

## Identity Discourse in Islamic Architecture

Rashid Kolvir Hojjatollah<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran

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### ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the meaning and decoding of identity in Iranian-Islamic architecture in urban texture. As the official language of the building is its identity, it is attempted to remind its nobility, conceptuality and dynamics of its identity in Iranian architecture. Mosque is a part of architecture enhancing the meaning of identity in Islamic countries and it is the center of emergence of spiritual identity and it is also reminder of exact meanings of urban identity. Mosque is the most important urban element and the common characteristics of the identity of all Islamic cities that should be taken into attention and ignoring it leads into unknown Islamic city. This paper review the relationship between mosque building as identity maker element and organizing urban spaces that increases visual importance of these spaces and cause meaningful understanding of urban vies. In the followings of the discussion, important points and effects of mosque on the view of the city as a symbol in Islamic cities are briefly explained.

Keeping the value of identity components of Islamic communities (mosque) and trying to improve living quality and urban view (Urban identity) are the main objectives of this research.

**KEY WORDS:** Identity; architecture; meaning; city; mosque; framework.

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### INTRODUCTION

Identity in its general meaning has long history and dates back to human being civilization history. But background of this discussion is not for a long time in architecture and urbanization. Recusant concept of architecture and urbanization identity in understanding and recognition process encounter human being with multidimensional phenomena [1].

At the beginning, "Identity" covered some fields such as philosophy, logic and psychology but considering the recent decade's scientific changes, it extended to human being realm [2].

In architecture analysis, man-made cities and environments (Made by human being), "Identity" play an important role in the recognition of citizens of the city as the most important factors of understanding the city. It is evident that rarely we can find art that is linked with people life. Architecture art is one of the most obvious symbols of culture of each community, historical period and it is an obvious representation of human being environment [3].

Here Islamic architecture art is spiritual array being compatible with Islam spirit that is portrayed in the building and its main duty is showing subjective ideas being visible by objective forms. Indeed, each building as a part of architectural culture and identity is responsible to enhance subjective thought by its superficial and inner forms. Islamic architecture art as it is beyond the history of form and style is not an exception. This kind of architecture is the achievement of identity, cultural and environmental factors.

Islamic architecture identity starts with mosque, but not due to this fact that mosque is the first spiritual building but due to this that mosque in its" physical performance is a place for worship but in its metaphysical performance and spiritual and mystical revelations as Robert Hylan Brand in Islamic architecture book stated, is the revelation of all Islamic architecture mysteries" [4] and it is one of identity maker factors of Islamic cities, an identity that based on cultural aspects is meaningful process on other meaning resources of the city.

### Terminology of identity

In Dekhoda dictionary regarding the root of the term identity is the word "Ho". Identity is called the external existence and sometimes the identity and individuation and it is "partial reality" [5]. The root of the word "Identity" in Latin is called "Identitas" and is derived from "idem"- similar with two main meanings: The first meaning is "absolute similarity" and the second meaning is "distinction" [6]. So, identity with the meaning of "similarity" is discussed from two different angles and creates at the same time two probable ratios between people and objects as: "Similarity" and "Difference" [7]. Identity represents a kind of unity, unification, similarity, continuity and integrity and literally means a set of signs that cause exact identification of an entity.

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\*Corresponding Author: Rashid Kolvir Hojjatollah, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran. E-mail: [phD\\_rashid@yahoo.com](mailto:phD_rashid@yahoo.com)

Regarding the root of the term “identity” as it is stated in “Asfar Arbae” book, the following items are considered:

- Identity meaning the real existence of an object
- Identity meaning nature
- Identity meaning existence
- Identity meaning example [8].

### **Identity characteristics**

Identity represents the spiritual and materialistic aspect of human being or an object in the world. Indeed we can say that identity is “qualitative” linking the past and present as it can have divine nature.

