



Sacred Space Transformation in the Context of Power and Culture: Lessons from the Hagia Sophia Mosque (Turkey) and the Sultan of Ternate Mosque (Ternate, Indonesia)

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Abstract. This study analyzes the transformation of sacred spaces within the context of power and culture through a comparative study between Hagia Sophia in Turkey and Sultan Ternate Mosque in Indonesia. Employing a theoretical and conceptual approach based on literature and historical documents, this research examines the political influence on architectural transformation, symbolic meanings in power transitions, local cultural adaptation practices, and meaning negotiation within community contexts. Findings reveal that Hagia Sophia represents a substitutive-confrontational transformation model driven by identity politics agenda, while Sultan Ternate Mosque demonstrates an accumulative-consensual model that is organic and participatory. These differences reflect the influence of socio-political contexts and cultural traditions in shaping sacred space transformation patterns. This research contributes to theoretical understanding of the relationship between space, power, and culture, while providing practical implications for cultural heritage and sacred space management in plural societies.

Keywords: Sacred Space, Architectural Transformation, Political Power, Cultural Identity, Religious Symbolism.

1 Introduction

The transformation of sacred spaces has emerged as a global phenomenon that reflects complex interactions between religious, cultural, and political forces. The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul exemplifies this complexity, having undergone multiple transformations from a Byzantine church to an Ottoman mosque, then to a museum in 1934, and back to a mosque in 2020 (Çoruhlu et al., 2020; Machabée, 2023; Oztig & Adisonmez, 2024). This reconversion was driven by the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) to assert its Islamic political vision and reinforce its authority through a neo-Ottomanist agenda (Oztig & Adisonmez, 2024; G. Trantas, 2025). Similarly, other significant sites

worldwide—including the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba in Spain, the Ayodhya Temple in India, and various European synagogues—have become contested spaces where religious claims intersect with heritage conservation and national identity (Cesari, 2021; Edge & Rajan, 2020; Griera et al., 2024). These transformations reveal how sacred spaces become arenas for political and cultural contestation, challenging traditional notions that separate religious use from heritage status.

In the Indonesian context, historic mosques represent a unique synthesis of Islamic principles with local traditions, embodying what is known as "Islam Nusantara." These mosques function not merely as places of worship but as cultural heritage sites that reflect the syncretism of Islamic and indigenous influences (Primanizar, 2024; Wiryomartono, 2023). The architecture of Indonesian mosques incorporates local materials and design elements, creating distinctive blends that respond to climatic conditions and customary practices (Budi & Wibowo, 2018). Furthermore, the interaction between Islam and local customs (*adat*) involves dynamic negotiation of values and practices, as seen in regions like Jayawijaya where traditional rituals are harmonized with Islamic teachings (Ismail & Asso, 2024). This cultural integration demonstrates how mosques serve as political arenas where local leaders engage with communities, reflecting the political significance of religious spaces in accordance with Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony (Hasanah & Purwanti, 2020).

Despite the global significance of sacred space transformations, comparative studies examining these phenomena from cross-regional perspectives with critical approaches to power and culture remain limited. Previous research tends to focus on sacred spaces from purely historical or architectural viewpoints, without holistically considering how political dynamics interact with local forces in shaping the physical adaptation of worship spaces. Moreover, the concept of authenticity in religious architectural preservation is still dominated by Western standards, even though Islamic and local indigenous perspectives offer different understandings of sacred value continuity that are crucial to examine within the Global South context. The lack of deep exploration into how local identities and central power negotiate to create distinctive narratives and forms of sacred space represents a significant research gap that this study aims to address.

This research poses two fundamental questions: how does political power influence the transformation of worship spaces in the cases of Hagia Sophia and the Sultan of Ternate Mosque, and how do local dynamics mediate the process of sacred space adaptation both physically and symbolically? Through a decolonial theoretical lens, this study seeks to reveal how authenticity within Islamic and local traditional contexts challenges Western epistemological hegemony in understanding sacred space. The research objectives include identifying patterns of sacred space transformation, comparing the substitutive-confrontational model (Hagia Sophia) versus the accumulative-consensual model (Ternate), and contributing to decolonial theory and context-based conservation. This study offers theoretical contributions to the intersection of religious architecture, spatial studies, and political culture, while positioning architecture from the periphery as a valid source of knowledge that challenges Eurocentric dominance in sacred space understanding.

