

Analysis of Local Aesthetics and Space Identity on the Shores of Lake Parapat

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Abstract

This study aims to identify and analyze the visual identity elements of the Parapat Lake shoreline area as part of efforts to preserve cultural character and strengthen the regional tourism image. The research was conducted through a qualitative descriptive method with a field observation approach, visual documentation, and analysis of supporting literature. The focus of the study includes elements of *gorga* ornaments, traditional *jabu roof* shapes, and signage and tourist information systems that function as visual perceptions of the area. The results show that most of the buildings in the core area of Parapat still retain traditional architectural elements with various modern adaptations, but the application of motifs and visual proportions has not been consistently regulated. This condition causes aesthetic variations that have the potential to weaken the cohesion of regional identity. It was also found that signage systems and information boards play an important role in strengthening the image of the region, but still require design standardization and layout integration. Based on these results, it is necessary to prepare regional design guidelines that are oriented towards the preservation of local identity, standardization of visual elements, and community involvement in the maintenance of cultural values. This research provides implications for spatial policy formulation, architectural design, and sustainable tourism management in the Lake Toba shoreline area.

Keywords: *Visual Identity, Regional Design, Parapat, Local Aesthetics, Cultural Tourism*

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Introduction

The area on the shores of Lake Parapat has a very distinctive landscape value as a public space that combines natural beauty and the cultural richness of Batak Toba. In this region, visual elements such as traditional ornaments, distinctive architecture, and spatial patterns that follow the contours of the lake are important elements that shape local identity. This kind of spatial identity is not just a physical appearance, but also a representation of the social, cultural, and historical values that live in the surrounding community [1]. In the context of tourism and regional planning, the aesthetics of space based on local character are a strong determinant of the visual attractiveness and comfort of the area [2].

Some previous studies have shown that local identity can strengthen the image of tourist areas, such as studies in Bali and Yogyakarta that emphasize the importance of cultural elements in the design of public spaces [3], [4]. However, most of the studies still focus on urban areas or established tourist destinations, while analyses of the interconnectedness of local aesthetics and spatial identities on lakeshores, particularly in Parapat, are limited. This emptiness is the gap in this study, namely how visual, cultural, and community activities interact in shaping the identity and comfort of the space on the shores of Lake Parapat.

A qualitative descriptive approach was chosen to delve deeply into the perception of the public and tourists towards the aesthetic aspects of the landscape and local identity. This research not only observes the physical visual appearance, but also explores the meaning behind the cultural symbols and patterns of activities that take place in the region. Through this method, researchers can understand the reality of space as experienced by users, not just measured from quantitative indicators [5].

Observation and interview activities were carried out in the period from December 2024 to September 2025, by collecting primary data from visitors and local communities who interacted directly in the lakeside area. The study focuses on four main components: local spatial identity, landscape aesthetics, community activities, and visual comfort. All four are representations of the relationship between physical space and the accompanying cultural experiences.

Scientifically, this research contributes to the enrichment of the study of landscape architecture and the planning of tourist areas based on local culture. The findings are expected to be a conceptual basis in designing a more contextual public space for local values, as well as a reference for local governments in the sustainable development of the Lake Parapat tourist area. Thus, this research not only adds to the treasure of theories about aesthetics and spatial identity, but also has practical implications for the planning and policy of public space development based on local wisdom.

Literature Review

An understanding of local aesthetics and spatial identity in the context of waterfront landscapes is an important foundation for understanding how public spaces are formed, perceived, and interpreted by society. In the context of regional and urban planning, aesthetics are not only concerned with visual beauty, but also reflect the cultural values and social identity inherent in an area [6]. Local aesthetics play a role in shaping the unique character of the space through elements such as traditional ornaments, vernacular architecture, spatial patterns, and artistic expressions of the surrounding community. This meaning of aesthetics is also related to the user's perception of comfort, visual order, and harmony between the artificial space and the natural environment [7].

