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*Diandra Pandu Saginatari
Adrian Perkasa*

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PAIN AND DECAY: A COLLOQUIAL CONVERSATION ON PRESERVING THE URBAN HERITAGE

Diandra Pandu Saginatari¹
Adrian Perkasa²

¹University of Nottingham
United Kingdom

²Universiteit Leiden
Netherlands

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to converse about urban heritage preservation and its experience. To converse is to colloquially discuss ideas that comes to mind while we are looking back at the 2019 photographs of some parts of Kota Tua Surabaya (The Old Town of Surabaya) and reflect upon our knowledge background, one of architecture, the other of history. This conversation is created through a form of creative writing, creative nonfiction, where we begin with our personal thoughts, one of experiencing ruination and the other of witnessing complexity of urban heritage preservation, one of decay and the other of paint. We involve relevant discourses and the use of visual materials such as collages, diagrams, and drawings as a form of visual inquiry and visual illustration, showing the interpretation, reality, and the imagination of fragments of Kota Tua Surabaya. The process involved in creating this conversation could be one of the ways to creatively build collaborative knowledge and have the writings and the visual materials based on personal voice, expanding the academic form of writings.

Keywords: urban heritage, conservation, decay, ruins, colloquial conversation

Correspondence Address: Diandra Pandu Saginatari, 113 Eltham Drive, NG8 6BT, Nottingham, United Kingdom. Email: diandra.saginatari@nottingham.ac.uk

Background

In big cities of Indonesia, such as Jakarta, Semarang, and Surabaya, there is usually an urban heritage area called *old town*. The preservation and development of the area are generally in the hand of the municipality. This old town usually becomes one of the tourist spots for local people. It has a special atmosphere of oldness as one of the main attractions (Ryynänen, 2018). The area often consist of an assemblage of old buildings, some are preserved and revitalised, and some slowly transform into ruins. Walking among ruins arguably offers a compelling sensory experience. In his writing about experiencing industrial ruins, Edensor (2007) explained that the ruins offer visual stimulant, unfamiliar ones, from objects, forms, decay, peeled paints, and plants that colonise the space. It also has particular scents of rotting and the quality of silence (Edensor, 2007). Edensor's case makes the experience of industrial ruin area distinct from the other part of the city.

This paper attempts to converse about such experience in the context of urban heritage preservation. This conversation is between the two authors who came from different backgrounds which are architecture and history. We would like to converse about some part of Kota Tua Surabaya (The Old Town of Surabaya) that we visited back in 2019. To converse, here, means to colloquially discuss any idea that comes to mind while looking back at the photographs taken on the day of the visit and create a reflection based on our combined background of knowledge.

We would argue that this conversation is a form of creative writing. Creative writing here could be considered as a creative nonfiction, which "locates its power in our desires for knowledge and narrative" (Williams, 2013, p. 25) and the creative nonfiction's core is the element of 'let me tell you the story of what I saw and what it means to me' (p. 25). This is one of the elements employed in this paper. Besides, this paper seems to reflect what Yoo (2017) described as having "my personal writer's voice" (p. 452) for a scholarly audience. With that in mind, in this paper, we begin with our thoughts. Along the way, we involve relevant discourses and visual materials for the conversation as a form of visual inquiry and visual illustration.

The visual material involved in this conversation is based on the photographs of Kota Tua Surabaya that we took back in 2019. In architecture and history, photography can be used for recording and documentation purposes as it has an objective quality, until the digital process was introduced and make the photograph becomes easily manipulated (Vassallo, 2017). We employ image processing techniques to the photographs within this conversation as a form of visual inquiry and illustration. The utilised image processing techniques includes photo edit and tracing to create output such as collages, diagrams, and line drawings as an attempt to go beyond photograph as documentation and create visual output with more space for interpretation.

