

Original Research Article

Architectural Proving Ground: A Novel Approach to the Visual Re-Creation of Hidden Spaces in Historic Cities (Case Study: Religious Buildings in Rasht, Iran)

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Abstract

Problem statement: Contemporary cities require a stronger sense of identity and place, particularly concerning their historic sites. In this context, the recovery of hidden spaces is of paramount importance. This study defines “hidden spaces” as historically significant buildings that no longer have a physical presence or visible trace.

Research objective: This study aims to introduce a new type of oral history through field studies one that is not only auditory but also visual. It presents an innovative approach that relies heavily on the interaction between the witness (interviewee) and the field researcher (interviewer). This method involves physical and mental movement through space and time, recognizing building plans, the development of forms, and architectural details of historical structures. This process is referred to in this study as the “Architectural Proving Ground.”

Research method: The research is applied in purpose and descriptive-analytical, conducted through qualitative methods. Sampling was conducted in stages, combining convenience, snowball, and purposive sampling techniques. The study’s statistical population, in its physical-spatial aspect, includes religious buildings in Rasht from the Safavid era to the end of the Pahlavi II period. In terms of human resources, the study draws upon local witnesses and elders who were involved in or have observed events related to these buildings.

Conclusion: The analysis reveals that within the conditions of the Architectural Proving Ground, the lived experiences of the witnesses—guided by the researcher—through methodical steps involving hypothesis presentation and testing, lead to the spatial anchoring of the witnesses’ memories. This, in turn, brings meaning to these places and uncovers patterns of architectural transformation and development across historical periods. The study thus offers a scientific framework that demonstrates how the Architectural Proving Ground can facilitate the visual re-creation of hidden spaces and help identify the lost spatial structures associated with them (such as memories and related events) in historic cities.

Keywords: *Rasht, Religious Buildings, Visual Re-Creation, Oral History, Architectural Proving Ground.*

Introduction

Today, more than ever, there is a pressing need to reclaim identity, restore urban spaces, and visually re-create lost historic structures in modern cities. The fragmentation and loss of these spaces resemble a broken prayer bead string—reweaving

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it is essential to the cohesive identity of a city. While various disciplines such as archaeology, mythology, art history, literature, and mysticism (Haeri, 2014, 43) offer paths to search for urban spaces, the process of retrieving the identity of places from lost spaces remains one of the most delicate and challenging endeavors in architecture

and urban studies. These studies typically occur under constraints where legal or social conditions do not allow excavation or physical exploration of historic sites. Therefore, they rely on the testing of hypotheses derived from written sources and audiovisual data. Moreover, the quest to rediscover hidden spaces is not merely about re-creating lost religious structures; it involves retrieving lost fragments of a city's cultural and spatial identity.

Rasht, a city with a rich historical background, suffers from a lack of documentation on its spatial and physical structures before the Qajar period. Existing accounts are mostly limited to historical narrations, travelers' notes, and a few drawings (Safardost, 2005, 71). Many pre-Qajar structures were severely damaged or destroyed due to natural disasters, social upheavals, or urban development. Only a few were restored during the late Qajar or early Pahlavi I periods. The humid climate of the region has accelerated the deterioration of these buildings, making historical investigation difficult. The limited lifespan of structures in Rasht means that few pre-Qajar buildings have survived. Moreover, the erasure of spatial reference points and the lack of integration with newer urban developments have led to spatial disjunction. New structures, disconnected from their historical context, have emerged like mutated cells—spontaneous and unrooted. As a result, architectural archetypes have been altered. To retrieve the historical identity of structures lost in the dust of natural or man-made events, there is a need for efficient, innovative methodologies capable of extracting influential components through fieldwork and answering key questions, ultimately reconstructing their form and physical characteristics. This research, therefore, focuses on the religious architecture of Rasht, proposing a new approach to audiovisual oral history in architecture. It seeks to reveal the historical process of architectural change and development, facilitate the visual re-creation of hidden places, and identify the lost spatial environments that once contained these places (such as the memories of witnesses and related historical events) in ancient cities.

Research Methodology

This study is applied in terms of its aim and descriptive-analytical, conducted through qualitative methods. The innovation of this research lies in the development of a novel process modeling approach, based on the alignment of library studies, fieldwork, and the formulation and testing of written and visual hypotheses. Data collection and analysis were carried out across four research phases - Phase Zero (pre-testing environment) and three subsequent testing phases (Proving Grounds). In this research, samples have been examined across multiple dimensions in each study phase. The selected samples represent either the general state under investigation or serve as specific instances of phenomena that the researcher seeks to deeply understand (Sarmad et al., 2014, 89). Each study phase reflects the results of research within a specific or variable timeframe and includes one or more of the following components:

- A) Oral data, whether raw or analyzed;
- B) Structured or evolving library research, or processed literature reviews;
- C) Historical images or maps (scaled and with new outputs)
- D) Visual outputs such as plans and 3D illustrations;
- E) Analysis of building contradictions following oral data collection and preliminary modeling using the AHP method

F) Step-by-step field corrections with key witnesses

Each phase either aligns these components or confirms, refutes, completes, or leads to the formation of new processes. The researcher adopted a pre-defined theoretical and methodological approach for each phase; however, this approach gradually evolved, becoming more flexible and developmental over time. The spatial-physical population of the study includes religious buildings and spaces in the seven historical districts of Rasht, from the Safavid era to the present. This is based on historical written sources such as books, travelogues, documents, old maps (including the 1867, 1948, 1953, and 1966 maps), aerial photographs from

1956, sketches, and historical images. From a human resource perspective, the population includes local witnesses and elderly individuals who were present during historical events or physical-spatial changes related to the religious buildings, either as participants or observers.

The role of the researcher in this study is both active and influential. Rather than acting as a dogmatic judge, the researcher enters the field as a learning observer. Unlike the quantitative paradigm that emphasizes controlled and artificial environments, this research adopts a qualitative, natural, and open paradigm. Scientific dogmatism has no place in reporting results; rather, the findings are relative and flexible (Safaeipour, 2016, 84; Groat & Wang, 2005, 191). The semantic scope of the research is open, based on architectural interpretations alongside historical, geographical, social, and cultural analyses. The selection and combination of research methods and tools have been gradual, beginning with library studies, field questions, and hypothesizing interactions between the researcher and witnesses. This conceptual framework has led the researcher toward a progressively smaller and more focused sample, bringing them closer to the core research question. As the study advanced, the researcher became more engaged with the field, communication became more active and productive, and witnesses were granted more freedom of expression. This increased the cohesion and depth of dialogue between the field researcher (interviewer) and witnesses and enriched the complexity and depth of the data (ibid., 2016, 101–102).

