


## Article

# The Creation of “Sacred Place” through the “Sense of Place” of the Daci’en Wooden Buddhist Temple, Xi’an, China

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**Abstract:** After the Industrial Revolution, new technologies and architectural forms gradually replaced China’s wooden construction system, which had lasted for thousands of years. The architectural narrative also turned a new page. As pieces of architectural and cultural heritage and as the residence of “gods”, wooden Buddhist temples carry the indelible imprints of history and religion and have become a healing place or spiritual home for people living in urban areas. In order to preserve the local cultural context and explore the creation of a spiritual “sacred place”, this study traces the spiritual and cultural value of Xi’an’s wooden Buddhist temple through ethnographic qualitative methods of text analysis, observation and interviews. The case study examines the metaphorical symbolism of the architecture’s “sense of place” and religion in terms of architectural structure and components, and the advantages of creating a “sacred place” are examined based on the characteristics of wooden materials. The results show that the design elements of wooden Buddhist temples connect cultural identity and collective memory, which are inseparable from religion, and because of the material properties of wood, they sublimate the sacred atmosphere of religion. Moreover, identifying the “sense of place” and the atmosphere of sacred spaces through the structure, components, and material characteristics of wooden temple architecture offers a new perspective that focuses on architectural emotions and creates a new topic of “sacred places”. Such temples have the potential to enhance human spiritual health and well-being.

**Keywords:** sense of place; sacred place; Buddhist temple; timber architecture; architectural heritage; spiritual healing



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## 1. Introduction

Buddhist temples provide an intriguing glimpse into ancient Chinese architectural culture and represent the precious historical heritage of contemporary Chinese timber-frame architecture [1]. From the perspective of historical development, architectural heritage silently conveys the natural factors and local context of a specific place. Disembedding phenomena, such as the homogenization of time and space and the abstraction of communication, reflect the hollowing out of social life [2]. With the accelerated urbanization in China over recent years, regional culture and historical memory are gradually disappearing. In today’s fast-paced urban life, people are defined by modern time and consumption, and the value of the individual’s inner self has been neglected. People’s souls are inevitably displaced. People’s search for the meaning of life and their awareness of “root-seeking” ultimately point to a yearning for spiritual pursuits and a desire to belong to a “sacred space”. Therefore, creating a “sense of place” and a “sacred place” in Buddhist temple architecture undoubtedly offers a spiritual antidote to modernization.

Religious architecture has tremendous cultural and architectural significance for various world civilizations [3]. The design of religious spaces in historical culture represents the narrative, cultural, and architectural context of a place [4]. Every work of religious architecture is a mixture of cultural elements, the spirituality of the people, and physical design. Physical space contributes to but limits a “sense of place” because it creates a focal

point for a “sense of place” [5]. Architectural heritage presents not only the physical return of the architecture but also, more importantly, the emotions, memories, and feelings created when the architecture is preserved [6]. Architecture is closely related to culture. Culture consists of concepts, symbols, and entities that influence the development of architectural systems from multiple perspectives, such as architectural materials, architectural technology, and architectural art [7]. Chinese Buddhist temple architecture represents the survival of the Chinese wooden architectural system. It retains the wooden architectural form and conveys China’s thousand-year “ritual” ideology, the philosophical thoughts of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism on the unity of humans and nature, the symbiosis with nature, and the national spirit of confidence and openness to foreign cultures [8]. From the perspective of the sacredness of architecture, van der Leeuw placed the sacred at the core of religious significance, emphasizing that the sacred represents a transcendent power that secular life does not possess [9]. The elements of water and light have original sacred significance in religious architecture [10]. Religious symbols, spatial proportions, and visual and perceptual elements have been mentioned in the literature. In the latest research, Daelemans emphasized that human spiritual perception is not only related to one sense, that space is not a simple two-dimensional figure, and that sacred space is not only defined by what the eyes see, leading to the topic of spatial synesthesia design [11]. Similarly, the character of wood contributes prominently to different aspects of the structure and the visual, tactile, olfactory, and auditory sensory qualities of Chinese Buddhist temples. Therefore, the spirit of the heritage of wooden Buddhist temples and the material characteristics of sacred atmosphere creation deserve careful examination, and the related cultural, metaphorical, and recognizable design elements are worth exploring. Because it is related to the preservation of national culture, the protection of the architectural heritage and harmonious spiritual and cultural life of society is essential.

Xi’an is an important birthplace of the Chinese nation. With the strong support of Buddhism from the ancient ruling class, Xi’an became an essential source of the spread of Buddhist culture in the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) and reached unprecedented prosperity in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–AD 907) [12]. These Buddhist temples have a special status in history and represent the historical memory of the city. Although some researchers have discussed the distribution and construction of Buddhist temples in China and the importance of Buddhist temple architecture in Xi’an from a macro perspective, few researchers have specifically discussed the design elements of Buddhist temple architectural components from the perspective of wooden materials and regional culture. Therefore, the main problem currently facing researchers is the need for more scientific and systematic methods to examine the cultural effectiveness of the wooden materials and building components of local Buddhist temple architecture in Xi’an to help preserve the historical context and create an environment for spiritual culture. This study takes Daci’en Temple in Xi’an as a case study and wooden materials as the main basis for an analysis of the characteristic symbols of the wooden architectural components and cultural metaphors and attempts to identify the cultural narrative of “sense of place”. In terms of the visual, tactile, olfactory, and auditory dimensions of the characteristics of wooden materials, this study explores the sacred atmosphere and cultural expression of wooden Buddhist temples that ultimately create a spiritual “sacred place”. Such “sacred places” can evoke people’s collective memory, local identity, national self-confidence, place attachment, and spiritual salvation.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Wooden Materials

Over the past few decades, numerous empirical studies have demonstrated that indoor environments with natural elements outdoors benefit human health and well-being [13]. Materials are the physical elements of architecture, and, to a large extent, they are inseparable from the “sense of place”. Materials and technologies represent an era, embodying time and historical background [14]. The return to materials is a noble tribute to the authenticity and cultural narrative of postmodernist architectural heritage. The meaning of

“place” is more related to indescribable memories, associations, smells, or other feelings. Materials have multiple functions, such as visual, tactile, auditory, and olfactory, which are critical components of the material experience [15]. Visual factors such as the material’s color, texture, and quality are the material’s natural expression. The visual factors formed by different construction methods and processing methods, as well as the material expression resulting from the subjective feelings that vary from person to person, contain a significant humanistic component [16]. Due to the influence of today’s concept of cultural inheritance, wood is usually no longer used as a structural material but rather as a material that allows architects to add a sense of history and culture to their buildings. As a representative traditional building material, wood is a strong symbol for expressing traditional space. There is more spiritual affinity and identity in creating traditional spaces [17]. China has thousands of years of wooden construction cultural history. The mortise and tenon frame structure reached maturity in the Tang Dynasty. From a contemporary perspective, prefabricated structures like building blocks can significantly shorten the construction period. Today, with the continuous innovation of new technologies, wood has regained importance due to human beings following the principles of sustainable development theory. The renewable nature and recyclability of wood represent one of the most effective measures to limit energy consumption and resource conversion [18]. The cycle of wood and soil is in line with the Chinese Feng Shui theory of the mutual generation and restraint of the five elements and the philosophical concept of the unity of nature and humans [19]. The long history of timber frame construction is an indelible aspect of the Chinese spirit and Chinese tradition. It has even become a symbol of the process of time and represents the continuity of society.

