

Physical Environment, Social Behavior, and Economic Activity: A Legal and Economic Analysis

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ABSTRAK

The physical environment plays a highly significant role in shaping human social behavior. Environmental psychology research has consistently demonstrated that factors such as personal space, density, noise, temperature, air pollution, and architectural design directly and indirectly influence how humans interact with one another in daily life. Various studies show that unsupportive environmental conditions can diminish the quality of social interactions, increase aggressiveness, and disrupt individual mental health. Conversely, a well-designed environment can promote social harmony, enhance productivity, and restore psychological well-being. This article employs a qualitative approach through the library research method to analyze the relationship between the physical environment and social behavior. The study draws on the work of David O. Sears, Jonathan L. Freedman, and L. Anne Peplau (1994) in their book *Social Psychology*, supported by theories such as Cognitive Load Theory (Moreno & Park, 2010), Self-Control Theory (Ghufron & Risnawita, 2010), and the Environmental Stress Model (Bell et al., 1996). The findings affirm the importance of an environmental psychology approach in designing humane and sustainable living and working spaces to improve the quality of social life in the modern era of urbanization.

Kata Kunci: environmental psychology, social behavior, personal space, density, environmental stress, architectural design.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are social creatures who are never free from the influence of their surrounding physical environment. At every moment, in every activity undertaken, humans interact directly or indirectly with the physical elements of their environment. According to Budianto (1997), the environment exerts a profound influence on individual behavior. As a concrete illustration, a good and conducive environment brings positive effects on individual development physically, psychologically, and socially. Conversely, a poor and unsupportive environment will have serious negative consequences for the individuals living within it.

Environmental psychology is a branch of psychology that specifically studies the reciprocal relationship between humans and their physical environment. This field of study encompasses how the environment affects human behavior, feelings, and mental health, and how humans in turn shape and transform their environments. In the context of social interaction, factors such as room design, noise levels, sound and air pollution, and limitations on movement can significantly alter how people communicate, cooperate, and build relationships with others. This discipline has grown rapidly since the mid-twentieth century, in line with the rapid growth of cities worldwide and the increasing complexity of human-built environments.

For several decades, social psychology tended to focus only on the direct influence of human beings on one another such as group pressure, conformity, and interpersonal dynamics. However, Sears, Freedman, and Peplau (1994) provide a far broader and more comprehensive perspective, asserting that social behavior never occurs in a vacuum. Every human action is bound by and influenced by its physical context from the layout of living spaces and the density of settlements to the level of urbanization, air temperature, and air quality in a given area. The physical environment in this perspective is not merely a passive backdrop, but acts as both stage and active participant capable of directing social interaction, triggering interpersonal conflict, or creating conditions that promote harmony and social solidarity.

The exploration of environmental psychology has become increasingly crucial and urgent in the modern era, where people spend more and more time in built environments that are often designed without considering the basic psychological needs of their users. Contemporary problems such as rapid urbanization, excessive noise pollution in large cities, chronic traffic congestion, and rigid and monotonous building and residential area designs are not merely technical or architectural issues. At their core, they are deep psychological issues that directly impact societal stress levels, mental health quality, and individuals' ability to build healthy and meaningful social relationships. When the physical environment fails to provide adequate space for privacy, quality interaction, and territorial exploration, individuals tend to experience a gradual decline in social functioning.

A deep understanding of the mechanisms through which the physical environment influences human behavior is essential to addressing many social challenges facing society today. For example, this understanding can answer questions such as: how can the right design of an urban park contribute to reducing crime rates in a given area? Or how can the arrangement of desks and lighting in a library significantly improve student learning effectiveness? Or why are employee satisfaction levels in open-plan offices consistently lower than those of employees who have semi-private workspaces?

Contemporary research from around the world consistently shows that wall colors, lighting quality, the availability of green spaces, air circulation, room acoustics, and noise levels in and around homes or workplaces significantly affect individual productivity, creativity, stress levels, and psychological well-being. Through this article, we aim to comprehensively discuss how these physical elements profoundly influence the human psyche often subconsciously and to identify the practical implications for spatial design and urban planning policies oriented toward human welfare.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1) Cognitive Load Theory

Cognitive Load Theory, developed by Moreno and Babette Park (2010), is a research-based framework that explains how humans process and store information in the context of learning and everyday mental activity. This theory provides useful guidance for understanding why individuals experience difficulty processing large amounts of information simultaneously, especially when in an uncondusive, noisy, or high-pressure environment. Fundamentally, this theory explains that human information processing capacity is limited, and when that limit is exceeded, the individual will experience a significant decline in cognitive performance.

