



Post-Soviet Housing: “Dacha” Settlements in the Tashkent Region

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Abstract: *The post-Soviet period has been witness to a rather difficult process of establishing a new socio-economic and political system in Uzbekistan. The housing question was significantly resolved within the U.S.S.R., while currently the issue of housing has become exacerbated mainly due to the privatisation of the existing housing stock. However, as more young people now enter adulthood, the need for affordable housing once again comes to the forefront in Uzbekistan - namely in Tashkent, a place attracting the youth from all other regions. This research paper focuses on one of the housing solutions in the Tashkent Region: particularly the reconstruction of summer houses, or dachas, into permanent homes for year-round living. The findings are based on several observations from the field and expert interviews with local dacha residents during the summers of 2015 and 2016. The revival of a traditional lifestyle, combined with the modernisation and “Euro-style” of Uzbek houses, represents a case of “indigenous modernities”.*

Keywords: post-Soviet housing policies; affordable housing solutions; Uzbek house courtyards and gardens; dacha summer houses.



Introduction

Just like many Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Uzbekistan celebrated the 25th anniversary of its independence this year. At this time, it is relevant to evaluate the reforms and policies that were adopted in order to transform society. Currently, the housing question is one of the major urban issues. In the early years of independence, the demand for new housing was not as acute; therefore, it did not receive as much attention from the new Uzbek government as other aspects of the economy. The old Soviet system, where the state would provide at least a minimal standard housing for all of its citizens, has significantly diminished due to a lack of resources. Today state agencies only provide housing for some of their employees. At the same time, the private sector has been falling behind with the mass construction of affordable housing. Thus, the new housing provision system has yet to be developed according to free market principles (Salimova 2012; Tokhtakhodzhaeva 2007).

Tashkent Housing Situation in the Post-Soviet Period

Since the early 2000s, the demand for housing in Tashkent has been on the increase as more young people have entered adulthood, have formed their own nuclear families or simply have moved out of their parents' homes. Yet, they have found themselves in a void situation, caught up in the transitional process of two opposing systems. Under the new economic structure, the government continued to provide housing only to certain groups (i.e. military, higher-rank ministry employees, etc.), and there was not a proper financial system set up for the gradual funding of private housing construction (equivalent to a Western¹ system of mortgage loans). During the "perestroika" period, construction of cooperative housing had risen among active citizens who managed to build private houses in the Soviet Union and its dominions (Andrusz, Marcuse, and Pickvance 1996; French 1995). However, many such endeavours were slowed down with the collapse of the U.S.S.R.²; thanks to the inevitable default of economies in the Soviet republics, Uzbekistan included, there was a rapid increase in inflation and even hyperinflation (790-2700% annually in 1992, until it stabilised around 35% in 1994³).

Despite relatively stable growth of housing prices in Uzbekistan in the 1990s and up until the first half of the 2000s, the housing situation has changed drastically since 2006. The sharp rise of housing prices and the subsequent need for establishing a housing financial system has transformed the housing question in Uzbekistan. This problem had been solved partially by the government's decision on an introduction of a mortgage system (Ipoteka) with lower interest rates. Nevertheless, it was not an adequate solution for young families whose incomes do not usually meet the requirements. These, along with additional reasons, led to a mismatch between the supply and demand of affordable housing for young people in Tashkent. They often rely on their social capital - networks of family and friends - to secure separate housing (Perera and Salimova 2016). This represents a bottom-up approach that is employed by ordinary citizens'

¹The term "Western" in this article is related to Western European and Northern American housing systems, which includes bank mortgages with interest payments.

²Most of the data was collected from online forums reflecting Soviet life based on the memories of former citizens of the Soviet Union.

³From Worldmark Encyclopedia of Nations: Uzbekistan, Economy.



and which helps to ease the housing shortage. Such argumentation in favour of alternative solutions is based on the discourse of people's spaces, an argument extensively elaborated on by Nihal Perera (2016).

Regardless of this situation, the housing shortage is not immediately apparent in Tashkent due to strict regulations of rural to urban migration, preventing the uncontrollable population growth that is typical of other Asian cities⁴. The main instrument for limiting city growth is "propiska", a system of registering citizens at places of permanent residency introduced by the Soviets. This legal regulation affects many aspects of citizens' daily lives, including the right to live at a registered place (apartment, dormitory, house), the right to receive social benefits (stipend, pension, unemployment, etc.), and most importantly, the right to purchase and own a private dwelling (Tukmadiyeva 2016; Turaeva 2012). In order to buy a house or apartment in one's preferred city or region, one must have permanent propiska there. In the case of Tashkent city and region, it is very difficult or nearly impossible for residents from other cities or regions in Uzbekistan to obtain permanent registration there provided they do not work at strategically important state agencies. Thus, the propiska system still plays a key role in housing acquisition as permanent registration is a prior requirement for the purchase of any dwelling unit.