• Oral history methodology

Oral history is conducted using specific methods within the broader framework of naturalistic and qualitative research. Naturalistic approaches seek to explain human complexity. They acknowledge the ability of individuals to shape their own experiences and emphasize that reality is a composite of truths, best understood through the collection and analysis of personal accounts and

subjectivities (Adib Haj Bagheri et al., 2007, 23). The foundation of oral history is the interview. An interview is essentially a question-and-answer exchange between the field researcher and an individual, recounting parts of their life, a particular event, or a place. The field researcher mentally reconstructs the narrative, comparing it with their conceptual framework, to identify distortions in the historical account (Javanbakht, 2015, 541–542). The interview technique can be part of the design project process, defining the interview category that makes it architectural in the same way that we refer to an architectural plan. The interview is used not only as a mechanism for obtaining information but also as a strategic template of the project itself, that is, a fruitful strategy that is presented as a response to needs and acts with specific methods to represent a project (Cantero Vinuesa, 2022, 99). One of the points that the field researcher should pay attention to is the choice of places or interview locations. The interview location should be suitable for the conversation in every respect. Providing a suitable environment is one of the requirements of a good interview and should not be easily overlooked. The field researcher cannot always consider the same location for all interviewees; because sometimes the narrator himself wants to determine the location of the interview; many are interested in having the interview conducted at their home, because it is more convenient, or some narrators prefer the interview to be conducted at their workplace due to various busy schedules (Aghaei, 2015, 554). In this research, spaces such as inside mosques and religious buildings, public passages in neighborhoods, witnesses' homes or shops, and the researcher's office were used. In some cases, to access supplementary data, the researcher conducted oral and visual interviews with key witnesses by moving around the space of the study area to help retrieve their visual memory for simulating elements and details.

• Sampling method

In the present study, three layers were used for

sampling (step by step) in field studies through oral history, each of which is explained in the following order:

First Layer: Convenience Sampling: In this layer, first, the target population (available or volunteer individuals) was identified and selected for interviews. Then, the sampling indicators of the selected individuals were determined, which included the following:

- A) Gender
- B) Age
- C) Local residency
- D) Profession (Witnesses' professions in the past were related to mosques, or these people's professions were unrelated, and they were only observers of the relevant events)
- E) Position (their role in connection with the buildings).

Second Layer: Snowball Sampling: By applying the snowball method, the target community, which is widespread, dispersed, and heterogeneous in the first layer, is somewhat smaller and homogeneous with the research subject, and includes people such as local trustees, congregational imams, trustees, servants, builders, destroyers, and people who participated in the renovation, reconstruction, and restoration of mosques and in holding religious and ritual ceremonies. It is in this layer that "key witnesses" are identified, witnesses whose reliance on oral data and visual memory is more credible than other witnesses.

Third Layer: Purposive Sampling: The focus of this sampling was on key witnesses identified based on the previous layers; in other words, the field researcher tried to select witnesses purposefully, based on what kind of specific information was needed following the initial findings. The issue of who to select was influenced by who was interviewed in the previous stages and what kind of information was received from them. The process of obtaining supplementary data through various tests, especially the "step-by-step correction test" which is specific to "key witnesses", witnesses who, despite

having an acceptable visual memory of history and architecture, naturally have a time limit because an individual's memory is limited to a maximum of two generations before them. As the studies progressed and evolved, it became purposeful, and its main feature was the verification of the information collected and the hypotheses explained from the library data of phase zero and fieldwork, and the testing of the hypotheses in the process of fieldwork in the next three phases.

Steps of Sampling Methods: The combination of three sampling methods (convenient, snowball, and purposive) is sequential and multi-stage. The process of selecting samples in the present study is such that at each stage the number of sample units becomes smaller and the data received becomes more accurate; in the first layer (convenient sampling), the researcher seeks to extract primary data and in this regard faces a broad, dispersed, and heterogeneous target population. In the second layer (snowball sampling), the target population is smaller than the first layer and has greater integration and homogeneity with the research topic. Finally, the third layer (purposive sampling) will lead to the identification of key witnesses and the acquisition of supplementary data.

Architectural Proving Ground Approach

The word "Proving Ground" in the present study is a compound that gives meaning to a space or place of testing; the reason for using this word in the study is to explain a new approach and function in the oral history of architecture. This approach, while having similarities with other components of oral history, also reveals an important difference. Just as the place where oral history takes place is a space for creating a discourse between witnesses (especially key witnesses) and the field researcher to recount memories and past events, and from this perspective, recalling memories can help to draw and narrate the architecture of the past (Ardhyanto et al., 2023, 18); "architectural proving ground" also meets these conditions, but what makes the proving ground

different is the formation of a space for the physical and visual reconstruction of buildings that either do not exist or have few traces of their past remains. To approach visual hypotheses, both witnesses and field researchers face a difficult task, because this action goes beyond the expression of memories and events, and requires methods for retrieving the visual mind and relies on the memory of witnesses, which can provide an alternative source for reconstructing the image of past architecture and the built environment (ibid., 2023, 5). Methods that have been gradually identified during field studies; the field researcher (or interviewer) also intelligently plays an effective role in orienting the visual memory of witnesses based on information obtained from library studies; in the test site, sometimes what is tested is the same space in which the witnesses and field researchers have been present; because it is by being in this space that they also represent and retrieve the location, form, and function of the buildings in question.

Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical foundation of this research is grounded in identifying lost spaces and invisible places in the city of Rasht and employing an audio-visual oral history approach based on the “Architectural Proving Ground” methodology. The outcome of this approach is presented through visual hypotheses.