Cognitive load theory applies to two main, interrelated domains: human memory structure (Cognitive Structure) and information processing (Cognitive Load). Human cognitive structure consists of three memory systems that operate sequentially and synergistically. First, sensory memory, which acts as the first entry point for all information received from the environment through the senses of sight, hearing, touch, and others—with large capacity but extremely short duration. Second, working memory, which has a very limited capacity of approximately 7 ± 2 units of information at once—the system responsible for all active and conscious information processing. Third, long-term memory, which stores all previously learned knowledge, schemas, and experiences with essentially unlimited capacity (Plass and Kalyuga, 2010).

In the context of a poor physical environment, various conditions such as excessive noise, inadequate lighting, extreme temperatures, and high density all have the potential to simultaneously burden working memory with irrelevant stimuli. When the capacity of working memory is exceeded due to too much information being processed at once, the individual experiences what is known as cognitive overload. This condition directly and significantly impacts a person's ability to concentrate on the task at hand, solve problems effectively, communicate clearly and empathetically, and make rational and wise decisions. Sari (2022), in her research on basic statistics learning, confirmed that a learning environment

designed according to the principles of cognitive load theory significantly improves student learning outcomes.

The implications of cognitive load theory for social behavior are substantial. A person experiencing cognitive overload due to their environment tends to become more easily frustrated, less tolerant of differing opinions, and more inclined to avoid complex social interactions. Therefore, a well-designed physical environment that minimizes distractions and provides optimal conditions for cognitive function is not only a prerequisite for individual productivity, but also for the quality of healthy and constructive social interaction.

2) Self-Control Theory

Self-control is an individual's ability to read situations involving themselves and their environment with sensitivity, as well as to control and manage behavioral factors in accordance with the situation and circumstances including the ability to regulate behavior, manage the desire to attract attention, change behavior to suit others, please others, conform to others, and conceal feelings (as cited in Ghuftron and Risnawita, 2010).

An uncomfortable physical environment directly erodes an individual's self-control capacity. Research shows that exposure to poor environmental conditions such as continuous noise, extreme heat, and crowding gradually depletes the mental resources used to regulate impulses and emotions. This concept is known as ego depletion: the condition in which an individual's capacity for self-regulation diminishes after facing a series of demands requiring self-control.

In dense and noisy urban environments, residents are often in a state of chronic ego depletion. This may explain why levels of aggressiveness and interpersonal conflict tend to be higher in densely populated urban areas compared to quieter rural areas. Conversely, environments that provide tranquility, green spaces, and pleasing visual stimuli have been shown to help restore self-control capacity and improve the quality of social interaction. Research by Khumaizah and Siregar (2015) also affirms that religiosity and moral values embedded in the individual act as a buffer against environmental pressures, enabling people to maintain self-control even in less-than-ideal environmental conditions.

3) Environmental Stress Model

The environmental stress approach is widely used in environmental psychology. Stressors such as noise, population density and crowding, work pressure, natural disasters, pollution, and others are aversive environmental

conditions that threaten human well-being. As a mediating variable, stress is defined as a reaction to aversive environments (Bell et al., 1996). These reactions include emotional, behavioral, and physiological components. The physiological component is often referred to as systemic stress, while the emotional and behavioral components are called psychological stress.

Because systemic and psychological stress are interrelated and do not occur in isolation, environmental psychologists typically combine both into a single theory known as the environmental stress model. In this model, stressors refer to environmental components, while stress responses indicate the reactions caused by those environmental components. There are three main characteristics of stressors: (1) cataclysmic events, such as natural disasters with massive and sudden impact; (2) personal stressors, such as job loss or family conflict of an individual nature; and (3) background stressors, such as daily traffic jams, chronic noise, or an unergonomic work environment, which though low in intensity are continuous and cumulatively affect psychological well-being.

The environmental stress model provides a useful framework for understanding how the physical environment systematically affects social behavior. When a person is exposed to environmental stressors over an extended period, their coping mechanisms become overloaded. As a consequence, the individual tends to withdraw from social interaction, show increased aggressiveness, or experience a reduced ability to empathize with others. Romadhona and Wala (2023) affirm that psychological stress caused by poor social and physical environments significantly inhibits individual adaptive behavior in daily life.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs the library research method. This method was chosen based on the primary objective of the research: to review, synthesize, and analyze existing findings in the scientific literature regarding the influence of the physical environment on human social behavior. This approach enables the researcher to build a comprehensive, in-depth, and interdisciplinary understanding based on the accumulation of scientifically tested and academically recognized knowledge. Library research was also chosen for its efficiency in integrating theoretical perspectives from various relevant sub-disciplines, including social psychology, clinical psychology, architectural science, and urban planning.

