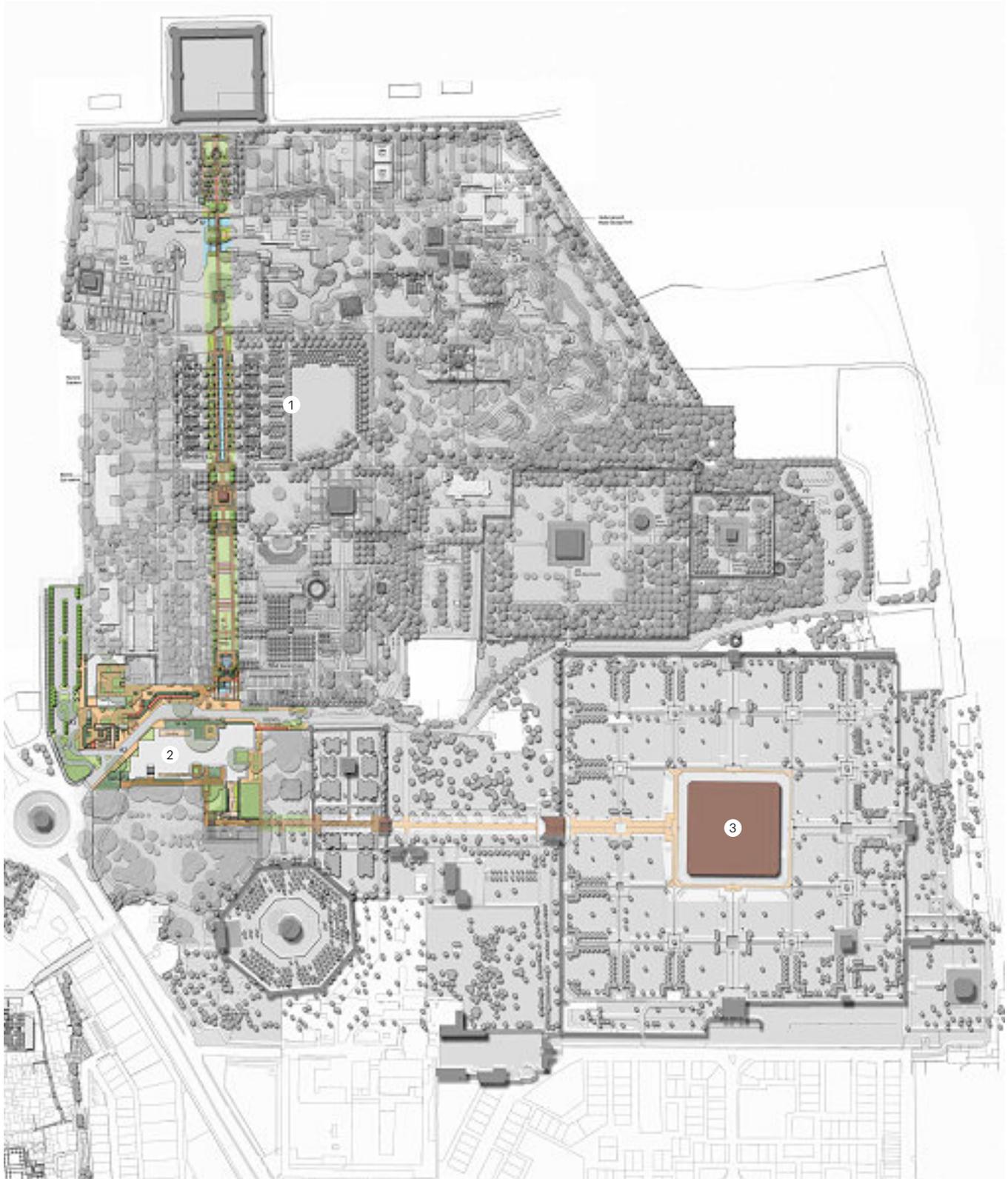




Humayun's Tomb Site Museum

Subsequent to the decade-long efforts undertaken by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), the revitalized Humayun's Tomb complex and its environment now receive almost two million visitors each year. A state-of-the-art Museum is to be built at the entrance to this World Heritage Site and Sunder Nursery with the goal of explaining Mughal heritage and the development of the Nizamuddin area over a millennium, as well as illustrating the pluralist Sufi cultural traditions that defined Hindustani culture for at least five centuries. This is the first of the Site Museums planned for the twenty-five *Ardash* or 'model' monuments recently designated by the Indian Ministry of Culture.

