

Reframing Informality in Nilkhet Book Market: A Transformation of Spontaneous Urban System into a Structured Cultural Realm

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ABSTRACT

Nilkhet book market can be described as a knowledge economy-based marketplace which plays an essential role as an interface between the vendor community and the reader society by providing affordable books (Begum, 2025). Even though the market is considered socially and economically important, it is run under an informal spatial form which often comes into contradiction with the formal urban planning and resource management rationale in Bangladesh (Khan & Podder, 2023). The purpose of this paper is to explore approaches for the transformation of the informal nature of Nilkhet book market into a culturally relevant and optimized urban space. Firstly, the current physical and social nature of the market, including roadway systems, entrance points, population density, and functional variety of the businesses, were examined. Based on the analysis conducted, a transformation strategy was designed applying the principles of architectural and urban design. The proposed strategy focuses on such aspects as optimization of the ventilation system, path management, and multi-functionalism. It is clear from the results that the spatial reorganization and flexibility of design can help make the market an efficient urban space that remains informal in nature. According to the current research, informal urban structures do not have to be considered as barriers to the formal development of cities; instead, they can be seen as valuable cultural and economic resources through inclusive design approaches (Islam, 2024). In this context, the proposed transformation of the Nilkhet Book Market may serve as an example for the redevelopment of informal markets in other urbanizing cities.

Keywords: Nilkhet Books, Informal Urban Development, Urban Redevelopment, Architectural Design, Cultural Space, Flexible Space Design, Urban Space

INTRODUCTION

Nilkhet Book Market is an urban space in Dhaka city where knowledge, memory, the economy of bargaining, and informal urban development are visible together (Lewicka, 2008; Roy, 2005; van Eck et al., 2022). What began as an informal market for sidewalk booksellers nearly four decades ago has gradually transformed into a distinct market. Today, Nilkhet is not just a place to buy and sell old and new books; it is also an important part of the student experience, the culture of exam-centered preparation, the knowledge system based on notes-photocopying-printing, and the book-commercial identity of Dhaka (Hamid et al., 2009;). Its development was largely spontaneous, unplanned; but this informal development has enlivened the market on the one hand, but also created infrastructural and design weaknesses on the other (Mehta, 2007; Yatmo, 2008). Due to its location, Nilkhet is of particular importance to the Dhaka city. It is closely connected to Dhaka South, Mirpur Road, New Market, Elephant Road, Katabon and the surrounding institutional and commercial areas. The market acts as a student shopping hub, where book binding, photo, printing and binding services are also available. This location has made Nilkhet not just a market, but also an effective connection center for the educational facilities. A large part of the users are university students and job seekers; as a result, a special urban culture has been created here for book buying, information exchange and academic exchange (Hamid et al., 2009; van Eck et al., 2022). The strength of Nilkhet lies in its informality, the same word is the source of urban problems. Health The internal

hilly roads are very narrow, schooling is unorganized in many cases, waste management and sanitation, and drainage are inadequate. In addition, temporary structures and footpaths are handed over to pedestrians, and rickshaws, CNG vehicles and active energy are strongly concentrated near the market. As a result, the market has created an ineffective situation in terms of economically viable urban efficiency, safety, purpose, use and convenience (Lata et al., 2019; Mehta, 2007; Yatmo, 2008). This dual reality identifies the main problem of the research. The aim of this research is to explore the spontaneous and ceremonial phenomenon of the Nilkhet Book Market in a structured cultural context, in which the socio-cultural character of the society, the student body, and the consumption politics of the commission remain intact (Lewicka, 2008; Roy, 2005; van Eck et al., 2022). Objectives are-

- To analyze the spatial, social, and functional structure of Nilkhet.
- To identify the strengths and structural weaknesses of the market's informality.
- To assess user behavior, market economics, and accessibility patterns.
- To propose a transformation framework integrating cultural continuity and urban systems.



Figure Shows: Original Site of Nilkhet and Nilkhet Book Shop Plan

The following sections will structure this research step by step. Theoretical discussions on the literature of the world, urban informality and cultural space will be presented. The research methodology, fieldwork and data collection will be described. The next section will examine the existing spatial, social and functional conditions of the Nilkhet; then the discussion will explain the main problems, alternatives and transformation strategies. Finally, a design and planning framework will be presented. This study has some limitations. First, it is a case-study study; the results may not be applicable to other informal book markets. Second, the sample size of the survey was limited and it examined the experiences of specific users and students. Third, it was not possible to collect market economics. Furthermore, the lack of a fully deterministic, time-based, and comparative urban analysis does not include the applicability of the proposed transformation plan. Future research needs to explore in more depth the applicability of the proposed transformation plan. In particular, it is difficult to fully map changes in user behavior over time. Therefore, future research should adopt a mixed-methods and longitudinal approach. Research Questions are -

Has the informality of Nilkhet simultaneously created its vitality and dysfunction?

What design and planning strategies can transform this market into a structured cultural context?

