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ORIGINAL STUDY

Light and Sama as a Common Language of Sacred Architecture: A Comparative Reading Inspired by Rumi's Mysticism

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ABSTRACT

In the tradition of Islamic mysticism, light symbolizes the singular divine truth and circular motion expresses the human journey from multiplicity toward unity. In Rumi's thought, these two elements are not merely sensory phenomena but ontological structures of the spiritual journey, where light corresponds to presence and awareness, and sama represents the return to the center of truth. This article aims to explain the role of these two concepts in shaping the spatial expression of sacred architecture and examines how light and circular movement, rooted in Islamic mysticism and especially in Rumi's teachings, appear as a "shared spiritual language" in the architecture of different religions. The main problem addressed is the lack of comparative studies that analyze these two symbols together across Islamic, Christian and Eastern traditions. The central research question asks how light and rotation are consciously or unconsciously reflected in sacred architecture and what role they play in users' spiritual experience. The research adopts a qualitative, interpretive and comparative approach and analyzes five case studies from three religious traditions: Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque and Sancaklar Mosque (Islamic), the Church of Light and Notre Dame du Haut (Christian), and Borobudur Buddhist temple (Eastern). The findings indicate that light in all three traditions symbolizes divine presence and the disclosure of meaning, and circular or spiral paths function as metaphors for the spiritual journey toward unity. This conceptual convergence suggests that light and rotation can provide a basis for interpreting architecture as a language of peace, unity, and interfaith dialogue.

Keywords: Rumi's thought, Light and sama, Christian architecture, Eastern architecture, Islamic architecture, Spiritual architecture

Introduction

Throughout history, sacred architecture has embodied humanity's quest for meaning, transcendence, and connection with the divine. In all cultures and religions, places of worship are not only physical environments for ritual, but also mechanisms for expressing

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and experiencing metaphysical ideas. Among the symbolic elements that shape these spaces, light and circular movement occupy a privileged position. In various spiritual traditions, they are understood as universal metaphors for awareness, presence, and spiritual return.

In Islamic mysticism, especially in the thought of Jalal al-Din Rumi, light is the manifestation of divine unity, and rotation in sama symbolizes the journey of the soul from multiplicity toward the one truth. These two concepts not only form the foundations of mystical ontology, they also enter the language of architectural space (Blair & Bloom, 1994; Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 2015). In the Christian tradition, light is tied to revelation and divine presence, while in Buddhism circular and ascending paths metaphorically express the movement toward enlightenment. Such parallels suggest that the concepts of light and rotation, despite cultural differences, have materialized as shared structural patterns in sacred architecture worldwide, from the ascending stupa of Borobudur to the luminous cross of the Church of Light and the radiant dome of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque.

Research gap

Despite a body of work on light or circular form in religious architecture, few studies have examined these two elements together, within a specific theoretical framework such as Rumi's mysticism, and comparatively across the three traditions of Islam, Christianity, and Eastern Buddhism. This gap creates the need for a new, integrative investigation.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to explain how light and circular movement, grounded in the mystical metaphysics of Rumi, have emerged as shared symbolic languages in the architecture of different religions, and how this convergence can be interpreted as a basis for understanding unity, peace, and spiritual experience in architecture.

Methodology

The research employs a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative approach, analyzing five architectural examples from three religious traditions: Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque and Sancaklar Mosque from Islam, the Church of Light and Notre Dame du Haut from Christianity, and Borobudur temple from Buddhism. The analysis focuses on the spatial, visual, and semantic roles of light and movement.

Five key architectural examples were selected:
Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque (Isfahan, Iran)
Sancaklar Mosque (Istanbul, Turkey)
Church of Light (Ibaraki, Japan)
Notre Dame du Haut (Ronchamp, France)
Borobudur Temple (Central Java, Indonesia)

In an age marked by identity crises and cultural fragmentation, rediscovering such shared elements in spiritual architecture can open new horizons for discourses on unity, interfaith dialogue, and global peace. Light and rotation, beyond the differences between traditions, provide a shared interpretive framework for human spirituality and transform architecture into a common language of divine presence and spiritual return.

Literature review

The symbolic role of light and movement in spiritual architecture has been examined in several disciplines, including theology, philosophy, phenomenology, and architectural theory. In the Islamic tradition, light is not merely a physical phenomenon but a metaphysical principle articulated in the Qur'anic verse "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth" (Surah al-Nur 24:35). Its centrality in shaping the aesthetics of Islamic architecture has been emphasized repeatedly by Nasr (1987), Ardalan and Bakhtiar (1973). In this reading, Islamic architecture is not simply a built shell but a diagram of a monotheistic cosmology in which light functions as a tool for perceiving divine unity.

Suhrawardi's Illuminationist philosophy deepens this foundation. In Hikmat al-Ishraq, being is structured as a hierarchy of lights, from the Light of Lights to lower degrees. This luminous ontology forms the basis for interpreting architecture as an interaction between radiance and shadow (Burckhardt, 2009; Matracchi & Habibabad, 2021). Examples such as Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, where indirect and filtered light creates an experience of sacred separation, embody this ontology.

