



Study of Symbols and Perceptions as an Effort to Exist Architecture in Muhammadiyah Educational Buildings

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the symbolic meaning and user perception as key factors sustaining the architectural identity of Muhammadiyah educational buildings, focusing on SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo. Using a qualitative interpretive method, it applies Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic triad—icon, index, and symbol—combined with hermeneutic interpretation from field observation and perception surveys. Findings show that spatial configuration, symmetrical geometry, and color symbolism (blue–yellow) reflect the principles of faith, rationality, and *tajdīd* (renewal), with the mosque as the central ideological orientation. Users perceive strong identity, pride, and emotional attachment to these symbolic elements. The study concludes that Muhammadiyah architecture functions as an ideological medium translating spiritual values into spatial order, proposing an Ideological Architecture Model integrating form, meaning, and user experience

INTRODUCTION

Architecture serves not only as a container of activity, but also as a symbolic medium that projects values, ideologies, and collective identities suatu komunitas (Imankulov et al., 2024). In the context of Islamic education in Indonesia, the first generation of Muhammadiyah schools were built by highlighting the spiritual values and ideology of modernist Islam through architectural elements such as limasan roofs, calligraphy, and the orientation of the central worship room (Widiastuti et al., 2021). The building functions as a visual da'wah vehicle that combines the function of education with ideological representation. However, contemporary developments show a shift towards modern-minimalist design that tends to strip away Islamic symbols, in line with the trend of architectural globalization that prioritizes aesthetic simplicity but reduces the ideological narrative power of religious-based educational spaces (Imankulov et al., 2024)

This global phenomenon has significant implications at the local level, especially in Muhammadiyah schools in urban areas of East Java. An initial study at SMAMDA Sidoarjo showed the loss of typical architectural symbolic elements of Muhammadiyah, such as the symbol of the organization on the main façade, monotheistic calligraphy, and the central layout of the worship space (Imankulov et al., 2024). This shift results in a dissonance between the physical space and Islamic values that should be internalized in the architecture of education. This condition is in line with the findings (A.Hildayanti & Wasilah, 2023), which highlights that the modernization of Islamic education often ignores the dimension of spirituality in the design of spaces, so that the building becomes functional but symbolically sterile. As a result, many students are not even aware of the identity of their school as a Muhammadiyah institution except from the signboard, reflecting the occurrence of (Byrne, 2022). The Separation Between Architectural Symbolism and Ideological Identity (Fahmi et al., 2022).

A number of previous studies have explored the relationship between symbolism and architecture in religious contexts. For example (Imankulov et al., 2024) examines the meaning of the symbol of the Buran tower in Kyrgyzstan, while (Mälksoo, 2021) Seeing symbolic ritualization in military space. In Indonesia, (Suryandari et al., 2023) Unveiling hybrid symbols in contemporary mosque architecture. However, these studies focus more on monumental buildings or religious ritual spaces, rather than on non-pesantren Islamic educational institutions such as Muhammadiyah schools. In addition, architectural semiotics research tends to be applied to urban contexts sekuler (Boterman, 2020) or institutional visual communication (Zulfah, 2024), but it has not been widely applied to read the architectural symbols of modern Islamic schools through the perspective of user perception. In fact, Peirce's theory of semiotics, which maps meaning through a triad of icons, indexes, and symbols, offers a highly relevant analytical framework for deciphering visual representations in educational architecture (Arafah et al., 2023).

Based on these gaps, this study seeks to answer two main questions: (1) how visual symbols in Muhammadiyah school architecture represent ideological meaning; and (2) the extent to which the perception of school residents reflects

their understanding of the symbol. Through a qualitative approach based on phenomenology with analysis (Rahma Istifada & Wirawanda, 2024), This research not only identifies architectural symbols that are present or missing, but also explores how symbolic meanings are perceived, accepted, or ignored by teachers, students, and school administrators (Efendi et al., 2023).

