The Architecture of Grief

Representing the Evolution of Shia Mourning Spaces and Contributions to Islamic Architecture

by
Inam Zehra Rizvi

A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Architecture

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada,2025
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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract |

In Shia Islam, commemorative mourning rituals for the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, have undergone a process of evolution over the past 1,400 years. In documenting the evolution of the typology of the Shia Mosque, we find that its programs are directly related to the mourning rituals and symbolic icons that they house. This evolution is marked by the migration of material and visual forms to new lands, and its resultant replications vary in their scale and in their accuracy, often interacting and absorbing the cultural underpinnings of the region it occupies.

This process reflects the spatiotemporal re-imagining of the phenomenology of “parallel pilgrimages” that captivates generations of Muslims. This thesis aims to explore these practices by focusing on ritual architectural events such as craft-making, mosaic arts, processions, and the creation of replica shrines. With the aim to demystify the current Shia practices and their distinctions from universal mosque spaces, a design approach focused on religious and cultural contributions on this form of collective grief and remembrance can have an opportunity to provide a space for clarity and education for what is a heavily stigmatized practice.

Keywords: Pilgrimage, Islamic Architecture, Auto ethnography, Mobility, Shrines, Women, Cultural identity, Public space, Ritual

Acknowledgments

I'd like to extend my warmest thanks to Anwar Jaber for taking on the thesis with an open mind and giving me the space to explore the thesis on an academic and personal level.

Thank you to RJvP for taking on the supervisor role and supporting me through the conclusion of this thesis, our conversations were incredibly helpful to keep me steady.

I'd like to thank Jaliya Fonseka for encouraging me to believe that this thesis held the power to represent my lived experiences, and for sharing the beauty in the process of self exploration and journeying.

A massive thank you to Tara Bisset for agreeing to join in as my committee member, for your kind words, support, and invaluable resources.

Special thank you to Muntazir Jaffer of the ISIJ from the Jaffari Community Center for allowing me to document the Islamic center that has shaped my faith growing up.

I'd also like to express my deepest gratitude to Mohamed Kumail Kassam from the Masumeen Islamic Center for your eagerness and warmth in our conversations. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me and for sharing notes and drawings of the center.

My humblest thanks to Hyder Jahim from the Al Hussain Foundation for generously providing supportive information to represent the mosque and cemetery complex.

Dedication

To my parents, for instilling the beauty of this tradition in me growing up.
To my friends, who carried me through with open ears, minds, and arms.
To Sonia, for coffee, comfort, kindness and unconditional support.

This thesis was written during an incredibly tumultuous time in my life. With you around me I was able to find peace in my work and in myself. For that I am everlastingly grateful. Finding a part of myself was my bottom line in this thesis, to turn my attention to a much neglected, yet essential part of my self. Difficult conversations, contradictions, and many identity crises' later, you still taught me to look at the best parts of myself, and that the good will come as long as there is faith.

For all the space you've made for me, I hope I can make one quite as beautiful as that.

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...The ta'ziyah drama of the betrayal and murder of Imam Hussayn does not cease to bring an Iranian audience to tears no matter how many times they have seen the martyrdom enacted. On the contrary. They weep, in part, because they have seen it many times. People want to weep. Pathos, in the form of a narrative, does not wear out.

-Susan Sontag

Preface |

My intention with this thesis is not to emphasize or further push for a religious divide but instead it comes with a curious yearning to understand the history and evolution of the Shia mourning practices, and how these differences manifest architecturally. My emphasis on exploring the ideological roots of the practice will not debate nor call into question the legitimacy of the practice but rather I aim to document the architectural and cultural evolution in the South Asian diaspora in Canada. Growing up in a minority community, I've always felt that Shia religious expression is often overlooked in the West and misunderstood in the East. This project is shaped by my own experience of navigating the fragmentation of my faith in the diaspora, explored through the lens of artistic expression influenced by regional mourning traditions.

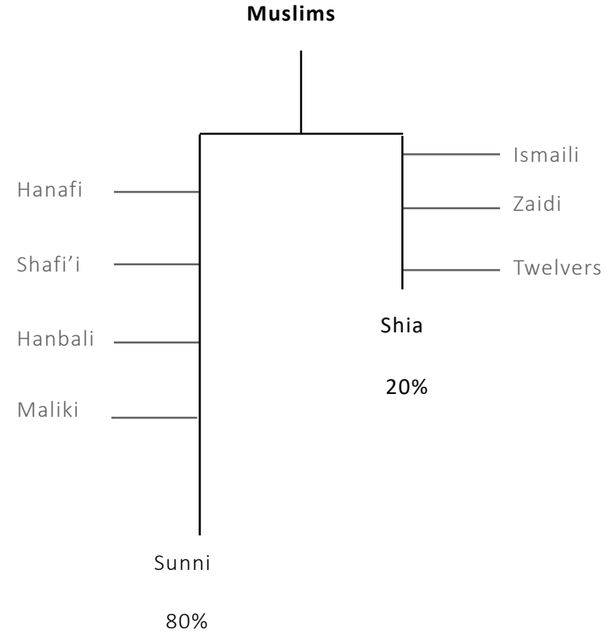


Figure 1. Islamic Divisions

Introduction | 00

The Battle of Karbala occurred on the 10th of the Islamic month of *Muharram* in 680 AD. It was fought between the forces of Hussain ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, and the ruling Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Muawiya. Hussain, also referred to as Imam Hussain, was brutally martyred last after losing each member of his army in front of his eyes, mostly consisting of his family, companions and young sons - including his own six month old infant. Hussain's small army of 72 was encircled in the desert plains of Karbala in iraq by Yazid's army of tens of thousands. Access to the nearby Euphrates River was cut off, leaving them with the agony of thirst under the merciless desert heat for three days before being martyred.

This martyrdom is mourned annually by Shia Muslims during the first 10 days of Muharram which makes up the most intensive period of mourning. Shia muslims make up the second largest branch of Islam after Sunni Islam and makes up about 10–20% of Muslims worldwide.[1] The term Shia is defined as 'follower' from Arabic, and differs from the Sunni branch who believe the only rightful successors of the Prophet Muhammad is his cousin Imam Ali- the first of twelve Imams or leaders. Pilgrimages to the shrines of Imam Hussein, his companions, and family members in Karbala are particularly significant to visit on *Ashura* - the 10th day of Muharram, and *Arbaeen*, 40 days later, during which the city's twin shrine complexes are visited by vast numbers of pilgrims. This thesis will examine the role of pilgrimage and its impact on diasporic memory practices following its cultural and emotional currents that run from a remembered past to shape the creation of Shia mourning spaces today.

Once Shia Islam was officially recognized as Iran's state religion in the sixteenth century, it came to be established as the cultural and religious identity of the region.[2] Mourning ceremonies and shrine visitation to the complexes are commonly referred to as *ziyarat*, had became deeply institutionalized. This form of commemoration faced restrictions under some rulers for most of early Islam, but Shias have consistently resisted them and regarded it as the righteous form of mourning. It continues to be practiced by Muslims today through the form of visitation for the purpose of intercession. These practices of visitation

1 Edith Szanto, "Shia Islam in Practice," in Handbook of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Lives, ed. Ronald Lukens-Bull and Mark Woodward (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 39–53, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32626-5_8.

2 James W. Allan, The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shi'ism: Iraq, Iran and the Indian Sub-Continent, Biennial Ehsan Yarshater Lecture Series (London: Azimuth Ed., 2012).

were established by the family members of those who were martyred, and subsequently birthed the annual visitation of the two major pilgrimages to the shrine complexes in the holy city of Karbala in Iraq. Since the end of the Iraq War of 2003 under Saddam Hussain's rule, pilgrimage to the region has grown exponentially and globally which was previously restricted due to aggravated sectarian violence and forbidden shrine visitation.[3]

Since then, the shrine complexes have expanded and undergone construction numerous times to accommodate the influx of new pilgrims each year.[4] In 2023, the amount of pilgrims on Arbaeen peaked at 22 million, marking it the largest religious pilgrimage in the world.[5] Along with pilgrimage, Shia expressions of grief and solidarity have gone through a gradual process of growth over the past 1400 years, coursing through national and sectarian identities. Entire cities have emerged around sacred tombs and shrines, shaping beliefs, practices, and rituals across various societies. This evolution has given rise to unique architectural elements that reflect the artistic and cultural expressions of Shia communities. These innovations have not only enriched the architectural landscape but also heightened the spatial and sensorial 'affect' of the pilgrimage experience.

The phenomenology of visitation has created an archipelago of religious shrines throughout cities in Iran and Iraq that is stitched together through pilgrimage routes. Through the spread of Shia Islamic and Persianate influence into the Deccan, the spread of Shia established cities across modern day India began the subsequent production of Shia arts, as well as the need for pilgrims to bring back commemorative objects from their visit to the holy sites. This included pilgrimage scrolls and religious artworks, which depicted the sacred landscapes of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hussain.[6]

Indo-Islamic traditions of venerating the dead are expressed through the concept of replication- or visitation for those who cannot travel. With

3 Ali B. Al-Furaty and Ammar S. Ashour, "Assessing the Building's Developments on the Human Perception: The Case Study of Imam al-Hussain Shrine in Karbala, Iraq," Association of Arab Universities Journal of Engineering Sciences 26, no. 4 (2019): 73–82, https://doi.org/10.33261/jaaru.2019.26.4.009.

4 Shubber M. Falah, "The shrine that consumed its town: The role of religion and politics in reshaping the Iraqi City of Najaf." PhD diss., University of Cincinnati (2018).

5 'Photos: Arbaeen, One of the World's Largest Annual Pilgrimages in Iraq | Religion News | Al Jazeera', accessed 30 December 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2023/9/7/photos-arbaeen-worlds-largest-annual-pilgrimage-in-iraq.

6 Ulrich Marzolph and Mathilde Renauld, 'An Illustrated Shiʿi Pilgrimage Scroll in the Collections of the Royal Asiatic Society', Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 32, no. 1 (January 2022): 187–211, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186321000031.

only memory and representations with them was born the practice of replica creation, where mediums of interpretations were inspired by highly stylized motifs superimposed on existing architectural techniques of constructing. This architectural essence flowed into and out of Lucknow in the early eighteenth and nineteenth century. If Karbala became a graveyard for Imam Hussain, in Nawab ruled India, a makeshift Karbala served both as a graveyard for the ritual burial of the *taziya* (model shrines) of those Imams as well as a replica mausoleum.[7] Through these traditional forms of craft making, the mosque typology has evolved to accommodate a house for a taziya called an *Imambada* that now exists in almost every Shia mosque.

For those who practice mourning rituals outside of its original regional languages and nationalities, the understanding of the pilgrimage today is made from a patchwork of icons, symbologies, photographs, and narratives. In a contemporary setting, these diasporic ties are created and practiced in a domestic setting and within mosques. My perspective in this thesis allows me to approach it as someone within the practice of the faith, removed from its place of origin. The practice of mourning has always seemed semi distant - far removed from the workings of daily life, and this thesis had given me the opportunity to study my faith more intentionally.

Research Question/Problem

How are the shrines of Shia architecture representative of the expression of grief and how do they permeate outside of their context? How can architecture enhance the mourning experience when learning from the past, while looking for contemporary architectural expressions? What does the future of commemorative Shia architecture look like in a fragmented and diasporic setting?

Literature Review

The architecture of tombs and shrines in Islam is iconographically similar to that of a mosque, however, the development of funerary culture comes from multi-denominational societies and their respective urban traditions.[8] There

7 Holly Shaffer, 'An Architecture of Ephemerality between South and West Asia', Text, Journal18: a journal of eighteenth-century art and culture, 28 October 2017, World, https://www.journal18.org/issue4/an-architecture-of-ephemerality-between-south-and-west-Asia/.

8 Sepideh Parsapajouh and Mathieu Terrier, "Cemeteries and Tombs in the Muslim Worlds at the Crossroads of Religious, Political and Memorial Issues: An Introduction," Revue Des Mondes Musulmans et de La

is a wealth of information on early Shia Islamic architectures arising from the Safavid and Selujik periods in Iran that differentiate themselves from former Islamic periods Foundational readings by historian Oleg Grabar will establish the architectural study of Sufi and Shia studies of saintly tombs and mausoleums, asserting the position that the Shia shrine can be a categorized as a typology of its own in his text *The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures, Notes and Documents*. Design approach principles will parallel with the discourse on the curation of Muslim centric spaces for Shia mourning defined as architecture that is created by Muslims, for Muslims—where Muslims have the opportunity to express their cultural independence.[9]

Édouard Glissant's Relation theory in his book *Poetics of Relation* is an essential point of reference in this thesis - a concept that I came across when studying the blending and reconfiguring of culture through art and cultural exchange.[10] Cultural legitimacy can often be threatened in reinterpretation, and can fall subject to generalizations of myth of and tragedy, and in it requires a negotiation between the 'opacity and the transparency' of a culture when translating systems of knowledge to avoid what Glissant refers to as 'reduction', or an oversimplification in rationalizing a culture to a western audience.[11]

In documenting these systems through the 'cultural archive,' as presented by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, a collection of histories, texts, artifacts, and images is gathered.[12] However the curation requires a delicate approach towards shifts and transformations of narratives and perspectives to be represented through the chosen system of classification and representation.

Methodology

As someone born and raised as a Shia Muslim, my approach in this thesis works in the framework of Glissant's relation theory, especially in the concept of "roots" as a connection to one's origins and cultural heritage, but one that embraces and celebrates the importance of "routes" as well – the journeys,

Méditerranée, no. 146 (2019), https://doi.org/10.4000/remmm.13414.

9 Nasser Rabbat, 'What Is Islamic Architecture Anyway?', Journal of Art Historiography, 2012, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1021054388/citation/D234D8F8FF6D4965PQ/1.

10 Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997

11 Glissant, Poetics of Relation

12 Michel Foucault, 'Texts/Contexts: Of Other Spaces', in Grasping the World, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2019), 371–79, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429399671-24.

migrations, and encounters that shape individual and collective identities over time. For Glissant, identity is not fixed but continually evolving through movement and exchange. From the Iraqi pilgrimage to the Shia diaspora explored in India, this thesis undergoes a cultural analysis and documentation that aims to provide a subjective exploration of Shia memory-making. Tools of travel writing and drawing will allow for the "visualizing" the pilgrimages and their replications. [13]

Photography will be used as a method of documentation of cultural symbols, icons, lamentations, and artifacts. On an architectural level, this will be through both concrete analysis of specific shrines as theaters of grief and will include case studies of spaces where mourning practices are carried out.[14] The thesis is organized temporally throughout, starting from the present or "today", to the early Islamic development of the mourning practices in "origin", to the diasporic arts in "yesterday" and finally culminating in a proposed Shia mosque in the design chapter "tomorrow".

Design Output

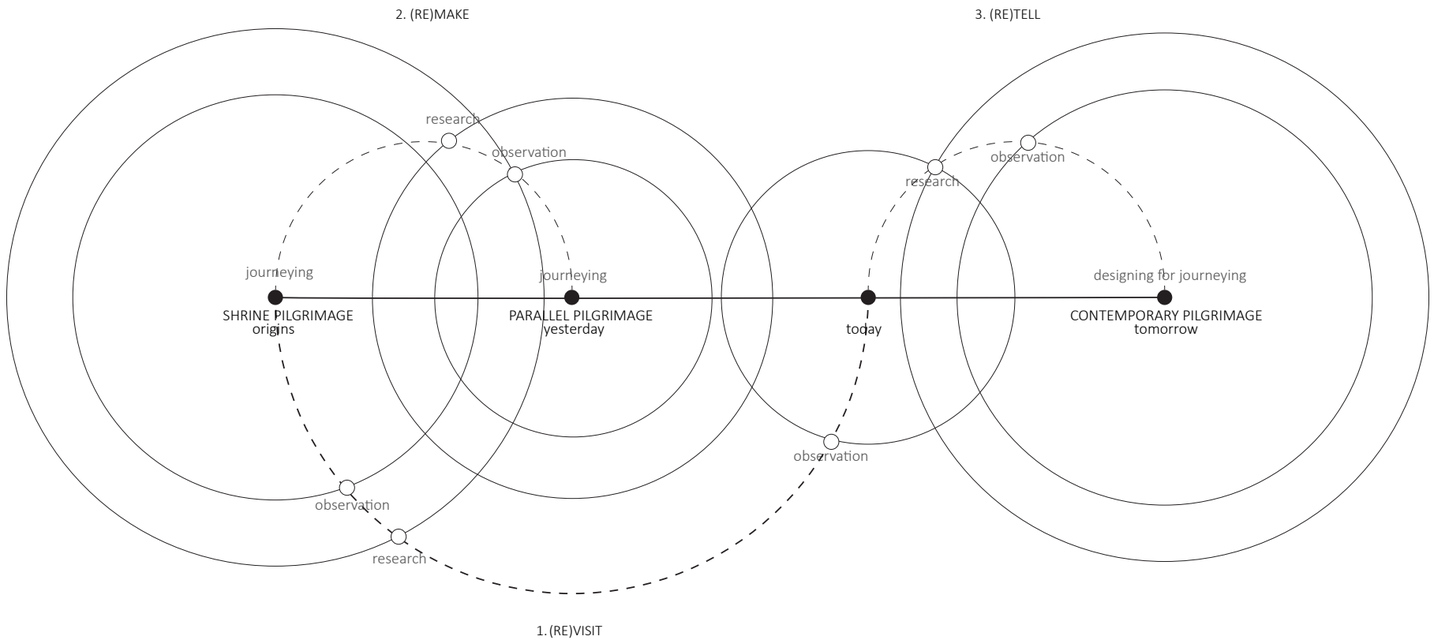
I have created a design response inspired by the architectural mourning practices of diasporic Shia communities. The curation of the procession of grief during the month of Muharram inspires an artistic revival, one that allows for artistic agency and uses of space. Using these principles, I aim to reconcile the fragmented collection of diasporic practices within an architectural experience through an auto ethnographic approach to travel writing. By questioning the colloquial term of "Islamic Architecture", the evolution of the mosque typology requires it be studied as an architectural process alongside discourses of vernacular and regional architectures and craftsmanship.[15]

13 Adel Nikjoo et al., "From Attachment to a Sacred Figure to Loyalty to a Sacred Route: The Walking Pilgrimage of Arbaeen," Religions 11, no. 3 (2020): 145, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11030145.

14 Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar, "Religion and Place Attachment: A Study of Sacred Places," Journal of Environmental Psychology 24, no. 3 (2004): 385–97, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2004.08.005.

15 Rabbat, 'What Is Islamic Architecture Anyway?'

Methodology Map



Spirituality is a journey that for many begins with religion, and blossoms over time into virtue. For others it's a moment, a chord, a word, a space, or a feeling that changes their perception of the world around them. That sensation becomes an inner voice, something to follow in stages, or to chase. Personal journeys are rarely linear, not in the movement of time, not in progress and certainly not in consistency. To me, this is the beauty of the inner voice Yet, this unpredictability is what makes it so beautiful—the shifting vantage point it offers.

The most transformative aspects of spirituality are its moments of transition and change—liberating and forgiving, both to the self and to others. Laying bare the practices in this thesis had me questioning if I was the right person for the undertaking. With my lived experiences in hand, I had documented a reality that many experience as some form of evidence in representation that I hardly saw, let alone in a positive light. This thesis was a confrontation and an admission of the paralysis I faced, between two worlds: the religious and secular. There is no doubt a disconnect exists both architecturally and culturally here in North America. To trace backwards the steps it took for our spaces of worship to look the way they do in Shia Mosques and diasporic spaces of worship, I documented them in drawings and diagrams. It was here, immersed in the rituals and stories of Karbala, that I realized authenticity and collective emotional expression lie at the heart of spiritual revival. that invigorates change to extend beyond the self. I could ask myself, if I could see myself at any stage of this journey, and remain unchanged. And if not, what did it take to inspire change?

What interests me about the Shia practice is the ability to embrace various forms of the arts, and the welcoming of inter-cultural identities into its material memories. Representing this form of collective grief and remembrance can provide a space to understand a heavily stigmatized practice.

This faith was instilled in me by my mother and the women around me who upheld it so dearly. For me, it was the practice of poetry recitation that became my untetherable connection to the arts of Islam. I remember how, in the intimacy of our home, my mother would gather women from the neighborhood to recite poetry together. The melodies, the emotions, and the power of those words captivated me and became the foundation of my thesis—a journey to understand and honor these deeply personal and collective spaces of faith, and to evoke the grief of the martyrdom and sacrifice of Hussain to those who listened.

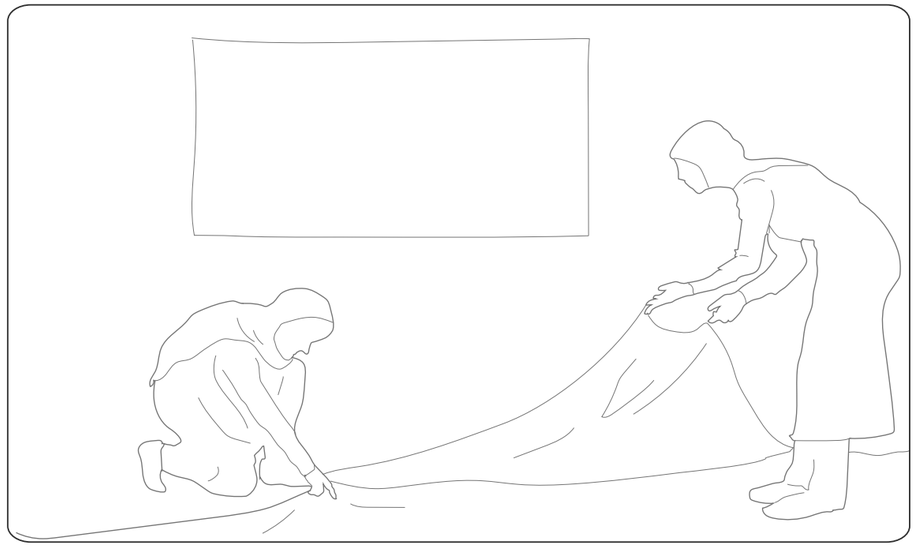


Figure 2. On the night before the first of Muharram, the moon sighting marks the start of the mourning period. In our house, white cloth is laid out on the floor and the walls covered in tapestries passed down from my Grandmother's collection from Lucknow.



Figure 3. Preparing cooking and packaging individual takeaway meals in the kitchen



Figure 4. Distributing meals to guests

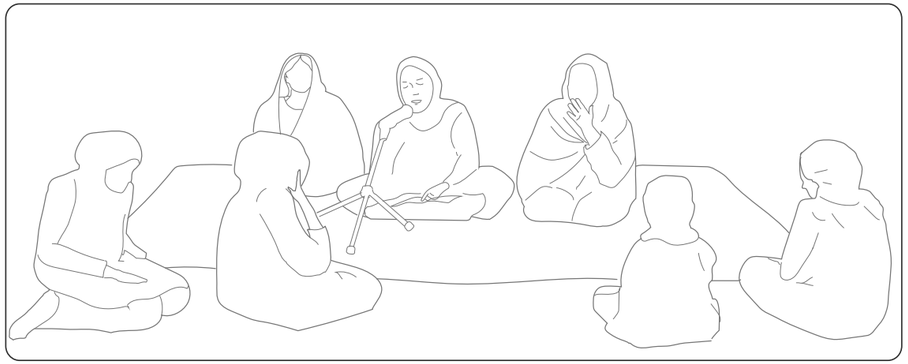


Figure 5. Poetry recitation, known as a Marsiya, is read in groups, with verses requiring one lead reciter. The word Marsiya is derived from the Arabic word marthiyya, meaning a great tragedy or lamentation for a departed soul.



Figure 6. Children reciting 'Matam' poetry- the recitation of poetry involving a light rhythmic beating on the chest.



Figure 7. Food and refreshments are served at the end of the event. It is often referred to as a 'Sabeel'.

Pre Majalis : 12:00 pm

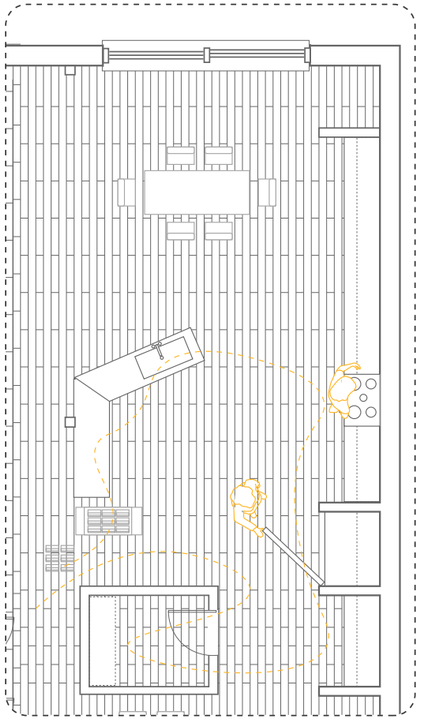


Figure 8. Preparation of *tabbaruk* for guests.

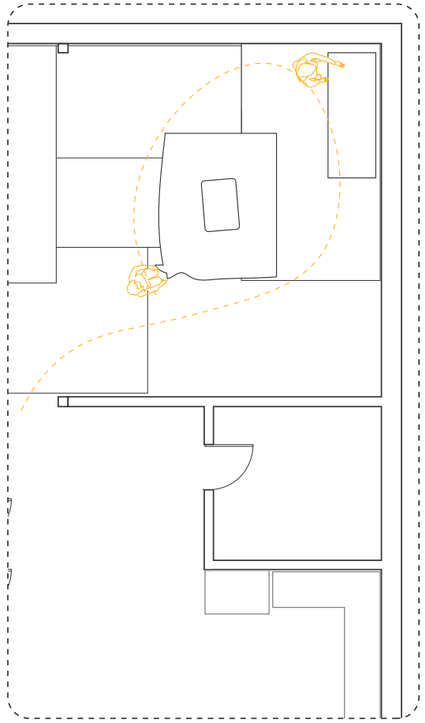


Figure 9. Laying down white cloth and preparing the room.

We begin preparing food in the kitchen around noon, usually it is just my mother and I, but close family friends volunteer their time to help prepare it with us. Some foods are traditionally cooked in relation to the martyr in commemoration. My mother tells me each morning if there is a particular specialty that is made that day, and for the next few hours, we cook and clean to prep for our guests to arrive. This is called a *Majalis* which translates to 'a gathering' from its roots in Arabic.[16] The term has evolved to specifically refer to assemblies centered on religious recitation and mourning.

In the basement of our home, we set up the space and adjust the clean white cloth on the ground. A beautifully embroidered pillow is kept in the center of the room with a microphone for poetry and prayer recitation. At the edge of the room, is the *imambada,* (a collection of Shia symbols) and candles are lit to prepare the appropriate atmosphere.

The small imambada is set up and covered – it serves as a small token of remembrance to house symbols and icons that mark the tragedy. It is decorated between lights, candles, and religious symbols.







Figure 10. Imambadas from ladies Majlises in our neighbourhood.

16 Francis Robinson, "Introduction: The Shia in South Asia," Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 24, no. 3 (2014): 353–61, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43307307.

During Majalis : 4:00 pm

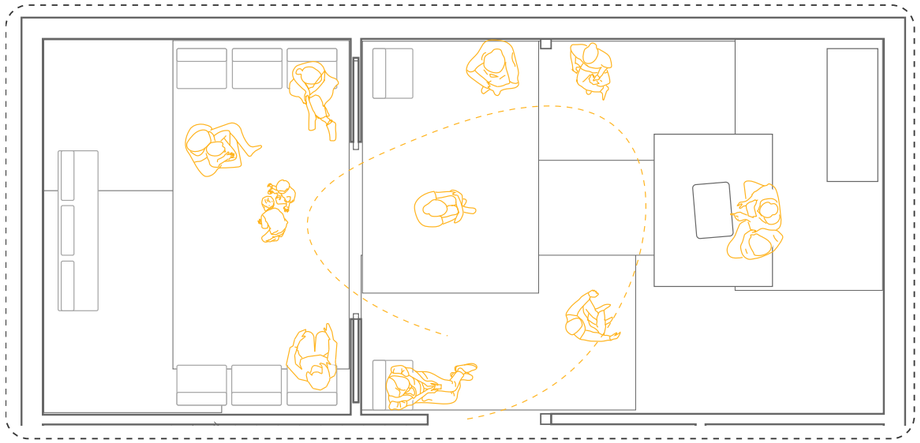


Figure 11. Performance of Marsiya- usually in groups, or Salams usually performed by one or two people.

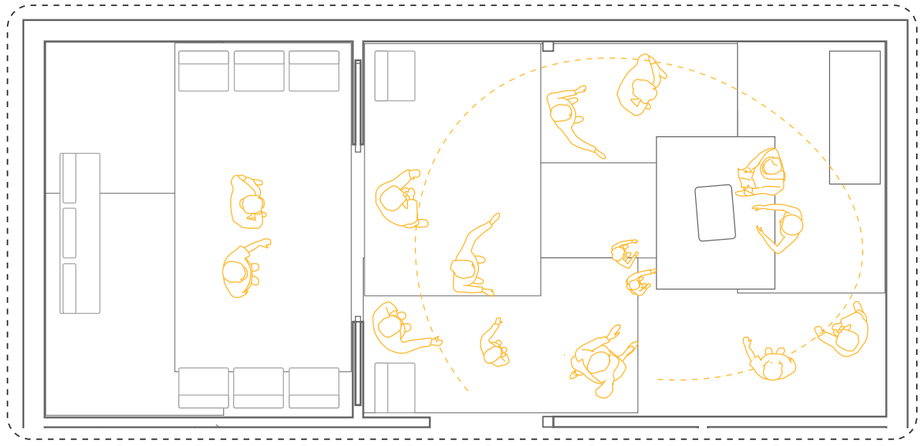


Figure 12. Women performing Matam while standing up.

Women from around our neighbourhood begin to trickle in. We sit in the living room and chat about plans to visit Karbala this year until we're ready to get started. We pour them water and have them get comfortable before heading to the basement where we've dedicated the space for mourning. There we sit on the white cloth and begin with a prayer.

The space is comfortingly intimate under dim lights. Soft candles flicker around the room, and with the women shrouded in black, the atmosphere for mourning is set. Reciters shift into the center of the room to read elegies, either one at a time or multiple in unison known as *salams,* and *marsiyas* respectively (figure 11) both of which are stylistically dependent on the region and recitation pattern it originates from. Nonetheless, they rattle listeners to the point of tears.

I make my way to the center and lay down the book my mother scripted her grandfathers poetry in Urdu. The pillowcase is embroidered in green and red thread onto a black cotton fabric

It becomes so clear to me how the space is safe for women to passionately recite, with their voices raised, and their expressions laid bare. Women, children and elders take turns reciting poetry they've written by hand or by professional reciters, or from ones that have been passed down for generations.

We stand up and recite another round of poetry. It is accompanied with a light rhythmic beating of the chest, each one in unison, each one in support for the reciter. This is called *Matam* in Urdu or *Latmiyya* in Arabic, its an act that demands space and since it is emotional in its essence, its expression flows through each individual- yet, in a collective setting, we find ourselves moving as one, which creates a powerful and contagious tempo maintained by the reciter. Some recitations are slow and deliberate, weighted with meaning, while others quicken—like a shared heartbeat, rising and falling in unison.

Post Majalis : 5:30 pm

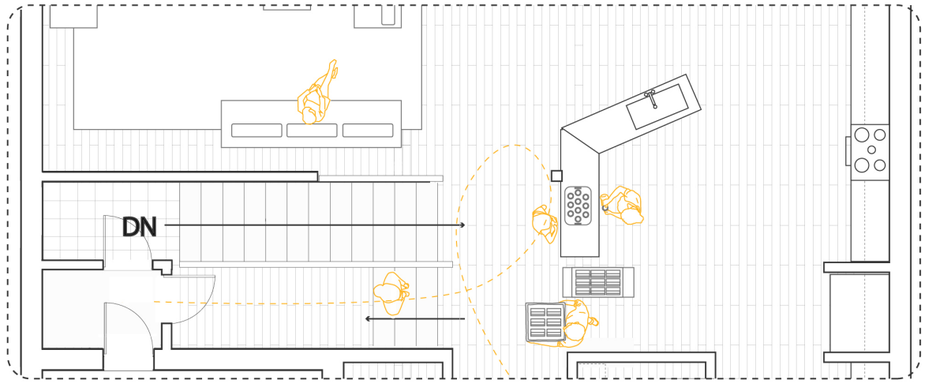


Figure 13. Packing and distributing food one by one and thanking the guests for joining.



