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Diverse Sacred Experiences in Placemaking: A Study of Data Darbar Complex

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Abstract

The current study aimed to examine one of the most famous and visited shrine of Pakistan with focus on the spiritual spatial dynamics of the Ali Hajveri Shrine, or Data Darbar Complex. For this purpose, the theoretical framework of placemaking was used. Visitors with a deep, intangible spiritual connection visit the shrine. This emphasizes the shrine's role as a communal site with a daily influx of thousands of people. The visitation of people to the shrine showcases its significance as a refuge for the homeless which also serves as a symbol of hope. The study explored how effectively the shrine develops spiritual connections and enhances visitor experiences through its architectural elements. The expansion of the shrine has introduced new layers and systems which complicate the visitor experience. The courtyard creates a strong connection with the ground and sky; however, lower ground floor limits this experience. The confined dim spaces lack a divine connection and fail to develop cohesive spatial relationship. By analyzing the historical evolution of the site, as detailed by Ghaffar Shahzad, the research aimed to offer a comprehensive understanding of how the development of the shrine has shaped the spiritual and visitor experiences over time, with reference to spirituality and placemaking.

Keywords: community, culture, Data Darbar Complex, placemaking, public spaces, shrines, spirituality

Introduction

The development and significance of public spaces is deeply intertwined with the concept of placemaking. Placemaking is a process that seeks to nurture community engagement and enhance the participatory nature of these spaces through thoughtful designs and strategic interventions. Public spaces, as embodiments of public life, are shaped by the unique dynamics of each society. Furthermore, these places are influenced by factors, such as

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balance between public and private life, cultural values, climate, topography, and socio-political systems. The emphasis on public spaces may vary significantly across cultures For instance, in European contexts, public spaces often serve as forums for civil engagement and social interaction. Whereas, in many Asian cultures, there is a greater emphasis on private life, leading to a more reserved approach towards public spaces. (Carr, 1992).

In Pakistan, a nation rich in cultural diversity and historical influences, public spaces exhibit a wide range of characteristics. These spaces include the bustling bazaars from the colonial and Mughal eras as well as the recently developed civic and cultural centers in larger cities. While modern public spaces often reflect contemporary global influences and are strategically planned, many older spaces, deeply rooted in tradition, continue to maintain their significance within the urban fabric. These evolved public spaces act as bridges between past and present, weaving together memories and connections with their visitors. The juxtaposition of old buildings within their evolving contexts highlights the contrast between time as a continuous phenomenon and time as something frozen. When visitors engage with these historical sites, they connect with the past through architecture, history, spiritual significance, or religious teachings. Thus, these sites function as time machines, allowing users to traverse different eras and connect deeply with historical narratives (Sajjad, 2012).

The Data Darbar Complex in Lahore serves as a profound testament to the fluidity of time and the layering of cultural and spiritual narratives. As a site of immense religious and cultural importance, it attracts thousands of visitors daily, acting as a sanctuary, a place of worship, and a source of both spiritual and material sustenance. This complex illustrates how public spaces may transcend their physical boundaries to become integral components of societal identity and collective memory. Through its diverse programs and architectural elements, the Data Darbar Complex offers a unique lens to explore the intersection of public life and religious significance in Pakistan, embodying a narrative that is both timeless and ever-changing (Bélanger, 2002).

Although, the Data Darbar Complex and similar shrines are closely linked with spirituality, the experiences they offer often go unquestioned once the structures are built. Architects, designers, and researchers typically focus on the meaning of space and its elements. However, there is a

noticeable lack of analysis on how these spaces foster spirituality, particularly from the perspective of users who possess an internalized experiential vocabulary. The architecture of Data Darbar, designed under the orders of a ruler, is inherently associated with spirituality and divine connection. However, there is little comprehensive research that examines or dissects its spiritual character through the lens of user experience. (Birch & Sinclair, 2013)

To develop a comprehensive framework for spiritual placemaking, it is essential to define spirituality within the context of how individuals experience it in the built environment. Drawing from various disciplines including psychology, architecture, and placemaking theory, this research is built upon previous studies that outline key characteristics of spiritual experiences (Maslow, 1961; Pahnke & Richards, 1966). Maslow identified several traits indicative of self-transcendence, such as a sense of unity, integration, ego dissolution, and effortless flow, as well as qualities, such as spontaneity, creativity, autonomy, and emotional release. These traits serve as markers of spiritual engagement within a space, providing a structured foundation for the study of how design elements can facilitate or hinder such experiences (Birch & Sinclair, 2013).

This research aimed to extend the above-mentioned insights by exploring the intersection of placemaking and spirituality, particularly in the context of public spaces, such as shrines. Furthermore, it examined how design and spatial features of a shrine, that is, accessibility, adaptability, comfort, and infrastructure (Zhuang, 2008) shape the spiritual experiences of visitors. Additionally, the study aimed to investigate how these elements collectively influence the behavior and perceptions of individuals, fostering a sense of spiritual connection and communal engagement. By treating the shrine as both a spiritual and social space, the research explored how it continues to serve as a focal point of public life, actively shaping community dynamics. The study aimed to define a holistic concept of "spiritual placemaking", in which physical spaces not only meet functional and social needs, however, also support spiritual growth and transcendence. This integrated approach would offer architects and urban designers' insights into how to craft environments that nurture both individual spirituality and community well-being.

Literature Review

The Data Darbar Complex and its urban peripheries represent an area rich in historical significance and spiritual importance. This analysis draws on a range of literary works and approaches to understand the site's history, characteristics, and its impact on users.