In Rumi's mysticism, light is the singular truth that gathers all multiplicity within itself, and the spinning of sama is the manifestation of the movement of existence from dispersion toward unity. Chittick (1983) demonstrate that Rumi uses light and movement not merely as poetic metaphors, but as cognitive and ontological models that can also be applied in interpreting architecture and sacred space. In this view, the whirling body of the dervish moves like the cosmos and expresses the return of all parts to the center of truth.

Christian theology also assigns a fundamental place to light. The Gospel of John describes Christ as "the light of the world," a concept that has shaped church architecture from Gothic cathedrals to modern chapels. Tadao Ando's Church of Light uses a single cross-shaped opening to make light the main component of spiritual experience, while Le Corbusier's Notre Dame du Haut uses irregular openings and colored light to create a multilayered luminous space that links materiality to the sacred.

In Eastern traditions, especially Mahayana Buddhism, architecture functions as a mandala for meditation. Borobudur temple is a prime example of this pattern: pilgrims move along concentric paths, and with each ascent, they receive more light; the spatial journey becomes a metaphor for spiritual practice and enlightenment.

Phenomenological theorists such as Pallasmaa (2005) and Norberg-Schulz (1980) have shown that light, movement, and atmosphere are tools for constructing meaning and sacred experience. This approach understands sacred architecture not merely as a physical structure but as a field of embodied perception and encounter with transcendence.

Despite this rich body of research, most previous studies focus on a single religious tradition and only a few compare light and movement across Islam, Christianity, and Eastern Buddhism. Furthermore, earlier works often study light in isolation and rarely examine its structural relationship with circular movement, a key concept in Rumi's mysticism. Studies such as Mahdizadeh et al. (2012), Allahyari Bargeshadi and Jamali (2021), and Mehrabian and Mashhadi (1403/2024) do compare mosques and churches, yet their focus is primarily on light rather than on movement patterns or their mystical models.

On the other hand, classical definitions of light as the foundation of visual perception in architecture (Grütter et al., 2014; Major et al., 2010) indicate that light is not only a physical element but a producer of the psychological quality of space. However, the relationship between "light" and "rotation" as two complementary elements in spiritual architecture has rarely been analyzed.

The research gap thus becomes clear: the absence of a coherent study that analyzes light and movement simultaneously, across three major architectural traditions, through a unified theoretical framework grounded in Rumi's mysticism. This study seeks to address that gap and to show how light and rotation can be interpreted as a "shared grammar" of spiritual architecture.

Light in Islam

In Islamic culture, light symbolizes guidance, divine presence and sanctity, a meaning drawn directly from the verse "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth" (Surah al-Nur 24:35). Qur'anic and theological interpretations emphasize the "unity of light" and the "multiplicity of darkness," meaning that light represents the single truth, while darkness represents dispersion and distance from meaning. Thus, in the Islamic tradition, light acquires ethical, existential and epistemic functions: dispersing confusion, illuminating the path and opening perception.

The arrival of Islam in Iran interacted with pre-existing cultural notions that regarded light as a symbol of purity and truth, and this synergy transformed architectural aesthetics. In this context, light in Islamic architecture is not a decorative addition; it is structural, a factor that gives meaning to space and activates the sacred experience (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Nasir al-Mulk Mosque in Shiraz (Pink Mosque), one of the most remarkable examples of the use of light in the history of architecture (https://charsik.com/blog).

Salama (2019) describes light as "the soul of Islamic architecture," explaining that by its quality, intensity and mode of entry, light animates the body of the building and makes the perception of divine presence possible.

In mosques, especially through domed openings, tall windows, and perforated screens, light simultaneously plays three roles:

- Spiritual role: recalling the presence of God and creating a sense of sacredness in the space.
- Perceptual role: guiding the gaze, shaping the rhythm of light and shadow, and emphasizing architectural details.
- Phenomenological role: constructing a dynamic space that reveals different layers of meaning throughout the day.

Indirect and filtered light, a key characteristic of historical mosques such as Sheikh Lotfollah, creates an atmosphere of contemplation, stillness, and inner concentration, in harmony with Islamic mysticism and the concept of tawhid. In these spaces, instead of producing intense glare, light appears gradually and gently, guiding perception from multiplicity toward unity.

Overall, light in Islamic architecture is the spatial manifestation of the same logic articulated in Islamic theology and mysticism: unity, guidance, and presence. This metaphysical status of light provides an appropriate ground for linking it with the concept of rotation in Rumi's mysticism and prepares the way for a comparative interpretation of different architectural traditions.

Light in the Mosque

In Islamic architecture, the mosque is a space of release, stillness and spiritual return, where the tensions of life subside, and inner balance is restored. When designing mosques, architects have considered light not only as a source of illumination but also as a symbolic and doctrinal element. Light in mosques generally enters from two main sources:

- General light for the prayer hall, provided by large openings that illuminate the main space and the mihrab.
- Direct daylight, entering through windows, dome openings, and perforated screens into the main hall (Fig. 2).

