When Narratives Shape Space: Discursive Boundary Formation in a Residual Residential Space

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Abstract
Residual space in residential areas is often understood as the remnants of development that lacked a formal function. This study argues that residual space is a cultural text whose meaning is produced through narratives, everyday practices, and the formation of symbolic boundaries. Using a case study in Kampung Padi, Bandung, the study adopted a qualitative, interpretive method integrating behavioural mapping, spatial configuration analysis, and in-depth interviews to examine how cultural narratives transformed space. The research was motivated by the increasing social and cultural changes experienced by urban neighbourhoods, where residual spaces become important arenas for everyday interaction and negotiation among diverse community groups. The results showed that narratives about security, language, morality, and protection formed symbolic boundaries through informal regulations, changes in spatial appropriation patterns, and spatial fragmentation. The study proposes the concept of cultural re-coding, a process in which changes in cultural meaning are manifested in spatial configurations and social practices. This study showed that cultural sustainability depended on the presence of open spaces and the capacity to sustain interaction, exchange experiences, and form shared meanings among communities. The findings contribute to discussions on culturally informed urban design by highlighting the importance of preserving residual spaces as adaptive settings that strengthen social cohesion and support the continuity of local cultural identity amid urban transformation.

Keywords: *Cultural text; residual space; symbolic boundaries; spatial configuration; cultural sustainability*

Introduction

Space is shaped by narratives encountered every day, reinforced through social practices, and materialised in spatial configurations that determine acceptance, monitoring, or exclusion. In many Indonesian cities, residual space is generally

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understood as the result of a planning process that is not designed to serve a specific social function. The absence of a specifically designated function creates opportunities for the community to appropriate the space for play, interaction, and intercommunity building. Therefore, the function of residual space is determined not only by design but also by the meaning-making process that occurs through everyday cultural practices. This allows the space to acquire an unplanned social and cultural identity (Rickles, 2019).

Several studies have shown that the openness, visibility, and connectivity of space influence patterns of social interaction (Hillier & Hanson, 1989; Villagomez, 2010; Qi et al., 2024). Meanwhile, studies on symbolic boundaries described how narratives and social categories shaped legitimacy and exclusion (Lamont, 2022; Yazdiha, 2022). These two traditions have developed separately. However, the mechanisms connecting cultural narratives to spatial transformation and changes in social relations remain largely unexplained empirically.

To address this gap, the present study integrated perspectives on cultural text, sustainability, spatial appropriation, and symbolic boundaries to explain how everyday narratives gained legitimacy. The process also includes forming symbolic boundaries and materialising them in spatial practices. The transformation of residual space is thus understood as the result not only of physical changes in the area but also of cultural processes that gradually shape how the community uses, organises, and interprets shared space.

As described above, this perspective is relevant to the residual space in Kampung Padi, Bandung, a planned residential area directly adjacent to an organically developing settlement. The differences in spatial and social characteristics transformed the residual space into an arena for encounter and negotiation between communities. In the area's early stages of development, the residual space served as a communal playground, enabling spontaneous interactions between children and residents of both communities. As the area developed, narratives about security, environmental protection, and concerns about social influences from neighbouring regions also increased. These narratives gradually changed community perceptions of residual space, thereby limiting access, shifting interaction patterns, and forming previously invisible symbolic boundaries.

From this perspective, the present study aimed to describe how everyday narratives formed symbolic boundaries that materialised in the transformation of residual space, influencing cultural sustainability by changing patterns of interaction between communities. The study also made a conceptual contribution by integrating spatial and cultural perspectives.

Reading Residual Space as Cultural Text

Space refers to a physical entity resulting from planning and development processes, as well as a social construct continuously produced through human relationships, practices, and experiences. Lefebvre (1991) argued that space results from the interaction among spatial practices, representations, and representational spaces. The perspective was later developed in spatial sociology, which viewed

space as the product of reciprocal relationships among actors, objects, and social practices rather than as a passive arena for activity (Fuller & Löw, 2017).

