

# *Dialectics Of Surakarta Society Perception Of Murals At Gatot Subroto Street, Surakarta, Indonesia*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The present study captured people's perception of murals at Gatot Subroto street (Gatsu), Surakarta, Indonesia. On the one hand, murals at Gatsu were viewed as attractive works since they presented positive expressions and did not contain any criticism. Moreover, they were viewed as capable of enlivening a creative urban atmosphere. On the other hand, some people viewed that these murals also represent an irony as murals are supposed to be the means for lower-class people to voice their criticism and protest and be utterly free from the government's intervention. This study finds it necessary further to explore the Surakarta people's perception of these works. This qualitative study was expected to capture the people's perception of the murals and how murals can influence people's views in this era. To this end, interviews, observation, and literature studies were conducted. Hegel's dialectics was applied to obtain the middle alternative for the contradictive views.

**Keywords:** *Mural, Perception, Society, Surakarta, Indonesia, street art.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The mural project in Gatot Subroto (Gatsu) street in Surakarta has existed since 2017. This project, known as "Solo is Solo," is a fruit of collaboration between artists and the Surakarta government to address vandalism issues in Gatsu street. The government wanted to eliminate vandalism issues by replacing them with good artworks that may serve as a new potential tourism destination for the city. After years, the project draws people's attention and is seen as a new tourism destination. People begin to take pictures, hold art events, and make films in Gatsu street.

While some people are pleased by this mural project, others do not view it as a solution for the problems in Gatsu Street. Some people view this project as merely the government's strategy to turn Surakarta into a metropolitan like Jakarta. Others

think that Surakarta is a city of culture famous for its tradition and rules. This mural project still becomes an object of debate, whether or not murals suit Surakarta's condition or whether there are other agendas behind the mural project. While some people view the mural project in Gatsu street as a huge public gallery to share knowledge and activity, others view it as the government strategy to turn the city into a metropolitan and grow the street's popularity and economic activities.

In this study, we captured different views from Surakarta people related to the murals in Gatsu. The collected data were classified into "pros" and "cons" categories. The data were obtained from interviews with academicians, artists, culture experts, architects, designers, city travelers, and former Surakarta mayor. By summarizing these experts' points of view, we were allowed to provide the factual and intrinsic stories of the mural, enriching insight into the artwork

as a wall accessory and its impact on people. This study broadly explored the function and the impact of murals in addressing a problem. The result of the study presents a lesson for other parties who intend to start similar projects.

## 2. METHOD

In this study, a descriptive qualitative approach was applied. The data were collected through interviews, observations, surveys, and literature study. The data were presented in dialectics, two-way communication between thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The concept of dialectics, according to Hegel, depicts the trilogy of the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. This concept highlights that the only absolute truth is the revolutionary spirit, i.e., changes/contradiction to the thesis by antithesis into synthesis [1]. In other words, the present study depicted the synthesis of the community's views represented by some people from different fields regarding Gatsu's mural project.

## 3. THESIS: MURAL AS THE CITY REBRANDING

The mural contains several definitions. In the prehistoric era, it is the paintings on the wall. Meanwhile, the history of street art serves as the community movement to protest or express their thoughts to other people or the government. Recently, a mural has been popular to beautify a city or village to improve its people's life quality. It is a part of public art, an umbrella term describing artwork located beyond formal museums and galleries [2]. Public art may take many forms, from national statues and monuments to murals or even wall graffiti painted by the public.

In Surakarta, the mural project was executed in a public area where economic transactions take place. In this regard, we conducted interviews with figures behind this project, including Prof. Sardono as the project initiator, Mr. Sony, and former Surakarta Mayor FX Rudy as the field coordinator of the project.

This project began when Prof. Sardono met the former Surakarta Mayor, FX Hadi Rudyatmo, in 2016. The mayor expressed his concern about the vandalism issues in the city's main street (Gatsu). The main city street was full of advertisements that were poorly arranged. Based on Prof. Sardono's experience when visiting Brazil and New York, where street art was born, he was inspired to make the street art project a

corrective attempt to address vandalism problems in Surakarta [3].

The location of the project was selected based on several considerations made by Prof. Sardono. He stated that the work should be done near the city's activities, as positioning may affect four social outcomes [4]. Location plays a pivotal role in the mural project. The place should have the element of surprise. Prof. Sardono called this consideration with the term "Prapatan," a Javanese term for road intersection. He said that an intersection is a place where people gather. However, today, people have lost the function of an intersection as it is merely used to advertise commercial products.

