

Visual Hegemony in Professional Judgment: A Qualitative Delphi Study on Pedestrian Street Quality

Maryam Ghasemi Nasab¹, Hamidreza Azemati^{2*}, Fatemeh Jam³

¹ Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Design, Shahid Rajaei Teacher Training University, Tehran, Iran. Email: m.ghaseminasab@sru.ac.ir

² Department of Architecture, School of Architecture and Urban Design, Shahid Rajaei Teacher Training University, Tehran, Iran. Email: azemati@sru.ac.ir

³ Department of Urban Design, Faculty of Architecture and Urban Design, Shahid Rajaei Teacher Training University, Tehran, Iran. Email: f.jam@sru.ac.ir

*Corresponding author: Hamidreza Azemati

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Abstract

In many pedestrianization projects, particularly in Iranian cities, a structural gap is persistently reproduced between the quality envisioned during the design process and the quality realized through users' lived experiences. This article argues that such a gap cannot be adequately explained by technical deficiencies, implementation failures, or the absence of design indicators alone, but must be theorized at a deeper level, within the epistemological logic of professional judgment through which spatial quality is identified, prioritized, and legitimized. Adopting a qualitative exploratory–explanatory research design, the study examines how urban design experts judge “pedestrian street quality” and which implicit evaluative patterns structure these judgments. To this end, a three-round Qualitative Delphi method was conducted with fourteen architecture and urban design experts, intentionally designed not to achieve consensus but to elicit tacit, taken-for-granted assumptions underlying professional judgment. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and directed content analysis to trace the stabilization of dominant judgment patterns across Delphi rounds. The findings reveal that prevailing professional judgment, shaped by academic training and dominant design discourses, is characterized by a “professional gaze” structured through visual hegemony, whereby spatial quality is largely reduced to physical-formal and visually oriented criteria. This evaluative logic stands in fundamental tension with users’ experience of space as embodied, multisensory, and temporally situated. Rather than offering empirical generalizations, this article advances a theoretically transferable interpretation of the quality gap, reframing it as a cognitive and epistemological tension embedded within professional judgment, with important implications for urban design evaluation and professional education.

Keywords

Professional Judgment, Perceived Spatial Quality, Professional Gaze, Visual Hegemony, Qualitative Delphi.

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Introduction

In contemporary cities, pedestrian streets are no longer understood merely as corridors of movement; rather, they function as key settings for urban experience, social interaction, and everyday civic life (Karimi Yazdi et al., 2016). The quality of these environments significantly shapes how people choose to stay, pause, interact, and engage with the city, making pedestrian streets a critical domain for both research and practical intervention in urban design (Ranjbar & Raees Esmacili, 2010; Habibi & Haghi, 2018). This growing emphasis reflects a broader shift in urban planning paradigms from automobile-oriented models toward human scale and experience centered design approaches. Svarre (2015) captures this transformation through the distinction between “architecture at 60 km/h” and “architecture at 3 km/h,” highlighting the importance of designing cities from the perspective of the pedestrian. Within this framework, enhancing urban quality of life is no longer associated with quantitative expansion, but with the qualitative enrichment of public spaces, particularly the often-neglected spaces between buildings (Cerrone et al., 2021). Seminal urban thinkers such as Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl have consistently argued that social presence, diversity of activities, and opportunities for pause, encounter, and mutual observation are fundamental conditions for creating lively and meaningful urban spaces. Empirical and review studies further corroborate the central role of lived experience and perceptual richness in the vitality of pedestrian oriented environments (Shahbazi et al., 2019).

In parallel, Iranian research over the past two decades has devoted substantial attention to identifying the components that shape pedestrian street quality, addressing a wide range of physical, social, and economic attributes (Ranjbar & Raees Esmacili, 2010; Habibi & Haghi, 2018). Many studies have also examined the causes of failure in pedestrianization projects, often pointing to inconsistencies between design intentions and everyday use (Kheyr al Din et al., 2019). Despite this extensive body of scholarship, a closer examination reveals a notable imbalance: while considerable effort has been directed toward defining what constitutes spatial quality, far less attention has been paid to how such quality is perceived, interpreted, and ultimately judged. Although perceptual differences between users and professionals have been acknowledged in some Iranian studies (Karimi Yazdi et al., 2016; Mansouri, 2024), the evaluative role of urban design experts has largely remained unquestioned. Experts are frequently treated as neutral arbiters of spatial quality, while the cognitive frameworks, perceptual assumptions, and interpretive logics underpinning their judgments are rarely interrogated as a subject of research in their own right. Existing investigations into professional values in architectural and urban design communities indicate that expert judgments are strongly shaped by shared educational backgrounds and disciplinary norms (Saifi et al., 2020); however, the specific judgment logic governing evaluations of pedestrian streets remains theoretically underexplored.

