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# THE GHALWAR MOSQUE AND GIRLS SCHOOL

*A Project Recently Re-examined*  
*Danish Contribution in Post-War Conservation*  
*of Afghanistan Heritage in Herat, 1993-94*

*by Abdul Wasay Najimi*



## Introduction

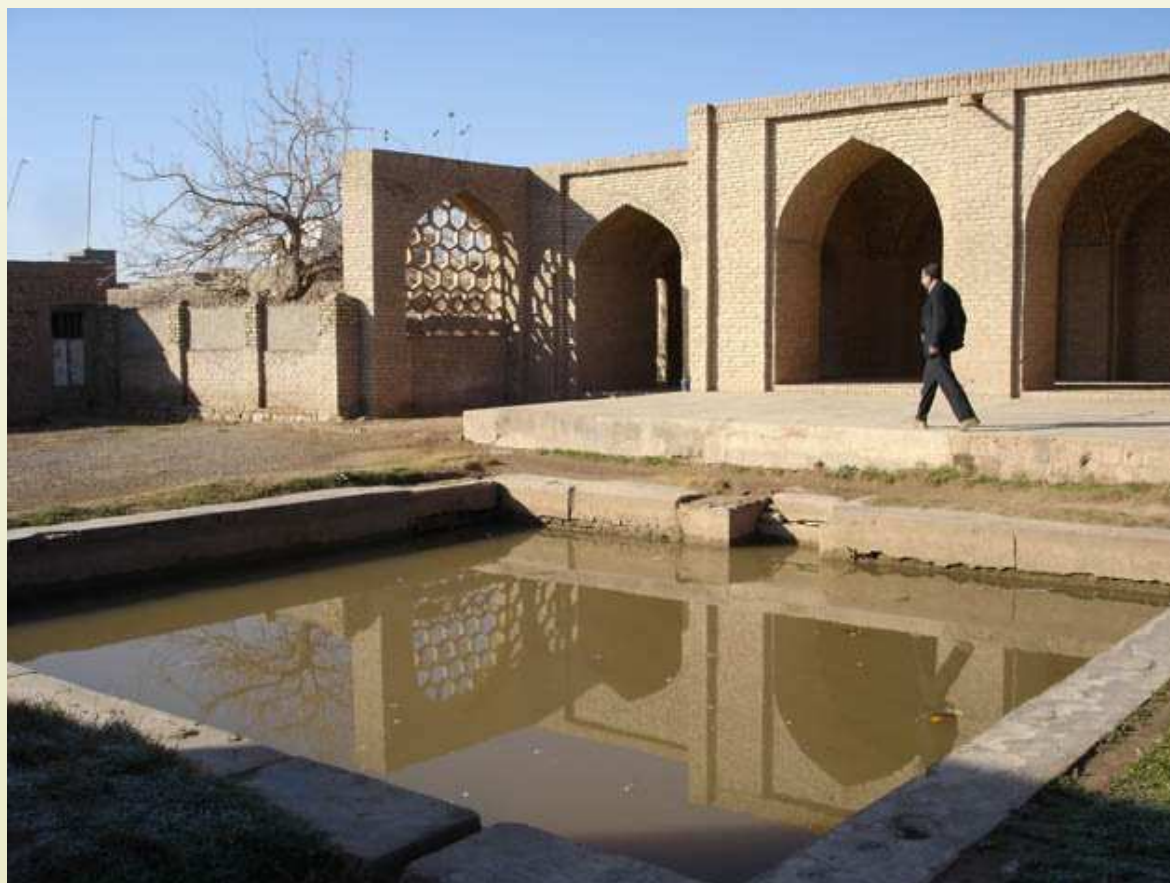
Ghalwar is a village located four kilometers west of the Old City of Herat on the ancient route that starts at the Iraqi Gate of the Old City and heads westwards towards Kohsan and Nishapur. The center of the village, also known as Hauz-i-Karbas (weaver's cistern), is 112 meters on the north side of the present road towards Zindajan and is located on the crossroads of an ancient route linking it to villages like Azadan, where the 14<sup>th</sup> century complex of Abul-Walid exists. The geographic coordinates for the Hauz-i-Karbas are: 34°21'N 62°09'E.

In this village one can find the historic mosque (figure 1), reportedly built in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and renovated with tile decoration in mid 15<sup>th</sup> century, the contemporary restoration of which is

documented in this article. The housing cluster comprising a village constituent to this mosque was surrounded by fertile agricultural land and gardens filled with grapevines, irrigated by the Enjil canal. A covered water cistern, sponsored by the charity of a weaver (Karbas) after whom the centre of the village is named also existed here. The 9<sup>th</sup> century mosque was restored by the Timurids in 845 Hijri [1441-42 AD] at the époque of Shahrukh Mirza, and the mihrab was decorated with a panel of fine tile work unique in Herat and a tiled tablet was installed (figure 2).

Badly destroyed during the war in the 1980s, Ghalwar mosque and its site (figure 3) became the focus of the first heritage conservation project in Herat after relative calm returned to the area in 1992. The mosque was restored structurally and the fallen and damaged pieces of the Timurid tile

*Figure 1. The courtyard view of the mosque after restoration.*







بمقاد سالها این نظم و ترکیب	زما هر نذر خاک افتاده جانی
غرض نقشبست کز ما باز ماند	که هستی را نمی بینم بقانی
مگر صاحب دلی روزی برحمت	کند در کار مسکینان دعانی
تمت هذا العماره المبارکه الشریقه فی شهر رسته خمس و اربعین و ثمانیه مائه	

Figure 2. (above) The restored inscription tile tablet (photo 2005); (below) Farsi and Arabic text. Persian Poetry from Gulistan Sa'di, worked on the tile tablet; date of construction is 845 Hijri.

work of the Mihrab were recovered and assembled by a team of local masons and craftsmen with funds from Denmark throughout 1993-94. Following this work the Mosque resumed its function as a centre for the community and, with the introduction of a small complex of new buildings adjacent to the mosque serving as a girls education centre, it also became a place for learning. The new buildings, which followed the conservation of the mosque, were built using traditional materials and techniques.

