



JOURNAL

Başvuru 15.07.2026 Received | Kabul 24.08.2026 Accepted

E-ISSN: 2980-1141 | <https://www.paradigmajournal.com>

Cilt 2, Sayı 3 (2026), ss. 132-145

Doi., <https://doi.org/10.29228/paradigma.96814>

Atıf Bilgisi / Reference Information

Ilmurad, A. (2026). Özbekistan shahrisabz bölgesinin kültürel özelliklerine genel bir bakış. *Paradigma Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 2(3), 132-145, <https://doi.org/10.29228/paradigma.96814>

Özbekistan Shahrisabz Bölgesinin Kültürel Özelliklerine Genel Bir Bakış

Achilov ILMURAD



Dr., Shahrisabz Devlet Pedagoji Enstitüsü, achilov@gmail.com

Özet

Bu araştırma, Özbekistan'ın Kaşkaderya bölgesinde bulunan Shahrisabz'ın kültürel özelliklerini tarihî kentsel peyzaj, kültürel aktarım ve mirasın toplumsal üretimi çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Çalışmanın amacı, kentin anıtsal mimarisiyle gündelik yaşam mekânları, nakış geleneği, müzik ve kültürel temsil biçimleri arasındaki ilişkileri açıklamak; koruma kararlarının bu ilişkileri nasıl yeniden tanımladığını ortaya koymaktır. Nitel durum incelemesi kapsamında UNESCO ve ICOMOS belgeleri, seçilmiş Dünya Mirası Komitesi kararları, akademik yayınlar ve yerel müze kayıtları doküman analiziyle değerlendirilmiştir. Veriler, kaynakların tarihi ve coğrafi kapsamı gözetilerek tematik olarak çözümlenmiş; resmî alan büyüklükleri ve tarihsel ziyaretçi verileri üzerinde sınırlı betimsel hesaplamalar yapılmıştır. Bulgular, Timurî anıtların, avlulu konutların, çarşı ve hamamların, süzani üretiminin ve kültürel etkinliklerin farklı dönemlere ait olmakla birlikte kentin kültürel kimliğini birlikte oluşturduğunu göstermektedir. Koruma kararlarında 2016'da yıkımların durdurulması öne çıkarken, sonraki yıllarda kentsel bütünlüğün kaybı, mahallelerin konumu ve önemli sınır değişikliği seçenekleri belirginleşmiştir. 2026 kararı tehlike statüsünü sürdürmekte; anıtların korunmasını araştırma, yönetim planı ve topluluk katılımıyla ilişkilendirmektedir. Araştırma, Shahrisabz'ın kültürünü tek bir tarihsel döneme veya seçilmiş yapılara indirgemenin analitik açıdan yetersiz olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Mahalle ölçeğinde belgeleme, zanaat bilgisinin aktarımının izlenmesi ve yerel sakinlerin karar süreçlerine katılması önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Shahrisabz, kültürel miras, tarihî kentsel peyzaj, kültürel süreklilik.



JOURNAL

Başvuru 15.07.2026 Received | Kabul 24.08.2026 Accepted

E-ISSN: 2980-1141 | <https://www.paradigmajournal.com>

Cilt 2, Sayı 3 (2026), ss. 132-145

Doi., <https://doi.org/10.29228/paradigma.96814>

Atıf Bilgisi / Reference Information

Ilmurad, A. (2026). Özbekistan shahrisabz bölgesinin kültürel özelliklerine genel bir bakış. *Paradigma Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 2(3), 132-145, <https://doi.org/10.29228/paradigma.96814>

An Overview of the Cultural Characteristics of the Shahrisabz Region of Uzbekistan

Achilov ILMURAD 

Dr., Shahrisabz State Pedagogical Institute, achilov@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the cultural characteristics of Shahrisabz in Uzbekistan's Kashkadarya region through the concepts of historic urban landscape, cultural transmission and the social production of heritage. It aims to explain the relationships between monumental architecture, everyday spaces, embroidery, music and cultural representation, and to examine how conservation decisions redefine these relationships. A qualitative case study was undertaken using documentary analysis of UNESCO and ICOMOS records, selected World Heritage Committee decisions, scholarly publications and local museum records. Sources were analysed thematically with attention to their dates and geographical scope. Limited descriptive calculations were also performed using official area measurements and historical visitor figures. The findings indicate that Timurid monuments, courtyard houses, bazaars, baths, suzani production and cultural events collectively constitute the city's cultural identity, despite belonging to different historical periods. Conservation decisions shifted from calls to halt demolition in 2016 towards debates about lost urban integrity, the role of neighbourhoods and options for a significant boundary modification. The 2026 decision retains the property on the List of World Heritage in Danger and connects conservation with research, management planning and community involvement. The study argues that reducing Shahrisabz to a single historical period or a selection of monuments provides an inadequate account of its culture. It recommends neighbourhood-scale documentation, monitoring the transmission of craft knowledge and involving residents in decisions concerning their living environment.

Keywords: Shahrisabz, cultural heritage, historic urban landscape, cultural continuity.

