

VENETIE VAN JAVA: REINTERPRETING KOTA LAMA SEMARANG FROM A HISTORICAL AND TOURISM PERSPECTIVE (1824–2024)

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Abstract

During the colonial era, Semarang earned the nickname *Venetie van Java* as a reflection of the city's character, which was supported by a network of rivers, canals, and rapidly expanding maritime activities, making it an important center of trade and administration on the northern coast of Java. In this context, Kota Lama served as the core of colonial urban development, shaping Semarang's spatial structure, economic activities, and historical identity. This study aims to analyze the development of Kota Lama between 1824 and 2024 and to examine the dynamics of its transformation into a cultural heritage-based tourism area using historical methods that include heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The research findings indicate that the demolition of the fort in 1824 marked a turning point in the area's functional shift from a defensive zone to an open city integrated with the colonial economic system and urban development. Entering the 20th century, the Kota Lama experienced a decline due to shifts in the economic center and the orientation of development policies. However, since the early 21st century, revitalization through a conservation approach based on heritage tourism has successfully revived the area as a cultural heritage space with historical, educational, and economic value, thereby reflecting the sustainable transformation from a colonial fortified city into a cultural tourism destination that is adaptive to the times.

Keywords: Kota Lama Semarang; *Venetie van Java*; Historical dynamics; City identity; Heritage tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Kota Lumpia, Kota Atlas, Port of Java, and *Venetie van Java* are some of the nicknames bestowed upon Semarang City. These diverse nicknames emphasize that Semarang possesses a distinct character and special qualities that set it apart from other cities. One of the most well-known nicknames is *Venetie van Java*, which was given by the Dutch East Indies government because Semarang was considered to share similarities with the city of Venice in Italy, particularly in terms of its geographical conditions and spatial layout at that time (Pangestuti & Ningsih, 2024). This nickname reflects how the topographic conditions and spatial layout of Semarang during the colonial period shaped a distinctive urban identity in the historical development of cities along the northern coast of Java.

The city of Venice is known for its interconnected network of rivers that cut through the city, creating a unique and captivating landscape. A similar condition was once found in Semarang City, which was traversed by a number of rivers and canals, thereby forming a unique cityscape. During the Dutch East Indies administration, these rivers and canals were not merely aesthetic elements, but rather functioned as primary transportation routes as well as hubs for trading activities (Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2017). During this period, river-based transportation was considered more efficient than land routes, both in terms of cost and the ease of goods distribution.

The development of Kota Lama Semarang was inseparable from the economic and political policies implemented by the Dutch colonial government in the early 19th century. Since Semarang

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was opened as a free trade port in 1870, this area experienced rapid growth. The colonial government transformed the city into a distribution center for agricultural commodities from the interior of Central Java, such as coffee, sugar, and tobacco, bound for international markets (Saraswati & Purwanto, 2022). This policy drove the optimization of canals and rivers as primary transportation routes supporting the flow of trade to and from the port.

As one of the oldest port cities on the northern coast of Java Island, Semarang played a crucial role in the colonial history of the Dutch East Indies (Nurhajarini, Fibiona, & Suwarno, 2019). The area now known as a cultural heritage tourism hub originated from a colonial settlement in the city center, namely Kota Lama. Traces of this colonial legacy can still be witnessed today through historic buildings, such as Gereja Blenduk (Koepelkerk) and the Spiegel building. During the colonial era, this area was also surrounded by a sturdy fortress that enclosed the Kota Lama area. However, in 1824, the fortress was demolished by the colonial government as part of urban modernization efforts (Chawari, Novida, & Sugeng, 2019). This demolition marked the end of the fortress's 68-years existence since 1756.

The city fortress was deemed no longer relevant by the Dutch colonial government. This decision was highly likely influenced by the construction of the Anyer–Pancarukan highway (1808–1811) under the orders of Governor-General Daendels (Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2017). In addition to dismantling the fortress, the colonial government also constructed a port canal in 1870–1872 named Nieuwe Havenkanaal, which became known by the local community as Kali Baru. This development allowed small ships to berth at *Sociëteitsbrug*, which is now better known as Jembatan Mberok, resulting from the local community's adaptation of the pronunciation of *brug* into *brok* or Mberok (Utomo, 2023). This period was the golden age of Semarang's canals, as the rivers became the main driver of the city's economy through the activities of Pelabuhan Kalibaru.

