

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36719/2706-6185/50/52-57>

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## **Comparative Study of Decorative Elements in Azerbaijani Eclectic Architecture at the End of the 19<sup>th</sup> – and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

### **Abstract**

This study examines the development of architecture and urban planning in Baku at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this period, the rapid growth of the city and the construction of new residential, administrative, religious, and domestic buildings highlighted the role of professional architects and engineers. Local architects, particularly Gasim bay Hajibababayov, Gafar İsmayilov and Zivar bay Ahmadbayov, contributed to the formation of a unified architectural zone in the city by synthesizing national architectural traditions with the principles of European and Russian architectural schools.

During the period of eclecticism and stylistic preference, buildings incorporated elements of the Shirvan-Absheron classical architecture, such as arches, vaulted ceilings, dome interiors and volumetric-spatial compositions, showcasing the richness of national architectural traditions. At the same time, the use of reinforced concrete, metal, glass, and other new materials enabled the realization of large-scale structures, arches and dome designs.

The study highlights the scale of development in Baku's historic center and Absheron settlements, emphasizing national-romantic trends, religious structures, baths and residential buildings, along with their planning and architectural forms. The issue of preserving historical buildings is also addressed, noting that in 1988, more than 850 architectural monuments were included in the state-protected list.

The construction of the Transcaucasian and Baku–Tbilisi railways introduced the “Eastern style” and Moorish architecture, which, combined with local architectural traditions, significantly influenced the formation of the city's architectural identity. This research reflects the richness and historical-cultural significance of Baku's architectural heritage in the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries, resulting from the synthesis of national and international influences.

**Keywords:** *Baku, architecture, urban planning, eclecticism, national architecture, Shirvan-Absheron style, European architecture*

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## **XIX əsrin sonu XX əsrin əvvəllərində Azərbaycanda eklektika memarlığında dekorativ elementlərin müqayisəsi**

### **Xülasə**

Bu araşdırma XIX əsrin sonu və XX əsrin əvvəllərində Bakıda memarlıq və şəhərsalma proseslərinin inkişafını öyrənir. Həmin dövrdə şəhərin sürətlə böyüməsi və yeni yaşayış, inzibati, dini və məişət binalarının tikilməsi peşəkar memar və mühəndislərin fəaliyyətini aktuallaşdırmışdır. Yerli memarlar, xüsusilə Qasım bəy Hacıbababəyov, Qafar İsmayilov və Zivər bəy Əhmədbəyov, milli memarlıq ənənələrini Avropa və rus memarlıq məktəblərinin prinsipləri ilə sintez edərək, şəhərin vahid memarlıq zonasının formalaşmasına töhfə vermişlər.

Eklektik üslub və üslubpərəstlik dövründə tikilmiş binalarda Şirvan-Abşeron klassik memarlıq elementləri, tağlar, tağbəndlər, günbəzdaxili interyerlər və həcmi-fəza kompozisiyaları milli memarlığın zənginliyini nümayiş etdirir. Eyni zamanda dəmir-beton, metal, şüşə və digər yeni materialların tətbiqi böyük konstruksiyaların, tağ və günbəz layihələrinin reallaşmasına imkan yaratmışdır.

Araşdırmada Bakının tarixi mərkəzində və Abşeron yaşayış məntəqələrində milli-romantik istiqamət, dini qurğular, hamamlar və yaşayış evləri əsasında inkişafın miqyası, planlaşdırma və memarlıq formaları göstərilmişdir. Həmçinin, tarixi binaların qorunması məsələləri də diqqətə alınmış, 1988-ci ildə 850-dən çox memarlıq abidəsi dövlət tərəfindən qorunan siyahıya daxil edilmişdir.

Zaqafqaziya və Bakı-Tiflis dəmiryolunun inşası zamanı tətbiq olunan “şərqi üslub” və Mavritaniya memarlığı, yerli memarlıq ənənələri ilə birləşərək şəhərin memarlıq simasının formalaşmasına mühüm təsir göstərmişdir. Bu tədqiqat Bakının XIX-XX əsrlərdə memarlıq irsinin milli və beynəlxalq təsirlərin sintezi nəticəsində yaranan zənginliyini və tarixi-mədəni əhəmiyyətini əks etdirir.

