

URBAN ELEMENTS IN SHAPING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AREA IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable tourism areas require spatial environments that protect ecological resources while producing a distinctive and memorable destination identity. This study analyzes the role of urban elements in shaping sustainable tourism area identity in an emerging coastal destination. A descriptive qualitative design was employed through field observation, semi-structured interviews, documentation, and literature review. The analysis focused on eight urban elements: land use, building form and massing, circulation and parking, open spaces, pedestrian pathways, supporting activities, signage, and environmental preservation. The findings show that the identity of the tourism area is shaped most strongly by coastal landscapes, natural open spaces, mangrove and coral reef ecosystems, and community-based activities. These elements strengthen sense of place, visual attractiveness, ecological value, and the authenticity of visitor experience. However, pedestrian facilities, wayfinding systems, parking management, and architectural design control remain insufficiently integrated with sustainability principles. The study formulates an Urban Elements-Based Tourism Area Identity Model, which positions spatial-physical, socio-cultural, visual-legibility, and ecological elements as interconnected determinants of sustainable destination identity. The model offers a conceptual framework for planners and policymakers seeking to balance tourism competitiveness, environmental conservation, and local identity.

Keywords: Environmental Preservation, Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Area Identity, Urban Design, Urban Elements.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism development has become a central concern in destination planning because tourism growth can simultaneously generate economic opportunities, social transformation, and environmental pressure. In contemporary tourism discourse, destination competitiveness is no longer assessed only through the availability of accommodation, attractions, and accessibility. It is increasingly assessed through the ability of a destination to maintain ecological quality, support local communities, and offer a distinctive sense of place that can be recognized and remembered by visitors. The World Tourism Organization (2018) links tourism development with the Sustainable Development Goals by emphasizing inclusive growth, responsible consumption, and environmental protection. Similar arguments in tourism studies show that sustainability must be understood not merely as a technical issue of resource management, but as an integrated planning agenda that includes governance, community participation, spatial quality, and visitor experience (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Buckley, 2012; Saarinen, 2006).

Tourism area identity is an important component of this agenda. A destination with a strong identity offers legibility, uniqueness, emotional attachment, and symbolic meaning. Place identity literature explains that identity emerges from the relationship between physical setting, human experience, memory, and social meaning (Proshansky et al., 1983; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). In tourism contexts, the identity of a destination affects image formation, place attachment, satisfaction, and loyalty (Chen & Chen, 2010; Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Yuksel et al., 2010). Therefore, the formation of tourism area identity cannot be separated from how visitors and residents encounter, interpret, and use the built and natural environment. A tourism destination becomes meaningful when its spatial structure, landscape character, cultural practices, and environmental quality are organized as a coherent spatial experience.

Urban design provides a useful lens for understanding this relationship because it connects spatial form with human perception and activity. Lynch (1960) argues that the imageability of a place is shaped by paths,

edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. Shirvani (1985) emphasizes land use, building form and massing, circulation and parking, open space, pedestrian ways, activity support, signage, and preservation as key components of urban design analysis. Later urban design literature similarly stresses the importance of public realm quality, walkability, visual coherence, and human-scale environments in producing places that are usable, meaningful, and sustainable (Carmona, 2021; Gehl, 2010; Montgomery, 1998). These theoretical foundations indicate that tourism identity is not produced by branding alone. It is materially constructed through urban elements that shape how a destination looks, functions, and is experienced.

In tourism planning, the integration of urban elements is especially important for coastal and nature-based destinations. Coastal tourism areas often depend on natural scenery, beach access, local settlements, marine ecosystems, and informal community activities. If development is not carefully managed, tourism investment may fragment local landscapes, reduce ecological quality, and weaken the very identity that makes the destination attractive. Dredge and Jenkins (2007) argue that tourism planning should connect land use, infrastructure, environmental management, and stakeholder interests. Hall (2011) adds that sustainable tourism governance requires policy learning and institutional coordination because isolated interventions rarely resolve complex destination problems. This implies that the identity of a sustainable tourism area needs to be planned through spatial integration rather than through separate sectoral projects.