Accordingly, the principal gap in the literature lies not in a lack of indicators or design criteria, but in the absence of a critical understanding of the specialized judgment logic through which pedestrian-oriented spaces are evaluated and prioritized. Addressing this gap, the present study moves beyond the prevailing approach of enumerating and weighting quality indicators (Habibi & Haghi, 2018) and instead places professional judgment itself at the center of analysis. Rather than asking, “What factors define pedestrian street quality?”, this research poses a more fundamental and underexamined question: How do urban design experts conceptualize, interpret, and judge quality? By adopting qualitative methods to uncover the latent cognitive and perceptual patterns embedded within professional practice, this study seeks to explain the persistent disjunction between theoretical knowledge and lived outcomes in pedestrianization projects. In doing so, it resonates with recent Iranian research emphasizing embodied perception and lived experience in urban environments (Fathi & Asgari, 2025; Shafiei Masouleh et al., 2024), while contributing a design thinking-oriented perspective that foregrounds professional judgment, cognitive fixation, and evaluative reasoning as critical factors in urban design outcomes.

Literature Review

A systematic review of the literature on pedestrian space quality shows a clear shift over time: from rigid, engineering oriented evaluations toward approaches that are more sensitive to human experience. Despite this evolution, a fundamental gap remains. While researchers have become increasingly precise in defining what constitutes quality, much less attention has been given to how quality is actually judged, specifically, the cognitive processes and judgment logics through which experts interpret and prioritize these criteria. This omission is particularly problematic from a design thinking perspective, where understanding the mindset of designers and decision makers is central. Existing research on pedestrian space quality can be broadly grouped into three dominant streams.

1. *The Physical Paradigm: Objective Measurement and Its Limitations*

Early studies, especially in the Iranian context, largely framed pedestrian street quality through the logic of traffic engineering and physical determinism (Habibi & Haghghat, 2018). Researchers such as Ranjbar and Raees Esmaili (2010) proposed quantitative checklists focused on measurable indicators like sidewalk width, pavement condition, and visual sightlines (Naeimi et al., 2014). At the core of this approach lies a positivist assumption: that a linear relationship exists between “physical form” and “pedestrian behavior” (Ewing & Handy, 2009). Although this paradigm was instrumental in establishing basic regulatory standards, it has been widely criticized for oversimplifying spatial experience. Treating space as an assemblage of physical components marginalizes the lived, subjective realities of users (Gjerde, 2010). More recent scholarship underscores that spatial perception is not passively received but actively constructed through embodied and sensory engagement, an experiential dimension entirely absent from purely physical assessments (Fathi & Askari, 2025).

2. *The Experiential Paradigm: Perception, Sociality, and Lived Space*

In response to this reductionist outlook, a second wave of research, drawing on the influential ideas of Jane Jacobs (1961) and Jan Gehl (2010), shifted attention toward the social and perceptual dimensions of public space (Haas, 2019; Cerrone et al., 2021). Studies in this vein, including those by Shamaii and Eghbal (2016), argue that spatial quality emerges through the dynamic interaction of physical form, social practices, and cultural context (Kheireddin et al., 2019). This body of work marks a clear transition from “designing for movement” to “designing for presence and experience,” foregrounding concepts such as vibrancy, sense of belonging, and psychological safety (Shahbazi et al., 2020; Sanford, 2025). However, its main weakness lies in its heavy dependence on self-reported user data. While these studies richly describe how spaces are perceived, they often stop short of explaining why these perceptions fail to meaningfully shape final design outcomes. As a result, the persistent gap between designer intent and user experience remains largely untheorized (Mansouri, 2024; Clement & Soltani, 2025).

