



AGA KHAN CULTURAL SERVICES - AFGHANISTAN

FINAL NARRATIVE REPORT



Project: **Rehabilitation Natural Landscape Khwaja Parsa Garden in Balkh**



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1. SELECTIVE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Khwaja Parsa public garden in Balkh is not only the site of the most important public monuments in historic the historic town, but is also an extensive urban green space attracting thousands of visitors and vendors from the surrounding community and wider region. The city itself, although primarily a work of urbanization conducted during the 20th century, still reflects the grandeur of one the most important historic cities in Central Asia. According to sources, it was the home of the Zoroaster (circa 900 B.C.) and also formed the capital of the Iron Age Kingdom of Bactria as well as the Achaemenid satrapy of the same name. Subsequently, it was one of the cities of the Graeco-Bactrian Kingdom established by the followers of Alexander of Macedonia in Ay-Khanum. Referring to the city as the 'Mother of Cities' in the early Islamic period, the historic Balkh was one of the greatest urban centers in Central Asia until it was systematically destroyed by the Mongol invasions of the early 13th century. While the city recovered during the Timurid period in the 15th -16th centuries, it never returned to its previous size nor did it regain its former importance.



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Plans to modernize the city in the 1950s led to the development of a “radial planned city” with the “Khwaja Parsa” park at its geographic centre containing the historic structures of Khwaja Abu Nasr Parsa’s Shrine and the Subhan Qoli Madrassa gate at opposite ends of the site. The park is surrounded by a road and is linked to the town via wide radial avenues lined with mature trees and one-story buildings containing the main bazaar. The park itself has a “modern” concrete fountain at its centre and is linked via radial paths to the outer pathways, reproducing the city plan in a smaller scale. In addition to Khwaja Parsa’s shrine, which is being restored under a separate agreement with the Federal Foreign Office, and the remains of the Subhan Qoli madrassa gate, the grave of Rabia Balkhi (famous Afgan woman poet) is also located within the park. In the context of the recent explosion in unregulated urban development, experts believe Balkh to be one of the most intact and unspoiled archaeological landscapes in Central Asia. While few of the magnificent structures that once adorned its streets remain today, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre has commenced the process of inscribing the city on the tentative list as World Heritage site. The shrine and park of Khwaja Parsa is a highly visible landmark located at the centre of Balkh and the rehabilitation of the surrounding park will provide the public with a safe environment for recreational, educational and commercial activities, while enhancing access to two important historic monuments located within the park. Once completed, the activities envisaged under this grant will assist in the safeguarding of the natural landscape of the garden, making it more accessible for visitors, providing public amenities and services that ensure the appropriate operations and management of the site. As the public garden is located in an area that once contained historic buildings, as part of this project archaeological investigations will be carried out to help define the history and character of the site. Depending on the significance and scale of the findings, efforts will be made to incorporate the archaeology as part of the design of the site. In addition to using the gardens for recreational and commercial activities, this will enable visitors to have a better understanding of the historic significance of the site and the wider area.

2. OBJECTIVES AND APPROACH

As an addendum to two grants provided by the Federal Republic of Germany (2012-2013), aimed at safeguarding the historic shrine of Khwaja Parsa Shrine, the goal of this project is to protect one of Afghanistan's most significant cultural sites and make its monuments and landscape accessible to the public. The works envisaged under this grant, representing a continuation and expansion of the landscaping activities undertaken in 2012, will significantly enhance the environment and make it safe for use by the surrounding community. Rehabilitation works will provide a platform for continued development of Afghan professional capacity and training of skilled craftsmen and gardeners.

