

Original Article

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The function of religious rituals in the reproduction of collective spaces: studying the role of Ashura rituals in the formation of urban vitality in Javadiyeh neighborhood, Tehran

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Abstract

In recent decades, increasing attention has been paid to the role of collective rituals in revitalizing urban spaces and fostering social cohesion, particularly in Middle Eastern cities. This study investigates how religious rituals contribute to spatial regeneration, the strengthening of social capital, and the formation of cultural identity within the urban fabric of Javadiyeh, Tehran. Employing a qualitative approach and a case study strategy, data were collected through 19 semi-structured interviews with residents and ritual organizers, complemented by field observations. Thematic analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 2022. The results revealed that rituals temporarily transform everyday spaces, enhance spatial vitality, and rebuild social relationships by fostering trust and solidarity among residents. Moreover, rituals act as mechanisms of collective memory, reinforcing the neighborhood's cultural identity. However, the lack of institutional support and formal participatory frameworks poses challenges to the sustainability of these processes. The findings highlight the importance of community-based approaches in urban policymaking and underscore the need to recognize rituals as cultural assets and tools for urban regeneration. By providing an interdisciplinary perspective on the interrelation of space, ritual, and society, this study offers new insights into the cultural dynamics of contemporary cities.

Keywords

urban ritual
social capital
collective memory
cultural identity
public space
urban regeneration

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, urban vitality and the quality of collective life have become central themes in urban studies, particularly as cities confront rapid socio-spatial transformations and growing cultural diversity. Urban scholars and policymakers increasingly recognize that the sustainability and livability of cities do not rely solely on the efficiency of physical infrastructures; instead, they hinge upon the social and cultural dynamics that animate public spaces (Montgomery, 2020; Gehl, 2011; Carmona, 2021). Public spaces, in this regard, are not merely physical settings but symbolic and social arenas in which interaction, collective memory, and cultural identity are produced and continuously reproduced (Amin, 2020; Mehta & Palazzo, 2021). Despite the emphasis within global urban-planning discourses on design-led vitality, walkability, and cultural events, the role of rituals and cultural practices as spontaneous drivers of urban life—particularly in non-Western contexts—has received insufficient scholarly attention (Kong, 2020; Edensor, 2019; Amer, 2022).

In societies rooted in religious or traditional foundations, rituals constitute an integral component of urban life. They not only structure the temporal rhythms of the city but also transform ordinary spaces such as streets and squares into venues for collective experience and civic participation (Eliade, 1959; Kong, 2010; Isnaeni et al., 2025). From this perspective, rituals represent a form of bottom-up spatial agency that challenges technocratic, top-down logics by reappropriating the urban realm through creative and embodied performances (Harvey, 2012; Lefebvre, 1991). Building on Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, such rituals can be conceptualized as performative practices that convert abstract space into lived space, embedding meaning, memory, and community within the urban fabric (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996). Recent studies further demonstrate that ritualized, embodied participation contributes to the reproduction of local identity, spatial justice, and social cohesion (Kureel & Sen, 2023; Li et al., 2025; Swartjes & Berkers, 2025).

Despite these emerging insights, the literature on urban vitality remains shaped mainly by secular and Western-centric paradigms, which conceptualize vitality primarily through economic, aesthetic, or functional dimensions (Jacobs, 1961; Montgomery, 2020). In contrast, the communicative and symbolic dimensions of vitality—those rooted in collective experience, historical memory, and the spiritual

resonance of place—have been understudied (Massey, 2005; Kong, 2020). This theoretical gap is particularly evident in Middle Eastern and Islamic contexts, where religious rituals such as Ashura play a sustained and emblematic role in reproducing neighborhood-level cultural and social life. In Iranian cities, ritual practices associated with Muharram, especially the noon commemoration of Ashura (being called Zohr-e Ashura), transform streets and urban passages into stages of collective memory, solidarity, and participation. However, few studies have systematically examined how these rituals, through embodied and symbolic actions, regenerate collective spaces and produce distinctive forms of urban vitality that diverge from consumption-oriented Western models.

This oversight partly reflects an epistemological bias within urban theory. Much of the urban literature has treated culture and religion as background variables rather than generative forces in the production of space (Eade & Mele, 2018; Amer, 2022). Consequently, limited understanding exists regarding the ways through which rituals, via repetition, embodiment, and symbolic enactment, can generate and reproduce collective spaces and social capital. Furthermore, urban vitality is often measured using quantitative indicators such as pedestrian flows, land-use diversity, or economic activity (Mehta, 2019; Li et al., 2025), while its more qualitative dimensions—such as place attachment, collective memory, and lived experience—remain marginalized. Addressing this conceptual gap is especially crucial for cities of the global south, where informal cultural and religious practices play significant roles in fostering social cohesion and community resilience (Kureel & Sen, 2023; Hamdani et al., 2025).

In Iran, the historical interconnection between urban morphology and ritual life has long constituted a key pillar of urban identity. The traditional spatial structure of Iranian cities—including squares, bazaars, and mosques—provided platforms for religious gatherings, communal rituals, and localized ceremonial practices (Moayedi et al., 2015; Molaei & Aysham, 2023). However, modernist urban planning, with its prioritization of vehicular networks and functionalist spatial logic, has weakened these participatory spaces, contributing to declining place attachment and reduced neighborhood-scale social interaction (Molaei & Aysham, 2023; Khasto, 2023). Within this context, religious-cultural rituals such as Ashura temporarily reappropriate public spaces, generating a form of spontaneous urban revitalization that remains unrecognized mainly in formal planning frameworks.

Investigating this phenomenon offers new pathways for rethinking concepts such as vitality, belonging, and community within Iran's cultural–urban context.

Accordingly, this study examines the role of the Zohr-e Ashura ritual in the Javadiyeh neighborhood of Tehran to illustrate how this ritual operates as a socio-spatial mechanism that revitalizes collective life and reanimates urban public spaces. As one of Tehran's historically and socially resilient neighborhoods, Javadiyeh represents a fertile case for analyzing the interplay between memory, space, and collective identity. Each year, the Ashura ritual transforms ordinary streets and passageways into dynamic and meaningful stages—an enactment of vitality generated not through formal design interventions but through spontaneous participation and embodied collective practices.

Employing a qualitative and interpretive methodology, this research seeks to address three core questions:

1. How does the Zohr-e Ashura ritual activate and transform urban spaces?
2. How does this ritual influence patterns of social interaction and the reproduction of collective identity?
3. Through which mechanisms do embodied religious practices contribute to the revitalization of public spaces in Iran's cultural context?

