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ЧУВСТВА ОБЩЕСТВО ГОРОД: ЖИВОЙ ГОРОД

Аннотация: *В статье исследуется взаимосвязь между социальной теорией и городским опытом, а также рассматривается вопрос, почему некоторые города воспринимаются как «живые» несмотря на очевидные пространственные и инфраструктурные ограничения. Основной тезис заключается в том, что «живость» города возникает не только благодаря его формальным или эстетическим качествам, но и вследствие взаимодействия и нередко несоответствия между чувственным восприятием среды, социальным присутствием и пространственной организацией. Городская витальность рассматривается не как фиксированное свойство городской формы, а как возникающее состояние, формирующееся в результате непрерывного взаимодействия человека, общества и окружающей среды.*

Ключевые слова: *чувства, общество, город, городская витальность, сенсорное восприятие, социальное присутствие, пространственная структура.*

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SENSES SOCIETY THE CITY: ALIVE CITY

Annotation: *This paper explores the relationship between social theory and urban experience, asking why certain cities are perceived as "alive" despite evident spatial and infrastructural limitations. The central argument is that urban "aliveness" does not emerge from formal or aesthetic qualities alone, but from the interaction and often misalignment between sensory experience, social presence, and spatial organisation. Rather than being a fixed property of urban form, vitality is understood as an emergent condition produced through the continuous interplay between body, society, and environment.*

Key words: *Senses, society, city, aliveness, sensory perception, social presence, spatial structure.*

Cities are often evaluated through measurable criteria such as accessibility, efficiency, and infrastructural performance. Within this framework, a "good" city is expected to function smoothly, providing comfort, safety, and clarity of movement. However, lived experience frequently contradicts these assumptions. Some urban environments, despite evident spatial and infrastructural shortcomings, are perceived as vibrant, engaging, and "alive," while others, designed according to established planning principles, remain emotionally flat and socially inert. This paradox became the starting point for this research. Arriving in Cork, Ireland, the city initially revealed itself as atmospherically rich and spatially engaging. Yet, over time, a series of everyday challenges became apparent: narrow sidewalks, spatial conflicts between pedestrians and vehicles, limited public realm infrastructure, and fragmented urban conditions. Despite these shortcomings, the city retained a strong sense of vitality. This raises a central question: why do some cities feel alive despite spatial and infrastructural limitations?

This paper argues that dominant approaches in urbanism tend to prioritise abstract, functional, and visual dimensions of space, while underestimating the role

of embodied and sensory experience. As Henri Lefebvre argues, space is not a neutral container but a socially produced condition shaped through practices, representations, and lived experience [1]. However, much of contemporary urban development operates within what he describes as “abstract space,” characterised by control, standardisation, and the reduction of space to a functional and economic resource. Such conditions risk suppressing the experiential and sensory richness of urban life. In parallel, Juhani Pallasmaa critiques the dominance of vision in architectural thinking, emphasising that “the experience of architecture is multi-sensory” and fundamentally grounded in the body [2]. For Pallasmaa, the city is not simply seen but felt, through touch, sound, smell, movement, and memory. This suggests that urban experience operates on a level that precedes conscious interpretation, where the body acts as the primary interface between the individual and space.

Building on these positions, this research proposes that the “aliveness” of a city emerges not from its formal qualities alone, but from the interaction between sensory perception, social presence, and spatial structure. To investigate this, the paper employs a design-led research approach grounded in a case study of Cork. The study integrates embodied observation, a participatory survey “Draw a City”, and spatial analysis into a conceptual framework referred to as a triptych “Urban Trixel”, consisting of three interrelated layers: the experienced city, the perceived city, and the produced city.

