

# Architecture of Religious Spaces as Catalysts for Social Reform: “The Theory of Indirect Space in Interfaith Congregational Environments in Tanzania”

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**Abstract--** Religious architecture has traditionally been understood as a spatial expression of doctrinal identity and sacred separation. However, in increasingly pluralistic societies, religious spaces are also emerging as platforms for interfaith engagement and social transformation. This study investigates how architectural configurations of congregational and interfaith environments in Tanzania contribute to processes of social reform and interreligious dialogue.

Using a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist inquiry, the study draws on questionnaires, focus group discussions, and comparative case studies of selected religious sites in Dar es Salaam, Arusha, Zanzibar, and the University of Dar es Salaam. The findings reveal that direct spatial integration of faith groups within sacred interiors is perceived as theologically and symbolically constrained. Instead, participants strongly support the use of neutral, semi-public, and transitional environments.

The study introduces the concept of “Indirect Space Theory”, defined as architectural spaces positioned between sacred and secular domains that enable interaction without compromising religious identity. These spaces such as courtyards, multipurpose halls, and transitional thresholds function as mediating environments for dialogue, trust-building, and reconciliation.

The research concludes that architecture is not a passive container but an active agent in peacebuilding processes. Indirect spaces significantly enhance interfaith participation and social cohesion by enabling controlled proximity between religious groups.

**Keywords--** Indirect Space Theory; Interfaith Architecture; Sacred Space; Social Reform; Religious Pluralism; Tanzania; Architectural Hybridity; Spatial Justice; Peacebuilding Spaces.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Religious spaces have historically functioned as physical manifestations of spiritual authority, doctrinal identity, and communal belonging. In both Islamic and Christian traditions, mosques and churches are not only places of worship but also symbolic structures that define the boundaries of sacred experience [14].

However, contemporary urban contexts characterized by religious diversity increasingly challenge the exclusivity of sacred architecture.

In Tanzania, where Christianity and Islam coexist within shared urban landscapes, interfaith interaction is often facilitated through organized programs rather than spatial design [14]. Yet, the spatial dimension of such interactions remains underexplored in architectural discourse. While interfaith councils and peace initiatives promote dialogue, the built environment rarely reflects intentional design for such encounters [10].

This study argues that architecture plays a critical but under-theorized role in shaping interreligious relations. It proposes that between the extremes of sacred exclusivity and secular neutrality exists a spatial condition that enables controlled interaction without doctrinal conflict [12]. This condition is conceptualized as Indirect Space.

The aim of this research is therefore to examine how architectural environments can function as catalysts for interfaith dialogue and social reform, and to develop a theoretical framework applicable to pluralistic societies.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between space, religion, and society has been widely explored in architectural and sociological theory. [5] distinguishes between sacred and profane space, [2] arguing that sacred architecture demarcates a rupture in spatial experience. [9] further advances this discussion by asserting that space is socially produced, shaped by political, cultural, and ideological forces.

[8] introduces the concept of conflict transformation, emphasizing the importance of relational spaces in fostering reconciliation. In parallel, [6] conceptualizes peace as a structural condition, not merely the absence of conflict, implying that spatial systems can either support or hinder peacebuilding processes.

In Islamic architectural thought, [11] and [17] emphasize the symbolic and ethical dimensions of space, while Christian architectural discourse following the Second Vatican Council promotes openness and ecumenical accessibility.

More recent scholarship on multi faith spaces [2] highlights the emergence of shared religious environments, yet these studies often lack a formal architectural typology explaining how such spaces function spatially.

Similarly, [13]'s principles of common-pool resource governance provide an indirect but valuable framework for understanding shared spatial systems, particularly in relation to rule flexibility and boundary management.

Despite this body of knowledge, there remains a gap in architectural theory regarding mediating spatial forms that enable interfaith interaction without dissolving sacred identity. This study addresses this gap through the development of the Indirect Space Theory.

### III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: INDIRECT SPACE THEORY

This study adopts the socio-spatial paradigm advanced by [9], who argues that space is socially produced through the interaction of physical form, social practices, and symbolic meaning. Within the context of interfaith relations in Tanzania, religious environments are therefore understood not merely as physical settings, but as socially constructed arenas in which identity, memory, authority, and power relations are continuously negotiated [1]. The built environment does not simply accommodate interfaith interaction; rather, it actively shapes visibility, proximity, hierarchy, accessibility, and patterns of social engagement. Consequently, architectural design may either reinforce exclusivist spatial boundaries or facilitate transformative relational practices grounded in coexistence and dialogue.

The sacred, profane dialectic articulated by [5] further provides a conceptual basis for understanding the symbolic organization of religious architecture. In many African contexts, sacred space [3], [18] embodies transcendence, divine order, ritual identity, and symbolic separation from ordinary life [3]. In contrast, profane or civic space said by [16] represents the realm of everyday social interaction, public exchange, and collective civic experience. While sacred architecture [15] preserves theological integrity and religious identity, it may simultaneously resist pluralistic accommodation. Conversely, civic neutrality may encourage social interaction but often lacks the symbolic and spiritual depth required for meaningful reconciliation [4] and relational transformation.

To address this tension, the present study introduces the concept of the "*indirect space*", a hybrid architectural typology situated between sacred centrality and civic neutrality. This liminal spatial condition functions as a mediating threshold that is neither entirely sacred [21] nor wholly secular, yet remains symbolically hospitable to multiple faith identities.

Within urban Tanzanian contexts such as Dar es Salaam, where churches, mosques, and religious compounds [20] frequently coexist within densely populated neighborhoods, such indirect spaces may include shared courtyards, interfaith [17] learning pavilions, dialogue halls, community mediation gardens, or transitional gathering spaces positioned adjacent to, but distinct from, primary worship areas.

The framework is further informed by peacebuilding theories developed by [8]. [8]'s relational conflict transformation model emphasizes the importance of sustained human relationships and safe spaces for dialogue in achieving reconciliation, while Galtung's conception of structural and cultural peace highlights the necessity of addressing both visible and invisible forms of violence embedded within social systems and cultural structures [19]. When translated into architectural terms, these theories support the intentional design of environments that spatially embody encounter, negotiation, coexistence, and mutual recognition.

Accordingly, this study advances the hypothesis that interfaith programs in urban Tanzanian contexts become more effective when supported by deliberately designed indirect spaces capable of mediating between sacred exclusivity and civic inclusivity. In this formulation, architecture becomes more than a physical container of religious practice [22]; it emerges as an infrastructural catalyst for peacebuilding, social cohesion, and sustainable social reform.

Therefore, Indirect Space Theory proposes that interfaith interaction is most effective not within sacred interiors, but within mediating architectural zones positioned between sacred and secular domains.

### IV. METHODOLOGY

#### 4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative interpretivist research design, grounded in the understanding that religious architecture is both material and symbolic [7]. The approach is informed by the understanding that religious architecture, particularly within interfaith contexts, operates not only as physical infrastructure but also as a symbolic, relational, and experiential construct. Investigating such environments therefore requires methods capable of capturing subjective meaning, spatial perception, and lived experience.

To enhance analytical robustness and methodological triangulation, the research integrates three complementary strategies: structured questionnaires, focus group discussions, and multiple case studies [7].

This mixed qualitative framework enables cross-validation of findings across perceptual, dialogical, and spatial obs

Fieldwork was conducted in three Tanzanian urban contexts characterized by religious plurality and active interfaith engagement: Dar es Salaam, Arusha, and Zanzibar. ervational data.

#### 4.2 Research Setting

- *Dar es Salaam*, as the country's largest metropolitan center, presents dense spatial proximity between mosques and churches within mixed neighborhoods.
- *Arusha*, known for its civic and international character, hosts several interfaith peace initiatives.
- *Zanzibar*, with its Muslim-majority context and Christian minority presence, offers a distinct socio-religious spatial configuration.