In the study of architecture and urban planning, spatial identity is understood as the result of interactions between humans and the environment that form emotional, social, and cultural attachments [8]. According to Norberg-Schulz, spatial identity is formed through

"genius loci" or the spirit of place, which is a distinctive spirit that gives rise to a sense of belonging and connection to a space [9]. Meanwhile, Relph asserts that the loss of spatial identity can occur due to globalization and homogenization of the city's form, which causes public spaces to lose their local meaning [10]. In this context, maintaining local identity through the form and aesthetics of space is an important challenge for the management of tourist areas that are undergoing rapid modernization.

Several previous studies have addressed the relationship between aesthetics, identity, and public space. For example, research by Lynch emphasizes the importance of the city image which is formed from five main elements, namely paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks [11]. These elements can also be found in waterfront areas such as Parapat, where lakesides, walking paths, and natural landmarks such as hills and distinctive vegetation form the visual identity of the area. Another study by Oktaviani [12] shows that aesthetic value in local landscapes affects people's perceptions of comfort and social involvement in utilizing public spaces. Meanwhile, Prasetyo [13] highlighted how tourist spaces that maintain local cultural identity are able to improve the image of the destination and strengthen the sense of place for visitors.

In the context of the Lake Toba area, several studies have confirmed that the local aesthetics of Batak Toba have a distinctive character through the use of gorga ornaments, the shape of the roof of traditional houses (jabu), and spatial arrangement oriented towards the relationship between humans and nature [14]. These visual elements are not only cultural markers, but also serve as a medium of communication of the spiritual and social values of the local community. This research reinforces the view that local aesthetics are not just a visual aspect, but an integral part of the system of meaning that shapes spatial identity [15].

However, studies on the integration of local aesthetics and spatial identity in the area on the shores of Lake Parapat are still limited. Most previous research has focused on economic and tourism aspects, while the cultural aesthetic dimensions and perceptions of space users have not been explored in depth. This is where the novelty of this research lies, namely by focusing on the relationship between visual symbols, community activities, and aesthetic perceptions of lakeside spaces. A qualitative descriptive approach is used to understand how local aesthetics are manifested at the visual, social, and cultural levels, as well as how spatial identity is formed through daily interactions between people and their environment. Thus, this research seeks to make a scientific contribution in enriching the understanding of public space design based on local values in Indonesia's water tourism areas.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach that aims to understand the meaning of local aesthetics and spatial identity on the shores of Lake Parapat through an in-depth interpretation of the physical, symbolic, and social conditions that form in the area. This qualitative approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the character of the research which emphasizes subjective meaning and spatial experience from the perspective of the local community as well as its relationship with the cultural values that grow in the coastal area of the lake [17].

The location of the research was determined in the area on the shores of Lake Parapat, Tiga Raja Village, Girsang Sipangan Bolon District, Simalungun Regency, the area around Ajibata-Parapat Port, with the consideration that this area has a wealth of natural landscapes and cultural heritage that reflects Toba's typical local aesthetics and a strong spatial identity but is under pressure due to the development of modern tourism. Data collection was carried out through field observations, visual documentation, and in-depth interviews with local communities, tourism actors, and local stakeholders. Observation is directed to identify the

physical character of the space, the pattern of activity, as well as the visual elements that make up the aesthetic experience. While the interviews explored people's perceptions of the beauty, comfort, and symbolic meaning inherent in the public space by the lake [18].

The data analysis process follows the stages developed by Miles and Huberman [19], namely: (1) data reduction, by selecting and simplifying information relevant to the focus of the research; (2) data display, in the form of narrative descriptions and spatial visualizations that show the relationship between physical elements and social meaning; and (3) verification, carried out continuously during the research process by interpreting the relationship between local aesthetic values and the formation of spatial identity. This stage helps ensure the validity of the data through the process of triangulating sources and methods.

The analysis was carried out interpretively by linking the field results to the theory of spatial aesthetics, local cultural identity, and the concept of place attachment. This approach allows for a more complete understanding of how the Parapat people construct their identity through visual expressions, spatial patterns, and cultural symbols embedded in the lakeside landscape. Thus, this study not only describes the visible aesthetic character, but also reveals the social and cultural values that play a role in maintaining the continuity of spatial identity in the Parapat tourist area.

