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ADAPTIVE REUSE, COMMUNITY, AND CULTURE: SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND THE SACRED SPACE OF HERITAGE BUILDINGS IN PALOPO CITY

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Abstract

The buildings of the Luwu Kingdom, including the Post Office, Deputy Mayor's Office, government offices, places of worship, and tombs, hold significant value as heritage architecture in Palopo City. The spatial distribution of these buildings is a defining characteristic of the city's conservative areas. The typology of heritage buildings reflects a distinct architectural identity and shares connections with similar structure elsewhere. Syntactic relationships exist between these heritage buildings, reinforcing their historical and cultural significance. However, the government's efforts to preserve and manage these historical structures, despite their high educational value, remain inadequate. In contrast, the local community actively engages with these heritage buildings, both in their use and in academic or cultural studies. The research employed qualitative methods, adopting symbolic interactionist research paradigm. The findings show that heritage architecture carries meanings derived both from their building themselves and from the people who interact with them. The spatial hierarchy of Palopo City consists of the Tana Bangkala, Lalebata, and Tana Tekko areas, all of which are integral to the city's Historical Urban Landscape (HUL). The Tana Bangkala area contains a site that functions as a profane space for the community. The Lalebata area serves as a governmental space, while the Tana Tekko area is a sacred space characterized by the tombs or mausoleums. The spatial arrangement of these areas reflects a cosmological structure. Additionally, Tana Tekko and its surrounding context share similarities with a Mausoleum in Gowa, while the the kingdom's architectural context is connected to Malay architecture across the archipelago.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Heritage Architecture, Historical Urban Landscape, and Nusantara Architecture

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of cultural landscape integrates perspective on human habitation, emphasizing the interaction between people and their environment. Cultural landscape objects represent a distinct category of heritage and historic sites, reflecting both aesthetics and functional dimensions of human engagement with their surroundings. Palopo, a city in South Sulawesi, has significant historical markers. Like other major cities in Indonesia, it features classic European-style buildings that incorporate the Garden City concept. Cities such as Semarang, Bandung, Malang, and Jakarta adopted this concept during the Dutch colonial era. In contrast, Yogyakarta and Surakarta are characterized by the traditional city square layout, distinguishing them from cities influenced by European planning models.

Palopo's urban composition is unique, both in its spatial arrangement and architectural characteristic (Sutrisno et al., 2021). The city's social structure and historical status of its kingdom have remained intact and sustainable. The concept of 'sense of place' is crucial in cultural landscapes, as it contributes to the creation of meaning and identity (Ariannia et al., 2023). The architectural heritage of Palopo's old city blends classical Islamic and European influences, making it significant site for preservation and conservation efforts. In this context, Palopo City presents itself as a viable model for sustaining and maintaining its architectural heritage. The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), a global organization dedicated to the conservation of historical buildings.

In the design of architectural works, the philosophical phenomenon of the crisis of form and meaning presents a unique challenge (Lobo, 2016). Therefore, in accordance with the original spirit of the Athens Charter of 1931 and the Baku Charter of 1976, historic monuments are protected. Both charters emphasize not only the conservation of building as objects but also the broader significance of their surrounding environments. Methodologies and paradigms are essential for understanding the significance of places and buildings in Palopo City. Communities interpret historic cities as a third space – informal, irregular, and voluntary spaces (Ebrahimi et al., 2017). In this regard, symbolic interactionism serves as a paradigm that highlights the interaction between humans and their built environments, as well as the interpersonal interactions with these spaces. Additionally, the Buma Charter considers aspects of aesthetic, historical, scientific, or social value for past, present, or future generations. However, the decision-making process in reusing old buildings is complex and often faces obstacles at the stakeholder level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adaptive Reuse

According to Alauddin, the reuse of historic buildings can contribute to energy and resource conservation (Alauddin et al., 2022). The concept, known as green adaptive reuse, serves as a strategy to extend the lifespan of buildings while reducing their carbon footprint (Langston, 2011). Additionally, adaptive reuse plays a crucial role in mitigating global CO₂ emissions as part of a sustainable development strategy (van Laar et al., 2025). The implementation of adaptive reuse involves utilizing existing structural elements, thereby minimizing the demand for new construction materials and reducing waste. Fundamentally, adaptive reuse aims to preserve heritage values, which can be further enriched through architectural intervention (Augustiniok et al., 2025).