## 2.2. Sense of Place

As a topic, “sense of place” emerged in the 1960s, emphasizing the emotional connection generated by the interaction between people and places. A sense of place emphasizes the perception of a specific experience and the emotional awareness it conveys [20]. This topic is widely used in various fields such as environmental psychology, sociology, community psychology, human geography, cultural anthropology, gerontology, urban studies, architecture, and planning. Genius Loci’s book, *Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, is the first step towards a phenomenology of architectural research. He believes that only when people experience the meaning of place and environment can the originally featureless site become a real and specific “place” where human behavior occurs [21]. With the development of human society and lifestyle changes, architects, designers, and planners are paying increasing attention to the spiritual shaping of the environment. Some scholars have applied the “sense of place” theory to the field of religious architecture [22–24]. Mazumdar argued that while religion can imbue religious sites with symbolic meaning that differentiates them from ordinary physical environments, architectural design may have the same ability to cultivate place attachment, devotion, and spirituality in worshipers [25]. Religion is an evocative factor, connecting people to religious architecture through sacred acts. It plays an important role in people’s place attachment, which is reinforced by the architectural features of the place [26]. Scannell and Gifford’s research results revealed 13 categories of benefits of place attachment: memory, sense of belonging, relaxation, positive emotions, activity support, comfort and security, personal growth, freedom, entertainment, connection with nature, practical benefits, privacy, and aesthetics [27]. It can be inferred that the stronger the attachment of believers to religious architecture, the more significant the emotional healing effect of religion on people. Bahauddin emphasized the importance of the cultural attributes of sacred sites in his study, noting that St. Petersburg Church in Malacca is seen as a microcosm of the early settler Portuguese community, where the native spirit of the Portuguese is united in the realization of cultural identity and identity [28]. With regard to China, in “On Rural Construction”, Liang stressed the importance of “sense of place” in the rural construction of a human spiritual homeland [29]. Lian discussed the advantages of Xi’an’s cultural “gene” in his study,

“Regional Research on Contemporary Architecture in Xi’an” [30]. In a local context with strong historical factors and a sense of emotional belonging, collective unconsciousness and root-seeking effects are the psychological driving factors that stimulate personal experience.

### 2.3. Sacred Space and Buddhist Temples

The key to sacred architecture is the need to imbue the building with spirituality, transforming a simple space into a spiritual place [31]. Lois González argued that sacred spaces have symbolic meaning beyond their immediate physical form [32]. Qin and Song proposed that the experience of religious architectural space is emotionally and psychologically suggestive, and religion uses symbolic language to maintain connections with higher reality. In this particular space, people feel physically safe and undisturbed while engaging in deep prayer or meditation [33]. Religious architecture records the historical interaction between humans and their sacred environment. Architecture reveals and conceals social events and relationships in specific ways, forming a bridge for dialogue between people, cultures, and religions [34]. From a secular perspective, the spirituality inspired in sacred spaces has been used to heal the mind, body, and spirit [35]. In Egypt, the Sun is considered the eye of the creator of the universe. Daelemans discussed sacred spaces: “When the soft light and organic colour essence in the room will make people fall into mystery and contemplation, they will feel a spiritual healing, soothing and relaxing” [11]. Zheng also suggested that in religious architecture, sacred space is jointly shaped by color, light and shadow, material, content, natural elements, supporting furnishings, and so on, expressing a complete set of national cultural connotations [36]. Wu argued that materials enrich the visual experience through color and texture in sacred spaces [37]. The research on Chinese Buddhist temples mainly focuses on landscape environment, spatial layout, architectural forms of the era, distribution of Buddhist temples, decorative colors, and so on [12,18,38–40].

From a global perspective, every representative local religious building has its own unique architectural narrative. The Taj Mahal incorporates Islamic architectural ideas, but its structure also shows traces of Iranian, Indian, British, and Akbari architecture [41]. The Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok, Thailand, is considered the most sacred temple in that country. Its sanctity mainly comes from the enshrined Emerald Buddha, which serves as a medium to embody a powerful symbol of Buddhism and royal power [42]. The Sri Kamatchi Amman Temple in Penang is the only Vishwakarma community temple in Malaysia and a place where identity is formed [42]. Jigme Thinley emphasized that the architectural, cultural, and religious value of Bhutan’s ancient monasteries is a huge asset to the country, and these monasteries have sacred spiritual significance. Gamache raised the controversial topic of the contemporary Wat Rong Khun. It is undeniable that this temple attracts hundreds of tourists every day, but the exaggerated decoration and unrealistic plastic materials are strange and deformed for a temple. This postmodern simulated space that is divorced from cultural narratives is defined as a superficial consumerist virtual scene that is disconnected from the spirit [43].

From a global perspective, the topic of “sense of place” emerged in the 1960s and has gradually attracted attention in the field of religious architecture. However, the most obvious research conclusion regarding “sense of place” in religious architecture is the attachment to place generated in religious interactions, which is undeniable. The cultural attributes assigned to religious buildings have also begun to take shape in recent years and represent a gradually increasing research trend. However, the current research on Buddhist temple architecture in China remains within the scope of combining and summarizing the architectural heritage, and research on the “sense of place” and sacred perception of Buddhist temple architecture is still rare and has not formed a continuous topic. The cultural genes behind Chinese Buddhist temple architecture are precious assets that cannot be overlooked, and the related research is essential. Wooden materials and its cultural attributes have received widespread attention in the literature. Therefore, this study attempts to combine the theoretical frameworks of “sense of place” and “sacred space”. Taking Daci’en Temple in Xi’an as a case study,

this paper explores the cultural inheritance of wooden materials in Buddhist temple architecture and the strategies for creating a “sacred place” atmosphere. It emphasizes the sacredness and culture of religious architecture against the background of wooden materials. Such a “sacred space” not only nurtures place attachment but also realizes identity, including cultural identity, and evokes collective memory.

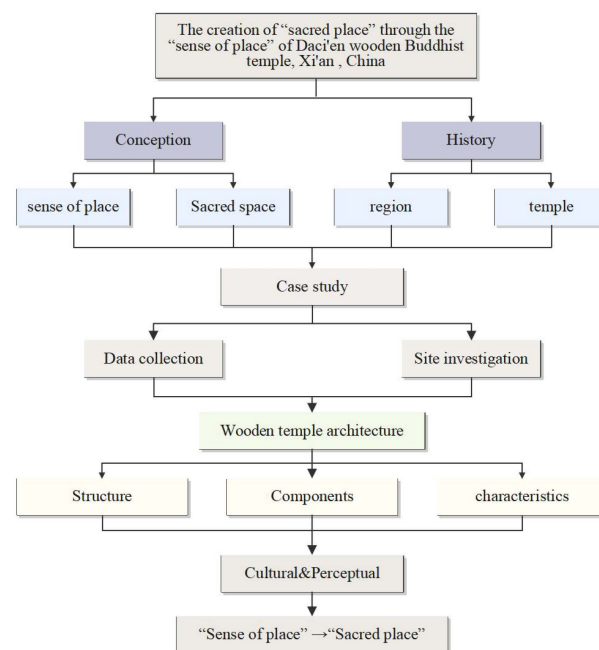
### 3. Research Methodology

This study used qualitative research methods, including literature collection, field-work, and data analysis, to create a relatively detailed description and analysis of the design. Based on literature research, the authors identified and classified the cultural characteristics of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in Chinese Buddhist temple architecture, as well as the characteristics of wooden materials. And conducted a long-term follow-up investigation of typical cases in Xi’an using an ethnographic methodology. Moreover, combining primary and secondary data, the design principles of wooden materials in relation to “sense of place” and “sacred place” are examined. Since the research is not limited to the physical form of the building, and the spiritual culture is more abstract, the authors of this study also conducted semi-structured interviews with experts, monks, and worshipers to identify regional cultures and screen the effectiveness of wood in terms of space culture and atmosphere. The main contributions of this study are as follows:

- Through exploring the cultural metaphors and characteristic symbols of wooden architectural structures and components, we show the inheritance of the historical context of architecture and the “sense of place” cultural narrative of architectural heritage and sacred symbols.
- From the perspective of the perceptual characteristics of wooden materials, we explore the wooden expression of Buddhist temples’ sacred atmosphere and culture at the visual, tactile, olfactory, and auditory levels.