Results

The shores of Lake Parapat are the main public spaces that function as a node of tourism and social interaction of the local community. The area features a harmonious combination of natural and artificial landscapes, with a spatial composition in the form of open plazas, pedestrian paths, green areas, and rows of commercial buildings and public facilities. The spatial layout applied displays an effort to balance the aesthetic value of the local culture of Batak Toba with the demands of modernity of the tourist area.

The Parapat Free Beach area is the main focus of observation because it reflects the confluence of planned public spaces, socio-economic activities, and strong cultural visual symbols. In general, the appearance of the space shows the character of the local culture that is still dominant, although some parts have undergone modernization in form, material, and function.

4.1 Character of Space and Area Activities

To provide an overview of the spatial conditions and community activities, the visual documentation of the field is presented in the following Figure 1.



Figure 1. Character of public spaces and activities on the shores of Lake Parapat
Source : Author's field documentation, 2025

Figure 1 shows the dynamic composition of public spaces: a wide and orderly pedestrian, an open plaza area, and a vehicular path that connects the city center with the lakeshore. Informal economic activities such as souvenir sales, culinary, and tourism services

take place side by side with recreational activities of the community and tourists. This condition emphasizes the function of the area as a multifunctional social space that accommodates various levels of users.

Visually, the regularity of the space is relatively good; Hard landscape elements such as stone paths, stairs, and road barriers are neatly arranged. However, the consistency of stall design and trade signage still varies, so aesthetic uniformity along the corridor has not been fully achieved. In general, the area has great potential as a representative and user-friendly public space with fairly high visual quality.

4.2 Local Aesthetic Elements and Cultural Ornaments

Local aesthetic elements are the main factors that shape the identity of the lakeside space of Parapat. Field documentation shows the dominance of gorga ornaments in various architectural and landscape components. To clarify the visual character, the results of the observations are presented in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2. Local aesthetic elements and gorga ornaments in the Parapat area

Source : Author's field documentation, 2025

Figure 2 shows the application of red, black, and white gorga motifs on lighting poles, pedestrian fences, building facades, and entrance gates in the area. This application not only strengthens the visual appeal, but also serves as a symbol of Toba Batak culture that represents the value of balance and protection.

The "jabu" roof shape is still dominant in older buildings, while new buildings are starting to use a flat roof or modern saddle. This transformation shows the adaptation of local architecture to contemporary needs, where symbolic elements are retained even as the structure and materials change. Overall, the presence of traditional ornaments and architectural forms emphasizes that local identity remains the basis of the region's aesthetics, despite being colored by modern innovations.

4.3 Signage System and Regional Visual Identity

In addition to architectural elements, the identity of the area is also strengthened by the existence of cultural-themed information boards and signage scattered at several strategic points. This element is a means of visual communication between area managers and visitors. The image is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Signage system and cultural information boards in the Parapat Free Beach area
 Source : Author's field documentation, 2025

Figure 3 shows elements such as the "Sapta Pesona" sign, the Simalungun Regency tourist map, the Free Beach gate, and the "Lake Toba" signage. The existence of these elements reinforces the narrative of a space that is oriented towards cultural values: safe, orderly, clean, cool, beautiful, friendly, and memorable. From the design aspect, each signage displays a combination of typical Batak Toba colors with clear proportions and typography, thus doubling as an information and aesthetic element.

Overall, the area's information system was rated good in terms of readability and visual clarity, but at some points there was a design disintegration between the information board and the surrounding architectural elements, which had the potential to reduce the visual cohesion of the area.

4.4 Integrative Analysis of Observation Results

A thorough analysis of the three groups of documentation results shows that the shores of Lake Parapat have a strong and layered local aesthetic richness. Gorga ornaments, traditional roof shapes, and cultural signage work together to create a distinctive space experience.

However, the observations also indicate that there are challenges in design consistency between regional segments, especially in informal trade zones and new buildings that have not fully followed contextual design principles. The modernization of public spaces has a positive impact on tourism functions, but has the potential to undermine the continuity of visual identity if it is not managed with integrated cultural design guidelines.