2 Theoretical Framework

This study employs decolonial theory as its primary analytical lens, drawing particularly on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the "Production of Space" which posits that space is a social product shaped by interactions and power dynamics within society (Thompson, 2009; Zagora & Samic, 2014). Lefebvre's framework illuminates how architecture and urban planning are influenced by socio-political agendas, reflecting and reinforcing power structures embedded within spatial arrangements (Huchzermeyer, 2019; Thompson, 2009). Critical Heritage Studies further enriches this framework by addressing the complexities of authenticity and heritage conservation in politically charged contexts, advocating for more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches that challenge Eurocentric and colonialist underpinnings of heritage practices (McArthur, 2022; Saifi et al., 2022; Wells, 2010). This decolonial perspective emphasizes the need to recognize and challenge colonial legacies embedded in spatial design while highlighting how spaces can signify both oppression and resistance (Lara, 2022).

The concept of authenticity in architecture presents a contested terrain where Western perspectives, traditionally emphasized by scholars like Brandi and Jokilehto, prioritize the preservation of original materials and historical accuracy (Bosman, 2020; Mens, 2020). However, decolonial critiques argue that authenticity is often a colonial construct used to enforce power relations and marginalize Indigenous perspectives, advocating instead for more flexible and context-specific understandings that recognize the dynamic and evolving nature of cultural heritage (Ellis, 2014; Verbuyst, 2025). In contrast, Islamic perspectives on sacred spaces emphasize transcendent and spiritual aspects over physical forms, where the sacredness of mosques is linked to their role in fostering community and spiritual connection rather than architectural authenticity (Allahham, 2019; Ayyad, 2024). This spiritual emphasis aligns with broader Islamic principles that prioritize the spiritual over the material, while local perspectives, such as those found in Javanese religious architecture, demonstrate how local symbols and traditions can be harmoniously integrated with modernity to create sacred spaces that resonate with community identity (Adicandra et al., 2022).

The analytical framework for this comparative study employs five key indicators to examine the interplay between architecture, culture, and politics. First, spatial transformation analysis examines changes in layout, function, and symbolism that reveal the influence of historical and contemporary power dynamics on sacred spaces. Second, political influence assessment considers how different forms of governance—whether empires, nation-states, or local sultanates—shape architectural practices and reflect broader socio-political contexts. Third, cultural integration evaluation explores how Islamic traditions and local *adat* practices interweave to create unique architectural expressions that embody community values. Fourth, authenticity discourse analysis contrasts Western frameworks with local interpretations to understand how different conceptualizations of authenticity impact heritage preservation and community identity. Finally, community participation examination investigates the tension between top-down impositions and grassroots movements, exploring how participatory frameworks can better reflect local identities and foster decolonized narratives that emphasize marginalized voices. These indicators collectively enable a comprehensive analysis of how

sacred space transformations reflect complex negotiations between power, culture, and community agency.

3 Methodology

This research employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine the transformation of sacred spaces through the lens of power and cultural dynamics. Data collection relies primarily on secondary sources, including scholarly literature, archival materials, historical documents, and academic works that provide comprehensive insights into the transformation processes of both case studies. The analytical method utilizes a comparative framework based on the five indicators previously established: spatial transformation (layout, function, symbolism), political influence (state, empire, sultanate), cultural integration (Islamic tradition, *adat*/local practice), authenticity discourse (Western vs. local perceptions), and community participation (top-down vs. bottom-up approaches). The selection of Hagia Sophia and the Sultan of Ternate Mosque is strategically justified by their contrasting transformation contexts: Hagia Sophia represents a state-driven transformation embedded within global geopolitical considerations, where political authority has repeatedly redefined the site's function to assert national and religious identity on an international stage. Conversely, the Sultan of Ternate Mosque exemplifies a community-driven transformation characterized by local negotiation processes, where traditional *adat* practices intersect with Islamic principles through grassroots participation and regional cultural dynamics. This comparative approach enables the identification of distinct patterns in sacred space transformation while revealing how different scales of power from global geopolitics to local community agency shape the physical and symbolic evolution of religious architecture.

4 Results and Discussion

Table 1. The comparative analysis between Hagia Sophia and the Sultan of Ternate Mosque reveals distinct yet intersecting trajectories in how sacred spaces evolve under the influence of power, culture, and community.

