

Cultural Placemaking to Preserve Suku Laut Heritage in Indonesia's Riau Islands Communities

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Abstract

This research explores efforts to preserve the cultural heritage of the Suku Laut in the Riau Islands through placemaking initiatives within coastal settlements. Historically dependent on the sea for their livelihood and identity, the community now faces significant challenges in maintaining their cultural traditions amidst modernization and shifts in coastal ecosystems. This research aims to identify design strategies that harmonize traditional cultural values with the demands of contemporary development, focusing on revitalizing the community's living spaces. Employing qualitative methods, including interviews, field observations, and document analysis, the research highlights the critical role of cultural placemaking. Key elements include incorporating traditional architectural features, using locally sourced materials, and restoring communal spaces to promote sustainable coastal settlement designs. The findings indicate that this approach which respects the cultural values and the Suku Laut's relationship with their natural environment can promote social and environmental sustainability. In conclusion, integrating cultural placemaking into coastal settlement design is pivotal for preserving the cultural heritage and enhancing the quality of life for the Suku Laut amidst the ongoing modernization.

Keywords: *cultural placemaking; coastal settlement; heritage; modernization; Suku Laut*

Introduction

The Riau Islands, strategically located at the crossroads of Southeast Asia's maritime routes, have historically served as a vibrant hub for cultural exchange and economic activity ([Phillips, 2021](#)). This archipelago, characterized by its extensive network of coastal settlements, represents a rich tapestry of human interaction deeply

connected to the surrounding seas. Among its diverse communities are the Suku Laut, also known as Orang Laut or Suku Laut, whose lives, traditions, and identities are intrinsically linked to the maritime environment ([Suwarlan et al., 2024](#)). These indigenous communities possess a unique cultural heritage shaped by centuries of seafaring practices, a deep understanding of marine biodiversity, and an intimate relationship with the natural resources of the region. Their traditions, such as nomadic seafaring, Pekajang, Berkiyau, the Merawai dance, and Buang Temakok, are deeply rooted in their maritime way of life. Socially, their organization typically reflects a kinship-based structure, with groups led by an elder, often referred to as Kepala Suku ([Chanet et al., 2022](#)). As such, their way of life constitutes an invaluable cultural asset within the socio-cultural landscape of the Riau Islands (see Figure 1).

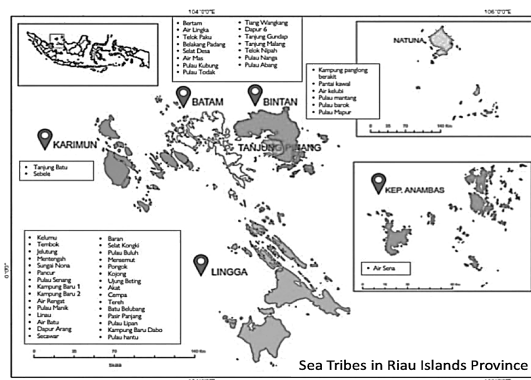


Figure 1. Suku Laut in Riau Islands Province Map

Source: Yayasan Kajang, 2020

Over the past few years, however, coastal settlements in the Riau Islands, despite their cultural and ecological significance, have faced increasing threats from urban expansion and coastal development driven by modernization and global economic integration ([Hidayati, 2021](#)). These transformations often prioritize economic growth and physical infrastructure, while overlooking the socio-cultural and ecological systems that have long sustained local communities. As a result, traditional ways of life, particularly those of the Suku Laut, whose identities are deeply intertwined with the marine environment, are becoming increasingly vulnerable to displacement, cultural erosion, and weakening social ties. To sustain the Suku Laut's traditions, lifestyles, and social cohesion amidst these changes, future development in this region needs to adopt a more holistic and context-sensitive approach. Rather than imposing top-down, homogenized models of development, there is a need to integrate local knowledge systems, cultural practices, and environmental relationships into the planning and design process. This also requires acknowledging contemporary transformations, such as shifts in livelihood patterns, mobility, and socio-spatial interactions, that continuously reshape identity, social relations, and everyday practices.

