

Original Research Article

Analysis of the Articulation of Old Mosque Architecture within the Discursive Space of Islamic Art Based on the Discourse Analysis Theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe

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Received: 10/11/2024

Accepted: 26/05/2025

Available online: 22/06/2025

Abstract

Problem statement: This study addresses the articulation of old mosque architecture within the discursive space of Islamic art. In the discursive space of Islamic art, architecture functions as a central semiotic system that plays social, cultural, and political semiotic roles from various dimensions. However, when Islamic, traditional, or Iranian architecture is discussed, this semiotic system takes on discursive characteristics. Thus, Islamic architecture, particularly in the form of religious buildings with both social and religious functions, is rearticulated through signs and within the process of inter-discursive competition.

Research objective: This study aims to explain the mechanisms of articulation in Islamic architecture within the discursive space of Islamic art, shedding light on the discursive roles and functions of old mosque architecture.

Research method: This study is a qualitative study conducted using discourse analysis, seeking to answer the question: Is there a relationship between the structure and articulation of old mosque architecture and the discourse of power and religion?

Conclusion: The main findings indicate that within the discursive space of Islamic art, architecture has undergone numerous transformations in the context of socio-cultural structural changes driven by the discourse of power. The evolving social functions of mosques today, compared to the architectural structures of mosques in earlier periods, reflect this transformation.

Keywords: *Discourse, Articulation, Islamic Art, Architecture, Mosque, Maqsurah, Minbar, Power, Politics.*

Introduction

Given the growing number of studies and research in the field of Islamic art and the increasing academic interest in this discipline, it is essential to examine the evolving methodologies in Islamic art research. This helps to clarify existing issues, challenges, and shortcomings, and to align relevant theories and analytical approaches when

engaging with Islamic art. On the other hand, exploring various dimensions of Islamic art in the contemporary era, as well as reviewing the ups and downs in the scholarship of this field, further highlights the need for such examination.

It appears that some researchers and authors active in the realm of Islamic art adopt a purely retrospective and review-based perspective, reducing the discourse of Islamic art to a mere

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historical subject. Therefore, if the study of Islamic art history is not based on a deep understanding of its characteristics and potential, it will only intensify the theoretical ambiguities and issues surrounding Islamic art studies. In fact, there is a noticeable lack of realistic and critical research in academic settings, and most of the existing research merely reproduces the scholarly traditions of Western authors who were the pioneers in this field. Their methods are largely descriptive and report-like, using historical language, which, while useful as an initial introduction, is insufficient for deeper engagement.

One of the main obstacles in Islamic art studies is the abstract and traditionalist approach of some scholars. This perspective tends to steer young researchers toward repetition, passivity, and asceticism, thereby marginalizing critical reasoning, cultural and social awareness, and analytical depth in the field. By assigning authority to numerous mystical and philosophical writings and embracing extreme sanctification, such perspectives create an atmosphere in which Islamic art is treated as an unchangeable and immutable subject.

In contrast, the discussions and analyses in this study are grounded in analytical and critical theories. Key theoretical perspectives relevant to critical discourse analysis—particularly the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe—form the foundation of this paper. While there are various methods within critical discourse analysis that researchers may use to explore a subject, this study—focused specifically on the articulation of old mosque architecture—draws on the most relevant and applicable discourse analysis theories for its investigation.

Problem Statement

The central issue addressed in this study is the interpretive relationship between power, ideology, and Islamic art, with mosque architecture considered the focal object of study. From this perspective—and considering architecture as a textual artifact in reference to the concept proposed by Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1977, 155-156). we are essentially

dealing with a syntactic and spatial semantic system. This system, through its role in the broader context of social conditions, both produces discourse and simultaneously becomes the intersection of the discourses of power and religion.

Examining this discursive relationship in the context of Islamic architecture is not possible through the deterministic and fundamentalist views of traditionalist scholars. The limitations in discursive interpretations of this topic stem from the dominance of traditionalist approaches in Islamic architectural studies.

