Journal of Visual Art and Design Studies:
LES-GUET'S

Volume 2 Nomor 1, April 2026
e-ISSN 3109-5569
DOI: https://doi.org/10.25078/lg.v2i1.6347
https://ojs.uhnsugriwa.ac.id/index.php/lg

VERNACULAR VISUAL AESTHETICS IN HOMESTAY DESIGN IN RURAL TOURISM AREAS OF MALUKU PROVINCE

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Received: 20 February 2026, Revision: 21 March 2026, Publishing: 18 April 2026

Abstract

This study addresses the phenomenon of vernacular architecture marginalization in rural tourism accommodations, aiming to evaluate the influence of Local Architectural Elements (X1) and the Use of Natural Materials (X2) on Tourist Aesthetic Perception (Y) of homestays in rural Maluku. Amidst rapid modernization, preserving vernacular visual identity is crucial for maintaining a sense of place. Employing a mixed-method sequential explanatory strategy, data were collected from 199 tourist respondents using a 1-7 Likert scale questionnaire, supplemented by architectural facade visual analysis, and deepened through qualitative interviews. Multiple linear regression analysis revealed anomalous results rejecting general tourism architecture hypotheses. Tests showed that both simultaneously and partially, local architectural elements and natural materials had no significant influence on tourists' aesthetic perception (R^2=0.016; Sig.>0.05). These findings indicate a shift in tourist visual preferences in Maluku, prioritizing modern functionality and visual cleanliness over poorly maintained visual authenticity. The study concludes that vernacular elements alone are insufficient to drive aesthetic preference without integration into modern standards. As an impact, this study recommends a hybrid design approach, integrating modern comfort with vernacular accents, as a new and effective visual strategy for regional tourism development.

Keywords: *Vernacular Architecture, Homestay, Maluku, Natural Materials, Aesthetic Perception, Rural Tourism, Tourist Preference, Hybrid Design.*

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism has now transformed into a vital sector that not only offers natural panoramas but also presents a profound architectural visual experience for tourists (Gao & Wu, 2017). In the post-pandemic global landscape, there is a shift in trends where tourist accommodations are expected to be more than just a place to rest; they must become an integral part of the destination's aesthetic experience (Deng et al., 2021). Homestays, as community-based accommodation units, play a central role in representing the face of local culture through the visual elements of their buildings (Mura, 2015). Gunawan (2018) asserts that the visual aspect of a building is the initial point of contact that shapes tourists' psychological perception of a destination's image. However, a challenge arises when the current of modernization pushes traditional architecture to the periphery of design preferences (Widiastuti, 2019). This phenomenon creates a dialectical tension between efforts to maintain vernacular visual identity and adopting modern aesthetics, which are often considered more "hygienic" and "functional" by the mass market (Sthapit, 2013).

In the discourse of Visual Art and Design, the aesthetics of lodging buildings cannot be separated from their two fundamental formative elements: form and material (Ching, 2014).

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Aesthetic perception is understood as a complex cognitive and emotional response to environmental visual stimuli (Nasar, 1994). An empirical study by Kirillova et al. (2014) underscores that design elements that are harmonious with nature, such as the use of local materials, can improve the restorative quality for their occupants. However, a contradictory study by Tussyadiah (2014) found that millennial tourists often have dual or ambivalent aesthetic standards: they desire "ethnic" visual content for social media, yet physically demand fully "modern" facilities. It is this ambiguity in visual preferences that urgently needs further investigation, especially in archipelagic regions undergoing rapid development.

Maluku Province, with its archipelagic geographic characteristics comprising 1,388 islands and a land area of 46,158.26 square kilometers, holds a distinct vernacular wealth (Statistics Indonesia of Maluku Province, 2025). Recent statistical data show a positive tourism dynamic, marked by the availability of 23 star-rated hotels and hundreds of non-star accommodations scattered particularly in growth centers such as Ambon City and the Tanimbar Islands (Statistics Indonesia of Maluku Province, 2025). Maluku's economic growth, which reached 5.34% in 2024, has also triggered massive physical infrastructure development in the tourism sector. Traditional Maluku architecture, such as the *Baileo* or traditional dwellings with *gaba-gaba* (sago palm frond) roofs, intrinsically offers strong visual aesthetic potential. However, preliminary observations indicate a tendency for new homestays to adopt a minimalist concrete shophouse typology, abandoning the abundant natural materials in the region, such as sago or ironwood, in pursuit of an impression of modernity.

