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MORALITY BEFORE KNOWLEDGE

Reconceptualizing authenticity in islamic urban heritage: A critical spatial analysis of ritual practice, collective memory, and community engagement

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ABSTRACT

Background: *Eyüpsultan*, one of Istanbul's most historically and spiritually significant Islamic urban quarters, faces increasing pressure from rapid urban development and heritage commodification. These transformations challenge conventional understandings of authenticity, especially in sacred urban contexts. This study aims to introduce and develop the concept of lived authenticity—a framework that interprets authenticity not only as material preservation but as a dynamic, culturally embedded experience shaped by ritual, spatial memory, and community engagement. **Methods:** Using a qualitative methodology, the research combines visual-spatial ethnography, photographic documentation, semi-structured interviews, and historical-architectural review conducted over a twelve-month period in *Eyüpsultan*. **Findings:** The study finds that the authenticity of *Eyüpsultan* is continuously produced and reaffirmed through embodied religious practices, evolving spatial configurations, and collective memory. This lived authenticity resists static or object-based definitions, offering instead a perspective rooted in continuity of use and sacred urban rhythms. **Conclusion:** The research challenges dominant conservation paradigms by proposing a contextually grounded model of authenticity, contributing to theoretical discourses in Islamic urban heritage and offering insights for participatory, community-oriented preservation strategies. **Novelty/Originality of this Article:** This study offers a novel concept of "lived authenticity" that reconceptualizes urban heritage authenticity as an active, embodied cultural experience shaped by community practices and spatial memory, moving beyond traditional static preservation models.

KEYWORDS: eyüpsultan; critical spatial theory; islamic heritage; lived authenticity; sacred urbanism.

1. Introduction

Eyüpsultan, one of the most historically revered and spiritually vibrant districts of Istanbul, serves as a compelling locus for exploring the evolving dynamics of authenticity in Islamic urban heritage. As the resting place of *Abu Ayyub al-Ansari* an esteemed companion of the Prophet Muhammad the area has long attracted pilgrims and spiritual seekers, embedding it deeply within the cultural memory of the Ottoman and post-Ottoman Islamic world. Beyond its religious significance, *Eyüpsultan* exemplifies the spatial and symbolic richness that characterizes Istanbul's complex urban fabric.

Istanbul's broader urban morphology reflects a unique cultural "DNA" composed of both planned geometrical layouts and unplanned, organic developments (Kaya & Bölen, 2017). Within this mosaic, *Eyüpsultan* stands out for its dense layering of sacred spaces, communal rituals, and architectural palimpsests, making it a fertile site for examining the lived dimensions of heritage (Altun, 2023). Studies have shown that the historic urban fabric of Istanbul continues to inspire contemporary city-making practices by emphasizing local values, spatial rhythms, and enduring cultural patterns (Nuray, 1995). The district's religious and civic infrastructures form part of the city's dynamic urban identity, intricately tied to both memory and morphology.

As Istanbul evolves into a global metropolis, space syntax analyses have demonstrated shifting patterns of spatial accessibility and urban integration (Kubat & Ayse, 2001). Simultaneously, cultural events such as the European Capital of Culture 2010 have played a strategic role in rebranding the city's image for global audiences, further intensifying the commodification of heritage (Biçakçi, 2012). Scholars have argued that Istanbul's position as a cultural and geopolitical bridge offers both opportunities and tensions for sustainable urban development, particularly in areas of historic and religious significance (Karaman & Levent, 2000).

Despite these insights, prevailing heritage frameworks often remain grounded in Eurocentric models that privilege material conservation over socio-spatial practices. Documents such as the Venice Charter or the Nara Document on Authenticity emphasize physical integrity, often failing to capture the performative, ritual, and spiritual dimensions that define Islamic sacred spaces. In the context of *Eyüpsultan*, this disjunction becomes especially apparent. While the district continues to serve as a living urban religious center, interventions rooted in material-based preservation may neglect the intangible qualities that sustain its sacredness.

This paper addresses this conceptual and methodological gap by introducing and developing the concept of lived authenticity, a framework that positions authenticity not as a static attribute of architectural form, but as a relational process enacted through ritual, spatial memory, and community engagement. Using *Eyüpsultan* as a field-based case study, the research adopts a qualitative, spatial-ethnographic approach to trace how sacred urban heritage is continuously shaped and negotiated through both tangible and intangible practices. By situating this inquiry within critical heritage theory, Islamic urbanism, and the lived experience of space, the study contributes a culturally grounded alternative to prevailing models of conservation and heritage evaluation.

2. Methods

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in spatial ethnography and critical heritage analysis to investigate the notion of lived authenticity in the *Eyüpsultan* district of Istanbul. The study was conducted over a period of twelve months, combining empirical observation with archival, visual, and narrative-based methods to ensure triangulation of data (Denzin, 2017; Miles et al., 2014).

2.1 Research location and justification

Eyüpsultan was selected as the research site due to its continuous use as a sacred urban space and its layered history within the Islamic urban tradition. The district exhibits a rich assemblage of mosques, tombs, cemeteries, and pilgrimage routes, many of which remain active in communal religious life. These characteristics make *Eyüpsultan* an ideal setting for investigating how authenticity is enacted beyond material preservation. A research map was developed following cartographic standards to document spatial typologies and routes of ritual movement within the district (Kubat & Ayse, 2001).

The study was conducted in *Eyüpsultan*, a historically significant district located on the northwestern edge of Istanbul, Türkiye. As shown in Figure 1, *Eyüpsultan* is situated along the Golden Horn and is known for its spatial concentration of Islamic heritage sites,

including mosques, tombs, cemeteries, and religious schools. Its strategic location within the greater Istanbul region offers both historical continuity and contemporary relevance as a sacred urban hub.
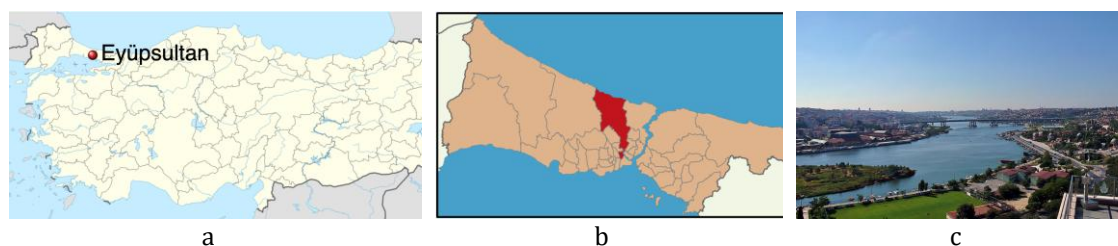

| a | b | c |

Fig. 1 Location of *Eyüpsultan* within the national context of Türkiye (a) the metropolitan area of Istanbul (b) and view from Golden Horn (c)

2.2 Data collection techniques

This study employed a multi-method approach comprising three primary strategies. First, Visual-Spatial Ethnography was conducted through systematic photographic documentation across various spatial zones, including mosque courtyards, cemetery alleys, commercial areas, and urban thresholds. This method enabled the researcher to capture temporal shifts in spatial usage, symbolic markers, and material interventions, following the framework proposed by Pink (2013). Second, narrative interviews were carried out using a semi-structured format with 25 key informants, including religious leaders, community members, heritage officials, and urban planners. The interviews focused on themes such as memory, spirituality, spatial practices, and perceptions of change. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a grounded theory approach as outlined by Charmaz (2012). Third, an archival and historical review was conducted by examining both primary and secondary sources to trace the transformation of *Eyüpsultan*'s built environment, spiritual functions, and symbolic geography over time. This included municipal plans, Ottoman-era maps, and historical photographs obtained from local archives and cultural institutions.

