

Original Research Article

An Ontological Interpretation of Cypress and Water in the Public-Ritual Architecture of Yazd

(Case Study: Cham Fire Temple, Mehrpadin Mosque, Vaqt-o-sā'at Square)*

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Abstract | Yazd, a city with rich historical and cultural heritage, developed within a harsh desert climate and faces shortages of natural resources, particularly water and vegetation. This environment has elevated certain natural elements such as water and cypress beyond their biological roles, granting them a significant meaning in shaping public-ritual spaces. This study aims to investigate the ontological significance of water and cypress in forming Yazd's public-ritual spaces through an examination of three key sites: Cham Fire Temple, Mehrpadin Grand Mosque, and Vaqt-o-sā'at Square. This study employed a qualitative approach based on ontological analysis and used document analysis and field observation methods. Findings show that water and cypress serve more than just biological or aesthetic purposes; as essential elements, they hold meaningful roles in the spatial structure, collective memory, and lived experience of Yazd's residents. Water, symbolizing purity and life-giving qualities, alongside cypress, representing immortality and connection to the spiritual realm, contribute to the creation of places with existential depth. These elements act as conduits for sacred meaning, elevating spaces from mere functionality to existential and cultural significance. The research also indicates that fully understanding these ontological connections is essential to grasping the complete meaning of Yazd's public-ritual spaces.

Keywords | *Yazd, Public-Ritual Spaces, Ontology, Water, Cypress.*

Introduction | The city of Yazd, one of the oldest urban fabrics in Iran, has developed within the hot, arid climate of the desert. The scarcity of natural resources, especially water and vegetation, has led the people of Yazd throughout history to develop creative ways of living, building, and imbuing meaning into urban spaces. Among these, two rare but significant natural elements—water and the cypress tree—have always played roles beyond mere

biological or aesthetic functions. These elements have been repeatedly and meaningfully present in Yazd's public-ritual spaces, thus occupying a unique place in shaping the spatial experience of its inhabitants. However, a fundamental question remains:

How have the natural elements of water and cypress, within Yazd's cultural and climatic context, transcended their biological functions to enable a lived experience of the sacred and the emergence of place?

This question guides us to reflect on the ontological role of water and cypress in the existential structure

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of Yazd's urban and ritual spaces. Therefore, this study seeks, through an ontological approach, to examine the quality of these elements' presence in three key public-ritual spaces of Yazd—Cham Fire Temple, Mehrpadin Grand Mosque, and Vaqt-o-sā'at Square—and analyze their relationship with the formation of place, meaning, and urban lived experience.

Theoretical Foundations

When studying place in architecture from an ontological perspective, it is not regarded as mere space hosting events but as “being” itself. Architecture is understood not as a reflection of form or function but as a process of “bringing-to-being,” where elements and spaces move from indeterminacy to existence in relation to humans, nature, and the whole of being. This perspective, rooted in Western philosophy especially Plato, Aristotle, Heidegger, and Norberg-Schulz, assigns special significance to place.

Plato, in his dialogue *Timaeus*, introduces the concept of *chôra*—a receptacle where existence moves from potentiality to actuality. This receptacle is not a physical place in the modern sense but an ontological site enabling the emergence of beings. Aristotle's concept of *topos* describes place as the natural position of each element, emphasizing place as an active field of intrinsic relationships among objects and their positions in existence (Biabani et al., 2021).

In Heidegger's thought, architecture and place-making are defined as a kind of “bringing into being.” In his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking,” place is not merely “where” in space but an existential phenomenon arising from the gathering of fundamental elements. According to him, elements—especially natural ones—that can unify the “fourfold” of the sky, earth, mortal human, and the sacred enable the emergence of place (Heidegger, 1971).

Christian Norberg-Schulz, building on Heidegger's philosophy, argues that place possesses existential quality. He speaks of *Genius Loci*¹, not as a subjective or poetic idea, but as something emerging from the ontological structure of place. He believes a place comes into being when basic elements—such as water, tree, mountain, or light—are arranged spatially and temporally to allow for the ontological dwelling of humans (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, 28). In this view, the human role is not only to perceive place but to participate in its being.

Thus, environmental elements have no inherent meaning but become real only when related to the whole of existence. This meaning, in traditional Iranian architecture—particularly within the desert context of Yazd—can be examined in the fundamental role of natural elements like water and cypress in public-ritual places.

