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To dwell in the house of god: The self-production and self-consumption of space

Zeynel Dündar^{1*} and **Emre Demirel²**¹Department of Interior Architecture and Environmental Design, Faculty of Art and Design, Artvin Çoruh University, Artvin, Turkey²Department of Interior Architecture and Environmental Design, Faculty of Fine Arts, Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey

Abstract

Contemporary architectural discourse often prioritizes material permanence and formal completion, overlooking how spatial meaning dynamically emerges through lived events. Challenging this paradigm, this study employs a tripartite hermeneutic/phenomenological methodology – visual deconstruction, mythological-historical criticism, and ethnographic hermeneutics – to argue that architectural space materializes through event-based “dwelling” rather than static structures. Analyzing four cases, we demonstrate how spaces self-produce through curated incompleteness, while ideological completion destroys their capacity to be dwelt in. Behzad’s *Beggar at the Mosque Gate* (1489) redefines sacred space through insurgent dwelling – by ignoring ablution rites and prayer times, the beggar exposes architecture as an existential negotiation rather than a ritual container. Conversely, the Tower of Babel’s geometrically perfected ziggurat precluded dwelling by reducing human agency to mechanical execution, while Constant’s New Babylon became “undwellable” through its frictionless abstraction, erasing resistance essential to lived space. The Great Mosque of Djenné, however, sanctifies imperfection via annual “*crepissage*” – a communal plastering ritual where decay and renewal coalesce, embodying Heidegger’s “fourfold” (earth, sky, mortals, divinities) through cyclical labor. Our findings reveal that spaces thrive as “mnemonic ecosystems” when embracing the Zeigarnik Effect: Djenné’s unfinished walls and Behzad’s open-ended visual narrative compel engagement, whereas Babel and New Babylon’s ideological completeness fossilizes meaning. This duality challenges contemporary preservation – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s “mummification” severs Djenné’s “chain of memory,” while its ritual adaptation sustains resilience through collective “dwelling-in-decay.” We conclude that spatial vitality depends on “architecture as event,” where meaning arises through harmony with transience (mud, cracks, erosion), epistemic humility (resisting ideological finality), and embodied acts (plastering, transgressing, storytelling). For contemporary spatial production, Djenné’s model – spaces that “breathe, bleed, and are reborn” – offers an antidote to Western permanence fetishes: To dwell is to participate in imperfection; to build is to surrender to time. Future practice must cultivate “dwellable” spaces through events, not monuments.

***Corresponding author:**Zeynel Dündar
(zeyneldundar@artvin.edu.tr)

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1. Introduction

This study fundamentally repositions architectural discourse by arguing that space transcends physical dimensions and formalist constraints, emerging instead as a phenomenological construct dynamically constituted through temporal events and embodied practices. We propose that spatial meaning is not embedded in inert structures but continuously regenerated through lived experiences – a mental building process where cultural memory and social rituals intersect. This framework bridges hermeneutic interpretation and spatial phenomenology, challenging materialist paradigms while prioritizing embodied perception over geometric abstraction. Crucially, we introduce the “Zeigarnik Effect”¹ – a psychological principle where incomplete tasks occupy persistent cognitive space – as a lens to understand how “spatial incompleteness” fuels architecture’s self-production.

Like Zeigarnik’s unfinished tasks, architecturally incomplete spaces – those permitting reinterpretation and adaptation – linger in collective consciousness, compelling engagement across generations. This cognitive persistence transforms physical voids or ephemeral structures into enduring “mnemonic ecosystems.” Behzad’s 15th-century miniature² of a beggar transgressing mosque ritual, the Tower of Babel’s mythological fragments, and Constant Nieuwenhuys’ unrealized *New Babylon* (1959 – 1974) exemplify this: Here, Behzad’s pictorial space, though materially absent, thrives as a mental construct through artistic and ritualistic re-engagement. Its power stems not from formal perfection but from curated incompleteness – gaps that invite participatory meaning-making.

Our tripartite methodology – visual deconstruction, mytho-historical criticism, and ethnographic hermeneutics – interrogates four cases:

- (i) Behzad’s miniature (c. 1489) freezes a transient event (the beggar’s ritual subversion) into enduring spatial consciousness, demonstrating how painterly narrative sustains spaces beyond physical decay.
- (ii) The Tower of Babel, through its biblical collapse, exposes architecture’s paradox: Ideological completion accelerates obsolescence. It’s prescribed “perfection” consumed spatial potential, rendering it conceptually “complete” yet existentially inert.²
- (iii) New Babylon’s utopian blueprints (1959 – 1974) reveal a foundational paradox: Though theoretically embracing incompleteness, its failure originated in “conceptual totalization.” Constant’s obsessive modeling of “play” as a mechanized variable – documented in his 1974 manifesto *New Babylon: An Urbanism of the Future* – effectively predetermined creative freedom, reducing “*homo ludens*” to algorithmic behavior. As Wigley³ observes in Constant’s *New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (1998), “The very act of comprehensively representing dynamic space petrified its potential.”
- (iv) Djenné Mosque’s annual “*crepissage*” (French: Plastering) ritually embodies intentional incompleteness. By ritualizing decay, it transforms erosion into sacred memory, fusing Heidegger’s “fourfold” (earth, sky, mortals, divinities) with communal labor.⁴

These cases form an epistemological spectrum: From representation (Behzad) to myth (Babel), speculation (New Babylon), and lived practice (Djenné). Djenné serves as our phenomenological linchpin – its clay walls resist Western preservation dogmas through cyclical rebirth.

Bluma Zeigarnik’s study demonstrated that interrupted tasks are recalled 90% more accurately than completed ones – a cognitive bias termed the “Zeigarnik Effect.”¹ We adapt this principle to spatial theory, arguing that:

- (i) Incomplete spaces (Djenné’s cracked facades, Behzad’s open-ended narrative) act as cognitive irritants, provoking continuous mental reconstruction. Their unresolved states generate mnemonic tension, ensuring cultural transmission.
- (ii) Complete spaces (Babel’s conceptual finality, New Babylon’s frictionless utopia) induce cognitive closure. Their ideological perfection terminates engagement, triggering spatial consumption.

