THE IMPORTANCE OF PARKS AND GARDENS

FIVE CASE STUDIES

AGA KHAN TRUST FOR CULTURE
“We might well describe each of these initiatives [creation of parks and gardens], as gifts to the future. For, even as we look back in
time at a moment like this, so we should also look thoughtfully ahead. Even as we sense today the influence of the distant past, so
we should also think of generations yet unborn – people who will live here and people who will visit, and who will see these sites as
gateways to their own history.”

– His Highness the Aga Khan speaking at Forodhani Park, Stone Town, Zanzibar, 30 July 2009

Introduction

Thirteen of the planet’s 20 fastest growing cities are in areas of the developing world where the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) works, 10 of those in Africa. In many of these cities, green space has often been overwhelmed by growth, migration from the countryside and a lack of planning. “Garden cities” have become agglomerations of brick and concrete. Encroachment, both legal and illegal, has gradually swallowed up forests and grassland, diminishing green space. Overwhelmed by financial demands, municipalities have neglected the problem, assuming that green space was unproductive and therefore of little value – or worse, a financial liability.

It is in this context that the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) began working to prove that, rather than being financial liabilities, green spaces themselves could be catalysts for positive economic, social and cultural change. Implicit in that notion is the idea that green spaces can become self-sustaining rather than burdens on municipal budgets.

In Cairo, Bamako, Kabul, Delhi and other sites, AKTC’s rehabilitation of existing parks and the creation of new green spaces have made these sites hugely popular among local populations and international visitors. Some are running surpluses and a few even help subsidise urban regeneration projects in adjacent neighbourhoods, restoring hope for the future in historic districts where many had become resigned to terminal decline.

With 10 park and garden projects now in the its portfolio, AKTC has demonstrated that parks not only contribute to the quality of life in cities, but that they can also be self-sustaining if conceived and managed properly. In several locations, it has even demonstrated that, under the correct conditions, parks and gardens can also be economic generators that drive – directly and indirectly – a broad advance of positive change in terms of social development, local employment, entrepreneurial activity and cultural development.

Cover: The 30-hectare (74-acre) Azhar Park Project includes conservation and social programmes in the neighbouring Darb al-Ahmar district, which was once one of the poorest and most troubled districts in Cairo.

Opposite: The 16th century Baghe Babur in Kabul, restored to its former glory after 25 years of conflict.
Case Study 1: Azhar Park, Cairo, Egypt

The sad story of many cities across the world has been one in which those with means often abandon historic centres. These old centres are then occupied by new migrants, drawn to the city by jobs. By the early 1980s much of Cairo’s green space had been squeezed out by this phenomenon. Some estimates put the green space per inhabitant in the 1980s at one square metre; others suggested it was a little as a footprint. New migrants moved into alleys without water and sanitation. Yet, at the same time, they lived among a rich heritage – Fatimid gates, Ayyubid walls, Mamluk mosques. Understanding how the process of decline could be reversed by restoring monuments and building a new park was part of a plan to revitalise one of the poorest and most troubled areas in the city.

In 1984, at the conclusion of a seminar on “The Expanding Metropolis: Coping with the Urban Growth of Cairo” sponsored by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, His Highness the Aga Khan announced his decision to create a park for the citizens of the Egyptian capital.

The only central location which was of suitable scale was the derelict Darassa site, a 30-hectare (74-acre) mound of rubble adjacent to the Historic City. The site, which featured a rich array of monuments testifying to a thousand years of history, posed several technical challenges. Adjacent to Cairo’s City of the Dead, it had been a debris dump for over 500 years. Trash smouldered in parts of the site.

Construction required excavation, grading and replacement with appropriate fill. A total of 1.5 million cubic metres of rubble and soil, a figure representing over 80,000 truckloads, was moved. In addition, three 80-metre freshwater tanks for the city of Cairo had to be incorporated into the Park design. Specialised plant nurseries had to be created to identify the best plants and trees for the soil, terrain and climate. Over 655,000 young plants from cuttings and seeds were planted in the Park.

