

The sacredness of the prayer hall at Al-Azhar Grand Mosque Summarecon Bekasi through multisensory experiences

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<i>Article history:</i> Received January 10, 2026 Received in revised form Jan. 27, 2026 Accepted April 12, 2026 Available online June 01, 2026 <i>Keywords:</i> Mosque architecture Multisensory experience Phenomenology Prayer space Sacredness	<i>This study examines how sacredness in contemporary mosque prayer spaces is perceived when visual symbolic expressions are no longer the dominant mode of representation. The purpose of this research is to uncover how sacredness within the prayer space of the Al Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Grand Mosque is constructed through the multisensory experiences of worshippers. The novelty of this study lies in the application of a multisensory approach as a methodological framework for investigating mosque sacredness, as well as in its specific examination of the sacred quality of the prayer space at the Al Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Grand Mosque through the sensory experiences of worshippers, an aspect that has not been previously explored in depth. A qualitative method was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews with worshippers as the primary data collection strategy, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the framework developed by Braun and Clarke. The findings indicate that the sacredness of the prayer space emerges from the integration of multisensory experiences involving auditory, visual, tactile, olfactory, and kinesthetic perceptions. Auditory experiences, particularly the imam's recitation, the call to prayer, and the sound of water, play a dominant role in nurturing devotion and spiritual engagement. Natural elements function as mediators of sacredness, while bodily comfort constitutes a fundamental condition for maintaining spiritual focus during worship. Visual elements operate as a controlled spatial background that supports worship activities without dominating perceptual attention. These findings demonstrate that sacredness in contemporary mosque prayer spaces is not primarily visual in nature, but is holistically embodied through an integrated multisensory experience.</i>
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Introduction

Sacredness emerges through the distinction between sacred and profane space, in which sacred space is understood as a realm where human beings encounter a higher reality (Eliade 1959). Within worship environments, sacredness constitutes the essential quality that enables space to function not only as a setting for fulfilling religious duties, but also as a medium that

facilitates transcendental experience (Sastrosasmito 2020). From this perspective, sacredness is not solely embedded in physical forms or symbolic attributes; rather, it is actualized through the lived experience of space as perceived by its users. In mosque architecture, the prayer hall represents the central worship space where primary rituals are conducted and where sacredness is most profoundly experienced



by the congregation (Dwihutari ; Yenny Gunawan 2019).

The sacred experience within a mosque develops through a sequence of spatial transitions that worshippers undergo from the moment they enter the mosque precinct until they arrive at the main prayer hall. Each spatial layer within this progression embodies distinct meanings and functions, expressing a gradational relationship between profane and sacred domains. As congregants move deeper toward the mosque's core, the hierarchy of sacredness intensifies, culminating in the prayer hall as the most sacred point within the mosque's architectural configuration (Paramitha and Salura 2020). When the quality of space and atmosphere is not effectively articulated, the mosque may continue to function in a normative sense as a place of worship; however, such conditions risk diminishing the congregation's level of solemnity and spiritual awareness (Hasbi and Musdinar 2020).

With the advancement of contemporary mosque architecture, design expressions have become increasingly diverse and no longer consistently conform to stereotypes associated with monumental domes, minarets, and ornamental features as primary signifiers of sacredness (Sholihah and Syamsiyah 2021). Current approaches often adopt a more restrained and open aesthetic, accompanied by flexible spatial arrangements that respond to evolving worship practices (Latief Hilmy and Yacobus Ari Respati 2024). These transformations in architectural expression generate questions regarding how sacredness in prayer spaces can continue to be articulated and interpreted when visual and symbolic markers are no longer dominant elements in mosque design.

Previous scholarship on mosque sacredness indicates that interpretations of sacred meaning in worship spaces have largely been addressed through partial perspectives. Several studies highlight the importance of signs, symbols, and spatial orientation in constructing sacred meaning through visual dimensions (Adiputra and Salura 2021), while others approach sacredness through sacred geometry and cosmological symbolism embodied in mosque architectural form (Sarmila, Norhayati, and Laila 2024).

Research on user perceptions of mosque sacredness following renovation further demonstrates that alterations in spatial expression influence congregational interpretations, yet such

studies remain primarily focused on visual aspects (Saefudin et al. 2024). Meanwhile, other investigations consider individual sensory components separately, such as the influence of water sounds on feelings of calm during worship (Nurazizah et al. 2022), openings on the thermal comfort of worshippers (Rahmananda et al. 2021), and materials on the perceived atmosphere of worship spaces based on user perceptions (Artiningrum and Kurniasih 2025). However, studies that integrate multiple sensory dimensions to understand the formation of sacredness in prayer spaces based on worshippers' direct experiences remain limited.

