



CULTURAL SPACE AND URBAN SEMIOTICS OF TURKISTAN CITY: SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF URBANISATION

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Abstract. Turkistan occupies a unique position within Kazakhstan and the wider Turkic world as a centre of spiritual heritage, historical memory, and contemporary urban development. Despite growing scholarly attention to tourism, heritage management, and urban growth, limited research has examined how cultural symbols contribute to the construction of urban identity and meaning. This study investigates the semiotic role of cultural symbols in Turkistan's urban transformation.

An interdisciplinary qualitative approach combining urban semiotics, discourse analysis, and visual analysis was employed. The study examined official policy documents, development strategies, tourism materials, architectural projects, visual representations, and urban design elements produced between 2018 and 2025. The analysis was guided by Lotman's concept of the semiosphere and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital. The findings identify three interconnected symbolic dimensions within Turkistan's urban landscape: Sacred Centres, Modern Signifiers, and Spatial Narratives. The Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi functions as the city's primary symbolic anchor, while contemporary projects and urban design elements integrate narratives of spirituality, cultural continuity, heritage, and modernisation. Together, these dimensions create a coherent symbolic environment that shapes perceptions of identity and urban development. The study contributes to research on urban semiotics and heritage-based urbanisation by demonstrating how cultural symbols actively participate in the construction of contemporary urban identity.

Keywords: Turkistan; urban semiotics; cultural heritage; urbanisation; symbolic capital; identity construction; post-Soviet cities.

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ТҮРКІСТАН ҚАЛАСЫНЫҢ МӘДЕНИ КЕҢІСТІГІ МЕН ҚАЛАЛЫҚ СЕМИОТИКАСЫ: УРБАНДАЛУ КОНТЕКСТІНДЕГІ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК-МӘДЕНИ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ

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КУЛЬТУРНОЕ ПРОСТРАНСТВО И ГОРОДСКАЯ СЕМИОТИКА ТУРКЕСТАНА: СОЦИАЛЬНО-КУЛЬТУРНАЯ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ В КОНТЕКСТЕ УРБАНИЗАЦИИ

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Аңдатпа. Түркістан Қазақстан мен жалпы түркі әлемінде рухани мұраның, тарихи жадтың және заманауи қалалық дамудың орталығы ретінде ерекше орын алады. Туризм, мәдени мұраны басқару және қалалардың өсуі мәселелеріне ғылыми қызығушылықтың артуына қарамастан, мәдени символдардың қалалық бірегейлік пен мағына қалыптастырудағы рөлін зерттеген еңбектер аз. Бұл зерттеу Түркістанның урбандалу үдерісіндегі мәдени символдардың семиотикалық рөлін қарастырады.

Зерттеуде қалалық семиотика, дискурстық талдау және визуалды талдауды біріктіретін пәнаралық сапалық әдіс қолданылды. 2018–2025 жылдар аралығында дайындалған ресми саяси құжаттар, даму стратегиялары, туристік материалдар, сәулеттік жобалар, визуалды материалдар және қалалық дизайн элементтері талданды. Талдау Ю. Лотманның семиосфера тұжырымдамасы мен П. Бурдьенің символдық капитал теориясына негізделді.

Зерттеу нәтижелері Түркістанның қалалық кеңістігіндегі өзара байланысты үш символдық өлшемді анықтады: «қасиетті орталықтар», «заманауи таңбалаушылар» және «кеңістіктік нарративтер». Қожа Ахмет Ясауи кесенесі қаланың негізгі символдық өзегі ретінде қызмет етеді, ал заманауи жобалар мен қалалық дизайн элементтері руханият, мәдени сабақтастық, мұра және жаңғыру туралы нарративтерді біріктіреді. Бұл өлшемдер біртұтас символдық орта қалыптастырып, қалалық бірегейлік пен даму туралы түсініктерге ықпал етеді. Зерттеу мәдени символдардың қазіргі қалалық бірегейлікті қалыптастырудағы белсенді рөлін көрсету арқылы қалалық семиотика мен мұраға негізделген урбандалу саласындағы зерттеулерге үлес қосады.

