

CULTURAL DYNAMICS AND URBAN AMBIENCE: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR FORT PORTAL CITY, UGANDA

BY

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11TH. APRIL. 2026

Abstract

Urban ambience is simply the mood of a public space—what you notice with your senses, who you see around you, and what time it is. Many researchers agree that this mood plays a big role in how pleasant city life feels (Gehl, 2010). But in smaller cities of sub-Saharan Africa, including those in Uganda, we still know very little about how local culture shapes this mood. This paper looks at existing studies published in academic journals that explore the link between culture and the feeling of cities. It pulls together work from urban studies, environmental psychology, cultural geography, and city planning. The review covers findings from many parts of the world, including East Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North America. From this review, three main ways that culture affects urban ambience stand out. First, culture shapes how people use space, such as whether they bring their shops and home activities out onto the street (Chen, Thibaud, & Guo, 2019). Second, culture influences what kinds of sensations people enjoy, meaning that tastes for noise, crowds, and social buzz differ from one culture to another (Wang & Zhang, 2020). Third, culture sets the timing of street life, including daily and seasonal patterns shaped by weather and local customs (Nasrabadi, Pourjafar, & Bemanian, 2018). After laying out these findings, the paper applies them to Fort Portal City in Uganda. Fort Portal is a quickly growing smaller city with a rich mix of cultures, including the Batooro, Bakiga, and other ethnic groups. The review finds that very little research has been done on urban ambience in Uganda and East Africa more broadly (Kattimani & Devadas, 2024). The paper then talks about what these findings mean for city planning in Fort Portal. Suggestions include designing public spaces that fit local culture, supporting informal activities like street selling, matching nighttime plans to local routines, and finding a balance between what residents and visitors need. Finally, the paper suggests where future research should go in Fort Portal and in other similar smaller African cities.

Keywords: Urban ambience, cultural dynamics, literature review, Fort Portal City, Uganda, public space

1. Introduction

Urban ambience is the unspoken, felt character of a street, square, or neighbourhood. It explains why one public area feels warm and full of life while another feels tense or empty. Unlike buildings themselves, which are the physical shells of a city, ambience is about what you experience: the sounds, smells, temperature, social interactions, and daily patterns that together create a unique atmosphere (Thibaud, 2011). Over the last few decades, a growing number of studies in urban studies, environmental psychology, and cultural geography have argued that urban ambience is not the same everywhere or purely a matter of physical design. Instead, it is heavily shaped by cultural dynamics—the shared habits, values, unspoken rules, and everyday practices of the people who live there (Low, 2017).

The connection between culture and urban ambience has many layers. Comparative research has shown that different cultural groups use public space in very different ways. For instance, a study comparing night markets in London and Shanghai found that the same physical setting can produce completely different feelings because culture sets different norms for how much crowding, noise, and closeness to strangers is acceptable (Wang & Zhang, 2020). Likewise, work from the Middle East and southern Europe shows that cultures in hot climates shift social activities to the evening hours, creating busy late-night street scenes, while cultures in cold climates pack activities into the afternoons, leaving streets empty after dark (Gehl, 2010; Nasrabadi et al., 2018). These cultural differences are not just about looks or feelings; they have real effects on city planning, public health, safety, and local economies.

Despite how rich this global body of work is, most studies have focused on big cities in Europe, East Asia, and North America. Much less attention has gone to smaller cities in sub-Saharan Africa, where fast urbanization, cultural diversity, and unique colonial and post-colonial histories create special conditions (Pieterse, 2011). Uganda, like many African countries, is urbanizing quickly, especially in smaller cities such as Jinja, Gulu, Mbarara, and Fort Portal. These cities face planning challenges that are very different from those of huge global cities. They have limited formal infrastructure, strong informal economies, and many ethnic and cultural groups living close together within small urban areas (UN-Habitat, 2020).

