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Preserving the Tangible and Intangible Values of the Baltit Fort in Gilgit-Baltistan Pakistan, through Adaptive Reuse

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Abstract

Tangible and Intangible values are the distinctive qualities that, through the connection of humans with a building and its surrounding community, enable the creation of a particular link called "genius loci" that links the past to the present. In the present time, ancient buildings and sites of historical importance are the carriers of collective memories, which, together with the local characters, create this special spirit of space. Over time, these associations have become an integral part of the local community, telling a unique story.

The paper explores how tangible and intangible heritage values can be translated into a new use for a building, connecting its history to the present via a case study in Pakistan: The Baltit Fort (14th century AD). The 700-year-old fort was used as a residence until the 20th century but fell into disrepair over the years. After a restoration project that was part of the 'Aga Khan Trust for Culture' initiative in the northern areas of Pakistan, the building is now open to visitors as a museum.

The paper will critically examine the approaches of the adaptive reuse implied for the project to explore how the tangible and the intangible essence of the past have played a role in proposing the new functions. The study's outcome will be to see how the symbolic values of the past play an important role in giving a building a new function, preserving the spirit of the place, and preserving significant cultural assets.

Keywords: tangible and intangible values, spirit of place, preservation, adaptive reuse, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Our built heritage represents a picture of the past. Safeguarding this heritage is a means to preserve the identity of a community's culture and hand it over to future generations. In the present time, there are many buildings which had been host to historical events or some cultural associations, and their material and tangible qualities make them a heritage for a community. These buildings do not restore the memories or meaning in physical forms but are the carriers of memories imbued in them. The definition of conserving these as heritage has evolved over the last few decades of the 20th century. From the 19th century, tangible values have played the main role in defining and directing the conservation of built heritage. Now, in modern times, from a strong focus on tangible forms of a historic building or site, the concept is developing with the

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inclusion of the intangible aspects of place in the conservation process. UNESCO's 1972 World Heritage Convention recognised the importance of built values for the protection of historic buildings (UNESCO, 1972), but with time, it has become clear that the intangible values or the spiritual products associated with the built heritage also need to be preserved in the process. The tangible fabric of a building and the intangible aspects are inextricable from each other and give a historic building or site its meaning and create a special spirit of that place, the *genius loci*. This was supported by the convention for the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of 2003 (Avrami & Mason, 2019; Bassa & Kiss, 2009; Rogers, 2019) and the 2008 'QUÉBEC Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place' (ICOMOS, 2008; UNESCO, 2003). During his Keynote speech at the 14th ICOMOS General Assembly and Scientific Symposium, Mounir Bouchenaki explained that intangible heritage includes "customs and oral traditions, music, languages, poetry, dance, festivities, religious ceremonies as well as systems of healing, traditional knowledge systems, and skills connected with the material aspects of culture, such as tools and the habitat." (Bouchenaki, 2003). These buildings still hold a glimpse of the past, not only in their physical aesthetical form but also in the intangible memories or the *genius loci* of the interior. Preserving this intangible memory is, however, a challenging task (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2011). The benefits of reusing these historic structures are not only limited to generating economic or ecological opportunities but also contribute to the social, cultural, and psychological stability of a community or region, safeguarding the references of their past for the future and playing a positive role in creating a diverse and sustainable environment (Pekol, 2009). These historic structures can create a tangible or intangible bond between the new generation and their culture.

In the present time, to preserve an old building, the new strategy of adaptive reuse can manipulate the issues of historic buildings, which become abandoned as time, technology, and societies progress in a faster environment. For these sites to sustain their existence with time, adaptive reuse plays an essential role in the sustainable reclamation of these sites. Adaptive reuse is one of the conservation techniques which can save heritage buildings from being replaced by new buildings but also can create a balance between the use (new or old) and meaning of tangible and intangible aspects of a building to preserve the identity of the place (Misirlisoy & Gunce, 2016; Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2013).