Түйін сөздер: Түркістан; қалалық семиотика; мәдени мұра; урбандалу; символдық капитал; бірегейлікті қалыптастыру; посткеңестік қалалар.

Аннотация. Туркестан занимает особое место в Казахстане и более широком тюркском мире как центр духовного наследия, исторической памяти и современного городского развития. Несмотря на растущий научный интерес к туризму, управлению культурным наследием и городскому росту, исследования роли культурных символов в формировании городской идентичности и смыслов остаются ограниченными. В данной статье рассматривается семиотическая роль культурных символов в процессе урбанистической трансформации Туркестана.

В исследовании использован междисциплинарный качественный подход, объединяющий городскую семиотику, дискурс-анализ и визуальный анализ. Были изучены официальные нормативные документы, стратегии развития, туристические материалы, архитектурные проекты, визуальные репрезентации и элементы городского дизайна, созданные в период с 2018 по 2025 гг. Анализ основывался на концепции семиосферы Ю. Лотмана и теории символического капитала П. Бурдьё.

Результаты позволили выделить три взаимосвязанных символических измерения городского пространства Туркестана: «священные центры», «современные означающие» и «пространственные нарративы». Мавзолей Ходжи Ахмеда Ясави выступает основным символическим ядром города, тогда как современные проекты и элементы городского дизайна интегрируют нарративы духовности, культурной преемственности, наследия и модернизации. В совокупности эти измерения формируют целостную символическую среду, влияющую на восприятие городской идентичности и развития. Исследование вносит вклад в развитие городской семиотики и изучение урбанизации, основанной на культурном наследии, демонстрируя, что культурные символы активно участвуют в конструировании современной городской идентичности.

Ключевые слова: Туркестан; городская семиотика; культурное наследие; урбанизация; символический капитал; конструирование идентичности; постсоветские города.

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Introduction

Turkistan, located in southern Kazakhstan, is not only an ancient city; it is a symbolic and spiritual centre deeply embedded in the cultural memory of the Kazakh people. With a population of approximately 300,000, the city is home to the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yassawi, which is included in UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage List (UNESCO, 2025). This has made Turkistan a major pilgrimage site and an important focal point of Turkic unity (Maldybek et al., 2025).

In recent years, the urban landscape of Turkistan has undergone rapid transformation. The city's renewal is significant not only architecturally but also ideologically: in 2025, the Government of Kazakhstan granted Turkistan the status of "the country's spiritual, historical-cultural, and tourist centre and an architectural monument" (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025). This legislative step formally confirms what has long been observed — Turkistan's role as a national and transnational symbol that brings together statehood, historical continuity, and religious memory.

Beyond its significance within Kazakhstan, Turkistan occupies a prominent position in the cultural and spiritual geography of the wider Turkic world. For centuries, the city has been associated with the legacy of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, whose teachings played a major role in the spread of Sufism and Islamic culture among Turkic-speaking communities across Central Asia (Sala, 2018). The Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi continues to attract pilgrims and visitors from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Türkiye, reinforcing Turkistan's role as a transnational centre of spiritual heritage and cultural memory (Erdogan, 2024a). In recognition of its historical and cultural importance, Turkistan was designated the Cultural Capital of the Turkic World by the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) in 2017. In 2021, Turkistan was recognised as the Spiritual Capital of the Turkic World during the summit of the Organization of Turkic States, further reinforcing its symbolic role as a centre of shared historical memory, religious heritage, and cultural cooperation among Turkic-speaking societies (Erdogan, 2024b).

The contemporary significance of Turkistan extends beyond heritage preservation and pilgrimage tourism. Following Kazakhstan's independence, considerable efforts were undertaken to restore the city's historical prominence and strengthen its role as a centre of education, culture, and international cooperation. One of the most important initiatives was the establishment of the Khoja Ahmed Yasawi International Kazakh-Turkish University, which became an important educational and cultural institution promoting cooperation among Turkic-speaking countries and strengthening Turkistan's role as a regional centre of knowledge and intercultural exchange (Ahmet Yesevi University, n.d.). Together with large-scale urban development projects, investments in tourism infrastructure, and the administrative elevation of Turkistan as the regional centre of Turkistan Region, these initiatives have transformed the city into a unique space where sacred heritage, state policy, cultural diplomacy, and contemporary urbanisation converge.