• Water: the beginning and continuity of life

In Iranian ontology, water is not merely an element for survival but a foundational force in the emergence of the world and cosmic order. Mythological narratives, sacred texts, and architectural and urban structures all attest to water's role in the origin of creation and the continuation of existence (Bahar, 1996; Tabarsi, 1971; Eliade, 1959). In this context, water is simultaneously the source of life, a purifier, and a mediator between humans and the sacred; Iranian and Islamic religious texts even describe it as the first creation and source of being (Mansouri, 2011; Yarahmadi et al., 2022).

The historical and cultural awareness of water's life-giving role in Iran has elevated it beyond a climatic or functional role, positioning it as a symbol and existential mediator in architectural and urban spaces. Its presence in shrines, Persian gardens, pools, cisterns, and qanat channels responds not only to physical needs but also reflects a profound necessity for the emergence of place in relation to life-giving and sacred forces (Mansouri, 2020a; Alehashemi, 2009; Soltanzadeh & Soltanzadeh, 2017).

Ontologically, what grants water this position is not just its physical presence but its role in enabling the emergence of place. In Iranian architecture, water is often placed at the center of ritual and communal spaces, where it does not merely flow but generates place. As Norberg-Schulz asserts regarding basic elements like water, in Iranian architecture it creates a focal point for dwelling, social interaction, and sacred experience, laying the foundation for spatial existence (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, 28).

Yazd, located in the desert, regards water not only as a vital resource but as the primary organizer of the city's spatial structure. The city's form has developed along qanat networks and water flows, with major urban spaces such as squares, Hosseiniyehs, and ritual centers located adjacent to or in direct relation with water (Mansouri, 2020b; Cheraghi, 2009) (Fig. 1). This presence extends beyond the physical form into the language, rituals, literature, and beliefs of the people. Terms and ceremonies such as “Abro” (water passage), “Abpashi”



Fig. 1. Aerial photograph of the qanats of Yazd.
Source: <https://akharinkhabar.ir/photo/523695/>

(sprinkling water), “Tirgan” (rain festival), and “Namaz-e Baran” (rain prayer) illustrate the existential role of water in the Iranian lifeworld (Razi, 2006; Shahla, 2020; Dekhoda, 1998).

Water, from this perspective, should be viewed not only as a source of life but also as an intermediary that makes the emergence of place possible. This viewpoint raises the status of water beyond just a climatic or symbolic element and turns it into one of the essential components of ritual-public places. Accordingly, the analysis of spatial examples in the city of Yazd in the following sections will examine this assumption within the context of more defined places.

• Cypress; symbol of the upper world

In the Iranian worldview, the tree is not merely a biological entity but a vital existential element in the relationship between humans and the universe. Among trees, the cypress holds a special status and, within the fundamental Iranian spatial triad of water, tree, and chahartaqi, serves as a mediator between earth and sky (Mansouri, 2020a). Ontologically, the cypress is not just an object in space but a fundamental element that, as Heidegger states, enables the emergence of place through its relationship with humans, the sky, the earth, and the sacred (Heidegger, 1971).

In Iranian myths and rituals, the cypress represents heavenly power, immortality, purity, and stability. Its evergreen nature, absence of decay, and upright form symbolize continuous life and presence in the intermediate realm; this presence connects in Iranian culture to religion, life, death, idealism, and a bond with the sacred (Jahanpour, 2016; Mansouri, 2011). In this setting, the cypress tree is not just a subject of respect or

ritual use but an ontological element that, by being located in ritual centers, allows the sanctification and place-making of space.

From physical and visual perspectives, the cypress, in association with sacred sites, has a role beyond decoration or symbolism. Its placement in fire temples, shrines, and worship places has made it the existential core of space—a place where people recognize the sacred in relation to the world and themselves (Zare Zadeh & Purmand, 2009). This is particularly visible in Yazd, where ancient cypresses are not only alive but their presence shapes both the physical structure and social activity of the space (Fig. 2).

The symbolic role of the cypress also illustrates its transformation from a natural element to a sacred object. In Yazd, this process is evident as the concept of the cypress evolves into the mourning palm or designs like the boteh-jeghah pattern in carpets and rugs, showing how a natural element, through cultural and ritual development, solidifies the existence of place via symbols and ceremonies (Mohtasham & Samanian, 2017; Mansouri, 2014). In ritual squares such as Amir Chakhmaq, the palm no longer functions merely as a structure but embodies the cypress’s symbolism—steadfastness and martyrdom—within a social context (Fig. 3).

Within this framework, the cypress tree holds not only a physical or aesthetic presence but, as a vital element, elevates the ritual space beyond the physical plane and transforms it into a place. As Norberg-Schulz notes, elements such as trees can stabilize the spirit of a place, provided they stand in a meaningful relationship with humans and the world (Norberg-Schulz, 1980, 28). In Yazd, this relationship is not only established but also



Fig. 2. Tying vows and expressing wishes and desires at the cypress shrine. Source: Zare Zadeh & Purmand, 2009.