The conceptual design presented in 2011-12 envisioned a sunken building inspired by the traditional *baolis* or step-wells of northern India. AKTC commissioned a heritage impact assessment study for the design prior to seeking planning approvals. The Ministry of Tourism has generously provided a grant for the construction of this Museum.¹ In keeping with its conservation role for the larger site, AKTC has commissioned the architectural and landscape design and will undertake, in coordination with the local authorities, the museographical exhibition design for this first Site Museum. A foundation laying ceremony was celebrated on 7 April 2015.



1

- 1 Sunder Nursery
- 2 Site Museum
- 3 Humayun's Tomb

100 m

Christine Mueller and Pankaj Vir Gupta,
Mohammad Shaheer

The Architecture of Humayun's Tomb Site Museum

Christine Mueller and Pankaj Vir Gupta

The Site Museum for Humayun's Tomb has been envisioned as the spatial link between the significant and distinct historical sites of the Nizamuddin Basti, Sunder Nursery and the tomb of the second Mughal emperor, Humayun [1]. To establish a spatial threshold – important in terms of emphasizing a sense of place for this ensemble of Mughal-era landscape and architecture – the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), supported by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), proposes to build a Site Museum as a vital public amenity, facilitating the visitor's experience of Humayun's Tomb and adjacent sites.

The architectural concept for the new Site Museum draws from the tradition of subterranean *baolis* – medieval step-wells that served as reservoirs for fresh water, and provided a cool, sky-lit refuge for travellers. The architecture of the Museum is also conceptually grounded in the Mughal commitment to aesthetic practice – illustrated through the relationship between architecture and nature. Gaston Bachelard – in his text *The Right To Dream* – describes this as an “immense charity towards the beautiful”. He describes how, at dusk, gardeners might place lamps and a mirror before each lotus stem on the cusp of bloom so that the flower might blossom at dawn with greater confidence and delight in its own beauty. It is the splendour of this original imagination that enables us to perceive the clarity of this Mughal architecture over five centuries after its initial conception – positing beauty as integral to the act of building.

The Humayun's Tomb Site Museum has been organized in two distinct and interlinked zones: a primary Entrance Plaza situated adjacent to Sunder Nursery, and a subterranean Museum complex near the entrance gate to Humayun's Tomb.



2

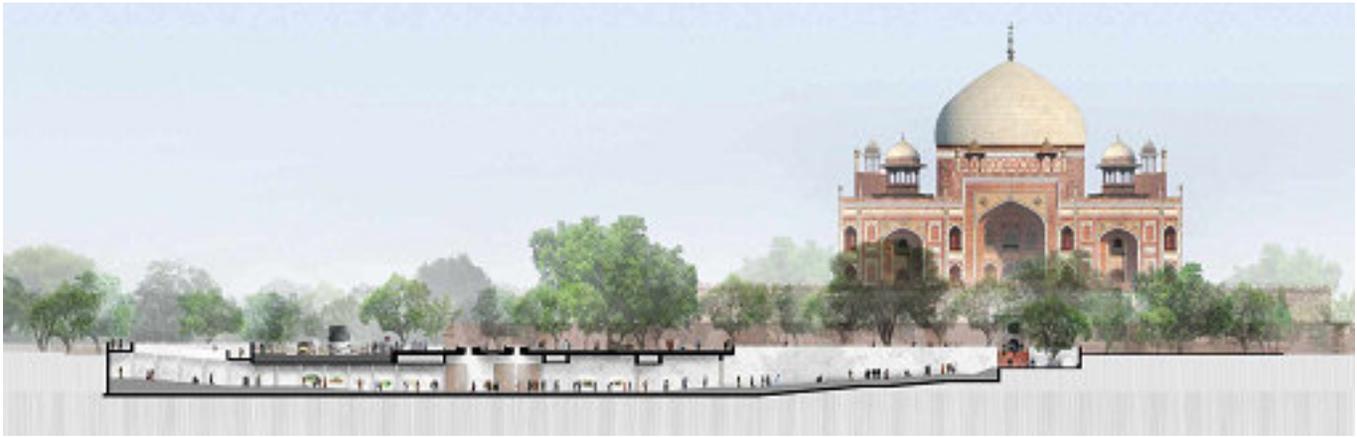


3

[1] Plan showing the carefully designed spatial links between the new Site Museum, Sunder Nursery and Humayun's Tomb.