### Historical Background

Thirty years ago, Ghalwar was one of many idyllic villages surrounding Herat and many people like Abdul Wahid Nafez, the provincial head of culture in the city until 1978, owned land there and would escape the hectic pace of Herat on the weekends in preference for his tranquil gardens. This changed with the onset of war and Ghalwar and other villages were systematically depopulated and the

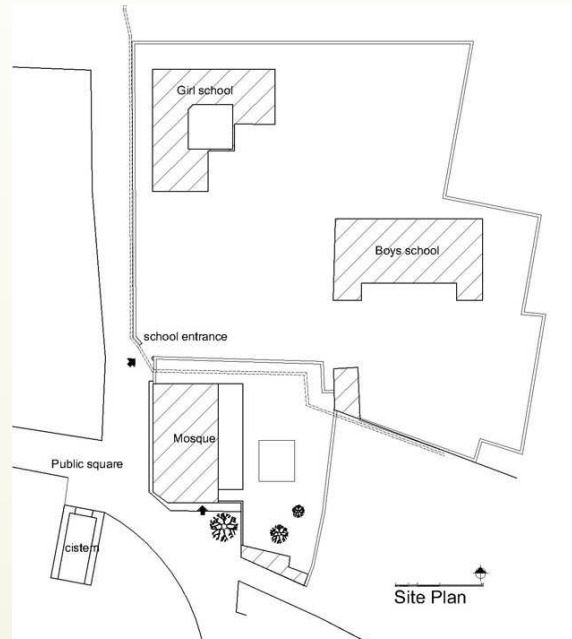


Figure 3. Site plan of the reconstructed mosque and the new school.

buildings destroyed during the 12-years war of resistance sparked by the Soviet invasion in 1979. Famous resistance leaders from the village like Abdullah of Hauz-i-Karbas and the Khalifa, leader of the local Sufi order, were imprisoned and killed in 1979.

One account of the devastation caused by the war is told by Nick Danziger [1], who wrote the following in 1988: "I stayed in a village where they claimed there had been 5,000 inhabitants. There remained one building intact in the whole village. I did not see more than ten inhabitants there. To destroy this place the bombers came from Russia. And there were craters everywhere, even where there were no buildings, so there was no pretense about, «we are trying to hit the mujahideen». It was a complete blitz. All the way from there on into Herat there was no one living there, absolutely no one. The town that I stayed in, Hauz Karbas, looks like Hiroshima. And there had been tremendous amounts of vineyards there, and they were just reduced to

*gray dust. It really sums up everything that exists in Afghanistan today”.*

The Swedish writer Stefan Lindgren also visited Herat and described the tragic destruction of the villages to the west of the city in 1986 [2].

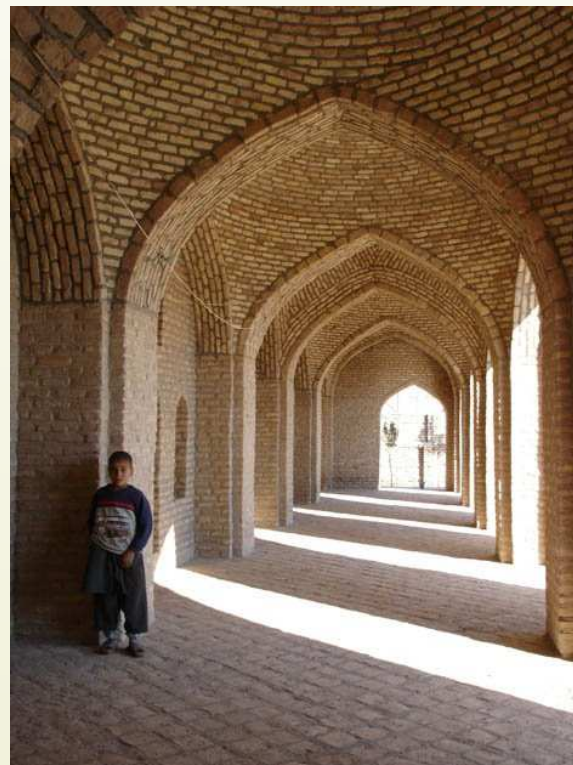
Following the withdrawal of the Soviet army in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet installed regime in 1992, the responsibility of the provincial administration of Herat was given to a war veteran, Ismail Khan, who became governor of Herat. People began to return to their villages and claim their lands and in the process of picking up the pieces of their lives the reconstruction of the city and the surrounding villages began. The author went to Herat in 1993, as an architect and member of a team from the Danish NGO DACAAR, to set up an office and to begin a post-war rehabilitation program focusing on the reconstruction of schools, community buildings, roads and irrigation structures, similar to what this organization had been doing in the eastern parts of Afghanistan.