***Açar sözlər:** Bakı, memarlıq, şəhərsalma, eklektika, milli memarlıq, Şirvan-Abşeron üslubu, Avropa memarlığı*

## Introduction

From the second half of the 19th century to the early 20th century, architectural and urban development in Azerbaijan underwent a significant phase of growth. This period is distinguished by both the preservation of local national architectural traditions and the influence of European and Russian architectural movements. Across various regions of Azerbaijan, particularly in the Baku–Absheron area, the accelerated economic and political development led to the extensive formation of residential, administrative, industrial, and religious buildings in terms of their spatial composition, architectural features, and decorative design.

The professionalism in urban planning began to increase from the late 19th century, with both local architects and engineers and architects invited from Russia and Europe actively contributing to these efforts. As a result of this collaboration, the city witnessed not only the preservation of national architectural traditions but also the application of eclectic architectural trends. In particular, the planning and construction activities carried out in Baku between 1880 and 1920 ensured the architectural cohesion of the city while enhancing its stylistic diversity and historical-cultural value (Aghazadeh, 2012, p. 234).

The architectural heritage of this period is of significant importance not only from technical and aesthetic perspectives but also as an indicator of the city's socio-economic development. Within this context, the trends in the development of national architecture, the implementation of eclectic styles, and the issues of preserving historical and cultural heritage remain central and worthy areas of study in the history of Azerbaijani architecture.

## Research

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the extensive processing of oil and natural gas in Baku, the rapidly expanding geography of trade and the influx of foreign investment laid the foundation for capitalism and contributed to its significant development. This growth found reflection, in one form or another, across the regions of Azerbaijan. Progress in all directions, as in other sectors of Azerbaijan, was particularly evident in the construction industry, which developed in accordance with the demands of the capitalist system and was able to keep pace with it.

The design and construction of buildings with new functions, differing entirely from previously built structures, and featuring diverse character and content became increasingly relevant (Abdullayeva, 2013). In Azerbaijan, projects emerged that adhered to the traditions of various historical architectural schools, leaving a deep mark on the development of architectural history through their originality, progressive planning methods, and volumetric-spatial compositions. In these projects, engineers, construction workers and craftsmen skillfully integrated national architecture with the methods of European and Russian architectural trends, creating entirely new compositions and opening a previously unseen chapter in the history of architecture.

During the period under consideration, the practice of architecture and construction across various regions of Azerbaijan was influenced not only by the local climate, natural environment and historical development, but also by the occupations and products of the regional population. In addition, the projects reflected the continuous evolution of Azerbaijani architectural schools, demonstrating the line of tradition and heritage. Skilled craftsmen, who made adept use of locally available natural materials while preserving the fundamental principles of architectural traditions and transmitting their expertise and individual characteristics from generation to generation, advanced further during this period by creating architectural compositions that distinguished these buildings from earlier constructions. Attention was paid not only to the exterior design of the buildings but also to the decorative appearance of their interiors, resolving these aspects by drawing inspiration from the finest examples of folk art.

Eclecticism characterized Azerbaijani architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. During these two centuries, the simultaneous work of both local and foreign architects in Azerbaijan, along with their mutual pursuit of innovation, was among the factors that enhanced eclecticism. Azerbaijani architects primarily focused on the formation of the national architectural school, while at the same time they did not abandon the principles of classical architecture. Foreign architects, on the other hand, based their designs on European architectural traditions, yet they were also interested in incorporating both Eastern and Azerbaijani national architectural elements. As a result of these and similar factors, Azerbaijani architecture developed in an eclectic manner. Each architect had their own distinctive style, often associated with a particular architectural trend. As evident from the architectural monuments discussed, sometimes the exterior and interior of a single building were designed as transitions between different architectural styles. Occasionally, the exteriors incorporated elements from several styles. However, due to the great skill of the architects, each architectural monument was completed as a coherent composition, constructed without disrupting the overall stylistic harmony of the Baku architectural ensemble.

