



Journal of Architectural Research and Education

Journal homepage:

<https://ejournal.upi.edu/index.php/JARE/index>



Exploring Genius Loci through a Phenomenological Approach: A Study of Malalayang Beach Walk in Manado City

Yeremi Y. R. Van Rate ^{*1}, Hartanto Budi Yuwono ²

^{1,2} Universitas Katolik Parahyangan, Bandung, Indonesia

*Correspondence: E-mail: yeremivanrate@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the concept of genius loci through a phenomenological approach in the Malalayang Beach Walk area of Manado City. The approach emphasizes human sensory experience and existential awareness in perceiving space, focusing on the relationship between nature, people, and architecture in shaping the meaning of a place. Malalayang Beach Walk is a public pedestrian promenade located along the southern coastline of Manado, developed by the government as part of the city's waterfront vision to enhance the value of coastal areas. This site was selected due to its rich natural and cultural context, including its scenic marine landscape, coral reef ecosystem, and historical coastal features such as Batu Lrana. The study employs a descriptive qualitative method with data collection through field observation, visual documentation, and interviews with users of the space. The findings indicate that the formation of genius loci in this area is strongly influenced by the integration of natural settings, human activities, and architectural responses to the environment. The spatial experience is shaped not only by visual elements but also by users' emotional connections and social interactions within the space. These results can serve as a foundation for future design strategies that emphasize identity, memory, and meaningful engagement with place in the development of coastal public spaces.

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Submitted/Received 27 June 2025

First Revised 28 July 2025

Accepted 29 August 2025

First Available online 30 Sept 2025

Publication Date 1 November 2025

Keyword:

genius loci,
phenomenological approach,
architecture

1. INTRODUCTION

Manado City is known for its "Waterfront City" concept, which focuses on the planning and development of the coastal area along Manado Bay, featuring a 17 kilometer long shoreline. In an urban context, a waterfront refers to an area that is in direct contact with a body of water such as the sea, a river, a lake, or other types of water and has a physical or visual connection to the water element (Supriyadi, 2008).

The coastal area of Manado City holds various natural resource potentials, such as marine landscapes and underwater ecosystems. This natural potential is utilized by the city government through various forms of coastal development, aiming to optimize the value of these available natural resources.

Based on this, a spatial tourism development pattern was established in North Sulawesi, known as the Key Tourism Area (KTA). Malalayang District, an administrative area within Manado City, is included in the coastal development plan under the Manado-Bunaken KTA. As the capital of North Sulawesi, Manado City has been designated by the government for coastal development as a main gateway referred to as the "Gate of Paradise in North Sulawesi." (Government of Indonesia, 2024).

The selection of this case study is based on development efforts carried out by the government from 2020 to 2022, specifically the improvement of the coastal area in Malalayang District. This improvement is known as the Malalayang Beach Walk, a 1.2-kilometer pedestrian promenade that prioritizes the enhancement of public open space along the Malalayang shoreline.

Public open space is an open area that is freely accessible to the public for various activities (Paravicini, 2003). The activities that take place in this space can be everyday activities, such as relaxing or enjoying the surrounding environment, or occasional ones, such as hosting specific events that contribute to increased social interaction (Carr, 1992).

The concept of *genius loci* was first introduced by Alexander Pope in the 18th century. He used this concept as a fundamental basis for landscape design, emphasizing the character and context of a place (Walczak, 2015). This emphasizes that every place tends to have unique physical characteristics and perceptual meanings, requiring architects and landscape planners to be sensitive and responsible in developing appropriate design solutions.

A concept and understanding put forward by Christian Norberg-Schulz in his book *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* presents *genius loci* as a fundamental influence in the philosophical ideology of phenomenology. Through this concept, Norberg-Schulz adopts a 'scientific' approach in a more poetic manner to emphasize the importance of place (Kaffah and Ekomadyo, 2022). *Genius loci* identifies two types of indicators: natural places and man-made places. A natural place refers to elements such as water, rocks, and trees that give a location its distinctive character. In contrast, a man-made place is a space created by humans to support their everyday needs.

Genius loci offers an appropriate approach for exploring and understanding how the meaning of a place is shaped by its users. To support this, (Norberg-Schulz, 1980) proposed a phenomenological method that involves describing the physical characteristics of a place and interpreting the human experiences that occur within it. Phenomenology is derived from the Greek words *phainomenon*, meaning "that which appears," and *logos*, meaning "science" or "study." Specifically, phenomenology focuses on the study of human conscious experience of phenomena (Santri and Putri, 2020).