*Figure 4. View of the mosque being reconstructed (photo by Claus Christensen, 1994).*



One of the projects was the restoration of the Ghalwar mosque and its tile work (figures 4-11). A picture taken in midst of the war and published by Sikorsky in 1989 [3] of the destroyed mosque showed the tile panel still standing (figure 7). It was hoped that one may still find it in the same

*Figure 5. The summer prayer hall (2005).*





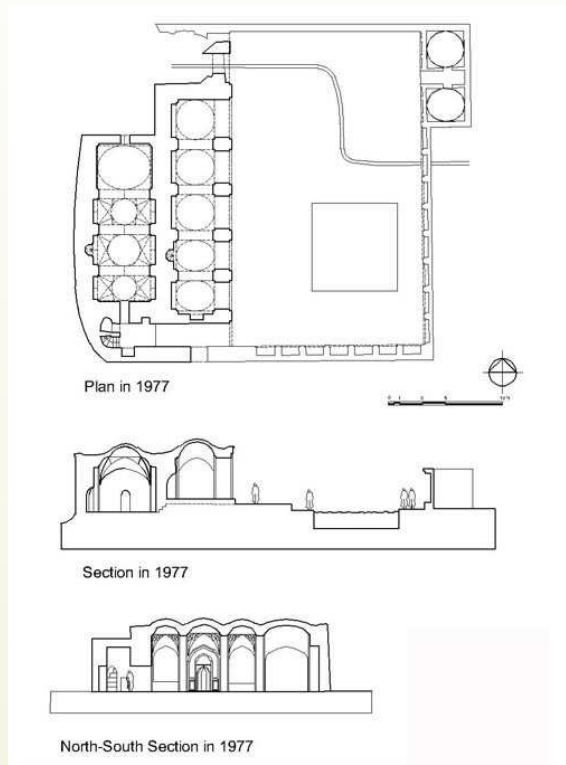


Figure 6. Plan and section of the mosque in 1977.



Figure 7. The main prayer hall after the roof destruction in 1985 (photo by Sikorsky; translated by Ahrary 1989).

condition. To everyone's disappointment, upon reaching the village in 1993, it was discovered that all that remained on the site was a mound of debris covering the shattered pieces of the elaborate tile work that once decorated the mihrab (figure 8). The villagers narrated that government forces, suspecting that the mosque was used as a hiding place by the opposition, bombed it in mid 1980s.

By this time several families had returned after being displaced or were refugees in Iran and re-accommodated amidst the collapsed buildings, the remaining of which projected the architectural character of the village.

Partnering with the newly re-established local branch of the department of historic monuments and involving members of the community, a brief consultation process was initiated, which led to the restoration of the mosque, providing a catalyst towards the regeneration of the village.

The author's own knowledge about the Ghalwar mosque was from 1973, when as a student of architecture in Kabul University he visited Herat. The mosque, built of thick mud walls and covered with arches and domes, typified the materials and forms used in buildings in the region. The main prayer hall, which also used to be the winter prayer hall, was accessed through a vaulted corridor with little natural light. Adjacent to the prayer hall, the summer prayer hall opened to the courtyard. The main hall of the mosque was originally composed of three vaulted bays, the central bay framing the mihrab with glazed tiles. The tiled panel framing the mihrab was made up of blue, turquoise, terracotta, green and white glaze cut pieces forming a Quranic inscription [Ayatul Kursi], verse 255 of First Sura—Albaqara. This panel was carefully framed by floral designs and geometric shapes, all set as muaraq completing the final ring of an arched recess. Similarly, a rectangular tiled panel with inscriptions in Persian and Arabic recording





Figure 8. View of the Mihrab found in 1993-94 (photo by Claus Christensen).

the dedication and date of the construction was found on the wall inside the main hall. The internal soffit of the arched recess was decorated with abstract geometric patterns known as gereh made of plaster. This technique was known at that time as also seen on the buildings of Ghaznavids and Ghurids period. Openings in the upper part of the first vaulted bay to the south, made up of screens of plaster and tessellation of geometric shapes, allowed natural light into the main hall. At a later date another domed chamber formed part of an extension of the main space to the north.

The summer prayer hall, laid out parallel to the eastern wall of the main hall, formed an open colonnade looking out into courtyard where a 1.5 meters deep pool of water for ablution was situated. The pool was fed by a small channel which also provided water for the village cistern [hauz-i-karbas], located across the street. A low mound adjacent to the cistern formed a graveyard, where the graves of important persons were marked by carved marble gravestones. The remaining buildings in the village were one story high courtyard houses of various sizes. Several large mulberry trees planted on the edge of the water channel running along the street provided deep shade.

Subsequently, the Ghalwar mosque was surveyed and documented four years later, in the summer of 1977, when a team of architecture students from Kabul University were engaged by UNESCO's rehabilitation project in Herat in surveying and recording monuments within the Old City. A Soviet scholar G.A. Pougatchenkova had also visited and published her study of this building in 1976 [4].

### **Restoration of the Building and Mihrab Tiles**

The damage that occurred during the war did not completely destroy the delicate glazed tiles surrounding the Mihrab of the Ghalwar mosque.

What the war did not destroy, nature ravaged over time. Following the destruction of the roof of the mosque by bombs, as depicted in the picture by Sikorski, the decorated mihrab survived for some time longer. But without its protective covering, rainwater began to seep into the cracks between the exposed tiles deteriorating the gypsum bedding. As the temperatures dropped in the winter this water froze and expanded causing the tile work to break and fall apart.

