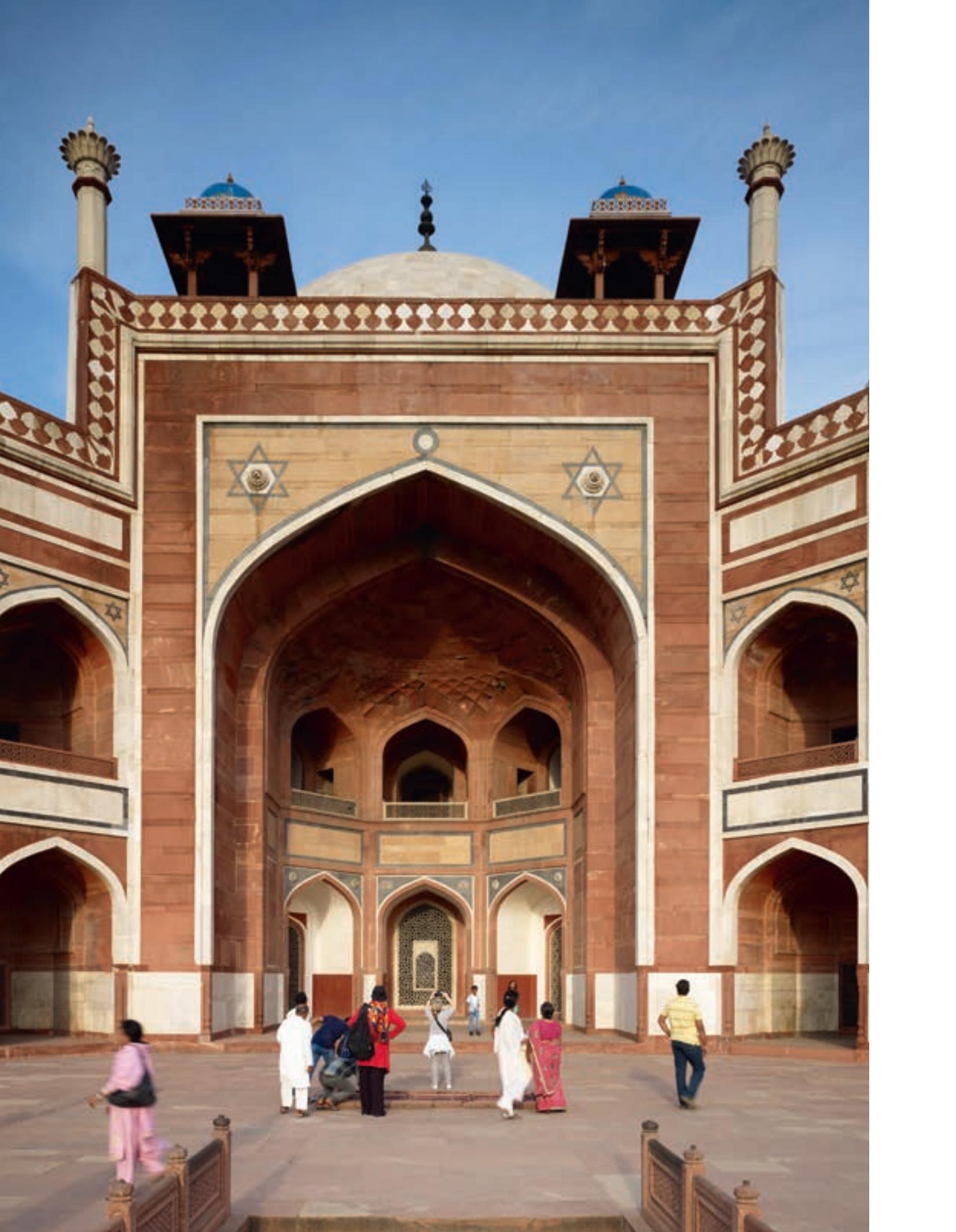


AGA KHAN HISTORIC CITIES PROGRAMME: PARKS AND GARDENS







WITH THOSE WHO WILL WALK THESE PATHS IN THE FUTURE

SHIRAZ ALLIBHAI

AGA KHAN HISTORIC CITIES PROGRAMME

The mission of the Historic Cities Programme is to undertake multi-input urban regeneration projects in historic urban centres that spur social, economic and cultural development in a manner that improves people's lives and is replicable. In carrying out this mission, the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme (AKHCP) has served as a laboratory for "model" projects that demonstrate appropriate methods for the restoration and reuse of culturally significant buildings and open spaces, as well as the rehabilitation and regeneration of urban areas. These projects have also played a transformative role, helping arrest urban decline and decay, together with the erosion of identity that results from the destruction of the built heritage.

At its inception, AKHCP operated on a very different scale than it does today. Over time, the nature of the projects changed, first organically, then more systematically and precisely. As the Programme confronted problems related to historic centres and the local populations living in proximity to the structures, it became apparent that the cultural assets restored by AKHCP could not be divorced from the people living in poverty around these inheritances from the past. The thesis posited by the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme is that by making investments in cultural initiatives there is an opportunity to improve the quality of life for the people who live around remarkable inheritances of past great civilizations; that culture can be a springboard for positive change. It was a hypothesis that needed to be tested and the historic cities in the Muslim world became the laboratories to test these ideas over long timeframes.

With the gift of Al-Azhar Park, Cairo, His Highness the Aga Khan embarked on a shift in the methodology, scope and objectives of the Historic Cities Programme. The idea was a novel one: the creation of Al-Azhar Park on a huge dump area next to the historic city walls as a catalyst for a large-scale urban conservation and development strategy for the derelict historic district of al-Darb al-Ahmar. The notion was that the restoration of cultural assets, the improvement of public spaces and the rehabilitation of urban areas could spark social, economic and cultural development within communities and cities. AKHCP expanded beyond mere restoration of monuments, and engaged itself in activities related to adaptive reuse, contextual urban planning and the improvement of housing, infrastructure and public spaces. It began to undertake related socio-economic development initiatives directed at upgrading local living conditions. And its



Preceding pages, the Qutb Shahi Tombs complex, Hyderabad, India, consists of thirty tombs, mosques and a mortuary bath, spread over nearly forty-three hectares.