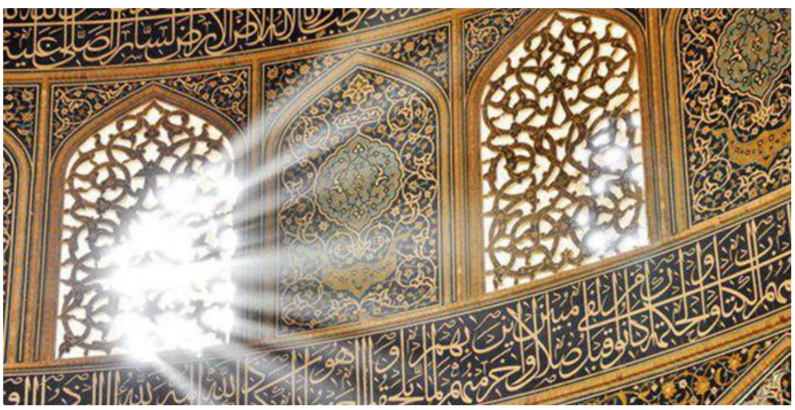


Fig. 2. Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Isfahan (https://charsik.com/blog, Charsik Architectural Glass, 2025).

Mosques, regarded as the most beloved places to God in Islamic culture, function as the heart of the city, and light plays a fundamental role in organizing their spiritual structure. The mosque dome, with its spherical geometry and height, is an ideal medium for the "play of light and shadow," a play that reinforces the immaterial dimension of the space and produces an experience of sacred presence (Burckhardt, 2009; Matracchi & Habibabad, 2021, 2022).

In mosque architecture, the movement from darkness toward light is a spatial metaphor for the believer's journey toward divine guidance. This experience is created through indirect light, spaces of pause, and layered gradations of intensity along the worshipper's path. Spaces designed with natural light evoke a calm, mysterious, and contemplative atmosphere. In such environments, soft shadows and gradual changes in brightness lead the mind toward introspection and mystical reflection. The contrast of light and shadow not only produces visual depth but also helps detach the mind from worldly attachments. The greatest intensity of light is usually concentrated in the most sacred areas, such as the mihrab, reinforcing their spiritual significance.

Salama (2019) identifies four primary functions of light in mosques:

• Symbolic dimension

In Islamic thought, light symbolizes divinity and the manifestation of God's presence. Interior elements such as the mihrab do more than indicate the qibla; they are "symbolized" by light and become guides toward the sacred domain (Salama, 2019, p. 235). Light signals divine presence, while shadow recalls the impermanence of the material world.

• Spiritual psychological dimension

Balanced light calms the spirit of the space and strengthens the spiritual bond among worshippers. Salama (2019) notes that light entering through dome openings "illuminates the space equally," and this equality metaphorically suggests that "divine light reaches all individuals" (p. 236). This quality intensifies the user's sense of safety, tranquility, and sanctity.

• Aesthetic dimension

In traditional Islamic architecture, wooden mashrabiyyas, colored glass oculi, and marble or stone light filters serve to modulate natural light. These elements create poetic compositions of light and shadow and subtle plays of color (Mazaheri & Mazaheri, 2020). Over the course of the day, light changes, and this temporal shift adds a dynamic quality to otherwise static architectural elements (Salama, 2019, p. 237).

• Functional dimension

Sufficient light is necessary for daily activities and ritual practices. Salama (2019) stresses the importance of avoiding excessive light contrast, especially around the mihrab, so that visual distraction does not interfere with the worshippers' concentration.

Taken together, these dimensions show that light in mosques is not merely an illuminator but a constructor of the sacred experience, playing a central role in the spiritual and aesthetic orientation of the space.

Light in Christianity

In Christianity, light is one of the most fundamental divine symbols, encompassing a wide range of spiritual meanings, from purity and salvation to the presence of God. In the scriptures, light is consistently used as a metaphor for divine truth, and in the Gospel of John, the resurrected Christ declares, "I am the light of the world." This statement sheds light on a physical phenomenon as a sacred and spiritual element. The luminous halo around Christ's face in Christian art and the glowing cross are visual signs that affirm the centrality of light in Christian theology. In the Middle Ages, light was considered the most important means of representing spirituality and the sacred because it made divine presence manifest in the material world. In this tradition, light serves as an intermediary

between God and the world, and church architecture explicitly reflects this spiritual language (Monshat, 2013).

Light in the Church

The term “church” derives from the Greek word ekklesia, meaning “assembly” or “gathering.” In the Christian tradition, the church is expected to represent an image of the heavenly realm on earth; therefore, light plays a central role in its spatial organization.

- Church architecture is structured according to a symbolic east–west orientation:
- East (the altar): symbol of sunrise, the beginning of the day, and the manifestation of God’s presence.
- West (the entrance): symbol of the material world and the realm of humans.

The movement of the believer from the entrance (west) toward the altar (east) is a metaphor for the spiritual journey from the earthly realm to the divine. Like the spatial pattern of “movement from darkness to light” in Islamic architecture, this path has a spiritual and ascetic dimension. Light enters the church mainly through:

- Eastern windows and narrow openings,
- Rose windows,
- Tall arched windows,
- Domes or vertical roof openings.

This system of lighting emphasizes the altar and the sanctuary, illuminating the spiritual center of the church. Morning light, entering at a soft and gradual angle, creates a contemplative and emotional atmosphere and turns the church into a place for spiritual revelation. Church architecture rests on two spiritual axes:

- Horizontal axis: the believer’s movement from west to east,
- Vertical axis: the descent of light from above to below, symbolizing the descent of divine mercy from heaven to earth.
- Together, these axes construct a space in which the human being can experience divine presence through light.