This paper will analyse a restoration project completed under the umbrella of the Aga Khan Foundation in Pakistan: The Baltit Fort. The study aims to illustrate how the adopted adaptive reuse strategy used the tangible and intangible memories or values of the selected building in proposing the new functions for the fort and how the new functions have compelled the spirit of place. The study will also focus on how this adaptive reuse strategy not only preserved the building but also preserved and promoted the local skills and the cultural identity of the local community and created an economic opportunity for the local community. The paper will conclude with how this process was used for other projects in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan and has become a catalyst for the integrated cultural heritage and sustainable development of the area.

2. Methodology

The paper's methodology is based on a comprehensive review of the available literature on Baltit Fort. The literature review aimed to have in-depth knowledge of Fort's historical perspective to see how the building has developed over 700 years. This historical background of the building has also played an important role during its restoration process and in proposing new functions. The paper also studied the restoration and adaptive reuse process to show how tangible and intangible values have been preserved during the process. For this purpose, the proposed drawings and images of before and after the project were analysed. The analysis of the preserved tangible and intangible values is shown in a table form through different pictures.

3. Case Study: Baltit Fort, Karimabad, Pakistan

The study project 'The Baltit Fort' is situated in the Northern Areas of the Gilgit Baltistan of Pakistan (Figure 1). The project was initiated by the "Aga Khan Trust for Culture" through its 'Historic Cities Support Programme' in the 1980s with a brief survey of the fort by Richard Hughes and Didier Lofort (Table 1) (Bianca & Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2005). The purpose of preserving this

historic site by the Aga Khan Foundation was not just to save an old, abandoned building, but they wanted to preserve the local culture, traditions, skill work, arts, and crafts of the area and to encourage the local youth to promote their cultural identity. The project was also done on such a model that it will self-sustain the future maintenance and development costs to provide economic opportunity and produce skilled workers of local crafts and traditional construction techniques for the area to play a key part in the region's sustainable development. For this purpose, an English Engineer, Richard Hughes, and French architect and designer, Didier Lefort, were engaged by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. The Baltit Fort restoration project has become a catalyst for a new type of integrated cultural development project not only in the Northern area of Pakistan but also for the world. (Bianca, 2005) [1].



Figure 1. Pakistan map showing the location of Baltit Fort. Source: Google Earth-edited by First Author.

Table 1. Timeline of Baltit Fort Restoration Project. Based on the data from publication by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and a report by Li Lian Tan

S.No	Date (Year/Month)	Milestone
01	1980	Brief Survey by Richard Hughes
02	1985	Officially engagement of Richard Hughes and Didier Lefort by The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC)
03	1985-1989	Detail survey and documentation of the Fort by Richard and Didier
04	1990-1991	Site Work on retaining walls and repair of stonemasonry walls
05	1992-1996	Restoration of the Fort.
06	1996(September)	Opening Ceremony

3.1. Historic Background

The Baltit Fort, the prime historic landmark of the area, was built in the 14th century AD, but some of the archaeological traces go back to the 8th century AD, and since 2004, on UNESCO's tentative list of 'World Heritage Sites' [2], set on the top of Hunza Valley in the northern region of Pakistan, among some of the highest mountains of the world. A key point for the fort, with a natural showground formed by the terraced slopes of the mountain, from where the whole of the Hunza valley can be seen with a very spectacular vista (Khan, 1996) (Figure 2 and Figure 3). This site for the fort was chosen very sensibly as it is a point of natural auditorium formed by the terraced slopes of the mountains (Figure 4), which enabled the control of the water flow routes from the Ultrar channels in the past. The valley is separated into two levels, i.e., upper and lower levels, so the fort also served as a defence barrier for the upper valley in the past.



