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Semiology of Art and Mysticism in Persian Architecture According to Rumi's Mystical Opinions (Case Study: Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque, Iran)

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Abstract: A glimpse of the history of Islamic art indicates that Sufism and mysticism have long been among the most important intellectual and spiritual currents influencing Persian art and architecture. Accordingly, re-reading the symbolic concepts as well as the mystical and spiritual semiotics and seeking their reflection in the body of architecture is an obligatory instruction that should be considered in the process of architectural design. In this research, the authors endeavor to investigate the semiology in the physical elements of Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in Isfahan and its relationship with Rumi's mysticism using inferential–analytical methods and based on library studies and empirical observations. This research found that the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque was constructed according to the mystical opinions of Rumi in order to demonstrate the semantic values of different levels of the universe in its physical form, structure and configuration. According to the findings, the use of Rumi's mysticism propagates a God-centered semantic spirit to the body of Persian architectural elements, which always reminds human beings of their true home, which is the heavenly world. According to Rumi, the nature of architecture is beyond the material, and it is God-centered contemplation that turns the architecture into magnificent buildings.

Keywords: semiology; mysticism; Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi; Persian architecture; Islamic architecture; Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque



Citation: Askarizad, Reza, Jinliao He, and Roomina Soleymani Ardejani. 2022. Semiology of Art and Mysticism in Persian Architecture According to Rumi's Mystical Opinions (Case Study: Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque, Iran). *Religions* 13: 1059. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13111059>

Academic Editor: Labeeb Bsoul

Received: 24 July 2022

Accepted: 1 November 2022

Published: 4 November 2022

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1. Introduction

A glimpse at the history of Islamic art indicates that Sufism and mysticism have been among the most important intellectual and spiritual currents influencing Persian art and architecture (Blair and Bloom 1994). The interrelation between mystical thoughts and Persian architecture is so profound and extensive in some cases that the assumption of separation of architecture from mysticism seems impossible (Karimi et al. 2020). Sufism found its way into art through the ritual of magnanimity, and through this, it indicated its influence in the architecture, especially of the mosques (Rehman 2002). Iranian Muslim architects have also endeavored to construct the components of buildings, especially mosques, in such a way that reflects the manifestation of human's relationship with God on the one hand and God's relationship with humans on the other (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 2000).

In this research, the authors strive to investigate a kind of semiology in the physical elements of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in Isfahan and its relationship with the mysticism of *Maulana Jalaluddin Mohammad* (Rumi), using inferential–analytical methods and based on library and empirical studies. The Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque is one of the masterpieces in the history of Iranian architecture which was constructed in 1619 by the chief architects *Mohamadreza Isfahani* and *Sheikh Baha'i* during the reign of Shah Abbas. Later, by the advice of Arthur Upham Pope (Lipae et al. 2020), Reza Shah Pahlavi had renovated and repaired this mosque in the 1920s. This mosque was selected for this research due to its significance

and distinguished design paradigm in comparison to the traditional mosques in Iran which seems to deserve further nuanced investigations in terms of mystical insight.

Contemporary architecture, regardless of its spiritual manifestations, has become the only depiction of materialistic and ostentatious aspects in which the nature of human life and spiritual concepts are unveiled (Kiessel and Tozan 2021). On the other hand, Islamic architecture can be deemed to be an unopened school that everyone appreciates according to their level of comprehension (Hillenbrand 1999). In this regard, architecture has a central role among the arts that shape the built environment and prepare it for the descent of blessings (Burckhardt 1967). Persian art and architecture, in addition to miscellaneous facets of architecture, has a comprehensive system which represents mystical concepts and provides the possibility of experiencing their multidisciplinary aspects. Hence, its purpose is to display this semantic structure based on the experiences of space, time and the audience's participation in meaning, to symbolically understand architecture (Mirmiran 1996). In fact, Persian architecture characterizes a conceptual process which features a symbolic vision and seeks to express and stimulate a profound sense of eternal and spiritual semantic values in the visitor (Ardalan 1995). Also, in the creation of unique design and construction procedures, the divine sense has always taken precedence over the sense of beauty and goodness (Hillenbrand 1994).

Many scholars of Islamic culture and art have sought a meaning related to mystical teachings and Islamic wisdom behind the appearance of Islamic art (Petersen 1999). According to Robert Hillenbrand (1999), Islamic culture and civilization can be deemed as the most beautiful manifestation of the fusion of art and mysticism. Hence, art has found an intrinsic aspect in Islamic civilization and is considered as a kind of esoteric knowledge and intuitive insight (Hillenbrand 2003). Therefore, re-reading the symbolic concepts as well as the mystical and spiritual semiotics and seeking their reflection in the body of architecture is an unavoidable instruction that needs to be considered in the process of architectural design. Therefore, the following questions are posed in order to reach the appropriate answers.

- What influence has Rumi's mysticism had on the formation of the physical elements of Persian architecture?
- What influence will the use of Rumi's mysticism have on the nature of the architectural space of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque?

It should be noted that due to the importance of the subject and the fact that the main structure of Islamic mysticism and architecture are both derived from the concepts of the Holy Quran and less research has been carried out so far on the semiotics of Rumi's mysticism in Persian architecture, especially Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque, it was intended to bridge the identified scientific gap in the present study. In the following, after brief references to the concept of mysticism in Persian art and architecture, an attempt has been made to study and re-read mysticism in Rumi's mystical literary poems and at the same time, to gauge the opinions of experts in this field. The functional framework of the research outline has been depicted in the form of a flowchart accordingly (Figure 1).

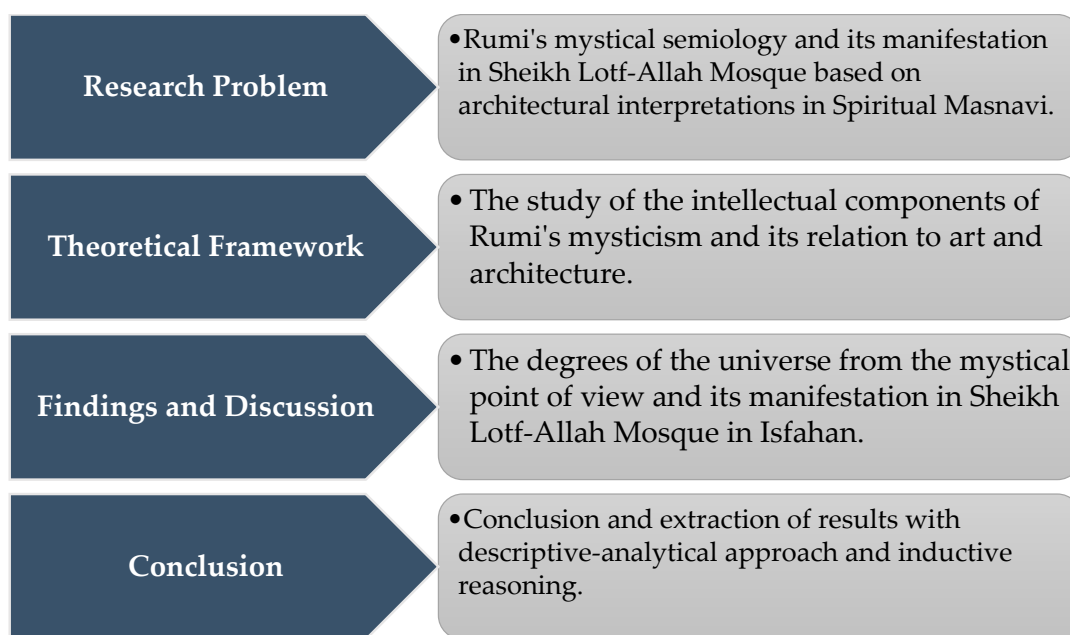


Figure 1. Functional framework of the research outline (authors).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Semiology of Art and Mysticism

The term semiology was first influenced by the works of scholars such as Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure (Parsaee et al. 2015) who believed that a sign is an indicator of something in another physical structure (Soleymani and Askarizad 2018). On the other hand, an object or artwork is an instrument for conveying spiritual and semantic messages so that without it, art does not make sense at all (Ghouchani and Taji 2021). The messages and symbols used in the mystical language of art are not conventional and have an inherent connection with their meanings (Akkach 2012; Jones 2022). Studies suggested that traditional Sufi conceptions can take advantage of the mystical principles for analytical purposes (Dickson 2022). Researchers in this field benefit from the world of philosophy, theology and art history. Without understanding the world of mysticism, it is not possible to recognize the mystic artists, their works or products. In fact, understanding the source of mystics' understanding, helps us to grasp their opinions as well as possible (Memarian 2005). Meanwhile, studies have shown that each place of worship symbolically indicates signs of holiness in its physical structure (Hoffman 2010). Yet, other studies have corroborated that the basis for the symbolic conceptual signs in Islamic architecture originated from the literature of Islamic jurisprudence (Rabbat 2014). In this respect, Nasr (2007) believed that bridging the gaps of science must be intermingled with the metaphysics from above so that its undisputed facts can continue to acquire spiritual significance. It should never be forgotten that for non-modern man, whether ancient or contemporary, all matter in the universe has a sacred aspect. They are manifestations of a higher degree of reality that simultaneously obscures and reveals the cosmic territory.

2.2. Rumi's Mysticism

Rumi is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding figures of the Iranian mystical school, which has brought this school to the peak of its perfection and maturity. Rumi's Gnosticism is based on the unity of existence and divine love (Zarrabi-Zadeh 2016). Rumi has emerged following the evolution of philosophical thought and religious experience and was the true heir of this intellectual and spiritual treasure. He shapes his semantic components and emotions in the form of ordinary stories, and after a few instructive verses, he abruptly becomes ecstatic. He turns back to the story and sometimes through a set of brainstorming within a word in the last stanza, spontaneously overwhelms into a metaphysical issue (Figure 2). This is the adopted procedure of Rumi in his famous book *Spiritual Masnavi* (Abdolhakim 1997). Rumi interprets

the universe using theoretical and practical mysticism as well as the unity of existence in the manner of discovery and intuition. Although Rumi does not attach much value to the apparent gifted science, he believes that it is incumbent on people to work hard and study. In this regard, since it is not expedient to cast doubt on apparent science, attempts should be made to turn the science and imitative knowledge into a true science. This means to be promoted from the science of certainty to the truth of certainty and this is not possible except with the assistance of the intellectuals and the consideration of the Almighty. Rumi considers the procedure to reach this degree to be austerity, in order to enjoy the divine blessing and the purified nature (Zarrabi-Zadeh 2008).

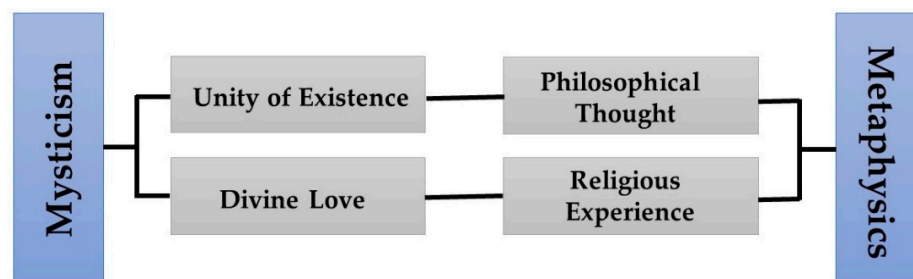


Figure 2. The evolution of Rumi's mysticism (authors).

2.3. *Mysticism in Islamic Architecture*

The basis for recognizing and realizing traditional Islamic architecture, which extends the principles of sacred architecture from the mosque to any other architectural unit and finally to the design of the city itself, is the spiritual relationship between the universe and human beings (Shahshahani 1998), because this relationship is rooted in the divine principle that is the source of all these facts. In other words, from the traditional point of view, human beings and the universe are the product of sacred art. Humans, the universe, and sacred architecture, in terms of their ontological reality, are ultimately dependent on the divine essence. However, it must be declared that from the point of view of knowledge, all categories of cosmology, anthropology, and philosophy of art have traditionally been examples of the various applications of metaphysical principles in different fields (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 2000).

The relationship that Nasr (2007) alluded to here is a threefold interconnection among the universe, humans, and architecture. This relationship arises by considering a centrality that indicates the origin of the creation of all three factors (Figure 3). The common point of these three in the semantic perspective of Nasr and Ardalan is the presence of a heavenly spirit in them. "Human is a temple in which the soul dwells. The universe originates from the same soul as well. The mosque is also the house of God, a building in which humans must feel the divine presence and benefit from the revelation of the mercy of the Almighty that emanates from the soul" (Nasr 2007). One of the most fundamental segments of the mystical view of architecture is to establish a relationship between heaven and the earth. From this point of view, everything that is made in this materialistic world is an implication of the heavenly world (Memarian 2005).

The most significant characteristic of Islamic architecture is that it revolves around monotheism because, in Islamic mysticism, the whole universe goes back to a single origin (Akkach 2012). Monotheism is the first principle of the religion of Islam and is the basis of other beliefs of Muslims (Burckhardt 2009). The emphasis of Islam on congregation and unity among Muslims caused Islamic architects to construct their buildings focusing on unity in the highest way and the architecture of mosques is the highest place for the expression of Muslim beliefs and thoughts (Farrag 2017). Creating unity has been the cornerstone of Muslim architects' conceptualization system (Saniei and Delavar 2012). The purpose of Islamic art is to provide the built environment as the best manifestation of divine unity. Art brightens the world and helps the soul to give up interest in the turbulent multiplicity of materials and to turn to infinite unity (Brend 1991). In the unifying system of traditional

Islamic society, architecture has acquired a particular place. Architecture as a phenomenon in this society, reflects the principle of unity which Muslim architects intermingled with the architectural techniques and the geometry of science (Burckhardt 1967).

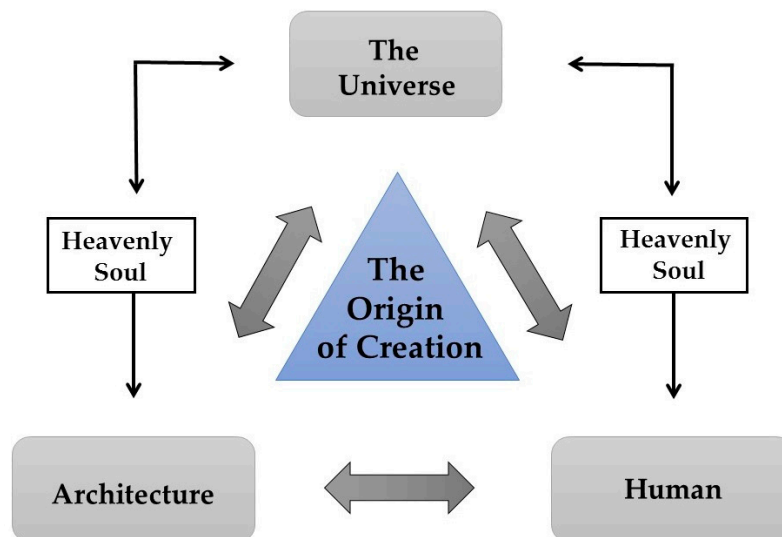


Figure 3. The threefold relationship among the universe, human and architecture from the semantic point of view of Nasr and Ardalan (authors).

Muslim artists have adopted three instruments to implement their mystical thoughts and ideas in art, in addition to their doctrinal dimension. The first one is related to the *geometry*, which expresses unity in the spatial order. The second one is the *equilibrium* that depicts unity within the mundane and spatial order. The third one is *lighting* which stimulates sight capability and makes objects visible (Figure 4) (Burckhardt 2009). The light is not indeed visible by itself; just as non-existence is not recognized except in comparison with its antithesis. It means the existence of darkness is not observable unless it is accompanied by light (Burckhardt 2009). Studies have supported the fact that lighting in religious spaces has a significant correlation with visitors’ sense of spirituality (Matracchi and Habibabad 2021, 2022). The boundaries between light and dark create shadows and light determines the inherent identity of the artwork. Not only does it make the work observable, but it gives it such a particular glory that the phrase “Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth” (Noor, verse 35) is manifested. There is no symbol or manifestation that is as close to divine unity as light. That is why Islamic artists strive to implement this factor as much as possible in what they create (Burckhardt 2009).