The theoretical framework draws on concepts of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991), collective memory (Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1992), and social capital (Putnam, 2000) to articulate a culturally grounded understanding of urban vitality that moves beyond the limits of quantitative and Western-centric approaches.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is built upon three foundational pillars that allow for a dialectical and multidimensional analysis of the Zohr-e Ashura ritual across its spatial, social, and cultural dimensions. Accordingly, the framework integrates the ideas of Henri Lefebvre (production of space), Edward Soja (Thirdspace), and Maurice Halbwachs (collective memory), while drawing on the concepts of social capital (Putnam, 2000) and embodied memory (Connerton, 1989). The core premise of this framework is the notion of “ritual as a space-producing act”—a practice that simultaneously produces space, strengthens community, and regenerates memory.

2.1. Ritual as a spatial-productive practice: from abstract space to lived space

According to Lefebvre (1991), space is not a neutral container but a social product continuously shaped and reshaped through dialectical processes and everyday social practices. The Ashura ritual, as a spatially generative act, activates Lefebvre's spatial triad in the following ways:

- It challenges representations of space—the planned, abstract, and functional spatial order in which the street is conceived primarily as a traffic conduit.
- It transforms this order into a representational space, saturated with symbolic, emotional, and collective meanings, turning the street into a stage for mourning and communal solidarity.
- Ultimately, it produces vibrant space, formed through direct, embodied, and affective experience, temporarily suspending the routines of everyday urban life.

The ritualized space generated through these practices closely aligns with Soja's (1996) notion of Thirdspace: a hybrid, simultaneously real-and-imagined realm that is individual and collective, present-oriented yet infused with the past. This space transcends reductive binaries—private/public, sacred/secular—and opens possibilities for resisting the homogenization and commodification of urban environments.

2.2. Meaning-making mechanisms: collective memory and embodiment

The question remains: How is this meaningful spatial production achieved? The answer lies in Halbwachs' (1992) theory of collective memory. Rituals—particularly those involving simulation and mourning—serve as primary instruments for activating and transmitting collective memory. This transmission occurs not through text, but through embodied memory (Connerton, 1989). The Ashura ritual reconstructs the memory of a historical event through bodily rhythms (chest-beating), collective movements (processional groups), and ritualized physical performances. These embodied actions provide the raw material for transforming representations of space into spaces of representation.

2.3. Social outcomes: producing social capital and strengthening collective bonds

The creation of shared space and the embodiment of

collective memory naturally lead to the formation and reinforcement of social capital (Putnam, 2000). Voluntary participation in the ritual, repeated face-to-face interactions, and the sense of belonging and trust generated through shared experience collectively contribute to bonding social capital. This capital strengthens informal networks, enhances neighborhood cohesion, and sustains the social foundations required for the ritual's continuity. A dialectical cycle thus emerges: the ritual produces social capital, and the accumulated social capital in turn reinforces the ritual's future reproduction.

2.4. Synthesis of the theoretical framework

This integrated framework positions the Ashura ritual

not as a single-dimensional phenomenon, but as a complex practice situated at the intersection of three analytical axes:

1. Space (Lefebvre and Soja): the ritual produces and redefines urban space.
 2. Memory (Halbwachs and Connerton): the ritual reproduces and transmits collective memory through the body.
 3. Community (Putnam and Bourdieu): the ritual strengthens social ties and generates social capital.
- These three axes interact dialectically to explain the distinctive dynamics and forms of vitality produced by the Ashura ritual within the urban environment of the Javadiyeh neighborhood.

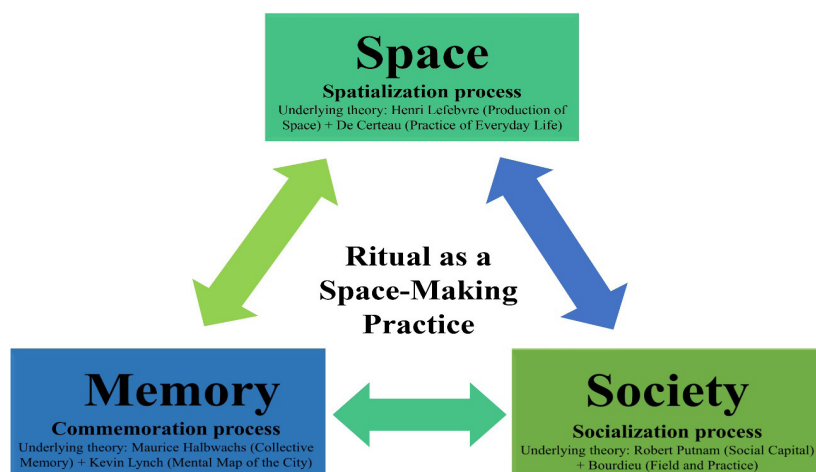


Figure 1. Dialectical relationships among space, memory, and society

3. Literature review

Over the past decade, urban studies have shifted from predominantly physical and functional approaches toward more cultural, experiential, and interpretive analyses of space. This theoretical turn responds to the inability of design-centered models to explain phenomena such as declining place attachment, diminished social interaction, and the symbolic depletion of public space (Carmona, 2021; Talen & Koschinsky, 2023). Within this paradigm, "space" is no longer conceived merely as a physical container, but as a socially produced, meaning-laden construct shaped through the interplay of embodied practices, lived experience, and cultural representation (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996).

Aligned with this shift, cultural and religious rituals have emerged as significant forms of spatial practice. Recent research demonstrates that rituals, through symbolic repetition, collective embodiment, and

ritualized temporality, elevate space from its physical dimension to a lived and perceived realm (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2018; Kong, 2020; Amer, 2022). Contrary to classical perspectives that attribute urban vitality to formal design or top-down policy interventions, these studies illustrate that urban dynamism often arises from spontaneous cultural practices.

In Western scholarship, attention to the affective, symbolic, and embodied dimensions of space has grown since the early 2010s. Studies on emotional geographies and lived urban experience highlight that meaning and identity are constituted not solely through physical form but through memory, emotion, and ritual repetition (Thrift, 2008; Edensor, 2019; Diez-Pisonero, 2025). Even in secular European contexts, the significance of processions, memorial rituals, and symbolic gatherings in sustaining collective spaces has been emphasized (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2018).

However, much of this literature remains influenced

by the binary of “modern West / ritualistic East,” where religious rituals in non-Western societies are often portrayed as traditional, irrational, or impediments to development. Such reductive readings obscure the complex social functions of religious rituals and understate their spatial, communal, and identity-forming roles. More recent scholarship has challenged this simplistic framing, showing that religious rituals can actively contribute to social ordering and urban vitality (Kureel & Sen, 2023; Swartjes & Berkers, 2025).

