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VISUAL CHANGES IN THE KESAWAN HISTORIC AREA OF MEDAN CITY BEFORE AND AFTER REVITALIZATION AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

Nabilah Khoirina¹, N.Vinky Rahman² and Achmad Delianur Nasution³

¹Universitas Sumatera Utara, Magister of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, Tri Dharma No.9, Padang Bulan, Kec. Medan Baru, Kota Medan, Sumatera Utara 20155, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Kesawan is a pivotal historic district in Medan City, essential to its identity and the advancement of urban tourism. Recent revitalization programs (2021–2026) were implemented to enhance environmental quality while safeguarding its colonial architectural heritage. This study aims to analyze the visual transformation of the Kesawan Historic District following revitalization and examine its subsequent implications for tourist attraction. Employing a qualitative descriptive-comparative approach, data were gathered through systematic field observations, comparative visual documentation between 2020 and 2026, and semi-structured interviews with ten tourists and an architectural expert. The data were analyzed using a coding process to identify dominant thematic patterns. The findings indicate that the revitalization program significantly bolstered the area's visual integrity by reorganizing corridors, controlling visual clutter—most notably through the implementation of integrated underground utility systems (SJUT)—and enhancing public spaces. Coding analysis revealed that "visual atmosphere" emerged as the primary driver of attractiveness, with the highest frequency of occurrence (107 mentions), followed by the physical presence of heritage buildings (57 mentions). The enhanced visual quality effectively serves as a dynamic "stage setting" that fosters social interactions and urban events, thereby solidifying Kesawan's image as a premier heritage tourism destination. This study concludes that the long-term sustainability of the district's appeal hinges on maintaining a meticulous balance between urban modernization and the preservation of its authentic historic visual character.

KEYWORDS: Regional visuals; historic areas; urban revitalization; tourist attraction; Kesawan Medan City.

1. INTRODUCTION

Urban tourism development has shown a significant increase over the past two decades as traveler interest in experiences based on culture, history, and local identity has grown [1]. Major cities

worldwide are shifting their tourism orientation from simple recreation toward heritage-based districts that offer historical narratives and unique urban visual characters [1]. This condition places historic districts as strategic assets for city governments to enhance destination competitiveness through revitalization programs [2]. Revitalization is understood as an effort to revive physically, socially, and economically degraded areas to make them visually and functionally productive again [2]. Through these programs, historic areas are expected to adapt to contemporary needs without losing their historical values [2].

However, revitalization practices often face significant challenges in cultural heritage preservation [3]. In many cases, the orientation of revitalization tends to prioritize economic function and instant aesthetics for investment purposes while neglecting visual authenticity [3]. In the context of heritage conservation, the visual condition is a fundamental value that determines the continuity of a historic area's character [4]. Visuals reflect the integrity of elements within buildings and the surrounding environment, including shape, scale, proportion, material, and color [4]. A loss of authentic visual characteristics can disrupt the readability of history and the identity of the urban landscape [4]. Architectural details and visual harmony serve as the primary media for communicating historical values to visitors [5]. Therefore, uncontrolled visual changes risk obscuring historical meaning and reducing the area's appeal as a heritage tourism destination [4], [5].

International principles, such as the Burra Charter, emphasize that the conservation of historic places must maintain the integrity of visual appearance and the "setting" of the location [6]. The Kesawan area in Medan City is one such significant heritage asset, characterized by high colonial architectural and historical values [7]. Designated as an urban tourism zone, it has undergone various revitalization programs to support economic and creative growth [8]. Despite these efforts, concerns have arisen that the visual role of historic buildings in Kesawan is shifting toward a mere "stage setting" for culinary and social activities rather than being the primary attraction [1], [9]. Current studies on Indonesian revitalization often focus on individual buildings or economic development rather than comprehensive before-after visual transformations [2], [8]. Furthermore, the scientific hierarchy of visual attraction compared to non-visual factors in Kesawan remains unclear [1], [3]. Consequently, this research aims to systematically analyze these visual changes and evaluate their implications for tourist attractions in the Kesawan Historic Area [8].