Opposite page, the central *iwan* at Humayun's Tomb, Delhi.

Above, tile-making vocational training workshop, Kabul.

focus shifted from international experts working in isolation to discovering and mobilizing untapped local potential and resources to ensure the eventual self-sustainability of its initiatives in terms of operational income, human resources and institutional management capabilities. Al-Azhar Park was inaugurated in 2005 and soon became a vibrant space of social interaction and inclusion, generating a surplus that was reinvested in the neighbouring district. The project established a methodology based on “anchor” interventions designed to kick off an incremental large-scale process of rehabilitation and regeneration. In this context, AKHCP has also developed the use of the ‘Public-Private Partnership Agreement’ (PPP), as the juridical basis for a complex project involving multiple inputs and partners.

This methodology has been put to good use in Aleppo, Kabul, Herat, Lahore, Delhi and Hyderabad, each time with different priorities, project components, institutional set-ups and partnerships responding to specific local conditions and with no pre-established formulae. While in Cairo the strategy was based on an AKTC initiative without any overall planning framework and the PPP was

The perimeter around the Citadel of Aleppo was pedestrianized following restoration of the Citadel.





established a few years later, in Delhi a 'Memorandum of Understanding' (MoU) with the Archaeological Survey of India identified the key project components. Similarly, in Lahore, AKHCP was part of a PPP to provide technical and financial assistance to the Walled City Project initiated by the World Bank and the government of Punjab under the terms of a strategic planning document that framed monuments restoration and urban rehabilitation. This "management model" has proved effective because of its flexibility and adaptability. It is based on the presence in the field of a local team of national, with occasional international, experts, while decision-making is based on a MoU and preliminary surveys to assess the needs and collect baseline data.

Efforts by partner development agencies, municipalities, NGOs and private investors have often amplified this multiplier effect. Thus, in Lahore, AKHCP work has led the local authorities to commission designs by others to convert the Imperial Kitchen (in Lahore Fort) into a quality heritage restaurant and further inward investment is benefitting the Walled City, where the government of Punjab has now stepped up its own funding. In Delhi, the restoration of Humayun's Tomb complex has led private investors to sponsor a lighting system and a gold-leaf covered finial for the mausoleum, while the Ministry of Tourism has made a grant for the Humayun's Tomb Site Museum, which may become a template for similar centres at other heritage sites in India. The George Town Project, Penang,

The fortified entry gate to the Citadel of Aleppo following restoration.

Opposite page, Alin Aq Palace (under restoration) and the Khayrbek Funerary Complex (completed), al-Darb al-Ahmar, Cairo.

Malaysia, has led a local commercial company to sponsor the rehabilitation and reuse of Cornwallis Fort in the Heritage Area; it is also now promoting appropriate redevelopment of the seafront and the northern marine walls. In Afghanistan, AKHCP work in Babur's Garden, Kabul, led to a large US Embassy grant for the Qala Ikhtyarudin in Herat, a grant from the government of India for the conservation/restoration of Stor Palace (which houses the Foreign Ministry), a large grant from the German Federal Foreign Office for a second park, Chihilsitoon Garden in Kabul, and more recently the transformation and urban upgrading of the Kabul riverfront.

ISLAMIC SOCIETIES AND THE PROCESSES OF CHANGE

The Muslim world is in a period of rupture. Rupture with its connection to the natural world; rupture in its understanding of its place in the world; and rupture of its connection with its own history, identity and culture. The prominent role of Western media and cultural forces is posing a threat to local and national identities and cultures, and their creative and sustainable evolution. Without cultural identity, social cohesion gradually dissolves, and human groups lose their necessary point of reference to relate with each other, and with other groups.¹ The ripple effects can carry on for generations.

Culture is made up of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes the modes of life, value systems, traditions and beliefs. The art, architecture, music, writing and thought, which are legacies of rich Islamic traditions, are embedded with meaning and ideas about what in life is accepted as being important.

Identity is a shifting concept of self. It is an important contributor to people's well-being and provides a feeling of belonging to something much larger than oneself, thereby providing a sense of comfort and security and allowing access to social networks that offer support and shared values.

Culture and identity are responsible for how we understand ourselves and our connection to our history. Muslim societies are experiencing dramatic processes of transition and change, which are radically altering the value systems of future generations. Symbols of pride and identity are disappearing, leading to a sense of exclusion and alienation. As a result, Muslim societies are questioning their place in a rapidly changing world.

Disappearing cultural heritage, unchecked urbanization and environmental degradation are eroding the fabric of Muslim societies and the values they hold dear. Stewardship of the environment, care for the natural world, sharing of resources, recognition of beauty as a divine blessing, and the environmental ethic in Islam, principles that helped guide the planning of early Muslim cities, are being lost as survival becomes a day-to-day priority.

As AKTC completes its third decade, the world is facing a global pandemic, growing distrust of government and institutions, rising nationalism, shifting global contexts and the ongoing development of Islamic societies inside and outside of their traditional borders. While AKTC has evolved and kept pace with change over the years, major new questions and challenges are emerging today. These arise from both global transformations and changes taking place in the Muslim world, which have a bearing on how the Trust envisions the challenges of today and how it anticipates the challenges it will face tomorrow.

AKHCP seeks to address issues in the built environment of historic cities as it is shaped by changing cultural, social, economic, political and environmental





Above, Historic Cairo's built environment is facing severe pressures.