Theoretically, this research enriches the semiotic knowledge of Islamic educational architecture by placing Muhammadiyah schools as a unique center of analysis, considering its role as a modern Islamic institution with a vision of *tajdid* (renewal). Practically, this study provides design recommendations for architects and school managers in reformulating architectural guidelines based on ideological symbols that are contextual to the demands of urban society. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of Peirce's visual semiotics approach with the perception of space users, so that the architecture of Muhammadiyah schools can be read as a visual *da'wah* medium that is relevant to the contemporary era without losing its ideological identity.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Teori : Charles Sanders Peirce

Architecture as a symbolic communication medium has long been understood not only as a physical structure, but as an expression of ideology, identity, and social values of a community. According to (Imankulov et al., 2024), architectural symbols such as the Buran tower in Kyrgyzstan serve as markers of cultural identity as well as the collective ideology of the community. In the context of modern Islamic education in Indonesia, the architecture of Muhammadiyah schools is the embodiment of the synthesis between modern rationality and Islamic spirituality as stated by (Fanani et al., 2021). The values of *tajdid* (renewal) which are the foundation of Muhammadiyah's ideology are reflected through symbolic elements such as the orientation of the worship room, *tauhid* calligraphy, and spatial planning that emphasizes the balance between the mundane and *ukhrawi*. Thus, educational architecture plays a role as a form of visual *da'wah* that connects the material and spiritual dimensions (Efendi et al., 2023).

In the framework of semiotics, an understanding of architecture as a system of signs is necessary in Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic theory of distinguishing between icons, indexes, and symbols. This approach allows for a deeper reading of the meaning of the architectural elements of Islamic education. As explained by (Rahma Istifada & Wirawanda, 2024), Peirce's semiotic analysis can decipher the relationship between visual forms and the ideological values behind them through the process of interpretation (*semiosis*). The application of this theory in the context of Islamic institutions is also described by (Zulfah, 2024), who interpret the Islamic university logo as a visual representation of theological values and modernity. Thus, the application of Peirce's semiotics in Muhammadiyah school architecture provides a comprehensive analytical framework to understand how architectural symbols function as an index of modernist Islamic ideology that shapes the perception and experience of space for school residents.

Previous research reinforces the importance of architectural symbolism in religious and educational contexts. (Ukabi & Gurdalli, 2023) examining the influence of ideology on school design in a pluralistic society in Cyprus, shows that the design of school spaces can strengthen or enhance the ideological identity of institutions. Meanwhile, (Suryandari et al., 2023) examining contemporary mosques in Indonesia that display hybrid symbols between Islam and the West, confirming the existence of a negotiation between the values of spirituality and modernity. Research (Andriyanti, 2021) Through the geosemiotic approach, it shows that the school space is also an arena of social meaning that reflects the hierarchy of values and community identity. However, the third study tends to focus on monumental architecture or general institutional contexts, not on modern Islamic schools such as Muhammadiyah. The discovery of an empirical and theoretical picture: there have not been many studies that link the architectural symbolism of Islamic education with the perception of space users, even though this relationship is important for understanding the whole ideology in the context of modern architecture. (Paasi, 2022) (Paasi, 2022)

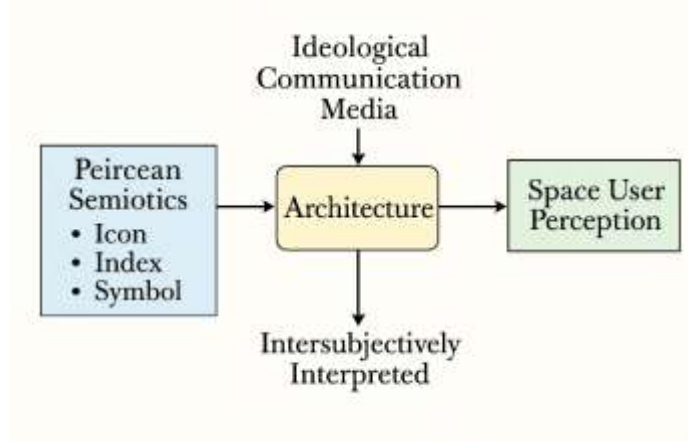


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Research (adapted from Peirce, 1903; Pass, 2022; Susanti & Ikaputra, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

