

Genius Loci European Area of Old City of Surabaya: Challenges and Opportunities for Development (Literature Study)

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ABSTRACT

The Old City of Surabaya is one of the historical areas established during the Dutch colonial period. Old Town Surabaya, with its unique architecture, spatial planning, and atmosphere, exudes a distinctive genius loci. The purpose of this paper is to provide analytical results related to the challenges and opportunities for development associated with the genius loci of the European area of Old Town Surabaya. This study adopts a qualitative research approach. The findings indicate that the Old Town Surabaya area features various forms of Dutch colonial architecture that embody rich historical and cultural values. Challenges in preserving the genius loci include development pressure and changes in function, degradation of authentic buildings, and minimal community participation. Meanwhile, opportunities for developing the area based on the genius loci include sustainable heritage tourism, adaptive reuse while maintaining character, a bottom-up approach to conservation, and multistakeholder collaboration.

KEYWORDS genius loci; Old Town Surabaya; opportunities; challenges



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INTRODUCTION

The Old City of Surabaya is one of the historical areas established during the Dutch colonial period. According to the literature review, the geographical location of the Old City of Surabaya lies along the banks of the Kalimas River. Several buildings in this area hold historical meaning, which serves as a distinctive feature of the city. The identity of a city, as expressed by Kevin Lynch (1960), lies at the core of its meaning, and it is this meaning that ultimately shapes the image of a place. Surabaya's Old City, with its unique architecture, spatial layout, and atmosphere, exudes a distinctive genius loci or "soul of place." It represents a harmonious blend of inherited historical values, embraced local culture, and the area's role as a cultural heritage site of inestimable value (Srivastava et al., 2024).

However, as time progressed, a transformation occurred in which several buildings with Dutch architectural characteristics were converted into modern structures (Nicolini, 2024). Additionally, challenges arose stemming from development pressures and cultural changes (Jigyasu, 2024). The analysis also shows that several colonial government centers were transformed into open and dynamic spaces (Bejarano et al., 2020). Yet, these renewal efforts were primarily executed through a physical approach (Nolin, 2018). While infrastructure and façade restoration are indeed crucial, their implementation often overlooks deeper essences—such as the relationship with the local community (Mahmoudi Farahani & Lozanovska, 2015), design authenticity, and historical significance. Consequently, this oversight may lead

to the fading of the *genius loci* and the erosion of historical identity (Hernández-Romero, 2022).

The transformation efforts generally reflect the adaptation of old buildings into modern facilities. Such adaptations not only change the function of the buildings but also offer opportunities for the community to preserve cultural heritage while freeing themselves from negative memories of the colonial period and drawing lessons from history (Fior et al., 2022).

According to previous studies, the spatial design of the Old City of Surabaya was originally based on the interests of the Dutch colonial rulers. At that time, spatial planning was concentrated in strategic locations such as administrative centers and other essential services. Over time, however, these areas evolved into zones for governance and various economic activities. Kota Lama Surabaya is now also utilized as a cultural tourism destination that attracts a wide range of visitors, while still preserving traces of Dutch colonial influence.

Amid the ongoing processes of globalization, issues have emerged concerning neglect in the conservation of cultural and historical contexts. Some parties fail to uphold essential principles in the preservation of heritage values (Quesada-Ganuza et al., 2022). This negligence has raised concerns about the loss of the city's authentic character. Consequently, this research applies the *genius loci* approach, which aims to implement strategies that attract tourists to Surabaya's Old City as one of the heritage sites from the Dutch colonial era.

The application of the *genius loci* approach takes into account several aspects, such as local culture, architecture, history, and the needs of modern society (Muleya, 2024). This approach seeks to strengthen urban renewal that extends beyond physical beautification by reviving the soul of the place (Sochacka et al., 2022). Through this, it can enhance sustainable, unique, and authentic attractiveness (Zapata Montalvo, 2021).

Based on the above discussion, this paper adopts the title "Genius Loci of the European Area of Surabaya's Old City: Challenges and Opportunities for Development (A Literature Study)." The purpose of this paper is to provide an analytical overview of the challenges and opportunities related to the *genius loci* of Surabaya's European quarter. Through these findings, it is hoped that this research can contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage, particularly in Surabaya.

METHOD

The writing method adopts qualitative research methods. Qualitative research is an analysis of several research findings carried out through the presentation of sentences/words composed from the results of critical thinking (Sugiyono, 2019). In writing this journal, a literature review approach was used through several valid sources with titles. The type of data used uses primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from observation and documentation activities carried out in the Old City of Surabaya. Furthermore, secondary data was obtained based on library research analysis to support the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Basic Concept of Genius Loci

Literally, genius loci means "the spirit of a place". Furthermore, some ancient Roman beliefs display the meaning of this loci genius as a unique protective spirit (Jiang & Lin, 2022). Viewed from an architectural point of view, it is explained that genius loci has a meaning related to an area that has a fairly unique place and its own distinctive character (Zhao & Ren, 2024). This includes emotional or spiritual impressions that are felt, culture, the natural environment, and the application of some physical elements. According to literature studies, it is related to spiritual or emotional impressions that can be felt by individuals when visiting the region (Li & Liu, 2024).