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Hagia Sophia (Turki)</i>	<i>Masjid Sultan Ternate (Indonesia)</i>
1. Spatial Transformation <i>[Changes in the function, form, symbolism, and meaning of sacred spaces]</i>	Gül (2019) revealed that changes in function and restoration materials affected the character of sacred space (for example, plaster changes, addition/closure of clay-pot cavities), thereby altering the interior soundscape and the perception of rituals/activities within the space.	Rahim & Marasabessy (2019) conducted a technical analysis showing functional and physical adaptation (clerestory, cross-ventilation, opening type, ventilation ratio) in the Sultanate Mosque building to achieve thermal comfort without air conditioning — reflecting the transformation of technical/functional aspects of

The historical description of the change in function (church → mosque → museum → mosque) is recorded as a series of legal-administrative processes that mediate the spatial status. (Coruhlu et al., 2020).

The transformation from museum → mosque is positioned as a symbolic act marking the reconfiguration of sacred spatial meaning within the national political narrative (Qodarsasi & Khofifah, 2020)

Documentation of material and restoration changes over time shows how these influences the spatial character (volume, layers of historical vs. modern plaster) and consequently the ritual/acoustic experience in Hagia Sophia (Z. S. Gül, 2019).

Dworzecki et al. (2025) also explained the practical consequences of functional change on public access, mosaic management (covering during prayer), and security arrangements — showing that the transformation altered

the spatial layout of access and collection management.

The reuse of the museum as a mosque was more symbolic than functional (Istanbul already has many mosques), so the meaning of space shifted as a political statement (G. E. Trantas, 2025).

Sujati & Iryana (2020) describe public concerns regarding access and freedom of visitation (the functional change may limit non-Muslim public visits), thus the transformation affects the public use and right of access to space.

sacred space to meet climatic and contemporary practice needs.

There has been a morphological shift of local mosques from traditional pyramid roofs to domed/modern variants; some retain traditional forms (Sigi Lamo), while others adopt new ones — showing transformation in form/function influenced by social and economic conditions (Bachrudin, 2014).

The spatial arrangement (mosque, palace, bridge, tomb) as interrelated units demonstrates structured sacred spatial organization reinforcing the political-cultural doctrine of the Sultanate (Hasim et al., 2023).

The study distinguishes inner/outer spaces and sacred/profane zones within the palace complex; Sigi Lamo is categorized as an outer sacred space — identifying functional-spatial divisions marking hierarchies of sacredness in the area (Muhammad & Agustina, 2017). Sigi Lamo is recorded as a square-plan mosque with a multi-tiered/seven-layered roof, retaining traditional architectural features (main columns, verandas) — showing continuity of form but also ritual-functional change throughout history (including renovation/restoration in 1982–1983) (Pinem, 2013).

Although not related to building form, Umaternate & Hidayat (2021) show transformation in the

2. Political Influence

[The Role of authority (states, rules, sultans, religious, scholars) in determining the function and status of space]

The legal argument and usage status of Hagia Sophia relate to the foundation deed of Fatih Sultan Mehmet and state administrative decisions (1934 museum decree). The Council of State annulled the 1934 decree based on waqf/foundation law, indicating that the decision regarding the spatial function was heavily influenced by legal and state instruments (Coruhlu et al., 2020). Qodarsasi & Khofifah (2020) link Hagia Sophia's status change with the rise of Islamic politics/domestic political agenda (a shift from Kemalist secularism to Ottoman/Islamic heritage policies as political legitimacy tools). Ministerial statements framed the status change as a matter of national sovereignty (not an international issue), thus situating the decision within the logic of state sovereignty (Kiran, 2020).

Dworzecki et al. (2025) explicitly stated that reconversion to a mosque was a political decision that generated diplomatic consequences (Turkey–Greece tension, NATO/EU response), and was seen as a component of national identity policy based on Ottoman heritage. G. E. Trantas (2025) argues that reconversion was a symbolic political act (neo-Ottomanism/revanchist agenda)

meaning of spatial orientation (qibla) — a shift between historically sacred orientation and modern scientific orientation.

The revival of the Sultanate institution (after a dormant period) influenced the standardization of mosque elements.

When the Sultanate authority was active, there were calls to restore and preserve traditional values (cultural control through leadership) (Bachrudin, 2014).

The palace (Kadaton) and Sigi Lamo function as mutually reinforcing elements: the palace as the center of political legitimacy and Sigi Lamo as the religio-cultural center. The Sultan is positioned as both a political authority and spiritual leader — political power constructs the status and function of sacred space (Hasim et al., 2023).

