

In the Queen's Footsteps: Evolution and Challenges of Architectural Education in Herat, Afghanistan

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Summary Statement: Architecture is a reflection of the culture and values of a society. Architectural heritage can be a source of inspiration for innovation within a culture. The city of Herat, Afghanistan is known as the pearl of Khorasan, popular for its magnificent Islamic architecture—much of it thanks to the patronage of the 15th-century Persian Queen Gawhar Shad. Over the past few years, Herat has suffered immense destruction of its culture and traditional architecture through war, political instability, and earthquakes. A new architecture school in Herat, tailored to the needs of women students, is working in the spirit of Queen Shad with the goal of honoring the city's architectural heritage and preparing it to build in the 21st century.

Herat's Cultural and Architectural Heritage and the Role of Women

Herat is home to some of the most glorious examples of Islamic architecture and art, such as the Herat Citadel or Qala-i-Ikhtiyaruddin—a remarkable example of the surviving citadels in the area and bear witness to the city's turbulent history¹; Khwaja Abdullah Ansari's Shrine Complex—the cultural inheritance of a prolific literary savant, poet, and one of significant figures in the development of early Sufism²; Masjid-e-Jame Herat, a Ghori mosque four iwan-mosque, described as one of the largest mosques in medieval Islam³ and a landmark of Herat's rich Islamic architectural history; and the Mosalla Complex and Gawhar Shad Mausoleum, the legacy of Gawhar Shad, described as “the most beautiful example of color in architecture ever devised by man to the glory of his God and himself”⁴. The Friday-mosque patronized by Gawhar Shad was the center of the sociocultural life of the Timurid society, used not only for religious activities and education but also for cultural activities⁵.

Queen Gawhar Shad was “the most important architectural patron of her time”⁶. She was the

¹Archnet.org. n.d. “Qala Ikhtiyaruddin.” Accessed November 14, 2023. <https://www.archnet.org/sites/6834>.

²Ali, Mukhtar H. 2016. “The ‘Doctrine of Love’ in ‘Abd Allāh Al-Ansārī’s Manāzil Al-Sā’irīn with Critical Paraphrase of ‘Abd Al-Razzāq Kāshānī’s Commentary.” *Journal of Sufi Studies* 5 (2): 140–55. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22105956-12341288>.

³Tirard-Collet, Olivier. 1998. “After the War. The Condition of Historical Buildings and Monuments in Herat, Afghanistan.” *Iran* 36: 123–38. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4299980>.

⁴UNESCO. 2014. “UNESCO, Government of Afghanistan and Herat’s Community Representatives Agree to Work Together to Help Safeguard Herat’s Extraordinarily Rich Cultural Heritage. | UNESCO.” 2014. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-government-afghanistan-and-herats-community-representatives-agree-work-together-help-0?TSPD_101_R0=080713870fab200063ebc6f22572faaa89428d90077ed4c0cf399b804b52ec3d7ac2f368d2d37de808ccaca16514300040f3befd809bda9ef7.

⁵Arbabzadah, Nushin. 2017. “Women and Religious Patronage in the Timurid Empire.” *Afghanistan’s Islam: From Conversion to the Taliban*, 56–70. <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.23>.

⁶Kane, Bernard O. 1993. “From Tents to Pavilions : Royal Mobility and Persian Palace Design” 23: 256.

wife of the Timurid ruler Shahrukh (r. 1405–47)⁷, and a skilled politician and leader, a great supporter of arts and culture, and a champion of many writers and artists, including the well-known female poet Mehri Herawi. She founded numerous educational institutions in Herat. After her husband's death, she ruled for another decade, still in power at the age of 80⁸. Gawhar Shad left an enduring mark on the religious landscape of the region by patronizing the construction of two separate Friday-mosque institutions in the key Timurid cities of Herat and Mashhad (Iran) in an era when patronage of the prestigious Friday-mosque institutions was traditionally the domain of sultans⁹.

Yet this golden era was not to last and the city that once received its architectural pedigree from Gawhar Shad gradually transformed into a place where people felt ashamed of calling a woman by her name, let alone accepting her participation in city building and construction.

Architectural education, especially in such a context, can help raise the consciousness of future architects to value architectural landmarks, along with providing the skills to preserve this valuable heritage. Queen Gawhar Shad is a role model for women architects in this context, demonstrating the importance of women in creating and preserving architecture. As Christopher N. Henry argues, we need women in architecture¹⁰. This is why over the past decade Herat's new architecture program, to which women students flocked, reflects the cultural confluence and expression within the architectural context of Herat.

⁷Arbabzadah, 2017.

⁸Fjellrik, Sadiyah Ehsan. 2023. "Afghan Female Teachers' Stories and Experiences."
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK558907/>.

⁹Arbabzadah, 2017.

¹⁰Henry, Christopher N. 2012. "Women in Architecture: We Need Them" | ArchDaily. 2012.
<https://www.archdaily.com/214742/women-in-architecture-we-need-them>.



Figure 1. The Minarets of Herat, Timurids (1370-1507).



Figure 2. Gawhar Shad Begum's Mausoleum.

The Architecture Program of Herat

The Faculty of Engineering in Herat, a key institution in the city's architecture and construction, trained hundreds of civil engineers in the city. But the presence of women in the program was miniscule. In 2008, through a collaboration between the University of Hartford in West Hartford, Connecticut, and Herat University (with aid of the World Bank and USAID), an effort was undertaken to not only strengthen the already-existing civil engineering program at Herat but also to establish a new architecture program. The consensus among faculty and university leadership was that it was necessary to establish an Architecture Department to help train indigenous architects to uphold the city's architectural heritage and to attract female students. It was decided to train female faculty members who would be role models for future women students.

