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Spatial Segregation and Gentrification in Metropolitan Urban Space: Dynamics of Socio-Economic Inequality, Marginalization of Urban Poor Communities, and Territory Restructuring Based on Urban Ecology Theory

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ABSTRACT

Metropolitan cities in the Global South are increasingly confronted with a paradox of urban development: while economic growth accelerates and skylines transform dramatically, vast segments of the urban population are pushed further to the margins — geographically, economically, and socially. This article examines the dynamics of spatial segregation and gentrification in Indonesian metropolitan cities, situating them within the theoretical framework of urban ecology and political economy. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative evidence from secondary data, policy documents, and existing empirical studies, this research analyzes how processes of urban restructuring systematically disadvantage the urban poor through displacement, loss of livelihood access, and erosion of social capital. The study argues that spatial segregation in Indonesian metropolitan contexts is not merely an outcome of market forces, but rather a product of deliberate policy decisions, land capital accumulation by elites, and the historical legacies of colonial spatial ordering. Using urban ecology theory — particularly the concepts of natural area formation, invasion-succession, and zone differentiation — alongside critical perspectives from urban political economy, this article demonstrates how gentrification operates as a mechanism for accumulation by dispossession. Findings indicate that communities in peri-urban and inner-city zones face compounding vulnerabilities when urban renewal programs are implemented without participatory safeguards. The article concludes by calling for a reorientation of urban planning toward spatial justice, emphasizing inclusive governance, community land trusts, and participatory spatial planning as countermeasures to market-driven urban restructuring.

Keywords: *spatial segregation, gentrification, urban ecology, urban poor, metropolitan, socio-economic inequality, dispossession*



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INTRODUCTION

"Every city gets the underclass it deserves. The poor who are swept away from the gleaming new developments do not disappear — they are simply relocated to places where the cameras don't point, where the investment doesn't reach, and where the state seldom looks. Gentrification, for all its aesthetic promise, is fundamentally a geography of forgetting." — Mike Davis, Planet of Slums (2006), as cited in subsequent urban poverty literature

This excerpt from one of the most consequential urban studies texts of the past two decades captures with uncomfortable precision the central contradiction at the heart of contemporary metropolitan development. Davis's observation — written about the global phenomenon of informal settlement displacement — resonates with particular force in the Indonesian context, where cities like Jakarta, Surabaya, Medan, and Makassar have undergone breathtaking physical transformation over the past three decades while simultaneously producing some of the most acute concentrations of urban poverty and spatial exclusion in Southeast Asia. The "geography of forgetting" Davis invokes is not metaphorical — it is a material process with measurable spatial coordinates, identifiable policy mechanisms, and concrete human consequences.

When applied to the Indonesian metropolitan experience, this observation invites a fundamental question: to what extent is spatial segregation in cities like Medan or Jakarta the product of organic urban growth, and to what extent is it the deliberate — or at least knowingly tolerated — outcome of development policies that prioritize capital accumulation over social equity? This article takes seriously the claim that spatial inequality in metropolitan Indonesia is not an accidental byproduct of modernization but rather a structurally reproduced feature of a particular mode of urban development, one in which the state, real estate capital, and global financial flows converge to reshape urban territory in ways that systematically disadvantage the urban poor. Through the lens of urban ecology theory, supplemented by critical political economy, this study seeks to map the mechanisms through which segregation and gentrification interact, and to assess the consequences for communities who find themselves on the losing side of the city's spatial renegotiation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban Ecology Theory and Its Application to Metropolitan Dynamics

Urban ecology theory, first developed by sociologists of the Chicago School — Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Roderick McKenzie — in the early twentieth century, proposed that cities could be understood as ecological systems in which human populations competed for space in ways analogous to species competition in natural environments. Burgess's concentric zone model, for instance, described how different social groups occupied differentiated spatial rings around an urban core, with the poorest populations clustered in transitional zones between the central business district and working-class residential areas (Park et al., 1925, as discussed in Flanagan, 2019). While the original Chicago School model has been substantially critiqued for its biological determinism and its failure to account for the role of power and policy in shaping spatial outcomes, its core conceptual vocabulary — natural areas, invasion and succession, zone differentiation — retains analytical utility when critically reworked (Gotham, 2020).

Contemporary applications of urban ecology theory have moved significantly beyond the naturalistic assumptions of the Chicago School. Scholars working in the tradition of critical urban ecology have integrated questions of power, race, class, and capital accumulation into ecological frameworks, producing what might be called a "political ecology of the city" (Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003, cited in Leitner et al., 2021). In this reworked framework, the "invasion and succession" dynamic that Park and Burgess described as natural is reinterpreted as a process driven by capital investment decisions, state policy, and the deliberate displacement of lower-income populations to make way for higher-value land uses — in other words, gentrification.

