

Revitalization of Kesawan District, Medan (2024): A Theoretical Evaluation Based on Roger Trancik's Concept of Lost Space

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Abstract

The Kesawan area in Medan represents a historically significant district, embodying rich cultural and architectural heritage. Recently, the area underwent a revitalization process aimed at reinstating its function as a competitive and sustainable public space, achieved through the integration of heritage conservation and contemporary urban development, thereby establishing Kesawan as a prominent heritage tourism destination in Medan. This study critically examines the 2024 revitalization of the Kesawan district employing Roger Trancik's *Finding Lost Space* theoretical framework. Adopting a qualitative research design with a case study approach, data collection encompassed in-depth interviews with local residents, business stakeholders, and relevant authorities, complemented by field observations and document analysis. The data were subjected to qualitative analysis to identify thematic patterns relevant to the study's objectives. The findings reveal that the revitalization project has effectively enhanced the area's aesthetic quality, spatial organization, and attractiveness as a heritage tourism site. Nonetheless, challenges persist in realizing public spaces that are spatially coherent, culturally meaningful, and inclusive for diverse user groups. Furthermore, limited community participation during the planning stages was identified as a significant barrier to fostering inclusive urban spaces. The sustainability and success of Kesawan's revitalization in creating human-centered urban environments are contingent upon a comprehensive application of Trancik's spatial design principles, alongside strengthened governance frameworks and increased public engagement throughout the planning and implementation processes.

Keywords: Urban Revitalization, Kesawan Medan, Public Space, Lost Space Theory, Spatial Design, Community Participation, Heritage Preservation

Introduction

Urban revitalization has emerged as a significant global trend, particularly in historic city centers. These initiatives have arisen in response to a range of urban challenges, including physical decay, loss of identity, and economic stagnation. The primary objective is to promote sustainable urban development and enhance the quality of life for city dwellers. Revitalization efforts often involve substantial investments in infrastructure and physical improvements, with the expectation of stimulating economic growth and tourism. However, there is frequently a tension between large-scale development goals—such as economic expansion and tourist appeal—and the more nuanced needs of human-scale environments and meaningful public spaces. In this context, Roger Trancik's *Finding Lost Space* theory provides a critical framework for evaluating such interventions. Trancik critiques modern urban development for creating *lost spaces*—leftover or neglected areas—resulting from a focus on isolated architectural objects and the disregard for spatial continuity and human scale. When revitalization projects, such as the one in Kesawan, are driven primarily by economic or large-scale infrastructure ambitions, there is a risk that they may unintentionally perpetuate or even create new *lost spaces* if human-centered design principles are not adequately integrated. This perspective forms a critical lens through which the Kesawan revitalization project must be evaluated.

The revitalization of the Kesawan Old Town Area in Medan represents a strategic initiative resulting from a collaboration between the Ministry of Public Works and Housing (PUPR) and the Medan City Government. This area holds significant historical value as a center of colonial economic activity during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as evidenced by the presence of numerous heritage buildings. The revitalization project aims to restore the area's vitality through improvements in aesthetics, the development of heritage tourism functions, and the strengthening of supporting infrastructure. Conceptually, the intervention can be analyzed through the framework of "lost space" as introduced by Roger Trancik. Although not explicitly mentioned in official documents, the very existence of the revitalization effort suggests a prior condition of spatial and functional degradation. According to Trancik, lost spaces are urban areas that are underutilized, disconnected from the urban fabric, or have lost their social meaning. This interpretation is particularly relevant to the pre-intervention condition of Kesawan.

The revitalization project, completed in September 2024, includes visual reordering of the area, functional transformation into a heritage tourism destination, and the development of essential infrastructure. The long-term objective of the project is to create a competitive and sustainable public space, with the expectation of fostering local economic growth through tourism and small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Nevertheless, the success of the revitalization effort requires critical evaluation. An excessive focus on aesthetics and economic returns, without due attention to spatial quality and human experience, risks reducing the intervention to a merely cosmetic transformation. Therefore, it is essential to assess the extent to which the project addresses the structural issues of lost space—beyond merely improving quantitative indicators

Literature Review

In his seminal work *Finding Lost Space: Theories of Urban Design*, Roger Trancik offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding and addressing the issue of urban spaces that fail to function as intended. His ideas are grounded in a critique of the modernist movement in urban design which, despite its progressive intentions, often resulted in spatial fragmentation and the loss of meaningful public space. Therefore, it is very important to understand the historical significance of areas like Merdeka-Kesawan for comprehensive planning and development (Aris & Nuraini, 2024, p. 256)