Regarding the characteristics of identity and structure or its framework the followings are considered:

- Nobility
- Dynamics and establishment
- Continuous link between the past and present
- Integrating subjective and form contents [9].
- Continuity of analogy, geometry form, color, etc.
- Non-polar nature (objective, subjective)

### **The meaning of identity in architecture**

“An overview of the definitions of identity shows that considering identity is both spiritual and non-materialistic and materialistic and framework aspects. Different aspects of identity are studied as separated from each other and consider their effects and interactions on each other. In addition not only each object is consisting of an identity but also identity is attributed to the traits that these traits are the result of the action of that object representing its spiritual characteristics that is revealed in a form [10]. “ Identity means “ The reality of an object or a person with his essential traits” it is a concept connecting a work (as architectural work) or a person (as human being) to its origin and root. If we accept this meaning about “identity”, then “architectural identity” is the root of architecture that cannot be more than one. In this case differences arise from the lack of deep understanding of concepts and definitions namely the lack of correct understanding of intellectual systems in which these concepts are defined that are tradition and modernity. In theoretical concepts of architecture, the term “identity” is used a lot. But it seems that using this term and other terms such as “nobility”, “spirituality”, “ Eternal models”, “multiplicity” and “unity” are mostly based on personal feelings based on materialistic and calculative reason or in other words, it is raised from “rational” or as Showan believes is based on “*Nafsania*” and as Genon says is based on “Sentimentalism” [11].

We shouldn’t forget that each object and concept requires an identity or needs to attain identity and that identity (as its distinctive aspect with other objects, concepts and subjects) is consisting of two external and internal aspects or in other words, spiritual and materialistic aspect. These two aspects of identities are not separated from each other and characteristics of each affects weakness and enhancing the other aspects [12].

As identity is the official language of the building and “ the identity of each building and city, essentially is the result of events occurring in it so, in the building and living complex, external form is not important but the events occurring in it are of importance [13], being influensive in the identity of the building itself and the city. Identity has dynamic concept being change continuously with the passage of time and forms the city or the building like a chain of continuous rings [14]. On another aspect, identity means that a person can distinct a place from another one. Lynch believes that variables, elements and factors such as continuous, analogy, geometry form, color, etc are important factors enhancing the meaning of identity. The building that is consisting of a good architectural identity and its meaning is understood by identity is indeed a building in which good criterions such as good view and appearances are observed in it [15].

### **The role of architecture in giving identity**

Architecture as a permanent identity factor in each city is obtained by identification of three main factors of form characteristics of the place, events, individual and group meaning and one of the most effective ways of being assured of such factors is increasing presence of people in urban spaces. The main factors of continuous presence of people in the city is its architecture as architecture improves the quality and readability of urban space and ensures the stability of urban places, surrounding identity formation and finally the generality of the city.

To understand the identity of each place, presence, movement, pause and thinking in framework, social and function characteristics of identity making architecture are necessary to provide a comprehensive recognition of that place [16]. Edward Relph in his book, place and placelessness, considers 3 main aspects for “place identity” and

says “structural aspects, activities and meaning form the main aspects of place identity” [17]. Meaningful architecture determines place identity and is revelation center of spiritual identity and represents exact meanings of urban identity.

Architecture with its own language (drawing and writing) can provide opportunities of “Improving urban identities or instability and worthlessness of urban structure.

### **Identity and its meaning in Islamic architecture**

The identity of Islamic architecture is a phenomenon being discussed at least from two aspects; at first, view and form that are seen in the public (morphology) and then the reality that is seen in Islamic architecture and it is an attribute that all religious architectures benefit it. Indeed the second view is the reality or legitimacy considering the “meaning” and in itself, keeps, forms, structures and finally improves urban identity. Islamic architecture identity is meaningful and original and as this architecture is not an “object” it cannot be owned.

### **Mosque, the common characteristics of Islamic cities identity**

The most obvious aspects, signs and identity factors of the community and Islamic city is mosque with the fundamental role from appearance identity and spiritual identity [18]. This growth of Islamic architecture (mosque) can play the role with its specialties as the factors of Islamic city identity. In this case the person has changed a part of objectivity to subjectivity and considers it as a part of his identity [19].

By introducing mosque as one of the obvious factors of urban identity, we can consider some details and elements that can act from mental, spiritual, materialistic and appearance aspects as the reminding element of city identity and living environment and finally the community identity.

Mosque is the revelation center of spiritual identity of Muslims and it is the most important urban and architectural element and is the actualization of the best forms and interests of Muslim architects. Architecture of mosque is the most unique, pure, ideal and content-based architecture that can be pointed and neglecting it lead into identity crisis of the city. Mosque is the established and defined identity of the city and the quality encouraging the residents to continue to live in Islamic city framework.

