

Reframing Urban Aesthetics: Beauty as a Multisensory, Embodied, and Culturally Mediated Experience

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Abstract

Urban aesthetic research continues to face several conceptual limitations: a persistent visual bias, limited cross-cultural sensitivity, weak explanation of how environmental qualities become aesthetic judgments, and insufficient attention to differences among user groups. Addressing these gaps, this paper proposes a multisensory framework that re-frames urban beauty as an embodied, relational, and culturally mediated experience. The framework conceptualizes urban aesthetic experience as a non-deterministic process connecting: (1) environmental inputs, including built, nature-based, symbolic-cultural, sensory-ambient, and functional qualities; (2) multisensory and embodied encounters through visual, olfactory, atmospheric and bodily engagement; (3) user classes, such as residents, commuters, visitors and city users; (4) contextual moderators, including individual, socio-cultural, spatial, environmental, institutional, and professional conditions; and (5) aesthetic responses, ranging from immediate appraisal to durable place-related outcome. It therefore avoids assuming a fixed relationship between urban form and aesthetic judgment. Although theoretical in focus, the paper is informed by a broader doctoral research project comparing Oulu, Finland, and Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The empirical material is not analysed in detail here, but it sensitizes the framework to cultural, climatic, morphological, and planning differences. Insights from this project, combined with a focused synthesis of the literature and identified research gaps, inform the proposed model. The paper contributes to urban studies, environmental aesthetics, and tourism-related urban research by offering a culturally responsive framework for understanding how urban beauty is perceived and mediated beyond visual form, while showing why aesthetic perception may vary across different contexts.

Keywords: urban aesthetics, urban beauty, environmental aesthetics, sensory urbanism, cultural mediation

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Introduction

What makes a city beautiful? This question has long occupied philosophers, architects, urban theorists, and planners. Yet in contemporary urban studies, beauty can no longer be understood only as a matter of visual form, architectural style, or formal composition. Cities are not simply seen from a distance; they are also encountered through everyday movement, sensory atmospheres, routines, memory, and everyday use. Following Lehtinen's (2025) distinction between the macro aesthetic layer of the cityscape and the micro aesthetic layer of everyday urban experience, urban beauty can be approached through both broad impressions of the city and situated, embodied encounters with its spaces. In this paper, urban beauty is understood not only as a visual quality of the built environment, but as a lived and relational experience shaped by the interaction between people and urban space.

This broader understanding challenges approaches that treat aesthetics as a secondary or decorative dimension of urban life. Environmental and everyday aesthetic studies have shown that aesthetic experience is active, situated, and participatory rather than detached or purely contemplative (Berleant, 2005; Saito, 2007). From this perspective, urban environments are not passive visual objects but experiential fields in which bodily movement, sensory perception, affective responses, memory, and cultural interpretation come together. Humanistic and place-based approaches are also useful because they show that urban environments are not perceived only as physical settings, but as lived environments shaped by familiarity, emotional resonance, and symbolic recognition (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977).

Despite this theoretical shift, urban aesthetic research continues to face several limitations. These limitations partly reflect the inherent complexity of urban aesthetics itself, which involves individual perception and emotion, bodily and multisensory experience, environmental conditions, collective meanings, cultural expectations, and planning decisions. Urban beauty can thus be approached not only through visual or formal qualities, but also through psychological, sensory, ecological, social, cultural, and political dimensions. For this reason, urban aesthetics is difficult to study through a single disciplinary lens or by focusing on isolated physical variables.

This complexity is reflected in four persistent problems in the literature identified in this study. First, urban aesthetic research has often privileged visual and formal qualities, such as architectural appearance, coherence, legibility, imageability, and spatial composition. These dimensions remain important, but they do not fully explain how urban beauty is experienced through sound, smell, movement, atmosphere, comfort, maintenance, and memory. Second, even when multisensory and atmospheric dimensions are acknowledged, the process through which environmental qualities are interpreted and transformed into aesthetic judgments remains insufficiently developed. Qualities such as greenery, water, materiality, sounds, cleanliness, safety, and symbolic value are examined separately, while less attention is given to how they interact with each other and other elements such as memory, bodily experience, cultural meaning, and everyday practice in shaping perceptions of beauty.

