

Finding Urban Happiness: Residents' happiness and the socio-spatial landscape of Naga City, Philippines

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Abstract

Understanding the relationship between urban landscapes and well-being is increasingly important in rapidly urbanizing cities to reassure urban planners and policymakers of effective strategies. This study examines urban happiness in Naga City, Philippines, through a survey of 312 residents. Demographic characteristics, including age and employment status, access to open and recreational spaces, walking behavior, and socio-spatial environments, all positively affect residents' happiness, well-being, and quality of life. The study emphasizes that people-centered planning and accessible public spaces are the core of building livable, happy cities.

Keywords: Urban Happiness; Socio-spatial Landscape; Well-being; Quality of Life

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1.0 Introduction

Urbanization is one of the most radical and defining trends in the 21st century. Statistics show that more than half of the global population lives in urban areas (UN DESA, 2018), and this share is expected to rise over the next few decades. People tend to go to cities because they promise economic mobility, cultural variety, and technological progress. However, these promises also bring daunting challenges, including environmental destruction, spatial disparity, traffic jams, housing shortages, and social dislocation. These challenges not only shape urban life materially but also have major implications for people's psychological and emotional health (Srivastava, 2009).

In the Philippines, as in any other country, rapid urbanization has already significantly reshaped the spatial layout and social behavior patterns of most cities. As a result, many studies and policies address urbanization, but they focus on national or regional conditions, particularly in major metropolitan areas such as Manila, Cebu, and Davao. Studies on medium-sized cities such as Naga are few and remain limited despite their socio-economic importance. Previous studies also show a clear gap in understanding residents' well-being in these secondary cities. Most of these cities are renowned for development, but systematic evidence on how socio-spatial factors

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affect residents' happiness remains limited. Studies have rarely included six key dimensions: demographic characteristics, mobility, leisure spaces, environmental quality, community participation, and perceived safety.

Thus, this study addresses this gap by examining Naga City, an independent component city in Camarines Sur, Bicol Region. Naga is located between 13 ° and 14° North Latitude and between 123 ° and 124° East Longitude, with about 8,448 hectares, or 84.46 sq km, of total land area and approximately 209,170 residents across 27 barangays (CPDO, 2021). Naga is also a center for commerce, education, governance, health care, and religion in the Bicol Region (City Government of Naga, n.d.) and was recently proclaimed a highly urbanized city (HUC) (PCO, 2026), which provides a compelling setting for examining urban happiness.

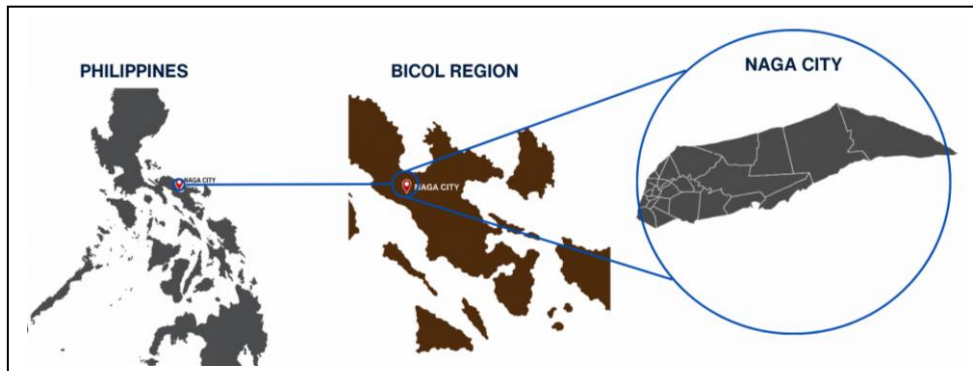


Fig. 1: Philippines and the study site, Naga City
(Source: Google Maps)

The general objective of this study is to identify how social relationships and socio-economic and demographic conditions, including the built environment, affect Naga City residents' happiness and to identify planning measures that can contribute to their overall well-being. It specifically aims to measure residents' happiness levels; examine income, employment, housing and living conditions, age, gender, and education; identify urban features that can contribute positively or negatively to well-being; and make evidence-based policy recommendations for the city.

The findings can inform planners, local government, and community organizations. This study has three main limitations: cross-sectional research design, sampling bias, and limited generalizability.