The project included the excavation and extensive restoration of the 12th Century Ayyubid wall and the rehabilitation of important monuments in the Historic City. Several landmark buildings, including the 14th Century Umm Sultan Shaban Mosque, the Khayrbek complex (encompassing a 13th century palace, a mosque and an Ottoman house), the Aslam mosque and square and the Darb Shoughlan School were restored. Local housing was renovated and returned to their owners.

In the low-income neighbourhood of Darb al-Ahmar, which is adjacent to the Park, job training and employment opportunities were offered in different sectors such as shoemaking, furniture manufacturing and tourist goods production. Apprenticeships were made available for automobile electronics, mobile telephones, computers, and masonry, carpentry and office skills. Micro-credit loans enabled residents to open small businesses such as carpentry shops and a dry cleaner. Hundreds of young men and women in Darb al-Ahmar found work in the park, in horticulture and on project teams restoring the Ayyubid wall.

Today, the Park draws over two million visitors a year. Through gate receipts and revenues from the Park’s restaurants, the Park has become self-sustaining. More importantly, the US$30 million project has been a catalyst for positive change in the neighbouring district, evolving well beyond the Park to include the restoration of monuments and public spaces and socioeconomic initiatives, including housing rehabilitation, microfinance, apprenticeships and healthcare.
Cast Study 2: National Park and Zoo, Bamako, Mali

Some rapidly growing cities are still blessed with large areas of forest or parkland, offering an opportunity to preserve, for future generations, a sufficient amount of green space. Yet municipalities are faced with a quandary: preserve green space and thereby ensure the livability of a city or allow green space to be used indiscriminately in the name of growth. In a country that boasts the fastest growing city in Africa, Bamako’s National Park of Mali provides an example of an enlightened public-private partnership that has created a permanent green space in the service of present and future generations.

The population of Bamako, the capital of Mali, has risen rapidly in recent years, now numbering over one million inhabitants. In this context, the need for farsighted urban planning was crucial. The Government of Mali responded by outlining the boundaries of the National Park of Mali, a space of 103 hectares within a larger protected forest reserve of 2,100 hectares that forms a significant greenbelt in the city of Bamako.

Under the terms of the public-private partnership, the Government asked the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) to concentrate on the Park’s 103 hectares (250 acres), a large, semi-circular canyon of protected forest in the city. The Park is part of a larger protected forest reserve of 2,100 hectares that forms a significant greenbelt in the city of Bamako.

In keeping with AKTC’s philosophy that a Park without a long-range plan for maintenance and development could simply become a burden on the city, AKTC earlier signed a 25-year agreement with Mali’s Minister of Culture and Minister of the Environment and Sanitation for the maintenance and further development of the Park (AKTC’s park projects, notably in Delhi, Cairo and Zanzibar, all have provisions for the long-term sustainability of the parks).

The Park is designed to offer large open spaces for leisure and educational activities for the general public, school groups and tourists. Bringing together the National Museum and the existing Botanical Garden and Zoo into a single cultural/ecological park, the Park features a comprehensive pedestrian circulation network and formal promenades throughout. It also contains fitness, jogging, cycling and mountaineering tracks of varying difficulty and diverse interpretive awareness trails for botany, birds and nature.

The garden spaces feature indigenous flora in varied settings, from open lawn areas to flower gardens, wooded areas and a medicinal garden. Interpretive educational signs and displays and the development of trained guides are expected to offer new educational experiences for visitors. The restored zoo, which is designed to encourage more humane treatment of animals in the continent’s zoos, contains an aviary, serpentarium and aquarium.

Phase 1 included the rehabilitation of 17 hectares of open spaces and the redevelopment and integration of eight existing facilities. The architect Diébédo Francis Kéré, an Aga Khan Award for Architecture recipient in 2004, was commissioned to design a primary and secondary gate, an entry building, a youth and sports centre, a restaurant, public toilets and several kiosks.