In this paper I will discuss a new phenomenon that I have observed during my fieldwork in Tashkent during the summers of 2015 and 2016: namely, the extensive use of the dacha (from Russian "a grant" of land) as permanent housing for middle-income and lower-income citizens of Tashkent. This new trend of moving residential development to the urban periphery is observed in many post-socialist cities, especially in Central and Eastern European cities since the late 1990s to early 2000s (Stanilov 2007). Yet, it appears that Uzbek cities are embracing this trend in significant strides only in the last few years.

Housing Types in Uzbekistan

A traditional Uzbek house is presented here as having a courtyard with a garden that is surrounded by the living quarters (Figures 1 and 2). Some of these houses still exist in the traditional *mahalla* (Uzbek community), while only a small number of them remain in original form in Tashkent city⁵; nowadays traditional houses are predominantly located in the surrounding villages and smaller towns. Recently Uzbek houses have been rebuilt into a contemporary style, representing a blend of a traditional and modern house, or as Jyoti Hosagrahar puts it, "indigenous modernities" (2005). This trend leads to a diminishing of "natural" elements in Uzbek houses as the customary fruit trees are being replaced by Western-style lawns and decorative trees (Figure 3). However, these types of houses usually belong to the wealthy Tashkent residents, who have stronger aspirations for Western life style. A majority of Tashkent residents were housed after 1957 in high- and mid-rise apartment blocks under the

⁴ This is in reference to Asian cities, such as Beijing, Cairo, Istanbul, Mumbai, Shanghai and similar cities which were not within the Soviet Union, and therefore, did not inherit urban growth control mechanisms.

⁵ More than 80% of Tashkent's old city structures were destroyed during the earthquake in 1966. Traditional houses were severely damaged because they were not built in accordance with seismological requirements, and therefore, were not stable for earthquakes of that magnitude (5.5).



Soviet housing reform⁶. Initially designed as quickly-constructed prefabricated housing, these buildings still occupy the largest segment of the Tashkent housing stock, the so-called “vtorichniy rynok” (from Russian “secondary market”). Newly built apartment blocks are usually bought by upper-middle or high income residents; therefore, these buildings are not considered as affordable housing in Uzbekistan.

Figure 1 and 2. Inner courtyard of a traditional Uzbek house in Tashkent. Photos by Hikoyat Salimova. August 2016.



Figure 3. Modern house with a lawn substituted for a traditional garden. Photo by Hikoyat Salimova. August 2015



Figure 4. The standard rural houses under the state program. Source: www.UzDaily.uz. (26.10.2016)



⁶ Soviet housing policy, following the Stalin epoch, aimed to eliminate the housing deficit by the 1980s by constructing cheap and small apartments for nuclear families (French, 1995). This goal was not achieved at 100%, leading to the government’s decision to allow individual construction of houses (Tokhtakhodzhaeva, 2007).



Housing Finance and Affordability

The more common and affordable houses are usually located either in the remote districts of Tashkent, on the outskirts or even in villages close to the city's boundaries. These houses are built by the state, private construction companies (Figure 4) or by ordinary citizens' who have their own resources (Figures 3, 5, 6). The state allocates general funds, including those from international aid organisations, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, to build affordable housing for young families. They are typically mortgages with lower interest rates⁷, around 10-15% (compared to interest rates from several banks' websites⁸). These long-term housing loans are more affordable than the offers from commercial banks; typically, however, these standardised housing schemes are located far away from the city, on the outskirts or even further, and therefore, are not as desirable for young people whose jobs are usually in the urban core.

Ordinary citizens, however, build incrementally as their financial means allow; consequently, such constructions are often chaotic and spontaneous. In many cases, such "amateur" builders lack the required legal paperwork since it is often unclear to what extent and how soon they will be able to realise their construction plans. The latter are frequently modified throughout the building process. When a family has extra money and construction workers are available, the major work is done; once funds are depleted or workers are no longer available, the process either gets slowed down or is put on hold until additional resources can be secured. Therefore, housing documentation (floor plans) and the legalisation (building permits) process often follows upon the completion of a major part of the building (this is based on informal conversation with individual home builders and the author's fieldwork notes). Despite these obstacles, such houses are more desirable for local residents as their desire to live in a traditional type of house is still evident. Even being relocated to high-rise apartment blocks was a rather reluctant process for the Uzbek people (French 1995).

Both types of houses have their advantages and disadvantages. While ordinary people can build their own houses according to their own timetable and needs, government-provided houses are uniform across the entire country and inhabitants have limited freedom to customise the exterior of these houses. Despite government subsidies, mortgage loans for standard houses are also relatively expensive for the average young family in Uzbekistan⁹. Also, without additional support from the extended family, young families usually cannot afford even these lower-rate mortgages. Moreover, the local population is fairly disappointed with these houses as some of them are already in need of repairs only after a few years of use. Rumours suggest that during construction the responsible companies take some building materials for their own use. Yet, from the outside, the houses look nice and presentable (Figure 4).

⁷ Unsubsidised private mortgage loans in Uzbekistan usually start at interest rates of 25% or higher.

