

# The Guzars of Shahrisabz

Nafisa Gilmanova

Leading Research Fellow

Institute of Art Studies, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan

**Abstract:** The article explores the issues of preserving traditional residential houses in the city of Shahrisabz and examines key principles for the integration of residential neighborhoods into a unified urban structure. Comparative examples are drawn from the historic cities of Khiva, Bukhara, and Samarkand.

**Keywords:** Residential houses, Shahrisabz, mahalla, traditional residential quarters, guzars, integration of residential neighborhoods.

## Introduction.

The city of Shahrisabz is one of the most significant cultural and historical centers in southern Uzbekistan, located along the Great Silk Road. With its ancient and rich history, Shahrisabz reached its peak during the medieval period, particularly in the 14th–15th centuries, under the reign of Amir Temur and the Timurids.

Due to the well-preserved urban structure, the historic center of Shahrisabz was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Site No. 885) on December 2, 2000, based on Criteria (iii) and (iv).

The territory of the historic center covers 240 hectares, with a buffer zone of 82 hectares. It encompasses outstanding architectural monuments of the Timurid era, as well as later structures and partially preserved traditional residential quarters, which once reflected the distinct character of the historic city.

Traditional residential houses in Shahrisabz share many similarities with the domestic architecture of Bukhara and Samarkand. Their layout is typically organized around an inner courtyard, often featuring a small transitional *aiwan*. Despite modest decoration overall, some houses – particularly their guest rooms (*mehmonkhona*) – still preserve painted ceilings to this day.

The old town layout of Shahrisabz consisted of one- or two-story timber-frame residential houses with flat clay roofs, grouped into residential quarters (*guzars*) according to social status.

These houses featured distinct and recurring spatial-planning elements, including an *aiwan* (open veranda), living rooms, and a designated guest reception area.

The residential streets within the *guzars* were narrow, with numerous dead-end branches, resembling long, high corridors bordered by solid clay walls (*duvals*) with small entrance doors.

The quarters were densely populated, ranging in size from 1.5 to 2.3 hectares, with a population density of 300 to 500 people per hectare. Within this vernacular urban fabric, neighborhood mosques were present, serving not only religious but also communal functions as spaces for addressing local issues.

Approximately 40 houses in Shahrisabz were once recognized as noteworthy examples of traditional architecture. However, little remains of the old and medieval dwellings due to widespread destruction and demolition.

## Materials and Methods.

In 1983, the Uzbek Scientific Research and Design Institute for Restoration (UzNIPI of Restoration) conducted a historical and architectural inventory of the old town fabric of Shahrisabz, documented in two volumes. The architectural survey drawings were carried out by Chief Architect A.K. Bogoukhov, Workshop Supervisor A.V. Korchuganov, and Chief Project Architect V.A. Bryukhanov<sup>1</sup>.

As of 2016, the historical part of Shahrisabz preserved medieval mahalla (neighborhood) names, along with their cultural traditions and artisanal crafts. These neighborhoods retained distinctive identities: Urda – the old part of the city, formerly surrounded by fortress walls and towers. It included administrative buildings, the ruler's palace, and other key institutions. Shahrisabz's Urda served as the administrative center of the city. The mahalla contained 202 houses.

Kunchikar – located on the side of the city's citadel where the sun rises. It consisted of only 4 houses.

<sup>1</sup> Archive of the Main Scientific and Production Department for the Protection and Use of Cultural Heritage Sites, Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Uzbekistan. – Tashkent, 1983.

Kaziguzar – meaning “mahalla of judges”, as it was home to city judges and high-ranking officials. It contained 383 traditional houses, 30 of which were historically significant.

Zingiron – named after the craft of saddle-making, which was essential due to the widespread use of horses and donkeys in the past. Saddles were in high demand among both civilians and the military. This mahalla had 504 houses.

Zargarlik – the mahalla of jewelers. Its name testifies to the ancient development of jewelry-making in Shahrissabz. It contained 95 houses.

