

## Traditional Bukharian Houses and Mahallas: A Shared Vernacular Heritage at Risk

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### Abstract

*Beyond being a form of community expression, the traditional Bukharian houses and mahallas – neighborhoods - illustrate a close relationship with the environment as the use of earthen materials and the design of its urban fabric respond to the harsh desert climate. This World Heritage listed vernacular architecture and mahallas in Uzbekistan are a vulnerable and rapidly changing heritage. Traditional techniques and know-how are getting lost and replaced by new construction techniques that most of the time are causing irreversible changes. In addition, their special attributes that make them unique are also disappearing due to changes of ownership, alterations, and adaptive reuse. In this context, a fragment of this heritage, the Traditional Bukharian Jewish Houses, was identified and included on the 2020 World Monuments Watch program to advocate for their preservation while maintaining the diversity and livelihood of the communities. Since the Watch inclusion, the World Monuments Fund (WMF) and International Institute for Central Asian Studies (IICAS), in partnership with the Bukhara State University and other local partners, have been working on the Documentation and Conservation project. The team assembled for this project is carrying out an updated inventory of the three Jewish mahallas using digital technologies and documenting and assessing the physical conditions of the houses. Ultimately, the project seeks to create best practice conservation guidelines not only for the Jewish houses, but also for all the traditional Bukharian houses that will foster community awareness of traditional construction techniques. This paper presents the process, challenges, and preliminary results of the project contributing to the protection of this outstanding Bukharian vernacular and shared heritage.*

**Keywords:** Bukhara, vernacular architecture, heritage documentation, shared heritage.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Bukhara

The history of Bukhara, situated along the Silk Roads, is exceeding over 2000 years. As a vital economic, cultural and educational centre in Central Asia, it served as a major centre of Islamic culture for many centuries from the Caliphate period in the 8th century to the Sheibanid period of Uzbek rules, which started in the 16th century.

In 1983, the historic city of Bukhara, with over 100 monuments, including historic ensembles, mausoleums, madrasas, mosques trade cupolas, baths, caravansaries, was designated as a museum-reserve by the Council of Ministers of Uzbek SSR (Decree No.308-16.05.1983). Ten years later, in 1993, Bukhara was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, as the most complete example of a medieval Central Asian town, preserving its urban fabric and historic buildings and structures. In addition, the urban fabric of the

Historic Centre of Bukhara is characterized by its traditional vernacular architecture organized in traditional mahallas *neighborhoods*, including three Bukharian Jewish mahallas.

From 2008 to 2013 the UNESCO Tashkent Office together with the Department of Cultural Heritage, the former Board of Monuments of Uzbekistan, in cooperation with local and international universities, surveyed 131 historic monuments, 203 municipal buildings, and 4063 residential houses in the Historic Centre of Bukhara. The large-scale field campaign highlighted the emerging threats with an adverse impact on the traditional vernacular architecture of Bukhara (Vileikis & Allayarov 2015; 2014). These threats affect even more the traditional Bukharian Jewish houses due to the migration of the Bukharian Jewish community and the shared nature of their heritage in a multicultural and multi-ethnic city as Bukhara.

## 1.2 Historic Background

The exact date of the appearance of the Jewish community in Central Asia, and in Bukhara in particular, is currently unknown. However, the majority of authors consider the existence of several migrations of Jews to Central Asia mainly from Persia from the 6th century until the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD, resulting in the emergence of the unified community of Jews, referred to as Bukharian Jews, although living in various Central Asian cities, including Bukhara.

The Bukharian Jews lived in Muslim Central Asia in separate mahallas preserving their traditional culture, and, at the same time, absorbing Persian and Central Asian elements. This context ensured the development of the distinct culture and occupations of Bukharian Jews, also reflected in their unique vernacular architecture and the urban public spaces of their mahallas (Sukhareva, 1966).

As regards to Bukhara, the historic records of the 16th-century mention three Bukharian Jewish mahallas within the city walls: Kukhna, Nau, and Amiribod. The number of Bukharian

Jews in the city was counted approximately at 800 families in the late 19th century. The Revolution and the inclusion of the Bukharian Khanate into the Soviet state also affected the Bukharian Jewish community. According to the 1926 census decreased to 3314 people in the city (Almeev, 1998).

The further gradual decrease of the Bukharian Jewish population was related to the loosening of the policy of the Soviet Union in the 1970s. This allowed Soviet Jews, including Bukharian Jews to migrate to Israel. In 1980s the Bukharian Jewish population reached over 27 000 in the 1980s in its highest pick. This process developed further into a mass migration of Bukharian Jews to Israel and the USA following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the establishment of independent Uzbekistan in 1991. As of 2021, there are 170 Bukharian Jews living in Bukhara (IA Regnum, 2021) with a rich and vivid collection of traditional Bukharian Jewish vernacular architecture left in the urban fabric of the historic centre of Bukhara.

