Research Article

FROM INNER ORDER TO URBAN ORDER: A BUDDHIST ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ETHICAL CITIES

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: Urban development across the Global South, particularly in Thailand, was increasingly shaped by economic optimization and administrative efficiency. However, these paradigms often overlook the ethical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of space. This paper aimed to propose a Buddhist ethical framework for urban design, drawing on the training principles of Sīla, Samādhi, and Paññā as an alternative model of civic development. The central objective was to reframe city-making as a moral process that emphasized the cultivation of inner ethical consciousness as foundational to spatial justice and civic sustainability.

Methodology: The study adopted a qualitative, interpretive-reflective case study approach. It drew on Buddhist hermeneutics and spatial ethics to analyze urban conditions in Chiang Mai through the lens of the Threefold Training. Data sources included textual analysis of the Handbook for Mankind, planning documents, and observational evidence from urban sites in Chiang Mai. To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation was applied by cross-checking textual interpretation, field observation, and literature. Urban phenomena such as traffic congestion, PM2.5 pollution, gentrification, and sacred space encroachment were interpreted as ethical dilemmas rather than technical issues. The methodology emphasized thick description and reflexive interpretation rather than empirical generalization.

Main Results: Findings revealed that Chiang Mai's urban transformation embodied multiple ethical tensions. The city's increasing congestion and air pollution violated the principle of Sīla by contributing to collective harm. Gentrification in Nimmanhaemin reflected craving, undermining social equity and mindfulness. In the old city area, sacred zones faced profanation due to tourism, diluting reverence and relational ethics. In response, spatial interventions, such as quiet lanes, breathable transit nodes with air-quality displays, heritage-sensitive zoning, and inter-being markets, were proposed to operationalize the Threefold Training. These interventions aimed to reduce harm (Sīla), stabilize attention and rhythm (Samādhi), and cultivate insight into interdependence and impermanence (Paññā). Such proposals demonstrated how Buddhist ethics could guide practical design choices in zoning, mobility, and community spaces.

Involvement to Buddhadhamma: This study contributed to the field of Applied Buddhism, with a focus on Buddhism and sustainable development and Buddhist innovations. Our research was deeply grounded in the principles of Traditional Buddhism, specifically the Threefold Training (Tisikkhā) as taught by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu in Handbook for Mankind. By drawing from the Buddhadhamma, the article provided a comprehensive moral ecology for evaluating urban spaces and reframing spatial decisions as ethical acts. We argued that urban design, often treated as a technical field, could be a form of Buddhist innovation. The research further connected with Buddhist anthropology by asserting that urban space was never value-neutral but a karmic field that either supported or obstructed inner liberation (Buddhism and the Development of Wisdom and Morality). This perspective demonstrated how applying Buddhist teachings could lead to the development of wisdom and morality for individuals and society. The Handbook for Mankind became a foundational text for a new method development that used urban design to cultivate ethical awareness and foster social and moral awakening.

Conclusions: This study contributed to ethical urbanism by proposing a Buddhist-informed design framework that bridged personal transformation and spatial justice. It argued that sustainable urban order had to be rooted in "Inner Order" a cultivated ethical awareness among planners, residents, and institutions. The findings highlighted potential contributions to urban policy, community engagement, and cross-cultural discussions of urban ethics. While the results were context-specific to Chiang Mai, the framework held broader implications for how spiritual traditions could inform urban ethics. Future research should explore comparative religious perspectives and integrate plural ontologies into the ethical urban design discourse. Ultimately, the city became not only a material infrastructure but a moral landscape, where every design act carried karmic weight and ethical potential.

Keywords: Inner Order, Urban Order, Buddhist, Anthropology, Ethical Cities

Introduction

As urban environments across Thailand and the broader Global South experienced intensified pressures of growth, inequality, and infrastructural transformation, prevailing paradigms of planning continued to prioritize administrative efficiency, spatial control, and economic optimization. While these priorities had shaped the development of civic infrastructures-such as government centers, transit hubs, and public spaces-they often lacked consideration for ethical values, cultural identity, and human well-being (Harvey, 2000); (Relph, 1976). Secular urban ethics frameworks typically focus on distributive justice, sustainability, and procedural fairness, yet they rarely integrate inner cultivation or spiritual awareness as foundational to spatial justice.

This gap was especially visible in Chiang Mai, where rapid urban growth had produced traffic congestion, gentrification, and the erosion of sacred spaces. Existing planning frameworks provided limited tools for addressing these challenges in ways that were both ethical and culturally resonant.

This article proposed an alternative framework of Buddhist Urbanism, which reframed the production of urban space not merely as a technical or bureaucratic task, but as an ethical undertaking rooted in inner awareness, compassion, and collective mindfulness. Drawing upon

the triadic disciplines (Sīla-Moral Conduct, Samādhi-Mental Concentration, Paññā-Wisdom), a foundational schema in Buddhist ethics, the study explored how urban design could be informed by a spiritual anthropology that centered moral development and cognitive clarity as prerequisites for just and sustainable civic environments (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996); (Harvey, 2000). Unlike most secular models, which emphasized external structures and rational planning, this approach situated ethical awareness within the individual and community as the starting point for sustainable urban order.

Rather than seeking control through visual order or functional zoning alone, this approach considered how spatial decisions could reinforce or undermine the conditions for ethical life. The article engaged in a reflective analysis that integrated Buddhist thought, spatial justice theory, and humanistic planning traditions to question dominant planning logics and foreground moral intentionality in design. In contrast to prior studies on ethical urbanism that emphasized legal frameworks or technocratic policies, this article advanced a Buddhist-informed model that treated the city as a karmic field, where spatial form both reflected and shaped inner ethical consciousness.

The central argument advanced was that urban order had to arise from inner order the cultivated moral awareness of planners, citizens, and institutions. Without such inner grounding, external structures risked becoming alienating, authoritarian, or spiritually hollow (Norberg-Schulz, 1979); (Sandercock, 2003). Accordingly, this study offered a Buddhist-informed urban ethic that aligned the transformation of space with the cultivation of self, proposing a design framework where built form, moral imagination, and spiritual presence converged.

