

HERITAGE AT THE CROSSROADS OF GEOGRAPHY AND DEVELOPMENT: CASE STUDIES FROM LAHAT REGENCY

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the intersection between geography, urban development, and heritage preservation in Lahat Regency, South Sumatra, Indonesia, using Lubuk Sepang and Bangke villages as case studies. Lubuk Sepang's river proximity and Bangke's mountainous terrain distinctly influence settlement patterns, heritage conservation challenges, and developmental pressures. Employing a mixed-methods approach—including fieldwork, geospatial mapping—the study identifies how geographical features impact heritage sites, community dynamics, and conservation strategies amid rapid urbanization.

The findings highlight that settlements near rivers face threats from infrastructure expansion, erosion, and environmental degradation, risking loss of cultural heritage linked closely to water resources. In contrast, mountainous settlements struggle with deforestation, landslides, and infrastructural encroachment, threatening ecological integrity and traditional heritage. Effective heritage conservation necessitates integrating geographical considerations into urban planning, adopting technological innovations such as GIS (Geographic Information System) and digital archiving, and fostering active community participation. The study provides actionable recommendations to harmonize urban growth and heritage preservation in geographically diverse areas.

Keywords: *Informal Settlements, Gender Equality, Social Inclusion, Urban Infrastructure, Vulnerable Groups*

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of geography and urban development presents unique challenges and opportunities for heritage conservation, particularly in regions undergoing rapid transformation. Most urban heritages are in jeopardy due to social changes (Jiang *et al.*, 2022). As settlements expand and infrastructure projects accelerate (Udeaja *et al.*, 2020), preserving historical, cultural, and environmental heritage often becomes

secondary to modern development (Hanif and Riza, 2025). This dynamic is particularly significant in regions like Lahat Regency, located in South Sumatra, Indonesia. The rich natural landscape and diverse geographical features shape how communities settle and develop (Thuc *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, community-driven planning possibly led to culturally rooted conservation while blending geographic context with stakeholder approaches (Fahmy and Thamarat, 2025). In such areas, geographical elements—rivers, hills, and valleys—serve as physical boundaries and as defining factors for both the growth of settlements and the conservation of heritage (Evans, 2003). The geographic dynamics and institutional heritage frameworks drive the urban transformation as well as related conflicts within communities (Gustafsson and Ripp, 2022).

Lubuk Sepang village and Bangke village as seen in Figure 1, two distinct settlements within Lahat Regency, offer compelling case studies for exploring the relationship between geography and development. Lubuk Sepang, situated near a river, has historically relied on the waterway for transportation, agriculture, and trade. This proximity to the river has shaped the village's cultural practices, resource management strategies, and overall settlement patterns. In contrast, Bangke village, located in the hilly regions of Lahat, presents a different set of geographical challenges. The village's location in a mountainous area influences its settlement structure, agricultural practices, and historical significance, making the region vulnerable to environmental degradation due to developmental pressures in the surrounding areas (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000).