Below, Delhi is facing serious environmental challenges.

conditions. Many such transformations have taken place in the Islamic world – which has experienced all these global shifts and undergone a range of societal and cultural changes.

SERIOUS CHALLENGES

The rise of populations and cities are contributing factors to greenhouse gas emissions which now substantially exceed the highest concentrations recorded in ice cores during the past 800,000 years, thus driving global warming. Atmospheric carbon dioxide levels, which primarily come from the burning of fossil fuels, have risen forty per cent since pre-industrial times.² We are already witnessing the loss of sea ice, rise of sea levels, longer more intense heat waves, change in precipitation patterns, wildfires, droughts and stronger hurricanes.

It is not only cities and coastal areas that will be hit; large-scale population displacement, loss of habitats and shrinking biodiversity will cause the loss of traditional practices and ways of living. Some cultures will be lost forever and with them, a chapter of our common humanity; this is beyond cities and states, it is civilizational.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION – DELHI

In cities around the world, the natural environment is being compromised and the result is a reduction of biodiversity and deterioration of the environment. It is happening on a mass scale with the depletion of resources such as air, water and soil, the destruction of habitats, and pollution (air, land, water and noise).

In Delhi, pollution is one of the most critical problems today. During the Covid lockdown, air pollution dropped to a twenty-year low. However, once restrictions were lifted, Delhi gains were clawed back quickly. In the winter of 2019, the city's extreme pollution caused the city government to declare a public health emergency, forcing it to shut down schools and cancel flights. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), up to 4.2 million people die every year because of exposure to air pollution, and smog has been linked to higher rates of stroke, heart attack, lung cancer and chronic lung disease. Delhi, which has the distinction of being the most polluted capital city, now has the almost 36.5-hectare Sunder Nursery, an oasis in the city that helps it to breathe.

HYPER-URBANIZATION – CAIRO

Over 1.8 billion people (24% of the world population) follow the faith of Islam. Of these, 1.5 billion live in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The world's Muslim population is expected to increase to 2.2 billion by 2030. If current trends continue, Muslims will make up 26% of the world's total projected population of 8.5 billion in 2030.³

In Cairo, already a mega-city with a population nearing twenty-one million people (Egypt's population surpassed 100 million in 2020), there is growing fear that this unsustainable population growth will increase poverty levels, increase social problems such as lack of safety, illiteracy and crime, create rising unemployment, and contribute to the scarcity of basic resources like land and water. Ninety-five per cent of the Egyptian population lives on about four per cent of the land. Public green space is encroached upon and fast disappearing. Government institutions are unable to manage the ever-increasing rate of growth of Cairo or to deal with its fallout. By the early 1980s, for example, this much of Cairo's green space was overtaken by development even though it had

been a city of gardens just a few decades earlier. Some estimates in the 1970s put the green space per inhabitant at one square metre; other studies suggested it was a little as a footprint. AKHCP's creation of the 30-hectare Al-Azhar Park in Cairo has created a green lung for the city.

URBAN STRESS – BAMAKO

Rapid urbanization in developing countries is creating a myriad of pressures on historic cores. Cities are under incredible pressures and great strain to accommodate citizens and provide a dignified environment and life. Many cities have reached “breaking point” as urban centres that are able to provide their inhabitants with even the most basic requirements of decent living, as well as jobs and access to social facilities. Their social and physical infrastructures, whether relating to cultural institutions, safety, green, open public spaces, waste management and sanitation, among other issues, are unable to keep pace. Many municipalities still lack the professional expertise and capacity to properly plan a sustainable and responsible path for their urban populations.

Bamako, Mali, has a population of 2.7 million people and is one of the fastest growing cities in the world. Bamako's infrastructure cannot handle the influx of people and its urban sprawl has led to dramatic losses in green space and agricultural land; since 1990, a loss of over fifty per cent of the city's arable land has been observed. Roughly sixty-five per cent of Bamako's population lives in informal settlements with limited access to basic services, amplifying the pace of sprawl and land degradation.⁴ The creation of the National Park of Mali by AKHCP offers an opportunity to preserve, for future generations, a sufficient amount of green space for the citizens of Bamako.

THE TRAUMA OF WAR – KABUL

In the past decades till today, war in the Muslim world has been a constant. Images of conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Syria and Yemen, just to name some, show up on news feeds every day. Urban warfare does more than damage buildings; it destroys livelihoods and the economy, interrupts education, frays the social fabric, creates a mass displacement of people, increases poverty and malnutrition, desensitizes populations against violence, and damages the natural environment. It also has an effect on mental well-being and mental health. In Kabul, an entire generation has grown up never having experienced peace and many Afghans are struggling to cope with the psychological, economic, social and physical ramifications of the conflicts, past and present.⁵ The restoration of Babur's Garden, in Kabul, by AKHCP provides a sanctuary in the midst of so much destruction and is helping heal the scars on this war-torn city.

AGA KHAN HISTORIC CITIES PROGRAMME: PARKS AND GARDENS PORTFOLIO

It is against this backdrop of cultural, economic and environmental challenges in the Muslim world that the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has entered its fourth decade focused on cultural development. AKTC views culture as an asset, one that has the potential to improve socio-economic conditions prevailing in many Muslim populations – often impoverished communities with a rich cultural heritage.

Today, AKHCP serves as a lighthouse in terms of demonstrating that community-focused urban regeneration models, on-site interventions, appropriate restoration, and reuse of culturally significant buildings within historic built environments



Above, Kabul riverfront showing the Machine Khana site under redevelopment.

Below, ruins of the Darulaman Palace, Kabul.

Above, AKHCP restored the Great Mosque of Mopti, Mali, under its earthen architecture programme.