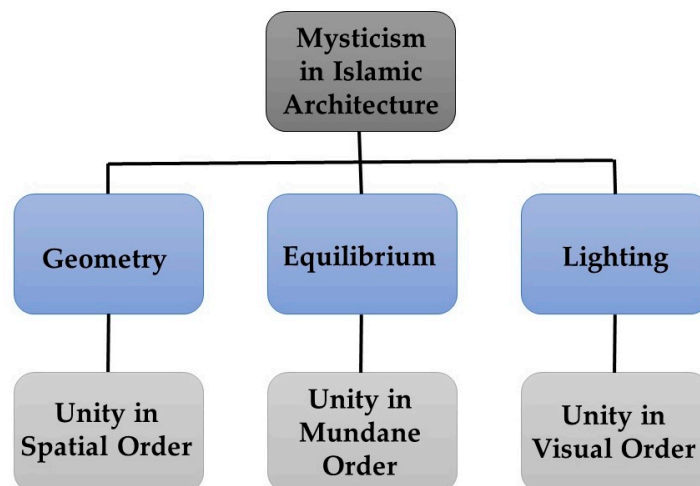


Figure 4. The pillars of the realization of the mystical spirit in the body of Islamic architecture (authors).

2.4. Representation of Mysticism in the Body of Islamic Architecture

Mystical architecture refers to a type of building that seeks to establish a special and unique semantic connection between specific forms in order to indicate a symbolic or aesthetic expression of mystical themes (Askarizad and Safari 2018). This type of architecture is separated from other buildings by using symbolic concepts and signs (Bolandian and Naseri 2014). Under the influence of ideas and traditions, the sacred architecture of Iran possesses an obligation to create an atmosphere that takes man from the material world to the spiritual world (Burckhardt 2009). It creates an environment that satisfies the spiritual requirements of the audiences in which the most ordinary people feel proximity to it because they consider the exterior view of a building as its appearance, and the interior of the building as its inside origin. Outside the building is simple to operate, but inside of it is much decorated. They consider the contradiction between the outside and inside of the building, as the contradiction between the world and the hereafter (Moghadam and Askarizad 2019) (Figure 5).

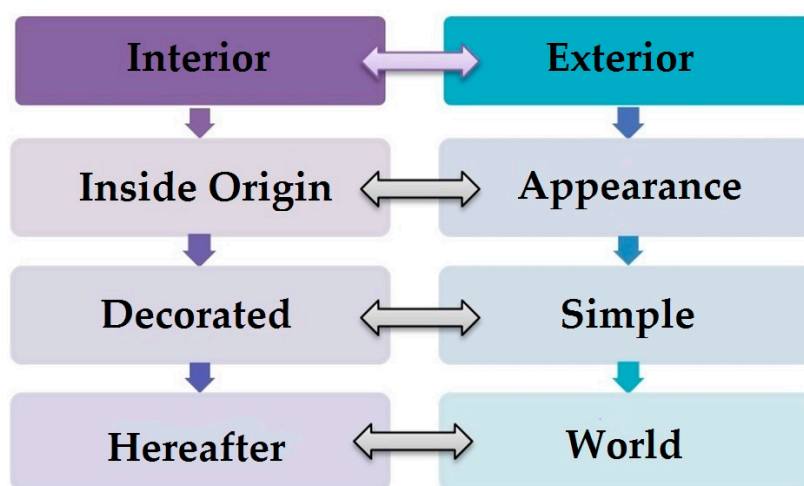


Figure 5. Representation of mysticism in the body of Islamic architecture (authors).

Divine and Islamic arts are the manifestation of divine unity in the mundane aesthetic and order more than anything else. Unity is reflected in the order, balance and cohesion of the world of plurality. Islamic art is an aesthetic experience of unity and plurality in which pluralities are converted to unity in the realm of a novel order (Burckhardt 2009). In this definition, Islamic art is organized in a way that enlightens and purifies the world and helps human beings to divest themselves of many anxieties and return to the clear and pure peace of infinite unity (Rahnavard 1995). According to Rumi, the inhabitants of the earth came from a single origin and could become interdependent through the heart, as a new state of harmony and in pursuing a transcendent goal. Thus, separation, polytheism, duality and differentiation are eliminated (Bolandian and Naseri 2014).

In Islamic mysticism, human beings have a special attitude towards the Creator of the universe and its affiliations. In this materialistic world, everything but the essence of truth moves towards God. This human lives in a society which has been ruled by the principles of tradition. These principles cover all segments of the population, from the general public to specialists and public scholars. Artists and architects are no exception to this rule (Moghadam and Askarizad 2019). An architect artist is a carrier and one of the users of these principles. In the meantime, the architects have an obligation to shape their works in this society based on the principles of tradition (Memarian 2005). From a mystical point of view, art has three facets: religion, doctrine, and truth, and the artist is responsible for conveying this feeling through using doctrine (Burckhardt 2009). In this way, the task of transferring to the intended destination is assigned to the architect and this creative path to the Supreme Being is the basis of the human's spiritual salvation (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 2000).

2.5. Rumi's Expression of Architecture

Rumi's expression of architecture falls into two general categories. The first is to speak explicitly and the second is to speak implicitly in the way of imaginary forms. The significance of speaking explicitly is conspicuous; but in the case of the second category, it should be noted that Rumi does NOT choose the imagination arbitrarily and haphazardly. Rather, every form of imagination he uses is instilled in his soul and mind from God (Chittick 2005). Thus, he adopts the metaphor to make a bridge to reach the truth of the divine (Schimmel 1993). Rumi's use of architectural images in expressing mystical and spiritual issues has at least two implications. Primarily, it makes those issues tangible; so that in comparing the unseen world to the garden, although the position of the world garden and the unseen garden are completely different, they are all degrees of a single truth. Consequently, the garden of the materialistic world can be deemed to be an example of the garden of paradise. This point brings the second notion. All of these notions indicate Rumi's invitation to move away from ordinary places to divine truth.

In this regard, in one of his quotes regarding architectural places, Rumi argued that "this place is a dream; only a sleeper considers it real" (Rumi 2009). Once again, he indicated his opinion regarding the true home of human beings in another position and analogized the material world (including architectural works) to be a dream. In another quote, he suggested that in order to become a pilgrim on the road of love, the first condition is to make yourself as humble as soil (Rumi 2009). The connotation of this verse reveals that soil as one of the basic materials of an architectural work can be a sign of modesty and all the embraced dignity of an architectural work is its humbleness. In the other quote by Rumi (2009), he denoted that "Why do you stay in prison, when the door is so wide open?". The necessity of changing the mindset of architects in order to create architectural works beyond its materialistic vision became conspicuous. In reflection the attributes of beauty Rumi stated that "Everything that is made beautiful and fair and lovely is made for the eye of the one who sees". Here, the quotation of "the one who sees" is not meant to denote looking at something beautiful; it can be inferred to the person who contemplates regarding the source of the beauty. All these statements are attempts to show that every architectural work should serve as a source of inspiration for reminiscence of the almighty. Any creator of an architectural work or its audience who pays attention to the words of Masnavi and puts them into practice also becomes a person of divine worship. For instance, those who have attained divine status are placed at the top of the house, and ultimately, the roof is the place of restless mystics (Rumi 2021). Some of the quotations of Rumi regarding place and architecture are given (Table 1).

Architectural material is essentially nothing but soil; it is the imagination and wisdom of a person that turns the soil into pleasant buildings. According to Rumi, architecture is a mixture of soil and art (Chittick 2005). Worship is an essence that can appear in any action and give it a spiritual essence. Therefore, architecture can also serve the divine commands. According to Rumi, a mixture of the deeds in the material world with the worship of God provides an opportunity to reach prosperity (Schimmel 1993). Thus, worship can occur in the architectural industry in two different ways. First, in the creation of the building and its essence; the second in the audience and their encounter with the building (Pishvaei and Ghoyoumi 2013). The previous literature advocates the effect of Rumi's intellectual thoughts on creation of some historical monuments next to graves which indicates the belief of life after death (Kazemi et al. 2012). In addition, the intellectual attitude of Rumi and its application in urban planning and architecture have been compared and argued with opinions of European philosophers such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida which elucidated a set of similarities among these intellectuals (Rahmani and Aminzadeh 2017; Askarizad and Safari 2018). They argued that social interaction in urban spaces is beyond a verbal connection and its sustainability depends on its spiritual continuation in soul and establishment of telepathy among them (Rahmani and Aminzadeh 2017). Furthermore, perplexity of the audiences is identified as one of the major applications of Rumi's attitude in architecture which may lead to remembrance of the almighty

(Askarizad and Safari 2018). As Rumi clearly stated that “Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment. Cleverness is mere opinion, but bewilderment brings intuitive knowledge” (Rumi 2009).