Kulollik – the mahalla of potters. The name has survived unchanged through centuries, as pottery was a principal craft in Shahrissabz since its founding, with skills passed down through generations. The mahalla contained 516 houses.

Koshkhovuz – water supply was vital to the infrastructure of the historical city. Aryks (canals) and hauz (pools) played a significant role in water provision and in shaping the city’s microclimate. The name “Koshkhovuz” (“two pools”) reflects the presence of two water sources in one location. It contained 413 houses.

Khabarlik – meaning “message” or “news.” During the Bukhara Khanate, messages from the Emir of Bukhara entered through the gates of the Shahrissabz fortress located in this quarter. The name commemorates this historical function. The mahalla had 460 houses.

Namazgoh – located in the central part of the historical city. In medieval times, public prayers were held in this area, hence the name “place of prayer.” This mahalla consisted of 32 houses.

Uychilik – a small mahalla with 21 houses<sup>2</sup>.

Results. In May 2021, UNESCO international experts conducted a study of several preserved traditional houses in Shahrissabz.

The main characteristics of the traditional residential houses preserved to date were as follows: the houses had an inner courtyard; some houses featured a gallery of windows; some were two-story houses with a veranda on the second floor and space for cattle or sheep and goats; local materials were used — sun-dried bricks; there were several windows facing the street; a garden with fruit trees and irrigation channels (aryks), which were also connected to other houses or the street; an iwan opening into the garden; the inner courtyards contained abundant vegetation, vegetables, and fruits for household use; there was an entrance hall followed by the main room; niches (tokcha) for household items were located in the walls of the room between the frame posts; ceilings in the main rooms were decorated with floral patterns, with some ceilings bearing the construction date of the house (usually late 19th century); courtyards were divided into male and female sections; an external kitchen with a tandoor was present; several windows on the second floor faced the street; there were basements for storage; wooden windows and doors had been replaced with plastic or metal ones; flat traditional earthen roofs were covered with metal sheets and had storage spaces under the roof; walls were made of a wooden frame filled with sun-dried bricks; the foundation walls were made of fired bricks; the exterior walls were coated with clay and adobe plaster.

Traditional residential construction is still actively practiced in Shahrissabz today. This allows traditional houses to expand independently through construction carried out by the residents themselves.

The residential houses of Shahrissabz were distinguished not only by their structural features but also by a harmonious combination of functionality and aesthetics. Their compositional design emphasized a sense of proportion and organic forms, creating a cohesive and expressive architectural appearance.

The historically established old-town area – the ancient city of Shahrissabz along with adjacent neighborhoods from later periods – occupied the southwestern part of the city, covering more than 200 hectares. This district represented a complex historical and architectural ensemble, combining monuments from different eras, residential buildings from past centuries, as well as public and residential buildings constructed in recent decades.

Until the 19th century, the city of Shahrissabz preserved the integrity of its unique urban structure due to the slow pace of development, which mainly took place outside the city walls. Although some changes were made

<sup>2</sup> From the report prepared for UNESCO in 2016: Historic Centre of Shahrissabz. Management Plan System for the World Heritage Property and Its Implementation. Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Main Department for the Protection and Use of Cultural Heritage Sites, State Inspection of the Kashkadarya Region. – Shahrissabz, 2016.

to the city's layout during the Soviet period, the medieval appearance of Shakhrisabz remained almost untouched.

In the historical part of the city, there were 26 monuments and more than 200 residential buildings considered valuable from the perspective of architectural heritage. Extensive research, design, conservation, and restoration works began here in the 1970s, playing an important role in preserving the unique appearance of Shakhrisabz.

After the approval of the master plan in 2009, the planned activities in the center of Shakhrisabz began to be implemented, leading to significant changes in the urban environment. During these transformations, some houses were demolished.