Although existing studies have examined heritage tourism, city branding, and urban development in Turkistan (Issakov et al., 2023; Omarkozhayeva et al., 2023; Nakhipekova et al., 2024), relatively little attention has been paid to the semiotic mechanisms through which cultural symbols operate within the urban environment. Most existing research focuses on tourism development, heritage management, economic growth, or regional branding, while the relationship between sacred heritage, contemporary urban planning, and symbolic meaning-making remains insufficiently explored. In particular, there is a lack of research examining how architectural forms, public spaces,

monuments, visual markers, and official narratives function together as an integrated symbolic system that shapes perceptions of spirituality, authenticity, and modernity.

The process of urbanisation in Turkistan presents a distinctive paradox: how can a city simultaneously embrace large-scale contemporary development projects while preserving and reinforcing its medieval heritage and spiritual significance? Modern infrastructure rises alongside sacred monuments, historical sites are incorporated into tourism initiatives, and new urban spaces are designed to reflect both cultural continuity and contemporary aspirations. Consequently, urban transformation in Turkistan cannot be understood solely as a material, economic, or administrative process; it must also be examined as a symbolic process through which meanings are produced, communicated, and legitimised.

To address this gap, the present study examines the semiotics of cultural symbols in Turkistan's urban transformation. Drawing upon urban semiotics, discourse analysis, and visual analysis, the study investigates how sacred heritage, architectural forms, public spaces, urban development projects, and official narratives contribute to the construction of symbolic meanings. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which cultural symbols are mobilised to create narratives of identity, spirituality, historical continuity, and modernisation. The article argues that Turkistan's contemporary development represents not only a process of physical urban growth but also a symbolic project in which cultural heritage actively participates in shaping the city's identity, prestige, and socio-cultural significance.

As one of Kazakhstan's most significant historical and spiritual centres, Turkistan provides a valuable case for examining how cultural symbols are mobilised within urban development strategies to construct narratives of identity, heritage, and modernity. The case of Turkistan is particularly relevant because it combines sacred heritage, large-scale state-supported urban development, and transnational cultural significance within a single urban space.

This study has three primary objectives:

1. To identify and analyse the key cultural symbols in Turkistan's urban landscape, including monuments, architectural forms, and spatial arrangements.
2. To examine how these symbols are mobilised in contemporary urbanisation projects to produce narratives of identity, spirituality, and modernity.
3. To evaluate the interaction between heritage preservation, tourism branding, and urban development, exploring how symbolic interventions influence public perception and the socio-cultural meaning of the city.

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. Which cultural symbols in Turkistan's urban landscape are most prominently highlighted in urban development and heritage preservation initiatives?
2. How do these symbols function semiotically to construct narratives of identity, spirituality, and modernity in the city?
3. In what ways do contemporary urbanisation projects, including tourism branding and new infrastructure, interact with sacred heritage, and how does this affect public perception and meaning-making?

Materials and Methods

To investigate the semiotic construction of spiritual and cultural meanings in Turkistan's urbanisation, this study employs an interdisciplinary qualitative approach combining urban semiotics, discourse analysis, and visual culture studies. The research treats the city as a symbolic text in which architecture, monuments, public spaces, visual markers, and official narratives function as interconnected systems of signs. The methodological framework is grounded in Lotman's (1990) concept of the "semiosphere" and Bourdieu's (1984) theory of symbolic capital, which together provide a basis for examining how cultural meanings are produced, communicated, and legitimised within urban space.

Data Collection and Selection Criteria

The empirical material was collected through the analysis of textual and visual sources related to the recent transformation of Turkistan. The corpus included official urban development plans and policy documents, legislation concerning the city's special status and cultural heritage, tourism and branding materials, architectural projects, the city's Design Code, and visual representations of the urban landscape. Particular attention was given

to materials produced between 2018 and 2025, corresponding to the period following Turkistan's designation as the administrative centre of Turkistan Region and the subsequent acceleration of urban development initiatives.

The selection of empirical materials was guided by three criteria:

Symbolic prominence within the urban landscape;

Relevance to official narratives of spirituality, cultural heritage, and national identity;

Visibility within contemporary urban development and tourism initiatives.