Cultural heritage objects are classified into three aspects: ideas, actions, and works (Koentjaraningrat, 2000). The third aspect, works, refers to human-made artifacts, sites, or objects that are tangible, visible, and documentable. Adaptive reuse falls within this category, specifically concerning the repurposing of historic buildings. While human actions and behaviours evolve to accommodate changing needs and functions, the physical structure of the building remains largely unchanged. In contrast, the second aspect, actions or behaviours, pertains to the ways in which communities interact with and utilize historical buildings in their activities.

Symbolic Interaction, Community, and Culture

Users and visitors of heritage buildings cultivate a sense of sacredness through their interactions with these structures (Sutrisno et al., 2018). In urban spaces, individuals generate conceptual abstractions through the reproduction of meaning. The old city, therefore, serves as a crucial site for exploring meaning, both as a symbol and as a sign. According to Mead, meaning is derived from the interaction between an organism and its social group (Mead, 2018). Individual gestures emerge in response to interactions with others, giving rise to meaning. While meaning exists inherently in nature, symbols are human constructs passed down through generations.

A community consists of individual or social groups who live and interact within a specific context. Local communities play a vital role in maintaining the balance between ecological conservation and cultural preservation practices, as these two aspects are often interconnected (Zakariya et al., 2025). Meanwhile, buildings serve as medium that connects individuals to the broader community. Talcott Parson asserts that culture represents the highest level of social control (Laurens, 2005).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Chalmers, science is constructed from facts, and its principles are designed to facilitate knowledge acquisition through the study of symbols (Chalmers, 1983). The buildings and spaces of Palopo have distinctive symbolic characteristics, reflecting interconnection between various architectural elements. To uncover these symbols, this study adopted Blumer's methodology of symbolic interactionism, grounded in Schutz's social phenomenology (Crozier et al., 1994). The phenomenological paradigm serves as a philosophical approach to examining the intricate relationships between cities and architecture. The concept of self-evidence in phenomenology emerges from the structured regularity of buildings – their spatial arrangements functions, and materials – which collectively shaped architectural character. Consistent with the phenomenological perspective in architecture, Norberg-Schulz emphasized that architecture exists at the intersection of space and character.

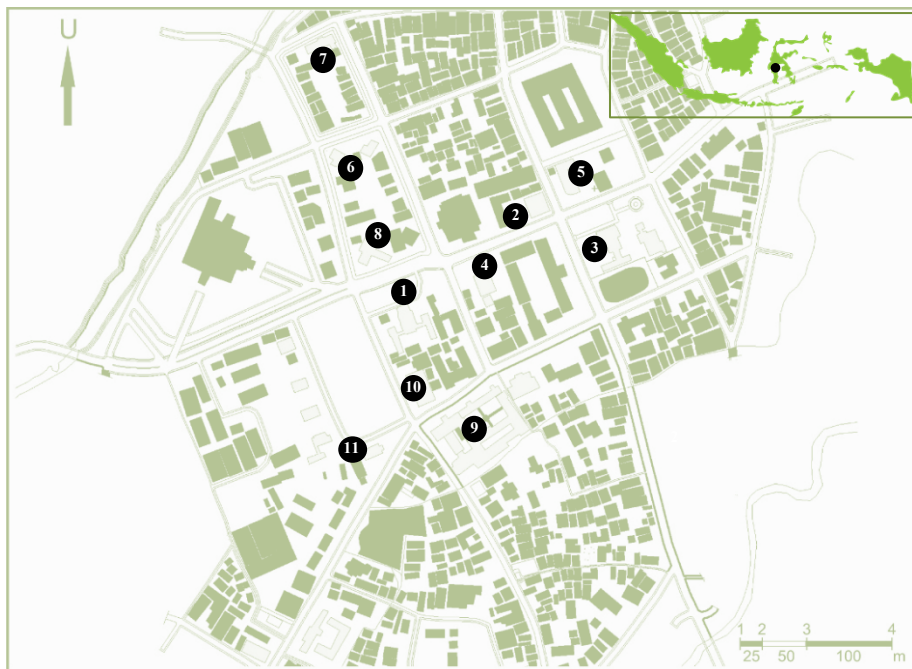


Figure 1: Syntactic relation of research objects in Palopo city

Source: Authors

Researchers determined that the historic building zone serves as a site for symbolic interaction (see figure 1). The selection of buildings was based on the criterion that they were over 50 years old. The snowball sampling method was

used to identify research objects and informants following interviews with community leaders. Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 15 community leaders who were well-versed in Luwu culture and architecture. A theoretical dialogue was applied during the analysis of research data. Semiological theory was used to interpret and decode space and place (Parsaee et al., 2015).

