

# Beyond The Faith: Spatial Explorations in Contemporary Sacred Architecture

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## Abstract

Sacred architecture has historically been understood through ritual symbolism and cosmological order. However, this study reexamines temple architecture by positioning spatial organization as the primary generator of sacred experience. Titled *Beyond the Faith: Spatial Explorations in Contemporary Sacred Architecture*, the research undertakes a qualitative and comparative analysis of traditional and contemporary Hindu temples in India. The study evaluates spatial hierarchy, thresholds, axial alignment, circulation patterns, and degrees of enclosure to understand how sacredness is constructed architecturally. Findings reveal a clear transformation from rigid, hierarchical, and ritual-controlled traditional temples to more open, layered, and flexible contemporary sacred environments. While traditional temples produce sacred experience through controlled progression and spatial compression toward the sanctum, contemporary temples reinterpret these principles by introducing adaptable circulation and inclusive gathering spaces. The shift reflects social and cultural changes such as urbanization and evolving spiritual engagement rather than theological transformation. The research establishes sacred architecture as an experiential spatial system and proposes a comparative spatial framework that can inform the design of contemporary sacred and contemplative environments responsive to modern social and psychological needs.

**Key Words:** Sacred Architecture, Spatial Organization, Temple Architecture, Hierarchy, Thresholds, Circulation, Contemporary Sacred Space.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Sacred architecture has historically functioned as a spatial medium through which societies materialize metaphysical belief systems and collective cosmologies (Eliade, 1959). Across civilizations, temples, cathedrals, and sacred precincts have been designed not merely as ritual venues but as architecturally structured environments intended to shape human consciousness (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). In traditional contexts, sacredness was established through hierarchical spatial ordering, axial alignment, and symbolic orientation that distinguished sacred from profane space (Eliade, 1959). Within Hindu temple architecture, sacred space is structured through codified principles derived from Vastu Shastra, particularly the mandala-based grid system that establishes centrality and spatial hierarchy (Michell, 1988). The progression from outer precinct to garbhagriha (sanctum) represents a ritualized spatial ascent encoded architecturally through layered thresholds and controlled movement (Kramrisch, 1946). Sacred experience in such contexts is produced through disciplined progression and spatial compression rather than individual interpretation (Hovorun, 2019). However, contemporary architectural discourse increasingly repositions spirituality as an experiential condition emerging through spatial interaction and perception rather than symbolic representation alone (Jain, 2025). Architecture is therefore understood not only as a container of doctrine but as an active system

that mediates experience through sequencing, enclosure, and movement (Pallasmaa, 2005).

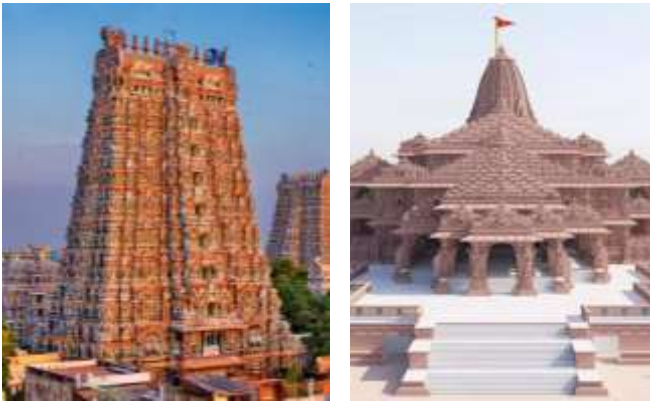


Figure 1 Traditional Temple vs Contemporary Temple

Source: <https://www.novatr.com/blog/temple-architecture-india>

## 1.2 Shift in Sacred Architectural Discourse

Classical temple studies emphasize cosmic order, ritual hierarchy, and theological symbolism as primary generators of sacredness (Eliade, 1959; Kramrisch, 1946). Sacred architecture is interpreted as a representation of metaphysical order spatialized through geometry and axiality (Michell, 1988).