Design and Approach

This study uses an interpretive qualitative approach with a case study design. A phenomenological-hermeneutic interpretive approach is used to examine the meaning of life experiences in the context of space and architecture in modern Islamic educational institutions. Plural case studies were chosen so that contextual variations (urban/semi-urban/suburban) could be compared, resulting in a deep and contextual understanding. Related articles show that qualitative phenomenological approaches are very appropriate for exploring human experience and meaning in educational or social contexts. (Habib et al., 2025)

Population and Sample

The research population consisted of all residents in three Muhammadiyah schools in East Java, with the object of the research being

architectural symbolic elements, and the subjects were purposively selected informants: school principals, teachers, students in grades X–XII, as well as local Muhammadiyah figures. Purposive sampling allows the selection of informants relevant to the themes of experience, architectural symbols, and ideologies. (Habib et al., 2025)

Data Collection Techniques

Data is collected through a combination of methods:

- Direct observation of architectural elements, behavior and interaction of space users.
- Semi-structured interviews to explore experiences, meanings and perceptions.
- Visual documentation (photographs, sketches) and archives of school documents for semiotic analysis. This multimodal method strengthens the validity of data through triangulation between methods and between sources, in accordance with the rigor qualitative practices recommended in the literature.(Habib et al., 2025)

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using the framework of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory (icons, indexes, symbols). The stages of analysis follow a general qualitative model: data reduction (organizing transcripts, notes, photographs), data presentation (thematic matrices, symbol maps) and conclusion conclusion (identification of patterns of symbolic representation and user perception). The coding process uses open coding - axial coding - selective coding. Validity techniques such as triangulation, member check, trail audit, and peer debriefing are also applied to ensure the credibility and correctness of the research. (Habib et al., 2025)

RESEARCH RESULTS

Profile of Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo School

The development location is located on Jalan Raya Jl. Mojopahit No.666B, Sidowayah, Celep, Sidoarjo District, Sidoarjo Regency, East Java 61215, located in a complex of the University of Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo (UMSIDA):

Table 1. Site profile

Profile		Description
Place		Jl. Mojopahit No.666B, Sidowayah, Celep, Sidoarjo District, Sidoarjo Regency
Area		1225 m2
Establishment Number	Decree	3703/II-SDA-I/JTM-76/1978

No. Operational Decree
Ladder
Accreditation
Owner

19.03/1223/01/X/2020
High School Education
A
Muhammadiyah Education Foundation



Figure 1. Location of SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo
Source: *google maps.com* (Access, 2025)

Symbolic Approach: Architecture as Da'wah

In the Muhammadiyah paradigm, architecture is not just a forum for activities, but a visual and ethical medium of da'wah (*spatial semiotics*). The building becomes a "language" that embodies modernist Islamic values: rational, clean, open, and functional.

This is in line with KH Ahmad Dahlan's view that education and learning spaces must *enlighten* (*tanwīr*) like the symbol of the sun in the Muhammadiyah logo. Therefore, the form of the SMAMDA building not only accommodates learning activities, but also "shines" on them with progressive Islamic values.

Symbolic Meaning of SMAMDA Architectural Elements

The dome elements on the logo and the shape of the school gate depict the spiritual openness and connectivity between science and worship.

1. The dome functions as a symbol of the sky – a universal spiritual space – while the gate is a sign of Muhammadiyah's openness to the community.

2. In the context of da'wah architecture, the position of the mosque in the center of the site plan, affirms the principle of monotheism as the center of spatial orientation, where all academic activities flow from and back to divine values.

Symbolic meaning: SMAMDA's architecture presents da'wah through spatial arrangement not verbal lectures, but a form that directs behavior towards spiritual awareness.

Geometric Shapes and Modern Structures

The post-2013 renovation changed the look of SMAMDA into a modern three-story structure with bold lines, wide windows, and a predominance of glass materials and neutral colors.

1. This is a form of functional modernism, as emphasized by Muhammadiyah architects such as Achmad Noe'man, who rejected excessive ornamentation and prioritized structural honesty and spatial efficiency.
2. The transparency of the glass symbolizes honesty and intellectual openness, an important value in Muhammadiyah's da'wah which is anti-superstitious and prioritizes rationality.
3. The symmetry of the building signifies order and moral discipline, while the open space in the middle creates egalitarian social interaction.

