

# Transformations of Local Heritage as a Historic Public Space: The Case of Medan Kesawan Area and Semarang Kota Lama, Indonesia

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## Abstract

Adapting local historic places into historic public places has gained prominence in Indonesia in recent years. Local heritage places can be used as public areas for various purposes, including artistic activities, tourism, and cultural events. This paper examines the transformations of historically significant local heritage public spaces in the Medan Kesawan and Semarang Kota Lama regions, in Indonesia.

This research uses a qualitative methodology with a literature survey and direct observation of the research object. Primary data was obtained by conducting direct observations in Medan's Kesawan Area and Semarang's Old Town. Secondary data was obtained from literature. It identified recurring themes, analyzing the data through data reduction, presentation, and conclusion.

The findings show that the revitalization of Medan Kesawan and Kota Lama Semarang improves the aesthetics of the city and promote local identity. This revitalization encourages local governments to preserve historic buildings and promote economic developments. Transformations of local identity through Local heritage in both areas have shown the importance of the availability of public space in transforming slum areas into areas with cultural value. Revitalization of Kesawan Medan has focused on the development of residential and culinary infrastructure. In contrast, revitalization of Semarang has focused on preserving historic buildings and developing a tourist area. The government and community have worked together to preserve and revitalize the historic area through a collaborative development model. The community has focused on neighbourhood marketing to attract visitors and enhance cultural identity. Urban renewal in both areas focuses on preserving the character of the areas through changes in accessibility, and building characteristics while strengthening community participation.

**Keywords:** Local Heritage, Historic Places, Public Spaces.

## Introduction

Indonesia has a rich cultural past that is inextricably linked to the locale of each region and cannot be divorced from the values held by local people and traditional culture. However, Indonesia's cultural heritage legislation still has many loopholes and has to be updated to reflect worldwide trends. As a result, attempts to protect Indonesia's local heritage remain arduous due to the necessity for synchronized and harmonized understanding and unity between the Central and Local administrations (Djukardi et al., 2020). Three laws in Indonesia refer to heritage conservation and management: *Monumenten Ordonnantie Staatsblad* 238 No. 19 of 1931, Law No. 5 of 1992, and Law No. 11 of 2010 on Cultural Heritage. However, Indonesia's cultural heritage laws must be amended to ensure the effective protection of cultural assets, both tangible and intangible. Moreover, as Fitri et al. (2016) points out, the rules must be strengthened in numerous areas to provide better protection and management in the future.

Kesawan neighborhood of Medan and the Old Town of Semarang are two areas that have significant local cultural heritage in Indonesia, as Medan City has historic or heritage buildings that have revitalized the Kesawan area as a cultural heritage (Sitorus et al., 2023). Previous research has revealed that the awareness of grassroots local communities is increasing. However, Fitri et al. (2020) points out that the idea of active community roles and integrated conservation of local cultural heritage development in the Kesawan area is still underdeveloped. The Kota Lama area in Semarang is one of the best-preserved historic centers among other major cities in Indonesia. However, until the mid-2000s, the area had suffered decades of neglect, exacerbated by poor drainage and intermittent floods (Amin & Kurniawan, 2020; Notesplusultra.com, 2018b). Since then, there has been a push to restore the vitality of the old town with the ambition of becoming a UNESCO World Heritage Site by 2020 (Notesplusultra.com, 2018a).

The transformation of local heritage places into historic public spaces is an issue that has gained attention in recent years in Indonesia. There are concerns that commercialization may be inevitable, and the city government needs to safeguard, maintain, and register heritage areas as World Heritage Sites (Sugangga et al., 2021). In addition, local heritage can be used as public spaces for various activities such as creative activities, tourism and cultural events. It is important to consider the quality of public spaces and organize them according to their conditions. In recent years, there have been efforts to restore the function of local heritage as historic public spaces in Medan Kesawan and Semarang Kota Lama areas. In this context, this research aims to illustrate how the Medan Kesawan and Semarang Kota Lama areas in Indonesia deal with the challenges and opportunities in preserving and revitalizing historic areas. Its objectives are:

1. To reveal how revitalizing historic areas promotes local identity in the public space of Medan Kesawan and Kota Lama Semarang.
2. To identify the transformations of local heritage identity while improving the economy of Medan and Semarang cities.
3. To show how stakeholder collaboration in building public spaces is a sustainable development strategy for managing local heritage.