Objective

This paper aimed to propose a Buddhist ethical framework for urban design, drawing on the training principles of Sīla, Samādhi, and Paññā as an alternative model of civic development. The central objective was to reframe city-making as a moral process that emphasized the cultivation of inner ethical consciousness as foundational to spatial justice and civic sustainability.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive-reflective research design, rooted in anthropological and Buddhist philosophical frameworks. The research central aim was to explore how Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's (1996) Handbook for Mankind-a seminal Buddhist text intended for laypeople-could serve as a moral-ethical lens for understanding and shaping urban space. Specifically, the research sought to construct a Buddhist-informed perspective on "Ethical Cities" by interpreting urban form, behavior, and spatial values through the training principles (Harvey, 2000); (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996).

Theoretical Framework: Buddhist Urbanism and Urban Form

1. Urban Form, Spatial Ethics, and the Threefold Training

1.1 Defining Urban Form

Urban form refers to the physical and spatial configuration of a city, shaped by building patterns, densities, transport networks, and public spaces (Carmona et al., 2010). Beyond its physicality, urban form embodied values such as identity, livability, and social equity (Relph, 1976); (Norberg-Schulz, 1979). Challenges such as sprawl, segregation, and car dependency showed that form

was never neutral-it reflected choices with ethical consequences for equity, dignity, and environmental well-being (Sandercock, 2003); (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2012).

1.2 Understanding Spatial Ethics

Spatial ethics examined the moral dimensions of urban organization, including equity, sustainability, and participation (Soja, 2010); (Sandercock, 2003). Justice implied equal access to housing, education, and clean environments; Sustainability called for resilience across generations; Participation ensured inclusivity in shaping the city (Throgmorton, 1996). Because trade-offs were unavoidable, spatial ethics was best seen as an ongoing process of critical reasoning, requiring pluralistic values, integrity, and long-term vision. This flexibility made it compatible with religious frameworks such as Buddhism.

1.3 The Threefold Training as Ethical Framework

The triadic disciplines offered a lens for spatial decision-making (Harvey, 2000); (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996).

1.3.1 Sīla (Ethics/Moral Conduct): Non-harm in land use, fairness in distribution, and environmental stewardship.

1.3.2 Samādhi (Concentration/Mental Discipline): Mental clarity for planning, disciplined use of resources, and unbiased judgment.

1.3.3 Paññā (Wisdom/Insight): Insight into interdependence, long-term vision, and cultural sensitivity.

These three were mutually reinforcing: Sīla provided ethical foundations, Samādhi ensured disciplined process, and Paññā gave foresight and depth. Neglecting one weakened the whole. Together, they formed a moral ecology of urbanism, guiding cities toward justice, resilience, and spiritual attunement (Relph, 1976); (Norberg-Schulz, 1979).

2. From Inner to Urban Order: A Buddhist Ethical Perspective on Spatial Organization

The phrase "From Inner to Urban Order" proposed a paradigmatic shift in how cities and civic environments were conceptualized and designed. Rather than treating urban order as merely a matter of physical regulation, zoning, or visual coherence, this concept emphasized the primacy of ethical consciousness and inner cultivation as the foundation of meaningful and sustainable spatial design (Harvey, 2000); (Sandercock, 2003).

Rooted in the Buddhist understanding of the mind as the source of all actions (Manopubbaṅgamā Dhammā), this approach asserted that the ethical quality of urban space had to emerge from the ethical quality of those who designed, inhabited, and governed it (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996). In this sense, urban order was not imposed, but composed-as a reflection of inner clarity, restraint, and wisdom (Cook, 2010).

This view resonated with the training principles, wherein ethical conduct generated relational harmony, mental discipline fostered attentiveness and calm, and wisdom dissolved attachment and delusion (Harvey, 2000). Applied to urbanism, this triadic framework suggested that just as the mind had to be trained to be free and compassionate, so too had the city to be designed to support freedom from suffering, cultivated mindfulness, and embodied compassion.

Table 1 Conceptual Components

Inner Order (Mind)	Urban Order (Space)	Corresponding Value
Ethical Intention (Sīla)	Zoning that promoted equity, safety, and dignity	Non-harm (Ahiṃsā)
Mental Clarity (Samādhi)	Spatial rhythm, access to quiet, and contemplative zones	Mindfulness (Sati)
Insightful Awareness (Paññā)	Design for impermanence, humility, and adaptability	Wisdom (Paññā)

This framework challenged the assumption that order emerged solely from top-down authority or structural rationalism. Instead, it advocated for an inside-out process, where the cultivation of ethical selves preceded the formation of ethical cities (Throgmorton, 1996); (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2012). In doing so, it aligned urban development with anthropological, spiritual, and cultural dimensions, rather than purely technical or economic logics.

By grounding civic planning in inner moral development, the "From Inner to Urban Order" model provided a non-dualistic, ethical framework that bridged personal transformation and collective spatial justice. It suggested that the future of city-making-especially in culturally Buddhist contexts such as Thailand-required not just smart governance or efficient infrastructure, but mindful presence, moral clarity, and cultural resonance (Relph, 1976); (Spiro, 1970).

3. Supporting Theories and Conceptual Frameworks

3.1 Buddhist Anthropology

Buddhist anthropology investigated the ways in which Buddhist worldviews, ethical practices, and conceptions of personhood shaped human behavior, social institutions, and built environments (Cook, 2010); (Spiro, 1970). Unlike classical anthropology that often focused on external rituals and cultural forms, Buddhist anthropology emphasized the interiority of experience-how suffering (Dukkha), attachment, and liberation were understood and acted upon through social and spatial practices (Tambiah, 1976). In the context of urban planning, this framework allowed us to read cities not merely as functional spaces but as arenas of karmic interaction, ethical cultivation, and existential meaning. Scholars such as Cook (2010) and Spiro (1970) had examined how Buddhist values influenced everyday life, while Thai thinkers such as Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1996) had called for Dhammic Society (Dhammānurāga) a community guided by moral responsibility rather than materialism or state control. In this view, a city was not neutral or secular but was ethically charged, and its design either supported or obstructed the conditions for inner growth.