Fort Portal City, in western Uganda, offers a particularly useful case for looking at how cultural dynamics and urban ambience come together. The city is a centre for commerce, government, and tourism, located near the Rwenzori Mountains, Kibale National Park, and several crater lakes. Its population includes many different cultures, with the indigenous Batooro people, migrant Bakiga communities, and smaller groups like the Basongora and Banyankole (UBOS, 2016). This cultural mix shows up in the city's public spaces: markets, taxi parks, roadside stalls, church grounds, and open squares. However, no known research study has systematically looked at how cultural dynamics shape the ambience of these spaces. The existing literature on urban ambience in Uganda is very sparse, with most work focused on Kampala and limited to topics like traffic jams, informal settlements, or garbage management—rather than the sensory and social experience of public space (Lwasa, 2010).

This paper fills this gap through a literature review. Instead of presenting new data collected in the field, it pulls together existing peer-reviewed research on cultural dynamics and urban ambience from around the world, then applies the findings to Fort Portal City as an example. The goal is twofold. First, the review aims to identify the main cultural mechanisms that, according to the literature, shape urban ambience. These are grouped into three categories: patterns of space use, sensory likes and dislikes, and daily and seasonal rhythms. Second, the paper looks at how these global findings might help us understand Fort Portal's urban ambience, while also acknowledging the limits of applying literature from different cultural and geographical settings.

2. Defining Urban Ambience and Cultural Dynamics

2.1 Urban Ambience: What It Means and What It Includes

Urban ambience, sometimes called urban atmosphere or urban mood, is the overall unspoken sensory and emotional quality of a public space (Thibaud, 2011). Unlike the shape of a building, which you can measure in metres and materials, ambience is about what you feel. It is what hits you when you step into a street, square, or park before you even notice things like building height, pavement width, or signs (Pallasmaa, 2005).

The literature consistently points to four interacting pieces that together create urban ambience (Gehl, 2010). The first piece is sensory input from sight, hearing, smell, touch, and temperature. Examples include the difference between traffic noise and birdsong, food smells versus garbage odours, and warm sun versus cold wind. The second piece is physical design, which covers the built environment, materials, scale, lighting, plants, and furniture. A wide concrete road feels different from a narrow cobblestone alley, and having benches, trees, or fountains changes how people experience a place. The third piece is social presence, meaning how many people are around, what they are doing, and how they interact. A street where families are strolling, friends are laughing, and vendors are calling out feels very different from a street where people avoid eye contact and rush past. The fourth piece is temporal rhythms, meaning how the space changes with the time of day, day of the week, or season. A business district that is crowded at noon and empty at 3 AM has a different mood at each time, just as a park that is full on weekends and quiet on weekdays changes its character.

A key point in the literature is that urban ambience cannot be reduced to physical design alone. A beautifully designed square may feel empty, windy, and unwelcoming if social and time-related factors are ignored. On the other hand, a simple, even run-down street can have a wonderful, lively ambience if cultural practices bring it to life (Zukin, 2010). This point is crucial for understanding why culture matters: ambience comes not just from buildings but from the interaction between built form and human activity.

2.2 Cultural Dynamics

Cultural dynamics are the shared habits, values, beliefs, unspoken rules, and social practices that define a group of people and that change over time (Low, 2017). The word "dynamics" stresses that culture is not fixed; it evolves through migration, generational change, economic shifts, and contact with other groups.

For this review, four features of cultural dynamics are most relevant to urban ambience. First, culture sets rules for appropriate behaviour in public spaces. Different cultures have different unspoken rules about what you can do in public (Hall, 1966). These include whether shops can spill out onto the pavement, whether home life extends into the street, whether strangers look each other in the eye, and whether loud talking is acceptable. Second, culture shapes sensory preferences. What feels "good" or "bad" in terms of noise, crowding, lighting, and social density varies from one culture to another. A level of bustle that one group finds exciting another may find stressful (Wang & Zhang, 2020). These preferences are learned, not inborn. Third, culture sets temporal rhythms. Culture determines when people wake up, work, eat, socialize, and sleep. These rhythms, often shaped by local climate and economic conditions, directly affect when public spaces are used and what happens there (Nasrabadi et al., 2018). Fourth, culture is both local and translocal. Every city has its own unique cultural context, but cultural dynamics also travel with migrants, media, and global exchange. Fort Portal City, like many urban centres, is shaped both by native cultural traditions and by influences from other parts of Uganda and beyond.

