

## UZBEKISTAN

### Samarkand

Samarkand has long been known as the symbol of Oriental culture, due to the various travel stories and fairy tales describing its splendid arts and architecture created in the fervent but also mysterious atmosphere. An ancient site, already known as Afrosiab in antiquity, but destroyed by the Mongols in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the heyday of Samarkand came when it was re-established by Tamerlane, the great Timurid ruler, towards the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The main period of Samarkand lasted through the 15<sup>th</sup> century, especially under Ulugh Bek, after which its political role diminished in favour of Bukhara and other cities. Its cultural significance still continued well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and its many fine monuments became a fundamental reference in the development of Islamic art and architecture. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the town decayed due to earthquakes and economic decline. It was given a new administrative role during the Russian period from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the recent independence of Uzbekistan in 1990.

#### Impacts on the Urban Fabric

During the past couple of centuries, there have been changes in the urban layout and there have also been many losses. The town has grown into a metropolis, though the Timurid city still forms its heart with the remains of the splendid monumental ensembles, including the Registan Square, the Bibi Khanum ensemble, the Ulugh-Bek Observatory, the fabulous monumental cemetery of Shakhi Zinda, and numerous other public buildings. Many of these buildings have suffered due to the earthquakes, such as the Bibi Khanum mosque, which was reduced to half of its original height in an 18<sup>th</sup>-century earthquake. The residential part of the town consists of courtyard houses built in mud brick with roof structures in timber, and with fine painted and plaster decorations in the interior. The traditional neighbourhood structure of the town is still intact, including small community centres with their spiritual and material facilities for the community. The community has retained its traditional spirit, and even the traditional crafts skills are still available and utilised for the maintenance and repair of the traditional housing stock.

During the Russian period, probably partly due to political reasons and partly due to the necessities of a modern administrative centre, the traditional urban fabric has suffered serious losses. On the spot of the former Timurid citadel, the Russian administration developed a 19<sup>th</sup>-century extension of the old town to the west, which today can be considered as part of the historic continuity of the place. On the eastern side of the Timurid town, there is the archaeological area of Afrosiab, which includes some significant monuments, such as the Shakhi Zinda ensemble. The Timurid city itself has been traversed by some new roads for traffic circulation, and the surroundings of many of the ancient monuments have been cleared, creating open areas with some garden layouts. This has led to the loss of traditional housing, and some serious wounds in the fabric of the historic town. Unfortunately, such demolitions have continued even in recent years.

Another problem area is found in the present condition of the ancient monuments. Until the end of the Russian period, only a minimum amount of repairs or restorations was carried out. Often these were done in the spirit of the Venice Charter, and the new work was clearly distinguished from the original. However, the

resources were obviously limited, and many buildings have remained with hardly any attention for decades. This has continued to cause an increasing amount of deterioration and decay.

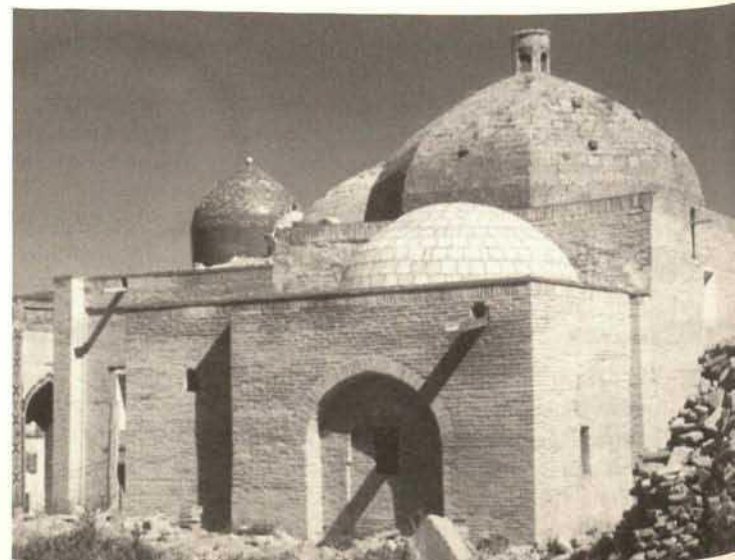
#### National Monuments

A major change has been brought due to the declaration of independence of Uzbekistan in 1990, and the ancient Timurid monuments have thus acquired a particularly strong national significance. These 'national monuments' are now seen as a representation of the national identity of the Uzbeks, and have thus become the object of a revived interest. In fact, over the past 10 years, several of these have been subject to restoration campaigns. The last of them is the Bibi Khanum mosque, where the upper part has now been completely reconstructed in reinforced concrete. The new structure has been covered with modern ceramic tiles, copies of the original – but slightly paler in tonality. The problems that may be caused by this work are related, for example, to the strong seismic hazard of the place, as well as the incompatibility of a modern concrete structure on top of traditional mud brick walls. At the same time, the trend of modernisation has continued, and more derelict residential areas have been replaced by modern garden layouts.

#### International Involvement

Samarkand has attracted a certain amount of international interest. Partly this was due to the international competition declared several years ago to design a new administrative and commercial centre for the city. Additional interest was attracted by the efforts of UNESCO and the Aga Khan Trust to promote the conservation of the old city and monuments. At present, in fact, the ancient monuments are duly protected under the national law. There are also

Mausoleum of Kussam ibn Abbas (1335) in Samarkand



long-term programmes for the restoration of ancient monuments associated with the anniversaries of the Timurid rulers. Plans also exist for the reconstruction of the earlier destroyed areas around the monumental ensembles, which are under the management responsibility of the Central Government as well as of the Samarkand Municipality. The aim of such programmes is to promote tourism, which is seen as a potential source of income in the future economy of the country. The programme has also included the removal of unsympathetic industrial activities away from the centre.

The programmes of the Aga Khan Trust have represented an important activity over several years. These programmes have focused especially on the rehabilitation of the residential quarters, giving particular emphasis to the issue of training and education. In fact, the programme has been able to sponsor several pilot works, consisting of the restoration and rehabilitation of traditional houses. In some cases, this has also involved the reconstruction of ruined structures using traditional techniques. Such works have involved foreign experts from neighbouring countries and Europe, and have been carried out by local technicians, architects and craft-persons. Unfortunately, the Aga Khan programme has now come to a conclusion, but it is hoped that it has contributed to building a more sympathetic approach to the care and use of traditional housing.

We appreciate that the historic significance of Samarkand is well recognised by the authorities. Nevertheless, the 'burden' of a modern industrial and technical approach often tends to carry away even the technicians. And politicians like to give priority to modernisation rather than working on the restoration of traditional mud-brick structures. It is thus that Samarkand faces many challenges, and where the potential World Heritage nomination may well give a positive input. At the same time, we recognise that the tasks the Samarkand people are currently facing are not indifferent. The city needs help from the international community. It is necessary to recognise the available skills, both traditional and modern, the important contribution of the Uzbek researchers, scientists and technicians for the knowledge and care provided so far. At the same time, the challenge that traditional structures face in front of overwhelming modern development are serious, and need clear strategic guidelines in order to reach reasonable solutions. What is required is a compatible and sustainable alternative that fully recognises the significance of the outstanding universal heritage of Samarkand and its people.

Jukka Jokilehto  
ICOMOS Finland