The data collection procedure was carried out through a systematic and structured search of various trusted academic databases, including Google Scholar, accredited national journal portals (SINTA), university digital repositories, and digital libraries. The primary data source for this study is Chapter 16 on Environmental Psychology in the

book *Social Psychology* by David O. Sears, Jonathan L. Freedman, and L. Anne Peplau (1994, Fifth Edition, Volume 2, Erlangga Publisher). This primary source is reinforced and contextualized with various supporting scientific literature related to cognitive load theory, self-control theory, the environmental stress model, and recent empirical research on the impact of various physical environmental elements on human behavior and psychological well-being.

The inclusion criteria applied in selecting the literature comprise three main aspects. First, topical relevance: the selected literature must be directly related to environmental psychology, social behavior, or the relationship between physical environmental conditions and individual psychological aspects. Second, quality and credibility: the study prioritizes indexed scientific journals, academic textbooks that have undergone peer-review, and works published by authors or institutions with a good academic reputation. Third, currency: to ensure relevance to contemporary conditions and challenges, the study prioritizes publications from the last 15 years, while still including seminal and classical works that form the theoretical foundation of this field, such as those of Altman (1975), Hall (1966), and Bell et al. (1996).

Data analysis was conducted descriptively-analytically and synthetically. In the descriptive stage, the researcher accurately and comprehensively described the key findings from each literature source. In the analytical stage, the researcher identified patterns, themes, and conceptual relationships emerging from the various sources. In the synthetic stage, the researcher integrated the various perspectives into a coherent narrative and logical argument about the mechanisms through which the physical environment influences social behavior. The validity and reliability of this study were maintained through source triangulation the practice of confirming every claim or proposition put forward with at least two or more independent literature sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personal Space and Territoriality

The concept of personal space is one of the most fundamental and most studied concepts in environmental psychology. Every individual, without being fully conscious of it, carries an invisible “bubble” around their body that functions as a psychological boundary between themselves and others. This invisible boundary was first systematically conceptualized by anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1966) through the field of study he called proxemics the science that specifically studies the use and perception of space by humans in social and cultural contexts. Sears et al. (1994) explain that violations of this personal space boundary consistently create discomfort, anxiety, and a strong impulse to seek greater distance from the perceived violator.

Hall divided personal space into four distinct zones based on physical distance and the social interaction context deemed appropriate for each zone. The intimate zone

(0–45 cm) is reserved exclusively for very close and intimate relationships, such as romantic partners, parents and young children, or in the context of medical care. The personal zone (45 cm–1.2 m) is used in everyday interactions with close friends and family. The social zone (1.2–3.6 m) is the distance commonly used in formal interactions, professional meetings, or with acquaintances. The public zone (over 3.6 m) is the distance used in public communication contexts, such as lectures, formal presentations, or stage performances. It is important to note that these norms are cultural and can vary significantly across cultures and social groups.

Humans also possess a sense of territoriality another spatial dimension equally important in understanding social behavior. Territoriality refers to the human tendency to claim, mark, defend, and personalize a particular area or space as one's own, whether permanently or temporarily. Altman (1975) divides human territories into three categories. Primary territory is the most personal and exclusive space such as a home, bedroom, or personal work desk defended very closely, with violations considered serious breaches of privacy and personal autonomy. Secondary territory, such as a favorite seat in class or a regular table in the cafeteria, has a lower level of ownership but still carries a sense of familiarity and preference. Public territory, such as a park bench or a spot on the beach, is open to everyone, but a person can still claim it temporarily while using it.

The factors influencing territoriality are diverse and encompass personal, situational, and socio-cultural dimensions (Nur'aini Ratna Dewi & Setiawan, 2024). From the personal dimension, characteristics such as age, gender, personality type (particularly the introversion-extraversion dimension), and the need for privacy largely determine how strongly a person enforces and defends their personal territory. Space personalization the act of decorating, arranging, or marking an area to reflect the owner's identity and preferences is the most visible manifestation of territorial behavior. In an office setting, employees who are allowed to personalize their workstations, such as by placing family photos, small plants, or personal items, consistently show higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

The implications of understanding personal space and territoriality for the design of the built environment are broad and practical. In modern office design, for instance, the trend of “hot-desking” or open-plan offices which eliminates fixed desks and workspaces for employees although claimed to increase collaboration and flexibility, in practice often results in increased disruptions, a significant decline in privacy, higher stress levels, and reduced productivity. This occurs because the system eliminates employees' ability to establish and defend their personal territory, a fundamental psychological need. In contrast, designs that strike a balance between collaborative spaces and semi-enclosed private areas, and that give users the flexibility to personalize their

workspaces, have consistently been shown to increase job satisfaction, creativity, and work productivity.