In this regard, placemaking offers a critical lens through which development can respond to both continuity and change. As highlighted by [Ellery et al. \(2021\)](#), placemaking is a dynamic process that shapes an individual's sense of place, occurring along a continuum from externally imposed change to community-driven transformation. While creative placemaking often emphasizes the role of art and cultural production ([Rosetia & Harun, 2026](#)), cultural placemaking places greater emphasis on embedding cultural values, lived experiences, and evolving community narratives within spatial development ([Ellery et al., 2021](#); [Raposo & Nofre, 2024](#); [Singh et al., 2023](#)). Through this lens, space is not merely designed but co-created, reflecting both heritage and contemporary realities. In coastal contexts such as the Riau Islands, cultural placemaking may provide a strategic approach to bridging tradition and modernity. By integrating intangible heritage, spatial practices, and community participation into development processes, it enables the creation of environments that are adaptive to modern pressures while remaining rooted in local identity. Furthermore, involving local communities in placemaking processes can strengthen heritage preservation, enrich cultural landscapes, and support sustainable tourism development ([Hamzah et al., 2024](#); [Nursanty et al., 2024](#)). In this way, development becomes a platform for cultural expression and social cohesion, rather than a force of disruption.

Notwithstanding its potential, prior studies on cultural placemaking ([Jeong, 2022](#); [Raposo & Nofre, 2024](#)) have given limited attention to traditional coastal communities such as the Suku Laut. Addressing this gap, the present study explored how cultural placemaking can support the preservation of their heritage and identity amid

ongoing transformations. Specifically, it investigates the case of the Suku Laut in Tanjung Gundap, Riau Islands, Indonesia, an area where cultural heritage and modern development often intersect. Through this case, the study contributes to broader discourses on indigenous heritage preservation by examining cultural placemaking as a practical and sustainable strategy for safeguarding traditions, reinforcing social structures, and maintaining community identity while adapting to contemporary socio-economic changes. Achieving this balance is essential to ensuring that the values and identities of the Suku Laut endure in the face of rapid modernization.

Literature Review

1. The Suku Laut in the Riau Islands

The Riau Islands, located between Indonesia and Malaysia, have been vital for maritime trade and cultural exchange for centuries ([Nugraha, 2022](#)). The Suku Laut, whose way of life is intimately linked to the sea through fishing and sailing, embodies a semi-nomadic existence, using boats as homes ([Lenhart, 2001](#)). Their profound knowledge of navigation highlights the harmonious bond between humans and nature ([Omstedt & Gustavsson, 2022](#)). Modernization often neglects the cultural heritage of the Suku Laut, putting their maritime traditions at risk and restricting their access to education and economic opportunities ([Bintana et al., 2020](#)). However, preserving the Suku Laut heritage is essential for enriching Indonesia's diversity in the face of modernization. Suku Laut deep connection to the natural environment provides valuable insights into living in harmony with nature and offers a model for living in balance with marine ecosystems, which is essential in addressing global climate change; their traditional ecological knowledge plays a vital role in preserving coral reefs and mangrove forests, which act as natural carbon sinks essential for mitigating climate change ([Nugraha, 2022](#); [Samsuddin et al., 2024](#)).



Figure 2. Pekajang Tradition in Lingga, Riau Island

Source: Yayasan Kajang, 2022

The Tanjung Gundap Suku Laut coastal settlement, as one of the last strongholds of the Suku Laut culture in mainland Batam, faces real threats from modernization, urbanization, industrial expansion, and environmental degradation ([Lenhart, 2001](#)). Simultaneously, the Suku Laut in the hinterland of Batam, such as Lingga Suku Laut, confronts analogous threats of environmental degradation resulting from industrialization and development, which jeopardize marine livelihoods and the Pekajang tradition (going to sea using sampan berkajang or canoe) of the Suku Laut (see Figure 2). Traditions that have been carried out for centuries are now on the verge of collapse. This situation further underscores the importance of exploring cultural placemaking strategies as a solution to preserve their traditions and identities (Zitcer, 2020). Community-driven initiatives can help create public spaces that value and represent the cultural practices of the Suku Laut, allowing the transmission of their cultural heritage to continue from generation to generation, despite rapid modernization ([Reich, 2020](#)).

