

A STUDY OF THE REASONS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF VARIOUS RELIGIOUS SITES AROUND THE SHRINE OF IMAM'S SISTER IN RASHT

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ABSTRACT

The holy shrine of *Khahar-e Imam's* (henceforth, *Imam's Sister*) is located at Sagharisazan neighborhood in Rasht. The number of religious buildings in the neighborhood that is part of the district of Zahedan, as an old structure of the city, specially attracts one's attention. Although, in each area of the old structures of the city, the center of the area is determined by a holy shrine, mosque, public bath, or a school, it seems that the number of religious sites in Sagharisazan and its surrounding areas is because of the conditions of location and the influence of its monument on its context. The main research question of the present study is the reasons for the influence of *Imam's Sister* on the architecture of Sagharisazan, and to investigate the location of this monument. The case study emphasizes the formation of religious sites around the shrine of *Imam's Sister* and its impact on the neighboring buildings. Also, the study investigates the impact of the monument on people's socio-cultural praxis and their attention to the monument based on their local values and beliefs. The research data was collected by documents and written studies and also by observation, field work, and interview in the shrine of *Imam's Sister*. The results show that the existence of several religious sites in the vicinity of *Imam's Sister* is due to socio-cultural reasons as well as the possibility for complementary sites and public services. This has created a mental image of social status, following the economic power of certain people, and at the same time has made the pilgrimage to *Imam's Sister* attractive, as a sign of spiritual destination. The formation of religious sites around the shrine of the *Sister of Imam Reza* (PBUH) is one of the most effective methods bestowing an identity to the texture and its surroundings.

Keywords: *Old Texture of Rasht, Possibilism, Sagharisazan, Religious Texture, Shrine of Imam's Sister*

INTRODUCTION

In the history of the formation of Islamic cities, mosques and religious places have been one of the important and influential elements, and have always been considered a place for public gatherings with a collective function in the social, economic, political, and physical life of the people. One of the religious places which has played an important role in the social life of people in Rasht during the years is the mosque and shrine of *Imam's Sister* in Sagharisazan area.

Given the several religious sites in the old texture of the city of Rasht and the connection between the religious sphere with other social, cultural, and economic spheres, it is worth asking why such religious sites have been established around *Imam's Sister* (in Sagharisazan) and what the influence of this shrine has been on the surrounding urban texture.

Some research concerning *Imam's Sister*, its formation and the architecture of the surrounding buildings, has been done so far. Research has also been conducted on the high number of religious monuments in Rasht.

One can mention various books which have described the monuments and their surroundings, and research which has identified its architectural features, however, these books have highlighted historical information and rested on description and have not analyzed the impact of the monuments on the urban and surrounding texture of the city.

The topic of the present research is therefore to investigate the reasons for the formation of religious monuments around one of the most important religious shrines of the city (*Imam's Sister*), and the

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characteristics of its context of formation. In other words, the present study investigates the formation and reasons behind the high number of religious sites around *Imam's Sister* in Sagharisazan (a neighborhood in Rasht.).

Since the present research takes into account the relationship between human beings and the environment, it is not based finding the norms for building mosques, rather it is based on positivists research which describes and explains a phenomenon.

The study's theoretical framework is based on Canter's theory of place which assumes that such a phenomenon is due to three reasons: physical characteristics, activities, and the mental perception of the audience.

Based on the principles of urban positioning, the shrine of *Imam's Sister* can be analyzed from spatio-geographical, economic-functional, and socio-cultural perspectives. Each of these factors suggests some characteristics of this monument and its relationship among the elements of the city's texture which is significant from the perspective of possibilism. In the light of previous studies, this approach is analyzed in details in two steps.

In the first step, the reasons for the formation of these religious sites based on physical context and the location of the shrine of *Imam's Sister* are analyzed. In the second step, the reasons for the formation is investigated in the light of the kind of relationship and influence between the other religious monuments of Sagharisazan and *Imam's Sister*.

It seems that the latter texture is an appropriate example for coordination with the context and the existing relationships with the central monument (*Imam's Sister*) where the existing mosques have been built in relation to the broader texture of the area.

The Location of the Shrine of Imam's Sister and the Surrounding Religious Monuments

The large number of holy shrines has been confirmed by many researchers, as Mackenzie writes, "In all areas of Iran, there are numerous shrines and holy monuments, however, in Gilan, I have seen more, all the villages are proud to have one or more shrines, on both sides of the road, there are many of them" (Mackenzie, 1980).

