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Edible Urbanism: Understanding Food Streets as an Urban and Architectural Generator

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Abstract - Food streets constitute a significant yet under-examined component of contemporary Indian urbanism. Functioning at the intersection of informality, temporality, and public space production, these corridors transform ordinary vehicular streets into high-density social ecosystems during specific time cycles. This study investigates food streets as adaptive spatial systems through comparative analysis of selected Indian contexts. Using qualitative observation, behavioural mapping, spatial measurement, and perception-based inquiry, the research examines how food practices reorganise circulation hierarchies, generate temporary enclosure, and foster inclusive public environments. The findings reveal that food operates as a spatial catalyst capable of restructuring urban morphology without permanent architectural intervention. Informal governance structures enable negotiation and continuity, while temporal activation permits reversible spatial hierarchies. The study argues that food streets should be recognised as dynamic public space typologies rather than informal encroachments. By reframing them as adaptive urban ecosystems, the research contributes to architectural discourse and proposes a more inclusive understanding of spatial production in rapidly urbanising Indian cities.

***Key Words*:** food streets, informal urbanism, edible urbanism, temporality, public space, adaptive architecture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian cities have historically accommodated informal economic activities within their public realms. Streets, markets, temple precincts, and neighbourhood nodes have long functioned as spaces of exchange, interaction, and collective life (Jane Jacobs, 1961; Jan Gehl, 2011). Among the most vibrant expressions of this tradition are food streets—linear corridors where street vendors cluster to serve affordable, locally embedded cuisine. Although often perceived as temporary commercial concentrations, food streets represent complex socio-spatial systems that significantly influence urban morphology (Amos Rapoport, 1982; Margaret Crawford, 1999).

Rapid urbanisation, infrastructural expansion, and vehicular prioritisation have transformed the character of Indian streets over the past decades (Ash Amin, 2002; Nikhil Anand, 2017). Planning policies increasingly emphasise regulation, zoning clarity, and traffic efficiency, often privileging formal systems over lived practices (UN-Habitat, 2010). Within this context, informal street-based economies are frequently marginalised or relocated in the name of order, hygiene, and modernisation (Ananya Roy, 2005; Solly Benjamin, 2008). However, food streets persist across metropolitan, heritage, and coastal cities, demonstrating resilience and adaptive capacity within restrictive regulatory frameworks (AbdouMaliq Simone, 2004).

Figure 1 *Figure 2*

These images show how street markets transform roads into vibrant spaces of informal trade and social interaction.

Source : shutterimages.com , gettyimages.com

Despite their prevalence, food streets remain underrepresented in architectural research. Existing studies predominantly address them from economic or sociological perspectives, focusing on livelihoods, informality, or tourism (FAO, 2013; World Bank, 2009). Limited attention has been given to their spatial transformation, enclosure dynamics, and temporal reconfiguration as architectural phenomena. This gap reflects a broader tendency within urban discourse to separate informal practices from spatial design thinking (Henri Lefebvre, 1991; Edward Soja, 2000).

This paper addresses that gap by examining food streets as adaptive urban ecosystems shaped by informal negotiation, spatial improvisation, and temporal activation. The central argument of this study is that food streets reorganise spatial hierarchy without relying on permanent architectural intervention. Instead, they produce enclosure, density, and identity through repetitive occupation, sensory layering, and behavioural coordination (Michel de Certeau, 1984; Kevin Lynch, 1960). Understanding this phenomenon is essential for developing inclusive and context-sensitive urban design strategies that acknowledge informality as an integral component of contemporary urbanism rather than a condition to be eliminated.

2. BACKGROUND

Indian cities have historically evolved as layered and pluralistic urban environments, where informal economic practices coexist alongside formal planning systems. Streets, temple precincts, marketplaces, and neighbourhood nodes have long functioned not merely as infrastructural corridors but as active socio-spatial domains of exchange, interaction, and collective life (Jane Jacobs, 1961; William H. Whyte, 1980). Within this broader framework, food streets emerge as one of the most vivid manifestations of everyday urbanism, where culinary practices intersect with spatial occupation to produce dynamic and adaptive public environments. Scholars of informality such as Ananya Roy (2005) and AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) emphasise that such spaces are not residual or marginal but are central to the functioning of cities in the Global South, shaping both economic networks and spatial configurations.

