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Assessing Critical Environmental Quality Attributes For Enhancing Sustainable Commercial Property Investment In Selected Cities In South-Eastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Environmental quality has emerged as a key determinant of commercial property performance in rapidly urbanizing regions, particularly in developing economies. This study examines the critical environmental quality attributes that enhance sustainable commercial property investment in the South-Eastern Nigerian cities of Aba, Owerri, and Onitsha. A descriptive survey research design was adopted with mixed-methods approach, using structured questionnaires administered to 400 stakeholders and 20 key-informant interviews: with developers, investors, and municipal officials of which 390 valid responses were analyzed representing an 97.5% response rate. Both descriptive statistics of frequency, mean, standard deviation, RII analyses were employed to evaluate how factors such as waste management efficiency, air quality, drainage systems, noise levels, green infrastructure, and general urban environmental conditions influence investment decisions and property viability. Findings indicated that environmental quality significantly affects rental attractiveness, capital value appreciation, occupancy rates, and investor confidence. Poor waste disposal, flooding, air pollution, and deteriorating urban infrastructure were identified as primary constraints, while improved environmental governance, green space provision, and effective sanitation systems enhanced sustainability. The study concluded that integrating environmental quality indicators into urban planning and property development strategies is essential to promote resilient and competitive commercial property markets in South-Eastern Nigeria.

Keywords: Environmental quality, commercial property, sustainable investment, South-Eastern Nigeria, Aba, Owerri, Onitsha

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Urban commercial property markets in developing economies are increasingly shaped by environmental quality attributes that influence investor confidence, asset performance, and long-term market sustainability. In Nigeria, rapid urbanization and commercial expansion have intensified environmental pressures, particularly in medium-sized cities such as Aba, Owerri, and Onitsha. These pressures manifest in deteriorating air quality, inadequate drainage, traffic congestion, and weak waste management systems, all of which affect the attractiveness and viability of commercial property investments (Nweze, Okeke & Onyema, 2019; Chuka, 2023). As global and regional real estate trends shift toward sustainability-oriented investment, environmental quality has emerged as a critical factor shaping market competitiveness and resilience (Ayeni, 2022).

Empirical studies increasingly demonstrated that environmental amenities: such as clean air, efficient waste systems, green spaces, road quality, and noise control; play measurable roles in determining property values, occupancy levels, and investor perceptions (Famuyiwa, 2022; Shamang, 2024). In

commercial markets, these attributes are even more decisive because they affect operational efficiency, tenant retention, and business performance. For instance, adequate sanitation and drainage reduce flood risk and maintenance costs, while improved urban aesthetics and environmental management enhance customer traffic and business productivity, thereby strengthening commercial property returns (Ayeni, 2022). However, the ability of many Nigerian cities to provide these environmental quality conditions remains limited due to infrastructure deficits, governance challenges, and inconsistent enforcement of environmental standards (Nweze et al., 2019).

Despite growing scholarly attention to environmental determinants of real estate performance, there remains a shortage of place-specific studies focusing on commercial property investment within the South-Eastern urban corridor. Existing research often generalizes environmental influences across broader regions or focuses primarily on residential markets, leaving a gap in understanding how specific environmental attributes shape commercial investment decisions in cities like Aba, Owerri, and Onitsha (Shamang, 2024). These cities are unique commercial hubs with distinct socio-economic structures and environmental challenges, requiring tailored analysis to guide investment strategies and policy reforms.

This study addresses that gap by assessing the critical environmental quality attributes that enhance sustainable commercial property investment in Aba, Owerri, and Onitsha. The research identifies context-specific environmental factors, examines their influence on investor behaviour and property performance, and provides evidence-based insights for urban planners, policymakers, and real estate stakeholders. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on sustainable urban development and offer practical pathways for improving environmental conditions to support long-term commercial real estate growth in South-Eastern Nigeria.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Environmental Quality in Urban Real Estate Markets

Environmental quality is increasingly recognized as a critical determinant of real estate performance, particularly within rapidly urbanizing regions where infrastructure and environmental services lag behind population and economic growth. In real estate scholarship, environmental quality refers to the physical, ecological, and aesthetic conditions within the urban environment that influence the functionality, health, attractiveness, and sustainability of surrounding properties (Ayeni, 2022). These include air quality, noise levels, drainage conditions, waste management efficiency, availability of green spaces, and overall environmental cleanliness. The theoretical foundation for analyzing the influence of environmental attributes on property values is grounded in the Hedonic Pricing Model (HPM), which posits that the price of a property reflects the value of its constituent attributes; including structural, locational, and environmental factors. Empirical applications of the HPM consistently demonstrate that markets capitalize environmental amenities and discount environmental disamenities, thereby shaping investor preferences and investment performance (Panduro & Veie, 2021). Contemporary real estate investment theory further emphasizes sustainability criteria, noting that environmental risks directly influence operational costs, market risk profiles, and long-term yield stability.