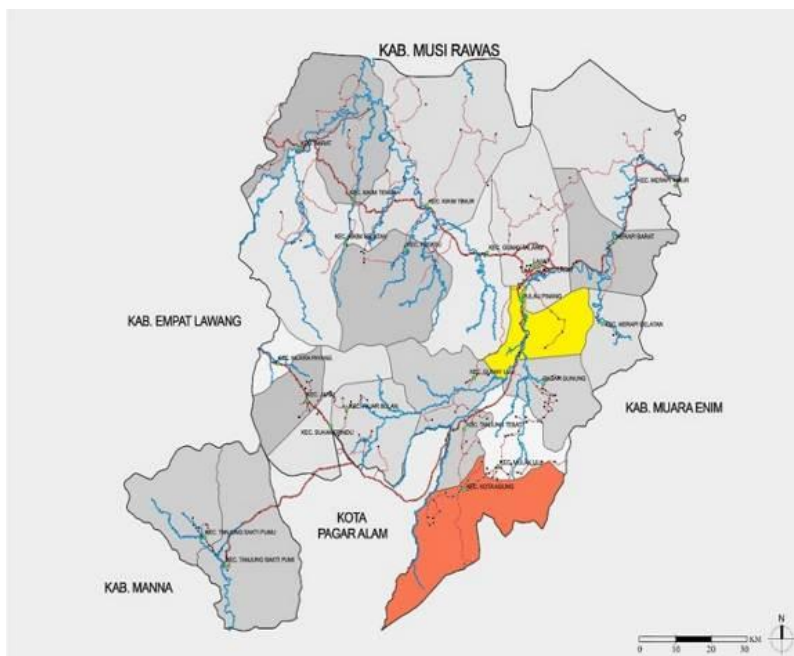


Figure 1. The Location of Lubuk Sepang and Bangke District in Lahat Regency
Source: Adapted from Government of Lahat Regency, 2025

This research examines the heritage conservation challenges in Lubuk Sepang and Bangke villages, investigating how their unique geographical features—river proximity in Lubuk Sepang and hilly terrain in Bangke—interact with urban growth and heritage preservation. By analyzing how the geographical characteristics of these settlements shape their cultural landscapes and affect the way heritage is perceived, this research provides insight into the diverse challenges each village faces as it navigates urbanization (Harrison, 2013).

This research offers a holistic understanding of how heritage can be integrated into urban development strategies through geospatial analysis, historical research, and community perspectives. The research highlighted specific patterns and strategies each village uses to maintain their cultural identity and identify how local authorities and communities address the unique challenges of balancing growth and conservation. By focusing on Lubuk Sepang and Bangke as case studies, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how heritage conservation can be achieved in geographically diverse areas undergoing rapid development. It also provides recommendations for urban planners, heritage managers, and policymakers on fostering sustainable development while preserving rural communities' cultural and historical fabric in the Lahat Regency (Sandler and Ingram, 2009). Ultimately, this paper argues that heritage preservation is not merely about maintaining physical structures but about safeguarding the cultural identity intertwined with the land's geography (Smith, 2006). The study of Lubuk Sepang and Bangke villages serves as a model for other regions facing similar challenges, offering strategies for the sustainable integration of heritage and development in a geographically varied landscape.

While there is a growing body of literature on urbanization and heritage preservation, especially in Southeast Asia, significant research gaps remain in geographically diverse rural-urban transition areas such as Lahat Regency. Existing studies have primarily focused on urban centers or regions with homogeneous geographical features, often overlooking the complexities introduced by river-based settlements and hilly terrains. Specifically, Lubuk Sepang and Bangke villages present unique environments where traditional settlement patterns and local heritage face distinct challenges due to their geographical positions—along a river and in a mountainous region, respectively.

Much of the existing research on heritage and development has been concentrated on policy and governmental strategies in urban centers, with limited focus on how local communities and geographical features shape heritage conservation efforts in smaller, rural settings. The lack of in-depth studies on the interactions between geography, community-driven heritage practices, and urban development in such regions highlights a clear gap in the literature. This study addresses this gap by offering detailed case studies from Lubuk Sepang and Bangke, examining the intersection of geography, settlement dynamics, and heritage preservation in rural-urban development.

Focusing on these specific, geographically diverse villages, this research aims to contribute a more nuanced understanding of heritage preservation in rapidly developing regions and inform future strategies for integrating cultural heritage within sustainable urbanization practices.

Based on the background, there are three research questions for this research:

1. How do the geographical features of the Lahat Regency influence settlement patterns and heritage conservation?
2. What are the key challenges for local communities and authorities in maintaining heritage sites within growing settlements?
3. How can heritage be integrated into the development policies of Lahat Regency to promote sustainable urban growth?

THEORY / RESEARCH METHODS

This research adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining fieldwork, mapping analysis, and case studies to investigate the intersection of heritage conservation, geography, and development in Lubuk Sepang and Bangke villages within Lahat Regency. The primary focus is on how the geographical characteristics of these areas (river proximity in Lubuk Sepang and hilly terrain in Bangke) influence settlement patterns and heritage preservation amidst rapid urbanization. The methodology is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between physical geography and cultural heritage and how local communities navigate these dynamics in the context of development pressures.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork was conducted to gather qualitative and quantitative data directly from the Lubuk Sepang and Bangke communities. The fieldwork was conducted with key informants' involvement, including local government officials, urban planners, heritage experts, cultural historians, and community elders. Therefore, deeper insights into the region's heritage conservation and urban development decision-making processes were gathered.