## 2. The Traditional Bukharian Jewish Houses: Documentation and Conservation Strategies Project

The Traditional Bukharian Jewish Houses two-year project was launched in 2020 by the World Monuments Fund (WMF) and the International Institute for Central Asian Studies (IICAS), in partnership with the Bukhara State University, Turin Polytechnic University in Taskent, UNESCO Tashkent Office, National Commission of the Republic of Uzbekistan for UNESCO, the Bukhara Branch of the Department of Cultural Heritage, and the City of Bukhara. The project is supported by the David Berg Foundation and World Monuments Fund (WMF, 2020).

Conditioned by the significance of vernacular architecture within the Historic Centre of Bukhara and its value for the diverse communities of this city, the project seeks to document and develop conservation strategies for the traditional Bukharian Jewish Houses and Mahallas.

### 3. Methodology

The methodology of the project follows a multidisciplinary approach including historians, architects, archaeologists, archivists, and heritage documentation specialists.

The first phase of the project included an assessment that was conducted at two levels of scale: mahalla (urban scale) and traditional houses (architectural scale). The mahallas were mapped with aerial photogrammetry. The limits were based on the area of the survey identified. The assessment of the houses was based on the archival documentation compiled by academics of the Bukhara State University, a literature review, the national heritage list of traditional houses (Republic of Uzbekistan 2019) in Bukhara provided by the Cultural Heritage Agency Branch in Bukhara, and aerial and terrestrial digital documentation, 3D heritage recording, door to door site survey, and questionnaires to owners/residents carried out by the WMF/IICAS team.

The houses surveyed were compared and ground-truthed with the UNESCO Tashkent Office survey of 2008-2013, to update and identify changes.

### 4. Identification of the Traditional Bukharian Jewish Houses and Mahalla

#### 4.1. Traditional Vernacular Architecture of Bukhara

The traditional vernacular architecture of Bukhara evolved over many centuries under the influence of economic, religious, and climatic conditions, shaping its unique features. The economic conditions overtime impacted the size of houses, the number of rooms, the building material and its quality and the number of floors reflected in the rational use of land resources in the historic center of Bukhara.

Only wealthy people could afford to build large houses with the use of imported timber, which ensured the durability of the construction.

Such houses usually had rich interior décor and required additional resources for heating in winters and conducting repairs.

The religious conditions affected parameters such as the height of buildings, their facades, entrances, and structures. One of the key differences for Islamic houses was conditioned by the strict division of the living space into female and male parts. Additionally, the traditional Islamic houses had two yards, one of them was the *tashkari* -external, accessible for guests, another was the *ichkari* – internal, used only by family members (Yusupova, 2004). In contrast the Jewish houses had only one living space and one yard.

The climate conditions played the most significant role. The Bukharian traditional houses usually did not have windows on the exterior facades. This was for their residents to be protected from the heat and the sand. There were usually two types of premises: summer and winter. Winter rooms were facing south and usually had a low ceiling. The summer hall facing north had very high ceilings. This was done to keep during the hot summer the house cool and comfortable (Vileikis et al 2017). These conditions applied to both types of traditional houses, Islamic and Jewish.

#### 4.2. Traditional Jewish Houses

The traditional Bukharian Jewish houses had similar features as the rest of the traditional houses in Bukhara, but also differed in some. The following six specific features were determined based on the archival sources analysis, field documentation, and stakeholders meetings.

Feature 1: Location. In Bukhara, there were three Mahallas of Bukharian Jews formed at different times in history: 1) Mahalla-i-Kukhna, starting around the 15th and in the early 16th centuries. Then the Jewish community was allocated additional land in the 17th and 19th and new mahallas developed: 2) Mahalla-I Nov, the new mahalla, and 3) Amirobad (Sukhareva, 1976). Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, due to the growth of the population, the extension area appeared (see Fig. 1).

