

***Ajrih Asih* as Transcendental Structure of Heritage Architecture: A Phenomenological Exploration at Van Lith Complex, Indonesia**

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Abstract This study investigates the transcendental meaning of the Van Lith Complex, a Catholic educational heritage site in Muntilan, Central Java. Conservation practices in the country remain dominated by material indicators, such as physical restoration or tourism output, because the intentional and spiritual dimensions of users were often overlooked. Therefore, this gap was addressed by applying a transcendental phenomenological approach, centred on the disclosure of meaning beyond descriptive accounts. Spatial awareness was analyzed through epoché, horizontalization, eidetic reduction, and noematic synthesis, enabling the identification of essential structures grounded in the lived experiences of clergy, educators, alumni, and residents who actively participated in religious and educational practices. Additionally, the findings resulted in the formulation of *Ajrih Asih*, a phenomenological construct that united reverential respect (*Ajrih*) and compassionate service (*Asih*). This construct showed that heritage space functioned as collective consciousness, continually renewed through rituals, relationships, and intergenerational values. A four-quadrant model was developed to explain how *Ajrih Asih* dynamically bridged leadership and architecture. *Ajrih*-Leadership focused on moral authority rooted in Christian faith, while *Asih*-Architecture celebrated inclusive communal spaces. Both collaboratively ensured continuity of spatial function and spiritual significance across generations. The present analysis contributed to heritage scholarship by connecting

Catholic–Javanese experiences with global frameworks such as UNESCO’s *Historic Urban Landscape*, the *Nara Document on Authenticity*, and resilience theory. Furthermore, *Ajrih Asih* offered a culturally rooted yet internationally relevant approach to heritage governance, positioning reverence and compassion as moral ideals and practical strategies for sustaining heritage architecture amidst ecological and social challenges.

Keywords *Ajrih Asih*, Heritage Conservation, Transcendental Phenomenology, Van Lith Complex

1. Introduction

Recent debates in heritage conservation have emphasized the importance of integrating intangible values, such as spirituality, ritual practice, and community memory, into preservation policies. A meta-regression of 85 cross-country studies confirmed that 26% of respondents valued spiritual-symbolic aspects above purely material qualities [1]. Presently, an increased number of people are realizing the importance of heritage assets in urban environments. Based on this perspective, significant attention is paid to preserving tangible heritage sites, such as historical buildings and monuments, while intangible cultural aspects are often overlooked [2], [3]. The perspective triggered an

increased focus on the exploration and understanding of the relationship between Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and urban resilience [2], [4]. In Indonesia, conservation regulations are predominantly material-centric, as evidenced by 2024 Yogyakarta policy research that showed indicators of success focused on physical restoration and tourism targets. However, the spiritual-communal dimension had not been prioritized [5], [6].

The disparity was evident in Catholic religious sites, as reported in recent research on the Van Lith Complex located in Muntilan, Indonesia (Figure 1). Architectural continuity of the Complex relies on the practice of *Ajrilih Asih*, a combination of respect and pastoral charity which has not been integrated into formal conservation plans [7], [8]. In addition, these results are in line with reviews of national heritage governance carried out by adopting intangible value indicators [9], [10], [11]. The above conditions also outlined the urgency of a preservation framework that positions faith communities as both producers and guardians of cultural heritage [12].

In this context, the preservation of heritage architecture often focuses on physical aspects such as form, materials,

and construction techniques, while the immaterial spiritual dimensions experienced by the community of stakeholders rarely receive equal attention [13], [14], [15]. This marks a global shift in stakeholder priorities between 2022 and 2024. UNESCO's *Historic Urban Landscape* and ICOMOS charters consistently highlight that heritage survival depends on the dynamic relationship between material form and lived experience [16], [17].

This inconsistency was observed in Catholic heritage sites, particularly at the Van Lith Complex in Muntilan (± 10 ha), established by Father Frans van Lith SJ between 1899 and 1914. The site had a Neo-Gothic church, boarding school, and religious congregational houses, and was known as *Bethlehem van Java*, a fundamental locus of Catholic identity in Central Java [18], [19], [20]. Meanwhile, historical records have shown that the Jesuit mission faced colonial restrictions, as the Dutch East Indies prohibited Catholic evangelization among the indigenous population due to political tension [18], [19]. Priests serving European communities received salaries, and those working with the Javanese depended entirely on congregational support [21].

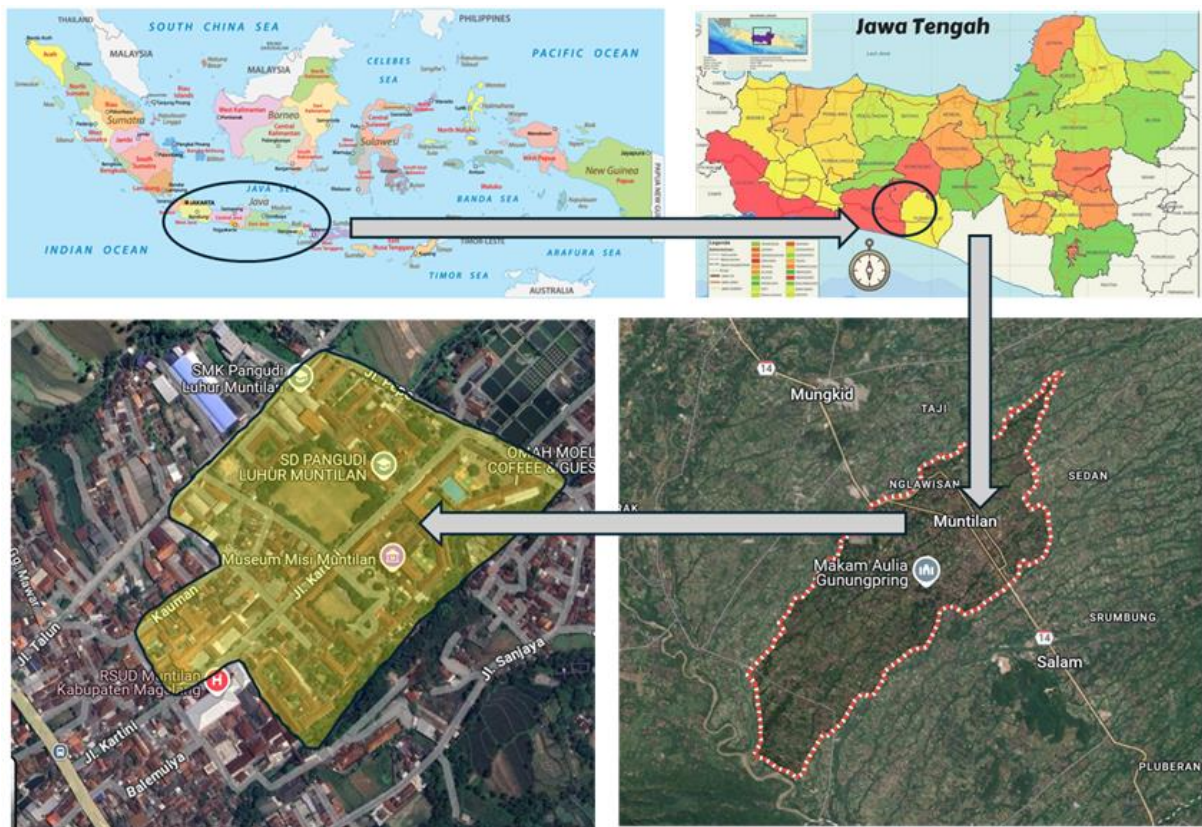


Figure 1. Research Location (Source: www.indozone, <https://moondoggiesmusic.com>, google map)

In response to the description above, Van Lith adopted radical strategies of inculturation. The piece of land purchased in Semampir Village, initially used as a rice barn, was transformed into a chapel, and the rectory into a teachers' school [22], [23], [24]. These acts symbolized architectural adaptation as well as negotiation between Javanese cosmology and Catholic spirituality, embedding *ajrih* (reverential awe) and *asih* (compassion service) into the spatial and social order. Eventually, the Complex functioned as a center of evangelization and socio-educational laboratory, integrating spiritual engagement with community empowerment.

Prior studies on the Van Lith Site shown in Figure 2, largely focused on institutional history [18], narratives of figures [25] or changes in urban morphology [23], [26], [27] while neglecting the transcendental meaning of space as lived by the community. Based on this perspective, existing phenomenological studies of religious environments were limited to educational psychology in dormitories [28].

By contrast, Muntilan functioned as both a center of evangelization and a socio-educational laboratory, integrating spiritual engagement with community empowerment. Heritage conservation studies often emphasized material form, but rarely addressed frameworks grounded in spiritual experience and transcendental phenomenology—an essential lens for interpreting *Ajrih Asih*. This study addresses that gap by analyzing Jesuit boarding education (1899–1914) and its

enduring influence. *Ajrih Asih*, derived from Javanese *Ajrih* (reverential awe) and *Asih* (compassion service), is translated as *reverential compassion*, reflecting the dialectic between transcendence and service that shapes the community's understanding and preservation of Van Lith heritage.

Following the description above, the transcendental consciousness of the Catholic community was applied to bridge the observed gaps. This was aimed at interpreting the heritage architecture of the Van Lith Complex. In addition, Husserl-Moustakas's transcendental phenomenology was adopted through epoché reduction, and synthesis [29], [30], [31]. After World War II, several architects increasingly engaged in phenomenology. For example, Ernesto Nathan Rogers introduced phenomenology to rethink modernism in architecture. This study reinterpreted sacred heritage through interviews, observation, and documentation. In line with the analysis, the findings enriched heritage preservation discourse with a spiritually grounded conceptual framework. It practically offered ethical guidance for sustainable conservation in the Semarang Archdiocese [32]. This enriches sacred heritage theory and guides contextual sustainable conservation practice.

This historical trajectory is highlighted not for its chronology, but to underline how spatial negotiations embedded reverence awe (*Ajrih*) and compassion service (*Asih*) as enduring heritage values.