The shrine of *Imam Reza's Sister*, called *Fatemeh*, is located at the neighborhood of Zahedan, in the area of *Imam's Sister* in Rasht, between Sagharisazan, Sukhte Tekyeh (The Burned Mosque) and Zarjoub (Nikuyeh, 2008).

"This place has been mentioned in many travelogues, people of Gilan have strong beliefs about it, and many miracles have been seen, and the center of Gilan is that shrine" (Beigi Boroujeni, 2004).

Thus, this shrine has been at the center of attention since a long time ago.

According to some researches, the factors influencing the spatio-physical setting of Rasht can be divided into four groups:

1. Natural factors (topographic characteristics)
2. Political factors (the rise of governments and their central location)
3. Economic factors (influenced by the location and the activities and their related sites)
4. Religious factors (the development of centers and sites of activities) (Safardust, 2005).

Some of these factors have had positive and some negative effects and in all they have determined the development of an urban texture.

Each of these factors shows a special kind of use and have not only influenced the shape and direction of physical development, but have also had considerable influence on the public characteristics.

In general, these factors have determined the characteristics and structures of the texture of Islamic cities, religious elements and public health in close relation to educational functioning of the monuments.

In the neighbored of Zahedan in Rasht, "the existence of religious schools [religious sites], schools, and public baths around *Imam's Sister* indicates the importance of such a religious and cultural hub which was initially created in Safavid era" (Safardust, 2005).

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Figure 1: Old Picture of Imam's Sister



Figure 2: The Changes Done to Imam's Sister



Figure 3: The Extension Added to Imam's Sister

Sagharisazan which is a part of the neighborhood of Zahedan, is the residence for the wealthy people of the city, and according to many historians, this neighborhood has become so significant because of a large number of well-known families living there. In general, with regard to the urban texture of Rasht, it can be stated that “the neighborhoods in Rasht were important because of their residents. For example, Sagharisazan, where a group of well-known and highly regarded families lived” (Nikuyeh, 2008). This neighborhood.

According to the table 1, the following points can be noted:

- The growing of social interaction with the emergence of public facilities around these mosques, and the transformation of these religious sites into the center of the neighborhood.
- Increased social interaction in accordance with the clergyman or the sufi's roles, and the changing of this area into a religious site in Rasht.
- The emergence of a sense of personal and religious hegemony by the wealthy and well-known people in the area.
- Providing for the daily needs of the people by creating educational, public health, treating, and economic centers around these mosques.
- Creating a place for facilitating geographical positioning by for example building a minaret on the mosques.

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Table 1: Introducing the Characteristics of Religious Buildings around the Shrine and Mosque of *Imam Reza's Sister*

Name of the Mosque	Brief Introduction about the Mosque	Results from the Explanations, Important for the Study
<i>Musa ibne al-Ja'far</i> (PBUH)	This mosque was first named after its clergyman, Imam al-Dawleh. After the establishment of Daneshsara (academia), this mosque was known as Daneshsara, and after the Islamic Revolution of Iran (1979), it changed into <i>Musa ibn al-Ja'far</i> (PBUH) (Khomamizadeh, 2011).	1. It seems that the existence of many mosques was because of the many clergymen in the area (a residence for sufis and mystics (zahed). Thus, each mosque was managed by a certain clergyman whose name was given to the mosque (e.g., Imam al-Dawleh)
<i>Mohammad Abad</i> (<i>Mahmoud Abad</i>)	It was called Yahudi Tapeh (Jewish Hill) in the past. Today it is called <i>Mohammad Abad</i> (Khomamizadeh, 2011). On the two roads leading to the mosque, there used to be shops for the everyday needs of the public.	Since usually there used to be shops around the mosque to provide for the daily needs of the people, it seems that the mosque was built to meet the needs of the people in the area (sometimes known as tribes).
<i>Haj Sami'</i>	“Located between Sagharisazan and <i>Imam's Sister</i> [...] Since the large neighborhood of Zahedan and the area of Sagharisazan were resided by the wealthy and land owners, the Sami' family built the mosque” (Nikuyeh, 2008). This mosque is 390 meters, and is the biggest mosque in Rasht. “This mosque had an old school on the south side in which theology students studied and lived. Some traditional physicians had an office in this mosque” (Sotoudeh, 1970).	Since most mosques had in addition to being a prayer house other uses, including, school, hospital, academia, etc., therefore, building a mosque, besides being a place for on time prayers, was a place to help the poor in each neighborhood.
	Based on the inscription on the cornice of this mosque, it was built in 1925 by the order of a	The better financial status a mosque benefactor had, the larger the mosque was built, like <i>Haj</i>