In historic contexts such as Fort Kochi, this phenomenon is deeply rooted in the inherited morphology of the urban fabric. Unlike contemporary planned streets designed for vehicular efficiency, zoning clarity, and infrastructural optimisation, these streets were shaped through colonial-era planning logics that prioritised compactness, climatic responsiveness, and pedestrian-scale movement (Menon, 1999; Logan, 2002). The resulting street widths—typically ranging between four to six metres—produce a condition of spatial compression, which becomes fundamental to understanding how informal food-based occupation unfolds. This aligns with observations in urban morphology studies, where historic street networks are understood as fine-grained systems that enable adaptive occupation (Conzen, 1960; Moudon, 1997).

This research specifically selects Fort Kochi as a primary case study due to several interrelated reasons. First, it represents a heritage urban environment where built form remains relatively intact, allowing the study to isolate how informal food systems operate within a stable architectural framework. Second, Fort Kochi is a tourism-driven precinct, attracting both local and international visitors, thereby intensifying food-based public activity and generating diverse patterns of spatial use (Kerala Tourism Reports, 2022). Third, its coastal climatic context introduces environmental variables such as humidity, rainfall, and temperature variation, making it an ideal site to examine climatic responsiveness in informal spatial systems. Finally, the relative absence of formalised, large-scale food courts in the area ensures that street-based food culture remains dominant, allowing direct observation of informal spatial production without heavy institutional intervention. These factors collectively make Fort Kochi a representative yet unique case for analysing food streets as architectural systems shaped by time, culture, and occupation.

Figure 3
The image shows a street in Fort Kochi.

Source: author

The condition of spatial compression in Fort Kochi does not function as a limitation; rather, it becomes an organising framework for spatial behaviour. The narrow geometry produces a linear spatial field, where edges assume primary importance, enabling vendors to align along built facades while preserving a central movement corridor. This phenomenon resonates with Jan Gehl's (2010) observations on edge conditions, where human activity tends to concentrate along boundaries that provide support, visibility, and psychological comfort. Consequently, the street transforms into a layered spatial section, comprising a solid architectural edge, a dynamic commercial layer, and a fluctuating circulation band. Informality, in this context, does not disrupt spatial order but operates in continuous negotiation with built form, reinforcing the underlying geometry rather than dissolving it (Hillier & Hanson, 1984).

The presence of threshold conditions further intensifies this interaction. Recessed doorways, verandas, shaded alcoves, and transitional spaces act as micro-territories of occupation, blurring the boundary between private and public domains. Such spaces align with Herman Hertzberger's concept of in-between spaces, where ambiguity allows for flexible use and social appropriation (Hertzberger, 1991). Over time, repeated occupation of these thresholds generates tacit territorial recognition, establishing spatial memory without formal demarcation. Similarly, intersections and corners function as nodal intensities, reflecting principles identified in Kevin Lynch's (1960) work on urban imageability, where nodes become focal points of activity due to visibility and convergence.

Beyond physical configuration, these streets are fundamentally structured by temporal rhythms. They do not exist as static environments but oscillate between states of inactivity, preparation, peak activation, and withdrawal. Morning conditions foreground the architectural fabric, while evening intensification transforms the same corridor into a dense, immersive food environment. This cyclical transformation aligns with theories of time-based urbanism, where space is understood as a product of recurring activities rather than fixed form (Lefebvre, 1991; Franck & Stevens, 2007). Time, therefore, acts as a primary architectural agent, capable of reorganising spatial hierarchy without requiring permanent intervention.

Materially, the food street is constructed through ephemeral and reversible elements—carts, tarpaulins, lighting systems, and portable infrastructure—that assemble and disassemble daily. This aligns with the concept of temporary urbanism, where lightweight and adaptable systems enable flexible occupation (Bishop & Williams, 2012). Despite their provisional nature, these elements collectively produce perceptual enclosure, sensory intensity, and spatial identity. Juhani Pallasmaa (2005) emphasises that architecture is experienced through the body and the senses, and this is particularly evident in food streets where sound, smell, light, and human density construct an immersive environment beyond visual form.