3.2 Humanistic Planning

Humanistic planning emerged from critiques of technocratic and top-down planning paradigms that prioritized efficiency, economy, and control over human well-being, emotional life, and cultural identity (Sandercock, 2003). Grounded in humanist philosophy and often inspired by phenomenology-particularly the work of Relph (1976) and Norberg-Schulz (1979) it emphasized that space was not abstract, but lived, perceived, and experienced through the human body and spirit.

Humanistic planning aligned closely with Buddhist ethics include: 1) Valuing subjectivity and inner life in public space; 2) Encouraging environments that foster dignity, reflection, and compassion; and 3) Opposing alienation caused by overly rational or mechanistic urban forms.

This approach supported the idea that ethical and emotional intelligence should inform how we plan, zone, and structure the city, echoing the core Buddhist aim of ending suffering through mindful action (Harvey, 2000).

3.3 Sacred Space Theory

Sacred space theory explored how certain environments became imbued with symbolic, spiritual, or ritual significance. While traditionally applied to temples, shrines, or pilgrimage routes, contemporary interpretations expanded the notion to include spaces of reflection, transcendence, or existential anchoring even within secular urban settings (Tuan, 1977); (Barrie, 2010).

Key thinkers such as Eliade (1959) argued that sacred space was created through repetition, orientation, and symbolic alignment, while others like Tuan (1977) and Barrie (2010) had emphasized experience and perception as central to sacrality.

In a Buddhist context, space became sacred not necessarily by religious designation but through the quality of presence it fostered-stillness, mindfulness, humility (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996). Thus, a civic plaza or government center designed with ethical intention, natural harmony, and cultural resonance might function as a "New Kind of Sacred Space," supporting collective awareness and moral life.

4. Conceptual Framework: From Inner Order to Urban Ethics

This article proposed a Buddhist-informed conceptual framework for ethical urban planning, grounded in the interplay between urban form, spatial ethics, and the Threefold Training. The model was built upon the understanding that urban space was not value-neutral, but rather a moral field shaped by the intentions, consciousness, and cultural values of those who designed, inhabited, and governed it. This framework was composed of three interlinked domains:

4.1 Urban Form as Moral Medium

Urban form was understood as both a physical configuration and a carrier of ethical values. The arrangement of streets, buildings, public spaces, and infrastructure did more than shape physical movement-it reflected societal priorities, political decisions, and cultural narratives (Carmona et al., 2010). Patterns of inclusion or exclusion, walkability, access to green space, and zoning practices carried moral weight and had direct implications for social equity, well-being, and environmental sustainability (Soja, 2010); (Sandercock, 2003).

In this framework, urban form was not merely a design outcome, but a platform for ethical engagement, serving as the material context in which justice, dignity, and human flourishing either emerged or were constrained (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2012); (Relph, 1976).

4.2 Spatial Ethics as Normative Lens

Spatial ethics was introduced as a normative lens for evaluating the moral dimensions of spatial decisions. They integrated concerns such as: 1) Equity and justice in the distribution of resources and public goods; 2) Sustainability in balancing present needs with future resilience;

3) Participation as a foundation for procedural justice; and 4) Responsiveness to ecological and cultural context.

Ethical spatial planning was not simply about codifying principles but required moral reasoning, interdisciplinary awareness, and sensitivity to pluralistic values (Throgmorton, 1996). The integration of spatial ethics into design processes foregrounded human dignity, ecological care, and intergenerational responsibility (Norberg-Schulz, 1979); (Harvey, 2000).

4.3 Threefold Training as Applied Ethical Practice

The core innovation of this framework was the integration of the Threefold Training as a structured ethical guide for spatial decision-making (Harvey, 2000); (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996):

4.3.1 Sīla (Moral Conduct): Anchored urban design in non-harm (Ahiṃsā), fairness, and environmental stewardship. Supported planning principles that protected vulnerable communities and ecological integrity.

4.3.2 Samādhi (Concentration): Embodied mental clarity and attentiveness in governance. Encouraged transparency, disciplined planning, and mindful allocation of resources.

4.3.3 Paññā (Wisdom): Promoted long-term vision, systems thinking, and cultural awareness. Helped planners discern the deeper causes of spatial suffering and avoid superficial or short-term fixes.

Together, these three dimensions created a moral ecology for urbanism, one that cultivated ethical consciousness in both individual planners and institutional systems.

5. Ethical Foundations in Handbook for Mankind

To ground this ethical framework in a culturally resonant and philosophically rigorous source, this study drew on *Handbook for Mankind* (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996) a widely circulated text in the Thai Theravāda tradition, written for laypeople seeking to apply Buddhist principles in everyday life. The book outlined the three disciplines as the foundation of ethical living and spiritual liberation. Rather than presenting these as abstract doctrines, Buddhadāsa emphasized their relevance to concrete situations of social interaction, environmental responsibility, and mental well-being.

By interpreting urban planning and spatial design through the ethical logic, this study repositioned the city as a karmic field of ethical cultivation, where spatial arrangements were both shaped by and shaped human consciousness. The text offered a moral compass for navigating tensions between economic development and spiritual integrity, highlighting how harm, distraction, and ignorance in the built environment mirrored deeper patterns of craving (Tanhā) and delusion (Moha). Conversely, spatial forms that embodied restraint, mindfulness, and wisdom could serve as vehicles for individual and collective transformation. In this way, Handbook for Mankind was not merely a religious guide but an applied ethical framework that aligned inner development with civic responsibility, making it a vital lens for theorizing ethical urbanism in the Buddhist context.

Research Design: Interpretive-Reflective Case Study

The study adopted a qualitative, interpretive-reflective case study design, appropriate for examining meaning, values, and lived experience, particularly when grounded in religious or

philosophical traditions (Geertz, 1973); (Flyvbjerg, 2001). This approach was selected because the research sought to interpret ethical dimensions of urbanism rather than produce generalizable models.

Data Collection Methods

Data were drawn from four main sources:

1. Primary textual analysis of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's Handbook for Mankind (Thai and English Editions).