How can interventions be designed in a way that does not disrupt livelihoods, student use and cultural memory?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban informality is no longer seen as a mere haphazard or unplanned state; rather, it is an ongoing process in the city (Bromley, 2000; Crossa, 2009). Informality is the adaptive urban form that emerges from the interaction of people, capital, pedestrian flows, needs, and limited space (Crossa, 2009; Latham & Layton, 2019). In this perspective, the market is not the “problem”, but rather a dynamic and living part of our city’s response (Crossa,

2009; Latham & Layton, 2019). From the roadside vendor to the school, the city has evolved into a permanent urban system (Bromley, 2000; Latham & Layton, 2019). In South Asian urbanism, markets and markets are not entities; they are built on sidewalks, alleys, intersections, temporary stalls, temporary and security barriers (Bromley, 2000; Crossa, 2009). These market cities function as on-grade infrastructures and formal uses (Bromley, 2000; Latham & Layton, 2019). As a result, markets are not just places of purchase; It also becomes a social context of waiting, waiting, waiting, information exchange (Latham & Layton, 2019). The location of Nilkhet and its surrounding connections are examples of such metropolitan-dependent urbanism. A simple retail explanation of the book market does not fulfill its meaning. Book markets function as infrastructures for knowledge flow, education, remembrance, debate and civic culture support (Latham & Layton, 2019). They make this market accessible and socially viable, especially for low-income readers, job seekers and councilors (Bromley, 2000; Crossa, 2009).

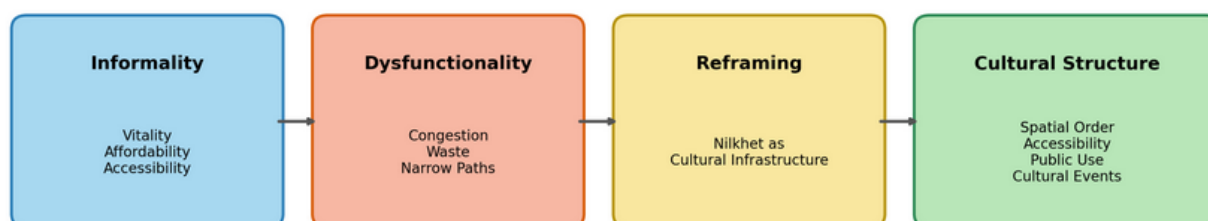
Nilkhet exemplifies a broad knowledge ecosystem, where print, binding, and book provision are central to its intellectual life, making books more than mere products (Latham & Layton, 2019). The quality of public space is reflected in pedestrian experiences—how easy it is to walk, stop, read, and find comfort. The urban space in Nilkhet is not just a passage for vehicles but a social business-centered environment (Latham & Layton, 2019). The dense pavements, narrow paths, and limited public spaces contribute to the pedestrian experience, highlighting the need for walkability, shade, resting areas, and safe crossings (Ewing & Handy, 2009). Market morphology in Nilkhet is not just about form but includes the circulation patterns, shop styles, and internal organization, often following an incremental logic rather than a strict grid (Crossa, 2009). Despite apparent chaos, Nilkhet functions as a practical system, with overlapping circulation and clustered book-related activities. Urban regeneration in Nilkhet, rather than erasing chaos, aims to organize it while preserving its cultural essence. This approach focuses on enhancing energy, safety, and environmental quality without displacing existing users and businesses (Zhu & Ye, 2024). Existing studies often overlook the cultural and social dimensions of informal markets in South Asia, making Nilkhet a crucial case to explore. It blends informality, student life, pedestrian culture, and cultural memory, offering a model for urban regeneration that maintains local livelihoods and cultural identity.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, informality is viewed as an adaptive feature of the city, not merely chaos or order (McFarlane, 2012; Samper & Liao, 2023). Nilkhet's evolution from sidewalk book publishing to a vibrant market caters to students, readers, vendors, and affordable services (McFarlane, 2012). It connects limited space with high usage and low-cost knowledge, forming a self-organizing urban system (Amin, 2008; McFarlane, 2012). The market, a blend of commerce and culture, supports both, and is not just a collection of shops but an ecology of books, food stalls, hawkers, and cultural flows (McFarlane, 2012; Samper & Liao, 2023). The majority of users are members and job seekers, with active cultural agents driving its transformation. The proposed cultural structure organizes informal power while preserving its essence, focusing on spatial order, accessibility, cultural events, and public use. Reframing Nilkhet as cultural infrastructure aims to address dysfunctions and create a more harmonious urban space.

Conceptual Framework Chart

Nilkhet Market: From Informality to Cultural Structure



Flow: Informality → Dysfunctionality → Reframing → Cultural Structure

Figure Shows: Conceptual Framework Chart.

Study Area Description:

Nilkhet, located in the heart of Dhaka, is surrounded by Dhaka University to the east, Mirpur Road to the west, and key transport links connecting surrounding areas. This strategic location has made Nilkhet a hub for education and urban life, evolving from sidewalk publishing to a vibrant market catering to students, book lovers, and low-cost readers. The area's growth has contributed to the urban culture, with a total site area of 7,970 square meters. The market hosts various entities, including Hazrat Shahjalal Bahu Mukhi Samaja Samiti, Babupura Smolders, and Jilani Super Market, among others. The site operates as a multi-institutional arrangement, with bookstores being the primary function, followed by print shops, photocopying, retail, and food services. The ground floor is primarily occupied by printing shops, while bookstores and offices are located on the first and second floors, offering a quieter, exploratory experience. The market's mixed-use system highlights its book-centric economy (Rahman, 2018).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design:

The Nilkhet Book Market was chosen as a case study for its significance as a long-standing, informal yet culturally important commercial area in the city. The study focused on the market's physical aspects, including its layout, shops, services, and environment, while addressing issues and transformations. It explored the market's scope, functionality, and diverse users, emphasizing how its spontaneous, chaotic nature contributes to social power and design. The research employed a problem-based inquiry method, examining the area, surrounding academic influence, and the book economy. The study aims to understand how this urban system could be transformed into a more organized cultural space.