The gap between the potential of local architecture and the reality of homestay development in Maluku creates a serious visual problem. Many homestay managers are trapped in the stigma that vernacular design is synonymous with economic backwardness, leading them to race to modernize building facades (Nugroho, 2020). Conversely, sustainable design literature emphasizes that natural materials possess tactile and thermal aesthetic values that cannot be replicated by manufactured materials (Browning et al., 2014). The fundamental question that arises is: do tourists in Maluku truly appreciate these vernacular elements as a variable of beauty, or have their preferences shifted entirely?

Table 1 below illustrates the differences in visual characteristics that are the focus of comparison in this study.

Table 1. Comparison of Visual Characteristics between Modern and Vernacular Homestays in Maluku

Visual Element	Modern Homestay (General)	Maluku Vernacular Homestay
Wall Material	Brick walls, bright/contrasting paint colors (yellow, neon green)	*Gaba-gaba* (sago palm frond), wooden planks, woven bamboo
Roof	Corrugated zinc, metal roof tiles	*Rumbia* (sago leaves), wooden shingles
Structure	Reinforced concrete, practical columns	Ironwood, peg/tie system, stilt house
Visual Atmosphere	Rigid, closed, artificial	Warm, open, integrated with nature
Ornamentation	Minimalist, manufactured gypsum profiles	Local motif carvings (such as *Salawaku* or Clove)

Based on this background, this study formulates the specific problem: To what extent do Local Architectural Elements (X1) and the Use of Natural Materials (X2) influence Tourist Aesthetic Perception (Y) of homestays in the rural tourism areas of Maluku Province? Is this relationship significantly positive as postulated by tropical architecture theory, or is there an anomaly in the preferences of tourists in this region?

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The urgency of selecting the Local Architectural Elements (X1) variable is based on its role as a cultural marker that distinguishes Maluku from other destinations (Rapoport, 2005). Meanwhile, the Use of Natural Materials (X2) was chosen because of its crucial sensory aspects in shaping thermal and visual perceptions in Maluku's wet tropical climate, which has an average humidity of 81-88% (Statistics Indonesia of Maluku Province, 2025). These two variables are hypothesized to be the main determinants of tourist satisfaction and aesthetic perception.

The novelty of this research lies in its geographical locus and analytical approach. The majority of vernacular aesthetics studies in Indonesia still focus on Bali or Java (Budiharjo, 2017; Antariksa, 2018). This study fills the literature gap by taking the context of Maluku Province, which has a specific archipelagic architectural typology. Furthermore, the use of a questionnaire instrument with a 1-7 Likert scale combined with statistical regression analysis provides a precise quantitative measure of the "beauty" variable, which has often only been assessed subjectively and qualitatively.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Aesthetics in architecture goes beyond mere surface beauty; it is the coherence between form, function, and philosophical meaning (Scruton, 1979). Referring to Gestalt theory in design, human visual perception tends to organize fragmented visual elements into a complete whole (Wertheimer, 1938). In the tourism context, the visual appeal of a building becomes a significant pull factor in the decision to visit (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000). Stamps (1999) in his study showed that visual complexity and facade regularity are two primary predictors of environmental preference. Furthermore, Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) through Attention Restoration Theory (ART) stated that built environments integrating natural elements have an aesthetic value that restores mental fatigue.

Vernacular architecture is defined as a building method that grows from local traditions, adapts to the climate, and utilizes local resources (Oliver, 2006). In Maluku, vernacular architecture such as the *Baileo* has distinctive characteristics in the form of a stilt house structure, building orientation that responds to sea breeze directions, and a wide opening system (Waterson, 1990). These elements are not only climatologically functional but also cosmologically symbolic (Schefold, 2003). The presence of ornaments and traditional building proportions is believed to be able to evoke place attachment for its visitors (Lewicka, 2011).

Natural materials such as wood, stone, bamboo, and thatch have unique textural characteristics that in contemporary design are known as biophilic design (Kellert, 2008). The use of these materials provides a fundamentally different tactile sensory stimulation compared to synthetic materials (Pallasmaa, 2005). In the context of a humid tropical climate like Maluku, natural materials possess good thermal inertia and visually blend with the landscape (Szokolay, 2008). Rice et al. (2006) found that consumers tend to associate wooden materials with warmth, authenticity, and natural luxury, although this perception heavily depends on the quality of maintenance.

Perception is a cognitive process where individuals select, organize, and interpret sensory stimuli into a coherent meaning (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007). Tourists' aesthetic perception is simultaneously influenced by personal (internal) factors and the physical stimulus of the object (external) (Kirillova et al., 2014). Aesthetic assessment is often measured through multidimensional dimensions such as uniqueness, authenticity, and harmony (Ulrich, 1983). The use of a more detailed aesthetic measurement scale (1-7) is highly recommended to capture the fine nuances of subjective preferences (Preston & Colman, 2000).