Figure 2. Baltit Fort, at the top of Valley. Source: Aga Khan Development Network

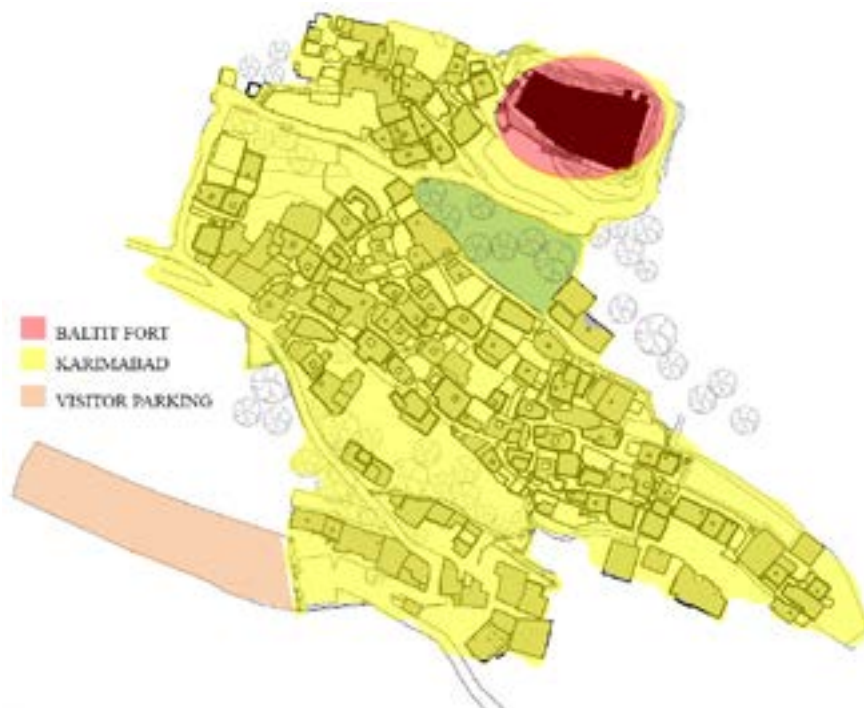


Figure 3. Plan Showing Baltit Fort in the context of Karimabad. Source: Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Edited by the first author



Figure 4. Western Elevation of Fort, facing Village. Source: Aga Khan Trust for Culture

3.2. Architectural Development of the Fort

The fort has gone through many different transitional phases and uses, i.e., from a small building to control the flow of water to defence purposes and, lastly, a very grand palace for the royals of the Hunza valley who ruled here. Initially, the fort consisted of two single-story houses, with a tower for defence purposes, that can still be seen in the northern part of the part. This layout became a typical house pattern for the locals, and some examples can be seen in the south of Gilgit-Hunza. The fort expanded due to these functional additions to a larger area, with the addition of new floors to accommodate the luxury requirements of the Mir's (royal family of Hunza) and various towers for security purposes.

In the early 20th century, the Mir redeveloped the entire top floor of the vernacular Fort to convert it into a palace with many features strained from British colonial buildings of Punjab. The original floor was left to its original form of the 19th century with some minor changes according to structural requirements. The Mir's bedroom, along with the spaces for the women, were premium rooms in the fort, so they were also left traditionally. The remaining rooms on the second floor were converted for private use by Mir, with adding a fireplace and western furniture and the use of curtains, cement renders, and wallpapers. During this remodelling and renovation phase of the fort, a semi-round imperial platform was introduced in the main building, mud-block walls were added for structure and thermal comfort, coloured glass windows, a Tibetan-style lantern, wood-planked and decorated ceilings for interior décor of the spaces were used, and wall-mounted fireplaces in many of the new rooms were constructed (Tan n.d.).

The Mir's family fully occupied the fort till the mid-1940s as their palace, and after 1945, the family abandoned the fort and moved to a new modern palace near the Baltit Fort. From 1945 to its restoration in 1989, the fort had been empty and left to decay only it was used by an American aid worker in the 1960s just for a few months. Though the fort lost its initial role of water control and defensive purpose and was abandoned by the royal family, the fort remains a symbol of the region's history and culture. It is an amalgamation of the architectural form, native regime, and belief systems of the region, providing a perception of the values of the Hunza people (Hughes, 2005a) [3].

