Altit Fort

Altit Fort is another of the great landmark monuments of Gilgit-Baltistan. Indeed, the shikar (watchtower) is some three hundred years older than the first phase of Baltit Fort, making it the oldest surviving standing structure in the western Himalayas. Arguably, it is also the most spectacularly sited fort, built on the very edge of the main Hunza gorge. It sits above 200-metre-high sheer cliffs and precipitous slopes that cascade down towards the river. Its importance stems from the control it exercised on the upstream communication routes.

The conservation strategy for Altit Fort was to preserve it in its ‘found’ state. Most conservation works therefore related to mending structural defects, stabilizing existing walls, realigning render to the wall substrates, replacing some roofs, treating wood decay and providing a nominal amount of lighting. However, for the walls that were too unstable, the infill was removed to allow them to be jacked back to more vertical positions and the stone and/or adobe soil blocks replaced in their original positions – making use of detailed survey drawings and photographs. This rather purist concept, an exciting objective in its own right, is significantly different from solutions applied to Baltit Fort, Ganish Village and Shigar Fort.

The conservation strategy for Altit Fort also extended to the associated historic garden, to the north of the Fort. Today, the garden is being kept as it is. When one enters the garden it is like stepping back in time. But before starting conservation of Altit Fort, it was decided to first rehabilitate Altit settlement, in order to allow for heritage-related values to take root more firmly, while reducing negative commercial pressures. The formation of the Altit Town Management Society (TMS), with a general body including forty per cent of women members and long deliberations about the impact of development, led to a clearer realization by the Altit community of the need to be proactive and involved in the cultural development process. As a result, the interventions in the environmental context, that is, in relation to the historic settlement, the ancient Fort and the built-up or agricultural land, took place under a citizen-managed land-use programme, prior to the monument conservation project.

Built on rocky, unproductive terrain, the settlement reflects traditional values of land use and conservation in a region scarce in agricultural land. Its historic
dwellings exemplify indigenous architectural forms, building techniques and materials well adapted to an environment whose hazards include earthquakes and bitterly cold winters.

By the late 1990s, the core settlement of Altit was abandoned by its residents, largely because of unsanitary living conditions and the inadequacy of houses to support modern life. A consequence of this process was the building of new houses in the surrounding farmland, where families with the financial means could create dwellings with modern facilities and greater living space. The newer houses, with their cement-block construction and rudimentary sanitation systems, contributed to an increase in pollution and a decrease in social cohesion. Moreover, the new construction came at the detriment of the verdant farming terraces and centuries-old fruit orchards that cover the surrounding hillsides. The physical condition of the Khun became increasingly dilapidated and its common spaces and historic houses were neglected.

Keeping in view the historic, cultural and architectural value of the village, an inter-vention was conceived that would enhance the value of the old settlement and demonstrate that people can sustain life at contemporary standards in harmony with the traditional built environment. The rehabilitation process included the piping of clean drinking water, safer underground electrification and proper sewage facilities, have led many families to move back into their ancestral homes, bringing the settlement back to the critical mass required for healthy sociality and democratic decision making. The Ali Khan Management Society (TMS) also oversees the collection of revenues from the project beneficiaries – the settlement residents – for the maintenance of improvements and services. The revenue is collected monthly, generating a total of PKR 17,000 per month from 150 households. The maintenance has proved entirely financially self-sustaining, even generating revenue for future improvements. Monthly expenditure for maintenance come to PKR 8,000; providing PKR 9,000 in monthly savings. In addition, the Ali TMS is already charging visitor entry fees to the rehabilitated Altit Village, thus generating additional funds.

The area’s water supply is sub-surface, coming from springs located to the east of the settlement. The water is pumped underground with a 100 HP motor.

The quality of life of the settlement residents has improved considerably since the sanitation system was installed. The sewage system serves the whole settlement by diverting its waste to the main sewer trunk line. The system is unique because of the use of the old garda house, which is now a treatment plant for the settlement.

The natural beauty of Altit and the potential for self-sustainability. Skilled craftsmen from the community were recruited to train the volunteer unskilled labour in traditional crafts and techniques. Traditional social and political practices have been strengthened as former settlement residents have moved back into their ancestral homes, bringing the settlement back to the critical mass required for healthy sociality and democratic decision making.

Significant issues and impact

Planning issues

At the urging of AKCS-P, residents have relocated their animals to pens outside the settlement, making the houses more spacious and more sanitary. AKCS-P has also provided technical support to families wishing to renovate the interiors of their homes using traditional materials and often incorporating elements of traditional craftswork.

Community involvement/Programme

In the process of rehabilitating and upgrading the settlement, local traditions of community participation and collective labour were drawn upon, reinforcing the community’s awareness of and pride in its heritage and the potential for self-sustainability. Skilled craftsman from the community were recruited to train the volunteer unskilled labour in traditional crafts and techniques. Traditional social and political practices have been strengthened as former settlement residents have moved back into their ancestral homes, bringing the settlement back to the critical mass required for healthy sociality and democratic decision making. The Ali Khan Management Society (TMS) also oversees the collection of revenues from the project beneficiaries – settlement residents – for the maintenance of improvements and services. The revenue is collected monthly, generating a total of PKR 17,000 per month from 150 households. The maintenance has proved entirely financially self-sustaining, even generating revenue for future improvements. Monthly expenditure for maintenance come to PKR 8,000; providing PKR 9,000 in monthly savings. In addition, the Ali TMS is already charging visitor entry fees to the rehabilitated Altit Village, thus generating additional funds.

Vocational training/capacity building

The settlement and improvements are the common property of the resident community. For the physical upkeep of the structures and services, the Ali TMS is able to draw on the expertise of those villagers who were given training during the course of the project.

Quality of life

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Lessons learned

Providing tangible benefits to the local communities prior to carrying out work on a landmark project is most helpful in alleviating their concerns and also reducing commercial tendencies.

Partners

Community Partners

The community of Altit.

Donors


Authoritative Framework

In 2001 the owner Prince Am Khan graciously gifted Altit Fort to AKDN while a sizable portion of the orchard garden was purchased. The Tourism Promotion Services is to manage the Khabasi Café opened up in the summer house, while the Women Social Enterprise in collaboration with AKDN TMS and with AKCS-P oversight are responsible for Altit Fort bail and the garden.