Located in the heart of New Delhi, in the setting of Humayun's Tomb World Heritage Site and dotted with over a hundred monuments, the project area may be the densest ensemble of medieval Islamic buildings in India. More importantly, the densely populated Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti is the repository of seven hundred years’ living culture recognized for its pluralistic traditions.

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of India’s independence, as a gift of His Highness the Aga Khan, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) implemented the Humayun’s Tomb Garden restoration. The successfully completed project led to a significant increase in visitor numbers and eventually culminated in a new public-private partnership project for a comprehensive urban renewal initiative in the area. With distinct conservation, socio-economic and environmental development objectives, this project aims to unify the three presently segregated areas of Humayun’s Tomb, Nizamuddin Basti and Sunder Nursery into an urban conservation zone of considerable breadth and cultural significance while improving the quality of life for resident populations.

Heritage Conservation: Humayun’s Tomb Complex

Conservation works aimed at enhancing the historic character and ensuring long-term preservation are now being undertaken on the mausoleum and associated gateways, pavilions and enclosure walls. Similarly, the project, through landscaping and conservation, will focus on enhancing the setting of the World Heritage Site and possibly lead to the expansion of the site’s boundaries.

Exhaustive archival research, site surveys, documentation using three-dimensional, state-of-the-art laser scanning technology, condition assessment and structural analysis preceded the preparation of detailed conservation proposals in keeping with established Indian and international conservation standards and guidelines. Conservation works then commenced in April 2008, following discussion and peer review. Significant completed works include the careful removal of over one million kilos of twentieth-century concrete from the roof and repairs to the dome, with its marble cladding repointed and cleaned and gold-plated finial repaired. The original Delhi quartzite paving of the lower plinth has now been restored, requiring the removal of concrete and manually lifting and resetting 12,000 square metres of stone blocks, most weighing over a thousand kilos.
Phasing 1997 → 2012

The project has also served as a platform for training programmes for conservation professionals and craftsmen. Over a hundred officers from across India have attended training modules focused on the preparation and use of lime mortar and high-definition survey techniques.

Sunder Nursery Monuments
Located immediately north of Humayun’s Tomb, the twenty-seven-hectare Sunder Nursery stands on the historic Grand Trunk Road linking Lahore to Kolkata and hosting significant sixteenth-century monuments that exist there thanks to nearby Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya’s dargah.

Conservation works are ongoing on the unique sixteenth-century Sunderwala Mahal and have been completed on the eighteenth-century Mughal-era garden pavilion, which was on the verge of collapse and threatened with demolition for a roadway project. Its conservation required painstaking work by master craftsmen using traditional materials, skills and techniques.

Over the next few years conservation works will be carried out on Lalkaranwa Burj and Sunderwala Burj – buildings considered to be of national importance. It is also planned to integrate the large Azimganj Serai, to the north of Sunder Nursery.

Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti
The densely populated Basti is named after one of India’s most venerated fourteenth-century Sufi saints, Sheik Nizamuddin Auliya. The conservation and rehabilitation of monuments and civic open spaces aim to restore its intrinsic cultural, historical and spiritual significance and enhance visitor experience for pilgrims and tourists.

Conservation works in the Basti commenced following the partial collapse, in July 2008, of the fourteenth-century Basti (step-well), considered holy and visited annually by millions of pilgrims. This is the only step-well in Delhi still fed by underwater springs, albeit heavily polluted by sewage and waste. Its collapse in July 2008 endangered the lives of both residents and pilgrims and necessitated urgent remedial measures. Prior to commencing conservation works on the Basti, studies were carried out using state-of-the-art technology including a ground penetrating radar survey, high-definition 3D laser scans, and geotechnical assessments.

In keeping with the requests of the Pirzadas, or keepers of the shrine, the Basti was also de-silted to its original levels and centuries of accumulations were manually removed requiring over 8000 man-days of work. The collapsed portions were rebuilt as per the original construction techniques and the entire wall surface was chiseled to remove a thick layer of silt. Prior to conservation works, a dwelling unit over the collapsed portion needed to be dismantled and an alternate residence built for the family.

Standing at the eastern edge of the Basti, the unique Mughal tomb known as Chaunsa Khamba, together with the tomb enclosure of Mirza Ghalib – South Asia’s most renowned poet – forms the largest open spaces within the Basti. Both enclosures have been landscaped so as to enhance its historic character and restore dignity while creating performance spaces for musical traditions associated with the area for over seven centuries.