Mapping Analysis (Geospatial Analysis)

Geospatial analysis examined the relationship between geography, settlement patterns, and heritage sites in the Lahat Regency. The analysis involved Mapping Settlement Growth and Heritage Sites and Land Use and Development Mapping.

The Mapping Settlement Growth and Heritage Sites used GIS (Geographical Information System) tools. Spatial data was collected on the geographical features of both villages, such as the river proximity in Lubuk Sepang and the hilly terrain in Bangke. This included topographic maps, satellite imagery, and other geospatial datasets that reveal the physical characteristics of the land. The research overlaid historical maps with current development plans to analyze settlement expansion and land-use changes. This helped to identify areas of rapid urbanization and any threats to heritage sites due to development.

Mapping Heritage Sites: The locations of significant heritage sites, such as traditional buildings, cultural landmarks, and natural landmarks that hold cultural

value, were mapped. The proximity of these sites to development zones, infrastructure projects, and urban growth areas was also examined.

The Land Use and Development Mapping consist of an analysis of land-use changes over time, including residential, commercial, agricultural, and industrial development, and helps assess how development patterns affect heritage preservation in both villages. Besides, buffer zones around heritage sites were defined to determine the impact radius of development activities and how these areas are being encroached upon or preserved.

Case Study of Lubuk Sepang and Bangke Villages

The case study approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how the unique geographical features of Lubuk Sepang and Bangke shape both the settlement patterns and the heritage conservation efforts in each village. The case studies involved geography and heritage, as well as the impact of urbanization. The comparison between Lubuk Sepang and Bangke provided insights into how the distinct geographical features of each village influence the way settlements evolve and how heritage is protected in varying landscapes.

Data Analysis

1. Qualitative Data: The fieldwork was framed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, challenges, and opportunities related to heritage conservation and urban development.
2. Geospatial Data: The GIS data was analyzed to identify land use and development patterns around heritage sites, including how proximity to geographical features (rivers or hills) influences settlement growth and preservation efforts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Geographical Factors

Lahat Regency, located in the southern part of South Sumatra, Indonesia, is characterized by a diverse and complex geographical landscape that includes river systems, mountainous regions, and valleys (Table 1). These natural features have shaped the region's development patterns and significantly influenced how heritage is preserved or threatened in Lahat. Understanding geographical factors is crucial for examining the relationship between urbanization, geography, and heritage conservation in the regency (Li *et al.*, 2025).

Table 1. The Local Characteristics of Villages

Villages	Lubuk Sepang	Bangke
Large Area (km2)	6,79	6,19
Sea Level (dpl)	173	957

Villages	Lubuk Sepang	Bangke
Distance to capital city (km)	16	79
Total Population (person)	776	696

Source: Statistics Indonesia of Lahat Regency, 2024

River Proximity and Development

One of the primary geographical features of Lahat Regency is its proximity to the Lematang River and other smaller rivers, which have historically served as vital transportation routes, agricultural zones, and settlements for local communities (Figure 2). Settlements near rivers, such as Lubuk Sepang village, have long relied on the rivers for trade, water supply, irrigation, and food resources. The river system has not only supported economic development. Still, it has also shaped cultural heritage practices, including river-based rituals, traditional fishing methods, and architectural styles that harmonize with the waterways (Duan *et al.*, 2025).



Figure 2. Lubuk Sepang Village is Strategically Located near Lematang, the Biggest River in Lahat Regency

Source: Adapted from Google Map, 2025

However, heritage preservation faces significant challenges as urbanization and infrastructure development increase in river-adjacent areas. Riverbanks are often targeted for development projects due to their strategic location for economic growth, such as the construction of bridges, factories, and residential complexes. This development can lead to the encroachment of modern infrastructure on traditional heritage sites, putting historical landmarks, buildings, and cultural landscapes at risk of being destroyed or altered (Figure 3) (Ju, Yang and Yang, 2025).

