

Lessons from the past: The *bale-bale* as a model for sustainable and participatory public space design

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Abstract

This article examines the role of *Bale-bale* in the socio-historical landscape of various rural communities in Indonesia. Beyond its basic function as a place of rest, this traditional pavilion is discussed through a sociological paradigm in the context of public spaces that played a vital role in the dialectic of communal life in the past. This study uses qualitative methods through historical and ethnographic literature reviews, which aim to reveal the dynamics of the *Bale-bale* as a multifunctional space. The results show that historically, the *Bale-bale* facilitated daily social interactions, served as a vehicle for information and deliberation, was a center of economic activity, and was a space for cultural practices such as the transmission of local knowledge and values. Its open and accessible architectural design represents the principles of togetherness, mutual cooperation, and transparency. Learning from the past, the role of the social institution known as *Bale-bale* can be reflected upon in the modern era to provide a perspective on the value of conceptualizing participatory and sustainable public spaces.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji peran dari *Bale-bale* dalam *landscap sosio-historis* pada berbagai masyarakat pedesaan di Indonesia. Melampaui fungsi dasarnya sebagai tempat istirahat, melalui paradigma sosiologi ruang pavilun tradisional ini dibahas dalam konteks ruang publik yang memiliki fungsi vital dalam dialektika kehidupan komunal masa lampau. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif melalui tinjauan literatur sejarah dan etnografis, yang bertujuan mengungkap dinamika *Bale-bale* sebagai ruang yang multifungsi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *Bale-bale* menurut sejarahnya memfasilitasi interaksi sosial sehari-hari, wahana informasi untuk bermusyawarah, pusat aktivitas ekonomi, serta ruang praktik budaya seperti proses pewarisan pengetahuan dan nilai-nilai lokal. Desain arsitekturnya yang terbuka serta mudah diakses, merepresentasikan prinsip kebersamaan, gotong-royong, dan transparansi. Belajar dari masa lalu, insitusi sosial bernama *Bale-bale* tersebut dapat direfleksikan perannya di era modern dalam memberi perspektif nilai untuk mengonseptualisasikan ruang publik yang partisipatif dan berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci

lessons; *bale-bale*; model for sustainable; public space; participatory

1. Introduction

The public spaces we encounter today in various forms and atmospheres, such as malls, city parks, town squares, urban galleries, libraries, and others (A. Ahmadin et al., 2025), are a modern face that adapts to the conditions and needs of the times. If so, it means that there are traditional forms of public spaces belonging to communal communities (Zahnow & Corcoran, 2025) in various regions in Indonesia that are interesting to discover, both in terms of their diverse forms and functions. This is important because historically, public spaces have played a vital role in the design of the social, cultural, and political dynamics of a society. The existence of public spaces (M. Ahmadin & Amiruddin, 2018) is not merely a physical place, but a reflection of cultural values, hierarchies, and power relations within a social group. Before entering the modern era and globalization (Foroutan & Tabibian, 2023), Indonesian communities in various regions had developed public spaces, with their own models of spatial practices, experiences, and ways of interpreting space based on their respective interests (Watkins, 2005). One form of public space that has its own unique and organic characteristics is the *Bale-bale* (Asmal, 2015), which can be found throughout the archipelago.

This simple architectural structure serves as a place to sit or rest in front of, beside, or around the main building. The functions of the *Bale-bale* as a public space (Radja et al., 2012) are diverse, such as: a stage for interaction, a forum for deliberation, a place for dispute resolution, a center for economic activity (Jaszczak et al., 2017), a means of informal education (Berman, 2020), and a place for preserving national culture (Ergashev & Farkodjonova, 2020). As an open space that offers easy access and a strategic location, the *Bale-bale* symbolically reflects the values of togetherness (Price et al., 2022), kinship (Katabarwa et al., 2000), mutual cooperation (Hariyanto, 2022), and transparency (Putra & Larasdiputra, 2023) as the philosophy of village life. Additionally, the *Bale-bale* exists in the midst of village life as a neutral space accessible to anyone from any group, without distinguishing between the elderly and the young, adults and children, or the rich and the poor.