2. Urban planning documents and master plans, especially those related to Chiang Mai's development.

3. Site observations, focusing on areas of congestion, heritage commodification, and temple-related public spaces.

4. Secondary academic literature on Buddhist ethics, urban anthropology, and urban design.

Case Selection Criteria

Chiang Mai was chosen because it was both a historically Buddhist city and a rapidly urbanizing regional hub. This dual character made it a pertinent case for testing how the Threefold Training could inform contemporary urban dilemmas.

Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor, the study employed triangulation across multiple data sources:

1. Textual exegesis of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's Handbook for Mankind (1996).

2. Planning documents and media reports on traffic, air quality, and infrastructure upgrades.

3. Field observations, compiled between January and May 2025.

This triangulation aligned with qualitative case study best practices, privileging thick description and reflexive interpretation (Geertz, 1973); (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Results and Discussion

The research findings were presented in two sections. First, the case study of Chiang Mai was reflectively interpreted. Second, the framework for ethical urban design was proposed.

1. Case Study: Chiang Mai through the Lens of Handbook for Mankind

1.1 Situating Chiang Mai as a Buddhist Urban Landscape

Chiang Mai, capital of the former Lanna Kingdom and now Thailand's second-largest municipality, offered a rare blend of dense Buddhist heritage and accelerated neoliberal urbanism (Askew, 2002); (Shatkin, 2017). Its moat-and-wall old city still anchors more than 300 active temples (Wat), while ring roads, shopping malls, and condominium towers have proliferated in the peri-urban belt over the past two decades. The city thus functioned simultaneously as a pilgrimage site, a creative hub for digital nomads, and an expanding regional service center (Van Esterik, 2000). For this reason, Chiang Mai constituted a pertinent "Moral Laboratory" in which to test how the Threefold Training could diagnose and re-orient contemporary urban dilemmas (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996); (Harvey, 2000). Moreover, the city's multi-faith demography, Buddhist,

Muslim, Christian, animist, and secular communities, required that ethical design principles be articulated in inclusive, non-confessional terms.

1.2 Ethical Diagnostics (Sīla): Three Manifest Urban Tensions

1.2.1 Mobility, Congestion, and Atmospheric Karma

TomTom's (2025) Traffic Index ranked Chiang Mai 79th globally, with an average congestion level of 37 percent and a 23-minute travel time for every 10 km, 4 percent worse than 2023 figures. Drivers collectively wasted 72 idle hours last year, the equivalent of three full days in stationary vehicles. This vehicular "Dukkha of Delay" intersected with a seasonal public-health crisis: February-April haze events regularly pushed PM2.5 concentrations above 90 μg/m³, rendering the air "Unhealthy" or worse (Pothisiri et al., 2020).

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu framed morality (Sīla) as refraining from harm to self and others; By that standard, both excessive private-car use and routine biomass burning constituted structural breaches of communal precepts (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996). The city's present mobility regime perpetuated Akusala-kamma (Unwholesome Action) by externalizing respiratory risks onto vulnerable groups-children, the elderly, and tourists seeking "Wellness" retreats-while privileging speed and private convenience (Harvey, 2000); (Cook, 2010).

1.2.2 Commodification and Gentrification in Nimmanhaemin

Nimmanhaemin, a once-sleepy university corridor, had morphed into an "Unapologetic Bubble" of specialty cafés, coworking lofts, and boutique condominiums catering to high-spending expatriates and domestic elites (Shatkin, 2017). Rising rents had displaced long-standing family shop-houses and informal street vendors, intensified socio-spatial stratification and diminishing affordability for lower-income residents (Askew, 2002).

In Buddhadāsa's ethical terms, the neighborhood embodied Tanhā (Craving) and Māna (Conceit): Craving for commodified lifestyle aesthetics and conceit in branding itself as a "Global" quarter detached from local interdependence (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996); (Swearer, 2010). Observational transects conducted on weekday evenings (19:00-22:00) recorded averaged decibel levels of 72 dB, well above the 50 dB threshold recommended for residential zones (World Health Organization, 2009), due to amplified music and traffic. Such sensory overload eroded opportunities for mindful dwelling and communal interaction, directly contradicting the moral imperative of reducing harm embedded in Sīla and spatial ethics (Harvey, 2000); (Relph, 1976).

1.2.3 Sacral-Profane Friction at the Old City Moat

Within the 1.6 km² walled core of Chiang Mai, daily rituals, such as almsgiving at dawn, evening chanting, and forest-like temple gardens, still punctuated urban rhythms (Van Esterik, 2000). Yet the narrow lanes around Tha Phae Gate doubled as congested tourism arteries, lined with massage parlors, hostels, and liquor bars (Askew, 2002). Field notes documented monks navigating human "Traffic Funnels," their begging bowls jostled by selfie sticks-an image of sacral space strained by commodified spectacle (Cohen, 2008).

Here, the transgression was subtler: A dilution of Hiri-ottappa (Moral Shame and Moral Dread) that once governed respectful spatial etiquette between laypeople and clergy

(Harvey, 2000). Sīla, in spatial terms, asked not merely "Are We Following Rules?" But "Does the Built Environment Cultivate Wholesome Dispositions?" (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996). Current patterns suggested an erosion of place-based compassion as economic imperatives crowded out contemplative atmospheres-illustrating Eliade's (1959) warning that sacred topographies could be destabilized when profane functions dominated.

1.3 Cultivating Concentration (Samādhi): Mindful Spatial Rhythms

If morality (Sīla) diagnosed harm, then concentration (Samādhi) offered the therapeutic regimen: Designing urban milieus that stabilized attention and calmed sensory turbulence (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996); (Harvey, 2000). This aligned with urban design theories that emphasized the importance of rhythm, quietude, and sensory legibility in creating livable and mindful environments (Norberg-Schulz, 1979); (Relph, 1976).

