

## *Negotiating Space and Security: The Sociocultural Role of Fences in Kapasan Chinese Settlements, Surabaya*

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**Abstract:** *Amidst urbanization and city development, traditional architectural elements often undergo transformation or risk losing their original meaning. The Chinese settlement in Kapasan, Surabaya, offers an intriguing example of how physical features like fences continue to preserve their symbolic and social functions in a modern context. This study examines the sociocultural role of fences in the Kapasan Chinese settlements in Surabaya, Indonesia, focusing on their significance as physical and symbolic elements. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research investigates how fences serve as boundaries, provide security, and reflect cultural identity within a multiethnic urban environment. Through field observations, interviews, and visual documentation, findings reveal that fences encapsulate historical resilience, cultural values, and adaptive responses to urban challenges. They act as protective barriers, markers of social status, and mediums for cultural expression. However, modernization and generational shifts pose challenges to preserving traditional designs. This research contributes to understanding the interplay between architecture, culture, and societal dynamics in multicultural settings.*

**Keywords:** *Chinese settlement, Pecinan, Cultural Studies, Gated space*

## **Menelusuri Ruang dan Keamanan: Fungsi Sosial Budaya Pagar Rumah dalam Komunitas Tionghoa Kapasan, Surabaya**

**Abstrak:** Di tengah dinamika urbanisasi dan perkembangan kota, elemen-elemen arsitektural tradisional sering kali mengalami transformasi atau bahkan kehilangan makna aslinya. Permukiman Tionghoa di Kapasan, Surabaya, menawarkan contoh menarik tentang bagaimana elemen fisik seperti pagar tetap mempertahankan fungsi simbolik dan sosialnya dalam konteks modern. Penelitian ini mengkaji peran sosial budaya pagar dalam permukiman Tionghoa di Kapasan, Surabaya, Indonesia, dengan fokus pada pentingnya pagar sebagai elemen fisik dan simbolis. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana pagar berfungsi sebagai batas, memberikan keamanan, dan mencerminkan identitas budaya dalam lingkungan perkotaan yang multietnis. Melalui observasi lapangan, wawancara, dan dokumentasi visual, temuan menunjukkan bahwa pagar mencerminkan ketahanan historis, nilai-nilai budaya, dan respons adaptif terhadap tantangan perkotaan. Pagar berperan sebagai penghalang pelindung, penanda status sosial, serta media ekspresi budaya. Namun, modernisasi dan pergeseran generasi menghadirkan tantangan dalam pelestarian desain tradisional. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada pemahaman tentang hubungan antara arsitektur, budaya, dan dinamika sosial dalam konteks multikultural.

**Kata kunci:** pecinan, permukiman cina, studi budaya, ruang berpagar

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## 1. Introduction

Kapasan, a residential area in Surabaya, is home to a Chinese community with a long history and rich cultural heritage [1], [2]. This neighborhood draws attention for its unique architectural and spatial characteristics, particularly the use of fences as a key element in organizing social space. In this context, fences serve not only as physical boundaries between private and public spaces but also as tools for creating security, identity, and social relationships within the community [3], [4]

The presence of fences in Kapasan reflects the evolving social and cultural dynamics of an urban environment with multiethnic communities. Fences are not merely architectural structures; they symbolize the adaptation and negotiation of the Chinese community with their surrounding environment [3], [4], [5]. Historically, the Chinese community in Indonesia has faced challenges such as discrimination and social exclusion [6], [7], [8]. As a result, fences have become a mechanism for both physical and psychological protection [9]

The function of fences in Kapasan is deeply rooted in the sociocultural values upheld by the Chinese community. Fences are often adorned with distinctive ornaments that reflect Chinese ethnic identity and philosophical values, such as harmony, prosperity, and balance. Thus, fences serve as a medium for cultural expression while safeguarding traditions amid the constant flow of modernization in the city of Surabaya [9], [10].

As a metropolitan city, Surabaya faces social issues such as crime and conflicts among residents [11]. Beyond their symbolic aspects, fences also address the security challenges of urban environments. In this context, fences act as physical safeguards that enhance the residents' sense of security. The use of tall fences with specific designs in Kapasan demonstrates a collective awareness of the importance of protecting private spaces from external disruptions.