Coastal area management essentially considers the relationship between natural potential and the presence of local communities. Through the dynamics and involvement of various stakeholders in the urban environment, the process of appropriation is understood as a form of social and physical adjustment and redevelopment to meet the needs of the people (Santoso, 2006). In understanding individual experiences that shape goals based on a strong foundation of knowledge, approaches that emphasize perception and cognition make significant contributions to the development of architectural knowledge (Hale, 2000).

The *Genius Loci* concept offers a relevant approach to understanding the meaning of a place, based on the relationship between nature and humans (Ersina et al., 2014). However, the application of this concept has not yet been systematically mapped as a foundation for coastal area development in Manado City. Therefore, a case study of the Malalayang Beach Walk coastal area was conducted as a comprehensive effort to identify findings focused on the meaning of place, with the aim of serving as a basis for future development planning.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Based on the issues outlined in the introduction, this study employs a qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because the research focuses on understanding the essence of a phenomenon. Data were collected through observation and interview techniques, then analyzed to gain insight into the meaning of place (settlement meaning) and to describe the essence of the experience in narrative form (Creswell, 1994).

This study explores the meaning of place at Malalayang Beach Walk based on the *Genius Loci* theory, in which the researchers examine and investigate occurring phenomena through an architectural phenomenology approach. Phenomenology is a systematic method aimed at revealing and explaining the structure of meaning derived from lived experiences, understood through the direct examination of concrete events in life itself (van Manen, 2017). Phenomenology is an approach that systematically and methodologically studies how reality appears in individual consciousness (phenomena). Its strength lies in its focus on human experience, particularly the aspect of consciousness (Hanifati and Harjoko, 2020).

This research begins with a discussion of natural and man-made places in the case study of Malalayang Beach Walk, followed by the identification of place-forming elements, which include four main aspects: image, space, character, and *genius loci* itself.

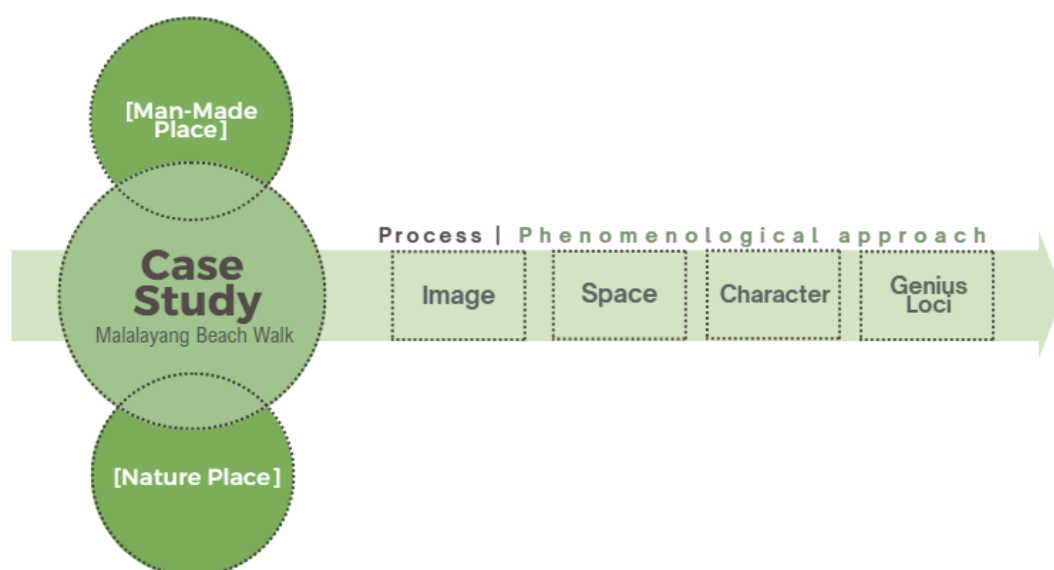


Figure 1. Genius Loci Research Focus Framework
(Source : Norberg-Schultz, 1991)

In this study, the author focuses the discussion on four main aspects: image, space, character, and *genius loci*. These four elements were selected because they are considered essential components in the formation of place, capable of reflecting users' emotional relationships and attachments.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Natural and Man-Made Places at Malalayang Beach Walk

Malalayang Beach Walk is located in Malalayang District, a coastal area in the southern part of Manado City. The natural aspect of this public open space is reflected in the presence of Malalayang Beach as a water element that serves as the main boundary of the area. This significance is based on its natural potential, such as the open sea panorama and the presence of coral reef ecosystems.



Figure 2. Malalayang Beach Walk
(Source: Author, 2025)

Along the coastline, the presence of natural rocks plays an important role as a connector between natural elements and human activities. Rock formations, rising approximately 1 to 1.5 meters above the surface, function to soften the transition between the waters of Malalayang Beach and the rigid seawall structure. In this area, sea waves tend to intensify and grow larger at certain times. Therefore, the arrangement of natural rocks serves as a “first layer” to help mitigate coastal abrasion. In addition to their ecological function, these elements also enhance the spatial experience through their aesthetic value, creating a natural impression and a calming atmosphere.