These sites were purposively selected to reflect varied urban religious morphologies and peacebuilding experiences within Tanzania.

#### 4.3 Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure balanced representation across religious, professional, and generational categories. Participants included:

- Religious leaders (Christian and Muslim)
- Architects and built-environment professionals
- Community elders
- Youth engaged in interfaith programs

A total of 60 participants contributed to the study:

- 30 respondents completed structured questionnaires
- 20 participants engaged in two focus group discussions (10 per group)
- 10 key informants participated in in-depth case study interviews

This composition ensured inclusion of both institutional and grassroots perspectives.

#### 4.4 Data Collection Instruments

Three principal tools were utilized:

1. *Structured Questionnaires*- Designed to capture perceptions regarding interfaith initiatives, spatial inclusivity, and architectural influence on dialogue.
2. *Focus Group Discussions*- Facilitated sessions explored spatial expectations, symbolic sensitivities, and the feasibility of shared or hybrid religious environments.

3. *Case Study Analysis*- Selected congregational and interfaith venues were examined through site observation, spatial sketching, and photographic documentation. Particular attention was given to circulation patterns, boundary articulation, symbolic markers, and degrees of spatial neutrality.

#### 4.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic coding procedures [7]. Responses were categorized under recurrent conceptual clusters, including:

- Forgiveness and reconciliation
- Non-violence and relational trust
- Sacred–profane boundary negotiation
- Emergence of “indirect space.”
- Architectural hybridity

NVivo software facilitated systematic coding and cross-case comparison. Case study observations were triangulated with participant narratives to identify recurring spatial patterns and socio-symbolic interpretations. This process strengthened validity and minimized interpretive bias.

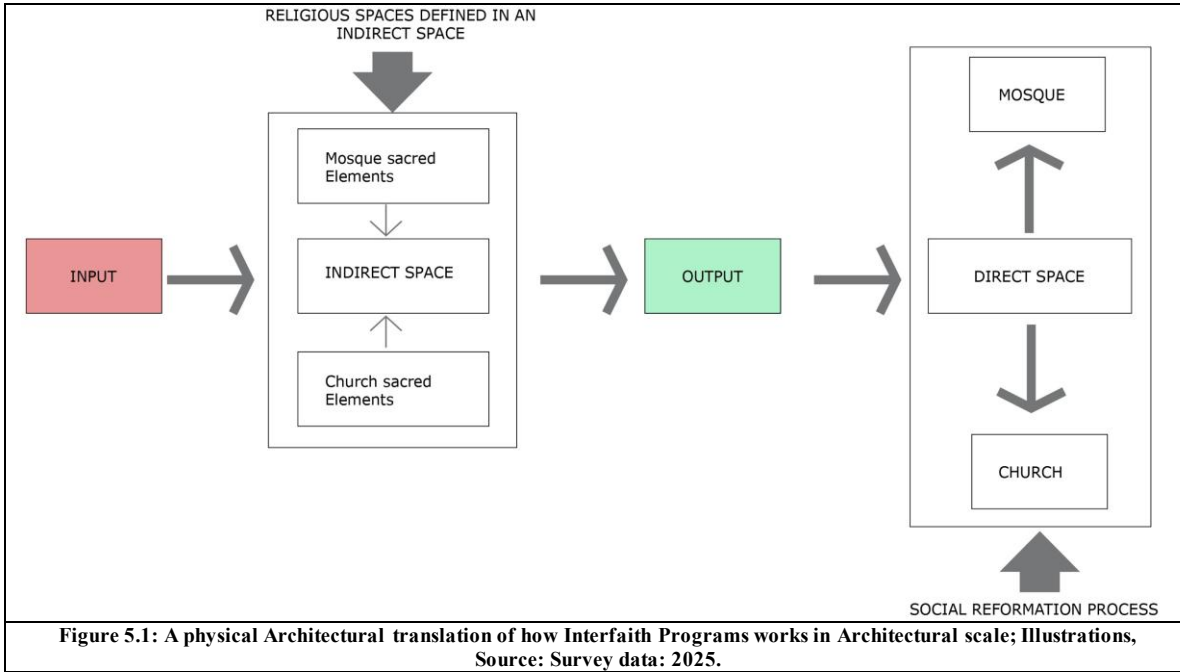
#### 4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained through voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality safeguards, and cultural sensitivity. Given the potential sensitivity of doctrinal discussions, focus group facilitation prioritized mutual respect and avoided adversarial theological debate. Participants were assured anonymity in reporting findings.

### V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

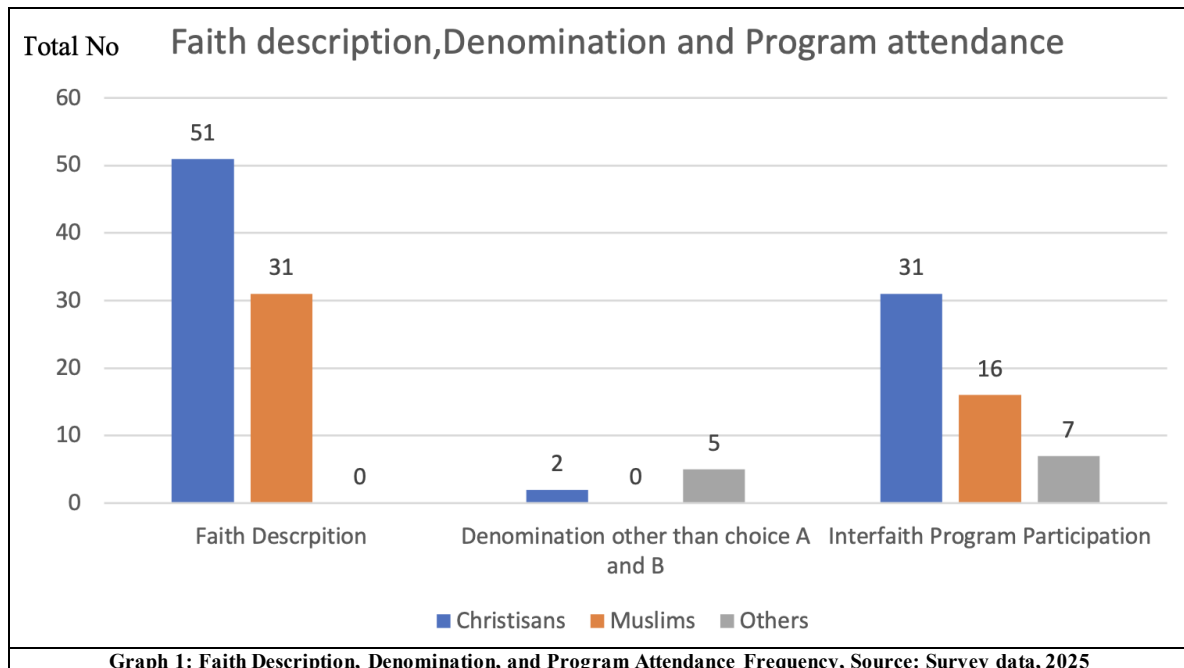
#### 5.1 Emergence of the “Indirect Space.”

Across the three urban contexts investigated- *Dar es Salaam*, *Arusha*, and *Zanzibar*- participants consistently emphasized the importance of spatial environments that facilitate interreligious interaction without compromising the sanctity of worship spaces. Both Muslim and Christian respondents expressed reluctance toward conducting interfaith programs within primary sacred interiors such as mosques or church sanctuaries. Instead, a strong preference emerged for adjacent yet symbolically moderated environments, including shared courtyards, gardens, lecture rooms, verandas, and multipurpose halls.