Fences also play a role in shaping social interactions within the Kapasan community. As spatial boundaries, fences regulate the extent to which interactions between homeowners and neighbors can occur. In many cases, fences do not entirely block visual or verbal communication but are designed to create a balance between privacy and openness. This phenomenon reflects the social dynamics of the Chinese community, which tends to value privacy while maintaining aspects of collectivity.

From a sociocultural perspective, fences in Kapasan represent a negotiation between private and public spaces [12]. Differences in fence designs indicate the social status, economic level, and cultural preferences of the homeowners. Some elaborate fences reflect the aspirations of the upper class, while simpler ones show adaptations to economic limitations without compromising cultural values.

It is important to note that fences also serve as symbols of segregation in certain areas [3]. In parts of Kapasan, fences are used to demarcate Chinese residential areas from other communities. This can be seen as a response to the long history of social exclusion faced by the Chinese community in Indonesia. On the other hand, fences also reflect efforts to create safe spaces for preserving the community's traditions and identity.

Urbanization and modernization in Surabaya present new challenges to the existence of fences in Kapasan. Many traditional houses are now being replaced by modern buildings, causing the aesthetics of traditional fences to be overshadowed by more functional and minimalist designs. This phenomenon raises questions about how the Chinese community can maintain their cultural values amidst the city's transformation.

The study of fences in Kapasan provides valuable insights into how communities utilize architectural elements to negotiate space, identity, and security. In a broader context, this research contributes to understanding the relationship between physical spaces and sociocultural dynamics in multicultural urban societies like Surabaya.

Therefore, understanding the role of fences in the daily lives of the Chinese community in Kapasan is not merely about discussing architectural elements but also about exploring the profound meanings that reflect the complexity of the relationships between individuals, communities, and the environments they inhabit. This serves as a foundation for further exploration of how the Chinese community in Kapasan creates spaces that are both secure and meaningful. The objective of this research is to examine how fences function as both physical boundaries and cultural symbols within a multiethnic urban setting. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study employs field observations, interviews, and visual documentation. The expected result is a deeper understanding of how architectural elements like fences reflect cultural identity, social values, and adaptive strategies within the urban context of a Chinese-Indonesian community.

## 2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the sociocultural role of fences in the Kapasan Chinese settlements in Surabaya. By employing qualitative methods, this research seeks to uncover the deeper meanings, values, and practices embedded in the design, use, and perception of fences within this community [13]. The methodology is designed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between architectural elements and social dynamics in Kapasan.

The research utilizes a case study method, focusing specifically on Kapasan as a bounded system that exemplifies the interaction between spatial design and sociocultural processes. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of the historical, social, and cultural contexts that shape the use and significance of fences in the area. The case study method is particularly well-suited for capturing the complexity of localized phenomena, such as the integration of architectural features into everyday social practices [13], [14].

Primary data collection was conducted through field observations, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation. Field observations focused on the physical characteristics of fences, their placement, and the spatial relationships they establish within the neighborhood. This included detailed documentation of fence designs, and materials as well as their proximity to public and private spaces. These observations provided a foundation for understanding the material

and symbolic dimensions of fences.

In-depth interviews were conducted with residents, local leaders, and community historians to gather firsthand accounts of the meanings and functions attributed to fences. Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of diverse perspectives, including differences in socioeconomic status, length of residence, and roles within the community. Open-ended questions facilitated discussions about personal experiences, cultural values, and perceptions of security and privacy associated with fences.

To complement the qualitative data, visual documentation was used to capture the aesthetic and structural details of fences. Photographs were analyzed to identify patterns in design elements, such as ornamental motifs. This visual analysis provided insights into the cultural and historical influences reflected in the fences, contributing to a richer interpretation of their sociocultural significance.

Secondary data was obtained from archival research, including historical records, urban planning documents, and previous studies on Chinese communities in Indonesia. These sources were used to contextualize the findings within broader historical and cultural frameworks. Archival materials helped trace the evolution of Kapasan as a residential area and provided background on the challenges faced by the Chinese community in Surabaya.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic coding, which involved organizing and categorizing the data into key themes such as security, privacy, identity, and community interaction. This process included iterative reading of interview transcripts and field notes to identify recurring patterns and relationships. Visual data were analyzed in parallel to identify correlations between design features and sociocultural meanings.

