

Research Article

Sustainable Disaster Heritage Tourism Evaluation at the Aceh Tsunami Museum: An Architectural Criticism Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The Aceh Tsunami Museum is a monumental symbol of the collective memory and resilience of the Acehnese people in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Designed by Ridwan Kamil, the building was originally intended as a memorial and educational facility, but over time it has faced challenges in maintaining the philosophical spirit that underpins its architectural form. This architectural critique study uses a descriptive-reflective qualitative approach with a dialectical architectural thinking critique method through the basic idea of Spirit of Place on the mental connection between humans and places in architectural design principles towards the concept of metaphorical architecture as a meaning-forming element, presenting the Tsunami Museum building in Banda Aceh as a research object. The dialectic between ideal ideas and empirical reality is the focus of the research analysis, which is presented between the reflection of the physical space and the mentality of visitors, referring to specific findings. The results of the reflection show a shift in design, whereby the symbolic power of the museum through its spiral shape, water, and lighting has created a strong vertical monumental impression, while the study of the spirit of place dialectic shows a horizontal design direction interpreted from the widespread impact of the damage.

Keywords: genius loci; spirit of place; metaphorical architecture; dialectics of architecture

1. INTRODUCTION

Historical tourism is a form of tourism that focuses on remembering, understanding, and preserving the values of the past that are important to the identity of a nation (Rahmat, 2021). This concept is not limited to archaeological relics or royal sites, but also includes monumental events that shape the collective consciousness of society, such as natural disasters, wars, and social movements (Hadi, 2025). In various regions, historical tourism has developed in various forms, ranging from art and archaeological museums, monuments of struggle, to disaster museums that record the trauma and resilience of communities (Krista, 2024). This phenomenon shows that each region has unique potential in creating historical spaces that reflect its journey of identity and social resilience (Putri, 2019). In this context, the Aceh Tsunami Museum in Banda Aceh is one of the most significant representations in the collective memory of the Indonesian people, as it stands on a narrative of deep sorrow and the spirit of the Acehnese people's recovery after the 2004 disaster.

However, over time, architectural forms that were originally intended as symbols of remembrance and education began to face issues of sustainability of meaning (Hasan & Ikaputra, 2025). Buildings constructed to commemorate tragedies and humanitarian values can experience a degradation of essence when their philosophical form no longer represents the events that gave rise to them (Lee, 2024). In the context of the Aceh Tsunami Museum, a conceptual question arises as to the extent to which the physical form of the building, in terms of its style, composition, and architectural expression, can still convey the message of the tsunami disaster to current and future generations, inspiring the people of Aceh in general and the people of Banda Aceh in particular to rise up, as a source of strength for life, to enhance development as a form of disaster preparedness, and to foster a sense of kinship among communities to nurture, protect, and progress together. This is the spiritual value of the museum as a historical disaster site with a strong sense of ownership and emotional attachment embedded in the lives of the community (Faqih Batubara, 2024). When formal elements lose their connection to their original meaning, museums risk becoming mere visual objects rather than reflective spaces that foster historical awareness (Zaninović et al., 2023). Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate the sustainability of the symbolic and spiritual values contained within the architecture, particularly in relation to the spirit of place that forms the basis of visitors' existential experiences.

Architecture plays an important role in maintaining continuity of meaning and building sustainable historical tourism (Rahmawati et al., 2025). Through the language of form, material, and space, architecture not only creates a physical container, but also provides emotional and spiritual experiences that can strengthen collective historical awareness (Liana & Albertus, 2023). In this case, the sustainability of historical tourism is not only measured by the number of visitors or economic aspects, but also by the extent to which buildings are able to maintain their cultural identity and the collective memory contained within them (Zhang et al., 2020). The Aceh Tsunami Museum is a relevant case study because its design was created to represent the philosophy of water, the journey of the soul, and life after disaster. However, there is a need to review how these representations continue to resonate with the essential meaning of the tsunami disaster in the context of architectural phenomenology, so that the museum does not lose its spirit and identity.