Designation of the area as a cultural heritage site (Law No.11/2010 and regional regulations) shows the role of the state/formal institutions in determining the legal status and preservation of sacred spaces and Sultanate structures (Muhammad & Agustina, 2017). Rituals involving the Sultan (e.g., Sultan's procession to the mosque) illustrate how political authority is embedded in religious rituals and spatial governance (Zakry, 2020).

marking a reversal of secularism and strengthening the identity of Islamic Turkishness under Erdoğan. Sujati & Iryana (2020) described both domestic and international reactions to Erdoğan's decision, emphasizing the framing of national sovereignty and the state's right to redefine the identity of heritage sites.

3. Cultural Integration

[Integration of cultural values (customs, local traditions, religion) in sacred spaces]

Kiran (2020) asserted the official narrative that the new function would not erase traditions of tolerance and diversity; Hagia Sophia is promoted as a symbol that "accommodates" multiple cultural/religious layers despite serving as a mosque. Sujati & Iryana (2020) argued that restoring its mosque function recognizes Ottoman/Islamic heritage and integrates Islamic values into contemporary national identity.

Bachrudin (2014) identified that similarities in architectural elements (roof forms, mihrab, minbar, ritual attributes) reflect the Sultanate's cultural influence on religious-space patterns as an expression of socio-cultural identity. Royal ceremonies (Legu Gam, Kololi Kie, Fere Kie) held in the palace-mosque complex show how Islamic and traditional rituals are integrated into sacred space as markers of status and legitimacy (Hasim et al., 2023).

Religious practices at Sigi Lamo merge sharia with local tradition (use of local language in sermons, "bobato akhirat"

as ritual organization representing local ethnicities/regions) — affirming cultural integration in mosque ritual management (Pinem, 2013).

Mosque rituals (restrictions on women praying inside, dress codes, prayer row hierarchy by rank, Kolano Uci Sabea)

reflect syncretism between Islam and custom; local traditions are aligned with Islamic principles based on indigenous wisdom, so sacred space embodies both cultural

and religious order (Zakry, 2020).

The Kololi Kie ritual combines Islamic values with local practices (pilgrimage to ancestral tombs and collective prayer), demonstrating integration of religion and custom within sacred spaces (Alhaddad & Effendi, 2022).

4. Authenticity Discourse

[Authenticity concept according to West authority vs. local interpretation]

Changes in restoration materials (e.g., use of gypsum/cement-based vs. traditional lime-based plaster) triggered technical debates on the appropriateness/authenticity of restoration materials, which affect the original character of the space (Z. S. Gül, 2019).

Legal debates also involved claims about the "authenticity" of function — according to the founder's waqf vs. the modern state's secular narrative — so authenticity discourse is expressed through legal norms (ownership/waqf) and conservation as a cultural asset (Coruhlu et al., 2020).

Sü Gül (2019) emphasized the importance of maintaining original plaster/material historiography to preserve the historical-acoustic character; restoration concerns not only aesthetics but also performative attributes (sound), which are part of the authenticity of sacred space. Dworzecki et al. (2025) noted UNESCO and international concerns about how new functions might affect heritage values, and potential conflict between international conservation narratives and domestic interpretations of the original function.

Sigi Lamo is declared "authentically preserved" and registered as a cultural heritage site; preservation efforts are

supported by local government recommendations to socialize its historical values — touching on authenticity discourse and heritage protection (Pinem, 2013).

A deviation in qibla direction ($\pm 20^\circ$) is maintained for sacred reasons, respecting ancestral ijtihad and concerns about social impacts of change; fiqh principles ("certainty is not removed by doubt") are used to justify keeping the old orientation — directly engaging with authenticity discourse versus modern scientific knowledge (Umaternate & Hidayat, 2021)

G. E. Trantas (2025) discussed how reconstruction of historical narratives (prophecy, conquest rhetoric) reinscribes “authenticity” of the site from religious/nationalist perspectives, distinct from international conservation discourse.

5. Community Participation
[The level of community involvement in preserving, interpreting, and transforming sacred spaces]

Dworzecki et al. (2025) presented survey findings showing strong support among government supporters and significant approval across the Muslim world, indicating public participation/acceptance as a factor of legitimacy. There were bottom-up movements (petitions, commemorative prayers, civic initiatives) supporting reconversion, showing that the process was not solely top-down (G. E. Trantas, 2025).