## Theoretical Framework

### Local Heritage

Local Heritage Theory is a concept that focuses on the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, which is the result of socio-cultural and political-economic development within a community. It emphasizes the importance of cultural heritage to educate about a community's past and an integrative element that helps strengthen cultural identity. It also highlights the representative nature of cultural heritage, which is passed on from one generation to the next and is based on the community's social activities.

Heritage studies first appeared in the late 1980s and have since evolved from descriptive to theoretical, from local to global in scale, and from deep prehistory to the present. The retheorization of heritage studies as "critical heritage studies" focuses on a variety of humanities and social science topics, such as bodies of knowledge, class,

colonialism/postcolonialism, dominant rhetoric/authoritarian discourse, gender, globalization, identity, ideology, institutions, memory work, nationalism, among others (Smith, 2014). In heritage studies, value of heritage is debated.

Van (2005) defines legacy value as having five dimensions: historical, aesthetic, scientific, social, and economic. Cultural legacy is dynamic and ever-changing, with discoveries in archaeological, historical, anthropological, artistic, scientific, contemporary creative, scientific, and technical works (Monteiro et al., 2015). The national and international trend in cultural heritage protection has moved cultural definitions to a larger role of heritage in society. Intangible cultural heritage is defined as "all the elements of authentic traditional creation, valuable from a historical and cultural perspective, passed down from generation to generation, expressed in literary, musical, choreographic, or other forms of expression" (Ursu et al., 2022; Di Giovine, 2018). Understanding local communities and their cultural heritage values is essential for managing cultural heritage sites.

## Public Space

The importance of public space in urban planning and architecture cannot be overstated. To comprehend the interaction between individuals and public spaces, theoretical frameworks have been constructed. According to expert views, locations are characterized by the alignment of mental representations, behaviors and physical environments. This approach describes the relationship between meaning and the physical context in public spaces (Aguila et al., 2019). Parkinson (2012) defines public space as "a space that is openly accessible, uses public resources, has a public effect, and/or is used to perform public roles." Lefebvre (2012) defines public space as "the physical meeting point between human and urban life" that depicts the living area where people's activities occur. Perceptions of professional about creating dynamic public spaces include making them accessible, safe, comfortable, attractive, useful, sustainable, and flexible (Li et al., 2022; El-Kholei & Yassein, 2022). Local heritage-related public spaces are unique due to their adaptive reuse, cultural identity, diverse values, community engagement, and economic and urban impact. These spaces play an important role in preserving cultural heritage, fostering community relations, and contributing to the revitalisation of urban areas, attracting tourists and driving local economic development.

## Literature Review

There is plenty of literature on the transformations of local historical places as a public space. They often address the function of public space design in the perception of surroundings (Birir & Adem, 2022; Bernabeu-Bautista et al., 2023). For example, Heldak & Gonda-Soroczynska, (2019) examine the historical legacy and space transformation, taking into account community life and spatial changes in regional architecture. Zagroba et al. (2020) explore the historic public spaces in small towns in Poland's Warmia area. They emphasize the relevance of spatial order and harmonious urban growth in developing local identity and views of urban space. In contrast Guan (2022) examines the production and modification of public space as an intrinsic element of the urban fabric and life. This is examined from the perspective of spatial flow. Similarly, Ding et al., (2021) examine the reconstruction of public spaces of the old community in the historical and cultural district of the Wuhan Tanhualin community. They use transformation as an example, based on urban acupuncture and moxibustion theory

Transforming historic heritage into public spaces can be a challenging process. According to Pranskūnienė & Zabulionienė (2023), one of the biggest challenges in current and future heritage transformation is the reliance on being constantly interconnected. This means that the transformation process must take into account the needs and expectations of various stakeholders, including local communities, governments, and heritage experts. In this connection, Babalis (2022) points out that historic cities face a number of critical issues such as the impact of open space and poor building quality. This means that the transformation process should address these issues and ensure that the design of public spaces is appropriate for the historic neighborhood. Bakri et al. (2022) examine the link between local people and their cultural assets has been investigated using grounded theory at Malaysia's George Town

World Assets Site. They provide a deep and rich understanding of the links between the World Heritage designation and its local communities, including how local people participate with and add significance to the site.