Below, the restored Old Dispensary, Stone Town, Zanzibar, now serves as a cultural centre.



can serve to rehabilitate historic districts, restore pride, and return a sense of identity. Through this integrated approach, the Programme demonstrates that strengthening cultural identity goes hand in hand with socio-economic progress. At the heart of this urban regeneration transformational model is the creation and rehabilitation of parks and gardens as drivers for change.

PARKS AND GARDENS

In historic urban centres, in the Old Cities where AKHCP is present – Cairo, Kabul, Lahore and Delhi – green space has often been overwhelmed by growth, migration from the countryside and a lack of planning. Encroachment, both legal and illegal, has gradually swallowed up forests and grassland, diminishing green space, reducing biodiversity, increasing smog and pollution, and lowering living standards. 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.

The most visionary, innovative and crucial element to AKHCP’s urban regeneration model is the restoration and creation of parks and gardens and the conceptualization, design, operation and programming of these spaces. The restoration and creation of parks and gardens, the most formidable tool in AKHCP’s arsenal, is transforming the urban fabrics of Cairo, Kabul, Delhi and other cities.

In the West, enlightened municipal planners now understand that parks are not just recreational assets but important parts of a community’s health and well-being, as well as important aspects of culture, social cohesion, even economic development. Parks also came to be known as climate modifiers, which could mitigate a city’s heat and pollution or as biodiversity clusters that often contained a surprising number of species. As a result of this new appreciation for their value, parks enjoyed a renaissance in the developed world. Yet in many parts of the Muslim world, the neglect of green space continues. In cities such as Cairo, Kabul and Bamako, with myriad problems including poverty, access to water and crumbling infrastructure, municipalities, beset by numerous demands on their finances, push green spaces down their list of priorities. The two largest parks in Kabul (Babur’s Garden and Chihilstoon Garden) and the largest park in Bamako were both rehabilitated by AKHCP.

His Highness the Aga Khan is believed to have created more parks and gardens than any other living individual. This stems from his role as Imam of the Shi’a Imami Ismaili Muslims. In Islam, the Holy Qur’an offers explicit direction to share resources beyond one’s requirements, and to care for the poor and those in need and to share in the creation of an equitable order of peace and harmony. Each generation must leave for its successors a wholesome and sustainable social and physical environment.

In his efforts to improve the physical environment, the Aga Khan took into account the power of parks and gardens to contribute to the improvement of urban environments, to advance positive processes of change in terms of social development, local employment and entrepreneurial activity, and to revive arts and crafts and cultural development in places where it is in danger of disappearing.

In the AKHCP’s portfolio, parks and gardens serve a multi-purpose role in the urban fabric and life of a city; they act to define the shape and feel of a city and its neighbourhoods and can also function as conscious tools for revitalization.



They also have a more spiritual connotation by reminding us of the beauty and mystery of God's creation. His Highness spoke of this connection at the inauguration of the Aga Khan Park in Toronto on 25 May 2015. His Highness stated:

*Parks and gardens can serve as symbols of "connection" in other ways as well. Among them are rich connections across time linking us to the past. The garden has for many centuries served as a central element in Muslim culture. The Holy Qur'an, itself, portrays the garden as a central symbol of a spiritual ideal – a place where human creativity and Divine majesty are fused, where the ingenuity of humanity and the beauty of nature are productively connected. Gardens are a place where the ephemeral meets the eternal, and where the eternal meets the hand of man.*⁶

For the Aga Khan, these parks and gardens seek to enrich the mind and soul. They are spaces in which interaction with other people and with nature takes place.

"The tradition of Islamic gardens places an emphasis on human stewardship, our responsibility to nature and to protect the natural world. [...] the garden here today is a place where – whatever difficult moments may come our way – we can always find, in the flow of refreshing water, a reminder of Divine blessing."⁷

Research indicates that parks and gardens offer a heritage value for people, suggesting that they are recognized for more than their aesthetic or recreational purposes. They are created to replicate the qualities of nature and enhance urban life; these open spaces form essential environmental and cultural assets in our cities. They provide areas for recreation, leisure and social activity;

Humayun's Tomb and Garden, Delhi, following restoration.



**Fifteenth-century Namakdan Pavilion,
Herat.**

contribute to our health, local economies and well-being; offer space for nature to flourish; and enhance the environmental resilience of the built environment.⁸ The uniqueness of gardens lies in the fact that they are spaces and, thus, also systems of culture, nature and society.⁹

While the general benefits of parks and gardens in cities are well understood, in the conception of the projects in the AKHCP portfolio the use of these spaces go beyond leisure, recreation and providing a respite from oppressive urbanization. Most parks and gardens in the AKHCP portfolio certainly do these things, but they are much more:

Social development

The aim of these parks is to improve quality of life. Surpluses of revenue over expenditure are channelled to social programmes to improve the quality of life of residents near these spaces.

Education

Parks and gardens capture a broad spectrum of the population. Through innovative programming and thematic events, knowledge is transferred and shared. They offer a venue to speak about the environmental ethic in Islam and can help foster a sense of civic responsibility as people begin to value and take care of these spaces.

Promote pluralism

Parks provide leisure spaces where communities of different backgrounds can interact. In the Muslim world, these types of spaces are rare, and their democratization, open to all citizens and non-exclusive, is an important aspect to creating park projects. They offer quality spaces for social interaction unhindered by caste or class.

Gateways to history

The parks are essentially in historic centres and offer views and access to monuments that have been brought back to life as part of the urban regeneration schemes undertaken by AKHCP.

Cultural development

Music performances, art events, craft expositions, education programming, and the introduction of site interpretation centres and guided visits of restored monuments and buildings in old cities create a more enriching experience for park and historic site visitors.

This publication contains a section on case studies of AKHCP parks and gardens projects (see p. 134 onwards), in which their design, implementation and impact are described in detail.

