

# The Phenomenon of the "Kiiz üy": Reflection in Contemporary Architecture of Kazakhstan

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**Abstract** The kiiz üy (yurt) - the traditional portable home of Kazakh nomads, stands as a core symbol of Kazakhstan's cultural identity, embodying centuries-old traditions and the ecological wisdom of the steppe civilisation. Its architecture is not merely a functional spatial solution derived from an ingenious lightweight structure, but also an expression of the aesthetic and symbolic values of the Kazakh worldview. This study reconsiders the yurt as a living architectural archetype that continues to shape the sustainable design culture of twenty-first-century Kazakhstan. It analyses how the spatial logic, material language, and ornamentation of the kiiz üy are reinterpreted in contemporary architecture and interior design, linking vernacular traditions to regional identity and ecological innovation. The originality of this research lies in its focus on recent architectural and artistic practices - including the Contemporary Kazakh Yurt by Nurgissa Architects and the Ancient Futures exhibition - which exemplify how traditional knowledge can be transformed into forward-looking architectural strategies. This perspective, connecting vernacular symbolism with sustainability principles, has not been addressed in previous literature. The findings highlight the continuing relevance of the kiiz üy as a source of adaptive design principles and cultural meaning. They may serve architects and designers seeking to integrate national heritage into modern contexts, thereby reinforcing environmental awareness and a renewed sense of cultural continuity.

**Keywords** Kazakh Yurt (*kiiz üy*), Kazakh Ornamental Art, Contemporary Kazakh Architecture, Nomadic Identity

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## 1. Introduction

The formation of regional identity is inseparably linked to enduring cultural archetypes, which manifest not only through language, art, and traditions but also in the spatial organisation of everyday life. For the Kazakh people, the kiiz üy - the nomadic yurt - stands as such an archetype, symbolising the unity of humanity and nature, mobility and adaptability, the sanctity of the centre, and the cyclical rhythm of seasonal life. Historically, the spatial model of the yurt reflected not only the pragmatic imperatives of survival but also profound cosmological concepts: reverence for the land, continuity of kinship, and the use of symmetry and zoning as metaphors for cosmic order.

The architectural structure of the yurt demonstrates a remarkable degree of rationality and ecological adaptability. Its modular and demountable construction is characterised by clearly defined functional zoning. Its interior arrangement, integrating masterfully crafted wooden structures, traditional reed mats (*chiya*), felt textiles, pile and flat-woven carpets, and wool straps, generates a self-sufficient, sustainable, and aesthetically expressive environment. Ornamentation in the yurt's elements fulfilled a dual role: decorative and semantic. Through a symbolic visual language, it conveyed concepts of the universe, social hierarchy, gender roles, sacred meanings, and cultural codes.



The exhibition's modular architecture, textile-based information media, and visual style informed by traditional ornamentation and biomorphic forms embodied the concept of a "living", adaptive project. The curators of Ancient Futures emphasise that returning to one's roots is not an act of nostalgia, but a manifestation of strategic thinking grounded in respect for the land and ecological balance. Through artistic, biotechnological, and scholarly practices, the participants demonstrated that the traditional way of life in Central Asia carries within it a philosophy of sustainability, founded on principles of "leaving no trace", reuse, natural cycles, and proportionality (Fig. 2).

Of particular significance is that the younger generation of architects and artists in Kazakhstan does not confine itself to the mere reconstruction of nomadic heritage; rather, it transforms its material and symbolic forms into contemporary artistic and design expressions. By

reinterpreting the form of the yurt, its ornamentation, and its spatial rhythm, they propose new architectural models – mobile, responsive to environmental rhythms, sustainable, and rich in cultural meaning. Both the Nurgissa Architects project and the Ancient Futures exhibition exemplify a broader tendency: young Kazakh creatives engage with tradition not as ethnographic stylisation, but as a dynamic resource for design thinking. This engagement with cultural nomadic heritage constitutes part of a wider strategy for shaping regional identity, grounded in the synthesis of environmental responsibility, technological innovation, and cultural continuity.

Contemporary projects in Kazakhstan demonstrate how architecture can engage with the national heritage – the yurt phenomenon – not by imitating the past, but by transforming traditional elements through the prism of new technologies.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the yurt as both an archetypal and functional foundation for spatial design in contemporary Kazakhstan. Special emphasis is placed on the internal structure of the yurt, its decorative elements and ornamental systems, and their role in shaping an ethnic aesthetic grounded in the principles of sustainability, locality, and cultural transmission. Through the analysis of current architectural and artistic practices, the study seeks to reveal the potential of traditional knowledge as a platform for innovative design solutions in response to the ecological and socio-cultural transformations of the twenty-first century.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study employs an interdisciplinary methodological approach to examining the origins, evolution, and contemporary architectural interpretation of the Kazakh yurt (kiiz üy) as a vernacular symbol of nomadic culture and regional identity. The research integrates historical, typological, iconographic, and compositional analysis to explore both the tangible and intangible dimensions of this architectural form.

A substantial body of scholarly work has been devoted to the origins, construction, and use of the yurt, as well as to its influence on modern architecture in Kazakhstan. The historical prerequisites for its emergence and the development of Kazakh traditional applied arts are extensively covered in the works of Akishev [5], Argynbaev [6], Basenov [7], Dzhanibekov [8, 9], Ibraev [10], Margulan [11, 12], Mukanov [13], Ordabaev [14], and Nurdubaeva [15]. Issues related to the formation of local architectural traditions have been addressed by Basenov [16, 17], Kapanov [18], Mendikulov [19, 20], Tuyakbaeva [21], Auezov et al. [22], Glaudinov [23, 24], Galimzhanova and Glaudinova et al. [25-26], Isabaev et al. [27], and others.