Third, aesthetic perception is not always sufficiently examined in relation to cultural background, personal experience, user type, social position, familiarity, and spatial contexts. What is perceived as beautiful, calm, vibrant, authentic, excessive, or neglected in one urban context may be interpreted differently in another. Fourth, the literature still tends to examine aesthetic dimensions separately, such as greenery, architectural form, soundscape, heritage, walkability, comfort, or maintenance, rather than fully integrating them into a coherent

analytical framework. As a result, urban beauty is not always approached as a combined lived experience in which material elements and intangible conditions interact.

These limitations are not only conceptual but also practical. If urban beauty is reduced to visual improvement, iconic design, or isolated environmental features, planning and design practices may overlook how aesthetic quality is actually experienced in everyday urban life. For example, a visually attractive urban space may still be evaluated negatively if it feels inaccessible, uncomfortable, poorly maintained, or sensorially unpleasant. Conversely, ordinary spaces may acquire aesthetic value when they support comfort, accessibility, care, and meaningful everyday use.

This paper aims to respond to these concerns by proposing a multisensory theoretical framework for understanding urban beauty as a multisensory, embodied, relational, and culturally mediated experience. The paper is conceptually focused, but research-informed in orientation, drawing on a broader doctoral project concerned with urban aesthetic perception across different cultural, climatic, spatial, and planning contexts. Its purpose is not to present comparative empirical analysis, but to advance an integrated conceptual model of urban aesthetic experience.

The proposed framework connects urban aesthetic elements, multisensory engagement, cultural interpretations, and the emotional and symbolic meanings through which beauty is perceived and evaluated. By doing so, the paper moves beyond narrow visual dimensions of urban beauty and clarifies that urban aesthetics can be understood as part of the lived and experiential life of cities. This perspective is relevant not only for urban theory but also for planning and design practice because it encourages attention to the sensory, cultural, environmental, and inclusive conditions through which urban environments become aesthetically meaningful for different users.

Literature Review

Urban Aesthetics Beyond the Visual

A useful starting point for rethinking urban aesthetics is not to reject visual approaches, but to recognize both their contribution and their limits. Environmental psychology and urban design have shown that visual and spatial qualities influence how urban environments are perceived and evaluated. Kaplan and Kaplan's (1989) work on environmental preferences identifies coherence, complexity, legibility, and mystery as important qualities in the appraisal of environments, while Lynch's (2008) concept of imageability explains how paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks support recognition, orientation, and memorability in the city. Nasar (1992) further distinguished between formal attributes, such as order, openness, upkeep, and incompatibility, and symbolic attributes, such as meaning, association, and inferred characters.

These visual and formal approaches are essential for understanding how urban environments are organized, recognized, and evaluated, but they do not fully explain urban beauty as a lived, sensory, and culturally interpreted experience. If aesthetics is approached mainly through compositions, legibility, or visual preference, the city risks being treated as an object to be viewed rather than an environment to be inhabited. Environmental aesthetics offers a broader alternative; in this context, Berleant's (1991) *Participatory aesthetics* is particularly useful because it rejects detached contemplation and frames aesthetic experience as active

engagement with the environment (Berleant, 2005, 2015). From this perspective, aesthetic value does not reside only in the appearance of objects or spaces but emerges through the relationship between environmental qualities and human engagement.

Everyday aesthetics reinforces this shift by extending aesthetic inquiry beyond exceptional works, monuments, or designed spectacles. Saito (2007) argues that ordinary environments and practical qualities are aesthetically significant because they shape how people experience daily life. In urban contexts, this means that streets, sidewalks, public amenities, maintenance, cleanliness, material textures, lighting, and accessibility are not secondary to aesthetic experience. They influence whether an environment feels cared for, comfortable, coherent, welcoming, neglected, or alienating. This perspective is particularly important for understanding urban beauty as part of everyday experience rather than as an extraordinary visual event.