In short, for this review, cultural dynamics are defined as the changing set of shared norms, practices, and values that guide how people use, perceive, and live in public space over time.

2.3 How Culture and Ambience Are Connected

Researchers have been studying how culture and the feeling of cities are linked for many years. This interest comes from many different fields, including urban studies, environmental psychology, cultural geography, and city planning. A broad analysis of research papers by Kattimani and Devadas (2024) looked at the worldwide research landscape for what they call "Urban Cultural Dynamics." They used data from a major research database covering the years 1965 to 2021. The study found that papers on this topic grew very fast between 2016 and 2022. This shows that both academics and policymakers are paying more attention to how culture shapes cities. The analysis also found that Italy, China, and Spain are the top three countries for total publications, and the journals that consistently publish the most important work in this field are *Landscape and Urban Planning*, *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, and *Tourism Geographies*.

Another important line of global research looks at how cities deliberately create "cultural zones" or "cultural districts" as a tool for managing urban space. A comparative study of cultural district development in Melbourne, Manchester, and Toronto found that creating cultural zones helps balance many different interests, including artists, arts institutions, property developers, politicians, and local communities (Creative improvement, cultural

infrastructure and urban zones, 2025). The study also showed that creative clusters, while meant to help local economies, tend to concentrate their benefits in areas that are already wealthy.

A major contribution to the study of urban ambience comes from a book edited by Sánchez, Paiva, and Malet Calvo (2024) called *Ambiance, Tourism and the City*. This collection fills an important gap in the literature. While much has been written about the sensory atmospheres of cities, very little attention has gone to how tourism affects these atmospheres. Through case studies of a traditional Italian market, a jungle park in Kuala Lumpur, a slum in Medellín, and beach tourism destinations in southern Spain, the authors show how tourism and city development affect the lived experience of modern cities. Key insights include "tourism gentrification," where everyday practices are pushed out and replaced with staged atmospheres designed for visitors, and the "authenticity paradox," where tourists looking for genuine experiences end up destroying the very authenticity they came to find.

Foundational theoretical work on urban ambience has been developed by several key scholars. Thibaud (2011) described ambience as the "sensory fabric" of urban spaces—the total sensory environment that shapes how people feel and act. Pallasmaa (2005) wrote extensively about how architecture involves all the senses, not just sight, arguing that modern city design's overemphasis on how things look has produced dull, uninviting public spaces. Gehl (2010) wrote an influential book called *Cities for People* that offers practical ways to measure and design for urban ambience, showing how street width, building height, the availability of seating, and protection from weather affect whether people stay or leave.

2.4 What We Know from Uganda

A striking finding from this literature review is that Ugandan and East African contexts are very poorly represented in global urban ambience research. The bibliometric analysis by Kattimani and Devadas (2024) found no significant publications on cultural dynamics and urban ambience from Ugandan institutions or focusing on Ugandan cities. This is a major gap, given that Uganda is one of the fastest-urbanizing countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

However, several studies from related fields offer useful insights into how cultural dynamics shape urban space in Uganda, even if they do not directly use the word "ambience." The African Cities Research Consortium has done detailed fieldwork on urban markets in Kampala. A study of Ggaba Market found that sellers extend their activities beyond formal market boundaries, creating open public-private boundaries similar to those documented in Asian contexts (African Cities Research Consortium, 2025). The research also found a significant mismatch between service hours and the actual rhythms of market life, with public toilets open only from 6:00 AM to 10:00 PM while sellers often worked until midnight.