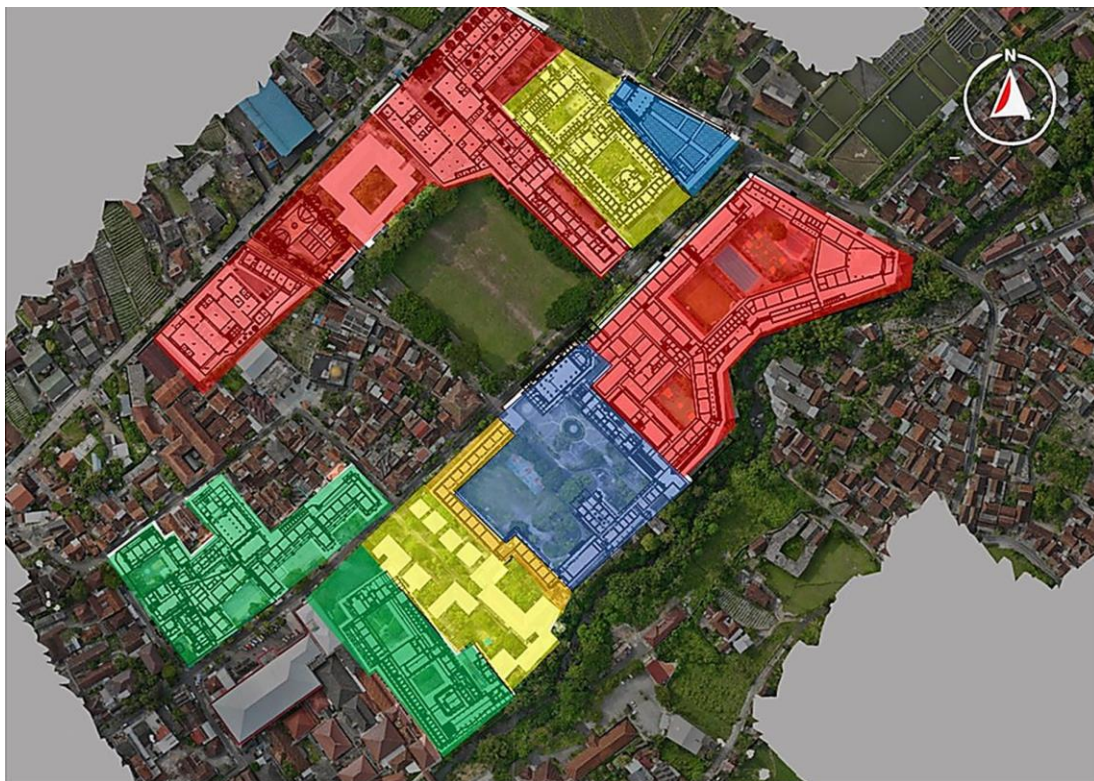


Figure 2. Research Site; Red: Unit sekolah Pangudi Luhur. Yellow: Biara FIC. Blue: Unit Paroki Santo Antonius. Orange: Unit sekolah Kanisius. Dark Green: Unit Biara OSF. Light Green: Unit Sekolah Marsudirini. (Source: Basic Map by drone documentation and modification by author)

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design and Approach

A transcendental phenomenological approach was adopted to analyze meaningful spatial experiences in the heritage architecture of Van Lith Complex in Muntilan, Indonesia, as shown in Figure 3. The approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of the structure, realized through participants' reflective awareness. Additionally, the search for transcendental meaning was achieved through *epoché*, the suspension of the initial theoretical horizon, with the aim that the subject's experience was authentic [29], [33], [34].

This study was carried out for 16 months, from April 2023 to August 2024, at the religious–educational site of Van Lith. The participants, who consisted of clergy, educators, alumni, and residents, were purposively selected based on direct engagement in religious or educational contexts. However, those unable to participate fully in the reflective process were excluded.

Data were collected through five main techniques, namely (a) in-depth interviews to explore affective and spiritual narratives, (b) direct observation of space in rituals and daily life, (c) visual and sensory documentation, including recording light, sound, and the atmosphere, (d) searching for historical documents and personal archives, as well as (e) observing ritual practices to capture the transformation of spatial meaning.

The analysis was carried out in three main reduction

stages, namely (a) Eidetic reduction, using horizontalization to distill essential meanings from 12 observation units into eight themes; (b) Intentional reduction relied on tracing the noesis-noema relationship, such as the subject's awareness of space and its objectified forms, resulting in three core concepts. (c) Transcendental reduction, synthesizing thematic meanings into a conceptual configuration that produced the *Ajrih Asih* theory, summarizes the values of reverence and compassion within religious and educational spaces.

The analyzed structure was designed hierarchically and iteratively, in accordance with the Husserlian principle of reduction. The principle stated that deep meaning was achieved through layered experience [31]. Each stage was interconnected and could not be interchanged. The process was validated through triangulation and member checking with key participants. Methodologically, this research showed heritage spaces functioned as visual artifacts and living entities that stored collective consciousness, spirituality, and social values manifested in spatial structures and governance. In this context, *Ajrih Asih* emerged as a conceptual synthesis from the intentionality of participant awareness, enriching the discourse of experience-based heritage architecture.

The combination of interviews, sensory documentation, and archival studies was deliberately adopted to achieve methodological triangulation, ensuring that no single perspective dominated meaningful interpretation. This strategy improved the credibility of findings, as phenomenological insight was grounded simultaneously in memory, bodily perception, and historical record.

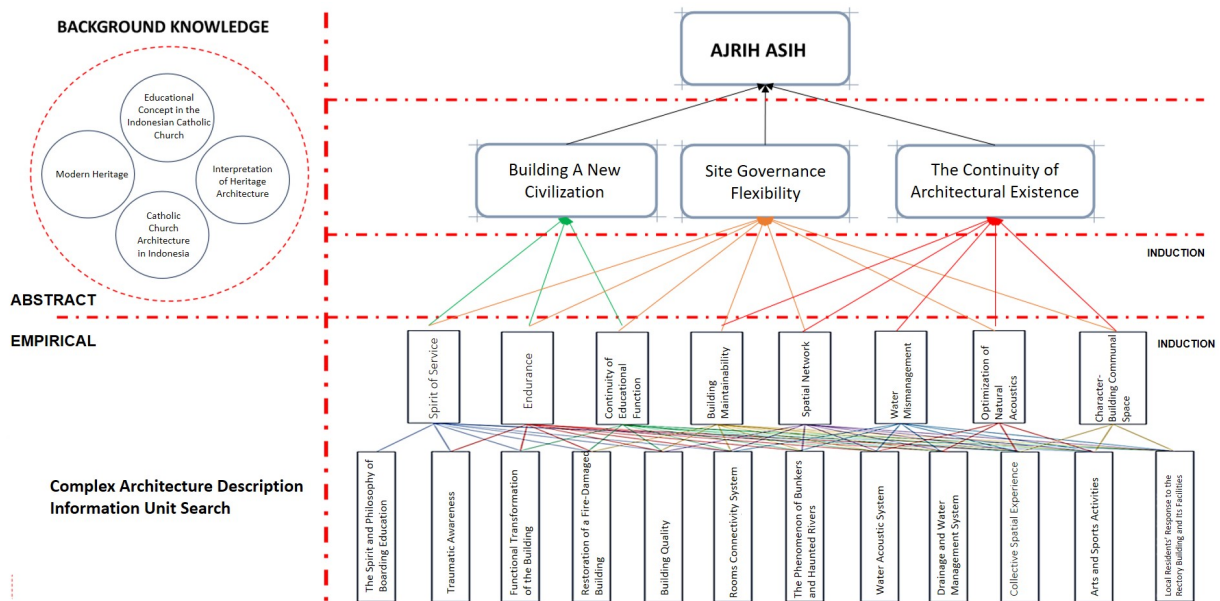


Figure 3. Research Design and Results (Source: Author)

2.2. Transcendental Phenomenology Thematic Synthesis

This thematic synthesis led to the disclosure of eight essential themes due to the phenomenological reduction process of 12 observation units (Figure 4). Furthermore, through the stages of *epoché* horizontalization, and transcendental synthesis, these results reflected participants' collective intentionality towards space, spirituality, and social memory. Each theme represented a meaningful structure derived from direct experience and reflective awareness. In the horizontalization process, all observation units were treated equally without any initial hierarchy of value, in accordance with the principle that all described experiences had the potential to contribute to the meaningful structure [35]. The units were filtered through eidetic reduction to identify the essential structure with eidetic intuition, enabling the discovery of essence through imaginative variability [36].

Theme 1 – Spirit of Service was embraced as a spiritual value embedded in daily practices and shared spaces. Meanwhile, collective service ethics were embodied by egalitarian settings, interfaith interactions, and post-fire reconstruction. Space design and communal activities reinforced Van Lith's vision of education through service. This theme was consistent with UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape, which described intangible values as inseparable from spatial continuity in heritage governance. Theme 2 – Endurance Historical trauma, such as the 1948 fire, which was transformed into resilience. In this context, adaptive reuse and reconstruction sustained spatial continuity, with rebuilt structures and bunkers symbolizing survival and healing. Education persisted as a function and source of collective strength. This finding was in line with the resilience theory in heritage studies, where crisis is reframed as an opportunity for institutional learning and adaptive continuity [36]. Theme 3 – Continuity of Educational Function- the site preserved its pedagogical essence, despite the spatial adaptation. In addition, learning activities occurred through classrooms, dormitory life, and extracurricular practices, integrating moral reflection into education. This continuity reflected the commitment of the community to comprehensive formation. Aside from that, the illustration of how heritage functions extended beyond physical form to serve as a living curriculum, reinforced the Nara Document's call for authenticity in function as well as materiality [36]. Theme 4 – Building Maintainability Maintenance was realized both technically and spiritually, perceived as an intergenerational responsibility. Furthermore, actions such as repainting, acoustic preservation, and river landscape care embodied reverence for living heritage. Community participation depicted conservation as a collective will. In this context, routine maintenance was described as living heritage practices

where continuity was safeguarded through daily actions rather than extraordinary interventions [36]. Theme 5 – Spatial Network Corridors, courtyards, and nodes led to the generation of a relational network connecting the past, present, and future. Additionally, physical and symbolic interactions positioned space as a field of communication. This network sustained community cohesion and cultural continuity, and such relationality reflected ICOMOS' description of heritage as a socio-spatial system where diverse networks of interaction ensured long-term resilience. Theme 6 – Water Mismanagement, Flooding, and drainage failures exposed weak coordination in ecological management. This was because disrupted water systems threatened architectural-landscape heritage, outlining the need for integrated ecological governance. Furthermore, water management played an essential role in heritage continuity. This led to the adoption of the Historic Urban Landscape approach, which framed urban heritage as a built form and an ecosystem where ecological flows defined cultural resilience [36]. Theme 7 – Optimization of Natural Acoustics: responsible for shaping spiritual and educational experiences without artificial technology. Based on this perspective, reverberation, silence, and auditory awareness were integral to worship and collective learning, with sound regarded as part of the site's spirituality and pedagogy. In phenomenological terms, sound refers to a lived resonance that positions heritage as an embodied experience, complementing architectural form [36]. Theme 8 – Character-Building Communal Space, such as dormitories, fields, and shared facilities, fostered tolerance, empathy, and cooperation. Living together cultivated collaboration and inclusive community values. These spaces reflected Van Lith's mission for the entire community to embrace education. As an inclusive space, it embodied the principle that heritage functions as a social commons, advancing participatory conservation consistent with recent cultural governance frameworks [36].

The results of eidetic reduction were presented in a systematic synthesis to illustrate the interconnectedness of participants' experiences. These were summarized in Table 1, which exhibited how spatial, social, and spiritual dimensions formed a meaningful, coherent structure.