The work began by clearing and simultaneously documenting what was found. Sorting through the debris the team painstakingly collected and stored all the pieces of the fallen and broken glazed tiles. Once the clearance was completed the original foundations and shape of the building became evident. While clearing the debris, materials such as brick and decorative fragments were collected and sorted in order to re-use them in the rehabilitation. Additional bricks needed in the conservation, of the same quality and size as the ones found in the debris, were supplied by the same producer who provided bricks for the much larger conservation project of Qala-e Ikhtyaruddine (Herat Citadel 1977-79). Finding masons who knew how to build in the same tradition as those who originally constructed the mosque was another important task. One of the elders in the village, who was a famous mason and plasterer in his youth in 1960s, would visit the mosque and perform his prayers amidst the ruins. Throughout the conservation he continued to come to the site for his prayers and began taking interest in the work although he himself was too weak to participate.

A section of the tile work that was still attached to the wall was discovered, which was protected by a shelter to prevent further damage. This section of unmoved tile became very important in the restoration as it provided the exact setting-out point for refixing the remaining tiles.



The provincial department of historic monuments through its supervisor Haji Abdul Ahad engaged an elderly mason, Khalifa Ahmad, who was experienced in working with brick buildings and domes. Two other men from Ghalwar offered to work in the rehabilitation and an elderly Baba Khair Mohammed, who was also from the village, became the foreman.

Following the clearance we discovered that the floor of the winter mosque, accessed through a vaulted corridor, was on a lower level. The summer prayer space resembled a colonnade with the brick pillars facing the courtyard. After further excavations in the courtyard the rectangular water pond surrounded by old mulberry trees appeared.

Initially the parts of a mud wall, made of stabilized earth called *pakhsa*, and that of sun dried bricks were stabilized. For exposed areas burnt bricks were now used. The bricks used for rebuilding the arches, vaults and domes, were specially ordered in size 20cm x 20cm x 4.5cm and were set in lime mortar.

Lack of time is the reason why many buildings are conserved improperly. It was important that this exercise would build local capacity and the understanding within the community of the value of their heritage and historic monuments. As the project progressed the conservation team discovered layers upon layers of earlier interventions upon the building. For example, once the damaged plaster from one wall was removed it was discovered that an earlier opening had been blocked over time. In addition to returning the building to what we felt was closer to its original design, we took the opportunity to introduce some enhancement to the way it could be used by women worshipers. As mosques, particularly in the villages, are commonly used only by men, it was decided to allow for another room and entrance to be added to the northernmost chamber of the main prayer hall. This was intended

as space to be used by women to participate in the congregational Friday prayer and the *tarawih* in the month of Ramadan. The final external finish of the building became exposed brick work, while the interior of the winter hall was restored to its original plaster finish of gypsum, incorporating small areas where the original plaster remained.

The project took in total 9 months to complete involving two masons and a number of unskilled laborers supervised by one foreman and two trainee architects. The site became attraction for visitors including a friend of Herat, Claus Christensen who was on visit in 1994.

To plan the restoration of the rest of the destroyed tile panel surrounding the mihrab one needed to return to previous documents and photographs. In order to find appropriate images of the full tile panel before it was damaged the Danish architect Flemming Aalund provided his photo of the *mihrab* taken in 1977 (figure 9). The full-page color photo

Figure 9. The tile decorated mihrab (photo by Aalund, 1977).

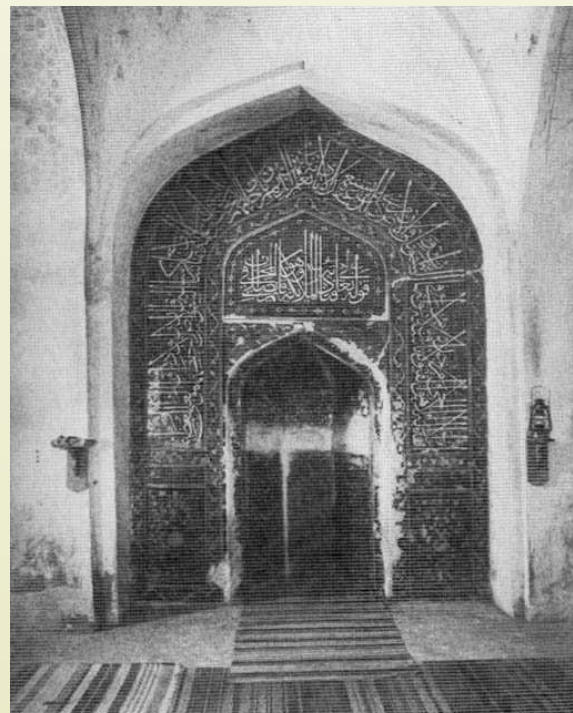




Figure 10. The Mihrab tiles reinstalled in 1994 (photo 2005).



he provided helped us to regroup the recovered tiles of the panel and to restore it (figures 10-11).

As for the plaster decoration on the soffits of the arches in the main hall of the winter mosque, a young mason, Ein-ul-din, assembled the fragments of decorative gypsum that were recovered from the rubble. The geometric base for the completed decoration is formed by a pentagon that is rotated around its central point and is repeated along the length of the arch (figure 12). The plaster screens allowing light into the main hall were cast of gypsum *in situ*, and the perforated geometry was made by hand as it had been originally constructed (figures 14-15).

After the removal of waste from the interior of the mosque, the internal floors were paved using square burnt bricks. Although the original floors were also made of burnt brick, over time they had been plastered with a composite of mud, gypsum and



Figure 11. Detail of the Muaraq tile work of the mihrab.

