



Public Space as Space of Intimacy: In/Visible Tactics in Romantic Expression

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Abstract. The phenomenon of public display of affection (PDA) or romantic expression in public spaces provokes various social reactions, particularly in Indonesian society that uphold strong social norms. In urban context, public spaces serve as important arenas where individuals express intimate and private romantic gestures openly. This study examines how architecture can play an inclusive role in accommodating romantic expressions while also addressing the social taboos surrounding PDA in public. To explore this issue, the research draws on the theory of space of intimacy by Charton & Boudreau (2017), proxemics by Edward T. Hall (1990), affordance by James J. Gibson (1979), and Brighenti's (2007) theory of visibility and invisibility tactics, along with other supporting theories. Using a qualitative method, data was collected from two case study locations which were urban parks through field observation and interviews conducted on both weekdays and weekends. Findings from this study indicate that romantic couples use spatial tactics and body gestures by being invisible from public view, allowing romantic expression without feeling directly scrutiny. Meanwhile, social surveillance is carried out by regulators (through public space managers) by increasing surveillance and visibility to regulate activities deemed to violate social norms. Thus, public spaces become inclusive environments capable of accommodating diverse experiences, including the intimate emotional expression for romantic couples that are considered taboo in public spaces.

Keywords: Romantic Expression, Space of Intimacy, Visibility, Invisibility, Spatial tactics.

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of publicly displaying romantic affection is often referred to as Public Display of Affection (PDA). PDA refers to romantic or affectionate behaviors expressed openly in public spaces, which may include physical acts such as holding hands, hugging, or kissing (Gillberg, 2014). In Indonesia, however, the public expression of romantic affection is still considered taboo (Ahmad et al., 2016). These socio-cultural norms frequently shape the boundaries of acceptable public behavior, particularly when it comes to emotional expressions of romantic nature. This study seeks to examine how romantic couples navigate the social boundaries shaped by taboos, norms,

and value systems through specific behaviors and spatial strategies to practice romantic intimacy and how public spaces in Indonesia have become inclusive of all citizens' various needs, including romantic expression.

In Indonesia, perspectives on PDA are significantly influenced by socio-cultural norms that place a high value on modesty and adherence to religious values (Polymenopoulou, 2018). This social taboo creates a dilemma for couples who wish to express their relationships openly while still being bound by prevailing norms and societal expectations. It is therefore essential to understand that public romantic expression is not a universal phenomenon; rather, it is a product of complex social relations shaped by cultural norms, values, and ongoing social transformations.

The concept of a space of intimacy refers to the identity of a space that inherently or through its design evokes or facilitates feelings of intimacy, closeness, and emotional connection (Charton & Boudreau, 2017). According to Bachelard's (1994) understanding, an intimate space is a space that is not open to just anyone. Hence, a space of intimacy falls within the broader concept of intimate space, as it is subjective and emotionally meaningful to the two individuals occupying it, and not accessible to others. This makes the intimate experience within such space exclusive to the romantic couple present. Therefore, couples who occupy public spaces to express romantic affection tend to select types of spaces that facilitate the feeling of intimacy. This analysis explores which spatial aspects contribute to the formation of space of intimacy in both case studies.

This analysis examines the phenomenon of public displays of affection (PDA) in public spaces, a sensitive issue related to social norms. The study aimed to identify the tactics used by couples who display romantic expressions in public spaces. Furthermore, the research also aimed to analyze the social, cultural, and spatial factors that shape couples' space usage patterns, as well as how they negotiate social norms that still consider romantic expressions taboo.

2 Methods

The primary methods employed in this study include literature review, case study analysis, field observation, interviews, and visual documentation. The initial phase involved a comprehensive literature review aimed at understanding fundamental concepts related to Public Display of Affection (PDA), public space, social control, as well as spatial strategies and tactics. The literature consulted consisted of academic journals, architectural theory books, and previous research reports.