Analytically, the existing literature can be categorized into three main streams:

1. Studies conceptualizing rituals as space-producing acts that activate public spaces through temporary appropriation and altered movement patterns (Edensor, 2012; Li et al., 2025).
2. Research examining rituals as mechanisms for generating social capital, enhancing trust, and strengthening community cohesion (Putnam, 2000; Woodhead & Catto, 2016; Isnaeni et al., 2025).
3. Investigations focusing on rituals as vehicles for reproducing collective memory and place identity (Halbwachs, 1992; Connerton, 1989; Graezer Bideau et al., 2024).

Despite theoretical advances, the empirical integration

of these three streams remains limited, particularly in non-Western religious contexts that are either overlooked or insufficiently captured by Western-centric frameworks. Most existing integrative models have been developed in European and East Asian cities, leaving their applicability to Islamic urban settings largely untested.

There is also a methodological gap: research has predominantly relied on quantitative assessments and physical-economic indicators, even though rituals—being inherently embodied and interpretive—necessitate qualitative, experience-centered inquiry (Connerton, 1989; Eliade, 1959). Consequently, the mnemonic, affective, and identity-related dimensions of ritual practices remain underexplored in urban scholarship.

Within this context, the present study—centered on the Zohr-e Ashura ritual in the Javadiyeh neighborhood—seeks to bridge these gaps by integrating the dimensions of space, memory, and community, while grounding this framework in Iran’s cultural-urban setting. The study aims to demonstrate how religious rituals can serve as socio-spatial mechanisms that reproduce meaning, generate social capital, and revitalize urban vitality.

Table 1. Comparison of main approaches in the literature on rituals and urban space

Analytical approach	Western studies	Non-Western studies (Iran)	Critical summary
Space	Edensor & Sumartojo (2018); Finkel & Platt (2020); Swartjes & Berkers (2025); Li et al. (2025)	Amer (2022); Kureel & Sen (2023); Moayedi et al. (2015)	Western scholarship predominantly frames events as instruments of urban regeneration and as drivers of the cultural economy. In non-Western contexts, spatial analysis is mainly descriptive and rarely situated within theoretical frameworks of the production of space. Gap: absence of analyses that conceptualize ritual as a form of religiously lived space.
Sociality	Putnam (2000); Woodhead & Catto (2016); Isnaeni et al. (2025)	Farahbakhsh et al. (2023); Khasto (2023); Mortazavi et al. (2024)	Social capital is often examined in highly abstract terms; in Iran, scholarly work tends to describe outcomes, rather than unpacking underlying social mechanisms. Gap: lack of a cyclical model linking ritual ↔ social capital ↔ space.
Memory	Connerton (1989); Nora (1989); Graezer Bideau et al. (2024)	Amer (2022); Heydari (2020)	Western literature frequently confines memory to industrial heritage or historic place-embeddedness. Iranian studies explore religious memory, yet its conceptual linkage to urban vitality remains weak.
Theoretical framework	Lefebvre (1991); Harvey (2012); Massey (2005)	Limited application of integrative frameworks	Many studies are either highly theoretical or case-based without theoretical grounding. Gap: lack of an integrated model connecting space, sociality, and memory within religious or ritual contexts.
Methodology	Systematic reviews, discourse analysis, and limited qualitative approaches	Descriptive and survey-based methods	Gap: shortage of interpretive, phenomenological, and lived-experience-based research on ritual spatialities.

4. Research methodology

This study, in terms of purpose, nature, and overall orientation, falls within the category of applied-analytical research and has been conducted using a qualitative approach. The qualitative orientation aligns with gaining a deep understanding of the social, spatial, and cultural processes embedded in urban phenomena, particularly those shaped within the context of collective rituals. Given the study's focus on the how and why of human interactions in urban spaces, interpretive and meaning-oriented methods were employed (Creswell, 2018). From an operational standpoint, the research adopts a case study strategy, selected for its capacity to facilitate an in-depth investigation of local contexts, cultural features, and interactional processes in real-life settings (Yin, 2014). The chosen case is an urban neighborhood with a rich religious and cultural heritage in which collective rituals play a central role in shaping spatial identity. The methodological framework is grounded in thematic analysis, designed to uncover and interpret latent patterns within field data, thereby revealing the underlying concepts and relational structures embedded in participants' lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). This approach enables a multilayered understanding of social realities and

contributes to the development of a mid-range theoretical explanation concerning the interplay between ritual, space, and community.

The study population consists of residents, participants, and observers of religious rituals in the Javadiyeh neighborhood of Tehran. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the goal was not statistical generalization but rather theoretical richness and conceptual saturation (Neuman, 2020). Accordingly, purposive sampling was applied to recruit individuals with direct and meaningful experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sampling criteria included:

- active participation in or direct observation of the ritual within the past three years;
- willingness to engage in in-depth interviews;
- diversity in age, gender, and social background to ensure the inclusion of multiple perspectives.

In total, 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants (12 men and women). Additionally, field notes derived from direct and informal observations were incorporated into the data analysis. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—that is, when no new concepts emerged from additional data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Table 2. Descriptive information of participants

Code	Age	Gender	Education level	Occupation	Duration of residence in the Javadiyeh neighborhood
Interview 1	42	Male	Bachelor's	Shop owner	38 years
Interview 2	65	Female	High school diploma	Retired, ministry of education	45 years
Interview 3	16	Male	High school	None	Since childhood
Interview 4	35	Male	Master's in sociology	Student	None (visitor)
Interview 5	42	Female	High school diploma	Salesperson	About 20 years
Interview 6	28	Male	Master's in sociology	Student	None (visitor)
Interview 7	55	Female	High school diploma	Retired	About 30 years
Interview 8	42	Male	High school diploma	Shopkeeper	20 years
Interview 9	27	Female	Master's student in sociology	Student	None (visitor)
Interview 10	65	Male	High school diploma	Retired	45 years
Interview 11	25	Male	Bachelor's in engineering	Private company employee	None (visitor)
Interview 12	23	Female	Research student	Student	None (visitor)
Interview 13	58	Male	Old high school diploma	Retired	44 years
Interview 14	48	Male	High school diploma	Shop owner	30 years

Code	Age	Gender	Education level	Occupation	Duration of residence in the Javadiyeh neighborhood
Interview 15	27	Male	Master's in sociology	Content researcher/writer	None (visitor)
Interview 16	34	Female	Master's in cinema (documentary)	Independent filmmaker	None (visitor)
Interview 17	72	Male	Old high school diploma	The railway company retired	54 years
Interview 18	39	Male	Master's in cultural management	Employee	20 years
Interview 19	25	Female	Bachelor's	Student	None (visitor)

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, participants included both long-term, locally active residents (11 individuals) and visitors who attend the ritual as outsiders (8 individuals). This combination enabled simultaneous examination of internal place attachment and the external appeal of the ritual, as well as comparative analysis of the perceptions held by both groups.