This study does not aim to answer all the complexities of the issues between architecture, history, and sustainability, but rather seeks to examine the spirit of the philosophy behind the design of the Aceh Tsunami Museum as a historical disaster tourist attraction through a phenomenological approach and architectural criticism. The research analysis uses the Spirit of Place instrument in architecture, which explains the relationship between the philosophical form of the object of study and the disaster event, providing answers to the dialectical architecture of the local community's mental approach to development. The combination of these two approaches is expected to produce architectural criticism that not only assesses visual aesthetics but also reveals the extent to which the building's form still reflects the philosophical meaning and values of historical tourism sustainability. Thus, this study emphasizes the importance of architecture as a living medium of remembrance, namely as a space capable of preserving collective memory so that it does not fade with time.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses an exploratory qualitative approach with the dialectical architectural criticism method (Paraskevas, 2018). A qualitative approach is used because there are qualitative phenomena that can only be interpreted through observation (Leonard A. Jason & David S. Glenwick, 2016), while an exploratory approach is used to explore elements of reality that connect the form and context of architecture (Bobby Harreveld, Mike Danaher, Celeste Lawson, 2016). Data collection was achieved through observation of the form and capacity of the space. The main analytical instrument in this study used Genius Loci, proposed by Christian Norberg Schulz, to reveal the relationship between form and space capacity (Christian Norberg-Schulz, 1976). The second instrument in this study was Karl Marx's dialectic, which was used to read the relationship between the ideal idea of architecture and the reality of meaning embodied in the experience of space (Alex Callinicos, 2011). This approach serves as a critical thinking tool to assess the extent to which the architectural form of the Aceh Tsunami Museum still retains its philosophical meaning as a living and sustainable memorial space for the community.

Within the framework of dialectics, the analysis is conducted in three stages: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis (Parlan & Bahar, 2024). The thesis stage examines the basic ideas and philosophy behind the museum's design as formulated by its architect, Ridwan Kamil, through a metaphorical architectural approach. At this stage, the physical form of the museum, such as waves, spirals, and water, is read as a symbolic representation of catastrophic events and human resurrection. The antithesis stage highlights the contradictions that arise between these ideal meanings and the actual experiences of visitors, including how the public's perception of space has shifted from reflective to aesthetic. Meanwhile, the synthesis stage uses Christian Norberg-Schulz's theory of architectural phenomenology to reinterpret the relationship between humans, space, and meaning. Through the Spirit of Place approach, this stage seeks to discover the true essence of the spirit of place, namely the existential awareness that arises from an authentic and meaningful experience of space.



Figure 1. The Aceh Tsunami Museum is located at Jl. Sultan Iskandar Muda No.1, Sukaramai, Baiturrahman District, Banda Aceh City, Aceh

Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling (Del & Tabrizi, 2020), because the Aceh Tsunami Museum is an icon of Aceh province as a monumental building with high historical value as a symbol of the community's recovery after the 2004 tsunami, which attracted worldwide attention and became a national disaster history tourist destination. The building

was designed with a metaphorical architectural concept in the shape of a wave, with elements of water, light, and spiral spaces that are rich in symbolic meaning.

Data collection was conducted through direct observation at the site, visual documentation of architectural elements, in-depth interviews with visitors, museum managers, and local architects, as well as a literature study of theoretical sources and building design documents. Data analysis was conducted descriptively and interpretively, by linking empirical observations of architectural forms (Liudas Samalavicius, 2012) with theoretical reflections based on dialectics and phenomenology. The results of this stage are expected to reveal the extent to which the form and meaning of the Aceh Tsunami Museum's architecture still reflect the values of *genius loci* and its contribution to the sustainability of disaster history tourism in Aceh.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interpretation of architecture as a space for experience and existential awareness occupies a central position in Christian Norberg-Schulz's thinking on *genius loci*, where architecture is understood as a medium that brings forth the spirit of a place through the close relationship between humans, space, and the natural context (Norberg-Schulz, 1979). Within this framework, museums or memorial spaces function not only as physical containers, but also as inner landscapes that allow visitors to remember, reflect on, and relive the tragedies that led to the construction of these buildings (Rosalia et al., 2024). The Aceh Tsunami Museum, one of the most important disaster monuments in Indonesia, was designed to fulfill this role through the symbolism of form and spatial metaphor (Oktaverina & Anisa, 2022). However, over time, tensions have arisen between the design intentions and the reality of the visitor experience, demanding a critical evaluation of the extent to which the space still retains its spirit of place.