3. *The Identified Gap: The Unexamined “Logic of Judgment”*

This unresolved tension points directly to the core research gap addressed in this study. Despite extensive knowledge of quality indicators, the divide between “designed quality” and “experienced quality” in pedestrian spaces continues to resist explanation (Clement & Soltani, 2025). Increasingly, evidence suggests that this problem does not stem from insufficient information but from conflicting cognitive frameworks. Design professionals, shaped by academic training and disciplinary norms, tend to prioritize abstract principles such as order, proportion, and formal coherence (Bay, 2001; Carmona, 2021). Users, by contrast, evaluate space through multisensory, meaning laden experiences rooted in comfort, security, and emotional resonance. A critical limitation of earlier research is its uncritical reliance on expert judgment as a neutral authority. Methods such as the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) have been widely used to weight quality indicators (Moradi Sangachini et al., 2025), yet the mental models, cognitive biases, and heuristics underlying these judgments are rarely questioned. Consequently, it remains unclear whether the visual formalist tendencies prevalent among urban design professionals align with, or, more plausibly, conflict with, users’ psychological needs for qualities such as mystery, intimacy, or sensory security (Akbarishahabi,

2022). This study argues that closing the quality gap requires more than refining indicators; it demands a design thinking intervention that critically examines expert judgment logic itself.

To unpack this logic of expert judgment and explain its divergence from lived experience, the analysis is structured around four interconnected conceptual pillars: 1. the ontological duality of spatial quality, 2. the epistemology of design judgment, 3. a critique of visual hegemony in professional practice, and 4. the pedestrian street as a social stage.

Pillar 1: *Ontological Duality: Designed Quality versus Lived Quality*

Contemporary theory increasingly rejects a singular notion of quality, emphasizing instead a fundamental duality between “designed quality” and “lived quality” (Clement & Soltani, 2025; Molnar, 2024). Designed quality is objective, physical, and codified. It is conceived through the language of engineering standards, Euclidean geometry, and quantitative regulations (Nacimi et al., 2014). Within this framework, quality is often reduced to a checklist of measurable attributes, materials, proportions, and visual order, under the assumption that compliance will automatically generate user satisfaction (Bay, 2001). Lived quality, however, operates on an entirely different register. It is phenomenological, intersubjective, and dynamic, emerging through users’ embodied encounters with space rather than through plans or specifications (Rezeanu, 2018). This quality is felt through psychological security, legibility, memorability, and perceptual comfort (Hoffman, n.d.). An epistemological rupture occurs when designers, trained to treat quality as a technical product, confront users who experience it as an ongoing perceptual process (Mansouri, 2024). This study contends that many pedestrianization projects fail precisely because expert cognition privileges designed quality at the expense of lived quality.

Pillar 2: *Design Epistemology and Professional Vision*

The second pillar focuses on how professionals come to know and judge space. Goodwin’s (1994) concept of “professional vision” is central here, describing how architects and urban designers are socialized into a particular way of seeing, categorizing, and interpreting the built environment. This trained gaze tends to abstract space, foregrounding values such as order, symmetry, and visual coherence (Styhre, 2010). From a cognitive perspective, experts rely heavily on mental schemas and heuristics to make rapid judgments (Hallihan et al., 2012). While efficient, this reliance can produce cognitive fixation, in which subtle but critical user needs, such as a sense of belonging or acoustic privacy, are consistently overshadowed by formal clarity or geometric control (Borowa et al., 2023). From a design thinking standpoint, this represents a failure of empathic framing. Accordingly, this study employs the qualitative Delphi method not simply to collect expert opinions, but to create a reflective space in which these hidden cognitive patterns can be surfaced and critically examined.

Pillar 3: *Visual Hegemony and the Multisensory Deficit*

The third pillar critiques the dominance of vision in urban design discourse. Pallasmaa (2024) famously describes this condition as the “hegemony of vision,” where spatial quality is equated with visual appearance and space is treated as an image rather than a lived environment (Pallasmaa, 2024). This bias stands in sharp contrast to the reality of walking, which is inherently multisensory, involving sound, smell, texture, and bodily movement (Spence, 2022). The perceptual gap between designers and users is therefore also an instrumental one. Designers assess space through drawings and visual simulations, tools that abstract and distance, while users experience space through their whole bodies within a dense sensory field (Clement & Soltani, 2025). Bridging this gap requires expanding professional evaluation beyond the primacy of sight toward a genuinely multisensory understanding of space.

Pillar 4: *The Pedestrian Street as a Social Stage*

Finally, adopting a behavioral lens, the pedestrian street is understood not merely as a circulation corridor but as a social stage for everyday life (Gehl, 2011; Jacobs, 1961). Within this framework, quality is reflected in the intensity of optional activities and the richness of social interaction. A central and unresolved question for expert judgment is therefore one of priority: should emphasis be placed on behavioral vitality and social

life, or on physical perfection and visual order (Mehta, 2013)? The theoretical model of this study uses this tension as an analytical lens to assess whether designed quality genuinely supports human interaction and everyday urban life.