• Invisible places

Space is not a container, a neutral and passive geometry, but is constantly produced and reconstructed through socio-spatial relations and relationships, and in general, the relations between “forms” and “processes”. Therefore, spatial behavior is not based on natural laws but is the product and outcome of cultural, social, political, and economic relations and relationships. A relational and relative understanding of space gives priority to analyses of how space is constructed and finds meaning through human actions (Shoorcheh, 2015, 23-24), based on the view of Christian Norberg-Schulz (2014, 21-23), human space is subject-oriented in terms of

immediate perception and reaching the center, which has existed in the human institution for a long time, is considered as the starting point of movement in the environment; And from this perspective, the center is a place that a wise and perceptive person has achieved in space, and in fact, centers that are established as places of action for special purposes. Now, to better understand the concept of place, it may be better to first consider that humans exploit the natural resources of the Earth to create a cultural planet in contrast to the physical planet (Shokouei, 1992, 30-29). Factors such as culture, climate, economy, and the policies governing society are effective in constructing spatial characteristics (Rezvani & Ahmadi, 2008, 50). On the one hand, the meaning of identity is synonymous with the concepts of distinction, stability, sustainability, and even sociability, and on the other hand, places themselves are inherently identity-giving and form the main elements and components of identity. Norberg-Schulz (2014, 115) considers place as a common value that we share with others; for this reason, ancient religious buildings have been the focus of the present study. Perhaps two major factors can be considered to cause the destruction or disappearance of ancient spaces and buildings, one factor considered without human intervention, which is caused by natural causes such as floods, earthquakes, landslides or deterioration of buildings, etc.; and another factor is influenced by human interventions that are related to political intent from the top down and are influenced by the exercise of sovereign power, or by other means such as the intervention of foreign and colonial powers or regional rivals, or the destruction of ancient structures caused by modernization and street fighting that took place under its influence; or whether a spontaneous action from the bottom up by popular forces, revolutionaries, reformists or even rioters has caused the destruction of historical monuments. But the meaningfulness of invisible places and the spatialization of spaces from the labyrinth of time in the minds of surviving witnesses or agents of the

formation of buildings entrusted to history has been the key to the search for the emergence of places within the scope of this research; These invisible places are buildings of historical value that no longer have an external existence or physical appearance, and the meaning of lost spaces is the ongoing and pervasive connections between the spaces that encompass these places (such as events or memories related to them).

• Oral history

We know that oral history emerged in the modern era, and represents another type of history that has enabled us to have a different perspective and understanding of the heritage of our land and ancestors through witness data (Veale & Schilling, 2004, 6); Oral history is the best solution for collecting first-hand information about forgotten topics or some written documents that have been neglected and is used to eliminate misinterpretations or fill research gaps in different fields (Quinlan, 2018, 33). From this perspective, oral sources in history writing have a very long history; although historians were more interested in these sources in some periods and less in others, oral history was initially presented in the field of political and military history and was dedicated to events in the lives of prominent figures. Attention to other branches of history, such as the history of art and architecture, as well as the events of ordinary people's lives in this field, is a new phenomenon. Attention to the mindset of the creators of past events and finding their interpretation in oral history is also related to recent years. Most research under the title of "architectural oral history" has been limited to the lives and works of contemporary architects and based on their conversations. Research in the field of local history has emerged based on people's statements and ancient architectural works (Hashemi, 2014, 58). Oral history can be used to document the physical history of a historical site; architectural or landscape features, changes over time, and uses of space can all be recorded using oral history as a methodology (Marcus, 2008, 2). From this perspective, oral tradition as a historical

source refers to production and the production process. Production refers to eyewitness reports. These reports or primary data from interviews with field researchers and witnesses are somewhat reliable and, of course, require careful examination of complex issues (Vansina, 2018, 22-25). One of the characteristics of oral history is the recognition of the influence and intervention of the field researcher and witness in the narrative. The witness is the source of oral history, but it is the field researcher (or interviewer) who forces him to speak and leads the conversation in the direction he wants; in fact, oral history is formed and developed between the witness and the field researcher. When the concept of "architecture" is added to "oral history," it makes it even more complex. Architecture has subjects; from the founder, sponsor, and benefactor, to the architect, builder, worker, and all kinds of engineers and artists; these architectural actors are either only the agents of the architectural event or those who have witnessed their work; they have been both the agents of the event and witnesses to it. Likewise, those who have witnessed the events and the ongoing life in the buildings, or have seen events related to various stages such as the design and construction of the buildings and living in them, or the abandonment and destruction of the buildings and their destruction (Qayumi Bid-Hindi, 2014, 14-15).

Research Findings

The main approach of the field researcher toward the witnesses in the Architectural Proving Ground was to reconstruct the lived experiences of the participants in order to spatialize their mental spaces and give meaning to these places within their visual-auditory discourse. In fact, by distinguishing, characterizing, and retrieving how the witnesses interacted with these spaces either individually or socially this method aimed to reveal invisible places and enhance their identity. In this context, samples of architectural elements and details of religious buildings in Rasht from the Pahlavi II era were used by the researcher to trigger brainstorming

and strengthen the visual memory of the witnesses (Fig.1).

Accordingly, the following methods were employed: evoking the sense of place and restoring the feeling of attachment from the past to space; recollecting personal and social memories and reconstructing witnessed and experienced events and activities; imagining presence and retrieving relationships between interior spaces; estimating ground and building scale; determining spatial enclosure; visualizing facades and orienting plans, elements, details, and building fronts; and envisioning form, proportions, and textures.

The research process through the Architectural Proving Ground approach was developed in four study phases:

A) Pre-Proving Ground Phase (Table 1):Phase Zero: Background and hypothesis formation. B) Architectural Proving Ground Phase (Table 3): Phase One: Presentation of initial hypotheses. Phase Two: Hypothesis testing. Phase Three: Presentation of visual hypotheses and theories (visual reconstruction of buildings).

The Pre-Proving Ground stage is the preparation of the architectural proving ground space, after examining maps, documents, travelogues, and various historical texts, dimensions, and

measurements extracted from written sources, along with the dimensions and measurements taken from the existing situation; then the field researcher’s initial hypotheses are formed within the framework of the architectural proving ground space. The following are the components and characteristics of the architectural proving ground, which are the result of the theoretical foundations extracted and the author’s field studies:

• **Physical/mental movement in space-time**

In the architectural proving ground, what is the agent of movement is the action or reaction of the field researcher-witnesses, but the context of movement occurs in space. Space takes on both a subjective and an objective and physical concept. This rotation and movement can be examined from both sides of the interview. In this respect, the witness’s stimulus is the memories and experiences that have occurred in past events, and the interviewer’s (or field researcher) stimulus is his data and knowledge from library studies. The interaction of these two stimuli is the third factor of movement in space. If this space is formed in the minds of witnesses, the presence of the field researcher or the search for his presence in this space is completely dependent on his skill and creativity, because the characteristics of this mental space have many obvious and hidden



Fig. 1. Examples of visual materials used in the Architectural Proving Ground. Source: Sotoudeh, 1995, 354–396.

Table 1. Phase zero research process in the architectural pre-examination. Source: Author.