[2] Entrance Plaza.

[3] Entrance ramp into the Museum.



4

As in the tomb of Emperor Humayun, the sequence of arrival and procession through the Entrance Plaza and Museum building assumes a sense of order in the formal arrival court. The Entrance Plaza [2] is comprised of multiple ticket counters, public amenities and a cafe, as well as access to a souvenir shop, an auditorium, library, crafts gallery and seminar rooms.

The Entrance Plaza functions as a threshold from which visitors may orient themselves, organizing their itinerary within the many architectural features of the area. A two-storey structure – shaded under the foliage of large trees – defines the northern end of the Plaza. It is built in conformity with the footprint and volume of the existing structure on this site and clad with red sandstone. The quality of stone craftsmanship remains a defining feature of Mughal architecture in India. In keeping with this tradition, the surface of the red sandstone has been carved, amplifying the play of light and shadow on the richly textured, natural stone. To demarcate the procession of visitors from the Entrance Plaza into the Cafe Court, the red sandstone facade transforms into a delicately carved, white marble screen, signalling the entry.

The tradition of geometric forms within Mughal architecture has influenced the design of the Site Museum. For the Mughals, geometry manifested a cosmic order. The arrangement of carefully proportioned spaces imposed a discipline for inhabitation. However, this fidelity to geometry also facilitated a heightened human awareness of the powerful union between illumination and volume. Thus Mughal architecture imbued space with a sense of the terrestrial frame of this world, while also evoking an awareness of a greater cosmic order. The spatial evolution of geometry into powerful forms was not enough to satisfy the Mughals; the great refinement of this aesthetic practice emerged as each surface was adorned with detail, texture and colour – revealing architecture as a kinetic spectacle.

To enter the museum galleries, visitors descend from the Entrance Plaza along a wide ramp [3], and walk through an Entry Gallery [5] – beneath the access road above – arriving into the Vestibule Gallery at a depth of six metres below the Plaza. The

interplay between natural light and space begins at this point of descent. The threshold into the Entry Gallery is illuminated by diffused light from a large skylight above. The Vestibule Gallery introduces visitors to the Model Gallery – showcasing a virtual display of the entire site as it existed during the Mughal era. From the Vestibule Gallery, visitors may visit the museum exhibits in the Permanent Gallery, or ascend the steps and proceed directly to the Humayun's Tomb complex.

The gallery spaces for the Humayun's Tomb Site Museum are arranged in a sequence of intersecting squares, with wide column spans of eight metres to enable curatorial flexibility for exhibit design [7]. Given the increased traffic of visitors expected at the site, the public circulation sequence has been organized along a primary axis, spanning the entire length of the Museum. Natural light, filtered through skylights and open courtyards, illuminates the galleries. These open courtyards are critical aspects of the galleries, enabling curated displays of Mughal architectural artefacts, including facade treatments, landscape elements and ornamental traditions. The engineering systems required for a modern museum are woven around each gallery through specific service corridors, thus facilitating curatorial and museum management protocols.

Mughal emperors and their architects accorded great worth to the relationship between form, space and material. Their mastery lay in achieving a delicate balance between boldly proportioned exterior mass and lyrical sculpting of interior volumes. In their use of stone masonry to sculpt the forms of their mausoleums, the Mughals conveyed an impression of permanence that characterizes their architecture. The Site Museum aspires for a similar sensibility in the visitor experience.

