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Caged balconies and aesthetic governance: Informal space appropriation across formal and informal housing regimes

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES: This article examines the phenomenon of caged balconies in Da Lat, Vietnam, to explain how informal spatial extensions mediate tensions between residents' everyday survival needs and aesthetic governance in a heritage-linked tourist city. Rather than treating caged balconies as isolated architectural violations, the study conceptualizes them as socio-spatial responses to housing scarcity under tourism-oriented visual regulation. Building on debates on urban informality, everyday urbanism, spatial justice, and the politics of visibility, the research aims to: (i) identify the drivers behind caged-balcony construction; (ii) compare their morphologies and interfaces with shared space; (iii) analyze mechanisms of surveillance, regulation, and stigmatization; and (iv) advance an Urban Aesthetic Justice framework to interpret these practices as contested claims to spatial legitimacy.

METHODS: The study adopts a qualitative comparative case design focusing on two contrasting sites: Ngo Quyen Apartment (formal housing) and the To Ngoc Van canal-side settlement (informal housing). Data were triangulated through field observation and photographic documentation, 60 semi-structured interviews with residents, typological analysis of balcony extensions, and review of planning regulations and secondary documents. Materials were analyzed using thematic and content analysis across micro (household), meso (neighborhood), and macro (policy–market) scales.

FINDINGS: Clear contrasts emerge between the two sites. In the formal apartment compound, caged balconies are typically small, standardized, and used for auxiliary functions such as drying and storage. In the canal-side settlement, extensions are larger, built from salvaged materials, and essential for cooking, sleeping, or livelihood activities. These differences reflect interacting micro-level household pressures, meso-level infrastructural and management conditions, and macro-level shortages of affordable housing under image-conscious planning. Field evidence further reveals uneven enforcement and differentiated stigma, in which visually “orderly” extensions are tolerated while precarious yet life-sustaining structures are marginalized within the tourism-oriented urban landscape.

CONCLUSION: The study advances an Urban Aesthetic Justice framework, emphasizing that spatial legitimacy in tourist cities is shaped not only by legality and safety but also by aesthetic regimes and politics of visibility. Caged balconies thus emerge as material indicators of how tourism-driven governance produces uneven tolerance of informality and reinforces socio-spatial inequality. Policy implications include expanding affordable housing supply, strengthening participatory planning, adopting flexible, area-specific regulations that legalize small, safe extensions while removing hazardous ones, and upgrading infrastructure in canal-side neighborhoods. Although limited to two case sites and primarily qualitative evidence, the framework offers a transferable lens for analyzing informal spatial practices in other heritage- and tourism-oriented cities.



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INTRODUCTION

Rather than treating caged balconies primarily as an understudied architectural phenomenon, this paper advances a broader research problem by asking how aesthetic regimes in tourist-oriented cities actively produce and legitimize spatial injustice. In cities such as Da Lat, where urban governance prioritizes visual order, heritage imagery, and tourism branding, informal domestic extensions become sites through which everyday survival needs collide with aesthetic norms. The resulting tension is not simply regulatory but also distributive and symbolic, determining whose spatial practices are tolerated, whose are stigmatized, and whose are rendered invisible. Caged balconies thus serve as a strategic empirical lens for examining how aesthetic governance operates as a mechanism of spatial differentiation, rather than as a neutral tool of urban management. Over the past four decades, Vietnam has experienced one of the most rapid urbanization processes in Southeast Asia, driven by the Doi Moi reforms, internal migration, and accelerating land commodification (Tuan, 2022). These transformations have intensified housing shortages and exposed structural limitations in state-led planning systems, particularly in their capacity to accommodate diverse household needs (Waibel *et al.*, 2007). In response, urban residents have increasingly engaged in bottom-up spatial adaptations, producing informal extensions that blur the boundaries between legality, necessity, and everyday urban practice (Labbé, 2014). Recent studies published in the International Journal of Human Capital in Urban Management (IJHCUM) have similarly examined how informal housing adaptations and everyday spatial practices emerge in response to structural planning constraints, emphasizing their implications for urban livability, resilience, and governance. These works highlight that informal

spatial modifications are not marginal anomalies but constitute integral components of how residents negotiate housing inadequacies and urban management regimes in rapidly changing cities. Situating the present study within this line of inquiry allows the Da Lat case to be read as part of a broader conversation on informal urban practices and their governance, while further extending this discussion toward questions of aesthetics and visibility in tourism-oriented contexts (Razmaramina *et al.*, 2025).

Among the most visible yet insufficiently theorized outcomes of this process is the proliferation of caged balconies, defined as metal-grill extensions projecting from balconies or windows to expand domestic space. While such structures have long been documented in megacities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, their growing presence in mid-sized cities signals a diffusion of informal spatial strategies beyond high-density metropolitan cores (Harun & Kassim, 2025; Thinh *et al.*, 2023). This shift calls for closer examination, particularly in cities where urban development is shaped less by industrial concentration than by tourism, heritage conservation, and aesthetic regulation. Da Lat represents a critical yet underexplored case in this regard. Originally developed as a colonial resort town, the city has cultivated a distinctive urban identity grounded in landscape preservation, climatic exceptionalism, and architectural imagery. Urban governance in Da Lat is strongly oriented toward maintaining a curated visual and ecological character, positioning the city simultaneously as a tourist destination and a regulated aesthetic environment (Jones *et al.*, 2023; Tu *et al.*, 2021). Within this context, the emergence of caged balconies is not merely a functional response to housing scarcity; it constitutes a contested spatial practice through which everyday survival needs confront image-conscious planning re-