According to the report on historic urban environment conservation problems and priorities for action, heritage practitioners must effectively express the many parts of the historic urban environment that contribute to the heritage values of the places (Getty.edu, 2010). Architectural qualities may be conveyed, but the social, landscape, and intangible values that must be preserved to sustain the urban region may need to be better defined. On heritage reuse and community engagement, identifying and strengthening individual and community talents is critical to realizing the potential of cultural property. Participation of experts is also important. According to Viola (2022), private professionals and universities capable of directing choices and accompanying training focused on the constructive specificities of local cultural assets and community empowerment is key in this context. This involves individuals and groups in heritage-related activities stimulating the development of talents, skills, and cultural identity. Most agree that reusing heritage is not just about preserving history but also about creating opportunities for sustainable growth and development.

## Research Methods

This research examines a case study of the Medan Kesawan and Semarang Kota Lama areas. It focuses on transforming local heritage as a historic public space. It uses a qualitative research methodology with a literature survey and direct observation of the object of research. It observed firsthand Medan's Kesawan Area and Semarang's Old Town.

Desk research, also known as secondary research or documentary research, is a type of research that utilizes material that has already been collected and published. This method of gathering information and insights requires evaluating and synthesizing existing data and sources, as opposed to collecting primary data through field research. Desk research is based on information gathered in reports, academic publications, websites, and other publicly available sources (Moore, 2006).

In achieving the research objectives, it explains how the revitalization of historic areas promote local identity in public spaces. Further, it examines the changes in local heritage identity in improving the economy of Medan and Semarang Cities. Furthermore, it examines the collaboration efforts of the stakeholders in building public spaces and sustainable development strategy of local heritage. Recurring themes are identified while linking the codes into research objectives. Following Ridder (2014) data is analyzed through data reduction, presentation, to derive conclusion.

## Findings and Discussion

### Revitalizing Historic Areas to Promote Local Identity in Public Spaces

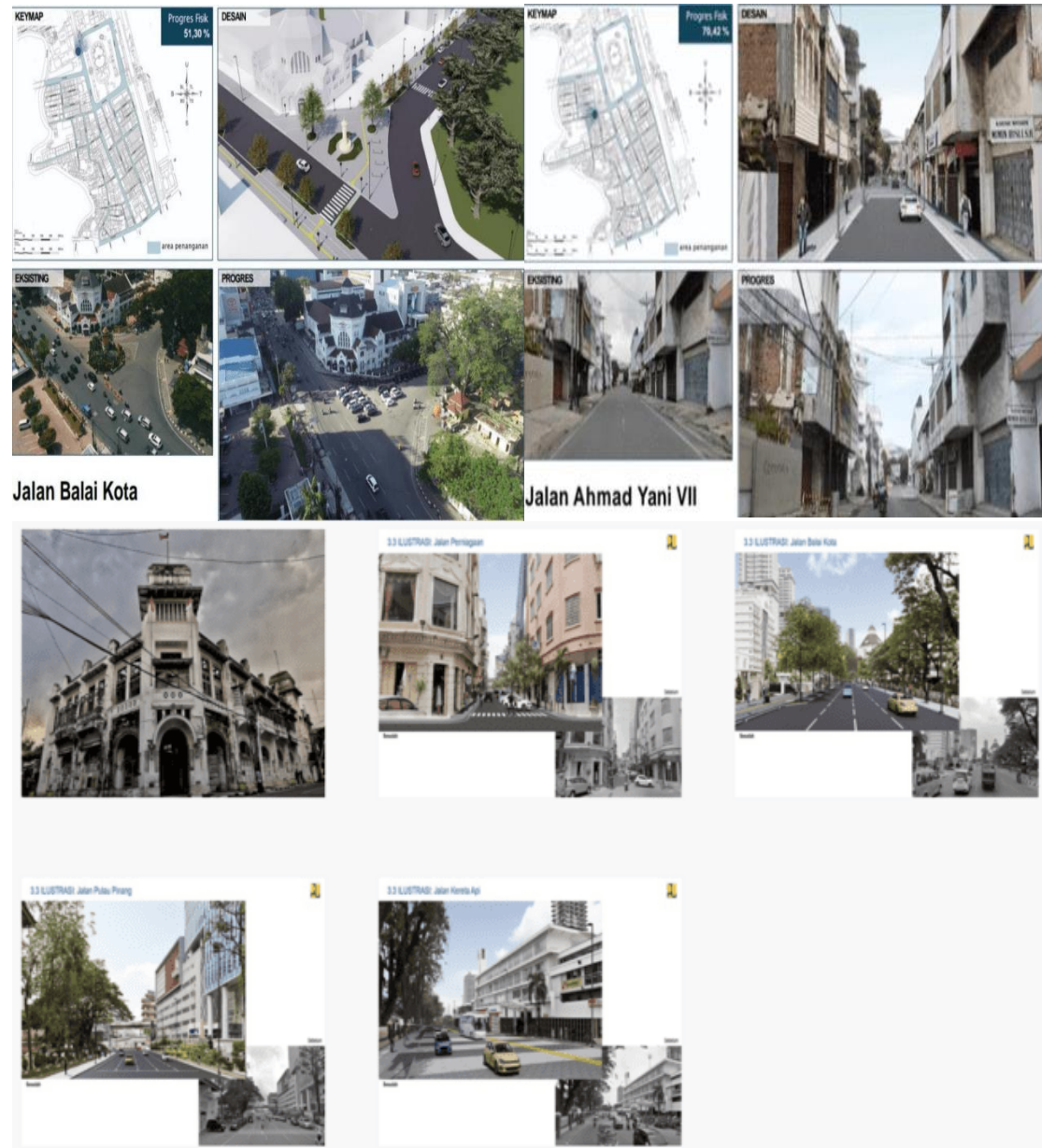
Public spaces always have an attraction as a city element that contributes to the formation of local identity and also as a place that can be promoted and enjoyed by the public. The revitalization of the Kesawan City Building in Medan is an effort to elevate the urban aesthetics and promote local identity as a cultural development goal. Indeed, the revitalization of the Old Town area of Kesawan can make this location a heritage tourism destination and improve the economy of the community.