The study of ornament as a language of cultural identity, its origins, historical development, semantic and utilitarian functions, and classification of forms is presented in the works of Ibraeva [28], Ospanuly [29], and Kalekova and Akishev [30]. The continuity of cultural heritage and the regional characteristics of Kazakhstan's architecture are examined in contemporary research by Abdrasilova [31], Baitenov [32], and Narynov [33], among others.

Academician Margulan A.Kh., in his study of the origins of Kazakhstan's traditional applied arts, noted that "...the principal factors in the development of crafts and applied art were animal husbandry, irrigated agriculture, metalworking, trade, and so forth" [10, p. 27]. He further stated that "Kazakh art inherited many traditions from the artistic culture of nomadic pastoralist tribes and preserved them to the present day, creatively reinterpreting and enriching them with new motifs" [34, p. 55].

Doctor of Architecture Glaudinov B. observed: "The felt yurt was widespread among nomadic pastoralist tribes as

early as the 7th–6th centuries BCE. According to ancient historians, it was already used by the Scythians, Saka, and other tribes whose economy was based on nomadic pastoralism. Chinese travellers described the rulers of the Usun as living in the summer in 'a round hut covered with felt'. The Kangju, Kyueshe (Kipchaks), Alans, and others followed the same practice" [35, p. 49].

Based on her analysis of scholarly works on the development of Kazakhstan's architecture from antiquity, Abdrasilova G. remarked: "...the yurt, having evolved from the mid-first millennium CE from a primitive conical hut through various types of mobile dwellings on carts with tented or sphero-conical roofs, existed in several forms: the ancient Turkic yurt (13th–early 14th centuries); the yurts of the Mongol nobility (15th–16th centuries); and the Kalmyk (Torgut) and Kazakh yurts (19th–early 20th centuries)" [31, p. 43].

Dzhanibekov U.D., in his study of the building culture of nomadic tribes inhabiting the territory of present-day Kazakhstan, concluded that the yurt "from a structural perspective is unsurpassed by any other nomadic dwelling and is the most perfect of portable shelters" [8, p. 14].

Many researchers have noted the continuity between the construction of yurts and monuments of Kazakh architecture: "In the structure and form of the dome, the presence of a connecting lintel, and the relief decorative belt at the base of the dome, one can trace structural elements of the traditional yurt. A feature unique in the East to monuments of Western Kazakhstan is the treatment of the entrance: in most cases, a straight lintel is placed above the opening (as in a yurt), and sometimes small reverse-curvature arches are formed, imitating the hanging folds of curtains covering the entrance to the tent or yurt" [28, p. 36].

Field research was conducted in Almaty and Astana and included visual observation, photographic documentation, and the analysis of selected buildings from the Soviet and post-Soviet periods that incorporate yurt-inspired forms. These case studies were studied in terms of spatial organisation, materials, and interpretation of traditional symbolic codes.

In addition to literature analysis and field observations, the research involved the preparation of schematic layouts, sectional and axonometric graphics. These visual materials illustrate the main structural parts of the yurt, shanyrak, uyq, kerege, chiy, and esik, explaining both their technical logic and symbolic roles. The produced graphics form the technical basis for the subsequent discussion. The research methodology comprised:

Historical-philosophical analysis – to investigate the material and spiritual dimensions of the yurt in nomadic culture;

Comparative-typological analysis – to identify continuities and differences in form and function;

Iconographic analysis – to examine the symbolism of the yurt's decorative elements;

Compositional analysis – focusing on spatial structure, layout, and proportional systems.







Primary sources included archival documents, ethnographic descriptions, scholarly monographs, and field surveys. The collected data were synthesised through qualitative content analysis and compared with international practices of adapting vernacular architecture.

This methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of the architectural language of the yurt, its contemporary reinterpretation within the urban environment, and its contribution to the discourse on sustainable and identity-oriented design in Kazakhstan.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The results are arranged to first describe the traditional structure and symbolic organisation of the yurt, followed by an analysis of its reinterpretation in recent architectural

and artistic practice, illustrated with drawings and photographs. The enduring cultural and architectural significance of the Kazakh yurt has been recognised internationally, as evidenced by UNESCO’s inclusion of the traditional knowledge and skills of its construction in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2014) [36]. This recognition affirms the yurt’s uniqueness and authenticity as a traditional mobile dwelling of the Kazakh people (Fig. 3). According to UNESCO, the yurt – a dwelling common among the nomadic communities of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan - consists of a circular wooden frame bound with ropes and covered with felt. It can be easily assembled and dismantled. The wooden latticework is traditionally crafted by men and their apprentices, while women undertake the interior and exterior decoration, embellishing it with traditional geometric patterns or stylised depictions of animals and plants [37].

Kazakh yurt. Exhibition at the Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty.	
Exterior view of the yurt	Interior arrangement of the yurt.
	
Shanyrak	Kerege and Chiy
	
Main facade of the Central State Museum	Stylised dome space, Central State Museum
	

**Figure 3.** Central State Museum of Kazakhstan, Almaty (1985). Architects: Yu. Ratushny, Z. Mustafina, B. Rzagaliev. (Photo by authors, June 2025)

The yurt, a mobile dwelling of the nomadic people, embodies a synthesis of structural ingenuity and traditional craftsmanship, representing the achievements and skills of master artisans. Its design unites strength and lightness, tectonic clarity and functionality [38]. The rapid assembly and disassembly of its components, coupled with its adaptability to extreme climatic conditions, made it ideally suited to the nomadic way of life [39]. As Martin Heidegger emphasised: “Dasein is spatial in that it dwells; and it dwells in that it builds” [40]. In the context of the Kazakh yurt, this statement acquires a special meaning: the space and form of this dwelling are inextricably linked to the nomadic worldview and cosmology.

