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SPATIAL CHARACTER AS A MEDIATOR OF SOCIAL INTERACTION DYNAMICS IN A TRADITIONAL MARKET: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SIBUHUAN TRADITIONAL MARKET

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ABSTRACT

Traditional markets function not only as economic spaces but also as social environments where everyday interactions continuously occur. This study aims to understand how the spatial character of Sibuhuan Traditional Market mediates the dynamics of social interaction among its users. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed through field observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation involving market managers, trades, and buyers. Data were analyzed using phenomenological coding, thematic analysis, and interpretation of lived experiences. The findings reveal five spatial characteristics that mediate social interaction: (1) spatial density as part of the market rhythm, (2) subjective and contextual strategic locations, (3) fluid boundaries between formal and informal spaces, (4) physical proximity that encourages repeated encounters, and (5) spatial attachment developed through recurring social practices. These spatial characteristics do not merely accommodate economic transactions but actively facilitate communication, negotiation, cooperation, and social relationships among markets users. The study concludes that spatial character and social interaction are mutually constitutive, where spatial configurations shape interaction opportunities while repeated interactions continuously reinforce the social function of the market. These findings contribute to phenomenological studies of essential dimension in understanding social interaction within public spaces.

KEYWORDS: spatial character, social interaction, traditional market, phenomenology, lived experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional markets are not merely places for economic transactions but also function as social spaces where everyday interactions continuously occur among traders, buyers, and surrounding communities [1]. Within the Indonesia context, traditional markets have long served as public spaces that facilitate communication, negotiation, information exchange, and the formation of enduring social relationships [2]. Consequently, the market should be understood not only as a physical environment but also as a

lived social space in which spatial experience emerges through daily activities and collective interactions [3]. The diversity of activities, spatial density, and irregular interaction patterns found in traditional markets represent essential characteristics that shape how users experience and engage with the built environment rather than merely indicators of spatial quality [4].

Traditional market also possesses distinctive spatial characteristics that differentiate them from modern commercial environments. Narrow circulation paths, irregular spatial configurations, informal trading areas, and continuously evolving spatial arrangements are not simply physical conditions but are integral components of users' everyday experiences [5]. Although such characteristics often appear inconsistent with conventional architectural principles, they contribute to the identity of traditional markets while simultaneously creating opportunities for diverse forms of social interactions across different spatial zones [6]. Furthermore, the collective experience of market density creates a unique social atmosphere in which conversations, informal encounters, bargaining activities, and mutual assistance become inseparable parts of everyday life [7]. These conditions indicate that spatial character actively influences how social interaction develops within the market environment [8].

Numerous studies have examined traditional markets from the perspectives of architecture, urban planning, economics, and social sciences [9]. Existing research has predominantly emphasized physical layouts, circulation efficiency, infrastructure quality, zoning system, management, and market performance [10]. While these studies provide valuable contributions to market planning and revitalization, they generally treat market space as an object to be measured and evaluated from a technical perspective rather than as a space experienced directly by its users [11].

Research exploring the social dimensions of traditional markets has shown that markets function as places where social relationships, information exchange, and local cultural values are continuously reproduced [12]. Nevertheless, previous studies have generally investigated social interactions as an independent phenomenon without explicitly examining how the spatial character of the market mediates the emergence and continuity of these interactions. Consequently, the relationship between spatial configuration and users lived explored in architectural studies [13][8]. Moreover, architectural research on traditional markets in Indonesia is still largely dominated by physical observation, descriptive analysis, and behavioral surveys, approaches that have limitations in capturing users' subjective experiences and embodied perceptions of space [14][13].

This limitation highlights the relevance of phenomenology as an architectural research approach. Rather than considering space solely as a measurable physical object, phenomenology understands space as a lived experience shaped through perception, bodily engagement, memory, and everyday practice [15]. From this perspective, architectural space acquires meaning through human experience, enabling researchers to reveal dimensions of spatial life that cannot be adequately explained through physical observation alone [12]. The concepts of embodiment, existential attachment to place, and intersubjective experience proposed by Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Norberg-Shulz, and Schutz provide

an important theoretical foundation for understanding how people experience and interact with architectural spaces in their daily lives. However, these phenomenological perspectives have rarely been applied to the study of traditional markets in Indonesia [14].

Sibuhuan Traditional Market provides an appropriate empirical setting for investigating these issues, as the largest traditional market in Padang Lawas Regency, Sibuhuan functions as the primary center of local economic and social activities, the market experiences its highest level of activity during the weekly market day, creating intensive interactions among traders, buyers, and market managers [16]. Its spatial environment is characterized by narrow circulation routes, irregular stall arrangements, open trading spaces, and overlapping formal and informal territories. Rather than constraining social interactions, these spatial characteristics continuously generate opportunities for encounters, negotiations, cooperation, and repeated social contact among market users [17]. The market therefore represents a suitable context for understanding how spatial character mediates everyday social interaction within a traditional public space [18].

