

Traditional Dwellings and Settlements

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TRADITION INFLUENCES CHANGES IN THE FUNCTION OF SACRED SPACE IN LAWEYAN SURAKARTA, CENTRAL JAVA

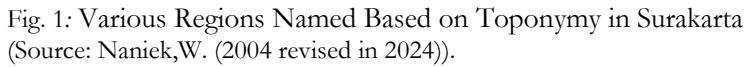
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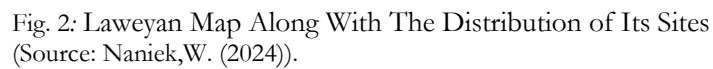
This paper critiques a space known as the Dalem, which exists in every house in Laweyan. This space is considered sacred. In traditional merchant houses in Laweyan, the Dalem was originally used for important family events. For example, during a wedding, the bride and groom would be seated in the center of the Dalem, in front of the Petanen (also known elsewhere as Krobongan, but referred to as Petanen in Laweyan). When a family member passed away, the body would be placed in the Dalem—not in the center near the Petanen, but to the right (west) side of it—before funeral prayers were performed and the body was taken to the burial site. Additionally, the Dalem was used for important and highly private family meetings. Today, however, there has been a shift in the function of the Dalem. What was once a sacred space has increasingly been transformed into a commercial area, such as a batik showroom, and in some cases even used as a storage space. This change is largely due to the adaptation of houses into batik shops. Intense market competition has led the traditional Laweyan community to overlook long-standing cultural norms in pursuit of greater economic profit. If this trend continues, it risks eroding the community's understanding of its local wisdom, as people become more driven by the currents of the global economy. There has been a shift in values, where "value" is increasingly equated with maximizing financial gain. This paper concludes with an appeal to contemporary batik entrepreneurs in Laweyan: in conducting business, they should continue to uphold local wisdom and traditional customs inherited from their ancestors—particularly by preserving the Dalem as a sacred space, in accordance with ancestral agreements of the past.

1. INTRODUCTION

Laweyan, as a *perdikan* (tax-exempt autonomous area), is quite unique in that it forms a distinct enclave. Its southern boundary is marked by the Kabanaran River, while its northern boundary is defined by a main road that was formerly known as Laweyan Street and later renamed Dr. Radjiman Street. This change is somewhat unusual, as it no longer aligns with the original toponymy of the area. Ultimately, Dr. Radjiman Street became the longest road in Central Java, stretching from Pasar Klewer to Kartasura (Mlayadipura, Tumenggung, 1981, as cited in Widayati, Surya, 2021).



1. Chinatown area in Balong Village, Pasar Gede
2. Arab quarter in Pasar Kliwon Village
3. Ulama (Islamic scholars) quarter in Kauman Village
4. Nobility (aristocratic) quarter in Jero Beteng/Baluwerti Village
5. Butchers' quarter in Pejagalan Village
6. Batik merchants' quarter in Laweyan Village



The Laweyan community is predominantly composed of batik merchants. Interestingly, these batik enterprises are largely managed by women (housewives), who are given the honorable title “*Mbok Mase*,” while the husbands serve as complements and as heads of the household. The husbands are referred to as “*Mas Nganten*” (Surya, Widayati, et al., 2021).



Fig. 3: Prototype of *Mbok Mase* & *Mas Nganten* of Laweyan in the 1950 (Source: Siti,R. (2024)).

During the height of their prosperity, these merchants competed to build grand houses that combined traditional Javanese spatial layouts with modern materials, inspired by the architectural style of Dutch residences. Laweyan became dominated by batik entrepreneurs’ houses in the Indies style; however, their spatial organization continued to follow the Javanese layout pattern, consisting of a terrace, *pendapa* (front pavilion), *dalem* (inner house), *sentong* (inner chambers), right and left *gandok* (side wings), right and left *lojen* (additional side spaces), and service areas including the kitchen, storage, and servants’ quarters. Nevertheless, there is one space that all merchants consistently possessed: the *Dalem* (Widayati et al., 2025).



Description:

- | | |
|------------|---|
| 1. Yard | 6. Sentong |
| 2. Terrace | 7. Pringgitan |
| 3. Pendopo | 8. Pavilion |
| 4. Dalem | 9. Factory |
| 5. Gandok | 10. Bathroom, toilet, warehouse,
and kitchen (service) |

Fig. 4: Example of the Floor Plan of a Batik Merchant House in Laweyan
(Source: Siti, R., 2024).