gimes. Existing scholarship on urban informality provides an essential foundation for understanding this phenomenon. Roy, (2005), reconceptualizes informality not as the absence of regulation but as a mode of governance characterized by selective tolerance and strategic enforcement, while Neuwirth (2016) frames informal structures as creative responses to systemic exclusion across the Global South (Roy, 2005). In Vietnam, studies have documented extensive household-level adaptations, particularly in tube houses, as residents respond to cost pressures, density, and regulatory constraints (Nguyen, 2025; Truong-Young, 2019). This body of work remains heavily concentrated on megacities, where informality is primarily explained through density, migration, and metropolitan land markets, leaving mid-sized cities analytically marginal (Tran Huynh Buu, 2022). Parallel research on everyday urbanism emphasizes how ordinary, incremental practices, such as extending balconies or appropriating semi-public space, actively produce urban form (Chase et al., 1999). In Vietnam, caged balconies exemplify such practices, enabling multi-generational living, small-scale economic activities, and domestic flexibility. Yet, as Corey, (2021) argues, much of the everyday urbanism literature underplays the role of state-led imagery and tourism markets in shaping which everyday practices are tolerated and which are stigmatized. This concern connects directly to debates on spatial justice and the right to the city (Lefebvre, 2014), which foreground questions of who is entitled to shape, modify, and inhabit urban space. While informal extensions are often treated as regulatory violations, they can also be read as legitimate claims to housing and spatial use in contexts where formal provision fails (Nguyen, 2025). In cities governed through aesthetic control, these claims are filtered not only through legal frameworks but also through visual norms that privilege certain forms of space-making over others. Work on urban aesthetics and the politics of visibility further illuminates this dynamic. Zukin, (2008) demonstrates how aesthetic regimes operate as instruments of power, while Ghertner, (2015), shows how appearance becomes a criterion for sorting spaces and populations in “world-class” city-making. In tourist cities such as Da Lat, where visual branding is central to economic strategy, informal extensions are often targeted not primarily for safety reasons but because they disrupt curated urban imagery (Tran Huynh Buu, 2022). As

a result, informality becomes unevenly governed. Compact, visually conforming adaptations may be tolerated, while precarious yet essential structures are stigmatized and rendered illegitimate. Despite these insights, a clear knowledge gap remains. Existing studies have not sufficiently examined how informality, spatial justice, and aesthetic governance intersect in mid-sized, heritage-linked tourist cities, which differ fundamentally from megacities in scale, governance priorities, and modes of visibility. In particular, little attention has been paid to how tourism-oriented aesthetic regimes actively shape the forms, regulation, and social meanings of informal domestic extensions. Addressing this gap, the present study advances three interrelated arguments. First, caged balconies in Da Lat function as essential socio-spatial adaptations to housing scarcity rather than incidental architectural violations. Second, their legitimacy is negotiated through aesthetic governance and visibility politics, producing differentiated tolerance and stigma across urban contexts. Third, these dynamics call for an Urban Aesthetic Justice perspective that links everyday survival practices to broader questions of spatial rights in tourism-driven cities. Accordingly, the paper pursues four objectives: (i) to identify the everyday drivers behind caged-balcony construction; (ii) to analyze their morphologies and interfaces with shared space in formal and informal settings; (iii) to examine mechanisms of surveillance, regulation, and stigmatization; and (iv) to propose an Urban Aesthetic Justice framework that contributes conceptually to debates on informality, planning, and spatial justice in heritage-oriented urban environments. This study argues that Da Lat’s informal aesthetics differ fundamentally from those observed in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City, not merely in degree but in governance logic. In megacities, informal extensions are largely shaped by extreme density, migration flows, and metropolitan land markets, and they are often tolerated as functional responses to congestion. In contrast, Da Lat is a mid-sized, heritage-linked tourist city where informality is governed primarily through aesthetic visibility rather than spatial saturation. Here, urban regulation is closely tied to landscape imagery, colonial-era architectural references, and tourism branding, which together produce a regime in which spatial legitimacy is determined by visual conformity rather than by use-value or necessity. As a result, informal extensions such as caged balconies are not simply

regulated as technical violations but are instead evaluated as disruptions to a curated urban image. This aesthetic mode of governance generates differentiated tolerance, whereby visually “orderly” adaptations are tacitly accepted while precarious yet life-sustaining structures are stigmatized, thereby producing a distinctive form of spatial injustice. By foregrounding this dynamic, the paper contributes a mid-sized, tourism-oriented perspective that extends existing informality debates beyond the megacity focus that currently dominates Vietnamese urban scholarship. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section introduces the theoretical framework, drawing on debates in urban informality, everyday urbanism, spatial justice, and aesthetic governance. This is followed by a section that describes the research design, case selection, data collection, and analytical approach. The subsequent section presents the empirical results, with a comparative focus on the form, function, regulation, and social meanings of caged balconies across formal and informal housing contexts in Đà Lạt. The paper then moves to a discussion that interprets these findings through the proposed Urban Aesthetic Justice framework and situates the case within broader regional and theoretical debates. The final section concludes by summarizing the key contributions, outlining policy implications, and identifying directions for future research.

Theoretical framework

Building on the above, this study uses a multi-layered framework with four pillars to analyze caged balconies in Dalat. (1) Urban informality (Neuwirth, 2016); (Roy, 2005) reads caged balconies not as exceptions to the urban system but as practices embedded in, and at times tolerated by, planning. This moves beyond a simple formal-informal binary. (2) Everyday urbanism (Chase et al., 1999) understands caged balconies as products of everyday practice: residents reproduce living space from micro needs - housing, petty commerce, social connection. (3) Spatial justice (Lefebvre, 2014; Soja, 2009) frames the tension between community claims to habitation and the symbolic logic of planning. In this reading, caged balconies materialize claims for spatial justice where residents’ needs meet aesthetic mandates and regulatory rules. (4) Urban aesthetics and the politics of visibility (Ghertner, 2015; Zukin, 2008) explain why caged balconies are labeled

“ugly” or “inappropriate.” The issue is not only construction technique; it is a mechanism of symbolic exclusion tied to urban branding in a tourism context. Together, these pillars read caged balconies as a calculated spatial strategy and as a site of contention among immediate needs, aesthetics, and governance Table 1.

Research questions and objectives

Based on the above context and framework, the study asks a central question: What do caged balconies in Dalat reveal about the relationship between residents’ everyday needs and urban planning oriented to heritage-tourism agendas? To answer this, the paper sets three objectives. First, clarify the everyday drivers that lead residents to construct and maintain caged balconies as a strategy for adapting to urban living conditions. Second, analyze how caged balconies are defined, monitored, and stigmatized within an urban environment under strict controls over aesthetics and image. Third, contribute to debates on informal architecture in Vietnam by extending analysis to a distinctive mid-sized tourist city where tourism and selective heritage shape regulation and visual management. The study advances both academic and practical discussions. Academically, it adds to research on urban informality and vernacular adaptation in Vietnam by shifting attention beyond megacities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to a mid-sized city framed by tourism and selective heritage. The Dalat case shows that informality is not confined to high-density contexts; it persists in tightly managed and staged environments geared to conservation and tourism. The study helps fill a gap in how everyday life, spatial justice, and aesthetic politics relate in cities that must both preserve and commodify their images. Practically, the paper offers a different lens for urban managers and policymakers in Dalat and other heritage-related cities in Vietnam. Rather than treating caged balconies simply as “architectural violations,” it reads them as spatial adaptations that reflect real housing needs and residents’ negotiations with the limits of formal planning. Recognizing and understanding these practices can support planning and conservation policies that are more flexible, inclusive, and equitable-balancing tourism development, visual preservation, and the dynamic needs

