

UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan's Historic Residential Architecture in Danger

With the closing of the Institute for Conservation and Restoration in the late 1990s, Uzbekistan lost its most important institution and voice in the field of architectural heritage protection. Local heritage administrations, although formally still extant, are sorely understaffed. Decisions are often not based on professional expertise. The Methodological Council of the Department of Cultural Heritage, as the relevant authority, certainly has the necessary expertise and has recently made some professional decisions on the protection of residential buildings, such as the registration of a 1920s housing complex in Amir Temur Avenue in Tashkent, a fine example showing the transition from colonial to constructivist architecture. In other cases, however, the Council is urged to refrain from a scientifically based examination of the objects in question, as with the neoclassical officers' houses in Parkent Street, dating from the late 19th century, which subsequently were lost.

Large-scale urban renewal projects threaten urban neighbourhoods even in the World Heritage cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, Itchan Kala and Shakhrisabz. In 2014, a part of the historic centre of Shakhrisabz was destroyed in order to create a large pedestrian corridor lined by tourist businesses. Even listed historic houses were razed, as the nomination documents reveal. Other buildings that were demolished had been changed substantially over the years, but in their layout and typology they still followed the traditions of Central Asian domestic architecture that had survived for centuries. The remaining streets are hardly recognisable now as examples of medieval urban design, which had been the basis for the city's World Heritage designation. A

new wall has been erected along the borders of the old town, so that the historic neighbourhoods (*mahallas*) are no longer visible either from outside the historic centre or from the tourist corridor.

In Samarkand, such screening walls have been erected since 2009 around the Gur Emir Mausoleum and north of the Registan. While many of the medieval monuments are being ambitiously restored, the surrounding traditional neighbourhoods are ruthlessly sealed off from them. Pathways through the old town, such as Tashkent Street, are now lined with uniform souvenir shops which contradict the introverted, private character of the old quarters. Access routes into the *mahallas* are either fully abandoned or closed with gates. At the same time, many of the buildings dating from the second half of the 20th century, from the Café Tabassum to the History Museum on the Registan, have fallen victim to urban purification. Because of the absence of management plans (a draft has been under discussion since 2017) and the lack of investments into the infrastructure of traditional neighbourhoods, the number of historic houses is continually decreasing. Unique old buildings have been given up in the last years in order to erect new hotels. Sometimes it is the owners themselves who demolish their houses because they fail to understand their value. And not seldom the decision-makers are directly involved; there seems to be a lack of understanding as well as of funding for maintenance and repair measures, even in the core zones of the World Heritage cities.

At its meeting in the summer of 2018, the Uzbek Delegation to the World Heritage Committee declared a moratorium on all demolition work at the Samarkand heritage site. Only a few months later, the facade of the former Samarkand Pilot Plant of Refractory Alloys on University Boulevard was demolished. It was this elaborate front which gave the building its special his-



Figs. 1 and 2: Samarkand, wall separating the living quarters from the tourist route, seen from the open space around the Gur-Emir-Mausoleum and from the neighbourhood (photos Jens Jordan 2010)



Fig. 3 and 4: Tashkent, area around the Hazrat-Imam complex in the centre of the remaining old town (Google Earth screenshots of 25 September 2017 and 16 September 2019, © Maxar Technologies)

toric and artistic values (according to article 3 of the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on the Protection and Use of Cultural Heritage). The mostly one-storey residential buildings in the European part of Samarkand are no better off. More and more of them are being torn down; sometimes only the façades are kept and integrated into new multi-storey buildings.

In Khiva, where the designation of a buffer zone has been demanded for years, traditional neighbourhoods that had survived around the urban centre Itchan Kala have been demolished in the course of large-scale renewal measures since 2015. With its hotels and souvenir shops, the tourist corridor laid out from the new train station to the old walled town resembles the modern axis through the centre of Shakhrisabz.

The situation in Bukhara is just as dramatic. From the central water basin Labi Khauz through the multi-domed market building all the way to the fortress Ark, new buildings line a trivial tourist corridor. Its new facades are covered with tiles in traditional décor, a treatment that mimics the medieval monuments instead of being reserved for them. At the same time, numerous monuments are deteriorating or even partly collapsing – as in the case of the important Abdulaziz-Khan Madrasa with decorated rooms, vaults and walls – because of vibrations caused by nearby construction sites. No signs of restoration efforts are visible so far. Here, too, the neighbourhoods – documents of a residential architecture and urban design highly adapted to climate and cultural patterns – are decaying. Residents complain that they are forbidden to enter their own houses because of an acute danger of collapse. Decisive assistance in the form of technical know-how or grants for repair work seems unavailable. The closer houses are to the tourist corridor, the greater is the likelihood for them to be torn down and replaced by new hotels.

