

RENEWED OWNERSHIP: RENOVATION OF HISTORICAL PALACE IN AFGHANISTAN SHOWS TO BE A MEANS FOR SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

In 2006 the Centre for International Heritage Activities in The Netherlands has been appointed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to identify, develop and coordinate a Programme for Culture and Development in Afghanistan. The main objective of this programme is capacity building for the heritage sector of Afghanistan through the rehabilitation of the National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul and the renovation of the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace in Kholm. In cooperation with the Afghan stakeholders a programme is formulated to achieve this. In this paper the community heritage programme at the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace will be discussed.

The Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace

Originally built in 1890-1892 the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace has been restored and renovated in the beginning of the 1970's. The palace had a very large enclosed garden where the local community could have social events. The plan was to turn the palace into a museum after the renovation activities in the seventies. An earthquake in 1976, resulting in serious damages, prevented this idea from being implemented. In the following periods of conflict and civil war, a lot of damage and neglect turned both the palace and the palace garden into hollow skeletons.

Starting in 1980 subsequently the Russians, Mudjahedeen and the Taliban have used the palace until 2001. They have all left their influence on the building and gave the history of inhabitants of the palace an extra dimension.

With the potential to become a tourist attraction the option of revitalizing the plan for establishing a museum in the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace was reconsidered by the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture.

Stakeholders involved

The local partner of the CIE in Afghanistan, AFIR architects have been preparing the project on location in Kholm and Kabul. The project itself is developed in close interaction and cooperation with experts from the Afghan Department for the Preservation and Restoration of Historical Monuments and the Director of Museums of Afghanistan, Dr Masoudi.

In two 'project definition workshops' that were organized in Kabul, many other stakeholders gave their input for the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace. For the local stakeholders in Kholm (the city in the neighbourhood of the Bagh-e Jehan Nama palace) many informal meetings were organised to discuss the renovation of the palace and its future functions. Master masons and gardeners have been consulted for the right approach of the work.

Our Centre and our local partner AFIR Architects have the objective in everything that is done in the programme that Afghan ownership has the highest priority. A vision for a participatory process that includes local people is vital for this project. This makes the renovation of the palace essentially a local challenge. According to professor Barakat the two most important basic needs for human recovery in the aftermath of conflict are to reaffirm a sense of identity and to regain control over one's life. On a small level the renovation of the palace and its garden can contribute to the basic needs and give the community a sense of place through participation in the project.

Capacity building

Capacity building is the keyword in the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace project. The building material is moreover specially made for the palace in the region or otherwise purchased in the region. For example the pakhsa, a special combination of mud, clay and dung that is mixed and densified by bulls in special fields surrounding the palace. The pakhsa is used for the reconstruction of the garden walls. It is a traditional craft that is executed by pakhsa Ustads (Dari for master) at the palace.

Local solutions and responses to challenges of restoration are more effective and sustainable than externally imported solutions. International expertise in a project can be very important to start a process and to educate people in the project, but after a project has come to an end the knowledge and possible solutions to problems need to be incorporated in the local community.

For all renovation projects capacity building programmes are developed. Through capacity building people gain knowledge of the place and the history of the region they live in. Besides stimulating local economy, understanding of the past, development of awareness and support for the site are included in the capacity building.

There are challenges of course. People who have had an education, are specialized in a craft or can speak English can earn more money abroad or within Afghanistan with an international organization. This drain of knowledge is a serious problem for the country.

Community & ownership

Before the wars commenced the garden of the palace had a very important role as social meeting place for the local families. The communities have indicated that it is very important for them to have this special place again. A landscape vision and a replanting plan have been designed by our local partner together with the elderly of the local community and the previous gardener who can still remember how the garden looked like before 1980. Next to this, a plan to improve the irrigating facilities has been made. In the autumn of 2009 the first fruit and nut trees have been planted in the garden and in April 2010 more trees are planted up to a total of almost 80 different tree species in one garden.

To be able to create historical awareness amongst the new Afghan generations that have only experienced war in the last three decennia, an education plan is being developed in close cooperation with regional schoolteachers. The teachers were trained for the specific 'Kholm for kids' education programme. They created a history of the region for the children on big sheets and they visited the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace as part of their preparation. The programme has already reached more than 500 local children (boys and girls) and will be continued in 2010.

Conclusions

Capacity building, ownership and community involvement are the keys to the development of the cultural heritage sector in Afghanistan. Heritage plays a vital role in local development and creating a sense of place.

Setting up a programme that focuses on the commitment of the local community however, takes time and requires flexibility. The international community often

doesn't have this time. A drain of knowledge on all levels in society is a serious problem. Local employers, who gain experience in a craft, can earn more money abroad or with an international organization.

The renovation of the palace and the preparation for an ethnographic museum in the palace is moreover a social, cultural and economic development project than a restoration or conservation project. This makes the palace more than just a cultural heritage object; it is a means of development for local Afghan communities.

© Hanna Leijen

e-mail: h.leijen@heritage-activities.nl

This article should be cited like this: H. Leijen, Renewed Ownership: Renovation of Historical Palace in Afghanistan Shows to be a Means for Social, Cultural and Economic Development, Forum Archaeologiae 55/VI/2010 (<http://farch.net>).