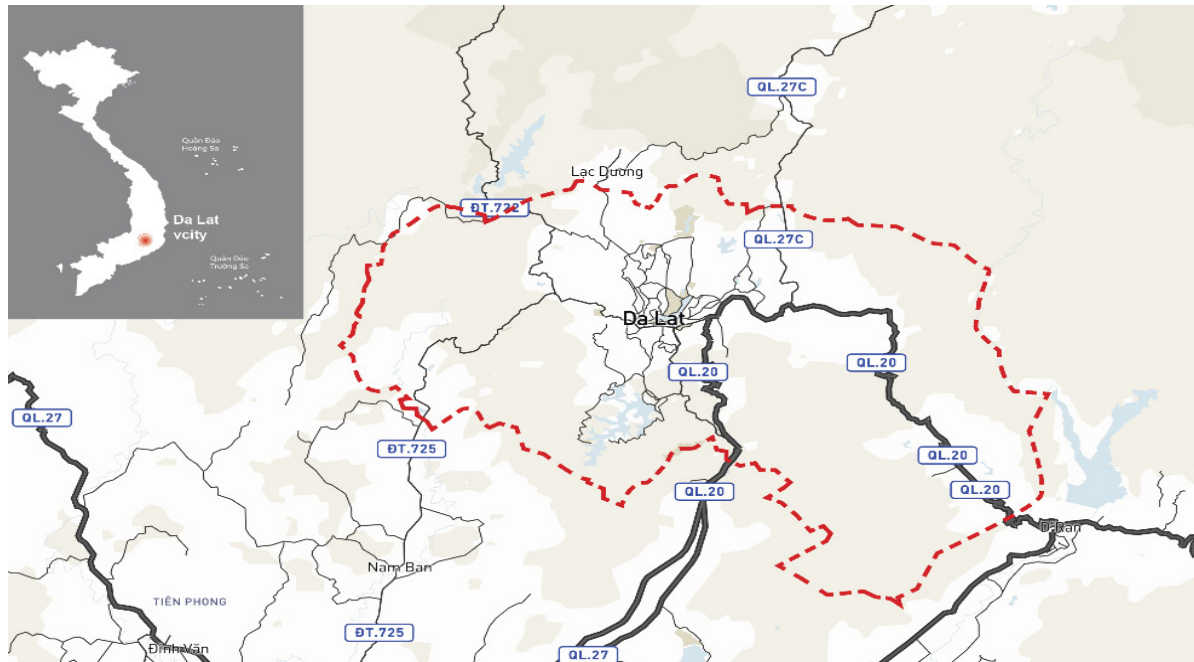


Fig. 1: Boundary of Da Lat City and research location.



Fig. 2: Characteristic Architecture of Da Lat.

Table 1: Comparison of the four theoretical approaches and the research approach for studying caged balconies

Theoretica	Main Content	Approach to Caged Balconies
Urban Informality (Neuwirth, 2016); (Roy, 2005)	Informality is not merely “outside” the system; it is a mode of urban operation at once selectively enabled by the state and creatively produced by residents.	Read caged balconies as outcomes of shortage and constraints in the formal housing system, and at the same time as flexible resident-made solutions for survival.
Everyday Urbanism (Chase <i>et al.</i> , 1999)	Everyday practice is central to urban production: people continually remake space through small, routine acts.	Read caged balconies as everyday creativity: ad-hoc extensions for additional living space, petty trade, or rental signs of adaptive flexibility.
Spatial Justice (Le-febvre, 2014) (Soja, 2009)	Spatial rights are at stake: who gets to use, alter, or produce space? Spatial justice entails a fair distribution of access and the ability to shape the city.	Read caged balconies as claims to the right to housing and the right to use space, especially for low-income households excluded from formal provision.
Urban Aesthetics (Ghertner, 2015); (Zukin, 2008)	Cities are governed not only by law but also by aesthetic norms and imagery; what counts as “beautiful/ugly” often decides what is deemed legitimate.	Read caged balconies as aesthetic controversies often labeled “ugly” or as “spoiling the image of a tourist city.”

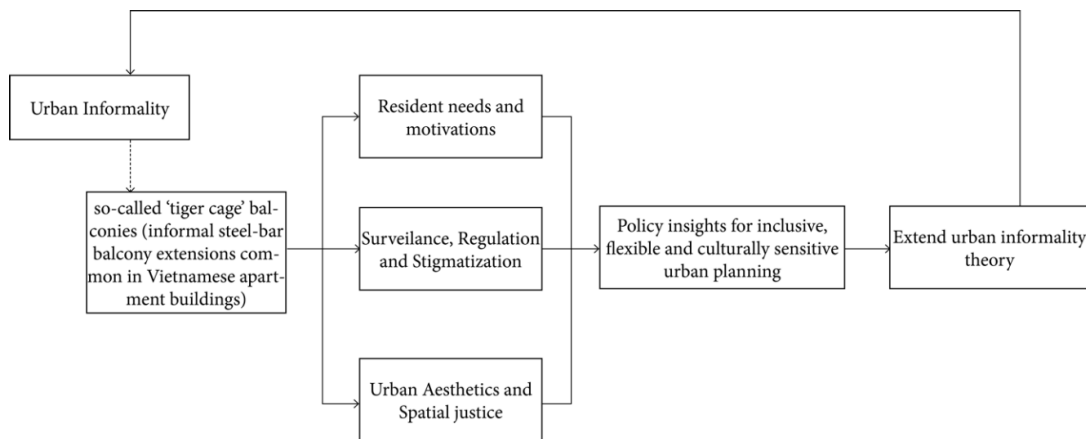


Fig.3: Research methods strategically applied to address specific research objectives

of local communities Fig. 3. Rather than treating caged balconies primarily as an understudied architectural phenomenon, this paper advances a broader research problem by asking how aesthetic regimes in tourist-oriented cities actively produce and legitimize spatial injustice. In cities such as Da Lat, where urban governance prioritizes visual order, heritage imagery, and tourism branding, informal domestic extensions become sites in which everyday survival needs collide with aesthetic norms. The resulting tension is not simply regulatory but also distributive and symbolic, determining whose

spatial practices are tolerated, whose are stigmatized, and whose are rendered invisible. Caged balconies thus serve as a strategic empirical lens for examining how aesthetic governance operates as a mechanism of spatial differentiation, rather than as a neutral tool of urban management.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the formation, transformation, and social meanings of caged balconies in a tourist city such as Dalat. A qualitative design is particularly suited to the topic

