

RECLAIMING THE CITY: RETHINKING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN SURAKARTA'S PUBLIC SPACE DEVELOPMENT

Jurnal Pengembangan Kota (2026)

Volume 14 No.1 (84–96)

Tersedia online di:

<http://ejournal2.undip.ac.id/index.php/jpk>

DOI: 10.14710/jpk.14.1.84-96

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Abstrak. This study critically examines citizen participation in public space development in Surakarta, Indonesia, a city that has undergone rapid transformation driven by city branding, beautification projects, and cultural events. While official documents such as the Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD) 2021-2026 and 2025–2029 promote an inclusive and collaborative vision, this research finds that participatory practices remain largely symbolic. Using a qualitative approach, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with a cultural expert, an academic, and a creative economy practitioner, combined with document analysis. Thematic findings reveal that public participation in Surakarta remains constrained by top-down governance, tokenistic consultation, and the dominance of the city-branding agenda. While civic engagement is acknowledged in policy discourse, practical implementation continues to prioritize visibility, efficiency, and investment attraction over inclusivity. The study concludes that achieving genuine co-creation in urban development requires stronger institutional mechanisms, transparent decision-making, and design practices that recognize citizens as co-designer of the city.

Keyword: Citizen Participation; City Branding; Public Space; Surakarta; Urban Governance

[Judul: MENGUPAYAKAN KEMBALI HAK ATAS KOTA: MENINJAU ULANG PARTISIPASI MASYARAKAT DALAM PENGEMBANGAN RUANG PUBLIK DI KOTA SURAKARTA]. *Studi ini meneliti partisipasi warga dalam pengembangan ruang publik di Surakarta, Indonesia, sebuah kota yang telah mengalami transformasi pesat yang didorong oleh pencitraan kota, proyek beautifikasi, dan acara budaya. Meskipun dokumen resmi seperti Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Daerah (RPJMD) 2021-2026 dan 2025–2029 mempromosikan visi inklusif dan kolaboratif, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa praktik partisipatif sebagian besar masih bersifat simbolis. Riset ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur kepada budayawan, akademisi, dan praktisi ekonomi kreatif, dikombinasikan dengan analisis dokumen. Temuan tematik mengungkapkan bahwa partisipasi publik di Surakarta masih bertumpu pada tata kelola top-down, konsultasi yang bersifat simbolis, dan dominasi agenda pencitraan kota. Meskipun keterlibatan warga diakui dalam wacana kebijakan, implementasi praktis terus memprioritaskan visibilitas, efisiensi, dan daya tarik investasi daripada inklusivitas. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa mencapai kolaborasi sejati dalam pembangunan perkotaan membutuhkan mekanisme kelembagaan yang lebih kuat, pengambilan keputusan yang transparan, dan praktik desain yang menempatkan warga sebagai co-designer kota tersebut.*

Kata Kunci: Partisipasi Warga; Citra Kota; Ruang Publik; Surakarta; Tata Kelola Perkotaan

Citation: Setiawan, Andi., & Purwandaru, Pandu. (2026). RECLAIMING THE CITY: RETHINKING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN SURAKARTA'S PUBLIC SPACE DEVELOPMENT. **Jurnal Pengembangan Kota**. Vol 14 (1): 84-96. DOI: 10.14710/jpk.14.1.84-96

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the city of Surakarta has witnessed an accelerated wave of urban development, particularly following the emergence of new

political leadership. These transformations are marked by extensive beautification projects (Prakoso, 2026; Surya, 2023), the proliferation of large-scale cultural festivals and intensified efforts in city branding (Puspita, 2026).

However, while these mega-events and aesthetic upgrades enhance the city's visual appeal, they frequently reduce local residents to passive spectators rather than active decision-makers in urban governance. This dominant focus on visual imagery risks marginalizing genuine community participation, transforming civic engagement into mere consumption of state-curated spectacles. To understand the ideological underpinnings of this trajectory and its implications for public involvement, Guy Debord's concept of the society of the spectacle provides an indispensable critical lens.

