

Elite Urban Expansion and Spatial Inequality: Evidence from a Coastal Community in Surabaya

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ABSTRACT

Keyword:

Coastal
Communities; Elite
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Production of
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Transformation.

Rapid urban expansion driven by elite residential development has increasingly reshaped coastal urban spaces in Indonesia, generating complex socio-spatial inequalities that remain insufficiently understood from the perspective of local communities. Existing studies predominantly emphasize physical spatial change or urban growth, while providing limited attention to how spatial transformation restructures everyday social relations, accessibility, and livelihoods. This study aims to examine the socio-spatial consequences of elite urban expansion in Kejawan Putih Tambak, Surabaya, through Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space. Employing a descriptive qualitative case study, data were collected through field observations and in-depth interviews with purposively selected local residents directly affected by land-use conversion and urban development. The findings reveal that the expansion of Pakuwon City has generated dual and uneven outcomes. While it has stimulated regional economic growth and created new employment opportunities, it has simultaneously displaced traditional coastal livelihoods, intensified social inequality, altered community structures, reduced spatial accessibility, and increased ecological pressures resulting from the conversion of fishpond areas into urban infrastructure. These findings demonstrate that urban space is socially produced through capitalist development processes that privilege investment interests over the lived experiences of local communities. The study contributes to the growing discourse on socio-spatial justice by highlighting the importance of integrating social equity into sustainable urban planning and coastal development policies.

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INTRODUCTION

Rapid urbanization has fundamentally reshaped the spatial configuration of cities across the Global South, where large-scale urban development has become a dominant strategy for accelerating economic growth and enhancing urban competitiveness (Zhuang & Ye, 2023). The expansion of elite residential

areas, commercial complexes, and integrated urban infrastructure has transformed not only the physical landscape but also the social relations embedded within urban space (Karimi, 2023). Although such development contributes to investment growth and modernization, it frequently generates unintended socio-spatial consequences, including unequal access to urban resources, displacement of local communities, environmental degradation, and the intensification of social inequality (Salvia et al., 2022). Consequently, contemporary urban transformation should be understood not merely as a process of physical development but as a complex reconfiguration of social, economic, and political relations that shapes the production and distribution of urban space (Lee, 2022).

Indonesia has experienced similar patterns of urban transformation, particularly in rapidly growing metropolitan areas where private property investment increasingly influences urban spatial development (Amri et al., 2023). Surabaya, as one of Indonesia's largest metropolitan cities, illustrates this phenomenon through the continuous expansion of elite residential developments, including Pakuwon City, which has significantly altered the socio-spatial landscape of Kejawan Putih Tambak. Historically characterized as a coastal settlement supported by fishpond cultivation and fisheries-based livelihoods, the area has gradually evolved into an urban extension dominated by residential enclaves and commercial facilities (Liu et al., 2026). While this transformation has stimulated economic activities and improved urban infrastructure, it has simultaneously reconfigured traditional livelihoods, accessibility patterns, environmental conditions, and the everyday experiences of local communities (Borello Vargas et al., 2025).

The complexity of these transformations cannot be adequately explained through conventional perspectives that primarily emphasize land-use change or urban economic growth. Rather, urban space should be understood as a socially constructed product shaped by the interaction of economic interests, political authority, and social power (Alami et al., 2023). Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space offers a critical framework for understanding how urban development reproduces spatial relations through three interconnected dimensions: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces (Shinde, 2022). Within this perspective, the expansion of elite urban developments represents not only physical restructuring but also a process through which capitalist interests redefine the meanings, functions, and accessibility of urban space for different social groups (Vergara-Perucich & Arias-Loyola, 2023).

Previous studies have extensively examined urban expansion, residential segregation, and socio-spatial inequality from various disciplinary perspectives. Existing evidence suggests that elite residential development often contributes to

spatial segregation, unequal access to urban facilities, and the marginalization of lower-income communities (Rahman et al., 2025). Other studies have highlighted that land-use conversion associated with large-scale urban projects frequently alters environmental conditions, employment structures, and patterns of community interaction (Zheng et al., 2024). In the Indonesian context, research has also documented how urban development reshapes coastal settlements through increasing property investment and infrastructure expansion (Awuah & Abdulai, 2022). Despite these contributions, the existing body of knowledge remains fragmented, as most studies emphasize either macro-level urban planning, physical spatial transformation, or economic development while paying comparatively limited attention to the lived socio-spatial experiences of affected local communities (Follmann et al., 2023).

