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INTRODUCTION TO THE PORTRAITS

Afghan culture and Afghan ownership are keywords in rebuilding Afghanistan. In this portrait book fourteen Afghans and one Dutchman, with his heart in Afghanistan, give their view and sentiments on the importance of cultural heritage for their country's present and future.

These portraits capture the stories of the people working in the National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul and for the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace project. Young or old, men or woman, craftsman or director; all the Afghans involved have a very interesting history and personal involvement with these two cultural heritage sites. For them, it is an opportunity to learn a profession and earn a living, it is an opportunity of local ownership and above all, it is an opportunity to safeguard their Afghan cultural identity.

Enjoy reading Another Afghan Story and be inspired.



HIS EXCELLENCY OMAR S. SULTAN

DEPUTY MINISTER OF CULTURE
AFGHANISTAN

“As a democracy we cannot tell people what to see, what to watch and what to do. But we need to give people awareness about our own culture. The young generation has not seen the culture of Afghanistan. During war it was complete destroyed. Through culture we should do the same thing now. Unite Afghans.”

CULTURE OF PEACE

Afghanistan's Deputy Minister of Culture, the dapper Omar Sultan is busy. After thirty years during which war and conflict warped, vitiated and virtually wiped out most of Afghanistan's culture, there is much work to be done. Art galleries to be rebuilt, artists supported, music schools set up, traditional musical instruments revived, theatres reconstructed and Afghanistan's historical monuments, artifacts and sites to be preserved. Sultan is well placed to understand this, having grown up steeped in the country's rich and pluralistic culture. As a fourteen-year old Omar Sultan was playing the guitar with a pop group he formed along with his schoolmates which included Ahmed Zahir, the legendary Afghan singer. “I was the first one to introduce the guitar to Afghanistan. I studied in the School of Classical European Music and learnt notation. At that time there were many cultural exchange programmes. We had Indian classical musicians and American jazz artists coming here.”

“We need to step away from the culture of war to the culture of peace. We would like to show the world that we have a culture that we want to share. Afghanistan is not killing, bombing or burkha.”

EXPOSING YOUTH TO CULTURE

It is not just the outside world that has grown used to images of Afghanistan at war. An entire generation of young Afghans has also grown up knowing little else. “We want to create awareness for the young generation of Afghans. Some of them have grown up in other countries. For example the looting that is taking place in the archeological sites. You cannot stop it without the people. You cannot get their approval by force. We need to have the cooperation of the people.”

One way of securing this, says Sultan, is to introduce the ancient culture through exhibitions and displays, something he feels the National Museum located in Kabul has already begun. “We have already started at the museum- bringing kids to the museum to come and look. I was very happy when I went the other day to the museum and saw young people from the university and our curators explaining the history to them. The building is ready for visitors. We have showcases. Some exhibitions have been held and I would like to see every two-three months a different exhibition.” Already he points out; around 10,000 antiquities have been returned to the museum. “Of course we have economic difficulties. I would like to ask the whole world to help us, to build provincial museums, be-

cause Afghanistan is not just Kabul and we have to respect other provinces. We need such museums all around Afghanistan. All Afghans have a right to see their own antiquities and heritage. That will make them feel more important, more respected.”

The Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace project is a beginning in this direction, says Sultan, expressing appreciation for the help received from the Dutch government. “The ethnographic museum that is being built; people are very happy with it. People need to see something is happening. They can see it in this project. I think 50% of the work is already completed. The local people are participating in the work and they are learning the skills. It is also a source of employment for them.” The revival of the garden at the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace is especially important,” he says, “because Afghans love to go on picnics.”

“Once, hopefully, inshallah – we have to be positive – one day the security of Afghanistan is going to be solved. Archeological sites and ancient monuments will play a very very big role in bringing tourism. You know before the pro-Russian coup d'état in 1978 tourism was the second income for Afghanistan. I would like it to be the first income.”

UNITING AFGHANS

Creating a sense of belonging, of national unity is an issue that Sultan feels strongly about, having felt its strength growing up in Kabul. “To be honest with you when I grew up in Afghanistan I never knew who belonged to which tribe. We are all Afghans. We were all Muslims and I did not know which sect it was – Shia or Sunni.”

“The culture played a role in the past. I think it was the source of Afghans to be united. Unfortunately in thirty years of war and later on, Afghans have lost their identity. Personally I believe that it is culture that will unite back the whole country. All the Afghans are proud of their cultural heritage that exists. As a democracy we cannot tell people what to see, what to watch and what to do. But we need to give people awareness about our own culture. The young generation has not seen the culture of Afghanistan. During war it was complete destroyed. Through culture we should do the same thing now. Unite Afghans.”

Omar Sultan has a sense of urgency and argues that culture is not a luxury that can wait. “You see the loss for the last 30-35 years and you see the result. They have to pay attention to the culture. It cannot wait. If you wait, every day the stability of Afghanistan is in danger.”

**PORTRAITS NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF AFGHANISTAN**



OMARA KHAN MASOUDI

DIRECTOR NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN

DESTRUCTION OF AFGHAN HERITAGE

Afghanistan's National Museum located in Kabul stays open seven days a week. Though museums all over the world have a weekly day off, this National Museum cannot afford any holidays, says museum director Omara Khan Masoudi. It has already lost too much time. The years of war and conflict in Afghanistan when the National Museum stood between the frontlines of opposing sides poised to take control of Kabul city, forced the closure of the museum many times – sometimes for days and at other times for weeks, and even months at a time. One, maybe two generations of Afghans have grown up without knowledge of their history and culture, and now, there is no time to lose, says Masoudi: “We want the museum to be open-everyday – so that people can come.”

As the director of the National Museum, he saw his beautiful city torn apart – through the eighties and nineties, watching the changing fortunes and twists and turns of history with successive regimes, bloody battles and internecine warfare. He saw the museum building come under shelling and rocket attacks and being looted. “Between 1992 and 1994 the museum was cut off. There was too much fighting and heavy artillery being used in the area. We

could not come there.”

In 1996 with the Taliban government taking control in Kabul, initially there was a semblance of stability as the fighting stopped. But as the conservative regime became more and more isolated from the international community and more influenced by its Al Qaeda partners, hardline Islamic edicts began to be imposed. Initial promises to safeguard the artifacts and historical sites were forgotten and orders were given to pull out and destroy all artifacts from the museum that bore resemblance to living beings. By then Masoudi and his liberal vision were no longer acceptable and he fled to Pakistan to live out the rest of the Taliban rule there.

When he returned, the museum was in ruins, its roof missing and most of its treasures looted or lying shattered in the midst of the debris. After the initial phase of emergency repairs the museum reopened to the public in 2002. That year there were only 2000 visitors. Since then donor help has helped to restore the museum as the number of visitors has grown, and the first seven months of this year alone saw 11,000 visitors.