Shahzad's (2007, 2009, 2013) works provide critical insights into the historical, cultural, social, and political significance of Data Darbar in Pakistan, helping to analyze how the Darbar has shaped public lives over time. Similarly, the research conducted Carr (1992) explored how public life shapes and is shaped by public spaces. This highlights the evolution of such spaces and their impact, insights that align with Shahzad's work.

Bélanger (2002) examined the relationship between collective memory and public spaces, helping to understand how Data Darbar serves as a focal point for spiritual collectiveness. A study conducted by Zhuang (2008) further explored public life, detailing activities, and challenges. These may undermine public spaces, offering a deeper understanding of Data Darbar's role in public life. Another investigation (Klimczuk, 2021) contributed demographic insights that are key to understanding the area's population. Ching's work (Ching, 2014) on spatial forms and order, along with Heidegger (1975) philosophies on transforming sites into significant locations, provided a deeper conceptual understanding of the complex.

Fahmawee (2022) offered an analysis of the semiotics for the complex's architecture, particularly in the context of Islamic architecture. While the Government of Pakistan (2022) provided practical insights into the infrastructure and current issues facing Data Darbar.

Sureshkumar (2024) underscored the spiritual connection between architecture and human experience, emphasizing how built environments foster intangible spiritual bonds. Similarly, Matracchi (2021) explored the impact of light in religious spaces, highlighting its role in enhancing the spirituality. These insights help evaluate the spiritual character of Data Darbar, revealing how architectural elements, such as space and light contribute to its spiritual atmosphere.

The existing literature on Data Darbar and related works offer valuable insights into how the complex was constructed and how spirituality and placemaking can be practiced and examined. However, there is a noticeable gap in research when it comes to analyzing the experiential aspects of Data

Darbar. This study sought to fill that gap by focusing on the experiential character of the shrine.

Research Methodology

The current research utilized both qualitative and quantitative approaches to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participatory nature of Data Darbar Complex. The qualitative aspect involves the exploration of various concepts through literature and existing works. Moreover, it also provides the researcher with a well-rounded vocabulary to interpret the space and form from multiple perspectives. This helps to situate activities and locations within the context of the study. Photography serves as direct evidence and is used to support the analysis visually. In parallel, simple random sampling was employed through questionnaires to assess user experiences, treating visitors to the space as a large cluster. For interviews and questionnaire responses, simple random sampling was applied to ensure unbiased participant selection. Understanding the quality of the space in relation to users was crucial, and this was achieved by conducting interviews and examining user behavior in depth. Moreover, the quantitative analysis included evaluating maps to gain insights into spatial dynamics and user movement throughout the site. The quantitative analysis conducted through interviews and questionnaires proved valuable, as individual experiences and personal data may differ significantly. Therefore, incorporating these varying experiences is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the research.

Additionally, the quantitative method was employed to measure and analyze user experiences, focusing on how individuals from the same cluster of devotees experience the spaces differently. It also aimed to quantify the extent to which different areas of the complex are being utilized by visitors. This approach was valuable in assessing whether the concepts and theories from the literature were accurately reflected in the real-world experience of the users, providing insights into the practical application of these ideas.

Data Analysis and Results

To analyze the spiritual experience through the lens of placemaking principles, it is essential to first understand the historical evolution of the site and its impact on its users. This would allow the assessment of how the site's evolution has influenced people's emotional attachment and sense of

belonging, as well as how it has shaped their experiences and perceptions of public life and spirituality. Furthermore, there is a need to explore how the site's spiritual essence, sense of belonging, and mystical significance were successfully incorporated into the design of the contemporary complex. The following points discuss and evaluate these aspects in detail:

Historical Evolution of Site

Data Darbar, now known as the Data Darbar Complex, played a pivotal role in the evolution of the city of Lahore. The deep love and spiritual devotion of people towards this shrine significantly influenced the city's growth. This affected its expansion in this particular direction by contributing to the development of Lahore as it is known today. To fully understand the present urban and spatial impact on the users of this site, it is crucial to examine how this place has historically shaped and transformed the lives of the city's inhabitants. This evolution can be categorized into two primary aspects mentioned as follows:

a) The site's physical development

b) Cultural evolution

### Site Evolution: Transforming Public Life

Located in Lahore, the shrine of Hazrat Ali Hajveri Ganj Bakhsh, known as Data Darbar, is the largest sanctuary in the region and a significant spiritual and urban center. Established in the early 11th century by Hazrat Ali Hajveri, who built a mosque near River Ravi, the site initially served as a focal point for prayer, education, and spiritual engagement. After his death, his monastery was converted into a tomb by Ghaznavid King Sultan Zakir-ud-din Ibrahim, marking the beginning of its importance as a center for Sufism and religious practice.

Over the centuries, despite the rise and fall of various empires including the Mughals and the British, Data Darbar maintained its spiritual significance. The shrine's caretakers, known as Gaddi Nasheens and Mutawallis, were instrumental in its evolution. They ensured it remained a central spiritual space that attracted visitors from all social classes. During the Mughal era, the shrine's role in society expanded as departments were established to maintain sacred sites and traditions, such as feeding the poor. This embedded the shrine further into the social fabric of city.