Based on these criteria, the study focused on the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, the Karavansaray complex, heritage-oriented public spaces, urban signage, city-name installations, directional markers, and official development narratives that contribute to the construction of Turkistan's image as a spiritual, historical, and cultural centre. The combination of textual and visual materials enabled the study to examine both the symbolic narratives promoted through official discourse and their manifestation within the physical urban environment.

Visual and Semiotic Analysis

The visual and semiotic analysis was conducted in three stages. First, key symbolic objects and urban elements were identified within the selected materials. These included heritage sites, architectural forms, public monuments, decorative inscriptions, pedestrian routes, visual markers, and signage systems. Second, these elements were categorised according to their dominant symbolic functions. Drawing upon principles of urban semiotics proposed by Gottdiener and Lagopoulos (1986), the identified elements were organised into three analytical categories:

Sacred Centres — heritage sites and religious landmarks that function as primary symbolic anchors, particularly the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi;

Modern Signifiers — contemporary urban projects that combine traditional Turkic motifs with modern architectural and planning practices, including the Karavansaray complex and Design Code-related visual elements;

Spatial Narratives — street layouts, public spaces, pedestrian routes, monuments, inscriptions, and directional markers that structure visitors' experiences of heritage, spirituality, and urban identity.

Third, these categories were interpreted through Lotman's concept of the semiosphere and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital. This made it possible to examine how individual urban signs gain meaning through their relationship to the wider symbolic environment of the city. To enhance analytical consistency, the identified categories were examined across multiple types of material, including visual data, planning documents, tourism narratives, and official policy discourse. This process enabled the identification of recurring symbolic patterns and facilitated comparison between official discourse, visual representations, and material urban forms.

Discourse Analysis

The discourse analysis focused on official policy documents, tourism promotion materials, urban development strategies, and public narratives concerning Turkistan's transformation. Particular attention was paid to recurring concepts and representations associated with "spiritual capital," "heritage," "Turkic identity," "modernisation," "urban development," "cultural continuity," and "tourism."

The analysis examined how these discourses construct Turkistan's image as a spiritual, historical, and cultural centre and how they contribute to the legitimisation of contemporary urbanisation projects. By comparing textual narratives with visual and spatial representations, the study identified the relationship between symbolic discourse and material urban transformation. This approach allowed the research to examine not only what meanings are attached to Turkistan's urban development, but also how those meanings are visually and discursively produced.

Theoretical Interpretation

The findings were interpreted within the broader literature on post-Soviet urban transformation, heritage-based city branding, and symbolic identity construction in Central Asia. Following Nas (1993), particular attention was paid to the ways in which symbolic branding, heritage preservation, and urban modernisation interact to produce distinctive forms of urban identity and socio-cultural meaning. This interpretive framework made it possible to analyse how sacred heritage, urban planning, public space, and symbolic communication interact to construct narratives of identity, spirituality, and modernity within the contemporary city. The three analytical categories (Sacred

Centres, Modern Signifiers, and Spatial Narratives) were used to address the research questions concerning the identification of cultural symbols, their semiotic functions, and their role within contemporary urban development.

Results

Sacred Centres

The analysis identified the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi as the principal sacred centre within Turkistan's symbolic landscape. Across official development documents, tourism materials, and visual representations, the mausoleum consistently occupies a central position in narratives concerning the city's identity, historical continuity, and spiritual significance. This prominence demonstrates its role not merely as a historical monument but as the primary symbolic anchor around which contemporary urban development is organised.

The analysis indicates that the mausoleum performs several interconnected symbolic functions. First, it operates as a religious landmark associated with pilgrimage traditions and the spiritual legacy of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. Second, it serves as a historical symbol connected with the political development of the Kazakh Khanate, including its association with the enthronement ceremonies of Kazakh rulers (Baltabayeva et al., 2019; Turgunova & Aubaikirova, 2025). Third, it functions as a contemporary cultural symbol used in official and tourism-related narratives that position Turkistan as a national and transnational centre of spiritual heritage. This symbolic centrality is reinforced by the spatial organisation of the city, where major tourism, cultural, and heritage narratives converge around the mausoleum.