The frame is traditionally crafted from wood, treated to achieve the flexibility required for the load-bearing elements. Felt and woven coverings serve as insulation, while textile and leather straps act as fastening components. The principal structural elements of the yurt include the crown or dome (shanyrak), radiating rafters (uyq), lattice walls (kerege), and door (esik)(Fig.4).

Through these technical and utilitarian functions, each carries rich symbolic significance. Scholarly studies examine the yurt not only as a dwelling adapted to nomadic existence, but also as a “microcosm of the macrocosm” shaping the Kazakh philosophical understanding of harmony between humanity and nature.

The dome (shanyrak) – a circular birch frame with a latticed cross, positioned at the apex of the yurt – symbolises familial well-being, the cyclical nature of life, and an eternal link with the divine (Fig. 3). In Kazakh, dome (shanyrak) has a fixed metaphorical meaning: “home” or “family hearth,” embodying spiritual connection to one’s dwelling. Like all structural components, it is carved from wood and often adorned with ornamental motifs, reinforcing its sacred role.

Supporting the dome (shanyrak) are the uyq – bent poles of willow or birch which form the dome’s perfect curvature and its central aperture. This aerodynamic structural system resists strong steppe winds while facilitating natural air circulation within the dwelling. Symbolically, the dome links the earthly and the divine. At their lower ends, the uyq are anchored into the kerege [41].

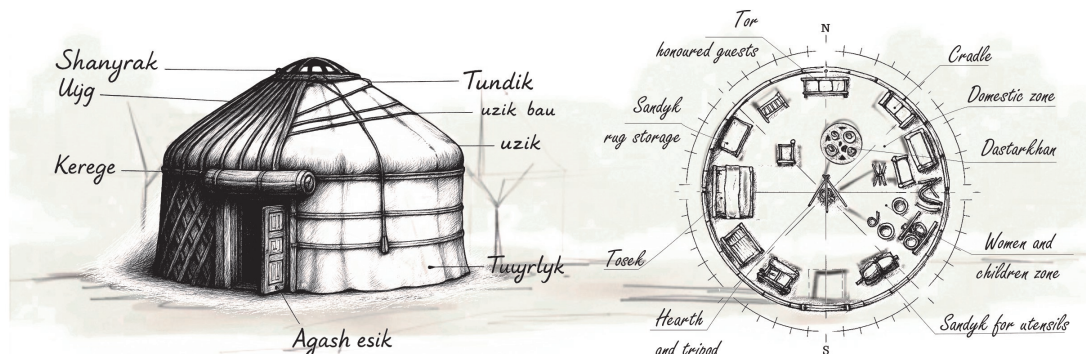
The lattice framework known as kerege, constructed from slender yet resilient wooden strips, forms the flexible walls of the yurt, enabling the dwelling to be easily extended or adjusted in size according to domestic requirements (Fig. 3). The wooden entrance door (esik), typically composed of two intricately carved panels, functions not only as a structural element but also as a symbolic threshold, representing protection and transition between domestic space and the external environment. As noted by Meirmanova G.A. [42] in “The Transformation of the Etiquette of Hospitality among Kazakhs”, hospitality is a cornerstone of Kazakh culture and a defining feature of the national character. It is absorbed with a mother’s milk, and the yurt serves as tangible evidence of this tradition: devoid of locks and heavy walls, it remains open to the world, just as the Kazakh soul is. Anyone who crosses its threshold in peace is welcomed with warmth and offered a generously prepared dastarkhan - a traditional spread symbolising hospitality and respect.

Vitruvius’s triad of architectural principles - utility, durability, and beauty - formulated in *De Architectura* [43], is fully realised in the Kazakh yurt. It is an ergonomic, structurally precise spatial form, in which even the most ornate decorative details serve functional purposes. For example, the brightly coloured woven bands (baskur) that encircle the yurt are not merely ornamental; they bind the frame and counteract the lateral thrust of the dome [14 p. 198].

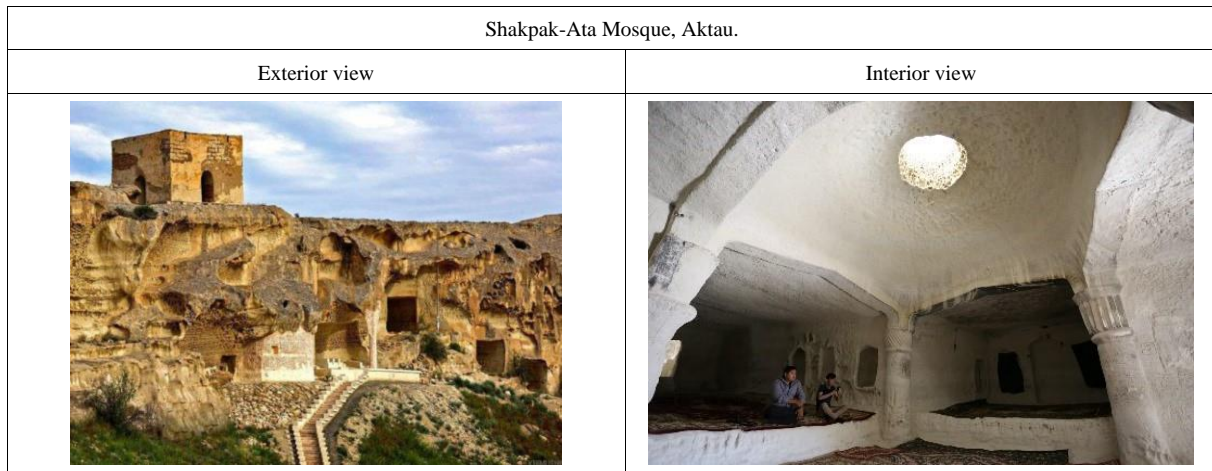
This deep integration of constructive and decorative functions is a hallmark of Kazakh craftsmanship. The collapsible structure requires numerous fastenings for both wooden elements and felt coverings. These woven patterned straps (zhelbau, uyq bau, tuyrlyk bau, uzik bau) contribute both aesthetic value and structural stability [14, p. 201].