A NEED FOR REGIONAL MUSEUMS

Three decades of war has meant not only the destruction of physical infrastructure and collection

“Deprived of peace and stability and dependent on donor countries for economic wellbeing, a younger generation of Afghans has grown up not understanding the pride that their parents had in a country with an ancient past and history. The ancient culture we belong to is not limited to this time or place. Seeing the objects in the National Museum can clear the minds of the youth.

We need the youth, educated youth to work here and this year we are lucky we have four of the best students of the department who have joined us. They show the visitors around and explain things to them. We are extremely lucky. The future of the museum must be in the hands of the youth.”

of artifacts, but also the destruction of the cultural space: the appreciation of art and music, the understanding of history, the interest in different cultures. War meant surviving from day to day and part of the survival was based on denying space to other groups, other cultures, since whatever was alien constituted a threat. “The youth of today, the children, they do not know what their history is. They do not know what a museum is or why it is important. They want to bring modern things” says Masoudi.

Deprived of peace and stability and dependent on donor countries for economic wellbeing, a younger generation of Afghans has grown up not understanding the pride that their parents had in a country with an ancient past and history. “The ancient culture we belong to is not limited to this time or place. Louis Dupree found artifacts from 120,000 years ago in Dasht e Naur in Ghazni. Seeing the objects in the National Museum can clear the minds of the youth,” says Masoudi.

The museum director takes great pride in the museum in Kabul but is adamant that all the country's heritage cannot be stored under one roof but must benefit people all over Afghanistan. “We must have museums in different provinces, especially near the ancient sites. Everyone cannot

travel to Kabul to visit this museum. People must have museums in their own provinces. If we have museums close to the sites of the excavation the local people can visit it and understand the important of the artifacts. Once they understand the value they will safeguard it, they will prevent it from being stolen.”

THE YOUTH IS THE FUTURE

Masoudi feels the National Museum can play a big role in creating space and tolerance. “The role of the museum is very important. Afghanistan has different ethnic groups. They have lived like brothers in the past. When people come here to the museum they can see and understand the different groups easily.”

Most of the visitors are youth and many of them children. While many of them may come to gape at the strange artifacts, most of them go back having learnt something of their own culture. “We need the youth, educated youth to work here and this year we are lucky we have four of the best students of the department who have joined us. They show the visitors around and explain things to them. We are extremely lucky. The future of the museum must be in the hands of the youth,” says Masoudi, looking every bit a youth himself in his enthusiasm.



FAUZIA HAMRAZ SAFI

DIRECTOR OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC DEPARTMENT NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN

“The ethnographic objects are the identification of our country. Our customs, our clothes, are what identify us as Afghans when we travel outside; they are distinct. The role of the museum is very important in displaying this. It is important for people of Afghanistan – those who lived outside as refugees- to learn who we are, what we are.”

LOOTING

When Fauzia came to work one morning, she found the locks broken and many of the cultural treasures missing. Gone were many of the beautiful rugs and carpets, made by different tribes and collected painstakingly. Gone were many pieces of the jewellery made by different ethnic groups. It was the beginning of the end and before long Fauzia also had to leave the country. It was the early nineties and the mujahideen had just taken power in Kabul, presaging a long period of civil war in Afghanistan.

Fauzia Hamraz Safi is the director of the ethnographic department in the National Museum. The feisty 47-year old woman has spent 27 years working with the National Museum, and with the ethnographic department since it was set up in 1983. At that time, she recalls, the display of the ethnographic department itself was larger than the display in the entire National Museum today. “We had 11 galleries, each devoted to a different tribe. We had displays divided into themes. Ethnic groups, religious minorities like the Hindus; the culture and customs of each was on display. I bought most of the artifacts in the bazaar, but I was helped by the members of the tribes and religious groups who would show me how the objects were

used and had to be displayed.”

At that time the ethnographic department was in Chaman e Huzuri next to the Ghazi stadium in Kabul. In 1985, increasing mujahideen resistance against the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan led to greater insecurity and the shifting of the ethnographic museum to the Presidential palace grounds. The display stayed there through the withdrawal of the Soviet troops, the fall of the Najibullah government and the mujahideen government taking control in Kabul. On a daily basis there were rocket attacks on the city. Still Fauzia continued to come. “I thought: I am a Muslim. If it is in my fate I will survive- or not.”

RESTRICTIONS FOR WOMEN

Internecine fighting and the resulting lawlessness led to the depredation of artifacts from the ethnographic department. “I would lock the doors each day before I went home. When I returned in the morning the locks would be broken. Beautiful pieces of jewellery, lovely carpets, all collected with care - began disappearing. I was so sad. I would complain in writing to the ministry. I would ask why they were doing this? I asked them to come and check the objects. They didn't do anything. I would complain each time to those

in charge of security. They didn't care. They would tell me: ‘We have taken over the government. These things belong to the government. So they belong to us’. ”Underlying the claim was a blatant threat: “They would say: ‘On the way here we killed five or six persons.’”

Despite the odds Fauzia continued with her work. In order to get around the city she adopted the ‘chadori’ a large all-enveloping scarf that was required by women going out in public because of the conservative values of the mujahideen. But soon the Chadori was not enough. The mujahideen government fell and with it came the Taliban with their new edicts. “They announced that women could not go out without the burkha. When I went to the ministry for work I could see they did not look at women with respect. They would question why I was there. My daughters could not study. We could never have imagined the bad behavior of the Taliban. I finally left for Iran.”

AFGHAN IDENTITY RESTORED

Though Iran provided safety, Fauzia was homesick throughout her stay, feeling physically sick with longing for her country and she returned as soon as she could after the fall of the Taliban government. When she returned to her place of work- the

National Museum, there was nothing left. “There was no office, no chair, no table, no roof no floor. All these Nuristani statues you see today were completely broken, shattered.” Fauzia collected the pieces and saved them. They were put back together with the help of an international expert restorer and are now housed in a one room display. Fauzia hopes that with time the ethnographic display can expand and include the diverse and varied culture of Afghanistan. “The ethnographic objects are the identification of our country. Our customs, our clothes, are what identify us as Afghans when we travel outside. They are distinct. The role of the museum is very important in displaying this. It is important for people of Afghanistan – those who lived outside as refugees- to learn who we are, what we are. Our history, our past, the Buddhist period before Islam.”

Fauzia fears that unless people learn about their own customs, the influence of outside cultures may wipe out the traditions of Afghanistan. “In my home we use the old traditional Afghan ways of decorating, not the new imported methods. If people can understand their own culture they will know they are all Afghans. It is not important whether they are Hazara, Uzbek or other tribe. We are just Afghans.”