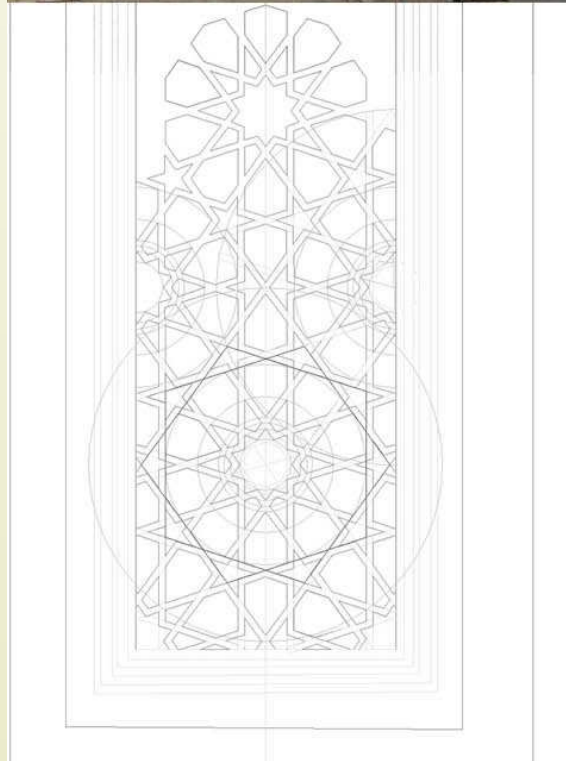
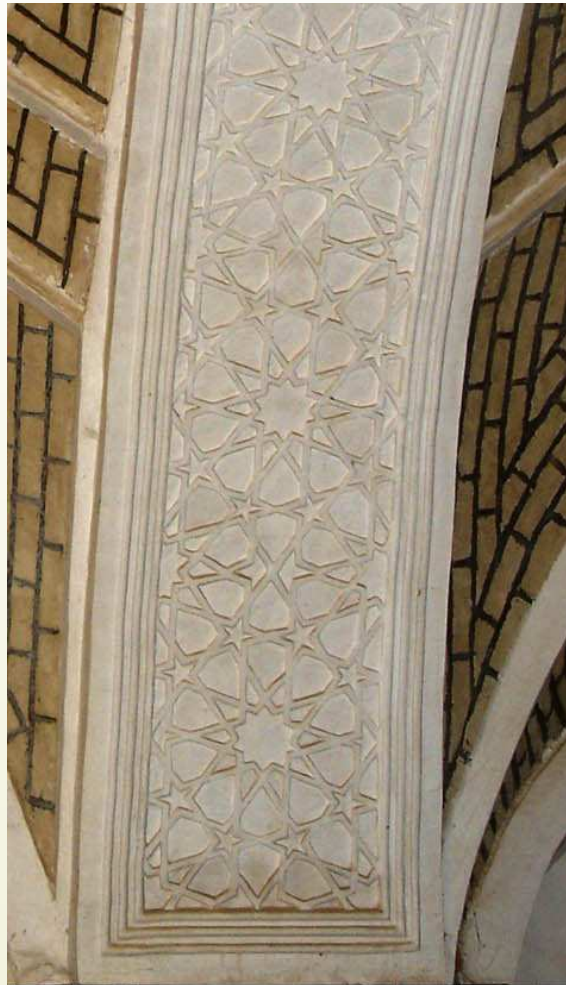


Figure 12. Details of arches plaster decoration.

