

WISDOM OF PERSIAN ARCHITECTURE: EXPLORING THE DESIGN OF THE M.T.O. SUFI CENTRES IN SEARCH FOR THE 'SPIRIT OF PLACE'

Nooshin Esmaeili^a, Brian Robert Sinclair^{ab}

^aUniversity of Calgary, Canada

^bSinclairstudio inc.

How to cite

Esmaeili, Nooshin, and Brian Robert Sinclair. "Wisdom of Persian Architecture: Exploring the Design of the M.T.O. Sufi Centres in Search for the 'Spirit of Place.'" In *Proceedings of 3rd Valencia International Biennial of Research in Architecture. Changing priorities*. Valencia. 2022. <https://doi.org/10.4995/VIBArch2022.2022.15239>

ABSTRACT

The field of architecture and design has changed and been impacted by advanced technology over the past few decades. Our world, which was already experiencing drastic change, has recently encountered accelerated upheaval due to the global pandemic. Enamored by virtual reality (VR), 3D printing, global positioning, and the proliferation of robots, we are arguably too often surrounded by resultant superficial, meaningless, and soulless spaces to which we can neither relate nor connect. The sense of delight, serenity, poetry, and beauty that we inherently desire and yearn for, is becoming increasingly rare – and at times even lost – in today's architecture. It can be argued that contemporary architecture risks becoming more a tool and product than a work of art that mirrors society and self. As architects, we are responsible to humanity through our quest to design spaces that reunite us with our inner selves and foster a sense of being. Considering recent challenges, crises, and catastrophes, designers are continuously researching the well-known traditional and aged architecture of the past for novel approaches that can enlighten future works. Architects are beginning to more assertively seek factors that propel transcendental experience in space. The present paper considers the case of Persian architecture - one

of the richest and most eminent architectural styles in the world. Most buildings of this genre were designed by individuals who were most notably spiritual masters, mystics, astronomers, mathematicians, philosophers, and then architects. This paper interrogates architecture to critically delineate Persian architecture's role in enhancing contemplation and provoking reflection while highlighting spaces that poetically respond to and nurture our soul. Deploying a literature review and analysis of recently built Sufi Centers in the United States, the research then builds an argument for linking the wisdom of Persian architecture with the spirit of place focusing on the encounter of transcendental moments in space. All these Sufi centers are affiliated with the *Maktab Tarighat Oveysi* (M.T.O.) Shahamaghsoudi School of Islamic Sufism. Analysis of case studies culls out qualities of space that give rise to sacred (non-religious) experiences including connection with self, balance/ harmony, and most important of all, unity, and oneness internally and externally. Persian architecture, as one of history's most celebrated building traditions, considers the intense relationship between the sacred and profane, between mortal and immortal, and between the physical and the non-physical. The analysis of these exceptional case studies serves as the foundation for an anticipated and thought-provoking guide to 'transcendental design,' introducing a novel

approach for designers that encourages advancing beyond the physical form to pursue and optimize the vital intersection of wisdom, space, place, and self.

KEYWORDS

Persian architecture; theory; transcendental space; unity; sacred space; spirituality; holistic design; systems-thinking.

1. INTRODUCTION

"The purpose of construction is making things hold together, of architecture to move us. Architectural emotions exist when the work rings within us in tune with a universe whose laws we obey, recognize, and respect. When certain harmonies have been attained the work captures us. Architecture is a matter of 'harmonies,' it is a pure creation of spirit." (Le Corbusier)

Faced with an inhumane and alienated society where one is constantly relying on technology for day-to-day needs, humans are in search of connections with their origins by creating sacred spaces that are uplifting and positively charged. Architecture has become more of a product that is being produced rapidly. This result in creating spaces that are: shallow, lack quality, and continue to exist without character and meaning. Given the advancements in science and technology at the moment where there is a constant need for quantifiable proof and reasoning, humankind is distanced and disarmed to genuinely experience the poetics and phenomena of art and architecture through a more qualitative approach (Failer 2014). It seems that we are in need to have more spaces that activate our "relationship to nature, a sense of spirit, connection to place, and the assurances of community" (Sinclair 2000). Exceptional architecture is a special

realm between imagination, reality, creativity, and a search within where everything reunites - a space that can "transcend time and climb toward the infinite" (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 1973). In transcendental architecture, there is no distinction made between space and the person present in space which fosters a sense of cohesion. Traditional methods of designing spaces are renowned for their unique and distinctive qualities in creating moments where people connect with themselves and their surroundings and one of these traditions is how Persian designed buildings through a lens of sacred. As Sinclair states "When one considers great cities, or great Architecture, or great spaces, there are inevitably aspects of 'awe', 'breath-taking' and the 'magical' at play" (2011, 4). Buildings and places that not only exhibit beauty, balance, and harmony with the physical world but also evoke a sense of curiosity and awareness beyond the brick and mortar- metaphysical qualities that foster connection with the Divine. Therefore, the embodied meaning of the visible world can be grasped once we look beyond matter and form to reach the invisible. This is the only way to truly experience architecture as a whole and to understand its relationship to ourselves and the environment.

With its distinctive style and design elements, Persian architecture echoes profound spiritual and cosmological meanings and concepts as well as, an in-depth connection with principles of nature and the metaphysical dimension. As one of the well-known architectural styles, Persian Architecture contains elements that are all interwoven together, and "nothing is ever divorced from meaning" (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 1973). In this paper, the authors aim to focus on the depth and layers of meanings that are hidden in this type of architecture with reference to mysticism. Meaning in Persian translates to Ma'na - genuine meaning or the spiritual. In the teachings of Islam, space has meaning as well and it is "one of

the most direct symbols of being” from the cosmology point of view, it is “the locus of the universal soul” (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 1973). Even though this style of architecture has a long history and deep roots in history, very few researchers have investigated an in-depth study and analysis of it in connection to sacrality and self. For this reason, this study aims to first investigate the depth of sacrality in Persian architecture through the lens of Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, and secondly to ascertain the link between key design principles and sacred by exploring the concept of hermeneutics (Ta’wil) and symbolism (Corbin 1969) by looking at specific examples of buildings called *Khanegah* ‘House of Present’. It is important to note the additional layers of information provided in this paper are through Nooshin Esmaeili’s (one of the author’s) lifelong personal experience, understanding, and education as a student of the School of Sufism. In this paper, the authors are interested in the connection and relationship of the individual with their surrounding environments, through the lens of sacred, and its impact on creating unique ineffable moments that are beyond the ordinary. As Rudolf Otto states this experience can be a mystery or a non-rational and non-sensory feeling where the primary and immediate object is outside the self - a numinous experience (Otto 1970). This study, therefore, set out to explore and uncover the wisdom of Persian architecture and the significance of the self within it. The findings show a holistic approach to designing space where one is present and connected not only with the environment and atmosphere, they are experiencing but also with an inward experience and reflection resulting in oneness and unity with the internal and external world. The findings also highlight the importance of orchestrating the physical with the metaphysical realm in architecture for a coherent design that is timeless and mystical.

2. SUFISM: THE PATH TO SELF KNOWLEDGE

Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, is an inner spiritual quest to realize one’s true self and to become one with the beloved-the Divine. There are various Sufi orders in the world, however for the purpose of this study and based on the authors’ personal experience and knowledge of the school (as a Sufi student of the M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi), the focus will be primarily on the M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi School of Sufism. Professor Nader Angha, the current master of the M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi, defines Sufism as the “Reality of Religion” (N. Angha 2011). He clarifies that the only way for the seeker to reach the truth, regardless of their ethnicity, race, or culture, is to gain knowledge of the ‘Self’ rather than following a formalized religion blindly. Even though the organization is recognized as the M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi School of Islamic Sufism, members of all other religions, including Christianity and Judaism, attend *Khanegah* and join the weekly sessions. According to professor Angha “The most fundamental purpose of religion is to transform human beings from their base level to their Divine level of existence” (N. Angha 2011, 36). Schimmel also explains that ‘Mysticism has been called “the great spiritual current which goes through all religions. In its widest sense it may be defined as the consciousness of the One Reality – be it called wisdom, light, love or nothing” (1975, 4). A central concept of Sufism is the principle and fundamental doctrine of Unity (Tawhid) or the action of uniting both within oneself and the world (Nasr 1964). In our today’s culture, we are accustomed to seeing “ourselves and other matter as individuals, separated and isolated” from one another by relying solely on our senses (N. Angha 2011, 42). In so doing, we are kept distanced from knowing our inherent essence and the unity of all existence remains hidden from us. The traditional Sufi culture was mainly centered in Persia over the past few

centuries and it has inspired the culture, people, traditions, art, and architecture of this region (Grisell 1983). The Persian word for Sufism is Irfan derived from the word *marifa*, which means to know, to cognize” (N. Angha 2011, 38). In Sufism the seeker of knowledge and truth is called Sufi, ‘*salik*’ or ‘*aref*’ who embarks on a journey through three main stages, to reach truth and enlightenment. Salik becomes the lover in search of the Divine - the beloved. These stages are *Shari’at* - traditions (exoteric/ external), *Tarighat* - the path of the heart (esoteric/internal), and *Haghighat* - state of the heart (Truth) (S. Angha 1986, 5). In Sufism, this truth, known as the source of life or the Divine, is within the physical body in the center of the heart (N. Angha 2002). The external world is the manifestation of the Divine that encompasses the cosmos. It is the reflection of the macrocosm whereas the Batin is the hidden dimension within man and is regarded as the symbol of the microcosm. Figure 1. A seeker is united with this source through self-cognition once all attachments to the world of material objects and the physical body have been removed. The seeker must transcend from the external, physical world (*Zahir*) to the hidden metaphysical realm (*Batin*) to reach the truth and thereby become unified with the Divine.

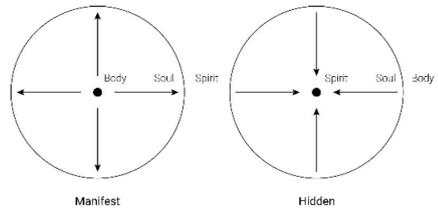


Figure 1. The manifest (*Zahir*) & the hidden (*Batin*). Source: (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 1973)

2.1 Principles of Sufism

To acquire self-knowledge the seeker is required to move from the external to the internal by following a specific set of principles to become pure and worthy to meet with the beloved. For obtaining truth and reaching self-cognition, a student first learns to manage and control his/her desires, habits, inclination, and dependencies on all physical, mental, and emotional levels. Consequently, transformation becomes apparent and gradually an inward sense of balance and peace will become dominant over all the constant “external attractions that pulled him in different directions” (M.T.O. 2022b). The Salik will discover the horizons of awareness without interruption and hesitation by following these eight principles (N. Angha 1986):

<i>Zikr</i>	to remember	Remembering God (the beloved) at all times
<i>Fikr</i>	to think, meditate	Being in a state of awareness and wondering
<i>Sahar</i>	to awaken	Awakening of soul and body
<i>Jui'</i>	to hunger	Having exterior hunger (mind) & interior hunger (heart) to obtain the truth & to persist in the search
<i>Somt</i>	to observe silence	Ceasing to think and talk about worthless things
<i>Saom</i>	to fast	Fasting of the body from food, mind from attachments, and soul from desires
<i>Khalvat</i>	to observe solitude	Praying in solitude, externally and internally
<i>Khidmat</i>	to serve	Dissolving in the truth of the master and dissolving in the Truth of existence, God.

Table 1. Principles of Sufism. Source: (N. Angha 1986)

2.2 Khanegah – M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi Centers

To gain any kind of knowledge, one needs to go to school and start learning under the guidance of a teacher or a master. In Sufism, the school where the *salik* would go for spiritual direction is known as the *Khanegah* which translates to 'House of Present'. The word '*Khaneh*' means house and 'Gah' is that real or true moment in which a person is present. Gah is that full awareness and presence that one needs to continuously reach and prolong, both inwardly and outwardly (M.T.O. 2015b). From prayer, contemplation, and group chanting (*Zikr*) to serving and practicing stillness and solitude, the seeker practices each of the above Sufi principles under the guidance of the master or '*Pir*' towards the journey to enlightenment. Figure 2 below features images for two of the M.T.O. centers in Virginia and Houston, Texas. The Sufi ritual and practices are only the initial steps for entering the realm of the hidden within one's heart. As a symbol of external purity and oneness, towards an ultimate manifestation of truth, every student wears a white garment. This practice serves as a reminder to the seeker that "one's outward and inward calmness saves oneself from distractions and leads the seeker to tranquility and peace within" (Sepehri 2019, 58). When students enter Khanegah, as a practice of liberating from all physical belonging and attachments, they will leave their social ranks, belongings, attachments, worries and thoughts, and even their shoes behind before

entering this sacred space (Grisell 1983). The challenge is to move through the external world as well as the human physical body to reach the internal source of life within the heart where peace and unity reside.

3. UNITY AND SACRALITY IN PERSIAN ARCHITECTURE

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters, compared to what lies within us." (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Sufism has immensely influenced the traditional architecture of Persia. Persian architecture creates sacred spaces as a medium for delivering transcendental experiences. These are not necessarily religious settings, but rather spiritual and mystical ones. Sacredness goes beyond the physical to evoke unmeasurable feelings. It elevates a regular state of thought to a more meditative and transcendental state, creating indirect yet sensitive communication at the individual level (Esmaeili and Sinclair 2021). To reflect and manifest sacrality in a physical form, unity has been one of the key components of this architectural style. The message of sacred places, such as Khanegah, is to "connect with ourselves and the world within and experience the transcendent" (Goldberger 2010). From the perspective of Persian architecture and Islam, man is not separate from the cosmos. As Hossein Nasr states "The body of the man



Figure 2. M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi Sufi Centers. a) Houston, Texas. b) Herndon, Virginia. c) Herndon, Virginia. Source: (M.T.O Website 2015a)

is the temple wherein resides the spirit (*ruh*) similar to cosmos that is animated by the same *ruh*". (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 1973). As previously mentioned from the Sufi perspective, the source of "life" (spirit or *ruh*) is in the man's heart, and it is called '*Jaan*'. The teaching of Sufism defines this source as the "stable reality" and calls it the "true self" or "I." Sufi teachings offer a more tangible explanation of this eternal source using the analogy of a seed. Once the seed is planted, it becomes apparent that the knowledge and life are embedded within the seed, and all "the necessary structure for it evolutionally process to move from seed to fruit was foreseen in the seed itself" (N. Angha 2011, 45). A pure and eternal source that resides within each being and similar to all cosmos are "equated with the Divine" (N. Angha 2011, 39). It is for this reason that the key doctrine of Islam is the oneness of existence - The One source, one beloved, and one truth. "Search for truth in your heavenly double, at a third point in the heart, the point of union of the two worlds, one delicate and one harsh, between sleep and wakefulness. The source of life in the heart is the light of knowledge and certainty, and the very knowledge itself.... It is the essence and the body of all things. Everything is brought to perfection by it" (Sadegh Angha 1986, 63). Similarly, Christopher Alexander also explains this concept as the sense of self and refers to it as "I" or "Self, a pure unity that exists within all matter that he calls the "Blazing One." He states "This actual unity cannot be described as a structure. Yet it is this actual unity which is the source of life in the things we admire, and the goal of all our efforts when we make a building or work of art." He refers to it as parallel to the material world, but "that it is inherently incapable of having the structure" (2002, 150). Like Christopher Alexander, the Sufi teachings also describe this stable unity as formless but eternal. Sufism makes clear that even though the matter has different manifestations, its genuine reality is never lost, and nothing is either increased or

decreased (N. Angha 2011, 42). Professor Nader Angha states "If we observe the structures of the smallest particles to the largest celestial bodies, we will see that the existence of each entity is founded upon a structure, and yet these structures are hidden to the naked eye" (N. Angha 2011). In Persian architecture, the physical form symbolizes and materializes this eternal source, while the spatial experiences are how it is represented and accessed (Esmaeili and Sinclair 2021). Humans have awareness of their body, their mind, and self. Humans are aware of their bodies and of themselves, thus it is reasonable to claim that our sense of self is entwined with the life and spirit of the building or place we are in.

3.1 Spirit of Place

The well-known concept of the *Genius Loci* (Spirit of Place), presented by Christian Norberg-Schulz, explains a similar concept in architecture. When all components of architecture work together in harmony and are unified, the outcome is a collection of spaces that have meaning and character (1980). Norberg-Schulz focuses on the existential dimension of architecture and emphasizes the qualitative and phenomenological aspects of space. His approach is to define and exhibit the relationship of man with his environment. It is common in western culture to refer to the individual in the space as the 'user' whereas, in Persian architecture, the individual is not the user who enters and passes through the space, he/she is in presence of architecture. The focus is on the full existence of the individual in space (mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually). The idea is to completely immerse the person in the experience, allowing them to feel the vitality and personality of the place from the first instant they enter it until the very end. Persian architecture has a distinctive approach that signifies a constant dialogue between the self and the place, creating an atmosphere that encourages introspection

while reuniting the individual with their origins. This dialogue then becomes a pathway in the experience of transcendence, which is “not beyond us but within us” (Walton 2015). This is also similar to the concept of “dwelling” that Norberg-Schulz introduced. He states “where dwelling happens is where life occurs” (1980). Persia has a complex and rich architectural history. Each element of the design has a spiritual connection to the overall theme of unity and oneness. Thus, the mystical and ontological depth of Persian architecture can only be appreciated once we transcend beyond the form and materiality of these elements. It is only then that we will be able to establish a clear relationship between the physical and the metaphysical, which will aid our understanding of sacrality and the transformational capabilities of Persian architecture (Esmaeili and Sinclair 2021).

3.2 Symbolism

Traditional architectures have been known to include a unified system of signs and symbols. Due to its rich content and manifestation of mystical and spiritual values, Persian architecture is one of the significant sources of symbolism. As a mediating vehicle, Persian architecture has applied this approach to represent the Divine, and the metaphysical concepts - a bridge between abstract, subjective principles with the tangible human experiences (Akkach 2005). This style of architecture serves as a gateway for transcendental exploration and meaning. As previously mentioned, the concept of *Zahir* and *Batin* (outward and inward) and their relationships are particularly important in understanding symbolism. According to Sufi's teaching, the external world is seen and “readily accessible to everyone” whereas the internal world is hidden and referred to as unseen. The outward world is “the world of natural realities that can be known directly through sense perception, whereas the unseen is the world of spiritual realities that

can only be grasped by imagination” (Akkach 2005, 29). Thus, it is through symbolism and imagery in architecture, that one can access the unseen. In Persian architecture, each external appearance and manifestation (*Zahir*) is the emergence of an internal truth (*Batin*) and a pathway to reach the final stage of ultimate truth (*Haghighat*). Samer Akkach explains that symbolism can be one of the best methods for “comprehending the inner meanings of traditional art and architecture and for penetrating deep into their worlds of spirituality and metaphysics.” (2005, 10). It is the inherent quality of sacred spaces to bring us into a state of peace and contemplation and to provoke and symbolize remembrance of the Divine (*Zikr*) (Nasr 1987, 4).

In addition to being a method, symbolism is also a language to convey thoughts and concepts in architecture. As Martin Lings put it is “the most important thing in existence” and “the sole explanation of existence” (Lings 1991, viii). In Persian architecture, spiritual connotations are prevalent in the choreography of space as well as architectural and design elements. Several of the principal places where symbolism may be seen include the usage of sacred geometry/shapes, and mathematical representations, as well as a relationship to nature and the cosmos. As Foster states “Centuries before computer-instigated geometry, through its knowledge of abstract mathematical symbols and their unifying relation to the various orders of reality, Islam aimed to relate the material world to its basic principle” (Foster 2005, 8).

4. CASE STUDIES

To better grasp the concept of symbolism and sacrality, this research conducted a preliminary examination of several key Persian architectural components via the prism of Sufism as well as their connection with cosmology and spirituality. The four case studies selected for this paper are the

Sufi Centers (*Khanegah*) affiliated with the M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi School of Sufism, built recently in the USA. It is important to note that the current study was based on a limited number of data collected mostly on the center's existing photographs, from the M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi website (<http://suficenters.org/>) as well as the photographs that are shown during weekly online lectures. Therefore, a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of each of the centers is necessary for the next phase of this research through an in-person site visit.

As mentioned earlier *Khanegah* means the "House of Present." The symbolic meaning of the house is the heart and *gah* is the present moment in time – not past or future - where the seeker is fully present, aware, and focus on his heart. It is though one's full presence in the heart that the ultimate state of self-cognition or *Haghighat* can be achieved in the journey from the self, through the self, and to the self. Since *Khanegah* is the primary place where the seeker turns to pursue knowledge on the path of Sufism, it is a rich source for understanding the wisdom of Persian architecture in connection with spirituality. Sufi students gather and unite in *Khanegah* for prayers, zikr, lectures by the master, or other related activities. It is important to note that these centers were all designed by the current Sufi master, known as *Pir*, and built under his guidance and supervision in Virginia, Los Angeles, Dallas, and Houston, and by attending *Khanegah* students practice peace, balance, and harmony both externally and internally. This is accomplished through practicing self-discipline, being mindful of the present moment, and regulating and controlling all aspects of being - physically, mentally, and emotionally. Architecture becomes an external manifestation of the journey to self in the path of the heart. The seeker shows his adherence to the eight Sufi precepts followed by other traditional rituals - *Shari'at* - (exoteric/external) - to develop a consciousness that will allow him to contemplate the Divine. All the design

elements are a means to "provide coherent modes of articulation for the awakened soul that seeks external expression" (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 1973).

4.1 Geometry and Form

Geometry and form are the main elements of design in creating spaces and moments in architecture. Shapes can influence how space is expressed architecturally. Nature is the source of all geometric forms and orders, and it is through nature and the cosmos that we understand the mathematical and complete manifestation of geometry and form. Foster reinforces this by stating that "the very structure of creation lies within geometry and numbers" (2005). Space is the most explicit representation of existence in Islamic doctrine, and "the 'locus' of the Universal Soul" in Islamic cosmology (Furze 2010). Geometry is directly connected with numbers and numbers are units of spatial classifications – three dimensions of space (x, y, z). Geometrical forms as defined by Furze, is "still moments, revealing continuous, timeless universal action which in general terms is hidden from sense perception" (Furze 2010, 81).

In Sufism, the circle is the most complete geometric shape, has great significance, and serves as the ultimate reflection of unity. The use of the circle and dome is one of the key elements known in Persian architecture which is also seen in the design of all the four M.T.O. Centers. The circle is entirely symmetrical relative to the center in all directions, making it the emblem of perfection. A circle is an endless form with no beginning or end. The circle symbolizes infinity and eternity, and it is the main underlying principle of composition in Islamic art and architecture, from the smallest detail patterns to large forms and buildings. Circles and spheres are said to be the symbol of creation as they can be found in the smallest particles such as atoms and cells and the movement of electrons (microcosm)

to the movement of stars and galaxies (macrocosms). The use of the dome in the design of the *Khanegah* and the orientation of the building towards the Qibla, are notable examples of this concept. In *Khanegah*, similar to all other sacred Islamic places, the students face the one singular point in the direction of *Ka'ba* (known to Muslims as the house of God and center of the Islamic world) for prayers, *zikr*, and mediation (Akkach 2005). This allows everyone to pray in one direction – towards the center- as a whole and practice oneness and unity as a large group as well as internally.

Breath of the Compassionate

In the teaching of Sufism and Islam, it is stated that man is the masterpiece of all creation and that go manifested himself and placed his essence into the man – “*Nafas - Al Rahman*” or the Breath of the compassionate. “The Breath of the Compassionate is the substance in which flowers all forms of material and spiritual being. It is the symbol of the creation of the entire cosmos. Physical bodies are manifested in the material cosmos when the Breath penetrates the material substance which is the receptacle of the corporeal form” (Corbin 1969, 298). The breath of the compassionate is also visible in the geometry and form of the *Khanegah* in the shape of the 8-pointed star.

In Persian architecture, all polygons originate from the intersection of circles including squares, rectangles, and triangles. Square represents the four directions, four quarters of the universe, four seasons, as well as four elements of nature – earth, wind, fire, and water. It is a symbol of stability and it “represents the most externalized and fixed aspect of creation” (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 1973). The 8-pointed star is also created by intersecting several circles because of interlocking two squares. The 8-pointed star, symbolizing the eight principles of Sufism, is connoted with the expansion and contraction of the form signifying the inhalation and

exhalation of the universe. Once the two forms are placed adjacently, they alternately expand and contract into one another, giving a visual sense of inhalation & exhalation. Figure 3 illustrates how the final form evolved through intersecting circles and the portrayal of the directional forces that shaped it. The symmetry and balance of the form also symbolize harmony and unity.

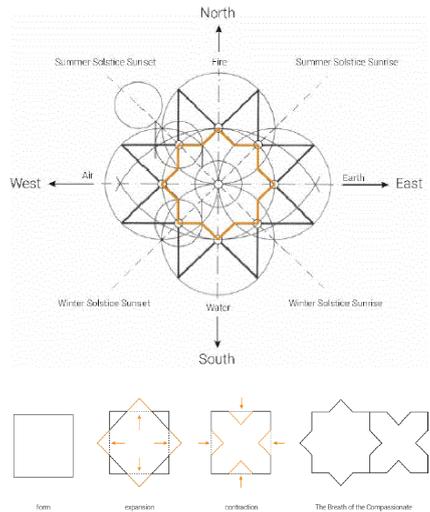


Figure 3. Development of the 8- pointed star - “The Breath of the Compassionate”. Source: (Author 2022, Bakhtiar 1976)

It is worth mentioning that the name of the Maktab Tarighat Oveysi (M.T.O.) Shahmaghsoudi is named after the first recipient of the holy prophet Mohammad’s Cloak who was Oveys al-Garani from Yemen. Oveys knew the prophet inwardly from the heart without ever meeting him in his lifetime. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) mentioned in one of his sayings: “I feel the breath of the Compassionate coming from the direction of Yemen” (Corbin 1969, 32).

4.2 Water and Purity

As one of the four elements of nature, water is a symbol of life, purity, reflection, and contemplation in various cultures and religions. Robert Birch describes the importance of water as the "...essence of life and the connection to water through place signifies a connection to an elemental place in Ourselves" (Birch 2014, 87). In both nature and our physical bodies, water is a metaphor for life (Barrie, Bermudez, and Tabb 2016) Persian architecture emphasizes the use of water as an essential element of design for sacred places both its physical and non-physical qualities. As a symbol of purity, water is present in Persian architecture for cleansing rituals before prayer whereas, in Persian gardens, it symbolizes life, beauty, and reflections of heaven on earth. In the design of the Khanegah, as well as the Memorial Building (built for the previous master of the M.T.O. school in Novato - California) a water fountain or a water feature is placed in front of the building in the courtyard. Most of these water fountains have an 8-pointed star pattern or decorations that resemble this design. By paying close attention one can see the fountain is composed of several components that join together to form a single entity that sits on a single point, and does so in perfect balance in line with the laws of physics and mathematics (Ayazi 2013). Figure 4 shows images of the water fountains located in front of the Sufi centers in Los Angeles and Dallas

as well as the Memorial building (built for the previous master of the school- Professor Sadegh Angha) located in Novato, California. One of the significances of Persian architecture is that it is both quantitative and qualitative, measurable, and immeasurable, tangible and intangible all simultaneously. The poetic, rhythmic, flow and movement of water along with its overall presence, not only activate the aural senses and provide a peaceful experience but also resembles the passing of time in creating an active architecture (Barrie, Bermudez, and Tabb 2016; Esmaeili and Sinclair 2021). The fountain symbolizes the pure life embedded within each individual and the internal balance and harmony that the seeker requires to achieve by practicing concentration and stability on the source of life in the heart. It can be said that the water symbolizes the external purification of the body and mind (Zahir) in the journey of internal self-cognition (Batin).

4.3 Persian Garden and Paradise

As part of its traditional culture, Persian architecture utilizes religious and philosophical ideas to construct a spiritual framework and has strived for unity and harmony within it. In Persian architecture, connection with nature, placement of the structure on the landscape, building's relationship to its surroundings and context, and the structure's orientation (toward the



Figure 4. M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi Sufi Centers & Memorial Building. a) Los Angeles, California. b) Dallas, Texas. c) Memorial Building, Novato, California. Source: (M.T.O Website 2015a)

Qibla) all have meaning and significance. On the other side, the use of the gardens and courtyards symbolizes the ultimate paradise and image of heaven on earth where humans can thrive and be in their ultimate state of being. Gardens are an expression of the soul where the body reunites with the spirit or 'Jaan'. It is a place where man is in full presence and experiences space with all his senses, the sound of the water and birds, the fragrance of the flowers, the colors of the trees, the warmth of the sunlight, and the overall beauty of the natural environment (Shirvani 1985). Man, according to Islamic teachings, is not distinct from nature. The garden from an architectural perspective "reflects the sense of place, the garden being viewed as a defined space encompassing within itself a total reflection of the Cosmos" (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 1973). The garden not only symbolizes growth and constant change in nature but its structures forms from a state of "progressive unfolding" (Alexander 2004). The Garden is a symbol of natural beauty that is hidden within it like a gem. The beauty is reminiscent of the Divine or the beloved. It is beauty that "bring (s) about remembrance of that celestial Beauty. If understood spiritually, beauty becomes itself the means of recollection and the rediscovery of our true nature as God had created us, the nature we still bear deeply within ourselves although it has been forgotten as a result of our falling into the state of ignorance and no longer knowing who we are" (Nasr 2007, 76).

To enter the garden and reach the main entrance of the building, one is required to pass through a Gate. The gate symbolizes the entrance to heaven, and it also denotes a passageway via which a seeker passes to begin the spiritual journey. As explained by Nasr, mysticism contains two main gates "knowledge and love" (Nasr 2007, 82). The journey is long and challenging; however, the seeker accepts to step on the path (Journey to self) and proceed toward the gate so he can eventually reach the truth and enter the garden - the paradise. The gate can also be symbolized as the entrance to the heart. Salik, through concentration and patience by practicing all the Sufi principles, will finally complete his journey and enter the realm of transcendental.

5.CONTEXTUALISING CASES | CONTRIBUTIONS TO A BROADER RESEARCH AGENDA

Through examining Persian architecture and its connection with sacrality and Sufism, one can understand different layers of knowledge and wisdom hidden within this architectural style. More research is needed to not only comprehend Persian architecture from a transcendental perspective but also to reveal design ideas and concepts that have been used traditionally for connecting man with their inner essence (Jaan) through architecture. There is still so much to learn and investigate that will further our search



Figure 5. Garden and gates of the M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi Sufi Centers, Source: (M.T.O. 2015a)

for creative ideas and methods to design environments with quality and meaning beyond form and matter. This preliminary study is part of a larger pursuit, and puzzle, to connect design to transcendence, stirring of the soul, and discovery of the self. This is a step toward a more thorough examination that is required to understand the relationships between the interior and external characteristics of the built environment and our everyday interactions with space. It is essential to not only explore the architectural characteristics of space but to observe and understand individuals' experiences and sense of space. This will be completed in the next phase of this research by implementing surveys, interviews, and conceptual mapping as well as first-person interpretation and analysis of space. The aim of this research and the purpose of this study have been reviewed with the M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi representatives. A personal visit to the centers, collaboration with M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi, personnel, and possibly a meeting with the architect of these facilities are planned to obtain further information for this project.

It is important to mention that all the M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi Centers are designed by Professor Nader Angha, the current Sufi master of the school. Professor Angha's expertise encompasses a wide range of subjects, including physics, mathematics, astronomy, astrophysics, quantum mechanics, biophysics, philosophy, poetry, and architecture, in addition to the esoteric disciplines and sacred sciences (the science of letters and numbers, alchemy, etc). (M.T.O. 2022a). As a result, our project is seeking approval from the M.T.O. School to examine these centers under the direct supervision and direction of Professor Angha. This is to ensure all the information is aligned correctly with the teachings of the school, as well as to make sure nothing is overlooked or interpreted misleadingly.

6.CONCLUSIONS

"Where is the Life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" (T.S. Eliot)

It is through the connection with the physical world that one can reach the realm of the unseen. The purpose of this preliminary study was to discover Persian architecture's wisdom and its link with the cosmological and metaphysical dimensions to reflect meanings that are beyond form and substance. Architecture goes beyond deploying bricks & mortar and building walls and roofs. The rich embedded meaning for each of the elements makes one curious to appreciate space as a whole entity. By becoming fully present in the moment and experiencing the space in deep ways, this style of architecture not only connects with the individual on a tangible level but also brings one closer to the self, providing a sense of peace, harmony, and tranquility. Since ancient times, sacred architecture has served as a conduit for the invisible to become visible and as a means of establishing a connection with the Divine. This study has identified that Persian architecture, seen from the Sufi perspective, strives to express the idea of harmony and oneness within one's heart, from the outer world of Zahir to the inner world of Batin. One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that the spirit of place in Persian architecture is not just in the space or the choreography of the space but that it is embedded within every element of design – unity in diversity. All design aspects have special meanings that represent the journey to the truth along the road of self-cognition, from the orientation, form, and geometry of the structure to the usage of the garden and even the gates. In the path of Sufism, students seek their inherent and inner beauty concealed within the heart via external forms in the physical world. The present study

contributes to our understanding of spirit in architecture not as something religious, but elegant and universal that can be experienced by everyone beyond the confinement of their race, culture, religion, or background. This research has proffered a deeper insight into understanding the connection of physical with metaphysical, visible, and invisible forms one of the well-known styles of architecture. As such the research will play a part in extending the wisdom ingrained in Persian architecture concerning the self by looking at the newly built case studies through the rich and perceptive lens of Sufism. This study will prove useful in expanding our understanding of designing buildings and spaces that are not simply a passageway for individuals to move through, but places that have qualities and create moments - spaces that require stillness and the full presence of an individual to connect with all aspects of their being. It is important to mention that the scope of this study was limited in terms of the number of design elements explored for the mentioned case studies. A further examination could assess and explore other key design elements, such as materially, color, light/shadow, etc, to grasp a more comprehensive understanding of sacrality in Persian architecture. The next stage of this research will concentrate on an in-depth analysis of all the four centers. To gain a deeper understanding of the quality of the spaces and the experiences people have while visiting, each of the centers will be investigated from both an architectural and phenomenological aspect.

REFERENCES

- Akkach, Samer. 2005. *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam*. New York: New York: State University of New York Press.
- Alexander, Christopher. 2002. *Nature of Order*. Book 4 .*The Luminous Ground*. Berkeley, CA.: The Centre of Environmental Structure.
- Alexander, Christopher. 2004. "A Vision of a Living World- Book 3." *Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and The Nature of the Universe*.
- Angha, Nader. 1986. *Kanzol-Soluk: Wealth of Cognition*. Tehran, Iran: Tehran, Iran: MTO Publications.
- Angha, Nader. 2002. *Theory "I": The Unlimited Vision of Leadership*. Riverside, CA: Riverside, CA: M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi Publications.
- Angha, Nader. 2011. "Sufism." In *Sufism Lecture Series*, 17–50. Great Britain: M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi Publications.
- Angha, Sadegh. 1986. *Al-Rasa'el*. MTO Publications.
- Ardalan, Nader, and Laleh Bakhtiar. 1973. *The Sense of Unity. The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*. Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 9. 1st ed. Chicago, London: Chicago, London: The Univesity of Chicago Press.
- Ayazi, Payam. 2013. "Sufi Symbolism." *Sufism Journal*.
- Bakhtiar, Laleh. 1976. *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest. Art and Imagination*. Thames and Hudson.
- Barrie, Thomas, Julio Bermudez, and Phillip James Tabb. 2016. *Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality*. Edited by Julio Bermudez, Thomas Barrie, and Phillip James Tabb. *Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality*. Ashgate Publishing.
- Birch, Robert A. 2014. "People, Place, and Spirit: Pursuing the Sacred in the Design of Built Environments." University of Calgary.
- Corbin, Henry. 1969. *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*. Princeton University Press.
- Esmaeili, Nooshin, and Brian R Sinclair. 2021. "Sacrality , Space + Self : Critical Explorations of Meaning , Relationship + Resonance in Islamic Architecture." In *Proceeding of the ARCC 2021 International Conference*. Architectural Research Centers Consortium, Inc.
- Failor, Jacqueline. 2014. "Seeking the Spiritual Self within the Interior Environment : Analyzing the Work of Heidegger to Define the Human-Object Relationship." In *Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality Symposium*, 1–5. Atlanta, Georgia: Architecture, Culture, and Spirituality Forum.
- Foster, Sabiha. 2005. *Islam + Architecture*. 1st ed. United Kingdom: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.
- Furze, Rodney Cresswell. 2010. "Mysticism in The Experience of Architecture." University of Exeter.
- Goldberger, Paul. 2010. "Architecture, Sacred Space, and the Challenge of the Modern." Retrieved from Paul Goldberger: 2010. <http://www.paulgoldberger.com/lectures/architecture-sacred-space-and-the-challenge-of-the-modern/>.
- Grisell, Ronald. 1983. *Sufism*. Berkeley: Ross Books.
- Lings, Martin. 1991. *Symbol and Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence*. Cambridge: Quinta Essentia.
- M.T.O., Shahmaghsoudi. 2015a. "MTO Centers." Retrieved from M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi Publications: 2015. <http://suficenters.org/usa/houston-construction/>.
- M.T.O. 2015b. "The Khanegah - MTO Shahmaghsoudi ®." Retrieved from M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi Publications: 2015. <http://mtoshahmaghsoudi.com/about-m-t-o/the-khanegah/>.

- M.T.O. 2022a. "Sufi Master - MTO Shahmaghsoudi @." Retrieved from M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi Publications: 2022. <http://mtoshahmaghsoudi.com/sufi-master/>.
- M.T.O. 2022b. "The Principles of Sufism - MTO Shahmaghsoudi @." Retrieved from M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi Publications: 2022. <http://mtoshahmaghsoudi.com/what-is-sufism/the-principles-of-sufism/>.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 1964. *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 1987. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 2007. *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition*. San Francisco: Harper One.
- Norberg-Schulz, Christian. 1980. *Genius Loci, towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York: New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc.
- Otto, Rudolf. 1970. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sadegh Angha. 1986. *Message From the Soul*. M.T.O. Shahmaghsoudi Publication.
- Schimmel, Annemarie. 1975. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. The University of North Carolina Press.
- Sepehri, Golzar. 2019. "Islamic Sufism in America : The Philosophy and Practices of the Oveyssi Tariqa." Harvard Extension School.
- Shirvani, Hamid. 1985. "The Philosophy of Persian Garden Design: The Sufi Tradition." *Landscape Journal* 4 (1): 23–30. <https://doi.org/10.3368/lj.4.1.23>.
- Sinclair, Brian R. 2000. "Emptiness: Science, Spirit and The Serach for the In-Between," 1–12.
- Sinclair, Brian R. 2011. "Contemplating the Spiritual Ethos within a Holistic Framework for Design + Planning," 1–5.
- Walton, Thomas. 2015. "Exploring Transcendence." In *Transcending Architecture. Contemporary Views on Sacred Space*, edited by Julio Bermudez, 260–66. Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press.