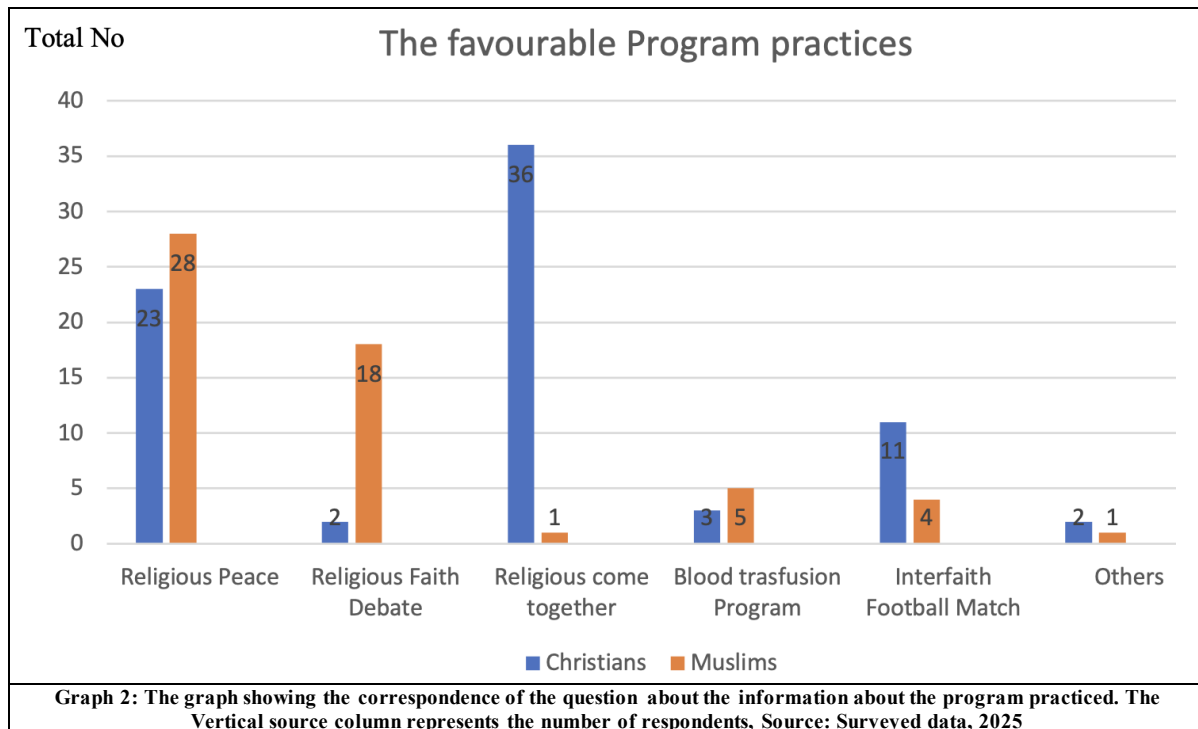
The above diagrammatic illustration explains the physical translation of this space for the work of social reform that interfaith programs result.

The following graphs represents the research findings that resulted from correspondents addressing the issues of faith, denomination and program attendance:



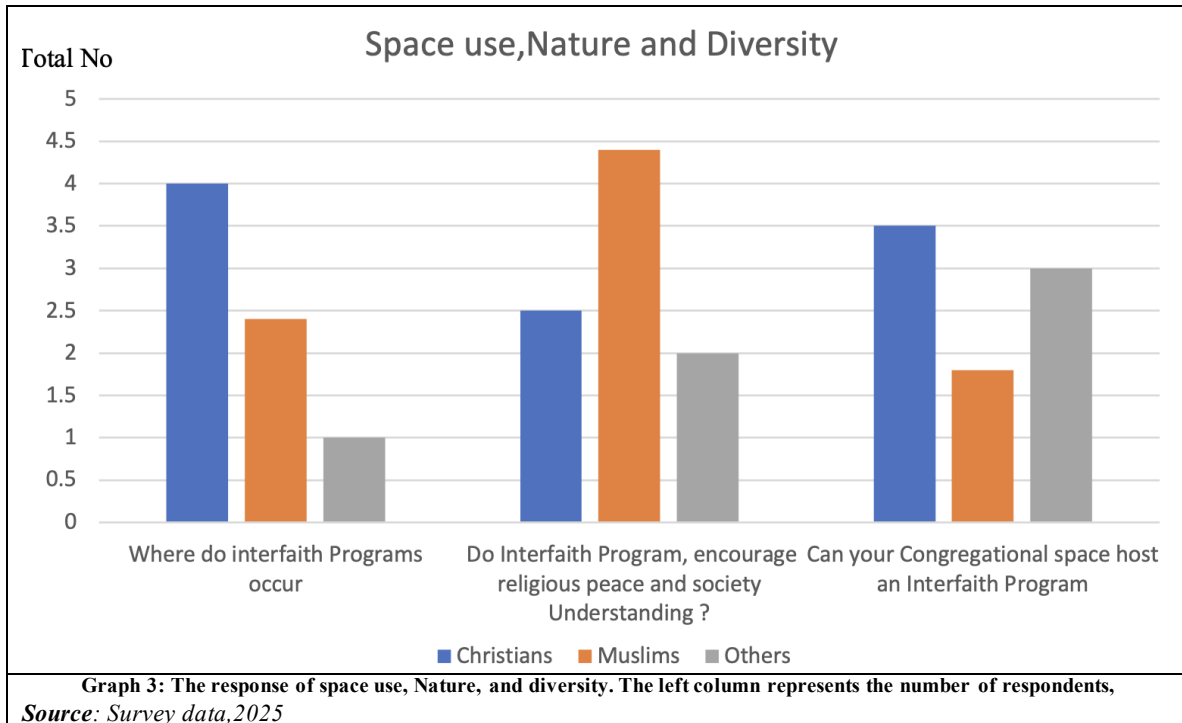
It was found that out of 82 sample spaces filled with the questionnaire sheets, 51 were Christians and 31 were Muslims. The results also showed that there was a great awareness of the *Graph 3: faith* interfaith programs to exist, and mostly the results showed they were practised by *Description, Denomination* Christians more than the

Muslims; that means many Christians tended to practise these *actions and* interfaith programs more than Muslims, and very little of a combination for both. The results *Program Attendance* showed that out of 82 sample spaces contacted, 31 showed awareness of Christians and 16 of Muslims.