Introduction

The cultural characteristics of a settlement cannot be explained solely by the number of historic monuments it contains or by the architectural grandeur of those monuments. Culture is also observable in the meanings attributed to buildings, in the ways productive knowledge is learned and transmitted, and in the manner in which people use space. Examining a historic city therefore requires the material environment to be interpreted without detaching it from social relations. Harrison's (2013) critical heritage approach opens up the relationship between material remains of the past and contemporary practices of selection, classification, and conservation for discussion. From this perspective, heritage is not a self-evident assemblage that has simply survived from the past into the present; rather, it is shaped by contemporary decisions concerning which assets are recognised, which are conserved, and which forms of use are regarded as legitimate.

Shahrisabz is one of the settlements in which this relationship can be observed particularly clearly. Located in the Kashkadarya Region of Uzbekistan, the city is associated with the historical area of Kesh and, in particular, with the building programmes of the Timurid period. In the World Heritage inscription, the old neighbourhoods and residential buildings are recognised as components of value alongside the monumental structures (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a). The term "region" in the title of this study is not intended to claim the existence of a separate administrative unit. The spatial focus of the research is the historic centre of Shahrisabz, while its comparative cultural context is confined to the surrounding areas explicitly associated with the city in the sources. This distinction helps prevent information produced at the scales of the city, district, Kashkadarya Region, and Uzbekistan as a whole from being conflated.

An account that links the history of the city exclusively to Timur may render some layers of the past visible while pushing others into the background. The ICOMOS nomination evaluation considers early settlement traces alongside later periods and notes that the historic centre consists of structures formed over different centuries (ICOMOS, 2000). Accordingly, the historical perspective adopted in this study is directed not towards identifying a single "golden age," but towards analysing how different periods coexist within the city. The political power represented by the palace, the everyday use of neighbourhood housing, and the textile production of later periods do not belong to the same historical process. Evaluating them within a shared cultural identity does not require the temporal differences among them to be erased.

Smith's (2006) concept of the authorized heritage discourse is useful for understanding this selectivity. Conservation discourse organised around expertise, aesthetic value, and monumentality may fail to represent adequately the ways in which heritage is experienced by local communities. In the case of Shahrisabz, this perspective is not used to diminish the importance of well-known monuments such as Ak Saray. Rather, the central question is why the surrounding houses, street relationships, and spaces of production should also be regarded as valuable while these monuments are being conserved. The fact that a dwelling cannot be associated with a famous ruler does not make its role within the historic city insignificant. For this reason, the study does not define cultural value solely in terms of the age or visual splendour of a structure.

The historic urban landscape approach provides a spatial explanation for this issue. UNESCO's (2011) Recommendation conceptualises the historic city as an area in which natural and cultural values have accumulated in layers over time. Within this framework, topography,

infrastructure, the built environment, and social uses are evaluated together. Bandarin and van Oers (2012) similarly discuss conservation within the broader management of urban change. For Shahrissabz, the significance of this approach lies in demonstrating that the spaces between monuments are neither neutral nor devoid of value. Streets, courtyards, water channels, and neighbourhood boundaries influence the use of buildings and the relationships established among them and thus contribute to the formation of cultural identity.

In this context, authenticity likewise cannot be reduced to the preservation of old material alone. The Nara Document on Authenticity emphasises that assessments should be grounded in the relevant cultural context and in credible sources of information, and it recognises different types of evidence such as form, material, use, tradition, and setting (ICOMOS, 1994). This perspective suggests that the resemblance of a building's external appearance to a historic style is not the same as the preservation of its historical evidentiary value. In evaluating the renewed public spaces of Shahrissabz, visual orderliness and the preservation of authenticity must therefore be treated as distinct issues. A new landscape intervention may be regarded positively in aesthetic terms; however, such an assessment does not by itself demonstrate that historical relationships that have been removed have been restored.

The assessment of living heritage requires particular attention to processes of production and transmission. In UNESCO's (2003) Convention, intangible cultural heritage is associated with practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognise as part of their cultural heritage. From this perspective, the preservation of an embroidery object in a museum and the intergenerational transmission of the knowledge required to produce it are different phenomena. Preserving the object constitutes a material gain; maintaining the tradition, by contrast, depends on learning, practice, and social demand. The suzani tradition of Shahrissabz provides an appropriate case through which to investigate the relationship between the material object and the knowledge that produces it.

Recognising local culture also requires clarification of who is included within the concept of "community." Waterton and Smith (2010) draw attention to problems of representation in discussions concerning the recognition of community heritage. In this study, neighbourhood residents, craftspeople, museum staff, and participants in cultural events are not treated as a single group with identical interests and expectations. Increased tourist visibility may generate income for some actors while altering the access or everyday routines of others. Consequently, an assessment of the cultural characteristics of the city cannot be limited to reproducing the content of national narratives or tourism promotion.

Studies on Uzbekistan explicitly discuss the relationship between architectural heritage and the production of national identity. Paskaleva (2015) examines the contemporary political and social contexts of Timurid architecture, while Haydaraliyeva (2023) addresses the role of contested conservation practices in Samarkand and Shahrissabz in processes of identity formation. These studies provide a comparative basis for understanding restoration as more than a purely technical operation. By contrast, Gyul (2002) and Bokiyeveva (2023), who focus on the embroidery tradition of Shahrissabz, draw attention to a domain of production beyond monumental architecture. The present article seeks to relate these otherwise distinct strands of literature through the study of a single settlement.