This dichotomy underpins our core thesis: Spaces “self-produce” when embracing incompleteness but “self-consume” when pursuing totality. Djenné’s plastering ritual actualizes this – each erosion fissure demands communal re-engagement, while the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)’s

¹ Behzād (born c. 1455? Herāt, Khorāsān—died c. 1536?, Tabrīz, Azerbaijan) was a major Persian painter whose style as a miniaturist and role as a teacher were vital to the development of Persian Islamic painting. Orphaned at an early age, he was raised by the painter Mirak Naqqāsh in Herāt, where he became head of the Herāt academy in 1486, a position he held until 1506. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Published February 15, 2024. Accessed January 9, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Behzad>.

² The term “miniature” originates from the medieval European practice of manuscript illumination, known as “*miniatura*,” in which red-orange pigment (“*minium*”—also called red lead powder or “leech”) was used to embellish the initial letters of chapters. Initially, the term meant “painted with leech,” but over time, it became associated with the Latin word “*minor*” (small) and came to refer to a small picture or illustration. Kluge F. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache*. Berlin-New York: de Gruyter; 1975:480.

preservation attempts sever the “chain of memory”⁵ by imposing artificial finality.

Mental construction is rooted in the embodied experience of space as an event, where the essence of architecture lies in experiential acts. Following Merleau-Ponty⁶ *Phenomenology of Perception*, spatial knowledge emerges through corporeal dialogue: The beggar’s feet on mosque stone, Djenné’s mud-smeared hands, Babel’s absent steps. This rejects Cartesian dualism, positioning space as:

- (i) Temporal: Meaning accrues through event sequences (prayer times ignored, plaster reapplied).
- (ii) Haptic: Walls “speak” through texture – cracks inviting touch, polished surfaces repelling it.
- (iii) Collective: Behzad’s miniature gains life through viewership; Djenné’s walls through communal labor.

The mind constantly (re)builds these spaces. Babel exists not as a ruin but as a cautionary metaphor; New Babylon, as a critique of modernist determinism. Their mental persistence – fueled by incompleteness – validates Henri Lefebvre’s^{7(p.83)} assertion: “Space is a mental and social fact.”

The wisdom of Djenné offers radical alternatives to culturally homogenized cities; spaces must breathe, bleed, and be reborn. This perspective shifts architectural practice toward an event-centered understanding, bringing forward specific principles for the future of design. Epistemic humility advocates rejecting the dogma of completion in favor of embracing spatial fluidity. Event protocols propose moving beyond static preservation toward cyclical renewal. Cognitive openness encourages the creation of narrative and structural voids that allow for communal ownership. As demonstrated by the beggar’s year-long occupation of the mosque, dwelling begins where the rules of architecture end.

2. Methodological framework

This study employs an interpretive-phenomenological lens to reconceptualize architectural space as a “temporal event” rather than a physical artifact. Rejecting Cartesian mind-matter dualities, we draw on Heidegger’s⁸ concept of “dwelling” – where space emerges through lived engagement – and Lefebvre’s⁷ spatial triad, which frames architecture as a dialectic between conceived, perceived, and lived dimensions. Our approach prioritizes hermeneutic depth over empirical metrics, arguing that spatial meaning crystallizes through disruptions to expected functions: The beggar’s transgression in Behzad’s miniature, Babel’s ideological collapse, or Djenné’s ritualized decay.

2.1. Interpretive foundations

Three interconnected hermeneutic modes guide our spatial exegesis:

- (i) Visual phenomenology decodes Behzad’s *Beggar at the Mosque Gate*. The beggar’s intrusion – bypassing rites⁹ – transforms sacred space into a site of existential negotiation. His act of dwelling subverts architectural determinism, privileging lived presence over ritual formalism.
- (ii) Mytho-historical critique examines the Tower of Babel as a conceptual ruin. Its biblically prescribed function¹⁰ as a “completed” ideological monument accelerated spatial obsolescence. Physical fragmentation became inevitable once human agency was reduced to mechanistic roles.²
- (iii) Ethnographic hermeneutics interprets the Djenné Mosque’s “*crepissage*” ritual. The annual plastering ceremony embodies Heidegger’s “*building-dwelling-thinking*” triad: Communal labor fuses material decay with sacred memory, making impermanence a theological praxis.⁴

Unlike quantitative methods that measure static forms, our methodology traces “contextual resonance” – how spaces retain cultural meaning through reinterpretation.

2.2. Analytical mechanics

Our analysis progresses through three phases, each anchored in phenomenological theory:

- (i) Event disruption: We identify ruptures in spatial function, such as the beggar’s violation of mosque protocols. Heidegger’s “*ereignis*”^{11(pp21-35,247)} (event of appropriation) illuminates how such interruptions reveal space’s ontological fluidity – where meaning is seized, not given.
- (ii) Mnemonic reuse: We trace cultural re-signification, exemplified by Babel’s metamorphosis from architectural failure to a metaphor for hubris. Pierre Nora’s “*lieux de mémoire*” (sites of memory) theory explains how ruins gain new life as collective symbols.¹²
- (iii) Ontological flow: We map resistance to spatial closure, as seen in Djenné’s cyclical rebirth. Lefebvre’s “*differential space*” – zones that evade dominant power structures – clarifies how the mosque’s ritualized decay defies Western preservation paradigms.⁷

This triad reveals space as a “*palimpsest*”: Each erasure or intervention adds layers of meaning.

2.3. Epistemological position

We ground our inquiry in Pallasmaa’s¹³ “*haptic epistemology*”: Spatial knowledge is felt through the

unfinished dialogue between event and form. This rejects architecture as a fixed product, asserting instead that:

- (i) Ideological completion consumes space: Babel and New Babylon failed because pre-defined functions nullified the dwelling's improvisational nature. Babel's ziggurat prescribed human movement like machine parts; New Babylon's frictionless utopia eliminated resistance, rendering it "undwellable."¹⁴
- (ii) Curated incompleteness enables dwelling: Behzad's beggar repurposed ritual space through insurgent occupation, echoing the Quranic edict that "mosques belong to God"¹⁵ – not institutional gatekeepers. Djenné's plastering ritual became a "festival of becoming" where collective labor transcends worship, actualizing Heidegger's maxim that only what is incomplete – what makes us capable of dwelling – can truly dwell.^{8(p157)}

Thus, spatial vitality emerges from "managed imperfection" – an epistemic humility that accepts architecture as a perpetually unfolding event.