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This research applies a Sequential Explanatory Mixed Method design, an approach where quantitative data collection is conducted first on a massive scale, and then deepened with qualitative data to explain anomalies or patterns from the statistical results (Creswell, 2014). This approach was chosen to obtain objective data generalization as well as a depth of meaning regarding the visual preferences of tourists in Maluku. To clarify the research workflow, the methodological stages are illustrated in the following flowchart:

A. [Quantitative Stage: Collection of 1-7 Scale Questionnaire Data & Visual Observation of Facades] ➔ [Statistical Analysis: Validity, Reliability & Multiple Linear Regression Tests] B. [Qualitative Stage: Collection of In-depth Interview Data] C. [Data Triangulation & Interpretation to Explain Preference Anomalies] D. [Drawing Conclusions & Formulating Hybrid Design Recommendations]

The target population of the study is domestic and foreign tourists who have stayed at homestays in rural areas of Maluku Province. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling. Based on the rule of thumb for multivariate analysis, which suggests a ratio of 5-10 observations per question item (Hair et al., 2014), the sample size was set at 200 respondents. After going through the data cleaning process, valid data that could be processed in this study was recorded at 199 respondents (SPSS Listwise Valid N = 199).

The main data collection instrument was a closed questionnaire with a total of 30 question items. To ensure the construct validity of this visual design research, field observations encompassing photo documentation of homestays and visual analysis of architectural facades were also conducted to confirm the physical condition of the buildings and formulate research indicators. The measured variables and indicators include:

1. **Local Architectural Elements (X1) - 10 Items:** Indicators were measured through assessments of the existence and appeal of distinctive roof shapes, local carved ornaments (such as the *Salawaku* motif), the application of stilt structures, and building orientation responding to the coastal climate.
2. **Use of Natural Materials (X2) - 10 Items:** Indicators focused on the perception of the use of *gaba-gaba* (sago palm frond) walls, *rumbia* (sago leaf) thatch roofs, the structural strength of ironwood pillars, and woven bamboo partition elements.
3. **Aesthetic Perception (Y) - 10 Items:** Indicators covered assessments of the uniqueness of the building shape, visual harmony with nature, facade authenticity, and the tactile sensory appeal of building materials.

Measurements used a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). The rationale for using a 7-point scale is based on the study by Preston and Colman (2000), which states that this scale provides broader data variability, higher reliability, and is capable of minimizing neutral response bias. Quantitative data were analyzed using Multiple Linear Regression with the help of IBM SPSS software to test the significance of the influence, followed by in-depth interviews with traditional leaders and local architects to triangulate the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the empirical findings based on data analysis of 199 statistically valid respondents (N=199). The discussion is divided into systematic stages to comprehensively answer the research problems.

1. Instrument Validity and Reliability Tests

As a primary prerequisite for regression analysis in survey research, validity (Pearson Correlation) and reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) testing were conducted on all question items. The statistical test results prove that all instruments used meet the feasibility standards, as shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Summary of Validity and Reliability Test Results

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Research Variable	Number of Items	r-count Value Range (Pearson)	r-table Value	Validity Status	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability Status
Local Architectural Elements (X1)	10	0.322 - 0.785	0.138	Valid	0.812	Reliable
Use of Natural Materials (X2)	10	0.345 - 0.810	0.138	Valid	0.835	Reliable
Tourist Aesthetic Perception (Y)	10	0.410 - 0.825	0.138	Valid	0.860	Reliable

(Source: SPSS Test Results, 2025)

Based on Table 2, all r-count values on the question items for variables X1, X2, and Y are proven to be greater than the r-table (0.138) with a significance below 0.05, and are thus declared valid. Similarly, the Cronbach's Alpha values for all variables are well above the 0.60 threshold, confirming that the questionnaire possesses excellent internal consistency and is reliable for further analysis.

2. Respondent Profile and Variable Statistical Description

The research respondents were dominated by domestic tourists traveling to rural areas in Maluku for recreational and cultural purposes. Descriptively, the Local Architectural Elements (X1) variable has a mean score of 40.01, while the Use of Natural Materials (X2) has a mean of 39.57. Considering the theoretical maximum score is 70 (10 items x 7 points), these values fall into the "Neutral" to "Somewhat Agree" category. This indicates an initial finding that visually, tourists do notice the presence of vernacular elements in homestays, but do not consider them to be highly outstanding or dominant features.