The production of space occurs simultaneously with cultural representation, which shapes how the community understands and gives meaning to space. From a representational perspective, meaning is not inherent in space itself but is constructed through language, symbols, narratives, and social practices (Hall, 1997). In architectural studies, Psarra (2010) reported that spatial configurations functioned as narrative structures that communicated cultural meaning. Daniels and Cosgrove (2013) stated that space and landscape invariably represented cultural values, symbols, and identities. A similar perspective was put forward in a study published in Cultural Intertexts, where space was viewed as a medium for representing cultural identity and experience, rather than simply a physical setting for an event (Madongonda & Chitando, 2025).

The relationship between spatial production and cultural representation showed that space is a cultural text that stores, reproduces, and transforms various social narratives through everyday practices. Like a text, it can be "read" through patterns of use, symbols, language, informal rules, and existing social relationships. This perspective provides a conceptual foundation for understanding residual space's capacity to acquire identity through cultural practices. Because it is not constrained by rigid formal functions, residual space offers opportunities for organically evolving processes of appropriation, social interaction, and meaning negotiation. This perspective serves as a starting point for describing how everyday practices develop into symbolic boundaries that regulate the use of space.

Everyday Appropriation and the Production of Space

Understanding space as a cultural text implies that users' everyday practices shape its meaning. De Certeau (1984), as reproduced in *Contesti* (2024), argued that space is not a finished product at the end of the planning process, but the result of everyday life practices continuously produced through activities, experiences, and social interactions. This process, known as spatial appropriation, enables repeated use to generate new functions, meanings, and identities through negotiations of spatial characteristics, user experiences, and social relationships.

The phenomenon of appropriation is most evident in spaces without a rigid use program, such as residual spaces in residential areas. Its flexibility allows various informal, unplanned activities, such as playing, interacting, resting, and building relationships between communities (Villagomez, 2010; Ayudya & Anggiani, 2021; Akkurt & Akbulut, 2025). Various studies also showed that the appropriation of shared spaces contributed to the formation of social cohesion, a sense of belonging, informal learning, and community resilience (Cattell et al., 2008; Francis et al., 2012; Qi et al., 2024; Van Oostrum, 2022; Asadollahi Asl Zarkhah et al., 2025). However, appropriation does not always produce inclusive spaces. As narratives of security, ownership, order, and social identity become institutionalised, everyday practices may evolve into informal rules that regulate access and legitimise exclusion, creating symbolic boundaries that reshape how space is used.

Narratives, Symbolic Boundaries, and Cultural Sustainability

Spatial appropriation is influenced by narratives developed within a community. From a language ideology perspective, language reflects social reality and reproduces the community's values, beliefs, and power relations (Woolard, 1998). The repeatedly produced narratives shape social categories, such as "us" and "them," "safe" and "unsafe," or "worthy" and "unworthy." Lamont and Molnár (2002) reported that the process produced symbolic and conceptual boundaries used by the community to categorise individuals and groups based on values, identity, and social legitimacy. Recent studies have shown that symbolic boundaries further shape spatial practices and mechanisms of exclusion across various urban contexts (Yazdiha, 2022; Jalili, 2022; Dixon et al., 2025).

Symbolic boundaries subsequently evolve beyond discursive constructions, gaining legitimacy through informal rules governing the use of space. Klopf et al. (2025) showed that symbolic and regulatory boundaries shape each other through discursive processes. Shared spaces play a crucial role by providing opportunities for community interaction, developing a sense of belonging, strengthening social cohesion, and reproducing cultural values (Cattell et al., 2008; Francis et al., 2012; Qi et al., 2024). Based on this conceptual relationship, the present study viewed the transformation of residual space as a gradual cultural process that begins with the formation of narratives in everyday practices.

Context and Analytical Method

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive case study design to understand how cultural narratives shape the transformation of residual space through everyday practices. The study was conducted in the residual space in the Kampung Padi housing complex on Kampung Padi Street, Dago, Bandung City, Indonesia. The location was selected purposively because it represented the intersection of planned settlements with organically developing settlements, namely Kampung Tanggulan, Kampung RT.06, and Kampung Biru. The area has a contoured topography, unclear physical boundaries, and differing social characteristics between the relatively homogeneous housing residents and surrounding village communities. These conditions made the residual space an arena for changes in function, interaction patterns, and the formation of symbolic boundaries in everyday life.