These conditions caused Kota Lama to function not only as a trading hub but also as a symbol of colonial power that integrated economic, administrative, and socio-cultural interests. However, entering the 20th century, changes in economic structures and urban planning policies gradually shifted the role of this area as the center of economic activity (Dewi, Sudikno, & Surjono, 2008). The orientation of trade was no longer reliant on river routes, especially after the construction of a modern port.

In the modern era, various issues such as flooding, land subsidence, and the lack of building maintenance further accelerated the decline of the area. Post-independence, Kota Lama was temporarily marginalized and viewed as a slum area. Even during the period of the 2000s to 2010s, Kota Lama experienced its bleakest era, marked by numerous abandoned buildings deserted by their owners (Nugraha et al., 2021). This degradation was inseparable from the shift of the government center and economic activities of Semarang City to other regions.

Entering the early 21st century, the paradigm toward the Kota Lama area began to change, particularly through government policy interventions in the field of cultural heritage preservation. One of the legal foundations used in the initial stage was Undang-Undang Nomor 5 Tahun 1992 tentang Benda Cagar Budaya, which explains that the management, protection, and utilization of historic sites and buildings are the responsibility of the government. The implementation of this regulation was reflected in various conservation and revitalization programs carried out by the local government, such as the restoration of historic buildings and zoning regulations. These conservation efforts successfully revived the image of Kota Lama as a historical tourism (heritage tourism) area. Various old buildings were renovated and repurposed as museums, art galleries, cafes, and public spaces (Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2017; Raditya, 2017). This transformation marks a reinterpretation process of Kota Lama, shifting from a colonial symbol into a representation of cultural identity as well as a tourism attraction for Semarang City.

This discussion becomes compelling because in 2015, Kota Lama Semarang was included in the UNESCO world heritage tentative list (Firdausyah & Dewi, 2020; Rubiantoro, 2018). According

to UNESCO, Kota Lama Semarang is the Best Preserved Colonial City in recognition of its historical value, which illustrates various crucial phases in the economic, political, and social development of Southeast Asia (Sari, Harani, & Hermin, 2017; UNESCO, 2015). This recognition demonstrates that historical spaces can undergo a transformation of meaning along with social, economic, and political changes. The transformation of the area aims to optimize its physical and functional conditions while simultaneously enhancing the image and function of the area (Zagroba & Gawryluk, 2019). The development of Kota Lama Semarang is considered capable of increasing tourism and cultural value for the community, thereby delivering an economic impact through the revitalization and development of heritage tourism (Amrillah & Wijayati, 2021).

The problems addressed in this study encompass two primary aspects: (1) how was the history of the formation and development of the Kota Lama Semarang area and *Venetie van Java* since the 19th century analyzed from colonial policies, economic dynamics, and urban spatial layout; and (2) how do revitalization efforts and cultural tourism development contribute to reinterpreting the identity of Kota Lama Semarang as *Venetie van Java*. Through the discussion of these two aspects, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding regarding the transformation of function and meaning of Kota Lama Semarang from a colonial space into a cultural heritage area and a historical tourism destination.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilizes the historical method as its primary approach. In historical research, there are four main stages: (1) heuristic or source searching, (2) source criticism or source analysis, (3) interpretation or interpreting facts and establishing meaning, and (4) historiography or the writing of history resulting from past reconstruction (Herlina, 2020; Kuntowijoyo, 2013). The use of this method was selected to produce objective writing in accordance with historical principles.

First, heuristic in the context of historical research is the process of tracing and collecting relevant historical sources, both in the form of data and historical evidence. In this stage, sources are distinguished into two types: primary sources and secondary sources (Gottschalk, 2015). The exploration of primary sources was conducted through online searches, including the website of the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia and the digital collections of Leiden University. The primary sources used in this study consist of photo archives related to the development of Kota Lama Semarang. Meanwhile, secondary sources were obtained through a literature study of scientific articles and books relevant to the research topic.