By bringing together theoretical insights from urban and architectural theory with practice-based research, this paper aims to reframe how urban environments are understood and evaluated. Rather than approaching the city as a fixed object, it positions urban space as a dynamic process shaped through the continuous interaction between body, society, and environment. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to broader discussions on how urban research and design might move beyond purely functional paradigms towards more human-centred and experientially grounded approaches.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Social Production of Space: Henri Lefebvre

The starting point for this research is the understanding that urban space is not a neutral, passive container but an active product of social relations. As Henri Lefebvre argues, "(social) space is a (social) product" [1]. This proposition shifts the focus of urban analysis away from form alone towards the processes, practices, and power structures that produce space.

Lefebvre's conceptual triad *spatial practice*, *representations of space*, and *representational spaces* provides a framework for understanding the multiplicity of urban experience. Spatial practice refers to the routines and everyday movements through which space is physically and socially reproduced. Representations of space correspond to the abstract, conceptualised spaces of planners, architects, and institutions, maps, diagrams, and regulatory frameworks. Representational spaces, in contrast, are lived and experienced, imbued with symbolic meanings, emotions, and memories [1]. While this triad suggests a potential unity between conceived, perceived, and lived dimensions of space, Lefebvre argues that modern urbanism is increasingly dominated by what he terms *abstract space*. This form of space is produced through processes of standardisation, measurement, and control, aligned with capitalist modes of production. Abstract space "tends towards homogeneity, towards the elimination of differences or peculiarities" [1]. In this condition, space is reduced to a functional and economic resource, prioritising efficiency and legibility over lived complexity.

Within such a framework, sensory richness and embodied experience are often marginalised. The dominance of representations of space, plans, zoning systems, and infrastructural logics, results in environments that are coherent in abstract terms but disconnected from lived experience. This creates a critical tension: the more space is optimised and rationalised, the more it risks becoming experientially diminished. Lefebvre's critique therefore opens a key question for this research: how does the

production of abstract space affect the ways in which cities are felt, inhabited, and experienced?

1.2 Embodied Perception and the Limits of Visual Urbanism: Juhani Pallasmaa

If Lefebvre provides a framework for understanding how space is produced, Juhani Pallasmaa offers a complementary perspective on how space is experienced. In *The Eyes of the Skin*, Pallasmaa challenges the dominance of vision in architectural and urban thinking, arguing that "the door handle is the handshake of the building" [2], emphasising the importance of touch, materiality, and bodily engagement. Pallasmaa critiques what he describes as the "ocularcentrism" of modern culture, where visual clarity and imageability are prioritised at the expense of other sensory modalities. This aligns with broader urban tendencies to design spaces that are legible and visually ordered but experientially shallow. In contrast, he proposes a phenomenological understanding of space, grounded in the body as the primary site of perception. As he states, "the body is the locus of perception, thought and consciousness" [2]. This perspective suggests that urban experience unfolds through a multi-sensory engagement with space: through sound, smell, texture, temperature, and movement. Importantly, these sensory inputs operate prior to conscious interpretation. The city is not first understood and then felt, it is felt before it is understood. This aligns with the phenomenological position articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who argues that "the body is our general medium for having a world" [3].

From this perspective, the reduction of urban space to visual and functional parameters represents not only a design limitation but a fundamental misalignment with human perception. When sensory diversity is diminished, through uniform materials, repetitive forms, or controlled environments, urban experience becomes flattened. The loss is not merely aesthetic but experiential: the city loses its capacity to engage the body and, by extension, to generate meaning.

1.3 Social Life, Movement, and Urban Experience: Jacobs and Debord

While Lefebvre and Pallasmaa address structure and perception, the social dimension of urban life is further articulated by Jane Jacobs and Guy Debord. Jacobs emphasises the importance of everyday social interactions in producing urban vitality. Her concept of "eyes on the street" highlights how the presence of people in public space contributes to safety, trust, and a sense of belonging [4]. For Jacobs, the street is not merely a physical corridor but a social environment shaped by continuous interaction.