In his later reflections, Debord (2020), argued that modern urban life has become fully subsumed within the logic of the spectacle, where appearances replace lived experience and image supplants substance. Within this framework, urban reality is aestheticized and depoliticized: the city becomes a stage upon which curated images of prosperity and progress obscure underlying social inequalities. As Gramsci's distinction between "common sense" and "good sense" reminds us, widely accepted notions of progress or development often conceal ideological control (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). Likewise, Fredric Jameson's observation of the "optical illusion of social harmony" (in Greenberg (2010)) reveals how the city-as-brand conceals the contradictions between the material city and its commodified representation. Citizens are thus transformed from active participants in shaping urban life into passive consumers of the city's image.

Building on this critique, several scholars have explored how city branding redefines the city from a polis, a site of civic deliberation, into a marketable commodity (Thörn, 2006). City branding, as an extension of neoliberal urbanism, positions the city itself as a commodity. Originally conceived as a strategy to promote local economies by marketing specific assets such as culture, heritage, and creative industries, branding now often functions to construct and sell a symbolic version of the city. As Makeham (2005), argues, cities are increasingly "performed" through aesthetics and spectacle, transforming urban life into a continuous display. Thörn (2006), further illustrate how this logic

encourages a competitive pursuit of symbolic capital, where cities rely on image-making to assert global visibility. The branded city claims to represent collective identity while, in practice, privileging elite and commercial interests. As Vanolo (2020) notes, criticism of this commodified urban condition is often dismissed as irrational precisely because the logic of branding has become embedded in what is perceived as common sense. As cited by Lindell (2013), Mukhtar-Landgren further observes that in such cities, the poor are "seldom discussed and never presented," as their presence disrupts the idealized imagery that sustains the brand. In this context, the image of the city is not merely aesthetic but deeply ideological: it constructs a selective and partial narrative of urban life that privileges visibility, competitiveness, and investment over inclusion, equity, and citizenship.

In the case of Surakarta, this logic is vividly apparent. Events such as the Solo Batik Carnival, Solo International Ethnic Music Festival, and Solo International Performing Arts are staged annually, emphasizing performativity and global appeal. Yet these spectacles often obscure the social and spatial exclusions embedded within the urban fabric. As Harvey (2019) notes, the commodification of urban space through branding tends to align urban development with capital accumulation rather than social equity. As city authorities and private actors collaborate to attract investment, the everyday concerns and lived experiences of local residents are frequently sidelined. Urban regeneration projects and creative city policies are justified by narratives of cultural uplift and economic growth, yet their outcomes often lead to displacement, gentrification, and the erosion of inclusive public spaces.

ISSN 2337-7062 © 2026 by Authors,

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Submitted 20 May 2026, accepted 30 July 2026

This paper was presented at the 6th International Conference on Smart City Innovation (ICSCI 2026), held on 11–12 May 2026 in Jakarta, Indonesia, and organized by Universitas Indonesia.

The logic of branding and revitalization tends, moreover, to marginalize less powerful communities. Public resistance to top-down development plans is often neutralized through regulatory measures, media framing, and, at times, coercive state actions. As documented in various urban studies (e.g., [Cameron \(1992\)](#)), such development processes tend to benefit capital interests while exacerbating inequality. In revitalized districts, displacement may occur through direct eviction or the indirect pressures of rising living costs, a process often legitimized under the discourse of attracting the "creative class" ([Florida, 2005](#)). Scholars such as [KrÄTke \(2010\)](#) and [De Jesus et al. \(2020\)](#) have offered critical perspectives on the global application of creative city models, particularly in the Global South, where local complexities are often overlooked in favor of imported urban ideologies.

Within the Global South, these dynamics frequently manifest with greater intensity, as the pressures of modernization intersect with persistent structural inequities. The city-as-brand in this context tends to amplify dispossession under the rhetoric of development and global competitiveness. Local cultural identity becomes instrumentalized, while the lived experiences of residents, especially those at the socioeconomic margins, are rendered invisible. As a result, urban development frequently reproduces social hierarchies even as it celebrates "creativity" and "participation."

Contemporary urban governance increasingly acknowledges the need for proactive and inclusive planning to mitigate these consequences. Rather than responding after displacement and gentrification have already taken place, cities are urged to establish anticipatory frameworks that protect vulnerable communities while enabling sustainable growth. The Three P's framework, protection, preservation, and production of affordable housing, illustrates one holistic approach to mitigating urban inequality. Yet, as scholars and urban practitioners widely acknowledge, no single solution exists for equitable development. Instead, decision-makers must cultivate sustained collaboration between government institutions,

community leaders, and residents most affected by urban transformation. Genuine participation, therefore, requires more than consultation: it calls for shared authorship and agency in shaping the city's future.

Reclaiming the city from the logic of spectacle and commodification ultimately requires a reassertion of what Lefebvre termed the right to the city: the collective power of inhabitants to shape and transform the urban environment according to their needs and aspirations ([Mitchell, 2003](#)). Genuine participatory planning and design processes have the potential to resist the depoliticized aesthetics of the branded city by restoring citizen agency to the core of urban governance. However, as numerous empirical studies have demonstrated ([Hove et al., 2022](#); [Jánová et al., 2025](#); [Rahmansyah et al., 2025](#); [Sibanda & Lues, 2021](#)), such participation must go beyond tokenistic consultation to address the structural conditions and power asymmetries that limit genuine democratic involvement. Building equitable, inclusive, and culturally grounded cities thus requires shifting the evaluative metrics of success from those based on visibility, image, and growth to those centered on justice, belonging, and the everyday well-being of citizens.

In the context of Surakarta, the city's transformation into a cultural spectacle raises fundamental questions about the role of its citizens: Who participates in shaping the city? Whose voices are heard, and whose are excluded? While city branding strategies promise prosperity and global recognition, they often mask the everyday exclusions experienced by the majority of residents, who remain spectators in their own urban landscape. Such concerns are not merely theoretical in the Surakarta context. Recent empirical work has begun to document the limitations of projects that claim collaborative foundations. [Mukaromah \(2026\)](#), examining informal settlement upgrading in Surakarta financed primarily through external grant schemes, found that community financial contribution was negligible and confined to the operational and maintenance stages rather than the construction process itself. This arrangement, while framed as participatory, produced a weak sense of community

ownership from the outset. Mukaromah argues that without meaningful community investment in the planning and building phases, the long-term sustainability of physical improvements depends heavily on externally driven capacity-building rather than on the intrinsic agency of residents.

This empirical reality contrasts sharply with theoretical frameworks of collaborative development, which presuppose deliberative decision-making, shared power, and genuine co-design among public actors (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Healey, 2020). In spectacle-driven cities, however, collaborative development is frequently co-opted as a branding narrative that masks structural exclusions.

Despite increasing global and local interest in participatory planning and inclusive urbanism, there remains a gap in understanding how citizen participation actually manifests within the spectacle-driven logic of city branding, especially in secondary cities like Surakarta, where image-making and elite interests increasingly define urban priorities. This study responds to a critical need to interrogate the disconnect between official narratives of inclusivity and the lived realities of urban marginalization. Specifically, this study aims to critically examine how citizens have been positioned within the development of public spaces in Surakarta over the past decade, evaluate the extent and nature of their participation, uncover the socio-political dynamics that shape public engagement, and assess whether current design and policy practices genuinely reflect inclusive and culturally grounded urban development.

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design to critically examine the dynamics of citizen participation in the development of public spaces in Surakarta. The qualitative approach is particularly suited for this inquiry, as it enables exploration of the complex socio-political, cultural, and economic factors that shape urban development practices, factors that resist reduction to quantitative indicators alone. The research foregrounds meanings, power relations, and lived experiences

surrounding the creation and use of public spaces in the city.

