

## Original Research Article

# Narrativity in Contemporary Architecture: A Heideggerian Phenomenological Reading\*

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## Abstract

**Problem statement:** In contemporary architecture, a kind of semantic isolation can be observed that reduces architecture to a merely physical object and weakens its connection with human experience and meaning. This challenge highlights the necessity of reinterpreting architecture from a phenomenological perspective, allowing spaces to become grounds for the manifestation of being and lived experience. Heideggerian phenomenology, with its emphasis on concepts such as Dasein and dwelling, provides a framework for a deeper understanding of this relationship.

**Research objective:** This study aims to explain the fundamental categories of narrative architecture from the perspective of Heideggerian phenomenology and to examine their reflections in human lived experience. The research also seeks to offer a theoretical framework for liberating contemporary architecture from semantic isolation and strengthening the bond between humans and their environment.

**Research method:** This study employed a systematic meta-synthesis and content analysis method based on the Sandelowski and Barroso model. The research population consisted of 57 scientific articles published between 2000 and 2025 in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, selected according to defined inclusion criteria. The data were qualitatively coded through thematic analysis and categorized into 10 main themes.

**Conclusion:** The findings revealed that these categories, including identity and meaning, historical narrative and heritage, sensory and perceptual experience, user interaction with space and context, narrative structure and form, symbolic expression, thematic and contextual narratives, integration and connection in design, interaction with context and community, and the architect's life quality and identity, overlap with Heideggerian concepts such as Being-in-the-world and care. Consequently, narrative architecture can enrich lived experience and lead to the creation of meaningful and identity-forming spaces.

**Keywords:** *Architectural Phenomenology, Heideggerian Phenomenology, Lived Experience, Dasein, Ontology of Place, Narrative Architecture, Phenomenology of Architecture.*

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## Introduction

Narrativity in architecture, as an emerging approach, goes beyond the mere physical design of spaces and seeks to create meaning and establish a profound connection between humans and their environment. This concept defines architecture as a medium for conveying stories, memories, and cultural values that enrich human lived experience (Pallasmaa, 2024). In this study, in addition to explaining the fundamental categories of narrativity from a Heideggerian phenomenological perspective, their reflection in human lived experience is also explored to strengthen the link between theory and actual experience.

In contemporary architecture, where challenges such as globalization and spatial homogenization threaten the identity of places, narrativity has become a means of reestablishing emotional and semantic bonds with space. This approach, by emphasizing how humans perceive and experience their surroundings, shifts architecture from a merely functional act toward a cultural and perceptual process. In this regard, Heidegger's phenomenology — focusing on the concept of Being and the human relationship with the world — offers a profound framework for understanding narrativity in architecture (Heidegger, 1967). Heidegger argues that human beings discover meaning through lived experience and interaction with their environment; therefore, narrative architecture can, by reflecting such experience, contribute to the creation of spaces that are not only functional but also meaningful and identity-forming.

The importance of narrativity in contemporary architecture lies in its potential to redefine the role of the architect as a storyteller. In this view, the architect, through spatial elements, material, light, and texture, creates stories that engage in dialogue with the user (Zumthor, 1988). These stories may stem from history, culture, or personal experience and, in doing so, strengthen the sense of belonging and identity among users of the space. However, the absence of a coherent framework for identifying the characteristics of narrative architecture highlights the need for research in this field. The central question of this study is: "What are the structure and characteristics of narrative architecture?" To answer this question, the meta-synthesis method has been employed.

This method, through systematic analysis and synthesis of previous studies, enables the extraction of foundational categories and the presentation of a comprehensive perspective (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Given the qualitative and multifaceted nature of the subject, meta-synthesis allows the researcher to benefit from diverse viewpoints and to propose a conceptual framework for narrative architecture.

This article aims to explain the fundamental categories of narrative architecture with an emphasis on Heideggerian phenomenology and its connection with human lived experience. By employing Heideggerian concepts such as worldhood and Dasein, this research seeks to demonstrate how architecture can serve as a medium for the manifestation of meaning and the enhancement of lived experience. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of narrativity in contemporary architecture and to pave the way for the design of spaces that not only meet physical needs but also reflect the emotional and existential dimensions of human life.

## Theoretical Foundations

Narrativity in architecture, as an emerging approach, goes beyond mere physical or aesthetic functions and focuses on creating meaning and lived experience within space. This concept, rooted in philosophy, literature, and the humanities, has been recognized in contemporary architecture as a means of fostering a deeper human connection with the built environment. In this context, Heideggerian phenomenology provides a theoretical framework that allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship between humans and place through concepts such as Being, worldhood, and care.

• **Heideggerian phenomenology and architecture**  
 Martin Heidegger (1967), the German philosopher, particularly in his seminal work *Being and Time*, emphasized the existential relationship between human beings and the world. He introduced the concept of Dasein — the being that creates meaning through its lived experience. For Heidegger, the world is not merely a collection of objects but a network of meanings formed through human interaction with the environment. In

architecture, this perspective places special emphasis on lived experience within space and on the role of place in generating meaning. Heidegger's later concept of dwelling illustrates the meaningful presence of humans in the world and implies that architecture should create spaces that go beyond mere shelter to provide opportunities for existential experience and a deep connection with place.

Norberg-Schulz (2000), inspired by Heidegger, developed the notion of the spirit of place, emphasizing the importance of creating spaces that reflect cultural and historical identity and meaning. Although other phenomenological perspectives — such as Merleau-Ponty (1962)— also stress spatial experience, subjectivity, and sensory perception, Heidegger's focus differs in that it centers on the existential bond between human beings and place, and on the ontological reading of this relationship.

Beyond phenomenology, other theoretical approaches offer different methods for analyzing narrative and space. Structuralists view architecture as a system of underlying patterns and relationships (Lévi-Strauss, 2008; Barthes, 1977), while semioticians focus on symbols and cultural codes as carriers of meaning. Post-structuralists, in turn, analyze space through the lens of power and historicity (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986; Derrida, 2002). However, Heideggerian phenomenology was chosen for this study because of its emphasis on lived experience and the existential connection between humans and place, which aligns more closely with identifying the fundamental categories of narrative architecture.