Figure 4
Image shows dismantlable and ephemeral carts in the street of Fort Kochi.
Source : alamy.com

Figure 5
Image shows movable carts in the edge of the streets of Mattanchery.
Source: Author

At its core, the functioning of the food street is sustained by social negotiation and informal governance structures. Vendors establish territories through repetition, users adapt behaviour to spatial constraints, and multiple stakeholders—vendors, residents, tourists, and shop owners—participate in maintaining equilibrium. This reflects broader theories of informal urbanism, where regulation emerges through practice rather than formal policy (Roy, 2009; Simone, 2004). Informality, therefore, operates not as disorder but as a structured, adaptive system of spatial production, governed by tacit rules and collective understanding.

This research ultimately positions food streets as time-generated architectural systems, where space is continuously produced through occupation, interaction, and sensory layering. By selecting Fort Kochi as a case study, the research highlights how historic morphology, climatic conditions, tourism dynamics, and informal practices intersect to produce a highly adaptive urban environment. Understanding this phenomenon requires moving beyond conventional definitions of architecture as static built form and recognising it as a dynamic process shaped by temporal, material, and social forces, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and context-sensitive architectural discourse.

3. BODY

The central question guiding this research emerges from a critical gap within architectural discourse: how do food streets operate as time-based spatial systems that produce architecture through informal occupation, rather than through permanent built form? While cities across India and globally accommodate vibrant street-based food environments, these spaces are rarely examined as architectural systems. They are often reduced to economic or cultural phenomena, leaving their spatial intelligence underexplored. This study therefore seeks to understand how such environments organise themselves spatially and temporally, and whether informality itself can be interpreted as a structured mode of architectural production. The research further asks how these systems maintain coherence, hierarchy, and identity without relying on formal planning mechanisms, and how users—vendors, visitors, and residents—collectively contribute to shaping space.

To address this inquiry, the research adopts a mixed-method methodological framework, rooted in an interpretivist approach but supported by selective quantitative validation. The interpretivist stance allows the study to prioritise lived experience, perception, and behaviour, recognising that food streets are not static environments but are continuously produced through human activity. At the same time, measurable aspects such as timing, frequency, and density are incorporated to strengthen analytical clarity. This combination ensures that the study does not rely solely on subjective interpretation but builds a triangulated understanding of spatial systems.

The research design is structured around three interrelated components: spatial documentation, temporal observation, and questionnaire-based primary data collection. Fieldwork was conducted across three distinct contexts—Thindi Beedi in Bengaluru, Fort Kochi in Kerala, and coastal food streets in Goa—each selected for its unique combination of morphology, culture, and climatic conditions. Multiple visits were carried out at different times of day, specifically during pre-activation hours, peak evening periods, and post-activity phases. This temporal layering was essential to capture the cyclical nature of food street transformation, reinforcing the idea that these spaces are defined not by static form but by recurring patterns of use.

Figure 6

Food Streets of Fort kochi
Source : Hrishikesh1234

Figure 7
Food Street of VV Puram , Bengaluru.
Source : tripadvisor.com

Figure 8
Coastal edge food street in Goa
Source: Gettyimages.com

During field visits, detailed spatial documentation was undertaken through sketches, photographs, and measured observations. Street widths were approximated, and the effective pedestrian corridor was identified by accounting for stall encroachment and crowd movement. The alignment of stalls along edges, the distance between vendors, and the extent of spillover into the central corridor were carefully recorded. Particular attention was given to edge conditions, where informal occupation interacted with built facades. Vendors consistently positioned themselves along these edges, creating a linear band of activity that framed the street. This resulted in a distinct spatial structure comprising three layers: a fixed architectural edge, a dynamic commercial strip, and a central circulation zone.

Temporal observation revealed that this spatial structure was not constant but evolved progressively throughout the day. In the morning, the street functioned primarily as a circulation corridor, with minimal vendor presence and clear visibility of built form. As the day progressed, vendors began setting up their stalls, gradually thickening the edges. By evening, the street transformed into a dense, pedestrian-dominated environment, where circulation slowed and interaction intensified. After peak hours, the process reversed, with vendors dismantling their setups and restoring the street to its baseline condition. This cyclical transformation highlighted the role of time as a primary architectural agent, capable of reorganising space without altering its physical dimensions.