In Islamic architecture at first Mysterism and then Symbolism are applied [20]. The issues in this field are cultural symbols and mysteries that can play the role as semantic aspect of architecture identity and urbanization. City or architecture is a tool to transfer concepts, customs and cultural aspects of the countries to future generation that is an identity maker element for human being processing identity.. Thus, identifying the elements, components and spaces of mosques with symbolic meaning is a fact by which exact meaning of urban identity is presented that should be taking into attention in design, planning and evaluation. In “mosque, different elements are considered that each has special applied role and they are consisting of spiritual value hierarchy that got the special expression in abstract thought. These elements are justified when they are the tool to reach spiritual soul in materialistic space not as objective” [21]. Readability of identity elements in mosque in connection with urban view is including: dome, minarets, open and close space, lights, directions, hierarchy, consuming materials, geometry forms etc.

### **Effective factors in formation of Islamic cities**

The effective factors in formation of Islamic cities are including as:” intellectual space”, “Practical space (Behavior) and “objective space” (framework) that can be explained as the followings:

- Intellectual space: Intellectual space (or monotheism and faith of the city dwellers) plays the main role in emerging “Islamic city”.
- Practical and behavior space: In this space according to the orders and rules of Islamic instructions, behavior of Muslims (city dwellers including managers or citizens) are formed. Behavior space is formed based on the rules of Islam instructions.
- Objective space: by educating refined, believing people that God has sent for human being life and live and act according to them [22].

### **Mosque and urban view**

Mosque is one of the key elements determining the form and shape of urban texture in Islamic cities views. Mosque and its position in expressing urban identity and urban planning is a relevant framework for identity continuity and is introduced as an element in framework-social-economical spaces. Urban planners analyze mosque space as one of the important factors of land use, whether in its cultural-religious use or in separate use and determine its position in functional organizing, qualitative and 2-dimentional (From geometry aspect) [23].

Mosque as the great manifestation of Islamic architecture as it is emphasized abstractly, personal and internal, should be considered as external and in group to add the spiritual quality of residential areas and urban

spaces by visual imagination. It can be concluded that the main building of the mosque should be built in urban design process to enhance Islamic city design model and increase its mental understanding for all the communities namely their special audiences [24]. In the design of Islamic city, consistency and overlapping of there “spaces” or three elements of intellectual space, practical space and objective space or structural space are necessary. These three spaces cause that Islamic city manifesting by mosque actualized in design process [25].

The relationship between mosque building and organizing urban and public spaces are considered from two aspects. At first more emphasis on interior architecture provide relatively negligence of external architecture of the mosque and second as the result of considering the first one, rarely spatial element of external mass of mosque is considered as a part of macro mass of residential complexes and some of the spaces as harmonious with other spaces in residential areas- namely their structural design- [26]. As Robert Hillenbrand writes:” The existence philosophy of building mosque is in a way that internal space should be prior to external space. So any decoration and solution helping its visual beauty should be manifested in interior architecture and interior space.

“Urban view and mosque are some topics used in public architecture and urban design from different aspects. Urban view is one aspect of different aspects of urban view transferring a kind of environmental concepts and experiences in visual imagination to people. Urban view as one of the issues in understanding, recognition, analysis process and designing urban spaces is the basis of considerable theories in the field of environmental design knowledge.

The relationship between mosque and urban view or in other words, the effective presence of building and mosque space in urban view is an important fact enhancing the examples of good environmental quality in theoretical urban design and on the other hand enhances vitality and meaningfulness of urban structure in an Islamic community” [27].

Four main topics in architecture of mosque about façade and city view are considered that are good solutions of identity.

- Visual importance of urban spaces, namely structural design of the city, general view of special view of specific fields to understand the environment and giving identity, readability, dynamics and permanency to these spaces.
- Understanding variables and criterions evaluating the good vital and visual quality in the background of some concepts such as variety, continuity, contrast, harmony, readability, identity, balance etc.
- Re-identification of elements, fields and factors that their suitable organizing desirability criterions and variables.
- Understanding urban-based views of mosque architecture via attending structural design, symbols and signs of urban files harmonious with mosque building along with the symbols formed in the centrality of the mosque in urban view [28].
- From the point of urban view, the mosque should be visible and it should be located in a place to establish its relationship whether in view or aspect or in the body of the city.