Furthermore, relatively little empirical research has simultaneously examined how elite urban expansion reshapes spatial accessibility, livelihood transformation, ecological conditions, and social inequality within coastal urban communities through a critical socio-spatial perspective (Suriandjo et al., 2023). Previous investigations generally treat these dimensions independently, overlooking the interconnected processes through which urban space is continuously produced and reproduced by capitalist development. As a result, the mechanisms linking spatial transformation to the everyday experiences of marginalized communities remain insufficiently explored, particularly within rapidly urbanizing coastal environments in Indonesia (Hamdani et al., 2026). This unresolved issue constitutes an important research gap that warrants further investigation.

Unlike previous studies, this research integrates the concepts of spatial transformation, social inequality, accessibility, livelihood change, and ecological pressure within a single analytical framework based on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space. Rather than interpreting urban expansion solely as physical land conversion or economic modernization, this study conceptualizes it as a socio-spatial process through which capitalist urban development reconstructs everyday life, redistributes opportunities, and reshapes power relations within local communities. By positioning the lived experiences of coastal residents as the central unit of analysis, this study extends existing scholarship on urban transformation beyond conventional planning and economic perspectives toward a more comprehensive understanding of socio-spatial justice.

The significance of this study extends beyond empirical documentation of urban transformation. Theoretically, it enriches contemporary discussions on the production of space by demonstrating how elite urban expansion simultaneously produces economic opportunities and socio-spatial inequalities within coastal settlements. Practically, the findings provide insights for policymakers and urban

planners regarding the importance of incorporating social equity, community participation, and ecological sustainability into future urban development strategies. Consequently, this research contributes to broader debates concerning inclusive urban governance and sustainable coastal development within rapidly urbanizing metropolitan regions (Monckeberg & Gómez, 2025).

This study aims to analyze the socio-spatial consequences of elite urban expansion on social inequality and community accessibility in Kejawan Putih Tambak, Surabaya. Employing a descriptive qualitative case study approach, the research investigates how the expansion of Pakuwon City has transformed traditional coastal space, reshaped local livelihoods, and reconstructed the everyday experiences of affected communities through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a case study design to examine the socio-spatial consequences of elite urban expansion in Kejawan Putih Tambak, Surabaya. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research sought to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of local communities regarding spatial transformation resulting from the expansion of Pakuwon City. Kejawan Putih Tambak was purposively selected as the research site due to its unique position as a coastal settlement that has undergone substantial land-use conversion from traditional fishponds to elite residential and urban infrastructure developments. The study adopted Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space as the primary analytical framework to interpret how spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces interact in reshaping social relations, accessibility, livelihoods, and environmental conditions within the study area.

Primary data were collected through direct field observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposively selected informants, including long-term residents, former fishpond farmers, community leaders, and local residents directly affected by land-use conversion and changes in spatial accessibility. Field observations documented physical changes in land use, settlement patterns, transportation access, public facilities, and environmental conditions, while interviews captured participants' experiences of livelihood transformation, social inequality, and everyday adaptation to urban development. Data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis process involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to identify recurring patterns and relationships among the emerging themes. The credibility of the findings was strengthened through data triangulation by comparing evidence obtained from observations and interviews, thereby ensuring the consistency and trustworthiness of the research findings.

RESULT

Spatial Transformation and Livelihood Reconfiguration

Field observations and interview findings consistently indicate that the expansion of Pakuwon City has fundamentally transformed the spatial structure of Kejawan Putih Tambak from a traditional coastal settlement into an integrated urban residential area. Prior to urban development, the area was predominantly characterized by fishponds, natural waterways, and community-based economic activities closely associated with fisheries and aquaculture. These spatial characteristics functioned not only as productive economic assets but also as social spaces that supported long-standing community interactions and local cultural identity. The gradual conversion of fishpond areas into residential complexes, commercial facilities, and urban infrastructure has substantially altered both the physical landscape and the social functions of space within the community.