Figure 14. Women lounging in living or guest rooms, socializing and having light refreshments.

As the gathering concludes, the women collect their belongings and join us for the distribution of food and we head back upstairs to the living area. A table is laid out with offerings, inviting everyone to sit, relax, and share in the meal. Chai is served followed by the distribution of *tabarruk*—blessed items symbolizing the sacred connection to the majlis (figure 13). This could be food to take home, small tokens brought from Karbala, or religious artifacts. The merging of hospitality and devotion feels natural, an inseparable part of the tradition (figure 15).

A few women stay back to help tidy up, while others linger until the evening, sharing moments of conversation (figure 14). For some of the elderly attendees, it's clear that this gathering is one of the rare opportunities they have to reconnect with others, a genuine connection with their community strengthened from one woman's house to another.

Procession on Ashura

On the 10th day of Muharram a public procession called a *Juloos* for the day of Ashura is taken out onto the streets. The movement of the Juloos is deliberate and unified with the recitation of elegies and the rhythmic performance of Matam on a public stage. Large flags, emblems, symbols, and replicas are carried along the route.



Figure 15. Hung tapestries brought from the Holy city of Karbala in an art form known as Pardeh-Duzi in Persian to decorate mourning spaces in mourning spaces.

A mosque in Scarborough Ontario carries an annual procession from the nearby Milliken park, back to its grounds along Steeles Avenue (figure 16). As they reach the mosque, food and water is generously and eagerly distributed to those who walked in the procession. Tents are set up with tables also known as a *sabeel* where families hand out homemade or bought food indiscriminately (figure 17).

The hospitality and gratitude towards serving the mourner of Hussain is inherent in any event of commemoration. It is done to please and gain divine intercession from the one who was martyred in thirst under the desert sun to save Islam.

Procession Outside Mosque Grounds : Day 10

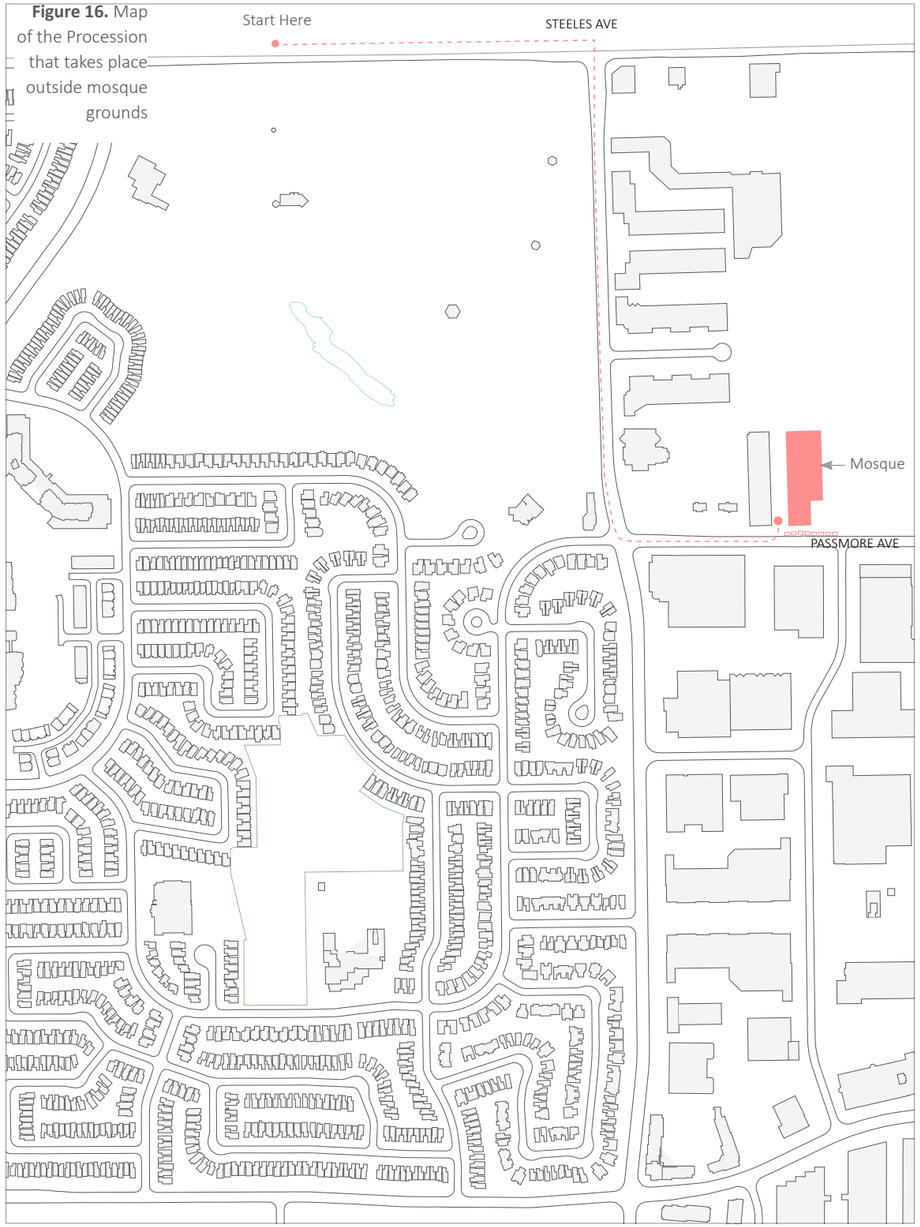
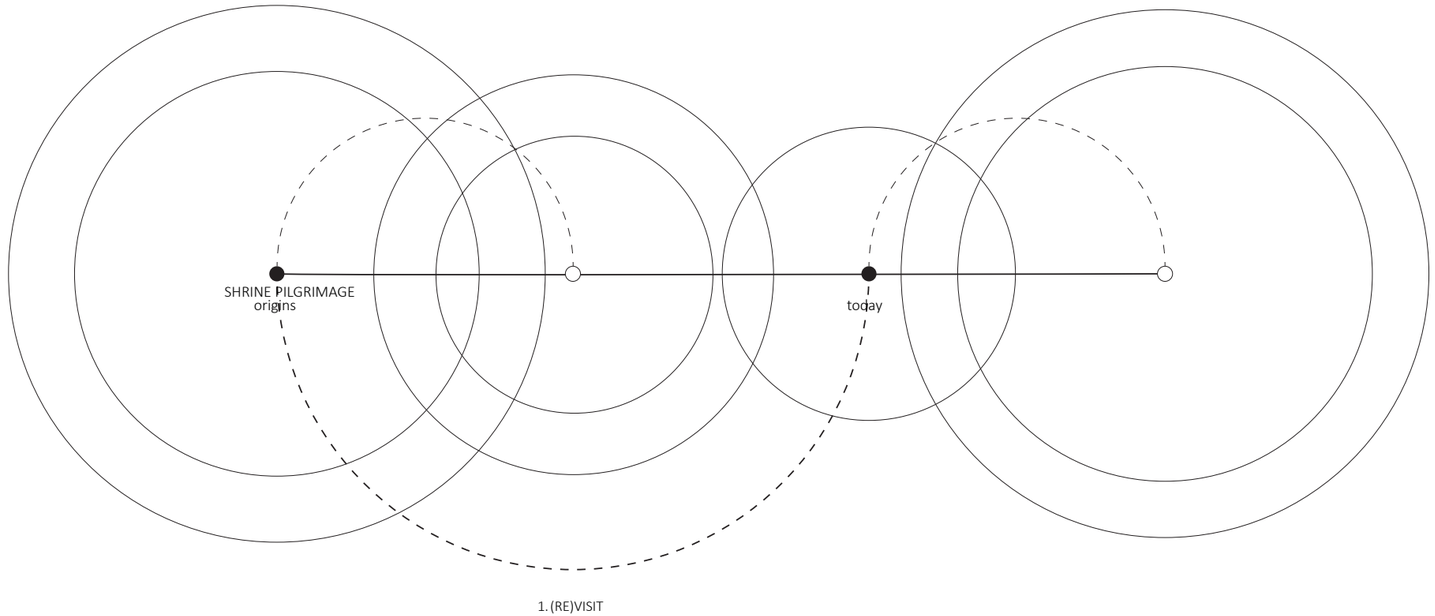


Figure 16. Map of the Procession that takes place outside mosque grounds



Figure 17. Many volunteers set up their own *sabeel* that line the road and hand out ample food and water.

Re(Visit) : Exploration of Phase 1



1. (RE)VISIT

Origin of Shrine Pilgrimage and Visitation

Mortuary Culture in Islam

While the practice of shrine visitation as part of mortuary and funerary culture has been widely observed as an act of veneration in human history, its acceptance into an Islamic practice was, and continues to be turbulent. In early Islam the concept of *taswiyah al-qubur*, also known as the "equalization of tombs with the surrounding ground" was considered the humblest form of burying the dead.[17] The development of the shrine as an architectural tool of veneration and distinction of saintly tombs was either built or destroyed based on strategic power relations and associations to its patronage or destruction. Grief served as a powerful tool that influenced the collective influence, which is why under Abbasid rule, the destruction of Shia shrines symbolized not only political dominance but also a strategic attempt to erase collective memory and communal identity. Initially, the Abbasids sought support from Shia factions to overthrow the Umayyad Caliphate, but once in power, they often turned against Shia communities to strengthen their political dominance through targeting Shia shrines and graves. Alternatively, the same grief was an emotional tool through which Shia communities resisted erasure and immortalized the suffering of the followers of Imam Hussain.

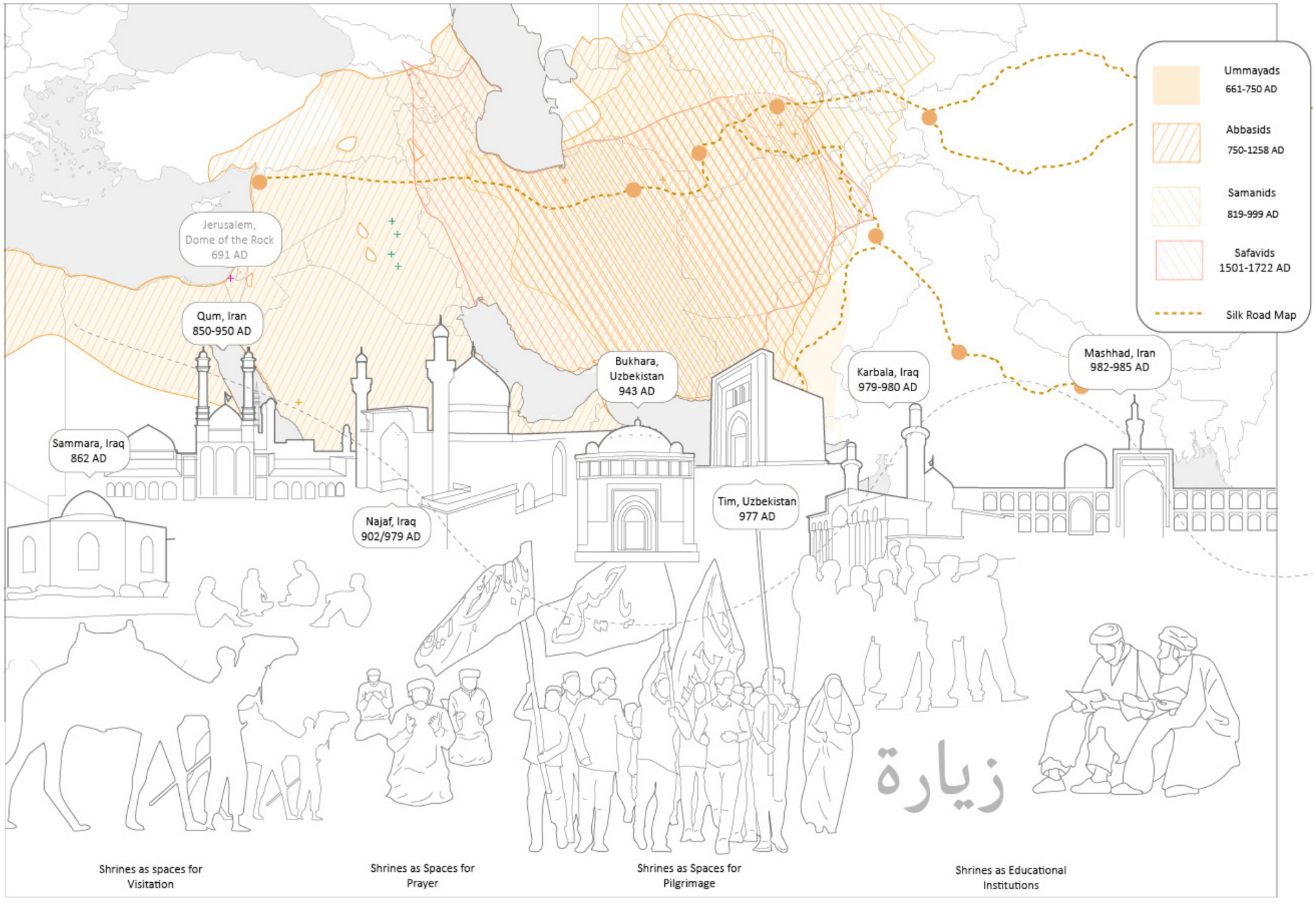
As Islam progressed and expanded to the east, visitation to the shrine of the prophet was allowed but kept-relatively unavailable, however “construction” over the grave was deemed unIslamic according to some ruling empires, and against its teachings in some schools of thought. However, if early Islam was so strongly set against the building of mausoleums and cultist practices in or around tombs, then the appearance of thousands of mausoleums and shrines throughout the Islamic world can be attributed to the superimposition on existing funerary practices, and later, funerary practices superimposed upon it.[18]

In 1966, Historian Oleg Grabar published a paper titled *The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures, Notes and Documents*, and puts together a timeline of mausoleums that have a “construction” atop of venerated graves, specifically a dome and enclosure of walls of some sort. It is well established that the Dome of the Rock is the first every memorial constructed in Islamic history under the Ummayad empire, and became a precedent for future Islamic monuments.

17 Oleg Grabar, ‘The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures, Notes and Documents’, Ars Orientalis 6 (1966): 7–46.

18 Ibid.

Figure 18. Timeline of Shine Evolution Adapted from Grabar, *The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures, Notes and Documents.*



The drawing (figure 18) illustrates the location and sequential construction of these domes, in addition to their various uses of space over time is overlayed on a map of the silk road, marking the movement of wealth and the Islamic dynasties along it. The correlation between early mausoleums and Shia holy sites with emphasis on the veneration for the descendants of the Holy Prophet. The ornamentation and construction during the Abbasid and Fatimid period were comparatively simplistic to later dynasties that overtook the region like IIlkhanids and subsequently the Timurids.[19] As they grew in importance politically and institutionally, shrines became complexes fundamental to the city fabric and regional identity.

Upon researching the history of the shrine of Imam Hussain in Karbala, Iraqi sources claim that the first dome ever erected in the Muslim era was constructed upon the shrine in 686 AD with a clay dome.[20] Although understudied and lacking documented evidence, this claim predates the construction of the Dome of the Rock, historically known as the first Islamic monument by the Umayyads in 691 AD. If this claim is the case, it make the tomb of Imam Hussain the earliest Islamic dome ever constructed.

The rise of the Safavid dynasty in the early 16th century redefined the religious and political identity of the Persian world. Soon after the Safavids rose to power, they established the sect of Shiism as the official religion of their dynasty. While it was in the process of transitioning, tomb veneration was heavily prevalent in the Persian world.[21] As Iranian lands shifted towards Shiism, they had been modifying the architecture and practices over time.[22] Although Shrines in Iran were incrementally ornamented by previous dynasties, major shrines in Iraq were developed by the Safavids. This architectural and regional language that was developed in Shia sites of worship distinguished them from their neighboring and rival empires—the Ottomans and the Mughals (to their east in India).[23]

19 Grabar, 'The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures, Notes and Documents'.
20 'A timeline of the constructions of Imam Hussain Holy shrine', Imam Hussain Holy Shrine, accessed 2 December 2024, https://imamhussain.org/english/18017.
21 'Gazing in the Eyes of the Martyrs: Four Theories of South Asian Shiʿi Visuality' in: Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World Volume 1 Issue 1-2 (2020)'.
22 'Inscriptions on Architecture in Early Safavid Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum', accessed 11 December 2023, https://doi.org/10.1086/701738.
23 Ali-Reza Goudarzi and Vikramāditya Prakāsh, "Origins and Development of the Shi'ite Islamic Shrine," 2017.



Figure 19. A Scene From The Battle Of Karbala: Ottoman Baghdad, Circa 1580-90

Shrines and Shia Arts

Shrine visitation by Shias are carried out across the Middle East, mainly in modern Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq at any tombs of the Holy Prophet and his family members, including the 12 Imams- the successors of the Prophet. Today they carry the same architectural language that visually tie together a Shiite identity that is strengthened through the phenomenology of visitation. This section covers the similar architectural and craft-making language used at the shrines in Karbala, and the origins from Iran. Because of this deliberate design language used, these shrines can be categorized as distinct from Sufi Mausoleums, even within the same region.[24] The veneration of tombs and the arts had been pioneered by Shah Abbas- the fifth Safavid shah of Iran from 1588 to 1629 who was an avid patron of the arts and adorned shrines with the same artistic language that was used in empirical palaces in an effort to create an association with the holy shrines and their ruling in Iran and subsequently in Iraq.[25]

At the shrines of Imam Hussein and his brother Abbas in Karbala, glazed tile mosaics like *Kashani* tiles in Iran or regional *Karbalai* tiles are often used to adorn walls, ceilings, and domes with intricate patterns or Quranic verses. Different regions feature unique colors and patterns, such as blue and turquoise in Persian designs.[26] The Karbalai tilework is heavily influenced by Kashani tiles, but have regional artistic differences. Some shrines use traditional marquetry in common wooden doors, *minbars* (pulpits), and other wooden structures within shrines, often carved with floral or geometric patterns. *Ayneh Kari* or mirror work was a kind of decorative art made by artists who assembled finely cut mirrors in geometric, calligraphic or floral patterns that became popularized in the Qajar dynasty.[27] This creates a beautiful shining surface, reflecting light as intricate abstract patterns.[28] The art of Ayneh Kari work was later adopted by the Timurids in Uzbekistan and the Mughals in India.[29]

24 Ali-Reza Goudarzi and Vikramāditya Prakāsh, "Origins and Development of the Shi'ite Islamic Shrine," 2017.
25 Grabar, 'The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures, Notes and Documents'.
26 James W. 1945- Allan, The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shi'ism: Iraq, Iran and the Indian Sub-Continent, Biennial Ehsan Yarshater Lecture Series (London [u.a.]: Azimuth Ed., 2012).
27 Allan, The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shi'ism.
28 'Ayeneh-Kari, the Art of Mirror-Work in Persian Architecture- Intangible Heritage- Culture Sector- UNESCO', accessed 13 December 2024, https://ich.unesco.org/en/files-2025-under-process-01347?include=slideshow_inc.php&id=02319&width=620&call=slideshow&mode=scroll#https://ich.unesco.org/img/photo/thumb/18528-HUG.jpg.
29 Reza Daftarian, 'Fractured and Dissolved, Architecture Ablaze: Towards an Understanding of Ayeneh-Kari in the Palaces of Iran' (Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2021), https://dspace.mit.edu/han-

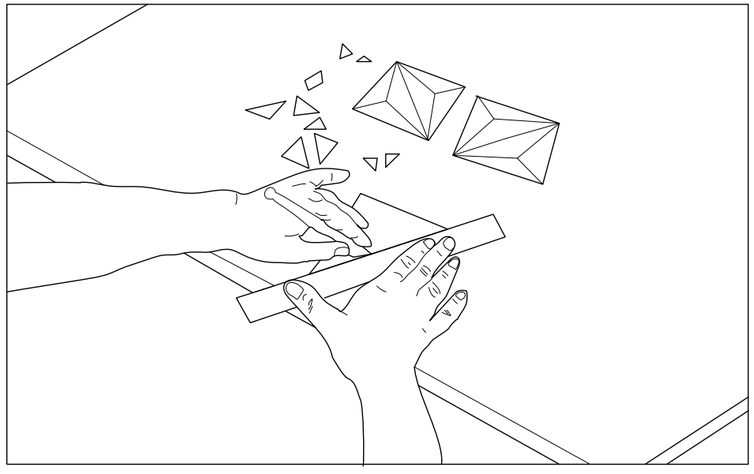


Figure 20. Ayenah Kari work: mirror cut by hand. Adapted from 'Ayeneh-Kari, the Art of Mirror-Work in Persian Architecture- Intangible Heritage- Culture Sector- UNESCO'.

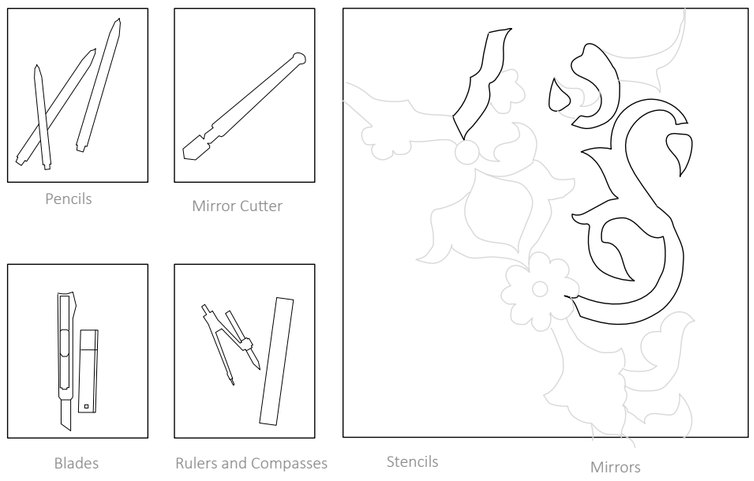




Figure 21. Tile mosaic with floral design, Iran (probably Isfahan), 1450-1500.



Figure 22. Alam used in battle or Islamic religious processions, teardrop-shaped plaque with openwork Arabic calligraphy, possibly 1500-1700



Figure 23. Cenotaph, 902 AH (1496–97 AD) Carved wood, originating from the Caspian region of Iran.

The technique used to create the multi-colored pattern is known as *cuerda seca* or 'dry cord'. The designer used a greasy substance to draw the pattern on the surface of the tile.[30] The pattern consisted of discrete compartments which were then filled with colored glazes. The grease kept the different colors separate during firing. It burnt off during the firing process, leaving cuerda seca outlines.

Standards called *Alams* are used in many parts of the Muslim world by the Shia community in processions marking the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, as a reminder of the flag of his army at the battle of Karbala.[31]

Visitation involves the praying for intercession at the cenotaph or empty tomb. In northern Iran's Caspian region, abundant wood was used to create large, carved panels with strap-work designs and lavish inscriptions, slotted into square corner posts. This cenotaph bears a prayer to the 'Fourteen Immaculates': Muhammad, Fatimah, and the Twelve Shiite Imams.[32]

dle/1721.1/139596.

30 Unknown, Tile, ca. -1500 1450, Glazed earthenware cut to shape and embedded in a plaster matrix, ca. -1500 1450, Victoria & Albert Museum Middle East Section, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1511885/tile-unknown/.

31 Alam, or Standard, Victoria & Albert Museum Middle East Section, accessed 27 December 2024, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O382551/alam-or-standard/.

32 J.M. Rogers, The Arts of Islam: Masterpieces from the Khalili Collection (London, 2010), cat. 243, 202–3.

The miniature painting from probably depicts the shrine of either one of the Twelve Imams (figure 24). At the center of the image is the cenotaph, or *Zari*, which is the iron enclosure of the cenotaph -an ornate structure often made of silver, gold, or brass latticework.[33] Men are holding the iron grill and others are in prayer. Various flags and Alams would remain in the shrine. Early examples of cenotaphs were simpler, with metal or wooden screens erected to create a boundary between pilgrims and the tomb. As the Islamic empire expanded, artisans from Persia, India, and other regions contributed their own aesthetics to the zari.

This image also depicts a holy figure's tomb, attached to a small mosque (figure 25). In behind the grille, on the opposing side are two women in white. The shrine became a space for both genders to be able to mourn and visit. Traditionally, shrines have designated specific areas for men and women, especially near the zari or within prayer halls, to allow for modesty and personal space in worship. For example, in the shrines of Najaf, Karbala, and Mashhad, men and women typically have separate, though adjacent, spaces for prayer and recitation.[34]



Figure 24. Miniature from a copy of Jafar al-Sadiq's Falnama . "Karkhi, porter of Imam Reza's tomb, is honored"



Figure 25. Miniature of prayer at a holy figure's shrine.

33 Miniature from a Copy of Jafar al-Sadiq's Falnama: "Karkhi, Porter of Imam Reza's Tomb, Is Honored." Iran, Tabriz or Qazvin, ca. 1550–60. Gouache on paper, sheet 59 × 46 cm. David Collection, inventory number 28/1997. Accessed December 2, 2024. https://www.davidmus.dk/kunst-fra-islams-verden/safaviderne-og-deres-efterfolgere/item/1386.

34 "Prayer in a Mosque." Miniature from Kulliyat-i Mawlana Ahli Shirazi (Collected Works of Mawlana Ahli Shirazi). Iran, Shiraz, ca. 1550. Gouache on paper, H: 35.5 cm; W: (open) 61 cm. David Collection, inventory number Isl 161. Accessed December 2, 2024. https://www.davidmus.dk/kunst-fra-islams-verden/moskeen/item/1602.

Formal and Spatial design of the Shrines in Karbala

The forms of the shrines within the urban fabric in Karbala reads like an archaeological city. With memorabilia marking sites of the battle, the city forms around it. For nearly 30 years, the president of Iraq Saddam Hussain banned the public observance of Arbaeen and Ashura. Since then, the number of pilgrims has been rising yearly. During the peak Arbaeen pilgrimage, the shrines are flooded, reaching a peak of 22 million pilgrims in 2023.[35] Today, the shrines and the city of Karbala have evolved over more than 1,300 years to accommodate millions of pilgrims, including the creation of a prominent walkway known as *Bayn al-Haramayn*, or "the area between the two Harams," connecting the shrines of Imam Hussain and Abbas. Additionally, some exterior courtyards have been expanded and partially converted into covered prayer spaces. The outside layer are service rooms, shops and portal entryways, an evolutionary complex space that caters to a pilgrims' every need.[36]

Arnold Nöldeke was a German orientalist who made several trips to the Holy shrines in Iraq between 1900 and 1909. He was granted special permission to visit and create detailed plans and sections of the major shrines there, presumably as a non Muslim in a holy site. He documented the twin shrines in Karbala of Abbas (figure 26) and Imam Hussein and the Shrine of Ali in Najaf. He published these drawings in a 1909 book titled *Das Heiligtum al-Husains zu Kerbelâ* (The Shrine of Hussain in Karbala). This work was one of the first comprehensive scholarly treatments of the architecture of Shia shrines.

The shrine of Hussain sits in a room is 4 meters by 9 meters long as the heart of the building. The dome is supported by 4 rectangular columns with a sectional dimension of 3.5 meters by 2.5 meters. The structure is made from local clay brick. The Top of the dome is 27 meters above floor level. There are 12 windows at 5 meters apart with pointed ends.[37]

35 Adel Nikjoo et al., "From Attachment to a Sacred Figure to Loyalty to a Sacred Route: The Walking Pilgrimage of Arbaeen," Religions 11, no. 3 (2020): 145, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11030145.
36 Ali B. Al-Furaty and Ammar S. Ashour, "Assessing the Building's Developments on the Human Perception: The Case Study of Imam al-Hussain Shrine in Karbala, Iraq," Association of Arab Universities Journal of Engineering Sciences 26, no. 4 (2019): 73–82, https://doi.org/10.33261/jaaru.2019.26.4.009.
37 'Description of the Present Al-Rawdha Al-Hussainiya-Part I-', accessed 2 December 2024, https://c-karbala.com/en/scientific-publications/4332.