Spatial Segregation: Conceptual Foundations and Measurement

Spatial segregation refers to the uneven distribution of social groups across urban space, typically measured along axes of income, ethnicity, or occupational status. Massey and Denton's (1993) foundational work identified multiple dimensions of segregation — evenness, exposure, concentration, centralization, and clustering — a typology that continues to inform empirical work on urban inequality (Feitosa et al., 2020). In Indonesian cities, spatial segregation has deep historical roots. The colonial spatial order of Dutch-era cities deliberately separated European, Chinese, Arab,

and indigenous populations into distinct *kampung* and *wijken*, a pattern whose echoes persist in contemporary urban geographies (Colombijn & Coté, 2015, cited in Kusno, 2020).

Post-independence urban growth has layered new forms of segregation on top of these colonial foundations. The rapid expansion of gated communities — *perumahan elite* — on the urban periphery has created spatial enclaves of upper-middle-class and wealthy populations shielded from the surrounding urban environment by walls, security systems, and privatized infrastructure (Leisch, 2022). Simultaneously, the concentration of informal settlements — *kampung kumuh* — in flood-prone, ecologically marginal, and peri-urban zones reflects the spatial marginalization of the poor (Reerink & van Gelder, 2020). The result is a city of extreme spatial contrasts in close physical proximity — what Caldeira (2000) famously termed the "city of walls" — where inequality is literally inscribed in the built environment.

Gentrification: Mechanisms, Actors, and Consequences

Gentrification, broadly defined as the transformation of working-class or devalued urban neighborhoods through capital investment and the displacement of lower-income residents by higher-income newcomers, has been extensively theorized since Ruth Glass first coined the term in 1964 (Lees et al., 2016). Neil Smith's (1996) rent gap theory remains among the most influential explanations: gentrification occurs when the gap between a property's current capitalized value and its potential ground rent under higher-value use becomes large enough to attract capital investment. This creates a structural incentive for developers, landowners, and the state to facilitate the displacement of existing low-income residents in order to realize higher land values (Shin et al., 2020).

In the Global South context, gentrification takes forms that do not always correspond neatly to the classic North American or European model. Lees et al. (2016) and Shin et al. (2020) have argued for the concept of "planetary gentrification," emphasizing that displacement and neighborhood transformation driven by capital and state actors are globally widespread but locally differentiated. In Indonesia, processes analogous to gentrification occur through urban renewal programs (*penataan kawasan*), riverside normalization projects (*normalisasi sungai*), and the development of mixed-use mega-projects on formerly low-income urban land (Padawangi & Douglass, 2015, cited in Hidayat et al., 2022). These processes are typically justified through discourses of urban modernization, disaster risk reduction, and the need to create a "world-class city" — discourses that obscure the redistributive consequences of spatial transformation.

Marginalization of the Urban Poor in Metropolitan Indonesia

The urban poor in Indonesian metropolitan cities — estimated to constitute between 8 and 15 percent of urban populations depending on the poverty measure used — face compounding and intersecting vulnerabilities (BPS, 2023). Spatial marginalization interacts with labor market exclusion, limited access to formal housing, inadequate social protection, and exposure to environmental hazards to produce what Moser (1998, cited in Satterthwaite & Mitlin, 2023) called the "asset vulnerability framework" — a condition in which the poor lack the assets necessary to manage risk and improve their situations. Research on urban *kampung* in cities including Jakarta, Surabaya, and Medan documents how residents of these settlements possess sophisticated forms of social capital and community organization that are systematically destroyed by displacement-oriented urban renewal (Wahyuni et al., 2021).

The concept of accumulation by dispossession, developed by David Harvey (2003, cited in Aalbers, 2019), provides a framework for understanding how urban renewal and gentrification function as mechanisms for transferring value from the urban poor to capital. When residents are displaced from land they have occupied for decades — sometimes without formal legal title but with strong customary claims — they lose not only housing but access to employment networks, social support systems, and livelihood assets accumulated over generations. This is, Harvey argues, a form of

primitive accumulation — the violent expropriation of community assets to fuel capital accumulation — that is ongoing and structurally reproduced by contemporary urban development.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive research methodology, supported by secondary quantitative data analysis. The research design draws on systematic literature review, document analysis, and spatial data interpretation to construct a theoretically grounded account of spatial segregation and gentrification dynamics in Indonesian metropolitan cities. Primary theoretical sources were drawn from urban sociology, urban political economy, and urban planning literature published between 2018 and 2024. Secondary empirical data were sourced from the Indonesian Central Statistics Agency (BPS), the Ministry of Public Works and Housing (PUPR), the UN-Habitat urban indicators database, and peer-reviewed empirical studies on Indonesian cities.