Because these semiotic systems—such as architecture—and these discourse-producing historical texts are constantly exposed to discursive conditions (i.e., changes in time, place, society, politics, etc.), they undergo semantic and functional transformations. These transformations mean that such texts cannot bear or sustain rigid, fundamentalist, or strictly historical readings. Today, this presents a significant research challenge in the field of Islamic art studies.

Indeed, aside from ideological references and the implicit systems of power and meaning within these texts (considering their diversity), one must acknowledge that the production and interpretation of meaning is a dynamic, generative process. The shifts in meaning and interpretation that we experience within discursive conditions are the result of a continuous interplay between presence and absence in the sense articulated by Jacques Derrida in (1987). These semiotic systems—including architecture—have had, currently have, and will continue to have varied semantic implications and textual functions over time.

For these reasons, discourse analysis is an appropriate method for analyzing the social, cultural, and political roles of old mosque architecture, as well as for articulating the relationship between power and religion. From this standpoint, one can gain broader insight into the role of power in architectural design and construction, and its relationship with the mechanisms of society. Therefore, one of the aims

of this study is to uncover the obscure or lesser-known dimensions of the functions of old mosques, using a critical approach to the views of traditionalist scholars.

Research Methodology

The foundational basis of this study, which is classified as a qualitative study, lies in the critical perspective. In fact, the methodology of this research is structured around discourse analysis theory, which falls under the umbrella of qualitative research. This approach enables the application of analytical critical methods grounded in qualitative inquiry.

In other words, “qualitative research is considered a process that includes multiple methods and requires a naturalistic and interpretive approach to its subject of study” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 12–18). For this reason, it is often regarded as a hybrid form of research, widely applied across various disciplines within the humanities and the arts.

Flick also identifies several key characteristics of qualitative research, including: 1. The appropriate selection and application of theories and methods; 2. The perspectives of research participants and the diversity among them; 3. The reciprocal influence between the researcher and the research; 4. The multiplicity and diversity of approaches and methods in qualitative research (Flick, 2009, 14).

As such, with the understanding that qualitative research emerges from cultural and social transformations—from traditional to modern contexts and beyond—and that it inherently embodies a post-structuralist outlook, the methodology of this study has been organized accordingly.

Theoretical Foundations

• Foundational Theories of Discourse Analysis

Fairclough defines the concept of discourse as follows: “I consider discourse to be an interwoven set of three elements: social practice, discursive practice (the production, distribution, and consumption of text), and the text itself. The analysis of a particular discourse requires an examination of each of these

three dimensions and the relationships between them. We hypothesize that there is a meaningful connection between the specific features of texts, the ways in which texts are linked and interpreted, and the nature of social practice” (Fairclough, 2009, 97-98).

Fairclough discusses three levels in discourse analysis: description, interpretation, and explanation. In this view, description pertains to the syntactic and grammatical structure of language. When Fairclough’s framework is extended to non-verbal texts, the structural form of an artwork is analogous to syntactic structure. According to Fairclough, one cannot directly access the structural effects of textual features on the foundation of society through formal characteristics of the text alone, since the relationship between the text and social structures is indirect.

This is where interpretation becomes necessary so that texts are produced and understood based on assumptions rooted in common sense that assign value to the text’s features. The process of interpretation, in fact, is the discursive practice that involves the production, distribution, and consumption of texts. Meanwhile, the process of explanation is the social practice, which considers the social contexts in which the text is produced.

