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Public art in urban space as a tool for spatial justice: Building inclusive cities through the public art project “Ziarah Utara”

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Abstract: Rapid urban growth and a development paradigm centered on economic expansion have turned urban space into an arena of competing interests among the state, capital, and citizens. In the context of Jakarta, the northern coastal area has become one of the most vulnerable spaces, experiencing social exclusion, ecological degradation, and the erasure of collective memory due to large-scale development projects. This paper examines how public art can function as a medium for articulating urban issues, producing alternative knowledge, and serving as a practice of urban spatial advocacy. By focusing on the public art project Ziarah Utara by Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina, this research employs a participatory qualitative approach using a case study method in Kampung Dadap, a coastal area threatened by reclamation. Research-based public art practices such as Ziarah Utara hold significant potential to expand the discourse of urban planning toward a more inclusive, democratic, and spatially just city. More specifically, the process of producing and screening *The Last Fisherwoman*, culminating in a fundraising campaign to construct a community toilet facility, functioned as an instrument of spatial justice through the production of knowledge, community empowerment, spatial advocacy, and the mobilization of collective action.

Keyword: public art, coastal city, inclusive city, right to the city.

INTRODUCTION

Cities continue to grow, expand, and become megastructures—faster than anticipated. Today, more than half of the world’s population lives in urban areas, with projections reaching 70% by 2050. It is estimated that nearly 2.2 billion people will migrate to and settle in cities across Asia and Africa (Ajay Bailey and Kei Otsuki, 2023). In Indonesia, from the 1930s to the present, the rate of urban population growth has consistently been two to three times higher than the national population growth rate (Marco Kusumawijaya, 2023).

This structural inequality triggers social exclusion, particularly in its spatial dimension. In the book *Inclusive Cities and Global Urban Transformation: Infrastructures, Intersectionalities, and Sustainable Development*, edited by Ajay Bailey and Kei Otsuki, social exclusion is defined by Levitas et al. (2007) as a complex and multidimensional process involving the denial of resources, rights, goods, and services to certain groups, including the inability to participate in broader social relations and activities.

In coastal areas, the concept of “intersectionality” becomes most evident. Since Indonesia’s independence, there has been no urban policy that views development as an integrated unity between land and archipelagic territories. In fact, following international recognition of Indonesia as an archipelagic state through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982), there should have been a paradigm shift—from a land-based vision to an integrated maritime-archipelagic perspective. The sea should no longer be seen as a boundary separating islands, but as a connector and unifier, a space of life and livelihood for communities.

Jakarta and the Thousand Islands both gained independence in 1945. However, their levels of development have not progressed equally. The Thousand Islands, despite being part of the Special Capital Region of Jakarta, face even more severe challenges. The region has already lost seven small islands, most of which have submerged due to coastal erosion, exacerbated by commercial extraction activities (Abimanyu Takdir Alamsyah and Idris Sikumbang, 2023) [3].

Based on research conducted by the geodesy research team at the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB), as reported by BBC, land subsidence in North Jakarta has reached up to 25 cm per year. According to the study, if no action is taken, by 2050 approximately 95% of North Jakarta will be below sea level, making it one of the areas experiencing the most severe land subsidence in the world. Kampung Dadap is among the most vulnerable to the dual impacts of upstream flooding from Bogor and tidal flooding.

The economic conditions of coastal residents are among the most precarious. Fishermen are forced to venture farther out to sea—incurring higher fuel costs—as fish stocks are displaced by reclamation projects and seawall. Meanwhile, seawater intrusion forces residents to purchase freshwater for daily needs.