Figure 9
Streets of Bengaluru filled with movable food stalls and carts at night.
Source: theculturetrip.com

To complement these observations, a structured questionnaire was administered to vendors, visitors, and local residents. The questionnaire was designed with clear intent, focusing on spatially relevant aspects such as timing, occupation patterns, behavioural preferences, and infrastructural challenges. For vendors, questions were framed to understand their operational routines, spatial positioning, and interaction with the environment. The responses provided critical insight into how space is produced and maintained from within the system.

Vendor Questionnaire – Percentage Summary

Question	Answers
What time do you start setting up your stall?	70% (4:30–6 PM), 20% (3:30–4 PM), 10% (earlier)
How long does it take to set up your stall?	55% (45–60 min), 30% (30–45 min), 15% (up to 90 min)
What time does peak business occur?	80% (7–10 PM), 15% (till 11 PM), 5% (late night)
Is this spot fixed for you, or does it change?	75% fixed, 15% slight change, 10% shift occasionally
How was this location decided?	45% seniority, 25% mutual agreement, 20% referral, 10% self-selected
Do you need electricity? If yes, how do you access it?	65% nearby shops, 20% generators, 15% battery
Do you provide seating? Why or why not?	40% provide, 35% avoid, 25% shared/standing
Do you face space-related conflicts?	60% minor conflicts, 25% none, 15% congestion issues

Does rain affect your business?	85% yes, 15% manageable
Are weekends busier than weekdays?	90% yes, 10% same
Do festivals increase business?	100% yes
Do authorities regulate your stall?	40% occasional checks, 30% festival checks, 20% informal tolerance, 10% licensed
Do customers prefer crowded conditions?	75% yes, 20% moderate, 5% avoid crowds
What is the biggest spatial challenge you face?	45% waste, 25% storage, 20% traffic, 10% lighting
Do you dismantle everything after closing?	80% fully, 15% partial, 5% leave items

Residents Questionnaire – Percentage Summary

Question	Answer
Has the food street changed traffic conditions?	70% increased congestion, 30% improved pedestrian safety
Does evening crowding disturb daily life?	50% moderate disturbance, 40% neutral, 10% severe
Has business visibility improved?	75% yes, 25% no/unsure
Do vendors block entrances?	55% partial obstruction, 45% mostly clear
Is waste management adequate?	60% needs improvement, 40% acceptable
Has safety improved due to activity?	80% yes, 20% unsure
Do festivals increase disturbance?	85% yes, 15% manageable
Would you support regulated vending zones?	75% yes, 25% no (fear loss of vibrancy)
Has property value or recognition increased?	65% increased recognition, 35% unsure
Do you prefer fewer vendors?	45% want fewer, 55% okay with current density
Does activity reduce crime?	70% yes, 30% unsure
Are emergency vehicle movements affected?	60% concerned, 40% manageable
Does the food street benefit the locality overall?	80% yes, 20% neutral

Visitors Questionnaire – Percentage Summary

Question	Answer
What time do you usually visit the food street?	70% (7–9:30 PM), 20% (after 9:30 PM), 10% (early evening)
What attracts you most here?	40% variety, 25% ambience, 20% affordability, 15% taste
Do you prefer crowded conditions?	65% moderate crowd, 25% too crowded uncomfortable, 10% less crowd
How long do you usually stay?	55% (45–90 min), 30% (<45 min), 15% (>90 min)
Do you feel safe here at night?	85% yes, 15% concerns late night
Does seating availability affect your stay?	75% yes (stay longer), 25% okay standing
Are weekends better than weekdays?	80% weekends, 20% weekdays
Do festivals improve the experience?	90% yes, 10% too crowded
Do vendors block pedestrian movement?	60% minor blockage acceptable, 40% manageable movement
Would you support regulated vending zones?	70% yes (if vibrancy stays), 30% no (fear loss of authenticity)

Vendor responses revealed a strong consistency in temporal patterns of operation. Most vendors reported beginning their

setup in the late afternoon, typically between 4:00 PM and 6:00 PM, with peak business occurring between 7:00 PM and 10:00 PM. This directly aligned with observational data, confirming that food streets are fundamentally evening-oriented environments. The duration of setup was generally short, often ranging from 20 to 40 minutes, indicating a high degree of efficiency and reinforcing the concept of ephemerality. The ability to assemble and dismantle quickly allows vendors to adapt to temporal cycles without permanent alteration to the street.