#### • **Narrativity in architecture**

Narrativity in architecture refers to the use of spatial elements, form, material, and texture to convey stories, memories, or concepts. Unlike modernist approaches that focused on functionalism and abstract forms, narrative architecture seeks to create a multisensory and meaningful experience for users. Narrative spaces, through the organization of pathways, spatial sequences, and visual cues, communicate stories that users experience as they move through them (Psarra, 2009). From a phenomenological perspective, narrativity in architecture depends on creating spaces that enable reflection and self-awareness.

Pallasmaa (2024) emphasizes the role of the senses in architectural experience, arguing that architecture should free itself from the dominance of vision. While this perspective provides a valuable critique of formalist approaches, within a Heideggerian framework, it becomes clear that sensory experience alone, if not linked to dwelling and continuity with the world, remains insufficient. Here, architectural narrativity is understood as a process that simultaneously encompasses perceptual, historical, and ontological layers. In other words, Pallasmaa (ibid.) paves the way for a sensory approach, while Heidegger elevates that experience to the level of meaning and being.

Examples of spatial narrativity can also be found in contemporary Iranian architecture. For instance, in Kamran Diba's Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, the combination of spatial sequencing, purposeful lighting, and the use of simple yet meaningful geometry creates a setting that narrates the cultural and artistic lived experience of contemporary society. The movement from the entrance to exhibition spaces, from interconnected galleries to the central courtyard, and from underground passages to skylit areas, not only shapes spatial experience but also reflects a hidden narrative of Iran's transition from tradition to modernity and the role of art within that process. These spatial patterns, within a Heideggerian phenomenological framework, can be interpreted as manifestations of dwelling and being-in-the-world in the contemporary Iranian cultural-historical context.

#### • **Characteristics of narrative architecture**

Various studies have explored the characteristics of narrative architecture from different perspectives. Generally, this type of architecture encompasses three main components: spatial structure, semiotics, and lived experience. Spatial structure refers to the organization and sequencing of spaces, allowing for gradual movement and discovery of meaning (Tschumi, 1996). Semiotics in narrative architecture involves the use of symbols, signs, and cultural references to convey specific messages (Eco, 1986). Lived experience, meanwhile, refers to how users perceive and feel during their encounter with space, a key aspect from a phenomenological point of view (Seamon, 2018).

Tschumi (1996) argues that narrative architecture is

shaped through events. His projects, such as Parc de la Villette in Paris, demonstrate how the combination of movement paths and stopping points invites users to actively participate in the discovery of meaning. In contrast, Eco (1986), focusing on symbols and cultural codes, shows how architecture can act as a medium for spatial storytelling, enriching user experience. These perspectives suggest that narrative architecture, both in form and structure and in meaning and experience, requires harmony between spatial and cultural elements.

## Literature Review

Studies by Kwon (2007) and Ryan (2015) have primarily analyzed architectural narrativity in relation to memory and urban storytelling, showing that space can serve as a vessel for history and collective identity. At the same time, case studies such as Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin demonstrate how architectural narrativity can express stories of rupture and loss. In contrast, examples from contemporary Iranian architecture — such as Azadi Tower or Tabiat Bridge — highlight narratives of continuity and cultural identity. This comparison reveals that architectural narrativity is not limited to representing the past but can also express diverse experiences of historical continuity or disruption.

### Research Method

The present study, aiming to explain the fundamental categories of narrativity in contemporary architecture and to identify its structures and characteristics from the perspective of Heideggerian phenomenology, employs the meta-synthesis method. Meta-synthesis is a qualitative approach that systematically integrates findings from previous studies to enable deeper interpretation and the creation of new knowledge (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). This method is suitable for addressing the main research question, “What are the structures and characteristics of narrative architecture?”, as it allows for a unified analysis of the scattered concepts found in existing literature.

The meta-synthesis process follows the model proposed by Sandelowski & Barroso (2007), consisting of the following steps: 1. Defining the research question and inclusion criteria, 2. Conducting a comprehensive search

of academic sources, 3. Assessing the quality of selected studies, 4. Extracting and coding data, 5. Analyzing and synthesizing findings, and 6. Providing an integrative interpretation.

Initially, databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were searched using keywords including “narrativity in architecture,” “Heideggerian phenomenology,” and “lived experience.” The inclusion criteria comprised qualitative or theoretical studies related to narrative architecture and a phenomenological framework.

The extracted data from the selected studies were coded and categorized through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify key themes such as spatial organization, semiotics, and lived experience. The findings were then synthesized within a Heideggerian phenomenological framework to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the characteristics of narrative architecture. This method, emphasizing depth and comprehensiveness, contributes to a more precise understanding of how narrativity enriches human lived experience in contemporary architecture.

The meta-synthesis approach was chosen with the goal of systematically collecting and integrating findings from previous research to develop a conceptual framework for narrative architecture through the lens of Heideggerian phenomenology. Although phenomenological research typically emphasizes field data and direct engagement with lived experience, meta-synthesis serves as a preliminary step, enabling the identification of fundamental categories and establishing a theoretical foundation for future field analyses (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). To strengthen the connection between method and research objectives, after extracting ten main categories, this conceptual framework was comparatively examined through selected examples of notable Iranian architecture to assess its applicability in analyzing real-world experiences.

## Discussion

The present study, conducted to identify the characteristics of narrative architecture from a Heideggerian phenomenological perspective, utilized the meta-synthesis method based on the analysis of 57 academic

articles published between 2000 and 2025. The research process was structured according to the seven-step model proposed by Sandelowski & Barroso (2007).

**• Step 1: Problem formulation**

The research question, “What are the structures and characteristics of narrative architecture?”, was defined to investigate the distinctive features of this approach (ibid.).