The main goal of this research is to use scientific methods to investigate the authenticity of the wooden materials used in local Buddhist temple architecture in Xi’an with regard to the architectural “sense of place” culture and the advantages of the materials in creating a sacred atmosphere. This is intended to help preserve regional history and culture and create a “sacred place” for contemporary spiritual culture.

The research framework is shown in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1.** Research framework.



#### 4. Case Study

Buddhism originated in India and flourished in China. Of course, Buddhism is distributed very widely. In addition to India and China, there are also unique Buddhist traditions and cultural backgrounds in other places such as Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Japan, Europe, and the United States. Due to differences in region, culture, and history, they present unique characteristics in their belief practices, rituals, architectural styles, and so on. Representative architectural styles are shown in Figure 2. Traces of the sinicization of Buddhism can be clearly seen in the architecture. The reason why Buddhism was able to reach its peak development in China lies in the philosophical connotations of Buddhist culture and Chinese Confucian and Taoist culture, which are connected and complementary. Its architectural form has also been integrated into the system of Chinese official architecture since the time when Buddhism started to spread to China [44]. Obviously, Chinese Buddhism has a unique glorious history and has made a global cultural contribution. This indelible trace has formed a collective memory and determined the research value and irreplaceable uniqueness of its architectural cultural narrative.

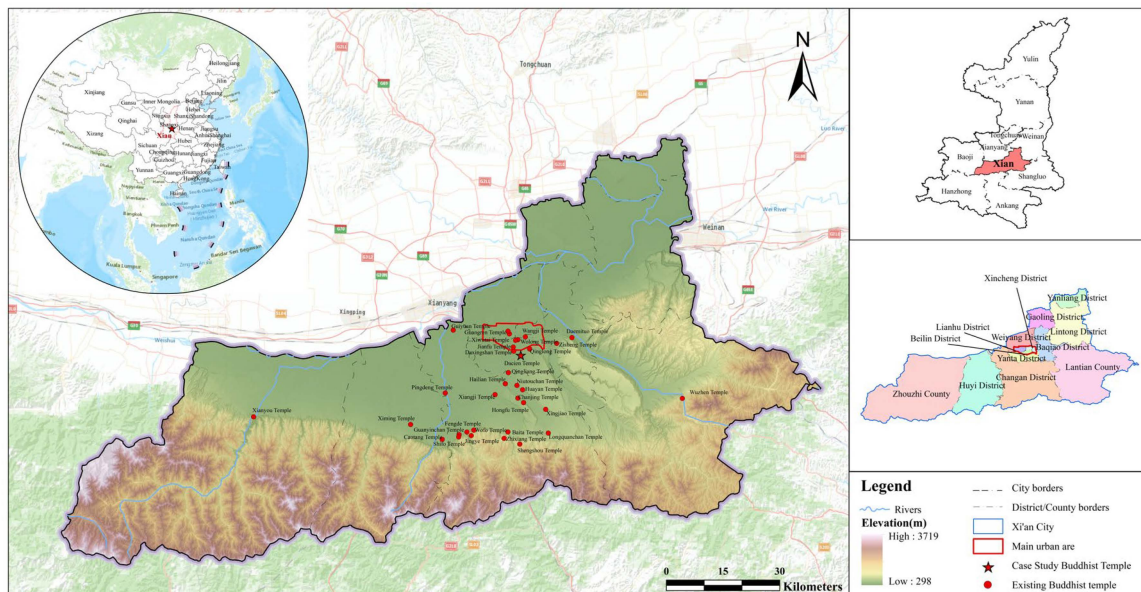


**Figure 2.** Representative Buddhist temples around the world: (1) Daci'en Temple, China; (2) Sanchi Pagoda, India; (3) Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Thailand; (4) Kiyomizu-dera, Japan; (5) Kagyu Samye Ling Monastery, Scotland; (6) Tooth Relic Temple, Sri Lanka.

This study focuses on Xi'an, the birthplace of Chinese Buddhism, where it has flourished. Daci'en Temple was selected as the case study object to identify the architectural narrative of its "sense of place" and sacred atmosphere. Xi'an has vital historical, cultural, and religious status. From a cultural perspective, this is because Xi'an is the ancient capital of 13 dynasties, from which the dust of history began to accumulate, stretching over a thousand years. The ancient capital with the most extensive history and the most dynasties in China, including the Zhou (1046 BC–771 BC), Qin (221 BC–206 BC), Han (206 BC–AD 8), and Tang (AD 618–AD 907) dynasties, Xi'an represents the mainstream of Chinese history and culture [45]. It was named a "Historical and Cultural City" by the State Council in 1982 [46]. From a religious perspective, Buddhism was initially introduced with the strong support of the ruling class. It was introduced in China during the Han Dynasty and reached its peak in the Tang Dynasty [12]. At the same time, Xi'an has become the translation center of Buddhist classics and the exchange center of global Buddhist culture [47]. Six of the eight sects of Chinese Buddhism are located in Xi'an [48]. Although it occurred after the late Tang Dynasty, as the political center moved eastward, Xi'an Buddhist Temple gradually lost its former central position in Buddhism. However, there is no doubt that the important existing Buddhist temples in the city have witnessed the prosperity and glory of Buddhism. They also embody the historical narrative of Buddhism's development in China, which took place over more than a thousand years, and have an unshakable, important position in the country's cultural heritage.

According to Zhou, there are 34 existing temples in Xi'an [49]. The distribution of Buddhist temples and a geographical analysis of Xi'an are shown in Figure 3. However,

due to the impact of urban expansion and policy and commercial factors in recent years, the prospects of the existing temples are not good. Based on the authors' actual visits, most of the Buddhist temples suffer from functional deficiencies, disrepair, and deformation of religious meaning. Temples listed as National Key Monasteries by the State Council of China and one of the eight major ancestral temples were included in the second round of inspections (15 Buddhist temples). Criteria for further case selection were the construction scale of the Buddhist temple, the architectural quality, and the creation of a sacred atmosphere. After the criteria were applied, five temples remained. Finally, Daci'en Temple was selected from these five as the case study object of this investigation. The advantages of the five temples are presented in Table 1.



