

*THE HISTORIC CITIES SUPPORT PROGRAMME OF THE AGA KHAN TRUST  
FOR CULTURE COMPLETES THE RESTORATION OF BALTIT FORT*

Stefano Bianca

Centuries-old landmark of Islamic architecture, brought back to splendour, is returned to its community as a cultural centre and economic force. Located at the top of a natural amphitheatre in Pakistan's rugged Hunza Valley, where it dominates an age-old settlement close to the great Silk Route, Baltit Fort has been described as "the most impressively-situated medieval castle in the world" (C.P. Skrine, *Chinese Central Asia*, Methuen, 1925). Founded more than seven centuries ago as a compound of houses with a defensive tower, then expanded and improved through a series of some seventy construction phases, the Fort was for many years the residence of the Mirs of Hunza, who ruled this high valley between China and the Indian sub-continent until Hunza became part of Pakistan's Northern Areas in 1974.

By that time, Baltit Fort had been abandoned. Though it still was considered to be the defining landmark of Hunza, the walls were leaning, the roof was full of holes, and the empty rooms were covered with mud and graffiti. Such was the situation in 1985, when the heir to the former Mir of Hunza appealed to His Highness the Aga Khan, as leader of the Ismaili community, to consider ways to save Baltit Fort from further decay, and if possible to restore it to its former splendour. The work began in earnest in 1991 through the newly created Historic Cities Support Programme (HCSP) of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

These efforts finally came to fruition on Sunday, September 29, 1996, when the Historic Cities Support Programme (HCSP) inaugurated the fully restored Baltit Fort, which is now being used as a museum and cultural centre serving both residents and visitors. Simultaneously, a public foundation called the Baltit Heritage Trust took ownership of the Fort, which it will maintain and operate as a focal point of the economic, social, and cultural development of the rapidly urbanising village of Karimabad. To ensure that the architectural restoration of Baltit Fort will be matched by a self-sustained rehabilitation process in the historic village, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has been instrumental in founding two additional local organisations: a non governmental Town Management Society, and its

technical services agency, the Karimabad Planning Support Service, both of which receive technical assistance from the HCSP.

"The dual task of applying international conservation standards to a structure as complex as Baltit Fort and of injecting compatible new uses into the restored architectural shell was a highly sensitive one," says Stefano Bianca, Programme Director of the Historic Cities Support Programme. "As the prime historic landmark of Hunza, the Fort is a major tourist attraction and a potential source of income for the local community. It can therefore be expected that the restoration project itself will act as a dynamic factor of change. The Historic Cities Support Programme has set out to assist the community in assessing the available development choices, with a view toward preserving and managing cultural and environmental values, while at the same time benefiting from the economic opportunities."

"Though we take great pride in the work accomplished so far," he continues, "we do not claim to have provided all the answers for the future development of Karimabad. Neither do we intend for the Karimabad planning project to freeze the area's physical conditions. Our principal aim was to provide an effective frame of reference for further deliberations and consistent action in years to come."

#### *History of Baltit Fort and its Restoration*

Baltit village is a very old settlement, where the original dwellings were single- or double-story houses with attached animal pens. One or two of these compounds, with a defensive tower attached, were constructed on a glacier moraine pinnacle and so became the core of a grand, continually evolving Fort. The Fort's owners were in an excellent position not only to control the valley's water supply but also to raid the trading routes between Persia and China, some 200 miles to the north. These lucrative activities allowed the owners to expand and improve the Fort many times, adding various towers and then a second story. The remodelling continued into the early 20th century, when the Mir of Hunza transformed the entire top floor into a palace, with some features drawn from British colonial buildings of the Punjab.

Although Baltit Fort was in a precarious condition when it was examined in 1979 by Richard Hughes and Didier Lefort, who were later to become consultants to the Trust, the building still dominated contemporary

life in the valley and still exerted a distinctive character. The massive structure remained delicately poised atop the soil cliff; details of its wood construction revealed how the Fort had been conceived to resist earthquakes. Moreover, the archaeological value of the site and structure was considerable, yielding strong evidence of a continuous evolution and very few signs of modern alterations. The structure was a masterpiece of craftsmanship, thoroughly adapted to climate and functions. The team considered it important to preserve Baltit Fort, not only as a legacy for posterity but also for the lessons it might provide about environmentally suitable building technology.

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture began supporting planning efforts for the restoration in 1985; but it could not sponsor active work on the structure until the former Mir of Hunza generously donated the Fort to the Baltit Heritage Trust (BHT), an entity established by the Government of Pakistan for the purpose of owning and operating the property. This donation to a public entity was accomplished in 1989. In 1991, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture began to fund conservation of Baltit Fort. It has committed over \$1.5 million to the restoration effort and associated activities, joined by the Getty Grant Programme and by NORAD, the Norwegian bilateral aid program.

Since this was to be the first conservation project undertaken in the Northern Areas of Pakistan, the Trust placed special importance upon introducing international conservation standards and conceiving the project as a teaching process. A number of young architects and engineers from the Northern Areas were provided with training through courses held at York University in England and at UNESCO's International Center for Conservation in Rome during the less-active winter months. The Aga Khan Housing Board, with its proven building expertise in these areas, took on the responsibility for construction management, hiring all site workers from the local community.

Whenever possible, original construction techniques and materials were used for repairs. The site team restored the physical shell to a satisfactory state of stability, strengthening the floors, roofs, and load-bearing walls. Minor functional adjustments were needed to adapt the building to its new use as a museum and cultural centre; these included the addition of basic electrical and plumbing services, a small pantry, toilets, and an emergency exit. In some instances, advanced technology was

introduced, such as tie-ropes and geo-mesh soil stabilisation to remedy serious structural problems. These interventions have been clearly indicated and differentiated from the preserved or restored elements.

The main rooms of the new cultural centre have been accommodated on the first floor of the Fort, around a small courtyard. A traditional living room with a covered roof opening serves for audio-visual presentations; on the other side of the courtyard are a library and study centre, with their floors suspended above the excavated archaeological areas of the Fort. The traditional rooms on the lower floor, with their attractive carved timber columns and beams, have been kept as they were and highlighted with integrated light fixtures. The more palatial rooms on the second floor provide spaces to exhibit what is left of the private collections of the Mir, including antique carpets, furniture, ceremonial robes, and weapons.

The ongoing evolution of Karimabad from a secluded rural settlement into a contemporary town may well be accelerated by the inauguration of the cultural centre and museum in Baltit Fort. In the absence of conventional municipal institutions, the Historic Cities Support Programme has therefore established the Karimabad Planning Support Service (KPSS), with architect and social organiser Essa Khan as its full-time manager.

Through its professional staff, and with the assistance of Masood Khan, an American planner of Pakistani origin, KPSS is providing development guidance at the grass-roots level. It is helping the local community to manage the problems of infrastructure, traffic, and environmental pollution; to promote the renovation of historic stone houses in the village, while introducing modern sanitary facilities and basic services; to design guidelines and aid in the development of houses, shops, hotels, and townscape improvements; and to build new, environmentally sensitive cluster housing. It is the hope of HCSP and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture that this aspect of the project will set an example for development in other rural areas in the north of Pakistan. For implementing these activities, KPSS relies on the social network of the village organisations that have been established over the past fifteen years through the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme. Some of the concepts used by KPSS have been developed in close co-operation with a research project carried out at MIT.