Data Collection Methods:

The research employed various methods, including field surveys, shop location mapping, shopkeeper questionnaires, and pedestrian/shopper surveys to collect data. A site survey was conducted to examine the market's layout, inner lanes, open areas, and existing infrastructure. Variations in usage patterns throughout the day were also noted. Shop location and typology were documented to understand the market's structure, business types (books, prints, bindings), and relationships with non-governmental organizations and temporary agencies. Semi-structured questionnaires were used to gather insights from shopkeepers about issues like crowding, ventilation, waterlogging, fire hazards, and hawker-related problems. Pedestrian and shopper questionnaires focused on user experience, safety, shaded seating, waste management, parking, and future market expectations. A functional distribution review assessed space usage, revealing the dominance of book-related activities. A traffic and environmental problem map addressed issues like parking, encroachments, and waste. Finally, a SWOT synthesis evaluated the market's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, focusing on congestion and environmental concerns.



Figure Shows: Survey Report of Shops Outside

Survey Variables:

The survey focused on variables explaining Nilkhet's informal urban reality, including issues like setbacks, ventilation, waterlogging, fire hazards, congestion, public amenities, shade, waste disposal, parking, and future transformation. Indicators such as clean streets, seating, toilets, peaceful spaces, and security measures were also evaluated. The goal was to determine the relationship between user experience and the physical environment. The questionnaire aimed to assess these factors and identify recurring problems in pedestrian flow, while developing a framework to address both symptoms and structural issues.

Analytical Methods:

The analysis of Nilkhet focused on various aspects through spatial and functional studies. Descriptive spatial analysis identified key paths and open areas. Functional classification categorized market activities into main and auxiliary centers to activate the space. User behavior analysis examined pedestrian movement, arrival times, and experiences of comfort or discomfort. Problem-solving mapping addressed issues like narrow corridors, waste, waterlogging, and safety hazards. A SWOT-based assessment combined internal and surrounding urban contexts, aiming to transform Nilkhet into a more organized, educational, and people-friendly cultural space. The study emphasized functional diversity, user communication, and infrastructure constraints, recommending both immediate measures and long-term design solutions to reconfigure the space for better usability and cultural significance. Nilkhet is seen as not just a market, but an urban cultural hub.

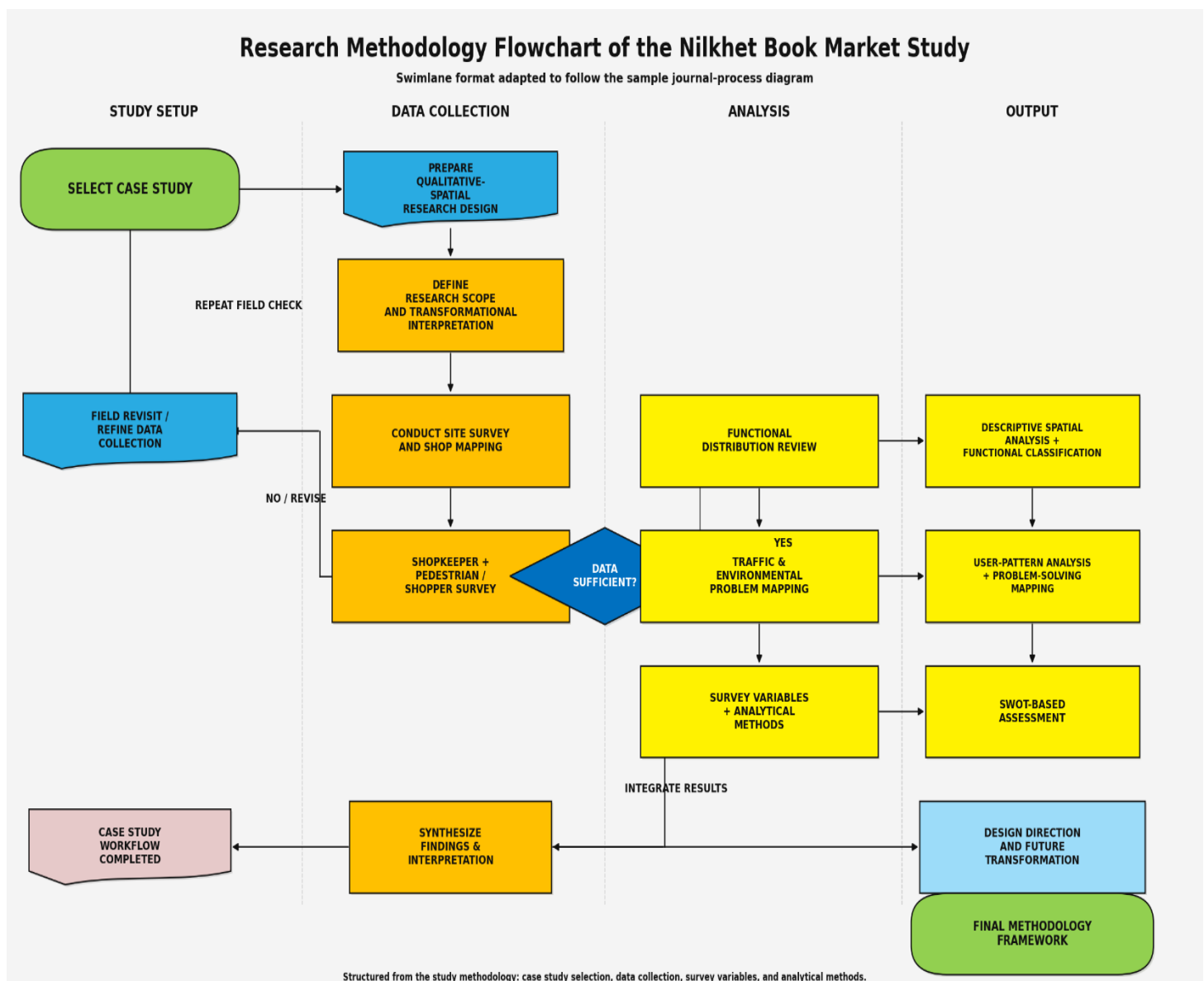


Figure Shows: Research Design and Analytical Framework of the Nilkhet Book Market Study

