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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Digital Humanities***Negotiating urban life: Place, community resilience, and lived experience in Northern Medan**Endar Sutan Lubis¹, R. Hamdani Harahap¹, Heri Kusmanto¹ and Hatta Ridho¹¹Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia*Correspondence: herikusmanto@usu.ac.id**ABSTRACT**

Urban life is shaped not only by infrastructure and planning but also by the meanings that people attach to the places they inhabit and the everyday practices through which they negotiate opportunities and constraints. This article examines how residents of Northern Medan experience and construct urban life amid spatial inequality, environmental vulnerability, and uneven urban development. Rather than conceptualizing urban livability as a technical outcome of planning interventions, the study approaches it as a lived experience produced through the interaction of place, community relationships, and everyday acts of resilience. Focusing on the districts of Belawan, Labuhan, Marelán, and Deli, the research employs a mixed-methods design combining household surveys, semi-structured interviews, and community narratives to explore both measurable dimensions of urban conditions and residents' interpretations of belonging, security, and quality of life. The findings reveal that urban life is negotiated through localized social practices that sustain community cohesion despite persistent challenges, including recurrent flooding, inadequate infrastructure, environmental degradation, and socio-economic disparities. Residents draw upon neighborhood solidarity, shared cultural practices, informal support networks, and collective adaptation to create meaningful forms of belonging and resilience that extend beyond material conditions. While spatial inequalities continue to shape everyday experiences, local communities actively reinterpret and reconstruct urban space through social relationships, cultural identity, and place-based knowledge. These findings suggest that urban livability is not merely a function of physical development but a socially and culturally produced condition emerging from the continuous negotiation between people, place, and structural constraints. By centering lived experience and everyday urban practices, this article contributes to urban humanities scholarship by demonstrating how community resilience and place-making shape the human experience of rapidly transforming cities in the Global South. It argues that understanding cities requires greater attention to the cultural meanings, social relationships, and everyday practices through which residents create dignified and livable urban lives.

KEYWORDS: urban humanities, lived experience, place-making, community resilience, urban livability, Northern Medan, everyday life, spatial justice

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INTRODUCTION

Urban life is not merely constituted by the physical arrangement of roads, housing, drainage systems, or planning documents; rather, it is fundamentally a lived social experience shaped by history, culture, power, and the everyday practices through which people inhabit and interpret urban space. Cities are more than built environments—they are places where identity, belonging, memory, and social relationships are continuously created, negotiated, and transformed. Consequently, urban livability cannot be understood solely through technocratic indicators such as housing adequacy, transportation access, environmental quality, or public service provision. Although these dimensions remain important, they reveal only part of what makes a city livable. Equally significant are the ways residents experience dignity, security, social inclusion, attachment to place, and the cultural meanings embedded in everyday urban life. From this perspective, livability is not simply an infrastructural achievement but a socially and culturally produced condition emerging through the interaction of place, institutions, and human agency (Marans & Stimson, 2014; Sheikh & van Ameijde, 2022).

Understanding urban livability as lived experience draws upon critical scholarship that conceives urban space as a social and cultural production rather than a neutral physical setting. Lefebvre (1991), in *The Production of Space*, argues that urban space is produced through the dynamic relationship between political authority, economic structures, and everyday social practices. Space therefore embodies particular values, priorities, and inequalities that shape how different groups experience urban life. Building upon this perspective, Harvey (1973) conceptualizes urban inequality through the lens of spatial justice, demonstrating that cities frequently reproduce social exclusion through unequal access to infrastructure, environmental protection, public services, and economic opportunity. Urban deprivation is consequently not only the result of material scarcity but also of social and political arrangements that unevenly distribute resources, recognition, and opportunities among urban residents. These perspectives collectively suggest that livability is inseparable from broader questions of justice, belonging, and the everyday experience of urban citizenship.

Critical urban scholarship also emphasizes that residents are not passive recipients of planning decisions but active producers of urban life. De Certeau (1984) argues that ordinary people continuously “make” the city through everyday practices of adaptation, negotiation, improvisation, and resistance. In neighbourhoods characterized by environmental vulnerability, limited infrastructure, or institutional constraints, communities often develop localized systems of cooperation that sustain daily life beyond the reach of formal governance. Collective environmental management, neighbourhood solidarity, informal economic exchange, and mutual support networks represent everyday practices through which residents negotiate uncertainty and construct meaningful places to live. Aldrich and Meyer (2015) describe this capacity as social resilience, emphasizing that trust, reciprocity, and collective action enable communities to respond to both immediate shocks and long-term structural vulnerability. Livability, therefore, extends beyond the physical environment to encompass the social relationships and cultural practices through which communities shape their urban futures.

This perspective has become increasingly important in an era of rapid global urbanization. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019), more than half of the world’s population now lives in urban areas, a proportion projected to approach 68 percent by 2050. While cities have become centres of economic opportunity, cultural exchange, and social transformation, they have also become sites where inequality, environmental vulnerability, and precarious living conditions are increasingly concentrated. UN-Habitat (2020) estimates that over one billion urban residents worldwide continue to live in inadequate settlements characterized by insecure tenure, overcrowding, limited sanitation, and environmental risk. These realities are especially evident across rapidly urbanizing regions of the Global South, where urban expansion often intersects with climate vulnerability, uneven development, and persistent socio-economic inequality. In these contexts, understanding urban life requires attention not only to material conditions but also to how people experience, interpret, and negotiate the changing realities of the city.

Southeast Asia illustrates these dynamics particularly clearly. Rapid industrialization, migration, and metropolitan expansion have transformed the region’s urban landscapes, yet economic growth has frequently been accompanied by fragmented development and widening spatial inequalities (Shatkin, 2019). Indonesia reflects this broader trajectory. Urbanization has accelerated dramatically over the past two decades, contributing to economic modernization while simultaneously exposing disparities in housing quality, environmental conditions, public infrastructure, and access to urban services (Firman, 2009; World Bank, 2023). Consequently,

Indonesian cities increasingly embody a dual reality: they are spaces of economic dynamism while also revealing persistent inequalities in how urban opportunities and environmental burdens are experienced across different communities.

Within this national context, Medan, the capital of North Sumatra Province, provides a particularly revealing setting for examining the lived experience of urban life. As one of Indonesia's largest metropolitan centres and an important gateway for trade and maritime activity, Medan has experienced sustained urban expansion driven by industrial development, population growth, and regional economic integration. Yet these transformations have unfolded unevenly across the city. Northern Medan, comprising Belawan, Labuhan, Marelan, and Deli, occupies a paradoxical position within this urban landscape. While the area plays a strategic economic role through Belawan Port and associated industrial activities, many neighbourhoods continue to experience environmental vulnerability, infrastructural limitations, and social marginalization.

Empirical evidence illustrates the depth of these challenges. Badan Pusat Statistik (2023) reports that Northern Medan contains a disproportionately high concentration of low-income households relative to other parts of the city. Informal settlements remain widespread, particularly in coastal and flood-prone areas where residents experience insecure tenure, overcrowding, and inadequate sanitation. Recurring tidal flooding (*banjir rob*), land subsidence, drainage failure, and environmental degradation continue to disrupt everyday life, especially in Belawan and Labuhan (Marfai et al., 2021). Hanifah et al. (2022) further observe that inadequate waste management, dense settlement patterns, and limited public green space have intensified environmental decline and public health risks. These conditions reveal not merely deficiencies in infrastructure but broader patterns of uneven urban development in which communities bear unequal environmental and social burdens despite their contribution to the city's economic vitality.

Yet interpreting Northern Medan solely through the lens of deprivation overlooks the rich social worlds that sustain everyday urban life. Beneath structural inequalities exists a vibrant landscape of neighbourhood solidarity, shared cultural practices, and locally embedded forms of resilience. Residents respond to recurring environmental uncertainty through collective clean-up initiatives, informal drainage maintenance, mutual aid during flooding, and enduring social support networks that function as informal systems of care. These practices exemplify what Simone (2004) describes as "people as infrastructure," whereby social relationships themselves become essential urban resources in contexts where formal systems remain limited. Community resilience, therefore, is more than a response to adversity; it represents a cultural practice through which residents sustain dignity, belonging, and continuity in everyday life.

The significance of place extends beyond its material characteristics. Across Northern Medan, residents continually attach social and cultural meanings to their neighbourhoods through memory, identity, and shared experience. In Belawan, maritime livelihoods and longstanding kinship networks cultivate a distinctive coastal identity rooted in generations of adaptation to changing environmental conditions. In Marelan and Deli, expanding residential areas symbolize aspirations for stability, recognition, and improved quality of life. In Labuhan, repeated encounters with flooding have fostered collective cultures of adaptation that shape local understandings of resilience, security, and belonging. These experiences demonstrate that urban life is not merely lived within space but continuously negotiated through place, where physical environments acquire meaning through everyday social practice.

Against this backdrop, this study examines how residents of Northern Medan negotiate urban life through their relationships with place, community, and everyday resilience. Rather than asking only how urban development shapes measurable living conditions, this article explores how people experience spatial inequality, construct belonging, and sustain meaningful lives amid environmental and social uncertainty. Employing a mixed-methods design that combines household surveys, semi-structured interviews, and community narratives, the study brings together measurable dimensions of urban conditions with residents' lived experiences and interpretations of place. In doing so, it contributes to urban humanities by demonstrating that urban livability is fundamentally a human experience shaped by cultural meaning, social relationships, and everyday practices through which communities continuously negotiate and recreate the city.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban Livability as Lived Experience

The concept of urban livability has evolved considerably from its early emphasis on physical infrastructure and environmental quality toward a broader understanding of how people experience everyday urban life. Earlier scholarship largely assessed livability through measurable indicators such as housing conditions, transportation systems, sanitation, accessibility, and green spaces, treating cities primarily as physical environments whose quality could be evaluated through objective standards (Lynch, 1981; Pacione, 2003). While these dimensions remain important, they provide only a partial understanding of what makes urban life meaningful. Contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that livability also encompasses subjective experiences of belonging, dignity, safety, identity, and emotional attachment to place. Marans and Stimson (2014) suggest that livability emerges through the interaction between objective urban conditions and residents' perceptions, demonstrating that cities are experienced as much through social relationships and cultural meanings as through their physical form. Communities with limited formal infrastructure may nevertheless sustain strong senses of well-being through neighbourhood solidarity, shared values, and collective attachment to place. From this perspective, urban livability is best understood not merely as the outcome of planning or infrastructure provision but as a lived social experience continually produced through everyday interactions between people and their urban environments.

This shift reflects a broader movement within urban humanities that understands cities as cultural and social worlds rather than solely as administrative or physical entities. Place is therefore not simply a geographical location but a setting where identities are formed, memories accumulated, and everyday practices acquire meaning. Urban life becomes intelligible not only through maps, plans, and development indicators but also through the stories, relationships, and lived experiences through which residents negotiate their environments. Livability consequently extends beyond questions of physical comfort to encompass the ways people create meaningful, dignified, and socially connected lives within the city.

Place, Spatial Justice, and the Experience of Inequality

Viewing cities through lived experience also requires attention to the unequal ways in which urban spaces are produced and inhabited. Lefebvre (1991) argues that space is socially produced through the interaction of political authority, economic interests, and everyday practice, meaning that urban landscapes inevitably reflect broader relations of power. Space is therefore never neutral; it embodies decisions about whose interests are prioritized and whose experiences remain marginalized. Harvey (1973) extends this argument through the concept of spatial justice, demonstrating that urban development frequently reproduces inequality by distributing infrastructure, environmental protection, and public resources unevenly across neighbourhoods. Consequently, urban disadvantage cannot be understood simply as a technical problem of inadequate infrastructure but must also be viewed as the outcome of historical, political, and economic processes that shape access to opportunity and recognition.

Within this perspective, place becomes central to understanding urban inequality. Residents experience the city differently depending upon how their neighbourhoods are valued, serviced, and represented within wider processes of urban development. Feelings of exclusion or belonging are therefore shaped not only by material conditions but also by the symbolic meanings attached to particular places. Watson (2009) similarly argues that rapidly urbanizing cities in the Global South frequently experience fragmented development in which economic modernization coexists with persistent social exclusion. Understanding urban livability consequently requires examining how inequalities are experienced in everyday life and how residents interpret, negotiate, and respond to these uneven urban realities.

Community Resilience and Everyday Urban Life

Despite structural inequalities, urban communities continually demonstrate remarkable capacities to negotiate uncertainty through everyday social practice. Rather than portraying residents as passive recipients of development policies, contemporary scholarship emphasizes their active role in producing urban life. De Certeau (1984) argues that ordinary people continuously "make" the city through routine acts of adaptation, improvisation, negotiation, and resistance. These everyday practices enable communities to create meaningful forms of social

life even within environments characterized by environmental vulnerability or institutional neglect.

This perspective is closely related to the concept of community resilience. Aldrich and Meyer (2015) define resilience not simply as the ability to recover from crises but as the capacity of communities to mobilize social capital, trust, reciprocity, and collective action in responding to long-term structural challenges. Such resilience is embedded within everyday relationships rather than formal institutions alone. Simone's (2004) notion of *people as infrastructure* further illustrates how social networks, informal cooperation, and neighbourhood relationships often function as essential urban systems where formal infrastructure remains inadequate. Community resilience therefore extends beyond disaster response; it represents a cultural practice through which residents preserve belonging, sustain collective identity, and negotiate the uncertainties of everyday urban life. The city is thus continually reproduced not only through planning and governance but also through ordinary acts of cooperation, care, and shared experience.

