

Restoring Transparency

Adaptive Reuse of Tashkent's Panoramic Cinema

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Abstract

This paper examines the adaptive reuse of the Panoramic Cinema in Tashkent, a modernist landmark completed in 1964. It was designed by V. Berezin, S. Sutiagin, I. Khaldeev, and D. Shuvaev, with O. Legostaeva, and engineered by A. Braslavskii, D. Antman, and A. Prigozhin. Conceived as a cutting-edge cinematic venue, it became a symbol of modernity and resilience in Soviet Central Asia, notably retaining its architectural integrity after the 1966 earthquake. Its bold composition—particularly the dynamic contrast between a solid rotunda and a glazed foyer—embodied a distinctly modernist vocabulary, merging structural innovation with spatial openness. In the early 2000s, the building underwent substantial alterations that compromised its original design intent. The once-transparent foyer was rendered opaque, erasing a key feature of the building's expressive dialogue between solidity and lightness. This transformation illustrates a broader challenge in the adaptive reuse of modernist structures: how to preserve conceptual clarity while accommodating new uses and technologies. The paper presents a conceptual proposal for the building's adaptive reuse, aiming to reinstate its lost modernist qualities while introducing balanced, functional upgrades. A central challenge lies in the original function of the building. The cinema hall housed in the massive rotunda was designed for approximately 2,500 spectators—a scale that is no longer economically feasible today, as smaller, more flexible screening spaces have become the norm. Compounding the issue, the main cinema hall is a space of high architectural significance and cannot be structurally altered. These constraints raise critical questions about where and how to insert new functional programs without compromising the building's heritage. Through this case study, the paper contributes to broader discussions on adaptive reuse, conservation of modernist heritage, and compromised approaches to repurposing large-scale cultural infrastructure in contemporary urban and economical contexts.

Keywords: Tashkent Modernism, Modernism in Central Asia, Restoring Transparency

Introduction

Tashkent's Panoramic Cinema (originally the Palace of Arts) belongs to the family of Uzbek modernism of the second half of the twentieth century. Its idea is expressed through a clear composition: a massive cylindrical rotunda housing the main hall is set on a lighter, two-level foyer base. The base is transparent, yet it is plunged into deep shade by geometric *brise-soleil* and arcades. In drawings and early photographs, the whole reads as a deliberate dialectic of mass and transparency: an almost Doric “drum” lifted above a glass base

(Fig. 1). The foyer, diagonally open to the city and glazed on two levels, functioned as an autonomous public space—crossed by everyday trajectories, with a restaurant on the upper floor, a place to await screenings, and to frame views of the city through the transparent windows and *brise-soleil*.

This unity of technology and architectural language stemmed from the logic of contemporary projection innovations (Bykov 1959, 24-35). The main hall was shaped like a segment of a Doric column in response to sight-line geometry and the curvature of a large screen.



Fig. 1. Panoramik Cinema. Left: view from the south (Sergo Sutyagin family archive, 1970s). Right: view from Navoiy Avenue (Sergo Sutyagin family archive, 1970s)

In this context, the Panoramik Cinema—designed by the young team of V. Berezin, S. Sutyaghin, J. Khaldeev, D. Shuvaev, and O. Legostaev and built between 1962 and 1964—should be understood both as a prototype and as a synthesis. It combines a large-format cinema hall with a suite of cultural functions within a single composite organism. After the 1966 earthquake, the building also gained significant urban importance (Chukhovich et al. 2025, 425-441), and its iconic, technology-driven form became an emblem of Tashkent modernism—an era in which experimentation was a method rather than an exception.

In 1976 Sergo Sutyaghin extended the complex with a smaller, 550-seat hall (Fig. 2). Rather than diluting the original compositional intent, this addition completed it. It acts as a calibrated counterweight at the edge of the glazed base, allowing the rotunda to remain a singular volume. Moreover, through its materials and the ornamental treatment of its façades, the new wing echoed the *maballa* adjoining the cinema, binding the modernist complex more closely to its immediate urban context. The building's language thus maintains a balance between monumentality and porosity. After 1991—amid the political transformation and the early-2000s development boom—the balance of the ensemble was disrupted. While the monumental rotunda retained a high degree of authenticity, Sutyaghin's volume was screened by low sheds, further blurring the composition's clarity. The most extensive alterations, however, affected the foyer. These transformations are crucial, because they erased the complex's core, original values—both operational and visual. The interplay between the two volumes (the transparent and the monumental) has disappeared. In this light, the significance of the foyer's restoration extends beyond safeguarding an icon. It encompasses the narrative of the entire ensemble along Navoiy Avenue, the ethos of the late-1960s post-earthquake reconstruction, and the enduring cultural and communal roles of Tashkent's institutions. Restored to its original form, the twentieth-century icon could once again operate as a twenty-first-century urban condenser.