RESULTS

This study has conducted a systematic investigation to investigate the spatial layout, user behavior, time use, infrastructural constraints and environmental research of the Nilkhet book market. The following results of the data collected through field and situation, user institutional analysis is announced.

FUNTIONAL PERCENTAGE

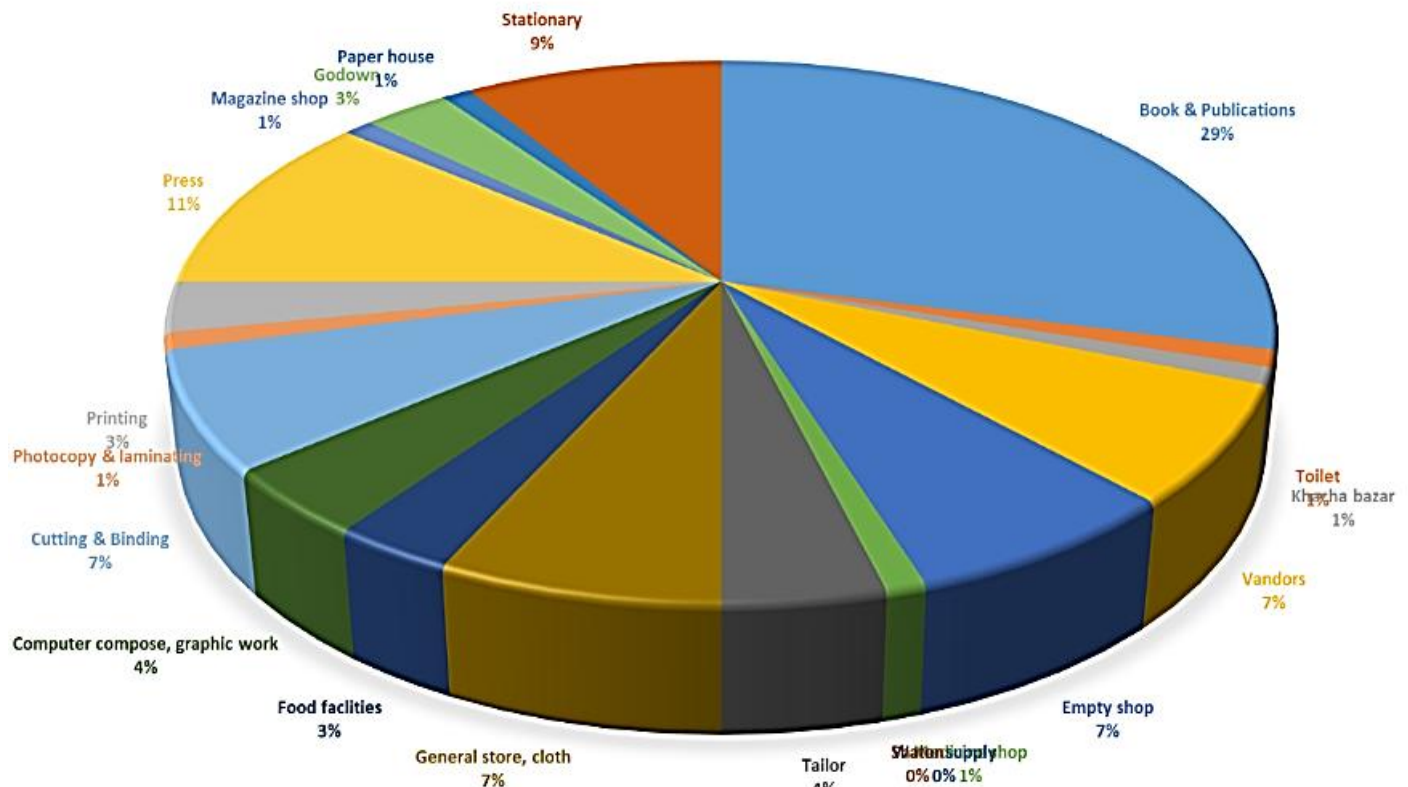


Figure Shows: Functional Percentage that shows, most of the area is occupied with book and publication. There are also food shops, stationery and press.

Spatial and functional characteristics of the market

The spatial analysis of Nilkhet market reveals it as a book-centric, densely populated commercial hub, where book and publishing activities drive its core. The market thrives on a wide variety of academic texts, books, and photocopying, positioning it as a knowledge-sharing center. Alongside the book trade, other businesses like printing, binding, food shops, and small retail create a mixed urban-commercial environment. However, the introduction of unrelated businesses disrupts the market's book-centric focus, leading to fragmentation and a lack of planned development.