The transformation of land use has been accompanied by significant changes in livelihood patterns. Residents who previously depended on aquaculture and fisheries have increasingly shifted toward employment in urban service sectors, including commercial services, facility maintenance, and other occupations associated with the surrounding urban economy. Nevertheless, the transition has not been experienced uniformly across all social groups. Younger residents generally demonstrate greater adaptability to emerging employment opportunities, whereas older community members experience greater difficulty adjusting because of limited occupational skills and the declining availability of traditional economic resources. These findings suggest that urban expansion has generated new economic opportunities while simultaneously restructuring local livelihood systems and creating unequal adaptive capacities among community members.

Table 1. Summary of Spatial Transformation in Kejawan Putih Tambak

Aspect	Before Urban Expansion	After Urban Expansion
Land use	Fishponds and coastal settlements	Elite residential areas and urban facilities
Main livelihood	Aquaculture and fisheries	Urban service and commercial sectors
Spatial function	Productive coastal space	Residential and investment-oriented space
Community interaction	Local community-based	Increasingly heterogeneous community

Emerging Socio-Spatial Inequality and Accessibility

Beyond changes in physical space, urban expansion has altered social relations within the study area. The increasing presence of newcomers and the rapid development of elite residential neighborhoods have reshaped the demographic composition of Kejawan Putih Tambak, creating a more

heterogeneous social environment. Although social interaction between local residents and newcomers continues to occur, differences in economic capacity, residential quality, and access to urban facilities have become increasingly visible. These changes indicate that urban development has contributed to new forms of socio-spatial differentiation in which access to urban resources is distributed unevenly across social groups.

Accessibility also emerged as one of the most prominent consequences of spatial transformation. Improvements in road infrastructure have enhanced regional connectivity; however, increasing traffic volume, particularly during commuting hours, has reduced the efficiency of daily mobility for local residents. Traffic congestion surrounding educational institutions, residential complexes, and commercial centers reflects the growing concentration of urban activities within the area. Consequently, accessibility should not be interpreted solely as the availability of transportation infrastructure but also as the ability of residents to utilize urban space effectively within increasingly complex patterns of mobility. These findings illustrate that infrastructure expansion does not automatically produce equitable spatial accessibility for all members of the community.

Table 2. Major Socio-Spatial Changes Identified in the Study

Theme	Empirical Findings
Livelihood transition	Shift from fisheries to urban employment
Social structure	Increasing population heterogeneity
Accessibility	Improved connectivity accompanied by traffic congestion
Social inequality	Unequal capacity to benefit from urban development

Environmental Consequences of Elite Urban Expansion

The findings further demonstrate that spatial transformation has generated important environmental consequences for the coastal ecosystem. The conversion of fishpond areas into residential and commercial developments has reduced natural water retention capacity and altered the ecological functions of the landscape. Although severe flooding is not reported as a frequent occurrence, local residents observed that temporary inundation becomes more likely during periods when heavy rainfall coincides with high tidal conditions. In addition, the declining environmental quality of rivers and coastal waterways reflects increasing pressure associated with urbanization and intensive land development. These observations indicate that ecological change constitutes an integral component of the broader spatial transformation process rather than an isolated environmental issue.

Overall, the empirical findings reveal that the expansion of elite urban development has produced multidimensional consequences extending beyond physical land-use conversion. The transformation has simultaneously generated new employment opportunities, improved regional economic activity,

reconfigured livelihood systems, altered patterns of accessibility, intensified socio-spatial differentiation, and increased ecological pressure within the coastal environment. These interconnected changes demonstrate that urban development represents a comprehensive process of spatial restructuring that reshapes the relationships between people, place, and urban resources. The findings therefore provide a strong empirical basis for understanding how elite urban expansion restructures everyday life within rapidly urbanizing coastal communities and serve as the foundation for the subsequent theoretical discussion through Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the expansion of elite urban development in Kejawan Putih Tambak represents more than a process of physical land conversion; it reflects a broader socio-spatial transformation that reconstructs the relationships between people, space, and economic activity. The conversion of fishponds into residential and commercial areas altered the functional meaning of space from a community-based productive landscape into an investment-oriented urban environment. This transformation illustrates that urban space is socially produced through interactions between capital investment, planning institutions, and political-economic interests rather than evolving solely through demographic growth (Marks & Baird, 2025). Consequently, spatial transformation should be interpreted as a process that simultaneously reorganizes material space and redefines the social practices embedded within it, a perspective that is consistent with Henri Lefebvre's conception of the production of space (Napoletano et al., 2022).