Fig. 3. The symbolic Nakhil structure in the communal square of Amir Chakhmaq, Yazd. Source: <https://iranstravel.com>

anchored in the fabric, rituals, and everyday life. Consequently, the cypress in Yazd's conceptual system acts as a fundamental element that enables the experience of presence within a place; an experience that ontologically connects nature, religion, and society.

• Cases

- Cham fire temple

The Cham Fire Temple vividly illustrates how a place emerges through the presence of fundamental natural elements within a cultural and ritual context. What elevates this site beyond a mere ritual building is the intertwined relationship among humans, nature, and the sacred, embodied by water and cypress. This relationship is not the product of deliberate design but has formed through continuous presence, memory, and ritual, enabling a sacred, experiential presence.

The ancient cypress tree, positioned at the temple's center, functions not only as a visual and spatial anchor but as the spiritual core of the space. Its central placement transforms it from a mere symbolic object into the axis of existential experience within the place. Heidegger's concept of the "gathering of the fourfold"—earth, sky, mortal human, and the sacred—is realized here.

Adjacent to the temple, the water reservoir serves

not merely a functional purpose but acts as a vessel of memory, life continuity, and generational connection. In Zoroastrian culture, water is regarded as a pure and luminous element; its quiet yet vital presence stabilizes the flow of life within the space. This water links the past—represented by the historical reservoir—to the present through its use in rituals, and the space itself, elevating the place from a functional site to a living, dynamic fabric.

Ultimately, what makes these two elements true place-makers is collective and ritual action: lighting candles, tying vows, and ritual gatherings. These acts transform the space into a stage of presence, where humans engage with nature and the sacred in a living relationship. Thus, the place does not emerge from the engineered design but from "being in relation" with nature's fundamental elements within the framework of local culture and the ritual beliefs of the Cham people (Fig. 4).

- Mehrpadin grand mosque

The Mehr Padin Grand Mosque in Mehriz City has been shaped through a profound connection with the local climate, the qanat system, and the ritual mindset of its residents, granting it a significance that transcends its function as merely a religious structure. Within this space, water and cypress

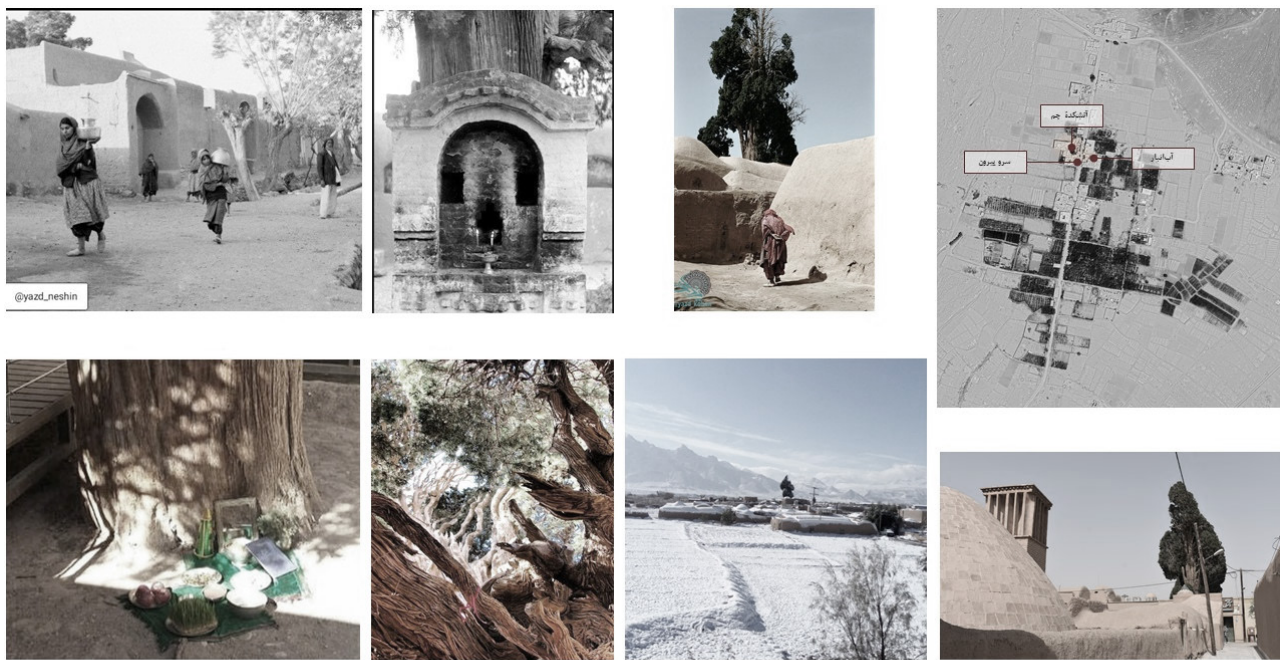


Fig. 4. The role of the cypress and water in the life-giving essence of the Cham Fire Temple. Source: Author's archive.

