

Report on Soviet Central Asia*

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In May 1986 I accompanied a group of major donors to an American museum, some major collectors as well, to Tashkent, Bukhara, Panjikent, and Samarqand (as well as Vladimir and Suzdal not far from Moscow). The trip to the "Islamic" part of the Soviet Union lasted seven days and, as is nearly always the case in the Soviet Union, was in the hands of *Intourist* both for practical details of travel and for assistance in visiting monuments and sites, although we established from the beginning that, after the guide's explanations, I could add a few words of my own. These were all places I had visited more leisurely eleven years earlier and I am therefore able to draw certain conclusions about the changes which have occurred as well as about their implications for the future. Furthermore, I had written in advance to a colleague in Tashkent who had arranged special visits to the new museums in Tashkent and Samarqand.

Most of the trip was in Uzbekistan, the third largest and most rapidly growing Soviet republic; Panjikent alone was in Tajikistan, the Persian-speaking republic, but many Tajik speakers are found in Samarqand. I did not visit then or earlier Turkmenistan or Kazakhstan, nor the semi-autonomous Karaqalpak area. Uzbekistan, by accident, design, and in fact historical development since the sixteenth century, dominates most of the Turkic area of the Soviet Union (with the exception of Azerbaydzhan west of the Caspian sea) and forms the Soviet *pendant* to Xinjiang within the Chinese system.

I shall divide this report into two parts: firstly, a description of architecture and architecture related features with the aims of identifying what is available to be seen and of evaluating its quality and importance for architecture in the Muslim world; secondly, a discussion of a number of issues which affect our "intelligence" of the Muslim architectural heritage or contemporary creativity.

ARCHITECTURE AND PEOPLE

Bukhara. Bukhara was the last of the centres of Central Asian Islam to have been occupied by the West, as it was only after the success of the Bolshevik revolution (around 1920) that it lost its nominal independence; until that time, a small Russian settlement had been established nearby, mostly in relationship to the railroad station, but the local amir ruled quite independently. It contains two masterpieces of early Islamic architecture, the tenth century Samanid mausoleum and the twelfth century Kalayan minaret. There is one secondary early monument, the twelfth century Majok-i Altari Mosque façade. A fourteenth century funerary ensemble (Chashm Ayub) and a fifteenth century *madrassa* sponsored by Ulugh Beg, are of secondary importance. A sizeable group of mosques and *madrassas* (ten to my knowledge) of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries exist for the most part arranged in clusters around open spaces or large pools within the city. There is a covered bazaar,

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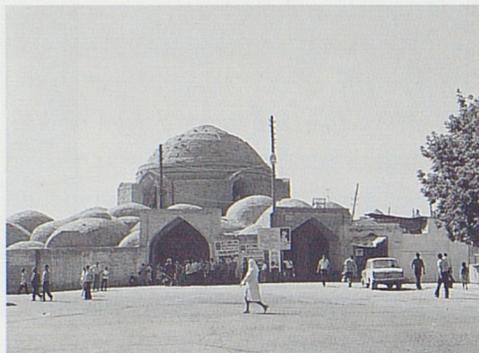
of which only three or four domed crossroads have been preserved and a citadel so often redone that it reflects mostly a nineteenth century state. There are a number of monuments in outlying parts of the oasis, of which only one was visited, the quaint country villa built by the last amir as a sort of Trianon in a Petersbourg sauce, but interesting because a local craftsman was asked to decorate a westernised hall, while Russian designers were expected to do the "oriental" ones.

