Questioning Urban Symbolism in the Old City of Semarang

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to analyze urban symbolism in the old city of Semarang, Central Java that is created from the physical and the non-physical elements of the city. Through historical analysis, the paper attempts to relate the physical elements that come from the structure of the city, such as buildings and transportation, with the non-physical elements that come from history and events. When Dutch colonialism came to an end, some colonial buildings in the old city of Semarang started to be neglected. However, urban symbolism created from trading, transportation and culture provides layers to the identity and culture of the city, which includes Chinese, Arab and indigenous culture. Recent effort to revitalize the city focuses primarily on physical aspects, rather than balancing both physical and non-physical aspects of the old city of Semarang. The result of this paper reveals that balancing both physical and non-physical elements of the city means taking a step further in understanding important things for the city. Moreover, understanding urban symbolism is necessary in sustaining the history and identity of the city as well as in giving direction to the development of the old city of Semarang.

Keywords: old city of Semarang, urban symbolism, colonial building, history of Semarang

1. Introduction
Kota Lama Semarang or the old city of Semarang is inseparable part of the development of Semarang city and gives important memories for the people of Semarang. Besides its physical elements, the old city of Semarang also has some historical moments and ceremonies that shape the atmosphere and memory of the city. Some of those moments were interpreted related to the physical conditions of the city such as buildings, landmarks, paths, edges, nodes, including how one building relates to other buildings.

As one of the biggest colonial city in Indonesia, Semarang has many layers of history affecting the shape of the city. Hindu-Javanese city planning principles influences the typology of the city through alun-alun and palace and religious buildings dominated the central square with the city center. At that time, non-native people usually live outside the royal city or the fortifications but very close to the river as the main transportation means. The oldest non-native settlement outside the wall was usually the Chinese settlement. The development of the city changed during the Dutch colonial period in the Dutch East Indies started when Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) occupied the Indies in
1619 and ended when the government of the Dutch East Indies surrendered to Japan in 1942 [1–3]. In the early sixteenth century, the Dutch initiated the construction of a small masonry fort near the existing city and it was located on the most strategic place near the old harbour and market located right on the river mouth. Inside the fort were some buildings for dwelling, warehouse and some military functions. In the nineteenth century, coastal colonial cities gained a new meaning as commercial centers, and the fortified cities were then no longer existed.

It meant that the old city of Semarang lost its glory and later on some marginalized people even started to live in the area since owners abandoned some of the old buildings. This situation also created the increasing crime rate and the image of the city as the center for economic and loaded with rich history was faded. In relation to its historical and architectural values, Kota Lama Semarang actually still has some economic and cultural potential. Those potential especially comes from existing colonial buildings that become a symbol of the glory of the old city. This paper aims to relate the physical aspects of the city, represented mainly by colonial buildings, and the meaning of urban symbolism in the old city of Semarang.

In order to understand the city, one should deal with both physical and non-physical conditions, including through the city’s urban symbolism. Symbol is a representative of another idea or meaning and related to the signification process that includes signifier and signified [4]. Urban symbolism is related to semiotics as well as expresses through various phenomena such as the architecture, streets, and rituals in the city. The signified can be called as the domain, which dominates the dynamical changes of old city of Semarang such as during the colonial period. Those domains are the glory of trading, transport and ethnic domain reflected in the history and the existing materials that still exist in the old city of Semarang.

In the study of the cultural dimension of the city, urban symbolism concerned with the meaning of urban symbols in relation to the cultivated surroundings. There are types of symbol bearers that a city might have such as material, iconic, behavioral and discursive bearers that work as the signifiers [5]. There are some symbol bearers of the old city of Semarang but this paper discusses mostly the material bearer, which is related to the architecture of the city. Architecture is important in understanding urban symbolism and represents meanings throughout the development of the city so that people get understand both signifier and signified or connotation meanings of the city. The urban symbol in general will reflect social, cultural and historical aspects of the city and conveys a shared memory.

In this case of Semarang old city, the material bearer is a material that is potential to hold the meaning of symbol bearers or can be called as the domain. The material bearers in the old city of Semarang are related to the physical elements of its urban space such as landmarks, edges and paths as physical aspects of the city [6,7]. Architecture such as Blenduk Church can be considered as a landmark while Berok Bridge at the west edge of old city, Chinese Settlement of Pecinan and Arab settlement or Kauman as the districts and Let. Jend. Soeprapto Street can be considered as major streets or paths. Those structures are important because they create the image of the old city and urban symbolism.