MOHAMMAD FAHIM

CURATOR, PALEOLITHIC PERIOD,
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN

“When I joined the National Museum I was aware I will not have too much money. But I was interested in this subject. I like ancient things. I like history. I am interested in old things... I have one goal personally. That the young people should know about the rich history and culture of this country. Then they can preserve it from looting and destruction... The role of the museum is very important in identification of Afghans with their history.”

GROWING UP

When he was growing up Mohammed Fahim’s father would tell him stories. “He would talk about the ancient sites and their history. He would talk about the customs and how they are celebrated.” It was only through the stories of his father, a policeman, that his country’s past became alive to Fahim. A child of the years of conflict, Fahim was born in 1982 when the country was in the throes of the war against the Soviets. By the time he was old enough to see things for him, the war was in full spate, and traveling around quite unsafe.

In 1992 Fahim’s family moved out of Kabul, a city that was a seat of power and craved as a prize by competing sides, being destroyed in the violence unleashed to gain control over it. The family lived on its patch of agricultural land in his village in the Logar province, farming to make ends meet, and Fahim had to join the village school.

It was only in 2004, after completing his studies in the Kabul University that Fahim came to the museum for the first time and was pleasantly surprised. “We had only heard from our teachers how it had been destroyed by the rocket attacks and bombard-

ment. We did not know it was being rebuilt.” Now in 2009, he has become one of the first curators, with responsibility for the Paleolithic period, a bright young man who is seen as a great asset to the museum.

JOINING THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

The decision to join the museum could not have been easy for Fahim. Educated youth with a good knowledge of English are in great demand and can command lucrative jobs with the international community working in Afghanistan. In contrast a government job pays little. “When I joined the National Museum I was aware I would not have too much money. But I was interested in this subject. I like ancient things and I like history.” It was a goal that was supported by his father who passed away three months after Fahim joined the museum in 2007, proud that his son had joined the prestigious National Museum.

“I have one goal personally. That the young people should know about the rich history and culture of this country. Then they can preserve it from looting and destruction. There is no place in Afghanistan that does not have an ancient site. Displaying

the objects in the museum helps us to know the different tribes and that ever tribe belongs to Afghanistan. The history and culture of this country belongs to all people living here.”

When young visitors come to the museum Fahim is one of those who takes them around and explains the provenance and context of the objects they see and this is not always an easy task. Growing up under rigid ideological religious regimes, many of the youth have been taught to reject pre-Islamic cultures as well as customs and habits of different tribes and regions. Many are children of migrants who have grown up ignorant of their ancient past, having had no opportunities in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran to connect with their own history and culture. “When I show them the objects, the idols for example, I try to explain that these are not against Islam. They are not meant to be seen as objects of worship. They are unique pieces of our ancient past- and each one tells a story.”

LEARNING FROM AFGHAN TREASURES

It is not just the ancient objects that interest Fahim, but also the intangible heritage and he has taught the subject after translating the conven-

tions of 1972 and 2003 into the local languages. “The role of the museum is very important in identification of Afghans with their history” he says. “I try to be patient with all the visitors and answer all their questions. I tell them that they can ask me anything they want and if I do not know the answer I will try and find out,” says Fahim with the gravitas and seriousness of his 27 years.

Working with the museum has given Fahim a chance not just to share his knowledge with young Afghans but also outside Afghanistan. “When people think of Afghanistan they just think of war. They know it just because of the fighting. But when we exhibit our treasures in other countries they realize Afghanistan has a history beyond the years of war.” Fahim treasures the memory of a visitor to the travelling exhibition of Bactrian gold that was exhibited in a San Francisco museum. The old lady had to be practically dissuaded from visiting Afghanistan, since she was completely amazed with what she saw of the ancient objects. “She just had one question for me: ‘How can I go to Afghanistan and see these ancient sites and beautiful things.’ I had to tell her it was a little bit difficult just now.”



KAKA NADIR & ISHMAEL MOHAMMED

CLEANERS AND GUARDS AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFGHANISTAN

“It was during the time of the Taliban that I was here. I do not remember who was in charge of the museum. It was some Kandahari. (Kandahari Pashtuns were the seat of power during the Taliban rule). It was difficult to protect the objects inside the museum. There was no roof. There was no storage to protect the objects from the sun and the snow. A rocket had damaged the front door. No one came those days. There were no visitors. Nothing was happening.”

THE TREASURES UNPROTECTED

Kaka Nadir (‘Uncle’ Nadir as he is known, since no one uses his real name Nadir Mohammed) and Ishmael Mohammed cannot read or write. They have worked as manual laborers all their lives, living from hand to mouth. Yet both the men have had a long association with the museum, having seen it during the worst of times, when all the educated staff had fled the country or left their jobs.

95-year old Kaka Nadir who is now working as a cleaner and guard at the museum and remembers how terrible it had become. “It was during the time of the Taliban that I was here. I do not remember who was in charge of the museum. It was some Kandahari. (Kandahari Pashtuns were

the seat of power during the Taliban rule). It was difficult to protect the objects inside the museum. There was no roof. There was no storage to protect the objects from the sun and the snow. A rocket had damaged the front door. No one came those days. There were no visitors. Nothing was happening.”

THE DUST OF KABUL

Kaka Nadir’s memory is not sharp in details. But he does remember earlier days and how different they were. “It was during the time of Zahir Shah – I think. I was young and I used to come very often to the National Museum. It was splendid. It was organized well and beautiful with sumptuous carpets on the floor. Tarzi was there then. The

gardens laid out by Amanullah used to be in full bloom. We had picnics here. We would come on Fridays and stay until midnight. All that was possible then.” What does the museum mean to him now? “The museum? What can I say about it? It is a job. My job. I clean the dust of Kabul from the things here.”

PUTTING BREAD ON THE TABLE

Ishmael Mohammed is about half the age of Kaka Nadir, but looks like an old man. Life in Afghanistan can be brutally hard and Mohammed has seen its face. He broke his arm and leg cleaning snow from the roof as a young boy and had to drop out of school. Soon after, both his parents passed away and he became the breadwinner of the family.

Mohammed’s introduction to the museum was by accident, during the time of the Taliban. Working as a day laborer he was one of many who were brought in to repair the roof. “It was a bad time. There had been so much rocket shelling. The walls were broken. There was nothing here. No one. All the things had already been looted during the civil war (between the Soviet and mujahedeen). Now it is a good place. It has been repaired. There are visitors and I have a job.” Mohammed’s job ensures that his five children can go to school. Mohammed cannot read about the objects in the museum and what they are. But he hopes his children will be literate. “I hope they will be able to read the Koransharif, and read the signs in shops. I cannot do that.



PORTRAITS BAGH-E JEHAN NAMA PALACE



ABDUL AHAD ABASSI

DIRECTOR OF PRESERVATION AND RESTORATION
OF HISTORICAL MONUMENTS AT THE MINISTRY OF
INFORMATION AND CULTURE OF AFGHANISTAN

A MONUMENTAL OFFICE

The office of Abdul Ahad Abassi, the Director of Preservation and Restoration of Historical Monuments at the Ministry of Information and Culture, is in a semi-circular room on top of one of Kabul's most beautiful monuments, the mausoleum of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan.