Interview data were obtained through snowball sampling and subsequently transcribed, coded, and thematically interpreted. The analysis was conducted through an ongoing dialogue between empirical narratives and relevant theoretical frameworks. It focused on uncovering meanings, symbols, and shared interpretations related to Luwu's heritage architecture, applying open coding and theory-driven reflection to interpret cultural narratives and spatial significance. The study acknowledges key limitations, including restricted replicability due to contextual interpretation, potential sampling bias arising from network-based participant selection, and limited generalizability inherent in qualitative and snowball sampling designs, while reflexivity was applied to ensure analytical transparency.

Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, and the study was conducted in accordance with applicable ethical standards for qualitative research, ensuring confidentiality, voluntary participation, and responsible data use.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Case Study Area: *Lalebata*

Lalebata is a government-designated area in the centre of Palopo city. It is densely populated and home to many Dutch heritage buildings (see figures 1, 3, and 4 in table 1). The researcher's symbolic interaction with building users was conducted across all heritage building sites. The context of symbolic interaction emerges both among users and between users and objects, whereas a syntactic relationship exists between objects.

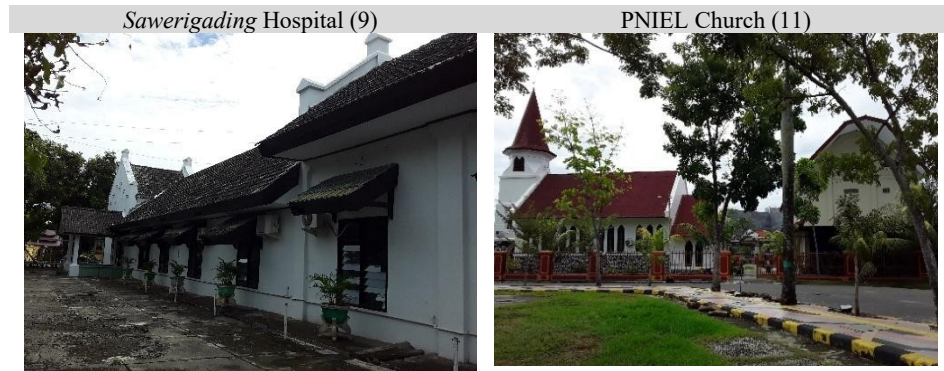
Classic European building

The location of classical European buildings shares similarities in form (see Table 1). All research objects are situated in the centre of Palopo City. As heritage buildings, they serve as spaces of human activities. The researchers identified and analysed ten heritage buildings that hold significant historical and social roles in Palopo City and the Tana Luwu region. These ten buildings represent the influence of classical European architecture (refer to figure 6 in table 1), local governance (see figures 3, 4, and 10 in table 1), public service functions (refer to figures 5, 7, and 9 in table 1), religious (refer to figure 11 in table 1), and military symbolism (see figures 1 and 8 in table 1).

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Table 1: Classic European buildings in the city centre (*Lalebata*)

SalassaE (3)	Deputy mayor's office house (4)
	
Post Office (5)	Military Office (1)
	
Military Police Station (8)	Mr. Sabani's Private House (6)
	
Veteran campus (7)	Culture Office (10)
	



Source: Copyright, Sutrisno (2017)

The *Lalebata* area is a government-designated district situated in the central part of Palopo city. Although the area is frequently bustling with activity, it does not experience significant traffic congestion. As one the city's historical centres, *Lalebata* plays a crucial role in facilitating the activities of the Palopo Urban Forum community. These activities receive financial support from the central government through grants provided by the Indonesian fund. Several buildings in the *Lalebata* area, such as the Military Police Station (refer to figure 8 in table 1) and the Deputy Mayor's Office House (refer to figure 4 in table 1), serve not only as administrative offices but also as social hubs. The official residence (see figures 4 and 6 in table 1) remains open to activities organized by students and community organizations. The back terrace and mini hall serve as informal gathering spaces, while the side yard was utilized for various community activities. Additionally, the outer courtyard provides a space for public interaction and student engagement. These spatial adaptations emerged organically, driven by interplay between the availability of space and the evolving needs of community, rather than through formal urban planning.