Based on the phenomenological perspective, memorial buildings should mediate human encounters with the deepest values of events, including sadness, loss, the continuity of life, and spiritual closeness to God (Liudas Samalavicius, 2012). However, many studies show that buildings with strong metaphorical characteristics often experience aesthetic drift, i.e., a shift from reflective spaces to visual objects that are perceived primarily as aesthetic icons of the city (Lucchini, 2023). This kind of shift is evident in the Aceh Tsunami Museum, where visitors' experiences are more often oriented towards admiration for form rather than existential reflection on the 2004 tragedy. This is in line with phenomenological criticism that the atmosphere of a memorial space can be weakened if form no longer opens the way for human encounters with deeper meaning. The contradiction between the initial design intent and the actual experience is then understood more sharply through Karl Marx's dialectical approach to architecture, which allows for an interpretation of the relationship between ideal ideas and social realities that arise from human interaction with space (Heynen & Loosen, 2019). In the context of this study, the thesis is the ideal meaning of a museum as designed through the metaphors of water, waves, spirals, and the journey of the soul. The antithesis is the weakening of the spirit of place because museums tend to be experienced as visual icons and aesthetic tourist attractions. The synthesis is a reinterpretation through the *genius loci* theory to rediscover the substance of meaning that museums should present as memorial spaces. This dialectical approach produces a new way of reading that places museums not only as design objects, but as a living relational process between buildings, visitors, and the socio-cultural context of the Acehnese people.

Studies on memorial architecture show that the meaning of a space is not only formed by its physical form, but also by the natural and historical context that surrounds it (Wagoner & Brescó, 2022). This is where the relevance of the *genius loci* theory structure, namely place, natural place, and man-made place, becomes the most appropriate framework for reading the Aceh Tsunami Museum as a whole. Place emphasizes the meaning of the museum's existence as a representation of the tragedy and resilience of the Acehnese people; natural place reveals the museum's relationship with its natural context and collective memory of the sea; while man-made place discusses how the museum's metaphorical architecture supports or weakens the essence of memorial space. This separation facilitates phenomenological reading but still allows for deep dialectical criticism. An initial reading of the field observation results shows that the spirit of place at the Aceh Tsunami Museum has not completely disappeared, but is in a weakened state due to an imbalance between the metaphorical form and the depth of the spatial experience. Visual elements such as the undulating mass, the tsunami corridor, the dramatic lighting, and the prayer room actually have strong potential to serve as gateways to an existential experience. However, the dominant symbolism and monumental aesthetics tend to make visitors experience the museum in a spectacular rather than contemplative manner (Syurya Warda & Galax Putra Jagat Paryoko, 2025). The dialectic between symbolism and phenomenology shows that the museum still holds potential meaning, but requires a more in-depth interpretive approach in order for the spirit of place to reemerge.

Based on this theoretical foundation, the results and discussion in the following section will map the Aceh Tsunami Museum through three main categories of *genius loci*, namely place, natural place, and man-made place, by applying Marx's dialectic (P. Kopnin, 2014) in each subpoint as a critical tool. This analysis aims to reveal the relationship between form, spatial experience, and essential meaning that should live in the museum as a memorial space for disasters. This approach allows for a more comprehensive and reflective reading, so that the resulting architectural criticism not only touches on aesthetic aspects, but also touches on the core of human experience in dealing with the collective memory of the tsunami.

3.1 The Dimensions of Existence and Meaning of Memorials at the Aceh Tsunami Museum

Results The existence of the Aceh Tsunami Museum as a memorial space cannot be separated from the tragedy of December 26, 2004, which became the existential foundation of this building. In Norberg-Schulz's concept of place, a place acquires meaning when it is able to provide an existential foothold, namely a deep connection between humans, space, and memory (Schulz, 1986). The Aceh Tsunami Museum was built not only as a repository of historical information, but also as a contemplative space that invites visitors to reflect on the reality of the disaster, reevaluate their relationship with life, and revive the spiritual awareness that arose from the event.



