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Analysis of Living Space Dynamics in Precarity: A Case Study of Tailors in Yogyakarta

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Abstract

Precarious work, marked by job insecurity and limited social protection, is a growing concern in rapidly developing Indonesian cities such as Yogyakarta, where tourism expansion and limited formal employment opportunities push many residents into informal labour. This article examines the living-space dynamics of tailors in the Terban area, who operate on land historically owned by the Sultanate and shaped by long-standing informal power structures. Using an ethnographic approach, the study explores how these tailors navigate uncertainty arising from insecure land tenure, fluctuating income, and weak institutional protection. The findings show that although their work aligns with many characteristics of the precariat, the tailors' collective strategies, particularly their community-based organisation, informal insurance mechanisms, and reciprocal patron-client relations with land custodians, provide alternative forms of stability. Their everyday practices reveal a form of agency that allows them to negotiate with authorities, sustain livelihoods, and shape their social and spatial environment. This study demonstrates that precarity among informal workers is not equal but mediated by local social relations and urban land politics, offering insights into how vulnerability, resilience, and spatial contestation intersect in contemporary urban society in Indonesia.

Keywords: Precarious Work; Patron-Client Relations; Tailor; Sultan Land; Yogyakarta; Indonesia

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Introduction

The phenomenon of the precariat, or workers lacking job security, has become a problem worldwide (Lian, 2024; Troy et al., 2025; Bayraktaroglu, 2025). The precariat is defined as a class whose members have non-permanent jobs and lack long-term employment contracts (Standing, 2011). The uncertainty in precariat employment extends to the variability of working hours and the ambiguity of the scope of work, with frequent management of up to five simultaneous jobs across a diverse array of sectors. This multi-job strategy spans numerous industries, including blue-collar fields such as construction and road building, the property sector, creative fields such as the arts, and highly specialised knowledge sectors such as academia (e.g., as researchers or adjunct lecturers). This necessity for complex, multi-sector engagement, driven by the fragmentation of standard employment, has been classified as a defining feature of modern precarious labour.

The emergence of the precariat is viewed as a consequence of the erosion of the post-World War II employment relationship model, resulting in a state of existence defined by uncertainty and insecurity that affects individuals' material and psychological well-being (Dingeldey, 2022). This insecurity is compounded by growing socio-economic heterogeneity across groups, housing situations, and tenancy arrangements, which intensifies pressures within the housing and land markets, leading to profound transformations in livelihoods and life trajectories spanning multiple generations (Howard, 2024).

Yogyakarta, situated within the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia, is a city facing precarious conditions. Having distinctive socio-economic characteristics and well-known for its role as a city of tourism and education, Yogyakarta attracts both Indigenous residents and long-term migrants. The substantial expansion of the tourism sector has been a key driver, creating numerous openings in the hospitality, culinary, transportation, and ancillary service industries (Wicaksono, 2020). Despite a growing tourism industry, this city faces significant labour market issues, such as precarious employment, characterised by low levels of education among the population and restricted access to resources and capital. One of the precariat jobs that can be categorised as defined by Guy Standing is that of a tailor, or in local terms, “Vermak”. The profession of "Vermak" in Yogyakarta encompasses the small-scale, traditional repair industry for items such as clothing, shoes, and bags. In this article, Vermak is associated with tailor workers who have unstable, temporary contracts and receive daily wages from their customers. Economically, repairing old clothing offers an essential, affordable solution for lower-income students and residents in and around Yogyakarta who cannot afford to purchase new items. Beyond this social dimension, the tailoring profession plays a unique role in extending product lifecycles, thereby supporting the principles of sustainable fashion and consumption (Zakim, 1998). The continued existence and relevance of this kind of job is a distinct form of livelihood that persists amidst rapid modernisation and the prevalent overconsumption of clothing products in Indonesia.

Despite the precarious nature of their work, these tailors face issues concerning job security and tenure. Their primary fear comes from the risk of sudden eviction from the shops where they reside and work. This land problem is rooted in the fact that, although they have occupied the Terban area of Yogyakarta for over 20 years, the land itself has historically been owned by the Sultanate (King). Consequently, they constantly struggle with issues of legality and land allocation. In the Indonesian context, the regulations governing land allocation for informal sector workers are complex and subject to variations in local government policies, supported by a range of national regulations, including Law No. 23 of 2014 on Regional Government, Government Regulation No. 69 of 1999 on Market Management, and technical regulations like the Minister of Agrarian Affairs and Spatial Planning/National Land Agency

Regulation No. 13 of 2017 on Complete Systematic Land Registration.

