



Light and Nature in Spiritual Interiors

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Abstract

Spiritual interiors are sacred spaces where architecture, ritual, and the human senses converge to nurture devotion and inner peace. In Indian traditions, light and nature have long shaped such environments. Sunlight enters through courtyards, carved openings, and latticed screens, casting patterns of glow and shadow that evoke reverence and mark the rhythm of time and prayer. At dusk, oil lamps and sacred flames extend this divine presence, their flickering glow symbolizing purity, continuity, and eternity. Nature deepens this experience by embedding sacred trees, flowing water, and landscapes into the spatial fabric, grounding spirituality in harmony with the environment. Case studies such as the Jawalamukhi Temple, Banglamukhi Temple, Anandpur Sahib Gurudwara, and Nizamuddin Dargah exemplify these principles. Methodology included visual documentation, site observations, interviews with caretakers, and experiential analysis of spatial rhythms over time. Together, these approaches reveal how light, flame, and nature orchestrate spiritual atmospheres. The study emphasizes that in an era where artificial and enclosed spiritual spaces are proliferating, there is an urgent need to return to these timeless design principles—not through replication, but through inspiration. By reintegrating natural light, sacred flames, and ecological elements, designers can create sustainable, meaningful spaces where spirituality is embodied and experienced, rather than merely observed.

Keywords: Architecture, Harmony, Interiors, Light, Nature.

1. Introduction

Spiritual interiors are sacred environments where architecture and human experience converge to support worship, reflection, and inner peace. More than functional spaces, they are designed to heighten the senses and evoke a sense of the divine through materiality, form, and atmosphere. Such interiors embody cultural values and rituals, shaping spaces that are both personally intimate and communally sacred. Within these spaces, light and nature play a central role. Natural light, shadow patterns, and changing atmospheres guide rhythms of prayer and contemplation, while elements such as trees, water, and landscapes ground spirituality in harmony with the environment. Together, they transform interiors into *living, dynamic experiences* rather than static structures, as seen across diverse traditions in temples, mosques, churches, gurudwaras, and dargahs. Their timeless presence offers lessons for contemporary design seeking deeper meaning and sustainability [1].

2. Aim

The aim of this research is to explore and interpret how light and nature influence the design and experience of spiritual interiors in Indian architectural traditions [2].

3. Objective

To explore the integration of light and ecology in the interiors of spiritual spaces. To compare how light and nature shape spiritual atmosphere across diverse religious interiors. To propose design guidelines inspired by traditional practices for contemporary spiritual interiors [3].

4. Scope And Limitation

This study examines the interior spaces of selected sacred sites in India where light and nature actively shape spiritual atmospheres. Case studies include the Jawalamukhi and Banglamukhi Temples, Anandpur Sahib Gurudwara, Nizamuddin Dargah, and a church, enabling cross-faith comparison. Focus is placed on experiential, sensory, and temporal aspects of

interiors. The study is limited to interior spiritual cores, excluding entire complexes. Analysis is qualitative and interpretive, without quantitative measures (e.g., lux levels). Constraints include limited site access, time restrictions, and reduced scope for observing seasonal changes [4].

5. Research Methodology

A qualitative approach combines architectural, experiential, and ethnographic methods. Tools include site visits, visual documentation (photographs, sketches), and ritual observations to understand how light and nature shape atmosphere. Semi-structured interviews with priests, caretakers, and devotees provide symbolic and functional insights. A comparative case study method highlights similarities and contrasts, distilling design principles relevant for both traditional and contemporary contexts. Dargah, and a church, enabling cross-faith comparison. Focus is placed on experiential, sensory, and temporal aspects of interiors. The study is limited to interior spiritual cores, excluding entire complexes. Analysis is qualitative and interpretive, without quantitative measures (e.g., lux levels). Constraints include limited site access, time restrictions, and reduced scope for observing seasonal change rather than a repetition of the Results Shown in Figure 1 [5].