3.3. The Approach of Conservation and Intervention

The conservation approach adopted in Baltit Fort was first to consider what was present on the site and to save it from further loss, as it was among the unique cultural identities left of the region and was considered endangered to lose its existence. The fort was a representation of the Baltit's traditional lifestyle and building typology, and the inheritance of the building's tangible materials, its intangible qualities, and the traditional construction technique used in it and its association with the royal family of the region were the key points which were respected for its conservation. The second aim, therefore, was to use conservation as a catalyst for building preservation, to make the building liveable according to modern facilities without losing the traditional aspect of the interior and maintaining the traditional spirit of every space. The third goal line was to develop and continue the traditional building skills and construction techniques of the local inhabitants and professionals, along with modern and imported heritage preservation techniques (Hughes, 2005a; Huges, 2005b) (Figure 5). The target of the designers was to propose new functions which not only save the fort from further decay and demolishing but also enhance the building's historic tangible and intangible values to make it visitable and livable again, and a project which can self-sustain it maintains cost in future and provide a platform for locals with economic opportunities. The goal of conservation was to replicate this fort's restoration and reuse project as a role model for the other monuments and historic sites of the northern region of Pakistan. Through the project, the organisation wanted to train local labour with traditional skills of vernacular construction techniques to launch a pool of capable professionals for commissioning future restoration projects in the North region of Pakistan.

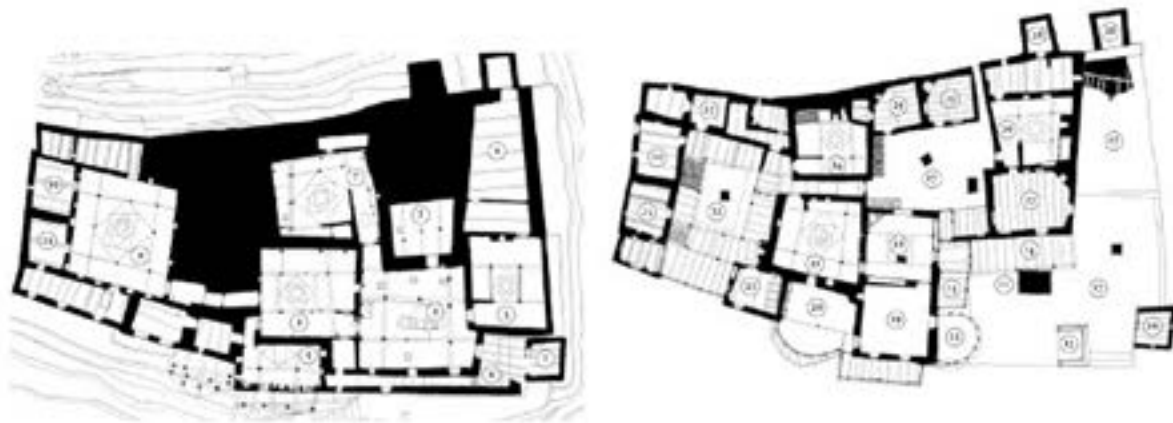






Figure 5. Left: Ground Floor. Right: First Floor. 1. Entrance staircase 2. First-floor arrival lobby and grain storage 3. Prison 4. Guard's rooms and guard's gallery 5. Courtroom (now office) 6. Guest room (now library, fig. 199) 7. Kitchen 8. Living room in the former old tower, now audio-visual room 9. Queen's apartment 10. Old tower with new emergency Staircase 11. Staircase Landing 12. Royal dais 13. Wazir's dais 14. Musicians Veranda 15. Armoury 16. Guard room 17. Open terraces 18. Waiting room with 'Tibetan Lantern 19. Mir's drawing 20. Mir's living room 21. Mir's bedroom 22. Queen's Summer Apartment 23. Storerooms 24. Queen's summer bedroom 25. Guest rooms 26. Apartment newly married couples 27. Living room 28. Toilet. Source Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

It was an adaptive reuse project where the architect was retorted to a diversity of apprehensions. In the context of these limitations, consequently, the main use selected for the restored Fort is an ethnographic museum with an active cultural centre with accompanying amenities.