2.3 Data analysis and interpretation

The analysis was conducted in three distinct phases. The first phase involved data condensation, during which key themes were extracted from both interview transcripts and photographic series, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and meanings. The second phase focused on data display, utilizing spatial diagrams, narrative excerpts, and layered maps to visually represent the findings and spatial dynamics of the study area. Finally, the third phase centered on conclusion drawing, where an interpretive synthesis was developed, guided by frameworks from critical heritage theory and spatial semiotics to contextualize and deepen the understanding of the observed transformations (Miles et al., 2014; Smith, 2006).
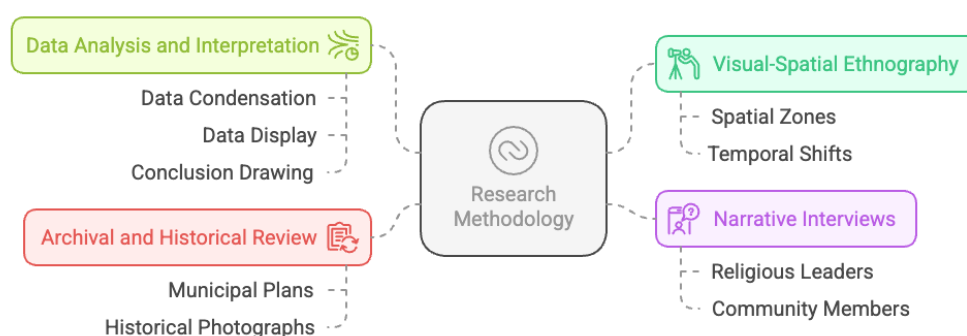

Fig. 2 Research methodology for authenticity study

The epistemological orientation of this study rests on constructivist grounded theory, recognizing that heritage meaning is co-produced by space, memory, and social practice. Ethical approval was obtained through institutional channels, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 *From framework to footpath: Interpreting space, ritual, and heritage in eyüpsultan*

3.1.1   *Critical heritage and the problematics of authenticity*

The notion of authenticity has long been a foundational yet contested concept within the field of heritage conservation. The Venice Charter of 1964 played a pivotal role in formalizing a positivist, material-centered approach, emphasizing the preservation of original fabric, form, and structure in architectural heritage (Wells, 2007). This framework emerged from a Eurocentric worldview that prioritized monumentality, stylistic integrity, and the aesthetics of the built environment. While effective in guiding early restoration efforts, it proved limited in addressing the layered, dynamic, and lived dimensions of heritage particularly in non-Western contexts.

A significant shift occurred with the adoption of the Nara Document on Authenticity in 1994, which introduced a more relativist and pluralistic approach to heritage values (Falser, 2010; Stovel, 2008). Influenced by cultural diversity discourses and critiques of Western universalism, the Nara Document reframed authenticity not as a universal absolute but as a context-dependent and culturally embedded judgment. It acknowledged that heritage could be manifest not only in material form but also in intangible elements such as rituals, traditions, and spiritual practices (Brumann, 2017; Scott, 2015).

Despite this conceptual evolution, the practical application of authenticity within global heritage regimes such as the UNESCO World Heritage framework—has remained inconsistent and often ambiguous (Brumann, 2017). The tension between standardized international conservation guidelines and local cultural specificities continues to generate friction, particularly in Asian contexts, where living religious traditions and informal spatial practices frequently defy codified preservation norms (Winter, 2012).

Scholars have thus called for a critical re-examination of authenticity as a guiding principle in heritage work. Emerging concepts such as "architectural heritage DNA" have been proposed to account for both tangible and intangible aspects of authenticity, allowing for a more nuanced appraisal of cultural continuity and spatial identity (Le & Nguyen, 2024). Others have highlighted the persistent conceptual clashes that have surfaced in the post-Nara period, suggesting that foundational assumptions in heritage theory require recalibration to reflect lived experience, not just formal attributes (Okawa, 2002).

One of the most influential critiques of contemporary heritage practice is articulated through Laurajane Smith's concept of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD). According to Smith (2006), AHD is a dominant framework embedded within institutional heritage systems particularly those shaped by Western epistemologies that privileges expert knowledge, monumental architecture, material conservation, and elite historical narratives (Smith, 2006). This discourse systematically marginalizes alternative forms of heritage-making, especially those based on intangible, community-driven, and spiritually lived practices. In contexts like *Eyüpsultan*, where urban space is continuously redefined through ritual, memory, and spiritual embodiment, the limitations of AHD become increasingly apparent. The framework's reliance on objectivity, fixity, and physical integrity often fails to engage with the ways in which local communities experience and reproduce authenticity. Moreover, AHD tends to universalize heritage values while excluding the socio-religious meanings embedded in spatial practices unique to Islamic cities. As such, applying AHD to living heritage sites like *Eyüpsultan* risks silencing community agency and misrepresenting the relational character of sacred urban space. This study, therefore, aligns with critical

heritage scholarship that challenges the hegemony of AHD and advocates for more inclusive, participatory, and context-sensitive approaches to understanding heritage in diverse cultural settings.

This study builds upon these debates by engaging with critical heritage theory and exploring authenticity as a socially produced and continuously negotiated value. In the context of *Eyüpsultan*, where religious life, spatial rituals, and community memory remain central to urban identity, we argue that the existing heritage frameworks are insufficient. There is an urgent need for alternative models such as the one we propose, lived authenticity that can better account for the embodied, performative, and relational nature of sacred urban space.

3.1.2 Islamic urbanism and the spiritual city

Islamic principles have historically played a fundamental role in shaping the morphology and ethos of cities across the Muslim world. These principles do not merely govern architectural form but also embed ethical, environmental, and spiritual values into the structure of urban life. Rooted in the Islamic worldview (*tawhid*), the planning of cities is viewed as an act of stewardship (*khilafah*), aiming to achieve balance (*mīzān*) between the built environment, human needs, and divine guidance (Kamal et al., 2023; Mortada, 2002). Thus, Islamic urbanism prioritizes human welfare, environmental harmony, and moral consciousness, leading to spatial configurations that facilitate communal living, spiritual reflection, and ecological sensitivity.