The primary data collection instrument consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face with informed consent. Interview questions were developed based on the research objectives and a review of the theoretical literature, and focused on three main areas:

- Participants' experiences of urban spaces during the ritual;
- Forms of social interaction and emergent relational networks;
- Cultural–identity meanings associated with space.

In addition to interviews, non-participant field observation was employed to document collective behaviors, activated spaces, and patterns of spatial use (Angrosino, 2007). These data were recorded through analytical field notes during the ritual and in the activities that followed. To enrich the dataset, secondary sources—including municipal documents, maps, and field photographs—were also used to support spatiotemporal comparisons.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, multiple strategies recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were applied:

- Internal validity (credibility): achieved through triangulation of interviews, observations, and documentary evidence.
- External validity (transferability): ensured by providing a detailed account of the spatial and cultural context to facilitate analytical generalization in similar studies.

- Reliability (dependability): maintained by documenting the data collection and analysis procedures systematically to enable auditability.
- Confirmability: strengthened through peer debriefing and member checking, during which preliminary themes were shared with selected participants to verify interpretive accuracy.

Furthermore, interview questions were piloted with three volunteer participants prior to the main data collection to evaluate conceptual clarity and linguistic coherence. Necessary revisions were subsequently applied to the structure and sequence of questions.

Given the qualitative orientation, the collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis—a flexible approach suited for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The analytical process proceeded through six steps:

1. Familiarization with data: repeated reading of interview transcripts and field notes to gain an overall sense of the content;
2. Generating initial codes: identifying key expressions and implicit concepts through open coding using MAXQDA 2022;
3. Searching for themes: clustering similar codes into conceptual subcategories and identifying their semantic relationships;
4. Reviewing and refining themes: examining internal coherence and external distinctiveness of themes, and merging or eliminating overlapping categories;
5. Defining and naming themes: formulating final theoretical concepts and writing interpretive descriptions for each theme;
6. Constructing the analytical narrative: synthesizing the findings into a coherent analytical account aligned with the theoretical framework.

Although the analysis was conducted inductively and remained grounded in participants' narratives, the

final stages involved connecting emergent themes with theoretical constructs such as the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991), social capital (Putnam, 2000), and collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992), thereby shaping the study's final conceptual framework.

4.1. Study area

The Javadiyeh neighborhood is one of the older, densely built, and socially cohesive districts located in the southern part of Tehran, within Municipal District 16. It is bounded by the railway to the north, Shush Street to the south, Navvab Highway to the east, and Bahmanyar Highway to the west. The physical fabric comprises a mixture of traditional houses, narrow alleys, Hosseinieh halls, Tekyehs, and open and semi-open urban spaces that support the formation of collective and ritual activities at the neighborhood scale.

One of Javadiyeh's most prominent characteristics is its cultural dynamism and the strong participation of

residents in religious ceremonies—particularly the rituals of Muharram and, most notably, the Zohr-e Ashura procession. For decades, Javadiyeh has served as one of Tehran's most recognizable centers for Ashura rituals, consistently hosting renowned ritual groups and long-standing mourning processions. The presence of multiple generations of residents, intergenerational transmission of ritual traditions, and the consolidation of collective memory around religious ceremonies have made the neighborhood an exemplary case for examining the interrelationship between ritual, community, and space.

The selection of Javadiyeh as the case study stems from its ritual-cultural richness, strong potential for field observation, active participatory context, and its capacity to manifest religious practices within public urban spaces spatially. These qualities render the neighborhood highly suitable for investigating the way the Ashura ritual contributes to urban vitality and the reactivation of public spaces.

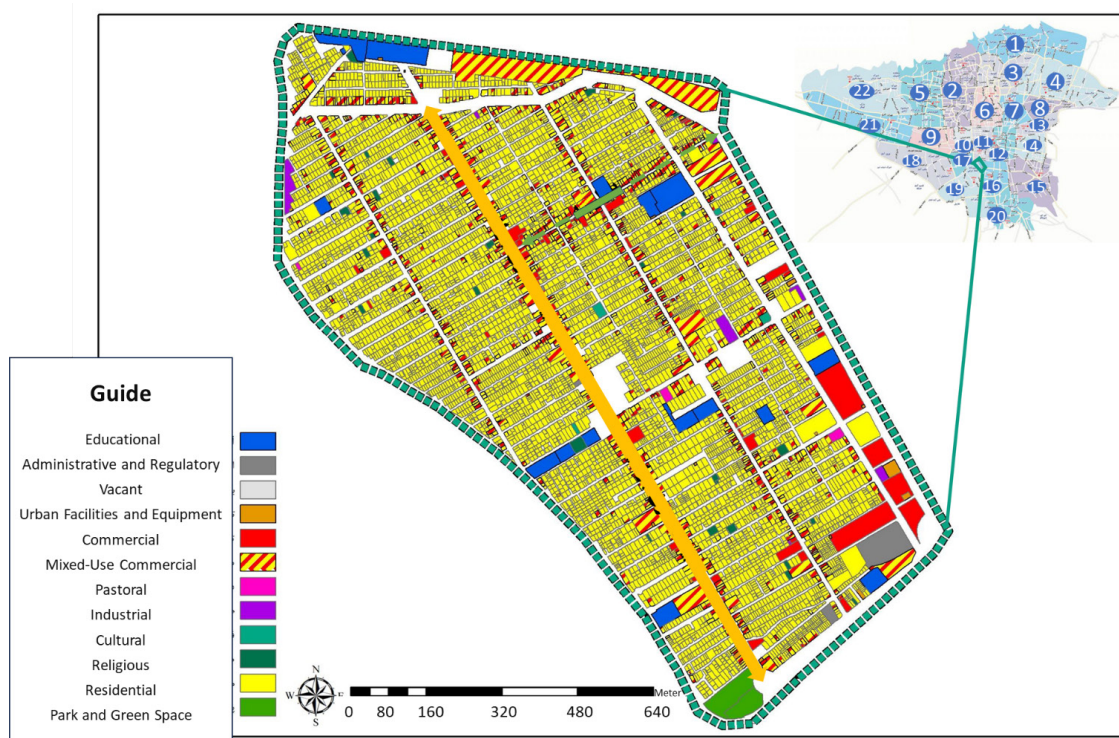


Figure 2. Study area boundaries



Figure 3. Embodiment of the ritual



Figure 4. Transformation of circulation space into a social field

5. Findings

This section presents the analytical process of the qualitative data based on Braun and Clarke’s six-phase thematic analysis framework (2006, 2021). The analysis followed a hybrid inductive–interpretive approach, meaning that while the semantic patterns were derived directly from the data, their interpretation was guided by the study’s theoretical framework—namely, the production of space, collective memory, and social capital. MAXQDA 2022 was applied to support the coding, categorization, and construction of the thematic map, ensuring transparency and auditability throughout the analytical process (Nowell et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Phase 1: Familiarization with the data