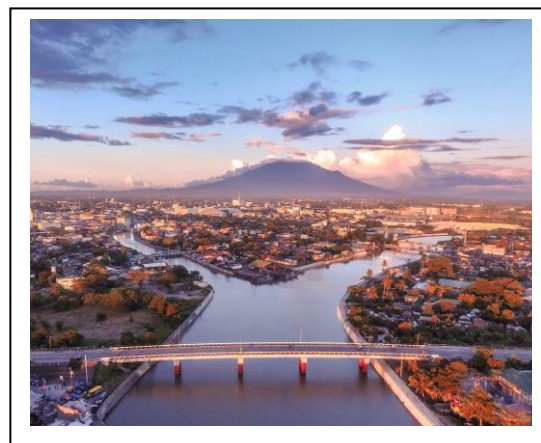


Fig. 2: Naga City's Aerial view.
(Source: Rhoem Daduya)

2.0 Literature Review

Urban happiness is currently one of the most studied aspects of urban life. People-based criteria are replacing economic growth and efficiency criteria in urban evaluation to support people's welfare and emotional and social well-being. As urbanization expands globally, we need to better understand the key aspects of happiness in our cities to support inclusive, livable, and resilient cities. The review focuses primarily on urban well-being in Naga City, Philippines, and is divided into five main parts.

2.1 Understanding Urban Happiness

Numerous academic studies have linked happiness and life satisfaction. Urban happiness is further referred to as the capacity of urban space to stimulate positive emotions and attract people to revisit the area (Sepe, 2017). The core dimensions of urban well-being include walkability, safety, and accessibility, among others. Previous studies have also confirmed that civic engagement (Leyden, 2003) and

urban green spaces and infrastructure (Florida, 2008) influence this indicator, while the impacts of factors such as income and education vary. Income, education, employment, commuting, and housing density also affect happiness differently across contexts. In 2011, Florida, Mellander, and Rentfrow proposed that social support, meaningful work, and lifestyle compatibility are core predictive variables of life satisfaction.

In 2021, Toger et al. further supplemented the related domains of urban well-being, including health behaviors, social connections, and daily physical activity. This series of studies ultimately points to the interdisciplinary "happy city" approach that integrates urban planning, public health, and psychology. This approach traces back to the WHO Ottawa Charter of 1986.

2.22 Socio-Spatial Landscapes and Well-Being

The socio-spatial landscapes, referring to an interactive assemblage of built environments and social activities, have spatial elements across different dimensions acting in sequential layers to shape residents' behaviors and well-being. In contrast, well-being itself has multiple dimensions and group-level heterogeneity. Elements such as street form, land use, building form, public spaces, walkable streets, mixed-use parcels, active public spaces, and accessible gathering areas can foster positive feelings such as social interaction and a sense of belonging. Gehl et al. (2011) and Montgomery et al. (2013) also confirm this finding, and Frey and Stutzer (2010) further highlight the role of urban socio-spatial dynamics in well-being satisfaction. Landscape elements also shape well-being at many levels. Walkable streets and parks can support social interaction (Abraham et al., 2010), and Kytta et al. (2016) show that urban diversity, accessibility, and legibility will enhance people's sense of place engagement. Oh-hyun Kwon et al. (2021) also say that greener environments, water features, lower temperatures, and fewer impermeable surfaces are associated with positive emotions. So, a well-designed environment promotes active lifestyles, positive social relationships, and inclusive spaces. Huppert (2009) defines well-being as positive emotions, resilience, purpose, social relationships, and belonging.

2.3 Cultural Context of Urban Happiness in the Philippines

Culture and history shape urban happiness in the Philippines. Filipino happiness is relational and collective, not individual (Alampay & Jocano, 2014). It is rooted in native values such as "kapwa" or "bayanihan" (collective mutual aid). It is carried out through "sari-sari" neighborhood family-run stores and barangay community administrative centers. David (2018) and Villanueva (2020) have found that these spaces can deepen people's attachment to their community. The parade and fair held during the Peñafrancia Festival in Naga City provide evidence of hybrid urbanization in the Philippines, blending tradition and modernity as modern shopping malls and traditional public spaces coexist in a mutually complementary way.

