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## CASE STUDY RESEARCH PAPER

### The Role of Conceptual Art in the Design of Contemporary Mosques in Khorasan: An Approach to Modernization and the Maximum Engagement of the Cultural Audience

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#### ABSTRACT

Given contemporary cultural, social, and technological transformations, rethinking the design of Islamic mosques especially in the Khorasan region, with its rich heritage of religious architecture has become an undeniable necessity. This research aims to present a conceptual framework for employing the elements of conceptual art in the design of contemporary Khorasan mosques in order to enhance the spiritual experience and attract cultural audiences, particularly the younger generation. The research method is qualitative and descriptive-analytical with a mixed (qualitative-quantitative) approach, drawing on library study, field observation and imaging, and semi-structured interviews (with twelve designers and users), together with the comparative analysis of four notable examples of religious architecture in Khorasan: The Goharshad Mosque (Mashhad), the Jameh Mosque of Neyshabur, the Akbariyeh Cultural Complex (Birjand), and the Hazrat Zahra Mosque (Mashhad). The findings show that integrating the components of conceptual art light, form, time, and participation with traditional architecture, while preserving Islamic identity, enhances the sensory, spiritual, and cultural connection of the audience with the mosque space and provides a basis for renewing the cultural functions of these spaces; moreover, this connection is realized more strongly in the redesigned contemporary examples than in the historical ones. Finally, the research proposes that designing mosques with an interactive, multisensory approach in which conceptual art becomes a shared language between tradition and contemporaneity can be a creative response to the spiritual and cognitive needs of contemporary societies.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Despite extensive efforts to modernize religious architecture in Iran, the design of contemporary mosques in Khorasan has not yet been able to establish an effective link between the rich traditions of Islamic architecture and the cultural needs of the new generation. Most existing designs focus on reproducing historical forms and pay less attention to the spiritual and interactive experience of the audience. This has caused a considerable part of young people to experience the mosque not as a space for spiritual connection, but as a merely ritual and unappealing building. Under such conditions, “conceptual art”—as a contemporary current that emphasizes meaning, experience, and audience participation—can offer a new approach for regenerating religious spaces. As the principal cultural–religious spaces in Islamic societies, mosques have always held a special place in the religious, social, and identity-related life of Muslims. In the Khorasan region, which has a rich background in Islamic architecture and religious art, mosques have played a role beyond that of a mere place of worship and have always been a ground for linking people, culture, and religion (Hosseini et al., 2020). However, the rapid social, cultural, and technological transformations of recent decades and the change of lifestyle, especially among the young generation, have reduced the appeal of traditional spaces and made the necessity of rethinking the design and function of these spaces more evident than ever (Jafari & Razavi, 2021). One of the fundamental challenges of the contemporary architecture of mosques in Khorasan is the inability to respond to the spiritual, aesthetic, and communicational needs of the new generation. The mere use of traditional patterns, without attention to today’s cultural language, has caused the young generation to distance itself from these spaces. In this context, conceptual art as one of the influential currents in contemporary art, with its emphasis on meaning, experience, and audience interaction has unique capacities for the redesign and renewal of religious spaces (Smith, 2018). By

drawing on visual elements such as light, form, color, and interactive arrangements, conceptual art can create a meaningful, multisensory, and interactive space that provides a novel and appealing experience of presence in the mosque for today’s generation. Especially in a region such as Khorasan, which has a powerful cultural–religious substrate, adopting this approach can be an effective factor in preserving Islamic identity while simultaneously attracting the maximum number of cultural audiences (Nasr, 2020). Therefore, the main problem of this research is: how can the design of contemporary mosques in Khorasan be improved through the use of the principles of conceptual art in such a way that, while preserving Islamic identity, it increases the spiritual experience and the engagement of the cultural audience? The objectives of the research, in line with its vision, can be divided as follows. General objective is to present a conceptual framework for employing the elements of conceptual art in the design of contemporary Khorasan mosques with the aim of enhancing the spiritual experience and attracting cultural audiences.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The design of mosques in the contemporary context has always been one of the concerns of architects and researchers in the field of Islamic architecture. In recent decades, with the expansion of the modernization process and cultural changes, the need to rethink religious design patterns has been felt more than ever. Numerous studies have focused on the role of light, form, color, and symbolism in enhancing the audience’s spiritual experience (Heidari et al., 2019; Hosseini et al., 2020; Jafari & Razavi, 2021). These studies show that religious architecture cannot respond to the cultural and cognitive needs of the new generation merely by reproducing traditional forms. In this regard, conceptual art as a contemporary approach that emphasizes meaning, experience, and audience participation has been able to open a new path for designing sacred spaces (Smith,