Symbolic meaning: SMAMDA's modern façade affirms an *enlightening and rational Islam* – not symbolic and ornamental. Da'wah is articulated through regularity of form and efficiency of function.

Open Circulation and Midspace

The site field area and the middle courtyard function as a participatory space, a place for social gatherings, ceremonies, and student da'wah activities.

1. This spatial pattern reflects the egalitarian ethos of Muhammadiyah without a hierarchy of space that symbolically separates "teachers" and "students", but fosters togetherness.
2. The open space is also a "public da'wah container", where academic and religious activities complement each other.

Symbolic meaning: SMAMDA's central space serves as a *microcosm of civil society* – where Islamic values are practiced in social life.

Colors and Materials

1. The dominance of white and light gray colors depicts *the intention of purity and neutrality of views*, in accordance with the meaning of white in the symbol of Muhammadiyah.
2. The soft green color on the logo and interior ornaments reflects the shade of Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin, which is a soothing and non-extreme education.

Symbolic meaning: The combination of neutral and green colors is not only aesthetic, but also an ethical statement: a rational but still reassuring da'wah. Integration of Da'wah, Modernity, and Muhammadiyah Identity

Overall, SMAMDA is a model for modern Muhammadiyah da'wah architecture.

1. Modernity is present in the form, structure, and technology of buildings.
2. Da'wah is present in spatial orientation, spiritual symbols, and socio-religious atmospheres.
3. Muhammadiyah's identity is imprinted through the continuity of the sun symbol, green-white color, and the pattern of space openness.

Thus, SMAMDA does not only stand as a school building, but as a manifestation of *the space* of value, where the principles of *tajdīd* (renewal), *tanwīr* (enlightenment), and *tauhid* (oneness) incarnate in a rational, open, and functional architecture as a contemporary da'wah instrument.

The renovation of the Muhammadiyah school building from the period of 2013 - 2025, brings a significant impact from the exterior and interior shape, so as to change the identity of the symbol for the users of the Smamda school from teachers, students, employees, and community leaders in the environment itself and outside the environment.