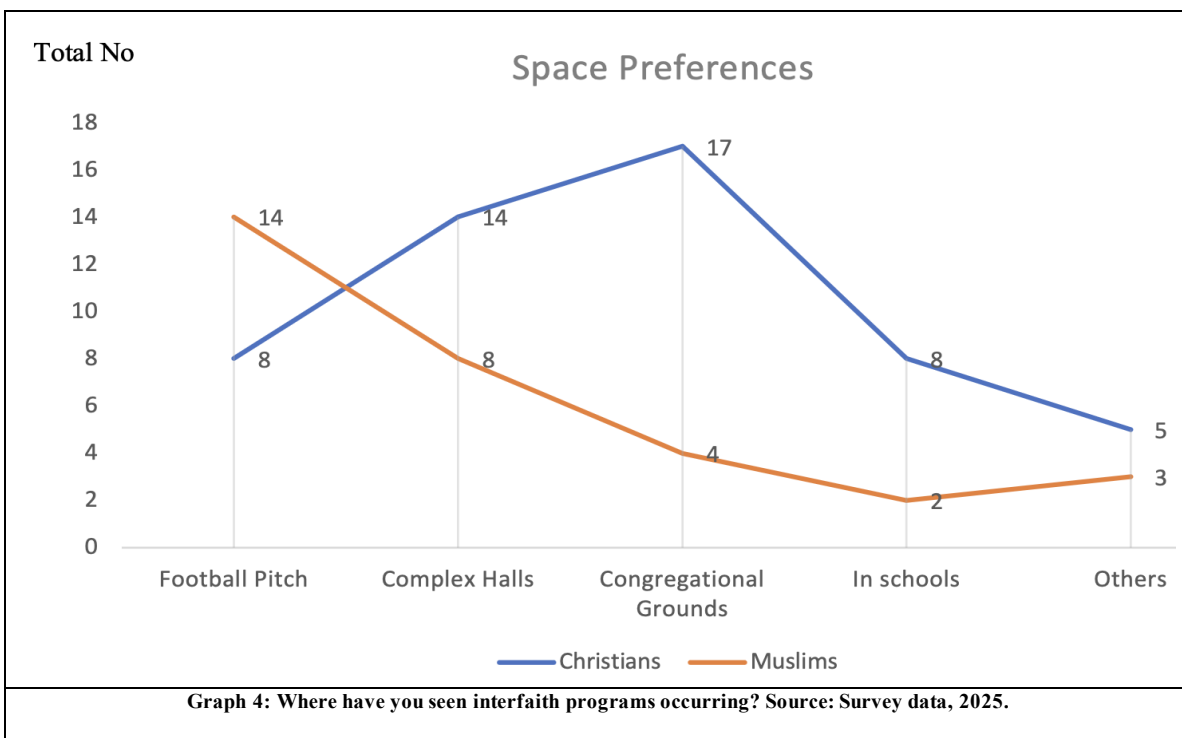
From the questionnaire results, it was found that the frequency for the reasons of attendance is different for the Christian and Muslim faith. This has two implications; first, the faith concept practises and secondly the level of Awareness. In the first case most Christians showed that their aware of the interfaith concept and it was found out that, they were the one who mostly visited and practiced.

The following results were gathered to understand space use, nature of this space and its diversity, these questions had the major aim to position the focus on architectural grounds.



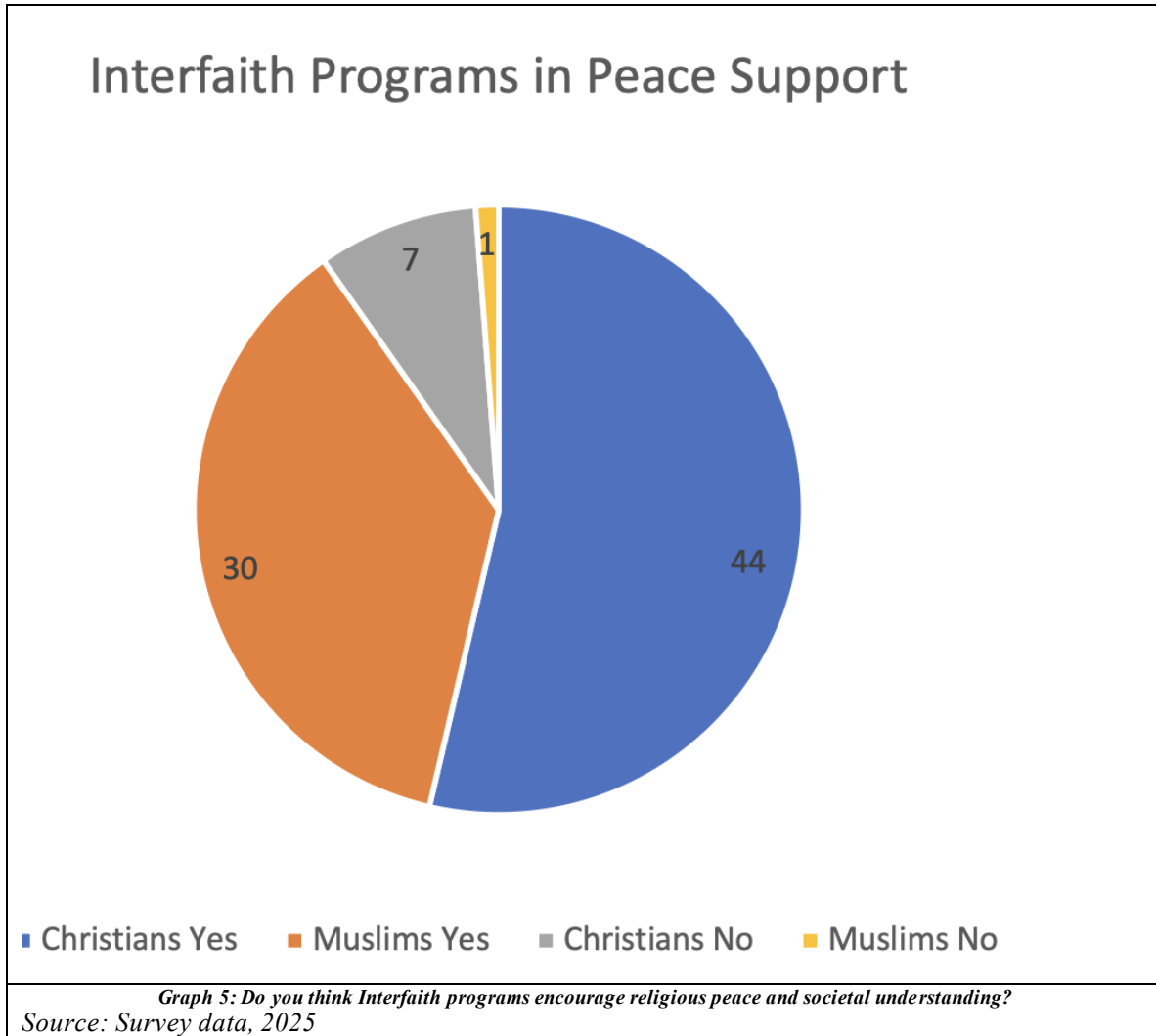
The first part had the intentions of understanding the mentality where these programs were usually preferred to happen.

They both had a focus on establishing the field of observation in an architectural phenomenon. The following graphs represents the findings from the above 3 graphs:



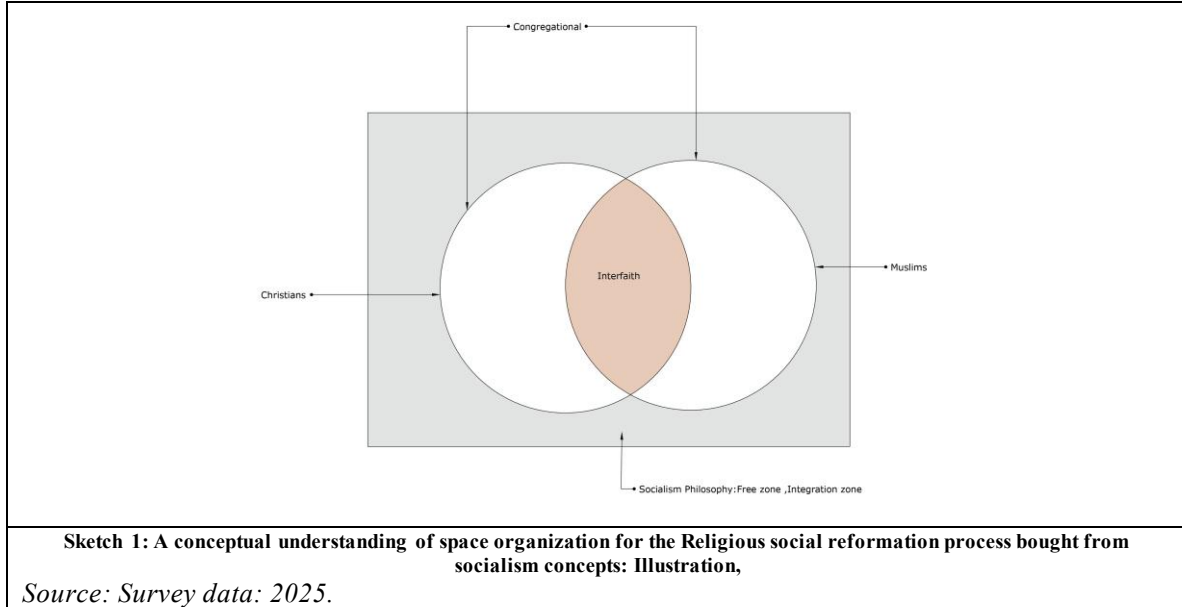
From the above data, the response of space preferences was tested, and it was found that Graph 4: Christians

preferred the congregational grounds more for the interfaith programs and practices.