Triangulation was employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. By cross-referencing data from interviews, observations, and visual analysis, the study ensured a comprehensive and consistent interpretation of the role of fences in Kapasan. This approach also allowed for the identification of discrepancies or contradictions, which were further explored to enrich the analysis.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Participants were given the opportunity to review and clarify their responses to ensure accurate representation of their perspectives. Ethical approval was sought from relevant institutional review boards to ensure compliance with research standards.

By integrating multiple data sources and employing rigorous analytical methods, this methodology provides a robust framework for examining the sociocultural role of fences in Kapasan. The approach ensures that the findings are grounded in empirical evidence while remaining sensitive to the nuanced and context-specific dimensions of the community's spatial practices. This methodological design is intended to contribute not only to an understanding of Kapasan but also to broader discussions on the interplay between architecture, culture, and urban dynamics in multicultural settings.

### 3. Result and Discussion

The study reveals that fences in Kapasan play a multifaceted role in the sociocultural lives of the Chinese community. Beyond their physical function as boundaries, fences symbolize privacy, security, and identity, reflecting the community's history, cultural values, and adaptive strategies. They serve as artifacts of resilience, preserving cultural expressions while responding to urban and historical challenges.

Fences are primarily valued for their ability to ensure security [15]. Residents frequently highlighted their role in protecting households from external threats, such as theft and social disturbances. Observations noted that fences often feature tall structures and pointed designs, emphasizing their protective function. This prioritization of security reflects both historical experiences of vulnerability and the practical realities of urban life in Surabaya.

Dual role of fences in maintaining privacy and mediating social interactions was also evident. Fences are often constructed to shield private spaces from public view while allowing controlled engagement with neighbours. Designs incorporating semi-permeable materials, such as iron bars or latticework, illustrate the community's efforts to balance privacy with openness, enabling meaningful yet measured exchanges within the neighbourhood.



**Figure 1.** Fence with semi-permeable materials, such as iron bars or latticework in Kapasan Chinese Settlement

The aesthetic aspects of fences underscore their cultural significance. Some fences in Kapasan incorporate traditional Chinese motifs (Figure 2), such as geometric patterns symbolizing harmony and prosperity [16], [17], [18], [19].



**Figure 2.** Geometric pattern of fence compared to the references

These decorative elements serve as a medium of cultural expression [20], [21] asserting the identity of the Chinese community in a multicultural urban context. These decorative elements found in architectural details such as fences, gates, and façade ornamentation function as a significant medium of cultural expression. They reflect the values, beliefs, and aesthetics of the Chinese community, serving not only a practical purpose but also symbolizing identity and belonging within a diverse and multicultural urban environment. Through the use of specific motifs, patterns, and traditional symbols, these elements communicate cultural pride and continuity, allowing the community to maintain a visible and meaningful presence in the public landscape. At the same time, they act as visual reminders of the community's historical roots, linking present-day residents to their ancestral heritage. Even as the surrounding area experiences change through urban development and modernization, these decorative features provide a sense of stability and cultural memory. They contribute to the preservation of collective identity and offer a contrast to the often homogenizing effects of contemporary architectural trends. In this way, these design elements play an essential role in both asserting cultural identity and fostering a deeper appreciation of the community's historical and cultural contributions within the evolving cityscape.

Socioeconomic factors influence the design and material of fences. Higher-income households often invest in elaborate designs featuring premium materials like wrought iron or marble, while lower-income residents tend to use

simpler and more affordable materials such as steel or wood. This variation highlights the intersection of economic status and cultural practices, with fences serving as subtle indicators of social stratification within the community.

The historical roots of fences in Kapasan are tied to the community's response to periods of discrimination and exclusion. During times of heightened anti-Chinese sentiment, fences were constructed as both protective barriers and symbols of resilience. Older residents recalled how fences provided safety and a sense of stability in tumultuous periods, underscoring their historical and emotional significance.

While fences are often seen as barriers, they also function as spaces for interaction. Observations noted that gates and fence openings frequently serve as informal gathering points, facilitating controlled social exchanges. This dynamic reflects the adaptability of the community, where fences not only separate but also connect individuals and households.



