The four-hundred-year-old Shigar Fort was selected for adaptive reuse and restoration as a major strategic investment that would re-establish community identity and confidence by conserving and putting into use one of the major heritage assets of Baltistan, in the rugged high desert mountains of the Karakoram in northern Pakistan. The current function of the Fort/Palace complex as a heritage guest house and museum is having ripple effects in terms of economic benefits for the community, generating employment and training, both in artisanal skills and in tourism. The project provides an income stream for future maintenance of the Fort and to sustain local institutions. The value of cultural heritage has become evident in the region. Community-based planning and rehabilitation of the three traditional settlements of Khlingrong, Chippa and Halapa surrounding Shigar Fort accompanied the restoration, with three additional villages – Giangpa, Champaq and Agapa – benefiting from similar rehabilitation efforts subsequently. The upgrading of the Shigar public bazaar and the construction of a community school building using traditional techniques and local materials at Sainkhore were also undertaken.

Built on a massive boulder, Shigar Fort is locally known as Fong Khar – literally the Fort on the Rock. Located on the right bank of a mountain stream, slightly elevated above the nearest hamlets of Shigar, it is at the foot of a steep rock formation, a hundred or so metres high, on top of which lie ruins of the original fort.

Raja Hassan Khan, the twentieth ruler of the Amacha dynasty, ascended the throne in 1634, but lost his kingdom to invaders. He managed to regain his throne with the help of forces of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan. The raja brought various artisans including shawl weavers, carpenters, goldsmiths and stone carvers from Kashmir to Shigar and proceeded to build the Fort/Palace. Fong Khar was gradually abandoned in the 1950s in favour of more recent annexes, built in its immediate vicinity.

Shigar Fort in its ‘received’ state was an abandoned and neglected building that had undergone many changes. But it was also a wonderfully preserved statement of history. The idea of promoting a new type of environmentally conscious cultural tourism was decisive for the reuse design of Shigar Fort, both in Project Scope / Objectives

The objectives for the Shigar Fort project were the reconstruction and reuse of the monumental heritage monument in Shigar, leading to a revival of pride, identity and skills for the community. New aims were highlighting the awareness of the importance and relevance of cultural and architectural heritage in the present, the initiation of conditions for socially responsible tourism and economic development of the area, and finally, the creation of revenues for the maintenance of the Fort, as well as for the community.

The reconstructed outer wall of the reception hall of the Shigar Fort/Palace complex is at terrace level.

Opposite Page:
A view of the Old House and Raja Mosque.

The reconstructed outer wall of the reception hall of the Shigar Fort/Palace complex is at terrace level.
The adaptive reuse plan for the Fort was predicated on transforming it into an exclusive thirteen-room guest house with the grand audience hall and anterooms serving as a museum of Balti woodcarving and local living traditions. The guestrooms — some rather small, others having a comfortable suite character — retain the authentic character of the Fort/Palace as much as possible. Modern furniture and equipment in the rooms is minimal. Many guestrooms feature original or restored woodwork complemented by traditional craft objects and artefacts from the region. Accommodation is geared to an international clientele of connoisseurs, who look for a special experience.

The “Old House”, located at the entry of the compound, has been redesigned and converted to cater for all service functions, including a reception area and museum ticketing. Inside, the building accommodates a kitchen and ground-floor restaurant with outdoor sitting space and an upper-floor lounge with balcony overlooking the stream, a meeting room and administration facilities. The Garden House, with no historic features, was refurbished and extended to offer seven additional guest rooms that are more ‘conventional’ and modern in character, that is, larger and more practical than the average guest room in the Fort. However, most of the rooms overlook the garden and therefore have a charm of their own. Offering two alternate accommodations enables the complex to cater for different tastes and types of clients.

Beyond its architectural and environmental merits, this project is the first attempt to achieve a wider cultural development initiative in Gilgit-Baltistan based on the promotion of a new type of culturally and ecologically sensitive tourism. The location of Shigar on the access route towards some of the highest mountains in the world and the metalled road between Skardu and Shigar facilitates marketing of the guest-house complex. Guests have the opportunity to engage in short treks in the vicinity, or to indulge in trout fishing. They can climb Shigar rock, visit the hot springs at Chutron (two hours from Shigar), visit monuments in Shigar and Skardu, or take day-tours to Khaplu, Kiris and Kharmang, or Deosai.