At the heart of many classical Islamic cities lies the mosque, not only as a religious center but also as a generator of spatial order and social cohesion. From this node radiate institutions such as the *sūq* (market), *madrasah* (school), and *ḥammām* (public bath), creating a web of spaces where sacred and civic life fluidly intersect. This non-zoning approach, where sacred and profane uses coexist and complement one another, fosters a sense of holistic urbanism that is walkable, organically developed, and intimately tied to daily life. The *fina*, or the transitional space between private dwellings and public paths, further exemplifies the integration of privacy, hospitality, and shared responsibility in spatial design (García, 1993), see Figure 3 below.
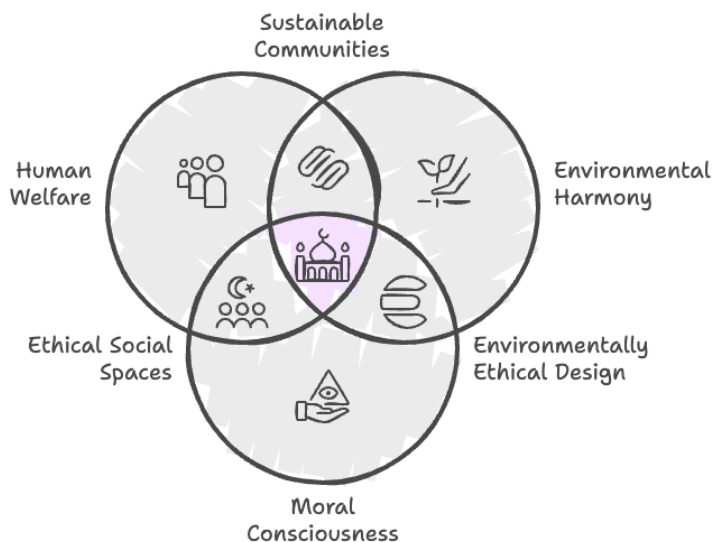

Fig. 3 Holistic urbanism in islamic cities

Moreover, Islamic urban jurisprudence influences building regulations, circulation, and inheritance laws, ensuring equitable access and continuity across generations (Bondarabady & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2018). In cities such as Yazd, these principles are manifest in compact urban layouts, shaded alleys, and self-regulating water systems—demonstrating sustainability not as an afterthought, but as a spiritual imperative (Shojaee

& Paeezeh, 2015). Ethical dimensions also inform architectural ornamentation and environmental integration, reflecting a design logic where form follows *adab* Islamic ethics (Belmessaoud -Boukhalfa, 2012).

The case of Kuala Terengganu, a Malay-Islamic city, illustrates how Islamic urbanism adapts fluidly across geographies, accommodating vernacular traditions while preserving essential values such as modesty, cleanliness, and community orientation (Latip et al., 2020). Similarly, *Eyüpsultan* anchored by the tomb of *Abu Ayyub al-Ansari* serves as a vibrant continuation of Ottoman-Islamic spatial logic, where *baraka* (blessing), *ziyārah* (pilgrimage), and waqf-based endowments shape both the physical landscape and the rhythms of spiritual life.

Islamic urbanism offers a spiritually grounded and socially attuned model of city-making, in which the sacred is not separated from the urban, but rather animates it. The spatial configuration of *Eyüpsultan*, with its layers of meaning, memory, and movement, exemplifies this integration reinforcing the importance of reading Islamic cities not only as architectural artifacts but as spiritual texts written in stone, path, and ritual.

The spiritual architecture of Islamic cities is deeply shaped by concepts such as *baraka* (blessing), *ziyārah* (pilgrimage), and *waqf* (charitable endowment), each of which contributes to the formation of a sacred urban atmosphere. These concepts are not abstract ideals; rather, they are spatial forces giving form to cities through ritualized movement, communal obligation, and symbolic presence. According to Bianca (2000), the flow of *baraka* through certain urban nodes particularly shrines, tombs, and mosques creates a sacral hierarchy of space, where spiritual intensity influences architectural orientation and circulation (Bianca, 2000). In this sense, the city becomes not just a settlement but a pilgrimage landscape, defined by trajectories of devotion and reverence.

a   b

Fig. 4 Pilgrimage and spiritual power of *Abu Ayyub al-Ansari*

Ziyārah, the act of visiting a sacred site, particularly the tombs of saints and revered figures, generates ritual pathways and socioreligious rhythms that structure the temporal life of the city. These practices often lead to the clustering of services markets, fountains,

lodging around spiritual epicenters, reinforcing both the economic vitality and sacred character of certain districts. Moreover, the institution of *waqf*—a religious endowment dedicated to public good—has historically played a central role in sustaining the physical and spiritual infrastructure of Islamic cities. From mosques and schools to fountains and caravanserais, *waqf*-funded structures exemplify a model of urban stewardship in which faith, charity, and spatial justice are intimately linked (Hakim, 1994).

In this context, *Eyüpsultan* represents a remarkable continuation of Ottoman-Islamic urban logic, where sacred space, communal use, and urban morphology are harmoniously interwoven. Centered around the tomb of *Abu Ayyub al-Ansari*, the district has long functioned as a hub of pilgrimage and spiritual power its layout guided not by rigid planning but by the natural flow of devotion, respect, and communal rituals, see Figure 3 below. The proximity of cemeteries, tekke (Sufi lodges), sebils (public fountains), and markets illustrates the Ottoman principle of integrating life and afterlife, body and soul, into a cohesive urban cosmology.

The axiality of *Eyüpsultan* Mosque and its surrounding sacred topography is not accidental—it reflects the Ottoman mastery of aligning spiritual geometry with lived functionality. As such, *Eyüpsultan* stands as a living testimony to how Islamic urbanism transcends technical planning and becomes an act of cultural and spiritual inscription, shaping not only how cities are built, but how they are believed in and remembered.

3.1.3   *Lived space and spatial practice*

The analytical lens of Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad comprising spatial practices (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and spaces of representation (lived space) offers a powerful framework for understanding the dynamic processes through which space is socially produced and spiritually experienced (Watkins, 2005; Baydar et al., 2016). In this triad, perceived space refers to the physical and functional dimensions of space, shaped by everyday routines and bodily movements. Conceived space represents the abstract and planned space of architects, planners, and technocrats often embodied in maps, zoning regulations, and institutional discourse. In contrast, lived space is the space of experience, symbolism, memory, and emotion where meaning is embodied and reinterpreted through cultural practices and rituals, see Figure 5 below.
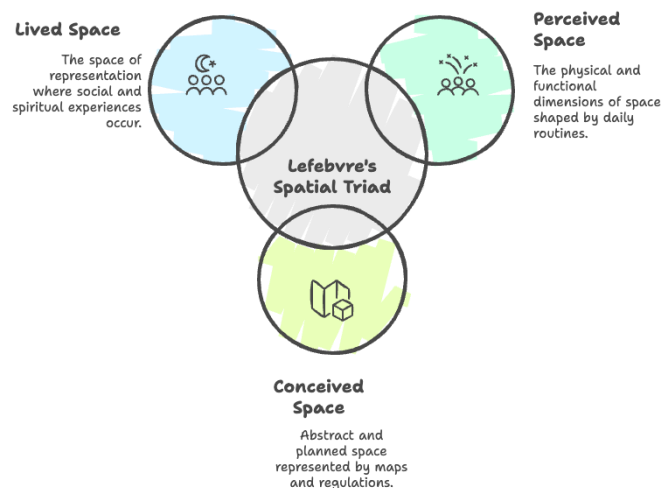

