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# PROCEEDINGS

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# **REBUILDING AND REDEFINING THE IDENTITY OF A PLACE: THE INFLUENCE OF THE URBAN ELEMENTS MATERIAL CONDITION ON THE EXISTENCY OF IDENTITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The historical urban elements have strong values as part of city identity that differentiates a city from other places. Previous studies have explored the way to identify place identity using the imperishable evidence. This paper analyzes the effort to rebuild identity where the perishable urban elements are dominated. By reviewing the concept of identity and the meaning of place, this paper answers the research question of how to rebuild and redefine the identity of a place where the physical evidences are tend to be neglected or disappeared. It concludes human aspect contributes to the sustainability of identity. People are more aware to the imperishable urban evidence and its combination with modern style. These responses will construct the meaning of the place, in another word, the identity of the place.

**Keywords:** Place identity, People perception, building materials, historical area

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The identity of a city can be seen as an intangible asset and also a selling value of a city. The existence of historical urban fabrics connects the past with present situation and figures out the future existence of historical urban area. Usually the effort to rebuild and redefine identity can be conducted by reshaping or readapting the physical-existed urban fabric, or extending the old urban pattern based on the remaining of physical urban elements. Previous studies have explored the effort to lift-up place identity using the physical evidence, usually the non-wooden evidence, i.e. the fortification line of fort city (Chapman,2006), the extended grid pattern of grid order city, the replication of axial orientation of city (Wang, 2010)

To enrich the knowledge of urban studies, this paper aims to analyze the rebuilding of identity in historical area where the building material are dominated by perishable or wooden dominated construction in Palembang<sup>1</sup>, a river city in Indonesia, where stones could

not be provided by its surroundings. Hence the infra structure and buildings were built from timber which was easily to be found. Therefore, this study elaborates on the importance of materials of old urban elements on the persistency of historical area identity. It is done by reviewing literature on the basic concept of identity and its relation to the uniqueness of a place. Since the place is utilized by man, this paper also looks at the relation of people and a place and how this relationship contributes to the sustainability of place identity. The research question is how to rebuild and redefine the identity of a place where the physical evidences are tending to be neglected or disappeared.

## **2. THE DEVELOPMENT IN HISTORICAL AREA**

Historical area has a specific spatial structure that came as result of human civilization in the past. Usually it is the first place where the pioneer community founded the city. Past people built the place with their creativity in forms of building, space, and other infrastructures to accommodate their activities. They built these things based on few thoughts and beliefs, adaptation to nature, political consideration and ideology (Widodo, 2009; Chapman, 2006; Na, 2009). As the time goes by, the city developed and the population increased. The place could no longer accommodate the development, thus the urban area is expanded, extent to outside of historical area or left it away by its original inhabitants, move to another place as a new town.

Historical area in cities can be valuable asset to the city's society. The reason is because the historical area has the cultural identity, scarcity value and resource value that makes it worth to be preserved (Doralti, 2004). Its historical-social-cultural value which left on the old urban elements informs the past living condition to the current residents. We can derive a lesson from vernacular environment at historical area (Rapoport, 2004; Handal, 2006). For example, the architecture of Chinese house in Palembang that was built in 1800s. The house shows the way Chinese people adapted to the environment of the river city of Palembang. They did it by combining the local, Chinese and European styles, an eclectic architecture. The locality of the house can be seen from

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<sup>1</sup> According to BPS (1994) 52,24% of Palembang area is flood and filled with water

its pillar house construction and also its roof form. The foreign influence can be seen from the space order that follow the Chinese traditional house, and the Indisch<sup>2</sup> style of building construction.



**Figure 1:** The old Chinese houses in Palembang

Understanding the potential value of historical area along with maintaining its urban elements and spatial structure will achieve the purpose of preservation and conservation; maintain the continuity of culture and sustainability environment (Wang, 2010). This will strengthen the values and quality of historical area, and further it will become a tool to generate the place identity of city (Gaspodini 2004; Doralti, 2004).

The modern development brings changes to the old urban area in two opposite poles, existed and developed or declined and neglected. The former can be categorized as the successful one, when the historical area possessed its identity and strongly embodied in people's memory. In this condition, the traditional elements are attractive to visitors. It is supported by a strong character of its authenticity like the morphological character in form of building façade, grid pattern, axial system of old city (Kozlowski and Bowen, 1997; Chapman, 2006; Wang, 2010). In this case, the durability of urban elements and the continuity of social-cultural activities have strong contribution to the livability and existence of historical site. Like in the street study done by Kozlowski and Bowen (1997), the continuity of building facade outline creates strong visual character to the Brisbane historical area. This situation needs the existence of architectural detail that is formed by the durable material. The cultural activities is the key for revitalization of historical area like in Ibrahim pasa village, the disappearing traditional laundry activities creates unused open space, thus eliminate the livability of one of cultural activities in this historic village (Karakul, 2009). To avoid the loss of livability and existence of historical site, it is important to combine the old and new since it enables the historical site to increase its economical value as well as architectural and historical value (Wei and Kiang, 2009).