The analytical framework integrates urban ecology theory — specifically the concepts of zone differentiation, invasion-succession, and natural area formation as reworked by critical urban scholars — with Harvey's accumulation by dispossession framework and Lees et al.'s planetary gentrification thesis. Spatial data on settlement density, poverty concentration, land value changes, and displacement incidents were triangulated with policy documents on urban renewal programs in Jakarta, Medan, Surabaya, and Makassar. Findings were analyzed thematically, organized around three core analytical axes: (1) the structural drivers of spatial segregation, (2) the mechanisms and actors of gentrification processes, and (3) the consequences for urban poor communities and pathways toward spatial justice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Structural Patterns of Spatial Segregation in Indonesian Metropolitan Cities

Analysis of spatial and demographic data from Indonesia's four major metropolitan areas reveals consistent patterns of socio-economic segregation, characterized by the concentration of high-income populations in gated residential zones and formal commercial corridors, and the concentration of low-income populations in informal settlements, peri-urban fringe areas, and ecologically marginal zones. Table 1 below illustrates the distribution of informal settlements and poverty concentration across selected Indonesian metropolitan areas.

Table 1. Distribution of Informal Settlements and Urban Poverty in Selected Indonesian Metropolitan Cities (2022)

Metropolitan City	Population (million)	% Population in Informal Settlements	Urban Poverty Rate (%)	Number of Kumuh Zones (Official)
Jakarta	10.6	16.8	4.6	432
Surabaya	2.9	19.3	5.1	214
Medan	2.5	22.7	8.4	187
Makassar	1.5	24.1	4.3	153
Bandung	2.4	18.2	3.9	176

Source: BPS (2023); Kementerian PUPR (2022); UN-Habitat Urban Indicators (2022)

The data in Table 1 reveal that Medan and Makassar — secondary metropolitan centers with less developed formal housing markets and weaker regulatory enforcement — exhibit proportionally higher concentrations of informal settlements than Jakarta or Bandung, despite having smaller absolute populations. This finding is consistent with the urban ecology proposition that spatial differentiation is intensified at specific phases of metropolitan growth, particularly when formal housing supply fails to keep pace with in-migration and when land markets are dominated by speculative actors with limited accountability to low-income residents (Gotham, 2020; Leisch, 2022).

The spatial pattern in these cities also corresponds to what urban ecologists describe as a process of "filtering" — in which housing stock moves down through the socioeconomic hierarchy as newer, higher-quality units are built for upper-income consumers, and older stock filters down to lower-income populations. However, this filtering process has been severely distorted in Indonesian cities by the simultaneous expansion of gated communities on the periphery and the demolition of inner-city informal settlements for commercial and infrastructure development, leaving the poor caught in a spatial squeeze between exclusionary peripheries and disappearing inner-city niches (Hidayat et al., 2022; Reerink & van Gelder, 2020).

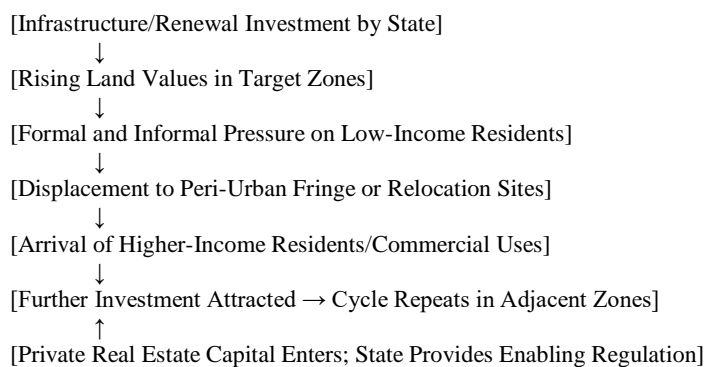
Gentrification Processes: State-Led Displacement and Capital-Driven Transformation

A defining feature of gentrification in Indonesian metropolitan cities is the centrality of state actors — not just private real estate capital — as agents of displacement. Unlike the market-driven gentrification model dominant in North American cities, Indonesian urban transformation has frequently been initiated or enabled by government programs: riverbank normalization, slum upgrading programs that ultimately relocate rather than upgrade, infrastructure corridor development, and the designation of "strategic national project" (PSN) zones that override local land use protections (Padawangi & Douglass, 2015, cited in Wahyuni et al., 2021).