Following the literature review, two case study locations were selected: Taman Literasi Martha Christina Tiahahu (representing a cosmopolitan and open public space in the city center) and Waduk Brigif (representing suburban public space, surrounded by residential areas). The case study selected two locations within the same city, South Jakarta. South Jakarta was chosen as the case study area because it is one of the areas with a high density of social activity, both among local residents and newcomers. In general, parks in South Jakarta have the advantage of strategic locations close to cul-

tural areas, business centers, and residential areas. This advantage supports the attraction of visitors and various activities in these parks (Pratiwi et al., 2023). This high level of social activity makes public spaces in South Jakarta a strategic arena for observing the phenomenon of public displays of affection (PDA), including how couples utilize or adapt to existing spaces and norms.

The case studies have different location characteristics: the first case study is located around the center of South Jakarta, which is easily accessible to anyone, while the second case study is located on the outskirts of South Jakarta. Public spaces in the more open and cosmopolitan urban center tend to be more tolerant of public romantic expressions compared to more conservative rural/suburban areas (Naibaho & Murniati, 2022), thus giving rise to differences in leniency between public spaces. Through this understanding, the two locations were chosen to see how differences in social and cultural values influence romantic expressions in public spaces as well as the strategies and tactics of using public spaces. Field observations were conducted in both locations to document how couples utilize and choose spaces while expressing affection in public. These observations were carried out at various times of day (morning, afternoon, evening, and night) and on different days (weekdays and weekends) to capture the variations in spatial usage depending on lighting conditions and surrounding public activity.

To complement the observations, interviews were conducted with couples and individual users present in both urban parks. These interviews included relevant questions related to topics such as romantic location preferences, considerations in choosing a romantic spot, and more. This aimed to understand their motivations, perceptions of social norms, and considerations in choosing specific times and locations for PDA. Additional interviews were also conducted with space managers or residents to gain insights from the perspective of space supervision and management. Finally, visual documentation—including photographs, field sketches, and spatial usage maps—was used to support visual analysis of the physical elements influencing user behavior, such as lighting, vegetation, seating, stepped areas, and circulation paths.

3 Results

The study selects two locations in South Jakarta, due to the vibrancy of the locations, and the various social activities that take place. This characteristic supports the attraction of visitors and a wide range of activities in public parks (Pratiwi et al., 2023). The two locations represent distinct spatial characteristics: the first is situated near the city center of South Jakarta, easily accessible to the public, while the second is located in the outskirts of the city. Public spaces in more urban, cosmopolitan city centers tend to be more tolerant of romantic expression in public compared to suburban or rural areas, which are often more conservative (Naibaho & Murniati, 2022).

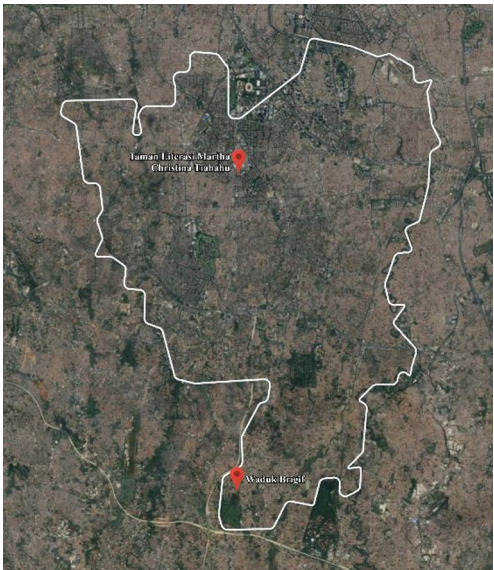


Fig. 1. Map of South Jakarta City Area and Location of the Two Case Studies

A study by Hien (2013) suggests that PDA is more normalized in urban environments. Thus, this study was conducted in urban public spaces that younger people frequent, where they feel more comfortable in expressing romantic affection. The two selected locations have contrasting spatial and social characteristics. This allows us to see how physical environments and social factors contribute to the different spatial tactics employed by the couple.



