

Gilgit-Baltistan Evaluation Report

Jolyon Leslie

This report is part of an assessment the impact and long-term sustainability of the physical rehabilitation and socio-economic initiatives implemented by AKCSP over the past 15 years in and around Baltit, Ganesh, Altit and Shigar in Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan. Specifically, this section explores the impact of AKCSP's work in effecting and sustaining positive change in the built environment through physical interventions.

Introduction

The process of heritage conservation and social development by AKCSP began in 1989 with a project for the conservation and re-use of the Baltit fort, before being extended into the adjoining traditional settlement, where support was provided for the improvement of homes and provision of basic infrastructure. A range of work was subsequently undertaken in the settlements of Aliabad, Altit, Ganish, Chumarkan, Gulmit and Nagar, as well as in Shigar and Khaplu, in Baltistan. In order to address the complex set of issues that are raised by this array of interventions - which range from the conservation of individual historic buildings, to the provision of basic infrastructure to settlements, and the formation of institutions to manage both - this assessment deals with the major instruments of change that have been employed over 15 years, namely:

- the **technical** approaches that underpin processes of documentation, conservation, rehabilitation and construction, as well as efforts to ensure that both buildings and infrastructure are effectively maintained after hand-over. Where relevant, the significance of these technical approaches in enabling replication are also be explored.
- the **institutional** approaches adopted to ensure the effective management of conservation sites in the four locations. Drawing on discussions with some of the external partners and current AKCSP staff, the evolution and effectiveness of the various organizational arrangements are explored.

Background

The physical and social setting in which AKCSP's interventions in Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan take place is uniquely challenging. Not only are there significant logistical and supply constraints that need to be addressed if results are to be achieved within defined seasons, but the issue of professional skills has had to be addressed from the start - in fact, the development of a team of dedicated professionals from the region

is a major achievement in itself. In an area with a strong tradition of community structures, but little in the way of formal institutions that would normally oversee the technical aspects of development, the programme has also had to foster the formation of bodies that might sustain the process of development, and for which there was little precedent at the time of the inception of the AKCSP programme in 1980. It is in this context that field staff have had to find a balance between the need to demonstrate results - to donors and communities alike - with support for longer-term processes that are the key to sustainable development, which needs to address the underlying issues of rural poverty and marginalization of some communities.

While the time-line of the various projects undertaken by AKCSP is dealt with in more detail elsewhere in this assessment, it seems important to outline the underlying strategies that have guided the programme, as part of a discussion about the impact of physical interventions on the built environment. Working within an overall goal of safeguarding historic property and patterns of settlement, the key strategies adopted by AKCSP during the course of the past 15 or more years have been:

- to conserve important historic buildings, including key religious structures, forts and palaces (acquired from the families who inherited, but could no longer maintain them), as well as traditional houses within key settlements that retain a degree of integrity in form and fabric.
- to provide basic services for the inhabitants of these settlements, primarily to improve living conditions, but also to ensure that their unique fabric be preserved, to the extent possible.
- to generate revenue from restored buildings - through entry charges for museums, accommodation provided in adaptively re-used guest-houses, restaurants, tea-houses and from other sources - as a means of ensuring the sustainability of these premises, once handed over
- to develop skills and generate employment within communities during the course of projects, so as to contribute to improved livelihoods both during and after the intervention.
- to foster the formation of appropriate local institutions, both to facilitate the process of negotiation and implementation of projects, but also to oversee the subsequent maintenance and management of facilities, from historic public buildings to infrastructure, and (in certain cases), the wider process of physical development.

The evolution of AKCSP's work in the region over time highlights how versatile the programme has been in responding to developments and opportunities that have emerged, and the growing experience of the project team. One example of the approach has evolved lies in the contrast between the Baltit fort, whose conservation was triggered by its fragile state (as borne out in the time taken to undertake a complex series of engineering and conservation works) while subsequent AKCSP projects, such as those in Altit and Khaplu, have been characterised by a more tactical approach towards the process of conservation, while carefully balancing this with upgrading and development activities within the wider settlement. So too, a progressive emphasis on adaptive re-use of historic buildings, where this is feasible, serves to illustrate the evolving strategy within AKCSP's programme.

Justification of intervention in the local context

Developed over time, the strategies above have been developed against a backdrop of rapid physical transformation in the region. Not only is there, as elsewhere in Pakistan, significant population growth in Gilgit-Baltistan, but changing social patterns result in a demand for separate homes for nuclear families. In a context where it was normal for an extended family to occupy a single dwelling only a decade ago, this is resulting in a dramatic sprawl of once-compact villages, whose productive land is in many cases being taken up by new housing, most of which is built using modern materials and non-traditional forms. As a community elder explained at a meeting in Hunza during this assessment, the only way that the traditional pattern of settlement in the area can effectively be safeguarded is 'if we have more land'. While there have been several initiatives, by AKCSP and others, to undertake settlement planning exercises, the continuing sprawl of settlements suggests that these have proved difficult to implement, even where authoritative institutions might exist or have the mandate to do so. Added to this phenomenon is the 'development' pressure relating to the KKH and tourism, which will be dealt with in a separate section of the assessment.

Although a 'cluster housing' initiative in the Karimabad valley, implemented by AKCSP, aimed to explore the option of constructing compact shelter, using traditional materials and with modern levels of servicing, as an alternative to the sprawl taking place around the traditional villages, this seems to have remained at a pilot phase.

While the transformation of traditional patterns of settlement are a critical issue in the region, and have been addressed through most of AKCSP's projects, it was the poor condition of an important historic building that was the starting-point for the programme in 1980, when initial surveys were carried out of the Baltit fort. These surveys revealed an advanced degree of decay that necessitated significant structural in-

tervention, if the complex was to be effectively safeguarded. With virtually no precedent for a conservation project on a unique traditional structure that was in a fragile condition, in a very remote location, the first AKCSP undertaking in the region posed a significant challenge. The details of the technical approach adopted in the conservation of the Baltit fort are dealt with elsewhere (*ref HCP brochure on Hunza and Baltistan*), but they clearly demonstrate how solid foundations were laid at that time for subsequent conservation initiatives by AKCSP in the region.

In terms of the **technical** approach adopted for the conservation of the Baltit fort, one of the critical opportunities that the project offered was for a detailed investigation of the nature of traditional construction, which in the case of most public buildings of this importance, took place in stages over an extended period of time, and often reflected the changing fortunes of the owner. In the case of Baltit, this required a rigorous process of documentation, which has set a standard that has subsequently been maintained across the AKCSP programme in Gilgit-Baltistan. Through the understanding that it provided of the characteristics of a complex building that possibly dates back some 700 years, over which some 70 distinct phases of construction were identified, the surveys enabled the team to develop a set of technical measures that drew on the evident strength of traditional techniques, including the timber cribbage that had ensured the longevity of the fort's walls, while also entailing use of relatively high-technology materials where this was deemed essential. By the same token, the Baltit project provided opportunities to explore how best to find a balance between the preservation of the original form of the building, while introducing new elements such as a suspended floor that enables visitors to inspect archaeological features in the basement of the building, revealed during the course of the early engineering works. This has been further explored in the adaptive re-use of the Shigar fort in Baltistan, although this and other interventions by AKCSP in the region have been careful to strictly adhere to international conservation charters, with which the teams in the field are clearly very familiar.

This technical rigour, with years of documentation and analysis preceding any significant physical intervention, also underpinned the approach used in the **Altit** fort, where work began in 2005. In this case, it was important to determine the form and characteristics of the rock outcrop on which the fort had been built, if effective measures to address the deflection of the structure were to be designed. Through an understanding of such structures developed in Baltit and other projects, the team in Altit were able to determine how best to strengthen the existing rubble stone and adobe block walls and repair the timber cribbage, which serves to strengthen the structure in an earthquake-prone area. These works have been carried out in careful-

ly-planned stages, so as to avoid any risks to the surviving structure. Opportunities for structural improvements have also been exploited, such as the insertion of timber wall-plates under roof beams, where none had originally existed on certain internal walls, or the introduction of stone plates under internal timber posts - both, demonstrating how traditional techniques have been used in preference over more modern interventions, where the latter are not deemed essential.