**Figure 3.** Distribution map of Buddhist temples in Xi'an (GIS analysis diagram by the authors).

**Table 1.** Results of case study selection.

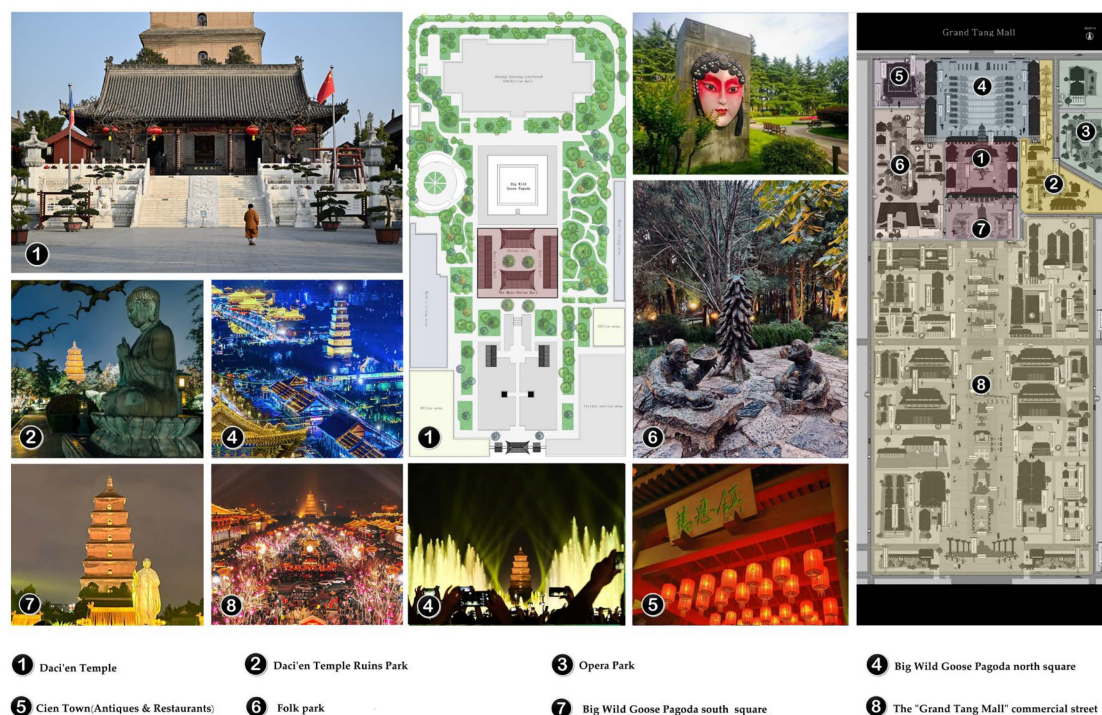
Selection Criteria	DCE	DXS	GR	WL	JF
Located in the main urban area	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Temple is a Han-style royal temple and is relatively large in scale	✓	✓		✓	✓
Temple has a rich historical and cultural background in the Sui and Tang dynasties	✓	✓			✓
One of the three major translation centers	✓	✓			✓
The main hall is made of wood	✓				✓
One of the eight major ancestral temples	✓	✓			
The temple contains a World Heritage Site	✓				
Selection result	✓				

Temple Abbreviations: DCE (Daci'en Temple); DXS (Daxingshan Temple); GR (Guangren Temple); WL (Wolong Temple); JF (Jianfu Temple).

Daci'en Temple is located at the core of Xi'an's cultural landmark, "the Great Tang Mall". It is an essential landmark for Xi'an to showcase its culture and tourism development. The World Heritage "Big Wild Goose Pagoda" is located in Daci'en Temple. Because it conveys the architectural narrative of the prosperous Tang Dynasty culture, it has become the soul of the entire scenic area. "The Great Tang Mall" covers multiple functions such as culture, cuisine, humanities, art, leisure, landscape, and commerce. The Tang cultural per-



performances and antique buildings tell people about the impressive history of the city from different perspectives. The total construction area of the scenic area is 650,000 square meters. It attracts a steady stream of tourists from China and abroad to experience the prosperity and cultural charm of the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–AD 907). The layout of Daci'en Temple and its surrounding environment is shown in Figure 4. During the reign of Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty (AD 648), Prince Li Zhizhi rebuilt the site of Jingjue Temple in the Northern Wei Dynasty (AD 386–AD 557) and renamed it Daci'en Temple in memory of his mother, Empress Zhang Sun. This temple was the largest and most magnificent temple in Xi'an during the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–AD 907) [50]. This temple is full of stories about the prosperous Tang Dynasty and the rise and fall of the nation more than a thousand years ago. The first abbot of the Buddhist temple was Master Xuanzang, known as the nation's backbone. His dictated account of what he saw and heard, *The Records of the Western Regions of the Great Tang*, provided much geographical guidance regarding the smooth flow of the Silk Road and the later domination of the Western Regions by the Great Tang. The Big Wild Goose Pagoda, which he designed to store scriptures, has become a World Heritage Site and has stood on this land for thousands of years [51]. It proves China's openness, compatibility with foreign cultures, and national self-confidence. The temple has long been associated with the country's collective memory, this temple is not only a sacred Buddhist healing space, but also a shining statement of the local spirit of the city of Xi'an.



**Figure 4.** Layout of Daci'en Temple and its surrounding environment.

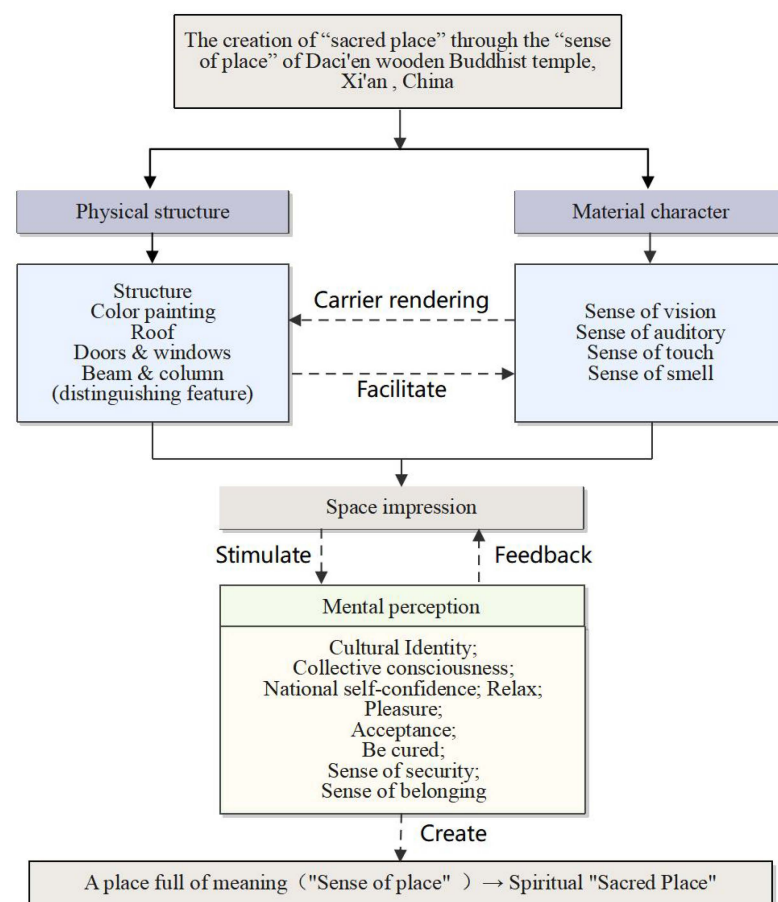
Based on the literature, due to financial considerations and the advantages of new technology, most of the existing Buddhist temples in China use brick–concrete structures, and a few crucial halls use brick and wood structures, the appearance of which retains the formal characteristics of the ancient wooden structures. The two main halls on the central axis of Daci'en Temple are precious brick and wood structures, which contain evidence of the exquisite craftsmanship and philosophical connotations of Chinese wooden architecture. The sufficient materials, high interior space, and solemn aura have a unique “local” cultural language and spiritual “sacred place” metaphor due to the use of wooden materials.