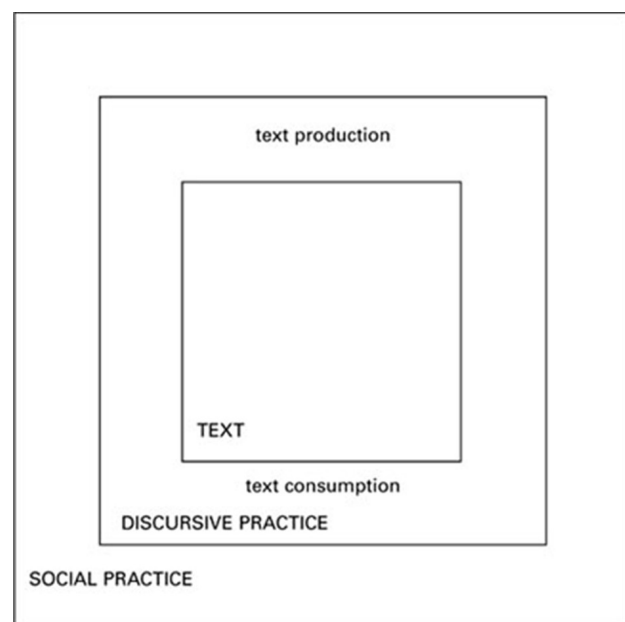


Fig. 1. Norman Fairclough’s Analytical Model. Source: Fairclough, 1989, 25.

Discourse Theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe

For Laclau and Mouffe, who adopt a poststructuralist perspective, discourse is a meaningful system of both linguistic and non-linguistic signs. In fact, “Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory seeks to offer a discursive understanding of all social phenomena. According to this theory, social matters are understood as discursive constructs. All social phenomena can be analyzed and interpreted through discourse analysis tools” (Soltani, 2012, 70).

In this theory, analysts do not restrict their perspective to the study of a single text. Rather, “the general idea of discourse theory is that social phenomena are never complete or finalized. Meanings can never be permanently fixed, and this opens the way for continuous social struggles over the definitions of society and identity, which in turn have social consequences. The task of discourse analysts is to reveal these ongoing struggles over the fixation of meaning across all levels of the social sphere” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2010, 53-54; Soltani, 2012, 70). “From Laclau and Mouffe’s point of view, every action and phenomenon must be discursively constructed to become meaningful and comprehensible. In other words, activities and phenomena become understandable only when they are placed within a specific discursive context alongside a set of other elements. Nothing has an identity per se; rather, it gains its identity from the discourse in which it is situated” (Soltani, 2012, 72). However, with this same perspective, Laclau and Mouffe also criticize the reductionist features of classical Marxism and Saussurean structuralism, believing that there is no longer any foundational element that gives meaning and identity to all other phenomena. Instead, the identity of any given element emerges within a network of other identities articulated together¹ (ibid., 73). This concept plays a key role in Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory and is also central to shaping the analytical models of this study.

Laclau and Mouffe define discourse as “the fixation

of meaning within a particular domain. All signs within a discourse are moments²” (ibid., 56). This means that we continuously attempt to fix the meanings of signs by inserting them into a network of relations with other signs (Rashidi, 2017). “However, this process is ultimately impossible because the fixation of the meaning of signs is always contingent and conditional it is possible, but never guaranteed” (Soltani, 2012, 75–76; quoting Jørgensen & Phillips, 2010, 25).

“But how is it that some signs become so familiar and conventional that they seem entirely natural to us?” (ibid., 76). The answer lies in repetition. As signs are repeated over time, they gradually lose their original meaning and begin to approach objectification. In semiotics, objects have the potential to become signs, and a sign is that which holds meaning—a meaning that is neither essential nor fixed, but rather contingent upon discursive conditions.

Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, 105) explain this process of “naturalization” with their unique theoretical concept of articulation:

“We call an articulation any practice that establishes a relation among elements such that their identities are modified as a result of the articulation. The structured totality resulting from the articulation is called a discourse. Differential positions articulated within a discourse are called ‘moments’. Conversely, any difference that is not discursively articulated is called an ‘element’.” (Cited in Soltani, 2012, 76).

Therefore, articulation refers to the process of combining and situating phenomena together phenomena that are not naturally or inherently connected. In this process, whenever a sign links with other signs, a moment or dimension is formed.

Following their explanation of the concept of articulation, Laclau and Mouffe present four additional key concepts, which we briefly describe here based on Jørgensen and Phillips (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2010, 56-63) and Soltani (2012, 76–81):

“...According to Laclau and Mouffe, a discourse is a field in which a collection of signs forms a

network, and their meanings are stabilized within it. Any sign that enters this network and is ‘fused’ through articulation with other signs becomes a moment. The meaning of these signs is fixed through their differences—what they call ‘positions of difference’. The meaning of signs within a discourse is partially fixed around a nodal point, a prominent and privileged sign around which other signs are organized and articulated.” (Soltani, 2012, 76–77; see also Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, 112).