The information above shows that there was an approximately equal percentage of agreement between the two religious groups on the interfaith programs in its contribution to religious tranquility.

As [14] suggested, these programs can be seen in the other way to help the process stabilize and an architecture of these spaces to be thought officially to the practice.



Interfaith programs to take place outside the congregational area. Here, an essential point, program, is marked for where the investigation should lie for the selected cases to link with research for a hybrid space.

These findings substantiate the study's conceptualization of the "Indirect Space" as a mediating architectural layer situated between sacred centrality and civic neutrality. Such spaces were perceived as relationally inclusive while simultaneously preserving doctrinal and symbolic boundaries. Rather than functioning as fully secular environments, these intermediate spaces retained proximity to sacred institutions while avoiding direct liturgical intrusion.

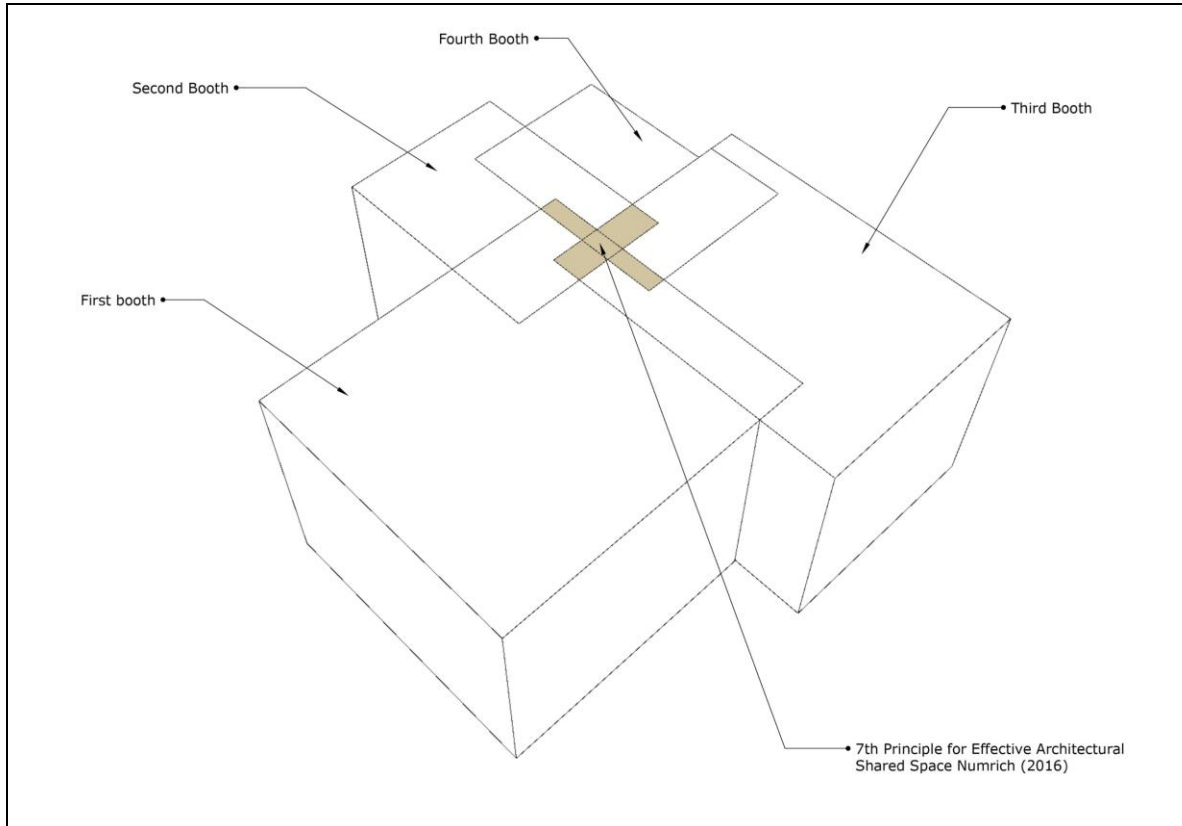
The findings further suggest that interfaith engagement is spatially more sustainable when architectural environments provide symbolic flexibility. This supports Henri Lefebvre's proposition that space is socially produced and actively shapes social relations.

In this context, architecture operates not merely as a backdrop for interfaith activity but as an active mediator of relational interaction and coexistence.

### 5.2 Architectural Hybridization Patterns

Case study analysis revealed recurring patterns of architectural hybridity across both congregational and interfaith environments. These included:

- multipurpose halls integrated within religious compounds,
- semi-open courtyards facilitating informal encounters,
- shared pavilions used for seminars, mediation, and public dialogue,
- and symbolic landscape elements such as water features, trees, shaded seating, and geometric motifs carrying universal rather than doctrinal meanings.



**Sketch 2: Religious spaces defined by Numrich (2016) Effective principles for Architectural shared space for social reforms,**  
*Source: Survey data: 2025*

At Mtoro Mosque, the frontal staircase and open courtyard functioned beyond their religious purpose to

become spaces of informal gathering, commercial exchange, public discussion, and social coexistence.



**Figure 5.1 The social role of the staircase at Mtoro Mosque, illustrating public interaction, resting, informal conversation, contemplation, and small-scale commercial activity.***Source: Survey data, 2025.*

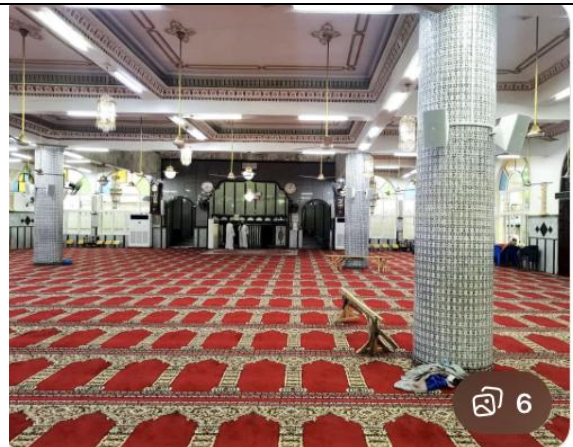


**Figure 5.2 The Frontal adoration space for muslim believers has formulated a strong element for social interaction created by the mosque space:** *Source: author survey data: 2025*