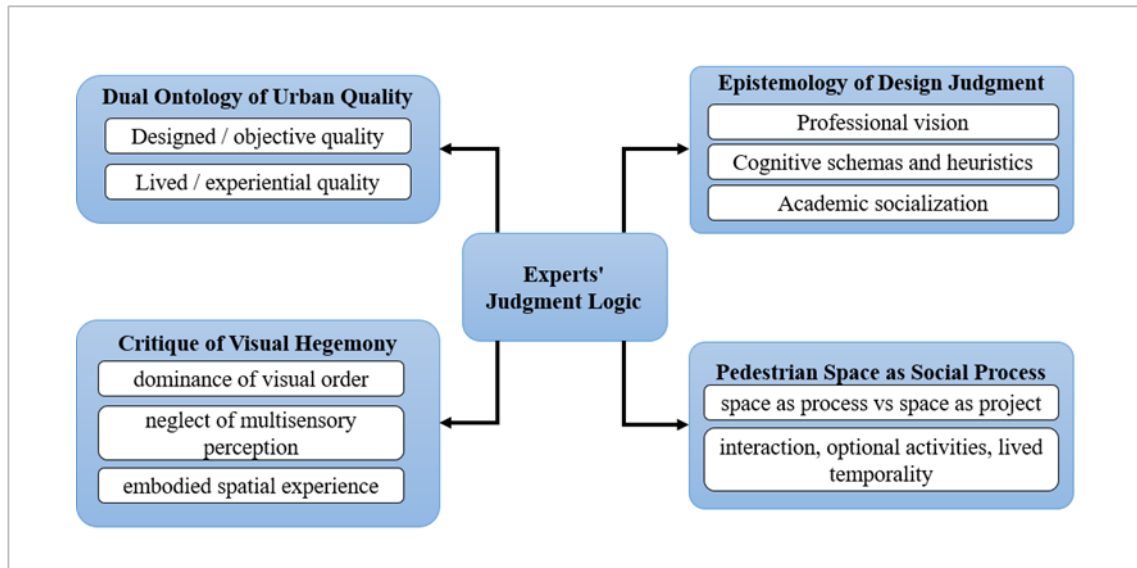


Figure 1: An analytical framework illustrating the four conceptual pillars underpinning expert judgment logic in urban design evaluation. The model integrates the dual ontology of urban quality, epistemology of professional judgment, critique of visual hegemony, and the understanding of walking as a social process. Developed through qualitative Delphi analysis, these categories operationalize the cognitive structures and decision patterns guiding expert assessment in pedestrian street projects. (Source: Authors)

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study adopts an exploratory–explanatory qualitative research design, reflecting both the open-ended nature of the research questions and the interpretive character of the data. The investigation addresses the concept of spatial quality not as a fixed or measurable attribute, but as a cognitively and epistemologically constructed phenomenon, shaped by professional training, perceptual biases, and judgment heuristics. Given this complexity, conventional quantitative or indicator-based evaluation approaches are insufficient for assessing the implicit reasoning and tacit knowledge that inform expert evaluations. Consequently, the study employs the Qualitative Delphi method as its principal methodological strategy. In this research, Delphi is deliberately repurposed: rather than functioning as a tool for statistical aggregation or forced consensus, it is used as a dialectical and reflective inquiry into the mental logics underlying professional judgment. This approach enables the systematic articulation of otherwise unspoken assumptions, priorities, and evaluative patterns within the expert community.

Target Population and Expert Selection

The target population comprised 14 experts, scholars, and professional practitioners actively engaged in architecture and urban design in Iran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, guided by expertise-based criteria designed to ensure both depth of experience and relevance to pedestrian-oriented urban environments. Initial participants were identified through purposive sampling based on expertise criteria, after which a limited snowball strategy was employed to reach additional experts with comparable professional standing and relevant experience. Selection criteria included: Holding at least a Master’s or PhD degree in architecture, urban design, or urban planning; Possessing a minimum of five years of substantial professional practice or focused academic research related to public spaces and pedestrian

streets; Demonstrated involvement in the design, critique, or evaluation of urban-scale pedestrian street projects. The panel size was determined in accordance with the principle of theoretical saturation. Data collection continued until recurrent patterns of judgment became stable, and additional input no longer yielded meaningful conceptual variation.