The process of extracting prerequisites for hypotheses		Explaining the process of presenting and testing research hypotheses
Phase Zero: Background Presenting Hypotheses	Step 1: Determine the location and general characteristics of religious buildings	<p>Determining the current status of religious buildings</p> <p>Preparing a list of religious buildings in Rasht based on reliable sources and references, including: Rabino, 2012; Sotoudeh, (1995) and a map of 1287 AH (1870), Under the no: 110703-14, IICHS.</p> <p>Examining the condition of buildings, including reconstruction, restoration, renovation, and demolition.</p>
	Step 2: Identify the Current Situation	<p>Preliminary interview about buildings</p> <p>The preliminary interview aimed to identify general themes based on the dispersed and heterogeneous target community. It was necessary to obtain a list of people related to the building, including local trustees, community imams, board of trustees, servants, builders, destroyers, and people who had participated in the renovation, reconstruction, or restoration of the buildings and the holding of religious and ritual ceremonies, for further reference and supplementary interviews.</p>
	Step 3: Identifying Changes in Religious Buildings in Historical Periods	<p>Form "A": Review of existing architectural specifications</p> <p>A- Impression (Rolleh) of religious buildings; B- The architecture of the original building and changes in the building in historical periods; C- Historical events and incidents related to the building; D- Internal dimensions (sketches); E- Main details (based on the current situation).</p>
	Step 4: Review the dimensions, size of buildings, and the scaling of maps and aerial images.	<p>Form "B": Review of ancient architectural features</p> <p>Organizing data from interviews with witnesses based on the assumptions the researcher has obtained from reviewing library studies.</p>
		<p>Identifying the current situation, analyzing library and oral data, and examining the changes that have occurred</p> <p>The current situation maps were drawn based on field observations. Matching oral data with data extracted from reference sources, especially the book: "From Astara to Estarbad (a source that refers to the exact dimensions and sizes of buildings in the second Pahlavi period)."</p>
		<p>Reviewing maps and comparing them to each other</p> <p>The historical process of religious buildings has caused them to encounter new materials and changes inside and outside. In order to identify these changes, we must first have the scale, dimensions, and size of each religious building. For this purpose, it is necessary to match the maps with each other. Therefore, the maps of the years 1870, 1948, 1953, and 1966 were matched with each other.</p>
	<p>Reviewing old images and aerial photographs</p> <p>After the old maps, aerial photographs were included in the project, and among them, the aerial photograph from 1956 was selected due to its emphasis on precise details, and the location and overall dimensions of the religious buildings in the maps were matched to the aforementioned aerial photographs.</p>	

dimensions that are imprinted on the mind of the witness by the challenge of the movement of his vision and the experience of his presence in the past. In addition to controlling the path of the interview, the field researcher must understand what the witness says and, on the other hand, discover what remains behind the curtain of his mind and has not yet found a place and channel for expression. If movement in space-time also occurs in a physical context, the field researcher's responsibility is still heavy and decisive. Which path to choose for testing

goes back to previous library studies and oral data that are expressed by the witness at the same time as movement and rotation in space.

• **Identifying the location and direction of the building**

One of the challenges of the architectural proving ground is to identify the local location of a building where the available library data is limited to knowing the name or a few partial and unrecoverable data, or frames, scales, and proportions from an old map. In this case, the architectural proving ground

finds it difficult to recognize a building that must rely more on the mind of one or more witnesses. To test the validity and accuracy of the oral data of the witnesses, the researcher must use various tests, numerous and sometimes contradictory and contradictory tests. In which part of the street or market today the building is located, where the entrance front of the building was, on which front the openings were located, and addressing other elements and details of interest, relying on the oral data of one or more witnesses cannot be the only factor in the visual processing of the building in question. It can be said that the rotation in the simulated environment by the witness requires the simultaneous reconstruction of the physical-mental space and the time of presence/occurrence.

• Identifying the plan or form of a building

The approach of this research is to recover visual memory, recognize the plan, or simulate the form of the building, which establishes a relationship between the plan and the form as a simultaneous movement from the “whole to the part” and from the part to the form or the overall plan of the building; for this purpose, it is necessary to recognize the form, according to Albert Frey (2008, 3), form is the physical realization of an internal concept, which implies the internal relationships and aesthetic perception of the sensory and expressive appearance of an object, and it cannot be defined as a specific phenomenon. In addition, form has various equivalents in different languages (Amraee, 2014, 28), but Wucius Wong believes that form means anything that is seen and has shape, size, color, and texture, and it is an independent and positive form that occupies space (Wong, 2013, 140). Although there is a close relationship between form and shape, to better explain this issue, Grutter, quoting Louis Kahn, distinguishes these two concepts by referring to the fact that shape and form are not the same, considers shape to be related to design, and form to consist of the visualization of separable elements and components (Grutter, 2011, 117). In other words,

the design gives reality to a visualization of the visual elements of architecture, including point, line, surface, and volume, because form in architecture includes these elements and subsequently the architectural space is also influenced by the relationships between these elements and the result of their combination (Erabi, 2013, 20). From this perspective, the combination of elements is the method and style that has established harmony between these elements (Vaziri, 2004, 21). These harmonies have expanded beyond any style in the history of architecture, in the form of two holistic and detail-oriented systems. In the holistic system, a main rule explains the relationship between the desired whole and its constituent parts; on the contrary, in the part-oriented system, the parts are repeated with a specific rule (similar to the architecture of the Islamic period) and form the desired whole. (Mosavi, 2012, 30) For this purpose, to integrate the information of the witnesses to distinguish the internal and external forms of religious buildings, the researcher has provided the testing space by testing the spatial arrangement of the elements and details of the buildings proposed by the witnesses and processing the selections by the field researcher from the classification of the presented visual patterns.

• Identifying elements and details

The visual reconstruction of elements and details, through typological modeling for presentation to witnesses, creates a challenge to recall hidden or faded images in the minds of witnesses. This two-way challenge requires both the accuracy, breadth, and quality of the fieldwork of the researcher, and also depends on the type of actions, reactions, and responses of witnesses to the proposed patterns. Perhaps one of the factors that measures the quality of this type of challenge is the response of witnesses through the selection of the proposed patterns designed to be effective in organizing the mental framework of the witnesses.