Likupang has emerged as one of Indonesia's strategic tourism development areas. The area contains beaches, coastal settlements, hills, mangrove ecosystems, coral reefs, and local cultural resources that provide strong potential for sustainable tourism development. Official development information positions Likupang as a special economic zone and a strategic destination with significant investment and tourism potential (Badan KEK Nasional, 2020). Previous local studies also show that villages around the Likupang tourism area possess diverse natural and community-based attractions that can support destination development if they are managed with environmental sensitivity (Firmansyah, 2021). At the national level, community-based tourism and village tourism have been promoted as alternative approaches for strengthening local economies and diversifying tourism products (Kementerian Pariwisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif, 2021; Kawuryan et al., 2022).

The expected condition, or *das sollen*, is that tourism development in Likupang should strengthen local identity through environmentally responsive land use, human-scaled architectural forms, accessible circulation, comfortable pedestrian routes, coherent signage, community-based activities, and strong environmental preservation. In reality, or *das sein*, the field condition indicates that several urban elements remain unevenly developed. Pedestrian facilities are still limited in several locations, wayfinding systems are fragmented, parking management is not yet fully integrated with visitor flows, and architectural character has not been consistently guided by place-based design principles. At the same time, increasing tourism pressure has the potential to transform natural and residential landscapes. This gap between sustainable tourism ideals and existing spatial conditions requires systematic analysis.

Previous studies have addressed sustainable tourism, destination image, place attachment, urban tourism, and environmental governance (Ashworth & Page, 2011; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Lee, 2013; Styliadis, 2018). However, many studies examine these themes separately. Studies that explicitly connect the eight urban design elements with the formation of sustainable tourism area identity in an emerging coastal destination remain limited. The novelty of this study lies in developing an Urban Elements-Based Tourism Area Identity Model that integrates spatial-physical, socio-cultural, visual-legibility, and ecological components into one conceptual framework. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the role of urban elements in shaping sustainable tourism area identity and to formulate a model that can guide sustainable tourism planning and development.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. A qualitative approach was selected because the research problem concerns spatial meaning, place character, visual quality, community activities, and stakeholder interpretation. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for investigating how people experience places and how meanings are constructed in specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The descriptive orientation also allowed the study to document the existing condition of urban elements and interpret their contribution to tourism area identity. In line with qualitative research principles, the researcher served as the main instrument supported by observation sheets, semi-structured interview guides, visual documentation, and literature review matrices (Abdussamad, 2021).

The research subjects included stakeholders related to tourism development, namely local community members, tourism business operators, visitors, and area management representatives. These subjects were selected because they interact directly with the tourism area and therefore possess experiential knowledge about accessibility, environmental quality, local activities, visitor comfort, and destination identity. Data collection was conducted through field observations, interviews, documentation, and secondary-source review. Field observations focused on eight urban elements: land use, building form and massing, circulation and parking, open spaces, pedestrian pathways, supporting activities, signage, and environmental preservation. Documentation included photographs, spatial notes, and visual records of tourism facilities and environmental features. Secondary sources included planning documents, reports, regulations, and relevant scientific literature.

Data were analyzed using descriptive-interpretative techniques. The analysis consisted of data reduction, categorization according to the eight urban elements, interpretation of the relationship between spatial conditions and identity formation, and synthesis of findings into a conceptual model. Miles et al. (2014) explain that qualitative data analysis involves condensation, display, and conclusion drawing in an iterative process. This study adopted that logic by comparing field evidence, stakeholder statements, visual documentation, and theoretical concepts. To strengthen validity, data triangulation was conducted by comparing observation findings, interview responses, documentation, and literature-based interpretation. The research framework is presented in Figure 1.