6. Literature Review

The relationship between *light, nature, and spirituality* has been widely acknowledged across cultures and traditions, though interpreted differently within architectural discourse. Scholars emphasize that spiritual architecture is not merely about physical form, but about creating *atmospheres that nurture devotion, reflection, and transcendence* (Rasmussen, 1964; Eliade, 1987). Norberg-Schulz (1980) further argued that light transforms space into an experiential reality, shaping perception, rhythm, and symbolism. Together, these foundations establish light and nature as *key mediators between the material and the spiritual*, essential for understanding sacred interiors. Light has historically been associated with *purity, transcendence, and continuity of the sacred*. In Indian sacred architecture, sunlight filtered through **courtyards, carved openings, and jalis* animates interiors with patterns of glow and shadow, marking temporal cycles of prayer and devotion (Tillotson, 1998). At dusk, oil lamps and sacred flames extend this presence, their flickering glow symbolizing eternity and purity (Michell, 1977) [6]. While these works highlight the symbolic aspects of light, fewer studies consider its *experiential and temporal dimensions*, such as how worshippers engage with the changing quality of light across rituals and times of day. Nature has been equally central to the making of spiritual interiors, serving as both a physical and symbolic anchor. Scholars such as Kramrisch (1946) and Michell (1977) describe Indian temples as microcosms of the cosmos, where mountains, rivers, and vegetation are represented in spatial and ritual order. Haberman (2006) highlights the role of rivers and temple tanks in sustaining purification practices, while Jain (2010) emphasizes sacred groves and trees as enduring sites of ecological spirituality. In gurudwaras and dargahs, courtyards, gardens, and flowing water nurture *communal gathering, sensory engagement, and contemplative calm* (Singh, 2008). Unlike abstract symbolism, these elements offer tangible connections to the natural world, rooting worshippers in cycles of growth, renewal, and balance. Despite this, much of the scholarship has examined individual natural features in isolation, leaving the *holistic interplay of