Fig. 2. Taman Literasi Martha Christina Tiahahu Site Plan

The first case study is Taman Literasi Martha Christina Tiahahu, located in the Blok M area, specifically on Jalan Sisingamangaraja III, South Jakarta. It is strategically accessible, situated within the Blok M transit hub and near the Blok M MRT station and TransJakarta bus stop, making it easily reachable by both public and private transportation (see Figure 1). The park covers an area of approximately 9,710 square meters and adopts a two-level open green space concept with a circular layout. It is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

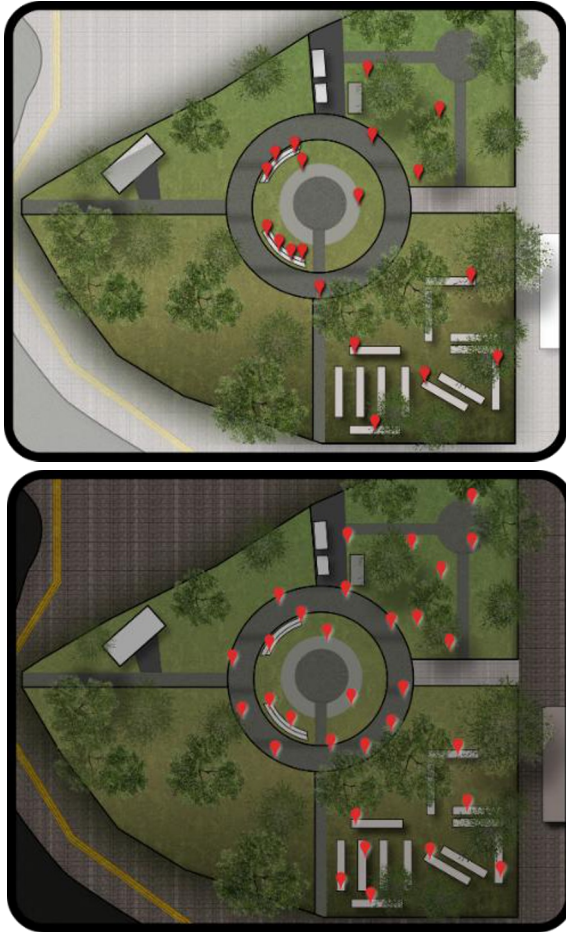


Fig. 3. Romantic Expression Occupation Point in Taman Literasi (Light and Dark Conditions)

Several zones within the park have been identified as key sites for romantic expression. On weekdays, acts of affection are commonly observed in seating areas, green open spaces, the amphitheater, and even near the children's plaza. These behaviors occur both during daylight and nighttime hours, within the park operating hours. On weekends,

romantic expressions are present throughout almost the entire park, regardless of lighting conditions. From morning to late afternoon, couples engaging in Public Displays of Affection (PDA) tend to occupy ground-floor areas such as the green open spaces, seating zones, and the amphitheater. From late afternoon to evening, occupation shifts toward the second floor's open-air areas and seating spaces adjacent to build structures. Romantic couples in this park prefer areas with minimal traffic, shaded, and private.

As of May 2025, Taman Literasi operates as a 24-hour park. To support this, PT ITJ (Integrasi Transit Jakarta) has increased security presence, with officers stationed at both entrances and patrolling the park daily. On weekdays, one officer remains on duty 24 hours, while weekends see additional staff. After midnight, only the main gate remains open. Although the park remains busy until midnight, no major increase in visitors has been reported. Lighting stays on until 5 a.m., and CCTV coverage is being expanded from 10 to 16 units, focusing on entrances, areas prone to illegal parking, and other sensitive spots (Detik.com, 2025).



Fig. 4. Waduk Brigif Site Plan

The second case study is Waduk Brigif, a large reservoir located in Cipadak, Jagakarsa, South Jakarta, specifically on Jalan Aselih RT 10/RW 1. Covering approximately 10 hectares, it comprises an upper reservoir (3.3 hectares) and a lower reservoir (6.7 hectares). Waduk Brigif is open daily from 07:00 to 22:00 WIB. It is accessible via Jalan Aselih and close to Jalan M. Kahfi I, which is serviced by mikrotrans public transportation. However, most visitors to the site are local residents who typically arrive by private means—bicycles, motorcycles, or cars. Numerous instances of romantic expression were observed at Waduk Brigif. On both weekdays and weekends, displays of affection commonly occurred in seating areas, green open spaces, and the amphitheater. Such behaviors were more frequently documented during the evenings, especially when it gets darker. From morning until afternoon, couples typically occupied seating areas

and green spaces surrounding the reservoir. In contrast, during late afternoon to evening hours, romantic activities were more concentrated in the seating areas along the reservoir's edges. The romantic couples in this case study preferred areas with views that are away from the busy traffic, allowing them to have more intimate privacy.