The geographical proximity to rivers also contributes to the erosion of riverbanks, which can threaten physical heritage structures, such as historical buildings located near water, and disrupt traditional farming practices and cultural activities reliant on river ecosystems. This creates a dilemma between preserving heritage deeply tied to the river and embracing the economic opportunities provided by development along these waterways (Ray and Tiwari, 2025).



Figure 3. Lubuk Sepang Village has a Cluster of Traditional Houses, Incredible Natural Scenery, and Direct Access to the Main Road

Hilly Terrain and Settlement Patterns

The mountainous terrain of regions like Bangke village in Lahat presents different challenges (Figure 4). The steep, hilly landscape influences settlement patterns by restricting the spread of urbanization and limiting access to certain areas. Historically, settlements in hilly regions were more isolated, often relying on traditional agriculture and local resources. This isolation has helped preserve certain aspects of the cultural heritage in these areas, as the communities were less affected by external influences than their counterparts in flatter, more accessible regions (Li *et al.*, 2025).



Figure 4. Bangke Village has a Cluster of Houses (with Enormous Fishponds)
Source: Adapted from Google Map, 2025

However, the same geographical features that once helped protect heritage are now also putting it at risk. In recent years, infrastructure expansion and the construction of roads and urban centers have started encroaching upon these hilly areas, threatening ecological integrity and cultural landscapes. The development of residential areas on slopes and hillsides can lead to deforestation, soil erosion, and landslides, which can damage historical sites, agricultural terraces, and natural heritage sites that are integral to the cultural identity of the local population (Shen *et al.*, 2025). Moreover, the growing demand for resources in these areas, such as timber and minerals, can lead to environmental degradation, further endangering heritage sites.



Figure 5. Bangke Village has Dominant Traditional Houses of *Rumah Panggung/Baghi*

Due to inaccessibility and poor infrastructure, the mountainous terrain poses a challenge to preserving tangible heritage, such as historical buildings and monuments (Figure 5). The development of roads and transport networks to improve access to these areas, while beneficial for modern development, can disrupt the balance between heritage preservation and urban expansion (Ray and Tiwari, 2025).

Climate and Natural Resources

The climate in Lahat Regency, which is marked by tropical weather with heavy rainfall, impacts the development patterns and can lead to seasonal flooding along riverbanks. The region's tropical climate and lush forests have historically provided ample resources for agriculture, including rice, rubber, and palm oil, which are central to the local economy. Sustainable land use practices, developed over generations, are integral to maintaining the ecological and cultural heritage of the region (Figure 6) (Zhang, 2025).

However, climate change and increased human activity in the region, such as deforestation, illegal logging, and unsustainable agricultural practices, have begun to alter the landscape. These changes threaten the environment and endanger cultural heritage that depends on specific natural resources, such as timber for traditional houses or local plants used in cultural ceremonies. In particular, the overexploitation

of natural resources can diminish the cultural significance of the landscapes themselves, undermining the local communities' connection to the land and their heritage (Shen *et al.*, 2025).



Figure 6. Common Traditional Ways

Urbanization Pressures and Land Use Changes

The rapid pace of urbanization in Lahat Regency, driven by government projects and private development initiatives, has introduced further challenges. As cities expand into rural territories, agricultural lands are converted into urban spaces, altering communities' physical landscape and social fabric. The infrastructure development—including roads, buildings, and utility systems—has begun encroaching on historically significant sites, such as traditional villages, temples, and natural landmarks (Li *et al.*, 2025).

Urbanization also creates tensions between heritage conservation and economic development. The increased demand for housing, industrial facilities, and infrastructure often competes with the need to preserve sites of historical and cultural significance. As modern buildings replace traditional architecture, architectural heritage is gradually lost. Moreover, development policies prioritizing economic growth over heritage preservation may overlook the importance of safeguarding traditional practices and cultural landscapes that define local identity (Alisoy, 2025).