Surakarta possesses a good design with its large sidewalk surrounded by Tamarind trees in Slamet Riyadi Street. Babat Solo supports it by Raden Mas Sayid, a painter and a thinker who write about city signs, stating that (1) big clock located in the city center functions to learn about time, (2) public transportation shows the citizen's mobility; and (3) Prapatan serves as a place where people a long time ago found the direction. Prapatan hosts thousands of events, memories, opportunities, and hopes for many people [3].

Over time, the city losses its attractiveness, leading to its citizens' depression. Accordingly, the city becomes a place where people commit harmful activities such as crimes, among others. Grounded on this thought, the "*Solo is Solo*" mural project is aimed to invite youths to paint murals. Since painters draw public attention to watch and are not limited by time, Prof. Sardono invited youths to discuss and find out other city signs. Based on the discussion, they found another city sign, namely traffic lights. Accordingly, crossroad serves as a strategic location to make murals. People stop for three minutes at the crossroads and view the murals while waiting for the green light. In one hour, there will be hundreds of people will view these works. The dialog presented in the mural is different from that in paintings. It even goes beyond performance art. Thus, by selecting the Gatsu crossroads, they expected to revive the initial function of crossroads [3].

"*Solo is Solo*" has existed since 2017, and many murals have been changed since then. The murals were renewed almost every year. These murals brought different themes, such as "city rebranding" and "reimagine city graffiti." So the purpose of Solo is Solo mural project was to build the city image as a creative city.

Our discussion with Mr. Rudy (former Surakarta mayor) revealed that the mural project aimed to remove vandalism and facilitate youth's creativity. The project began at Gatot Subroto street, where intense economic activities occur in that place. The object of the mural was the rolling door shops' rolling door so that the work can be enjoyed at night when the shops are closed. The project targets several locations in the city to present different themes based on the history of the locations. The murals aimed to reflect the aesthetic side of the city and, most importantly, to highlight the city's identity as a multicultural city [5].

There were approximately 40 murals in Gatsu in the project's first year; additions and replacements were made in the following years. In 2020, a new mural was added. We collect the data from some people in Surakarta. We asked the respondents whether or not these murals were interesting. Out of 98 respondents who had visited Gatsu, 90.4% stated that these murals were fascinating and improved the city's aesthetics, and 9.6% stated they were less attractive. People are interested in murals due to either visual aspects or meaning. 55.1% of the respondents stated that they were interested in the visual aspects (i.e., exciting color and image). These factors underlie people's interest in the mural, and most of them stated that the visual factor plays an essential role in the mural [6].

Respondents in this study are more interested in murals presented in simple, meaningful forms. The visitors' favorite murals hold a similarity in that they contain elements of local culture. Most people are not interested in a mural with excellent visuals but complicated meanings.



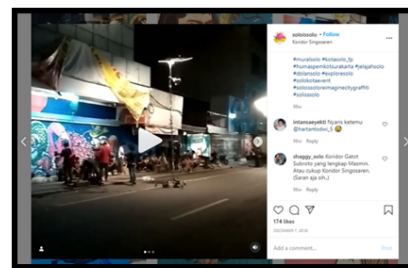
**Figure 1.** Photo Background for Pre-Wedding. Source: Instagram Solo is Solo



**Figure 2.** Foto Background for Eksistensi. Source: Instagram Solo is Solo



**Figure 3.** Video Dance Background. Source: Instagram Solo is Solo



**Figure 4.** Movie Set Background. Sumber: Instagram Solo is Solo

We also interviewed Blontank, an activist of city cultural development and city visual culture observer. He said that he was interested in murals when visiting Yogyakarta. He believed that Surakarta had great potential like Yogyakarta. In Addition, he viewed that people today like to take a selfie, and by taking advantage of this selfie trend, mural art can be popular among modern people and even serve as a new tourism destination [7].

#### 4. ANTITHESIS: MURAL AS COMMUNITY VOICES

While some people agree with the mural project, others express their contradictions related to the project. Among those expressing their disagreements were academicians and artists: Zen Zulkarnaen (Zen), the City cultural development activist, city community

activist, and city visual culture observer, Albertus Rus Putranto Ponco Anggoro (Titus), the academician and city cultural development activist, city community activist, and city visual culture observer, Melati Suryodarmo, an Artist and urban community mover, and Halim HD (Liem Goan Lay), a City cultural development activist and city visual culture observer.