Abassi's office itself exemplifies many of the complex challenges of preserving historical monuments in present day Afghanistan. "We are not really supposed to be here, you know", says Abassi. "This should not be an office, it is a monument. But there was no other space available." Abassi's presence in the building has actually been a blessing in disguise. As part of a beautification plan around 50 years ago, the buildings fine red brick work was painted over with white paint, something Abassi had removed three years ago after he was able to produce a photograph dating back to 1928 to show the original building. Yet, every day there is pressure from other organizations who cannot see the sense of a red brick building which could be plastered over to make it neat, clean and shiny, and Abassi lives in fear of the day this beautiful monument will be turned over to an organization that lacks experience as well as appreciation of history.

With the organic growth of the country's historical and building traditions ruptured by war, the post-2001 building boom has been based on emulation of styles, sometimes several different styles merging in one building. The celebration of the garish and glittering has also often meant a disregard for the old and traditional as the country attempts to slough off its old skin, pockmarked by conflict and dusty with neglect. Creating an appreciation of the historical and the traditional with a view to its preservation is a constant challenge that Abassi faces.

COWS AND MUD

In terms of preservation Abassi is a purist, something that sometimes put him on a path of confrontation with others. "We have the Venice Charter, the International Conventions. Restoration should not change the shape or colour of the buildings, though modern materials can be used inside the walls – for example to create insulation," he says firmly. Finding traditional materials in Afghanistan is not a problem. One of the main building materials, mud, for example, is easily available. The transforming of the mud into the exact material required, with the addition of straw or lime or ash or hemp in the right quantity and with the right technique, is the real difficulty. Skills have been lost and most people

"We should not forget history. If we just wait until security has been restored completely before we do anything, we will lose these historical buildings. You know thousands of schools were burnt down during the war. Now you can build them again. If you destroy old buildings, you can rebuild them, but you cannot put the history back into them."

do not want to use time-consuming traditional methods. "I am very glad that AFIR bought cows to stamp the mud into the proper consistency for the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace project. In another project I had worked on, it took three months to convince the organization to use the correct technique." Abassi has been to the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace project several times and has enjoyed the discussions on the making of the traditional pakhsa (densified mud layers). "If you follow the traditional method, the walls will last 500 years. If you don't they will vanish in five." "Using the traditional methods also keeps alive the skills and transfers them to a new generation where they may otherwise have been lost completely", says Abassi. "There is such a shortage of skills that we sometimes have to take skilled workers from one province of the country to another to work on a particular project."

LOCAL INVOLVEMENT, LOCAL MATERIALS

Abassi is particularly happy with the local community involvement at Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace. "If you involve the local community as they (the CIE/AFIR) have done, in this project they will clean it, protect it and preserve it. If you just close the doors

and carry out the project people will not be interested. We make this for the people. It is not like the Serena (the barricaded luxury hotel across the street from his office). This is for the local community." The use of old traditional materials rather than modern concrete is just not historically accurate but also practical for living conditions. "Concrete for example retains water and increases the humidity inside the home, which can lead to rheumatism. The traditional organic materials dry the water and reduce humidity. When concrete is used in the repair of old historical buildings it can bring the water into the building and destroy it. The materials and the building techniques also kept the old buildings cold in summer and warm in winter." Asked why culture should be a focus of attention for Afghans and internationals when there are so many competing needs in Afghanistan, some as basic as food, shelter and water, Abassi agrees that those need to be met as well. "But besides those we should not forget history. If we just wait until security has been restored completely before we do anything, we will lose these historical buildings. You know thousands of schools were burnt down during the war. Now you can build them again. If you destroy old buildings, you can rebuild them, but you cannot put the history back into them."



MOHAMMAD SHARIF MOHAMMADI

SPECIALIST IN HISTORICAL BUILDINGS WORKING
WITH THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND CULTURE
DEPARTMENT IN THE PROVINCE OF BALKH IN
NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN

HISTORICAL SITES

As Mohammed Sharif draws deeply on his cigarette, gesticulating enthusiastically with one hand to explain an intricate point about the history of the monument in front of him, it is easy to forget that he is 64 years old. Despite difficult health, age and deep personal tragedies that have left him scarred, his years seem to fall away from his shoulders when he finds an audience interested in the subject dear to him- history and the monuments that are living symbols of the past.

Sharif is a specialist in historical buildings and has over four decades of experience in this field, having worked under successive regimes. He recalls with excitement how he was able to ensure a change in the flight path of a commercial airline after its flights endangered a historic monument. He recalls with disappointment how in the years of intense fighting there was neither money nor the political will to pay attention to history. Historical sites suffered- from neglect or because they were appropriated for use as government offices, military bases or command posts.

THE BAGH-E JEHAN NAMA PALACE

One building, which turned into a military base for successive regimes, was the Bagh-e Jehan Nama. Constructed in 1890-92 by Amir Abdur

Rehman Khan, the 'Iron Amir', the palace was a tribute to the town of Tashqurghan of which he had been made the Governor at the tender age of 9. The benevolent boy pardoned all taxes of the town, a decision reversed by his father, but the people of Tashqurghan retain a fondness for the Amir whose subsequent state policies saw the forcible resettlement of Pashtun tribes in the Northern areas in an effort to enfeeble his enemies and keep the North under his control.

The palace was built on a slight rise in the flat plain that is surrounded by jagged mountain peaks and close to the legendary river Oxus or Amu Darya. Its excellent location and the high fortress-like walls surrounding the large garden also made it an ideal military compound from where garrisons could defend themselves and launch attacks. "It was occupied by the Soviet troops and later the mujahideen and the Taliban. It was with the military commanders even after the Taliban fell, but they handed over the possession to us", says Sharif.

Balkh, situated on the site of the ancient Greek city of Bactria attracted many visitors over the centuries. Sharif himself recalls seeing Russian,

"During the war people were too busy trying to survive. Many went out of the country as refugees so they had no chance to learn about its history. Many of the young people living in Balkh today do not know about the history of Balkh. Maybe they study it in their text books but they haven't been able to see it with their own eyes. But this year for the first time we had visitors to Balkh, even to the Bagh e Jehaan Numa. They were students from different universities as far as Herat, Kandahar and Kabul."