3. Subjects of study

3.1. Behzad's miniature: Beggar at the mosque gate

Behzad's *The Beggar at the Mosque Gate* (1489) in Figure 1, functions not merely representationally but as a hermeneutic arena where architecture and narrative converge. The miniature's intricate ornamentation – particularly the geometric arch vaulting and the figures' garments – is not decorative excess, but spatial signification, marking sacred hierarchy.¹⁶ Most significantly, Behzad creates tension between stasis and dynamism: While the mosque physically reflects Islamic architectural principles ("qibla" orientation, ablution areas), the beggar's phenomenological intervention destabilizes its meaning.

This story, adapted from Sa'di's *Bustan* (Cairo MS Adab Farsi 908), serves as a hermeneutic key by visually articulating the literary text. It interrogates the spatial system, enables reinterpretation, and in doing so, establishes an ontological foundation:

An outwardly humble yet inwardly resolute elder (the beggar figure) seeks refuge in the mosque. Rejected by an institutional authority figure ("This is no place for beggars!"), he retorts: "If not for people, whose house is this?" He enters and proclaims: "I shall not return empty-handed from God's gate." He dwells there for a year, and on his deathbed whispers: "He who knocks on God's door, it shall be opened for him."⁹

This narrative interweaves the mosque's physical architecture with the emotional and spiritual dimensions

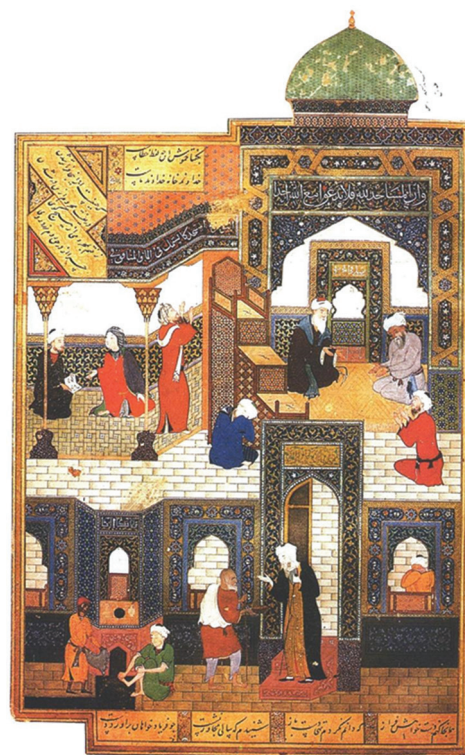


Figure 1. Kemaleddin Behzad. *The Beggar at the Mosque Gate*. 1489. Miniature. Original work in manuscript of Sa'di's *Bustan* (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, Ms. Adab Farsi 908).

Source: Barry, MA. *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzad of Herat* (1465 – 1535). Paris: Flammarion; 2004:200.

of human experience, highlighting Behzad's ability to transform static visual forms into dynamic storytelling and reflective spaces. Thus, the story operates on three levels:

- (i) Literal: The beggar's necessitated physical occupation of sacred space.
- (ii) Symbolic: Babylon as "*Bāb-ili*" ("Gate of God")¹⁷ – where worldly struggle meets divine sanctuary.
- (iii) Phenomenological: Space reconstituted through insistent lived presence rather than ritual conformity.

The concluding line of Sa'di's story, "He who knocks on God's door, it shall be opened for him," is profoundly symbolic, signifying the beggar's ultimate sanctuary within God's house – a refuge from the turmoil of hunger, homelessness, and destitution. This concept parallels the beggar's metaphorical journey seeking solace in "*Bāb-ili*":

In Akkadian, the name "Babylon" is etymologically linked to the phrase "gate of god" ("*bāb*" [gate] + "*ili*" [of god]). The city's name first appears in Akkadian texts from the late third millennium Before Common Era, though its founding likely predates these references. Initially known in Sumerian as "*Ka-dingir-ra*" (where "*ka*" = "gate," "*dingir*" = "god," and "*-ra*" = possessive suffix [of]), this

Sumerian name was later adapted into Akkadian as “*Bāb-ilim*” (Babylon).¹⁷

This linguistic and symbolic nexus between the story’s setting and Babylon’s historical-cultural context enriches the narrative, intertwining the beggar’s plight with the spiritual and historical weight of seeking divine sanctuary at the metaphorical “Gate of God.”

Within the context of spatial agency, this miniature reflects the symbolic essence of the architectural processional plan, which intrinsically represents a journey of spatial and spiritual progression. Aligned toward the “*qibla*” – a unifying, faith-centered direction – it traces movement toward the “*mihrab*.” This architectural narrative mirrors ritual progression, beginning with the “*muezzin*”’s daily call to prayer, which guides the congregation toward the courtyard’s center, where symbolic purification rites occur. The white courtyard pavement emerges as a consecrated zone for spiritual cleansing, offering metaphorical release from the burdens of worldly existence.

The spatial journey depicted in the miniature directs both the figures and the viewer’s gaze toward the “*mihrab*” as the focal point, symbolizing the initial stage of worship. While architectural “spatial agency” facilitates experiential insight, the primary prayer hall, transitional pathways, and peripheral furnishings create interstitial zones. These spaces mediate between the dynamic urban fabric and the sacred interior, gradually intensifying the sense of seclusion and spiritual focus as one approaches the structure.

The miniature’s visual composition accentuates this narrative. The dark beige path extending along the garden wall symbolizes the outermost zone adjacent to the courtyard. It connects to the mosque via the garden gate – a transitional boundary separating the chaotic urban landscape from the courtyard’s ordered tranquility. The courtyard gate, meanwhile, regulates access and reinforces the threshold between external disorder and internal sanctity.