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Goldasteh or Sagharisazan

tradesman named Haji Ali Shirvani (Nikuyeh, 2008). The reason why it was called *Goldasteh* (finial) was because of the beautiful brick minaret. This mosque was completely destroyed by the earthquake in 1990.

Sami's mosque, which had many uses for the people of its neighborhood. The mosques were also a sign of the benefactor's social and economic power.

From the explanation regarding *Haj Sami's* mosque and the minaret of *Goldasteh* mosque, it can be stated that the benefactors of the mosques were well-to-do people who owned lands and property in the area. Thus, it seems that some decided to build mosques to show their social and economic power.

Despite the brick minaret of *Goldasteh* mosque, and the multiple uses that mosques had, the large number of mosques in the area was because of the role they played in people's mind, identity, and also the role these mosques played as a center for gatherings and the people's pilgrimage through them toward the main center (*Imam's Sister*)

Shrine and Mosque of Agha Seyyed Abbas

This shrine is located at the neighborhood of Sagharisazan near the shrine of *Imam's Sister*. The shrine was built for two brothers named Seyyed Abbas and Agha Seyyed Esmaeil, two of Imam Musa Kazem's (PBUH) sons. "This site [at first] was just a shrine, but later on a mosque was built next to the shrine" (Khomamizadeh, 2011).

It seems that because of the large number of mosques in this area, building mosques somehow showed the reverence and respect of the people toward those to be buried in them.

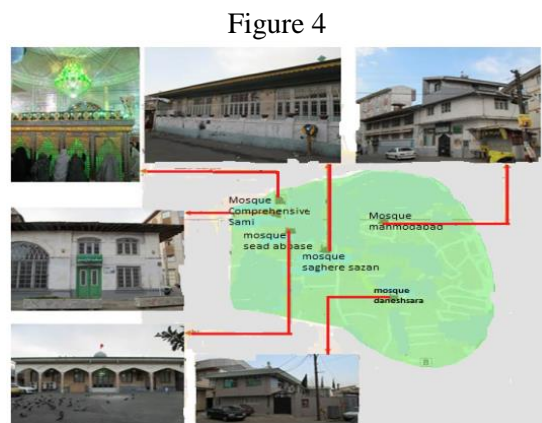


Figure 5: Introducing the Religious Sites around the Shrine of *Imam's Sister* in Rasht and Locating it on the Map in the Area of Sagharisazan (the Green Area)

From the above explanations regarding the mosques and religious sites, it can be concluded that these urban structures, are on the one hand dependent on economic conditions (the wealth of the benefactors), physical and aesthetic characteristics as an urban sign, and religious beliefs, and on the other hand, met the daily needs of the people.

To find the reasons behind the existence of a large number of religious sites around the shrine of *Imam's Sister*, one needs to pay attention to the geographical position of the sites. This is important from two perspectives: 1) spatio-physical, and 2) socio-cultural. Thus, the present article is based on the theory of possibilism, and philosophically, is oriented to positivism which describes and explains a phenomenon. According to Vidal de la Blache who emphasizes the two main factors of natural territory and lifestyle, and which is in contrast to environmental determinism, known as environmental possibilism, cultural praxis and human beings' behavior are effective on regional orientations, and cultural and traditional privileges, human beings endeavor, and territorial decisions are taken into account (Shokouhi, 2004). As the typology of the theories of urban designing is based on the influence of environment on human beings, designing theories have been formed according to three assumptions about "environment-behavior relationship".

In other words, the role of the physical (environmental) element in shaping the behavior could be deterministic, probabilistic, possibilistic. Possibilists believe that "though the characteristics of physical environment creates possibilities and limitations for carrying out behaviors, mostly people choose and behave according to their cultural values" (Golkar, 2004).

