

REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM APPROACHES IN THE REINTERPRETATION OF SACRED NOTION IN MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract: *The debate over the sacred meaning in mosque architecture has become increasingly prominent with the emergence of mosque construction that tends to emphasize aesthetic and symbolic aspects, but sometimes neglects the spiritual dimension and the experience of sacredness. In this context, an epistemological issue arises regarding how sacredness is understood, whether as an objective reality inherent in space and form (realism), or as a subjective construction born from human experience of space (anti-realism). The main problem of this study lies in the reduction of sacred meaning, which causes mosque architecture to lose its spiritual value and become merely a visual representation without depth of meaning. This study aims to reinterpret the notion of sacredness in mosque architecture through a critical examination of two philosophical approaches to knowledge, realism and anti-realism, in order to formulate a new and more comprehensive. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method based on a literature review, examining recent books and scientific journals that discuss the philosophy of realism and anti-realism, the theory of sacred space, and studies of contemporary Islamic architecture. This reinterpretation opens up the understanding that mosque architecture is not merely a place of worship, but a space for mediation between transcendence and social life.*

Keywords: *Realism, Anti-realism, Sacredness, Mosque architecture, Transcendental*

Introduction

Mosque construction in the contemporary era tends to increasingly emphasize visual, aesthetic, and symbolic aspects, often neglecting the spiritual dimension, which should be the core of mosque architecture (Ayyad, 2024). This situation raises epistemological questions regarding the nature of sacredness in architecture, whether sacredness is an objective quality or a subjective construct an objective quality inherent in form and space, as understood in the realist paradigm, or a subjective construct emerging through the experiences and perceptions of the congregation, as emphasized by anti-realism.

This debate is crucial because the reduction of sacred meaning has shifted the meaning of mosque space. From a spiritual vessel that conveys profound transcendence, it has become a mere visual representation that emphasizes aesthetics but lacks meaning (Ahsani et al., 2024). Therefore, this research stems from the need to revisit the understanding of sacredness in mosque architecture to address this narrowing of meaning and restore the relationship between architectural form, spatial experience, and the spiritual values it embodies.

The study of sacredness in mosque architecture is an important concern in Islamic architectural studies, especially when the experience of space is not only understood as a visual phenomenon (Simmins, 2004), but also as a spiritual encounter between humans and the divine (Siyahrood et al., 2019). Understanding how sacredness is present, experienced, and interpreted in mosque spaces depends on the underlying philosophical framework. Two approaches to the philosophy of knowledge, realism and antirealism, show contrasting yet mutually enriching conceptual bases for reading the relationship between architectural space and sacred experience (Khasri & Fuad Abdullah Harahap, 2024). This approach is in line with (Geva, 2023) who states that sacred architectural design must be able to unite tangible and intangible elements, namely connecting the physical form of the building with the spiritual dimension that lives in the experience of the user of the space.

In the perspective of realism, sacredness is seen as an ontological nature (Danermark et al., 2019) that exists independently of human consciousness and hierophany, which is a manifestation of God's presence (Eliade, 1959). The mosque space, with its geometric arrangement, certain proportions (Ahsani et al., 2023), Qibla orientation (Cuenca-Abellán, 2024), and play of light (Hasbi & Musdinar, 2020), has the objective ability to give rise to transcendental experiences (Fireza et al., 2025). Previous research has shown that cosmological structures and patterns in mosque architecture are able to produce consistent spiritual experiences among various individuals (Nasser, 2024). This study confirms that physical form can act as a medium for presenting divine reality.

In contrast, the anti-realist approach positions sacredness as a construction of meaning born from the perceptions, experiences, and socio-religious practices carried out by individuals or groups (Durkheim, 1995). Within this framework, the mosque space is not inherently sacred, but becomes sacred through interpretations, rituals, and symbolic relationships built by the congregation (Rasdi, 2017). Sacredness emerges as a phenomenological and intersubjective experience that depends on the awareness and culture of the community that uses it.