**• Step 2: Literature search**

A systematic search was conducted in the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases using relevant keywords. Articles published between 2000 and 2025 were selected according to specific inclusion criteria. The list of keywords is presented in Table 1.

**• Step 3: Selection of relevant studies**

A total of 57 academic and research papers and books were screened based on criteria such as relevance to narrative architecture, high impact factor, and adequate quality (evaluated using the CASP checklist).

**• Step 4: Data extraction and coding**

From these studies, 285 statements were extracted. After initial coding, they were reduced to 70 codes, which were then categorized based on conceptual similarities.

**• Step 5: Analysis and synthesis of findings**

The codes were analyzed, and through the synthesis of common patterns, the key characteristics of narrative architecture were identified. The results, presented in Table 2, served as the basis for subsequent analyses. After identifying the 70 initial codes, they were grouped into 10 final categories according to Table 3.

**• Step 6: Development of the conceptual framework**

To assess content validity, interviews were conducted with five experts in focus group sessions who confirmed the identified codes. The study’s reliability was evaluated using a Kappa coefficient of 0.684, indicating satisfactory agreement (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007).

**• Step 7: Presentation and interpretation of findings**

In this step, 70 codes were classified into 10 categories: 1. Identity and Meaning, 2. Historical Narrative and Heritage, 3. Sensory and Perceptual Experience, 4. User Interaction with Space and Context, 5. Narrative Structure and Form, 6. Symbolic Expression, 7. Thematic and

Table 1. Selected keywords for literature search. Source: Authors.

Main keywords	Keywords
Alternatives for “Contemporary Architecture”	Contemporary Architecture
	Modern Architecture
	Postmodern Architecture
	Digital Architecture
	Sustainable Architecture
	Experiential Architecture
Key characteristics	Characteristics
	Feature
	Element
	Principle
	Aspect
	Design Factor
Alternatives for “Narrative Architecture”	Storytelling Architecture
	Spatial Architecture

Contextual Narratives, 8. Integration and Connection in Design, 9. Interaction with Context and Community, and 10. Quality of Life and Architect’s Identity. These categories were analyzed through Heideggerian concepts such as Being-in-the-world and Care, revealing that narrative architecture enriches lived experience.

In notable examples of contemporary Iranian architecture—such as the Azadi Tower in Tehran, designed by Hossein Amanat—narrative architecture manifests through a symbolic structure that fuses traditional and modern geometries. By combining arches, iwans, and stone materials, the tower not only serves as an urban monument but also narrates Iran’s national identity and historical transformation in recent decades. Similarly, the Tabiat Bridge in Tehran, designed by Leila Araghian and Alireza Behzadi, through its diverse movement paths, public gathering spaces, and the linking of two urban parks, creates a setting for lived experience and the formation of collective memory. Within Heidegger’s phenomenological framework, these spatial narratives can be viewed as manifestations of “care” for the environment and community, reflecting both individual and collective identity within the context of contemporary place.

This study, by identifying ten fundamental categories of narrative architecture—including identity and meaning, historical narrative and heritage, sensory and perceptual experience, user interaction with space and context,

Table 2. Extracted codes from the statements. Source: Authors.

Code	Sources
Enhancing quality of life	Keeping & Shiers, 2017
Spatial structure and organization	Pisani, 2018; Roslan & Anuar, 2021; Norouzi & Khademi, 2021; Pérez-Moreno, 2017; Lus Arana, 2013; Chupin et al., 2021; Baharuddin et al., 2022
Reflection and representation of meaning and identity	Hvattum, 2018; Emmons et al., 2019; Acilu & Labarta, 2020; Casale & Garda, 2025; Putz, 2019; Scarrocchia, 2012; Baharuddinet al., 2022; Grigas, 2023; Baydar, 2002; De la Vega de León, 2022; Serrano & Moreno, 2012; Devos, 2016
Reconsideration and reconstruction of the past in narrative	Lotfi & Sholeh, 2024; Sánchez, 2021; Pérez-Moreno, 2017; Grigas, 2023
Imaginative, symbolic, and structural expression	Giannetti, 2021; Emmons et al., 2019; Scarrocchia, 2012; Devos, 2016; Aroni, 2022; Hvejsel & Kirkegaard, 2013
Sensory and emotional expression	Casale & Garda, 2025; Pisani, 2018; Jia, 2024
Cultural and historical expression	De la Vega de León, 2022; Acilu & Labarta, 2020; Patteeuw & Szacka, 2018
Existential and philosophical expression	Castillo, 2017; Mavromatidis, 2025
Connection between history and experience	Pisani, 2018
Connection between art and space	Lus Arana, 2013
Contextual and historical influences	Rodrigues, 2022; Giannetti, 2021; Hvattum, 2018; Somogyi et al., 2024; Scarrocchia, 2012
Philosophical influence on narrative	Castillo, 2017
Visual and aesthetic experience	Giannetti, 2021; Hvejsel & Kirkegaard, 2013; Acilu & Labarta, 2020; Lus Arana, 2013; Bauer & Santos, 2021
User's sensory experience	Giannetti, 2021; Scarrocchia, 2012; Abdelmonem, 2016; Hamza, 2011; Loakaewnoo, 2024; Fernández-Morales et al., 2016; Emmons et al., 2019; Grasser-Parger, 2024; Lotfi & Sholeh, 2024; Barranha et al., 2017; Baharuddinet al., 2022; Islambegović et al., 2023; Serrano & Moreno, 2012
User's lived experience	Casale & Garda, 2025
User's experience of play	Jeon & Park, 2015; Aroni, 2022
User's experience of cultural context	Sánchez, 2021
User's experience of space	Rodrigues, 2022; Casale & Garda, 2025; Bernhardsson, 2008; Pereira, 2020; Baydar, 2002; Choudhury & Roy, 2015; Keeping & Shiers, 2017; Somogyi et al., 2024; Ho, 2022
User's experience of film	Trindade, 2021
User's experience of boundaries	Baydar, 2002
User's experience of meaning and heritage	Castillo, 2017; Grigas, 2023; De la Vega de León, 2022; Roslan & Anuar, 2021; Mavromatidis, 2025; Pérez-Moreno, 2017; De Carvalho et al., 2021; Alves, 2014
User's experience in interactive spaces	Jeon & Park, 2015
User's experience in exhibition spaces	Patteeuw & Szacka, 2018
User's experience in learning	Chupin et al., 2021; Burton & Salama, 2023
Continuity of meaning in design	Hvattum, 2018
Balance between local and global	Adeyemo & Amole, 2024; El-Ashmouni & Salama, 2020; Zein, 2021; Bauer & Santos, 2021
Interaction with cultural context	Patteeuw & Szacka, 2018; Fernández-Morales et al., 2016
Interaction with spatial context	Scarrocchia, 2012
Interaction between sense and environment	Choudhury & Roy, 2015
Cultural interaction with structure	Devos, 2016
User interaction with the museum	Pisani, 2018
Integration of sense and reason	Islambegović et al., 2023
Integration of structure and meaning	Giannetti, 2021
Integration of tradition and modernity	Sánchez, 2021; Rodrigues, 2022; Bernhardsson, 2008; Adeyemo & Amole, 2024
Integration of art and architecture	Jeon & Park, 2015
Preservation of historical values	De Carvalho et al., 2021
Preservation of indigenous meanings	Sánchez, 2021