2018; Nasr, 2020). By focusing on the audience’s mental experience and using visual elements such as light, form, arrangement, and sound, this art provides the capacity to create multisensory and meaningful spaces. Recent studies in Iran have also addressed the effect of the components of conceptual art in religious spaces. For example, Rezaei and Mousavi (2018) examined the effect of color on the perception of mosque space, Heidari et al. (2019) pointed to the role of abstract forms in the spiritual experience, and Karimi (2021) considered interactive design in modern mosques a factor for increasing social

participation. Nevertheless, a major part of this research has focused more on descriptive and aesthetic analysis and has paid less attention to objective indicators of the cultural audience’s experience. In recent years, international articles have also emphasized the importance of lived experience in religious architecture. In particular, in the period 2022 to 2025, studies have been published that are directly related to the subject of this research; Table 1 reviews the background of the subject regarding the effect of conceptual art on the design of cultural spaces. (Tab. 1)

**Table 1:** Review of the background of the subject regarding the effect of conceptual art on the design of cultural spaces (Source: Authors).

No.	Author / Year	Research title	Method	Key findings
1	Hosseini et al. (2020)	The effect of lighting design on the spiritual experience in modern mosques	Analytical–descriptive	Appropriate lighting increases the sense of presence and the spiritual experience.
2	Jafari & Razavi (2021)	A comparative study of traditional and modern mosque architecture	Comparative study	Combining traditional and modern architecture increases spatial appeal.
3	Heidari et al. (2019)	The role of abstract forms in the spiritual perception of mosque space	Content analysis	Abstract forms can strengthen the audience’s spiritual connection with the space.
4	Smith (2018)	Conceptual Art in Religious Spaces	Case study	Conceptual art can create a dynamic, interactive experience of religious spaces.
5	Nasr (2020)	The Modernization of Mosque Architecture	Qualitative analysis	Combining contemporary art with Islamic architecture preserves identity and attracts the young generation.
6	Ahmadi & Naseri (2022)	A study of the effect of symbolism in Islamic architecture	Qualitative analysis	The use of visual symbols increases the audience’s semantic connection with the space.
7	Brown (2019)	The Role of Minimalist Design in Worship Spaces	Experimental	Minimalist design increases concentration and calm in worship spaces.
8	Rezaei & Mousavi (2018)	The effect of colour on the perception of mosque space	Experimental	Colour can enhance the spiritual sense in the audience.
9	Wilson & Khan (2021)	Blending Tradition and Innovation in Mosque Design	Comparative study	Combining traditional architecture with new technologies increases social interaction in mosques.
10	Karimi (2021)	Interactive design in modern mosques with a maximum-engagement approach	Field	The use of conceptual art increases social participation.

11	Rahimi (2023)	Exploring the Influence of Religious and Cultural Beliefs on Architectural Appropriateness in Iran's Contemporary Mosques	Qualitative	The contradiction between "authenticity" and "innovation" in contemporary mosque design stems from the lack of a conceptual framework for interpreting spiritual experience.
12	Hassan (2024)	Biophilic Design for the Architecture of Islamic Houses of Worship in Egypt	Mixed-method	Emphasises the role of natural elements and light in creating a bond between humans and the worship space, centring users' lived experience.
13	Amin & Khalid (2024)	Authenticity in Islamic Sacred Spaces: Case Studies of Distinctive Regional Mosques	Comparative study	Re-reads the concept of "spiritual authenticity" in the local cultural context and emphasises participatory design.
14	El-Masry (2024)	Contemporary Models of Mosques: Methods of Architectural Heritage Inspiration	Qualitative	Many contemporary mosques, inspired by traditional forms and geometry but in a minimalist, conceptual form, achieve a new experience of worship space.

Alongside the domestic studies, this research indicates a growing attention to the relationship between spiritual experience, sensory interaction, and cultural identity in the design of religious spaces. However, most of these studies have either remained at the conceptual level or have not addressed a specific geographical context such as Khorasan. A review of the existing sources shows that, although numerous studies have been conducted on re-reading the traditional forms and symbols of mosques, the link between the language of conceptual art and contemporary mosque design in the cultural and historical context of Khorasan has been less examined. Most previous studies have been limited to aesthetic analysis and the qualitative interpretation of space, whereas the objective examination of indicators such as the degree of audience interaction, sensory satisfaction, and spiritual experience has been less measured. Accordingly, the present research seeks to present an analytical framework for applying the components of conceptual art in the design of contemporary Khorasan mosques by combining qualitative and quantitative approaches.

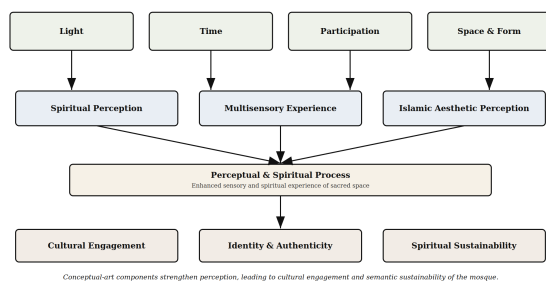
#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As one of the influential currents in contempo-

rary art and architecture, conceptual art emphasizes meaning, experience, and the active participation of the audience. In the context of religious architecture, this approach seeks to go beyond the outward representation of symbols and to create a space in which the audience lives the "spiritual experience" in a sensory and perceptual manner. Based on the relevant theoretical literature (Nasr, 2020; Smith, 2018; Karimi, 2021), the main components of conceptual art in religious architecture can be summarized in four key axes: light, time, participation, and space and form.