2.1. Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of key municipal planning documents, including Surakarta's Medium-Term Regional Development Plan (Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Daerah or RPJMD). Informants were selected through purposive sampling, prioritizing individuals who possessed both direct critical engagement with the city's public space transformation and specific operational knowledge of the analyzed documents.

Three key informants were selected to ensure a balanced, multi-perspective triangulation covering civic, theoretical, and practical dimensions: Cultural Practitioner (CL): A long-standing figure with a proven track record in Surakarta's civic and heritage discourse across multiple mayoral administrations. Their historical involvement provides longitudinal insights into the shift in the city's governance paradigm and the contextual evolution of municipal policies.

Academic (A): An urban planning specialist who actively served as an academic partner in official municipal consultation forums during the drafting of the RPJMD. This direct involvement ensures deep familiarity with the structural framework, policy objectives, and formulation dynamics of the investigated planning documents. Creative Economy Actor (CEL): A practitioner who has spearheaded organic, community-led cultural initiatives. Their experience offers a pragmatic counter-perspective to municipality-organized festivals, grounding the document analysis in the realities of grassroots spatial practice and public engagement.

The interviews focused on each informant's experiences and perceptions of the planning, design, and management of public spaces in Surakarta, with particular attention to issues of inclusivity, power relations, and citizen participation. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participant's consent. The semi-structured format

allowed flexibility for probing emergent topics while maintaining consistency across key thematic areas, including policy implementation, public engagement mechanisms, and socio-political constraints in urban governance.

To contextualize and triangulate the interview data, document analysis was conducted alongside primary fieldwork. Rather than an exhaustive archive search, the review deliberately targeted key official policy and promotional artifacts that explicitly articulate Surakarta's urban agenda. Specifically, we analyzed municipal planning reports—primarily the Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD) of Surakarta for 2021–2026 and 2025–2029—alongside official city branding strategies, tourism promotional materials, and media coverage of urban revitalization projects.

The selection of these specific documents directly responds to the study's core focus on the tension between official narratives of inclusivity and the lived realities of citizen participation. As the primary statutory policy instrument, the RPJMD synthesizes the municipality's overarching development paradigm, strategic objectives, and spatial priorities. Analyzing the RPJMD allows us to unpack how the local government formally conceptualizes "participation" and public space governance at the institutional level. Concurrently, city branding, promotional materials, and media archives capture how this vision is publicly staged as a cultural spectacle. Together, these documents expose the institutional logic, policy discourses, and ideological frameworks that underpin Surakarta's urban trajectory, providing the baseline against which the actual scope, depth, and limits of community engagement are critically evaluated.

2.2. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using [Saldaña \(2009\)](#), two-cycle coding process. In the first cycle, initial codes were generated inductively from interview transcripts and documents to identify recurring concepts and key expressions related to participation, governance, and representation. In the second cycle, focused coding was employed to cluster similar codes into broader thematic categories. Through iterative interpretation, three

dominant themes emerged: (1) the persistence of top-down planning logics, (2) symbolic inclusion and performative participation, and (3) the ambivalent agency of citizens within controlled urban spaces.

This thematic structure enabled analysis of how participatory discourse in Surakarta's urban development intersects with neoliberal strategies of city branding and cultural commodification. Interpretation was further informed by theoretical frameworks drawn from neoliberal urbanism ([Brenner & Theodore, 2005](#); [Harvey, 1989](#)), the production of space ([Lefebvre, 1992](#)), and creative city critique ([KrÄTke, 2010](#)), situating the empirical findings within a broader political-economic and cultural context.

2.3. Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in full accordance with the ethical guidelines stipulated by the university ethics committee, and formal ethical approval was obtained prior to the commencement of data collection. All procedures involving human participants were carried out in strict adherence to the committee's requirements throughout every stage of the research process.