The themes were analyzed in depth through an intentional reduction approach, which focused on the intentionality of participants' awareness of space as shown in Figure 5. This led to three main concepts, namely (1) Building a New Civilization, (2) Flexibility of Site Governance, and (3) Continuity of Architectural Existence. Each concept emerged from the narrowing of certain themes that shared a common thread of awareness, spatial practices, and recurring historical values. These three concepts formed the basis for compiling a more complete local theoretical framework in the subsequent section.

The three concepts were not interchangeable rather, they followed a hierarchical sequence where eidetic reduction identified invariant essences. Additionally, intentional and transcendental reductions disclosed consciousness–object relations, and synthesized meanings into a coherent

theoretical framework, respectively. These processes reflected Husserl’s insistence on bracketing presuppositions and Moustakas’s appeal to uncover the structures of experience as a foundation for conceptual innovation.

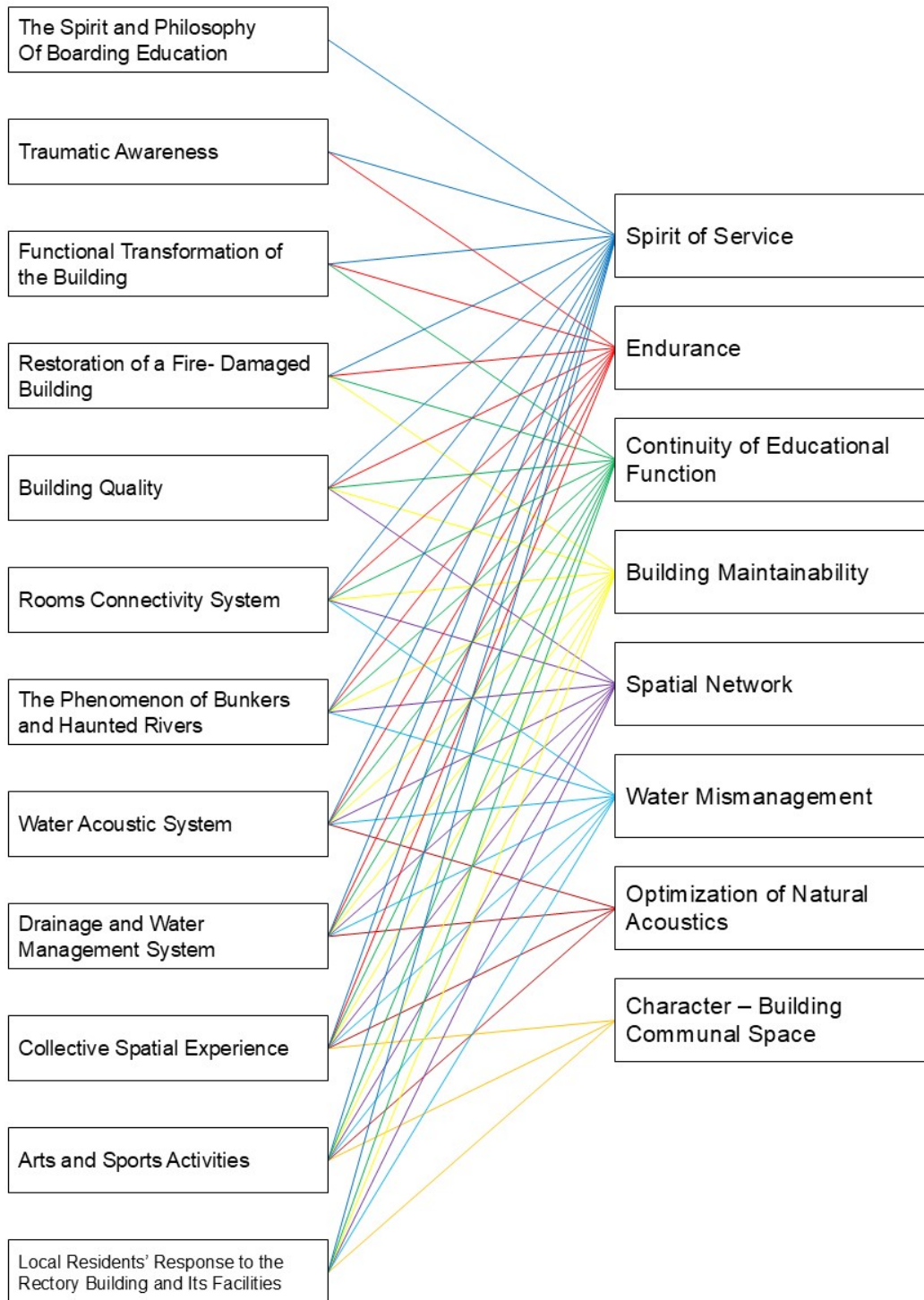


Figure 4. Thematic Synthesis of 12 Observation Units into 8 Themes (Source: Author)

Table 1. Table of Concept Extraction from Essential Themes

No	Essential Themes	Description	Narrowing Down to Concept
1	Spirit of service	Service refers to a spiritual value manifested in social relations, space design, and interfaith activities.	Building a new civilization
2	Endurance	The transformation of historical trauma into collective strength led to the restoration of space as a symbol of resilience.	Building a new civilization
3	Continuity of Educational Function	Consistent educational function realized through adaptation of space and affective curriculum across generations.	Building a new civilization
4	Building Maintainability	Space maintenance is regarded as a form of spiritual and intergenerational responsibility.	Site Governance Flexibility
			The Continuity of Architectural Existence
5	Spatial Network	Space is described as a physical, social, and symbolic relational network existing between entities and generations.	Site Governance Flexibility
			The Continuity of Architectural Existence
6	Water Mismanagement	Ecological disturbances occurred due to the weak coordination of water management, outlining the importance of synergy in landscape management.	Site Governance Flexibility
			The Continuity of Architectural Existence
7	Optimization of Natural Acoustic	Auditory awareness of sound and silence was considered as an aspect of spirituality.	Site Governance Flexibility
			The Continuity of Architectural Existence
8	Character-Building Communal Space	Space aimed to form a collective character through shared activities that result in social values.	Site Governance Flexibility
			The Continuity of Architectural Existence

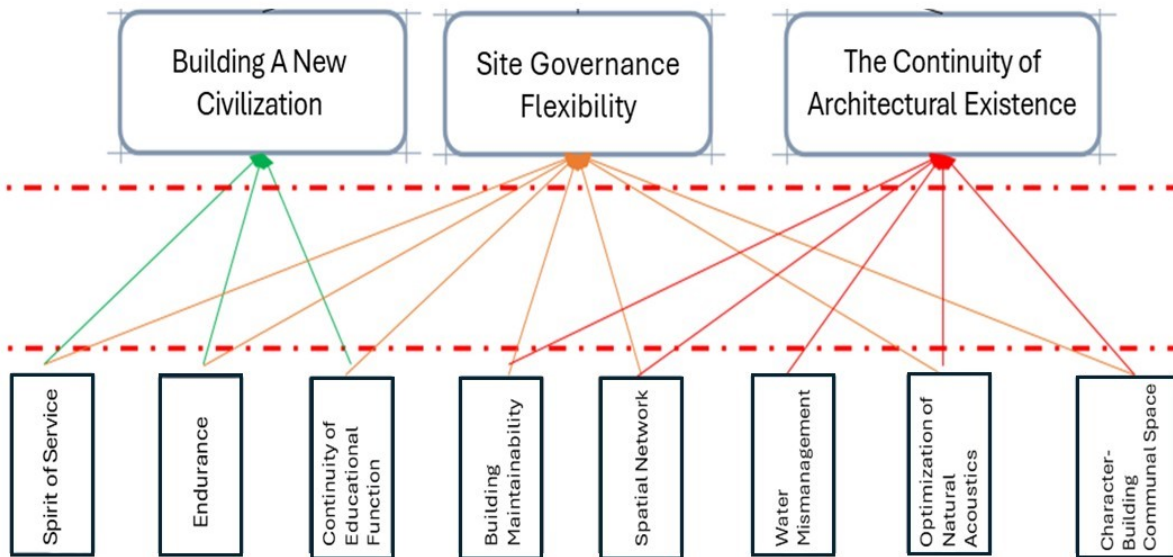


Figure 5. Induction of 8 Themes into 3 Concepts (Source: Author)

2.3. Conceptual Foundation and Thematic Synthesis

The following eight essential themes —Spirit of Service, Continuity of Educational Function, Endurance, Building Maintainability, Water Mismanagement, Optimization of Natural Acoustics, Spatial Network, and Character-Building Communal Space —obtained through phenomenological reduction, were grouped into three main concepts.

2.3.1. Building a New Civilization

Asih thus resonates with transformative heritage governance frameworks, where adaptive participation,

spiritual intentionality, and intergenerational solidarity complement UNESCO’s Historic Urban Landscape principles. The first concept, Building a New Civilization, emerged directly from themes of service, education, and resilience, setting the foundation for governance and architectural continuity.

This concept evolved from the collective awareness of service, education, and survival. In addition, the schools, cooperatives, and health services established by Van Lith and religious congregations represented more than institutional functions, forming a socio-cultural order aimed at empowering indigenous communities. The

architectural aspect was perceived as physical and a medium for shaping identity including collective values. In global terms, this perspective reflected UNESCO’s Historic Urban Landscape, which focused on the role of community-driven institutions in sustaining heritage landscapes [36].

Figure 6 Building a New Civilization shows that heritage spaces operated as social transformation laboratories, integrating spirituality and education as tools for cultural resilience.

2.3.2. Building a New Civilization

Building upon this social foundation, the second concept, Site Governance Flexibility, explains how institutional adaptability secured resilience across crises.

The concept reflected institutional adaptability derived from spiritual solidarity and community participation. Despite crises such as arson, revolutions, and internal disputes, the site validated governance resilience through collaborative participation and adaptive strategies. Spatial networks and ecological systems were maintained, proving that governance was inseparable from landscape continuity. This finding was in line with transformative heritage governance approaches [36], which described flexibility, social learning, and participatory management as keys to resilience. Moreover, the governance flexibility at Van Lith

showed how religious values, particularly reverence and compassion guided institutional adaptability, bridging spiritual authority with practical conservation strategies.

Non-Physical Dimensions: Spirit of Service and Adaptive Governance.

Spirit of Service, inherited from Van Lith, transformed moral enthusiasm into a resilient socio-institutional system. Although the site had been hit by arson, looting, and collective trauma, the management was intact. This led to the formulation of an adaptive governance model, responsive to changes in educational regulations and socio-political dynamics from the colonial era to the present. The model reflected the principles of adaptive governance—social learning, flexible institutions, and collaborative participation—in the face of environmental change [37], [38].

In line with the description above, the conflict between education providers, namely Marsudirini Foundation and Pangudi Luhur, did not paralyze the system; rather, it strengthened the spirit of kinship. The motto *Cor Ed Cor Locutum Est* led to the transformation of disputes into constructive dialogue and a dynamic division of roles. This approach reflected transformative heritage governance, with local and spiritual values guiding institutional flexibility [39], [40], [41].