2. VISUALIZATION OF HISTORICAL AREAS IN RELATION TO TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

2.1 Visual Integrity and Conservation of Historic Districts

Visual integrity is a fundamental value in the conservation of cultural heritage that determines the continuity of a historic district's character [4]. It reflects the degree of wholeness and consistency in the visual appearance of an area as a unified historical environment [4], [6]. Conceptually, this integrity is shaped by the observable relationships between urban elements, such as street corridor patterns, facade harmony, scale, proportion, and supporting visual elements [4]. According to UNESCO, visual

integrity in historic areas is deeply linked to the wholeness of visual character and spatial structures that form the identity of a place [4]. International conservation principles, such as those outlined in the Burra Charter, emphasize that preserving historic places must involve maintaining the integrity of the visual appearance and the "setting" of the location [4], [6]. These visual conditions serve as critical indicators for assessing the extent to which modern interventions or development programs still respect the historical values and identity of a site [6].

In the context of urban landscape conservation, architectural facades and visual harmony between elements act as the primary media for communicating historical narratives to visitors [5]. The loss of authentic visual characteristics can lead to a disconnection in historical readability and the erosion of a district's collective identity [4], [5], [10]. Furthermore, modernization pressures and revitalization programs often present a "double-edged sword" scenario, where the pursuit of economic function and instant aesthetics may trigger significant visual changes [3], [11], [12]. Such uncontrolled transformations, including non-contextual facade modifications and visual clutter from commercial signage, risk reducing the area's visual authenticity and causing homogenization [3], [11], [13]. Therefore, managing visual quality is essential not only for maintaining the aesthetic value of the built environment but also for ensuring the long-term sustainability of the area's historical character and its appeal as a heritage tourism destination [4], [11], [14].

2.2 Dimensions of Regional Visual Character

The visual character of a historic district is not merely defined by individual architectural objects but is formed through an integrated system of spatial and visual dimensions. This character is shaped by the complex relationship between the built environment's physical form, historical morphology, and the functional activities occurring within the urban space [15]. Based on a synthesis of international conservation guidelines and urban design theories, the dimensions of regional visual character can be categorized into three primary components: Spatial Structure, Corridor Visual Harmony, and Supporting Visual Elements [4]. These three dimensions serve as the fundamental framework for assessing the visual quality and integrity of heritage areas, particularly in the context of urban revitalization [10].

Spatial Structure represents the fundamental framework of a historic area, reflecting the historical relationship between street networks, block configurations, and building masses that have evolved over time [10]. This dimension focuses on the area's morphology, where historical street corridors function as the primary organizing elements that direct movement and shape the visual experience of users [15]. The legibility of this spatial structure is a critical indicator of visual integrity, as it allows visitors to understand historical patterns through the observable connections between buildings and public spaces [16]. Maintaining the continuity of spatial structure is essential to prevent the disconnection of the physical environment from its historical narrative during modernization processes [11].

Corridor Visual Harmony refers to the consistency of visual relationships between building facades and public space elements along historical paths. In urban design, this corridor is perceived as an "urban room" where visual quality is determined by the rhythm of facades, mass proportions, and building scales [15]. Facade rhythm is created through the repetition of architectural modules such as windows, doors, and rooflines, which provide a sense of order and historical continuity [7]. Furthermore, the consistency of materials and colors reinforces the district's identity by maintaining contextual visual harmony between buildings [17]. Fragmentation of this harmony, often caused by non-contextual modifications or unregulated building heights, can significantly degrade the area's aesthetic quality and historical meaning [14].

Supporting Visual Elements serve as the final layer that strengthens the regional character through environmental details such as signage, street furniture, lighting, and landscape [15]. Although these elements are not primary objects, they play a strategic role in connecting buildings with public activities and enhancing the visitor's spatial experience [18]. Contextual design of street furniture and signage is vital to avoid visual pollution that can obscure architectural details and reduce the area's legibility [19]. Additionally, integrated pedestrian paths and balanced landscape arrangements provide a more human scale to the historic environment, fostering social interaction (Gehl, 2020). Ultimately, the integration of these supporting elements with the authentic historical character is a key factor in the success of heritage area revitalization [7].