All participants were informed of the purpose of the research and consented to the use of anonymized quotes. Sensitive or identifiable information was excluded to ensure confidentiality. The study adhered to ethical principles of respect, transparency, and non-harm in qualitative inquiry.

3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the empirical findings of the study in relation to its four core aims: examining how citizens have been positioned within Surakarta's public space development; evaluating the extent and nature of their participation; uncovering the socio-political dynamics that shape public engagement; and assessing whether current design and policy practices genuinely reflect inclusive and culturally grounded urban development. The findings are organized thematically, drawing on interview data and document analysis (see [Table 1](#)). Furthermore,

the findings interpreted through the theoretical frameworks outlined in the preceding sections.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of Citizen Participation in Surakarta’s Public Space Development

Theme	Key Issues / Findings	Representative Quotes	Analytical Character / Interpretation
1. Top-Down Urban Governance	Urban planning and development in Surakarta remain dominated by government-led agendas, with limited opportunities for citizen input during early planning stages.	“Most of the projects are already decided before citizens are even informed,” (CL).	Reflects a hierarchical governance culture that values efficiency and image management over deliberation. Participation is reactive, not proactive.
2. Tokenistic Participation	Public consultations exist but are often superficial, serving to legitimize pre-existing plans rather than to invite real co-decision.	“The government sometimes holds meetings with communities, but they are mostly for show,” (A).	Indicates tokenism—participation used as a symbolic tool to validate policy rather than shape it. Citizens’ voices are acknowledged but not acted upon.
3. Urban Spectacle and City Branding	Public space development aligns with the city’s branding strategy, emphasizing aesthetics and tourism rather than local needs.	“The city is becoming a stage, not a living space,” (CL).	Consistent with Debord’s concept of the society of the spectacle. Beautification and events prioritize external image over social inclusion.
4. Socio-Spatial Exclusion and Displacement	Several projects, such as the renovation of Jurug Zoo and the relocation of Manahan shelter vendors, displaced informal communities without adequate dialogue.	“We were just told to move; there was no proper discussion,” (CL).	Reveals exclusionary urbanism—development that marginalizes informal and low-income groups, undermining spatial justice.
5. Aspirational Participatory Vision (RPJMD 2025–2029)	Official documents articulate inclusive and collaborative visions involving government, business, academia, and citizens.	“Surakarta develops local, regional, and international collaboration involving multiple stakeholders.” (RPJMD 2025–2029)	The participatory framework exists discursively but lacks institutional mechanisms and accountability structures to ensure meaningful citizen influence.
6. Barriers to Genuine Co-Creation	Technical, financial, and political constraints hinder sustained participatory design processes.	“Participation takes time and resources; the city government prefers fast and visible results,” (CEL).	Structural barriers reinforce short-termism and central control, limiting experimentation with co-creation models.
7. Emerging Civic Appreciation and Adaptation	Despite limited involvement, some communities creatively appropriate public spaces post-construction for cultural and social activities.	“At least now we can use these spaces for our events,” (CEL).	Suggests a form of bottom-up adaptation—citizens reclaim and reinterpret spaces within the constraints of a controlled urban framework.

3.1. The Rhetoric of Inclusivity in Urban Policy

The Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD) of Surakarta 2025–2029 presents a compelling narrative of progress. It states that future urban development will be guided by principles of inclusivity, resilience, integration, and sustainability (Inklusif, Tangguh, Terpadu, dan Berkelanjutan). The plan further introduces "collaboration" as one of its key development visions:

"Surakarta develops models of collaboration at local, regional, national, and international scales. This collaboration involves government, communities, businesses, industries, academia, media, and other stakeholders who actively participate in sustainable development. Cross-actor collaboration ensures synergy in financing, implementation, and utilization of development outcomes."

At the level of discourse, this statement reflects a progressive orientation toward participatory and multi-stakeholder governance. However, this research found that the language of participation in Surakarta's policy frameworks functions largely as symbolic rhetoric, serving as a legitimating discourse that obscures the persistence of top-down decision-making. As one academic participant (A) stated: "Yes, the city talks about collaboration all the time. But collaboration only means asking people to agree with what has already been decided."