Mosque as an “Urban symbol” with visible building in the surrounding can visual relationships should have unique presence. This structural index can be used in architecture of mosque as the followings:

1. External volume with super humanistic dimensions
2. High floors
3. Harmony and special decorations
4. Suitable combination of the shapes
5. Color or materials distinctive of the texture (dome tiling)
6. Using symbolic elements (Minaret)
7. Unity of the complex

Each of the above items causes that mosque in its urban structure turn into a suitable symbol. The connection of this religious building (mosque) with other spaces is divided into two groups in terms of internal and external link:

a. External scale of the mosque, being divided into two groups:

1. The mosques with limited performance and intra-township scale or it is used as a place for prayers (The mosques located inside the market), mostly they have overlapping structure in their adjacent texture and they body is not distinguished from outside, so external scale of the mosque is not understood. These kinds of mosques link with urban texture by an entry and sometimes the entry opens to the mosque yard.
2. The mosques with the function of super township or urban. These mosques due to their functions, dedicate a great dimension and they are mostly separated in some parts from the adjacent texture sometimes due to the importance of the mosque in most parts and passages are located around the mosque. Despite the internal space of these mosques creating spacious feeling in human being, in external body, total enclosing is felt by the viewer

because height-width ratio is mostly about 1/1 and sometimes  $\frac{1}{2}$ . The mosque enhances the feeling of encountering with a big building beside the passage giving the good news of an important occurrence [29].

In these mosques, some entries provide the link between internal spaces of the mosque with the surrounding space, these entries open to the yard from different directions and in some mosques, the various entries and their opening in different parts of the yard, enhances passing attribute of internal space.

In terms of place, no mosque is built in dead end alleys because mosque like a living creature is having spiritual life. Great part of this life is viable through various entries that like some gates by linking the corridors and passages and the surrounding towns, turn mosque into a place for passing. The movement and presence of people makes the mosque alive. In each mosque, there is a main entry and in proportion to the wideness of the building, other minor entries are created to help main entries and attraction from different places. The most important characteristics of entry are as the followings:

1. Dominant appearance in the outside
2. Magnificence
3. Symmetry
4. Decoration

Appearance: As at first glance, mosque entry is seen as an abstract and in harmony with the mosque follows an obvious model and in by pass or the square, it is preferred to the wall and its surrounding texture [30].

Overdoor of the mosque is erected from the surrounding bodies and indentation of its entry, invite man humbly. In fact, entry space is like a beautiful umbrella as a tree opening his arms to hug man. Erected branches (minarets) are compatible with standing position in prayer and the arch in the entry indicates infinite sky separating the outside (Materialistic space) from inside (spiritual space).

The appearance of entry outside the mosque should be more dominant because this part of mosque should have strong invitation aspect in comparison with other components. As not to influence worshippers by exiting from the mosque, the span of entries in the yard are plain and they are not located in the axle of symmetries. This is while entry outside the mosque gets more importance in the main axle of symmetry.

Magnificence: Overdoor is more important, bigger and longer in comparison with its two sides. Human being by observing the big scale of overdoor, by adoring this magnificent considers himself a small and unimportant creature before God.

Symmetry: It is one of the most important strategies is symmetry in division in front façade as overdoor is located in two sides as symmetry element in the middle and arches in two sides.

The created symmetry in addition to more emphasis on overdoor, create balance and comfort in the space. The other reason of using symmetrical shapes is its structural reason that is the best selection in terms of easy construction, resistance and force division.

Decorations: Decorations of overdoor are more comprehensive and different from other entry parts. Calligraphy of Holy Quran inscriptions and building repairs explanation, tiling, Karbandi, stalactites are these decorations. Stalactites in addition to solving the covering of the corners and gradual movement from rectangular plan to arch provide good tiling and by exact shaping, are consisting of the performance of playing with light and creating light and shade [31].

Internal scale of mosque space is divided into two groups:

1. The mosques without internal open space: In this group, there are some mosques that separately lack internal open space (central yard) and it is not possible to evaluate internal spaces scale and evaluate enclosure feeling. Sheikh Lotfollah mosque and some of the mosques namely being built inside the market are used for salespersons in the market to say their prayer (Mostly by people who help the others) and are included in this group. In this group of mosques due to small dimension of mosques (Naves, yards etc.) width-height ratio of internal yard is between  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{1}{4}$  and enclosure feeling is a lot in the space.