Traditional mosque courtyards typically feature fountains that consolidate movement toward the center and anchor the space upon entry. Behzad’s depiction of the fountain, however, introduces an interpretive divergence: Its form appears inverted and exposed, as if revealed within an unenclosed structure. This inversion invites the viewer to reinterpret the purification process. Tracing the schematic architectural navigation line in this miniature reveals the cleansing ritual – an indispensable prelude to worship – strategically positioned just outside the entrance gate, underscoring its preparatory significance before entering the sacred interior.

Viewed from this perspective, it is evident that individuals enter the mosque only after completing the

purification ritual – a pre-requisite for spiritual entry. Following ablution, worshippers proceed through an auxiliary gate into the mosque, penetrating deeper into the sacred space. The “*mihrab*,” a symbolic portal within the mosque, facilitates the continuation of their spiritual journey. This meticulously designed spatial sequence creates a rhythmic flow through narrow passages, low doorways, and a series of steps, establishing an intentional progression from the external world toward the heart of the mosque.

Transitions between the street, courtyard, arched colonnade (portico), celestial courtyard, entrance narthex, and central dome exemplify rigorous planning and intentionality. Each zone serves as a transformative stage in the journey toward the mosque’s interior. The prayer hall – a critical component of this journey – functions as a preparatory space, accessed via a winding path that subtly guides worshippers into a state of contemplation and readiness.

Behzad’s paintings offer insight into the spatial organization of such environments, revealing a clear hierarchy between central and peripheral zones. A sequence of spaces extending from the urban periphery to the mosque’s interior symbolizes a gradual detachment from the anxieties and distractions of daily life. This transition not only emphasizes physical distance from the chaotic city but also underscores the spiritual transformation required to enter the prayer space, offering a sense of sanctuary and focus.

Spaces within the miniature are comprehensively and purposefully arranged to provide viewers with a cohesive, immersive experience. This is achieved through Behzad’s approach to space and architecture, characterized by a kind of “architectural promenade.” While the miniature centrally organizes space, the architectural journey is meticulously constructed through the sequential arrangement of spaces. Each zone carries both visual and symbolic significance, contributing to the overarching narrative. This non-homogeneous progression culminates in a choreographed spatial movement that guides the viewer’s gaze and experience.

This miniature features 12 figures. Behzad notes that 11 adhere to specific protocols governing mosque entry. In contrast, the beggar challenges traditional norms associated with this act. The narrative depicts an elderly man – identified as a beggar – attempting to enter the mosque with unshakable faith in divine benevolence. The miniature shows him approaching without performing ablution at the designated fountain. However, another figure – a self-appointed authority – blocks the mosque’s entrance, attempting to dissuade the elder from entering.

Though the story does not explicitly state this individual's level of religious conviction, his well-groomed attire and headgear suggest a superficial adherence to doctrinal principles. Behzad's emphasis transcends ritual formalities, underscoring that worship is not merely a performative act but requires spiritual depth and sincerity. Despite the admonishing figure at the entrance, Behzad inscribes a Quranic verse above the main portico: "The mosques belong to God, so do not invoke anyone alongside God."¹⁵ This inscription accentuates the narrative's core theme of authentic spiritual devotion, reinforcing the idea that true worship transcends external appearances and ritual compliance.

Sa'di's story emphasizes values of generosity, faith, and hope over rigid formalities. It implies that pre-planned or standardized religious behavior may restrict spiritual openness and suppress unpredictability. The elderly beggar's journey toward the mosque is depicted as incomplete, contributing to the narrative's sense of ambiguity and interpretive openness. He does not wait for prescribed prayer times nor dress according to mosque conventions. Instead, he advances toward the Tower of Babel (salvation) constructed in his own mind. According to the narrative, the beggar lived in the mosque with faith and hope for a year, ultimately passing away there. Sa'di suggests the beggar's unwavering hope and faith led him to a more mature state of mind, attaining a level of understanding inaccessible to others. Thus, he alone could reside within the symbolic Tower of Babel. Ultimately, he transformed the mosque into a dwelling – a revolutionary act in its own right. Through hope and faith, the beggar "dwelt" (*"wohnen"*) in the mosque in the Heideggerian sense, for he built it, and thus, he lived within it.

3.2. The Tower of Babel: Ideological completion as spatial failure

The city of Babylon, often envisioned as a metaphor for humanity's aspiration to create an idealized paradise, reflects the desire to build a perfect sanctuary in the image of God. This utopian vision manifested in a complex architectural ensemble, including lush gardens and the iconic tower, symbolizing humanity's yearning to recreate the lost Eden. The metaphor of Paradise, as an idealized space free from negative elements, implies no need for shelter or protection. In such a realm, external threats or vulnerabilities are absent, rendering the very concept of dwelling unnecessary.

Rykwert¹⁸ challenges traditional interpretations, suggesting that the absence of a house in heaven, as described in the Bible, is not a literal omission but rather a misreading influenced by the text's presentation of a perfect

space. Harries,¹⁹ on the other hand, raises a compelling counterpoint: Why would a house in heaven be necessary at all? He posits that Adam and Eve, residing in their serene and sheltered garden, had no need for such a structure within the bounds of their idealized existence.

However, according to prevailing beliefs, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise necessitated the construction of a dwelling on Earth. This need was not merely but symbolic; an effort to reconcile with the imperfections of the mortal world. Through human ingenuity and labor, the act of building became a means of addressing these flaws, completing and transforming the environment into a secure refuge. This process illustrates humanity's enduring endeavor to recreate safety and belonging in a world marked by uncertainty and imperfections.

Hegel asserts that the initial impetus for the emergence of art and architecture stems from humanity's recognition of nature's deficiencies and inadequacies. According to this perspective, the raw and unrefined state of the natural world compels human beings to transform and complete it consciously.²⁰ By imposing order, meaning, and purpose, humans reshape their surroundings to align with their needs and ideals.

One of the most profound and defining characteristics of humanity is its capacity to transform knowledge and, through this transformation, reconfigure both the physical and metaphysical realms. This transformative capacity does not merely enhance nature; it also addresses perceived gaps and deficiencies. The concept of nature's "incompleteness" serves as a foundational premise in this discussion, implying that spatial forms and events are inherently unfinished and require human intervention and reinterpretation to achieve a sense of coherence and meaning.