The high-ceilinged Permanent Gallery, with an indoor area of over 1000 square metres, is the largest gallery space in the entire Museum. A wide courtyard flanks the north wall of this gallery, allowing light to wash across the floors and walls [6]. The floor surface of this courtyard is patterned with glazed, coloured tiles, evoking the floral motifs that adorned Mughal-era monuments. The stone-lined alcoves in this courtyard will

[4] Circulation sequence linking Sunder Nursery and Humayun's Tomb.

[5] View of the Entry Gallery.

[6] The Permanent Gallery and courtyard.

[7] Gallery level plan.

display reconstructions of prominent architectural elements of monuments and landscapes from the greater Nizamuddin area. The south wall of the Permanent Gallery features four, sky-lit niches – each four metres wide and six metres tall. These niches enable curators to display large objects with natural overhead light while protecting them from the outdoor environment. Given the large floor area, overhead skylights diffuse filtered light onto the polished marble floor. This subtle play of light and shadow illuminates the space and reflects on the plaster of the pleated ceiling above, creating an additional geometric imprint.

Adjacent to the Permanent Gallery, the Finial Gallery will house the restored copper finial of Humayun's Tomb, as well as other original architectural elements recovered during the conservation effort undertaken at the Humayun's Tomb complex since 1997.

The Finial Gallery leads into the second Vestibule Gallery, situated along the axis of the Sunder Nursery promenade above. This space – marked by a single column at its centre – offers the choice of ascent to Humayun's Tomb [4], or to Sunder Nursery. In each case, the re-emergence of the visitor from the subterranean to the terrestrial plane is spatially distinct. The gallery and ramp leading to Sunder Nursery evoke a cherished Mughal motif – the architecture of water. The scent and sound of water are

palpable as visitors emerge from this Vestibule Gallery. As they ascend into the arbour of Sunder Nursery, a scalloped fountain – the *chinikhana* – offers a cool and welcome threshold for entry into the garden realm. For visitors proceeding to Humayun's Tomb, the ramped garden of the Long Court [9], sculpted under the canopy of large trees, offers a release into the walled compound of the Tomb enclosure.

The architecture of the Humayun's Tomb Site Museum is perhaps best expressed in the Garden Plaza terrace [8|10|11] – its facade to the sky. Sheltered beneath the canopy of the mature trees on the site, this stone plaza reveals only a modest hint of the Museum below – soft light emitted at dusk through the marble screened skylights.

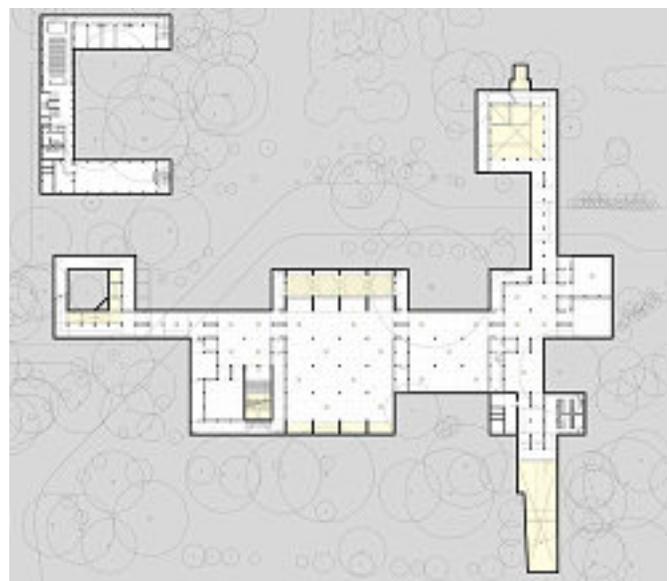
For visitors to experience the craft traditions that were introduced to India during the Mughal period and which continue to flourish in many ways, the contemporary architecture of the Site Museum aspires to 'inhabit' the spatial past. In evoking the tactile material culture of the Mughals, it engenders an awareness of the lineage of craftsmanship that has endured across five centuries. The builders of Humayun's Tomb created an absolute and enduring edifice that transcended the vicissitudes of their era. The Site Museum prepares present-day visitors to behold this remarkable achievement.



5



6



7

A scale bar indicating 50 meters and a north arrow symbol.

