

Baltit Fort

GILGIT-BALTISTAN, PAKISTAN

Baltit Fort not only towers over Karimabad, but is also the sentinel of the Hunza Valley. Under the protective presence of the Fort, the houses of the traditional settlements of the old Baltit (now Karimabad) Village are gathered along the slopes beneath it. The Fort forms the backdrop and the focus to these settlements. Restoration and reuse of the 700-year-old Baltit Fort as a cultural and historical museum, and the conservation of its context, the historic settlement of Karimabad, are best seen within the perspective of changes that started in the second half of the twentieth century with the independence of Pakistan and accelerated from the 1970s onwards.

Many of the traditional social conventions that held the community together in the past had been weakened first with the abolishment of the mir in 1974 and then when Hunza, which had remained largely insulated from external forces, was opened up in 1979 with the construction of the Karakoram Highway (KKH) that links Islamabad to Kashgar.

It was recognized that, if not managed properly, forces of change resulting from development could spoil the impressive natural setting and the cultural heritage that was Karimabad's major resource. Preservation of the outstanding physical and environmental qualities was deemed essential to the well-being of central Hunza. The peaks of the Ultar, Rakaposhi and others, the terraced fields, the irrigation channels, the clustered settlements, the wealth of historic buildings and the rich cultural heritage needed to be protected and made to act as drivers for development.

The rapid change from a secluded rural area into a semi-urban one, with the attendant issues of infrastructure, traffic, commercial activities, tourism and new construction modes, all affected the physical environment and charm of Karimabad. These facts needed to be taken into account as part of the programme that had started with the restoration of Baltit Fort.

Baltit Fort had been abandoned in the early 1950s and a new palace constructed where the mir had moved with his family. In the 1980s the Fort was fragile and if it had been permitted to collapse Hunza would clearly have lost its major landmark and an important part of its cultural identity. However, before conservation work could be started, it needed to be transferred from private to



The restored Baltit Fort seen from the south-west.

Opposite page:

A view of Baltit Fort's southern facade from below highlights its early 20th-century wooden additions.



1 Baltit Fort 2 Karimabad 3 Visitor Parking

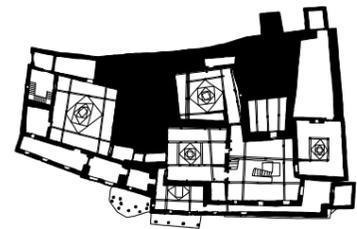
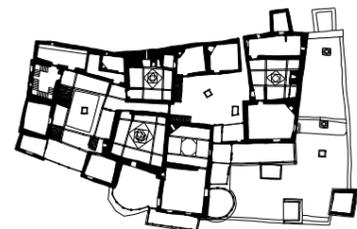
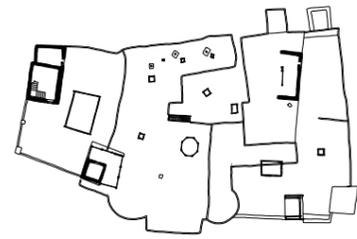
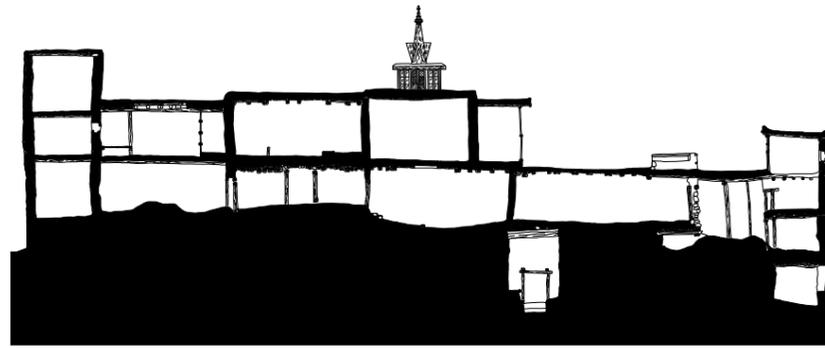


Project Scope/ Objectives

The physical conservation of Baltit Fort was conceived to meet several interrelated objectives. The first of these was to restore and reuse the Fort as a museum and cultural centre and to protect and manage the built environment of Karimabad. A second objective was to train local people in conservation and related disciplines, establishing a pool of professionals capable of undertaking future restoration projects. Third, the project is meant to serve as a demonstration of excellence in conservation and to stimulate awareness and understanding of the significance of restoration and reuse of similar monuments.



Right, a latitudinal section of Baltit Fort and, below, floor plans of the roof (top), the upper level and the bottom level.



public ownership. The mir on behalf of his family graciously decided to gift the Fort and the land surrounding it to the newly formed Baltit Heritage Trust (BHT) enabling a physical programme of works to be initiated.