Framing art and architecture as responses to nature's perceived inadequacies underscores the intrinsic relationship between human creativity and the spaces we inhabit. This relationship positions construction as an aspiration to bridge the gap between the ideal and the real, reconciling human desires with the conditions of existence.

The city and Tower of Babel, referenced in both the Old and New Testaments, as shown in [Figure 2](#), have long captivated artists and intellectuals, particularly during the Renaissance. While this study does not seek to explore the motives behind Babel's construction or the subsequent linguistic fragmentation of humanity, the narrative provides a foundation lens for interpreting the symbolic significance of the structure.

The Old Testament recounts: "Then they said, 'Let us build ourselves a city,' and they said, 'Let us build ourselves

a tower that will reach to the heavens and make a name for ourselves. So that we may not be scattered over the face of the earth.”¹⁰ In this context, the Tower of Babel embodies humanity’s ambitious attempt to achieve unity and permanence through ingenuity. However, the outcome reflects a failure reflected in human hubris. This failure illustrates the broader theme of the consequences of arrogance and overreach, a narrative echoed throughout interpretations of the story over time.

This raises a provocative question: Was it truly God who left the Tower of Babel in ruins, or was the downfall the result of the idealized design of the “ziggurat” itself? The structure, with its top floor symbolically reserved for the deity and planned in seven ascending levels, was meticulously designed down to every detail.²¹ In this sense, the building reflected a pre-determined order in which the actions of its users were strictly dictated and constrained. The notion of an idealized, divine architecture – intended to mirror heaven’s perfection – paradoxically imposed such rigidity that it lacked flexibility and adaptability. It demanded unwavering adherence to form and function. As such, the Tower of Babel was a building that was “complete,” yet its very completeness may have hindered its ability to fulfill its symbolic purpose, raising the question of whether the structure’s downfall resulted from the perfection it aimed to embody.

3.3. Ritual impermanence as theological praxis: The Great Mosque of Djenné

The Great Mosque of Djenné embodies a radical proposition in architectural theory: That decay can be sacred. Unlike the Tower of Babel’s pursuit of permanence, this earthen sanctuary – the world’s largest mud-brick structure – embraces its ephemerality through an annual resurrection ritual that transforms vulnerability into communal sacrament. As the Niger River floodwaters recede each spring, Djenné becomes a living theater where devotion materializes in clay-smeared hands. Elder mason Amadou Cisse articulates this ethos: “We don’t just repair walls; we renew our covenant with the divine.”²² This “*crepissage*” ritual transcends maintenance to become what theologian Brown²³ describes as “tactile liturgy” – where matter and meaning merge through collective labor.

The architectural logic of Djenné’s Great Mosque transforms material vulnerability into spiritual resilience through its dynamic relationship with decay. Its sunbaked “*banco*” walls, reinforced with palm-wood “*toron*” ribs, weather Mali’s extreme climate – where torrential rains sculpt gullies into facades and “*harmattan*” winds etch intricate cracks across surfaces. Rather than resisting this natural erosion, the structure embraces it as a theological

imperative, echoing Heidegger’s principle that true building must acknowledge the transience of dwelling.^{8(p150)} Each fissure becomes a summons for communal renewal, materializing the Islamic ethic of “*istikhlaf*” (human stewardship of creation)²⁴ through collective plastering rituals that bind earthly impermanence to sacred continuity.

As shown in Figure 3, the “*crepissage*” unfolds through organic phases rather than rigid stages. The ritual’s cyclical nature stems from the community’s constant motion. Weeks before the event, elders examine wall fissures while children gather rice husks for mortar. Women prepare ritual foods, such as “*dege*” porridge sweetened with wild honey, embodying cross-class solidarity.²⁵ This preparatory tension mirrors psychologist Zeigarnik’s^{1(p307)} observation that unfinished spatial conditions heighten communal awareness.



Figure 2. Pieter Bruegel the Elder. *The Tower of Babel*. Oil on oak panel. Source: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Accessed February 23, 2024. <https://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/323/>.



Figure 3. Malians participate in the annual replastering of the Great Mosque of Djenné, Mali. Photograph published May 15, 2024. Source: 12Punto. Accessed April 2, 2024. <https://12punto.com.tr/yasam/afrikanin-tac-mahali-djenne-ulu-cami-onarildi-36705>.

At dawn on the day of “*crepissage*,” thousands of community members – including masons, farmers, and merchants – form human chains to transport water from the Bani River. This collective action embodies the Islamic ethic of communal responsibility, exemplified by Imam Ousmane Diakité’s teaching that spiritual merit comes from sharing burdens rather than accumulating wealth.²⁶ The ritual creates a socially egalitarian space where bankers and beggars work side by side, manifesting what urban theorist Lefebvre⁷ described as the transformative power of collectively produced space – lived space.

This is a sensory theology. Teams climb scaffolding, pressing banana-fiber-reinforced mud onto walls with bare hands. The mosque’s iconic pinnacles – “*mihrab*” minarets symbolizing Islam’s Five Pillars – are reshaped by master masons chanting, “Allah is the light of heavens and earth....”²⁷ This choreography induces what psychologists Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi term “collective flow” – a trance-like fusion of labor and worship.²⁸

By contrast, UNESCO’s 2016 suspension of “*crepissage*” to prioritize material integrity ignited community protests over the severing of spiritual continuity.²⁹ As anthropologist Marchand^{4(p132)} observes, the plastering ritual is Djenné’s heartbeat; its cessation represents cultural suffocation. This conflict exposes a fundamental dichotomy: Western preservation petrifies architecture as an artifact, while Djenné’s people sustain it as a living practice through embodied renewal.