*Light:* as the main factor in creating a sense of spirituality, the bond between earth and sky, and an element that conveys meaning through visual perception. *Time:* the experience of continuity and change in religious spaces, through movement, changing light, and the sensory rhythm of the space. *Participation:* the degree of engagement and active presence of the audience in the spatial experience through sensory, functional, or mental interaction. *Space and form:* the physical structure that, through arrangement, geometry, and proportions, provides a ground for meaning and experience. Together, these components lead to the formation of three mediating variables: spiritual perception,

multisensory experience, and the perception of Islamic aesthetics. In the conceptual model of the research, it is assumed that the “components of conceptual art,” through strengthening the perceptual and spiritual experience of the audience, lead to an increase in cultural engagement and the semantic sustainability of mosque architecture. In this framework, light and form play the role of visual tools that shape aesthetic and spiritual perception; time and participation, as behavioral and experiential factors, build the interactive experience of the space; and finally, the combination of these components leads to attracting the audience, increasing the sense of presence, and forming a spiritual experience in mosque architecture. Thus, this theoretical framework becomes the basis for the comparative analysis of the samples in the field section of the article, and by means of it, quantitative indicators such as the amount of light, the duration of the audience’s presence, and the level of interaction in the selected mosques will be measured (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1:** The conceptual diagram of the research; the relationship between the components of conceptual art (light, form, time, participation) and the spiritual experience (Source: Authors).

### CHARACTERISTICS OF KHORASAN'S RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE

The architecture of Khorasan's mosques, from the Goharshad Mosque to the Malekzadeh Mosque of Birjand, has always been a combination of sacred geometry, the use of natural light, Quranic calligraphy, and symbolic motifs. These elements can be re-created within the frame-

work of conceptual art and transformed from a traditional form into a contemporary space that is nonetheless faithful to Islamic identity. Relying on doctrinal, climatic, and cultural principles, the religious architecture of Khorasan holds a special place in the history of Iranian Islamic architecture. From the early Islamic periods to the contemporary era, this architecture has always been known for features such as sacred geometry, the balance of form and content, the use of native materials, and the meaning-oriented presence of decorative elements (Pirnia, 2012). One of the most distinctive features of Khorasan's religious architecture is attention to spiritual space-making through light and geometric simplicity; in mosques such as the Goharshad Mosque of Mashhad or the Jameh Mosque of Neyshabur, the use of natural light alongside the iwan-based structure, symmetrical minarets, and brick or tile arrangements enhances the sense of spirituality and presence in the sacred space (Kiani, 1999). (Tab. 2)

Another important feature is the conceptual place of the dome in Khorasan's architecture. Domes not only have a structural function but are also positioned at the center of the worship space as a symbol of the sky and divine unity. The use of Quranic calligraphy, especially the Thuluth and structural Kufic scripts, has also directly transferred religious meanings into the aesthetic space (Blair, 2006). In addition, in Khorasan's religious architecture the concept of the “sanctity of space” is fully observed through spatial hierarchy: the passage from the entrance to the courtyard, then the iwan, and finally the domed prayer hall defines a kind of spiritual journey within the architectural body, which is seen in many of the historical mosques of this region (Hillenbrand, 2000). Moreover, the element of water in the central courtyard seen in many of Khorasan's mosques is a symbol of purification, calm, and connection with the Quranic paradise (Grabar, 1990). This element, especially alongside the shade of trees and cool arched niches, provides a sensory and mystical experi-

ence for worshippers. Another point is attention to the relation of the human being to the scale of space. In Khorasan's traditional architecture, unlike some of today's architecture that merely

displays form, an effort has been made to observe the human scale and to reinforce the sense of security and calm in the individual (O'Kane, 2003). (Fig. 2)

Table 2: The most important features of Khorasan's religious architecture (Source: Authors).

Architectural feature	Description	Case example
Sacred geometry	Use of golden proportions, qibla centrality, and symmetry patterns	Goharshad Mosque
Meaning-oriented ornamentation	Calligraphy of Quranic verses; use of arabesque and floral motifs with mystical meanings	Jameh Mosque of Neyshabur
Natural lighting	Use of latticed windows, skylights in the dome chamber, and the open iwan	Malekzadeh Mosque, Birjand
Native materials	Use of brick, plaster, lapis-lazuli tile, and local wood	Most historical mosques of the region
Iwan pattern	Four-iwan space, central courtyard, and large dome chamber	Khorasan seminaries

**Features of Khorasan Religious Architecture**



Figure 2: A graphic representation of the features of Khorasan's religious architecture (source: authors, 2025).