Furthermore, Laclau & Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, 111) explain:

“All the potential meaning positions that a discourse excludes are referred to as the field of discursivity. This field is a reservoir for the ‘surplus of meaning’ generated through the process of articulation. In other words, the meanings that a sign might have in other discourses are excluded by a particular discourse to produce a unified meaning.” (Cited in Jørgensen & Phillips, 2010, 57).

For example, in the Islamic interpretation of art (as proposed by some Iranian authors), meanings associated with ancient signs or those tied to Iranian identity are excluded as the ‘Other’ to construct an Islamic reading of art. In a hybrid Iranian-Islamic reading, signs belonging to both discourses (Iranian and Islamic) are articulated together to form a new discourse of Iranian-Islamic art.

In this sense, the field of discursivity includes all categories that exist outside a given discourse overflowing meanings that are rejected or excluded by that discourse. According to Jørgensen and Phillips, this leads to another important concept in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory: the element.

“A discourse tries to turn elements (signs found in the field of discursivity) into dimension³ by reducing their polysemy and giving them fixed meanings. In discourse theory terms, discourse creates a closure—a temporary halt to the slippage of signifieds. But closure is never final. The transition from element to dimension is never completely successful, and discourse can never be entirely fixed, as it is always vulnerable to weakening

or transformation due to competing meanings” (ibid., 59; see also Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, 110).

Discourses always strive to assign meaning to floating signifiers in their own particular way. Once Islamic art emerged as a field of study and a body of visual texts, it acquired its specific meaning under such conditions. Floating signifiers, which are among the foundational concepts in discourse theory, are defined as:

“Signs that different discourses attempt to give meaning to in their own specific manner.” (Soltani, 2012, 79, quoting Jørgensen & Phillips, 2010, 28)

Ultimately, Laclau and Mouffe do not limit their approach and strategy to language and semiotic systems of communication; rather, they extend it to multiple layers of the social realm, because in their view, discourses are material constructs. On this matter, Jørgensen & Phillips (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2010, 70) write:

“In Laclau and Mouffe’s approach—just like other approaches in discourse analysis—both social and physical phenomena exist, but our access to them is always mediated through systems of meaning in the form of discourses. Physical phenomena have no inherent meaning; meaning is something we assign to them through discourse.”

As part of their studies, Laclau and Mouffe present a striking example:

“A stone does not exist independently of systems of social classification; whether we consider it a throwable object or a piece of art depends on the discursive context in which it is placed.” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1990, 10, Cited in ibid., 70)

Therefore, Laclau and Mouffe do not distinguish between discursive and non-discursive matters, but rather view their relationship as dialectical.

Architecture in the Discursive Space of Islamic Art

Laclau and Mouffe refer to the signs and elements that are excluded from a discourse to establish its intended meaning in the field of discursivity. This refers to the condition in which the excluded signs reappear

outside the boundaries of the discourse. For example, in the discursive field of traditionalism, elements associated with modern aesthetics, culture, society, and historical material components are considered excluded signs and elements. This condition also becomes evident in the process of representing texts or artworks. That is, the transformation of previous themes and meanings (such as ancient and Iranian themes) to reconfigure texts (artworks) leads to the formation of the discourse of Islamic art, and subsequently, interdiscursive relations emerge. For instance, discourses such as Shiite art, sacred art, religious art, transcendental art, mystical art, and so on are, in fact, discourses connected to the central discourse of Islamic art, and the relationship between them is an interdiscursive one.

Based on this, Hillenbrand writes:

“Architecture may be the only field among the visual arts that can offer a relatively continuous transition, although even there many gaps still exist (Hillenbrand, 1985, 175-212). Consider how a simple provincial fire temple or chahartaq of which the Firuzabad fire temple is a prime example could be converted into a mosque simply by blocking the nearest entrance facing the qibla, as can be seen in the chahartaq of Yazdakhast.” (Hillenbrand, 2014, 111).