In the context of heritage preservation, Kepczynska-Walczak & Walczak (2015) argued that a hyper-realistic representation

does not necessarily 'speak' to the audience as it "impose a solution, not giving a chance to own reflection" (p. 11). The representation such as hand drawings "stimulates the viewers' imagination and sensitivity" (Kepczynska-Walczak & Walczak, 2015, p. 11). This suggests the importance of gaps, incompleteness, and the imperfectness of the visual materials in conversing about heritage area. Therefore, visual materials attempted to be involved in this conservation seem appropriate.

To begin with...

We explored Kota Tua of Surabaya, which was recognised as Kawasan Cagar Budaya (Heritage Area) by the municipality. Since the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Dutch colonial government developed the edge of Kali Mas (Mas river) into the centre of government and trade (Dick, 2003). This area is known as the *Beneden stad* (lower city), whose current location can be identified in the Kota Tua Surabaya vicinity, including the main streets such as Jalan Karet Ponggung, and Kembang Jepun, and also the kampungs (neighbourhoods). In this area, one can quickly find various built environments established from the 1850s to the 1940s with distinct architectural styles in each period. Jalan Ponggung and its surrounding area are well known as the oldest fish market in Surabaya and even East Java.

According to several historical sources, such as the city map of Surabaya and von Faber's work *Oud Soerabaia* (1931) and *Nieuw Soerabaia* (1935), this area is called *Smokkelstraat* which means the smuggling street, where the most significant transactions, legally or illegally, took place. The former port of Surabaya is also located in this area. During the colonial period, the government allocated this area as the settlement for Indian, Arab, and Malay people. Whereas in its southern side, now known as Jalan Kembang Jepun and Jalan Karet, was the Japanese and Chinese people's settlement.

Compared to Kota Tua in other cities such as Jakarta and Semarang, Kota Tua Surabaya is still very vibrant. Most buildings are neglected, and there are no significant activities during the night in both cities. In contrast, the residence and the people are flocking to the Kota Tua of Surabaya round the clock. Based on the photographs taken around of the revitalised streets of Jalan Ponggung, Jalan Karet dan Jalan Gula and the area of Pabean Market and fish market, we begin our conversation. Saginatari will begin first, conversing about experiencing ruination. Perkasa will respond to Saginatari's conversation to converse further about witnessing the complexity of heritage conservation. Reflecting to both conversation accounts, we explore what kind of discussion could emerge.

Saginatari: Experiencing ruination

I do not know if it is appropriate to talk about ruination in the context of inhabited heritage areas like Kota Tua Surabaya as ruination is a hint to converse about ruins. Ruins could be considered as the end of architecture (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014). It is an "edifice that is no longer in use" (Hill, 2019, p. 295), which has

lost its original function (Somhegyi, 2018) due to physical decay. Although its physical state is diminishing, ruin's metaphorical and allegorical potential is expanded (Hill, 2012, 2019). Ruin is associated with fragments, both as a physical entity and its relation to the memory, absence, and sense of incompleteness (Hill, 2019; Somhegyi, 2018), allowing for new interpretations, values, and meanings. However, what I am trying to converse here is the idea of ruination as a process, where a building exist in a state that is not exactly or not yet a ruin.

Ruination...it is a continuing process that develops at differing speeds in differing spaces while a building is still occupied. Assembled from materials of diverge ages, from the newly formed, to those centuries or millions years old, a building incorporates varied rates and states of transformation. Fluctuating according to the needs of specific spaces and components, maintenance and repair may sometime halt ruination or delay in somewhat, while accepting and accommodating partial ruination can question the recurring cycles of production, obsolescence and waste that feed consumption in a capitalist society. (Hill, 2019, p. 295)



Figure 1. *Fragmented decay on neighbourhood walls around the fish market (Image by author, 2021)*

Based on Hill above, ruination involves the material and social process, decay, and maintenance. I would argue that ruination is inevitable as decay is a natural process that operates in any physical entity. However, maintenance performed by human usually try to delay or denied that process. In his writing on ruin, Simmel (1959) mentioned that "decay appears as nature's

revenge" (p. 259). It shows the 'violence' perspective from humans where nature (decay or plants growing) attacks and human (maintenance and repair) defence. In the context of Kota Tua Surabaya that I observed back in 2019, the interplay between decay and maintenance was intriguing. This conversation aims to narrate the experience based on visual material collected and speculate some concepts. To begin with, ruination seems to occur everywhere, at least in the photographs captured. The photographs show decaying and ageing materials, which visible through various textures, stains composed of different materials, and living things.