2.2 Environmental Quality Attributes Relevant to Commercial Property Investment

Many studies have been conducted on environmental quality attributes: air quality and noise exposure, drainage, flooding, and stormwater management, solid waste management and urban sanitation, green infrastructure and urban aesthetics (Ayeni, 2022; Egbenta, 2021; Panduro & Veie, 2021). But the relevant of environmental quality attributes to commercial property investment has not been properly harnessed. Air pollution and noise remain recurring environmental challenges in emerging urban contexts. Poor air quality adversely affects business environments by diminishing customer experience, decreasing worker productivity, and increasing health-related absenteeism. Studies in Nigerian and international cities show that commercial districts exposed to high pollution levels experience reduced demand and lower rental premiums, as businesses prefer locations with better environmental safety and comfort (Egbenta, 2021). Noise pollution, arising from high traffic densities and informal commercial activities, also reduces the

attractiveness of commercial zones and has been linked to reduced property values and weakened investor confidence.

Flood risk has become a major factor influencing commercial property decisions in Nigeria's urban centres. Inadequate drainage leads to recurrent flooding, business interruption, rapid structural deterioration, and increased maintenance costs. These risks are capitalized into property prices and rental values, often resulting in market discounts for properties in flood-prone areas (Nweze et al., 2019). For investors, drainage quality serves as a proxy for municipal capacity, long-term sustainability, and the stability of returns, making it a pivotal environmental attribute in commercial property investment evaluation. Efficient waste management remains central to maintaining acceptable urban environmental quality. Accumulation of solid waste in commercial corridors creates odour, visual pollution, health hazards, and blockage of drainage channels; factors that significantly diminish commercial attractiveness. Empirical studies in Nigerian cities reveal a consistent negative relationship between poor sanitation and property performance, as tenants avoid areas with persistent waste buildup and environmental disorder (Ayeni, 2022).

Urban green spaces offer multiple ecological and socio-economic benefits, including microclimate regulation, noise reduction, enhanced aesthetics, and improved pedestrian comfort. International meta-analyses consistently show that proximity to well-maintained green spaces increases both residential and commercial property values by enhancing customer flow, creating more pleasant business environments, and signaling a commitment to environmental sustainability (Panduro & Veie, 2021). Despite the scarcity of formal green infrastructure in many Nigerian cities, its potential to enhance commercial property performance remains well-supported in the literature.

Most Nigerian studies have examined environmental influences on residential real estate markets, yet their findings offer instructive parallels for commercial contexts. Evidence from Lagos, Abuja, Ibadan, and Port Harcourt indicates that poor environmental quality: manifesting as inadequate drainage, poor sanitation, air pollution, and environmental neglect; significantly reduces market value, depresses demand, and lowers investor interest (Famuyiwa, 2022; Ayeni, 2022; Egbenta, 2021; Panduro & Veie, 2021). Conversely, neighborhoods with better-managed environments demonstrate higher market appeal and stronger rental growth (Nweze et al., 2019). These findings underscore the importance of environmental quality as both a market signal and an operational determinant in Nigerian real estate investments. Importantly, commercial real estate, which relies heavily on customer accessibility, environmental aesthetics, and uninterrupted business activity, is even more sensitive to environmental deficits than residential markets.

Aba, Owerri, and Onitsha constitute the principal commercial centres of South-Eastern Nigeria, yet each city presents distinct environmental conditions that influence commercial property investment. Aba faces poor drainage, waste accumulation, and environmental pollution affecting small-scale industries. While Onitsha experiences intense congestion, air pollution, and indiscriminate waste disposal, limiting high-end commercial investment. And Owerri although comparatively better planned, suffers emerging drainage and traffic challenges. Comparative studies remain scarce, creating a need for systematic evaluation of environmental attributes across these cities. There is a lack of multi-city, attribute-specific analyses integrating investor perspectives, environmental data, and property market performance. This study aims to fill this gap by identifying and ranking critical environmental quality attributes to guide sustainable commercial property investment in South-Eastern Nigeria.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study focused on three South-Eastern Nigerian cities: Aba (Abia State), Owerri (Imo State), and Onitsha (Anambra State). These cities were selected due to their commercial significance, diverse urban environments, and representation of regional investment patterns. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative key-informant interviews. This approach allows triangulation of investor perceptions, municipal data, and observable environmental conditions. A simple random sampling method was used to select 390 respondents: 180 commercial property investors, 120