The development of the concept of this loci genius went along with the passage of time. The development of the intended concept is that the meaning of loci genius becomes more architectural and has philosophical value where previously the concept of loci genius was seen as mythological or spiritual (Wojcik-Popek, 2019). The design theory of the genius loci in the field of architecture is seen as how the unique character responds to a building (Maniaci, 2019). Based on this, it is necessary to consider several components, including:

1. Interaction between humans and the environment
2. Functions and social needs of the community
3. Local history and culture
4. Local geogradish conditions and climate (Żmudzinska-Nowak & Wałek, 2024).

Norwegian architect and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz is one of the most influential figures in expanding the concept of Genius Loci in modern architecture. In his book "Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture" (1980), he combined phenomenological thought (particularly from Heidegger) with architectural theory. Some key points from his thoughts:

1. Architecture must help humans "dwell" or dwell in the world, namely living authentically and meaningfully in space.
2. Design should reveal and reinforce the identity of a place, not ignore it. It encourages a phenomenological approach to understanding space, which emphasizes direct human experience of place (Favre-Brun et al., 2012).

The Concept of Genius Loci in the Old City of Surabaya

Genius loci (soul of place) refers to the unique character, atmosphere, and meaning inherent in a location (Wang & Wang, 2020). In the context of Surabaya's Old City, this concept includes:

- 1) Historical Value: As the center of the Dutch colonial government and economy, this area preserves a visual narrative through architecture and spatial planning.
- 2) Cultural Identity: The combination of European and local influences creates a distinctive character that distinguishes it from other areas in Surabaya.
- 3) Space Experience: The atmosphere of the old town with Indische Empire-style buildings, well-organized streets, and the Kalimas River as a connecting element of history.

However, the revitalization approach so far tends to be physical (e.g., façade repainting, road repairs) without strengthening historical narratives and community involvement. As a

result, the genius of the loci is threatened by modernization that is insensitive to cultural heritage (Stepanchuk et al., 2020).

Problems in the Old City Area of Surabaya

The identification of the main problems includes two key aspects: changes in visual character and physical degradation of buildings. Regarding character changes, the research findings show that several historical buildings have undergone various forms of modification that deviate from colonial architectural styles. Based on observations in the Old City area of Surabaya, its distinctive visual identity has been diminished. This reduction is due to several alterations, such as the use of modern building materials, changes in façade colors, and the installation of billboards. These visual transformations are often caused by a lack of supervision over physical modifications and weak implementation of preservation regulations. Consequently, this issue has become a major problem that can influence the city's visual appeal and, indirectly, its attractiveness to tourists.

Furthermore, the second problem in Surabaya's Old Town area is the physical degradation of buildings. Some structures have suffered damage, including collapsed roofs, broken ornaments, and cracked walls. In addition, both public and governmental awareness of the importance of preserving relics from the Dutch colonial period remain minimal. Therefore, it can be concluded that the physical degradation of buildings poses a serious threat to their sustainability. Moreover, the analysis shows that this degradation can also affect tourists' perceptions of the site as a historical tourism destination (Anisimova & Zimarin, 2023).

In this discussion, the analysis results are reviewed from historical, cultural, visual, and physical aspects (Tian & Zakaria, 2025). First, regarding historical and cultural aspects, the research findings indicate that the Old City of Surabaya holds significant historical value from the Dutch colonial period. However, these values have not been optimally integrated into the current regional management strategies. Second, in visual and physical aspects, it is found that visual elements such as building façades, cobblestone streets, and green arrangements—typical of colonial urban design—need to be preserved and restored. Enhancing the area's attractiveness can be achieved through restoration that adheres to conservation principles, including the use of authentic materials and designs consistent with colonial architecture. Furthermore, it is essential to consider the historical values inherent in every planned modification.

The Elements That Make Up Genius Loci

The elements that constitute the loci genius include physical, social, and symbolic components (Sedreddine, 2025). The physical element refers to visible and tangible aspects of a place, which shape its character and atmosphere. The Old City of Surabaya contains several physical elements, such as colonial buildings that display distinctive Dutch characteristics. The social element refers to the patterns of life, interaction, and activities within the community. Its function is to create vitality and dynamism in the space while fostering emotional connections between people and place. In Kota Lama Surabaya, these social elements are manifested through traditional economic activities, such as trading at the Customs Market. Moreover, the area's ethnic diversity—comprising Javanese, Arab, and Chinese communities—has fostered a long-standing coexistence.

