

AKPIA Travel Grant Report
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Bukhara: the Case of Urban Amnesia

Bukhara, a former leading Islamic center from the 9th to the 16th century, went through major changes and modifications starting in 1924 when it was included into the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. As a result of early Soviet destruction, neglect, and repurposing of historical monuments, by the 1930s, Bukhara's commercial life was diminished and religious life largely ceased to exist. Bukhara's physical environment was targeted in order to foster a new system of social relations and norms that corresponded to the Soviet socialist ideals.

With decreasing decentralization and the growing nationalist sentiment in the 1960s, conservation of historical Bukhara gained a special prominence. It started to play an important role in late Soviet ideological campaign of nation-building in Uzbekistan and in the shaping of a new, modern image of the country. Maintaining architectural heritage was regarded as a prestigious attribute of a modern society, which late Soviet Uzbekistan aspired to be. Consequently, propaganda and restoration of Bukhara's monuments sharply increased in the 1960s-1980s. Sudden rise in restoration went hand-in-hand with its increasingly deteriorating quality. Undocumented full reconstructions of monuments, lack of historical accuracy, use of synthetic materials and untraditional construction techniques were widely used throughout the 1960s-1980s to restore as many monuments as possible in the shortest time.

When in 1991 Uzbekistan gained independence from the Soviet Union and was left with a post-independence dilemma of establishing its national identity, restoration of architectural heritage continued to play a vital role in the process of constructing a new image of a new country (Fig. 1). Developed in the 1960s, technocratic approach to restoration and accelerating downfall of quality continued into post-independent Uzbekistan. While late Soviet restoration in Bukhara was generally regarded as destructive and undocumented, contemporary restoration brought both trends on a different level, leading the international community to wonder whether one can still call Bukhara's monuments "historical" given the current practices of restoration.



Figure 1: Bukhara today: Madrasa Kukeldash in the center of the city. August 2011. Image is courtesy of the author.

With the aid of the AKPIA Travel Grant, I traveled to Bukhara during the summer of 2011 to carry out field research on how contemporary Uzbekistan negotiates with and interprets its past through the current practices of conservation of architectural monuments in Bukhara, given its Soviet past. During my trip I set to answer the following questions: What is the meaning of Bukhara’s architectural heritage and its restoration in Uzbekistan today? What is the message contemporary Uzbekistan is trying to communicate through their practices of restoration? And to what degree is there continuity between late Soviet and contemporary methodological approaches to conservation?

I approached these questions through two main sources. The first one was Uzbekistan’s media reports on contemporary conservation projects, which included both the propagandist perspectives and the opinions of private sector agencies. This source was particularly useful for two interconnected reasons: the obvious lack of other literary sources on the subject matter, and architectural conservation in today’s authoritarian Uzbekistan being linked to the larger political issues which makes it a problematic subject for contemporary scholarship.

The second part of my project involved fieldwork. I was able to talk to the following people: two individuals from the Bukhara Regional Committee for Conservation and Use of Historical Monuments, the director of the Ark Museum in Bukhara involved in some of the projects on restoration of Bukhara's urban heritage, and two independent scholars working as archeologists in Bukhara and Samarkand. Personal interviews helped me collect detailed stories of restoration of several architectural monuments in Bukhara, which I used as a starting point for conclusions on the methodological approaches in contemporary restoration practices. Finally, I had a chance to visit the Central State Archives in Tashkent. Although looking at some of the information concerning restoration during the Soviet era was helpful, I had extremely limited and selective access to the materials available in the archive.

By examining local media reports, UNESCO reports, archival materials, talking to local people, as well as to scholars and officials who deal with the conservation of monuments in Bukhara, I gathered a richer understanding of how conservation of Bukhara's urban heritage today reflects the larger struggles and attempts of post-independent Uzbekistan to deal with the search for the national identity and the process of national image construction.