In the first step, transcripts of the semi-structured interviews and field observations were read multiple times, accompanied by repeated listening to audio

recordings. During this phase, preliminary analytical notes were written, focusing on recurrent patterns, emotional undertones, and initial interpretive impressions. Statements such as:

- “The street comes alive on the Day of Ashura.”
- “Everyone cooperates—even people who usually do not know one another.”
- “We walk the same route every year; it feels like part of the neighborhood’s identity.”

Themes related to urban vitality, social cohesion, and collective served as early indicators of memory, forming the basis for the initial coding phase.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

In this phase, the data were coded line by line using MAXQDA, applying open coding to identify the primary concepts. A total of 87 codes were generated, derived from both participants’ expressions and the researcher’s conceptual interpretations.

Table 3. Initial coding

Initial coding	Direct quotes	Corresponding theoretical concept
Change in the function of public spaces.	Interview 1: Local park turns into a food distribution site; interview 3: The dirt field behind the mosque... becomes a charity distribution center; interview 16: Side alleys... turn into food stations;	Human presence and activity, public participation (young), functional diversity, social activity, human-scale (Jacobs) vibrancy, social interaction (Whyte), revitalization of unused spaces (Carmona), movement paths, symbolic places, routes (lynch)
Revitalization of abandoned spaces	Interview 2: Places usually abandoned the rest of the year... give a sense of life; interview 6: Urban spaces usually unused... turn into activity hubs; interview 3: Those spaces are usually idle... full of movement, light, sound;	Human presence and activity (young), social activity, natural surveillance (Jacobs), interaction and vibrancy (Whyte), revitalization of abandoned spaces (Carmona), recognizable places, sightlines, and movement paths (lynch)
Spatial meaningfulness and sacredness	Interview 1: Spaces like the main street of Javadiyeh... gain sacredness; interview 2: The procession of banners... is very sacred to me; interview 4: Space is not only physical; Cultural and social meaning the ritual gives to space;	Human presence, social activity (young), cultural value, social activity, safety (Jacobs), vibrancy and meaning (Whyte), preservation of values, revitalization of meaningful spaces (Carmona), symbolic places, paths, and meaningful locations (lynch)
Spatial dynamics and vibrancy	Interview 1: Main streets... gain social function; interview 2: Brings movement, stops, stillness, sound; interview 3: Javadiyeh on this day is unlike any other day.	Human activity and presence (young), functional diversity, social interaction (Jacobs), vibrancy (Whyte), space revitalization (Carmona), access paths and visibility, recognizable places (lynch)
Spatial symbolization	Interview 4: Uniform clothing of mourners, banners, drum and cymbal sounds... symbols of unity; interview 16: Ritual music with collective mourning... a sense of ritual theater;	Presence and participation, human activity (young) cultural value, social activity (Jacobs) vibrancy and meaning (Whyte) preservation of cultural values, space revitalization (Carmona) symbolic places (lynch)
Social cohesion and unity	Interview 1: The Zohr-e Ashura ... creates unique unity; interview 17: When everyone marches in a group... cohesion emerges; interview 2: This ceremony is not only mourning; it is a form of community and neighborhood unity;	Human presence and social activity (young), social activity, social value, interaction (Jacobs), space revitalization (Carmona), social paths (lynch)
Networking and social connections	Interview 1: Every year, new faces join the gathering... continuity continues; interview 15: This ceremony acts like a living social network; interview 10: Every year, I meet new people at the ceremony;	Social presence and interaction (young), social activity, networking (jacobs), vibrancy, interaction (whyte), space revitalization (carmona), social paths, visual spaces (lynch)

Initial coding	Direct quotes	Corresponding theoretical concept
Trust and social cooperation	Interview 1: Many shopkeepers... form close relationships; interview 16: People in different roles—volunteers, eulogists... social bonds; interview 16: This ceremony revives forgotten relationships;	Presence and interaction, activity (young), social activity, local interaction, social networks (Jacobs), vibrancy, interaction (Whyte), revitalization of social relations (Carmona), interaction paths and places (Lynch)
Hospitality and moral capital	Interview 6: When charity stations are active... display hospitality; interview 17: The neighborhood seems hospitable for a day... gives life to the area;	Human presence and activity (young), social activity, ethical values (Jacobs), vibrancy and interaction (Whyte), space revitalization (Carmona), social places and accessibility (Lynch)
Place-making and identity	Interview 1: Javadiyeh is mainly recognized by this ceremony... "Javadiyeh means it is Ashura." Interview 17: Our neighborhood is recognized by this ceremony... it is a symbol of Javadiyeh. Interview 16: Javadiyeh, through this ceremony, becomes a ritual brand.	Social activity, cultural symbol (Jacobs), vibrancy and meaning (Whyte), preservation of place identity (Carmona), symbolic places and recognizable routes (Lynch)
Historical and generational memory	Interview 15: Urban spaces carry memory... a narrow alley today is a space of cohesion; interview 17: When the banner moves... I recall my parents. Interview 17: Since childhood, in these alleys of Javadiyeh... my father was one of the founders;	Presence and activity (young), social activity, historical memory (Jacobs), vibrancy (Whyte)
Intergenerational cultural transmission	Interview 1: Children... carry flags, their presence energizes the ceremony; interview 2: My grandson films with his phone... connects in his own way; interview 10: Children and adolescents enthusiastically participate;	Social activity, cultural transmission (Jacobs), memory preservation, revival of memories, cultural value (Carmona), memorable paths and places (Lynch)
Place attachment and sense of belonging	Interview 2: On this day, the neighborhood takes a different shape... I feel my roots are here; interview 3: The neighborhood is not just home... a collective memory; interview 18: Sense of belonging and responsibility... part of Javadiyeh's dynamics;	Social activities and interactions (young) social activity, place attachment (Jacobs), attachment and connection to place (Carmona), identity-rich places (Lynch)
Managerial challenges	Interview 1: local park turns into a food distribution site; interview 3: The dirt field behind the mosque... becomes a charity distribution center; interview 16: Side alleys... turn into food stations;	Social activity, management challenges (Jacobs), vibrancy (Whyte), managerial challenges (Carmona)
Institutional capacity building	Interview 2: Places usually abandoned the rest of the year... give a sense of life; interview 6: Urban spaces usually unused... turn into activity hubs; interview 3: Those spaces are usually idle... full of movement, light, sound;	Social activity, institutional management (Jacobs), vibrancy (Whyte), institutional revitalization (Carmona), participatory paths and places (Lynch)
Participatory governance	Interview 1: Spaces like the main street of Javadiyeh... gain sacredness; interview 2: The procession of banners... is very sacred to me; interview 4: Space is not only physical; cultural and social meaning the ritual gives to space;	Human presence and activity (young), social activity, local participation (Jacobs), participatory governance (Carmona)
Sustainable development and tourism	Interview 1: Main streets... gain social function; interview 2: It brings movement, stops, stillness, sound; interview 3: Javadiyeh on this day is unlike any other day.	Cultural tourism (Jacobs), revitalization of culture and branding (Carmona), tourism paths and places (Lynch)