The Kololi Kie ritual involves broad community participation and serves as a medium of spiritual communication between individuals and ancestral spirits, showing communal engagement in maintaining and interpreting ritual-space meaning (Alhaddad & Effendi, 2022). Adoption of Sultanate elements in community mosques illustrates a social mechanism (patronage, adherence) where communities replicate sacred forms even without full philosophical understanding — showing participation in reproducing sacred imagery (Bachrudin, 2014). The division of roles (bobato akhirat, prayer row organization) reflects organized community participation in managing rituals and mosque space (Zakry, 2020). Resistance by local communities and traditional leaders to alter the qibla direction shows the role of customary leaders (adat chiefs, modim) and sensitivity to traditional authority in defining ritual practice/space; technical (scientific) changes risk social friction, indicating political-cultural influences in technical decisions (Umaternate & Hidayat, 2021).

(1) Spatial Transformation.

Both sites underwent profound transformations in function and meaning. Hagia Sophia's reconversion cycles—from church to mosque, to museum, and back to mosque—illustrate a spatial palimpsest driven by political symbolism and heritage re-interpretation. These transitions altered not only the building's material fabric but also its ritual soundscape and access hierarchy, marking shifts in religious identity and state ideology.

In contrast, the Sultan of Ternate Mosque (Sigi Lamo) experienced adaptive transformations primarily in architectural morphology and environmental performance. The introduction of cross-ventilation and clerestory systems demonstrates how local builders integrated climatic responsiveness into sacred architecture. Yet, its spatial form—square plan and tiered roof—retains continuity, symbolizing both resilience and cultural rootedness.

(2) Political Influence.

In Turkey, political authority has historically dictated Hagia Sophia's status, from the secular museum decree of 1934 to Erdoğan's reconversion in 2020—an act widely read as a political statement of neo-Ottoman identity and sovereignty. Conversely, in Ternate, political power manifests through the Sultanate's spiritual authority. The mosque and palace form an inseparable spatial-political system where ritual processions reaffirm the Sultan's legitimacy as both temporal and spiritual leader. State recognition of the complex as cultural heritage further demonstrates how political structures mediate sacred status.

(3) Cultural Integration.

Cultural synthesis defines both contexts. Hagia Sophia is officially promoted as a symbol of coexistence between Christian and Islamic heritage, while the Sultan of Ternate Mosque embodies the integration of Islamic law with local adat. Rituals such as Kololi Kie and Legu Gam fuse ancestral veneration with Islamic devotion, illustrating how local cosmologies shape the meaning of sacred space within a hybrid cultural framework.

(4) Authenticity Discourse.

Hagia Sophia's authenticity discourse revolves around material and legal dimensions—debates over restorative materials, the founder's waqf deed, and international heritage claims. In contrast, Sigi Lamo's authenticity is preserved through cultural continuity rather than material conservation. The maintained deviation of the qibla orientation ($\approx 20^\circ$) signifies deference to ancestral ijtihad, privileging local spiritual authority over scientific precision. Thus, authenticity is interpreted as fidelity to inherited belief rather than conformity to universal conservation standards.

(5) Community Participation.

Public involvement plays crucial roles in both sites. In Turkey, civic movements, petitions, and popular sentiment legitimized Hagia Sophia's reconversion, reflecting bottom-up endorsement of state-led change. Meanwhile, in Ternate, community engagement operates through ritual participation and customary governance (*bobato akhirat*). Local resistance to altering the qibla underscores community agency in maintaining sacred order, showing how social cohesion and local wisdom shape spatial continuity.

5 Conclusion

The comparison between Hagia Sophia and the Sultan of Ternate Mosque demonstrates that sacred space transformation is neither purely architectural nor theological—it is a socio-political and cultural process negotiated through power, identity, and tradition. In Hagia Sophia, spatial and functional changes articulate a narrative of political sovereignty and national identity formation. In contrast, the Sultan of Ternate Mosque reflects the endurance of local cosmology where religious, political, and cultural elements interweave harmoniously.

Both cases highlight that the “sacred” is not fixed but continuously redefined through historical circumstances and communal interpretation. Political authority may reframe sacredness through policy and symbolism, but cultural adaptation and collective participation sustain its living meaning. These findings suggest that understanding sacred space requires an integrative lens—where architecture, politics, and culture converge to construct and reconstruct spiritual identity across time and place.

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