Ultimately, Djenné’s endurance as Africa’s oldest continuously maintained sanctuary stems from its rejection of completion dogma. Where Babel’s architects sought immortality through geometric perfection, Djenné’s custodians accept decay as divine pedagogy. The mosque thus embodies Zeigarnik’s principle at a civilizational scale: By remaining perpetually unfinished, it compels communal re-creation across generations.^{4(p148)}

3.4. New Babylon project

Constant Nieuwenhuys’ New Babylon project, conceived between 1959 and 1974, presents a speculative vision of a utopian world in which creativity and play supplant labor as the defining human activity. This ambitious architectural concept reimagines space, functionality, and habitation by proposing a dynamic environment – perpetually incomplete, mutable, and collectively shaped – designed to accommodate the shifting needs and desires of its inhabitants. Central to Nieuwenhuys’ vision is the idea of “*Homo Ludens*,”³⁰ or “playing man,” liberated from traditional societal constraints and thriving in a space that prioritizes adaptability and creativity.

Rooted in the principles of unitary urbanism, New Babylon envisions a city composed of modular structures and interconnected “zones,” analogous to the situationist concept of neighborhoods. These spaces, equipped with mobile and reconfigurable elements, are intended to foster a perpetually evolving environment where hierarchy and permanence are rejected in favor of fluidity and impermanence.³⁰ This speculative society assumes the emancipation of humanity through automation, where individuals are freed from the drudgery of production to engage in boundless leisure and collective creativity. As such, New Babylon stands as a direct critique of capitalist ideologies and the deterministic tendencies of modernist architecture, advocating for a spatial experience defined by human agency rather than pre-defined functionality.

However, Nieuwenhuys’ vision also invites critical reflection on its feasibility and implications. Heynen¹⁴ highlights the conceptual inconsistencies and practical challenges inherent in the project, noting the absence of tangible representations to substantiate its claims. Although Nieuwenhuys asserts that “the true architects of New Babylon will be the Babylonians themselves,” this notion is not fully realized in the project’s models. Instead, Nieuwenhuys shifts toward exploring New Babylon’s essence through speculative artistry – drawings and paintings that emphasize its conceptual framework over physical implementation.^{14(p160)}

This transition underscores the philosophical tension at the heart of New Babylon: The interplay between order and chaos, permanence and transience, control and freedom. Through its speculative design, visible in [Figure 4](#), the project raises profound questions about the



Figure 4. Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys, *Ode à l'Odeon*, 1969. Oil paint and lacquer on canvas. Created in Amsterdam. Object number: 334673. Kunstmuseum Den Haag, on long-term loan from Fondation Constant. Photograph by Tom Haartsen. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://www.kunstmuseum.nl/nl>.

nature of human habitation: Can a perpetually evolving space offer greater fulfillment than one that is fixed and complete? Does the process of continuous creation hold more significance than the structure itself? Constant's visual representations further accentuate these tensions, evoking an underlying sense of ambiguity and unease. The fragility of utopian ideals suggests that the enduring power of New Babylon lies in its incompleteness – a paradoxical yet profound statement on the nature of dwelling and human creativity.

Hilde Heynen also identifies key inconsistencies in Constant's work on *New Babylon*, particularly regarding the tension between the concepts of autonomy and collectivism. She argues that while Constant's use of singular figures may align with the idea of autonomy, this is at odds with the collective foundation upon which New Babylon is built. Heynen views Constant's work as a definitive vision for a post-revolutionary era, but she also perceives contradictions between this idealized vision and the realities of the period. It is possible that, through her extensive research on *New Babylon*, Heynen recognized that the realization of such a utopia was ultimately unfeasible due to the inherent complexities of human nature.^{14,p.169} She articulates this position in the following way: The conviction in revolutionary change and the potential for genuine human transformation was a hallmark of the intellectual climate of the 1960s, from which *New Babylon* emerged. However, this perspective overlooks the insights of that very era, what Foucault³¹ referred to as the "micrology of power." Such an approach fails to consider the intricate interconnections between the fundamental structures that underpin social systems and the psychological processes that shape individual behavior.

The concept of *New Babylon*, which promises infinite freedom and quality leisure time by attributing dynamic qualities to its various spaces, ultimately gives rise to a dystopian environment marked by feelings of loneliness, confusion, and disorientation. This occurs because the spaces are designed with no boundaries, leading to emptiness and uniformity. The lack of distinctive character in Constant's universally designed spaces has become a subject of architectural criticism, evoking comparisons to critiques of the international style. In her analysis of Constant's final representation of *New Babylon*, *Terrain Vague*, Heynen argues that the work illustrates that New Babylon is, in fact, "undwellable."^{14(p175)}

Heynen emphasizes the impossibility of materializing the utopian vision of New Babylon, suggesting that its failure lies in the coexistence of both dystopia and utopia, success and failure. She argues that while humans strive for the pinnacle of societal advancement, the intrinsic

limitations of human nature – combined with the ever-evolving dynamics of social, economic, environmental, and technological forces – render the achievement of a true utopia an elusive pursuit. Despite its contradictions, Heynen suggests that the allure of New Babylon stems precisely from these tensions.

4. Findings and discussion

In this study, we created a debate that reveals a fundamental dialectic in architectural ontology – spaces that embrace "event-driven incompleteness" foster authentic dwelling, while those pursuing "ideological completion" invite existential collapse. Across Behzad's miniature, Babel's ruins, Djenné's cyclical rebirth, and New Babylon's speculative utopia, we witness how spatial meaning emerges not from perfected forms but from the friction between human action and mutable structures.

4.1. Behzad's spatial rebellion

Behzad encodes spatial rebellion through four compositional strategies that subvert architectural determinism. The fountain – traditionally a purification tool – is overturned, its ritual function bypassed. The garden gate, designed as a transitional threshold, becomes a breached boundary allowing urban chaos to infiltrate sacred space. The Quranic inscription ("The mosques belong to God")¹⁵ serves as an ironic counterpoint to the exclusionary figure blocking entry. Most radically, the beggar – ostensibly a peripheral non-worshipper – occupies the compositional center, visually aligned with the "mihrab."

These elements manifest Heidegger's "*bauen wohnen denken*"¹⁸ (building-dwelling-thinking):

- (i) Building occurs through the beggar's year-long occupation, reconstructing the mosque's purpose;
- (ii) Dwelling emerges as he rejects ablution rituals, asserting authentic presence over formal piety;
- (iii) Thinking crystallizes in his dying words – "God's door opens to the seeker"¹⁹ – dismantling spatial hierarchies.