Phase 3: Searching for themes

In this phase, conceptually similar codes were organized into preliminary thematic categories. The aim was to identify underlying semantic patterns

within the data. Following a systematic review of the analytical memos and a comparative examination of the codes, sixteen conceptual clusters emerged, each forming an initial subtheme.

Table 4. Identification of sub-themes

Sub-theme	Initial codes
Change in the function and meaning of urban spaces	Transformation of public spaces, revitalization of abandoned spaces, spatial sacredness, cultural meaning of space, social function of spaces
Spatial-movement dynamics	Human flows, movement and pauses, processions, vibrant space, spatial mobility
Ritual symbolization and staging	Symbols of unity, ritual theater, cult rural-religious scene, collective performance, ritual display
Sensory experience and spatial perception	Saturated with color, sound, and movement; humanized space; spatial openness; sensory perception of space; lively space
Social cohesion and solidarity	Unique unity, larger cohesive community, annual social gathering, collective empathy, local unity
Networking and social connections	New relationships, living social network, expansion of friendships, new acquaintances, social bonds
Trust and collective cooperation	Cooperation in ceremonies, spontaneous participation, teamwork, local mutual aid, and social collaboration
Hospitality and moral capital	Display of hospitality, service to people, collective pride, ritual hosting, and ethics of hosting
Place-making and identity	Local identity, ritual brand, symbol of Javadiyeh, collective identity, neighborhood recognition
Historical memory and intergenerational continuity	Remembrance of parents, collective memory, family traditions, generational memories, communal commemorations
Cultural transmission and informal learning	Intergenerational continuity, ritual education, value transmission, cultural socialization, hands-on learning
Place attachment and sense of belonging	Roots in the alleys, collective memory, emotional bond with the neighborhood, sense of belonging, spatial attachment
Management and infrastructure challenges	Lack of facilities, traffic problems, overcrowding, absence of services, and disorder
Institutional capacity building and urban participation	Municipal participation, professional planning, institutional coordination, organizational support, integrated management
Participatory governance and bottom-up development	Bottom-up development, widespread enthusiasm, local self-organization, collective management, local initiatives
Sustainable development and cultural tourism	Religious tourism, cultural branding, ritual hub, local development, cultural economy

Phase 4: Reviewing and refining the themes

The identified themes were reviewed in terms of internal coherence, distinctiveness, and alignment

with the research questions. Several themes were merged while others were separated to ensure conceptual clarity.

Table 5. Theme refinement

Sub-theme	Initial codes
Functional transformation of spaces	Conversion of a park into a food distribution point, dirt ground into a food center, and abandoned space into an activity hub
Movement and flow dynamics	Procession movement, movement and pause, human flows, spatial mobility
Meaning-making and spatial perception	Spatial sacredness, sensory experience (color and sound), humanized space, spatial openness
Redefining urban boundaries	Suspension of usual boundaries, multifunctional spaces, ritual territories
Social cohesion and unity	Unique unity, larger cohesive community, collective empathy, local solidarity
Networking and local connections	New relationships, living social network, expansion of friendships, social bonds

Sub-theme	Initial codes
Trust and collective cooperation	Cooperation during ceremonies, spontaneous participation, teamwork, and social collaboration
Participation norms and communal ethics	Hospitality, service to people, sense of responsibility, ritual ethics
Local Identity formation	Local identity, ritual brand, symbol of Javadiyeh, collective identity
Collective memory and intergenerational continuity	Remembrance of past generations, childhood memories, family traditions, communal commemorations
Intergenerational cultural transmission	Ritual education, cultural socialization, intergenerational continuity, value transmission
Place attachment and sense of belonging	Roots in alleys, emotional bond, sense of belonging, spatial attachment
Operational and infrastructure challenges	Lack of facilities, traffic, overcrowding, absence of services, disorder
Institutional and participatory Capacity Building	Municipal participation, professional planning, institutional coordination, and organizational support
Local self-organization and governance	Bottom-up development, widespread enthusiasm, local initiatives, collective management
Development Vision and Sustainability	Cultural tourism, branding, local development, ritual sustainability

Phase 5: Naming and defining the themes

After the final refinement, each theme was redefined with a clear conceptual description and analytical boundaries:

- Theme 1: Ritual vitality and spatial transformation
This theme reflects the processes through which ritual practices transform transitional urban spaces into arenas of social and cultural participation. Participants described how silent streets turn into vibrant settings of collective life. This theme illustrates the transformation of “abstract space” into “lived space” within Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial theory.
- Theme 2: Generating social capital and local cohesion
This theme highlights the formation of trust-based relationships and cooperative bonds among residents. The shared experience of working toward a common goal produces a form of bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000). Interviews revealed that many participants maintained their social connections even after the ritual ended.
- Theme 3: Memory and the symbolic reproduction of place

The Ashura ritual is not only an event but also an enactment of the neighborhood’s shared memory. The repetition of routes, symbols, and ritual gestures evokes the past within the present moment. As one interviewee stated: “Every time the alarm moves, I remember my childhood—it is as if the whole neighborhood comes alive.” This theme aligns with theories of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) and embodied memory (Connerton, 1989).

- Theme 4: Institutional challenges and capacities
This theme encompasses the managerial and infrastructural dimensions of the ritual. Although the ceremony fosters strong social enthusiasm and cohesion, the lack of facilities and insufficient institutional coordination (with the municipality and local organizations) poses challenges to its continuity. Nonetheless, many participants perceived the ritual as an opportunity for cultural place-branding within the neighborhood.