The Landscaping of Humayun's Tomb Site Museum

Mohammad Shaheer

The proposed landscape around the new Museum is designed to function as a series of generously proportioned walkways, gardens and plazas offering a pleasant experience to the large numbers of people that will walk through them, and to provide well-defined sitting places where families, small groups and school parties can conveniently gather or rest. Each space is planned to benefit from the shade, shelter and visual interest offered by the many fine mature trees found on the site.

The main landscape spaces are the Entrance Plaza, the Museum Court, the Access Courts, the *Jamun* Tree Court, the Cascade Court, the Long Court and the Garden Plaza.

Visitors enter the Entrance Plaza [2] under the foliage of existing *Neem* (*Azadirachta indica*) and *Peepal* (*Ficus religiosa*) trees, part of an extended grove around which the above-ground facilities of the Museum have been aligned. The Plaza is

accessible from east and west: the eastern entry enables visitors arriving by private bus – tourists and schoolchildren for example – to alight or board directly from either side of the road that presently runs between the two parts of the site. On the western side, a separate alighting point for those arriving by private car or taxi is planned adjacent to the Nursery's boundary, along with parking space for 200 cars.

The Entrance Plaza extends into the Museum Court, an expansive space virtually roofed over by the soaring canopies of several existing *Neem* and other trees of the *Ficus* species. This court then stretches into the main landscape of Sunder Nursery by way of a large space provisionally identified as the Crafts Court – an outdoor place for craftsmen to demonstrate and exhibit stone and other crafts under the shade of an existing cluster of *Siris* (*Albizzia*) and *Neem* trees.

For visitors arriving by public bus, the entrance area of the proposed new complex is already quite well connected by foot-paths and an underpass across Mathura Road to the Nizamuddin



8



9



10



11

Basti. As part of a larger plan, parking for sixty tourist buses has been proposed at the eastern edge of the site, not far from the main entrance court of the Site Museum.

Strong connections – physical and conceptual – are established with the new landscape that is taking shape in Sunder Nursery and in the vicinity of Humayun’s Tomb as part of the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal Initiative. A major exit from the Site Museum terminates the southern extent of the Sunder Nursery central axis. Further south on this axis the design of the main exit and its associated spaces is accurately coordinated with the central approach to Humayun’s Tomb so that existing visual alignments are not compromised [1][11].

Conceptually the intent of the landscape design is to illustrate and interpret the rich traditions of design and planting associated with gardens of the Mughal period, and also with their Persian precedents. Each of the three access courts leading to the lower level of the Site Museum is intended to highlight an individually distinct landscape feature.

At the main entrance for visitors for instance, an existing *Jamun* tree is taken as the central element around which the sloping walkway descends gently to the level below, and thus gives its name to the *Jamun* Tree Court. The design of another entrance/exit proposes a traditional water-cascade as its dominant feature, making a symbolic connection with the central axis of Sunder Nursery; hence its name, the Cascade Court. The third court, where visitors exit from the Museum and

join the main approach to Humayun’s Tomb, is designated the Long Court [9], appropriate to its shape: a broad pathway about five metres in width inclining gently beside a grassy slope along the length of a very large linear enclosed space, shaded by groups of existing trees at its edges.

The extensive roof of the Museum, just a few steps above the surrounding park, is called the Garden Plaza [8][10], set among existing trees. Its design is a variation on the garden carpet motif, an idea previously explored in the gardens along the central axis of Sunder Nursery. The flat plane of the roof suggests a carpet in the shade of trees. Its landscape is imagined as the contemporary interpretation of a garden carpet design, mostly in sandstone. The conventional features of such a carpet, as indeed also of a garden in the Persian style – a central water channel, planting beds, and narrow runnels for irrigation – are represented respectively as very simple patterns in the paving, and as thin shallow channels incised into the surface and suitably sloped to allow for surface run-off from this large paved area.

Endnote

- 1 The Ministry of Tourism has pledged INR 49 crores (approximately USD 8 million) towards the Museum’s construction.

[8] The Garden Plaza.

[9] The Long Court: the proposed exit from the Site Museum onto the main approach to Humayun’s Tomb.

[10] The central channel of the Garden Plaza.

[11] A view of Humayun’s Tomb from the west, with the proposed roof garden of the Site Museum in the foreground.