Perhaps the most severe issue is the unregulated struggle over space. Land ownership and environmental infrastructure are increasingly controlled by large-scale capital interests. Dadap Subdistrict, Kosambi District, Tangerang Regency, Banten, has faced repeated eviction issues since 2016. Quoted from BBC, in May 2016 representatives of fishermen from Kampung Dadap, Kosambi, Tangerang Regency reported to the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) allegations of violence carried out by authorities during the eviction of the fishing settlement. In July 2018, residents reported another eviction attempt in Kampung Dadap to the Rujak Center for Urban Studies. The community was informed that the land they have occupied since the 1970s would be used for toll road expansion to connect new residential developments in the area. Efforts to obtain land rights have been undertaken for at least five decades, yet legal recognition has not been achieved. As written by Ezi Zulkarnain (2018), “Warga Dadap Mencari Keadilan” published on Rujak.org, a recommendation issued by the Ombudsman in 2016, urging the Tangerang Regency Government to process applications for land registration documents (SKT) or land certificates for the residents of Kampung Baru Dadap, has also not been implemented. Although Jakarta has one of the longest coastlines in the world, public access to comfortable coastal spaces remains extremely limited. Residents must often pay to access beaches managed by private developers. Furthermore, government policies tend to favor elite groups by granting reclamation permits for large developers to construct new artificial islands.

Yet, the coastal zone and the adjacent old city form the very soul of Jakarta. Marco Kusumawijaya, in Jakarta, Sang Metropolis published in *Jurnal Kalam*, argues that Jakarta’s most important monument is not a building, but the historical North–South axis stretching from Sunda Kelapa Harbor to Kebayoran Baru. According to Marco: “This is a monumental unity in its own way, remembered by most of its citizens as Jakarta’s identity”.

Observing intersectionality in practice means witnessing how various forms of discrimination—spatial, political, economic, and cultural—overlap and intersect, reinforcing persistent inequalities. Drawing on the concepts of Accontine and Crenshaw, as discussed in

Bailey and Otsuki's work, the art project Ziarah Utara by Irwan Ahmett represents a form of intersectional development—an imagination of an inclusive city in which citizens collectively intervene to reduce inequality and improve their quality of life (Accontine and Crenshaw, 1991).

Spatial justice as a critical discourse in urban studies was revitalised by Edward William Soja, an urban planner at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). According to Soja, cities shaped by neoliberal planning, despite their claims to uphold the ideals of freedom and liberty, remain structurally governed by the neoconservative logic of free-market economics or democratic capitalism, which ultimately fails to transform the underlying geography of inequality. Nevertheless, the pursuit of justice as a "symbolic force" operates more effectively across divisions of class, race, and gender. In *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Soja cites Edward W. Said, the scholar who developed the concept of Orientalism: "Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons, but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings."

Building upon this perspective, Soja conceptualises the spatial causality of justice and injustice by arguing that both are embedded in spatiality itself—in the multi-scalar geographies through which people live, ranging from the spaces of the body and the household, to cities, regions, nation-states, and ultimately the global scale. He operationalises this framework through three interrelated principles. First, the ontological spatiality of being, which holds that human beings are simultaneously spatial, social, and temporal beings. Second, the social production of spatiality, which posits that space is socially produced and therefore can also be socially transformed. Third, the socio-spatial dialectic, whereby space shapes social relations just as social relations shape space (Soja, 2010).

Irwan Ahmett is one of Indonesia's most active artists in addressing environmental, civic, and urban issues. Emerging as part of Jakarta's art scene in the 2000s, he expanded his artistic practice into public space alongside the establishment of the collective Ruang Rupa (Harsono, 2000). This new generation of artists connected their work with the most intimate and vital space for them: the urban environment. As a collective, Ruang Rupa dismantled the boundaries of art, creating works in public spaces, with the public, and presenting them alongside the public.

Yunanto et al. (2013) argue that Post-Suharto artistic practices increasingly blurred disciplinary boundaries, integrating not only art but also knowledge production. Irwan, who began his career in graphic design, combines design approaches with various aspects of urban life. His work increasingly engages with socio-political issues and questions the nature of human interaction within urban space.