Figure 2. The exterior of the Aceh Tsunami Museum is spiral-shaped, resembling the shape of the tsunami waves at that time

In the perspective of the thesis, architect Ridwan Kamil translates the memorial's intention through the metaphors of water, the spiral of life, and inner journey (Dafrina, 2013). Spaces such as the Tsunami Corridor (Space of Fear), the Memorial Hall containing a series of tsunami visual monitors, and the Well of Prayer (Space of Sorrow) with the names of victims on its vertical walls are designed as spatial experiences that stimulate sadness, fear, hope, and resurrection. At this stage, the museum appears to combine the local spirituality of Aceh with the narrative of post-disaster reconstruction, resulting in an atmosphere of existential value. However, an antithesis arises when the memorial's intention shifts due to contemporary visiting patterns that are more visually oriented than reflective. The phenomenon of aesthetic drift is evident when spaces designed as quiet spaces, such as the Tsunami Corridor and Prayer Well, are more often used as backdrops for selfies or centers of aesthetic attention. Museums lose some of their existential power when the experience of space is reduced to visual sensation rather than inner reflection.

This contradiction is even more apparent in tsunami artifact rooms and historical display rooms, where the belongings of victims are often viewed in passing without any deep emotional involvement. In phenomenology, this indicates a loss of atmosphere as the essence of a place (Sicovic, 2023). When the atmosphere weakens, a place becomes merely a location, rather than a lived space. Nevertheless, the synthesis shows that place is not entirely lost. The Well of Prayer, with the names of victims carved in a circle and vertical lighting from above, still presents a stirring silence. This space produces a stable existential experience due to its minimal aestheticization. The Memorial Hall, which contains dozens of tsunami visual monitors, also remains a factual space that brings back the reality of the disaster through authentic documentation.



Figure 3. Memorial Hall, a room with 26 monitor stands that visitors can use to watch videos or clips of the 2004 Aceh tsunami

Marxist dialectics help us interpret this tension as a historical process involving design intent, changes in user behavior, and negotiations over the meaning of space. The thesis, which is the architect's intention to create a memorial space; the antithesis, which is the museum's transformation into a visual tourist attraction; and the synthesis, which is a

reinterpretation of the meaning of place, imply that the museum's existence is constantly evolving within the social and spiritual dynamics of society. Therefore, the place at the Aceh Tsunami Museum is in a liminal position: symbolically strong, but existentially fragile. The spirit of place can only be maintained if the experience of space is redirected towards contemplation, rather than mere visual consumption.

3.2 Integration of Natural Elements and Memory Landscapes in the Formation of Museum Identity

Norberg-Schulz's concept of natural place emphasizes the relationship between architecture and the natural elements that shape the identity of a place (Alifa & Ridwan, 2022). In the context of the Aceh Tsunami Museum, “nature” is not only the geography of Banda Aceh, but also the waves, water, wind, light, and all the natural dimensions that framed the 2004 tragedy. The museum's architecture seeks to mediate the traumatic relationship between the people of Aceh and the sea, which is both a source of life and disaster.



Figure 4. Illustration of the facade and roof of the Aceh Tsunami Museum.

Within the framework of the thesis, the museum translates the power of nature through formal metaphors and the atmosphere of space. The mass of the building resembles waves; the Tsunami Corridor is filled with the echoes of water and darkness; dim lighting reflects the atmosphere of chaos. Spaces such as the Audio-Visual Room, Memorial Hall, and Mini Theater reconstruct memories of nature through documentation and live recordings. The symbolism of water here serves as a medium to connect humans with the forces of nature that once destroyed their city.

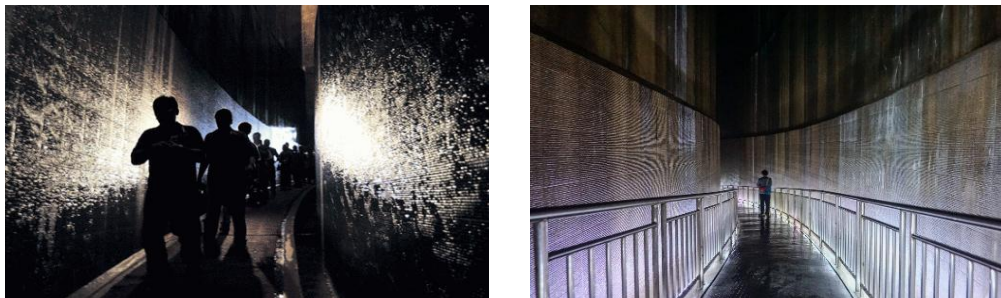


Figure 5. A narrow, dark corridor with the sound of rushing water, interpreted as a Space of Fear (tsunami corridor), is designed to create an immersive experience and a sense of loss through a narrow, dark passageway