A. Lost Space

Trancik defines lost space as “leftover, unstructured, and marginalized spaces,” essentially urban voids that are neither maintained nor meaningfully used by the public. He further asserts that these areas are undesirable urban remnants in need of redesign, as they contribute little to their surrounding environment or to the people who inhabit it. The emergence of such spaces is a consequence of the modern city-building paradigm, which tends to treat buildings as isolated objects within the landscape rather than as integral components of a cohesive spatial network. Trancik identifies five primary factors contributing to the proliferation of lost spaces:

- a. The dominance of the automobile
- b. The influence of the Modern Movement in architecture
- c. Urban renewal and zoning policies
- d. The prioritization of private interests over public good
- e. Land-use changes in city centers

Trancik emphasizes that lost space is not merely an aesthetic issue; rather, it reflects deeper structural problems within contemporary urban development paradigms. Therefore, any sustainable revitalization effort must address these systemic roots, rather than focusing solely on physical or visual interventions. In the context of Kesawan's revitalization, if the primary focus is limited to improving aesthetics or infrastructure without incorporating human-centered design principles, the project runs the risk of reproducing new forms of lost space or failing to achieve a truly sustainable urban transformation.

B. Urban Spatial Design Theories: Figure-Ground, Linkage, and Place Theory

In response to the phenomenon of lost space, Roger Trancik proposes three primary approaches in urban spatial design, which serve both as analytical frameworks and design strategies. These include:

C. Figure-Ground Theory

This theory emphasizes the spatial relationship between built form (mass) and voids (open space) within the urban fabric. A well-structured urban environment is characterized by clearly defined open spaces (figures), deliberately shaped by the surrounding built mass (ground). The approach underscores the importance of exterior spaces that are not residual or leftover, but rather have clear form and function as integral components of the city structure.

D. Linkage Theory

This theory focuses on the connective elements within the urban environment—such as pedestrian paths, corridors, street edges, and transportation networks. Its primary goal is to establish a structured and legible system of movement that visually and functionally integrates various parts of the city. Enhancing connectivity, spatial legibility, and continuity is essential to creating a cohesive and accessible urban experience.

E. Place Theory

Place theory centers on the qualitative and meaningful aspects of space. Beyond considerations of form and function, this approach accounts for symbolic values, local identity, collective memory, and the potential of space to foster a sense of ownership and encourage social interaction. As such, place theory highlights the emotional and cultural

dimensions of urban design, advocating for the creation of spaces that resonate deeply with users and support vibrant community life.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach because it aims to explore and understand in depth the revitalization process of urban spaces in the Kesawan area and evaluate it through the theoretical framework of "Finding Lost Space" by Roger Trancik. This approach is exploratory and interpretative, focusing on visual, spatial, and social data (Yin, 2000 in Rambe & Nuraini, 2024; Praja & Nuraini, 2024; Sitompul & Nuraini, 2024; Turio & Nuraini, 2024). According to Creswell (2014 in Azmi & Nuraini, 2024; Laia et al, 2024; Muazro & Nuraini, 2024; Ramadhani & Nuraini, 2024) qualitative research is used to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study method to evaluate the revitalization of the Kesawan Area in Medan. The case study method is an in-depth qualitative approach to a specific object, event, individual, group, or location, aimed at understanding a phenomenon comprehensively within its real-life context (Moleong, 2000 in Nuraini, 2019; Yin, 2000 in Nuraini, 2024; Groat & Wang, 2000 in Nuraini et al, 223). The qualitative approach is selected to enable a comprehensive understanding of the area's social, cultural, and physical conditions, as well as the impacts of the revitalization efforts (Yin, 2000 in Sugiarto & Rahmadania, 2024;). Data were collected through in-depth interviews with local residents, business owners, and key stakeholders; field observations regarding the physical condition and spatial organization of the area; and document analysis of official materials related to the planning and implementation of the revitalization project. All data were analyzed qualitatively to identify patterns, themes, and emerging meanings, thereby providing a holistic overview of the successes and challenges of the revitalization in alignment with Roger Trancik's theory of lost space

Results

A. Evaluation of the Revitalization of the Kesawan Area in Medan Based on Roger Trancik's *Finding Lost Space* Theory

This report analyzes the revitalization of the Kesawan Area in Medan using the theoretical framework of *Finding Lost Space* by Roger Trancik. The primary focus is on how the revitalization addresses the issue of "lost spaces" in urban environments through Trancik's three core concepts: Figure-Ground, Linkage, and Place.