In addition to these studies, the Al Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Grand Mosque has also been examined in several prior architectural investigations. Rahayu (2018) examined the mosque's façade and form as expressions of architectural articulation, while (Nugraha, Anisa, and Ashadi 2019) explored the meaning of mosque architecture through a semiotic approach focused on visual signs and symbols. Another study by (Rahmananda et al. 2021) assessed the influence of openings on worshippers' thermal comfort as a functional aspect of the building. Although these studies provide important insights into the physical, symbolic, and environmental comfort characteristics of mosque spaces, they continue to position the building as the primary object of analysis and do not situate worshippers as subjects of spatial experience.

Therefore, a research gap persists concerning the understanding of sacredness within the prayer space of the Al Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Grand Mosque, which has not yet been explored through an integrated multisensory perspective grounded in worshippers lived experiences. Interpretations of sacredness in this context remain dominated by visual, symbolic, or technical approaches that address the building in a fragmented manner, while the bodily and sensory experiences of worshippers as foundational components in the construction of sacred meaning have not become the principal focus of investigation. This gap highlights the need for a phenomenological approach capable of revealing how the quality of the prayer space is experienced, perceived, and interpreted holistically by users.

In this respect, Pallasmaa's theory of multisensory experience provides a relevant conceptual framework for understanding the formation of meaning in worship environments. Pallasmaa argues that meaningful architecture is

encountered through the full range of human senses, not solely through vision, but also through hearing, touch, smell, and the kinesthetic awareness of the body in space (Pallasmaa 2005). This multisensory perspective enables a more comprehensive understanding of how the qualities of prayer spaces profoundly shape sacred experience.

Within the context of contemporary mosque architecture in Indonesia, several mosques demonstrate design strategies that emphasize spatial quality and sensory engagement as integral aspects of worship practices (Rochimah and Toteles 2024). One such example is the Al Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Grand Mosque, whose open spatial configuration, integration of natural elements, and distinctive articulation of light and materials provide a relevant setting for examining multisensory experience in prayer spaces. Based on this premise, the present study aims to reveal how sacredness in the prayer space of the Al Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Grand Mosque is interpreted by users through multisensory experiences, as well as to identify the sensory faculties that contribute to the formation of sacred experience. Academically, this study seeks to enrich scholarship on worship space architecture, particularly regarding the understanding of sacredness in prayer spaces through phenomenological and multisensory perspectives. Practically, the findings are expected to serve as a reference for architects and designers in creating prayer spaces capable of supporting solemnity, comfort, and the depth of spiritual experience among congregants.

Methods

Study object

The Al Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Grand Mosque is a contemporary Islamic worship facility designed by Ridwan Kamil and situated within the Summarecon Bekasi district. Its architectural conception departs significantly from conventional mosque typologies. The building adopts a cubic massing without the presence of a dome, and the principal prayer hall is designed as a column-free interior space, thereby generating a high degree of visual openness and uninterrupted spatial continuity during congregational worship. This design strategy reflects broader tendencies in

contemporary mosque architecture, in which domes, minarets, and ornamental decoration are no longer positioned as the primary signifiers of sacredness in religious architecture (Sholihah and Syamsiyah 2021).

The Al Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Grand Mosque was selected as the research object because its prayer hall exemplifies a contemporary architectural approach that constructs sacredness through the qualitative dimensions of spatial experience rather than through the dominance of symbolic representation or conventional formal expressions. The prayer space emphasizes visual transparency, spatial continuity, the controlled admission of natural light, and the integration of natural elements, all of which collectively shape the spatial atmosphere and influence the sensory perceptions of worshippers during prayer activities. This perspective aligns with the view that the quality of a worship environment is not solely interpreted through visual perception but is also formed through the engagement of multiple human senses in the production of meaning and sacred ambiance (Pallasmaa 2005).