Preliminary research led me to conclude that today, historical monuments in Bukhara are objectified and branded as nothing more than the glorious legacies of the national past. They are being conserved for the purpose of existing literally as *stage props* and *backdrops* for the national celebrations (Fig. 2). In this authoritarian regime, these celebrations are effectively used by the government to communicate with people and to present formal account of Uzbek national history.¹ There are 57 official national holidays, anniversaries, and festivals in Uzbekistan today. Some of the holidays remained from the Soviet era, but many were "invented" after Uzbekistan's independence in 1991. The ultimate goal of such celebrations is to reinforce the ethnically defined national traditions and collective traits, such as hospitality, in order to create a cultural and ethnic construct of "Uzbeks" that is different from other Central Asian people. This construct is used by the government to establish Uzbekistan as a legitimate nation in the world. Urban heritage of

¹ Due to an authoritarian regime, people in Uzbekistan do not have much of a chance and appropriate conditions to voice their opinion on any subject matter. The state does not engage in two-sided dialogues with its citizens. Public mass celebrations, which are equally plentiful in Uzbekistan today as well as during the Soviet era, became the only way to create a seaming communication between the authoritarian state and people. The content and message of such cultural celebrations is usually rigidly controlled by the state. These celebrations are enthusiastically organized by the state officials to give a uniform and forced picture on any concern in contemporary Uzbekistan's society, and envisioned by the state to serve as a point of reference for regular people of what and how to think. More on this topic can be found in the book by Laura Adams "The Spectacular State: Cultural and National Identity in Uzbekistan" (2010).

historical cities like Bukhara, which, according to random Soviet demarcation in the 1920s, happened to be assigned to the new geopolitical entity of Uzbekistan, is opportunistically used by the modern state to showcase rich cultural and historical roots, ultimately hoping to acquire a more respectable place in the international community.



Figure 2: Celebration of the Spring Festival in Bukhara on the background of Madrasa Mir Arab, which is literally used as a *stage prop* for the national celebration. During the post-independent restoration of the madrasa a big platform in front of the monument was cut off in order to better accommodate national dance and singing performances. Image source: <http://gulnara-opa.livejournal.com/7994.html>. Accessed on March 5, 2012.

In addition, newly created holidays and anniversaries became one of the major reasons to initiate restoration, setting artificial deadlines for the work to be finished.² This trend in contemporary Uzbekistan takes its beginning from the Soviet era, when anniversaries served as one of the major incentives for any work to be

² One of the biggest anniversaries celebrated in post-1991 Bukhara was its 2,500th anniversary (1997). In the process of preparation for the anniversary many of Bukhara’s historical monuments have been restored with serious violations, such as “major re-facing and rebuilding of historical monuments and replacement of traditional architectural elements with inappropriate modern materials.” (Source: <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/periodicreporting/APA/cycle01/section2/602-summary.pdf>. Accessed on March 5, 2012). Other reports on violation of post-independent restoration of historical monuments in Bukhara can be found on the UNESCO website: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/602/documents/>. Accessed on March 5th, 2012.

done, including restoration of historical monuments.³ Together, unrealistic time constraints and artificial reasons for restorations to display historical monuments as *cultural trophies* glorifying Uzbekistan's national past, render quality and faithfulness to history unimportant (Figs. 3, 4).



Figure 3: “Beautification” of the area around *khanka* Nadir Divanbegi in Bukhara in preparation for the national holiday *Asrlar Sadosi* (Echo of the Century) celebrated in Uzbekistan from April 30th – May 1st, 2011. *Asrlar Sadosi* is a festival of traditional culture. In 2011 it was organized by Gulnara Karimova (the President’s daughter). Image on the right shows the area around *khanka* Nadir Divanbegi in March 26, 2011; image on the right shows the same monument only a couple of months later, in August 2011. Images source: Left: <http://sporim.uz/?p=6914>. Accessed on March 5, 2012. Right: photograph by the author, August 2011.