The characteristics of the national architectural composition of the buildings erected during this period, the interplay of tradition and innovation in vernacular architecture, and the boundaries of national architecture were studied and articulated by our prominent scholars M. Useynov, A.Salamzadeh, L.Bretanski (Bretanski, 1951, p. 32), A.Gasimzadeh, K.Mammadzadeh, G.Alizadeh, H.Rzayev, A.Mehdiyev, fon der Nonne (Fatullayev-Figarov, 2013a) and other researchers (Fatullayev, 2013, s. 119). During the indicated period, in various regions of Azerbaijan, and particularly in Baku, the study of volumetric-spatial composition and architectural features of different types of buildings, their construction dates, and their interaction with other influences - especially European architectural styles-led to the emergence of eclectic architecture, extensively discussed in several valuable monographs by Sh.Fatullayev-Figarov (Fatullayev-Figarov, 2013b, p. 480). According to these researchers, the core of this architecture was derived from folk creativity: the national architectural composition skillfully incorporated traditional forms such as arches, vaults, portals, domes, minarets, balconies, latticework, and others, while taking into account the locally available construction materials and, most importantly, the regional climatic conditions, thereby achieving a developed and progressive architectural expression.

After Azerbaijan became part of the Russian Empire, along with increased attention to the construction of administrative and public buildings, the restoration of certain existing structures and their adaptation for these functions was also supported by the Empire (Azerbaijan, 1996, s. 34). During this period, some palace buildings in Baku, Ganja, Shaki and Guba were utilized for such purposes. In the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the architectural and planning composition of administrative buildings was fully formed, reaching a high level of sophistication. It should be noted that until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the construction of these buildings was primarily carried out by the state. At that time, the economic conditions in Russia, with both positive and negative aspects, influenced Azerbaijan's development and sought to guide it accordingly. Simultaneously, the socio-economic context demanded, from an architectural perspective, the construction of new types of buildings.

As in other regions of Azerbaijan, political and economic development in the Baku-Absheron area progressed rapidly. In 1859, Baku was declared the provincial center and was mainly located

within the Inner City, surrounded by fortress walls (Abdulragimova, 2010, p. 21). The rapid pace of construction led to the erection of buildings of various types. These structures, with their distinctive architectural appearances and spatial-compositional solutions, were unique and non-repetitive, contributing significantly to the growth and shaping of the city. This development was evident not only in Baku but also in the surrounding Absheron villages.

To meet the demands of the rapidly developing construction sector, a limited number of local architects and builders were joined by architects and civil engineers invited from European countries and Russia. Local architects, who had a proper understanding of the urban planning principles, regulations, and rigor of Russian and European architecture, managed not only to solve urban planning tasks efficiently but also to create interesting layouts for residential buildings and design facades that reflected local characteristics. As a result, the architecture of the buildings erected during this period demonstrates a skillful integration of national architectural traditions with European architectural trends. In Baku, particularly between 1880 and 1920, along with work carried out on the city's Master Plan to meet modern requirements, various buildings of unique character were constructed, distinguished by their distinctive architectural compositions.

The city's population increased at a pace unprecedented in the world at that time. In Baku, alongside courtyard houses, there were constructed mansions and palace residences with rich volumetric-spatial compositions and decorative designs, administrative and governmental buildings, religious structures, and baths. In construction, in addition to local natural building materials, reinforced concrete, metal, glass, and other inorganic materials, as well as sanitary equipment and elevators, began to be used. The use of reinforced concrete and metal allowed not only for large-span coverings, domes, arches, and vault constructions, but also paved the way for the erection of buildings that had previously been unknown in architectural form.

Starting from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, profound changes occurred in the architectural and construction activities of the city. The inclusion of the positions of city engineer and city architect in the staff structure promoted the application of professionally developed architectural projects in Baku's construction. In this direction, alongside civil engineers and architects arriving from St. Petersburg, local architects actively participated, foremost among them being Gasim bay Hacıbababayov, who in 1890 became the architect of Baku and Shamakhi and notably, was the first Caucasian appointed to this position (Novruzova, 2005, p. 47). His student and assistant, later the renowned architect Mashadi Mirza Gafar Ismayilov, from 1880 supervised construction works in a large part of the Inner City (Old City), leaving behind large residential buildings in the suburbs as his legacy. The author has identified over 250 of his projects in the archives of Azerbaijan.

