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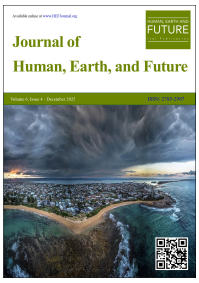

The Ideal City: A Planning Approach to Sustainable Urban Place Making

Jakleen Q. Zumaya [1], Tuqa R. Alrobaee [2], Ali M. Abuali [2], Ahmed S. Al-Khafaji [2*], Ghaith J. Althabhawi [2]

[1] *College of Applied Arts, Uruk University, Baghdad, 10068, Iraq.*

[2] *Faculty of Physical Planning, University of Kufa, Al-Najaf 54001, Iraq.*

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Abstract

This study proposes a planning approach for the "ideal sustainable city" that reconciles spiritual, material, and behavioral dimensions. It aims to apply the philosophical concepts of idealism into workable indicators that respect local identity and integrate sustainability goals. The study employed an analytical methodology that combines a spatial analysis approach using geographic information systems (GIS) for several indicators, including the land use index, 15-minute access to services, and population density. It also utilized a field survey analyzed using a Likert scale, as well as a comparative review of three international case studies (Auroville, Freiburg, and the Vatican). The indicators were applied to the city of Kadhimiya (Baghdad). The results indicated a diverse land use structure, equitable access to services, moderate population density, and high residential density. Meanwhile, the spiritual indicators (religious, cognitive, and emotional) scored highest, while the perceived safety level was average. Aesthetic aspects declined due to the asymmetry of facades and poor maintenance. While the behavioral factor played a role as a link between spiritual and material values through attention to public space, renovation/improvement within a complex framework that takes into account the context and respects the religious heritage city.

Keywords: The Ideal Sustainable City; Physical Factors; Social Characteristics; Spiritual Factors; Behavioral Factors.

1. Introduction

The concept of the ideal city has long captivated philosophers and urbanists, serving as a lens through which societies imagine moral order, social harmony, and human flourishing. Although no single, universally accepted definition exists, various intellectual traditions from the classical utopia to the modern “good city” paradigm have sought to articulate how urban form can reflect justice, balance, and collective well-being [1]. While these approaches differ across time and culture, they converge on a central vision: cities should not merely provide shelter or infrastructure but also nurture belonging, beauty, and ethical purpose. Yet, despite centuries of theorization, contemporary sustainability practice often abstracts the city into a technical object, efficient but spiritually and socially hollow, where measurable performance outweighs moral and cultural identity [2].

The ideal city transcends mere spatial organization; it represents a synthesis of religious, social, and aesthetic values that harmonize material efficiency with moral purpose [3]. Philosophical traditions have grounded this vision in

* Corresponding author: ahmeds.alkhfaji@uokufa.edu.iq

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enduring principles such as justice, moderation, virtue, and civic participation, affirming that a truly ideal city sustains both people and planet through balanced governance and ethical stewardship. However, contemporary sustainability frameworks have increasingly become over-physicalized, reducing urban performance to quantifiable metrics of density, infrastructure, or energy efficiency while neglecting intangible dimensions of spirituality, meaning, and collective identity. This over-emphasis on physical efficiency privileges the environmental and economic pillars of sustainability, while the social and spiritual pillars remain conceptually underdeveloped and empirically underrepresented [4, 5].

Several empirical and historical studies have illustrated this persistent imbalance between the physical and the spiritual in urban theory and practice. Kourtit et al. (2020) differentiated between a city's "spirit," its social capital and cultural identity, and its "body," defined by physical infrastructure, showing that citizens' affection for their city depends strongly on non-physical attributes such as walkability, liveliness, and social vitality [6]. McDonald et al. (2018) further demonstrated that integrating nature into urban life enhances psychological well-being, emphasizing the importance of sensory and emotional equilibrium in sustainable urban environments [7]. Johnson-Woods and Feldpausch-Parker (2022) introduced the twin paradigms of New Urbanism and New Ruralism as hybrid frameworks that reconcile density with openness to preserve the "spirit of place" [8]. In a historical context, Strickland (2023) examined New York's 1961 zoning reforms to reveal the tension between utopian planning ideals and the socio-economic realities that reshape them [9]. Likewise, May (2023) traced early Mesopotamian and classical models of proportion and harmony as ancient expressions of moral spatial order linking geometry with virtue [10]. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that while the physical form of cities can be optimized, their spiritual and ethical dimensions remain the foundation of urban meaning and attachment, a premise central to the present research.

Classical idealism viewed the city as a moral entity in which the physical order reflects inner virtue. Thus, form and meaning are inseparable. In this current study, idealism is approached as a philosophical and ethical orientation, not as a religious doctrine. Thus, the spiritual dimension refers to the emotional and symbolic forces of peace, belonging, beauty, and transcendence that give urban form its moral and emotional resonance. These can be translated into behavioral indicators (social cohesion, cooperation, and attachment) through the tripartite structure (spiritual, behavioral, and material). The study seeks to achieve harmony between meaning and matter.

Recent studies have renewed the connection between spirituality and sustainability, emphasizing moral and affective dimensions in urban well-being. Müller (2023) identified human–nature resonance as a spiritual driver for sustainability transformation [11], while Ramanathan (2025) linked spirituality with social development through compassion and ethical awareness [12]. de Diego Cordero et al. (2024) demonstrated that ecospirituality enhances environmental care and global health by integrating indigenous worldviews [13]. In the Global South, Ogunbode (2023) revealed that religious practices in Nigerian cities shape both communal solidarity and ecological pressures [14], and Al-Thani (2025) showed that spiritual well-being in Qatar intertwines faith, ethics, and belonging [15]. Together, these works affirm that sustainability transcends physical efficiency, requiring cultural and spiritual coherence for true human flourishing.

Manassova et al. (2024) pointed to the evolution of the concept of the ideal city from ancient times to the present day. The study placed great importance on social dynamics within the city. It also addressed the evolution of ideas about urban space, particularly those related to religious, ethical, mythological, social, and aesthetic priorities, as well as its focus on issues related to urban security. The study encourages consideration of urban projects that contribute to social reconstruction and in which the spiritual and ethical ideas of society prevail. This can lead to meeting the aspirations of current generations to consider the public good and achieve justice within the city, as well as security and comfort [16].

In his study of the ideal city, Donato (2024) attempted to present a strange synthesis between Aristotle and utopia. Through his in-depth study of Politics, he demonstrated Aristotle's keen interest in imagining the ideal city. The study indicated that Aristotle adopted a multifaceted approach to his analysis of ideal cities, summed up by his critique of previous ideal cities and the cities he designed. This study attempted to shed light on the points of convergence between contemporary utopias and Aristotle's utopia, demonstrating how they share essential components [17].

One of the studies that provided a new understanding of the ideal city and its mechanisms is Marques's 2025 study. The author presented a new and bold idea, summed up in the study's main question: "Why do different cultures, across such diverse and diverse geographies, embrace a common notion of the so-called 'informal city' as a place to live?" He considered the informal city to be an ideal urban model, a spatial response to a specific urban landscape. Despite its many drawbacks, it offers the potential for the emergence of a new lifestyle. In his opinion, this ideal urban entity (informal cities) emerged as a necessary and rapid response to the absence of public land policies, housing market failures, or conditions resulting from social and economic crises. Marques believes that the informal city is ideal in its ability to meet people's needs under specific circumstances [18].

Providing a critical assessment of several contemporary urban models that have emerged as part of the efforts of urban planners and designers to address environmental, social, and economic challenges, Barsi, in 2024, introduced concepts such as the "creative city," the "smart city," and the "happy city." He argued that the creative city focuses on

developing the cultural and creative industry and stimulating economic growth, while the smart city is based on the use of information and communications technologies to improve urban systems and shift toward sustainability. The happy city, on the other hand, focuses on mental health, social cohesion, and human well-being, relying on a number of urban physical components. His study addressed the potential impacts and risks of these models, such as overreliance on technology and increased social disparities. He concluded that a single model cannot be applied to all urban settlements due to differences in their characteristics, such as the natural environment, history, roots, and traditions [19].

In the context of some of the criticisms directed at sustainable cities, Leino et al. (2025) presented criticisms of the urban renewal approach used to transform the Finnish city of Tampere into a sustainable city. A set of serious challenges emerged, which can be summarized as: the loss of social equality, changes in the social and cultural fabric of neighborhoods, as well as an increase in the cost of living and housing rents, which causes class gaps due to the exclusion of low-income people. The study recommended the need to reconsider urban policies in light of sustainable development to ensure social justice [20].