## 5. Findings and Discussion

Based on the information mentioned above in the survey on Buddhist temple architecture in Xi'an, the effectiveness of the temple's "sense of place" and sacred atmosphere can be evaluated from the synesthetic perceptual characteristics of Daci'en Temple's wooden architectural structures, components, and materials. Architectural components and structures are the material carriers for preserving the nation's history, culture, and collective memory. They also facilitate the divine perception of sight, hearing, touch, and smell. These tangible architectural components and invisible wooden characteristics together form a specific spatial impression, stimulating people's "sense of place" and perception of the sacred, ultimately forming a spiritual "sacred place". Such "sacred places" represent the spiritual significance of Buddhist temple architectural heritage.

The examined relationship between wooden architectural elements and "sacred places" is shown in Figure 5. Next, a detailed analysis is performed, and conclusions are drawn based on the architectural structure, building components, and material characteristics of Daci'en Temple. The data will answer the research questions and mutually verify the validity of the results with the theory of textual analysis.

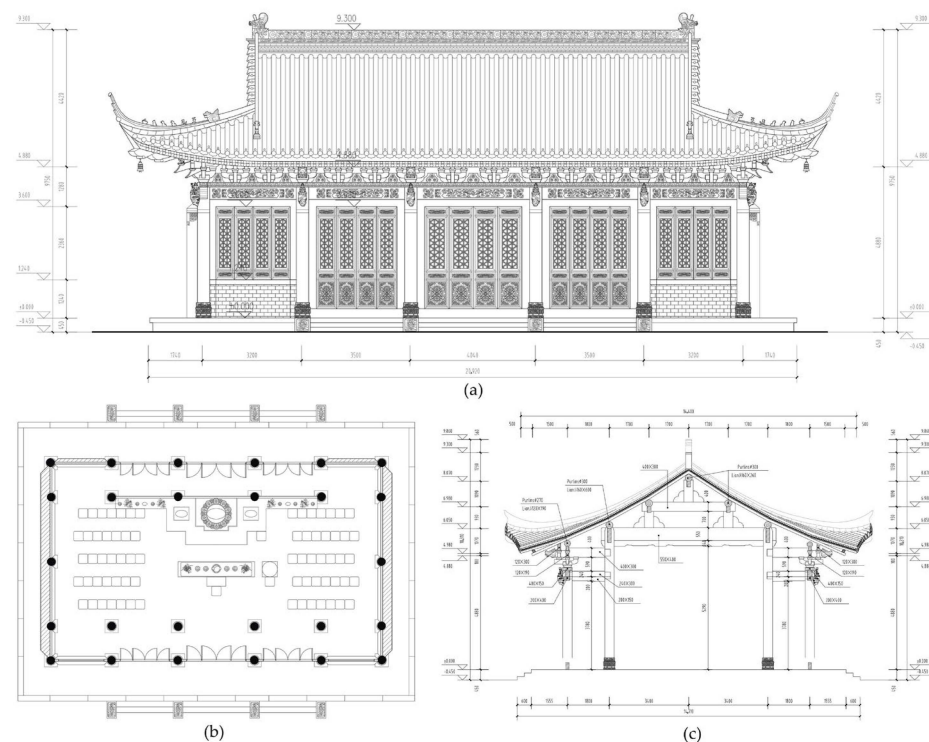


**Figure 5.** Relationship between wooden architectural elements and "sacred places".

### 5.1. "Sense of Place" and "Sacred Places" from the Perspective of Architectural Elements

The essential existing architectures of Daci'en Temple are the Main Shrine Hall, the Dharma Hall, and the East and West Side Halls on the south side of the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, which provide the main scope of this study. The building to the north of the Big Wild Goose Pagoda is the Datang Sanzang courtyard, a recently built modern cultural exhibition hall, and the other buildings are offices and living areas for monks. As mentioned previously, the layout of the courtyard and the focal areas of this study are shown in Figure 4. The temple's Main Shrine Hall and Dharma Hall use brick and wood struc-

tures. The wooden frame is composed of columns, beams, purlin, and fang to form a frame to bear the roof load, and the wall is not load-bearing. The unique beam and column structure of ancient Chinese architecture is reproduced in the architectural heritage of Xi'an's landmark Daci'en Temple. An architectural structure diagram of Daci'en Temple is shown in Figure 6. The wooden material reproduces the exquisite craftsmanship of wooden architecture and the Chinese culture that has permeated it for thousands of years through the language of architectural art, such as the visible exposed structure, the volume of space, the sense of form, and the internal material entity. These elements stimulate people's spiritual perception of local culture to varying degrees when entering the temple and can evoke people's recollection of history, recognition of cultural confidence, and sense of belonging to sacred space at a deeper level. As mentioned above, Buddhism originated in India but flourished in China. Wooden architecture is a cultural treasure of China. When Buddhist temples were first introduced to China, they were integrated into the Chinese wooden architecture system [1,52]. These exquisite architectural components are religious as well as national, and they are endowed with historical metaphors and religious sanctities. The wooden architecture of Daci'en Temple reflects China's millennium of cultural ideology and national self-confidence. It passes on the national spirit to future generations through the architectural medium.



**Figure 6.** Architectural structure diagram of the Main Shrine Hall of Daci'en Temple: (a) elevations, (b) plans, (c) sections (drawn by the authors).

#### 5.1.1. Ritual Culture and Metaphorical Symbols

- (1) **Roof:** The roof reflects the philosophy of harmony between humans and nature and the hierarchy of priority and inferiority. Different styles of roofs in China represent the hierarchy of architecture [53]. According to antiquity, the flying eaves reflect people's reverence and yearning for "God", and the roof curve seems to merge with the sky. This form expresses the Chinese people's pursuit of "transcendence", "nirvana and rebirth", and "harmony between man and nature" of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism [54]. The two main halls on the central axis of Daci'en Temple are built with higher-level Xieshan roofs, and the Side Halls on both sides are built with lower-level hanging Xuanshan roofs, as shown in Figure 7. The Xieshan roof purlins face

the mountain side of the construction of the “人” sealing plate and are nailed with plum blossom nails, which are a symbol of the Royal Temple class; in ancient times, the ordinary people were called “no nails”, and their architecture was not allowed to use the plum blossom nails decoratively [55]. The unique flower ridge brick carvings of the Guanzhong Plain are used on the Xieshan roof of the Main Shrine Hall to emphasize the regional characteristics of Xi’an. In the “hanging fish” position on the roof of Xieshan, the male and female fishes among the Eight Treasures of Buddhism are used as metaphorical symbols of Buddhism to symbolize the transcendence of time of resurrection, immortality, and regeneration, as well as the free and open-minded wisdom of fish in the water.