"Decay is a live-giving as it is life-taking" (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014, p. 69); it is the harbinger of death (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014). Based on Tschumi (as cited in Hejduk, 2007), decay is a form of transgressing; architecture goes past expectation. Physically, decay is perceived as a form of degradation or deterioration of the material. It is site-specific (Sotomayor, 2014) and situated phenomenon as "its interaction with its own biotope in a particular space and time" (Cairns & Jacobs, 2014, p. 85). Decay is the working together of the environment and the physical entity.

The apparent cause of decay is weathering, as weathering has the power of subtraction (Mostafavi & Leatherbarrow, 1993). It peels paints, infiltrates bulks, and stains through the involvement of the sun, rain, and dust. In addition to weather is the 'wear,' the traces of human activity that directly engage the surfaces and involve elements like weather, such as water and dirt. Besides, the material assemblage, such as the age of the material and the act of maintenance and repair, also become the causes of decay.

As I walked in this narrow alley with decaying high walls on both sides, I looked up and saw some windows with canopies. One of the canopies even touched the wall across. Yes, it was pretty narrow. At that time, it was so quiet. I noticed some plants were growing on the wall near and far from the ground. I saw a deserted green plastic basket on the side. I was still thinking, there should be people. However, the silence, the decaying surfaces, and the growing plants that I experienced at that particular time alluded to abandonment. Did the decaying walls belong to inhabited buildings or ruins? Why the walls were decaying? How the plants started flourishing in this considered hostile environment of man-made surface? This experience was just for some seconds, yet I got the gist.