The UN-Habitat's "Right to the City" paradigm emphasizes equitable access, participation, and dignity in urban life principles reflected in the model's behavioral and material dimensions [21]. Similarly, the emerging Urban Happiness Index links environmental quality and social interaction with emotional well-being, aligning closely with the study's spiritual and affective indicators [22]. Integrating these frameworks situates the research within current sustainability discourse, bridging local cultural contexts with universal goals of justice and human flourishing.

Previous studies have noted the absence of integrated approaches that integrate spiritual and behavioral dimensions with physical indicators in sustainable planning. The current research addresses this gap by proposing a three-dimensional planning model that unifies the spiritual, behavioral, and physical aspects of urban sustainability. The model identifies measurable indicators for each dimension: spiritual (religious, emotional, cognitive, and aesthetic), behavioral (cohesion, belonging, and cooperation), and physical (density, accessibility, land-use entropy, and environmental quality). This model was pilot tested in Kadhimiya (Baghdad), a heritage area rich in symbolic and spiritual identity, and compared to three global models: Auroville, Freiburg, and Vatican City.

This research seeks to transform idealism from a philosophical concept into measurable urban indicators by integrating it with the concept of urban sustainability to bridge the gap between the epistemological concept and empirical urban practice. Figure 1: Formulating the general outlines of the research based on the knowledge gap.

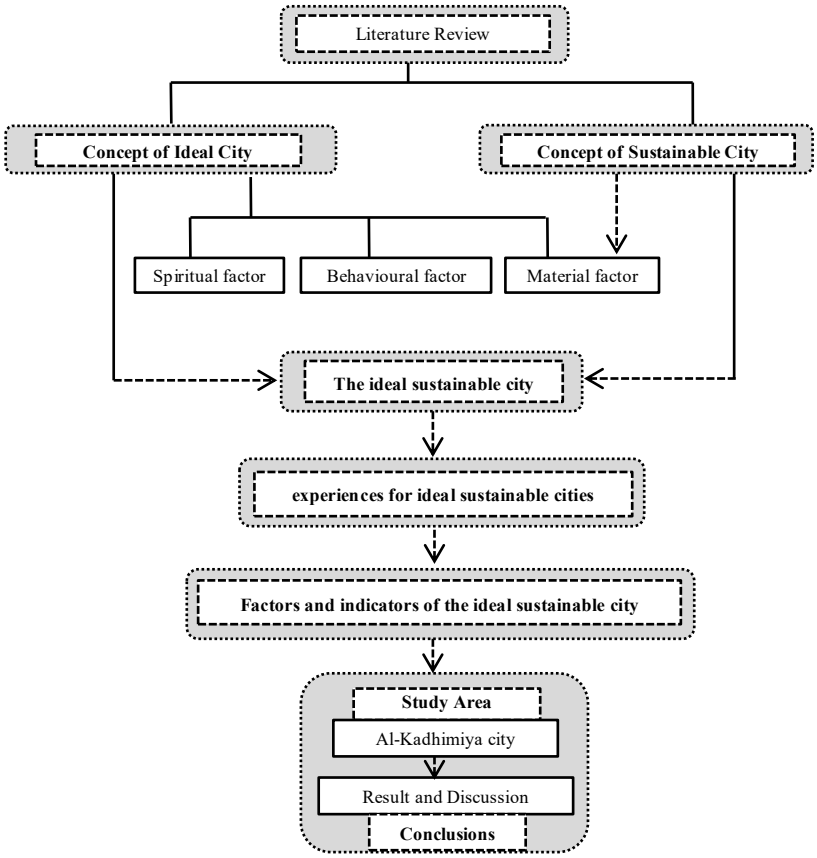


Figure 1. Formulating the general outlines of the research based on the knowledgegap

The first section of the research will present the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the ideal city and its relationship to sustainability. The second section will explain similar experiences of ideal sustainable cities. The third section will derive the factors and indicators of the ideal sustainable city. The fourth section will explain the scientific methodology used in the research. The fifth section will define the case study. The sixth section will discuss and analyze the case study. The seventh and final section will discuss the experimental results and directions for future research.

1.1. Philosophical Trends in Interpreting the Ideal City

Plato is known as the father of idealism. In his idealist philosophy, he presented two existences: the first is the world of the spirit, or mental existence, which is permanent, everlasting, and orderly. The second is the existence of the body, or the world of appearance, whose existence depends on the perception of the five senses. This existence lacks perfection and organization. Based on the foundations he presented in his philosophy, Plato presented a comprehensive description of the city, calling it the virtuous city. Plato creates a model of training and education for the elite of society, marginalizing the common people. The common people serve the elite and provide for their needs. Plato's philosophy relies on the exclusive role of reason in acquiring knowledge. The soul ascends to the world of ideas and acquires superior knowledge through the mind [23]. According to Plato's theory of the soul in The Republic, the soul consists of three parts: reason, appetite, and spirit. Unlike Plato, Al-Farabi sought to achieve perfection for all of the city's inhabitants, as his city was linked to the concept of ethics. For Al-Farabi, the source of knowledge is reason, along with the associated divine revelation. He also points out that the role of reason alone, as well as the imaginative faculty and the soul, also play a role in acquiring knowledge, comparing his city to a living body. Al-Farabi's theory of the soul in the virtuous city states that the soul has five main faculties: nutrition, sensation, representation, appetite, and reason. From the above, three basic trends in the concept of idealism can be summarized:

- First: The trend of subjective idealism: Idealism considers that man is a combination of mind and matter, or as it is known, the soul and body, and that the soul is something that can only be perceived by the mind, and not by the senses that perceive the body. It considers that a person's thoughts and beliefs originate from the mind or the soul. Idealists believe that knowledge and ideas based on both the mind and the soul represent reality [24].
- Second: The objective idealism trend: This type of philosophy believes in the objectivity and reality of things in the world. Human knowledge is determined by the nature of the world. The world is both ideal and real. This is reflected in the type of knowledge derived from it, which is also real. This trend supports the role of the senses in discovering the world and the reality of things, as the construction of rational knowledge must be based on them [25].
- Third: The trend of personal idealism: that truth is not represented by an abstract idea or a specific thought process, but rather by the personality and is reflected in behavior. The personality of the individual is what represents the awareness through which facts are perceived and is reflected in experiences. Personal idealists believe that life has a value that cannot be expressed in words or fixed meanings, and that the human being has a greater value than anything else, and that societies must appreciate this value and care about meeting all the needs of all their members [26].

We note that the latter trend is close to the philosophy adopted by Al-Farabi in his book “The Views of the People of the Virtuous City” in Islamic philosophy, as he emphasizes the advancement and building of societies and cities, which must be based on virtues, cooperation between people, ethics, and everything that serves the interests of individuals in this world and the hereafter, and achieves happiness for them [27].

The previous paragraph highlighted three philosophical trends with their clear issues in philosophical schools, each adopting different preferences for the soul and the body. Based on these trends, we can derive three basic approaches that represent the philosophy of ideal city planning:

- The trend of prioritizing the spiritual over the material: This trend emphasizes the predominance of spiritual issues related to the human conscience and subjective feelings at the expense of the city's material aspects. This can be summarized by the following indicators: religious dimension, sense of security, emotional dimension, cognitive dimension, and aesthetic dimension.
- The trend of prioritizing material over spiritual: This trend emphasizes the predominance of material issues related to the city's structure, its physical environment, and its components at the expense of spiritual issues. This trend can be summarized by the following indicators: availability of opportunities, employment, food and water availability, availability of infrastructure, availability of housing, and land use.
- The spiritual-material balance orientation: This orientation emphasizes the balance between the spiritual and material aspects by reflecting their influence on user behavior in the city. This orientation may be the most significant, as the paramount importance of the ideal city must be reflected in the city's fulfillment of its users' needs and the extent to which it achieves their happiness and comfort. This orientation can be summarized by the following indicators: interpersonal trust, citizens' willingness to engage in cooperation and exchange, a sense of belonging to the group, property rights, the right to access services, pollution prevention, and the protection of environmental resources.

1.2. Sustainability and Idealism

As is well known, sustainable cities are the result of confronting rapid urbanization and increasing consumption, and the resulting environmental, social, and economic solutions. Urban sustainability is defined as the desired state of the urban environment, in which resources are used rationally to ensure balance and justice between successive generations, protect the natural and built environment within the city, achieve economic stability, community self-reliance, and achieve high well-being for its members, fulfilling their basic needs [28].