In literary narrative, Sa'di; visually, Behzad arranges this rebellion as follows: The inverted hierarchy marginalizes 11 obedient figures while placing the beggar at the center; the temporal collapse in the narrative freezes only his entrance and death, skipping ritual intervals. He enters the mosque without regard for specific prayer times. Temporary materiality is symbolized by the flickering candle flame, reflecting the event-related meaning of the space.

The Babylonian resonance ("*Bāb-ili*" = "Gate of God")¹⁷ transforms the mosque into a transhistorical heterotopia. Like Babel's interrupted ascent, the beggar's "unfinished" journey – bypassing purification, ignoring prayer

times – collapses sacred/profane binaries. Both spaces derive meaning from desire, not completion.

This creates a phenomenological promenade that subverts Cartesian ideals:

Where traditional practice demands
Street → Gate → Courtyard → Prayer zone → (5 times a day, at pre-determined times), the beggar forges
Street → Direct Entry → “*Mihrab*” → Year-long dwelling.

Key deviations include:

- (i) Compressed thresholds (perforated gate, displaced fountain);
- (ii) The “*mihrab*” re-signified as the nucleus of the dwelling, not the terminus of ritual;
- (iii) Bodily purity replaced by spiritual resistance;
- (iv) Interstitial zones suspending sacred/profane classification.

The Zeigarnik effect further validates this ontological incompleteness – interrupted spatial actions create cognitive retention, making unfinished events more memorable. Here, Behzad presents architecture not as a solved equation but as a lived question – meaning germinates in the gap between rule and practice. The beggar’s revolutionary act exposes the hypocrisy of exclusionary sanctity, proving that space belongs to authentic dwellers. In this lies Behzad’s legacy: Spatial democracy, where true worship flourishes not in perfect forms, but in resilient spaces of dwelling.

4.2. Babel’s tyranny of completion

The Tower of Babel epitomizes architecture’s most seductive fallacy: That perfection can be designed into existence. Unlike Djenné’s participatory becoming, Babel’s ziggurat imposed ideological finality – a monument to humanity’s ontological contradiction where divine perfection was pursued through architectural hubris. While Djenné embraces cyclical rebirth and Behzad’s beggar embodies phenomenological openness, Babel manifests what Gaus terms “the tyranny of the ideal,”³² fossilizing utopian aspirations into oppressive forms. Its seven-tiered structure, meticulously planned with the “*gigunu*” (summit shrine) reserved for divine encounter, reveals the paradox – physical incompleteness masked ideological completion.

The tower’s incompleteness was existential, not structural – its design pre-supposed a finished cosmic order that reduced human agency to mechanical execution. This inverted Hegel’s insight that architecture emerges from negotiating nature’s “incompleteness,” instead imposing regimented closure. The result was Lefebvre’s “abstract space,” detached from lived experience. As Pallasmaa observed, spaces that pre-determine all actions permit performance but preclude dwelling. Bruegel’s painting inadvertently critiques this flaw: Chaotic scaffolding

swarms with disconnected laborers, foundations crumble mid-construction, and the absence of collective purpose exposes how “finished” designs invite entropy.

Heidegger’s fourfold further reveals Babel’s dissonance:

- (i) Earth was denied through human-made bricks replacing stone;
- (ii) Sky was monopolized in the conquest of celestial realms;
- (iii) Mortals became instruments, not dwellers;
- (iv) Divinities were confined to a caged shrine, not a threshold.

Thus, the collapse was ontological – “No thing can dwell where the fourfold is fractured.” Where Behzad’s beggar achieved sanctuary through inhabiting incompleteness (bottom-up appropriation, narrative temporality, transgressive agency), Babel’s builders conflated structural completion with existential fulfillment, yielding ruins of ideological collapse. Its legacy endures as a cautionary event: Spaces aspiring to perfection become uninhabitable, while those embracing imperfection – like Djenné’s mutable mosque – sustain life for centuries.

4.3. Djenné’s wisdom of decay

Here lies the revolutionary counterpoint: Where Babel sought immortality, Djenné sanctifies transience. The annual “*crepissage*” ritual embodies Zeigarnik’s principle that incompleteness compels engagement. Djenné Mosque’s deterioration is not a flaw but theology materialized – an architectural acknowledgment of human finitude. While Babel’s ziggurat pursued immortality through geometric rigidity, Djenné celebrates mortality through fluid form. Yet this ritual faces existential threats from modern conservation paradigms. The Aga Khan Foundation’s well-intentioned interventions – cement stabilizers, suspended plastering – misunderstand the mosque’s ontology, just as UNESCO’s preservation mandates treat the structure as an artifact rather than an event. For Djenné’s people, halting “*crepissage*” severs Hervieu-Léger’s “chain of memory,”⁵ disrupting the tactile transmission of faith across generations. The cracks in the walls are not defects but invitations; the eroded surfaces are palimpsests awaiting reinterpretation.

This cyclical incompleteness generates profound cognitive resonance. As Bluma Zeigarnik observed, unfinished tasks linger in memory with visceral urgency. Djenné’s ritual embodies this through phases: Anticipation (children tracking flood calendars for communal feasts), collaboration, climax (the mosque glistening under the Harmattan sun), and suspension (immediate decay priming the next cycle). This perpetual “not-yet-finished” state mirrors Behzad’s beggar – both reject completion

to sustain meaning. Djenné materializes Saint Bernard's wisdom that "true sanctuary lies in unmediated nature," dissolving boundaries between earth and worship. Clay from ancestral riverbanks, water from seasonal floods blessing the mortar, and palm wood scaffolding breathing with humidity literally embody Heidegger's fourfold: Earth, sky (prayer calls), mortals (community), and divinities (Quranic inscriptions).