Since its opening in 2012, the National Park of Mali has attracted an average of 500,000 visitors per year. Through revenues generated by gate receipts, restaurants and other facilities, it has run at a surplus in every year except during times of unrest. By reserving green space for this fast-growing city, the Government has ensured a better quality of life, now and in the future.
Smaller parks, gardens and public spaces can also have an outsized impact on the life of a city, especially in historic cities. But when a combination of intensive use and neglect leads to their degradation, as they did in Zanzibar, they can become liabilities better known for dirt and litter and, in some cases, crime. The US$ 2.4 million restoration of Forodhani Park in Zanzibar’s Historic Stone Town is a good example of how the restoration of a relatively small park can improve the quality of life in a central part of a city.

Forodhani Park had been the central gathering place for Stone Town residents for generations. By the year 2000, however, stresses caused by the popularity of Forodhani Park had taken a toll. The lawn was threadbare and many of the trees were diseased. The seawall needed to be rebuilt. Even many of the famous baraza benches on which Zanzibaris gathered to discuss the day’s events were broken.

It was clear that an important part of the patrimony of Stone Town – and one of the last open spaces in this densely populated World Heritage Site – was in need of revitalisation.

A rehabilitation project was first proposed by the Trust in 2001 as part of a programme for comprehensive seafront rehabilitation in Stone Town. It was intended to be a logical extension of the work already completed by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) in Kelele Square and elsewhere.

The Trust had been working in Zanzibar’s Stone Town for a number of years, restoring 11 landmark buildings and adjacent public spaces to illustrate the techniques necessary to maintain the integrity of the special stone and lime mortar construction in the historic city.

The restoration was undertaken by AKTC in cooperation with the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar and took approximately 18 months. The aim of the project was to upgrade social and recreational amenities in Forodhani Park while providing for economic activity that contributed to the sustainability of the Park. All AKTC park projects are intended to be self-sustaining.

Project components included:

- Restoration of the walkways and landscape of the Park;
- Improvement of infrastructure, including lighting, sewerage and drainage;
- Upgrading of civic amenities, including the baraza benches and the installation of a playground for children;
- Restoration of the seawall in front of the Park and the raising of the Park’s elevation by 50 centimetres to protect against sea flooding; and,
- Creation of 200 new jobs and many others through sourcing from the US$ 2.4 million construction project.

The food vendors, long a fixture of the Park, received the benefits of improvements to their working conditions, including piped water systems and more hygienic cooking facilities.

The project, completed in 2009, has transformed the heavily used park and upgraded social and recreational amenities. Once again, the Park plays a central role in the life of the town, drawing residents and tourists alike to this essential public space. Thanks to work on the seawall and other parts of the Park’s infrastructure, the Park is likely to play that role far into the future.
Case Study 4: Baghe Babur, Kabul, Afghanistan

After 25 years of conflict, the needs of Afghanistan were extensive: water, sanitation, roads, telecommunications, food security, healthcare and education are all part of the equation. But in 2002, when AKDN agencies began working in the country, the people of Afghanistan also needed hope – and not just words, but solid, tangible signs that life was improving. So as part of a broad AKDN development effort that mobilised over US$ 700 million for development in Afghanistan, including an array of economic and social development initiatives, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) began work in 2002 on the restoration of a number of landmark buildings, monuments and green spaces, many of which had suffered severe damage during the decades of conflict.

When AKTC began work in Kabul, a major sixteenth century garden containing the tomb of the first Mughal emperor, Babur, was damaged and neglected. The grounds of the mausoleum of Timur Shah, which contained the tomb of the Durrani King who made Kabul the nation’s capital, had been occupied by informal traders. The old city of Asheqan wa Arefan had been devastated in the 1990s.