Debord, in contrast, focuses on the experiential and psychological dimensions of urban space. Through the concept of the *dérive*, he describes a mode of drifting through the city guided by atmospheres, sensations, and affective responses rather than functional goals [5]. This approach foregrounds the role of movement, chance, and subjective experience in shaping urban perception.

Together, these perspectives reinforce the idea that cities are not only structured environments but lived and socially mediated processes. Urban space becomes meaningful through interaction between people, between bodies and environments, and between different layers of experience.

1.4 Conclusion

Taken individually, these theoretical positions offer powerful but partial insights. Lefebvre explains how space is produced and structured, revealing the dominance of abstract, controlled environments. Pallasmaa, supported by phenomenological thought, explains how space is perceived through the body, highlighting the importance of sensory engagement. Jacobs and Debord introduce the social and experiential dynamics of urban life. However, none of these frameworks alone fully explains why certain cities feel "alive." Lefebvre's theory risks remaining at the level of structural analysis, while Pallasmaa's focus on perception does not fully account for the socio-spatial conditions that enable or constrain experience. Similarly, Jacobs and Debord foreground social interaction and movement but do not fully integrate these with broader spatial production processes.

This research therefore positions the “alive city” as emerging from the intersection and misalignment of these dimensions. It is not the product of spatial form alone, nor solely of sensory richness or social interaction, but of their interaction. More importantly, it is within the tensions between these layers between conceived, perceived, and lived space that urban vitality emerges.

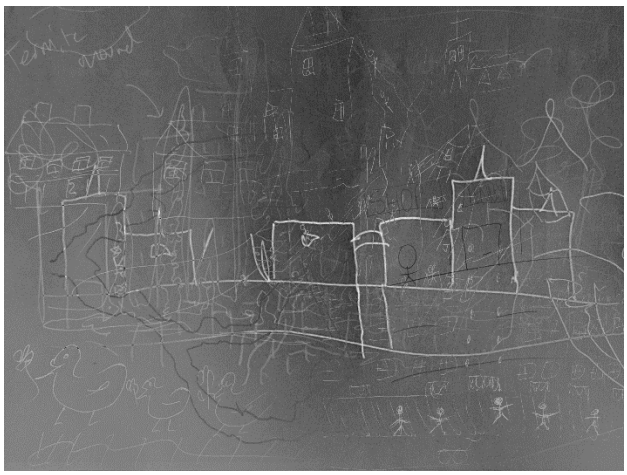
METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, design-led methodology in which architectural practice functions as a mode of inquiry rather than solely production. Following the principles of research through design [6,7], the study combines observation, interpretation, and representation in an iterative process. The methodology integrates three complementary approaches.

First, embodied observation was conducted through repeated walks, sensory mapping, and video documentation (pic. 1), focusing on movement, rhythm, sound, smell, and spatial transitions. Drawing on phenomenological perspectives [2,3], this method investigates how urban space is experienced through the body and senses rather than through visual analysis alone.

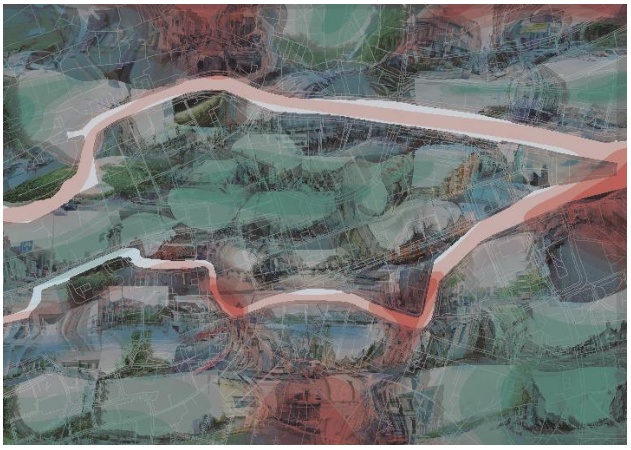
Picture 1. Video documentation

Second, a participatory survey “Draw a City” (pic. 2) explored collective urban perception. Participants were asked to draw the city, revealing which elements are retained, simplified, or omitted. The survey highlights the gap between lived urban experience and its cognitive representation, resonating with Lefebvre’s representations of space [1] and Lynch’s concept of imageability [8].