In many historical churches, light is deliberately dramatic: varying intensities, the colors of stained glass, and deep chiaroscuro create an atmosphere of spiritual grandeur (Fig. 3). In this sense, light is not only a means of illumination but also a tool for magnifying divine majesty.

Thus, light in the church is both a theological concept and a spatial device; it elevates architecture beyond a material shell and transforms it into a field of sacred experience.

Case studies

Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque

Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, constructed in the early seventeenth century during the Safavid period, is one of the most prominent examples of mystical Islamic architecture. In contrast to congregational mosques whose structure is organized around a courtyard, iwans, and minarets, this mosque has no courtyard or minaret, and its entire spatial organization is concentrated in a single domed chamber. The deliberate omission of external markers shifts spiritual focus inward, toward introspection and inner contemplation, in full harmony with the foundations of Islamic mysticism and its emphasis on the inner journey.



Fig. 3. Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris, France (https://charsik.com/blog, Charsik Architectural Glass, 2025).

Light enters the mosque through intricately patterned windows located around the base of the dome. Sunlight passes obliquely through these openings and refracts on geometric tilework and arabesques. This refraction dissolves material surfaces in immaterial radiance and elevates the space from earthly reality to a sacred quality. The dome, adorned with sunburst patterns, acts as a cosmic canopy. The light that emanates from its center can be read as an architectural metaphor for Suhrawardi's "Light of Lights," the symbol of divine unity both above and within.

The dome's decoration includes concentric rings of peacock feather motifs. Eight rings, each with thirty-two feathers, together yield the number 256, which, according to abjad numerical calculation, corresponds to the word "nur" (light) (Askarizad et al., 2022). This numerical coding adds another layer of luminous symbolism to the structure.

Color composition also carries spiritual meaning: the contrast between cream or buff (earth, nasut) and turquoise (heaven, sama') on the outer shell of the dome, and the dominance of blue, dark blue, and turquoise tones inside, creates an image of a paradisal realm. This chromatic duality aligns with Rumi's logic of opposites and their ultimate reconciliation (Askarizad et al., 2022).

In Rumi's mysticism, the heart is often likened to a dome that receives divine light only once the self has been emptied. This metaphor connects closely with the spatial experience of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque: the path that leads from the dark entry passage toward the luminous dome is the architectural embodiment of the movement of the soul from multiplicity to unity, a movement Rumi describes as the journey from shadow into the sun of truth.

This experience is also compatible with Suhrawardi's Hikmat al-Ishraq. In his ontology, existence is organized in a hierarchy from light to darkness, and the intensity and direction of light express different levels of being (Asadollahi et al., 2021). In Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, the gradual increase in light intensity along the path from the entrance to the dome materializes this ontological ascent (Fig. 4).

خاصه خورشید اِمالی ان سریست
روز و شب ردار او روشنریست

Especially that sun of perfection, which is all a secret
Day and night, its only work is pouring out light.

مطلع شمس آی ر اسندری
بعد از آن هرجا روی نمو فری
Be the place where the sun rises, if you are truly Alexander.
Then wherever you go, you will appear fair and noble.
بعد از آن هرجا روی مشرق شود
شرقها بر مغربت عاشق شود
After that, every place you set foot will turn to “east”;
All the Easts will fall in love with your “West”.
حس خفاشت سوی مغرب دوان
حس دراشت سوی مشرق روان
The sense of your bat-like eye keeps running toward the west,
But the sense in your inner steps is moving toward the east.

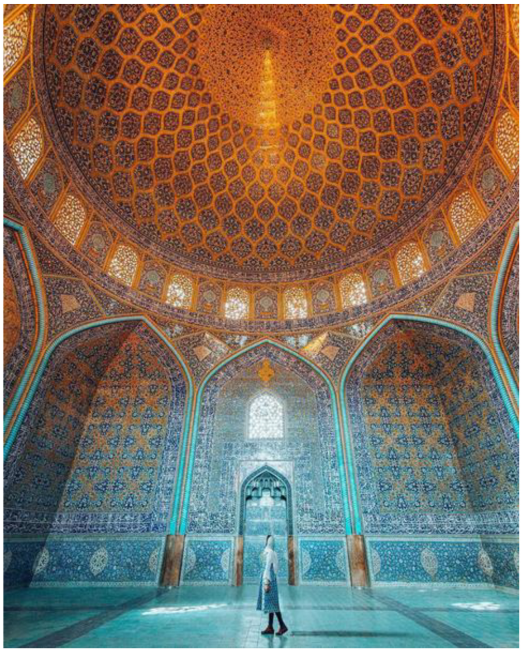


Fig. 4. Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Isfahan, Iran (https://www.reddit.com).

Sancaklar Mosque

Sancaklar Mosque in Istanbul, designed by Emre Arolat (2013), is one of the most significant contemporary attempts to redefine the typology of the Islamic mosque. By sinking into the ground and omitting conventional elements such as domes and minarets, it distances itself from the vertical, icon-like expression of traditional mosque architecture and instead follows an introverted, minimalist, and perception-centered approach. Its direct relationship with the site topography creates a spatial experience that guides the user not upward toward the sky, but inward toward silence, depth and contemplation (Fig. 5).