In terms of materials used, project staff in Altit have been able to draw on a body of experience with stabilized mortars and plasters so as to improve the longevity of structural elements or finishes. As in other AKCSP projects, use extensive use has been made of traditional techniques such as the use of birch-bark to reduce the risk of rot in timber boarding used on earth roofs, or the mixing of apricot juice into the final roof finish, so as to improve water-resistance. Likewise, the careful matching of juniper sections in repairs on the cribbage, along with use of *gasunder* wood for pegs to fix these timbers, illustrate the care that has been taken to ensure an appropriate degree of authenticity in the course of the conservation process. The re-use of materials has also been important, with original adobe blocks being re-incorporated into areas where reconstruction proved necessary in Altit. In the case of Khaplu, the wall construction of a new accommodation wing adjoining the palace is entirely from adobe blocks, used within a system of timber framing in the manner that is widely seen in traditional buildings in the region.

One aspect of AKCSP's evolving technical approach that is amply illustrated by the work in Altit is in an emphasis on training for women from the settlement, 12 of whom have been provided instruction and subsequently employed as carpenters, electricians and masons during the course of the conservation work. Aside from improving the livelihoods of the women trained, the aim is to ensure that skills are available within these communities, either for subsequent conservation work or new-build.

It was in the conservation and adaptive re-use of the historic fort at **Shigar** in Baltistan that an additional technical challenge was faced by the AKCSP team, as they embarked on preparing designs for the incorporation of guest-rooms, with modern services, in part of this sizeable fortified residence of traditional construction. Based on painstaking documentation of the existing structure of the fort, it proved possible to create a variety of guest-rooms and other spaces within the existing fabric of the building, and to route plumbing, waste and electrical networks in the least intrusive manner, without compromising the integrity of the historic structure. In contrast to the transformation that took place in Shigar, a conscious decision was made in the case of the Altit to leave the original structure as a 'shell' for visitors to inspect the rich historic structure and decoration, but with only minimal servicing. Perhaps driven

in part by a changing attitude within the international conservation community, where the imperative of ensuring that interventions are 'reversible' has gained ground in recent years, this approach has been made possible by the fact that facilities for visitors to Altit can be provided in an adjoining summer-house and orchard. Even with this possibility, it remains unclear exactly what function the Altit fort will have once restored - and perhaps draw lessons from the 'museum' approach that was adopted in Baltit, while ensuring that the complex is truly integrated into the life of the community who have been so involved in planning and realizing its conservation.

No such ambiguity affects the ongoing conservation and construction work in **Khaplu**, where some 15 guest rooms are being built away from the historic palace, which will only be partially used for accommodation, so as not to compromise the integrity of the original building. If part of the aim of the use of traditional materials in the extension in Khaplu is to encourage local home-owners to follow this example, there would seem to be a need for outreach to ensure that builders are aware of the implications, in terms of costs, environmental performance etc.

The approach employed in the **conservation of smaller residential and public buildings** has generally been undertaken in the context of the safeguarding and development - and, in certain cases, planning initiatives - of entire **settlements**, and this has always included the provision or upgrading of basic infrastructure. While investments in upgrading within the settlement below Baltit came after work was begun on the fort, in the case of Altit the upgrading of the settlement, which is home to some 1,200 people, was deliberately completed prior to work beginning on the fort itself.

The first such intervention of this sort by AKCSP was in the villages of Diramishal and Khurukshal that lie on the slope beneath the **Baltit** fort, where by 1996 a system of water-borne sanitation and anaerobic treatment was provided for the conservation zone, and subsequently extended in 2003 to serve the wider settlement of Karimabad. It was in order to try to stabilize the settlement and improve living conditions within traditional homes in the area immediately below the Baltit fort (then under conservation) that a pilot project for the repair of some 30 dwellings was initiated, along with support for stone paving of alleys and stairs.