Sustainable cities around the world share a set of similar concepts: mixed land use, diversity, compactness, density, sustainable transportation, latent design, and greening. Accordingly, researchers in the field of urban sustainability have pointed to basic theories that address sustainability indicators, such as the 3D theory, which includes density, diversity, and design, and the 5D theory, which includes density, diversity, design, destination accessibility, and distance to transit [29-31].

This similarity in concepts and indicators among sustainable city types around the world has created a state of similarity that may approach the level of identity in the urban structure of these cities. This has sparked debate about the identity of the place and the spiritual aspect that the city should possess, based on the characteristics of the place that distinguish it from others. There is a knowledge gap in urban sustainability's approach to the spiritual dimensions of the city or the identity of the place, as sources usually refer to this concept in terms of what is known as well-being or quality. The authors of this study agree that spiritual dimensions are achieved through the planning and design of urban environments that take into account or reflect the state of physical, psychological, and spiritual balance among residents. Accordingly, this balance can be achieved through the ideal city approach.

Sustainable city indicators are purely physical indicators that do not take into account the spiritual aspect. Therefore, the ideal city approach has been proposed, which includes, among its indicators, religious, emotional, cognitive, and aesthetic dimensions that explore the profound meanings of place, thereby constituting the spiritual aspect of the city.

These dimensions complement other material indicators to achieve the ideal sustainable city. The next section of the research will discuss three cities that have achieved sustainability indicators, as well as possessing the uniqueness of spiritual and aesthetic features that the ideal city approach focuses on.

2. Experiences of Pioneering Cities

This section will review the experiences of pioneering cities around the world that combine the characteristics of idealism and sustainability, to derive indicators for the ideal sustainable city.

The three cities Auroville (India), Freiburg (Germany), and Vatican City (Italy) were selected to represent distinct cultural models within the context of sustainable urbanism. Auroville embodies an Eastern, communal, spiritual model that integrates ecological living with transcendent values. Freiburg reflects a Western environmental model characterized by participatory governance, social justice, and energy efficiency. Vatican City embodies a symbolic religious model, where moral order and spiritual identity shape spatial organization.

2.1. Auroville – India

Located in southern India, near the city of Pondicherry, it has a population of about 2,500 people of more than 50 nationalities, living cooperatively on the east coast. The city was founded in 1968 on the initiative of Mira Alfassa, nicknamed “ The Mother." This city is managed by Aurobindo International with the support of the Indian government and UNESCO. It relies on the city not just being a place to live, but rather a human experience of living in peace, cooperation, and spiritual integration. The city is based on four principles: belonging to all humanity, striving for continuous development, not being subject to any particular religion or sect, and working as a collective service, not for personal gain. This city was designed by the French architect Roger Anger.

This city is characterized by a circular layout with a spiritual center (Matrimandir) in the middle, which is the spiritual heart of Auroville, in addition to a huge golden dome used for silent meditation. The city is not dominated by religious rituals, and the houses are diverse in design and sustainable, constructed from local materials. The city is also surrounded by forests and organic farms, which are used to achieve food and environmental self-sufficiency. The main reason the city is ideal and sustainable is its harmony with itself, society, and the environment, as well as its breaking down of religious and ethnic barriers. The city is a true model of self-sufficiency and sustainable living and a true human test of spiritual and social development [32]. As illustrated in Figure 2, Auroville City in India represents a contemporary experiment in spiritual and communal urbanism.

Figure 2. Auroville city in India

2.2. Freiburg – Germany

It is considered one of the most successful sustainable cities in the world, achieving the "ideal city" model through a balance between the environment, self-sufficiency, social justice, fair planning, and community spirit. The city focuses not only on direct religious practices, but also embodies an environmental and ethical spirit in daily life. There is a clear harmony between humans and nature, viewed as a moral and spiritual value, which promotes mental health and a connection to the environment [33]. The city aims to achieve energy self-sufficiency through solar power, and encourages urban agriculture and local organic food initiatives. The city includes several distinct neighborhoods, such as Vauban [34].

It is an example of a semi-independent community in terms of energy and services. It is considered one of the world's most sustainable neighborhoods, as it is car-free, relies on renewable energy, and is designed to foster social interaction. In the housing sector, there are residential projects that take into account social diversity and income levels, such as the Rieselfeld neighborhood. The city also relies on the use of low-energy building technologies, which allows for cost savings in the long term [35]. As shown in Figure 3, Freiburg in Germany stands as a global exemplar of environmental sustainability and technological innovation.

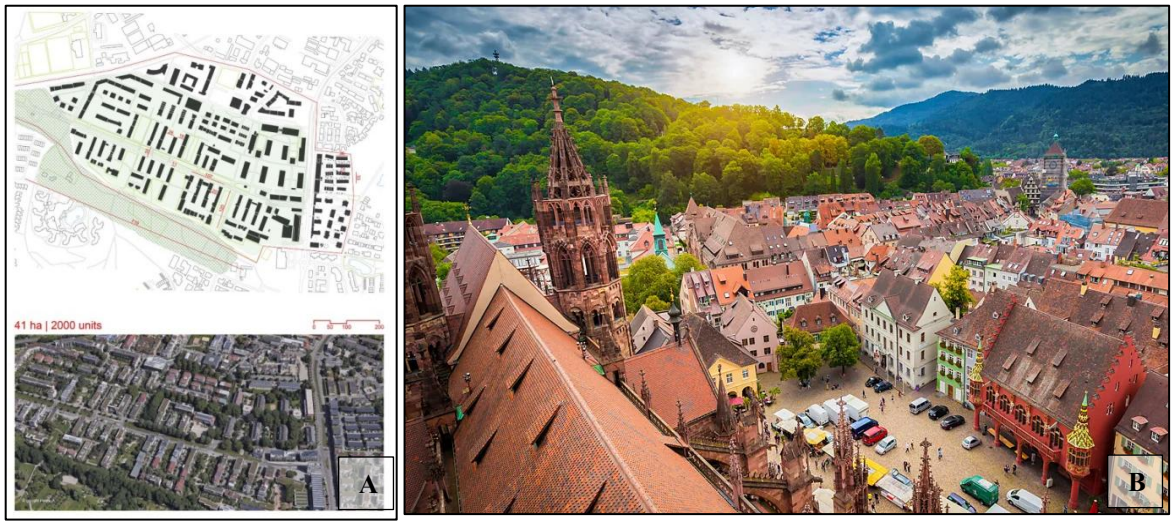


Figure 3. (a) City plan Freiburg, (b) forest Freiburg: a city in Germany located in a forest

2.3. Vatican – Italy

It is a miniature model of an ideal sustainable city. Space is limited, but the city planning is rational and efficient in distributing events. We also note the preservation of the historical architectural identity while incorporating modern energy and sustainability solutions. The city's spiritual dimension is evident in the presence of the world center of the Catholic Church and its use of faith and religion as a motivation for environmental conservation. The city is also distinguished by its preservation of the sacred character of its public spaces and architectural symbolism.

On the environmental front, the city relied on renewable energy and the shift to electric vehicles, in addition to the use of smart LED lighting systems to reduce energy consumption. City planning focused on increasing the percentage of green spaces, which now represent more than 50% of the total area. City planning also reinforced religious and ethical dimensions as tools for sustainable development, linking spiritual, environmental, and social values within a clear urban landscape [36]. As depicted in Figure 4, Vatican City in Italy exemplifies a compact urban model deeply rooted in spirituality, symbolism, and cultural heritage.