2. Cultural Placemaking in Coastal Settlements

Placemaking is often framed as an inclusive and participatory approach to spatial development; however, it is more accurately understood as a contested socio-spatial process through which places are produced, negotiated, and legitimized across both material and symbolic dimensions ([Rosetia & Harun, 2023](#)). Beyond physical design, placemaking operates as a mechanism of meaning-making, shaping how space is experienced, represented, and

valued. As noted by [Reich \(2020\)](#), placemaking fosters shared memory and belonging, thereby supporting the formation of resilient and socially cohesive communities. While the collaborative nature of placemaking has been extensively studied, recent perspectives have shifted. Placemaking aims to augment the value of a specific location; nevertheless, its persistent outcome issues arise from ambiguity over the nature of these values and their origins ([Dubois et al., 2023](#)). This ambiguity becomes more pronounced in culturally sensitive contexts, where development interventions risk simplifying or commodifying local identities. In response to these challenges, cultural placemaking has particularly emerged as a more grounded and community-oriented approach that explicitly centers culture as both a driver and an outcome of spatial development.

Unlike other forms of placemaking that may prioritize physical enhancement or socio-economic revitalization, cultural placemaking centers the co-production of space through lived experiences, cultural practices, and community narratives ([Ellery et al., 2021](#); [Raposo & Nofre, 2024](#); [Singh et al., 2023](#)). Rather than treating culture as a static asset, it views culture as dynamic, evolving, and embedded in everyday practices. Consequently, place identity is not treated as a fixed attribute to be preserved, but as an evolving construct shaped by the interplay between historical legacies, social relations, and spatial transformations ([Atwa Eldek et al., 2022](#)). As [Wheeler \(2016\)](#) suggests, the character of a place is inseparable from its cultural legacy; however, this legacy is neither singular nor stable, but subject to reinterpretation and contestation over time.

The critical relevance of cultural placemaking becomes particularly evident in coastal settlements, where culture, environment, and livelihood systems are deeply entangled. In such contexts, spatial interventions cannot be reduced to formal or aesthetic considerations, as they directly intersect with ecological processes and socio-economic survival strategies. Cultural placemaking may thus extend beyond symbolic representation to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems, vernacular spatial practices, and adaptive environmental relationships ([Ounanian et al., 2021](#)). This integrated approach allows for the creation of spaces that are not only culturally expressive but also environmentally responsive and socially meaningful. While urban designers have increasingly adopted placemaking to enhance the attractiveness and functionality of public spaces ([Pendlebury & Porfyriou, 2017](#)), its application in coastal contexts demands a more nuanced understanding of local socio-cultural and economic dynamics, as well as environmental vulnerabilities. Accordingly, cultural placemaking in coastal settlements should not be limited to the preservation of tangible heritage, such as traditional architecture or craftsmanship, but must also engage with intangible cultural practices, social structures, and evolving community needs.

Moreover, the implementation of cultural placemaking frequently reveals a gap between discourse and practice. While participatory and community-led approaches are widely advocated, they are often undermined by fragmented governance structures and limited institutional support. In many cases, community initiatives remain peripheral to formal planning processes, resulting in isolated interventions with limited long-term impact. The case of Bima Regency, Indonesia, exemplifies how weak collaboration among stakeholders can constrain the transformative potential of placemaking ([Rifai & Haeril, 2024](#)). This highlights a broader structural issue: without meaningful integration across scales of governance, placemaking risks being reduced to a symbolic exercise rather than a substantive tool for spatial justice and cultural sustainability.

To address these limitations, cultural placemaking should be reframed not merely as a design strategy, but as a critical practice that mediates between preservation and transformation. This requires moving beyond the tokenistic inclusion of cultural elements toward a deeper engagement with the socio-political and ecological contexts that shape place. Key principles may include: (i) mobilizing local resources, both tangible and intangible, as active agents in spatial production, (ii) foregrounding the meanings embedded in cultural practices and social relations, and (iii) enabling adaptive and innovative reinterpretations of identity in response to contemporary change ([Aguspriyanti et al., 2023](#); [Jeong, 2022](#); [Raposo & Nofre, 2024](#)). Crucially, these principles must be supported by collaborative governance frameworks that redistribute decision-making power and ensure sustained community involvement.

3. Socio-Cultural Changes in Coastal Community

Building resilience within coastal settlements characterized by strong cultural identities and deeply embedded local values requires more than the provision of functional space; it necessitates a critical understanding of how socio-cultural systems evolve under changing conditions ([Sills, 2021](#)). In these contexts, socio-cultural change is not a linear trajectory of loss or preservation, but an ongoing negotiation between continuity and transformation.