His works span various media and forms—ranging from research, installations, video, mapping, performance art, to found objects. Nearly all of his works revolve around interaction, relationships, and citizen interventions in urban space. His ongoing project, Ziarah Utara, is an extensive body of work that examines various issues along Jakarta's northern coast. Developed over more than five years (and still ongoing), the project is based on long-term collaborative research with the Rujak Center for Urban Studies (RCUS).

RCUS is an authoritative institution in urban knowledge production and one of the few organizations seriously monitoring issues in North Jakarta's coastal areas. As a think-act tank, its approach is multidisciplinary. Elisa Sutanudjaja, founder and director of RCUS, explained one reason behind initiating this multidisciplinary art project: the democratic nature of art. "Art can break the walls of silence".

Since 2018, Irwan Ahmett has developed the Ziarah Utara platform, collaborating with two Australian artists with backgrounds in geography, Hannah Ekin and Jorgen Doyle. Each year, Irwan consistently walks nearly 50 kilometers along the coastline—from Kampung Dadap to Marunda in North Jakarta. Through this weeks-long walking ritual,

mapping, documentation, and findings from coastal communities are presented to the public. His work emphasizes process, often valuing the act of creation more than the final outcome. Ziarah Utara constitutes the primary and foundational working process underlying the public art practices of Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina. Rather than being a single artistic product, Ziarah Utara functions as a process of source work through which artistic ideas, knowledge, and materials are generated for subsequent creative production. Without being constrained by rigid academic research protocols, Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina conduct extensive inquiry and observation through multiple approaches. These include rational methods such as discussions, theoretical engagement, analysis, and interviews, as well as experiential approaches based on intuition and lived experience. They also immerse themselves in the community through live-in practices and embodied engagement, while collecting objects, photographs, spatial records, and movement-based ideas. Together, these diverse forms of inquiry constitute the source material for their artistic practice. The knowledge, experiences, and materials gathered through this source-work process are subsequently codified, interpreted, and composed into various forms of public art, including documentary films, performance art, photography, music, and exhibitions.

Contemporary artists frequently operate in interdisciplinary fields—anthropology, ecology, urban studies, and technology—positioning them as producers of social knowledge rather than mere creators of art objects. In this process, Irwan functions as a social technocrat or researcher deeply engaged in thinking, research, and collaborative creation with communities. Visitors, audiences, and urban residents are not merely consumers of his work—they become co-creators. From the outset, audiences are involved in the ongoing interpretation and meaning-making process, encouraged to think critically before, during, and after the presentation.

Irwan's practice continuously generates new spaces. He creates urban spaces and new experiences by working directly on-site, deliberately engaging with both public and private spaces in specific locations. By consciously stepping outside traditional galleries and museums, he enters community-owned spaces, expanding the very definition of art. Through collective, conceptual, and participatory practices, Irwan Ahmett seeks to create alternative spaces where citizens can celebrate their right to live, imagine, and act within the urban landscape.

Ziarah Utara is not merely an artistic act, but also a method of social research, urban knowledge production, and urban ecology—documenting the loss of space, transformations of coastal landscapes, and the persistence of memory among communities marginalized by development projects. In *Spatial planning for us: A community guidebook*, Rujak Center for Urban Studies (n.d.) highlights the importance of community participation in spatial planning processes as a means of fostering a more equitable and democratic spatial framework. This study aims to answer the question, “How can public art serve as a medium to articulate urban issues in Jakarta?” With a specific focus on the public art project Ziarah Utara, the researcher seeks to examine how issues in the coastal areas of North Jakarta are represented in a long-term artistic practice initiated by artists Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina.