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The symbolic element, although intangible, has a profound connection to cultural identity, values, and the inherent meanings of a place. In the context of Surabaya's Old City, this element is embodied in its identity as the City of Heroes. The area symbolizes the nation's struggle, serving as the site of pivotal historical events, especially the Battle of Surabaya on November 10, 1945, which centered around the Red Bridge (Jembatan Merah). These historical values form the community's collective memory and impart deep meaning to the spaces and buildings within the Old City.

The role of the *genius loci* concept in the architecture and planning of Surabaya's Old City can be examined through three key aspects: place-making, identity and sustainability, and conservation and revitalization. From the perspective of place-making, revitalization planning should aim to create a strong sense of place. Analysis indicates that Surabaya's Old City has a distinctive ambience characterized by narrow streets, an old-town atmosphere, and the dominance of colonial architecture. Therefore, place-making efforts can include emphasizing historical narratives in tourism, repurposing heritage buildings as museums, galleries, or cafés, and improving public spaces to make them more comfortable and meaningful.

In terms of identity and sustainability, Surabaya's Old City embodies the collective identity of Surabaya residents as people of resilience and commerce. The implementation of *genius loci* in this aspect requires the adoption of sustainable architectural principles in which old buildings are revitalized rather than demolished, ensuring the preservation of their historical value. The active involvement of local communities plays a crucial role in strengthening social and cultural sustainability, while new architectural interventions must be contextually adapted to harmonize with the area's existing character.

The conservation and revitalization aspect emphasizes that preserving the *genius loci* aims to rejuvenate the buildings and spaces of Surabaya's Old City—not to freeze them as relics of the past. Revitalization should promote the area's productivity and vitality through activities such as local MSME development, cultural events, and the enhancement of historical tourism. Restoration efforts should be based on the intrinsic values and meanings of the structures, not merely their physical appearance, and supported by in-depth studies of the area's character to avoid interventions that diminish historical integrity.

In preserving the *loci genius*, several challenges and opportunities must be considered. The main challenges include development pressures and functional changes to colonial buildings that often disregard design authenticity; degradation of heritage values due to inadequate understanding of conservation principles and excessive commercialization; and limited community participation, as residents are often treated as objects rather than active subjects in revitalization. Nonetheless, various opportunities exist for developing *loci*-based areas, such as promoting sustainable heritage tourism through historical narratives and technological integration, adapting building functions while maintaining original character, adopting bottom-up conservation approaches involving local communities, and fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration among government, academia, businesses, and NGOs in formulating regulations, maintenance programs, and sustainable funding strategies.

Strategies to Increase Area Attractiveness

The following is explained related to the implementation of several strategies in increasing the attractiveness of the area, namely:

- a) Physical Preservation
 - 1) Restoration of historic buildings by retaining original elements such as ornaments, roof shapes, and facades.
 - 2) Removal of inappropriate modern elements, such as billboards and incompatible building materials.
- b) Visual Character Restoration
 - 1) Alignment of building colors with typical colonial color palettes (such as white, beige, and dark brown).
 - 2) Improvements in public spatial planning that support the visual of the area, such as cobblestone streets and classic lighting.
- c) Strengthening Cultural Identity
 - 1) The creation of history-based information boards and signs in each building to educate visitors.
 - 2) Organizing cultural events that represent the colonial period, such as historical festivals or guided tours.
- d) Regulations and Policies
 - 1) The application of strict regulations on building changes to maintain visual harmony.
 - 2) Regular supervision by local governments and involvement of local communities in the management of the area.

Furthermore, from the implementation of this strategy, it can have the expected impact, including:

- 1) Regional sustainability is supported by collaboration between the private sector, the community, and the government.
- 2) Increase the interest of domestic and international tourists through an authentic experience
- 3) Restore the authenticity of the area as an icon of Surabaya's history.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion drawn from the above study is that the Old Town area of Surabaya contains various forms of Dutch colonial architecture that embody significant historical and cultural values. There are three main sectors in the Old City of Surabaya—Jalan KH. Mas Mansyur, Jalan Kembang Jepun, and Jalan Rajawali—each with its own distinctive characteristics. In response, the Surabaya City Government has issued a regional regulation on cultural heritage preservation to ensure that the exterior appearance of heritage buildings remains authentic, even if their functions are adapted. Revitalization efforts also include the arrangement of vegetation and the installation of historical information boards to enhance public and tourist understanding.

Challenges in preserving the genius loci include development pressure and functional changes, degradation of authentic buildings, and minimal community participation. Meanwhile, opportunities for developing genius loci-based areas include sustainable heritage tourism, adaptive reuse while maintaining character, a bottom-up approach to conservation, and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Suggestions for future research include expanding this study with quantitative data, as the present research is limited to descriptive findings. Readers are encouraged to explore more detailed and in-depth information related to this topic in line with the study's title, to achieve a broader understanding. Additionally, communities are recommended to take an active role in preserving cultural heritage—particularly historical buildings such as those found in the Old City of Surabaya

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