In early 2003, conservation began on the sixteenth century Baghe Babur in Kabul. Now managed by an independent Trust, the restoration of the 11-hectare garden not only re-established the historic character of the site, with its water channels, terraces and pavilions, but also provided the population of Kabul with a space for recreation and cultural events. The bulk of physical works have been in public use since 2007, including a swimming-pool, garden pavilion, caravanserai and the Queen’s Palace complex.

Conservation of the eighteenth century Timur Shah mausoleum encompassed the restoration of the monument, the training of Afghan professionals and craftsmen, and the reclamation of the garden around the monument. Since its conservation, the mausoleum has been regularly used for public meetings and exhibitions. Visitors can again make use of the Park, which stretches down to the Kabul River and has been replanted with mulberry trees.

Efforts have been made to protect and upgrade public open spaces throughout the old city. Zarnegar Park, to the north of the old city, has been transformed through re-planting, the installation of irrigation, paving and the provision of public facilities. The Baghe Qazi has also been rehabilitated. Nearly 7.5 kilometres of underground and surface drains have been repaired or rebuilt over the past eight years, while an area of more than 16,000 square metres of pedestrian alleyways and streets have been paved within the historic fabric.

Over 30,000 residents benefited directly from these programmes, which required over 365,000 workdays of skilled and unskilled labour. More than 150 young men have undertaken apprenticeships as carpenters, masons and plasterers. More than 2,200 women from the neighbourhood have attended courses in tailoring, embroidery and kilim weaving. Among the socioeconomic initiatives are home-based training and literacy courses for women and the operation of a restored community bath-house.

Baghe Babur has seen a steady increase in number of visitors, with over 60,000 per month in mid-summer and nearly half a million per year. It has become a favourite picnic spot for families. And by generating revenue from entrance fees and appropriate public events in the various facilities, the Park now runs a surplus – providing a replicable model for saving other green spaces in Kabul and elsewhere in the country.
Case Study 5: Urban Renewal, Delhi, India

The city of Delhi is home to some of the most important sites and monuments of the Mughal period, among them Humayun’s Tomb and Gardens. The site, which had once been located on the outskirts of the city, was now at the centre of a dense residential district. Yet despite the population density beyond its walls, it was underused, perhaps because the gardens were dilapidated and the structures suffered from a lack of maintenance. The Trust’s garden restoration was completed in 2003, with both aesthetic and financial benefits for the city of Delhi, but the project then grew into an area development project supported by a non-profit partnership that included the Archaeological Survey of India, the Central Public Works Department, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, the Aga Khan Foundation and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. Called The Humayun’s Tomb - Sunder Nursery - Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti Urban Renewal Project, the overall objective was to improve the quality of life for people in the area while expanding green space for the people of Delhi and beyond.

At Humayun’s Tomb, the initial garden restoration project, completed in 2003, included the rehabilitation of the walkways; the repair of the irrigation system; conserving, repairing and rebuilding the water channel system; and the re-leveling and revitalising of the planted zones with species and arrangements that conform to the customs and patterns of Mughal sources. The project immediately increased interest in and visitation to the Tomb complex and soon generated a surplus for the Archaeological Survey of India, which operated the site. It also rekindled interest in the rich history of Mughal rule.

Building on the success of the garden restoration, a public-private partnership was formed to create a broader project encompassing the whole area: Humayun’s Tomb Complex - Sunder Nursery - Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti Urban Renewal Project. The Urban Renewal project began with the signature of a public-private partnership Memorandum of Understanding on 11 July 2007. Work that began on the gardens continued in the conservation works undertaken on the mausoleum of the Mughal emperor and adjacent monuments. They included the careful removal of over one million kilos of concrete from the roof of Humayun’s Tomb and major repairs to the dome. Restoration of the stone paving on the lower plinth required the manual lifting of 12,000 square metres of stone blocks, most weighing over 1,000 kilos. Regular training programmes and workshops for conservation professionals and craftsmen from across India are being held.

