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Original Research Paper

Reinterpreting spirituality in Iranian architecture through Mulla Sadra's transcendent philosophy and the fourfold model of cognition

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Abstract

Iranian architecture has historically evolved in close association with spirituality, a relationship reflected in its spatial organization and philosophical foundations. Drawing upon Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy and the Fourfold Model of Cognition, this study investigates the spiritual dimensions of Iranian architecture. Employing a qualitative logical–interpretive approach, the research draws on Islamic-Iranian philosophical sources and selected examples of traditional Iranian architecture. Its theoretical framework is grounded in Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy (al-Hikma al-Muta'āliyah), based on the principles of the Primacy of Existence, the Gradation of Existence, and Substantial Motion. From this perspective, architecture is understood not merely as a physical artifact but as an existential phenomenon capable of expressing philosophical principles. The Fourfold Model of Cognition, rooted in Iranian philosophical thought and the distinction between the apparent (ẓāhir) and hidden (bāṭin), provides an analytical framework for examining the relationship between architecture and wisdom. Comprising four interconnected levels—concepts (meanings), foundations (principles), patterns (design frameworks and methods), and exemplars (cases and applications)—the model traces the movement between meaning and matter and between the hidden and the apparent. Based on theoretical analysis and observations of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, the findings indicate that Iranian architecture, through Transcendent Philosophy, transcends aesthetic and functional dimensions to create a mystical and ontological experience of space. The study concludes that Mulla Sadra's philosophical foundations can support the revitalization of spirituality in contemporary architecture, while the Fourfold Model of Cognition provides a methodological framework for interpreting and designing architectural spaces from a spiritual perspective.

Keywords: Spatial authenticity, primacy of existence, substantial motion, gradation of existence, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque

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مقاله پژوهشی

معنویت و معماری ایرانی از منظر حکمت متعالیه با اتکاء به روش چهارگانه شناخت

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چکیده:

معماری ایرانی در طول تاریخ همواره در پیوندی عمیق با معنویت شـــکل گرفته اســـت؛ پیوندی که نه‌تنها در سازمان‌دهی فضایی و کالبدی آن، بلکه در مبانی فلسفی و نظری آن نیز بازتاب یافته است. این پژوهش با بهره‌گیری از حکمت متعالیه ملاصـدرا و الگوی چهارگانه شـناخت، به بررســی ابعاد معنوی معماری ایرانی می‌پردازد. پژوهش حاضر با رویکردی کیفی و روش تحلیل منطقی-تفسیری، بر پایه منابع فلسفی ایرانی-اسلامی و نمونه‌هایی منتخب از معماری سـنتی ایران انجام شـده اسـت. چارچوب نظری پژوهش بر حکمت متعالیه ملاصـدرا (الحکمة المتعالیة) استوار است که بر اصول اصالت وجود، تشکیک وجود و حرکت جوهری بنا شده است. بر اساس این دیدگاه، معماری صـرفاً یک پدیده کالبدی و سـاخته‌شـده انسـانی نیسـت، بلکه حقیقتی وجودی اسـت که می‌تواند بازتاب‌دهنده این اصـول فلسـفی باشـد. الگوی چهارگانه شـناخت، که ریشـه در اندیشـه فلسـفی ایرانی و تمایز میان ظاهر و باطن دارد، چارچوبی تحلیلی برای فهم رابطه میان معماری و حکمت فراهم می‌آورد. این الگو شـــامل چهار ســـطح مرتبط با یکدیگر اســـت: مفاهیم (معانی)، مبانی (اصـــول)، الگوها (چارچوب‌ها و روش‌های طراحی) و مصـــادیق (نمونه‌ها و کاربردها) که از طریق آن، حرکت متقابل میان معنا و ماده، و میان باطن و ظاهر، مورد بررســـی قرار می‌گیرد. یافته‌های پژوهش بر اساس تحلیل نظری و بررسی مسجد شیخ لطف‌الله نشان می‌دهد که معماری ایرانی با تکیه بر اصول حکمت متعالیه، فراتر از ملاحظات زیبایی‌شناختی و کارکردی، امکان تجربه‌ای عرفانی و وجودشناختی از فضا را فراهم می‌کند. این رویکرد، برداشـتی فراتر از فرم و عملکرد ارائه داده و معماری را با ابعاد معنوی و شـهودی تجربه انسـانی پیوند می‌دهد. نتایج پژوهش نشـان می‌دهد که مبانی فلسـفی حکمت متعالیه ملاصـدرا می‌تواند چارچوبی نظری برای بازآفرینی ابعاد متعالی معماری معاصر فراهم آورد و الگوی چهارگانه شـناخت نیز روشـی ارزشـمند برای تفسیر و طراحی فضاهای معماری با رویکردی معنوی ارائه می‌کند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: اصالت فضا، اصالت وجود، حرکت جوهری، تشکیک وجود، مسجد شیخ لطف‌الله

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Original-Forschungsarbeit

Neubetrachtung der Spiritualität in der iranischen Architektur durch Mullā Ṣadrās transzendentale Philosophie und das vierstufige Erkenntnismodell

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Zusammenfassung:

Die iranische Architektur hat sich im Laufe der Geschichte in enger Verbindung mit Spiritualität entwickelt. Diese Verbindung zeigt sich nicht nur in ihren räumlichen Strukturen, sondern auch in ihren philosophischen Grundlagen. Ziel dieser Studie ist es, die spirituellen Dimensionen der iranischen Architektur auf der Grundlage der Transzendentalen Philosophie Mullā Ṣadrās und des Vierstufigen Erkenntnismodells zu untersuchen. Die Untersuchung folgt einem qualitativen, logisch-interpretativen Forschungsansatz und stützt sich auf Quellen der iranisch-islamischen Weisheitstradition sowie auf die Analyse ausgewählter Beispiele traditioneller iranischer Architektur, insbesondere der Scheich-Lotfollāh-Moschee. Die theoretische Grundlage bildet die Transzendentale Philosophie (al-Hikma al-Mutaʿāliyya), die auf den Prinzipien der Ursprünglichkeit des Seins (Aṣālat al-Wuǧūd), der Abstufung des Seins (Taškīk al-Wuǧūd) und der substanziellen Bewegung (al-Haraka al-Ǧawhariyya) beruht. Aus dieser Perspektive wird Architektur nicht lediglich als materielles Objekt verstanden, sondern als ein existenzielles Phänomen, das geistige und philosophische Bedeutungen verkörpert. Das Vierstufige Erkenntnismodell mit seinen Ebenen Begriffe, Grundlagen, Muster und Manifestationen ermöglicht die Analyse der Bewegung von innerer Bedeutung zu äußerer Form und umgekehrt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die iranische Architektur über funktionale und ästhetische Aspekte hinaus eine mystische und ontologische Erfahrung des Raumes ermöglicht. Die Prinzipien der Transzendentalen Philosophie Mullā Ṣadrās sowie das Vierstufige Erkenntnismodell bieten daher einen geeigneten theoretischen und methodischen Rahmen zur Interpretation und Wiederbelebung spiritueller Dimensionen in der zeitgenössischen Architektur.

Schlüsselwörter: Räumliche Authentizität, Primat der Existenz, substanzielle Bewegung, Gradation der Existenz, Scheich-Lotfollah-Moschee

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1. Introduction

Iranian architecture, as one of the richest and most profound manifestations of artistic and cultural expression, has always maintained a close relationship with the beliefs, values, and intellectual traditions of Iranian society. Throughout history, this relationship has been shaped by religious, mystical, and philosophical traditions, shaping a holistic conception of spirituality in architecture. Iranian architecture not only provides a setting for everyday life and human activities but also creates a spatial context for contemplation, worship, and fostering a connection between humanity and the Divine. The presence of symbolic motifs, sacred geometry, numerical patterns, and ritual spaces in Iranian architectural works reflects an approach that extends far beyond mere functionalism—one that seeks to establish a meaningful relationship between the body, the soul, and the spirit, guiding human beings from the material realm toward the realm of meaning. In contemporary architecture, however, this spiritual dimension has been largely neglected, and architectural production has become increasingly dominated by economic considerations and functional requirements.

Throughout history, spiritual concepts have been manifested in Iranian architecture in ways that are evident not only in religious buildings such as mosques, Sufi lodges, and mausoleums but also in non-religious structures, including Persian gardens, palaces, and traditional houses. Through the deliberate use of symbolic elements such as light, water, color, geometry, and calligraphy, Iranian architecture has sought to create spaces capable of providing not only visual beauty but also inner tranquility and spiritual elevation. Consequently, many scholars regard Iranian architecture as a symbolic language that conveys profound meanings rooted in the intellectual tradition of Iranian-Islamic wisdom. Among the philosophical systems capable of explaining this relationship, the Transcendent Wisdom (al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'āliyah) of Mulla Sadra occupies a particularly significant position. This philosophical system is founded upon principles such as the Primacy of Existence, the Gradation of Existence, and Substantial Motion. It conceives the universe as a continuous process of perfection and existential ascent (Ṣadr al-Muta'allihīn Shīrāzī, 2002). From this perspective, architecture transcends its physical form to become a manifestation of a particular degree of existence and a medium through which the human journey toward spiritual perfection may unfold. Accordingly, a deeper understanding of

these philosophical foundations and their architectural manifestations can provide valuable insights for contemporary architects and artists.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in logical reasoning to address the following fundamental question: How can spiritual concepts be preserved and reinforced in contemporary Iranian architecture? The findings are expected to provide architects, designers, and researchers in the fields of art and architecture with a conceptual framework for integrating art, knowledge, and spirituality in the creation of contemporary architectural spaces.

2. Literature Review

The literature relevant to this study can be organized into three thematic categories: (1) meaning and spirituality, (2) Transcendent Wisdom, and (3) the relationship between Transcendent Wisdom and art and architecture.