Three spatial prototypes emerged from on-site mapping and stakeholder charrettes:

1.3.1 Quiet Lanes

Selected lanes within the moat zone were designated as pedestrian-priority corridors during morning and evening hours (06:00-09:00 and 17:00-21:00). Temporary bamboo gates, modeled on temple entryways, close streets to motorized traffic, enabling walking meditation loops and morning markets. Sound measurements during a two-week pilot dropped to 48 dB, fostering conditions conducive to mindfulness practice (World Health Organization, 2009).

1.3.2 Shade-and-Stillness Pocket Parks

Underutilized temple forecourts were re-landscaped with native teak hardwood and reflective water basins. The design drew on Buddhadāsa's emphasis on natural dharma (Thammachat) as a tutor of calm abiding, cultivating spatial qualities that invited stillness and interiority (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996); (Swearer, 2010).

1.3.3 Breathable Transit Nodes

Bus stops were retrofitted with permeable lattice screens and micro-green walls to filter PM2.5. Though modest in scope, real-time air-quality displays invited commuters to practice awareness of breathing (Ānāpānasati) while waiting, converting idle moments into contemplative opportunities (Ashton, 2018).

These interventions demonstrated how Samādhi could serve as both design ethos and planning criterion, countering overstimulation and distraction through forms that anchored attention and embodied presence.

1.4 Designing for Wisdom (Paññā): Urban Insight and Interdependence

Wisdom, in Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's schema, was the ability to see through the illusion of separateness and recognize the profound interdependence of all phenomena (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996). Applied to urban design, Paññā became the lens through which invisible connections, ecological, social, temporal, were made visually and experientially legible (Swearer, 2010); (Cook, 2010).

Urban interventions that encouraged insight included:

1.4.1 Haze Season Installations

LED light masts along Suthep Road depicted hourly PM2.5 data in color-coded gradients. These visual cues allowed pedestrians to witness how agricultural fires 200 km away manifested as localized suffering, provoking reflection on shared responsibility and the ripple effects of human action (Pothisiri et al., 2020); (Harvey, 2000).

1.4.2 Impermanence Walks

Temporary exhibitions curated by local art students mapped flood markers, demolished houses, and changing land prices onto the existing streetscape. These walks helped residents experience impermanence (Anicca) not as an abstract doctrine but as embodied urban memory, encouraging awareness of temporal fragility and historical transformation (Tuan, 1977); (Norberg-Schulz, 1979).

1.4.3 Inter-being Markets

Monthly night markets designed on an "Alms-like" model, where vendors committed to donating 10 percent of profits to temple-run community kitchens. The spatial layout followed a clockwise circumambulation, echoing ritual paths around a chedi, and reinforcing the idea of commerce as circular generosity rather than linear extraction (Eliade, 1959); (Barrie, 2010).

Such design strategies cultivated reflective awareness and moral imagination, aligning physical space with Buddhist insights into interdependence, non-attachment, and communal care-core components of Paññā as ethical urban wisdom.

1.5 Integration with Emerging Transport Infrastructure

The Mass Rapid Transit Authority's proposed three-line Light Rail network (35 km, slated for operation in 2027) was touted as the backbone for a low-carbon Chiang Mai (Bangkok Post, 2025). However, a Buddhist-ethical reading demanded that such mega-projects served more than congestion relief: They had to actively redistribute mobility benefits and minimize spatial resentment (Harvey, 2000); (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996).

Workshop scenarios modeled station precincts as "Wisdom Hubs", integrating:

1.5.1 First and last mile minibus shuttles subsidized for low-income residents.

1.5.2 Meditation pavilions inspired by northern Salā typologies (Barrie, 2010).

1.5.3 Community noticeboards promoted local farm-to-city produce exchanges.

In effect, the rail system became an "Urban Circulatory System" that not only transported bodies but also circulated compassion and local knowledge, mirroring the *Handbook for Mankind's* call for a society "Moving Together Toward Emancipation" (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996).

1.6 Synthesis: From Diagnosis to Prototyping

Table 2 summarizes how key urban tensions in Chiang Mai are mapped onto the training principles and how these ethical lenses inform spatial interventions with corresponding moral aims. The table reflected the teacher's view that urban life, like monastic life, should be a field for ethical cultivation and liberation-oriented practice (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996); (Swearer, 2010).

In this sense, design became not merely aesthetic or functional but ethical praxis, a medium for shaping karmic flows through deliberate spatial arrangement (Harvey, 2000).

Table 2 The Ethical Lenses and Spatial Interventions

Ethical Lens	Observed Problem	Spatial Intervention	Anticipated Moral Outcome
Sīla	Congestion & haze	Low-emission transit + vehicle quotas	Reduced harm to community health
Sīla	Nimman gentrification	Affordable retail kiosks in "Inter-being Markets"	Economic equity, restraint of craving
Samādhi	Sensory overload	Quiet lanes & shade parks	Cultivation of mindfulness
Paññā	Sacred-profane dilution	Impermanence walks & LED haze displays	Insight into interdependence & impermanence

This framework underscored that urban form was never merely a technical arrangement of streets, buildings, or infrastructures. Instead, it represented an ethical medium that both reflected and shaped human consciousness. Relph (1976) emphasized that place was imbued with meaning through lived experience, while Norberg-Schulz (1979) argued that architecture provided orientation and identity by mediating between human beings and their environment. These classical insights remained relevant but risk becoming historically bound if not supplemented by contemporary perspectives. More recent scholarship has extended this dialogue, showing how sacred architecture and public space created interfaces of ethical and communal life (Silva Leite et al., 2024). Such work demonstrated that spiritual values and civic design continued to intersect in ways that fostered belonging, relational harmony, and cultural resilience. When integrated with Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's (1996) teachings on the three disciplines, these perspectives illustrated that built form was not static but dynamic: Shaping moral awareness, sustaining communal identity, and aligning physical planning with spiritual liberation.

1.7 Reflexive Limitations

This case study consciously privileged the researchers' positionality as both observer and participant within Chiang Mai's civic and academic networks, offering deep contextual insight but also risking a tilt toward reformist optimism (Clifford & Marcus, 1986); (Cook, 2010). The interpretive-reflective method, while rich in narrative and ethical inference, carried inherent subjectivity-particularly when applying religious texts to urban systems that were technically, politically, and culturally hybrid (Joas, 2001).