The main trend was an increase in single-story residential buildings, the introduction of new urban planning standards and regulations, as well as improvements in urban infrastructure.

By the early 2000s, after more than a century of use, the residential houses in the central part of the historic city, built at the end of the 19th century, were in dilapidated and hazardous condition. The lack of sewage, water supply, and other necessary utilities created unfavorable living conditions, causing many residents to seek improved housing.

After conducting surveys and documentation, the dilapidated buildings were demolished, while architectural elements of historical value were preserved.

The measures implemented contributed to improving the living conditions of the residents in the historic center, enhancing the environmental situation, and reducing traffic congestion in the central districts. However, these changes affected the overall perception of the historic center.

To preserve it, surveying work was carried out, documentation was completed, and individual architectural elements of historical and artistic value were preserved.

In connection with the inclusion of the historic center of Shakhrisabz in the UNESCO World Heritage List, special attention was given to its preservation and development. To implement large-scale urban transformations, a special action program was developed and approved by the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. 31 dated February 20, 2014, "On the program of comprehensive measures for the development and reconstruction of the city of Shakhrisabz, Kashkadarya region."

After the demolition of the residential buildings surrounding the monuments and forming a cohesive historical and architectural ensemble, it became evident that the historic center of Shakhrisabz required further rehabilitation. Consequently, a decision was made to restore the traditional residential houses based on archival materials, measured drawings, and photographs, with the aim of returning the city's authentic appearance as fully as possible.

In the central part of historic Shakhrisabz, three traditional residential houses, built at the end of the 19th century, have been preserved and placed under the protection of the city's Cultural Heritage Protection Inspection. These houses were constructed using the *sinch* technology, in which a wooden frame was filled with unfired bricks. This type of construction demonstrated resistance to seismic activity but had a limited lifespan.

Based on scientific research, a restoration and rehabilitation project was developed for these three traditional architectural sites. Work was carried out to collect data and prepare conservation projects for the preserved residential houses in the historic center.

### **Objective.**

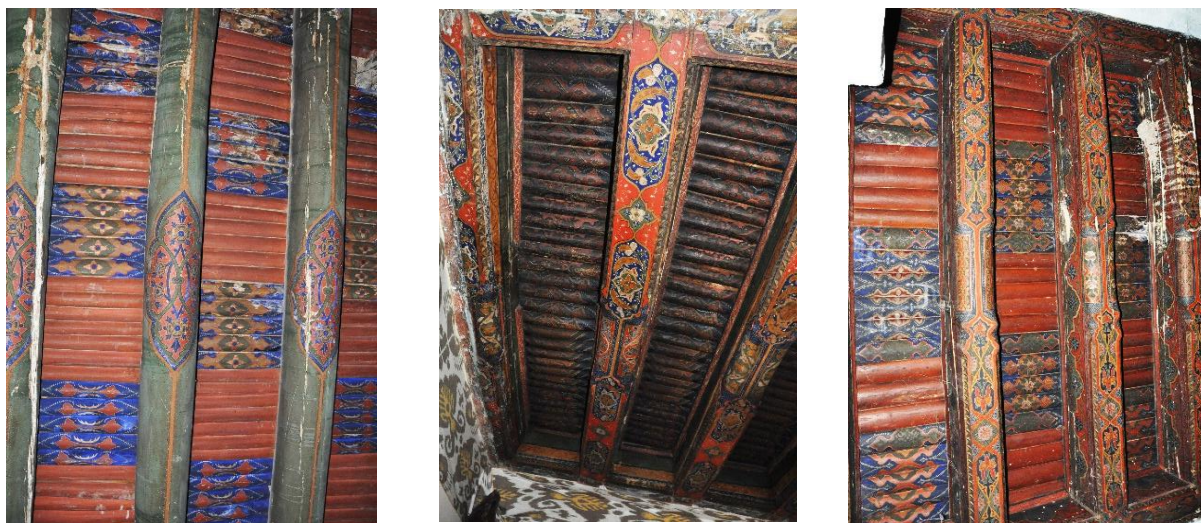
To preserve traditional housing, special attention should be given to integrating residential neighborhoods into the overall fabric of the historic center. Without this connection, the city loses its unity, turning into fragmented pieces without historical continuity. It is important to restore the visual and functional links between the center and residential areas, which requires reopening the traditional radial streets leading to the center, previously connecting the city's four parts. Currently, many of these streets are blocked by artificial barriers – these should be reconsidered and, in some cases, removed to restore the natural historical street structure.