Table 2: Meaning of symbolic interaction in old buildings

Themes	Sub-Themes and meaning
Military/ office buildings	- Primarily serve as residential spaces for users - Function as shared container - Represent exceptional architectural craftsmanship - Stand out as heritage buildings, distinct from their surrounding - Similar architectural styles indicate social status - Grid-shaped city streets serve as a force-breaking strategy - Dams and paddy fields function as a security barrier for the region - Functional repurposing serves as an adaptive strategy for managing state-owned buildings

Source: Author's

Adaptive reuse between classic European building and the community

Adaptive reuse is demonstrated in various ways across different heritage buildings. Some buildings have undergone significant functional transformation, such as *Sawerigading* Hospital, where certain structures and spaces have been repurposed into modern healthcare facilities. Conversely, buildings such as the Post Office and PNIEL Church have retained the primary functions while adapting to the evolving needs of their users for administrative and religious activities. Efforts to preserve original architectural elements are integrated with spatial adaptations, ensuring the continuity of historical identity amidst the functional changes. This adaptation is facilitated through shared space utilization and functional modifications.

The symbolic interaction between heritage buildings and the community can be analysed through the concept of 'self-organization', a process within complex systems theory where structures and order emerge spontaneously without centralized control. In this context, the communities of the Palopo Urban Forum and the Palopo Heritage Society exhibit adaptive and responsive behaviour in their engagement with heritage buildings. These communities assess how buildings are utilized and maintained, ensuring their sustainability. Furthermore, through the Palopo Urban Forum, which involves professional architects, heritage buildings are occasionally reinterpreted.

Another notable aspect of PNIEL Church is the community's ongoing commitment to maintaining its religious and social functions. Even in the absence of major formal interventions, the physical sustainability and symbolic significance of the church are preserved through active community participation. Thus, includes regular worship, religious holiday celebrations, social gatherings, and early childhood education initiatives such as schools and kindergartens. The preservation of PNIEL Church extends beyond physical conservation, it is sustained through the continuous engagement of residents and the broader community. This demonstrates an effective model of cultural heritage preservation through decentralized governance where the community itself assumes the role of custodian, ensuring the church's enduring relevance and integrity.

The pragmatic meaning of heritage is reflected in the way users perceive the *Kedatuan Luwu* Building, particularly *SalassaE* and *LangkanaE*. The *LangkanaE* building, reconstructed for continued use by Datu Luwu, serves as an architectural reference for other structures in Palopo City and much of the Tana Luwu region. Furthermore, it exhibits syntactic and semantic relationships with buildings in North Luwu Regency (Masamba), Luwu Regency (Belopa), and East Luwu Regency (Sorowako).

The concept of quality of life was reflected in the environment of the Luwu royal palace. The researcher observed the traditional process of crafting

Kawali weapons within the palace grounds, where a community of *Kawali* enthusiasts gathered to showcase their cultural heritage. Notably, in the palace courtyard, a sculpture depicting a hand holding a *badik* was erected as a symbol of Luwu culture in Palopo City. The pragmatic meaning of this cultural practice is embedded in the *badik*-making process. As one informant described:

“Badik makers are one family, comprising brothers and sisters from North Kolaka... Some collectors of Badik highly seek after Badik made by women...The mystical element in blacksmith-making activities is said to be that it is not the maker who makes the iron, but rather other elements that work in conjunction with him”. (Informant, 2019)



Figure 2: Community interaction of Luwu Heritage Weapon owners.
Image Copyright, Sutrisno (2017)
Source: Author

Building objects in the syntactic relation of space

The architectural replica of certain building represents two distinct yet interconnected cultures. The *bassesangtempe* (Bastem) house is classified as a typical adaptive structure, blending elements of both *To Riaja* and *To Ugi* architectural styles. Meanwhile, PNIEL Church is a direct representation of the Toraja house. One informant emphasized that the territorial influence of Luwu historically extended into the Toraja region. The parameters of sacred space encompass various aspects, including spatial orientation, centrality, boundaries, symbolism, rituals, and spiritual experiences that transcend the mundane.