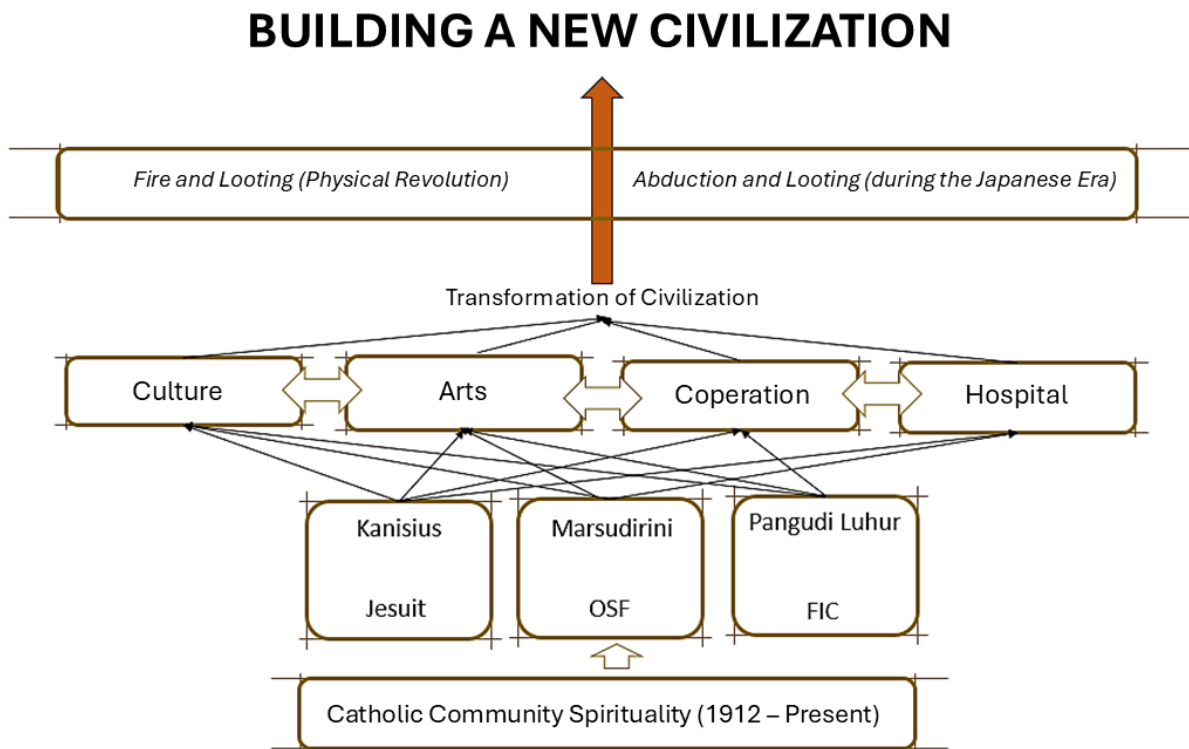


Figure 6. Building a New Civilization: The Diagram of Transformation from Conflict to Culture, Arts, Cooperation, Hospitals, and Spirituality. (Source: Author)

Physical Dimension: Structural Resilience and Spatial Networks

The flexibility of the site's governance was proven by the spatial and structural continuity maintained, despite the 1948 fire. Building reconstruction was carried out on the original site without changing the orientation of the dormitory, church, and public spaces, sustaining natural acoustic continuity, as well as spatial connectivity. Additionally, the management of water continuously flowing from the highlands to the Novitiate, including the physical and narrative preservation of the bunker space, showed that the site's historical and spiritual values were also maintained. *Lengkong*, a connecting path between religious and educational entities, served as a symbol of spatial and social flexibility. Simultaneously, the synergy of the site's functions remained intact even though the local government managed certain assets. This heritage-as-a-living-system approach strengthened the site's resilience by mutually reinforcing its physical and social elements [42], [43].

As illustrated in Figure 7, the diagram demonstrates that governance flexibility was not only institutional but also spatial, ensuring resilience through collaboration and continuity. Van Lith Complex maintained its function and value through a combination of flexible institutional governance and consistent spatial continuity. This reflected the flexibility of the system, supported by collaboration between the congregation, space users, and the community. Extending beyond governance, the third concept, Continuity of Architectural Existence, integrates ecological, spatial, and cultural systems into long-term heritage survival.

2.3.3. The Continuity of Architectural Existence

This concept integrates five essential themes: maintainability, water management, acoustics, networks, and communal space across three historical phases. The narrative of continuity demonstrates that heritage survival depends not solely on reconstruction but on the integration of ecological-spatial systems with cultural values. This aligns with resilience theory, which reframes heritage as an ecosystem where material, ecological, and spiritual dimensions interact [36]. Continuity here is not passive survival but an active process of adaptation rooted in reverential awe (*Ajrih*) and compassion service (*Asih*). It shows how architecture becomes a living medium of intergenerational values, where form, practice, and governance converge.

The diagram in Figure 8 shows how heritage architecture influenced the formation of a new civilization through interconnected spatial and institutional networks. Flexible governance enabled adaptive preservation, as depicted by the collaboration among Jesuits, FIC (Fratres Immaculatae Conceptionis), OSF (*Ordo Sanctae Francisciae*), Kanisius Foundation, Marsudirini Foundation and Pangudi Luhur

entities. Furthermore, architectural continuity reflected resilience theory, where heritage functioned as an ecosystem integrating values, functions, and environment [36]. The transcendental reduction led to the evolution of three concepts, namely Building a New Civilization, Site Governance Flexibility, and Continuity of Architectural Existence. Additionally, Building a New Civilization was embedded in inclusive education and cooperatives. Site Governance Flexibility reflected institutional adaptability and collaboration. In respect to this perspective, Continuity of Architectural Existence, sustained spatial and symbolic stability through reconstruction, ecological management, and acoustic preservation. Collectively, these were unified under the *Ajrih Asih* framework, reverence and pastoral charity guiding solidarity, decision-making, and intergenerational continuity of heritage architecture.

2.4. Participant Dialogic Reflection in Formulating *Ajrih Asih* Theory

Transcendental phenomenology viewed participants as subjects of consciousness who interpreted experiences with respect to space, time, and leadership [44]. This narrative was guided beyond historical description by reflective dialogical interviews. Additionally, the narrative aimed to explore the meaningful experience gained from Van Lith and then discover how the legacy lives on in daily space and behavior. The process included initial exploration, site observation, confirmation, and reflection. Repeated interviews were conducted to inquire about events and the meaningful experiences of participants, as per Van Lith's teachings. In this context, the principle of reductive dialogue outlined the dialectical meaningful experience and reflection [32], [45].

Van Lith's teachings evolved into a transcendental awareness of communal life, sustained by the FIC Brothers, OSF Sisters, teachers, and residents responsible for managing schools and preserving historic buildings. In view of this analysis, the values of *Ajrih Asih* materialized as a collective consciousness, where *Ajrih* nurtured resilience amid trauma and *Asih* inspired selfless service rooted in spiritual connectedness. Formulated through participants' intentional experiences, the theory stated that heritage architecture embodied living layers beyond meaningful physical form, continually renewed through practice and relationships. However, Van Lith's transcendental vision bridged God, humanity, and nature, uniting reverence and pastoral compassion as the basis of spatial formation and leadership. This ethos materialized during the early phase (1899–1902) through the construction of a rectory, church, and college as *Ajrih* structures. The essence of *Asih* depended on the dormitories, teachers' houses, and a medical center.

As shown in Figure 9, the arrival of religious congregations—FIC and OSF—marked the expansion of *Ajrih Asih* values into a more complex system. The sub-

Ajrih units (*Ajrih 1.1* and *Ajrih 1.2*) and *Asih* (*Asih 1.1* and *Asih 1.2*), namely the brotherhood building, novitiate school, convent, and hospital, were spatial expressions of the internal values associated with the obedience of each

congregation. These individuals remained in the governance system. Moreover, the relationships formed centers of spiritual strength and service, rooted in respect and charity derived from Catholic teachings.

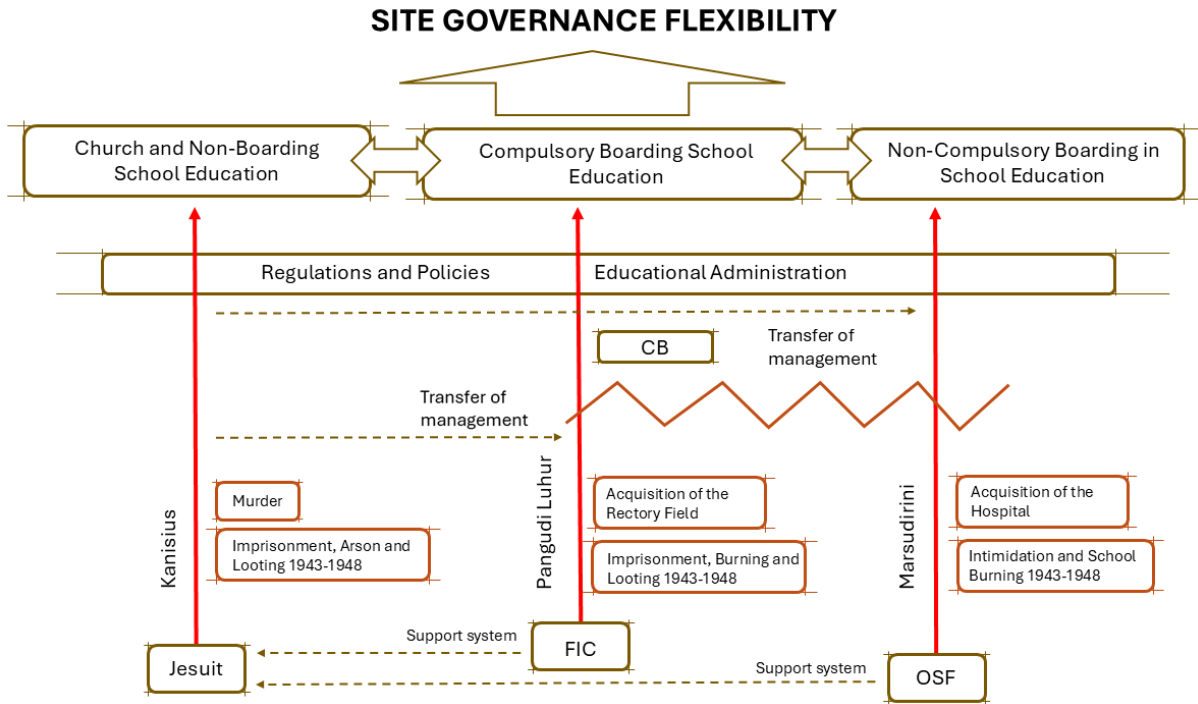


Figure 7. Site Governance Flexibility: The diagram shows the adaptive site governance, connecting institutions, resilience, collaboration, and spatial continuity. (Source: Author)

