PUBLIC OPEN SPACES OF THE TRADITIONAL MAHALLA IN HISTORIC KHIVA: SPATIAL TYPOLOGY, CURRENT TRANSFORMATIONS AND PRINCIPLES OF REVITALIZATION

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Abstract. *The thesis examines the public open spaces of the traditional mahalla in the historic part of Khiva – the guzar, the network of lanes and dead-end alleys, the thresholds in front of houses and the water points – as a distinct layer of the urban heritage. On the basis of field surveys and behavioural observation, the spatial typology of these spaces is described, the main processes of their present-day transformation are identified, and six principles for their revitalisation are proposed.*

Keywords: *Khiva, mahalla, guzar, public space, dead-end alley, threshold, urban fabric, tourism, revitalization.*

Discussions on the conservation of historic Khiva have traditionally been organised around two scales: the individual monument and the city as a whole. Between them lies an intermediate scale that is decisive for the everyday life of the old town, namely the open spaces of the mahalla – its small squares, lanes, dead-end alleys, water points and the thresholds in front of houses. Rarely listed as heritage and lacking a single owner, they are the first to be altered when tourism and traffic enter the historic core. J. Gehl argued that the quality of a city is measured less by its buildings than by the life that takes place between them [1]; for the historic quarters of Khiva this “life between buildings” is precisely what distinguishes an inhabited town from an open-air museum.

The aim of the present study is to identify the types of public open space in the traditional mahalla of historic Khiva, to describe the transformations they are undergoing today and to formulate principles for their revitalisation. The research combined walking surveys and photographic recording in selected quarters of Itchan Kala and Dishan Kala, behavioural mapping of how residents and visitors use streets and small squares at different times of day, informal interviews with long-term inhabitants, and comparison with published studies on the social organisation of Central Asian urban neighbourhoods [2] and the morphology of traditional Islamic cities [3].

The survey allowed four principal types of mahalla open space to be distinguished.

The guzar. The guzar is the social node of the quarter: a small, often irregular square formed at the junction of lanes, typically accompanied by a neighbourhood mosque, a teahouse, a few workshops or shops and a water point. Its irregular shape results from the gradual accretion of surrounding buildings. Its function, however, is clear and stable – it is the place of daily encounters, of men's gatherings after prayer, of informal trade and of community decisions. O.A. Sukhareva's classic study of the Bukharan quarter community showed that the guzar and its mosque acted as the institutional centre of the mahalla [2], and the Khivan evidence points to a similar role.

The lane and the dead-end alley. The residential street network of the old town is branched and irregular. Through-lanes of modest width lead to narrower passages and finally to dead-end alleys (berk ko'cha) shared by a small group of families. B.S. Hakim has shown that in traditional Islamic cities such cul-de-sacs were effectively the collective property of their residents, governed by customary rules on access, projections and openings [3]. In Khiva the dead-end alley functions as an extension of the household: children play there, neighbours sit together in the evening and domestic work spills out of the gates.

The threshold. The zone immediately in front of the gate – with a raised earthen platform or bench (supa), a carved door and sometimes a tree – is the smallest, yet one of the most socially active, spaces of the mahalla. It mediates between the privacy of the home and the collective life of the lane and allows elderly residents in particular to take part in street life without leaving their doorstep. Ch. Alexander described such edges as critical “patterns” for the vitality of any neighbourhood [4].

The water point and planting. Wells and, in some quarters, small ponds together with the trees planted around them created points of shade and coolness in an otherwise compact, hard urban fabric. They also served as landmarks and meeting places.

The comparison of the surviving spatial structure with its present use reveals several processes of transformation. First, commercialisation of the main tourist routes: along the streets most frequented by visitors, thresholds and ground-floor rooms are converted into stalls and souvenir displays, so that the lane loses its residential character and residents avoid it. Second, the uneven distribution of tourist flows: while a few routes are overloaded, deeper quarters remain almost untouched by investment and continue to deteriorate. Third, the penetration of motor vehicles and service transport into lanes that were never intended for them, leading to parking on small squares and the displacement of pedestrian activity. Fourth, the disappearance of water points and the reduction of shade planting, which makes open spaces uncomfortable in summer and deprives them of their role as gathering places. Fifth, standardised paving, lighting and street furniture introduced in recent improvement works, which often ignore the differences between a guzar, a through-lane and a private dead-end alley and thus blur the traditional hierarchy of publicness. Finally, the gradual erosion of customary self-management: the collective responsibility of neighbours for cleaning, repairing and regulating their shared alleys is weakening, while municipal services are not organised to operate at this fine scale.

Behavioural mapping also demonstrated a clear link between the physical condition of these spaces and their social use. Lanes that retained shade, seating at the thresholds and limited through-traffic showed noticeably more stationary activities – conversation, children's play, sitting – than lanes of similar width that had been turned into commercial corridors or car access routes. This confirms the observation of W.H. Whyte that people use most intensively those small spaces that offer seating, shade and the presence of others [5].

Drawing on the analysis above and on international experience in the design of public spaces [1; 6; 7], the following principles for the revitalisation of mahalla open spaces in historic Khiva are proposed.

1. Preserving the gradient of publicness. Interventions should respect and make legible the sequence guzar – through-lane – dead-end alley – threshold. Each of these spaces requires a different treatment: materials, lighting and furnishing should vary according to the degree of publicness rather than be unified across the whole historic area.

2. Priority of everyday use. Public spaces of the mahalla should be designed first for the daily needs of residents – walking, meeting, children's play, sitting at the doorstep – and only secondarily for visitors. Commercial use of thresholds and lanes in residential quarters should be limited by clear regulations.

3. Restoring microclimatic comfort. The re-establishment of shade trees, water elements and seating at traditional locations is an inexpensive but highly effective measure; it returns to the open spaces their historical role as cool, sheltered places and supports their social life during the hot season.

4. Diversifying visitor routes. Instead of concentrating tourists on a few overloaded streets, secondary cultural routes through less visited quarters – linked to craft workshops, local guzars and family guest houses – should be developed.

5. Pedestrian priority with managed service access. Private car traffic and parking should be removed from lanes and small squares, while timed access for

deliveries, waste collection and emergency vehicles is organised through designated routes on the edge of the quarters.

6. Community stewardship. The customary responsibility of neighbours for shared lanes and alleys should be revived and formalised through agreements between the mahalla committee and the heritage authority, supported by small grants for maintenance and greening. This reflects the participatory approach of contemporary public space management [6].

Public open spaces of the traditional mahalla constitute an integral, though insufficiently recognised, component of the heritage of historic Khiva. Their hierarchical system – from the guzar to the doorstep – embodies the social organisation of the community and provides the conditions for everyday life in the old town. Current processes of commercialisation, uneven tourist pressure, vehicular intrusion, loss of shade and water, and standardised improvement works threaten to dissolve this system. The six principles proposed here can serve as a basis for guidelines on the design and management of public spaces in Itchan Kala and Dishan Kala and are recommended for testing in a pilot quarter, where their effect on residents' use of space can be monitored and evaluated.

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