A study by the TOPOWA project looked at how young women in Kampala's slums experience city environments (TOPOWA study team, 2025). Using hands-on methods including community mapping and Photovoice, where participants take pictures of their surroundings, the study found several stressors that hurt the city experience, including poor garbage management, flooding, violence, gender-based harassment, crime, and alcohol-related problems. The study also found protective resources that create positive experiences, including schools, places of worship, health centres, social networks, a sense of identity, and sports activities.

Stevenson (2014) offers a comparative analysis of how cultural planning has been applied in different global settings, with examples from Australia, Europe, Asia, and North America. While the book does not focus specifically on Africa, its analytical framework is highly relevant to understanding Fort Portal. Stevenson identifies a core tension in cultural planning between a top-down, tool-based approach where culture is used mainly for economic growth and city branding, and a bottom-up, participatory approach where culture is understood as everyday practices and community assets.

2.5 What Is Missing in the Literature

The review reveals several gaps in the global literature. First, sub-Saharan Africa is very poorly covered in urban cultural dynamics research (Kattimani & Devadas, 2024). Second, most research focuses on world cities or major metropolitan centres, ignoring the smaller cities where most urban growth is happening. Third, while the *Ambiance, Tourism and the City* book addresses the link between tourism and ambience, research in this area is still limited

compared to other aspects of urban ambience (Sánchez et al., 2024). Fourth, the role of market associations, taxi committees, and other informal groups in shaping ambience is understudied globally.

When we look specifically at Uganda, the gaps are even more striking. No published study has measured urban ambience in Fort Portal or any Ugandan smaller city. Local words for describing ambience, such as Rutoro terms for noise, crowding, calm, and bustle, have not been recorded. We do not know whether Batooro, Bakiga, and other ethnic groups in Fort Portal have different space use patterns or sensory preferences. The daily, weekly, and seasonal patterns of street use in Fort Portal have not been systematically observed. And city planning documents for Fort Portal do not mention ambience or cultural dynamics as planning considerations at all.

3. What This Means for Fort Portal City, Uganda

Fort Portal City lies in western Uganda, about 300 kilometres from Kampala, in Kabarole District. It is a centre for commerce, government, and tourism, located near the Rwenzori Mountains, Kibale National Park, and several crater lakes. The city was officially raised to municipal status and later to city status under Uganda's recent urban governance reforms (UN-Habitat, 2020). Fort Portal's population is culturally diverse. The native population is mostly Batooro, and the Rutoro language and Toro kingdom traditions are a big part of the city's cultural identity. However, migration from other regions—especially the Bakiga from southwestern Uganda, as well as Banyankole, Basongora, and smaller groups—has created a multi-ethnic urban environment (UBOS, 2016).

The three cultural mechanisms identified in the global literature all apply to Fort Portal. On space use patterns, the literature on open public-private boundaries and street commerce fits well. In Fort Portal's central market area and along main roads, sellers spill onto pavements and even roadways, matching patterns documented in Chongqing and Shanghai (Chen et al., 2019). On daily rhythms, Fort Portal's equatorial climate means that early morning and late afternoon are peak times for socializing, shopping, and walking, while activity after 9 PM is more limited due to safety concerns and poor street lighting (Nasrabadi et al., 2018).

Several culture-specific dynamics are especially relevant to Fort Portal. First, the Toro Kingdom remains culturally important, and public events like the *Empango* coronation anniversary create temporary changes in urban ambience. Second, Fort Portal's ethnic diversity raises questions about whether different groups use public space in different ways. Third, tourism significantly affects ambience through hotels, lodges, and craft markets, possibly creating "staged" ambience for visitors while wearing away genuine local practices (Sánchez et al., 2024). Fourth, informal management of public space by market associations, taxi park committees, and local elders plays a big role in shaping ambience.