When I visited Bukhara eleven years earlier, most of the buildings were in an advanced state of decay and the large ones were used for squatter inhabitation. The Kalayan minaret and the Samanid mausoleum alone were in a reasonable state of preservation, while the Mir Arab Mosque was used (as it still is now) as the one major centre of Islamic learning in Central Asia; I could visit it in 1973 and speak in Arabic with its teachers; I did not try to do so this time, as the circumstances of my visit did not make it appropriate. Since 1973 Bukhara, together with Khiva, Suzdal, and perhaps other cities in the U.S.S.R. were proclaimed museum-cities and, in Bukhara, a massive programme of cleaning and restoration has begun. Thus the Kalayan Mosque is being repaired, the three buildings around the Liab pool have been for the most part (but not entirely) vacated, the streets cleaned to a sanitised degree, and a vast new rectilinear city of administration, institutions, and apartments built around the old city. The Samanid mausoleum has become the focal point of a handsome park with a Ferris wheel in the background and a new and fairly lively bazaar nearby. The Chashm Ayub ensemble has been repaired but is mostly used as a storage place whilst the Magok-i Attari Mosque has become the local discotheque, a rare instance of this type of adaptive reuse. There are street lights everywhere, buses circulate from one end of the city to the other. Every quarter is provided with a primitive dispensary. National costumes have almost disappeared except for the ubiquitous *ikat* fabric of women's clothes and the caps of men. The vast majority of the population is Uzbek and Europeans are quite clearly a minority.

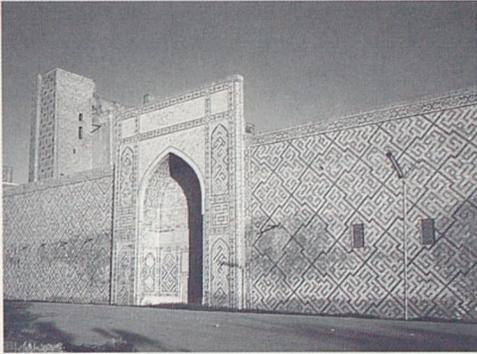
The work of restoration is done by students in a local art school; the idea is good, but there was very little supervision and the students had done little research. For instance, inscriptions were mirror-reversed instead of being copied, as no one knew the Arabic alphabet.

In a few years, the programme of restorations will be completed and Bukhara will become a true tourist city in the Soviet style; antiseptic and soulless monuments adapted to a city whose real life will for the most part have moved elsewhere. The emphasis will be on a vertical past emphasising local intellectual and folk heroes (it is curious that there is a life-size statue of Nasrettin Hoca on one of the main squares). Processions of buses with visitors will be given an explanation of history which is not so much inaccurate as partial; there will be thousands of postcards and folk dances for foreigners.

Samarqand. From the moment of arrival at the airport and especially during the short drive to the city, an entirely different atmosphere prevails. Samarqand is a large (400,000 inhabitants) and very active city on a much more uneven terrain with clearly demarcated areas. There are the immense ruins of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic city known as Afrasiyab. Ulugh Beg's stunning observatory is located at the edge of the ruins. There is the deep ravine, with the old cemetery and the moving sanctuary of Shah-i Sindah; also the "old city" which has lost nearly all of its traditional character, but whose imperial Timurid and later monuments (the Bibi Khanum Mosque, Registan, Gur-i Amir, traces of an old bazaar) dominate everything around them. A nineteenth – twentieth century city of wide tree-lined avenues with pre-revolutionary buildings alternates with new Soviet constructions which include a huge opera house, a university, the main hotel, and beyond it all apartment complexes and eventually outlying villages in the lush valley.



Bukhara, remains of sixteenth century bazaar.



Samarqand, Ulugh Beg madrasa, side wall, early fifteenth century.

The main points of historical interest are:

- *Ulugh Beg's observatory*, part of whose immense underground sextant has been preserved in the midst of the foundations of the building. Nearby stands a well organised small museum on Ulugh Beg and astronomy. A project exists for rebuilding the observatory more or less according to the plans and calculations made by Prof. Bulatov, the most brilliant scholar of Uzbekistan. However well intentioned and probably attractive to visitors, the whole idea is a historical menace, as it would freeze a single and by necessity hypothetical reconstruction.
- *The Shah-i Sindhah*. This is a series of private mausoleums of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries along a narrow path leading up to the sanctuary of Kutham b. c'Abbas, a relative of the Prophet alleged to have been killed during the conquest of Central Asia. It is still a holy place, although not officially. The anti-religious museum of atheism which had been set in the mosque at the entrance of the complex has been replaced by a souvenir shop. The monuments have for the most part been well repaired and are accessible throughout, including the sanctuary of the holy man which has been beautifully cleaned and in which a careful programme of restoration of paintings goes on. The Shah-i Sinda, with its festival of colour and of architectural techniques, is a true architectural masterpiece and a place of piety, whose transformation into a museum has in no way altered its emotional impact. It has been the subject of much archaeological work and of several excellent publications in Russian.
- *Bibi Khanum Mosque*. This was the somewhat megalomaniac congregational mosque built by Tamerlane. Eleven years ago it was in ruins and its façade as well as its sanctuary dome and *iwan* were standing impressively but precariously against the blue sky. An immense work of restoration is taking place there, with no less an objective than to rebuild the mosque almost entirely. Two of the *iwans* and one of the domes have already been redone in reinforced concrete and the process of covering up with copies of remaining designs is well under way. Although I realise that something major had to be done, I have the feeling that these restorations are overdone and that they will falsify the appearance of a grandiose mosque, perhaps because there was something totalitarian in its architectural grandeur. The technical work of restoration struck me as one of very poor quality in details, probably because of the absence of good craftsmen.
- *The Registan*. This is a complex of three buildings, one (Ulugh Beg's) of the fifteenth century, the other two of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, creating together a large open space which was the hub of the old city. The three buildings have been more or less entirely restored, on the whole well, especially Ulugh Beg's *madrasa*, which is a true masterpiece of elegance and refinement. A *son et lumiere* programme is given there at weekends, which recounts the history of the city up to the time in the 1920's when the women of Samarqand formally threw off their veils on the Registan. The space in front has been successfully designed for performances and as a park.
- *Gur-e Amir*. This is the majestic tomb of Tamerlane, fully restored and with all exterior parts beautifully cleaned. I could not judge the quality of the work done in all details, but it struck me initially as very good.
- A newly built museum with a superb historical collection of paintings and ceramics, but also with excellent coverage of nineteenth and twentieth century popular art, especially textiles which are wonderfully exhibited. It has a large staff of six or seven curators, partly Russian and partly Uzbek. The museum is of excellent design but poor construction. It has an inadequate library.
- There are other buildings of interest in Samarqand and its region which are accessible on demand.

Panjikent. Here there are ruins in the process of excavation, some 80 kms to the east of Samarqand and some 300 km to the West of Kashgar, on the Silk Road. The excavations, whose finds are mostly in Leningrad, are among the most spectacular in Asia, as they, with a few others, led to a total re-evaluation of pre-Islamic Central Asia. The site itself is most spectacular in a setting with the snow-capped Altai beginning around it and leading eventually to the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas. In the village nearby, there is a museum of zoology, ethnography, and history.

I mention Panjikent for two reasons. One is that it is an occasion to see the fantastic urban transformation of a minute village of old with dozens of large buildings fulfilling new administrative, medical and educational functions.

The whole area has a strong Tadjik nationalism. The other reason for mentioning it is that the trip is a wonderful occasion to see the enormous development of irrigated agriculture and of sources of energy.

Tashkent. For the general purposes of the Award, Tashkent, the fourth city in the Soviet Union (1.8 million inhabitants and the capital of Uzbekistan), should be studied in great detail, because it is a model in the creation of a new metropolis in the style of the Second World. Nature helped with an earthquake in 1966 which destroyed most of the traditional city. The reconstruction was rapid and allowed for a restructuring of the town and for the dislocation of its traditional fabric. The sprawling traditional city of adobe houses, of which a few examples remain, was replaced by wide avenues, large and fancy official buildings, and parks, while enormous apartment complexes on the outskirts reorganised the social structure of the town. A subway of a luxury unknown even in Moscow relates the various parts to each other. As opposed to the drabness of so many Russian cities, here an effort was made to provide buildings with colour and with more original designs than is normally the case. With the monument to the earthquake, a visual symbolism based on contemporary events and their subsequent mythification is being created. The tight and small old native city is lost in the growth of a metropolis, as are the remains of a late nineteenth century Russian administration and garrison town.