Recent scholarship, however, shifts attention toward embodied spatial engagement and experiential sequencing (Pallasmaa, 2005). Norberg-Schulz (1980) argues that architectural meaning emerges through lived spatial experience and orientation within place. Jain (2025) further contends that sacred experience unfolds through movement and spatial transition rather than through symbolic observation alone.

Empirical studies on contemporary sacred spaces indicate that openness, layered circulation, and inclusive spatial planning enhance contemplative engagement (Raghani et al., 2022). These studies suggest that sacredness can emerge from spatial organization even in the absence of overt ritual symbolism (Raghani et al., 2024).

## 1.3 Problem Context

Despite extensive scholarship on temple symbolism and cosmological frameworks, there remains limited systematic comparison between traditional and contemporary temple architecture through a structured spatial analytical lens (Hovorun, 2019). Many studies remain descriptive, focusing on iconography or theological meaning rather than examining how spatial hierarchy and circulation patterns generate sacred experience (Michell, 1988).

Simultaneously, rapid urbanization and social transformation have reshaped devotional practices and expectations of sacred space (Raghani et al., 2024). Contemporary temples increasingly serve not only as

ritual centers but as environments of reflection, congregation, and psychological grounding (Jain, 2025). However, architectural research has insufficiently explained how these social shifts translate into spatial reconfiguration.

## 1.4 Purpose of the Study

This research aims to investigate how sacred experience in temple architecture is generated through spatial organization rather than ritual symbolism alone (Jain, 2025). By conducting a qualitative and comparative analysis of traditional and contemporary temples, the study examines spatial hierarchy, thresholds, axial alignment, circulation logic, and degrees of enclosure as primary architectural parameters (Raghani et al., 2022). The study seeks to establish that sacredness is not a fixed symbolic condition but an evolving spatial phenomenon shaped by socio-cultural transformation (Hovorun, 2019). It proposes that contemporary temple architecture reinterprets traditional spatial grammar to respond to modern urban and psychological contexts without altering theological foundations (Raghani et al., 2024).

## 1.5 Structure of the Paper

The paper is organized into five major sections. Section 2 reviews theoretical and empirical literature on sacred spatiality (Eliade, 1959; Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Section 3 outlines the qualitative comparative methodology adopted for spatial analysis (Raghani et al., 2022). Section 4 presents case study analysis of traditional and contemporary temples. Section 5 discusses findings, limitations, and implications for architectural theory and practice.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Conceptual Foundations of Sacred Architecture

Sacred architecture has historically been interpreted as the physical manifestation of spiritual and cosmological beliefs within the built environment (Eliade, 1959). Across different cultures, sacred structures such as temples, mosques, churches, and monasteries function not only as ritual spaces but also as spatial systems designed to guide human perception and experience (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). The architectural arrangement of sacred buildings traditionally reflects a structured order that distinguishes sacred space from ordinary space, reinforcing spiritual meaning through spatial organization (Kramrisch, 1946).

In classical interpretations, sacredness emerges through symbolic representation, ritual performance, and spatial hierarchy (Eliade, 1959). Architectural elements such as axial alignment, orientation, and layered thresholds are used to construct a progression from the profane exterior world toward a sacred interior core (Michell, 1988). This process establishes a psychological transition where architecture becomes a mediator between the physical and metaphysical realms (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

In Hindu temple architecture specifically, sacred space is structured through principles derived from Vastu Shastra, which organizes the temple according to a mandala grid system that establishes hierarchy and centrality (Kramrisch, 1946). The central sanctum or garbhagriha represents the spiritual nucleus of the temple, while surrounding spaces such as mandapas, courtyards, and circumambulatory paths guide devotees through a sequence of spatial experiences (Michell, 1988).

This spatial sequencing is designed to produce spiritual awareness through movement and progressive enclosure rather than through symbolic interpretation alone (Eliade, 1959). Devotees move from open and accessible exterior spaces toward increasingly restricted and sacred zones, reinforcing a sense of spiritual ascent through spatial compression and ritual movement (Hovorun, 2019).