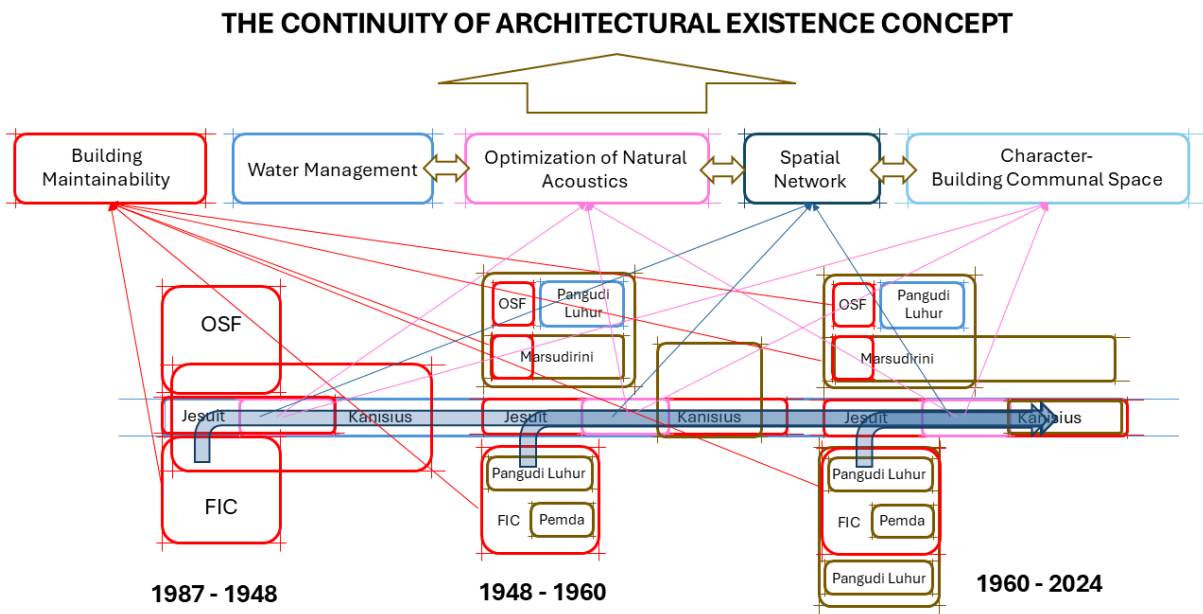


Figure 8. The Concept of Interconnected networks sustained governance, education, and architectural continuity. (Source: Author)

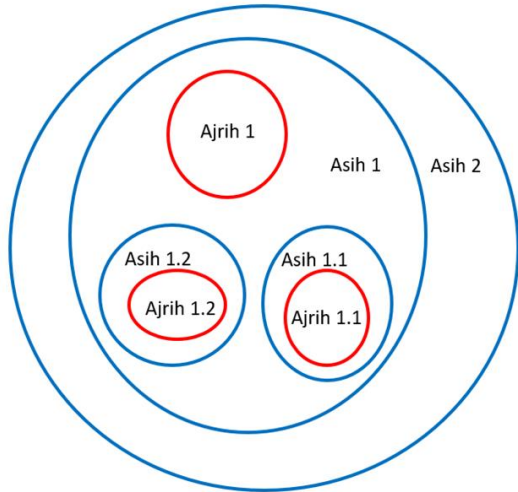
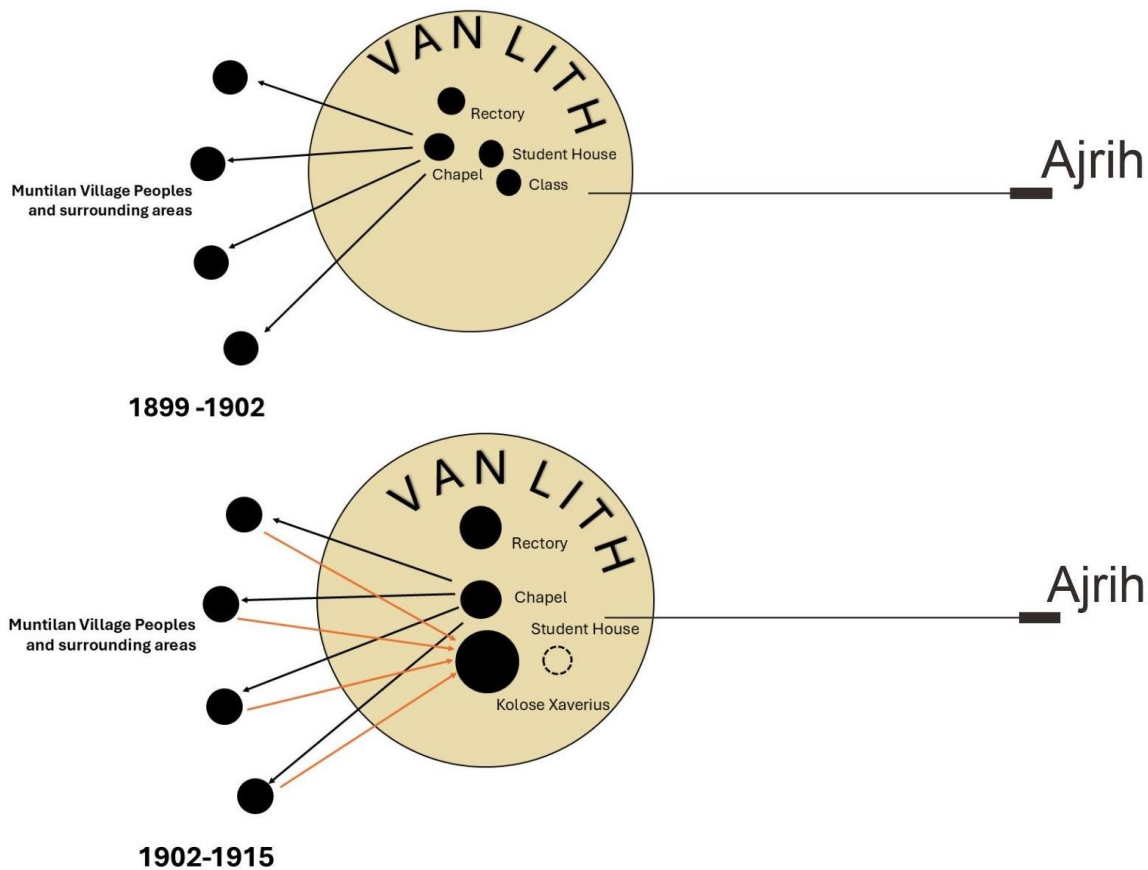
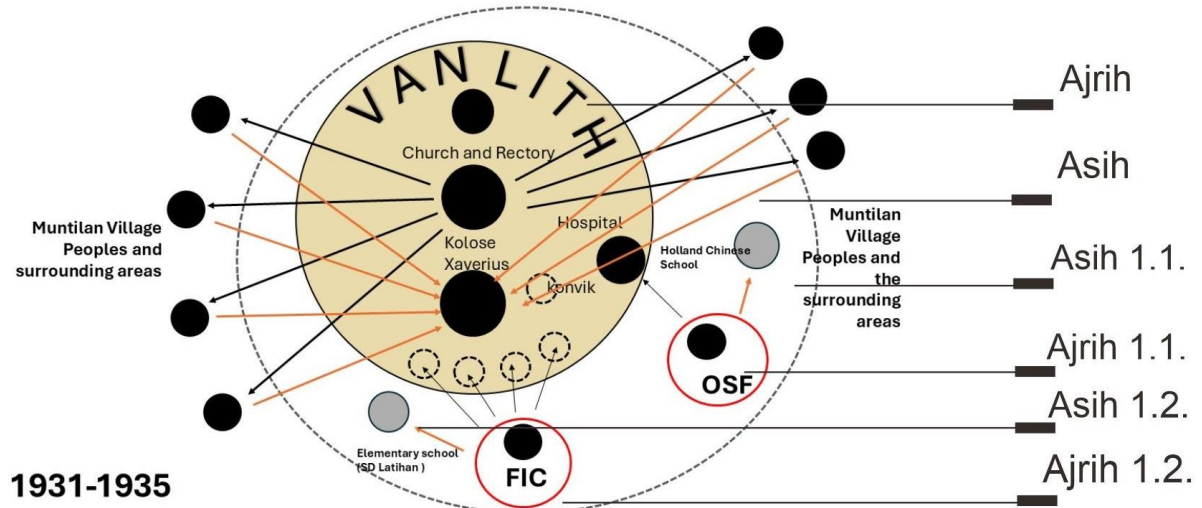
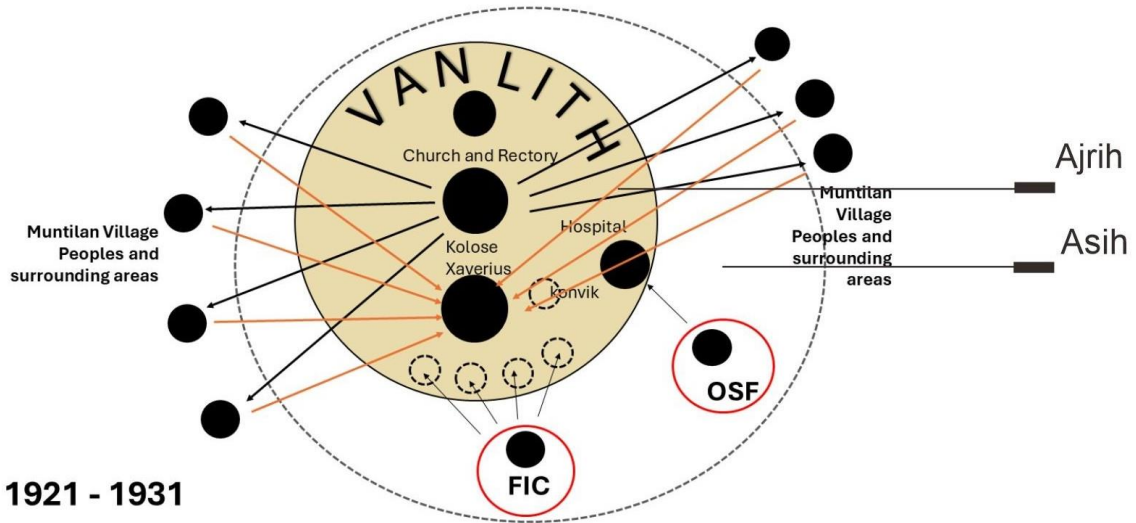
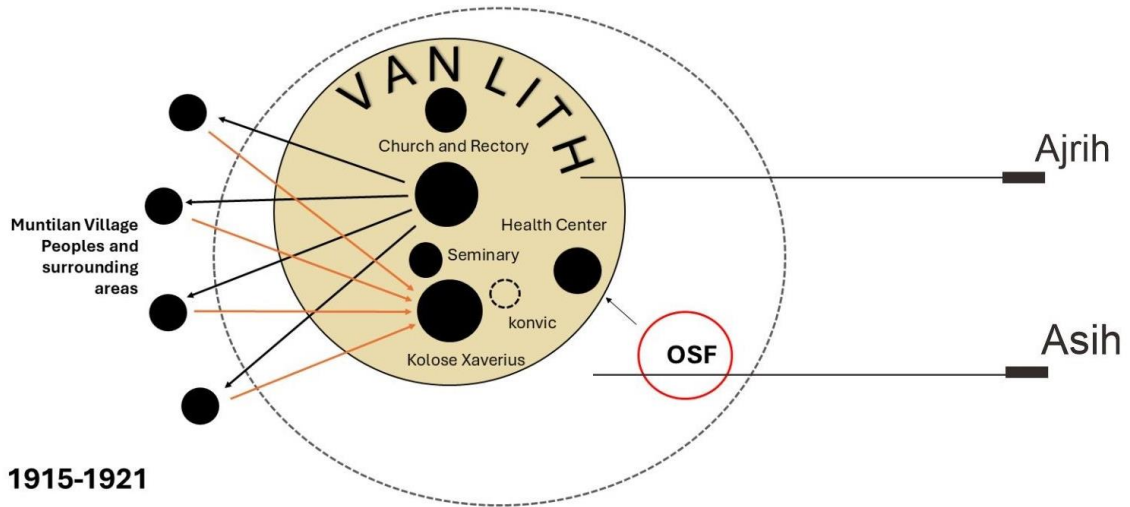