The "monuments" of Tashkent are the opera, two hotels, the museum, a department store, and so on; the instruments of contemporary life. In a city which is two thirds Uzbek only, nearly all the slogans are in Uzbek, whereas in Bukhara they were in Russian. The new museum is of very high quality in design, technique of exhibition and pedagogical purposes. Its large staff is extremely competent. It is the pride of the academic Tashkent, which, through G.A. Pugachenkova, L.I. Rempel, and A. Bulatov, is a major school of historical and archaeological learning. Most of the exhibition space is once again devoted to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The detailing of the construction and the finish are mediocre, but not as bad as in hotels or in more provincial places.

In general, however, Tashkent seems to me to represent one model of modernisation, which, in spite of or because of its Second World methods, ought to be better known by the Award: it depicts the construction of a modern city with an ethnically mixed population in the process of cultural homogenisation and with a "universal" ideology (Communism) in national (Uzbek) garb.

ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

Uzbekistan and I assume other republics of Central Asia as well as Azerbaydzhan have undergone an almost total physical and mental revolution, far greater than in Russia proper or anywhere else in the Muslim world. The technical, educational, and economic infrastructure for contemporaneity is in place, the emancipation of women irreversible, the building of spaces for modern activities on its way, if not

already there. Tashkent or Samarqand seek comparison with the First World, not with the Third World, and the means to achieve all of that are those of the Second World. *Faust*, *Carmen*, and *Otello* were on the programmes of theatres, together with contemporary local plays, and Shakespeare was performed in Uzbek.

- All of this is accompanied by a true worship of the past and of its monuments, which are for the most part reconstructed and maintained. But this worship is couched almost exclusively in national terms, the Uzbeks being seen as the successors of the Soghdians, a kind of absurdity which amuses historians but which had parallels in imperial Iran. The means for the knowledge of the past are, however, almost entirely through scholarship in Russia, as there is very little knowledge left of Arabic, relatively little of Persian, and the cyrillisation of the alphabet has made access to old Turkish difficult. Islam is rarely talked about and knowledge of the faith or of its practices and implications is limited. What has replaced it all is, it seems to me, a sort of national communism which is seen as the motor for change and success. Traditional Islam is only visible in its most superstitious folk ways, at least in the large cities, and appears most of the time as a negative and obscurantist feature opposed to progress.
- In the area of building, the contrast is striking between the ambition of the projects, the often acceptable if pedestrian quality of the designs (with some exceptions in Tashkent or the Samarqand museum), and the miserable quality of execution, where even simple concrete T-blocks never seem to fit with each other. The state of plumbing is nearly disastrous and, with occasional exceptions, the finish of anything which requires craftsmanship is miserable. The process of construction is also rather curious, as the landscape is filled with cranes, most of which are not working, and with huge construction projects with only a dozen working people. I do not know the explanation for this phenomenon, but I am sure that formal Sovietologists do.
- It is a world trying to create visual symbols for itself. The means, however, are almost exclusively those of western sculpture and, except for the rather successful earthquake sculpture in Tashkent, most of these symbols are not inspiring. I have often wondered, as I watched people there, what in their own minds most easily identifies them as different or as themselves. It is probably clothes, as Uzbeks alone wear consistently their little skull caps and the *ikat* imitating dresses. It probably no longer is Islam, at least not in the large cities, but how easily and how well can a secular ideology of this type survive? And how exportable is it?
- The striking contrast between poor execution and high ambition in major restoration projects raises a fundamental question: does it matter? It seems to me that accuracy in reconstruction may only be a scholar's wish but not the expectation of a monument on the part of a culture. There is a subject for future discussion.
- Finally, I feel that it would be worthwhile to learn more about the issues of architecture, past and present, in Soviet Central Asia and I urge that the means to do so be developed. The reason is not simply that here is a large body of Muslims undergoing the most irreversible revolution of any Muslim land. Nor is it that the vehicle of the revolution, communism, is being exported elsewhere. It is rather that the Central Asian experience, in many ways like the Turkish one with which it has a lot in common, illustrates one of the available ways of modernisation and change, one which sees in national pride allied with a theoretical ideology a possible substitute for older ways. The problem is that both the ideology and the access to national pride have to go through an alien language and alien power. At this stage, I suspect, Russian control of the political process is a price that can be paid for material and educational progress, but can it last?