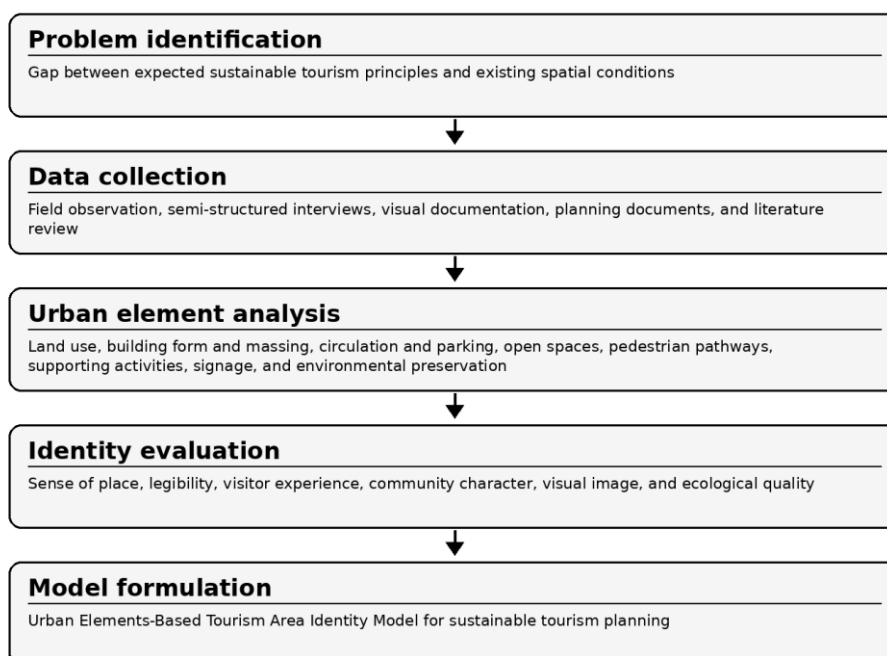


Figure 1. Research framework**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION****Land Use as a Determinant of Tourism Area Identity**

Land use is a fundamental urban element because it organizes the distribution of activities and defines the relationship among functional zones. In the study area, land use is structured around tourism zones, residential areas, conservation zones, green open spaces, coastal areas, and supporting service functions. This structure contributes to tourism area identity by connecting nature-based attractions with local settlements and visitor-oriented facilities. From an urban design perspective, coherent land use can reduce spatial conflict and strengthen the legibility of a destination because visitors are able to understand where activities occur and how different parts of the area relate to one another (Carmona, 2021; Lynch, 1960).

The field findings indicate that the strongest identity of the area is derived from the dominance of coastal landscapes and conservation-oriented spaces. Beaches, mangrove forests, coral reef ecosystems, hilly terrain, and vegetation function not only as natural resources but also as spatial markers. They differentiate the destination from more urbanized tourism areas and support an image of nature-based and ecotourism-oriented development. In sustainable tourism theory, the protection of such resources is essential because the tourism product depends directly on environmental quality (Buckley, 2012; Saarinen, 2006). The Likupang Special Economic Zone master plan, shown in Figure 2, also indicates the importance of spatial zoning in balancing tourism development, public services, residential functions, and green areas.

**Figure 2. Likupang Special Economic Zone master plan**

Source: Adapted from KEK.go.id (2024).

However, tourism growth has begun to influence local land-use patterns. Several residential buildings have been transformed into homestays, restaurants, small shops, and other tourism-supporting facilities. This transformation can provide local economic benefits and encourage community participation, which Lee (2013) identifies as an important factor in residents' support for sustainable tourism. Nevertheless, unmanaged conversion may also reduce the continuity of local residential character and increase pressure on coastal ecosystems. The key planning implication is that land-use management must be adaptive and protective at the same time. Tourism activities should be concentrated in appropriate zones, while

conservation spaces, local settlements, and public access to coastal landscapes should be safeguarded as core components of destination identity.

Building Form and Massing as a Representation of Local Character

Building form and massing shape the visual relationship between built structures, landscape, and human experience. Field observation shows that building massing in the tourism area is still dominated by one- to two-story structures. This low-rise pattern creates a human-scaled environment and allows visitors to appreciate the coastal and hilly landscapes. Human scale is essential in tourism areas because it supports comfort, visual permeability, and direct engagement with the surroundings (Gehl, 2010). In coastal destinations, excessive building height can weaken landscape continuity and reduce the dominance of natural scenery.

