

Public Open Space Based On Place Identity (Case Study : Merdeka Square)

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ABSTRACT

Public open space has a very high role for the city community, apart from being related to the physical environment, public open space functions as a variety of social and cultural meanings at a very high level. Public open space can be seen based on the identity place. There are four aspects that can from the identity of a place, namely: sustainability, self_esteem, self_ability, and uniqueness in the Merdeka square. This namely accessibility, comfort, activity, and social interaction. The findings show that the merdeka square as a public open space already contains the identity of the place. However, there are many problems with the arrangement of the merdeka square area which is still lacking, causing the view that binds the merdeka square area to be invisible. Therefore, the government must improve the arrangement of the area so that it blends with the identity of the place around it.

Keywords: public open space, place identity



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1. Introduction

Public open space plays an important role in improving the quality of urban life because it supports environmental quality, aesthetics, social interaction, cultural expression, and community welfare. In urban contexts, public open space is not only understood as a physical area but also as a social and cultural setting that accommodates various meanings and activities for city residents [1]. According to Law No. 26 of 2007 concerning Spatial Planning, green open space is defined as an elongated area, path, or clustered area whose use is more open and where plants grow naturally or are deliberately planted. The regulation also states that each city should allocate at least 30% of its area as green open space, consisting of 20% public green open space and 10% private green open space. However, Medan City still faces a shortage of public green open space, as the available public green space is only around 6% of the required 20%. This condition indicates the urgency of improving and evaluating public open spaces in Medan, including Merdeka Square as one of the city's important public spaces.

Public open space can be defined as an accessible urban space that allows people to conduct various activities, such as recreation, sports, education, social interaction, informal trading, and cultural events. A successful

public open space should provide psychological comfort and safety through clear spatial linkages, pedestrian access, integration with transportation modes, and appropriate land-use relationships [2]. User behavior in public open spaces is influenced by several aspects, including comfort, sociality, accessibility, and activity [3]. In addition, the quality of public open space can be assessed through facilities, accessibility, activities, and climate comfort [4]. High-quality public open spaces encourage people to stay longer and participate in more diverse activities. Therefore, the quality of Merdeka Square as a public open space should be examined through its functional and physical characteristics, particularly in relation to accessibility, comfort, activity, and social interaction. Accessibility is one of the key elements in evaluating public open space. It is related to affordability, acceptability, availability, and adequacy in reaching and using a destination [5]. Accessibility also refers to the ease with which users can reach a place and conduct activities comfortably [6]. In the context of Merdeka Square, accessibility is important because the area is surrounded by significant urban functions and historic buildings, including the Post Office, Bank Mandiri, London Sumatra, Bank Indonesia, and the Railway Station. These surrounding elements strengthen Merdeka Square's role as a central urban space and provide a spatial connection between public activities and the historical identity of Medan.

Comfort is another important factor in public open space because it reflects users' overall assessment of the physical environment. Comfort may be influenced by circulation, climate, natural conditions, noise, smell, spatial form, safety, cleanliness, and visual quality [7]. Activity in public open space is also influenced by spatial form, spatial relationships, and supporting physical elements such as lighting, pedestrian paths, vegetation, seating areas, and waste facilities [8]. Meanwhile, social interaction is a fundamental requirement for social activities in public spaces because it allows people to meet, communicate, play, conduct transactions, and build social relationships [9][10]. These aspects are relevant to Merdeka Square because the area accommodates various facilities and activities, including green fields, jogging tracks, parking areas, children's recreation areas, sports facilities, religious facilities, commercial areas, and cultural activity spaces. In addition to its function as a public open space, Merdeka Square also needs to be understood through the concept of place identity. Place identity is formed through the relationship between people and place, especially when users have positive perceptions and emotional bonds with a particular environment [11][12]. Place identity can also be seen as a dynamic social product that emerges from memory, experience, and interaction with the physical and social environment. It is commonly shaped by four main principles: distinctiveness, continuity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy or self-ability [12]. Furthermore, place identity becomes an important attraction because it distinguishes one place from another and strengthens the meaning of place for its users [13].