Aldo Rossi in Architecture of the City defines architecture as forms that have continued over time to become types that constitute the history of the city or its memory, and the culture of the present [8]. Rossi criticizes the lack of understanding of the city in architectural practice and argues that a city must be valued as something constructed over time through its urban artifacts or monuments or in other words monuments give structure to the city. Functions vary over time but form remains and the meaning in the city is based on memory and monuments. Memory or urban facts withstand the passage of time and become monuments while monuments give meaning to the life of the city through memory.

A good urban space design is the design supporting the architectural value that able to contribute meaning and value to its environment [9]. By knowing the urban symbolism, hopefully it will be easier for people to appreciate and understand social, cultural and historical values of the old city. Hopefully, revealing the urban symbolism in the old city of Semarang is important because this will
help to develop the city and revitalize important meanings that come from both physical and non-physical aspects of the city.

2. Methods
The method used for this research was mostly historical and literature review to gather information of the development of the old city of Semarang. Because the old city of Semarang is a historic area, studying historical aspects of Semarang related to the development of the city was conducted through literature and archives reviews in order to understand the link between physical conditions and urban symbolism. We used qualitative method in analyzing the relation between the physical and non-physical elements of the Semarang city. First, since the research deals with urban symbolism, it is necessary to analyze the structure of the old city of Semarang through its development. Then, it is important to understand historical and cultural meanings of the city as an effort to analyze how urban symbolism is created. Lastly, information from literatures and archives, together with analysis of the old city of Semarang’s map, and field research are important in analyzing and interpreting the connection between urban space and symbolism.

3. Discussion
Semarang was one of the major colonial urban centers in Java, and it gained a municipal autonomy under the Decentralization Act passed in 1903. The city was a busy port, the center of a rail networks and played an important role in connecting places of sugar industry (see figure 1). The population of Semarang between 1905 and 1920 increased from 96,000 to 158,000 and by 1930 the population reached 218,000 [2]. There was an expansion of the population because the city attracted people from the hinterland to seek job opportunities that the city provided. Semarang was home to multi-ethnic people (see figure 2) and the population in 1905 consisted of indigenous people who dominated the number of population (seventy-eight per cent), local Chinese population who dominated the commercial sector (fifteen per cent) and other Asian peoples (two per cent) [2,10,11]. The Chinese built shop houses mostly near the river and those types of buildings are still existed in the Pecinan kampong, including the one that surrounded the old city of Semarang. New housing areas were developed inside and around the city to accommodate the rapid growth of urban population and some industrial buildings as well as central business districts emerged in the city centers.

![Figure 1](http://fariable.blogspot.com/2011/01/elemen-perancangan-kota-hamid-shirvani.html)

**Figure 1.** The old city of Semarang as trading port centre. Source: http://fariable.blogspot.com/2011/01/elemen-perancangan-kota-hamid-shirvani.html

![Figure 2](http://example.com/figure2.png)

**Figure 2.** These two figures have been placed side-by-side to save space. Justify the caption.
During the early Dutch colonial era, the Dutch built the Vijhoek Fort to secure their business in Semarang and to provide trading facilities for VOC (see figure 3). This fort had five bastions, so that it is known as De Vijfhoek or the Five Corners bastion. The fortified wall was demolished in 1824 to make way for new commercial business area. Although the Vijhoek Fort was no longer creating a significant mark for the surroundings, however, the history of Vijhoek as an important fortress continued and gave a direction of the city development of the south of the fort. The destruction of Vijhoek Fortress was meant to accommodate the growth of the city and the further development of the area meant a consideration of surrounding areas, including Chinese, and other local settlements as part of a greater Semarang City. The invasion of Japanese Imperial army to Southeast Asia also had changed the course of urban history. After 1942, local people started to leave their buildings in the Old City of Semarang to escape from Japanese and the owners and the users left many buildings after the independence (see figure 4).

Figure 3. Vijhoek Fort in the early eighteenth century was still separated from the settlements. Source: Purwanto, 2005

Figure 4. The old city of Semarang after the independence of Indonesia. Source: Sumaningsih in Purwanto, 2005

Below are some discussions of the old city of Semarang in relation to the development of the city and urban symbolism coming from trading, transportation, and cultural domains.