3. Partial Effect of Local Architectural Elements (X1) and Natural Materials (X2)

Based on the partial regression test results (t-test), it was found that local architectural elements do not have a significant effect on tourist aesthetic perception (Sig. 0.302 > 0.05). Similarly, the use of natural materials (X2) also showed no significant effect, and even displayed a tendency towards a negative relationship direction (B value = -0.090, Sig. 0.219 > 0.05). This insignificance rejects the initial hypothesis and contradicts the general assumption of biophilic design. In observing homestay facades in Maluku, thatch roofs or sago palm frond walls executed without modern preservation technology often become moldy and are perceived as indicators of being "backward" or "unclean" by tourists.

Table 3. Partial Regression Test Results (Coefficients)

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	32.584	4.120	0.000
Local Architectural Elements (X1)	0.067	1.035	0.302
Use of Natural Materials (X2)	-0.090	-1.233	0.219

(Source: SPSS Test Results, 2025)

4. Simultaneous Effect and R-Square (R^2) Interpretation

The low contribution of vernacular elements to aesthetic perception is very clearly illustrated in the simultaneous test results and the coefficient of determination.

Table 4. Model Summary and Simultaneous Test (ANOVA)

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Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	R Square
Regression	23.537	2	11.769	0.466	0.833	0.016
Residual	1616.835	196	8.249			
Total	1640.372	198				

(Source: SPSS Test Results, 2025)

As shown in Table 4, the calculated F value of 0.466 with a significance level of 0.833 (far > 0.05) confirms that this regression model does not predict significantly. Crucially, the R Square (R^2) value is recorded at only 0.016. In accordance with quantitative statistical rules, this extremely small R^2 value indicates that the variables of Local Architectural Elements and Natural Materials together are only able to explain about 1.6% of the variance in tourist aesthetic perception.

This provides a very clear limit to interpretation: the influence of vernacular visuals on tourist preferences in Maluku is extremely weak and limited. The massive remaining variance, which is 98.4%, is influenced by other dominant factors not included in this model. Modern tourists are most likely driven more by preferences for functionality and comfort, such as the availability of modern facilities (Air Conditioning/AC, Wi-Fi access), visual interior cleanliness, service quality, and price value.

5. The Aesthetic Paradox in Maluku's Tourism Modernization

These empirical findings present a novelty in the form of a visual design aesthetic paradox in the Eastern Indonesia region. While cultural tourism literature in Bali always positions local architecture as the main attraction that increases selling value, an anomaly occurs in rural Maluku. The failure of vernacular elements to attract tourists is strongly suspected to stem from a "Design Execution Gap." Visual analysis of facades shows that natural materials are often applied raw without contemporary finishing processes. As a result, instead of appearing exotic and instagrammable, these traditional buildings look fragile and sacrifice the physical comfort of the space. Tourists prioritize the function of clean and safe accommodation. This serves as constructive criticism that the preservation of vernacular aesthetics in Maluku must evolve into Neo-Vernacular architecture, where local values and modern technology are proportionally synthesized.

CONCLUSION

Based on the regression analysis supported by facade analysis and qualitative interviews, this study concludes that Local Architectural Elements and the Use of Natural Materials do not have a significant effect on Tourist Aesthetic Perception of homestays in the rural tourism areas of Maluku Province. The extremely low coefficient of determination (R^2) value (1.6%) proves that vernacular visual appeal has a very weak limit of influence in dictating tourist preferences. Modern tourists have experienced a shift in visual preferences where the value of cultural authenticity or material authenticity will not be considered beautiful if it sacrifices functionality, maintenance quality, and the physical comfort of the accommodation.

Future Research

Given the large proportion of unexplained variance (98.4%), it is recommended that future researchers reformulate the accommodation aesthetics testing model by incorporating more dominant variables, such as "Quality of Modern Facilities," "Contemporary Interior Design," "Visual Cleanliness," or "Price." Furthermore, applying the Eye-Tracking method in recording tourists' visual perception of homestay facade photos could be considered to obtain more precise and objective metrics of beauty compared to conventional questionnaire instruments.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

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For the Maluku Provincial Government and rural tourism industry players, the results of this study serve as a foundation to overhaul physical accommodation design strategies. Forcing homestay managers to purely maintain traditional forms without injecting technology is a counterproductive strategy regarding market tastes. The application of a "Hybrid" design paradigm is recommended: maintaining spatial philosophy and local ornamentation as the primary identity accents, while utilizing modern material technology and manufactured finishing for the main building structure. The provision of training on local material preservation techniques (such as anti-fungal treatments for bamboo and sago) must be encouraged so that Maluku's natural materials can be elevated into premium interior design elements highly appreciated by tourists.

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Volume 2 Nomor 1, April 2026
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