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PONDOK BORO DARMIN AS AN ALTERNATIVE HOUSING FOR MIGRANTS IN SEMARANG, 1980-1990

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Pondok Boro Darmin as an alternative residence for migrants in Semarang during the period 1980–1990. The boarding house primarily accommodated low-income informal workers who were excluded from formal housing schemes amidst the city's rapid urbanization. Employing a historical methodology comprising four stages—heuristics (collecting primary sources, including interviews and archival documents), source criticism (validating data), interpretation (socio-economic analysis), and historiography (historical writing)—this research situates Pondok Boro Darmin within the broader socio-economic transformations of Semarang during that era. Findings reveal that during the 1980s, accelerated economic activities in the vicinity of Pasar Johar and the city center created a demand for flexible, low-cost housing solutions for rural migrants seeking employment in trade, transportation, and informal sectors. Pondok Boro Darmin emerged as a strategic yet modest communal living space that not only provided cost-effective accommodation but also nurtured social resilience through solidarity, unwritten norms, and adaptive networks. By the close of the 1990s' first decade, shifts in urban planning, rising land values, and increasing pressure for city modernization began to challenge the sustainability of such informal housing solutions. This temporal scope (1980–1990) thus represents a transitional period when Pondok Boro Darmin stood at the intersection of grassroots urban survival strategies and the growing tension between informal housing and formal urban development agendas.

I. INTRODUCTION

Semarang is the capital city of Central Java Province and a strategic center of trade on Java's northern coast. Its strategic geographical position as a port city and a center for commodity distribution, coupled with the development of the manufacturing and service industries as well as the expansion of areas around Tanjung Emas Port and the Warehousing complexes, attracted migrants who hoped to find better economic opportunities compared to the conditions in their regions of origin (Jonkie Tio, 2001). This condition established Semarang as a magnet for urbanization during the 1980–1990 decade, when the migration wave from rural areas to the city increased in alignment with the rapid development of the economic and infrastructure sectors.

The rapid transformation of Semarang into an industrial area cannot be separated from the influence of simultaneous population growth. Based on data from the Central Java Provincial Central Statistics Agency (BPS), the population growth rate of Semarang City during the 1980–1990 period was 2.00%. This figure represents a significantly high growth rate, especially when compared to the national natural population growth of 1.98% during the same period. This discrepancy indicates that population growth in Semarang City was not solely attributable to birth rates but was also influenced by the influx of residents from outside the region, or, in other words, urbanization (Handayani & Rudiarto, 2014)

According to Bintarto (1984), urbanization is a process of population relocation from rural territories to urban areas, which is generally motivated by the desire to obtain more decent employment, access to education, healthcare services, and an improvement in the quality of life. This phenomenon reflects the presence of a development disparity between rural and urban areas. As reported by Suara Merdeka Newspaper on November 2nd 1989, the development gap between villages and cities became the primary catalyst for the migratory flow of the rural population into urban territories.

Pondok Boro represents a form of simple dwelling generally inhabited by rural migrants who come to the city to work in the informal sector. Known as a daily and monthly rental residence with highly affordable prices, Pondok Boro offers an alternative housing solution for migrants who arrive without guaranteed permanent employment or social support (Puspita, 2023). According to Mr. Sarwoto, the owner of Pondok Boro, the name 'Pondok Boro' itself is derived from Javanese, meaning 'migrant dwelling,' because it is occupied by migrants (Interview with Mr. Sarwoto, July 1, 2025). Its characteristics are distinctive, such as the *kamar los*. The term "los" itself originates from Javanese, frequently used to designate a type of building or space structured in a single row that lacks substantial partitioning separating the individual rooms, save for thin walls or boards. Although the physical quality is rudimentary, the appeal of Pondok Boro lies in its strategic location and the affordability of its rental costs (Sholihah & Ardhya Nareswari, 2024).

This research aims to uncover the history of the emergence of Pondok Boro Darmin in the Kauman area, Semarang, as an alternative dwelling for low-income migrants during the 1980–1990 era. The year 1980 was chosen as the starting point because it signifies the increasing migratory flow and the demand for low-cost housing in Semarang due to the expansion of the industrial and service sectors. The year 1990 is established as the final boundary because changes in urban spatial planning policy began to occur, affecting the existence of informal residences such as *pondok boro*. The focus of the study encompasses the background of its establishment, the characteristics of Pondok Boro Darmin's inhabitants, and the social dynamics formed within it. Using a social history approach, this study utilizes primary sources such as Suara Merdeka newspaper archives, interviews, and is reinforced by relevant academic literature.