The program tangled the intricate adaptation of a private residence into a public use building, where the old functions of the fort became a base for designing the spaces for a new function of the museum, and the furniture, glass windows, wooden ceilings, and the items used by the Royal family were utilised as the display items for a museum (Fig.7-8) During the whole process the idea followed was sample 'doing as much as necessary and as little as possible' (Fig.9). Based on the developed design guidelines for the project, the premium rooms of the Mir's were not utilised for any dramatic interventions and were just restored to their original form by displaying the traditional furniture and materials to show the lifestyle of the Hunza royals. Along with the museum activity, a library space has been introduced in the former guest room, with its floor suspended on the archaeological remains of the fort. This library function is introduced to provide a space where some publications regarding Hunza Valley can be put for reading and can also be used by national or international researchers working in this region as a base site for their research. A kitchen was also created, and an emergency staircase was inserted. All these new additions were installed in such a way that, if required, they can be removed or changed in the future without damaging the original fabric of the building. Moreover, when new elements are mandatory, they are used gladly divergent, such as the metal grill floor or the emergency staircase. Some additional facilities, such as a coffee shop with a public toilet, a workshop facility with a store and showroom, and a ticket office, were adjusted in old houses of the Fort (Hughes, 2005a; Tan n.d.) (Table 2).

Table 2. Tangible and intangible values preserved in Baltit Fort restoration and re-use in pictures, compiled by the first author.

<p>Form & Design (Tangible Values preservation)</p>	 <p>During the Restoration and Adaptive Reuse, the original vernacular form and shapes of the fort were not changed, and no modern intervention was added to maintain a link between the fort and its surroundings. Image Source: L-R. AKDN, www.hunzatourism.com, AKTC .</p>
<p>Use & Functions (Preserving Intangible values through a new function)</p>	 <p>The new Function of the museum displays the traditional lifestyle and history of Mir's of Hunza. By introducing this new function, full respect is given to spaces, locals' connection to the fort and Honouring rulers of the area. Source: AKTC, www.hunzatourism.com</p>
<p>Materials, Traditions, and Techniques (From Tangible to Intangible or Vice versa)</p>	 <p>Local Craftsman Celebrations of Traditional festival in Baltit Fort</p> <p>Restoration & Reuse not only preserved the fort, but also the traditional materials, construction technique and local traditions. Source: AKTC, www.gbee.pk</p>
<p>Spirit of Place</p>	 <p>Baltit Fort, with all his glory and excellence in its exterior and interior. Source: www.hunzatourism.com, www.gbee.pk</p>

4. Conclusion

The study of the Baltit Fort adaptive reuse process shows that the designers and the conservation cavalrymen have revealed the historical background of the Baltit Fort in its tangible and intangible values and utilised it in the theory and practice of engaging the new function. The case study discussed reveals that the ideological, physical, knowledgeable, and digital interpretation and notch of involvement of locals not only saved the historic landmark of the area but also preserved the shared or communal memories and social meaning implanted in the tangible and intangible forms of Baltit Fort the Hunza Valley community.

In the adaptive reuse process of Baltit Fort, the cultural or the physical and intangible values were guided in the process of proposing new functions with the main goal of the project to be able to retain the old fabric and to intrinsic the character and genius loci of the building or site. During the whole process of reuse, wherever feasible, the historical tangible or intangible forms of different spaces were not disturbed even with the new function of the museum. Instead, these spaces become more attractive for the tourist in the form of ethnographic display rooms where the visitors can feel the traditional lifestyle of the Mir's of Hunza and local people. In the Baltit Fort restoration process, the theoretical tactic of nominal interference with the building spaces to attain the new use and continuing social significance and preserve the spirit of space of the building and site was successful research. This project became a role model for other projects in the area, like 'The Altit Fort', 'The Shigar Fort' and 'The Khaplu Palace', where the Aga Khan Trust for Culture not only followed the same methodology and process but also took it one step further by proposing the function of a hotel along with museum where people not only can see the history, tradition of the area but can have experience of the traditional lifestyle by staying for a night in the rooms preserved in the original forms with modern facilities.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Endnotes

This paper has been presented at the SPACE International Conference 2021 on Architectural Conservation and Restoration.

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