From the description above, it is evident that the *Dalem* space in every house in Laweyan is inherently sacred. The *Dalem* was originally designated by the first owners of these houses for important family events. For example, during a wedding ceremony, the bride and groom were seated in the center of the *Dalem*, in front of the *Petanen* (also known as *Krobongan*, but referred to as *Petanen* in Laweyan). When a family member passed away, the body was placed in the *Dalem*—not in the central area near the *Petanen*, but on its right (western) side—where funeral prayers were performed before the body was taken to the burial site (Widayati et al., 2025). In addition, the *Dalem* was used for important and highly private family meetings. The primary livelihood of the Laweyan community as batik entrepreneurs experienced its peak from the royal era until around the 1980s. After that period, the batik industry declined; however, the community continued to uphold traditional values inherited from their ancestors. Subsequent generations have sought to preserve these traditions while also adapting to the demands of changing times. The evolving needs of society have driven social, cultural, and

economic transformations, which have ultimately extended into the realm of tradition itself (Widayati & Surya, 2021).

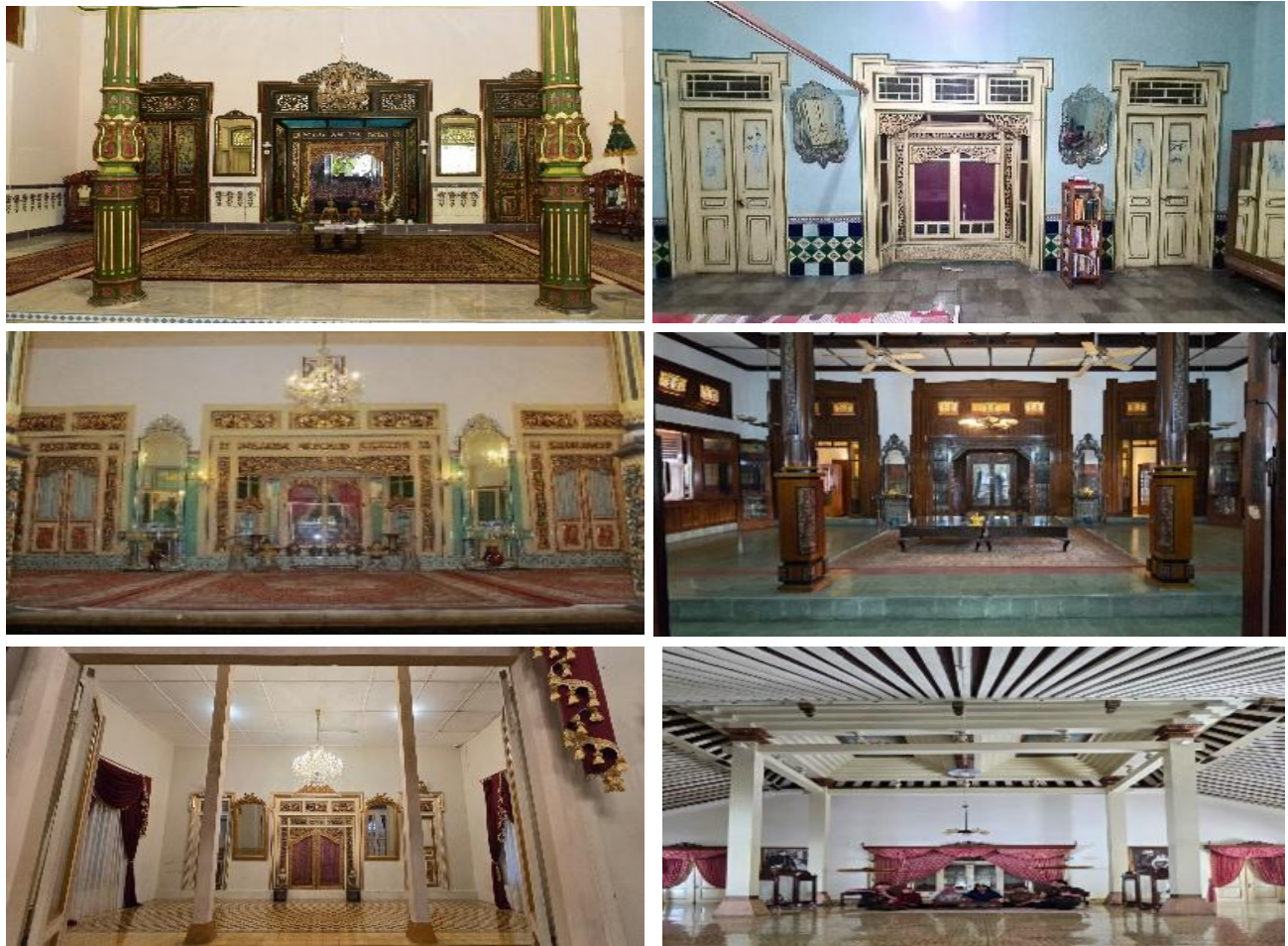


Fig. 5: Various *Ruang Dalem* that are sacred to the original owners of merchant houses in Laweyan (Source: Naniek,W. (2024)).