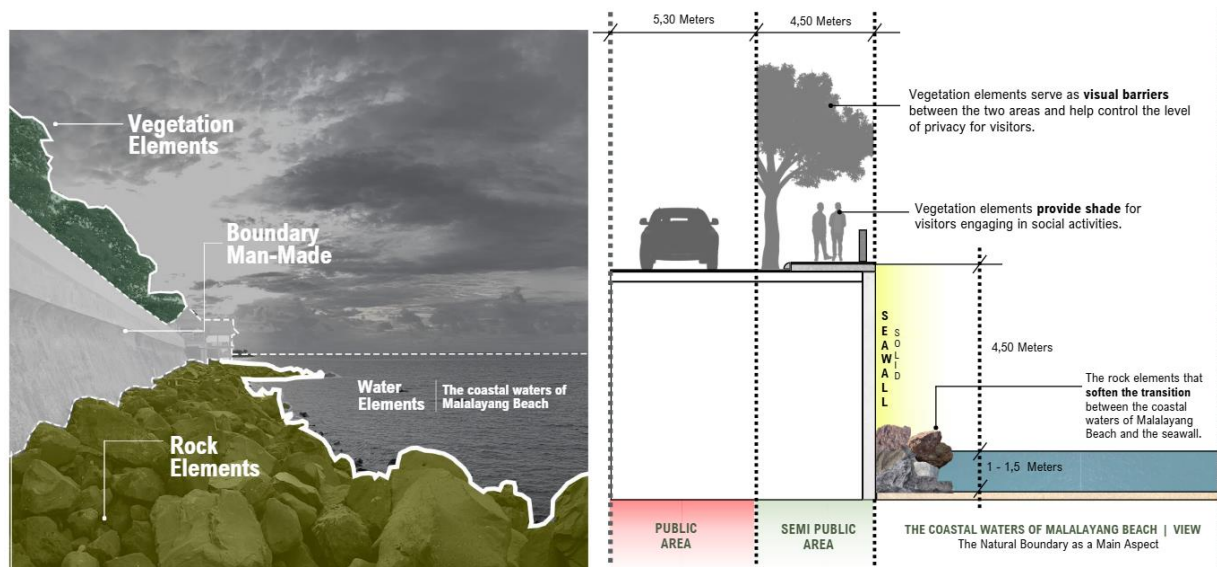


Figure 3. Natural Place Configuration at the Border of Waters and Land of Malalayang Beach Walk
(Source: Author, 2025)

The rocks located along the boundary of this area serve not only a practical function but also hold significant historical meaning for the local community. The border area of Malalayang Beach Walk was once believed to be a lookout point used to monitor the arrival of enemies. One of the well-known stones is *Batu Lrana*, which bears footprints and is believed to be a legacy of two ancestral figures (*dotu*), namely Dotu Tumampasa and Dotu Kaburo (Monoarfa et al., 2021).



Figure 4. "Batu Lrana" On The Border As Part Of The Historical Value Of The Community
(Source : Google)

Vegetation elements are neatly arranged along the pedestrian path, creating a cool and pleasant atmosphere. The placement of vegetation is concentrated in areas with high potential for social interaction, aiming to enhance user comfort. In addition, these elements function as soft visual barriers between the semi-public zone the pedestrian path and the public zone represented by the main intercity road. The presence of vegetation also strengthens the emotional connection between users and the primary natural element, namely the waters of Malalayang Beach, ultimately contributing positively to the overall spatial quality.



Figure 5. Vegetation Elements as Potential Spaces for Interaction
(Source: Author, 2025)

In response to the presence of natural elements, man-made features are also introduced in the form of public open space facilities such as pedestrian paths, cultural stages, floating stalls, seating areas, and other supporting elements. These architectural interventions serve not only a practical function but also strengthen the visual and emotional connection between people and the natural environment, particularly Malalayang Beach.