The shrine underwent numerous expansions and reconstructions, reflecting both devotion and the changing needs of its users. Notable contributions include the mosque's dome constructed by Gulzar Shah and its expansion by Raees Mian Ghulam Rasool in 1921. As Lahore urbanized, the shrine's surroundings transformed into a bustling urban center with facilities, such as parking lots, a soup kitchen, and a small library, catering to a diverse user base. The site's evolution from a spiritual retreat to a multifaceted complex was further accelerated post-independence, especially with the establishment of the Auqaf Department in 1959 and a significant expansion under General Zia-Ul-Haq in 1981 (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Old Site Plan of Data Darbar (Shahzad, 2007)

OLD SITE PLAN OF DARBAR/MOSQUE
HAZRAT DATA GUNJ BUKHSH ALI HUJVERI
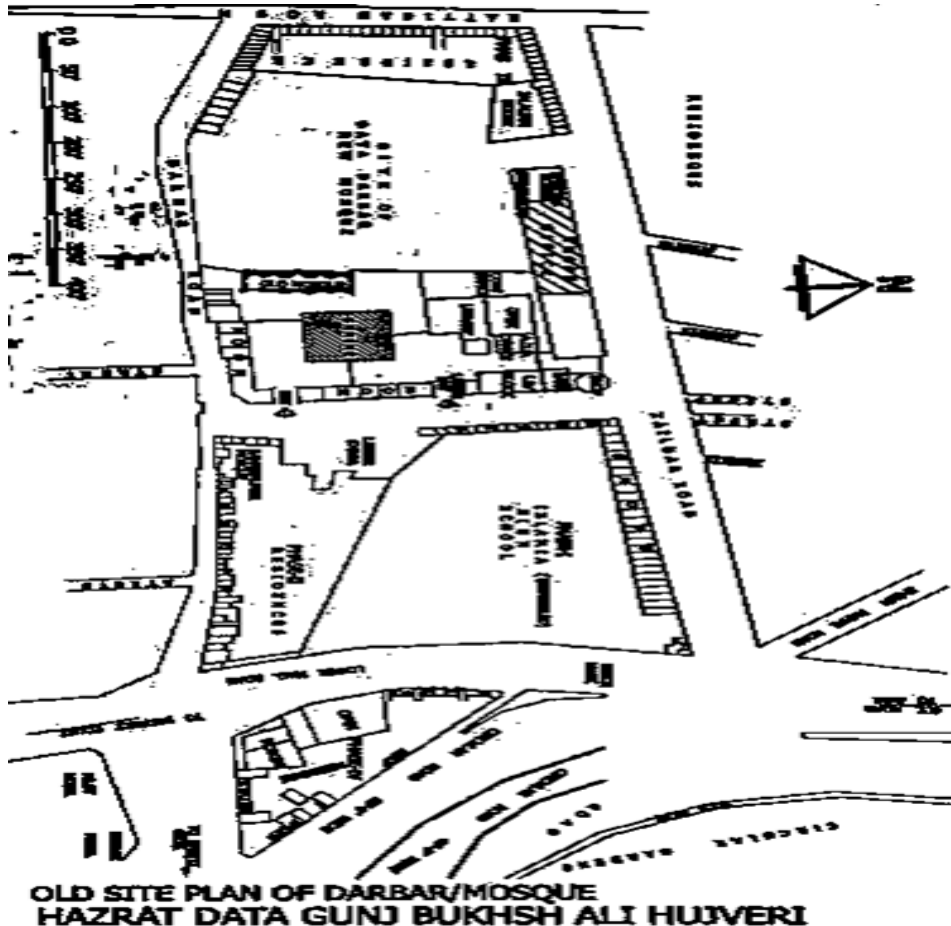
Cultural Evolution (Re-shaping Culture through Spirituality)

It is essential to briefly discuss the interplay between culture and traditions and how they merge to create a spiritual culture. Culture, closely tied to traditions and ways of life, shapes national identities through deeply-rooted customs, such as celebrations, respect for elders, and justice systems. On the other hand, spirituality centers on the inner connection between an individual and God, whether in solitude or within a community. When spirituality adopts cultural traditions or rituals to connect with or celebrate God, it becomes a method of divine connection. This fusion creates a societal experience where religion, culture, and spirituality intertwine. In this process, culture transforms into ritual, spirituality becomes the internal experience, and religion serves as the official doctrine that either incorporates or adapts to these practices, resulting in a unified spiritual-cultural expression (De Sapio, 2023).

Sufis regarded mosques as places of worship and their monasteries as institutions to practice asceticism and attain spiritual enlightenment. During the lifetimes of Sufi saints, followers would visit their monasteries to seek blessings. After the passing of a Sufi saint, their tombs became symbolic focal points where devotees from all religions and social classes would gather to seek blessings from God through the saint's spiritual presence. This tradition nurtured cohesion and religious diversity, making these tombs significant gathering places for people belonging to various faiths (Platovnjak, 2017).

The Sufi belief system, along with the activities and spiritual practices centered around the tombs, gradually shaped traditions and evolved into a distinct culture. For instance, while Islamic academic traditions do not incorporate music as an essential component of religious practices, Sufi mysticism has recognized music as a means of awakening spiritual consciousness. The creation of Sufi devotional music, known as Qawwali, exemplifies this recognition. Today, Qawwali is celebrated for its transformative spiritual impact on society. Moreover, it has become an integral part of culture in the subcontinent, to the extent that it is often referred to as religious music (Askarizad, 2018).

The Complex

In pre-partition India, tombs and mosques were traditionally regarded as separate entities. While it was common to construct a mosque adjacent

to a shrine, the shrine itself maintained its status as a cultural space with its own distinct social dynamics. However, in Pakistan, a Muslim democratic state, authorities have ensured the integration of mosques and tombs within the same built environment. This approach led to the development of mosque complexes, where tombs became integral components of the larger complex (Shahzad, 2007).