Density and Crowding

It is important to distinguish between two concepts that are often conflated: density and crowding. Density is an objective measure referring to the number of individuals per unit area, while crowding is a person's subjective perception of inadequate available space. A person may be in a physically crowded room but not feel crowded if the situation is perceived positively such as at a lively music concert. Conversely, a person may feel very crowded even in a room that is not particularly full, if the situation feels out of control.

High levels of crowding often lead to a series of negative responses that impact social behavior. First, social withdrawal: individuals tend to reduce interpersonal interactions as a strategy to regain the personal space they feel has been lost. Second, increased aggression: when personal space is continuously violated, tolerance for frustration decreases and the likelihood of interpersonal conflict increases. Third, performance decline: crowding has been consistently shown to reduce performance on complex tasks requiring high concentration, due to distraction and competition for attention.

The classic study conducted by Calhoun (1962) on rat populations showed that extreme density caused the collapse of social order, increased aggressiveness, and serious behavioral deviations a phenomenon he called the "behavioral sink." Although these findings cannot be fully applied to humans due to the far greater complexity of social and cognitive factors, this study provides an important theoretical basis for understanding the destructive effects of uncontrolled density.

In the urban context of Indonesia, the issue of population density is increasingly relevant. Large cities such as Jakarta, Surabaya, and Medan face the challenge of extremely high residential density. Baiquni (2009) emphasizes that population explosion and unplanned urbanization have created serious environmental and social problems. In urban slum areas, extreme density correlates with high crime rates, weakening of social bonds among neighbors, and low levels of social trust. This situation demands a more integrated approach to urban planning centered on the psychological needs of its citizens.

Noise, Temperature, and Pollution

Noise is an unwanted sound that is disruptive to hearing and can reduce hearing ability in those exposed to it (WHS, 1993). Physically, sound is measured by intensity (in decibels/dB) and frequency (in Hertz/Hz). Noise above 85 dB sustained over a prolonged period is considered harmful to hearing health. However, in the context

of environmental psychology, the impact of noise extends far beyond physiological aspects alone.

Malau, Manao, and Kewa (2017), in their analysis of traffic noise levels on highways, found that chronic noise exposure from motorized vehicles significantly contributes to a decline in the quality of life for residents living near major roads. The psychological impacts of noise include increased stress levels, sleep disturbances, reduced concentration ability, and heightened irritability. Children who grow up in noisy environments consistently show lower academic performance and impaired reading ability compared to children living in quieter environments.

Ambient temperature is also a powerful physical stressor. Research shows a curvilinear relationship between temperature and aggression: both very low and very high temperatures can increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior, although heat tends to have a stronger effect and has been more extensively studied. The heat discomfort hypothesis states that high temperatures increase feelings of discomfort, which in turn lowers the threshold of tolerance for frustration, thus increasing the likelihood of aggressive responses.

Air pollution, although its effects are more difficult to measure directly, has also been shown to affect social behavior. Exposure to pollutants such as carbon monoxide (CO), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), and fine particles (PM_{2.5}) is associated with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, which in turn affect the quality of a person's social interactions. Fadilah (2021) shows that prolonged psychological stress including that triggered by poor environmental conditions has tangible physical manifestations in the form of skin disorders and other somatic conditions, further reinforcing the argument that the physical environment and mental health are two sides of the same coin.

Social Environmental Design

Architectural design and spatial planning possess a remarkable and often underappreciated power to shape the patterns and quality of human social interaction. William Whyte, through his meticulous observational research on public spaces in New York City, showed that seemingly minor design details such as the position of stairs, the presence of fountains, the availability of movable seating, and how easily people can see others from a given spot dramatically influence how often and how long people are willing to use a public space. Spaces that enable people to meet spontaneously (sociopetal spaces) tend to promote friendship formation, strengthen community bonds, and foster the creation of social capital. In contrast, spaces that physically separate people (sociofugal spaces) tend to promote isolation and social anonymity.

One of the most influential classic studies on the relationship between physical design and social relationship formation is the study conducted by Festinger, Schachter, and Back (1950) at the Westgate student housing complex at the Massachusetts Institute

of Technology (MIT). This study found, surprisingly, that the strongest predictor of friendship formation was not shared interests, background, or personality, but simply physical proximity. Students living in adjacent units or on the same floor had far broader and stronger friendship networks than those living in more isolated corners. Even the position of apartment units facing shared stairwells or parking areas which increased the likelihood of accidental encounters proved to produce residents with wider social networks.