Fig. 6: A Death Ceremony Layout
(Source: Naniek,W. (2024)).

The issue that arises is the coexistence of continuity and change in Laweyan's responses to social, cultural, and economic developments, which in turn affect tradition and ultimately lead to a transformation in the function of the sacred *Dalem* space. This study employs a naturalistic qualitative method with a grounded theory research strategy. The objective of the research is to formulate solutions that enable a balanced approach to the transformation of sacred spaces—particularly the *Dalem*—resulting from social, cultural, and economic factors, while still accommodating and preserving the traditional values of Laweyan.



Fig. 7: Family Discussion in *Ruang Dalem*
(Source: Nanick,W. (2024)).

PRESENT-DAY LAWEYAN

Laweyan has undergone significant changes in the present time, primarily because the original occupants—those who built the houses—have passed away. Ownership has been transferred to their children and subsequently to their grandchildren (Eksanti et al., 2022).

There are various forms of new ownership of merchant houses related to the conditions described above, including: (1) houses being sold to outsiders from outside Laweyan; (2) heirs, such as children or grandchildren, no longer continuing the batik merchant tradition due to occupational diversification, resulting in the houses being rented out to individuals who conduct business in Laweyan; and (3) heirs leasing the houses for a period of 30 years, after which the tenants convert them into homestays or non-batik commercial spaces, including other types of production facilities beyond batik, among other developments (Widayati, 2002).

Related to various contemporary factors, the *Dalem* space, which was originally regarded as sacred by early batik merchants in Laweyan, is no longer given the same level of respect. In merchant houses that are rented out for furniture production, the Dalem is used as a timber storage area, with wood materials arranged in ways that do not honor the *Petanen*. There are also Dalem spaces that are used as batik showrooms, allowing visitors to enter the Dalem easily without any sense of hesitation, respect, or cultural propriety (Widayati et al., 2025).



Fig. 8: Ruang Dalem is Used as a Wood Storage
(Source: Naniek,W. (2024)).



Fig. 9: Ruang Dalem is Used as a Batik Showroom
(Source: Naniek,W. (2024)).

2. THE CONCEPT OF SACRED, SACRED SPACE AND RITUALS

The concept of *genius loci*, or the “spirit of a place,” explains that every place possesses an identity, meaning, and atmosphere that shape human experience of space. Sacred space is understood as a space that holds a special position within a culture, as it connects humans with spiritual, symbolic, and cosmological values that go beyond its physical function (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

In the context of *genius loci*, sacred space is not only understood through its architectural form, but also through its ability to evoke human experience, existence, orientation, and meaning. This theory emphasizes the importance of spatial qualities that can create a sense of connection between humans, place, and the natural or spiritual order (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

In its elaboration, this theory is divided into several key components: place identity, atmosphere and meaning, orientation and cosmic order, relationship with nature, and ritual structure. Through these principles, the theory of *genius loci* provides a conceptual framework for understanding how physical form can carry spiritual

and symbolic meaning, as well as how architecture plays a role in maintaining sacred qualities through identity, atmosphere, relations with nature, and ritual structure.

The study of sacred space was discussed by Mircea Eliade in his book *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957), and later examined by Widayati (2004). It explains, among other things, that the sacred refers to something that possesses transcendent meaning, value, and power, whereas the profane refers to what is ordinary, everyday, and devoid of such transcendent meaning (Eliade, 1957; Widayati, 2002).

The transformation of value systems in the Laweyan community regarding the *Dalem* space—from sacred to profane—can be analyzed through Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration, as presented in his 1984 work. To understand social structural change in Laweyan within the framework of the sacred and the profane, Giddens’ sociological perspective of structuration is applied, which emphasizes ongoing social practices. As he argues, “the basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to structuration theory, is neither the experience of individual actors nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across time and space.” Structuration theory highlights the importance of social practices in both action and the structure of social life. Structuration refers to the way social structures are produced, reproduced, and transformed through practices that occur across time and space, particularly in the relationship between agents (actors) and structures (Giddens, 1984).