Cultural norms, social structures, and spatial practices are continuously reconfigured through interactions between local traditions and external pressures. Socio-cultural theory suggests that culture simultaneously stabilizes and transforms social life. Social dimensions include structures, values, and relationships within society, influenced by institutions like family, religion, and education ([Arifa et al., 2023](#)). In coastal communities, shared values, kinship systems, and place-based practices have historically structured social cohesion and collective identity. However, these systems are increasingly reshaped by internal dynamics, such as demographic shifts, generational change, and evolving aspirations, as well as external forces including rapid development and governance interventions ([Suwarlan et al., 2023](#)). These transformations alter not only livelihoods and settlement patterns but also the meanings and values attached to place, indicating that socio-cultural change is a constitutive process in the production of space rather than a secondary outcome of development.

As mentioned earlier, cultural placemaking emerges as a critical approach for engaging with, rather than resisting, socio-cultural change within this dynamic context. Its significance lies in its capacity to mediate the tension between continuity and transformation, enabling communities to reinterpret their identities while maintaining social cohesion. However, existing applications frequently reduce culture to a commodified asset within tourism-driven agendas, overlooking the deeper socio-cultural processes that sustain community life ([Djukic et al., 2023](#); [Hansasooksin & Tontisirin, 2021](#)). Therefore, integrating socio-cultural change into cultural placemaking strategies is essential to ensure that interventions remain contextually grounded and socially responsive. By recognizing culture as dynamic and continuously negotiated, cultural placemaking can move beyond static preservation toward supporting adaptive processes of identity formation and community resilience. This positions socio-cultural change not as a challenge to be managed, but as a fundamental driver that shapes the effectiveness and sustainability of placemaking in coastal settlements.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the intersection of cultural preservation and modernization within coastal settlements of the Suku Laut in the Riau Islands. Tanjung Gundap was selected as the case study due to its significance as one of the remaining coastal settlements where the Suku Laut community continues to reside in mainland Batam. The area represents a transitional landscape where traditional maritime-based lifestyles intersect with rapid urbanization and industrial expansion, making it a critical site for examining cultural transformation and resilience. The research was designed not only to understand socio-cultural dynamics, but also to systematically develop culturally grounded placemaking strategies. To achieve this, the study followed a multi-stage qualitative process that integrates data collection, interpretation, and strategy formulation.

Data collection was conducted through three primary methods. First, semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten key stakeholders, including five members of the Suku Laut, a community leader (Kepala Suku), a government representative, a cultural academic expert, and two architects and planners. This selection ensures the inclusion of both emic (community-based) and etic (expert and institutional) perspectives, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of cultural values, spatial practices, and development pressures ([Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021](#)). The interviews explored themes such as cultural changes, architectural adaptations, and settlement transformations. Second, field observations were undertaken to document alterations in spatial configurations, architectural typologies, and patterns of everyday outdoor activities within the settlement, highlighting the effects of modernization. Particular attention was given to how cultural practices are embedded in physical space, including communal areas, housing forms, and interactions with the coastal environment ([Byrne, 2021](#)). These observations provide critical insights into the relationship between tangible spatial elements and intangible cultural meanings. Third, document analysis was conducted to contextualize current conditions within broader historical and institutional frameworks. This included reviewing local development plans, cultural preservation policies, and historical records, to trace adaptive responses to changes in the area over time ([Alidousti & Sahli, 2024](#)). This step helps identify gaps between policy intentions and lived realities on the ground.

The analytical process followed a structured thematic analysis, conducted in two stages. The first stage identified key themes related to socio-cultural changes, activity patterns, and the evolution of residential structures. The second stage examined relationships between these themes, particularly how socio-cultural transformations influence spatial configurations and community identity. Building on this analysis, the development of cultural

placemaking strategies was carried out through a framework-based synthesis based on the literature review. Empirical findings are mapped against key dimensions of cultural placemaking, such as local resources activation, cultural meaning and social relations, and adaptive cultural transformation (Aguspriyanti et al., 2023; Jeong, 2022; Raposo & Nofre, 2024), to identify strategic priorities. This process translates qualitative insights into actionable design and planning strategies that balance cultural continuity with the need for adaptation to contemporary challenges. To enhance the validity and reliability of the study, methodological triangulation was employed by cross-verifying data from interviews, observations, and documents. In addition, member checking was conducted with selected community participants to ensure that interpretations accurately reflect local perspectives and lived experiences. This iterative validation process strengthens the credibility of the findings and ensures that the resulting cultural placemaking strategies remain grounded in the community context.