LESSONS LEARNED

In performing its mission, AKHCP has implemented some twenty-two Area Development Programmes and urban regeneration projects in eleven different countries in Asia, Africa and Europe. In each case, AKHCP has adopted a pragmatic, adaptive and incremental approach in the service of the following broad principles and ambitions:

1 Seek to increase the beneficiaries' independence, to involve local communities, and to secure the support of public and private partners.

AKHCP projects, in all the places it works, include a strong community component, not just in terms of outreach, but also through engaging the local beneficiaries of projects as community groups that are integral to the planning processes and project design.

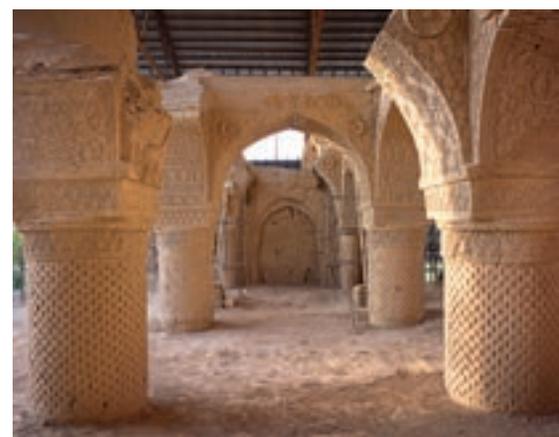
2 Design urban projects with a view to maximum beneficial impact on the economies and quality of life of the populations involved.

The urban regeneration of historic districts (starting with al-Darb al-Ahmar in 2002) represented a "quantum leap" by providing a set of responses to the problems of historic urban districts and introducing quality-of-life initiatives with measurable indicators. These projects thus provide a critical, multi-disciplinary context and offer greater rewards in terms of transformative impact due to scale. AKHCP's portfolio of projects has diversified, grown and taken on greater complexity, allowing AKTC to develop technical skills and urban-planning capacities as well as mechanisms to implement ambitious rehabilitation schemes and manage/operate the assets created.

Project formulation is preceded by an extensive fact finding and orientation process. Carrying out a baseline survey among local households is an important element that is nearly always part of such fact-finding exercises and

Below, the 8th-century Noh Gunbad Mosque, under restoration by AKHCP, is believed to be the oldest and most important early Islamic-era building in Afghanistan.

Following pages, Qala Ikhtyaruddin (the citadel of Herat) during restoration works.









The Machine Khana site, part of the Kabul riverfront upgrading project, Kabul.

is crucial when urban regeneration and housing rehabilitation interventions are concerned. The Cairo project, where this comprehensive approach has been tested since the year 2000, has demonstrated, more than in any other intervention, that growth and development are subject to research, planning, organization and the cultivation of relationships on the one hand; and to promoting values like gender equity, a clean and stable environment, and financial sustainability on the other. The methodology has been replicated in Kabul, Mopti and Delhi, where progress is constantly monitored by seeking supportive evidence through new data collection. Comparisons are made between various target groups through independent evaluations, through focus group meetings, and through personal interviews with beneficiaries.

3 Plan park projects for the long term, so as to enable them to become self-sufficient both financially and in terms of human resources.

The creation or preservation of precious green space in cities with increasing density (as of 2002) to improve the environment and quality of life involves the start-up of long-term financially sustainable operations that call for new management structures and capacities, new opportunities for co-funding, and working with partners, thereby changing the nature of AKTC's portfolio and selection criteria. The positive assessment by governments of several of these projects indicates their sustainability.

Over forty million people are projected to visit AKTC high-profile parks and related cultural facilities through 2020 (reduced now due to park closures as a result of the Covid pandemic). Al-Azhar Park in Cairo, Babur's Garden

and Chihilsitooon Garden in Kabul are self-sufficient and generate surpluses of revenue over expenditure. It is forecast that Sunder Nursery, Delhi, will also generate surpluses once fully operational. These parks, with their monuments, cultural facilities and amenities, play a crucial role in overcrowded and densely populated cities as green safe areas for leisure and social interaction that are very much appreciated by the local population.

4 Develop a methodology and approach that can be replicated and adopted by other institutions or governments.

AKHCP has achieved a stature and reputation as a reliable partner and an institution that achieves the highest standard of work. As such, it has increasingly taken on the role of technical adviser or implementer of projects at the request of third parties. These projects are fully funded and are a direct outcome of the past successes.

5 Use Public-Private Partnership (PPP) agreements to structure cultural urban projects with governmental institutions and other partners.

PPP agreements provide for an effective juridical basis for complex projects involving multiple inputs and partners. PPP is essential for a long-term vision of development. In the case of AKHCP, the mandate is to create financially self-sustainable projects that are income-generating endeavours in which surpluses are reinvested in the project. This has proved to be a very useful mode of operation and has set a precedent in Egypt, Mali, Syria and India, where PPPs for projects in the cultural sector are rare and often not legally recognized. Where AKHCP has utilized the PPP model for cultural projects, a legal precedent has been set that can open the door for future investment in cultural assets by international organizations.

In each AKHCP Area Programme, where success or failure can be gauged only in the long term, some components have been successful while others have been less so. This is the case of Cairo, where besides the “success story” of Al-Azhar Park, the extremely valuable and pioneering efforts in conservation planning for the district of al-Darb al-Ahmar have been hampered by legislative constraints and unchecked building. In Lahore, the approval of a coherent conservation plan and related implementation tools, together with the identification of appropriate pilot projects and priority interventions of urban upgrading, has paved the way

Chihilsitooon Garden, Kabul, is resplendent in spring.





Top, the Picture Wall, Lahore Fort, is among some of the most exquisite features of the Fort and is one of the largest murals in the world.