This discursive construction and transformation of elements is constantly visible in Islamic architecture. It is not merely a structural transformation, but rather one tied to ideological, social, and cultural contexts a process that has unfolded within a discursive spatial framework.

Hillenbrand also explains the emergence of the mosque in his book *Islamic Architecture* (Hillenbrand, 2010, 36) as follows:

“In essence, the mosque is not a building at all. It is, rather, a space dedicated to worship. Furthermore, one must add that the entire history of the mosque as an architectural form unfolds within the worldly realm. This might seem like an extreme or provocative statement. Nevertheless, if the absolute simplicity of the requirements for Muslim congregational prayer is fully understood, it would be a mistake to interpret

the later architectural complexity of mosques as a response to ritual needs. Quite the contrary, one must say that such complexity was fundamentally the result of adopting non-Islamic elements and integrating them into a new context.” (Hillenbrand, 2010, 36).

Hillenbrand is considered part of the group of historians who take a realistic and rational approach. Based on the discussions mentioned, it can be argued that most of the ornamentation and elements associated with mosque architecture in later periods particularly during the Safavid era in Isfahan clearly became the site for the manifestation of political, social, and cultural discourses. Thus, during these historical periods, the mosque with all of its unique decorative and aesthetic complexities became a text for the realization and concrete expression of the dominant discourses of the ruling power.

Articulation of Old Mosque Architecture

By examining the mechanisms of articulation in mosque architecture, we come to understand that this discursive space gains meaningful significance through the presence of social groups or the public, and their actions within the framework of religious and political events. Language plays a key role in discourse formation, in accordance with the theories and approaches presented in the theoretical foundations section.

On the other hand, the minbar (pulpit) as a conventional and symbolic sign, and also the maqsurah (enclosed area near the mihrab), are not merely passive objects or neutral elements. Rather, they define discursive dimensions of the situation—dimensions that are connected to the act of a speaking individual, which in turn implies a connection with the public. Therefore, in such a context, we encounter an interdiscursive relationship between the religious discourse (which is rhetorical and persuasive) and the discourse of power (which is politically rhetorical), and this connection materializes within the discursive space of mosque architecture.

Thus, the mosque acquires multiple functions. One might argue that this articulation indicates the

convergence of religious discourse and political power. For this reason, interpretive fallacies and rhetorical or theoretical manipulations within the discourse of traditionalists tend to marginalize the social and political constructs of truth altogether.

Leaman critiques such approaches, writing:

“As Wittgenstein and Grabar both suggest, we must be wary of generalizations. Nevertheless, for writers who deal with religion and art, generalizing is as essential as bread and water⁴, because it is precisely what distinguishes them from ordinary people...” (Leaman,2004,14).

Grabar also discusses the manifestation and representation of power:

“Even public and communal structures such as mosques and caravanserais reflected the grandeur, pride, and authority of sultans, caliphs, or rulers.

These structures were erected during their reigns, and their names were inscribed on the buildings. From ninth-century Qayrawan to tenth-century Cordoba, from tenth-century Isfahan to thirteenth-century Delhi, Islamic congregational mosques featured a distinct and hidden section known as the maqsurah, richly decorated and uniquely innovative in design and composition. This section was a designated space for the sultan—a visible presence of worldly power within a structure that was meant to belong to the entire Islamic community.” (Grabar, 2009, 65).

Grube after discussing domes in architecture and their shared functions across different buildings, writes:

“It seems that the dome, rather than signifying a specific architectural type or building with a specific function, is a major symbol that is, an indicator