However, contemporary architectural discourse has begun to reinterpret sacred architecture through experiential and phenomenological perspectives (Pallasmaa, 2005). Scholars argue that spirituality within architecture is not solely produced by symbolic elements but also emerges from spatial perception, bodily movement, and sensory engagement (Jain, 2025). From this perspective, sacred architecture functions as an experiential environment where spatial qualities such as scale, light, enclosure, and orientation shape emotional and psychological responses (Pallasmaa, 2005).

As societies evolve and urban environments become more complex, sacred spaces increasingly respond to broader social needs such as contemplation, community gathering, and psychological well-being (Raghani et al., 2024). This shift has led to new architectural interpretations that emphasize spatial openness, flexible circulation, and experiential engagement while maintaining continuity with traditional sacred principles (Jain, 2025).

Thus, contemporary sacred architecture can be understood as an evolving spatial practice where sacredness emerges through interaction between human

perception and architectural space rather than through rigid symbolic structures (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

## 2.2 Theoretical Models of Sacred Spatial Experience

Several theoretical frameworks help explain how architecture produces spiritual experience through spatial organization. These models highlight the relationship between spatial design, human perception, and emotional response.

One important theoretical perspective is the Human Experience Model, which emphasizes how architectural space influences psychological and emotional responses (Pallasmaa, 2005). According to this model, architecture affects human awareness through sensory engagement with light, scale, materiality, and spatial progression. Sacred spaces therefore become

| Category                                   | Parameters & Focal Points   |
|--|---|
| Spatial Experience                         | Overall perception and engagement of users with sacred space over time    |
| Thresholds and Transitional Spaces         | Gateways, courtyards, mandapas, intermediate zones, sequencing of entry   |
| Axiality and Orientation                   | Strength and direction of spatial axes, centrality, navigational focus    |
| Circulation and Movement Patterns          | Prescribed paths, circumambulatory routes, linear vs. flexible movement   |
| Embodied Perception and Spatial Engagement | Opportunities for pause, observation, reorientation, personal interaction |

*Table 1 Analytical variables and spatial parameters of the study*

environments that stimulate introspection and contemplation rather than merely hosting ritual activities (Jain, 2025).

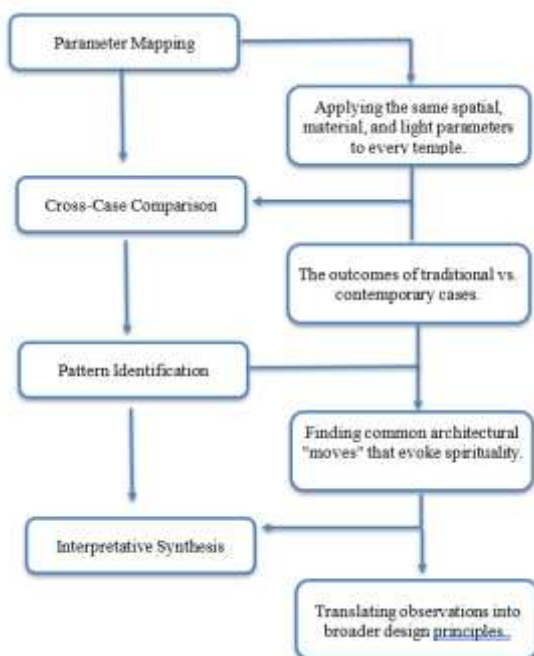
Another significant framework is the Sense of Place Theory, developed by Norberg-Schulz (1980). This theory argues that meaningful spaces emerge when architecture establishes identity, continuity, and orientation within a specific context. Sacred architecture strengthens this sense of place by creating environments that foster connection between individuals, communities, and cultural memory (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

In sacred environments, spatial identity is often reinforced through architectural hierarchy and symbolic orientation (Eliade, 1959). Elements such as gateways, courtyards, and sanctums help structure spatial experience while maintaining continuity between architecture and cultural meaning (Michell, 1988).

