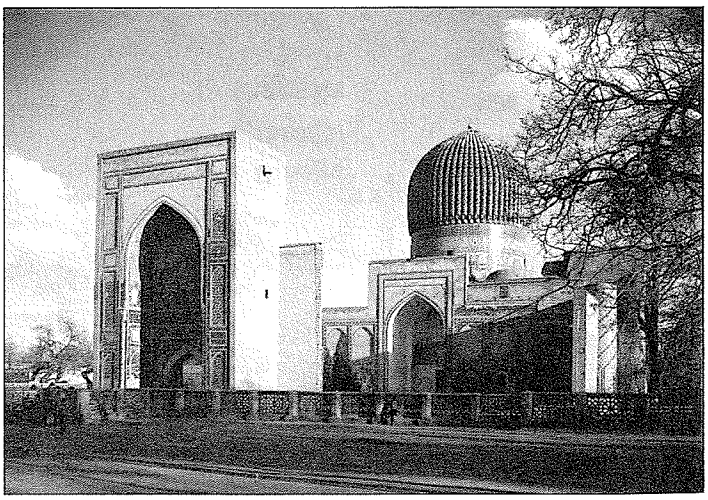
The Heavenly City Of Samarkand

by Roya Marefat

The many architectural splendors of Samarkand—the mosques, religious schools, shrines, and mausoleums, sparkling even today with glazed tiles in lapis, turquoise, and gold—owe largely to the efforts of one man, the legendary conqueror known to the West as Tamerlane. A Turkicized Mongol from the Barlas tribe, Timur (1336–1405) ruled a vast empire that stretched at its height from India to Anatolia and Damascus. Endowed with artistic vision as well as military prowess, Timur laid the foundations of an artistic renaissance that was to mark the next two centuries of Islam and have a direct influence on the architecture of Iran and India.

There is no more vivid portrait of Timur himself than that penned by historian René Grousset: "Tall, with a large head and deep reddish complexion, this lame man, ever coursing about the world—this cripple with his hand ever clasped about his sword, this bowman whose marksmanship, as he 'drew the bowstring to his ear,' was as infallible as Chingis Khan's—dominated his age like Chingis Khan before him." Unlike the blunter Chingis, Timur was a Machiavellian ruler who frequently ran his empire behind figureheads, but he was every bit as determined as his predecessor.

Conscious of the symbolic power of architecture, Timur commissioned works with posterity in mind, building not only in Samarkand but in other areas of Transoxania, including his birthplace, Kish. He was usually ruthless with the people he conquered, but he spared the lives of artists and craftsmen to bring them to work in his capital. Always concerned with legitimizing his rule—he married a descendant of Chingis Khan to compensate for the fact that he himself was not related to the ear-

