

# The Dynamics of Meaning an Urban Public Space in the New Normal Era

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# The Dynamics of Meaning an Urban Public Space in the New Normal Era

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## Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic or Covid-19 is happened in several countries, including Indonesia. This condition has an impact not only on public health but also on all sectors of social order. Yogyakarta as a province in Indonesia receives the impact of this pandemic, especially the Malioboro as a famous public area in the city. The Malioboro area as an urban public space become deserted due to the coronavirus pandemic. The new normal policy, which implemented by the government through the adaptation of new habits, little by little bringing back the activities in the Malioboro area. Appeals to maintain social distancing keep on encouraged with direct and written persuasive methods. The purpose of this study is to explore people's perceptions of urban public spaces in the new normal era in the Malioboro area. The method was used by conducting a direct survey in Malioboro and giving a closed questionnaire online to the public. The discussion was performed by examining the results of a closed questionnaire with the current situation in Malioboro. The conclusions obtained that the community has received information to maintain social distancing but there are still many people who ignore the appeal so that no difference in social distancing occurred in the situation before the pandemic. This condition does not change the spatial patterns and layouts related to space at the public scale and the distance of social interactions.

**Keywords:** *Covid-19, social distancing, public spaces, social interaction.*

## Introduction

The Corona Virus pandemic or Covid-19 has hit several countries in the world, including Indonesia. This pandemic situation has an impact not only on public health but also on all sectors of social order. In previous normal times, local governments in many cities competed to obtain various kinds of attributes and advantages embedded in their cities. These attributes can be in the form of environmental carrying capacity, ability to survive, competitiveness, and

sustainability. But in certain situations and times of crisis like today, a city is required to be able to function properly for its citizens. Intensive policy coordination and strategy are needed to create well-functioning cities - inclusive, healthy, resilient, and sustainable. To reduce the transmission of the coronavirus and protect the health of individuals and society, policy measures were implemented to limit the use of public spaces with social distancing policies.

Yogyakarta as one of the tourist destinations in Indonesia has a well-known public space not only for the people of Yogyakarta but also for people from outside the region (Nisa and Haryanto, 2014, p. 934), namely the Malioboro Street area (hereinafter referred to as Malioboro).

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Malioboro as a public space is a place for social interaction, buying and selling transactions, to attractions that are always crowded with tourists almost every day. But Malioboro, which is usually busy, is now deserted due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Appeals to maintain social distancing, avoid crowd, stay at home, and avoid public places have caused activity in Malioboro become deserted, so there is not much activity happening in this area.

Figure 1. The quiet Malioboro area due to the corona virus pandemic.  
Source: <https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-tengah/d-4954252/malioboro-yogya-suwung-gegara-corona/1>



Foto: Malioboro sepi gegara pandemi Corona, Yogyakarta, Kamis (26/03/2020). (Pradito Riza Perbanan/detikcom)

The government issued a new normal policy by adopting new habits. Doubts arise regarding the adoption of this new habit, will Malioboro as an urban public space return to what it was before the pandemic? What dynamics might the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic have on social functioning and relationships in the public sphere once these restrictions are lifted? The depth and extent of the transformation are unclear, especially with regard to the design, use, and perception of public space in the future.

This study aims to highlight issues that have emerged in the new normal era after the Covid-19 pandemic, the social perceptions of the community towards the application of new habits, as well as the possible changes in interaction patterns in the design of urban public spaces. There is a possibility that the Covid-19 crisis could fundamentally become a crisis that changes the relationship between urban users of public spaces and public spaces

as a "place". This study will measure the initial process of community understanding of social distancing or also known as physical distancing. In addition, this study documents the ability of individuals and communities to exercise social distancing associated with activities in public spaces, as well as changes in social perceptions related to interactions between individuals in public spaces.

This research raises the dynamics of issues that arise related to the possibility of implementing a new normal after the Covid-19 emergency response period, especially in Malioboro and its relation to the form of interaction and design of urban public spaces. In addition, through this research wants to find out the public's understanding of changes in the meaning and social expression of urban public spaces.