serve not only as biological or decorative elements but as essential, life-giving foundations of the place—elements that allow users to experience presence, sanctity, and meaning.

Water conveyed through the flowing qanat of Mehr Padin, the pool, and the cistern, plays an active role in sustaining spatial life and linking the past, present, and sacred. Here, water is more than a technical utility; by enabling habitation, purity, and ritual, it transforms the mosque into a lived experience. As Heidegger suggests, a place emerges when fundamental elements unite to foster a relationship between humans and beings. In this mosque, water fulfills that vital role, providing the basis for presence through ablution, gathering, purity, and peace.

Although the cypress tree is physically absent from the space, it exists symbolically through patterns, decorations, and the collective imagination of the community. This symbolic presence goes beyond mere decoration, embodying meanings of immortality, resilience, and connection to the heavenly realm. The cypress's role within the people's mindset, rituals, and the mosque's visual identity creates a meaningful structure that invites reflection and contemplation on one's existence in the world. This experience exemplifies what Norberg-Schulz describes as the "existential quality of place" (Fig. 5).

- Vaqt-o-sā'at square

Vaqt-o-sā'at Square, a prominent feature in Yazd's historic fabric, clearly illustrates how urban spaces can transform into meaningful, ritualistic, and existential places through the presence of natural elements. Situated at the confluence of the city's three main qanats—Zarach, Elaheabad, and Vaghfabad—this square is more than an engineering or functional junction; it is a convergence of the essential elements of life, ritual, and memory—what Heidegger terms the condition for the emergence of place.

Water in the square has a multi-layered presence: it appears through the qanats and their outlets as well as through cisterns that continue to serve communal purposes. This presence extends beyond mere flowing water; it sustains the relationship among humans, time, and nature. The water here carries the historical memory of collective survival efforts while simultaneously providing a setting for ritual acts such as vows and purification. Thus, water transcends its physical role, enabling the sacred to be experienced in daily life by connecting past and present.

The cypress element is symbolically present in the square as the ritual nakhil. This nakhil, one of the oldest mourning structures in Yazd, represents not only mourning but also the standing, steadfast cypress linked to the heavens—through which people experience the sacred and the idea of immortality. In line with Norberg-Schulz's view, this nakhil embodies



Fig. 5. The impact of water and the presence of cypress trees in the center of the Mehrpadin neighborhood on the continuity of life. Source: Author's archive.

the spirit of the place: resilience, martyrdom, and a connection to collective identity.

Ultimately, what elevates Vaqt-o-sā'at Square from a mere public open space to a place of presence are the collective ritual activities: the nakhl procession and mourning gatherings, all involving interaction with water and the nakhl. These rituals transform the space beyond its practical function, making it a stage for meaning, identity, and sacred experience (Fig. 6).

Research Method

This research employed a qualitative method based on an interpretive approach emphasizing an ontological reading of place. This study drew upon the ideas of Martin Heidegger and the architecture-centered interpretations of Christian Norberg-Schulz to explore the phenomenology of place in relation to fundamental elements like water and cypress. Using a case study approach, three representative public-ritual spaces of Yazd—Cham Fire Temple, Mehrpadin Grand Mosque, and Vaqt-o-sā'at Square—were selected and examined through document analysis, field observation, and phenomenological interpretation. The cases were purposefully chosen due to the meaningful presence of natural elements within both the spatial and mental structure of these places. The analysis focuses on understanding the quality of these

elements' presence in lived experience, collective memory, and ritual actions, aiming to demonstrate how these elements transcend functional roles to enable place-making and the manifestation of sacredness.