The use of timber, natural stone, earth-tone colors, and tropical architectural responses reflects an effort to preserve the environmental character of the area. Such features strengthen place identity because they connect architecture with climate, material culture, and landscape setting. Norberg-Schulz (1980) argues that the spirit of place emerges when buildings respond to the character of their environment. Relph (1976) similarly stresses that placelessness occurs when places lose distinctiveness through standardized forms. In this context, building design should not simply imitate generic resort architecture; it should interpret local coastal and Minahasan cultural characteristics in a contemporary yet context-sensitive manner.

A challenge identified in the field is the absence of specific design guidelines that regulate architectural character throughout the area. Some new buildings begin to adopt forms that are less compatible with the coastal landscape. Without guidelines on height, facade treatment, roof form, material selection, setbacks, and landscape integration, future development may gradually weaken the tourism identity. Therefore, design control is required not as a restriction on investment, but as a tool for maintaining visual coherence and sustainability. Place-based architectural guidelines can help ensure that tourism facilities contribute to the identity of the area rather than replacing it.

Circulation and Parking as Components of Accessibility and Visual Order

Circulation and parking determine how visitors enter, move through, and understand a tourism area. Accessibility is a key component of destination competitiveness because it influences visitor comfort, time efficiency, and perceived quality of experience (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The development of road infrastructure leading to the tourism area has improved regional connectivity and enabled visitors to reach coastal attractions more conveniently. This condition supports destination growth and increases the possibility of integrating multiple attractions within one tourism route.

Despite this improvement, the increase in tourism vehicles has produced new spatial challenges. During peak periods, tour buses and private vehicles are often observed using road shoulders as temporary parking spaces. This condition can reduce road capacity, disturb pedestrian movement, and weaken the visual quality of the area. In urban design terms, circulation should not be understood merely as vehicle movement. It is part of the spatial experience because roads, paths, nodes, and arrival points influence how visitors form mental maps of the destination (Lynch, 1960). Poor parking management can therefore affect not only traffic efficiency but also the identity and comfort of the tourism area.

A centralized parking system integrated with shuttle services, pedestrian routes, and destination nodes would help reduce vehicle pressure around sensitive coastal areas. Such a system would be consistent with sustainable tourism planning because it can limit congestion, reduce visual clutter, and improve visitor mobility. Ashworth and Page (2011) note that tourism activity is embedded within wider urban and local systems. Therefore, tourism circulation should be coordinated with community mobility rather than

designed exclusively for visitors. In the study area, circulation planning needs to connect regional access, local roads, pedestrian pathways, and tourism attractions into a coherent mobility network.

Open Space as the Dominant Element of Tourism Area Identity

Open space is the most dominant urban element in shaping the identity of the tourism area. The character of the destination is defined less by large buildings or commercial facilities and more by beaches, coastal edges, hills, tropical vegetation, mangrove areas, and green spaces. These natural open spaces create visual openness, environmental comfort, and direct contact with coastal landscapes. Open space also performs ecological functions that are highly relevant to sustainable tourism, including coastal protection, habitat provision, microclimate regulation, and water infiltration.

Figure 3 illustrates the importance of coastal open space as a visual and experiential element. The beach, vegetation, boats, and settlement edges create an authentic tourism landscape that combines natural scenery with local life. This aligns with tourism experience theory, which argues that visitors seek not only attractions but also meaningful encounters with place (Urry & Larsen, 2011). The quality of open space can therefore shape destination image, satisfaction, and attachment. In nature-based destinations, environmental quality itself becomes a core tourism product (Buckley, 2012).



Figure 3. Open spaces in the Likupang tourism area

Source: Author documentation (2024).

The field findings indicate that open spaces should remain a priority in all tourism development policies. White-sand beaches, mangrove forests, hilly landscapes, and green open spaces distinguish the area from other destinations and provide opportunities for recreation, environmental education, conservation tourism, and community-based tourism. However, if development encroaches on these open spaces, the destination may lose its strongest identity asset. Sustainable tourism planning must therefore maintain ecological buffers, public access to coastal areas, and landscape continuity. Open space should not be treated as residual land after development; it should be treated as the primary structuring element of the tourism area.