Rest of Table 2.

Code	Sources
Creating space with the community	Grasser-Parger, 2024
Critical and heterotopic narrative	Abdelmonem, 2016; Grigas, 2023; De la Vega de León, 2022; Ho, 2022
Educational narrative	Chupin et al., 2021; Somogyi et al., 2024; Burton & Salama, 2023
Reconstructive and future-oriented narrative	Ho, 2022; Barranha et al., 2017; Putz, 2019; Burton & Salama, 2023
Sustainable narrative	Hamza, 2011; Singh et al., 2024; Choudhury & Roy, 2015; Keeping & Shiers, 2017; Van de Riet et al., 2017; Burton & Salama, 2023
Historical narrative	Sánchez, 2021; Giannetti, 2021; Pisani, 2018; Pérez-Moreno, 2017
Biotic and natural narrative	Hamza, 2011; Singh et al., 2024; Van de Riet et al., 2017; Rahubadda & Kulatunga, 2024; Norouzi & Khademi, 2021
Stylistic narrative	Hvattum, 2018; Emmons et al., 2019
Cinematic and visual narrative	Baharuddinet al., 2022; Trindade, 2021; Alves, 2014; Acilu & Labarta, 2020; Serrano & Moreno, 2012
Urban and capitalist narrative	Abdelmonem, 2016; Pereira, 2020; Putz, 2019
Emotional narrative	Jia, 2024
Scientific narrative	Mavromatidis, 2025
Cultural and geographical narrative	Hvattum, 2018; Pereira, 2020; Adeyemo & Amole, 2024; El-Ashmouni & Salama, 2020; De Carvalho et al., 2021; Alves, 2014; Islambegović et al., 2023; Norouzi & Khademi, 2021
Narrative of modernity	Rodrigues, 2022; Bernhardsson, 2008; Adeyemo & Amole, 2024; El-Ashmouni & Salama, 2020; Zein, 2021; Bauer & Santos, 2021
Heritage narrative	Loakaewnoo, 2024; Barranha et al., 2017
Architect's identity narrative	Casale & Garda, 2025; Lotfi & Sholeh, 2024
Playful narrativity	Jeon & Park, 2015
Postmodern narrativity	Patteeuw & Szacka, 2018
Semantic and symbolic narratives	Devos, 2016; Lus Arana, 2013; Roslan & Anuar, 2021; Baydar, 2002; Fernández-Morales et al., 2016
Narrative spatial structure	Casale & Garda, 2025; Hvejsel & Kirkegaard, 2013; Pereira, 2020; Mavromatidis, 2025; Baydar, 2002; Emmons et al., 2019; Somogyi et al., 2024; Ho, 2022; Shen & Yu, 2024
Responsible spatial structure	Hamza, 2011; Keeping & Shiers, 2017
Structuring and materiality	Hvejsel & Kirkegaard, 2013
Vernacular and craft-based structures	Singh et al., 2024; Choudhury & Roy, 2015; Van de Riet et al., 2017; Rahubadda & Kulatunga, 2024; Ortiz, 2018; Zein, 2021
Interactive structures	Grasser-Parger, 2024; Aroni, 2022
Multi-layered and multi-purpose structures	Loakaewnoo, 2024; Baydar, 2002; De Carvalho et al., 2021; Barranha et al., 2017; Alves, 2014
Dynamic narrative structures	Jeon & Park, 2015
Simplicity and authenticity	Scarrocchia, 2012
User participation in narrative	Grasser-Parger, 2024
Social semanticism	Sánchez, 2021
Renewal of the past	Bernhardsson, 2008
Cultural identity in exhibitions	Patteeuw & Szacka, 2018
Regional spatial identity	Sánchez, 2021; Rodrigues, 2022; Hvattum, 2018; Bernhardsson, 2008; Costa, 2021; Chupin et al., 2021; Abdelmonem, 2016; Pereira, 2020; Castillo, 2017; Grigas, 2023; Loakaewnoo, 2024; De la Vega de León, 2022; Hamza, 2011; Adeyemo & Amole, 2024; Roslan & Anuar, 2021; Fernández-Morales et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2024; Baydar, 2002; Grasser-Parger, 2024; Lotfi & Sholeh, 2024; Choudhury & Roy, 2015; Keeping & Shiers, 2017; Jia, 2024; Somogyi et al., 2024; El-Ashmouni & Salama, 2020; Pérez-Moreno, 2017; De Carvalho et al., 2021; Baharuddinet al., 2022; Ho, 2022; Trindade, 2021; Van de Riet et al., 2017; Barranha et al., 2017; Putz, 2019; Rahubadda & Kulatunga, 2024; Alves, 2014; Islambegović et al., 2023; Acilu & Labarta, 2020; Burton & Salama, 2023; Ortiz, 2018; Serrano & Moreno, 2012; Norouzi & Khademi, 2021; Lus Arana, 2013; Zein, 2021; Pisani, 2018
National identity in design	Devos, 2016

Table 3. Identified categories. Source: Authors.