Visual documentation in this study is analyzed using the historical visual analysis method, which views photographs as historical sources that hold an informational value equivalent to written sources. The analysis is conducted by identifying and interpreting various visible visual elements in the photographs, such as river and canal networks, bridges, buildings, as well as community activities that reflect the social, economic, and spatial conditions of the area during specific periods (Pradita & Itawan, 2023). Each visual element is examined contextually to understand its meaning, function, and changes throughout the development of the Kota Lama Semarang area. The results of the visual analysis are then compared with written archives, historical maps, and supporting literature through source triangulation techniques in order to obtain a more valid and comprehensive interpretation regarding the transformation of the Kota Lama Semarang area and the construction of its identity as the *Venetie van Java*.

The next stage is verification (source criticism). Source criticism in historical research aims to select and test the eligibility of the sources obtained during the heuristic stage. Source criticism is divided into two types: external criticism and internal criticism (Kuntowijoyo, 2013). External criticism aims to assess the authenticity or genuineness of the source, while internal criticism aims to test the credibility and reliability of the content or information contained within the source.

The subsequent stage is interpretation. At this stage, the researcher interprets historical facts based on the results of the source criticism previously conducted. The final stage in the series of the historical method is historiography. The writing process was conducted by reconstructing the

interpreted historical facts into a systematic, logical, and chronological historical narrative (Kuntowijoyo, 2013).

The background of this research topic is driven by the still limited academic studies that specifically place rivers and canals as key elements in the formation of the spatial structure, transportation system, and economic dynamics of the Kota Lama Semarang area during the colonial period. This limitation of perspective opens up an opportunity to present a more comprehensive analysis by integrating historical, economic, and spatial aspects in viewing the area's transformation from a colonial fortress city, experiencing degradation in the 20th century, to being revitalized into a cultural heritage-based tourism area in the 21st century. Therefore, this study attempts to reinterpret the concept of *Venetie van Java* not only as a historical symbol but also as an urban identity construction.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Development of the Kota Lama Semarang Area

Dutch colonization from the 17th century to the 20th century also influenced the morphology of coastal cities in Southeast Asia, including Semarang. The presence of colonial powers that built trading posts in coastal areas shaped a distinctive spatial layout pattern. The Dutch tended to build cities in coastal areas by locating ports near river mouths (Nurhajarini et al., 2019). This strategy was considered effective for monitoring ships entering the city while facilitating the distribution of goods. Semarang developed into one of the largest port cities on Java Island, along with Batavia and Surabaya, becoming a primary export and import gateway. These conditions encouraged the arrival of various trading communities who subsequently settled in Semarang (Nurhajarini et al., 2019).

The following is the statistics of Semarang's population by ethnicity and origin from 1850 to 1941.

Table 1. Population of Semarang 1850–1941 (Brommer et al., 1995)

	1850	1890	1920	1930	1941**
Total population	29.000	71.186	158.036	217.796	280.000
Pribumi	20.000*	53.974	126.028	175.457	221.000
Chinese	4.000	12.104	19.720	27.423	40.000
<i>Vreemde Oosterlingen</i> (Foreign East/ Arabian, dll)	1.850	1.543	1.530	2.329	2.500
European	1.550	3.565	10.151	12.587	16.500

* including 1,500 Makassar people

** estimation

Based on Tabel 1, it can be seen that the coastal social life of Semarang at that time was heterogeneous, consisting of various ethnicities from across the Nusantara region as well as foreign countries. These communities were subsequently fragmented into more restricted social spaces and grouped by ethnicity within specific residential areas, such as Pecinan, Pekojan, and Kampung Bugis (Nurhajarini et al., 2019). This spatial separation pattern was also implemented by the colonial government. Kota Lama Semarang was built as a residential area for European people, particularly the Dutch. The relatively smaller European population compared to other groups created an impression of exclusivity toward the Kota Lama area.

These conditions drove the formation of the European quarter or *De Europeesche Buurt*, which became the initial structure and the embryo of the city's development. This area originated from a pentagonal fortress known as De Vijfhoek, which later expanded to the Raden Patah Street and Tawang areas. A body of information indicates differing perceptions regarding the existence of the fortress, particularly concerning the equivalence between the De Vijfhoek fortress and the city fortress in general (Chawari et al., 2019). The term fortress city was used because within the area, there was a European settlement equipped with a defense system in the form of a fortress

(Nurhajarini et al., 2019). Apart from serving as a means of defense against external threats, this fortress also acted as a spatial boundary between ethnic groups.