A further contribution comes from critical accounts of aestheticization. Welsch (1997) argues that aesthetics is no longer confined to art, design, or exceptional objects, but increasingly permeates everyday environments, social life, and urban experience. In contemporary cities, this process is visible in beautification strategies, public art, heritage policies, design interventions, and place branding, where aesthetic value is often used to produce identity, attractiveness, and symbolic distinction. Zukin (1995) similarly reminded us that urban aesthetics is not neutral; it is shaped by cultural values, economic interests, institutional priorities, and forms of symbolic power.

These perspectives prevent urban beauty from being understood as a purely sensory response or as an individual preference alone. Bourdieu's (1984) *Judgment of taste* shows that aesthetic preferences are shaped by habitus, cultural capital, learned dispositions, and social position. In urban contexts, Zukin's (1995) work further demonstrates that aesthetic values are embedded in symbolic economies, public culture, redevelopment strategies, and struggles over urban image and representations. Urban beauty is therefore not only perceived through the senses; it is also interpreted through social distinctions, cultural meanings, institutional priorities, and symbolic power.

Research on destination aesthetics also supports a broader understanding of beauty by treating aesthetic judgment as multidimensional (Nasiri et al., 2024) rather than as a simple statement that a "place is beautiful". Kirillova et al. (2014) show that aesthetic appraisal involves interrelated sensory, spatial, temporal, and formal qualities. Kirillova and Lehto (2015) further translate destination aesthetics into more observable attributes related to setting, upkeep, harmony, age, scale, and form. Although developed in tourism research, these studies are relevant to urban aesthetics because they show how beauty can be analysed as a structured process of evaluation rather than as a vague subjective impression.

Taken together, these debates indicate that visual dimensions remain essential but insufficient. Urban aesthetics requires an approach capable of linking formal and spatial qualities with everyday use, social practice, and cultural interpretations.

Multisensory, Embodied, and Culturally Mediated Experience of Urban Aesthetics

If urban beauty is not only a visual property, then aesthetic experience may be understood through the body, senses, and the interpretative frameworks through which people encounter urban environments. Sensory urbanism provides an important basis for this shift. Howes (2005)

is useful in showing that sensory experience is culturally organized rather than purely psychological. Pallasmaa (2007) further challenges vision-centered approaches by emphasizing the multisensory and bodily character of architectural and urban experience. Thibaud (2011) extends this perspective to urban ambience, showing how sound, smell, light, texture, rhythm, and movement shape the experience of place from within.

Embodied perception theories further clarify this point. Gibson's (2014) ecological approach emphasizes that environments are perceived in relation to action: people do not simply register forms, but encounter affordances that invite, support, or discourage particular forms of movement and use. In urban settings, a shaded path, a bench, a waterfront, or a poorly maintained square may all shape aesthetic judgment by influencing how the body moves, pauses, or feels oriented in space. Pallasmaa (2007) similarly argues that architectural and urban experience is fundamentally multisensory, involving the whole body rather than vision alone. Vihanninjoki's (2021) work on affordance-based urban aesthetics reinforces this view by showing that aesthetic appreciation emerges through situated movement, changing perspectives, and practical engagement with urban atmosphere.

Atmospheric approaches deepen this embodied account by shifting attention from isolated urban features to the overall felt quality of situations (Böhme, 2014, 2017). Thibaud's (2011) concept of urban ambience similarly frames perception as situated, multisensory, and experienced from within. For Thibaud, ambience brings together sensory phenomena, spatial conditions, affective tonality, movement, and social practice. From this perspective, urban beauty is not located in buildings, landmarks, or parks, but also in the atmospheric relations through which urban environments are felt as vibrant, neglected, or meaningful.

This is particularly evident in soundscape and smellscape research; Schafer's (1993) work shifts attention from isolated sounds to the total acoustic environment as perceived and interpreted by listeners. Axelsson et al., (2010) further show that, soundscapes are commonly evaluated through dimensions such as pleasantness and eventfulness, which helps explain why quietness is not always positive, and liveliness is not always negative. Different urban settings may therefore generate different auditory judgments depending on context, expectation, rhythm, and use. Smellscape research offers a parallel contribution; Rodaway (1994) positions smell as part of embodied sensory experience, closely connected to orientation, memory, and environmental meaning. Henshaw (2013) shows how urban smellscape contribute to comfort, familiarity, cleanliness, vitality, and place character. Xiao et al. (2018) further demonstrates that olfactory appraisal depends on qualities such as pleasantness, freshness, intensity, familiarity, and appropriateness. Soundscape and smellscape research, therefore, show that sensory qualities are important to urban aesthetic experience. However, sensory perception alone does not explain how these qualities become meaningful or how they are transformed into aesthetic judgments.