User usage and consumption patterns

A look at the social and economic characteristics of the users shows that Nilkhet First, the users are party candidates and power seekers. For them, this market is considered a stellar source for collecting core textbooks, auxiliary books and notes. Second, a large portion of the users come to the platform instead of the platform to join the book form online. The main reason for this is to get books at low prices, the opportunity to make books and the convenience of immediate purchase. Third, although the main purpose of many visitors is to buy books, printing, typing and binding services also play an important role. The general service for the general public has become multifaceted in its functionality. Empowerment, 200-taka pattern test shows that the user exchanges 500 taka per visit. Also, a portion spends from 500 to 1000 taka. The median income of this market indicates the suitable character of the users.



Figure Shows: Existing Scenario of new Market and Space Quality

Time-based and institutional usage patterns

The usage of the market varies according to the time, which is related to the business activities of the users. First, the market is used in the morning. At this time, the students come to collect their papers before class. After this, the evening and part-time hours are also comparatively busy, although it is less than the usual morning hours. Second, with the main institutional councils and higher education institutions of the market. The main offices of Dhaka University, Eon Foundation and other educational institutions in the vicinity of the market are associated with the education system.

Spatial Problems and Internal Clutter

The spatial analysis identified problems in the market interpretation, which negatively affects the user experience. First, the internal routes are very narrow and slow. Information shops and temporary installations narrow the routes, resulting in congestion. Second, the definition of corridors and paths is absent. As a result, users do not find their way easily and the market's navigation system is chaotic. Third, there is no planned plan in the market layout. Randomly placed shops have destroyed the visual order of the market. In the center, due to the urban layout, open spaces are exposed. As a result, the comfort of rest and relaxation for users has been limited.

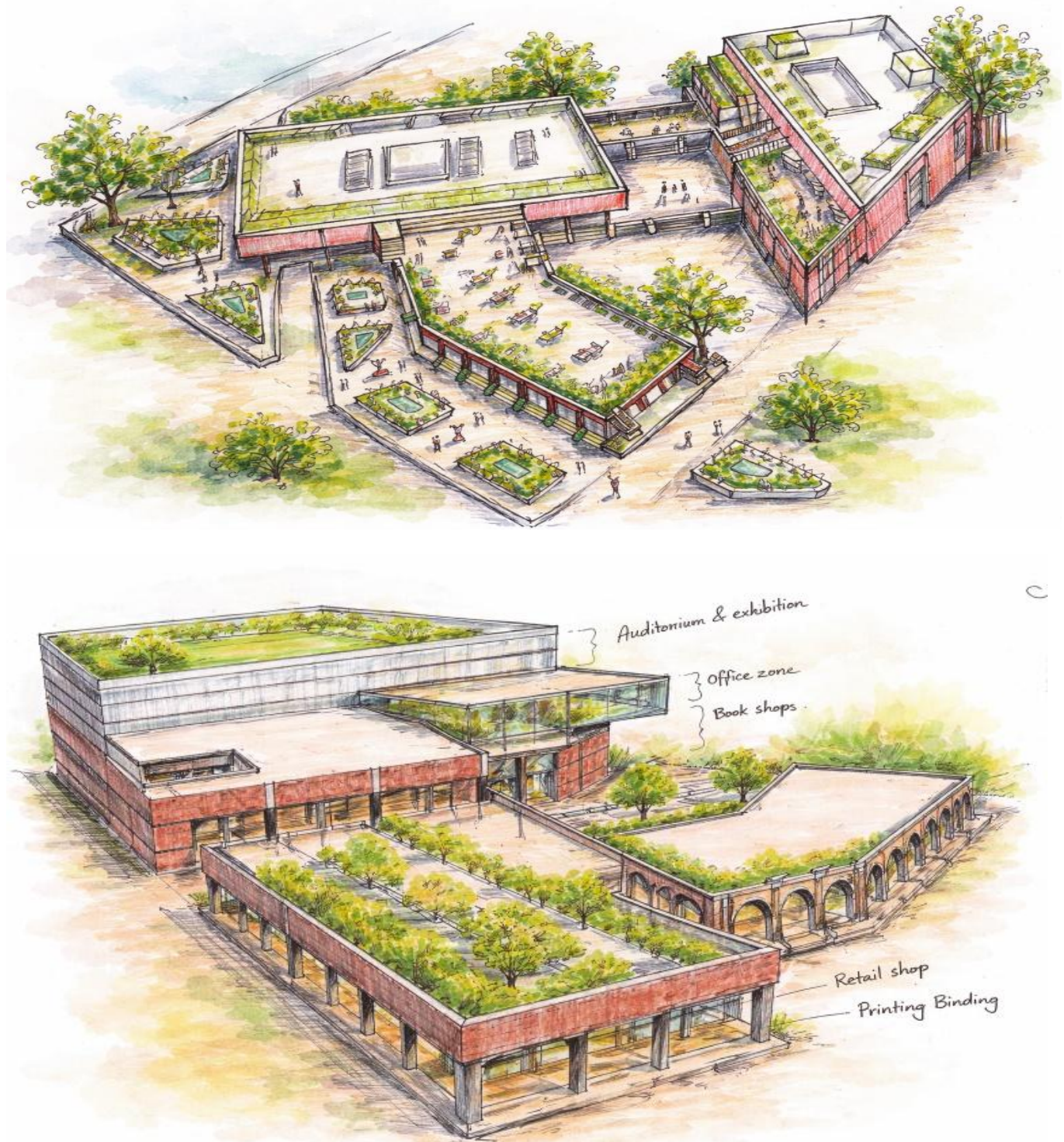


Figure Shows: Conceptual Massing Development of Nilkhet Book Market.