During the period of eclecticism and stylistic historicism, the direct involvement of professional architects in urban planning in Baku determined the architectural currents applied in construction.

For the local environment, this represented an innovation, and projects executed in various stylistic aspects alongside the traditional architectural style gained the appreciation of clients.

The stylistic distinctiveness of the city developed along two directions: the local school referencing the Shirvan-Absheron classical architectural tradition, and the quickly popular European architectural school. A unified architectural zone of the city began to take shape. The creative work of architects such as Zivar bay Ahmadbayov, Haji bay Akhundov, I.V.Goslavskiy, Gasim bay Hacıbababayov, Gafar Ismayilov, A.S.Kandinov, I.K.Ploshko, E.Y.Skibinski, K.B.Skurevich, N.P. Tverdokhlebov (Naghiyev, 2013) and others was represented in this development.

Particular attention should be paid to the efforts under civil engineer Zivar bey Ahmadbeyov to study national architectural monuments. On Z. Ahmadbayov's initiative, in 1918, civil engineers Omar bay Abuyev and Ismayil bay Qajar participated in measuring the dimensions of the Shirvanshahs Palace ensemble, a masterpiece of Azerbaijani architecture. The renowned professor of art history V.M. Zummer highly appreciated the measurement works carried out by Ismayil bay Nabi oghlu and the drawings he prepared (Fatullayev, 1986, p. 345).

By the late 1890s, in buildings constructed according to the projects of I. Edel and Y. Skibinski, the influence of the Shirvanshahs Complex and the spread of the Moorish style were noticeable.

This, in turn, enabled a more serious approach to the promotion of local architecture at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interest in the national-romantic direction was also awakened through the design of religious buildings, residential houses and household facilities such as baths.

In this context, in Baku and the settlements of Absheron, the scale of development was observed through the construction of mosques and baths according to traditional planning forms. The interiors of these buildings consisted of architectural-construction forms such as corbelled arches, vaulted ceilings, and domes, which represented the fundamental background of national architecture. Despite the limited application of architectural forms in existing structures, true tectonic architectural works were being created. Interior spaces were represented with columned arches, multi-layered stone vaulted ceilings, and domes shaped in the classical corbelled style. Multi-tiered prayer halls, endowed with deep interior space and imbued with the lyricism of architectural forms and strong tectonics, created a unique and inimitable atmosphere.

The construction of the Transcaucasian Railway, along with its various functional and characterful structures and the opening of the Baku-Tbilisi railway in 1883 marked the beginning of the penetration of the “Eastern” architectural style - or the Moorish style, known across the region from Egypt to Spain as Muslim-Arab-Eastern architecture -into Azerbaijan. Along the railway line, the primary architectural objects of this type were the buildings of passenger stations at major railway hubs in Baku, Ganja, Hajigabul, Julfa, and other cities (Karimov, 1992, s. 120). The designs were prepared in St. Petersburg under the directive of the Viceroy of the Caucasus. Considering the Eastern characteristics of the Muslim provinces of Transcaucasia, the buildings were constructed in an “Eastern style” that shared certain commonalities with local architecture.

### Conclusion

The architectural developments of Azerbaijan from the late 19th to the early 20th century reflect a unique synthesis of national traditions and foreign influences. The cityscape, particularly in Baku and the Absheron region, showcases the successful integration of European and Russian architectural trends with local architectural identity, resulting in buildings distinguished by their spatial composition, stylistic diversity and decorative richness. The participation of both local architects and foreign engineers and architects in urban planning and construction contributed to the creation of a coherent architectural environment while preserving historical and cultural values. Public, residential, industrial and religious buildings from this period demonstrate not only technical and aesthetic achievements but also the socio-economic progress of the region. The study and preservation of this architectural heritage remain of paramount importance. They provide insight into the evolution of national architecture, the application of eclectic styles and the urban development patterns that shaped modern Azerbaijan. Ensuring the protection and proper documentation of these monuments allows for the continuation of the historical and cultural narrative of Azerbaijani cities, offering future generations an authentic connection to their architectural past.

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Daxil oldu: 03.04.2025

Qəbul edildi: 22.07.2025