

The Relationship Between Life and the Urban Environment

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ABSTRACT

This research presents a creative study exploring the relationship between life and the urban environment through contemporary painting. In the context of rapid urban development, cities are no longer perceived solely as physical structures but as living systems shaped by socio-cultural and environmental dimensions that influence human life and experience. This study aims to examine the connection between human life and the urban environment and to translate the research findings into creative outcomes using acrylic painting as a visual research medium. The research adopts a qualitative approach combined with practice-based creative research. It incorporates a review of relevant literature on urban environmental concepts and symbolic interpretation theory, together with field observations of the riverside community along Khlong Hua Takhe in Bangkok. The creative process consists of conceptual analysis, visual design development, and the creation of acrylic paintings that convey symbolic relationships between nature, community, and urban structures. The findings reveal that human life within urban contexts remains closely connected to natural elements, particularly water-based environments that shape community identity, collective memory, and everyday life. The artworks demonstrate a synthesis of organic and geometric forms, layered colors, and varied textures to express harmony, tension, and contrast between natural and built environments. Through symbolic interpretation, the paintings function as mental spaces that encourage viewers to reflect on their own experiences of contemporary urban life. This study confirms that contemporary painting can serve as an effective research outcome for generating artistic knowledge and communicating complex relationships between life and the urban environment.

Keywords: Contemporary Painting, Symbolic Interpretation, Urban Environment, Visual language

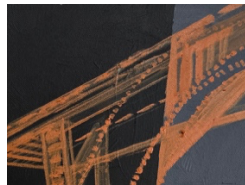
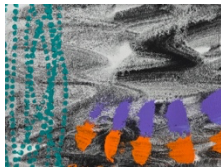
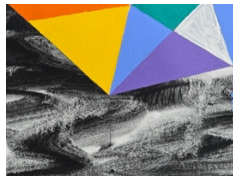
Introduction

In the context of contemporary urban development, cities are social and cultural ecosystems that profoundly shape human lifestyles, thoughts, and identities. The relationship between “life” and the “urban environment” has therefore become a continuously important issue, receiving attention in the dimensions of social sciences, the environment, and contemporary art. These fields reflect human existence within rapidly changing and complex urban structures. Contemporary painting plays a significant role in conveying and interpreting this relationship using visual language that blends the concrete and the abstract, employing symbols, forms, colors, and textures, as well as communicating human emotions and feelings. Creative works of art can function as mental spaces, allowing viewers to consider and interpret the meaning of life existing within the urban environment, especially in the contemporary context where nature and man-made structures inevitably overlap. Conversely, Mo and Chandhasa (2023) said rural scenes are depicted through biological, fluid, and tranquil forms, reflecting the serenity and simplicity of nature. These soft and irregular forms evoke a sense of tradition, community, and a harmonious connection with the natural world. Paintings connect rural landscapes with a slower pace of life and the preservation of cultural heritage. However, the depiction of these delicate and sometimes scattered elements suggests vulnerability to external influences, particularly urban expansion.



Figure 1. Hua Takhe Canal 2025, Acrylic on Canvas
Source: Researcher

Table 1. Data analysis with symbolic interpretation theory and Urban and Environment Concept

Theory of Symbolic Interpretation		Urban and Environment Concept	
Life Symbols	Visual language	City Symbols	Visual language
			
			

The theory of symbolic interpretation describes images, shapes, colors, and visual artistic elements. It does not only have meaning on a concrete level, but serves as a symbol that reflects human thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and experiences. Therefore, interpretation is caused by the interaction between the works themselves. Social and Cultural Context and Audience Experience 6 (Ricoeur, 1976)

The concept of the city and the urban environment is the relationship between human beings and the environment, forming a "place" that has emotional and cultural meaning. These concepts help explain the connection between human life and the urban environment in a deeper dimension. (Tuan, 1977)

Source: Researcher

Research objective

To study the relationship between life and the urban environment in the context of contemporary cities and to use the results of the study as a concept to create paintings using acrylic paint techniques to convey the symbolic meaning of the existence of life in the midst of urban structures through the use of shapes, colors, textures, and visual artistic compositions

Literature review

Boonserm and Chandransu (2025) assert that the promotion of urban art through the integration of government policy, artistic practices, and community engagement can significantly elevate the environmental, social, and cultural value of urban areas. Their research indicates that urban art in the Thai context has the potential to reflect local identity, wisdom, and community lifestyles, alongside raising environmental awareness and promoting urban sustainability. This concept aligns with studies on the relationship between human life and the urban environment through artistic creative processes.

Chen (2025) emphasizes the role of art in public spaces as a channel for communicating climate change and urban environmental problems at the societal level. He points out that art can transform complex academic information into easily accessible aesthetic experiences for viewers. Thus, artwork stimulates awareness, questioning, and public participation in everyday environmental issues. This role makes art in public spaces more than just a symbolic medium; it becomes a space for collaborative learning within urban society.