2.3 Tourist Attraction and Visual Perception in Heritage Tourism

Tourist attraction is a fundamental concept in urban studies that describes a destination's capacity to draw interest, visits, and interaction from travelers [1]. In historic urban contexts, this attraction is not limited to individual monuments but encompasses a holistic spatial and visual experience perceived by visitors [4]. Visual characteristics, such as colonial architectural facades and unique urban settings, serve as the primary drivers for tourists seeking authentic historical narratives and cultural identity [20]. These visual elements often function as the initial stimulus that shapes a visitor's "first impression" and determines their decision to explore an area further [7]. The harmony of scale, color, and rhythm along street corridors creates a distinct visual appeal that modern urban environments often lack [5].

The perception of a heritage district is deeply influenced by the degree of visual authenticity and the legibility of its historical character [4]. Visitors tend to have a higher level of interest in buildings that maintain original architectural details, as these elements effectively communicate the area's identity [5]. Furthermore, a destination's image is constructed through the accumulation of visual and environmental quality experiences during a visit [21]. Visual comfort and spatial legibility play significant roles in enhancing this experience, making the historic environment more pleasant and memorable for the public [22]. Uncontrolled visual changes or the presence of visual pollution can degrade this perception, potentially shifting the area's appeal from heritage-based tourism toward generic consumption-based tourism [3], [18].

Ultimately, the synergy between visual quality and functional dynamics determines the long-term sustainability of a heritage destination [7]. While non-visual factors such as culinary activities and social events are strong motivators for visiting, the historic visual character often serves as the essential "stage setting" that enriches the overall experience [7]. High-quality visual environments foster positive emotional connections and lasting memories, which are critical indicators for visitor satisfaction and the intention to return [4]. Therefore, managing visual perception through conservation-based revitalization is essential to maintain a district's competitive edge and safeguard its unique cultural significance [3], [18].

2.4 The "Stage Setting" Concept in Urban Revitalization

The concept of "stage setting" in urban revitalization describes a condition where the improved visual quality of a historic district functions as a dynamic backdrop for contemporary social and economic activities [1]. Rather than being perceived merely as static historical artifacts, restored buildings and corridors serve as a lived-in environment that supports creative events, culinary tourism, and public interaction [1]. This setting is crucial because it provides an immersive and nostalgic experience that enriches the overall tourism narrative, effectively bridging the gap between the area's past identity and its modern functional needs [11], [18].

Research within the Kesawan area indicates that a preserved visual atmosphere acts as a primary catalyst, transforming physical space into a meaningful "urban room" where social performances occur [12], [20]. Even when visitors are primarily motivated by non-visual factors such as dining or social gatherings, the historical "stage" remains the essential element that strengthens the district's image as an authentic heritage destination [4], [15]. Therefore, the success of a revitalization program is largely determined by its ability to create a harmonious synergy between the authentic visual character of the past and the vibrant, evolving activities of the present [8]. Managing this "stage" through consistent design guidelines is vital to prevent visual degradation and ensure the long-term sustainability of the area's cultural significance [11], [12].

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-comparative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the visual transformation of historic buildings within a tourism context [23], [24]. A qualitative approach is utilized to interpret the meanings, characters, and visual qualities of the built environment based on field conditions and established architectural conservation frameworks [25]. Specifically, the research applies a "before-after" comparative analysis, evaluating the visual conditions of the area in 2021 (pre-revitalization) and 2026 (post-revitalization) [23]. This method is considered effective for assessing the impact of development interventions on the visual authenticity and integrity of a historic site [24].

The research is located in the Kesawan Historic Area, Medan City (Figure 1), with a primary focus on the Jalan Ahmad Yani corridor. This site was selected through purposive sampling due to its high concentration of colonial architecture and its strategic role as a major urban tourism destination currently undergoing revitalization. The Ahmad Yani corridor specifically represents the visual transition between modern urban developments and Medan's historical heritage. For the qualitative data, subjects were also chosen via purposive sampling, consisting of ten tourists and architectural experts. The sample size for informants was determined by the principle of data saturation, where data collection concludes once information becomes repetitive and no new significant themes emerge.