Djenné subverts Western preservation dogmas. Where Babel's ruins signify failure, Djenné's erosion signals vitality. Each plaster layer represents Tim Ingold's "correspondence" – a dialogue between maker and material. The mosque evolves organically – French colonial reconstruction (1907) flattened its fractal complexity; Aga Khan's restoration (1996) standardized windows, disrupting ventilation; community-led replastering (2024) reintroduced curvilinear buttresses. These adaptations reveal architecture as a verb – a continuous negotiation between tradition and contingency. Ultimately, Djenné offers salvation for an age obsessed with permanence. Its walls whisper: To dwell is to participate in decay. While Babel's architects fled mortality, Djenné's custodians embrace it – their cracked hands molding a sanctuary that breathes, bleeds, and rebirths itself. Like Behzad's beggar transforming space through obstinate presence, Djenné's community sanctifies imperfection through collective care. In a world of climate collapse and cultural erasure, this mosque testifies: True resilience lies not in resisting change but yielding to it – one handful of mud at a time.

4.4. New Babylon's paradoxical cage

Finally, Nieuwenhuys' New Babylon emerges as a haunting paradox – a visionary critique of capitalism that inadvertently replicates the very determinism it sought to dismantle. Conceived amid post-war optimism, its modular megastructures promised liberation through play: Labyrinthine platforms suspended above the earth, where walls shifted on rails, colors mutated with mood, and "*Homo Ludens*"³⁰ would sculpt space like clay.

Yet this utopia contained its own dystopia. As Heynen discerned, the project's fatal flaw lay not in ambition but in its ideological completeness. By pre-determining all human activity as creative play, New Babylon denied the messy realities of rest, conflict, and mundane ritual – realities essential to dwelling.

Constant's sketches reveal an unsettling truth: Fluidity became tyranny. To inhabit New Babylon meant surrendering to perpetual curation – walls reconfiguring by abstract "*derive*" rather than need, zones morphing through algorithmic whim instead of communal consensus. This echoes Foucault's "micrology (microphysics)"³¹ of

power" – freedom so meticulously engineered that it calcifies into control. The absence of thresholds erased spatial anchors, inducing topological disorientation – the loss of cognitive maps that root us in place.

Unlike Djenné's tactile clay or Behzad's pigment-stained parchment, *New Babylon* existed only as ink or plastic models. This abstraction proved prophetic when Constant designed *Terrain Vague*, unconsciously acknowledging failure through derelict lots beneath the megastructure. These "vague terrains" symbolized ignored human needs: The desire for grounding and imperfect boundaries. As Heynen observed, true dwelling requires resistance – surfaces that push back and spaces that remember – qualities absent in New Babylon's frictionless planes.

Its kinship with Babel is uncanny: Both prized conceptual perfection over lived experience, reduced inhabitants to ciphers, and collapsed under ideological weight. Yet while Babel asserted divine authority, New Babylon fetishized human agency into erasure – freeing citizens from labor only to imprison them in endless self-reinvention. Heidegger's warning went unheeded – New Babylon violated the fourfold by severing earth with steel platforms, obscuring sky with decks, denying mortals refuge, and banishing the sacred. This explains the spectral figure adrift in Constant's painted voids. Ultimately, New Babylon's legacy lies in productive failure – by exposing the limits of architectural determinism, it vindicates Djenné's wisdom. Spaces thrive through curated incompleteness – not control. Where Djenné's crumbling plaster invites touch, New Babylon's pristine modules repel; where the beggar's intrusion deepened meaning, Constant numbed through enforced novelty. New Babylon endures not as a blueprint but as a cautionary poem – the dream of absolute freedom is dwelling's greatest threat.

5. Conclusion

This study has fundamentally reconceptualized space not as a static artifact but as a dynamic, event-driven phenomenon – a mental construct continuously reproduced through human engagement. By liberating architectural discourse from materialist and formalist constraints, we reveal that spatial meaning emerges not from perfected forms but from the "friction" between mutable structures and lived events. Our tripartite methodology – visual deconstruction, mytho-historical critique, and ethnographic hermeneutics – demonstrates that spaces thrive through curated incompleteness, while those pursuing ideological completion invite existential collapse.

Behzad's beggar and the Great Mosque of Djenné exemplify space as a self-generating phenomenon – a

mental construct continuously reshaped through lived engagement. The beggar's transgressive dwelling subverts ritual determinism, exposing architecture not as a static solution but an existential question. His defiance of prayer times transforms sacred space into a site of negotiation, where human agency disrupts pre-defined order. Similarly, Djenné's ritualized "*crepissage*" – the annual renewal of its cracked clay – materializes imperfection as theology. Here, erosion becomes sacred: Communal labor embraces decay, embodying Heidegger's fourfold (earth, sky, mortals, divinities) by weaving human finitude into regenerative care.

In stark contrast, Babel and New Babylon consume themselves through rigid idealism. Babel's ziggurat imposed a "completed" cosmic hierarchy, reducing human dwelling to mechanistic compliance, while New Babylon's frictionless utopia erased resistance and memory. Their ruins stand as heterotopias of failure, where pre-determined meaning suffocates inhabitation. Unlike these projects, self-producing spaces thrive through embeddedness in events: Djenné's plastering festival and Behzad's miniature endure as cognitive architectures precisely because they harness the Zeigarnik Effect – unfinishedness compels engagement. Babel's artificial completeness, however, fragmented cultural memory by denying process.

Djenné thus challenges preservation dogma. UNESCO-style mummification severs the "chain of memory;" true resilience emerges through collective rituals that yield to change. Heidegger's triad – "*bauen*" (building), "*wohnen*" (dwelling), "*denken*" (thinking) – finds radical expression here; space flourishes when rules are disrupted, not obeyed. In an age of climate collapse and cultural homogenization, Djenné's model – spaces that "breathe, bleed, and are reborn" – offers salvation from the Western fetishization of permanence. The beggar's obstinacy, Babel's rubble, Djenné's cracks, and New Babylon's ghosts all declare – architecture lives only when incomplete. To dwell is to participate in decay. Future practice must cultivate events, not preserve objects – one handful of mud, one transgressive act, one ritual at a time. Space, in its essence, is an event.

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Methodology: Emre Demirel

Writing – original draft: Zeynel Dündar

Writing – review & editing: Emre Demirel

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