We collected data through behavioural mapping, non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation. Behavioural mapping is a widely used method to identify the relationship between user activities and the spatial characteristics of an environment (Bishop et al., 2024). In addition, we conducted observations and interviews to uncover everyday practices, narratives, and community perceptions of residual space. Field observations were conducted in stages from 2019 to 2026 to capture the dynamics of residual space transformation. In-depth interviews included village leaders, housing administrators, security officers, children, parents, and residents, selected purposively based on personal use, management, and everyday interactions in the residual space.

The analysis was conducted thematically by integrating observation and interview data. Space-use patterns obtained through behavioural mapping were interpreted alongside narratives evolving from the interviews. This was achieved using a framework of cultural text, sustainability, spatial appropriation, language ideology, and symbolic boundaries.

Residual Space as a Shared Cultural Space

Before undergoing a functional change, the residual space in Kampung Padi served as a shared cultural space that brought together children from two residential communities with distinct social characteristics. The space was not designed as a playground or formal public space. Its openness, easy access, and lack of clear physical boundaries allowed a variety of spontaneous activities.

Figure 1 shows that the residual space was distributed across several interconnected open points, with no significant physical barriers, even before spatial fragmentation. This interconnectedness created a network of informal spaces that allowed children to move freely across residential boundaries.

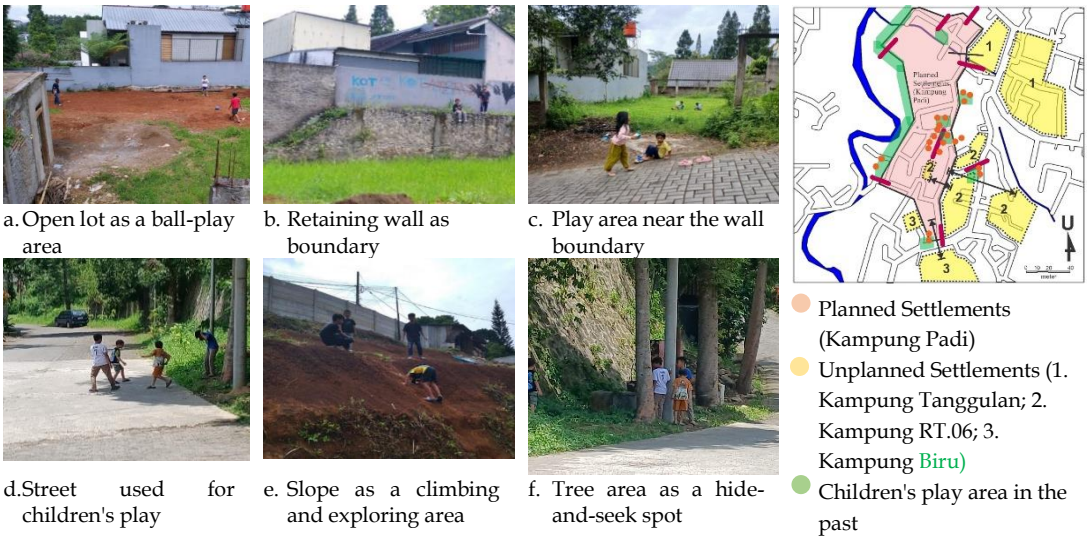


Figure 1. Residual space as a shared cultural space before spatial fragmentation

The behavioural mapping shows that play activities are not concentrated in a single location but spread flexibly across the available space, reflecting its characteristics. The children used various open spaces for playing, cycling, chatting, and gathering without separation based on community origin. The relatively even distribution of activities showed that residual space does not belong to a particular group but is used collectively through shared appropriation.

The findings showed that residual space functioned beyond recreation, evolving into a shared cultural space through repeated everyday appropriation. Rather than being defined solely by design intentions, its meaning emerged from everyday practices, supporting de Certeau's (1984; reproduced in 2024) and Low's

(2010) view that space is socially produced through use. This finding also reinforces previous studies showing that the flexibility of residual space promotes social interaction, community cohesion, and shared experiences (Villagomez, 2010; Van Oostrum, 2022; Akkurt & Akbulut, 2025). Consequently, the residual space became a shared cultural setting that sustained spontaneous cross-community encounters and cultural sustainability.