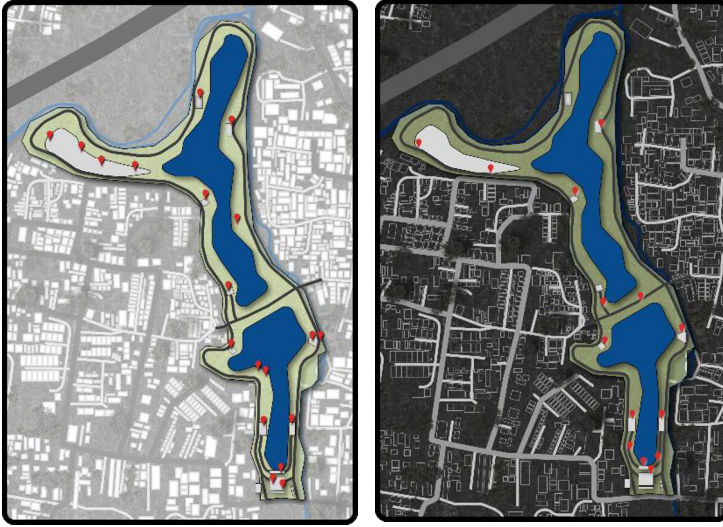


Fig. 5. Romantic Expression Occupation Point in Waduk Brigif (Light and Dark Conditions)

Surveillance at Waduk Brigif is managed through regulated operational hours, from 07:00 to 22:00 WIB. This is enforced through physical barriers such as gates and fences, which are opened only during operational hours to control public access. Additionally, a security post is stationed near the main entrance with officers on duty 24 hours a day. However, patrolling is not continuous; security personnel conduct periodic rounds primarily to ensure general safety within the area.

The case studies of Taman Literasi Martha Christina Tiahahu and Waduk Brigif share several spatial similarities and differences. Both sites feature key spatial elements such as seating areas, amphitheaters, open spaces, and green areas, all of which provide opportunities for a wide range of public activities. These spaces allow users to engage in casual activities including socializing, relaxing, dining, and other forms of leisure. The dominance of natural elements at Waduk Brigif creates numerous points where people can become invisible.

4 Discussion

After mapping out the locations where romantic expressions occur in Taman Literasi, four types of spaces of intimacy were identified. Several factors influence the selection of these spaces by couples. Each of the four spaces offers distinct spatial features, lighting conditions, and locations that support different modes of romantic expression and behavior.

According to Zumthor's (2005) theory of atmosphere, lighting is a crucial element in the creation of an intimate atmosphere. An intimate atmosphere plays a key role in supporting the formation of a space of intimacy, as such space refers to one that facilitates emotional closeness (Charton & Boudreau, 2017). In the case of Taman Literasi, the intimate atmosphere is largely influenced by varied lighting features. Areas with lower lighting levels are more frequently occupied by couples as spaces of intimacy, particularly after dark, where dim lighting enhances a sense of intimacy and privacy. Pallasmaa (2014) emphasizes the importance of sensory perception in shaping our experience of space, asserting that truly engaging environments stimulate all senses, creating a holistic and memorable encounter (Michels, 2015). Thus, public space can be understood not only as a physical environment, but also as a generator of distinct atmospheres that influence individual behavior and emotion.

As illustrated in Figure 3, Area 1, located near the amphitheater, is equipped with spotlighting, LED lights, and ambient lighting, making it a focal point due to its brightness at night. Area 2, a green open space, is illuminated by spaced garden lights that produce dim lighting. Area 3, an uncovered open area on the second floor, receives light from ambient fixtures and nearby building lights (city lights). Area 4, consisting of an installed seating area, is lit by garden lamps partially obstructed by dense vegetation, resulting in subdued illumination. During times when visitor density is low, Area 3 becomes the most frequently occupied by romantic couples due to its minimal lighting, which fosters a more intimate and private atmosphere. Conversely, during peak hours with high foot traffic, all areas are actively occupied by couples openly expressing romantic affection without hesitation or social discomfort.