The recurring representation of the mausoleum in planning documents, tourism promotion materials, and urban branding initiatives suggests that sacred heritage occupies a central role in the symbolic construction of the city. Historical heritage is therefore not presented as a separate or isolated component of urban life. Rather, it functions as the foundation upon which contemporary narratives of identity, legitimacy, and development are constructed. The visual prominence of the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi within the urban landscape further reinforces its role as the city's primary symbolic anchor (see Illustration 1). Its architectural dominance and frequent representation in official and tourism-related materials contribute to the construction of Turkistan's image as a spiritual and historical centre.

Figure 1

The Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, Turkistan, Kazakhstan. Photographed by Petar Milošević (2013)



Modern Signifiers

The second category of analysis focused on contemporary urban projects that combine modern infrastructure with references to cultural heritage. Among the analysed materials, the Karavansaray complex emerged as the most visible example of this process. Although developed as a contemporary tourism and commercial project, its architecture, visual design, and promotional narratives draw upon historical imagery associated with the Silk Road,

Turkic cultural traditions, and the idea of Turkistan as a heritage-based destination (Nakhipekova et al., 2024; Turgunova & Aubakirova, 2025).

The analysis revealed that contemporary development projects in Turkistan are rarely presented solely in terms of economic growth or infrastructure expansion. Instead, official discourse consistently connects modernisation with themes of historical continuity, cultural preservation, spiritual development, and tourism branding. Concepts such as “spiritual capital”, “heritage”, “cultural centre”, “Turkic identity”, and “modernisation” appear alongside descriptions of urban development initiatives in policy documents and development strategies (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025; Pravitel’s tvo Respubliki Kazahstan, 2018). These concepts appeared repeatedly across policy documents, development strategies, and tourism promotion materials, suggesting a consistent effort to frame urban development through cultural and symbolic narratives. The repeated use of this vocabulary suggests that official discourse frames urban transformation not simply as economic development but as a process of cultural revitalisation and symbolic nation-building.

Particular significance was observed in the implementation of the city’s Design Code, which regulates architectural appearance, visual consistency, signage, and public-space aesthetics. The analysed materials demonstrate that urban design is intentionally used to reinforce a coherent visual identity grounded in references to local heritage and Turkic cultural traditions. Traditional decorative motifs, culturally recognisable forms, and references to local heritage are incorporated into contemporary planning practices and urban design regulations (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025). As a result, urban planning functions not only as a technical process but also as a mechanism for communicating symbolic meanings through the built environment.

Within the Karavansaray complex, the Craftsmen’s Center provides a particularly clear example of this process. By combining contemporary tourism functions with representations of traditional crafts and cultural practices, it visually communicates continuity between historical heritage and present-day urban development.

The Karavansaray complex exemplifies this process of symbolic modernisation through heritage-oriented architectural design. Although contemporary in function, its visual language incorporates references to Turkic history, Silk Road traditions, and regional cultural identity, allowing modern development to be presented as a continuation rather than a replacement of historical heritage.

These findings suggest that modern urban projects in Turkistan operate simultaneously as functional infrastructure and symbolic instruments through which narratives of modernisation, cultural continuity, and heritage-based identity are communicated.

Spatial Narratives

The analysis of visual materials identified several recurring forms of symbolic communication embedded within public space. Four dominant categories were observed: sacred site designations, historical-themed installations, illuminated identity inscriptions, and heritage-oriented directional signage.

Sacred site designations were observed throughout central urban areas in the form of large-scale visual references to Turkistan and its principal heritage locations. City-name installations displaying “Түркістан” and “Turkistan” are positioned in parks, pedestrian zones, and public spaces. These markers ensure the continuous visibility of the city’s cultural and spiritual identity within everyday urban life. They function not only as decorative elements but also as symbolic reminders of Turkistan’s status as a spiritual, historical, and cultural centre.