Categories		Codes
Identity and meaning in narrative architecture	IM	- Regional spatial identity IM1
		- Cultural identity in exhibitions IM2
		- National identity in design IM3
		- Reflection and representation of meaning and identity IM4
		- Social semanticism IM5
		- Continuity of meaning in design IM6
		- Preservation of indigenous meanings IM7
Historical narrative and heritage	HN	- Historical narrative HN1
		- Heritage narrative HN2
		- Preservation of historical values HN3
		- Connection between history and experience HN4
		- Reconsideration and reconstruction of the past in narrative HN5
		- Renewal of the past HN6
		- Contextual and historical influences HN7
Sensory and perceptual experience of the user	UE	- User's sensory experience UE1
		- Visual and aesthetic experience UE2
		- User's experience of space UE3
		- Interaction between sense and environment UE4
		- Sensory and emotional expression UE5
		- Integration of sense and reason UE6
		- User's lived experience UE7
		- User's experience of meaning and heritage UE8
User interaction with space and context	UI	- User's experience of cultural context UI1
		- User's experience of play UI2
		- User's experience of film UI3
		- User's experience of boundaries UI4
		- User's experience in interactive spaces UI5
		- User's experience in exhibition spaces UI6
		- User's experience in learning UI7
		- User interaction with the museum UI8
Narrative structure and form	NS	- Spatial structure and organization NS1
		- Narrative spatial structure NS2
		- Responsible spatial structure NS3
		- Interactive structures NS4
		- Multi-layered and multi-purpose structures NS5
		- Dynamic narrative structures NS6
		- Structuring and Materiality NS7
Symbolic expression and semantic narration	SE	- Imaginative expression SE1
		- Symbolic and structural expression SE2
		- Semantic and symbolic narratives SE3
		- Playful narrativity SE4
		- Cinematic and visual narrativity SE5
		- Existential and philosophical expression SE6
		- Emotional narrative SE7
		- Critical and heterotopic narrative SE8
		- Postmodern narrativity SE9
Thematic and contextual narratives	TN	- Educational narrative TN1
		- Reconstructive and future-oriented narrative TN2
		- Sustainable narrative TN3
		- Biotic and natural narrative TN4
		- Stylistic narrative TN5
		- Urban and capitalist narrative TN6
		- Narrative of modernity TN7

Rest of Table 3.

Categories		Codes
Integration and connection in design	LD	- Integration of tradition and modernity LD1
		- Integration of art and architecture LD2
		- Connection between art and space, integration of structure and meaning LD3
		- Balance between local and global LD4
		- Vernacular and craft-based structures LD5
		- Simplicity and authenticity LD6
Interaction with context and community	IC	- Interaction with cultural context IM1
		- Interaction with spatial context IM2
		- Cultural interaction with structure IM3
		- Creating space with the community IM4
		- User participation in narrative IM5
		- Cultural and geographical narrative IM6
		- Philosophical influence on narrative IM7
Quality of life and architect's identity	QL	- Enhancing quality of life QL1
		- Narrative and architect's identity QL2
		- Cultural and historical expression QL3
		- Scientific narrative QL4
		- Responsible spatial structure QL5
		- User's experience of space QL6
		- Preservation of historical values QL7

narrative structure and form, symbolic expression, thematic and contextual narratives, integration and connection in design, interaction with context and community, and quality of life and architect's identity—elaborates the characteristics of this approach from a Heideggerian phenomenological perspective.

These findings both align with and diverge from previous studies. Coates (2012) emphasized the role of museums in conveying historical narratives, corresponding to the category of “Historical Narrative and Heritage”. Likewise, Pallasmaa (2024) highlighted the importance of multi-sensory perception in understanding space, aligning with the category of “Sensory and Perceptual Experience”.

However, this study contributes new dimensions by introducing categories such as “Quality of Life and Architect's Identity” and “Integration and Connection in Design,” which have received less attention in prior research. For instance, Seamon (2018) focused on place-making and contextual interaction but paid limited attention to the architect's individual identity. Moreover, the emphasis on Heideggerian phenomenology—unlike Eco (1986) 's semiotic approach—offers a more existential and profound interpretation of narrativity. These distinctions demonstrate the broader comprehensiveness of the present findings in encompassing the social, cultural, and existential dimensions of narrative architecture.

Overall, the results affirm previous studies while presenting a more cohesive and multidimensional framework for understanding narrative architecture.

To visualize the relationship between the identified categories and the fundamental concepts of Heideggerian phenomenology, Fig. 1 illustrates the conceptual framework. In this diagram, the ten final categories of narrative architecture are arranged around Heidegger’s key philosophical notions—such as “Being-in-the-world,” “Care,” and “Dwelling.” These ontological cores establish conceptual and philosophical connections among the categories, showing how each relates to lived experience and the meaningful presence of humans in space. The diagram thus provides a comprehensive understanding of the internal structure and conceptual coherence of narrative architecture.

The structure of the diagram (Fig. 1) is designed to reflect the conceptual interrelations between categories and Heidegger’s philosophy. For example, the category “Identity and Meaning” corresponds to “Being-in-the-world” since narrative spaces strengthen human presence in the world by representing individual and collective identities. Similarly, “Historical Narrative and Heritage” relates to “Temporality,” expressing historical continuity in lived experience. The categories “Sensory and Perceptual Experience” and “User Interaction

with Space and Context” connect with “Care,” as they emphasize the dynamic relationship between humans and their environment and the enhancement of the sense of belonging.