Meaning and Spirituality: Nasr (2010), in Islamic Art and Spirituality, explains the sacred nature of Islamic art and architecture and interprets Islamic architecture as a manifestation of Divine Unity grounded in philosophical and mystical principles. Sahaf (2016) similarly examines the fundamental concepts of Iranian wisdom and their relationship with Iranian architecture. Maleki (2017) examines the concept of meaning, its significance in traditional and contemporary architecture, and meaning-centered architectural approaches. Norberg-Schulz (2008), in Meaning in Western Architecture, traces the evolution of meaning across different periods of Western architectural history.

Transcendent Wisdom: Shajari (2015) discusses the concepts of human nature, the soul, and human perfection. Yazdanpanah and Dargahi-Far (2020), in Characteristics of Transcendent Wisdom, examine the philosophical, mystical, and ontological foundations of this intellectual tradition. Pouyan (2020) explores the concept of existence from the perspectives of both Transcendent Wisdom and Islamic mysticism, whereas Adelzadeh (2023) investigates the soul andintellectual cognition, and presents a comparative analysis of Peripatetic philosophy and Transcendent Wisdom. Likewise, Souzanchi (2010) explains the principles of the Unity of Existence and the Gradation of Existence, while Nasr, through his studies of Mulla Sadra and Transcendent Wisdom, highlights

the integration of reason, revelation, and intuitive knowledge as the defining characteristics of this philosophical tradition.

Transcendent Wisdom, Art, and Architecture: Rastaei and Hekmat Mehr (2023), in Theoretical Foundations of Islamic Art, explain the ontological, epistemological, anthropological, theological, axiological, and aesthetic foundations of Islamic art from the perspective of Transcendent Wisdom. Similarly, Sahaf (2012), in his doctoral dissertation, examines the relationship between the body, soul, and spirit in explaining the spirituality of the Iranian house based on the philosophical principles of Transcendent Wisdom. A summary of the related studies, together with their methodologies and principal findings, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Literature review related to the topic of Transcendent wisdom and its manifestations in art and architecture.

Authors / Year	Research Method	Research Title	Results and Findings
Motevali Haghighii, Sahaf, Kamalizadeh (2023a) (2024b)	Descriptive - Analytical, case studies with an interpretive approach	The steps of space perception in the Allahverdi khan portico, with looking at the concept of the Mulla Sadra's theory of substantial motion.	Islamic art, through its trans-material perspective, expresses divine unity. Likewise, Iranian architecture, as the symbolic manifestation of an eternal order, presentsthe material world as a transient realm through which human beings journey toward a higher state of existence and inner tranquility. Within this worldview, movement and perception are inseparably intertwined, each depending upon the other for its realization.
	Theoretical foundation, logical reasoning	Excellence in Iranian architecture by relying on the Transcendent Wisdom (Al-Hikmat al-Muta'āliyah)	The separation of contemporary architecture from the philosophical foundations of Iranian wisdom has contributed toa crisis of identity. Based on the principles of the Primacy of Existence, the Gradation of Existence, and Substantial Motion, architecture possesses both essential and existential dimensions, with primacy accorded to its existential aspect. Accordingly, the application of these philosophical principles can provide a foundation for the developmentof contemporary architecture.
Labkhandagh (2024)	Deductive reasoning Method	Mosque and Meaning: Examining the Place of "Sacred Spatial Order" in Utopia, from the Origin of Sadraean Cultural Theory	Grounded in Transcendent Wisdom, Ṣadrian cultural theory explains the reciprocal relationship between systems of meaning and spatial order. Within this framework, the mosque serves as the focal point of the monotheistic order of meaning and plays a fundamental role in shaping the Islamic city and endowing its urban elements with meaning through its centrality and architectural characteristics.

Authors / Year	Research Method	Research Title	Results and Findings
Jalili-Nia, Jodeyri Abbasi, Shafizadeh, Sattari Sarbangholi (2024)	Mixed - Qualitative, historical-interpretive and descriptive	Manifestation of Transcendent Wisdom in Iranian-Islamic Architectural Works and Buildings of the Safavid Period (The Place of Sheikh Shahabuddin Ahri)	According to Mullā Ṣadrā, architecture encompasses both essential and existential dimensions, with primacy accorded to its existential dimension. Substantial Motion provides the framework through which architecture progresses from materiality toward meaning. The findings of this study suggest that, by drawing upon the philosophical foundations of Ṣadrian thought, it is possible to formulate principles for the development of contemporary Iranian architecture.
Ghasemi, Sahaf, Jalaeian Ghane (2024a)	Qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach with a logical strategy	In the seeking of the imagination from wisdom perspective and its role in Iranian art and architecture	Drawing upon the ideas of Islamic philosophers, this study develops four principles—Re-creation of Reality, Unity of Opposites, Reflection of Truth, and Architecture as an Endless Process—derived from the role of the imaginal faculty in Iranian art and architecture, and explains the theoretical foundations and architectural manifestations of each principle.
Nikoofar, Ahari, Nadimi, Salem (2023)	Interpretation and Conclusion from Mulla Sadra's Opinions	From Disposition to Love: Understanding Architect's Work in Sadrian School	As a purposeful creator, the architect, through an understanding of existence and causal relationships, shapes the built environment to create spaces suited to human life. Beyond establishing a new order within nature, this creative process contributes to the perfection of human being and transforms architecture into a manifestation of beauty and virtuous action.
Daneshmand, Fattahi (2023)	Descriptive - Analytical	Introducing the Transcendent Perceptual Process In order to perceived the Aesthetic Quality of Space	The aesthetic quality of architectural space is a multidimensional construct that extends beyond sensory perception to encompass cognitive, affective, and intuitive processes. Accordingly, the aesthetic perception of space is shaped through four interrelated levels: sensory perception, affective engagement, semantic understanding, and cognitive integration.
Gheisi (2023)	Descriptive - Comparative	Reading the Architectural Decorations of Sultan Shahabuddin's Tomb and Comparing It with Some Principles of Transcendent Wisdom	The architecture and ornamentation of the Shrine of Sultan Shahab al-Din may be interpreted as symbolic expressions of key concepts within Transcendent Wisdom, including the Primacy of Existence, the Gradation of Existence, the Unity of Being, and Substantial Motion. Architectural elements such as light, spatial continuity, hierarchical organization, and ornamental motifs are employed to express these philosophical principles.
Zamani, Akbari, Motevali (2022)	Analytical and historical description, combined with logical reasoning	A comparative study of the formation of the porch of Allah Wardikhan of the holy shrine of Razavi based on the ontology of Mulla Sadra	The Muslim architect seeks to create spaces that foster the experience of presence within the realm of meaning. Architectural principles such as centrality, positive spatial organization, unity within multiplicity, spatial continuity, and hierarchical order are grounded in the philosophical foundations of Transcendent Wisdom.

Authors / Year	Research Method	Research Title	Results and Findings
Moein Mehr, Majidi (2022)	Descriptive - Analytical	Identifying School Architectural Design Criteria Based on Mulla Sadra's Theory of Substantial Motion as an Effective Factor in the Formation of Human Identity	Based on the theory of substantial motion, education is understood as a process of human existential transformation. Accordingly, educational environments should be designed in accordance with the existential dimensions of human beings as well as their temporal and spatial contexts.
Baniasadi Baghmiran, Asgari (2022)	Qualitative, Content Analysis	Influencing the Works of Art and Architecture in the Islamic-Iranian Civilization by the Sublime Art and Wisdom	Within the framework of Islamic religious aesthetics, the Muslim architect and artist participate in a mode of intuitive creativity that reflects divine creation through the harmonious integration of form and meaning. This worldview is manifested in architectural principles such as centrality, light, harmony with nature, geometry, balance, privacy, and a sense of mystery.
Sedighi, Panahi, Foroutan, Dibadj (2021)	Qualitative, analytical, descriptive, and logical reasoning	Effective Factors in Interpretation or Reading the Islamic Architectural Based on Transcendent Wisdom.	The interpretation of architecture from the perspective of Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy depends upon the architect's cognition and the pre-understandings associated with his or her existential condition. In light of substantial motion and the relativity of time, this cognition is formed through instinctive, innate, and volitional dimensions and is shaped by beliefs, values, and the surrounding cultural context.
Taghdir (2021), (2019)	Logical reasoning	Rereading of Creation and Perception Process in Architectural Pieces, On the basis of Transcendent Wisdom. Structure of Creation and Perception Process in Architectural Pieces, on the basis of Transcendent Wisdom	According to Transcendent Wisdom, human beings, through their creative faculty, serve as manifestations of the divine act of creation. By reinterpreting the process of cosmic creation, the structure of architectural perception and creation can be explained through five interrelated stages: the existential level of the architect and the observer, the external faculties of perception, the internal cognitive faculties, the constituent elements of architecture, and the four fundamental dimensions of human needs—material, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual—which together determine the quality of this creative process.
Shajari, Silvayeh (2020)	Analytical, interpretive description	A Visualization the Relation Between the Mosque's Dome and the Levels of Existence in the Transcendent Wisdom	By directing the observer's gaze toward the heavens, the mosque dome symbolizes transcendence and unity. Within the framework of Transcendent Wisdom, the dome represents the manifestation of the sensory, imaginal, and intellectual realms. Its material substance corresponds to the material world, its form reflects the imaginal realm (ʿālam al-mithāl), and the ascending geometry from the base to the apex of the dome symbolizes the existential journey from multiplicity to unity.