B. Analysis of Theory Application

1. Figure-Ground Theory

The revitalization of Kesawan, from the perspective of figure-ground theory, examines the extent to which the initiative has succeeded in defining the spatial relationship between buildings (figure) and open space (ground). While improvements in visual appearance—such as facade painting and area tidying—are evident, the figure-ground theory emphasizes the creation of positively defined outdoor spaces rather than mere cosmetic enhancements. If interventions fail to reorganize the spatial structure between building masses and open spaces, the result may be a disjointed urban fabric where buildings appear isolated and the in-between spaces remain as leftover areas, rather than being integrated into an active urban system. True success lies in how both restored heritage buildings and new structures synergistically shape a coherent, legible, and spatially meaningful urban space.

2. Linkage Theory

Within the linkage framework, the revitalization efforts in Kesawan seek to enhance connectivity and movement systems, both within the area and in relation to the wider urban network. These efforts include the development of new infrastructure and temporary road closures as a response to the motor vehicle dominance that identified by Trancik as a key cause of urban lost spaces. However, this approach carries ambivalent potential. If the new infrastructure reinforces vehicular flows or creates new physical barriers, it may worsen spatial fragmentation and generate more anti-spaces. Conversely, if infrastructure design prioritizes pedestrians, smooths interspace connections, and integrates public transport modes, the revitalization aligns with Trancik's principles. The success of the linkage approach largely depends on the design's ability to enhance human connectivity, spatial legibility, and the creation of an urban environment that is interconnected, inclusive, and easily navigable while gradually reducing vehicular dominance to support public life.

3. Place Theory

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C. Identification of Successes and Challenges in Addressing "Lost Space"

1. Successes

- a. Enhanced Aesthetics and Order: The revitalization has improved the visual appeal of the area and cleanliness, aligning with the goal of creating a “more beautiful, orderly, neat, and clean” environment.
- b. Tourism Appeal and Economic Potential: The transformation of Kesawan into a "heritage tourism destination" has increased visibility and stimulated local economic prospects
- c. Partial Heritage Preservation: Several historical buildings have been incorporated into the tourist narrative, supporting conservation efforts.

2. Challenges

- a. Undefined Open Spaces: Without fundamental changes in spatial patterns, the spaces between buildings remain as leftover areas instead of active urban spaces.
- b. Limited Connectivity: New infrastructure has not fully resolved vehicular dominance or provided well-connected pedestrian pathways.

- c. Inauthentic Places: The focus on tourism risks commodifying cultural heritage without fostering emotional ties or a sense of ownership among the local community.
- d. Tensions Between Modernization and Preservation: Synergizing old and new elements may create new anti-spaces if modernization is insensitive to historical context.
- e. Lack of Community Participation and Governance: Low public engagement and weak intergovernmental coordination hinder the creation of inclusive and humane public spaces.

Table 1. Evaluation: Revitalization of the Kesawan Area in Medan vs. the Principles of "Finding Lost Space"

| Trancik’s Theoretical Principle | Relevant Aspects in Kesawan’s Revitalization | Assessment | In-Depth Justification / Analysis |
|-------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| Figure-Ground Theory | Building and open space arrangement, integration of historical façades, creation of well-defined public spaces. | Fair / Needs Improvement | The revitalization may have improved visual appearance and environmental cleanliness. However, a deeper analysis is needed to determine whether these changes have fundamentally transformed the mass-void relationship to create well-defined “positive space,” or if they remain cosmetic. Are the buildings still perceived as isolated objects, or do they now form cohesive “walls” that define space? |
| Linkage Theory | Pedestrian pathways, area-to-area connectivity, transportation integration, reduction of vehicular dominance. | Needs Improvement / Not Yet Addressed | Infrastructure development shows potential for enhanced connectivity. However, it is crucial to evaluate whether the planning prioritizes pedestrian movement over vehicles. If motorized traffic still dominates, this contradicts the linkage principle, which emphasizes human-scale spatial connections as a remedy to lost space. |
| Place Theory | Identity, cultural meaning, user experience (locals and tourists), sense of ownership, accommodation of local cultural needs. | Needs Improvement / Not Yet Addressed | The transformation into a “heritage tourism icon” is an admirable goal. Yet, it is essential to assess whether this transformation has truly created an <i>authentic place</i> that is meaningful to the local community, or if it remains a superficial tourist attraction. The lack of local participation risks impeding the development of a genuine, emotionally resonant place. |
| Addressing the Causes of Lost Space | Managing the impact of motor vehicles, zoning policies, public-private interest balance, community participation. | Not Yet Addressed | Although the revitalization includes physical improvements, systemic issues such as vehicular dominance and minimal public involvement seem to remain unresolved. These limitations can restrict the long-term impact and sustainability of the revitalization efforts. |