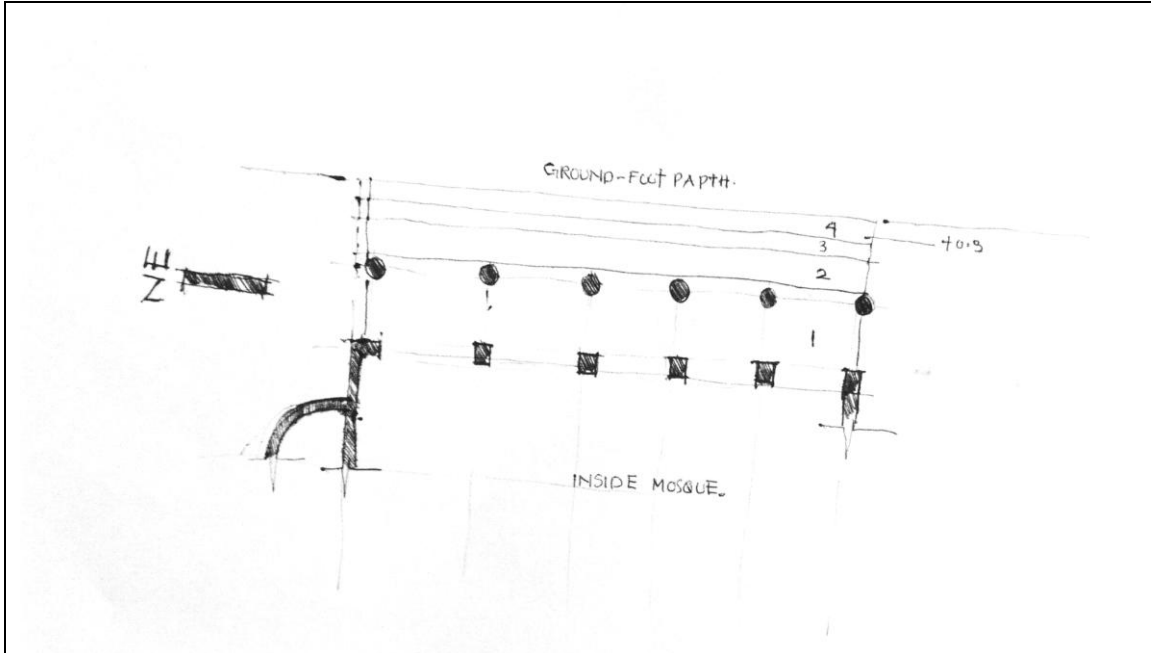


**Map 1: Aerial map showing the Location of Masjid Mtoro in Kariakoo, Dar es salaam: *Source: Mapbox, Retrieved Nov, 2025***

Most Muslims use space “A” during the morning when the sun is not too high and too hot. At 2 p.m. the movement and seating shift closer to the intermediate spaces “B” and “C” at space “B” it’s where most of the interaction can be observed with the general public at “X” and becomes even stronger at the transitional space “D”.

While during the evening, the most used space is “D” where non-Muslim faith utilise it by eating food and it is here where you will find most of the public discussion are taking place.

Although most Muslims who utilise space “B” still discuss and communicate with the public occur, but this distinction clearly shows the demarcation of faith. Also, during the evening, space “B” is mostly used as a breakthrough, and the space also performs several activities that are socially understandable. Its reflection is that to them after praying, the mosque compound is not left empty without activities, although there is a strict boundary between the inside and the outside



**Sketch 3: Ground Floor Plan showing a connection between the staircase and the Footpath:**

*Survey data: 2025*

Also, the presence of the mosque in an unenclosed area has created people seeking help to come closer. During the day you can spot several disabled people around the

compound asking people for a help, although this can be defined as a general function of any sacred place but at this place it occurs differently.



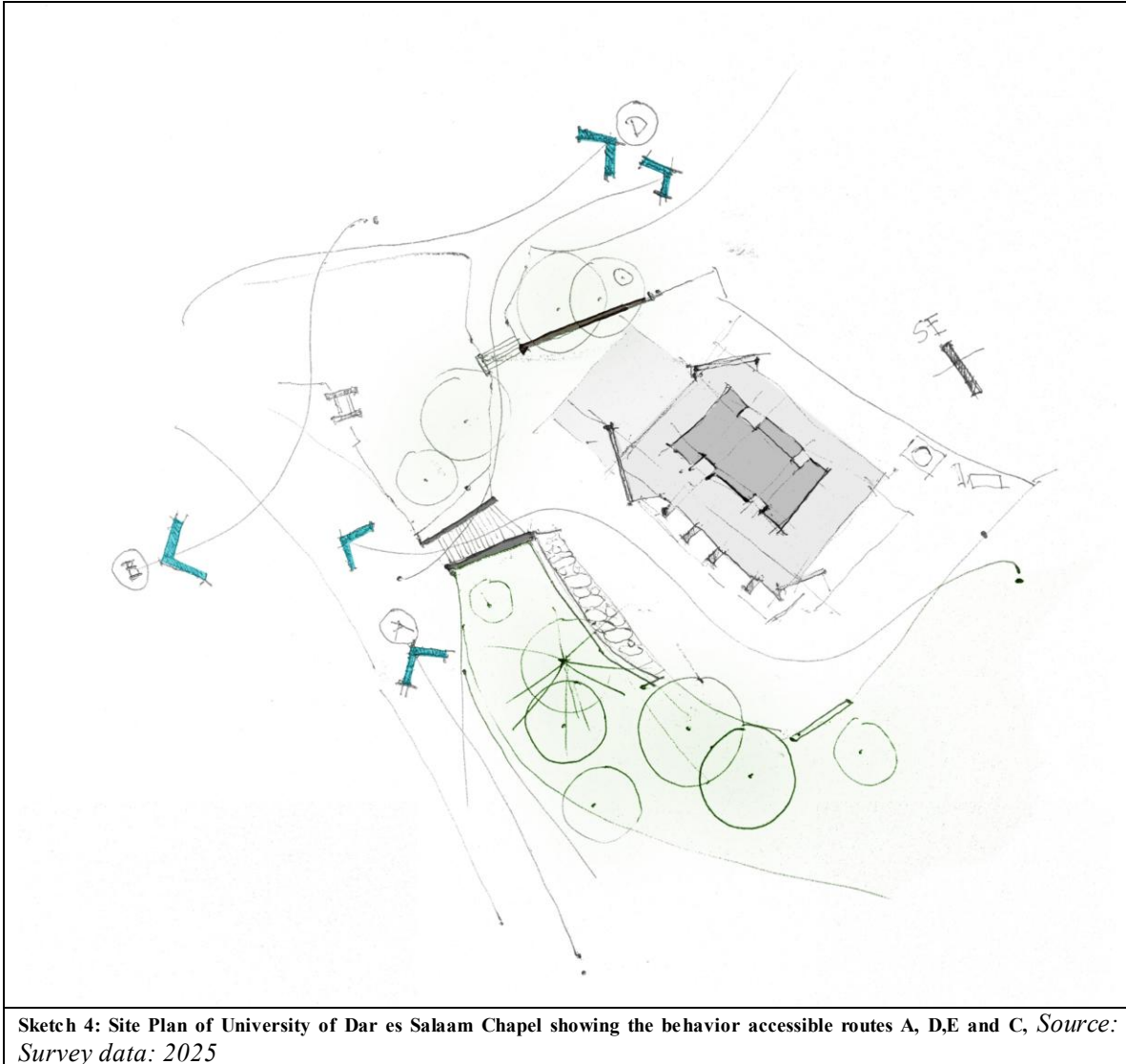
**Figure 5.3 shows the Joint Christian Chapel, University of Dar es Salaam, built 1975: Source: Francesca McKenna**



**Figure 5.4: Chaplaincy Bell far from left seen while moving near the Chapel along the road, Source: Survey data: 2025.**