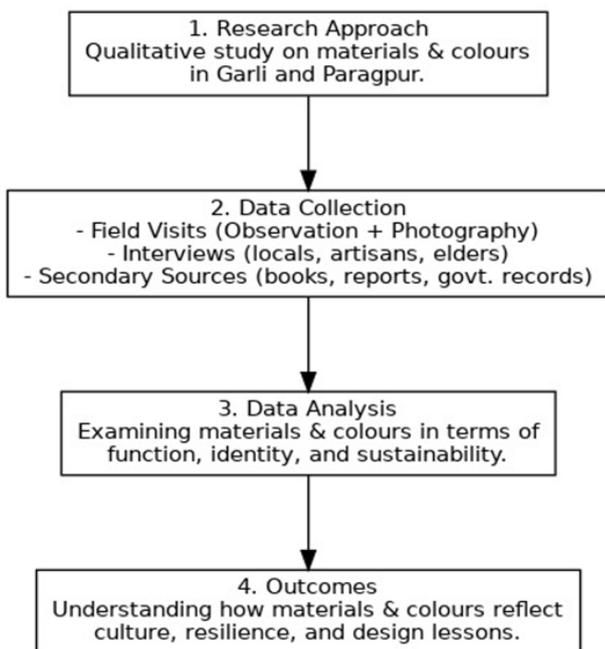


Figure 1 Flow Diagram

nature with other spatial elements underexplored*. In recent decades, scholars have expressed concern over the *erosion of sensory and ecological dimensions* in modern spiritual interiors. Frampton (1995) critiques contemporary religious architecture for prioritizing monumentality and efficiency over intimacy and atmosphere. This critique resonates in the Indian context, where many new sacred spaces rely heavily on artificial lighting and enclosed forms, often overlooking traditional relationships with sunlight, landscape, and ventilation. Conversely, sustainable and biophilic design theories (Kellert, 2015) call for a return to natural light, greenery, and water as strategies for human well-being and ecological harmony. Yet, few studies connect these frameworks directly to *living traditions of Indian sacred interiors*, where such principles remain embedded in practice [7]. The reviewed literature establishes that both light and nature are foundational to sacred architecture, but studies often analyze them in isolation—light as symbolic illumination or nature as ecological context—rather than as an integrated experiential system. Furthermore, while architectural descriptions are well-documented, little attention has been given to how caretakers and worshippers perceive, inhabit, and ritualize these spaces over time. This gap underscores the need for research that combines symbolic, architectural, and experiential perspectives. Addressing these gaps, the present research examines case studies including the Jawalamukhi Temple, Banglamukhi Temple, Anandpur Sahib Gurudwara, and Nizamuddin Dargah. Through visual documentation, site observations, and experiential analysis, the study investigates how light, and nature together create spiritual atmospheres. By drawing inspiration from traditional practices while engaging with contemporary concerns, it argues for the relevance of these timeless design principles in shaping sustainable, meaningful, and experientially rich spiritual interiors today [8].

7. Case Study

7.1. Anandpur Sahib Gurudwara

The Anandpur Sahib Gurudwara reflects Sikh ideals of humility and equality. Natural light enters through skylights and clerestories, softly illuminating the

Guru Granth Sahib. Courtyards and the sarovar invite openness, ventilation, and reflection, while the langar reinforces inclusivity. The natural hill setting strengthens the connection between spirituality and landscape. The spatial arrangement of the Gurudwara embodies Sikh ideals of equality and inclusivity. The Darbar Sahib, or main prayer hall, is minimally ornamented to keep the focus on the Guru Granth Sahib, illuminated by soft streams of daylight. The langar hall, where all people share meals irrespective of status, further reinforces humility and spiritual equality. Open courtyards and pathways encourage movement, gathering, and reflection, while the natural setting of Anandpur Sahib in the hills strengthens the spiritual connection between worshippers and the landscape Shown in Figure 2.

Diagrammatic Breakdown: Light & Nature in Anandpur Sahib Gurudwara

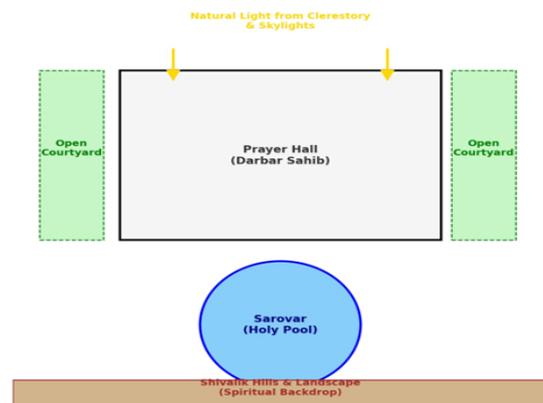


Figure 2 Diagrammatic Breakdown: Light & Nature in Anandpur Sahib Gurudwara

Light within the Gurudwara holds both symbolic and functional significance. Diffused daylight enters through skylights and high openings, bathing the interiors in a gentle glow that shifts with the rhythms of the day. The Guru Granth Sahib is always placed in focus under carefully directed light, symbolizing divine presence and guidance. Artificial illumination is minimal and warm, supporting a meditative atmosphere. In this way, light becomes more than a design element—it becomes a spiritual force guiding reflection and devotion. Nature is equally essential in shaping the spiritual environment. Open courtyards draw in sunlight, air, and sky, creating expansiveness and openness in worship. The presence of water in