Impact on Heritage Preservation

The geographical factors that shape Lahat's development, such as river proximity, mountainous terrain, climate, and land use changes, play a central role in shaping settlement patterns and development. These same factors present both opportunities and challenges for heritage preservation, and addressing these complexities requires a nuanced approach that integrates environmental conservation, cultural heritage, and sustainable development. Protecting cultural landscapes, traditional settlements, and natural resources is critical to preserving the Lahat Regency's heritage while allowing for the benefits of modern development (Shen *et al.*, 2025).

In conclusion, the geographical factors of Lahat Regency—rivers, mountains, climate, and urban growth—play a central role in shaping settlement patterns and development. These same factors present both opportunities and challenges for heritage preservation, and addressing these complexities requires a nuanced approach

that integrates environmental conservation, cultural heritage, and sustainable development (Ju, Yang and Yang, 2025).

The Role of Settlements

Settlements play a significant role in preserving cultural heritage, as they represent living environments where historical practices, architecture, and traditions have been sustained over generations (Figure 7). From historic cities to rural villages, settlements encapsulate culture's intangible and tangible aspects, including traditional crafts, festivals, language, and architecture (Figure 8). However, the preservation of cultural heritage within settlements faces numerous challenges, mainly due to rapid urbanization, climate change, and pressures for modern development.



Figure 7. Lubuk Sepang Village has Several Typologies of Traditional Houses



Figure 8. Bangke Village has a Significant Number of Traditional Houses

One of the primary challenges is the impact of urbanization on traditional settlements. As cities grow, historical areas often face encroachment from modern developments, threatening the preservation of cultural landmarks and heritage sites. The expansion of urban areas can lead to the demolition of culturally significant buildings, the displacement of local communities, and a loss of cultural identity (Amato *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, the lack of effective governance and legal frameworks often results in the erosion of cultural landscapes, with heritage sites left vulnerable to neglect or improper restoration (Harbiankova, Scherbina and Budzevich, 2023).

In addition to urbanization, climate change poses a serious risk to preserving settlements with historical significance. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and other environmental changes jeopardizing settlements' physical structures and cultural landscapes. For example, coastal communities with historical significance are often at risk of erosion, affecting the authenticity of the cultural heritage preserved in these areas (Shcherbina and Salmo, 2023).

The solutions to these challenges lie in integrated approaches prioritizing sustainability, community involvement, and adaptive reuse of historical buildings. One potential solution is incorporating cultural heritage into urban planning and development processes. By ensuring that cultural values are embedded within the planning framework, cities can balance modern needs with preserving historical identities (Vythoulka *et al.*, 2021). The adaptive reuse of buildings, where old structures are repurposed for new functions while retaining their historical significance, is another approach that can help maintain the connection between past and present (Jaffar and Harun, 2019).

Moreover, the role of technology in cultural heritage preservation has been highlighted as a crucial tool in recent research. Digital preservation techniques, such as 3d modelling, offer new possibilities for recording and sharing the history of settlements. These technologies can help restore deteriorating structures and create virtual representations of cultural heritage that can be accessed globally, contributing to greater awareness and protection efforts (Harbiankova, Scherbina and Budzevich, 2023). Additionally, fostering public-private partnerships and encouraging local communities' active participation in heritage conservation can create a more sustainable approach to cultural preservation.

Therefore, preserving cultural heritage in settlements requires policy, technological innovation, and community engagement. Addressing these challenges effectively can ensure that settlements continue to serve as repositories of cultural memory while evolving to meet modern needs. It is essential to create solutions that allow cultural heritage to thrive within contemporary life while respecting the traditions that define it.

The Challenges and Opportunities

The preservation of cultural heritage in Lahat, especially in rapid urbanization and development, presents a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities. Urbanization often brings economic growth and modernity, but it also threatens the

integrity of historical sites, local customs, and traditional practices that form the essence of Lahat's identity.

Challenges

One of the most pressing challenges is the displacement of communities due to the expansion of urban areas. As Lahat undergoes infrastructural development, rural areas and heritage sites are often overlooked or even destroyed to make way for new developments, resulting in the loss of historical landmarks and traditional ways of life. The risk of cultural homogenization is high, with modern urban living sometimes diminishing the value and relevance of local traditions (Husyam *et al.*, 2024).