Moreover, quantitative data-such as longitudinal reductions in PM2.5 levels, mobility mode-shifts, or behavioral change outcomes-remained provisional. Many of the proposed design interventions (e.g., "Quiet Lanes," "Wisdom Hubs") were in pilot or concept stages, and their long-term moral efficacy required multi-year monitoring and cross-agency coordination (Pothisiri et al., 2020).

Finally, while Handbook for Mankind offered a compelling and universalist Buddhist ethic, it did not fully account for the plural ontologies that shaped everyday spatial practice in northern Thailand. Animist-Lanna cosmologies, spirit-house geomancy, and secular

planning frameworks continued to mediate how space was made meaningful on the ground (McDaniel, 2011); (Keyes & Tanabe, 2016). Future research should explicitly integrate these multiple worldviews to refine and localize the ethical city model, ensuring it resonates with vernacular lifeworlds as well as normative philosophical ideals.

2. Toward a Framework for Ethical Urban Design

Building upon the empirical insights and Buddhist hermeneutics discussed in the preceding case study, this section synthesized a conceptual framework for ethical urban design grounded in Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's Threefold Training. The intention was not to impose a rigid doctrinal model but to propose a reflective toolset-a moral compass-for urban designers, planners, and policymakers who sought to humanize the city through ethical orientation.

2.1 From Buddhist Anthropology to Design Praxis

In Buddhist anthropology, space was never value-neutral. Urban form was interpreted not only through its physical configuration, but also through its capacity to influence behavior, cognition, and moral development (Spiro, 1993); (Cook, 2010). This approach aligned with Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's assertion in *Handbook for Mankind* that the ethical cultivation of laypeople had to be firmly rooted in everyday life-in the spaces of work, movement, rest, and interaction (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996); (Swearer, 2010).

The city, in this reading, became a moral training ground a Dhammasālā that either supported or obstructed human liberation (Vimutti). Thus, urban space was karmically potent: It carried consequences beyond aesthetics or utility, actively shaping mental states, ethical intentions, and relational dynamics (Harvey, 2000).

Urban design, therefore, became a form of karmic architecture, in which spatial arrangements not only emerged from intention but also reconfigured intention in return. Each built element-walkway, plaza, transit stop-functioned as an opportunity for mindfulness, restraint, generosity, or their opposites. Ethical urbanism, then, was not simply about "Livability" as commonly conceived in Western planning discourse, but about enabling beings to live with awareness, attuned to interdependence, impermanence, and the reduction of suffering (Norberg-Schulz, 1979); (Relph, 1976).

In this way, the shift from Buddhist anthropology to design praxis called for a spatial ethics of liberation, where planning and architecture served not as neutral tools of statecraft or commerce, but as active Dhammic agents in the collective pursuit of well-being.

2.2 Principles of the Ethical Urban Design Framework

Based on the Chiang Mai case and interpretive readings of Handbook for Mankind, the following core principles were proposed:

2.2.1 Sīla (Ethical Restraint and Compassion in Form)

Ethical urban design began with minimizing harm-both direct and structural (Harvey, 2000). This involved cultivating urban forms. Buddhadāsa emphasized Sīla as the foundation for reducing egoism; In spatial terms this meant resisting design choices that privileged consumerism, privatization, or visual dominance over collective well-being (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996).

2.2.2 Samādhi (Stabilization of Attention through Spatial Rhythm)

Modern urbanism often fragments attention through overstimulation, excessive signage, and accelerated sensory environments (Relph, 1976). Ethical design under Samādhi centered on mindfulness in motion. Buddhadāsa often referred to "Natural Dharma" (Thammachat) as a teacher of concentration; Ethical urbanism should emulate natural rhythms-sunlight, wind, seasonal cycles-rather than imposed abruptness or speed (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996).

2.2.3 Paññā (Wisdom and Design for Inter-being)

The highest aim was to awaken insight: Seeing self as embedded in ecological, temporal, and karmic interdependence (Swearer, 2010). Urban space could serve as pedagogy. Narrative environments, such as signage, public art, and spatial storytelling, made impermanence and causality visible (Tuan, 1977). Designs for mutual support, such as housing and economic zones, enabled circular economies, resource sharing, and ethical trade (Barrie, 2010). Built interdependence by integrating temples, schools, markets, and gardens in proximity could reinforce the inter-being of roles and spaces (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2012). In Buddhadāsa's thought, wisdom (Paññā) arose from direct perception of reality; Ethical urban design should therefore have invited insight rather than enforced control (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, 1996); (Harvey, 2000).

2.3 Spatial Strategies across Scales

To make these principles actionable, the framework proposed intervention strategies at three interrelated scales: The body, the neighborhood, and the city-each aligned with a dimension of the Threefold Training. This multiscalar lens drew from humanistic and Buddhist planning traditions that treated space as lived, relational, and ethically charged (Relph, 1976); (Cook, 2010); (Swearer, 2010).

Table 3 Spatial Strategies Across Scales

Scale	Focus	Strategy	Ethical Effect
Body	Sensory experience	Quiet zones, seating under trees, and breathable pathways	Supported mindfulness and reduced sensory aggression (Samādhi)
Neighborhood	Social relations	Community centers, shared markets, and child-friendly walkways	Encouraged compassion, reciprocity (Sīla)
City	Systemic patterns	Transit justice, air-quality transparency, and green corridors	Enabled awareness of interdependence and karmic causality (Paññā)

This multiscalar perspective enabled urban designers and planners to tailor interventions without reducing ethics to formal aesthetics or symbolic gestures (Norberg-Schulz, 1979); (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2012). It acknowledged that ethical spatial practice had to operate simultaneously at personal, communal, and systemic levels, allowing the Tisikkhā to be embedded as a living ethic across scales of the built environment.

2.4 Application in Pluralistic Contexts

While this framework drew from Theravāda Buddhist sources, its practical applications were not restricted to Buddhist-majority regions. The ethical dimensions-non-harming, attentiveness, and interdependence-resonated across spiritual and secular traditions (Harvey, 2000); (Swearer, 2010). However, localized adaptation was essential. In cities with Muslim, Christian, or animist traditions, ethical goals could be reframed in terms of compassion, stewardship, or sacred reciprocity (Tuan, 1977); (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2012). The framework should thus be viewed as contextually grounded yet spiritually portable.

