

Migration And Transformation Of Facade Elements In Eurasian Architecture: From Imperial China And Central Asia To Europe And The Indian Subcontinent (11th–17th Centuries)

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Received: 25 October 2025 **Accepted:** 16 November 2025 **Published:** 21 December 2025

ABSTRACT

This article examines the genesis and long-term transformation of facade architecture in Uzbekistan from antiquity to the seventeenth century, emphasizing its internal logic of development and its interaction with broader architectural traditions of Central Asia and the Islamic world. Based on archaeological evidence, historical written sources, and architectural-typological analysis, facades are interpreted as independent and primary carriers of symbolic, spatial, and ideological meaning rather than as secondary derivatives of plan or structure.

Keywords: Facade architecture, Uzbekistan, architectural genesis, Central Asia, Timurid architecture, portal, monumentality, symbolism.

INTRODUCTION

In much of classical architectural historiography, facades have been regarded as subordinate elements derived from planning schemes or structural systems. Such an approach, however, proves insufficient when applied to the architecture of Central Asia and Uzbekistan, where the facade often functions as the principal bearer of architectural meaning and visual identity [2; 3]. In many historical monuments of the region, the facade precedes and even dominates the internal spatial logic, shaping perception at the scale of the city and the ensemble.

The theoretical concept of architectural genesis, developed by Shukur Dzhuraevich Askarov, provides a critical framework for understanding this phenomenon. In *Genesis of the Architecture of Uzbekistan*, Askarov demonstrates that architectural form in the region evolved through a long and continuous process rooted in early urbanism, defensive architecture, and ritualized spatial hierarchies [1]. Within this process, the exterior wall, entrance, and frontal

composition emerge as some of the earliest architectural devices for expressing power, order, and sacred meaning.

Uzbekistan's architectural heritage—from ancient Khorezm and Sogdiana to Samarkand and Bukhara—offers a unique opportunity to trace the development of facade architecture over more than two millennia. The aim of this article is to analyze the historical foundations and typological evolution of facades in Uzbekistan and to identify the core principles that governed their transformation from antiquity through the Timurid period.

METHODS

The research employs an interdisciplinary methodology combining archaeology, architectural history, and typological analysis:

1. Archaeological analysis of early fortified and urban sites, including Toprak-kala, Ayaz-kala, Varakhsha,

and Afrasiab, based on excavation reports and syntheses by S. P. Tolstov and E. V. Rteladze [4; 9].

2. Architectural-typological analysis of facade elements—walls, portals, niches, surface articulation, and axial composition—in monuments of different historical periods.

3. Comparative historical analysis situating Uzbek monuments within the broader context of Central Asian and Islamic architecture [5; 6].

4. Interpretative analysis of symbolic and ideological meanings of facades, following the approaches of Pugachenkova, Bulatov, and Grabar [2; 3; 7].

The study relies on a critical reading of both material evidence and written sources, including medieval chronicles and travel accounts, to ensure factual reliability [8].

RESULTS

1. Pre-Islamic Foundations of Facade Architecture

Archaeological data from pre-Islamic sites in Uzbekistan indicate that facade principles were established at a very early stage of architectural development. In Toprak-kala (1st–4th centuries CE), the royal palace complex is enclosed by massive walls with clearly articulated entrance axes, emphasizing frontality and hierarchical access [4]. The facade here functions as a visual marker of authority, separating administrative and ceremonial space from the external environment.

Similarly, the palace complex of Varakhsha (6th–8th centuries CE) near Bukhara demonstrates a strong emphasis on monumental exterior walls and axial entrances, reinforced by painted interior halls that correspond to the frontal organization of the exterior [9]. As Askarov notes, such early architectural forms reflect the emergence of facade as a symbolic boundary expressing political and social order [1].

These examples confirm that the facade in early Uzbek architecture was not merely defensive but already possessed representational and ideological significance.

2. Early Islamic Period: Stabilization of Facade Typologies

With the spread of Islam from the 8th century onward, facade architecture in Uzbekistan underwent a process of formal stabilization and symbolic enrichment. Religious and funerary architecture introduced new compositional principles while preserving earlier traditions of frontality and entrance emphasis.

The Samanid Mausoleum in Bukhara (late 9th–early 10th century) represents a key milestone in this development. Its facades are conceived as fully articulated architectural surfaces, where brick patterns, structural clarity, and proportional harmony merge into a unified visual system [2; 6]. Pugachenkova emphasized that the monument marks the transition from massive, largely undifferentiated walls to a consciously designed facade plane [2].

Other early Islamic monuments, such as the Arab-Ata Mausoleum (10th century) and early mosque structures in Bukhara and Samarkand, further demonstrate the consolidation of facade typologies based on rhythm, symmetry, and symbolic articulation.

3. Seljuk and Pre-Timurid Developments

During the 11th–12th centuries, the Seljuk period introduced new facade devices that would later be fully developed in Timurid architecture. The increasing use of deep portals, recessed niches, and ornamental brickwork transformed facades into spatially complex compositions [6].