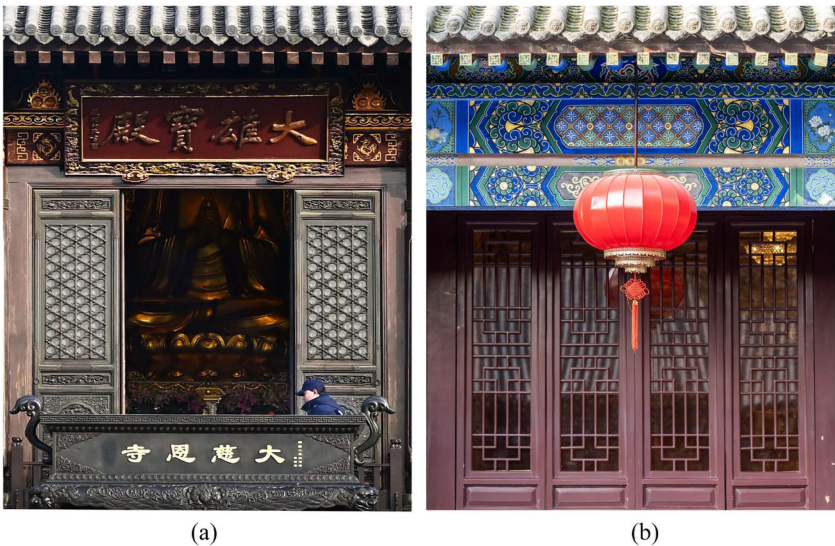


**Figure 7.** The roofs of Daci'en Temple: (a) the Xieshan roof of the Main Shrine Hall, (b) the Xuanshan roof of the Side Halls (photos by authors).

- (2) Doors and windows: The two main halls on the central axis of Daci'en Temple are decorated with the highest-grade royal “San jiao liu wan” rhombus, and the Side Halls on both sides are decorated with lower-grade “lantern brocade” patterns for the wooden doors and windows, as shown in Figure 8. “San jiao liu wan” usually uses three lattice bars to intersect at one point, and a small metal nail is nailed on this gathering point, thus forming a six-petal rhombus flower at the intersection. This pattern belongs to the highest grade for doors and windows. The “San jiao liu wan” rhombus patterns are complex, connoting heaven and earth and implying the four directions. It symbolizes the intersection of heaven and earth and the birth of all things [56]. The “lantern brocade” features in the East and West Side Halls. A common window pattern in ancient times, it symbolizes brightness and auspiciousness. Like roofs, doors and windows still reflect the hierarchical etiquette system of ancient Chinese architecture and convey the hope of beautiful and auspicious celebrations [57]. As decorative enclosure interfaces, doors and windows not only meet the basic requirements for opening windows but also create subtle changes in light and shadow, satisfying artistic and sacred aesthetic needs. These strictly differentiated ritual-grade decorative components invite people to admire the openness and equality of contemporary life. The extensive use of royal-level architecture in the temple highlights the sacred status of Buddhism. As the Tang Dynasty's capital, Xi'an witnessed a prosperous and glorious period for Buddhism. Its prosperous economy and developed culture attracted people from all over the world. The high-level decorative components in Daci'en Temple silently tell the story of Xi'an as the national Buddhist center in the Tang Dynasty, like a crown jewel shining for thousands of years.
- (3) Beam: The decorative paintings on the beams in the temple are divided into three types: (a) Gilt wood carving of the “Hexi” structure, (b) Pure wood carving of the “Hexi” structure, (c) Xuanzi color painting. The characteristics are shown in Table 2. Daci'en Temple is a thousand-year-old temple. Due to historical changes and wars, it has been rebuilt in every dynasty since the Sui and Tang dynasties. The predecessor of the current Main Hall was rebuilt in the Ming and Qing dynasties [58]. Based






on the provisions of Article 14 of the Cultural Relics Protection Law, when repairing, rebuilding, constructing, or relocating key cultural relics, protection units, and other important cultural relics across the country, their original historical appearance must be retained as much as possible to ensure that the restored buildings still conform to their historical characteristics. Therefore, the restored Main Shrine Hall continues to use a Qing-style architectural structure. In order to retain the Daci'en Temple's splendor, which is attributed to but better than the Tang, the Main Shrine Hall on the central axis was built with pure Indonesian pineapple lattice wood, echoing the magnificent historical culture and architectural colors of the Tang Dynasty. Moreover, the colorful paintings on the architectural beams of the main hall took advantage of wood and carved pure wood colors, replacing the rich colors of Qing-style paintings to highlight the characteristics of Tang Dynasty culture. As the highest-level architecture, the Main Shrine Hall adopts the "hexi" color painting composition form, with wood carvings of golden dragons and Buddhist lecture pictures, and it is gilded. The Dharma Hall is the sub-high level, using dragon patterns with the original color of pure wood. The halls on both sides were painted with sub-lower-level "Xuan zi" colored paintings. In addition, a large number of metaphorical decorative patterns were painted on the beams and "Suifang" at different positions.



**Figure 8.** The windows of Daci'en Temple: (a) the “San jiao liu wan” window of the Main Shrine Hall, (b) the “lantern brocade” window of the Side Halls (photos by authors).

**Table 2.** Characteristics and culture of color painting.

Style	Characteristic	Rank	Photo
A. Gilt wood carving of the “Hexi” structure	Gilt, dragon pattern, Buddhist lecture pictures	Highest level Royal main architecture	
B. Pure wood carving of the “Hexi” structure	No gilding, dragon pattern	Sub-high level Royal main architecture	
C. Xuanzi color painting	“Xuanzi” pattern, no dragon pattern	Sub-lower level Royal secondary architecture (Side Halls)	

Examples of the patterns are the Ruyi Flame Mani Jewel, which represents the wish for all things after establishing good roots; the Lonicera pattern, which symbolizes cold resistance, heat resistance, tenacity, immortality of the soul, and eternal life; the Ruyi pattern,



one of the Eight Treasures of the Buddha, which represents the good hope for success and fulfillment; the Falls Demon Cloud pattern, which symbolizes the elimination of delusion in the heart, and the return to serenity and wisdom; and the Boku Cloud pattern, which represents the endless wisdom of Buddha's Dharma, as well as human nature, nobility, and elegance. These patterns, shown in Figure 9, are metaphorical symbols of religious philosophy. They are read by people and resonate with their thoughts, stimulating memory and imagination. Ultimately, the sanctity and salvation in the worshiper's heart are completed through the wisdom of religious philosophy and people's longing for a better future.



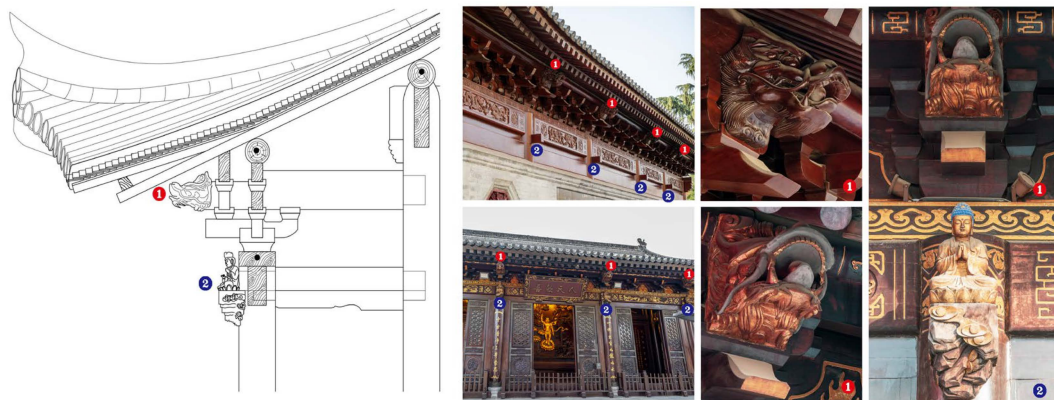
**Figure 9.** Wooden carvings with metaphorical patterns on beams: (a) the “Ruyi” pattern, (b) the Lonicera pattern, (c) Falls Demon Cloud pattern, (d) the “Ruyi” Flame Mani Jewel, (e) the Boku Cloud pattern, (f) the Golden Dragon “hexi” pattern, (g) the Buddha vase cloud pattern (photos by authors).