D. Key Findings and Insights

The evaluation of the Kesawan Medan revitalization through Roger Trancik's Finding Lost Space theory shows that the project has made significant progress in aesthetic aspects and positioning the area as a heritage tourism destination. However, from a deeper spatial and quality-of-space perspective, the revitalization achievements are still suboptimal.

Key findings include:

1. Visual and economic success: Increased tourism appeal and visual orderliness of the area.
2. Spatial weaknesses: The public spaces formed have yet to fully reinforce meaningful spatial relationships, especially in terms of figure-ground, linkage, and sense of place.
3. Gap between narrative and reality: There is a discrepancy between the government's vision to create competitive public spaces and the outcomes observed on the ground.

E. Implications for Urban Planning in Medan

The Kesawan revitalization reflects fundamental issues in Medan's urban planning system. This case highlights a development pattern overly focused on visual aesthetics, with minimal community involvement and weak institutional coordination. It underscores the need for governance reform and a planning approach that is more inclusive, participatory, and oriented towards the quality of public spaces.

Main implications:

1. Weak public participation: Design and implementation processes lack meaningful community engagement.
2. Automobile dominance: Space prioritization still favors vehicles over pedestrians.
3. Spatial discontinuity: Weak integration among spatial elements results in an area that is socially and spatially less vibrant.

F. Recommendations for Future Urban Interventions

Based on the Finding Lost Space theory, the following urban intervention recommendations can improve space quality in Medan and prevent the creation of "lost spaces":

1. Figure-Ground
 - a. Establish strict design guidelines to ensure well-defined, enclosed public spaces.
 - b. Encourage infill projects to connect fragmented city blocks.
 - c. Use façade designs that actively engage with public spaces
2. Linkage
 - a. Expand networks of comfortable, safe, and integrated pedestrian pathways.
 - b. Implement pedestrian zones in high-activity areas.
 - c. Develop multimodal transportation systems to enhance city connectivity.
3. Place
 - a. Apply cultural sensitivity in public space design.

- b. Involve communities in space programming to enhance sense of ownership.
 - c. Create spaces that promote social interaction and local activities.
4. Systemic Causes of Lost Space
- a. Revise outdated zoning policies.
 - b. Balance public and private interests in development.
 - c. Strategically manage automobile impacts to foster a more human-centered urban life.

G. Suggestions for Enhancing Public Participation and Governance

To ensure the success of future urban interventions, improving governance quality and public participation is crucial:

1. Inclusive and Sustainable Participation
Engage residents actively from project inception to completion, beyond formal consultations.
2. Strengthening the Role of City Government (BAPPEDA)
Enhance institutional capacity of BAPPEDA to act as facilitator and coordinator of cross-sector planning.
3. Multi-Stakeholder Forums
Create collaborative forums that structurally unite government, community, and private sector.
4. Collaboration with Academia
Leverage expertise from local academics such as those from USU for research, design, and technical capacity building.
5. Dissemination Strategy for Research Findings
Use media like policy briefs, public workshops, and interactive spatial visualizations to make research accessible and impactful.

Conclusion

The Kesawan Medan revitalization is an important and strategic urban intervention. However, fully successful creation of meaningful, human-scaled urban space, as defined by Roger Trancik, requires deeper engagement with fundamental spatial design principles and addressing governance and community participation challenges. Trancik's Finding Lost Space theory proves to be a robust and relevant analytical framework for evaluating contemporary urban interventions both globally and locally. The analysis of Kesawan's revitalization reveals that despite achieving several goals, particularly in aesthetics and tourism appeal, there remains significant room for improvement in creating well-defined (figure-ground), coherently connected (linkage), and culturally rich and meaningful (place) spaces.

These challenges are compounded by systemic urban planning issues in Medan, such as limited public participation and suboptimal government facilitation. By systematically integrating Trancik's principles into future planning and design practices, and addressing governance and participation issues, Medan has the potential to develop more humane, sustainable, and culturally resonant urban spaces. This report affirms that effective urban design is not only about buildings but also how the spaces between them are crafted to create rich and meaningful city experiences for all inhabitants.

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