Figure 4: “Beautification” of Bukhara done in preparation for national holiday *Asrlar Sadosi*. Recently found archeological site in the center of Bukhara was quickly displayed as a one of the tourist attractions of the city without allowing for a proper archeological study. In the process of sloppy covering up of the monument in order to make it “displayable” for the tourists, the archeological site suffered destruction and some of the information, that could be extracted if proper archeological study was possible, was lost for good. The image on the left shows condition of the archeological site on March 26, 2011; and the image on the right shows the same site a couple of months later, in August 2011. Images source: Left: <http://sporim.uz/?p=6914>. Accessed on March 5, 2012. Right: photograph by the author, August 2011.

³ For example, 35 monuments in Bukhara had to be restored within two years for the “made-up” 1,000th anniversary of Ibn Sina in the 1980s. Source: Ashrafi, Krukov, “Results of the X Five-Year Plan and New Perspective of the Development of Protection Organizations in the XI Five-Year Plan,” *Architecture and Construction in Uzbekistan* 6 (1981): 4-5.

The majority of contemporary restoration is done without adhering to traditional materials and techniques and without the use of historical references, simply because they no longer exist. The restoration projects instead are projects of state “re-imagination” of how monuments could have looked or should have looked (Fig. 5). Not only are separate parts of the monuments modified without proper documentation, whole buildings, architectural complexes, and even their locations are “re-imagined” by the contemporary state. An example of such “challenging” or “correction” of history in Uzbekistan is the restoration of *mazars*.⁴ The approach to the restoration of *mazars* is generally characterized by partially or completely removing the original monuments, replacing them with new and more glorified versions of the old buildings. Recently, there has also been an active attempt to rebuild some of Bukhara’s *mazars*, which were completely destroyed during the early Soviet era. However, due to the absence of any available information on their location and what these long-destroyed *mazars* originally looked like, new buildings and their locations often have nothing to do with the original monuments.



Figure 5: Examples of recent restoration of historical monuments in Bukhara. Top left: Restoration of the Ark Citadel - the oldest historical monument in Bukhara. In April 2011, part of the Ark’s wall collapsed. The collapse was due to the poor previous restoration of the same area in 2010. In both cases, there had been a serious violation of building techniques and materials while restoration. According to its original construction, the Ark was structurally supported by logs running through the thickness of

⁴ *Mazars* are large Sufi burial complexes and holy places for religious pilgrims. Bukhara, historically one of the most important religious centers of the Islamic world as well as a birthplace of one of the largest Sufi orders, Naqshabandi, has a great number of *mazars*.

the wall, which is filled with mud. During the last two times, restoration had been done with short pieces of logs, emphatically extruding outside the wall, creating only a visual effect of support, while concrete was used to structurally support the wall. **Top right:** Madrasa Abdulaziz Khan. Picture of the main portal and its *kitsch* restoration. Initially, the main portal of this *madrasa* was restored during the Soviet time in 1934. Old craftsmen carefully restored only damaged stalactites and put the date of the restoration. They did not dare renew the old ornaments. Despite the lack of historical sources, the main portal was fully restored recently without any historical references. **Bottom left:** Chor Bakr burial complex. During the recent restoration of this monument, it was decided by some bureaucrats that the complex should look white, despite the insistence of archeologists that the original color was gray. Traditional gray color was achieved through the traditional technique of burning brick twice and dipping it into natural yellow pigment solution. During the recent restoration, not only the technique was not followed, but the color of Chor Bakr was also visually modified to such degree that it is almost impossible to see the original monuments. **Bottom right:** Juma Mosque inside the Ark Citadel is another example of *kitsch*, undocumented restoration.