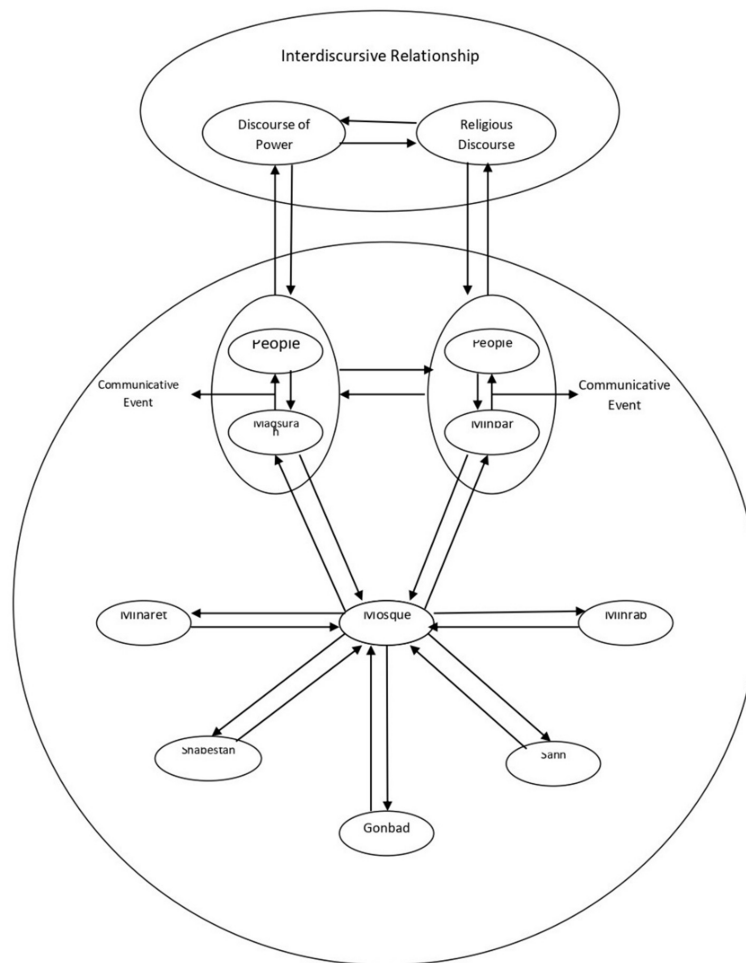


Fig. 2. Articulation of the Structural Mechanism of the Mosque and Interdiscursive Relations. Source: Illustration created by the researcher.

of power, a royal city, and the central point of a gathering or assembly. Therefore, it can serve both religious and non-religious purposes. Its appearance cannot aid us in understanding, interpreting, or identifying a building.”(Grube,2009,11).

This is because the mosque is a material phenomenon with a discursively ordered and articulated system of signifying structures, whose components and elements also play roles in communicative processes. If we take into account the beliefs and convictions of society, the complex processes of the cognitive and social dimensions of this discursive order become more evident.

As André Godard argues:

“Art should not be viewed merely in terms of materials, stone or brick, or the craftsman’s skill. Rather, it is the ideas and spirit of the nation that create artistic works or a particular style and framework. In this sense, the spirit governing Greek architecture was one of harmony and proportion; in Roman architecture, it was order, power, and utility; in Byzantine architecture, a mixture of Asian and Greek spirit; and in church architecture, the dominant spirit was that of worship and devotion”(Godard,1998,344).

All the elements and signs in the architectural system of the mosque have played roles in realizing various discourses, and thus the mosque becomes a text where the discourses of religion, power, and social practice intersect.

Historians describe the plans and designs of early mosques—including the first mosque built by the Prophet—as very simple, devoid of complex or excessive structures. It was only in later decades, particularly during the Umayyad period, that influences from Persian and Byzantine architecture introduced new elements to mosque design, such as the mihrab, dome, chahartaq (four-arch structure), minaret, maqsurah, and arched niche above the mihrab (Hillenbrand, 2007, 77–82).

Given these points, the maqsurah can be considered an element for the visible manifestation of power. The mihrab relates to the collective act of worship

and supplication oriented toward the qibla, and this collection of textual elements transforms the mosque into a structure deeply connected with society and history through its realization and manifestation of multiple discourses.

Some scholars have also argued that:

“The mihrab was a royal and aristocratic structure introduced into mosques to distinguish the position of the caliph or his representative so much so that during the Umayyad period, the mihrab was sometimes used by the ruling sultans themselves” (Grabar, 2000, 132–133).