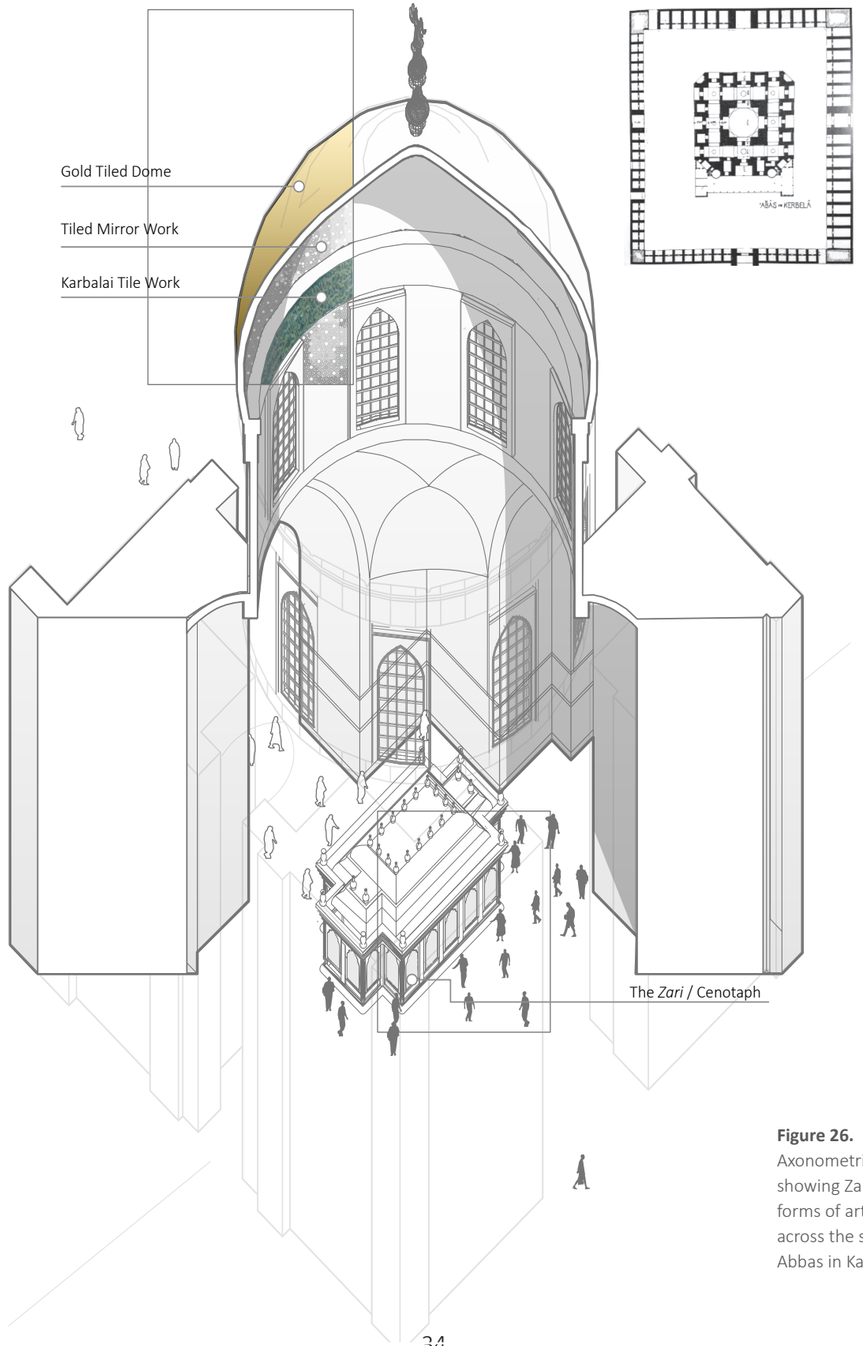
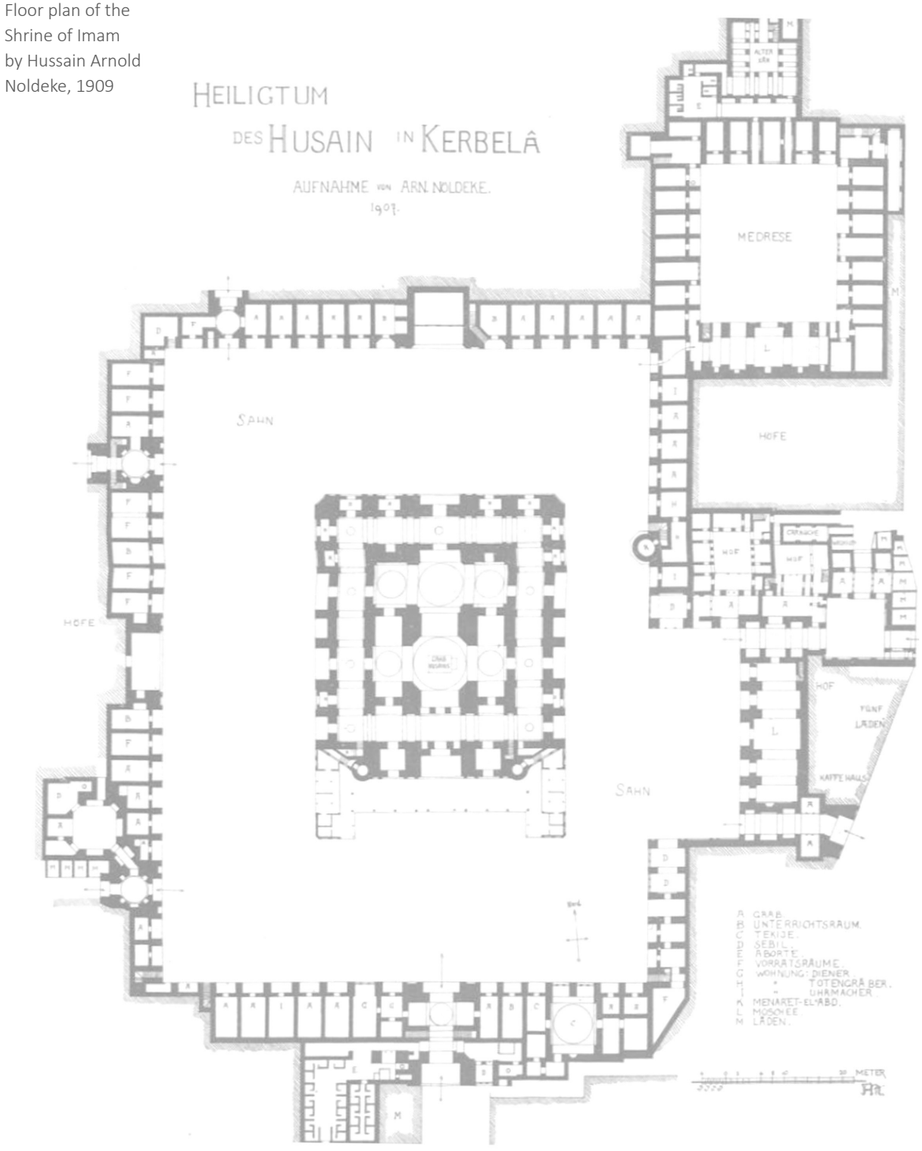


Figure 26.
Axonometric cut showing Zari and forms of artwork across the shrine of Abbas in Karbala

Figure 27.
Floor plan of the Shrine of Imam by Hussain Arnold Noldeke, 1909



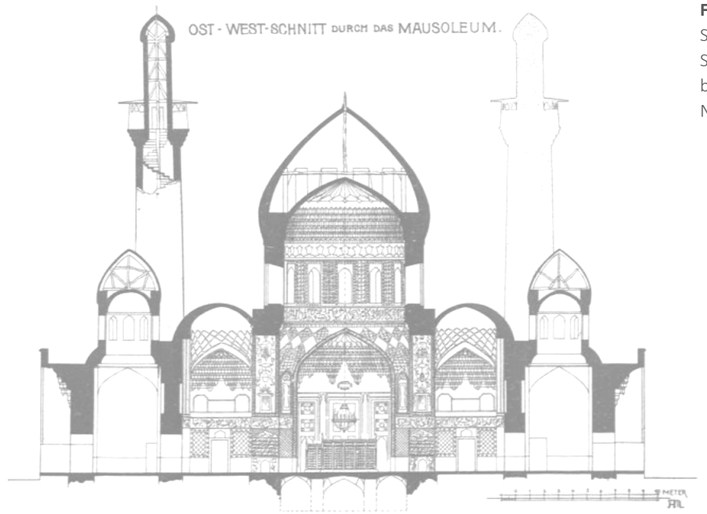


Figure 28.
Section of the Shrine of Imam by Hussain Arnold Noldeke, 1909

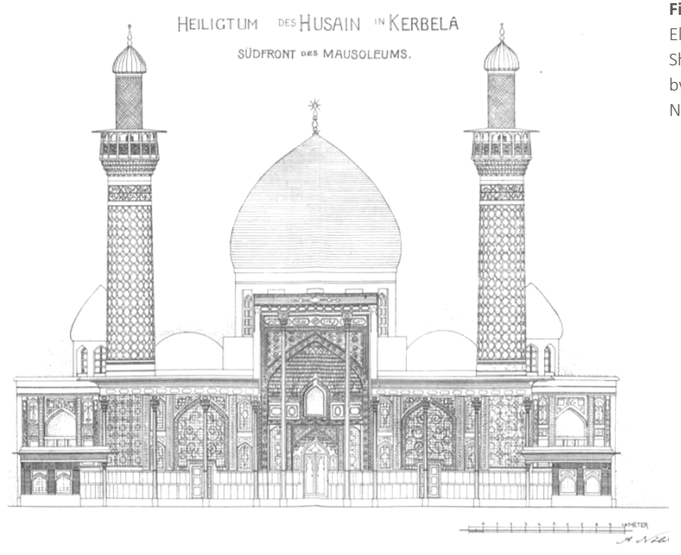


Figure 29.
Elevation of the Shrine of Imam by Hussain Arnold Noldeke, 1909

Figure 30.
1944 Map of Karbala Shrines

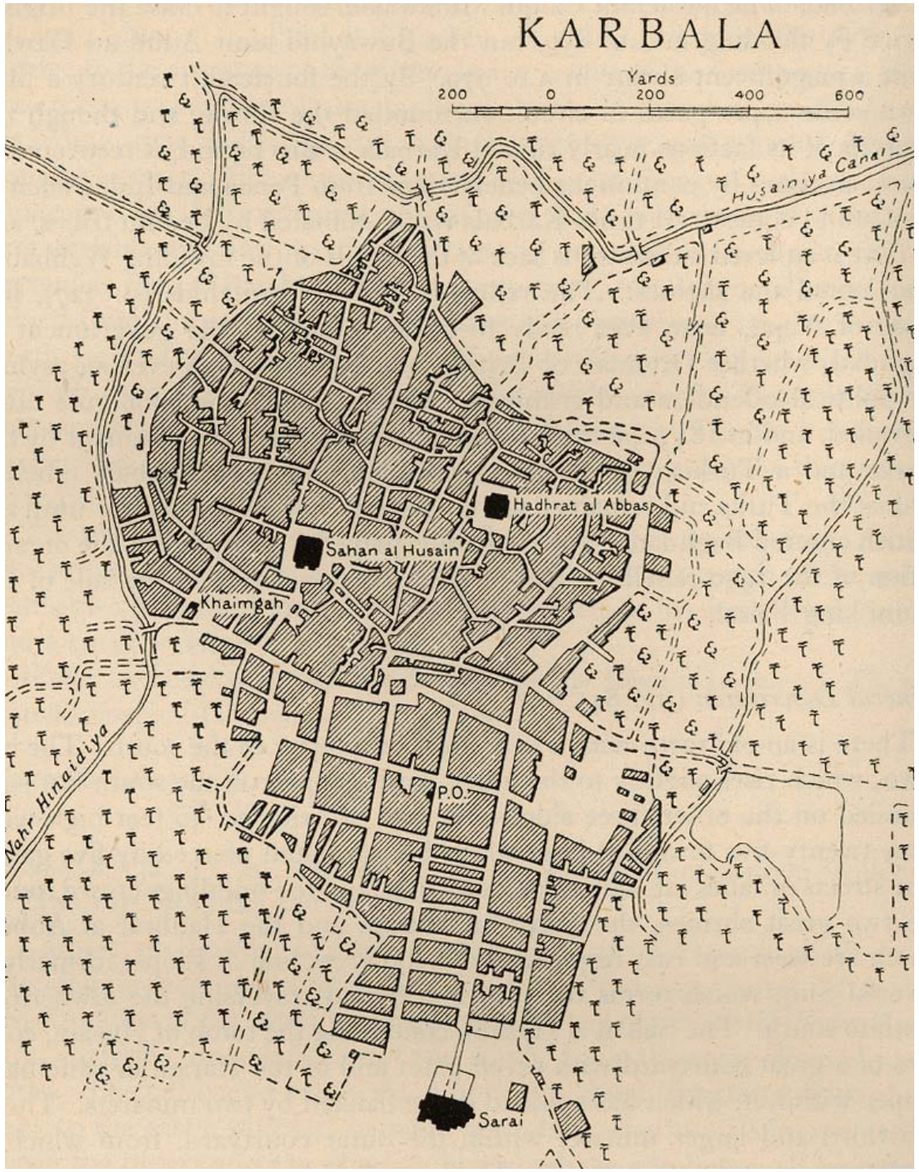




Figure 31.
Aerial images showing the before open courtyard



Figure 32.
Aerial images showing the covered courtyard

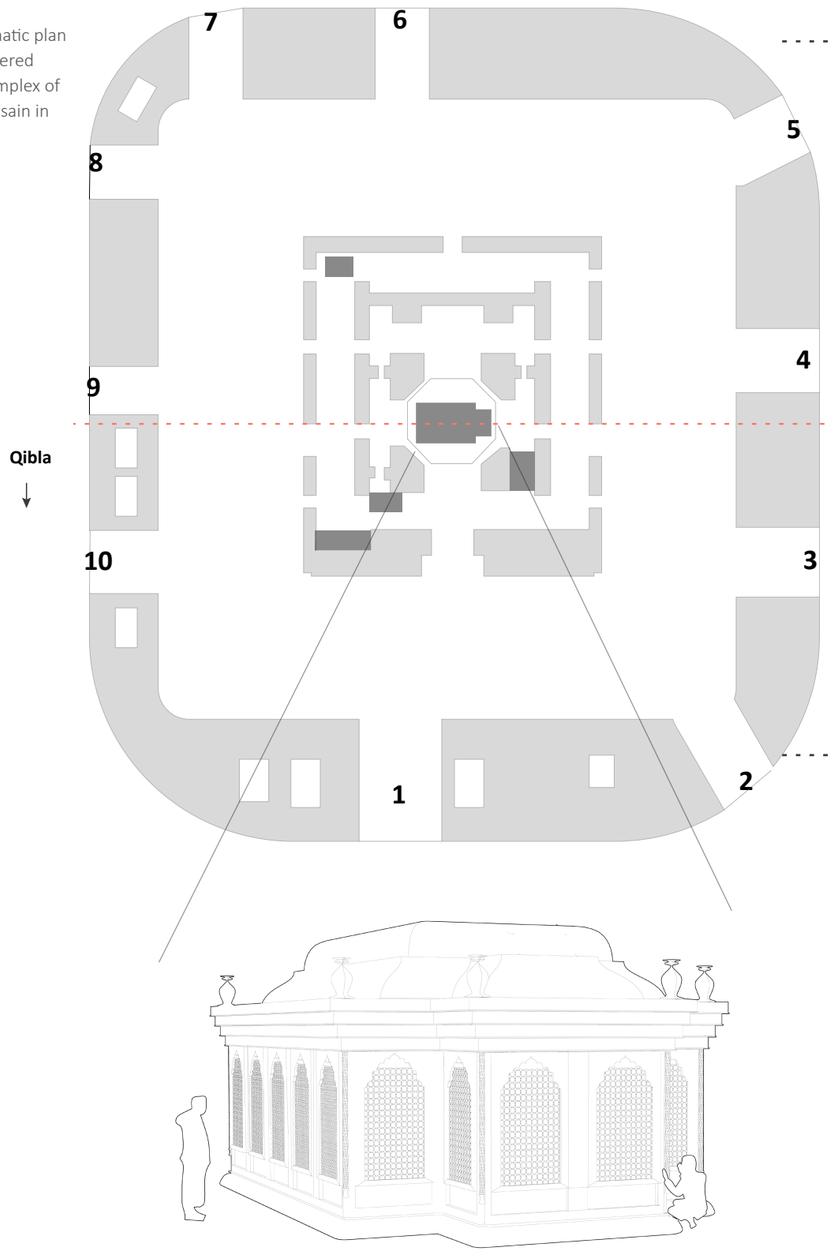


Figure 33.
Diagrammatic plan of the covered Shrine complex of Imam Hussain in Karbala



Figure 34.
Aerial Image of Karbala's Twin Shrines Google Maps

Ephemeral Elements of Sacred Shrines

There are a multitude of elements of separation that a shrine monument uses to distinguish itself from the wider urban fabric. These visual markers emphasize their role as spiritual epicenters and establish an identity that acts as a disruptor. Disruption is not chaotic but intentional, serving to draw attention to the shrine as a place of spiritual significance and to create a stark contrast between the ordinary (profane) and the extraordinary (sacred).. In the Islamic world, tombs are typically house the graves of royalty or the wealthy, and are mainly visited by tourists, like the Taj Mahal or Soltaniyeh. In contrast, shrines are deeply spiritual sites that are directly associated with holy or religious figures.[38] Architecturally, the shrines contain a sequence of elements that deliver an experience both ideologically, but experientially as well. This is done both with Islamic iconographies with intersections of sizing, and scaling, and strategic placement of these elements to deliver an affect. Forms, materials and lighting play into the sequencing and intimacies of the spaces (figure 30).

Methods of disruption include change of scale, orientation, an association with an axis mundus that connects the profane with the sacred, superimposition onto its existing landscape, a repetition of its disruptive typology, the development of a complex architectural language, and a hierarchy marked by multiple thresholds that creates a contradiction in interior space and its surroundings.

The way the shrines in Karbala are experienced from the street is through drawing the eye straight to it as one looks through the major gates. At the Shrine of Al Abbas, the walkway past the entrance portal gently descends downwards in a slope pointed towards the Zari bringing the visitor to new lowered plane. On the street level, this allows one to see the tomb from a distance, but is journeyed towards upon entering the complex after a series of prayers for intercession.

38 Goudarzi and Prakāsh, “Origins and Development of the Shi’ite Islamic Shrine.”

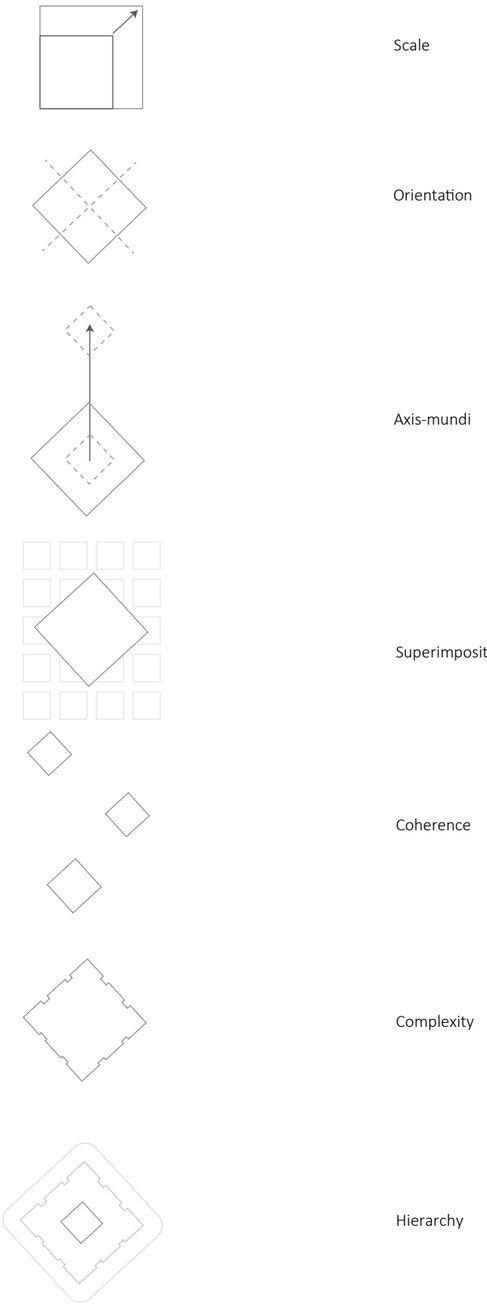


Figure 35. Diagram of Disruption

Mobility and Pilgrimage

Sacred shrines allow for the confrontation with grief to create an immersive trauma that tethers the pilgrim to the grief. These experiences are transient, carried by pilgrims who come and go, reshaping memory through acts of imagination through the cyclical memorialization that serves both the individual drive, and the social drive. The essence of holy places resides in the minds of those who visit them.[39] These sacred spaces, sometimes newly imagined, are influenced by evolving perceptions and experiences with the past often being emotionally and conceptually transposed into the present.

Since mobility is a key instigator for the strengthening of memory, the visual past is continually moved into the present, often in the urban spaces that serve as theatre for the performance of ideological practices.[40] The experience of grief in religious spaces is a unique point of connection. In the search for knowledge and enlightenment, Holy spaces become a natural space of convergence and community service in the name of a higher purpose. These links are formed through a combination of sensory, material, and visual methods, as well as technologies developed to support fleeting religious experiences. Local craftsmanship played a key role in this process. By merging both foreign and native techniques, an innovative architectural style was developed. These manifested in temporary and permanent arts that merged with foreign and indigenous techniques in material practices of local artisans which was shaped by buildings, drawings, and dreams, that influenced architectures constructed to evoke sensory experiences.[41]

39 "Parallel Pilgrimage: Reflections on the Space/Time of Shrines, with Bruce Grant, A. Azfar Moin, Catherine Wanner, Wei-Ping Lin, Ismail Fajrie Alatas, and Michael Christopher Low," Comparative Studies in Society and History (blog), August 2, 2022, https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/cssh/2022/08/02/parallel-pilgrimage-reflections-on-the-space-time-of-shrines-with-bruce-grant-a-azfar-moin-catherine-wanner-wei-ping-lin-ismail-fajrie-alatas-and-michael-christopher-low/.

40 Christiane Gruber, "Islamic Architecture on the Move," International Journal of Islamic Architecture 3, no. 2 (July 1, 2014): 241–64, https://doi.org/10.1386/ijia.3.2.241_1.

41 Gruber, 'Islamic Architecture on the Move'.

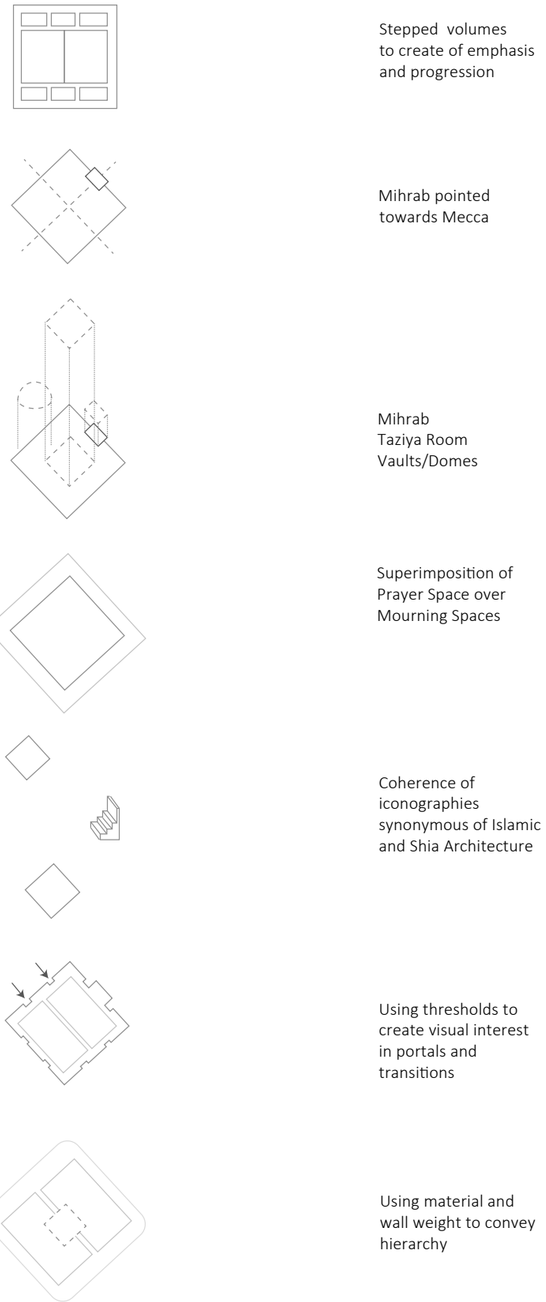


Figure 36. Diagram of Disruption

Arbaeen Journal

Sitting at a family friend's house in early November we gather over dinner and reminisce over the experience of Arbaeen. My mother boasts to have touched the cenotaph twice through the thick of the crowd at the Shrine of Al-Abbas in Karbala. Naz aunty retorts with how she doesn't believe that it would have made much of a difference if she did or did not touch it- after all she made it under the dome. Regardless my mother asks "Still, did you touch it?"

Her pride came from hours of wading through a relentless crowd of millions. It is obvious that the complexes in Iraq, both in the cities of Najaf and Karbala were met with overwhelmingly demanding capacities. It's no wonder that their paths never crossed once.

A year later, on the 23rd of July 2024, I had booked my tickets for Arbaeen as well. I was eager, but equally nervous. it would certainly not be easy; physically nor emotionally however I was determined to experience the promised rewards of self sacrifice.

After booking tickets, we secured a ground package with a caravan that would make all of our accommodations with us. The thought of walking in 40-degree weather was daunting enough and training for the walk was the only way to make sure I could handle it by sticking to a healthy die, staying hydrated, and by walking at least 30 minutes a day.

After a 2-day journey to Doha's International A, we caught a detour to Baghdad because of strained political relations resulting in no-fly zones near Najaf. Although it was nothing compared to the risks pilgrims took during the era of Saddam, threats of a war still filled headlines. Despite all the tensions, the police at the airport stood handing out food to those who waited to collect entry visas issued upon arrival in Iraq. The hospitality here was unlike anything I'd seen before.

We were met with our tour group outside the airport and then hopped in a taxi to head towards Najaf. Three hours later, we reached the start point of the journey. The Holy Shrine of Ali.

My perspective of Ziyarat in this thesis is through my lens as a Shia woman. The experience I have through the cities in Iraq and through pilgrimage is different from the male perspective since all religious spaces are split by gender. All women are expected to wear loose black clothing in the form of an *Abaya* or a *Maqna that* covers one from head to toe, including hair and all limbs completely covered except for the face and hands in respect to the sanctity of the shrines - including the journey towards them. In having to dress uniformly in the Maqna I was essentially merging my identity with the millions of other women around me. Males are encouraged to dress in black as well, however there is no specific dress code other than the expectation to behave and dress in

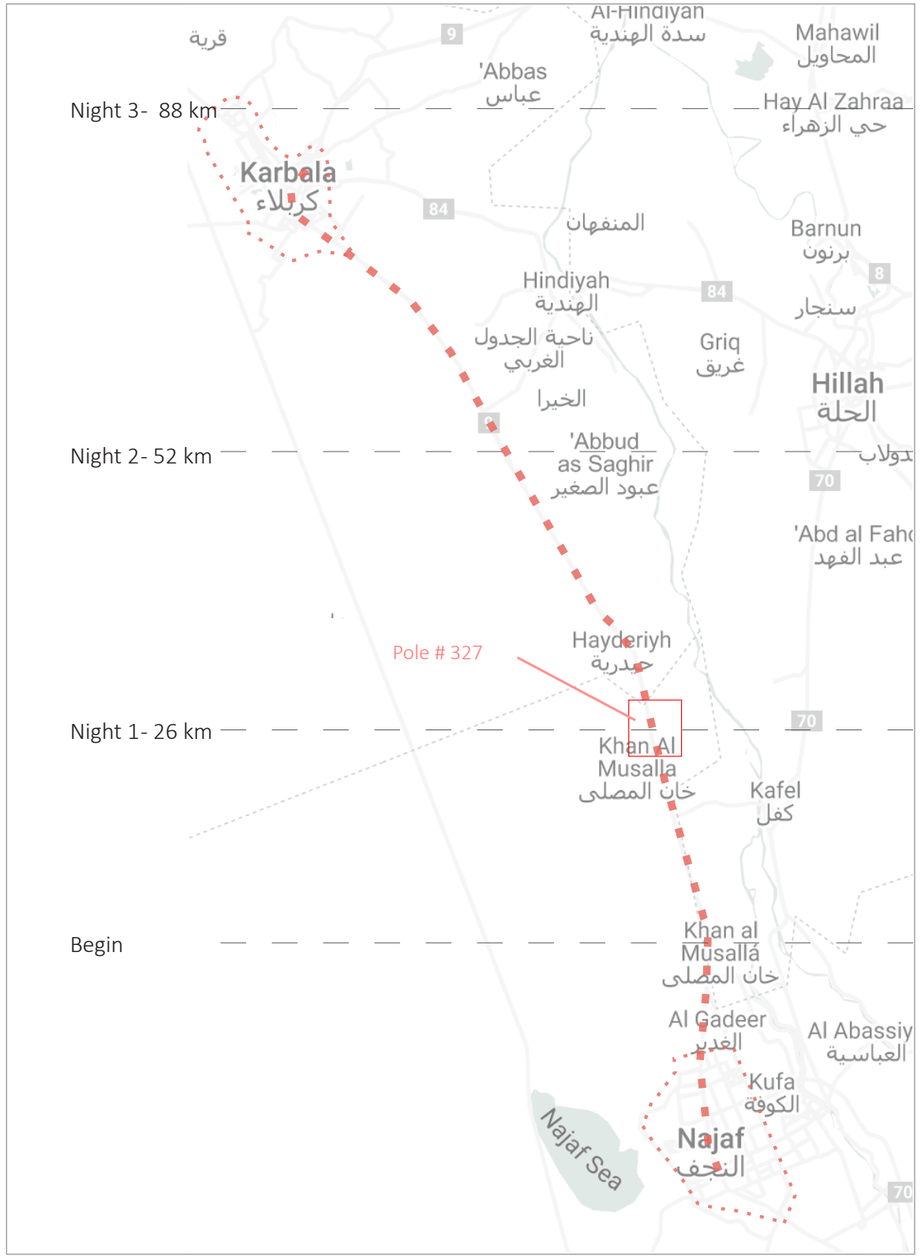
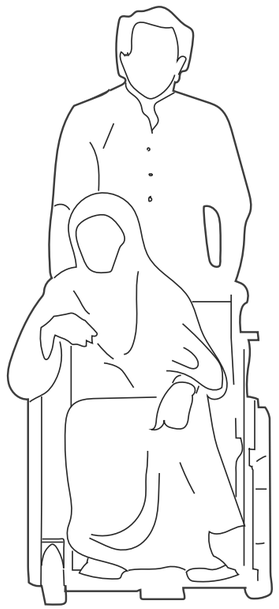


Figure 37.
Complete path of 1452 poles from Najaf to Karbala. Adapted from Google Maps

Day 1: Shrine of Imam Ali

There is a heavy sincerity in the congested alleys of Najaf especially during the time for evening prayers. The first thing one notices is the overwhelming amount of people lined up in mass to enter the complex. All roads and lanes leading to the mausoleums have checkpoints, where and bag searches and pat downs are carried out. A second check takes place at the entrance of the shrine after shoes, As I get closer to the entrance, the crowd pushes me inwards, where a collective urgency vibrates through the mass of women in a sea of black – the color of mourning.



Departure

We leave for the walk after evening prayers when the heat has died down. My mother sits in a wheelchair while my brother pushes her along. The pilgrimage path runs along a road lined with 1452 poles from start to finish where *Moukebs* (or rest stations) are constructed by volunteers and sponsors. I count as I walk - about a hundred steps from one pole to the next. They are adorned with banners and flags bearing religious inscriptions and are made from both temporary and permanent structures, mostly buildings that can support the capacity of visitors.

Pilgrims walk en mass carrying flags and banners. The streets are filled with a chaotic hum of prayers, chatter from crowded pilgrims who speak in their mother tongues, and dedicated chanting- as if one would give their life in that moment out of loyalty.

The inviting scent of freshly cooked meals from the *moukebs* fill the air where volunteers prepare food for the pilgrims. It is distributed so eagerly, and with such a frequency, that every few steps one is handed a meal or a drink, and with so many variations, there seems to be nothing short of abundance in this land. Cloth coverings and mist is sprayed on pilgrims to battle the heat from the desert sun, and lines mostly the path for pilgrims between Najaf and Karbala.

Night one:

As dusk approaches, the path is illuminated on one side with street lights, and the other side from the bright inviting lights from the rest stops. We continue walking, making sure to take frequent breaks to hydrate and rest. The shelter point we agree to stay the night in, is located at moukeb number 327, an Indian sponsored rest area.

The entrance to the moukebs is lined by a host of free medical services: a dentist, doctors and massages for both genders on either side of the courtyard. The mens section has a washroom to the right and a eating space on the left. In the center is the sleeping hall. Across the hall is a mosque. Behind it is the women's hall separated by two thick curtains. On the left was an eating space for women, and on the right was a two storey sleeping hall. Bedspreads are laid out on the ground with hundreds of women sleeping side by side. We choose a spot by the air conditioner, and sleep until morning prayers.





Legend

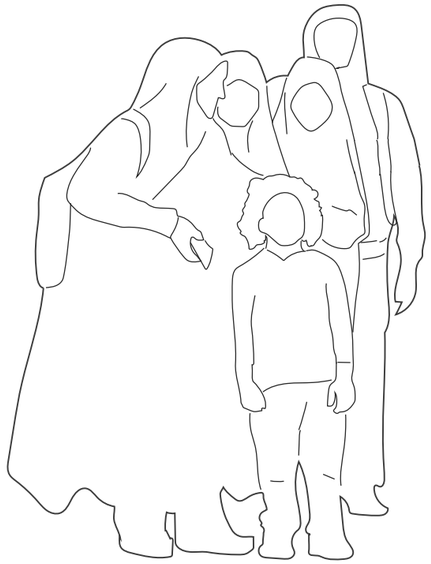
1. Women’s dentist
2. Women’s massage
3. Serving tables
4. Women’s eating area
5. Women’s sleeping area
6. Women’s washroom
7. Mosque
8. Men’s dentist
9. Men’s massage
10. Serving tables
11. Men’s eating area
12. Men’s sleeping area
13. Men’s washroom

Figure 38. Map of moukeb #327 adjacent to the walking path. Adapted from Google Maps

Day 2 : Continuing onwards

The morning begins with tea and breakfast, medical stations, foot massages are open 24/7 for anyone facing any pain. We waited until evening to begin walking again after praters. It would be another 6 hours, before finding a Moukeb to rest the night in again.

We take some time to settle with our group after morning prayers, and spend the day participating in some activities of remembrance. We sit in on lectures, or participate in poetry recitation. It is clear that this culture of unconditional servitude and hospitality towards pilgrims is a reflection of the lessons learnt in the sacrifice of Imam Hussain. After the day ends, we catch a bus to reach Karbala to conclude the rest of the walk.



Day 3: Arrival

Once we reached the first of the twin shrines, it was already daybreak. We spent the morning walking an additional few hours within Karbala until we see the Golden domes beyond the crowd. We first make our way to the Shrine of Al Abbas, before heading to the martyr Hussain. The cobblestone roads are worn by the footsteps of millions—people of every age and from every corner of the world. The air hums with the hums of salam, We stayed in Iraq for 9 additional days, visiting other religious Shrines, mosques, and points of historical significance. We visited multiple shrines in Kufa, Kazmain and Samarrah.

To say Ziyarat is difficult is an understatement. I'm not sure if I found the answer to what inspires change, but i do believe that it stems from an intense emotional connection where faith borders certainty. The will to endure a worthy sacrifice is a crucial step one has to take to have any kind of drastic outcome.