In this study, public art is defined as artistic interventions outside conventional gallery spaces that involve citizens and urban space as their medium (Hall & Robertson, 2001). This research observes that many studies on art practices have not sufficiently connected artistic production with the city as a specific site of creation shaped by its own urban issues and complexities. Ziarah Utara has previously been examined by Soh Kay Min, a writer, curator, and researcher whose works focus on political ecology and aesthetics, published in platforms such as *Southeast of Now*, ResearchGate, and the Dutch Art Institute. However, in her article published in *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, Soh discusses Irwan Ahmett's public art practice primarily within the context of the artist's creative struggles and aesthetic concerns (Soh Kay Min, 2024). To obtain her doctoral degree

at the Australian National University, Elly Kent examined Irwan Ahmett's artistic practice through her dissertation, focusing on the ideology of post-New Order Indonesian artists who developed collaborative and participatory practices with communities through the principle of gotong royong (Elly Kent, 2022). Based on previous studies on the vulnerability of coastal communities and public art practices in urban spaces, this research identifies a gap in studies that examine public art practices in coastal areas as a method for producing knowledge of spatial justice, particularly in fishing villages directly affected by large-scale coastal development projects such as PIK 2 and NCICD.

METHOD

This study employs a participatory qualitative approach using a case study method in Kampung Dadap, Tangerang, Banten—a traditional fishing village threatened by large-scale development projects (Pantai Indah Kapuk 2). The researcher was involved in observing the artists' research process from June 2025 until the presentation of the work in the waters and fishing settlement of Kampung Dadap on August 24, 2025. The researcher also participated in various ceremonies, festivals, and annual celebrations held by the residents of Kampung Dadap, such as the Dadap Festival and Sedekah Laut. As shown in Figure 1, *Ziarah Utara* art projects have been conducted in Kampung Dadap, helping residents to “resist” and understand spatial and cultural oppression.

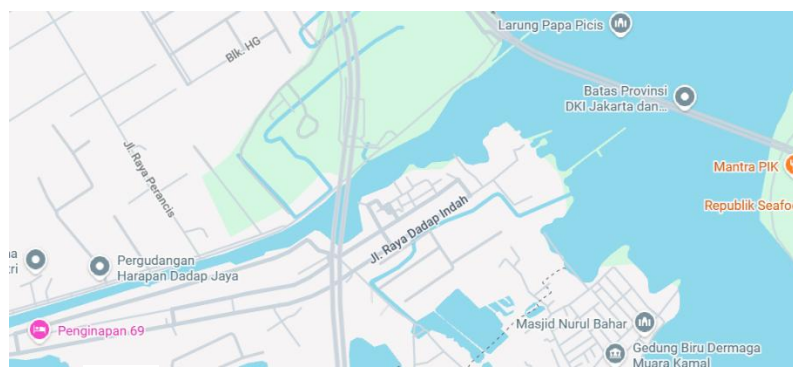


Figure 1. Wilayah Kampung Dadap, Tangerang, Banten.

For decades—at least since the 1970s—the residents of Kampung Dadap have been continuously defined, formulated, and judged by networks of technocracy and capital without ever involving the community itself. This fishing village, located on the border between Tangerang and Jakarta, sits at the estuary where a river meets the coastal waters of Jakarta. Most residents are fishermen from northern Java regions such as Indramayu, Cirebon, Pati, and Blora, as well as Bugis communities. They have built semi-permanent houses along the land beside the sea wall (NCICD).

The government-imposed sea wall has made it increasingly difficult for fishermen to go to sea. They must now take longer routes due to blocked access. Erwin Suryana, Deputy for Program and Network Management at the People's Coalition for Fisheries Justice (KIARA), reported that many fishermen have experienced declining catches since the NCICD project began. Beyond economic losses, the sea wall has also triggered flooding.

A 2022 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states that infrastructure-based flood mitigation solutions can become “maladaptation” if implemented in the long term. The report cites Jakarta's sea wall project as an example, where efforts to reduce flood risk may instead increase vulnerability among the poorest urban populations. As shown in Figure 2, by closing bays and river estuaries, the sea wall accelerates sedimentation, which slows river flow into the sea and increases flood risk.