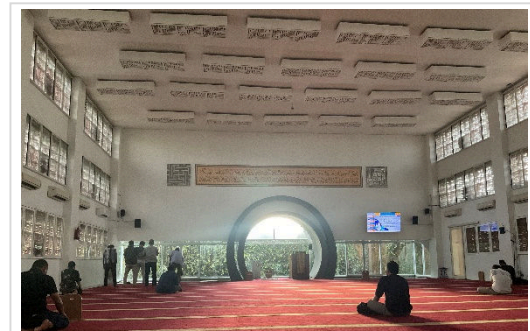


Figure 1. Prayer space during the day



Figure 2. Prayer space at night

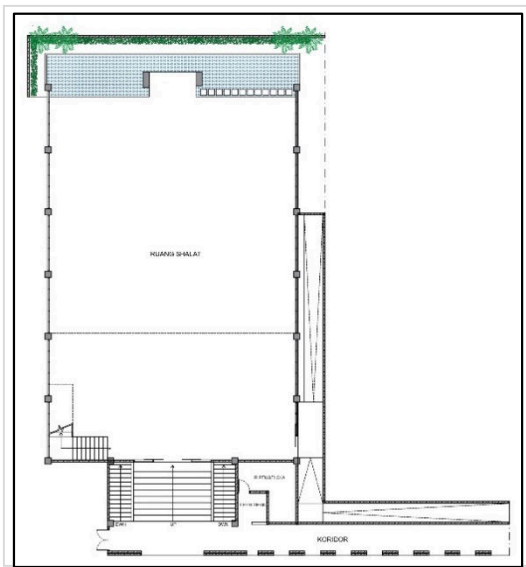


Figure 3. Floor plan of the prayer room at Al Azhar Grand Mosque Summarecon Bekasi

Research method

This research employs a qualitative methodological framework to investigate the sacred experiences perceived by users of the mosque's prayer hall. A qualitative approach was selected because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of users' subjective viewpoints (Creswell and Creswell 2018) in interpreting spatial quality and the atmosphere of worship, aspects that cannot be adequately explained through numerical measurement alone. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for examining user experiences and interpretations of prayer spaces that are symbolic, emotional, and closely tied to spatial perception.

The study involved several participants, specifically worshippers who utilize the prayer hall of the Al Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Grand Mosque. Participants were recruited through incidental sampling (Sugiyono 2020), meaning worshippers who happened to be present in the prayer space during the research period and agreed to participate were included. Although participant recruitment was incidental in nature, specific criteria were still applied to ensure their relevance to the research objectives. These criteria included: (1) worshippers who had performed prayers at the Al Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Grand Mosque at least twice, ensuring they possessed sufficient experiential familiarity with the space to reflect upon it; (2) adult participants, considering their cognitive capacity

to articulate experiences and spatial perceptions verbally; and (3) participants without impairments to their primary sensory faculties, allowing the multisensory qualities of the prayer environment to be fully experienced and interpreted. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews aimed at exploring congregants' experiences related to spatial atmosphere, the qualitative attributes of the prayer environment, and their worship experiences. The interviews concentrated on sensory dimensions of experience, including visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic aspects, serving as an operationalization of Pallasmaa's theory of multisensory experience within the context of religious architecture.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The analytical process began with repeated readings of interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of congregants' experiences in perceiving and appreciating the prayer space. Relevant statements were then assigned initial inductive codes based on meanings emerging directly from the data. These preliminary codes were subsequently grouped according to conceptual similarity to develop provisional themes. The themes were reviewed by systematically comparing them with the entire dataset to ensure coherence, consistency, and clarity of interpretation. In the final stage, the principal themes were defined and named as a synthesis of congregational experiences, which were then presented as research findings and constituted the foundation for further discussion.

Results and discussion

Results

Based on a thematic analysis of the interview data, several key themes emerged that illustrate the interplay between architectural elements and human sensory perception in the experience of the prayer room at Al-Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Mosque. The analysis followed a systematic procedure involving initial coding, grouping of codes, and the review and confirmation of themes, as outlined in the methodology section. A summary of the findings is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Themes of multisensory experiences in the prayer room of the Al-Azhar Mosque

Theme	Element	Sense
Dominance of Auditory Experience in Devotion	Sound of Water, Imam's Voice, Call to Prayer	Hearing
Elements of Nature as the Sacred Mediator	Water Ponds, Gardens	Hearing, Sight
Physical Comfort as the Foundation of Devotion	Material, Room Temperature, Room Scale, Circulation	Touch, Kinesthetics
Visual Atmosphere Supporting Worship	Natural & Artificial Lighting, Ornaments, Mihrab, Color	Vision

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The theme Dominance of Auditory Experience in Devotion encompasses the various sounds present during worship, including the imam's recitation, the call to prayer, and the splashing of water. These elements were consistently mentioned by participants when describing their experiences in the prayer room.