## Methodology

This research uses a qualitative method based on the phenomenon of reducing activity in urban open spaces, especially in the Malioboro street area due to the coronavirus. The Malioboro area, which on normal days is filled with activities such as walking, sitting around, taking selfies, performing art music, and buying and selling transactions is now deserted. This happened due to an appeal from the Government to stay at home and avoid crowded places or doing the social distancing to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

The theory used to discuss this phenomenon is the theory of public space and its supporting elements. The supporting elements of public space include street furniture and social interactions that happen on it.

The research location is in the Malioboro street area, to be precise starting from the railroad tracks of Tugu train station to the zero kilometer area in the city center. The reason for choosing this location is because it forms a single road axis and is a public space that consists of various activities so that it is always crowded with

visitors on weekdays. The activities carried out by the community at this location include walking, sitting around, taking selfies, buying and selling transactions, seeing musical group attractions, and so on while enjoying the atmosphere of the Malioboro area which is unique because of its architecture of shops, including the pedestrian lane with renovated street furniture. increase the comfort of visitors who are active in Malioboro.

Data collection used a closed online questionnaire method which was filled in by 153 respondents. The respondents were randomly chosen who represented citizen which live in Yogyakarta or had lived in Yogyakarta.

### Literature Review

According to the <sup>3</sup> World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>1</sup>, Covid-19 is an infectious disease caused by the coronavirus. This virus attacks the human respiratory system and can get worse if it affects the elderly with respiratory problems, diabetes, and cancer. This virus can be transmitted easily through the nose, coughing, or sneezing. Until now, there has not been found a specific drug or treatment method to cure this disease.

Maintaining social distancing is one of the most recommended ways by the government to reduce the spread of this virus. According to the Regulation of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Indonesia Number 9 of 2020 concerning Guidelines for Large-Scale Social Restrictions, to maintain social distancing, it is carried out by vacationing the workplace, limiting activities in public places or facilities, and limiting social and cultural activities.

Reporting from the WHO website page<sup>2</sup>, efforts to maintain social distancing can be done by maintaining a minimum distance

of 1 meter from other people, avoiding crowds, covering nose and mouth with arms or tissues when coughing or sneezing, staying at home, and wearing a mask if necessary to go out of the house. This is important to do in the new normal era like today so that people do not only do their usual activities but also adapting to new habits that are in accordance with health protocols.

### Social Distancing

Theories about distance and space that studies human perceptions of space are called Proxemic (Hall in Mulyana, 2005). According to Hall, in daily interactions, such as when using public facilities or when in a crowd, humans still have their own space, meaning that humans create distance or space. The function of humans is to create a sense of security, facilitate communication, establish intimacy, and reduce potential threats. There are 4 distance zones according to Hall in Mulyana (2005), namely (1) Intimate Distance (<0.5 meters). This prerequisite is the existence of emotions between two or more people. (2) Personal Distance (0.5 - 1.5 meters), this distance is a personal distance, where someone can still hold hands or discuss personal problems. (3) Social Distance (1.5 - 3.0 meters), this distance is also called psychological distance, where a person can feel anxious if others enter their boundaries. At this distance, someone can easily join or leave discussions or chats with those around them. (4) Public Distance (> 3.0 meters), this distance is often used in public places, usually, there is no deep exchange of information.

Hantono (2019) wrote in his journal that a person's behavior in responding to a spatial space can be influenced by several factors such as culture, age, gender, and others. Hantono (2019) adds that someone's personal space is dynamic and can change so that someone will feel anxious if someone else enters their personal space. The pandemic may limit someone's ability to develop new relationships, especially among strangers

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1), accessed 2 June 2020

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>, accessed 2 June 2020

(Roeses, 2020, p. 11). From the opinion above and current conditions (Covid-19 pandemic), health factors can also affect a person's social distance in interacting in public spaces.