French, Italian, British and Indian archaeologists working in the province. But the beginning of the conflict saw a dwindling of numbers. "The international tourists started becoming fewer and fewer in the time of Nur Muhammad Taraki" says Sharif. "Slowly they stopped altogether and later it became unsafe even for the Afghans to visit. Earlier, before the war, people had a good knowledge about their history. During the war people were too busy trying to survive. Many went out of the country as refugees so they had no chance to learn about its history. Many of the young people living in Balkh today do not know about the history of Balkh. Maybe they study it in their text books but they haven't been able to see it with their own eyes. But this year for the first time we had visitors to Balkh, even to the Bagh-e Jehan Nama. They were students from different universities as far as Herat, Kandahar and Kabul."

THE AFGHAN YOUTH AND THE PALACE

Sharif's own sons exemplify the difficulties that prevent many Afghan youth from learning more about their own culture. They both would like to spend more time learning their father's discipline but the pressure of time and money are a consid-

eration. His older son, who has a keen interest in history and historical monuments, earns money working as a translator for an international organization while the younger son attends classes in university as well as IT courses in addition to working part time.

"I have proposed to the Ministry to have a programme for teaching these things in school but so far they have not been able to do it. Mr Anne's programme (the program for teaching history of the area to school students initiated through the AFIR project) is very very very very important", he says repeating his words to stress their enormity. "They need to learn about the history so that they can preserve it and prevent its destruction". It is precisely because of this that Sharif believes work on historical monuments cannot wait until other more urgent needs are met. Work on both has to go side by side. "A good time for this work is now. If they know about the history they will not destroy it and will not allow others to destroy it or to excavate artifacts and smuggle them. They will also know about their ancestors. Who they were and how they lived. This is important for their future."



GHULAM RASOOL

CHIEF FOREMAN, BAGH-E JEHAN NAMA PALACE PROJECT AND FORMER MUJAHEDDEEN FIGHTER

“Bagh-e Jehan Nama was a good military target since the Russians were living inside. We wanted to attack and capture it. We made homemade bombs and threw them on the compound. We used a mixture of raisins, soap, oil, and acid mixed with fuel and we would light them and throw them in. Sometimes we would get rockets from Pakistan and fire them on the Bagh-e Jehan Nama. I knew they had a secret passage under the Bagh. They also used it as a jail for their prisoners.”

EARLIEST MEMORIES

Ghulam Rasool spent considerable amount of time shooting rockets and mortars at the Bagh-e Jehan Nama palace. Today he is the chief foreman (Boshi) on the construction site, raising the thick high boundary walls made of mud that defend the palace. What seems like an irony is actually a logical trajectory for this resident of Tashqurghan who was drawn by circumstances into the civil war and has emerged from it missing the toes of one of his feet, but his spirit undiminished by the traumatic events he witnessed and participated in.

Rasool’s earliest memories of the Bagh-e Jehan Nama are of being chased out of the garden by Fazl, the gardener as he tried to steal fruit from its extensive orchards. It was the fifties, and Afghanistan had another twenty years of peace under Zahir Shah. Belonging to an extremely poor family, Rasool did not go to school but worked from an early age as a tailor, and then a construction worker. He worked for two years as a manual laborer on the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace when it was renovated in the early seventies, its rotting woodwork replaced by concrete construction. After that he

worked on the ‘Tim’, the covered bazaar, and he was there when it was burnt down two years later.

HOMEMADE BOMBS

“The Russians came in helicopters and entered Tashqurghan. Then they brought tanks; the Tangi (the narrow gorge that forms the entrance to Tashqurghan from the south) was closed off. I joined the mujahedeen to fight the Soviet backed government. It was Babrak Karmal in power then. I joined them because the Russians were invaders. I got weapons to fight against the enemy.” It was while trying to seize an enemy tank that Rasool stepped on a mine that blew off his toes. He recovered in Pakistan where he was taken by other mujahedeen soldiers, but it was only one of 31 trips that he made into that country he recounts proudly as he crossed over for weapons and support which he would bring back to continue the fight. “After the blast injury I was in Pakistan for three months and then I came back and continued fighting.”

“Bagh-e Jehan Nama was a good military target since the Russians were living inside. We wanted

to attack and capture it. We made homemade bombs and threw them on the compound. We used a mixture of raisins, soap, oil, and acid mixed with fuel and we would light them and throw them in. Sometimes we would get rockets from Pakistan and fire them on the Bagh-e Jehan Nama. I knew they had a secret passage under the Bagh. They also used it as a jail for their prisoners.”

“After the Soviets were defeated I worked as an ordinary laborer, but things got difficult. Because the fighting started again, the roads were closed and there were no jobs. I didn’t join the fighting then. I was not with any side.”

TEACHING AND RESTORING

“I worked on building sides as a gillkar (mason) after learning the technique from Ustad (master) Samad. Now I am teaching the students those who work under my supervision. The technique we use here is a 200 or 300 years old technique from the time of the Ghaznavis. It takes an entire day to create the mixture that we use to build the surrounding walls of the Bagh-e Jehan Nama site. Now this

method is used only in historical buildings. Nobody uses it for ordinary buildings anymore.”

Though unlettered, Rasool has a strong sense of history, of his country, of Tashqurghan and the Bagh-e Jehan Nama. “Amir Abdur Rehman Khan was captured by the British and when he came back he made this garden for his wife. He moved to Kabul to fight the British invaders.”

Rasool hopes Bagh-e Jehan Nama will be restored to its past glory. “The palace should be preserved, it should not be destroyed. When people come to visit it because it is a historical site, the people will also benefit from the visitors. Someone will buy melons and someone else meat from the market.”

Rasool has no regrets about targeting the Bagh-e Jehan Nama during his days as a mujahedeen, saying it was his job to fight the Soviet troops. He also does not blame them for turning it into a military base. “It was a different time. There was a war. Both sides had to fight.”



FAZL AHMED

GARDENER AT THE BAGH-E JEHAN NAMA PALACE GARDENS

FRUIT TREES IN ABUNDANCE

At 74 years Fazl Ahmed has beaten the odds already. Life expectancy in this country is 43 years but the slower pace of life in Tashqurghan, and its well-integrated small community has probably helped him survive. It has also given his life continuity and an attachment with the history of the place that many other Afghan families, torn asunder by the conflict and displaced from their roots, do not have.

Fazl's association with Tashqurghan and the Bagh-e Jehan Nama dates back to the time of the builder of the palace Amir Abdur Rehman Khan when his grandfather, a Kandahari soldier in the Amir's army was given land to settle down in the area. After years of soldiering he turned to gardening, taking charge of the large grounds of the palace. Fazl's son now represents the fourth generation of gardeners and Fazl himself continues to work on the palace garden which is being revived. He remembers wandering through the gardens when it had fruit trees in abundance. "The garden had every kind of fruit tree. Peach, apricot, almond, grapes, figs and pomegranates, mulberry, yellow plums, pomegranates, sour plums." Did

you write peach?" He wants to know worried that the treasures of the garden will be reduced in number by a hasty scribble. "Peach, pear, apples, plum, cherry" he reels off.