This reflects what Arnstein (2015), calls tokenism: citizens are consulted or informed, yet the power to decide remains firmly in the hands of authorities. Theoretically, genuine collaborative development requires shared authority, mutual consensus-building, and co-ownership from inception through implementation (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Healey, 2020). In Surakarta, however, 'collaboration' is instrumentalized as an administrative strategy to streamline execution and secure public endorsement. Rather than redistributing decision-making power to civil society, the municipal framework conflates collaborative governance with stakeholder alignment, reducing democratic

participation to procedural compliance. The gap between the RPJMD's stated vision of collaborative development and the governance practices it produces is therefore not incidental but structural, a condition in which inclusive language is deployed to manage legitimacy rather than to redistribute power.

3.2. The Persistence of Top-Down Urbanism

Across all three interviews, participants agreed that public space development in Surakarta continues to be dominated by bureaucratic and political control. Even where consultation sessions are organized, these tend to occur after project plans have already been finalized, rendering community input largely ceremonial.

The cultural leader (CL) articulated this vividly: "Public participation is mostly ceremonial. Decisions are made before people are invited to talk. We just come to hear what will happen, not to shape what should happen." He further emphasized that this approach has generated sustained frustration, particularly among small-scale traders and residents affected by redevelopment: "People complain because they are not involved from the beginning. Look at the Manahan shelter renovation: vendors were relocated without real discussion. Or the Jurug Zoo redevelopment, where long-time workers and small traders were evicted for aesthetic reasons. It's development by decree, not by dialogue."

These examples illustrate how urban renewal projects, framed as beautification or modernization, can reproduce social exclusion and displacement. Similar dynamics have been observed in Tangerang and Malang, where riverbank and urban kampung redevelopments frequently prioritize spatial order and tourist appeal over community welfare (Lestari et al., 2022; Sukowati, 2022). The socio-political dynamics at work here are consistent with Harvey (2019), observation that the commodification of urban space tends to align development with capital accumulation rather than social equity, a process in which the state acts less as a mediator between

competing interests and more as a facilitator of investment.

The creative economy practitioner (CEL) offered a pragmatic account of why genuine participation remains rare: "A truly participatory process takes time and resources. The government prefers efficiency: fast results that can be showcased. But citizens do appreciate the new spaces; they feel proud to use them, even if they weren't part of the planning." This observation points to a deeper tension in Surakarta's development model, namely the prioritization of visible, deliverable outcomes over the slower, less legible processes of democratic co-governance.

3.3. Symbolic Inclusion and Performative Participation

While Surakarta's RPJMD 2021-2026 adopts the vocabulary of inclusivity, participation in practice operates at the lowest rungs of [Arnstein \(2015\)](#), ladder of citizen participation, primarily at the levels of informing and consultation. This produces what Cooke and Kothari term the tyranny of participation, wherein the appearance of inclusion masks structural asymmetries in power ([Kim, 2025](#)).

The academic participant (A) observed: "Participation is used to validate decisions, not to transform them. It's more about demonstrating that the process looks democratic." In this sense, Surakarta's participatory practices function as a performance of democracy, aligning closely with [Debord \(2020\)](#) concept of the society of the spectacle. Participation becomes a visual token within the city's branding narrative, a demonstration staged for investors, donors, and media audiences rather than a genuine mechanism of governance.

This performative quality has significant implications for cultural grounding, one of the core concerns of this study. While Surakarta's cultural identity, rooted in Javanese traditions, batik craft, and performing arts, is prominently featured in its branding and festival programming, the communities who carry and reproduce that identity are rarely involved in shaping the spaces in which it is displayed. Culture is instrumentalized as aesthetic

content rather than honored as a living practice embedded in community life. The aestheticization of urban space through murals, river walks, and public plazas offers a sense of collective ownership, yet visual inclusion of this kind often conceals the exclusion of voice ([Setiawan, 2022](#)). As the creative economy practitioner (CEL) observed: "People can use the new parks, organize events, or take photographs there. But they didn't help design them. Participation exists in usage, not in creation." This distinction between use and authorship is central to understanding the constrained nature of citizenship in neoliberal urban governance. Citizens are encouraged to consume urban spaces, but not to produce them ([Verloo, 2023](#)).