However, the modern development in historical area can also result in low quality environment. As it locates in core urban area which has high building density and population, the uncontrollable developments create the urban sprawl in historical area. The environment quality is declined; the historical urban elements are pressed by the new social structure from the shift of social demography profile. The historical building and space are

left by their original users, replaced by newcomers or urban migrants, who have no sense to the place. The old urban elements conditions are tend to be decayed, neglected and disappeared. One of the sources of this is the missing of interrelation between social-cultural aspects and physical aspects in the new context of use of historical area, that create unused building and space. Further, environment started to be decayed, and then ruin in time (Karakul, 2009).

### **3. HUMAN ASPECTS IN PLACE IDENTITY**

Inn (2004) defined place identity as a condition where the sameness and unity persists into physical settings, situation of activities and meanings. The representation of identity in physical environment determines the sustainability and continuity of identity of a place. On the other hand, disruption of the place causes destruction of the identity (Ross and Uzzell, 1996).

Identity of a place is related to meaning and based on the memory of someone's who are staying, or have stayed or have visited a place. The emergence of place identity in someone's memory is a result of translation on interaction process between mental and physical aspect of human and his environment. Handal (2006) gave an example of Bethlehem for this understanding. Mentally, the identity of Bethlehem arose from the interconnection between culture, belief and history of Bethlehem in believer's mind, then this emotional power crystallized within rational power. This mental process then interacts with surrounding and recognizes it as a cultural landscape. It becomes an expression of a set of activities of someone or a group of people (Rapoport, 2004). Therefore, the physical conditions of old urban element contribute to the emergence and the persistency of place identity and collective memory of a place. A well maintained, durable and long lasting urban elements support the persistency of place identity towards visual sense.

In addition, the urban elements can be seen as an icon that represents one self in a society. The elements have the ability to serve as icon for a meaning in identity forming. The elements also act as symbol for formation of social memory and values based on people experience's with the elements or place (Hull IV, et.al, 1994). This builds emotional bonding to the place that is known as personal attachment. The meaning and memory describe the role of place in a self's life and form a psychological relationship between individual and community and the environment (Guillani and Feldman, 1993 cf. Walker and Ryan, 2008)

## **4. DISCUSSION AND RESULT**

### **4.1. URBAN ELEMENTS AND PLACE IDENTITY**

As a part of urban structure, the old urban elements have contributed in restructuring the identity of historical area. Urban element existence contributes to the sense of continuity of the place. The buildings, the streets, the alleys, the private – public open spaces that still can be found in historical area enable oneself to recognize his/her position and relation to the place, and represent

<sup>2</sup> Indisch architecture is addressed to Dueth architecture style that adapted to local architecture of its colony. In Indonesia, the buildings that have Indisch architecture can be found in different expressions. In Java island, the expression of Indisch can be slightly different compared to the one in Palembang.

oneself's the place identity. Experiencing the spatial structure of old urban elements also bring the romanticism of past in present situation, so that it can recall sense of belonging to the inhabitants or citizens of a city and also build a sense of pride to their place. From here we can make an inference that the condition of the remaining urban elements which is determine by its material contributes to place identity existence. How the material contributes to rebuild the identity will be discussed in the following section of this paper.

The identity place reconstruction is easier if the urban elements are dominated by persistent and durable materials. Visually the buildings that erected with durable structure and made from imperishable materials have stronger character. Thus, it creates specific urban character of the area where the building is located. The visualization helps the conservation effort to be conducted successfully since the remains are the historical – cultural traces that has valuable assets to a city. The future development of historical area that consists of historic continuity, transformation and sustainability (Pang, 2006) are supported by the visualization of urban elements supported in suitable way into the context of historical area.

There are some case studies that show how old urban elements being used to strengthen the place identity. They construct the identity through the typo-morphological ways. In Suzhou studied by Pang (2006), the axial of courtyard and hierarchical of space order in Chinese traditional house, can be applied in modern development in China, both in site and neighborhood scale. This study is in line with Gaspodini's on Greek cities (2001), that a common morphological feature will create strong formal character of a place. The study on fortified city of Valencia and Floriana also informed that the distinctive character of urban form and space, such as grid pattern and fortification line, can become coincidence that are significant as potential distinctive qualities of a place (Chapman, 2006).