The next part explores how these structural and spatial principles are echoed in modern Kazakh architecture and design, presented through visual and analytical examples.

Scholars such as Dzhaniybekov U.D. have observed similarities between the structural forms of ancient memorial architecture and the yurt, as in the underground mosque of Shakpak-Ata (Fig. 5), whose domed ceiling with a central oculus directly recalls the shanyrak [8, p. 11], [44].



**Figure 4.** Schematic plan and axonometric drawing showing principal structural elements of a traditional kiiz üy (Created by authors, July 2025)



**Figure 5.** Shakpak-Ata Mosque, 10th–15th centuries, north of Aktau [45, 46]

The incorporation of the yurt's conceptual and spatial principles into contemporary architecture is rooted in its minimalist structural efficiency, multifunctionality, and ecological compatibility, as it is built exclusively from biopositive materials in harmony with the natural environment. The migration of ornamental motifs from applied arts into architecture has occurred organically, as a continuation of cultural tradition.

Ibraeva K.T. identifies parallels between Kazakh ornamental art and architectural decoration, noting that structural and decorative features of the yurt are echoed in architectural monuments: shanyrak motifs in mausoleum domes, mouldings above portals recalling rolled felt curtains, and interior finishes that replicate yurt ornamentation [14, p. 287].

The yurt's enduring relevance is evident in numerous modern pavilions, kiosks, and monumental buildings, including the Kazakh State Circus in Almaty [14, p. 287].

The dome, a defining element of Eastern architecture, remains central to contemporary Kazakh design, linking heritage forms with modern engineering. In current interpretations, the shanyrak may serve as both a decorative and structural device, from stylised domes to panoramic skylights. Similarly, uyq and kerege motifs appear in public buildings such as the Central State Museum in Almaty (architects Ratushny Yu., Mustafina Z., Rzagaliev B.).

An exemplary synthesis of advanced technology and traditional motifs is seen in the School Children's Palace in Astana (architect Yavein N.) [47] (Fig. 6). Its central eight-metre-high cylinder, 156 metres in diameter, references the circular form of the yurt or the shanyrak's central opening, while its metal lattice subtly evokes the collapsible wooden frame [48, p. 138].

The lattice-like wooden framework of the yurt walls (kerege) has been reinterpreted in a number of prominent architectural landmarks in Kazakhstan. In the structural frame of the ATS building in Almaty (arch. Babenko V., Petrov A., Petrova A., 1981), composed of round metal beams arranged in a rhomboid grid, one can clearly discern

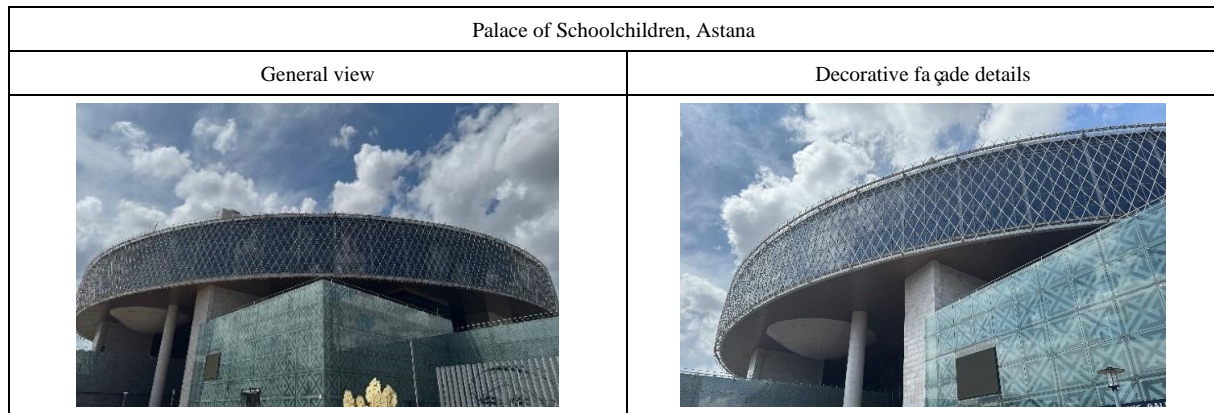
a stylised reference to the kerege motif (Fig. 7).

The distinctiveness of this design was highlighted by the German architect Meuser F.: "...the white steel structure, like a second skin, envelops the almost windowless cube. Based on the static separation of the two parts of the building, the external structure functions as a corset for the inner volume" [49, p. 52]. These elements, while serving as a practical engineering solution to the structural and functional requirements of the project, seamlessly integrate national motifs into the vocabulary of Soviet modernist architecture.