2.4 Methodologies for Measuring Urban Happiness

To measure urban happiness, researchers need a multi-dimensional measurement system that accounts for subjective, objective, and geographic indicators (Samavati & Desmet, 2022). One method of measuring happiness is the Objective Well-Being Scale, which provides a reference for happiness/life satisfaction (Diener, 1984). Another method of measuring urban happiness is assessing the relationship between commuting, leisure, public space, and emotional experience using the Day Reconstruction Method (Kahneman et al., 2004). At the same time, the Urban Happiness Index integrates subjective well-being with environmental quality, accessibility, mobility, green space, and social interaction (Choi et al., 2020). Walk Score and Space Syntax Analysis relate urban form to movement, behavior, and well-being (Hillier & Hanson, 1984).

2.5 Research Gaps and Studies on Naga City

Naga City is understudied for its economic, religious, and cultural importance in the country. Studies on urban well-being in the country's medium-sized cities are sparse, and most focus on larger cities. Many sources report on the urban well-being of cities; therefore, it is well known that the interaction of multiple factors influences urban well-being. Porio & See (2017) said that social ties in remote places outside large metropolises can support well-being. However, no empirical evidence of the relevant operating mechanisms has been provided for Naga City. To fill this gap, this study focuses on six core dimensions: mobility, leisure, environmental quality, community participation, safety, and cultural practices.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research is a quantitative cross-sectional descriptive correlational study of happiness, well-being, and the urban environment of Naga City, Philippines. The method used allowed the researchers to collect measurable data, describe respondents' satisfaction and happiness levels, and analyze correlations between socio-demographic characteristics, daily life in the city, and socio-spatial conditions. The study includes several potential determinants, such as financial stability, housing quality, social relationships, work-life balance, personal fulfillment, accessibility, mobility, recreational and open spaces, infrastructure, public service, environmental quality, and

perceived safety. It adopts single-time-point cross-sectional data, and the conclusions reflect respondents' perceptions only during the survey period. This study explicitly acknowledges this limitation.

3.2 Study Area and Respondents

The study was conducted in Naga City, Philippines, a major hub of education, commerce, culture, religion, and public services in the Bicol Region. With its many residential neighborhoods, commercial areas, institutions, transport routes, recreational facilities, and open spaces, it is an ideal place to study how the city environment affects residents' happiness.

A total of 312 respondents were from different age groups, employment types, household incomes, and residential locations. Eligible respondents could understand and complete the questionnaire and voluntarily consented to participate. The sample's diversity allowed us to identify larger differences in urban happiness across population groups and residential settings in the city.

3.3 Research Instrument

The researchers administered a structured survey questionnaire to 312 residents of Naga City to gain insights into their well-being and life in the city, from socio-demographic factors to feelings of happiness around the city, recreational places, walking experiences, and other aspects of urban life.

The questionnaire asked about happiness with the living conditions, leisure opportunities, transportation, and the role of open spaces in physical fitness, social interaction, mental well-being, and overall happiness. The questionnaire also examined happiness while walking with family and friends, in natural places, in neighborhoods, in commercial areas, and when going to work or school. Happiness was measured on Likert-type scales.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Respondents' Profile

The 312 survey respondents represented various age groups, employment categories, household income levels, and residential locations within Naga City.

Table 1. Respondents' Profile (N=312)

Profile Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	15-24	80	25.6
	25-54	230	73.7
	55-64	2	.60
Gender	Male	177	56.7
	Female	132	42.3
	Prefer not to say	3	1
Civil Status	Single	273	55.4
	Married with children	27	40.7
	Married without children	7	2.2
	Prefer not to say	5	1.6
Employment Status	Student	117	37.5
	Employed	175	56.1
	Unemployed	13	4.2
	Working student	3	1
	Other	3	1
	Self-employed	1	.30
Monthly Household Income	P 9,100.00-36,400.00	150	54.2
	36,401.00-182,000.00	122	44.0
	Above P182,000.00	5	1.8
Current Living Arrangement	Own house	204	66.7
	Living with relatives	44	14.4
	Rent a house/apartment	36	11.8
	Student/work dormitory	19	6.2
	Other	21	.7
	Living with employer	1	.3

Note: Percentages are based on all 312 respondents. Blank income and living-arrangement responses are reported as "Not reported." Minor response variants were consolidated.