Fig. 5 Exploring the Interplay of space in urban experience of henri lefebvre's spatial triad

In the context of *Eyüpsultan*, this framework illuminates how sacred urban space is continually shaped by religious rituals, spiritual embodiment, and historical memory. For example, the perceived space is reflected in the pedestrian flows around the Eyüp Sultan Mosque, the bustling daily activity of pilgrims, and the circulation routes linking tombs,

cemeteries, and fountains. The conceived space emerges through official restoration policies, heritage signage, and architectural interventions that reconfigure how the district is imagined and regulated by authorities. Meanwhile, the lived space of *Eyüpsultan* manifests through practices such as *ziyārah*, recitation of prayers near tombs, barefoot processions, and other acts of devotion that imbue the space with spiritual intensity—often independent of, or in tension with, the official designations of the site.

This triadic reading enables us to recognize multiple layers of spatial meaning, often coexisting or conflicting. As Lefebvre emphasized, spatial production is never neutral; it is contested, negotiated, and continuously redefined (Gulliver, 2016; Leary-Owhin, 2016). The lived practices of residents and pilgrims in *Eyüpsultan* challenge the dominant heritage discourse by asserting differential space—a space charged with collective memory, resistance to commodification, and religious vitality. This is particularly relevant in urban environments undergoing transformation, where standardized heritage frameworks risk flattening complex spatial identities.

The legacy of Lefebvre's triad has inspired further theoretical advancements, notably Edward Soja's "trialectics of spatiality", which insists on considering all three spatial moments simultaneously for a holistic understanding of space (Márton, 2015). In doing so, it becomes clear that the spiritual authenticity of *Eyüpsultan* cannot be understood solely through architectural conservation or regulatory planning. It must be analyzed through the dialectical interplay of space as used, conceived, and lived where urban form becomes inseparable from spiritual performance and social meaning.

In further deepening our understanding of lived space, the insights of Doreen Massey offer a crucial expansion. Massey (2012) reconceptualizes space as inherently relational, progressive, and multiple not a fixed container for human action, but a dynamic product of interrelations, trajectories, and negotiations of power (Massey, 2012). Rather than being static or bounded, space is always under construction, shaped by social, political, and cultural processes occurring across time and scale (Rodgers, 2004; Taylor, 2013).

This relational perspective aligns strongly with the spatial condition of *Eyüpsultan*, where sacred urbanity is not simply inherited, but actively remade through daily practices, spiritual performances, and community engagements. Space here is produced through ritual gestures, like touching tomb enclosures, reciting prayers along pilgrimage paths, or pausing for ablution at historic sebils. These actions embed personal and collective memory into the fabric of the city, making space not only experienced but co-authored by its users (Meegan, 2017; Sergot & Saives, 2016).

Moreover, Massey's notion of space as multiplicity enables us to understand *Eyüpsultan* not as a singular heritage site, but as a constellation of overlapping spatial narratives. For instance, it is simultaneously a place of worship, a tourist attraction, a neighborhood, a pilgrimage hub, and a symbol of Ottoman-Islamic identity. These layers are not neatly separated; they coexist, compete, and intersect revealing the politics of spatial meaning and the ethical responsibilities of planners, policymakers, and heritage managers in acknowledging these diverse claims (Darling, 2009; Gulson, 2015).

In this way, space becomes a field of power-laden negotiations, where past, present, and future interact. Massey's approach challenges us to move beyond architectural analysis and to engage with the lived, relational, and contested nature of urban sacredness. For heritage practitioners working in Islamic contexts, this implies that preserving authenticity is not about freezing space in time, but about enabling its ongoing production through social memory, ritual flow, and community continuity. Through Massey's lens, we see that *Eyüpsultan*'s value lies not only in its monuments or mapped boundaries, but in its relational vitality a space constantly shaped by those who move through it, dwell in it, and assign meaning to it.

3.1.4   *Framing lived authenticity*

Building upon the critical heritage discourse, Islamic urbanism, and spatial theory including Lefebvre's triad and Massey's relational spatialitythis section proposes a new

conceptual lens: lived authenticity. Unlike conventional understandings of authenticity which often rest on material conservation or marketable heritage aesthetics, lived authenticity is understood here as a processual, ritualized, and community-anchored phenomenon. It is not fixed in objects or timelines, but unfolds through lived experience, sustained rituals, and the social-spatial continuity of place.

Drawing from Lefebvre's notion of lived space, this concept foregrounds the embodied, symbolic, and affective dimensions of urban sacred environments. In *Eyüpsultan*, authenticity is continually enacted not only through the physical presence of heritage buildings but through repetitive practices of prayer, *ziyārah*, memory-sharing, and spiritual gestures. These practices make space meaningful, not merely as a backdrop, but as a performative field of belief and belonging.

The relational view advanced by Doreen Massey complements this by emphasizing authenticity as a product of interactions across trajectories and scales between residents and pilgrims, planners and practitioners, history and the present. Rather than viewing heritage as a static remnant, lived authenticity positions it as a fluid, negotiated performance of identity, deeply embedded in the social body of the community.

The concept also draws from interdisciplinary studies that explore how authenticity is both socially constructed and personally experienced. Scholars such as Bessant (2011) and Pessi (2013) note that religious traditions and collective emotions play central roles in forming experiences of authenticity (Bessant, 2011; Pessi, 2013). These are not passive inheritances but actively cultivated through rites, stories, and spiritual labor. In *Eyüpsultan*, this is visible in the way locals maintain shrines, navigate ritual paths, or recount spiritual histories—actions that reinforce a sense of rootedness and sacred legitimacy.

Moreover, lived authenticity acknowledges the tensions of modernity: the mediatization, public performance, and even the instrumentalization of authenticity in heritage and tourism contexts (Seran, 2010; Insa & Josefa, 2021). Yet, it resists reducing authenticity to surface-level "experience design." Instead, it focuses on how spiritual continuity, ritual repetition, and social interaction serve as the living core of urban sacredness.

This theoretical proposition locates authenticity within social-spatial interaction, not as a heritage status to be certified, but as an evolving, contested, and resilient cultural force. In doing so, lived authenticity bridges the material and immaterial, the personal and collective, the historical and the emergent offering a more nuanced, context-sensitive framework for reading and preserving sacred Islamic urban heritage.