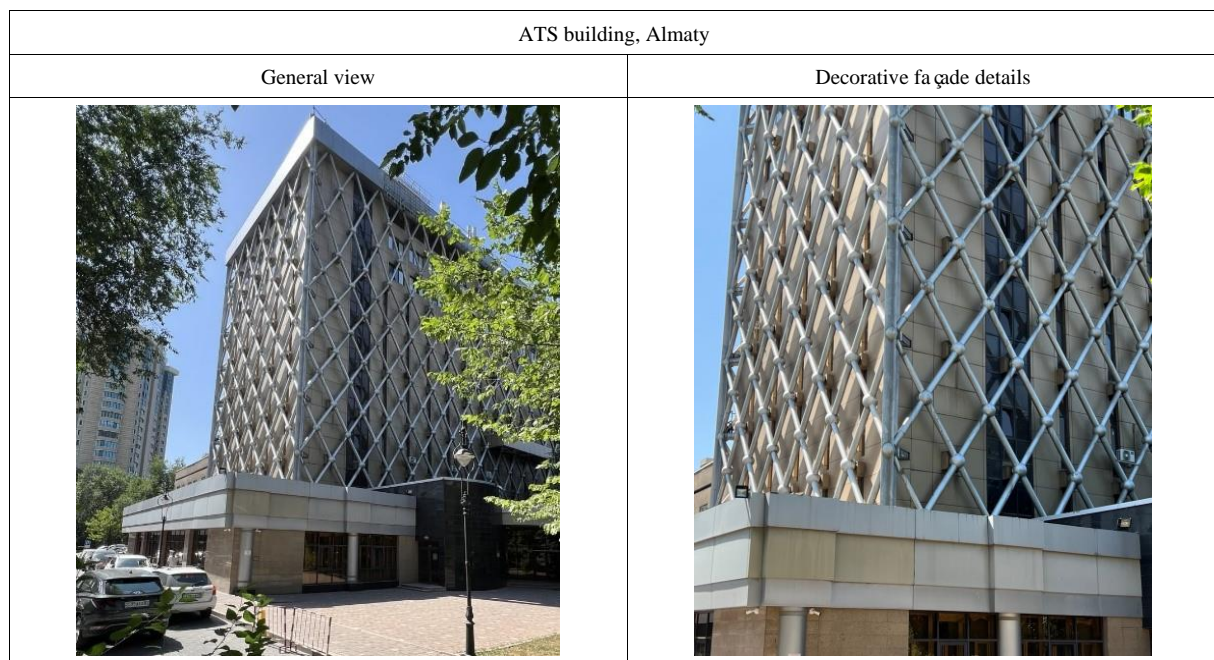
On the façade of the Palace of Independence (Linea Tusavul Architecture, 2008) in Astana, the kerege motif is reimagined as a structural-decorative device, articulated through intersecting rhythmic lines reminiscent of the lattice framework of the yurt walls (Fig. 8).

The decorative motifs of the yurt are increasingly being integrated into contemporary interiors of both public and residential spaces, with the aim of evoking an atmosphere deeply rooted in local history. For example, interior designers frequently employ three-dimensional wall panels made from polyurethane or plaster, featuring lattice patterns reminiscent of the kerege. Structural elements of the yurt's doorway are likewise reflected in the stylisation of modern buildings executed in the Kazakh style: entrance portals with ornamental framing and intricately carved door leaves represent a vivid reinterpretation of the decorative techniques characteristic of the traditional dwelling.

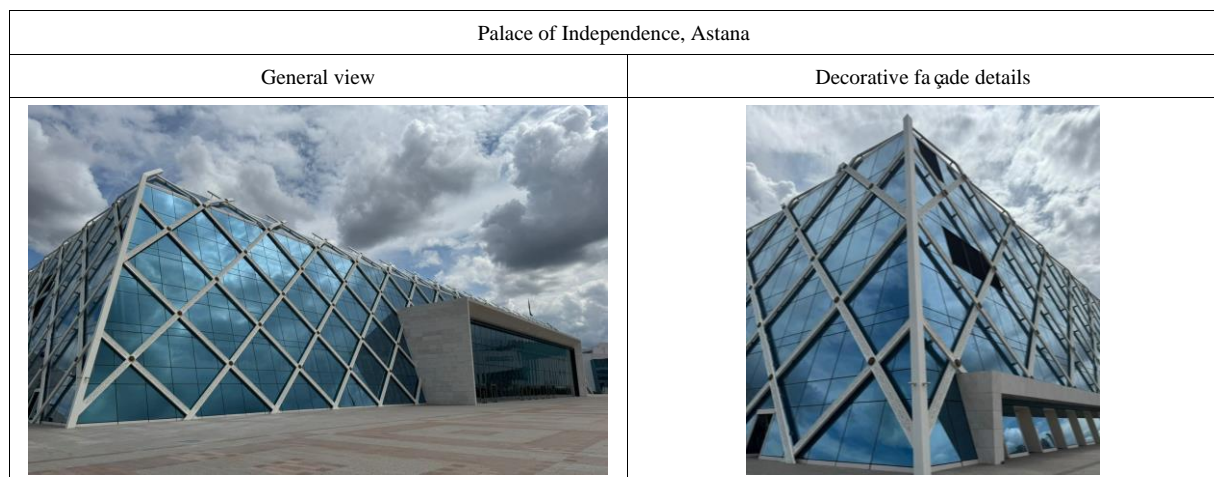
In traditional Kazakh culture, the concept of the "home" (ıy) is understood not merely as a physical structure, but as a space imbued with profound symbolic and spiritual significance. The sacred meaning of the house and its components is inseparably linked to historically embedded perceptions of the universe and to the relationship between human beings, the cosmos, and spirituality. Traditions and rituals in Kazakh households are often shaped by the symbolic perception of the yurt as a locus of human vitality and ancestral continuity.



