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Cultural Perspectives on the Museumization of the Baku Khans' Palace

Abstract

The Baku Khans' Palace is one of the main architectural monuments located in Icherisheher, which is considered a historical and cultural part of Baku and represents the cultural heritage of the city. According to information obtained from sources, since the country's independence, the Republic of Azerbaijan has been carrying out many restoration and reconstruction works in the Icherisheher. The initiatives of Great Leader Heydar Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, and First Vice-President Mehriban Aliyeva are crucial in this work. The Baku Khans' Palace is also included in this restoration process. After intensive reconstruction work, the palace continues to function as a museum. Thus, the palace is not only a historical and cultural monument but also a museum that plays an important role in the tourism sector of Azerbaijan. Currently, there are many tourists from different countries of the world visiting this unique palace. The description of the place reflecting the palace culture and the park expressing the landscape around the palace creates a very interesting environment for visitors. In addition, the article also studies an adaptive method that ensures the restoration and functional reuse of monuments. The presented article is based on a cultural analysis of the palace's contribution to cultural heritage, as well as its role in the development of local tourism.

Keywords: *Icherisheher, Baku Khans' Palace, tourism, cultural heritage, adaptive reuse, cultural analysis*

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Bakı Xanları Sarayının muzeyləşdirilməsində mədəni perspektivlər

Xülasə

Bakı Xanları Sarayı Bakının tarixi və mədəni hissəsi hesab edilən İçərişəhərdə yerləşən və şəhərin mədəni irsini təmsil edən əsas memarlıq abidələrindən biridir. Mənbələrdən əldə edilən məlumatlara görə, müstəqillik illərindən bəri Azərbaycan Respublikası tərəfindən İçərişəhərdə çoxsaylı bərpa və yenidənqurma işləri davam etdirilir. Bu işdə Ulu Öndər Heydər Əliyevin, Azərbaycan Respublikasının Prezidenti İlham Əliyevin və Birinci vitse-prezident Mehriban xanım Əliyevanın təşəbbüsləri əvəzsizdir. Həmçinin, Bakı Xanları Evi də bu bərpa prosesinə daxildir. İntensiv yenidənqurma işlərindən sonra saray muzey kimi fəaliyyətini davam etdirir. Belə ki, saray təkcə tarixi və mədəni abidə deyil, həm də Azərbaycanın turizm sektorunda mühüm rol oynayan muzeydir. Hazırda dünyanın müxtəlif ölkələrindən bu unikal sarayı ziyarət edən çoxlu sayda turist var. Saray mədəniyyətini əks etdirən məkanın təsviri, eləcə də sarayın ətrafındakı mənzərəni ifadə edən park ziyarətçilər üçün çox maraqlı bir mühit yaradır. Bundan əlavə, məqalədə abidələrin bərpasını və funksional olaraq təkrar istifadəsini təmin edən adaptiv metod da araşdırılır.

Tədqim edilən məqalə sarayın mədəni irsə verdiyi töhfənin, eləcə də yerli turizmin inkişafındakı rolunun kulturoloji təhlilinə əsaslanır.

Açar sözlər: İçərişəhər, Bakı Xan Sarayı, turizm, mədəni irs, adaptiv yenidən istifadə, mədəni təhlil

Introduction

Baku is a historical and cultural city of Azerbaijan, with the central area known as Old City or Inner City. İcherişeher has many monuments, including a tower, a mosque, a palace, and a bathhouse (İbrahimov, 2006, pp. 97–149) that serve different functions within the tourism sector. These cultural monuments symbolize the national cultural and historical values of Azerbaijan. Additionally, they are involved with the visitors from different parts of the world. One of the most significant monuments of İcherişeher is the Baku Khans' Palace, which functioned as the residence of the Baku khans and their families in the XIX century. At the present, the palace has been transformed into a museum and works as an important cultural trip destination for both local and international tourists. The research evaluates the Baku Khans' Palace from two perspectives: as a historical architectural monument and as a modern museum. Therefore, the transformation of the palace shows the main relevance of the present study. The object of this study is the Baku Khans' Palace, and the subject examines how its transformation into a museum contributes to cultural tourism. The aim of this scientific paper is to explore the role of the Baku Khans' Palace, which was transformed into a museum, in promoting culture and cultural tourism. The study focuses on the following tasks to achieve this aim:

- To examine the historical, architectural, and cultural value of the palace;
- To review the restoration and the adaptive reuse carried out in the palace;
- To analyze the palace's role in the tourism sector;
- To assess how the museum helps visitors engage with Azerbaijani history and culture.

The sources of this research article include scientific studies by local and international researchers, as well as related online resources. The article uses methods such as historical-architectural and cultural analysis, along with the study of related field documents.

Research

Following the death of Nadir Shah in 1747, Azerbaijan was divided into several khanates. One of them was the Baku Khanate (Aşurbəyli, 2009, p. 202). Although the Baku Khanate was small in terms of territory, it had strategic importance in northern Azerbaijan and played an important role in regional political dynamics. The Baku Khans' Palace, which is located in the southeastern corner of İcherişeher near the Goshə Gala or Şamaxı gates, represents a critical symbol of Baku Khanate. The palace complex consists of the palace of the last Baku Khan, Hüseynqulu Khan, and the residences of prominent figures such as Abdurrahim Bey and Mehdiqulu Bey. The historical sources indicate that the Khans preserved multiple suburban gardens, and auxiliary properties were highly regarded for their aesthetic and functional significance. The travelers and researchers, such as S.G. Gmelin, E. Kempfer, and A.F. Ulski, explored the palace. They studied its surroundings as extraordinarily rich and systematized, noting walled gardens blending Eastern and European styles, pools, exotic animals such as gazelles and peacocks, and elaborately arranged floral compositions. The palace and its gardens functioned not only as a residence but also as a center of administration, socio-political activity, and cultural display. As a result, it reflects the hierarchical and urban organizational structures of the Baku Khanate. Archival and historical sources also confirm that earlier rulers, including II Mirza Muhammad Khan, Hüseynqulu Khan, and Muhammad Gulu Khan, applied the palace's garden estates for leisure and representation, highlighting the continuity of political and cultural traditions (Ələkbərova, 2019; Əliyeva, 2018; İbrahimov & İbrahimov, 2020).