According to the table from the 1983 album of drawings, the historic part of the city once contained a larger number of traditional houses, a significant portion of which has since been demolished. The following houses have survived: Kopkon Street, 45 – a house originally built in the 17th century. One block consisting of two rooms has been preserved to this day. The building currently operates as the Dalon Hotel. The interior retains carved wooden beams reflecting traditional decorative elements; Kozi Guzzar Street, 75 – a block of two



rooms has survived; Eshonpir Street, 36 – currently used as a hotel. The traditional inner courtyard and mehmonkhona (guest room) with carved beams have been preserved.

These buildings represent unique examples of traditional housing in Shakhrisabz and are important elements of the city's cultural heritage, requiring careful preservation and a professional approach to their conservation.



Examples of ceiling paintings in preserved residential houses of Shakhrisabz. Photo by I. Garifullin, 2019.

### Conclusion.

In June 2016, the World Heritage Centre, together with the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), expressed serious concerns regarding the implementation of the state program for the development and reconstruction of the historic center of Shakhrisabz. The main reason was the potential negative impact of the ongoing works on the authenticity and integrity of the site inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. As a result of a joint UNESCO/ICOMOS monitoring mission in March 2016, all reconstruction works were suspended.

The city's original urban structure was clearly legible: the planning concepts of its time, the boundaries of the city's historic growth, and the stages of its evolution were clearly traceable. The main compositional, planning, and functional axes, oriented in the medieval period from south to north and from east to west, as well as their connection with residential quarters and the surrounding architectural and planning landscape, were distinctly expressed.

According to the master development plan, the demolition of part of the residential buildings in the city center was aimed at opening panoramic views of the architectural monuments and enhancing the visual appeal of the historic core. However, despite the achieved results, the change in the urban fabric significantly affected the overall perception of the historic environment: the familiar spatial structure and the authenticity of the urban fabric were disrupted. This necessitated a reconsideration of approaches to the rehabilitation and recreation of the historical atmosphere of the center of Shakhrisabz.

As part of the efforts to rehabilitate the historic center, historians, architects, and restorers are working on developing a project to preserve the city's historic core and ensure its protection on the World Heritage List. One of the key measures is addressing the integration of residential neighborhoods and the reconstruction of traditional houses based on archival materials, measured drawings, and historical photographs. The preparation of a comprehensive rehabilitation project for the historic part aims to improve the condition and appearance of the city, as well as restore its unique cultural and architectural heritage.

The main principles of integration, i.e., uniting residential neighborhoods into a single urban structure, are: Consideration of historical and cultural value: Traditional residential buildings are not only architectural objects but also carriers of cultural and social heritage. When developing reconstruction and improvement projects, it is important to preserve authentic elements of façades, layouts, and decorations.

Architectural harmony: New constructions or renovated buildings should harmoniously fit into the existing architectural environment. This is achieved by using traditional building materials and architectural elements (such as arches, carved wooden doors, and windows).

**Social significance of residential neighborhoods:** The historic city center continues to be a living space, so it is important to consider the needs of the local population. Infrastructure development (roads, water supply, sewage systems) must be adapted to the conditions of dense historic development.

**Functional adaptation:** Some buildings may be repurposed for cultural or tourist uses; however, it is essential to maintain the residential function of historic neighborhoods. This will preserve the authentic atmosphere of the city and support active social interaction.