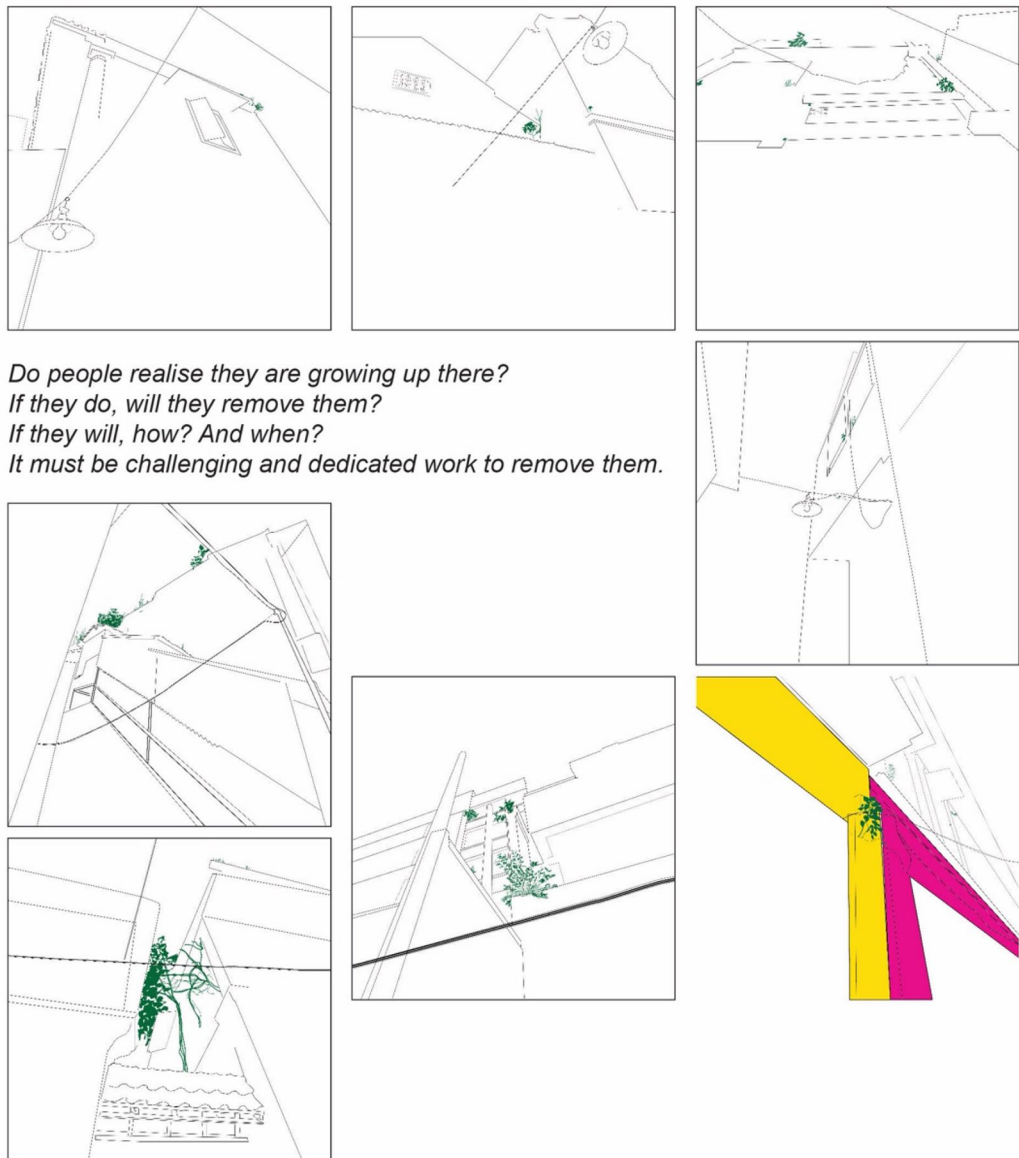


Figure 2. The eerie narrow alley (Image by author, 2021)

In one of my experiences walking around the old and decaying Kota Tua Surabaya, I felt, probably, the one that Mark Fisher (2016) explained as eerie. The eerie is "constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*" (Fisher, 2016, p. 61); it is the feeling about something present when it should be nothing and nothing present when it should be something. This was the effect that I felt from one of the alleys I passed by that day.

Man-made structures, such as cities and walls, are hostile (Spirn, 1984) and stressful (Lisa & Pacini, 1993) environment for plants. Nevertheless, some plants keep growing in this environment. They adapt, and the environment gives way. Starting with material decay and deterioration, in ruination, the material bulk starts deforming, cracking, providing a 'ground' physical space for plants to create bio-colonisation. Sun and rain will give what plants need for photosynthesis. Besides, man also has a role in the possibility of bio-colonisation as maintenance or repair could delay the process while the act of abandonment could speed up the process (Hill, 2019; Lisci et al., 2003).

Figure 3. The weeds up there (Image by author, 2021)



The emergence of plants growing on walls or buildings is part of ruination. Without the act of maintenance, this growth has the potential to invade the whole structure, becoming overgrown, uncontrollable, just like weeds. Weeds could be considered as unwanted nature in architecture or subnature (Gissen, 2009). Gissen argued that weeds are a living subnature that is uncontrollable and invasive. In the literal sense, "weeds are plants out of place" (Gissen, 2009, p. 150). I might have found weeds in Kota Tua Surabaya.

Weeds are not inherently unwanted, as their unwantedness is socially determined (Gissen, 2009). I am personally fascinated by these so-called weeds, which in this case, I am referring to plants growing on walls or buildings in Kota Tua Surabaya. I enjoyed their presence in the photographs. Sometimes you did not realise that they were there as they blended nicely with the decaying surfaces. What fascinates me the most is when I looked up, and I found them growing on the roofs or high surfaces, where they are basically out of reach.