#### 5.1.2. Special Performance of Temple Components

Architecture is a symbol carrier; the most basic function of architectural symbols is to express ideology or meaning and for people to recognize and communicate the ideas and meanings expressed [59]. Throughout history, people have attributed many perceptible meanings to architectural symbols. These are the thoughts and architectural consciousness of the architectural artisans. The architecture of Daci'en Temple has two special designs that convey to people the historical significance and sacred mission carried by this solemn wooden structure.

- (1) The “Tao jian Liang”: The two main halls on the temple's central axis are decorated with dragon heads in the positions of the “Tao Jianliang”, parts of all government-style wooden structures, and with the wooden Buddha statue in the position of “Bao-tou Liang”. The structure and position are shown Figure 10. “Tao Jianliang” is used on top of the column head “Dougong”, the beam that carries the house's eaves. The typical official style for this component is for its structural form to be exposed without any other decoration. Daci'en Temple was decorated with a wooden round dragon head sculpture, which not only has a long-cherished wish to prevent fires and eliminate disasters, according to tradition, but also, more importantly, uses eye-catching wooden dragon head symbols to reflect the ancient cultural background of the divine right of kings and the integration of politics and religion. It shows the interdependence between imperial power politics and the development of Buddhism. Through the material carrier of Buddhist temples, people can recall the Tang Dynasty's prosperity and the country's rise and fall a thousand years ago. Daci'en Temple is built around the World Heritage “Big Wild Goose Pagoda”. These aspects of Buddhist

temple architecture represent the cultural imprint of Buddhism's peak development in the Tang Dynasty. According to the records, when Xuanzang returned to the eastern land of Tang, the emperor who founded the reign of Zhenguan, Emperor Taizong, welcomed him into the temple with formal specifications second only to the state banquet [60]. In order to store the retrieved scriptures, Xuanzang personally designed and organized the construction of the "Big Wild Goose Pagoda", which has stood for thousands of years. From then on, he devoted his life to translating Buddhist scriptures. Therefore, Daci'en Temple became China's highest school of Buddhist studies during the Tang Dynasty. It is also the ancestral home of the Chinese Buddhist Consciousness-Only Sect [50]. Architecture uses its unique artistic language to continue describing the great history of the past, and these spiritual metaphors expressed through architecture will unconsciously influence people's emotional experiences. The temple has long been associated with the collective memory of the nation. It is also a glowing statement of the place spirit of Xi'an. It is a "sense of place" and culture preserved by architectural heritage.



**Figure 10.** Beam structure: (1) "Tao Jianliang" decorated with dragon head, (2) "Baotou Liang" decorated with Buddha statues (photos and drawings by authors).

- (2) The "Baotou Liang": On the "Baotou Liang" of the Main Shrine Hall, which is the position of the pillar head, the front of the hall is decorated with four "Ran deng Buddhas" carved in the round. The back row is carved with the four Bodhisattvas "Wen-shu", "Puxian", "Dizang", and "Guanyin". At the four corners are "Guan Yu" and "Wei Tuo" Dharma Protector Bodhisattva, and a strong man is used to decorate the "Corner God". These components are shown in Figure 11. Functionally, the "Baotou Liang" is the interspersed structure between the beams and columns formed by the increased space of large-scale wooden architecture in the form of lifting beams. The "Corner God" is located on top of the corner "Dougong", supported by the flat disk "Dougong", and the top of this supports the corner beam [61]. In traditional official-style architecture, the column head of "Baotou Liang" is generally matched with the colorful paintings of "Liang Fang", and there are also very few important palaces designed with dragon carvings. The decoration of "Baotou Liang" also strictly follows the traditional Chinese etiquette system to reflect the status of the owner of the architecture. The "Baotou Liang" decoration in Daci'en Temple shows the lofty architectural status of the royal Buddhist temple. The exquisite gilt Buddha statues are special decorative symbols, different from ordinary wooden palace buildings. This kind of decoration has a strong religious meaning, and its artistic connotation is more significant than its architectural or structural function. The "Baotou Liang" and "Corner God" in Daci'en Temple construct the supreme wisdom of the Buddhist world. They contain the Buddhist philosophy of mindfulness and perfect practice, touching the sacred perception of worshipers. Moreover, the artistic decoration of the architecture stimulates the religious consciousness and imagination of believers. In addition,

some of the wooden statues of Buddha have a unique Western style in terms of tone, a metaphor for the historical event of Xuanzang masters in the West seeking the law and spirit of perseverance and determination, but it also demonstrates China's national spirit of being compatible with and accepting of foreign cultures and full of confidence in not being assimilated.



**Figure 11.** Featured components of the four corners: (1) “Corner God” decorated with a strong man, (2) “Baotou Liang” decorated with Buddha statues (photos and drawings by authors).

### 5.2. “Sense of Place” and “Sacred Places” from Material Characteristics

In the shaping of spatial atmosphere, materials that constitute the boundary of space are the medium through which people perceive space, and they significantly impact the atmosphere of space [62]. From a material perspective, wood has a real, friendly, and natural material character and, at the same time, has excellent material qualities such as load-bearing capacity, sound absorption, and strong plasticity. It conveys the expression of the humanistic spirit from multiple perceptual dimensions to enhance the “sense of place” and sacred atmosphere of Buddhist temples.

From a visual perspective, wood can produce a diffuse reflection of light, so that the light in the wooden space will actively increase the layering of the space and give it the charm of the passage of time. Wood has special double-layer reflection characteristics. When light irradiates the surface of wood, part of the reflected light is generated on the boundary layer where the air contacts the surface of the object. Another part will pass through the boundary layer and enter the inner layer, and then pass through the boundary layer. The diffuse reflection between fine particles in the inner layer returns to the boundary layer. The former part is the surface reflection, and the latter part is the inner reflection. The light reflection characteristics of wood are the result of the combined effect of surface reflection and inner reflection [63]. In addition, the results of wood structure analysis show that wood is a complex of cell structural units, so its longitudinal section will expose cell cavities due to cutting [64]. These cell cavities form countless tiny “concave mirrors”, and the light passes through them. Refraction occurs in all directions, forming a diffuse reflection, and part of the light is absorbed, making the light softer and giving the reflected luster the visual effect of a silk surface [65]. The dispersion effect of the wooden space enclosure interface creates a strong visual contrast with the Buddha statue focused on the gilded light, which further highlights the sublimity, sacredness, solemnity, and sense of stunning of the Buddha statue. The wooden interior atmosphere is shown in Figure 12. Worshipers are more likely to gain inner peace and healing when surrounded by this diffuse light. When natural light enters the temple through the doors and windows, it presents a quieter spatial atmosphere, slowly expressing a sense of acceptance for believers. It seems that this place



belongs to oneself, giving believers a sense of belonging and allowing people to engage in a dialogue with their faith in a pure period with shelter and safety.