Fig. 6. Lighting Point Plan and Type of Space of Intimacy at Taman Literasi

The compact size of Taman Literasi combined with its high visitor density requires adaptation to spatial boundaries. When the park is not crowded, spatial boundaries can be ideally maintained, as outlined in Edward T. Hall's (1990) theory of proxemics, which defines intimate distance (touching) as 15–20 cm, personal distance as 45–122

cm, social distance as 122–366 cm, and public distance as greater than 366 cm. This is evident in how the spacing between groups of visitors allows each group to maintain its own territorial and personal space without being disturbed by others.

However, during crowded conditions, these spatial boundaries—particularly for couples—undergo adaptation. The limited public space must be shared simultaneously by all users. According to Hall (1990), territoriality is the process of claiming and defending a space, often manifested through the placement of personal belongings around one's body to mark personal territory. Personal space, then, becomes an invisible bubble of protection that individuals maintain around themselves (Madanipour, 2003, p. 19). In crowded situations, this territoriality collapses to the scale of the body itself, with no extensions beyond it, as every inch of space is occupied.

In public spaces, territoriality and interiority are formed through how individuals symbolically and physically “claim” space. Territoriality here does not refer to legal ownership but rather to the creation of personal space and transitional zones that help users feel comfortable. Altman (1975) defines territoriality as a mechanism of regulating interpersonal distance to maintain privacy and psychological control. Privacy enables individuals to share intimacy within their chosen personal space, thus facilitating the vulnerability essential for love, friendship, and trust (Krattenmaker, as cited in Silver, 1997, p. 43).

In the case of Taman Literasi, romantic couples utilize spatial elements to construct their own “intimate spaces” within a public environment that is formally open and monitored. They often choose vegetated corners or positions behind physical elements such as short walls, steps, or circular benches to create blind spots from observers and space managers. At night or in dimly lit areas, they use darkness to create interiority. According to architectural theory (Zumthor, 2005), dim lighting generates a private atmosphere and reduces visibility. Couples frequently sit side by side, facing open space rather than main circulation paths, thereby minimizing the risk of direct observation and using their bodies to create a visual barrier for privacy.

This analysis shows that the formation of territoriality and interiority in public space occurs through spatial strategies (site selection and use of spatial features), postural strategies (seating orientation and body distance), temporal strategies (time selection), and perceptual strategies (light levels and visual barriers). By applying these theoretical frameworks, it becomes clear that couples—either consciously or unconsciously—manipulate spatial elements to carve out intimate zones within spaces of public surveillance, responding simultaneously to architectural design and social control mechanisms.

In the case study of Taman Literasi, one form of invisibility tactic is carried out through the strategic use of spatial elements. Strategies of visibility and invisibility are employed to manage the dynamics of how individuals are seen in public spaces (Brighenti, 2007). This approach emerges as a tactic by couples to render themselves invisible, in an effort to avoid potential negative stigma. The use of spatial corners with limited access and lighting—particularly on the second floor—creates a sense of privacy and enhances the couple's invisibility in public, and is among the most frequently

observed tactics. This tactic involves a series of behavioral adjustments aimed at reducing the visibility of affectionate expressions, allowing couples to engage in intimate behavior without drawing unwanted attention or violating prevailing social norms.

However, when the park becomes crowded and all areas of Taman Literasi are occupied, the spatial element loses its effectiveness. In such conditions, the ability to blend into the crowd becomes a key tactic for achieving invisibility. Couples camouflage their actions within broader public activity, thereby dissolving spatial boundaries such as territoriality, personal space, and privacy. In these situations, their own bodies become the spatial boundaries between individuals or groups.