Natural light in this mosque is deliberately sparse, tightly controlled, and precisely calibrated. It enters through narrow slits, roof gaps, and hidden skylights, tracing sharp,

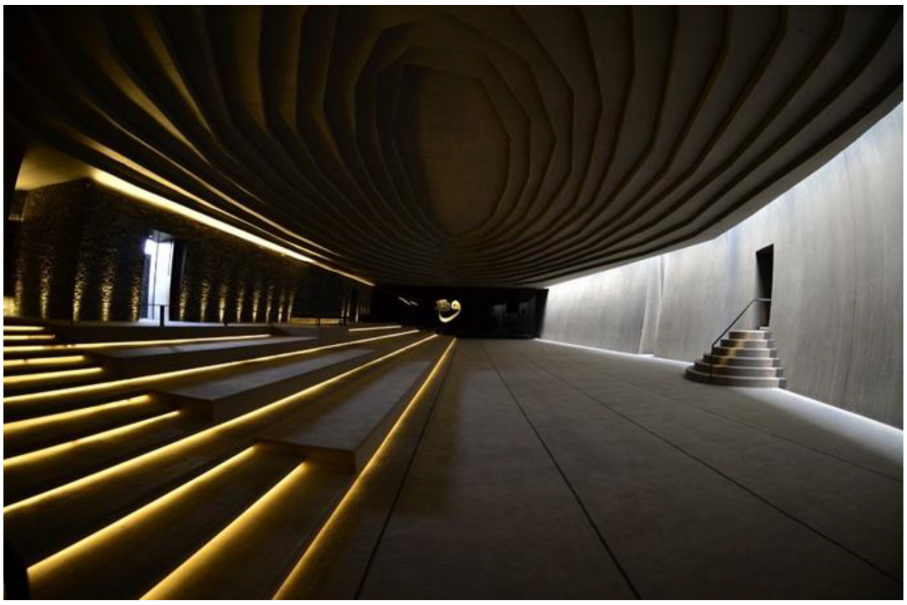


Fig. 5. Sancaklar Mosque: A symbol of modern Islamic architecture and cultural heritage (https://www.sirkecimansion.com/sancaklar-mosque/).

layered lines of light across rough stone walls. Unlike the generous, diffused light typical of historical mosques, this controlled illumination shifts the user's perception from broad horizontal awareness to focused, localized experience. Light here is not decorative; it is the primary agent of spiritual experience, and the absence of ornament intensifies its guiding role (Asadollahi et al., 2021).

This approach is implicitly aligned with Rumi's thought. For Rumi, ultimate light is a singular truth perceptible only when "perceptual veils" are reduced, and superficial multiplicities are removed. One of his quatrains expresses this condition:

حس دراشت سوی مشرق روان
To where? To that realm where no place can be found,
جز سنابرقِ مهِ الله نست
Where nothing remains but the flash of the Divine Moon.
از همه اوهام و تصورات دور
Far beyond all illusions and imagined forms
نور نور نور نور نور نور
There is nothing there but light, light, light, light, light, light.

Instead of making circular motion explicit in form, Sancaklar Mosque generates a phenomenological "rotation": a path that leads visitors downward into darkness, then returns them upward toward the light of the prayer hall. This descending and ascending movement becomes a psychological spiral, moving from exterior to interior, from multiplicity to unity. The lack of ornament reinforces this movement and turns light into the only adornment, revealing the essence of simplicity and truth. Rumi captures this logic succinctly:

در مسجد و در عبه به دنبال خدایم
In the mosque and in Kaaba we seek God,
از حسِ خدا در دلمان دور و جدایم
Yet, from the sense of God within our hearts, we are far apart.
هم مسجد و هم عبه و هم قبله بهانهست
Mosque and Kaaba, and qibla are all but pretexts,
دقّت بنی نورِ خدا داخل خانهست
If you look closely, God's light is inside the house.

In this framework, Sancaklar Mosque can be understood as an architecture that defines "house" not as a physical location but as a space of awareness, where light builds meaning rather than merely creating images.

Church of light–Tadao Ando

Tadao Ando's Church of Light (1989), located in Ibaraki, Japan, is among the most influential minimalist works for studying the relationship between light, spatial perception, and spiritual experience. Constructed from exposed concrete with simple geometric forms and devoid of unnecessary ornament, it creates an environment in which light is the only active element shaping the sacred experience. The spatial organization is based on a pure concrete shell with a cross-shaped geometry, and this formal simplicity focuses the user's perception on "how light enters" the space (Hayati et al., 2017; Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Church of Light, 1989 (Photo: Sira Anamwong via Shutterstock).

The eastern wall, which contains the only controlled opening in the building, is the main perceptual focus. The cross-shaped slit admits natural light with a specific intensity, direction, and pattern, altering the perceived quality of the space throughout the day.

Light here is not decorative; it is a window to the sky and a sign of divine presence. As Selsoor (2009) notes, in this church, "the human spirit, nature and God meet in a cosmic unity of space and light."