A third theoretical framework is the Processional and Sequential Model, which focuses on movement as a generator of meaning in sacred architecture (Kramrisch, 1946). In many traditional temples, spiritual experience unfolds through sequential movement across multiple thresholds and spatial zones. The progression from entrance to sanctum represents a symbolic and experiential journey that gradually intensifies sacred awareness (Eliade, 1959).

In contemporary interpretations, however, processional movement becomes more flexible and adaptable (Raghani et al., 2022). Rather than enforcing strict ritual routes, modern sacred spaces often allow visitors to navigate spaces freely, enabling individual interpretation and reflection (Jain, 2025).

Together, these theoretical models demonstrate that sacredness in architecture can be understood not only as symbolic representation but also as a spatial experience shaped by movement, perception, and interaction with the built environment (Pallasmaa, 2005).



### 2.3 Evolution of Temple Architecture

Temple architecture in India has undergone continuous transformation across historical periods while maintaining core spatial principles derived from religious and cosmological traditions (Michell, 1988). Early temples were relatively simple structures that

focused primarily on housing the deity and supporting ritual practices (Kramrisch, 1946).

Over time, temples developed increasingly complex spatial organizations characterized by multiple courtyards, mandapas, and circumambulatory paths (Michell, 1988). This complexity reflected the integration of social, cultural, and ritual activities within temple environments (Eliade, 1959).

During medieval periods, temple architecture reached a high level of sophistication, particularly in regions such as South India and Odisha (Michell, 1988). Temples such as Brihadeeswarar Temple, Meenakshi Amman Temple, and Sun Temple Konark demonstrate monumental spatial hierarchies, axial alignments, and elaborate sculptural symbolism (Kramrisch, 1946).

These temples were designed to accommodate both ritual practices and large gatherings of devotees while reinforcing cosmic symbolism through architectural geometry (Eliade, 1959). The spatial organization of these temples often followed strict mandala-based layouts that reinforced centrality and orientation (Michell, 1988).

However, contemporary temple architecture reflects changing social conditions and cultural expectations (Raghani et al., 2024). Rapid urbanization, increased mobility, and exposure to diverse belief systems have transformed how people engage with sacred spaces (Jain, 2025).

Modern temples increasingly incorporate larger open spaces, flexible circulation routes, and campus-like layouts that support multiple forms of engagement (Raghani et al., 2022). These environments allow visitors to gather, pause, reflect, or simply experience the architecture without strictly following ritual sequences (Jain, 2025).

This evolution demonstrates how sacred architecture adapts to social change while maintaining continuity with traditional spatial principles (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

### 2.4 Comparative Case Study Analysis

To understand how sacred spatial experience has evolved, this research compares selected traditional and contemporary temple case studies in India.

The traditional temples analyzed include:

- Meenakshi Amman Temple, Madurai
- Brihadeeswarar Temple, Thanjavur
- Sun Temple, Konark

These temples represent key architectural developments from the medieval period and demonstrate strong spatial hierarchy and ritual sequencing (Michell, 1988).

The contemporary temples analyzed include:

- ISKCON Temple, Bangalore
- Akshardham Temple, New Delhi
- Ram Mandir, Ayodhya

These temples represent modern reinterpretations of sacred architecture designed within contemporary social and urban contexts (Raghani et al., 2024).

Traditional temples typically follow a linear axial organization where movement progresses from entrance gateway through successive courtyards and halls toward the sanctum (Kramrisch, 1946). This sequence reinforces spiritual anticipation and ritual discipline (Eliade, 1959).

For example, the Brihadeeswarar Temple demonstrates a strong axial alignment connecting the entrance gateway, courtyard, mandapa, and sanctum (Michell, 1988). The monumental scale and spatial compression intensify the sacred experience as devotees approach the central shrine (Eliade, 1959).

Similarly, the Sun Temple at Konark employs strict geometric alignment and symbolic orientation that reflects cosmological concepts related to the movement of the sun (Kramrisch, 1946).

In contrast, contemporary temples reinterpret these spatial strategies through greater openness and flexibility (Raghani et al., 2022).