The social transformation (Rabie, 2013) of society towards modern life has led to marginalization and changes in the function of traditional public spaces, namely *Bale-bale*. This has occurred alongside the emergence of various malls, plazas, city parks, cafes, and other types of establishments that offer physical comfort and modern aesthetics. A typology of public spaces characterized by social segmentation, controlled activities, and dominated by the logic of consumption. This change marks the transformation of Indonesian society from communal to individualistic and consumeristic (Lee et al., 2010). This article aims to provide a comparative analysis between traditional and modern public spaces in Indonesia, through a qualitative approach with literature and comparative studies. Through these comparisons, valuable lessons from the past about the models and functions of traditional public spaces (Gehl, 2007) can be identified and integrated into the planning of future public spaces that are sustainable, participatory, and humane (Bravo, 2020).

Given the importance of the role of *Bale-bale* as a multidimensional public space in past societies, this article explores and analyzes its role from social, cultural, and political perspectives. In addition, it analyzes the inclusive function of *Bale-bale* in relation to its architectural model and layout. In terms of its relationship with cultural aspects, this article identifies the values of local wisdom that are constructed and preserved through the *Bale-bale* using a historical study approach. The results of this study are expected to provide conceptual recommendations for the planning process of public spaces in the future.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a literature review approach (M. Ahmaddin, 2022) on a number of relevant research results as well as concepts and theories of public space. This approach was chosen to extrapolate, describe, and analyze the functions and roles of Bale-bale as a public space in the past in rural areas. The types and sources of data used in this study were secondary sources, such as textual documents in the form of books on social history, culture, art, architecture, and others. In addition, primary sources were used in the form of scientific articles on ethnography, traditional architecture, and others. The visual documents used were sketches, paintings, and old photographs documenting activities in the Bale-bale.

The data collection technique used was documentary study through searching and collecting various relevant literature sources (Rahman et al., 2022). This technique included recording quotations, ideas, and key findings related to the function, form, and meaning of Bale-bale. A literature review was conducted to analyze and compare various sources.

Data analysis techniques were carried out using qualitative content analysis and historical analysis, through the following processes: (1) Data reduction, which involved sorting and focusing on specific data about the existence of Bale-bale in relation to the context of traditional public spaces; (2) Data display, which is presenting data narratively and systematically to facilitate drawing conclusions; and (3) Verification and drawing conclusions, which is connecting data with various sources to construct arguments, interpret meanings, and answer research questions (Fernandes et al., 2024).

3. Discussion

3.1. Bale-bale and Village Communities in Indonesia

Bale-bale, as one of the most popular vernacular architectural (Creang et al., 2010) products among communities and ethnic groups in Indonesia, has various names that reflect linguistic diversity. In addition, the diversity of forms and nuances of function of *Bale-bale* according to their cultural context is a symbolic reflection of their practices, experiences, and meanings. In the Sumatra region, the community refers to *Bale-bale* by various names. For example, in West Sumatra, the Minangkabau people call it *Balai Adat* (Karkikawening, 2001), which refers to its function as a meeting place and forum for deliberation. The Batak people who live in North Sumatra call it *Bale* or *Sopo* (Nuraini et al., 2011), which is an open space where the lower part functions as a meeting room and the upper part as a place to rest. Meanwhile, in Aceh, it is called *Bale* or *Seuramoe* (Hasbi, 2017), based on the function of the porch in traditional Acehnese houses. *Seuramoe* serves as a space for welcoming guests and a lounge for the family who owns the house.