From the beginning it was intended that the conservation should retain the historic character and appearance of the Fort. The restoration of missing features would be based on sound archaeological evidence. It was also realized that if the restored Fort were to enhance and promote cultural values of a living culture it needed to contribute to economic opportunities for the residents and to generate sufficient income to sustain operation and maintenance costs. Accordingly, the main uses selected for the restored Fort were those of a museum and active cultural centre.

While work started on Baltit Fort, a strategic framework for the orderly physical growth and development of Karimabad, and for the maintenance of its environmental and cultural assets, home to a population of around 5000, was developed, resulting from the analysis of its situation in 1992, and leading to the development of the 'Karimabad Conceptual Development Plan' (KCDP).

Although the plan for Karimabad, as conceived in the KCDP, is still not enforceable by law, it increased the awareness of the community about the issues at stake, leading to a participatory development process and the need for a community-based institution. In order to anchor this process in the local community, the Karimabad Town Management Society (KTMS), a democratically elected body, was formed and registered under the Social Welfare Societies' Law. The KTMS promotes community involvement in planning efforts in Karimabad and also exercises influence on development projects that advance the KCDP land use, infrastructure and road planning components. The KTMS has also attracted donor funding for a sanitation project that has enabled full coverage to Karimabad and the lower village of Ganish. This was in line with the earlier pilot project of rehabilitation and sanitation project for a portion of Khurukshal Village that had succeeded in bringing people back to old settlements that were being abandoned.

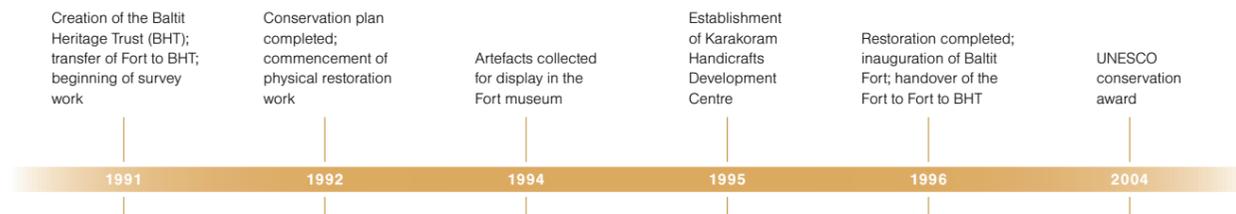
With increased interest from the community and awareness about the need to plan for development and channel change, Karimabad is in far better shape now than it would have been without the KTMS. There is a new attitude towards the local environment that helps to preserve the farming terraces and encourages the introduction of improved standards of health and hygiene, while reviving sound traditional construction techniques.

Opposite page:
Pathways lead up to the entry of Baltit Fort after restoration. The village of Karimabad appears at the base of the structure.





Phasing 1991 → 1996



Left, a carpet-weaver works under the auspices of the 'Karakoram Handicraft Development Project'.

Right, the *mir's* bedroom on the second floor, seen after restoration, is part of the visitor tour.

The 'Karakoram Handicraft Development Project', which was set up to complement the Baltit Fort project, and since 1999 managed by the Karakoram Area Development Organization (KADO), produces small embroidered gift items, *sharma* (local woollen rugs) and hand-knotted carpets, allowing for increased incomes for thousands of women. KADO also operates a solid-waste disposal programme in central Hunza.

By mobilizing community resources, providing incentives, and demonstrating evidence of short and long-term benefits, the restored Baltit Fort has transformed Karimabad into a focus of interest in northern Pakistan, while giving local culture a renewed legitimacy in the face of powerful factors of recent change. The project has helped to renew the residents' pride in their heritage. The restoration of Baltit Fort within its setting of the historic village of Karimabad demonstrates the ability to integrate conservation issues in the larger context of community and regional development.

Background

BRIEF HISTORY OF PROJECT SITE

Baltit Village is one of the three oldest known settlements in Hunza, the others being Ganish and Altit. Under the protective presence of the Fort, the houses of the traditional settlements of old Baltit (now Karimabad) Village are gathered up the slopes beneath it. Baltit Fort is dramatically located at the top of a natural amphitheatre formed by terraced slopes, and the site was carefully chosen to control the irrigation channels that emanate out of Ultar. It is a remarkably complex building resulting from more than 700 years of 'organic growth', starting possibly from a watchtower and an adjoining building. Traditional stories mention that it was never captured by outside powers until the advent of the British in 1991 after having defeated the joint Hunza-Nagir forces at Nilit, when Baltit Fort was opened up and the British took control.

Challenges

PROJECT RISKS

This was the first major project of its kind ever in Gilgit-Baltistan, where restoration expertise and skills were not available. Consequently, international expertise was called in for the conservation.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The historic settlements immediately below the Fort were being abandoned as households realized that rather than living in cramped and unsanitary conditions it was preferable to move to lands available in the orchards and terraces, where new housing could be constructed to meet needs of the increasing family size.