Monuments such as the Magoki-Attari Mosque in Bukhara and early mausoleums in Termez reveal an advanced understanding of facade depth and chiaroscuro, where light and shadow become active compositional elements. These developments align with broader Central Asian trends and prepare the ground for later monumental synthesis.

4. Timurid Architecture: Culmination of Facade Articulation

The Timurid period (14th–15th centuries) represents the culmination of facade development in Uzbekistan. Monumental ensembles such as Registan Square (Ulugh Beg Madrasa, Sher-Dor Madrasa, Tilla-Kari Madrasa), the Bibi-Khanum Mosque, and the Shah-i Zinda necropolis in Samarkand display an unprecedented scale and complexity of facade composition [3; 10].

Timurid facades are characterized by colossal pishtaqs,

flanking minarets, large-scale decorative programs, and strong axial symmetry. Bulatov described these facades as “architectural screens” that concentrate ideological meaning and dominate urban space regardless of internal layout [3]. Color, geometry, and epigraphy are deployed to reinforce the visual hierarchy of the facade.

Despite their apparent novelty, Timurid facades maintain continuity with earlier traditions. As Askarov emphasized, they represent the mature stage of a long evolutionary process rather than an abrupt stylistic rupture [1].

DISCUSSION

The expanded analysis confirms that facade architecture in Uzbekistan evolved through a cumulative and internally coherent process rather than through episodic stylistic borrowing. External influences—Persian, Islamic, and broader transregional traditions—were not mechanically replicated but selectively absorbed and reinterpreted within an architectural framework deeply rooted in local construction practices, spatial concepts, and symbolic systems [1; 5]. This process of adaptation was facilitated by the long continuity of urban life in Central Asia and by the persistence of inherited architectural models dating back to pre-Islamic periods.

Such an understanding challenges older diffusionist interpretations that describe Central Asian facades primarily as derivatives of Iranian or Middle Eastern prototypes. While formal parallels undeniably exist, especially in portal composition and ornamental vocabulary, the underlying logic of facade organization in Uzbekistan reflects a distinct architectural mentality shaped by local social structures, climatic conditions, and urban morphology [2; 3]. In this sense, the facade should be viewed not as an imported surface treatment but as a structurally and semantically autonomous component of architectural form.

A key aspect of this autonomy lies in the consistent emphasis on frontality and entrance articulation across different historical epochs. From fortified palaces of antiquity to Islamic religious and educational buildings, the facade functioned as a primary interface between architecture and the public realm. As demonstrated by Askarov’s concept of architectural genesis, early defensive walls and controlled access points established a spatial logic in which the exterior plane already carried symbolic meaning related to authority, protection, and social

hierarchy [1]. This logic persisted and evolved, ultimately shaping the monumental facades of medieval ensembles.

Moreover, facades in Uzbekistan played a decisive role in structuring urban space and collective perception. In cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara, monumental facades were oriented toward key squares, streets, and processional routes, forming visual axes that organized movement and ritual behavior. The facade thus became an active participant in urban scenography, contributing to the formation of a coherent architectural image at the scale of the ensemble and the city as a whole [7]. This urban function distinguishes Central Asian facade architecture from traditions in which exterior surfaces primarily reflect interior spatial organization.

The symbolic dimension of facades further reinforces their role as active agents in architectural evolution. Through scale, proportion, ornament, and color, facades communicated ideological messages related to political power, religious authority, and cosmological order. Timurid architecture, in particular, demonstrates how facade composition was employed to project imperial ideology and spiritual legitimacy, often independently of the complexity of internal layouts [3]. In this context, the facade operates as a visual text, encoding meanings that were immediately legible to contemporary observers.

Finally, the cumulative nature of facade development in Uzbekistan underscores the importance of continuity over rupture in architectural history. Even during periods of intense cultural exchange, such as the Timurid era, new facade forms did not replace earlier traditions but rather synthesized them into more complex and monumental expressions. This continuity supports the view that facade architecture in Uzbekistan represents a long-term cultural construct, shaped by successive layers of historical experience and collective memory [1; 7].

In sum, the discussion highlights the facade as a central architectural phenomenon that mediated between architecture and society, between past and present, and between local traditions and transregional influences. Recognizing facades as active, meaning-generating elements allows for a more nuanced understanding of the architectural heritage of Uzbekistan and its significant contribution to the broader history of Central Asian and Islamic architecture.

CONCLUSIONS

The study demonstrates that facade architecture in Uzbekistan developed as a stable and meaningful architectural system from antiquity to the seventeenth century. The main conclusions are as follows:

1. Facade principles emerged early in fortified and administrative architecture as symbolic and spatial boundaries.
2. The Islamic period introduced axiality, rhythm, and hierarchical articulation, reinforcing the facade's representational role.
3. Seljuk and pre-Timurid developments expanded facade depth and ornamental complexity.
4. Timurid architecture represents the culmination of facade evolution, synthesizing scale, symbolism, and urban dominance.
5. The overall process corresponds to the concept of architectural genesis formulated by Sh. D. Askarov, emphasizing continuity over rupture.

Recognizing facades as independent architectural phenomena allows for a deeper understanding of Uzbekistan's architectural heritage and its contribution to the wider history of Central Asian and Islamic architecture.

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