Finally, the presence of wooden latticework (Girih-Chini), Muqarnas, and pointed arches in this architecture reflects not only visual aesthetics but also deep symbolic and mystical layers within these spaces, which can be re-created in contemporary design with a new language. On the whole, Khorasan's religious architecture possesses an authenticity, meaning, and proportion that can inspire contemporary approaches to mosque design, especially if combined with the new tools of conceptual art such as interactive arrangement, smart lighting, and minimalist forms.

*Methodology*

The present research method is descriptive-analytical and of an applied type with a mixed

(qualitative and quantitative) approach. Its aim is to analyse how the components of conceptual art appear in the design of contemporary Khorasan mosques and to evaluate the effect of these components on the spiritual experience and the engagement of cultural audiences. The research population comprises all the contemporary mosques of Razavi and Southern Khorasan that were built or redesigned from the 1990s (1370s) onward. From among this population, four notable examples were selected by purposeful sampling so that historical, stylistic, and cultural diversity would be taken into account. These examples are: the Goharshad Mosque of Mashhad (a historical Timurid example), the Jameh Mosque of Neyshabur (a Seljuk example with a volumetric structure), the

Akbariyeh Cultural Complex of Birjand (a revitalized Qajar example), and the Hazrat Zahra Mosque of Mashhad (a contemporary example with a minimalist design). These examples were selected with the aim of examining continuity and transformation in mosque design, from traditional to contemporary, so that the relation-

ship between “conceptual elements” and the “semantic transformation of space” could be analyzed in the historical and geographical context of Khorasan. To ensure the comprehensiveness of the samples, five main criteria were taken into account in their selection. (Tab. 3)

**Table 3:** The criteria for selecting the samples (Source: Authors).

Criterion	Description
Historical age and authenticity	Representing the continuity of religious architecture across different periods (Timurid to contemporary)
Creativity in spatial design	Degree of innovation in light, form, or the combination of functions
Conceptual innovation	Presence of elements that engage the audience's meaning and experience (such as interactive light or abstract form)
Type and diversity of the cultural audience	Range of users including pilgrims, students, artists, and the young generation
Accessibility and documentation potential	Feasibility of field survey, photography, and dialogue with users

Data collection was carried out using three main instruments. First, library study, comprising theoretical sources on conceptual art, Islamic architecture, and the experiential design of religious spaces. Second, field observation and visual survey, carried out by attending the selected mosques and recording plans, lighting, form, and symbolic elements. Third, semi-structured interviews with designers and users (twelve people in total) to examine the spiritual experience, the sense of presence, and the degree of

sensory interaction with the space. The combination of these three instruments made a multi-level analysis possible, so that both theoretical and empirical data, side by side, would increase the validity of the findings. To measure and analyses, qualitatively and quantitatively, the users' spiritual experience in the mosque space, five main indicators were defined. These indicators were measured through observation, physical measurement (such as light intensity), and a five-point Likert questionnaire. (Tab. 4)

**Table 4:** The indicators for measuring the spiritual experience (Source: Authors)

Indicator	Type of measurement	Description
Sense of sacred presence	Qualitative – interview	Feeling of calm, concentration, and spirituality in the space
Light and spiritual perception	Quantitative – measuring natural and artificial light intensity	Measured with a lux-meter at different hours of the day
Sensory interaction with space	Qualitative/quantitative – observation and questionnaire	Degree of attention to form, colour, sound, and spatial arrangement
Symbolic perception and calligraphy	Analytical – content analysis	Examining the meaning and visual message in the Quranic ornamentation
Duration of presence and user satisfaction	Quantitative – questionnaire	Average duration of presence and user satisfaction score on a 1–5 scale

Data analysis was carried out at three complementary levels. First, using qualitative content analysis, the semantic and conceptual themes arising from the forms, lighting, and arrangement were extracted. Second, quantitative comparative analysis was used to compare the indicators of light, form, calligraphy, and interaction in the four selected mosques, in order to examine the effect of the components of conceptual art on the audience's spiritual experience. Finally, the triangulation method was employed to increase the validity and accuracy of the results, so that the field data, the interviews, and the theoretical analysis were compared and matched with one another. This multi-method combination caused the findings to be both statistically valid and semantically rich, so that the relationship between the “conceptual element” and “spiritual perception” in the design of Khorasan's mosques could be explained precisely and objectively.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the theoretical framework of the research, the data analysis was carried out with a focus on the four main components of conceptual art namely light, time, participation, and space/form. The aim was to explain how these components are realized in the design of the selected Khorasan mosques and to examine their effect on the audience's spiritual experience. The analyses were conducted comparatively between two general groups of samples: traditional mosques (Goharshad, Jameh of Neyshabur) and contemporary mosques (Akbariyeh of Birjand, Hazrat

Zahra of Mashhad). In each mosque, the field data, interviews, and observations were matched with the conceptual framework of the research to show how the proposed model has been realized in practice.