Picture 2. Social survey "Draw a City"

Third, spatial analysis examined the physical structure of Cork through criteria such as scale, continuity, pedestrian conditions, activity, and enclosure. Spaces were evaluated according to varying levels of comfort and experiential quality, informed by human-centred urban design principles [9] (pic. 3).



Picture 3. Affective map

These methods are synthesised through the conceptual framework of the Triptych "Urban Trixel," (pic. 4) consisting of three interrelated layers: the embodied city, the perceived city, and the spatial city. Adapted from Lefebvre's spatial triad, the model allows the research to identify alignments and discrepancies between how the city is produced, perceived, and experienced. It is within these discrepancies that the conditions of the "alive city" are explored.

Picture 4. Triptych "Urban Trixel"

FINDINGS

3.1 Embodied City: Habit, Attention, and Sensory Persistence

The embodied investigation of Cork reveals a paradox at the core of urban experience: while conscious attention diminishes through repetition, sensory engagement does not disappear, it shifts beneath awareness. This observation aligns with Pallasmaa's assertion that architecture is experienced "through the body and the senses, not solely through vision" [2]. Over time, the city becomes visually predictable, but sensory fluctuations, changes in sound, smell, light, and spatial compression continue to structure experience. This suggests that urban perception operates on two levels: a conscious, visually oriented layer and a pre-conscious, embodied layer.

In Cork, this duality becomes particularly evident along transitional spaces: bridges, intersections, and shifts between open and enclosed streets. These moments interrupt routine and re-activate perception. Here, Ingold's notion of "being alive to

the world" becomes relevant, where perception is not static but continuously formed through movement and engagement [10]. The city is not a fixed environment but a field of changing relations.

At the same time, repetition plays an ambivalent role. While it reduces cognitive load and creates a sense of stability, it also risks flattening experience. This reflects Sennett's argument that overly coherent and controlled environments can suppress complexity and reduce opportunities for engagement [11]. The embodied findings therefore suggest that urban vitality depends not on constant stimulation, but on a balance between familiarity and interruption what can be described as controlled instability.

3.2 Perceived City: The Reduction of Urban Experience

The "Draw a City" survey reveals a striking pattern: participants overwhelmingly represent the city through buildings, particularly facades, while rarely depicting people, movement, or sensory conditions. The city, as it exists in the collective imagination, is reduced to a set of stable, visual elements. This finding resonates strongly with Lynch's concept of imageability, where the city is structured through elements that are easily recognisable and cognitively organized: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks [8]. However, while Lynch presents this as a positive condition for urban legibility, the results of this research suggest a limitation: what is most imageable is not necessarily what is most experientially significant.

The absence of people in the drawings is particularly revealing. Despite Jacobs' emphasis on the centrality of social life in urban vitality "the sidewalk ballet" of everyday interactions [4], this dimension is largely omitted in representation. This suggests that social interaction, while essential to lived experience, is not easily captured or retained in cognitive images of the city. Similarly, sensory elements, sound, smell, atmosphere, are almost entirely absent. This aligns with Pallasmaa's critique of ocularcentrism, where visual perception dominates at the expense of other sensory modalities [2]. The perceived city becomes simplified, stabilised, and

detached from the dynamic and relational qualities of lived experience. From a Lefebvrian perspective, this layer can be understood as a form of representation of space, where complexity is filtered into abstract, legible forms [1].

However, the findings suggest that this abstraction does not simply occur at the level of planning and design, but also within everyday cognition. The city in the mind is already an edited version of the city as lived. This reduction has significant implications. If both urban design and collective perception prioritise visual and formal clarity, other dimensions of urban life, social interaction, sensory richness, temporal variation, risk being systematically undervalued. The perceived city, therefore, contributes to the production of environments that are coherent but potentially lifeless.