The topic of Pondok Boro in Semarang City has garnered attention in several previous studies. One relevant study is that conducted by Fika Annisa' Sholihah and Ardhya Nareswari (2024), which examined the Residential Characteristics of Low-Income Laborers: Pondok Boro Kampung Sumeneban Semarang. This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach and reviewed the characteristics of Pondok Boro based on five elements of settlement (man, society, space, network, and nature). Another study by Khusnul Khotimah et al. (2024) in their article, *The Pondok Boro Program in Semarang City Supports Empowerment Towards SEHATI Village*, focused on the health and spirituality aspects of Pondok Boro Trimulyo resident post-relocation from Pasar Johar. This research concentrated on the changes in Clean and Healthy Living Behavior (PHBS) and the internalization of Islamic values through an intervention program from RSI Sultan Agung. Nuridin et al. (2024), in a collaborative community service journal, conducted community service activities at Pondok Boro Trimulyo using an approach of moral education and legal awareness. This activity aimed to increase residents' awareness regarding the values of Pancasila and their rights and obligations as citizens, including the ownership of population documents and the importance of a value system in communal life.

This study, however, differs from the previous research. This examination is more focused on the historical and social period, utilizing a historical approach that encompasses the stages of heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography, by excavating primary sources such as archives, interviews, and local documentation. This stands in contrast to previous studies, which predominantly employed contemporary descriptive methods.

II. METHODS

The method employed in this research utilizes the historical method, which is an approach conducted by critically and systematically tracing, testing, and analyzing various traces or legacies of the past. In practice, this method consists of four main stages: collection of historical sources

(heuristics), evaluation or criticism of sources, interpretation of historical facts, and the final stage, historical writing or historiography (Kuntowijoyo, 2003).

The first stage is the collection of historical sources (heuristics); in this stage, the author gathers sources that will subsequently serve as the guidelines for this research. Historical sources consist of both primary and secondary sources (Porra dkk., 2014). Primary sources in this research were obtained through semi-structured interviews with key actors or individuals who were contemporaries and had direct involvement with Pondok Boro Darmin. The semi-structured approach was selected to ensure the researcher maintained a basic question guide, yet still provided space for the informants to elaborate on their experiences more freely and in depth. The recruitment of informants was focused on Pondok Boro, Kauman, Central Semarang, utilizing the largest possible number to obtain accurate data. In addition to interview results, other primary sources were acquired from contemporary newspapers accessed through the Suara Merdeka Archives Depository and data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS). Furthermore, secondary sources encompass books, academic works, and relevant electronic references.

The second stage in this research is source criticism or verification, which aims to ascertain the validity of the information from the sources that have been collected. This stage is crucial in determining whether the historical data utilized constitutes fact or merely fabrication. Source criticism in historical research is divided into two parts: external criticism and internal criticism (Widja, 1989). This process is executed by comparing various sources to assess their consistency and validity. The third stage is interpretation; at this stage, the previously separate sources are arranged chronologically to form a unified and coherent narrative. Subsequent to undergoing the verification process, the data is then synthesized into a chronology.

Following the systematic verification and arrangement of the discovered facts, the final stage conducted is historical writing or historiography. Historiography constitutes the presentation of the historical research findings through structured writing. Similar to a scientific report, historical writing must be capable of conveying a clear representation of the entire research process, ranging from the planning phase to the derivation of conclusions (Abdurahman, 1999).

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

History and the Origin of Pondok Boro Darmin

During the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century, Semarang City underwent rapid development as a port and a major trading center in Central Java. Its strategic location on the northern coast of Java Island established Semarang City as a significant port within the commodity distribution network between the hinterland and international markets (Septiawan, 2022). Merchant vessels from various nations, such as Great Britain, the Netherlands, Japan, and other European countries, routinely docked at this port, thereby reinforcing Semarang's role in global trade activities (Kasmadi, 1985).