Pedestrian Pathways and the Tourist Spatial Experience

Pedestrian pathways are essential for creating direct interaction between visitors and the environment. Walkability influences comfort, safety, accessibility, and the possibility of spontaneous engagement with local activities. The field condition shows that many pedestrian routes remain basic and are often formed by road shoulders, sandy surfaces, drainage covers, or informal paths. These conditions are not yet adequate for diverse users, particularly older visitors, children, and people with mobility limitations. A sustainable tourism area should provide safe, inclusive, and comfortable pedestrian access to major attractions and supporting facilities.

Figure 4 shows village road conditions and the shaded spatial atmosphere that can become an asset for pedestrian tourism. The presence of trees, open spaces, and local houses creates an authentic walking experience. However, the physical infrastructure requires improvement through continuous pathways, clear edges, drainage integration, resting points, lighting, and universal design principles. Gehl (2010) emphasizes that good public environments support walking, staying, seeing, and social interaction. In tourism destinations, these qualities are also related to visitor experience and destination image.



Figure 4. Village road and pedestrian environment

Source: Author documentation (2024).

Pedestrian improvement should not erase the natural character of the area. Hardscape design needs to be sensitive to coastal conditions, local materials, and ecological drainage. Boardwalks, permeable surfaces, shaded routes, and interpretive paths can connect beaches, mangrove areas, settlements, and tourism service nodes. When pedestrian networks are integrated with open space and signage systems, they can strengthen legibility and sense of place. Thus, pedestrian pathways should be planned as experiential corridors rather than simply as transportation infrastructure.

Supporting Activities as Reinforcing Elements of Area Character

Supporting activities are important because destination identity is shaped not only by physical form but also by social practices. Local culinary businesses, homestays, handicrafts, fishing activities, small-scale tourism services, and community interactions contribute to the authenticity of the tourism experience. Figure 5 shows village activities and settlement elements that are closely integrated with the coastal environment. These activities demonstrate that the area is not merely a tourist enclave but also a lived place where residents continue to perform everyday economic and social practices.



Figure 5. Supporting village activities in Likupang
Source: Author documentation (2024).

Community-based activities can strengthen sustainability when local residents obtain benefits from tourism and remain involved in decision-making. Lee (2013) shows that community attachment and involvement influence support for sustainable tourism development. Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) further argues that tourism should be socialized toward ecological and social justice rather than driven only by corporate growth. In the study area, supporting activities therefore need to be encouraged in ways that increase local income, preserve cultural practices, and prevent displacement or marginalization of residents.

The development of supporting activities requires spatial and institutional support. Local food stalls, homestays, craft markets, boat services, and community interpretation centers need appropriate locations, design standards, sanitation facilities, and capacity-building programs. These elements can strengthen visitor experience while maintaining the local character of the destination. If supporting activities are replaced by standardized commercial facilities, the destination may become less distinctive. Therefore, the creative economy and community-based tourism should be treated as integral elements of tourism area identity.

Signage System and Area Legibility

Signage and wayfinding systems help visitors understand the spatial structure of a tourism destination. In the field, signage is still dominated by destination name boards, traffic signs, and simple directional markers. Figure 6 shows a destination sign that functions as an arrival marker and identification element. The large lettering and contrasting tones make the sign visible, but the broader wayfinding system remains limited. Visitors still need clearer information about routes, attraction locations, environmental rules, parking areas, pedestrian paths, and community facilities.



Figure 6. Signage system in the tourism area

Source: Author documentation (2024).

Lynch (1960) emphasizes that legibility is central to how people perceive and remember urban environments. Passini (1984) similarly explains that wayfinding involves spatial information, decision-making, and environmental communication. In tourism areas, signage is not only a technical navigational device. It can also function as a visual identity element, an educational medium, and a tool for communicating sustainability values. Signage can explain mangrove conservation, coral reef protection, local history, cultural etiquette, waste management, and safe visitor behavior.