These perspectives are particularly valuable for understanding rapidly urbanizing cities across the Global South, where uneven development, environmental vulnerability, and social diversity intersect in complex ways. Northern Medan reflects these broader dynamics. Although the region occupies a strategic economic position through maritime trade, industrial activity, and port development, many communities continue to experience recurrent tidal flooding, inadequate waste management, dense informal settlements, and limited public infrastructure (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023; Hanifah et al., 2022). Yet these structural challenges coexist with strong neighbourhood solidarity, locally rooted adaptation strategies, and enduring forms of communal life that enable residents to negotiate the uncertainties of everyday urban existence. Examining Northern Medan through the lens of urban humanities therefore shifts attention from infrastructure alone toward the cultural meanings of place, the lived experience of inequality, and the everyday practices through which communities create belonging and resilience. This perspective provides the conceptual foundation for understanding urban livability not simply as a technical condition but as a socially and culturally negotiated experience of living in the contemporary city.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine how urban life is experienced, negotiated, and socially constructed in Northern Medan through the interconnected dimensions of place, community resilience, and everyday life. A mixed-methods design was selected because the human experience of the city cannot be understood solely through measurable indicators of housing conditions, infrastructure, or environmental quality. While these material dimensions remain important, urban life is equally constituted through people's perceptions of place, social relationships, collective practices, and everyday strategies of adaptation. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches therefore enables a more comprehensive understanding of both observable urban conditions and the meanings that residents attach to their neighborhoods, identities, and lived experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The study was conducted in the four sub-districts of Northern Medan—Belawan, Labuhan, Marelan, and Deli which were selected because they represent diverse social, cultural, and spatial contexts within a rapidly transforming urban region. Although these districts share common challenges, including recurrent flooding, environmental degradation, inadequate public infrastructure, and socio-economic inequality, each possesses distinct community histories and localized ways of negotiating everyday urban life, making them appropriate settings for exploring how place and resilience shape urban experience.

The quantitative phase involved a structured survey of 100 respondents selected through stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation across the four sub-districts. The survey instrument captured residents' perceptions of housing conditions, accessibility, environmental quality, neighborhood interaction, public facilities, and overall quality of everyday life. Additional questions explored household socio-economic characteristics, experiences of environmental vulnerability, participation in community activities, and perceptions of belonging within the neighborhood. Responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale ranging from poor to very good, allowing for systematic comparison across different localities. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and linear regression to examine relationships between neighborhood conditions, community participation, and residents' experiences of urban life. Rather than treating statistical findings as complete explanations, the quantitative analysis served as a foundation for identifying broader patterns that could be interpreted through residents' own accounts of everyday urban

experience.

The qualitative phase complemented these findings by exploring how residents understand, interpret, and negotiate life within their neighborhoods beyond what can be captured through numerical indicators alone. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with local government officials, community leaders, neighborhood representatives, and residents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The interviews focused on everyday experiences of living in Northern Medan, residents' relationships with their neighborhoods, perceptions of environmental change and urban inequality, community responses to recurring challenges, and the social meanings attached to place, belonging, and collective life. Informal conversations, community narratives, and field observations were also incorporated to document everyday interactions, neighborhood practices, and locally embedded forms of resilience that characterize ordinary urban life.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework of coding, categorization, theme development, and interpretation. This analytical process facilitated the identification of recurring themes related to place attachment, community resilience, belonging, everyday negotiation, and the lived experience of urban inequality. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was undertaken through triangulation, allowing measurable characteristics of neighborhood conditions to be interpreted alongside residents' narratives and everyday practices (Miles et al., 2014). By bringing together statistical evidence and interpretive social inquiry, this study approaches urban life not as a fixed outcome of planning or infrastructure alone, but as a continuously negotiated social experience produced through the interaction of place, community relationships, cultural meanings, and everyday human agency. This methodological orientation aligns with the urban humanities perspective adopted throughout the article, recognizing that cities are understood not only through their physical form but also through the lived experiences of the people who inhabit them.

RESULTS

The findings of this study demonstrate that urban life in Northern Medan is shaped not only by the physical characteristics of neighborhoods but also by the ways residents experience, interpret, and negotiate everyday life within conditions of uneven urban development. Quantitative analysis indicates that neighborhood conditions have statistically significant relationships with both household economic well-being and perceptions of environmental quality across the four sub-districts of Northern Medan. Housing comfort, accessibility, environmental maintenance, and access to public facilities were positively associated with household stability and residents' perceptions of neighborhood well-being. Regression analysis further shows that these neighborhood characteristics explain a substantial proportion of variation in socio-environmental outcomes ($R^2 = 0.38$ for economic outcomes and $R^2 = 0.41$ for environmental outcomes), suggesting that material conditions continue to influence everyday urban experience. At the same time, the statistical patterns reveal important local variations, indicating that urban life is experienced and negotiated differently across communities with distinct social, cultural, and environmental contexts.

In Belawan, everyday urban life is profoundly shaped by the interaction between environmental vulnerability and maritime livelihoods. As a coastal district closely connected to port activities, Belawan illustrates how place influences both economic opportunity and everyday uncertainty. Accessibility to transportation networks, public facilities, and settlement infrastructure emerged as significant predictors of household economic well-being. Yet residents simultaneously confront recurring tidal flooding, land subsidence, and inadequate drainage systems that continually disrupt daily routines and livelihood security (Marfai et al., 2021). Despite these structural constraints, community narratives reveal strong adaptive capacities rooted in neighborhood cooperation, kinship networks, and long-standing maritime traditions. Collective responses to flooding, informal environmental maintenance, and mutual support systems demonstrate that resilience is not merely a response to environmental risk but an everyday social practice through which residents sustain belonging, dignity, and continuity within a changing coastal landscape.