The description of the analysis of social relations can be explained as follows: we must acknowledge the existence of a syntagmatic dimension, namely the creation of patterns of social relations in space and time that involve the reproduction of certain practices, and a paradigmatic dimension that involves the actual ordering of the “modes of structuring” that are continuously involved in such reproduction (Giddens, 2010: 26).

In addition, the way to describe the structuration of social change is as follows: in social analysis, structure refers to the set of structuring properties that enable the “binding” of time and space within social systems. These properties make it possible for similar social practices to exist across widely varying spans of time and space, while also giving those practices a “systemic” character (Giddens, 2010: 27).

From the above explanation, the core of Structuration Theory lies in three main concepts: structure, system, and the duality of structure.

The explanation is as follows: structure refers to rules and resources, or a set of transformational relations organized as properties of social systems, which shape the recurrence of social practices (Nashir, 2012).

Giddens identifies three clusters of structure. First, signification structures, which involve symbolic schemes, meaning, labeling, and discourse. For example, referring to an instructor as “teacher,” or turning on a vehicle’s left indicator light as a sign of intention to turn left. Second, domination structures, which refer to the control over people and resources. For instance, depositing money in a bank represents a form of economic domination structure through control over money or assets. Third, legitimation structures, which involve normative rule systems expressed in legal order. For example, traffic police conducting checks on motorcyclists or drivers who do not carry a driving license (SIM—*Surat Izin Mengemudi*) (Giddens, 2010).

Meanwhile, a system refers to reproduced relations among actors or collectivities, organized as regular social practices. Structuration is the set of conditions governing the continuity or transformation of structures, and therefore the reproduction of social systems themselves. Social practices may take the form of habitual actions, such as in Javanese culture, where a male child is referred to as “*tole*” (Giddens, 2010).

Giddens shows that structures—such as traditions, institutions, moral codes, and other expectations that define how things are done—are generally relatively stable, but they can be changed, particularly through the unintended consequences of action. This occurs when people begin to neglect, replace, or reproduce these structures in different ways. In Laweyan, new merchants attract buyers in order to maximize profit by displaying their goods inside the *Dalem*. Buyers are drawn to the spatial setting itself, which increases sales significantly. However, these shop owners often do not recognize or are not aware of the sacred value of the *Dalem*, as they are newcomers and have not been informed about its cultural meaning. Even some fourth- or fifth-generation descendants of batik entrepreneurs no longer acknowledge the sacredness of the *Dalem*; their main concern is that their goods are sold (Giddens, 2010; Nashir, 2012).

In Laweyan, Law No. 11 of 2010 concerning Cultural Heritage also applies, along with the Surakarta City Regional Regulation (Perda) No. 10 of 2013 on the Preservation of Cultural Heritage and Mayor Regulation (Perwali) No. 24.1 of 2021 on the Utilization of Cultural Heritage. These regulations govern the protection, utilization, and management of this historic area. The law stipulates that when an area is designated as cultural heritage, all contents within it—including buildings and the surrounding environment—must comply with existing legal regulations. Elements classified as *fixed* (sacred) must be preserved, while *semi-fixed* elements may be partially preserved and partially developed, depending on agreements reached in the Cultural Heritage Expert Council established by the local government. Meanwhile, *non-fixed* (general) elements may be developed. Previous studies have clearly established that the *Dalem* is a sacred space. This means that, both physically (tangible) and non-physically (intangible), its spatial configuration and function must not be altered. Batik showrooms and commercial activities should instead occupy other available spaces within the house. This is closely related to Laweyan's status as a *living monument*. The sacred value should be maintained, as it represents a unique cultural asset of the Laweyan community (Cultural Heritage Law, 2010; Widayati, 2025).

2.1. Research Method

The research method used in this study is a qualitative approach employing grounded theory research. In addition, focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with the Laweyan community to obtain more accurate data (Strauss, 199-; Denzin, 2009; Karuntu, 2022; Arrahmat, 2025). Spatial data of buildings were classified into three categories: public spaces, semi-private spaces, and sacred spaces. Observations from selected representative samples were then coded and analyzed using preservation, conservation, and revitalization theories, and further compared with Law No. 11 of 2010 on Cultural Heritage. In the context of Laweyan, Surakarta City Regional Regulation No. 10 of 2013 on Cultural Heritage Preservation and Mayor Regulation No. 24.1 of 2021 on the Utilization of Cultural Heritage also apply. These regulations govern the protection, utilization, and management of this historic area (Pillai, 2020; Priyomarsono & Surya, 2022). The expected outcome of this study is to provide guidance for regulating the functions and activities within the *Dalem* space so that its sacred value is preserved, while still allowing room for adaptation and development in the context of contemporary modernity.