The construction of the Data Darbar Complex, spanning from 1979-1999, was carried out in two phases. During the 1980s, the complex expanded from 5 kanals and 4 marlas to 58 kanals through land acquisition. The main components of the complex include the shrine, Jamia Mosque, Sama'a Hall, a basement parking facility for 198 cars, Jamia Hujveria, a library, a seminar hall, and a mechanical room (Shahzad, 2009). The complex attracts a significant number of visitors, with daily attendance ranging from 40,000-60,000 on weekdays (Government of Pakistan, 2022).

To understand the participatory nature of the complex, it is divided into the following areas and analyzed how effectively these spaces, through the lens of placemaking, shape experiences, embrace diversity, influence ideologies, and impact public life. This was achieved by asking targeted questions to users and visitors. Each area was individually assessed and evaluated in conjunction with relevant literature

a) Architectural form and its impact

b) Access and entrance

c) Planning and its impact

d) Human dimensions of the space

e) Visual enhancement

f) Infrastructure and services

Architectural Form

The analysis conducted through questionnaires suggests that while many visitors to the Data Darbar Complex find the site spiritually significant, this connection is primarily attributed to the revered Sufi figure associated with the site rather than the architectural design itself. A significant number of visitors is not particularly concerned with the architecture. They perceive the spiritual essence of the complex more through its religious and cultural significance than its physical form. Among

those who are more analytically inclined, there is an appreciation for the external architectural form, though it is often viewed as somewhat alienated from its surroundings. The architectural design, intended to reflect cultural heritage while embracing modernity, blends influences from the Badshahi Mosque, the Shahjahani Mosque, and the Masjid Wazir Khan, as envisioned by General Zia ul Haq (Shahzad, 2007).

Despite these efforts to integrate diverse architectural elements, the complex's imposing block-like structure, set within a lower middle-class neighborhood, seems to lack partially, both physical and spiritual resonance with its surroundings. The design creates a distinct separation between the interior and exterior, obstructing visual and experiential connections, and further isolating the complex from its urban context. This disconnection suggests a missed opportunity to harmonize the spiritual significance of the site with its architectural expression (Ching, 2014).

Figure 2
Government of Pakistan (2022) Data Darbar Complex

Architecture Semiotics. Initially, Islam had no tradition of symbolism or aesthetics, however, through travel and migration, it adopted various elements that have since become closely associated with its concepts. The architectural elements of Data Darbar can be interpreted with various religious meanings. For instance, arches in religious architecture symbolize the pathway of life, connecting the entrance to the mosque, which represents home.

Similarly, the arches symbolize a divine gateway in religious architecture, serving as a portal for transcendence. The complex features two minarets that, while no longer functional, symbolize guidance and reasoning. Originally, minarets were used for the call to prayer, however, with technological advancements, they have lost their functional purpose and are now used to celebrate grandeur and symbolize access to the mosque, keeping people on the right path. Additionally, these minarets reflect Iranian culture. Similarly, in the Data Darbar Complex, although a dome is not physically present, it is suggested in the design to connect users with the religious significance of the structure. In Islamic architecture, the dome is emblematic of the Prophet's (PBUH) tomb (Fahmawee, 2022).

Access and Entrance

The Data Darbar Complex is easily accessible from various parts of the city, with Metro Bus Service facilitating public transportation to the area. The complex has separate entrances for male and female visitors. Upon arrival, visitors encounter security blockades and guards, reflecting the country's security concerns and the site's vulnerabilities. Navigating the narrow walkway to the security scanner, 53% of visitors reported being more focused on safety and survival than on the spiritual experience, praying for their own and their companions' protection. This emphasis on security detracts from the public space's intended atmosphere. About 36% mentioned that, as Pakistanis, they have grown accustomed to such measures, though it still pains them to live at such a place where security cannot be fully ensured, acknowledging that determined attackers would act regardless.

Figure 3

Barriers at Data Darbar Complex

Planning and its Impact

Through the lens of placemaking and spirituality, the experience of the space can be analyzed as follows:

Sensory Experience and Scale. After passing through the barricades, visitors first encounter the shoe racks, followed by the sound of gushing water from the ablution area, and then the vast courtyard with an off-centered tomb. Around 55% of visitors reported that the sheer scale and expanse of the complex create a sensory disconnection from the surroundings, particularly affecting touch and hearing. Although, a partial connection is maintained through sight and smell from nearby roads.

The repetition of arches creates spatial depth and naturally guides the eye towards the tomb. The contrast between the bustling traffic outside and the serene environment inside helps people focus on their purpose of visiting. The use of marble and its aesthetic appeal, along with the vastness it imparts, were appreciated by many visitors, though some concerns were noted, which are discussed later in this paper (Wyckoff, 2014).

When asked about the courtyard's role in the overall spiritual and physical experience of the Data Darbar Complex, 70% of visitors highlighted the connection with the celestial space above, facilitated by the courtyard's openness. This space allows visitors to relax or even sleep and it also serves as a refuge for homeless individuals, with its use also shaped by the prevailing climatic conditions (Heidegger, 1975)

Figure 4

Courtyard and the Semi-private Zones

A Semi-private Zone. The courtyard's design, featuring two corridors leading to adjacent streets and topped with contemporary-style domes

inspired by traditional motifs, significantly enhances the spiritual experience at the Data Darbar Complex. The arches, connecting the courtyard to nearby roads and partially screened by jalis for protection, create semi-private spaces that blend functionality with aesthetic appeal (Figure 4).

