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Converting Office Building to Residential Use: Identifying Location Preferences of Prospective Users

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered work patterns in Indonesia, leading to a rise in office vacancies due to remote and hybrid work models. Simultaneously, Indonesia faces increasing demand for affordable housing, driven by rapid population growth and urbanization. Therefore, office-to-residential building conversion can be a solution to address underutilized office space and growing housing demand. This study examines the potential for converting vacant office buildings into residential functions in Indonesia, with a focus on analyzing location criteria as a starting point for implementing this strategy. By combining a literature review with statistical analysis of survey data, this research identifies the key criteria for considering suitable building locations for conversion, based on the perspectives of prospective users. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers and developers aiming to tackle urban space inefficiencies and growing housing demands by considering office-to-residential conversions, with location analysis serving as a critical first step.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant shifts to real estate markets (Biro Humas Kemnaker, 2020). With widespread business closures, the majority of office employees were compelled to work from home, reducing their reliance on physical office spaces (Chafi et al., 2022; Gupta et al., 2024; Van Nieuwerburgh, 2022). As a result, empty office areas have increased, especially in big cities in Indonesia, reaching 209 hectares (Bahfein & Alexander, 2021; Indraini, 2021). The latest update indicates that the vacancy area of office buildings in Jakarta, Indonesia's national capital, remains at 2 million square meters of a total supply of 11 million square meters in 2024 (Sandi, 2025). Between the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and the second quarter of 2024, the average annual office absorption was negative, at -54,244 square meters (Sandi, 2025). The hybrid scheme has become a trend that is perceived as more efficient and reduces operational costs. The urban retail sector has been hit as hard as the urban office sector (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2022). The urban and suburban retail trends are unfolding within a broader context of increasing online shopping, a behavior that saw rapid growth during the pandemic. Other key contributors to office vacancies include the downsizing of bank branch offices and the planned relocation of the nation's capital to East Kalimantan. Since 2015, the number of bank branches has decreased by approximately 1,055 units annually—a trend accelerated by the pandemic and the rise of digital banking (Irawati, 2023). Furthermore, the *Ibu Kota Nusantara* (IKN) capital city relocation program will require the transfer of at least 35 ministers and 16,990 state civil servants (ASNs) to IKN beginning in 2024, moving them from the current capital, Jakarta (MENPANRB, n.d.; SmartID, 2023).

If remote work policies continue or expand, the shift toward remote work has led to a spatial mismatch in the real estate market (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to address vacant office space to prevent urban deterioration. Urban office space can be reduced only through two main methods: demolition or conversion to alternative uses. While re-purposing for healthcare, life sciences, or industrial purposes may be viable in some cases, the most frequently discussed and practical conversion is transforming office buildings into residential apartments. In the Indonesian context, the backlog number is decreasing from 10.51 million units in 2022 to 9.9 million units in 2023 (Perkim, 2024). Even though the number is decreasing, the rest of 9 million units show housing needs issues are still relevant. As such, transforming obsolete office buildings into residential units presents a practical solution to help meet this increasing need without having to open new land (Pratiwi et al., 2023; Yust & Meghdari, 2023). This strategy can also extend the life of existing buildings, reduce costs for property owners, conserve energy and materials, minimize environmental impact, and curb urban sprawl (Dickson et al., 2021; Glumac & Islam, 2020; Gursel et al., 2023; Kim & Lee, 2020; Titelboim, 2020; Van Nieuwerburgh, 2022). Office buildings located in city centers, such as those in Jakarta, are especially suitable for conversion due to better access to infrastructure and services compared to suburban areas (Kolachalam, 2022; Remøy & van der Voordt, 2014). However, the feasibility of such conversions depends largely on the demand for housing. Market demand plays a critical role in determining whether a building conversion is viable (Kolachalam, 2022; Rajabi et al., 2024; Živković et al., 2015). Therefore, supply must align with the needs and preferences of potential users or buyers.

Currently, there is a lack of research and data on the office-to-residential conversion in the Indonesian context. Since not all vacant office buildings are relevant to be converted, this article aims to investigate the location criteria based on prospective users' perspectives. Location becomes the entry point in consideration before investigating the building characteristics in converting buildings (Kolachalam, 2022). The findings of this study aim to support stakeholders in aligning housing supply with actual demand, thereby helping to

address Indonesia's growing housing needs and responding to the issue of vacant oversupply offices.