Two female students (Mahsa Khatibi and Homaira Fayez) received scholarships to pursue their Master's degrees at the University of Hartford. The goal was to establish and lead the new architecture program to attract women students—a challenge in a male-dominated society. This remarkable step was actually a revival of the city's long-forgotten tradition and heritage of women's involvement in architecture, whose foundation was laid by Queen Gawhar Shad.

A proposed curriculum was first established in the US (Keshawarz et al. 2009). In June 2009, Hartford's Dr. Saleh Keshawarz and Dr. Theodore Sawruk travelled to Herat to finalize the curriculum and present it to the president of Herat University, the Ministry of Education, and the World Bank¹¹. The department was established with an allotment of facilities and equipment, including a design studio, a PC-Lab, and textbooks.

Challenges and Rewards of the New Architecture Program

In 2010 with the return of the two faculty members the department was established. Despite having space and tools, it was a big challenge to run an academic department in a male-dominated society. On the other hand, the already existing civil engineer program was well known and respected; the architecture profession and all construction work were practiced by civil engineers. This raised doubts in Herat about whether architecture graduates could compete with civil engineering graduates. The new program was also challenged by a lack of trust and institutional encouragement by the university. The program suffered from a dearth of faculty due to a lack of faculty lines. It was difficult to convince others that architectural education involves considerable studio time and space. For a while there were only two women faculty in the department, simultaneously managing the program and teaching many of the courses.

Although the department started as an undervalued and underrated program, the faculty and the students soon proved themselves one of the finest departments in the university. Assessment reports from the Herat University Quality Assurance Committee document this. The faculty were determined, passionate, and committed to making architectural education for women a reality at Herat. In 2018, the faculty grew to five, one man and four women. A 2019 department survey of architecture alumni revealed that many of architecture graduates were hired based on their qualifications. Many female students were attracted to the program, with a high ratio of females to males compared to other departments. Exhibitions of student work showcased their achievements and helped improve job opportunities (the 2017 exhibit was one of the university's most visited shows, attracting

¹¹Sawruk, Theodore. 2013. "Reconstructing Afghanistan: An Architecture Curriculum for a 'New Way of Life.'" *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 2 (2): 371–95. https://doi.org/10.1386/ijia.2.2.371_1.

Herat government officials and industry heads). In 2020, several faculty members enrolled in doctoral programs abroad in preparation to start a Master's degree program.



Figure 3. Architecture program exhibition. (Photo by author)



Figure 4. Architecture students on visit to historic site. (Photo by author)

Challenges to Architectural Education and Herat's Architectural Heritage

In August 2021, the Taliban once again took over. Three of the architecture faculty (among them two women) were in the midst of their doctoral research. In 2022 women were banned from universities throughout the country. The Higher Education Development Program (which allegedly exists to improve the relevance and quality of higher education in Afghanistan), who sponsored the doctoral studies of the two female faculty ceased its support, ironically demanding them to return to Afghanistan upon the completion of their doctorates--in other words, wanting them to stay at home with their doctoral degrees. All five architecture faculty are scattered in different countries. Their absence signals the loss of architecture expertise achieved through more than a decade of training and practice.

And then things got worse. Thousands perished in Herat when a series of four powerful and devastating earthquakes (magnitude 6.2 to 6.3) last October demolished and damaged many buildings, including many historic monuments. The earthquakes caused severe damage to Qala e Ikhtyaruddin, Masjid-e-Jami, and the Minarets of the Gawharshad Musalla--the identity, the pride, and the cultural heritage of Herat. Although there was not much damage to the physical structure of the Faculty of Engineering, the destruction of the architecture program's academic structure appears is irreversible.



Figure 5. The Minaret of Masjid-e-Jame Herat after the earthquakes in 2023. (Source: Facebook)

Conclusions

The cultural and architectural heritage of Herat has been imperiled by natural as well as social disasters. The Taliban's rule from 1995 and 2001 and their comeback in August 2021 further adds to the neglect and destruction of these monuments. The October 2023 earthquakes caused major damage to many monuments, including the Mosalla Complex. The architectural heritage in Herat was not only damaged during wars and natural disasters, but also faces serious risks from erosion, decay, misuse, and neglect¹².

There's a fear that the end of architectural education for women might lead to the end of architectural heritage in Herat—the loss of identity and belonging. We not only need trained and experienced architects in Herat, we also need women architects. The architecture program has lost its experienced staff, four of whom were women. Architecture is a form of care¹³. Caring is natural to women; it is a gift endowed to them. We need women architects in Herat to care about the heritage of the city. Nearly half of Afghanistan's population is female. Design is a collaboration between many people and disciplines. The role of women as consumers, producers, creators, and critics of the built environment is critical and undeniable¹⁴.

The story of Queen Gawhar Shad is an inspiration for all women in architecture, especially those from Herat, illuminating the role a woman can play in changing the cultural and architectural history and prestige of a region by caring for the world's most memorable historic monuments.

Without a doubt, we need more Gawhar Shads!

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¹³Krasny, Elke. 2019. "Architecture and Care." *Critical Care Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet*. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12273.003.0005>.

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