One of the most significant findings from vendor interviews was the stability of spatial positioning. A majority of vendors reported occupying the same location daily, suggesting the existence of informal territorial systems. When asked how these locations were determined, responses consistently pointed toward negotiation, seniority, and mutual understanding rather than formal allocation. This indicates that food streets operate through self-organised spatial hierarchies, where long-term presence establishes legitimacy. New vendors typically occupy residual spaces rather than displacing existing ones, demonstrating a form of spatial etiquette that maintains order without external enforcement.

Questions related to infrastructure revealed the presence of hidden support systems within the informal network. Many vendors relied on nearby shops for electricity, either through direct connections or informal arrangements, while others used portable generators. This highlights the role of micro-infrastructure, which, although not formally integrated into the urban system, is essential for the functioning of the food street. Similarly, decisions regarding seating were influenced by spatial constraints. Some vendors provided seating to attract customers, while others avoided it to maximise turnover and maintain circulation flow. These choices directly impact the spatial configuration of the street, as seating increases occupation depth and reduces available movement space.

Figure 10
This image shows vendors occupying fixed, edge-aligned stalls, reflecting informal territorial systems shaped by repetition, negotiation, and long-term spatial stability.
Source: thehindu.com

Vendor responses also shed light on conflict and negotiation mechanisms. While space-related conflicts were acknowledged, they were generally described as manageable and resolved through discussion rather than confrontation. This suggests a collaborative environment where vendors recognise mutual dependence. Climatic factors, particularly rain, were identified as significant challenges. Vendors adapted by extending tarpaulins, repositioning equipment, or temporarily reducing operations, demonstrating environmental responsiveness. Weekly and seasonal variations further influenced business patterns, with weekends and festivals attracting higher footfall and leading to increased spatial density.

Figure 11
This image shows temporary stalls with umbrellas and tarpaulins, illustrating how vendors collaboratively adapt to climate and spatial constraints through flexible, negotiated arrangements.
Source : alamy.com

Another important insight emerged from questions related to customer behaviour. Vendors observed that crowds often attract more customers, creating a feedback loop where density becomes a marker of popularity. This perception influences how vendors position themselves and manage their stalls, reinforcing the idea that spatial conditions are shaped not only by physical constraints but also by behavioural expectations.

Overall, the vendor responses provide a detailed understanding of how food streets function as organised yet informal systems, where spatial order is maintained through repetition, negotiation, and shared practices. The findings confirm that informality does not imply randomness but operates through embedded logic and collective agreement. Vendors are not merely occupants of space; they are active agents in its production, shaping the architecture of the street through their daily routines and interactions.

This first phase of analysis establishes a foundation for understanding food streets as dynamic systems where space, time, and behaviour are deeply interconnected. The combination of spatial observation and vendor insight reveals a consistent pattern of edge-based occupation, temporal concentration, and informal regulation. These findings set the stage for further analysis of how visitors and residents perceive and interact with this environment, and how these interactions contribute to the overall spatial system.

Building upon the spatial observations and vendor-based insights, the second phase of the study focuses on how visitors and local residents perceive, interpret, and interact with the food street environment, and how these perceptions further shape the architectural character of the space. While vendors actively produce the spatial framework through occupation, it is the users—both transient and permanent—who validate, modify, and reinforce these spatial systems through behaviour. The inclusion of these perspectives allows the research to move beyond physical analysis and engage with the experiential and

social dimensions of architecture, which are central to understanding food streets as lived environments.

Visitor responses revealed a strong alignment with the temporal patterns identified during fieldwork. A majority of respondents indicated a clear preference for visiting food streets during the evening hours, typically between 6:00 PM and 10:00 PM. This confirms that the identity of the food street is closely tied to its peak activation phase, where lighting, crowd density, and food variety collectively produce an immersive environment. Unlike conventional commercial spaces that operate throughout the day, food streets rely on temporal concentration, where activity is compressed into a specific time window, intensifying both spatial and social interaction.