Figure 5

Master Plan of Data Darbar Complex
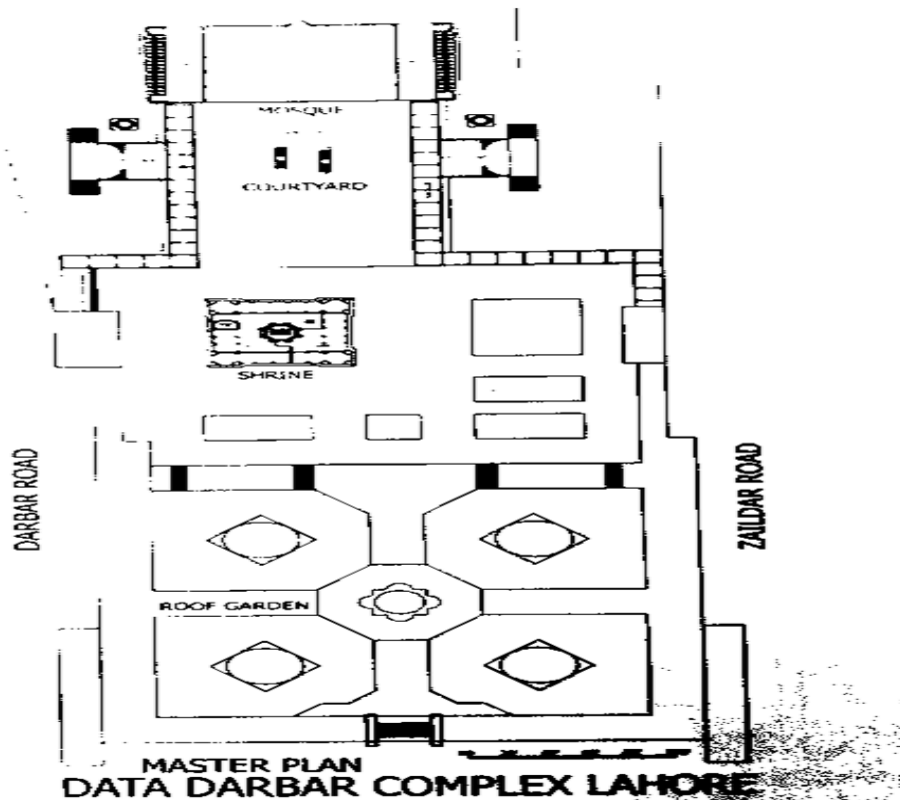
Hierarchical Spatial Experience. The shrine is situated slightly to the left in the middle of the courtyard, while the mosque is positioned at the far end. The shrine's architecture embodies Persian design, which is traditionally associated with Islamic representation. Whereas, the mosque features a contemporary design. At first glance, the mosque seems to dominate the site due to its larger scale and capacity. However, an experiential analysis reveals a different narrative (Figure 3).

Regarding the functional and symbolic relationship between the shrine and the mosque, 67% of respondents believe the shrine serves as a temporary stop. This guides visitors towards the mosque as the ultimate destination, symbolizing a journey from spirituality to structured religion. The fact that donations collected from devotees are primarily intended for the shrine highlights that the mosque's functionality is closely tied to the shrine. Despite the mosque's grand scale, the shrine remains the central authority around which the entire complex revolves.

Figure 6
The Tomb and the Rituals

The Mosque. After passing through the tomb, the next notable feature is the mosque, which rises tall and spreads wide. The ablution facilities are located on the lower ground floor. The mosque's contemporary design extends from the traditional structure of the tomb into the modern architecture of the complex. Between the two is a courtyard known as the mosque courtyard. General Zia ul Haq's design instructions for the mosque included three specific features: the minarets should reflect the design aesthetics of Turkish mosques, the galleries should feature small domes, and the northern and southern entrance gates should embody Islamic architectural style. These elements are now visible in the completed structure (Shahzad, 2007).

The transitional space between the tomb and the mosque offers a unique experience. Although, the entire complex allows visitors to sit anywhere, the courtyard often sees groups of people gathering to do Zikr. Interestingly, even during prayer times, many visitors prefer to remain in the tomb to seek blessings, while others choose to pray there rather than in the mosque or its courtyard. They view the tomb as a more sacred space for prayer. The

mosque itself is spacious, accommodating many worshippers, with upper galleries for women.