This diagram (Fig. 1) not only aids in understanding the internal coherence of the conceptual framework but also serves as an analytical tool for architects and researchers to interpret and assess spatial narrativity in real projects. For instance, in analyzing Tehran’s Tabiat Bridge, the categories “Interaction with Context and Community” and “Sensory and Perceptual Experience” correspond with Heideggerian notions of “Care” and “Dwelling” through its pathways and the linkage of two parks. Ultimately, the diagram demonstrates that narrative architecture, through its connection with Heidegger’s existential concepts, provides a foundation for enriching the human lived experience.

### Case Analysis of Iranian Architectural Examples

To evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed conceptual framework grounded in Heidegger’s philosophy, eight exemplary cases of contemporary Iranian architecture were selected: Azadi Tower, City Theater (Teatr-e Shahr), Shushtar-e-No Town, Azadi Stadium, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Milad Tower, Tabiat Bridge, and Valiasr Mosque. These examples were chosen according to three main criteria:

**1) Functional diversity:** These buildings represent a wide range of functions, including monumental (Azadi Tower), cultural (City Theater and Museum of Contemporary Art), residential–social (Shushtar-e-No Town), sports (Azadi Stadium), infrastructural (Tabiat Bridge), communicational–touristic (Milad Tower), and religious (Valiasr Mosque).

This diversity enables a comprehensive exploration of narrative categories across different architectural functions.

**2) Cultural and social value:** Each building was selected for its cultural, social, or symbolic influence within the context of Iran’s contemporary history. For instance, Azadi Tower stands as a national symbol and a representation of Iran’s historical transition, while

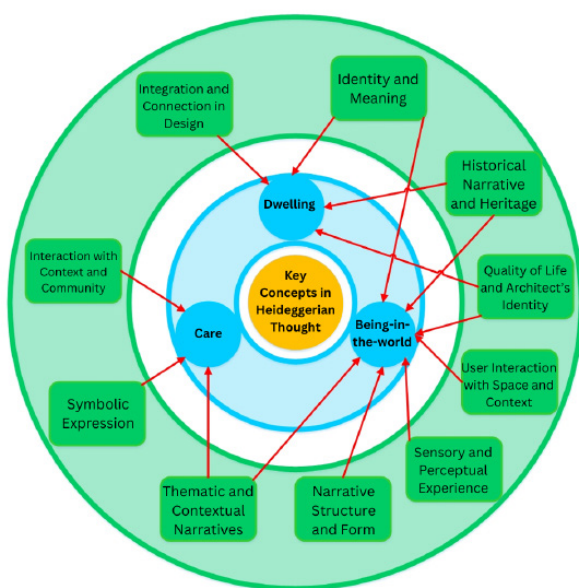


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of Narrative Architecture Based on Extracted Categories and Heideggerian Concepts. Source: Authors.

Tabiat Bridge serves as a vital platform for social and recreational interaction.

**3) Spatial narrative capacity:** These examples possess spatial, formal, and semiotic characteristics that enable the representation of the identified categories—such as identity and meaning, sensory experience, and contextual interaction. For example, the spatial sequencing and lighting of the Museum of Contemporary Art or the dynamic movement pathways of the Tabiat Bridge provide opportunities to analyze narrativity from a Heideggerian phenomenological perspective.

These criteria ensure that the selected examples not only represent contemporary Iranian architecture but also serve as real and tangible contexts for testing the proposed conceptual framework.

The analysis of these selected cases revealed that the identified conceptual categories (Table 4) can be traced not only at the theoretical level but also within tangible spatial experiences. Consequently, they can function as an effective tool for interpreting narrative structures within architecture.

Comparative Analysis (Table 4) indicates that the conceptual categories of the proposed framework are present in the eight contemporary Iranian buildings in distinct yet complementary ways. This analysis confirms that Heideggerian concepts such as “dwelling,” “situatedness,” “openness to the world,” and “being-in-the-world” are identifiable and interpretable not only at a theoretical level but also in the sensory, spatial, and meaningful experiences of these buildings. Therefore, the proposed conceptual framework can evolve from an abstract model into a practical tool for analyzing and interpreting narrative in contemporary architecture.

From a phenomenological perspective, architecture acquires meaning when humans are present in a space and gain a lived experience of it. Thus, examining narrative in architecture is not limited to form or function but depends on the quality of “presence” in the space. Accordingly, the contemporary Iranian architectural examples in this study are categorized and analyzed not merely as physical objects but as “places for being.” This categorization is based on different qualities of presence in space, including four main categories:

**1) Ritual and spiritual presence:** Spaces where the environment serves a commemorative or ritual function and reflects national or religious identity.

**2) Collective and social presence:** Spaces that provide a setting for social gatherings, interaction, and collective experiences.

**3) Cultural and artistic presence:** Spaces where artistic and cultural experiences shape spatial narrative.

**4) Every day and lived presence:** Spaces directly connected to daily life, habitation, or leisure experiences.

This categorization demonstrates that contemporary Iranian architecture encompasses a diverse range of presence qualities (Table 5). Azadi Tower and Valiasr Mosque, by creating ritualistic and symbolic spaces, reflect a form of “Care” for cultural–religious identity and values. Azadi Stadium and Tabiat Bridge, as collective spaces, enhance lived experience and social interaction. On the other hand, City Theater and Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art serve as platforms for cultural and artistic narrative, while Shushtar New Town and Milad Tower are most closely connected to everyday presence, social life, and leisure experiences.

Within the framework of Heideggerian phenomenology, these qualities of presence can be seen as manifestations of concepts such as “Being-in-the-world,” “Situatedness,” and “Openness to the world.” Therefore, categorization based on spatial presence not only facilitates the analysis of narrative architecture but also provides a tool for a deeper understanding of identity, meaning, and lived experience in contemporary Iranian architecture.