Figure 9. The Circle of *Ajrih Asih* in the Conceptual Level of Material Dimension. (Source: Author)

Figure 10 shows how the concept of place, interpreted transcendently, shaped spiritual territory. Each building, in addition to its architectural function, also expressed the spirit of place, interpreted by its inhabitants in relation to their spiritual lives and service. *Ajrih* is at the core—the center of the place's meaning as sacred and worthy of respect—while *Asih* represented the circles of service extending outward, comprising the surrounding community and village missions.

Spatial dynamics and transcendental values in the time trajectory of *Ajrih Asih* Formation: A Development Following Historical and Spiritual Dynamics. These transcendental spatial meanings are traced across six temporal periods, as shown in Figure 10: (a). 1899–1902 The Beginning of Van Lith's Leadership Trail. During this initiation phase, *Ajrih* manifested in the formation of an inclusive education system and social relations, including the engagement of the local Muslim community. (b). 1902–1915 Consolidation and Expansion. The establishment of colleges and educational infrastructure marked the consolidation phase of *Ajrih* values in a disciplined learning system and community. (c). 1915–1921 Transition to *Ajrih Asih*. The arrival of OSF marked the integration of *Asih* as a dimension of service and compassion service in the daily lives of the education and health communities. (d). 1921–1931 Social Integration and Sustainability. The role of FIC led to the strengthening of a more comprehensive education system. *Ajrih* and *Asih* were translated into institutional management that was socially and interfaith oriented. (e). 1931–1935 Institutionalization and Community Involvement. The value structure of *Ajrih Asih* is deeper and more complex. There is an expansion of social functions and a division of sub-units of values within the education system. (f). 1935–2024 Expansion of Values and Meaningful Conservation. Without changing its location, the influence of *Ajrih Asih* deepens—three schools of thought, across generations, purity maintained.





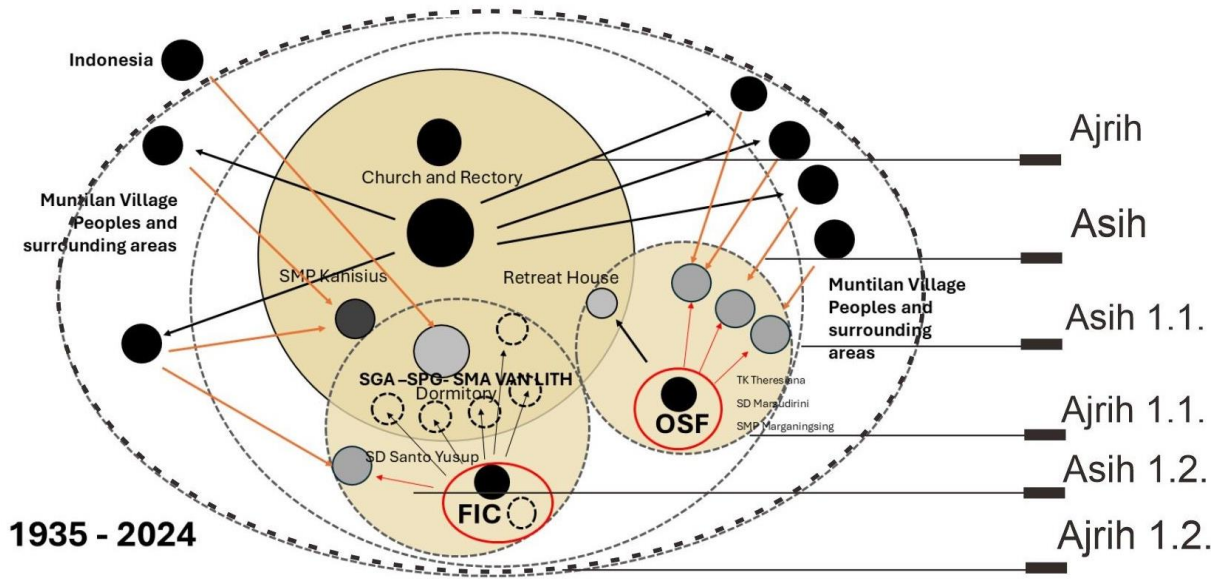


Figure 10. Spatial Formation of *Ajrih Asih* (Source: Author)

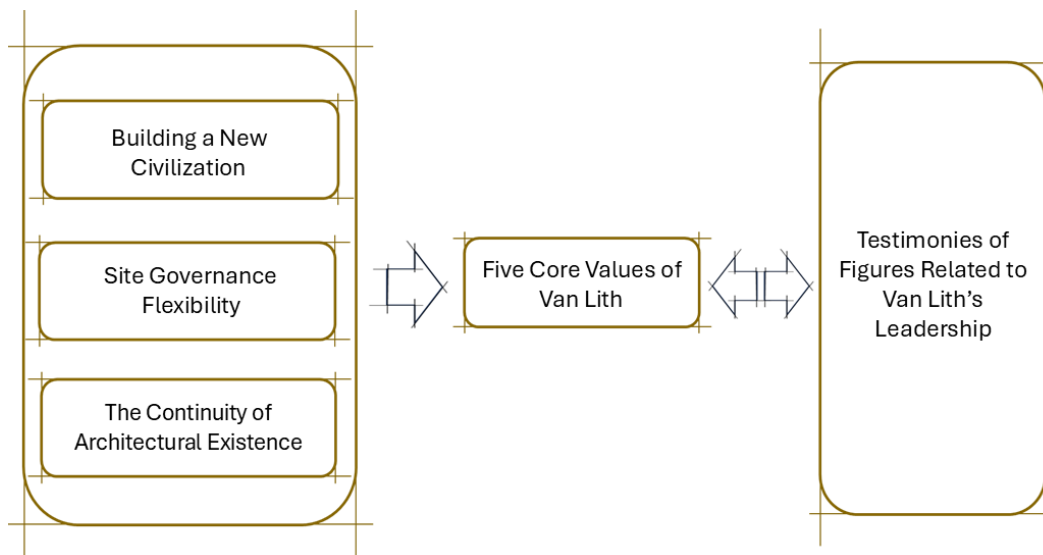


Figure 11. Introduction to the Value of Van Lith Figure. (Source: Author)

Figure 11 illustrates the integrity of *Ajrih's* values as a place of returning to the Creator, based on an interview with Pastor Hasto (2024).

2.5. *Ajrih* as a Spatial Transcendental Principle

Ajrih served as a guiding value in the complex spatial development. This value was initially manifested through the construction of Saint Anthony of Padua Church and Van Lith Rectory, which served as both a spiritual center and an epicenter for leadership decisions (Figure 11). Both symbolized Van Lith's commitment to educating the Javanese community through a distinctive Catholic boarding school approach.

The functions of dormitories, schools, and hospitals were derived from the values of *Asih*, namely love and

service, built on the basic principles of *Ajrih*. The combination of the two produced a functional and valuable landscape structure. Based on this perspective, landscape refers to the result of social and ecological processes, including human interaction with the environment [46], [47], [48].

Van Lith Complex was subjected to a transformation process, from a natural to a cultural landscape through continuous educational and service activities. Additionally, this process created a landscape that combined physical space and spiritual norms.

Following the description above, the cultural landscape in Muntilan reflected the intersection of physical (topography, rivers, building networks) and intangible culture (rituals, values, leadership structures). Meanwhile, landscape referred to a socially constructed system that

served as a living representation of culture preserved through spatial and symbolic order [49], [50].

In this context, *Bethlehem van Java*, the nickname given by Van Lith's students since the early 20th century, served as the site's symbolic and spiritual identity. It was not merely a metaphor, rather the embodiment of the Genius Loci that shaped the soul of the place [51], [52], [53].

The values of *Ajrih* served as a conceptual guideline for the spatial development of Van Lith Complex, initially manifested through Saint Anthony of Padua Church and Van Lith Rectory as spiritual centers, as shown in Figure 12. Both buildings served as epicenters of mission leadership. Architectural functions of the dormitory, school, and hospital were based on the principle of *Asih*, namely charity and service, rooted in the fundamental values of *Ajrih*. The integration of these two values created a functional landscape, rich in spiritual and social aspects.