Figure 2. Tidal flooding inundates the homes of Kampung Dadap residents.

Kampung Dadap is one of the last remaining fishing villages, squeezed between two elite developments designated as National Strategic Projects (PSN): Pantai Indah Kapuk 1 and Pantai Indah Kapuk 2. The village has repeatedly faced eviction threats from the Tangerang municipal government. Today, two toll roads stand above Kampung Dadap, connecting PIK 1 and PIK 2, yet residents remain without official identification (KTP), electricity, or clean water. The area is regularly flooded by tidal water, constantly threatened with eviction, and targeted by land mafias seeking to take over residents' land.

The researcher also conducted interviews with Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina, public artists who have been developing the Ziarah Utara art platform since February 2018, tracing the coastline from Kampung Dadap to Marunda over a distance of 42 kilometers. By walking, the two artists research the problems along Jakarta's coastal areas and communicate them through the public art project Ziarah Utara. The researcher also interviewed local residents encountered during coastal festivals and traditional ceremonies, such as Sedekah Laut and the Dadap Festival. To complement the study, Marco Kusumawijaya, founder of the Rujak Center for Urban Studies and one of the initiators of Ziarah Utara, was also interviewed.

This study places particular emphasis on artistic praxis—derived from the Greek term *praxis*—referring to reflective and conscious action in applying theory toward social and political change.

A key challenge in any research involving marginalized groups as sources of knowledge is the existence of unequal power relations. Coastal residents living in poverty often perceive researchers as individuals who have access to resources, institutions, or opportunities that may address their needs. Therefore, from the outset, researchers must clarify that participation in the study does not guarantee policy changes, material assistance, or direct intervention. In *The Basics of Social Research*, Earl Babbie outlines the basic elements of informed consent, emphasizing the importance of providing a clear statement when conducting research involving marginalized groups. This includes explaining from the beginning that the inquiry is part of a research activity, along with an explanation of the research objectives, the estimated duration of participants' involvement, a description of the procedures to be undertaken, and the identification of any procedures that may be experimental. Researchers must also clearly explain any reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, or potential consequences that participants may experience during the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Viewing the city as a social field brings us to a fundamental issue: who has the right to define urban space. In this context, space is no longer merely a physical container, a place

to dwell, or a technical-technocratic location, but a political arena where the interests of the state, capital, and citizens contest one another. The prominent 20th-century French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, through his magnum opus *The Production of Space*, had already emphasized that space is not a neutral entity, but the result of economic, social, and power relations. Space is produced, filled, interpreted, and maintained through practices and representations.

Everything that occurs within urban space, including art, for Lefebvre is not merely an ornament of the city. Art has the potential to create representational spaces—spaces that are lived, symbolic, and rooted in the everyday experiences of citizens. For Lefebvre, space does not exist naturally, but is historically produced. It carries power relations and modes of production.

Within this framework, the focus of spatial analysis must shift from spatiality to the production of space, in order to understand space as a result of social and economic contradictions. The process of producing space is always shaped by tensions between the logic of power—which organizes, regulates, and classifies—and the lived practices of citizens, who experience, interpret, and sometimes resist it.

In opposition to abstract space, Lefebvre proposes differential space—a space that allows for plurality, friction, and subjectivity. This space emerges through practices of appropriation. Appropriation is a conscious act not merely of using or borrowing space, but of reclaiming it for collective life.

Public art *Ziarah Utara*, from Lefebvre’s perspective, operates primarily within the third dimension—representational spaces—by activating memory, ritual, local narratives, and the embodied experiences of coastal communities. Kampung Dadap, often positioned as a “residual space” within Jakarta’s metropolitan planning, is reconstructed as a meaningful space through pilgrimage, performativity, and artistic interaction.