Middle, view across the Lahore Fort courtyard to the Badshahi Mosque.

Bottom, interior of the restored Wazir Khan Hammam, part of an ensemble of Mughal monuments in Lahore restored by AKHCP.

to implementation of a consistent and successful strategy of architectural and urban rehabilitation. The same methodology has had different outcomes due to the different institutional and legislative frameworks and governance systems. Some efforts are less impactful because of unexpected events and conflicts. This is again the case of Cairo where the lack of governance and the political instability after the events of January 2011 seriously compromised the rehabilitation of al-Darb al-Ahmar. Even more tragic is the situation in Aleppo, Syria, where the Citadel and its perimeter, restored and rehabilitated by the Trust, have been heavily damaged by civil conflict.

THE CULTURAL AGENCY OF THE AGA KHAN DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

AGA KHAN TRUST FOR CULTURE

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) is the cultural agency of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Its programmes promote debate about the built environment, notably in the context of development; propose exemplars and solutions for contemporary design problems; train architects; engage in the physical and social revitalization of communities; promote music and musical education, and, with the creation of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, now encompass the realm of museology. By pursuing a worldwide strategy of influence, AKTC has leveraged the transformative power of culture to improve the socio-economic conditions of Muslim populations. At the same time, it has promoted a more informed understanding of the diverse cultures of the Muslim world and demonstrated the valuable role that different forms of cultural expression can play in development.

The Trust grew out of the activities and initiatives of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (AKAA, established in 1977) and the parallel thinking that took place during the inception of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard and MIT (AKPIA – 1979). Architecture and, more broadly, the built environment have been at the core of the Trust’s mandate. The work of AKAA came to be complemented by the Aga Khan Historic Cities Programme (AKHCP) created in 1992. Prior to that date, the establishment of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in 1988 as a single overarching institution was intended to consolidate these efforts.

LOOKING FORWARD

After more than thirty years, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has to assess its achievements and consider strategic realignment. To remain relevant and effective, AKTC must identify key changes in the global environment, in which social, cultural and economic conditions are transforming societies. With over ten park and garden projects in its portfolio, are there new models of partnerships to explore that will allow for the creation of more green spaces in historic city centres? Looking to the future, while parks and gardens can be transformative for a city and in the life of citizens, are municipalities ready and willing to learn the lessons from AKHCP projects? Do opportunities exist to bring in private-sector funds and public partners? What is called for is imagination, vision and boldness beyond the ordinary.

What can be done to alter the trajectory of rapid urbanization, environmental degradation and the loss of cultural identity? The challenges facing the Muslim world specifically, and indeed much of the world, are formidable. The Covid pandemic has exacerbated these problems. Some of the solution will certainly be a mix of new technologies, new medicines and treatments, and new energy

sources, to name a few, but not every solution will be a new one. The processes of change will also be driven by grass-roots initiatives, civil society, community engagement, changes in diets, new methods of farming and production, more efficient supply chains, and less acceptance of the unfairness of our economic systems and wealth inequality.

The Aga Khan Trust for Culture, collaborating with enlightened municipalities and other entities, has understood that the restoration, rehabilitation and creation of parks and gardens offers but one sustainable and impactful solution to address some of these challenges. The creation of parks and gardens, while by no means a panacea for all that is ailing dense cities, does offer a model for governments to consider. A model that addresses some issues related to urbanization, cultural identity, and environmental and climatic concerns. AKCHP has tested this model, refined this model, proven this model, and documented this model to share with others.

In Cairo, Bamako, Kabul, Delhi and other sites, AKCHP's rehabilitation of existing parks and gardens and creation of new parks are popular among local populations and international visitors. Some are running surpluses and help subsidize urban regeneration projects in adjacent neighbourhoods, restoring hope for the future of these historic districts that had become resigned to terminal decline. It has demonstrated that parks not only contribute to the quality of life in cities, but that they can be self-sustaining if conceived and managed properly. It has demonstrated that under the correct conditions, parks and gardens can advance positive change in terms of social development, local employment, entrepreneurial activity and cultural development where none existed before.

When future generations walk in these spaces, in the shade of a majestic tree or on the soft green grass of a gently sloping lawn, they might recognize the seedling of an idea that was planted a long time ago; a vision to provide a better life. It is in these spaces that hope eventually takes root and flowers. His Highness describes parks and gardens as gifts to the future. These gifts, if nurtured and cared for, will continue to keep on giving.

*As we walk through this place, we can feel a deep sense of connection with those who walked through similar gardens centuries ago. And, by renewing our connection with the past, we can also connect more effectively with one another – and, indeed, with those who will walk these paths in the future.*¹⁰

1 Speech delivered by His Highness the Aga Khan at the Prince Claus Fund's Conference on Culture and Development in Amsterdam, Netherlands, 7 September 2002.

2 "Three Minute Story of 800,000 Years of Climate Change with a Sting in the Tail", Ben Henley and Nerilie Abraham in The Conversation, 12 June 2017, available at: <https://theconversation.com/the-three-minute-story-of-800-000-years-of-climate-change-with-a-sting-in-the-tail-73368>.

3 "The Future of the Global Muslim Population. Projections for 2010–2030", Pew Research Center: Forum on Religion and Public Life. January 2011. From the "Executive Summary", p. 13.

4 "Open Cities Africa", available at: <https://open-citiesproject.org/bamako/>.

5 "The Cost of War. Afghan Experiences of Conflict, 1978–2009", Oxfam International, November 2009, p. 4, available at: https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/afghanistan-the-cost-of-war_14.pdf.