The continuity aspect of place identity is related not only to the physical form of a place but also to the values, memories, stories, historical experiences, and familiarity attached to it [12]. This aspect is important for Merdeka Square because the area has historical value and is surrounded by buildings that contribute to the collective memory of Medan City. Self-esteem refers to the positive evaluation or sense of pride that individuals or groups associate with a place [13]. A place with distinctive characteristics, symbols, and historical meaning can create pride and attachment among its users [14][15]. Self-ability or self-efficacy refers to users' ability to control, access, and use the environment comfortably and safely [11][16]. In public open space, this aspect is reflected in the availability of clear access, safety, comfort, facilities, and spatial organization that allow users to conduct their desired activities. Uniqueness or distinctiveness also plays an important role in place identity because unique physical features, landmarks, historical buildings, and specific spatial characters help people recognize and differentiate one place from another [11][16][17].

Based on this theoretical background, Merdeka Square is an important case for examining the relationship between public open space and place identity. The area is not only used for social, recreational, cultural, and commercial activities but is also connected to historical buildings and urban memories that contribute to its identity. However, the arrangement of the area still requires improvement, particularly in terms of spatial organization, visual connection, signage, comfort, and integration with the surrounding historical environment. Therefore, this study aims to assess Merdeka Square as a public open space based on place identity. The research question addressed in this study is: how does Merdeka Square reflect place identity as a public open space? The purpose of this study is to evaluate Merdeka Square through the aspects of public open space,

namely accessibility, comfort, activity, and social interaction, and through the aspects of place identity, namely continuity, self-esteem, self-ability, and uniqueness.

2. Method

This study employed a mixed-method research design to evaluate Merdeka Square as a public open space based on place identity. The mixed-method approach was selected because the study required both measurable user perceptions and contextual interpretation of the physical and social conditions of the site. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires to assess users' perceptions of accessibility, comfort, activity, and social interaction, while qualitative data were obtained through field observation and interviews to provide deeper explanations of how these aspects contribute to the formation of place identity. This approach enabled the study to combine numerical assessment with interpretive understanding, which is essential in examining public open space as both a physical setting and a socially meaningful urban place. The research was conducted at Merdeka Square in Medan, Indonesia. The site was selected because it functions as one of the most significant public open spaces in Medan and is surrounded by several important historical and urban landmarks. Merdeka Square is bordered by the Post Office building to the north, Bank Mandiri to the south, London Sumatera to the southwest, Bank Indonesia to the west, and the Railway Station to the east. These surrounding buildings strengthen the historical and spatial character of the area and make Merdeka Square relevant for the study of place identity. The spatial boundary of the research area is presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Merdeka square boundary

Merdeka Square contains various public facilities that support social, recreational, commercial, religious, and cultural activities. The facilities identified in the study area include entrance and exit gates, a pavilion, green field, jogging track, parking area, bookstore, skateboard area, Merdeka Square monument, children's recreation park, flower garden, cleaning service unit, musholla, toilets, sports equipment, bicycle area, Merdeka Walk, badminton court, tourist services, and office facilities. These facilities were observed to understand how the physical elements of the site support public use and contribute to users' perceptions of accessibility, comfort, activity, and social interaction. The distribution and condition of these facilities are shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Merdeka square

The population of this study consisted of users of Merdeka Square, including visitors who used the space for recreation, sports, social interaction, commercial activities, cultural activities, and other public purposes. A total of 100 respondents were involved in the questionnaire survey. The respondents were selected using random sampling with consideration of user relevance to the study site, particularly those who were present in the area and had direct experience using Merdeka Square. This respondent group was considered appropriate because the research focused on user perception and experience in evaluating the identity of the place. The questionnaire was developed based on two main conceptual dimensions: public open space quality and place identity. The public open space dimension consisted of accessibility, comfort, activity, and social interaction. These indicators were used to examine how users experience the space in relation to movement, safety, convenience, available activities, and opportunities for social engagement. The place identity dimension consisted of continuity, self-esteem, self-ability, and uniqueness. These indicators were used to evaluate how Merdeka Square is perceived as a meaningful place through historical memory, pride, user control, comfort, safety, distinctiveness, and its relationship with surrounding landmarks. The questionnaire responses were measured using a Likert scale, allowing respondents to express their level of agreement with each statement.