As one of the most outstanding examples of Islamic architecture of the Timurid era, the Goharshad Mosque of Mashhad has always been of interest to architects, researchers, and artists. This historical building is not only of unparalleled value in physical and aesthetic terms, but has also played a key role in the religious identity of the Khorasan region from a semantic, cultural, and social standpoint. In line with the comparative analysis of the role of conceptual art in the design of contemporary mosques, a precise and structural examination of the features of this mosque provides an important model for understanding the combination of tradition with meaning and experience in religious spaces. (Tab. 5)

#### The Goharshad Mosque (Mashhad)

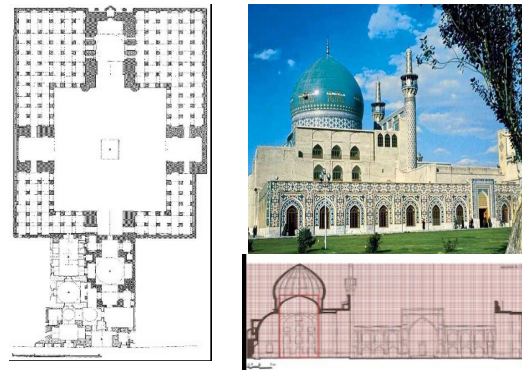


Figure 3: A view of the plan, section, and perspective of the Goharshad Mosque, Mashhad (Hekmat, 2011).

Table 5: The architectural features and semantic values of the Goharshad Mosque, Mashhad (Source: Authors)

Indicator	Description
Historical period	Timurid (9th century AH)
Distinctive architectural features	Turquoise tilework with geometric and floral motifs; a lofty dome and tall iwans; latticed windows and glazed domes for natural lighting
Artistic and visual elements	Quranic calligraphy in Thuluth and Kufic scripts in the inscriptions and blind arches; arabesque decorations and artistic details throughout the building
Lighting	Purposeful use of natural light through openings, domes, and latticed windows to create a sense of spiritual presence and stillness in the space

Comparable feature	A unique combination of natural light and calligraphy as meaningful elements; the creation of a calm, spiritual space through the harmony of form, light, and Islamic-Iranian arts
Cultural and social value	An outstanding example of the unity of aesthetics and meaning in Iranian Islamic architecture; a religious, ritual, and cultural gathering center of Mashhad with a symbolic place in the region's religious architectural identity
Dominant audience type	Religious pilgrims and enthusiasts of historical and traditional artistic architecture

In this mosque, the component of “light” plays a central role in creating a sense of sacred presence. Through the latticed openings and reflection in the tiles, light transforms the visual experience into a spiritual one. The symmetrical

geometric form and calligraphic arrangements convey meaning in a non-verbal manner. However, audience participation is mostly passive, and the space is limited for sensory interaction. (Tab. 6)

Table 5: The architectural features and semantic values of the Goharshad Mosque, Mashhad (Source: Authors)

Conceptual component	Manifestation in design	Effect on spiritual experience	Evaluation
Light	Use of latticed windows and colored reflection	Inducing a sense of presence and calm	Strong
Time	Change of light during the hours of the day	Creating a perceptual rhythm	Medium
Participation	Ritual, not interactive, presence	Non-participatory experience	Weak
Space and form	Symmetry and centrality of the dome chamber	Sense of stability and sanctity	Strong

The Jameh Mosque of Neyshabur

As one of the oldest surviving mosques of the Seljuk era, the Jameh Mosque of Neyshabur is a symbol of the continuity and coherence of Iranian-Islamic architecture within the historical context of Khorasan. With its emphasis on volumetric structure, spatial proportions, and the purposeful use of simple yet effective architectural elements, this mosque has played an important role in shaping the sense of place and the spiritual experience in religious spaces. Compared with contemporary mosques, the features of this mosque provide a suitable ground for analyzing how traditional architecture responds to the spiritual-social needs of the audience. The following table reviews the key components of this historical building along the axes of architecture, lighting, calligraphy, and cultural-social

values. (Tab. 7 and Fig. 4)

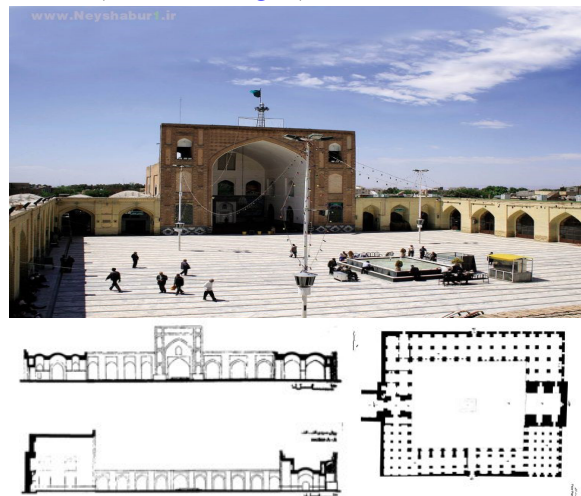


Figure 4: A view of the plan, sections, and courtyard of the Jameh Mosque of Neyshabur (Pirnia, 1992)

**Table 7:** The architectural and semantic features of the Jameh Mosque of Neyshabur (Source: Authors)

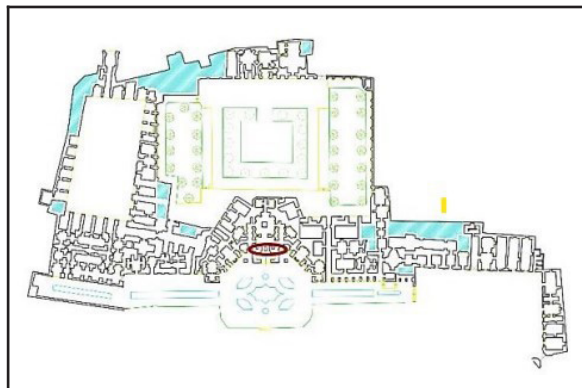
Indicator	Description
Historical period	Seljuk (5th–6th centuries AH)
Distinctive architectural features	A coherent volumetric structure with tall arches and huge domes; the use of simple proportions and symmetrical geometry in plan and section
Artistic and visual elements	Limited ornamentation focused on the structure; simplicity of forms and emphasis on the grandeur of the space without reliance on decorative detail
Lighting	Natural light through large openings and open spaces; the use of light to reinforce the sense of grandeur, dignity, and connection with the sacred space
Comparable feature	Emphasis on architectural volume and broad lighting instead of detailed ornamentation; the creation of a sense of silence, calm, and grandeur through the architectural structure
Cultural and social value	A historical religious center of the city with a devotional and identity function; a symbol of cultural stability and the continuity of the architectural tradition in the historical context of Khorasan
Dominant audience type	Pilgrims, local residents, and enthusiasts of historical and traditionalist architecture

In this example, the structural form and Seljuk geometry are the main factor of the spiritual experience. The presence of natural light is fainter, but the space, in terms of proportions and geometric order, strengthens the perception of

the meaning of divine unity. Nevertheless, the absence of interactive elements has caused the audience's experience to be more contemplative and less sensory. (Tab. 8)

**Table 8:** An examination of the conceptual components of the research in the Jameh Mosque of Neyshabur (Source: Authors).

Conceptual component	Manifestation in design	Effect on spiritual experience	Evaluation
Light	Limited entrances of light to the central courtyard	Sense of inner concentration	Medium
Time	Stability in form and light	Calm, static perception	Medium
Participation	Collective presence in prayer and ritual	Group experience	Medium
Space and form	Seljuk and iwan-based geometry	Conveying order and unity	Strong



**Figure 5:** A view of the Akbariyeh Cultural Complex, Birjand (Source: Authors) and The plan of the Akbariyeh Cultural Complex, Birjand (Razavi, 2016).

As one of the notable examples of Qajar-era architecture in eastern Iran, the Akbariyeh Cultural Complex of Birjand has in recent years been restored with an approach based on contemporary redesign and revival. While preserving its traditional features, this complex has embraced components of conceptual art and interactive design aimed at increasing audience participation especially that of the young generation—

in religious and cultural spaces. Analyzing this building alongside historical and contemporary mosque shows how traditional architecture can be combined with technology and today's design language without harming cultural authenticity. The following table summarizes the most important spatial, artistic, and functional features of this complex in the context of contemporary redesign.

**Table 9:** The architectural and interactivity features of the Akbariyeh Cultural Complex, Birjand (Source: Authors)

Indicator	Description
Historical period	Qajar (13th–14th centuries AH)
Distinctive architectural features	A historical structure with iwans, a central courtyard, and domed spaces; the use of traditional architecture with native materials (brick, plaster, wood)
Artistic and visual elements	Limited use of traditional ornamentation such as muqarnas and calligraphy; the re-creation of forms with a tendency toward minimalist design in the restored parts
Lighting	The use of artificial and interactive light in the contemporary redesign; a focus on directional, experience-oriented light to enhance audience interaction
Comparable feature	The combination of tradition and modernity in the new designs; the use of light and form as tools for attracting and engaging the cultural audience, especially the young
Cultural and social value	A cultural–religious center with mixed functions (education, rituals, exhibition); a successful example of reviving historical spaces with a new cultural–social approach
Dominant audience type	Young people, students, cultural tourists, and enthusiasts of revitalized heritage

In the redesign of this complex, an effort has been made to create a balance between tradition and modernity. Natural light, in combination with new materials (white stone and glass), has reinforced the sense of transparency and

calm. With the addition of complementary cultural spaces, cultural audiences have also been attracted, and the possibility of social participation in the space has increased. (Tab. 10)

**Table 10:** An examination of the conceptual components of the research in the Akbariyeh Cultural Complex, Birjand (Source: Authors).

