

# The cityscape of modern Central Asia

At present, no expense is spared for the regeneration of the Uzbek capital; national and international resources are being used to create the skyline of modern Tashkent. Importantly, Timurid (14th century) and Shaybanid (16th century) architectural styles have been used to construct a modern Uzbek identity. Although Samarkand was the main Timurid capital and Bukhara the Shaybanid stronghold, Tashkent has become the emblem of everything that is new and modern in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Like an architectural palimpsest, the Timurid and Shaybanid past is used to define the present political and religious agenda of independent Uzbekistan.

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## The independent boom

During the second half of the 19th century, the New City of Tashkent was founded to the east of the Anhor canal. The urban plan of this rapidly expanding city was determined by the Tsarist Russian administration, which was ruling Turkestan at the time. The New Tashkent had a fan-shaped layout with wide avenues organised around a nucleus, known today as the Amir Timur Square (fig.1). The square has become the ideological centre of the city. Ever since this major addition to the urban layout of Tashkent, the metropolis has remained divided into the Old City and the New City. The two parts differ in their architecture, urban plan and amenities and have never functioned as a whole.

With the independence of Uzbekistan, proclaimed on 1 September 1991, the skyline of Tashkent changed dramatically. The most characteristic feature of the present architectural boom is that the majority of the buildings draw inspiration from the glorious Timurid and Shaybanid past. Two major sites, recently built, are the Palace of International Forums (2009) situated in the New City, and the Khazrat Imam Complex (2007) in the Old City. Their symbolism is evident. On the one hand, the Palace facing the horse statue of Timur underlines his status as the great national hero. The Khazrat Imam Complex, on the other hand, reflects the respect for Islam as the state religion.

## The Khazrat Imam Complex

In January 2007 the International Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) declared Tashkent one of the four capitals of Islamic culture. The Khazrat Imam Complex - the oldest and holiest site in Tashkent - was chosen to commemorate the occasion. The new building activity transformed the image of the Old City and created a large-scale pilgrimage site in what used to be a remote area, off the beaten track, amidst narrow streets of mud-brick housing. The most important construction within the complex was the new Khazrat Imam Mosque built by the Uzbek president Islam Karimov (fig.2).

With the Khazrat Imam Complex, Karimov created a centre for the Old City, which no other urban planner before him had managed to achieve. By drastically modernising the Old City, especially its most religious and sacred kern, a new tolerance towards Islam was availed, which had probably been unthinkable during the early years of Uzbek independence. Furthermore, the building project was characterised by direct citations of Timurid and Shaybanid iconography and urban planning.



The Khazrat Imam Complex evolved around the mausoleum of Kaffel Shashi (d. 976/77), one of the first imams of the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam. During the sixteenth century, when Tashkent gained cultural and commercial importance under the Shaybanid dynasty, a new mausoleum for Kaffel Shashi was built in 1541-42, known at present as the Khazrat Imam (fig.3). The mausoleum of Sujunidz Khan (d. 1525), the first Shaybanid ruler of Tashkent, was erected in the cemetery that evolved to the south of the Kaffel Shashi burial site. The Barak Khan Madrasa was built around the mausoleum of Sujunidz Khan in the period 1530-1550. The Muslim Board of Uzbekistan and the seat of the *mufti*<sup>2</sup> were housed in the Barak Khan Madrasa from 1950 to 2007.

The Khazrat Imam Mosque was created exactly in the main axis of the sixteenth-century royal Shaybanid madrasa. Within a remarkably short period of four months in 2007, the Barak Khan Madrasa was adorned with three turquoise pseudo-Timurid cupolas on high drums. It seems that the Barak Khan Madrasa was redesigned according to the greatest surviving Timurid model. The only building in present-day Uzbekistan with three cupolas forming one ensemble is the Bibi Khanum Mosque (1398-1405), which Timur erected in Samarkand as the greatest architectural achievement of his reign (fig.4). The mosque was conceived as the flagstone of Timurid craftsmanship and architectural ingenuity. The addition of the three domes to the Barak Khan Madrasa makes a very clear architectural reference to the Bibi Khanum Mosque. Furthermore, the two domes above the vestibule also refer iconographically to the Shaybanid Mir Arab Madrasa (1535-1536) in Bukhara. The two side domes, characteristic of the Mir Arab Madrasa, are repeated on the main façade of the Barak Khan Madrasa and on the main façade of the new Khazrat Imam Mosque. By utilising architectural elements of previous key monuments of the Timurid and Shaybanid dynasty, the modern Uzbek artistic elite aspires to the status of powerful leaders, creating artefacts on the same grand-scale as their predecessors.

As architectural emblems of the former capitals of Bukhara and Samarkand, these monuments are reused in an attempt to legitimise the political and religious power in Tashkent, the capital of modern Uzbekistan. This process can be defined as architectural palimpsest. The outcome is a mix of Timurid, Shaybanid and modern Uzbek iconography, meant to unify national traditions. The popular Khazrat Imam Mosque is visited both by local people and by governmental officials on state visits. The Khazrat Imam Complex was the key architectural achievement of modern Uzbek architecture in 2007.



# The politics of urban renewal in Tashkent



Its success and popularity with the local population proved to be a determinant in the presidential elections in December of that same year. With the Khazrat Imam Complex the long-anticipated centre of the Old City was finally created.