Field observation was conducted to verify the physical condition of the site and to support the interpretation of questionnaire results. The observation focused on spatial access, pedestrian circulation, signage, parking arrangement, public toilets, seating areas, activity zones, vegetation, cleanliness, safety, and visual connections between Merdeka Square and the surrounding historical buildings. This observation was important because place identity cannot be assessed only through perception; it also needs to be understood through the actual spatial and physical conditions that shape users' experience of the place.

Interviews were used to obtain qualitative information from users regarding their experiences, memories, sense of attachment, and perception of Merdeka Square. The interview data helped explain why certain aspects of the site were perceived positively or negatively by the respondents. In particular, the interviews explored users' views on the relationship between Merdeka Square and the surrounding historical buildings, the symbolic value of the square, the visibility of landmarks, the comfort of using the space, and the role of the area in supporting social and cultural activities. The qualitative findings were used to strengthen and clarify the quantitative results from the questionnaire. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis. The mean score of each questionnaire item was calculated to identify the level of user perception for each indicator. The mean values were then interpreted to determine whether each aspect of place identity was perceived positively by users. The analysis focused on four main aspects of place identity: continuity, self-esteem, self-ability, and uniqueness. Each aspect was examined in relation to the public open space indicators of accessibility, comfort, activity, and social interaction. This analytical structure allowed the study to explain how the physical and functional qualities of Merdeka Square contribute to the formation of place identity.

The qualitative data from observations and interviews were analyzed through thematic interpretation. The information was grouped according to the same analytical categories used in the questionnaire, namely continuity, self-esteem, self-ability, and uniqueness. Observation findings were compared with respondents' perceptions to identify consistencies and discrepancies between the physical condition of the site and user experience. This triangulation strengthened the validity of the findings by ensuring that the interpretation was not based solely on questionnaire scores but also supported by direct field evidence and user narratives. Through this methodological framework, the study assessed Merdeka Square as a public open space based on place identity in a systematic and integrated manner. The use of questionnaires provided measurable evidence of user perception, while interviews and observations offered contextual understanding of how the site functions as a meaningful urban place. This method is expected to provide a reliable basis for evaluating the quality of Merdeka Square and for formulating recommendations to improve its spatial arrangement, public facilities, historical visibility, and identity as an important public open space in Medan.

3. Result and Discussion

The assessment of Merdeka Square was conducted by examining four dimensions of place identity, namely continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and uniqueness. These dimensions were interpreted through the public open space indicators of accessibility, comfort, activity, and social interaction. The results were obtained from 100 respondents using a Likert-scale questionnaire and were supported by interviews and field observations. Overall, the findings indicate that Merdeka Square is perceived positively as a public open space with a recognizable place identity. However, several aspects still require improvement, particularly in relation to wayfinding, spatial arrangement, visual connection with surrounding historical buildings, and the functional optimization of public facilities. The continuity dimension reflects the extent to which Merdeka Square maintains historical values, collective memory, familiarity, and the relationship between the square and its surrounding urban context. As shown in Table 1, respondents gave positive assessments for all continuity indicators, with the strongest score given to the direct accessibility connection between Merdeka Square and the surrounding historical buildings. The availability of national and religious celebration activities also received high scores, indicating that the square continues to function as a civic space for collective events. The lowest score in this dimension was related to pride in the historical story of Merdeka Square, although the score remained positive. This suggests that the historical meaning of the square is still recognized by users, but its interpretation and public communication should be strengthened through clearer historical narratives, signage, and spatial design.

Table 1. Merdeka Square based on place identity on the aspect of sustainability

Statement	Average Value
Availability accessibility visitors direct connection between the merdeka square and historical building	4,15
Feel comfortable walk in merdeka square and historical building that surrounds it	3,97
Availability of activities big day celebration national in the merdeka square	4,11
Avaibility of activities big day celebration religion in merdeka square	4,10
Very proud of history story on merdeka square	3,87

The findings in Table 1 confirm that the continuity of Merdeka Square is not determined only by its physical form but also by its historical associations, public activities, and users' memories of the place. This supports the view that continuity in place identity is shaped by values, nostalgia, experience, and familiarity [12]. Interview results also indicate that users still associate Merdeka Square with surrounding historical buildings such as London Sumatra and other heritage-related urban elements. Therefore, the square's identity is constructed through the relationship between the open space and its broader historical setting. Nevertheless,

the findings also imply that continuity should be made more visible through heritage interpretation, better visual corridors, and spatial arrangements that reinforce the relationship between the square and the surrounding landmarks.