The objective of this project is to rehabilitate the neglected landscape of the public garden as part of a wider initiative to restore the Khwaja Parsa Shrine, one of the most important Timurid monuments in Balkh. The detailed objectives of this project were to: (1) undertake essential **rehabilitation** of the natural and built landscape; (2) make the garden **accessible and safe** for visitors; (3) promote the use of the space for appropriate forms of **itinerant commerce**; (4) support development of **capacity** of Afghan professionals, craftsmen and gardeners; and (5) increase **public awareness** of Afghanistan’s build heritage. In order to fully achieve the goals of the project sustained investment is required to ensure that the neglected landscape is



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rehabilitated, with multi-year planting of new saplings and the removal of more invasive species of trees. The rehabilitation program, which is expected to continue through a second grant by the Government of Germany in 2013, aims to improve the natural and build environment through landscaping the site and providing public services for visitors.





3. PROJECT ACTIVITIES:

3.1. Landscape works

Paving Pathways (inside garden)

Perimeter ring paving: With major works carried out on paving pathways “external” to the park in the first-phase of this landscaping grant, the focus on the second-phase was to significantly improve public access within the site through the construction of pathways using baked brick paving. An area located adjacent to the internal elevation of the perimeter wall and frequented by visitors remained unpaved. The irregular surface which presented problems for visitors particularly during the rainy season was also used by some visitors as an open latrine. Following the lowering of the ground to match levels in other areas of the garden, more than 1102 square meters of new baked brick paving was laid and pointed using lime mortar on a base of compacted earth and lime concrete. The 3 meter wide paved zone represented the most frequented area of the garden, particularly during itinerant market days taking place twice weekly. The paving of this circular promenade around the garden significantly increased the usable area within the site.

Diagonal Paving (Edge Finish): In order to improve 6 existing concrete pathways laid diagonally from each of the six entrances of the garden to the central zone of the site, more than 25 cubic meters of concrete was removed from the edge of the surface using circular cutters and replaced with a 20cm wide edging of baked brick masonry. Together with the construction of a new 3-meter wide brick pathway linking the Subhan Qoli madrassa gate to the centre of the site, more than 1320 square meters of baked brick paving was laid and pointed using lime mortar.

Sports area: An large area on the western perimeter of the Park was allocated for a volleyball court, which had previously been constructed with minor investments. As the site was used regularly by young men for sport and did not present a problem for other visitors, as part of paving works the ground of the court was paved and made ready for safe use.

Surface Irrigation Channels

Cleaning: As part of routine clearance works, more than 720 cubic meters of accumulated silt and mud was removed from 2125 linear meters of existing surface channels and drains. While gravity fed river water is available within the park, the accumulation of silt and mud during regular flooding of the Balkh river requires constant maintenance in order to regulate internal levels of channels and improve the flow of water on-site.

New irrigation channels: Simultaneous to laying new paving within the park, more than 1217 linear-meters of brick lined open channels were constructed alongside pathways linking the park. Using more than 173 cubic meters of brick, the construction of the channels improved the flow of water and provided access to newly planted areas adjacent to the perimeter wall. Linked to the existing irrigation network, all new water channels provide access to gravity flow river water or can be used to irrigate the site by water pumped mechanically from underground wells.



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Clearance & Demolition

Demolition of central water fountains: Inappropriate concrete constructions had been built within the park containing important historic structures within the last decade. A dilapidated concrete fountain at the centre of the circular park, together with various other unused constructions, including benches and floral design decorative elements, were demolished and the debris was disposed of off-site. In order to ensure design continuity, large sections of concrete pathways that remained in good working order were repaired and a baked brick edge finish was constructed using more than 25 cubic meters of brick and lime mortar.

Regular upkeep of landscape: Surveys had revealed that many of the trees within the park were invasive species that leaches nutrients from local deciduous trees, causing their roots to dry out. As it is within the jurisdiction of the local municipality to address this issue, a joint team formed of municipal and AKTC staff led the effort to remove more than 200 invasive trees from the site. In total more than 6 metric tons of dried trees and shrubs was removed by hand and transported to designated dumping sites.