In addition to these national regulations, the local legal framework includes Law No. 13 of 2012 on the Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY), which grants the province unique privileges in government administration and land allocation. Yogyakarta maintains distinct traditional land ownership patterns, that is: narawita land (owned by the Sultan/King) and lungguh land (parcels granted to nobles or officials as emoluments). This unique Javanese land ownership structure is inextricably linked to the Sultan's absolute authority as ruler over the territory's land. Management and administration of this land are subsequently delegated to the King's designated servants or officials (Setiawati, 2011).

This study examines the precarious nature of tailoring as a livelihood and the strategies tailors employ to navigate uncertainty, particularly in relation to land tenure in Yogyakarta. It also seeks to understand how migrant tailors—especially those residing along Jalan Terban—perceive and interpret the city. The article first outlines the characteristics of the research site, which is located on land owned by the Sultan of Yogyakarta, and then proceeds with the methodology, findings, and discussion.

Profile of the Study Area

The street of Terban in Yogyakarta holds a complex history, as it was historically a market area dominated by local gangs who claimed the territory in the 1950s. Despite this, the formal local authority—the Sultanate—permitted the area to be used for residential, business, or office purposes (Dikih, 2018). While the area accommodates both the tailors (Vermak workers) and other street vendors (known locally as pedagang kaki lima or PKL), only the tailors have formed an organised body. The relationship between the tailors and the landowners (representing the local authority) has evolved into a stable, mutually beneficial one, with the tailors paying rent to the local government in the form of redistributive taxes, signifying a recognised, albeit informal, arrangement.

Figure 1. The Terban Area where Tailors Reside
Sources: Rafi, Diona and Josephine, 2023

The change in land utilisation began with the construction of Mirota Campus, a big supermarket, by a private company in 1950 (Samodra, 2014). This development directly led to the dispossession of power from informal authorities. Consequently, the commercial spaces in Terban were transformed into rented shop lots, with occupants now required to pay 8 million rupiah annually (2023), often framed as a fee for "security" services. This payment system highlights the precarious status that continues to plague the tailors' community organisation. The Sultanate's formal land claims are particularly intimidating, as they fuel persistent fear of eviction. What makes Yogyakarta unique, however, is the region's strong cultural character, evidenced by the citizens' modest daily lives and the apparent resilience against the ruler's capitalist control (Sudarmono, 2022), despite the ongoing land status conflict involving the Sultan's authority.

Methods

This study employs an ethnographic approach that allows the researcher to see the layers of meaning embedded in participants' everyday activities through engagement, direct observation, and active involvement in the field (Spradley, 2016). Data were gathered through participant observation, concentrating on the tailors' daily work routines, their patterns of social interaction, and how they organise and utilise the physical space of their workshops along Terban Street. Semi-structured interviews with four tailors in Terban Street (men and women) to capture their personal narratives and interpretations of navigating employment instability. The fieldwork was conducted between January and July 2023. This research originated as an academic assignment, which influenced the researcher's positionality and access to the field. By initially engaging with the subjects through a structured academic framework, the researcher established a 'gatekeeper-approved'[1] entry point that later evolved into a deeper, more reflexive engagement with the 'PVermak' (tailor) workers. The author's position as a student at the Universitas Gadjah Mada provided a dual lens: it granted the formal legitimacy needed to navigate administrative regulations, while also requiring a conscious effort to bridge the power gap between an academic 'outsider' and the informal 'insider' workers.

This positionality shaped the interpretation of the data through a critical-phenomenological perspective, rather than viewing the Sultan Ground regulations as mere legal artefacts. The author's background has enabled them to interpret them as lived constraints that dictate the precarity of the workers' spatial existence. Therefore, the analysis is not a detached observation but a product of a situated dialogue where the researcher's academic rigour met the workers' lived experiences of vulnerability.

The data from the interview is then analysed using Geertz's (1973; [2021]) principle of "thick description," situating the practices of a tailor's life within their wider cultural and structural configurations. This analytical process includes iterative coding, reflexive memo-writing, and cross-checking field notes with interview accounts. These techniques are commonly used in ethnographic interpretation to ensure contextual depth and interpretive rigour. Through this approach, the research offers a detailed portrayal of the resilience strategies crafted by the tailors as they confront persistent structural pressures and precarity shaping their everyday lives.