Historical-themed installations are particularly visible within the Karavansaray complex and adjacent public spaces, which have been intentionally developed as heritage-oriented tourism environments (Turgunova & Aubakirova, 2025). Decorative panels, inscriptions, and architectural elements refer to Turkic history, the Silk Road, and regional cultural traditions. These visual components create symbolic links between historical memory and contemporary urban development, supporting findings regarding heritage-based identity construction in Turkistan (Nakhipekova et al., 2024). They also help transform public space into a curated environment where visitors encounter selected narratives of heritage and identity.

Illuminated identity inscriptions, including city-name installations and tourism-oriented photo zones such as “I Love Turkistan”, constitute another recurring symbolic feature of the urban landscape. Their prominence within public space contributes to the visual branding of the city and reinforces its recognition as a distinctive cultural and

spiritual destination. These inscriptions operate as easily recognisable markers of place identity and support the transformation of Turkistan into a visually legible tourism and heritage city.

Examples of city-name installations, public inscriptions, and Design Code-related visual elements are presented in Illustration 3. These visual markers contribute to the continuous communication of identity narratives and strengthen the symbolic visibility of heritage within everyday urban space.

Figure 2

City-name installation and Design Code-related visual elements contributing to urban identity construction in Turkistan. Photo source: Otyrar.kz (2025)



Directional signage leading to heritage sites, museums, religious landmarks, and public cultural spaces performs a dual function. On the practical level, it guides visitors through the city. On the symbolic level, it organises movement through a structured cultural landscape in which sacred and historical sites occupy privileged positions. In this sense, signage does not merely provide orientation; it participates in the production of spatial narratives by directing attention toward selected places of memory, spirituality, and heritage.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Sacred Centres, Modern Signifiers, and Spatial Narratives do not operate independently. Rather, they form an interconnected symbolic system through which Turkistan's spiritual status, historical heritage, and contemporary urban identity are simultaneously communicated and reinforced.

Discussion

Cultural Heritage and Urban Modernisation in Turkistan

The analysis shows that cultural heritage occupies a central position in the contemporary urban transformation of Turkistan. The analysis identified the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi as the principal symbolic anchor around which urban identity, tourism development, and official narratives are organised. Rather than functioning solely as a historical monument, the mausoleum operates as a multi-layered cultural symbol connecting religious heritage, political history, and contemporary nation-building processes. This finding supports previous research highlighting the historical and spiritual significance of the mausoleum within Kazakhstan and the wider Turkic world (Baltabayeva et al., 2019; Turgunova & Aubakirova, 2025).

The results further demonstrate that sacred heritage is not treated as an isolated historical resource. Instead, heritage functions as the foundation upon which contemporary development initiatives are legitimised and communicated. Official policy documents, tourism narratives, and urban development strategies consistently position Turkistan as a spiritual, historical, and cultural centre (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025; Pravitel'stvo Respubliki Kazahstan, 2018). This suggests that urbanisation in Turkistan is simultaneously a material and symbolic process in which physical development is closely connected with the construction of cultural meaning.

The integration of heritage references into contemporary urban projects indicates that modernisation in Turkistan is not presented as a break from the past. Instead, development is framed as a continuation of historical and cultural traditions, allowing new infrastructure to acquire symbolic legitimacy through its association with heritage. The Karavansaray complex and related development initiatives demonstrate how contemporary infrastructure is intentionally embedded within narratives of Silk Road heritage, Turkic cultural traditions, and spiritual capital. Rather than replacing historical heritage, these projects symbolically extend and reinterpret it within a modern urban context (Ashworth et al., 2007; Richards, 2018). However, the case of Turkistan differs from purely tourism-oriented models because sacred heritage remains central to the city's symbolic identity rather than functioning solely as a marketing resource.

Urban Semiotics and Symbolic Capital

The findings provide empirical support for Lotman's (1990) concept of the semiosphere. The interaction between the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (Sacred Centre), the Karavansaray complex (Modern Signifier), and city-name installations and directional signage (Spatial Narratives) demonstrates how individual urban elements derive meaning through their relationship to a wider symbolic environment. This finding demonstrates that symbolic meaning in urban environments is relational rather than intrinsic. Individual urban objects derive significance not solely from their physical characteristics but from their interaction with other symbolic elements within the wider urban landscape. The Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, the Karavansaray complex, public inscriptions, city-name installations, and directional signage collectively contribute to a coherent symbolic narrative that links spirituality, cultural continuity, and modernisation.