### **Public Space**

Urban public space is an important element of city's liveability (Lennard in Rossini and Nervino, 2019, p. 64). Public space are needed to create a safe, viable, and sustainable urban environment (Schmidt and Nemeth, 2010, p. 454). The well maintained, healthy and safe public space can make a city become an attractive place to live and work (Andersson, 2016, p. 5). According to Carr in Illiyin and Idajati (2015), public space must be able to be used for various activities, be able to be used by the general public from various backgrounds, and have links with social contexts. Budihardjo and Sujarto in Wardhani (2018) added that public space is a space that can be used as a meeting location and a place for joint activities. Apart from being a place for activities and socializing, public space also has benefits in improving the economy and health for humans (Pratiwi, 2016, p. 64).

According to Hatmoko in Mulyandari (2011), public space based on its shape can be divided into the street e.g. road corridor and square. Nasution and Zahrah (2017) also argue that public spaces can be in the form of squares, gardens, parks, circulation paths, and space between buildings. The existence of public space can be supported by the existence of street furniture.

According to Harris and Dines in Saifuddin and Qomarun (2019), road furniture is the element contained in the road landscape to support comfort, pleasure, information, circulation control, and protection of road users. Street furniture elements should be able to reflect and blend with the character of the local environment. Manurung (2018) adds, if the public space should be able to be a space for community activity and socialization, relieve fatigue, and play and interact with all city residents. According to

Manurung (2018), the public space of a city cannot be equated with other cities, elements of local culture, lifestyle, and social patterns are unique concepts of public space used by each city. The quality of public spaces in a city can be seen from the performance of these public spaces in providing comfort for its users (Octarino and Kristiadi, 2019, p. 6).

### **Social Interaction**

The existence of public space cannot be separated from the social interactions of its users. Public spaces that are identical with various social activities and interactions should be enjoyed by everyone without any restrictions (Rahmiati, 2017, p. 1). According to Gerungan (2010), social interaction is a relationship between two or more individuals where one behavior affects and changes the behavior of the other, and vice versa. According to M. Sherif in Gerungan (2010), social interactions can be influenced by social situations such as situations of togetherness. A togetherness situation is a situation where people who do not know each other get together and the social interactions that occur between them are not very deep. The most important thing in this situation is that they do not have such deep social interactions, but they are in one place to fulfill a common good. An example is the people gathered in a market. Their presence in the market is not for deep social interaction but because of common interests, for instance shopping.

According to Rappoport and Mouden in Saifuddin and Qomarun (2019), the activities of users of public spaces can contain 4 elements, namely (a) actual activities such as walking, eating, etc., (b) ways of doing such as: walking on the sidewalk, eating at home, and others, (c) additional activities such as: walking while looking at shop windows e.g. window shopping, and (d) experiencing activities and the environment.

## Result and Discussions

Malioboro is a well-known public space not only for the people of Yogyakarta but also for people from outside the region. It is evident from the closed online questionnaire that was filled in by 153 respondents, 99.3% knew about the Malioboro road area, especially from the railroad tracks to the zero kilometer point. As already stated that the selected respondents are those who live in Yogyakarta, or have lived in Yogyakarta, it is obtained data that respondents come from various regions, such as Lampung, Makassar, Toraja, Ambon, and Kupang. This shows that Malioboro is a distinctive public space and is open not only to residents of Yogyakarta, but also to people from outside the region.

Based on the results of the questionnaire, those who have visited Malioboro always take the time to come back to visit this area even though at different times, some are every month, every 3-6 months, every year, or every holiday season arrives. Visitor comes to this area with various purposes, from shopping to taking a walk or sitting around enjoying the atmosphere of Malioboro. The following is a photo of the Malioboro Street area with various activities carried out by both visitors and business people in Malioboro.

Figure 2. Night music attractions are one of the interesting activities in the Malioboro street area.  
Source: Dewangga Documentation, 2019.



As a public space, Malioboro is inseparable from the architectural elements that form it, such as old buildings that are still standing and street furniture along Malioboro. This is evidenced by the

results of the questionnaire, where 54.9% of respondents answered that architectural elements are the most interesting things in the Malioboro street area. The existence of street furniture elements, such as benches or chairs, greatly supports the comfort of visitors who are active in this area. Those who are tired of walking can rest on the benches provided. In addition, the Malioboro street signboard is also an element of street furniture that is often used as a photo object for visitors.