2. METHODS

This study employed a mixed-method approach, beginning with a comprehensive literature review on global practices of office-to-residential conversion. The qualitative phase employed an exploratory approach based on grounded theory (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013), aimed at uncovering new insights into the criteria of office-to-residential conversions, specifically focusing on the location aspect as an entry point in considering building conversion. In addition, a questionnaire was conducted among potential users to assess their preferences in location aspects. Using a convenience sampling method (Golzar & Tajik, 2022), the questionnaire was shared with colleagues, acquaintances, and members of the general public who are of productive age and currently considering renting or purchasing a home. This sampling approach was chosen to ensure relevance and efficiency in targeting individuals most likely to be affected by or interested in such conversions. Data collection was conducted over two months, resulting in a total of 227 responses. The responses were statistically analyzed using JMP software to identify the correlation between the location criteria of converted office-to-residential buildings with user interest in building conversion. Figure 1 below shows the research framework.

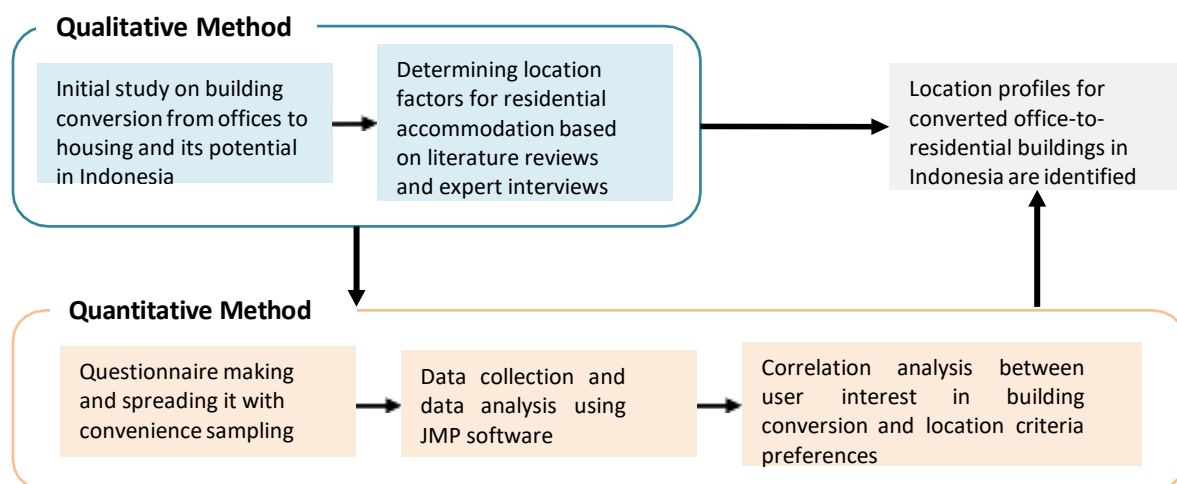


Figure 1. Research Framework

When considering building conversions, it is essential to involve discussions among stakeholders or an expert in property (Ilkovičová et al., 2020). Therefore, interviews were also conducted to explore the potential for office-to-residential conversions and to understand key market demand considerations in the Indonesian context from the perspective of experts. Participants in the interviews included representatives from property organizations, academic professionals involved in construction projects, and government officials responsible for urban permits. Based on insights from the literature and interview findings, several indicators were identified for profiling potential users and buyers, with a focus on their location preferences for office-to-residential conversions in Indonesia. These indicators formed the basis of the questionnaire design, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Prospective User Profiling Indicators

Location	
1. Characters	
a.	Nature of the built environment (zone/area, developer)
b.	Green space

Location	
2. Facilities	
a. Public transportation (bus/train station)	
b. Market	
c. School	
d. Office	
e. Recreation facilities (park, hotel, sports center)	
f. Medical facilities	
g. Bank/post office	
3. Accessibility	
a. Distance to public transportation	
b. Distance to public facilities	
c. Parking facilities	
d. Private vehicles use frequency	
e. Accessibility to residential	

Source: Analyzed by Authors based on Zivkovic et al (2016) and Geraedts et al (2018)

Based on the indicators above, a questionnaire comprising both closed-ended and open-ended questions was distributed online to the respondents. The close-ended questions included multiple-choice formats and Likert scale items. The Likert scale questions asked respondents to rate the importance of various ideal housing conditions, including strategic location (near workplace, station, etc), easy access to public transportation, and the existence of public facilities (park, school, worship places, etc). The respondents are asked to identify which factors are considered most and least important, starting from scale 1 for not important to scale 5 for very important. The open-ended question was designed to gather qualitative insights into respondents' reasons for selecting their preferred locations for converted office-to-residential buildings.