Table 1. Some of the quotations of Rumi in relation to the place and architecture (Rumi 2009, 2021).

Quotations	
1	Lovers don't finally meet <u>somewhere</u> . They're in each other all along.
2	There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground; there are a thousand ways to go <u>home</u> again.
3	This <u>place</u> is a dream. Only a sleeper considers it real. Then death comes like dawn, and you wake up laughing at what you thought was your grief.
4	Would you become a pilgrim on the road of love? The first condition is that you make yourself humble as <u>dust and ashes</u> .
5	If the foot of the trees were not tied to earth, they would be pursuing me. For I have blossomed so much, I am the envy of the <u>gardens</u> .
6	Why do you stay in <u>prison</u> , when the <u>door</u> is so wide open?
7	Everything that is made <u>beautiful</u> and fair and lovely is made for the eye of one who sees.
8	I know you're tired but come, this is the <u>way</u> .
9	The wound is the <u>place</u> where the <u>light</u> enters you.
10	When the world pushes you to your knees, you're in the perfect <u>position</u> to pray.
11	Be empty of worrying. Think of who <u>created</u> thought.
12	Don't you know yet? It is your <u>light</u> that lights the world.
13	Love is the <u>bridge</u> between you and everything.
14	Seek the wisdom that will untie your knot. Seek the <u>path</u> that demands your whole being.
15	It's your <u>road</u> , and yours alone, others may walk it with you, but no one can walk it for you.
16	Why do you stay in <u>prison</u> when the <u>door</u> is so wide open.
17	As you start to walk on the <u>way</u> , the <u>way</u> appears.
18	If <u>light</u> is in your heart, you will find your way <u>home</u> .
19	There's a <u>field</u> somewhere beyond all doubt and wrong doing. I'll meet you there.
20	Become the sky. Take an axe to the <u>prison wall</u> . Escape.
21	The wealth within you, your essence, is your <u>kingdom</u> .
22	Wherever you stand, be the soul of that <u>place</u> .
23	Let us carve gems out of our stony hearts and let them <u>light</u> our <u>path</u> to love.
24	Whoever has heart's <u>doors</u> wide open, could see the sun itself in every atom.
25	You are not one you are a thousand. Just <u>light</u> your lantern.
26	Be a lamp, or a lifeboat, or a ladder. Help someone's soul heal. Walk out of your <u>house</u> like a shepherd.
27	The <u>garden</u> of the world has no limit except in your mind.
28	When I am silent, I fall into the <u>place</u> where everything is music.
29	<u>Beauty</u> surrounds us, but usually, we need to be walking in a <u>garden</u> to know it.
30	Whatever purifies you is the right <u>path</u> , I will not try to define it.

The spirit of the architect's action and his good intentions affect the place. As in Masnavi, the Kaaba and Al-Aqsa Mosque are mentioned as good examples, and the Zarar Mosque is mentioned as a bad example (Ghoyoumi and Pishvaei 2012). The universe is the creation of God, and the architectural work is the creation of the architect, and this correspondence makes the architect remember God's creation and subsequently down-

grade their work. According to the common ritual of magnanimity, Muslim architects are supposed to be aware the fact that everything is mortal except the divine aspect. Therefore, they attempt to create God-oriented architectural work (Ibid). Rumi's encounter with architecture and place is the best example of such a reminder. Rumi constantly points out that the true homeland of man is somewhere else, and the desired architecture should be reminiscent of the true homeland which is the hereafter. Rumi connects every place to the main pillars of his worldview, namely God, the world and man. This is how he always considers the place as a manifestation of God (Chittick 2005). Based on the conducted studies and interpretations, the levels of the universe are divided into four categories from a mystical point of view, and based on these principles, the basis for research analysis has been accomplished (Table 2). According to mystical intellectual school, *Nasut* is perceivable by the senses, while *Malakut* is the sphere of the non-manifest and serves as a link between physical and spiritual spheres. *Jabarut* is the sphere of divine names and considered as a spiritual sphere. These ontological processes supplement with the fourth sublime world called *Lahut* which is considered as the sphere of the divine essence (Braginsky 1993).

Table 2. The levels of the universe from a mystical point of view (Rumi 2021).

The material world (<i>Nasut</i>)	The material world is the universe we live in now which is bound by time and place.
The heavenly world (<i>Malakut</i>)	The heavenly world is beyond the material world like the world of purgatory or the world of angels.
The abstract world (<i>Jabarut</i>)	A world which is an abstract of material, form, and time, a world of divine power and greatness, dominance with gratification.
The divinity world (<i>Lahut</i>)	It is the most holy essence of God that is inconceivable.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Case Study

The Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in Isfahan as one of the magnificent monuments throughout the history of Persian architecture was investigated as a case study in order to assess the semiology of art and mysticism based on the mystical opinions of Rumi. This mosque is located in the Naghsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan, Iran. The Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque, which is one of the most aesthetically beautiful architectural works in the Safavid period, is structurally different from the traditional paradigms of Persian mosques due to its particular physical characteristics. Unlike the common spatial pattern of Persian architecture, it lacks the central courtyard and minaret and has an extroverted nature (Blair and Bloom 1994). In other words, the special and distinctive organization of this mosque and its hierarchical nature has had a great impact on creating the mystical spirit formed in this sacred building (Shahani 2018). Therefore, due to its significance and unique particularities in the spatial configuration and physical structure, the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque was selected as a case study for further analysis in order to discern the interrelation between art and mysticism. Further explanations and illustrations of the case study can be found in the following link (<https://apochi.com/attractions/isfahan/sheikh-lotfollah-mosque/>, accessed on 20 July 2022).

3.2. Research Design and Procedures

The method used in this research is based on qualitative analysis. The data acquisition process in this research has been accomplished using library resources and documents that have been conducted with instruments such as taking notes. Therefore, using resources (e.g., books, scientific articles, dissertations), the theoretical framework of the present research was prepared and compiled. Based on the conducted studies, the semiotics of art and mysticism in Persian architecture should be scrutinized based on two dimensions namely *physical* structure and *semantic* values. Accordingly, *geometry*, *equilibrium* and *lighting* were

recognized as the pillars of the realization of the mystical spirit in the physical structure of the building. It should be noted that in order to assess the configurational geometry of the case study, the syntactical method has been implemented using convex maps and visibility graph analysis. Moreover, in order to evaluate the state of equilibrium, the golden ratio analysis has been applied in both plan and the elevation of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque. Furthermore, in order to examine the illumination analysis system of the case study, the procedure of light acquisition has been identified using inferential analysis obtained from the section plan of the mosque. On the other hand, by delving into the levels of the universe from the mystical point of view, the semantic dimension of Gnosticism has been scrutinized using the semiology of implemented arrays via empirical observations and inductive reasoning procedure (Figure 6).

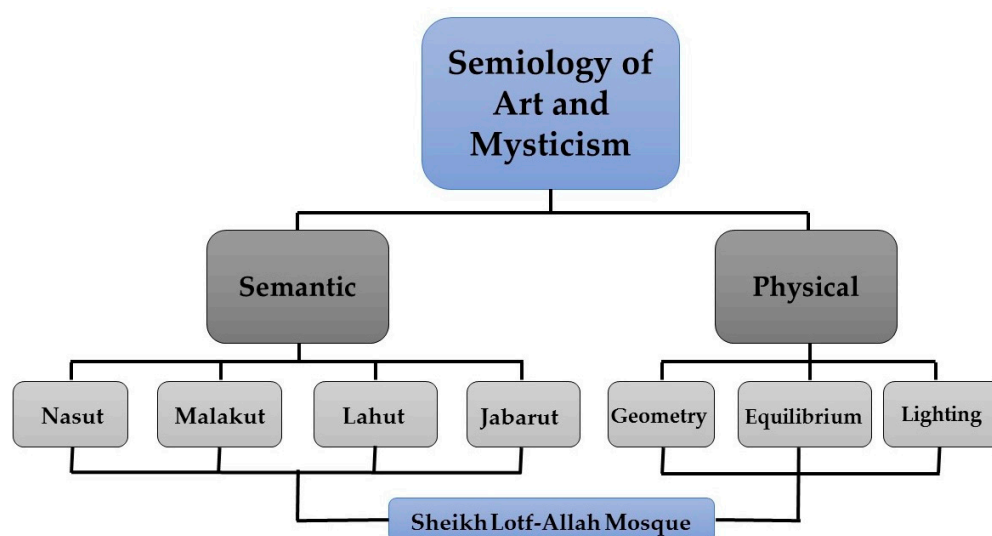


Figure 6. Conceptual framework of the research based on the semiology of art and mysticism (authors).