6 Speech delivered by His Highness the Aga Khan at the inauguration of the Aga Khan Park, Toronto, 25 May 2015.

7 Ibid.

8 "Living with Environmental Change", Polaris House, Swindon, UK. By Eirini Saratsi, University of Kent, with Vince Holyoak and Jenifer White, Historic England, based on

research funded by the Valuing Nature Programme, Note No. 36, September 2016, p. 2, available at: <https://nerc.ukri.org/research/partnerships/ride/lwec/ppn/ppn36/>.

9 Reinhard Hüttel, Karen David and Bernd Uwe Schneider, "Historic Gardens and Climate Change: Insights Desiderata and Recommendations", November 2019, p. 400, available at: DOI:10.1515/9783110607772-035.

10 Speech delivered by His Highness the Aga Khan at the inauguration of the Aga Khan Park, Toronto, 25 May 2015.



HOW PARKS CAN IMPACT PERSONAL WELL-BEING AND STIMULATE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

CRISTINA DE BORBÓN AND JURJEN VAN DER TAS

Since the end of the colonial period the developing world has been urbanizing at unprecedented speed. Lagos's population increased forty-five times in size over the course of just sixty years while Kinshasa's, over the same period, expanded an astonishing seventy-four times. Unfortunately, such growth has rarely been accompanied by effective mechanisms for urban planning and creation of essential infrastructure. As a result, many expanding metropolises underserve their growing urban populace with access to green open space. Where cities could grow gradually and over longer periods of time, as was the case in Europe and North America, the creation of green open space became an integral element of urban planning. Work on Central Park in New York started in earnest as long ago as 1857, while the origins of London's Hyde Park can even be traced back to 1637. Modern metropolises of similar size that expanded only recently, however, appear to have had neither the time, nor the financial means, to set aside green open space of adequate dimensions to serve their fifteen million plus populations.

In recognition of the needs of urban citizens to green, clean and safe open space in the countries where it is active, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) has made the creation and operation of parks that subscribe to these criteria a core element of its mission. In order to ensure that the Trust can meet the expectations of its current and future park visitors, it was felt from the onset of AKTC's engagement with parks that measurement of their impact on visitors would be essential. In addition, it was realized that the impact of parks on the socio-economic development of those living in the immediate surroundings of AKTC's parks – spaces that are referred to as the catchment areas¹ – should equally be taken into consideration.

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING AN IMPACT MEASUREMENT SYSTEM FOR PARK VISITATION

Cairo's Al-Azhar Park, which informally opened to the public in October 2004, is for good reason referred to as the "Mother" of all AKTC parks. Not only was it the first of the five major² and eight minor³ urban parks that the Trust completed between 2004 and 2019, it also continues to be the largest in terms of the number of visitors that pass through its gates on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, Cairo was for this reason selected by AKTC for the development of an impact measurement system that looks not just into how the design and operation of



Opposite page, welcome performance for visitors at the main entrance of Cairo's Al-Azhar Park.

Above, spontaneous dancing at Babur's Garden, Kabul.

parks affects the visitor, but also gives indications of how parks that are created and operated by AKTC influence the catchment area.

The Parks Impact Measurement System (or PIMS for short) started off as a pilot project in Cairo in 2014. Over a six weeks' period during the spring of that year, six hundred park visitors were asked about their experience inside Al-Azhar Park. Randomly⁴ selected visitors at the point of exit from the park were asked questions concerning their impressions of it. Other information, such as the duration of each visit, gender, age, profession, mode of transport and location of the homestead was also registered.

Analysis of the data collected through this pilot project showed a number of issues, such as group size and purpose of the visit, to be correlated (larger groups being directly linked with family outings and social bonding within the family). This allowed for rationalization of the future PIMS research exercise

Picnicking at the Sunder Nursery/Humayun Tomb complex, Delhi.





without compromising its reach and depth. In addition to an adjusted questionnaire for registering the impressions of park visitors, AKTC decided that PIMS should also contain “hard data” from park visitation, such as overall visitor numbers per quarter, the number and types of events held, as well as estimates of the age groups and gender of all park visitors, based on all-day observations at particular intervals.

To appreciate the changes occurring in a park’s catchment area, a component was introduced concerning quantitative and qualitative socio-economic data collection in the areas surrounding a park. These data are periodically compared with information from baseline surveys that the Trust carries out at the onset of park projects, in order to appreciate changes that have occurred and that could be attributed to the operation of the park.

Left, a moment of relaxation during children’s play in the National Park of Mali.

Right, creativity class in Al-Azhar Park, Cairo.



Family outings in Babur's Garden, Kabul.

THE IMPACT OF PARKS ON VISITORS: OUTCOME OF INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS

Information collected from visitors inside the park, as well as opinions that visitors living in the catchment areas expressed during focus group meetings, provides insight in the different values that visitors attach to a park. Three main values for a park seem to stand out: the *intrinsic value* (broadly translated as the nature and greenery that the park provides), the *amenity value* (that is, the variety and quality of the facilities inside the park) and the *historic value* (that is, the historic setting of the park or the historic elements inside or nearby).

The most frequently cited reason for visiting a park is “to enjoy nature”, which clearly indicates that the intrinsic value of a park is what is most appreciated. It appears that the natural ambiance that a park offers allows people to feel at ease and to socialize. It is not surprising, therefore, that “socializing with friends or family” is often cited by visitors in the same breath as “to enjoy nature”. However, there appears to be an element of habitualization associated with the intrinsic value. The green environment that a park offers is after some time mentally absorbed and taken for granted – and subsequently less frequently mentioned by regular visitors. Where each year substantial numbers of new visitors are appearing, as in Kabul and Cairo, the appreciation of the intrinsic value stays high. In contrast, the National Park of Mali, which depends for 95% on regular visitors, has seen a downward trend in the level at which its intrinsic value is appreciated. As this last park also offers sports and gym facilities, as well as an amphitheatre, a children’s playground and kiosks, appreciation for its amenity value has risen over time while its intrinsic value has gone down. The historic value is of particular importance for visitors to Babur’s Garden and Sunder Nursery. In Cairo, despite the park being located adjacent to the city’s Historic Wall and in close proximity of major monuments, its historic value was only mentioned as most important by 15% of all visitors during 2019 – the last year of data collection.