While the scope of this study is limited to a single informal sector in a specific location, it offers a deep exploration of localised living-space dynamics. The findings are not intended for broad generalisation but serve to enrich academic understanding of how urban spaces and informal labour intersect. By prioritising the lived experiences of 'Permak' workers, this research can hopefully contribute to the study of urban precarity and the struggle for spatial agency in contemporary Yogyakarta.

[1]The primary gatekeepers in this research were local cultural practitioners and community intermediaries who had longstanding relationships with the tailors (tukang permak) and with us as researchers.

Findings

Livelihood Precarity

Precariousness is closely tied to the rise of job insecurity and the expansion of informal forms of labour. Growing concern over unstable employment emerged strongly after the economic crisis of the 1970s, whose social impacts sparked widespread debate throughout the 1980s, first in Western Europe and later across North America (Betti, 2018). During this period, the increase in non-permanent and irregular work arrangements became a defining feature of labour markets.

These transformations in labour practices were inseparable from the broader shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism, which fundamentally reconfigured capitalist production. These transformations in labour practices were inseparable from the broader shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism. Fordism refers to the industrial model popularised by Henry Ford in the early twentieth century, characterised by mass production, standardised products, rigid work routines, and long-term employment within large factory systems. Under Fordism, labour was organised through repetitive tasks and hierarchical management structures aimed at maximising efficiency and productivity.

In contrast, Post-Fordism emerged in response to economic globalisation, technological change, and the growing demand for flexibility in production and consumption. This model is marked by flexible labour arrangements, short-term contracts, decentralised production, digital technologies, and the expansion of service and creative industries. Rather than relying on stable, long-term employment, Post-Fordist economies increasingly depend on precarious, mobile, and adaptable forms of labour. As a result, workers are often required to continuously adjust to changing market conditions, technological systems, and patterns of consumption. As industries moved away from uniform mass production toward more flexible, specialised, and decentralised systems, the structure of work itself was reshaped. This evolution intensified workers' exposure to risk, leaving employment more unstable, fragmented, and tied to fluctuating market conditions. Precarious work, characterised by insecurity, inconsistent income, and limited protection, became an increasingly widespread experience in the post-industrial era.

This trend also reflected a deeper historical trajectory. Even as unemployment and low wages had already contributed to fragile working conditions in the late 1940s and 1950s, full-time employment was still upheld as a global ideal. On the other side, the late twentieth century witnessed a more pronounced divide. Rising inequality and the erosion of traditional labour guarantees paved the way for the emergence of a new socio-economic class shaped by precarity, one that followed and differed from the earlier industrial proletariat.

The precarity is determined not only by the nature of work but also by workers' social positions. Jankowski (2024) views precarity as the result of the interaction between insecure employment and workers' precarious lives within a contingent landscape. Millar (2017) suggests that the new working class is shaped by the daily experience of recurring uncertainty, while Fowler (2020) asserts that this condition produces hysteresis, social suffering, and symbolic insecurity when the habitus no longer aligns with changing social structures. Thus, the precariat can be understood as a working class united by experiences of structural uncertainty and multidimensional vulnerability.

Pierre Bourdieu used the concept of *précarité* to describe the social disruptions produced by globalisation and the increasing instability of labour under contemporary capitalism. He argued that the spread of flexible labour systems and temporary employment created a "generalised insecurity" that reshaped social relations and everyday life in late modern societies (Bourdieu, 2018). The impacts of neoliberalism and globalisation are not only for the poor but also shape modes of social existence. The uncertainty has given rise to a new habitus that operates within the logic of insecurity, competition, and the weakening of collective solidarity (Bourdieu, 2018).

Seemingly, Judith Butler conceptualises precarity as the fundamental vulnerability of human life, referring to conditions that endanger existence in ways that lie beyond individual control (Butler, 2004; Butler, 2021). From this perspective, human life is constitutively relational, shaped through interdependence with others, such that survival is inseparable from the social, affective, and political networks. Precarity, therefore, arises from the unequal distribution of social protection, recognition, and support. Butler further argues that vulnerability possesses a performative dimension that generates ethical and political possibilities (Butler, 2016). Rather than being understood solely as a passive condition, vulnerability can function as a moral resource through which claims for recognition and social justice are articulated. Nevertheless, to grasp the ethical and political potential of vulnerability, it is necessary to examine how it is lived, experienced, and negotiated within specific social contexts. These interpretations further highlight how the rise of precarious labour is intertwined not only with economic factors but also with broader cultural and political transformations shaping contemporary life.