3.2 Spatial-religious morphology of eyüpsultan

The spatial-religious morphology of *Eyüpsultan* reveals a richly layered sacred landscape shaped by centuries of Islamic spiritual practices, community participation, and urban adaptation. Rather than forming a geometrically planned district, *Eyüpsultan* has developed organically through religious activity and collective memory, exemplifying the core principles of Islamic urbanism mosque-centered development, walkability, and the interweaving of sacred and civic functions (Mortada, 2002; Kamal et al., 2023) Hakim, 1994). This morphology is not only architectural but ritualized, relational, and deeply rooted in community engagement.

As shown in Figure 6, the *Eyüpsultan* district is spatially structured around the Eyüp Sultan Mosque and Tomb, forming a spiritual and morphological nucleus. From this center radiate processional paths such as *Silahtarağa Caddesi* and *Cülus Yolu*, connecting key religious institutions Mihrisah Sultan Complex, Sokollu Mehmet Pasha Madrasa, and cemeteries within a sacred urban grid. These axes do not merely serve movement but function as ritual corridors, traversed during acts of *ziyārah*, Friday prayers, and commemorative pilgrimages. The clustering of fountains (sebils), tombs, and waqf-based structures reflects what Bianca (2000) described as a "spatial hierarchy of baraka," where proximity to saints, water, and communal rituals reinforce spiritual gravity (Bianca, 2000).
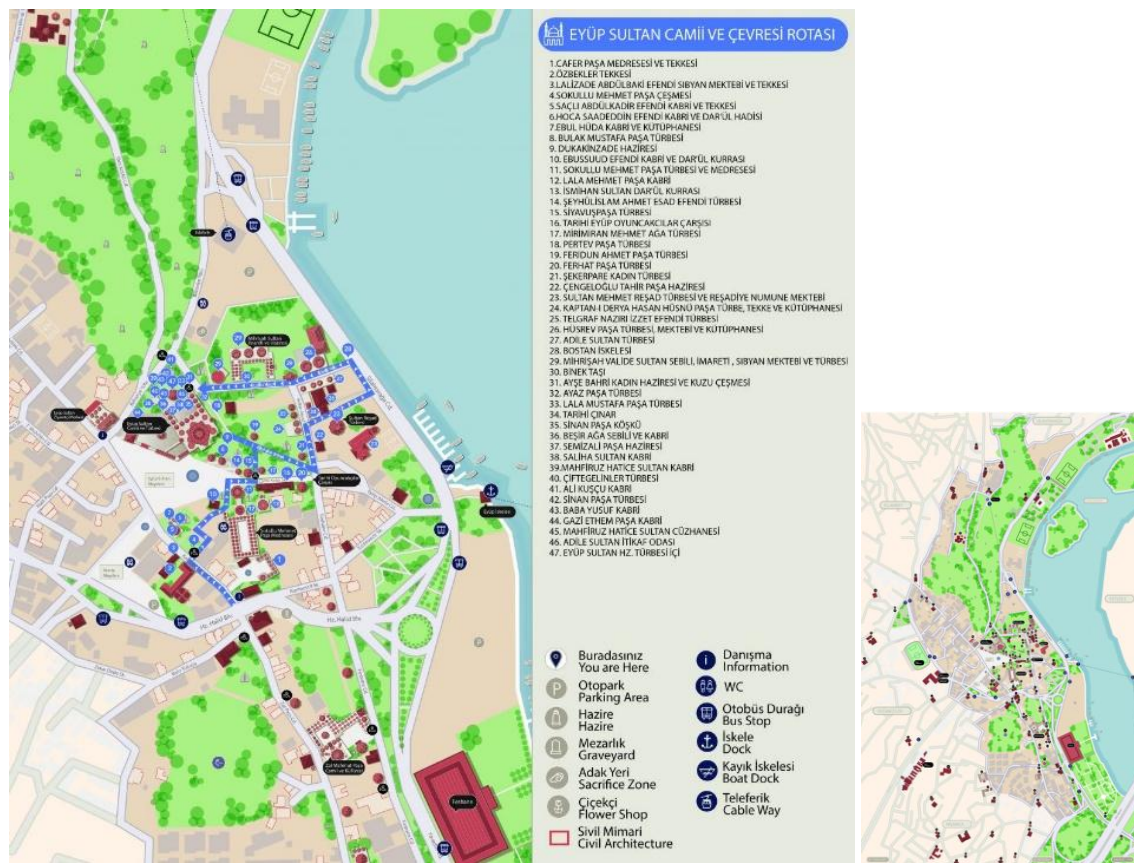
Fig. 6. Map of *eyüpsultan* mosque and its surroundings
(Belediyesi, n.d.)

The spatial layering of these elements is illustrated further in Figure 7 below, which highlights the morphological integration between heritage buildings, ritual pathways, and public gathering spaces. This overlapping of sacred and social functions embodies Massey's (2005) concept of space as a constellation of relational trajectories, where meaning is produced through encounters, memories, and practices rather than formal design alone (Massey, 2012).
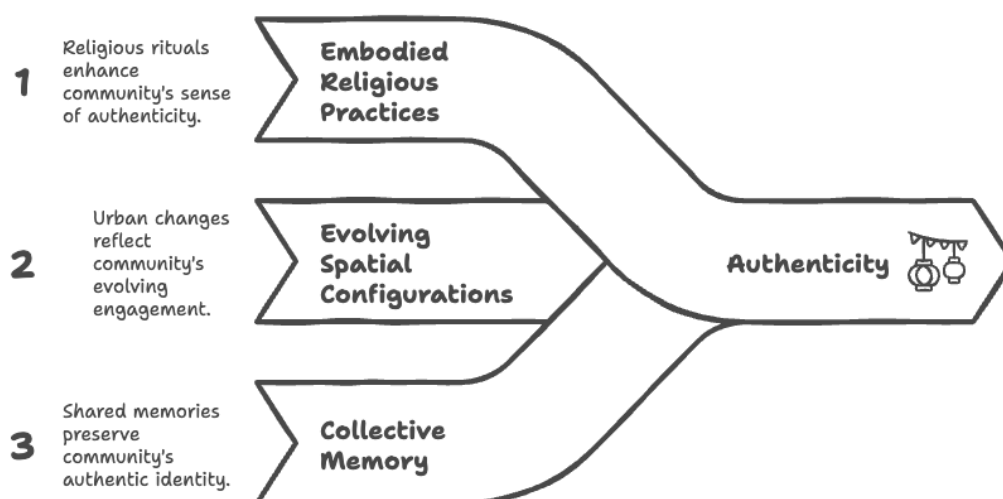

Fig. 7 Pillars of authenticity

To better understand the evolving religious functions of key spatial components, Table 1 bellow, presents a comparative typology of significant elements within *Eyüpsultan*'s heritage zone. The table shows how structures such as the Eyüp Sultan Mosque maintain

high levels of ritual engagement, while others, like madrasahs or fountains, have undergone adaptive reuse or symbolic diminishment. For example, several fountains, originally vital for ablution and ritual purity, have become decorative or inaccessible, reflecting what García Lanza (1993) and Bondarabady & Khavarian-Garmsir (2018) note as functional ruptures within sacred infrastructure.