In 1799, the Dutch trading company, namely the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), went bankrupt. Along with changes in colonial government policies, the concept of a fortress city was deemed no longer relevant, and the fortress was demolished in 1824. This demolition was related to the construction of the Anyer–Pasarukin Post Highway by Herman Willem Daendels through the Bojongsche Weg route, which is currently known as Pemuda Street (Chawari et al., 2019; Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2017). The construction of this project cut through the Kota Lama area, specifically at Heerenstraat, which is currently named Letjen Soeprapto Street.

Since the demolition of the fortress in 1824, the colonial government began to increase infrastructure development in Semarang as part of urban development and commercial activity reinforcement efforts. This development included new road networks, such as Bojong Street, Randusari Street, and Mataram Street, as well as the expansion of transportation facilities supporting the mobility of goods and people. To streamline trading distribution, a new canal named Kali Baru was also constructed, allowing small ships to berth as far as *Sociëteitsbrug* (Chawari et al., 2019). The economic growth at that time was influenced by various policies implemented by the Dutch East Indies government.

One of these policies was the enforcement of Tanam Paksa by King Willem I in 1831. This policy increased the volume of export commodities, thereby requiring a more efficient distribution system. During the 1864–1873 period, the first railway line was constructed by the Nederlandsch-Indische Spoorweg Maatschappij (NIS) from Semarang toward the Vorstenlanden region (Surakarta–Yogyakarta), which was subsequently followed by canal construction in 1866. By 1881, Semarang already possessed steam-powered city trams (city tram) to support intra-city mobility (Saraswati & Purwanto, 2022). This later generated interest among many companies to establish trading businesses in this city.

The following is a table showing the number of trading companies in Semarang from 1829 to 1840:

Table 2. Number of Trading Companies in Semarang 1829–1840 (Claver, 2014)

Year	Total companies	Private companies	Dutch companies	Ratio of Dutch trading companies to total (%)
1829	13	9	4	31
1830	13	9	4	31
1831	14	9	5	36
1832	14	9	5	36
1833	15	5	10	67
1834	15	5	10	67
1835	15	4	11	73
1836	15	4	11	73
1837	13	6	7	54
1838	13	6	7	54
1839	17	9	8	47
1840	14	6	8	57

Based on the data in Tabel 2, Dutch trading companies began to dominate starting in 1833. Throughout the 1829–1840 period, Semarang had an average of 14 active trading companies each year, with approximately 40–60% of them being Dutch companies (Claver, 2014). Private companies, which were mostly owned by the Chinese ethnicity, played a significant role in export activities within maritime trade (Nurhajarini et al., 2019).



Figure 1. Shipping activities in Kali Baru Semarang
in the early 20th century (KITLV, 1902).

Figure 1 shows the shipping activities in Kali Baru Semarang, reflecting the growing economic activities of that period. This economic growth is demonstrated by the presence of various warehouses owned by private trading companies as well as by the *Nederlandsche Handel Maatschappij* (a Dutch trading company) (Nurhajarini et al., 2019).

The Kalibaru canal played an important role in supporting the development of the Pelabuhan Semarang during the colonial period, particularly as an infrastructure designed to increase the efficiency of goods distribution and commercial activities (Rosyid, 2025). The construction of this canal began in the 1870s decade to replace the old port route that passed through Kali Semarang, thereby allowing larger vessels to berth closer to the center of economic activities, while smaller boats could still access the canal route leading into the city (Utama & Lusianto, 2019).

In addition to utilizing small ships sailing through the canal toward the city center, the mobility of goods was also supported by a railway line network located around the port area. This railway line functioned as a means of transporting goods from Semarang Port to various regions in the interior, such as Vorstenlanden, Blora, and Cirebon, and vice versa, thereby strengthening the integration of the trade network between coastal areas and the hinterland (Utama & Lusianto, 2019).



Figure 2. Jembatan Mberok (*Sociëteitsbrug*) around 1920 (KITLV, 1927).