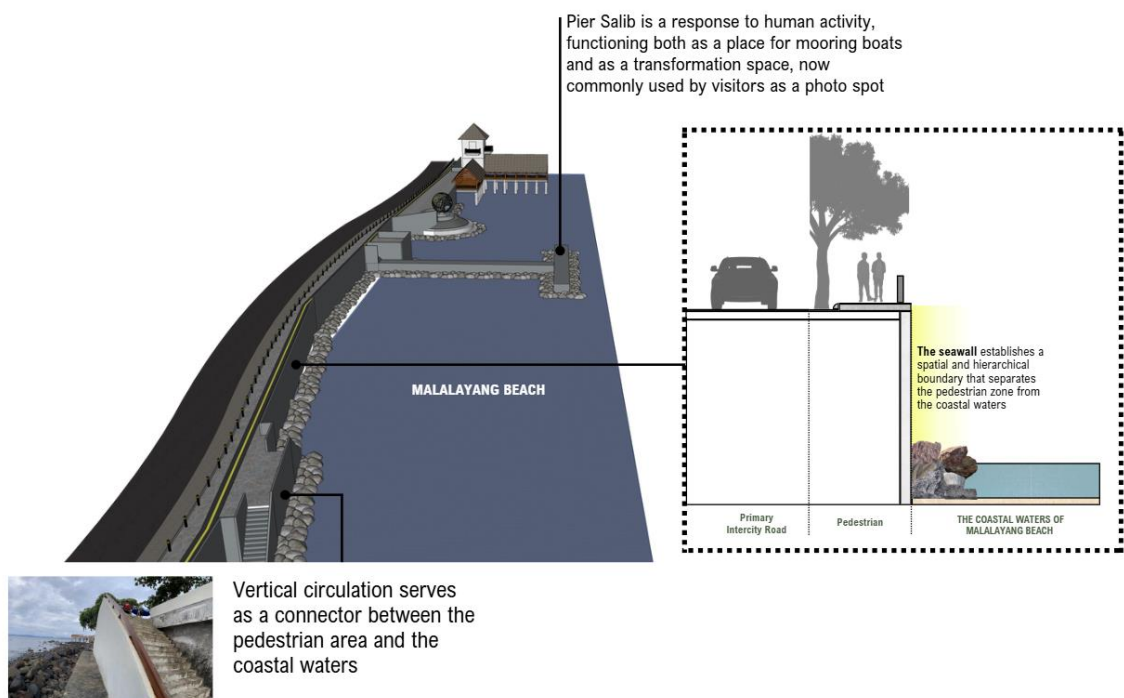


Figure 6. Man-Made Place Configuration on the Water and Land Boundary of Malalayang Beach Walk
(Source: Author, 2025)

The condition of the waters in the Malalayang area, particularly during periods of high rainfall, can trigger large waves that require anticipation. In response to this natural condition,

the public open space is equipped with a seawall that extends along the coastline. Beyond serving as the primary protective barrier, the seawall also establishes a distinct "gap" or boundary between land and sea. With a height of approximately 4.50 meters above the water surface, this structure creates a significant spatial hierarchy between water-based tourism activities and land-based attractions.

To address this distinct separation, vertical circulation paths are provided at several points along the pedestrian area, functioning as direct access routes to the waters of Malalayang Beach. These access paths strengthen the connection between natural and man-made elements, facilitating a smoother and more intentional transition between the two.

3.2 Image

In an effort to uncover the genius loci, the aspect of image serves as the initial point of exploration. Image refers to the visual distinctiveness that characterizes a place—uniqueness that can be directly perceived and subsequently described as a distinctive visual identity for further analysis (Habibullah and Ekomadyo, 2021).

In general, Malalayang District is divided into two main areas or domains: the Malalayang Beach Walk, which functions as a Public Domain, and the surrounding residential area, which serves as a Semi-Public Domain. Although complementary, these two areas differ in terms of spatial expression and the intensity of their meaning. The residential area has developed organically as a space for everyday life, while the Malalayang Beach Walk is a public space created through a deliberate and planned design process. Together, these areas form a unified spatial image, offering a continuum of experience that flows from the intimacy of daily life to open spaces that foster social interaction.



Figure 7. The Primary Road Connects Two Distinct Zones
(Source: Author, 2025)

As a coastal area, the image of Malalayang District is strongly shaped by water-based tourism and recreational activities, which serve as the main attractions of the area. The primary road functions not only as a transportation route for both locals and tourists, but also as a unifying element that connects two distinct zones within a comprehensive system of connectivity. Along this primary road, various facilities and land uses are distributed, forming the overall pattern of regional activity.

Although residential areas still dominate, the overall development of the district is moving toward a mixed-use function, as evidenced by the presence of commercial zones, public services, educational facilities, and other supporting functions. This transformation enhances

the area's attractiveness and creates broader opportunities for the community to engage with, participate in, and experience the dynamic life of Malalayang District.

3.3. Space

Public open spaces in coastal areas can generally be classified into two types: formally designed public open spaces and organically emerging public spaces without specific planning. Planned coastal public spaces are characterized by predetermined functions and spatial arrangements intended to support community activities. In contrast, unplanned public spaces are typically open areas informally used by residents, often without regulation or time restrictions (Siregar et al., 2024).