However, the antithesis arises when the metaphor develops into an aesthetic effect that loses its existential depth. The experience of water in a dark corridor, for example, is often perceived as a “dramatic attraction” rather than a reminder of disaster. The phenomenon of detached phenomenality occurs when natural symbols are physically present but do not evoke spiritual depth. In Marx's dialectic (Xiang Feng, 2014), this tension can be read as a conflict between the representation of nature (as designed by the architect) and actual experience (as felt by visitors). Waves become form, not force; the sound of water becomes effect, not trauma. This contradiction reveals the loss of the existential relationship between humans and nature that should be at the heart of a natural place museum. However, synthesis opens up possibilities for improvement. Spaces such as the Mini Theater, Documentary Room, and Memorial Hall, which show live footage of the tsunami, have a natural power that cannot be faked by the aestheticization of space. Visual documentation presents nature in its most honest form, not as a metaphor, but as reality. Furthermore, natural place is also present through the geographical context of the museum, which was built in the middle of an area devastated by the tsunami. The changed urban landscape, the collective memory of the community, and the museum's proximity to the affected area reinforce the relationship between architecture and nature. Finally, the natural place at the Aceh Tsunami Museum shows an ongoing dialogue between the symbolism of nature and existential experience. The potential for depth of meaning is enormous, but it requires a more meditative curation of space so that the human-nature relationship can be reestablished spiritually, not just visually.

3.3 Evaluation of Artificial Architecture: Form, Spatial Metaphors, and the Dynamics of Visitor Experience

In Norberg-Schulz's theory, man-made places refer to how architectural works are able to construct meaning through form, material, and atmosphere created by humans (Vecco, 2020). The Aceh Tsunami Museum displays human interpretations of natural tragedies through metaphors of spirals, waves, light, and dark spaces. Spaces such as the Spiral Corridor (Space of Confusion), Light of Hope, Memorial Hall, and Well of Prayer show how humans attempt to reorganize trauma into architecture. In the thesis stage, visual metaphors are used to construct a narrative of humanity's journey from fear to hope. The spiral corridor depicts the confusion during the disaster; the Light of Hope presents a symbol of resurrection; the Memorial Hall displays documentation of the tsunami; and the Well of Prayers, with the names of victims engraved around its high walls, serves as a space for collective mourning.



Figure 6. The Spiral Corridor or Space of Confusion was designed to depict the confusion of the Acehnese people when the tsunami struck

However, the antithesis arises when the metaphor becomes so dominant that it distracts visitors from their inner experience. The beauty of form actually detracts from the spiritual depth that should emerge from the memorial space. Spaces such as the Space of Hope and the Spiral Corridor are more often judged for their photogenic qualities than for their metaphorical meaning. In this space, the visitor's mental state begins to be neglected by the strong disaster event, as represented by the atmosphere poured on the floor of the building below. From within, the antithesis is more visible in the meaning of the museum's design, which is arranged vertically in interpreting the experience of the tsunami disaster. Where the vertical architectural design of the broad lighting at the top of the building that dims down to the building's bottom is analogous to the flow of water interpreted by the metaphor of the actual event. This is very different from the meaning of the form of the interval of sea waves that spread horizontally hitting all the land they encounter. With this duality of meaning, there is concern that the museum design is only a symbol of the history of disasters because it is not in line with the frequency of actual disasters or the deviation of the building's architectural form from the meaning as the reason for the museum building's existence.