Phase 6: Developing the analytical narrative

In the final stage, the themes were synthesized into a coherent analytical narrative to derive broader patterns of meaning. The overall analysis demonstrates that the Ashura ritual in Javadiyeh is not merely a religious event but a complex mechanism for producing and reproducing collective urban space. The themes collectively reveal that:

- At the spatial level, the ritual induces a temporary yet influential transformation of urban functions, generating social vitality.
- At the social level, networks of cooperation and trust emerge, contributing to the neighborhood’s social capital.
- At the cultural level, collective memory and identity are reproduced, reinforcing place attachment.
- At the institutional level, sustaining this dynamic requires synergistic urban management and policy coordination.

These findings are consistent with the study’s theoretical framework and demonstrate that religious

rituals—by interlinking space, community, and memory—play a significant role in fostering social sustainability and urban vitality (Lefebvre, 1991; Halbwachs, 1992; Putnam, 2000).

6. Discussion

This study, focusing on the Zuhr-e Ashura ritual in the Javadieh neighborhood of Tehran, demonstrates that religious rituals in the urban context of Iran function as powerful mechanisms for the production of space, the strengthening of social relations, and the reproduction of collective memory. These mechanisms align with key debates in contemporary urban studies while simultaneously challenging several assumptions embedded in Western-centric research. The findings reveal that the urban environment of Javadieh is transformed during the ritual from a merely physical and transitional setting into a lived, meaningful, and participatory space—a result consistent with the cultural-social turn in urban studies (Carmona, 2021; Mehta, 2018). However, unlike many documented experiences in European and East Asian cities—where rituals are frequently interpreted through frameworks of event economies and urban tourism (Richards, 2020; Kureel & Sen, 2023)—the ritual in Javadieh produces a space that is not commodified but rather communal and meaning-laden. This distinction highlights the contextual nature of ritual practices. It demonstrates that the mechanisms of spatial production in Iranian cities are grounded in grassroots participation rather than top-down policy design.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support Lefebvre's (1991) conception of the production of space, as the streets, alleys, and open spaces of the neighborhood become lived spaces when they are occupied through ritualized bodily movement. This reflects the embodied and symbolic dimensions of space emphasized in recent scholarship on urban geography (Thrift, 2008; Edensor, 2012), but does so within a religious and highly localized context. In contrast to many Western studies that examine memory primarily through formal heritage policies (Nora, 1989), collective memory in Javadieh is lived and re-enacted through ritual practice and social participation. This observation reframes the theories of Halbwachs (1992) and Connerton (1989) within a non-Western context and illustrates that memory does not necessarily depend on institutional frameworks for its continuity.

At the social level, the study shows that the Ashura ritual strengthens networks of trust, solidarity, and

cooperation, producing a form of ritual social capital. While this process aligns with Putnam's (2000) model of collective activity as a driver of social trust, in Javadieh—unlike many cases discussed in Western literature—this capital emerges not through formal associations but through grassroots ritual action and informal social networks. This finding resonates with Putnam's discussion of the capacity of informal networks and echoes observations from domestic research on neighborhood attachment (Farahbakhsh & Afzali, 2023; Khasto, 2023), although previous studies have paid far less attention to the role of streets and open spaces. Accordingly, the present study slightly destabilizes the centrality of the mosque as the primary locus of social life and shows that the street—activated through ritual—can also acquire deep social and identity-oriented significance.

Comparing the findings with scholarship from the Global South (Simone, 2019) provides further insight. Contrary to perspectives that portray low-income neighborhoods as socially fragmented, the case of Javadieh illustrates how rituals can reinforce durable social networks and participatory freedoms. This distinction is not an anomaly but a product of the particular rhythms of urban life in Iran—characterized by long-term residency, spatial density, kinship networks, and the embeddedness of ritual as an everyday meaning-making practice.

The findings also reveal the limitations of form-centered approaches to urban planning in Iran. While dominant regeneration policies often prioritize physical redesign, this study shows that urban vitality cannot emerge without meaning and community participation—components that are produced through collective practices. This conclusion aligns with human-centered approaches to the study of urban space (Gehl, 2011; Montgomery, 1998). Accordingly, the production of vitality in Iranian urban contexts is not primarily an engineering project but a cultural and social process.

Despite the study's emphasis on cohesion and social unity, the findings should not be interpreted through an overly idealized lens. The Zuhr-e Ashura ritual, like any space-producing collective action, is shaped and reproduced within power relations. In other words, space is not only produced but also controlled. Field observations indicate that the organization of ritual routes, the distribution of resources (such as offerings), role assignment, and the placement of stations are often influenced by specific groups—such as long-standing religious associations, neighborhood elders,

or traditional religious authorities. This dynamic can result in a form of ritual power concentration, potentially enabling spatial and symbolic inequalities within the ritual landscape. From a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault, 1977), space is always a site of power, even when it appears in a sacred form. Additionally, through the lens of the right to the city (Lefebvre; Harvey), one may question whether access

to space, visibility, and ritual participation are equally available to all groups. This question is particularly relevant for women, youth, and individuals with non-dominant lifestyles. Recognizing this critical dimension shifts the interpretation of the ritual beyond a narrative of cohesion and towards an understanding of it as a multilayered and potentially contested urban phenomenon.

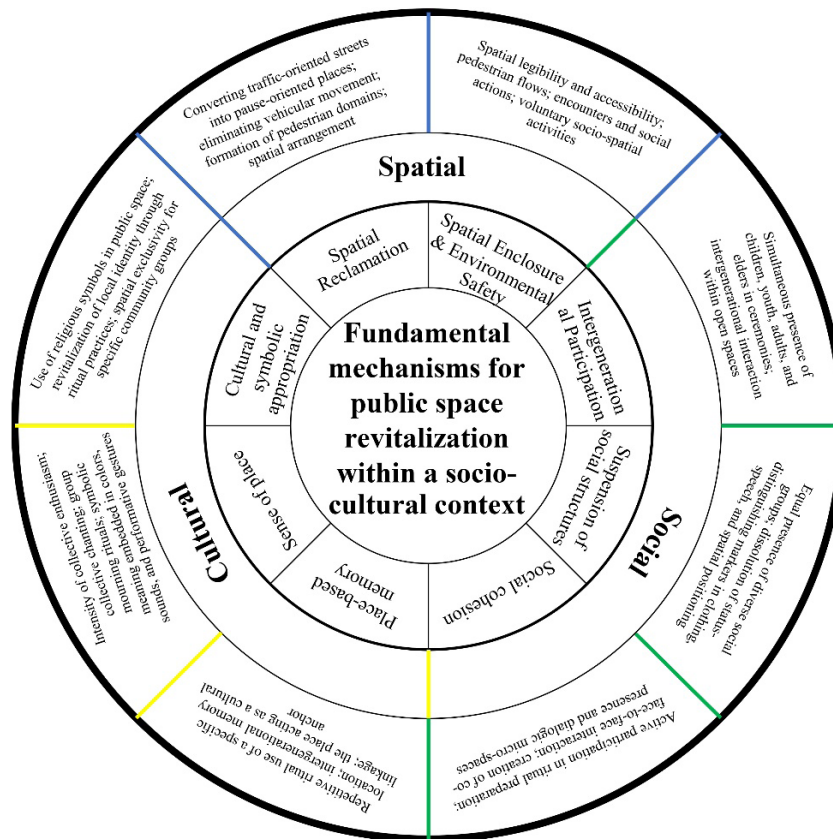


Figure 5. Core mechanisms for revitalizing public space in a cultural–social neighborhood context