Figure 3. Street furniture in Malioboro.  
Source: Dewangga Documentation, 2019.



The existence of Malioboro as a public space is in accordance with Illiyin and Idajati (2015) opinion, where this area is able to accommodate various community activities both individually and in groups, and is able to become a place for people to socialize, seek entertainment, and release fatigue with socio-cultural distinctiveness (Manurung, 2018) in Malioboro.

Since the corona virus pandemic hit Yogyakarta in mid-March 2020, activity in the Malioboro street area has been quiet. This condition is contrast to the condition of Malioboro in the time before the pandemic. Not many people have activities in this area, as well as business actors who have not opened many stalls/kiosks. Pedicab and horse cart transportation service providers who are often found parking their vehicles on the side of the road are now rarely seen.

Figure 4. The parking area for pedicabs / horse carts and street vendors with low activity.  
Source: Dewangga Documentation, 2020.



This condition is the impact of the social distancing policy issued by the Government to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus. With the appeal to stay at home, automatically activities in public spaces will also stop. Of the 153 respondents, 98.7% have known social distancing and the benefits of social distancing (98.7%). According to the poll conducted, 60.1% (92 people) of respondents agreed that social distancing reduces their comfort in interacting with others, while 27.5% (42 people) of respondents did not feel social distancing policies reduce their comfort in social interaction. However, 93.5% (143 people) agreed to do social distancing in public spaces, meaning that respondents had the awareness to maintain social distancing when in public spaces.

The Malioboro street area as a public space is synonymous with crowds. The results of the online poll also stated that 69.9% (107 people) of respondents agreed that public spaces were identical to huddling human activities, however 71.2% (109 people) of respondents could still enjoy freedom in public spaces even without having to crowd and does not reduce their comfort in social interaction in public spaces (100 respondents).

With the new normal policy, activities in public spaces, especially in the Malioboro street area, are slowly recovering with health protocols that must be implemented. This is certainly a positive thing not only for business actors in the Malioboro road area but also for people who miss activities in the Malioboro street area. From the poll results, 84.3% (129 people) of respondents agreed that doing activities in public spaces is fun. This is in accordance with the opinion of Manurung (2018) which states that the function of public space is not only a place for social interaction but also as a place for entertainment and relieving fatigue.

Now the Malioboro road area has begun to be reorganized to anticipate the spread of the coronavirus. Various kinds of methods have been applied, including placing the sinks at 40 points, 20 points on the east side of the pedestrian path and 20 points on the west side of the pedestrian path. This handwashing place is not only provided by the government, but also by business actors.

Figure 5. Hand washing facilities provided by the government.  
Source: Dewangga Documentation, 2020.



In addition to providing handwashing facilities, another method used to monitor people who are active in this area is by dividing the Malioboro area into 5 zones. The first zone starts from the Inna Malioboro hotel to Malioboro Mall. The second zone is from Malioboro Mall to Mutiara Hotel, the third zone from Transjogja 2 - Suryatmajan Bus Stop, zone four from Suryatmajan - Pabringan,

and zone five from Pabringan - Zero Kilometer Point. In each zone, there are officers who check body temperature and visitors are asked to fill in data via barcode scans in each arrival area of each zone. Several security guards were deployed in several places to supervise and give advice to people who are active in this area. Text and graphic appeals are also placed in several places to remind visitors. Some seats have also been provided with ropes to remind people about social distancing restrictions.

Figure 6. Monitoring points in Zone 1 before visitors enter the Malioboro area.  
Source: Dewangga Documentation, 2020.



Figure 7. An appeal in the form of writing or graphics placed on the pedestrian path.  
Source: Dewangga Documentation, 2020.