The Akshardham Temple complex, for instance, is organized as a large campus environment containing gardens, plazas, exhibition spaces, and devotional halls (Raghani et al., 2024). This arrangement allows visitors to engage with sacred space through multiple experiential paths rather than a single prescribed route. Similarly, the ISKCON Temple in Bangalore integrates congregational halls and open gathering spaces within a modern structural framework (Jain, 2025). These spaces support both devotional activities and community engagement.

The Ram Mandir in Ayodhya retains traditional temple symbolism while incorporating expanded transitional spaces and broader circulation paths to accommodate large numbers of visitors (Raghani et al., 2024).

These case studies demonstrate how sacred spatial principles continue to influence contemporary temple design while adapting to new social conditions.

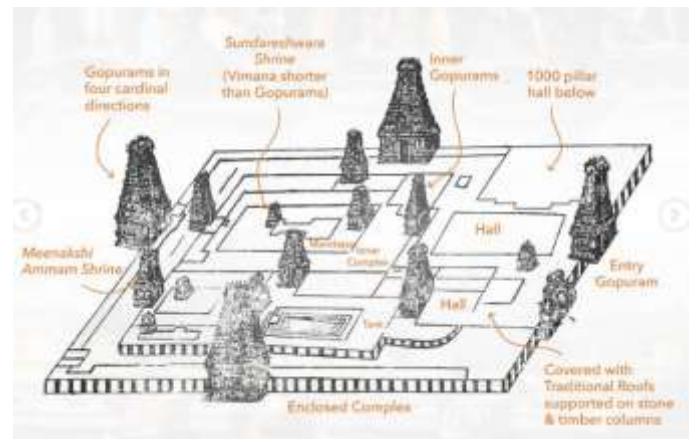


Figure 1 Isometric View of Meenakshi Amman Temple (Traditional Temple)



Figure 2 Akshardham Temple Spatial plan (Contemporary Temple)

## 2.5 Spatial Parameters of Sacred Experience

This research identifies several key spatial parameters that influence sacred experience in temple architecture.

### Spatial Hierarchy

Spatial hierarchy organizes temple space according to levels of sacred importance (Kramrisch, 1946). In traditional temples, the sanctum occupies the highest level of hierarchy while outer spaces serve transitional roles (Eliade, 1959).

Contemporary temples maintain hierarchical organization but often soften the intensity of spatial restriction (Raghani et al., 2024).

### Thresholds and Transitional Spaces

Thresholds play an important role in guiding spatial experience (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Gateways, courtyards, and mandapas function as intermediate zones that prepare visitors for entry into sacred spaces (Michell, 1988).

These spaces allow gradual psychological transition from everyday environments to sacred environments (Pallasmaa, 2005).

### Axiality and Orientation

Axial alignment provides spatial clarity and symbolic direction within temple architecture (Kramrisch, 1946). Traditional temples often align their axes according to cosmological principles and cardinal directions (Michell, 1988).

Contemporary temples reinterpret axial alignment by integrating multiple circulation routes and spatial nodes (Raghani et al., 2022).

### Circulation and Movement

Movement through space is central to sacred experience (Eliade, 1959). Circumambulatory paths and processional routes guide devotees through sequences of spatial engagement (Kramrisch, 1946).

Modern sacred architecture often encourages flexible movement patterns that allow visitors to pause, reflect, and explore (Jain, 2025).

### Embodied Spatial Perception

Finally, sacred experience emerges through embodied perception of architecture (Pallasmaa, 2005). Light, materiality, scale, and spatial proportion influence emotional and psychological responses within sacred spaces (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

These sensory qualities allow sacredness to emerge through spatial interaction rather than symbolic representation alone (Jain, 2025).

### 2.6 Synthesis of Findings

The comparative analysis reveals a fundamental transformation in sacred architecture.

Traditional temples rely on rigid spatial hierarchy and ritual movement to produce sacred experience (Eliade, 1959). These environments emphasize discipline, order, and collective ritual identity (Kramrisch, 1946).

Contemporary temples, however, emphasize experiential engagement and spatial flexibility (Raghani et al., 2022). Movement patterns become less rigid, and sacred experience emerges through interaction with architectural space (Jain, 2025).