I was blessed with the opportunity to embark on this pilgrimage, and with it, I prayed under the dome in absolute certainty that things would change for me.

Figure 39. Boarding the connecting flight



Figure 40. Taking the bus from Baghdad Airport to Najaf



Figure 41. Walking to the hotel in Najaf





Figure 42. Gate into the Prayer hall in Imam Ali's Shrine, Najaf.

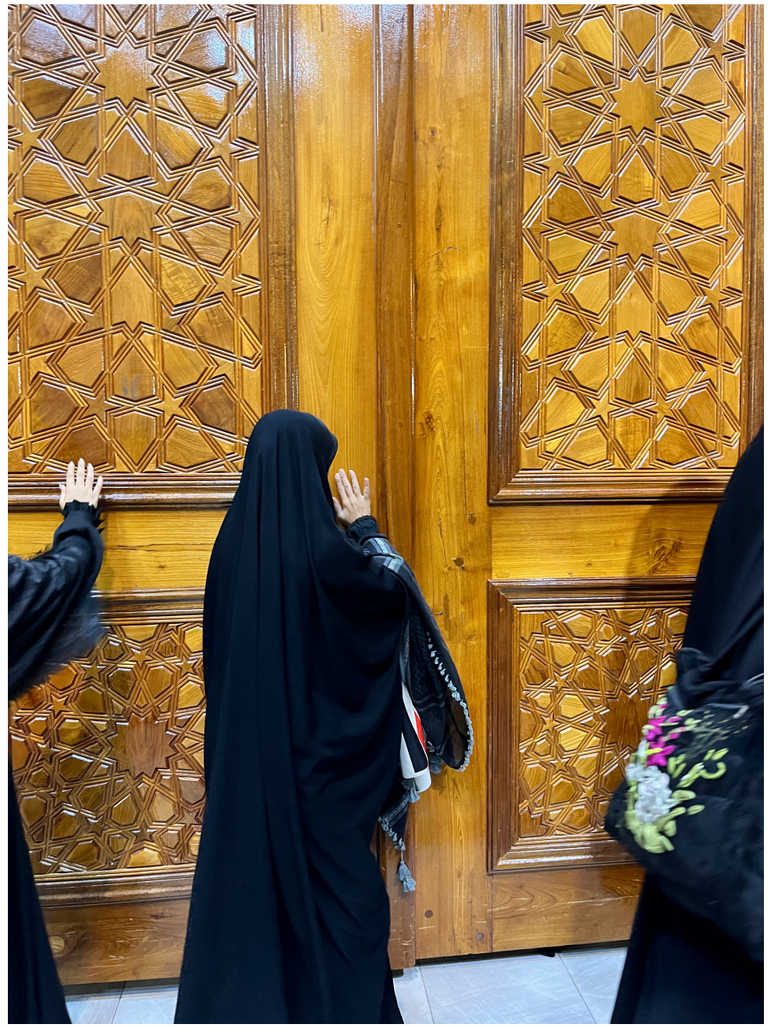


Figure 43. Marquetry and wood carved door leading into the Prayer hall in Imam Ali's Shrine, Najaf.

Figure 44. Ayeneh Kari Mosaic work leading to the tomb in Imam Ali's Shrine, Najaf.

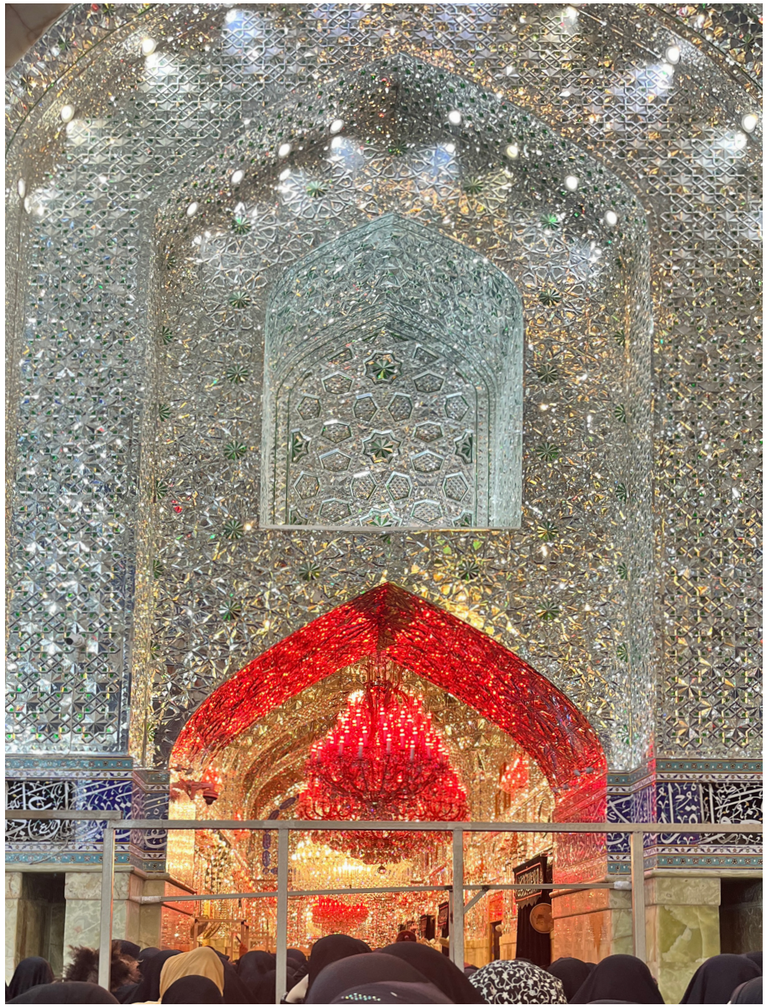




Figure 45. The tomb of Imam Ali, Najaf.

Figure 46,47,48.
The *Mashi* or Walk to Karbala from Najaf, facing the moukebs









Figure 49. 'Gate of Karrama' entrance to the Shrine of Imam Hussain.



Figure 50. Walking from the hotel to the shrine of Imam Hussain



Figure 51. The 'Zari' of Imam Hussain in Karbala



Figure 52. The road between the twin shrines of Imam Hussain and his brother Abbas in Karbala

Figure 53. The womens section of the shrine of Imam Hussain



Re(Make) : Exploration of Phase 2

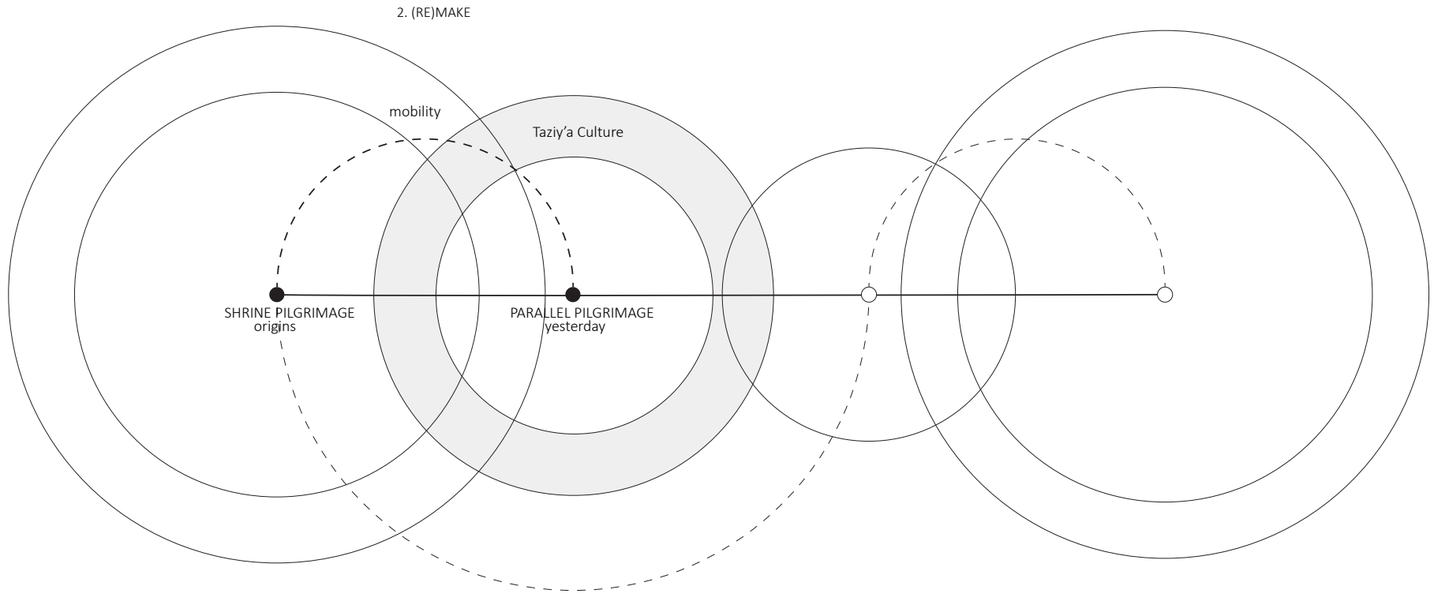


Figure 54.
Map of the Islamic empires
Adapted from multiple sources.

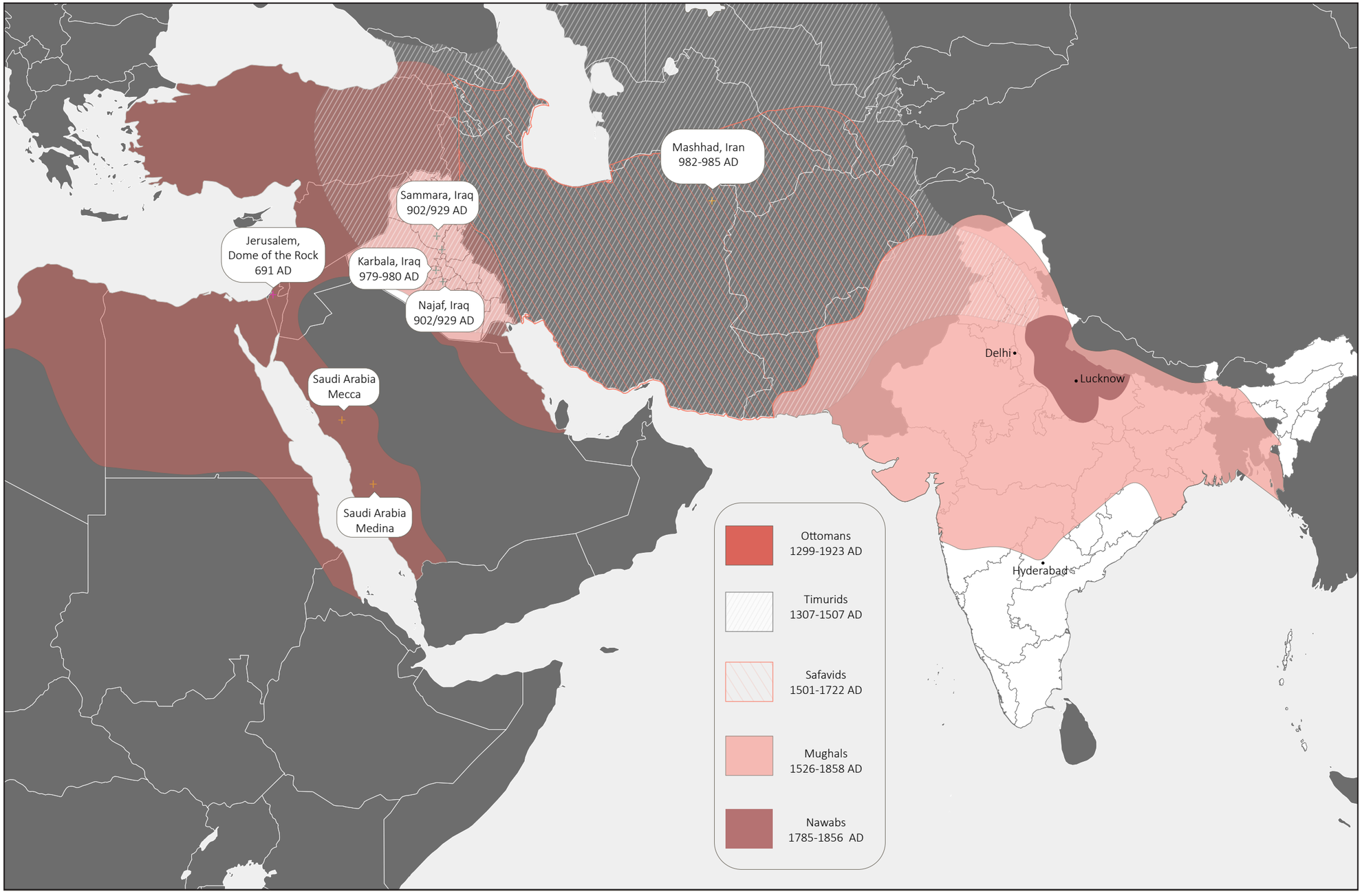




Figure 55.
Shi'a Muslims Mourning Before a Taziya, c. 1800, Lucknow, India, Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

In this exploration, I study the evolution of migratory Islamic artifact and the method of manipulating static elements through exaggeration in their scale, form, repetition, but through their dialogic intellectual and artistic processes that invoke the evolution process. There are roughly 60 million Shia Muslims in India, making it the second largest national group only to Iranian Shias.[42] Along with the century long practice of visitation to Karbala, pilgrimage memorabilia and subsequent material and visual forms shifted to new lands as the Islamic dynasties expanded into south Asia. This mobilization incites cultural and artistic exchange, replication, revival and assembled configurations. Nasser Rabbat explains this phenomenon as a result of Islamic architecture being reduced to its most apparent characteristics as "static, sensual and ornamental being the favorite among them."[43] The contribution of craft within commemorative architectures breaks the boundaries of religion and brings it closer to an art form that invokes not only prayer, but a series of rituals and religious artifacts. In the "replication" phase, the culture is intensified in the attempt to draw near to the "whole" though the assertion of identity and intense devotion. It's a renunciation of architectural and artistic craftsmanship that originates in Holy shrines, and in their representations.

42 Francis Robinson, "Introduction: The Shia in South Asia," Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 24, no. 3 (2014): 353–61, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43307307.

43 Nasser Rabbat, 'What Is Islamic Architecture Anyway?', Journal of Art Historiography, 2012, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1021054388/citation/D234D8F8FF6D4965PQ/1.

Culture of Replication in the Deccan

Origins of Shia Culture in India

The spread of Shia Islam in India, beginning in the Deccan and traveling to other regional empires, is deeply tied to the diasporic imaginations and cultural practices shaped by recollections and representations of pilgrimage. This cultural adaptation can be attributed to: migration and patronage of religious institutions. During the 14th and 15th centuries, the Bahmani Sultanate, followed by the Deccan Sultanates, actively promoted Shia Islam. These rulers were often of Persian descent and influenced by Persian culture.[44]

In 1722, the Mughal emperor appointed Sa'dat Khan as the Nawab of Awadh, a region east of Delhi. As Mughal power declined, the Nawabs grew stronger, with Sa'dat Khan securing a hereditary position, ensuring his descendants would rule Awadh until 1856. Both Sa'dat Khan and his grandson, Shuja' al-Daula (1732-1775), governed from Faizabad. However, around 1775, Shuja' al-Daula's son, Asaf al-Daula (1748-1797), moved the capital to Lucknow.[45] The Nawabs of Awadh in Lucknow had established one of the greatest centers of Shia cultures outside of Iran and Iraq.[46]

Shia practices were institutionalized through the construction of mosques, *ashurkhanas* (mourning halls) also called *imambadas* interchangeably, and other religious spaces which are richly adorned with calligraphy, floral motifs, and replicas of *alams*, became focal points of mourning ceremonies.[47]

Pilgrimage certificates and scrolls helped shape and reinforce a Shia Muslim geography, specifically created for and by south Asian pilgrims by artists in West Asia.[48] The domes of the shrines at Mecca have plumped into Mughal or Awadhi-style ones, adding another layer to this imaginary, where no building is stable in reproduction, or representation.[49]

44 Richard M. Eaton, A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761: Eight Indian Lives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 52–54.
45 Gruber, 'Islamic Architecture on the Move'.
46 Robinson, "Shia in South Asia," 354
47 Karen G. Ruffle, Everyday Shi'ism in South Asia: Devotion and Ritual Practice in Pakistan and India (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 43–45.
48 'From Mecca to Mashhad: A Lithographed Shiite Pilgrimage Scroll from Iran', video, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, accessed 7 December 2023, https://www.loc.gov/item/2021689079/.
49 Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran, 'Illustrated Pilgrimage Scroll', Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran, accessed 7 December 2023, http://www.qajarwomen.org/en/items/15157A1.html.

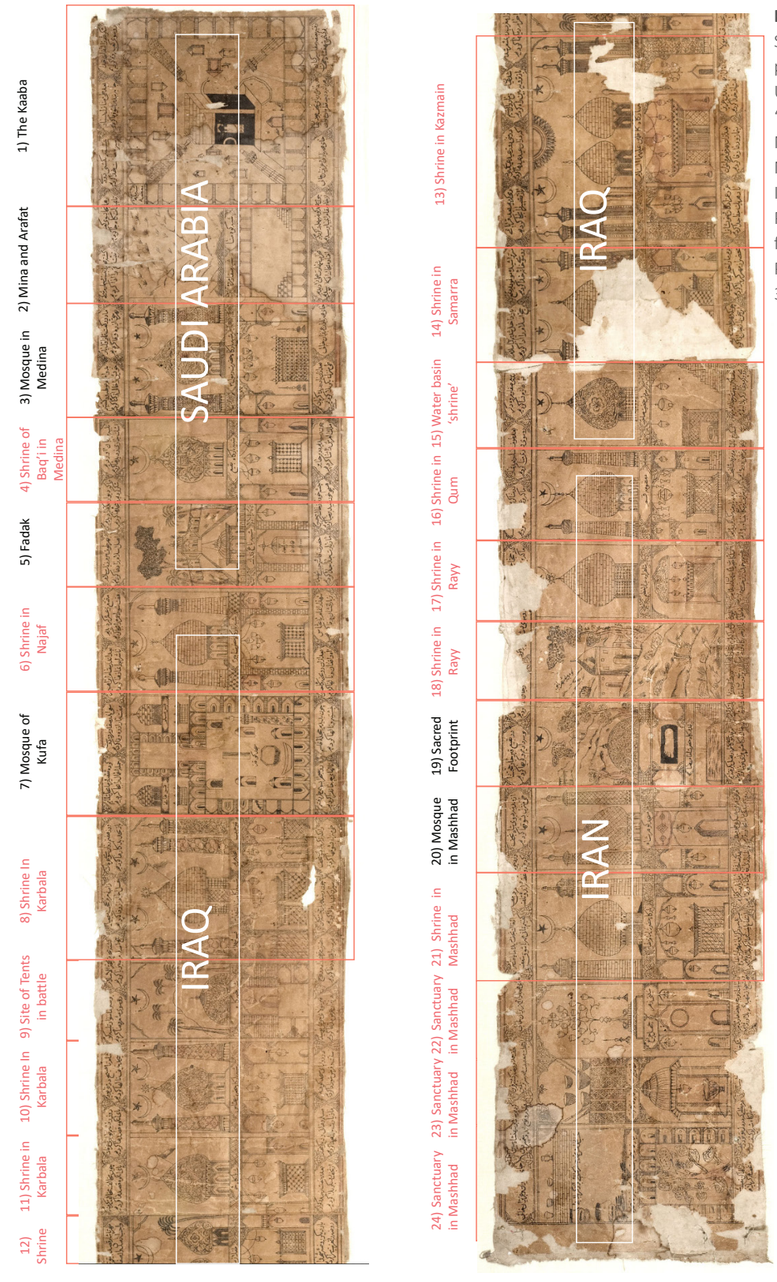


Figure 56. South Asian pilgrimage Map Ulrich Marzolph, 'From Mecca to Mashhad: The Narrative of an Illustrated Shi'i Pilgrimage Scroll from the Qajar Period', Muqarnas 31 (2014): 207–42.

Taziya Culture and Its Role in Replication Practices in India

In the city of Lucknow, where my paternal family, and maternal roots can be traced in India, the craft of *Taziya* making (or replication of the mausoleum of Imam Hussain) is carried out with varying degrees of local craftsmanship with an emphasis on reusable materials that ends in its burial and decomposition. They are typically, portable architectural models at a range of scales from palm sized, to processional displays, that resemble the Shia tombs or mausoleums. Taziyas are not exact replications of the Imam Hussein Shrine or any other mausoleum in Karbala. Instead, they are symbolic representations, adapted to local artistic styles and cultural contexts in the Indian subcontinent.

The term Taziya translates to “condolence” in Arabic. As a material and architectural form, the Taziya serves not only as a memorial but also as a conduit through which collective grief is articulated and processed within the community. Artisans craft these structures with varying degrees of scale, style, and ornamentation, utilizing materials such as colored paper, bamboo, sugar, and clay.[50] Taziyas have also been mediums of creative interpretations from highly stylized motifs that are superimposed on Hindu Templar ornamentation. Such mourning is based on the medieval philosophical principle of imitation called *tashabbuh* or “making a resemblance”.[51] This perspective extends to any kind of religious or sacred art that deals with the faith of its practitioners, freeing the artist from restrictions of innovation. Early Taziya making was a memory making practice - where the only memory of the models remain, and the rest was buried into the earth on the day of Ashura.

Along with these models, other significant icons are housed inside a room called a *Taziyakhana* which can interchangeably be called an Imambada which can even contain replicas of the Zari as well. Of these in Lucknow is known as Kazmain near my grandmother’s house in India, it is an almost exact replica of the shrine in Kazmain, Iraq. Outside its walled courtyard is a mosque on the west, and within it in the center is a hall that leads into the chamber clad in Ayneh Kari mosaic walls, and a guilded iron Zari in the center. [52]

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50 ‘History of Taziya in India: The Symbol of Muharram Mourning’, accessed 12 April 2024, https://map.sahapedia.org/article/History-of-Taziya-in-India:-The-Symbol-of-Muharram-Mourning/10701.
51 ‘History of Taziya in India’.
52 ‘Lucknow | Rauza Kazmain', accessed 13 December 2024, https://lucknow.me/Rauza-Kazmain.html.

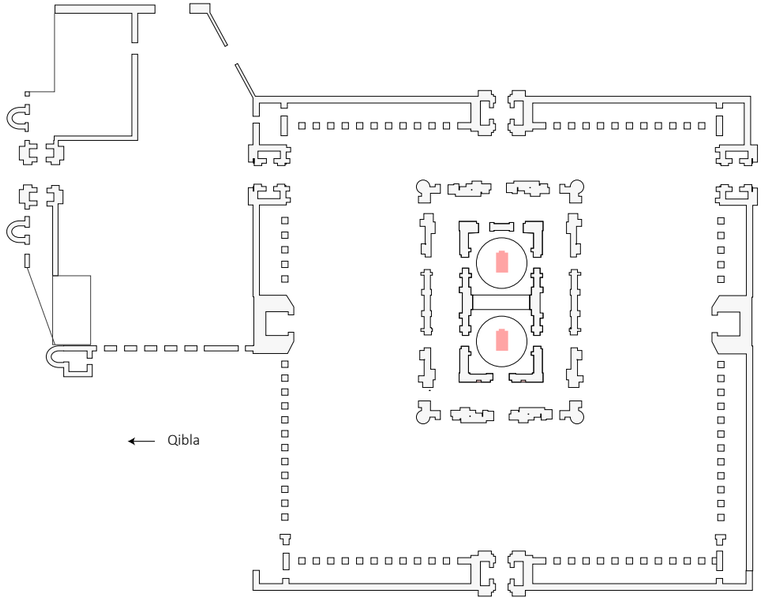


Figure 57. Plan of Shrine replica Rauza-E-Kazmain in Lucknow Adapted from KRVIA 'The Lucknow Portfolio Exhibition', 2016.



Figure 58. Shrine replica Rauza-E- Kazmain in Lucknow, 1874.

Taziya Making and Progress

Architectural models traditionally aim to communicate clarity and completion; however, Taziyas, particularly in Lucknow, often embody the concept of the sublime and unattainable, rather than promoting immediate comprehension.[53] Drawing on Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of “relational aesthetics,” Taziya-making is all about communal connections, transforming the actual act and display of art into a space for shared memory and representation.[54] The act of crafting a Taziya becomes a bridge between the tangible and intangible- where devotion lies in the hands of one who creates to glorify.[55]

The craft is deeply rooted in regional traditions, with materials varying across the country depending on local availability and cultural preferences. In Uttar Pradesh, particularly Lucknow, artisans often rely on bamboo and wood for the skeletal structure due to their flexibility and accessibility. [56] Rajasthan and Gujarat use vibrant colored paper and reflective foil to create ornate designs that symbolize reverence and festivity. In states like Madhya Pradesh, artisans incorporate plaster of Paris and clay to achieve intricate detailing and structural stability. [57] In Hyderabad, Taziyas are adorned with silver and gold foil work, as well as the use of natural dyes and pigments.[58]

The plan is usually square or octagonal. Within the process, two principles are carried throughout: beauty and grandeur. Tapering technique and minarets are used to enhance beauty and grandeur.

The key architectural elements are the *takht* base, usually cubical with a hollow interior to reduce weight, and the skeleton is traditionally made of found materials, being bamboo, cardboard, and sometimes reinforced with steel. In the front, there’s a main arched door with a small shrine marking where Imam Hussain was martyred. There are a minimum of two storeys, at the top of which is covered a *gumbad* or a dome. A canopy typically covers the taziya. There’s no set size for Taziyas; factors like material, affordability, regional architecture, competition, and materials determine size, decoration, and height.

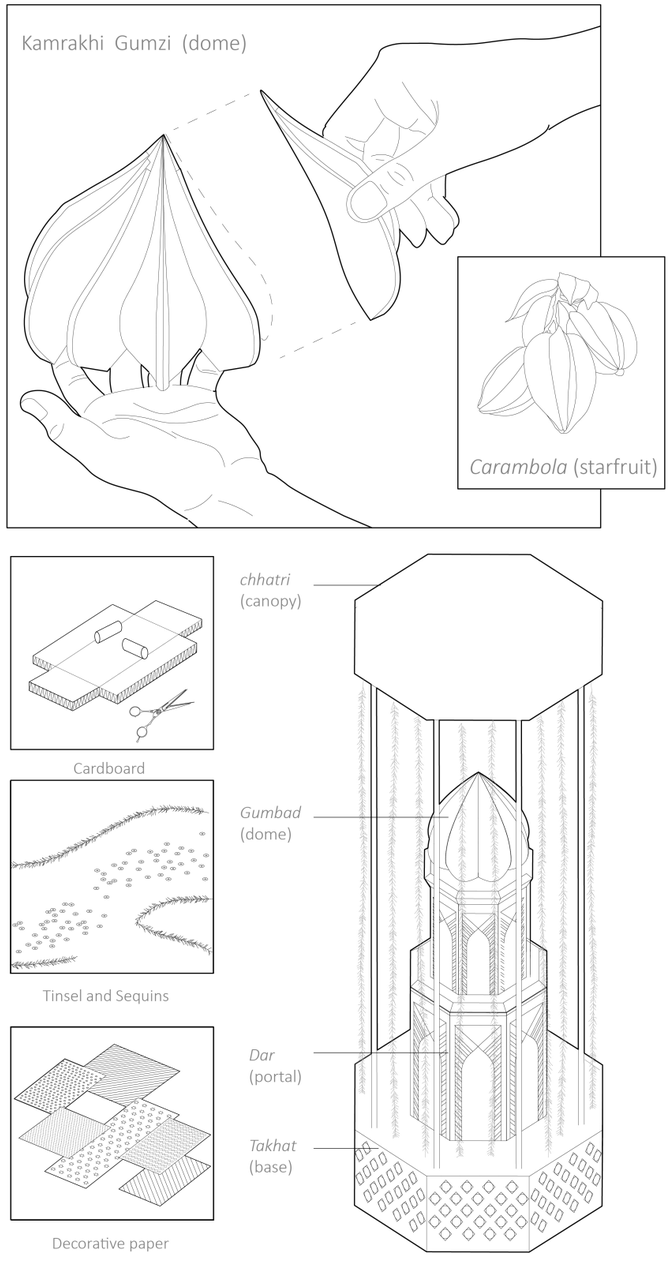
53 Asher, Catherine B. Architecture of Mughal India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
54 Bourriaud, Nicolas. Relational Aesthetics. Dijon: Les presses du réel, 1998.
55 Ahmed, Farzana. Sustainability in South Asian Crafts. Karachi: Craft Research Press, 2020.
56 Asher, Architecture of Mughal India.
57 Nath, R. Indian Architecture: Islamic Period. Jaipur: Historical India Publications, 2015.
58 Khan, Rizwana. Heritage Crafts of India. Delhi: National Handicrafts Publications, 2018.

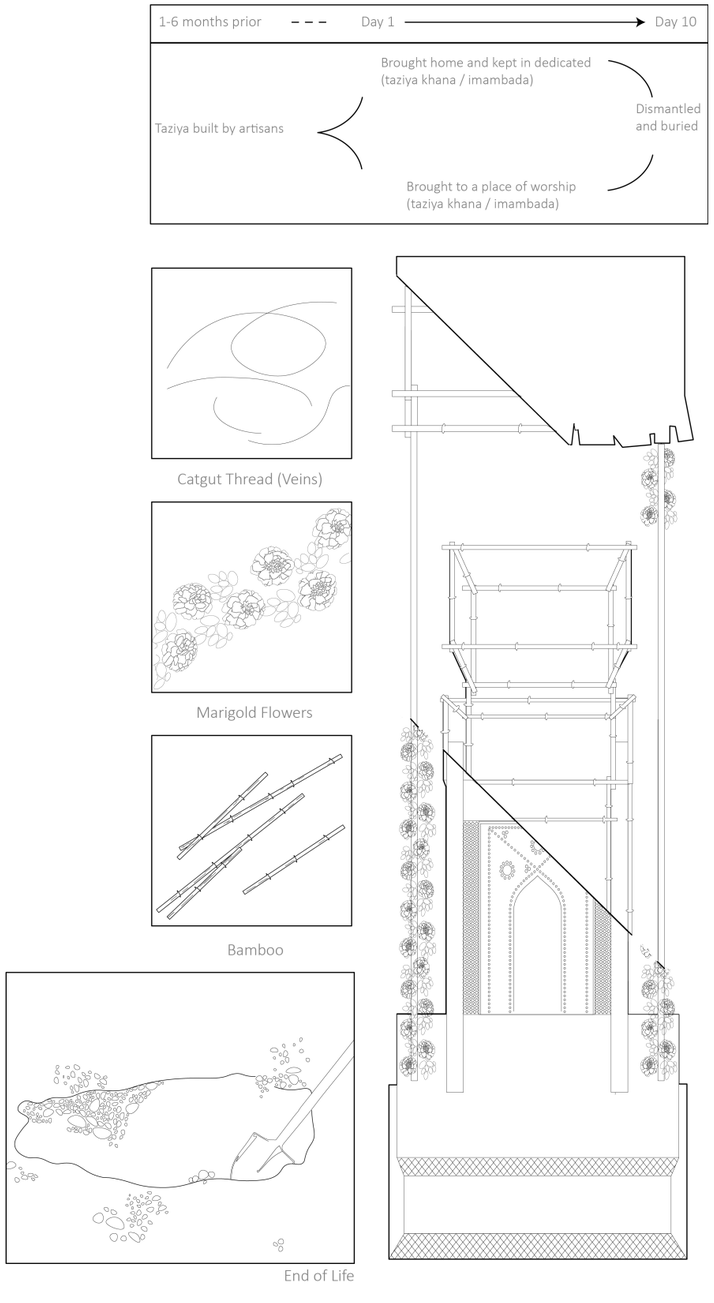


Figure 59.
One of Two Drawings of Muharram Scenes, Benares, India; Victoria and Albert Museum

Figure 60.
Regional material used in Taziya making Adapted from 'Making of the Taziya in Uttar Pradesh'.