Interviews with Zen and Titus reveal the reason for their disagreement with murals in Gatsu street. They argued that the project does not represent the definition of the mural itself as they view that the mural, historically, must be initiated by the people, not the government. They argued that mural should be a means for the community to be heard by others, including the government. Whereas in the Gatsu context, the government aimed to beautify the city and turn the city to be like Jakarta. Because mural was the voice of folk, it is like their effort to be heard by others includes the government. Surakarta is different; its rules and traditions are different from other cities. Another reason for their disagreement comes from the process of the project itself. They believed that the government needed to hold an intense discussion with the community before initiating the project. Through discussions, there could be other solutions to the problem [8].

Another disagreement was expressed by Melati Suryodarmo, a performance artist and a citizen living in the Gatsu area. She disagreed with this mural project because the mural did not suit the buildings in the area, which contain many historical values. She believed it would be wiser if the government chose to conserve traditional craft and arts instead of foreign mural art to brand the city's image. She argued that the combination of mural art and the old city would be a mess. The government is supposed to find other areas that need development instead of the historic Gatsu area. She argued that such mural projects should be done in a suburban area like Mojosongo, not the city center [9].

When starting a mural project, it is crucial to find a suitable location to help, educate, and provide recreational impact for lower society. It is also pivotal to consider the historical aspect when starting such a project [9].

We also interview Andi Setiawan, an academician, and observer of the city's visual culture. In a local newspaper in 2017, the mural project in Gatsu was irrelevant with Surakarta because similar to Zen and Titus, the community, not the government, should initiate the mural. Therefore, the government needs to communicate with the community first before doing the project. When the government aimed to eliminate

vandalism using mural projects, it was pivotal for them to find out why vandalism happened. The mural should represent people's voices, including the voice of the vandals, as street art stems from the community's initiatives [10].

However, it is the vandalism that is the people who might want to convey their ideas. Freedom from vandalism gets out of hand and makes the city look ugly. So, there is distrust from the government to the community and vice versa. It is necessary to explore the problem first, who made the vandals, find out about them, and ask the community what they want, not to decide unilaterally with certain parties.



**Figure 5.** Vandalism in Gatsu. Source: Apika, 2020



**Figure 6.** Vandalism in Gatsu. Sumber: Apika, 2020

Furthermore, Halim HD has been traveling in many cities worldwide. Then he gives his insight through this interview. He said that the Movement of the Mural must be started from the folk itself. Indeed, restlessness from folk who want to share their opinion. He agrees that vandals need to be removed or at least provide the rules: mural must have a standard of how to make the city beautiful, it can be by mural or others, but the problem is this mural has lack of research, it is not beautiful and intellectual enough to be a landmark [11].

He said he does not believe in freedom. We need to consider other aspects, especially it is a public space. It is contestation in public space. Therefore, a mural is an idea, mind, concept, Etc. Mural in Solo need a concept; people cannot make it mixed. They

need to prepare the concept seriously so that other people can judge Solo's society through this mural. He declined that art or mural must be free because of the expression; meanwhile, the main thing is not freedom but compromise in public space. For example, if we come to a new place, we can not arbitrarily and ask permission first "*Kulo Numuwun, Aslamualaikum*" (Javanese manners). So mural is the problem for public space, not an individual problem. So if we want to give a solution for public space, we need to ask are society and the environment [11].

The first solution for this issue is a thematic problem; the second is a technical taste; the third is work team structure; the fourth is research to find the sub-local history to summarize collective memory. The last thing is that the place must be iconic. Halim said that the artist is not a perfunctory person; he is not selfish but cares about others. Instead, he should represent the voice of society. The solution for making a mural is the dialog and the selection to choose the quality muralists [11].

## 5. SYNTHESIS

The previous sections have described two different perspectives regarding the mural project in Gatsu street. On the one hand, the mural in Gatsu is viewed as a solution for vandalism issues. In Addition, this project also facilitates youth's creativity in expressing their idea. Furthermore, this project is also viewed as giving more value-added to the mural.

Local people who own the mural space were also concerned about whether or not they have been involved and benefited from the project. It is also essential to determine the concept and carefully select the muralists involved in the project in order to present more quality artworks. Furthermore, the work should stem from the community, including the themes and the mural story. It is recommended to present the cultural history of the people and the place to create more valuable works.

The "cons" group thought that the parties were not involved enough to create public space. They argued that it is pivotal to engage with artists and discuss with experts to find the best solution for the problem.

A mural project should not be merely decorating walls and beautifying the city. It serves a particular purpose that could not be viewed merely from the visuals mural, as asserted by e T.C. Chang, that art is not merely about aesthetics but also the representation of issues of urban identity, place-making, and claims to space [12]. Mural art usually contains meaning broader than just aesthetics. In this regard, an example can be drawn from the recent mural in Gatsu entitled Spider-men. The mural aims to influence people about the Indonesian new education curriculum. This mural

contains a deep intrinsic meaning of Solo citizens' spirit to get up after the lockdown. It also serves as a medium to trigger the community's awareness of rapid-changing issues, particularly in education [13].