Sanitation and service shortage

Limitations were observed in the analysis of the sanitation and property service conditions of the market. First, the entire market exists only as a platform, which is therefore inadequate for many users. Secondly, waste management and drainage systems. Unplanned waste disposal and an inadequate drainage system are raising environmental issues. Thirdly, limited police assistance is not being provided to the market in a timely manner. Moreover, public facilities—such as restrooms, drinking fountains, or seating—are inadequate, which reduces the overall user experience.

Accessibility and Backwardness

There are problems in terms of ease of use and usability, which hampers its effectiveness. Firstly, peak hours are very difficult. Surrounding problems complicate the response of vehicles to the question of questions. Secondly, rickshaws, CNG, and temporary shops have encroached on the market and sidewalks, resulting in pedestrian traffic jams. Thirdly, there is no specific loading/unloading zone for goods. As a result, activities are chaotic. Any orderly, user-friendly access for motorbikes or scooters is strongly encouraged.

Environmental and Safety

The environmental and safety conditions of the market have been identified as an important issue. Firstly, air pollution (PM2.5/AQI increase), noise pollution and computer are common problems in the area. The main reasons for the pressure of vehicles and network operations are. Secondly, waterlogging, mining impacts and unplanned waste are creating long-term environmental hazards. Thirdly, there is no quick response in case of fire or emergency. Narrow paths and obstacles can hinder the implementation of safety measures, which can make the operation of a safety system risky.

**Nilkhet Book Market Results Heat Map
(Interpretive scores from qualitative findings)**

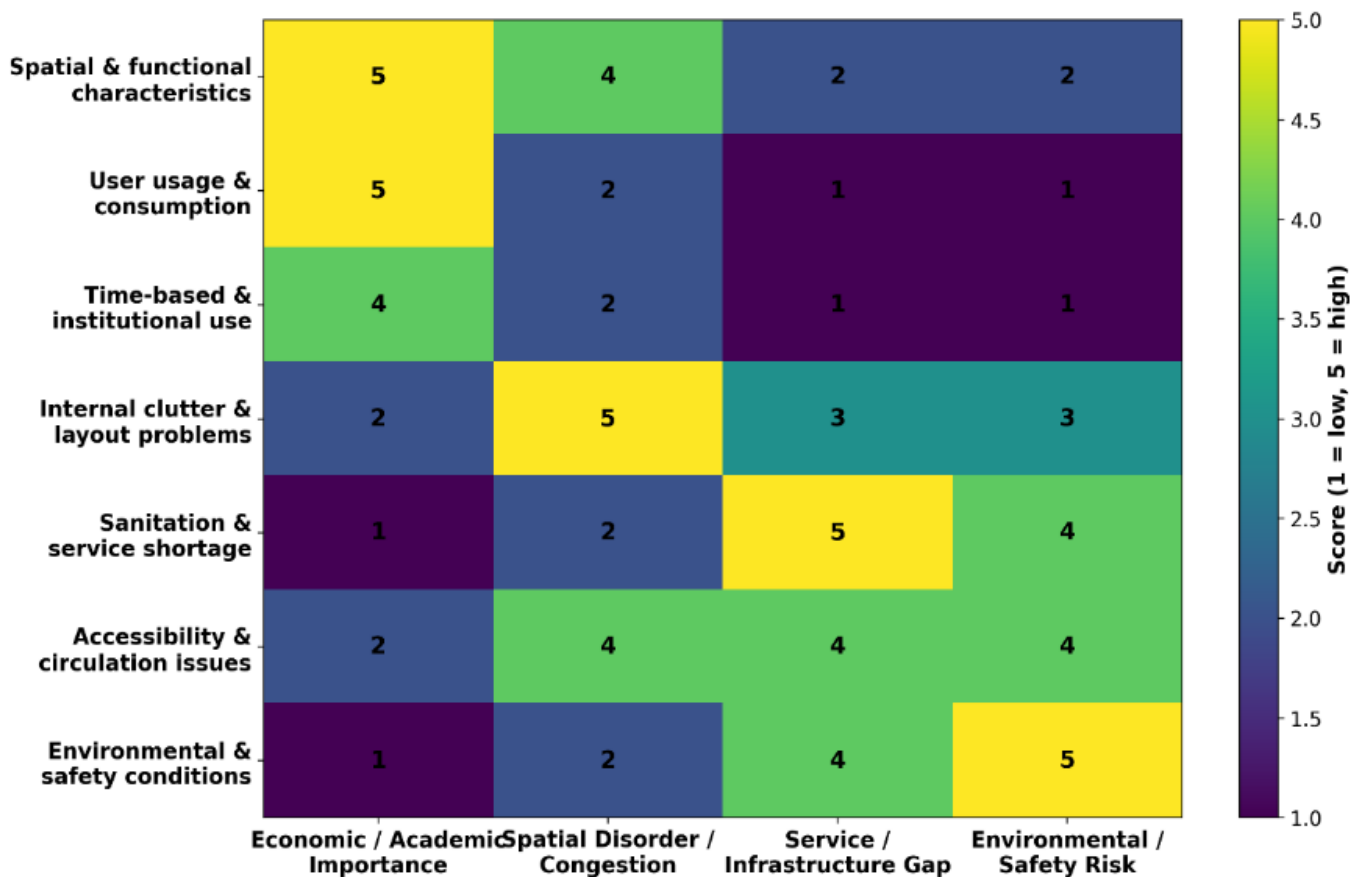


Figure Shows: Thematic Heat Map of Spatial, Service, Accessibility, and Environmental Issues in the Nilkhet Book Market

Nilkhet: A Tale of Memories and Pages - A Modern Architectural Framework

The Nilkhet Book Market is re-framed rather than redesigned. This architectural intervention preserves the market's chaotic essence, emphasizing intellectual exchange, cultural resistance, and everyday negotiations. By integrating layers of time, movement, and informality, the design allows Nilkhet to thrive as a space for social interaction and intellectual discourse. The project responds to the urban context, where chaos and informal activities are integral to the market's life. It incorporates architectural layers that blend the past, present, and future: the Historic Layer features arches and low-height book zones; the Present Layer introduces open courts and mixed-use stalls for informal seating; and the Future Layer envisions glass bridges, upper reading spaces, and digital zones. This layered approach frames Nilkhet's history while enabling its dynamic, evolving nature, without erasing the vibrant chaos that defines its cultural identity.