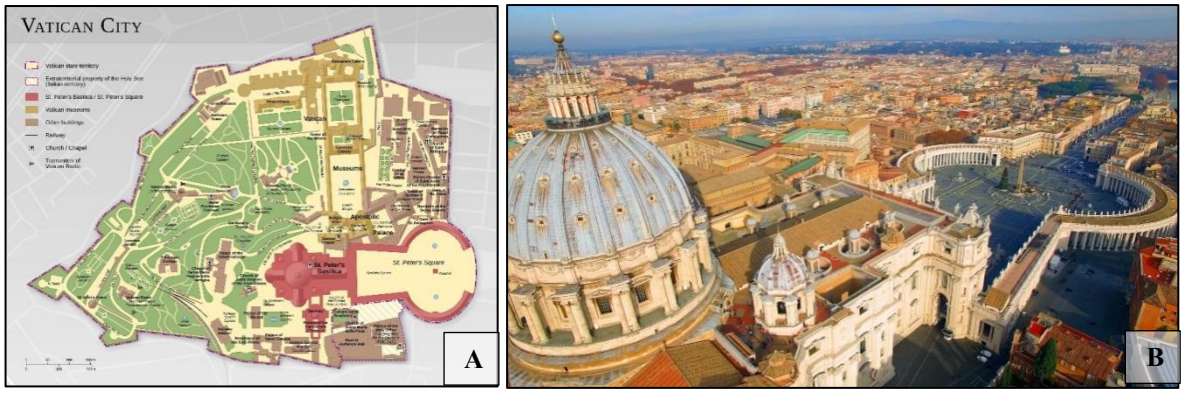


Figure 4. (a) Plan of Vatican City, (b) Urban spaces and distinctive elements of the city

Table 1. A summary of the factors and indicators of the ideal sustainable city according to the three previous experiments

The factors	Auroville – India	Freiburg – Germany	Vatican – Italy
Spiritual aspect	It houses the Matrimandir meditation centre as a spiritual hub.	Respect for nature is part of spiritual values.	It is a global center of the Catholic Church, home to St. Peter's Basilica and the Holy See, and is a global religious symbol.
Self-sufficiency	Reliance on renewable energy and organic agriculture.	Relying on solar energy and urban agriculture.	It is not entirely economically or food-sufficient, but relies on church donations, stamp and coin sales, and private media sources.
Providing appropriate population and housing density	Sustainable housing built with local materials.	Sustainable and affordable housing.	Housing is provided for clergy and employees (not open to the public), and there is strict regulation of housing distribution within the small town.
Land use distribution	A circular planning that distributes residential, agricultural, and cultural areas in a balanced manner.	Urban planning that integrates housing, work, and leisure.	The planning is clear and precise: areas for worship, administrative areas, residential areas, and the Vatican Gardens are all distributed effectively despite the small area.
Social aspect	A cooperative society without individual ownership, which promotes community participation.	Resident participation in decision-making and neighbourhood planning.	A small, organized community based on religious and functional affiliation. Its members enjoy strong community solidarity and shared functional and religious ties.
Environmental aspect	Design in harmony with nature, preserving biodiversity.	An environmentally friendly transportation system and vast green spaces.	Environmental initiatives have been launched by the Vatican, such as the use of electric vehicles and LED lighting systems.

3. Indicators and Metrics of the Ideal Sustainable City

From the above, several detailed indicators can be derived that are effective in planning the ideal sustainable city and explaining the methods for measuring them, as follows:

3.1. The Spiritual Factor

Regular spiritual activities practiced by people are essential to ensuring a balanced life and expressing one's relationship with God, the forces of nature, or the spirits of ancestors [37]. This was evident in the planning of buildings dedicated to the spiritual aspect, namely:

- Religious dimension: Creating quiet spaces around official religious buildings or places, such as churches, temples, mosques, and cemeteries, which enhances spiritual experiences and benefits users [38].
- Feeling safe: According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, safety and security are among the basic second-order needs that must be met by all humans [39]. A sense of safety has been shown to contribute significantly to mental health. It is often recognized as a key component of ideal sustainable communities, as it is associated with lower crime rates [40, 41].
- The emotional dimension: Emotion is one of the psychological processes that human perceptions can experience. Emotions are a type of driving force that stimulates and directs human behavior. Emotions are emotional states with physiological, cognitive, and behavioral components [42]. The emotional dimension, in particular, has become an essential part of urban planning, as emotional relationships and responses can structure urban spaces and thus highlight certain behaviors. They are thus linked to human interaction in urban spaces, which gives them sustainability and permanence, which makes people happy based on some desired outcomes in their minds, in addition to intensifying emotion and sensory connection to the urban context [43].
- Cognitive dimension: It includes the human relationship with the cognitive elements of the place, as the memories, beliefs, meaning, and knowledge that individuals form with their surroundings make them personally important. Attachment to place as a cognitive state involves the structure of both connection and meaning of place. Cognition facilitates proximity to place. Through memory, people create the meaning of

place and connect it to the self. One can develop attachment to environments in which memorable history or important events have occurred. These communities have been described as “symbolic communities,” since attachment is based on mental representations [44].

- Aesthetic dimension: Spirituality represents a subtle blend of buildings, nature, and its various forms, or provides elements of surprise and suspense to reveal one thing and hide another [45]. It is an indicator strongly linked to the spiritual aspect. The most important element of a city's urban identity, distinguishing it from other cities, is its aesthetic value. One of the most prominent aesthetic values of the city is the preservation of the city’s cultural and civilizational heritage and its natural characteristics [46].

3.2. The Physical Factor

This factor includes a group of sub-indicators that are related to the physical structure of the city and can be measured quantitatively, namely:

- Self-sufficiency: A self-sufficient city is defined as one with a defined perimeter, in which a population is self-sufficient: that is, there is an economy within the city that fully employs the population, and services and cultural infrastructure within the city are sufficient to supply the population [47]. Perhaps the most important things that require self-sufficiency within cities are: food supplies through urban agriculture, fresh water supplies, air purification (clean air), carbon reduction, and flood prevention [48]. In addition to the necessity of achieving energy self-sufficiency, using one of the types of renewable energy [49].
- Housing: This includes the right of individuals to obtain adequate housing for human life. It includes three important indicators: the provision of affordable housing, a high rate of housing ownership, and density. Affordable housing is defined as housing that is not "excessively expensive relative to basic production costs." It is also defined as housing that has an acceptable relationship between household income and expenditure on housing costs [50]. One of the effects of affordable housing on an ideal and sustainable city is its impact on human health, both mental and physical, as it leads to improved health outcomes by freeing up household resources for food and healthcare expenses. It also provides greater residential stability for families, which reduces stress and the associated adverse health outcomes [51]. It is measured through field surveys, knowing the prices of housing units, and comparing them with the average income. As for the ownership of residential units, it enhances the feeling of belonging to the place and reinforces its idealism, as the emotional and financial investment used in constructing, purchasing, and decorating the residence will be made, in addition to the time, effort, and money spent [52]. Home ownership may contribute to improved health by fostering greater self-esteem, increasing residential stability, and increasing feelings of security and control over one's physical environment, as measured by a questionnaire. As for density, the relationship between it and the ideal sustainable city is multidimensional, as it is linked to several variables such as livability, quality of infrastructure, appropriate access distances, and others [53]. Density may be the most common attribute for achieving sustainability because it is related to the effective population numbers that make urban activities and functions efficient and sustainable. Density is summarized by two indicators: population density, which is a demographic measure of the number of people in a unit of area and is expressed in people/hectare. Many sources indicate that the appropriate population density is 200-250 people/hectare. Housing density, which indicates the relationship between residential use and other uses, is measured by dividing the number of housing units by the unit area, and its appropriate value is 40-50 housing units per hectare [54].
- Equitable distribution of land uses and services: Equity is one of the fundamental characteristics of an ideal sustainable city. Therefore, there must be equity in the distribution of land uses and services. Diversity in land uses can reduce spatial inequality and enhance the quality of services provided to residents [55]. Another key element that achieves justice is fair access to all facilities and services, which should not exceed a 15-minute walk, including access to public transportation [56].

3.3. Behavioral Factor

This factor is the link between the spiritual and physical factors in the city, through users’ perception of their environments and their reflection in their behavior. The indicators of this factor are as follows:

- Social cohesion: Social cohesion is based on the strength of social relationships characterized by the presence of trust and participation among individuals within that society. Social cohesion is also defined as the sense of belonging and connectedness felt by individuals. This depends on the inclusion of all groups in society in daily social interactions, ensuring that all residents of a city or community are connected to the broader institutions that make up society. It is inherently based on social justice: without equitable access to opportunities and resources and inclusion in civic life, the social fabric cannot hold together. In ideal cities, human relationships

are a fundamental component of citizens' quality of life. These relationships, often referred to as social capital, depend on trust between individuals, the strength of community solidarity networks, and citizens' willingness to practice mutual assistance and cooperation [57].

- Environmental aspects: The environmentally conscious city is the ideal urban model in which nature and technology are fully integrated and human creativity and productivity are maximized. This factor contains several sub-indicators: preventing the spread of various types of pollution, revitalizing vegetation cover, using renewable energy, producing renewable and carbon-free energy, protecting environmental and basic resources, and protecting and enhancing biological and natural corridors [58, 59]. Table 2 shows a summary of the factors and indicators, their measurement methods, and their standards.