Noor (2023), in his research on the evaluation of child-friendly educational infrastructure design, comprehensively affirmed that the physical environment of schools has a far greater influence on children's development than is generally recognized by educators and parents. Schools designed with attention to the principles of environmental psychology providing adequate natural lighting, good air circulation, controlled room acoustics, safe and stimulating play areas, and wide and clean corridors and transition spaces significantly contribute to more positive social-emotional development, higher learning motivation, and lower stress levels in children. Conversely, gloomy, cramped, noisy, and poorly maintained school environments are associated with increased anxiety, reduced intrinsic motivation, and increased disruptive behavior among students.

The concept of biophilic design a design approach that consciously integrates natural elements into built environments, based on Edward O. Wilson's biophilia hypothesis that humans innately have a deep need to connect with nature and other living things is gaining increasing recognition and broad application in contemporary environmental psychology and sustainable architecture practice. Research from various countries consistently shows that the presence of green plants, water elements such as ponds or fountains, abundant natural light, views of nature through windows, natural material textures such as wood and stone, and access to green open spaces in or around buildings can significantly reduce stress, accelerate recovery from mental fatigue, enhance creativity and problem-solving ability, and encourage more positive and supportive social interactions.

At the urban planning scale, understanding of environmental psychology has driven the emergence of various innovative planning concepts such as walkable cities, connected green open space networks (green networks), and human-centered design approaches to district planning. Helmiannoor (2018) emphasizes the urgency of creating high-quality educational environments not only from a pedagogical perspective, but also from ecological and psychological perspectives, given the cumulative impact of the physical environment on the character development and social capabilities of younger generations. Meanwhile, Panjaitan (2018), in his research on the influence of the work environment on employee productivity, empirically confirmed that investing in improving the quality of the physical work environment yields a very significant return

in the form of increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, and improved retention of talented employees.

CONCLUSION

Based on the comprehensive review conducted through the library research approach across various relevant scientific literature, a series of clear and important conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between the physical environment and human social behavior. Fundamentally, this study affirms that the physical environment plays an extremely crucial, pervasive, and often underappreciated role in shaping the quality and dynamics of human social interaction. This influence operates through various psychological mechanisms that interact with one another from direct effects on physiological and emotional states, to indirect effects through the formation of behavioral norms and the conditioning of social expectations.

The study of personal space and territoriality convincingly demonstrates that humans have a very fundamental and universal need for space that can be claimed, controlled, and personalized as a basis for safety, identity, and personal autonomy. Violations of personal and territorial space boundaries whether intentional or resulting from inadequate environmental conditions consistently elicit stress responses and can disrupt the quality and depth of social interaction. Understanding proxemics and territoriality has very direct practical implications for the design of workspaces, educational institutions, public service facilities, and residential environments.

The phenomenon of crowding affirms that the subjective experience of space not merely the physical measure of density is the most decisive determinant of its impact on psychological well-being and social behavior. Persistently felt crowding tends to progressively increase stress, aggressiveness, and social withdrawal. Other environmental conditions, such as chronic noise, extreme temperatures, and air pollution, are also proven significant environmental stressors that cumulatively erode self-control capacity, overload working memory beyond its limits, and increase vulnerability to mental health disorders. The three main theories examined in this article Cognitive Load Theory, Self-Control Theory, and the Environmental Stress Model together provide a comprehensive and mutually reinforcing theoretical framework for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying the influence of the physical environment on social behavior.

On the other hand, a well-designed environment oriented toward human needs especially one that considers the principles of environmental psychology and integrates natural elements (biophilic design) has been shown to actively promote positive and meaningful social interaction, reduce interpersonal conflict, accelerate recovery from stress and mental fatigue, and improve overall psychological well-being. The principle of sociopetal spaces offers concrete guidance that can be implemented in the design of

public and semi-public spaces to encourage interaction and the formation of closer communities.

Finally, a deep and comprehensive understanding of the principles of environmental psychology has become increasingly indispensable in the current era of rapid urbanization and massive infrastructure development. Close and systematic collaboration among environmental psychologists, architects, urban planners, policymakers, and user communities is essential to realize a built environment that genuinely supports rather than hinders the psychological and social well-being of society. The effects of the physical environment often operate subtly below the threshold of our everyday awareness, yet their cumulative impact is very real, significant, and determinative of the quality of social life, the level of harmony among people, and the mental health of society as a whole over the long term.

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