⁸ Mortgage loans in Tashkent are offered at Ipoteka Bank, Alpjamol Bank, Asaka Bank, National Bank of Uzbekistan, Credit-Standard, Join-Stock Commercial Industrial Construction Bank (<http://www.ostamyy.com/Mortgage/Uzbekistan.htm>).

⁹ The average gross salary in Uzbekistan is equal to \$500 per month, according to the Uzbek government (official announcement of 31.08.2010).



Dachas as a New Housing Solution

An important aspect to consider is the scarcity of empty land for new constructions in the city. This forces urban house inhabitants to sacrifice the cultural tradition of building additional living quarters within their small urban land parcels for their children who get married and who start their own families. Therefore, many Tashkent residents have discovered a solution in housing outside of the city with dachas (Figures 5 and 6). Originally, standard empty land plots some distance away from the city were given by local governments during the late Soviet era to urban residents through professional associations which had legal permits to use the land for gardening. Many designed their own summer houses on these plots as well, while the land was still mostly used for traditional cultivation as urban gardens were in pre-Soviet times. Thus, dachas represent an opportunity to return to a traditional lifestyle and get away from crowded city life. This is an especially popular trend among the older generations who choose to move to the outskirts of the city and leave their urban dwelling to their grown children who are looking to start their own families. This is also an optimal solution - given the dacha is located close to Tashkent in an adjacent village, such as Keles, Khasanboy, Kibray, Nazarbek, Toytepa, Zangiata, etc. - to building new housing without compromising the city life.

Figures 5 & 6. Dachas in Kibray Region, Tashkent. Photos by Hikoyat Salimova. September 2016.



Revival of Traditional Houses in the Form of Indigenous Modernities

Traditional activities in Uzbek houses were various and included: gardening; breeding of a small stock of cattle (sheep, goats, cows and even horses); breeding of poultry (chicken, rarely ducks, geese or turkey); baking and cooking in a traditional oven (*tandyr*); carrying out other daily chores; and preparing for special festivities (*toys*), namely weddings and anniversaries, Muslim holidays and events (Eid, *hatim*, funeral, etc). Urban houses, due to their limited premises, do not allow for many of these activities to take place within a modern space. Cattle and poultry breeding are no longer encouraged because of animal-related odours that are considered inappropriate for a European-style house. Gardening is replaced by traditional Western lawns and decorative trees from different climates, such as fir and palm trees. However,



this so-called “upgraded” lifestyle is only observed among the upper-middle and higher income groups, which tend to transform their houses in the form of indigenous modernities as discussed earlier.

The vast majority of Uzbeks, nevertheless, rely on traditional activities to supplement the household income by reducing food costs and catering to local tastes still predominant in the region despite the desire to become more “Europeanised”. Therefore, dachas, which previously were used only as summer houses, now are turning into permanent houses with all of the amenities necessary for the traditional Uzbek lifestyle. However, some dachas also encompass a luxurious and modern style; such dachas take up more than the usual space on the garden plot. Additionally, their amenities often include electricity, natural gas, water and even sewer lines. These dachas are Europeanised just like modern houses in the city, where even the garden is replaced with Western landscaping. Although these “luxurious” dachas are part of a growing trend, they still make up a minor share of all dachas as local residents are not yet ready to give up their fruit trees and vegetables in return for complete “Westernisation”. Rooted in the Uzbek collective memory of Tashkent residents is nostalgia and attachment towards fruit trees and a preference for their own products over the market substitute.

Conclusion

When observing the results of the transformation of the urban periphery of Tashkent, it is notable that local residents have substantial power in creating, modifying and upgrading their living conditions. In doing so, they strengthen their capacities through building social capital based on formal and informal networks, and thus lessen their dependency on the state, supporting the argument for the creation of so-called “people’s spaces” (Perera 2016). Hence, this short research paper draws the following conclusions. First, the housing question is still mainly dependent on the efforts of local citizens who manage to create adequate housing within their own means. However, their resources are often limited, disruptive and/or seasonal, making the individual housing construction process a rather ongoing life-long project for many Tashkent residents. The legal aspects, such as official building permits, also create additional obstacles during this process as the state requirements are too complicated and are still based on the old Soviet system. Second, a strong aspiration for Western-style development often pushes ordinary citizens to inadvertently follow the current trend and undertake housing projects not essential to their ordinary life, but which rather serve aesthetic purposes and fulfil their desire for a higher standard of living. Eventually, such desires escalate the initial costs of construction and create an extra financial burden on the house owners. This adds to the length of the construction process and forces residents either to wait longer to move in or to start living in uncompleted houses, bearing the inconveniences of a construction site. Third, the official state reports on housing partially contradict reality. Standard housing is provided in rural areas and requires the families to move out of the city and does not necessarily help to solve the housing shortage in the city. Nevertheless, some such project houses are located in close proximity to Tashkent’s city limits and allow for a relatively short commute for such inhabitants, especially if they have personal vehicles. These arguments illustrate that housing planning in Uzbekistan is not up-to-date with the realities of today: it is incoherent, inconsistent, spontaneous and re-active. A revision of urban policies from both the perspective of the state and ordinary citizens could foster a solution to the housing problem.



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