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach using phenomenology as the primary methodological framework [19]. The phenomenological approach was selected because the research seeks to understand the lived experiences of market users in experiencing spatial characteristic and how these characteristics mediate everyday social interactions within the traditional market environment [20]. Rather than measuring causal relationships or testing hypotheses, phenomenology emphasizes understanding the meaning embedded in participants' subjective experiences as they engage with their social and spatial environment [21].

The study adopts the perspective of social phenomenology proposed by Alfred Schutz, which views social reality as being constructed through individuals' everyday experiences within the lifeworld. From this perspective, space is understood not merely as a physical setting but as a lived environment where repeated interactions, routines, and social relationships continuously shape human experience [21]. To minimize researcher bias, the principle of epoche (bracketing) was applied throughout data collection and interpretation by consciously suspending prior assumptions and allowing participants' experiences to emerge naturally during the interview process [22].

2.2 Study Area

The research was conducted at Sibuhuan Traditional Market, located in Padang Lawas Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Sibuhuan Traditional Market was selected because it functions not only as the primary economic center of the regency but also as an important social space where traders, buyers, and market managers engage in continuous everyday interactions [16]. The market exhibits diverse spatial characteristics, including varying levels of density, flexible spatial arrangements, and

overlapping formal and informal activity zones, making it an appropriate setting for investigating the relationship between spatial character and social interaction [8].



Figure 1: Research Location

2.3 Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that all informants possessed direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation [23]. A total of seventeen participants were involved, consisting of two market managers, eight traders, and seven buyers. These participant groups were chosen because they represent the primary users who routinely experience and interact within the market environment from different perspectives [24]. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicated by the recurrence of similar experiences and the absence of substantially new information during subsequent interviews [25].

2.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through three complementary techniques; field observation, semi-structured interview, and documentation. Field observations were undertaken to examine the physical characteristics of the market, including circulation patterns, spatial density, trading activities, and users' interaction behaviors within different market zones [26]. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to describe their lived experiences, perceptions, and everyday interactions while maintaining sufficient flexibility to explore emerging issues relevant to the research objectives [27]. Documentation, including photographs and field notes, was used to support observational findings and provide contextual evidence for interpreting participants' narratives [28].

2.5 Phenomenological Coding

Data analysis began with verbatim transcription of all interview recordings. The transcripts were repeatedly read to achieve familiarity with participants' narratives before the coding process

commenced [29]. Open coding was then conducted to identify significant statements reflecting participants' experiences of spatial characteristics and social interaction [30]. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader conceptual categories based on shared meanings and recurring patterns [31]. Throughout this process, the researcher continuously compared codes across participants while maintaining the phenomenological principle of bracketing to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants lived experiences rather than preconceived theoretical assumptions [32].

2.6 Thematic Analysis

The coded data were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis. Initial codes were organized into sub-themes, which were subsequently synthesized into overarching themes representing the essential characteristics of participants' experiences [25]. The analysis focused on identifying how specific spatial characteristics influenced opportunities for encounter, communication, negotiation, cooperation, and repeated social interaction within the market environment [30]. Finally, each theme was interpreted phenomenologically to reveal the essential relationship between spatial character and the dynamics of everyday social interaction [25].

The analytical process resulted in five major themes describing how spatial character mediates social interaction within Sibuhuan Traditional Market: (1) spatial density as part of the market rhythm, (2) subjective and contextual strategic locations, (3) fluid boundaries between formal and informal spaces, (4) physical proximity that facilitates repeated encounters, and (5) spatial attachment developed through recurring social interactions. These themes form the basis for understanding the mediating role of spatial character in shaping the everyday social dynamics of the traditional market.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Spatial Density as part of the Market Rhythm

The findings indicate that spatial density functions as more than a physical characteristic of Sibuhuan Traditional Market. Rather than merely restricting movement, density creates a continuous rhythm of encounters that facilitates social interaction among market users. Narrow circulation paths, overlapping commercial activities, and the concentration of traders and visitors particularly during weekly market days produce repeated face-to-face encounters that become an integral part of everyday market life.

Field observations reveal that limited circulation space requires traders and buyers to constantly negotiate movement. Users routinely slow their pace, wait for others to pass, adjust their walking direction, or briefly communicate to coordinate movement through congested corridors. These micro-level negotiations transform physical constraints into opportunities for spontaneous social contact. Instead of perceiving congestion solely as a circulation problem, many participants regarded it as an inherent characteristic of a lively traditional market where interaction naturally occurs.