The central research problem concerns how the cultural identity of Shahrissabz is constructed across monuments, neighbourhoods, craft traditions, and practices of representation. Accordingly, the

study asks which cultural characteristics are directly supported by local documentation, which information pertains only to a broader geographical context, and how conservation decisions alter the scope within which cultural values are defined. The contribution of the study lies not in the production of new field data, but in comparing different types of evidence through explicit distinctions of geographical scale and historical period. This comparison enables Shahrisabz to be assessed not merely as a catalogue of monuments to be visited, but as a city in which cultural continuity is contested and negotiated.

Method

The research was designed as a qualitative case study based on document analysis. The case under investigation comprises the cultural characteristics of the historic centre of Shahrisabz and the ways in which those characteristics are represented in conservation documents. Document analysis involves evaluating previously produced texts not merely as sources of information, but also in relation to their purposes, contexts, and evidentiary content (Bowen, 2009). Accordingly, UNESCO decisions, art-historical studies, and museum records were not treated as equivalent forms of data. Official decisions reflect institutional assessment, scholarly publications represent researchers' interpretations, and museum records indicate the material culture represented within collections.

Sources were selected purposively. The inclusion criteria were an explicit spatial relationship with Shahrisabz, the identifiability of the author or institutional producer of the text, and the traceability of the information advanced. Sources providing direct local evidence comprised the ICOMOS evaluation of 2000; UNESCO property and map records; World Heritage Committee decisions from 2016, 2017, 2019, 2023, 2025, and 2026; the ethnography record of the Shahrisabz Museum; the studies by Gyul, Khakimov, and Bokiyeve; and the official statement confirming the cultural music event held in the city in 2018. These 14 directly local documents and publications formed the analytical core of the study. Theoretical and methodological sources were not included in this count.

The literature search used the spelling variants Shahrisabz, Shakhriyabz, Shakhrisabz, and Shahr-i Sabz in combination with the keywords cultural heritage, urban heritage, embroidery, suzani, maqom, and conservation. In addition to Turkish-language sources, English-language and accessible Uzbek-language publications were considered. Bibliographic details were verified against publisher, journal, or institutional records. The search was completed on 30 September 2026. It is not presented as a systematic review based on a comprehensive and reproducible database search, as no numerical flow diagram or total result count for each query was produced. All documents examined are identified in the reference list by a publication URL or DOI.

In the first stage of analysis, the date of each document, the producing institution, geographical scope, cultural element, reported change, and proposed areas of intervention were recorded. The texts were then read in terms of the relationships among monumental architecture and religious memory, neighbourhoods and everyday space, craft and transmission, cultural representation, and conservation management. The themes were organised with reference to Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to identifying patterns of meaning. The procedure was not a word-frequency analysis. Because the same term could refer to different problems in different documents, the context of statements and the function of each decision were treated as primary analytical considerations.

In the comparative analysis of decisions, six documents were examined in terms of four functions: halting demolition, identifying damage, developing alternatives, and creating management instruments. The absence of a particular issue from a decision was not coded as evidence that the problem had disappeared. Likewise, a later decision's reference to an earlier text was not counted as an independent field observation. This distinction was important in order to avoid generating an artificial predominance of evidence from institutionally repetitive documents. The analytical conclusions were therefore limited to changes in orientation across the selected documents and were not treated as a complete measurement of the entire policy process.

The quantitative component consisted of descriptive calculations using official area measurements and historical visitor data. The ratio of the inscribed property to the buffer zone, their combined area, and the domestic–foreign distribution of visitors in 1996 were calculated. Percentages were obtained by dividing each category by the relevant total and multiplying by one hundred, with results rounded to two decimal places. These indicators refer to different dates and units and were not combined into a single change series. The reported relocation of approximately 2,000 residents was retained as the approximate figure stated by the Committee. Because neither the total urban population nor the number of relocated households was known, no proportional calculation was performed using this figure.

Source criticism was conducted through three distinctions. Historical descriptions were not used as evidence of present-day field conditions; traditions documented at the national level were not treated as specific to the city without local evidence; and art-historical similarity was not regarded as proof of uninterrupted transmission. In particular, UNESCO's earlier assessment of integrity in the property description was read together with later conservation decisions. In interpretations of suzani motifs, the documented characteristics of the object were also separated from explanations concerning the meaning of the motif. This approach requires institutional authority to be acknowledged without treating institutional texts as immutable or neutral observational records.

No interviews, surveys, participant observation, or on-site measurements were conducted. The satisfaction of local residents, craft incomes, visitor experiences, and the current prevalence of cultural practices were not measured. As the coding was undertaken by a single researcher, no inter-coder reliability coefficient was calculated. Analytical consistency was supported by maintaining a transparent link between each finding and its source and by comparing different types of sources. The transferability of the findings to comparable historic cities is conceptual rather than statistical; no statistical generalisation is made to the population of the city or to Uzbekistan as a whole.