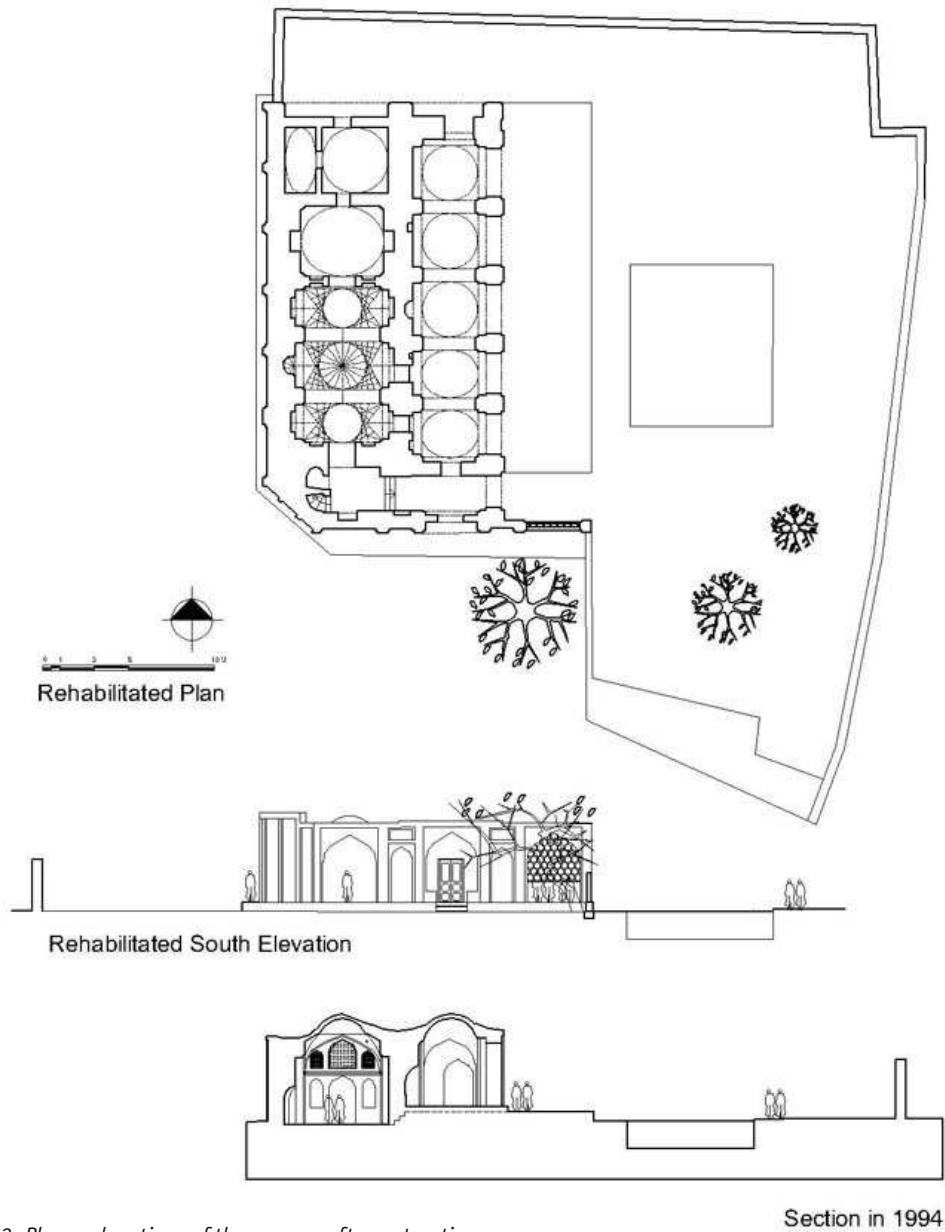


Figure 13. Plan and sections of the mosque after restoration.

lime plaster. For the external finish of the roof, the traditional technique of waterproofing with a layer of lime-mud plaster before covering it with a layer of mud-straw plaster was applied.

While attempts were made to restore the building to its original form, in certain areas the team introduced enhancements which were thought to better suit the future use of the spaces. On the southern elevation additional bay was added to

the composition of the facade, in order to provide both symmetry to the blank arcade flanking the entrance and to enclose the courtyard. In doing this a screen was built within the extended arch allowing a visible connection between the courtyard and the street.

As a result of the lessons learned and capacity built during the conservation of the Ghalwar mosque the team moved on to restore a further



nine important historic structures in other historic neighborhoods of Herat, such as Mahal-i-Araban, Abulwalid, Mahal-i-wardaka, Baraman, Mahal-i-Babajji, that belonged to Enjil district (north of the river Harirud), and Ziaratja at southern part of Herat valley. Also the team continued restoration at Shahzada Abdullah and the Gowharshad in Kohsan (west of Herat).

One of the concerns, upon completing the restoration, was how the site would be looked after and maintained in the years to come. Traditionally village elders would collectively take the responsibility of maintaining communal buildings which they considered common property. But at the time of completing the restoration, not many of the former inhabitants of the village had returned and it was not clear whether the previous social structure and sense of responsibility was intact.

Working for Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Herat in 2004-06, I went to re-examine Ghalwar project.



Figure 14. Screen of brick work implemented in the mosque and school buildings.

Figure 15. Ceiling details of the restored prayer hall (photo by Claus Christensen, 1994).

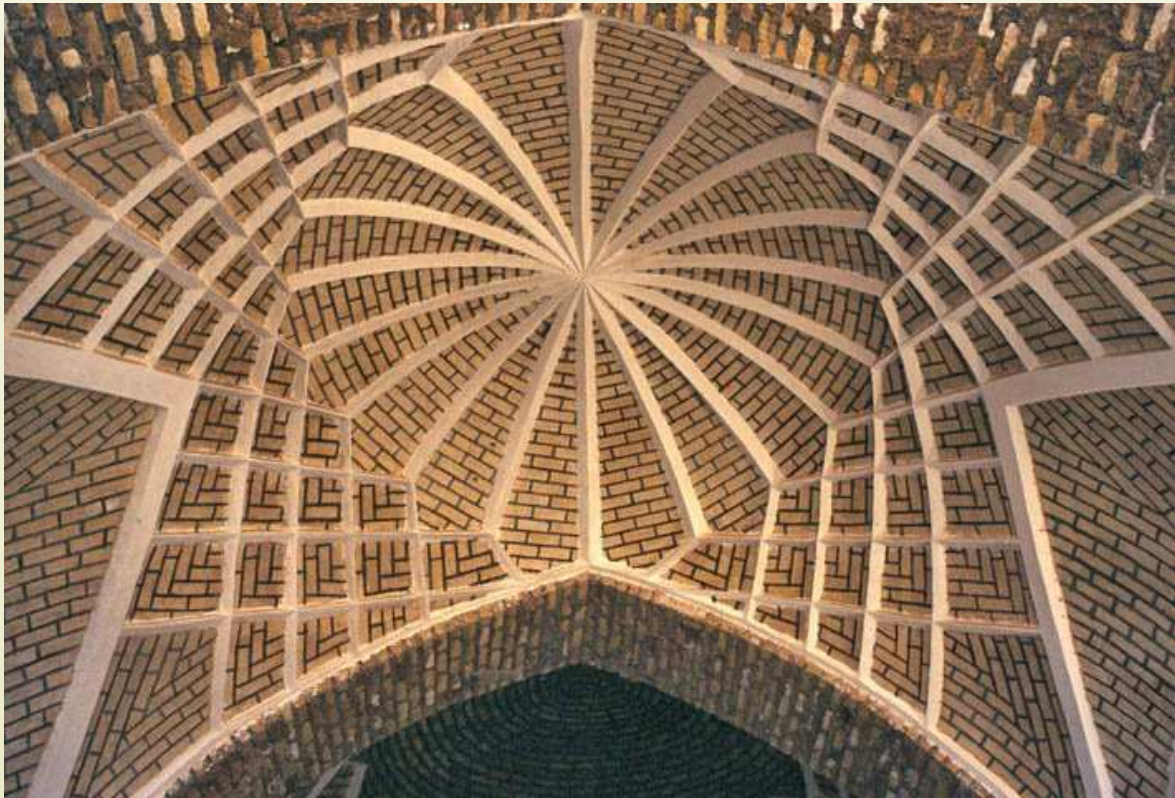




Figure 16. Interior of the winter praying hall of the mosque and children taking primary education (2005).