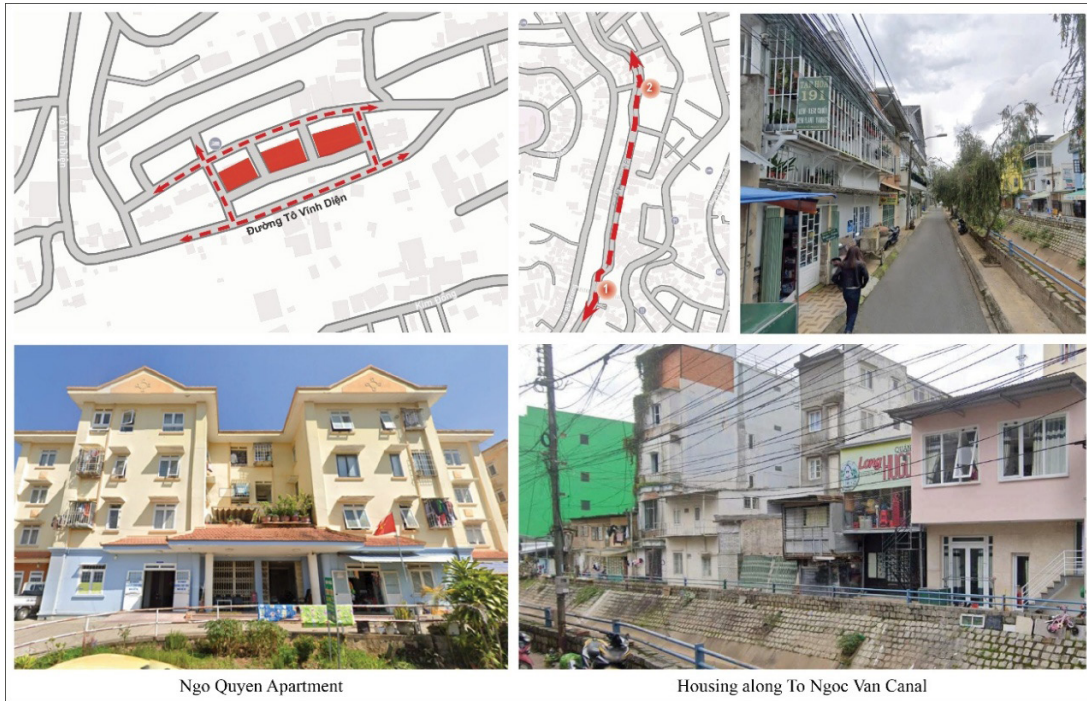


Fig. 4: Current status of caged balconies in Ngo Quyen Apartment and along To Ngoc Van Canal

because it captures the depth of everyday experience, residents' spatial strategies, and the ways municipal authorities and wider communities interpret the phenomenon. Dalat is selected as the focal case because of its distinctive status as a tourist city. Perched at roughly 1,500 meters (about 4,900 feet) above sea level on the Lang Biang Plateau, Dalat is the most populous settlement in Vietnam's Central Highlands and one of the country's most prominent tourist destinations. Historically, Dalat has been a unique urban setting marked by the coexistence and development of diverse cultural influences. It is also a city where caged balconies are widespread yet remain under-examined in a systematic manner. A case study approach allows the analysis of the complex relations among formal urban planning, everyday practices of living, and the politics of aesthetics within a specific context, thereby generating insights with broader relevance for comparable cities in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

Research design

This study adopts a comparative case design to clarify how caged balconies emerge and function across contrasting urban contexts within the same

city. By examining Ngo Quyen Apartment and the To Ngoc Van canal-side settlement Fig. 4, the analysis demonstrates that informal domestic extensions are shaped not only by household needs but also by differentiated socio-economic conditions, infrastructure provision, and governance regimes. Ngo Quyen Apartment represents a formal housing context characterized by standardized building typologies, defined property rights, and established management oversight, resulting in relatively regulated and compliance-oriented forms of informality. In contrast, the To Ngoc Van canal-side settlement exemplifies an informal housing regime marked by self-built dwellings, insecure tenure, limited infrastructure, and minimal regulatory presence, where caged balconies function as necessity-driven and precarious spatial adaptations. Locating both sites within the same city allows the study to isolate the effects of governance context and planning control, rather than broader citywide economic conditions, on the form, regulation, and social meaning of caged balconies. The paired comparison reveals how differences in infrastructure stability, income levels, and aesthetic expectations produce distinct modes of informal space-making. This contrast strengthens the analytical linkage between

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of study participants.

Demographic Characteristics	Locals	Key Informants	Total
Investigation Groups			
In-depth interview	Ngo Quyen Habitats	To Ngoc Van Habitats	
	26(12M,14F)	31(16M, 15F) 3 (3M,0F)	60(31M,29F)

T(F = Female, M = Male)

spatial inequality and urban informality, showing that variations in caged-balcony construction reflect systematic urban conditions rather than isolated local idiosyncrasies.

Data collection

The study adopts a qualitative design and triangulates multiple sources to build a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Fieldwork was conducted over 12 months between March 2024 and February 2025. Initial site reconnaissance and observational mapping were carried out between March and May 2024, followed by in-depth interviews and detailed photographic documentation from June to October 2024. Supplementary observations, follow-up conversations, and document review were completed between November 2024 and February 2025. This extended engagement enabled iterative refinement of interview themes and triangulation between observational and interview-based evidence.

Field observation

At both sites, we conducted on-site surveys and kept detailed notes on the physical environment, housing typologies, and in-situ caged-balcony extensions. Observations included photography, basic measurements of added structures, and documentation of the surrounding urban context. Direct observation clarified the architectural morphology of caged balconies and their interactions with adjacent public and semi-public spaces.