4. Research Findings

4.1. Geometric Analysis of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque to Create Unity in the Spatial Order

The golden ratio is one of the principles that has been used since ancient periods (Mustafa and Rashid 2019). Renaissance writers considered this proportion to be a heavenly relation (Ching 2007), because it was believed that this proportion originated from the superior nature of God (Leopold 2006). As in many elements of nature, the principles and rules of this relation are found in abundance (Iosa et al. 2018). A number of studies implemented the principles of golden ratio in their works in order to discern the proportion logic behind Islamic architectural spaces (Dabbour 2012; Nabavi and Ahmad 2016; Naseri and Farsani 2022). The Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque is located on the eastern side of Naghsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan, Iran. The geometric analysis of Naghsh-e Jahan Square based on the principles of golden ratio indicates that the main geometry of this square is based on the proximity of two golden rectangles next to one another and its dimensions and size are not configured haphazardly. Rather, it has been derived from these sacred principles. On the other hand, the location of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in Naghsh-e Jahan Square indicates that its orientation should be based on the entering audiences from the direction of *Qibla*. All these cases have shown the mastery of the architect on the principles of geometry, which has masterfully adjusted the position of the building relative to each other and has created an eye-catching harmony among them (Figure 7).

In the next part of the geometrical analysis, it has been attempted to delve into the topological characteristics of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in order to grasp its configurational logic. In this regard, the Space Syntax method was implemented using the simulator software of Depthmap. This method is widely applied in previous studies regarding Islamic architecture (Alitajer and Nojumi 2016; Askarizad 2020; NikKhah et al. 2021;

Zolfagharkhani and Ostwald 2021; Khotbehsara et al. 2022; Khozaei Ravari et al. 2022). It should be noted that this research has been focused on the qualitative approach of the Space Syntax in order to maintain the coherency and solidity of the study. The associated analysis in this research is based on the visibility graph analysis and convex map in order to understand the spatial configuration logic of the studied mosque plan. In this regard, four graph analysis: visual connectivity, visual integration, agent-based and convex map analysis were implemented in this research. The findings of the step depth value obtained from the convex map indicated that the configuration layout of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque is based on a spatial hierarchy logic that allows the audiences to traverse a set of spatial sequences in order to reach their ultimate destination. Moreover, the results obtained from visual connectivity and agent-based analysis confirmed the fact that the dome-house is considered to have the most potential space for the accumulation of audiences as their target destination. Ultimately, the obtained graph from visual integration analysis revealed that the second part of the corridor characterized the most integrated space in comparison to the whole configuration of the mosque. This space as a mediator between the exterior world and interior world plays a significant role in the transmission of semantic notions for the Muslim audiences (Figure 8).

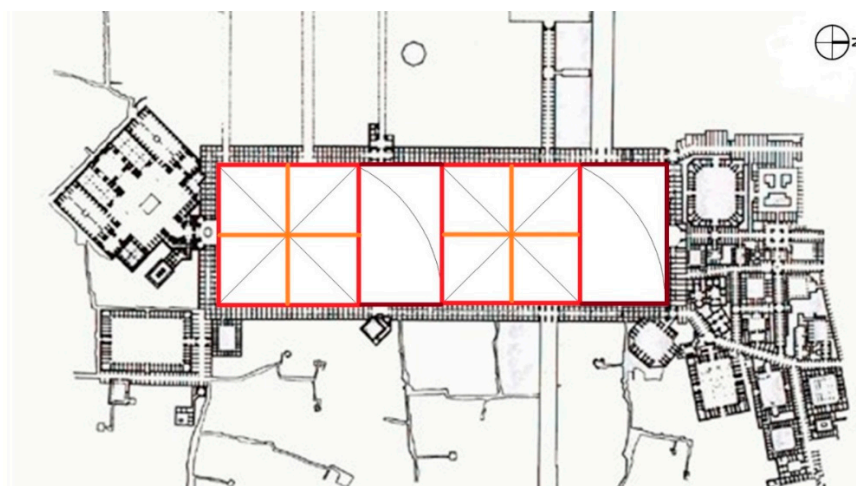


Figure 7. Geometric analysis of Naghsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan and the location of the mosque based on the principles of golden ratio (authors).

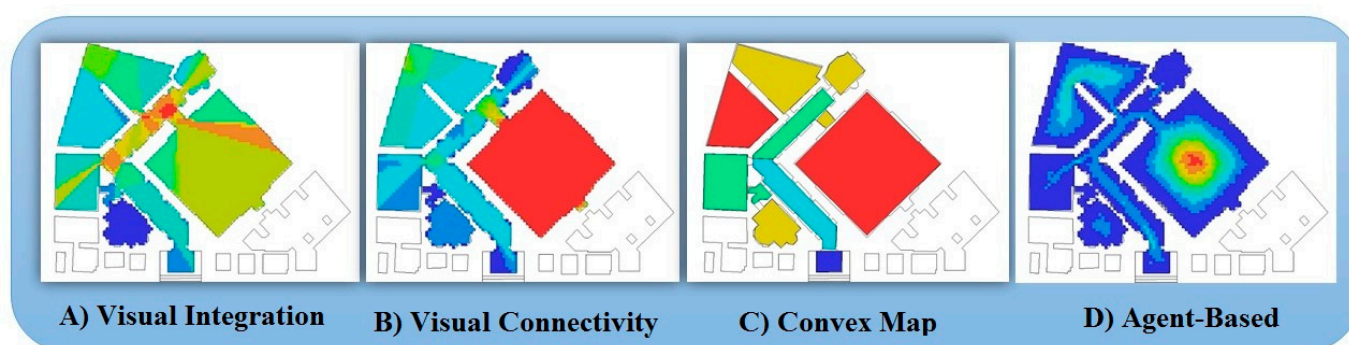


Figure 8. Spatial configuration analysis of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque using Space Syntax method (authors).

4.2. Analysis of Equilibrium for Creation of Unity in the Materialistic Order

Regardless of the significant deconstruction in the design of Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque compared to the traditional paradigms of Persian mosques, the architect of this building has been surprisingly successful in creating the equilibrium; while implementing specific characteristics such as introversion and lack of use of the courtyard and minaret, which

are conspicuously visible. The precise proportions and equilibrium in the main facade of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque is one of the most attractive visual effects of this mosque and absorbs the attention of every audience. The results of the geometric analysis of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque reveal that the spatial configuration of the dome of this mosque is geometrically related to the entrance frontage, in which the architect of this monument has masterfully created a precise balance. This connection and visual balance between the frontage and the dome is also evident in the facade of this building, which, despite the asymmetry, has created a logical equilibrium between these two significant elements. The findings also displayed that golden ratios were implemented in applying the proportions of these two elements (Figure 9).

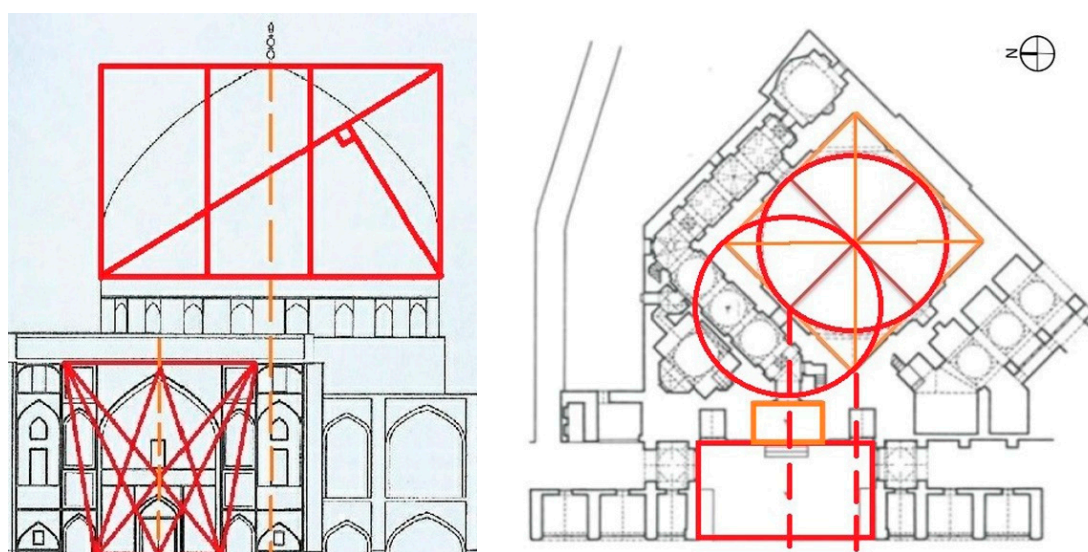


Figure 9. Geometric connection between the dome and the frontage of Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in plan and façade (authors).