To analyze the questionnaire results, statistical analysis was conducted using JMP software, marking the second phase of the study, which applied quantitative methods. JMP (John's Macintosh Project) is a data analysis tool that enables users to visually explore and interpret data, supporting decision-making throughout the analytical process. The analysis aimed to identify the correlation between location criteria as the dependent variables and users' interest in converted office-to-residential buildings as the independent variable. A relationship between two or more variables was considered significant if the Pearson and Likelihood ratio values generated by JMP fell within the 1% to 5% range. These significant correlations demonstrate the influence of one factor over another. Nevertheless, some non-significant results also provided valuable insights and contributed to the overall understanding of user preferences.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The questionnaire data were collected from 227 respondents, with 62% female and 38% male. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 58, with the largest group being between 20 and 25 years old. Most participants held either a Bachelor's or a Master's degree. While their professional backgrounds varied, the majority were private-sector employees. Monthly income levels were divided into six categories, with the majority of respondents having a monthly income around IDR2,000,000 – IDR3,999,000 rupiahs. This is followed by those with an income of more than IDR10,000,000 and those with an income between IDR6,000,000 and IDR7,999,000. About 63% of respondents were unmarried, 36% were married, and 1% had previously been married, indicating that most participants were relatively young and, as a result, did not yet have children. Table 2 below shows the demographic data of respondents.

Table 2. Demographic Data

Items	Number	Percentage (%)	Items	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender			Occupation		
• Male	87	62	• Entrepreneurs	16	7.05
• Female	140	38	• Freelancers/Free Workers	26	11.45
			• Housewives	7	3.08
			• Civil Servants	35	14.54
			• Private Employees	87	38.33
			• Students	54	23.79
			• Others	2	1.76
Marital Status			Monthly Income		
• Married	82	36	• > IDR10,000,000	40	17.6
• Unmarried	143	63	• IDR8,000,000-IDR10,000,000	27	11.9
• Once Married	2	1	• IDR6,000,000-IDR7,999,000	38	16.7
			• IDR4,000,000-IDR5,999,000	36	15.9
			• IDR2,000,000-IDR3,999,000	54	23.8
			• <IDR2,000,000	32	14.1
Last Education					
• Doctorate	3	1.3			
• Master Degree	55	24.2			
• Bachelor Degree	154	67.8			
• High School Diploma	12	5.3			
• Middle School Diploma	3	1.3			

These respondents represent individuals entering their productive ages, as well as young couples, both of whom require housing to support their daily lives. Older respondents—typically those over 50—may be seeking housing for their children, particularly for university purposes. This suggests that the majority of potential users are young, independent individuals who require residential units suited to their lifestyle. In general, they are looking for compact and affordable housing, typically between 24–48 m². Previous studies have shown that residential units converted from office spaces also tend to fall within this range, generally between 30–50 m² (Pratiwi et al., 2022). As can be seen in the income range, most respondents fall within the middle range, and they prefer to set aside 10-30% of their income to purchase or rent a house. This means studio or one- bedroom units that provide an affordable price are preferable. In addition, the interested respondents mostly come from big cities such as Banten, Bandung, Kalimantan (where the IKN program took place), and Jakarta. This suggests that these cities could be best practice locations for implementing building conversion programs, as potential buyers are already present there.

3.1. Location Issues and Legal Aspects

Office-to-residential building conversion has been implemented in other countries since 90's, such as in the Netherlands and England. The numerous existing mid-rise vacant offices that

can be found in the Netherlands and England are the major criteria for conversion. In addition, the typology of office conversion, whether for affordable or upper-class housing, similarly depends on the location. There are two categories of locations: strategic locations (such as city centers) and non-strategic locations. In strategic locations, the potential for building conversion is quite high, because generally in these locations, there are facilities and access needed by residents. However, comfort related to noise limits needs to be considered, considering that locations close to highways tend to have noise levels that are less suitable for residential functions. As for building conversions in non-strategic locations, generally the selling value is lower, so that usually building owners will continue to try to increase the value of the property. Building conversions in these locations requires the addition of public facilities for residents, such as supermarkets, clinics, and transportation facilities. In addition to the provisions above, other things that need to be considered are related to natural ventilation and lighting, as well as access to views outside the office building to be converted. The availability of a parking area for residents is essential too for the users.