Figure Shows: Re-thinking Nilkhet Book Market (Design).

DISCUSSION

Nilkhet cannot simply be described as a market; it is a student-centric, service-oriented, and culturally embedded urban ecosystem (Chen et al., 2020; Simone, 2004). Beyond bookselling, it combines knowledge acquisition, shopping, social communication, and administrative activities in a uniquely Pakistani context. The market has evolved organically, with spatial arrangements shaped by user needs, forming a spontaneous urban system (Charman & Govender, 2016; Suryanto et al., 2020). It operates as a “living system,” adapting continuously to users' demands. The flexibility of Nilkhet, especially among shopkeepers, allows them to quickly respond to changing needs, making it an essential space for users with limited incomes (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2019). The proximity of services like printing, binding, and academic institutions adds to its efficiency. However, the market's informal character, while initially beneficial, is leading to congestion, narrow paths, and slow circulation (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2019; Suryanto et al., 2020). The lack of formal oversight has hindered infrastructure development, and while informality has positive aspects, it is now creating negative consequences. Nilkhet's cultural significance, tied to books and knowledge, is being undermined by inadequate infrastructure and chaotic layout. Instead of a complete overhaul, a regenerative approach that maintains its informal structure is needed, ensuring the preservation of its cultural and political identity while meeting urban demands (Chen et al., 2020).

Framework Chart: Nilkhet's Informal Urban Structure

A vertical reading of identity, functions, limitations, and regeneration

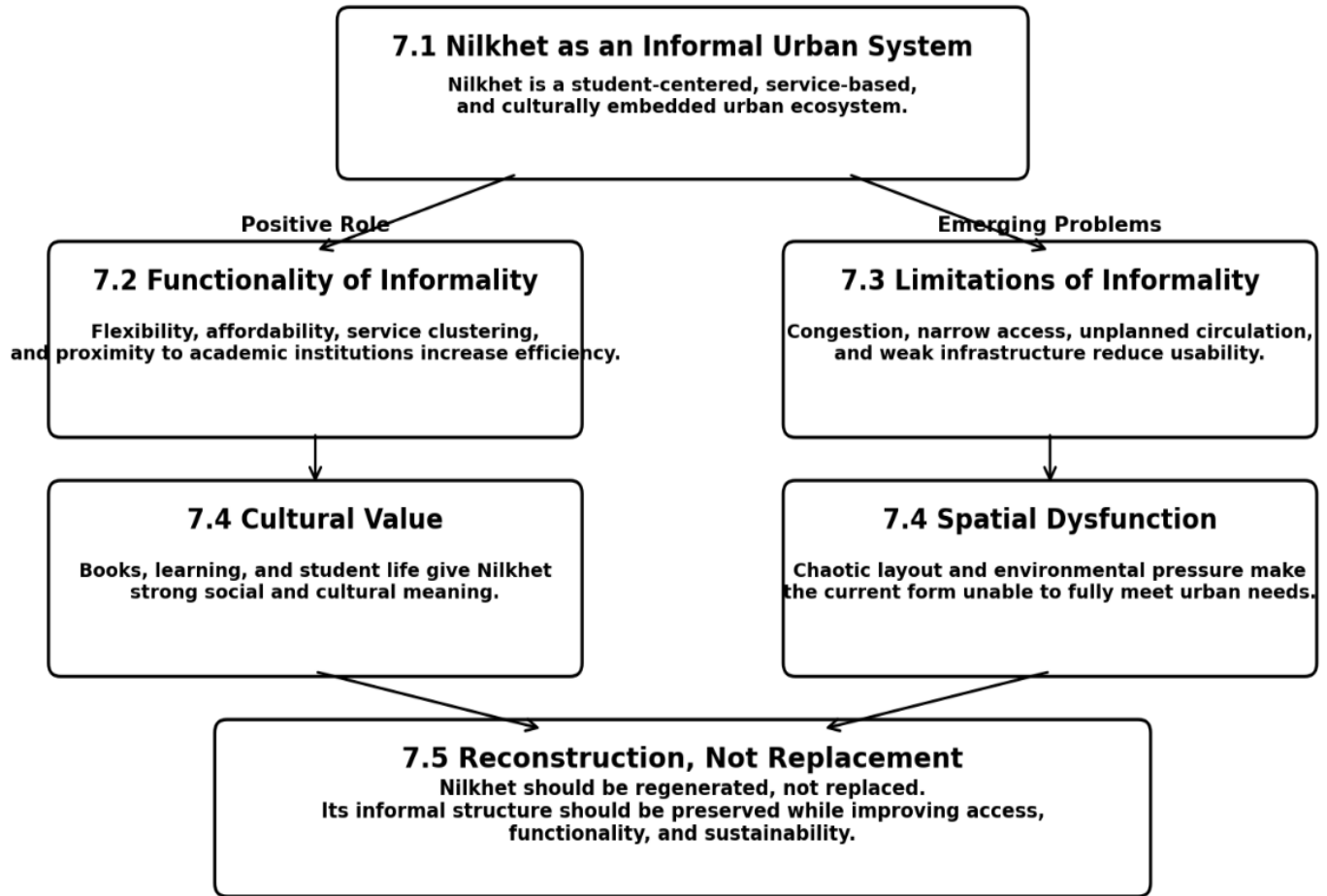


Figure Shows: Nilkhet as an Informal Urban System: Functionality, Limitations, and Regeneration