Loss of Transparency and Functional Drift

The loss of transparency at the Panoramic Cinema unfolded in multiple layers. First, the original glazing. The continuous ribbon of windows was replaced with new units of a different module and with thicker frames, disrupting the perception of an almost uniform sheet of transparent glass. On the south side, the geometric *brise-soleil* were removed (Fig. 2). Their form not only embellished the façade but, above all, adapted the modernist volume to local climatic conditions, reinforcing the idiom of Tashkent and Central Asian modernism. The sun-shading devices used at the Panoramic Cinema referenced the solutions by Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa for Brazil's Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair. This reference matters, because Tashkent modernism underwent a significant evolution in its search for architectural means of climate mitigation that ultimately helped shape the city's distinctive modernist language. The simple, modular *brise-soleil* at the Panoramic Cinema were among the first of their kind in Tashkent—pioneering in the formation of a regional modernism—and in later buildings, such as the Lenin Museum (1970) and the Peoples' Friendship Palace (1981), they were reinterpreted in line with local culture, drawing on Islamic patterns and geometries. The foyer's north façade was largely built over. At first-

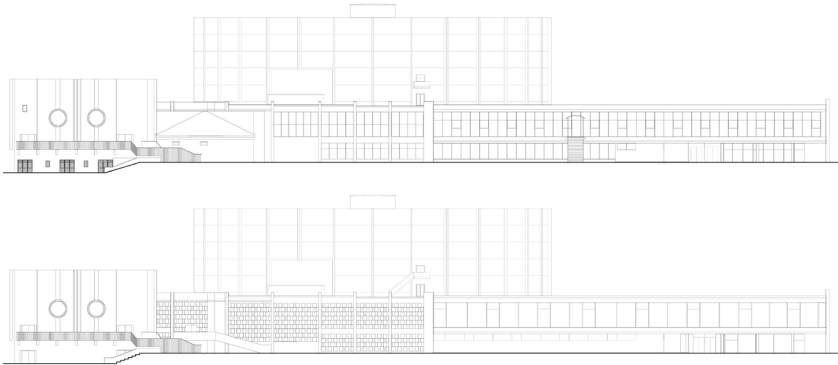


Fig. 2. Evolution of the Panoramic Cinema—south elevation. Bottom: 1976 condition; top: 2022 condition

floor level, a large screen and the cinema sign were installed around the new window frames, while advertising panels were added at ground level to accentuate the main entrance. These changes reconfigured the building's perceptual hierarchy. The light base, once open and deep, began to read as a heavy, patchwork insert beneath the monolith of the rotunda.

However, it was the interior interventions that proved decisive. The foyer—conceived as a continuous, two-level public space—was subdivided from within by new rooms and partitions, which eliminated the diagonal sightlines (Fig. 3, Fig. 5). On the ground floor, the vestibule with cloakrooms and ticket islands was turned into a cinematography museum, where display cases and exhibits were arranged along a monumental corridor, with a bar created at its end. On the first floor, the museum–exhibition function was continued. Conference rooms and small screening rooms were added to the central part of the foyer, replacing the former restaurant and buffet. All these interventions transformed the service logic into a barrier: the foyer lost its status as an “urban room” and became a collection

of disconnected functions offering a low-quality experience. Instead of the prestige and breathing space of large, open volumes, chaos and a sense of oppression appeared. This marked a radical shift in perception.