4.2 Satisfaction with Urban Environment

Respondents reported positive satisfaction levels regarding:

Living arrangements (Mean - 3.89)

Leisure opportunities (Mean - 3.63)

Transportation options (Mean - 3.50)

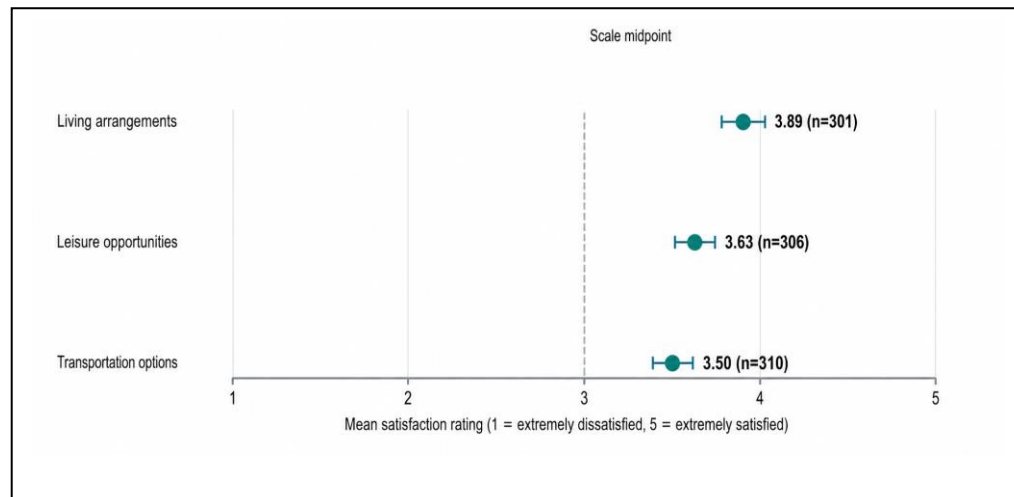


Fig. 3. Satisfaction with selected aspects of the urban environment.

4.3 Recreational Spaces

Open spaces were highly valued:

Mental well-being (88.6%)

Physical Fitness (87.9%)

Close to nature (87.0%)

Social interaction (86.6%)

Overall happiness (84.7%)

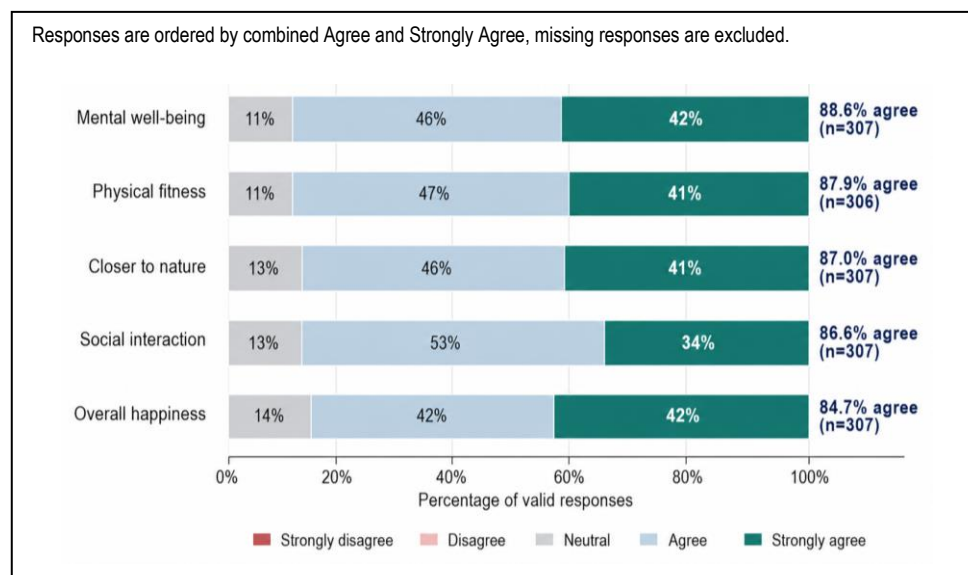


Fig. 4. Perceived benefits of accessible open and recreational spaces.