Hilmy et al., (2025) Symbolic Interaction Theory suggests that the meaning of symbols arises from the collective processing between individuals within a social context. This view is reflected in Talbioui's (2024) research, which uses this concept to analyze the interpretations in contemporary urban youth art. Talbioui points out that symbols do not have fixed meanings but are created by humans through interaction and the context of urban life (Talbioui, 2024). Furthermore, the application of this framework to urban sketching by Hilmy et al., demonstrates that artistic activity helps people construct meaning and connection with urban spaces through the interpretation of symbolic architectural elements and their own feelings.

Zhang (2025) points out that ecological public art plays a crucial role in transforming the environmental behavior of viewers. Art does not merely serve to beautify urban spaces; it acts as a medium for creating awareness and ecological awareness about the relationship between humans and the urban environment. The research found that when viewers interact with artwork in public spaces, they develop a psychological sense of ownership of the urban area, a key factor leading to long-term changes in environmental attitudes and behaviors. This concept reflects how art can function as a social tool that concretely connects people's daily lives with urban environmental issues.

Research methodology

This research employs a qualitative research methodology combined with practice-based/creative research, aiming to study the relationship between human life and the urban environment. The research findings are presented in the form of acrylic paintings. Data sources and scope include documentary research on contemporary art, urban and environmental concepts, and symbolic interpretation theories. Field data was collected through observation of riverside communities, specifically the Hua Takhe Canal, involving photography and sketching. The creative process encompasses analyzing the concepts and contexts of the urban environment, designing conceptual and visual elements, and creating acrylic paintings to convey the symbolic relationship between life and the urban environment.

Findings

1. Conceptual Results: From the study of the spatial context and related literature, it was found that life in an urban environment is not separate from nature, but rather exists in a state of interdependence and adaptation. Waterways, as cultural infrastructure of riverside communities, serve as both a source of sustenance and a space for memory. The painting therefore develops the main concept of “life existing amidst urban structures,” reflecting the harmony and fragility of this relationship.

2. Form and Visual Composition Results: The painting demonstrates an integration of representational and abstract visual languages through the interaction of form, color, texture, and spatial organization. Geometric forms and architectural structures symbolize the rigidity and order of the urban environment, while organic shapes representing water, vegetation, and natural surfaces introduce a sense of movement, vitality, and ecological continuity. The contrast between angular and fluid forms creates visual tension, reflecting the coexistence of human-made structures and natural systems within contemporary cities.

Color relationships play a significant role in shaping the visual experience. Warm and saturated tones within architectural elements contrast with cooler and more transparent layers associated with water and nature, creating a dynamic balance between stability and change. The alternating use of opaque and transparent acrylic layers generates depth and overlapping spatial effects, suggesting the gradual interpenetration of natural and urban environments. These visual contrasts encourage viewers to experience both harmony and conflict, evoking feelings of reflection, uncertainty, and adaptation that characterize contemporary urban life.

3. Symbolic Meaning Findings Symbolically, the painting establishes a sort of figurative “mental space” in which viewers are invited to consider their own relationship to the metropolitan environment. The asymmetric shape and the layered textures are symbols of complexity, unpredictability and the perpetual change of urban life. Variations in transparency and opacity suggest the co-existence of visible and invisible dimensions of human experience such as memory, identity and social interaction inside the city. There is also an emotional conversation between control and freedom, stability and change, in the contrast of the visual shapes of the substantial architecture and softer natural elements. The presence of natural images in urban design is a sign of resilience, hope and the possibility of ecological balance inside the contemporary city. These symbolic links encourage the viewers not only to see the urban backdrop but also to feel the tensions and harmonies that define regular living in metropolitan settings.

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Conclusions and Discussion

This creative research, “The Relationship Between Life and the Urban Environment,” aims to study the relationship between human life and the urban environment in a contemporary urban context. The research findings are then used as a concept for creating acrylic paintings. The results show that cities are not merely physical structures, but living systems comprising nature, communities, and human activities that are intricately interconnected and interdependent. This relationship is reflected in the paintings using symbols, forms, colors, and textures that represent the coexistence between nature and urban structures, both in dimensions of harmony and fragility. Artistically, the resulting paintings serve as a mental space, allowing viewers to interpret the meaning of life in the contemporary urban environment themselves. Academically, the research confirms that creative research in painting can generate new knowledge about the relationship between life and the urban environment, using artistic creative processes as a tool for studying, analyzing, and communicating social, cultural, and environmental issues in depth.

The research findings reveal that the relation between life and urban components can be shown in visual narratives such as shapes, colors, radar and different storylines. This is backed by Ricoeur's (1976) analytical concept, in which information flows express content through presentations that reflect thoughts, experiences and views. Further studies conducted by Hilmy et al. (2025) and Talbioui (2024) reveal that the opinions expressed between journalists and the urban space, and the findings of Chen (2025) and Zhang et al. (2025), who often perceive traditional art, can ease the collection of information for knowledge and motivate target audiences to think about the relationship between humans and the city, promoting creative research into knowledge and effectively communicating key issues in culture and the environment.

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