Today, restorations of monuments in Bukhara are primarily done to “beautify” the city⁵ in order to *show it off*, rather than restoring the buildings to preserve their historical accuracy. These beautification projects are also intended for Uzbeks to remind them of their rich heritage and of their belonging to one of the ancient civilizations, placing Uzbekistan as a nation in world history. In addition, such projects assure people that by taking care of the monuments the state is taking care of them as well. Through beautification projects and numerous national celebrations, the state is using its historical and cultural capital to distract its citizens from pressing socioeconomic problems, similar to the Roman idea of placating the masses with “bread and circuses.” This strategic move on the part of the authoritarian government is also intended to pacify small business owners in Bukhara who, in order not to jeopardize their businesses, have to enforce “donations” for the restoration of historical monuments.

As for the people who live in Bukhara’s historical core, restorations came to be associated with demolition of their homes and neighborhoods, regarded as birthplaces of their ancestors. Restoration of a single monument within the traditional residential fabric is usually followed by a 50 meters “clean-up” (demolition of residential fabric) perimeter around a monument to yield more impressive panoramic views. Short notice of eviction, as well as empty promises of compensation for relocation, are two major consequences of historical restoration that Bukhara’s residents are facing today. In addition, new projects aiming to improve infrastructure of historical Bukhara, seem to be implemented strictly for the benefits of tourism. As a result of recent gentrification in Bukhara, some of the public areas within the city that used to belong to the residents are now readjusted to accommodate tourists instead.

⁵ See Figures 3 and 4 for the example of beautification projects in Bukhara.

Bukhara's historical monuments are thus reduced to mere capitalization of the built environment to sell Uzbekistan as a destination for tourists interested in its religious, historical, Orientalist, and environmental attractions. Today, there is a great number of tourist websites advertising exotic images of Bukhara: blue domes, tall minarets, *muezzin* calls, "velvet nights and bright starts," *chaikhanas* (traditional tea places), *bazaars* with "Eastern" sweets and spaces. By presenting Bukhara as a "city-fairytale," "autograph of time," and "ancient civilization," such websites overemphasize *exotic Islamic-ness* of Bukhara, attempting to *freeze* it in time for the tourist's admiration.

In addition to selling the image, tourism has also become one of the main economic sectors in Bukhara, and is therefore directly correlated to the restoration of historical monuments. Quick and *kitsch* restoration is often a result of impatience to promote tourist development in Uzbekistan (Fig. 6). However, contemporary *kitsch* restoration have started to repel even tourists, who refuse to settle for Bukhara's obviously falsified and over-restored monuments. The fact that popular distaste failed to stop Uzbekistan's government from propagating the same practices of restoration points to the larger issue. Tourism is not the ultimate reason of the feverish zeal of the state to restore Bukhara's urban heritage at any price.



Figure 6: Images from the Uzbekistan's national tourism company, "Uzbektourism." Over the past decade, Uzbekistan has unfolded an extensive program to promote cultural, religious, and environmental tourism in the country. Images source: <http://www.uzbektourism.uz/en/>. Accessed on March 5, 2012.

In contemporary Uzbekistan, architectural heritage signifies a much larger and complex concept used as an important part of its identity construct. It signifies its aspiration for universal value, and the act of conservation emphasizes that

Uzbekistan has the same universal values as the rest of the modern world. The exaggerated contemporary practices of restoration almost desperately proclaim Uzbekistan's desire to assume equal standing with the rest of the global community and to elicit recognition as their peer.

Although tourism in itself is not the main reason for the declining quality of conservation, recently it has become one of the most deciding factors in choosing an approach to restoration and in dictating a very simplified and casual attitude to historical heritage in Uzbekistan. If Uzbekistan continues this trend of making tourism-dependent decisions on restoration and the remaking of the built environment, Bukhara will soon turn into an Orientalist theme park. While Uzbekistan should take advantage of its rich history in order to position itself strategically in the global stage, it needs to think about how to balance addressing the needs of its current citizens, making urban interventions in Bukhara in a more meaningful way, as well as preserving its historical monuments with greater respect to their rich history.