Learning from traditional model making practices





The pictures made by Indian artists for the British in India are called Company paintings. This one depicts part of the Muharram procession, which Muslims carry out in memory of the martydom. The bamboo and paper Taziya models are seen being carried along with *Nakhl* (part of a Nakhl Gardani) in the center of the image . It is a type of Taziya that is carried in many cities and villages in Iran. It symbolizes the casket of Imam Hussain in a wooden scaffold shaped like a tree leaf. It is draped with with black fabrics, swords, arrows, flowers to depict the horrors that the body of Hussain endured during his death.

Men are participating in matam, some partaking in reenactments, and others are carrying Alams. Women and children can be seen observing the procession both in the foreground of the image, and atop the hill as well.

Twelve smaller paintings (framed in four groups of three) are depicting participants in the Muharram festival. Alams, Nakhls, Taziyas, and ornamented lamps are some of the material culture that are represented in these frames. Group 1 Image (top to bottom): Reciter sitting atop a Mimbar while a listens; two men exchanging water at a Sabeel; man performing ritual of Oudh. Group 2: all three images are men holding an Alam, Nakhl, and Taziya in order . Group 3 Images (top to bottom): Man playing the drum; Man holding Alam in front of recreation of the procession; Man playing the drum in front of Alams. Group 2: all three images are men performing rituals in front of Alams

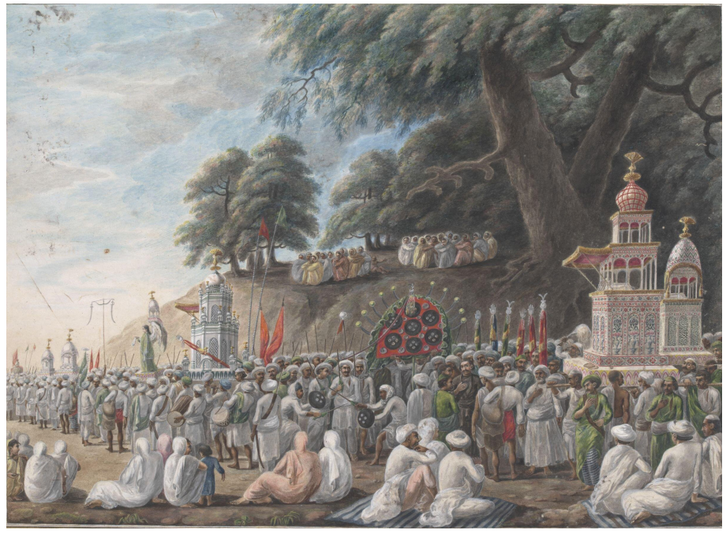


Figure 61. A Muharram Scene, Victoria & Albert Museum South & South East Asia Collection.



Figure 62. "The Muharram Festival," attributed to Siva Lal, Patna, ca. 1850–60

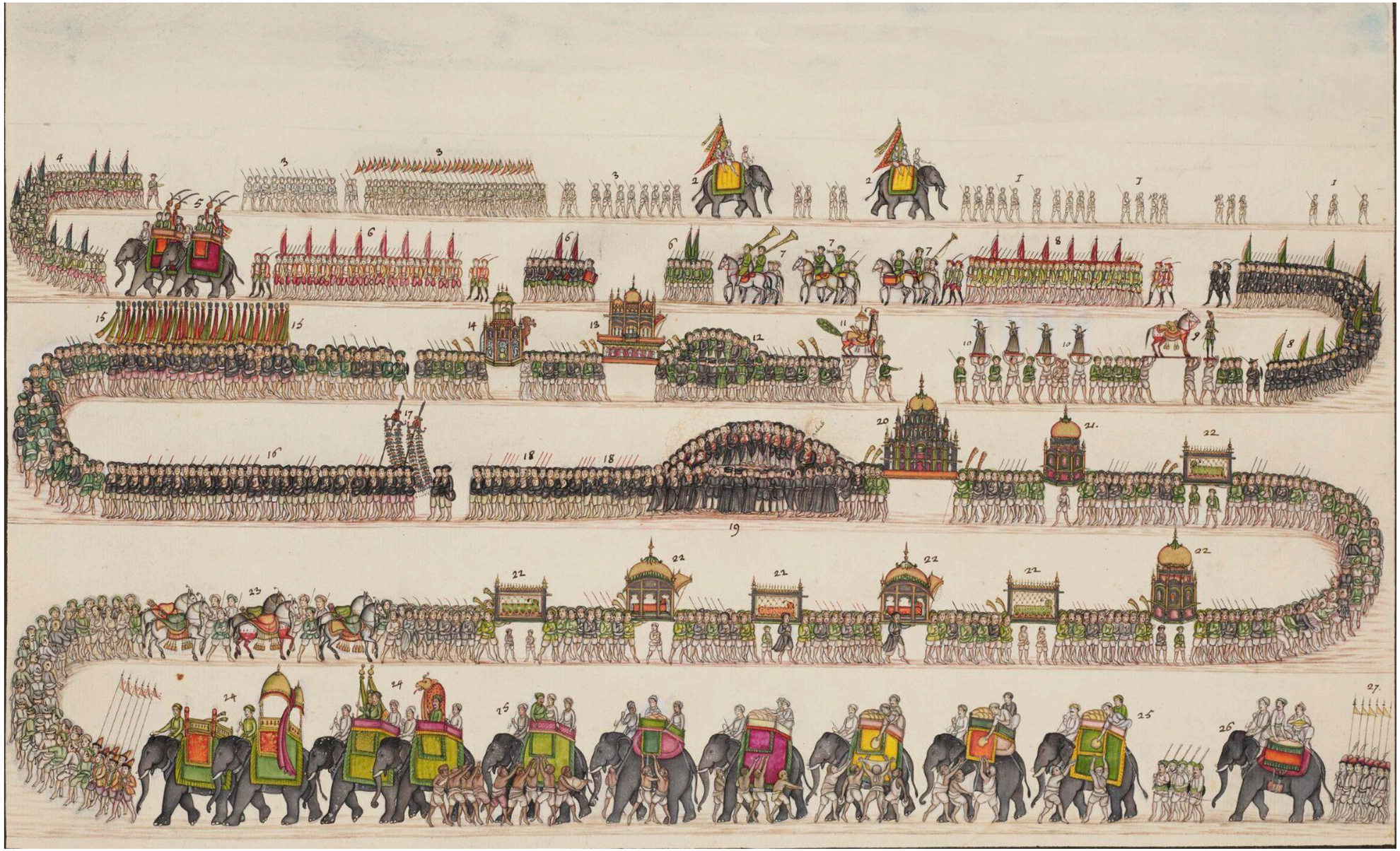


Figure 63.
Muharram Ceremony, Faizabad, India, c. 1772. In Colonel Jean-Baptiste Gentil's Album, 30.

The man who refused to drink

There was a man advanced along the Way
Who always, to his puzzled friends' dismay,
Refused to drink sweet sherbet. "Why is this?"
One asked: "What could explain this prejudice?"
He said: "I see a man who stands on guard
And notes who drinks – his eyes are cold and hard,
And if I drank, the sweetest sherbet would,
I know, act like a poison in my blood.
While he stands here the contents of the bowl
Are liquid fire to sear the drinker's soul."
Whatever lasts a moment's only worth
One barley grain – though it were all the earth;
How can I trust what has no rooted power?
And holds existence for a transient hour?
If you achieve your every wish, why boast
Of glory insubstantial as a ghost?
If disappointments darken all your days,
You need not grieve, for nothing worldly stays –
It is your passion for magnificence
That prompts your tears, not fancied indigence.
What is your grief compared with all the pain
God's martyrs suffered on [Karbala]'s plain?
In His [God's] clear sight the hardships you endure
Show like a treasure, glittering and pure –
Each breath you breathe His kindness reaches you,
And untold love envelops all you do –
But you forget His grace, and negligence
Makes friendship look like meaningless pretense.[61]

61 Farid ud-Din Attar, The Conference of the Birds, translated by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis (London: Penguin Classics, 1984).

The poem "The Man Who Refused to Drink" is written by the Sufi poet Farid Ud-Din Attar (ca. 1145–1221) in his book *The Conference of the Birds*. He presents an allegory in which a man rejects the temptation of sweet sherbet, recognizing that indulging in transient pleasures would ultimately harm his spiritual well-being. Before the Battle of Karbala, Imam Hussain and his followers endured severe thirst after their water supply was cut off. On the anniversary of his death, many Shias mourn the thirst of Imam Hussain and his children, and sometimes refuse water in his memory. Attar uses the protagonist's refusal to drink sweet sherbet, despite its apparent allure as a metaphor that would feel like poison in his blood. The man's rejection of the sherbet parallels the moral stance of Imam Hussain, where the acceptance of worldly power was a betrayal of divine justice and truth. He chose martyrdom to on the desert plains of Karbala, and was immortalized as a symbol of resistance against tyranny.

What Attar does so successfully in this poem, is emphasize the glory and grief in Imam Hussein's martyrdom. I still remember the way this poem made me feel when I first came across it. The grief should not be transient, but rather there must be an emotional and moral impact that his sacrifice has on the Muslim soul.

Attar's style of writing has strong themes of conviction and faith, in which the model of martyrdom was popularized in Persian and even in earliest popular Sufi songs in Turkey, like those composed by Turkish Sufi poet Yunus Emre in the late 13th and 14th century, where Imam Hussein is referenced as the 'fountain head of the martyrs'.[59] The elegies in Turkish and Persian tradition are similar to that in the regional languages of the Indian subcontinent in the development of the Urdu marsiya from its beginnings in the late 16th century whose thought was permeated by the teaching of the Sufis.[60]

Initially, classical *marsiya* was like a painting, where after reading or hearing a recitation one could vividly imagine the graphic scenes in Karbala. With pioneering poets in the Deccan like Mir Anis (d.1874), Iqbal and Mirza Dabeer (d.1875), marsiya in the 19th century had been uniquely developed as it was brought from Delhi to

59 Yunus Emre Divani, p. 569.

60 Amy Bard, 'Value and Vitality in a Literary Tradition: Female Poets and the Urdu Marsiya', n.d.

the city of Lucknow where it became the hub of marsiya poets under Nawab rule, to become more poetic and far reaching than before.[62]

The marsiya acts as the poetic tether from the collective grief we feel when hearing of his suffering, to the individual. It pulls on our morals, our surroundings and our identities. Nohas, which are also read during mourning ceremonies, are distinct from marsiyas in their style and purpose: in the form of a shorter and more rhythmic poetic lament designed to be recited in processions and gatherings standing up (figure 64). Urdu, as a language of synthesis, creates a dynamic syncretism within marsiya and noha literature, where- much like the language itself - poets could blend elements from different linguistic backgrounds. The language is a conglomeration of Hindavi words blended with Persian, Arabic and Turkic script.[63]

Urdu marsiyas and nohas are known to be sentimental, but they portray and glorify the ideal morals expected of its followers - that when a soldier of God is sent to battle, he had both the strength in his faith, and softness in his heart to shed tears.[64] These poets also narrated the tragedy of Karbala in notes of cultural and ceremonial imagery of North India, especially in the promotion of values were especially important in 19th century Lucknow.[65] During the struggle for independence in the 1930's and 40's, poetic elegies acted as a political means to propagate the view that Karbala is not a stagnant pathos event, but a model for revolutionary struggle.

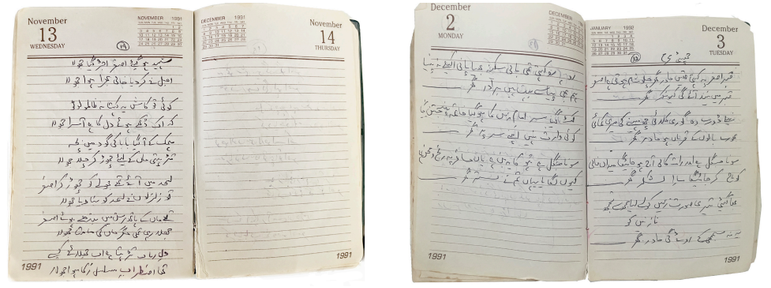


Figure 64.
Nohas written by my Grandmother in my mother's diary

62 C.M. Naim, "The Art of Urdu Marsiya," in Islamic Society and Culture, ed. N.K. Wagle and M. Israel (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1983), 101–116.

63 Naim, "The Art of Urdu Marsiya," 101–116.

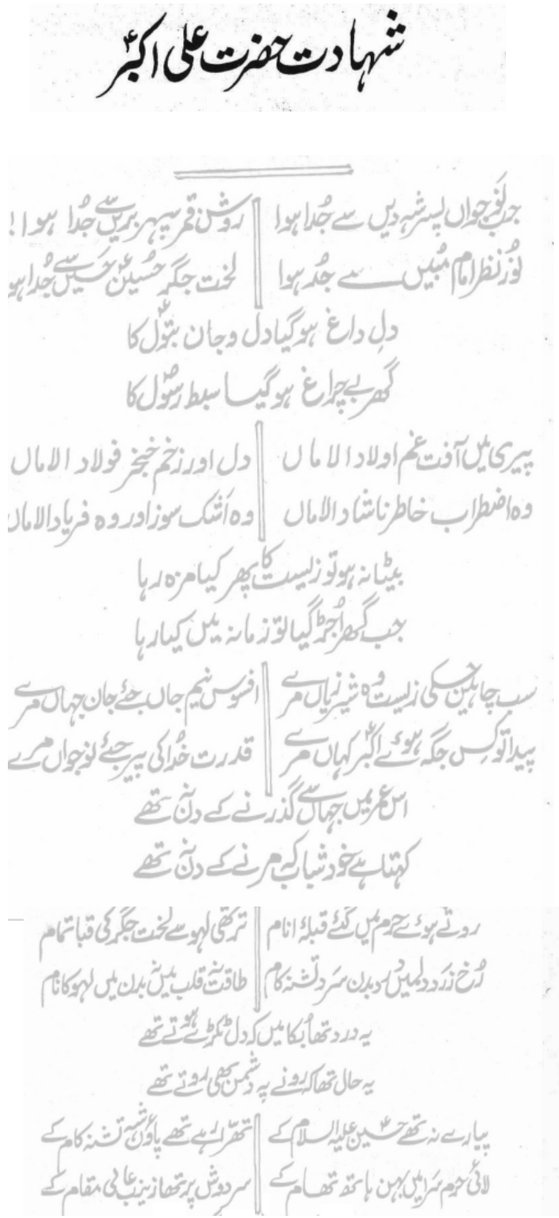
64 Naim, "The Art of Urdu Marsiya," 101–116.

65 Naim, "The Art of Urdu Marsiya," 101–116.

Marsiya for the martydom of Ali Akbar, Son of Hussain

On the day Hussain's son parted from Hussain.
The brilliancy of light from the heavens waned.
His eyes lost their glow when He lost His youthful son.
Hussain's radiant son with the Holy Prophet's face.
The heart of Batool's Son was unbearably bruised.
The home of the Prophet's Grandson darkened with gloom
A spear had pierced through Akbar's heart.
Hussain saw the gash that tore Akbar's chest apart.
A father can hardly watch a son in such a state.
It exceeds all bounds of forbearance alas.
Though known for his patience, even (Jacob) couldn't have borne.
Such pain, such loss, such misery, such woes.
A young son dying, the father fifty-seven years old.
The pain, like a knife, pierced through His soul.
Watching His son suffer, watching him die.
Watching the mother weep to see Akbar no more.
What flavor does life hold after you lose a child?
After your home is deprived of such youthful life.
That son from whom Hussain couldn't bear to part.
Was killed by the people of Shaam and Iraq.
"Hurry Oh death" Hussain cried out in pain.
"I have nothing more to live for, nothing alas"
"May no home suffer a fate as wretched as mine.
Life has no meaning when your child is gone"
"He died while everyone prayed he would live.
Strong, bold, handsome, courageous, and quick
Born elsewhere and dead in this strange land.
A young son died while an old father lives"

Figure 65. Mir Babar Ali Anees. Selected Works of Anees.



I had been introduced to a place in of pilgrimage in India known as Hussain Tekri - translated to 'Hussain Hill' - from a friend of mine who had endured a string of bad luck over the past year. As we sat on the floor of her apartment in Toronto sharing stories about her life in India and my upcoming plans to visit, she told me an almost unbelievable story about her mother being freed from the possession of a spirit. As the night stretched on, she shared photos and videos of a ritual, particularly one known as the *Haziri* - the equivalent of an exorcism which takes place at Hussain Tekri. The intensity of the ritual - the shaking and screaming, left me both incredibly fascinated, and unsettled.

I had never heard of it myself, especially not as part of a ritual that is done during the actual pilgrimage to Karbala. In fact, not many Muslim saint shrines accommodate haziri, and some actively oppose it.[66] But the very nature of Hussain Tekri is one of ambiguity. It is more than a space of absolute representation of religion; it is a spiritual bridge. It unites people who have the desperate and shared need for healing. This was a place where it is said incurable illnesses - especially mental illness - are believed to have been miraculously healed. There was some unattainable truth that I could not grasp myself when I first came to hear of it. I had decided to visit India in December of 2023.

66 Carla Bellamy, The Powerful Ephemeral (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), https://www.perlego.com/book/551967/the-powerful-ephemeral-pdf.

Located in Jaora, Madhya Pradesh, India, is a parallel pilgrimage site of replica shrines. Its origins trace back to the early 19th century, during the reign of Nawab Mohammad Iftikhar Ali Khan Bahadur, a ruler of the princely state of Jaora. According to local tradition, the Nawab was inspired by a divine vision in which he was instructed to create replica shrines where people, particularly those unable to travel to Karbala, could practice Ziyarat.[67]

It has six shrines, which I will refer to as it is referenced in the local areas as a *Dargah* [68] - commonly described as the tomb of a Muslim saint in its vicinity. All of these Dargah's are made from poured concrete and decorated with plasterwork and paint. From the entrance, Fatima Al Zehra (daughter of Mohammed), Imam Hussain (son of Ali), Zainab (daughter of Ali), Abbas (son of Ali), Sakina (daughter of Imam Hussain) and Imam Ali (son of Abu Talib and cousin, son-in-law of Mohammed).

The *shabis* or replicas - are central to the experience of the dargahs, allowing pilgrims to connect spiritually with the key Shite figures, especially for those who may not have the opportunity to visit Karbala in Iraq. The shabis within Hussain Tekri also mirror the practice of placing replicas in imambadas The shabis in Hussain Tekri are yet another physical extension of the traditions seen in imambadas across the Shia world.

67. Bellamy, The Powerful Ephemeral, 2011.
68 Bellamy, The Powerful Ephemeral, 2011.

Imambadas often house shabis as symbolic representations of Karbala, The shabis, like taziyas, serve as visual and tangible links to the events of Karbala but shabis - as representations of sacred tombs - are permanent fixtures within imambadas and dargahs compared to taziyas which are used processionally. The interior walls and ceilings adorned with the mirror mosaics, possibly as a reference to the actual shrines in their respective regions. Windows are made from the same iron lattice work that makes up the shrines to allow for the tying of knots within it, creating tether from the individual to the Zari itself.

The various rituals may not fit easily within the parameters used in the pilgrimage to Iraq since their healing narratives are blended with local cross cultural belief. Healing in this case is rooted in the mental state, which is linked to the spiritual maladies one may have, or that one was subjected to in the case of my friend's mother. The shrine's openness to such practices allows visitors from various cultural and folk backgrounds to integrate their beliefs into the healing experience. Through the intercession of the saints and for the pleading of their help, the resultant reaction at Hussein Tekri evoke a visceral, cathartic physical experience, such as crying or trembling, which is interpreted as a sign of prayers being answered and burdens being lifted in the form of a cathartic release.

The sequence of visiting each dargah is determined by the timing and order of the *Oudh* that is delivered - a smoky incense equivalent of the dispersal of a symbolic medicine - that is paraded in the courtyards in the morning and afternoon. It is delivered every half hour starting from the Dargah of Sakina and Abbas, then at the dargah of Imam Ali, then at the dargah's courtyard of Imam Hussein and Zainab and concludes at the dargah of Fatima Al Zehra in half hour intervals (figure 67).[69]

In my time visiting, it was impossible to overlook the demographic that surrounded me. Most of the pilgrims were destitute, or severely poverty stricken, so much so that they lived in tents on the grounds just outside the entry gates. Many were here looking for a miracle, Sunni Muslims, Hindus, and people from local folk traditions all partook in the search for hope. Women, in particular form a large segment of visitors, as they often seek the intercession of saints for issues related to health, marriage or fertility.

69 69 Bellamy, The Powerful Ephemeral, 2011.

Figure 66. The *'Dargah* of Lady Zainab in *Hussain Tekri.* Not To Scale.

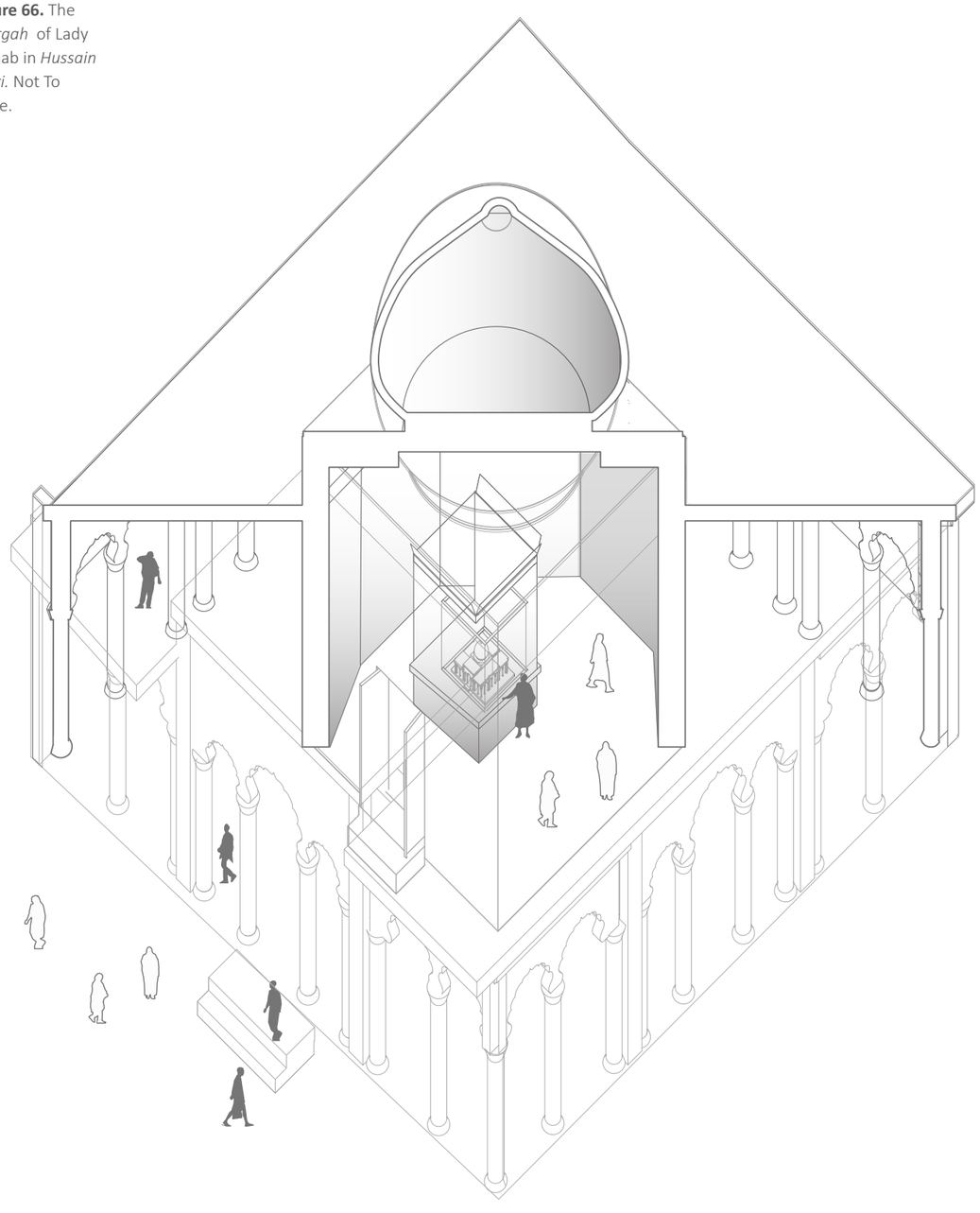
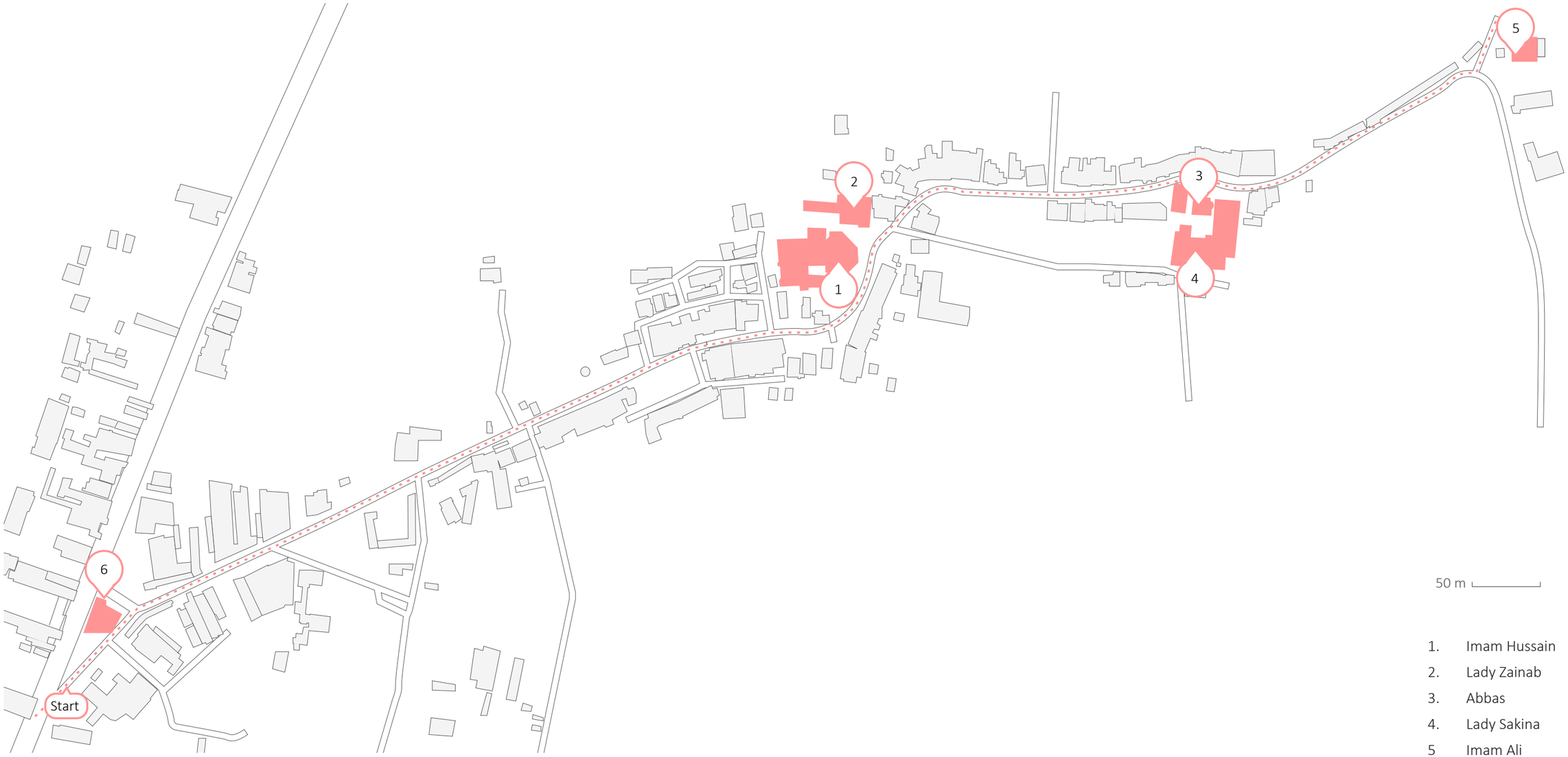


Figure 67. Map of Hussain Tekri and the 'Dargahs',



1. Imam Hussain
2. Lady Zainab
3. Abbas
4. Lady Sakina
5 Imam Ali
6. Fatima Al Zehra

Figure 68. Entry Gate to Hussain Tekri



Figure 69. The flower market at the entrance of Imam Hussain 'Dargah'



Figure 70. The tying of knots for prayers to be answered.



Figure 71. Entrance gate to imam Hussain 'dargah'



Figure 72. Gate leading to the Dargah of Imam Hussain



Figure 73. Inside the courtyard of the Dargah



Figure 74. View of the Dargah of Imam Hussain and Lady Zaineb



Figure 75. For those who enter, they can visit the replica inside the 'Dargah'



Figure 76. For those who cannot enter, they pray outside at the windows that look into the 'dargah'.

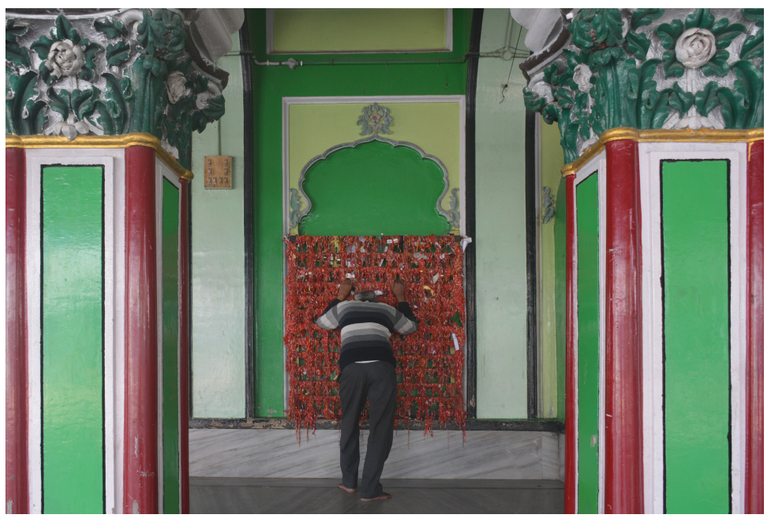




Figure 77. Lady Zainab's 'dargah'



Figure 78. Inside the 'Dargah' is another replica where pilgrims ask for intercession.

Figure 79.
Marketplace that sells all kinds of icons for pilgrims to place in their 'imambadas'



Figure 80.
Lady Sakina's 'dargah'.





Figure 81.
Al Abbas' dargah under construction



Figure 82. Gate to the dargah of Imam Ali

Figure 83.
'Dargah' of Imam Ali



Figure 84.
Oudh- meant to symbolize the smoke of the tents burning during Ashura



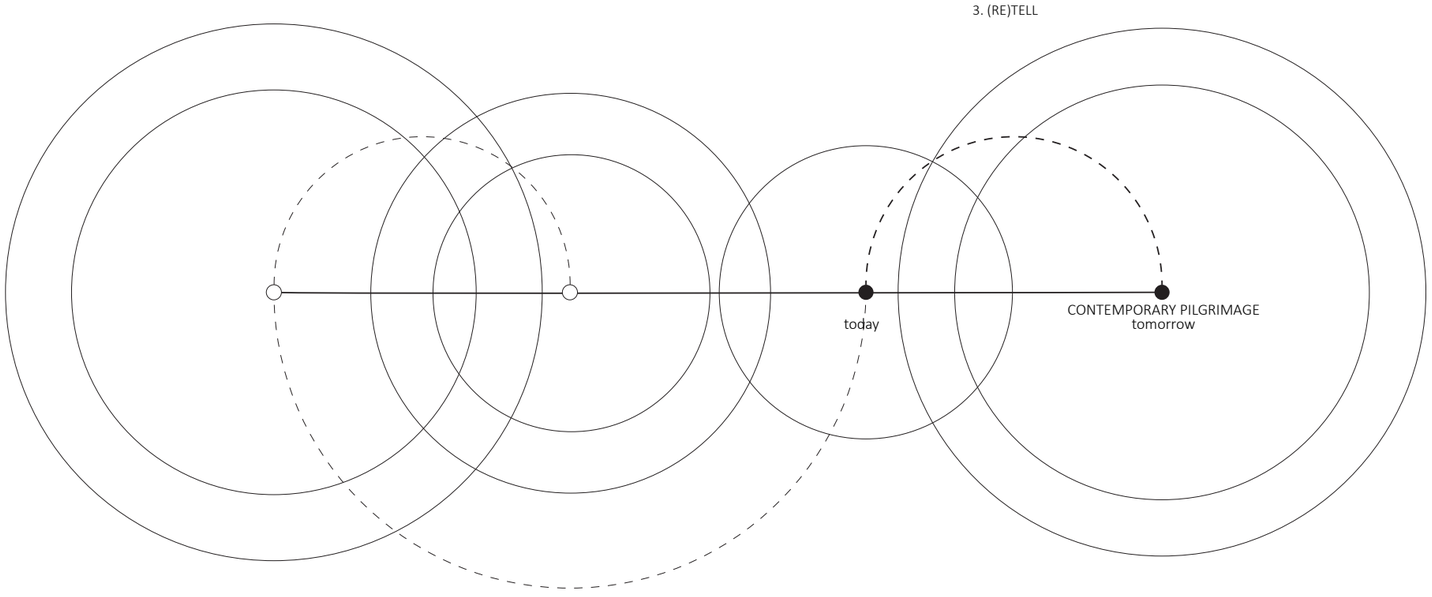


Figure 85. Dargah of Lady Fatima



Figure 86. Henna Hand prints on the dargah of lady Fatima for those praying for marriage

Re(Tell) : Exploration of Phase 3



04| Shia Mosques in Canada|



Figure 87. Shia Mosques in Ontario

Shia mosques in Canada, while fewer in number compared to Sunni mosques, serve as vital religious and cultural hubs for the growing Shia Muslim population in the country. The majority of Shia mosques are concentrated in larger urban centers such as Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary, where significant Shia communities reside. Many of these mosques are purpose-built with distinct spatial and spiritual requirements, including spaces for communal prayer, imambargahs for religious gatherings, and educational facilities for religious teachings.