### **Analysis of the Spatial Experience of Azadi Tower and Tabiat Bridge**

The spatial sequence of user experience reveals how spaces are gradually perceived and discovered. In Azadi Tower, the movement begins from Azadi Square, continues toward the underground entrance, and then leads visitors into the museum space. From there, they gradually ascend to the upper levels, ultimately reaching the observation platform at the top. This spatial sequence creates a multi-sensory experience: visual (views of the square and the city), auditory (echoes of sound in the underground space), and tactile (the feel of stone and

Table 4. Correlation of the Ten Categories of Narrative Architecture with Examples of Contemporary Iranian Architecture. Source: Authors.

Identified categories	Azadi Tower	City Theater (Teatr-e Shahr)	Shushtar-e-No (New Shushtar Township)	Azadi Stadium	Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art	Milad Tower	Tabiat Bridge	Valiasr Mosque
Identity and meaning	National symbol and embodiment of Iranian modernity	Cultural and artistic identity	Local and social identity	National and athletic identity	Artistic and contemporary identity	Symbol of progress and technology	Urban and collective identity	Contemporary religious identity
Historical narrative and heritage	Narrative of the transition from tradition to modernity	Narrative of cultural transformations after the 1960s	Reflection of social life in Khuzestan	Narrative of national unity	Narrative of global modern art in Iran	Narrative of the capital's development	Narrative of the human-nature connection	Narrative of religion in the metropolitan context
Sensory and perceptual experience	Play of light and shadow on white stone	Acoustic design of halls and circular movement	Experience of hot climate and windcatchers	Sense of collective presence and stadium chants	Skylights and interconnected galleries	Urban skyline and nighttime illumination	Movement along intersecting paths and urban viewpoints	Combination of light, concrete, and ritual space
User interaction with space and context	Connection with Azadi Square	Connection with the central urban fabric	Design based on climate and local lifestyle	Connection with the city and public sports culture	Connection with Laleh Park and the urban context	Connection with the highway network	Connection between two city parks	Connection with Valiasr Street and the city
Narrative structure and form	Arch-like form and symbolic geometry	Circular plan with surrounding performance halls	Organic fabric and spatial hierarchy	Monumental scale and central organization	Combination of underground pathways and skylights	Tall and technological structure	Multi-layered pathways and platforms	Modern form inspired by tradition
Symbolic expression	Integration of Iranian and modern design traditions	Circular form as a symbol of community	Climatic and social indicators	Symbol of strength and solidarity	Symbol of the transition of Iranian art	Symbol of modernity and innovation	Symbol of connection and gathering	Symbol of reinterpretation of religious architecture
Thematic and contextual narratives	National and historical narrative	Cultural and artistic narrative	Socio-local narrative	Athletic and national narrative	Artistic and global narrative	Technological and modernity narrative	Environmental and social narrative	Contemporary religious narrative
Integration and connection in design	Fusion of tradition and modernity	Integration of performing arts and architecture	Integration of vernacular and modern architecture	Integration of sports, city, and national identity	Integration of modern architecture with Iranian culture	Integration of structure, technology, and urban identity	Integration of nature, humans, and the city	Integration of religious tradition with contemporary architecture
Interaction with context and community	Urban and national space	Center for cultural gathering	Social life and neighborhood interaction	National gathering during events	Center for artistic interaction	Center for technology and tourism	Urban and family gatherings	Religious gatherings within the urban context
Quality of life and architect's identity	Enhancement of national spirit and urban identity	Enhancement of urban culture	Improvement of social quality of life	Enhancement of collective vitality	Enhancement of artistic experience	Enhancement of tourism and urban economy	Enhancement of collective and recreational experience	Creation of a contemporary ritual experience

Table 5. Categorization of contemporary Iranian architectural examples based on the quality of presence in space. Source: Authors.

Type of presence in space	Examples	Distinctive features of spatial narrativity
Ritual and spiritual	Azadi Tower – Valiasr Mosque	National/religious symbol, narrative of collective identity, reflection of cultural values
Collective and social	Azadi Stadium – Tabiat Bridge	Public gatherings, social interaction, leisure, and collective experience
Cultural and artistic	City Theater – Museum of Contemporary Art	Artistic narrative, sensory–perceptual experience, cultural expression
Every day and lived	Shushtar New Town – Milad Tower	Local life, connection with climate and city, leisure, and touristic experience

concrete). Moreover, the semantic experience of the visitor is closely tied to the symbol of national identity.

In Tabiat Bridge, the walking path begins at the park entrance and leads to the first level of the bridge. Visitors then pause on the second level to rest or enjoy a café before finally reaching the third level, where they can enjoy views of the Alborz Mountains and the cityscape. The spatial experience of the Tabiat Bridge is also multi-sensory, involving visual (natural and urban vistas), auditory (sounds of people and birds), olfactory (scents of nature and greenery), and tactile (the feel of wood and metal pathways) dimensions. The semantic experience here lies in fostering social connection and interaction with nature.

To compare these two examples, the movement sequence and related sensory experiences are summarized in Table 6.

This analysis demonstrates that spatial experience in both cases is not limited to visual perception alone; rather, through the combination of multiple senses and the meanings associated with place, it creates a rich and multidimensional experience for users. Such an approach enables a deeper understanding and more precise analysis of the relationship between spatial structure and user experience.

### Conclusion

The present study aimed to answer the question: “What constitutes the structure and characteristics of narrative architecture?” Through a meta-synthesis approach and based on Heideggerian phenomenology, the research identified and explained the fundamental categories of narrative architecture. Findings derived from the analysis of 57 scholarly articles published between 2000 and 2025 resulted in 70 initial codes, which were consolidated into ten main categories: 1. Identity and Meaning, 2. Historical Narrative and Heritage, 3. Sensory and Perceptual

Experience, 4. User Interaction with Space and Context, 5. Narrative Structure and Form, 6. Symbolic Expression, 7. Thematic and Contextual Narratives, 8. Integration and Synthesis in Design, 9. Interaction with Context and Society, and 10. Quality of Life and the Architect’s Identity.