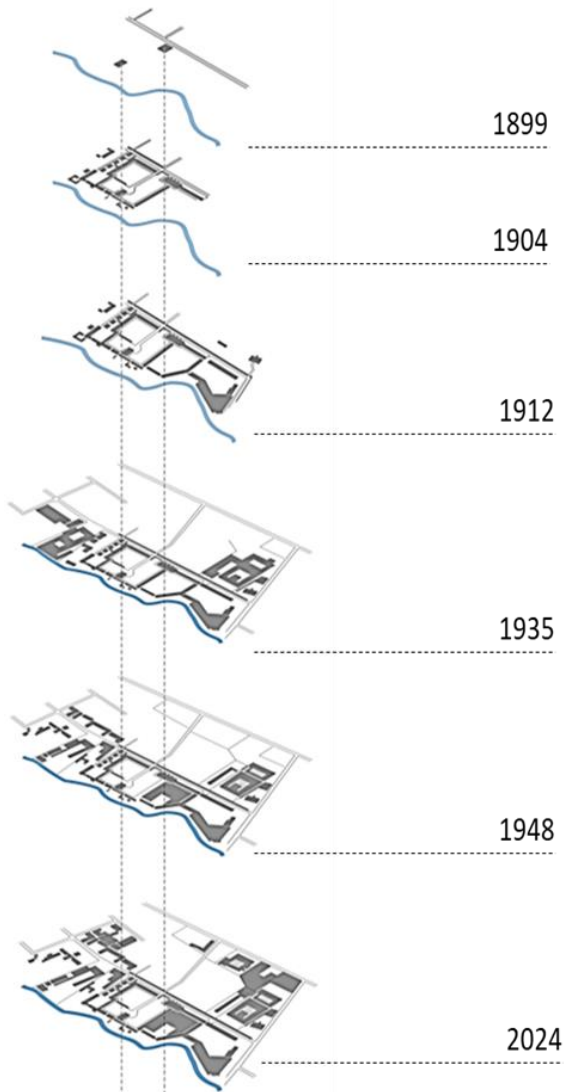


Figure 12. Spatial Development of Van Lith Complex (Source: Author)

Bethlehem van Java solidified the form of genius loci, an essential aspect of architecture that encapsulates the spirit of place, temporal relations, users, and local meaning, as stated by Schulz. In this case, *Bethlehem van Java* is not an aesthetic name, but a form of transcendental meaning regarding the unity between humans, space, and spirituality.

2.6. *Ajrih Asih* Theory

The theories are discussed with participants related to the meaning of *Ajrih Asih*, based on similarities and connections to the research questions and results. This led to the meaningful identification of heritage architecture by residents of Van Lith Complex. Therefore, the normative theories are centered on leadership and heritage architecture management. The theoretical exploration of heritage preservation was conducted to determine the position of *Ajrih Asih*, derived from the phenomenological approach. The diagram of this thought dialogue was in the form of a four-quadrant matrix as shown in Figure 13, with the vertical axis representing the spectrum from *Ajrih* (at the top) to *Asih* (at the bottom), and the horizontal axis showing aspects of Leadership (on the left) to Architecture (on the right). Each quadrant, resulting from the intersection of these two axes, contained keywords that described the manifestation of *Ajrih* or *Asih* values in leadership and architectural fields. The diagram also featured arrows connecting the four quadrants, forming a cyclical flow.

The quadrant model shows the cyclical interplay between *Ajrih* (reverential awe) and *Asih* (compassion service). *Ajrih* established discipline and reverence, while *Asih* integrated compassion and togetherness through light, sound, and space. This cycle sustained continuity, balancing authority with care in heritage leadership and architecture.

Quadrant of *Ajrih*-Leadership: Transcendental Leadership in the Preservation of Heritage Architecture.

Heritage leadership combined administrative responsibilities with collective cultural values, as shown in Figure 14. Additionally, the *Ajrih*-Leadership Quadrant, embedded in Javanese cosmological principles of reverence and obedience, described heritage as a living entity infused with meaningful transcendental and shared consciousness. It focused on five dimensions: Christian spirituality as the basis of leadership, compliance with cultural ethics, respect for heritage dignity, authority through moral example, and continuity of values across generations. These principles, collectively, ensure that heritage preservation extends beyond the physical form to include spiritual and ethical orientations.

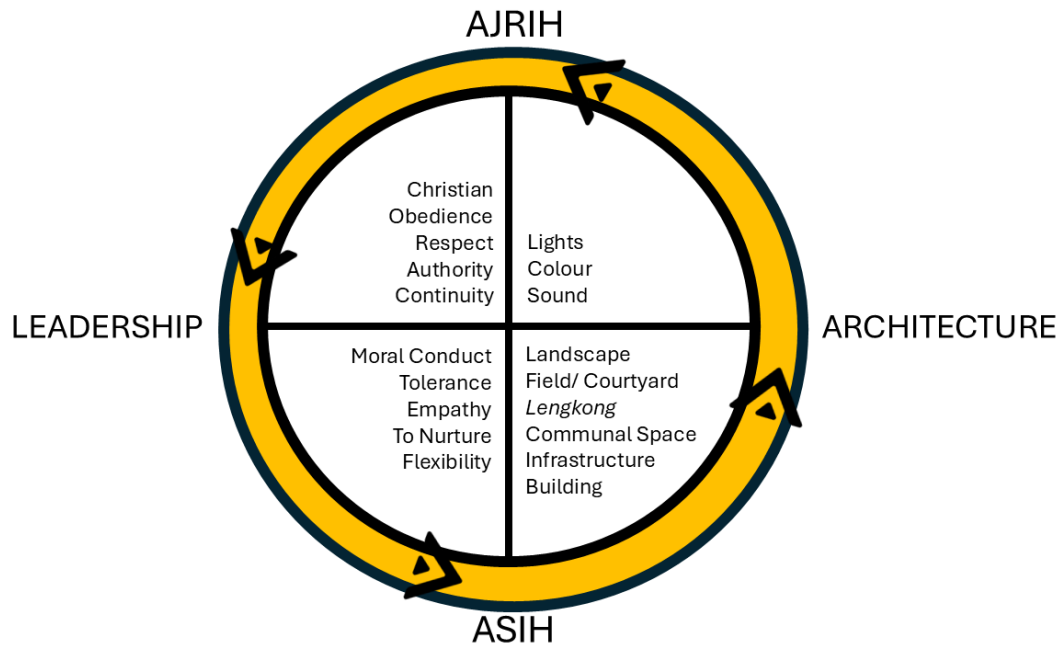


Figure 13. The cyclical quadrant model of *Ajrih Asih* connects leadership and architecture, integrating reverential awe (*Ajrih*) and compassion service (*Asih*) through values, symbols, and space. (Source: Author)

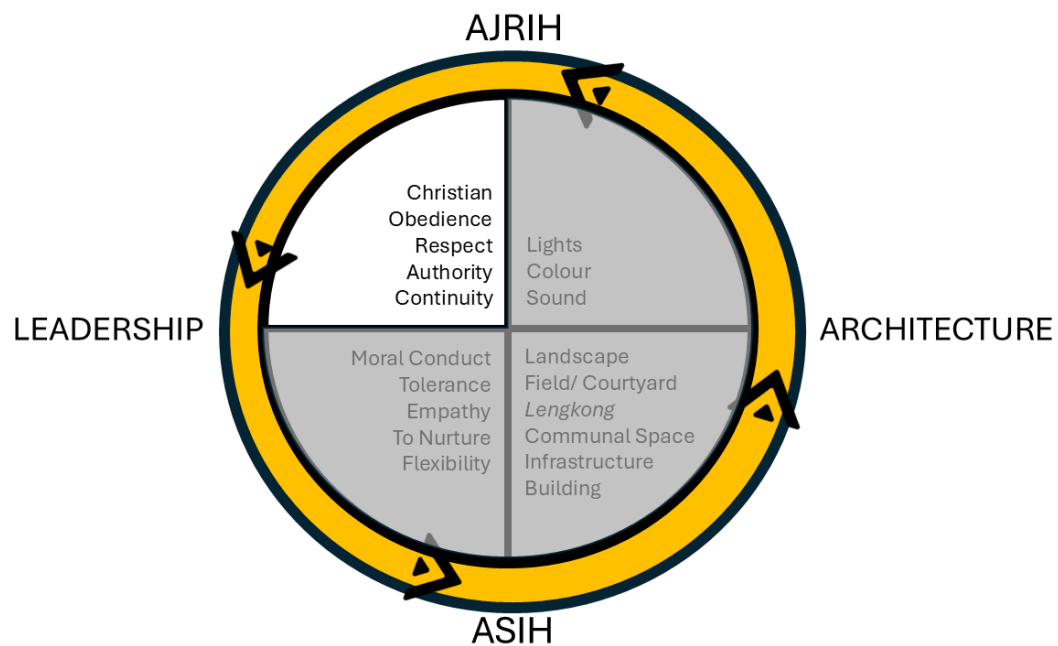


Figure 14. Quadrant of *Ajrih-Leadership* (Source: Author)

Ajrih-leadership is centred on non-material aspects such as etiquette, social harmony, and cultural sensitivity, demanding a balance between ethics, exemplary conduct, and courage. The interaction with *Asih*, which embodied compassion and collective spirit, resulted in the formulation of a cyclical sustainable leadership model. This framework enriched the theoretical discourse on transcendental conservation and also provided practical guidance. *Ajrih Asih* supported contextual, inclusive, and resilient heritage governance by strengthening community

participation and embedding reverential compassion values.

In this system, leaders grounded in *Ajrih* values tended to consider non-material deliberations—such as etiquette, social harmony, and cultural sensitivity—when making preservation decisions. Consequently, leadership in heritage architecture based on *Ajrih* demanded a balance between spiritual strength, ethical exemplarity, and the courage to maintain inherited values in the context of an ever-changing era.

Quadrant of Leadership-*Asih*: The Shift from Authority to Caring in Heritage Conservation Leadership.

Following the description above, heritage leadership must progress beyond authority to conform with changing social and cultural contexts. The Leadership-*Asih* Quadrant signified a shift from *Ajrih* values of obedience and respect to *Asih* values of love, care, and flexibility, as shown in Figure 15. This transition reframed leadership from hierarchical authority to dialogic, empathetic relations, forming a bridge between transcendental principles and community needs as shown in Figure 15. Furthermore, the quadrant embodied five values, namely etiquette, depicting respectful and non-coercive engagement, Tolerance, promoting inclusivity and intercultural dialogue, Caring, prioritizing empathy and attention to social impacts, Nurturing/Preservation, expressed through policies that sustain heritage function and vitality as well as Flexibility, enabling contextual adaptation without undermining identity.

Based on this perspective, *Asih* leadership, practically advanced participatory preservation, with communities as active agents, alongside flexible policy, where adaptive reuse supports social and economic sustainability. Moreover, by embedding compassion into governance, this quadrant addressed the limitations of structuralist approaches, ensuring that heritage conservation preserved both the physical form and the lived meaning across generations.

Quadrant of *Asih*-Architecture: Architecture Transforming Values in Heritage Spaces.

The *Asih* value embodied love, care, flexibility, and relational continuity, manifested in physical and spatial heritage forms. These reflect concern for space, time, and human relationships, functioning not as inert objects but

living entities animated by inherited values, as shown in Figure 16. Awareness of *Asih* impacted forms that blended harmoniously with the environment, including green landscapes for ecological contemplation, fields as social centres, and arches symbolizing flexibility and temporal continuity. Community spaces were designed to be inclusive and participatory reinforced tolerance, civility, and communal living, while infrastructure integrated function, comfort, and spirituality. The diverse buildings were regarded as living symbols of social and religious values, leading to the formulation of three guiding principles. This included (1) space relates to community historical significance, (2) form adapts flexibly to contemporary needs while retaining spiritual essence, and (3) space unites rather than divides. Furthermore, *Asih* ensured continuity, meaning, and functionality, positioning architecture as a living soul that sustains heritage in respect to daily communal activities.