The Kesawan area, as in the past, has become a culinary center and a center of various other activities. From 1913-1937, it has grown rapidly with the emergence of residential buildings and shops, government, trade, and entertainment centers. In 1938-1962, Kesawan has begun to be filled with more modern buildings (Rachmawati, 2021).

This condition has led the Mayor of Medan to plan to develop the area as a culinary center to realize it as the Kitchen of Asia. Revitalization efforts have encouraged the return of local identity to Kesawan. This was not the case which did not follow the old structure and damaged the old image from 1996-2004 when shophouses of up to five stories were built in Kesawan. At its peak in 2013, Jalan Kesawan, which changed its name to Jalan Ahmad Yani, functioned as a trading center with two-story shophouses (Portal.pemkomedan.go.id, 2023a).



The shophouses sell various musical instruments, sports equipment, souvenirs, household furniture, and fabric (Rachmawati, 2021; Chairunnisa, 2022); Tambunan & Tarigan, 2022; Merdeka.com, 2021). Indeed, the Medan City Government is working to revitalize the Kesawan area by preserving its historic buildings to encourage economic developments (Figure 1 Kesawan settlement revitalization design) (Portal.pemkomedan.go.id, 2023b).

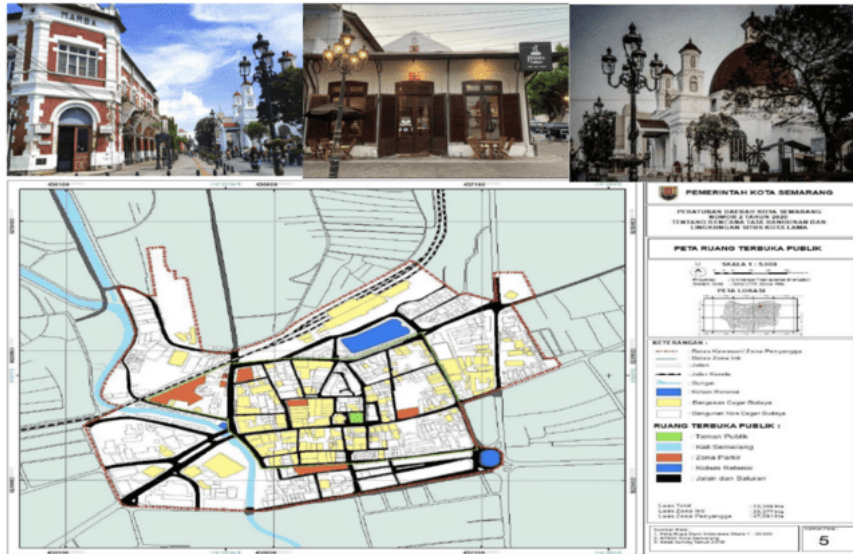


**Fig 1:** Kesawan Settlement Revitalization Design

Source: Portal.pemkomedan.go.id, 2022; Portal.pemkomedan.go.id, 2023b

Almost as same as Kesawan, the reduced urban activities of the Old Town area have led to the paralysis of the old city, characterized by the condition of the environment in the area. It is less well maintained and has damaged buildings. The environment in the Old Town Semarang is thus derelict. As Sari et al. (2017) shows, the shift in the development direction toward modern cities causes old cities to be abandoned and receive less attention. This is the case in Semarang Old Town where there was a government and trading area during the Dutch colonial era (Cnbcindonesia.com, 2018; Mulyono, 2020; Kompas.com, 2020). The changes have made local identity a critical aspect of the development of the area.

Old Town Area totals around 35 Hectares. It has multi-ethnic settlements. Thus, encouraging the activities that can increase economic value in its management planning are needed. Environmental quality has become an important aspect of the development of the area (Firdausyiah & Dewi, 2021).



**Fig 2:** Old Town Buildings and Old Town Public Open Spaces

Source: (Peraturan.bpk.go.id (2020; Itsnaini & Tashandra, 2022; Semarangkota.go.id, 2022; Pariwisata.semarangkota.go.id, 2023)