Semi-structured interviews with residents

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 60 residents living in Ngo Quyen Apartment and along the To Ngoc Van canal-side settlement, including 26 participants from the formal apartment

compound, 31 from the canal-side area, and three local key informants familiar with housing management and neighborhood conditions. Interviews were carried out in participants' homes and focused on residents' motives, experiences, and perceptions regarding the construction and use of caged balconies Table 2. A purposeful, site-based sampling strategy was adopted to capture diversity in household structure, tenure status, and spatial practices rather than to achieve statistical representativeness. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adult residents aged 18 years or older who either owned or rented dwellings with caged balconies or had direct experience living adjacent to such extensions. Efforts were made to ensure gender balance, with 31 men and 29 women, and to include a range of age groups and livelihood conditions. The interview guide covered key themes, including reasons for extending domestic space, construction processes and costs, interactions with regulatory authorities, and perceived impacts on household life and the surrounding community. Together, these interviews provide rich qualitative evidence on the social drivers and lived implications of caged-balcony construction across both formal and informal urban contexts.

Housing and balcony typology analysis

In parallel with interviews, we classified and analyzed the forms of caged balconies at each site. Based on observation and collected measurements, extension modules were grouped by size, material, and position. Comparing the typologies of caged balconies between the apartment compound and the canal-side settlement helps assess whether differences in spatial configuration and urban management lead to distinct forms and scales of extension. We also reviewed the underlying housing structures (e.g.,

apartment layouts versus self-built canal-side houses) to situate the need for expansion.

Secondary documents

We analyzed secondary sources to contextualize the field data: (1) Dalat's urban planning files and building regulations (to assess the legal framework for extensions and housing construction); (2) population statistics and local government reports on the two study areas (to understand demographics, income, and settlement histories); and (3) prior studies and academic literature on informal housing and caged balconies in Vietnam. This document analysis cross-checks field findings against policy and theory and situates results within broader scholarship on Vietnamese urban planning and development.

Analytic strategy

All qualitative materials, including interview transcripts, observation notes, documents, and photographic annotations, were analyzed using a combined thematic and content analysis approach. Interviews were fully transcribed and coded manually through iterative reading and the systematic organization of data into thematic clusters, rather than through automated software. This manual process enabled close engagement with residents' narratives and attention to the contextual specificity of spatial practices. The analysis followed three interrelated stages. (i) Open coding was conducted to identify recurring themes related to residents' motives and purposes for constructing caged balconies, as well as their physical forms and materials, interactions with authorities and legality, and perceived social and spatial consequences. (ii) Axial coding was used to link these themes across micro (household), meso (neighborhood), and macro (policy and market) scales, allowing patterns to be situated within broader urban conditions. (iii) Interpretive synthesis was undertaken to connect the empirical themes to the theoretical constructs of urban informality, spatial justice, and aesthetic governance. Following within-site analysis, a systematic cross-case comparison was undertaken between Ngo Quyen Apartment and the To Ngoc Van canal-side settlement. This comparative step foregrounded similarities and differences in rationales, construction pathways, and regulatory experiences, thereby clarifying how governance context, infrastructure conditions, and socio-economic inequality shape the production

and interpretation of caged balconies. The resulting core patterns and themes form the empirical foundation for interpretation presented in the Results and Discussion sections.

Ethical considerations

The research adheres to established ethical principles in urban social research, especially when working with vulnerable communities in informal settings. Informed consent was obtained before each interview after participants were briefed on the study's aims. Personally identifiable information is protected; participant names and precise addresses are not reported, ensuring anonymity. Fieldwork was conducted with respect and attentiveness, avoiding judgment of living conditions or decisions to build caged balconies. The study is context-sensitive: recognizing that caged-balcony extensions are tied to livelihoods and urgent needs, interviews were conducted in a friendly manner and avoided questions that might raise concern. Findings are presented in aggregate, emphasizing the phenomenon rather than attributing responsibility to individuals to protect informants and avoid negative impacts on the communities studied. Complementing these ethical safeguards, the study also reflects critically on researcher positionality as an integral part of ethical practice. The researcher's training in urban planning and architecture, together with prior professional engagement in Vietnamese planning and design discourse, enables sensitivity to aesthetic regulations and planning logics shaping residents' environments. At the same time, this background carries the risk of privileging formal design norms over everyday spatial practices. To address this concern, the analysis consistently foregrounds residents' narratives and lived experiences, rather than applying normative judgments of form or appearance. Throughout fieldwork and interpretation, reflexive attention was paid to how concepts such as "ugliness," "order," and "visual disruption" are socially constructed and institutionally embedded, rather than treated as neutral descriptors. Interpretations of aesthetic governance were therefore grounded in participants' accounts and triangulated with observed regulatory practices, strengthening ethical integrity and reducing the risk of imposing external evaluative frameworks on residents' spatial adaptations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Form, function, and spatial effects of caged balconies

The survey and field observations reveal clear differences in caged balconies between Ngo Quyen Apartment and the canal-side settlement along To Ngoc Van. In this study, “caged balconies” refer to metal-grill enclosures attached outside balconies or windows, commonly used to expand usable floor area. Their scale, materials, placement, and everyday functions vary markedly across the two sites.

At Ngo Quyen Apartment, most caged balconies are small, typically about 1–2 m², projecting roughly 1 m from the facade. These additions are mainly used for drying clothes, potted plants, or small storage (Fig. 5). The extension has no independent floor support; the frame is drilled and anchored into the building’s structural elements. By contrast, in the To Ngoc Van canal-side area, extensions are substantially larger. Many structures reach 4–6 m² and are used for functions such as a cooking corner or auxiliary sleeping area. This necessity is reflected in residents’ own accounts. As one canal-side resident explained: “The house is too small for five people. If we don’t extend outward, there is nowhere to cook or sleep. We know it looks messy, but we have no other choice.” (Fig. 6). In some Vietnamese urban housing estates, similar extensions have been reported to add up to 12 m² of usable space. Construction characteristics also differ. At Ngo Quyen, caged balconies are comparatively uniform and sturdy, typically built with welded steel frames anchored to the structure, anti-rust coating, and metal mesh; some households add glass or acrylic panels for rain protection. Styles and colors are relatively consistent. In To Ngoc Van, caged balconies frequently use makeshift and salvaged materials, including corrugated sheets, timber boards, wire mesh, and recycled plastics. Craft quality varies and structures often appear fragile. Comparable conditions in canal-side settlements include patched shelters using rusted metal or cardboard, propped on limited supports over weak ground. Placement and encroachment patterns likewise diverge. At Ngo Quyen, caged balconies generally remain within the original balcony footprint, rarely extending beyond the building line. They cluster on mid and upper floors and have limited impacts on shared space. In To Ngoc Van, many additions protrude into alleys or shared passageways, narrowing circulation. In some cases, residents stack additions onto neighboring roofs, producing patchwork

agglomerations above street level. Similar conditions have been observed where inter-block voids are filled and stacked cages reduce space quality and emergency egress. The housing context reported for each site also differs. Ngo Quyen is a state-built apartment compound with standardized layouts; unit sizes of roughly 50–65 m² generally cover basic family needs. Extensions, when present, serve auxiliary functions. By contrast, the canal-side settlement comprises self-built, space-constrained houses, often only a few tens of square meters, hosting larger households and lacking enclosed amenities.