4.4 Walking and Happiness

Walking significantly contributed to happiness:

Walking with family/friends (90.2%)

Walking in natural environments (89.5%)

Walking in malls/commercial areas (69.7%)

Neighborhood walking (68.0%)

Walking to work/school (67.0%)

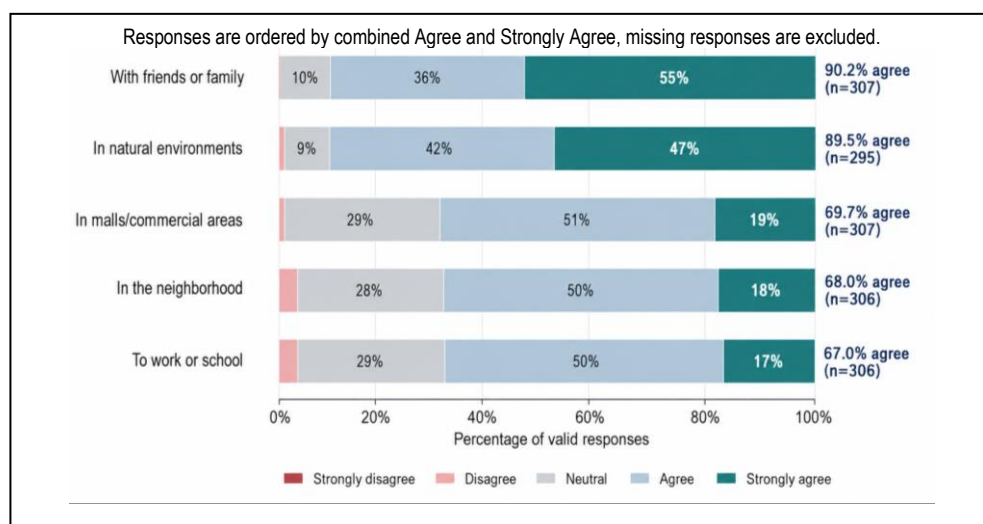


Fig. 5. Contribution of walking to happiness.

4.5 Determinants of Urban Happiness

Table 2. Determinants of Urban Happiness

Rank	Urban happiness determinants	Weighted mean	Valid N	Interpretation
1	Happiness with environmental conditions	3.49	300	High
2	Strength and quality of social relationships	3.49	303	High
3	Quality of living conditions and home environment	3.43	304	High
4	Personal fulfillment and satisfaction in daily activities	3.39	303	Moderate
5	Overall work-life balance	3.24	299	Moderate
6	Ownership of or access to properties	3.23	301	Moderate
7	Availability and quality of open/recreational spaces	3.21	301	Moderate
8	Current salary and financial stability	3.11	295	Moderate

Interpretation bands: 1.00–1.80 Very low; 1.81–2.60 Low; 2.61–3.40 Moderate; 3.41–4.20 High; 4.21–5.00 Very high. Rankings compare weighted mean ratings; valid N varies because some respondents skipped individual items.

5.0 Discussions

The findings show that urban happiness among Naga City residents is shaped by interconnected individual, social, economic, environmental, and spatial factors. The 312 valid survey responses shown in Figure 3 reflect varied experiences across different demographics and residential groups. Results show that employment and income influenced housing, mobility, leisure, and resources, while location influenced access to work, transport, services, and recreation. However, a follow-up inferential study is still needed to further verify these group-level differences.

Figure 3 shows Residents' satisfaction with the urban environment. Living arrangement has the highest mean of 3.89, followed by leisure opportunities at 3.63 and transportation options at 3.50. These ratings indicate positive feelings but also areas for improvement. The high score indicates that many residents see their homes and neighborhoods as a place of comfort, security, and family life. However, the mean may cover inequalities between homeowners and renters, income groups, and central and upland barangays. The average of 3.63 for leisure opportunities indicates a connection to places and activities for relaxation, recreation, and social interaction (e.g., parks, plazas, sports facilities, commercial venues, religious spaces, and neighborhood gathering areas). Access may still be limited by income, time, transportation, physical ability, and residential location. Recreation should therefore be part of urban well-being, not an added benefit.

Transportation had the lowest mean of 3.50; nevertheless, it was still positively evaluated. Residents may remain concerned about congestion, cost, waiting time, limited routes, discomfort, and safety. Since transport determines access to work, schools, healthcare, services, and recreation, improvements in public transportation, sidewalks, crossings, lighting, drainage, shade, and accessibility could reduce travel stress and expand urban participation.

The findings also emphasize the value of recreational and open spaces, as shown in Figure 4. Mental well-being received the highest response at 88.6%, followed by physical fitness at 87.9%, close to nature at 87.0%, social interaction at 86.6%, and overall happiness at 84.7%. Residents therefore regard open spaces as essential well-being infrastructure rather than decorative features. Parks, plazas, and green areas support relaxation, exercise, play, conversation, and community activities while relieving noise, heat, congestion, and stress.