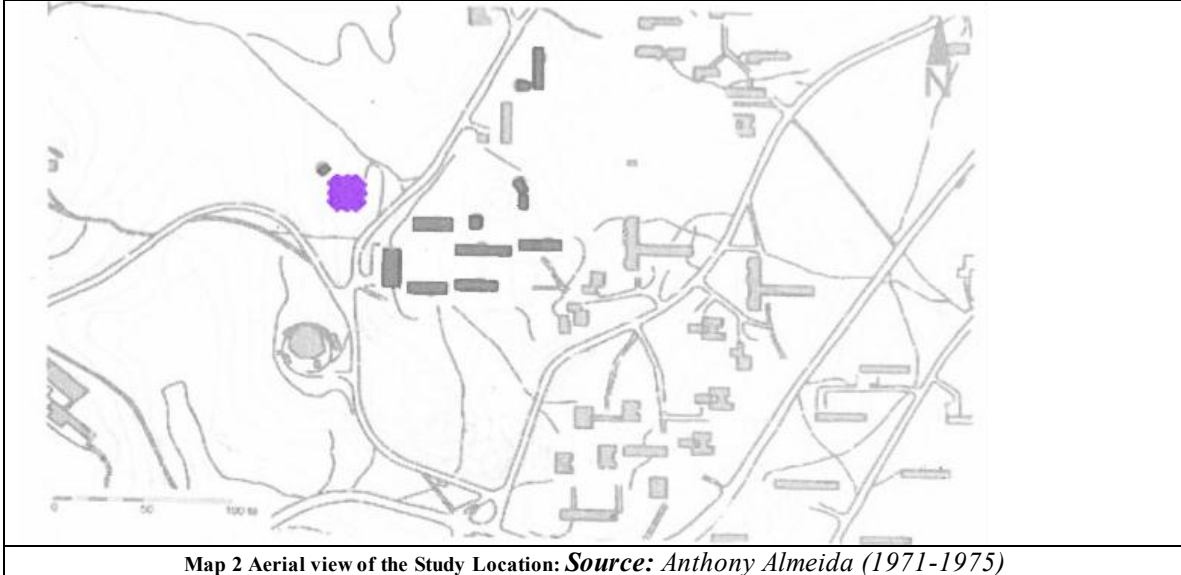
At the University of Dar es Salaam chapel, huge number of people can be seen during Sundays' services.

One different characteristic at this particular day is that it is not easy to see those few particular people especially the Muslims using route "C" rather using routes "E", "D" or "A".



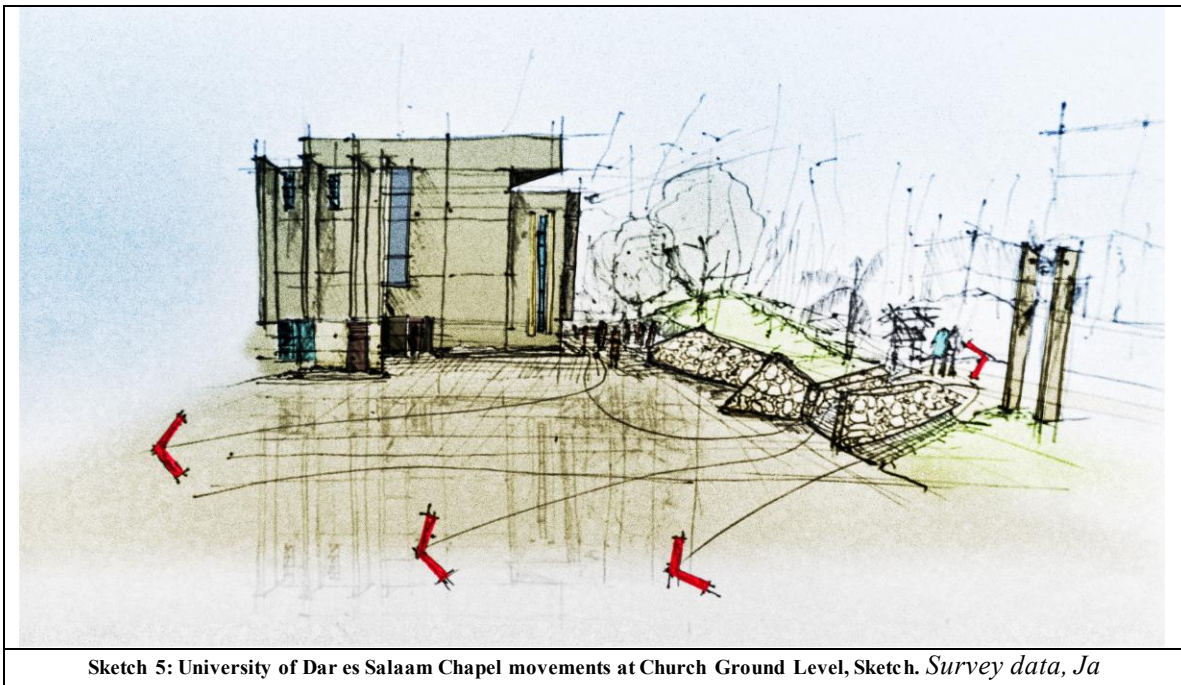
Similarly, the University of Dar es Salaam Chapel demonstrated forms of moderated openness through

circulation networks, accessible pathways, and neutral landscape treatment.



Importantly, these hybrid spatial forms often emerged incrementally through social practice and programmatic adaptation rather than through intentional architectural policy. Their organic evolution indicates that religious communities are already informally producing transitional environments capable of supporting interfaith coexistence, despite the absence of formalized design frameworks for peace-oriented sacred architecture.

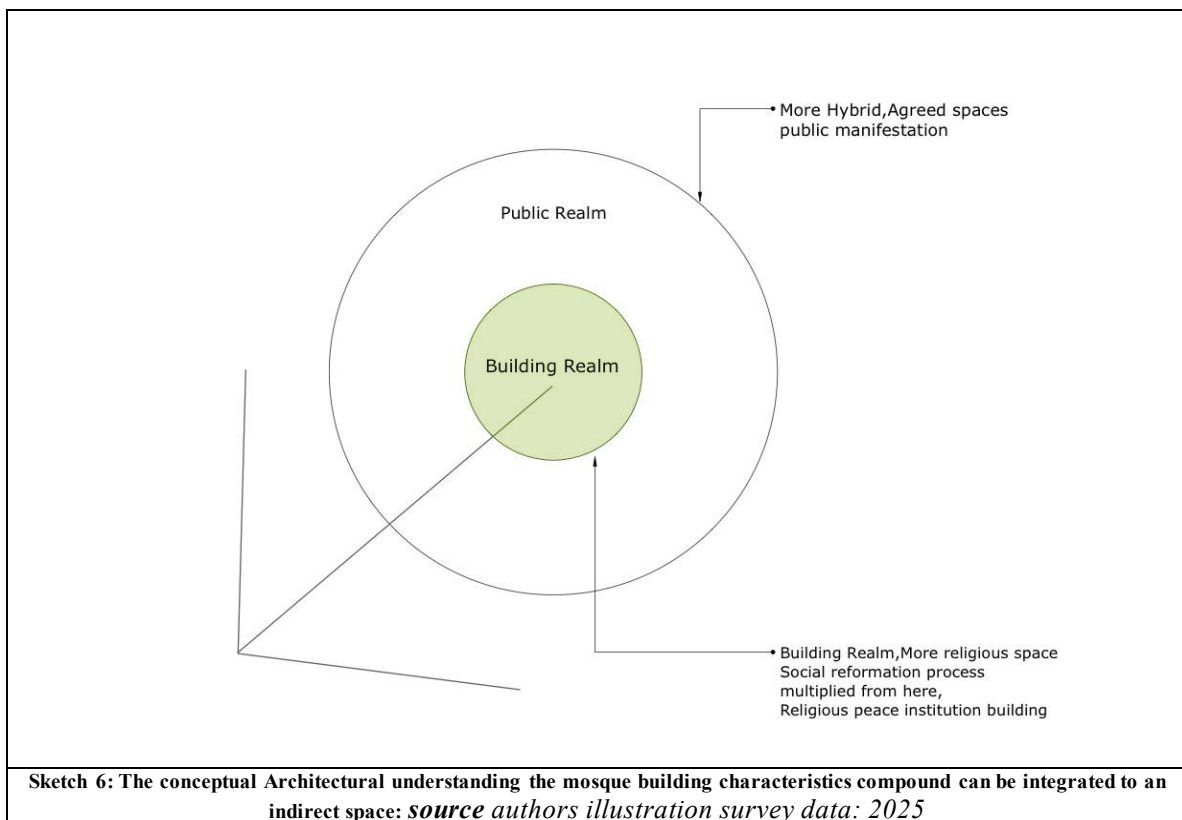
This finding suggests the need for a deliberate architectural model capable of translating these informal practices into structured spatial strategies for interfaith peacebuilding.