Malalayang Beach Walk is a public open space that falls under the typology of Quasi-Public Space, where its management, regulations, and activities are not entirely controlled by the community (Carmona et al., 2003). The activities that take place along this pedestrian area are essentially oriented around the role of Malalayang Beach, which has been organized through the provision of spatial facilities to accommodate community and user activities. Malalayang Beach Walk offers various spatial facilities that are classified based on the type of activity: necessary activities and optional activities (Gehl, 2012).

3.3.1 The Pier Salib

The Pier Salib is a spatial facility designed to support main (necessary) activities that are vital for the community, particularly fishermen and local residents. This facility functions as a transitional space between public open space activities and those that take place on the water.

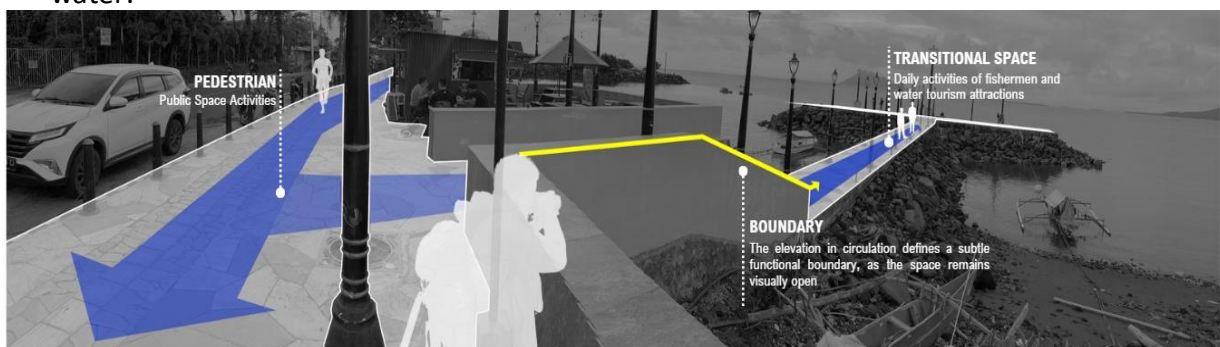


Figure 8. Elevation Differences That Affirm Transition Space
(Source: Author, 2025)

The spatial transition is characterized by the use of physical elements such as elevation differences, which provide functional boundaries while maintaining visual openness. The circulation within this transitional space is oriented toward the sea, with a visual focal point at the cross landmark located at the end of the pier, reinforcing spatial orientation and enhancing the user experience.

3.3.2 Warung Apung and Warung Minum

Warung Apung and Warung Minum are spatial facilities arranged linearly along the Malalayang Beach Walk pedestrian path. The activities that take place in this area are generally classified as *optional activities*, where users come to enjoy Manadonese culinary specialties while taking in the panorama of Malalayang Beach.

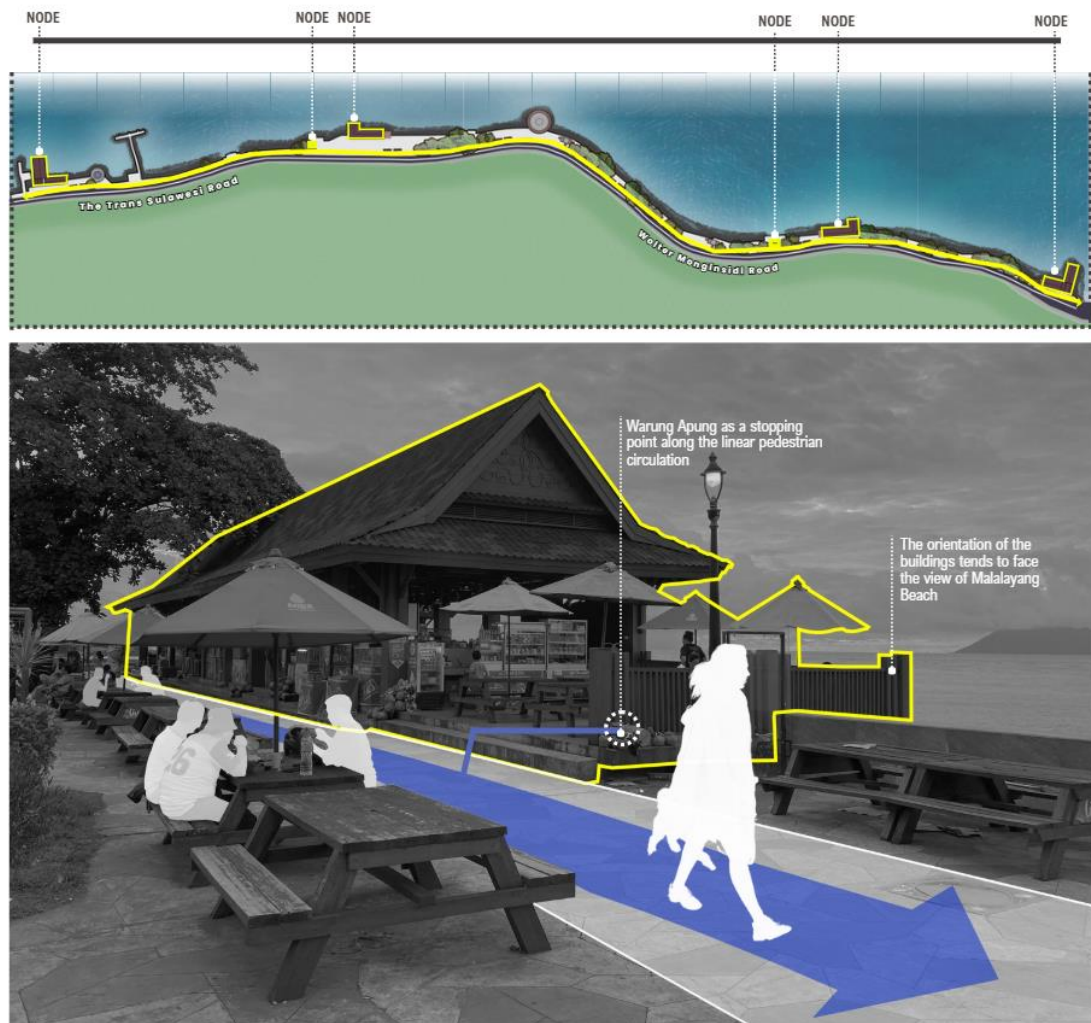


Figure 9. Nodes or Stopping Points Along the Pedestrian
(Source: Author, 2025)

Along the pedestrian path, buildings such as *Warung Apung* and *Warung Minum* serve as nodes or stopping points. Their presence rhythmically breaks the circulation pattern and functions as spatial elements that create transitions between movement and static activities, such as sitting or dining. *Warung Apung* features a visual opening facing Malalayang Beach, which not only enhances spatial orientation but also enriches the user experience during various activities.

3.3.3 Pedestrian

The pedestrian area in the Malalayang Beach Walk spans 1.2 kilometers and functions as a connecting pathway, equipped with both softscape and hardscape elements, such as organized vegetation and benches placed at several points.

User activities in this area generally fall under the category of social activities, where the presence of various elements supports actions such as walking, enjoying the beach view among the trees, relaxing by the shore, and exercising. A number of benches scattered along the path are also frequently used by the diving community as spaces for interaction, information exchange, and preparation before engaging in snorkeling activities.



Figure 10. Pedestrians as a Place for Interaction
(Source: Author, 2025)

The activities taking place in this space tend to be more diverse, as it not only functions as a pedestrian pathway, but also allows users to enjoy a variety of dishes offered by local vendors.

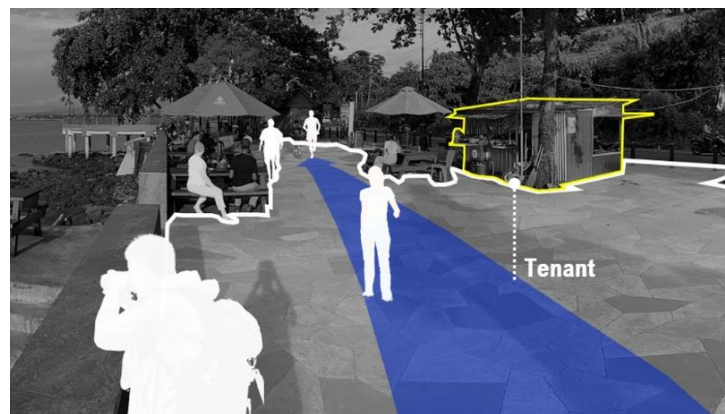


Figure 11. Tenants Along the Pedestrian
(Source: Author, 2025)

The dimensions of the pedestrian paths in this area vary, with a minimum width ranging from 3 to 5 meters, allowing for unobstructed two-way movement. This condition provides a sense of comfort for users as they explore the entire coastal area of Malalayang Beach Walk. A clear hierarchy also exists between pedestrian paths and roads, where pedestrian comfort is ensured through the presence of bollards that serve as boundary markers or protective barriers.