Qualitative Delphi Design

This study employed a qualitative Delphi method to explore the underlying judgment logics shaping professional evaluations of pedestrian street quality. The Delphi was designed not as a consensus-seeking or ranking-oriented technique, but as a reflective and dialectical process aimed at eliciting, refining, and stabilizing expert judgment patterns. In the first round, open-ended questions were used to elicit experts' individual criteria, reasoning strategies, and evaluative priorities when assessing pedestrian streets. This round functioned as a mental exploration phase, allowing diverse, and often implicit judgmental assumptions to surface without constraint. The second round operated as a reflexive feedback stage. An anonymized thematic synthesis of the first-round responses was shared with participants, enabling them to reconsider their own positions in relation to the emerging collective patterns. Experts were invited to clarify, refine, or contest the preliminary categories, thereby deepening the interpretive dialogue. The third round served as a stabilization and member-checking phase. At this stage, the refined judgment logics were presented back to the panel for critical reflection, confirmation, and final adjustment. Rather than enforcing agreement, this round aimed to ensure that the identified evaluative patterns accurately reflected the experts' professional reasoning and that no dominant logic was imposed through procedural bias.

Data Analysis and Analytical Stabilization

Qualitative data analysis followed a directed thematic and qualitative content analysis approach. In the first step, open coding was applied to expert statements to identify recurring evaluative expressions, metaphors, and reasoning strategies related to pedestrian street quality. These initial codes remained close to the language of the participants. In the second step, axial clustering was employed to group related codes into broader evaluative categories, revealing patterns of emphasis, exclusion, and prioritization within expert judgment. Through iterative comparison and constant reflexive memoing, these categories were further synthesized into higher-order judgment logics. In the final step, interpretive synthesis was conducted to articulate the conceptual structure underlying these judgment logics and to relate them to broader theoretical debates on visual dominance, professional cognition, and spatial perception (Figure 2). First-round questions focused on how experts spontaneously described and prioritized quality criteria (e.g., "What elements most strongly influence your judgment of a pedestrian street's quality?"), while subsequent rounds invited reflection on emerging patterns rather than numerical ranking. To enhance analytical transparency and assess the stabilization of judgment patterns across Delphi rounds, complementary quantitative indicators were employed. Following qualitative coding and synthesis, a structured set of judgment items derived from expert discourse was examined for internal coherence (Cronbach's alpha = 0.975). This analysis was used to assess the consistency of shared evaluative tendencies rather than to claim psychometric validity (Table 1).

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.975	0.976	30

Additionally, Cochran's Q test ($Q = 52.738, p < 0.01$) was applied to examine whether differences among judgment items across experts were statistically meaningful. The significant result indicates that expert judgments were not homogenized, but organized around distinguishable and stable evaluative patterns. These quantitative indicators are therefore interpreted as supplementary evidence supporting analytical stabilization, while the core findings remain grounded in qualitative interpretation (Table 2).

Table 2: ANOVA with Cochran's Test

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	Cochran's Q	Sig
Between People		382.962	13	29.459		
Within People	Between Items	40.762	29	1.406	52.738	0.005
	Residual	273.038	377	0.724		
	Total	313.800	406	0.773		
Total		696.762	419	1.663		