Among the Javanese and Balinese communities, this traditional public space is commonly known as *Bale-bale* or *Bale*, while in rural Java it is called *Emper* (Sunarmi, 2025), which refers to a covered front porch or *Pendopo* (Purnomo et al., 2023), regardless of size. Its function is generally the same, namely as a space to receive guests from outside the village or visiting neighbors. In Bali, the name *Bale-bale* is associated with local architecture, namely *Bale* (Sunland, 2013), which has several specific functions according to its name category, namely: *The local wisdom study of luan and teben concept on balinese ethnic houses (Case Study: Balinese Ethnic Houses in Denpasar, Bali)*, which functions as a meeting room for traditional ceremonies; *Bale Loji* (Wijaya, 2020), which is a place to sleep or receive guests; and *Bale Bale Sakenam* (Wicaksono, 2024), which is a multipurpose pavilion for family use. Meanwhile, the Sundanese people refer to it as *Saung* or *Bale* (Yuliyanto & Musthofa, 2018). In terms of function, *Saung* is a simple building in rice fields or gardens used as a place to rest, while *Bale* refers to a space located in the yard of a house.

The diversity of terms used to refer to Bale-bale as a traditional public space is also evident among the Dayak people of Kalimantan, who call it Sandung or Rumah Betang (Long House) (Suswandari et al., 2022). This public space is unique in that the Rumah Betang has a long and spacious room called Pante (Johansen, 2014), which functions as a space for social activities, a forum for deliberation, and a place for traditional rituals. In terms of form, this type of public space is another form of *Bale-bale* or *Bale-bale* in a long and spacious version. Meanwhile, the Toraja people in South Sulawesi call it *Labo* or *Barung-Barung*, which is located in the courtyard of the traditional Tongkonan house (Parung et al., n.d.). Its functions are generally the same as in other regions, namely a place to receive guests, a family meeting room, and a place to sit while watching the *Rambu Solo'* ritual (Handayani¹ et al., 2020). The Bugis people call it *Lego-lego* (Prianto et al., n.d.) with functions similar to those of *Bale-bale*, namely as a guest room and a place to relax, while some Makassar people call it *Dego-Dego* (Armiwatyi et al., 2023), as in Selayar, Bulukumba, and others. The Sasak people in Lombok call it *Bale Tani* or *Bale Jajar* (Wazni et al., 2023), which functions as a family room, bedroom, and place to receive guests.

Although there are different names and various terms for these traditional public spaces among communities in different regions, their essence points to a similar function. This function is as a public space, semi-public space, or communal space that serves as a stage for social interaction, a forum for reflecting traditional values, and a means of forming a collective identity among fellow villagers. This phenomenon is also evidence that the need for public spaces has long been part of Indonesian society, including in rural areas.

3.2. *Bale-bale* as Space and Place

The existence of *Bale-bale* as a traditional public space for rural communities in Indonesia can be seen based on its role, namely as a place (the physical place) (Lentini & Decortis, 2010), which is a physical object that can be seen, with the following characteristics: (1) *Bale-bale* has physical boundaries or a clear structure, such as a floor, pillars, and a roof; (2) *Bale-bale* can be coordinated, occupying specific and strategic locations, such as in front of or beside traditional houses or private homes; (3) *Bale-bale* is made of materials such as wood, bamboo, palm fiber, and other natural materials; and (4) *Bale-bale* functions as a place to sit and relax, receive guests, and lie down. A space can be transformed into a place or can be said to be a place if it is connected to its function. The function of *Bale-bale* as a container or facility for social interaction for communal communities in rural areas means that it can be categorized as a place. Conceptually, the *Bale-bale* as a space (the social space) can be seen from its value, which remains alive and dynamic, especially as an arena for social interaction and other meaningful activities.

