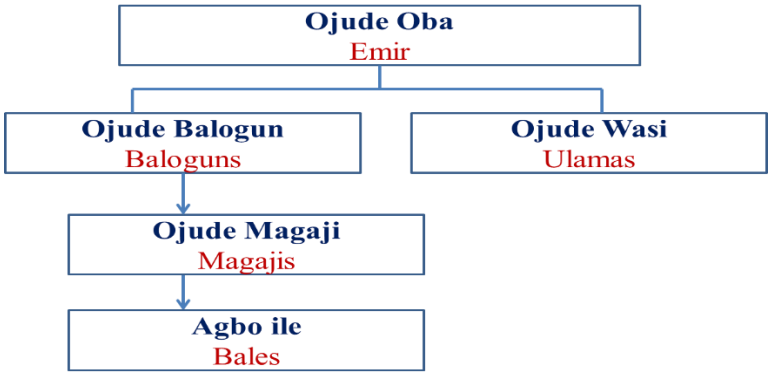

Figure 2. Organization structure of *Ojude* in relation to the traditional rulers in Ilorin

Traditional public space (TPS) is generally described as the land set aside for the purpose of public entertainment and protection of environmental, socio-cultural values for the current and future generations ((Afon, A. O., *et al,* 2020). Allocation of traditional public spaces is most often determined by Traditional rulers appointed by local or state government authority through traditional state council. Under the above traditional council, the hierarchy of TPS (Ojudes) includes Ojude Oba, Ojude Balogun, Ojude Wasi, Ojude Magagi and Agbo Ile. These TPS (Ojudes) in Ilorin are hierarchically classified using traditional organogram as well as size, function and structural properties. It is also recognised that categories of traditional public space areas can be nested within one another. For instance, if designed appropriately, Ojude Oba may also act as a local or neighbourhood public space for nearby residents.

The Ojudes are designated for socio-cultural and religious activities. They are used by both adults and children for different purposes but are mostly dominated by children. Also, on the last day of the month of *Ramadan*, a religious festival is normally staged at the *Ojude Oba*. The three-dimensional qualities of the Ojude are as follows: (i) it serves socio-cultural events; (ii) it serves religious events; and (iii) it serves economic functions.

It is worth mentioning that studies on traditional public spaces and their impacts on socio-cognitive and physical development have not been emphasised in literature. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this would be the first of its kind as there is no empirical study on traditional public space in Ilorin city, Nigeria. Traditional public spaces are not new except in few cases. In the pre-colonial and colonial eras, most of these traditional public spaces were traditionally used for security (Omoiya, 2004). The *Ojudes* were often populated and guarded by *Dongari* (the slaves) to protect the areas under each *Balogun* (the Warlord) against any external aggression and internal insurrection (Chisholm, 1911).

The thinking was that the slaves would have incapacitated or weakened the enemies at the *Ojudes* before the *Baloguns* would finally destroy the intruders (Omoiya, 2004). Essentially, the contemporary Ilorin is characterised by some traditional public spaces. These spaces include Ojude Oba in Ilorin west, Ojude Balogun Alanamu in Ilorin West, Ojude Balogun Ajikobi in Ilorin West, Ojude Balogun Gambari in Ilorin East, Ojude Balogun Fulani in Ilorin South, among others. The organisational structure of Traditional Public Space in Ilorin is as depicted in Figure 4.2 and are further expatiated in the following paragraph.