Table 2. Ideal city indicators and methods for measuring them

The factors	Main Indicators	Sub-Indicators	Measurement method	Standard
Spiritual factor	Religious dimension	Official religious buildings such as churches, temples, and mosques	Questionnaire form	Likert scale
		Buildings for shrines and cemeteries		
		Create quiet spaces around religious buildings		
	Feeling safe	With crime rates declining	Questionnaire form	Likert scale
		The presence of security and surveillance elements		
	Emotional dimension	Sensory contact with the urban context	Questionnaire form	Likert scale
		Response rate and interaction with physical structures		
	Cognitive dimension	Cognitive Material Elements in the City	Questionnaire form	Likert scale
		Events and Memories in the City		
	Aesthetic dimension	Integration of buildings with nature	Questionnaire form	Likert scale
		The presence of buildings that express the identity and heritage of the place		
		The presence of elements of surprise and suspense in urban design		
Physical factor	Self-sufficiency	Possibility of obtaining a job opportunity	Through a field survey: comparing the available job opportunities with the number of people able to work	Availability of job opportunities for all who can work
		Food supplies	Field survey	The presence of urban agriculture
		Fresh water supply	Field survey	The presence of freshwater sources
		Energy self-sufficiency	Field survey and relevant department data	The amount of power output
	Housing	Availability of affordable housing	Field survey: comparing citizens' incomes with housing unit prices	Unit prices are proportional to income rates
		The high percentage of residential ownership	Questionnaire form	The higher the ownership percentage, the better.
		Population density	Field survey	200-250
		Housing density	Field survey	40-50
	Fair distribution of land uses and services	Diversity of land uses	GIS, entropy equation	0-1
		Fair access to all services (15 minutes)	GIS measuring the access distance for all services	The distance ranges from 500-800 m.
Behavioral factor	Social cohesion	Trust between individuals	Questionnaire form	The higher the cohesion, the better.
		The power of solidarity networks in society	Field survey and relevant department data	Taking the necessary measures to achieve it
		The willingness of citizens to exercise mutual assistance and cooperation		
		A feeling of belonging to the group		
	Environmental aspects	Preventing the spread of various types of pollution	Field survey and relevant department data	Taking the necessary measures to achieve it
		Revitalizing vegetation		
		Production and using renewable energy		
		Protecting environmental and basic resources		
		Protecting and enhancing biological and natural pathways		

4. Research Methodology

The research methodology employed an analytical approach to sustainability theories and idealism theories to determine the ideal sustainable city. Previous literature on both concepts was presented to explore their factors and indicators. The study then reviewed several experiences that exhibit the characteristics of ideal sustainable cities, from which three key factors were identified: spiritual, physical, and behavioral. These factors were divided into main and sub-indicators. They were measured in various quantitative and descriptive ways. Each indicator was described, along with the measurement method and appropriate criteria for achieving the ideal sustainable city.

These indicators were applied to measure and analyze the current situation of the Kadhimiya city, Baghdad, to identify the city's strengths, weaknesses, and potential strengths. This methodology was used to develop a plan for the future development of Kadhimiya city, in accordance with the concept of an ideal sustainable city (Figure 5).

The research population consists of the residents of the Old City of Kadhimiya (n = 31,847). The minimum sample size was calculated using the Stephen K. Thompson equation, assuming a p-value of 0.50, a 95% confidence level (z = 1.96), and a margin of error of d = 0.05. The sample size was 380 participants.

The study adopted a sampling method according to spatial and socio-functional dimensions. The study area was divided into spatial strata (neighborhoods surrounding the Holy Shrine) and socio-functional strata (residents, workers/traders, and visitors). Participants in each stratum were then selected using a sampling method at different times and days of the week to ensure spatial and social representation. Responses were analyzed using a three-point Likert scale (agree = 3, neutral = 2, disagree = 1). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics by calculating percentages for response categories, and the arithmetic mean and standard deviation for each indicator. Means of the composite dimension indices were calculated after standardizing the response direction.

$$n = \frac{N*p(1-p)}{[(N-1)(d^2/z^2)]+p(1-p)} \quad (1)$$

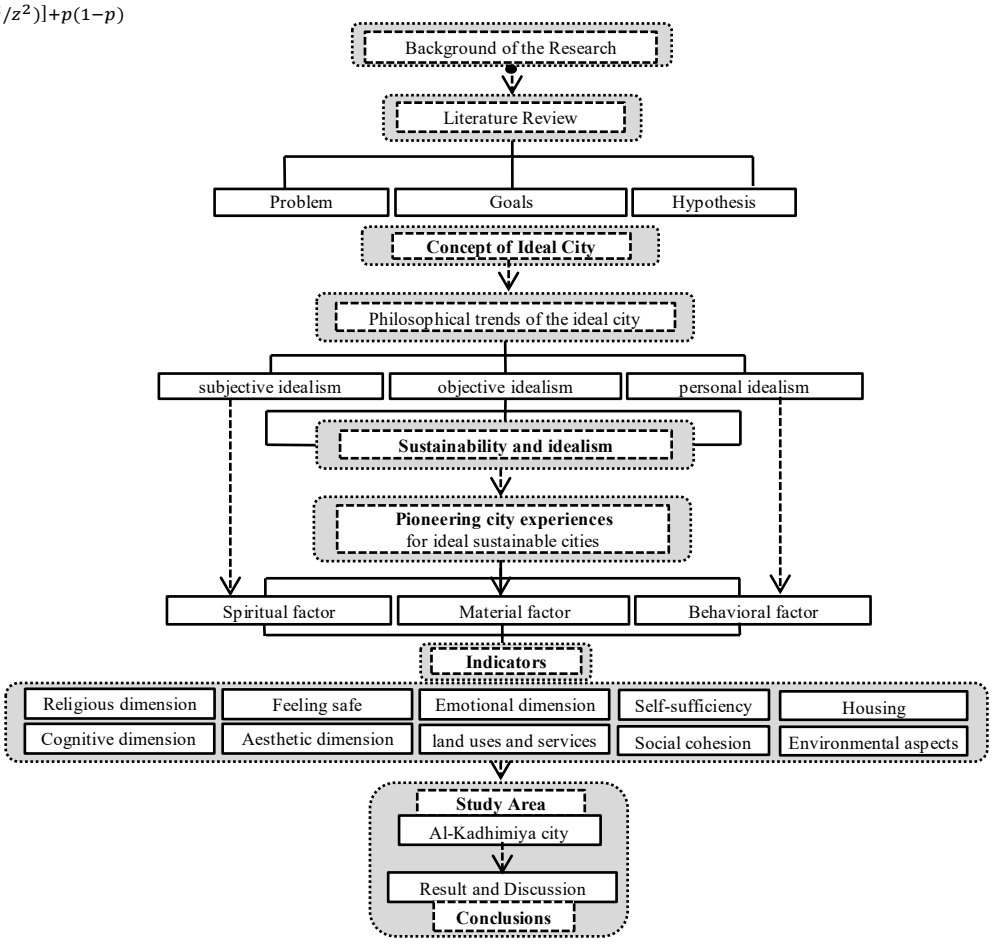


Figure 5. Research methodology

5. The Case Study

Kadhimiya city is located north of Baghdad on the western bank of the Tigris River. It is one of the heritage areas in Baghdad, and its geographical location is determined by the coordinates of 33.38306° north, 44.34° east [60]. As presented in Figure 6, Al-Kadhimiya City is located in the northwestern part of Baghdad, Iraq, along the western bank

of the Tigris River. The district is one of the oldest and most significant urban centers in Baghdad, known for its rich spiritual heritage and cultural identity.

Kadhimiya city is of great importance to Shiite Muslims because it contains the shrines of Imam Musa al-Kadhim, to whom the city's name originates, and his grandson, Muhammad al-Jawad. The city contains many sites, markets, and heritage houses, in addition to the presence of large shopping centers [61]. Kadhimiya city is distinguished by its preservation of its heritage and historical landmarks, as it represents an image of the Arab-Islamic city that preserves the uniqueness of its identity and its spiritual, planning, and architectural heritage. In addition, it is distinguished by its winding alleys and internal spaces as climatic planning treatments [62].