Figure 2 shows transshipment or boat loading and unloading activities in the Jembatan Mberok area. The bridge originally had the name *de Zuideport*, which then changed to *Gouvernementsbrug* because it was located near the government office (the City Hall, which is currently the finance building). After that, it changed names again to *Sociëteitsbrug* due to its proximity to the *societiet de Harmonie* (now the Bank Mandiri building) (Utomo, 2023). The canal crossing the area was utilized as a goods distribution route via boats and small-sized ships carrying commodities from the port to the commercial center in the Kota Lama area. Along the canal banks stood buildings in colonial architectural style utilized as trading offices, government buildings, and various other commercial facilities (Chawari et al., 2019). Meanwhile, land transportation activities around the area demonstrated high mobility of goods and people supporting trade dynamics.

The need for a marine transportation system integrated with the canal network prompted the construction of tram lines for intra-city transportation and railways for inter-city connectivity. However, tram operations only lasted for approximately 58 years (1882–1940) due to unprofitable operational costs and a shift in urban spatial concepts that began to be dominated by four-wheeled motorized vehicles (Saraswati & Purwanto, 2022). This change reflected a shift in the orientation of the urban transportation system from rail-based modes toward highway transportation modes, which were deemed more flexible in supporting urban mobility.

The urban transportation system of Semarang developed rapidly in the early 20th century. This network not only connected Semarang with other regions but also integrated various parts of the city (Utama & Lusianto, 2019). Road infrastructure became a vital element in this transportation system. In the initial stage, road construction was centered around the Kota Lama area, which was subsequently expanded, thereby driving the formation of new areas as centers of social, political, and economic activities (Chawari et al., 2019; Nurhajarini et al., 2019).

Following the independence of Indonesia, attention toward the sustainability of the Kota Lama area was relatively limited. From the 1950s decade until the early 21st century, this area experienced a decline due to the relocation of the government center and economic activities to other regions. Many buildings were abandoned, the environment became slum-like, and crime rates increased, causing the area to once be nicknamed a “ghost town” (Sari, 2012).

The Shifting Function and Revitalization of Kota Lama

The increasingly modern development of Semarang gradually sidelined the Kota Lama area into a quiet, poorly maintained, and physically degraded area (Sari, 2012). Economic and governmental activities that were previously centered in this area shifted to the Bojong Street region, which is currently known as Pemuda Street. The decline in attention toward Kota Lama was not without reason. In the 2000s period until the early 2010s, this area was known as one of the most slum-like and abandoned regions in Semarang (Nugraha et al., 2021). The area around the Mberok bridge up to Kolonel Sugiono Street frequently emitted unpleasant odors due to scattered piles of garbage.

The Kota Lama area has a total area of ± 27 hectares. The boundaries of this region were previously based on the city fortress. However, after the demolition of the fortress, the Dutch people expanded settlements in this area. Currently, the Kota Lama area is surrounded by Mpu Tantular Street to the west, Tawang Street to the north, Cendrawasih Street to the east, and Sendowo Street to the south (Chawari et al., 2019; Sari, 2012).

Area quality improvement efforts were carried out by the local government with support from the central government. In 2003, the Mayor of Semarang at that time, Sukawi Sutarip, issued the Rencana Tata Bangunan dan Lingkungan (RTBL) for the Kawasan Kota Lama, which was established through Peraturan Daerah Nomor 8 Tahun 2003. This regulation was subsequently updated through *Peraturan Daerah Nomor 2 Tahun 2020* as an adjustment to the area's arrangement needs (Firdausyah & Dewi, 2020).

Based on Undang-Undang Nomor 11 Tahun 2010 about Cagar Budaya Article 5, an object, building, or structure can be proposed as cultural heritage if it meets several criteria, including: being at least 50 years old; representing a specific style period that is at least 50 years old; possessing special significance for history, science, education, religion, and/or culture; and having cultural value in strengthening national identity. Kota Lama Semarang is deemed to have fulfilled these criteria, making it eligible for preservation and restoration.

The beauty of the colonial architecture and spatial layout of Kota Lama led to its inclusion on the tentative list of world heritage sites by UNESCO in 2015 (UNESCO, 2015). Semarang City Government has been striving to promote this area to be included in the permanent World Heritage Site list by fulfilling the requirements of building authenticity and adequate conservation systems (Sonaesti & Purwanto, 2022). Nevertheless, the management of the area is considered not yet fully aligned with UNESCO's recommendations regarding the Historic Urban Landscape approach,

meaning the nomination process as a world heritage site continues to face a number of challenges (Sonaesti & Purwanto, 2022).