Various efforts have been made by the Government to remind people who are active in the Malioboro street area to always keep their distance, even though the results are not directly proportional to what is expected. Based on the results of observations carried out on July 5, 2020, at 10:00 WIB, there are still many people who ignore the appeal to maintain social distancing. This can be seen from the

many people who are clustered and sitting close to each other. Even though the majority of visitors have worn masks, the call to distance themselves is ignored. Even some of the seats that had been given ropes were damaged by the community who ignored the appeal.

Figure 8. Seats with orange rope as a barrier, damaged condition (left). Source: Dewangga Documentation, 2020



Figure 9. The call for distancing is ignored. One bench is used by three people.  
Source: Dewangga Documentation, 2020.



When night falls, conditions in Malioboro are getting denser in this new normal era. Based on the results of an online poll, 59.5% (91 people) of respondents stated that they chose to visit Malioboro in the afternoon until evening. When observations were made on Sunday, July 12 2020 at 19.00-21.00, it was seen that this area was getting denser with active people. Appeals to maintain distance given by officers and written warnings are no longer valid, even though most people still wear masks when doing activities in the Malioboro area. Based on



observations it is also known that if many people are reluctant to keep their distance according to regulations, the community has also ignored the call to walk in one direction. Activities in the Malioboro area at night feel back to normal, even though in the new era it is normal like now.

Figure 10. Zero kilometer area which is busy with community activities.  
Source: Dewangga Documentation, 2020.



Figure 11. The neglected call for distancing.  
Source: Dewangga Documentation, 2020.



The presence of officers in the field, in fact, is not able to control people's behavior in public space. During the observation, it was not uncommon to see several officers who chose not to reprimand the community, some zones that were monitoring points were also not properly monitored so that there were visitors who were not controlled, and there were even zones where there were no officers on duty.

Figure 12. Officers who do not remind the public to keep their distance.  
Source: Dewangga Documentation, 2020.

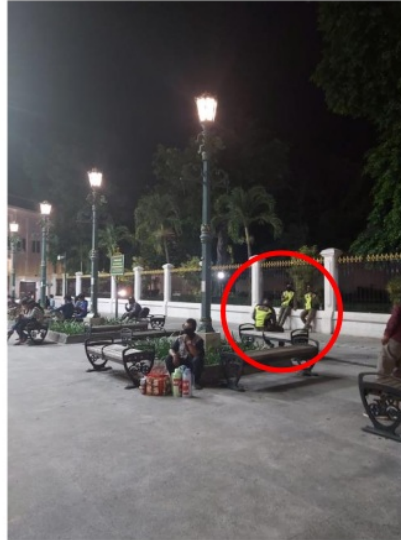


Figure 13. Zone areas that are not guarded by officers.  
Source: Dewangga Documentation, 2020.



From these conditions, it shows that public awareness of maintaining social distancing in public spaces is still very low. People still have not adapted to new habits in the new normal era, especially in their activities and interactions in urban public spaces. Many people are still at a personal distance (Hall in Mulyana, 2005) when conducting social interactions in public spaces. In fact, the presence of security officers has not been able to remind visitors to always maintain social distance, at least 1.5 - 3 meters. Various written and graphic appeals have not been able to

control community activities in urban public spaces.

## Conclusion

The Malioboro street area is a public space that is in great demand not only by residents of Yogyakarta but also from outside the Yogyakarta area. Even though activity in this area had decreased due to the coronavirus pandemic, slowly activity in this area began to return to the new normal era. The meaning of urban public space as a place for various activities and social interactions that are identical to crowds and crowds does not experience a degradation of meaning. What differentiates this time is the presence of a handwashing place and various written and verbal warnings made by security officers. This is done to comply with health protocols issued by the government, although sometimes there are still many people who do not care about these health protocols. The coronavirus pandemic has not been able to reduce the meaning of urban public spaces, especially Malioboro, as a pleasant place for most people to carry out various activities and social interactions..

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PAGE 1

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PAGE 2

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PAGE 3

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PAGE 4

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PAGE 5

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PAGE 6

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PAGE 7

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PAGE 8

---

PAGE 9

---

PAGE 10

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