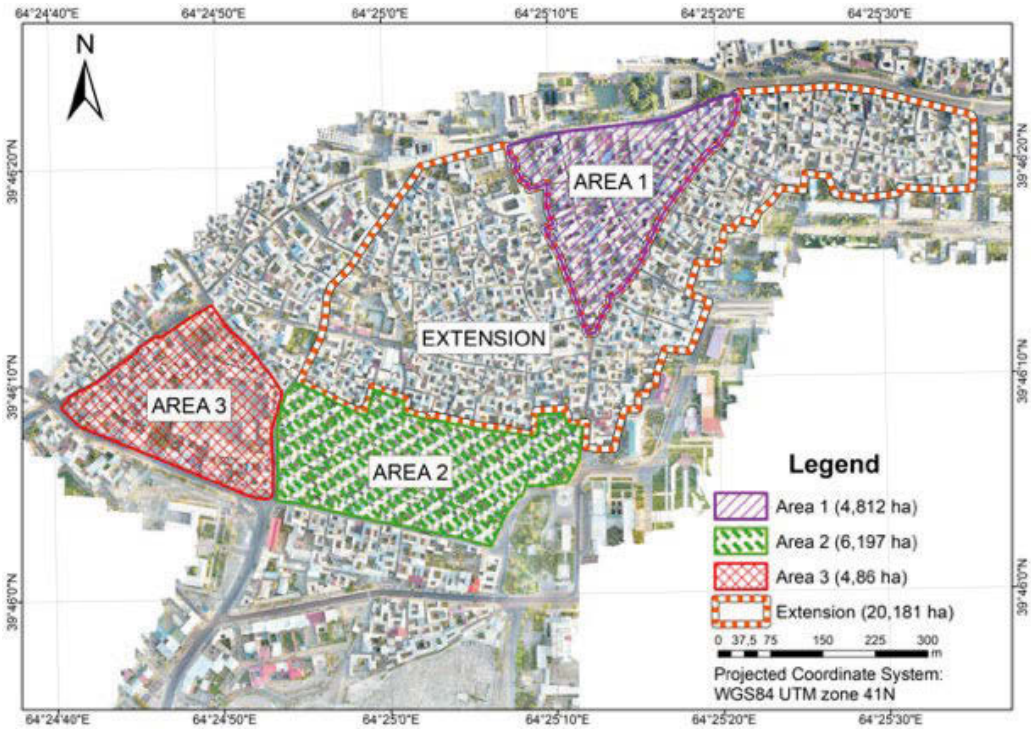


Fig. 1. Feature 1 of the traditional Bukharian Jewish houses: location, Mahalla-i-Kukhna is given as Area 1, Mahalla-I Nov is given as Area 2, Amirobod is given as Area 3 (Source: IICAS, 2022).



Fig. 2. Feature 2 of the traditional Bukharian Jewish houses: a mekhmonkhana oriented to the west (Source: IICAS, 2022)

Feature 2: Mekhmonkhana – *guest room*. The decoration of the mekhmonkhana was distinguished by some originality, especially in houses

where it could serve as a home synagogue (see Fig. 2). Torah scrolls and prayer accessories were kept in niches of the wall facing west to Jerusalem. In large houses of rich Jews in Samarkand, mezzanines with separate entrances were built near the eastern wall, on which women prayed (Arshavskaya, 2004).

Feature 3: Jewish decoration. In addition to the traditional floral and geometric ornaments for the Muslim East, the wall paintings included inscriptions in Hebrew, images of a six-pointed star, fish and birds, landscapes of holy places for Jews (Arshavskaya, 2004; see Fig. 3).

Feature 4: Low narrow entrance door (see Fig. 4). This feature of traditional Bukharian Jewish houses was initially conditioned by the fact that the Bukharian Jews were not allowed to have horses in the city, and, therefore, compared to Islamic houses, there was no need to have high and wide entrance gates (Yusupova, 2004).



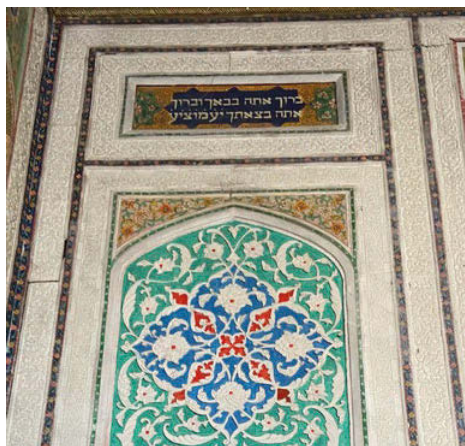


Fig. 3. Feature 3 of the traditional Bukharian Jewish houses: Jewish decoration (Source: IICAS, 2022)



Fig. 4. Feature 4 of the traditional Bukharian Jewish houses: low narrow entrance door (IICAS, 2022)



Fig. 5. Feature 5 of the traditional Bukharian Jewish houses: a corridor (Source: IICAS, 2022)



Fig. 6. Feature 6 of the traditional Bukharian Jewish houses: cellars system, a brick staircase connecting the cellars system and the lower courtyard with the upper courtyard (Source: IICAS, 2022)

Feature 5: *Dolon – corridor*. The low narrow entrance from the street led through a covered L-shaped corridor (see Fig. 5) to the cellars system and lower courtyard (*ruj howli*). The L-shaped corridors usually had two doors, including the entrance door and a door, closing the junction of the corridors, creating closed entrance space separated from the cellars system (Yusupova, 2004).

Feature 6: *Sytem of cellars*. Many Bukharian Jewish houses had a basement for storing food and wine vessels. However, in Bukhara, to compensate for the lack of land area, the basements were transformed into comprehensive cellars systems with household and traditional crafts production and storage facilities. The cellars system was arranged around the lower courtyard, which had a brick-paved roof and served as the floor of the upper open courtyard (Arshavskaya, 2004). The courtyards were connected by a central brick staircase.