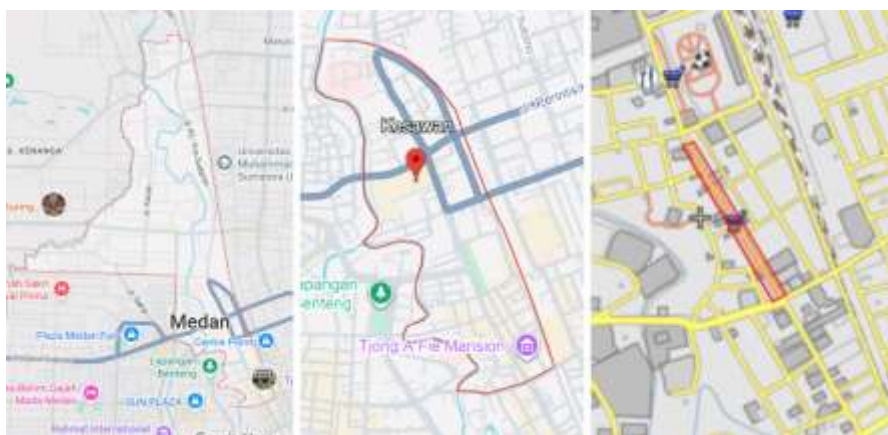


Figure 1: Research Location

Primary data collection involves direct field observations to identify physical changes in the area's spatial structure and visual harmony. This is complemented by visual documentation, utilizing both archival photos and current field photography to serve as empirical evidence for the comparative analysis. Additionally, semi-structured interviews are conducted to explore tourists' perceptions and emotional connections to the area's visual atmosphere. Secondary data is gathered through a literature study of academic journals and international conservation guidelines, such as the UNESCO Historic Urban Landscape and the Burra Charter [4], [6].

The collected data is analyzed through a qualitative coding process to identify dominant themes emerging from the interviews, such as "visual atmosphere" and "heritage buildings". Comparative analysis is applied to evaluate the transformation of visual integrity by contrasting the 2021 and 2026 conditions [23]. The study utilizes data triangulation synthesizing observations, documentation, and interviews to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings. Finally, the analysis interprets the relationship between these physical transformations and the resulting implications for the area's tourism competitiveness.

4. RESULTS & DISCUSION

4.1 Visual Transformation of the Kesawan Historic Corridor (2021–2026)

The comparative analysis of the Jalan Ahmad Yani corridor reveals a fundamental visual transformation between the pre-revitalization period in 2021 and the post-revitalization condition in 2026. Prior to the intervention, the area's visual integrity was significantly degraded by visual pollution, characterized by a chaotic network of overhead utility cables and uncoordinated commercial signage that obscured the historic building facades. The revitalization program successfully addressed these issues by implementing the Integrated Utility Ducting System (SJUT), which moved all utility lines underground, thereby restoring the clear view and original architectural rhythm of the colonial buildings. Furthermore, the cleaning and repainting of heritage facades followed preservation principles, restoring their authentic visual appearance without compromising their original structures (Figure 2).





Figure 2: Left (2026) Right (2021)

The most prominent physical change perceived by users is the widening of pedestrian paths, which now utilize andesite stone materials. This spatial rearrangement creates a harmonious "urban wall" effect, strengthening the visual continuity of the historic building rows that serve as the primary identity of Medan's city center. Beyond material changes, the addition of street furniture, such as classic street lamps, garden benches, and shaded greenery, has transformed the corridor's character into a more human-centric environment. These pedestrian paths now function not only as circulation routes but also as vital visual transition spaces that connect historic architecture with contemporary public activities (Figure 3) (Figure 4).



Figure 3: Pedestrian & Street Furniture



Figure 4: Lighting in the Ahmad Yani Corridor

The challenge of visual clutter from commercial elements was mitigated through strict signage control. Previously, large billboards often covered critical architectural details like ornaments and window openings. Post-revitalization, the standardization of signage size and placement allows the unique characteristics of each heritage building to be legible once again from the street level. Additionally, a well-planned lighting system featuring warm, dim-yellow lights has successfully created an elegant and nostalgic night atmosphere, highlighting facade details and reinforcing the monumental impression of the colonial architecture. Collectively, this transformation has evolved the Ahmad Yani corridor from a degraded environment into a dynamic "stage setting" capable of accommodating social activities while solidifying Kesawan's image as an authentic heritage tourism destination (Figure 5).