The following are the methods used in visual memory retrieval based on the introduced

components and features, and in the architectural proving ground by examining the case examples of the present study, including ancient buildings: “Darvish Mokhlis Mosque”, “Chomarsara Mosque”, “Haj-Hassan Salehabad Mosque”, “Mulla Ali-

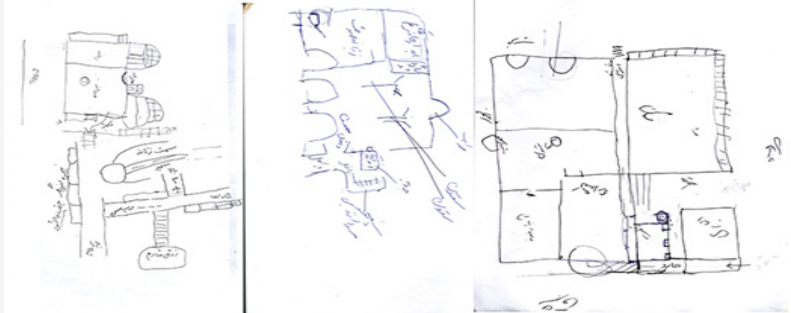
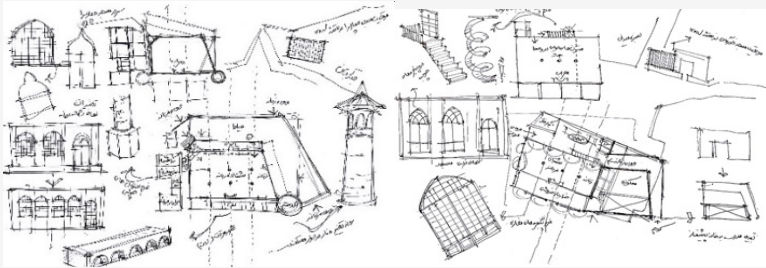
Mohammad Mosque”, “Khorgami Mosque”, “Cheheltan Mosque”, and “Lakani Mosque”, which are described in detail and based on function in Table 2.

The step-by-step approach to visual recreations is

Table 2. Methods Used for the Retrieval of Visual Memory Based on the Features of the Architectural Proving Ground. Source: Author.

Features	Description of the methods for each feature
Mental/physical movement in space-time	<p>The use of the method of “returning to the starting point of movement in the space of the building” by the field researcher was factor in the witness’s mental movement in space-time. This method can be examined in two cases. The first case is when the field researcher interviews the witness in a space outside the location of the building under study. In this case, relying on the witness’s mental image of the building, the direction and number of its elements and details are tested. This case is the witness’s mental movement or effervescence in the context of space-time; an example of this case is the “Darvish Mokhlis Mosque”. In the second case, the presence or proximity of the field researcher and the witness in the location of the old building further strengthens the witness’s visual memory and reduces the error rate for identifying the desired factors. This case is the same as physical movement in space-time. This method was used in the “Chomarsara Mosque”.</p>
Identifying elements and details	<p>The method of “returning to the starting point of movement in the building space” is also applicable to this feature of the test site.</p> <p>To overcome the challenge of recognizing elements and details, the method of “comparison with elements of the existing situation” has also been used. This method is such that the field researcher compares the height of the components of the old buildings (such as the height of the roof, the height of the porch, etc.) with the height of the components and details of the existing situation at the test site to strengthen the visual memory of the witness. This method was used in the “Haj Hassan Mosque”.</p> <p>Another method used by the field researcher in locating the components of the building by the witness was the “trial and error method”. This method is such that the field researcher, by drawing the framework of the old building on paper and determining the possible locations of its components under investigation, allows the witness to choose the correct option. This method was used in locating the spire of the building in the “Chomarsara Mosque”.</p> <p>Another of these methods is the “vision direction test”, in which the witness is guided by the field researcher and looks at his visual memory; then, based on the recognition of the vision direction from the perspective of his visual memory, he locates the elements and details of the building. The field researcher has used two cases of this method during field studies, as follows:</p> <p>Case A- When the test site is located at a distance from the location of the building under study. In this case, the field researcher, relying on the witness’s mental image of the building, tests his vision direction until the location of the building’s components is determined. This case was used in the “Darvish Mokhlis Mosque”.</p> <p>Case B- Unlike the first case, in another situation, the field researcher and the witness are close to the location of the old building, in which case the witness’s visual memory is stimulated and the reliability of his vision direction in recognizing the location of the building’s elements and details increases. An example of this method was used to identify the location of the women’s half-story in the “Khorgami Mosque”.</p> <p>Another method used by field researchers to identify the location of building components by a witness was the “marking of neighborhoods” method. This method is such that the field researcher strengthens the witness’s visual memory by marking the neighborhoods in the location of old religious buildings, as a result of which he recognizes the location of the elements and details of the old building with a lower percentage of error compared to these marks. The difference between this method and the “marking of existing buildings” method is that in this method, the field researcher interviews the witness in a location close to the location of the building under study, but this method is applicable in both cases of the presence or absence of the building under study. Examples of these two methods were used in the “Mulla Ali-Mohammad and Chomarsara Mosques”.</p> <p>The “mental reinforcement” method is such that the field researcher strengthens the witness’s mind by presenting patterns of architectural elements as well as existing images of old religious buildings and then tests him in recognizing the direction and location of the building’s elements and details. This method is usually used when the old building has been destroyed. It is possible to implement this method in a space near or outside the location of the building under study; it can be safely said that this method has been used in all religious buildings in the studied area.</p> <p>In the conditions of the test site, when the witness is unable to correctly transfer his mental data, the field researcher has used the “identity of elements in religious buildings” method. In this method, the field researcher strengthens the witness’s visual memory by testing the similarities of the components of the building under study to the elements of other religious buildings, and increases the validity of his mental images in recognizing the nature of the building’s elements and details. This method is used when the building under study has been destroyed and the field researcher is trying to simulate the building through the visual memory of witnesses. This method has been used to determine the height and shape of the spire of the “Darvish Mokhlis Mosque” and its similarity to the spire of the “Mulla Ali-Mohammad Mosque”.</p>

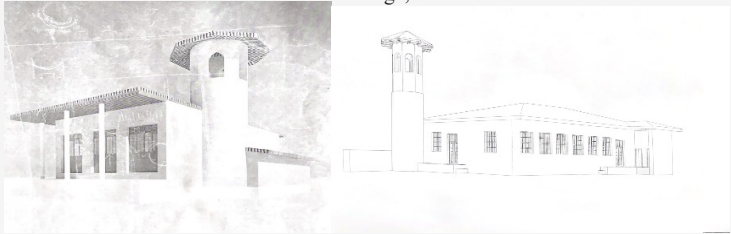
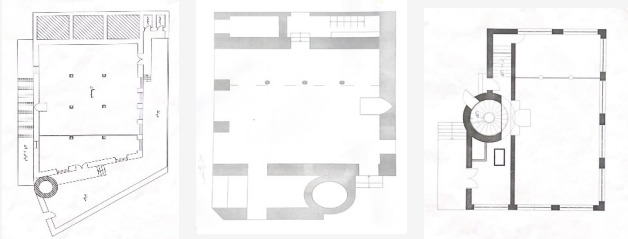
Rest of Table 2.

Features	Description of the methods for each feature
Identifying the location and direction of the building	<p>To locate the old buildings by the witness in the test site conditions, the field researcher used the method of “marking existing buildings”; in this method, the field researcher focuses the visual memory of the witness in the specified location by marking known existing buildings until the location of the old buildings is determined by him/her concerning these marks. This method is used in situations where the old building has been destroyed and the interview is conducted in a space far from the location of the building under study. This method has been used to identify the location of old buildings around Rasht Municipality Square.</p>
Recognizing the form and plan of a building	<p>The “witness mental image drawing” method is such that the witness is guided by the field researcher to draw his/her mental image in the form of a facade and plan of the building. In this method, as in the previous two cases, the test site can be located in a space close to or outside the location of the building under investigation; in the image below, you can see examples of mental drawings by witnesses of Rasht mosques.</p>  <p>Examples of the eyewitness’s mental image of religious buildings in Rasht (Right to left, mosques: Cheheltan, Haj-Hassan, and Lakani). Source: Author.</p> <p>Another method was to use the “field researcher’s drawing of the witness’s mental image”, in which the field researcher draws the plan and form based on the witness’s statements. In this method, the field researcher draws a schematic drawing using the collected data after completing the interview and in a space away from the test site. This method was also used in “Khorgami and Darvish Mokhlis Mosques”; an example of the field researcher’s drawings of the witness’s mental image within the framework of the architectural proving ground to recognize the form and plan of the Darvish Mokhlis Mosque, which resulted from a correction-like interview between the field researcher as an expert and guide with the witnesses, to lead to relatively documented drawings and subsequent visual simulation.</p>  <p>Examples of the field researcher’s mental image of the witness in the religious buildings of Rasht (Right to left, mosques: Khorgami and Chomarsara). source: author.</p>
Recognition of functions and performances	<p>The method of “distinguishing similar elements” is used when the witness has mentioned similar uses for old religious buildings. This method can be effective in forming the building plan in different historical periods. An example of this method was used in the changes of the second Pahlavi period of the “Lakani Mosque”, which had two abdarkhanehs, in such a way that the field researcher, guided by the witness, distinguished the use of similar elements and details in the building.</p>

detailed in [Table 3](#) below; a research process that defines the “architectural proving ground” approach that relies on presenting and testing hypotheses and ultimately visual recreation (or hypotheses).

Testing Hypotheses in the Architectural Proving Ground Hypotheses in the Architectural Proving Ground are tested in two intertwined steps supported by field research results:

Table 3. Research process of the first, second, and third phases in the architectural exam. Source: Author.

The Hypothesis-Making Process In the Architecture Lab		Explaining the process of presenting and testing research hypotheses
	Step 1	Typing and modeling elements and details within the scope of the research
	Step 2	In-depth interviews with key witnesses
Phase One: Presenting Initial Hypotheses		<p>Based on all the existing buildings from the Qajar period within the research area, elements and details of religious buildings were typified for doors, windows, and columns, as well as plaster and kashikari decorations in interior and exterior spaces, because the flourishing period of Rasht architecture was from the mid-Qajar period onwards.</p>
		<p>In this step, in-depth (or supplementary) interviews are conducted with key witnesses who have been identified from informants and previous witnesses or who have been referred to for the umpteenth time from previous steps and phases.</p>
		<p>After the in-depth interview step and modeling of elements and details based on Phase Zero and analysis of oral data, preliminary visual hypotheses were formed in the form of “initial modeling”, as follows:</p>  <p>Examples of early modeling in religious buildings in Rasht (right to left, mosques: Chomarsara and Haj-Hassan), source: author.</p>
	Step 3	<p>Early modeling of buildings in the second Pahlavi period</p>
		<p>After the in-depth interview step based on library studies and oral data analysis, preliminary hypotheses were formed in the form of a “primary plan”, some examples are as follows:</p>  <p>Examples of the initial plan of religious buildings in Rasht (Right to left, mosques: Darvish Mokhlis, Mulla Ali-Mohammad, and Chomarsara), source: author.</p>
	Step 1	<p>A test to examine the contradictions of religious buildings</p>
Phase Two: Hypothesis Testing		<p>For buildings that faced many contradictions after collecting oral data and initial modeling based on it, the AHP method was used to examine contradictions based on Expert Choice software, and contradictions of elements and details were examined (Table 4).</p>
	Step 2	<p>Applying “Step-by-Step Correction”</p> <p>This step is specific to buildings that have had multiple ambiguities after collecting oral data and initial modeling based on it, or have even been destroyed. In this method, witnesses whose information is more reliable during several interviews and testing of the data provided by the field researcher, and on the other hand, have a good visual memory; their ideas and hypotheses, guided by the interviewer, were tested many times in different fronts and directions, based on their mental and visual data; and a method similar to the correction between a professor and a student in a university environment in the form of “step-by-step correction” was used in this step so that the interaction between the field researcher and the key witness could lead to the most accurate plan and modeling (Fig. 2).</p>
Phase Three: Presenting Visual Hypotheses		<p>Based on the results of all tests, initial modeling, oral data analysis, and library studies, the resulting hypotheses and theories were expressed, which will lead to the presentation of final 3D images under the title of “visual recreations” of Rasht’s religious buildings (Table 5).</p>

A) Contradiction testing

One of the challenges of oral history is the contradictory statements made by several witnesses (even key witnesses), and to assess the accuracy of these statements, the “Analytical Hierarchy Process” was chosen as a method for evaluation. In the general structure of this process, judgments are made through a scoring scale from 1 to 9 with pairwise comparisons, in such a way that first the importance of the criteria to the goal is presented, then the preference of the options to each of the criteria is presented, and finally, the weight of the criteria is determined. For this purpose, 8 main criteria, including: “number”, “age”, “location”, “duration of residence in the place”, “literacy level”, “verification of the accuracy of other statements made by witnesses”, “consistency of the statement with written sources” and “long-standing connection with the ancient building” were determined as indicators for assessing the statements. The AHP method was used to rank the indicators in the conditions of the architectural proving ground using the Expert Choice software; at this stage, the contradictions in the elements and details of the

ancient building, including type, number, material and decorations of the column; type, number, form and decorations of the window; decorations of the altar; pediment and other details of the building such as these were examined in line with the approach to visual simulation of case examples within the scope of the research similar to the example presented in Table 4.