In negotiating their spatial boundaries, a unique finding reveals one reason why blending with the crowd is tolerated in busy settings: the gender-based seating arrangement. Seating arrangements in which individuals sit next to someone of the same gender provide a sense of safety and comfort for couples in occupying public space. Alternating gender pairings—such as female-male followed by male-female—serve as one way of achieving invisibility in the crowded spaces of Taman Literasi. This seating arrangement aligns with Koning's (2006) understanding of women's privacy needs, which are influenced by personal demographics such as income level, age, health, and personal anxiety levels. For women, privacy involves how they are seen—visually, physically, and sensorially—by both men and women, particularly in public open spaces. In this context, privacy is viewed as a means of achieving invisibility and providing necessary boundaries for women's occupation of public space. In environments that do not offer sufficient privacy, women adjust their behavior or values, both of which can influence cultural continuity (Rapoport, 1980). This is demonstrated by the gender-based seating behavior. Furthermore, it can be concluded that women's privacy mechanisms respond to three main components: design, usage, and regulation (Al-Bishawi et al., 2017).

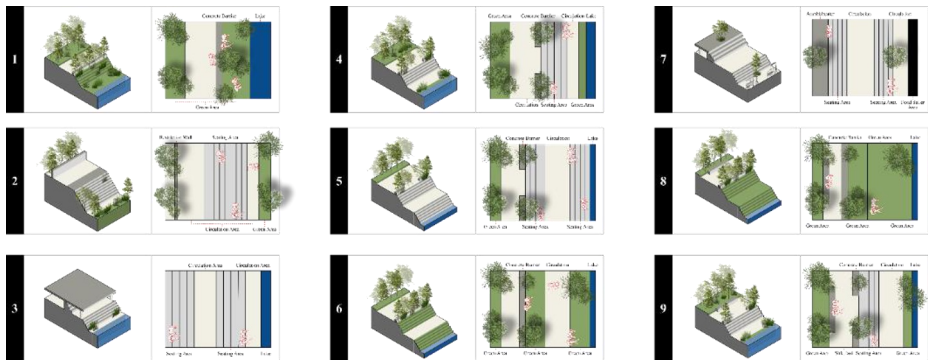


Fig. 7. Type of Space of Intimacy at Waduk Brigif

One of the spatial strategies used by Taman Literasi management to maintain the security of the area is the use of various types of lighting installations—such as spotlights, pole/garden ambience lights, and ambient lighting—placed at different points. This is in line with Zack & Govender's (2019) theory that space managers can use visibility

and lighting to create a sense of control and order. These installations, which are activated starting at 6:00 PM, aim to regulate visibility in dim areas of the park at night. Although the placement is not yet optimal—with several very dark corners remaining that could potentially facilitate socially deviant behaviors—the presence of security officers and elevated building masses allows for visual surveillance not only by staff but also by other users of the space.

In contrast to Taman Literasi, the Waduk Brigif case study offers many possibilities for romantic couples to occupy different spatial areas. The diversity of spatial features—such as seating areas, vegetation, topographical contours, and landscape—provides users with multiple opportunities for action. This aligns with James J. Gibson's (1979) theory of affordance, which suggests that the environment provides "action possibilities" that organisms can utilize based on their perceptual and physical capabilities. In relation to the concept of the space of intimacy, the wide range of affordances at Waduk Brigif plays a crucial role in couples' selection of intimate spaces. The spatial diversity found at Waduk Brigif yields nine types of space of intimacy. These nine types provide affordances that support the intimacy of romantic couples occupying public space, in accordance with the understanding of the space of intimacy as articulated by Charton & Boudreau (2017). On the other hand, the diversity of spatial features also increases the likelihood of both positive and negative behaviors. As Gibson (1979) explains, affordance offers users the potential for both beneficial and harmful actions. Figure 4 presents the nine types of space of intimacy identified at Waduk Brigif.

The nine types of space of intimacy identified at Waduk Brigif offer multiple possibilities for the occupation of space through romantic expression. While these spaces differ in terms of specific spatial features, the variation in elevation—due to topographical contours and stepped seating—serves as a distinctive characteristic of the spatial configuration at Waduk Brigif. The green landscape and waterscape elements of the reservoir also serve as important visual features, as the scenic view enhances the romantic atmosphere, thereby supporting the creation of space of intimacy.

As a large-scale public space with a wide variety of spatial features, Waduk Brigif offers ideal opportunities for the formation of intimate zones for romantic couples. According to Edward T. Hall's theory of proxemics, the expansive spatial layout allows for appropriate interpersonal distances: intimate (15–20 cm), personal (45–122 cm), social (122–366 cm), and public (>366 cm). The scale of the site enables visitors to select occupancy points that match their desired level of privacy—even during periods of high visitor density. This allows individuals and groups to maintain spatial boundaries without significant disruption from others.