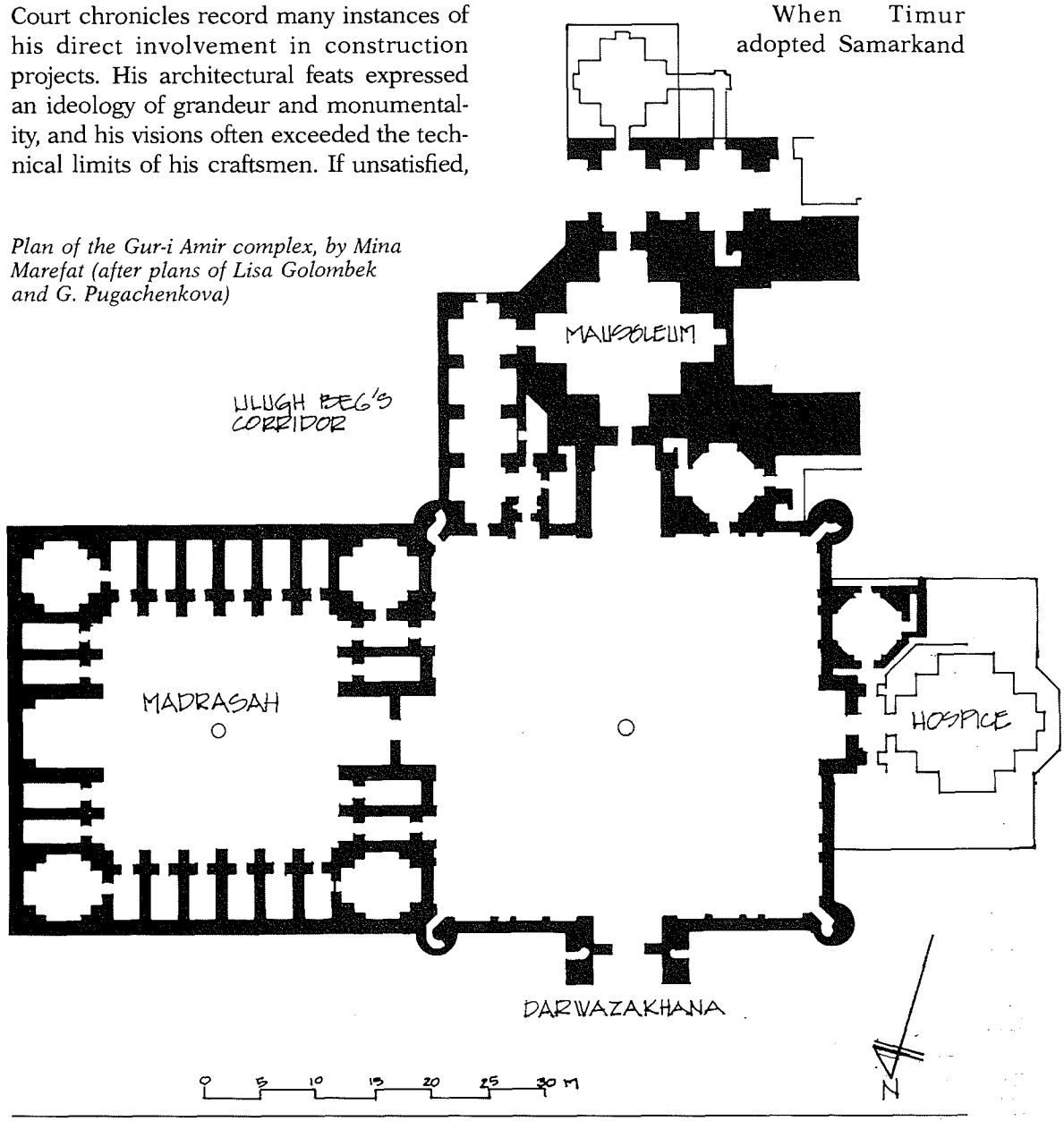


This contemporary photograph of the Gur-i Amir ("King's Grave") complex features the gateway, the entry hall, and the fluted, melon-shaped double dome.

lier conqueror—he created an architecture that fused Islamic elements with refined Persian artistry and symbols of the rugged nomadic culture of the Turks and Mongols.

Timur was no passive patron of the arts. Court chronicles record many instances of his direct involvement in construction projects. His architectural feats expressed an ideology of grandeur and monumentality, and his visions often exceeded the technical limits of his craftsmen. If unsatisfied, he would order that a building be redone. At the same time, he was obsessed with speed, and the noblemen who supervised his projects understood the literal meaning of deadlines.

When Timur adopted Samarkand



Plan of the Gur-i Amir complex, by Mina Marefat (after plans of Lisa Golombek and G. Pugachenkova)

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as his capital in 1370, the former Persian city was still recovering from the Mongol devastations of the previous century. The palaces that once lined the river were in ruins, and none of the city walls remained standing. The brick, adobe, and stone remnants of the old city were little more than ghostly reminders of a rich Persian, Turkic, and Islamic heritage. Timur quickly brought new life to his capital, commissioning numerous gardens, pavilions, and palaces for his personal pleasure. These works moved poets to think of Samarkand as "the paradisiac city," and Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo, the Spanish ambassador to the court of Timur, confirmed the accounts of their magnificence:

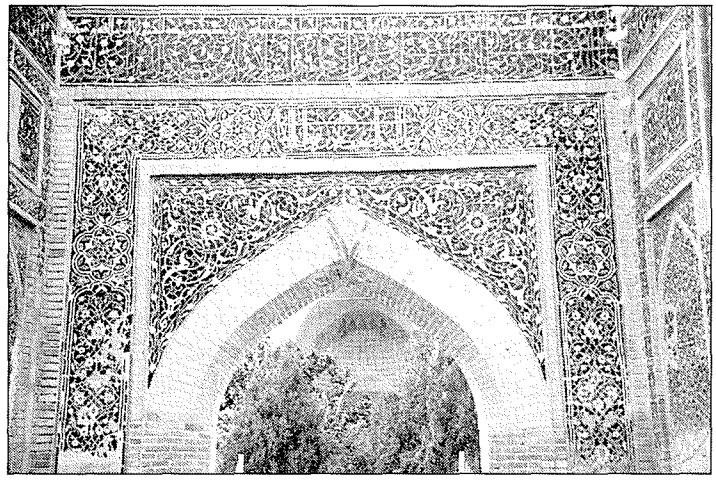
> The garden where this festival took place is very large and it is planted with many fruit-bearing trees with others that are to give shade, and throughout are led avenues and raised paths that are bordered by palings along which guests might pass their way. Throughout the garden many tents had been pitched with pavilions of colored tapestries for shade, and the silk hangings were of diverse patterns, some being quaintly embroidered and others plain in design. In the center of this garden there was built a very fine palace the ground plan of which was a cross. The interior was all most richly furnished with hangings on the walls.

Inspired by mosques he saw during his India campaign in 1398–1399, Timur commissioned the building of a monumental congregational mosque, known today as Bibi Khanum. Some 400 to 480 marble columns, hauled from quarries by 95 elephants that Timur brought back from Hindustan, helped to support what historians Lisa Golombek and Donald Wilber call "one of the most colossal monuments ever built in the Islamic world." From India, the conqueror also brought stonemasons to construct a building whose dome, chroniclers said, "would have been unique had it not been for the heavens, and unique would have been its portal had it not been for the Milky Way."

By far, though, the best-known structure Timur commissioned in Samarkand is the mausoleum known as Gur-i Amir. Although it eventually became his own resting place, he ordered it built in 1404 for his grandson and heir, Muhammad Sultan, who had died in battle the year before at age 29. Dissatisfied with the initial result, Timur ordered his workers to make it grander. Clavijo reported that the command was carried out in 10 days, but the detailed execution of the structure casts doubt on his account.

Typifying the Timurid emphasis on a unified design for clusters of structures, the Gur-i Amir was built not as a single monument but as part of a larger complex, including three structures earlier commissioned by Muhammad Sultan. The most conspicuous of these neighbors was a religious college, or *madrasah*, but there was also a dervish hospice and a public bath.

The entrance to the Gur-i Amir (which in fact was erected by Timur's grandson) is a monumental gateway, or *darwazakhana*. Measuring 12 meters high, it is elaborately decorated in lapis tile with ornate Arabic calligraphy and lush vegetal motifs. The appearance of inscriptions on buildings, neither new nor limited to funerary structures, was integral to Islamic architecture from its inception. The dedicatory, religious, and pious sayings were interwoven in the buildings, often providing information about the date of construction, the patron, the builder, and the function of the edifice. (The architect of the gateway inscribed his name and birthplace in a cartouche on the facade: Muhammad b. Mahmoud *al-bana* Isfahani.) The geometric and vegetal ornamentation derived from an even older Middle Eastern art and architecture, but they came into wider use after the rise of Islam because of the faith's prohibition against the making of figural images. The artists of



A detail of the gateway built by Ulugh Beg in 1434 provides a fine example of the arabesque motif and Timurid tilework.

the Islamic world transformed the naturalistic forms into elaborate abstract figures, generally known as arabesques.

Beyond the *darwazakhana* is a square courtyard measuring 32.5 meters on each side, with walls that still retain remnants of rich tile mosaics. In the time-consuming and costly method of tilework known as mosaic faience, each individual color was fired separately, cut to the desired shape, and fitted into place. This technique, originally developed in Iran, was introduced to Samarkand during the building of the tomb of Timur's sister and then used in other structures. The decoration of the courtyard included both floral and vegetal ornamentation, at times intertwined with elegant Arabic calligraphy. The floral and vegetal motifs had great symbolic significance in tomb architecture because of the association of the garden with paradise in Islam. Appropriately, the Arabic terms for tomb and garden are the same word: *rawza*.