The frequency and duration of visits further reinforce the idea that food streets function as social spaces rather than purely transactional zones. Many visitors reported returning regularly, with visits ranging from occasional outings to weekly routines. The duration of stay often extended beyond immediate consumption, with users spending time walking through the street, observing stalls, interacting with vendors, and engaging with companions. This indicates that the food street operates as a performative public realm, where the act of being present is as important as the act of purchasing food. Spatially, this behaviour contributes to increased dwell time, which in turn affects crowd density, circulation patterns, and the overall atmosphere.

One of the most revealing aspects of visitor responses relates to perception of crowding. Contrary to conventional urban design principles that prioritise comfort through decongestion, a significant number of respondents expressed that moderate to high density enhances their experience. Crowds were associated with vibrancy, authenticity, and cultural richness, suggesting that compression is not perceived as a negative condition but as an integral part of the spatial identity. This perception directly influences how space is navigated. Instead of expecting uninterrupted movement, visitors adapt to slower, fluid circulation, weaving through clusters and pausing frequently. The architecture of the food street, therefore, accommodates and even encourages non-linear movement patterns, where interaction and observation take precedence over efficiency.

Sensory perception emerged as a critical factor in shaping visitor behaviour. Responses indicated that lighting, smell, and sound significantly influence movement and decision-making within the street. Brightly lit stalls were more likely to attract attention, acting as visual anchors within the dense environment. Similarly, the aroma of food played a key role in guiding visitors, often leading them toward specific stalls even before visual identification. Sound, including conversations, cooking noises, and ambient music, contributed to the perception of liveliness. These findings highlight that navigation within food streets is not solely visual but multi-sensory, reinforcing the idea that architecture in these contexts is experienced through the body rather than just the eye.

Questions related to spatial preference revealed that many visitors favour walking and standing consumption over seated dining. This preference is partly influenced by limited space but also reflects the informal and dynamic nature of the environment. Standing allows for greater mobility and engagement with multiple stalls, while seating often anchors users to a single location. As a result, the absence of extensive seating does not diminish usability; instead, it supports the fluidity of movement that defines the food street experience. Responses regarding safety indicated that well-lit and crowded environments are generally perceived as secure, supporting the concept of passive surveillance, where continuous activity deters unsafe conditions.

Local residents provided a contrasting yet complementary perspective, focusing on the impact of food street activity on everyday life. Their responses revealed a complex relationship between benefit and inconvenience, reflecting the dual nature of these environments. On one hand, residents acknowledged that food streets contribute to increased visibility, economic activity, and cultural vibrancy within the neighbourhood. On the other hand, concerns were raised regarding traffic congestion, noise levels, and waste management, particularly during peak hours and festival periods.

Questions related to traffic conditions highlighted the transformation of the street from a vehicular corridor to a pedestrian-dominated space during evening hours. Residents noted that while this shift enhances public activity, it can also disrupt routine mobility, especially for those living or working within the area. However, many respondents recognised this as a temporal adjustment rather than a permanent disruption, suggesting an implicit acceptance of the street's dual function. This reinforces the idea that food streets operate through time-based negotiation, where different uses are accommodated at different times rather than through fixed zoning.

Responses regarding vendor placement near entrances and building edges revealed ongoing processes of spatial negotiation between private and public domains. While some residents expressed concerns about blocked access, others acknowledged that these interactions are typically resolved through communication and mutual adjustment. This indicates that the boundary between formal and informal space is not rigid but continuously negotiated, allowing coexistence rather than conflict.

Waste management emerged as a critical issue, with several residents pointing to inadequate disposal systems during peak hours. This highlights a key limitation of informal systems, where infrastructure does not always match intensity of use. At the same time, responses regarding safety suggested that increased activity and lighting contribute positively to perceived security, particularly at night. This aligns with broader urban theories that link active public spaces with reduced crime and improved surveillance.

Interestingly, when asked about overall impact, many residents expressed that the food street benefits the locality, despite its challenges. This indicates a recognition of its cultural and economic value, suggesting that complete removal or strict regulation may not be desirable. Instead, there is a preference for balanced intervention, where improvements in infrastructure and organisation enhance functionality without disrupting the existing system.