A different pattern emerges in Labuhan, where community relationships occupy a central place in residents' experience of urban life. Although several neighborhoods continue to experience limited infrastructure and environmental challenges, residents consistently described strong neighborhood solidarity, collective environmental initiatives, and reciprocal support networks that reduce the effects of recurring urban problems.

Community participation in drainage maintenance, localized waste management, and informal systems of mutual assistance reflects the capacity of residents to negotiate everyday challenges through cooperation rather than through institutional intervention alone. Consequently, residents' experiences of place are closely associated with feelings of trust, collective responsibility, and social recognition, suggesting that the quality of urban life is shaped as much by social relationships as by the physical characteristics of the neighborhood.

In Marelan, urban life reflects the aspirations and uncertainties associated with rapid peri-urban transformation. Quantitative findings indicate that housing quality, environmental cleanliness, and access to green space significantly influence residents' perceptions of everyday well-being. As residential expansion continues, improvements in housing and neighborhood conditions are frequently interpreted as symbols of dignity, social mobility, and future security rather than simply as material improvements. Residents associated meaningful urban life with safe public spaces, healthy environments, and opportunities for family development, particularly children's education and health. These findings suggest that place functions not only as a physical environment but also as a symbolic expression of aspiration, identity, and the desire for recognition within the broader urban landscape of Medan.

The experience of Deli demonstrates the importance of everyday social interaction in shaping relationships with place. Public facilities, environmental management, and neighborhood maintenance contribute significantly to residents' assessments of their living environment, yet interviews consistently emphasized that a meaningful urban life depends equally upon routine social encounters, communal trust, and familiarity among neighbors. Informal gathering spaces, local commercial activities, and everyday interactions reinforce a strong sense of belonging and strengthen community cohesion. These findings resonate with Simone's (2004) concept of *people as infrastructure*, illustrating how social relationships themselves become essential forms of urban support where formal infrastructure remains uneven or insufficient.

Taken together, these findings suggest that urban life in Northern Medan cannot be understood solely through measures of infrastructure or physical development. Rather, it is continuously negotiated through the interaction of material conditions, social relationships, cultural meanings, and community agency. Uneven urban development undoubtedly produces spatial inequalities that expose many neighborhoods to persistent environmental and socio-economic challenges. Nevertheless, residents are not passive recipients of these structural conditions. Through neighborhood solidarity, collective adaptation, shared cultural practices, and locally embedded knowledge, communities continually reinterpret and reconstruct the meanings of place. Urban life therefore emerges not simply as a consequence of planning or infrastructure, but as a lived social experience through which people negotiate belonging, dignity, and everyday existence within rapidly changing urban environments.

Respondent characteristics

The survey included 100 respondents distributed proportionally across the four sub-districts of Northern Medan: Belawan (25), Labuhan (25), Marelan (25), and Deli (25). Respondents represented diverse socio-demographic backgrounds, comprising 58% male and 42% female participants. Ages ranged from 25 to 60 years, with a mean age of 38 years. Educational attainment was predominantly at the secondary-school level (52%), followed by primary education (27%) and tertiary education (21%). The majority of respondents (63%) were engaged in informal occupations, including fishing, petty trading, and daily wage labor, while 24% worked in formal employment associated with port services or public institutions. The remaining 13% reported irregular employment or unemployment. Average household size was five members, reflecting relatively high dependency ratios compared with broader urban averages reported by Badan Pusat Statistik (2023).

Reliability and validity of the research instrument

Reliability analysis produced Cronbach's Alpha coefficients exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 across all constructs, including neighborhood conditions (0.82), household economic well-being (0.76), and environmental quality (0.74). Item-total correlation analysis further confirmed the validity of the measurement instrument, indicating that the survey consistently captured the principal dimensions examined in this study.

Relationship between neighborhood conditions and household economic well-being

Linear regression analysis identified a positive and statistically significant relationship between neighborhood conditions and household economic well-being across Northern Medan. The aggregate model indicated that neighborhood characteristics explained 38% of the variation in household economic sustainability ($R^2 = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$). Respondents reporting higher levels of housing comfort, accessibility, and neighborhood functionality also reported greater income stability, more diversified livelihood opportunities, and stronger household economic security.

When examined separately, Belawan produced the strongest explanatory relationship ($R^2 = 0.42$), where transportation accessibility and public facilities emerged as the principal contributors to economic well-being, reflecting the district's dependence upon maritime and port-related activities. Labuhan demonstrated a moderate relationship ($R^2 = 0.37$), with community cooperation and informal economic activities strengthening household resilience. Marelan ($R^2 = 0.36$) showed that housing quality and proximity to commercial areas significantly influenced household income, while Deli ($R^2 = 0.39$) highlighted the contribution of public services and environmental management to local economic activities.