Aesthetic perception is also culturally mediated; Bourdieu's (1977) *habitus* shows that taste and aesthetic preference are shaped by learned dispositions, social positions, and cultural capital. Ingold (2008) adds that perception is formed through culturally embedded ways of inhabiting and engaging with the environment. Drenthen and Keulartz (2014) further show that cultural frameworks influences what is interpreted as harmonious, expressive, authentic, excessive, or meaningful. This clarifies that individuals do not simply respond to environmental stimuli; they interpret them through memories, expectations, symbolic associations, and social narratives.

This cultural mediation is also connected to different modes of urban engagement. Following Martinotti (1993), residents, commuters, visitors, and city users may encounter the same environment through different temporalities, routines, and expectations. Seamon (1979) is useful for understanding how residents' aesthetic judgments may develop through repetition, familiarity, everyday movement, and accumulated sensory memory. Urry (1996) helps explain how visitors may approach urban environments through selective attention and mediated expectations, while MacCannell (2009) shows how symbolic markers can influence what is recognised as meaningful, distinctive, or worth seeing. These differences do not imply that one group perceives beauty more accurately than another. Rather, they show that urban aesthetic experience is situated: it depends on how individuals enter, use, remember, and interpret urban environments.

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that urban beauty is formed through the interaction of sensory perception, bodily engagement, atmospheric conditions, and cultural interpretation. This provides the conceptual basis for the framework proposed in this paper, which treats aesthetic experience as a process through which built, natural, symbolic, and ambient elements become meaningful through multisensory encounter, various mediators, and interpretative judgments.

Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual theory-building methodology. The framework was developed through a focused synthesis of literature from urban aesthetics, environmental and everyday aesthetics, sensory urbanism, embodied perception, cultural mediation, tourism-related urban research, and urban planning. The review was not conducted as a systematic review; rather, it was used analytically to identify concepts that explain how urban aesthetic qualities are perceived, experienced, interpreted, and evaluated. Finally, these concepts were organized into five connected components, which shaped the non-deterministic model (see discussion).

Additionally, the paper draws on the author's broader doctoral research project comparing urban aesthetic perception in Oulu, Finland, and Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The empirical material from this project is not analysed in detail here, yet it helped orient the framework. Although theoretical in focus, the paper is research-informed. It does not aim to test causal relationships or produce statistical generalizations, but to propose a framework that can guide future empirical studies and support more context-sensitive approaches to urban aesthetics research, planning, and design.

Discussion

The proposed framework synthesises the literature reviewed above by positioning urban beauty as a non-deterministic process of aesthetic experience. It does not assume that specific urban elements automatically produce fixed aesthetic evaluations. Rather, it suggests that urban beauty emerges through the interaction between three main dimensions: the elements encountered in urban environments, the multisensory and embodied ways in which these elements are experienced, and the user classes whose perception is differentiated. These dimensions are then shaped by moderators that influence how aesthetic encounters are interpreted and whether they remain immediate appraisals or become connected to more durable place-related outcomes (Figure 1).

The first part of the model concerns the elements of the urban aesthetic experience. It builds on established visual and spatial approaches to environmental preferences, imageability, and aesthetic evaluation, but extends them beyond visual compositions alone. The framework, therefore, does not restrict urban beauty to formal organization or visible urban form. Instead, it groups the main aesthetic elements into built features, nature-based elements, symbolic-cultural features, and sensory-ambient qualities. These categories correspond to the diagram's central distinction between aesthetic elements and functional/inclusive affordances as cross-cutting conditions.