Grand Mean: 3.81

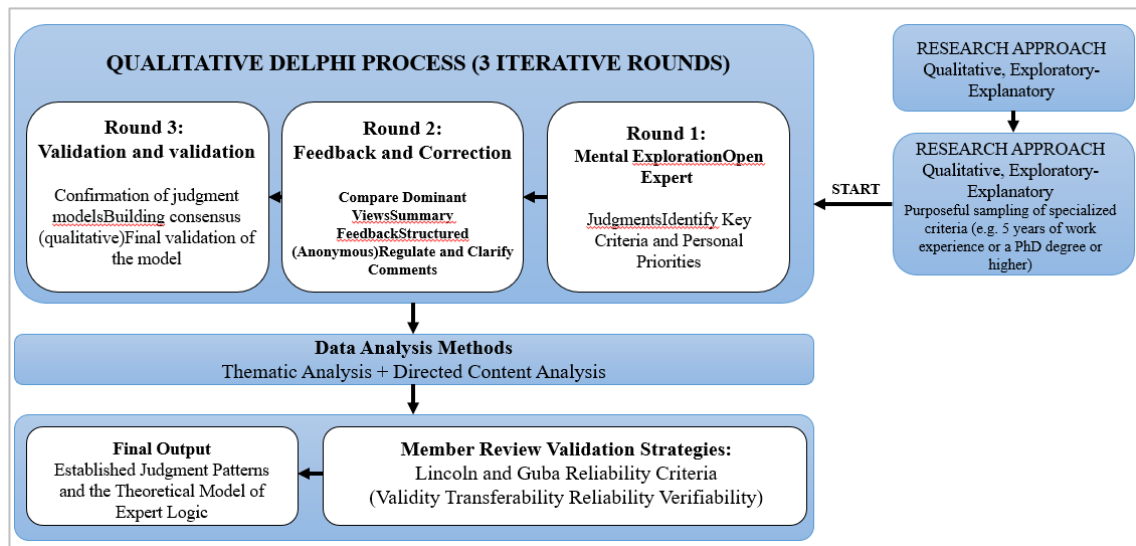


Figure 2: An analytical research design based on a qualitative Delphi approach, conceptualized as a reflective and dialogical tool for uncovering expert judgment logic in urban design. The three-round process facilitates cognitive deframing, comparison of evaluative priorities, and stabilization of shared and divergent mental models regarding pedestrian street quality. By integrating thematic and directed content analysis with iterative member review, the framework translates tacit professional reasoning into an explicit analytical model (Source: Authors).

For example, repeated codes such as “visual order,” “façade alignment,” and “geometric clarity” were clustered under the axial category of visual–formal dominance, which later contributed to the higher order logic conceptualized as visual hegemony.

Ensuring Trustworthiness (Validity and Reliability)

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured in accordance with the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through iterative member checking conducted at the conclusion of each Delphi round, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations and thematic syntheses. Dependability and confirmability were addressed by systematically documenting all analytical steps, coding decisions, and methodological choices, thereby ensuring auditability. To further support dependability, the stability of analytical categories was continuously assessed across Delphi rounds, ensuring that identified judgment logics were not artifacts of a single iteration but persistent patterns of professional reasoning. Transferability was approached analytically rather than statistically. Thick descriptions of expert judgment logics and their contextual grounding in Iranian professional practice are provided to allow readers to assess the relevance of the findings to comparable contexts. Quantitative indicators were not employed to generalize findings or claim statistical validity, but solely to support the transparency and stabilization of the qualitative analytical process across Delphi rounds.

Discussion

This research set out to dig beneath the surface of quality checklists, aiming to uncover the hidden mental models that shape how urban-design experts judge pedestrian spaces. What emerged from three rounds of Delphi dialogue is a story not of technical failure, but of clashing worldviews: the gap between the quality that is designed and the quality that is lived reflects a deep-seated ontological and epistemological divide between designers and everyday users. The following sections weave these findings into three core arguments, each critically engaging with the literature on design thinking and spatial perception (Figure 3).