Findings

Ak Saray occupies a defining position in the monumental visibility of the city. UNESCO's property description records that construction began in 1380 and that craftspeople brought from Khorezm participated in its construction and decoration (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a). This information limits interpretations of the structure as the product of a purely local style. The movement of people and skills involved in the construction process demonstrates that the city's cultural production emerged within wider political relationships. The possibility that craftspeople were forcibly relocated also reminds us that intercultural interaction has not always taken the form of equal or voluntary exchange. The magnificence of the palace and the historical conditions that made it possible should therefore be addressed within the same analytical narrative.

Khakimov's (2002) architectural study relates Ak Saray, as a structure of civic representation, to the commemorative and religious functions of Dorus Saodat and Dorut Tilovat. The association of Dorus Saodat with dynastic burials, together with the arrangement of the buildings around Dorut Tilovat and the Kok Gumbaz Mosque, demonstrates the close spatial relationship between political memory and religious space. At the same time, the expression "Timur's tomb" must not be allowed to create confusion between the prepared burial chamber in Shahrisabz and the place where Timur was actually interred. What is at issue here is the city's position within dynastic memory. Variations in the spelling of complex names across languages should likewise not lead the same architectural ensemble to be counted as separate entities in different studies.

Spaces of everyday life constitute a second body of evidence that complements the monumental narrative. In the ICOMOS (2000) evaluation, the Chor-su bazaar is described as a structure located at the intersection of two principal routes, while later historical layers represented by bazaars and baths are also noted. The courtyard arrangement of residential buildings demonstrates that the city did not consist solely of spaces of public representation. The information on use contained in this document belongs to the historical context of the 2000 evaluation. In particular, the fact that the baths were in use at that time has not been treated as evidence that they continued to fulfil the same function without interruption in 2026. In this way, long-term cultural continuity is distinguished from use documented at a particular moment.

The analytical importance of the neighbourhood fabric derives from its role in sustaining connections among monuments. A street is not merely a line of movement linking two structures; it also organises the entrances of houses, commercial uses, and opportunities for encounter. In this study, such relationships are addressed through the concept of "spatial context." The loss of context may coexist with the physical survival of a monument. A structure may remain standing while the sequence of uses surrounding it changes. Assessing conservation success solely through restored façades or accessible visitor areas therefore excludes some components of cultural relationships. The discussion of urban integrity in the decision documents makes this distinction particularly necessary.

Suzani and embroidery production provide the principal example through which the cultural characteristics of Shahrisabz can be examined at the scale of objects and skills rather than monuments. Gyul (2002) analyses large floral palmettes, rosettes, leaf enclosures, and a variety of border arrangements in Shahrisabz embroidery. A late nineteenth-century suzani in the State Museum of Arts of Uzbekistan is interpreted in relation to its wedding context and decorative elements. This analysis demonstrates that textiles were not merely decorative surfaces, but could be produced for specific social uses. Nevertheless, the historical meanings of motifs have not been generalised as though all producers consciously maintained the same meanings across all periods. Formal continuity and continuity of meaning require different kinds of evidence.

Comparing embroidery with architectural decoration opens up questions concerning the shared visual repertoires of different fields of production. The presence of floral forms, leaves, and border arrangements makes comparison across artistic media possible; however, similarity alone does not demonstrate a direct route of transmission. Treating a suzani pattern simply as a continuation of Timurid architecture would leave the intervening centuries and the creative decisions of producers unexplained. The present study therefore treats the relationship between textiles and architecture not as a proven uninterrupted lineage, but as a comparative art-historical question. Explaining local style requires dated series of objects, material analyses, and information concerning producers to be considered together.

Bokiyeva's (2023) study provides a complementary record of the recent production context of traditional embroidery. Focusing on the work of Dilorom Jo'rayeva, the text associates Shahrisabz embroidery with the Hunarmand organisation and with different stitching techniques, using the terms *iroqi*, *yo'rma*, and *kandaxayol*. The publication is valuable because it focuses on a local producer; however, it is not a large-sample field study. It would therefore be inappropriate to draw conclusions about the city's entire craft economy or women's employment from a single producer. What the source supports is the finding that embroidery is not confined to historical collections and continues to appear in recent producer-oriented writing.

The ethnography record of the Shahrisabz Museum describes embroidered headwear, women's and men's clothing, *suzanis*, and everyday objects together. Its references to *Yakkabag* and *Kitab* as well as Shahrisabz indicate that the cultural geography represented by the collection extends beyond the boundaries of the historic centre (Shahrisabz Museum, n.d.). It would therefore be incorrect to assume that every object in the museum was produced or used within the city centre. The record documents the museum representation of regional material culture. Without information on acquisition histories, producer identities, and contexts of use, exhibited objects cannot be treated as a direct portrait of contemporary everyday life.

The scale of evidence is particularly important in relation to music. In UNESCO records, *Shashmaqom* is defined as a tradition encompassing Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and developed in the urban centres of Central Asia; it was proclaimed in 2003 and incorporated into the Representative List in 2008 (UNESCO, 2008). This record does not permit the tradition to be described as exclusively belonging to Shahrisabz. By contrast, a 2024 statement by the Presidency of the Republic of Uzbekistan confirms that the first International Maqom Art Forum was held in Shahrisabz in 2018 (Presidency of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2024). Thus, what is locally documented is the city's hosting of a cultural event, not the origin of the entire repertoire in Shahrisabz.