As noted, "Possibilism, is a philosophical viewpoint in which natural environment creates possibilities for the human beings' choice so that they can choose according to their cultural needs" (Shokouhi, 2004). Thus in this school of thought, human beings can manipulate the environment and change it according to their needs, shaping their goals by considering tradition and collective goals to which they belong (Shokouhi, 2004).

Thus, given the potentials of Sagharisazan and the kind of human-environment relation which is rooted in cultural attitudes, it can be argued that people have defined their relation to the environment according to paying utmost attention to their religious sites, kind of social interactions, hegemony in identity, meeting daily needs, and the environmental features.

Analyzing the Religious Sites from Spatio-Psychical Perspective

Based on historical evidence, the aforementioned area, used to be a place for the sufis and mystics, and a residence for religious figures among the people in Rasht. The existence of the shrine of *Imam's Sister*

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and Agha Seyyed Abbas and Esmaeil proves this point. Thus, the large number of religious sites in this urban area is because of the importance of the shrine of *Imam's Sister* as a religious center for the people of Rasht. It is worth mentioning that this neighborhood was the origin of inhabitation because of its suitable hydrology (Khomamizadeh, 2011). Thus, according to the theory of possibilism, the existence of environmental potentials, is one of the reasons for the existence of a large number of religious sites.

In studying Islamic cities, taking into account the behavior of the people, mosques are considered the center for people's activities and gatherings (Karimi, 2003).

The number of religious sites, each being a center, are focal points which determine the centrality of the shrine of *Imam's Sister*. In other words, each of these mosques, have the potential for being the center of the neighborhood as directed toward the shrine of *Imam's Sister*; each mosque foregrounds the element around which it has been built.

Thus, in addition to being a stopping place for peripheral activities (spiritual, economic, social, cultural, and educational), each mosque emphasizes the centrality of the shrine of *Imam's Sister*.

Strengthening the axes of vision and visual corridors leading to the mosque play a key role in locating them.

"Being able to locate the mosque, given its limit of functioning, is highly important. From the perspective of urban aesthetics, the mosque should be distinguished as a praying center, and should be built in a place where it is easily discernable in the urban environment" (Karimi, 2003).

Each mosque in Sagharisazan is a sign, and these signs are one of the factors for the perception of the environment by the people, which highlights the location of the shrine of *Imam's Sister* (Consulting Engineers of Gozineh, 2003).

If the height of adjacent buildings is equal or less than the height of the mosque, the mosque's location is facilitated through the discernibility of the environment. The middle texture of *Imam's Sister* neighborhood has all these characteristics and therefore the number of mosques as a visual sign of the neighborhood highlights the shrine and its discernibility.

It seems that the discernibility of the shrine of *Imam's Sister* has been achieved because of the semiotic functions of the surrounding religious sites. Moreover, these mosques in terms of their architecture, height, and location have foregrounded the discernibility of this holy shrine so that *Imam's Sister* has been firmly established as a visual and physical site.

It seems that another reason for the formation of religious sites around the shrine of *Imam's Sister* is creating a preparatory route to the shrine. The benefactors of the mosques have contributed to other peripheral activities on the road to the shrine of *Imam's Sister* by building educational centers, public health, and trade centers so that approaching the shrine of *Imam's Sister* has been designed to be in accordance to moving through other religious and public health centers.

As such, a person experiences different places and activities on the road, and is finally guided to the mosque. Thus, the appropriate positioning allows the person to know that he is approaching the mosque. Given all these organizations, the person did not need any other signs to lead him to the mosque [12]. Therefore, the existence of these religious sites around the shrine of *Imam's Sister* suggests a step-by-step movement (hierarchy) toward this holy shrine so that after the formation of these religious sites, people who entered the area through this route, had a gradual, meaningful, and exciting experience on their movement toward the destination. It is therefore clear that these routes have been made after building the mosques in order to prepare a step-by-step movement from the entrance of the city to the shrine of *Imam's Sister*.

Accordingly, analyzing the positioning of the shrine of *Imam's Sister* from a spatio-physical aspect shows that the shrine has centrality, discernibility, and a hierarchy of functions and concepts, and also the fact that the existence of these religious sites foregrounds the shrine in the eyes of the citizens.

Since these places are the symbols of the neighboring people, they are effective in increasing social solidarity and a sense of belonging.