The revitalization of the Kawasan Kota Lama Semarang faces several structural and social constraints. The main issue consists of tidal floods (*banjir rob*) due to land subsidence and a drainage system that is not yet optimal (Sari, 2012). The geographical condition of the area, which lies in a low-lying coastal plain, is worsened by the phenomenon of land subsidence and sea level rise, causing periodic water inundation that directly impacts the physical damage of cultural heritage buildings. Mitigation efforts have been carried out through the construction of flood control systems (*polder*), drainage network improvements, as well as technical infrastructure-based flood control planning (Prabowo & Salaj, 2020). However, an approach that tends to focus on technical solutions has not been fully balanced with an integrated and sustainable environmental management strategy. This indicates that handling tidal floods requires not only physical intervention but also long-term planning that considers ecological aspects, spatial planning, and climate change adaptation.

The revitalization process of the Kawasan Kota Lama Semarang also faces challenges in implementing the Historic Urban Landscape principles recommended by UNESCO. Based on the study, the revitalization strategies carried out still tend to be partial and have not fully accommodated a holistic approach that integrates physical, social, cultural, and economic aspects in a balanced manner (Prabowo & Salaj, 2020). One of the main criticisms is the dominance of a top-down decision-making model, with relatively limited community involvement in the planning and management process of the area. In addition, a phenomenon known as “Disneyfication” has emerged, which is the tendency to add visual elements and ornaments that are not authentic to the historical character of the area, thereby potentially reducing the original value and integrity of the cultural heritage (Prabowo & Salaj, 2020). This condition demonstrates that the revitalization is not yet fully aligned with HUL principles, which emphasize the importance of preserving historical values within the context of modern urban development. Therefore, an evaluation toward a more inclusive, participatory, and *historical value*-based revitalization approach is required to maintain a sustainable balance between tourism development and cultural heritage preservation (Sonaesti & Purwanto, 2022).

In general, the Kota Lama revitalization program encompasses three main aspects, namely road repairs, pedestrian path arrangement, and drainage system improvements (Amrillah & Wijayati, 2021). During the 2011–2012 period, the Semarang City Government collaborated with the Ministry of Public Works and Public Housing (Kementerian Pekerjaan Umum dan Perumahan Rakyat), focusing on the improvement of the Kali Semarang drainage system. This program was subsequently continued with the arrangement of green open spaces, such as Taman Srigunting and Taman Garuda during the 2014–2015 period.

Quoting information from the website of the Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia (29 May 2018), the government along with the PUPR ministry conducted the arrangement of the Kota Lama area with a total budget of approximately Rp156 billion. The project commenced in 2017 and was targeted for completion in April 2019 (Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2019). The Minister of PUPR, Basuki Hadimuljono, stated that the arrangement was carried out to make the area more organized and comfortable as a tourist destination, considering that previously, tourists visiting Semarang tended to prefer other destinations such as Candi Borobudur and Pulau Karimunjawa (Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2018). Kota Lama is projected as the center of historical tourism in Semarang City. The government hopes that this revitalization will be able to increase tourist attraction and drive the economic growth of Semarang.

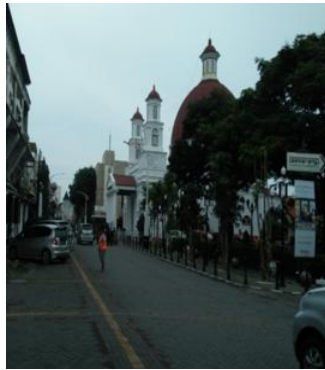


Figure 3. Blenduk Church area before being revitalized in 2017 (ANRI, 2017)

Suprpto Street area in Gambar 3 shows a street space condition that is not yet optimally organized, both in terms of parking management and the provision of pedestrian paths. Vehicles can be seen parked along the roadway without a clear regulation system, thereby potentially reducing traffic space capacity and disrupting the visual order of the area. In addition, the pedestrian path appears narrow and is not yet well-defined, meaning that the spatial function for pedestrians cannot be accommodated optimally.