Figure 7
The Courtyard as a Communal Place

Figure 8
Lower Ground Floor Plan
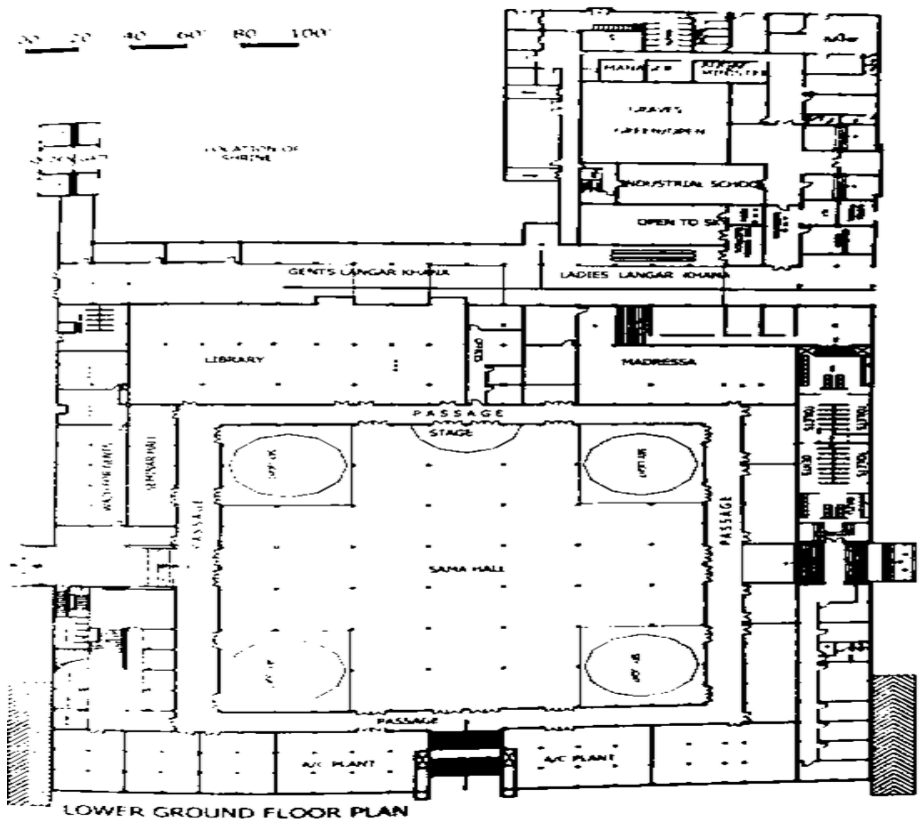
Lower Ground Floor and Functional Fragmentation. On the lower ground floor, communal spaces, such as the community kitchen (Langar Khana), Samaa Hall, and a library are found, with separate kitchens for men and women. The "Markaz-e-Ma'arif-e-Aulia", or "Center of the Knowledge of Saints", includes a library and seminar hall where annual congregations for saints are held. Although, the doors and paneling are beautifully ornamented, the design of the Samaa Hall, intended to enhance spiritual experience through qawwali, falls short. Despite accommodating four to five thousand people and being accessible from adjacent roads, the space is not as prominent as it should be.The overall connection between these spaces lacks flow which makes them more decorative and functional rather than truly experiential. When asked about the design and prominence of the lower ground spaces, such as the Samaa Hall, library, and community kitchens, 42% of respondents agreed that these areas feel hidden and disconnected. While, 24% noted that this affects the essence of spatial spirituality. The focus here shifts from experiencing unfolding spaces to merely accommodating functional areas, resulting in a fragmented and less engaging spiritual experience.

Figure 9
The Lower Round Floor Plan

Gender-specific Spatial Design. The gender participation within the complex reflects the religious and cultural mindset, with the architectural layout distinctly segregating spaces for men and women. Women are not prominently visible, as they are confined to specific areas, while men enjoy the freedom to move freely throughout the complex. Although, women are provided with essential facilities, the spatial design lacks cohesion between genders, which aligns with the cultural character of the city, its mysticism, and the religious traditions.

Human Dimensions of the Space

Human dimensions in a public space refer to the comfort and basic human rights it provides to its users. The large enclosure with its galleries welcomes visitors, allowing them to use the space according to their needs and comfort. However, despite marble being a cooler material, the marble floor heats up under the summer sun, pushing users to seek refuge in the adjacent galleries, the Tomb, the mosque, and lower ground areas.

The complex serves a diverse range of users including homeless individuals; however, this diversity has raised safety concerns. The lower ground, with its secluded spaces, offers opportunities for those engaging in illicit activities to act discreetly and escape to nearby roads. A public space where users do not feel secure cannot be considered a successful public space (Jain, 2019).

## Visual Enhancement and Spiritual Experience

Sight plays a crucial role in experiencing a space and selecting the right materials, colors, and textures is essential to ensure this experience is enriching. Each space within the complex is adorned with distinct ornamentation that offers visitors unique visual and spiritual experiences. The Samaa Hall, for instance, is illuminated by four fiberglass skylights and features brass and silver sheet gates that leave a lasting impression. Quranic and poetic verses are intricately carved throughout the complex, the minarets are crowned with gold leaf cones, and a carved aluminum glass screen adds to the aesthetic appeal. Ceramic work and engraved calligraphies further enhance the overall visual experience, showcasing fine craftsmanship. These decorative elements imbue each space with distinct meaning, enriching the visitor's spiritual journey (Shahzad, 2007).

The spiritual essence of architecture often hinges on the role of light in defining its meaning. Sacred spaces typically use materials with varying degrees of transparency, translucency, or opacity to enhance this effect. However, the Data Darbar Complex does not seem to emphasize light in its design. While the reflective marble in open areas may enhance the experience when illuminated, many of the complex's spaces lack adequate natural light and rely on electricity even during the day. The spaces are not designed to interact meaningfully with light, and there are no surfaces that create unique light-based experiences throughout the day. For instance, the Sama Hall features large skylights but remains covered most of the time.

Since the hall, used for Qawwali performances, typically opens only once a week or month and the performances occur mostly at night, it does not have the opportunity to provide a distinctive light-based experience (2021, Pietro Matracchi, Ali Sadeghi Habibabad).