Result and Discussion

The Suku Laut in Tanjung Gundap, Riau Island, face challenges as their cultural heritage is marginalized by industrial expansion and modernization, jeopardizing their physical and cultural landscapes. The allure of modern lifestyles also hampers the transmission of cultural knowledge to younger generations. To capture these dynamics, the delineation of the study area focuses on the core settlement zone, including residential clusters, communal spaces, and coastal interfaces where socio-cultural activities take place. This boundary was determined based on field observations and activity mapping, particularly identifying key hotspots such as religious spaces, communal gathering areas, and productive zones. Within this context, cultural placemaking is positioned as a strategic framework that integrates maritime traditions into spatial development, enabling adaptive continuity rather than static preservation. This approach highlights the potential of Tanjung Gundap to serve as a model for sustainable, culturally grounded tourism while maintaining community identity and agency. A summary of the data analysis and key findings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Data Analysis and Findings

Data Collection Method	Focus of Analysis	Findings
Semi-structured Interviews	Understanding cultural changes, architectural adaptations, and settlement transformations from various stakeholders.	1. Shift from a semi-nomadic sea-based lifestyle to land-based living 2. Increasing involvement of younger generations in non-traditional culture and non-traditional occupations 3. Continued emphasis on community gatherings and shared spaces.
Field Observations	Documenting outdoor activities, behavioral patterns, communal interactions, and evolving architectural structures.	1. Changes in settlement structures from stilted to land-based housing 2. Transformation of <i>pelantar</i> into multipurpose spaces (e.g., bike parking) 3. Outdoor activities shifting from sea-based to land-based communal activities.
Document Analysis	Examining historical and contemporary records, including local development plans and cultural preservation policies.	1. Evidence of government policies influencing settlement planning 2. Recognition of cultural placemaking efforts as a tool for preserving traditional identity 3. Increased focus on heritage conservation within urban planning policies

Triangulation Process	Cross-verification of data from interviews, observations, and documents.	1. Confirm that modernization has had a transformative impact on the culture, social structure of the Suku Laut 2. Integration of traditional elements into settlement and communal spaces 3. The need for community driven placemaking strategies to balance development with heritage preservation.
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Source: Authors

1. Social Changes and Activity Patterns

The research findings illuminate the adaptive strategies of the Suku Laut residing in the traditional coastal village of Tanjung Gundap as they navigate modernization while safeguarding their cultural heritage. A key change is the shift from a semi-nomadic, sea-based lifestyle to a more land-oriented existence due to economic pressures and educational opportunities. Younger generations are increasingly joining urban economies, taking on non-traditional jobs like tourism and industry, which reduces their reliance on the sea. However, this gradual evolution does not diminish the community's profound emotional bond with their coastal environment, which remains a cornerstone of their collective identity.

The resilience and sustainability of the Tanjung Gundap Suku Laut depend not only on physical structures but also on preserving their socio-cultural elements. Their closely-knit coastal settlements enhance social cohesion and collective defense against environmental threats, fostering community interaction and support. The spatial configuration of settlements plays an important mediating role in this transition. Communal areas, including spaces for gatherings, ceremonies, and everyday interaction, remain critical sites where cohesion and shared values are reinforced. These spaces are not only physical nodes of activity but also cultural anchors that sustain social capital. Their continued relevance demonstrates how physical environments are central to the reproduction of identity, providing both a setting for collective practices and a buffer against social fragmentation. The transformations in the cultural configuration of the Suku Laut in Tanjung Gundap have profoundly impacted their behaviors, activities, and interactions with their environment. As modernization has gradually reshaped their livelihoods, the Suku Laut have adapted their daily practices and communal interactions, which are now visibly reflected in the evolving coastal landscape, architecture, and their use of the sea.