the sarovar symbolizes purity and inner cleansing, while shaded areas and trees offer resting places for both contemplation and community dialogue. The Gurudwara's setting amidst the natural landscape embodies Sikh philosophy, reminding devotees of the unity of all creation and their place within it. For pilgrims, the journey into the Gurudwara is a gradual transition from the ordinary to the sacred. Pathways and open courts naturally lead toward interiors suffused with light, drawing the gaze to the Guru Granth Sahib. The integration of nature grounds this experience, reminding worshippers of simplicity, humility, and connection to creation. Collective rituals such as *sangat*, or shared prayer, and *langar*, the community meal, are enriched by these spatial qualities that dissolve boundaries and foster belonging. The Anandpur Sahib Gurudwara shows how light and nature are not decorative additions but essential elements of spiritual architecture. Light sanctifies the sacred text, while nature reinforces values of openness, purity, and inclusivity. Together, they create an environment where spirituality is experienced collectively, profoundly, and simply true to the essence of Sikh philosophy [9].

7.2. Case Study

- **/Jwalaji Temple (Jawalamukhi Temple) – A Unique Integration of Natural Flames, Architecture, and Design**

The Jwalaji Temple in Himachal Pradesh is defined by its eternal blue flames, symbolizing divine energy and serving as natural illumination. The sanctum's low ceilings and stone surfaces enhance the flickering glow, creating an intimate atmosphere. Its placement within the Kalidhar hills reflects Hindu cosmology, integrating fire, water, air, and earth. Courtyards, terraced paths, and surrounding biodiversity ground the temple in its natural setting, embodying eco-spiritual design. These flames burn flawlessly blue, varying in size and intensity, each assigned a symbolic role (e.g., one for prosperity, another for health). Devotees offer milk, water, and oblations (*ahutis*) directly to them, which the flames "consume" without extinguishing.

- **This natural lighting creates a dynamic, ethereal ambiance:** the blue hues cast a mystical glow, symbolizing divine energy

(Shakti) and the tongue of Sati. Historically, attempts to douse them (e.g., by Akbar) failed, reinforcing their sacred, uncontrollable nature. In design terms, the flames serve as "living lamps," eliminating the need for external illumination during day or night, and their perpetual motion adds a temporal dimension to the space—flickering like a divine heartbeat. This integrates lighting as an architectural element, where the sanctum's low ceiling and stone walls contain and reflect the light, fostering introspection and awe. Nestled in the verdant Kalidhar hills of the Dhauladhar range, Jwalaji Temple embodies a symbiotic relationship with its natural environment, aligning with Hindu cosmology where temples mirror the universe's elements (Pancha Mahabhuta: earth, water, fire, air, ether). The site's selection at a natural gas vent exemplifies "geomantic" placement, where geological features dictate sacred geometry.

- **Fire Element Dominance:** The flames represent Agni (fire), harmonizing with the temple's volcanic-like origin, evoking Sati's fiery sacrifice.
- **Surrounding Landscape:** Overlooking lush Kangra Valley with rivers and forests, the temple's elevated position integrates terraced paths and open courtyards that frame panoramic views, blending built and wild elements. Nearby hot springs and the Beas River enhance water-fire duality.
- **Sustainability:** No artificial interventions disrupt the ecosystem; rituals use biodegradable offerings, and the structure's stone base minimizes environmental footprint. Fairs incorporate natural motifs like red silken flags waving in the mountain breeze, tying human devotion to seasonal cycles.
- **Biodiversity:** The Shivalik foothills host diverse flora (e.g., rhododendrons) and fauna, with the temple's open layout allowing breezes to ventilate and cool the space, promoting passive climate responsiveness.

This nature-centric approach underscores eco-

spiritual design, where the temple is not imposed on the land but emerges from it, fostering a sense of eternal renewal. The temple's layout follows a compact, axial plan rooted in Vastu Shastra, emphasizing centrality and procession toward the divine core. Spanning a modest courtyard it prioritizes experiential flow over grandeur.