While the number of Shia mosques continues to grow, there are approximately 30-40 dedicated Shia mosques and Islamic centers in Canada, serving various branches of Shia Islam, including Ithna Asheri (Twelver), Ismaili, and Bohra communities. These mosques not only provide spaces for worship but also act as focal points for religious events such as Muharram and Ramadan, and offer community services, schooling and charity events.

Renovated Religious Buildings

These mosques are created by converting former churches, synagogues, or other religious buildings. While the external architecture often retains elements of the original structure—such as steeples, gable roofs, or stained glass—the interiors are adapted to meet Islamic requirements. The Qibla wall- wall directed to Mecca that Muslims pray towards- is added or reoriented, and previous religious symbols may be replaced with Islamic designs. These buildings can be a blend of different architectural influences, which creates a neutrality in religious heritage and Islamic design.

Leased or Owned Space in Strip Malls

Mosques housed in leased spaces within strip malls are typically minimalist and functional in design. The exterior blends into the commercial surroundings, with few or no Islamic architectural features. Inside, these spaces are adapted for prayer, with simple layouts that focus on maximizing usable floor space. These mosques often have basic facilities, with a main prayer area, an area for ablutions, and some partitioning for gender separation. The design is utilitarian, prioritizing affordability and accessibility over architectural grandeur.

Purpose Built Mosques

Purpose-built mosques are designed from the ground up with Islamic architectural elements in mind. These structures often feature domes, minarets, and intricate geometric or calligraphic decorations. The interior spaces prioritize large prayer halls, often separated for men and women, with clear qibla walls oriented toward Mecca. These mosques typically have courtyards, educational spaces, and community rooms, providing a full spectrum of services to the congregation.



Figure 88.
Zainabiya Mosque in a former 'Countryside United Church'

Zainabiya Mosque, Thornton ON



Figure 89. Dua Center in an industrial zoned strip mall in Ajax

Dua Center, Ajax, ON

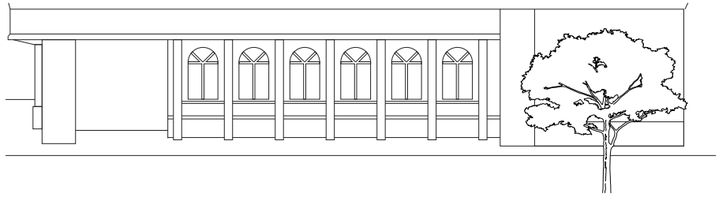


Figure 90. Razavi Community Center in Stoney Creek

Razavi Community Center, Stoney Creek ON

Case Study| Jaffari Community Center

Figure 91. Jaffari Community Center
Photo taken by Author

The Jaffari Community Centre (JCC) in Thornhill, Ontario, has a rich history rooted in the migration and settlement of the Shia community in Canada. Its origins date back to the early 1970s when Shia Muslims, primarily from East Africa (particularly Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya), began to immigrate to Canada due to political unrest and economic opportunities.[70]

The Islamic Shia Ithna Asheri Jamaat (ISIJ) of Toronto, the umbrella organization that manages the JCC, was formed in 1969. Initially, the community would gather in rented spaces and private homes for prayers and religious events. As the Shia community grew in the Greater Toronto Area, the need for a dedicated, purpose-built space became increasingly apparent. The center includes facilities for daily prayers, major religious events such as Muharram and Ramadan, classrooms for Islamic education, a banquet hall, and spaces for community gatherings.

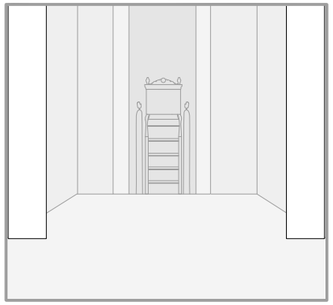
70 'Chronicle 50-A History of the First 50+ Years of the ISIJ of Toronto', accessed 7 December 2024, https://chronicle50.jaffari.org/introduction/.

EDUCATIONAL

Resource Library

School
- Classroom
- Offices
- Study Spaces

Offices

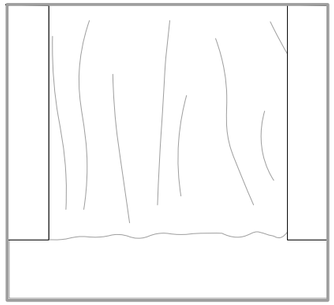


Multipurpose Halls including gymnasiums not only engage the community in activities beyond worship, but also act as additional space for surplus visitors when capacity is at full.

RECREATIONAL

Cafe and Dining

Gymnasium
- M/F Washrooms
- M/F Change rooms



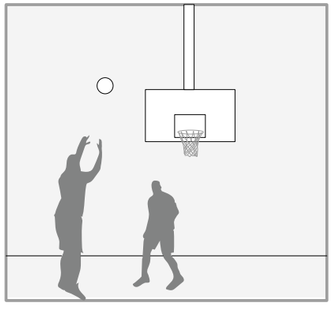
WORSHIP SPACES

Prayer Hall/Jamaatkhana
- M/F Ablution Spaces
- Offices
- M/F Washroom
- M/F Coat Room
- M/F Zari Room

Hall

Offices

Burial Services



Flexible Spaces allow for the seamless transition between event to another. After the speech is read from the Minbar, curtains can be pulled in front of the walls and allow for a stage to set for poetry reciters

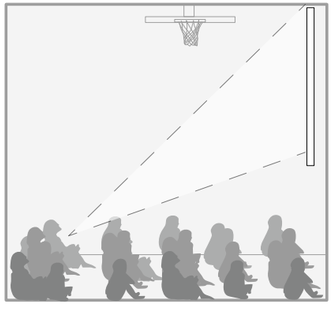
SERVICE SPACES

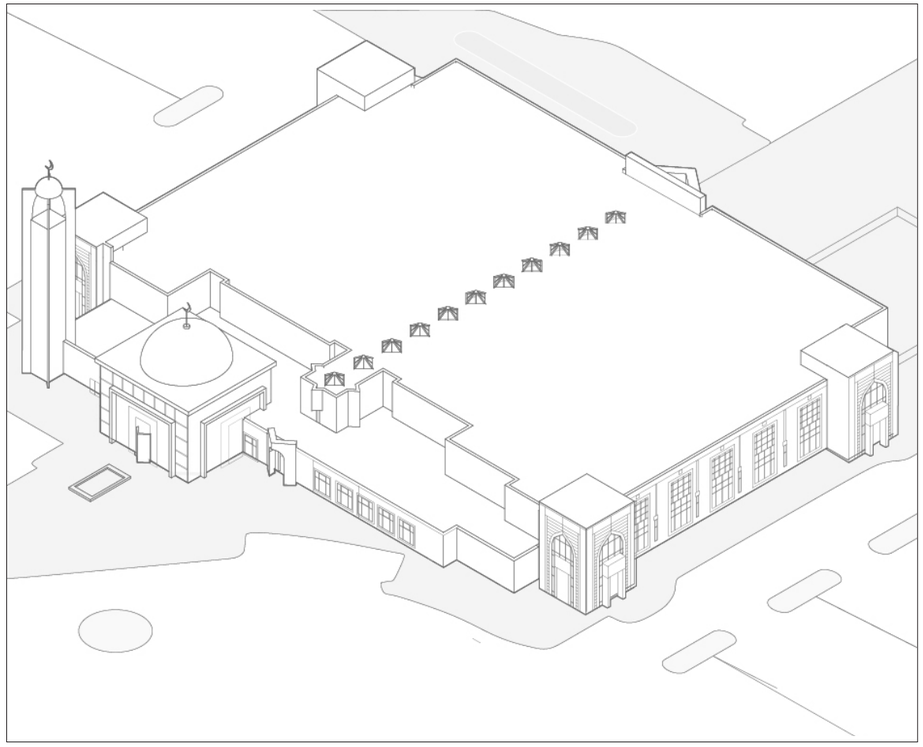
Kitchen

Nursery Spaces

M/F Washroom

M/F Coat Room





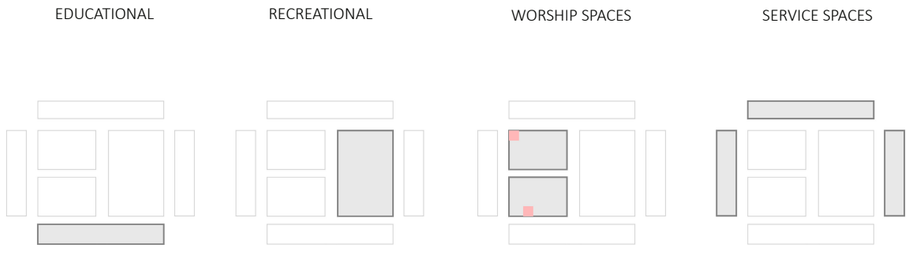


Figure 92. Diagrammatic use in Jaffari Community Center

Case Study| Masumeen Islamic Center

As the Shia community in Mississauga grew, so did the center, becoming a full-fledged institution with facilities for congregational prayers, religious education, social events, and charity activities. Its growth mirrors the demographic trends in Mississauga, where the Muslim population—particularly Shia Muslims—has increased steadily due to immigration and community development.

The center provides a dedicated space for Shia Muslims to perform daily and Friday prayers, observe significant religious events like Muharram, Ashura, and Arbaeen, and celebrate Eid. The center was one of the first in the area to be able to organize social gatherings, dinners, and events that bring together families from diverse backgrounds in the GTA as a purpose built mosque. It was inaugurated in 2003 as an addition to the ISIJ's initiatives in establishing Shia Mosques.[71]

71 'Chronicle 50-A History of the First 50+ Years of the ISIJ of Toronto'.

Figure 93.
Masumeen islamic center
Photo taken by Author

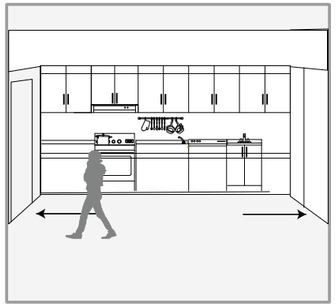


EDUCATIONAL

Resource Library

School
- Classroom
- Offices
- Study Spaces

Offices

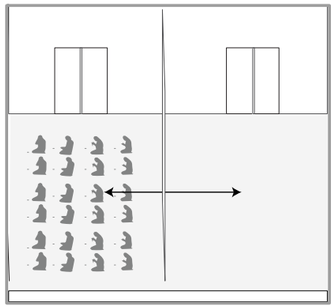


A coat and shoe area outside the prayer halls with a small kitchen between the men's and women's prayer halls facilitates easy meal service.

RECREATIONAL

Cafe and Dining

Gymnasium
- M/F Washrooms
- M/F Change rooms



The gymnasium is located adjacent to the prayer halls, allows easy access and serves as a multipurpose overflow space for large congregations.

WORSHIP SPACES

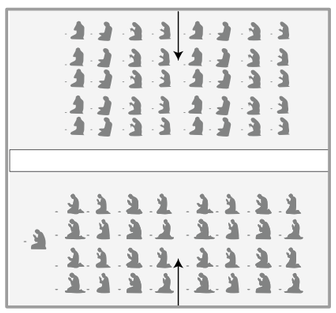
Prayer Hall/Jamaatkhana
- M/F Ablution Spaces
- Offices
- M/F Washroom
- M/F Coat Room
- Zari Room

Hall

Offices

Burial Services

Short stairways provide access to the main floor and a half-above-ground basement with large windows, ensuring natural light for school classrooms.



Centrally located, it allows for gender-segregated entrances and two parking lots on either side for efficient access.

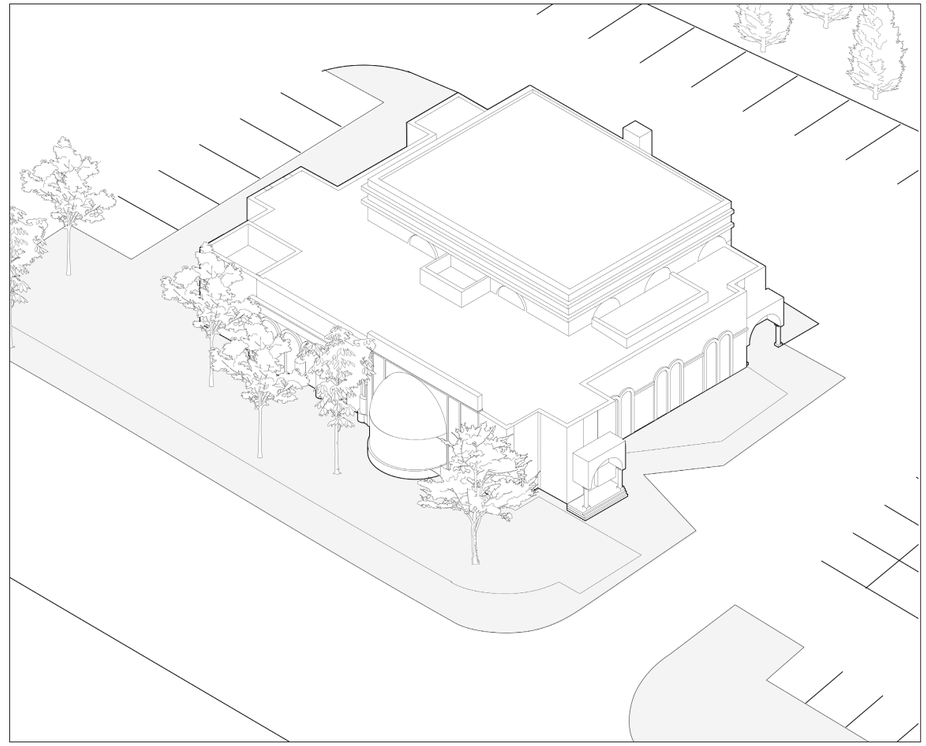
SERVICE SPACES

Kitchen

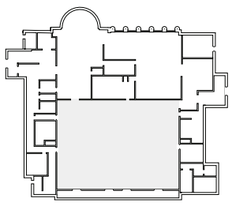
Nursery Spaces

M/F Washroom

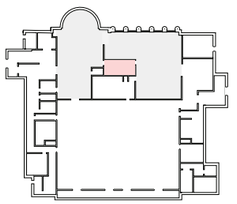
M/F Coat Room



RECREATIONAL



WORSHIP SPACES



SERVICE SPACES

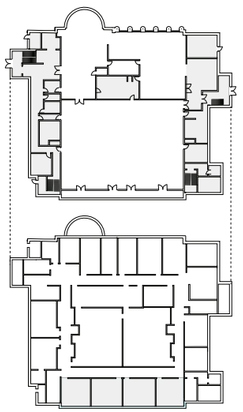


Figure 94. Diagrammatic use in Masumeen Community Center

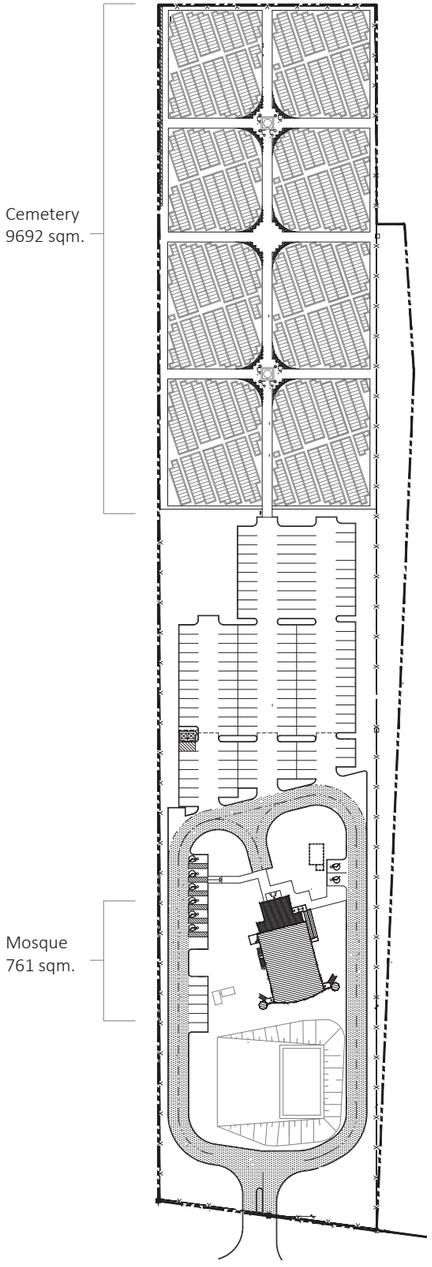
Case Study| Al Hussain Foundation

The Al Hussain Foundation is a Mosque and a Cemetery Complex established by the Iraqi-Canadian Shia Muslim community in Ontario with the aim of creating a space for religious worship, cultural preservation, and community service. The Al Hussain Foundation Mosque has 2 minarets, the same as the Shrine of Abbas and Imam Hussain in Karbala. It acts as a spiritual home for Shia Muslims in the Greater Toronto Area, particularly those who arrived in Canada as part of waves of migration from Iraq and other regions with significant Shia populations, such as Lebanon and Iran.[72] The complex is located in Markham Ontario, in a relatively remote patch of land, creating an intimate, tranquil and private space for those grieving loved ones.

72 'About | Al Hussain Foundation.Ca', accessed 13 December 2024, https://www.alhussainfoundation.ca/about-2-2/.



Figure 95. Al Hussain Islamic center
Photo taken by Author



EDUCATIONAL

Resource Library

WORSHIP SPACES

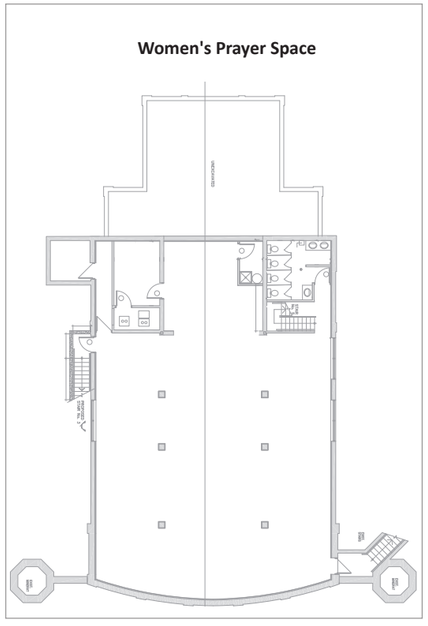
Prayer Hall/Jamaatkhana Mens
M Washroom
M Coat Room
Prayer Hall/Jamaatkhana Mens

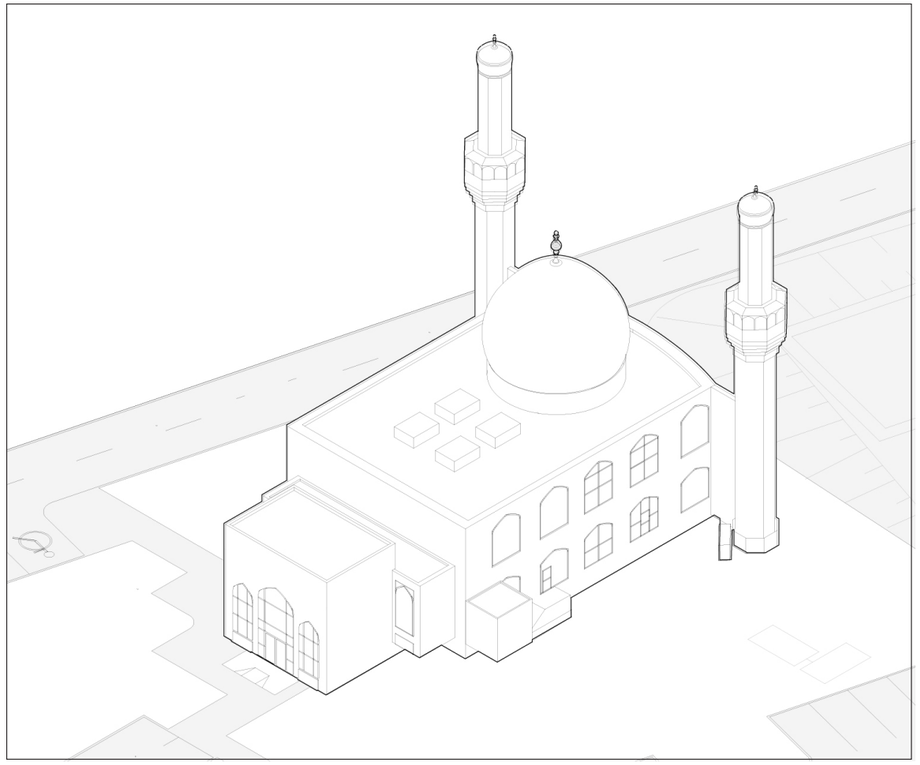
F Washroom
F Coat Room

Burial Services

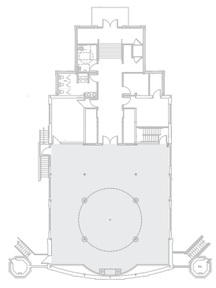
SERVICE SPACES

Office

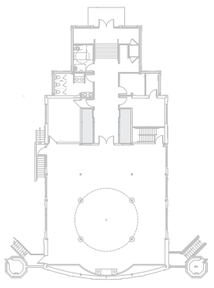




WORSHIP SPACES



EDUCATIONAL



SERVICE SPACES

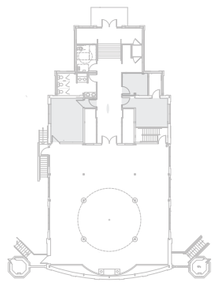


Figure 96. Diagrammatic use inside Al Hussain Foundation Mosque

Figure 97.
Cemetery behind
the Mosque

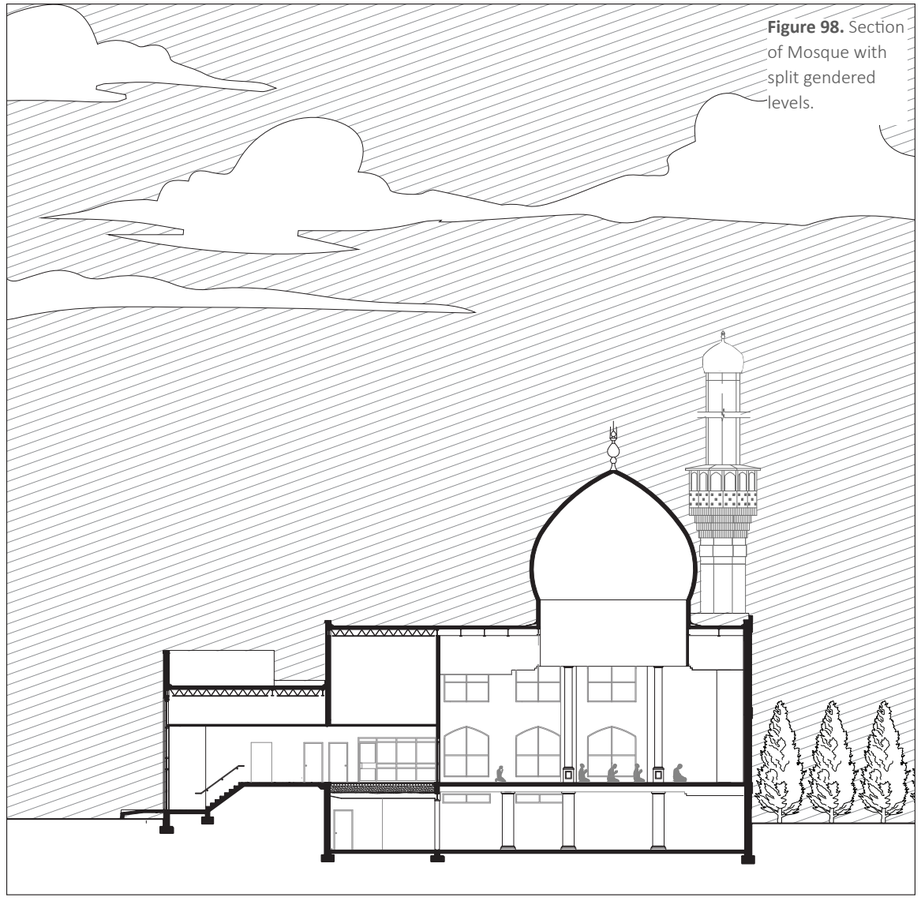


Figure 98. Section of Mosque with split gendered levels.

The cemetery plot is arranged in rows, where the deceased is to be laid on their right side, with their face oriented towards Mecca. The body can be cleansed and shrouded indoors, and necessary rituals can be carried out. Access to the mosque is through a one way road that requires the visitor to encircle the monument to leave. The experience is individual upon entering, collective when visiting, and individual once again while leaving. It's well cared for landscape creates a sense of journeying between the slow and gradated walk to the cemetery. The mosque itself has two levels segregated by gender, the main prayer space is occupied by men and the lower level by women.

Design Proposal| Site Selection

Islamic architecture has often been defined within rigid historical boundaries, with earlier scholars asserting that its creativity ended with the onset of colonialism and modernization in the 18th and 19th centuries. Contemporary Islamic architecture was largely disregarded, dismissed as either derivative modernism or hybrid.[73] In the Western context, re-framing Islamic architecture as a dynamic and evolving tradition is essential. To address the construction of these venerative spaces, their design approach must be rooted in both a religious context and the artistic culture it cultivates. By highlighting the contribution of craft within commemorative architectures, this proposal aims to demystify the current Shia practices and highlight their unique distinctions from universal mosque spaces while serving a broader community.

This project proposes the architecture of a cultural center to reinsert a design repertoire as both a foundational body of knowledge and a process of creation and expression. This center allows Muslims to have an opportunity to express their cultural independence in architecture. Located near the Black Creek parkland area near the bustling Jane and Finch intersection,a new

73 Nasser Rabbat, 'What Is Islamic Architecture Anyway?', Journal of Art Historiography, 2012, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1021054388/citation/D234D8F8FF6D4965PQ/1.

Figure 99.
Shia Mosques in the GTA

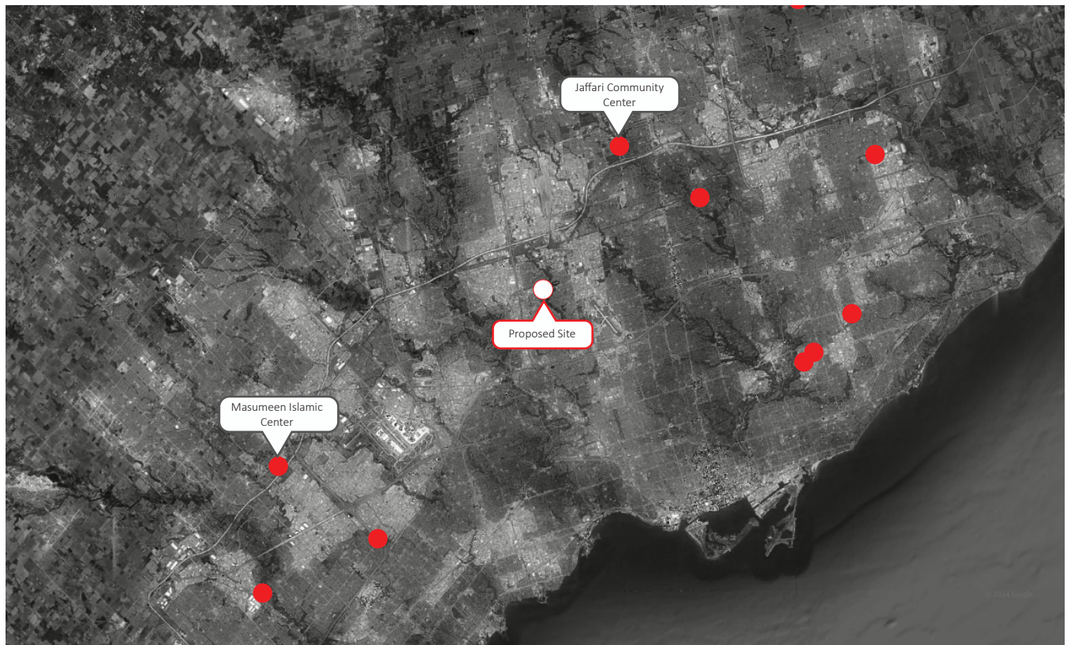
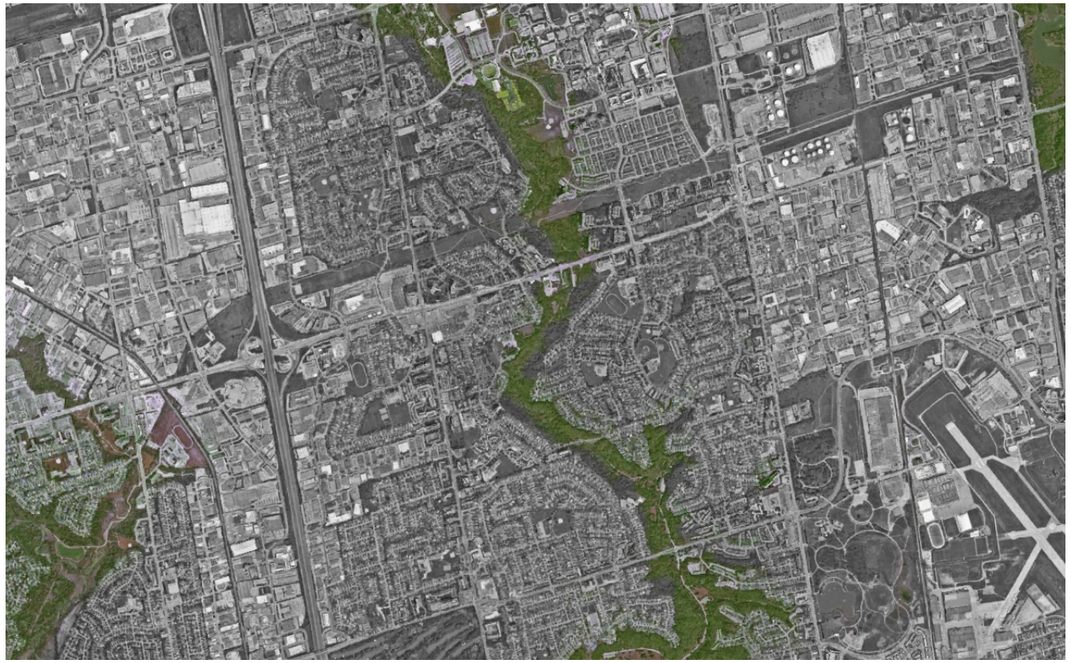


Figure 100.
Black Creek and Greenlands



interconnected Shia cultural center that acts as a connector amidst a significant gap. Currently, there are very limited Shia mosques in the area, which means local residents must travel significant distances for worship, community events, and religious education. Establishing a cultural center here would provide much-needed support for its growing population.