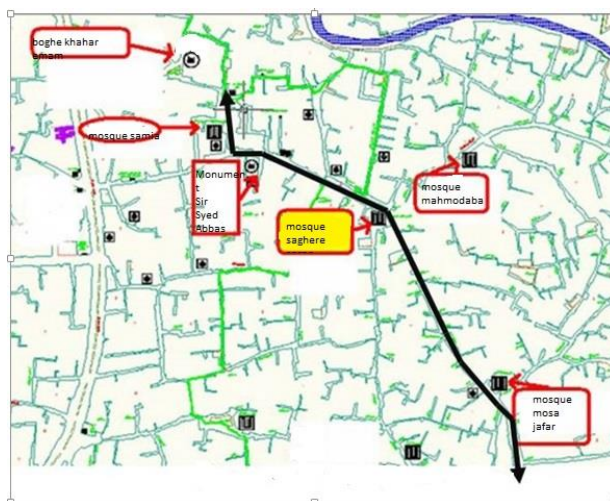


Figure 6: The Route from Iraq Bridge to the Shrine of Imam's Sister

Socio-Cultural Aspects

Since mosques have always been a place for social communication in the neighborhoods and cities, many of the social and economic activities like education, resolving disputes, solving social and economic problems took place in the mosques [14]. Thus, the formation of many mosques in this neighborhood and its belonging to different classes of people, increased social solidarity.

Another reason for the creation of the aforementioned religious sites was the need for collective communication among the residents which was achieved with the building of these religious sites. Inside or outside the mosques were appropriate places for social interaction, and since the people living around a mosque usually belonged to a tribe this interaction led to social solidarity. "Social solidarity is a factor for facilitating social communication; with the help of this factor the citizens can fruitfully interact with one another" [14].

In historical studies of the city of Rasht, it has been repeatedly said that some of the land owners built a mosque for their own tribe, and according to most researchers of Gilan's culture, those wealthy families who lived in Sagharisazan and Zahedan, owned a lot of land and property.

Thus, to establish a powerful social status and to strengthen their religious status, they became benefactors for building a mosque or a religious place; as noted, "The lane following Samiei's family reaches *Imam's Sister*, where the mosque of *Haj Sami*' was located [...] which was built by the late Haj Sami' Khan Rashti" (Khomamizadeh, 2011).

It seems that building religious sites was meant to gain social and economic power, and the well-known families of the city used this for economic legibility; also each mosque was a symbol of the identity of the people in the neighborhood (Consulting Engineers of Gozineh, 2003). For the wealthy people of each neighborhood, building a mosque was a profitable thing to do which manifested social and economic power and was a symbol of authority. Thus, the large mosque of *Haj Sami*' which was located near the shrine of *Imam's Sister* showed the economic status of its benefactor; given its multiple functions, it was also useful for meeting the needs of the people of the neighborhood and for increasing a sense of belonging and social interaction.

Thus, socio-cultural factor had a pivotal role in the existence of religious sites by reflecting identity and increasing social relations. Thus, the socio-cultural factor has a pivotal role in establishing and extending religious sites in this neighborhood.

Creating a special image of an object is effective in its semiotic role. "To create a special image of an object, first it is necessary that the object becomes identified and its differences clarified, and then the object can be considered an independent unit" [15].

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As mentioned earlier, these religious sites belonged to a tribe or a group of people, thus, another reason influencing the formation of various religious sites, was the reflection of the inhabitants' identity. In such a case, identity is manifested in the urban texture where the buildings have a key role in maintaining people's memories and perceptions [15]. It seems that this latter factor has affected the middle scale urban identity (the case study).

From the economic perspective, since public places like the mosques have a close relationship with the social life of the people, they are affected by the socio-biologic needs, and are therefore used to meet the daily needs of the people.

Therefore, minor economic functions are important in such contexts; where another reason influencing the formation of various religious sites is to provide for a wide range of goods and services for the inhabitants, thus, cultural, trades (shops), and educational centers have been created alongside the mosques (e.g., the mosque of the school of *Haj Sami* and the mosque of *Daneshsara*) to meet some part of the daily needs of the inhabitants and to improve the living conditions of the neighborhood; because "the quality of urban life is increased by economic opportunities such as the closeness of home and work place, providing a wide range of goods and services, etc." [15].