To my pleasant surprise, on many of the visits that I have made to the village after the restoration, the mosque and related buildings were found well maintained and kept clean. It became very interesting for me as an architect to observe how people used the spaces restored through this exercise. The mosque was used both as a space to pray and to teach increasing numbers of pre-school children (figures 16-18). The grandson of Baba Khair Mohammed, who was foreman during the restoration, was one of those learning from the Imam in the mosque. Contrary to what it was intended for the women prayer area to become, I discovered that the Imam of the mosque had occupied the room for himself. Another addition to the building by the community was the introduction of wiring for lighting within the building. At the time of the restoration, Ghalwar did not have electricity but since 2001 electricity has been brought to the village. In hindsight it would have been better to provide for electrical wiring in the building in anticipation of the electricity.

Community participation for upkeep was seen, but the Afghan Department of monuments of Herat province should still guard this unique heritage.

*Figure 17. Roadside view of the mosque building.*

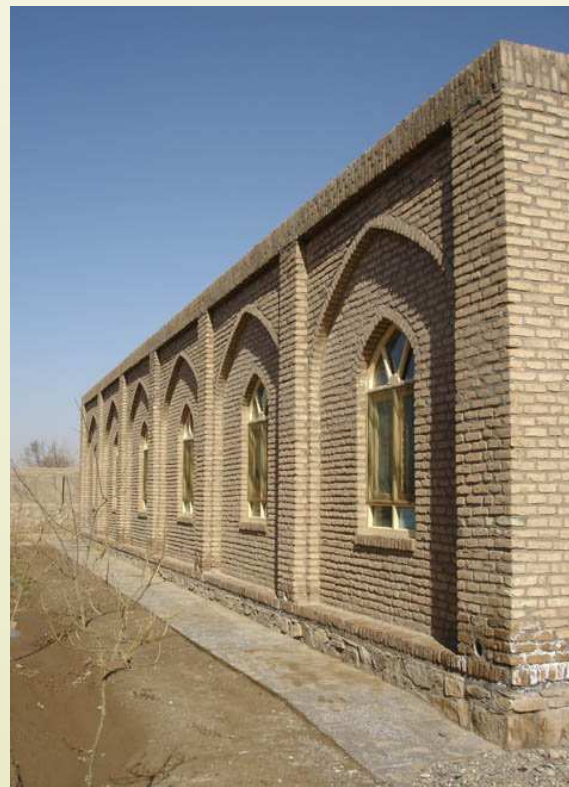


### **Building the New Girls School**

In the second stage of the project in Ghalwar, applying lessons learned in the conservation of the mosque, a new school was built to the north of the mosque using traditional materials and techniques. Funds for the school came from DANIDA and the “Friends of Herat”, a French organization created by Christina L’Homme the widow of a Frenchman Stefane Thiollier that had died in France shortly after his visit to Herat in 1991.

Since the building was to be located a few meters from the mosque it seemed important from the beginning that the new school must be built in harmony with the existing building. The team designed a structure of brick arches and vaults. The building was composed of six classrooms, a teachers’ room and a store-room. While the base plan of the building was derived from an L-shape access corridor, the space at the intersection

*Figure 18. Western Facade of the school building (2005).*



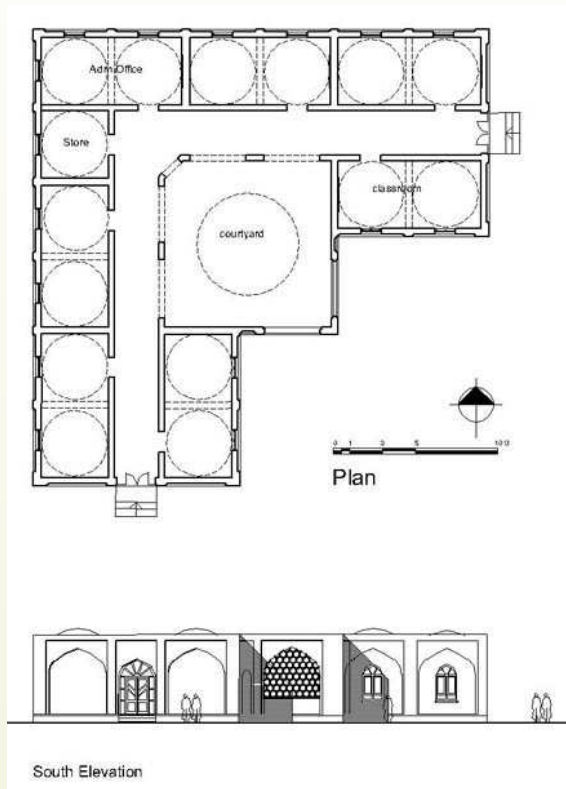


Figure 19. Plan and Elevation of the school building.