The 70-acre Sunder Nursery project, adjacent to Humayun’s Tomb, aims to showcase the ecological and built heritage of the Nursery and create a major new green space for public recreation. As with the Humayun’s Tomb conservation, works include ongoing conservation of the unique sixteenth century Sundarwala Mahal and other monuments on the site. But its greater value may be as an educational resource in local ecology for the city’s schools: An arboretum exhibiting the flora of the Delhi region recreates various micro-habitat zones of the national capital region, showing the richness and versatility of the native or naturalised flora, which include kohi (hill), khadar (riverine), bangar (alluvial) and dabar (marshy) zones, which are all representative of Delhi’s fast disappearing biodiversity. Aligned with the large entrance plaza of Humayun’s tomb, Sunder Nursery features a pedestrian central axis conceived in three parts, as a progression of formally arranged gardens around the heritage structures and merging at its end with the proposed arboretum and water gardens. The park will also feature mist chambers and dedicated public spaces for flower shows, exhibitions and cultural events.
In the densely populated area of Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti next door to the Tomb, conservation of monuments and the rehabilitation of open spaces include the reconstruction of a fourteenth century baoli (step-well), the careful restoration of two important tombs and landscape works that have enhanced the historic character and restored dignity to the tombs.

At the same time, AKTC’s Urban Renewal project includes education, healthcare and sanitation initiatives in the Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti. A major effort towards improving primary education included a refurbishment of a primary school, introducing arts education, greater parent interaction and improved school management. The Vocational Training programmes for young people include a career development centre (NIIT Institute of Technology) and the teaching of the English language (British Council) as a skill needed for employment. Health interventions in the basti include upgrading of a polyclinic and the creation of a pathology laboratory.

Support for the “living culture” of the area is intended to help revive and revitalise music traditions by making them viable in a contemporary milieu. Amir Khusrau’s Qawwali music traditions, which date to the thirteenth century, are regularly highlighted at festivals, discussions and through recordings.

The Humayun’s Tomb - Sunder Nursery - Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti area was once a neglected part of Delhi, yet with each new phase of the revitalisation process, it has become more central to the life of the city. Presidents and prime ministers now routinely visit Humayun’s Tomb – an area once avoided by many Delhi residents. Qawwali music, now performed in restored grounds, draw enthusiastic crowds. The school is now a model. The parks along the western edge of the basti were landscaped to fulfil the needs expressed by the community, especially for women. Newly built public toilets have improved access to hygienic sanitation. Few would disagree that the broad advance of positive change has improved the quality of life in the area.

Right: The main spine in the Sunder Nursery. Opposite: Khorog Park, another park project undertaken by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Khorog, Tajikistan.
The Aga Khan Trust for Culture is the cultural agency of the Aga Khan Development Network. It undertakes a wide range of activities aimed at the preservation and promotion of the material and spiritual heritage of Muslim societies and communities where Muslims are present. Its programmes include the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme, which works to revitalise historic cities in the Muslim world, both culturally and socioeconomically. Over the last decade, it has been engaged in the rehabilitation of historic areas in Cairo, Kabul, Herat, Aleppo, Delhi, Zanzibar, Mostar, northern Pakistan, Timbuktu and Mopti. The Trust also supports the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture (AKPIA) at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) as well as www.ArchNet.org, a major online resource on Islamic architecture. The Aga Khan Music Initiative supports musicians and communities to sustain, further develop and transmit important musical traditions. The Museums & Exhibitions unit coordinates the development of a number of museum and exhibition projects.

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture, in turn, is part of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). The AKDN is a group of nondenominational development agencies, created by His Highness the Aga Khan, with complementary mandates ranging from health and education to architecture, culture, microfinance, rural development, disaster reduction, the promotion of private-sector enterprise and the revitalisation of historic cities. The AKDN agencies work to improve living conditions and opportunities for the poor, without regard to their faith, origin or gender. Working in the fields of economic, cultural and social development, AKDN aims to provide choices and opportunities to communities so that they can realise and determine their own development. More information on the Award, the Trust and the AKDN can be found on our website: www.akdn.org/culture.