Regulation, oversight, stigma, and safety-related observations

Across both sites, residents link caged-balcony extensions to limited interior space and efforts to improve everyday living conditions. In the To Ngoc Van canal-side settlement, multi-member households extend space by adding lean-to attics, canopies, or steel-mesh frames for drying and storage. The choice of low-cost, easy-to-install materials reflects economic constraints. Motivation is also associated with tenure: owner-occupiers, about two-thirds of households, are more proactive in modifying their homes, while renters rarely invest in extensions. In Ngo Quyen Apartment, where unit layouts are standardized and living conditions are comparatively stable, motivations are mainly auxiliary rather than adding rooms. Oversight and enforcement are reported to differ by site. At Ngo Quyen, the presence of building management and peer attention is associated with self-limited extensions; several residents stated that oversized additions would prompt reminders or objections from neighbors. One resident shared: “Small cages are acceptable here, but if they protrude too much, neighbors will complain or the management will say that they undermine the building’s image”. At To Ngoc Van, the absence of centralized management and routine oversight is associated with more extensive and varied construction, including encroachment into alleys and common space. In regulatory terms, unauthorized extensions are classified as violations, but enforcement varies. Compact additions at Ngo Quyen are reported as more often tolerated when perceived as temporary or limited in structural impact. At To Ngoc Van, despite more serious violations, inspections and sanctions are reported as infrequent, and some households described small fines as a cost



Fig. 5: Current functional use of caged balconies at Ngo Quyen Apartment Building



Fig. 6: Current functional use of caged balconies at housing along To Ngoc Van Canal

Table 3: Micro-Meso-Macro drivers of caged balcony formation and governance

Analytical Level	Key Factors	Manifestation in Ngo Quyen Apartment	Manifestation in To Ngoc Van Canal-side Area
Micro (Household)	Household size, tenure, daily needs	Auxiliary use (drying, storage); small-scale cages	Essential use (cooking, sleeping); large extensions
Meso (Neighborhood)	Infrastructure, management, oversight	Stable infrastructure; informal peer regulation	Narrow alleys; weak oversight; spatial encroachment
Macro (Policy/Market)	Housing supply, planning priorities, aesthetics	Partial tolerance under image control	Informality normalized under neglect and stigma

of doing construction. Socially, caged balconies are frequently described as “ugly” and “damaging to urban image,” particularly in a tourist city like Dalat. Along the canal, extensions are also linked to stereotypes of poverty and non-modernity. One local official stated: “Caged balconies along the canal look messy, both hazardous and harmful to the image of a tourist city like Dalat.” Safety-related concerns are also noted for improvised canal-side extensions, including risks of structural failure, electrical fires from ad hoc wiring, and reduced emergency access in narrowed circulation spaces.

Discussion

Interpreting divergence: housing constraints and multi-level drivers

The divergence between Ngo Quyen and To Ngoc Van can be interpreted through differences in housing constraints and governance conditions. In Ngo Quyen, the state-built apartment typology and standardized unit sizes (roughly 50 to 65 m²) support extensions that remain supplementary rather than essential. In the canal-side settlement, more severe space constraints and limited enclosed amenities correspond to larger and more intensive extensions that function as necessary living space. In low-income urban contexts where per-capita dwelling space can be extremely limited, incremental additions often become an everyday survival strategy rather than an optional improvement (Neuwirth, 2016). The drivers of extension can be synthesized across three levels. At the household level, limited floor area, multi-generational composition, tenure status, and functional needs shape extension practices. At the community or estate level, local infrastructure and oversight conditions influence whether extensions remain contained or become spatially intrusive. At the institutional level, broader market and policy conditions affect residents’ capacity to access formal housing

options and thereby increase reliance on self-provisioned enlargement. This multi-scalar reading aligns with the argument that informality is structured by planning and state power, rather than existing outside it (Roy, 2005). To clarify this synthesis, the following table summarizes the key drivers of caged-balcony formation at the household, neighborhood, and policy - market levels, and compares how these factors manifest differently in Ngo Quyen Apartment and the To Ngoc Van canal-side settlement. The table provides a structured overview of how housing constraints and governance conditions jointly shape divergent extension practices across the two sites.

Urban Aesthetic Justice (UAI) as an interpretive framework

UAI is proposed as an interpretive framework to explain how everyday housing adaptations are evaluated and governed in heritage-linked tourist cities Fig. 7. The framework integrates four components: everyday spatial practice, aesthetic governance, politics of visibility, and spatial legitimacy Fig. 8. Everyday spatial practice highlights routine, small-scale adaptations through which residents secure livability under constraint, consistent with everyday urbanism’s attention to ordinary practices as constitutive of urban life (Chase et al., 1999). Aesthetic governance captures regulatory regimes in which visual order, heritage imagery, and tourism branding shape the evaluation of space alongside legality, consistent with arguments on rule through aesthetic norms and image-making (Ghertner, 2015). Politics of visibility specifies how tolerance, enforcement, and stigma vary according to visual prominence and symbolic meaning, producing differentiated treatment of similar practices across urban space (Ghertner, 2015). Spatial legitimacy refers to the socially and institutionally mediated recognition of residents’ rights to occupy, modify, and represent space, extending spatial justice discussions