Conceptually, this approach is comparable to Rumi's mystical tradition, not at the level of literary imagery, but at the level of perceptual models of light. Rumi understands light as the agent that enables passage from appearance to reality, allowing one to distinguish truth from illusion by transcending perceptual limitations.

In the Mathnawi, light is presented as a regulator of perception, while multiplicity is treated as the outcome of veils.

بود آدم دیدهٔ نور قدیم
Adam was the eye that beheld the primordial Light,
موی در دیده بود وه عظیم
But a single hair before that eye appeared a mighty mountain.

This "reduction of obstacles" is also evident in the Church of Light: the removal of color, ornament, varied materials, and multiple light sources concentrates perception on a single luminous center. This follows the same logic that Rumi expresses in his parable of smoke and flame:

جانست ون شعله ولی دودش ز نورش بیشتر
The soul is like a flame, yet its smoke outweighs its light.
ون دود از حد بذرد در خانه ننماید ضیا
When smoke becomes too dense, no light can shine in the house.
ر دود را متر نی از نور شعله برخوری
But if you lessen the smoke, the flame's light will appear
از نور تو روشن شود هم این سرا هم آن سرا
And by your light, this dwelling and the next will both be illuminated.

Minimalism in Ando's church thus operates as a structural reduction in order to heighten clarity of perception. Light is the primary agent of understanding, determining the path, destination, and meaning of space. From the perspective of environmental psychology, changes in light intensity and direction in the Church of Light shape users' behavior and attention, thereby structuring their experience.

Phenomenologically, the focus of perception around the cross-shaped opening is comparable to the "rotation around a center" in Sufi sama. In sama, a fixed center organizes the dancer's motion and consciousness; in the Church of Light, the eastern opening plays a similar role as a perceptual center, toward which all visual and spatial lines converge. Thus, the relationship between light, centrality, and perception can be explained structurally in both systems.

The stillness of concrete contrasted with the dynamism of light produces a duality resembling "body and soul": the body remains still while the soul moves and spins within the light.

In sum, Ando's Church of Light is an exemplary case for exploring the relationship between light, perception, and spirituality in contemporary architecture and shows notable convergence with key epistemological concepts in Rumi's work. This convergence makes it possible to develop new comparative models of light that emphasize the perceptual function of illumination, the reduction of distracting multiplicities, and the guidance of attention in space.

Notre Dame du Haut–Le Corbusier

Notre Dame du Haut, designed by Le Corbusier in 1955 at Ronchamp, is one of the most innovative religious buildings of the twentieth century and a turning point in modern spiritual architecture. Abandoning classical symmetry, it uses undulating walls, irregular openings, and a shell-like roof to create a space defined not by fixed form but by the dynamism of perception. Spatial experience in this chapel depends on the movement of the user, the angle of view, and the path of entry; the building becomes a "perception-based system" rather than a static object (Figs. 7 and 8).

In contrast to the single-source light of Ando's Church of Light, illumination at Ronchamp enters through a constellation of deep, irregular openings. These vary in size, depth, and color, creating what might be called "guided dispersion": the multiplicity of light sources does not produce chaos but a coherent perceptual system. The depth of the openings generates complex patterns of shadow and glow; colored light continuously transforms the atmosphere. The result is a space in constant flux that keeps the user's experience in a state of perceptual dynamism.

This multi-centered luminous structure can be interpreted within Rumi's framework. For Rumi, light is a single truth whose manifestations appear multiple because of human perceptual limitations. Similarly, at Ronchamp, despite the diversity of apertures and light paths, a unified perception of space emerges. As Rumi suggests, the "sun that shines in hearts" illuminates both heaven and earth, and the soul responds in wordless joy.

آن آفتاب ز دل در سنهها بتافت

That Sun whose radiance shone from heart to breast,

بر عرش و فرش و نبد خضرا مبارست

Its blessing rests on throne and earth and the emerald dome above.

دل را مجال نست ه از ذوق دم زند

The heart finds no breath to speak from such ecstasy,

جان سجده مند ه خدایا مبارست

While the soul falls in prostration, crying: O Lord, how blessed it is.

In this church, the perception of light depends on bodily and inner movement. Every step reveals a new angle of light and shadow, leading the user from surface to meaning through a searching, exploratory process. This gradual, fluid experience corresponds to Rumi's epistemology, which defines knowledge as a dynamic, non-linear transformation of perception rather than an instantaneous grasp.

By using a non-linear formal structure, Le Corbusier frees the chapel from rigid geometrical frameworks. This formal liberation aligns with Rumi's notion of "epistemic suspension," the release from fixed mental forms as a condition for deeper understanding. Just as Ronchamp loosens the user's dependence on classical order, Rumi invites the seeker to let go of mental rigidities and enter an immediate, moment-by-moment encounter with reality.

Notre Dame du Haut can thus be regarded as a key case in the study of light and spiritual perception: a building that, through its non-linear form, multiple light sources, and gradual experiential unfolding, creates a perceptual model resonating with core Rumi concepts such as unity in multiplicity, perceptual dynamism, gradual knowledge, and freedom from linear structures. This overlap is not merely symbolic; it operates at the level of cognitive structures and models of spatial perception, and can serve as a foundation for new theoretical frameworks in research on light and spirituality in contemporary architecture.