All these developments are well known from other countries and times. Preservation of vernacular heritage is one of the most difficult tasks in the modernisation process, much more so than the restoration of single monuments. Frequent losses are caused by two related deficiencies that often accompany rapid urban development: On the one hand, there is the tendency toward purification, i.e. to isolate architectural monuments from their more modest surroundings. But such monuments are in most cases intricate formal and functional parts of a larger urban structure. Devoid of this meaningful, small-scale context they morph into pure museum-objects and tourist commodities. On the other hand, we see a general lack of acceptance of historic houses and neighbourhoods as significant testimony of the country's cultural history. Even members of the former Board of Monuments of Uzbekistan (now Cultural Heritage Department) considered the historic neighbourhoods to be not worth preserving and the living conditions there to be unacceptable. Rehabilitation, upgrading and modernisation of houses, while practiced individually to some degree, are practically unknown in professional planning circles. Without question, the traditional houses do pose problems, such as rising damp and outdated infrastructures. Yet, the reluctance to consider alternatives to large-scale, destructive urban renewal most likely stems from the ideology of Soviet times, when the cities of Uzbekistan were chosen to be models for overcoming obsolete conditions in the socialist republics in the south. The predicament of the traditional residential architecture is intensified if decision-making authorities profit from construction activities and regard the very areas whose protection is entrusted to them as their personal capital.

The losses described here are a phenomenon typical in the whole country. Besides the four World Heritage cities, the capital

Tashkent with its historic neighbourhoods, which have no less protected cultural heritage status, is particularly affected. Since the late 1970s comprehensive inventories of residential heritage buildings have been carried out; in the 1980s protected historic areas (ensembles) were designated. These listings are no longer to be found in the heritage inventories, which were revised after Uzbekistan's independence (1991). Within the area of the old town, from more than 800 courtyard houses that ought to be preserved as valuable heritage or at least be documented as historic evidence, only one example is now to be found in the register. Recent research by local architects, conservators and the authors has shown, however, that numerous houses worth preserving as registered buildings do still exist. These include traditional double-post wood-frame houses with typical niches in the rooms and elaborate half-round timber beam ceilings, dating from the 19th century.

The historic part of Tashkent with traditional housing that survived the earthquake of 1966 and was preserved in large parts is now successively being razed. In 2014, a new ring road was built and new development followed alongside it. In 2017 and 2018, two *mahallas* were completely eradicated for the “Tashkent City” project.

Besides the vernacular residential clusters, unique buildings of Soviet modernism were also destroyed, such as the House of Cinema with murals by Bakhodir Jalalov and the Palace of the Pioneers. Fragments of the neighbourhood mosque, with its notable Art Nouveau facade, were integrated into a new public park as the only remnant of the old neighbourhood. Presently, several *mahallas* are being demolished in the central part of the remaining old town, between Hazrat-Imom and Chorsu Bazar. In their place, an enormous museum is being erected. This Centre of Islamic Civilisation, out of scale for this part of the old Islamic town, absurdly seems to compromise the very heritage it is dedicated to.

Equally endangered are residential buildings erected in colonial times in European styles. An example is the officers' houses on Parkent Street, north of the former cadets' institute (now a hospital). The ensemble of nine buildings was distinguished for its high-grade interiors, including parquet floors and tile stoves. When the planned clearance was announced in spring 2019, such elements were removed by the residents. Around the Lashkarbegi (Niyosbek) Street and M.-Gandhi Street, numerous one-storey colonial houses have survived. They show neoclassical or Art Nouveau decorations and bear witness to the time of the tsars, when Tashkent evolved into a double city. The entire area is now acutely threatened by demolition.

Only a few buildings remain from the early Soviet period, and they are equally threatened. The City Municipality has published plans showing, for example, a business centre that will soon replace the multi-family residence at Mustaqillik Street 2 from 1931. The building exhibits a close relationship to European avant-garde architecture. Its facade is quite similar to Bruno Taut's Buschallee housing development in Berlin: rounded balconies define large niches, behind which the bathrooms and kitchens are located – a novelty at the time.

Housing projects from the 1940s and 1950s show regional variations of the motto “neo-classicism plus regional style” prescribed by Moscow. They characterise the representative avenues erected during those years, such as the tree-lined Navoi Street. However, instead of being designated as historic ensembles (a term and concept provided by the state preservation law), these rows of apartment buildings are equally under pressure. Planning



Fig. 5: Tashkent, housing block at Mustaqillik Avenue from 1931 (photo Jens Jordan 2019)

offices are commissioned to produce studies for business centres in their place. Another example is the “Polkushka” housing development from the 1950s: it is threatened by demolition even though the buildings, with elaborate neoclassical detailing, are in good condition.

The continuing large-scale demolition projects, in which the historic and cultural value of the existing heritage hardly seems to play any role, have led to unrest among residents and a strong protest movement in social networks. As a reaction, projects were partitioned into smaller steps and the execution time stretched over a longer period. Uzbekistan is in the process of further losing its rich residential heritage, the built testimony of the people’s long-time way of life. Once more, the reasons are twofold: firstly, conservation and restoration efforts are too narrowly focused on public buildings and tourist hotspots; sec-

only, all aspects of mundane, vernacular, traditional residential architecture, in whose tight urban fabric the medieval monuments were integrated, are being surrendered to radical, large-scale modernisation with the help and in the interest of capital investment.

What is necessary in this situation is to strengthen the competence and the staffing of the heritage authorities, to promote the ongoing dialogue and transfer of know-how concerning methods of sustainable urban rehabilitation, to designate conservation areas (ensembles), and to regulate urban development through transparent expert advisory bodies. In times of rapid economic and societal development processes, strong professional voices are needed to make the arguments heard for the long-term advantages of preserving these valuable and most endangered parts of the architectural heritage.

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