This shift reflects broader social changes including urbanization, cultural diversity, and evolving spiritual practices (Raghani et al., 2024).

Despite these changes, contemporary sacred architecture continues to draw upon traditional spatial principles such as hierarchy, orientation, and progression (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

Therefore, sacred architecture should be understood as a continuously evolving spatial practice rather than a fixed symbolic tradition.

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

### 3.1 Summary of Research Findings

This research examined how sacred experience in temple architecture is generated through spatial organization rather than ritual symbolism alone (Jain, 2025). Through a qualitative and comparative analysis of selected traditional and contemporary temples in India, the study investigated spatial hierarchy, thresholds, axiality, circulation patterns, and embodied spatial perception as key architectural parameters shaping sacred experience (Raghani et al., 2022).

The findings confirm that traditional temple architecture produces sacred experience through rigid spatial hierarchy, controlled axial progression, and restricted access to inner sanctums (Kramrisch, 1946). In these environments, sacredness emerges through a structured sequence of spatial compression and ritual movement that gradually intensifies spiritual awareness (Eliade, 1959).

In contrast, contemporary temple architecture reinterprets these spatial principles through openness, layered spatial arrangements, and flexible circulation patterns (Raghani et al., 2024). Modern sacred environments allow visitors to engage with space through movement, pause, and observation, enabling more personal and experiential forms of spirituality (Jain, 2025).

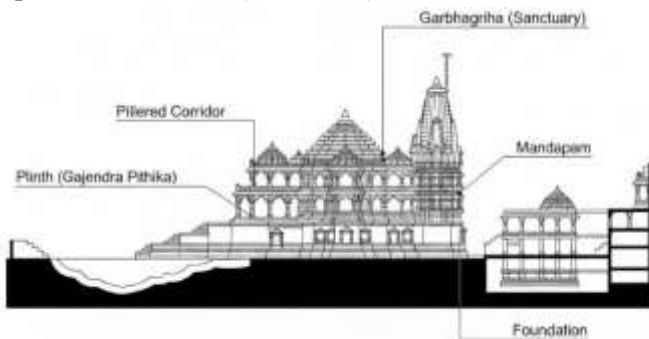


Figure 4 Akshardham Temple Section (Contemporary Temple)

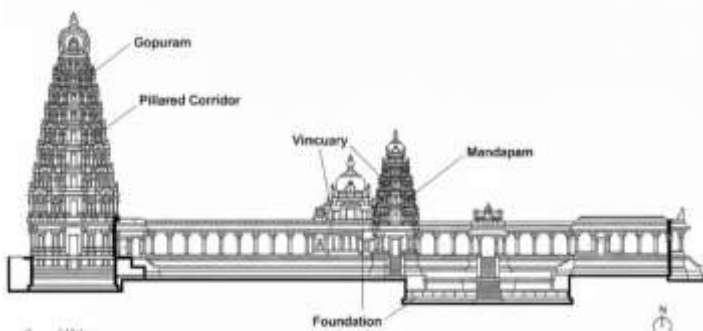


Figure 3 Section of Meenakshi Amman Temple (Traditional Temple)

The comparative analysis therefore demonstrates that sacred architecture has evolved from ritual-controlled spatial systems to experience-oriented spatial environments (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

### 3.2 Interpretation of Spatial Transformation

The study reveals that the transformation in sacred architecture is primarily driven by social and cultural changes rather than theological shifts (Raghani et al., 2024). Traditional temple layouts reflected hierarchical social structures and collective ritual practices that were dominant in pre-modern societies (Hovorun, 2019).

However, contemporary societies are characterized by urbanization, cultural pluralism, and changing patterns of religious engagement, which have reshaped expectations of sacred space (Jain, 2025). As a result, modern temple architecture increasingly prioritizes accessibility, inclusivity, and spatial flexibility (Raghani et al., 2022).