Narratives Producing Symbolic Boundaries

Changes in the function of residual space are not initiated by alterations in the physical configuration, but by changes in how the community interprets the space and the groups that use it for various activities. The interviews showed that, before access restrictions were materialised, various narratives developed around security, language, morality, and protection, gradually transforming shared space into a selective one. These narratives reflected individual perceptions and shaped social categories of who is considered worthy of using the space, thereby forming the basis for symbolic boundaries that influence usage practice.

The first narrative constructs the dangerous other, as one informant stated: *"Village children have a negative influence on complex children."* The term negative influence does not describe the objective characteristics of other groups but constructs a representation of "the other" as a threat to the social environment. Moreover, through this narrative, the residual space is no longer understood as a shared play space but as one that should be protected from groups perceived as posing a risk. The narratives of security shape the categories of "us" and "them," which form the basis for symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Yazdiha, 2022).

The second narrative constructs language as a means of boundary-making, as another informant stated: *"Their language is harsh and not refined Sundanese. We are worried our children would be influenced."* The quote shows that language is treated not only as a means of communication but also as a marker of cultural identity. The concerns raised are not about linguistic differences, but about the social values attached to other groups' speech patterns. As a result, language has evolved into a mechanism of differentiation that reinforces symbolic boundaries between communities. This perception shapes everyday practices, as some parents limit children's interactions with other groups, fearing the transfer of values considered inappropriate (Woolard, 1998; Young & Sercombe, 2010).

The third narrative moralises the other. The narratives about security and language were further reinforced by moral judgments about other groups. For example, an informant stated: *"They were already smoking as little children."* The narrative constructs individual behaviour as a moral representation of the entire group. Community identity forms not from direct interaction, but from stereotypes about behaviours considered deviant. This perception reinforced the social legitimacy of limiting intergroup interaction. The residual space was therefore seen as increasingly in need of protection from influences considered destructive (Cohen, 2011; Critcher, 2008).

The fourth narrative centred on protecting vulnerable community members. An informant stated: *"We are worried that girls will be bullied if they play with them."* This concern framed spatial restrictions as a way to protect vulnerable community members while also legitimising exclusion. As a result, parental supervision increased, cross-community interaction declined, and protection evolved into informal rules regulating who could access and use the space.

The four narratives showed that changes in residual space started with alterations in the systems of meaning in everyday life. Narratives about security, language, morality, and protection reinforced each other in forming social categories between "us" and "them." At this stage, symbolic boundaries remained discursive. However, as these boundaries begin to influence parental decisions, children's interaction patterns, and how the community manages space, they develop into social practices that materialise in spatial configurations. This process of materialisation is further discussed in the next section.

Materialising Symbolic Boundaries through Spatial Configuration

Narratives that develop within a community do not remain purely discursive; they gradually materialise in practices of spatial use. The observations showed that as narratives about security, language, morality, and protection gained social legitimacy, the previously shared residual space began to shift in usage patterns.

As shown in Figure 2, residual space usage has changed significantly as diverse narratives developed. Play areas, initially scattered across several open areas, have become increasingly limited and fragmented. Children's activities are no longer freely distributed but concentrated in locations some residents consider safe.



a. Children's play in front of a house



b. Alley used for children's play



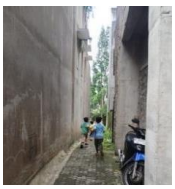
c. Children building and playing together



d.Tree area as a hide-and-seek spot



e. Vacant land used for play and exploration



f. Alley as a children's play corridor

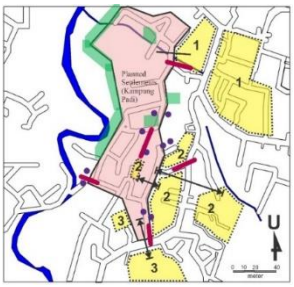


Figure 2. Materialisation of symbolic boundaries in residual space

The numerous changes were further reflected in everyday community practices. Parents increasingly supervised play activities, limited play areas, and directed children to interact with groups with similar social backgrounds. These restrictions were not implemented through formal rules but developed as informal

norms that gradually changed mobility patterns, interaction intensity, and how space was used.