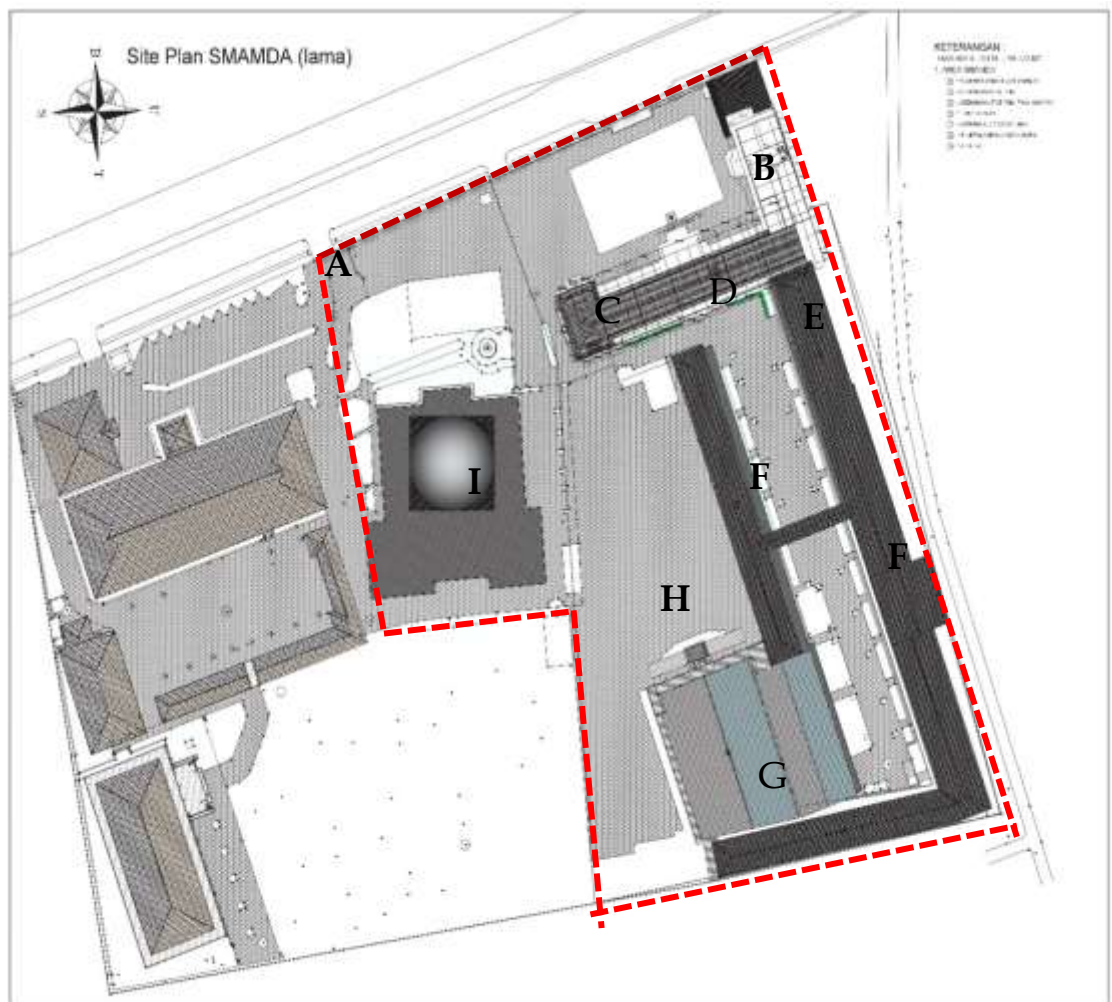


Figure 2. Lay out development before renovation in 2013

Source: *Archive and survey documents*

INFORMATION:

Area = 1 225 m²

A. GATES

B. PDM BUILDING, DIDASMEN, AISYAH

C. PCM BUILDING

D. R. LOBBY BUILDING AND CLASSROOM

E. PRINCIPAL'S AND TEACHER'S BUILDING

F. CLASSROOM AND LAB BUILDINGS

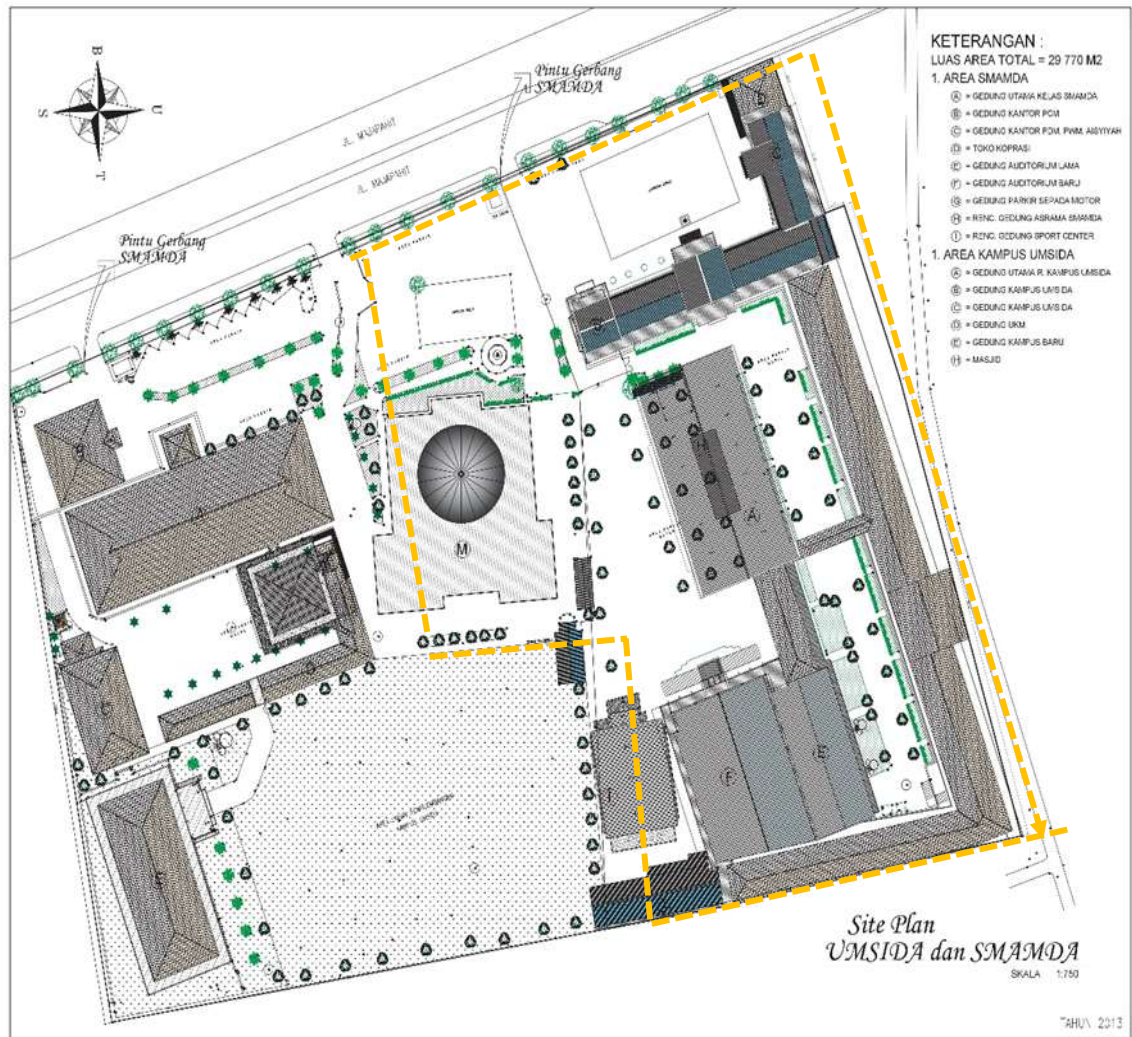


Figure 3. Lay out developments in 2024 – current condition
 Source: Archive and survey documents



Figure 4. Transformation Changes before the 2013 renovation – current condition Source: Archive documents and surveys Year 2025

Table 1. Elmen Exterior Architecture of SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo

Elemen Fasad	Analysis of Geometric Shapes & Patterns School Visual Imagery Symbols of Openness, Simplicity, and Modernity	Semiotic Interpretation (Islamic-Urban Sidoarjo Dialogue)
Auditorium KH. AR Fachruddin 	- Symmetrical composition with firm vertical–horizontal lines; The square roof stands out with red and yellow colors. -Represents the center of activities and symbols of science. - Bright colors signify an open and dynamic spirit; Simple yet expressive structure.	This façade signifies Islamic modernism through rational geometry; a symbol of openness in school public activities.
Main building (SMAMDA frontage) 	-The dominance of rectangular shapes, the rhythm of vertical windows, triangular elements on the roof as visual markers. -Formal, orderly, and representative imagery. -The blue-yellow color reflects the identity of Muhammadiyah; the regularity of the façade symbolizes rationality.	It shows a balance between modern Islamic values and the image of progressive urban educational institutions.
Classroom and student workspace 	-Repetitive modular structure, blue–yellow contrast color, use of vertical grilles and balconies. -Visuals are dynamic, expressive, with a young character. -The grid provides transparency (a symbol of openness); The simple square shape signifies simplicity.	Representing the creative and inclusive spirit of students; Semiotic interpretation: the building as a modern "charitable container".