3.3 Spatial City: Comfort, Discomfort, and the Conditions of Experience

The spatial analysis of Cork categorises urban environments into varying levels of comfort: high, medium, and low. However, the findings complicate a straightforward correlation between comfort and perceived vitality.

Highly comfortable spaces tend to exhibit a set of recurring characteristics: human-scale proportions (2–4 storeys), a balance between openness and enclosure, active ground floors, and visual diversity. These conditions align with Gehl's principles for human-centred urban design, which emphasise the importance of walkability, social interaction, and sensory engagement [9]. In such spaces, the individual feels both oriented and protected, while still remaining open to interaction.

At the same time, moderately comfortable spaces reveal moments of tension: imbalances in scale, interruptions in continuity, or partial inactivity. These spaces often possess latent potential, inviting exploration but lacking full activation. Interestingly, these transitional conditions frequently generate stronger engagement than uniformly "ideal" environments.

In contrast, low-comfort spaces are characterised by car dominance, narrow sidewalks, lack of activity, and sensory discomfort (noise, smells, emptiness). Here,

Lefebvre's concept of abstract space becomes particularly visible: environments optimised for movement and efficiency, but detached from human experience [1]. These spaces often produce feelings of alienation, where the individual perceives themselves as out of place or unnecessary.

However, and this is a critical finding, not all discomfort correlates with a lack of vitality. Certain spatial conditions that are technically "imperfect" or even uncomfortable can still generate interest and engagement. For example, spaces with visual complexity, unexpected transitions, or partial disorder often attract attention and invite exploration. This aligns with Sennett's argument for the value of "open" and incomplete urban systems, which allow for adaptation and improvisation [11].

Moreover, the presence of people plays a disproportionate role in shaping perception. As Jacobs suggests, social activity transforms space, creating a sense of safety and belonging regardless of physical conditions [4]. Conversely, even well-designed environments can feel empty and lifeless in the absence of social presence. This leads to a key observation: spatial qualities alone do not determine the experience of the city. Instead, they interact with sensory perception and social dynamics in complex and often unpredictable ways. The same physical environment can be experienced differently depending on time, activity, and the presence of others.

3.4 Conclusion

Across all three layers, a consistent pattern emerges: the embodied, perceived, and spatial dimensions of the city do not align. The body continues to sense what the mind no longer registers, the mind simplifies what the city actually contains, and spatial structures produce conditions that do not directly translate into lived experience. This misalignment is not a flaw, it is a generative condition. It introduces friction, difference, and unpredictability, which in turn create opportunities for interaction, discovery, and meaning. As Ingold suggests, life unfolds not in static structures but in the "in-between" of relations and movements [10]. The "alive city," therefore, cannot be reduced to a set of optimal spatial conditions. It emerges through

the dynamic interaction and partial disjunction between how the city is produced, perceived, and experienced.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a central condition of urban experience: the embodied, perceived, and spatial layers of the city do not fully align. Rather than forming a coherent whole, these dimensions operate simultaneously yet often contradict one another. We sense one city, imagine another, and design according to a third logic. This misalignment is not accidental but constitutive of how urban environments are experienced.

The research argues that the "alive city" emerges not from spatial perfection or optimisation, but from tension between sensory perception, social presence, and spatial structure. In contrast to the functional city, which prioritises efficiency, predictability, and control, the alive city is characterised by openness, variation, and partial inconsistency. This aligns with Lefebvre's critique of abstract space, where excessive rationalisation produces environments that are legible but experientially diminished [1]. Similarly, Sennett's distinction between "closed" and "open" urban systems suggests that vitality depends on incompleteness and the possibility of improvisation [11]. The case of Cork demonstrates that urban vitality can persist despite infrastructural shortcomings. Narrow sidewalks, irregular spatial conditions, and fragmented urban structures introduce unpredictability that can intensify engagement. This does not imply that dysfunction should be idealised, but rather that excessive optimisation risks flattening experience. As Zukin argues, environments designed to simulate authenticity often become visually coherent yet socially hollow [12].