Quadrant of Architecture-*Ajrih*: Architecture as a Form of Transcendental Submission.

The *Ajrih* quadrant framed architecture as a medium of spiritual submission, expressed through light, color, and sound. Furthermore, these elements transcended material form, connecting space to divine presence as shown in Figure 17. Light symbolized awareness and peace, as in the FIC Chapel, where illumination surrounds rather than outlines, fostering contemplation. Reflecting on this perspective, color conveyed harmony. For example, white and yellow depicted purity and liturgical majesty, respectively, while stained glass represented reverence and silence. Additionally, sound provided resonance, with natural reverberations, echoes, and ambient noises uniting the community in sacred awareness. These elements collectively created experiences of reverence, humility, and recognition of human limitation.

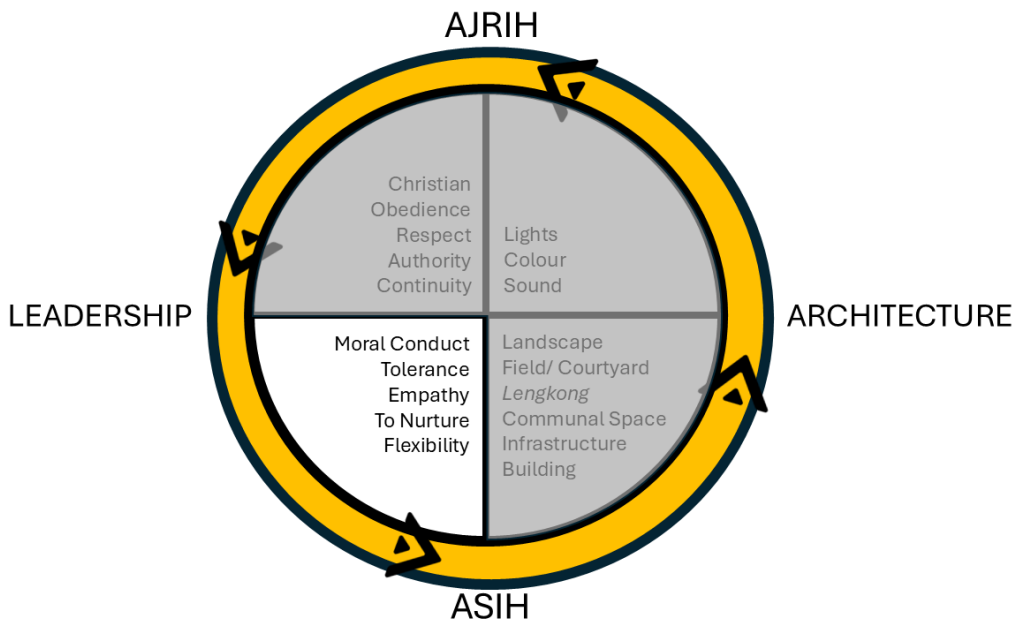


Figure 15. Quadrant of Leadership- *Asih* (Source: Author)

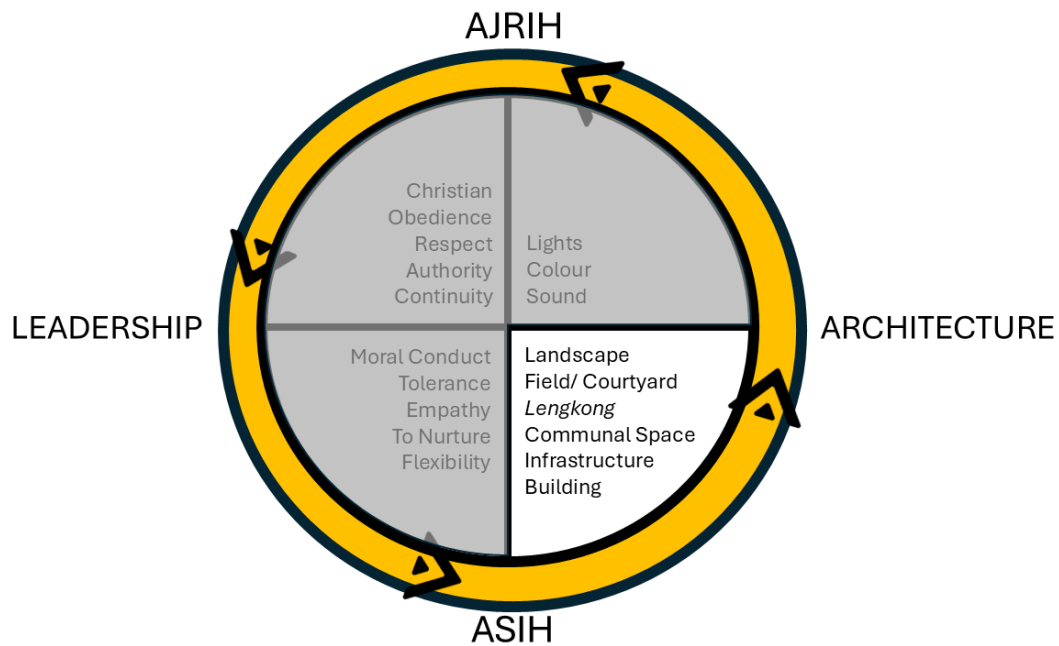


Figure 16. Quadrant of *Asih*-Architecture (Source: Author)

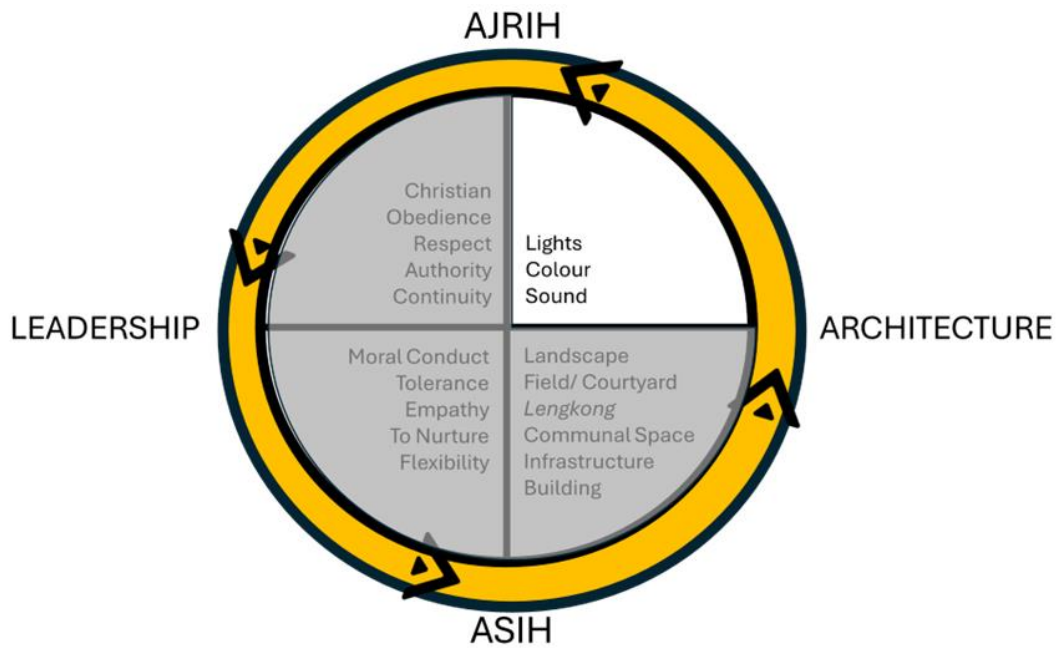


Figure 17. Quadrant of Architecture-*Ajrih* (Source: Author)

The architecture of this quadrant functioned as a spiritual bridge, where form supported experience rather than its dominance. Within the *Ajrih Asih* framework, this balance complemented leadership; *Ajrih* without *Asih* risked rigidity, while *Asih* without *Ajrih* weakened authority. As a result, the quadrant ensured that heritage architecture sustained both sacred meaning and human connection, integrating reverence with compassion in preservation.

2.7. Understanding Keywords in *Ajrih Asih* Theory

This study proved that the *Ajrih Asih* theory was formulated from lived practices within the Van Lith Complex, where reverential awe (*ajrih*) and compassion service (*asih*) shaped both governance and spatial continuity. The theory was distilled from intergenerational practices, such as Jesuit inculturation strategies, FIC and OSF educational missions, alongside Pangudi Luhur’s

adaptive school management, rather than offering abstract principles. These practices collaboratively showed how heritage spaces functioned as *living systems* sustained by values embedded in daily rituals, ecological care, and community solidarity.

The four-quadrant model provided a practical view with respect to understanding how leadership and architecture continuously interacted. For example, *Ajrih-Leadership* was reflected in moral authority during liturgical governance, while *Asih-Architecture* was embodied in communal fields and inclusive dormitory spaces. The interactions explained why the Van Lith Complex had endured crises, fires, political upheavals, and land-use pressures, while maintaining its educational and spiritual identity.

Ajrih Asih theoretically enriches global heritage discourse by outlining spiritual intentionality alongside material authenticity, reflecting UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape and the Nara Document. Practically, it offered guidance for Catholic heritage governance in Indonesia, ranging from alumni-based funding models to participatory conservation, which includes local residents and interfaith communities. Therefore, *Ajrih Asih* refers to a local contribution and a transferable model, connecting Southeast Asian heritage practices with international debates on resilience and living heritage.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, *Ajrih Asih* theory formulated a paradigm for the preservation of heritage architecture based on spiritual experience, transcendental awareness, and social ethics. The positioning of Van Lith Complex as a practical laboratory, enabled this theory to successfully formulate the dialectical relationship between reverential awe (*Ajrih*) and compassion service (*Asih*) as the foundation for preserving religious spaces.

Ajrih Asih outlined that heritage spaces were the embodiment of collective consciousness, continuously renewed through practice, social relations, and community values. The four-quadrant framework explained the dynamics of architecture and leadership, as well as offered a systematic structure for examining the transformation of values into spatial forms.

Theoretically, *Ajrih Asih* met the evaluative criteria of the theory evaluated based on four main dimensions, namely scope, abstraction level, parsimony, and language precision. This framework was applied in modern empirical political theory, which centered on the integration of deductive processes and empirical testing. In line with *Ajrih Asih's* concise and open framework for empirical testing, the theory conformed with Popper's falsification principle. Additionally, the dichotomous-complementary values of *Ajrih Asih* bridged transcendental aspects and practicalities of preservation design.

The practical implications of this research were broad,

from religious spatial design, participatory conservation policies, to the formation of spiritual value-based leadership. Accordingly, this theory was transformed into an evaluation instrument or design guide for other religious communities and sites. *Ajrih Asih* theory should be considered as Indonesia's contribution to the discourse of heritage preservation based on meaningful spirituality, and social resilience.

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