Mosque (An-Nur Mosque) 	-Large domes with Islamic geometric motifs (blue-yellow), slender towers, vertical white façade. -Spiritual and monumental image.Symbol of spirituality and purity (white); the geometry of the dome as a symbol of monotheism. =To be the center of the ideological meaning of Muhammadiyah; Connecting faith with the rationality of urban space.	To become the center of the ideological meaning of Muhammadiyah; Connecting faith with the rationality of urban space.
Main gate 	-Horizontal lines with dominant institutional writing; simple and symmetrical shapes. -Official image and strong identity. -Openness is demonstrated by direct visual access; simplicity of form without excessive ornamentation.	Facade as a "marker of meaning" of Muhammadiyah's ideology: openness to urban society.
Student Dormitories 	-Vertical mass with linear windows, blue accents on the frame, stacked volume. -Rational, minimalist, functional façade. -Neutral colors and bold shapes emphasize modernity and discipline.	Facade as a "marker of meaning" of Muhammadiyah ideology: openness to urban society
SMAMDA Sport Centre	-Flat façade with long horizontal lines, dynamic logo in green.	Representing the value of physical-spiritual balance

	-A modern and active image. -Colors and symbolic shapes of healthy and progressive activities.	in the view of modern Islam of Muhammadiyah.
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The semiotic analysis of SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo reveals that its architectural form—spatial layout and façade—embodies not only functional design but also the ideological identity of Muhammadiyah. Applying Charles Sanders Peirce’s concept of icon, index, and symbol, the study finds that architectural elements operate as interconnected signs shaping user perception. Iconic features such as symmetrical geometry, white-blue tones, and rhythmic window patterns convey purity, order, and rationality as ideals of modern Islamic education. Indexed through qibla orientation, open communal spaces, and mosque integration, the architecture connects learning with spirituality. Symbolic elements like calligraphy, the Muhammadiyah logo, and room configurations represent values of da’wah, tajdid (renewal), and enlightenment. Meaning arises through users’ spatial experiences and social interactions, making the school’s architecture a medium of ideological communication that unites religious symbolism, modern rationality, and functional needs into a cohesive expression of Muhammadiyah’s educational philosophy.

Table 2. Interior Table of SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo

Space/Area	Analysis (Meaning of Spatial Arrangement, Qibla Direction, Public-Private Area, and Islamic Zoning)	Semiotic Interpretation (Spatial Planning as an Index of Order and Value of Monotheism)
Santri Dormitory 	-A simple, functional, and orderly space supports the habit of disciplined life and togetherness in religious and social learning. Semi-public private areas are used for rest and religious study. The direction of the space may have been adjusted so as not to contradict the qibla, indicating the manners of Islamic space.	The orderliness of the bed and the simplicity of the design became symbols of equality, discipline, and social monotheism – all equal before Allah.

Auditorium / Lecture 	-Large space for academic and religious activities (studies, seminars, graduations) signifies the integration between science and faith. The main public area, is not specifically oriented to the qibla because it is multifunctional. Open zoning emphasizes the value of inclusivity and da'wah.	The spacious and symmetrical spatial arrangement reflects openness and social harmony – Muhammadiyah's values of enlightenment and order of life.
Mosque 	The spiritual center and moral development became the axis of worship activities and the moral orientation of the institution. The direction of the qibla is clear, the orientation of space confirms the spiritual center of the institution. The zone is very private (khusyu') but still open to all school residents.	The dome geometry, symmetry, and calligraphy reflect monotheism and the order of the cosmos – the mosque as a microcosm of the divine order.
	A forum for modern Islamic science and literacy, combining intellectual and spiritual values. Academic public areas, neutral from the direction of the qibla but symbolically lead to "science as worship".	The modern, bright, and neat design signifies the spirit of tajdid (renewal) of Muhammadiyah: knowledge as a way to get closer to Allah.
Receptionist/Lobby 	Guest welcome room and information center; reflects the administrative order and professional image of modern Islamic institutions. The outdoor public area becomes a gateway to more private spaces.	A symbol of transparency and service: the regularity of tables, lighting, and rows of trophies signify progress and trust.