The diversity in the immediate neighborhood invites those who wish to learn about the practice towards the gallery. Muslims in the area make up the second largest religious group in the area, and with its connections to nearby community spaces, it can act as a space for interfaith dialogue.

The Jane and Finch intersection is easily accessible through its proximity to Highway 400. The main road contains a community center and a Toronto public library, which can contribute to the hub of activity. It is also a short drive from York University's campus, strengthening the demographics of students to access the workshops and library facilities offered into the community spaces. The site is currently a parkette lot separate from the adjacent school, and creates a condition where it must: be inviting to the residential neighborhood it borders, provides a connection to the neighboring school and maintains privacy for Muslims who wish to use the mosque only. The Black Creek parkland area was chosen because of its connection to water- a small distant symbolic proximity to the Euphrates The naturalized setting allows for the Mosque to hide amongst the heavily forested area. The site slowly slopes downwards into the creek, which allows for the visual of the sinking Mosque embedded into the landscape.



Figure 101. Site selection near Jane and Finch on Topcliff Ave.

From Public to Sacred: Design Approach for Shia Rituals and Space

To create a unified complex that houses a variety of rituals, the design must account for the different temporal and spiritual experiences these spaces embody. In the proposal, this duality is expressed through a gradient of accessibility and transparency, transitioning from public, educational spaces to more private, sacred areas. This approach reflects the varying degrees of openness and protection that different functions and rituals require within the complex.

The library and gallery, positioned as outward-facing components of the complex, act as educational bridges, inviting non-Muslims to engage with the history, art, and intellectual traditions of Shia Islam. The library and gallery serve as repositories of archives that not only house historical, theological, and cultural knowledge but also serve as instruments for creating relationships between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The library is housed in a separate building - in a different pattern of time. It operates in multiplicities, in different regions, different languages, but most importantly, it coordinates with future generations. It is the motivating connector to the evolution of culture. The meeting ground is at the Centre of the complex - where private becomes public. and also acts as a space for procession, exhibition, and education. It is a incubator for the rhizome, introduced in the gallery.

As one moves deeper into the complex, the gradient transitions toward increased opacity. The mosque itself, reserved for Shia Muslims, embodies the protected space where sacred rituals and practices can unfold without the external observation. The mosque as a shrine has the potential to transport the mourner to Karbala itself. It is accessed through a decent down into the earth, such that when a worshiper lays their head in prostration, they lower themselves into their graves. The prayer room is based on the zari itself, rectangular in its shape, where worshipers point their faces towards Mecca. The mosque is a cyclical loop - from the cleansing of one's self, to the dome encapsulating the zari that grows from the prayer space, and returns to it. It acts as a repository of tradition that is constructed in a enclosed context sacred to those who use the space for prayer.

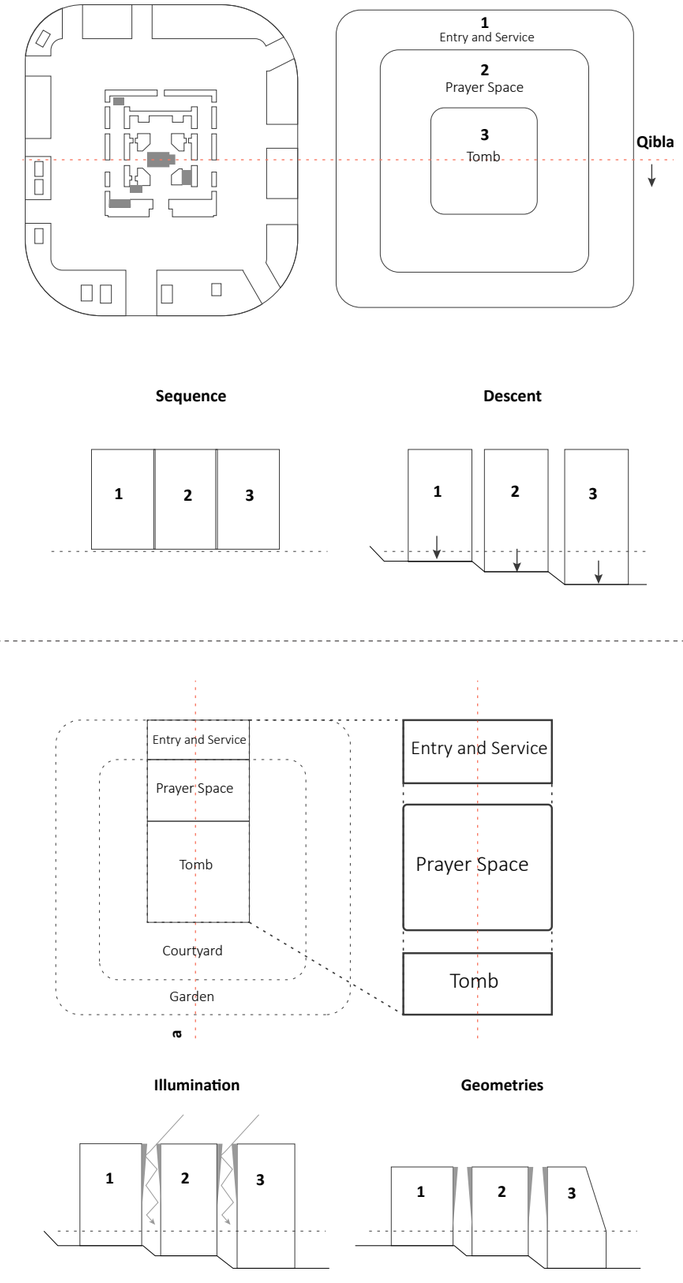
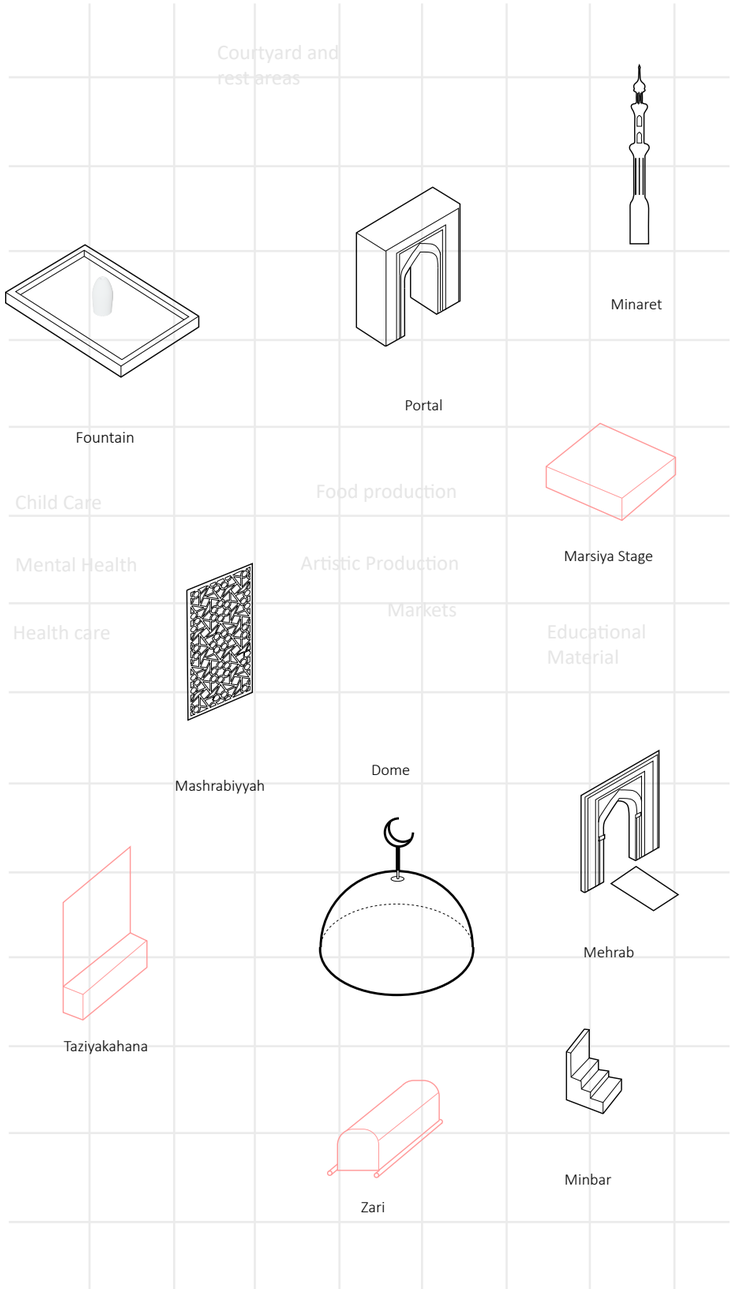


Figure 102. Design inspiration from the Shrine sequence in Karbala

Figure 103. Islamic Elements with essential Shia centric design additions



The portal acts as the distinguisher of sacred/profane

a Minaret is a symbol for Call to prayer

Fountain- symbolizes water and cleanliness

Mashrabiyya allows for selective view

Stage for poetry recitation

Dome acts as an identity marker for Muslims

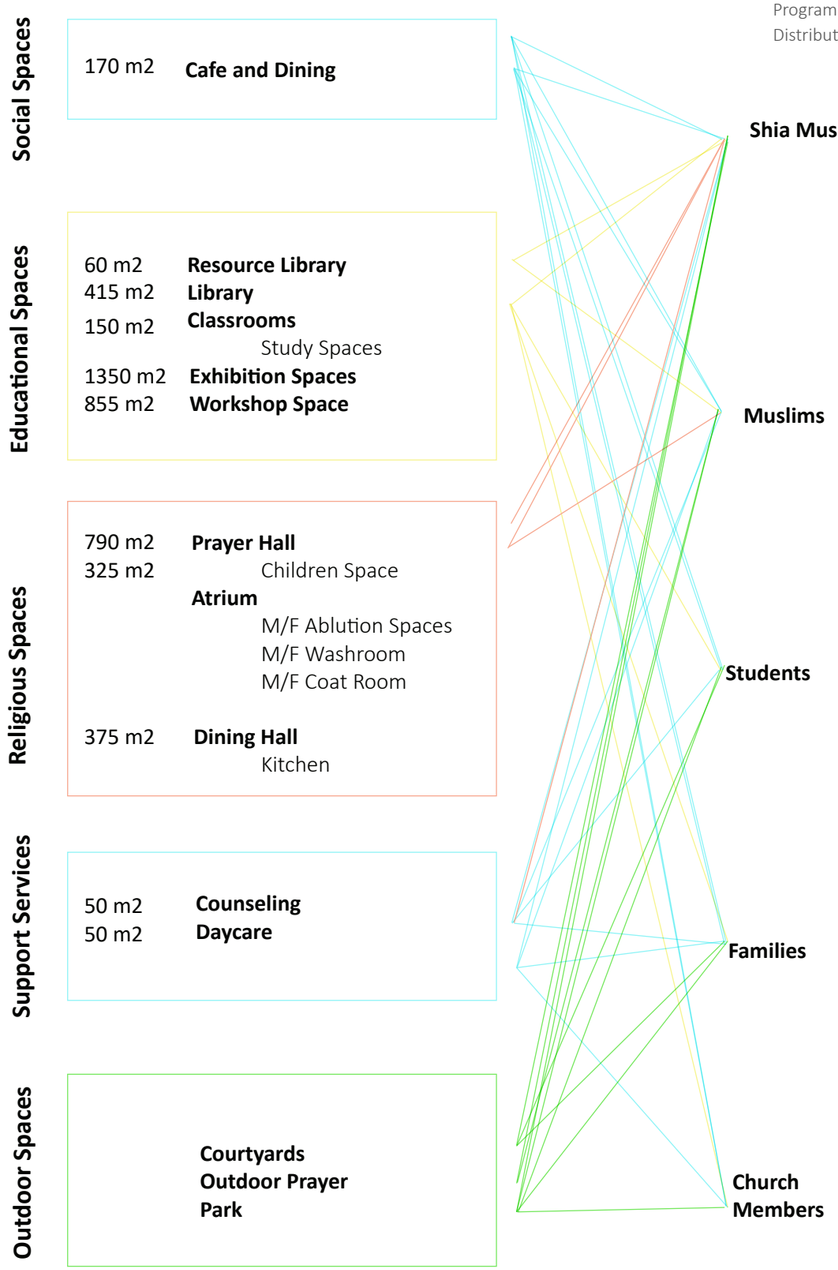
The Mehrab points and exalts the direction for prayer

A taziakhana is a shrine commemorating Shia religious figures' martyrdom.

A minbar is a pulpit in a mosque for preaching

Zari marks the symbolic tomb of the Martyr Imam Hussain

Figure 104. Programmatic Distribution



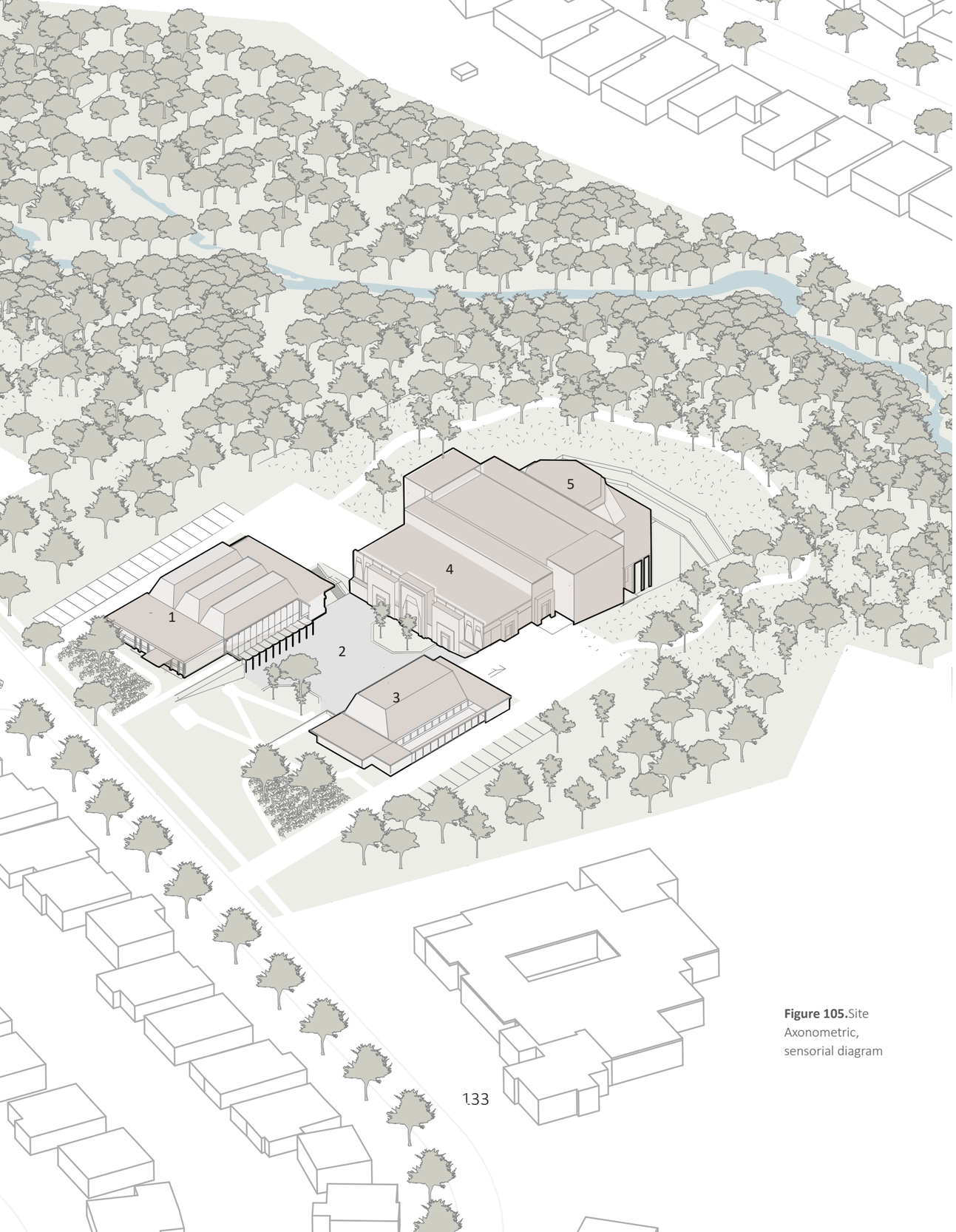


Figure 105. Site Axonometric, sensorial diagram



Gallery



Workshop



Food Production and Serving



Poetry



Outdoor Planting (SEASONAL)

Onions, potatoes, beets, lettuce, kale, carrots, radishes, tomatoes, bell peppers etc.



Fruit Bearing

Apple trees, Pear trees, Plum trees, Peach trees,



Berried Plantings

Serviceberry, elderberry, black currant



Wind Resistant Trees

White spruce, Norway spruce, eastern white pine, hackberry, bur oak tree



Outdoor Stair

Bird's nest fern, rubber plant,

Figure 106.
Senses Diagrams



Figure 107.
Exterior View



Figure 108.
Internal render of Library

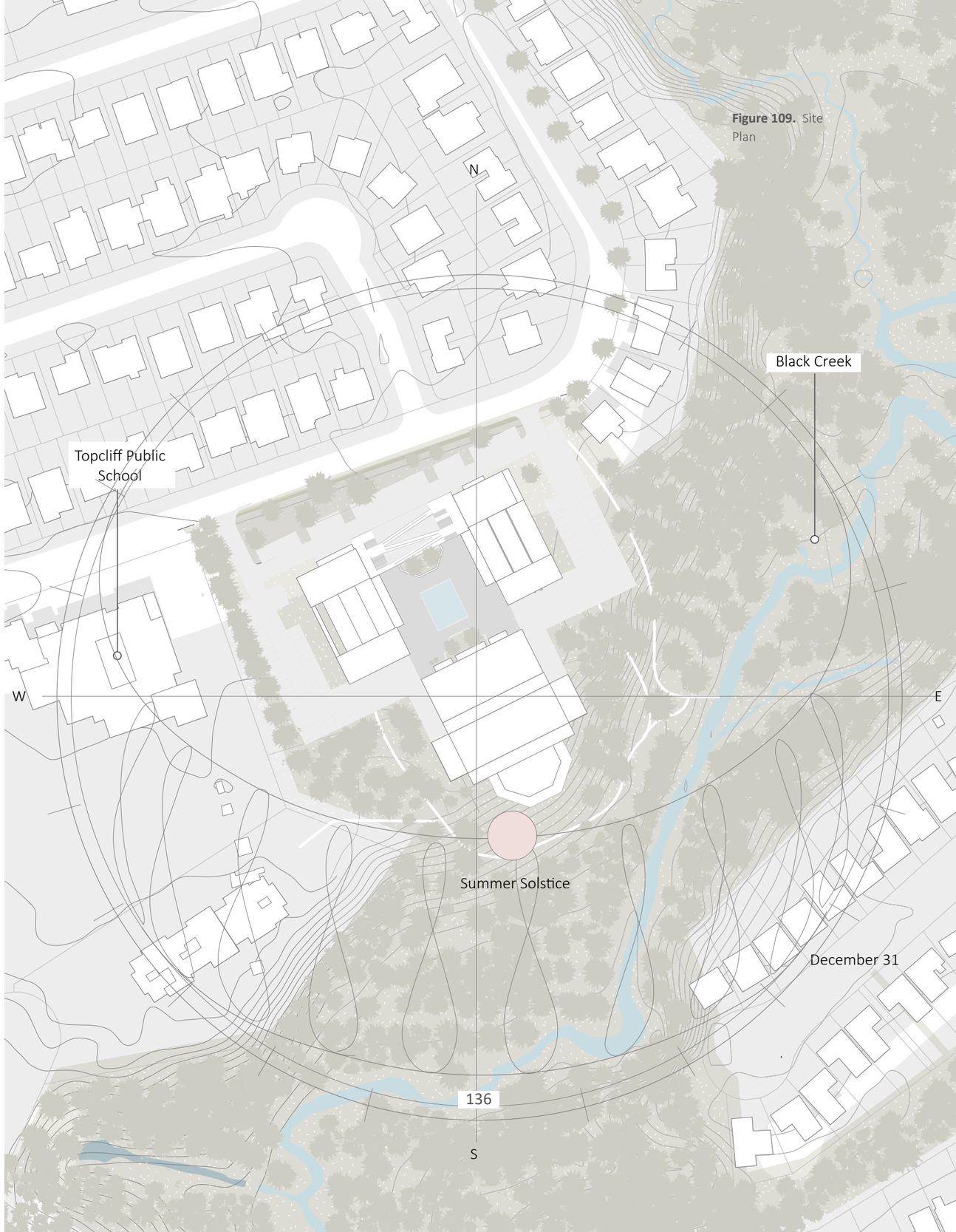


Figure 109. Site Plan



Figure 110.
Exterior View



Figure 111.
Internal render of Library

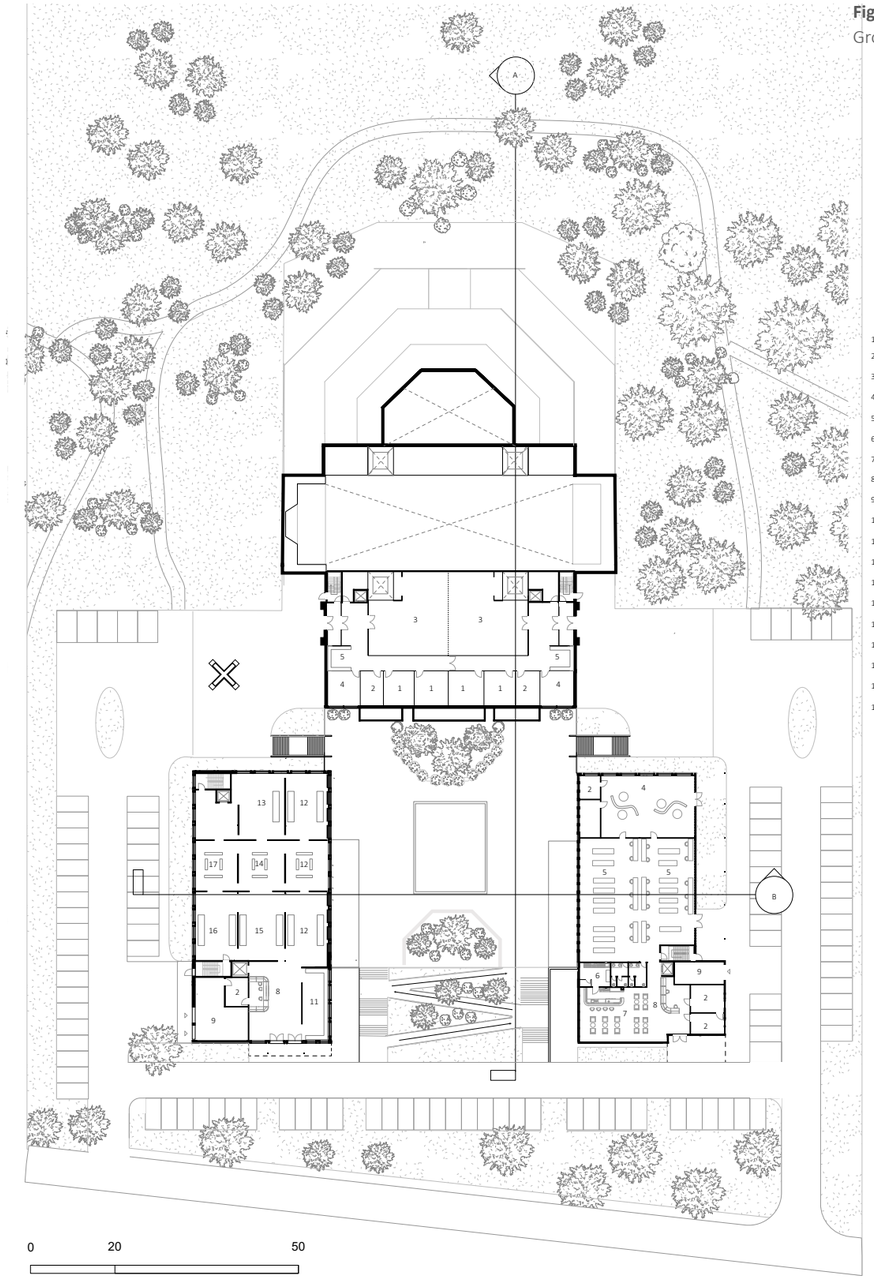


Figure 112.
Ground Floor plan



Figure 113.
Imambada/Prayer space

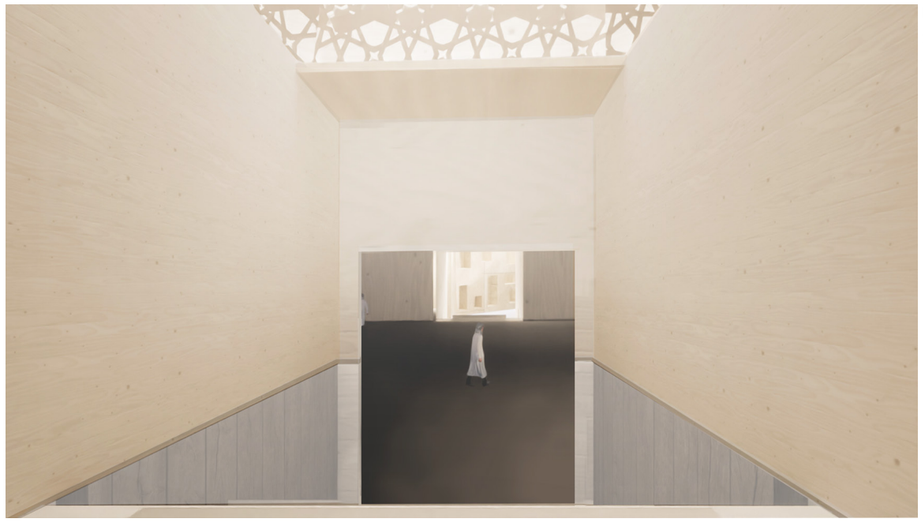
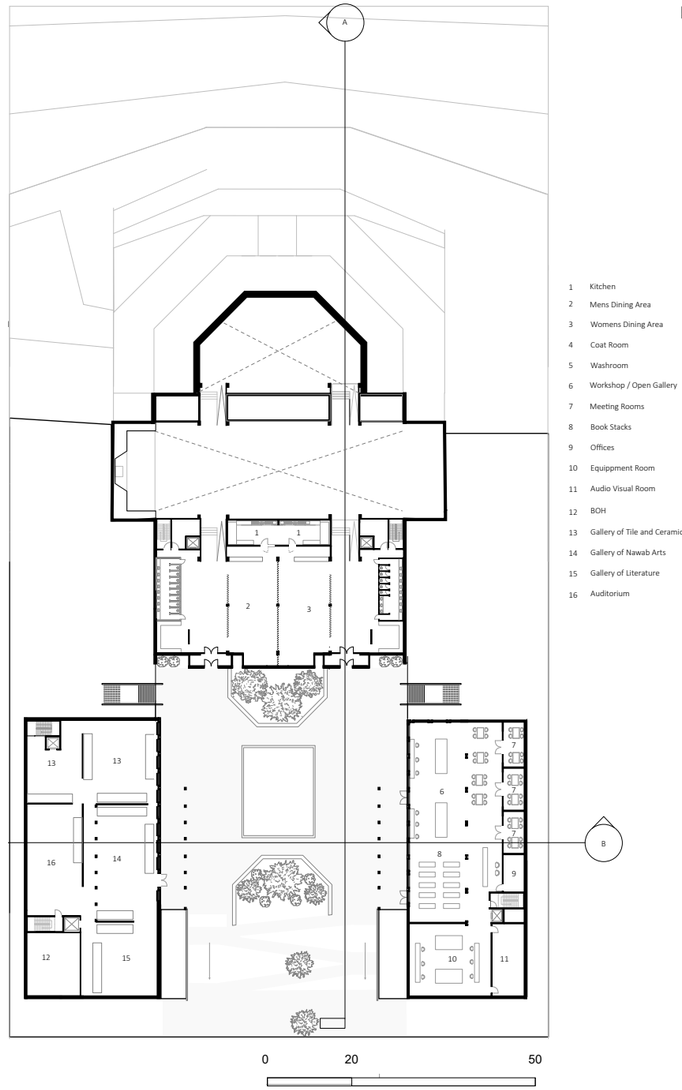


Figure 114.
Stairwell down to the Prayer Space



1 Kitchen
2 Mens Dining Area
3 Womens Dining Area
4 Coat Room
5 Washroom
6 Workshop / Open Gallery
7 Meeting Rooms
8 Book Stacks
9 Offices
10 Equippment Room
11 Audio Visual Room
12 BOH
13 Gallery of Tile and Ceramics
14 Gallery of Nawab Arts
15 Gallery of Literature
16 Auditorium

Figure 115.
Basement level plan



Figure 116.
Taziyakahana



Figure 117.
Exterior View

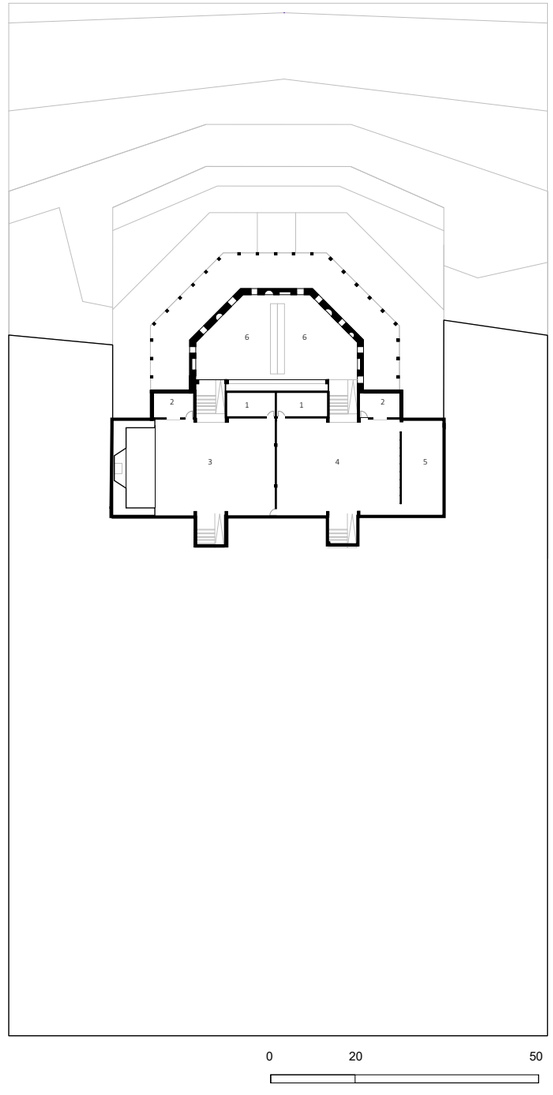


Figure 118. Prayer Space Level



Figure 119. Overall View of Cultural Center complex

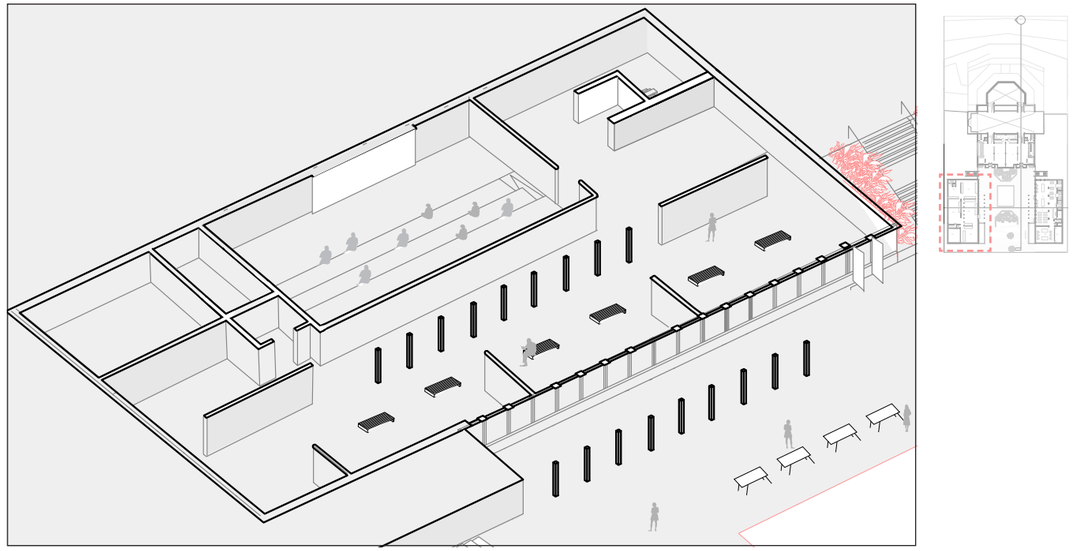


Figure 120. Temporary Exhibition Basement Level

The exhibition space at the lower level of the Shia Islamic cultural gallery focuses on the commemoration of Muharram in the context of North America. It explores the annual pilgrimage to Karbala, and the connection to Shia Muslims in North America today. The exhibition features a small theater room, where visitors can watch films or presentations about the history and rituals of Muharram, as well as the journey to Karbala. Surrounding this room are exhibition spaces that display artifacts, photographs, and personal stories that show the impact of Muharram on Shia communities in North America. Historical texts, traditional clothing, and items related to the pilgrimage, such as flags and banners used in processions, are also included. The exhibition showcases the creation of art tied to Muharram, such as calligraphy, photography, and murals, reflecting the cultural and spiritual significance of the event. The exhibition ends with a view into the public courtyard, linking it to the workshop space across the building, where these artistic traditions are actively being produced.