Figure 10
Ornamentation and Tile Work
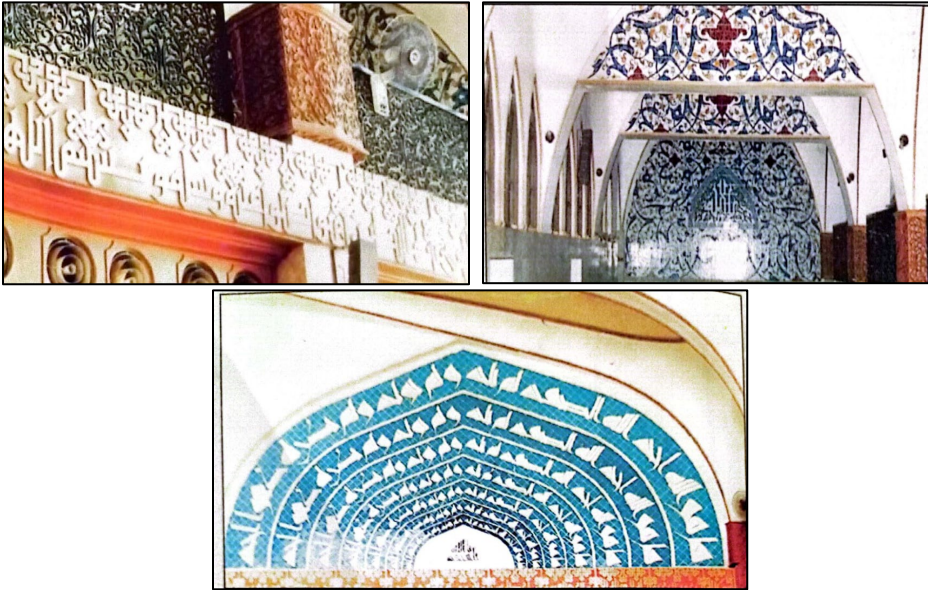
Permeable Area or Green Spaces

When the Data Darbar Complex was originally constructed, entering through the Lower Mall gate would first reveal a Mughal-style Chahar Bagh, a garden symbolizing the Garden of Paradise surrounding the deceased. This space, covering one lakh square feet and divided into four equal sections, is visible in the master plan of the complex. However, in the early 2000s, this garden was replaced with tiles to accommodate a growing number of visitors. Although, the fiberglass skylights above the Sama Hall remain open, the green spaces that once played a vital role in the public space for both recreation and health are now missing. Today, the Data Darbar Complex has no green spaces, while its urban surroundings suffer from heavy traffic and noise pollution. The lush greenery that once provided a refreshing experience for visitors is no longer present.

Infrastructure and Services

A public space accommodating such a large daily influx cannot operate effectively without adequate infrastructure. If not properly equipped, situated in a bustling area, the structure could further strain the location and potentially aggravate existing issues.

Ablution Area: Despite the presence of 161 ablution facilities spread across various areas, visitors continue to complain about their insufficiency.

Parking: The parking area of approximately 73,000 sq ft with a capacity for 198 cars in the basement, has been closed since 2010 following a blast within the complex premises. Despite the presence of traffic police and security guards, the lack of a traffic management plan around the complex diminishes the user experience, rendering their presence ineffective.

Jamia: Jamia Hujveria is situated on the lower ground floor and lacks proper teaching environments and facilities.

Electrical and Mechanical System: The complex has been equipped with modern electrical and mechanical systems for air flow. Systems for electricity supply and lighting are also integrated (Government of Pakistan, 2022).

Discussion

The Data Darbar Complex expansion, which modernized the shrine while incorporating traditional elements, underscored its political and social significance. The surrounding area developed into a vibrant marketplace, blending religious, social, and commercial activities. Data Darbar, once solely a space for spiritual development, has evolved into a dynamic hub of public life, reflecting the intersection of tradition, religion, and modern urban life in Lahore. During the expansion of the shrine, a large Qawwali Hall, known as the Samaa' Hall, was constructed. In this hall, followers gather every Thursday to immerse themselves in the mystical music. People from diverse backgrounds visit the shrine in large numbers on religious occasions, such as Shab-e-barat, the death anniversary of Hazrat Ali Hajveri, and other ceremonies, marking these events as significant religious gatherings. The expansion of the complex was undertaken not only to accommodate the growing number of visitors but also to facilitate greater participation in these events. Over time, geometric patterns, initially used for decoration, have come to represent perfection. These elements not only enhance the visual appeal but also reflect cultural heritage and cultivate deep emotional and spiritual connections among users.

According to visitor questionnaires, 39% of respondents noted that these semi-private areas strike a balance between openness and seclusion, allowing for spiritual practices and intimate conversations while remaining connected to the broader spiritual environment. However, they emphasized that this experience is most meaningful on quieter days. Meanwhile, 29% viewed the semi-private areas as simply decorative marble passageways. Though, they appreciated the width of the passage. Most interviewees agreed that the design fosters communal gatherings and worship in the open courtyard, while also providing opportunities for personal reflection and prayer in the more sheltered spaces created by the arches.

When asked how the presence of both the mosque and shrine influences their spiritual and religious experiences, 47% of users indicated that the shrine is the dominant factor, as the majority of visitors specifically come to visit it. Meanwhile, 22% of users consider both the shrine and mosque equally important, and 15% view the mosque as a complementary element that symbolizes the Islamic structure. Upon entering the grand courtyard, flanked by elongated galleries, 49% of visitors felt a sense of freedom and empowerment, marking their initial spiritual connection. Visitors express that their relationship and experience in the courtyard and inside the tomb undergo a transformation as they cross the threshold marked by the series of arches. This transition heightens their devotional feelings and emotions, bringing them closer to their revered spiritual leader. The traditional arches on all sides not only connect them to their cultural roots, however, also keep the shrine open from every direction, allowing air to flow freely through the tomb. This design results in a cool and dim atmosphere inside, even during a bright sunny day, requiring the use of artificial lighting. Approximately, 55% of visitors associate this darkness with a sense of peace and tranquility, despite it being considered an architectural shortcoming.