Contemporary sacred spaces often incorporate open plazas, gardens, congregational halls, and expanded transitional zones that allow users to experience spirituality through spatial interaction rather than ritual prescription (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). This shift enables sacred architecture to accommodate both collective worship and individual contemplation within the same spatial framework (Pallasmaa, 2005).

Thus, sacred architecture continues to maintain symbolic continuity while simultaneously adapting to changing cultural contexts (Michell, 1988).

### 3.3 Contribution to Architectural Theory

This research contributes to architectural discourse by redefining sacred architecture as an experiential spatial system rather than a purely symbolic structure (Jain, 2025). By emphasizing spatial organization, movement, and perception as generators of sacred experience, the study aligns with phenomenological interpretations of architecture (Pallasmaa, 2005).

The study also establishes a comparative analytical framework based on spatial hierarchy, thresholds, axiality, circulation patterns, and embodied spatial engagement (Raghani et al., 2022). This framework allows sacred architecture to be analyzed systematically across historical periods and architectural typologies (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

Furthermore, the research demonstrates that sacredness can emerge from spatial experience even in environments where ritual symbolism is minimized or reinterpreted (Jain, 2025). This perspective expands the theoretical understanding of sacred architecture beyond traditional religious contexts (Hovorun, 2019).

### 3.4 Implications for Architectural Practice

The findings of this study offer important insights for architects and planners involved in designing contemporary sacred environments (Raghani et al., 2024). Rather than replicating traditional temple forms, architects can reinterpret traditional spatial principles to create environments that respond to modern social and psychological needs (Jain, 2025).

Spatial strategies such as layered thresholds, flexible circulation paths, and balanced spatial hierarchy can help generate contemplative environments that support both spiritual reflection and community interaction (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). These strategies enable sacred architecture to remain culturally meaningful while accommodating contemporary lifestyles (Pallasmaa, 2005).

In rapidly urbanizing contexts, sacred spaces can also function as environments for mental well-being, social interaction, and cultural continuity (Raghani et al., 2024). Designing temples and contemplative environments as spatial experiences rather than strictly ritual enclosures can therefore enhance their relevance in modern society (Jain, 2025).

### 3.5 Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this research has several limitations. The study relies primarily on secondary literature and documented architectural case studies, which limits direct observation of user experience within sacred environments (Raghani et al., 2022).

Additionally, the analysis focuses specifically on Hindu temple architecture within the Indian context, which may restrict broader generalization across other religious traditions (Michell, 1988). The research also does not incorporate empirical psychological or behavioral data that could further validate the experiential impact of spatial design (Pallasmaa, 2005). Therefore, the findings should be understood as interpretative architectural insights rather than definitive empirical conclusions (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

### 3.6 Scope for Future Research

Future research can expand this study by incorporating user-based experiential studies and behavioral analysis to better understand how individuals perceive and interact with sacred architecture (Jain, 2025). Observational studies, surveys, and environmental psychology methods could provide deeper insights into the relationship between spatial design and spiritual experience (Pallasmaa, 2005).

Further research could also extend the comparative framework to include sacred spaces from different

religious traditions, such as churches, mosques, monasteries, and meditation centers (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Such studies would help determine whether spatial strategies that generate sacred experience are universal across cultural contexts (Hovorun, 2019).

Additionally, interdisciplinary research integrating architecture, psychology, and neuroscience could explore measurable connections between spatial environments and emotional or contemplative states (Raghani et al., 2024).

### 3.7 Final Reflection

Overall, this research demonstrates that sacred architecture is not a static symbolic tradition but a dynamic spatial practice that evolves alongside society (Jain, 2025). While traditional temples rely on hierarchical order and ritual progression, contemporary sacred spaces emphasize experiential engagement and spatial openness (Raghani et al., 2022).

By understanding sacredness as a spatial condition produced through movement, perception, and interaction, architects can design environments that sustain spiritual meaning while responding to contemporary cultural realities (Pallasmaa, 2005).

Thus, contemporary sacred architecture does not abandon tradition; rather, it reinterprets traditional spatial principles to create meaningful spiritual environments for modern society (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

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