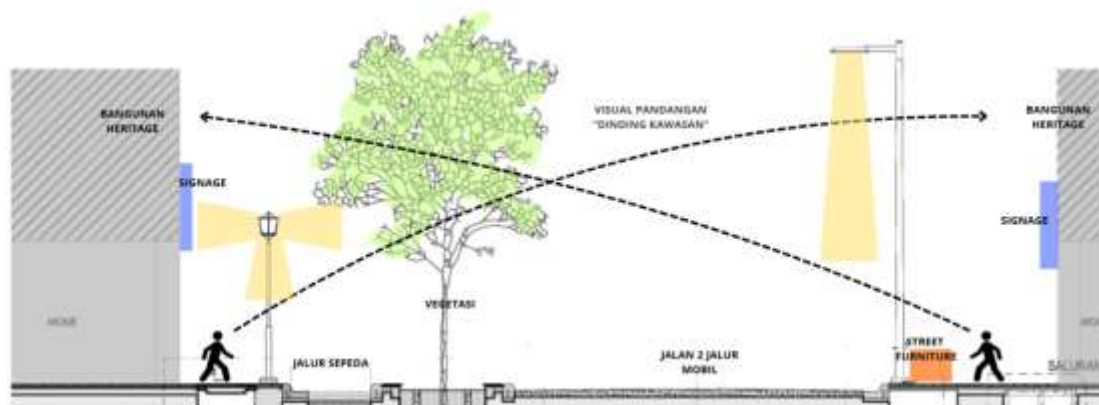


Figure 5: Visualization of Corridor Visual Comfort

4.2 Analysis of Tourist Perception and Visual Attraction

The analysis of tourist perception was conducted through semi-structured interviews with ten informants, consisting of tourists and architectural experts. Qualitative coding was applied to the interview transcripts to identify the dominant themes that shape the area's visual attractiveness. The coding process revealed five primary categories: Visual Atmosphere (107 mentions), Heritage Buildings (57 mentions), Social Activities (39 mentions), Events (29 mentions), and Landmarks (19 mentions). These frequencies indicate that the visual appeal of the Ahmad Yani corridor is multi-

dimensional, extending beyond physical architecture to include spatial experiences and social dynamics (Table 1).

Table 1: Coding Analysis (Keyword)

Coding Analysis	<i>Frequency of Keyword Occurrence</i>
Visual Atmosphere	107
Heritage Building	57
Landmark	19
Social Activities	39
Events	29

Visual Atmosphere emerged as the most dominant theme, suggesting that visitors perceive the corridor as a unified and immersive environment rather than a collection of individual objects. This perception is closely linked to "visual comfort," where the synergy between colonial facades, repainted buildings, and the Underground Integrated Utility Ducting (SJUT) creates a neat and nostalgic ambiance. Informants explicitly noted that the harmony of neutral building colors paired with warm yellow night lighting strengthens the area's identity as a classic "urban room".

Heritage Buildings and Landmarks continue to function as the anchor of visual identity, providing the unique character that distinguishes Kesawan from modern urban areas in Medan. Visitors expressed high appreciation for authentic architectural details, such as original windows, doors, and classic ornaments, which are now more legible due to strict signage control. Furthermore, Social Activities and Events were identified as vital components that transform the historic environment into a living space. The improved visual quality acts as a robust "stage setting" for activities like street photography, social gatherings, and festivals, effectively bridging the gap between the historical narrative and contemporary urban life (Figure 6) (Figure 7).



Figure 6: Corridor Social Activities



Figure 7: Events

4.3 Discussion: Visual Character as a "Stage Setting" for Urban Tourism

The research findings confirm that the revitalized visual character of the Kesawan Historic Area functions effectively as a "stage setting" a dynamic physical backdrop that facilitates and enriches various contemporary urban activities. Rather than being perceived merely as a collection of static historic artifacts, the buildings and corridors of Jalan Ahmad Yani serve as a lived-in environment that bridges the gap between historical identity and modern functional needs. This "stage" is not formed by individual architectural objects alone but through an integrated "Visual Atmosphere," which emerged as the most dominant factor in shaping the area's attractiveness with 107 mentions from informants.