In secular contexts, the emphasis on mindfulness, sensory well-being, and relational design aligned with trauma-informed urbanism, care ethics, and insights from environmental psychology (Davidson & McEwen, 2012); (Carmona et al., 2010). Buddhadāsa's contribution lay in reorienting the urban conversation from material adequacy to spiritual clarity-an intervention that did not require metaphysical assent but instead invited ethical reflection through lived experience.

In implementation, co-design workshops would include monks and lay Buddhists alongside Muslim, Christian, animist, and secular community representatives, with pilot activities hosted not only in temple precincts but also in mosques, churches, spirit-house courtyards, and neutral civic venues (e.g., Schools, Health Clinics, Transit Nodes) to ensure cultural resonance and equal access.

To safeguard religious neutrality in publicly funded spaces, the framework avoided doctrinal iconography and instead emphasized universally legible qualities-shade, quiet, clear wayfinding, and transparent environmental information-so that benefits remained inclusive for non-Buddhist residents and visitors. Design deliberations would translate the ethical aims, in Table 4, into shared values (e.g., Non-harming ⟶ Public Health; attentiveness ⟶ Sensory Comfort; Interdependence ⟶ Community Care and Stewardship), enabling value-equivalent articulation across belief systems.

Table 4 Translating ethical aims into shared values

Ethical Aims	Shared Values
Sīla	Public health, safety, and dignity
Samādhi	Calm, sensory comfort, and focused wayfinding
Paññā	Stewardship, reciprocity, and social cohesion

2.5 Ethical Design as a Path, not a Product

Lastly, the framework reframed ethical urbanism not as a one-time deliverable but as a continuous path (Magga) toward collective flourishing (Harvey, 2000). Urban designers, like practitioners of Dhamma, were co-travelers in a shared karmic field, not omniscient architects of fixed perfection. Ethical clarity, in this view, was iterative and relational-emerging through cycles of reflection, action, and feedback (Throgmorton, 1996); (Sandercock, 2003). The city was thus not a finished object but a living process of mutual awakening (Relph, 1976); (Norberg-Schulz, 1979).

Urban ethics had to therefore be cultivated: In how designers engaged communities, revised assumptions, and welcomed critique-not merely in the final physical output. Buddhadāsa's

reminder that "True Morality is the Heart Trained to Let Go" underscored that an ethical city was not simply one with clean parks or low emissions; It was a city where egocentrism was softened and beings remembered they were not alone.

2.6 From Handbook to Blueprint

By interpreting Handbook for Mankind as an ethical map and Chiang Mai as a reflective mirror, this paper proposed a framework that bridged inner training and outer form. The Threefold Training became, in this view, not only a moral path for individuals but also a design ethic for shared environments. Urban design, in Buddhadāsa's vision, was not separate from the path to liberation-it was one of its most urgent expressions in the modern world. While the framework was derived from Theravāda sources, its implementation plan included multi-faith co-design and neutral public-space cues, which we expected to enhance inclusivity and applicability beyond Buddhist audiences.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

This study proposed a Buddhist ethical framework for urban design (Figure 1), grounded in Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's *Handbook for Mankind* and anthropological interpretations of spatial ethics. Using the Threefold Training as a guiding structure, the research reimagined urban development not as a purely technical endeavor but as a moral process rooted in inner transformation. By situating this framework within urban studies, the study underscored how spatial form shaped justice, equity, and belonging. At the same time, it engaged religious studies, showing how Buddhist ethics articulated relational responsibility and non-harm in everyday life. Finally, it connected with ethical philosophy, aligning with debates on virtue ethics and moral responsibility in contemporary civic life. Through a case study of Chiang Mai, the study thus positioned urban planning as an interdisciplinary field, where design was simultaneously spatial, cultural, and moral.

Through a case study of Chiang Mai, the essay critiqued dominant planning paradigms focused on efficiency and control, instead framing urban challenges like congestion and inequality as manifestations of collective ethical failings such as craving and delusion. It introduced design interventions like quiet lanes, inter-being markets, and breathable transit nodes as spatial embodiments of Buddhist values.

The study ultimately portrayed urban design as a form of Buddhist praxis, where the city was a moral landscape capable of either reinforcing suffering or enabling ethical living. Designing the city, therefore, became a karmic act, shaping not just space but the spiritual well-being of current and future generations.