In the case of the village of **Ganish**, a programme of conservation was initiated in 1996, when the inhabitants showed an interest in sanitation work then being carried out in Karimabad, from where the sewage pipes ran through land belonging to residents of Ganish. This helped to bring together two sets of skills and experience within the AKCSP team which had until then worked separately; those involved in conservation (on the Baltit fort) and those who dealt with upgrading and social development in

the villages that make up Karimabad. While the bulk of the 1,800 or so inhabitants of Ganish had access to a source of safe water, there was no corresponding system to deal with the resulting waste water. In addition to the sanitation system, improved stormwater drainage was provided, along with a new piped water network, following a similar technical approach to that adopted earlier for Karimabad. Here, as in Shigar, Nagar and Khaplu, the technical approach to provision of basic services has taken account of the local circumstances, particularly with regard to the future maintenance of schemes by villagers themselves. In all cases, the systems have been designed for a 30-year period of operation, taking into account projected population increase.

In the case of Ganish, some degree of additional economic benefit has accrued to the community, who are able to use the outflow water from the sewage treatment plant for growing vegetables on land reclaimed on the river bank.

The initial focus for AKCSP's conservation work in Ganish village was the central square or *jataq*, around which are grouped 4 historic family mosques which retain fine decorative timber work on the external facades, which were carefully documented prior to conservation work starting. The investment in these public buildings, and on improvements to the *pharee* or cistern that lies in the heart of the village, a degree of trust was built up, which proved invaluable in the subsequent implementation of extensive conservation and upgrading, in which members of the community took an active part. In a way, the collective rehabilitation effort has helped to overcome internal differences that exist within the community in Ganish, although the construction of a large and intrusive concrete mosque on the southern edge of the settlement suggests that the goal of safeguarding the integrity of the village might not in fact be shared by all inhabitants. While no effort has been spared by AKCSP staff to address the complex community relations that seem to prevail in Ganish, the project arguably illustrates the limits of the 'technical' aspects of conservation and upgrading. Having lost agricultural land to floods, most inhabitants of Ganish are unable to move their animals outside of their homes, as was possible for the villagers of Altit. As long as residents of Ganish continue to live in close proximity to their animals, there are limits on what can be realistically achieved in terms of improvements in living conditions, if the dense traditional fabric of the village is to be preserved intact.

No such constraints seem to have faced the settlement development initiatives in Balistan, where the focus has been primarily on Shigar and Khaplu, where major investments have been made in conservation of historic forts. In **Shigar**, there has been a balance from the inception of the programme between conservation of significant public buildings (such as the exquisite 625-year old Amburiq mosque) or improvement of services within traditional settlements, and the conservation/conversion of the histor-

ic fort itself into a guest-house. The fact that small-scale upgrading measures have taken place on some 3,400 households around Shigar points to a significant impact on living conditions in the area. It is perhaps too early to judge whether these investments, or the restoration of the Shigar fort itself, might have an impact on self-built construction in the area. For the time being at least, most homes in the area continue to be built in a traditional manner, with little evidence of the process of transformation that has been so damaging in Hunza and elsewhere in the region,

A significant outcome of programme activities in Shigar lies in the extent to which AKCSP staff are being asked for advice on new construction. One such example lies in the new Jame mosque, which is being built entirely with traditional materials and takes a form that, although large in extent, is sympathetic to its context. Perhaps less successful is the large school that has been built with AKCSP support just outside Shigar and which, although built with traditional materials, is somewhat massive in form.

AKCSP's involvement in settlement development in **Khaplu** is a long-standing one, with the construction of a community centre and pilot conservation of houses in 1998, which took place at the same time as emergency repairs to the Khaplu palace complex. Subsequently, other conservation and upgrading initiatives took place in Astana Mir Ahmad, Khanqa and Banpi. More recently, the construction of a water-filtration unit to serve the Palace guest-house and 30 houses in the area has had a direct impact on the lives of the surrounding community. The primary focus for the time being, however, is the ongoing conservation of the large palace building, where similar techniques to those developed in Baltit, Altit and Shigar are being applied,

While there have been efforts to translate the lessons from the conservation of historic buildings into accessible message for local builders of traditional homes, this never seems to have come together as a coherent element within the AKCSP programme. Very few of those interviewed during the course of the assessment acknowledged having received building advice, either in Hunza or Baltistan. Experience elsewhere in the world suggests that low-key building advice, with appropriate messages about the economic and environmental advantages of certain key techniques, could have a significant impact on rural building practice. The impressive body of experience that exists within the AKCSP team, from the level of craftsmen to professionals, on such techniques, suggests that greater emphasis might be given to this than has been the case to date.