From Lefebvre’s perspective, such practices constitute the politics of everyday life (*la vie quotidienne*), where resistance to the dominance of capitalist space can occur in subtle yet radical ways. In the context of Jakarta’s northern coast—marked by reclamation, industrialization, and land speculation—the practices of Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina can be understood as efforts to restore the city as an *oeuvre*, a collective living work, rather than merely an economic product or technocratic object.

Public art by Irwan Ahmett here is not urban decoration, but a tool for producing urban knowledge: it reveals power relations, ecological inequalities, and erased histories. This aligns with Lefebvre’s call to restore symbolic, festive, and ludic dimensions into urban life as forms of resistance against technocratic rationality.

The *Right to the City* also encompasses the right to difference and the right to participation. It rejects the homogenization of space and life produced by modernist planning and the property market.

Sherry Arnstein (1930–1997), an urban planner and public policy consultant from UCLA, argued that public participation is often symbolic or manipulative, lacking real power for citizens to influence policy. Arnstein proposed a radical framework emphasizing citizen power and control. She asserted that communities should not merely receive policies, but actively engage in planning, implementation, and evaluation. She conceptualized the “Ladder of Citizen Participation”—ranging from manipulation to full citizen control.

Irwan Ahmett’s work is not merely a public art object, but part of the process of space production, advocacy for social justice, interpretation of the city, sharing of aesthetic experiences, and encouragement of community participation. Genuine dialogue among stakeholders can only occur when citizens hold control—through partnerships in which citizens and authorities collaborate equally in planning and decision-making. The Ladder of Participation helps explain the position of citizens in urban policy and how urban issues are reflected in Irwan Ahmett’s public art.

The public art practices of Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina in urban space, referring to the book *See it Again, Say it Again: The Artist as Researcher* (Valiz, 2011) edited by Janneke Wesseling, indicate a shift in artistic discourse from the artist as merely a maker to the artist as a researcher. In this paradigm, artists are no longer viewed solely as producers of aesthetic objects, but as producers of knowledge through creative practice. For Wesseling, art is not only a form of expression, but a mode of thinking and producing knowledge. Essentially, artistic research has its own methods, even if they are not always formal, standardized, or empirical like those of science.

Art operates through intuition, material experience, the body, social relations, and embodied knowledge. Thus, knowledge in art emerges through the process of making, not merely through verbal reflection. Art does not pursue empirical truth, but meaning, critique, and new questions. Wesseling refers to the concept of *homo poeticus*—humans as creative beings, beings who “make”—emphasizing that “to make is to know.”

The creative process begins with the observation of issues, themes, problems, findings, and concerns identified by the participants involved in the *Ziarah Utara* art project. They report the results of prior observations and propose possibilities for exploring themes and forms of collaboration, interaction, cohesion, and intervention at a specific site, Kampung Dadap.



Figure 3. Irwan Ahmett, together with the residents of Kampung Dadap, mapping the site-specific environment.

Irwan Ahmett (more commonly called Iwang), for example, discovered a series of old warehouses—beautiful and still usable as performance spaces. These warehouses are submerged in seawater during tidal flooding. What is particularly interesting is that Irwan found a mural painted by a man suspected of having schizophrenia on one of the abandoned buildings along the coast of Jakarta. The images depict various objects, created using any available medium—charcoal, markers, pencils—yet filled with pure, naive, and honest lines. Some parts also consist of text (perhaps reflections or aphorisms), layered and collaged together with paintings of other fantastical objects.



Figure 4. Tita Salina collaborates with the residents of Dadap to map the site-specific environment.

For the artists involved in *Ziarah Utara*, the coastline is a vast canvas. They aim to raise awareness and encourage more people to engage with environmental issues along Jakarta's coast. The difference between Venice and Jakarta—both of which face significant land subsidence—is that in Venice, for example, there are numerous civic initiatives that have made the threat of the city's submergence a shared public agenda.