The green open spaces in the Old Town neighborhood have provided a place for gathering and bring in many people (Figure 2). Its development, focuses on five aspects. First, the development of open spaces (shown in green) that can increase interaction, such as parks. Second, the river arrangement (shown in light blue) is an effort to reduce the risk of flooding in the area. Third, it deals with parking zones that can accommodate more vehicles. Parking arrangements can encourage regional aesthetics, order, and security. Fourth, it involves the improvement of the retention pond (shown in blue) as a rainwater reservoir and water control. Fifth, it focuses on the roads and channels (shown in black). This is intended to improve pedestrian-friendly road access by providing various facilities, such as benches and directions. Meanwhile, the canal controls water so as not to be affected by flooding during the rainy season.

Availability of public spaces with local identity is an important need in building a beautiful city and a cultured society. Both areas place local identity with the mission of restoring the area as it was originally has encouraged various regional development policies. Availability of public space is an important aspect in both areas by building the identity of a place in environmental, economic, and social aspects. Improving buildings is the beginning of restoring the city's local identity.

Both areas have differences in the development of regional identity. Revitalization of the old town of Kesawan Medan focuses more on developing residential infrastructure in the old town of Kesawan. This is inseparable from the location of Kesawan, which is in the center of Medan City with high community intensity. However, this condition hurts the Kesawan area, where the rapid movement of people encourages minimal economic interaction. This makes the identity of the city diminish. According to the Mayor of Medan, revitalization was carried out to restore the function of the heritage area as an economic center in the area of historical buildings. The strategy is to limit road access by narrowing several roads, such as Ahmad Yani Road, to encourage increased transaction value (Aldi, 2023). This allows people to walk around and enjoy the area.

According to Firdausyiah & Dewi (2021) and Setioko & Harsritanto (2017), revitalization of the old city of Semarang focuses more on the preservation of historic buildings and the development of the tourist areas. Revitalization encourages changes in spatial patterns

that include space use, building characteristics, accessibility, land prices, and settlement characteristics. In this connection, Yuliati (2019) points out that the Semarang City Government's efforts to protect and develop the city due to its unique and interesting position as a cultural heritage and tourism attraction. This encourages the identity of local heritage to be developed by focusing on buildings as places that can encourage various tourist activities, trade, creating neighborhoods and offices. This is an effort to restore the function and glory of the area as in the past.