The self-esteem dimension measures the extent to which Merdeka Square generates pride, symbolic meaning, and user attachment through its spatial elements and facilities. As presented in Table 2, the highest score was found in the availability of pedestrian access directions, followed by parking area directions and regulatory or safety markers. These results indicate that respondents generally perceive some spatial guidance in the area. However, several indicators received lower scores, particularly the availability of information-center markers, recreational area markers, sport area markers, performing arts area markers, buying and selling area markers, and waste-disposal instructions. These relatively lower scores show that the symbolic and functional clarity of the square remains insufficient.

Table 2. Merdeka Square based on the identity of the place on the aspect of self-esteem

Statement	Avarage Value
Pedestrian acces direction are available in the area on and off the merdeka square	4,01
Parking area directions are available	3,81
There are markers for the direction of trading locations in the area	3,59
Availability of directions to public toilets	3,64
Availability of wine marke to the information center	3,03
Avalability of regulatory markers and safety requirements	3,78
Availability of instruction for disposing of garbage in its place	3,26
Availability of sport area markers	3,21
Availibity of recreational area markers	3,17
Availability of performing arts area marker	3,28
Availability of buying selling area marker	3,31
Availability of sign of a sitting and gathering area	3,46

The results in Table 2 suggest that Merdeka Square has the potential to generate self-esteem because users can still identify certain access points, rules, and activity areas. However, the uneven quality of wayfinding reduces the ability of the space to communicate its identity clearly. In place-identity theory, self-esteem is related to a positive self-evaluation or collective pride associated with a place [13]. It is also strengthened when a place has distinctive characteristics that make users feel proud and emotionally connected [14], [15]. In this case, Merdeka Square already has strong historical and symbolic potential, but the lack of consistent signage and spatial markers weakens the expression of that potential. Improving wayfinding systems, information boards, historical markers, and activity-zone signs would strengthen users' pride, orientation, and attachment to the square. The self-efficacy dimension evaluates users' perception of their ability to use, access, and control the environment safely and comfortably. As shown in Table 3, the highest score was given to the organization of the parking area, followed by comfort in disposing of waste, access by public transportation, use of public toilets, and comfort when enjoying performing arts. These findings show that Merdeka Square provides a relatively functional environment for daily and occasional public activities. However, the lowest scores were found in comfort during play activities and sport activities, indicating that some recreational and physical activity spaces may require further improvement in terms of safety, maintenance, spatial clarity, and user comfort.

Table 3. Merdeka Square based on the identity of the place on the aspect of self-ability

Statement	Avarage Value
Walking trails on and off the pitch are adequate	3,51
The parking area is very well organized	3,94
Fell comfortable and safe walking in the merdeka square	3,58

Statement	Avarage Value
Feel safe and comfortable palcing the vechile in the parking area	3,48
Fell safe and comfortable to the field by public transportation	3,61
Fell safe and comfortable using public toilet	3,59
Feel safe and comfortable throwing trash in the rash	3,67
Feel safe and comfortable doing sport	3,39
Feel safe and comfortable playing in the merdeka square	3,30
Feel safe and comfortable enjoying performing arts	3,59
Feel safe and comfortable buying and selling	3,54
Fell safe and comfortable with seating facilities	3,51