Figure 5. Presentation of the *Ziarah Utara* project

Without being constrained by rigid academic language, discussions on exploring sources among collaborators unfold in a relaxed and casual manner. Each participant shares their own creative materials in relation to the performance theme, drawn from literature research, field observations, live-in experiences with fishermen, embodied exploration, and the collection of objects.

At times, these discussions spark improvisations. When one collaborator mentioned presenting the latest data on land subsidence and coastal abrasion steadily encroaching upon Jakarta's land, Iwang asked that the material also be interpreted by a dancer, who would bring the data to life in the performance space through movement vocabulary. "We'll try it later in the studio," said Iwang.

The Body as a Scanner

For Iwang, data always has two faces: it conveys information, yet it can also obscure it. A number of studies presented in the performance—such as research on land subsidence conducted by King’s College London using various remote sensing techniques, including Google Maps, satellite imagery, and drones—are still unable to define the complexities of Jakarta’s coastal issues in a rigid and precise way. The realities faced by coastal communities continuously slip away, exceed, and remain beyond the reach of the many “eyes” employed by the state to address coastal problems.



Figure 6. Presentation of the *Ziarah Utara* project.

The praxis of critically reading urban space, grounded in direct findings from the field, transforms the *Ziarah Utara* art project into a socio-ecological report on the coastal crisis. Within Wesseling’s framework, art here operates as the production of situated knowledge, a critique of state and capital power in the production of space, and a non-formal social archive that records lost histories.

For two weeks, he walked along the coastline, mapping and documenting the growth of the urban landscape over more than 42 kilometers—expanding in a brutal, fragmented manner that divides and marginalizes the lives of coastal residents.

While walking along the shore, a woman suddenly approached Iwang, carrying a bucket and showing him a turtle. This shelled animal had long disappeared from Jakarta’s coastal areas, as it could no longer survive in waters depleted of oxygen and filled with waste. With its small limbs and passive mode of defense—retreating into its shell—it inevitably drowns when attempting to swim in Jakarta’s waters.

The story of the turtle sinking with its shell, due to environmental degradation, becomes an allegory for the fate of coastal communities who are “silenced” either abruptly through forced evictions of fishing villages or gradually through processes in which fish traps and docks grow increasingly deserted, the sea is enclosed and polluted, and fishing becomes ever more difficult. In its most advanced form, fishing families—these “people of the sea”—are forced to become “people of the land,” taking on precarious jobs as factory workers, security guards, or drivers in luxury residential complexes along the coast.

Fluid Relationships between Artists, the Public, and Site-Specific Contexts

Ziarah Utara is an open laboratory within urban space. The coastline becomes the studio, residents become co-researchers, and walking becomes a research method. As Wesseling suggests, knowledge is not something that is simply discovered and reported, but something formed through direct engagement with a specific site.

In Ziarah Utara, the local public is not merely an audience, but also narrators, sources of data, and agents of change. Here, art becomes a platform of advocacy for coastal communities vulnerable to reclamation, tidal flooding, and eviction.

Iwang has a long-standing relationship and deep connection with the residents of Kampung Dadap, one of the initial points of the Ziarah Utara journey among many other coastal villages he has “visited.” Kampung Dadap represents the face of a kampung-city on the border between Jakarta and Banten, continuously facing eviction threats due to its strategic location targeted by large-scale developers.

Reviving folktales, oral traditions, and local mythologies as a critique of technocratic thinking

In an eclectic manner, coastal residents draw on folktales, oral stories, and mythologies to critique the modernity imposed by policymakers. Reclamation islands, luxury housing developments in Pantai Indah Kapuk, Taman Impian Jaya Ancol, and toll roads are manifestations of modernization projects that marginalize coastal communities. Through their mythologies, residents resist this form of modernization. For them, it seems easier to think in terms of fantasy—surreal, even absurd—than to follow rigid modernist and technocratic frameworks. They are aware that the everyday pressures they face are produced by these very projects of modernity.



Figure 7. Parading a turtle, oral traditions, and the local history of Kampung Dadap residents.