Relationship between neighborhood conditions and environmental quality

Neighborhood conditions also demonstrated a statistically significant relationship with residents' perceptions of environmental quality. The aggregate model explained 41% of the variation in perceived environmental conditions ($R^2 = 0.41$, $p < 0.05$). Important contributing factors included drainage maintenance, waste management, neighborhood cleanliness, and access to green spaces.

Variation across the four districts further illustrates how environmental experience remains closely connected to place. In Belawan, drainage systems and flood mitigation measures were the strongest determinants of environmental quality because of the district's exposure to recurring tidal flooding. In Labuhan, community participation and neighborhood cooperation played a particularly important role in maintaining environmental conditions. Marelan emphasized the importance of green space and household waste management, whereas Deli highlighted the contribution of municipal waste collection and neighborhood maintenance to residents' environmental experience.

Preliminary qualitative findings: Insights from the Department of Spatial Planning (Distaru)

Interviews with officials from the Medan Department of Spatial Planning and Housing (Distaru) provide important institutional perspectives that complement residents' accounts of everyday urban life. Several interconnected themes emerged from the interviews.

Distaru described a number of ongoing initiatives designed to improve neighborhood conditions in Northern Medan, including the KOTAKU (Kota Tanpa Kumuh) program, which prioritizes drainage improvement, clean water provision, and waste management infrastructure. The agency also emphasized its responsibilities for preparing Detailed Spatial Plans (RDTR), providing planning guidance, and monitoring spatial development. Nevertheless, officials acknowledged that institutional capacity remains constrained by limited financial resources, administrative complexity, and competing development priorities.

Land ownership emerged as one of the most significant structural challenges affecting urban development. The limited availability of municipally owned land restricts the expansion of public open spaces and complicates efforts to relocate residents from environmentally vulnerable settlements into planned housing developments such as Rusun Belawan Bahari. Officials also recognized that recurring tidal flooding and inadequate drainage continue to undermine settlement quality despite ongoing planning interventions.

Distaru further explained that attempts have been made to align formal planning documents with residents' lived realities through public consultations and focus group discussions involving community representatives, professional organizations, public agencies, and private-sector stakeholders. Although these initiatives have strengthened dialogue between institutions and communities, officials acknowledged that translating community perspectives into planning decisions remains difficult because of institutional fragmentation and resource limitations.

Inter-agency coordination among Distaru, the Public Works Department, Bappeda, and the Environmental Office occurs through regular coordination meetings intended to integrate planning and implementation.

However, overlapping institutional mandates, regulatory complexity, and limited budgets frequently delay project implementation and reduce policy effectiveness.

Officials also highlighted ongoing efforts to integrate broader principles of neighborhood quality into spatial planning through environmental zoning regulations, building controls, mangrove conservation, neighborhood design guidelines, and the expansion of green open spaces. Yet many of these initiatives continue to face practical obstacles associated with land acquisition, funding constraints, and enforcement challenges.

Community participation remains an important component of planning practice, particularly during the preparation of spatial plans. Nevertheless, interviewees acknowledged that participation often remains consultative rather than genuinely collaborative, limiting communities' influence over final planning decisions. The interviews therefore reveal a continuing gap between institutional planning processes and residents' everyday experiences of urban life.

Overall, the qualitative findings demonstrate that while formal planning institutions recognize the importance of creating more sustainable and inclusive neighborhoods, the everyday experience of urban life in Northern Medan continues to depend not only on planning interventions but also on the capacity of communities themselves to negotiate environmental uncertainty, sustain social relationships, and continually recreate meaningful places within an uneven urban landscape.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that urban life in Northern Medan cannot be adequately understood through the physical characteristics of neighborhoods or the effectiveness of planning interventions alone. Rather, urban life emerges as a socially produced and continuously negotiated experience shaped by the interaction between place, unequal development, community relationships, and the everyday practices through which residents respond to opportunities and constraints. This interpretation reinforces Lefebvre's (1991) argument that urban space is never neutral but is continually produced through the interplay of political authority, economic priorities, and everyday social practice. The experiences of residents in Northern Medan illustrate that cities are not simply material environments organized through infrastructure and planning; they are lived environments in which meanings, identities, and social relationships are constantly created and reconstructed. The coexistence of strategic economic functions—including maritime trade, industrial expansion, and logistics infrastructure with recurring flooding, environmental degradation, and neighborhood vulnerability reveals how urban development simultaneously generates opportunity and reproduces inequality. Consequently, understanding urban life requires attention not only to the distribution of physical resources but also to the human experiences through which residents interpret, negotiate, and inhabit urban space.