Based on this understanding, this study aims to interpret sacred ideas in mosque architecture through a critical examination of two philosophical approaches to knowledge, realism and antirealism, in order to formulate a new, more comprehensive understanding. This approach is expected to enrich the discourse on sacred architecture and provide a more balanced conceptual perspective between the objective dimensions of space and the construction of human spiritual experience. Furthermore, this study is expected to foster a methodological dialogue between the philosophy of knowledge and architectural theory, thus providing a basis for further research.

Literature Review

Philosophy of Knowledge: Realism and Anti-Realism

The philosophy of knowledge realism is a school of thought in philosophy that asserts that reality or the external world truly exists independently of human thought or perception. In the context of epistemology (the theory of knowledge), realism argues that human knowledge is a reflection or representation of objective reality, not merely a construct of the mind.

The principles of realism view the external world as truly existing objectively, regardless of whether or not humans observe it, so that knowledge is considered a representation of that reality (Erikawati, 2023), like a photograph that records a real object (Tamrin, 2019). In this view, knowledge arises from direct interaction with reality, not merely from ideas or subjective perceptions, because objects remain and do not change even when they are not being observed. Realism also criticises idealism by rejecting the idea that reality only exists in the human mind, and affirms the existence of a world outside human consciousness.

Meanwhile, anti-realism argues that we cannot be certain that the world or objects of knowledge truly exist independently of human thought or language. Therefore, truth is not always understood as the correspondence between statements and external reality, but rather as something that depends on justification, evidence, or agreement within a community (Haukioja, 2020). This view also emphasizes that humans have limitations in proving whether knowledge truly describes the external world. Knowledge is seen as a construction, the result of interpretation, or even a product of social convention, not as a direct reflection of objective reality. Furthermore, in anti-realism, a statement is considered meaningful or true only if it can be verified or proven in practice, not based on claims about things that are inaccessible or unprovable.

The Concept of Sacredness in the Islamic Perspective

Seyyed Hossein Nasr stated that the experience of sacredness in the Islamic tradition is rooted in existential unity (*wahdat al-wujud*) and divine love that ignites the soul, which can be realized concretely. (Nasr, 1987) criticized the strict dichotomy between sacred and profane expressed in modern Western thought. Through the work of 'Attar and the tradition of *Sufism*, he presented an esoteric unity that eliminates the boundary between the material and spiritual worlds, so that his criticism tends to support the absence of a sacred-profane dichotomy in the Islamic view. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas in *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* reveals that the sacred is not merely something "specifically for religion," but an essential quality of reality rooted in the relationship of all things to God as *al-Haqq* (The All-True). The sacred is anything that points to, reminds, and confirms human attachment to God, so that sacredness is not a social construct, but something objective, embedded in the structure of the cosmos and the order of being (Al-Attas, 1995). Meanwhile, Titus Burckhardt, in his book *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, understands the "sacred" in Islam not as something separate from the world, but as the light of *Tawhid* that permeates and organizes all forms, including art and architecture. Therefore, for Burckhardt, sacrality in Islam is seen when form, technique, and metaphysical meaning unite (Burckhardt, 2009).

In Islam, the sacredness of space is closely linked to *Tawhid*, the orientation of the Qibla, and the mosque's function as a center of worship and community. Sacredness arises not only from physical form or ornamentation, but from the space's relationship to the principle of the oneness of God, sharia law, and the spiritual experience of the congregation within. Architectural elements such as the mihrab (mihrab), pulpit (pulpit), lighting, and spatial order serve as media that help create a sense of divine presence. Sacredness in Islam is egalitarian, every Muslim has the right to access the prayer space, and holiness is determined by the intention and practice of worship, not merely architectural splendor. Thus, the sacredness of a mosque is a blend of theological principles, architectural symbolism, and collective spiritual experience (Ahsani et al., 2024).

Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach based on a literature-based/conceptual study (Susanto et al., 2024). This method is used to understand phenomena in depth through the collection and analysis of non-numerical data from various literature sources, emphasising holistic description, inductive analysis, and interpretation of meaning based on the subject's perspective. The focus of the research is on a deep understanding of the meaning of sacredness in mosque architecture, rather than quantitative measurement of variables (Creswell, 2013). As a literature study, this research uses books and scientific journal articles as the main data sources,

which are examined systematically, structurally, and critically to construct theoretical arguments (Snyder, 2019)

Result and Discussion

Realism: Sacredness as an Objective Entity of Space in Mosque Architecture

The realism paradigm is based on the assumption that the sacred dimension is a dimension of reality, existing independently of human consciousness. In the critical realist perspective, as proposed by (Snyder, 2019), reality has a layered ontological structure, where the world consists not only of observable phenomena (empirical), but also includes the mechanisms and structures that operate behind human experience (real domain). In the context of mosque architecture, sacredness can be understood as an objective entity that hierophany exists in the elements of space, form, light, geometry, and the spiritual orientation of the building (Hoffman, 2010). These elements can help stimulate a connection with the Divine, as signs (*ayat*) in remembering the Divine (Ahsani, 2024).

The mosque space serves not only as a venue for religious activities but also as an ontological medium that radiates transcendental meaning. This aligns with the realist view that the spiritual world has a real existence and can be presented through architectural arrangements. Realists believe that there is a world independent of thought and consciousness (a world independent of the mind) (Khasri & Fuad Abdullah Harahap, 2024). Research in contemporary Islamic architecture shows that the realist approach is manifested in mosque design, which emphasizes the direct relationship between physical structure and sacred experience. Empirical research by (Payandeh et al., 2024) reinforces the realist view by showing that the geometric and numerical patterns in the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Iran do not merely serve as decorative elements, but rather reflect the order of the cosmos that connects humans with the Transcendent. Furthermore, they convey cosmological messages by presenting spiritual experiences objectively and consistently in individual contexts. Similarly, (Jin, 2022) asserts that vertical spaces and domes in Islamic architecture create a spiritual awareness of the relationship between earth and sky, signifying a cosmic dimension that represents humanity's connection with divine reality.

Within the framework of realism, these two perspectives reinforce the understanding that mosque architecture is understood as an ontological mediator and a universal medium that embodies divine order through its form, proportion, and spatial order. Through elements such as natural light, geometric symmetry, precise Qibla orientation, and the symbolic structure of space, the mosque functions as a medium that helps facilitate the experience of sacredness through an encounter between humans and a transcendental presence, within an architecture realized cosmic order.

The realist view in the philosophy of science, as explained by (Danermark et al., 2019), is based on the belief that social and material reality has a real structure and mechanism that can be explained through scientific observation. In sacred architecture, this means that form, space, and materiality have objective causal power that influences human spiritual experience. Thus, the realist paradigm understands sacredness as an objective and inherent quality rooted in divine principles and manifested through symbolism, geometry, and spatial orientation in mosque architecture. (Askarizad et al., 2022) emphasizes that sacredness is not merely a perception, but is embedded in a design that adheres to Islamic principles to remind the congregation of God's presence. This realist approach directs architectural research on mosques towards empirical studies of how physical elements systematically and measurably create spiritual effects.

Anti-Realism in the Interpretation of the Sacredness of the Mosque

According to (Kuhn, 2020), understanding a scientific phenomenon is always framed by a paradigm that determines how reality is viewed. In the context of researching sacred experiences in mosque architecture, this paradigm shapes how people interpret space and symbols as manifestations of sacredness within a particular social and spiritual order. The anti-realist paradigm holds that the experience of sacredness is not objectively inherent in space or architectural objects but is constructed through awareness, interpretation, and cultural context.