4.3. Illumination Analysis of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque to Create Unity in Visual Order

Among the architectural elements, light is considered as the most comprehensive symbol of divine unity (Burckhardt 2009). Among the architectural attributes, openings, light and illumination are considered as irreplaceable components of Islamic architectural elements (Hillenbrand 2003). Studies have also supported the fact that lighting in religious spaces has a significant correlation with visitors' sense of spirituality (Matracchi and Habibabad 2021, 2022). Hence, illumination as a factor explaining the visual order, reveals the signs of the sanctity of religious buildings and it is considered as a fundamental factor in Islamic architecture (Ruck et al. 2000). In the dome-house of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque, the system obtaining natural light is based on receiving light from the walls of the dome through latticed windows. For this reason, the penetration of light from the sides of the dome and its reflection is effective in creating a spiritual and mystical feeling and brings a sense of presence in a celestial space for the audience. The play of light and shadow in the transition through the lattice windows shows the audience a pleasant feeling of the arrays used and the Islamic role-playing in the space in a way that "the dynamic motion of the penumbra in space, functionally represents the fourth dimension of time" (Baboldashti et al. 2018). On the other hand, the light that shines from the entrance to the dome can be considered as an indicator of the direction of the *Qibla* and the altar that shines from the space above the corridor to the dome (Figure 10).

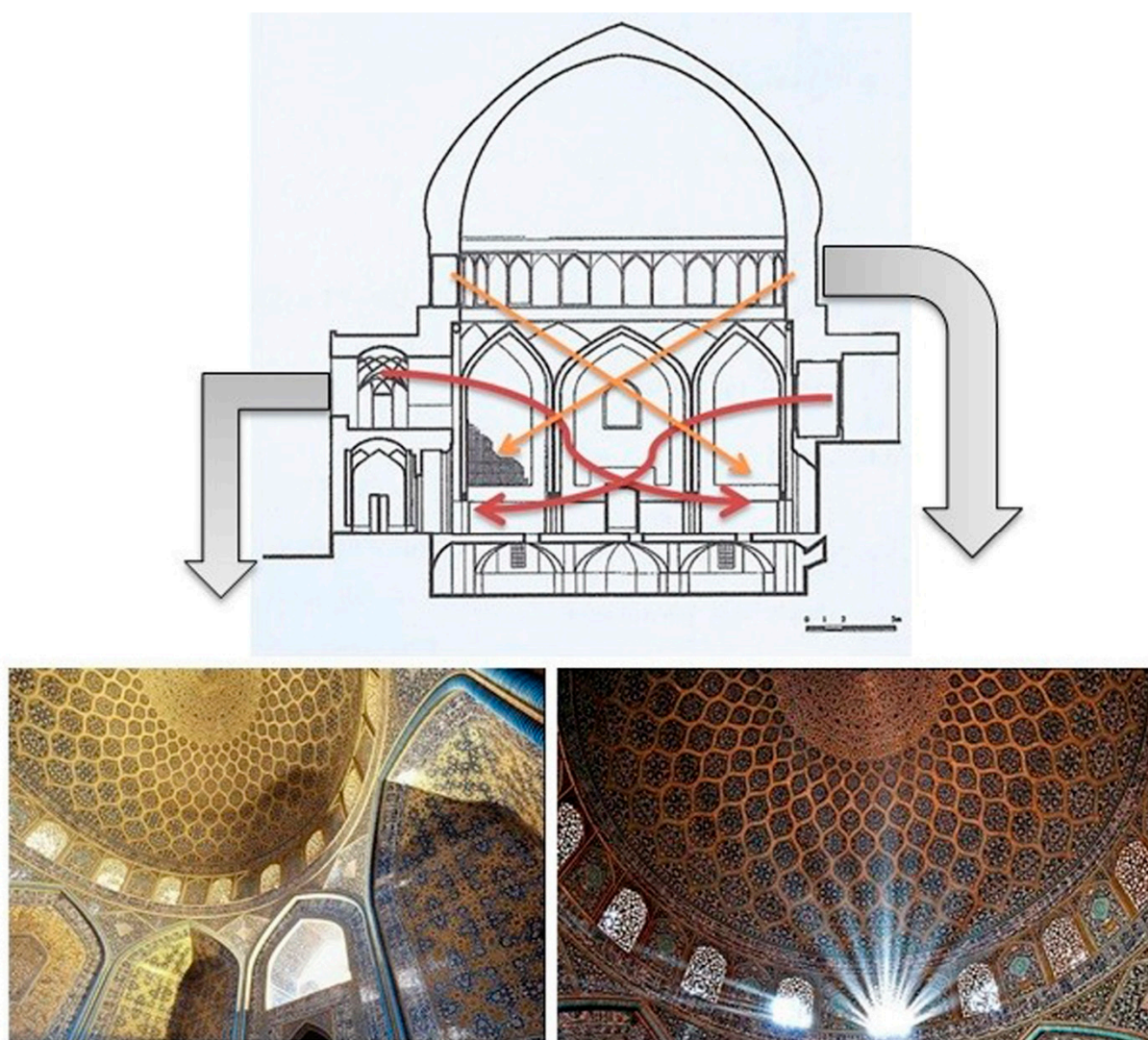


Figure 10. Analysis of the illumination system and the main openings of receiving natural light in the dome of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque (authors).

4.4. Semiology of Arrays Implemented in the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque

The dome of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque is one of the most beautiful domes, showing off its beautiful pea-colored mosaic tiles with a spectacular geometry. In the center of the interior space, a peacock dome is designed that directs light magnificently into the interior of the mosque by presentation of fractal geometry. The method of delineating designs in the dome of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque is that there is a sun pattern in the middle of the dome and then there are eight rings around the sun. There are 32 peacock feathers in each ring, which becomes bigger when it comes to the proximity of exterior rings (Mirzakhanian and Shahroudi 2014) (Figure 10).

There are 20 windows in this mosque, and the dome of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque is illuminated through these light sources. Sixteen windows are located at the stem of the dome at regular intervals and the other four windows are on the four sides of the walls (Figure 10). As mentioned, the design of the dome which is similar to peacock feathers and the sun in the middle part of it refers to the light concept in this mosque. The play of light in the dome of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque is highly spectacular. The peacock-like motifs on the dome are fully unfolded in the middle of the day through the light sources mentioned, and the dome becomes a point of light. The interesting connection between these motifs and letters is such that if we count the number of circles around the sun that contain motifs

similar to peacock feathers to eight, the number of 256 is obtained, which according to the alphabet order, is equivalent to the *Noor* (Mirzakhanian and Shahroudi 2014). Thus, there is a direct relationship between decorative motifs implemented in this mosque and the alphabetic order of Light (*Noor*) word. The word of “Light” been used multiple times as a sign of reaching the truth of certainty.

In the center of the unique roof of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque and the central point of all the Muqarnas decorations, which comprise woven polygonal motifs, as if reminiscent of the uniform crystalline system of the materialistic world that has a mathematical order. The orbital lattice under star patterns is reminiscent of star orbits and the distances between the suns are like the rays that shine in the starry sky (Necipoglu 1996). All these cases represent the threefold connection between human, the universe and architecture, which is a manifestation of the mystical architecture of this magnificent building (Figure 3).