The findings likewise extend debates on spatial justice by demonstrating that inequality is experienced not merely through unequal access to infrastructure but through the everyday realities of living within places that are differently valued by urban development processes. Harvey (1973) argues that the distribution of urban resources reflects broader political and economic priorities rather than neutral planning decisions. Northern Medan exemplifies this dynamic. Although the area plays an essential role in supporting Medan's economic growth, many communities continue to experience environmental degradation, recurring tidal flooding, limited public amenities, and persistent infrastructural deficiencies. These conditions are experienced not simply as technical shortcomings but as everyday realities that influence residents' sense of security, belonging, and recognition within the city. Spatial justice, therefore, extends beyond the equitable provision of services to encompass the ways people experience dignity, inclusion, and the right to inhabit meaningful urban environments. The findings suggest that place itself becomes a site where broader social inequalities are encountered, interpreted, and negotiated in everyday life.

At the same time, this study reveals that residents actively negotiate structural disadvantage through locally embedded forms of resilience and place-making. Rather than portraying communities as passive recipients of uneven development, the findings demonstrate how everyday practices of cooperation, adaptation, and mutual support continually reshape urban experience. This interpretation resonates strongly with de Certeau's (1984) understanding that ordinary people create the city through routine acts of improvisation, negotiation, and social practice. Across the four sub-districts, residents developed distinctive ways of responding to their local circumstances. In Belawan, maritime traditions and kinship networks strengthened collective responses to

environmental uncertainty. In Labuhan, neighborhood solidarity and reciprocal social relationships reinforced communal responsibility for shared spaces. Marelan reflected aspirations for dignity and social mobility through improvements in residential environments, while Deli demonstrated how everyday interactions in public and informal spaces cultivate a durable sense of belonging. These varied experiences illustrate that urban life is never experienced uniformly but is continually shaped by local histories, cultural values, and community relationships that give meaning to particular places.

The findings further suggest that community resilience should be understood not simply as the capacity to recover from environmental disruption but as an ongoing cultural practice embedded within everyday social life. Aldrich and Meyer (2015) emphasize that social capital, trust, and reciprocity frequently constitute the most important resources available to communities facing persistent uncertainty. Northern Medan provides a compelling illustration of this perspective. Collective responses to flooding, informal neighborhood maintenance, mutual assistance, and locally organized environmental initiatives reveal that resilience is sustained through social relationships as much as through formal institutions. Simone's (2004) concept of *people as infrastructure* offers a particularly useful framework for interpreting these findings. In contexts where formal systems remain uneven or insufficient, social relationships themselves become forms of infrastructure that enable everyday urban life to continue. Community resilience therefore emerges not merely as an adaptive strategy but as a way of inhabiting place through shared responsibility, collective memory, and enduring social connection.

Viewed through the lens of urban humanities, these findings invite a broader understanding of cities as cultural and social worlds rather than solely as objects of planning and governance. The significance of place in Northern Medan lies not only in its physical characteristics but also in the meanings residents attach to neighborhoods through memory, identity, everyday interaction, and collective experience. Place functions simultaneously as a material environment and as a cultural landscape in which people construct belonging, negotiate vulnerability, and sustain dignity amid structural inequality. This perspective broadens conventional discussions of urban development by demonstrating that the experience of the city cannot be reduced to measurable indicators alone. Instead, urban life is fundamentally constituted through the ongoing relationship between people, place, and everyday practice. Such an understanding aligns closely with the concerns of urban humanities, which emphasize interpretation, lived experience, and the cultural dimensions of urban existence.

The institutional findings generated through interviews with the Department of Spatial Planning (Distaru) further illuminate the relationship between formal planning and everyday urban life. While government agencies have introduced initiatives addressing drainage improvement, housing, environmental management, and spatial regulation, institutional actors themselves acknowledge persistent constraints arising from limited resources, fragmented governance, land ownership challenges, and procedural forms of public participation. These institutional realities help explain why many residents continue to rely upon community-based forms of adaptation despite ongoing planning interventions. Rather than presenting institutional planning and community resilience as competing approaches, the findings suggest that they exist in a dynamic relationship in which everyday community practices frequently compensate for the limitations of formal urban governance. Understanding this relationship requires greater recognition of local knowledge, lived experience, and neighborhood-based practices as valuable forms of urban knowledge rather than simply informal responses to institutional shortcomings.

The findings also carry broader implications for understanding rapidly transforming cities across the Global South. Northern Medan illustrates that urban transformation is experienced not only through demographic growth, economic expansion, or physical redevelopment but also through changing relationships between people and place. As cities continue to expand, questions of belonging, identity, recognition, and cultural continuity become increasingly important dimensions of urban life. The experiences documented in this study suggest that communities continually reinterpret urban change through locally grounded meanings and everyday social practices, demonstrating that cities are as much cultural landscapes as they are physical settlements. This perspective contributes to contemporary urban humanities scholarship by showing how lived experience provides an essential lens for understanding the complexities of urban transformation beyond conventional planning frameworks.