Directly across the courtyard from the gateway stands the tomb chamber. On the side of the chamber facing the gateway is an *iwan*, a roofed space enclosed on three sides and open on one. This distinctive architectural form derived from ancient Persia, its name originally being synonymous with the word palace. (The famous *iwan* of the Sassanian Persian palace, Taq-i Kisra, in Ctesipohon, was so grand in its dimensions—35 meters in height, 25 in width, 50 in depth—that subsequent builders tried, usually without success, to equal it.) Functioning as a transitional zone between the exterior and the interior, the three-sided hall was incorporated in secular and religious architecture throughout Central Asia, as well as in the common courtyard house.

The vaulted roof of the *iwan* in Gur-i Amir is richly decorated with a honeycomb design called *muqarnas*, the individual cells of which are in square, rhomboid, almond-shaped, and barley grain patterns. In the Gur-i Amir the cascading *muqarnas* is made of stucco and is decorative rather than structural. Applied to both the interior and exterior of buildings, the *muqarnas* symbolized the vault of heaven and the complex composition of the cosmos.

The tomb chamber itself, octagonal on the outside, is capped by a high drum on top of which sits a melon-shaped dome. The dome in Islamic funerary architecture has a long tradition. In fact, both the Persian and Arabic words for it eventually came to be synonyms for tomb. How this association came about is not entirely clear. Some scholars see the influence of Turco-Mongol society. The tent, or *yurt*, of the nomads was used not only as a dwelling but as the place for displaying the bodies of the dead before burial. Thus, it is believed, the dome mimicked the form of the tent in the sturdier urban materials of stone and brick.

(The melon shape of the Gur-i Amir dome is particularly suggestive of the circular ribbed skeleton supports of the *yurt*.) As well as carrying such traditional associations, the fluted azure and turquoise dome of the Gur-i Amir set a new standard for artistic achievement. Its double-domed structure allowed greater height, and the outer dome, with its 64 flutes, measures 34.09 meters from the ground.

The exterior wall of the tomb chamber is decorated with tiles geometrically arranged to spell the words "Muhammad" and "Allah" in a recurrent pattern. Such repetition, typical of Islamic art, recalls the repetition of prayers, or *dhikr*. Today, the tiles still shimmer in the bright Central Asian sun, making the mass of the tomb chamber appear light, almost weightless.

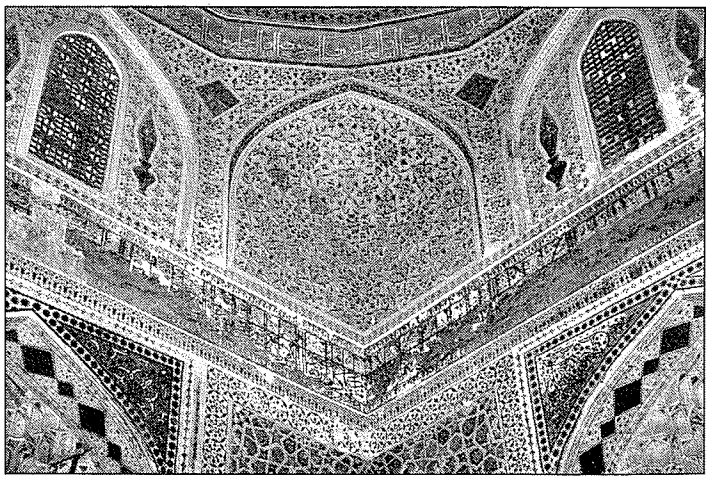
The dominant color of the exterior tiles is blue, ranging from light turquoise to deep cobalt and lapis. Because blue was the color of mourning in Central Asia, it was the logical choice for most funerary architecture. But the preference reflected a range of other, more favorable symbolic associations. As well as being the color that wards off the evil eye (a function that it still performs on the doors of many Central Asian houses), blue is the color of the sky and of water, the latter being a precariously rare resource in Central Asia and the Middle East. Abetting this clearly overdetermined fondness for the color is the fact that the region abounds in such minerals as lapis and turquoise.