### 5.3 Sacred-Profane Boundary Negotiation

The findings revealed a persistent negotiation between the preservation of sacred integrity and the desire for relational openness. Participants from both religious traditions expressed concern regarding the potential

dilution of sacred identity if interfaith engagement occurred directly within core worship spaces. Consequently, neutral or semi-neutral environments were consistently identified as more appropriate for dialogue and collaborative interaction.



This spatial preference reflects Mircea Eliade's distinction between sacred and profane space. However, the study extends this binary framework by identifying an intermediate condition in which architecture mediates between sacred exclusivity and public accessibility. The "Indirect Space" therefore emerges not as a profane substitute for sacred space, but rather as a liminal threshold enabling controlled relational encounter.

Participants further indicated that environments characterized by flexible circulation, visual openness, reduced symbolic rigidity, and shared accessibility encouraged greater trust, forgiveness, and collaborative participation. Conversely, heavily restricted or symbolically exclusive environments often reinforced separation and social caution.

These findings reinforce the theoretical proposition that reconciliation processes require spatial conditions capable of moderating symbolic boundaries without erasing religious distinctions. Architecture therefore becomes a critical instrument in negotiating coexistence between identity preservation and civic interaction.

### 5.4 Spatial Infrastructure and Interfaith Program Effectiveness

A clear relationship emerged between the availability of indirect spatial infrastructure and the perceived effectiveness of interfaith initiatives. Sites equipped with neutral or hybrid environments consistently demonstrated:

- higher participation rates,
- stronger youth engagement,
- reduced intergroup suspicion,
- and greater continuity of dialogue activities.

In contrast, programs lacking supportive spatial environments tended to remain episodic, leadership-centered, and less accessible to broader community participation.

These findings indicate that architecture functions as both an enabling and constraining variable within interfaith peacebuilding processes. The effectiveness of dialogue initiatives was influenced not solely by theological or organizational factors, but also by the spatial conditions within which interaction occurred.

This observation aligns with John Paul Lederach's theory of relational peacebuilding, which emphasizes the importance of safe social environments in sustaining trust formation and conflict transformation. Architecturally, such environments must embody neutrality, accessibility, symbolic moderation, and social permeability.

The study therefore concludes that the architectural production of "Indirect Space" constitutes a critical spatial mechanism through which religious environments can transition from identity-reinforcing enclosures into relational interfaces for social reform and peaceful coexistence.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1 Conclusion

This study investigated the role of architecture in facilitating interfaith dialogue and contributing to social reform within urban religious contexts in Tanzania. While mosques and churches remain central to spiritual life and identity formation, the findings demonstrate that these spaces are largely defined by doctrinal exclusivity, which limits their capacity to support sustained interreligious interaction.

Within this historical context, the mosque emerged not only as a place of worship but also as a social and civic institution supporting dialogue, education, governance, and communal engagement. As noted by [19] mosques historically functioned as welcoming and open environments in which individuals from different backgrounds could observe, learn, ask questions, and participate in peaceful interaction. Such spaces reflected broader Islamic social objectives that extended beyond the Muslim community itself.



Figure 6.1 Pope Francis and Mufti Rahmi Yaran inside the Blue Mosque, *symbolizing* interfaith encounter and religious coexistence.

**Source:** Reuters/Tony Gentile, 2022.

The empirical evidence indicates that interfaith engagement is most effective when conducted within what this study conceptualizes as "**Indirect Space**," a neutral, transitional spatial condition situated between sacred interiors and secular urban environments.

These spaces, including courtyards, multipurpose halls, shared gardens, and semi-open pavilions, provide symbolic and functional settings that enable interaction without compromising religious integrity.



**Figure 6.2.: A payer Pavilion: Panoramic image of a shared space between Muslim and Christian in Khartoum Sudan :**  
**Source: Author's construct, 2025**

Participants consistently associated such environments with increased openness, relational trust, forgiveness, and non-violent coexistence.

The study further establishes that architecture should not be understood as a passive container of social activity, but rather as an active mediator of meaning, behaviour, and intergroup relations. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Henri Lefebvre, Mircea Eliade, and John Paul Lederach, the research demonstrates that spatial design significantly influences the effectiveness of peacebuilding processes.

In this regard, architecture emerges as a critical but often under-theorized dimension of interfaith engagement. When intentionally designed, religious environments can function not only as places of worship but also as catalysts for social cohesion and reconciliation. The proposed concept of Indirect Space therefore offers a new interpretive and design framework through which sacred architecture can actively contribute to peaceful coexistence in religiously plural societies.

## 6.2 Recommendations

### 6.2.1 General Recommendations

- Collaboration should be strengthened among interfaith councils, urban planners, policymakers, and architects to design spaces that support interreligious engagement intentionally.
- Future religious and community infrastructure should integrate **neutral or hybrid spatial zones** that function as shared platforms for dialogue, education, and collective activities.
- Schools of architecture and urban design should incorporate interfaith spatial design principles into curricula to equip future professionals with competencies in peace-oriented design.

### 6.2.2 Design of Neutral (Indirect) Spaces

Interfaith engagement requires environments that are neither strictly sacred nor entirely secular, but symbolically inclusive and accessible. These “**third spaces**” should be designed to accommodate equal participation from diverse faith groups while avoiding doctrinal dominance.

Key spatial strategies should include:

- flexible seating arrangements,
- open courtyards and semi-enclosed gathering zones,
- landscape elements such as trees, water, and light to create universal symbolism,
- and avoidance of exclusive religious iconography.

Such design approaches reinforce spatial neutrality while maintaining cultural sensitivity.

### 6.2.3 Macrocosm and Microcosm Spatial Integration

Architectural design for interfaith environments must mediate between:

- the **macrocosm** (religious worldviews, cosmologies, and doctrinal identities), and
- the **microcosm** (everyday lived social interactions).

Indirect Spaces should therefore embody shared symbolic languages, such as geometry, nature, light, and openness while remaining grounded in local cultural and environmental contexts. This dual sensitivity enables architecture to function as a bridge between belief systems and lived experience.

### 6.2.4 Flexible Spatial Governance and Reduction of Contextual Constraints

Rigid spatial regulations that reinforce exclusivity should be moderated within shared environments. Instead, a flexible spatial governance framework should be adopted to allow inclusive use without undermining doctrinal integrity.

In practical terms, multipurpose and shared spaces should:

- avoid permanent religious exclusivity in design elements,
- prioritize adaptability over fixed symbolic dominance,
- and support multiple forms of non-conflicting use (dialogue, education, community meetings, and mediation).

This flexibility enhances participation while maintaining respect for sacred boundaries.

#### *6.2.5 Policy Implications*

- Urban planning authorities should formally integrate interfaith spatial principles into development frameworks and zoning policies.
- Faith-based organizations should include shared and neutral spaces within their institutional design as part of community outreach strategies.
- Development partners, NGOs, and peacebuilding institutions should support architectural projects that explicitly embed spatial strategies for reconciliation and interfaith dialogue.

#### *Final Scholarly Positioning*

This study concludes that sustainable peacebuilding in religiously plural societies requires not only dialogue and institutional cooperation, but also intentional spatial design. The introduction of the Indirect Space Theory contributes a transferable architectural model that reconceptualizes sacred environments as relational interfaces rather than closed symbolic systems.

By repositioning architecture as an active agent in social transformation, this research extends beyond descriptive spatial analysis and contributes a theoretical framework applicable to other multicultural and multi-faith urban contexts beyond Tanzania.

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