Figure 3 shows that these changes were realised through controlled access to residual space. Formal entrances supervised by security personnel controlled the main circulation to residential areas. Meanwhile, the informal access previously provided through spatial gaps was gradually closed, restricting free mobility and interaction across communities.

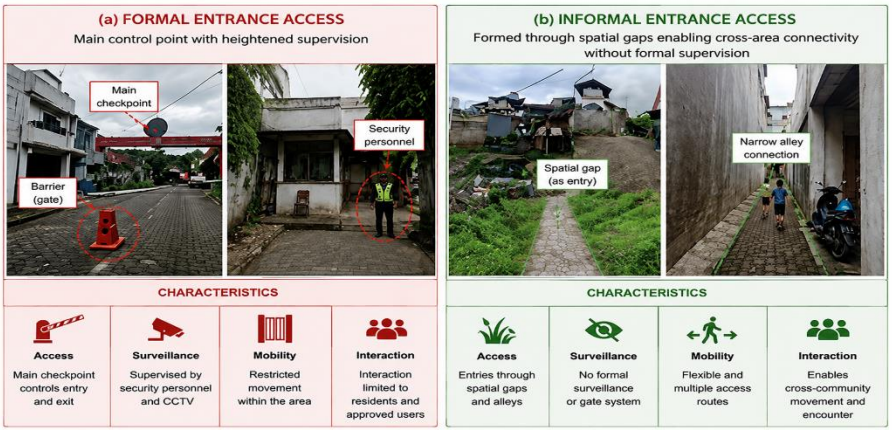


Figure 3. Formal and Informal Access Routes Shaping Symbolic Boundaries

The results suggested that symbolic boundaries did not remain mere social categories of "us" and "them," but acquired material form through the control of access and surveillance of space. Cultural narratives shaped symbolic boundaries, which transformed social practices and, in turn, produced new spatial configurations. The transformation of residual space referred to a process of cultural recoding, in which changes in cultural meaning manifested as shifts in spatial configurations and usage practices. Spatial transformation did not invariably start with design interventions. It also originated from changes in systems of meaning reproduced through social practices which gain legitimacy through informal regulation and materialise in new spatial configurations.

Implications for Cultural Sustainability

The transformation of residual space altered patterns of spatial use and influenced cultural processes that were previously developed through everyday interactions. When residual space served as a shared cultural space, it offered opportunities for children from different communities to build social relationships, share experiences, and generate shared meaning through play. As symbolic boundaries became spatial restrictions, opportunities for cross-community encounters tended to diminish. These results suggested that cultural sustainability depended on the physical presence of open spaces and the ability to sustain inclusive social practices (Habib et al., 2023; Feng & Hou, 2023). The findings further indicate that spatial meaning changes through cultural recoding, in which cultural narratives evolve into symbolic boundaries, informal regulation, and spatial configurations that reshape everyday interaction.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the transformation of residual space is driven not only by physical change but also by cultural processes through which everyday narratives evolve into symbolic boundaries that reshape patterns of spatial use. Before spatial fragmentation, residual space functioned as a shared cultural space supporting interaction and relationship building across communities. As narratives concerning security, language, morality, and protection gained legitimacy, they gradually materialised into informal regulation and spatial restrictions that fragmented interaction and altered the social meaning of space.

The study contributes by proposing cultural re-coding as a conceptual framework to explain how cultural narratives evolve into symbolic boundaries, informal regulation, and spatial transformation. This framework demonstrates that spatial configurations are not merely products of planning and physical intervention, but also material expressions of cultural processes reproduced through everyday practice. These findings highlight that creating inclusive urban environments requires attention not only to physical design, but also to the narratives, social relationships, and everyday practices through which space is continuously interpreted, negotiated, and transformed.

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