This interpretation is consistent with urban semiotic approaches that conceptualise cities as communicative systems composed of interacting signs and symbols (Gottdiener & Lagopoulos, 1986). The results indicate that Turkistan functions as a symbolic text in which architecture, public space, and visual communication mechanisms work together to reinforce specific narratives concerning heritage, identity, and development. In this respect, urban space performs a communicative function that extends beyond practical or aesthetic considerations.

The findings also support Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic capital. The Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi functions as a culturally legitimised symbol that provides authority, prestige, and authenticity to contemporary urban development projects. Through its association with spiritual heritage and historical continuity, the mausoleum contributes symbolic value that can be mobilised within tourism promotion, city branding, and development discourse. Consequently, heritage becomes a form of symbolic capital that enhances the legitimacy of both public policy and urban transformation initiatives.

Sacred Heritage, Tourism, and Identity Construction

The findings suggest that tourism in Turkistan cannot be understood solely through economic indicators or visitor statistics. While previous studies have emphasised the contribution of sacred heritage to tourism development and regional economic growth (Issakov et al., 2023; Omarkozhayeva et al., 2023), the present study demonstrates that heritage sites also perform important symbolic functions within the urban environment.

The Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi serves not only as a tourism attraction but also as a central mechanism through which narratives of spirituality, authenticity, and cultural continuity are communicated. Public spaces, heritage routes, visual markers, and tourism-oriented installations reinforce these narratives by directing attention towards selected representations of history and identity. As a result, tourism infrastructure becomes integrated into a broader symbolic system that contributes to the construction of place identity.

This observation is consistent with heritage studies emphasising that heritage is actively constructed, interpreted, and communicated through contemporary cultural and political processes (Smith, 2006). In Turkistan, heritage is not simply preserved but continuously reinterpreted through urban development, tourism promotion, and symbolic communication strategies. The findings therefore demonstrate how sacred heritage can simultaneously support economic development, cultural preservation, and identity construction.

Urban Identity and Symbolic Communication in Post-Soviet Contexts

The case of Turkistan contributes to broader discussions concerning urban identity formation in post-Soviet cities. Previous research has shown that architecture, heritage, and symbolic landscapes frequently play important roles in redefining national identities following political transformation (Koch, 2013; Young & Light, 2001). The findings of this study support these observations by demonstrating how heritage symbols are incorporated into contemporary urban development strategies to communicate narratives of cultural continuity and national significance.

Turkistan's development strategy places sacred heritage at the centre of urban identity construction, distinguishing it from many post-Soviet urban branding projects that focus primarily on modernity and economic competitiveness. The city's symbolic landscape combines religious heritage, historical memory, cultural diplomacy, tourism development, and contemporary infrastructure within a unified narrative framework (Nakhipbekova et al., 2024; Turgunova & Aubakirova, 2025). This integration enables Turkistan to present itself simultaneously as a spiritual centre, cultural destination, regional capital, and modern city.

The findings, therefore, suggest that Turkistan represents a distinctive model of heritage-based urbanisation. Unlike many heritage cities where historical monuments function primarily as tourism assets, Turkistan combines religious significance, national historical memory, and contemporary state-supported urban development within a single symbolic framework. The city's designation as the Spiritual Capital of the Turkic World and its role as a centre of pilgrimage provide symbolic resources that extend beyond local or national identity. As a result, urban development projects in Turkistan are embedded within broader narratives of Turkic cultural continuity, spiritual heritage, and regional cooperation (Erdogan, 2024a; Erdogan, 2024b; TURKSOY, 2017).

Implications and Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to the literature on urban semiotics, heritage studies, and post-Soviet urban transformation by providing an empirical analysis of how sacred heritage, contemporary urban development, and symbolic communication interact within a rapidly transforming heritage city. The findings show that cultural symbols are not merely reflections of identity but active instruments through which meanings, values, and narratives are produced and communicated.