The theme Natural Elements as Mediators of Sacredness involves the presence of water ponds and gardens or vegetation within the prayer room area. Participants frequently referenced these natural elements as integral to the spiritual and aesthetic character of the space.

The theme Physical Comfort as the Foundation of Devotion addresses the spatial and material aspects that influence bodily comfort during worship, such as flooring materials, room temperature, scale, circulation patterns, and ambient scent. These factors were noted in relation to participants' bodily experiences during the performance of prayer movements.

The theme Visual Atmosphere Supporting Worship pertains to the visual qualities of the space, including natural and artificial lighting, color schemes, calligraphic ornamentation, and the mihrab. These elements contribute to the

visual experience of worshippers, both prior to and during worship.

Collectively, the findings indicate that the experience of the prayer space emerges from the integration of physical elements and multisensory responses. These four themes provide a foundation for further discussion on the formation of sacredness in worship spaces.

Discussion

1) The Dominance of Auditory Experience in the Formation of Devotion

The study reveals that auditory experiences, particularly the imam's recitation and the call to prayer, are the most influential factors in shaping congregational devotion. This suggests that the sacredness of the worship space is primarily constructed through auditory stimuli rather than visual cues. Ritual sounds, complemented by natural sounds, are directly apprehended by the body and play a crucial role in the perception of the sacred.

"Yes, the most noticeable is the sound of the call to prayer. It feels so good when there is a call to prayer. The sound makes us solemn, so we become solemn and understand the verses being recited. It feels comfortable and calm" (P1).

"The melodious recitation of the imam, meaning the pronunciation of the verses, the rhythm of the verses is good, of course it makes you feel calm, the recitation makes you feel calm, one of the things you want to find in worship is calmness" (P7).

Participants also highlighted the sound of water splashing from the pond within the prayer room as a soothing auditory backdrop that helps maintain focus during prayer.

"The most dominant sound, in my opinion, is the sound of the pond in front, so there is the sound of water splashing. Maybe because it's not found anywhere else, and I also think the sound is soothing" (P15).

This observation aligns with Juhani Pallasmaa's critique of the visual dominance in contemporary architecture and his emphasis on multisensory, embodied spatial experiences. According to Pallasmaa, auditory perception can generate emotional depth and spatial continuity, as sound permeates space beyond visual boundaries (Pallasmaa 2005).

In mosques, the imam's recitation and the call to prayer operate as ritual sounds that signify sacredness, while water sounds introduce a natural, calming element. The combination of

ritual and natural sounds produces a temporal, immersive, and dynamic sacred atmosphere (Shan and Liang 2021). Water sounds, in particular, enhance comfort and solemnity during worship (Nurazizah et al. 2022). Thus, sacredness in worship spaces is not a fixed attribute of architectural form but emerges through sound events experienced simultaneously by the body and consciousness.

2) Natural Elements as Mediators of Sacredness

Natural elements, including water and vegetation, are perceived as components that foster calmness, freshness, and a sense of connection to nature. Their presence not only creates a tranquil atmosphere but also encourages deeper, more reflective spiritual engagement. Beyond water features, participants consistently associated gardens and vegetation with sensations of coolness, naturalness, and serenity. The visual presence of greenery reinforces the natural ambiance and serves to divert attention from the external hustle and bustle, creating a focused and contemplative environment within the prayer space (figure 4).

"The water and in front of it there are flowers and trees, as if we were in a forest, as if there were nature not only inside the room" (P5).

"The pond, from the pond there are views, it's different from other mosques, it looks like, like praying in a rural atmosphere, it's solemn for me" (P6).

"The atmosphere, in my opinion, is very comfortable, especially with the sound of dripping water, making it feel like you're in nature, like you're in a forest, in nature" (P15).