B) Step-by-step correction test

Buildings with multiple ambiguities, including some of the influential and historic religious buildings of Rasht (case studies of this research), such as the mosques Darvish Mokhlis, Mulla Ali-Mohammad, Chomasara, Lakani, Haj-Hassan, Khorgami, and Cheheltan, after collecting oral data and initial plans and modeling based on them, qualified for this test. In this test, witnesses whose information, over several interviews and validation by the field researcher (in phase one), proved more credible and who had good visual memory, were introduced as “key witnesses” in this study. Their hypotheses, guided by the interviewer (field researcher), were repeatedly tested based on their mental data, sketches, and 3D models resulting from previous interviews in various directions and

Table 4. Sample of the “Contradiction Examination Test” in Religious Buildings of Rasht: Statement on the Type of Columns in Chamasara Mosque. Source: Author.

Contradiction Criteria	Interpretation	Review Result	Review Result	Hypothesis 1: Brick Column	Hypothesis 2: Wooden Column	Hypothesis 3: Wooden and Brick Column	Hypothesis 4: No Column
Number of Witnesses	Based on field interviews, 2 witnesses stated the mosque’s columns were brick, 1 said wooden, 7 said wooden and brick, and 3 said the mosque had no columns.	Given the greater number of witnesses who stated the columns were wooden and brick, this option appears to be correct.	0.149	3 0.079	1 0.047	7 0.667	5 0.207
Age of Witnesses	The average age of key witnesses who stated the columns were brick, wooden, and wooden & brick is 70, 80, and 65 years, respectively. No age data is available for those who stated no columns.	Considering the ages of the interviewees, the hypothesis that the columns were wooden seems more plausible.	0.220	5 0.207	7 0.667	3 0.079	1 0.047
Position of Witnesses	—	This criterion had no impact on the conclusion.	0.055	1 0.25	1 0.25	1 0.25	1 0.25

Rest of Table 4.

Contradiction Criteria	Interpretation	Review Result	Review Result	Hypothesis 1: Brick Column	Hypothesis 2: Wooden Column	Hypothesis 3: Wooden and Brick Column	Hypothesis 4: No Column
Duration of Residency	Mr. Rajabi Pasikhani and his wife, Ms. Azami, have owned a tailor shop in the neighborhood for a long time. Also, Mr. Amin Kasmaei has had a pastry shop near the mosque for a long time. The duration of residency for other witnesses is unknown.	Given the longer residency of those who claimed the columns were wooden and brick, this hypothesis seems valid.	0.053	1 0.1	1 0.1	7 0.7	1 0.1
Literacy Level of Witnesses	—	This criterion had no impact on the conclusion.	0.022	1 0.25	1 0.25	1 0.25	1 0.25
Verification of Other Statements by Witnesses	Field interviews indicate that the statements of all witnesses on other points are credible.	Therefore, it can be said that the claims about the type of column by all witnesses might be accurate.	0.069	1 0.25	1 0.25	1 0.25	1 0.25
Consistency of Statement with Written Sources	Written sources do not mention the material of the mosque's columns.	This criterion had no impact on the conclusion.	0.285	1 0.25	1 0.25	1 0.25	1 0.25
Long-term Connection to the Historic Building	Mr. Rajabi Pasikhani and his wife, Ms. Azami, have had a longstanding presence with a shop nearby. Mr. Amin Kasmaei also has a long-term connection through his pastry shop near the mosque. Other witnesses' connection is limited to visiting the coffeehouse opposite the mosque.	Given that three informants have had a long-term connection with the mosque's interior, the hypothesis of wooden and brick columns seems correct.	0.147	1 0.1	1 0.1	7 0.7	1 0.1
Final Interpretation: Summarizing the results and applying the weighted values, Hypothesis 3 (wooden and brick columns) has the highest value compared to the others; hence, the columns of Chomasara Mosque were wooden and brick.				0.213	0.269	0.315	0.203

perspectives. This method recognizes that memories and evocative stories are only realized through a series of meaningful concepts, interpretations, and clear and meaningful representations for the narrator or witness (Abrams, 2016, 64). From this perspective, these tests resemble the correction process (design critiques) between professor and student in academic environments. This scientific approach in the present research is the step-by-step correction between the field researcher and the key witness(es) with good visual memory (Table 2). Identification of

the building's form and plan, and subsequently the changes that occurred over historical periods (especially from the late Qajar to the late Pahlavi II period), resulted from the interaction between the field researcher and the key witness(es) (Fig. 2). The outcome of this process is considered the approach to the most plausible scientific hypotheses based on the characteristics of the architectural proving ground. The final product of this process is the developed building models (Table 5), which lead to the visual re-creation of historic buildings.

Conclusion

The results of this research demonstrate that reinforcing identity cohesion through the recovery of hidden spaces and the restoration of the historical identity of Rasht’s religious buildings relies on an efficient and innovative approach. This approach

not only facilitates the interpretation of intangible historical events related to the lost spaces surrounding the ancient monuments of Rasht but also enables the tangible physical reconstruction and restoration of these buildings by addressing numerous questions that previously posed unresolved challenges for

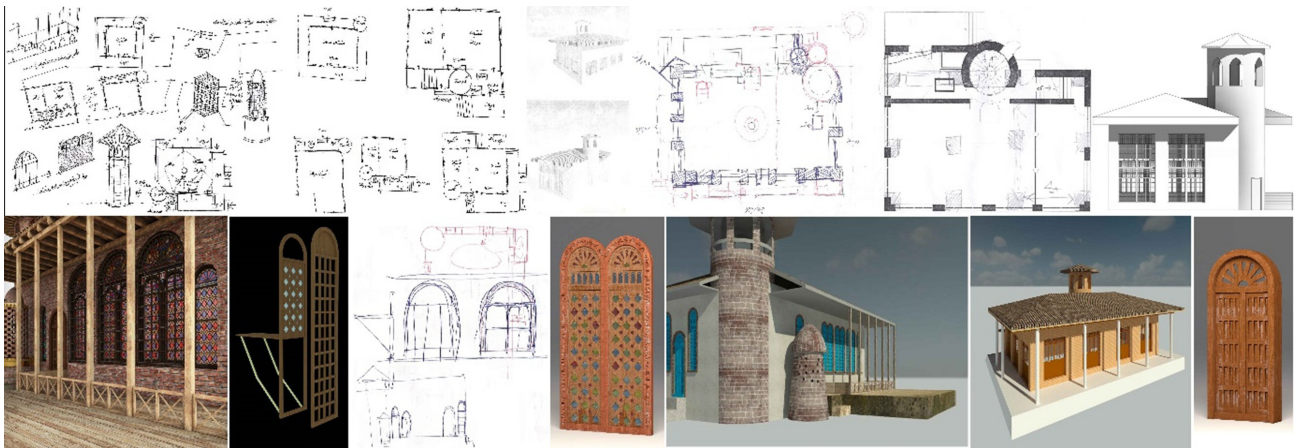












Fig. 2. Examples of the step-by-step correction process between the field researcher and key informants in the religious monuments of Rasht: Darvish Mokhlis Mosque. Source: Author.