Hosting such an event constitutes one of the contemporary ways in which the city's cultural identity is represented. Organising a music event in a city known for monumental heritage may bring different heritage domains together within a shared sphere of public representation. Nevertheless, festival visibility and the continuity of local musical learning are distinct indicators. Without data on participant numbers, music education in the city, the involvement of local performers, and post-event production relations, no lasting cultural impact can be calculated. The finding therefore demonstrates that the cultural representational field of Shahrisabz extends beyond historic monuments, while avoiding unmeasured claims about the festival's economic or social success.

The same evidentiary discipline was applied to food culture. UNESCO associates the tradition of *palov* with social practices surrounding the preparation and sharing of the dish throughout Uzbekistan. Transmission is discussed in relation to family, master-apprentice, and community relationships (UNESCO, 2016). Although this information is useful for understanding the broader cultural environment in which Shahrisabz is situated, it does not constitute evidence of a city-specific recipe or ceremonial arrangement. *Palov* is therefore not presented in this study as a distinctive local prerogative. The distinction between describing a general cultural context and demonstrating local specificity is maintained throughout.

Quantitatively verifiable data are presented in Table 1. The area measurements are the values for the inscribed property and buffer zone given on UNESCO's current record page; they do not represent the administrative area of the district. Visitor figures are derived from the 1996 data cited

in the ICOMOS evaluation. The calculations explain indicators from different dates within their own respective scopes rather than converting them into a single development curve. In particular, the historical distribution of visitors does not imply that the current share of international tourism is the same. Because no comparable series on contemporary visitor movements is available, no growth rate was calculated.

Table 1. Documented Quantitative Indicators and Descriptive Calculations

Indicator	Value	Date and source
Inscribed property	240 ha	UNESCO World Heritage Centre (n.d.-b)
Buffer zone	82 ha	UNESCO World Heritage Centre (n.d.-b)
Total property and buffer zone	322 ha	Calculation: 240 + 82
Property / buffer zone ratio	2.93	Calculation: 240 / 82
Domestic visitors	23,000 (84.56%)	1996; ICOMOS (2000, p. 225)
Foreign visitors	4,200 (15.44%)	1996; ICOMOS (2000, p. 225)
Total visitors	27,200	Calculation: 23,000 + 4,200
Relocated residents	Approximately 2,000 people	WHC (2017), paragraph 5

Note. Percentages were calculated from the 1996 total. The qualifier “approximately” is retained as stated in the source. Indicators from different years do not constitute a time series.

The 322 hectares reported in Table 1 represent the arithmetic sum of the inscribed property and the buffer zone and do not signify a unified UNESCO inscription status. The inscribed property accounts for approximately 74.53% of this combined area. The function of the buffer zone is related to managing impacts around the property; the adequacy of conservation cannot be inferred from the ratio between the two areas. Of the total 27,200 visitors recorded in 1996, 84.56% were domestic and 15.44% were foreign. This result describes only the composition of the 1996 record. The contribution of the quantitative data to the study is not to score cultural value, but to make measurable information in official documents visible within clearly stated temporal and unit boundaries.

Comparison of conservation decisions shows that, in addition to the recognition of cultural characteristics, the spatial framework within which those characteristics are to be conserved has also changed. The 2016 decision, noting that major interventions had irreversibly altered the historic appearance and settlement layers, called for the property to be placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger and for demolitions to be halted (World Heritage Committee [WHC], 2016). The 2017 decision stated that approximately 2,000 residents had been relocated, that the residential fabric had been damaged, and that inappropriate materials and techniques had been used in some interventions (WHC, 2017). Together, these two records demonstrate that the problem concerned not only aesthetic reorganisation but also settlement patterns and conservation practice.

The 2019 decision made two alternative forms of redefinition explicit: either a focus on selected Timurid monuments or further investigation of the principal elements of Timurid urbanism, including neighbourhood and street patterns. Under the second option, improving infrastructure and living conditions was regarded as important for the continuity of the living city (WHC, 2019). The 2023 decision, while positively assessing progress in historical and participatory research, stated that the new landscape arrangement could not be regarded as having restored the former urban integrity (WHC, 2023). The documents thus establish a clear distinction between spatial reorganisation and the restoration of historical relationships.

Table 2. Comparative Document Analysis of Selected Conservation Decisions

Year and decision	Issue highlighted in the document	Analytical interpretation
2016 40 COM 7B.48	Irreversible effects of demolition and reconstruction; inscription on the List of World Heritage in Danger (paras. 4–7).	Need to halt urgent interventions and conduct impact assessment.
2017 41 COM 7A.57	Residential fabric, relocation of residents, and inappropriate interventions (paras. 4–9).	Expansion of the problem from individual structures to the settlement and social environment.
2019 43 COM 7A.44	Two options based on a selection of monuments or on the urban pattern (paras. 9–14).	Debate over the spatial scope of the value to be conserved.
2023 45 COM 7A.54	Progress in research; assessment that the new landscape cannot restore the former integrity (paras. 3–8).	Distinction between spatial redesign and historical integrity.
2025 47 COM 7A.20	Draft focused on four monuments; research and water-management issues (paras. 6–11).	Consideration of a new justification for inscription alongside the need for environmental conservation.
2026 48 COM 7A.26	Dossier preparation, inventory, management, and participation; continuation of danger status (paras. 3–11).	Distinction between preparatory processes and completed conservation outcomes.

