

The Koba Caravanserai And Its Restoration History (Shahrisabz)

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Annotation. One of the important monuments of the city of Shakhrisabz - the Koba caravanserai is located in the old town part of the city, which chronologically dates back to the 16th century. The historic building was subjected to a research process in 1987 due to cracks in the walls of the building's interior and defects in the roof. The article examines the history of architecture and the processes of restoration of the building.

Keywords: Shakhrisabz, Koba, caravanserai, madrasah, architecture, monument, restoration, reconstruction, project

Shahrisabz is a city rich in historical monuments, and its territory contains architectural heritage from various periods. Among these historical structures are many buildings that once served different social functions. One of them is the Koba Caravanserai, located in the old historic part of the city[1]. The Koba Caravanserai—later converted into a madrasa – is a single-story structure believed to have been built in the late 15th or early 16th century. Its plan is rectangular and includes an inner courtyard. The caravanserai, constructed from rectangular baked bricks measuring 26×26×5.5 cm and 25×25×5 cm, follows a simple rectangular layout. The overall dimensions of the madrasa plan are 37×4×37.6 meters[2]. Rooms (hujras) are arranged around the courtyard and along the perimeter. Originally, the madrasa contained 25 hujras, of which 17 have survived. The loss of several rooms is due to repeated repairs and structural alterations over time. All the hujras are organized around the square courtyard, with entrances facing inward. Their roofs are covered with arched domes that open toward the courtyard. At the corners of the building, spherical-conical domes rest on distinctive sail-like pendentives, creating a unique architectural silhouette[3]. The exterior façade is formed by tall, plain walls without decorative ornamentation – unsurprising, as caravanserais traditionally lacked elaborate adornment. The deep foundations and thick walls ensured the stability of the arches and domes, contributing to the building’s enduring structural strength.

During the Soviet period, the street where the caravanserai (later a madrasa) stands was named after Lenin. The building occupied a highly convenient location, and a major tourist route passed directly through this area. The caravanserai formed a distinctive architectural complex together with the XVI century hamman and the XIX century Mirhomid khanaqah. Situated in the old quarter of Shahrisabz, the Koba Caravanserai held an important place in the city’s historical landscape and visually aligned with other heritage sites. To the north of the Koba structure lie the ruins of the Aq-Saray palace, while to its south stands the Dorut-Tilovat complex. Aq-Saray and the monumental Dorut-Tilovat ensemble, dating from the Timurid period, are positioned along the same axis. As is well known, the Dorut-Tilovat complex includes major monuments such as Kok Gumbaz and Gumbazi Sayyidon, forming one of the city’s most significant architectural ensembles. Within the broader urban structure, the presence of the Koba architectural complex plays a notable and meaningful role.

No written sources or studies about the caravanserai were identified during the search for literature, nor were any historical photographs or architectural drawings found. Some information about the structure was obtained from elderly residents of the city. According to them, the monument was used as a madrasa at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Another view suggests that the building was converted into an educational institution later, in the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries [4]. Analyses and observations by architectural specialists also indicate that the structure served multiple functions. Their assessments draw attention to the building’s plan, the alterations made to it, and the exceptional thickness of its walls. Local informants reported that foreign envoys once stayed here. Although the exact construction date of the

caravanserai remains unknown, the architectural layout, brick masonry, and structural features of the domes suggest that it was built in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. It is believed that by the nineteenth century, the structure was in use as a madrasa.

Specialists cite several comparative examples to support the idea that caravanserais were often converted into madrasas. Scholars of architecture and history emphasize that such transformations were characteristic of architectural practice in Movarounnahr, as the rectangular courtyard layout made these buildings functionally versatile. Examples include the fifteenth-century Mirzoi Caravanserai, reconstructed as the Tillaqori Madrasa in the seventeenth century, and the Nadir Devonbegi Caravanserai, which was also transformed into a madrasa. During the research, it was found that the western part of the madrasa had collapsed and was deteriorating. The walls, constructed of baked brick and coated with a layer of gypsum plaster, were finished with white stucco. Several vertical and diagonal cracks were found in different sections, indicating the necessity of restoration. The domes and roof were in poor condition due to damage caused by precipitation, resulting in significant loss of the upper structural components. Like other historic buildings in Shahrisabz, the Koba complex was examined by restoration specialists, and the areas in need of repair were identified. A project plan was developed to organize the restoration work. According to this plan, preparatory measures included setting up temporary structures and facilities [5]. These initial tasks focused on stabilizing the site. The plan also included dismantling and replacing damaged structural elements and undertaking reconstruction where needed.

Another crucial component of the project involved conducting historical, archival, and bibliographic research. For this purpose, materials from archives in Tashkent, Bukhara, Samarkand, Karshi, and Shahrisabz were to be reviewed. However, the bibliographic research did not yield meaningful results, and researchers relied primarily on on-site study of the monument and the accounts provided by local informants. Equipment necessary for dismantling and restoring structural elements was installed inside and outside the madrasa. Before the restoration began, the removal of damaged parts and clearing of debris had to be completed. Materials were to be lifted and transported using hoisting mechanisms. Water and electricity supply for the project were provided through the local distribution network. Prior to the start of restoration, the exact sources of electrical power and the configuration of the electrical system were clarified. Logistics were also carefully planned to ensure the timely delivery of construction materials through available streets and access roads. For the convenience of workers and staff, service and utility rooms were allocated and placed in unused chambers. The initiative to begin restoration came from local authorities. According to Resolution No. 211 of the Shahrisabz City Executive Committee dated 22 May 1987, the Scientific-Production Department for Cultural Monuments of the Ministry of Culture of the Uzbek SSR initiated preliminary work at the Koba Caravanserai on 5 June 1987.

Scientific investigations carried out in 1987 revealed that the madrasa had been partially destroyed and subjected to multiple repairs over time. As a result, only two-thirds of the monument had survived, and its original appearance had been significantly lost. During the reconstruction of Lenin Street in the first half of 1987, several nearby structures were demolished, which caused additional damage to the monument. Following concerns raised by the municipal inspectorate for the protection of cultural heritage, specialists from the UzNIPI Restoration Institute, led by Kh. Sultanov, conducted urgent preliminary research. Their findings confirmed the architectural value of the building and the necessity of its preservation [6]. Based on this research, it was concluded that the monument should be restored and later incorporated into tourist routes. The results of the scientific research were summarized only after all stages of investigation were completed. The project documentation was prepared in two phases: the first consisted of an outline restoration project along with cost estimates, while the second contained the working drawings. To expedite the preservation of the monument, it was decided to begin urgent stabilizing and repair work even before the final project was completed [7]. As a sixteenth-century architectural monument, the Koba Caravanserai [8] possesses significant scientific, practical, and artistic value [9]. Moreover, because only a small number of caravanserais from this period have survived in Central Asia, it represents a rare and remarkable example of architectural heritage.

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