The town of Khorog is the capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region in Tajikistan and it is situated in the heart of the Pamir Mountains near the border with Afghanistan. Khorog is a remote settlement and out of necessity must cultivate self-sufficiency. Its dedicated recreational areas are few but vital to the lives of the inhabitants as spaces to socialize and places to play.

The Park site, comprising a run-down open space on the riverfront, is roughly in the city centre of Khorog and is nestled on an alluvial plain only a few hundred metres wide, caught between the steep and barren mountain range of the Pamirs and a bend in the Gunt River. The site was gifted to His Highness the Aga Khan on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of his Imamat, and since 2005 has been the focus of a rehabilitation project designed to offer visitors a high-standard public park with amenities.

Between June and August 2004 the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) initiated an exercise of extensive consultation with the population of Khorog, with the aim of assessing what would be core functions and essential features of an upgraded park. The resulting six-hectare Khorog Park is a place to reflect, relax and enjoy nature in the company of friends and family. At its commencement, the project presented an opportunity to provide an enhanced park facility for the entire city; a lively green space and civic space for all of its citizens; recreational facilities for families and children; and the means to integrate the urban green space into the city network.

Construction of the Park commenced in spring 2005. Work on the Park by AKTC included the enhancement of the already well-wooded area; a programme of levelling works, topsoil enhancement, fertilizing and irrigation; the sowing of lawns; planting of appropriate plants and flowers, which were raised in an on-site nursery; and the restoration of stone channels used for irrigation in the summer. The first phase of Park construction was completed in 2007 and involved approximately ninety local workers. Work on the Park’s main features – the pond, the restaurant, tea-house and open-air theatre – was completed in 2009.

The design inspiration for the Park came as a direct response to the dramatic climate and landscape of the region and the common need for a public garden.
Background

Brief History of Project Site

The site was part of the Gunt River flood plain including an elbow of redundant meander, now a pond. It has many mature trees, especially the distinctive Pamir poplar. It survived as an area of open space on the banks of the river within the very centre of the city's urban development. When still part of the former USSR, the area was developed as a civic park, with some formal pathways, flower beds and statuary. The riverbank, subject to erosion, was terraced. It was a conduit for two major cross-town throughfares, a pedestrian link below and parallel to the main road, and a riverside walkway on top of tending bank revetments. Overgrown and under-maintained, the park fell into disrepair and ad hoc animal grazing, erosion and encroachment continued. Moves to restore and upgrade the site began, leading to the opening of the new multi-purpose Park.

Challenges

Project Risks

The river adjacent to the Park has a horseshoe summer flow, due to melt water from glaciers upstream, while strong currents can carry large boulders and barge debris. Careful survey of the embankments and bank, flow rate and volumes, were useful to scientifically inform the engineering design specifications for new revetments. Khorog’s tempestuous make importing materials difficult and an local sourcing was paramount.

Site Conditions

The extreme mountain and valley topography, combined with the flood plain of the river, severely limited available land for both urban and open spaces. Long periods with deep snow and frozen ground require the seasonal coordination of works. In addition, the area is prone to earthquakes.

Environmental Concerns

Potential riverbank erosion, pollution of the river during construction and the protection of site vegetation were all ongoing environment issues during the roll out of this project.

Building Conditions

Seasonal extremes required tight and rapid programming of works and shift working. Incomplete site works were protected during winter close downs. Local materials, namely stone, were used throughout the Park for pavings, structures and buildings. Specific attention was given to frost proofing of construction details and incorporating structural elements in buildings to offset earthquake damage. Most of the plant materials was sourced from either the local State Botanical Garden or neighbouring towns in order to ensure its hardiness, accessibility, ease of transport and to support local suppliers.

Significant Issues and Impact

Data Collection/Surveys

The documentation prepared before the interventions included a topographical survey of all site features, croquis of river crop, specimen trees, boundary conditions, white areas, adjacent development proposals and river dynamics, including a visual assessment of the riverbank opposite the Park. Prototypes of construction materials and details were produced early on in the planning process to inform design and define acceptable levels of workmanship.

Master Planning Process

The master planning process defined the general programme and priorities of intervention and framed the character of a unique Tajik City Park. This led to the preparation of area plans, descriptions of works, operational standards and budgets. The plan was tailored to its context within the heart of the city. In form and function it was designed to interact with adjacent land uses, the they planned jamatkhana, residential, commercial or city pedestrian links.

Infrastructure

New lines for water, sewage and electrical distribution were installed to service proposed Park facilities. New bore holes and an irrigation ring main were installed to serve the new Park’s planting and provide a clean source of water for the central pond. Several existing buildings were rehabilitated or transformed for new relevant purposes, namely Park administration and maintenance, administration facilities, open-air theatre, and tea-house and restaurant precinct. Few construction resources were available in site, but creative use of stone and local plants enhanced the project implementation.

Community Involvement/Programme

School children participated in Park clean-up in non-construction areas during the upgrade and even the army contributed to general site clearance works.

Vocational Training/Capacity Building

Stone masonry, general construction, landscape earthworks and horticulture were all fields of capacity development in the execution of this project.

Partners

Public Partners

City of Khorog, Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast.