

“Reading” Lasem Heritage Buildings as Marketing Strategy for the Cultural Tourism Sustainability: A Phenomenological Perspective

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Abstract. In recent years, Lasem tourism has grown, especially about historical buildings. However, the tourism sector has experienced a decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Various strategies are carried out by the local peoples and also foundations that care about Lasem, to restore the economic situation and continue to strive to maintain the culture in it. This study aims to determine the tourism promotion strategy in Lasem, which involves historic buildings. This study uses a qualitative approach and a phenomenological point of view to enrich the discussion. The results showed that by reading the tangible value of the building, its cultural meaning was obtained, which became a notable element in tourism marketing. It can be beneficial for local governments and owners of cultural heritage buildings to boost the economy in the tourism sector. At the same time emphasizes that cultural values are a significant part of tourism that can make a place survive because it has a distinctive character and identity.

Keywords: Lasem Heritage, Tourism Marketing, Cultural Sustainability, Phenomenology

1. Introduction

The existence of historical buildings will only become the ordinary relics that decorate a place, if it is not accompanied by the value in it. The value is a story that become the breath and the soul of a historic building. How to get the value is to read it. Reading historical buildings is different from reading writings. There are several values in reading buildings, namely the visible and invisible, such as the cultural and historical stories contained in them. These typical stories are the “wealth” of the building and become an added value for tourism in Lasem that other places do not have. Tourism is a basic need of human life. Tourism is an instrument to improve the quality of people's lives, as emphasized by Sunaryo (2013, p.35), “Improving people's welfare is not only in material and spiritual aspects but also be able to improve aspects of cultural and intellectual welfare of the community as a host” [1]. According to Csapo (2012), cultures are not separated from the formation and development of tourism aspect and the embodiment of cultures is providing opportunities to build the tourism component that possible to gather people [2].

Lasem has attractive tourism potential, and every year there is a significant development, but tourism facilities have not prepared optimally. Therefore, various efforts have been made to keep attracting tourists to Lasem, one of which is a historical tour by visiting historical buildings throughout Lasem, one of which is the Peranakan houses in the Chinatown area of Lasem. A marketing strategy is needed, so that tour activities become more meaningful so that tourists do not forget their experience in Lasem and have the desire to return to Lasem. The strategy is to "read" the historic buildings in Lasem. That way, more and more people visit Lasem, the tour's activities are more and more in demand, tourists buy Lasem souvenirs, the income of local people will also increase. That is an economic contribution to the local government.

Why Lasem has chosen? because this place was once a maritime industry that could attract immigrants to develop houses in its surroundings. Although the hinterland was the center of government in the era of the powerful Bhre Lasem and his successor, the heart of economic activity was concentrated in the port area. The area around the port attracted the arrival of the Chinese who later built Chinatown. The Chinatown area is located near ports and markets, and indigenous people prefer to live around the port, the city center, and along the Lasem River upstream [3]. As a result, Lasem has become a bustling business town with a variety of activities. The community interacts with foreign traders so that there is a mixture of cultures such as Chinese, Arabic, and local. The traders who came, some chose to stay in Lasem, some even married locals so that there was cultural acculturation. Diversity in Lasem is not just a doctrine, but has been ingrained in the life of its community [4].

For a long time, Lasem has attracted researchers, especially about its historic buildings, such as ancient pagodas and Peranakan houses that are hundreds of years old. Studies related to buildings in Lasem, especially Peranakan houses were reported in research conducted by Edi in 1989 but were not discussed in detail. According to him, Lasem as a historical site has a Chinese cultural influence on the architectural style of houses in Lasem. The influence can be seen in the shape of the roof-shaped and the gate with typical Chinese carvings [5]. Other research on Lasem was also discussed by Suroyo et al. (1994), who provided information on the cultural acculturation within architecture. Lasem's uniqueness from its rich history to its culture has attracted both local and international researchers. Lasem is not only the object of academic research, but various national newspapers also cover a lot about its history and culture [6]. Kompas, a well-known national newspaper in Indonesia, studied Lasem specifically in 2008 and published a book on the history and culture of Lasem [7]. The historical and cultural information about Lasem was rewritten by Pratiwo in 2010 in his book. The book contains information on the Lasem development up to the Peranakan house of Lasem [8]. In 2014, a book entitled Lasem Negeri Dampo Awang: A Forgotten History by M. Akrom Unjiya described the history of Lasem based on historical artifacts. He noted that Lasem has charm as the area included in a multi-cultural area [9].

The above studies explain more to cultural perspective that possible to support the analysis. Meanwhile, the following studies are more focused on the discussion of tourism. However, it is still related and in line with the explanation above. The research by Hastari in 2007 and Muarifuddin in 2017, followed by Lukiarti and Widodo in 2021 which states that Lasem does have strong tourism potential because it has interesting cultural acculturation. Another interesting potential is the architectural art of ancient buildings with Chinese cultural influences found in Lasem [10, 11, 12]. However, there has been no study on tourism strategies in Lasem that uses a phenomenological approach with a strategy of reading historical buildings. Based on this, the following research questions were formulated - How to read historical buildings can be a marketing strategy in Lasem cultural tourism and make tourism in Lasem sustainable?.

2. Method

To be able to answer research questions, this study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach as a tool to analyze the data obtained. so that the research objectives are also well achieved. Both are appropriate for research related to culture. Phenomenology deals with experiences with actual situations [13] therefore, the author must be part of research known as a reflective practitioner. Through this method, researchers are in the study community for a certain period to become part of the culture and community [14]. This activity needs to be carried out so that researchers have experiences, thoughts, and views that are in line with the state of the community, in addition to being able to deeply explore something that wants to be known. According to Bahauddin (1999), this method is used to explore, deepen and understand the culture of an object of study. That provides an opportunity for researchers to know the results of the research properly because whatever is experienced becomes a part of itself [15].

A pilot study was conducted before the main study was carried out and analysed. Part of the pilot study process includes direct observation to identify environmental conditions, possible local challenges, and strengths and weaknesses of information that can be obtained. The pilot study in Lasem, Central Java was carried out on 2-5 February 2017 as an introduction to the place and object of the study. Then it was continued at the end of 2018, followed by 2019 to make observations and gain experience. The opportunity was also to obtain visual data and verbal data through interviews. In 2020 and 2021, research data was obtained through social media platforms, one of which was Instagram.

3. Result and Discussion

Experience in Reading Historical Buildings in Lasem

When you come to Lasem, don't expect to be presented with beautiful buildings in the style of big cities, because Lasem will serve old buildings, but beautiful because of their rich history and culture. however, that is precisely what can be “sold” from Lasem. From a phenomenological point of view, historic old buildings that are hundreds of years old have a strong emotional appeal despite not having the image of a modern building. Thus, in an effective ancient building fragile and ancient has the sensory appeal of the body to feel and experience more deeply so as to want to try to better understand the situation that occurs [16].

“Why do so very few modern buildings appeal to our feelings, when almost any anonymous house in an old town gives us a sense of familiarity and pleasure”

(Pallasmaa, 1985)

When you visit a Peranakan house in Lasem, you will be welcome by the presence of a gate. The following is one of the Peranakan houses that will serve as an example of the study – Kidang Mas Peranakan House in Babagan village, Lasem. If you read it, the gate of the Kidang Mas Peranakan house is a simple type and does not have a variety of ornaments. Based on an interview in 2019 with the sixth generation in the family, Rudi Siswanto, he was informed that the condition of the gate is still in good condition and has remained since it was built by the first generation, only changing color. The gate consists of two parts, the outside of which is smaller than the inside. The outer gate as known as *Hek* (in Dutch) is an arrangement of green wood which is shorter than the brown inner gate which is 3 meters high. The inner gate used to have Chinese writing, but it was covered with paint during the New Order government in 1990 (see Fig.1). The Kidang Mas Peranakan house is a house that is hundreds of years old but is still preserved from extinction, although some architectural materials have changed. Let's read the house; The front porch floor and the interior of the house were initially made of wood, now transformed into broken white tiles, but have a suitable purpose and do not lose the spirit as a historical building (see Fig.2).



Figure 1. “Reading” the house of Peranakan Kidang Mas: The House has a Chinese cultural influence, however, the floor material has changed to use contemporary materials.



Figure 2. “Reading” the Gate of the Kidang Mas Peranakan House: Simple, has Chinese Cultural Influence, seen from the roof of the gate, the front gate is called *Hek*, a name known during the Dutch Colonial Period.

In addition to reading about the house directly experienced by the author, there are also many examples of similar activities carried out by the community in Lasem who usually accompany tourists to explore tourist destinations in Lasem. The companion is also a guide who has equipped himself with knowledge of history, culture, and traditions related to tourist objects so that whatever architectural “language” is conveyed will be easy to read. A person who cares and loves Lasem is known as Pop, he already can read about various kinds of historical buildings in Lasem. This strategy was very useful and valuable, especially when the covid-19 pandemic hit, almost no one came to Lasem. However, it turns out that

this method can not only be done offline but online also by utilizing social media. He believes that conveying the results of reading to tourists will indirectly help revive and restore the economy in Lasem. Figure 3 shows several Lasem tour packages with various destinations in the form of ancient architectural buildings. Based on the author's experience, when visiting certain historical building destinations, tourists or visitors will receive the story of the building from the tour guide. Tourists not only see the beauty of the building but are invited to "read" the building. The condition, form, and aesthetic elements of the building convey historical messages and cultural influences that can be read by tour guides and tourists. Reading activities and delivering readings to tourists may look simple, but not everyone can understand (see Fig.4)



Figure 3. The Tour Package that Involves “Reading” Heritage Building Activities.

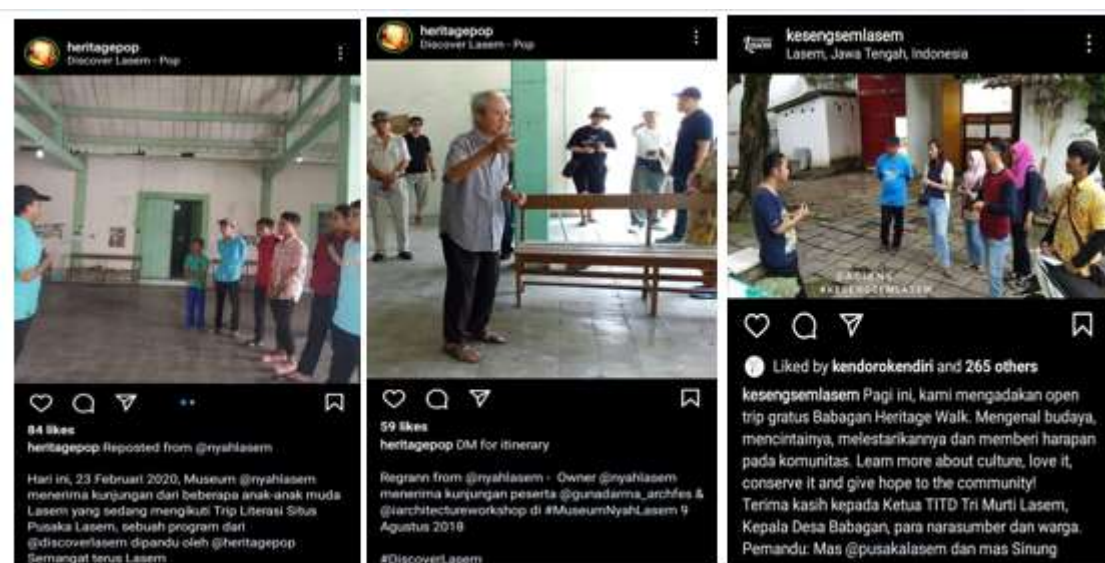


Figure 4. “Reading” Heritage Building Activities in Lasem.

4. Conclusion

Reading historical buildings not only brings understanding to those who experience them but also provides unforgettable memories and experiences. Giving experiences and memories is the key to the sustainability of tourism. This marketing strategy not only provides a presentation of the beauty of tourism destinations, but also provides education from the perspective of history, culture, and even traditions that are read from the building. Education does not stop at that time but will be continued by tourists as intangible gifts from Lasem. Thus, the historical and cultural values will be preserved.

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