3.4. Negotiating Agency in Controlled Urban Spaces

Despite these structural constraints, citizens in Surakarta exhibit considerable adaptive agency. Communities find creative ways to reclaim meaning within new urban environments that were not designed with their input. The cultural leader (CL) noted: "Even if we weren't asked to design these spaces, people still make them alive. They rehearse traditional dances, hold markets, and celebrate community events there. That's how we reclaim the city: by living in it."

This form of spatial appropriation resonates with [De Certeau \(2024\)](#), notion of tactics, the everyday acts through which ordinary people re-appropriate systems and spaces imposed upon them. In Surakarta's case, such tactics are culturally significant: the persistence of community rituals, traditional performances, and informal markets in formally designed spaces represents not merely resistance but an assertion of local identity that official planning has failed to accommodate. These practices, while modest in scale, reveal citizens' capacity to transform spaces of control into spaces of expression, and to sustain cultural grounding from below even when it is absent from above ([Djufri, 2025](#)).

However, these grassroots actions remain reactive rather than transformative. They revitalize public life but rarely influence institutional power or long-term planning decisions. Without structural mechanisms that embed citizen co-design from the

outset, participatory ideals risk being reduced to cultural performances rather than instruments of political empowerment (Verloo, 2023).

3.5. Comparative Reflections: Lessons from Elsewhere

Experiences from other cities demonstrate that genuine participation is achievable when institutional frameworks and design cultures shift from consultation toward co-creation. Medellín, Colombia, once stigmatized by violence, transformed its urban landscape through participatory urbanism, integrating citizens into every stage of urban aerial cable-car public transport system infrastructure planning (Brand & Davila, 2011). Projects such as the Escaleras Eléctricas de la Comuna 13 were co-designed with residents, linking social equity with physical transformation in ways that reflected the community's own spatial narratives.

Similarly, Seoul's participatory budgeting system empowers local communities to propose and vote on urban improvements, turning budgetary decision-making into a sustained public dialogue (No & Hsueh, 2022). Barcelona's Superblock program integrates co-design workshops and digital participation platforms, enabling residents to shape the mobility and ecological design of their own neighborhoods (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2024).

Crucially, what distinguishes these cases from Surakarta is not the rhetoric of participation but the redistribution of decision-making authority. In each example, citizens were granted meaningful agency at stages where plans could still be changed, and facilitation was provided independently of state actors. Compared to these models, Surakarta's participatory framework remains procedural and state-centered. It lacks sustained mechanisms for community-led decision-making and independent facilitation. While the RPJMD articulates "collaboration" as a vision, collaboration in practice remains vertical, between government and external experts, rather than horizontal, among communities, civil society organizations, and diverse urban actors. This gap is particularly consequential in a city whose cultural distinctiveness depends on the vitality of

community practices that top-down development continues to marginalize.

3.6. Between Vision and Reality: Synthesis and Implications

The findings across all four thematic areas reveal a persistent disjunction between official rhetoric and lived reality. Taken together, they provide clear responses to the study's research aims.

Citizens in Surakarta are positioned primarily as end-users and beneficiaries of urban development rather than as co-authors or rights-bearing participants in shaping it. The extent of their participation, as evidenced by both policy documents and interview data, remains confined to the lower rungs of Arnstein's ladder: informing and consultation at best, non-participation at worst. The socio-political dynamics underlying this condition are structural rather than incidental: a governance culture that prioritizes efficiency, visibility, and investment attraction over deliberation, transparency, and community ownership. The result is that development decisions are legitimized through the language of collaboration while remaining effectively closed to meaningful public influence.