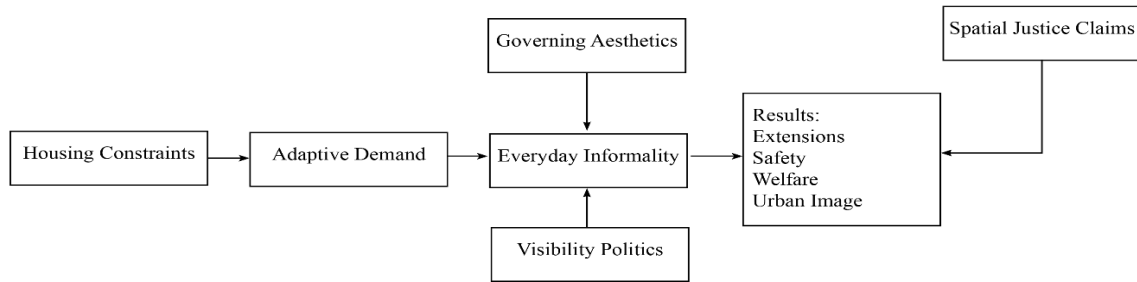


Fig. 7: Urban visual justice framework

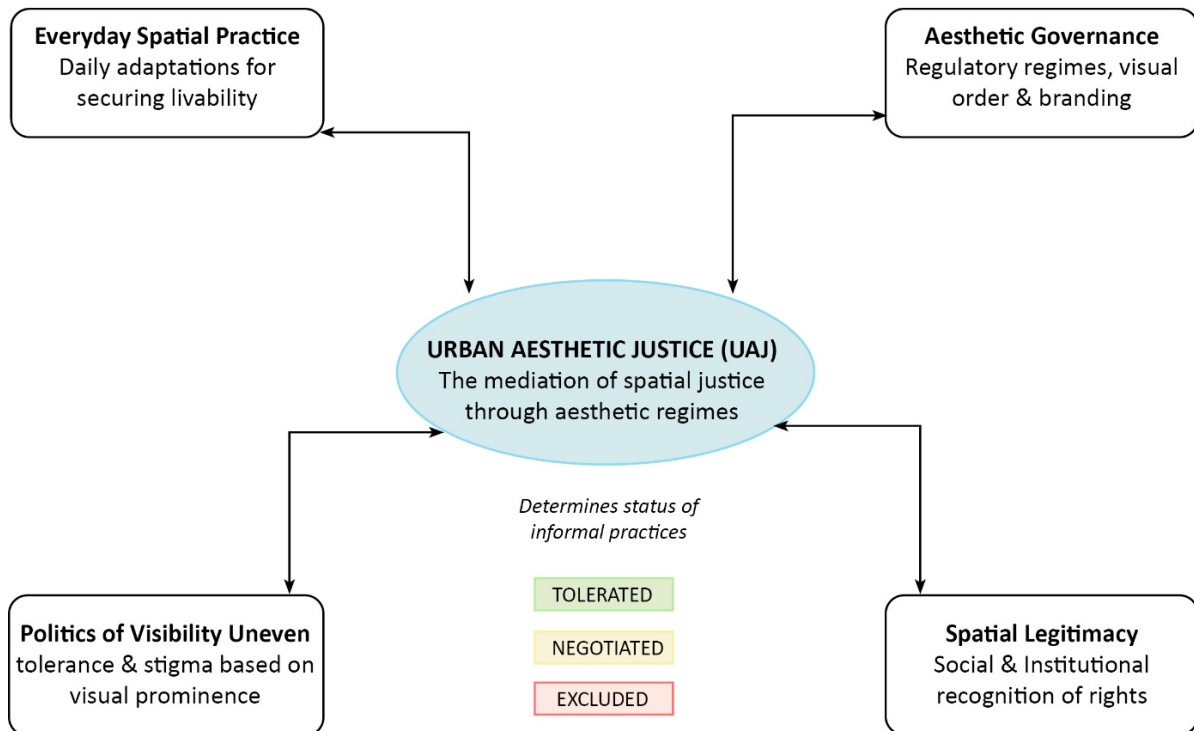


Fig. 8: UAJ components: practice, aesthetic governance, visibility, legitimacy

that emphasize rights to produce and use space (Soja, 2009). UAJ also clarifies how representational order becomes part of the justice question in tourism-oriented heritage settings. In this sense, the framework is compatible with Lefebvre's emphasis on the right to difference as a claim to lived heterogeneity against homogenizing spatial orders (Lefebvre, 2014), and with Jacobs' emphasis on everyday urban life as the basis of how cities function and remain legitimate in practice (Jacobs, 1961). Within this framing, caged balconies can be read not only as functional extensions but also as resident-produced differences that

conflict with curated facade regimes in branded tourist cities.

UAJ differs from existing frameworks such as Urban Visibility and Aesthetic Citizenship in both analytical focus and normative orientation. Studies of urban visibility primarily examine how cities are seen, represented, and governed through visual regimes, emphasizing spectacle, imagery, and perception as instruments of power. Aesthetic citizenship, in turn, focuses on how residents gain recognition or belonging through conformity to dominant aesthetic norms, often highlighting inclusion through visual participa-

tion or performance. By contrast, UAJ foregrounds questions of justice rather than representation, emphasizing how aesthetic regimes actively distribute spatial legitimacy, risk, and material opportunity. Rather than asking who is visible or recognized, UAJ asks whose everyday spatial practices are tolerated, negotiated, or excluded under aesthetic governance, particularly in contexts of housing scarcity. In this sense, UAJ reframes aesthetics not merely as a symbolic or cultural register, but as a governing mechanism that produces spatial inequality, especially in tourism-oriented and heritage-linked cities.

Policy contradictions, regional parallels, and broader applicability

The Da Lat case can be situated within broader contradictions between policy aspirations, heritage branding, and everyday housing needs. Vietnam's urban policy promotes modern and sustainable development goals, yet reports and commentaries indicate persistent constraints in affordable housing supply, contributing to households' reliance on self-provisioned space-making (Hùng, 2021; Xuan, 2024). In Da Lat, strict place branding narratives and aesthetic regulation are widely discussed as shaping planning priorities, while integrated social housing solutions remain limited (Nguyen & Vo, 2025). This tension is particularly notable given that the national programme has formally assigned provincial completion targets for social housing for 2025 and subsequent years through 2030 (Decision No. 444/QĐ TTg, 2025). At the provincial level, Lam Dong established a Social Housing Development Steering Committee and set an implementation goal of more than 2,000 social housing units for 2025 to 2030, while also reporting multiple planned land sites for social housing but a still limited number of approved projects at the time of reporting (Nguyen & Vo, 2025). Uneven implementation further blurs the boundary between legal and illegal practices, echoing findings that enforcement can be selective and exceptionalized under pressure from low-income and migrant housing demand (Seo et al., 2022; Tinh & Kamalipour, 2024). These interlocking contradictions are summarized in Figure 9. This pattern aligns with Roy's conceptualization of informality as a mode of regulation, where rules are selectively applied, suspended, or reworked to allocate legitimacy (Roy, 2005). In tourism-oriented contexts, this selectivity often intersects with aesthetic gover-

