


# Reclaiming urban space: Socio-economic dynamics in the Car-Free Day Boulevard of Makassar

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## Abstract

One interesting urban phenomenon is urbanization and its resulting impacts, often neglecting the function of public space for the sake of motorized vehicles. This results in reduced social interaction and local economic opportunities. Therefore, the Car Free Day program exists as a form of tactical urbanism to reclaim temporary street space by transforming it from a transportation corridor into a public space filled with activity. This article analyzes the practices of social interaction and economic activity that occur in this area, as well as the perceptions of visitors and business owners regarding the meaning of this public space. Data collection techniques were carried out through observation, interviews, and documentation. The results of the study indicate that the practice of utilizing space on the Boulevard highway has created a new socio-economic ecosystem in Makassar City. This government program also motivates the restoration of the social function of the road and forms a form of local economic empowerment. The findings of this study can even serve as recommendations for the city government for sustainable public space planning oriented towards fulfilling the social rights of city residents.

## Abstrak

*Salah satu fenomena perkotaan yang menarik adalah urbanisasi bersama dampak yang ditimbulkan, seringkali kurang memperhatikan fungsi ruang publik demi keperluan kendaraan bermotor. Hal ini mengakibatkan berkurangnya interaksi sosial serta peluang ekonomi lokal. Dengan demikian, Program Car Free Day hadir sebagai salah satu bentuk tactical urbanism untuk mereklamasi ruang jalan yang sifatnya sementara dengan mengubahnya dari koridor transportasi menjadi ruang publik yang dihidupi oleh aktivitas. Artikel ini menganalisis praktik-praktik interaksi sosial dan aktivitas ekonomi yang berlangsung di area ini, serta persepsi pengunjung dan pelaku usaha mengenai makna ruang publik ini. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa praktik pemanfaatan ruang di jalan raya Boulevard tersebut, menciptakan sebuah ekosistem sosio-ekonomi baru di Kota Makassar. Program pemerintah ini sekaligus motivasi untuk pemulihan fungsi sosial jalan serta bentuk pemberdayaan ekonomi lokal. Bahkan temuan penelitian ini dapat menjadi rekomendasi bagi pemerintah kota untuk perencanaan ruang publik berkelanjutan yang berorientasi pada pemenuhan hak-hak sosial warga kota.*

## Keywords

Reclaiming; urban space; socio-economic; social activity; car free day

# 1. Introduction

One of the popular discourses in urban studies today is public space, conceptually, theoretically, through its utilization, and infrastructurally, within urban spatial planning policies. In his study of public space, Jürgen Habermas used the term "Public Sphere" to describe its function and changes within the context of structural transformation (A. Ahmadin et al., 2025). This concept is a development of the spatial typology practiced by the German bourgeoisie in the 18th century, serving as a forum for discussion and a platform for channeling aspirations, upholding the principle of freedom. Habermas labeled a space that facilitates freedom of expression for every citizen as an independent public sphere separate from the state and the market (Habermas, 1991). Specifically in the context of the political arena, Habermas refers to political representation with reference to its function and tends to serve as an arena for articulating various interests for politicians. According to Kohn, the key to the existence of public space is not merely social and aesthetic issues; access to public space is paramount, functionally speaking (Kohn, 2004).

Changes in society due to advances in science and technology (Capra, 1982), manifested by the highly dense work environment, have made public space crucial for communities, especially in urban areas. Research on the importance of public space governance in urban areas sheds light on the nature and importance of urban development. Public space, in this context, is likened to an urban facility that functions to address tensions and foster integration and tolerance within urban communities (Madanipour, 1999). Evidence of serious attention to the importance of public space is reflected in the emergence of various research topics utilizing diverse theories and multidisciplinary approaches (Ramadier, 2004). This is also recognized in a study on spatial change as a phenomenon of urban life (Alberti et al., 2003).

The importance of public space as a vital need for urban communities faces a paradoxical situation, particularly marked by the dominance of motorized vehicles congesting roads and sidewalks. This not only causes serious congestion and pollution in urban areas but also erodes social activity and spatial interaction within the community. Streets, essential living spaces for urban communities, serving as venues for economic activity and social gatherings, have been reduced to mere transportation corridors. In response to this issue, a series of movements have recently emerged to reclaim urban space for humans, popularly known as tactical urbanism or pop-up urbanism, such as temporary, relatively low-cost Car Free Days.

Similar to other cities in Indonesia, Makassar, the capital of South Sulawesi province, has implemented a Car Free Day (HBKB) zone on Boulevard Street in Panakukang District. Its functions include sports facilities, social interaction, trading activities, socialization and promotional events, and various other activities (A. Ahmadin, 2023). The use of this street as a public space is limited to its operational hours, from 5:30 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. every Sunday. This is an interesting discussion from a sociological perspective, particularly from the perspective of spatial sociology (M. Ahmadin, 2025), specifically identifying patterns of visitor interaction, mapping the structure and characteristics of economic activity, and analyzing the perceptions and meanings given by visitors and business actors to the meaning of public space.