**Figure 6.** School Children's Palace, Astana: Designed in 2010–2011 by the team led by Nikita Yavein (*Studio 44*). (Photo by authors, June 2025)



**Figure 7.** ATS building in Almaty, designed by architect V. Babenko, A. Petrov, A. Petrova, 1981. (Photo by authors, June 2025)



**Figure 8.** Palace of Independence, Astana, designed by architect Gültekin Linea and constructed by Sembol İnşaat, 2008. (Photo by authors, June 2025)

Scholars have proposed several interpretations of the circular form of nomadic dwellings. One perspective holds that the circle, along with the process of erecting the yurt, carried sacred significance, akin to the act of world creation. The shanyrak – the central crown of the yurt – has long been associated with cultural and historical concepts, sacred customs, and symbolic meaning. Interpreting its horizontal plan as a cross enclosed within a circle, researchers have concluded that the shanyrak can be regarded as a model of the universe, closely related to Scythian-Saka cosmology. This cosmological model is embodied not only in the shanyrak itself, but in the entire structure of the yurt. When viewed in plan, the yurt reveals four symbolic reference points: t̄r (place of honour), esik (entrance), oñ jaq (right side), and sol jaq (left side) - forming, in effect, a quadrangle inscribed within a circle. The dome of the shanyrak, supported by radiating poles (uyk), together with the cultural and domestic horizon, symbolises the union of Earth and Sky. In this symbolic reading, the sun - entering from the East as the “first guest” - marks the beginning of a new day. Within this semiotic framework of “macrocosm and dwelling”, the shanyrak and the heavens are comparable concepts, with the celestial sphere (kök aspan, “blue sky”) having a direct conceptual connection with the cult of Tengri [30, p. 26].

The yurt is thus conceived not merely as an everyday shelter, but as a microcosm – an integral part of the macrocosm – shaping the nomadic worldview. This cosmological symbolism extends to domestic objects and architectural monuments, particularly memorial and cultic structures. As scholars have observed, “This microcosmic modelling of the structure of the macrocosm was most fully and clearly embodied in ritually significant objects and constructions: royal and wedding garments, ceremonial and bridal yurts. These were intended to reproduce the universal cosmic order and to signal the beginning of ordered existence in the universe – only in this way could rituals fulfil their intended function. Square and circular structures correspond to the images of earth and sky, while their corners symbolise the cardinal directions. The vertical composition of an architectural monument reflects the tripartite structure of the cosmos: the upper tier symbolises the sky, the sun, and the sacred fire; the middle tier, the terrestrial world of the living; and the lower tier, the underworld” [29, p. 31].

The internal zoning of the yurt reflects principles of social hierarchy and gender roles inherent in Kazakh society. The t̄r, located opposite the entrance, was traditionally reserved for honoured guests and senior members of the family. The remainder of the space was conventionally divided into male and female domains. As

noted in *The Kazakh Yurt*, “The symbolic expressiveness of the yurt is largely due to the clarity of its spatial zoning, achieved through the arrangement of various objects and the role of decorative art in shaping and embellishing its interior” [14 p. 93]. At the compositional centre lies the oshak (hearth), around which the interior is organised. The hearth functioned not only as a place for food preparation, but also as a site for social interaction and decision-making. In its sacred dimension, the maintenance of the fire symbolised generational continuity, ancestral protection, vital energy, and the perpetuation of the lineage.

In Kazakh architecture, circular spaces with a pronounced vertical axis continue to carry special significance. In contemporary architectural planning, circular halls and reception areas are often conceived as semantic centres that embody the symbolic idea of unity. The internal spatial organisation of modern interiors - particularly in areas designated for receiving guests - often draws upon traditional principles of hospitality. Areas reserved for honoured guests and elders (t̄r) remain, as in the past, positioned opposite the main entrance.

A striking example of the symbolic adaptation of the yurt form in modern architecture is the Palace of Marriage in Almaty (architects Mendikulov M.M. and Leppik A.A., 1971) [50]. Its circular plan may be interpreted as a metaphor for the hearth and the family: in Kazakh, shanyraq k̄teru signifies the establishment of a household. The ceremonial ascent of newlyweds up the central staircase to the t̄r - the principal space for the wedding ceremony - reinforces this symbolism. The façade, clad in white marble and adorned with a decorative, ornamented sun-shading lattice of duralumin, recalls both the external covering and the structural framework of the traditional yurt (Fig. 9).

The interior furnishings of the yurt - including furniture, textiles, utensils, domestic objects, and weaponry - bear the imprint of long-standing traditions and serve as exemplars of Kazakh folk craftsmanship. Characterised by formal restraint and ornamental decoration, they reflect the cultural world of the Kazakhs and their close relationship with nature. As noted by researchers, “The historical development of art among the nomadic people of the steppe was marked by its predominantly applied nature, with the yurt serving as the principal locus for the concentration of objects of nomadic life. In the architecture of this mobile dwelling, a synthesis of the arts was achieved, in which the decorative and applied arts played a leading role. Woven bands, wall hangings, and floor carpets were the primary decorative elements within the space, defined by the lattice wooden structure of the yurt and enclosed by felt coverings” [28, p. 37].



**Figure 9.** Wedding Palace in Almaty, architects Mendikulov M., Leppik A., Orazymbetov N., 1971. [51]

Ornament, as a fundamental component of decorative art, constitutes an integral part of the cultural heritage of the Kazakh people, transmitted across generations. Tracing the origins of traditional crafts, academician A. Margulan observed: “There are grounds to believe that the folk art of the Kazakhs is genetically connected with the art of the Saka, Wusun, Huns, and other tribes that inhabited the territory of Kazakhstan in antiquity” [11, p. 31].