The position of the *Bale-bale* as a space is characterized by its existence through the construction of social activities (Liebrucks, 2001) such as conversation, deliberation, and storytelling, which are part of cultural heritage. Without ongoing social activities, the *Bale-bale* is merely a structured arrangement of wood or bamboo. Another characteristic is its symbolic meaning, which is not merely as a place to sit but as a symbol of togetherness, solidarity, and transparency. In addition, its function is determined by the community, such as using the *Bale-bale* as a place to rest, a place for deliberation to resolve problems/disputes, a place for cultural education, and a place to welcome guests. In short, the physical structure of the *Bale-bale* is a place that has been transformed from its functional aspect into a space marked by life and interaction.

Physically, *Bale-bale* can be perceived as an architectural product that functions as a container for social interaction while symbolizing the implementation of the principles of openness and accessibility (Gupta et al., 2025). The architectural design of the *Bale-bale*, which is an open space without walls resembling a low stage, is evidence of the reflection of the values of openness. Its location in the center of the village or around the meeting hall reflects its non-exclusive nature and that it is shared property. It even symbolizes equality and democracy (Post, 2006), where every individual has the right to attend,

listen, or participate in the deliberation process. This is where it becomes interesting when compared to modern public spaces, where the *Bale-bale* carries the concept of an organic and non-commercial public space (Bodnar, 2015). Thus, with the influence of modernization causing a shift in social solidarity from mechanical to organic, the *Bale-bale* can be interpreted not as a medium for nostalgia, but as a lesson about spaces designed to unite various elements of society.

3.3. *Bale-bale* in the Narrative of Sustainable Public Space

Bale-bale as a traditional public space is oriented towards the concept of sustainable public space design, which has three main pillars as well as models, namely: (1) environmental sustainability (O'Donoghue, 2019), namely the construction of *Bale-bale* using local and natural materials such as wood, bamboo, coconut leaves or palm fiber available in the village environment, which ecologically reduces the carbon footprint, (2) architectural design in the form of wall-less and open spaces (Webster, 2007) reduces the use of artificial cooling systems that require large costs, (3) buildings with high roofs create a comfortable and natural microclimate, and (4) enable natural recycling (André & Cerdá, 2006) because the materials used can decompose naturally when the building is no longer in use.

The existence of *Bale-bale* can create socio-cultural sustainability, where its function as a public space can strengthen the social and cultural structure of the community. *Bale-bale* also reflects inclusiveness, where this space is open to the public without discrimination based on social status, age, or gender. In addition, *Bale-bale* becomes a forum for cultural preservation (Akhmedova & Kuznetsov, 2022) through the transmission of noble values in the form of folk tales. Furthermore, from the aspect of community participation and social cohesion (Dassopoulos & Monnat, 2011), *Bale-bale* embodies the spirit of mutual cooperation and creates a sense of shared ownership. *Bale-bale* even strengthens social networks as a support system in times of crisis. In terms of economic sustainability, the architectural design of *Bale-bale* implies the importance of efficiency and economic resilience, such as low costs for both construction and maintenance because the materials are easily obtained.

4. Conclusion

Bale-bale as traditional public spaces and modern public spaces represent two different paradigms in Indonesian social life. *Bale-bale* can be seen as architectural designs that function as social institutions that are pillars of communal life in rural communities. In contrast, modern public spaces reflect social changes towards individualistic principles and the trend of capitalist consumerism. The orientation of traditional public spaces, which uphold the principles of inclusiveness, participation, and sustainability, serve as multifunctional venues for social interaction, deliberation, and the transmission of cultural values. Meanwhile, modern public spaces, despite providing physical facilities and an aesthetic atmosphere, appear exclusive, controlled, and oriented towards commercial or profit-oriented values.

Learning from the past about the social and cultural functions of *Bale-bale* as a traditional public space with all the values attached to its existence, its existence is still relevant to the context of social life today. This means that traditional public spaces are capable of maintaining social cohesion in a society that is increasingly fragmented based on individual interests. Thus, the socio-cultural vision of the future requires efforts to recontextualize the values of the *Bale-bale* in the form of contemporary public spaces that combine local wisdom with a modern style that emphasizes humanistic principles, ecological wisdom, and participation.

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