Table 1. Spatial-religious typology of *eyüpsultan*'s heritage zone

Spatial Element	Primary Function	Religious/Symbolic Role	Observed Transformation	Continuity Indicator
Eyüp Sultan Mosque Complex	Prayer, pilgrimage	Tomb of *Abu Ayyub al-Ansari*; site of ritual blessings (*du'a, ziyarah*)	Refurbishment of facade and lighting	High: daily prayers, continued pilgrimage
Sacred Cemeteries (*Hazîre*)	Burial, remembrance	Resting place of notable scholars, Sufi leaders	Spatial densification; gated pathways added	Medium: shift from open to managed space
Silahtarağa Street	Processional & access route	Traditional *ziyarah* path, connects residential area to shrine	Commercialization; cafes and shops along the route	Medium: ritual flow still intact
Fountain Nodes (*Sebils*)	Ablution, symbolic purity	Spiritual cleansing before prayer or tomb visitation	Many in disrepair; some restored as decorative objects	Low: functional use diminished
Religious Schools (Medrese)	Islamic education	Historically used for Quranic instruction and scholarly activity	Adaptive reuse as administration or exhibition spaces	Low: symbolic continuity, function lost

These spatial-religious patterns are not only visible in the physical layout of *Eyüpsultan* but are also deeply affirmed by the community's lived experiences. Qualitative interviews with local stakeholders and residents highlight how spiritual memory and urban form are co-produced in meaningful, culturally embedded ways. One religious leader at a local mosque remarked:

> *"The alignment of the tombs, fountains, and mosque paths is not random it follows the footsteps of those who came before us. This is not just a district; it is a memory that walks."* (Interview, Local Imam)

This comment emphasizes the diachronic layering of sacred movement through space, echoing Massey's (2005) idea of place as a trajectory of interwoven stories. Similarly, a local elder and resident of *Eyüpsultan* expressed concern about changes in ritual flow caused by new constructions:

> *"We used to walk straight from the cemetery to the sebil for ablution before prayer. Now it's blocked. We go around, but it breaks the rhythm it feels different."* (Interview, Resident)

This testimony aligns with findings from Table 1, illustrating how spatial disruptions affect ritual behavior, not just mobility. The sacred rhythm of the city is altered, underscoring the fragility of lived authenticity when spatial morphology is interrupted. A heritage officer working with the municipality further confirmed the importance of spatial integration:

> *"People think heritage is only in the buildings, but in Eyüpsultan, it's in the way people use the space. You can't conserve the mosque and ignore the path leading to it."*
> (Interview, Cultural Heritage Staff)

This insight reinforces the research's core proposition that spatial authenticity is not located in isolated monuments, but in the connectivity of sacred elements and the community's embodied use of them. This transformation underscores the tension between material preservation and spiritual continuity a key theme in lived authenticity. While formal restorations (often aligned with conservation frameworks) emphasize architectural integrity, everyday users sustain *Eyüpsultan*'s sacred identity through lived practices: barefoot processions, whispered prayers at tombs, and lingering moments of reflection in courtyards.

In this way, *Eyüpsultan*'s morphology operates as a ritual infrastructure, aligning built form with spiritual intent. Its authenticity cannot be reduced to static monuments or restored facades it is continuously reconstituted through ritual movement, communal presence, and social-spatial interaction (Kamal et al., 2023; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005). By interpreting its spatiality through the lens of lived authenticity, *Eyüpsultan* emerges as a sacred palimpsest—where authenticity is not preserved in stone, but performed in space.

3.3 Symbolic continuities and ruptures

Beyond its architectural and morphological richness, *Eyüpsultan* is sustained by layers of symbolic meaning that emerge from embodied practices, communal rituals, and long-standing spiritual traditions. These layers constitute what Lefebvre (1991) defines as spaces of representation, and what Pessi (2013) and Bessant (2011) describe as authenticity emerging through ritualized, affective engagement with space. In *Eyüpsultan*, authenticity is enacted not through material stasis but through symbolic renewal a continuity of belief, performance, and memory that transcends built form.

As shown in Table 2 below, this symbolic continuity is neither total nor unbroken. Several elements of *Eyüpsultan*'s sacred life have undergone ruptures often due to urban modernization, institutional regulation, or heritage commodification. Practices once spontaneous and community-driven, such as open-air dhikr sessions, collective mawlid gatherings, and ritual cleansing at sebils, have been reduced, redirected, or regulated. This echoes Spicer's (2011) critique of modern authenticity as increasingly performative and monitored transformed from internalized meaning into public display.

Table 2. Symbolic continuities and ruptures in *eyüpsultan*'s sacred landscape

Element/Practice	Symbolic Meaning	Status	Continuity	Rupture
Ziyārah to *Abu Ayyub al-Ansari's* Tomb	Connection to prophetic history; source of *baraka*	Active	Maintained as core spiritual act; strong communal attachment	Spatial access narrowed during peak tourist seasons
Use of Cemeteries for Reflection	Remembrance (*dhikr*), meditation on mortality (*memento mori*)	Declining	Visited during religious holidays; seen as sacred places	Restricted by fencing, reduced access, touristic photo-taking behavior
Sufi Processions & Mawlid Gatherings	Embodied spirituality; oral transmission of tradition	Reduced	Occasional local-led gatherings in mosque precincts	Limited public processions due to regulation; loss of public auditory culture
Pilgrimage Path from Golden Horn	Historical ritual route; symbolic	Fragmented	Some pilgrims still walk route symbolically	Interrupted by modern infrastructure and

| | purification journey | | | commercial detours |
| Public Use of Sebils (Fountains) | Charity; ritual purification before prayer | Mostly abandoned | Some decorative restorations remain | Original ritual function lost; seen as aesthetic or historical object only |

This dynamic is acutely observed by local voices. A religious educator from a nearby madrasa explained:

> *"The old gatherings during Mawlid used to be spontaneous. Now they are limited to the mosque interior, and people hesitate to sing or pray loudly in public. It feels… controlled."* (Interview, *Madrasa* Teacher)

Such testimony reflects Spicer's (2011) critique of modern authenticity as increasingly monitored and restrained, reshaped into curated spiritual performances. Similarly, a shopkeeper near the pilgrimage route commented on changes to *ziyārah* behavior:

> *"Visitors still come to the tomb, but the path is no longer spiritual. There are more souvenir stalls than silent spaces. We used to see people walk slowly, now it's like passing through a market."* (Interview, Local Shop Owner)

This illustrates how ritual trajectories are altered, diminishing the contemplative atmosphere that once characterized the site. It also reinforces Schug's (2010) concern about authenticity being transformed into spectacle and consumption. However, ruptures do not always eliminate meaning. As a female community member active in a *halaqah* noted:

> *"Even if we can't gather outside like before, we now use smaller indoor spaces. The feeling is the same we still feel connected to the spirit of this place."* (Interview, Resident and Community Volunteer)

This reveals how symbolic continuity is recontextualized rather than erased, aligning with Elias (2019) and Massey's (2005) view of space as socially produced and resilient to disruption. The lived sacredness of *Eyüpsultan* adapts, finding new expressions in the face of structural change.