### **Transformation of Local Heritage Identity in Improving the Economy of Medan City and Semarang City**

Presenting public spaces such as local heritage areas is closely related to the demands for a better quality of life for the urban communities. It involves not only the visual-aesthetic aspects of the environment but also the level of comfort. However, local heritage plays an important role in transforming and improving the economy. Both areas have the same pattern in developing the area. First is the development of social entrepreneurship: both areas encourage social and environmental conditions with aspects of comfort developed to encourage active participation in contributing to improving the economy. Resource management and economic activities can strengthen positive cultural governance and encourage sustainable development. The old city of Semarang and the Kesawan area place Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) as the driving force of the area. Second, local heritage-based economic development preserves identity while contributing to economic growth as a local heritage advantage. This condition is strongly influenced by service and identity transformation that shifts to a local commodity-based economic structure—Kota Lama with antiques and Kesawan with culinary as an effort to restore past intentions.

Third, it contributes to increasing the attractiveness of the area. Local heritage identity when transformed can be an attraction. This makes Kota Lama one of the top tourists visit centers in Central Java. Physical changes to buildings that are more attractive to tourists can increase community activity in the area. The Kesawan area in building the identity of the building is important to build activities around the area that can increase transaction values. Therefore, the Medan City Government has designated Kesawan Square as a culinary center, cultural center, and creative industry center.

### **Stakeholder Collaboration in Building Public Spaces**

In both areas, there is the issue of ownership of privately owned buildings. This is very much related to protection and maintenance. Seeing this problem, the government has developed a collaborative development model with various private and community sectors. The government has developed the area by improving and preserving the historical character of the area, connectivity, and aesthetics to bring about many interactions. At the same time, the community has focused on marketing the area to attract visitors and preserve the environment by increasing cultural identity.

This collective awareness is an effort to preserve and revive the historic area. Strengthening the area's identity by highlighting its characteristics and distinctive features, the Old Town of Semarang has four unique characteristics: Kampung Melayu, Old Dutch Town, Kauman, and Chinatown. This makes cultural identity and community involvement important. Meanwhile, Medan's Kesawan area has an active trading area and is a tourist attraction. Thus, community involvement in offering merchandise is important.

Collaboration in developing the area involves the government, local communities, and the central government. This is related to efforts to preserve the environment. Before the revitalization, the old town of Semarang was often flooded and Kesawan was rundown. Government, private, and community elements are important in collaborating in the area's management. The community can encourage various activities within it in the form of art exhibitions or MSME activities to improve the region's economy. The routine of the creative community is starting to find space in Medan City with the Kesawan area. The community of music artists, comic artists, sketchers, parkour movement artists, and recreational sports



regularly carry out activities in Kesawan (Sinaga, 2023). Cultural communities act as one of the important nodes of cultural heritage preservation in Indonesia. They have several assets that other stakeholders do not, such as proximity to the community, knowledge, and awareness of the importance of cultural heritage preservation (Gandhawangi, 2023). This makes community involvement in the planning and implementing old town management programs important for sustainable development.

### **Sustainable Development Strategy Branding Local Heritage**

Changes in the spatial pattern of the area that include the use of accessibility space, building characteristics, and society have encouraged efforts to maintain the character of the area. Government has protected the building as an effort to prevent the form of the building, while the function of the building can be used as an area development. This step is an effort to maintain the authenticity of the shape of the building. In developing public facilities, the city governments of Medan and Semarang have focused on various community activities that can increase interaction, starting from providing public spaces such as parks, playgrounds, and cultural community centers. These facilities help attract visitors. The branding strategy, by highlighting unique features and characteristics, such as historic buildings, cultural events, and local cuisine have become the value of marketing commodities.

The Kelana Nusantara program in Kota Lama has been initiated to build a stronger network between fellow creative economy players, the city government, and the central government. This is an effort by the government to create policies that are right on target, right on benefits, and right on time through adaptation, innovation, and collaboration to support business opportunities and create jobs for the community (Kemenparekraf.go.id, 2022). Meanwhile, the development of MSMEs in the Kesawan area as an MSME center that is expected to boost the community's economy is the focus of sustainable development (Simarmata, 2021).