Based on the mechanisms identified in the study, policies aimed at enhancing urban vitality and revitalizing public spaces within the context of religious rituals should be designed and implemented across three interrelated dimensions: spatial, social, and identity–cultural. Such an approach enables a shift from purely physical interventions toward culturally informed and participatory urban governance. At the spatial level, policies should prioritize spatial flexibility and adaptability to ritual rhythms. Findings indicate that the Zühr-e Ashura ritual in Javadieh requires temporary, dynamic, and reconfigurable spaces. Deploying movable street furniture during ritual periods can prevent spatial degradation while enhancing opportunities for pause, observation, and

interaction. Formal regulations for temporary pedestrianization of main ritual routes, coupled with short-term traffic management, can improve safety, legibility, and overall spatial experience. Complementary measures—such as appropriate lighting, temporary visual markers for procession paths, and lightweight infrastructure (temporary electricity, water, mobile sanitation)—support functional performance and enhance ritual quality without imposing long-term stress on the neighborhood fabric. At the societal level, strengthening participatory governance emerged as a key condition for sustaining rituals and neighborhood vitality. Policies should enhance coordination between formal institutions and

local communities. Establishing a Javadieh Muharram coordination committee, comprising the municipal authority, neighborhood council, religious associations, and local leaders, can serve as a permanent facilitation body to ensure participatory planning, conflict reduction, equitable resource distribution, and cohesive ritual management. Structured support for local volunteer networks—through safety training, crowd management, and event organization—can enhance the quality of ritual execution. Facilitating neighborhood dialogues before and after rituals fosters collective learning and self-organizing capacity. Employing community social facilitators as intermediaries between residents and institutions further reinforces participatory governance and operational coherence.

At the identity-cultural level, the primary goal is to preserve ritual authenticity and strengthen place-based identity. The zuhr-e ashura ritual functions beyond a simple event, acting as a vehicle for collective memory and cultural capital. Documenting ritual routes, symbols, narratives, and neighborhood memories as intangible cultural heritage can support the preservation of collective memory. Avoiding excessive commercialization and managing religious tourism through a community-centered tourism approach safeguards authenticity and resident agency. Intergenerational cultural programs—including storytelling, workshops, youth education, and artistic activities—facilitate the transmission of ritual identity. Supporting vernacular arts associated with rituals, such as noheh, ta'ziyeh, calligraphy, and ritual iconography, fosters the reintegration of art, religion, and urban space.

Overall, these recommendations build directly on the empirical mechanisms identified in the study while introducing two concrete institutional mechanisms—the Coordination Committee and community social facilitators—enhancing their operational feasibility and policy relevance within the neighborhood context. Otherwise, the study has some limitations. It provides only a preliminary analysis of power relations, spatial control, and potential conflicts, suggesting the need for deeper exploration in future research. Subsequent studies could focus on gendered experiences of ritual spaces, youth engagement with rituals in the context of urban modernity, and the exclusionary or inclusive functions of collective rituals. Comparative studies across neighborhoods in Tehran or other Iranian cities, longitudinal data collection, and mixed-method approaches (qualitative–quantitative) could further

test and generalize the analytical framework developed in this study.

7. Conclusion

The findings extend beyond a localized case study, offering significant theoretical contributions to urban studies, cultural geography, and urban planning. First, the study presents an integrative model that frames religious rituals not merely as cultural events but as active mechanisms for the production of urban space. The model highlights the interconnection of three dimensions—space, memory, and collective action—demonstrating how rituals, through embodied practices, repetition, and temporary occupation, reproduce neighborhood meaning and identity. This addresses a theoretical gap in which ritual studies and spatial production theory have seldom been integrated.

Second, the study reconceptualizes urban vitality. Unlike conventional approaches that measure vitality primarily through physical, functional, or consumption-based indicators, this research shows that vitality can emerge from ritualized practices and lived experiences. By emphasizing meaningful ritual and lived memory dimensions, the study offers a novel perspective on urban dynamics, moving vitality beyond design or event economies toward cultural and symbolic processes.

The meaningful–ritual dimension underscores that urban spaces are animated not merely through physical presence or consumptive activity but through symbolic meanings, collective experiences, and ritualized actions. In Javadieh, the Zuhr-e Ashura ritual demonstrates that urban vitality can emerge independently of formal design interventions, sustained instead by temporary ritual occupation and symbolic place-making.

The lived memory dimension further emphasizes that urban vitality is ephemeral without the continuity of collective memory. In Javadieh, the Ashura ritual not only activates spaces temporarily but also, through historical recollection, intergenerational transmission, and place-based identity reinforcement, fosters a form of enduring vitality. Memory thus constitutes a foundational element of urban life, where real vitality emerges when spaces become repositories of historical and emotional experience.

Third, the study develops an analytical framework for understanding spontaneous collective actions in urban spaces. Although grounded in the Ashura ritual of

Javadieh, the framework is not limited to religious practices. It can be applied to analyze other forms of collective spatial occupation, including urban protests, street festivals, sports gatherings, or national ceremonies—actions that, through temporary occupation, disruption of everyday order, and meaning production, play a decisive role in urban dynamics. In this sense, the proposed model possesses analytical generalizability beyond both the specific geography and religious context of Javadieh.

Overall, this study demonstrates that urban space is not merely a physical domain but a social, memory-laden, and symbolic arena, continuously reshaped by human practices. The Zuhr-e Ashura ritual in Javadieh exemplifies this process, where lived culture transforms the city from within. By emphasizing the interconnection between space, memory, and collective action, this research opens new horizons for understanding urban vitality in non-Western contexts. It underscores the need to rethink dominant urban planning approaches.

Authors' Contributions

The corresponding author was solely responsible for all stages of the research process, including study design, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and preparation of the final manuscript. The author approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no actual or potential conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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