The development of local institutional capabilities has been vigorously pursued by the Aga Khan Cultural Services-Pakistan (AKCS-P), resulting in the formation of the Shigar Town Management and Development Society (TMDS), an active partner for all projects and activities in Shigar. The TMDS as an institution that consolidates and brings together the thinking of the Shigar community on matters related to culture and tourism has been an essential mechanism, acting as a bridge and allowing for the articulation and discussion of views, while also allowing for information and news to reach the community in a considered and comprehensive manner.

The project provided an opportunity to act as a catalyst for a comprehensive improvement of the local economy, generating direct and indirect employment opportunities. Situated in the immediate proximity of a poor and unskilled village population, it was thought the Shigar Fort Residence project could raise the quality of life in the villages surrounding it, and boost economic enterprises in the bazaar area. This process was accompanied by a proactive village upgrading and rehabilitation programme that has reached almost twenty-five per cent of the households of Shigar’s two union councils.
The restored Khlingrong Mosque stands near the Shigar Fort/Palace complex.

Background

BRIEF HISTORY OF PROJECT SITE

Fong Khor is the last remaining structure associated with the ruling Amacha family, which claims to have ruled Shigar for 32 generations. Sources describe the Amachas as having their origin in the “Amacha” tribe of Ganish, Hunza. The present raja, Mohammad Ali Shah Baaba, believes that the Amacha originally belonged to China. Buddhist ruins in the vicinity of Shigar Fort testify to the lengthy human occupation of the site.

In general household economy depends on agriculture, with some seasonal tourism-related activities when tourist trains stop. The Abruzzi Higher Secondary School Building has been built, designed to be compatible with local construction techniques.

New building facilities

Like other valleys, provision of clean drinking water remains a major area of concern. Although there are a number of piped water systems, these carry unfiltered water.

Building conditions

During the past two to three centuries Shigar Fort had already undergone many transformations and adaptations. As built in 1609, it is a partly naturalized condition, with some of the former rooms serving as cow-sheds and a new ramp access leading directly into the former reception room.

Significant issues and impact

Planning issues

A combined museum/guest house option was selected for Shigar Palace that allowed ARCS-P to develop a different restoration philosophy, complementing the approach applied to Baltit Fort. The reuse aims helped to carry out a more proactive policy of consolidation, restoration and reconstruction based on the evidence uncovered during the consolidation process. All efforts have been made to preserve the patina of older elements, and newer elements and finishes have been executed to be in sympathy with this age value.

Historic buildings/memorials conserved

The positive impact of the conservation of Shigar Fort translated into practical action by the Shigar community. In one case the shrine of one of the saints in Shigar was restored by the community itself serving a UNESCO award of merit. The larger community has started work on a James Magsi using traditional design, materials and construction techniques.

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Project risks

Since this was the first major project of its type in Baltistan, in order to create credibility and trust with the local community and demonstrate the procedures and benefits of culturally relevant rehabilitation, the restoration of Amburmo Mosques in Shigar, selected in consultation with the community, was carried out in 1998. The result of this conservation impressed the community, encouraging the way for the restoration of Shigar Fort.

Demographics

The two union councils of the town of Shigar, Marapi and Murkunja, collectively make up a total population size of around 10,800 and 1240 households spread around 20 villages/settlements.

Rehabilitation work in progress

The establishment of the Shigar TMDS, with a size of around 10,000 and 1240 households spread over 20 villages/settlements and has a population of around 3300 in eight villages.

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Status of health and education

Education has been recognized by the Shigar community as having the highest priority it identified was education.

Project implementation

After a visit to Hunza by the Shigar TMDS, rehabilitation work in progress over 21 villages. Rehabilitation projects have had a direct impact on almost 400 households with a population of over 21 villages. Rehabilitation projects have had a direct impact on almost 400 households with a population of over 21 villages.

Community involvement/programme

The Shigar TMDS is a key forum for the community, which is spread over 20 villages/settlements and has a population of around 12,000 people. The Shigar TMDS, established by the Shigar TMDS, with both community development and planning function, brought the village upgrading operations into a stronger relationship with the monument conservation project. It was from the villages of Khlingrong, Chinpa and Halapa, where village upgrading had first occurred, that most of the work on the Fort project were drawn and continue to be driven by the working staff of Shigar Fort Residence.

Lessons learned

In order for local community institutions to have sustainability, the resources to enable rehabilitation and reuse projects, such as Shigar Fort Residence, are critical. Also utilizing the strengths of AKDN agencies provides synergies. The role of Tourist Promotion Services (TPS) in managing the Residence exceedingly well is a case in point.

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