Conceptual component	Manifestation in design	Effect on spiritual experience	Evaluation
Light	Use of natural light in the roof and walls	Enhancing calm and transparency	Strong
Time	Change of light color at different hours	Dynamism in the perception of space	Strong
Participation	Complementary cultural spaces (exhibition, gallery)	Increasing interaction and the sense of belonging	Strong
Space and form	Combination of traditional volume and modern lines	Unity between past and present	Strong

The Hazrat Zahra Mosque (Mashhad)



Figure 7: A view of the Hazrat Zahra Mosque (Kermani, 2022).

The Hazrat Zahra Mosque in Mashhad is an example of a new approach to the design of religious spaces, in which a measured combination of educational, religious, and conceptual functions is seen. With its emphasis on minimalist design, purposeful environmental arrangement, and the intelligent use of light and sound, this mosque seeks to provide a meaningful and calming experience for its audience especially semi-

nary students and the young generation. Unlike historical mosques, which are mostly based on ornamentation and volumetric grandeur, this space emphasizes simplicity, functionalism, and an experience-oriented approach in design. The following table analyses the key components of this mosque, which have made it one of the outstanding examples of contemporary religious architecture. (Tab. 11)

Table 11: The spatial and educational features of the Hazrat Zahra Mosque, Mashhad (Source: Authors).

Indicator	Description
Historical period	Contemporary (designed and built in recent decades)
Distinctive architectural features	The integration of religious and educational functions in a unified structure; the use of simple, open and closed forms to create stillness, concentration, and spirituality
Artistic and visual elements	A tendency toward minimalist design; the use of calm surfaces, neutral colours, and an orderly spatial arrangement
Lighting	Precise management of natural and artificial light to create a calm, focused environment; the use of directional light to reinforce the educational and mystical aspects of the space
Comparable feature	A spatial arrangement based on balance, silence, and light; an optimal combination of devotional and educational functions in a simple yet effective design
Cultural and social value	A modern religious space centered on jurisprudential education; a focus on creating an interactive environment while preserving the reverence, calm, and spirituality expected in a mosque
Dominant audience type	Seminary students, university students, young people interested in a modern spiritual space, and teachers of Islamic sciences

This mosque is an outstanding example of contemporary conceptual design. The minimalist form, directional lighting, and removal of unnecessary ornamentation have created a space

based on “semantic emptiness.” Audience participation is formed through movement and free presence in the space, rather than through the traditional ritual structure. (Tab. 12)

**Table 12:** An examination of the conceptual components of the research in the Hazrat Zahra Mosque, Mashhad (Source: Authors).

Conceptual component	Manifestation in design	Effect on spiritual experience	Evaluation
Light	Light focused on the qibla and the central space	Perceptual focus on the axis of meaning	Strong
Time	Change of shadows on the walls	Experience of passage and presence	Strong
Participation	Freedom of movement and perception of space	Sensory and experiential participation	Strong
Space and form	Conceptual minimalism, removal of ornamentation	Perception of emptiness and meaning	Strong

**COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

A comparison between the traditional and contemporary mosques of Khorasan shows that in the historical examples, meaning is conveyed

mostly through symbols and ornamentation, whereas in the contemporary examples, meaning is realized in the process of experience and interaction. (Tab. 13 and Fig. 8)

**Table 13:** The distinctive and comparable features of the samples examined in the research (Source: Authors).

Case study	Architectural features	Use of light	Role of calligraphy	Distinctive cultural & social features	Comparable points
Goharshad Mosque (Mashhad)	Turquoise tile-work, magnificent dome and iwans, Timurid architecture	Extensive use of natural light through latticed windows and glazed domes	Prominent Quranic calligraphy, decorative and spiritual	A spiritual gathering center, a space of contemplation and worship, a symbol of Islamic art	Combination of light and calligraphy to convey religious meanings; architecture with rich decorative detail
Jameh Mosque of Neyshabur	Tall arches, large domes, Seljuk architecture	Natural light from large openings and vast spaces	Presence of calligraphy in minimal ornamentation, greater emphasis on architecture	A historical religious gathering center, emphasis on the grandeur of architecture	Greater emphasis on architectural volume and lighting than on calligraphic ornamentation
Akbaryeh Cultural Complex, Birjand	Qajar architecture, use of traditional elements with contemporary renovation	Use of interactive and modern lighting in the new designs	Limited use of traditional calligraphy, tendency toward minimalist forms	Attracting the young generation, combining tradition and new technology	Integrating traditional architecture with contemporary lighting and design to enhance the spiritual and functional experience

Hazrat Zahra Mosque	Educational and religious architecture, open and closed spaces suited to education and worship	Purposeful management of natural and artificial light for concentration and calm	Use of calligraphy in wall ornamentation to increase educational motivation	A religious education center, a calm and focused environment	Attention to environmental design, light management, and the spiritual role of calligraphy in the educational space
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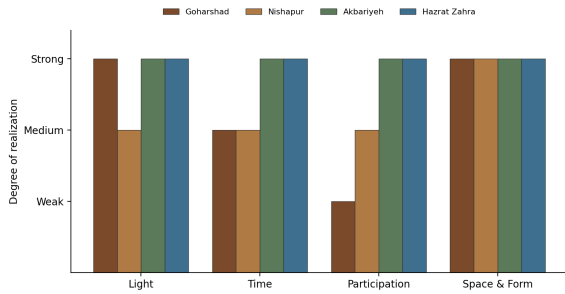


Figure 8: A comparative chart of the indicators in the studied samples (Source: Authors).