In this broader landscape of uncertainty, those working in non-permanent sectors become vulnerable. Individuals can be displaced at any moment in the pursuit of profit, a situation reinforced by Labour Market Flexibility (LMF) policies that shift risk away from employers while keeping workers in unstable positions. Such an approach ignores the reality in an economy driven by market mechanisms. Vulnerability then extends to both employed and unemployed populations. In this context, the precariat emerges: a new social class shaped by modernity and characterised by insecurity, limited protections, and dependence on informal work. The phenomenon of precarity, especially in the worker unions, had emerged before, during, and after the Great Recession. These disruptions are experienced differently across regions of the world, depending on each society's economic, political, and social conditions (Wallace, 2025).

The challenge of establishing a single, formal definition of non-permanent or vulnerable work reflects a broader institutional hesitation. Such a definition would require acknowledging issues that are deeply political, closely tied to social movements, and often at odds with dominant labour policies that promote flexibility as an economic necessity. As precarious employment expanded, the idea of uncertainty also took on wider and more existential meanings.

Community Solidarity

As already discussed above, the conditions of precarity are evident in Yogyakarta, a city marked by rapid tourism growth and steady inflows of students and young migrants. Indeed , Yogya is one of the cities that have lower regional minimum wages in Indonesia. Here, the expanding lower-income population often turns to informal economic activities to survive. Tailors in Yogyakarta exemplify this dynamic: their work is informal, unstable, and deeply embedded in social relationships that both support and constrain them. Their livelihoods depend on networks of customers and service providers, as well as on the tenuous connection between their modest workspace and their jobs. The tailors, then, can be understood as part of the precariat, navigating a city shaped by economic pressures, mobility, and persistent structural inequalities.

From the conversations with the tailors, their memories paint a vivid picture of a different time. M (55 years old), who has worked in the area for nearly two decades, recalled his early years with a soft laugh. He said:

> Before I was married, back when I first started this business, I often slept right here in the shop just to finish orders. I'd wake up on top of a pile of fabric.

Meanwhile, Mrs T (50 years old) shared her own recollection of those busy days. As she shared are memories:

> People think it's quiet now, but I still sew almost every day. There are always orders coming in. Some customers even bring their clothes directly to my house.

For both of them, these stories are reminders of a time when tailoring held a more central and valued place in everyday life.

Over the years, the tailors in Terban have built a network of mutual support that functions much like a patronage system, sustained through their own community organisation. Mr A described how this collective has shaped their working environment:

> Because of the tailored organisation, things feel more supportive here. There's a strong sense of solidarity among us.

That solidarity manifests in everyday acts of reciprocity, upheld by shared rules that everyone voluntarily follows.

As the head of the organisation, MR A explained one of these practices:

> Every Wednesday, each of us contributes five thousand rupiah. It's used when someone falls ill or if there's a death in the community—it's our version of insurance.

This simple, weekly contribution binds the tailors together, reinforcing their commitment to the group's norms.

Mr S echoed this sentiment, emphasising the importance of communication within the network. He added:

> The relationship among us service providers is good. We meet regularly to discuss anything that needs attention—like when a colleague has an accident. The organisation manages a cash fund, and everyone contributes the same five thousand rupiah every Wednesday.

Through these shared practices, the tailors maintain a resilient and tightly woven community.

The tailors of Terban work in a space marked by uncertainty. Their workshops stand on land that remains vulnerable to eviction, even though many of them pay annual rent, around eight million rupiah in 2025, to informal landowners. In return, these landowners provide a kind of patronage, a safety net that the tailors have come to rely on more than the formal protections of the local government. As AN (45 years old) reflected:

> Only now do I realise, the government mostly just comes by, looks around, and signs papers.

Within this informal system, their organisation plays an equally crucial role. According to Mr A, the collective fund supports far more than workspace repairs. He explained:

> I have lost track of how many millions were used for rehabilitation. The money comes from our shared cash fund. It is not only for that, but we also use it for social activities, for members who fall ill, and for community events during the fasting month.

Since most of the tailors are Muslim, they regularly organise gatherings, such as breaking the fast together and contributing to Ramadhan charity.

Yet beneath these communal ties lies a constant worry. As Mr M narrated:

> Our biggest fear is eviction. Terban has been facing serious disruptions. I have been called into negotiations and asked to come up with solutions regarding the land and everything else. But what can we do? This is our livelihood. Behind each of us are wives and children who depend on this work.

The solidarity which formed in the community is stronger than the workers' trust in the local government. The members of the tailor community rely more on internal solidarity and a system of mutual assistance than on formal government assistance. The community serves not only as a forum for organising work but also as a social protection institution, including financing health care and social activities.

The economic sustainability of informal alteration workers is fundamentally underpinned by the interpersonal solidarity and trust established with their clientele. This social bond transcends mere commercial transactions; it serves as an informal institutional mechanism

that mitigates volatility in the informal sector. As evidenced by Ibu Ira (27), who maintains a consistent daily income of approximately 150,000 IDR, the "stability" of the informal worker is not derived from a formal contract but from a reliable, local demand for specialised skills. This trust-based reputation serves as a form of social insurance, in which word-of-mouth referrals and repeat business create a resilient, albeit unofficial, employment network.

This relational continuity is further demonstrated by the high degree of customer loyalty, which remains intact even when workers relocate. The testimonies of informants indicate that customers, ranging from students to office workers, prioritise the "proven quality" and established rapport over geographical convenience. Mr. A's experience, in which clients followed her from her time as an employee to her transition to an independent business owner in Bantul, illustrates that the tailor's "workplace" is not a fixed physical location but a mobile social network. These enduring ties represent an adaptive strategy that provides a semblance of economic certainty in an environment devoid of legal labour protections.

While this solidarity provides relative economic stability, it does not erase the structural precarity of their existence. The "adaptive strategy" of building trust networks is in constant tension with the spatial vulnerability of their operations. Because these tailors occupy urban spaces within the Sultan Ground, their economic survival remains fragile. The resilience found in their social networks is threatened by the uncertainty of their physical "living space," highlighting a profound contradiction between strong social foundations and weak spatial security. Operating under the authority of Sultan Ground, the tailors occupy a workspace that is neither entirely legal nor entirely illegal. Their everyday practices demonstrate how precarity is spatially mediated and negotiated through social relations, trust, and adaptive strategies.

Despite working in the informal sector and engaging in the exchange of goods and services, they do not fully experience the conditions of precarity typically associated with the definition of precarious jobs in the world. Their collective organisation functions as a social and economic safety net, providing stability and continuity for their profession. Even though their situation aligns with many of the characteristics of the precariat described by Standing (2011), these tailors cannot be categorised within that class. Their strong internal solidarity and organisational support help them overcome the deeper vulnerabilities that are usually faced by precarious workers.

Patron-Client Relationship

Scott (2020) describes the patron–client relationship as a reciprocal bond between individuals of unequal social and economic standing, formed on the basis of mutual benefit. In such a relationship, a continuous exchange takes place between the patron, who holds greater power, resources, or knowledge, and the client, who occupies a lower position. The patron offers various forms of protection and support, including access to economic resources, assistance with legal or social matters, and guidance in political or community affairs. In return, the client provides loyalty, recognition, and social or political backing, all of which reinforce the patron's status and influence.

These exchanges are typically indirect, informal, and sustained over time, involving the provision of services, goods, or other forms of assistance. Patron–client ties can emerge across political, economic, social, and cultural settings. In the case of the tailors in Yogyakarta, their relationship with informal landowners reflects this dynamic. The tailors depend on landowners for access to workspace, while the landowners benefit from rent and the loyalty of those who occupy the land.

To maintain internal cohesion and prevent competition that may weaken their position, the tailors also organise themselves collectively, establishing rules and practices that strengthen solidarity. Similar patterns can be found in other Indonesian communities, such as among the Bugis-Makassar people, an ethnolinguistic community originating from South Sulawesi, Indonesia, who are widely known for their strong traditions of mutual cooperation, kinship

solidarity, and collective economic networks that shape both social and occupational relations. Here, patron–client relations are shaped by power and kinship, offering protection and welfare while reinforcing dependence on community elders (Nursaadah, 2025). In many ways, the social structure within the tailoring community mirrors these long-standing patron–client traditions in Indonesian society.

The presence of the Sultan (the formal owner of much of the land in Yogyakarta) adds another layer of complexity to these patron–client dynamics. His authority, intertwined with that of the local government, shapes power relations that directly affect the everyday lives of communities, including the tailors. Because control over land remains centralised, the tailors' workspace can be relocated or reclaimed at any time, heightening their sense of uncertainty. Spatial conflicts of this kind are not unique to Yogyakarta; they are widespread across Indonesia, where government bodies hold the legal power to designate land as cultivation zones or protected areas under spatial planning regulations. Yet on the ground, these formal rules often clash with community claims and long-standing practices, making land disputes nearly unavoidable.

These tensions intensify when communication between authorities and residents breaks down. When communities feel excluded from decisions about land use or spatial planning, they experience neglect and perceive that their needs are undervalued. Such feelings commonly escalate into conflict. The situation worsens when power and resources are concentrated in the hands of a few, leading to unequal access to land and reinforcing the vulnerability of groups like the tailors. This imbalance can deepen dissatisfaction and strain the relationship between residents and the state.

Resolving these conflicts requires more than legal authority; it demands meaningful dialogue and cooperation. Ensuring that communities participate in spatial planning processes is essential so that policies reflect their aspirations and livelihood needs. For the tailors, genuine involvement in these decisions is crucial to securing stable workspaces within an increasingly contested urban environment. Ultimately, only through collaborative engagement and attention to spatial justice can tensions between communities and government authorities be reduced, allowing for more sustainable and equitable solutions.

Spatial Liminality

Places are often imagined as fixed, stable locations with a distinct, unchanging character (Massey, 1994). Yet, the lived reality of many workers today suggests something far more fluid. The concept of liminal space captures this condition, a state of being "in-between," where individuals stand on the threshold between old and new social arrangements. Thomassen (2024) sees that liminality represents a phase in which people confront the tension between unstructured activity and the structured outcomes of social life, producing heightened self-awareness. The liminal stage is marked by identity ambiguity, shifting norms, and the absence of new, stable social orders (Banfield, 2022). Turner's notion of being "betwixt and between" similarly describes a situation in which old roles are lost but new ones have yet to take form (Wels et al., 2011).

From this framework, contemporary societies can be understood as living in a state of structural liminality (Thomassen, 2014), which consists of a prolonged condition of moral, social, and institutional uncertainty intensified by global economic shifts and neoliberal reforms. These forces have destabilised older forms of security, such as permanent employment, strong community bonds, and predictable social values, without replacing them with more reliable alternatives. As a result, people increasingly inhabit a liminal world that demands constant adaptation and reinvention.

The process of precarisation described above intensifies liminality by transforming uncertainty into a permanent condition of life. Masquelier (2019) conceptualises this situation as "existential insecurity." This phenomenon is also evident in the realm of leadership, where precarity is understood as a social condition

shaped by exposure to power relations and dominant normative frameworks (Palmer & Eidevald, 2025). In this sense, precarity constitutes a multidimensional liminal condition that emerges from the erosion of social rights and the weakening of social safety nets, thereby necessitating social innovation and responsive social policy interventions (Maestripieri & Gallego-Calderón, 2024).

The concept of Homi Bhabha's Liminal Space, often termed the "third space", in postcolonial theory, emphasises that identity and culture are not fixed, but are perpetually reconstructed in the ambiguous zone where different cultural systems meet. This interstitial passage (Bhabha, 1994) is not a place of passivity; rather, Bhabha (2021) highlights its potential as a dynamic site of hybridity, negotiation, and creative resistance. Cultural meanings are actively reworked, allowing marginalised groups to challenge and transform the dominant power structures. This liminal space is structurally analogous to a "threshold," marking the boundary or border across which passage occurs, influencing social interactions as relationships and status are negotiated, and often determining acceptance or rejection (Chakraborty, 2016). For Bhabha, this hybridising process is ongoing, and it opens up possibilities for cultural difference without assuming or imposing a hierarchy. No culture is truly pure, because it is always in contact with the "other." The notions of hybridity and liminality refer to both space and time in shaping the “location of culture”.In the context of this study, these concepts can be seen in how the tukang permak negotiate their identities and social relations within Yogyakarta’s urban environment. Many of the workers are migrants who continuously navigate between rural values of kinship and mutual support and the competitive demands of the urban informal economy. Their workplaces become liminal spaces where different cultural backgrounds, economic practices, and social expectations intersect, producing hybrid forms of solidarity, labour relations, and everyday survival strategies.