Weeds are like the armpit's hair of the human body that tend to be shaved off and concealed but somehow has a sensual sense at the same time (Crowdy, 2017). And I think it is obvious that not everybody could or want to groom their body. Arguably, this is what I think happened behind the decaying surfaces and the plants growing around Kota Tua Surabaya. Its status as urban heritage makes the emerging question of who owns the 'body,' followed by who must/would/could/want to groom it. It reminds me of Simmel's story on inhabited urban ruins in Italy, where he said that the men there passively 'let it decay,' so ruination becomes a natural process together with the inhabitation (Simmel, 1959). So, the question here is, do the people of Kota Tua Surabaya *let it decay*?

Perkasa: Complexity of heritage preservation

The municipality of Surabaya had initiated the revitalisation project of the Kota Tua area in 2018. They intended to promote and develop this area as a new tourist destination. But, before I continue, I would like to describe Indonesia's current heritage preservation regime briefly. The Indonesian government enacted the *Undang-Undang Cagar Budaya* (Cultural Heritage Law) in 2010 as a framework of heritage preservation efforts at the national level. As mentioned in the primary international charters of heritage preservation, the heritage building's authenticity needs to be preserved, such as the Burra Charter of 1979 and the Washington Charter of 1987 (Hassan & Xie, 2020). We define preservation as efforts to safeguard heritage. However, when we discuss the Kota Tua of Surabaya as a case study, we refer to the concept of heritage preservation as stated in the 2010 Indonesian Cultural Heritage Law. According to article 22, preservation shall mean the dynamic program to maintain the existence of cultural heritage and its value by protecting, developing, and utilising it.

The Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia also published a manual to safeguard and develop archaeological and historical objects in 1985 (Ministry of

Education and Culture, 1985). If one follows both the 2010 law and the 1985 manual, the vegetation that grows in the heritage buildings should be terminated. They even categorised moss and the weeds as the buildings' internal threatening factors (Ajis, 2018). The 2010 law also promulgates the responsibility of regional and local governments in the cultural heritage preservation efforts. They began this project by painting all the old buildings in Jalan Panggung and Jalan Karet's main street. As we observed, they continue to build pedestrians and beautify the environments, such as replacing the modern LED lamp with an old gas-like light and putting the natural stones in the road as in old city areas in Europe. Thus, the municipality takes the responsibility as the one who wants to prevent further decay in this area.

However, this is not the complete answer to the question mentioned above. Following the national heritage law of 2010, the Surabaya municipality is responsible for preserving cultural heritage as the local government. On the other hand, article 2 of this law also allowed the public to be involved in the heritage preservation efforts (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010). Several heritage enthusiasts and communities confronted the Kota Tua Revitalisation project of the government. Article 31 states that revitalisation shall mean the development activities aimed at re-growing the importance of cultural heritage with adjustment of new function space that is not contradictory to the principles of preservation and community's cultural value (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010). They argued that the beautification worsened this area's old atmosphere due to improper painting in many buildings, especially in Jalan Panggung. Some of them mocked this project by calling it the preservation of barbie-doll pink house style instead of historic buildings. They want the government to repaint those buildings with their original colour as in the past (Supriyadi, 2019). From their interest, we notice that these communities also would like to join the battle to stop the built environments' decay. But there is another following question, what about the people who live and/or work there? Do they have the same interest with the government or the heritage enthusiasts?

Our experience walking in the Kota Tua area, including its surrounding kampungs, provides an opportunity to explore what is/are the people's interest. We started a conversation with Sohib, a local activist in Kampung Pabean, where the busy fish market is located in this neighbourhood. He completely accepts the government's *Revitalisation Project* and believes it would positively impact his neighbourhood. Despite being involved in a particular heritage community, Sohib does not see the municipality's painting efforts as a big problem. As long as it could prevent further decay, he supports any intervention in the historic buildings. He showed us several 'neglected' houses whose owners left (Figure 4). Some of them are just left empty, but many buildings are inhabited, legally or illegally, by new residents.