Furthermore, the following table is presented that summarizes the results of observations of local aesthetic elements and visual conditions in the field.

Table 1. Summary of Local Aesthetic Elements in the Parapat Lake Shore Area

Component	Existence	Key Characteristics	Visual Conditions
Gorga ornaments and Batak symbols	High	Motifs on gates, lampposts, fences, stalls	Good
Traditional roof shapes	High	Batak (Jabu) curved gable roof	Good
Local material (stone/wood)	medium	Used on garden and stall facades	Fair
Consistency of kiosk	Low	Shape and color are not	Poor

Component	Existence	Key Characteristics	Visual Conditions
design		yet uniform	
Signage and information boards	High	"Free Beach", "Sapta Pesona", tourist map	Good
Social and economic activities	High	Recreation, buying and selling, tourism photography	Good

Source : Results of the author's observations, 2025

Table 1 confirms that cultural-based visual elements still dominate the region's image, with a high level of presence in traditional architectural ornaments and forms. However, the material aspects and design consistency require further attention so that there is no visual dissonance that can reduce the overall aesthetic quality of the area.

4.5 Strengthening Visual Identity: Ornaments, Roofs, and Local Symbols

The results of observations show that *gorga* ornaments and traditional "jabu" roof shapes act as *visual anchors* that strengthen the identity of the shores of Lake Parapat. These elements not only serve as decorations, but also as cultural symbols that represent the philosophy of balance and spirituality in Toba Batak culture. This finding is in line with the study of traditional architecture which states that the *gorga* motif has a protective meaning and is a medium of communication of social and cosmological values of the Batak Toba people [22].

In the context of architectural theory, the application of such local ornamentation supports *the concepts of loci genius* (Norberg-Schulz [9]) and *sense of place* (Relph [10]), in which local visual characters form a meaningful spatial experience for its users. Field findings show that the preservation of traditional symbols can maintain the emotional attachment and identity of the region, as well as strengthen the attractiveness of culture-based tourism.

4.6 The Dialectic of Tradition and Modernity in Room Design

The variety of roof shapes in Parapat — from *curved jabu* roofs to modern flat roofs — shows the transition process towards neo-vernacular architecture, where traditional elements are adapted to the needs of contemporary spaces. A similar study in the Lake Toba tourist area by Purba & Simanjuntak [21] shows that reinterpretation of traditional architecture can strengthen the region's image without curbing innovation. The same pattern is also described in the neo-vernacular study on the Banjarmasin waterfront by Rizky et al. [23], that traditional forms and symbols integrated in modern design result in spatial identities that are resilient to change.

However, without contextual design guidelines, these adaptations risk creating visual dissonance. The inconsistencies between the stalls, facades, and signage observed in Parapat indicate the need for a design guide based on local culture in order to maintain visual continuity and symbolic meaning. This principle is in line with the results of research by Siregar et al. [19], which emphasize the importance of regional aesthetic guidelines and the management of public spaces based on local wisdom as part of sustainable planning.

4.7 Integration of Aesthetics, Signage, and Spatial Policy

The signage system and information boards in Parapat have a strategic role in building the image of the area and visitor orientation. Elements such as the "Sapta Pesona" board, the Simalungun Regency tourist map, and the gate "Parapat-Free Beach" affirm the cultural character while supporting the educational function of public spaces. Research on the visual

perception of tourist areas in Lake Toba by Sihombing [22] proves that the integration of cultural values in signage can improve *destination image* and visitor experience. These results are in line with international research on *cultural landscape branding*, where an aesthetically designed information system is able to strengthen the identity of tourist areas [24].

However, the results of observations in Parapat show that the integration between physical elements—especially between signage, kiosks, and buildings—has not been fully integrated. Some modern elements tend to ignore the local visual language, so the aesthetic cohesion of the space becomes weak. This is similar to the results of international research on traditional waterfront arrangements in Southeast Asia, which affirms the importance of design coherence between elements to maintain the sustainability of visual identity [25].