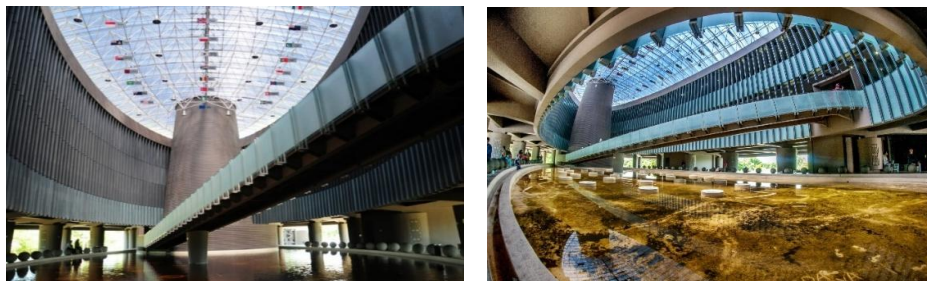


Figure 7. Space of Hope or bridge of hope displays 54 flags of countries that participated in donating and providing assistance to Aceh after the tsunami

Contradictions are also apparent in the behavior of visitors at the Memorial Hall and Prayer Well, where moments of silence are often disrupted by non-reflective activities such as taking photos or talking loudly. This demonstrates a weakening of dwelling; the human ability to “reside inwardly” within a space. Through synthesis, phenomenology helps to confirm that museums still have great capacity to bring man-made places to life if the atmosphere of the space is refined. The Well of Prayer is the most existentially powerful space, where the spiral space, the names of the victims, and the resonance of voices present an experience of grief that is not easily replaced. The Memorial Hall, as a space for factual documentation, also has stable pedagogical and emotional power.



Figure 8. Space of Sorrow is a prayer room at the end of the circulation area with a calm and dim atmosphere as a symbol of “rebirth” after the disaster

This synthesis also serves as a critique of sustainable tourism architecture: museums must reduce the dominance of dramatic effects and strengthen contemplative experiences so that the meaning of memorials is not eroded by aestheticization. The spirit of place can only be restored through a balance between metaphorical form and atmospheric depth. Thus, the man-made place at the Aceh Tsunami Museum exists in a dialectic between symbolism and existentialism. Metaphorical architecture provides visual power, but it is the phenomenology of space that ensures the museum remains alive as a space for healing and the formation of collective consciousness.

4. CONCLUSION

The configuration of space and form at the Aceh Tsunami Museum shows that the genius loci contained within it works through three main layers, namely place, natural place, and man-made place, which interact with each other to form its memorial identity. Analysis shows that the museum has a strong intention to create a contemplative space through the metaphors of water, the spiral of life, and a dark and quiet atmosphere that marks the emotional journey of visitors. However, the dialectic between thesis (architectural intent and metaphorical message), antithesis (shift in meaning due to the aestheticization of space and visitor behavior), and synthesis (reinterpretation of meaning through phenomenology) reveals that the spirit of place experiences significant tension. Through synthesis, this study affirms that the sustainability of disaster history tourism cannot be achieved solely through the power of formal symbolism, but through the museum's ability to restore the spirit of place by reconstituting the atmosphere, narrative, and rhythm of the space. Some spaces, such as the Tsunami Corridor, Space of Hope, and Spiral Corridor, tend to shift toward becoming visual commodities, while spaces such as the Prayer Well and Memorial Hall remain capable of maintaining their existential intensity because they present grief and facts in a more authentic manner. Thus, this museum finds itself in a position where, on the one hand, it possesses strong symbolic power, but on the other hand, it is vulnerable to a reduction in meaning due to changes in tourist consumption patterns.

Within the framework of the epistemology of cycle, the relationship between form, experience, and meaning in museums can be interpreted as a cycle of architectural knowledge that continuously moves from design intent to spatial experience, from experience to reinterpretation, and from interpretation to the formation of new meaning. The synthesis of Marx's dialectic provides direction for the critique of sustainable architecture, that the sustainability of historical tourism does not lie solely in the physical structure of the building or the number of visitors, but in the museum's ability to maintain visitors' existential awareness of the disaster that gave birth to it. The Aceh Tsunami Museum will remain alive as a memorial space if it is able to maintain a balance between visual metaphors and a contemplative atmosphere, between aesthetics and spirituality, and between historical narratives and inner experiences. The true sustainability of a museum is not about the endurance of form over time, but about its ability to continue to evoke memories, heal wounds, and build the collective preparedness of the Acehnese people in the present and future.

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