Institutional issues

Through the various initiatives outlined above, the AKCSP has consistently worked to put in place representative structures to facilitate the planning, implementation and management of individual buildings or facilities such as infrastructure. Building on the experience of the Town Management Society (TMS) that was formed for Karimabad in 1995, a succession of bodies have been established and, where required, continue to receive technical support from AKCSP staff on the ground. While the mandates of these bodies seem to have varied between locations, they seem to have generally played a critical role in ensuring the effective implementation of project activities, especially with regard to dispute-resolution, the mobilization of community labour as a contribution to AKCSP interventions, and in the operation and maintenance of infrastructure. An example of how the formation of such entities has had to adapt to the community dynamic is in Ganish where, because not all of the inhabitants were willing to be involved in a TMS, resulted in the formation of the Ganish Khun Heritage and Welfare Society, with a limited mandate and coverage only in one cluster. In the case of Nagar, the formation of 'construction committees' has proved effective in building trust with communities, particularly with regard to procurement of materials for upgrading works. In Khaplu, a TMS that was established in 2003 reportedly has 75 members, and seems to provide a degree of local ownership on the conservation process, as well as on aspects of settlement planning.

While the continued functioning of infrastructure seems to point to the effectiveness of project-specific entities on technical tasks, it is less easy to evaluate their performance in managing facilities. In the case of the Baltit fort, which is currently managed by the Baltit Heritage Trust, there seems to be scope for a more community-focussed use of the complex, which should perhaps be seen more as a school or educational facility than a museum. Without a greater degree of innovation, there is a risk that the Baltit fort remains a symbolic relic of the past, with little real connection to the contemporary life of Karimabad. At the time of visiting it during the assessment, it was eerily empty and there was virtually no information available about the history of the structure or the settlement below, or the process of conservation and upgrading.

As non-governmental bodies, however, there are clearly limits to what project-specific entities such as this can achieve in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan. This is particularly apparent in the realm of settlement planning, in which significant investments were made during the course of the realization of work in Baltit/Karimabad, but which the TMS in this case seems to have failed to implement. While this a complex issue to address in any rural settlement, let alone one in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan, unless some authoritative institution is able to deal with planning issues, the significant gains

that have been made by AKCSP in conservation, provision of services and community development risk being compromised by uncontrolled growth of settlements. Interestingly, members of the community in Hunza stressed the need for more sustained technical support for - and scrutiny of - the TMS. The latter point perhaps derives from repeated assertions that the recovery of operational costs of infrastructure was, in some cases, applied selectively. In the case of Ganish, community elders spoke of the continuing need for technical and managerial support from an 'umbrella' organization such as AKCSP.

Summary of conclusions/recommendations

1. There is a need to effectively address the long-term, inevitable, process of transformation and establish a system of technical advice that not only offers practical building advice to householders (in coordination with BACIP/AKPBS), but also works more closely with the TMS and other bodies to develop cluster plans. Despite the mixed results that emerge from AKCSP's involvement in settlement planning in recent years, there is clearly a felt need on the part of some community elders, who have no-one else to turn to.
2. Given the experience developed by AKCSP staff over 15 years, there would seem to be sufficient material to assemble a set of 'standard operating procedures' to cover aspects of documentation, conservation (including maintenance and visitor management), upgrading and the development of community structures. Such a set of SOPs could both help to synthesize key lessons learned from various projects or processes, and also serve as a training tool for the next generation of young professionals.
3. There is a need for continuity of inputs from AKCSP to both conservation and upgrading projects. Without this, there is a risk of compromising the gains that have been made to date, as buildings or systems are not adequately maintained. Aside from their impressive technical abilities, an important strength of the AKCSP team in Gilgit-Baltistan derives from the fact that they are from the region, and can therefore be very effective advisors, as well as agents of change.
4. Significant achievements have been made by the AKCSP team in developing female skills, both in surveying and documentation, as well as construction skills. This provides an opportunity to develop a longer-term community development programme in Altit that provides support to this group - and possibly others - in improve their livelihoods beyond the completion of AKCSP's conservation work.