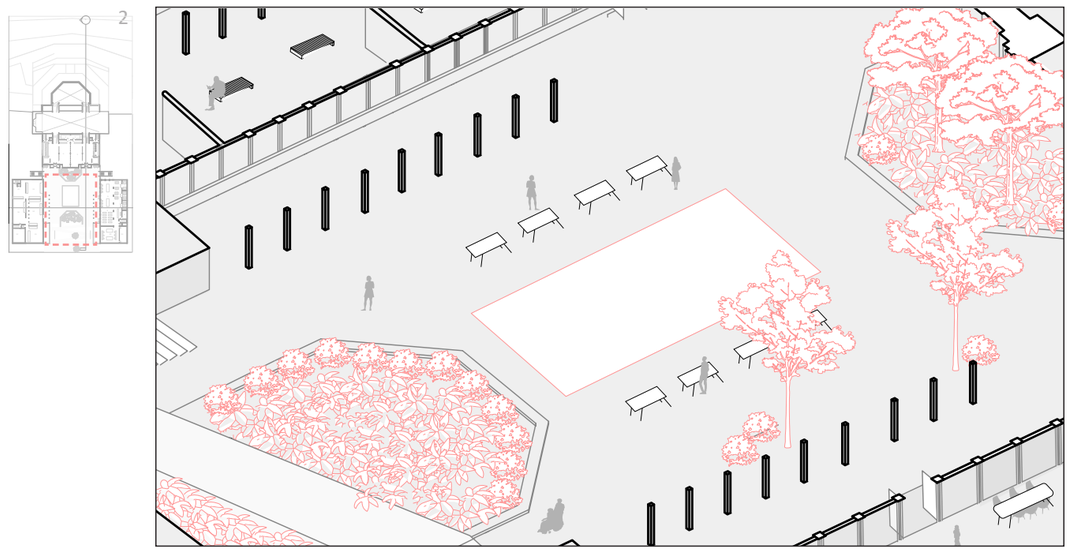
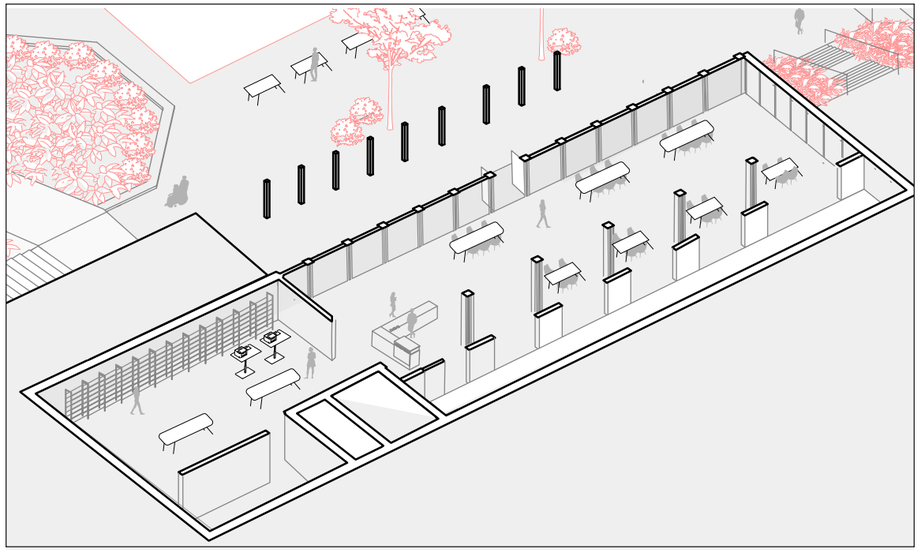


Figure 121. Sunken Courtyard and Fountain

The courtyard acts as an outdoor exhibition space for showcase that extends between the workshop and the gallery. Between the mosque, the courtyard acts as a marketplace. This outdoor exhibition space also reflects the Islamic tradition of *Bazaars* or marketplaces, where art, culture, and ideas were historically exchanged in a public, communal setting. The courtyard, as part of the larger public arena, makes the process of artistic creation and cultural production accessible, inviting individuals from different walks of life to experience the richness of Shia Islamic art. By connecting the public with the creative process—whether through viewing works made in the adjacent workshop or engaging with exhibitions—it allows visitors to see how traditional and modern practices intersect, in an entirely non-hierarchical, decentralized structure where multiple connections and paths interweave.

3



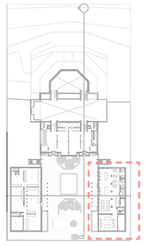
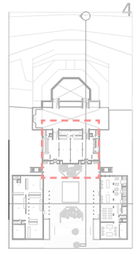


Figure 122. Workshop Basement Level

The workshop space in the Shia Islamic cultural center is designed to foster both individual creativity and community collaboration. Located below the library, it allows easy access between the library's intellectual resources and the hands-on artistic process in the workshop. The space includes individual rooms for students or artists, a photo studio, and specialized areas for ceramics and tile work, where traditional arts like mirror-work (Aineh kari) and Kashani and Karbalai tile work are taught. The large, open communal workspace encourages collaboration and the exchange of diverse ideas. The public courtyard serves as an outdoor exhibition space, connecting the three buildings and offering a place for public interaction with the artwork created inside, linking artistic production, education, and community engagement.

4



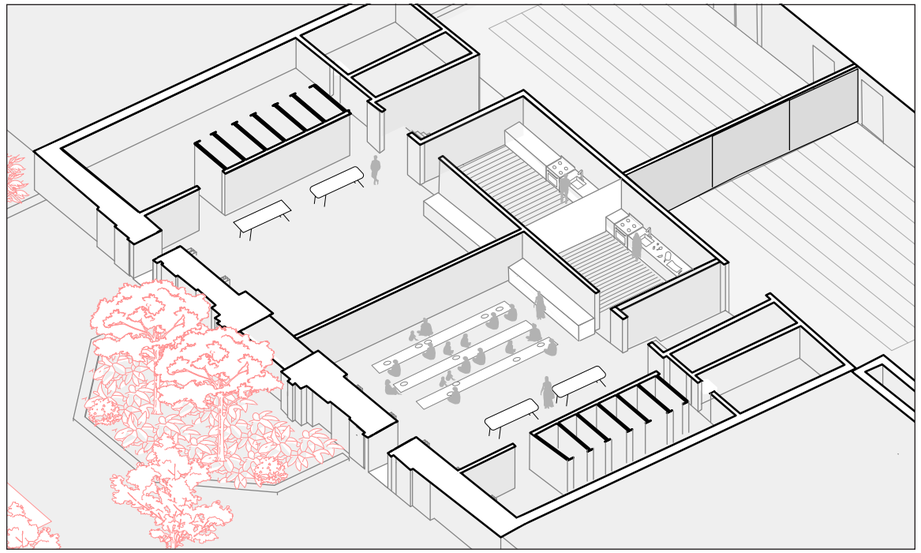
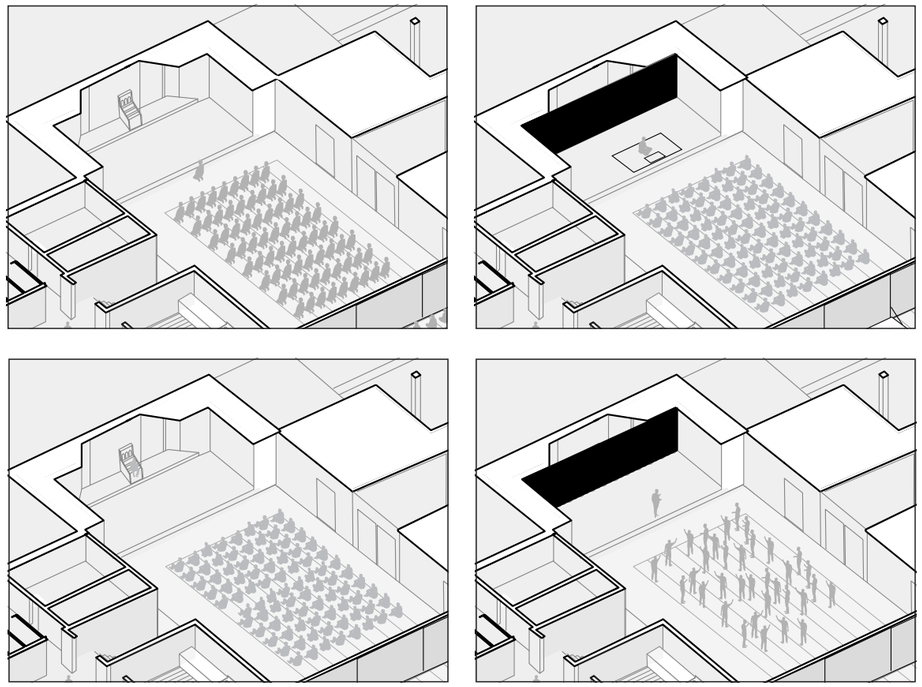


Figure 123. Mosque Atrium and Kitchen

The kitchen and the distribution of food is the show of hospitality that is so deeply ingrained in Shia culture. It is located centrally between the entry and the prayer space and shared between the men and women side for movement and optimal distribution of food. The atrium is an open space that can transition into a separated room for Muslims to gather, eat and socialize after the events have concluded. The open use nature of the space allows for either seated eating, or for tables to allow food to be taken for easier dispersal on busier nights. The mens and womens side is identically reflected to encourage women to utilize a space that is designed intentionally and acts as a contemporary response to previous mosque designs where women were often relegated to the periphery, both in terms of physical space and participation.

5



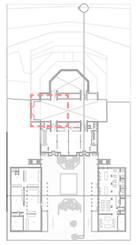
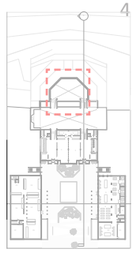


Figure 124. Series of uses for the *Jaami,* gathering space in addition to prayer.

The central worship space provides the space and access to perform wide all wider mourning rituals in addition to its main function as a prayer space. In Muharram, the sequence of nightly mourning begins with Quran recitation and evening prayers. Then a prayer is read before the performance of Salams and Marsiya on the stage to set the scene. After, a lecture or sermon is delivered in memory of the martyr, which concludes in Matam to be either broadcast or viewed in both the mens and the womens side.

Both genders are segregated by a walled *mashrabiyya*- a screen where partial view is accessed by women to view into the mens side, but prevents men from seeing the women behind them. The walled segregation allows for a sound barrier in the event where women would like to hold a congregation of their own. In this case, the stage is pulled down from the wall, and can allow women to practice freely.

4



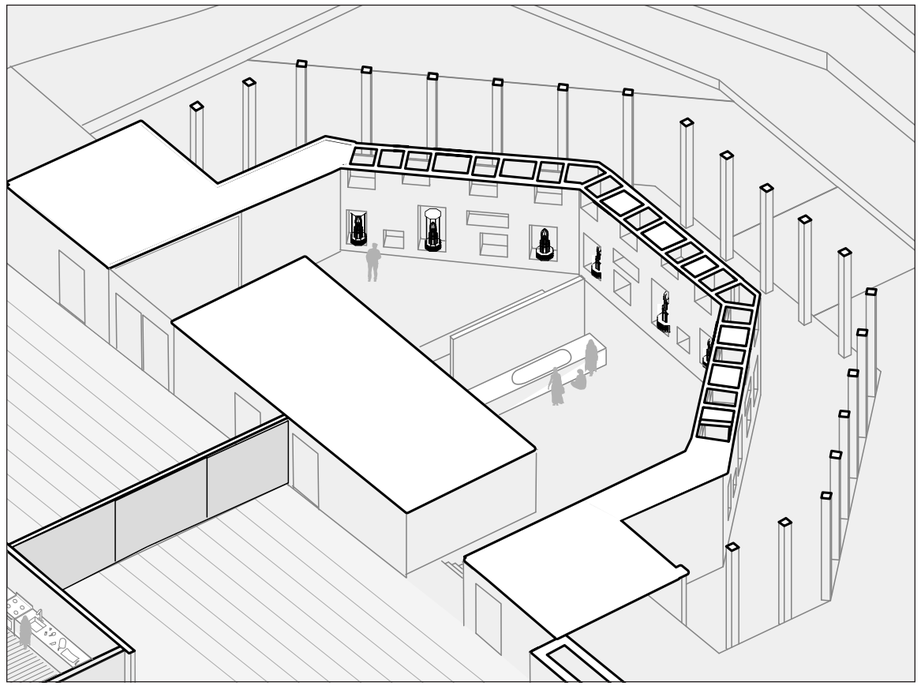


Figure 125. Taziyakhana

The mosque concludes in the taziyakhana. The Zari acts as a divider between the two genders. The space is smaller in its surroundings, creating a sense of intimacy and connection for the few entering the space.

The thick walls act as encasements for the taziyas created in the workshops. The weight of the material creates a opaque barrier to the outside, punctured by deep windows. Lanterns and lights kept within the wall will light up the space within these pockets, allowing the mosque to act a museum of its own arts. Above it is a skylight, brightened in the day, and softly lit in the evening. Alams and other tapestries are kept in the Taziakhana for Muslims to keep material culture in a space for reverence, isolated from public access.

Figure 126.
Library Exterior





Figure 127.
Interior Gallery View



Figure 128.
Exterior Gallery View

Wall Section

1. Insulated Tempered Glass 120 mm
2. Laminated Tempered Fin Glass Mullion
3. Silicone Sealant
4. Fin Connection Bolt
5. Fin Spider Bolt
6. Perforated Wood Screen

Roof Section

1. Asphalt Shingles
2. Weatherproofing
3. OSB Sheathing
4. 38 mm Air Gap
5. 62.5 mm Rigid Insulation
6. 150 mm Insulated Rafters
7. Vapour Control Layer
8. 12.5 mm Gypsum Wall Board Finish

Figure 129.
Double skin Gallery wall section

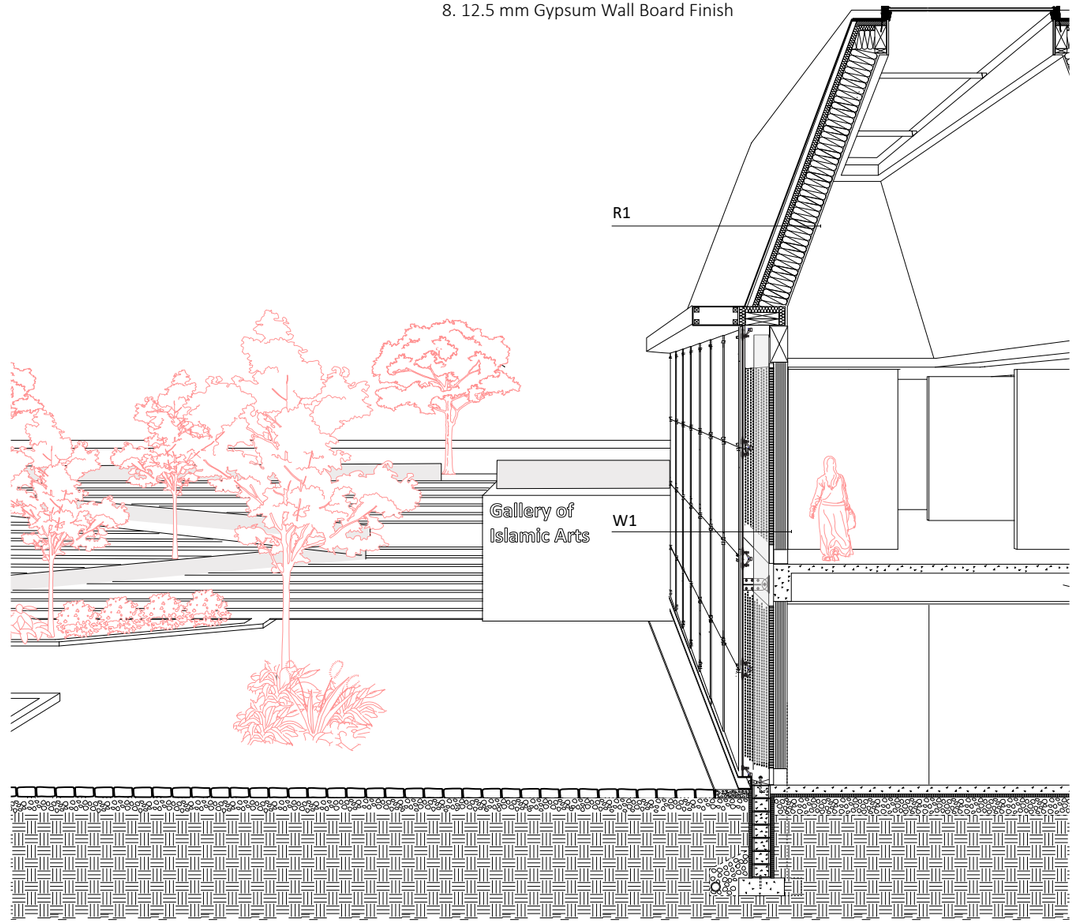




Figure 130. Exterior Back View

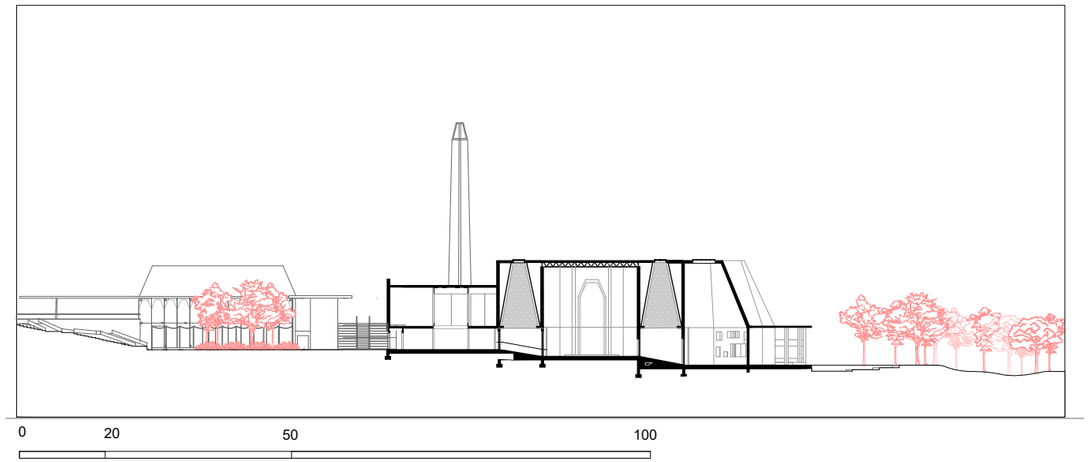


Figure 131. Section A through Mosque

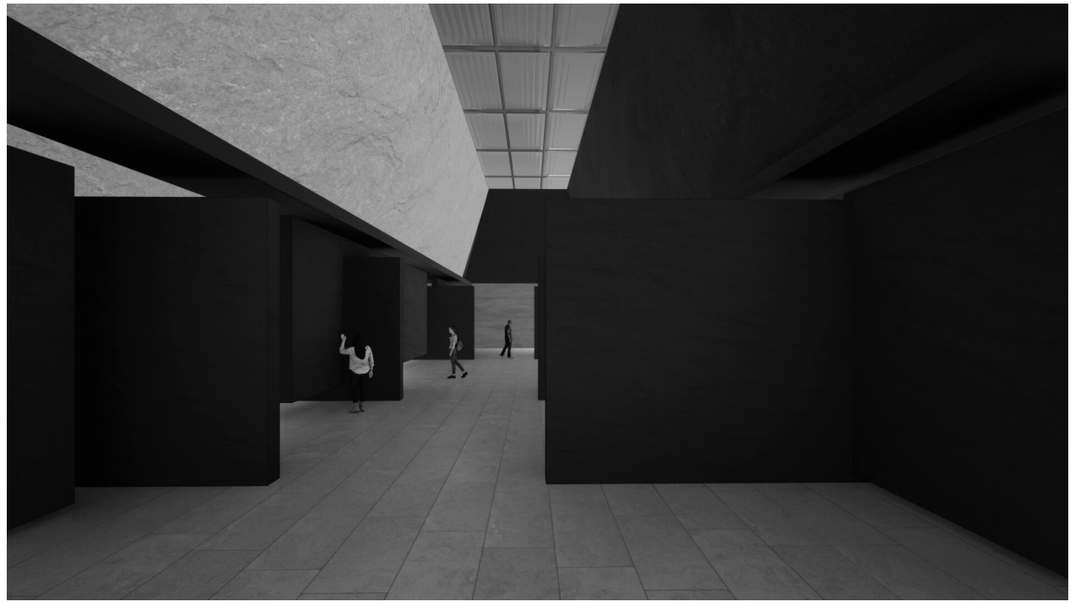


Figure 132. Gallery Interior

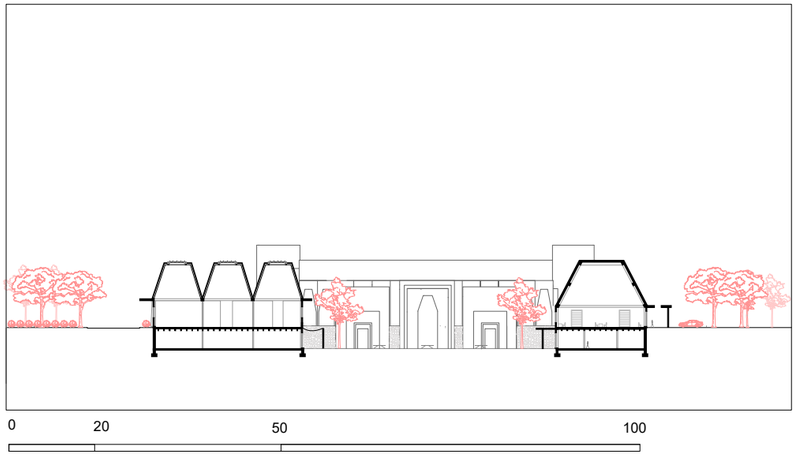


Figure 133. Section B through Library and Gallery

Figure 134.
Structural
Axonometric
of Gallery and
Library space

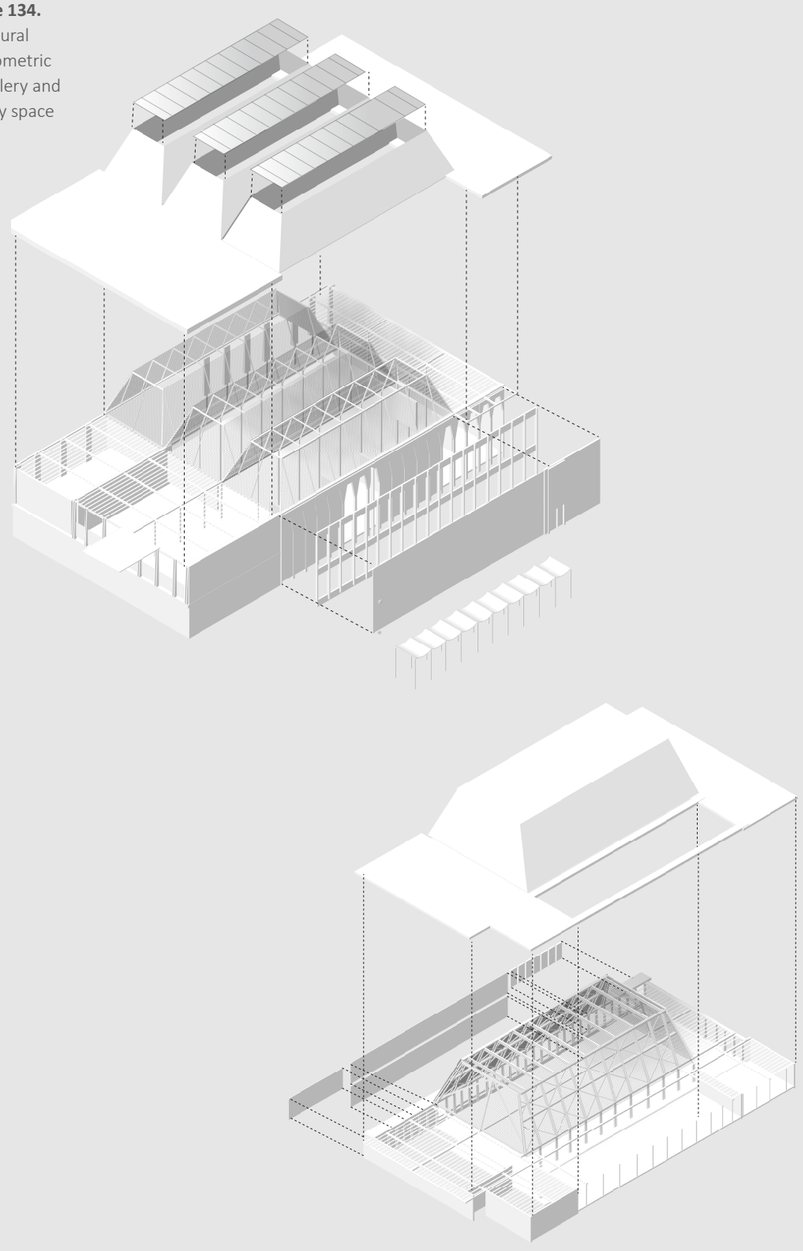
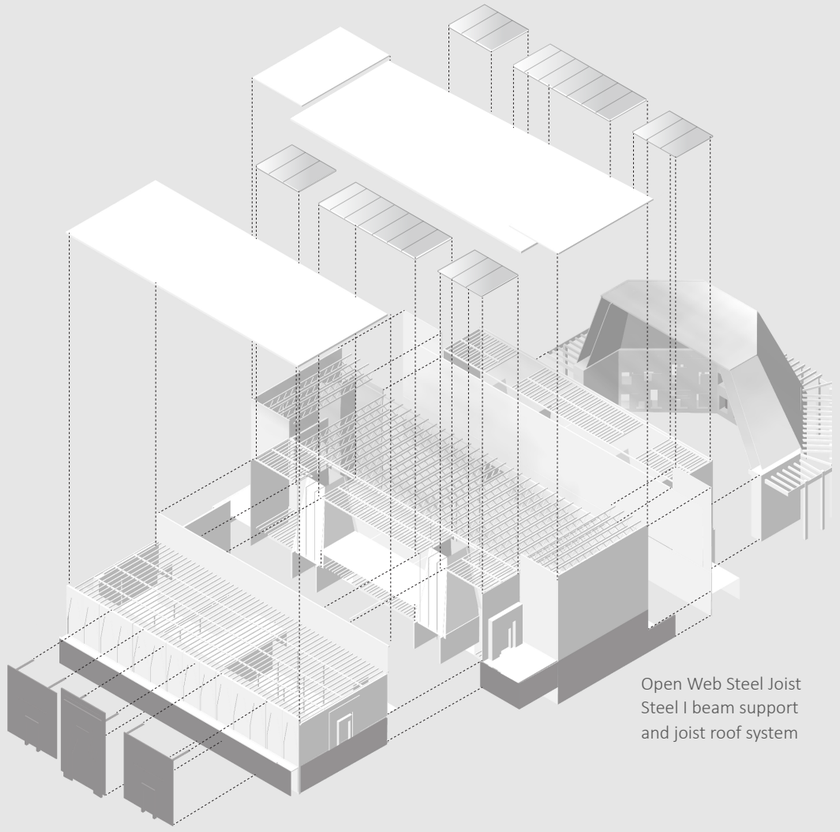


Figure 135.
Structural
Axonometric of
Mosque



Open Web Steel Joist
Steel I beam support
and joist roof system

Conclusion|

This thesis contextualizes the commemoration of Shia mourning practices within a range of historical, cultural, and architectural narratives, in response to the events of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his companions in 680 AD that continues to inspire annual rituals of mourning. The historical evolution of Shia mourning spaces, from the pilgrimage to shrine complexes at Ashura and Arbaeen, to the influence of mourning spaces, to diasporic reconstructions of mourning spaces around the world. This research situates Shia mourning spaces within broader architectural discourses, challenging reductive categorizations of Islamic architecture as static or uniform. Theoretical frameworks such as Édouard Glissant's concept of "roots" and "routes" and Michel Foucault's notion of the cultural archive provide critical tools for understanding how these spaces evolve.

The architectural framework of the proposed center contains a gradient of accessibility and transparency, transitioning from public, educational spaces to private, sacred domains. The design integrates these elements within a contemporary setting, creating opportunities for interfaith engagement, cultural exchange, and the preservation of Shia identity. It positions the architecture of Shia rituals as an adaptive and meaningful cultural practice that bridges the historical roots of mourning traditions with contemporary diasporic needs. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader understanding of Shia mourning traditions as an essential component of Islamic architectural heritage.



Figure 136. Exterior View behind Taziyakhana

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Glossary

Abaya
A loose, flowing cloak worn by some Muslim women, often as a form of modest dress.

Arbaeen
A significant Shia observance marking the end of the 40-day mourning period after Ashura.

Ashura
The tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussain at Karbala.

Dargah
A shrine built over the grave of a revered saint, often a site of pilgrimage.

Imam
An Islamic leader, particularly in Shia Islam, referring to the spiritual successors of Prophet Muhammad.

Oudh
Burned as incense or used to produce aromatic oil, valued for its rich, smoky scent.

Sabeel
A public water station set up for mourners and pilgrims during Muharram as an act of charity.

Sajdigah
A small clay tablet used by Shia Muslims during prayer to place their forehead on while prostrating.

Shabi
A symbolic reenactment or representation of sacred events, particularly scenes from the Battle of Karbala.

Shia
One of the two main branches of Islam, which emphasizes the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad's family, particularly Imam Ali and his descendants.

Tabbaruk
Blessed offerings, such as food or items, distributed during religious gatherings for spiritual benefit.

Taziya
A passion play or symbolic representation commemorating the tragedy of Imam Hussain's martyrdom at Karbala.

Zari
A decorative, often gilded, metal structure placed over the grave of an Imam or saint as a symbol of veneration.

Ziyarat
A pilgrimage to sacred sites associated with the Prophet Muhammad, his family, and other revered figures in Islam.

Imambada
A hall or structure dedicated to mourning and remembrance rituals, often decorated with models of shrines.

Majalis
Religious gatherings held to recite oral liturgies recounting the tragedy of Karbala.

Marsiya
A form of elegiac poetry, particularly in Urdu, that mourns the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his followers.

Maatam
Acts of mourning that may include chest-beating, lamentation, and self-flagellation during Muharram.

Mashi
A form of pilgrimage on foot, often performed during Arbaeen to reach Imam Hussain's shrine in Karbala.

Maqna
Maqna refers to a traditional head covering worn by some Muslim women.

Nakhl

Nakhl is a symbolic wooden structure carried in processions, representing Imam Hussain's coffin.