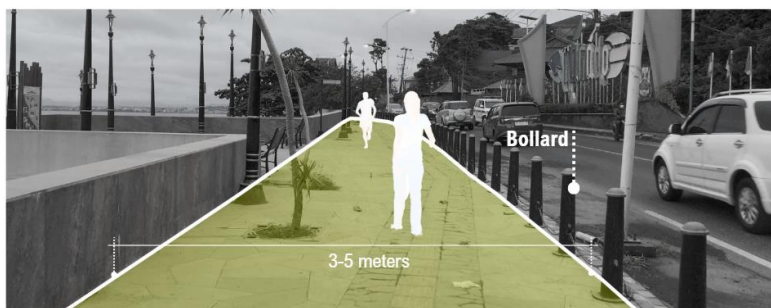


Figure 12. Dimensions of Malalayang Beach Walk Pedestrian
(Source: Author, 2025)

3.4. Character

Malalayang Beach Walk establishes a strong sense of place through the integration of natural elements, local culture, and responsive public space design. The primary character of this place is reflected in how the natural element, Malalayang Beach is utilized as the main axis, serving not only as a scenic view but as an integral part of the living environment. The linear

orientation of the pedestrian path is strategically designed to offer a gradual and purposeful spatial experience, connecting various activity points equipped with spatial facilities such as floating stalls, the Cross Pier, cultural stages, and monuments. Each spatial element is rhythmically arranged, creating a dynamic and engaging spatial experience that avoids monotony.

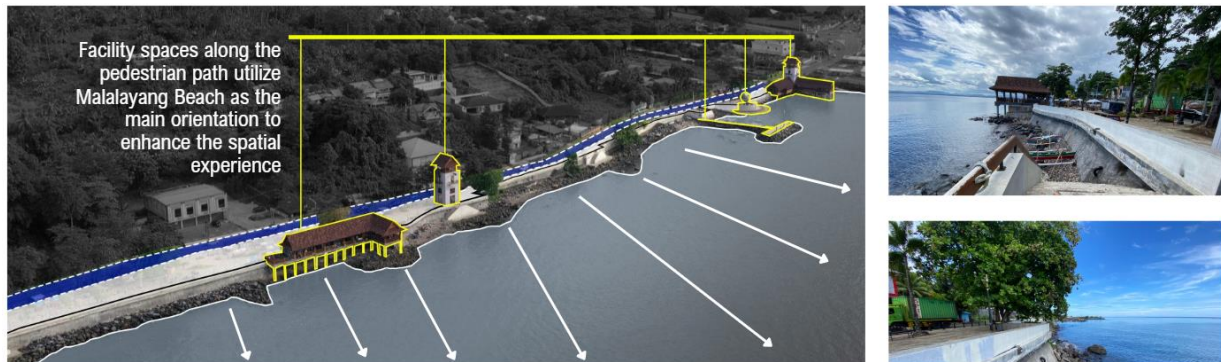


Figure 13. Malalayang Beach as the Main Orientation in Improving Spatial Experience for Users

(Source: Author, 2025)

The linear form of the pedestrian path plays a significant role in consistently directing users' gaze toward the beach. The continuous and unobstructed visual relationship between the walkway and the Malalayang Beach panorama fosters a strong emotional connection between space users and the surrounding natural landscape. The sea serves not merely as a backdrop, but as an integral part of the spatial journey, experienced as a cohesive and immersive whole.

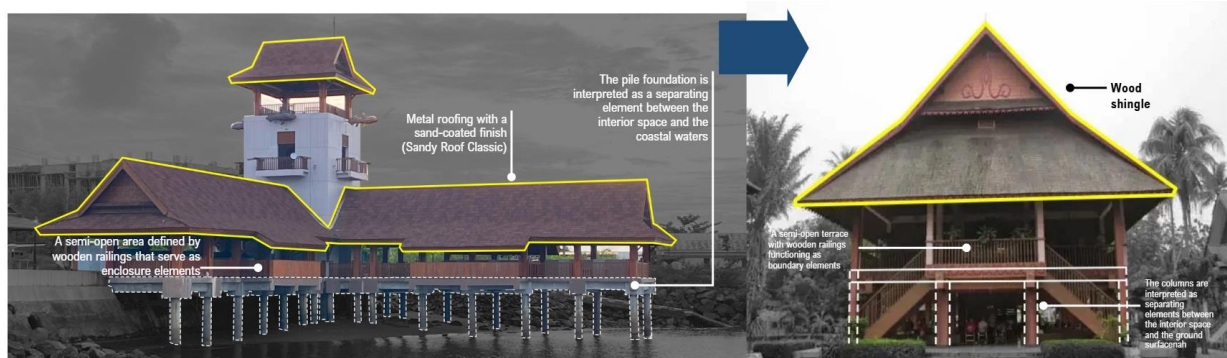


Figure 14. Adaptation of the Architectural Form of the Floating Warung from the Form of the Walewangko House

(Source: Author, 2025)

Warung Apung is the main spatial facility at Malalayang Beach Walk that represents a locality-based architectural approach in creating spatial experiences. As part of the coastal environment, Warung Apung is built using pile structures approximately five meters above the water surface. These columns symbolically reflect the principles of traditional *Rumah Walewangko* architecture, particularly the separation between the main living space and the ground. Wooden materials used for the flooring, railing, and ornamental details evoke a warm, natural, and familiar atmosphere for visitors. Meanwhile, the roof form adopts the traditional gable shape typical of *Rumah Walewangko*, but with a modern touch using sand-coated metal (Sandy Roof Classic), which is lightweight and corrosion-resistant serving as an alternative to traditional materials such as thatched palm roofs.