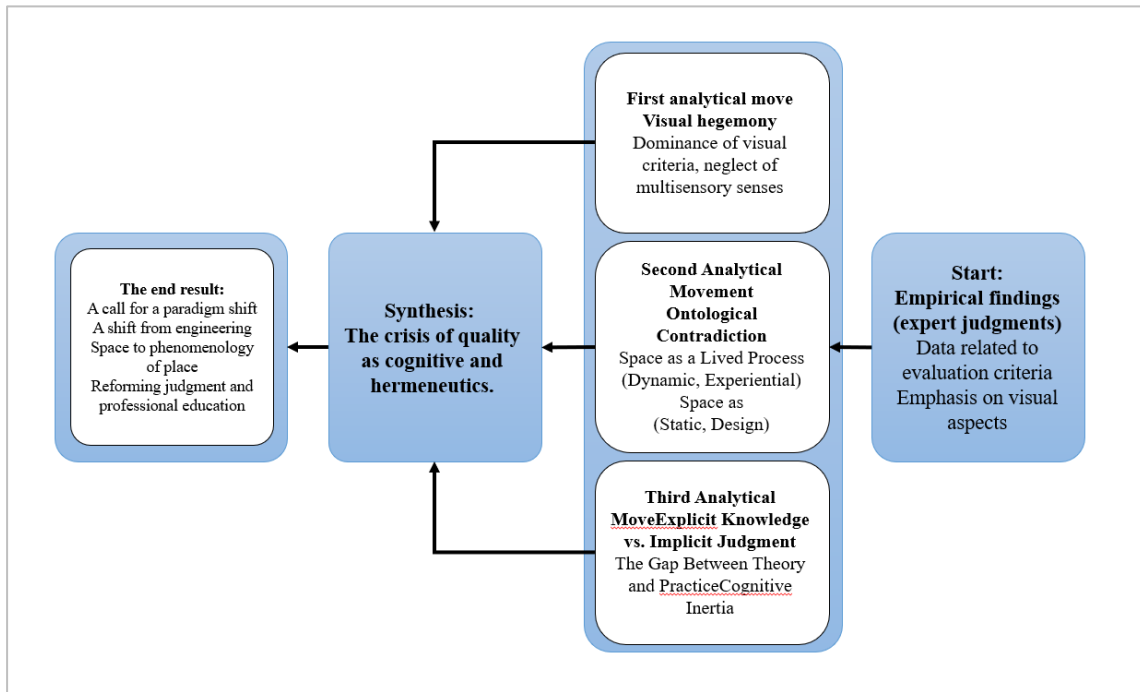


Figure 3: Analytical reasoning path synthesizing the empirical findings and interpretive arguments of the study (Source: Authors).

The diagram traces the progression from empirical expert judgments, characterized by a dominant reliance on visual evaluation criteria, toward three analytical moves:

- Visual hegemony and the systematic exclusion of multisensory experience
- The ontological contradiction between space as a static project and space as a lived, dynamic process
- The gap between experts' explicit theoretical knowledge and their implicit judgmental practices shaped by cognitive inertia.

Together, these intertwined analytical moves converge on a synthesis that frames the quality crisis of pedestrian streets as fundamentally cognitive and hermeneutic, ultimately motivating a paradigm shift from space as an engineered object toward space as a lived phenomenon, with direct implications for professional judgment and design education.

1. The Tyranny of the Eye: When Seeing Becomes Judging

The exclusion of lived and social experience was not framed by experts as a denial of its importance, but rather as a methodological and professional necessity. One expert explicitly stated, "I agree that social life matters, but those aspects are difficult to measure. As professionals, we have to rely on tangible and visible indicators" (Expert 3). Here, measurability operates as a justificatory principle through which multisensory and experiential dimensions are sidelined. This reliance on tangible indicators reinforces a technically oriented judgment logic that privileges what can be visually identified and documented over what is lived, perceived, and socially produced.

The Delphi process revealed a telling cognitive dissonance among experts. In conversation, they championed social, sensory, and human centered values, yet when asked to evaluate actual spaces, their judgment almost invariably snapped back to visual order: symmetry, geometric clarity, and graphic legibility. This pattern mirrors what Akbarshahi (2022) and Bie (2001) describe as the “aesthetic bias” ingrained by architectural education, a preference for tidy, structured compositions over messy, lived complexity. Where this study pushes further is in showing that this visual bias is not a conscious choice but a conditioned reflex, a kind of professional habitus absorbed through years of training and practice. Experts may quote Pallasmaa (2024) on embodied experience or Spence (2022) on multisensory design, but in the heat of judgment, non-visual senses, sound, smell, and texture are quietly filtered out. The result, as Kheiruddin et al. (2019) poignantly note, is streets that are “beautiful yet soulless.” Visual hegemony, we argue, is not an oversight; it is the default operating system of professional vision, one that continually reproduces quality as a visual commodity.

This dominance of visual-formal criteria was consistently articulated by experts when describing their evaluative priorities. As one participant noted, “When I evaluate a pedestrian street, the first thing I look for is visual order, clean lines, façade alignment, and geometric clarity. If these are not present, other aspects become secondary” (Expert 7). This statement exemplifies how spatial quality is primarily reduced to optical coherence and geometric control, positioning visual order as a prerequisite for all other dimensions of evaluation. Such reasoning reveals the internalized hierarchy of visual control within professional practice in which multisensory, social, and experiential aspects of space are systematically marginalized at the initial stage of professional judgment.

2. Project vs. Process: Two Ways of Being in Space

Beneath the surface of evaluation criteria lies a fundamental ontological split. For experts, a pedestrian street is often a project, a finished, deliverable product that can be assessed against a checklist. For users, the same street is a process, a dynamic, time sensitive, ever-changing milieu of encounters and experiences. This finding resonates with recent work by Clement and Soltani (2025) and Molnár (2024) on the chasm between “designed” and “lived” quality. Even when experts nod to the importance of social interaction (Shomai & Eghbal, 2016), the Delphi data show that they tend to reduce it to hardware, benches, plazas, and pause points, missing the phenomenological richness of how people actually inhabit space. This semantic shrinkage explains why checklist-based evaluation tools so often fall short: they capture the artifact but not the experience, the project but not the process.