**Table 1:** Indicators of Local Heritage Sustainability Development Strategy for Kesawan and Kota Lama Areas

Source: Author, 2023

<b>Sustainability Strategy</b>	<b>Kota Lama</b>	<b>Kesawan neighbourhood</b>
Branding	Little Netherland	The Kitchen of Asia
Economy	Utilization of old buildings, and MSMEs.	Utilisation of old buildings, establishing a culinary centre area.
Physical Area	Focus on the buildings, infrastructure, accessibility, and environment that influence tourism.	Focus on developing tourism destinations that have the potential to attract tourists. Improve physical conditions, economic opportunities, social activities, cultural activities, and environmental quality.
Social	Collaboration with various parties in organizing cultural event activities, availability of facilities and security, and convenience.	Collaboration with various parties in organizing cultural events, festivals, and community engagement activities.
Environmental conditions	Improving environmental quality and encouraging connectivity in the Old Town area.	Developing public space areas that provide convenience.

Both areas cannot be separated from the concept of urban renewal, which is characterized by involving the revitalization of old or slum urban areas to improve their physical, social, and economic conditions (Ursic & Kriznik, 2012; Nugraha et al., 2021). Increased investment and activities in trade and services, as well as tourism, combined with the artistic value of ancient European-style buildings have triggered the emergence of both the public and private informal sectors (Nugraha et al., 2021). The old town and Kesawan are attractive with their ancient architectural elements that add to the visual appeal for the tourists. Combining traditional and modern life allows urban renewal to encourage aspects of urban



settlement resilience from the urban decay in cities. Thus, the urban renewal strategy has propelled the Old Town and Kesawan neighborhoods to the center of culture and has restored the economic viability of the area by attracting private and public investment.

The urban renewal model with a gentrification approach is important in promoting the sustainability of an area. Gentrification results from public policies associated with large urban redevelopment schemes (Glass, 1964; Mehdipannah et al., 2018). Gentrification, more broadly, is the return of productive capital investment to the city (Smith, 2002; Yazar et al., 2020). The commitment of the local government in collaboration with the community to increase the importance of the Kota Lama and Kesawan urban areas by improving the quality of the environment without changing the physical structure of the area is an effort to revive the area that improves the quality of life of the community.

## Conclusion

This paper concludes that revitalization of the Medan Kesawan area has improved the aesthetics of the city and has promoted local identity as a cultural development destination. Medan's Kesawan area has become a culinary hub and centre for various activities, with the Mayor of Medan planning to develop it as the Kitchen of Asia. Revitalization efforts have encouraged the return of local identity to Kesawan, with the city government working to preserve historic buildings and encourage economic development. Meanwhile, the Kota Lama area in Semarang, which was the centre of government and trade during the Dutch colonial period, focuses on environmental quality and provides green open spaces for gathering and activities. This development focuses on five key areas: open space development, river realignment, parking zones, retention pond improvements, and pedestrian-friendly streets and channels.

Public spaces with local identity are essential for building beautiful cities and cultured communities. Both areas place local identity with the mission to restore the area to its original state, encouraging various regional development policies. Revitalization of Kesawan Medan focuses on the development of residential infrastructure, while the revitalization of Semarang focuses on the preservation of historic buildings and the development of tourist areas. Thus, public spaces play an important role in building a beautiful city and promoting local identity. The transformation of local identity through Local Heritage in Medan's Kesawan and Semarang's Old Town has opened up the paradigm of the importance of the availability of public space in creating areas that were once slums into areas of high cultural value. Urban identity socializes and interacts with others by improving the physical conditions, economic opportunities, social activities, cultural activities, and environmental quality of the area.

The government and local communities are working together to preserve and revive historic areas in Medan City and Semarang City through a collaborative development model. The community focuses on marketing the area to attract visitors and enhance cultural identity. Urban renewal in Medan and Semarang focuses on preserving the character of the area through changes in accessibility, building characteristics, and strengthening community participation. Government protection and community activities have been implemented to maintain the authenticity of the built form. Public facilities, such as parks and cultural community centres, have been developed to attract visitors. The Kota Tua and Kesawan areas have attracted private and public investment, fostering the resilience of urban settlements.

It is important to build on this research by looking at the sustainability aspects of local heritage tourism development to encourage local identity that blends past and present cultures.

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