Apart from the dome, the other noticeable feature of the tomb's exterior, according to historical sources, was its four minarets. These were the towers from which the *muezzin* called the faithful to prayer; they also stood as important elements of the Islamic urban iconograpy. Today, only two minarets survive, but because they are truncated and lack inner staircases, they barely resemble minarets at all.

The interior plan of the tomb chamber is square. Each side, 10.22 meters long, has a deep niche, covered with elaborate decorations in the *muqarnas* motif. The interior height of the chamber is 22.5 meters. Inside, the transition from the square chamber to the dome is achieved by means of squinches, which create an octagonal zone of transition.

Carrying the Islamic passion for geometry to new lengths, the Timurid builders established certain measurements as the basis for other elements of a structure. The entire geometric system of the Gur-i Amir is based on the two rectangles (and their diagonals) that together form the square plan of the tomb chamber.

As well as providing an outstanding example of the Timurid fascination with vaulting, the interior of the Gur-i Amir is sumptuously decorated in gold and lapis, applied in the technique of wall painting



An interior view of the Gur-i Amir shows the transitional zone—the squinch—between the square tomb chamber and the round dome.

known as *kundul*. Unique to Central Asia, *kundul* gives the appearance of embroidered gold fabric. The geometric design of the interior features the use of the twelve-sided and five-pointed star. Within the rhomboid shape of the star, the name Muhammad is interwoven three times.

In the central part of the chamber, a carved stone banister surrounds cenotaphs of Timur and his family, who are buried in a cruciform crypt. Seyyed Birka, an important religious figure, was not a member of the family, but his body was moved to the tomb by order of Timur—yet another attempt to solidify the foundation of his rule by associating himself with Islam.

The body of Timur himself was laid to rest at the foot of the Seyyed Birka. His clothing and military gear were placed on the walls, and though nothing remains of these memorabilia, vestiges of another Mongol tradition are visible in the form of a *tuq*—a tall pole with horses' tails, symbolizing the Turkish ritual of horse sacrifice honoring the dead. Even in death Timur continued the intermingling of Islamic and nomadic traditions.

In 1409 Ulugh Beg (r. 1409–1446) became the ruler of Samarkand when his father Shahrukh assumed the Timurid throne. Ulugh Beg followed in the footsteps of his grandfather and became a prolific patron of architecture. Making the most important additions to the Gur-i Amir, he was responsible for the construction of the gateway to the building and for the corridor that leads to the tomb chamber.

Under Ulugh Beg's rule Samarkand flourished as a center for culture, science, literature, and the arts. His observatory, some of which survives, is a testimony to the technological sophistication of the Timurids. Ulugh Beg's *madrasah* in the Registan, the grand square in Samarkand, served as the inspiration for two other *madrasahs* commissioned later by the Shaibanids, the successor dynasty to the Timurids. The square, with its theological schools and bazaars, became the hub of the city and still stands as one of the world's most celebrated examples of urban design.

Just as Timurid architecture absorbed the influence of Persian and Indian building, so the great Timurid works came to influence the architecture of the Safavids in Iran and of the Mughals in India. Babur (1483–1530)—the founder of the Mughal empire—remained proud of his Timurid lineage, and he and his descendants became prolific builders, embellishing their cities with monuments and gardens. Whether Babur or envoys from the Mughal court were responsible for the transfer of Timurid ideas, or whether they came with Persian architects, the Timurid building style had a decisive imprint on some of India's more prominent structures. Similarities between the Gur-i Amir and the Taj Mahal include octagonal exterior plans, bulbous domes, *iwans* that punctuate the central part of both buildings, and their four minarets.

Today the Gur-i Amir alone marks the spot where a complex of buildings once stood. The ornately decorated monument to the dead seems to defy death and remains a reflection of paradise. Though new buildings everywhere jostle with the old, Samarkand still asserts the religious and imperial greatness of the Timurid empire. Even under the Soviets, when bars were housed in *madrasahs* and pop concerts and sound-and-light shows were held at the Registan, Muslims from all parts of the Soviet Union continued to flock to Samarkand to visit the shrines and the Gur-i Amir. In alternating hours, tourists and pilgrims paid homage to Timur's legacy.