This finding suggests that spatial density generates interaction opportunities by increasing the frequency of unplanned encounters. The close physical arrangement of users encourages greetings, brief conversations, bargaining, information exchange, and mutual acknowledgment that would occur less frequently in more spacious and formally organized commercial environments. Consequently, social interaction emerges not because users intentionally seek communication, but because the spatial configuration repeatedly places individuals within immediate interpersonal distance.



Figure 2: Circulation Narrows

From a phenomenological perspective, the experience of density is embodied through everyday movement. Users develop practical spatial knowledge that enables them to anticipate congestion, interpret movement patterns, and adjust their bodily actions without conscious deliberation. Such embodied familiarity reflects how space is experienced through continuous engagement rather than abstract spatial cognition. Over time, repeated exposure transforms crowded conditions into a familiar rhythm rather than an exceptional circumstance.

These findings also demonstrate that density contributes to the production of social space. The market's crowded atmosphere is continuously reproduced through recurring daily practices rather than resulting solely from limited physical capacity. As users repeatedly negotiate shared space, density becomes a catalyst for everyday social interaction, reinforcing both collective familiarity and the social vitality of the traditional market.

3.2 Subjective and Contextual Strategic Locations

The study found that strategic spatial position significantly mediates social interaction by determining accessibility, visibility, and the likelihood of encounters between traders and customers. Rather than being defined solely by the formal market layout, strategic locations are socially constructed through everyday experience and repeated patterns of movement within the market.

Traders consistently preferred locations situated along major circulation routes, market entrances, and highly visible pedestrian flows. These positions maximize opportunities for customer encounters because products remain easily observable and accessible to visitors. Consequently, areas originally intended as circulation spaces frequently evolve into economically active locations as traders expand their stalls toward terraces, corridors, and roadside spaces.



Figure 3: The stall is located on the main access route

The findings indicate that strategic positioning increases interaction opportunities by concentrating human movement within specific spatial nodes. Customers passing these locations are more likely to stop, initiate conversations, negotiate prices, or engage in informal exchanges beyond commercial transactions. Therefore, spatial position functions not merely as an economic advantage but also as a mechanism that structures the intensity and frequency of interpersonal interaction.

Moreover, users collectively reinterpret spatial value through everyday practice. Locations become "strategic" because they repeatedly facilitate successful interactions rather than because they conform to formal planning regulations. The meaning of spatial position is therefore continuously negotiated through the relationship between physical accessibility, social visibility, and accumulated user experience.

This demonstrates that strategic spatial position mediates social interaction by increasing encounter probability. Repeated interactions occurring within highly accessible locations gradually strengthen familiarity between traders and customers, contributing to the development of trust, customer loyalty, and long-term social relationships.

3.3 Fluid Spatial Boundaries Between Formal and Informal Spaces

Another significant finding concerns the fluidity of spatial boundaries between formal and informal spaces. The distinction between designated trading areas and circulation spaces becomes increasingly blurred as users continuously adapt the market environment according to everyday needs.

Observation shows that terraces, corridors, transitional spaces, and road edges frequently function as temporary trading areas. Rather than remaining fixed according to formal planning, spatial functions shift dynamically in response to crowd intensity, commercial opportunities, and users' practical requirements. This flexibility expands the spatial arena in which social interaction can occur.



Figure 4: Use of circulation areas and building setback lines for stalls

Fluid boundaries create interaction opportunities by extending social activities beyond officially designated commercial zones. Informal conversations, bargaining, information exchange, and spontaneous encounters occur not only inside permanent stalls but throughout transitional spaces where traders and buyers temporarily occupy shared environments. Consequently, interaction becomes dispersed across the market rather than confined within formally planned locations.

The findings further suggest that spatial flexibility supports continuous social adaptation. Traders regularly modify stall arrangements, extend merchandise displays, and negotiate temporary spatial occupation without permanently altering the market structure. These adaptive practices illustrate that space remains socially produced through ongoing negotiation rather than fixed physical design.

As these adaptive behaviors recur daily, informal spatial practices become normalized components of market life. Repeated occupation of flexible spaces gradually institutionalizes informal interaction patterns, reinforcing collective understanding regarding acceptable spatial use while strengthening everyday social relationships among market users.

3.4 Physical Proximity that Facilitates Repeated Encounters

Physical proximity emerged as another important spatial characteristic facilitating social interaction. The relatively short distance between traders creates conditions that support continuous communication, cooperation, and reciprocal assistance throughout daily market activities.

The close arrangement of trading stalls enables traders to observe one another, exchange information, borrow equipment or change, assist neighboring vendors during busy periods, and maintain frequent informal conversations. Although commercial competition exists, physical closeness simultaneously encourages mutual dependence that contributes to everyday social solidarity.