Although, the absence of separation in the structure of the houses for male and female parts could be considered a feature of traditional Bukharian Jewish vernacular architecture, it was decided to

omit this characteristic due to its dynamic nature. The internal structure of the houses was always changing due to family extensions and other needs. Moreover, in the 1930s, the majority of the traditional Bukharian Jewish Houses were nationalized by the Soviet government and were re-used as public facilities or communal houses, therefore, their internal structures had overcome subsequent transformations and adaptations for new functions.

### 4.3. The Survey

In 2021, a survey was launched to identify the current state of the mahallas and the traditional Bukharian Jewish houses. The area surveyed was within the three Jewish mahallas and the additional adjacent extension. 68 traditional Bukharian Jewish houses and two Bukharian Jewish synagogues were identified on the map based on the address or on the knowledge of the team members. It is relevant to highlight that only the rich houses in the surveyed area were preserved over time due to the durability of the materials used for their construction and its high importance.

In accordance with the preliminary results of the survey, only 22 houses from 70 have preserved all the features introduced before of traditional Bukharian Jewish vernacular architecture.

The small number of the well-conserved houses in terms of features is conditioned by the gradual decrease of the Bukharian Jewish population. This has led to the acquisition of these houses located in the Historic Centre of Bukhara by local hoteliers or residents. The change of function and consequent adaptation resulted in 1) the conservation of all features, as it is in the hotel on Turkijandi Street; or 2) the loss of one to three features. In some cases, the hotel owners have been able to buy several neighboring traditional Bukharian Jewish houses and transformed them into a single property, as it happened at one of the houses on Eshoni Pir Street. This interventions are ultimately transforming the interior structure of the historic mahallas.

Regardless the process, which affects the traditional houses, the mekhmonkhana and the cellar systems remain in 96% of cases as the most stable features of the traditional Bukharian Jewish vernacular architecture. In this light, low entrances and corridors are considered to be the most endangered features of traditional Bukharian Jewish houses surveyed, wherein 38% of cases, these parts of the houses were significantly modified.

As regards of feature 3, the current preservation trends in the area surveyed are the following: (1) both Jewish decorations and Hebrew inscriptions are preserved (23%), (2) Jewish decorations are preserved, Hebrew inscriptions are covered, whitewashed or replaced by Muslim inscriptions (23%), (3) both Jewish decorations and Hebrew inscriptions are whitewashed (about 30%).

It is important to highlight that the religious, cultural, and ethnic identity of the current owners of the houses do not always impact the state of conservation of the features. For instance, one of the best-preserved traditional Bukharian Jewish Houses on Eshoni Pir Street is currently owned by a Muslim family, who conserves all original Bukharian Jewish features of their traditional house, including Jewish Decorations and Hebrew inscriptions (see Fig. 7).

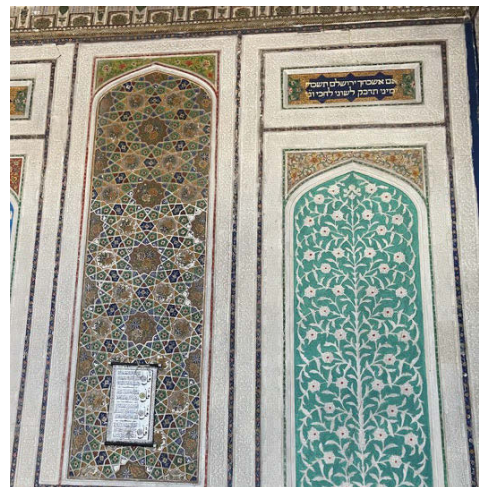


Fig. 7. The Traditional Bukharian Jewish house on Eshoni Pir Street: the Islamic shamail on the left and preserved Hebrew inscriptions on the right. (Source: IICAS, 2021).

## 5. Conclusion

The preliminary results of the 2021 survey of the traditional Bukharian Jewish houses in the World Heritage Historic Centre of Bukhara confirmed the vulnerability and rapid change of this type of vernacular architecture caused by either change of function or change of ownership of such houses. This demonstrates the need for rigorous conservation guidelines to support the local stakeholders, including home owners, authorities, and professionals to conserve these unique examples of vernacular architecture in Uzbekistan. At the same time, the majority of the identified features of the traditional Bukharian Jewish vernacular architecture, including the mekhmonkhona, cellars system, and partly Jewish decoration, are preserved regardless of the nature of the above-mentioned changes.

The examples of traditional Bukharian Jewish houses that are currently owned by Muslim families and have all features preserved, represent an outstanding example of intercultural and interreligious dialogue common to the Silk Roads city of Bukhara.

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