Revitalize the historic urban area underpinned by three attributes: place assets, obsolescence and intensities of development pressures (Tiesdell, 1996 cf Doralti, 2004). Physical (structural) obsolescence is affected by time, climate and also poor maintenance. It also creates image obsolescence that make visitors fell frustrated when seeing the failure of historical continuity as old urban elements. Finally it contributes to the deteriorating and decaying of historical place identity.

Furthermore, there are five inherent values of element of urban structure, named visual character, visual association, structure value, functional value and sensory value. These values determine whether an urban element is important to be protected and preserved or not (Kozlowski and Bowen 1997). Related to this argument, the materials such as timber contribute to visual character and structure value. Visually, material promotes the importance of an urban element through its usage in architecture detail and building appearance as an old historical entity. It also enables an element to show its

attractiveness. Structurally, a well constructed and erected urban element is supported by the durability of materials against the climate and chemical threats.

## 4.2. REBUILDING THE IDENTITY IN DECAYING PLACE

Usually we can find traditional architecture value in historical area. Traditional is conceptualized as local expressions (Rapoport, 2004) that differentiate one's to another as local character or identity, e.g. the roof structure of Palembang limas house as a solution for the need to provide split level in Limas main room<sup>3</sup>.



**Figure 2:** (left) The Roof Form Limas House, and (right) Split Level At Limas Main Room  
Source: (left) [www.scycrapercity.com](http://www.scycrapercity.com); (right) [www.rumahlimasPalembang.blogspot.com](http://www.rumahlimasPalembang.blogspot.com)

In addition, the cultural and social diversity in historical area are the sources of sense of place and rootedness in society (Handal, 2006). When a person experiencing the spatial structure of historical area, he or she will experiencing the traditional atmosphere that brings his or her imagination to the human creative genius in the past in dealing with social system. The traditional value also shows the uniqueness of society in the past time that will develop the sense of belonging to citizens. The feeling of pride also arises when recognizing how complex those past system gave solution to the past life.

As the historical area experiences the change, one of the consequences of it is the loss of specific local identity. The changes can result in three conditions (1) no changes; when the frequency use is decrease by still in the same style, (2) changes, when there is a alteration in spatial system because of changes in accommodating activities and (3) disappear, when there is an interruption on cultural activities that produce the unused place or buildings, lead to deterioration of urban elements (Karakul, 2006). A good example is given by the open space in front of Chinese Kapiten's house in Palembang. It was used as an accommodation of multi-ethnics social activities. This function disappeared when the function of Kapiten was vanished after independence era along with the abandoned Kapiten's house, then the open space became unused place.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is important to consider the material condition in maintaining the existence of urban elements.

<sup>3</sup> The limas house main room has four-five split level, named *kekijing*. It is usually owned by the family with high social status. This room has function as a main room for social gathering purposes. The guests will sit on the floor, based on his social status. The highest level is address to the highest social status.

<sup>4</sup> Since 2006, the local authority try to rebuild the open space by renovated the Kapiten House complex, including the open space

At the historical area, the urban elements that are dominated by perishable material are also experiencing the transformation. Usually, this area is located where the natural resources could not provide the durable materials for development the urban elements in the past. In this situation, the buildings, bridges, even open spaces are made by timber known as perishable material. As transformation happened, they cannot persist in challenging the age and climate threat, and it tend to decay and ruin. The visualization of old elements is disappearing, and then the identity of this place tends to disappear.<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned by Handal (2006) the process of building and rebuilding meaning is done on the basis of emotive (the heart) which is a strong feeling comes from culture, belief, history, and formed and reformed by the flow of rational forces (the head). Regarding to the situation above, rationally a new meaning can be reborn in historical area by introducing the modern atmosphere. Modern designs have meanings of state of the modern art civilization. It is a symbol of human creative, symbol of establishment of economy and social state of society. These will rise a sense of belongings and sense of pride in people's perception. The modern designs also share new commonalities to the society and prevail to tourist; hence they promote the urban economic development in new urban forms. In other words, the combination between old and new is a way to form adaptive reuse which makes balance between preservation and modern progress (Samant, 2004).

## CONCLUSION

In order to rebuild the city identity at historical area which its old urban elements are dominated by perishable materials, the designer should touch the psychological aspect of people perception of identity and meaning. The psychological aspect consists of creating and rebuilding the attachment to the place in form of sense of pride, sense of belongings and sense of place. The historical evidence condition such as building condition should be well visualized, maintained and conserved to build the visual character appraisal of old urban elements. A comprehensive and integrated conservation design with modern trend should be conducted as modern urban elements can act as attractive elements in new adaptive urban structure. This effort should be completed by synergizing with economic revitalization.

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<sup>5</sup>Like what happen to Limas House in Palembang. Because of age factor and the increment price of timber, the maintenance cost for an old timber house become very expensive. Only a few Limas House can persist and usually they are owned by privileged family.