Fig. 10: Block Division in Research Implementation
(Source: Naniek, W. (2024)).

The novelty of this research lies in its approach to maintaining the *Dalem* as a sacred space, ensuring its preservation and continuity, while simultaneously providing room for adaptive development in the context of contemporary modernity. This is achieved by allocating other spaces within the house for commercial activities, thereby balancing cultural preservation with economic functionality.

2.2 Result and Discussion

Socio-Cultural Conditions of the Community

The batik merchants of Laweyan occupy a unique position, as their economic strength and wealth have historically surpassed that of the nobility, although culturally they are not considered equal to the aristocratic *keraton* elite. In contrast to the patriarchal traditions commonly found in Javanese society, the Laweyan community upholds a form of gender parity, with women playing a dominant role in the economic sphere. Batik enterprises are managed by female proprietors known as *Mbok Mase*, while husbands, as household heads, are referred to as *Mas Nganten*. Although men have a limited role in business activities, they retain full authority

as heads of the household in making important internal family decisions. This arrangement reflects a balance between economic functions and traditional domestic structures (Hunter, 1997).

Transformation and Development of the Laweyan Area

The Laweyan community is currently undergoing significant transformation following the passing of the older generation and the transfer of property ownership to heirs. This dynamic has led to three main patterns of change: houses being sold to outsiders, rented out due to the diversification of heirs' occupations, or leased long-term for up to 30 years. As a result, many buildings have been functionally converted into homestays, non-batik commercial spaces, other types of production facilities, and even star-rated hotels. Physically, these functional changes have also altered building façades, where structures that were originally single-story have now developed into multi-story buildings exceeding two floors (Pillai, J., 2020).



Fig. 11: Solia Zigna Hotel at Jl. Radjiman, 4 Star Hotel with 10 Floors & 130 Rooms, Constitutes a Precedent (Source: <https://soliahotels.com/solia-zigna/gallery>. (Accessed on 3rd January 2026)).

The consequences of these changes in land use extend to environmental facilities, including accessibility, the availability of parking spaces, transportation modes, and the overall transformation of the

area's landscape. In addition to physical changes, there is also a degradation of the symbolic meaning of residential spaces, particularly the *Dalem* area, which was formerly regarded as sacred.

Spaces that were previously used for sacred events such as weddings, funerals, and family meetings have now experienced a functional shift into timber storage areas or batik showrooms. Changes in lifestyle—such as the use of chairs in place of traditional floor seating (*lesehan*) during activities—have further diminished the sacred value of these spaces among the descendants of the merchants. Overall, the integration of historical values with modern needs continues to erode the authenticity of symbolic meanings within this heritage area (Pillai, J., 2020).



Fig. 12: A Chair is Placed in Front of The Sacred *Petanen* for Sitting.
(Source: Naniek,W. (2025)).



Fig. 13 The Sacred Petanen is Used as a Storage Room.
(Source: Naniek,W. (2025)).



Fig. 14 The Sacred Petanen is Used as a Batik Showroom.
(Source: Naniek,W. (2025)).

3. CONCLUSION

There has been a transformation in the function of the sacred *Dalem* space in Laweyan, Surakarta, Central Java, driven by changes in traditions that have evolved over time. This shift is rooted in differences in value systems between past and present Laweyan society. In the past, when Laweyan was still inhabited by batik entrepreneurs up to the third generation, the Dalem was regarded as the most sacred space among all other rooms. This generation organized their batik businesses by occupying spaces such as the terrace, *pendapa*, *gandok*, and *lojen/pavilion*. Meanwhile, the Dalem remained unchanged as a sacred space.

At present, as Laweyan is increasingly inhabited by people from outside the area (who reside in Laweyan as traders), all spaces—including the *Dalem*—are being utilized as batik showrooms. In addition, some descendants have also transformed the sacred function of the Dalem into a living room. The area in front of the *Petanen*, which was formerly used for floor seating (*lesehan*), is now furnished with chairs for sitting and social activities. As a result, the sacred value of the Dalem space has largely diminished.

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