Figure 4. Neglected house due to fire incident (Image by author, 2019)



Figure 5. Romantic Landscape with Ruined Tower (Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cole_Thomas_Romantic_Landscape_with_Ruined_Tower_1832-36.jpg)

In contrast to the government's interest and the heritage communities, almost all kampung residences, sellers, and workers of Pabean Market that we interviewed are worried about the *Revitalisation Project*. This project excludes them since the beginning. They do not even know are they can still live and work there as usual, or they would kick out because of many reasons like illegally occupying neglected buildings, selling the fishes outside the main market building, to name a few. They want to continue their life within the present situation as the plants such as weeds and moss grow on old buildings' materials. In sum, we believe that they are more inclined to work with change processes, including decay (DeSilvey, 2006, 2017).

If the celebrated nature painter Thomas Cole could create a work based on this area, we believe he would take a side on the residents. According to Simon Schama (1995):

For someone like Cole, obsessed with vegetable theology, mortality could only be a prologue to a new life. So, it is not surprising to discover that some of his valedictory crosses actually seem to be in a process of depetrification... In one, Cole sets a young tree growing from the stone ruin of a Gothic church so that the architectural form of sacred botany returns, as it were, to its true nature. In its pair, the huge cross dominating the foreground seems, even when its unfinished condition is taken into account, deliberately fuzzed and scumbled at its edge, as if invaded by some mossy, lichenous, irresistibly organic growth. (pp. 204–205)

Chapman (2012) stated that these buildings are 'caught in-between' their time and the sense of buildings of the present when investigating several ruins in Southeast Asia. Over time, these ruined structures' initial purposes are no longer critical to the subsequent local communities. Although some sites may maintain their religious or cultural importance, most are unused or underused. In our observation in Kota Tua, the 'caught in-between' situation also occurs for plants that grow organically. As for the government, heritage communities, and experts, they are more interested in preserving the object. On the other hand, biologists, ecologists, or nature conservation experts would probably have less interest in the vegetation in this area.

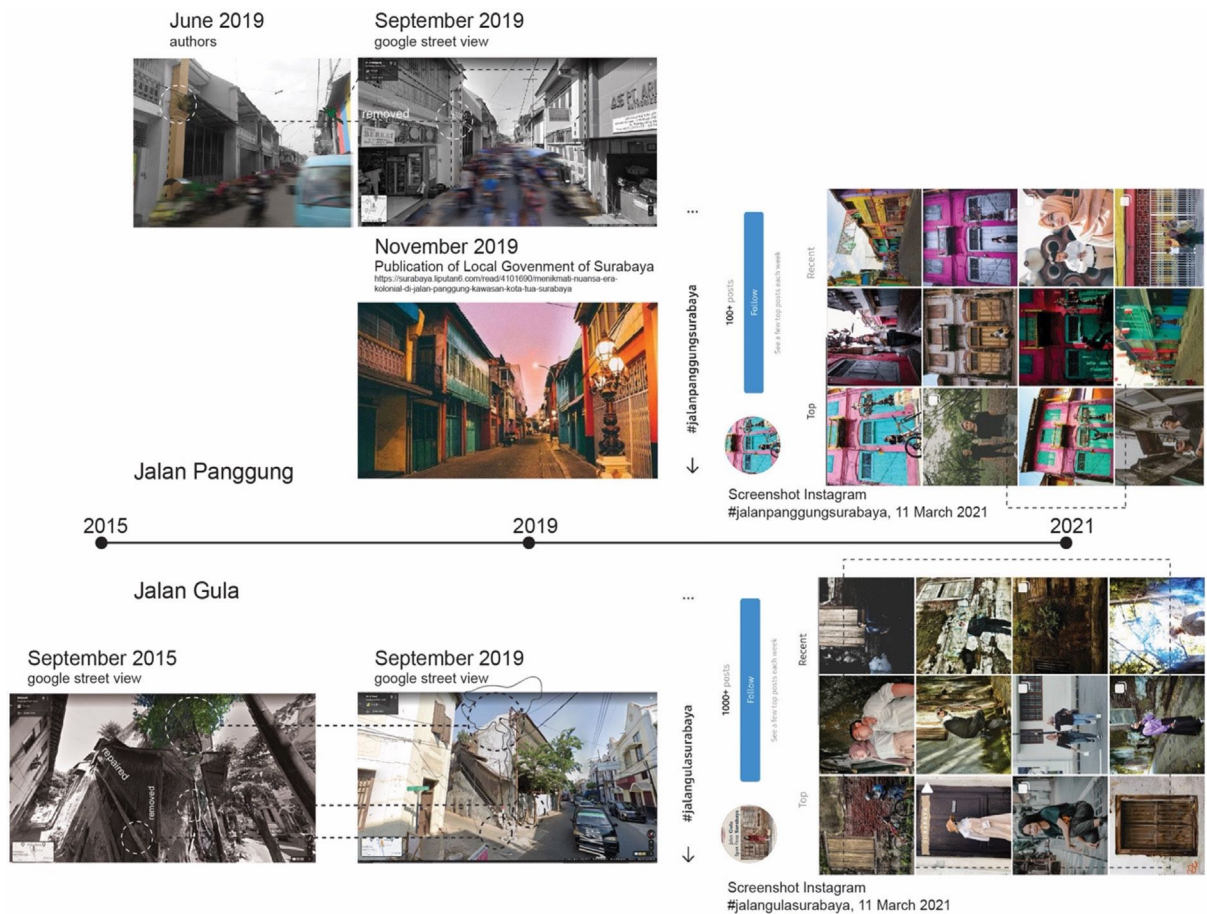
In the cultural heritage such as candi or temple, the national government pays more attention to conserve its original form. They even have a particular conservation office at Borobudur Temple, which became the national centre for conservation studies. This institution's main objective is to conduct conservation studies on aspects of civil engineering, architecture, geology, biology, chemistry, and archaeology of Borobudur Temple and other cultural heritage in Indonesia (Peraturan Menteri Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan 29/2015). Nevertheless, in the context of urban heritage like in Kota Tua Surabaya, they have not shown their interest yet.