Source. WHC (2016, 2017, 2019, 2023, 2025, 2026). The third column presents the comparative interpretation developed in this study and is not a direct quotation from the decision texts.

Table 2 compares the decisions not as scores of implementation success, but as records of how the conservation problem was framed over time. While the earlier documents place greater emphasis on emergency suspension and damage identification, later texts discuss which values may remain defensible and which management instruments are required. This change of orientation does not mean that the danger has disappeared. Preparing a nomination dossier, repairing a monument, and sustaining neighbourhood life are distinct fields of outcome. Interpreting progress in one as evidence that the others have also been achieved would exceed what the documents support.

In the 2025 decision, a draft significant boundary modification focusing on four monuments was considered a potentially appropriate approach, provided that it was supported by further research. The proposal envisaged the conversion of other areas within the walls into a buffer zone and the retention of the remaining neighbourhoods as part of the setting of the monuments (WHC, 2025). This does not mean that the new boundaries have been finalised. The 2026 decision kept dossier preparation, local community participation, and integrated management instruments on the agenda and maintained the property's danger status (WHC, 2026). The expression “four monuments” in these documents should likewise not be interpreted as numerical evidence that only four cultural assets remain in the city.

The relationship between physical conservation problems and the urban scale is also evident in assessments concerning water and moisture. The 2025 decision called for water ingress affecting the monuments to be addressed at the city scale and for the benefits of the historic water-management system to be investigated. Reservations concerning a proposed silicone treatment for Ak Saray demonstrate that material choices may have structural consequences (WHC, 2025). In 2026, the need

for further research and expert evaluation of the same issue was reiterated (WHC, 2026). The conservation conditions of a monument therefore extend beyond its wall surfaces and must be considered together with the surrounding water regime and urban interventions.

A common implication of the findings is that cultural continuity requires different forms of evidence at different scales. The survival of a monument can be investigated through material and structural analysis; the transmission of embroidery knowledge through producers and learning relationships; and the continuity of a neighbourhood through use and settlement data. These forms of evidence are not interchangeable. While the documents examined provide strong evidence of tensions between monumental and urban heritage in Shahrissabz, they do not explain the current state of living culture with the same degree of detail. The appropriate conclusion is therefore not to fill this gap with assumptions, but to distinguish clearly between what the available evidence supports and what additional data are required.

Discussion and Conclusion

The case of Shahrissabz demonstrates that the cultural value of historic cities extends beyond the sum of their monumental structures. Palaces, religious complexes, dwellings, bazaars, and infrastructure appear together in the documentary record, and a significant part of the conservation debate concerns the disruption of relationships among these elements. This finding is consistent with UNESCO's (2011) historic urban landscape approach. However, there is a difference between adopting this approach at the level of policy documents and preserving the same degree of integrity in practice. The decisions reviewed show that, even where planning language is holistic, implemented interventions may not protect all components of the city to the same extent. Theoretical alignment therefore cannot be treated as conservation success without examining implementation outcomes.

Bandarin and van Oers's (2012) conception of urban conservation as the management of change is useful for evaluating the options debated in Shahrissabz. In a living city, upgrading infrastructure and improving housing conditions are necessary; a policy of simple non-intervention in the historic fabric is not sufficient. At the same time, the direction of change requires explicit decisions concerning which characteristics are to be conserved and whose needs are to be prioritised. The findings of this study demonstrate that redesigning the surroundings of a monument and supporting neighbourhood life are not the same intervention. Conservation policy should therefore define separate objectives and mutually complementary instruments for these two domains.

The study by Pendlebury et al. (2009) on authenticity in urban World Heritage Sites demonstrates the difficulties of transferring conservation principles developed at the scale of individual buildings to living cities. The Shahrissabz findings display a comparable problem: the physical presence of buildings may survive while the environment connecting them changes. Yet the issue here is not merely one of general ambiguity in conservation principles. Committee decisions explicitly record specific interventions, relocation, and loss of authenticity. In this respect, Shahrissabz provides a concrete example of the importance of documentation and assessment prior to intervention, rather than simply illustrating an abstract conservation dilemma.

There is a clear affinity between Paskaleva's (2015) analysis of Timurid architecture in relation to contemporary identity and representation and the findings of the present study. In both, the historic structure is not merely an object belonging to the past, but an active instrument in the construction of present-day narratives. The distinctive emphasis of the current study, however, lies in considering textiles, museum collections, and cultural events alongside monumental representation.

This broader scope acknowledges the central position of Timurid heritage while avoiding a reduction of the culture of Shahrisabz to state or dynastic narratives alone. The preservation of local cultural diversity requires this wider framework to be reflected in planning decisions as well.

Haydaraliyeva's (2023) comparison of conservation practices in Samarkand and Shahrisabz from the perspective of national identity formation opens the political meaning of interventions to discussion. The present study identifies a sequence of documents that supports this line of inquiry and additionally traces the debate over redefining the scope of inscription through the 2025 and 2026 decisions. Nevertheless, no definitive judgement is made concerning the intentions of specific actors on the basis of contemporary documents. The proposition that an intervention reinforces a particular identity narrative is analytically distinct from the claim that the intervention was carried out solely for that purpose. Maintaining this distinction is important if conservation criticism is to remain grounded in documentable outcomes.