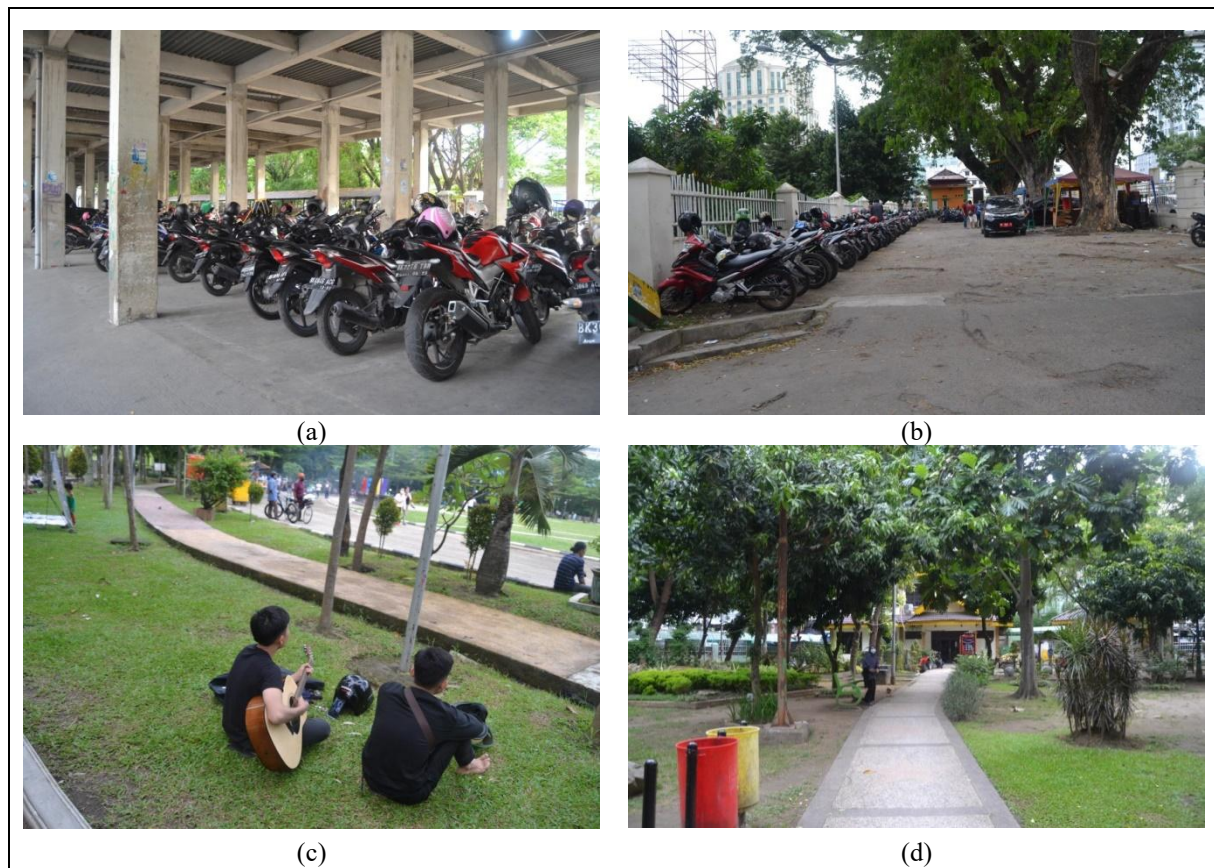


Figure 3. Safe and comfortable facility conditions

The results in Table 3 are supported by field observations, as illustrated in Figure 3, which shows the condition of facilities related to safety and comfort. These findings indicate that Merdeka Square generally enables users to perform various activities, although the quality of some facilities still needs enhancement. In place-identity studies, self-efficacy refers to users' ability to function effectively in a physical and social environment and to feel that they can control or use the environment according to their needs [11][13][16]. The relatively positive scores indicate that Merdeka Square supports this dimension, but the lower values for sport and play activities suggest that the square needs better facility maintenance, clearer activity zoning, more inclusive pedestrian circulation, and safer recreational areas. These improvements are important because public open space should not only be accessible but also enable users to interact with the environment confidently and comfortably.

The uniqueness dimension evaluates the distinctiveness of Merdeka Square as a place that can be recognized, remembered, and differentiated from other public open spaces. As presented in Table 4, the highest score was given to the use of the pavilion for interaction and local product activities, followed by the attractiveness of views toward preserved historical buildings. The accessibility to the independence monument, pavilion, zero point of Medan City, and surrounding historical buildings also received a positive score. However, the lowest score was found in the use of the pavilion for local art performances and cultural activities. This indicates that

although Merdeka Square has strong physical and historical uniqueness, its cultural programming is not yet fully optimized.