These categories were interpreted through Heidegger’s key concepts, such as Being-in-the-world, Temporality, Care, and the Fourfold, revealing that narrative architecture transcends physical functionality by enriching the human lived experience through the creation of meaning, connection with history, and enhancement of a sense of belonging.

To reinforce the link between theory and lived experience, these categories were comparatively examined in selected examples of contemporary Iranian architecture. The analysis showed that each identified category could be traced within the spatial, sensory, and semantic qualities of these buildings and thus served as a framework for interpreting narrative in architecture. Consequently, the main research question, “What constitutes the structure and characteristics of narrative architecture?”, was addressed by proposing a conceptual framework rooted in Heidegger’s philosophy and validated through real-world examples. This framework can serve as a foundation for future research, architectural design, and project evaluation from a narrative perspective. Nonetheless, further field-based studies exploring users’ lived experiences are necessary to enhance their validity and practical applicability.

The category of “Identity and Meaning” reflects the role of narrative architecture in representing individual and collective identities, aligning with Heidegger’s concept of Being-in-the-world. It confirms that narrative spaces invite users to reflect upon their existential position (Heidegger, 1967). “Historical Narrative and Heritage” emphasizes the connection between architecture and

Table 6. Movement sequence and related sensory experiences in Azadi Tower and Tabiat Bridge. Source: Authors.

Building	Spatial sequence	Visual experience	Auditory experience	Tactile experience	Semantic experience
Azadi Tower	Entrance – Underground – Upper Level	View of the square and the city	Echo of sounds	Stone and concrete	Symbol of national identity
Tabiat Bridge	Level 1 – 2 – 3	Views of the Alborz Mountains and the city	Sounds of birds and people	Wood and metal	Social connection and harmony with nature

the past, corresponding with Temporality and enabling users to experience historical continuity. This finding is consistent with Kwon (2007), who highlighted the role of museums in conveying historical narratives (Coates, 2012). “Sensory and Perceptual Experience”, focusing on the role of the senses in spatial understanding, parallels Pallasmaa (2024)’s perspective that architecture is a multi-sensory art, demonstrating how narrative architecture creates deep and layered experiences through light, texture, and sound.

The categories of “User Interaction with Space and Context” and “Interaction with Context and Society” emphasize the dynamic relationship between humans, their environment, and their communities—concepts tied to Heidegger’s notion of Care. These categories underscore narrative architecture’s capacity to enhance belonging and social engagement, echoing Seamon (2018) ’s work. “Narrative Structure and Form” and “Symbolic Expression” address the use of forms and symbols to convey meaning, aligning with Heidegger’s view of architecture as poetry (Heidegger, 1971). “Thematic and Contextual Narratives” and “Integration and Synthesis in Design” highlight the importance of climatic, cultural, and contextual harmony, linking to Heidegger’s concept of the Fourfold. Finally, “Quality of Life and the Architect’s Identity” explores how architecture affects everyday life and reflects the creativity and values of the architect—an aspect seldom examined in previous studies.

By introducing new categories such as “Quality of Life and the Architect’s Identity” and “Integration and Synthesis in Design,” this study adds novel dimensions to the literature on narrative architecture. Unlike semiotic approaches such as Eco (1986), which focus on symbols and cultural codes, this study proposes a phenomenological interpretation rooted in existential experience. Compared to Seamon (2018), who emphasized place-making, the present research expands the scope by examining both the architect’s individual identity and the social impacts of architecture, offering a more holistic framework that encompasses cultural, social, and existential aspects.

From a theoretical perspective, this study confirms that narrative architecture is not merely a medium for

storytelling but a framework for meaningful dwelling. This aligns with Heidegger’s notion of Dwelling (Heidegger, 1971), positioning architecture beyond form and function as a vessel for existential experience.

From a practical perspective, the findings can guide architects, urban designers, and planners toward a more meaningful and human-oriented design approach. The identified categories, such as Identity and Meaning, Historical Narrative and Heritage, and Lived Experience, provide conceptual tools that move design beyond mere functionality toward the creation of spaces rich in cultural, emotional, and social depth. For instance, in urban design, attention to collective and historical narratives can revive a sense of belonging and collective memory. In museum design, spatial sequences, movement paths, lighting, and materiality can serve as narrative devices. In public spaces, understanding users’ lived needs, spatial flexibility, and sensory-social experiences can foster authentic dwelling. The conceptual framework proposed in this paper thus serves as both an analytical and design tool, enabling architects to consciously use space to express identity, reflect heritage, and enrich lived experience—ultimately elevating architecture from the physical to the existential and narrative level.

In the context of contemporary Iranian architecture, there exists strong potential for the development and localization of narrative design. Examples such as Azadi Tower, City Theater, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Tabiat Bridge, and Valiasr Mosque present multilayered narratives of identity, community, ritual, and Iranian aesthetics through their forms, spatial sequences, and urban contexts. Future research is therefore encouraged to test this conceptual framework within Iranian contemporary architectural practice, exploring the interrelation of narrative, lived experience, and cultural context more operationally.

However, this study also has limitations. Its focus on publications from 2000–2025 and reliance on specific databases may have excluded relevant works. Moreover, the dependence on Heideggerian phenomenology might have restricted other theoretical perspectives. Future research should examine real case studies of narrative architecture across diverse regions to validate these

findings, and employ mixed-method approaches—combining meta-synthesis with field analysis—to gain deeper insights into practical applications.

Overall, this research offers a coherent and multidimensional framework that provides a new understanding of narrative architecture as an approach for creating meaningful spaces that enrich human experience. The findings not only contribute to architectural theory but also serve as a guide for designing spaces that reflect humans as beings engaged with the world, history, and society. By confirming and expanding previous scholarship, this study demonstrates that narrative architecture can act as a bridge between past and present, individual and community, and form and meaning, thus enhancing quality of life and reinforcing identity and belonging.

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