The transformation of Kesawan into a robust stage setting is driven by the synergy between authentic physical preservation and enhanced public comfort. The implementation of the Integrated Utility Ducting System (SJUT) and the restoration of building facades have successfully recovered the original architectural rhythm, providing a nostalgic and immersive experience for visitors. These physical improvements act as a catalyst for social performances, such as street photography and urban exploration, where the colonial "urban wall" provides a unique aesthetic value that modern urban environments often lack (Figure 8).

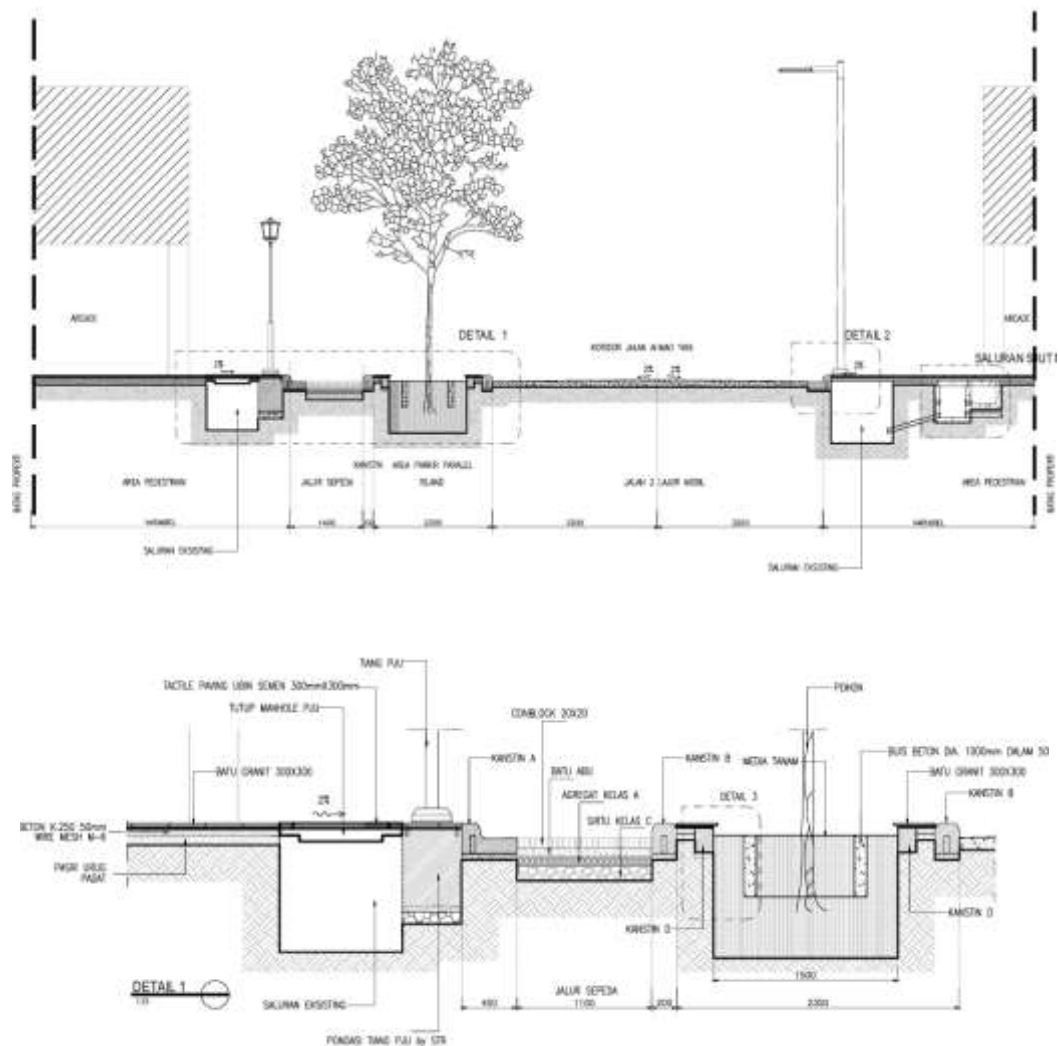


Figure 8: DED for Revitalization of Corridor A Yani (Cut A)