Table 4. Merdeka Square based on the identity of the place in the unique aspect

Statement	Avarage Value
Availibility of acces easy to monument independence, pavilion, zero point Medan city, and historical building around the merdeka square	3,45
Very interesting be in the field independent with that view focused on the building history still preserved	3,63
Pavilion building at the time of activity culture is used for showing art local performance and local product	3,25
Pavillion building at the time of activity culture is used for interaction in introduce and selling local product	3,88

The findings in Table 4 indicate that Merdeka Square has a distinctive identity because it is spatially connected to historical buildings and contains several recognizable urban elements. This supports the argument that uniqueness, landmarks, and specific characters are important components in defining place identity [17]. The square's uniqueness is not limited to its physical features but also includes its historical setting, visual connection with surrounding heritage buildings, and potential role as a cultural activity space. However, the low score for local art performances shows that the cultural function of the pavilion should be strengthened. Regular cultural programming, improved visibility of historical elements, and better integration between the pavilion, monument, and surrounding buildings would enhance the distinctiveness of Merdeka Square and reinforce its role as a landmark public open space in Medan.

Taken together, the four dimensions show that Merdeka Square has a generally positive place identity but has not yet reached its optimal quality as a public open space. The continuity dimension received the strongest evaluation, which indicates that historical memory and civic activities remain central to the identity of the square. The self-esteem and self-efficacy dimensions received moderate but positive evaluations, suggesting that users can access and use the space, although signage, facility quality, and spatial organization still require improvement. The uniqueness dimension shows that the square is recognizable and historically meaningful, but its cultural and visual potential should be further developed. These findings demonstrate that place identity in Merdeka Square is produced through the interaction between historical continuity, spatial legibility, user comfort, activity diversity, and symbolic distinctiveness.

4. Conclusion

This study examined Merdeka Square as a public open space based on the dimensions of place identity, namely continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and uniqueness. The findings show that Merdeka Square is generally perceived as a public open space with a positive place identity. The strongest dimension is continuity, as users still associate the square with historical values, surrounding heritage buildings, collective memory, and civic activities. This finding confirms that the identity of Merdeka Square is strongly shaped by the relationship between the square, its historical setting, and the public activities that continue to take place within it. The self-esteem dimension shows that Merdeka Square has the potential to generate pride and attachment among users, particularly because of its symbolic position in Medan City and its relationship with surrounding historical buildings. However, the results also indicate that this dimension is weakened by insufficient wayfinding, limited information markers, and unclear signs for some activity zones. The self-efficacy dimension shows that users generally feel able to access and use the space safely and comfortably, especially in relation to

parking, public transportation access, sanitation facilities, and general pedestrian use. Nevertheless, lower scores for sport and play activities indicate that recreational facilities, safety, and maintenance should be improved. The uniqueness dimension confirms that Merdeka Square has distinctive value as an urban landmark because it is connected to historical buildings, the independence monument, the pavilion, and the zero point of Medan City. However, its uniqueness should be strengthened through better visual integration, more effective use of the pavilion for cultural activities, and stronger interpretation of historical narratives. Therefore, the main contribution of this study is the demonstration that the quality of Merdeka Square as a public open space cannot be evaluated only through physical facilities but should also be understood through users' perceptions of identity, memory, pride, comfort, and distinctiveness.

Based on these findings, the improvement of Merdeka Square should focus on strengthening its historical visibility, improving wayfinding and signage, enhancing comfort and safety, maintaining recreational and public facilities, and activating cultural programs that reflect local identity. These recommendations are important to ensure that Merdeka Square functions not only as an accessible public open space but also as a meaningful urban place that reflects the historical and cultural identity of Medan. Future studies may expand the analysis by involving larger respondent groups, comparing Merdeka Square with other public open spaces, and examining temporal variations in public use during weekdays, weekends, and major civic or cultural events.

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6. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, and no personal, financial, commercial, or institutional relationship influenced the design of the study, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings, or preparation of the manuscript.

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