Figure 3 illustrates the current patterns of activities among the inhabitants of Tanjung Gundap. High activity levels associated with mobility, extend from land to the coast, whilst hotspots representing the highest levels of activity are identified solely on land. Key activities within these outdoor spaces throughout the day include religious activities (location 1), community living areas (location 2), and charcoal production in *dapur arang* (location 3). These active engagement of individuals with the socio-physical environments foster meaningful memories contributing to emotional attachment to both the places and communities, thereby shaping their collective identities. The shift in socio-cultural dynamics has greatly affected the Suku Laut's behaviors and activities. Outdoor activities vary in intensity across the landscape, with a noticeable transition from sea to land dependency. Major activity hotspots are all on land, highlighting this shift.

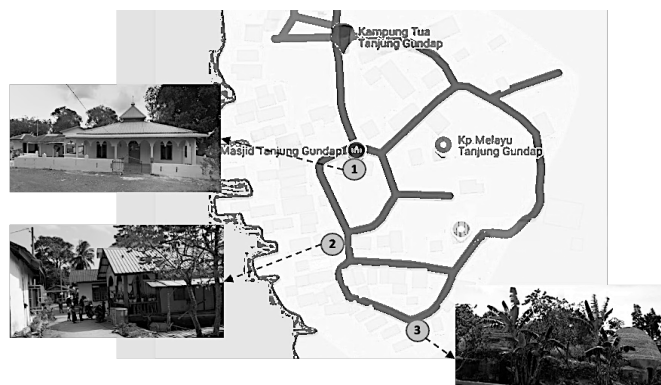


Figure 3. Activities spots in Tanjung Gundap

Source: Authors

2. Evolution of Residential Structures

In addition to the transformation of outdoor activities, the residential structure in Tanjung Gundap has undergone significant changes. Traditionally, the Suku Laut lived in sampan berkajang (canoes with roofs or canopies), reflecting a semi-nomadic maritime-based way of life. However, over time, the settlement structure has transitioned to coastal settlements with stilt houses. Stilt houses have also undergone an evolution from being made from wood to being made from concrete, as illustrated in Figure 4.

The evolution of settlements has resulted in spatial variations. The once boundless outdoor space with houses has been transformed into an outdoor area with defined boundaries by using fences. In the Tanjung Gundap Suku Laut settlements, *pelantar* (wooden platforms) are positioned in the front, side, or back of the house, serving as a divider between the houses. Initially, these *pelantar* acted as connecting streets (paths) for coastal settlements among stilt houses. However, currently some *pelantar* have also been repurposed to serve as parking areas, storage areas, and drying areas, and some have even been turned into main roads for vehicles made of concrete. This shift in residential architecture not only showcases the community's adaptation to a more sedentary lifestyle but also signs the development of their cultural landscape.



Figure 4. Residential buildings transformation in Tanjung Gundap; and *pelantar* turns to parking area and made of concrete

Source: Authors

3. Cultural Placemaking as a Preservation Strategy

The results reveal that the transformation of Suku Laut settlements is not merely physical, but socio-cultural, reflected in shifts in coastal landscapes, architectural forms, and intangible cultural practices. These changes indicate an ongoing reconfiguration of relationships between people, space, and the marine environment, where traditional practices are being adapted, reinterpreted, or, in some cases, fragmented. This underscores that development in such contexts cannot be approached as a purely technical or spatial intervention; rather, it must engage with the socio-cultural processes that shape how space is produced and experienced. Consequently, safeguarding traditions

while accommodating modernization requires a community-driven approach in which local actors actively negotiate the direction and form of change.

Table 2 illustrates the process of developing cultural placemaking strategies through the systematic translation of empirical findings into spatial and design responses. This process is grounded in a cultural placemaking framework structured around three key principles: local resource activation, cultural meaning and social relations, and adaptive cultural transformation. Rather than applying these principles deductively, they were derived from empirical findings and operationalized through a mapping process that links observed socio-cultural dynamics to specific spatial interventions. This mapping involved aligning key patterns, such as shifts in livelihood, transformations in communal activities, and changes in spatial use, with corresponding design strategies. For instance, the identification of local resources informed interventions that prioritize the use of vernacular materials and coastal spatial configurations, reinforcing continuity with existing environmental and cultural contexts. Similarly, insights into cultural behavior and social relations guided the design of communal spaces that accommodate rituals, social gatherings, and everyday interactions, ensuring that spatial interventions remain embedded in lived practices. In parallel, the principle of adaptive cultural transformation directed attention toward the reinterpretation of identity through symbolic elements and spatial narratives, enabling the preservation of cultural meaning while accommodating contemporary change.