One vital component in the colonial logistic system in Semarang was the Semarang River (Kali Semarang). This river functioned as the primary route for the traffic of wooden vessels transporting high-value merchandise, including spices (Inagurasi, 2016). The river flow connected the port with the storage warehouses and logistic centers in the interior of the city, thus establishing it as the economic artery of the city during that era. On the banks of the Semarang River, there was a structure that was utilized as a storage warehouse which was subsequently converted into a Pondok Boro. Its location is on the riverbank of the Semarang River, more precisely in Kampung Sumaneban, Kauman Sub-district, Central Semarang District. Initially, this building served as a warehouse for spices and other trade commodities. Its position, located directly on the river edge, facilitated the process of loading and unloading vessels directly from the pier (Ruth dkk., 2020)



Figure 1. Map of Semarang in 1800 and the initial location of Pondok Boro Darmin Structure
(Source : Nationaal Archief, The Hague: Inv. No. NA NL-HaNA_4.MIKO_11)

During post-Indonesia's independence in 1945, the function of the former warehouse structure on the banks of the Semarang River began to undergo a change (Dewi, <https://www.merdeka.com/jateng/sudah-berdiri-sebelum-indonesia-merdeka-penginapan-di-semarang-ini-hanya-bertarif-rp4-ribu-per-hari-199837-mvk.html?page=4>, diakses pada 14 Juli 2025). At that time, a village head named Darmin took the initiative for migrants originating from Kebumen to occupy the warehouse as their temporary dwelling. During that period, numerous migrants were arriving in Semarang seeking employment but faced difficulties in acquiring accommodation. Some of them were even compelled to spend the night around Pasar Johar

without proper habitation (Wiyono, 1991). Over time, the warehouse transitioned to become a residence for migrants, particularly those who were from Kebumen. In its development, the number of occupants continually increased and was no longer restricted to migrants from a single region. Newcomers from other areas started to occupy the dwellings, consequently establishing it as a collective dwelling with a more diverse background.

The naming of Pondok Boro reflects the structure's function and social identity. Thus, Pondok Boro can be literally interpreted as a residence for migrants (Nandang, 2011). In general, its existence reflects socio-economic condition of urban lower class who must face limitations in accessing proper habitation. Moreover, Pondok Boro represents how the migrant community is able to build construct solidarity, shared identity, and survival strategies amidst urban spaces that are not consistently accommodating toward marginalized people (Kusumaningrum dkk., 2020).

Physical Condition and Facilities of Pondok Boro Darmin

Pondok Boro generally consists of semi-permanent structures or are the result of functional conversion from older structures adapted for mass habitation. Some of these originate from old houses or former warehouses, such as Pondok Boro Darmin in Kampung Sumeneben, which was initially a warehouse owned by a Chinese landlord and subsequently utilized as a residence for migrants from Kebumen who lacked accommodation. The Structural composition of these buildings comprises several mass units divided into 'los' rooms and 'kamaran' rooms, each with distinct characteristics and rental schemes. The 'los' type lacks partitions between sleeping spaces and is rented on a daily basis, whereas the 'kamaran' type incorporates partitions and is rented on a monthly basis (Wawancara, Pak Sarwoto, 1 Juli 2025).



Figure 2. The condition of Pondok Boro (Source : Personal documentation, Aditya Nandito)

From a construction standpoint, the building utilizes primary materials consisting of brick and wood, whereas the partitions between the rooms are fabricated from rudimentary materials such as bamboo matting (*gedek bambu*) or asbestos sheets. The flooring is mostly composed of rough cement plaster, and the roof employs aging clay tiles. In several instances, according to an interview with Mr. Kalijan, a resident of Pondok Boro Darmin, leaks in the roof were repaired autonomously by the occupants (Wawancara, Pak Kalijan, 1 Juli 2025). The lack of ventilation results in humid and dark indoor conditions, which potentially leads to respiratory disorders. Nonetheless, the majority of occupants do not raise issue with these physical conditions, as they prioritize the strategic location and the affordable rental rates.

The basic facilities available at Pondok Boro Darmin during the 1980s period included shared bathrooms and toilets, a communal kitchen, a clothes drying area, and open drainage channels. Clean water was sourced from a borehole managed by the lodging authority; however, the limited number of water points frequently resulted in queues for bathing or washing, particularly during the morning and evening hours. Domestic wastewater was discharged directly through open sewers that emptied into the Semarang River, consequently posing risks of environmental contamination and emitting foul odors.