The so-called “animal style,” which emerged in the third century BCE, found expression in the stylised ornamental decoration of jewellery, weapons, and household artefacts of the people who, since ancient times, inhabited not only the territories of present-day Kazakhstan but also vast regions of Central Asia, Southern Siberia, and Eastern Europe. These objects, crafted from wood, tanned leather, metal, and bone, embodied profound symbolic meaning and reflected mythological conceptions of the universe characteristic of the cultures of the Stone and Bronze Ages. Ornament, as a universal sign-symbol system, encapsulated cosmogonic and mythological knowledge rooted in the syncretic worldview of early humans, a fact substantiated by comparative analyses of ornamental art monuments from various archaeological cultures [52].

Their decoration employed gold and silver plates, bone and wood carvings, and inlays of semi-precious stones such as jasper, carnelian, and turquoise. The symbolic vocabulary of the “animal style” continues to inspire contemporary Kazakh artists, designers, and architects, who reinterpret its motifs in modern creative practice. As noted in the scholarship, “Kazakh ornamentation traces its origins to deep antiquity, undergoing transformation under the influence of various cultural and historical factors. Developing over centuries through the logical continuity of artistic thought and its plastic expression in form, Kazakh

ornament has reached us while preserving its authenticity and originality. It clearly exhibits zoomorphic, vegetal, geometric, and other motifs” [8, p. 25].

Tengrism, the primordial belief system of the Turkic people, profoundly shaped Kazakh culture and, in particular, ornamental traditions. Cosmological images of the sky and universe, together with solar symbols, conveyed notions of infinity and humanity’s connection to the cosmos. Stylised depictions of mythological animals, “tree of life” motifs, and vegetal and geometric forms reflected a spiritual worldview grounded in reverence for natural forces and the enduring relationship with Tengri and the spirits of ancestors.

Under the influence of Islamic culture, which spread across Kazakhstan in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Kazakh ornamentation integrated intricate vegetal and abstract motifs reminiscent of Arabic calligraphy. These elements became characteristic of embroidered textiles such as clothing, baskurs (woven ribbons) and tuskiiz (decorative wall hangings).

During the period of the Kazakh Khanate (15th-19th centuries), the principal canons of ornamental art were consolidated, retaining their profound symbolic significance and continuing to reflect the worldview and cultural values of the Kazakh people. Almost every element of the traditional Kazakh dwelling, regardless of utilitarian function, was adorned with ornament. Felt coverings, textiles, carpets, and wooden yurt components served as protective talismans safeguarding the household. Functional objects - including clothing chests, bed stands, dish containers, saddles, harnesses, and weapons - have survived in their original form, preserving their uniqueness and beauty.

Carpet-making occupies a distinguished place among Kazakh domestic crafts. As a structurally important part of the yurt interior, carpets provided thermal insulation, protection, and served as the principal decorative elements. They continue to play a significant role in contemporary interior design. Tekemet, syrmak, and tuskiiz each have distinct functional applications, classified as either floor coverings or wall hangings. As noted in *Kazakh Yurt* [14 p. 141]: “In creating the distinctive interior of the yurt, the tekemet fulfils multiple roles. This colourful felt - inherently of the steppe in its technology, colour combinations, and methods of ornamental pattern-making - embodies many aspects of nomadic culture and worldview. The equilibrium between pattern and background reflects the ancient dualism of Kazakh thought. Warm, naturally toned colours express the timeless harmony between human spirit and nature, while the monumental, resilient laconicism of large-scale ornament subtly conveys the integrity and strength of the national character.”

The distinctive technology of tekemet production, which involves applying dyed felt ornaments onto a felt base, has endured over time and is now employed by contemporary artists in wall panels, garments, and domestic objects. Both syrmak and tekemet integrate seamlessly into modern interiors, serving as focal accents that impart authenticity and cultural depth, whether in vibrant hues or restrained palettes.

Traditional Kazakh interiors are characterised by vivid colouration, layered composition, and a rich interplay of textures and materials. The symbolic role of colour is rooted in the beliefs of ancient tribes inhabiting Kazakhstan. As recorded in [11, p. 87]: “In antiquity, the colouring of objects in particular tones and the use of specific pigments in ornamentation held symbolic meaning, expressing defined concepts and beliefs. Blue symbolised the sky and veneration of the heavens; red represented fire and the sun; white denoted truth, joy, and happiness; yellow signified wisdom; black symbolised the earth; and green represented spring and youth. These compositional principles persist in contemporary Kazakh decorative arts, along with a wide repertoire of primary and derivative ornamental elements.”

The ethnic interior style, which gained global popularity in the mid-twentieth century, has its origins in the colonial era, when travellers brought household artefacts from Africa, India, and Asia into Europe. Styles such as Oriental, Japanese, and Chinese conveyed the cultural atmosphere of specific ethnic groups through the integration of authentic elements. Decorators and architects meticulously recreated the ambience of distant lands.

Since the early twenty-first century, ethnic style has evolved under the influence of globalisation and the realities of contemporary life. Intercultural exchange has

fostered new concepts, with stylistic movements such as fusion, contemporary, eclecticism, and wabi-sabi providing platforms for reinterpreting and integrating ethnic aesthetics into modern interior design and architecture.