Table 5. Process of visual hypotheses under the Architectural Proving Ground conditions. Source: Author.

Case Studies	Memory Retrieval Methods	Testing for contradictions in propositions	Modeling changes in historical periods (with specific colors) and the development of ancient building elements and details based on “step-by-step correction”	Visual recreation of case studies
Chomarsara Mosque	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Physical movement in space-time. 2. Trial and error. 3. Drawing the mental image of the witness by the field researcher. 4. Mental intensification method. 5. Marking adjacencies. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Proposition: Type of window (Orosi / hinged). 2. Proposition: Window form (arched / rectangular). 3. Proposition: Type of column (brick / brick-wood / wood / no column) — see Table 4. 4. Proposition: Number of windows (four / eight). 	<p>Modeling of the first Pahlavi, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling of the early Pahlavi II, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling from the middle of the Pahlavi II, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling of the late Pahlavi II, Source: Author.</p>	<p>Visual re-creation of the late Qajar period. Source: Author.</p>
Darvish Mokhlis Mosque	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mental movement in space-time (returning to the point of movement in the building). 2. Mental intensification method. 3. Similarity of elements in religious buildings. 4. Drawing the mental image by the field researcher. 5. Viewpoint testing. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Proposition: Number of columns (one / two / none). 2. Proposition: Presence of minaret (with minaret / without minaret). 3. Proposition: Type of window (Orosi / hinged). 4. Proposition: Type of column (brick/ wood). 5. Proposition: Window decoration (colorless/colored). 	<p>Modeling of the Qajar, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling of the first Pahlavi, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling of the early Pahlavi II, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling from the middle of the Pahlavi II, Source: Author.</p>	<p>Visual re-creation of the early Second Pahlavi period, Source: .Author</p>

Rest of Table 5.

Case Studies	Memory Retrieval Methods	Testing for contradictions in propositions	Modeling changes in historical periods (with specific colors) and the development of ancient building elements and details based on “step-by-step correction”	Visual recreation of case studies
Khorgami Mosque	1. Drawing the mental image of the witness by the field researcher. 2. Mental intensification method. 3. Physical movement in space-time. 4. Viewpoint testing (element recognition challenge).	1. Proposition: Mihrab decoration (stucco carving/stucco carving and mirrorwork). 2. Proposition: Type of column (wood/brick). 3. Proposition: Window form (arched / rectangular). 4. Proposition: Wall decoration (cement carving and painting/stucco carving and painting/cement carving/stucco carving and mirrorwork/stucco carving).	 <p>Modeling of the Qajar, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling of the first Pahlavi, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling from the middle of the Pahlavi II, Source: Author.</p>	 <p>Visual re-creation of the First Pahlavi period, Source: Author.</p>
Haj-Hasan Mosque	1. Comparison with existing elements. 2. Drawing the mental image by the witness. 3. Mental intensification method.	1. Proposition: Type of column (wood/brick / no column). 2. Proposition: Type of window (Orosi / hinged).	 <p>Modeling of the first Pahlavi, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling from the middle of the Pahlavi II, Source: Author.</p>	 <p>Visual re-creation of the First Pahlavi period, Source: Author.</p>
Cheheltan Mosque	1. Drawing the mental image by the witness. 2. Mental intensification method. 3. Mental movement in space-time (return to the starting point of movement in the building).	1. Proposition: Window decoration (colorless glass / colored glass). 2. Proposition: Number of columns (one / two).	 <p>Modeling of the Qajar, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling of the first Pahlavi, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling from the middle of the Pahlavi II, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling of the late Pahlavi II, Source: Author.</p>	 <p>Visual re-creation of the late Second Pahlavi period, Source: Author.</p>
Mulla Ali-Mohammad Mosque	1. Marking adjacencies. 2. Similarity of elements in religious buildings. 3. Physical movement in space-time. 4. Mental intensification method.	1. Proposition: Type of column (wood/brick). 2. Proposition: Mihrab decoration (stucco carving/stucco carving and tilework / no decoration).	 <p>Modeling of the Qajar, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling of the first Pahlavi, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling from the middle of the Pahlavi II, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling of the late Pahlavi II, Source: Author.</p>	 <p>Visual re-creation of the First Pahlavi period, Source: Author.</p>
Lakani Mosque	1. Drawing the mental image by the witness. 2. Mental intensification method. 3. Distinction between similar components (challenge of functional recognition).	1. Proposition: Window decoration (colorless/colored/patterned). 2. Proposition: Type of column (wood/brick / wood-brick).	 <p>Modeling of the Qajar, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling of the first Pahlavi, Source: Author.</p> <p>Modeling from the middle of the Pahlavi II, Source: Author.</p>	 <p>Visual re-creation of the First Pahlavi period, Source: Author.</p>

the researcher. The visual hypotheses generated in this study, structured within a systematic framework, reveal the elements and details of the public buildings within the scope of the research (ancient religious monuments of Rasht). From this perspective, the “Architectural Proving Ground” approach—which encompasses both auditory and visual aspects and serves as a bridge between oral and visual data—has played a significant role in accessing the architectural elements, details, and recovery of ancient monuments. In the Architectural Proving Ground, after the initial library and field studies (Phase Zero), hypotheses are presented (Phase One), followed by testing the hypotheses, including the “step-by-step correction” (field researcher with key informants) and the “contradiction examination” (Phase Two). From this perspective, it has led to the generation of objective, spatial, and locational data, which, in the third phase of the Architectural Proving Ground, has proposed probable visual hypotheses. These hypotheses, presented within a methodological framework, pave the way for the architectural re-creation of structures across historical periods (Table 5).

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