It is worth noting that the drastic transformation of the foyer in the first decade of the 2000s also reflected new requirements in cinema typology. As is often the case, visual transformations followed programmatic ones. While the Panoramic Cinema was originally designed around a large auditorium seating approximately 2,000 spectators, such capacities had ceased to be economically viable by that time. The prevailing operational model instead favored a greater number of smaller halls, typically accommodating between 100 and 250 seats. From this perspective, filling the foyer with museum and exhibition functions was an attempt to sustain day-to-day activity outside screening hours, albeit at the cost of the space's original transparency and operability. The paradox is that the solutions adopted, although intended to adapt the complex to contemporary demands, ultimately reversed the core idea on which the scheme was founded. The open, porous base was meant to draw the city inside. After a series of alterations, this relationship fractured. The foyer no longer staged a social prologue to the screening, and the rotunda lost the spatial support that anchored its meaning within the urban fabric.

Restoring the Hidden Modernist Features

This essay argues that there is another way. It is possible to restore lost modernist values—transparency and an urban function—by reorganizing necessary contemporary programs. Such an approach can re-establish a balance between the building's original qualities and its operability under present conditions. The strategy of conservation and restoration of lost features is proposed, integrating the best-preserved part of the complex—the rotunda—and concentrates action on its remaining parts.

The first step is subtraction (Fig. 3). All accretions that block the two-level glazing should

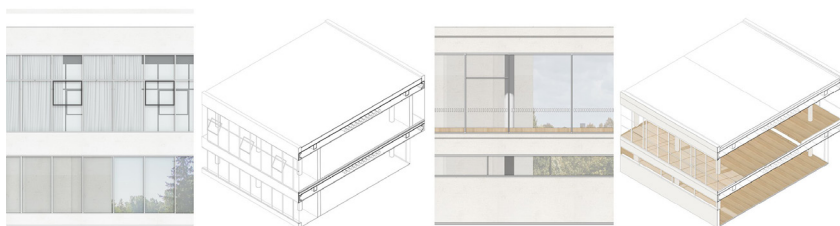


Fig. 3. Restoration of the foyer's glazed façade. Left: existing condition (elevation and axonometric). Right: proposed restoration (elevation and axonometric)

be removed. The former composition of window modules and the slenderness of their frames should be reinstated; and the lost *brise-soleil* should be reconstructed. Replacing thick profiles with more slender ones will once again emphasize the verticality of the foyer and restore a sense of transparency and continuity. The foyer interior should be freed from partitions—especially those on the first floor—which, when seen from outside through the glazed façades, obscure the monumental rotunda. Consequently, the contemporary small screening rooms and multipurpose spaces should be relocated. In addition, all added volumes that disrupt the integrity of the building should be dismantled.

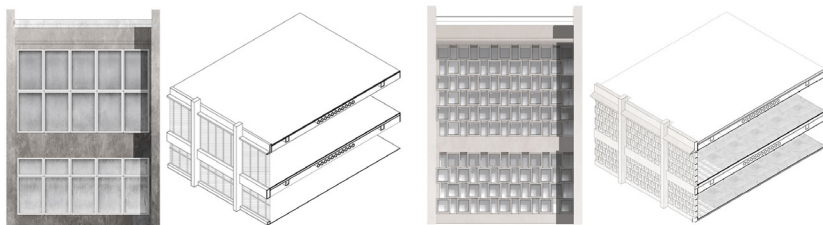


Fig. 4. Restoration of the foyer's *brise-soleil* façade. Left: existing condition (elevation and axonometric). Right: proposed restoration (elevation and axonometric)

The next step is the reconstruction of the *brise-soleil* (Fig. 4) and repair work on the two surviving panels, which are in very poor condition. The spaces between the fins have been filled with brick and require clearing, followed by the restoration of the original geometry. Reconstructing the *brise-soleil* restores not only the image but above all the microclimate and the way the city is “framed” by shadow and light. The return of these sun-shading devices recreates the foyer’s characteristic penumbra and once again articulates Tashkent’s modernist idiom—one in which environmental means are the language of architecture. The height, spacing, and profile of the fins should be derived from analysis of the surviving fragment and archival sources. Where contemporary elements are necessary, their distinctness should be legible without breaking the overall rhythm of the composition.

The strategy for the adaptive reuse of the Panoramic Cinema aims not only to restore the foyer to a state close to its 1960s original, but also to transform the entire complex into a more broadly defined cultural institution—while retaining its cinema function and all key architectural features. The new functional layout reinstates the scheme’s original logic. The foyer serves as a supporting space for the rotunda and the west wing, and each of the three components can operate independently so that, outside screenings, other social functions can take place in parallel without conflict. Drawing on the original principle of independent entrances to the individual volumes enables programs to be flexibly linked or separated.