Socio-economic initiatives
Aimed at improving the quality of life for the densely populated Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti, the project takes a synergistic, community-centric and collaborative approach to develop and strengthen essential urban services through interventions in core areas of education, health, sanitation and upgrading open spaces.

Education
The existing education infrastructure has already been significantly enhanced and improved. Interventions in key segments of education, such as the training of teachers and support for students, were extended to include a major refurbishment of a municipal primary school building. This was in a dilapidated state and lacked functional toilets or drinking water. Aimed at creating a student friendly, secure school environment beneficial to the growth and development of pupils, ‘Building as a Learning Aid’ elements were incorporated and provisions made for drinking water, separate toilets for boys and girls, wider stairs and safety features, like additional exits, unbreakable window panes and new electrical systems. The renovated school and education initiatives have resulted in a 150 per cent increase in the enrolment of students in just over a year.

Health
Interventions at the municipal polyclinic have significantly improved the quality of available clinical and preventive health care. A newly established pathology lab is capable of conducting thirty-four types of tests and more than 3500 people have used the facility to carry out over 11,000 tests in just over a year. The initiative has included placing additional doctors for consultations in Gynaecology, ENT and Eye Care.

Vocational Training
In response to community needs, vocational training, career development and employability programmes have been developed and are being implemented. These are aimed at building skills that translate into employment for youth, and livelihood opportunities and financial independence for women.

Urban improvements
A year after socio-economic development programmes commenced in the Basti and interaction with residents had increased, a physical mapping was undertaken in 2009 with the intention to plan sensitive urban improvements including landscaping of open spaces and street improvement plans for both are now being implemented.
The parks along the western edge of the Basti will be landscaped to suit the needs expressed by the resident community in consultation meetings and as such there will be earmarked parks for women, children, cricket and other sports, community functions and weddings.

A key intervention for urban renewal in the Basti, the community toilet complex built in 2009 has improved access to hygienic sanitation for residents and pilgrims, who rely on public utilities. Also, over a hundred household toilets have been connected to the sewerage system and portions of the sewerage system relaid as part of the conservation works on the Basti.

Cultural revival initiative

Exceptional by virtue of not just its vintage, the 700-year-old ‘living culture’ of the heritage area is a unique blend of secular and interfaith elements that encompass performing arts, classical music, poetry and traditional crafts in the setting of significant monuments. The project aims to revive and revitalize these components by documenting and recording their rich legacy and by making them viable in a contemporary milieu and to showcase this intangible heritage through music festivals held at the performance halls created within the Basti. With the Qawwals music of fourteenth-century poet-composer Amir Khusha Dukhi originating here, it is the focus of documentation, training and outreach components of the project.

The initiative also aims to build awareness and generate interest in the built heritage on the Basti through activities like street, painting, craft workshops and guided walking tours – led by trained youths of the area. Basti youths tutored in the traditional craft of paper cutting now augment family incomes with sales of their products.

The landscape master plan includes a micro-habitat zone/arboretum to showcase Delhi’s fast disappearing biodiversity. In a first for Delhi, the arboretum will house three hundred tree species representative of Delhi’s native flora, trees and plants favoured by the Mughals and secure an important bird habitat. In addition, monitoring and evaluation systems to track programme beneficiaries were established. A Quality of Life survey, aimed at establishing benchmark indicators was also carried out. In addition, monitoring and evaluation systems to track programme beneficiaries and changes due to implementation of interventions have been established.

Sunder Nursery: Developing a city park

The twenty-seven-hectare Sunder Nursery established in 1912, is being developed as an urban park with distinct heritage, ecological and nursery zones. Works to enhance and showcase its ecological and historical heritage under a multidimensional landscape and conservation programme are now ongoing.

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A prime objective of the programme is to integrate the three presently segregated zones: Nizamuddin Basti, Humayun’s Tomb and Sunder Nursery. Physical survey of the entire project area and zones abutting the project have been completed. At the Basti and Nursery this will be achieved by forming a single pedestrian entrance zone, emphasized by an interpretation centre, heritage trails will link the Basti where, following detailed physical mapping and studies, the project will focus on urban improvements. The three project zones of Humayun’s Tomb, Nizamuddin Basti and Sunder Nursery will be interconnected by nature trails and heritage walks that link not just the three sites but also their heritage, monumental and cultural landscape. The resulting landscape will offer a unique experience for visitors while enhancing the cultural significance of the greater Nizamuddin area.

Background

The three project zones of Humayun’s Tomb, Nizamuddin Basti and Sunder Nursery are to be interconnected by nature trails and heritage walks that link not just the three sites but also their history and also their cultural heritage under a multidimensional landscape and conservation programme are now ongoing.

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