Authors / Year	Research Method	Research Title	Results and Findings
Amrolahzadeh, Rahmati (2018)	Interpretation and inference from Quranic verses and Transcendent Wisdom	A Review of Ibn ʻArabī's Interpretation of ʻArsh in Light of Transcendental Wisdom and its Application in Religious Architecture	According to the principle of the gradation of existence in Transcendent Wisdom, the Divine Throne (ʿArsh) is manifested differently at each level of existence. Within the material realm (Nāsūt), this reality finds expression in sacred architecture, particularly mosques and temples. Religious artists have sought to represent this metaphysical truth in Islamic architecture by translating intelligible realities into sensible forms.
Sadeghi, Dadgar, Samavati (2018)	Descriptive-analytical, content analysis, library studies	Explaining aesthetic components in Transcendent Wisdom and their manifestation in Iranian bazaars	The aesthetic components of Transcendent Wisdom may be classified into two categories: mental and physical. The mental components pertain to psychological and perceptual dimensions, whereas the physical dimensions are associated with factors such as proportion, geometry, and spatial hierarchy.
Shafi'zade, Koohi Geygloo, Abbaszadeh (2018)	Mixed, Descriptiv, Comparative Analysis	Comparing Mulla Sadra's concept of substantial motion with knot-making principles in Islamic art based on the equivalence of existence	Geometric interlacing, through characteristics such as repetition within perfection, the capacity for transformation by means of secondary patterns, and the preservation of unity within multiplicity, reflects the principle of continuous creation in Ṣadrian philosophy. Within this perspective, the gnostic artist manifests the perfection of creation through the generation of diverse geometric patterns, expressing the process of existential perfection (labs baʿd labs, successive renewal of being) in Islamic architecture.
Soleimani Sheijani, Khakpour, Raeissamiei (2014)	Historical and Descriptive Interpretation	A Review on the principles and objectives of contemporary architecture in Iran from Mulla Sadra's point of view	According to Mullā Ṣadrā's conception of existence and essence, architecture possesses both essential and existential dimensions. The essential dimension addresses material and functional requirements, whereas the existential dimension expresses the intrinsic reality of the architectural work.
Shajari, Tabatabaei Lotfi (2016)	Descriptive-analytical	Creativity in Architecture Inspired by Transcendent Wisdom. Contemporary Wisdom	Within the framework of Transcendent Wisdom (al-Hikmah al-Muta'āliyah), human creativity is regarded as a manifestation of divine vicegerency (khilāfah) and the creative attributes of God. As such, it unfolds across different degrees corresponding to the gradation of existence and finds expression in art and architecture. From this perspective, architecture represents the conscious transformation of the environment by human beings and can be understood within the descending and ascending ontological order of the realms of existence.
Baniasadi Baghmirani, Hosseini, Shahcheraghi (2024)	Qualitative, Comparative Analytical, Documentary Studies	Empty space; The place of manifestation and perception of meaning in Islamic architecture	Void space, as the medium through which meaning becomes manifested, profoundly influences the observer's perception. By transcending materiality, such space creates the conditions for the emergence of meaning and shapes both conscious and subconscious perception. Consequently, it guides the observer through a gradual journey from outward form to inner reality, ultimately leading toward spiritual perfection.

A substantial body of research has addressed a wide range of topics, including the process of artistic creation and perception, the principles and objectives of Iranian architecture, aesthetic components, creativity, the role of imagination, the concept of empty space, and the principle of Substantial Motion. Collectively, these studies have contributed to a deeper understanding of architecture from the perspective of Transcendent Wisdom. Nevertheless, a review of the existing literature indicates that the concept of spirituality has received relatively limited scholarly attention within the theoretical framework of Transcendent Wisdom. Furthermore, an analysis of recent research methodologies reveals that the application of the Fourfold Recognition Method to the interpretation of artistic and architectural works represents a relatively new approach in this field. Accordingly, the novelty of the present study lies in integrating the philosophical principles of Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Wisdom with the Fourfold Recognition Method to establish a theoretical framework for explaining spirituality in Iranian architecture. Unlike previous studies, which have primarily examined either the philosophical foundations or the physical characteristics of the built environment in isolation, this research seeks to establish a systematic relationship between the ontological and aesthetic principles of Transcendent Wisdom and the spatial experience of architecture. In doing so, it provides a framework for analyzing Iranian architecture from both philosophical and experiential perspectives.

3. Materials and Methods

This study is theoretical in its objective and qualitative-interpretive in nature. It adopts the philosophical framework of Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Wisdom and employs the Fourfold Recognition Method to analyze the concept of spirituality in Iranian architecture. Within this framework, the Fourfold Recognition Method serves as a theoretical model for explaining the relationship between human beings, space, and meaning.

The research began with the extraction and interpretation of the philosophical foundations of Transcendent Wisdom through a descriptive-analytical approach. These philosophical principles were subsequently operationalized as architectural components that could be systematically analyzed and examined through selected examples of Iranian architecture. The research process was carried out in four successive stages:

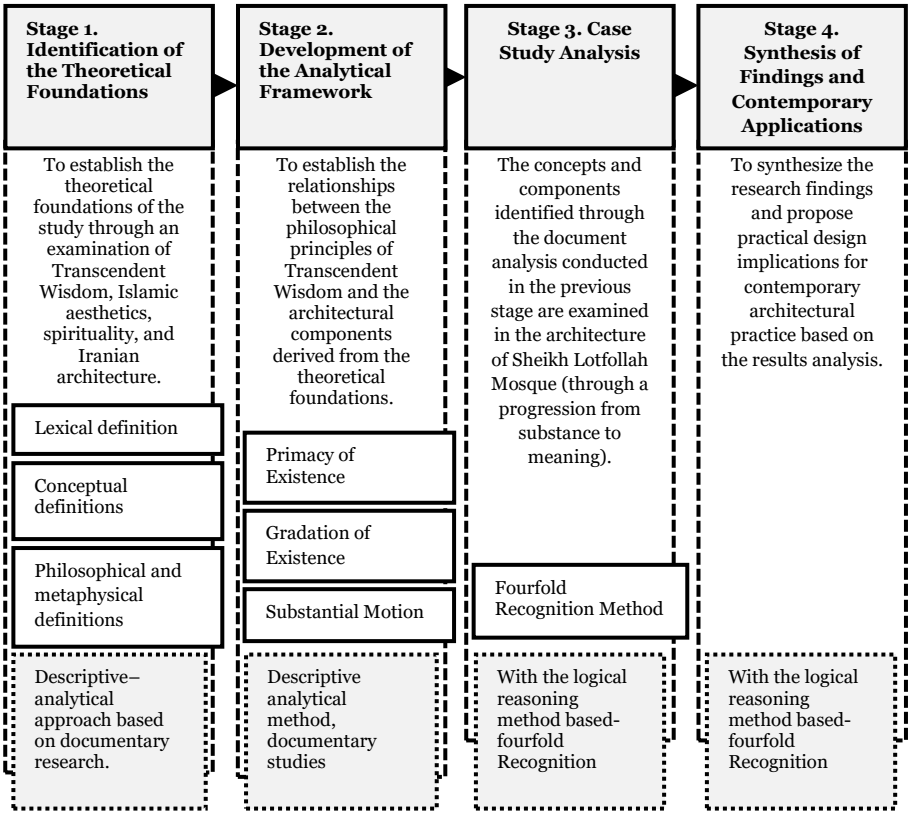

Figure 1. Research Process and the Methods Applied at Each Stage.

Review and extraction of the theoretical foundations: In the first stage, scholarly and documentary sources related to Transcendent Wisdom, Islamic aesthetics, spirituality, and Iranian architecture were systematically reviewed. Based on this review, the philosophical principles underpinning the concept of spirituality were identified and extracted.

Development of the analytical framework: Building upon the theoretical foundations, the relationships between the philosophical principles of Transcendent Wisdom and architectural components were established. In this framework, concepts such as the Primacy of Existence, the Gradation of Existence, Substantial Motion, and Sadrian aesthetics were operationalized as architectural indicators that could be systematically analyzed, including spatial hierarchy, light, geometry, movement, and perceptual experience.

Case study analysis based on the Fourfold Recognition Method: The selected case study, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, was analyzed using logical reasoning and the Fourfold Recognition Method, which examines architectural works at four analytical levels. To further verify the findings, additional examples of Iranian architecture were also examined using the same analytical framework.

Extraction of findings and interpretation of contemporary applications: In the final stage, the analytical findings were interpreted in light of the principles of Transcendent Wisdom. Their capacity to explain spirituality in Iranian architecture and their applicability to contemporary architectural design were subsequently evaluated. Figure 1 illustrates the research process and the methodology employed at each stage.

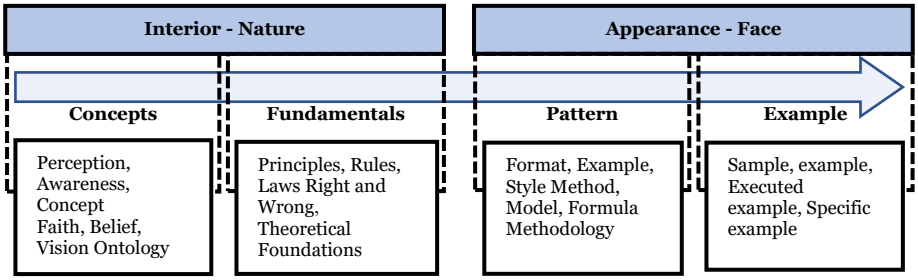

Figure 2. The Fourfold Recognition Method (Jalaeian Ghane, Ghasemi, & Sahaf, 2025, p. 69).

Based on the principle of the outward and inward dimensions (ẓāhir and bāṭin), Sahaf (2016, p. 52) developed the Fourfold Recognition Method, which consists of four principal components: Concepts, Foundations, Patterns, and Instances. This framework provides a systematic means of examining the relationship between abstract concepts and their concrete manifestations. According to this method, human understanding of existence and worldview unfolds through four successive stages: (1) understanding concepts, (2) establishing foundational principles, (3) developing patterns, and (4) generating instances—that is, tangible examples or objects produced according to general patterns and adapted to specific contexts. Collectively, these four interconnected stages constitute the Fourfold Recognition Method (Motevali Haghighi, Sahaf, & Kamalizadeh, 2024b) (Figure 2).

4. Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical framework of this study is organized into three sections. The first section examines the definition of meaning and spirituality in philosophy and wisdom traditions. The second explores the beauty and aesthetic theory in Sadrian philosophy, and the third discusses the ontology of beauty and the philosophical foundations of Mulla Sadra.

4.1. Definition of Meaning and Spirituality in Philosophy and Wisdom

A useful starting point for clarifying the concepts of meaning and spirituality is an examination of their lexical definitions. A review of three major Persian dictionaries—Dehkhoda Dictionary (Dehkhoda, 1998), Moein Dictionary (Moein, 2004), and Sokhan Dictionary (Anvari, 2002)—shows that the Persian terms referring to meaning (maʿnā) and spirituality (maʿnaviyyat) belong to the same lexical family and share a common semantic origin. Collectively, these dictionaries define meaning as that to which a word, phrase, or sentence refers, namely its concept, intention, or significance. Likewise, spirituality is defined as that which pertains to meaning, the inner dimension, inward thought, or the non-material aspect of reality.

A review of the writings of contemporary scholars further indicates that the term spirituality has become increasingly prominent in modern intellectual discourse. It appears explicitly in the works of thinkers such as Henry Corbin, Huston Smith, Titus Burckhardt, Daryush Shayegan, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, suggesting that its contemporary usage has become widespread only in recent decades. Nasr (1999, pp. 19–20), in his article Spirituality and Science: Convergence or Divergence?, argues that defining spirituality is even more difficult than defining science itself, since the concept has been employed in highly diverse and often ambiguous ways. He explains that the modern European use of the term is relatively recent, having first emerged within Catholic circles during the past one or two centuries. In contemporary discourse, the term is frequently used either as a substitute for religion or, in some cases, in contrast to it. Nasr further observes that the corresponding terms in Eastern languages preserve the original etymological meaning of the Latin spiritus, referring directly to the spirit. For example, the Arabic term rūHāniyyah derives from al-rūH (spirit) and conveys essentially the same meaning without the semantic ambiguity associated with many contemporary Western interpretations.

Given the central role of this concept in the present study, it is necessary to formulate an operational definition of spirituality from a descriptive and interpretive perspective. Based on the foregoing discussion, spirituality may be understood as that which relates to the spirit (rūH) within the traditional tripartite conception of the human being as comprising body, soul, and spirit. Since the spirit is regarded as having a Divine origin, spirituality signifies a relationship with the spiritual realm and, ultimately, with the Creator. Consequently, spirituality encompasses those dimensions of human existence associated with the knowledge of God (maʿrifah), faith in Divine Unity (tawHīd), and adherence to Divine guidance. Because spirituality fundamentally involves an inward mode of understanding and an inner experience of meaning, it cannot be fully captured through precise conceptual definition. For this reason, meaning and spirituality remain among the most complex and elusive concepts in contemporary discourse. Within the framework of the present study, spirituality is therefore understood as a mode of monotheistic orientation grounded in both inward cognition and recognition of the Divine (Sahaf, 2012, pp. 94–95; Sahaf, 2016, pp. 54–55).

Since art seeks to express and manifest meaning through form and matter, making the intelligible perceptible, the separation of art from spirituality has no place within either theoretical or practical wisdom. Nevertheless, many works that are conventionally regarded as "works of art" are, as acknowledged by numerous philosophers and artists, primarily concerned with material concerns and embody little, if any, spiritual content —or at least not the form of spirituality understood by religious thinkers and advocates of metaphysical reality. This condition can largely be attributed to the quantitative and materialistic worldview that dominates contemporary society, as well as to the interpretation that both artists and their cultural context assign to the meaning of artistic works. As awareness of the hierarchical dimensions of human existence diminishes, spirituality itself is increasingly reduced to a material and quantitative concept. To clarify this issue, it is useful to consider the different dimensions of human life These extend continuously from the material and physiological realm through the psychological and psychic dimensions, and ultimately toward the realm of the spirit and its relationship with the unseen world.

A broader examination of the history of Iranian philosophical thought further clarifies this understanding of spirituality. From the pre-Islamic period, beginning with the teachings of Zoroaster in the sixth century BCE and continuing through Mani and Mazdak, to the post-Islamic intellectual

traditions represented by Avicenna (Peripatetic Wisdom), Suhrawardi (Illuminationist Wisdom), Ibn ʿArabi (Mystical Wisdom), and Mulla Sadra (Transcendent Wisdom), as well as later philosophers such as Mulla Hadi Sabzevari and Seyyed Jalal al-Din Ashtiani, Iranian philosophical thought has consistently maintaineda profound spiritual orientation (Corbin, 2008, pp. 504–510). This continuity of thought reveals a fundamental characteristic of Iranian wisdom: for more than 2,600 years, spirituality has remained an enduring and living principle founded upon Divine Unity (TawHīd). Throughout these intellectual traditions, theological belief has constituted the central axis around which philosophical reflection has evolved. Consequently, spirituality should not be regarded as an isolated philosophical concept but rather as a universal and shared foundation underlying the diverse schools of Iranian wisdom. When discussing spirituality within the Iranian intellectual tradition, one is therefore referring to a deeply rooted and self-evident worldview rather than to a marginal or exceptional philosophical position.

This historical continuity also explains the key distinction between philosophy and wisdom (Hikmah) within the Islamic intellectual tradition. As Nasr explains, philosophy in the Islamic world, like that of other traditional civilizations, has always maintained a close relationship with religion and was therefore understood as wisdom rather than as an autonomous intellectual discipline. It never sought to challenge truths revealed through Divine revelation, whose primary source in Islam is the Holy Qur'an, together with the Prophetic traditions (Nasr, 2008). A similar relationship existed for many centuries in the Christian West, where philosophy remained closely integrated with theology and sought to provide a rational understanding of a world fundamentally shaped by religious reality. It was only after the Renaissance, and particularly from the seventeenth century onward, that philosophy in the West gradually developed into an increasingly independent and predominantly rational discipline.

Accordingly, it may be concluded that philosophy and wisdom were originally closely intertwined. However, with the emergence of the rise of rationalism, philosophical inquiry gradually diverged from wisdom. Within the context of the present study, wisdom (Hikmah) may therefore be understood as Divine Philosophy, while a sage (Hakīm) is one who possesses insight into the inner meanings of reality and the spiritual dimensions of existence. Consequently, the intellectual heritage of Iran is more accurately characterized as a tradition of Iranian-Islamic Wisdom than as one founded solely upon rational philosophy in its modern sense (Sahaf, 2012, pp. 95–96).

4.2. Beauty and Aesthetics in Sadrian Philosophy

Among Islamic philosophers, Mulla Sadra devoted greater attention to aesthetic arguably more than many of his predecessors, to the extent that the seventh volume of *Al-Asfār al-Arbaʿah* may be regarded as an independent treatise on aesthetics. He defines beauty as "*al-jamīl huwa al-ladhī yustaHsan*" ("the beautiful is that which is perceived as beautiful") and considers it the perfection appropriate to every existent. From his perspective, art and beauty arise through the attainment of higher degrees of existence within the imaginal realm (*ʿālam al-mithāl*) and through the perception of its universal forms. Accordingly, beauty is inseparable from perfection and constitutes a degree of existence itself; every being partakes of beauty in proportion to its share of existence. Mulla Sadra attributes the origin of all beauty to the Divine Reality, maintaining that the beauties of the world are reflections of the Absolute Divine Beauty. Consequently, the perception of beauty is not merely a sensory experience but an existential one that guides human beings toward truth and perfection (Taiebinazari & Monfared, 2023, p. 64; Hashem Nejad, 2006, p. 321; Ghasemi, Sahaf, & Jalaeian Ghane, 2024b, p. 259).

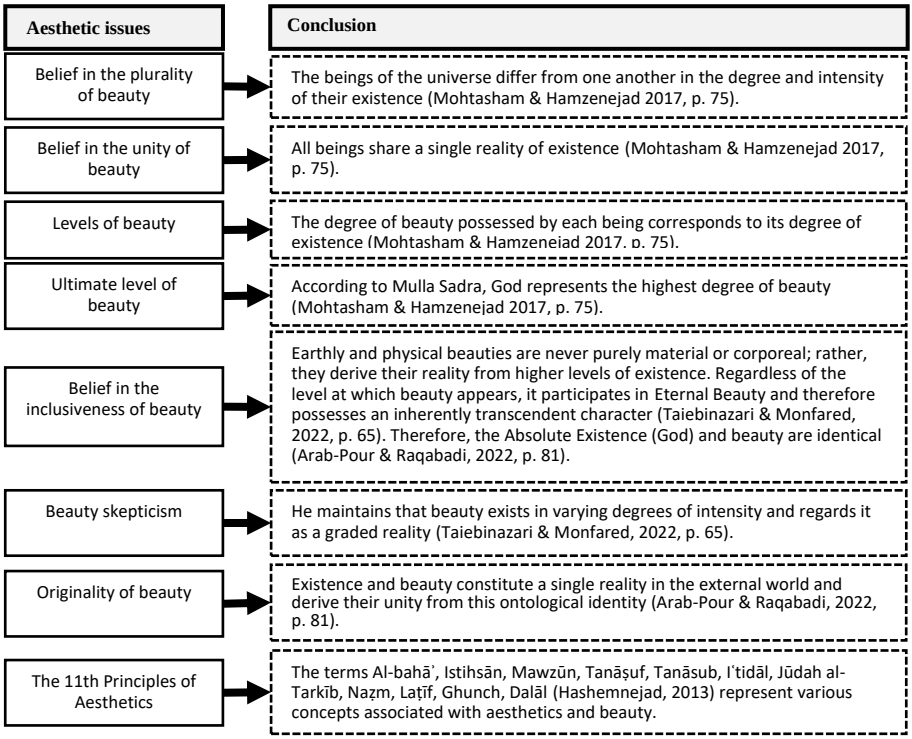

Figure 3. Mulla Sadra's Perspective on Aesthetics.