Waste management was not handled by the City Sanitation Department but was instead executed autonomously by the occupants, who collected waste for sale to local collectors. The kitchen area and living space were multifunctional. Although the available facilities were highly limited, all of them were nevertheless capable of fulfilling basic functions, namely as a place for resting, cooking, personal hygiene, and socializing, as is commonly observed in marginal settlement areas (Darmiati, 2000).

From a social perspective, the involvement of the city government during that era was generally indirect. There were no specific programs to regulate, supervise, or improve the quality of dwellings such as Pondok Boro, despite their significant contribution to the absorption of migrant labor sustaining the city's trade sector, particularly in the Pasar Johar area. Urban housing policy during the New Order period primarily focused on the development of formal housing (e.g., the Perumnas program) and the arrangement of commercial zones, whereas non-formal residential areas like Pondok Boro were often overlooked in urban planning (Chiu & Ha, 2018). The government tended to tolerate the existence of such lodgings as long as they did not generate land conflicts or disturbances to public order, thereby making it a form of tacit accommodation for the housing needs of low-income urban migrants. Consequently, the social relationship between the Pondok Boro occupants and the city government was functional yet minimally interventive (Herawati dkk., 2023).

Pondok Boro Darmin is situated in a narrow alley with a road width of only approximately 1.5 to 2 meters. Its location on the banks of the Semarang River (Kali Semarang) renders Pondok Boro vulnerable to flooding during the rainy season. Such physical environmental conditions pose

a specific challenge, especially during the wet season. However, its proximity to economic activity centers like Pasar Johar and the port continues to establish Pondok Boro as an appealing option for informal workers seeking to minimize transportation costs. The limited drainage system and high-density spatial arrangement frequently make the Pondok Boro environment appear dilapidated. Nevertheless, the occupants are generally satisfied because they possess low expectations regarding this dwelling. For them, the primary priority is efficiency in urban life, and Pondok Boro is functionally capable of meeting that necessity (Tyas, 2018).

Although the building structure has existed since the colonial era, the majority of Pondok Boro dwellings have never undergone comprehensive renovation. The structural design still retains its original colonial-era blueprint, and repairs are only executed in the event of severe damage, and even then, autonomously by the occupants or managers (Interview, Kalijan, July 1, 2025). The city government rarely involved itself in the renovation process because the majority of the Pondok Boro land lacked official certification and was not covered by public housing programs. Legal and bureaucratic constraints became the primary factors impeding the integration of Pondok Boro into the city's formal housing system. Furthermore, the absence of accurate administrative data regarding the number and profile of the occupants complicated the government's ability to design precisely targeted assistance or relocation policies.

Social Function and the Character of Pondok Boro Residents

Initially, the occupants of Pondok Boro were predominantly migrants originating from Kebumen, a region in southern Central Java known as a source of migrant labor. This pattern reflects the phenomenon of network migration, where individuals tend to follow the trajectory of relatives or neighbors who had previously migrated and settled in the city (Ridlo, 2016). According to the management of Pondok Boro Darmin in Kampung Sumeneban, the dominance of migrants from Kebumen was highly pronounced during the initial phase of the lodging's operation. However, over time, the composition of occupants became more diverse, encompassing regions such as Sragen, Purwodadi, Banjarnegara, Klaten, Solo, Gunung Kidul, and Cirebon (Wawancara, Pak Sarwoto, July 1 2025).

This type of migration pattern confirms that Pondok Boro functioned not merely as a temporary dwelling, but also as a space for social intergration based on regional origin. Newcomers were typically introduced by relatives or village acquaintances and informally recommended to the manager. In this manner, Pondok Boro palyed a vital role in organizing the mobility of working-class migrants in Semarang.

Based on the Suara Merdeka Newspaper (June 6, 1987) their occupations encompassed construction laborers, market porters, street vendors, pedicab drivers, and laundry workers. The instability of daily or weekly income motivated a preference for flexible rental systems, such as

those offered by Pondok Boro. The daily rental scheme provided the latitude to adjust payments according to financial capacity, without the commitment of a long-term contract.