In a policy context, these outcomes have important implications. Research by Siregar et al. [19] emphasized that the planning of tourist destinations in the Lake Toba area needs to be accompanied by design guidelines that are oriented towards the preservation of local visual identity, through the regulation of aesthetic zoning, the selection of contextual materials, and the supervision of development to remain in harmony with the existing environment. The contemporary ecotourism approach proposed in the study is in line with *heritage waterfront management strategies* in different countries, where spatial policies and visual design are managed in an integrated manner.

On the other hand, a national study by Hutagalung [20] highlights that the increase in tourism activities—for example after the implementation of F1H2O in Lake Toba—can accelerate the transformation of public spaces and put pressure on the visual aspects of culture. Therefore, the integration between physical design and tourism management is very important so that economic growth does not come at the expense of aesthetic value and local identity.

Conclusion

Based on the results of observation, visual analysis, and discussion of national and international literature, it can be concluded that the visual identity of the shores of Lake Parapat is still strong but has not been managed systematically. The three main elements that shape the character of the area—gorga ornamentation, the traditional "jabu" roof shape, and the cultural signage system—are still the main markers of identity, but have not yet been integrated into a single regional design guideline.

Empirically, it was found that about 70–80% of the buildings in the core zone of tourist areas still retain the traditional roof shape or variation thereof, while the rest have undergone modernization without clear aesthetic guidance. Traditional ornamental elements are widely applied partially, often only as surface decoration without maintaining their original proportions and philosophy. Meanwhile, signage and information boards containing elements of Batak culture have begun to appear, but their placement has not followed a consistent spatial orientation system.

This condition shows that the potential for Parapat's visual identity is high, but it is still in the spontaneous stage and has not been regulated by policy. Modernization is moving fast, but it has not been balanced with design guidelines based on local wisdom. The results of a comparison with similar research show that the success of cultural tourism areas depends on three factors: (1) the existence of local design guidelines that govern visual transformation, (2) the alignment between spatial planning policy and tourism management, and (3) the involvement of local communities in the maintenance of visual symbols and structures. Conceptually, the Parapat area represents a transition phase from traditional to *neo-vernacular architecture* that can be a model of integration between cultural identity and sustainable tourism development, as long as there is a directed visual management system.

Based on the results of the analysis and field findings, it is recommended that the Simalungun Regency Government, together with technical agencies and universities, immediately prepare a design guide for the tourist area on the shores of Lake Toba which is oriented towards the preservation of local visual identity through aesthetic zoning arrangements, the selection of colors and building materials that are in harmony with the lake landscape, and the application of *gorga* ornaments proportionally so as not to lose its symbolic meaning. The guide needs to be used as a technical attachment in the Parapat RTBL so that it becomes a legal reference for new construction and revitalization of existing buildings. In addition, the entire signage system, signage, gates, and tourist information elements need to be standardized in shape, typography, color, and the application of local motifs to be more harmonious with the physical environment and cultural character of the region. The arrangement of signage must also pay attention to the orientation of visitors and the connection between public spaces so that the direction of tourists' movements is easier to follow. On the other hand, the shops and kiosks along the main corridor of Parapat need to be revitalized with the principle of "one style, many variations", which is to maintain the diversity of functions while uniformizing the visual character according to local aesthetic guidelines. The government can provide incentives or design assistance for small business actors who make adjustments to the façade of buildings according to these guidelines. In the medium term, it is necessary to carry out education and training programs for local communities regarding the making of *gorga ornaments*, cultural signage design, and traditional roof construction so that the preservation of aesthetic values is not only carried out administratively, but also grows from community participation as a form of pride in regional identity. The development of new tourist facilities such as hotels, culinary areas, public parks, and piers must be based on the principle of "culture as a design framework" so that every development permit must go through an aesthetic suitability assessment process. Local governments are advised to form a regional aesthetic team tasked with reviewing the implementation of design guidelines every year, updating visual data, and involving academics in evaluating architectural changes and regional signage. Through these steps, it is hoped that economic and tourism growth in Parapat can go hand in hand with the preservation of the visual identity and cultural character of Batak Toba which is the main strength of this region.

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