- **Entrance Axis:** Pilgrims approach via a hillside path, passing lion-flanked gates into the open courtyard—a transitional "purgation" space for reflection.
- **Mandap and Pit:** The assembly hall leads to the square sanctum, where the central hollowed pit (3-4 meters wide) houses the flames amid four symbolic corners. Copper pipes subtly channel gas, maintaining ritual purity.
- **Circumambulatory Path:** A narrow pradakshina (circumambulation) route encircles the sanctum, allowing devotees to view flames from multiple angles without direct access, enhancing mystery.
- **Spatial Hierarchy:** Low ceilings in the sanctum contrast with open skies in the courtyard, guiding vertical progression from earthly to ethereal. The dome's apex aligns with hill contours, ensuring visual harmony.

7.3. Case Study

The Church of the Light, designed by Tadao Ando in 1989 in Ibaraki, Osaka, is a landmark of modern religious architecture. Built for a small Protestant community, it reflects Christianity's symbolism of light while resonating with Japanese traditions of simplicity and contemplation. The church is composed of two intersecting rectangular volumes, with the main chapel oriented toward a cruciform cut in the concrete wall. The raw concrete surfaces and aligned wooden pews intensify the focus on the luminous cross, while a narrow passage connects the chapel to its annex. This spatial journey embodies the Christian passage from darkness into light. Light serves as the central element. The cross-shaped aperture allows daylight to pierce the dim interior, creating a glowing symbol that shifts with time. The interplay of radiant light and shadow conveys salvation and grace, making illumination itself the

essence of spirituality Shown in Figure 3.

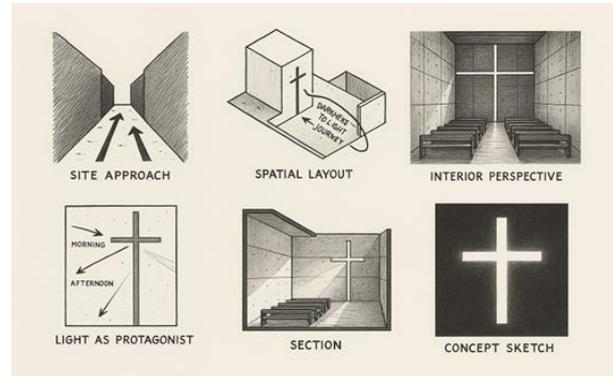


Figure 3 Chapel Concept

Nature enters indirectly through light and sky. The cruciform cut frames the ever-changing atmosphere beyond, while the approach path's sharp turns prepare visitors for the luminous revelation within. Instead of greenery, Ando captures nature in its most ephemeral quality—light—encouraging contemplation of creation's intangible essence. The Church of the Light shows how minimal means—raw concrete, geometry, and natural light—can create profound spiritual impact. By reducing architecture to silence and purity, Ando demonstrates that divinity is not found in ornament, but in the eternal dialogue between shadow, light, and the human spirit [10].

8. Result

The study of Jawalamukhi Temple, Banglamukhi Temple, Anandpur Sahib Gurudwara, Nizamuddin Dargah, and the Church of the Light shows that light and nature are consistently central to shaping.

9. Discussion

Findings confirm that light and nature are not decorative but foundational to spiritual interiors. Light symbolizes purity and divinity, as seen in flames at Jwalaji Temple or the cruciform glow in the Church of the Light. Experientially, changing daylight and natural elements create temporal depth, guiding worshippers from the ordinary to the sacred. Ecological features such as sarovars, courtyards, and trees also provide climatic comfort, linking spirituality with sustainability. By contrast, many modern spiritual buildings depend on artificial light and sealed forms, weakening sensory engagement. Reintegrating traditional principles with biophilic



design can restore ecological and spiritual depth to contemporary sacred spaces [11].

Conclusion

This research establishes that light and nature are universal design principles across faiths. Sunlight, shadow, fire, water, and open skies transform interiors into dynamic environments of reflection and devotion. Traditional approaches show that sustainable and spiritual design emerges when built form harmonizes with nature. Rather than replicating the past, architects should reinterpret these principles to shape contemporary spaces that are both environmentally responsive and spiritually resonant.

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