The findings also highlight that vitality is not solely spatial or individual, but relational. The city feels alive through the perceptible presence of others, through movement, sound, proximity, and shared sensory awareness. Extending Jacobs' concept of "eyes on the street" [4], the research suggests that co-presence itself

contributes to urban intensity. In this sense, the alive city is not simply populated, but relationally dense.

A further insight concerns the role of discomfort. Spaces that are slightly irregular, ambiguous, or unresolved often generate stronger engagement than fully controlled environments. Drawing on phenomenology and Sennett's argument for openness, the research suggests that variation and friction are necessary conditions of meaningful urban experience. Without contrast and unpredictability, urban space risks becoming experientially neutral.

Taken together, these arguments point towards a shift in how urban space is conceptualised. Rather than evaluating cities solely through form, function, or visual coherence, this research suggests a relational approach. The city is an ongoing interaction between body, society, and environment. Extending Lefebvre's spatial triad, this research proposes that vitality emerges not through harmony between conceived, perceived, and lived space, but through their partial disjunction. The alive city exists in the gaps between what is planned and what is experienced, between what is seen and what is felt. This reframing has implications for both research and practice. It suggests that designing for urban vitality is not about eliminating disorder, but about structuring conditions that allow for interaction, variation, and sensory engagement. In this sense, the goal is not to resolve the city, but to keep it open.

CONCLUSION

This research began with a simple but persistent paradox: why do certain cities remain vibrant and experientially rich despite spatial imperfections, while others, carefully planned and optimised, often feel inert? Rather than treating this contradiction as an exception, the study argues that it reveals a fundamental limitation within dominant approaches to urbanism itself. Contemporary urban development frequently operates through the pursuit of clarity, efficiency, and control. Within this logic, the successful city is understood as coherent, predictable, and optimised. However, the findings of this research suggest that urban vitality does

not emerge from resolution alone. On the contrary, excessive rationalisation risks reducing the very sensory, social, and experiential complexity through which urban life becomes meaningful.

By bringing together Lefebvre's theory of spatial production, phenomenological approaches to embodied perception, and theories of urban social life, this research proposes a shift from understanding the city as a fixed object towards understanding it as a relational and continuously unfolding condition. Within this framework, misalignment becomes critical. The embodied, perceived, and spatial dimensions of the city do not fully coincide, and it is precisely within these gaps that urban vitality emerges. The city remains alive not because it is perfectly ordered, but because it is never entirely resolved. Sensory ambiguity, partial disorder, interruption, and unpredictability are not necessarily failures of the urban environment; they can become conditions that intensify awareness, interaction, and engagement.

This has significant implications for both urban theory and practice. If vitality depends upon openness and relational density, then the role of urban design cannot be reduced to the elimination of friction or the optimisation of movement. A city designed entirely through logics of efficiency risks becoming experientially neutral: legible, functional, and controllable, yet detached from the complexity of lived urban life. In this sense, the research suggests that friction may itself operate as a form of urban infrastructure, sustaining encounter, perception, and social intensity. The study therefore calls for a reconsideration of how cities are evaluated and designed. Rather than asking how urban environments can become more efficient, the more urgent question may be how they can remain experientially open. The task of urbanism may not be to fully resolve the city, but to sustain conditions in which urban life can continue to emerge unpredictably through the interaction between body, society, and space.

Ultimately, the "alive city" cannot be fully planned, stabilised, or controlled. It exists in moments of tension, transition, co-presence, and sensory encounter. It

persists not through perfection, but through the capacity of the urban environment to remain unfinished, relational, and alive to those who inhabit it.

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