Figure 20. The protected patio of the girls school (2005).

provided a secured open space (figure 19). The team of craftsmen and laborers responsible for the restoration of the mosque were transferred onto this project.

In the design of the school, built in the context of children protection, it was important that the building provided both a place for learning and better security for the children. The building is accessible from two entrance doors, which could be locked while the children are in classes, and incorporated an external courtyard space for them to rest during class breaks.

The screened arcade of the courtyard was built of normal bricks, at kids' eye-level outwards, allowing them to see outside. While designing the screens, which were derived from the new screens added to the entrance wall of the mosque complex, one would have thought that they would not last very long. But since the screen made sense as local and traditional solution, it was pursued and have lasted so far (figures 20 and 21).

The original plan allowed for the landscaping of the site, and designs were made for a children's playground. As a result of water shortage in the community the planned greening of the site did not happen. But at a later stage the community constructed a boundary wall around the site in order to protect the property and allow only one access from the street.

Visiting this building 10 years later I was relieved to see that the structure was still there and stable. A lack of regular maintenance and cleaning had resulted in problems with the gutters. In post 2001 Herat, with funds from USAID, a private company painted the interior of the building and laid a water-proofing layer over the roof. The irony is that after completing this work the contractors replaced the original marble tablet with a new plaque out-





Figure 21. South-eastern view of the school building (2005).

side the boys school building, in which they indicated that the whole construction was built by them and with USAID funding. This shows both the lengths to which unscrupulous contractors go to make a profit and how a donor confined behind heavy security walls, but wanting immediate visibility could be deceived.

More of the village is reconstructed by now and the city has expanded until here. The road from Herat city and westwards to Rawashan passes some 112 meters south of the Ghalwar mosque, and has been recently widened implementing the 1962 city master plan. If asphalted for two way traffic as intended it would increase the urbanization process in Ghalwar, and much of its land could be transformed into buildings in a short time. When land is being transformed to construction, the pattern of agrarian employment is lost and the peasants would look for other jobs. Therefore, more shops and road-linked-services might emerge with consequences of a change in the character of Ghalwar, calling for safeguarding its heritage.

## Conclusions

The Ghalwar project is a good example of sustainable conservation and construction of new village buildings. It was a real laboratory for learning as well as teaching young architects and masons in

traditional modes of construction and the use of local building materials. It is also an indicator for a better maintenance and usage once the community participation, local ownership and capacity building were all pursued. Ghalwar was the first of nine community complexes restored as post-war reconstruction after 1992. It was important to safeguard the artwork of glazed tiles of this unique *mihrab* in Herat. Lessons learned from this exercise paved the way for the fast implementation of similar projects in other historic neighborhoods. These projects were good examples of cost efficiency. The direct costs of restoration of the mosque were around US\$ 9000 and of the school building around US\$ 12000.

The screen walls provided in the mosque and the school gives protection to the space where children could stay, a space outside their homes to play, learn and grow not too far from their elders and families. When a significant part of the village population was displaced they received education in camps and therefore they are now more desirous to go to school in their home village.

A functioning coordination between the government departments and the people needs to be at place to ensure protection of heritage, maintenance and appropriate use for the benefit of the living community.

Donors need to understand the real needs of the people and communities and should allocate funds according to local perceptions in order to serve the purpose most effectively, instead of trying to achieve quick visibility. One can do larger conservation works, but it is the smaller-scale projects – like public bath-houses, popular shrines and smaller mosques - that have had the most impact on people.

Danish contribution in safeguarding Afghanistan's heritage had been considerable in earlier times through UNESCO. Jen Hertz worked in consolidation of the main iwan of Gazargah complex and Erik Hansen restored the Ghurid portal to the Grand mosque of Herat in late 1960s. He also worked in documentation and re-installation decorative panels belonging to Lashkergah's royal mosque in the national museum of Kabul. Flemming Aalund worked in the restoration of Herat Citadel in 1977-78. Conservation works in Herat in early 1990s had positive impact on revival of villages and re-settlement of the returning refugees. But today Denmark has only army in Afghanistan. The majority of the 734 soldiers, among whom 34 women, stay mostly in Helmand which is another rich heritage site of Afghanistan. But Danish architects are not around.

Based on the embassy's website, Denmark's overall engagement amounts to 200 million USD per year. Development assistance alone is 80 million USD per year, some for support to education. But not much funds are given to Heritage nor education in architecture and planning, which is one of the immediate needs for the fast transforming sites and cities.

In January 1993 when we left Peshawar together with my colleague Bernt Glatzer to set-up the new DACAAR branch-office in Herat, Erik Christensen (from Ribe, Denmark) the then director of that



Figure 22. The protected patio linking the two corridors building (photo 2005).

NGO, saw us off at the airport asking me to promise that that I will do something good for the war damaged monuments of community importance in Herat. The year before, he had seen the damages to the Herat monuments. I kept my promise, but Erik could not see the results as he sadly passed away in mid 1993 in Nepal.

I dedicate this article to him.

### The Conservation Team:

**Conservation Architect:** Abdul Wassay Najimi

**Assistant architect:** Najib Ameri

**Government supervisor:** Haji Abdul Ahad

**Masons:** Khalifa Ahmad, Gul Mohammad

**Plaster works:** Ein-ul-Din, Mentor: Ustad Qamar

**Community Representative:** Baba Khair Mohamed

**Resource:** Flemming Aalund, Architect & Claus Christensen, Denmark

**Funded by:** Danida, EU & Friends of Herat

**Year completed:** Mosque 1994, School 1995



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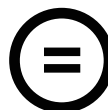
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