The sacredness of mosque architecture is not a natural property of the building, but rather the result of the meaning given by the congregation through their spiritual experiences and ritual practices (Khasri & Harahap, 2023). Thus, the mosque becomes a sacred space through the actions, worship practices, and symbols that are interpreted by the congregation, not simply because of its physical form or structure. This thinking aligns with the theory (Durkheim, 1995) that asserts that sacredness is a social construct born from collective practices and repeated religious rites. Therefore, sacred space exists within a horizon of religious meaning that is constantly renewed by social consciousness.

In the anti-realist perspective, sacredness is understood as a dynamic cultural, social, and individual interpretation that depends on the user's experience of the space. (Allahham, 2019) show that many contemporary mosque designs reinterpret traditional forms by emphasizing inclusivity, contextual relevance, and spiritual experience. This approach rejects the notion that a single form or symbol permanently represents sacredness, but rather assumes that sacred meanings continually evolve with social and cultural change. Thus, mosque architecture becomes a medium open to reinterpretation, where sacredness is created from a dialogical relationship among space, users, and the context of its time.

As explained by (Putnam, 2002), anti-realism rejects the notion of a single, objectively accessible reality and asserts that social reality is shaped through language, symbols, and cultural practices. Within this framework, sacred architecture lacks intrinsic meaning but derives its sacredness from the symbolism and rituals practiced by the community (Adiputra & Salura, 2021). For example, the shape of a dome or Islamic calligraphy is not automatically sacred, but becomes sacred because religious tradition and interpretation impart transcendental meaning to it. (Dressler, 2019) adds that reality, in the anti-realist perspective, is relative to human consciousness and shaped by social context and language. This means that the space of a mosque becomes sacred only when it is experienced and spiritually interpreted by the people who use it.

This anti-realist approach also aligns with contemporary architectural phenomenology, which places bodily experience, perception, and spiritual imagination as the primary sources of spatial meaning. (Jin, 2022) argue that the sacred experience of the Islamic dome is not solely determined by its physical form, but is shaped through the ritual movements of the *tawaf* (circumambulation), symbolic perception, and the imagination of the congregation as they interact within it. This demonstrates that sacredness is phenomenological and intersubjective; it arises from the relationship between space and consciousness, between materiality and spirituality, and between the physical and the imaginative. Therefore, research the experience of sacredness in mosque architecture needs to be understood as the result of a dialogue between space and humans, which is continuously created through shared practices, perceptions, and experiences within a living cultural context.

Conclusion

Sacredness in mosque architecture, when viewed through realism and anti-realism, demonstrates that sacred experiences do not exist within a single paradigm. From a realist perspective, sacredness is understood to be objectively present through the use of space, architectural elements such as domes, arches, light, materiality, and geometry, which enable mosque

structures to possess the intrinsic capacity to evoke a “real” sacred experience. However, from an anti-realist perspective, sacred experiences are seen more as the result of cultural interpretation and construction, dependent on individual and community consciousness, and influenced by how a person interprets space, symbols, traditions, beliefs, and spiritual background. Thus, the reinterpretation of sacred experiences positions sacredness as a dialectic between the objective qualities of space and the subjective meanings brought by humans. This makes mosque architecture a mediative space that helps shape how sacredness is simultaneously presented, perceived, and negotiated.

From a theoretical perspective, this approach forms the foundation of the transcendental realism paradigm, a framework that recognizes the existence of sacredness as an entity possessing objective power, but can only be actualized through bodily experience, perception, and the practice of worship. This paradigm paves the way for the study of sacred architecture to move beyond the old dichotomy between metaphysics and constructivism, toward a more coherent understanding of how space mediates spiritual meaning. Practically, future design demands an integration of spiritual consciousness, phenomenological experience, and social context. Thus, mosque architecture is not only visually beautiful, but also able to evoke serenity, presence, and reverence through the processing of light, acoustics, materiality, body movement, and social relations of the congregation.

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