Sport Centre / GOR 	Sports facilities affirm physical education as part of the formation of kaffah (physically and spiritually healthy) people. The public area is large, not directly related to the direction of the Qibla but supports the balance of activities in the world and the afterlife.	The spacious and symmetrical space symbolizes the spirit of struggle, strength, and cooperation – the value of jihad in the modern context.
Teacher/Administration Room 	The center for education and nurturing management, supports a directed and professional learning process. Semi-private zone (staff only). The direction and order of the table signified the coordination and order of the Islamic bureaucracy.	The structure of the tables and certificates on the walls symbolize accountability, collective work, and trust in the management of Islamic institutions.
Principal's Room 	A representation of visionary leadership based on progressive Islamic values. Private spaces are open for limited interaction; shows a balance between authority and deliberation.	The elegant and well-organized design reflects the symbol of monotheism through the regularity and professionalism of Islamic leadership.

Through a narrative and hermeneutic approach, the perception of spatial planning at SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo reveals that space functions not merely as a physical framework but as a medium for internalizing Islamic values and Muhammadiyah ideology. Orderly, symmetrical, and proportional layouts are interpreted by teachers, students, and staff as representations of moral and spiritual order that affirm the principle of tawhid. The arrangement of

dormitories, mosques, halls, libraries, and administrative areas creates spatial experiences that nurture awareness of balance between worldly and spiritual life. In hermeneutic reading, spatial organization is understood as a symbolic text integrating faith, knowledge, and charity—where qibla orientation, zoning boundaries, and spatial harmony signify religious and ethical coherence. Thus, SMAMDA's spatial layout becomes an architectural narrative of Islamic order, linking aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual dimensions into a unified system of meaning reflecting Muhammadiyah's progressive educational vision

DISCUSSION

The architecture of SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo functions as an ideological sign system that articulates progressive Islamic values through space and visual forms. In Peirce's semiotic perspective, the façade and layout of the school become not only physical icons, but also indexes of social relations and symbols of values such as order, rationality, and monotheism. Architecture here becomes a non-verbal da'wah medium that communicates Islamic morality and modernity in an urban context. This is in line with Eco's (1976) view of architecture as an "open text" that invites social interpretation. Elements such as blue-yellow color, symmetrical geometry, and spatial orientation towards the qibla display a dialectic between modernity and spirituality that reinforces the view of Nasr (1987) and Akhmedova (2019) that modern Islamic architecture is a form of spiritual rationalization, not just a religious aesthetic.

The results of hermeneutic interpretation show that spaces such as mosques, dormitories, and halls not only have a practical function, but also become an arena for internalizing the values of discipline, equality, and sincerity. This confirms the view of Lefebvre (1991) that social space is a symbolic construct that shapes collective behavior. Thus, SMAMDA architecture plays a role as a non-curricular pedagogical instrument that builds ideological and moral awareness through spatial experience. Theoretically, this research enriches the semiotic discourse of Islamic architecture by placing the concept of monotheism as a structural principle of design. Practically, the results confirm that the architecture of modern Islamic education must be designed as a da'wah space that integrates faith, science, and modernity in a unity of rational and spiritual meaning.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research confirms that the architecture of SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo functions not only as a means of education, but also as a medium of communication of progressive Islamic ideology. Through Peircean semiotic approaches and spatial hermeneutics, it is found that architectural elements such as symmetrical geometry, blue-yellow color, qibla orientation, and public-private spatial planning form a narrative of order, rationality, and spirituality. The school's architecture represents a harmonious synthesis of modernity and religiosity, as well as instilling moral and ideological values in users. This study recommends the development of a semiotic model of Islamic architecture through comparative studies between schools, integration of quantitative perception analysis, and digital exploration. Practically, the design of Islamic education is recommended to

integrate the values of monotheism, user participation, and adaptation to the urban context without losing spirituality.

FURTHER STUDY

This research has limitations in the scope of a single case study that focuses on SMA Muhammadiyah 2 Sidoarjo, so the results cannot be generalized to all the architectural contexts of modern Islamic education. The analysis also emphasizes more semiotic and ideological aspects without examining the technical dimensions, user behavior, or design efficiency quantitatively. Further research is recommended to use **a multi-site approach and mixed method** in order to expand the validity of the findings. Longitudinal and digital studies are also important to understand how the meaning of Islamic architecture changes with the development of technology and urbanization. Thus, further research is expected to enrich the theory and practice of Islamic educational architecture that is adaptive, participatory, and spiritually oriented in the modern era.

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