Furthermore, the "stage" character is most evident during specialized urban events like the Kesawan Night Festival (Figure 9). In these moments, the historic visual character provides a meaningful setting that enhances the quality of social interaction and culinary tourism. Even though many visitors are primarily motivated by non-visual factors such as dining or social gatherings, their experience is significantly strengthened by the historic ambiance, which serves as the foundation for the area's collective identity. Ultimately, maintaining this balance is crucial; uncontrolled commercial transformations or a loss of authentic details risk turning this vibrant stage into a generic commercial space, potentially eroding the long-term sustainability of Kesawan's appeal as a heritage tourism destination.



Figure 9: DED for Revitalization of Corridor A Yani (Cut A)

4.4 Conservation Challenges and Regional Sustainability

The revitalization of historic districts like Kesawan presents a complex challenge in achieving a balance between the demands of urban modernization and the preservation of authentic historic visual character. While revitalization successfully enhances physical infrastructure, it often faces the risk of "aesthetic homogenization" due to commercialization pressures. In many cases, renovations prioritize instant aesthetics to attract investment, which can lead to a loss of the unique architectural identities that define the area's cultural significance. This transformation potentially shifts the area's appeal from authentic heritage-based tourism toward a generic consumption-based environment.

A primary obstacle to visual sustainability is visual pollution caused by uncoordinated and excessive commercial signage. Prior to revitalization, chaotic utility lines and billboards significantly obscured historic facades; however, post-revitalization monitoring is essential to ensure these elements do not return and degrade the restored "urban room". Furthermore, the lack of legally binding Urban Design Guidelines remains a critical gap. Without specific regulations governing materials, colors, and the scale of new interventions, the historical narrative communicated through building facades may become fragmented over time.

The long-term sustainability of Kesawan as a heritage tourism destination depends on a strong synergy between the local government, building owners, and the community. Maintaining the area's visual integrity is not merely an aesthetic endeavor but a strategic investment in the city's collective memory and tourism competitiveness. Therefore, the enforcement of sensitive design guidelines and a continuous maintenance regime for supporting elements—such as classic lighting and pedestrian paths—are vital to ensuring that Kesawan remains a vibrant, lived-in historic environment for future generations.

5. CONCLUSION

The research concludes that the revitalization of the Kesawan Historic Area, specifically the Jalan Ahmad Yani corridor, has triggered a significant and fundamental visual transformation between 2021 and 2026. The shift from an environment degraded by visual pollution, such as chaotic overhead utility lines and unorganized commercial signage to an integrated corridor featuring an underground utility system (SJUT) and restored heritage facades has successfully recovered the area's authentic colonial character. The most impactful physical change is the widening of pedestrian paths using andesite stone, which creates a harmonious "urban wall" effect and reinforces the historical continuity that defines Medan's identity.

Empirically, this study identifies that "Visual Atmosphere" is the most dominant factor in shaping tourist attractiveness, with 107 mentions from informants, surpassing the appeal of individual architectural objects. The revitalized visual character functions effectively as a "stage setting" a dynamic backdrop that facilitates immersive nostalgic experiences and supports various social and creative activities, such as the Kesawan Night Festival. While non-visual factors like culinary offerings remain strong motivators, the visual comfort provided by the historic environment serves as the essential foundation for destination image and visitor loyalty.

However, the long-term sustainability of Kesawan faces challenges from commercialization pressures and the risk of aesthetic homogenization. To safeguard the area's visual integrity, there is an urgent need for the enforcement of legally binding Urban Design Guidelines to standardize signage, materials, and the scale of new interventions. Ultimately, the success of Kesawan as a heritage destination depends on a strong synergy between the local government, building owners, and the community to ensure that history is not merely observed as an artifact but experienced as a vibrant part of urban life.

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