The concept of intimacy here is understood in spatial terms, as articulated by Zumthor (2005), who emphasizes that intimacy is closely tied to proximity and spatial distance. Waduk Brigif enables the creation of private zones organically, with topographical contours and dense vegetation creating semi-concealed areas shielded from the view of other visitors. Elements such as the terraced slopes and lower edges along the waterline allow for the visual establishment of territoriality and interiority. Vegetation functions as a natural visual barrier, while the site's dynamic topography facilitates the formation of low-visibility occupation zones. Couples are often seen sitting side by

side on benches, at the water's edge, or along circular steps, forming a "personal bubble" as described by Hall—an intimate space shaped by cultural, personal, situational, and relational factors (Fitt, 1974). Some couples recline on the grass, horizontally expanding their private space. Seating positions oriented towards natural elements such as the lake or surrounding trees contribute to the creation of a tranquil, emotionally secure atmosphere. This behavior aligns with Gibson's (1979) theory of affordance, which posits that the environment offers action possibilities that correspond to the user's needs—including the need for emotional safety and comfort.



Fig. 8. Lighting Point Plan at Waduk Brigif

During daylight hours, couples utilize hidden points away from main circulation paths to avoid attracting attention. At night, areas with limited lighting become strategic locations for creating invisibility (see Figure 5). These tactics represent a form of resistance against prevailing social norms that restrict public expressions of affection—especially in conservative communities (Ahmad et al., 2016). Tactics, as described by Lydon and Garcia (2015), are characterized by their opportunistic nature: they exploit momentary possibilities and take advantage of spatial loopholes, enacted by those without direct control over space in an effort to subvert established norms. Interviews indicate that overt behaviors—such as leaning on a partner's shoulder or resting one's head on a partner's lap—often provoke disapproval from other visitors, particularly due to the presence of children.

This practice also demonstrates that invisibility is employed not only to achieve comfort but also to avoid social stigma. This supports Altman's (1975) view that privacy is a process of regulating social interaction through the management of distance and visibility. By selecting low-visibility and low-exposure locations, couples are able to regulate their interaction space without direct intervention from outsiders. From the perspective of spatial management, Waduk Brigif implements visibility strategies

through both design and operations. The presence of security personnel and operational hour restrictions from 07:00 to 22:00 WIB function as social control mechanisms to maintain order. Furthermore, entrance gates are closed outside of operational hours, limiting unmonitored activities. The amphitheater, positioned at a higher elevation, enables visual surveillance of the lower reservoir area. Street lighting installations also support nighttime monitoring, although illumination coverage remains uneven throughout the site. As Zack & Govender (2019) suggest, the management of visibility through lighting is a critical tool in creating a sense of order and safety in public spaces. However, unlit or dimly lit areas continue to present gaps in surveillance, offering potential opportunities for norm-deviant behaviors due to limited visibility and oversight.

5 Conclusion

Social taboos surrounding romantic expressions that are considered intimate and private in public spaces shape how couples navigate and occupy urban environments. Public spaces that are more open and cosmopolitan—such as Taman Literasi, located near the city center—tend to exhibit greater tolerance toward public displays of affection (PDA), whereas public spaces in peripheral urban areas—such as Waduk Brigif—are generally more conservative, creating social pressures that constrain such expressions. The presence of couples expressing affection in public indicates that these urban public spaces function as inclusive environments. Therefore, as inclusive spaces intended for all members of society, public spaces must be able to accommodate a range of lived experiences, including the facilitation of emotional intimacy for romantic partners.

Findings at Taman Literasi and Waduk Brigif indicate that couples often choose shadier, less lit areas to express affection. This phenomenon can be understood through Hall's (1966) concept of personal space, where individuals attempt to negotiate distance and visibility to maintain a sense of comfort. This relationship demonstrates that lighting is not only a matter of safety but also has implications for the distribution of social activities within the park. Therefore, from a design perspective, it is important for public space managers to balance lighting intensity: bright enough to create a sense of security but also providing quieter and more private zones for personal activities.

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