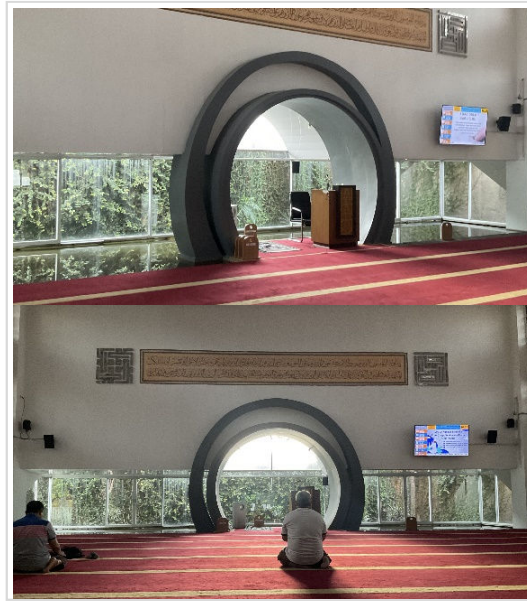


Figure 4. The presence of natural elements in the prayer room of Masjid Al-Azhar Summarecon Bekasi

From Eliade (1959) perspective, natural elements carry symbolic significance as media of hierophany, signifying sacred manifestations within otherwise profane space. Water is frequently associated with purification and life, whereas vegetation symbolizes growth, sustainability, and cosmic connection. The inclusion of water ponds and vegetation around the mihrab can be interpreted as a symbolic delineation between profane and sacred zones. These elements serve not merely as aesthetic enhancements but also as instruments for transcendental experiences, enabling worshippers to cultivate contemplative states and a sense of closeness to God. Across worship spaces, natural elements function both as symbolic markers and as shapers of the spatial atmosphere (Hendola, Safitri, and Purisari 2019).

Thus, natural elements operate as mediators of sacredness, linking the physical experience of worshippers to spiritual dimensions. Sacredness is conveyed not solely through formal religious symbols, but through consciously designed sensory encounters with nature embedded in the architectural composition of prayer spaces.

3) Physical Comfort as the Foundation of Devotion

The study indicates that physical comfort constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for

experiencing sacredness within worship spaces. Spatial and material factors, including flooring texture, room temperature, freedom of movement, and olfactory conditions such as ambient scent, directly influence worshippers' ability to maintain focus and devotion. Discomfort or sensory distractions can divert attention from worship to bodily sensations.

"Yes, the carpet is also impressive because it's softer, while the others are a bit hard. Yes, it's solemn, and when I prostrate, my knees don't hurt, so it's comfortable to pray" (P1).

"The carpet is soft, so it's comfortable, it has an effect, like this is enough, it affects the solemnity because the feet have no support, I'm afraid it will hurt, and the thin carpet will definitely hurt" (P11).

These observations suggest that material selections directly affect the qualitative experience of the worship space (Artiningrum and Kurniasih 2025).

"It's cool, when I first entered, the air conditioning was cold, yes, it does have an effect. If the place is not cool, it's not comfortable. If there is no air conditioning, if it's cold, we can pray calmly, we don't sweat, it's not comfortable if the place is not cool, it makes us rush and hurry" (P9).

"For concentration, personally, it's about the temperature. I can't stand the heat or humidity, so the temperature is very supportive for prayer and after prayer. The plus point is the pond in front of the mihrab, with the sound of flowing water, which I think is good" (P15).

Beyond thermal and textural considerations, olfactory conditions were noted to subtly affect physical comfort. Participants emphasized that a clean, fresh, and neutral aroma enhanced calmness and concentration before and during prayer.

"Yes, for the room, actually when we pray during the day, the aroma is fragrant, but when we pray at maghrib, maghrib is when people come home from work, stop by, pray, and that makes the carpet smell uncomfortable, sometimes" (P7).

"Actually, that aspect is quite good. Sometimes, some mosques are a bit damp, so they might smell a bit musty, which makes it uncomfortable to pray there. You just want to finish quickly. But here, because it smells nice, fortunately, I can still concentrate on my prayers, alhamdulillah, it's more comfortable here,

waiting for Asr prayer is also comfortable because of the fragrance" (P12).

Physical comfort also extends to spatial freedom, allowing unrestricted movement during prayer sequences. Spacious, unobstructed areas enable natural bodily movement without continuous self-awareness or distraction.

"There are no obstacles; it's spacious because the room is large" (P13)

"Yes, this is because there are no barriers or columns. I think the circulation is very comfortable, so it's more spacious. If you say it has an effect, I think it does, because it's comfortable for people to circulate in and out, so we don't need to keep saying excuse me" (P14).