In terms of the multitude of functions that a park has, its role as a catalyst for socializing is perhaps most outstanding. Families frequently mention that they see the park as an *extension of home*. Instead of inviting friends and family to their houses they invite them to the park. Picnics are the favourite form of park use for families. Another important function of the park is as a *forum for encounters*. Although the park is seen by most as a place to spend leisure time, it is for some also a place to observe other groups of people with different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. To this group the park offers exposure to society at large. It provides an unequalled chance for youngsters to socialize with people who are not necessarily from the same neighbourhood or who may not have the same social background.

All user groups from the catchment areas that were interviewed cherish the *leisure function* of the park. Teenagers in particular experience the park as a place for play. Many know every nook, paying attention to details such as the different plants, the flowers and even the fruits on the trees. For those in their late teens and early twenties, leisure takes on different forms and includes encounters with childhood friends, play and courtship. As a *backdrop for romance*, the park has an important function for young people, as it provides an open, public environment where close friends or fiancées can meet without being under the gaze of the entire family or the local community. This applies in particular to young women, who recognize the park’s most important function as a refuge

from scrutiny: a place where they feel free – a breathing space. Married women also mention their happiness at being able to visit AKTC’s parks unaccompanied by their husbands, thanks to the supervision and security that the parks provide. During visits to the park they are usually accompanied by other women, often daughters, family members or neighbours. Men frequently express that they cherish the presence of a park, as it reduces family disputes and acts as an outlet. Men also see the park as a breathing space – its spaciousness and openness being a rare quality in the increasingly congested and crowded city.

TRENDS IN VISITATION OF AKTC PARKS BETWEEN 2015 AND 2019
VISITORS’ AGE AND GENDER

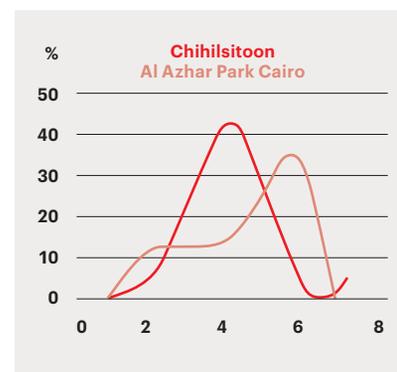
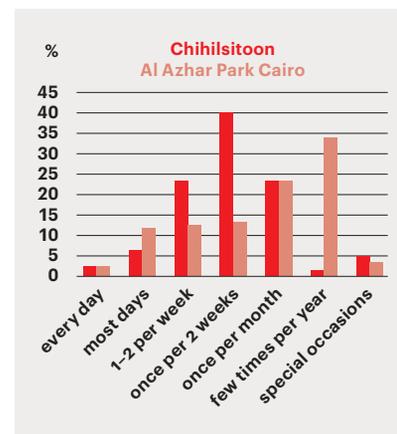
Visitors of the parks operated by AKTC tend to be young, not just in comparison with the urban population worldwide, but also in comparison with the make-up of the urban population in the cities where the parks are located. The National Park of Mali in particular, appears to attract young visitors. The 15–29 years-of-age group represents the vast majority of all park visitors, while visitors of 40 years and older are practically absent. Because women dominate in the younger age groups in Bamako, the overall gender divide among park visitors of the National Park of Mali over five years shows a slight tilt towards women.

Although visitors to Kabul’s Bagh-e Babur and Cairo’s Al-Azhar Park are spread out over a wider range of age groups, young visitors are still dominating in these parks. Over time, Babur’s Garden (or Bagh-e Babur) witnessed a slight increase in the average age of its visitors. The 60+ years-of-age group, which was notably absent over the first few years of park operations, now makes up 4% of all visitors. In Cairo the presence of visitors aged between 30 to 39 years seems to have grown over time, partially at the expense of the youngest age group and partially at the expense of the 60+ group, which, during the last year of data collection, was hardly present in the park.

Cairo has consistently scored 50/50 on the gender balance, with only minor variations over the years on either side. In Kabul, however, Babur’s Garden has not managed to achieve a gender balance anywhere close to Al-Azhar’s: in 2015 women made up just 30% of all visitors. By 2019 this had improved to 43%, but the desired gender balance of 50/50 was never achieved. It is not believed that this is due to cultural restrictions that limit women’s mobility. Nearby Chihilsitoon Garden, which opened in 2019 and which is managed through the same local Trust as Babur’s Garden, appears to attract women in substantial numbers. During its first year of operation more than 52% of Chihilsitoon’s visitors were female. In Delhi the gender balance was exactly 50/50 during its first year of operation.

VISITORS COMING IN GROUPS

Some noticeable differences in visitation patterns by groups were noticed across the parks operated by the Trust. Well over two-thirds of all Al-Azhar Park visitors were found to be part of groups that range from three to ten people – groups that are usually made up of family members. People visiting the park in pairs were generally friends or young couples, many of whom stated that they appreciate the park as a background for romance. Babur’s Garden in Kabul, where family outings to the park are as common as in Cairo, a trend appeared over time towards larger family groups and a decrease in the number of people visiting the park as a pair. Chihilsitoon Garden in Kabul was during its first year of operation very similar to Babur’s Garden in 2015 and 2016. As Chihilsitoon



Above, frequency of visits to Chihilsitoon Park (AKTC’s most recent) and Al-Azhar Park (AKTC’s oldest).

Below, in all AKTC-managed parks a trend has become apparent whereby the frequency of visits by regulars drops over time, but the duration of each visit increases.