"At that time Zahir Shah used to come with his wife or sometimes alone. It was a guest house for the royal family and they would come several times a year and it used to be opulent, with carpets, food, lights. The king would meet all the important people in the town. The governor, the mayor, the rich people and the traders. There would be banquets. During his initial visits he would arrive by car. Later on by plane." "Daud came too. I remember once he talked to people – just for twenty minutes and went back. That night there was the coup d'tat" (which overthrew the monarchy)."

OCCUPATION BY THE SOVIETS

With the next turn of the political wheel it was a Soviet-supported government and Soviet soldiers occupied the place. "The mayor told me: 'These soldiers are our guests and will stay for 10-15 days. Give them the keys.' I handed over the keys to them but they never left." With that Fazl Ahmed's

"When the Russian soldiers came the mayor told me: 'These soldiers are our guests and will stay for 10-15 days. Give them the keys.' I handed over the keys to them but they never left."

"I remember the earthquake. The earthquake came like a wave. As it receded the walls broke and the ceiling cracked. All the people from here, from Mazar – the rich people came to help us with clothes, shoes, other household needs of the people. But no one came to help repair the palace. No one came even to put one brick on top of another."

work as a gardener came to an end – for the time being. It was Russian workers who tended the garden which became part of the military base. "There was a basement of 4000 square metres under the garden. From here to the gate. When the mujahideen shelled from the mountains they hid in the basement." (This basement was destroyed during the time the Northern warlord Abdul Rasheed Dostum took control of the area after the fall of Soviet supported government.)

The Russian soldiers would use cannons to shell the town and the bazaar which was under the control of the mujahideen. When the mujahideen took control, they too occupied the palace but allowed Fazl to come in and collect the wild grass which he would sell outside. The only visitors to the Bagh-e Jehan Nama were those who came to meet the military commander. This continued through the Taliban times. "The town emptied out as people fled the area to different areas in the country" says Fazl who continued to live here. Fazl says there has been little difference to his life under the various regimes, but distinguishes the rule of Dr Najibullah as one which was good for the people.

After the fall of the Taliban, Tahir, a commander of the current Governor, General Atta Mohammad came here. The Taliban fled towards Kunduz.

SUMMER PICNICS

"After the palace came back into the possession of the government department of culture we first cleaned the palace and prepared some trees. But the real work started after AFIR came here. They started the restoration and have done good work. We are all happy with AFIR. People come to visit from Kabul, from Mazar. On holidays they come to picnic during the summer." Fazl would like to see "a good garden and a good park. The palace should be a museum. 36 years before they wanted to bring the national museum here, but when there was an earthquake everything was destroyed and they dropped the idea." "I remember the earthquake. The earthquake came like a wave. As it receded the walls broke and the ceiling cracked. All the people from here, from Mazar – the rich people came to help us with clothes, shoes and other household needs of the people. But no one came to help repair the palace. No one came even to put one brick on top of another."



ABDUL SHUKUR KHAN

LIBRARIAN AT THE
BAGH-E JEHAN NAMA PALACE

Abdul Shukur Khan may be the first curator of Afghanistan's first ethnographic museum even though he does not know it. The 57-year old librarian is in charge of the first public display in the palace that is still under renovation. In a tiny crowded room, he sits amidst old books, paper, photographs and artifacts collected and preserved painstakingly since possession of the Bagh-e Jehan Nama was returned to the Department of Historical Monuments of the Balkh province. Once the building is restored it is expected to become the first independent ethnographic museum of Afghanistan.

FIRST ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM

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Shukur Khan is from Tashqurghan. He has early memories of coming to the gardens as a school student to steal its fruit, bathe in the swimming

pool and have picnics after the school hours. "There used to be 18 gardeners keeping the garden spick and span then, and so many trees. I remember the cherries that grew here."

DISPLACED BY WAR

War interrupted the idyllic existence. Like many other Afghans Shukur Khan found himself driven out of his hometown by the conflict, becoming one of the millions displaced within the country by the violence of the war and the need for a subsistence living. Tashqurghan was on the frontlines with the military base of the Bagh-e Jehan Nama as a contested spot. "I went to Samangan (a neighboring province) and stayed there until the end of the war. I worked in the fields. I did not want to join the fighting so I had to leave." When he returned, Shukur Khan was shocked to see the ru-

ined garden and destroyed palace. "It has changed so much I could not believe my eyes." Now he sits in the midst of the palace under reconstruction, collecting objects, books, which he thinks, are important or precious. They might well be lost by the time the palace is ready to host the museum and a process for collecting, categorizing and storing objects is put into place. The museum, situated in the plains of Amu Darya, lies on the site of the ancient region of Bactria and it is not uncommon for farmers tilling their fields, or children playing in the grasses to stumble upon ancient objects. Years of war have prevented proper excavation, preservation and protection of archeological sites and Afghanistan, rich in myriad cultures that have passed through it, is replete with history a few inches under the ground. "People find things which they think might be old or important and

they bring it to me as gifts. I examine it and then if I keep it I give them a little money for their efforts" says Shukur Khan.

PASSING ON VALUES

His collection is not fancy or extensive, but this little room in the Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace is teaching people in the area the importance of conservation, the value of ancient objects and the reasons for putting them in safekeeping. It is also instilling in the people values that may help prevent the robbing, pilfering and smuggling of the country's treasures. Most importantly he is passing on these values to the younger generation many of whom come to visit him and borrow his books. Shukur Khan is never prouder than when he can satisfy the curiosity of a young mind seeking to learn more about his own history.



HAFIZULLAH AMIR KHAN

COOK AT THE HIGHWAY RESTAURANT TASHQURGHAN

“I used to go there to swim in the pool with friends when I was a child” he recalls. “Lots of tourists used to come there and also to see the Tim which was famous in Afghanistan. The air and water of the Tashqurghan was so good everyday 80-100 people would visit. I am glad that the palace is being rebuilt. More people are coming now to see the Bagh and when they visit the town they will need to eat so I hope to have more customers.”

REFUGEE IN PAKISTAN

The ‘Tim’, the covered bazaar of Tashqurghan was what attracted many visitors from far off places when the town was a bustling market on the trade route between Soviet Russia and Afghanistan. Traders from far off towns in Afghanistan and beyond would visit the cloth shop of Ustad Hafizullah Amir Khan, and he took pride in the quality of textiles he sold. When the ‘Tim’ was burnt down during the war – due to bombing by the Soviets the locals say - it ended a way of life and changed Hafizullah’s life for ever.