Mulla Sadra further maintains that God is the ultimate source of all beauty, perfection, and order, and that every form of beauty in the universe is a manifestation of His infinite Jamal (Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, 1981, p. 35; Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, 1975, p. 39). He regards the beauty foundin this world as a reflection of the beauty of the higher realms, which assumes forms of imperfection and change when manifested in the material world. From this perspective, beauty corresponds to the perfection of the soul, and its perception naturally evokes delight.

Consistent with this understanding, Schuon argues that art is authentic only insofar as it manifests Divine Truth and guides human beings from the outward forms of things toward their inner reality (Amiri, 2018, p. 28, citing Schuon, 2004, p. 44). Likewise, Michon (2004), drawing upon the Prophetic tradition "*Allah is Beautiful and loves beauty,*" maintains that the mission of Islamic art is to embody Divine principles through artistic forms. Beauty in Islamic art is therefore not merely a formal or visual quality but an expression of a spiritual reality.

Mulla Sadra also explains the relationship between love, beauty, and artistic creation by tracing artistic creativity back to Divine creation itself. In his view, the artisan's love for the work they create represents one of the degrees of love, and the artist participates in the manifestation of beauty through the creative act. By comparing the image of the beloved to a work of art, he explains the emergence of love through three successive stages: *takrār al-mushāhadāt* (repeated contemplation), *tawārud al-naẓar* (repeated visual encounter), and *istiHsān* (aesthetic appreciation) (Emāmī-Jomeh, 2018, p. 123). Accordingly, art is understood as the product of the soul's perfection and its existential growth, while genuine artistic creation ultimately originates from Divine inspiration and the intuitive contemplation of beauty (Taiebinazari & Monfared, 2023, p. 67).

Within the specific framework of Sadrian aesthetics, beauty is regarded as inseparable from the reality of existence itself. The manifestation of Divine Light in the sensible world can therefore be interpreted through a series of concepts developed by Mulla Sadra, particularly in *Al-Asfār al-Arbaʿah*. The most significant of these concepts include:

Al-Bahā[1]: Beauty, radiance, elegance, and that which gives rise to intimacy and attraction.

1. البهاء

IstiHsān[2]: The recognition and appreciation of beauty; one of the fundamental concepts of Islamic aesthetics, closely associated with *Husn* (beauty) and *maHāsin* (beautiful qualities) (Hashem Nejad, 2006; Pazouki, 2005, p. 23).

Mawzūn (Harmony)[3]: Denoting proportion, rhythm, and balance, particularly in relation to poetry and musical expression.

Tanāṣuf[4]**, Tanāsub**[5]**, and Iʿtidāl**[6] **(Symmetry, Proportion, and Balance):** Principal components of sensible beauty, referring to harmony, proportional relationships, and equilibrium among constituent elements (Ṣadr al-Mutaʾallihīn Shīrāzī, 2002, Vol. 7, pp. 173–180; Hashem Nejad, 2006, p. 145).

Jawdat al-Tarkīb[7] **and Naẓm**[8] **(Excellence of Composition and Order)**: Concepts describing the quality of composition and the orderly arrangement of elements, both regarded as essential indicators of perceptible beauty.

Laṭīf[9]**, Ghanj**[10]**, and Dalāl**[11]: Aesthetic attributes referring to delicacy, subtle elegance, gracefulness, and refined manifestations of beauty in both human beings and the higher degrees of existence (Ṣadr al-Mutaʾallihīn Shīrāzī, 2002, Vol. 2, p. 77; Ibn Manzūr, 1993, Vol. 2, p. 338).

In addition to these concepts, terms such as Talāluʾ (radiance), Shafīf (transparency), and Badīʿ (creative originality) also appear in Mulla Sadra's writings as aesthetic concepts closely associated with aesthetics (Hashem Nejad, 2006). The expression of these aesthetic principles varies according to the nature of each artistic discipline. In the performing arts, qualities such as proportion, symmetry, excellence of composition, gracefulness, and elegance are particularly prominent. In the visual arts,

2. استحسان
3. موزون
4. تناصف
5. تناسب
6. اعتدال
7. جودت التركيب
8. نظم
9. لطيف
10. غُنج
11. دَلال

concepts such as Al-Bahāʾ, IstiHsān, and delicacy and subtle refinement assume greater significance. In the applied arts—including architecture, literature, music, and traditional crafts—principles such as harmony, balance, and order play a central role. Nevertheless, all artistic disciplines draw upon these aesthetic foundations, albeit with different degrees of emphasis.

Accordingly, within Transcendent Wisdom, beauty is fundamentally an ontological concept intrinsically linked to perfection, the gradation of existence, and Divine Reality. Consequently, qualities such as order, proportion, balance, grandeur, and the perception of beauty provide theoretical framework for the analysis of Iranian architectural works.

4.3. Ontology of Beauty and the Philosophical Foundations of Mulla Sadra

Explaining the ontology of beauty from Mulla Sadra's perspective requires a brief review of the principal foundations of Transcendent Wisdom (al-Hikmah al-Mutaʿāliyah), which are outlined below.

Primacy of Existence (Aṣālat al-Wujūd): The distinction between existence (wujūd) and essence (māhiyyah) constitutes one of the most fundamental issues in Islamic philosophy. When considering any entity, two questions naturally arise: Does it exist? and What is it? According to the doctrine of the Primacy of Existence, objective reality is constituted by existence, whereas essence, although manifested in the external world, possesses no independent reality apart from existence, and its realization is entirely dependent upon it (Ṣadr al-Mutaʾallihīn Shīrāzī, 2002; Hekmat, 2002). From this perspective, existence is the original, objective, and indefinable reality, apprehended through immediate and intuitive knowledge (al-ʿilm al-Huḍūrī), whereas essence serves only as the conceptual framework through which beings are understood and has no independent reality apart from existence (Motevali Haghighi, Sahaf, & Kamalizadeh, 2024a).

Unity and Gradation of Existence (WaHdat al-Wujūd and Tashkīk al-Wujūd): According to Mulla Sadra, all beings participate in the same reality of existence; their differences arise not from distinct kinds of existence but from varying degrees of existential intensity and perfection. This doctrine, known as the Gradation of Existence, explains the diversity of beings as the result of different existential ranks rather than differences in the essence of existence itself. To illustrate this idea, Mulla Sadra

compares existence to light, which, despite being one reality, manifests in varying degrees of intensity and luminosity. Consequently, the higher the existential rank of a being, the greater its perfection and capacity for knowledge, whereas lower degrees are characterized by greater limitation and deficiency. At the summit of this hierarchy stands the Necessary Being (Wājib al-Wujūd), the most perfect degree of existence and the ultimate source of all levels of reality (Motevali Haghighi, Sahaf, & Kamalizadeh, 2024a).

Accordingly, unity and multiplicity are not regarded as contradictory concepts within Transcendent Wisdom. Rather, multiplicity represents the manifestation of different degrees of a single, unified reality. The universe is therefore understood as the manifestation of one Truth manifested through varying degrees of perfection and deficiency , perfection and imperfection, thereby giving rise to the diversity of created beings (Ṣadr al-Mutaʾallihīn Shīrāzī, 2002).

Substantial Motion (Al-Harakah al-Jawhariyyah): The concepts of motion and change have occupied a central place in philosophy since ancient Greek philosophy (Faramarz Qaramaleki, 2009). Within Transcendent Wisdom, Substantial Motion refers to the gradual actualization of potentiality into actuality. Mulla Sadra maintains that every being is intrinsically directed toward greater perfection and immateriality, and that no level of existence remains static (Moein Mehr & Majidi, 2022, p. 105). Every movement is therefore understood as a transition from deficiency toward perfection (Tabātabāʾī, 1991).

The fundamental distinction between Mulla Sadra's philosophy and that of earlier philosophers lies in his assertion that motion occurs not merely in accidents but within the very substance of beings. Consequently, the human being is understood as a dynamic and continuously evolving reality whose existential transformation and perfection unfold through the process of Substantial Motion (Motevali Haghighi, Sahaf, & Kamalizadeh, 2024a, p. 50).

Architecture and the Primacy of Existence: According to Transcendent Wisdom, the proper understanding of any phenomenon requires simultaneous consideration of both its essence and its existence. Architecture likewise possesses both an essential and an existential dimension. The essential dimension addresses functional and material requirements and remains conditioned by time and place, whereas the

existential dimension reflects the architect's existential orientation and serves as a manifestation of the Divine Names within the material world. Consequently, the true nature of architecture cannot be fully understood without acknowledging its existential dimension.

While contemporary architecture has frequently become confined to functional and physical considerations, Sadrian philosophy, through its emphasis on the inseparable relationship between outward form and existential reality, provides a philosophical foundation for reinterpreting the meaning, value, and spiritual significance of architecture (Motevali Haghighi, Sahaf, & Kamalizadeh, 2024a).

Architecture and the Principle of the Gradation of Existence: Human beings manifest their presence in the world through place. Within architectural theory, the doctrine of the Gradation of Existence (Tashkīk al-Wujūd) constitutes one of the principal philosophical foundations for explaining the relationship between form and meaning, as well as the validity of symbolism in architecture. Based on the philosophical principle of the Unity of the Intellect and the Intelligible (IttiHād al-ʿĀqil wa al-Maʿqūl), every architectural work possesses two modes of existence: external existence, referring to its objective realization in the physical world, and essential (or fixed) existence, referring to its prior existence within the architect's knowledge and consciousness. Consequently, an architectural work exists at the level of fixed existence before its material realization (Souzanchi, 2010). Within Transcendent Wisdom, this ontological distinction provides the basis for explaining the principle of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity, thereby offering a philosophical framework for understanding the relationship between meaning, form, and the existential presence of architectural works.