Discourses attempt to stabilize and convey their particular meanings through the strategic arrangement of elements within a specific relationship and this is the very process through which ideology is expressed. As a result, when discourse functions persuasively, and when art and architecture serve the system of power and are supported by its institutions, then according to Fairclough’s view of ideology, “Meaning serves power” (Cited in Jørgensen & Phillips, 2010, 130).

In this context, discourses, and texts serving as sites for the manifestation of multiple discourses are not created for themselves or autonomously, but rather to transmit meaning. Therefore, this process is inherently ideological, and every articulation essentially refers back to specific discourse(s).

CONCLUSION

A discourse-based reading in Islamic architecture begins with the assumption that Islam, as a meaningful human domain, constitutes a discourse in itself. The Islamic discourse encompasses all the methods, manners, and modes of lived experience. In this field—where signification, meaning-making, and meaning-construction take place—we encounter an interconnected network of signs, actions, social practices, discursive formations, and multiple texts. Discourses seek to stabilize and convey their specific meanings through the arrangement of signs in particular relationships, and it is within this process that ideology—or the mechanism of

persuasion—asserts itself. Consequently, when a discourse takes on a persuasive function, and when art and architecture serve the system of power and are shaped with its support, then, according to Fairclough, meaning serves power.

Naturally, texts (artworks) become the site of diverse meanings. Even in intertextual relations (between works of art), none of the artistic productions of the Islamic period were created in a vacuum; they are either dependent on prior texts or related to subsequent and surrounding texts. In fact, transformation, imitation, influence, and interrelation have always existed.

In discourse analysis and in articulating a semantic system such as mosque architecture, once the central sign is identified, one can investigate how competing discourses define the central (salient) and floating signs, and what types of meanings they seek to stabilize and produce. From the perspective of discourse analysis, the structural mechanisms of aesthetic form in Islamic architecture—as a visual system—are dependent on other layers or factors, and thus, the role of other textual layers (the interconnected chain of elements and signs) cannot be overlooked.

For example, muqarnas vaulting essentially articulates curved space, merges surfaces, connects opposing spaces, and creates zones for various themes. On the other hand, the presence of written language on the façade also contributes to meaning. At the same time, all the components of these decorations and embellishments are positioned in a way that results in a top-down visual authority toward the observer, indicating the dominance of power alongside religious discourse. In other words, this semiotic multiplicity and the complexity of decorative layers ultimately place meaning at the service of power.

Architecture is a product of social and cultural context and, at the time of its creation, had a direct connection to the political and governmental mechanisms of its era, as well as the social practices of the people. Therefore, the current transformation of

the function of such texts—such as their conversion into museum pieces—is one of the reasons that leads to traditionalist discourse propositions. This process emerges from the detachment of the text and its signifying system from its larger contexts.

Mosque architecture, in discursive terms, is thus analyzable and applicable through attention to textual features (i.e., the features of the works themselves), intertextual features (external factors), and context (the socio-cultural and political background). As such, it fundamentally escapes narrow, inward-looking, and fallacy-driven interpretations.

Endotes

1. Articulation
2. In Persian, the term moment is sometimes translated as “وقت” and in other cases as “وقتہ”.
3. translates moment as “bo’d” (dimension) and explains: A discourse is an attempt to convert elements into moments by reducing their semantic multiplicity into a fully fixed meaning (Soltani, 2012, 79).
4. While Leaman originally used the expression “like meat and drink,” given the local cultural and linguistic context, the equivalent phrase “like bread and water” has been used here to convey the same sense of necessity more appropriately for Persian-speaking audiences.

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Rashidi, S. (2025). Analysis of the Articulation of Old Mosque Architecture within the Discursive Space of Islamic Art Based on the Discourse Analysis Theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Bagh-e Nazar*, 22(145), 85-94.

DOI: [10.22034/bagh.2025.484291.5689](https://doi.org/10.22034/bagh.2025.484291.5689)

URL: https://www.bagh-sj.com/article_221757.html?lang=en