3.1. Urban Symbolism From Trading Domain
The size of the old city of Semarang is approximately thirty-one hectares more than fifty-one colonial buildings. Some of the colonial buildings are in good conditions but unfortunately a large number of those buildings are in bad conditions. The old city of Semarang had unique pattern coming from many layers of history, including during Dutch colonial period. The city was developed from a fortified city and at the end of the seventeenth century; the fortress had been torn down to accommodate the growth of the city as an important international trading port city. The city of Semarang became a multicultural and cosmopolitan city and some construction projects were done including building offices, hotels, and tramline.

By the 1700s, Javanese coastal cities, including Semarang, had central areas modeled after ideal Dutch port cities together with church, canals, and townhouses. The Dutch imposed the colonial cities’ landscapes with alien cultural and physical environments [12]. However, those aesthetic features led to problems as the cities grew such as dirty canals, and heavy architecture introduced by the Dutch was proved inappropriate for local climate.
In Semarang city, the construction of Lawang Sewu, the head office of the Dutch train company, indicated how modernity had spread and the need for reliable transportation system to support the city was increased (see figure 5). At the time, this fort area started to become a commercial center dominated by warehouses, office buildings, stores, and banks. There was also a widening of the Semarang riverbanks and the construction of a new harbour. Moreover, Lawang Sewu’s unique architecture that allowed cross ventilation and the use of local roof showed adaptation with local climate through built environment. In Kota Lama Semarang, the construction of Blenduk Church marked the importance of the area and the centrality of the location. Up to now the church still becomes a landmark of the old city. The construction of European settlements and buildings was done in order to facilitate the needs of new residences and an effort to modernize and regulate the city.

Figure 5. Lawang Sewu. Source: Tropenmuseum, part of the National Museum of World Cultures.

Figure 6. Tawang Station. Source: https://kebudayaan.kemdikbud.go.id/bpbbjateng/stasiun-tawang-stasiun-yang-terindah-di-hindia-belanda/

3.2. Urban Symbolism From Transportation Domain

In 1865, the Dutch built the railway system in Semarang for 25 km and this time was also marked with the construction of the office of Nederlandsch Indische Spoorweg Mij (NIS) in Semarang (known as Lawang Sewu building). The building was designed by JF. Klinkkramer and BJ Quindag in 1902 and became one of the first modern office buildings in Semarang. In fact, Semarang city was the first city that had train and tram systems in the Dutch East Indies. Another important building is Tawang Station that created a border for the northern part of the old city, and a renowned Dutch architect Thomas Karsten built it (see figure 6). Both the construction of Lawang Sewu as the head office of the Dutch train company and Tawang Station indicated how modernity had spread and the need for reliable transportation system to support for the city was increased. Moreover, Lawang Sewu’s unique architecture that allowed cross ventilation and the use of local roof showed adaptation with local climate through built environment.

The Netherlands Indies urban planning included the construction of the Great Post Road or Jalan Raya Pos that run across North Java during the reign of the governor general Herman Willem Daendels (1808–1811). The orientation of the old city of Semarang was also related to the Great Post Road. Previously, rivers functioned as the main transportation but with the construction of the Great Post Road and the railways changed Semarang spatial configuration from south-north orientation to east-west orientation. New settlements and commercial centers were built along the Great Post Road inhabited with multi-ethnic groups [10,13]. The Grote Postweg affected to the city’s physical elements in a way the transportation became a new orientation and it created new centers. There was also the tram system run inside the old city of Semarang Between the Berok Street and the Agus Salim street. The old city of Semarang itself was designed to accommodate various kinds of transportation like bicycle, cars, horse carriage and pedestrian.
3.3. Urban Symbolism From Culture Domain

The early development of the old city of Semarang had already shown people who lived in the city came from multi-ethnic groups such as Arab and Chinese. They came to the city as merchants or live at the city periphery as farmers and came to the city to sell their goods. In addition to the trading domain that dominated activities in the old city of Semarang, cultural domain was also important in the city. The port city of Semarang was the biggest trading center during the Dutch colonial era that especially came from sugar trading. One of the main actors was the great sugar seller Oei Tiong Ham was a successful Chinese contingent entrepreneur in Semarang who built some buildings in the old city of Semarang including the one close to Blenduk Church. Part of his wealth originated from sugar industry. People of Semarang also built living quarters such as Kampung Arab and Pecinan for the Chinese. At the time the Dutch built the Vijhoek Fort, Semarang city had typology of Javanese cities with some living quarters for various ethnic groups. Some kampungs were located in the southern part of the old city of Semarang.