Architecture and Substantial Motion: Since human beings, according to Transcendent Wisdom, are continuously progressing through Substantial Motion toward existential perfection, architecture can likewise serve as a medium for this ontological journey. Iranian architecture, through the conscious use of light, geometry, order, proportion, and spatial silence, creates an environment that encourages contemplation, reflection, and the inner spiritual journey. From this perspective, architectural space is not a neutral physical container but an active medium through which successive levels of perception unfold before the observer moves through it, gradually progressing from the material realm toward spiritual

meaning. Human movement within architectural space may therefore be understood as the architectural manifestation of Substantial Motion, a process in which sensory perception gradually develops into deeper forms of spiritual and intuitive understanding (Baniasadi Baghmirani, Hosseini, & Shahcheraghi, 2024).

5. Analysis: Spirituality in Art and Architecture from the Perspective of Transcendent Wisdom and Sadrian Aesthetics

Based on the philosophical foundations derived from Transcendent Wisdom, the relationship between philosophical concepts and the spatial organization of Iranian architecture can be systematically interpreted. This section analyzes that relationship with particular emphasis on Sadrian aesthetics, using Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque as a case study. Figure 4 illustrates the relationship between spirituality and beauty in art and architecture. Within Sadrian thought, beauty is not merely an artistic attribute but a path toward the realization of Absolute Truth. Art and architecture grounded in wisdom and spirituality are therefore capable of elevating human perception beyond the material realm through beauty itself, providing the conditions for spiritual ascent and intuitive contemplation.

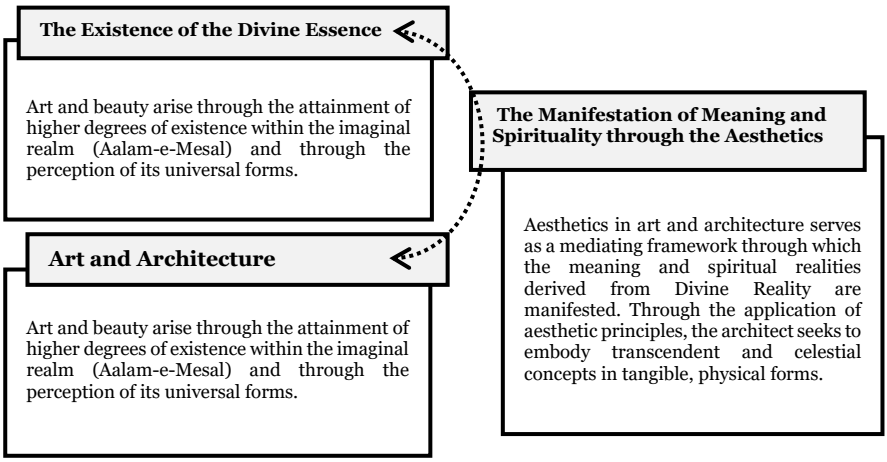

Figure 4. Relationship between Spirituality and Beauty in Art and Architecture from the Perspective of Transcendent Wisdom

Within the traditional classification of the arts, the applied arts comprise those artistic disciplines that combine aesthetic value with practical function. Architecture is therefore regarded as an applied art that, in addition to fulfilling material needs, embodies multiple levels of meaning, symbolism, and spiritual journey. Through material form, it serves as a manifestation of transcendent realities (Esmaeili, Jalaeian Ghane, & Sahaf, 2025).

Within the framework of Sadrian philosophy, architectural space may be understood as the manifestation of existence (wujūd) itself. Just as, in Transcendent Wisdom, essences represent different modes of manifestation of the one reality of existence, architectural space likewise manifests itself diverse forms and conditions. From this perspective, space in Iranian architecture possesses an ontological rather than merely physical significance. Its various spatial configurations—including enclosed, semi-open, and open spaces—may be regarded as distinct existential manifestations through which different degrees of spatial presence are embodied in architectural form.

These three spatial conditions may further be correlated with the three existential dimensions of the human being in Transcendent Wisdom — body, soul, and spirit—thereby reflecting the tripartite nature of the human constitution within the built fabric of Iranian architecture. Accordingly, architectural space, extending from the enclosed spaces to the open courtyard, unfolds through the Gradation of Existence, manifesting successive levels of being. This progression from materiality toward meaning corresponds directly to the doctrine of Substantial Motion, whereby existence continuously advances from potentiality to actuality and from multiplicity toward unity. From this interpretation, two principal conclusions may be drawn regarding the correspondence between the principles of Transcendent Wisdom and the structure of Iranian architecture:

(1) Primacy is accorded to space rather than merely to form or material, since space constitutes the medium through which human beings experience existence, and this experience is rooted in the existential dimensions of human beings.

(2) The three principal spatial typologies—enclosed, semi-open, and open spaces—correspond to the three existential dimensions of the human being—body, soul, and spirit. Iranian architecture therefore reflects

humanity's spiritual journey through the hierarchy of existence, progressing from the sensory world toward the imaginal realm.

4.4. Progression from Matter to Meaning in Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque

Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, situated on the eastern side of Naqsh-e Jahan Square, is one of the four principal architectural elements defining the central urban space of Isfahan. In his explanation of the hierarchical progression toward the spatial center, Mahmoud Tavasoli, drawing upon the views of Nader Ardalan (Bakhtiar & Ardalan, 1973) as well as Arthur Upham Pope (Pope, 1991), presents a diagrammatic interpretation of the movement from the public space of the square to the interior sanctuary (shabestan) of the mosque. The successive stages of this spatial journey are outlined below.

"If the spatial sequence is traced from the entrance, and the two transitional pause-spaces—the threshold to the corridor and the threshold to the prayer hall—are added to the five principal spaces, a total of seven spatial stages emerge, each possessing distinct morphological characteristics." (Tavasoli, 1995; Tavasoli, 2015)

1. Naqsh-e Jahan Square: The spatial journey begins in the vast rectangular square measuring approximately 165 × 510 m. Although the immense scale of the square does not allow the observer to perceive all of its major visual elements simultaneously, this expansive horizontal space creates a continuous relationship between earth and sky, symbolically uniting the terrestrial and the celestial realms.

2. The Forecourt of the Mosque: This transitional space serves as the observer's first preparation for entering an environment of a different scale and character.

3. The Entrance Iwan: Situated five steps above the level of the forecourt, the entrance *iwan* forms a narrower transitional space and constitutes the final exterior zone before entering the mosque.

4. The Entrance Threshold: Containing the main entrance door, this threshold functions as the first pause-space and marks the passage into the interior. It symbolizes the threshold to another world. From this point onward, the inner realm gradually reveals itself.

5. The Corridor: The corridor constitutes the central spatial element of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque. Had the mosque been constructed elsewhere—even elsewhere around Naqsh-e Jahan Square, such as on the site of Ali

Qapu Palace or the Shah Mosque—it would not have possessed its present spatial quality, because the proportional relationship between the exterior and interior spaces would have been fundamentally altered. It is within this corridor that the gradual separation from the external world and the transition toward the interior occur. During the passage through this intermediary space, the sounds, colors, movement, and activity of the outside world progressively fade away. The corridor thus functions as an intermediate realm between humanity (represented by the public square) and spirituality (represented by the prayer hall). It is a space situated between body and spirit—an imaginal realm mediating between the material and the spiritual worlds.

6. The Threshold of the Prayer Hall: This threshold constitutes the final pause-space before entering the innermost sacred realm.

7. The Prayer Hall (Shabestan): The prayer hall represents the ultimate interior realm—the realm of the unseen, a distinct world characterized by its spiritual presence.

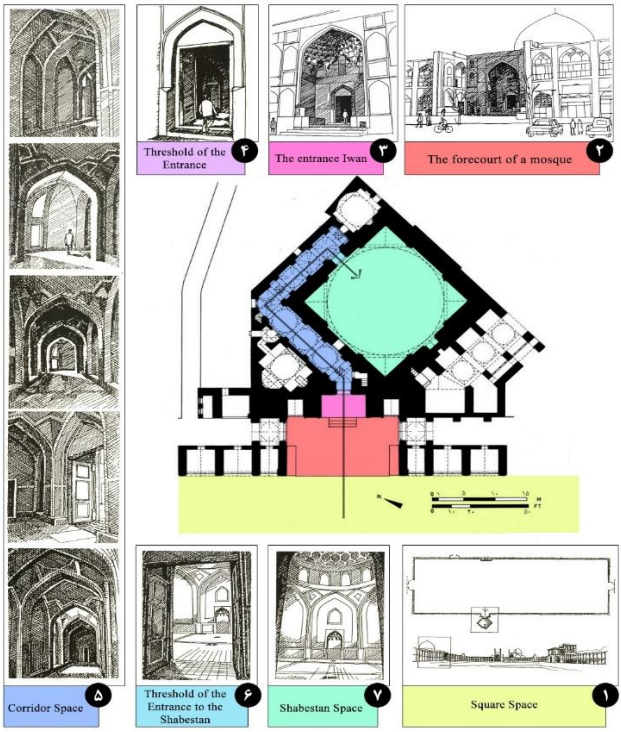

Figure 5 illustrates the complete sequence of these seven spatial stages together with the movement of visitors through the mosque.

Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque was selected as the case study for the present research for several reasons. First, its construction coincided with the flourishing period of Transcendent Wisdom and the lifetime of Mulla Sadra. Second, it occupies an exceptional position within Iranian-Islamic architecture. Finally, its spatial organization and architectural characteristics distinguish it from other Safavid-period mosques. Through features such as its carefully articulated spatial hierarchy, sophisticated orchestration of natural light, coherent geometric organization, and rich symbolic content, the mosque provides an appropriate case for explaining the relationship between the theoretical principles of Transcendent Wisdom and their architectural manifestation. For this reason, it has frequently been used in previous scholarship as one of the most representative examples for analyzing the semantic, perceptual, and spatial dimensions of Iranian architecture.

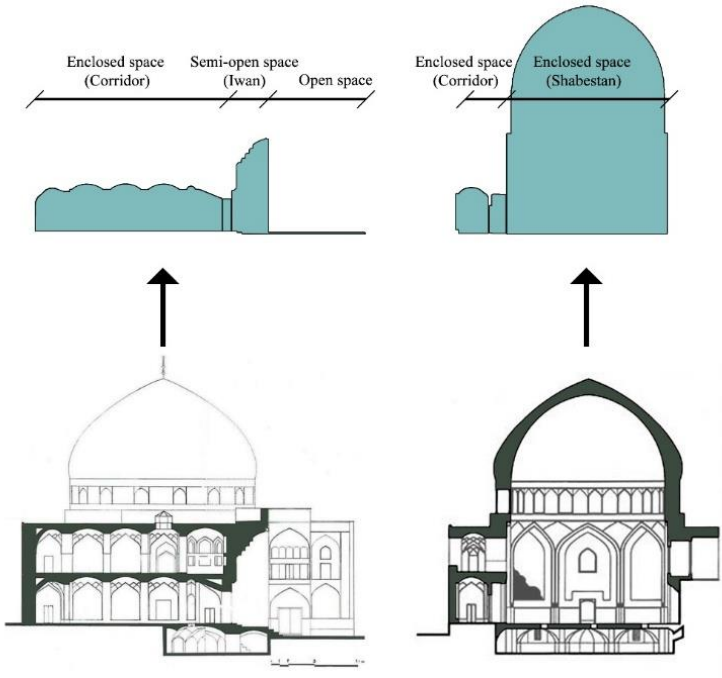

Figure 6. Sections of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque (right: section through the prayer hall (Mehrali, 2020); left: section through the entrance iwan (Karimi, Abouei, & Heydari, 2017)), illustrating the correspondence between the three spatial typologies of Iranian architecture – enclosed, semi-open, and open spaces – and the three existential dimensions of the human being (body, soul, and spirit) within the framework of al-Hikma al-Muta'āliyah.

The spatial organization of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque represents one of the most refined examples of a gradual and hierarchical progression from the outward to the inward. Unlike most Iranian mosques, its entrance does not lead directly to an open courtyard. Instead, visitors reach the prayer hall only after passing through a curved transitional corridor. This deliberate deviation symbolizes an inward journey, a gradual detachment from multiplicity, and a preparation for the reception of spiritual meaning. As illustrated in Figure 5, this sequence may be interpreted as an architectural manifestation of the soul's Substantial Motion, progressing from the corporeal toward the spiritual realm.

The journey begins at Naqsh-e Jahan Square, representing the realm of multiplicity, and culminates in the domed sanctuary, symbolizing unity and spiritual meaning. This progression offers a tangible expression of the transition from potentiality to actuality, reflecting the human journey from multiplicity toward unity. It closely parallels Mullā Ṣadrā's concept of Substantial Motion, according to which existence continuously progresses from its lowest material level toward higher degrees of immateriality and spiritual perfection.

The change in direction within the entrance corridor introduces a moment of pause and reflection, mentally preparing visitors for entry into the sacred domain of the mosque. Furthermore, the framed visual connection between the corridor and the domed chamber reinforces this contemplative transition. From Mullā Ṣadrā's perspective, this process may be understood as the gradual manifestation of meaning through architectural form. Throughout the circulation path, light transforms from a soft, dispersed, and fragmented illumination into a concentrated and unified radiance within the domed chamber (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Right: soft and dispersed natural light within the transitional corridor (Photograph by Sadaf Khadem Beheshti); Center: concentrated illumination inside the domed chamber; Left: the centrally illuminated domed chamber (Mehrali, 2020).

The geometric order of the domed chamber is organized according to a radial, center-oriented geometry that may be interpreted as an architectural manifestation of the Gradation of Existence. Its geometric composition expresses a progression from lower to higher existential levels (Figure 7). Consequently, the domed chamber symbolizes the highest spiritual state attainable by the human being, in which, at the culmination of Substantial Motion, the soul is liberated from the constraints of material existence.

4.5. Progression from Matter to Meaning in Other Works of Iranian-Islamic Architecture

Although the present study adopts Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque as its principal case study, many of the philosophical concepts derived from al-Hikma al-Mutaʿāliyah can also be identified in other masterpieces of Iranian-Islamic architecture. To demonstrate the broader applicability of the findings, several representative examples are briefly presented below.

Jameh Mosque of Isfahan: As illustrated in Figure 8, unlike the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, the Jameh Mosque of Isfahan has multiple entrances, all of which ultimately converge within the central courtyard. Serving as an intermediate spatial domain, the courtyard connects the various entrances to the principal prayer space while directing movement toward the southern iwan and ultimately the domed sanctuary. This spatial sequence can be interpreted through the concept of Substantial Motion, as visitors are gradually guided from public spaces toward progressively deeper levels of spiritual presence as they move through the mosque.

Moreover, the hierarchical arrangement and varying spatial qualities of the entrances, courtyard, iwan, and domed chamber, together with the progressive changes in elevation leading toward the sanctuary, express successive degrees of existence that can be interpreted through the principle of the Gradation of Existence. At the same time, despite their functional and formal diversity, these architectural elements are integrated into a coherent spatial system that represents the transition from multiplicity to unity, an interpretation that corresponds philosophically to the principle of the Primacy of Existence. Accordingly, the spatial organization of the Jameh Mosque of Isfahan may be regarded as a representative model of Iranian architecture, in which hierarchical spatial organization enables the gradual progression from the outward experience of space toward its inner spiritual reality.

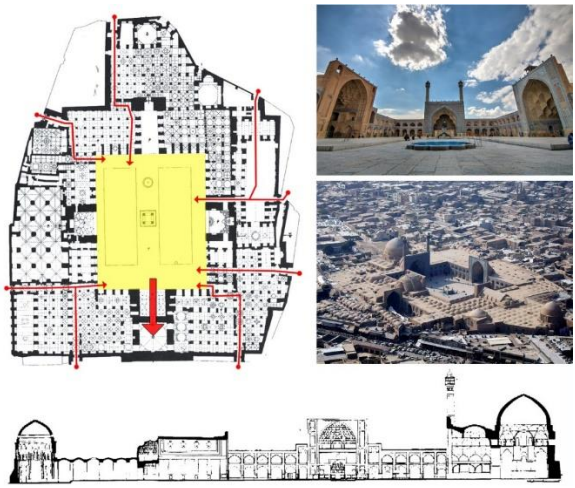

Figure 8. Jameh Mosque of Isfahan (Jabal Ameli, 2013).

Shah Mosque (Imam Mosque of Isfahan): The spatial organization of the Shah Mosque (Imam Mosque) is structured around a hierarchical sequence consisting of the entrance, transitional corridor, courtyard, iwans, and the principal domed sanctuary. Entry into the mosque occurs through a corridor that gradually turns toward the qibla, guiding visitors from the urban environment into a sacred realm before leading them to the central courtyard and ultimately the domed chamber. This spatial progression can be interpreted through the concept of Substantial Motion, as the visitor's perception gradually evolves from engagement with the external world toward increasingly profound levels of spiritual awareness.

Furthermore, the differing spatial qualities of the entrance, corridor, courtyard, iwans, and domed sanctuary express a distinct hierarchy of existential levels that may be explained through the principle of the Gradation of Existence. Within this hierarchy, the domed chamber serves as both the spatial and spiritual focal point of the mosque, representing its highest existential level.

Despite the diversity of spaces, circulation paths, and architectural elements, all components of the mosque are integrated into a coherent spatial system organized around the qibla. From the perspective of Transcendent Wisdom, this unity may be interpreted through the principle of the Primacy of Existence, whereby the multiplicity of

architectural elements ultimately serves the realization of a single ontological reality and a unified experience of sacred space. Consequently, the spatial organization of the Shah Mosque can likewise be regarded as a representative model of Iranian architecture, in which hierarchical spatial orderguides visitors through a gradual progression from multiplicity to unity and from outward appearance to inner spiritual reality.

Figure 9. Shah Mosque (Imam Mosque), Isfahan (Khanzadeh, 2024)

Fin Garden, Kashan: The spatial organization of Fin Garden is structured around a central axis, a system of water channels, the central pavilion (kushk), and a geometrically ordered network of circulation paths.

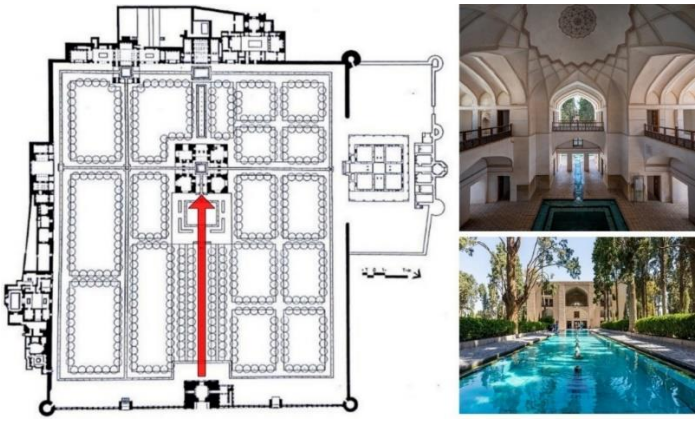

Figure 10. Fin Garden, Kashan (Daneshmand & Atik, 2024).