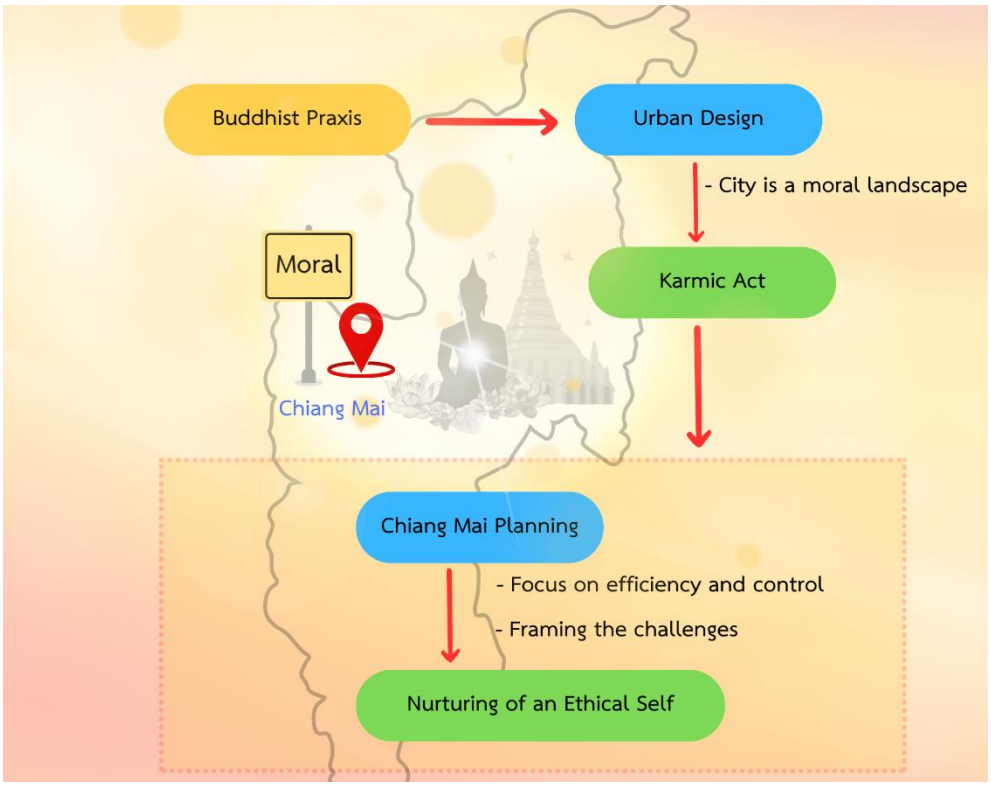

Figure 1 Body of Knowledge: Linking Buddhist Praxis, Urban Design, and Ethical Self in Chiang Mai Planning

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study proposed a Buddhist ethical framework for urban design by synthesizing insights from Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's Handbook for Mankind, anthropological interpretations of spatial ethics, and a case analysis of Chiang Mai. Grounding the analysis in the Threefold Training. The research presented an alternative model of civic development that began not with technical or institutional priorities, but with the cultivation of inner ethical consciousness. The core argument advanced throughout the paper was that meaningful and sustainable urban order had to be rooted in "Inner Order" the moral, cognitive, and spiritual development of individuals and communities. In contrast to dominant planning paradigms that emphasized administrative efficiency, visual control, or economic optimization, the Buddhist-informed framework reframed urbanism as a karmic process in which spatial forms both shaped and reflected moral conditions. Urban congestion, environmental degradation, and socio-spatial inequality-often treated as logistical or managerial problems-were re-interpreted here as expressions of collective craving (Tanhā), delusion (Moha), and ethical neglect. As demonstrated through the Chiang Mai study, ethical diagnostics revealed how everyday urban phenomena-from traffic systems to sacred-space encroachments-embodied deeper tensions between self-interest and communal well-being. The proposed design responses-quiet lanes and inter-being markets-illustrated how spatial strategies could operationalize Buddhist ethical principles. The framework was neither utopian nor prescriptive; Rather, it offered a moral compass for navigating the pluralistic and often contradictory terrains of urban development.

By structuring interventions across body, neighborhood, and city scales, the framework recognized the interdependence of interior and exterior conditions and encouraged design that cultivated mindfulness, compassion, and long-term vision. One key contribution of this study was its articulation of urban design as Buddhist praxis: The city became a living ethical field where liberation from suffering could be supported-or obstructed-by built form. In this light, the act of design was itself a moral act, with karmic consequences that rippled across generations. Regarding measurable indicators for the long-term ethical impact to complement the conceptual contribution, we specified a light-touch evaluation suite mapped to Sīla - Samādhi - Paññā. Sīla (Harm Reduction) could be achieved from peak/off-peak dB on quiet lanes, heat-stress proxies (Shade/UTCIs), and injury rates on pilot streets; Samādhi (Attention & Calm) could be attained from pedestrian/bicycle counts, public-transport boardings, 10 km travel-time reliability, and brief intercept surveys on perceived calm/safety/belonging; Paññā (Interdependence & Equity) could be obtained from an access within 10 minutes to green/quiet spaces, participation rates in co-design, and distributional checks for low-income groups (e.g., Fare Burden, Market Stall Affordability). Data collection was staged (Pre-pilot, 3-Month, 12-Month) and reported on public dashboards to foster civic learning rather than narrow compliance metrics. Regarding comparative insights beyond Buddhist contexts to broaden applicability, the framework was translated into value-equivalents recognizable across traditions: "Non-harming" on par with public health/stewardship (Islamic Amanah/Ihsan, Christian Caritas/Creation Care), "Attentiveness" comparable to sensory comfort/quiet enjoyment (Secular Environmental Psychology), and "Interdependence" equivalent to reciprocity/common good (Animist Sacred Reciprocity, Civic Care Ethics). Future comparative pilots in mixed-faith districts and secular precincts will use the same indicators to test resonance, with iconography minimized in public settings and universal design cues (Shade, Quiet, Legible Wayfinding, Transparent Environmental Information) emphasized. Regarding the roadmap for policy adoption, local governments could operationalize the framework through: 1) Planning instruments-comprehensive-plan policies that recognized "Quiet/Clean Access" as essential services; Overlay zones for temple-adjacent calm corridors; and Development-control standards for maximum façade noise, greening ratios, and breathable stops; 2) Design guidance-municipal streetscape manuals that included "Samādhi Sequences" (Busy-Buffer-Quiet), pocket-park typologies, and air-quality display protocols; 3) Budgeting & procurement-small-pilot line items, outcome-based contracts tied to the indicators above, and vendor specs for low-noise/low-emission materials; 4) Governance-an inter-departmental ethics and environment taskforce (Planning, Transport, Health, Culture, Religion) plus neighborhood co-design councils; and 5) Monitoring-open dashboards and annual "Ethical City" reports aligning with SDG 3/11/13 to institutionalize learning. However, several limitations remained. The framework was interpretive and context-specific, developed through Thai Theravāda sources and applied in a single regional city. Future research should explore how the Threefold Training can be adapted within Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna contexts, or dialogued with indigenous or Islamic planning ethics. Comparative studies across cities with different religious ecologies would deepen understanding of how spatial ethics manifest in diverse urban imaginaries. In conclusion, From Inner Order to

Urban Order did not call for more "Buddhist Cities" per se, but for more ethical cities, where urban form became a vehicle for moral cultivation and spiritual presence. As cities across Asia and beyond faced rising complexity and fragmentation, the Buddhist-anthropological perspective offered a timely reminder that the path to just, livable, and compassionate urban futures began within.

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