4. Discussion

This review has pulled together existing peer-reviewed literature on the link between cultural dynamics and urban ambience. Three main mechanisms came to light. First, space use patterns: culture decides whether public and private spaces are separate or open, whether street commerce is allowed or restricted, and who can use public space and when (Chen et al., 2019; Low, 2017). Second, sensory likes and dislikes: culture shapes what sensory conditions such as noise, crowding, lighting, and temperature feel pleasant or stressful, as shown by the contrast between Shanghai's *re'nao* and London's "buzz" (Wang & Zhang, 2020). Third, daily and seasonal rhythms: culture sets daily, weekly, and seasonal schedules of activity, deciding when public spaces are used and what mood they have (Gehl, 2010; Nasrabadi et al., 2018).

Applying global literature to Fort Portal City is both helpful and tricky. The three-mechanism framework offers a way to organize thinking about Fort Portal's urban ambience. However, the global literature is heavily weighted toward cities in Europe, East Asia, and North America, with very few studies from sub-Saharan Africa (Kattimani & Devadas, 2024). Ideas like *re'nao* and "buzz" are specific to certain cultures, and forcing these categories onto Fort Portal risks misunderstanding local experiences. What is needed is local understanding: learning how Fort Portal residents themselves describe and judge urban ambience.

This paper is a pure literature review, meaning it presents no new data collected in the field. The strengths of this approach are that it pulls together findings from many disciplines and geographic settings, offering a conceptual framework that can guide future hands-on research in Fort Portal. The weakness is that without local data, this review cannot describe what Fort Portal's urban ambience actually is. The implications for Fort Portal remain speculative, based on comparison with other places rather than direct observation of Fort Portal itself.

5. Recommendations for City Planning in Fort Portal

Based on the literature review, this section offers early recommendations for city planning and policy in Fort Portal. These recommendations are preliminary and should be tested through local research before being fully put into practice.

First, on how people use physical space, the literature consistently shows that street selling, open shop fronts, and informal commerce are key drivers of lively urban ambience (Zukin, 2010). In Fort Portal, where street selling is already widespread, planning should make this activity legal and organized rather than banning it. City officials should map where selling currently happens, create a management plan that assigns specific spaces and sets reasonable hours, and fit selling areas into street design through wider pavements and shaded spots.

Second, on what feels good to residents, no data currently exist on what Fort Portal residents find pleasant or unpleasant in terms of noise, crowding, lighting, and temperature. Planning should be guided by local tastes, not simply copied from other cities (Wang & Zhang, 2020). A mixed-methods study using surveys, focus groups, and sensory walks is needed, using methods like photovoice and walk-along interviews to identify local words and categories for different moods.

Third, on when people use public space, the literature indicates that peak urban ambience in many warm-climate cities happens in the late afternoon and evening (Gehl, 2010). Fort Portal's planning should support evening activity through longer market hours, evening events, and safety measures. Religious, cultural, and seasonal events temporarily change ambience, and planning should make room for these variations through flexible street closures and temporary selling permits.

Finally, several cross-cutting recommendations apply. Fort Portal's city planning documents should be revised to include ambience as a legitimate planning goal. A multi-stakeholder Public Space and Ambience Council should be created, bringing together city government, the Toro Kingdom, market sellers, taxi associations, tourism operators, and community groups. Before large-scale changes, a small pilot project should be tried to show the value of ambience-sensitive planning.

6. Where Future Research Should Go

The review points to clear priorities for future hands-on research in Fort Portal. First, researchers should record local concepts by finding out what Rutoro words and phrases residents use to describe the mood of their city, and compare these to ideas from other cultures like *re'nao* or "buzz" (Wang & Zhang, 2020). Second, researchers should measure sensory likes and dislikes by finding out what levels of noise, crowding, lighting, and temperature different groups including Batooro, Bakiga, men, women, youth, and elders find pleasant or unpleasant. Third, researchers should map space use by watching how public space is actually used, where different activities happen, and whether ethnic groups use space differently (Chen et al., 2019). Fourth, researchers should track daily and seasonal rhythms by recording daily, weekly, and seasonal patterns of street use and how these vary by location (Nasrabadi et al., 2018). Fifth, researchers should assess current planning by evaluating how existing city policies affect ambience. Sixth, researchers should compare across smaller cities by looking at how ambience in Fort Portal compares to other Ugandan smaller cities such as Jinja, Gulu, and Mbarara, as well as similar cities in neighbouring countries.