This distinction is important because beauty is experienced through the combination of aesthetic elements and functional affordances. Built features, nature-based elements, symbolic-cultural features, and sensory-ambient qualities provide the material, ecological, symbolic, and atmospheric conditions of aesthetic experience. Functional affordances influence whether these aesthetic qualities can be positively experienced in practice. This point is developed by Saito (2007), who explains that ordinary and practical dimensions of daily environments are aesthetically significant. In the proposed model, functional qualities are therefore not external to beauty; they are considered as a cross-cutting section mediating how aesthetic elements are encountered, used, and evaluated.

The second part of the model concerns multisensory and embodied encounters. Here, the framework draws on Berleant's (2005) *participatory aesthetics*, which understands aesthetic experience as active involvement with the environment rather than detached contemplation. Here, Berleant is particularly relevant because he shifts attention from the object viewed to the situation experienced. Gibson (2014) also supports this move by showing that environments are perceived through affordances, or possibilities for action. Pallasmaa (2007) further challenges the dominance of vision by arguing that architectural and urban experience involves the whole body. In this diagram, this is expressed through embodiment, auditory, visual, olfactory, and atmospheric dimensions. Urban beauty is therefore not only experienced visually; it is encountered through movement, orientation, sound, smell, atmosphere, and bodily engagement. This multisensory dimension links directly to the literature on atmosphere (Böhme, 2017; Thibaud, 2011), soundscape (Schafer, 1993), and smellscape (Henshaw, 2013).

The third part of the model concerns user classes. Residents, commuters, city users, and business-related users may encounter the same urban environment through different temporalities, expectations, and degrees of familiarity. This does not mean that each group has a fixed or predictable aesthetic response. Rather, it means that aesthetic experience varies based on the type of users who engage with the urban environment. Seamon's (1979) work on everyday movement and routines here shows how repeated bodily practices shape familiarity with place. Moreover, Urry's (2002) *gaze* helps explain how visitors and temporary users may approach places through selective attention and mediated expectations. MacCannell (2009) further clarifies how markers and symbolic cues influence what is recognized as worth seeing or remembering. The model, therefore, treats user classes as part of the aesthetic process, not as demographic categories alone.

The fourth part of the model consists of moderators: individual and experiential factors; socio-cultural and symbolic conditions; spatial and environmental circumstances; and institutional and professional mediators. These moderators explain why the relationship between urban elements, multisensory encounters, and aesthetic responses is non-deterministic. Aesthetic judgment is shaped not only by sensory exposure but also by social position, learned dispositions, and cultural capital, as suggested by Bourdieu (1984). It is also formed through

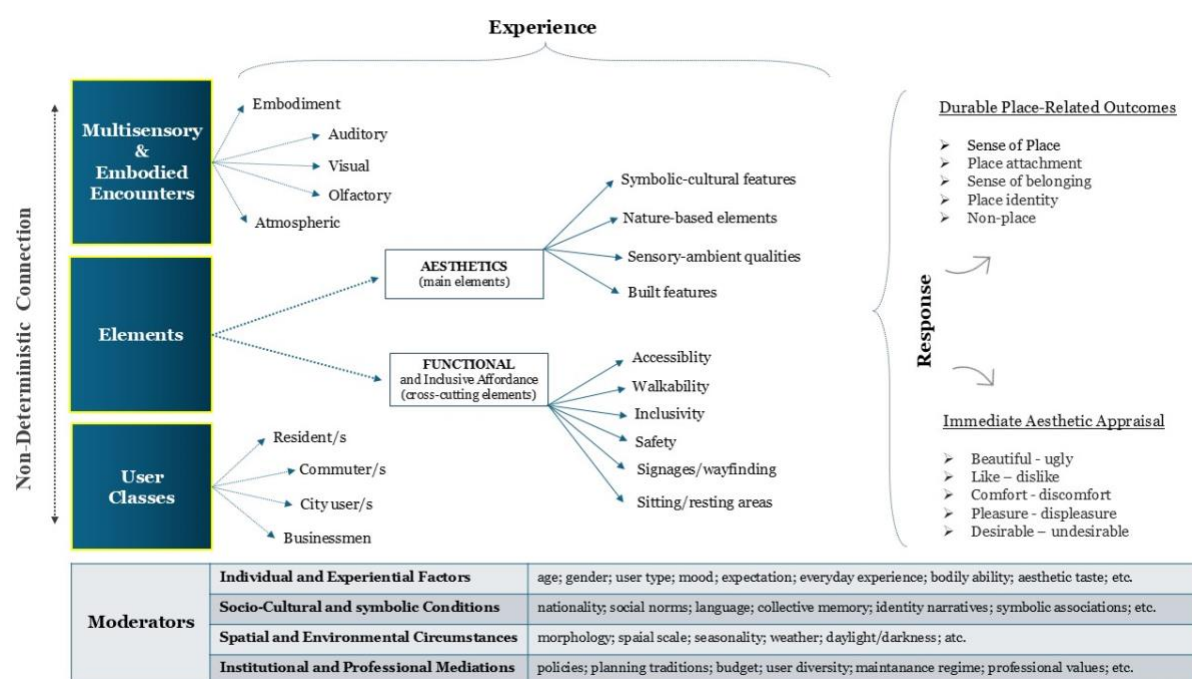
embodied and culturally situated ways of inhabiting the environment, as Ingold (2008) argues. In urban contexts, these processes are further shaped by cultural production, symbolic power, institutional priorities, and urban representation, as Zukin (1995, 2000) demonstrates.