Another important finding concerns the unequal capacity of local communities to adapt to the new urban economy. Although urban expansion generated employment opportunities in service and commercial sectors, these opportunities were not distributed equally among residents. Younger and economically active individuals were generally more capable of adjusting to the changing labour market, whereas older residents and those whose livelihoods depended on fisheries experienced greater socioeconomic vulnerability. Similar patterns have been identified in previous studies of rapid urbanization, which argue that capitalist urban development frequently creates differentiated opportunities while simultaneously reinforcing existing social inequalities (Bettache, 2025). From Lefebvre's perspective, this condition reflects the unequal distribution of the right to urban space, where economic participation increasingly depends upon individuals' capacity to respond to market-oriented development rather than their historical relationship with the place (Yang & Kesteloot, 2025).

The study further reveals that spatial accessibility cannot be understood

exclusively in terms of infrastructure availability. While road networks and urban facilities have expanded considerably, increasing traffic density and changing mobility patterns have reduced the practical accessibility experienced by local residents. This finding suggests that accessibility possesses both physical and social dimensions, in which the existence of infrastructure does not necessarily guarantee equitable mobility or equal opportunities to benefit from urban development (Attard et al., 2023). Similar observations have been reported in studies examining socio-spatial inequality in rapidly urbanizing cities, where infrastructure improvements often privilege economically dominant groups while creating new barriers for surrounding communities (Nicoletti et al., 2023). Therefore, accessibility should be interpreted as a socially negotiated outcome rather than merely an engineering achievement.

Environmental change also emerged as an inseparable consequence of spatial transformation within the study area. The conversion of coastal fishponds into urban residential developments has reduced ecological functions that previously supported water retention and environmental resilience. Although the area has not experienced frequent large-scale flooding, local observations indicate increasing vulnerability during periods of heavy rainfall coinciding with tidal fluctuations. These findings reinforce previous arguments that urban expansion frequently produces interconnected ecological and social consequences because environmental degradation directly affects community resilience, livelihood sustainability, and long-term spatial justice (Nguyen et al., 2023). Accordingly, sustainable urban development requires greater integration between economic growth, environmental conservation, and community well-being rather than emphasizing physical expansion alone (Allgood et al., 2023).

Overall, this study extends existing discussions on urban transformation by demonstrating that elite urban expansion simultaneously restructures livelihoods, accessibility, environmental conditions, and social relations within coastal communities. Unlike many previous studies that examine these dimensions separately, the present research integrates them within Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, thereby providing a more comprehensive explanation of how capitalist urban development reproduces socio-spatial inequality in everyday life. These findings contribute to the growing discourse on socio-spatial justice by highlighting that inclusive urban planning should not be evaluated solely through economic performance or physical modernization, but also through its capacity to preserve equitable access to space, sustain local livelihoods, and protect the social and ecological functions of urban communities (Ezeudu & Chukwudubem, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the expansion of elite urban development in Kejawen Putih Tambak has reshaped coastal space through a multidimensional process that extends beyond physical land-use transformation. The findings reveal that urban expansion simultaneously reconfigured traditional livelihoods, altered patterns of spatial accessibility, intensified socio-spatial inequality, and generated ecological pressures within the local community. Viewed through Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, these transformations illustrate how urban space is continuously produced and reproduced by the interaction of capital investment, planning policies, and social power, resulting in uneven access to opportunities and resources among community members. Consequently, spatial transformation should be understood as a socio-political process that fundamentally influences both the material organization of cities and the everyday experiences of their inhabitants.

This study contributes to the growing discourse on socio-spatial justice by integrating spatial transformation, livelihood transition, accessibility, and environmental change within a single analytical framework centered on the lived experiences of coastal communities. The findings highlight the importance of balancing economic development with social inclusion and ecological sustainability to ensure that urban modernization does not marginalize vulnerable populations. Future research is encouraged to adopt comparative and longitudinal approaches across different urban coastal regions to further examine how diverse governance models and development strategies influence the production of urban space and the pursuit of equitable urban development.

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