Fig. 7. Notre Dame du Haut: A Chapel by Le Corbusier (https://www.roadtripsaroundtheworld.com/notre-dame-du-haut-a-chapel-by-le-corbusier/).



Fig. 8. Notre Dame du Haut: A Chapel by Le Corbusier (inhabitat.com/Kristine Lofgren).

Borobudur Temple

Borobudur, the great Mahayana Buddhist stupa of the ninth century in Central Java, Indonesia, is one of the most significant spiritual architectural monuments in East Asia. Designed as a stone cosmic diagram, its structure consists of a series of ascending terraces along which pilgrims walk in a clockwise spiral. This ascending movement embodies the three cosmological levels of Buddhism: kamadhatu (the world of desire), rupadhatu (the world of form), and arupadhatu (the formless world), and evokes the journey from earthly attachments to enlightenment.

Light plays a crucial role in guiding both the physical and spiritual movement of the pilgrim. The lower levels are more enclosed, heavy, and shadowed, emphasizing bondage, ignorance and entanglement in the world of desire. As the pilgrim rises through the levels, spaces gradually open, the sky expands and natural light increases in intensity. This gradual increase in light symbolizes the liberation of consciousness from darkness and its entry into the realm of illumination, culminating at the open, luminous central stupa (Fig. 9).

This ascending, spiral path is comparable to the logic of motion in Rumi's sama. In sama, circular movement around a fixed center embodies the journey of the soul from multiplicity to unity. Rumi describes the axis of sama as the "return to the divine center," a path that is not linear but spiral and gradual. The same idea can be seen in Borobudur's spatial organization: with each circumambulation and each upward step, the pilgrim leaves another layer of darkness behind and moves closer to light. As Mazaheri and Mazaheri (2020) note, this structure links "symbolic rotation" with "spiritual ascent." At the summit, light appears as a sign of enlightenment, divine presence and spiritual awakening. This stage recalls Rumi's description of going beyond both worlds and reaching pure perception:

برون ز هر دو جهانی و در سماع آیی
Step outside both worlds the moment you enter the Sema;
برون ز هر دو جهانست این جهان سماع
For this world of Sema lies beyond the two worlds alike.
اره بام بلندست بام هفتم رخ
Though the seventh heaven stands as the highest roof,
ذشته است از این بام نردبان سماع
The ladder of Sema has already risen past that height.
به زیر ای بوبند هر ه غیر وبست
Tread underfoot all that is other than the Beloved,
سماع از آن شما و شما از آن سماع
For Sema belongs to you, and you belong to Sema.

In the final architectural stage of Borobudur, the pilgrim stands in a fully open, radiant space, released from the constraints of form and boundary, with only light and sky remaining (Fig. 10). This point expresses the Buddhist idea of "formless unity," and in a Rumi-inspired reading it corresponds to annihilation in light and divine presence.

These features make Borobudur an exceptional case in comparative studies of light, movement and spirituality. Through its spiral path, the temple gradually loosens the pilgrim's attachment to the ground and leads them through a perceptual and spiritual process toward illumination, structurally echoing Rumi's logic of "turning toward the center of truth."



Fig. 9. Seated Buddha inside the stupa (https://thenomadplanet.com/borobudur-spiritual-highlight-of-indonesia/).

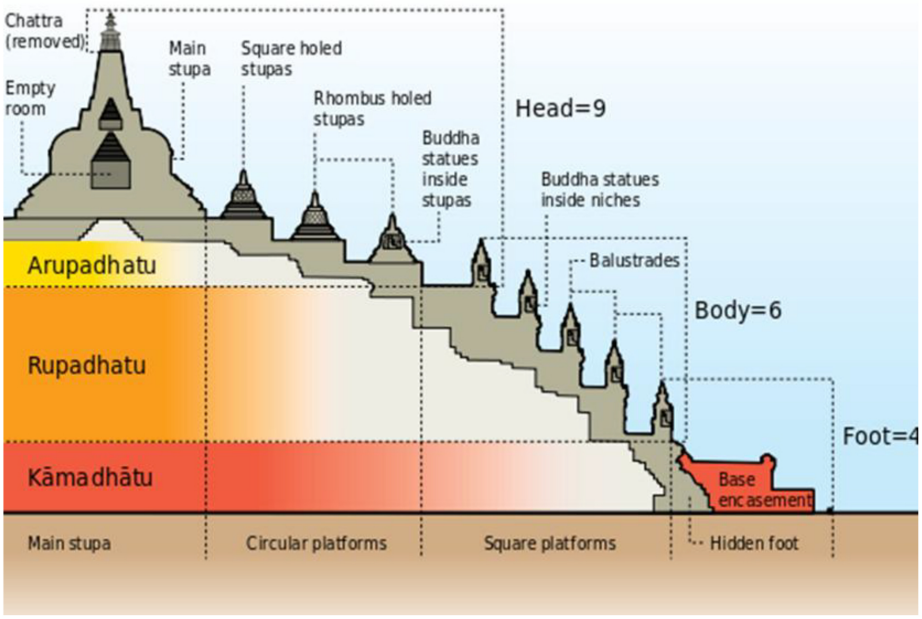


Fig. 10. The monument is divided into three broad levels corresponding to the three realms in Buddhist cosmology (https://www.twobirdsbreakingfree.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-borobudur).