The small screening rooms currently located on the foyer’s first floor are moved to Sutyaghin’s west wing so that the foyer regains its porosity and transparency (Fig. 5, Fig. 6). The original restaurant function on the first floor is also reinstated. The small sanitary and kitchen core at the eastern end is expanded to meet contemporary small-catering standards. The west wing at ground level will accommodate a set of small screening rooms with capacities of 50–100 seats and a sanitary–technical facilities. This arrangement enables parallel repertoires—from local premieres to thematic retrospectives—while keeping the rotunda as the main hall for premieres and special events. Access to the wing remains independent, supplemented by an internal passage connecting it to the rest of the complex. Circulation is designed so that audience flows do not collide with major events in the rotunda. The wing also receives its own small food service, box office, and cloakroom, although the principal points for these functions are located in the foyer zone. The small halls are arranged so that the restored *brise-soleil* become a key element of the shared waiting areas. From the inside, views open toward the mosaic of the adjacent Television complex.

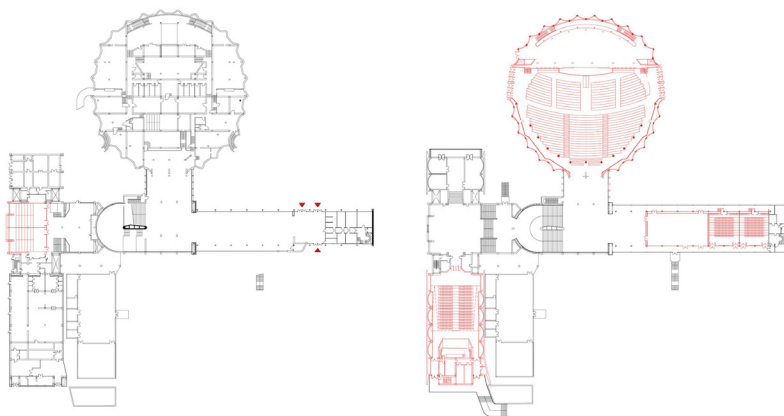


Fig. 5. Panoramic Cinema—current condition plans. Left: ground floor; right: first floor. Cinema and multifunctional halls highlighted in red

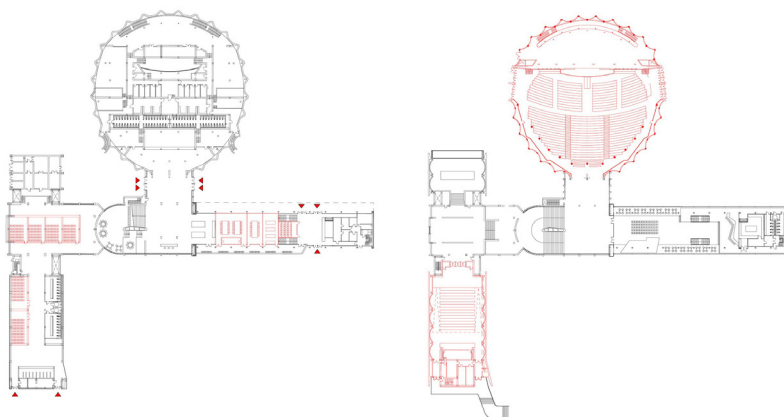


Fig. 6. Panoramic Cinema—proposed adaptive-reuse plans. Left: ground floor; right: first floor. Cinema and multifunctional halls highlighted in red

At ground level, the foyer once again opens onto the rotunda, restoring its glazed north façade and a full south wall with a horizontal band of clerestory windows—bringing light into the interior without the full transparency provided on the first floor. The foyer gains a multi-purpose function: conferences, workshops and accompanying events, as well as an archive of historical film recordings (Fig. 7). The space receives an independent entrance and a reception, behind which the office and administrative zone was located. New internal stairs (inserted between the columns and beams) connect the ground floor with the upper level—allowing the existing external staircase to be removed as an intrusive addition that disrupts the aesthetics of the modernist foyer. The stairs lead directly to the restaurant/dining hall on the upper level, which can operate both as a restaurant and as an event space. The complex also receives a new main entrance in the connector between the foyer

and the rotunda. This representative, two-storey interior—with a monumental staircase, a fresco, and a reconstructed *brise-soleil*—becomes the new vestibule, where a book/gift shop and the reception office was placed. The program beneath the auditorium has been gently expanded. The sanitary facilities have been enlarged and the principal cloakroom has been located there (Fig. 7).