The interior of Warung Apung is designed as a semi-open culinary space that fosters a relaxed and refreshing dining atmosphere, harmonizing with the character of the coastal

environment. The applied design not only functions as a commercial space but also reinforces the character of local Minahasan architecture through a responsive and sustainability-oriented approach.

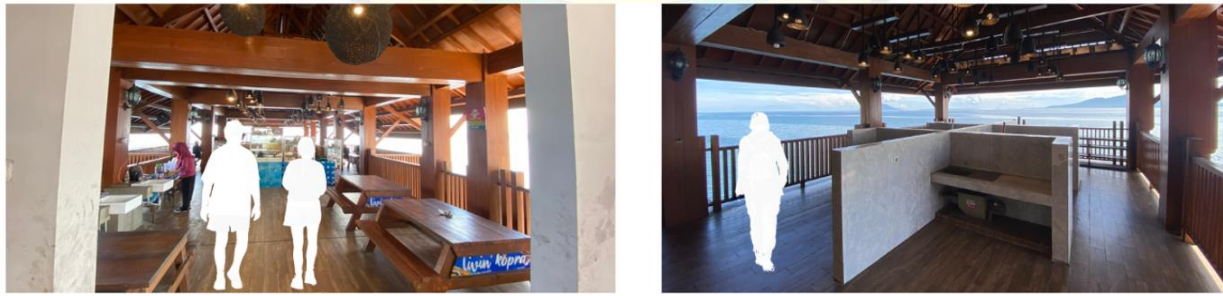


Figure 15. Semi-Open Interior Space
(Source: Author, 2025)

4. GENIUS LOCI

The character aspect is the most prominent dimension in revealing the genius loci of the Malalayang Beach Walk area. The spatial character of this area is shaped not only by its function and physical form, but also through a synergy of natural elements, local culture, and contextual architectural design. Malalayang Beach, as the main natural element, serves not merely as a visual backdrop, but as the central axis in creating a comprehensive and meaningful spatial experience. The local character is further emphasized by the presence of Warung Apung, which embodies cultural values in the form of a public space. Its design adapts traditional architectural principles of the Walewangko House, such as a stilt structure that elevates the building above the water and a distinctive gable roof. The use of wooden materials and semi-open structures fosters a warm, natural, and comfortable atmosphere, while harmonizing with the coastal environment. An architectural approach that is responsive to the surrounding natural environment and cultural context imbues this area with a strong and distinctive spatial character (Owen, 2008). This character embodies the genius loci, expressing a sense of place identity that is perceived, valued, and meaningfully interpreted by its users.

5. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the character aspect of the Malalayang Beach Walk area most strongly represents the genius loci, as it emerges from a harmonious integration of natural, human, and architectural elements. The spatial character formed is not only visually present, but also rich in meaning through the representation of Minahasa local culture. Elements such as the floating stalls, which adapt the traditional architecture of the Rumah Walewangko as transitional spaces to the sea, illustrate how architecture can contextually respond to local values. These elements serve not only practical purposes, but also function as symbols of the community's collective identity, reinforcing emotional attachment to the space.

In terms of image, the genius loci is reflected through the combination of the unique visual landscape of Malalayang Beach and the spatial connectivity created by the intercity primary road. This road is not merely a mobility infrastructure, but serves as a link between public spaces and residential areas, connecting users with the broader dynamics of the city of Manado. Its role enhances the identity of the area and shapes a distinctive and meaningful spatial image.

Meanwhile, in terms of space, the genius loci is expressed through the arrangement of inclusive public open spaces that accommodate both social interaction and water-based recreational activities. Users perceive this area as a space that supports a variety of activities, from relaxing and socializing to enjoying sea views and engaging in activities such as snorkeling.

These spaces are not only used functionally, but are also experienced as part of the community's collective memory and identity.

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the development of coastal areas such as Malalayang Beach Walk should strive to maintain a balance between modernization and the preservation of local identity. Design interventions must be carried out with sensitivity to the natural, cultural, and social contexts, and should involve active community participation to create a vibrant, meaningful, and sustainable public space. In this way, coastal areas can function not only as tourist destinations or economic zones, but also as living spaces that reflect the spirit or soul of a place.

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