**Sustainable development:** Integration of residential quarters should consider ecological aspects such as energy efficiency and the use of renewable materials. This contributes to the long-term preservation of architectural heritage.

Such an approach helps not only to preserve architectural heritage but also to maintain the vitality of the historic center, preventing it from turning into a museum-like space without active urban life.

Examples and recommendations for preserving traditional residential buildings in Shakhrisabz, based on historic cities:

In Khiva (Itchan Kala), traditional residential houses have been restored while preserving their original layouts and decorative elements. The houses remain in use, with some buildings adapted into craft workshops and guesthouses. The combination of residential and tourist functions helps preserve cultural identity.

In Bukhara, traditional residential houses have been restored with preservation of adobe walls and carved wooden elements. Utility networks have been improved without disrupting the historic appearance. Maintaining the residential function supports the vitality of the city center and preserves the traditional way of life.

In Samarkand (Siab district), residential neighborhoods have been preserved with minimal changes to their exterior appearance. Residents actively participate in the maintenance and repair of houses using traditional construction technologies. The active involvement of local residents in the restoration process increases awareness and responsibility for heritage preservation.

Recommendations for the preservation of residential buildings in Shakhrisabz:

**Documentation and inventory:** Conduct a comprehensive inventory of traditional residential buildings with photographic records and descriptions of architectural features. Create an electronic database accessible to architects and restorers.

**Adaptation without loss of authenticity:** Partially apply modern construction technologies while respecting traditional materials (e.g., insulating walls while preserving the adobe texture). Use methods of concealed modernization (such as internal insulation and discreet replacement of utility systems).

**Community involvement:** Organize workshops for residents on preserving traditional construction techniques. Engage local craftsmen and workshops in restoration works.

**Support programs:** Provide subsidies for the restoration of houses in the historic area. Organize training in traditional crafts to stimulate local production and the use of authentic materials.

**Balance between tourism and housing:** Limit commercial use of residential buildings in the historic center. Develop regulations for the use of residential properties for tourism purposes to prevent the city from turning into a tourist "decor."

**Eco-friendly approach:** Use solar panels integrated into the traditional architectural appearance. Encourage the use of environmentally friendly and locally available materials.

The preservation of the traditional residential stock in Shakhrisabz is a complex task that requires a balance between restoration, modernization, and social function. By applying the experience of other cities and adapting it to local conditions, it is possible to preserve the living fabric of the historic center without turning it into a museum-like space.

## References:

1. Mankovskaya L.Yu. Architectural Monuments of Kashkadarya. (Guidebook on Kashkadarya Region). – Tashkent: Uzbekistan, 1979.
2. Nazilov D.A. Cult-Mythological Traditions and Symbols in the Architecture of Central Asia. – T.: Publishing and Printing House «Science and Technologies», 2022. 492 pages.
3. Sultanov Kh.T., Gilmanova N.V. Historical, Architectural, and Artistic Heritage of Kashkadarya. – Tashkent: Fan va texnologiyalar nashriyot-matbaa uyi, 2022. 328 pages.
4. Sukhareva O.A. On the History of the Cities of the Bukhara Khanate. – Tashkent, 1958.

- 
5. Yusupova M.A. Bukhara School of Architecture of the 15th–17th Centuries – (Features and Dynamics of Development). – Samarkand, 2022. – pp. 186–198.
  6. Materials provided by the State Inspection for Protection and Use of Cultural Heritage Objects of Kashkadarya Region, Archives of the Main Department of the National Protection of Cultural Heritage Objects of the Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the National State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan.
  7. From the report prepared for UNESCO in 2016: Historic Centre of Shakhrisabz. Management Plan System for the World Heritage Site and Its Implementation. Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Main Department for the Protection and Use of Cultural Heritage Sites. State Inspection of Kashkadarya Region. – Shakhrisabz, 2016.
  8. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/>
  9. <https://www.institutparisregion.fr/>