Open spaces promote active lifestyles and social relationships. Their fitness benefit is that walking paths, exercise areas, play spaces, seating, shade, lighting, and accessible facilities help to get people, friends, and neighbors together. However, those benefits depend on quality, safety, maintenance, inclusiveness, and accessibility. Distant, poorly maintained, unsafe, or inaccessible spaces are less likely to create the benefits of an inviting, connected public space.

Figure 5 shows the influence of walking on happiness, but it varies by place. Walking with family and friends was the most common (90.2%), and companionship makes walking a social activity. Walking in natural areas was 89.5%, with greenery, shade, fresh air, and scenery as the restorative elements. These findings are useful for designing walking and green space planning: walkways with a lot of vegetation and connections to outdoor activities, like shaded sidewalks and nature corridors. Walking in malls and commercial areas was selected by 69.7%, and walking in neighborhoods was associated with happiness by 68.0%. Neighborhood walking promotes activity, local access, and social interaction. Malls are sheltered, secure, and climate-controlled, especially in hot or rainy weather. However, private commercial spaces are not to replace, but complement, inclusive public places where people can walk and socialize without buying any goods or services. Walking to work or school was the least common at 67.0%. However, these trips are still valued but also involve traffic, heat, rain, time pressure, and safety risks. This indicates that walking frequency alone does not mean a good experience for the pedestrian; comfort, safety, convenience, and choice also matter. Continuous sidewalks, safer crossings, traffic calming, shade, lighting, drainage, and connections to public transport will help reduce the number of trips needed.

The eight determinants of happiness listed in Table 2 show that urban happiness is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Financial stability removes uncertainty, quality housing provides security, and work-life balance allows for rest, relationships, and career-related activities. Social relationships offer companionship and emotional support, while personal fulfillment develops through meaningful goals and valued activities. Public services, environmental quality, and safety demonstrate the importance of governance and planning. Reliable healthcare, education, sanitation, drainage, waste management, transportation, and emergency services reduce daily burdens. Clean surroundings, greenery, thermal comfort, and flood protection support health and outdoor activity. Safety from crime, traffic, harassment, and environmental hazards affects residents' willingness to use streets, parks, and public facilities.

Generally, happiness emerges from the interaction between personal circumstances and Naga City's socio-spatial qualities. Integrated, barangay-sensitive planning should improve walkability, protect green spaces, strengthen services, support affordable housing, and create safe, inclusive places for social life. Further correlational, qualitative, and spatial analyses are needed to identify predictors, examine group differences, and locate underserved communities.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

Urban social and physical environments strongly affect urban residents' happiness and well-being. The results indicate that strong community ties, social inclusion, green and open spaces, good public infrastructure, and safe neighborhoods are the most important things for a better social life and a good community.

To enhance urban happiness, the city government should invest not only in public transportation, community centers, and other accessible public services, but also in parks, open spaces, and recreational facilities. The city should also strengthen programs that promote social inclusion, such as community events, cultural activities, and support for neighborhood associations. Address socio-economic inequalities through affordable housing, livelihood programs, economic opportunities, and job training.

Encourage residents to be active in urban planning and decision-making so their community is better served. Placemaking projects, public art, heritage conservation, and community-led revitalization can all enhance place attachment, local identity, and civic pride. With support from local governments, urban planners, and community organizations, cities can be more open, healthy, and sustainable, while also supporting population happiness and well-being.

Future research should extend these findings through longitudinal and barangay-level studies that track how happiness changes as Naga City continues to urbanize. Further studies may combine GIS-based spatial analysis with qualitative interviews and objective measures of walkability, accessibility, environmental quality, and public-space use to identify geographic inequalities and clarify relationships between socio-spatial conditions and well-being. Comparative research involving other Philippine cities is also recommended to test the transferability of the proposed Urban Happiness Framework. Pay particular attention to vulnerable population groups, the effects of flooding and climate-related hazards, post-pandemic changes in mobility and social interaction, and the impact of specific planning interventions on residents' happiness.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributes to urban planning, architecture, and quality-of-life studies by providing localized evidence on the relationship between residents' happiness and Naga City's socio-spatial characteristics. It identifies how access to open spaces, mobility, public services, safety, and social interaction influence urban well-being. The findings may help planners, designers, and local government officials develop more inclusive, accessible, and people-centered urban policies and environments. The study also provides a foundation for developing a localized Urban Happiness Framework applicable to Naga City and other comparable Philippine cities.

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