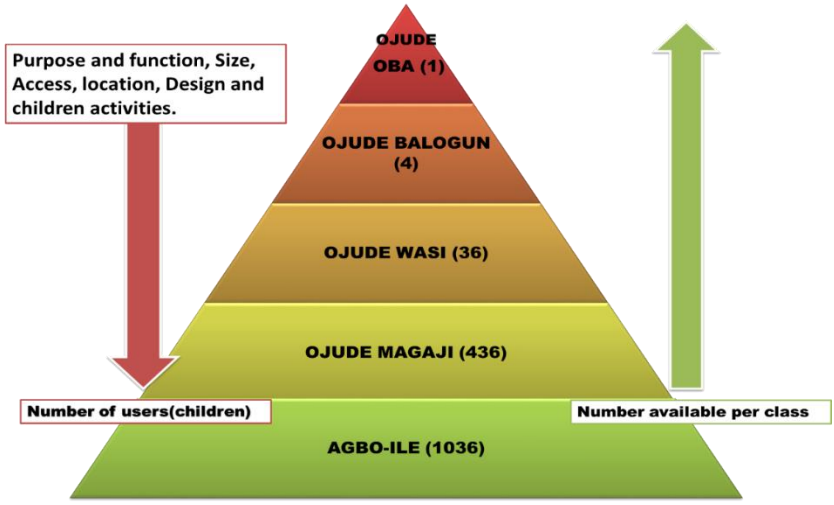

Figure 3. Hierarchy of Traditional Public Space in Ilorin, North Central Nigeria

Population of the Study

The target population includes:

- Residents living around the selected Ojude
- Regular users of the Ojude (youth, traders, elders, community leaders)
- Local government/cultural officials involved in public space management

Estimated population ≈ **150,000** (residents and frequent users within a 1 km radius of selected squares).

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A sample size of **300 respondents** was determined using the Cochran formula for large populations.

- Sampling Techniques
- Systematic random sampling for selecting general users at each Ojude
- Purposive sampling for community leaders, elders, and officials
- Stratified sampling across the three senatorial districts represented in Ilorin's demographic structure

Sources and Methods of Data Collection

Structured questionnaires (Likert scale, multiple choice, open-ended)

Non-participatory observation:

- behavioural mapping
- timing & duration of use
- activity classification

Secondary Data:

- Government planning documents
- Historical records
- Urban design/anthropological literature
- Satellite imagery and spatial data

Research Instruments

Questionnaire with sections on:

- Socio-demographic characteristics
- Frequency of Ojude use
- Perceived role in social cohesion
- Civic engagement functions
- Design/maintenance assessment

2. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1. Demographic Profile (n = 300)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	168	56.0
	Female	132	44.0
Age	18–25	84	28.0
	26–40	126	42.0
	41–60	72	24.0
	60+	18	6.0
Occupation	Students	102	34.0
	Traders/Artisans	87	29.0
	Civil Servants	63	21.0

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Others	48	16.0
Duration of Residence	<5 years	66	22.0
	5–10 years	102	34.0
	11+ years	132	44.0

Respondents reflect a broad age and occupational distribution, suggesting the Ojude is used by diverse groups.

Frequency and Pattern of Ojude Usage

Table 2. Respondents' Frequency of Use

Frequency	Count	%
Daily	84	28.0
Weekly	126	42.0
Monthly	54	18.0
Rarely	36	12.0

70% use the Ojude daily/weekly—indicating strong relevance in everyday community life.

Role of the Ojude in Community Identity

Table 3. Perceived Contributions to Community Identity

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
The Ojude strengthens cultural heritage	82	10	8
It reinforces shared community history	79	13	8
It promotes a sense of belonging	76	14	10
It supports inter-generational interaction	71	17	12

Respondents strongly associate the Ojude with cultural continuity and collective identity.

Ojude as a Space for Civic Engagement

Table 4. Civic Engagement Functions

Civic Role	Yes (%)	No (%)
Venue for community meetings	68	32
Platform for political dialogues	55	45
Mobilisation for social action	63	37
Conflict resolution gatherings	61	39

The Ojude is an important informal civic platform, particularly for community assemblies and conflict mediation.