Art, it turns out, teaches residents the meaning of resilience, resourcefulness, and strategies for confronting modernization projects imposed by actors from South Jakarta (the oligarchs based in City Hall, Menteng, and Kebayoran Baru). Through imagination, they dare to envision alternative possibilities beyond the realities they currently face. In this regard, I am reminded of Anthony Reid’s *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680*, which describes coastal societies in Southeast Asia as essentially *Homo Ludens*—humans who play. In addition to giving meaning to objects, coastal people are also deeply familiar with various forms of play.

From Representation to Transformation

While Ziarah Utara successfully represents spatial injustice through public art, representation alone does not automatically lead to social or spatial transformation. Recognising this limitation, the project extended beyond artistic representation by initiating concrete efforts to support social change.

In response to the precarious living conditions experienced by coastal residents, the local community and artist Irwan Ahmett launched a fundraising campaign to build a toilet facility for Mak Item, one of the central figures featured in the documentary *The Last Fisherwoman* (Nelayan Perempuan Terakhir). Mak Item’s house was severely damaged by recurring tidal flooding, including the destruction of her bathroom and sanitation facilities, which became unusable after being permanently inundated. As an elderly woman, the

absence of adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities has significantly affected her daily life and wellbeing.

To further bridge art and social activism, Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina established the Air Mata Aminatty Foundation, conceived as a platform where artistic practice meets civic engagement. On Saturday, 16 May 2026, a fundraising event was held at Wahyu Sihombing Theatre, featuring a screening of *The Last Fisherwoman* and the performance artwork *Intertidal*. During the event, architect Andesh Tomo presented the design proposal for Mak Item's new toilet facility.

The fundraising campaign has continued beyond the event and remains active. As reported through the Air Mata Aminatty Foundation's Instagram account (@airmata.aminatty), donations are still being collected. Of the total target of IDR 50,000,000 required to construct one toilet unit, IDR 31,847,347 has been raised to date.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that public art, as practiced in the *Ziarah Utara* project by Irwan Ahmett and Tita Salina, plays a strategic role as a medium for the production of urban knowledge, spatial advocacy, and the articulation of the right to the city. Public art not only represents issues in the coastal areas of North Jakarta, but also actively engages in the process of spatial production and the formation of citizens' subjectivities.

Through a participatory, body-based, and long-term research approach, *Ziarah Utara* produces a lived space that challenges the dominance of abstract space shaped by the logic of the state and capital. This practice reclaims the city as an oeuvre—a collective living work—in which citizens have the right to participate, to differ, and to imagine.

This study also demonstrates that public art can function as a democratic platform that opens spaces for dialogue among diverse actors, even outside formal policy mechanisms. Art serves as a non-formal social archive, an alternative research method, and a medium for shaping collective imagination amid ecological crises and spatial inequalities.

In contrast to technocratic research that relies on maps, satellite data, and predictive models, the knowledge produced through *Ziarah Utara* is relational and contextual. It records ecological loss, landscape transformation, as well as the trauma and nostalgia of coastal residents—elements often absent from official documents. The mythology of turtles, sea offering rituals, anonymous murals, and the performativity of fishermen's bodies become epistemic devices—valid tools for knowledge production within the context of art-based research.

Irwan's artistic practice, which involves research and public participation, constitutes a continuous effort to produce lived space in Henri Lefebvre's conception—namely, a space that is lived, perceived, and experienced through symbols, images, and emotions. This subjective space, rich with history and memory, often stands in contrast to conceived space, and becomes a form of resistance as well as an alternative way of understanding space.

Theoretically, this paper contributes to urban studies by integrating Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, Arnstein's concept of citizen participation, and Wesseling's artist-as-researcher paradigm within the context of contemporary Indonesian art practice. Practically, the findings emphasize the importance of incorporating cultural, artistic, and participatory approaches into more just and sustainable coastal planning.

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