The response side of the model distinguishes between immediate aesthetic appraisal and durable place-related outcomes. Immediate appraisals may occur through brief encounters, first impressions, or everyday use, showing how urban beauty is evaluated at the level of perception and affect. Durable place-related outcomes, by contrast, refer to longer-term responses that may emerge when aesthetic experiences are repeated, remembered, and connected to emotional or symbolic meaning. Tuan's (1977) account of experience and value helps explain how repeated encounters with environments may develop into affective bonds, while Relph's (1976) work on place and placelessness clarifies how such bonds may be strengthened or weakened through the depth of human-place relations. In this framework, outcomes are not treated as an automatic effect of beauty, but as possible immediate or gradual extensions of urban aesthetic experience.

The framework should therefore be understood as an analytical starting point rather than an exhaustive account of urban aesthetic experience. Due to the conceptual scope of this paper, some dimensions are only briefly addressed and require further development. Future empirical work can refine the model by examining how these dimensions operate across different urban contexts and user groups.

Figure 1

Proposed Multisensory Framework of Urban Aesthetic Experience



Source: Author's own elaboration based on the literature synthesis

Conclusion

This paper has argued that urban beauty is better understood not as a fixed visual property of buildings, space, or urban form, but as a multisensory, embodied, relational, and culturally mediated experience. By synthesizing debates from urban aesthetics, environmental and

everyday aesthetics, sensory urbanism, affordance-based perception, and cultural mediation, the paper proposed a conceptual framework for analysing how urban aesthetic experience is formed and evaluated.

The framework contributes to urban aesthetic theory by organizing aesthetic experience around five interrelated dimensions: environmental inputs, multisensory and embodied encounters; user classes; contextual moderators; and aesthetic responses, ranging from immediate appraisals to durable place-related outcomes. This structure shows that aesthetic judgment is not automatic, but emerges through the interaction between environmental qualities, sensory encounters, user perspectives, cultural expectations, and contextual conditions.

A central contribution of the model is its non-deterministic understanding of urban beauty. The framework does not assume that specific urban elements directly produce fixed aesthetic responses. Instead, it allows urban aesthetics to be studied as both immediate and cumulative: some responses emerge through direct perception and affect, while others may, over time, contribute to attachment, belonging, place identity, or, in weakened cases, non-place.

The proposed framework also has implications for planning and design practice. It suggests that aesthetic quality cannot be achieved through visual improvement alone. Urban environments become aesthetically meaningful when they support sensory richness, bodily comfort, accessibility, care, cultural recognition, safety, and inclusive use. This encourages planners and designers to treat urban beauty not as a decoration, but as an experiential and relational quality of urban life.

Further research can apply, test, and refine the model through comparative empirical studies involving different urban contexts, user groups, and planning settings. Such work can clarify how multisensory urban beauty is perceived, mediated, and valued across diverse environments, and how the proposed framework may support more context-sensitive approaches to urban aesthetic research, planning, and design.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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