The Baku Khans' Palace was a cultured architectural ensemble that combines residential, ceremonial, and functional structures. The main residential building, the seven-room, two-story Bedroom House called Yatag evi, was built by Dargahqulu Khan in the 1730s-1740s. And so, it reflects the architectural style and social status of the ruling elite. The palace includes the following buildings: residential and guest houses, usually two stories high, courtyards (five to seven in number) with central pools and fruit gardens, balakhana upper balconies, verandas, lattice windows, and

double-chimney kitchens, a mosque, bathhouse (notably the partially underground “Qum” bath), and a hunting lodge, water supply systems, including underground kahriz networks and ovdan reservoirs, auxiliary structures such as kitchens, servants’ quarters, workshops, and well-planned courtyards.



The mirrored hall of the last Baku khan by A.W. Kizevetter. (Azerhistory)

Decorative elements included mirror halls, vaulted Shahnishin platforms with stained glass, and intricately carved walnut doors and frames. German ethnographer A.W.Kizevetter, depicting a mirrored guest room with gold decorations, carpets, central fountains, and Shahnishin platforms, discovered a notable visual record in a painting. This painting provides unique insights into the lost interior of the palace. In addition, the “Qum” baths, with their octagonal plan containing changing and washing rooms and a boiler room, demonstrate the hydraulic engineering of Absheron. The palace extended beyond the fortress walls into suburban gardens called forstadt, including summer residences on the Absheron Peninsula. Historical maps, such as the 1809 schematic and Ulskiy’s 1861 hydrographic plan, indicate the presence of workshops, kitchens, stables, and other service structures. During the Russian occupation of Baku in 1806, the palace and its surroundings suffered significant destruction and looting. Russian military historian Lieutenant General V.A.Potto has documented the historical events and the fortress walls in the Baku Khanate. General Bulgakov temporarily resided in the Khan Palace and he noted its distinctly Eastern luxury. Valuable cultural artifacts were removed or destroyed, including oil-painted wall decorations, silk fabrics, carpets, mirrors, and carved doors. The residential buildings were partially reconstructed between 1806 and 1807, retaining traces of the original design and adding Russian architectural elements (Ələkbərova, 2019; Əliyeva, 2018; Ibrahimov & Ibrahimov, 2020).

Adaptive reuse is widely used as an active strategy for the preservation of monuments in different regions of the world. Several sites, such as mosque, church, and palace, are restored and adapted for new functions. When combined with periodic maintenance and minimal intervention principles, adaptive reuse demonstrates the effective conservation of inactive monuments. Transforming imperial residences into museums, heritage hotels, cultural centers, and tourism-oriented spaces not only preserves architectural authenticity but also generates revenue for maintenance and public involvement. Adaptive reuse thus emerges as a reliable conservation model that balances historical integrity with contemporary needs. Experiences from this process highlight the importance of integrated heritage management plans, stakeholder collaboration, and policy support to ensure the sustainable preservation of historic monuments and the continuity of cultural heritage (Choudhary, et al., 2024). As is known, museums play an important role in the development of cultural tourism and significantly contribute to tourism development, national identity, and cultural diversity (Zubitashvili, 2024). Consequently, there are several monuments that have been successfully restored and transformed into a museum through adaptive reuse in the Icherisheher (Museums, n.d.; Nəzərova, 2019; Nezerova, 2023). And the Baku Khan’s Palace is one of the such monuments.

The archaeological research and archival studies in the 21st century have revealed additional details about the palace infrastructure, including palace and residential structures, khan mosque, water supply systems (kahriz) and ovdan reservoirs, an underground bathhouse complex, remains of a

pottery workshop, kitchens, etc. Restoration, conservation, and landscaping works in the area began in 2018. The area also includes the “Baggal” souvenir and traditional handicrafts exhibition and sales gallery, a book house, and a café presenting national cuisine. A beautiful park has been established around the Baku Khan Palace Complex, which has become one of the favorite recreational areas for both residents of the capital and visitors. The Baku Khan Palace, which holds an important place in the history of Baku, is presented to the public as a museum after comprehensive reconstruction, conservation, and restoration works in the near future. The history of ancient Baku is showcased in a modern, dynamic, and digital format for a wide audience. The museum features audio guides, as well as artistic-historical and animated films presented in thematic rooms using virtual reality technologies (Ilham Aliyev and first lady Mehriban Aliyeva viewed restoration and conservation works carried out in a part of Icherisheher).

Conclusion

Generally, the Baku Khans' Palace is not only a historical residence but also an important monument to the political, cultural, and architectural achievements of the Azerbaijani khanates, reflecting centuries of statehood, artistic sophistication, and urban planning. The palace is of strategic importance in terms of its historical, architectural, and cultural heritage. The rebuilding of the Baku Khans' Palace and its opening as a museum have helped make Baku even more attractive to tourists. Turning the palace into a museum has also set new standards for how historical and cultural heritage can be preserved, studied, and shared, while offering visitors an interactive and educational experience. From a research point of view, it would be valuable to support more academic studies on the palace. It is advisable to cooperate with experts and continue research to gain a deeper understanding of the palace's history and architecture.

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