Discussion

The comparative analysis of five sacred buildings, two from Islamic architecture, two from the Christian tradition and one from the Buddhist tradition shows that despite cultural, theological and formal differences, light and movement function as primary tools for constructing sacred meaning in all of them. Each spiritual tradition interprets light and movement through its own epistemic lens, yet a set of shared metaphysical patterns emerges that can be called a “universal language of sacred space.”

In all the examples studied, light holds a status beyond the physical and acts as a mediator between the tangible and the sacred. In Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, indirect and filtered light becomes a metaphor for divine unity and is linked to Suhrawardi's luminous ontology. In Ando's Church of Light, a single beam of light splits the darkness and captures the Christian concept of salvation. In Borobudur, light gradually increases with the ascent and visualizes the path of awakening and spiritual release. These variations, despite theological differences, converge on a shared logic: light signifies presence, the unveiling of truth and proximity to the divine.

The second key element is movement, which appears either as actual spatial motion or as an internal, perceptual process. Rumi's circular movement in sama provides a powerful model for understanding these patterns. At Borobudur, the pilgrim's spiral ascent is a concrete metaphor for spiritual rise and return to the center. In Sancaklar Mosque, the downward movement into the earth followed by a return toward light evokes an inner rotation and creates a contemplative experience. In Ronchamp, movement is primarily phenomenological: fluid light, asymmetric forms and subtle gradations of brightness keep the user's mind and perception in constant motion.

In the Islamic examples, inwardness, subtle light and an emphasis on inner transcendence are prominent. In the Christian and Eastern examples, contrast, drama, openness and ascent play a stronger role in shaping spiritual experience. Nevertheless, in all cases, a central axis or focal source — whether a dome, a luminous cross, a stupa or a radiant sanctuary, functions as the perceptual center of unity. This centrality resonates with the Sufi concept of tawhid and the inner tendency of the human being to return to the center of truth.

The study also demonstrates that Rumi's mystical concepts of light and sama extend beyond Islamic boundaries and can serve as an analytical model for understanding spiritual experiences in other traditions. Rumi's metaphysical imagination, which sees light as the single reality and circular motion as the path of return, when translated into architecture, leads different cultures independently toward similar uses of light and movement.

In a world challenged by cultural fragmentation and spiritual crises, identifying these shared architectural patterns is not merely an academic finding; it is a reminder of the inner unity of human spiritual expression. Sacred architecture, by harnessing elemental forces such as light and movement, revives peace not only as a concept but as a lived spatial experience.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how two fundamental elements; light and rotation with deep roots in Islamic mysticism and especially in Rumi's philosophy, are manifested in the sacred architecture of different traditions. The comparative analysis of five key buildings from Islamic, Christian and Buddhist contexts showed that these elements operate beyond functional or aesthetic roles as shared metaphysical symbols, shaping a global language of spirituality in architecture.

Each of the analyzed buildings offers a distinct narrative of the relationship between light, movement and the sacred: the indirect, unity-seeking light of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque; the transcendent minimalism of the Church of Light; the earthen inwardness of Sancaklar Mosque; the fluid luminosity of Notre Dame du Haut; and the spiral ascent of Borobudur. Together, they demonstrate that light, in every case, signifies presence, guidance and the unveiling of truth, while movement – whether physical or perceptual reflects the soul's journey toward unity, peace or enlightenment. This parallelism suggests

that Rumi's mystical concepts, such as the illumination of the heart and the spiral return to the center, are traceable across cultures and not confined to the Islamic tradition.

Based on these findings, it can be argued that sacred architecture embodies a shared symbolic grammar. This grammar rests on elemental metaphors: light as manifestation, darkness as absence, and rotation as return to the center. These metaphors transcend doctrinal boundaries, enable shared spiritual experience and transform architecture from a mere cultural product into a medium for interfaith dialogue and the reconstruction of peace.

Theoretically, this research emphasizes symbolic continuity rather than formal divergence and contributes to the growing field of comparative sacred architecture. It also suggests that future studies can benefit from combining architectural analysis with metaphysical hermeneutics in order to understand how mystical traditions shape sacred spaces across different times and cultures.

In a world increasingly marked by polarization, loss of meaning and the dominance of materialism, re-engaging with the symbolic power of light and movement in architecture can offer more than aesthetic insight; it can open a path toward renewed spiritual reflection. As Rumi reminds us, "Do you still not know? It is your light that illuminates the worlds." Architecture too can carry this light, guiding the soul, drawing multiplicity into unity and bringing humanity's shared spiritual origin back into awareness.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Author contribution

The author participated in preparing the draft manuscript, supervising the research, developing the methodological framework, and revising the draft manuscript. The author reviewed and approved the final manuscript prior to submission.

AI usage statement

Generative AI tools were used during manuscript preparation for language editing, structural organisation and drafting assistance. The authors remain responsible for the accuracy, originality, ethical integrity, and final approval of the manuscript. Generative AI was not used to create, alter, or fabricate research data.

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