**Figure 3.** Fence as an informal gathering point

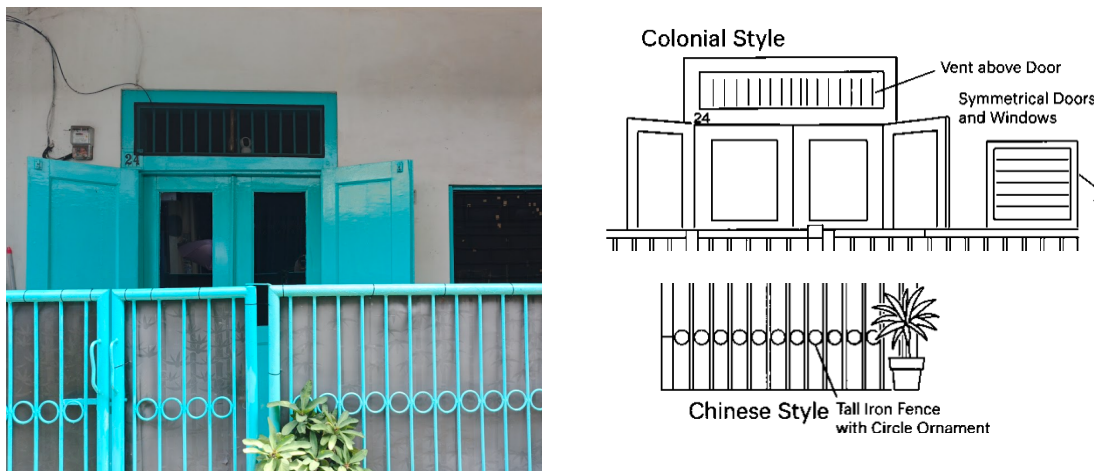
Urbanization and modernization are reshaping the aesthetics of fences in Kapasan. Modern homes increasingly feature minimalist designs with clean lines and neutral colours, reflecting contemporary architectural trends. While these changes signal adaptation to urban growth, they also raise concerns about the gradual erosion of traditional cultural expressions embedded in fence designs. Despite these changes, many residents continue to value fences as a means of preserving cultural identity. Traditional designs remain important for households seeking to honour their heritage. This effort is particularly evident among families where younger generations work with elders to retain cultural motifs while incorporating modern materials and construction techniques.

A key challenge identified in the study is the tension between maintaining traditional designs and adapting to modern needs. Younger residents often prioritize functionality and cost-efficiency over cultural symbolism, reflecting broader generational shifts in values. This raises questions about the future of Kapasan's architectural heritage and the community's ability to balance tradition

with modernization.

Fences also highlight the negotiation of public and private spaces within Kapasan. While they mark the boundaries of private property, they also define communal areas, such as alleys and walkways, where social interactions occur. This dual role reflects the adaptability of the Chinese community in managing spatial constraints and fostering social cohesion in a dense urban environment.

Historical and contemporary influences are clearly reflected in the design of fences found throughout Kapasan. Many of the older fences serve as physical records of the area's rich cultural past, as they incorporate a distinctive blend of traditional Chinese architectural motifs such as intricate latticework, symbolic carvings, and tiled ornamentation, alongside elements drawn from colonial-era design including wrought iron detailing, symmetrical forms, and classical European features. These stylistic combinations are not merely decorative; they convey a deeper narrative about the community's historical development. They show how various cultural influences, introduced through trade, migration, and colonization, have been thoughtfully adapted and incorporated into local architectural practices. Rather than replacing traditional forms, these hybrid fence designs reveal how the people of Kapasan have preserved their cultural identity while embracing new styles. In this way, the fences serve not only as physical boundaries but also as meaningful expressions of cultural continuity, adaptability, and the layered history of the neighborhood.



**Figure 4.** blending traditional Chinese and colonial architectural elements.

Perceptions of security are also shaped by urbanization. The influx of new residents and businesses has heightened concerns about crime, leading to the construction of taller and more fortified fences. This trend reflects the dynamic relationship between urban growth and localized security practices.