On the question of cultural grounding, the findings indicate that Surakarta's development practices fall short. Local cultural identity is deployed as spectacle and brand asset rather than integrated into planning as a living, community-held resource. The communities who sustain Surakarta's cultural distinctiveness remain peripheral to the decisions that determine how that culture is represented and spatialized in the public realm.

From a theoretical standpoint, this tension exemplifies what Harvey (2003) and Lefebvre (1992), describe as the contradiction between the right to the city and the commodification of urban space. In this context, the rhetoric of 'collaborative development' is subsumed under the logic of the spectacle. While collaborative development in urban theory denotes a communicative and relational process where diverse public actors collectively determine spatial outcomes (Healey, 2020), Surakarta's institutional practice reduces

collaboration to symbolic engagement and post-hoc endorsement. Public participation thus becomes a performative event that legitimizes urban redevelopment rather than a structural mechanism for reclaiming collective ownership. As Surakarta continues to position itself as a creative and collaborative city, the challenge ahead lies not in producing more spectacles of participation, but in restructuring governance to allow citizens to become true co-authors of their urban future. Genuine collaborative development requires time, trust, institutionalized co-design channels, and a structural redistribution of power—qualities that cannot be simulated through branding, beautification, or superficial consultation alone.

Ultimately, while Surakarta's official policies articulate a vision of inclusive and collaborative development, citizen participation in practice remains constrained to symbolic engagement and post-hoc involvement. Yet the resilience and creativity of local communities, evident in their everyday re-appropriation of public spaces, suggests the latent potential for a more democratic urbanism: one grounded not in spectacle, but in the lived agency of citizens reclaiming their right to shape the city.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined citizen participation in Surakarta's public space development through semi-structured interviews and analysis of the RPJMD 2021 - 2026 and 2025–2029, addressing four core aims: assessing how citizens are positioned in urban development, evaluating the extent and nature of their participation, uncovering the socio-political dynamics shaping engagement, and determining whether current practices reflect inclusive and culturally grounded urbanism.

The findings consistently reveal a disjunction between official rhetoric and lived reality. Although Surakarta's planning documents articulate a vision of inclusive, multi-stakeholder collaboration, participation in practice remains largely tokenistic. Citizens are engaged after decisions have been made rather than during the processes that shape them, functioning as audiences rather than co-

authors of urban change. This was evident in cases such as the Manahan shelter renovation and the Jurug Zoo redevelopment, where affected communities were displaced without meaningful prior consultation. The socio-political dynamics underlying this condition are structural: a governance culture that privileges efficiency, visual outcomes, and investment attraction over deliberation and power-sharing. On the question of cultural grounding, the study found that Surakarta's rich cultural identity is instrumentalized as spectacle and brand asset rather than integrated into planning as a community-held resource, leaving the very communities who sustain that identity peripheral to decisions about how it is represented in public space.

These findings point to a need for a shift from participation as procedural compliance to participation as shared authorship, supported by institutional mechanisms such as co-design processes, neighborhood assemblies, and transparent budgeting frameworks that engage marginalized groups from the earliest stages of planning.

This study has several limitations. The qualitative design, drawing on three key informants, provides interpretive depth but limits generalizability across broader populations and urban contexts. The analysis also focused primarily on cultural and spatial dimensions of participation, leaving economic evaluation and policy effectiveness for future inquiry. Subsequent research could expand the scope through comparative studies with other mid-sized Indonesian cities, quantitative assessments of participation levels, or investigation of digital platforms as channels for civic engagement. Despite these constraints, this study contributes to debates on democratic urbanism by exposing the gap between the imagined participatory city of official narratives and the experienced city of its citizens, and by affirming the urgency of reclaiming urban development as a genuinely collective process.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by Universitas Sebelas Maret. Ref number: 1297/UN27.22/PT.01.03/2025

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