**Figure 12.** Wooden interior atmosphere (photos by authors).

From a tactile perspective, the rustic and warm tactile feeling of wood helps reveal its true natural properties. The increase in reinforced concrete in cities has made people's lives colder. Urban industrial life is also relatively far away from nature, and since industrialization, the desire for nature has gradually increased. The real feeling of wooden materials makes people imagine nature and rural life. Wood comes from nature and is a symbol of life. Humanity's natural feeling comes from the many ways humans and trees interact. For example, enjoying the shade under a tree is a long-standing example of interaction between humans and nature [66]. The natural attributes of wood contain the philosophical ideology of symbiosis between humans and nature. In the same way, nature is a psychological gift to people. Returning to nature and feeling its authenticity can stimulate the joy and relaxation of being healed [67].

From an auditory perspective, in a wooden Buddhist temple space, a clean and meditative indoor environment makes it easier to create a sense of sacredness. Wood has good acoustic properties and good sound insulation properties. Wooden floors, ceilings, and veneers are all excellent sound insulation materials. Spaces with high sound requirements, such as concert halls and theaters, often use wood veneers to ensure a good acoustic environment [68]. Therefore, the natural wooden interface can create a purer spatial atmosphere inside the Buddhist temple to enhance the sacred effect. In addition to its good sound absorption ability, wood plays a vital role as a sounding board and sound element through its vibration spectrum characteristics and acoustic resonance [69]. Buddhist scriptures are sung in the main hall of a temple during daily Buddhist practice in the morning and evening. This ritual also highlights the unique characteristics of the sacred atmosphere of the Buddhist temple. The resonance effect produced by the natural sounds emitted in the wooden space can even surprise people at a visceral level and inspire a yearning and imaginative appetite for the sacred world. Pallasma discovered that vision opposes people and objects, separating them, whereas hearing creates people's feelings about things inside the body, links people and objects together, and forms a passive spatial experience [70]. This kind of interactive experience generated by hearing is completely different from secular



life, triggering people's sense of sacred belonging in the Buddhist temple space, and can best arouse the yearning and perception of the sacred.

From the perspective of smell, people perceive the environment of a space through their sense of smell. The brain associates the meaning of related smells and produces different spatial experiences [71]. Moreover, in the Internet era, smell and touch have become an irreplaceable real spatial experience. For wooden spaces, the olfactory characteristics of wood can evoke people's associations with nature, and the smell of wooden spaces can make people feel relaxed and healed [72]. This is because plants produce a volatile compound called "aromatic oil" during their metabolism, and this ingredient has a refreshing and calming effect. It has been shown that if a space has a relatively particular smell, people can still identify the smell and create associations with the original space a year later [73]. The smell produced by the wooden architecture and the smell produced by the wooden incense in a Buddhist temple space jointly shape the sacred aromatic charm of that space. Smell, like other perceptions, has a shaping effect on space. Using this characteristic, the smell in a space can create a spatial atmosphere and produce a narrative feature in the spatial environment [74]. In the Buddhist temple hall, the old smell produced by the weathering and deterioration of some wood reflects the authenticity of the architecture and conveys the sense of space, time, and narrative from another perspective. The architect Peter Zumthor said that the most lasting human memory of any space often lies in its smell because, through the association of smell, the memory of the entire atmosphere and inner feelings can be retained [75]. Through the stimulation of the sense of smell, wooden temple architecture remains in people's memory space in another non-physical form, completing the sacred space experience and place attachment.

Through the above analysis of the temple's architectural structure, decorative components, and wooden material properties, this study identifies the "sense of place" and sacred atmosphere of wooden temple architecture. In previous studies, the analysis of architectural heritage has mainly focused on analyzing technical applications and establishing Buddhist temples' heritage divisions. Identifying local culture and Buddhist decorative metaphorical symbols through wood components is the highlight and breakthrough of this study. Sacred places are created through a sense of place and the identification of sacred space design elements. This study is a new attempt to apply wood properties to synesthetic perception to explore the sacred experience of Buddhist temple space. This research will help to better preserve the heritage of wooden architecture, retain the historical context, and ensure a vivid "sacred" practical atmosphere in the architectural space of Buddhist temples. This should ensure the vivid vitality and spatial significance of architectural heritage under the physical interface. Taking the characteristics of wood as an entry point, this study provides scholars with a new direction for delving into the emotions, cultural identities, and religious experiences of Buddhist temple architecture in China, and it is a first step toward a theoretical framework for "sacred places". The "sense of place" in religious architecture remains an area of untapped research potential. In addition, the research involves architecture, religion, history, and human geography, and it also provides the possibility of cross-disciplinary research for scholars in other fields.

## 6. Conclusions

The architectural heritage of wooden Buddhist temples is a spiritual antidote to the loss of souls and the urgent awareness of "searching for roots" faced by people in contemporary urban life. An excellent Buddhist temple space can respond to people's emotional needs. This study takes Daci'en Temple in Xi'an as a case study for research and practice, exploring the creation of "sacred place" through "sense of place". The characteristics of wooden Buddhist temples are constructed through the architectural structure, the metaphorical symbols of the architectural components, and the perceptual characteristics of the materials. The architectural heritage of Daci'en Buddhist temples represents not only a "sacred space" for spiritual healing but also a spiritual "sacred place" that inherits the philosophy of Chinese Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism and contains collective

memory and cultural identity. Wooden Buddhist temples have distinct structural characteristics, surface properties, cultural affiliation, and religious significance. This study represents a pioneering attempt to define a cultural and sacred atmosphere with regard to the materials used in the construction of Buddhist temples. This work contributes to the understanding of this type of architecture and creates the topic of “sacred places”. The main conclusions that can be drawn are set out below:

- In wooden Buddhist temples, the authenticity of materials expresses the exquisite skills and philosophical culture of architecture, and it will also become a key part of the inheritance of architectural heritage in the future.
- Architectural heritage is a physical carrier of a “sense of place” and witness to history. Wooden Buddhist temple architectural structures and components are reflected with locally specific social ethics, religious status, philosophical ideas, and national spirit.
- Wooden Buddhist temples represent a specific historical process and religious culture through their unique architectural language and metaphorical symbolism. This architectural language can awaken people’s religious consciousness, collective memory, local identity, and national self-confidence, all of which contribute to the core meaning of the architectural narrative.
- In wooden Buddhist temples, the natural properties of wooden materials can form multi-dimensional sensory stimulations, including vision, hearing, touch, and smell, gradually evoking spiritual perceptions of comfort, safety, acceptance, and redemption. It is helpful to form a sense of sacred belonging and place attachment.
- The positive impact of wooden Buddhist temples on society is reflected in many aspects, from environmental protection and physical and mental health to cultural inheritance and even social harmony and stability. As a spiritual “sacred place”, such temples can provide spiritual comfort and stress relief, thereby reducing social conflict, and can enhance community cohesion and cultural identity, contributing to the overall well-being and sustainable development of society.
- In this study, the creation of “sacred place” through the “sense of place” in Buddhist temple architecture is found to be based on the advantages of wooden materials. In developing and protecting Buddhist temple heritage, other architectural elements must also be considered to sufficiently maintain the local context and enhance the emotional experience of the sacred space.

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