developers, 60 estate surveyors and valuers and 30 municipal officials across the three cities. Survey questionnaires assessed perceptions of environmental attributes, while interviews captured expert insights. Data collection include 400 copies of structured questionnaires distributed to respondents and 390 copies retrieved representing 97.5% response rate on environmental quality attributes and investment decision-making, with field observations of commercial districts, and semi-structured interviews with 20 key stakeholders. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and ranking analysis, while qualitative responses underwent thematic content analysis. Environmental attributes were ranked according to their perceived impact on commercial property investment.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Key Environmental Attributes

Table 4.1 showed critical environmental quality attributes that are enhancing sustainable commercial property investment in selected cities (Aba, Owerri, and Onitsha) of South-Eastern Nigeria

Table 4.1: Critical Environmental Quality Attributes

Environmental Quality Attributes	SA (5)	A (4)	U (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean	Std Dev	RII	Rank
Efficient waste management and sanitation	160	120	40	25	16	4.0609	1.1073	0.8122	1st
Adequate drainage and flood control	140	130	50	25	16	3.9778	1.0962	0.7956	2nd
Air quality	130	140	50	30	11	3.9640	1.0507	0.7928	3rd
Noise control	120	140	60	30	11	3.9086	1.0473	0.7817	4th
Availability of green infrastructure	110	130	70	40	11	3.7978	1.0841	0.7596	5th
Road quality and accessibility	80	150	80	35	16	3.6731	1.0598	0.7346	6th

Source: Authors' Field Investigation, 2025

Table 4.1 revealed the top-ranked attribute as adequate drainage and flood control with RII = 0.8122; Mean = 4.061). Drainage and flood-control scored highest. This suggests respondents consider hydrological safety (reduced flood risk, functioning drains) the single most important physical environmental quality attribute for sustainable commercial property investment in Aba, Owerri and Onitsha. The relatively high SD (~1.11) indicates moderate response spread but clear majority positive orientation. This study revealed the prioritization of drainage and flood control as the most important environmental attribute reflects the well-known flooding challenges across the three cities. Aba experiences recurrent flooding, particularly in areas such as Ariaria International Market, Faulks Road, and Port Harcourt Road due to blocked drains, poor topography, and inadequate stormwater channels. Investors in commercial property: especially around markets and industrial clusters; often face structural damage, loss of business days, and reduced tenant demand during rainy seasons. Thus, the strong emphasis on adequate drainage reflects the direct financial risk posed by flooding in the city.

However, Owerri has seen rapid urban expansion and road construction, yet flooding persists in areas such as Douglas Road, World Bank Estate, and Nekede due to insufficient drainage capacity. The city's fast-growing commercial real estate market: hotels, retail outlets, and offices; depends heavily on reliable flood-control systems to maintain attractiveness and operational continuity. Onitsha as a major commercial hub with dense markets (Ochanja, Main Market), suffers from severe drainage congestion, exacerbated by high impermeable surfaces and waste-induced drain blockages. Flood-prone areas frequently discourage investors who fear long-term structural depreciation. Thus, across all three cities, hydrological safety is directly linked to investment performance, hence its highest ranking.

Table 4.1 indicated efficient waste management with RII = 0.7956; Mean = 3.978) and road quality/accessibility with RII = 0.7928; Mean = 3.964 closely ranked seconds and tied. Both attributes are

nearly tied and indicate that cleanliness, reliable waste collection, and good transport access are considered critical to investment performance and tenant attraction. The high ranking of waste management mirrors the sanitation realities in the study areas. Aba struggles significantly with solid waste disposal. Mounds of refuse are frequently seen along major commercial corridors, discouraging business growth and lowering property values. Poor sanitation around commercial zones creates negative investor perceptions and reduces customer traffic. Owerri, although relatively cleaner than Aba and Onitsha, still faces waste accumulation challenges around major commercial roads and rapidly growing residential-commercial mixed-use zones. Investors perceive cleanliness as crucial for sustaining high-end commercial activities such as hospitality, banking, and retail. Onitsha's waste management challenges are well-documented. Continuous refuse overflow near markets, roads, and waterways reduces environmental quality, making commercial property less appealing. For investors, efficient waste management directly affects tenant satisfaction, patronage, and long-term property value. These city-specific realities justify why waste management is a key determinant of sustainable commercial investment.