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Planting

Flowers & Trees: As part of planting native species of trees on the site, landscaping personnel, including gardeners and assistants were engaged and provided with horticultural training by an experienced landscape architect. Eng. Latif, the chief landscaping architect for the Babur



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Gardens in Kabul continued training that had been initiated under the first stage of landscaping works over a one-month period in March/April 2013. Lessons included instruction on the sourcing and selection of suitable saplings, the preparation of a subterranean plant nursery, the preparation of surface irrigation channels, and the transfer of tree saplings into suitable metal container – enabling local gardeners to carry out extensive landscaping works. Further work was carried out towards the preparation of a subterranean nursery, which was planted with over 500 tree saplings. Over the course of 2013, more than 1200 trees, shrubs and flowers were planted within the park.

Intensive planting was carried out along the circular pathways along the internal perimeter of the garden. The intention was to present a green elevation outwards to the town, while ensure that more privacy could be given to family and children groups. Types of trees planted included Planes, Acacia, Mulberry, Cypress, Ash, Pine and Elm trees, while flowers and plants included Eglantine, Foxtail, Local Roses, and Russian Olives. More than 70 cubic meters of natural fertilizer was used during the planting of trees and flowers.



Garden Furniture & Safety Railings

Benches: In order to replace the concrete benches that had been demolished, new baked brick masonry seating structures were built along the internal paved area of the park using more than 3.6 cubic meters of brick masonry and lime mortar.



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3.2. Public Services

Toilets Facilities

Repair and upgrading of existing toilets: Urgent works were undertaken to repair dilapidated and unused toilet facilities, which included a new area for female visitors to the park. As Balkh does not contain publicly accessible latrines, large areas of the park had been previously used as an open latrine by inhabitants. The provision of toilets not only provides male visitors to the site with an important hygiene facility but also enables female and children groups with access to safe and clear toilets. Works included separating the toilet block to include a new access for women and the upgrading and installation of 12 new floor latrines. In addition to this internal flooring was repaired and more than 96 square meters of ceramic tiles were applied to the internal walls. In order to provide water within the facilities, more than 135 linear meters of galvanized piping was laid and linked to water reservoirs and sewage infrastructure was built and connected to an existing septic tank.

Electrical cables were laid and connected to lighting for the toilets that will enable the use of the facility in the early evenings. Lastly, the external area surrounding the toilets was paved with more than 150 square meters of baked brick using lime mortar and pointed.





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Ablution Facilities

Upgrading of existing ablutions area: Constructed using painted metal grills, the ablutions area for worshipper of the Khwaja Parsa mosque is built along the perimeter wall on the eastern edge of the garden. The dilapidated construction provided 26 separate spaces for washing yet the plumbing system only allowed the use of 6 of the units. In order to separate the internal private area of the facility from the adjacent public area of the park, a low brick masonry wall was constructed with small holes for the filtration of natural day-light into the space using more than 23 cubic meter of baked brick masonry applied with lime mortar. The internal and external elevations of the building were pointed using lime and brick powder and sealed. The exposed metal decking that previously covered the facility suffered from chronic leakage. As part of the upgrading works, the roof of the building was reconstructed using wooden rafters and decked with 140 square meters of wooden planks before being weather-proofed with a similar amount of galvanized tin metal.

The existing plumbing and water reservoir were removed and new plumbing was laid to service 26 functioning ablution units fed through a sealed water reservoir located on the roof in order to increase water pressure. The entrance to the building was reconstructed and two metal doors were installed. Electrical cables were laid and lighting projectors were installed within the facility in order to make it functional for evening prayers. The last area of works involved the repaving of the perimeter of the ablutions area using backed bricks on edge.

Provision of Water and Electricity

Irrigation and drinking water: During the first stage of landscaping works two 30-meter deep wells were mechanically dug and submersible water pumps were installed in order to provide water for irrigation in the park. In addition to this, two existing hand-operated water wells used for potable water were upgraded and the area around the wells was paved and overspill of water was redirected into adjacent irrigation ditches. As part of work carried out under this stage of landscaping, more than 170 linear meters of underground galvanized piping was laid and 12 stand-pipes were installed for the hand irrigation of large grass turf areas within the park. The previous irrigation of these areas involved the redirection of canal water into the low-lying turf areas resulting in the “ponding” of water for days rendering the spaces unusable.