Then...

In his writing, Rynnänen (2018) discussed the aesthetic of theme parks and museums in a historical urban. This relates to how a historical urban is presented and perceived by the visitors. As historical settings, historical urban and urban heritage could be considered as museums, which contain knowledge of the past, as evidence or artefacts of history. Yet, some historical urban area uses kitsch and "historical imposter" (p. 95) as an attempt for touristification. Therefore sometimes, a historical urban is closer to a theme park rather than a museum. However, Rynnänen suggested that theme parks and museums should be a horizon of experience as "city sometimes feels like a theme park, sometimes like a museum and sometimes as a scene from everyday life" (Rynnänen, 2018, p. 109).

This discussion reflects the conversation about the conflicting revitalisation process conducted in some parts of Kota Tua

Surabaya, especially in Jalan Panggung and Jalan Gula (Figure 6). In Jalan Panggung, the municipality painted all building façade with bright colours. This beautification is an attempt to delay decay. In reality, despite the disagreement with the heritage community, it invites visitors, and the street becomes one of the so-called 'instagramable' spots in the city. But how about the case of Jalan Gula? Jalan Gula could be considered the contender of the 'instagrammable' spot as this street is also popular, but it is instead due to its decaying quality. The question is, is this part of the plan of the municipality for Jalan Gula?



Jalan Gula reflects a gesture resonates with the idea of *counterpreservation* (Sandler, 2016) and *nonintervention preservation* (DeSilvey, 2017). Sandler (2016) proposed 'counterpreservation,' an act of preservation by utilising decay as a political gesture against gentrification in the Berlin neighbourhood. One of the examples is the Tutenhaus, where the inhabitants purposely let the façade of their building decay with weathering and plant growth so that it differs from the renewed building around the neighbourhood. Another example is Orford Ness National Nature Reserve in the UK, a former important British military complex, which within the effort to preserve the site, National Trust UK decided to employ nonintervention or "continued ruination" (DeSilvey, 2017, p. 78). The nonintervention

Figure 6. Jalan Panggung and Jalan Gula comparisons (Image by authors, 2021)

transformed heritage sites into nature reserves by appreciating both decay and ecology (DeSilvey, 2017).