Conclusion

This study, grounded in an ontological approach and examining three prominent examples of ritual-public spaces in Yazd, revealed that the natural elements of water and cypress—within the city's cultural, climatic, and ritual framework—serve roles beyond mere biological or decorative functions. As fundamental components, they contribute to the emergence of place and enable the lived experience of the sacred. Through a threefold interaction involving spatial structure, collective memory, and ritual practices of the community, these elements transform functional spaces into places imbued with existential significance and meaning. This transformation occurs through the combined influence of natural elements, spatial arrangement, and collective ritual action, wherein water and cypress establish centrality, invoke memory, and encourage ritual participation—elevating the space from purely functional to sacred and life-giving. At the Cham Fire Temple, these elements, centrally located, connect with memory

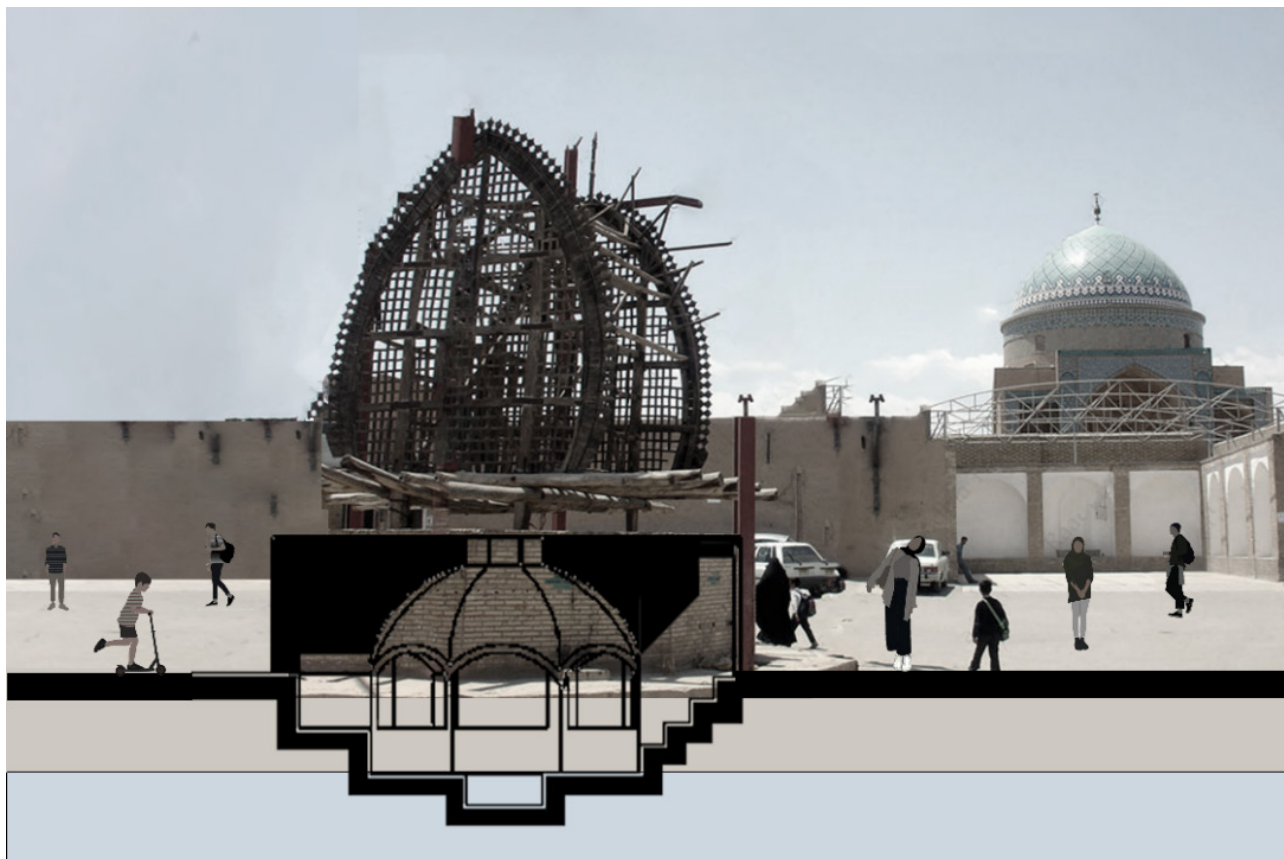


Fig. 6. The impact of water and the manifestations of cypress trees in Vaqt-o-sā'at Square on giving life. Source: Authors.

and the lived experiences of locals, enabling the emergence of the place. At Mehrpadin Grand Mosque, the interplay of the qanat system, cypress symbolism, and religious rites creates a setting conducive to experiencing presence and calmness. Likewise, at Vaqt-o-sā'at Square, the merging of qanats and the ritual nakhel, together with collective

ceremonies such as nakhel processions, imbues the space with memory and meaning. Answering the research question, water and cypress in these examples act not merely as physical or symbolic elements but as mediators of lived meaning, presence, and sacredness—transforming space into place and architecture into a sphere of being.

Endnotes

1. spirit of place

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