However, Blontank said that when the mural appeared in Surakarta in Gatsu, people thought it was a joke by the person or a particular community. There was a rumor stating that it was from the underground community. Their works were not ordinary; they are educated people with an open mind [7]. If the public places for the public, the underground community must be allowed to do a mural. However, because the rule was established, they lost a place to do their creative action. People are used to silence and low self-esteem. Obedient to the leader – the character of the Solo's community is plural and does not want to be too fanatic (tolerance and looking for a safe way and a middle way).

Blontank further adds that Surakarta is filled with conservative people; conservatives ask for forgiveness regardless of the artistic side. Surakarta people who live in Surakarta are inhibitive. While when they go out of the city, their tendency to show those ideas and expressions intensifies. The artists also exhibit a similar tendency in the city. Blontank believes that artists in Surakarta have the vast potential [7].

Based on the views above, it could be synthesized that the problem did not lie in the mural itself but in the process of the project. People contradicting this project argued that a mural should arise from the community, i.e., it should be the community that takes the initiative. It should not only be a deposit of paintings. For example, in China and other countries, the mural is used for propaganda in public space. Another drawback of the mural project in Gatsu also lies in the lack of technical side, where the government's intervention is tasteless [7]

Surakarta is known as a city of tourism. As a portrait of an old city in Indonesia, the city has undergone many physical, social, economic, and cultural changes. This city hosts various cultural agendas each year. There are many performing events such as Solo International Ethnic Music (SIEM), Solo International Performing Arts (SIPA), Solo Batik Carnival (SBC), Jenang Festival, Solo Keroncong Festival, Kirab to celebrate Independence Day [14]. However, modernization of pop culture also enters the City of Solo. As is well known, murals are neither the culture of the City of Solo nor of Indonesia. The history of the mural itself began in big cities in America, such as New York or Mexico City. It happened in the City of Solo; Solo's culture has now mingled with the modern urban culture.

The government brings these missions to create a better city according to its version. Pak Sardono's interest is to revive the community's creativity and perhaps carry out specific missions to convey a

particular message to the community through murals. For example, the spider-men mural introduces and supports the minister of education about the new curriculum.

Gatsu street was chosen as the location to start the mural project based on Prof. Sardono in 2017. As previously explained, this place (Kemlayan area) was once a very historical place with a high historical value. Professor Sardono thought that this was the most suitable place as an initiator to be continued elsewhere. It is supported by the Prapatan theory presented by Prof. Don. In Addition, Mr. Halim also said that a place for a landmark must be iconic. However, this contradicts Melati Suryodarmo's thought that mural is not an appropriate solution for the problem. There should be a better solution without eliminating the sense of historic place of the area. However, in this case, the owners of solid capital are fighting to implement the mural in that place. This scenario is contrary to the guidelines provided by Cardiff County Council (2005) that public art should be placed in a publicly accessible area, which is open to the appreciation of everyone. The rationale for public art incorporated as part of the urban landscape and its contribution to improving the urban quality of life and the city itself is often questionable. The incorporation of public art should respond to the particular setting of a public place, such as its use, significance, or history [2].

Surakarta possesses huge art potentials. Many art schools and artists live in the city. However, the facility to express their idea is still limited. Artists' collaboration is also still rare. The community has not been able to unite to better the city, so the discourse discussion is also not mature.

We can learn from China and Mexico that capable of turning murals into decisive actions to drive movement and people's lives. In the Chinese context, the mural work serves as a good communication that balances the position of the community and the government. Meanwhile, in Mexico, Diego Rivera managed to make a high-quality, meaningful mural by freely presenting the truth based on in-depth research before executing the mural.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study highlights people's different views on mural art. While some people consider mural to develop a city, the rest thinks that a more in-depth understanding of the problem is required to find the best solution. By having a holistic understanding of the problems, the mural may not serve as the best solution. Therefore, it is essential to develop two-way communication between the community and the

government. The mural is not a self-enjoyed artwork, it is a public work, so the public should benefit from it. It is also essential to build a solid team for a landmark project to build a city's identity.

Prudence should be applied when selecting the people involved in the mural project to represent the city image. The government needs to find a strategy to wrap different ideas coming from the people. By having a win-win solution for contrasting parties, the government may facilitate any public interest related to the mural. It is also essential to consider that people desire good communication and equal positions to support their interests.

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