The signage system in the tourism area should therefore be developed as an integrated wayfinding strategy. Directional signs, area maps, interpretive panels, trail markers, and destination gateways should use a consistent visual language inspired by local culture and coastal ecology. Materials should be durable and environmentally appropriate. Multilingual information may also be needed for broader visitor segments. By integrating legibility, identity, and environmental education, signage can strengthen both visitor experience and sustainable tourism management.

Environmental Preservation as the Foundation of Sustainable Tourism

Environmental preservation is the foundation of sustainable tourism area identity. The tourism area possesses important ecosystems, including mangrove forests, coral reefs, beaches, coastal vegetation, and habitats for endemic wildlife. These environmental features are not only ecological assets but also central components of destination attractiveness. Figure 7 shows a beach landscape that illustrates the close relationship between natural scenery and tourism identity. If environmental quality declines, the destination will lose its main competitive advantage.



Figure 7. Beach area in a coastal village

Source: Author documentation (2024).

Sustainable tourism research consistently emphasizes that tourism must manage its environmental impacts and protect the resources on which it depends (Buckley, 2012; Saarinen, 2006). Governance studies further indicate that environmental preservation requires institutional coordination, monitoring, and community participation (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2011). In the study area, awareness of environmental conservation has gradually increased alongside tourism development. Nevertheless, the expansion of tourism activities still requires stricter control, especially in relation to coastal construction, waste management, water quality, ecosystem disturbance, and visitor behavior.

Environmental preservation should be positioned as a core planning principle rather than as an additional program. Conservation zones, mangrove rehabilitation, coral reef protection, waste reduction, environmental interpretation, and visitor capacity management need to be integrated into spatial planning and tourism operations. This approach will help ensure that tourism growth does not undermine the natural identity of the area. The identity of the destination depends on the ability to maintain ecological uniqueness while providing meaningful visitor experiences.

Urban Elements-Based Tourism Area Identity Model

The findings indicate that sustainable tourism area identity is produced by the interaction of spatial-physical, socio-cultural, visual-legibility, and ecological elements. Land use, building form, circulation, open spaces, pedestrian pathways, supporting activities, signage, and environmental preservation cannot be planned separately. Each element influences the others. For example, pedestrian pathways become more meaningful when they connect open spaces, community activities, and signage. Building form contributes more strongly to identity when it respects land-use structure and environmental preservation. Similarly, supporting activities become more sustainable when they are located within accessible and ecologically appropriate spaces.

Table 1 summarizes the contribution of each urban element to tourism area identity. The table shows that every element has a different but complementary function. Some elements shape visual image, others shape accessibility, social meaning, ecological quality, or visitor experience. The model developed from this analysis is shown in Figure 8. It positions sustainable tourism area identity as the outcome of integrated urban elements. This is consistent with destination competitiveness theory, which stresses that destination success depends on core resources, supporting factors, management, and situational conditions (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). It is also consistent with place attachment literature, which shows that emotional and cognitive bonds are shaped by perceived place quality, identity, and experience (Ramkissoon et al., 2013; Styliadis, 2018; Yuksel et al., 2010).

Table 1. Contribution of Urban Elements to Sustainable Tourism Area Identity

Urban element	Identity contribution	Planning implication
Land use	Organizes tourism, settlement, conservation, and service zones	Protect conservation areas and guide compatible tourism functions
Building form and massing	Shapes visual coherence, human scale, and local architectural character	Prepare place-based design guidelines and height controls
Circulation and parking	Influences accessibility, arrival experience, and visual order	Develop centralized parking and integrated mobility routes
Open spaces	Provides the dominant coastal and ecological image of the destination	Maintain beaches, hills, mangroves, and green open spaces
Pedestrian pathways	Creates direct spatial experience and interaction with local environments	Improve safe, shaded, inclusive, and continuous walking routes
Supporting activities	Strengthens authenticity through local economy and community practices	Support culinary, homestay, craft, fishing, and community tourism
Signage	Improves legibility and communicates destination identity	Develop integrated wayfinding with local cultural and ecological cues
Environmental preservation	Protects the ecological basis of sustainable tourism attractiveness	Integrate conservation, monitoring, and visitor capacity management