In this way, understanding *Eyüpsultan*'s authenticity requires reading not only its form but its symbolic choreography: the rituals that persist, the meanings that shift, and the spiritual practices that adapt. It is within these continuities and ruptures that the sacred city remains alive *not preserved in purity, but sustained in participation*.

These changes reflect a spatial-symbolic negotiation, where the sacred must coexist with urban development and tourism economies. In some cases, spiritual practices are repackaged for consumption, reinforcing Schug's (2010) notion of authenticity becoming a spectacle rather than a lived reality. In other instances, the community adapts shifting gatherings indoors, redirecting processions, or reasserting spiritual rhythms despite infrastructural limitations.

Crucially, even where ruptures occur, symbolic continuity is not necessarily lost it is recontextualized. The community's ability to navigate and reinterpret sacred space demonstrates a resilience that aligns with the idea of lived authenticity as processual, negotiated, and relational (Massey, 2005; Elias, 2019). It also affirms Lefebvre's theory that space is never merely given, but produced through use, meaning, and re-enactment.

Therefore, understanding *Eyüpsultan*'s authenticity requires reading not only its form but its symbolic choreography; the rituals that persist, the meanings that shift, and the spiritual practices that adapt. It is within these continuities and ruptures that the sacred city remains alive—not preserved in purity, but sustained in participation.

3.4 Emergence of lived authenticity

The analysis of *Eyüpsultan*'s evolving urban-religious landscape reveals a form of authenticity that cannot be reduced to preserved structures or visual aesthetics. Instead, what emerges is a dynamic, affective, and participatory mode of spatial engagement what we define as lived authenticity. This concept builds upon the theoretical frameworks of Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey, while extending recent scholarly discussions around ritualized experience, communal agency, and symbolic resilience (Bessant, 2011; Elias, 2019; Pessi, 2013). In this context, authenticity is not a static attribute but a processual state, continually produced through ritual flow, spatial memory, and spiritual negotiation.

As presented in Table 3 below, lived authenticity in *Eyüpsultan* manifests across multiple interconnected dimensions: ritual continuity, spatial memory, community participation, temporal layering, emplaced spirituality, and negotiated modernity. These dimensions function not in isolation, but in synergy—co-producing an urban sacredness that remains alive and meaningful even in the face of spatial fragmentation and cultural commodification.

Table 3. Dimensions of lived authenticity in *eyüpsultan*

Dimension	Description	*Eyüpsultan* Example
Ritual Continuity	Ongoing religious practices across generations	Daily prayers, *ziyārah*, and Ramadan gatherings at *Eyüpsultan* Mosque
Spatial Memory	Collective remembrance tied to physical space	Locals referencing past routes, cemeteries, and sacred fountains
Community Participation	Active involvement of residents in maintaining and shaping heritage	Voluntary mosque maintenance, oral transmission of stories
Temporal Layering	Coexistence of multiple historical periods in urban form	Ottoman tombs adjacent to modern interventions
Emplaced Spirituality	Sense of sacredness rooted in specific spaces and their usage	Ritual gestures (e.g., kissing tomb railings), barefoot walking in inner courtyard
Negotiated Modernity	Adaptive responses to change while maintaining symbolic meanings	Integration of modern signage with Qur'anic calligraphy in heritage trails

These dimensions were substantiated during fieldwork through local testimonies that illustrate the *lived* and *affective* nature of sacred experience. A young caretaker at a Sufi lodge stated:

"The walls change, but the way we walk, pray, and feel here doesn't. We adapt, but the place still guides us." (Interview, Tekke Caretaker)

This statement reflects Lefebvre's idea that space is produced through repetition and meaning, not merely built elements. Similarly, a local woman who visits regularly with her children noted:

"I come here not only for prayer, but to show my children how we walk through the tomb paths, where we stop, how we whisper du'a. It's not just a visit it's a lesson of the heart." (Interview, Resident)

This aligns with Pessi's (2013) framing of authenticity through emotion, tradition, and ritual performance. Even where physical interruptions exist—such as fenced-off fountains or repurposed madrasahs participants reconstruct meaning through presence and memory. The community's ability to reinterpret space affirms Massey's (2005) concept of place as a "throwntogetherness" a multiplicity of trajectories and identities cohabiting within evolving geographies. Unlike materialist models of authenticity that prioritize conservation,

lived authenticity recognizes that sacred value persists even amid change, so long as the relational and performative layers of meaning remain intact.

This study argues that *Eyüpsultan*'s authenticity is not inherited in form alone, but continually authored by those who live, worship, and remember within its space. In this sense, lived authenticity emerges as both a framework and a practice—a means of seeing and sustaining sacred urban heritage not as a frozen relic, but as a living text written through bodies, beliefs, and spatial intimacy.

3.5 Conceptual contribution

The emergence of lived authenticity from the field study in *Eyüpsultan* offers not only a descriptive insight but also a conceptual intervention into dominant heritage and urban discourse. As presented in Table 4, this model diverges from established frameworks of authenticity such as material-based, Nara-influenced, or tourism-oriented interpretations by emphasizing space as ritualized, relational, and continuously co-produced by communities.

Table 4. comparative models of authenticity

Model	Definition/Focus	Strengths	Limitations in Islamic Contexts
Material Authenticity	Preserving physical fabric and historical integrity	Tangible conservation; measurable interventions	Ignores ritual use and intangible meanings
Nara-based Plural Authenticity	Contextual cultural expressions of value	Acknowledges diversity and cultural relativism	Application often inconsistent; still policy-centric
Tourism-driven Authenticity	Experience tailored to visitor expectations	Economic value; promotes visibility	Risks commodification and performance of culture
lived authenticity (proposed)	Ongoing community practice, spiritual continuity, memory	Embraces sacred rhythm, spatial practice, local agency	Less measurable; requires participatory engagement and deep ethnography

As illustrated in Table 4, the concept of lived authenticity offers a distinct departure from dominant models of heritage evaluation, particularly in the context of Islamic urban environments like *Eyüpsultan*. Unlike the material authenticity model, which privileges physical integrity and architectural conservation, lived authenticity foregrounds the significance of spatial ritual, embodied practice, and continuity of use. While the Nara-based pluralist model marked a critical evolution by introducing cultural relativism into heritage discourse, its practical implementation has often remained abstract or inconsistently applied, especially in non-Western sacred contexts. Meanwhile, tourism-driven models of authenticity tend to prioritize performative elements tailored to outsider perceptions, often at the expense of local meaning-making and spiritual depth. By contrast, lived authenticity emphasizes the everyday lived experience of space, where authenticity is produced through acts of devotion, memory transmission, and negotiated spatial adaptation. It resists codification, embracing instead a participatory, relational, and processual understanding of heritage. In doing so, it re-centers community agency, religious temporality, and the symbolic layering of urban space as core components of authentic heritage, particularly within spiritually charged urban districts like *Eyüpsultan*.