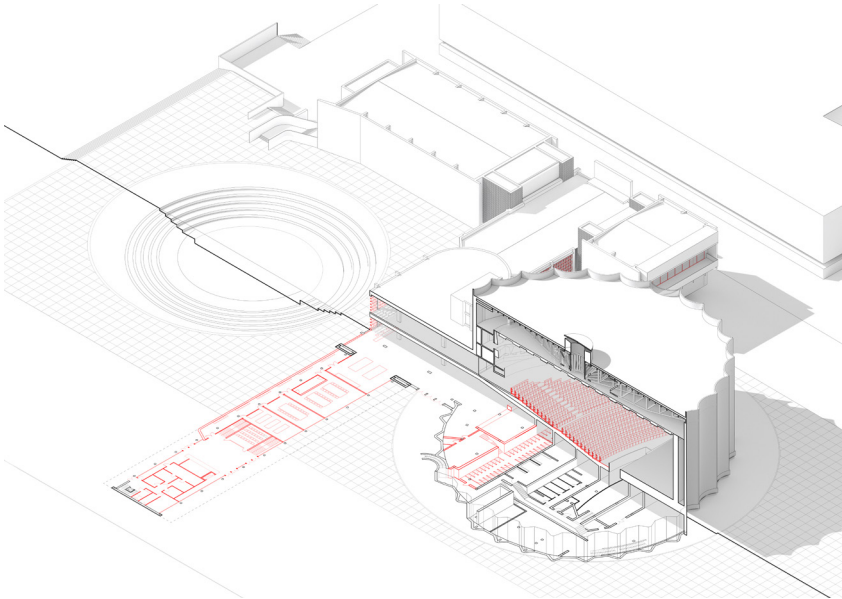


Fig. 7. Axonometric section through the rotunda and foyer illustrating the functional logic of the proposed adaptive reuse. Elements to be altered/restored are in red

In this adaptive reuse proposal, the institution's core profile remains cinematic. The solution enables the full spectrum of programming while simultaneously restoring the building's modernist qualities: transparency, porosity, and the capacity to mediate between the city and its functional use. The rotunda remains an almost untouched monument, the foyer regains its role as a public space, and Sutyaghin's wing together with the foyer's ground floor provide contemporary operational efficiency and a spatial compromise. As a result, the building achieves a durable model of operation in which the daytime institution and the evening event reinforce one another rather than compete.

Conclusions

The Panoramic Cinema is a local case with a global problem. In the second half of the twentieth century, glass-walled pavilions were icons of modernity, yet today their greatest asset—transparency—often hinders operation as programmatic “densification” fills formerly open spaces. The model proposed for Tashkent offers one feasible answer that can be transposed to similar buildings, while also foregrounding the issues of protecting “young heritage” (Chukhovich et al. 2025). Twentieth-century architecture often received

belated recognition. Buildings were not classified as heritage in time, and when they were, valorization was frequently superficial. As a result, elements crucial to their value—such as the characteristic *brise-soleil* and overall transparency at the Tashkent cinema—disappeared or were concealed under the pretext of “modernization.” The Panoramic Cinema shows that mere inclusion in a register is not enough [1]. Protection instruments must be concrete, operational, and enforceable.

Notably, the Panoramic Cinema has been proposed for inscription on the UNESCO WHL. It was included on Uzbekistan’s UNESCO Tentative List in 2024 as part of the serial nomination “Tashkent Modernist Architecture. Modernity and tradition in Central Asia,” together with fifteen other sites. In this context, questions of state of conservation and authenticity become particularly salient. The concept proposed here provides a reference for restoration that balances programmatic usefulness with architectural value—recovering modernist identity without sacrificing contemporary usage.

Notes

1. Although the building was listed in the national register of monuments as early as 1978, it lacked the mandatory conservation building card for many years (Chukhovich et al. 2025). This document was prepared within the *Tashkent Modernism XX/XXI* project and was only officially adopted and implemented in 2025.

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