Both PNIEL Church and the Old Jami Mosque of Palopo serve as symbols of interfaith harmony representing the coexistence of two religious traditions. While both structures hold historical significance, they belong to different generations contexts. The Old Jami Mosque also exhibits sacred spatial characteristics, particularly in terms of orientation and symbolism. The layout of the mosque adheres to the Qibla direction, reinforcing its spiritual significance. Additionally, the *tumpeng*-shared roof serves as a spiritual symbol in Islam. Local

religious leaders interpret its layers as representing the Shari'ah, Haqiqa, Tariqa, and Ma'rifa. As one informant explained:

"This mosque all has meaning...One door means one god, which means that there is only one God" (Informant, 2019).

The Old Jami Mosque of Palopo is deeply connected to the historical spread of Islam in the region. Its proximity to the *SalassaE* and *LangkanaE Palaces* further reinforces its historical and cultural significance. Additionally, synchronic and diachronic relationship are reflected in the preservation of historical symbols within the *SalassaE Centre Room (Batara Guru Museum)*, which serves as a sacred space (refer to figure 5).



Figure 3: Representation of the syntactic and semantic relations between the Palopo culture of South Sulawesi and Kelantan, Malaysia (*Image Copyright, Sutrisno, 2024*)

Syntactic and semantic relationships can be observed in the construction of the Old Jami Mosque of Palopo, a significant heritage site, and a comparable heritage object in Kelantan, Malaysia (see figures 3). This connection is exemplified by the mihrab inside the Old Jami Mosque of Palopo and the mihrab located in the NIK Rasidin Museum, Kelantan, Malaysia. From a diachronic perspective, these architectural elements serve as markers of the historical spread of Islam, particularly as traced through the role of *Dato Patimang*, an Islamic scholar from West Sumatra. The dissemination of Malay Islam through an extensive *ulama* network connected Kelantan with the Bugis-Makassar region. Azra highlights that scholar from Minangkabau, Aceh, and the broader Malay world, including Pattani, established an interconnected scholarly tradition known as the 'network of learning' (Azra, 1994). Oral historical accounts further support this, indicating that Islam in Palopo was introduced from

Minangkabau (Informant, 2018). Additionally, *Dato Sulaiman* played a crucial role in spreading Shafi'i jurisprudence, Sufism, and local adaptations of Islam within the Bugis region, including Tana Luwu (Hamka, 1982). This strong diachronic relationship between Malay culture from Kelantan and Islamic traditions in Palopo reinforces the historical and cultural significance of the Old Jami Mosque of Palopo. As a result of its rich historical background and distinctive architectural features, the Old Jami Mosque of Palopo has been recognized as an iconic architectural work. This designation is further validated by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture of Malaysia (MOTAC), which acknowledges the mosque as a heritage landmark due to its historical significance and representation of modern architectural influences.

LokkoE cemetery complex as a sacred area and The *Tana Tekko* as area, historically significant burial site. The term *LokkoE* originates from the Bugis language, meaning 'pyramid'. The *LokkoE* cemetery is traditionally recognized as the resting place of kings (informant, 2017). The *Tana Tekko* region was developed as a buffer zone, strategically positioned outside the *Lalebata* area. A river serves as a natural boundary, separating *Tana Tekko* from *Lalebata*.



Figure 4: Syntactic Relationship between Tombs in Palopo City and Tombs in Gowa Regency, South Sulawesi.

Source: Author

The kings' tombs are located in *Tana Tekko*, specifically situated in the corner of the burial area. The tombs follow a rectangular plan. The *LokkoE* gate is closely connected to the *SalassaE* complex, with *LokkoE* functioning not only as burial site but also as a selected tomb due to the sacred lineage of its ancestors. The tombs in Palopo and Gowa are deeply rooted in the era of Islamic civilization, serving as a symbol of the legitimization of Islam in the region (refer to figures 4). The dome-shaped tombs act as markers of collective memory, preserved and passed down through generations. This connection highlights a regional

relationship between the Luwu-Bugis and Gowa-Makassar cultures, where local traditions and universal Islamic values intersect and reinforce each other.