When the insights from vendors, visitors, and residents are synthesised, a clear pattern emerges. Food streets operate as multi-layered spatial systems, where different user groups contribute to shaping and sustaining the environment. Vendors establish the physical framework through occupation, visitors activate the space through presence and movement, and residents influence its integration within the broader urban context. Together, these interactions produce a system that is both dynamic and stable, informal yet organised.

From an architectural perspective, this synthesis reveals that food streets function as time-generated corridors, where spatial identity is produced through cyclical transformation. The consistent concentration of activity in the evening, the alignment of stalls along edges, and the reversible nature of occupation all contribute to a system that is defined by process rather than permanence. The street becomes an adaptive structure, capable of accommodating multiple uses without requiring physical modification.

The study also highlights the importance of sensory enclosure, where light, sound, smell, and density collectively create a perception of space. Unlike traditional architecture, where enclosure is defined by walls and roofs, the food street achieves this through atmospheric layering. This challenges conventional notions of architectural form and suggests alternative ways of understanding space as an experiential construct.

Furthermore, the research demonstrates that informality operates through embedded logic and self-regulation, rather than randomness. Territorial stability, mutual adjustment, and repeated occupation create a system of order that is both flexible and resilient. This has significant implications for architectural practice, suggesting that design strategies should focus on supporting existing patterns rather than imposing rigid frameworks.

Ultimately, the combined analysis of spatial observation and user perception confirms that food streets are not chaotic or unstructured environments but are highly organised systems shaped by time, behaviour, and interaction. They represent a form of architecture that is continuously produced and reproduced, adapting to changing conditions while maintaining a strong sense of identity. By recognising this, architects and planners can begin to engage with informality not as a problem to be solved but as a resource to be understood and integrated, paving the way for more inclusive and responsive urban design approaches.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Food streets must be understood not as peripheral or incidental phenomena but as resilient and adaptive urban typologies capable of transforming everyday infrastructure into vibrant public realms. Through comparative analysis of VV Puram in Bengaluru, Fort Kochi, and Goa, this research establishes that informality is not disorder but a context-responsive spatial system shaped by morphology, climate, and economic variation. Across all cases, consistent principles emerge—edge-based occupation, evening-centric activation, sensory intensification, and reversibility—indicating a shared architectural logic that transcends context. A key contribution of this study lies in addressing the lack of architectural inquiry into food streets in India, where they have largely been examined through sociological or economic lenses rather than as systems of spatial production. This research reframes them within architectural discourse, demonstrating that enclosure, hierarchy, and identity can emerge without permanent built intervention. The findings further reveal that sustainability is rooted in behavioural repetition and collective spatial memory: vendors occupy consistent locations, users internalise temporal rhythms, and residents negotiate coexistence within cyclical transformations. Such repetition produces informal stability without rigid zoning, relying instead on mutual adjustment, embedded norms, and continuous negotiation.

The study also identifies temporality as a primary structuring force, where phases of activation, intensification, and withdrawal enable reversible urbanism—allowing a single space to accommodate multiple functions over time. This offers critical lessons for rapidly urbanising contexts, where flexible, time-based use can maximise spatial efficiency without additional infrastructure. The role of micro-infrastructure and lightweight, adaptable materials—such as portable lighting, canopies, and informal service connections—demonstrates that architectural effectiveness can emerge from minimal, reversible systems, though gaps in sanitation and waste management highlight areas for targeted intervention. Sensory experience further defines these environments, as light, sound, smell, and density create perceptual enclosure beyond physical boundaries, challenging conventional notions of architectural space. Notably, crowd density is perceived positively, associated with vibrancy and authenticity, suggesting that standard metrics of comfort may not apply uniformly. From a governance perspective, the research critiques eviction-based approaches, instead highlighting existing systems of self-regulation and advocating for participatory, incremental frameworks that integrate rather than eliminate informality. Despite contextual differences—compact intensity in VV Puram, linear heritage sensitivity in Fort Kochi, and climate-responsive dispersion in Goa—all cases demonstrate adaptive intelligence. Ultimately, recognising food streets as legitimate spatial systems enables architects and planners to engage them as models of adaptive urbanism, where process, repetition, and collective participation redefine architecture as a dynamic, inclusive, and continuously evolving mode of spatial production.

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