# 2. Method

This research is an economic study with a spatial sociological approach, using qualitative data and descriptive analysis. The research data consisted of primary and secondary data obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation (M. Ahmadin, 2022). Observations were conducted by directly observing visitor activities, buying and selling, sports, and other activities in the Car Free Day area, which takes place every Sunday. Interviews were conducted independently with

visitors and vendors, and documentation was conducted through a series of document studies related to the background of the Car Free Day program and the development of its activities.

The study population consisted of all visitors, vendors, and other parties, including officers at the Car Free Day area, without sampling. Interviewees were selected purposively based on age, product type, and activities undertaken and preferences. Data analysis was conducted qualitatively (A. Ahmadin, 2013) to gain a deeper and more detailed understanding of the research objects and subjects, and to interpret and explore unstructured data. Qualitative analysis aimed to understand a number of complex phenomena related to the activities of visitors, vendors, and others related to the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of each individual.

The next step is to identify the various views of respondents so that the patterns and trends behind the research data can be understood, even though they cannot be measured numerically. The data analysis technique is carried out qualitatively (Rahman et al., 2022), both concerning form and content analysis, namely text data or respondents' statements that are conveyed repeatedly but have the same meaning, and conducting narrative analysis to fully understand the storyline in the data that has been collected.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Car-Free Day in Historical Narratives

Before discussing the Car-Free Day program as a tactical urbanism initiative in developing countries, including Indonesia, it is necessary to explore its historical roots. Originally called Car-Free Day (HBKB, abbreviated in Indonesian), it is a concept initiated in France on September 22, 1998. The program was initiated by the French Minister of the Environment, with the theme "In My City Without Cars." Subsequently, the term was changed to Car-Free Day (Britton, 2015). This term is also synonymous with No Exhaust Day, which in its implementation involves a ban on certain types of vehicles using exhausts, such as cars, motorcycles, buses, and others, on roads in certain areas.

In Surabaya, Indonesia, a similar program, "Segar Suroboyoku Rek," began a campaign to improve the city's air quality in 2000. This activity was combined with several accompanying activities, such as: a leisurely walk, a morning jog, opening stalls, morning exercise, and other activities. Starting as a campaign area, it was subsequently utilized by city residents as a venue for sports activities and tourism events. Subsequently, Car Free Day was adapted by governments in various cities across Indonesia as a weekly program, managed by the City Transportation Agency (Indricha et al., 2019).

The Car Free Day program can be traced back to several studies, such as the Car Free Day program along a 2 kilometer stretch of Jalan Raja in Hilir. This area is stated to serve as a place for the public to enjoy a relaxed and healthy atmosphere. Interestingly, the program's implementation involved over 40 government/private agencies and non-governmental organizations. For example, the Perak State Library, a government agency, participated in the Car Free Day program for the first time in 2015. Its involvement was motivated by a desire to introduce the wider community to various library services, improve collaboration and communication, and expand the role of library services in line with the goals, vision, and mission of the public library (Mohd Arsad, 2017).



Fig. 1. The atmosphere of the Car Free Day area on Jalan Boulevard, Makassar City, which appears to be filled with informal sector traders (Source: Whatspace.org)

### 3.2. Physical Transformation and Spatial Function

Physical transformation and spatial function can generally be understood as fundamental changes to the physical condition and intended use of a space (A. Ahmadin, 2024). In urban spatial planning, this refers to efforts to change the character, layout, and centralized activity in a specific location. In the case of Car Free Day in the Boulevard area of Makassar City, observations revealed fundamental changes in both function and atmosphere within the area. *First*, along the Boulevard stretch, which runs from west to east and vice versa, on weekdays (Monday through Saturday), this space is dominated by motorized vehicles, accounting for 90-95%. With Car Free Day, the space has significantly transformed into a vehicle-free zone, fully occupied by pedestrians and cyclists.

*Second*, observations also show that, in terms of spatial use patterns, informal economic zones account for 55%, located along sidewalks and even on the roadside where vendors sell their wares. Recreational activity zones, used by pedestrians, cyclists, and joggers, account for 30%, while social zones, such as children's play areas and community gathering spaces, account for only 15%. This data shows that activity on Car Free Day is currently dominated by the informal economy, with vendors operating along the left side of the road from west to east. Ironically, buying and selling activities take place not only on the sides of the road, but also in the middle of the road. Meanwhile, the right side of the road from west to east has been deliberately cleared for pedestrians, cyclists, and joggers.