According to Mr. Suparman, an occupant of Pondok Boro Darmin working as a street vendor, they tend to prioritize the dwelling's proximity to the workplace and low rental rates, rather than the physical quality of the structure (Interview, Mr. Suparman, July 1 2025). Consequently, although Pondok Boro possesses minimal facilities such as dim lighting, inadequate ventilation, and limited sanitation, these factors do not constitute a primary issue. As long as they are able to work and rest, the dwelling is deemed sufficient for basic necessities.

Social life at Pondok Boro Darmin proceeded dynamically and was based on collectivity. In the early 1980s, the unpartitioned *los* space fostered intensive interaction among occupants. However, solidarity did not immediately form entirely. Rather, it developed incrementally alongside increasing density and prolonged duration of residence. Initially, social relationships were functional and limited to fellow co-workers or regional relatives. Nevertheless, as the occupant composition grew more diverse and the pressures of life intensified, the value of solidarity evolved into a genuine social necessity (Interview, Mr. Kalijan, July 1, 2025).

Within the condition of high-density habitation, occupants began to develop patterns of mutual assistance (*gotong royong*), such as aiding sick neighbors, lending kitchen equipment, or sharing food during holidays. Activities like playing chess in the lodging's hallway or watching television collectively became the medium for daily interaction that reinforced the sense of togetherness. This culture gradually evolved into a form of unwritten norm that maintained social order amid the physical spatial constraints.

The social relationship also extended beyond the physical boundaries of the lodging. Small stalls around the dwelling, located both at the front and the back of the structure, functioned as spaces for informal interaction between the occupants and the local community, especially the indigenous residents of Kampung Kauman. By the late 1980s, this relationship became more fluid as many of the lodging's occupants participated in Neighborhood (RT) activities or provided assistance when local residents organized events such as communal feasts (*kenduri*) or community mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*).

Thus, social solidarity in Pondok Boro is not an inherent legacy that existed from the beginning but rather the result of a process of collective adaptation to the cramped, informal, and challenging dwelling conditions. This process unfolded incrementally throughout the 1980s decade became the fundamental foundation for sustaining the social functionality of the lodging. Towards the end of the 1990s decade, the number of Pondok Boro occupants began to decline significantly. This decrease was influenced by several external factors. Firstly, a shift in migration patterns occurred, where the younger generation opted to migrate to larger cities such as Jakarta, which were perceived as offering greater economic opportunities. Secondly, a social transformation took place among long-term occupants. Many of them had children who achieved economic stability

and invited their parents to return to their hometowns. Nevertheless, Pondok Boro persisted because it remained necessary for the segment of the population requiring affordable, flexible housing located near the city center. For some remaining occupants, the reduction in density actually provided an advantage in the form of more expansive living space and an increased level of privacy.

Social and Cultural Dynamics at Pondok Boro Darmin in the 1980-1990 Period

Pondok Boro Darmin functioned not merely as a shelter but also as a social space that shaped a solid dynamic. Unwritten social norms, solidarity among residents, and a system for accepting new occupants based on social networks developed. The harmonious relationship with the surrounding community further reinforced these bonds. Thus, Pondok Boro Darmin is not merely a dwelling but also a living space that represents significant social and cultural values (Andriyani, 2023)

One of the most prominent social characteristics of Pondok Boro Darmin is the strong solidarity among its occupants. Collective living within a single structure with shared facilities, such as the communal kitchen, bathrooms, and drying area, fostered intensive interaction that consequently engendered a sense of togetherness and mutual trust among individuals. The occupants knew each other, shared food, and provided assistance during illness (Interview, Suparman, July 1, 2025).



Figure 3. Interaction among residents in Pondok Boro (Personal Documentation, Aditya Nandito)

This solidarity was reinforced by the similarity of socio-economic background and regional origin. The majority of occupants hailed from regions such as Kebumen, Banjarnegara, Klaten, and Sragen, consequently importing collective cultural values such as mutual assistance (*gotong royong*), tolerance, and mutual respect. In this context, life in Pondok Boro did not generate a sense of alienation; instead, it presented a familial atmosphere that supported the adaptation process, especially for new migrants who had not yet established a social network in the city (Puspateja, 2013).