Color is one of the other important factors in creating the spiritual atmosphere of this mosque (Esmi and Saremi 2014). The effect of color on the human soul in the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque is undeniable and has a great importance and breadth of meaning. The colors accurately create their mystical and symbolic state in this mosque. The Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque stands out among the hundreds of mosques in the city of Isfahan and shows off itself in front of the sun. The eye-catching color of the dome has distinguished this mosque among all the mosques of Isfahan. The beauty of the color of its tiles, whether mosaic or polychromatic, is unique in its kind. The colors used in the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque are turquoise, azure, green, white, and in the form of cream or pea color, the use of these colors and their combination with light, mesmerizes the audiences (Mirzakhanian and Shahroudi 2014).

The results of the analysis obtained from empirical observations indicate that the most used colors in the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque were azure blue, pea yellow and turquoise blue, respectively. Findings indicate that in spaces such as the dome-house, corridor and frontage, the most frequently used color was azure blue. However, in the exterior side of the dome, the most used colors were pea yellow, turquoise blue and azure blue, respectively (Figure 11). Among the reasons for the frequent usage of pea yellow and turquoise blue in the exterior side of the dome, it can be mentioned such as coordination with the texture and background of Naghsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan, observing the principles of contextualism. Also, creating contrast with the blue background of the sky and the harmony of the turquoise color with the blue color of the sky, which has created a striking and magnificent combination, can be mentioned as other reasons for adopting these colors. This dualism may draw attention on highlighting binary opposites which was one of the primary principles of Rumi’s intellectual contemplating system according to the previously conducted studies (Askarizad and Safari 2018). The frequent usage of pea-yellow color in the exterior side of the dome, as a sign of soil and the material world may be manifested based on mystical point of view. In addition, the frequent usage of turquoise blue in the interior side of the mosque may be found to be consistent as a semiology of skies and heavenly world according to mystical viewpoints. Moreover, the use of turquoise color in the stem of the dome has created an eye-catching connection with the azure color used in the frontage, all of which express the aesthetic nature of its architect and the celestial origin of this sacred building.

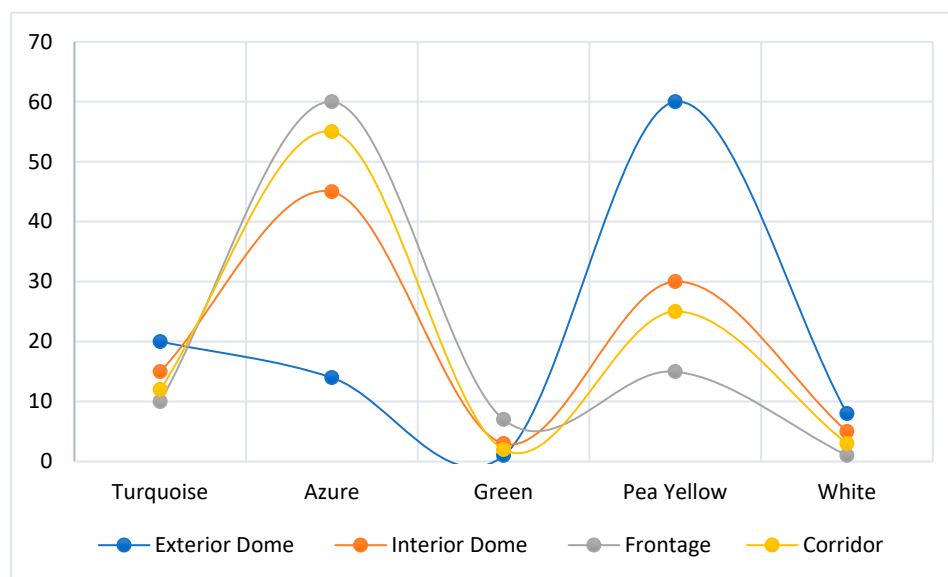


Figure 11. The proportion of colors used in the arrays of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque based on the empirical observations (authors).

4.5. Manifestation of Mysticism in the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque

The eastern wall of Naghsh-e Jahan Square has been excavated in a pristine way, which is the result of a rectangular indentation of blue mosaic work from which the connecting space of the mosque begins. Ascending the five stone steps, we enter a gate that deviates obliquely to the left, and thus enter the transitional space. It is a narrow and dark passageway that contrasts with the bright sunlight we pass behind. By going forward, an oblique light from the left side illuminates the pathway. The light that falls on the opposite wall creates an axis in space. By turning into the right side, we encounter another light. By spinning twice and being in increasing darkness, a sense of isolation and loss from the outside world overwhelms the audience. But as the gentle light is seen along the path, it passes through what appears to be a door and the space behind it.

At this moment, the sense of transmission is truly felt and by rotating through the light, we arrive at the transcendental space of the dome. The vertical surfaces are framed by rotating in endless linear strips of Quranic texts by wire frames that are helical to the transitional space of the dome. As the fluid passes through the lattice openings, the blue Islamic motifs rise to the apex of the celestial arch, which strikes the sky with the white rays of the sun and once again absorbs the eye to this earthly paradise. In the meantime, with the entry of light from the stem of the dome, a spiritual atmosphere has been created. The Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque is the only mosque in Iran whose entrance and altar are located in the same direction. In this mosque, what we understand from the painting is the same as what we see in the Islamic fonts that implemented the building, and what can be observed in the appearance of the building is what is implemented inside the walls. Most importantly, what is seen inside the building is what we see outside.

By crossing the square, when we enter the mosque, we indeed pass through the material world, which is characterized as spatio-temporal, and enter to the interior side of the dome space as a metaphor of the heavenly world (*Malakut*). Here, we dwell and come across numerous geometric patterns that go to the point of light at the top of the dome and reflect the same forms and dimensions of the heavenly world. This movement in the form of unity in the multiplicity of geometric motifs continues until it reaches the other two worlds, namely *Jabarut* and *Lahut*, which are inconceivable. In this way, the manifestation of mysticism in a religious building reaches its peak as if it takes man from the material world and the world of impermanence to other levels of the universe, namely *Malakut*, *Jabarut*, and *Lahut*. This creative journey which was formed based on the mediators of architectural attributes comprising spatial configuration and physical structure, attempts to delineate

mystic ontological metaphors for the audiences. The outcome of these analyses can be considered as the novel contribution of the present study. It has to be noted that the level of grasping of this universe depends on the perception, capability and life background of the audience (Figure 12).

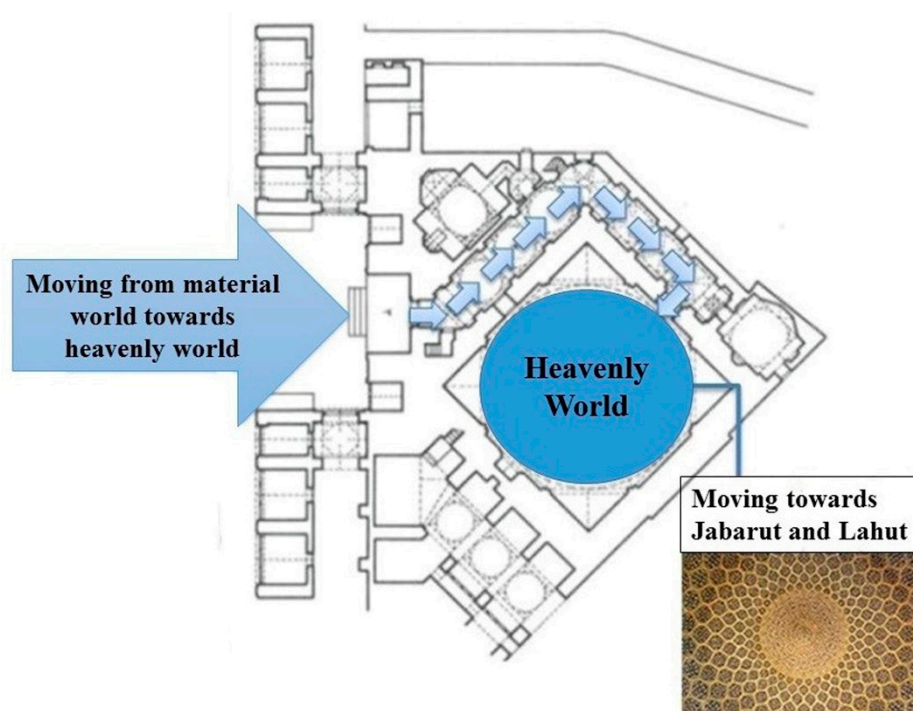


Figure 12. The journey of the audiences from the material world of Nasut to the heavenly world of the Malakut in the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque (authors).