Visitors not only engage in spiritual rituals, such as offering prayers, tasting salt, and drinking water at the shrine, however, also prioritize performing religious rites, for instance praying and reciting the Holy Book, within its sacred space. The shrine's Ghulam Gardish area accommodates various people and activities. When asked why they choose to offer Friday prayers in this complex, particularly near the tomb, despite the presence of the historically significant Badshahi Mosque nearby, 74% of respondents linked their choice to a deep personal connection and devotion to the shrine. They believe that their prayers are more likely to be answered due to the

special spiritual atmosphere (barakah) of the place. This spatial arrangement promotes a unique blend of religion and spirituality, creating a distinctive belief system and culture within the complex.

About 65% of visitors describe the mosque as a divine experience and rate it according to international standards. Despite its beauty and capacity, the mosque does not attract as many visitors as the shrine, with some people even turning their backs to the mosque while praying towards the shrine in the courtyard. The lower ground floor is connected to adjacent roads, providing direct access from both. However, the transition from the expansive, open courtyard to the considerably narrower spaces below is abrupt. When visitors were asked how this transition impacts their spiritual experience, 22% responded that spirituality is the matter of mind and heart. While, 36% felt that the shift into darker and more confined spaces disrupts their inner spiritual state. A significant number of visitors noted that the fragmentation of spaces breaks their spiritual experience, causing it to fade away as they move through the area. When asked about the impact of these safety concerns, particularly in the lower ground areas, 44% of the respondents reported feeling unsafe, while 24% were unaware of the issue. Incidents involving drug users, pickpockets, and individuals fleeing from homes have been reported, especially during crowded events, such as the annual Urs and Friday prayers.

At the Data Darbar Complex, marble has been used for floor and walls of the open areas. When asked, "How does the use of marble, with its reflective properties and timeless appeal, affect your experience of the space?", 34% of visitors noted that it makes the space brighter and more expansive. While 40% associated the marble with spirituality, comparing it to the Kaaba. Marble's historical association as a timeless material reinforces its use in sacred spaces. When asked, "How balanced are the contemporary and traditional elements?", 38% felt that the design reflected a harmonious blend of different styles. While 20% believed that the space was more relatable and culturally significant before the addition of magnificent new structures. Additionally, 32% connected the design with traditional elements.

In response to the question, "Which decorative elements in the complex most enhance your visual and spiritual experience?", 57% chose Quranic verses, while 23% highlighted ornamentation and calligraphy as enhancing their visual experience. Many visitors agreed that the complex is a beautiful

place where people can reflect, remember Allah, and appreciate the aesthetic elements. The visitors were able to dissect the beauty of material while resonating with the spiritual significance of the Quranic verses and calligraphy, which positively impacted their spiritual well-being.

The Data Darbar Complex enlightens the environment, culture, and religion to promote devoted and standard practices in relation to Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh. In comparison to the tomb and above levels, there are rather more practical, functional, and spatial spaces related to spiritual and ritual parts on the lower ground floor as compared to upper floors. Thus, the experience provided to the visitors is shallower. Despite the fact that ornamentations are represented due to their symbolic meaning, the latter position beauty over spiritually significant appearance. While security processes and measures are important for the spirit of adaptation and readiness to its application, they also infuse a sense of suspicion in the visitor and unconsciously transform the feeling and ambience of the space. For the complex to maximize its spiritual and communal capacity, there also has to be better planning and organization of space relations in any future development or expansions.

Conclusion

The current research was conducted to explore the dynamics and assess the spiritual character in order to enhance the participation of the complex. It may conclude considerable experiential observations and results. The Data Darbar Complex has evolved into a significant public space that deeply influences its visitors through a blend of spirituality, culture, and religion. Its ability to induce devotion and engagement in rituals centered on Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh highlights its functional design. However, the space welcomes diverse visitors and encourages religious tolerance, the disconnection between certain architectural elements and the spiritual experience of some visitors reveals a need for a more cohesive design approach. The security measures are necessary and reflect resilience and adaptability, however, also subtly alter visitors' sense of peace.

Key areas, such as the tomb evoke strong emotional and spiritual connections, however, other spaces, particularly the lower-ground functional areas, lack the immersive qualities needed for deeper engagement. The upper floor, offering freedom and rest, contrasts with the ornament-focused lower levels, which prioritize appearance over

meaningful spatial design. Additionally, incidents of insecurity hinder full spiritual immersion and create a sense of guardedness among visitors. Furthermore, the use of ornamentation, rooted in spiritual symbolism, also serves as a display of official prestige and reflects the patrons' status. Overall, while the complex attracts many visitors, its design and spatial coherence fall short in fully serving their spiritual needs. Enhancing accessibility, integrating activities with the surrounding area, and fostering a more spiritually immersive environment are crucial for the complex to fulfill its potential as a sacred space.

Limitations

The research on visitors' experiences within the Data Darbar Complex offers valuable insights. However, it primarily emphasizes observable behaviors, interviews, and survey data. Spiritual experiences are inherently subjective and challenging to quantify, often varying significantly among individuals due to personal, cultural, or environmental influences. For instance, while some visitors find peace in the shrine's dim lighting, others may not share the same sentiments, indicating the complexity of individual perceptions. The study also fails to adequately address the challenges in measuring spiritual connection, as factors, such as mood, past experiences, and the presence of fellow devotees may greatly impact emotional responses. Additionally, the nuanced relationship between religion and spirituality is underexplored. Many respondents may view the shrine as a pathway to structured religion, while others may see these aspects as more fluid and interconnected. Finally, the reliance on survey percentages oversimplifies the deeply personal nature of spiritual experiences, shaped by architectural design, historical significance, and individual beliefs. While the study provides a foundational understanding of visitors' experiences, it may not fully capture the depth and variability of personal spirituality.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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