The proposed model has practical implications for tourism planning. First, planners should identify which urban elements already function as identity strengths, such as open spaces and environmental preservation. Second, weak elements, such as pedestrian pathways, wayfinding, parking management, and design guidelines, should be improved without damaging the natural and cultural character of the destination. Third, community-based supporting activities should be integrated into tourism infrastructure so that local residents remain visible and economically involved. Fourth, environmental preservation should guide all spatial decisions. Through this integrated approach, sustainable tourism area identity can become not only a branding outcome but also a spatial, ecological, and social planning strategy.

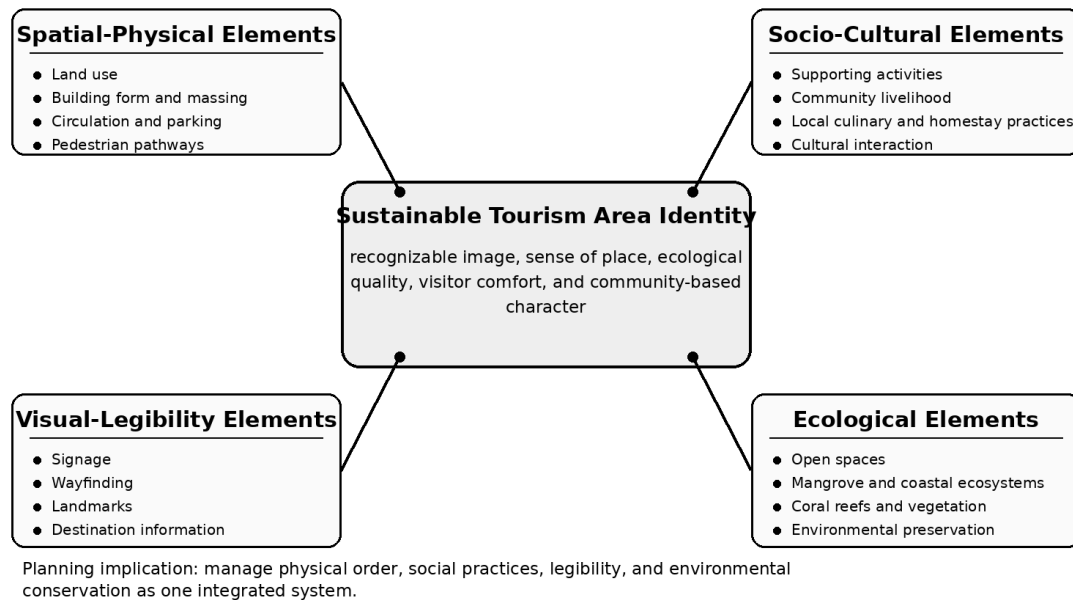


Figure 8. Urban Elements-Based Tourism Area Identity Model
Source: Author analysis (2024).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that sustainable tourism area identity is shaped by the integrated contribution of eight urban elements: land use, building form and massing, circulation and parking, open spaces, pedestrian pathways, supporting activities, signage, and environmental preservation. In the study area, open spaces and environmental preservation are the strongest identity-forming elements because coastal landscapes, mangrove ecosystems, coral reefs, beaches, hills, and tropical vegetation define the destination's visual and ecological character. Community-based supporting activities further strengthen authenticity and local distinctiveness. However, pedestrian facilities, wayfinding systems, parking arrangements, and architectural design control still require improvement to ensure that tourism development remains accessible, legible, comfortable, and consistent with the area's natural character. The proposed Urban Elements-Based Tourism Area Identity Model demonstrates that destination identity should be planned as an integrated system connecting spatial-physical, socio-cultural, visual-legibility, and ecological elements. This model can guide planners and policymakers in developing tourism areas that balance tourism competitiveness, environmental conservation, and local community identity.

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