With his good shop as well as place of work gone, Hafizullah fled to Pakistan where he lived in the border town of Peshawar, which hosted millions of Afghan refugees. Like many Afghans who have been forced to give up their vocations

and take other, often menial, jobs in order to survive, Hafizullah looked around for work and realized that the influx of the Afghan refugee population had created a need for quick cheap Afghan food, with Afghan plates unused to the more spicy cuisine of the Indian subcontinent that dominates Pakistan. He opened a small hotel and worked as a cook until the Russians left. “I thought the country would be peaceful after the foreign soldiers left. But instead there was a war between the different sides.” Hafizullah found it difficult to come back to Tashqurghan and instead opened a shop in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

COOKING ALONG THE HIGHWAY

He returned to Tashqurghan after the fall of the Taliban, but is not quite home yet. His current shop sits on the main arterial road connecting

Central Asian countries to Afghanistan because that is where the business is. The through traffic carryings goods and people in a constant flow of trucks, buses and cars provides a steady business. But life is hard and there is no downtime. “I take four days off every year during Id” he says, sounding surprised at the question about whether he takes a weekly holiday. The only time he does not cook is when he is at home, where the women in his family take care of the meals. His shop upon the main road is only rented since he hopes he can build a more permanent one in the bazaar of the town of Tashqurghan eventually. He is waiting for the road running through the Bazaar to be finished and also, for more visitors to the town, visitors who will be visiting to see the Bagh-e Jehan Nama.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

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HASSAN KHAN & SAIFATULLAH

MASTER AND APPRENTICE CARPENTER
BAGH-E JEHAN NAMA PALACE PROJECT

CARPENTRY WORKSHOP IN THE PALACE

Hassan Khan's earliest memories of the Bagh-e Jehan Nama are of coming to the garden with his mother when he was five or six years old to celebrate Id and Nawroz. The gardens were open to the public and were the natural place of celebration for the Tashqurghan community though the palace itself remained out of bounds, reserved for the royal family. When he was six, things changed when the Soviet troops entered Afghanistan. Not much is the same now. The palace which hummed with life is empty, the rooms damaged, the garden depleted. Only the flocks of white pigeons which he used to see coming in flocks to bask on the warm and high fortress like walls surrounding the garden have returned to their perch.

But Khan now has a room for his carpentry workshop inside the palace under renovation and it buzzes with the sounds of brisk activity. He is constructing doors and windows for the damaged palace and at the same time training a new generation of young carpenters from Tashqurghan, in the skills that were passed on to him from his father and his grandfather, both of whom worked as carpenters.

TALIBAN PERIOD

Khan has had a long innings in carpentry. His school caught fire during the fighting. When two bombs exploded on his house his father was injured, forcing the young boy to become the family wage earner. Later, because the family lived in the part of the town controlled by the mujahideen, his father was arrested by the government soldiers.

During the Taliban there were other forms of harassment. "We had to change the clothes we wore and adopt the turban and pants worn in the South. Even when we prayed in one mosque the Talib soldiers would come and insist we had not prayed forcing us into another mosque and making us say our prayers twice over. Later they tried to recruit us into the Taliban forces." Khan and his brother fled to Mazar to avoid conscription. "No one knew us there in Mazar so we could work there. We lived there for four years and then returned to Tashqurghan."

TIME FOR BEAUTY AND DESIGN

Khan is happy to be working in the palace, which is regaining its prestige with a growing number

"During the war people did not have time or resources to think of beauty and design and beautiful objects. They just wanted a door or a window. Practical things."

"Everyone needs doors and windows to their house don't they? That's what makes this a good profession."

of visitors. "They come to me and ask about the history of the palace" he says, his voice full with a sense of ownership and pride. Working here he can also revive his skills for beautiful and delicate work, something for which there is appreciation amongst people once more. "During the war people did not have time or resources to think of beauty and design and beautiful objects. They just wanted a door or a window. Practical things."

TRAINING A NEW GENERATION

Practical things are indeed what draws Khan's apprentice Saifatullah to carpentry. "Everyone needs doors and windows to their house don't they? That's what makes this a good profession." Saifatullah is only 18 years old and has recently finished his school that was interrupted by the war and needs to start earn his living. His father is too old now to do the job of a traveling salesman as he used to do. The family depends on the earnings of Saifatullah and his older brother.

Saifatullah was born in 1991 and some of his earliest memories are of the Taliban regime, which took power in this area in 1998. He and his brothers would smuggle themselves out to attend

secret schools that were forbidden by the Taliban. This year Saifatullah has exercised his right to vote for the first time, and is hopeful about his life after the Taliban regime because "there is more freedom, a job, a better economy."

He is proud of the Bagh-e Jehan Nama "because it is historical and people are coming to see it. Tashqurghan does not have any other place to equal this. Many people are coming and this will help the economy of Tashqurghan."

He knows the palace is more than a hundred years old – but his knowledge of its history is a bit shaky and he is not sure who built it, naming another Afghan king nearly thirty years later. However where he goes wrong he has help at hand. His teacher, Hassan Khan jumps into the conversation to correct him, worried that his student will give the wrong impression to a visitor. Working with an experienced teacher means Saifatullah will learn much more than just his skills at woodwork.



ANNE FEENSTRA

PRINCIPAL AFIR ARCHITECTS AND
PLANNERS, KABUL AND Kholm

“We realized there was no way we could fix the palace without doing anything about the garden. The garden had to be addressed. Instead of imposing something and saying ‘this is good for you’ there was much more of a dialogue in the beginning of the project and we have managed to continue that. It is a lot of work, a lot of talking and even more listening but I believe over the past two years local people have taken ownership of the project which makes is sustainable.”

BUILDING AS CONSTANT DEVELOPMENT

Dutch architect Anne Feenstra is unusual in many ways, more so in Afghanistan where internationals working in the conflict zone find themselves constrained by myriad security restrictions and cultural hesitations, often spending their entire time behind barricaded compounds and armoured cars. Feenstra however can be found many a sunny afternoon strolling down the lanes and by lanes of old and new Kabul.

With two design teams in Afghanistan, Feenstra has had an unusual variety of projects – the visitors centres for the first two national parks, maternity waiting homes for pregnant Afghan women, the Bagh-e Jehan Nama in Kholm in North Afghanistan, work on the interior of the National Museum in Kabul along with other modern functional buildings. If Feenstra defies stereotyping, he reciprocates by refusing to stereotype the peoples, places and culture of a complex and difficult country.

Disputing the notion that time stood still during the years of conflict Feenstra says, “even in a conflict buildings are being built. I think it is a constant development.” What was lost was “the ability of Afghans to express themselves, that has been eroded and negatively influenced by that long

period where people didn’t have a lot of time to think about these issues. So what do you do? You live in Peshawar (Pakistan) you see the most powerful people had these kind of houses, so you build a house like that.”