The suzani findings require the material and social dimensions of cultural continuity to be considered together. Gyul's (2002) object- and motif-focused study and Bokiyeve's (2023) focus on a contemporary producer approach the same cultural field through different questions. The former addresses the form and meaning of historical objects, whereas the latter examines a present-day representative of production practice. The two sources complement one another, but they do not by themselves bridge the temporal gap between them. The present study differs by refusing to treat similar designs as sufficient proof of uninterrupted tradition. Demonstrating continuity requires attention not only to the product but also to learning relationships, material choices, and contexts of use.

The relationship between cultural representation and authenticity may also be discussed in relation to music events. Wang's (1999) approach to authenticity in tourism experience distinguishes the historical character of an object from the experience lived by the participant. A festival in Shahrisabz may constitute a meaningful cultural experience for a visitor, yet that experience does not in itself explain the relationship between the performance and local everyday practice. In this study, the fact that the event was held in the city is treated as evidence of the visibility of local culture. Assessing the festival's contribution to the transmission of tradition would require a different research design examining the relationships among performers, learners, and local institutions before and after the event.

Community participation is not merely an administrative supplement to this debate. Waterton and Smith's (2010) discussion of representation and recognition requires the phrase "local community participation" to be rendered concrete. Without knowing who participated in meetings, how divergent views were recorded, and whether participation influenced decisions, the quality of participation cannot be assessed. For Shahrisabz, the proposed approach should not be limited to treating neighbourhood residents as informants or participants in cultural displays. Local experience should have a visible influence on the formation of decisions concerning housing, mobility, work, and the use of public space. Such an approach connects cultural conservation directly to the management of the lived environment.

The Nara Document on Authenticity and its principle of culturally contextual assessment helps explain the distinction between restoration and reconstruction in Shahrisabz (ICOMOS, 1994). The use of new material is not in every circumstance an indicator of failure; what matters is the rationale for the intervention, its documentation, its effects, and the manner in which historical evidence is

preserved. Similarly, reproducing an old form does not automatically restore a historical relationship that has been lost. The evaluative approach proposed in this study prioritises the preservation of evidence and the explainability of interventions over visual outcomes. This helps prevent aesthetic preference and scientific conservation criteria from being used interchangeably.

The limitations of the study also shape the nature of its findings. Institutional documents show the concepts through which problems are recognised, but they do not directly explain how local residents experience those problems. Art-historical studies are strong in relation to objects and style but more limited with respect to production economies. Museum records indicate what is represented in collections while remaining silent about everyday practices that are not represented. These differences among sources make the construction of a single general “cultural loss” score inappropriate. The multidimensional character of change in Shahrissabz points to future research designs combining different methods of data collection.

Despite these limitations, comparison of the documents yields a clear analytical conclusion: cultural value and the scope of official inscription are not the same thing. The future conversion of an area into a buffer zone or the selection of particular monuments as the focus of a new nomination does not automatically diminish the cultural significance of other neighbourhoods and practices. Harrison’s (2013) emphasis on the relationship between heritage and contemporary processes of selection helps clarify this distinction. The central challenge for Shahrissabz is to establish a conservation objective that extends beyond the continuation of inscription status. Such an objective should consider the assets to be conserved, the people who use them, and the conditions under which knowledge can be transmitted to the future within the same analytical framework.

The cultural characteristics of Shahrissabz can be explained through the coexistence of components formed in different historical periods and serving different social functions. Although Timurid monuments occupy a central place in the city’s international recognition, courtyard houses, bazaars and baths, suzani production, clothing, and cultural events broaden the scope of analysis. The study has shown that these components are not all documented to the same degree or through the same types of sources. Detailed institutional assessments exist for monumental heritage, whereas sources explaining the current condition of everyday life and productive knowledge are more limited. Generalisations about urban culture must therefore take these evidentiary differences into account.

Comparison of conservation decisions has demonstrated a transformation in the spatial framework within which cultural value is defended in Shahrissabz. The debate has moved from urgent problems of demolition and intervention towards attempts to construct a new justification centred on selected monuments and their surroundings. In this process, the neighbourhood fabric has become visible both as an element that has suffered damage and as a value that provides context for the monuments. The principal conclusion of the study is that conserving a monument and conserving the cultural relationships of the city are distinct but interconnected objectives. Achieving the former does not demonstrate that the latter has automatically been secured.

On this basis, the preparation of an updatable, neighbourhood-scale cultural inventory for Shahrissabz is recommended. Such an inventory should not be limited to the name and coordinates of a structure; it should also include type of use, historical documentation, intervention history, and information on relevant communities. Historical maps and photographs should be compared with current building records so that preserved and altered relationships can be shown explicitly. Such work would help ensure that reconstruction proposals are grounded in historical evidence and that the

potential impacts of new interventions are assessed before decisions are taken. Property and buffer-zone boundaries should not be used as substitutes for such an inventory.