Aside from that, different locations will produce different types of housing and target groups (Remøy & van der Voordt, 2014). For example, the demand for housing for seniors in the Wilhelminastaete, Netherlands, is increasing. Then, converted building users can consider a group consisting of commercial and social companies to provide housing in the rental sector. However, the location is suitable for student housing if it is well-connected by public transport and close to universities or schools. The building conversion that is supported by its location in a very green area (filled with natural elements) and close to city facilities such as shops, parking areas close to the property, health facilities, supermarkets, and schools, can be considered for various social groups, from beginners to seniors.

In the Indonesian context, the conversion of office buildings into residential units has not yet received focused regulatory or policy attention. Although market demand plays a crucial role in determining the feasibility of such conversions, the practice is legally permissible, particularly in Jakarta, where most economic activities are concentrated, especially within the Central Business District (CBD). According to discussions held with the Jakarta local government, recent regulations support more flexible zoning by allowing mixed-use developments, aiming to stimulate job creation. However, building owners must still comply with different standards, as residential and office buildings are subject to separate requirements. Additionally, owners must refer to the ITBX (Permissible, Limited Permission, Conditionally Permitted, Conditionally Limited Permission, Prohibited) zoning table, which outlines the building functions and activities allowed, restricted, or prohibited within specific zones.

3.2. User Interest and Location Criteria

The survey results indicate that a considerable proportion of respondents are open to living in converted office buildings (41%), provided that certain criteria are met. There are 33.5% saying they doubt living in converted buildings, and 25.6% said they have no interest. There are diverse factors that shape residential location decisions in various urban settings, highlighting the importance of environmental quality, transportation accessibility, housing types, and social considerations. Residential preferences differ notably depending on household income, family structure, and regional context. Key priorities for respondents include access to private housing, closeness to healthcare and educational institutions, and low levels of environmental pollution. The findings indicate that enhancing transportation infrastructure, minimizing pollution, and improving neighborhood safety are essential priorities in urban planning and policy-making. These measures are crucial to addressing the varied needs of households and increasing the overall quality of residential living

environments. Concerning accessibility, there are 9 questions for respondents related to the distance between the house to public facilities, such as schools/colleges, amenities, healthcare, sport, office, public space, public transportation, and commercial facilities. It turns out that the correlation between user interest with house-to-school/college distance is significant. Most interested respondents prefer to have a 2-5 km distance to access schools/colleges from their house, despite the closer ones (< 2 km). This indicates the respondents prefer to reach the school area in a short time, but are unlikely to live near the public facilities that are a source of congestion and crowds. The correlation between user interest with other functions is not significant, showing the big consideration for the respondents in choosing a house is the accessibility to schools/colleges.