3. The Knowing–Doing Gap: When Theory Doesn’t Change Practice

This persistence of visual dominance is further sustained through cognitive inertia embedded in professional training and practice. As one participant reflected, “We were trained to evaluate spaces through drawings, sections, and regulations. Even if theories have changed, in practice we still judge projects the same way” (Expert 11). This reflection crystallizes the structural gap between explicit theoretical knowledge and implicit judgmental routines. Even when professionals are aware of contemporary experiential and perceptual theories, their evaluative practices remain anchored in visually mediated tools and conventions, perpetuating visual hegemony through professional socialization rather than conscious resistance. Perhaps the most provocative finding is the stubborn disconnect between what experts know and how they judge. Participants were well versed in the canon of human-centred design, from Gehl’s walkability principles to Jacobs’s Street life observations, yet their practical evaluations remained anchored in engineering logic, traffic metrics, and formal aesthetics.

This echoes Naeimi et al.’s (2014) caution that designerly interpretations often stray from the user lived experience. Our contribution is to frame this gap not as a knowledge deficit but as a cognitive inertia, a collective reluctance to recalibrate the mental algorithms that guide professional judgment. In other words, more information does not automatically lead to better judgment. Thus, while many studies call for new regulations or finer grained evaluation criteria, our findings point to a deeper lever: the unwritten rules of professional critique and the value systems that silently steer design decisions. The quality crisis in Iranian

pedestrian streets, we contend, is less about missing bricks and mortar and more about a crisis of perception, a failure to see space as users live it. Until professional judgment expands beyond the visual and the formal, and until lived experience becomes the true benchmark of quality, our streets will remain elegant stage sets rather than vibrant, living places.

At the core of the quality crisis in urban design lies a simple but persistent divide: professionals and users do not evaluate space in the same way. On one side stands designed quality, an objective, formal logic grounded in geometric order, technical drawings, and measurable physical criteria that dominate expert judgment. On the other side is lived quality, the way space is actually experienced through the body, the senses, movement, and everyday social encounters. Placing these two logics side by side exposes the central dilemma explored in this study. What professionals explicitly assess often fails to align with what users actually experience. Current evaluation frameworks tend to reward what can be seen, measured, and drawn, while overlooking the situated, intersubjective meanings that emerge through use. This imbalance helps explain why visually “successful” projects may still feel lifeless or unconvincing in practice, and why a fundamental recalibration of professional judgment, and design education is no longer optional, but necessary.

Conclusion

This study shows that the recurring shortcomings observed in many Iranian pedestrian street projects cannot be adequately understood through deficiencies in physical standards, technical regulations, or evaluation indicators alone. Instead, the findings suggest that these shortcomings are closely linked to how professionals cognitively interpret, prioritize, and operationalize notions of quality through deeply internalized judgment logics. By shifting analytical attention from design outcomes to the processes of professional judgment, this research addresses a critical gap in the literature that has largely treated expert evaluations as neutral and self-evident.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of repurposing the Qualitative Delphi method as a reflective and interpretive inquiry into expert cognition rather than a consensus-seeking or ranking technique. Through iterative rounds of dialogue, feedback, and analytical stabilization, the approach enabled the identification of persistent evaluative patterns and the articulation of otherwise tacit professional assumptions. In this sense, the contribution of the study lies not in statistical generalization but in offering a transparent analytical pathway from expert discourse to conceptual interpretation.

Theoretically, the findings support the notion of a dual ontology of urban quality, distinguishing between quality as a designed, static artifact and quality as a lived, dynamic process. While empirically grounded in the Iranian context, this distinction is proposed as a conceptually transferable framework that may inform critical reflection on professional judgment in other socio-cultural settings.

From a practical perspective, the study suggests that improving pedestrian street quality requires more than refining design guidelines or adding new evaluation criteria. It calls for a reconsideration of the epistemological foundations of professional judgment and greater attention to lived, multisensory experience within both design practice and education. Acknowledging the contextual scope and qualitative nature of the findings, future research could extend this line of inquiry by examining how alternative judgment frameworks might reshape design decisions and urban outcomes in different contexts.

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Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence: AI based language tools were used solely for English language editing and stylistic refinement. These tools did not contribute to data analysis, interpretation, theoretical development, or decision-making processes. All analytical content, arguments, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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