Moreover, there is a lack of awareness and inadequate integration of cultural heritage into urban planning processes. As development projects often prioritize economic objectives over cultural ones, heritage sites may not receive the protection they deserve. This degrades physical spaces with immense cultural value, weakening community ties to their heritage. In some instances, the preservation of cultural identity becomes a secondary concern compared to the allure of modern, cosmopolitan growth.

Opportunities

However, urbanization also offers unique opportunities to integrate cultural heritage preservation into development. Sustainable urban planning incorporating heritage conservation can foster a more harmonious relationship between modernity and tradition. By preserving cultural assets alongside urban growth, Lahat can create a city that values its historical narrative while meeting the needs of its population.

A growing global interest in cultural tourism is another avenue through which Lahat can capitalize on its heritage. Heritage sites, if preserved, can attract tourists who are eager to learn about local culture, thus providing economic benefits while promoting cultural awareness and preservation. As mentioned by Yumnahanin, W.D., & Rukayah, S. (2023), a village with significant potential for a specific theme would offer social and economic improvement (Yumnahanin and Rukayah, 2023).

Collaborative efforts between local communities, urban planners, and cultural institutions can also create a space where both development and heritage preservation go hand in hand. These efforts can include creating cultural hubs or museums that showcase local history and traditions, giving residents and visitors access to the rich cultural tapestry of Lahat. Lastly, introducing innovative technologies such as digital archiving, virtual tours, and interactive cultural spaces can offer alternative ways to preserve and share cultural heritage without sacrificing the need for urban development (Mulya and Hudalah, 2024).

Community Awareness

The successful preservation of heritage in Lahat also depends on community awareness. When residents understand the value of their cultural assets, such as traditional practices, historical sites, and local customs. The local community's involvement in supporting and participating in efforts to protect heritage shows an understanding of the value of their cultural assets. The awareness or a sense of pride and ownership of heritage would be influenced. Furthermore, it encourages

communities to advocate for integrating heritage into development plans. Due to a lack of understanding of the local people, many cases of ineffective development, including in heritage areas, have happened (Kardinal *et al.*, 2024). Hence, educational programs, public campaigns, and community-led initiatives are key in ensuring. The preservation is seen not as a barrier to progress, but as a vital part of Lahat's identity and sustainable urban future.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, geography significantly influences heritage preservation amid rapid urban development in Lahat Regency, Indonesia. The geographical features of Lahat Regency—such as its hilly terrain, river systems, and fertile valleys—strongly influence settlement patterns by concentrating communities along accessible lowlands and waterways. These features also shape heritage conservation, as many historical sites are located in remote or elevated areas, requiring tailored preservation strategies that account for environmental challenges and accessibility.

River-based settlements like Lubuk Sepang are particularly vulnerable to infrastructure expansion, riverbank erosion, and environmental degradation, threatening traditional practices and heritage sites closely tied to water resources. In contrast, mountainous villages such as Bangke encounter distinct challenges from development activities, including deforestation, soil erosion, landslides, and encroachment from infrastructure expansion. These geographical features dictate unique preservation requirements, highlighting the necessity for tailored conservation approaches.

Successful heritage preservation requires integrating cultural heritage into sustainable urban planning frameworks, utilizing technological innovations such as GIS mapping and digital archiving, and fostering active participation from local communities. Engaging stakeholders through inclusive planning and education initiatives can further strengthen preservation efforts. This research provides detailed insights into these dynamics. It offers practical recommendations to effectively balance modern development goals with conserving cultural identity and heritage, deeply rooted in geographical landscapes.

Furthermore, as a limitation, this study is limited by the challenging terrain that causes less availability of up-to-date and detailed spatial data, as well as limited access to some heritage sites. Additionally, local perspectives on settlement and conservation were not deeply explored. It affects the comprehensiveness of the findings. The recommendation of this research should incorporate community input to better understand local priorities and cultural values. It is significant to use advanced geospatial technologies like GIS and remote sensing to improve mapping accuracy. Further research could explore the impact of climate change on both settlement patterns and heritage conservation in the region.

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