THE BAGH-E JEHAN NAMA PALACE PROJECT

The Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace project is an example of Feenstra’s endeavour to combine historical preservation with a new function. Built in 1892 by the ‘Iron Amir’, the building became a military encampment after the loss of power of the royalty, was bombarded with artillery, burnt in parts and damaged severely by an earthquake. Through an “open definition process” AFIR invited Afghans and internationals to discuss a sustainable solution. The process continued in Kholm, the location of the project, with the local community. “We realized there was no way we could fix the palace without doing anything about the garden. The garden had to be addressed. Instead of imposing something and saying ‘this is good for you’ there was much more of a dialogue in the beginning of the project and we have managed to continue that. It is a lot of work, a lot of talking and even more listening but I believe over the past two years local people have taken ownership of the project which makes is sustainable.”

The next challenge was thinking about the impact of the new function of the palace, which is to become Afghanistan’s first ethnographic museum. The three separate wings could not remain separate allowing wind, dust and insects to enter if the museum was to preserve the artifacts. “It was a mixture of restoring and giving a contemporary solution for the new function of the building.”

The Bagh-e Jehan Nama Palace project has also turned into an educational programme, something that Feenstra who teaches architecture pro bono in the University of Kabul was keen on. The skilled artisans on the project site have been persuaded to take on apprentices - a transfer of skills, which would otherwise have been lost. AFIR has also prepared and introduced an educational component about the palace and local history into the local school curriculum to make children more aware. “I am happy that we were able to improve the garden with Dutch funding because it means a lot of people will go there to have a picnic. And because we have restored the historical walls the garden is a safe place. That will help eventually get visitors into the museum. Because how do you get local people into a museum? They sometimes don’t know what is a museum, what is the concept of a museum, but they know very well what a garden

is. If they spend time in the garden, curiosity will hopefully do the rest of the trick.”

CHALLENGE OF AFGHANISTAN

Working in Afghanistan has many challenges, some seemingly mundane, some with more serious consequences. Just before the restoration project in the National Museum could begin, Feenstra cut his toe on the broken steps, necessitating several stitches, something that could have been quite tricky in Afghanistan where good medical care is still difficult. Three years from then Feenstra can take pride in the fact that the smooth stone floors, new stairs, the new balustrade, the windows letting in light have made the museum a place that is easy to visit, safe to walk around in and one which can take a large number of visitors at the same time, something that is especially valuable for encouraging visits by groups of schoolchildren.

While the ongoing conflict imposes a number of restrictions on freedom of movement and requires imaginative solutions to complex problems, Feenstra, on principles refuses to work in the areas where the intensity of the conflict would require travelling in armoured vehicles or with armed guards or living in barricaded houses. The rule of thumb principle is simple: “We don’t work in areas where we cannot work with the people”.



MUSTAFA RAWAN

PROJECT MANAGER AFIR ARCHITECTS AND
PLANNERS, KABUL AND Kholm

“Culture is the bone structure of the country. The ancient historical monuments, they are what makes this country alive. The monuments tell that Afghanistan has a good history. Without them what would be there? What do we have now?”

PERSONAL FREEDOMS

He is 23 years old and likes the films of Jean Claude Van Damme and sci-fi movies. He wears his hair long, curling at the edges. He likes bright t-shirts and Indian soap operas. But Mustafa Rawan also has a keen feeling of his Afghan identity, and the need to preserve and build on what is uniquely Afghan.

Like many of Afghanistan's youth making ends meet while completing an education interrupted by conflict, Rawan studies in university while working in AFIR's architecture and design office in Kabul. He also represents the diversity of influences that shape Afghan youth today, challenging some aspects of Afghan tradition and culture while strongly upholding other aspects, finding out what it means to be an Afghan in a country different from the one his parents grew up in and one shaped, in part, by the intense force of conflict and the displacement of millions of citizens. If Rawan is keen to preserve aspects of Afghan culture he is also equally keen to preserve what he considers to be his personal freedoms. His hairstyle, for example has gotten him in trouble with both his father and the local cleric but Rawan is willing to spend hours arguing about the logic of

personal freedoms and why this does not impinge on his character as a good Muslim.

CULTURE IS THE BONE STRUCTURE OF THE COUNTRY

Rawan is a keen follower of Bollywood soap operas, he believes more films capturing the authenticity of Afghanistan's reality need to be made to capture what is going on in Afghanistan and make people aware of the problems and tensions in Afghan society.

Similar efforts are needed in the area of music, and a return to the Afghan roots. “I used to listen to a lot to pop and liked the gimmicks used in it. When you hear it first, it sounds nice. But over time I have come to appreciate the more classical music of Afghanistan. I like the use of the harmonium and tabla (traditional instruments). In the new music the feeling is missing. I see that most of the young generation is turning more and more towards the traditional music of Afghanistan. They have begun to appreciate it. You know my friends have a music group which plays traditional music. Nowadays they are very much in demand and are considered real ustads (masters).” This is precisely one of the reasons why Rawan finds the work he does with AFIR both engaging

and rewarding. “Culture is the bone structure of the country. The ancient historical monuments, they are what makes this country alive. The monuments tell that Afghanistan has a good history. Without them what would be there? What do we have now? The new buildings are what Anne (Anne Feenstra, principal architect in AFIR) calls the wedding cake houses. This is boring.”

SEEING IT GROW

Rawan likes visiting the Bagh-e Jehan Nama mainly because of the bustle of activity. “You see people there are very busy. Many poor people are employed there and they are earning money. I see the walls made of pakhsa developing slowly and feel happy. The people on the project are local, they are employed, the project grows and donors are happy.”

AFIR's work in the National Museum has great symbolism for Rawan as an emblem of Afghan culture. “Earlier the inside of the museum resembled a jail. It used to be so dark and dirty. We slowly worked on it to change it, built cabinets for the display of carpets which used to lie on the ground. If we are not interested in our National Museum it shows we do not respect our culture. Afghans have to visit the museum, see the exhibitions form

Ai Khanoum and Bagram. If we do not see what is there how can we get a feeling for our culture?” Rawan likes to talk about this project and has taken many photographs which he shares with his family and friends. “I have taken my friends there and now they are taking their other friends to see the museum.”

As a young Afghan Rawan is also angry about the vast sums of money spent in this country without any result, a feeling that is shared by many Afghans who have seen a process of contracting and sub-contracting siphon off millions of dollars in commissions, overheads and fat salaries leaving little on the actual construction of the project. The result is that the final implementer uses sub-standard material, adopts short cuts and ensures that the local community is kept out of the project site to prevent scrutiny. Rawan takes pride that the projects he is working on are very different. “These projects, they belong to the people. We are not building houses for the rich. This is for everyone. Lots of foreigners come and lots of things are promised. Billions of dollars are coming in- where is the result of that. But in our projects they can actually see something happening. The result is there is something of beauty there, for the people.”

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Contact Information:
Centre for International Heritage Activities
PO Box 11125
2301 EC Leiden
The Netherlands
+31(0)71 5168 890
www.heritage-activities.org
info@heritage-activities.org