The Ciliwung River normalization program in Jakarta provides a paradigmatic case. Between 2013 and 2019, thousands of households along the Ciliwung riverbank were displaced under the justification of flood mitigation and environmental restoration. While the technical rationale was legitimate — the settlements did indeed occupy flood-prone areas — the implementation overwhelmingly prioritized displacement over in-situ upgrading, and relocation destinations were frequently distant from residents' employment centers, social networks, and livelihood assets (Simone, 2019; Hidayat et al., 2022). The rent gap dynamic identified by Smith (1996) operated powerfully here: riverside land in central Jakarta had enormous unrealized development potential that could only be captured through the removal of existing low-income residents.

Figure 1 below schematizes the cycle of state-facilitated gentrification as documented in the Indonesian metropolitan context, illustrating how policy decisions, land value dynamics, and displacement processes interact in a self-reinforcing cycle.

Figure 1. The State-Facilitated Gentrification Cycle in Indonesian Metropolitan Cities



Source: Authors' synthesis based on Shin et al. (2020); Hidayat et al. (2022); Wahyuni et al. (2021)

This cycle operates through what Harvey (2003, cited in Aalbers, 2019) terms accumulation by dispossession: the appropriation of community assets — land, social networks, locational advantages

— to create the conditions for capital accumulation by developers, investors, and state actors. The dispossessed communities do not share in the value created by urban transformation; instead, they absorb its costs in the form of displacement, increased commuting distances, higher housing costs in relocation zones, and the destruction of the social capital that constituted their primary risk management resource.

Urban Ecology Dynamics: Invasion, Succession, and Zone Restructuring

Viewed through the lens of urban ecology theory, the spatial transformations documented above can be analyzed as processes of invasion and succession — the displacement of one social group from a territorial niche by another — driven not by ecological competition but by differential access to capital and political power. In Medan's northern waterfront districts, for example, the succession of traditional fishing communities (nelayan) by tourism and mixed-use real estate development follows a pattern strikingly analogous to what Burgess described as zone succession, but with the crucial difference that the "invading" population is not simply a demographic group moving in search of housing, but a configuration of capital interests seeking to unlock the exchange value of strategically located urban land (Nasution et al., 2021).

Table 2 below illustrates the relationship between land value change, population displacement, and the typology of urban renewal programs in selected Indonesian metropolitan zones, drawing on available empirical data.

Table 2. Land Value Change and Displacement Patterns in Selected Urban Renewal Zones (2015–2022)

City	Renewal Zone	Program Type	Land Value Change (%)	Estimated Households Displaced	Relocation Distance (km)
Jakarta	Bukit Duri/Ciliwung	River normalization	+340	4,200+	15–30
Jakarta	Pluit Reservoir	Reservoir normalization	+280	2,800+	12–25
Medan	Belawan Waterfront	Tourism/port development	+190	1,100+	10–18
Surabaya	Bratang Corridor	Road widening/commercial	+220	890	8–15
Makassar	CPI Reclamation Zone	Reclamation/mixed-use	+410	3,500+	18–35

Source: Compiled from Hidayat et al. (2022); Wahyuni et al. (2021); Yuliantoro (2021); Kementerian PUPR (2022)

The data in Table 2 demonstrate a consistent pattern: urban renewal programs in all four cities produced substantial land value increases in target zones, while simultaneously displacing significant numbers of households to locations considerably distant from their original communities. The Makassar CPI (Centre Point of Indonesia) reclamation case is particularly striking, with a land value increase of 410 percent accompanied by the displacement of over 3,500 households — many of them Bajo sea nomad communities whose livelihood was directly connected to coastal proximity — to relocation sites up to 35 kilometers from their original settlement (Yuliantoro, 2021).

These patterns confirm the central theoretical proposition of this article: that spatial restructuring in Indonesian metropolitan cities operates through a mechanism of accumulation by dispossession, in which the spatial claims of the urban poor are subordinated to the imperatives of capital accumulation, and in which urban ecology dynamics — zone differentiation, succession, and boundary contestation — are shaped decisively by the distribution of power and capital rather than by any natural or neutral market process.