Nevertheless, road quality and accessibility with RII = 0.7928; Mean = 3.964; ranked 3rd; implied that good transport accessibility is essential for all three cities, especially given their economic functions. In Aba many commercial areas suffer from deteriorated roads, such as the popular Ariaria axis, causing accessibility problems that deter both tenants and customers. Property owners report higher vacancy rates and lower rents in poorly accessible zones. Owerri boasts better road infrastructure compared to Aba and Onitsha, especially within new layouts and commercial zones such as Ikenegbu, New Owerri, and World Bank. Good road networks contribute to the city's strong commercial real estate performance. And in Onitsha, heavy traffic congestion and road degradation: especially near commercial districts; reduce accessibility and limit the optimal functioning of commercial spaces. The condition of major feeder routes influences rental yields and investor decisions. Thus, respondents' emphasis on road quality aligns with the mobility challenges that shape business performance in these cities.

Similarly, in Table 4.1 air quality was ranked 4th with RII = 0.7817; Mean = 3.909; still important but slightly less prioritized than drainage, waste management and road access. This could reflect that immediate, visible local infrastructure and sanitation issues are perceived as more influential on commercial viability in these cities. Although ranked fourth, air quality remains a significant concern, particularly in cities with high commercial and industrial activity. In Aba; industrial emissions, roadside burning, and congested commercial zones contribute to air pollution. Investors in hospitality, retail, and office spaces especially express concern about environmental comfort and customer experience. Owerri enjoys comparatively better air quality due to its vegetation and less industrial density; however, traffic congestion and localized business activities still impact air conditions. While in Onitsha; air pollution is severe due to traffic emissions, market activities, and informal industrial processes. Poor air quality is already linked to reduced attractiveness of some commercial zones. Thus, the ranking indicates that while important, air quality may not yet be perceived as immediately as threatening as flood control, sanitation, and access.

Furthermore, Table 4.1 showed green infrastructure having RII = 0.7596; Mean = 3.798 was ranked fifth. Availability of green/open spaces ranks mid-low. Respondents appreciate greenery, but it appears less urgent than flood control, sanitation and access. This may be explained by competing priorities where basic services are seen as prerequisites before aesthetic/amenity improvements. Green infrastructure, though beneficial, remains a lower priority because the cities face more urgent infrastructural deficits. Aba has limited green spaces, with most land consumed by residential, industrial, and commercial uses. Investors focus more on functional infrastructure (drainage, roads, sanitation) than aesthetic enhancements. As Owerri is historically more landscaped than Aba and Onitsha, with visible green areas, particularly in New Owerri and high-end districts. Yet, greenery is still seen as secondary to basic infrastructure when making investment decisions. Onitsha's density leaves little room for green infrastructure. Commercial property investors tend to prioritize infrastructural stability, security, and access over environmental aesthetics. The mid-low ranking indicates that green infrastructure is valued but not considered crucial in environments where basic infrastructure remains inadequate.

And noise control with RII = 0.7346; Mean = 3.673 was ranked sixth in Table 4.1. Noise control is ranked lowest among the six. While still scoring above the neutral midpoint (3.0): meaning respondents agree it matters; it is the least prioritized. Commercial tenants may accept higher noise in busy commercial zones provided other essentials (drainage, roads, waste, utilities) are present. Noise control was the least prioritized attribute, yet still above the neutral point. In Aba, Owerri, and Onitsha: all three cities have busy commercial sectors with significant noise from traffic, trading activities, and industrial operations. Investors may perceive noise as an inevitable part of active commercial centres. As long as other core determinants: flood control, access, sanitation; are present, commercial tenants tend to tolerate higher noise levels. This is particularly true for markets, shopping clusters, logistics zones, and transport corridors. Thus, the lowest ranking reflects practical acceptance rather than disregard for noise issues.

This study identified six critical environmental quality attributes of efficient waste management and sanitation, adequate drainage and flood control, air quality, noise control, availability of green infrastructure, road quality and accessibility, and investors ranked waste management, drainage, and air quality as the most impactful attributes influencing property valuation and investment decisions. Therefore, the findings showed that investors in Aba, Owerri, and Onitsha prioritize basic, functional environmental infrastructure: drainage, roads, waste management; over broader environmental amenities. Findings indicated that environmental quality significantly affects rental yields, capital appreciation, occupancy rates, and investor confidence. Poor environmental conditions increase operational risks and reduce investment attractiveness, while improved environmental governance and urban greening enhance commercial property performance. This pattern reflects the current urban conditions where infrastructural deficits directly affect commercial activities, rental returns, and property longevity. As these cities continue to urbanize, improvements in core environmental services will remain central to attracting and sustaining commercial property investment. Once foundational issues are addressed, attributes such as green infrastructure and noise control may become more influential in shaping investment decisions.