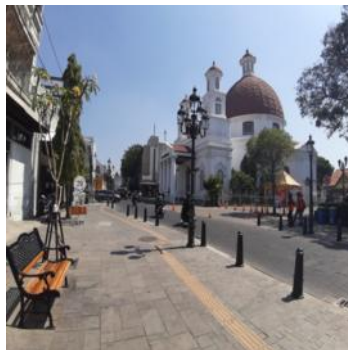


Figure 4. Blenduk Church area after being revitalized in 2017 (ANRI, 2017)

The physical changes of the Suprpto Street area are significantly visible in Gambar 4, through the arrangement program implemented by the Direktorat Jenderal Cipta Karya, Ministry of Public Works and Public Housing (*Kementerian PUPR*) in 2017. The work carried out encompassed road and pedestrian repairs, drainage system construction, the provision of underground utilities (box utility), street furniture arrangement, landscape improvements, and the revitalization of Kolam Bubakan and Kolam Berok (Amrillah & Wijayati, 2021). This revitalization successfully created a more organized spatial layout and enhanced the tourism image of Semarang, particularly history-based tourism (heritage tourism).

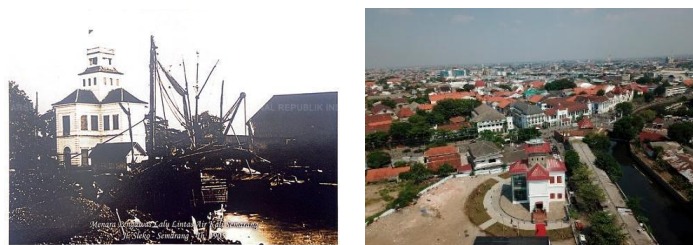


Figure 5. Comparison of Menara Syahbandar Sleko in 1905 and 2023 (ANRI, 1905; Yasa, 2023)

Figure 5 shows the physical changes of the Menara Syahbandar Sleko in 1905 and 2023. Historically, this tower was built in 1825 by the Dutch East Indies government as a watchtower for water traffic in Kali Semarang. The rehabilitation of this building was the result of a collaboration between the Semarang City Government and PT Pertamina Gas Negara as the area manager. The renovation of this building was carried out due to damage to the exterior appearance of the building located on the southwest corner in 2017 (Chawari et al., 2019). Construction commenced in

December 2022 and was completed in 2023 as an effort to enhance tourist attraction in Kota Lama (Purnamasari, 2023).

The development of the tourism sector following the revitalization in the Kota Lama area not only strengthens the historical value of the region but has also led to an increase in community economic activities. Various formal and informal jobs utilizing the tourism potential have emerged, such as culinary businesses, photography services, photo property rentals, and street vendors.

Table 3. Number of tourist visits by tourist type in Semarang City (jiwa) 2019-2023
(Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Semarang, 2024)

Year	Local tourist	International tourist
2019	7.223.529	82.030
2020	3.260.303	6.628
2021	2.663.684	77
2022	5.338.233	4.918
2023	6.478.883	13.992

Based on Tabel 3, the number of tourists in Semarang experienced a temporary decline in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The peak occurred in 2021 with a massive decline in foreign tourists. However, in the subsequent years, an increase in tourists occurred once again. The average number of tourists in Semarang from 2019 to 2023 was 5.014.455 jiwa per year. This demonstrates the role of the Kota Lama Semarang revitalization in increasing the number of tourists in Semarang.

Table 4. Number of tourist visits based on the visited tourist attraction 2017-2021
(Pemerintah Provinsi Jawa Tengah, 2022)

Type of tourist attraction	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Cultural tourism	1.371.709	1.452.451	1.638.167	521.860	265.587
Marine tourism	1.071.728	1.164.635	1.313.550	429.251	441.557
Agritourism	8.090	8.792	9.916	3.241	2.557
Nature tourism	1.108.028	-	1.357.179	433.998	254.610
Historical tourism	1.371.709	1.452.451	1.638.167	523.860	607.983
Religious tourism	489.789	-	599.921	112.222	149.021
Culinary tourism	1.934.500	2.110.153	2.379.966	777.742	111.907

Based on Tabel 4, regarding the number of tourist visits by visited tourist attraction during the 2017–2021 period, there is a visible variation in the distribution of visits reflecting tourist preferences for specific types of destinations in Semarang City. History and culture-based tourism, including the Kota Lama area, shows a tendency to be one of the primary attractions, despite still experiencing fluctuations along with the impact of the pandemic in 2020–2021. On the other hand, recreational and culinary attractions also demonstrate a significant contribution to attracting domestic tourist visits. This pattern indicates that not only the number of tourists experienced dynamics, but there was also segmentation based on interests and visit purposes. Thus, the revitalization of Kota Lama plays a role not only in increasing tourist quantity but also in strengthening the area's position as a leading destination in the historical tourism category integrated with the surrounding creative economy activities.