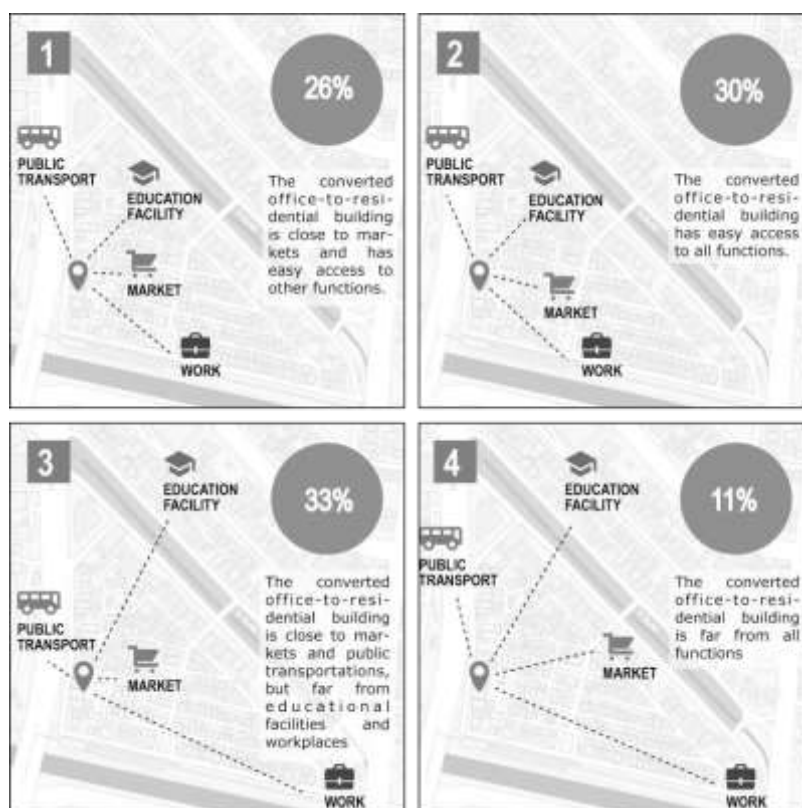


Figure 2. Preferred Location in Conjunction with Public Facilities Distance

As can be shown in Figure 2 above, respondents indicated a strong preference for housing locations near public transportation and grocery stores. In the questionnaire, four visual scenarios of converted residential building locations—each with varying proximity to amenities—were presented (Figure 2). Respondents were asked to select the option they found most appealing. The results showed that 33% chose Option 3, followed by 30% choosing Option 2, 26% selecting Option 1, and only 11% favoring Option 4. In addition, the correlation between interested respondents with the option 3 location has a lowly significant number, indicating potential users are inclined to live in such conditions.

To better understand why Option 3 was the most preferred, respondents were asked to explain their choices through open-ended questions. Their responses revealed recurring keywords such as “close to the grocery market,” “close to public transportation,” and “easy access.” These answers suggest that proximity to essential daily services and transportation options plays a significant role in decision-making. The grocery store is valued for fulfilling daily needs, while access to public transit supports convenient travel. However, another analysis regarding transportation choices found that most respondents typically use private vehicles for commuting to work or school. Providing convenient infrastructure to support

public transportation use can attract potential users to live in converted buildings, as respondents consider living near such facilities.

In contrast, respondents who selected Option 4 had notably different reasons from those who preferred Option 3. Key phrases from their responses included “the market is always crowded,” “slum area,” “everything is online,” and “not too close or too far.” These responses suggest that those favoring Option 4 view proximity to markets as less desirable due to issues like congestion and a perceived decline in neighborhood quality. They believe it’s ideal for the residential location to be somewhat removed from busy commercial areas. Additionally, advancements in technology have influenced their preferences—some respondents noted that online shopping eliminates the need to live near a physical market. It’s important to note that only around 11% of all respondents chose Option 4, indicating this view represents a smaller portion of the overall sample.

Housing preference is also closely tied to affordability (Byun & Ha, 2016). Following the question about preferred location, respondents were also asked about their ideal rental or installment price for housing in their chosen location, under certain specified conditions. The analysis of the significant causal relationship between the amount of income allocated for housing and the selected location reveals the following patterns. Respondents who selected Location 1 are willing to allocate 10%–30% of their income for housing. Those who chose Location 2 are prepared to allocate a higher portion, around 30%–50% of their income. Respondents who opted for Location 3, which was the most preferred, are also inclined to allocate 10%–30% of their income. Meanwhile, those who selected Location 4 prefer to spend only a maximum of 10% of their income on housing. From this, it can be concluded that most respondents are willing to allocate 10%–30% of their income to obtain housing, particularly at Location 3, which offers desirable features such as proximity to public transportation and grocery stores. Further analysis indicates that, regardless of income level, respondents consistently show a willingness to allocate 10%–30% of their income for housing. This suggests a relatively stable range of perceived affordability among prospective users.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The conversion of vacant office buildings into residential units offers a strategic response to Indonesia’s post-pandemic urban challenges. With continued office under-utilization and escalating housing demand, adaptive reuse of existing buildings can serve as a sustainable and efficient approach to urban planning. In the Indonesian context, office-to-residential building conversion is permissible, especially in the Central Business District in Jakarta, where the government regulates these areas to become mixed-use areas, indicating a flexibility to practice a building conversion program. However, the challenge comes from different building standards between office and residential functions. Henceforth, there should be further studies to investigate the potential of office buildings that can be converted into residential, and the conversion strategy, both in terms of planning, design strategies, and technical aspects in the field. Nevertheless, individuals interested in residing in converted buildings believe that transforming office spaces into residential units is a feasible option in Indonesia.

The success of office-to-residential building conversion depends on the integrated planning strategies that consider both market needs and user preferences. In this case, location plays a crucial role as it can be a driver for conversion and to determine typology, whether for low-, middle-, or upper-class apartment, individual, elderly, family, or new couple. Most potential buyers in Indonesia who are interested in converted office-to-residential buildings come from big cities, with certain location criteria being met. A compact

and affordable unit that is close to public amenities and has easy access to the school/workplace are the main criteria expected by prospective users, as most of them are of productive age. They prefer to live near public transportation and not too close to public facilities, where traffic congestion is common. The growing work-from-home trend also highlights the importance of offering comfortable housing units that address factors such as noise, views, and pollution to support a conducive WFH environment. These insights are expected to give valuable input for stakeholders in addressing the potential of office-to-residential conversions in Indonesia, particularly concerning location criteria.

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