Both the nonintervention preservation and the counterpreservation are a form of preservation that embraces decay, growing nature; and value the dilapidated state of a building. Regardless of the intention of the municipality, for the case of Jalan Gula, the decay and the growing plants work together in creating a space for people to relate to the past, in a way it preserves the space through its atmosphere and continual appreciation from the visitors.

Now, let's imagine for once if Jalan Gula is revitalised like Jalan Panggung, but still embracing nonintervention preservation by letting the nature grow (Figure 7). Will it still be an *instagrammable* spot?

Maybe it will still persist as an *instagrammable*, albeit with a possible disagreement from the heritage community. Regardless, it contributes to creating the tourism 'the face' of Kota Tua Surabaya. However, if we supposedly shift for a little bit to the inhabited neighbourhood in the area, beyond 'the face,' we could witness the everyday life of the existing informal houses occupying space in between this heritage area's old houses. And if we extend the conversation on weeds, from literal to metaphorical, we could converse about this so-called 'illegal

Figure 7. Speculating the barbie doll pink house style Jalan Gula (Image by authors, 2021)

inhabitant.' We found such illegal inhabitant during our visit to one of the alleys on Jalan Panggung, discovering informal houses built in between gaps of old houses. This is a very intriguing context as it has many issues, from ownership, spatial tactics of the 'illegal inhabitant,' and the revitalisation agenda for such area. Like the literal weeds, this kind of existence will naturally stay, and it will be removed if the existence start causing damage or certain 'order' are in place. But the question is, does it need to be removed at all?

Finally...

The conversation shows interpretation, reality, and imagination of some fragments of Kota Tua Surabaya. It reveals the existing layers of complexity of the inhabited heritage area. From the materiality of the ruins and decaying surfaces; the weeds, both literally and metaphorically; the many actors involved, such as the municipality, related communities, and the inhabitant; all are intertwined altogether in 'preserving' the area. It also shows many points of view hovering above the local issues. Something worth questioning is, if preservation or revitalisation are considered required, what is it for? Is it for creating the 'image' of the area? Or for the 'life' of a building? Or for the 'death' of weeds? Or for the sake of people?

The possible answer from the government would be the last one. But it will only ignite further questions, who are these people? The heritage enthusiasts? The legal residences in this area? The undocumented occupants? The potential tourists? The mayor of Surabaya? And still, we can add many more people to this list. Some of these people probably do not yet realise the quality of intangible heritage in this area, which is the oldest fish market activity in Surabaya and East Java. The market has existed for more than two centuries. As a building, the market can be categorised as *cagar budaya* (tangible cultural heritage). Still, the market in the broadest sense also includes the means, activities, and practices that are only limited to a building. If we cannot implement such means as part of the UNESCO's intangible heritage, the market in this area still boast the quality of a living heritage. Buyers, sellers, and suppliers are still flocking this area for centuries regardless of the many changes in the built environment, including the decay and the new paintings. This market, including its activities, has already become a tourist attraction, as mentioned in several tourist guidebooks (Leushuis, 2014). Then, return to the aforementioned question, what is this revitalisation project for?

We think that the reader could capture the colloquial sense of the conversation, along with its limitations. As the conversation started with personal photographs taken by the authors and without primary data such as the age of the buildings, plants, and the 'voice' of the inhabitants, the conversation hovers on the surface with speculation. In the end, it produces more questions rather than answers. However, such a conversation could actually become the first engagement of an interdisciplinary approach as it builds up through responses between the

authors and reciprocally intrigues curiosity. We believe that this paper is not finished, and the process of creating this conversation could be repeated to expand the topics or build a more in-depth conversation. The involvement of the visual materials is also important as a mode of inquiry and illustration for the conversations. In architecture, such a process could be one way to creatively build collaborative knowledge based on "my personal writer's voice" and thus creatively expand the possibilities of academic writings.

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