Observational Findings

- High activity between 4pm–8pm
- Dominant activities: social interaction, informal trade, youth gatherings
- Cultural events significantly increase usage
- Spatial design issues: insufficient seating, poor lighting at night

Having highlighted the attributes of different kinds of Ojudes, Table 4.1 summaries main characteristics of Ojudes such as purpose and functions, access, sizes, locations, design and children activity in the spaces.

Table 5. Classification of Ojudes in Ilorin City

Ojudes	Purpose and functions	Access	Sizes (hectares)	Location	Design	Children activities
Ojude Oba	Ojude Oba is a target public space for traditional activities involving all Ilorin residents and royals. It is primarily used for recreation and royal festival (Durban) during Sallah festival (Eid-Adha). The space is for formal and informal activities involving children and adults. It encourages culture, norms and values of Ilorin city	It is easily accessible to all users, especially children, through walking and vehicular movement. Within 400m or 5 minutes' walk to residents. It has an adjoining road on the three sides of the space.	0.5-1.5	It is located in the centre core of Ilorin city. It is bounded by three major markets (Oja), namely Oja Oba, Oja Idi-ape and Oja Ago. The central mosque is located beside the space. Ojude Oba is surrounded by other Ojudes.	Support good passive observation by adult. Half of the space has hard landscape while they remain has sandy surface. It built on sense of place attachment. It has natural features like trees and sand. It has a garden where animals like horses, tortoises are kept	Cycling of used tyres, running and walking within the space. Informal and collective play like football, moonlight tales (alo), and ten-ten. Learning Islamic education (Madrasat).
Ojude Balogun	The spaces are smaller compared to Ojude Oba. The space provides an informal setting for play and physical activity acrobatics (takitiobo).	They are freely accessible through the decorated and elaborate entrance to all residents within 500m of the space. With a major access road in	0.4-1.0	They surround Oju Oba. Two of Ojude Balogun (Ojude Alanamu and Ojude Gambari) has a market (Oja) besides them	They are built on sense of place attachment. They have natural features like trees and sand.	Cycling of used tyres, running and walking within the space. Informal and collective play like football, moonlight tales (alo), and ten-ten.

		front of the main entrance.				
Ojude Wasi	They are used periodically for Ramadan activity. These spaces provide setting for interaction for people during sermon. They are used for Islamic programs.	They are within walking distance for the residence that leave around the community.	0.5-1.0	A mosque is always located close to them. They are easily accessible through walking	They are free space surrounded by many residents	Informal and collective play like football and ten-ten Learning Islamic education (Madrasat)
Ojude Magagi	They are communal spaces within a particular district. They are collectively used by adults and children	They are within walking distance for the residence that leave around the community	0.5-1.0	A mosque is always located close to them. They are easily accessible through walking	They are free space surrounded by many residents	Informal and collective play like football and ten-ten Learning Islamic education (Madrasat).
Agbo-Ile	They are primarily for children play. They are usually smaller in size compared to four other classes of Ojudes	They are mostly accessible to children within the extended family compound. They are accessible to all residents because of their proximity	0.1-0.5	They are located within the neighbourhood	It is open courtyard which is enclosed or nested by residential house of children with the locality. Most of the spaces have hard surface (concrete) Most of them has natural features like trees, grasses and sand	Cycling of used tyres, running and walking. within the space Informal and collective play like football, moonlight tales (alo), and ten-ten. They also housed a section for learning Islamic education (madrasat)

The table reveals clear hierarchical and functional distinctions between different categories of Ojudes, showing that each type plays a unique role in Ilorin's urban and social landscape. Ojude Oba emerges as the central and most multifunctional public space, serving royal festivals, cultural events, Islamic education, and both formal and informal activities for children and adults. Its location in the urban core—surrounded by markets and the central mosque—demonstrates its civic centrality, while its design elements such as natural vegetation, sandy and hard surfaces, and symbolic animal gardens reinforce its cultural importance. In contrast, Ojude Balogun spaces, although smaller, serve as important satellite public spaces surrounding Ojude Oba, providing accessible grounds for informal play, acrobatics, communal storytelling, and everyday socialization.