By creating trades, cultural, and educational centers next to the mosques, the inhabitants were more attracted, and thus, the functions of urban life were added to the functions of religious sites. It can be concluded that the economic function of the religious sites was mostly to strengthen socio-cultural bonds and it can be considered an independent factor in the urban life of the people.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the above considerations, the social factor is the main factor in the formation, influence, and modelling in this texture. Accordingly, physical-spatial, socio-cultural, and also economic factors have played a role in drawing the attention of the people to the shrine of *Imam's Sister*. The formation of trades centers (shops) and other peripheral sites around each mosque which plays the economic role in creating jobs and wealth is also rooted in the social factor in order to construct social communication among the inhabitants and increase social interaction and solidarity.

The formation and accumulation of religious buildings around the shrine of *Imam's Sister* in Rasht is mostly because of the physical-spatial and socio-cultural factors; one can also mention hydrology as a factor for the early inhabitation of the area. This latter factor has led to the formation of various shrines in the area.

The presence and authority of the wealthy people in each neighborhood is one of the factors for strengthening the religious pole as a manifestation of social and economic power. Moreover, the religious sites around the shrine of *Imam's Sister* have been built in close interaction with the shrine of *Imam's Sister*, which is a highlight of the identity of the people, and functions as a sign of the mental perception of the people.

As people began to know that they are approaching this holy shrine they also noticed the peripheral attractions like discernibility, hierarchy, meeting social, economic, cultural, educational, and meeting their daily life needs.

The location of these religious sites around the shrine of *Imam's Sister* has made it possible the creation of social and economic praxis for the inhabitants. It can be argued that the socio-cultural factor has had the main role in the formation and influence of the texture surrounding the shrine of *Imam's Sister*, and other factors are dependent on the socio-cultural factor.

Analyzing the reasons for the formation of many religious sites, in addition to the conditions of locality, suggests a kind of interaction between the inhabitants and the shrine of *Imam's Sister*. It seems that this neighborhood has been effective as a religious factor in the spatio-physical configuration of Rasht, and has created a religious center in the city of Rasht.

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Table 2: The Reasons for the Formation of Religious Sites with Respect to the Type of Interaction between People and the Completion of its Peripheral Activities

Classification		Effective Conditions	The Role of the Conditions in the Formation of Various Religious Sites
1) Spatio-physical aspects	Centrality	People's need for a place to get together in order to have social communication and meet their general needs.	Building mosques due to creating central points (focal points) was to do other peripheral activities, and the people's emphasis on highlighting the centrality of it.
	Discernibility	The shrine of <i>Imam's Sister</i> must be fore grounded as a prayer center, and it must be built in a neighborhood where it can become a center of visual and physical attraction.	The reason for the formation of many religious sites around the shrine of <i>Imam's Sister</i> , increasing the discernibility and distinctiveness of the shrine; these mosques were not meant to exceed the grandeur of the shrine.
	Hierarchy	Appropriate positioning of the mosque of <i>Imam's Sister</i> in accordance with the activities done there, informs the person about approaching the mosque.	The reason for the formation of many religious sites around the shrine of <i>Imam's Sister</i> is to create a preparatory route to reach the shrine. There is step-by-step (hierarchy) movement toward the shrine by having created other religious sites and public baths.
	Communication and Social Solidarity	Depending on what kind of other places they are built next to, special group of people are drawn to the mosques. Therefore, it increases unity and social solidarity among the people who go there; social solidarity facilitates and increases social communication. Where there is a higher degree of social communication, the rate of crime drops.	Another reason for the formation of many religious sites is the need for social communication among the inhabitants which was achieved by building the religious sites. Inside or outside of these sites was an appropriate place for social interaction, and since the inhabitants of the neighborhood around a mosque belonged to a tribe, this interaction led to social solidarity. Such a texture with a high degree of communication and solidarity and low rate of crime is appropriate for the area around the shrine of <i>Imam's Sister</i> .
2) Socio-cultural aspects	Identity	Creating a clear image of the neighborhood is effective in its semiotic role and giving an identity to it.	Building mosques as a clear image and sign of the inhabitants identity and their reverence toward <i>Imam's Sister</i> .
3) Economic Aspects		The quality of life increases through creating economic opportunities such as the closeness of home and work place, and providing for a wide range of goods and services, etc.	Building mosques in order to create economic opportunities by building trades, education, and public health centers around it.

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