AVAILABILITY OF DRINKING WATER AND PROPER SANITATION FACILITIES

Traditionally the sources of water are the irrigation channels that tap the Ultar. The water in these channels was very carefully monitored to ensure judicious distribution, particularly during early spring when new crops were in need. Also it was ensured that these channels would not be polluted and no direct washing of clothes, bathing or throwing of rubbish would occur, as well as runoffs from fields into these channels. However, with changes leading to the establishment of the first piped water lines and the abolishment of the Mirdom, this restraint disappeared, resulting in the water channels no longer being clean. Also the traditional system of sanitation was being abandoned for modern systems by setting up crude cesspits.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

A road was planned to go through the historic settlement that would have affected most of the households and would certainly have led to the total abandonment of the settlement.

BUILDING CONDITIONS

Baltit Fort was in a state of advanced decay, with the roof resembling a patchwork of holes. Rainwater was able to flow freely into all parts of the building and even down into the lowest storeys. Most of the timberwork had rotted, while renders were reduced to piles of soil collected on the floors. Many walls were tilting and others had settled because they did not have foundations or sat on the loose moraine soil.

Significant Issues and Impact

DATA COLLECTION/SURVEYS

A number of surveys were completed for the 'Karimabad Conceptual Development Plan' in the mid 1990s, in the physical and housing realms, as well as building typologies, demographics and economic conditions. For sanitation needs, surveys to determine routes and meet future needs were carried out. After restoration and its opening, Baltit Fort attracted large numbers of visitors (around 20,000), which, though, have declined sharply after "9.11" (11.09.2001). However, even in 2009 around 3500 foreign visitors and 8000 domestic visitors paid for access to Baltit Fort.

MASTER PLANNING PROCESS

The 'Karimabad Conceptual Development Plan' was commissioned in 1992, when it was realized that the traditional settlements were being abandoned, with the consequent implication of building new houses in the terraced land, resulting in the charm of the bowl of Karimabad being dotted with unappealing new constructions in concrete and at the cost of the farming terraces and orchards. New haphazard road constructions were being planned that would destroy old settlements and also lay Karimabad open to all sorts of commercial exploitation, taking away its charm and balance. The multi-faceted planning process had a number of objectives, including establishment of a representative local institutional body – the Karimabad Town Management Society – allowing for conservation of both the traditional settlements and the scenic environment and establishing an adequate road and service infrastructure to provide for appropriate land-use patterns while responding to a growth in population and changing economic trends.

PLANNING ISSUES

Abolition of Hunza State in 1974 led to an institutional vacuum, as no proper authority took over the responsibilities of the Mirdom that had existed since then. Further, the anomalous status of Gilgit-Baltistan within Pakistan has not allowed for a system of governance that responds to local needs. This was all compounded by the fact that Karimabad was not treated as a town or municipality, further affecting planning for its development. Thus, patchwork development projects implemented through annual development plans have been the norm. It is only in late 2009 that a deputy commissioner has been placed in Karimabad, and a more formal planning process is expected to start.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS/MONUMENTS CONSERVED

In addition to Baltit Fort, five historic houses in its vicinity, two mosques – including the Hanging Mosque on the pathway to the Fort – and the historic watermill that used to be the ground storey of the watchtower, as well as another watchtower, have been restored. For the Fort, remedies were found by putting a temporary protective cover on the roof, while structural problems of the foundations and load-bearing walls were tackled first, allowing for conservation of the architectural fabric and finishes later. Timber elements were procured and inserted at the identified critical intervention points, while modern interventions were also inserted for extra structural strengthening, such as synthetic polyurethane reinforcement meshes and polymer anchor cables. Additional importance was given to preserving the timber lacing and cribbage work, as a means of demonstrating the value of this unique engineering and construction

system in resisting earthquakes and of reviving traditional local skills and crafts.

CONTRACTING METHODS

The Aga Khan Planning and Building Services (AKP&BS), then known as the Aga Khan Housing Board, was contracted to carry out work on Baltit Fort under the supervision of AKTC. Work on Baltit Fort and the rehabilitation of the historic settlements around it engaged over 200 unskilled persons.

QUALITY OF LIFE

With support from the community a modern sanitation system has been laid to cater for all the residents of Karimabad as well as Ganish, covering 1000 households. Piped water schemes have also been implemented, while the local community is encouraged to move animals to their fields.

LESSONS LEARNED

This being the first conservation and rehabilitation project brought a wealth of learning to other projects that were taken up subsequently. One major development was the bringing together of the conservation and rehabilitation processes so that planning and implementation were further improved.

Partners

PUBLIC PARTNERS

Government of Pakistan represented on the Baltit Heritage Trust.

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The community of Karimabad.

Donors

PUBLIC PARTNERS

Government of Norway, Aga Khan Foundation, European Union, Getty Foundation, Sumitomo Foundation, Silver Jubilee.

Authoritative Framework

Agreement signed in 1991 with the Baltit Heritage Trust for the restoration of the Fort and its return to the Baltit Heritage Trust for its future safekeeping and use.