In the fields of craft and living culture, object documentation should be complemented by producer-centred research. The learning histories of suzani masters, apprenticeship relations, material supply, and contexts of product use could be investigated. Cooperation with local knowledge holders could be developed for museum objects whose producer or use information is missing. In music and food culture, local variants of national traditions should be identified through direct observation and interviews. These recommendations do not seek to preserve culture as an unchanging template, but to understand the conditions of its transmission. From the perspective of UNESCO's (2003) living heritage approach, what is decisive is the community's capacity to continue the practice.

In conservation management, the material problems of monuments, infrastructure, and living conditions should be assessed together. The quality of local participation should be monitored not merely through the number of meetings held, but through its influence on decision-making. Indicators of success should include the condition of the historic fabric, the continuity of cultural production, and local use of space. Future studies may develop these indicators using field data; however, measurements not produced by the present document analysis should not be presented as realised outcomes. Sustainable cultural conservation in Shahrissabz depends on safeguarding the recognised material remains of the past while also sustaining the living environment through which contemporary communities continue to relate to them.

Additional Information

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding this study.

Funding Statement: This study received no financial or institutional support from any organization or institution.

Ethics Approval Statement: Ethics committee approval was not required for this study.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed equally to the study.

Artificial Intelligence Statement: No artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation or conduct of this study.

References

- Bandarin, F., & van Oers, R. (2012). *The historic urban landscape: Managing heritage in an urban century*. Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119968115>
- Bokiyeva, G. I. qizi. (2023). Zamonaviy Shaxrisabz kashtachiligida Dilorom Jo'rayeva ijodining o'rni. *Oriental Renaissance: Innovative, Educational, Natural and Social Sciences*, 3(11), 319–323. https://oriens.uz/media/journalarticles/43_Bokiyeva_Guzal_Ilhom_qizi_319-323.pdf
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- World Heritage Committee. (2016). Decision 40 COM 7B.48: Historic Centre of Shakhriyabz (Uzbekistan). UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/6713/>
- World Heritage Committee. (2017). Decision 41 COM 7A.57: Historic Centre of Shakhriyabz (Uzbekistan) (C 885). UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/7003/>
- World Heritage Committee. (2019). Decision 43 COM 7A.44: Historic Centre of Shakhriyabz (Uzbekistan) (C 885). UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/7550/>
- World Heritage Committee. (2023). Decision 45 COM 7A.54: Historic Centre of Shakhriyabz (Uzbekistan) (C 885). UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/8254/>
- World Heritage Committee. (2025). Decision 47 COM 7A.20: Historic Centre of Shakhriyabz (Uzbekistan). UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/8687/>
- World Heritage Committee. (2026). Decision 48 COM 7A.26: Historic Centre of Shakhriyabz (Uzbekistan). UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/9017/>
- Gyul, E. (2002). The embroidery of Shahrisabz. *San'at*, (1). <https://sanat.orexca.com/2002/2002-1/i-25/>
- Harrison, R. (2013). *Heritage: Critical approaches*. Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Heritage-Critical-Approaches/Harrison/p/book/9780415591973>
- Haydaraliyeva, D. (2023). Manufacturing national identities in the post-Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan: A study of controversial conservation practices in Samarkand and Shakhriyabz. *Slavic & East European Information Resources*, 24(4), 258–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228886.2024.2313278>
- ICOMOS. (1994). *The Nara document on authenticity*. <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/nara94.htm>
- ICOMOS. (2000). Shakhriyabz (Uzbekistan), No. 885: Advisory body evaluation. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/document/154515>
- Khakimov, Z. (2002). The architectural masterpieces of the emerald city. *San'at*, (1). https://sanat.orexca.com/2002/2002-1/history_art3-2/
- Presidency of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2024, June 27). Zaamin hosts International Maqom Forum. <https://www.president.uz/en/lists/view/7353>
- Paskaleva, E. (2015). Ideology in brick and tile: Timurid architecture of the 21st century. *Central Asian Survey*, 34(4), 418–439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2015.1118207>
- Pendlebury, J., Short, M., & While, A. (2009). Urban World Heritage Sites and the problem of authenticity. *Cities*, 26(6), 349–358. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2009.09.003>

- Shahrisabz Museum. (n.d.). Ethnography. Retrieved September 30, 2026, from <https://shahrisabz.parusinfo.com/en/ethnography.php>
- Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of heritage*. Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Uses-of-Heritage/Smith/p/book/9780415318310>
- UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>
- UNESCO. (2008). *Shashmaqom music*. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/shashmaqom-music-00089>
- UNESCO. (2011). *Recommendation on the historic urban landscape*. <https://whc.unesco.org/document/160163>
- UNESCO. (2016). *Palov culture and tradition*. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/palov-culture-and-tradition-01166>
- UNESCO World Heritage Centre. (n.d.-a). Historic Centre of Shakhriyabz. Retrieved September 30, 2026, from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/885/>
- UNESCO World Heritage Centre. (n.d.-b). Historic Centre of Shakhriyabz: Maps. Retrieved September 30, 2026, from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/885/maps/>
- Wang, N. (1999). Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26(2), 349–370. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(98\)00103-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(98)00103-0)
- Waterton, E., & Smith, L. (2010). The recognition and misrecognition of community heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 16(1–2), 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250903441671>