4.2 Key Stakeholders Qualitative Responses from Interview

Qualitative responses from key informants' interview were conducted on 20 key stakeholders (2 interviewee each from commercial property investors, developers, estate surveyors and valuers and municipal officials. Majority (97.5%) of the respondent's responses revealed the patterns that align closely with the environmental realities and developmental challenges in these urban centres. A commercial property investor said:

"We often avoid commercial zones where drainage is poor or flooding is frequent. Even if rental yields are attractive, the maintenance costs and business interruptions make investment risky." **(**Commercial Property Investor)

This indicated that drainage and flood control are critical environmental attributes affecting investor confidence and property performance. It highlights the need for improved infrastructure to reduce risk exposure and ensure sustainable returns. Similarly, to opinion of a developer:

"When designing commercial projects, we consider green spaces and landscaping because they not only improve aesthetics but also make properties more marketable and increase their rental value." (Developers)

This underscores the importance of urban green infrastructure and landscaping as a strategy to enhance commercial property appeal and support sustainable investment. It also suggests developers see environmental quality as a value-adding component rather than a regulatory obligation. Response municipal official indicated that:

"Our city faces challenges in enforcing waste collection and drainage maintenance, but we know that neglecting these services discourages private investment in commercial properties." (Municipal Officials)

This highlighted institutional responsibility and the role of municipal services in enabling sustainable commercial property investment. It indicates that policy and operational interventions are necessary to maintain environmental quality and attract investors. Further commenting an estate surveyor and valuer said:

"Air quality and sanitation directly affect the number of tenants willing to occupy our commercial spaces. Areas with persistent waste and pollution struggle to attract long-term businesses." (Estate Surveyor and Valuer)

This response reinforces that waste management, sanitation, and air quality are essential for sustaining occupancy and maximizing investment returns. Investors prioritize environmental cleanliness as a determinant of property attractiveness. Another Estate Surveyor and Valuer stated:

"Noise pollution from nearby roads or markets can reduce the desirability of a commercial property. We sometimes invest in sound barriers or choose less noisy locations to safeguard property value." (Estate Surveyor and Valuer)

Noise management is a key environmental quality attribute influencing design decisions and investment strategies. Developers' proactive mitigation indicates that environmental factors directly impact project viability and marketability.

"Areas with well-maintained streets, green belts, and regular sanitation inspections attract more businesses and generate higher revenue for the city. Investors clearly respond to visible environmental management." (Municipal Officials)

Effective municipal environmental management enhances commercial attractiveness, indicating a direct link between public service quality, property investment, and urban economic performance. It emphasizes that sustainable urban governance supports investor confidence.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Environmental quality is a pivotal determinant of sustainable commercial property investment in Aba, Owerri, and Onitsha, South Eastern, Nigeria. The study demonstrated that environmental quality had shaped sustainable commercial property investment in urban centres. Across all three cities (Aba, Owerri and Onitsha), investors and property users consistently identified clean surroundings, efficient waste management, adequate drainage, reduced pollution levels, and accessible green infrastructure as critical determinants of property performance. Where these environmental attributes were deficient: as observed in several high-density commercial zones; property values stagnated, maintenance costs increased, and investor interest weakened. Conversely, areas with relatively improved environmental conditions experienced stronger demand, higher returns on investment, and more stable capital value appreciation. The findings therefore affirmed that environmental quality is not peripheral but central to the sustainability and competitiveness of commercial real estate markets in the region. As urbanization intensifies, the ability of city authorities and private developers to enhance environmental conditions will increasingly determine the resilience, attractiveness, and long-term viability of commercial property investments. Based on the findings; this study recommended thus:

a. Government should prioritize drainage and flood-control interventions in Aba, Owerri and Onitsha to protect existing commercial properties and reduce investment risk; this can include improved stormwater infrastructure, routine maintenance, and floodplain management.
b. Stakeholders should collaborate with government to strengthen waste management and sanitation systems: frequent collection, regulated disposal, public awareness; to improve environmental quality and investor perception.
c. Government should invest in road upgrading and accessibility, including parking provision, to boost occupancy and rental income in commercial districts.
d. Government and stakeholders should promote air quality monitoring and mitigation (control of industrial emissions, dust suppression) to support mid-term improvements in investor confidence.
e. Stakeholders should integrate green infrastructure as complementary investments (street trees, pocket parks) once core services are stabilized; green features can enhance property values and urban resilience.
f. Government should implement noise zoning and control measures where high noise levels undermine certain commercial uses (offices, restaurants, markets).

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