Discussion

The condition of tailors in Terban can be seen through the intersection of liminality and Yogyakarta’s postcolonial spatial order. Yogyakarta functions as both a modern Indonesian city and a hereditary kingdom, where the Sultan retains formal authority over vast tracts of land. This dual structure, part modern bureaucracy and part pre-colonial monarchy, has created an ambiguous regime of land governance. Within this system, informal workers such as tailors occupy what Thomassen (2014) calls structural liminality: a prolonged condition of uncertainty where rights, authority, and institutional responsibilities remain unsettled.

This postcolonial liminality is not merely symbolic but deeply spatial. Sultan Ground represents a form of traditional authority that long predates colonial rule, while state planning laws represent the modern regulatory framework. These overlapping systems generate competing claims over land use, resulting in a spatial environment where legality is negotiated rather than guaranteed. For the tailors, this produces a workspace that is neither formally legal nor entirely prohibited, allowing occupation to continue for decades while still remaining vulnerable to sudden eviction. Their everyday life unfolds within this “in-between” spatial condition that is never fully secure, yet never fully displaced.

The tailor as a marginalised group navigates and reinterprets contradictory power structures. The community organisation can function as a third space; an arena where they produce their own norms, practices, and protections beyond formal state mechanisms. Through weekly contributions, shared decision-making, and collective monitoring, they create a parallel governance structure that mimics bureaucratic order while responding directly to local needs. In this hybrid space, the tailors reinterpret the authority of the Sultanate and informal land brokers, positioning themselves not merely as passive subjects but as active negotiators of their livelihood.

Turner's idea of "betwixt and between" also becomes visible in the tailors' identities. They are essential service providers in a city driven by tourism and student mobility, yet they remain structurally invisible within urban policy. Their workshops are built in semi-permanent, long-standing yet legally uncertain spaces. Their work is economically valuable for urban society but institutionally unprotected. This liminal condition produces both vulnerability and adaptive potential. Many tailors develop heightened responsiveness to shifts in consumer cycles, seasonal student arrivals, or changes in land-use enforcement. Their flexibility in workspace arrangement, service diversification, and reliance on social networks exemplifies how liminal subjects craft strategies for survival.

Liminality in this context is both a threat and a resource. Liminality forces the creation of informal social networks (communitas, to borrow another term from Turner). These networks act as a flexible resource, allowing tailors to share customer referrals and provide mutual warning systems against sudden municipal crackdowns. The lack of state support fosters an organic, resilient community infrastructure. Although it exposes tailors to eviction, income instability, and a lack of legal recourse, it also enables them in shape their own social infrastructure to some extent. Their patron–client relations with informal land custodians, while unequal, provide access and continuity in the absence of formal titles. Their internal solidarity network provides micro-insurance, social support, and conflict mediation that the state does not provide for them. This combination of vulnerability and agency reflects the hybrid, postcolonial nature of urban governance in Yogyakarta, where formal and informal systems coexist and mutually shape one another.

In this sense, the tailors' everyday life offers an example of how informal workers in postcolonial cities navigate structural uncertainty not only through individual resilience but through collective organisation and spatial negotiation. Their experience demonstrates that precarity is not a static condition but a relational process shaped by land politics, cultural authority, and the creative use of liminal spaces.

Conclusion

Tailors in Terban experience precarity, but their vulnerability is mediated and partially mitigated by community solidarity, informal insurance, and negotiated patron–client relations within Yogyakarta's unique postcolonial land regime. Their economic viability depends not only on craftsmanship but also on their skill in navigating relationships with customers, landholders, local authorities, and fellow workers, each interaction contributing to the fragile equilibrium that sustains their work. Despite the pressures of changing consumer habits, fluctuating demand, and the dominance of inexpensive mass-produced clothing, many tailors continue to find ways to reposition their services and exploit niche opportunities. Their ability to innovate and reconfigure their work, even within constrained circumstances, underscores the resilience embedded in their community-based strategies.

Recognising the tailors' living space as fluid and continuously negotiated points to the urgent need for policies that acknowledge and support informal workers rather than marginalise them. Ensuring the long-term viability of this occupation requires more than individual adaptability; it calls for structural attention—fair spatial governance, accessible social protection, and community-backed initiatives that affirm their role in the urban economy. Strengthening these forms of support is essential for enabling tailors to sustain their livelihoods amid the evolving conditions of a rapidly changing city. Informal workers such as tailors carve out stability within structurally liminal environments; this article contributes to broader debates on precarity, urban marginality, and spatial justice in the Global South.

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The authors used Gemini AI for English proofreading. The authors remain fully responsible for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of all content.

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