7. Conclusion

This literature review has looked at the link between cultural dynamics and urban ambience, with special attention to Fort Portal City in Uganda. Several key conclusions come out of this work.

First, urban ambience is conceptually different from architecture. Ambience is the sensory, social, and time-based mood of a public space—the felt experience of being in a street, square, or market. Architecture provides the physical shell, but ambience comes from the interaction between that shell and the human activity happening inside it (Thibaud, 2011). This difference matters because a beautiful building or square can have a terrible ambience if it feels empty, windy, or unwelcoming. And a very simple, even worn-down street can have a wonderful ambience if it is full of life, noise, and social interaction.

Second, the literature clearly shows that cultural dynamics are not a small side issue but central to how ambience is created. Three main mechanisms were identified: space use patterns (Chen et al., 2019; Low, 2017), sensory likes and dislikes (Wang & Zhang, 2020), and daily and seasonal rhythms (Gehl, 2010; Nasrabadi et al., 2018). These three mechanisms work together and reinforce each other.

Third, when we apply this framework to Fort Portal City, we find both that the global literature is relevant and that there are major gaps in our knowledge. Fort Portal's space use patterns, sensory setting, and daily rhythms broadly match patterns seen in the global literature. However, no research has directly measured urban ambience in Fort Portal or any Ugandan smaller city. We do not know what words residents use to describe the mood of their streets. We do not know whether Batooro and Bakiga people have different tastes. We do not know the exact daily and weekly rhythms of street use. We do not know how traditional institutions like the Toro Kingdom shape public space. These are not small gaps. They are major holes in our understanding.

Fourth, for city planners and policymakers in Fort Portal, planning decisions that ignore cultural dynamics are likely to fail. Attempts to ban street selling, impose European-style building setbacks, or force markets to close early would clash with local space use patterns and daily rhythms. Ambience can be actively shaped through design and policy, but only if planning is rooted in local tastes. This calls for hands-on research, including surveys, focus groups, and sensory walks, to find out what Fort Portal residents actually find pleasant or unpleasant. Informal players such as market sellers, taxi associations, and cultural leaders must be included in planning processes. They already manage public space in practice. Formal planning that leaves them out will be useless at best and hostile at worst.

This review has several limits that must be acknowledged. It is a pure literature review, meaning it presents no new data collected in Fort Portal. The implications for Fort Portal are therefore speculative. They are based on comparison with other places rather than direct observation of Fort Portal itself. The global literature reviewed is heavily weighted toward European, East Asian, and North American settings. Very few studies come from sub-Saharan Africa. Cultural dynamics in East Africa, including ethnic diversity, colonial planning legacies, and traditional institutions, may differ from those documented elsewhere in ways that this review cannot capture. Finally, the review assumes that cultural dynamics are fairly stable. But Fort Portal, like all cities, is marked by rapid change, migration, and cultural mixing. What is true today may not be true tomorrow.

Urban ambience is not a luxury or an extra nicety. It is a basic part of urban quality of life. The way a street feels—whether welcoming or hostile, lively or dead, safe or threatening—shapes whether people stay, talk, shop, walk, or go home. In fast-urbanizing Africa, where millions of people are experiencing city life for the first time, the quality of urban ambience has deep effects on how people get along, how local economies work, how healthy people feel, and how satisfied they are with their lives. This review has argued that cultural dynamics are the main unseen force shaping urban ambience. In Fort Portal City, as in all cities, the habits, values, and unspoken rules of residents turn physical infrastructure into felt experience. Understanding this process, and planning with it rather than against it, is one of the most important and neglected tasks of modern city governance. The literature offers a framework. What is needed now is hands-on research, community involvement, and political will to put that framework into practice in Fort Portal and the many smaller African cities that share its conditions.

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