## The Palace of International Forums 'Uzbekistan'

The present Amir Timur Square has been regarded as the ideological centre of Tashkent ever since 1882. The site was chosen at the crossing point of the Moscow and Kaufman avenues, which followed the trading routes of the Silk Road. The Moscow avenue followed the caravan route to Kashgar and further to China, and the Kaufman avenue was laid out along the road to Kokand, situated in the Ferghana valley. The square was regarded as the centre of Russian rule in the nineteenth century. In 1913 the monument of the Turkestan governor Kaufman was marked with a plaque reading: "General Kaufman and the Army that Conquered Central Asia". Then, following the October Socialist Revolution in 1917, the Kaufman monument was dismantled (1919). In 1930 a bust of Lenin was erected on the square for a short time, which was subsequently replaced by a statue of Stalin at the end of the 1940s. After considerable Soviet reconstruction during the 1950s, a monument of Karl Marx was instituted in 1968. The Karl Marx monument was dismantled in 1993 as it did not represent the ideology of the new Uzbek state. In 1993, celebrating the anniversary of the Uzbek independence, the bronze horse statue of Amir Timur was revealed and the square adopted its present name. Amir Timur was proclaimed the symbol of Uzbek national identity. Once the pro-Timurid direction of cultural production and activities in modern Uzbekistan became manifest, the Amir Timur Square was adorned with the Timurid Museum (1996) and the Palace of International Forums in 2009.

The Palace of International Forums 'Uzbekistan' was completed in an exceptionally short timeframe of only six months. Its doors opened on 2 September 2009 to coincide with the celebrations of the Uzbek Independence Day on 1 September, and with Tashkent's 2200th anniversary. The client of the project was the 'Republic of Uzbekistan'. The country's most important representative building is designed for congresses,

Fig.1 (left): Amir Timur Square.

Fig.2 (left): Khazrat Imam Mosque.

Fig.3 (left): Khazrat Imam.

Fig.4 (left): Bibi Khanum Mosque.

Fig. 5 (above): Congress Centre, Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Designed by the Ippolito fleitz Group, 2009. Photography © Zoöey Braun.

Footnote image: Detail Sun Face.

All photographs by author (2013), unless otherwise specified.

conferences and cultural events. Commissioned in March 2009, the German architectural bureau Ippolito Fleitz Group<sup>3</sup> created a contemporary interior while incorporating elements from traditional Uzbek architecture. Their interior design won the 'Best Architects 11 Award'.<sup>4</sup>

The exterior of the building is colossal and robust. The glazed façade is decorated with white columns of Thassos marble with traditional Uzbek capitals. The massive, semi-circular corners remind one of the gigantic *guldasta* (corner towers) of the Timurid Yasawi Shrine (14th century). An elaborate cornice executed in white marble finishes off the exterior wall. A Shaybanid architectural quotation comes in the form of the solar detail (below) taken from the tympanum of the Shir-Dar Madrasa in Samarkand, and is used here on two rectangular niches on the façade facing the Amir Timur Square.

The surface area of the palace measures 40,000 square metres, spread across four levels. Millions of Swarovski crystals were used for the chandeliers, precious metals were incorporated into the design, and 850 eight-pointed marble stars were inlaid in 18 natural stone formats. The most characteristic design feature of the foyer is the massive twenty-three metres long chandelier executed in 1,1 million Swarovski crystals. Another eight spherical chandeliers decorate the gallery (fig.5).

Protruding into the gallery, the exterior of the auditorium with 1,850 seats forms an organic counterpart to the strict geometrical design of the façade and the sixteen-meter high window axes. The seats are upholstered in turquoise blue. This is a metaphor for the lapis lazuli, a colour that has become indigenous to Timurid architecture and has been widely used for glazed tiles and ribbed domes in Samarkand. The carpets are hand-woven, referring to the century-old carpet industry of Uzbekistan. The palace is a masterpiece of white marble. The magnitude of the project, the choice of the most expensive materials and the global character of the project logistics only testify that no expense was spared throughout the construction.

## Conclusion

This sketch is a modest attempt to shed more light on the building activities in Tashkent during the last decade. It stresses the importance of the Timurid and Shaybanid heritage for the formation of the architectural landscape of Tashkent. The new constructions range from complex religious compounds to public buildings. The style is eclectic. While the majority of the earlier renovations were carried out by local artisans and architects, there is a tendency in the last couple of years to open the state commissions to foreign companies. As a result, new architectural gems have been created by using the latest technology. Obviously, the state assets are used for creating the new image of independent Uzbekistan as a reliable business partner on a global scale.

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## Notes

- 1 ISESCO was established by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in May 1979. ISESCO is one of the largest international Islamic organizations specialising in the fields of education, science & culture. Its headquarters are in Rabat, Morocco.
- 2 Uzbekistan's highest religious leader.
- 3 The information in this article is based on the Ippolito Fleitz Group's press release on the Palace of International Forums. The reproduced pictures are free press images as defined by the Ippolito Fleitz Group.
- 4 Architectural award for the best and most interesting project of German/Austrian/Swiss architects. For more information, please refer to the award website at: <http://bestarchitects.de/de/award/info.html>