2. Mosques are consisting of open internal space with extra-township performance and in urban scale: in this group there are mosques being built with extra-township and urban performance, so the complex of mosque spaces is various and their yard is big. In this group of mosques, height-width ratio of the yard is between 1/5.5 to 1/6.5. Important mosques in Isfahan are in this group.

Considering the role and function of mosque in this group, enclosure feeling is not observed here but the area of yard is taken into attention in order that open and wide space of yard as the location of saying prayer in some days in the year has subjective and objective link without any barrier with sky and the world [32].

Moving toward mosque is done by a movement on foot, gradual, meaningful and attractive defining the destination. Big scale and considerable distinction of the structure of the mosque, in comparison with the surrounding buildings and defined volume elements such as dome and minaret emphasizes on obvious presence of mosque as a respectful urban symbol.

### **Inside and outside of the mosque**

Gradual transferring the “outside” to “inside” via thoughtful organizing of various spaces, release human being from materialistic world of outside and prepare his presence in “inside” and “comfortable” space of mosque. The space that fulfills a person need for loneliness, thinking, focus and worship, being together and doing public religious rituals and due to valuable feeling enhances belongings to the mosque.

Internal space with pure, simple and full forms is determining factor of each mosque. The combination of facades, entering to the internal space of mosque, space dimensions, elements and materials of view etc are all the factors making attaining identity in each internal space possible [33].

Architecture of mosque should meet the demands of the contrast between the inside and outside space and keeping hierarchy. When we enter the building, there is evident difference between inside and outside. This case is at its pinnacles in mosques as a person by going to the outside and inside, travels from unity to plurality, silence and crowd. Each internal space is the place of is private place and considering to inner part and each outward space is the focus of external factors. Or in other words, space, components and building images in the outside are observing center and seeing in pointing and in inside is thinking and searching in inner world [34].

### **The link between outside and inside**

In the mosque, internal and external spaces are separated from each other by main elements of each space. Boleof says:” duality between inside and outside is the basis of any space understanding and internal health of any man requires that to search work outside and find comfort inside”. In the design and construction of mosque, this view is observed from past to present. Human being needs both outside and inside space and the possibility to move between these two spaces, so these are not separated absolutely and there is connection between these two. The location and form of these connections between inside and outside are the results of the contrast existing in the essence of the connections between these two spaces. As the internal space should be in a way that is enclosed and protective against outside space and between these two spaces there should be connection.

Mostly these two spaces are separated by a wall. As from the outside, inner space is not only distinguished by form but also by its openings. The question here is raised is that whether outside façade of a mosque should represent its inside or its internal and external forms should be distinguished?

Answering these questions depending upon each style is different. If there is direct connection between inside and outside in terms of form, we talk about readable organizing system. A solution in which inner shape is not distinguished from its outside shape is a case of unreadable organizing system addressing our feeling more than our mind.

The separation of inside and outside form can be the result of preliminary design; it means that external form is different from internal form in terms of plan design.

Another kind of separation of outside and inside is created when it arose the façade of expected building that doesn't fulfill its inside space.

Physical and spiritual characteristics in connection with other surrounding buildings:

Comfort and being separated from turmoil of outside:

Inside the mosque should be protected against outside turmoil. Providing this condition dictates some characteristics to the architecture of mosque as the followings:

- Using introvert shape
- Applying hierarchy between outside and inside of the mosque and its spaces
- Locating mosque and its adjacent activities
- Using the minimum opening to outside space that disobey good hierarchy
- Protecting mosque against outside turmoil, not only protect worshippers from distracting voices but also indicates the separation of the prayer performer from materialistic affairs.
- Avoiding special forms that instill considering materialistic affairs to the mind [35].

### **Centrality**

This case along with the importance and value given by Muslims to mosque (in comparison with other public and urban functions) and it cause that in urban texture and structure “centrality” in the city, township and even urban complexes be for mosque [36].

From the aspect of building internal space, centrality can regulate all internal activities of the building. The origin and center of the space is a part of building in which exceptional turning point is occurred.

Evolutionary trend of diversified elements (pluralities) to central unity is seen in most of Islamic architecture spaces and the yard of mosques is the focal point of this thought and reaching function elements to other kinds of buildings.