In contemporary Kazakhstan, ornamental motifs and spatial zoning principles derived from the yurt are increasingly incorporated into the design of ethnic restaurants, hotels, exhibition pavilions, and cultural centres, reinforcing national identity within modern spaces. Restaurants of national cuisine act as cultural attractors, offering immersive experiences through food, music, and spatial design. This study analyses ethnic cuisine restaurants in Almaty that appeal to both residents and international visitors.

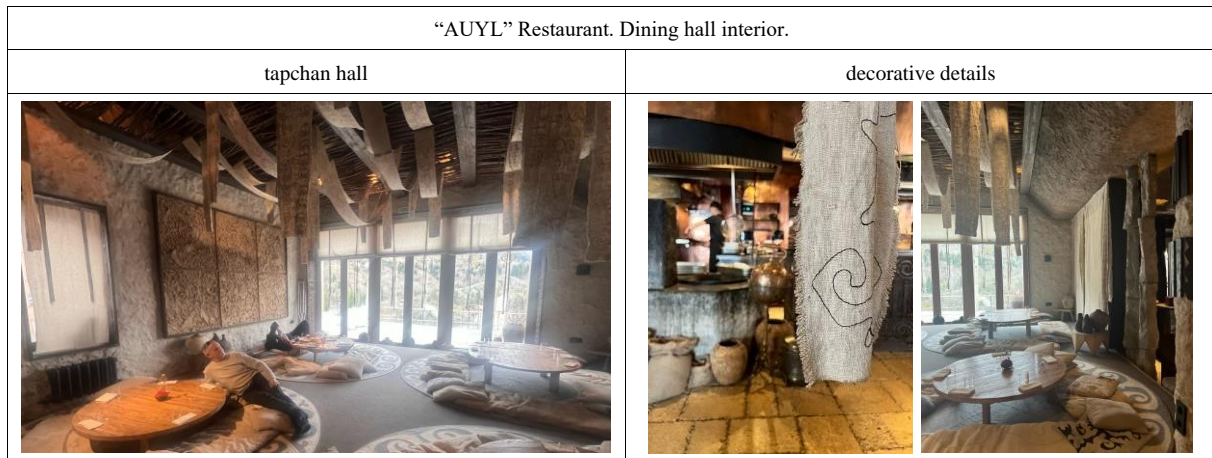
The architectural concept of the NAVAT chain of Oriental cuisine restaurants is based on the synthesis of diverse cultural influences. The ethnic variety of the cuisine is reflected in the interiors: decorative plasterwork and mosaics replicate Uzbek ikat patterns; traditional Turkish stained-glass lamps coexist with Kyrgyz syrmak felt carpets, evoking the vibrant atmosphere of an Eastern bazaar.

A different approach is evident in the SANDYQ restaurant in Almaty, where eclectic, stylish interiors combine contemporary materials, panoramic glazing, and modern lighting with elements of the traditional Kazakh dwelling, including carpets, tableware, and outer garments. The restrained wall finishes act as a backdrop, allowing antique Kazakh carpets to serve as statement features.

In 2024, the AUYL restaurant was listed among the world’s most beautiful restaurants by Prix Versailles, the annual UNESCO architecture and design award [53, 54].

The restaurant is situated in the Medeu Gorge near Almaty, within a historic building dating back to the Soviet modernist era. Its concept is presented as “neo nomad cuisine”, with interiors inspired by the nomadic culture of Central Asia. The Neo Nomad style embodies a contemporary reinterpretation of nomadic aesthetics, blending traditional motifs and natural materials with modern technological elements (Fig. 10).

Dishes prepared over an open fire, traditional low round tables, untreated wood, clay tableware, leather seating, chests, textiles, and qoshma (felt floor coverings) serve as direct references to the dwellings of nomads. The rough texture of the wall finishes and monochrome tekemet wall hangings, executed in subdued grey and brown tones, define the restrained and natural colour palette of the interior. Modern technologies incorporated into the technical and lighting systems are seamlessly integrated into the ethnic setting, creating a welcoming atmosphere that harmoniously combines warmth, authenticity, and contemporary comfort for visitors.



**Figure 10.** “AUYL” Restaurant in Almaty (Photo by authors, June 2025)

## 4. Conclusions

Architecture influences both the physical environment and the spiritual perception of space, shaping a sense of identity and belonging. In the context of globalisation, maintaining cultural integrity while engaging with contemporary innovation becomes a key challenge for Kazakhstan’s architectural development [55].

The study demonstrates that the *kiiz üy* (yurt) remains not only a historical dwelling but also a living archetype that continues to inspire contemporary design strategies. Its structural clarity, symbolic depth, and ecological adaptability provide a valuable framework for sustainable architectural thinking. Examples such as the Contemporary Kazakh Yurt by Nurgissa Architects and the Ancient Futures exhibition reveal how traditional concepts can be reinterpreted through new materials, digital tools, and ecological technologies. These artistic and architectural practices illustrate the potential of vernacular heritage to foster creative experimentation and environmental responsibility.

The research findings confirm that the yurt’s spatial organisation, decorative language, and material logic continue to inform the aesthetics of modern Kazakh architecture. Designers increasingly integrate these principles into the exteriors and interiors of public and residential buildings, creating spaces that combine technological precision with cultural symbolism. Such projects promote continuity between the past and the present, transforming the memory of nomadic civilisation into a source of forward-looking architectural identity.

Ultimately, the dialogue between art, architecture, and tradition exemplified by recent Kazakh projects demonstrates that cultural heritage, when creatively reinterpreted, does not constrain innovation — it enriches it. Preserving the yurt’s conceptual essence in contemporary practice thus becomes not a nostalgic return to the past, but an affirmation of a sustainable and culturally conscious future.

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