Social Consequences: Erosion of Community Capital and Compounding Vulnerability

The social consequences of displacement extend far beyond the immediate loss of housing. Research on displaced communities in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Medan consistently documents a syndrome of compounding vulnerability that includes deteriorating mental health outcomes, increased household debt, loss of informal employment networks, children's school dropout due to relocation, and the dissolution of community mutual aid systems (wahyuni et al., 2021; Satterthwaite & Mitlin, 2023). These consequences are particularly severe for women, elderly residents, and households dependent on location-specific informal livelihoods such as street trading, home-based cottage industries, and proximity-dependent service work.

The destruction of social capital — the networks of reciprocity, trust, and mutual obligation that constitute the primary safety net for the urban poor — is perhaps the most underappreciated consequence of displacement-oriented urban renewal. Putnam's (2000, cited in Woolcock & Narayan, 2020) framework distinguishes between bonding social capital (ties within a community), bridging social capital (ties between communities), and linking social capital (ties between communities and institutions of power). Displacement attacks all three: it physically disperses the networks of bonding capital, disrupts the channels of bridging capital, and severs the hard-won relationships with local officials, service providers, and informal economy intermediaries that constitute linking capital. Rebuilding these forms of capital in relocation sites — where residents are often strangers to one another and to local institutions — typically takes years or decades, during which households face intensified vulnerability.

Toward Spatial Justice: Policy Implications and Alternative Urban Futures

The analysis presented in this article points toward a set of structural reform requirements for urban policy in Indonesia. First and most fundamentally, there is a need to shift the prevailing paradigm of urban development from one that prioritizes spatial aesthetics and capital accumulation to one that places spatial justice — understood as the equitable distribution of urban resources, opportunities, and decision-making power across social groups and geographic zones — at its center (Soja, 2010, cited in Leitner et al., 2021).

This paradigm shift requires concrete institutional reforms. Community land trusts — organizational models in which land is held collectively and permanently removed from the speculative market — have demonstrated effectiveness in several Global South cities as a mechanism for securing the spatial claims of the urban poor against gentrification pressure (Bunce, 2018). Participatory spatial planning processes, in which affected communities are genuine co-producers of urban development plans rather than stakeholders to be consulted and overruled, are a second essential instrument. The Indonesian government's own KOTAKU (Kota Tanpa Kumuh/Cities Without Slums) program has incorporated participatory elements, but evaluations suggest that genuine community agency in decision-making remains limited in practice, with upgrading often giving way to relocation when land values make in-situ improvement economically unattractive to local governments and developers (Nasution et al., 2021; Wahyuni et al., 2021).

Third, the legal framework governing urban land rights needs to be reformed to recognize and protect the customary and practical tenure rights that millions of urban poor households hold over the land they occupy, even in the absence of formal certificates. The perpetual insecurity of informal tenure is itself a mechanism of dispossession, leaving communities vulnerable to displacement at any point when their land becomes attractive to capital or the state. Recognition of community land rights through instruments such as collective tenure certificates (hak komunal) and strengthened eviction protections would substantially reduce the ability of urban renewal programs to displace communities without negotiated consent and fair compensation.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that spatial segregation and gentrification in Indonesian metropolitan cities are not natural outcomes of urban growth but structurally reproduced features of a development model that subordinates the spatial claims of the urban poor to the imperatives of capital accumulation and aesthetic modernization. Drawing on urban ecology theory and Harvey's accumulation by dispossession framework, the analysis has demonstrated how processes of zone differentiation and invasion-succession — naturalized by both ecological metaphors and market ideology — are in fact driven by the convergence of state policy, real estate capital, and global investment flows, operating through mechanisms that systematically disadvantage the poorest and most vulnerable urban residents.

The data examined reveal consistent patterns across Jakarta, Medan, Surabaya, and Makassar: urban renewal programs produce dramatic land value increases while displacing thousands of households to distant relocation sites, destroying the social capital and livelihood assets that constitute the primary risk management resources of the urban poor. These consequences are compounded by the gentrification dynamics that follow displacement, as higher-income residents and commercial uses colonize the zones vacated by former communities, completing the circuit of accumulation by dispossession.

Addressing these dynamics requires not merely better implementation of existing programs but a fundamental reorientation of urban development policy toward spatial justice, participatory planning, community land rights, and the recognition that the urban poor are not problems to be removed from the city but legitimate residents whose claims on urban space must be respected and protected. The city without segregation — the genuinely inclusive metropolitan space — is not a utopian fantasy but a policy choice, one that requires the political will to subordinate capital interests to the requirements of social equity and human dignity. How Indonesia's metropolitan cities answer this challenge will determine not only the spatial form of their futures but the quality of life of the millions who call them home.

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