### **Introversion**

Unavoidable characteristics of the architecture of some buildings such as mosque, house, school and Carvansary etc refer to their introversion characteristics being related to the basics and of philosophical-social principles. In this architecture, the real value is depending upon the essence and inner core of the building and outward body is just a virtual cover protecting the reality and its inner richness determine the real essence of the building and it is not compared with the outside space.

In eastern thought and Islamic land, the essence of space is in its inner space and inner life creates the basis of the space. Considering the inner materials is formed based on culture, the style of life, tradition and world view getting its final meaning along with environmental, geographical and climatic.

Introvert form takes the attention toward the sky, being in introvert space (four angles) reminds us of the world bounded with 4 directions. Introvert space of mosque arena put human being in the direction as he is behind the world (external space) and in front of the other world (Naves, niches)" [37]. The shape of central yards as introversion symbol is a symbol of plan of Muslims Qible (Mecca) that is at the center of Islam from geographical aspect.

### **Mosque and city**

Mosque in culture is not only the place to worship God, but also it is the gathering center of people and important part of the city. Mosque in our view is Gods house and sacred place, a place that religion and the world come together. All the mosques constructed in all Muslim countries due to their effect on city view are famous as identification model and introduction of Islamic architecture in the world. " The importance of mosque in old cities of Islam world was in a way that city term was attributed just to where MasJId Jame was built and the extension of urban texture followed the location of Masjid Jame"[38].

A mosque should be located in geographical map as there is not problem for people to attend it. To achieve a correct locating of mosque, the following aims should be considered as the main points:

- Using mosque element in enhancing the city structure and directing its growth in future
- Adequacy, good variety and distribution of use in cities
- Organizing symbolic foundation and city view including other aims as:
  1. The position of mosque as congruent factor in the city
  2. Mosque element as identity making activity center
  3. Creating stability, continuity and integrity in the city
  4. Renovation of the existing cultural and religious center
  5. Establishing relationship of city structural network with other parts considering the urban hierarchy
- Adequacy, good variety and distribution of use in cities
  1. Creating functional unity in the city by establishing logical relationship between the functions and urban activities considering the compatibility and convergences.
  2. Creating spatial unity in the city by establishing logical relationship between the function and space
  3. Organizing the main city elements in urban life
  4. Establishing the relationship between the main elements and hierarchy of the ways network
  5. Crating functional variety and vitality in the city
- Organizing symbolic foundation and city view
  1. Creating good relationship between city elements as considering cultural continuity of different periods are
  2. Creating and promoting readability in the city by creating good connection between their elements
  3. Using special criterions and architectural specifications of the location to improve aesthetic aspects to suggest cultural identity to people
  4. Enhancing direction capabilities in the city and renovation of unity principle in plurality and creating good scale
  5. Using building densities and grading distinctions to help the visibility of the mosque
  6. Using continuous understanding of elements and urban symbols to increase readability and efficiency of the city
  7. Creating good spatial quality for different activities
  8. Considering climatic consideration in determining place in mosque [39].

## Conclusion

There are different interpretations about “Islamic urbanization”, so identification of attributes of “Islamic city” is one of the primary requirements. Here identification of Islamic city identity characteristics and its principles are of requirements of Islamic society.

In this paper it is attempted to give importance to key points of Islamic city identity in urban texture and in connection with mosque. We find that one of the most important factors of understanding Iranian-Islamic architecture in urban texture having important role in citizens understanding is identity. By searching in the identity of Islamic cities we find that mosque and its architecture is analyzed as a permanent identity factor in each city and a permanent quality that is always in the spectrum of “past-today” of Islamic city structure. Renovation of identity in the city (mosque) is achieved when the continuity of architecture history is observed as meaningful in it.

In the following result, it is reminded that identity elements in mosque being in relation with urban view are including: dome, minarets, open and close spaces, lights, directions, hierarchy etc are only a part of identity concept in Islamic cities as there are effective factors such as objective space, practical space, intellectual space in structure and formation of Islamic cities identity.

From urban view aspect, the mosque should be located in a place to establish its connection with city body. This “urban symbol” in its surrounding texture should be unique. The results of this paper to achieve a correct locating of mosque can be reviewed in three levels:

- Using mosque element in enhancing city structure and directing its future growth
- Adequacy, good variety and distribution of use in cities
- Organizing symbolic foundation and city view

To achieve a good scale of meaningful and identity making architecture of Islamic cities, good structural models of mosques are presented.

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