The movement of visitors from the entrance toward the center of the garden provides a gradual experience of spatial discovery and an increasing awareness of its geometric order. This progression may be interpreted through the concept of Substantial Motion, as spatial perception continuously develops throughout the journey.

At the same time, the principal axis, central pavilion, watercourses, and surrounding spaces, while forming parts of a unified spatial system, differ in their spatial qualities, visual prominence, and functional significance. These differences reflect successive degrees of existence that correspond to the principle of the Gradation of Existence.

Moreover, the geometric unity of the garden, together with the diversity of its natural and architectural elements—including water, vegetation, pathways, and built structures—exemplifies unity within multiplicity, a characteristic consistent with the principle of the Primacy of Existence in Transcendent Wisdom. Accordingly, the spatial organization of Fin Garden may also be regarded as an exemplary model of Iranian architecture, in which spatial order and perceptual hierarchy gradually guide visitors toward an experience of unity emerging from multiplicity

Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili Shrine Ensemble: The spatial organization of the Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili Shrine Ensemble is structured around a sequential progression of entrance spaces, courtyards, corridors, and ceremonial spaces culminating in the principal mausoleum. This spatial sequence gradually guides visitors from public domains toward progressively more sacred realms and may therefore be interpreted through the concept of Substantial Motion, as the visitor's spatial experience progressively advances toward deeper levels of spiritual presence and existential awareness.

The differences in the location, spatial quality, and degree of sanctity among the various spaces within the complex likewise express a hierarchy of existential levels that may be explained through the principle of the Gradation of Existence.

At the same time, despite the functional and formal diversity of its architectural components, the ensemble is unified within a coherent spatial system centered on the shrine itself. Philosophically, this characteristic corresponds to the principle of the Primacy of Existence,

whereby diverse architectural elements converge toward a unified ontological reality.

Accordingly, the Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili Shrine Ensemble may also be regarded as an outstanding example of Iranian architecture, whose hierarchical spatial organization represents a gradual progression from multiplicity to unity and from outward experience toward inner spiritual awareness.

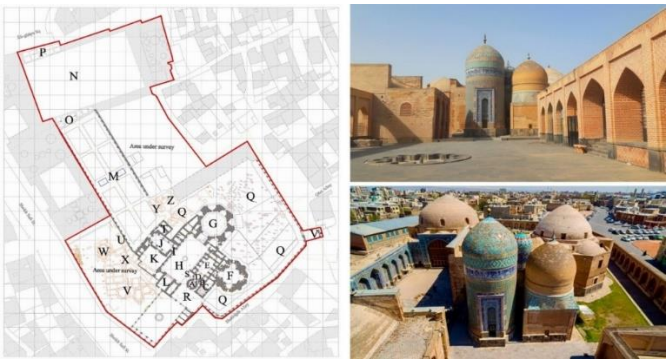

Figure 11. Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili Shrine Ensemble (Yousefi, Alizadeh Sola, & Tavousi, 2013)

An examination of these case studies demonstrates that, despite differences in function, spatial organization, and historical context, they share a common spatial logic. In each example, the movement of visitors from public spaces toward the principal architectural spaces is organized through a gradual and hierarchical sequence, whereby spatial experience progresses from multiplicity to unity and from the initial levels of perception toward deeper levels of presence and meaning. This characteristic can be interpreted through the concept of Substantial Motion, understood as the progressive development of human perception through space.

Furthermore, the differences in location, spatial quality, and degree of sanctity among the various spaces express a hierarchy of existential levels that corresponds to the principle of the Gradation of Existence. At the same time, despite the functional and formal diversity of their architectural components, each complex is organized as a coherent and purposeful spatial system. This unity within multiplicity can be understood through the principle of the Primacy of Existence.

Accordingly, it can therefore be concluded that these three philosophical principles are not confined to a single architectural example; rather, they constitute an interpretive framework provides an interpretive framework for understanding the spatial organization of a wide range of significant works of Iranian architecture. The findings of this study therefore extend beyond the selected case study and may be generalized to other examples of Iranian architecture characterized by hierarchical and meaning-based spatial organization.

4.6. Application of the Principles of al-Hikma al-Mutaʿāliyah in Contemporary Architecture

The practical application of al-Hikma al-Mutaʿāliyah in contemporary architecture lies primarily in emphasizing the existential and spiritual dimensions of architectural space. According to the principle of the Primacy of Existence, architecture should not be confined to the creation of form and physical structure; rather, it should provide a setting that enriches lived experience and strengthens the individual's relationship with meaning.

Likewise, the principle of the Gradation of Existence underscores the importance of creating spatial hierarchies and graduated perceptual sequences, enabling users to experience their surroundings through a progressive and increasingly profound process of spatial awareness as they move through the built environment.

From another perspective, the concept of Substantial Motion offers inspiration for the design of spaces that encourage discovery, contemplation, and gradual existential transformation. Within this framework, the deliberate use of light, geometry, proportion, spatial order, and carefully structured spatial sequences not only enhances the aesthetic quality of architecture but also creates conditions conducive to spiritual experience and reflective engagement.

Accordingly, al-Hikma al-Mutaʿāliyah may serve as a robust theoretical framework for rethinking contemporary architectural practice, reinforcing its humanistic and spiritual dimensions while providing philosophical guidance for the creation of meaningful architectural environments.

Table 2. Practical framework for applying the principles of al-Hikma al-Muta'āliyah in contemporary architectural design based on the Fourfold Recognition Framework.

Sadrian Philosophical Principle	**Concept**	**Design Foundation**	**Architectural Pattern**	**Contemporary Design Application**
Primacy of Existence	Unity within multiplicity	Creating coherence among architectural elements while avoiding spatial fragmentation; prioritizing open space	Integrated spatial organization, legible spatial structure, logical functional relationships	Designing architectural complexes that organize diverse spaces within a unified architectural identity
Gradation of Existence	Spatial hierarchy and varying degrees of experiential intensity	Creating intentional differentiation among spaces according to their significance and degree of privacy	Spatial hierarchy, gradual variation in height, lighting, materials, scale, and accessibility	Designing public, semi-public, and private spaces within architectural environments
Substantial Motion	Progressive transformation of human perception	Designing spaces based on movement and the gradual discovery of place	Hierarchical circulation, spatial sequence, gradual changes in light, scale, and visual perception	Designing experiential circulation routes that unfold progressively
Synthesis of the Three Principles	From multiplicity to unity	Meaning-oriented and human-centered design	Hierarchical spatial organization, gradual guidance of users, strengthening the sense of place	Creating contemporary architecture with an Iranian–Islamic identity that not only fulfills functional requirements but also provides meaningful and perceptually enriching experiences

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate a meaningful and meaningful relationship between the fundamental principles of Mullā Ṣadrā's al-Hikma al-Muta'āliyah and the spatial organization of Iranian architecture. The analysis of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, conducted through the Fourfold Recognition Framework, revealed that concepts such as the Primacy of Existence, the Gradation of Existence, and Substantial Motion are not

merely abstract philosophical doctrines; rather, they are embodied in the mosque's spatial organization and in the perceptual experience of its users. The analysis of additional architectural precedents further indicates that spatial hierarchy, the gradual transition from public to sacred spaces, the orchestration of natural light, geometric order, spatial proportion, and the continuity of architectural elements collectively facilitate a progressive experiential journey from the outward to the inward and from multiplicity toward unity.

From a methodological perspective, this study demonstrates that the Fourfold Recognition Framework provides an effective analytical model for translating philosophical concepts into architectural indicators suitable for systematic analysis. The framework establishes a coherent relationship between the theoretical foundations of al-Hikma al-Mutaʿāliyah and the analysis of architectural works, while also offering a methodological approach applicable to the study of other examples of Iranian architecture.

The creation of spiritually meaningful architecture in contemporary practice—similar to that found in traditional Iranian architecture—ultimately depends upon the architect's inner conviction and spiritual awareness. Within the Fourfold Recognition Framework, this dimension is represented through inner (psychic) cognition, which forms the conceptual foundation of architectural creation. In Iranian philosophical thought, self-knowledge (maʿrifat al-nafs) constitutes the prerequisite for the soul's journey toward perfection, leading to the elevation of the human being through successive existential levels and representing the ultimate objective of life within the tradition of Islamic wisdom. Grounded in this epistemological perspective, contemporary architects may move beyond purely formal or functional approaches and, by emphasizing the ontological essence of architecture rather than its external appearance, create environments that foster deeper existential and spiritual experiences.

Accordingly, Iranian architecture may be understood as a symbolic language that, through the application of philosophical principles and transcendent aesthetic values, not only produces spaces of beauty and functional excellence but also serves the existential journey of human beings. Recognizing this dimension offers valuable guidance for contemporary architectural practice, particularly at a time when many urban and architectural environments have become increasingly detached

from identity, meaning, and spiritual significance. Revitalizing the spiritual dimension of Iranian architecture therefore requires a critical reinterpretation and application of the principles of al-Hikma al-Muta'āliyah in both architectural theory and design practice. The present study represents a step toward this objective.

Table 3 presents the analysis of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque using the Fourfold Recognition Framework, illustrating the gradual translation of philosophical concepts from the realm of inner meanings into their tangible architectural and spatial manifestations.

Author contributions

The authors confirm the study conception and design: Khosro Sahaf, Navid Jalaeian Ghane; data collection: Navid Jalaeian Ghane. Alireza Jalaeian Ghane; analysis and interpretation of results: Khosro Sahaf, Navid Jalaeian Ghane. Alireza Jalaeian Ghane; draft manuscript preparation: Navid Jalaeian Ghane. The results were evaluated by all authors, and the final version of the manuscript was approved.

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Conflict of Interest

"The authors declare no potential conflict of interest regarding the publication of this work. In addition, the ethical issues including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and, or falsification, double publication and, or submission, and redundancy have been completely witnessed by the authors".

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