### 3.3. Dynamics and Patterns of Social Interaction

Observations and interviews indicate an increase in the quality and quantity of social interactions in Car Free Day areas. This is evident from the statements of 150 informants, who reported intense social interactions with family, coworkers, friends, and others, with 78% of them having conversations lasting more than 5 minutes. This figure is significantly higher than the interactions that occur on sidewalks on normal days. In terms of interaction characteristics, meetings with friends



(45%), family (35%), and other interactions (20%). While there are no dedicated spaces to facilitate these three types of interactions, Car Free Day public spaces have become important facilities that bring together various social strata from various ages, occupations, and ethnicities.



Fig. 2. One of the social activities is children's games in the public space of Car Free Day, Boulevard, Panakkang, Makassar City (Source: Whatspace.org)

### 3.4. Visitor Perceptions of Public Space (Car Free Day)

The perceptions of visitors and vendors regarding Car Free Day are almost directly proportional, with both considering this area to contribute significantly to fulfilling their respective needs. The function of public space, from a recreational and psychological perspective, is demonstrated by a brief survey. 90% of respondents stated that they visit this place to unwind, relax in a new environment, and experience a relaxed atmosphere not found in their home or workplace. From an economic perspective, the majority of visitors believe that the economic activities at Car Free Day offer affordable prices and satisfactory quality compared to shopping in large shopping centers. The experience of shopping with a certain level of satisfaction becomes a recurring practice and a unique attraction for this public space, making it seem as if it belongs to the city's residents. This phenomenon seems to indicate the process of forming a collective identity as a result of spatial awareness formed through a series of practices, experiences, and interpretations of space.

### 3.5. Analysis Based on the Production of Space Theory Paradigm

The phenomenon of social and economic activity in the Car Free Day area is interestingly linked to Henri Lefebvre's theory of production of spaces (Lefebvre, 2012). *First*, spatial practice relates to perceived space, reflected in behavioral patterns in daily life, particularly when engaging in activities in the car-free area. The assumption is that before the Car Free Day program, spatial practice was dominated by the logic of modern capitalism, in the form of the need for efficiency and speed of motorized vehicle mobility on the highway, with the Boulevard merely serving as a transportation corridor. However, a fundamental shift in spatial practice occurred when the Car Free Day program was promoted, becoming a center for social interaction and the creative economy. During the Car Free Day activities, human bodies were seen taking over space, as

seen in play activities where a child transformed the asphalt road into a play area, albeit temporarily, for about four hours. Several other visitors were also seen engaging in the practice of transforming the road under a shaded tree into a place to enjoy certain dishes, sitting on the asphalt floor as if they were at a dining table at home. This spatial practice also constitutes an alternative economic practice, supporting the growth of an informal economy characterized by buying and selling practices in a relaxed context and with a distinct persona than the formal economy in malls.

*Second*, representations of space, namely, conceptualized space, envision social and economic activities in the CFD as a space planned, conceptualized, and regulated by experts, namely city planners, architects, and authorities. The CFD can also be perceived as a space that represents power relations and dominant ideologies. The Boulevard area, a main road located in Panakkukang District, was originally a space for cars and other motorized vehicles, with road markings equipped with traffic lights at the western end and other traffic signs. The purpose was to regulate and discipline road users. Within the paradigm of spatial sociology, the Boulevard section is a product of an ideology, namely car-centric urbanism, which has experienced temporary appropriation from its dominant space. The city government, as the authority, through its policy programs transformed the concept of this space into a temporary public space that functions as a center for social interaction and informal sector economic activity.

*Third*, representational spaces, namely the spaces inhabited, allow us to view social and economic activities in CFD as public arenas filled with symbols, images, and the imaginative and emotional meanings associated with their users. This assumption is understandable in the context of the Boulevard's existence before CFD, which functioned only as a roadway, merely as a place to pass through without any deep emotional meaning for city residents. However, after the CFD program, the Boulevard area transformed into a representational space full of social and cultural meaning. The Boulevard also emerged as a symbol of togetherness and freedom in the context of collective identity, as well as a marker of the fulfillment of public rights for city residents.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the research results and data analysis, it can be concluded that the Car Free Day program held on Jalan Boulevard, Panakkukang District, Makassar City, has proven successful in transforming the function of space from merely a road as a means of transformation into a public space that accommodates social interaction and economic activities. In addition, the existence of CFD can be perceived as one form of effort to reclaim urban space, especially in the aspect of rediscovering its social function. In fact, CDF in practice is a local economic empowerment project, although limited to the use of public space that is temporary in nature. The pattern of utilizing public space on the highway as a center of social and economic activities can also be seen as tactical urbanism that can be replicated in the form of city government policies elsewhere. Furthermore, social and economic activities in the CFD can also be seen as an arena of conflict between two spatial representations with opposing visions. On the one hand, there is a dominant spatial representation, namely the Boulevard's role on weekdays as a corridor for vehicle mobility that supports business activities, offices, and other activities as capital accumulation. On the other hand, there is a counter-spatial representation, namely the CFD, which emerges as a space for the reproduction of social life and the construction of informal sector economic activities with a people-oriented economic vision.

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