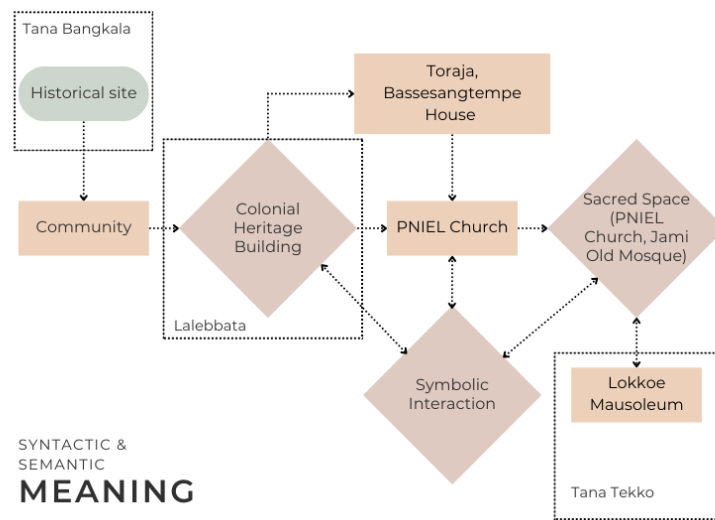


Figure 5: Syntactic and Semantic Meaning of Object Research
(image copyright, Sutrisno, 2025)

Symbols of sacredness are embodied through both space and user activities in the crafting and preservation of heirlooms. The *Kawali*, a traditional weapon resembling a dagger or kris typical of the Bugis people in South Sulawesi, serves not only as a means of defence, a symbol of fertility, or a representation of masculinity but also holds profound symbolic and cultural significance for the indigenous community. Known specifically in Bugis Luwu culture, the *Kawali* represents a strong connection to local cultural heritage (Sutrisno, 2017). Traditional leaders utilize the *Kawali* as a marker of cultural identity, reinforcing their roles and cultural authority. For the community, the *Kawali* is more than just a weapon—it is a cultural artifact that links them to their history, ancestral traditions, and values of honour. The researcher’s observations reveal that the *Kedatuan* indigenous community possesses a strong ‘sense of belonging’ to their local heritage. In this context, the *Kawali* functions as a medium of cultural expression, playing a significant role in enhancing the quality of life by reinforcing cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

Heritage architecture in Palopo City plays a pivotal role in shaping the urban spatial structure, representing historical and cultural values. The typology of

heritage buildings – such as the *Kedatuan Luwu*, post offices, official residences, office buildings, worship buildings, and historical tombs – not only exhibits distinctive architectural characteristics but also established a network of syntactic relations between objects dispersed across the city's conserved areas, between districts, and even across national borders. Adopting the symbolic interactionism paradigm reveals that the meaning of heritage architecture is not fixed or objective. It emerges from the interactions between buildings and their users, as well as from the symbolic constructions that develop within local communities. The community contributes a unique perspective to the discourse on heritage conservation and adaptive reuse, particularly within the context of Southeast Asian and Nusantara architecture. Their local knowledge, cultural practices, and collective activism enrich conservation strategies, ensuring that heritage preservation remains contextually rooted and socially meaningful.

The *Tana Bangkala*, *Lalebata*, and *Tana Tekko* areas collectively form a hierarchical spatial arrangement within the city's historical landscape. These three areas function as profane, administrative, and sacred spaces. The spatial structure of these area reflects a distinctive cosmological order, establishing connections with architectural tradition outside Palopo. This exemplified in the relationship between *Tana Tekko* and the mausoleum typology in Gowa, as well as the influence of Malay architecture on the *Kedatuan* complex and the Old Mosque. Despite the limited attention from the government towards the preservation of heritage objects, the active involvement of community in utilizing, interpreting, and studying these buildings plays a crucial role in sustaining the historical and educational significance of Palopo City's heritage architecture.

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