From a phenomenological perspective, following Merleau-Ponty, the body functions as a subject experiencing space rather than as a passive object within it. The experience of worship space is therefore embodied, engaging all senses, including olfaction, in shaping spatial and spiritual awareness (Foucault and Clark 2005). This view is reinforced by (Pallasmaa 2005), who emphasizes that the sense of smell evokes memories, emotions, and presence, facilitating stable bodily conditions that allow attention to remain on

Accordingly, physical comfort, including scent, is not merely a technical requirement but constitutes the existential foundation of sacredness. When the body is calm, stable, and undisturbed, worshippers can engage fully and meaningfully in the devotional experience.

4) Visual Atmosphere Supports Worship

The study found that visual elements, such as lighting, color, room scale, and calligraphic ornamentation, function as supportive conditions that enhance the worship atmosphere rather than as focal points of attention (figure 5).



Figure 5. Elements of the mihrab, lighting, and ornaments of the Al-Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Mosque

Participants indicated that overly bright, contrasting, or decorative visuals could disrupt focus and solemnity.

"I kind of like it like this, not too bright, just right, so I can be solemn, not too bright, because if it's bright, it's too striking" (P4).

"Actually, during prayer, it's not too bright, because when praying, you look down, not up, haha. maybe before and after, when you're waiting, you might as well read, sometimes even read along, like Ar Rahman, Ar Rahim, reading one by one while waiting and feeling bored, compared to just scrolling on your phone, so you might as well read along" (P12).

Visual elements are particularly influential during the pre-prayer phase. Once worship begins, attention shifts from vision to auditory and bodily experiences.

This aligns with [Zumthor \(2006\)](#) notion of architectural atmosphere, which emphasizes that spatial quality is not determined by prominent form or ornamentation but by subtle, holistic impressions affecting users' emotions and bodily responses.

In the context of sacred spaces, visual elements function most effectively when they do not dominate consciousness, serving instead as a subtle backdrop that promotes calmness and concentration. This perspective aligns with [Pallasmaa \(2005\)](#) critique of the visual dominance in contemporary architecture, emphasizing the importance of regulating visual stimuli so that spatial experience is perceived holistically through the body.

Calligraphy and lighting within worship spaces thus operate as contemplative backdrops, facilitating spatial orientation and reinforcing the identity of the space, rather than serving as primary focal points during prayer. Careful control of light intensity, color, and visual detailing is essential to prevent distraction and preserve the sacred quality of the environment. Consequently, visual sacredness in worship spaces is not achieved through visual opulence or complexity, but through simplicity and deliberate management of visual stimuli, supporting inner tranquility and concentration on worship.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the sacredness of worship spaces emerges from integrated multisensory experiences. Auditory dominance, natural elements, physical comfort, and a carefully controlled visual atmosphere interact simultaneously to shape the devotional experience of the congregation. Sacredness,

therefore, is not the product of any single element, but results from the holistic integration of sensory experiences directly perceived by the body.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the research objectives have been successfully achieved, namely, to reveal how the sacredness of the prayer space at Al-Azhar Summarecon Bekasi Grand Mosque is interpreted by users through multisensory experiences. By examining the congregation's sensory perceptions, the study shows that sacredness is not solely determined by conventional religious symbols or architectural forms, but is enacted through spatial experiences directly apprehended by the body during worship.

The results indicate that auditory experiences, particularly the imam's recitation, the call to prayer, and natural sounds, play a central role in sustaining devotion. Additionally, natural elements, physical comfort, and the controlled visual environment serve as supportive conditions that enable worshippers to maintain focus and spiritual awareness throughout the act of prayer. These findings confirm that sacredness in prayer spaces arises through the simultaneous integration of multiple sensory experiences.

Academically, this research contributes to the study of worship space architecture by deepening the understanding of sacredness through a phenomenological and multisensory lens. It addresses a gap in previous research, which often interpreted sacredness primarily through visual dimensions, by demonstrating that the sacred experience is holistic, embodied, and multisensory. Practically, the findings can guide architects and designers in creating prayer spaces that not only fulfill ritual functions but also enhance solemnity, comfort, and spiritual depth through the intentional orchestration of sensory elements. In conclusion, the understanding of sacredness in worship spaces must be approached as a fully embodied spatial experience, mediated through human senses. A multisensory approach in the design and evaluation of prayer spaces is essential to ensure that contemporary mosque architecture continues to convey sacred qualities, even as architectural forms and expressions evolve.

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- Author(s) contribution**
- Slamet Saefudin** contributed to the research concepts preparation, methodologies, investigations, data analysis, visualization, articles drafting and revisions.
- Primi Artiningrum** contribute to the research concepts preparation and literature reviews, data analysis, of article drafts preparation and validation.