As illustrated in Figure 8, lived authenticity situates authentic heritage not in object or image, but in the intersection between ritual flow, spatial memory, and performative sacredness. Drawing on Massey's (2005) view of space as relational and Lefebvre's (1991) production of space, this model acknowledges the multiplicity of claims, rhythms, and meanings that constitute lived sacred environments. In Eyüpsultan, authenticity is not preserved it is performed.
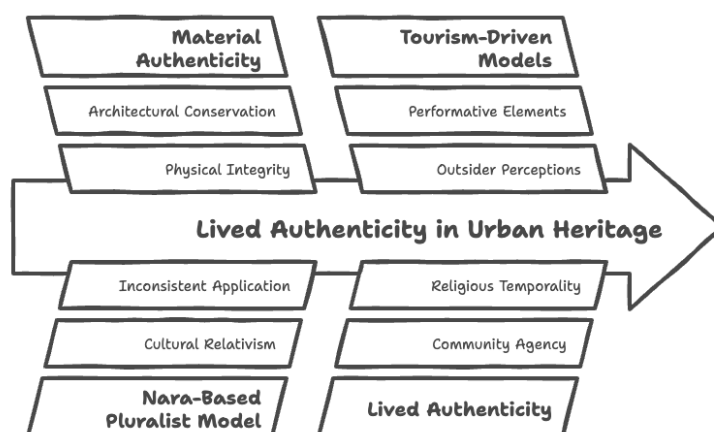
Fig. 8 Understanding lived authenticity in urban heritage

This is echoed in field observations. One imam interviewed during Ramadan preparations emphasized:

> *"You cannot understand this place if you only look at the stones. You must see the people who come every Friday, every holy night. They make it real."* (Interview, *Eyüpsultan* Mosque Imam)

Figure 9 below, further visualizes the dynamic layering of *Eyüpsultan*'s spatial experience. It shows overlapping zones of sacred density (mosque-tomb core), processional paths, and sites of symbolic transformation—such as fountains or former *medrese*—now recontextualized. These "zones of negotiation" align with what Leary-Owhin (2016) and Elias (2019) identify as differential spaces, where formal heritage frameworks and lived experiences intersect and sometimes clash.
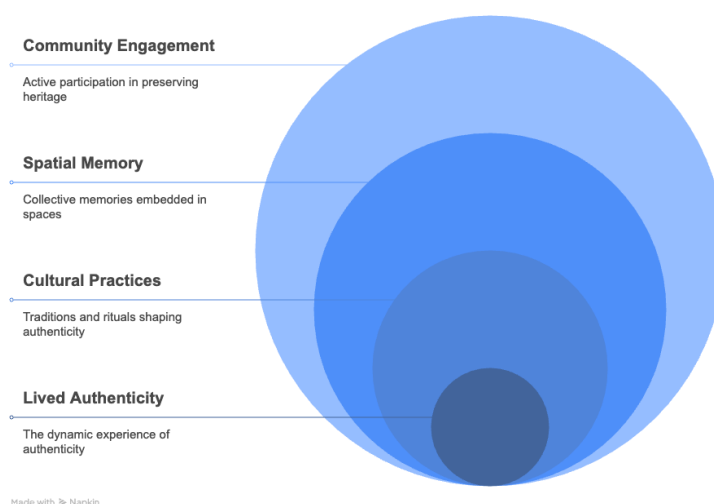

Fig. 9 Concept of lived authenticity in *eyüpsultan*

Despite modern encroachments—such as the conversion of pilgrimage paths into commercial lanes or the aestheticization of spiritual elements—residents continue to reclaim symbolic agency. As a heritage volunteer shared:

> *"Even when they renovate, we return to use the space our way. We pray there, we teach our children. The building changes, but the meaning continues."* (Interview, Local Cultural Volunteer)

This confirms that spiritual continuity and embodied knowledge function as guardians of authenticity, even when physical conditions shift. Thus, the value of *Eyüpsultan* cannot be understood through visual preservation alone. It must be viewed through the performance of belonging, as Schug (2010) and Pessi (2013) suggest through *what people do, feel, and repeat in space.*

In light of these findings, this research offers a place-based, culturally embedded alternative to dominant heritage discourses through the concept of lived authenticity. This contribution provides a framework grounded in Islamic urban spatiality, emphasizing the unique spatial logic and sacred geographies inherent to Islamic urban forms. It also introduces a methodological approach rooted in ethnographic observation and spatial interpretation, allowing for a more nuanced reading of lived experience within sacred urban contexts. Furthermore, it presents a critical stance toward prevailing heritage models that often overlook the significance of spiritual performance and the continuity of communal life in shaping and sustaining urban authenticity. By formalizing this concept, we invite scholars and practitioners to reconsider the criteria of authenticity, especially in living religious environments where memory, ritual, and identity are the true materials of heritage.

4. Conclusions

Through a layered analysis that blends spatial theory, Islamic urban principles, ethnographic immersion, and visual-spatial documentation, this research introduces a new interpretive lens, lived authenticity. Distinct from conservation-centric or tourism-mediated models, lived authenticity foregrounds the processual, relational, and ritualized nature of sacred space. It offers a framework in which authenticity is not inherited passively but co-produced by communities through daily acts of remembrance, embodiment, and spiritual navigation.

In *Eyüpsultan*, authenticity is not locked in its stone walls or archival plans; it breathes in the pathways walked by pilgrims, the whispered prayers beside tombs, and the sacred rhythms that resist urban erasure. Rather than measuring authenticity through preservation checklists, this study shows that it must be read through ritual flow, spatial memory, and symbolic adaptation.

The contribution of this research is thus twofold, conceptually, it advances lived authenticity as a new theoretical paradigm for interpreting heritage in dynamic, spiritually active urban contexts; and methodologically, it models an approach that centers community voices, visual-spatial ethnography, and Islamic principles of space in the analysis of urban sacredness.

This is not merely a revision of the heritage discourse it is a repositioning. A call to see sacred cities not as remnants of the past, but as spiritual infrastructures in motion, authored daily by those who inhabit them. In a global moment where heritage risks becoming hollow spectacle or sterilized monument, lived authenticity invites us to return to the essence of place as lived, loved, and believed. In *Eyüpsultan*, authenticity endures not because it has been preserved but because it continues to be practiced.

Author Contribution
All authors collaboratively developed the research framework and contributed to data collection and analysis. Each author participated in interpreting the findings and refining the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the article for submission.

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Ethical Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with academic research ethics. Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the non-invasive nature of the research, which involved interviews and visual-spatial observation without collecting personal or sensitive data. All participants were informed of the research objectives and provided verbal consent prior to their involvement.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Participants were informed about the aims of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidential treatment of all personal data. Written and/or verbal consent was secured prior to interviews and field documentation in accordance with ethical research standards.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to ethical considerations and the privacy of research participants, certain data (such as interview transcripts and field notes) are not publicly accessible.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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