The adaptive reuse of buildings also reinforces the economic dynamics of the area. Buildings that were previously abandoned are now being refunctioned along a number of streets (Amrillah & Wijayati, 2021). The culinary sector has become one of the most rapidly developing fields through

the utilization of historic buildings as cafes and restaurants, such as Ikan Bakar Cianjur, Rumah Makan Pringsewu, and Spiegel Bar & Bistro.

Along with the development of economic activities in the area, the boat tourism development program in Kali Mberok, Kawasan Kota Lama Semarang, became part of the riverfront area revitalization strategy using the *waterfront* concept, which aims to revive the historical function of the river as a water transportation route as well as a tourism destination (Fitriana, 2021). The area design study shows that the utilization of Kali Mberok as a boat tourism route is designed through the provision of docks, a controlled sailing route along the river, and integration with supporting facilities such as culinary areas, communal spaces, and pedestrian paths along the riverfront corridor.

Tourists are planned to be able to board boats from the main dock to cruise along the river and enjoy the panorama of the historic Kota Lama area, while several small docks are provided as alternative stop points along the travel route (Fitriana, 2021). This concept functions not only as a means of recreation but also as a medium for historical education of the area and an effort to boost local economic activities around the riverfront.

Previously, the Head of the Drainage Management and Development Section Department of Public Works (*Dinas Pekerjaan Umum*) in 2019 had also planned the development of boat tourism in Kali Mberok as part of river management and the strengthening of water tourism-based city identity, by utilizing the arched shape of the bridge as a visual potential to become a new tourist attraction (Agus, 2019). Thus, the integration between mature design studies and government policies toward boat tourism in Kali Mberok has the potential to become an important element in the development of heritage and waterfront tourism in Semarang City, which will reinforce the interpretation of *Venetie van Java* in the Kota Lama area.

In 2024, exactly 200 years after the demolition of the city fortress by the Dutch East Indies government, Kota Lama Semarang has experienced ups and downs of dynamics. The number of tourists in Kota Lama in 2024 also increased, with domestic tourists reaching 2.393.069 and foreign tourists reaching 18.040 tourists (Sari, 2025). This transformation demonstrates that the revitalization has not only successfully revived an area that had experienced stagnation but has also brought a significant impact on the development of tourism and the economy of Semarang City (Amrillah & Wijayati, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Based on the description above, the development of Kota Lama Semarang cannot be separated from colonial political and economic policies since the 19th century that shaped it as a center of trade and administration on the northern coast of Java. The demolition of the city fortress in 1824 marked a shift in the area's orientation from a defense territory into an open city integrated with a network of ports, canals, railways, and trams. This infrastructure strengthened Semarang's position as a distribution hub for agricultural commodities and transformed Kota Lama into a representation of colonial power that integrated economic, social, and modern spatial functions. The nickname *Venetie van Java* reflected the city's identity, which relied on the role of rivers and canals as the main drivers of commercial activity. However, entering the 20th century up to the post-independence period, this area experienced a significant shift in function due to changes in economic structures, the construction of a new port, and the relocation of government and commercial centers, causing Kota Lama to lose its vitality and experience a decline in both its physical condition and regional image.

The revitalization efforts carried out since the early 21st century became a turning point in the journey of Kota Lama Semarang. Through spatial planning policies, the conservation of cultural heritage buildings, and infrastructure arrangement during the 2017–2019 period, this area was transformed into a more organized and representative cultural heritage-based tourism destination. Revitalisation focused not only on physical repairs but also on strengthening the area's image as a public space with historical, architectural, and economic value, which was further reinforced by its

recognition on the UNESCO World Heritage tentative list. Thus, the reinterpretation of Kota Lama as Venetie van Java demonstrates a transformation of meaning from a symbol of colonial economy into an icon of sustainable tourism, while simultaneously affirming that colonial spaces can be reconstructed in accordance with modern developments without losing their historical value.

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