Proposed Transformation Framework

Nilkhet Bazar is an important yet chaotic urban hub that requires a coordinated, step-by-step transformation. This research aims to organize and enhance the market's informal character. The first step is reorganizing the market's paths, creating a clear main axis and widening internal paths with shaded corridors to improve flow and user comfort. Active zoning is needed to group similar businesses into logical zones, streamlining market activities and improving user experience. Nilkhet should also be developed as a public space and semi-public space with seating, small reading corners, parklets, street furniture and shaded resting points to encourage social interaction. Improved sanitation, waste disposal, drainage, and women's services are essential and mandatory. Traffic congestion can be reduced with designated drop-off zones and better footpaths. Environmental improvements, such as an effective drainage system and measures to reduce pollution, are crucial. Finally, Nilkhet should be redefined as a cultural zone or hub, preserving its heritage while promoting books, knowledge, and small cultural events to revitalize its role in the city.

Table Shows: Proposed Regenerative Transformation Framework for Nilkhet Bazar

Step / Theme	Main Focus	Problems Identified	Proposed Actions	Expected Outcome
1	Reorganizing market paths	Circulation routes in Nilkhet Bazar are disorganized, unclear,	Create a clear main axis or circulation spine; widen internal paths; add shaded corridors; improve	Better movement, easier navigation, and improved user comfort

		and difficult for users to navigate	wayfinding and guidance systems	
2	Functional zoning of activities	Different types of activities and services are randomly distributed, causing confusion and wasted time	Arrange books, printing, binding, stationery, food, and services into logical zones; apply a balanced policy for stalls and booths	Greater market efficiency and improved user experience
3	Public space development	There are no proper seating or resting spaces for users who stay for long periods	Introduce reading corners, seating areas, and shaded resting points; create spaces for small cultural activities	The market becomes both a shopping area and a social gathering space
4	Sanitation and women-friendly services	Poor environmental quality due to lack of toilets, waste disposal, and drainage; insufficient facilities for women	Build adequate toilets; improve drainage; establish proper garbage disposal and waste management; introduce portable sanitation systems	Cleaner environment, healthier conditions, and better inclusiveness
5	Traffic and vehicular management	Traffic congestion and poor transport support reduce accessibility and pedestrian safety	Create designated drop-off zones; provide bicycle and motorbike parking; free and restore footpaths	Easier pedestrian movement and reduced congestion
6	Environmental improvement	Waterlogging, noise pollution, air pollution, and waste create environmental pressure	Install effective drainage systems; regulate noise and air pollution; introduce recycling and proper waste disposal; involve city corporation	Improved environmental sustainability and long-term urban health
7	Cultural repositioning of Nilkhet	Nilkhet is seen mainly as a book market, limiting its broader urban identity	Redefine Nilkhet as both a book market and a cultural zone; encourage books, learning, conversations, and small cultural events	Preservation of heritage along with

Policy and Governance Implications:

The proposed transformation of Nilkhet Book Market goes beyond design; it involves a comprehensive reform. Successful implementation requires coordinated efforts among institutions like the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), Rajuk, the traffic police, and local development centers. A political platform must be formed to bring all stakeholders together. The process will be phased to ensure livelihood-sensitive changes, considering the market's importance to itinerant entrepreneurs whose income depends on it. A comprehensive planning framework should include fair-market systems to regulate hawkers' activities, with designated zones or stalls to protect their livelihoods. A cooperative-based management system will help organize rent, security, and control. Additionally, urban design must be linked to maintenance and service provision to sustain long-term improvements. By adopting practical and inclusive approaches, Nilkhet's transformation will create a sustainable, efficient, and effective urban space that balances development with social well-being.

CONCLUSION:

The Nilkhet Book Market is more than just a commercial space; it represents a historically significant informal urban area that has developed a distinct political and cultural identity. It serves as a hub of knowledge, academic depth, and cultural exchange, with its paths and architecture reflecting its relevance to the community. However, the current chaos and dysfunction at Nilkhet are not in line with its founding principles. These issues stem from uncontrolled expansion, inadequate service provision, and a lack of long-term development planning, which have limited the market's potential. As a result, the market's chaotic state reflects both political and practical

challenges. Transforming Nilkhet into a well-organized cultural urban area is possible by focusing on purposeful development, spatial planning, population density, and cultural integration. Such an approach would create a healthy, effective urban environment while preserving the market's traditions. This would allow Nilkhet to evolve, balancing its historical significance with the demands of a modern city. The experience of Nilkhet can serve as a model for reconstructing other informal markets across South Asia, showing how informal urban systems can be systematically reorganized without completely erasing their essence. Nilkhet, therefore, is not just a local case; it offers valuable insights for broader urban discourse and transformation.

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The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) only for language refinement, grammar correction, and improving the readability of the manuscript. All scientific content, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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