Daily activities such as communal cooking, playing chess in the afternoon, and casual conversation constitute the concrete manifestation of social practices that reinforce community cohesion. Furthermore, during significant moments, such as when an occupant passes away or returns to their hometown, solidarity is also demonstrated through material and labor assistance, emphasizing that Pondok Boro functions not only as a residence but also as a second family for its occupants. Not all individuals are immediately permitted to reside at Pondok Boro Darmin. Although the rental system is offered on a daily or monthly basis, the process of admitting new occupants is conducted selectively through a social recommendation mechanism. Typically, prospective occupants are introduced by long-term residents who are known and trusted by the management. Only after undergoing an informal introduction process and being deemed socially suitable is an individual authorized to reside there, usually starting by renting a sleeping space in the *los* area before transitioning to a partitioned room (*kamaran*) if feasible (Interview, Taryono, July 1, 2025).

This system was designed to maintain social stability and prevent potential disruptions, such as theft, internal conflicts, or cultural incompatibilities. The primary consideration was not merely financial capability but rather the social reputation, origin, and conduct of the prospective occupants. Thus, the aspects of solidarity and community security were prioritized over economic gain. This process also demonstrates how the rural social structure is reproduced within the urban environment, forming an adaptive and sustainable community network (Sholihah & Ardhya Nareswari, 2024). Despite being located within a high-density settlement area, the relationship between the occupants of Pondok Boro Darmin and the residents of Kampung Sumeneban proceeded in a harmonious atmosphere. The occupants did not live in isolation but actively interacted in daily social life. Small stalls around the lodging served as crucial spaces for informal interaction, functioning as places for purchasing daily necessities, conversing with residents, and even receiving assistance in the form of borrowed goods or food from the stall owners.

The involvement of the lodging's occupants was also evident in various social and religious activities within the Neighborhood (RT) environment, such as the celebration of major religious holidays or the commemoration of Independence Day. Their participation in these activities reflects a high level of social inclusion, where their status transitioned from being merely temporary migrants to becoming an integral part of the local community. The established relationship also served a strategic function. In emergency situations, such as illness, loss of property, or theft, local residents often served as the first parties to provide assistance. This bond was founded upon mutual trust and reciprocal involvement, with the awareness that the lodging's occupants contributed to the local economy through occupations such as laborers, small traders, or informal service providers (Landau & Freemantle, 2018).

Pondok Boro Darmin represents a cultural mosaic, where various local expressions from diverse regions converge and integrate within a single living space. Although the community is heterogeneous, the occupants exhibit a high degree of adaptation in formulating new norms and patterns of collective life. The cultural values they imported from their regions of origin were processed and adjusted according to the dynamics of communal living (Mambiew dkk., 2023). The result of this process is the formation of a multicultural yet simple social ecosystem. Amidst the physically cramped building conditions and minimal privacy, the occupants were able to maintain boundaries between individuals, respect differences, and collectively create social comfort. The harmony in inter-regional interaction became a concrete manifestation of the social capital that sustains the viability of the informal urban community. For the occupants of Pondok Boro Darmin, the physical quality of the dwelling is not the primary priority. The more essential values are social comfort—feeling accepted, mutual assistance, and being respected as a part of the community. Therefore, although this structure does not yet meet the standards for proper habitation administratively, it has long functioned socially and culturally as a "home" in the substantive sense (Jamiludin dkk., 2023).

IV. CONCLUSION

Pondok Boro Darmin in Kampung Sumeneban represents a case of alternative housing for low-income migrants in the heart of Semarang City, emerging during the 1980s–1990s decade. It provides strategic dwelling for informal sector workers around Pasar Johar with a flexible rental system and without complicated administrative requirements. The social dynamics within this lodging are built upon community solidarity formed by shared regional origin and economic limitations, reinforced by a social recommendation system and harmonious relations with local residents, although it remains outside the scope of formal policy due to the occupants' unofficial domicile status. The absence of government intervention means basic facilities are managed autonomously by the occupants, while social relationships among residents become the primary resource for coping with structural limitations. This lodging demonstrates that informal settlements are not merely emergency shelters but rather strategic social spaces in urban life. Consequently, city housing policy must be more inclusive by recognizing the social function and community value of such spaces as a legitimate part of the urban landscape, moving beyond a focus solely on legality and ownership to address accessibility and spatial justice for vulnerable groups at the core of city activity.

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