5. Discussion

5.1. The Obtained Interpretations of the Research Findings

When we enter the mosque by crossing the square, we are actually passing through the material world, in which human materiality is in the objective form and bonded by time and space. Passing through a narrow and dark corridor, which contrasts with the bright sunlight we passed behind, it is a sign of the bridge between *Sirat* and the world of purgatory. So that by moving forward, a course of light from the left side, illuminates the way for the audience. The light that falls on the wall creates an axis in space, and by turning right, we encounter another light. By spinning twice and being in increasing darkness, a sense of isolation and loss from the material world prevails. But as the gentle light that moves along the path, it makes the right direction more visible to the audience.

By arriving at the space under the dome, we enter a world that is an embodiment of the heavenly world and beyond the material world. At this moment, the sense of transmission is fully felt and by passing through the light, we enter the transcendental space of the dome-house, an atmosphere that is reminiscent of heaven for the audience. Vertical surfaces with rotation in endless Islamic texts, by passing the fluid through a cylinder with lattice openings, once again draw the eye to this earthly paradise, which has created a spiritual atmosphere by entering the light from the stem of the dome. Here, we come across many geometric patterns that continue to the point of light at the top of the dome and represent the heavenly world. This pattern continues in the form of unity, despite the multiplicity of geometric motifs, to the point where it later reaches two other worlds, *Jabarut* and *Lahut*, which are inconceivable (Figure 12).

5.2. Research Contribution

According to the studies of other scholars, the principles of art and beauty in Islam are completely mystical and subject to the spiritual attitude of Muslims to the truth of existence (Haj Vaziri et al. 2021). Moreover, the attitude of mystics such as Rumi towards beauty and art is completely different from what we think in the present age, and it seems impossible for someone who has nothing to do with it to realize this lofty position (Pazoki 2003). According to Rumi, architecture has a deep relationship with the universe and human beings, and all the prestige of architecture is that it goes beyond its physical structure and seeks the truth of the place (Pishvaei 2011). According to him, the main obligation of an architect is to point out the existence of another world, and the wise architect has to mix the physical structure with such wisdom in order to display something reminiscent of Hereafter (Pishvaei and Ghoyoumi 2013).

Rumi calls on human beings to destroy the image they have of the body of architecture and to destroy the house of their carnality in order to find the treasures hidden in it. Rumi's effort in the *Spiritual Masnavi* is to invite people to the truth and call them to cross the floor of multiplicity and reach the boundless sea of truth (Ghoyoumi and Pishvaei 2012). The present research, while aligned with the results of other studies, focused on the semiology of the elements of art and mysticism from Rumi's point of view in the form of factors such as physical structure and semantic values in the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in Isfahan. This fact reveals the acquired novelty in this study. The results of this study advocated the fact that the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque was constructed according to the mystical opinions of Rumi in order to demonstrate the semantic values of different levels of the universe in its physical form, structure and configuration.

6. Conclusions

The present study is based on the semiotics of art and mysticism in Persian architecture. A multitude of scholars of Islamic culture and art have sought a meaning related to mystical teachings and Islamic wisdom behind the appearance of Islamic art. In fact, Islamic culture and civilization are the most beautiful manifestations of the fusion of art and mysticism, and art has found an inherent aspect in Islamic civilization and is considered a kind of esoteric knowledge and intuitive insight. Hereupon, re-reading the symbolic concepts and mystical and spiritual semiotics and seeking their reflection in the body of architecture is a necessary task that needs to be taken into consideration in the process of architectural design. The primary objective of this study was to investigate a kind of semiotics in the physical elements of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in Isfahan and its relationship with Rumi's mysticism and the audience's attention to mystical behavior and the unity of the Almighty.

In order to answer the questions of this research, it can be stated that Rumi's mysticism, which has a God-centered nature and considers the whole material world to serve this principle, have had a significant impact on the formation of Persian architecture, especially holy places such as mosques so that the basis for the formation of spatial configuration is to achieve the principle of unity and God-centered contemplation. The findings also indicated that the use of this creative journey was admirably implemented in the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in Isfahan (Figure 13). These principles, from its primary location which was based on the principles of golden geometry to the formation of interior spaces, spatial hierarchy, exterior facade, lighting system, and the implemented arrays, have been surprisingly successful in conveying this feeling. In addition, its semantic reflection in the simulation of the material world, the transitional space of the purgatory world and the heavenly world has been notably designed and implemented.



Bright Light

- Material world
- In the constraints of time and place



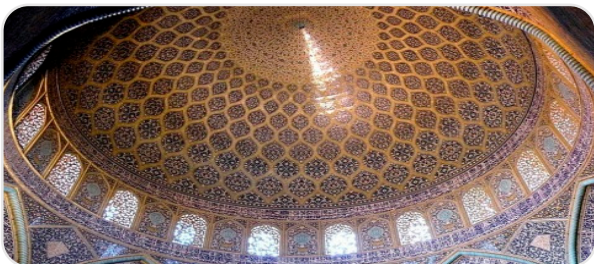
Transitional Space

- Dark passage in contrast with bright light / Purgatory world
- The space between the two worlds / Sense of isolation



Gentle Light

- Guide us to the right path
- Indicates the right way and reach the destination



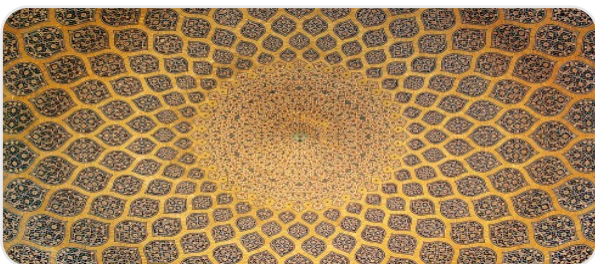
The Dome-House

- Represents heaven
- The ray of sunlight illuminates the spiritual atmosphere



Endless Islamic Texts

- Confrontation of vertical surfaces with endless Islamic texts
- Framing the transition space of the dome with Quranic texts



Fractal Geometric Pattern of the Dome

- Expresses unity in plurality
- The transit mediator from the Malakut to Jabarut and Lahut

Figure 13. Semiology of art and mysticism in the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in Isfahan (authors).

Rumi's purpose regarding architecture is not just the physical structure of the building. Rather, it is a reminder of the separation from the materialistic world and the passion of

returning to God Almighty. In his viewpoint, everything in this world is valuable only for serving the remembrance of God and helping humans to set on the path to the Supreme Being. Therefore, the architecture intended by Rumi is the one that reminds the creator of the universe. He intends to remind the audience where they came from, where they are and where they are going. This issue has occurred in a completely artistic manner in the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque of Isfahan. The architect of this mosque sought to create an ideal world so that he could portray the beauties of that world in this building, as the source of the symbolic aspects of this mosque should be found in the heavenly world. The spatial configuration and arrays implemented in Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque are all responsible for transmitting the image of paradise.

In this way, the concepts of Rumi's mysticism are manifested in the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in Isfahan, as if it takes humans from the material world to other levels of the universe, that is, the *Malakut*, *Jabarut*, and *Lahut*. According to the investigations, the findings indicate that the architect of the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in Isfahan, by using the dexterous combination of artistic and mystical themes, has separated the purely physical nature from this building. He has endeavored to present the task of transmitting the spiritual sense to the audience through the physical structure of the building. Overall, the results revealed that the use of Rumi's mysticism in the Sheikh Lotf-Allah Mosque in Isfahan augments a God-centered semantic spirit to the body of the architectural elements of this mosque, which always reminds people of their true home. Also, according to this viewpoint, the nature of architecture is beyond the physical structure, and it is God-centered thinking that turns them into admirable buildings.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, R.A.; methodology, R.A.; software, R.A. and R.S.A.; validation, J.H.; formal analysis, R.A.; investigation, R.A. and R.S.A.; resources, R.A.; data curation, R.A., J.H. and R.S.A.; writing—original draft preparation, R.A.; writing—review and editing, R.A. and J.H.; visualization, R.A. and R.S.A.; supervision, J.H.; project administration, R.A. and J.H.; funding acquisition, J.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC, No. 42130510 and No. 42171214).

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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