*Comparison of architectural features:* historical examples such as the Goharshad Mosque and the Jameh Mosque of Neyshabur emphasize traditional architectural elements, whereas contemporary examples such as the Akbariyeh Complex and the Hazrat Zahra Mosque use minimalist and conceptual approaches. This difference in approach reflects the different needs of audiences in different historical periods.

*The role of light in space-making:* in all the examples, light plays a role as a key element in creating a spiritual space, but the manner of its use differs. In the historical mosques, natural light enters the space through architectural openings, whereas in the contemporary examples, smart and interactive lighting holds a special place.

*Audience interaction with space:* the contemporary examples, by using interactive elements such as smart lighting, multipurpose spaces, and flexible arrangements, provide the possibility of greater audience interaction with the space. This interactive approach has been very effective in attracting the young generation and creating a dynamic experience of presence in the mosque. In traditional architecture, light is

more a symbol of sacred presence, but in conceptual architecture it has become a tool of connection between the human being and the space. In terms of the participation indicator, a significant difference is seen: the historical mosques have a ritual interaction, whereas the new mosques also provide an experiential and cultural interaction. (Fig. 9)

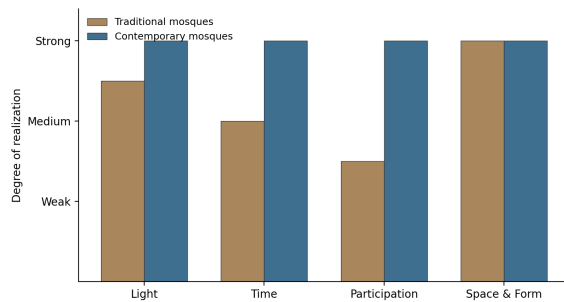


Figure 9: The degree of realization of the components in mosque design (Source: Authors).

#### Connection with the theoretical framework

The findings confirm that the theoretical framework proposed by this research (the relationship between the elements of conceptual art and the spiritual experience) has been realized in the contemporary examples. In traditional architecture, the relationship between “light” and “meaning” is more symbolic and static, but in contemporary architecture this relationship becomes dynamic and interactive. Also, in the new conceptual design, the component of “participation” plays a mediating role between the space and the spiritual experience and has led to an increase in the sense of cultural belonging.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Focusing on the role of conceptual art in the design of contemporary Khorasan mosques, the present research showed that the conscious use of com-

ponents such as light, form, time, and audience participation can lead to the enhancement of the spiritual experience and cultural engagement in worship spaces. The findings indicate that religious architecture, when it goes beyond the level of symbolic representation and pays attention to the sensory and multifaceted experience of the audience, is able to establish a living and lasting bond among Islamic identity, contemporary technology, and the cultural needs of the new generation. From a practical standpoint, the results of this research can guide designers, cultural institutions, and urban managers in regenerating religious spaces. In particular, the use of interactive lighting, minimalist forms, and multipurpose cultural arrangements can, in the design of new worship spaces, increase the voluntary presence of the young generation and strengthen the sense of spiritual belonging. Moreover, these results provide cultural policymakers with the possibility of formulating strategies for integrating religious values with the language of contemporary design. From a theoretical standpoint, this research is a first step toward formulating an analytical model for the relationship between conceptual art and the spiritual experience in the design of the Iranian-Islamic Mosque. This model can serve as a basis for future research. It is suggested that subsequent studies examine new dimensions such as the effect of digital media, smart lighting, and virtual reality on the experience of the contemporary mosque. Likewise, a comparative examination between other cities of Iran and global examples can add to the richness of the theory of Islamic conceptual architecture. In the field of future research, it is suggested that empirical and field investigations be conducted on the effect of digital media, virtual reality, and smart-light technology on the spiritual experience in contemporary mosques. A comparative analysis between the mosques of Iran and those of other Islamic countries can also be effective in enriching the theory of "Islamic conceptual architecture." Finally, the findings of this research emphasize that the contemporary mosque of

Khorasan can revive its role in today's cultural society only when, instead of repeating historical forms, it focuses on lived experience, meaning, and audience interaction where conceptual art becomes a linguistic tool for expressing faith and identity, and can be a shared language between tradition and contemporaneity in mosque design, leading to the creation of spaces that are considered not only a place of worship but also a ground for cultural and social connection in Islamic societies.

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