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TASHKENT MODERNISM: WHERE ARCHITECTURE BECAME A CIVIC ART

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Annotation: UNESCO's recognition of ten modernist landmarks reveals a Central Asian capital in which engineering, ornament, memory and public life were composed as a single artistic language.

Keywords: Tashkent Modernism; UNESCO World Heritage; Uzbek Architecture; Soviet Modernism; Central Asian Architecture; Monumental Art; Architectural Heritage; Cultural Identity; Urban Preservation; Twentieth-Century Architecture.

A city reconstructed—and reimagined

In July 2026, UNESCO inscribed "Tashkent Modernist Architecture: Modernity and Tradition in Central Asia" on the World Heritage List. The serial property brings together ten buildings and urban complexes created from the 1960s to the early 1990s: the Zhemchug residential building, the State Museum of History, the Central Exhibition Hall of the Academy of Arts, Kosmonavtlar metro station, the Big Solar Furnace, the Peoples' Friendship Palace, the State Museum of Arts, the State Circus, Chorsu Market and the Alisher Navoi Cinema Palace. The recognition is historically significant: it places the architectural culture of twentieth-century Central Asia within the international narrative of modernism, a narrative too often written primarily through Western Europe, North America and a small number of Soviet centres.

Tashkent's modernist identity cannot be explained by style alone. It emerged from a period of intense urban transformation, accelerated by the devastating earthquake of 1966. Reconstruction introduced broad avenues, new civic axes, public gardens, cultural institutions and experimental housing. Modernist planning offered speed, scale and technical confidence, while seismic engineering became a practical necessity. Yet the new city was never simply an imported model. Architects, artists and craftspeople transformed industrial systems through the climate, materials, social customs and visual traditions of Uzbekistan.

This is the central achievement of Tashkent modernism: standardisation did not eliminate artistic individuality. Reinforced concrete, prefabrication and large spans formed the structural vocabulary, but ceramic surfaces, patterned screens, mosaics, reliefs, carved elements, coloured glass and monumental lighting gave the buildings cultural depth. The resulting architecture is neither purely

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Soviet nor merely "Oriental" decoration applied to modern forms. It is a hybrid language in which technology and tradition continually reshape one another.

Architecture as a total work of art

From an artistic point of view, these buildings are best understood as total environments. Architecture establishes mass, rhythm and movement; monumental art adds symbolism, texture and emotional temperature. The façade becomes more than an enclosure. It behaves like a woven textile, a geometric painting or a vast ceramic panel whose appearance changes with distance and sunlight. Deep grilles and projecting screens produce shade while turning the harsh Central Asian sun into a design material. Light is filtered, fractured and coloured; shadow becomes a moving ornament.

The State Museum of History demonstrates this fusion with particular clarity. Its powerful concrete volume is softened and enriched by a lattice-like outer layer derived from regional geometry. The screen is simultaneously climatic device, structural expression and cultural sign. Rather than copying a historic motif, the architects enlarged and abstracted it until it became modern architecture. The building therefore communicates at several scales: as an urban monument from the square, as a field of pattern from the street and as a sequence of light and shadow for the visitor approaching the entrance.

Nearby, the Central Exhibition Hall makes the building itself participate in the act of exhibition. Its folded surfaces and mosaic ornament create a changing visual cadence, inviting the eye to travel across geometry, colour and relief. This dialogue between fine art and construction is especially relevant to Uzbekistan, where monumental painting, ceramics and architectural decoration have long been understood as public arts. In Tashkent's modernist period, these disciplines were not secondary embellishments; they were integral to the identity and social meaning of civic space.

Domes, cosmos and collective imagination

The State Circus and Chorsu Market show how the dome—one of Central Asia's most resonant architectural forms—could be reinterpreted through modern engineering. The Circus appears at once futuristic and familiar: its sweeping circular silhouette suggests a spacecraft, an arena and the form of a traditional bowl. Its expressive profile gives the city a piece of architectural theatre before any performance begins. Chorsu Market, by contrast, places a vast turquoise-green dome above the continuous life of commerce. The exposed structural frame makes engineering visible, while the dome restores monumentality to an ancient urban activity: buying, selling, meeting and exchanging news.

Artistically, Chorsu is powerful because it does not separate everyday life from beauty. The market's colour, scale and radial order elevate routine transactions into a collective spectacle. Beneath the dome, produce, voices, movement and filtered daylight form an ever-changing installation. The building is not a static object viewed from outside; it is completed by human occupation. In this sense, its real medium is public life.

Kosmonavtlar station offers a different kind of immersion. Blue ceramic surfaces, luminous glass columns and relief portraits of space pioneers transform underground transport into a poetic journey.

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The station translates the idea of the cosmos into colour, light, portraiture and repetition. Its artistic programme once carried the ideological optimism of the space age, yet today it can be read more broadly as a dream of human curiosity and transcendence. Commuters do not simply pass through a tunnel; they enter a carefully composed narrative environment.

Modernism translated into Uzbek social space

The Zhemchug, or "Pearl," residential tower reveals that localisation occurred not only through ornament but also through spatial ideas. Its suspended communal areas reinterpret the social logic of the mahalla—the neighbourhood shaped by proximity, shared space and everyday encounter—within a high-rise structure. The project asks a question that remains urgent for contemporary cities: can vertical housing support community rather than isolation? Its answer is architectural but also ethical. Modernity becomes meaningful only when it preserves possibilities for human connection.

The Peoples' Friendship Palace similarly combines monumental civic scale with an interior world of craft, pattern and ceremonial movement. Its architecture frames collective gathering as an event of visual dignity. The Alisher Navoi Cinema Palace, conceived for panoramic film, expresses another dimension of the era's optimism: architecture as a machine for shared imagination. The State Museum of Arts uses abstract geometry and an atrium-centred composition to create a measured transition between city, architecture and art. Together, these buildings demonstrate that Tashkent modernism was not one appearance but a family of approaches—social, technological, climatic and symbolic.

The responsibility of recognition

UNESCO status should not turn these places into untouchable monuments detached from contemporary Tashkent. Their authenticity depends in part on continued use: people living in Zhemchug, audiences entering cultural palaces, traders working at Chorsu and passengers moving through Kosmonavtlar. Conservation must therefore protect both material fabric and living function. Original ceramics, mosaics, metalwork, lighting, spatial sequences and landscape relationships deserve the same careful attention as concrete structure.

The greatest threats may come not only from demolition but from gradual visual erosion: insensitive additions, advertising, replacement finishes, altered windows, poorly planned towers and the loss of open space around a landmark. Preserving a modernist building requires preserving the way it meets the skyline, the street, vegetation and neighbouring public spaces. It also requires specialist knowledge, because twentieth-century materials often age differently from traditional masonry and demand scientifically informed restoration.

For international audiences, Tashkent offers an important correction to the familiar map of modern architecture. Here, modernism was not a universal formula imposed without change. It was translated through local artistry. The city's finest buildings show concrete learning from ceramic pattern, industrial construction learning from the courtyard, and technological ambition learning from the symbolic power of the dome. Their value lies precisely in these conversations.

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The UNESCO inscription is therefore more than an honour. It is an invitation to see Tashkent as a major artistic capital of the twentieth century—and to understand architecture as a form of collective memory. These buildings preserve the ambitions and contradictions of their era, but they also remain open to new meanings. When conserved with intelligence and kept within the life of the city, they can continue to do what great public art has always done: give form to identity, dignify ordinary experience and allow a society to imagine its future.

Editor's note and sources

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