The remaining categories—Ojude Wasi, Ojude Magagi, and Agbo-Ile—serve predominantly neighborhood-level social and religious functions. Their proximity to mosques, residences, and family compounds reflects a deeply embedded communal structure, where public space is directly integrated into daily life. These spaces support children's activities, collective play, moonlight tales, informal learning, and religious sermons, indicating strong ties between spatial form, family systems, and civic interaction. The differences in size, access, and design show how Ojudes collectively function as a multi-scalar network of civic spaces—ranging from highly public and citywide (Ojude Oba) to community-embedded (Ojude Wasi and Magagi) and family-centered (Agbo-Ile). This spatial diversity demonstrates that Ojudes are not isolated playgrounds but culturally rooted infrastructures that anchor civic life, community identity, and intergenerational socialization.

Summary

The Ojudes are visibly hierarchical. At the top of the hierarchy is the Ojude Oba, followed by Ojude Balogus, then Ojudes Waasi, and lastly, Agbo-Ile. Ojudes shape the behaviours of children they are nurtured. It signifies the impact of environmental determinism on behaviour. For instance, children in Ojude Oba have characters and personalities that line with the space's conditions. They are likely to be more knowledgeable and positively exposed than children from other Ojudes.

The Ojude has many influential people with enormous facilities such as mosques, Madrasats, Emir Palace and three major markets. Subsequently, children from Ojude Baloguns behave in line with the traditional and cultural values of their respective Ojudes. For instance, Ojude Balogun Fulani is dominated by Fulani culture, and children learn their cultures from this Ojude. Also, children from Ojude Balogun Gambari are culturally inclined with Hausa traditions. The same goes with the children from Ojude Baloguns Alanamu and Ajikobi, where Yoruba culture is predominant. In Ojude Waasi, children learn more about Islamic traditions. Children that grew up here are more likely to be vast in Islamic traditions. In addition, children who utilize Agbo-Ile would learn traditions specific to their families through exposure to their physical and social properties.

Ojude Oba is the most vibrant among the classes Ojudes discussed due to the number of children that patronized the space because of its proximity to the Central Mosque, many Madrasat, and the three major markets in Ilorin. It should be noted that few items are common in all the classes of Ojudes that have been studied, such as functionality and landscape. Finally, the study identified the five classes of TPS (Ojudes) with their properties such as purpose and functions, sizes, access, location, design and children activities based on their usage. Therefore, the study's finding is a useful tool for other researchers and professional bodies to provide information on hierarchy of TPS (Ojude) in Ilorin, north-central Nigeria. Additionally, based on these findings, it is important to examine the attributes of Ojudes for socio-cultural well-being of the children.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, traditional public spaces in Ilorin, particularly the Ojudes, remain significant cultural, social, and civic assets despite the pressures of modernization and urban transformation. Their historical role in security, communal life, religious practice, children's development, and cultural preservation demonstrates a strong continuity between past and present functions. The study highlights that these spaces embody more than physical gathering points; they are repositories of historical memory, symbols of identity, and active facilitators of civic interaction.

Properly understanding their functions strengthens the argument that indigenous spatial forms are vital components of sustainable and culturally responsive urban development.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that urban planners, local authorities, and community leaders integrate Ojudes into formal urban planning frameworks rather than neglecting or replacing them with generic modern public spaces. Preservation efforts should focus on enhancing accessibility, improving maintenance, and incorporating culturally meaningful design elements that sustain traditional activities. Participatory planning should involve residents, traditional leaders, religious leaders, and youth groups to ensure that modernization efforts respect local heritage. Strengthening the role of Ojudes in civic programming—such as cultural festivals, educational activities, and community meetings—can enhance social cohesion, reinforce cultural identity, and deepen civic engagement in Ilorin.

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ISBN: 978-625-93102-2-0