Electricity and lighting: Sufficient provisions for the lighting of key areas within the garden including all public service areas, main entrances and key pathways leading to the central zone of the garden were made using more than 1150 linear meters of cabling and requiring the installation of 35 lighting projectors. When in use, these provisions will enable the public safe access to the garden in the early evenings.



AGA KHAN CULTURAL SERVICES - AFGHANISTAN

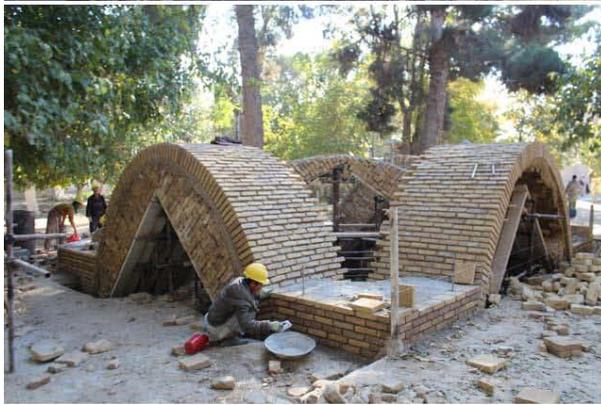


3.3. Reconstruction of Rabia Balkhi's Shrine

Rabia Balkhi is believed by many to be the first woman poet in the Persian language. Believed to have descended from royal lineage, her father was a chieftan at the Samanid court in the early 10th century. She is one of only two female writers of medieval Persia to be recorded in history by name. When her father passed away, her brother inherited his position. According to legend, her brother had a Turkic slave, with whom Rabia was secretly in love. At a court party, Rabia's brother discovered the affair and had his servant imprisoned in a well. He then had Rabia's throat slit and imprisoned her in a bathroom. It is said that she wrote her final poems with her own blood on the walls of the bathroom where she died. The servant managed to escape his imprisonment and, after discovering Rabia's fate, assassinated her brother before himself committing suicide.



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While the location of Rabia's imprisonment and even the truth behind her fate is an issue of debate, what remains certain is that her poetry ranks as some of the finest in the Persian language and that her final resting place is a modest subterranean room directly to the south of the Khwaja Parsa Shrine.

The circumstances of her death would seem to suggest that she would likely have been buried quietly and without much investment. What type of structure may have been originally built around her grave, if at all, is unknown. But the site of her grave, located in a half submerged cast reinforced concrete structure, has become shrine regularly visited by many women.

Discovered in a state of disrepair and close to collapse, works carried out under this grant has provided a modest traditional construction that provides appropriate protection for Rabia Balkhi's grave and marks the burial site of one of Afghanistan's most well known and tragic figures.

3.3.1. Demolition of submerged concrete structure:

Teams of laborers worked carefully to demolish the concrete building, starting with the roof and moving on to the stone masonry walls, removing more than 21 cubic meters of material without damaging the fragile grave covered in green cloth within the structure. Sections of the stone masonry walls were retained and strengthened before being incorporated into the foundation of the newly constructed building.

3.3.2. Reconstruction of brick masonry shrine

A double-barrel vault, composed of two large intersecting brick masonry vaults, was built with more than 25 cubic meters of baked brick masonry generally used in historic structures including the Khwaja Parsa Shrine. The vaults are open on all sides, allowing air to naturally ventilate the half submersed structure and direct views of the grave itself.

4. PROJECT DATA

Total man/days of employment generated: 16,629

Total personnel trained as masons and carpenters: 14

Total number of local architects, draftsmen and surveyors: 2

Total number of support personnel employed in the project: 4

5. ANNEXES TO THIS REPORT:

Annex 1: AKTC Project Panel

Annex 2: Project Photographs

Annex 3: Project Drawings and Surveys



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