The resulting strategies, presented in Table 3, should therefore be understood not as fixed or prescriptive solutions, but as context-responsive propositions that mediate between continuity and transformation. This is particularly relevant in Tanjung Gundap, where the findings indicate that socio-cultural changes are most evident in the reconfiguration of communal spaces and the evolution of traditional architectural elements. Accordingly, the proposed strategies focus on these two domains as critical sites for intervention. To enhance both validity and applicability, the strategies were further refined through an iterative validation process involving key stakeholders, including government officials, architects, planners, and cultural experts. This stage ensured that the proposed interventions are not only culturally grounded but also institutionally feasible and adaptable to existing development frameworks. Moreover, the validation process underscored the importance of multi-scalar collaboration, highlighting how the integration of community knowledge with professional expertise can produce more inclusive, context-sensitive, and implementable cultural placemaking strategies.

Table 2. Placemaking principles from thematic analysis

Theme	Findings from Observations & Interviews	Implications for Cultural Placemaking
Local resources activation	Land-based housing using mixed materials (wood, bricks, concrete)	Encourage contextual architecture that integrates local materials
Cultural meaning and social relations	Communal gatherings, cultural activities, and rituals still practiced but declining	Communal spaces as cultural hubs
Adaptive cultural transformation	Intergenerational transfer of traditional knowledge is declining as younger members choose modern cultures and livelihoods	Develop cultural tourism initiatives that engage youth in heritage conservation

Source: Authors

Table 3. Cultural placemaking strategies for Suku Laut's cultural heritage preservation

Placemaking Principles	Strategies for the Attributes of Suku Laut Settlement	
	Communal Spaces	Traditional Architectural Elements

Local resources activation (The use of locally available tangible and intangible assets as active components in shaping spatial development)	Design thematic and integrated outdoor public spaces, particularly the hotspot areas, reflecting the Suku Laut culture in modern era <i>e.g., smart fisheries village as a theme</i>	Develop thematic and integrated architectural styles for the buildings, maintaining the visual and cultural character of the settlement <i>e.g., the current residential building typology as a theme</i>
	Install informative signage and public art that illuminate the heritage of the Suku Laut, thereby establishing a visual connection to their cultural legacy <i>e.g., indigenous elements such as sampan berkajang can be displayed in public areas</i>	Use locally sourced and environmentally sustainable materials for the buildings, thereby supporting the local character <i>e.g., woods, bricks, and concretes as the main building materials</i>
Cultural meaning and social relations (Emphasizing the symbolic, social, and cultural meanings embedded in everyday practices and relationships)	Involve local inhabitants in the planning and decision-making processes to ensure that their voices and cultural practices are reflected in the development of public spaces <i>e.g., monthly meeting and design charrettes for the community</i>	Increase access to the sea, fostering diverse socio-economic opportunities for the community <i>e.g., more public spaces in the transition areas to drive more uses and activities in both that area and the sea</i>
	Enhance the quality of the hotspot areas to facilitate key activities within it by incorporating appropriate outdoor furnitures <i>e.g., improved tools for charcoals production in the location number 3 (see Figure 2)</i>	
Adaptive cultural transformation (The process of evolving, reinterpreting, and innovating cultural identity in response to contemporary changes)	Create appealing tourist destinations, such as cultural hub, and organise regular events that showcase the culture of the Suku Laut <i>e.g., traditional boat-making workshops in the location number 3 (see Figure 2), cultural walking tours, annual Suku Laut Festival</i>	Repurpose <i>pelantar</i> or terraces of residential buildings into social or workspaces <i>e.g., pelantar near the location number 2 (see Figure 2) can be utilised as either social places or areas dedicated to fishery production</i>
	Promote community-based tourism initiatives that empower local inhabitants and the use of digital media for cultural promotion <i>e.g., the younger generation as content creators to document, share, and promote their cultural identity</i>	

Source: Authors

The proposed strategies highlight the need to critically align shifting community behaviors with spatial design, positioning space as an adaptive interface rather than a fixed outcome. Empirical findings show that changes in outdoor space use and livelihood practices, such as charcoal production, social and religious gatherings, and children's play, reconfigure the functional demands of space, requiring it to remain flexible and multifunctional. The strategies advanced in this study emphasize thematic integration as a key mechanism, enabling the coexistence of multiple activities while embedding layered cultural meanings within everyday spatial practices. This approach extends existing studies on cultural placemaking, which often frame interventions such as cultural hubs, interpretive signage, and public art primarily as tools for cultural representation or place branding (Nursanty et al., 2024). While prior research highlights their role in enhancing visibility and attractiveness (e.g., tourism-oriented placemaking), the findings of this study reposition these elements as performative and relational tools. Rather than serving purely aesthetic or economic functions, they actively facilitate the transmission of cultural knowledge, support

intergenerational interaction, and reinforce collective identity through daily use. In this regard, cultural placemaking is not limited to symbolic representation but operates through the integration of meaning into routine spatial practices.

At the architectural scale, the findings further reveal a tension between continuity and transformation. This study demonstrates that evolving building practices can also create opportunities for reinterpretation. The introduction of new materials and construction techniques does not necessarily result in cultural loss, but can enable adaptive reconfigurations of traditional spatial relationships, particularly the community's connection to the sea. For instance, strategies that repurpose and modify existing structures to enhance sea access illustrate how architectural adaptation can simultaneously preserve cultural orientation and support emerging socio-economic activities. Moreover, the use of locally sourced, sustainable materials is not only a matter of conservation but also a strategy for reinforcing environmental resilience. This shifts the focus from static preservation toward adaptive continuity, where cultural distinctiveness is maintained through processes of reinterpretation rather than replication.

Overall, the findings contribute to the discourse on cultural placemaking in coastal context by demonstrating that effective strategies must move beyond representational and economically driven models. Instead, they should engage with the evolving socio-cultural dynamics of communities ([Raposo & Nofre, 2024](#)), positioning spatial design as a flexible, integrative, and adaptive process that mediates between tradition and change.

Conclusion

This study shows that cultural placemaking offers the Suku Laut of Tanjung Gundap a pathway to adapt to modernization while safeguarding identity. Cultural placemaking is most effective when understood not as a set of predefined design interventions, but as an adaptive process that translates socio-cultural dynamics into spatial strategies. In the context of Tanjung Gundap, modernization manifests through shifts in community behavior, spatial practices, and architectural forms, revealing both the vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities of coastal communities. Rather than indicating a linear loss of tradition, these transformations reflect an ongoing negotiation between continuity and change, where identity is continuously reconstituted through evolving relationships between people, space, and the coastal environment.

The findings suggest that cultural placemaking strategies grounded in local resource activation, cultural meaning and social relations, and adaptive transformation can mediate these transitions. By integrating traditional architectural elements, multifunctional communal spaces, and locally embedded practices, such strategies move beyond representational approaches toward more performative and context-responsive interventions. In doing so, they reinforce social cohesion, sustain cultural knowledge, and enhance ecological resilience. However, their effectiveness is contingent upon the extent to which they are embedded in community-led processes. Without meaningful participation, placemaking risks becoming reductive, either as aesthetic formalization or as an externally imposed development tool detached from lived realities. Furthermore, while placemaking in general is often associated with opportunities for economic development, particularly through tourism, this study highlights the inherent tension between valorization and commodification of culture. Aligning with critical perspectives in existing literature, the findings emphasize that culture should not be reduced to a consumable asset, but recognized as a dynamic system that underpins social identity and community resilience. Ensuring that cultural representations and spatial narratives are defined and negotiated by the community is therefore essential to maintaining authenticity, agency, and long-term sustainability.

Ultimately, cultural placemaking functions as a mediating framework that bridges tradition and modernity, not by preserving static forms, but by enabling adaptive continuity. Its significance lies in its capacity to support communities in actively shaping their spatial and cultural futures amidst ongoing transformation. Future research and policy should therefore prioritize participatory and multi-scalar approaches, integrating context-sensitive design with governance frameworks that empower local actors. Such an approach is critical for advancing more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable models of coastal development.

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