Finally, the mixed-methods design proved particularly valuable in capturing these multiple dimensions of urban life. Quantitative analysis identified significant relationships between neighborhood conditions and

residents' well-being, while qualitative evidence revealed the social meanings and everyday practices through which those statistical relationships are experienced and interpreted. Bringing these forms of evidence together provides a richer understanding of urban life than either approach could achieve independently. It demonstrates that the study of cities benefits not only from measuring physical conditions but also from interpreting the cultural meanings, social relationships, and lived experiences through which residents continually negotiate, inhabit, and recreate urban space.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that urban livability in Northern Medan cannot be understood solely as a technical outcome of spatial planning, infrastructure provision, or environmental management. Rather, livability emerges as a lived social experience shaped by spatial justice, community resilience, and the everyday interactions through which residents negotiate unequal urban conditions. The findings indicate that while physical dimensions such as housing quality, accessibility, public facilities, and environmental maintenance significantly influence residents' well-being, urban life is equally sustained by neighborhood solidarity, collective adaptation, and place-based cultural practices that enable communities to respond to environmental uncertainty and preserve social belonging. Urban livability, therefore, is not simply created through policy intervention or infrastructural investment; it is socially produced through the dynamic interaction between space, institutions, and community agency.

The case of Northern Medan further illustrates how uneven urban development generates differentiated experiences of urban life across Belawan, Labuhan, Marelán, and Deli. Although these districts play an important role in supporting Medan's maritime economy, industrial activities, and urban expansion, many residents continue to experience recurring flooding, environmental degradation, inadequate public infrastructure, and unequal access to urban opportunities. These conditions reveal that economic growth alone does not guarantee equitable improvements in quality of life. Instead, the benefits of development remain unevenly distributed, reinforcing patterns of spatial injustice that shape both material living conditions and everyday experiences of dignity, recognition, and belonging. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that local communities are not passive recipients of these structural inequalities. Through mutual assistance, informal neighborhood organizations, collective environmental management, and locally embedded adaptation practices, residents actively reconstruct urban life and create resilient forms of social organization that sustain everyday well-being. From a theoretical perspective, this article contributes to urban humanities scholarship by advancing a human-centered understanding of urban livability grounded in lived experience, place, and everyday social practice. Rather than conceptualizing livability primarily through measurable planning indicators, the study demonstrates that it is also constituted through the meanings residents attach to their neighborhoods, the relationships they cultivate, and the ways they negotiate structural constraints in daily life. In doing so, the article extends debates on spatial justice by showing that inequality is experienced not only through unequal access to infrastructure and public services but also through questions of identity, recognition, and belonging within the city. Likewise, community resilience is understood not merely as a functional response to environmental hazards but as a culturally embedded process rooted in trust, reciprocity, collective memory, and shared attachment to place. This perspective broadens conventional urban planning discourse by placing human experience, cultural meaning, and social agency at the center of urban analysis.

The study also offers practical implications for urban policy and planning in Northern Medan and other rapidly urbanizing coastal cities facing similar challenges. Improving urban livability requires approaches that move beyond infrastructure-centered development toward planning models that integrate physical improvement with social inclusion and community participation. Investments in drainage systems, flood mitigation, waste management, housing quality, public facilities, and environmental protection remain essential, but they should be accompanied by stronger institutional collaboration, more equitable spatial planning, and meaningful engagement with local communities throughout planning and implementation processes. Recognizing neighborhood organizations, community knowledge, and locally developed adaptation strategies as valuable components of urban governance can strengthen both policy effectiveness and long-term urban resilience. Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The study was based on a sample of 100 respondents drawn from four sub-districts in Northern Medan, which provides valuable insights into local urban experiences

but may not fully represent the diversity of conditions across Medan or other Indonesian cities. In addition, the cross-sectional design captures residents' perceptions at a single point in time and therefore cannot fully examine how experiences of livability and resilience evolve in response to changing environmental, economic, or policy conditions. Future research could employ longitudinal designs, comparative studies across multiple metropolitan regions, or participatory approaches that further explore how different communities construct place, negotiate urban change, and shape resilient futures under conditions of rapid urban transformation.

Ultimately, Northern Medan demonstrates that the future of urban livability lies not only in how cities are planned, but also in how communities inhabit, interpret, and collectively shape urban space through everyday life. Livability is sustained through the continuous negotiation between physical environments, institutional structures, and human relationships. Understanding cities therefore requires greater attention to the lived experiences, cultural meanings, and collective practices through which residents create dignity, resilience, and belonging within unequal urban landscapes. By foregrounding these human dimensions, this study argues that more inclusive and sustainable urban futures depend not only on better infrastructure, but also on recognizing the people whose everyday practices continually produce and sustain the city itself.

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