Figure 5: The distance between stalls fosters communication

Unlike commercial centers where greater interpersonal distance often limits spontaneous interaction, the compact spatial arrangement of the traditional market increases opportunities for repeated face-to-face encounters. Frequent communication gradually reduces social distance and strengthens interpersonal familiarity among neighboring traders.

The findings therefore indicate that physical proximity functions as a mechanism through which repeated everyday interaction develops into practical cooperation. Assistance provided during crowded market periods, routine conversations, and reciprocal support become embedded within ordinary market practices rather than exceptional social events.

Consequently, physical proximity contributes not only to operational efficiency but also to the formation of social cohesion. Continuous interaction supported by close spatial arrangement enables interpersonal trust and reciprocal relationships to develop naturally through everyday practice.

3.5 Spatial Attachment developed through Recurring Social Interactions

The final spatial characteristic identified in this study is spatial attachment developed through repeated interaction. The findings demonstrate that long-term routines between traders and customers gradually transform commercial relationships into enduring social connections.

Many participants reported visiting or operating within the same locations for many years. These repeated encounters foster mutual recognition, familiarity, trust, and emotional attachment that extend beyond purely economic exchange. Customers frequently return to the same traders not only because of product quality or pricing but also because of established interpersonal relationships.

Routine interaction continuously reinforces users' attachment to specific places within the market. Particular stalls become associated with personal memories, habitual practices, and long-standing relationships, allowing physical locations to acquire social meaning accumulated through repeated experience.

This attachment also explains users' resistance toward relocation. Concerns regarding relocation were expressed not merely in terms of potential economic loss but also because relocating would disrupt existing networks of interaction that have developed over extended periods. Thus, attachment reflects the integration of spatial continuity with social continuity.

The findings indicate that repeated interaction transforms temporary encounters into stable social relationships. Through continual routines of buying, selling, greeting, and conversation, the traditional market evolves into a socially meaningful environment sustained by long-term interpersonal connections.

SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

The five spatial characteristics collectively demonstrate that social interaction in Sibuhuan Traditional Market is mediated through an interconnected spatial process rather than isolated physical attributes. Spatial density generates frequent encounters, strategic spatial positions increase accessibility and visibility, fluid boundaries expand interaction spaces, physical proximity facilitates communication and mutual support, while repeated interaction strengthens attachment and interpersonal trust.

Taken together, these findings suggest a sequential mechanism through which spatial characteristics contribute to social relationship formation. Spatial conditions first create opportunities for encounter, which subsequently develop into repeated social practices through everyday routines. Over time, these recurring interactions accumulate into stable interpersonal relationships characterized by familiarity, reciprocity, and trust. This mechanism can be conceptualized as:

Spatial Character → Interaction Opportunity → Repeated Social Practice → Social Relationship

This conceptual sequence illustrates that spatial characteristics do not directly determine social relationships. Instead, they function as mediating conditions that increase the probability of interaction, allowing repeated everyday practices to gradually produce durable social ties. In this sense, the traditional market should be understood not only as a physical setting for economic exchange but also as a socially produced environment where spatial experience and everyday practice continuously reinforce one another.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the spatial characteristics of Sibuhuan Traditional Market do not merely provide a physical setting for commercial activities but actively mediate the dynamics of social interaction among market users. The findings demonstrate that five interrelated spatial characteristics

spatial density, strategic spatial position, fluid spatial boundaries, physical proximity, and spatial attachment developed through repeated interaction collectively shape the conditions under which social relationships emerge and evolve. Rather than functioning as passive physical attributes, these spatial characteristics create opportunities for encounters, facilitate recurring social practices, and gradually foster familiarity, trust, and social attachment among traders and customers.

The study therefore suggests that social interaction in traditional markets is not solely determined by individual behavior but is fundamentally influenced by the spatial environment that continuously structures everyday encounters. This relationship can be understood as a sequential process in which spatial characteristics generate interaction opportunities, repeated social practices, and ultimately enduring social relationships. These findings contribute to architectural and environmental behavior studies by emphasizing that market space should be understood as a socially produced environment where physical configuration and everyday human experience are inseparable.

Based on these findings, future market planning and revitalization programs should move beyond prioritizing physical modernization and commercial efficiency alone. Design interventions should preserve spatial qualities that encourage everyday encounters, maintain accessible and visually connected trading areas, accommodate adaptive spatial use, and support opportunities for repeated social interaction. Future research is recommended to investigate how these spatial characteristics influence different user groups or vary across temporal conditions and different traditional market contexts. Such studies would further advance understanding of the reciprocal relationship between spatial configuration, everyday practice, and social life in traditional markets.

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