nance, where visual conformity becomes a practical criterion shaping what is tolerated in public view (Ghertner, 2015). Comparable dynamics are documented across Southeast Asian cities where informality is managed through negotiated tolerance, image-led priorities, and uneven clearance or resettlement interventions. In Bangkok, street vending has been regulated through periodic clearance campaigns and negotiated rules justified through order and streetscape concerns (Batréau & Bonnet, 2016). In Metro Manila, eviction and resettlement along waterways have been framed through risk and safety governance that restructures legitimacy and displacement (Alvarez & Cardenas, 2019). In Jakarta, river normalization and flood control agendas have intersected with global city aspirations, contributing to differentiated legitimacy and displacement along riverscapes (Dovey et al., 2019). Beyond caged balconies, UAJ is intended to apply to other informal practices governed through aesthetic regimes, including rooftop extensions, street vending, and facade greening. Across these cases, spatial legitimacy is often shaped through aesthetic judgment and visibility, not only through uniformly applied legal criteria (Ghertner, 2015; Roy, 2005). Building on these regional precedents, Da Lat can draw practical lessons from community upgrading and incremental formalization approaches. Bangkok's Baan Mankong programme demonstrates how city-supported, community-led upgrading can improve infrastructure and housing conditions while reducing displacement through collective organization and tenure-related arrangements (Boonyaban-cha, 2005). Jakarta's long-running kampung improvement and more recent kampung-oriented initiatives similarly illustrate incremental service upgrading and negotiated recognition as alternatives to clearance, particularly in river-adjacent settlements (Bank, 1995; CODI, 2020). These experiences suggest that, for canal-side areas in Da Lat, pairing minimum safety and infrastructure standards with mechanisms that enable in situ upgrading and community participation may be more effective than purely aesthetic restriction or episodic enforcement.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the phenomenon of caged balconies in Da Lat to illuminate how informal spatial extensions articulate the tension between residents' everyday survival needs and the

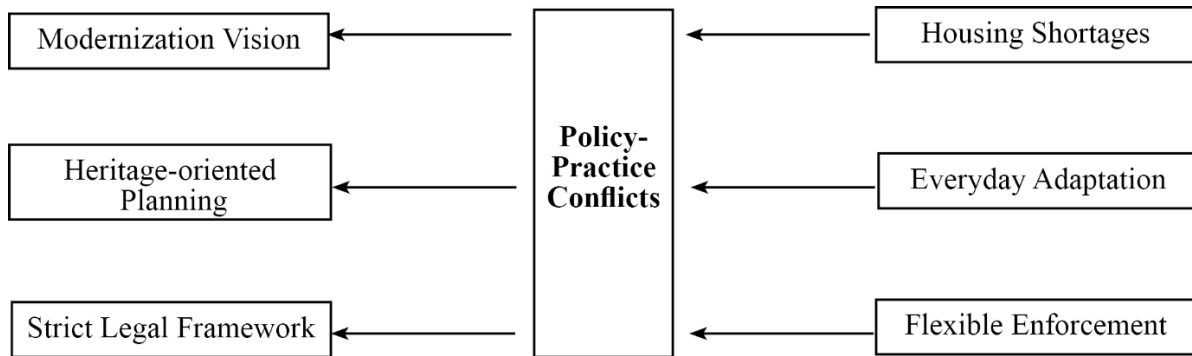


Fig. 9: Conflicts in housing policy and urban planning in Da Lat

aesthetic governance of a heritage-linked tourist city. Through a comparative analysis of Ngo Quyen Apartment and the To Ngoc Van canal-side settlement, the research demonstrates that caged balconies are not ad hoc architectural fixes but socio-spatial indicators of urban inequality, housing policy limitations, and uneven planning inclusion. The contrast between a formally managed residential environment and a precarious canal-side settlement reveals how household economics, infrastructure provision, and governance regimes shape both the form and persistence of informal extensions. More broadly, the findings expose a two-tier urban condition in which a carefully staged city for visitors coexists with an everyday city where residents improvise to secure livability. Empirically, the study provides systematic evidence of differentiated informality. In formal housing compounds, caged balconies tend to be compact and auxiliary in function, while in canal-side settlements they are larger, multifunctional, and integral to daily survival. This contrast offers an evidence-based benchmark for reinterpreting what is often labeled as visual disorder as an unevenly distributed necessity rather than individual noncompliance. These findings challenge dominant regulatory approaches that frame informality primarily as a technical or aesthetic violation. Conceptually, the paper advances the Urban Aesthetic Justice framework, which extends spatial justice debates by demonstrating that legality alone cannot explain spatial legitimacy in tourism-oriented cities. Instead, visibility and aesthetic conformity operate as de facto regulatory criteria through which tolerance, enforcement, and stigma are selectively ap-

plied. By foregrounding the politics of visibility, the framework deepens understandings of informality and everyday urbanism, emphasizing unequal rights to difference, recognition, and spatial presence. While developed through the case of caged balconies, the framework is transferable to other informal practices such as rooftop extensions, street vending, and facade interventions that are governed through image-making in heritage contexts. From a policy perspective, the study underscores the need for differentiated responses that combine immediate risk reduction with long-term structural reform. Short-term actions should focus on tiered regulations, minimum safety standards, participatory mediation, and targeted infrastructure upgrades, particularly in high-risk informal areas. Long-term strategies must expand affordable housing supply, integrate livelihood protection into upgrading programs, institutionalize participatory planning, and adopt urban design codes that balance heritage conservation with the right to everyday inhabitation. The study is not without limitations. Its empirical scope is confined to two illustrative sites and relies primarily on qualitative evidence. Future research should expand spatial coverage, incorporate quantitative and environmental analyses, and further test the applicability of Urban Aesthetic Justice across diverse heritage-linked cities.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

D. T. Do developed the conceptual framework and research methodology for the study. T.T. Truong, X.M. Ho, and Q.P. Phan performed the formal analysis. T. T. Truong and X. M. Ho prepared the original draft of

the manuscript. T.T. Truong, Q. P. Phan, and D.T. Do reviewed, revised, and edited the manuscript, and also contributed to the visualization of the research findings. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article. All ethical principles in research, including informed consent, data integrity, and originality of the work, have been strictly adhered to.

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ABBREVIATIONS (NOMENCLATURE)

m^2	Square meter
UAJ	Urban Aesthetic Justice

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