More specifically, the study demonstrates that Turkistan's urban transformation is characterised by the interaction of three interconnected symbolic dimensions: Sacred Centres, Modern Signifiers, and Spatial Narratives. Together, these dimensions create a symbolic environment through which spirituality, cultural continuity, historical legitimacy, and modernisation are simultaneously communicated. Sacred heritage, contemporary urban projects, and symbolic communication mechanisms collectively shape the production of urban identity, cultural continuity, and spiritual meaning. In doing so, the study contributes a semiotic perspective to existing research on heritage-based urban development and post-Soviet urban transformation. By integrating visual analysis, discourse analysis, and urban semiotics, the study also demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary approaches for examining the symbolic dimensions of urban change.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study employs a qualitative research design based primarily on the analysis of official policy documents, urban development strategies, tourism materials, and visual representations of Turkistan. Consequently, the findings reflect the symbolic narratives promoted through institutional and public sources and may not fully capture the perceptions of residents, visitors, or other stakeholders.

Second, the study focuses on a single case study. While Turkistan provides a valuable example of heritage-based urban transformation, the findings cannot be automatically generalised to other cities without consideration of their historical, cultural, and political contexts.

Third, the analysis concentrates on symbolic representations within the urban environment rather than measuring their social impact empirically. Future research could complement the present study through interviews, surveys, ethnographic observation, or comparative analyses involving other heritage cities in Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a useful framework for examining the relationship between cultural symbols, heritage, and urban transformation through a semiotic perspective.

Conclusion

This study examined the semiotic role of cultural symbols in the urban transformation of Turkistan, focusing on the relationship between sacred heritage, contemporary urban development, and symbolic communication. Using an interdisciplinary framework combining urban semiotics, discourse analysis, and visual analysis, the research explored how cultural symbols are mobilised within the city's evolving urban landscape. The material reveals that urbanisation in Turkistan cannot be understood solely as a process of physical development or economic modernisation; it also represents a symbolic process through which meanings of spirituality, cultural continuity, identity, and modernity are produced, communicated, and legitimised.

The analysis identified three interconnected symbolic dimensions that structure Turkistan's contemporary urban environment: Sacred Centres, Modern Signifiers, and Spatial Narratives. The Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi emerged as the principal symbolic anchor around which narratives of spirituality, historical continuity, and cultural identity are organised. Contemporary urban projects, particularly the Karavansaray complex and Design Code-related initiatives, function as Modern Signifiers that integrate heritage references into contemporary urban development. Meanwhile, public inscriptions, city-name installations, heritage routes, and directional signage contribute to the formation of Spatial Narratives that reinforce the city's symbolic identity within everyday urban space.

The findings further demonstrate that sacred heritage functions not merely as a preserved historical resource but as an active component of contemporary urban transformation. Through official discourse, urban planning strategies, tourism development, and symbolic communication mechanisms, heritage contributes to the construction of narratives concerning national identity, cultural continuity, spiritual significance, and urban modernisation. In this respect, Turkistan represents a distinctive model of heritage-based urbanisation in which sacred heritage, contemporary development, and symbolic communication operate as mutually reinforcing processes.

The practical significance of the study lies in its potential application to urban planning, heritage management, tourism development, and city-branding initiatives. The findings demonstrate how cultural symbols can be incorporated into contemporary urban development while preserving historical authenticity and strengthening local identity. The analytical framework proposed in this study may assist policymakers, urban planners, and cultural institutions in designing urban environments that balance heritage preservation with modernisation objectives.

The study contributes to existing research on heritage-based urban development, urban semiotics, and post-Soviet urban transformation by demonstrating how cultural symbols function as active instruments in the construction of urban meaning. By conceptualising Turkistan as an interconnected symbolic system composed of Sacred Centres, Modern Signifiers, and Spatial Narratives, the research highlights the importance of examining urban transformation not only through material and economic perspectives but also through the symbolic processes that shape collective identity, cultural memory, and perceptions of place. The case of Turkistan illustrates how sacred heritage can remain central to contemporary urban development while simultaneously supporting modernisation, tourism, and the construction of a distinctive urban identity.

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Ongalbaikyzy R. – writing the article text, literature review, analysis of cultural transformations and symbolic spaces, text editing.

Dinasheva L.S. – conceptual guidance, interpretation of cultural symbols, analysis of urbanisation processes, supervision and text review.

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