Fences in Kapasan also demonstrate environmental adaptability. Designs often include features like ventilation gaps and durable materials suited to the area's tropical climate, showcasing how practical considerations intersect with sociocultural values. Uniform fence designs adopted by certain clusters in Kapasan reinforce a sense of collective identity among residents. These shared



designs not only create visual cohesion but also strengthen communal bonds, illustrating the importance of fences in fostering a sense of belonging within the neighborhood.

Generational perspectives on fences reveal meaningful shifts in values, priorities, and interpretations of cultural heritage within the community. Older residents often place great importance on fences as symbols of cultural identity, historical continuity, and ancestral legacy. For them, these architectural elements carry deep emotional and historical resonance, representing a tangible connection to the past and a visual embodiment of traditional values and communal memory. They may recall the significance of specific motifs, construction techniques, or the stories behind particular fence designs, viewing them as integral parts of the neighborhood's historical fabric.

In contrast, younger generations tend to approach fences from a more practical and aesthetic standpoint. Their perspectives are often shaped by contemporary concerns such as functionality, modern design preferences, and urban lifestyle needs. While they may still recognize the cultural value of traditional designs, their priorities often center on clean lines, visual appeal, and how these structures fit within modern living environments. As a result, some traditional elements may be simplified, altered, or replaced to better align with current architectural trends.

This generational divide reflects a broader transformation in how cultural heritage is understood, valued, and preserved. It highlights the tension between honoring the past and adapting to the present, raising important questions about how traditions can be maintained in ways that are relevant to younger audiences. At the same time, it opens up possibilities for reinterpretation and innovation, where old and new values may coexist and inform one another in shaping the future of the built environment.

Maintenance of fences presents another challenge, particularly in lower-income areas. Financial constraints often hinder residents' ability to maintain the structural and aesthetic quality of fences, raising concerns about the sustainability of traditional designs in economically disadvantaged parts of Kapasan.

Local artisans play a critical role in preserving traditional fence designs. Their work, informed by cultural knowledge and technical expertise, makes them vital custodians of Kapasan's architectural heritage. However, the dwindling number of skilled artisans poses a risk to the continuity of traditional craftsmanship.

The findings suggest the need for policy interventions to support the preservation of fence designs in Kapasan. Local governments and heritage organizations could provide financial assistance, organize workshops, and promote awareness of the cultural significance of fences. These efforts could help sustain the community's architectural heritage amid ongoing urban transformations.

In conclusion, fences in Kapasan represent much more than simple, utilitarian structures meant to define boundaries or provide security. They serve as layered cultural artifacts that embody the historical resilience, lived experiences, and collective identity of the local community. Over time, these fences have become

vessels of meaning, carrying stories of migration, adaptation, and the negotiation between tradition and change. Through their evolving designs and decorative features, fences reflect a continuous dialogue between past and present, heritage and modernity, function and symbolism.

As Kapasan undergoes social and spatial transformation driven by urban development, modernization, and generational shifts, the meaning attached to fences is also being actively renegotiated. For some residents, especially the older generation, fences remain powerful symbols of cultural continuity and ancestral pride. For younger individuals, they may represent opportunities for reinterpretation, innovation, or aesthetic improvement. This negotiation of meaning—between preserving cultural essence and embracing new expressions—underscores the dynamic role of fences in mediating identity and belonging in a multicultural and changing urban environment.

Thus, fences are not static relics but living markers of Kapasan's evolving identity. They illustrate how architecture can serve as a platform for cultural expression and social commentary. Recognizing and engaging with this fluid interplay between architecture, culture, and society is essential for safeguarding the area's unique character. By appreciating fences as active sites of meaning negotiation, we can better understand how communities like Kapasan strive to sustain their heritage while navigating the complexities of contemporary urban life.

#### 4. Conclusion

Fences in Kapasan are integral to the sociocultural fabric of the Chinese community, embodying their historical resilience, cultural identity, and adaptability to urban challenges. Beyond serving as physical barriers, fences balance privacy and community interaction, mediate public and private spaces, and reflect socioeconomic and cultural diversity. The evolving urban landscape and generational changes, however, threaten the sustainability of traditional designs. To preserve Kapasan's unique heritage, policies promoting cultural awareness, support for local artisans, and integration of modern functionality with traditional aesthetics are essential. Ultimately, fences represent more than architectural elements; they symbolize the community's complex relationship with space, identity, and modernity.

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