Since the Vijhoek fort was demolished, the Dutch housing complex was moved to the Bodjong Street and later on Thomas Karsten, a Dutch architect who practiced in the Indies, designed the new Candi housing area in the southern part of Semarang city [12,14]. Karsten’s idea of creating the new housing complex was not only to provide good and healthy housing area but also promoting new social relations that was not based on race but social and economic relations. Other physical elements that became the borders of the city are Semarang River in the west, Tawang Station in the north, Cendrawasih Street in the east and Kepodang Street in the south.

The image of multi-ethnic in Semarang can be seen during Dugderan festival, an annual event to welcome the holy month of Ramadhan in Islamic calendar. People carry an imaginary animal called warak ngendog (see figure 7 and 8) that has the head of a dragon (Chinese), the body of a burqa (Arab influence for represent a special animal resembling the winged horse believed to take Prophet Muhammad to Sidratil Muntaha), and the tail of a goat (Javanese). The word ngendog itself means egg taken from the Javanese language that means the goodness that will bring peace to Semarang people who can live peacefully instead of their different ethnic backgrounds. There is even warak ngendog statue built on Bodjong Street, not far from the old city of Semarang. Nowadays, the government attempts to develop the area along the Semarang River to accommodate the Dugderan ceremony so that the area can be used for people to see the warak ngendog parade.

![Figure 7. Warak Sculpture Monument in Semarang Pandanaran Park. Source: author.](image7)

![Figure 8. Warak ngendog during Dugderan festival. Source: soloraya.com.](image8)

In addition to Dugderan festival, some buildings in the old city of Semarang also carry symbolical meanings for the people of Semarang. Blenduk church represents the Renaissance building style and
its location shows the centrality and the importance of the church. The church then can be assumed as the symbol of the Dutch power to shape the city and create a new central to the surroundings and do not follow local orientation. Javanese cities usually follow the orientation of the mountain and the sea, as part of the cosmology of the Javanese people. In later period, the influence of Islam in Java made religious buildings such as the city mosque had an orientation of kabah. This means that the Dutch wanted to create their own ideas of the city.

Beside the Church as the landmark of the area, there is also a symbol bearer of the old city of Semarang or the paths that are divided into major and minor paths. There is a L-Shaped building located faced north right of Blenduk Church (see Figure 9). Jiwasraya Insurance office building (see Figure 10) is another important building in the old city of Semarang. The building was designed by Thomas Karsten in 1918 with concrete-structure technology that was adapted to tropical climate through the use of corridors and a row of doors and windows to create open space, good air circulation inside the building and an area to penetrate the solar heat and to protect rainwater entering the room. The building was a symbol of modernity and adaptation to local conditions.

![Figure 9. Blenduk Church. Source: Crisco 1492](image1.png)

![Figure 10. Jiwasraya Building. Source: https://situsbudaya.id/gedung-jiwasraya-semarang/](image2.png)

The old city of Semarang has what Aldo Rossi mentions as forms that have continued over time to become types that constitute the history and the collective memory of the city up to the present (Rossi, 1966). Understanding of the city as something that is constructed over time through its urban artifacts or monuments give structure to the city. Buildings, streets, and landmarks in the city, including the development of the old city from a port, a fortress city and colonial city withstand the passage of time and become monuments that give meaning to the life of the city.

4. Conclusion

Urban symbolism is related to the physical conditions of the city such buildings and transportation, as well as the non-physical elements such as history and events in the city. From the history of the old city of Semarang, the structure of the city relates to trading, transportation and culture domains reflected in the histories and buildings that still exist in the old city of Semarang. Those domains are also connected meanings of the city – which then becomes urban symbol.

The old city of Semarang in its trading domain means the center of economic and trades throughout the history of the city. The city also bears the idea of connecting areas in Java, trading and having significant structures related to the development of transportation. Cultural domain also gives the city its own meanings through multi ethnic culture such as reflected during the annual event of Dugderan...
and warak ngendog parade. The three domains may reflect connections between physical and non-
physical aspects of the city, and how each aspect creates urban symbolism.

The result of this paper shows that balancing both physical and non-physical elements of the city
means understanding things that are important for the city. Important buildings, streets and landmarks
in the city are actually urban artifacts that create the structure of the city. The structure of the city
shows us the signifiers or things that create meanings in the city while symbols are directly or
indirectly embedded to the architecture of the city that at the end become the signified or connotation
meanings of the city. In conclusion, understanding urban symbolism is essential to sustain the history
and identity of the city as well as in giving direction to the development of the old city of Semarang.

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