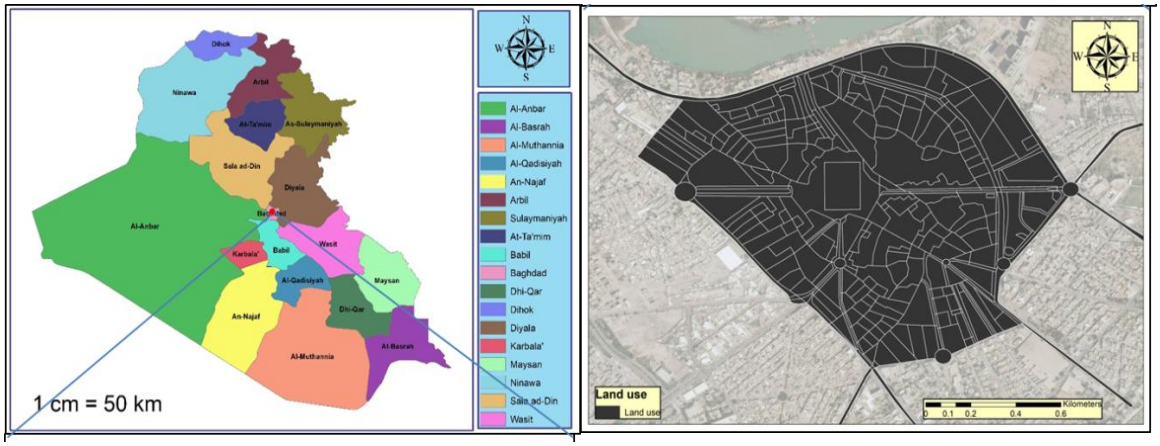


Figure 6. Location of Kadhimiya city

6. Results and Discussion

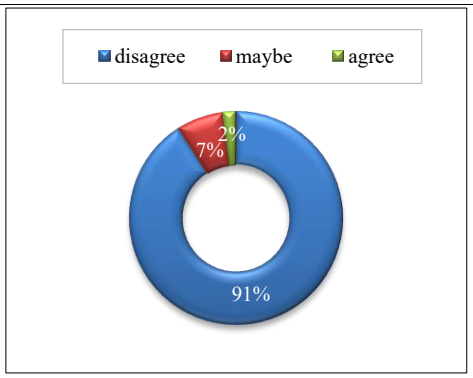
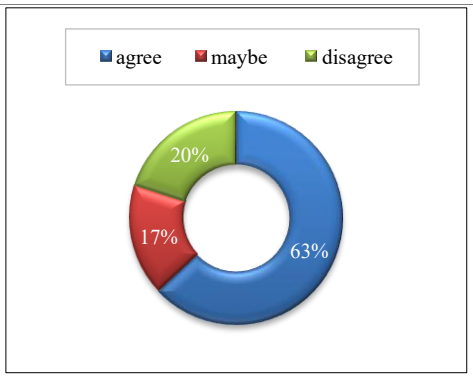
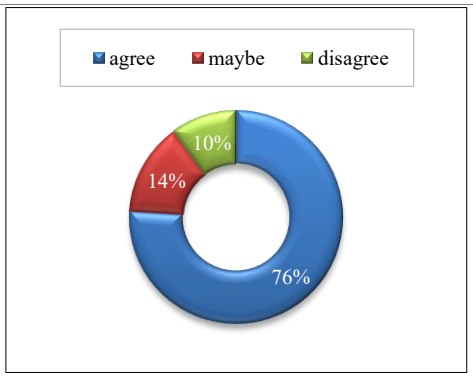
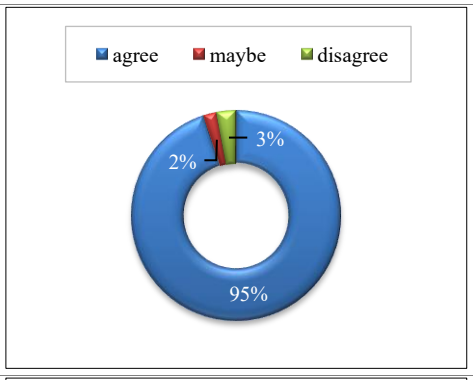
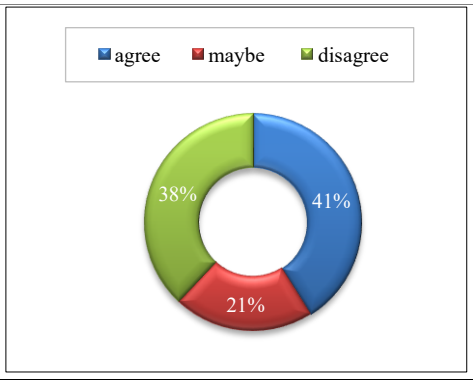
The indicators will be analyzed according to the three factors that were previously classified (spiritual factors, physical factors, behavioral factors) as follows:

6.1. Spiritual Factors

The analysis of this factor includes five indicators, which are

- Religious dimension: The results of the questionnaire showed that the religious dimension is largely achieved in the study area, due to the presence of the shrine of the two Imams. It was found that 91% of the intended sample achieved this dimension, and most of the residents in the study area visit it to perform religious rituals.
- Sense of security: The results showed that this indicator was met at a rate of 63%, which is considered average. This is because the study area is composed of a unified social fabric, united by religious ties and shared social norms. This necessitated the imposition of surveillance on the area, given the religious significance of the region. Furthermore, the presence of security personnel in the area further enhanced the achievement of this factor.
- Emotional dimension: The survey results showed that this indicator was met to a good degree, reaching 76%. This is due to the presence of religious events and memories in the study area, given that the general character of the region is religious and is usually associated with the performance of rituals and the commemoration of religious occasions connected to human feelings and conscience.
- The Cognitive dimension: The results showed a high percentage of achieving the cognitive dimension index, reaching 95%. This is due to the central location of the shrine in the area, as well as the high height of the shrine's minaret and domes and their distinctive yellow color, which were covered with gold sheets. The movement axes perpendicular to the location of the shrine and the presence of other divisions of the urban fabric within these axes also have a significant impact on the ease of visual and cognitive reading of the study area.
- The aesthetic dimension: The results showed that this indicator was achieved at a weak rate, reaching 41%, as the achievement of this indicator was limited to the shrine area only, as the other parts that make up the study area are spread with uncoordinated facades, and they have different finishing materials and different colors, and some of them are dilapidated and need maintenance, so attention must be paid to strengthening and enhancing this indicator within the study area. The quantitative results for these five indicators are summarized in Table 3, which presents the overall performance of the spiritual dimension within Al-Kadhimiya according to the questionnaire responses.

Table 3. The results of the indicators of the spiritual aspect factor obtained from the research sample

1. Religious dimension	Categories	No.	
Your presence in the study area is due to a religious aspect	agree	91	
	maybe	7	
	disagree	2	
2. Feeling safe	**Categories**	**No.**	
You feel safe when you are in Al-Kadhimiya city	agree	63	
	maybe	17	
	disagree	20	
3. Emotional dimension	**Categories**	**No.**	
Always want to visit Al-Kadhimiya city	agree	76	
	maybe	14	
	disagree	10	
4. Cognitive dimension	**Categories**	**No.**	
As you enter Al-Kadhimiya city, the first thing catch your eyes is the two shrines of the two Imams.	agree	95	
	maybe	2	
	disagree	3	
5. Aesthetic dimension	**Categories**	**No.**	
The aesthetic aspects of the urban landscape are highlighted throughout the entire study area in terms of the harmoniously designed and coordinated architectural facades in finishing materials and colors.	agree	41	
	maybe	21	
	disagree	38	

6.2. Physical Factors

This factor includes three main indicators, which are:

- Self-sufficiency: It consists of four indicators analyzed based on a field survey of the study area, namely:
  - Job opportunities: The study area offers a large number of private sector jobs. The area boasts a large number of hotels, shops, malls, and commercial markets, which help reduce the unemployment rate among the region's residents.
  - Food supplies: Food supplies are available through the agricultural regional environment of Baghdad, because the study area lacks urban agriculture and relies on imports to provide most of the food supplies for its population, due to the low prices of imported agricultural products compared to local products. This is a general problem in most areas of the country, not just in the study area.
  - Fresh water supplies: The study area does not suffer from problems in providing water to the population due to the presence of water supply stations and its proximity to the Tigris River, which is located near the study area. This is considered a natural source that provides water supplies to the region's residents.
  - Energy self-sufficiency: The study area lacks a variety of energy sources, relying primarily on national electricity (supplied by the government). It should also be noted that there are no renewable energy sources. Shop owners and hotels rely entirely on private generators, which alternate during power outages.
- Housing: It consists of four indicators analyzed based on a field survey of the study area, namely:
  - Availability of affordable housing: Field survey results showed an increase in housing and land prices in the study area due to the shift from residential to commercial use, which has led to a significant increase in land prices. One square meter sometimes costs as much as $15,000, and this price increases the closer one gets to the shrine.
  - High rate of home ownership: Home ownership in the study area is mostly private, which is considered a good indicator. However, at the same time, most homes have been converted into hotels, restaurants, and shops.
  - Population density: Data from the Old City of Kadhimiya indicate that the population has reached (31,847) people, representing 6.1% of the total population of the city, which is (521,444) people. The Old City extends over a total area of (141,508 hectares), and based on the population density equation (population / area), the population density is (225 people / hectare). This falls within the global standard for urban sustainability, which ranges between (200-250 people / hectare). This reflects the compatibility of the population structure of the Old City with the requirements of sustainable development.
  - Housing density: The number of residential units in the Old City of Kadhimiya reached (6,357), representing (31.9%) of the total residential units in the city of Kadhimiya, which number (19,948). The net residential area of the Old City extends to (68.75 hectares), and based on the net housing density equation (number of housing units / net residential area), the housing density reached (92 housing units/hectare). This rate exceeds the global standard for housing sustainability, which ranges from (40 to 50 housing units/hectare). This is due to the compact urban fabric that characterizes the Old City of Kadhimiya. The spatial proximity between the units, their small areas, and the division of the residential units into smaller areas than planned have led to a significant increase in housing density.
- Equitable Distribution of Land Uses and Services: Consists of two indicators analyzed based on a field survey of the study area:
  - Land Use Diversity: Using the entropy equation, it was found that the diversity measure achieved a value of 0.71, a value close to 1, indicating a good degree of diversity in land uses in the study area, The quantitative assessment of the material dimension is summarized in Table 4, which presents the results of the field survey and statistical calculations for the three main indicators: self-sufficiency, housing, and equitable land-use distribution. The spatial pattern of this diversity is further illustrated in Figure 6, which shows the distribution of land-use categories throughout Al-Kadhimiya and visually confirms the results derived from the entropy analysis.

Table 4. The proportions of land uses and the entropy equation

Land uses	Area (ha)	Ratio	Correct ratio	ln (correct ratio)	Multiplication result (ratio * ln)
Administrative	61192	4.32	0.043	-3.14	-0.14
Commercial	186963	13.21	0.132	-2.02	-0.27
Educational	39310	2.78	0.028	-3.58	-0.10
Healthy	18256	1.29	0.013	-4.35	-0.06
Open spaces	129657	9.16	0.092	-2.39	-0.22
parking	14050	0.99	0.010	-4.61	-0.05
Religious	29987	2.12	0.021	-3.85	-0.08
Residential	687499	48.58	0.486	-0.72	-0.35
Roads	248169	17.54	0.175	-1.74	-0.31
The total	**1415083**	**100**			**-1.56**

$$Ent = - [\sum pj \ln (pj)] / \ln (k)$$

$$\ln (k) = \ln (9) = 2.197 \quad (2)$$

$$Ent = - \frac{-1,56}{2,197} = 0.71$$

Using the GIS program, all land uses area of the Al-Kadhimiya city were measured, and their ratio is shown in (Figure 7), and their spatial distribution is shown in (Figure 8).

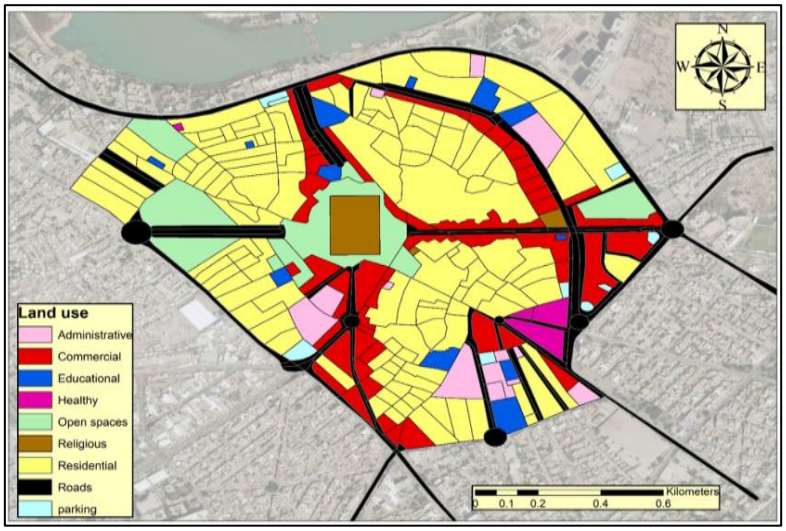


Figure 7. Land uses for the old city of Kadhimiya

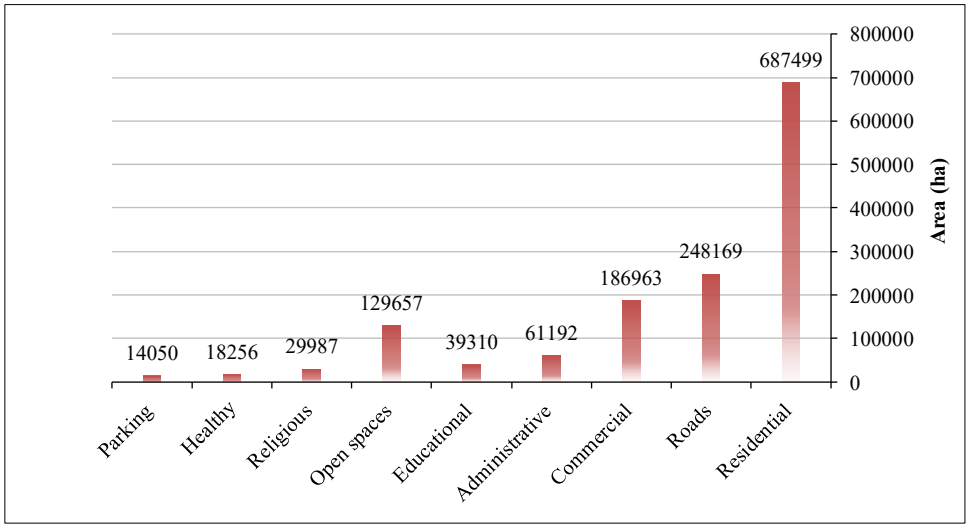


Figure 8. Area of land uses in the old city of Kadhimiya

- Fair access to all services (15 minutes): Using the GIS program, the access distance to the services available within the study area was calculated, with an access distance ranging between 500 - 800 meters. (Figure 9) Illustrating the services coverage area, we notice that most services cover the largest percentage of the study area, sometimes reaching more than 90% of the area. This is a positive indicator for achieving fair access to all services in the study area. As illustrated in Figure 8, the spatial distribution of services within the study area reflects a relatively balanced coverage in proximity to the main transportation corridors and central urban zones.

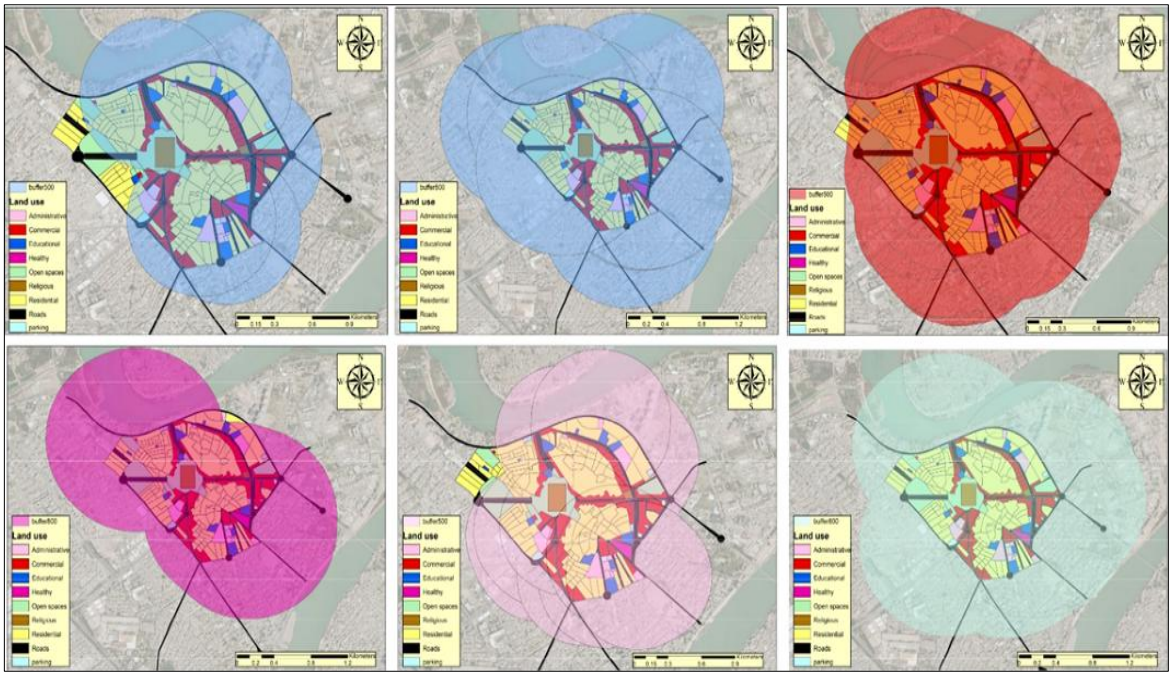


Figure 9. The scope of the services distribution in the study area

6.3. Behavioral Factors: This Factor Includes Two Main Indicators

- Social Cohesion:

It consists of four indicators analyzed based on the results of a questionnaire distributed in the study area, namely:

- Trust between individuals: The results showed that 61% of people in the study area have strong trust in their interactions, and that they maintain good relationships and social ties.
- Strength of community solidarity networks: The results showed that this indicator was met at a rate of 72%. This indicates that social cohesion and solidarity in the study area are good, due to the lack of social problems. This is because the area is composed of a unified social fabric, in addition to the fact that religious ties increase social cohesion and cooperation among community members.
- Citizens' willingness to practice mutual assistance and cooperation: The results showed that this indicator was met at a rate of 83%, indicating that residents have a high willingness to help others. This is most evident during religious occasions, when free water and food are distributed to visitors.
- Sense of belonging to the community: This indicator was largely achieved, with 94% of the results being achieved. This is because most of the residents have been present in the study area for many years, their presence is linked to the presence of the shrine, and they inherited their homes from their fathers and grandfathers.

- Environmental Aspects:

It consists of five indicators analyzed based on a field survey of the study area, namely:

- Preventing the spread of various types of pollution: Through field surveys and data from relevant departments, it was found that the study area suffers from many different types of pollution, such as air pollution and visual pollution, resulting from the inconsistent heights of buildings and the lack of human scale. It was also found to suffer from noise pollution resulting from the sounds of street vendors' devices scattered throughout the streets leading to the shrine.

- Revitalizing the vegetation cover: The field survey found that the vegetation cover in the study area is very poor because most of the agricultural lands surrounding it have been converted into buildings for residential and commercial use, which negatively impacts the ecological aspect of the area.
- Production and use of renewable energy: The field survey showed that this indicator is not met, as the study area relies on energy generated from fossil fuels and does not rely on any other renewable energy source.
- Protection of environmental and basic resources: The field survey revealed a significant weakness in achieving this indicator, as there is no protection of resources by citizens; protection may be limited only to the government institutions concerned with this.
- Protecting and enhancing biological and natural corridors: The field survey showed that the percentage of green areas and biological corridors is very small, not exceeding 9%, which is considered a very low percentage. Therefore, attention must be paid to planting and greening open areas and encouraging urban agriculture in the region, especially since the region is close to the river and water sources.

The results obtained show that the spiritual indicators of the study area outperformed the aesthetic indicators and some material indicators, as a result of the cultural importance of the religious identity that distinguishes the study area with the presence of an important religious shrine, which is (Imam al-Kadhim), and that the behavioral factor represents the main link between these dimensions.

The behavioral dimension acts as a bridge between the spiritual and material dimensions, transforming internal values into tangible urban practices. Spiritual indicators, such as peace, belonging, and moral responsibility, shape collective behaviors, cooperation, social trust, and the shared preservation of public spaces. These behavioral patterns, in turn, impact the physical environment, improving safety, cleanliness, and spatial vitality. In the city of Kadhimiya, religious events foster patterns of cooperation, preservation, and cleaning of urban spaces. The behavioral dimension also works by integrating emotional values with residents' daily spatial practices.

Higher scores on the spiritual indicators reflect, compared to the aesthetic indicators. In the case of Kadhimiya, a spiritual attachment to the sacred core and communal rituals generates a strong sense of place and identity, and dimensions of emotional security deeply rooted in the city's religious and historical context and people's connection to the shrine of Imam al-Kadhim. In contrast, lower scores on the aesthetic indicators are not attributable to a cultural indifference to beauty, but rather to neglected planning and maintenance, inconsistent facades, and the visual deterioration of the surrounding areas.

Table 5 summarizes a comparison between Kadhimiya and three global cities (Freiburg, Auroville, and the Vatican). The table shows that while Kadhimiya performs exceptionally well on the spiritual dimension, Freiburg leads on the material dimension, while Auroville balances behavioral and spiritual indicators.

Table 5. Comparative analysis of sustainability dimensions between Al-Kadhimiya and selected international cities

City/Case study	Spiritual Dimension	Behavioral Dimension	Material Dimension	Key Characteristics and Findings
Al-Kadhimiya (Iraq)	Very high (Religious 91%, Cognitive 95%, Affective 76%, Aesthetic 41%)	Moderate to high (Strong social cohesion, religious gatherings, community belonging)	Moderate (Density 225 persons/ha, Entropy 0.71, Access 500–800 m)	City distinguished by strong spiritual and cultural identity compensating for moderate material performance; demonstrates integration between faith-based values and urban form.
Freiburg (Germany)	Low (Secular orientation, limited symbolic content)	High (Environmental participation, citizen engagement)	Very high (Renewable energy, mixed land-use, green mobility)	Known for eco-efficiency and participatory governance; excels in environmental sustainability but lacks intangible/spiritual depth.
Auroville (India)	Very high (Philosophical-spiritual foundation, communal meditation)	Very high (Collective ownership, cooperative governance)	Moderate (Low density, limited infrastructure)	Embodies holistic spiritual utopianism; behavioral and spiritual synergy outweigh material constraints.
Vatican City	Very high (Global religious center, strong symbolism)	Low (Limited residential/social diversity)	Low (Small scale, restricted spatial growth)	Compact spiritual enclave; excels symbolically but limited in behavioral and material sustainability.

7. Conclusion

This study concludes that idealist philosophy provides a valuable foundation for rethinking sustainable urbanism through its three perspectives: subjective, objective, and behavioral. Together, these perspectives emphasize the impossibility of separating physical urban form from the human experience of meaning and ethics. The research has shown that many contemporary sustainable cities have become overly materialistic, focusing on form, density, and energy efficiency, without considering the spiritual and behavioral dimensions that nurture identity and social cohesion. By integrating these dimensions, the proposed three-dimensional model provides a comprehensive and measurable framework for diagnosing and improving urban environments. Pilot tests in Kadhimiya revealed that spiritual indicators significantly outperformed aesthetic indicators, reflecting a deep cultural emphasis on sacred sites, community rituals, and emotional attachment to place. In contrast, low aesthetic scores stem from neglected planning, asymmetrical facades, and a lack of maintenance.

The findings suggest that the future of sustainable urbanization depends on rebalancing material and spiritual elements, as well as behavioral coherence. Cities that ignore these interconnections risk becoming functional environments that, despite their good material elements, will be dominated in the future by congestion, high population density, and shrinking open spaces. Planners and policymakers should integrate indicators of spiritual well-being, safety, and social justice with traditional environmental and economic metrics. Religious heritage cities demonstrate that spiritual capital can enhance social trust and community resilience, but they require parallel improvements in aesthetics, mobility, and environmental quality. Future research should further refine these indicators and explore their applicability in different spatial and cultural contexts to humanize sustainability and restore the moral and emotional coherence of urban life. This research contributes to the emerging global discourse on spiritual urbanism and offers a replicable framework for culturally rooted sustainable planning.

8. Declarations

8.1. Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.S.A. and I.A.J.; methodology, S.K.A.; software, L.A.M.; validation, A.S.A. and T.R.A.; formal analysis, A.S.A.; investigation, I.A.J.; resources, A.S.A.; data curation, S.K.A.; writing—original draft preparation, A.S.A.; writing—review and editing, A.S.A.; visualization, L.A.M.; supervision, T.R.A.; project administration, I.A.J.; funding acquisition, A.S.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

8.2. Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available in the article.

8.3. Funding

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8.5. Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

8.6. Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

8.7. Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest concerning the publication of this manuscript. Furthermore, all ethical considerations, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the authors.

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